

The Derveni Papyrus and the Homeric Scholia

The exegesis of the Orphic cosmogony preserved in the Derveni papyrus fills 19 columns out of the 23 that were published anonymously in 1982 (*ZPE* 47, after p. 300); only 5 dealt with other matters.

Accordingly, scholars usually refer to its author as the ‘Derveni commentator’ and tend to think of his work as a ‘commentary’ on a par with those on Homer and other poets produced in the age of Aristarchus.

However, this is to misconceive the nature and affinities of the Derveni treatise. K. Tsantsanoglou published a greatly improved text of the first seven columns in 1997 (pp. 93-128 in A. Laks et G.W. Most (edd.), *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, Oxford). These discuss various matters, including a fragment of Heraclitus, the terrors of Hades and sacrifices to the Furies. Even before their common topic (which is the terrors of Hades) was identified, it became obvious that the purpose of the treatise was not to offer a commentary on the Orphic poem, but rather to insist on the importance of interpretation, whether holy rituals are in question or sacred texts like the Orphic cosmogony. The author holds that taking these scandalous things literally is a danger to one’s faith; to keep one’s faith, one must interpret them, using the methods of allegory and etymology pioneered by Theagenes of Rhegium in the later sixth century. Such methods flourished in the time of the sophists and the late Presocratics, where the Derveni author belongs; he resembles Empedocles, who likewise combined a physical system influenced by Anaxagoras with a Pythagorean eschatology (so Alcidas of Elea’s *Physics*, quoted by D.L. 8.56), since cols. 3 and 6 of the papyrus presuppose the survival of the soul after death.

Accordingly, the purpose of the Derveni author was to advocate a religious viewpoint, rather than to offer a commentary on the poetry for its own sake. In this aim he is far closer to the early philosophers and sophists than to rhapsodes like Stesimbrotus of Thasos or Plato’s Ion, who made their living by both performing and commenting on poets like Homer, Hesiod and Archilochus. Philosophers from Heraclitus to Plato despised the explanations of such rhapsodes. Theagenes and Xenophanes, who were probably both rhapsodes too, rose above this dismal level in that they offered a higher kind of theological interpretation; but even they were concerned above all with theology rather than with poetic exegesis for its own sake. Writers on Homer in the first half of the fourth century like Antisthenes continued this approach. It was only Aristotle who separated commentary on the poets from religious enquiry. The Derveni papyrus still belongs in the earlier phase, and is closer in its purpose to Prodicus’ book *On the Terrors of Hades* or to Protagoras’ exegeses of Simonides than it is to Aristotle’s *Homeric Questions* or its Hellenistic successors.