Some time around AD 200 in Rome a woman was laid to rest and commemo- 

trated by her loving husband by means of the following inscription:¹

Φῶς πατρικόν ποθέωνα, σύναμε σύνευνε Σόφι μου, 
λοιποὶς χρεισαμένι Χριστοῦ θυριτον ἁγγόν, 
ἀιώνων ἐπένευσας ἄθροιας θεία πρόσωπα, 
βουλής τῆς μεγάλης μέγαν ἄγγελον ὑόν ἀληθῆ 
[...] νυφωύνα μολούσα καὶ εἰς [κόλπους ἄνορούσα 
[ἀθάνατος] τι φατρικός κα[|]

Yearning for the light of the Father, my Sophe, sister and spouse, 
anointed in the baths of Christ with imperishable sacred myron, 
you were eager to gaze at the divine faces of aeons, 
the great angel of the great counsel, the true Son, 
you entered the bridal chamber and into the bosom 
of the Father you leapt, immortal [...] 

The lines form an acrostic revealing the woman’s full name: Flavia Sophe. She had been initiated into Christianity; more specifically, into Valentinianism.² The initiation ritual, a bath accompanied by an anointing with scented oil, is what secures for her the successful passage to the beyond. Having been made immortal, she leaps into the transcendent realm to be with the aeons and the Son in the bosom of the Father.


² The vocabulary and the ideas alluded to in the inscription leave no doubt about its Valentinian provenance; this was thoroughly demonstrated by Quispel, “Inscription de Flavia Sophe”. 

Gnostics and Orphics

Einar Thomassen
At about the same time, another Roman woman was buried. Her name
was Caecilia Secundina, and the following inscription, incised on a small
gold tablet, accompanied her in her tomb:

"Ερχεται ἐκ καθαρῶν καθαρά, χθονίων βασίλεια
Εὐκλεες Εὐβολευ τε, Διῶς όμος, ἀλλὰ δέχεσθαι
Μνημοσύνης τόδε δώρον, ἀοίδημον ἀνθρώποιοιν.
Καισίλια Σεκουνδίνα, νόμιμοι ἵπ τί δία γεγώσα.

She comes pure from the pure, Queen of the Chthonian Ones.
Eucles and Euboleus, child of Zeus. ‘But accept
this gift of Memory, sung of among mortals.’
‘Caecilia Secundina, come, by law grown to be divine’.

The proximity in time and place of the two inscriptions stirs the imagina-
tion. While Flavia Sophé was initiated into a Roman group of Valentinian
Christians, Caecilia was undergoing a different initiation, into a different
community. Both hoped that the ritual would bring them immortality
and a privileged existence of bliss in the afterlife. Flavia Sophé had mer-
ited such a status through the rituals of Christ, the Son of the Father,
Caecilia Secundina through those of Dionysus, the child of Zeus.4 Both
have now joined the company of the other initiates and entered the realm
of divinity. Although the inscriptions are of different kinds—the one an
epitaph, the other a tablet to be carried by the dead person herself—
they both serve to certify that the deceased has undergone initiation, is
pure and thereby qualified to rest among the immortals. It is an attractive
thought that the hopes of the two women were not so different, nor the
means by which they thought that these hopes might be fulfilled, even
though the deities in whom they put their hopes for the afterlife were not
the same.

Flavia Sophé was a Christian ‘Gnostic’, Caecilia Secundina a bakchê
of the ‘Orphic’ variety. Both terms are keenly contested and, beyond a
certain point, no longer very useful. However, within the limits where
these terms still retain some usefulness, some interesting comparisons
may be made between the two phenomena suggested by these terms.

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3 Bernabé, PEG 2.491 = A. Bernabé and A.I. Jiménez San Cristóbal, Instructions for
the Netherworld: The Orphic Gold Tablets (Leiden: Brill, 2008), no. L 11 = F. Graf and
the text and translation provided by Graf and Johnston. For a detailed commentary
on the text, see R. Kotansky, Greek Magical Amulets, Part I (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag),
1994, 107–112; also Bernabé and Jiménez, Instructions, 133–135; Graf and Johnston,
Ritual Texts, 122–124.

4 For discussions of the names Eucles (= Hades, or Zeus in his infernal aspect) and
Euboleus (= Dionysus), see the works cited in the previous note.