GREEK AND COMPARATIST REFLEXIONS ON FOOD PROHIBITIONS

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The purpose of this essay is to examine the way in which comparative thinking about ritual practices, especially prohibitions, was already taking shape in Antiquity.¹ That it was a comparative approach becomes manifest when we consider the way in which ancient Greeks looked upon Egypt. We may begin with an example taken from Herodotus, who states that “they (the Egyptians) are especially careful ever to wear newly-washed linen raiment.”² Further on, the same author declares that the Pythagorean, Orphic and Bacchic prohibition concerning wool—a prohibition that commands, in turn, the prescription of wearing linen—comes from Egypt.

[The Egyptians] wear linen tunics with fringes hanging about the legs, called “calasiris,” and loose white woollen mantles over these. But nothing of wool is brought into the temples, or buried with them; that is forbidden. In this they follow the same rule as the ritual called Orphic and Bacchic, but which is in truth Egyptian and Pythagorean; for neither may those initiated into these rites be buried in woollen wrappings. There is a sacred legend about this.³

Here, we are sent back to a space of comparison, in a very wide territory with vaguely limited provinces, in which practices that can be qualified in turn as Bacchic, Pythagorean, Orphic or Egyptian meet, intersect and merge. Unhappily, Herodotus does not specify whether the hieròs lógos that he mentions is Egyptian, Pythagorean or Orphic. Thus, the space for observation, the ground he chose for this limited comparative experimentation, has no precise limits. Its borders are not clear, and this can be explained (if not justified) by the fact that we are dealing with a set of practices that will never cease to be a topic of constant interrogation for the ancient authors themselves, from Herodotus to Porphyry and further.⁴

¹ This text is an updated and slightly revised version of an earlier article in French on this topic. See Borgeaud, “Réflexions grecques.”
² Herodotus II 37, near the beginning of the §. Translation by A. D. Godley.
³ Herodotus II 81.
Food as “Cultural Operator”

In this field of investigation, and with respect to ritual prescriptions, alimentary choices offer a major cultural “operator.” We may start here with a specific case, namely, the case of vegetarianism attributed to Orpheus’ teaching.⁵

As is well-known, attestations of vegetarianism—or rather, should we say, condemnations of sarkophagía—are extremely rare outside of Pythagoras and Empedocles. There seem to be seven of them, all pertaining to Orphism (bios orphíkos), of which five are explicit.⁶

We get a rather clear impression out of this small dossier. From at least the time of Aristophanes, one or a number of poems attributed to Orpheus circulated that condemned murdering animals for food and thus also condemned bloody sacrifices. There is no need to go back once more to

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⁵ For Orphic documents, cf. Bernabé, Poetae epicí Graeci; cf. also Kern’s edition, in Orphicorum fragmenta.
⁶ See, above all, Casadio, “I Cretesi di Euripide,” 297: 1) Aristophanes, Ranae 1032 (= test. 90 Kern, 547; translation by J. Henderson): “Just consider how beneficial the noble poets have been from the earliest times. Orpheus revealed mystic rites to us, and taught us to abstain from killings (Orpheus mèn gár teletás th’hemîn katédeixe phónôn t’apéchesthai).” 2) Plato, Leges VI 782c (= test. 212 Kern, 625 Bernabé; translation by R. G. Bury): “The custom of men sacrificing one another is, in fact, one that survives even now among many peoples; whereas amongst others we hear of how the opposite custom existed, when they were forbidden so much as to eat an ox, and their offerings to the gods consisted, not of animals, but of cakes of meal and grain steeped in honey, and other such bloodless sacrifices, and from flesh they abstained as though it were unholy to eat it or to stain with blood the altars of the gods; instead of that, those of us men who then existed lived what is called an “Orphic life,” keeping wholly to inanimate food and, contrariwise, abstaining wholly from things animate.” 3) Euripides, Hippolytus 952 (= test. 213 Kern, 627 Bernabé; translation by D. Kovacs): “Continue then your confident boasting, adopt a meatless diet and play the showman with your food (d’ìapsúchou borâs sítois kapéleu’), make Orpheus your lord (Orphéa t’ánakt’ékhôn) and engage in mystic rites (bákkheue), holding the vaporings of many books in honor! For you have been found out.” 4) Plutarch, Septem sapientium convivium 16, 159 C (= test. 215 Kern, 629 Bernabé; translation by F. C. Babbitt): “But to refrain entirely from eating meat, as they record of Orpheus of old, is rather a quibble than a way of avoiding wrong in regard to food.” 5) Jerome, Adversus Jovinianum libri II 2, 14 (= test. 300-1 Kern, 630f Bernabé) quoting Porphyry, De abstinentia 269 (4, 22, 7 = CUF t. III, 40): “Orpheus, in his poems, rejects with horror all carnal food (Orpheus in carmine suo esum carnium penitus detestatur).” 6) and 7) To these five attestations, one may add, with Casadio, the famous fragment of the Cretans by Euripides (quoted by Porphyry, De abstinentia 4, 19 = 567 T Bernabé), where the matter is abstinence from animal food, as well as a development found in Alexander Polyhistor (test. 214 Kern, 628 Bernabé, quoted by Diogenes Laertius VIII 33), where mention is made of “all that those who hold the office of celebrating rites in sacred ceremonies forbid” (i.e., red meat, fish, birds, eggs and broad beans).