

**The voice of Orpheus  
(Schol. Eur. *Hec.* 1267),  
or once more about the worn out thresholds  
of some subtumular constructions**

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To the setting sun:  
*If you go into the hollow of the earth in the Land of the dead,  
send a truthful prophet from the innermost part, I bet you.*

PGM VIII.74-81 (Faraone 2004: 5 27)

**Abstract.** Over the last few decades, a differentiated approach was gradually imposed in terms of the interpretation the subtumular constructions, which for a long time had been classified as burial constructions. Some of them are already seen as temples dedicated to both the initiation rite and immortality rituals. A number of constructions are marked with characteristics revealing their long-time use: several stages of construction in previously raised embankment, worn steps and thresholds, movable stone doors, etc. Based on a comparative analysis of the ancient written sources and the results of the archaeological research of some subtumular constructions, the article proposes another hypothesis regarding their functions as a subtumular oracul (*necromanteion*, i.e., Oracle of the Dead).

**Keywords:** tumulus, subtumular construction, Orpheus, oracle

**Problem situation**

Over the last few decades, a differentiated approach was gradually imposed in terms of the interpretation of the subtumular constructions, which for a long time had been classified as burial constructions. While some of them have already been seen as temples for initiation rites and immortality rituals such as Shushmanets and Helvetia in the Kazanlak Valley of the Thracian Kings; Chetiniova mound near Starosel; some others have been seen as performing

the role of heroa, such as Golyama Kosmatka tumulus in the Kazanlak Valley (Dimitrova 2015a; Dimitrova 2015b, 199-234 with lit.). A number of constructions would demonstrate characteristics revealing their long-time use: several stages of construction in previously raised embankment, worn steps and thresholds, movable stone doors, etc. Structures such as Golyama Kosmatka do not even have traces of human burial, but are rich in artefacts, broadly defined as “burial” gifts to serve the dead on his/her long journey to the Beyond. After a certain period of use with frequent visits to the facility, it suddenly changed its purpose for unknown reasons and was eventually turned into a burial complex or heroon (Fol, V. 2000, 46-68; Rabajiev 2011a, 44-60; Rabajiev 2011b, 25-31 with an overview of the hypotheses and lit.; see Kitov 2006, 82-113). This moment is marked by the ritual destruction of a part of the building and its sealing for all access from the outside. Thuswise, during the last of the three stages of its operation, the entrance to the domed room at Golyama Kosmatka was closed by a double-winged marble door decorated with relief medallions depicting Helios on the eastern wing and Medusa on the western wing. The door was closed from the inside with a latch (Fol, V. 2021, 140-151), which gave the researchers reason to assume that the facility was repeatedly used possibly as a “mysterical temple”. Having exhausted its functions, the facility’s doors were broken and the two entrances to the first and second chambers were walled up, and a fragment of them was placed face up on the stepped stone podium in the third chamber together with the votive gifts (Dimitrova 2015b, 209-210).

Based on a comparative analysis of the ancient written sources and the results of the archaeological investigations of some subtumular constructions of this type, I would like to add one more hypothesis regarding their functions as subtumular oracul (*necromanteion*, i.e., Oracle of the Dead).

### Orpheus the Soothsayer

Reminiscences of cult practices around the subtumular oracle (*necromanteion*) with the mediation of (anthropo-demonized) hero (Ustinova 2009a; Ustinova 2009b) are clearly discernible in the mythological and literary tradition surrounding the death of Orpheus in which patterns of mythologized ritualism emerge (Fol, V. 2005, 74-75). It marks several



**Fig. 1.** Head of Orpheus; a fragment of a black-figure vessel. Athens, Acropolis, ca. 470 BC; National Museum, Athens ([https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Orpheus-470-BC-National-Museum-Athens-Source-Greek-Mythology-1986-Athens\\_fig4\\_245542907](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Orpheus-470-BC-National-Museum-Athens-Source-Greek-Mythology-1986-Athens_fig4_245542907))

key stages of transformation of cult spaces (Lozanova-Stancheva 2019, 137-163) and their functional evolution in time, reflecting in the ancient sources.

Some time between 213 and 214, Flavius Philostratus (ca. 165/170 - in the period between the years 244 and 250) compiled a noteworthy dialogue entitled *Ἡρωικός* (*On heroes*), where he defined some of the most persisting characteristics of the hero cult, dominated by heroes' prophetic functions. There, he reports expressly that the heroes in question have appeared in the Troy Valley in numerous occasions to soothsay evil, natural disasters such as inundations and rain, or prosperity (Philostr. *Her.* 18.1-23.1), to cure illnesses (Philostr. *Her.* 16.1) or to protect from plagues as is the case with Rhesos (Fol, V. 2005, 67-77): λέγεται δὲ ὁ ἥρωος οὗτος καὶ λοιμὸν ἐρύκειν τοῦ ὄρους (Philostr. *Her.* 17.5) (This same hero is also said to keep the mountains free of pestilence - *Trans.* Aitken, Maclean). He is the most vivid incarnation of the divine oracle after his tragic death under the walls of Troy in (Pseudo-?)Euripides' tragedy of the same name. Unfortunately, this passage is badly damaged in the manuscripts and a clear reconstruction of its exact meaning is not possible.

In this work of his, Philostratus mentions *inter alia* the famous heroon-oracle, which was located on the island of Lesbos a very long time ago, where Orpheus' head (Fig. 1) would articulate its oracles, **singing**. After the atrocities of the Thracian women, the head of Orpheus, floating down the river Hebros and the Aegean Sea, reached the isle of Lesbos, settled in a crack in the island's land and from there it sang its prophecies (Philostr. *Her.* 28.8-13; Lozanova-Stancheva 2018, 135-146):

**Philostr. *Her.* 703-704:**

χρησθαι μὲν γὰρ καὶ τοῖς οἴκοι μαντείοις τοὺς Ἀχαιοὺς τῷ τε Δωδωναίῳ καὶ τῷ Πυθικῷ καὶ ὅποσα μαντεῖα εὐδόκιμα Βοιωτία τε ἦν καὶ Φωκικά, Λέσβου δὲ ὀλίγον ἀπεχούσης τοῦ Ἴλιου στέλλειν ἐς τὸ ἐκεῖ μαντεῖον τοὺς Ἕλληνας. ἔγρα δέ, οἶμαι, ἐξ Ὀρφέως, ἡ κεφαλὴ γὰρ μετὰ τὸ τῶν γυναικῶν ἔργον ἐς Λέσβον κατασχοῦσα ῥήγμα τῆς Λέσβου ὄκησε καὶ ἐν κοίλῃ τῇ γῆ ἐχρησμάδει. ὄθεν ἐχρῶντό τε αὐτῇ τὰ μαντικά Λέσβιοι τε καὶ τὸ ἄλλο πᾶν Αἰολικὸν καὶ Ἴωνες Αἰολεῦσι πρόσοικοι, χρησμοὶ δὲ τοῦ μαντείου τούτου καὶ ἐς Βαβυλῶνα ἀνεπέμποντο, πολλὰ γὰρ καὶ ἐς τὸν ἄνω βασιλέα ἡ κεφαλὴ ἦδε, Κύρω τε τῷ ἀρχαίῳ χρησμὸν ἐντεῦθεν ἐκδοθῆναι λέγεται ... τοσαῦτα, ξένε, περὶ τοῦ μαντείου τούτου Πρωτεσίλω τε καὶ Λεσβίων ἤκουσα ... (Kayser 1871).

**Philostr. *Her.* 28.8-13:**

[§28.8] The Achaeans customarily consulted their own oracles, both the Dodonian and the Pythian, as well as all the renowned Boeotian and Phocian oracles, but since Lesbos is not far from Ilion, the Hellenes sent to the oracle there. [§28.9] I believe that the oracle gave its answer through Orpheus, for his head, residing in Lesbos after the deed of the women, occupied a chasm on Lesbos and prophesied in the hollow earth. [§28.10] Hence, both the Lesbians and all the rest of Aeolia, as well as their Ionian neighbors, request oracles there, and the pronouncements of this oracle are even sent to Babylon. [§28.11] **His head sang many prophecies** to the Persian king ... [§28.13] This

much, my guest, I have heard about this oracle from both Protesilaos and the Lesbians ... (*Trans.* Aitken, Maclean).

In a later (written between 217 and 238) biography of Apollonius of Tyana (lived approximately between 40 and 120), Flavius Philostratus adds further details to the imaginary picture of the mystical oracle, reporting that Apollonius visited the *adyton* of Orpheus, when he passed through the island. There he learned that at the command of Apollo himself, the prophecies of the Thracian singer had been put to an end:

**Philostr. *Apollon.* 4.14:**

παρήλθε καὶ ἐς τὸ τοῦ Ὀρφέως ἄδυτον προσορμισάμενος τῇ Λέσβῳ. φασὶ δὲ ἐνταῦθά ποτε τὸν Ὀρφέα μαντικῇ χαίρειν, ἔστε τὸν Ἀπόλλω ἐπιμεμελησθαι αὐτόν. ἐπειδὴ γὰρ μήτε ἐς Γρύνειον ἐφοίτων ἔτι ὑπὲρ χρησμῶν ἄνθρωποι μήτε ἐς Κλάρον μήτ' ἔνθα ὁ τρίπους ὁ Ἀπολλώνειος, Ὀρφεὺς δὲ ἔχρα μόνος ἄρτι ἐκ Θράκης ἢ κεφαλὴ ἤκουσα, ἐρίσταται οἱ χρησμοδοῦντι ὁ θεὸς καὶ 'πέπαυσο' ἔφη 'τῶν ἐμῶν, καὶ γὰρ δὴ 'καὶ ἄδοντά σε ἰκανῶς ἦνεγκα'.

He also visited in passing the shrine of Orpheus when he had put in at Lesbos. And they tell that it was here that Orpheus once on a time loved to prophesy, before Apollo had turned his attention to him. For when the latter found that men no longer flocked to Gryneium for the sake of oracles nor to Clarus nor <to Delphi> where is the tripod of Apollo, and that Orpheus was the only oracle, his head having come from Thrace, he presented himself before the giver of oracles and said: "Cease to meddle with my affairs, for I have already put up long enough with your vaticinations." (*Trans.* Conybeare 1912, 373-374).

According to contested and contradictory accounts, the Pythia descended for her divination into a crevice in the floor of the *adyton* in Delphi (Ustinova 2009a: 142-146; Ustinova 2009b; Ustinova 2018, 60–62).

Lucian of Samosata (in Syria, ca. 120-180), describing in his work *Remarks Addressed to an Illiterate* (*Adversus indoctum* or *Πρὸς τὸν ἀπαίδευστον καὶ πολλὰ βιβλία ὀνόμεινον* 11-12) (for the shrine of Orpheus at Lesbos cf. Philostr. *Apollon.* 4.14; Phanocles, *Frg.* 1.141) how Orpheus' head was floating towards the Lesbos Island, singing a *threnos* about himself, adds that **the said head had been buried exactly where later appeared the Baccheion**. This is usually thought of as a sanctuary of Bacchus, but I would add - with associations of an oracle. The record clearly suggests at least a two-stage functional transformation of an initial funerary complex into an oracle-shrine or heroon-baccheion:

**Luc. *Ind.* 11-12:**

[11] οὐκ ἄκαιρον δ' ἂν γένοιτο καὶ Λέσβιον μῦθόν τινα διηγῆσασθαί σοι πάλαι γενόμενον. ὅτε τὸν Ὀρφέα διεσπᾶσαντο αἱ Θράτται, φασὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ σὺν τῇ λύρᾳ εἰς τὸν Ἐβρον ἐμπεσοῦσαν ἐκβληθῆναι εἰς τὸν μέλανα κόλπον, καὶ ἐπιπλεῖν

γε τὴν κεφαλὴν τῆ λύρα, τὴν μὲν ἄδουσαν θρηῆνόν τινα ἐπὶ τῷ Ὀρφεῖ, ὡς λόγος, τὴν λύραν δὲ αὐτὴν ὑπηρεῖν τῶν ἀνέμων ἐμπιπτόντων ταῖς χορδαῖς, καὶ οὕτω μετ' ᾠδῆς προσενεχθῆναι τῆ Λέσβῳ, κάκεινους ἀνελομένους τὴν μὲν κεφαλὴν καταθάψαι ἵνα περ νῦν τὸ Βακχεῖον αὐτοῖς ἐστὶ, τὴν λύραν δὲ ἀναθεῖναι εἰς τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος τὸ ἱερόν, καὶ ἐπὶ πολὺ γε σώζεσθαι [12] αὐτήν.

I have also an old Lesbian story which is very much to the point. It is said that after Orpheus had been torn to pieces by the Thracian women, his head and his lyre were carried down the Hebrus into the sea; the head, it seems, floated down upon the lyre, singing Orpheus's dirge as it went, while the winds blew an accompaniment upon the strings. In this manner they reached the coast of Lesbos; the head was then taken up and buried on the site of the present temple of Bacchus, and the lyre was long preserved as a relic in the temple of Apollo (*Trans.* H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler - *The Works of Lucian* 1905, 271).

Similar suggestions for the construction and two-stage operation of an underground facility that Flavius Philostratus identified as an *adyton* (Philostr. *Apollon*. 4.14), may also be discerned in the story narrated by Conon (FGrH 26 F1, frg. 45) about how Orpheus was torn into pieces by the Thracian women (Fig. 2), according to which an oracle recommended that the singer's head be buried in order to save the country from starvation:

**Conon**, frg. 45:

Λοιμῶ δὲ τῆς χώρας, ὅτι μὴ ἀπητήθησαν δίκην αἱ γυναῖκες, κακουμένης, δεόμενοι λωφῆσαι τὸ δεινόν, ἔλαβον χρησμὸν τὴν κεφαλὴν τὴν Ὀρφέως ἦν ἀνευρόντες θάψωσι, τυχεῖν ἀπαλλαγῆς. Καὶ μόλις αὐτὴν περὶ τὰς ἐκβολὰς τοῦ Μέλητος δι' ἀλιέως ἀνεῦρον ποταμοῦ, καὶ τότε ἄδουσαν καὶ μηδὲν παθοῦσαν ὑπὸ τῆς θαλάσσης, μηδέ τι ἄλλο τῶν ὅσα κῆρες ἀνθρώπιναι νεκρῶν αἴσχη φέρουσιν, ἀλλ' ἐπακμάζουσαν αὐτὴν καὶ ζωϊκῶ καὶ τότε αἵματι μετὰ πολὺν χρόνον ἐπανθοῦσαν. Λαβόντες οὖν ὑπὸ σήματι μεγάλῳ θάπτουσι, **τέμενος** αὐτῶ περιεῖρξαντες, ὃ τέως μὲν **ἥρωον** ἦν, ὕστερον δ' ἐξενίκησεν **ἱερόν** εἶναι· θυσίαις τε γὰρ καὶ ὅσοις ἄλλοις θεοὶ τιμῶνται γεραίρεται· ἔστι δὲ γυναιξὶ παντελῶς ἄβατον.

The country was then hit by a plague, because the women did not pay a penalty, and they received an oracle that they must find and bury the head of Orpheus to obtain relief. And it was found by a fisherman at the outflow of the Meletos river, still singing and having suffered nothing from the sea, nor any of the other disfigurements dead bodies suffer, but in the bloom of health and still with living blood despite the long time. They took it and buried it under a great tomb, fencing it around (with **τέμενος**), and it was formerly a hero shrine (**ἥρωον**) but then it prevailed as a holy place (**ἱερόν**). For it is honored with the same sacrifices and other rites with which the gods are honored. Entry is completely barred to women.



**Fig. 2.** Maenad severing the head of Orpheus. Red figure vase painting. 480 BCE. Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Nationale (<https://aras.org/chapter-5-jules-cashford>)

As early as in the beginning of the 20th c., what Jane Ellen Harriston saw in the original sanctuary described by Lucian was a *necromanteion* (νεκρομαντεῖον), i.e., an **oracle of a dead hero** (Harrison 1908, 465). The tomb/entombment of the dead hero could sometimes be turned into an oracle. The “oracle” of Orpheus on the Lesbos, according to Philostratus’ version, was the most famous and especially revered. To emphasize this, he adds that people from as far away as Babylon and Persia would come there to consult him. The combined information outlines several stages of evolution of the sacred: as a cult space in a natural environment; as *adyton*, i.e., a sacred underground construction; and finally as a shrine, worshipped “with what else the gods were worshipped”. A similar situation was also suggested by the Amphiaraos’ Heroon in the tractate *On heroes* authored by Philostratus, and about whom it was said that “the earth is said to hold in a cleverly devised and secret adyton” (*Trans.* Aitken, Maclean) (τὸν δὲ Ἀμφιάρεων, ὃν λέγεται ἡ γῆ ἐν σοφῷ ἀδύτῳ ἔχειν) (Philostr. *Her.* 17.1).

By the end of his tragedy *Hecuba*, Euripides introduces a curious episode containing a prophecy by the “Thracian Dionysos”, the latter having been mentioned for the first time here (Eur. *Hec.* 1267: ὁ Θρηξὶ μάντις εἶπε Διόνυσος τάδε). Through the Thracian king Polymestor, who had already been blinded by the angry Trojan women, the Thracian Dionysos gave a prophecy about the fate of the Trojan queen Hecuba: maddened with grief, she would become a fiery-eyed bitch (1265: κύων γενήσεται πύρσ’ ἔχουσα δέργματα) and would find her death in the waves of the sea jumping of the mast of the ship (Eur. *Hec.* 1259-1263); her name would be immortalized forever by her tomb (σῆμα) on Cape Kynossema (Κυνὸς σῆμα), i.e., “The Sign of the Dog” of Thracian Chersonesos, which would be serving as a sign/seamark in the sea for the seamen: τύμβῳ δ’ ὄνομα σῶ κεκλήσεται κυνὸς ταλαίνης σῆμα, ναυτίλοις τέκμαρ (Eur. *Hec.* 1271, 1273).

With this background, the scholiast introduces an intriguing comment on the mantic skills shown by Orpheus and again in a Dionysian context, very much like the information of Lucian's *Baccheion*:

**Schol. Eur. *Hec.* 1267:**

οἱ μὲν περὶ τὸ Πάγγαιον εἶναι τὸ μαντεῖόν φασι τοῦ Διονύσου, οἱ δὲ περὶ τὸν Αἴμον, οὗ εἰσι καὶ Ὀρφείως ἐν σανίσιν ἀναγραφαί, περὶ ὧν φησιν ἐν Ἀλκίσιτιδι ὀυδέ τι φάρμακον Θρήσσαις ἐν σανίσιν, τὰς Ὀρφεῖα κατέγραψε γῆρυς. ὅτι δὲ καὶ Διόνυσος μαντις, καὶ ἐν Βάκχαις φησὶ ἄμαντις δ' ὁ δαίμων ὄδε· τὸ γὰρ βακχεύσιμον καὶ <τὸ> μανιδῶδες μαντικὴν πολλὴν ἔχει'.

Some say, that the oracle of Dionysus was in Pangaeus, other - in Haemus, where were some writings of Orpheus upon tablets, about which he [Euripides] speaks in *Alcestis* [v. 966]: “Nor is there some kind of cure in the Thracian tablets which Orpheus’ word fulfilled”. And because Dionysus was also a prophet, in *Bacchae* [v. 288] he says: “This god is a prophet, too, for in his rites the Bacchic celebrations and the madness a huge prophetic power is unleashed”.

In fact, the literal translation of γῆρυς in the passage talking about the tablets full of “Orpheus’ speech” is rather a “voice, sound”, and not a “word, speech”, as it is usually translated or interpreted! This is another situation where Orpheus appears to perform the function of Dionysius’ *promantis*, filling the tablets with his voice/song, with the tablet being where the prophecies are recorded... In fact, these verses (962-972) in Euripides’ tragedy *Alcestis* (first staged at the ancient dramatic festival of Great Dionysia in 438 BC) was the earliest perceptible hint of Orpheus’ mantic skills. To them must be added the testimony of Philochorus (ca. 340 - ca. 261 BC) in Book One of his tractate *Περὶ μαντικῆς* (*On prophecies*: FGrH Jacoby, n. 328; Philochori Fragmenta), where it was claimed that Orpheus was a soothsayer (Ὀρφεῖα Φιλόχορος μάντιν ἱστορεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ περὶ μαντικῆς; cf. Clem. Alex. *Strom.* I, p. 334, D, Syll.). And in the context thereof, comes the assertion that again in Book One of *On prophecies*, Philochorus had cited the Orpheus’ poems, which said: “I am not an ignorant in prophecies”. This fragment was saved in the above quoted passage from the scholion of Euripides’ tragedy *Alcestis*:

**Schol. Eur. *Alcest.* 968:**

Φιλόχορος ἐν α΄ περὶ μαντικῆς ἐκτίθησιν αὐτοῦ (Ὀρφείως) ποιήματα ἔχοντα οὕτως· Ὅυτοι ἀριστεροῦς εἰμι θεοπροπίας’, ἅστινας κατέγραψεν εἰς σανίδας.

One gets the impression that these “poems” are actually the scriptures/prophecies recorded on the tablets. Philochorus may be trusted in all things connected with divination, as being descended from a priestly family, with the authority of an influential soothsayer and interpreter of oracles. He himself narrates in Book Nine of his *Atthis* that he held the post of a μάντις καὶ ἱεροσκόπος (a soothsayer and an inspector of sacrificial victims) in Athens in 306 BC, which

was when he interpreted an omen at the Acropolis (FGrH Jacoby, n. 328, frg. 67; Dionys. *Din.* 100.3; Suda s.v. Φιλόχορος: Φιλόχορος· Κύκνου Ἀθηναῖος, μάντις καὶ ἱεροσκόπος; Tober 2017, 460-484 with sources and literature).

Moreover, the thus highlighted circle of information should be supplemented a note by Strabon (7. Frg. 18), where he mentions Orpheus's divination skills (μαντικῆς) along with his skills as a magician (ἄνδρα γόητα), musician, and mystagogos into the mysteries:

**Strab.** 7.frg. 18:

ὅτι ὑπὸ τῷ Ὀλύμπῳ πόλις Δῖον. ἔχει δὲ κώμην πλησίον Πίμπλειαν: ἐνταῦθα τὸν Ὀρφέα διατρῖψαί φησι τὸν Κίκονα, **ἄνδρα γόητα**, ἀπὸ μουσικῆς ἅμα καὶ **μαντικῆς** καὶ τῶν περὶ τὰς τελετὰς ὀργιασμῶν ἀγυρτεύοντα τὸ πρῶτον, εἴτ' ἤδη καὶ μειζόνων ἀξιούντα ἑαυτὸν καὶ ὄχλον καὶ δύναμιν κατασκευαζόμενον: τοὺς μὲν οὖν ἔκουσίως ἀποδέχεσθαι, τινὰς δ' ὑπιδόμενους ἐπιβουλήν καὶ βίαν ἐπισυστάντας διαφθεῖραι αὐτόν. ἐνταῦθα πλησίον καὶ τὰ Λεῖβηθρα.

At the base of Olympus is a city Dion. And it has a village near by, Pimpleia. Here lived Orpheus, the Ciconian, it is said - a wizard who at first collected money from his music, together with his soothsaying and his celebration of the orgies connected with the mystic initiatory rites, but soon afterwards thought himself worthy of still greater things and procured for himself a throng of followers and power. Some, of course, received him willingly, but others, since they suspected a plot and violence, combined against him and killed him. And near here, also, is Leibethra (*Trans.* Jones 1924).

The mantic and magical properties of the Orpheus song are the most characteristic attribute of the Orpheus mythology. This is not about usual music making, but about **psychagogia** (ψυχαγωγία) and about **katabasic poetry**, about chants - spells, about the bewitching power with its music to touch the souls of the dead and to be their guide in the Beyond. As early as in the Aeschylean tragedy *Edonoi* from the tetralogy *Lycourgeia* (staged at the ancient dramatic festival of Great Dionysia, which could have been put on stage ca. 467 BC) (TrGF Radt F60; see Lozanova-Stancheva 1993, 61 sqq. with literature), Orpheus appears to have also been indirectly associated with the characteristic *mousomantis* (cf. μουσόμαντις: Schol. Arist. *Av.* 276: ποτ' ἔσθ' ὁ μουσόμαντις, / ἄλλος ἀβροβάτης, ὃν σθένει <>...), literally “prophesying with his singing”; this characteristic defines him as possessing the Knowledge of the past, present and future that can be transmitted musically. However, his μουσικὴ τέχνη is not just a musical art, but on a basic semantic level it is a complicated artistic system: vocal, sung or recited, choral or monophonic song, poetry, and instrumental music, rhythm, movement, and dance. To this complex notion is integrated the inspiring divine and mysterious dimension that stands beyond the technical formal musical skills of the singer. In this sense, Orpheus is a mediator, teacher, and guarantor of world harmony and balance. Orpheus' mysterious musical skills are primarily charged with ritual significance associated with his journeys to the Beyond. Education



through μουσική τέχνη had a direct impact on the integration of the individual into the community and, respectively, into the rituals of the community (Lozanova-Stancheva 2022, 17-30, see especially p. 17). Therefore, even in the mythological model on which the Orpheus tradition is constructed, we could detect reflections of ritual and religious concepts designed in the architectural features of some subtumular constructions (Russeva 2000; Valeva 2013; cf. most recently Sarbova 2022a; Sarbova 2022b).

### Archaeoacoustics and archaeoastronomical research and experiments

Within the panacademic project entitled *The Thracians - Genesis and Ethnic Development, Cultural Identities, Civilization Interactions and the Heritage of Antiquity*, in 2017 and 2018, a working group consisting of the following members: Prof. DSc Valeria Fol, Prof. Dr. Tihomir Trifonov, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ivan Simeonov, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aleksandar Aleksiev, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Georgi Nehrizov, Dr. Aleksandra Fol, Dr. Georgi Dimkov and operatic bass singer Harry Draganov of the Grand Théâtre de Genève conducted some acoustic studies with male voices in some subtumular constructions in the Kazanlak Valley, the Mezek Tomb, in Tomb No. 13, and the Sveshtari Tomb in the Sbornyanovo Archaeological Reserve, as well as the rock-cut sanctuary Gluhite Kamani (The Deaf Stones) in the Eastern Rhodopes, which again provoked the assumption of their possible functioning as initiation temples and places for katabasic initiation (Fol, A., Fol, V. 2018, 77-95; see Fol, A., Grahl 2009, 127-134; Fol, V. et al. 2016, 84-87; Fol, A. et al. 2017, 195-204). The magical functions of sound were investigated in sacred spaces - **heroa, spaces for mysterial initiations**, where the faithful through a specific type of word-music or melodic recitation communicated with the divine. An important point in this context is the specification by Flavius Philostratus in his dialogue *On heroes* (28.11) and in the biography of Apollonius of Tyana (4.14) that the head of Orpheus would actually *sing* its prophecies, which is suggested by other ancient accounts. The results of the experiment of Valeria Fol and team showed that in some subtumular constructions, such as the Grifoni, the Golyama Arsenalka, Golyama Kosmatka, in the Kazanlak Tomb (original), and in the Mezek Tomb, consciously sought acoustics were achieved (Fol, V. 2020, 164). For the hypothesis proposed here, it is important to note the finding made for the Golyama Arsenalka Mound that when the door is open, everything said, chanted and sung in the domed room, which plays the role of a sound amplifier, is heard outside by those standing in front of the facade (Fol, V. 2020, 166). It seems the same could be said for the situation at the Grifoni.

**The people outside could hear, but they would not understand what was being said/sung, and therefore - someone would have to interpret it for them!** That was the case in Delphi (Holland 1933, 201-214). This is attested to by Herodotus, who states that “there is a priestess who utters the oracle (of Dionysus in Thracia), as at Delphi; it is no more complicated here than there” (*Trans.* Godley 1920) (πρόμαντις δὲ ἡ χρέωσα κατὰ περ ἐν Δελφοῖσι, καὶ οὐδὲν ποικιλώτερον) (Hdt. 7.111.2).

The complex plan of most subtumular constructions with a well-formed vestibule, dromos, dome and/or a 'burial' chamber in which votive offerings are placed, but not always with relics of the buried (!), suggests rituals with different levels of access for different categories of participants (Rabajiev 2008, 82-86). The limited space of the dome camera (for example, the one in Golyama Kosmatka Mound is 3.35 m in diameter and 4.50 m high!) does not allow the presence in it of more than one person, i.e., except the priest/priestess *promantis* (πρόμαντις). He/she would “speak” in the name of the supernatural/divine, being filled with them, falling into a state of ἐνθουσιασμός and into a prophetic *mania*. The vestibule would possibly be a place for the priest (προφήτης) who asks the questions of the oracle and records the answers on tablets (Strab. 9.3.5; Plutarch. *Moralia* 397BC) that would be interpreted to the people by him thereafter. The fragment by Philochorus mentioned in the scholion to Euripides' tragedy *Hecuba* (Schol. Eur. *Hec.* 1267), leaves no doubt that the oracles were in poetic form.

This mechanism of divination could be seen in the depictions of three red-figure vases from the middle of the 5th century BC, as well as on a series of Etruscan engraved mirrors from the 4th century BC. The earliest depiction is on an Attic red-figure hydria, from the Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig, dated to the mid-5th century BC (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Attic red-figure hydria. Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig (<https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/K20.7.html>)



**Fig. 4.** Attic red-figure kylix, the Painter of Ruvo 1346, ca. 420-410 BC, exterior side A. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Corpus Christi College (inv. No. 25) ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Painter\\_of\\_Ruvo\\_1346\\_ARV\\_1401\\_1\\_head\\_of\\_Orpheus\\_giving\\_oracles\\_-\\_two\\_Muses.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Painter_of_Ruvo_1346_ARV_1401_1_head_of_Orpheus_giving_oracles_-_two_Muses.jpg))

Famous and very intriguing is the Cambridge kylix (Fig. 4) dated ca. 410 BC (Lozanova-Stancheva 2018, 135-146). A beardless youth vested in a *chlamys* (identified frivolously by some researchers as Musaeus - Linforth 1941, 125-133) with broad-brimmed hat of the *petasos* type usually meaning traveller, is sitted with a *diptychon* and a *styliu*s in his hands opposite a speaking (prophecies?) head. Another young beardless man stands facing them leaning on a branch in his hand, identified as Apollo, who with a commanding gesture seems to dictate the divinations of the head and the man recording them (Harrison 1908, 465-466; Robert 1917, 146-147; Schmidt 1972, 128-137). The image could illustrate the mechanism of recording the “voice” of the oracle on the tablets referred to by the scholiast to Euripides’ tragedy *Hecuba* (Schol. Eur. *Hec.* 1267). Already in the first publication of the drawing of the red-figure kylix in 1857, Julio Minervini (Minervini 1857, Tav. 33-40, cf. especially 33-39, Tav. IV, gig 1 e 2; Garezu 1994, 68) associates this scene with the history narrated by Philostratus and telling about Orpheus’ oracle on the Lesbos. Thus, this became the first publication that systematized all previously known literary information about the “Lesbian Oracle” and imposed it as a reflection of a real cult situation.

The **soothsayer** would usually hold a major role in the administration of the temple/oracle and the priestly collegium associated with it. The *Bessi of Satrae* in Thrace were precisely those who interpreted the oracles (Βησσοὶ δὲ τῶν Σατρῆων εἰσὶ οἱ προφητεύοντες τοῦ ἱεροῦ), while a priestess - like the Pythia in Delphi - pronounced the oracles according to Herodotus' famous description of the oracle of Dionysus in Thrace (Hdt. 7.111.1-2), i.e., made the connection between the forces of the Beyond and the present, between the divine and the human. It is very likely that the closure of access to the subterranean construction and the cessation of its open functioning were related to the possible death of the priest, the προφήτης, and/or the interruption of the priestly lineage caused by his possible burial.

Originally in Delphi, the oracles were pronounced by a priestess, the *promantis*, once a year (February/March), which was the birthday of Apollo (Plutarch. *Moralia* 438C), and during the Classical era, three priestesses would give oracles nine times a year during the period when Apollo was believed to reside at Delphi. Archeoastronomical investigations of some subterranean constructions suggest that they were used for sacred activities that followed the solar cycle. An example of this would be the facility under the Golyama Kosmatka Mound, where during the **winter solstice** the beam of light penetrates through the open (!) door that leads to the stone bed/bench opposite the entrance. During the **summer solstice**, a ray of light reaches the recessed circular altar in the shape of a solar disk with rays in the centre of the floor under the keystone in the shape of the sun (Fol, V. 2020, 166 with literature). Valeria Fol believes that the structure functioned as a temple for the dedication and measurement of time on the solar calendar (Fol, V. 2020, 166). To this might be added the hypothesis of the performance of divinations associated possibly with the time of death and birth of the sun god, depending on the position of the sun on the celestial sphere similar to the situation at Delphi. Such functions would explain the repeated and periodic opening and visiting of the facility on the relevant days of the year. The so-called 'burial' gifts in some of the structures may complement their characteristics as a kind of treasury, an *adyton*, where part of the gifts of the pilgrims came to receive an oracle were housed (Fol, V. 2007, 113, note 20). That would explain the absence of any trace of human burial, which is not necessarily true when the facility also functioned as a heroon. Based on the interpretation of Eleni Konsolaki (Konsolaki 2002, 25-36; see 27 with note 5-28) of the designated as a bench/ritual bed structure in the tomb at Methana, V. Fol draws attention to a possible ritual of placing gifts on it, as is the case with the stone step "bed" in the third chamber of the Golyama Kosmatka. It could be hypothesized that the names written on some of these gifts are not those of the deceased, but of the seeker of oracle from the gods/forces of the Beyond.

It is striking that all the subterranean structures in Ancient Thrace are distinguished from one another by their architecture and the mythological patterns that it follows. If the subterranean construction in the Shushmanets, Helvetia and Sveshtari mounds does not respond to tones, the one in the Grifoni Mound has the best acoustics of all studied. Helvetia and Sveshtari are not domed structures. From an architectural point of view, the building under Shushmanets is unique with its arch-shaped and column-supported façade

reflecting mythological suggestions of the Transition to the Beyond (Lozanova-Stancheva 2010, 40; Sarbova 2022a, 68-85; Sarbova 2022b, 24-29; Sarbova 2023a, 65-77; Sarbova 2023b, 271-289).

The Golyama Kosmatka Mound, however, in addition to all the questions it raises, is particularly intriguing due to the sculptural head ritually buried 7 m from the façade. Discovered in 2004 by the team of the Thracological Expedition for Mound Studies (Trakolozhka ekspeditsiya za mogilni prouchvaniya - TEMP) led by Dr. Georgi Kitov (National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) the head was covered with unworked, roughly crushed stones (Dimitrova 2019, 65-107). This situation has provoked a lively discussion, giving rise to a number of hypothetical interpretations dominated by the motif of the soothsaying Orpheus' head (Dimitrova 2019 with a review of the hypotheses and literature). Whether this ritual act was inspired by the mythological tradition traced here, reflecting the actual practice in Thracian antiquity of sacred acts related to divination, will remain at least for a long time a mystery to researchers (Kitov 2005; Fol, V. 2007, 256-258; Marazov 2007, 91-130, and others).

All that has been said thus far, hopefully, argues another hypothetical complex function of some of the subtumular constructions as oracles (*necromanteia*), which in addition to a place to receive oracles on a certain day of the solar year cycle, fulfilled the role of treasuries for storing the sacred gifts of pilgrims and prayors.

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### Abbreviations

**Clem. Alex. Strom.:** Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata*  
**Dionys. Din.:** Dionysius Halicarnasseus, *De Dinarcho*  
**Eur. Hec.:** Euripides, *Hecuba*  
**FGrH:** Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum  
**Hdt.:** Herodotus, *Historiae*  
**Luc. Ind.:** Lucianus Samosatensis, *Adversus indoctum*  
**PGM:** Papyri Graecae magicae  
**Phanocles, Frg.:** Phanocles, *Fragmenta*  
**Philostr. Apollon.:** Flavius Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii Tyanei*  
**Philostr. Her.:** Flavius Philostratus, *Heroicus*  
**Plutarch. Moralia:** Plutarchus, *Moralia*  
**Schol. Arist. Av.:** Scholia in Aristophanem, *Scholia in Aves*  
**Schol. Eur. Alcest.:** Scholia in Euripidem, *Scholia in Alcestin*  
**Schol. Eur. Hec.:** Scholia in Euripidem, *Scholia in Hecubam*  
**Strab.:** Strabo, *Geographica*  
**Suda:** Suidae Lexicon

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