

## THE TOPONYMS, HYDRONYMS AND CHARACTERS OF THE AFTERWORLD IN THE ROMAN CULTURE

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***Abstract:** The Roman afterworld, highly influenced by the Greek culture, was full of infernal characters which haunted the imagination of the living, generating an underworld topography and a route upon which the souls of the dead had to pass on their way to their final destination. All these were conditioned by the performance of specific burial rituals meant to ensure a safe passage of the soul through the Orcus and the Acherusian Fields in order to reach Tartarus and the Elysian Fields. The present article aims to give a review of the toponyms and hydronyms of the Inferno as well as of the characters of the underworld which govern this imaginary landscape, which, later on, after the emergence of the Christian belief, will be transposed to the Christian landscape of the afterworld through interpretatio Christiana.*

***Keywords:** Landscape, Toponymy, Inferno, Afterworld, Latin literature*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The system of beliefs in the afterlife is not personal, but a place in which people imagine that their beloved departed to continue their existence after death, and perform the same type of activities as the living (Mitch Hodge, 2011). One of the greatest fears of humans in relation to the underworld was connected to the Inferno, to the existence in the afterlife of a place of punishment or reward. In the beginning, the Inferno was a mere house for all the dead, all the shadows who left their graves (Cumont, 1922) except those who brought offense to the deities (Kun, 2018).

Once the representation of the Inferno becomes more complex, curiosity pushes people to visit their future place of residence. Consequently, visits to Inferno are mentioned in the earliest text of religious literature. This article aims to present the toponymy and characters of the afterworld present in the Latin written texts starting with the second half of the 1st century B.C.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to get a clear representation of the topography of the afterworld as well as to find how the toponymy and hydronymy of the underworld are transmitted in classical literature until the middle ages, highly influencing the way in which the Christian world understands and represents the afterlife, we research some of the most prominent literary works of the ancient Latin literature, as Roman authors give a detailed representation of the afterworld, situated underground, a hidden world, accessible exclusively to the souls of the departed, to the chthonic deities who are allowed to pass from one world to another, eager to find what the future holds for them. The most important and accurate description of the afterworld (Culianu, 2002) is considered the Nekyia scene in Song VI in Aeneid by Virgil (McLardy, 2014, Solmsen 1972), influenced by the Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey* (Adams, 2007), as well as by the literary tradition which includes, besides Homer, influenced from Hesiod, Lucretius, Horace and Plato (McLardy, 2014). This scene gives the most precise topographic description of the underworld (Capdecombe, 2003), a real guide of the Inferno described by Aeneas who spends a day in the Inferno, mapping the underworld.

## 3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In Greek mythology, the routes to Hades, the dark, underground realm, led through dark underground passages, or by navigating towards the west and over the Okeanos (the Western Sea), which surrounded the world. Hades is described as being surrounded by water, sometimes identifies with the sea (Okeanos) (Retief and Cilliers, 2005), sometimes with other infernal rivers, Acheron, Cocytus, Pyriphlegethon, Styx, and Lethe, each having different colors which illustrate their specific nature and course. The living can only visit the Inferno for extraordinary circumstances.

In Virgil's Aeneid, Aeneas asks for the help of Sibyl to be able to descend into the inferno to visit Anchises. Sibyl behaves as a mystagogue for Aeneas (Bremmer, 2009) and asks him to bring her the Gold Bough in order to give it to Persephone as her "rightful tribute" (Chevalier, 1994). In the second century, Lucian of Samosata also imagines the descent into the Underworld of Menippus who is helped by a magician (Dickie, 2001.2003), after performing a specific ritual in order to fool the masters of the underworld. While seeking the Gold Bough, Aeneas is guided by doves, the gift of Aphrodite. The motif of the birds leading the way derives from the legends of colonization, and the presence of two birds is an influence of the legend on the foundation of Rome. The two doves can be associated with the dove who lead the Argonauts through the Clashing Rocks. The Gold Bough is from oak and, just like the Golden Fleece, is glowing in the middle of a dark forest, both having the role of guiding lights (Bremmer, 2009). The bough was essential in the rituals of Persephone, without which people could not observe her rituals. It is well known that the novices in the rituals of Persephone at Eleusis had a pilgrim's rod made of a single myrtle branch or a bunch of myrtle twigs brought together by rings. Consequently, by bringing the Gold Bough to Persephone, the queen of the Afterworld, Aeneas behaves as an Eleusinian initiate, who, prior to the initiation, had to perform a ritual bath (Bremmer, 2009).

Aeneas is given a clear warning: *“the path to hell is easy: / black Dis’s door is open night and day: / but to retrace your steps, and go out to the air above, / that is work, that is the task”* (Virgil, Aeneid, Book VI, 126-129).

### **3.1. Entries to the Inferno**

The Romans believed that the entries to the Inferno were situated in accessible, but remote and hidden places. The access to the underworld is described with geographical precision: they are situated on remote mountain peaks or tall rocks which have deep caves, partially hidden by dense forests, and protected by the furious waters of the seas. Virgil locates one of the entries to the Inferno in the swamps of Acheron, near Cumae, in Campina, lake Fusaro today. The swamp is considered one of the places through which Acheron, the infernal river flowed (Powell, 2017). There was also another entry, in the same region, near the modern village Ariano Irpino, in the vicinity of a volcanic lake (Casagrande-Kim, 2021) or near a cave in Tesalia; other entries in Orcus were situated in Scythia, on the northern shore of the Black Sea, in Attica at Elefsina, and on Mount Laphystius in Boeotia, others were in Peloponnese at Cape Taenarus, also known as Cape Matapan, at Lerna, at Troezen and at Corinth (Hermione) (Casagrande-Kim, 2021).

### **3.2. The Orcus**

The Inferno ruled by Hades resembles a cave, surrounded by black seas with a pestilential smell. Virgil describes the journey of Aeneid accompanied by Sibyl to Orcus, after performing a series of well-established rituals. The antechamber of the after-world, Orcus is the first region accessed by any soul, living or dead (Panayotakis, 2016). It is represented as an immense open mouth that swallows the souls of humans. Geographically, Orcus spans from one of the terrestrial entries to the shores of the rivers Styx and the other infernal rivers – Acheron, which flows into the river Styx, and its affluent Cocytus, marking the edge between Orcus and the Acherusian Fields. The rivers of Orcus - Cocytus, Acheron, and Styx are slow due to mud and silt.

Orcus is an independent land, with clear boundaries, and represents a passage between the land of the living and the land of the dead, being a land of transition by nature. The souls of the dead hurry to go through it as soon as possible to reach their final, eternal destination. The Romans considered it more desirable to dwell in Tartarus for eternity than to linger in Orcus for too long, in a state of suspension, called *larvae* (Marinescu, 2005), without belonging to a particular category or class of souls, the only circumstance in which the souls were able to return to the earth was when they were summoned explicitly through necromantic rituals, but only the spirits of the recently departed were able to return, as their souls hadn’t reached their final destination and still awaited judgment in the land of Orcus (Casagrande-Kim, 2021).

The fear of the antechambers of the after-world is an old theme. Bremmer (2009) mentions the presence in the tombs of Greece of several gold sheets or plates with the inscription “go to the right” on the dead bodies. These had the purpose of guiding the souls of the departed in their journey to their final destination in the after-world (Casagrande-Kim, 2021).

After exiting the gate of Orcus, Aeneas encounters for the first time the flowing sands of Cocytus which surround a forest that spawns till the shores of the river Styx. The

departed follow a climbing path which becomes a wider sacred road” beyond the entry gates. On their journey through the land of Orcus, the souls must reach the guarded shores of the lake of Mnemosyne and drink water only from it, and not from somewhere else, in order to proceed to their final destination. Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, was a titanide and one of the daughters of Uranus and Gaea. Horace and Apuleius present this route as an easy path, but inevitable and with no return, as only the road to death may be. Seneca describes a landscape of deserted fields, barely perceivable in the darkness of the eternal night.

In the first half of the land of Orcus, the road goes straight, but in the second half there is an obvious change in the landscape, the path is more intricate and follows forests and rivers which flow in the river Styx and generate marshy pools with grasses and reed. Upon entering the land of Orcus, Aeneas and Sibyl meet several grim characters: Grief and Vengeful care; Pallid sickness, Sad old age, Fear and Persuasive hunger, Vile need, and Poverty, Ruin and Misfortune. On the right, they meet Sleep and Evil pleasures of the mind, and, on the left, death-dealing War and the steel chambers of Fury and mad Discord. Bremmer (2009) mentions that it is here that the War, Disease, and the vengeful Eumenides also live. In the middle of the realm of Orcus is an enormous dark tree where empty dreams reside. Orcus is also the home of other winged monsters and mythological creatures: centaurs and Scylla, Briareus, the Hydra of Lerna, the Chimera, Gorgons, and Harpies. They guard the road which leads from the entry towards the most remote realms of Orcus to the shores of the Styx, where Charon, the boatman, takes the souls of the departed on the other side for a dime (Casagrande-Kim, 2021). The souls walk in complete darkness and pass empty houses, rivers, the tree, and the guards, which are the main features of the Latin Orcus.

The souls of the dead crowd on the shores of the Styx to get on the boat of Charon, but he would only take those for whom the funeral rites had been performed according to the tradition (Adams, 2007). It is only they that can reach their final destination (Casagrande-Kim, 2021). the souls of the drowned or of the unburied must linger for one hundred years before being allowed to cross the river to their final destination. Chiara Botturi and Trac (2016) consider that this belief was the consequence of the ideological relation grounded on the Roman ideas of death, the afterlife, and the role of the burial and of performing funeral rituals.

### **3.3. The Acherusian Fields**

After crossing on the boat of Charon on the other side of the river Styx the road takes the souls of the departed through the Acherusian Fields. They are an intermediary region situated between the Orcus, Tartar, and Elysium (Casagrande-Kim, 2021). They are represented by Claudian as being surrounded by the river Styx. In Pharsalus, the soul of a soldier tells a story while standing on the shores in Orcus and gazes on the other side, where crowds of Roman leaders were sent to the Elysian Fields as well as to the Tartar. As soon as Sibyl and Aeneas get off the boat of Charon on the other side of the river Styx and go through the cave of Cerberus, as through a tunnel, after Sibyl sleeps Cerberus. On the other side, they encounter the souls of very young children, the innocently convicted, the suicides, as well as famous mythological women, such as Evadne, Laodamia, and Dido, the lover of Aeneas. The last category of souls encountered in the most remote regions between Acheron and Tartar/ Elysium are the famous men of war.

This second region crossed by Aeneas during his journey stretches from the shores of the river Styx until a road crossing where the road splits in two directions, one leading to Tartar and the other to the Elysian Fields. The road to the Elysian Fields is only for the blessed souls goes through the Asphodel Meadows. The road to Tartarus leads through the Valley of Tears and is followed by the wicked. There are only a few sources that describe the Acherusian Fields and are not very detailed, probably due to the minor importance of the souls that live there. The Acherusian Fields are inhabited not by individuals, but rather by vast and anonymous crowds, made of half-gods, heroines, and a large part of ordinary dead, divided into tribes and families. The souls of the dead may cross freely from one region of the Acherusian Fields to another but are not allowed to leave it. Seneca gives a brief but comprehensive description of the region, which resembles a wide barren, and deserted land, covered by darkness and governed by Hades.

### **3.4. Tartar and the Elysian Fields**

In the vicinity of the cave of Cerberus dwells Minos, the Judge. He separates the souls and places them according to various categories either in Tartar or Elysium, where there are other two judges. By placing Minos near the cave of Cerberus, Virgil underlines the idea that Minos was the judge of all the souls which, after being led by Charon, had to be directed to either one of the infernal realms, Tartar or Elysium, for eternity (Casagrande-Kim, 2021). In the place of judgment, Minos sits on a throne and is surrounded by the goddesses of vengeance and retribution, or the Erinyes (Grypeou, 2020). At the gates of Tartar, sits Rhadamanthus who carries out the judgment of Minos and sets appropriate punishments for all the souls. Tartarus is the deepest region of the underworld and is represented as having a gate and an antechamber.

As Bremer (2009) mentions, the road split where Aeneas is guided towards the right is a standard motif in the eschatological myths of Plato. This elaborate description of the after-world, with standard toponymy, the boat of Charon, the road split between Tartar to the left and Elysium to the right, the emphasis on the judgment, the theories of metempsychosis and purification underline, as McLardy (2014) states, an eschatology of Orphic- Pythagorean origin. Virgil describes Tartarus in Aeneid as bordered by the river Phlegethon, the river of fire, always very violent. The entry to Tartarus is guarded day and night by one of the Furies, Tisiphone. No mortal can enter Tartarus, from where howls, groans, and dreadful sounds can be heard.

Aeacus, with a similar function as Rhadamanthus, is the judge who sends the souls to various regions of the Elysian fields, according to their virtues and status in life. Aeneas and Sibyl are only allowed to enter the Elysian Fields upon presenting Persephone the Gold Bough. The Elysian Fields are crossed by the calm, fresh waters of the river Lethe near the palace of Hades and his wife, Persephone, and of the river Eridanus, which runs towards the upper world through a forest and smells of laurels (Bremmer, 2009).

Aeacus and Rhadamanthus support Minos by finalizing the verdicts of the judge of all souls. The location confirms the role of Minos in judging all the souls. Apuleius places at the entry Parcae, deities which control the life-thread, and destiny into the death of all mortals.



#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

We may conclude that the Latin literature represents the Inferno as divided into four main regions: Orcus, the Acherusian Fields, with the Valley of Tears, and The Fields with Asfodes, where the road to the Tartar and the Elysian Fields was situated. Each of these regions was delimited by four infernal rivers. Acheron - *the river of woe*– represents the pain of remorse; Cocytus – *the river of lamentation*- stands for the pain and sorrows of mortals; Pyriphlegethon – *the fire-flaming river*- the river of the human wrath, the flames of passion; Styx – *the river of hate*, of shuddering, symbolizes everything that makes people hate each other: and Lethe – *the river of oblivion, or forgetfulness* – represents the forgetfulness of the souls who have lost all memory of their former lives, for Lashante (2020) it represents the distancing from everything from the past in order to proceed forward. Casagrande-Kim (2021) states that for the Latin authors all the rivers from Hades, either friendly or not, were unsurmountable boundaries that bordered all four regions and prevented the souls from reaching forbidden areas, other than those to which they were assigned.

The literature on death and the afterlife gives a rather conventional image, with topographic precision of the after-world, with rivers, hills, valleys, fields, and forests, which in Tartarus become barren and deserted, as well as some architectural structures which replicate real landscapes, underlining the idea that the afterlife is a continuance of the life on earth. The study of the chthonic topography not only contributes to a better understanding of the religious and cultural beliefs on the afterlife but brings forth a set of well-established conventions. *Pater familia* and his family had a clear image of the afterlife and searched for a set of rituals for guiding the souls of the departed on their journey to their final destination, the Elysium. After the apparition of the Christian belief, representation and topography of the Christian afterlife will receive numerous influences and transpositions, and reinterpretations from the Latin beliefs through *interpretatio Christiana*.

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