

Vergil, Aeneid VI : Earlier Accounts of the Underworld

1. Homer, Odyssey X - XI

X.488ff.: Circe declares that Od. must go to the underworld to consult Teiresias, ^{and} gives directions for getting there: he must then cut a trench and make appropriate sacrifices. The dead will appear but none should be allowed near the blood in the trench until Teiresias comes: he will tell Odysseus how to return home.

XI.1ff.: Odysseus sails to the gloomy edge of the world in the west. Circe's instructions are carried out (cf. Aen. VI.243ff); the dead appear and flutter about with horrible moaning, but are prevented from drinking the blood.

51ff.: Elpenor appears: he had been killed in an accident in Circe's house but had been left unburied: Odysseus promises to return and bury him (cf. Palinurus in Aen. VI.337ff.).

90ff.: Teiresias appears and is allowed to drink the blood: he does so and foretells Odysseus' future (cf. Anchises in Aen. VI.890-2).

152ff.: Odysseus allows his mother Anticleia to drink the blood: she then recognises her son and inter alia tells him the state of affairs in Ithaca: Odysseus three times tries to embrace her but she slips from his grasp and explains that after death only the soul is left, fluttering on the air like a dream (cf. Anchises in Aen. VI.699ff.).

225ff.: Odysseus allows to drink and then questions a whole series of famous women - and then breaks off his narrative. His hosts, the people of Phaeacia persuade him to continue.

377ff.: Odysseus resumes. Agammemenon appears, drinks the blood and tells of his murder (cf. Deiphobus in Aeneid VI. 509ff.).

467ff.: Achilles comes and stresses the misery and gloom of the after-life, but is comforted by the good news of his son Neoptolemus.

541ff.: The ghosts of the dead press round Odysseus with questions, but Ajax remains aloof. Odysseus tries to placate him but Ajax turns back into Erebus. (cf. Dido in Aen. VI.450ff.).

568ff.: Note: this passage is often considered a later addition to the book. Odysseus now sees Minos delivering judgement (cf. Aen. VI.432ff.: but note the strong Roman colouring in the Vergil passage) and Orion hunting. He also sees the punishment of Tityos, Sisyphus and Tantalus. Heracles appears and tells how he dragged Cerberus from Hell.

The wraiths clamour round Odysseus, who panics and departs.

2. Descent (katabasis) of Heracles?

(a)[Apollodorus] Bibliothèque (2nd cent. A.D.) II.5.12:

A twelfth labour imposed on Hercules was to bring Cerberus from Hades. Now this Cerberus had three heads of dogs, the tail of a dragon, and on his back the heads of all sorts of snakes. When Hercules was about to depart to fetch him, he went to Eumolpus at Eleusis, wishing to be initiated. However it was not then lawful for foreigners to be initiated: since he proposed to be initiated as the adoptive son of Pylius. But not being able to see the mysteries because he had not been cleansed of the slaughter of the centaurs, he was cleansed by Eumolpus and then initiated. And having come to Taenarum in Laconia, where is the mouth of the descent to Hades, he descended through it. But when the souls saw him, they fled, save Meleager and the Gorgon Medusa. And Hercules drew his sword against the Gorgon, as if she were alive, but he learned from Hermes that she was an empty phantom. And being come

near to the gates of Hades he found Theseus and Pirithous, him who wooed Persephone in wedlock and was therefore bound fast. And when they beheld Hercules, they stretched out their hands as if they should be raised from the dead by his might. And Theseus, indeed, he took by the hand and raised up, but when he would have brought up Pirithous, the earth quaked and he let go. And he rolled away also the stone of Ascalaphus. And wishing to provide the souls with blood, he slaughtered one of the kine of Hades. But Menoetes, son of Ceuthonymus, who tended the kine, challenged Hercules to wrestle, and, being seized round the middle, had his ribs broken; howbeit, he was let off at the request of Persephone. When Hercules asked Pluto for Cerberus, Pluto ordered him to take the animal provided he mastered him without the use of the weapons which he carried. Hercules found him at the gates of Acheron, and, cased in his cuirass and covered by the lion's skin, he flung his arms round the head of the brute, and though the dragon in its tail bit him, he never relaxed his grip and pressure till it yielded. So he carried it off and ascended through Troezen. But Demeter turned Ascalaphus into a short-eared owl, and Hercules, after showing Cerberus to Eurystheus, carried him back to Hades.

(b) Bacchylides V.56ff. (476 B.C.) The story of Heracles' descent into Hades to carry off Cerberus and his meeting with Meleager. Note in particular lines 65ff.: "There by the waters of Cocytus he perceived the souls of hapless mortals countless as leaves quivering in the wind, where flocks graze on the gleaming headlands of Ida" (cf. Aen. VI.309f.).

(c) Pindar is known to have told much the same story as Bacchylides in one of his poems (again of the early fifth century B.C.). A recently discovered papyrus fragment (P.Oxy. 2622) contains parts of a poem which seems to tell how Heracles was initiated at Eleusis and then met Meleager in the Underworld (cf. Apollodorus and Bacchylides above). It may also contain the same leaves simile as Bacchylides and Vergil. This poem may well be that of Pindar.

(d) Aristophanes, Frogs (405 B.C.). Dionysus proposes to go down to the Underworld to bring back a tragic poet for Athens, and therefore consults Heracles about how to get there. Heracles tells him (136ff.) that he will come first to a big lake: an old boatman (i.e. Charon) will take him across in a tiny craft. He will then see a multitude of monsters. Then there will be a lot of mud (cf. Aen. VI.416?) and in this will be seen those who injured guests, struck their mothers, hit their fathers or perjured themselves (cf. those in Tartarus in Aen. VI.566ff.). Then he will come to a very bright and airy place, filled with music and men and women rejoicing: these are those who have been initiated in the Eleusinian mysteries (cf. Elysium in Aen. VI.637ff. - but Vergil does not regard initiation as the criterion for entry to his Elysium).

3. Descent of Orpheus

Servius on Aeneid VI.392f. (Charon's hint that he had been punished for letting Heracles into the Underworld) says that in a poem called Orpheus (i.e. a poem describing Orpheus' descent to find his wife Eurydice) it was recounted that Charon had been put in chains for a whole year for admitting Heracles to the Underworld. Various other references in ancient authors indicate the existence of one or more poems on this theme, which very probably included Orphic doctrines about the after-life (see below). Vergil may well have used such poems as a source of inspiration about the underworld: he had already told the story of Orpheus briefly in Georgics IV.467ff.

4. Orphic - Pythagorean doctrines about the after-life

A number of passages in Greek authors in particular indicate the existence of a complex of doctrines containing roughly similar ideas about the after-life and attributable in particular to the Orphics and Pythagoreans. There is no one standard doctrine and Vergil, in taking over these ideas, may have used more than one source. The following passages are those which offer the most immediate parallels to Aeneid VI.

(a) Pindar Olympians II.56ff. tells how, after death, the lawless are punished while the righteous enjoy a life of bliss with the gods. Those who have managed to be righteous in three lives pass to the Islands of the Blessed. In another fragment Pindar describes the life of fortunate souls after death in similar terms to those of Vergil in Aeneid VI.637ff.

(b) Plato, Phaedo 113ff. At death everyone is led by his daemon (this is perhaps the manes of Aeneid VI.743) to a place of judgement. Those who have lived middling lives are purified by punishment. Those who are incurable are thrown into Tartarus; those who have done great misdeed but are curable are sent to Tartarus but thrown back after a year. Those who have lived righteously come up to the pure dwelling place above and have their habitation upon the earth.

(c) Plato, Phaedr. 248f. For souls which have fallen from the heavenly places there is a period of 10,000 years during which in a series of lives they are gradually fitted to return whence they came. A few who have followed true wisdom get a shorter period of 3,000 years, but most souls, after death, are judged: some then pass beneath the earth for punishment; others live in the sky. At the end of 1000 years both groups are reincarnated.

(d) Plato, Republic X.614ff. (Er's account of the after-life). After death the soul passes to a place of judgement. The just are sent up the right hand road to the sky, while the unjust are sent by the left hand road downwards. They spend 1000 years in the place allotted. "For every wrong he has committed a man must pay the penalty ten times over, that is to say, once in each hundred years, such being the span of human life, in order that the punishment for every offence might be tenfold. Thus, all who have been guilty of bringing many to death of slavery by betraying their country or their comrades in arms, or have taken part in any other iniquity, suffer tenfold torments for each crime; while deeds of kindness and a just and sinless life are rewarded in the same measure. Concerning infants who die at birth or live but a short time he had more to say, not worthy of mention.

The wages earned by honouring the gods and parents, or by dishonouring them and by doing murder, were even greater."

For the great sinners are thrown into Tartarus. After their period of punishment or reward the souls return, are told to choose a new life, drink the waters of Lethe and are reborn.

(e) Bologna papyrus. This papyrus seems to be a first person narrative of a visit to an Orphic-style underworld. The fragments preserved seem to record first groups of sinners and their punishment and then those who are rewarded. The groups punished include (i) those guilty of unnatural sexual actions; (ii) the gluttonous; (iii) those who commit crimes out of avarice (some parallels here with Aen. VI.621-2). Those rewarded include those who showed sophrosyne and sacrificed themselves for their friends, those who adorned life with their wisdom (or skills) - singers, doctors etc.: for all this cf. Aen. VI.660-664.

5. The Dream of Scipio (Cicero, De Republica VI.9ff.)

Scipio Aemilianus dreams that he meets his grandfather, Scipio Africanus, who predicts his future career (cf. Anchises in Aen. VI.890-2). Africanus exhorts Aemilianus to devote himself to public service because there is an eternal life of bliss in store for those who serve their country well. This theme is then developed by Aemilianus' father, Paulus, who explains that the soul originates in the eternal fires called stars and planets and the body is in fact some sort of bondage for the soul. The soul that observes justice and duty in this life returns to the stars and becomes part of the Milky Way. Paulus then shows Scipio the nine spheres that comprise the world. The outer eight of these (down to the Moon) are all eternal, but below the Moon is what is mortal and doomed to decay. The spheres make their own music and by imitating this music skilled men have secured their own return to these upper regions; others have achieved the same reward by devoting their intellects to divina studia. Paulus again exhorts Aemilianus to keep his eyes fixed on this heavenly world and devote himself to the service of the state as a means of securing his own return there, whereas those who give themselves up to sensual pleasures and improper activities find that after death their spirits fly about close to the earth and only return to the heavens after many generations of torture.