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HEROI LOGOI – THE ESOTERIC SCIENCE OF ANCIENT GREEKS?

The present study deals with matters concerning the meaning of esoteric books on religious topics, and the extent of knowledge about them in ancient Greece within the classical period (the 5th and 4th centuries BC). Each Greek state (*polis*) demanded piety (*eusebeia*) from its citizens, who were expected to take part in the ritual of an official religious cult, organized by *polis*. At that same time the picture of the universe was created by popular religious notions, of which a great deal was conceived due to the writing down of the myths functioning as themes in the literature. According to the great Greek historian Herodot (the 5th c. BC), the Greeks' ideas of gods were shaped by epics of the archaic period, particularly *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by Homer and *Theogony* by Hesiodus. An average Greek of the classical period acquired his knowledge about the nature of gods from these very works, and at the same time the picture presented by the authors of epics was the basis of that knowledge, according to the official cult requirements.

However, along with the official religious cult open to everyone, some mysteries for the initiated participants developed very soon. In the 5th c. BC in Athens they were most of all Eleusinian mysteries as well as Dionysiac ones. They were also very well known in other parts of Greece. The initiation was a special ceremony in most cases, which brought out the nature of a divinity and of the religious practices devoted to it. Therefore, it was already an esoteric knowledge and in the beginning it was conveyed verbally among the initiated. Later it was put down in written form and prevailed as „holy books” – *hieroi logoi*. The appearance of such works is connected with the development of the Orphic mystery cult, of which the legendary musician and poet, Orpheus, was regarded as the founder. Nowadays we can hardly say anything of him, but are able to point to some other orphic poets and describe the main line of the development of this poetry.

Onomacritos, a poet living in the 6th c. BC and active at the court of the tyrant Hipparchus in Athens, contributed enormously to the development of that poetry. In the same period the Pythagoreans' works developed. The pythagorean school had also its *hieroi logoi* and, as well as the Orphism, dealt with theological matters and new, seemingly secret doctrines. Unlike the traditional myths and the official piety, these books presented the nature of gods and the world in a different way. They also discussed the nature of the human soul, the immorality of man, and gave the truth about relations between man and divinity. That truth was given

only to the initiated because as a rule *hieroi logoi* were supposed to teach them exclusively. Nevertheless, there is a lot of evidence that in the 5th and the 4th c. BC such works as theological and religious poetry, as well as phrases used during ritual ceremonies, and also magic formulae or incantations mentioned by Socrates in Plato's *Charmides*, were well known not only among the initiated.

Along with taking part in rites (*teletai*), those who became acquainted with the secret knowledge were supposed to lead a kind of life, which would distinguish them from the uninitiated people. That was the case of Hyppolitos, a popular mythological character, who was the main hero in a famous tragedy by Eurypides. His father Theseus scolded him for reading some „books”, and therefore leading a peculiar life, typical of the Orpheus worshippers. We can conclude then, that the Orphic works were for sure very well known in public in Athens in the 5th c. BC. That idea is backed by Plato's words in the *Republic* where he wrote about the Orpheus and Musaios supporters, who tried to increase their numbers by giving out „piles of books” with the overall explanation of the Orphic doctrine.

Aristophanes and Isocrates also briefly referred to the good knowledge people had, not only about their content. In the *Birds* Aristophanes ridiculed the Orphic cosmogony idea and, having concluded that, we can presume that the Athenian theatre's audience understood the author's mockery very well. From the 4th c. BC the authors dealing with theological issues (as a part of philosophical studies) knew and quoted various different *logoi*, either Pithagorean or Orphic, which included lectures on doctrines designed, by all accounts, only for the initiated.

Thus it seems as if the secret *logoi* were produced and developed in Greece according to the needs of a wide spectrum of the society. Those needs could not be fulfilled by the official cult because the recognition of full truth was not in the nature of the public citizen's piety. Therefore, an average Greek of the classical period could develop more complex and refined knowledge of the world, than existed in popular beliefs, from a great number of theological writings available then.