

Writing gods in the 5th century: Divine power in the Orphic *Argonautica*

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Classical Greek religion is often defined by a lack of an authoritative priesthood and sacred texts which they might control, produce or disseminate. Instead, Greeks generally looked to Homeric epic as the Panhellenic representation of gods and participated in localized cult practices. The Orphic texts in circulation from at least the 6th century BCE are thought to represent the margins, countercultural movements in response to the Homeric pantheon and operating outside of the 'polis religion' characteristic of Classical Greek cities. Many of these orphic texts reflect the belief of their owners in a life after death available to the initiates of this 'mystery cult', an eschatological view at odds with the Panhellenic pantheon. While Orphic groups define themselves through written texts, mainstream Greek gods and their cults can be said to be 'illiterate', to avoid written texts in the transmission of religious knowledge.

Our only surviving attempt to synthesize the multifarious Orphic writings and teachings comes in the 5th century CE in a little studied poem known as the *Orphic Argonautica*, an epic by an unknown author, probably composed in Egypt. This remarkable epic combines different philosophical, literary and religious traditions to describe the journey of the ship *Argo* under the guidance of Orpheus, who is here presented as a conglomerate of all of his mythical and cultic personae built up over centuries. The poem is narrated by Orpheus himself with the intention of revealing previously secret teachings and promoting his power to offer his adherents a life after death. This text differs radically from earlier epics by avowing to provide religious instruction and revelation, presented in an epic and mythological wrapper: the gaps in early Greek literature between the gods of myth and ritual, poetic texts and cult practice collapse in a mixture of the mainstream and subterranean, literature and religion and their interaction at the end of the ancient Greek epic tradition. This paper will look at the ways divine power is presented in the poem as reflections of contemporary cult interests and concepts mapped onto the long and disparate tradition of ancient 'orphic' teachings and discuss this changed perspective on religious texts from one of our latest and least understood sources.