

Copyright  
by  
Nancy Marie Hoffman  
2014

**The Report Committee for Nancy Marie Hoffman  
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**Mysticism and Allegory in Porphyry's *De antro nympharum***

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

---

Robert J. Hankinson

---

L. Michael White

**Mysticism and Allegory in Porphyry's *De antro nympharum***

**by**

**Nancy Marie Hoffman, B.A.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2014**

## **Dedication**

For Kate Bush, who has perhaps unknowingly been suspended in Gaffa with me throughout this project.

## **Abstract**

### **Mysticism and Allegory in Porphyry's *De antro nympharum***

Nancy Marie Hoffman, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisor: Robert J. Hankinson

This report examines Porphyry's *De antro nympharum* and its eclectic mixture of philosophy, allegory, and mysticism in the form of a Homeric commentary. The paper situates Porphyry's commentary in the broader tradition of Homeric interpretation with special attention to Stoic exegesis and Platonic views on poetry and myth. It also contextualizes Porphyry's philosophy in terms of the mystery cults, particularly Mithraism, that had grown very popular by Porphyry's time. The paper argues that Porphyry devised a practice of reading intended to promote a level of philosophical contemplation beyond the level of rational discourse, in keeping with the Neoplatonic philosophy of his teacher, Plotinus, and that this practice is especially evident in the *De antro nympharum*.

## Table of Contents

Mysticism and Allegory in Porphyry's <i>De antro nympharum</i> .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Vita et Opera Porphyrii .....	6
Allegory and Metaphor for the Ancients .....	8
History of Homeric Allegory .....	12
The Mysteries and Philosophy .....	26
Language and Transcendence .....	40
Porphyry's Cave and Philosopher in Later Antiquity .....	45
Conclusions .....	50
Bibliography .....	52

## **Mysticism and Allegory in Porphyry's *De antro nympharum***

### **Introduction**

From an extremely early point, Hellenic identity arranged itself around a set of key components. One of these important markers of Hellenism was the Greek language itself, a language of great antiquity and of a major, early literary tradition. This tradition was based especially around the Homeric epics and also around the somewhat later Homeric hymns. These poems performed many functions. The epics, alongside their more readily-apparent narrative and socio-cultural value, also provided important insights about the nature of the gods and the universe. The hymns, chiefly imprecations to the gods, often included major narrative components such as the hymn to Demeter. In each of these poetic modes there is an ever-present relationship between the verse and the gods. This relationship is not the same between the epics and the hymns—for instance, the Homeric speaker primarily speaks of Achilles' rage and of Odysseus' travails to the extent that the muse inspires him, whereas the hymns are in honor of a specific god and contain hope for favorable intervention on the part of that god. While the particulars differ between these two modes, poetry and prayer, the way they each allow an individual to evoke—in the case of epic—and invoke—in the case of hymn—the divine is central to the role that poetry would assume in later antiquity, from the Classical age onward. This relationship finds major expression in Porphyry's Homeric commentaries, which were at

once deeply steeped in the long tradition of Homeric interpretation and also a vehicle for Porphyry's Neoplatonic philosophy.

Homeric epic became for the ancients a source of all kinds of wisdom. Some sought historical fact in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; others sought self-aware philosophizing; still others looked for the hidden wisdom of lost sages encoded in the exploits of the Homeric heroes and the quarrels of their gods. Yet as Plato noted, seeking rational cosmic truths in the epics was at first glance a fool's errand. The gods of Homer behaved irrationally, unjustly, and less-than-divinely. Homer's inconsistency was a fundamental conflict for those who wished to treat the poems as philosophical texts. This conflict gave rise to inventive solutions: for instance, Stoic readers appealed to etymological arguments to discover key principles of Stoic physics and cosmology in the Homeric poems. If Hera was a fictional accretion surrounding a core truth about the nature of ἄη and its interaction with the other parts of the cosmos, her intractability toward Zeus in the *Iliad* can become symbolic of cosmic forces, rather than just petty.

These metaphorical or figurative etymological readings were essential to developing a mode of Homeric interpretation that reconciled perceived inaccuracies or falsehoods in the epics. The genre of philosophical Homeric interpretation became more popular over time, alongside a related but distinct genre of literary criticism as practiced by the scholiasts. As the genre developed, Homeric interpreters focused on key passages that had posed issues for many previous commentators in the hopes that their new reading would provide a solution for the passage (often enough in service of adding prestige and antiquity to their own philosophical school) and become the canonical reading. These

ancient commentators expanded on the paradigms of etymological interpretation, rhetorically-minded literary criticism, and exegesis on metaphors to develop an allegorical mode of reading. Allegorical reading connected one metaphorical interpretation to the next in a constant stream that took on its own narrative qualities, and it became a very popular tool for answering so-called “Homeric Questions” among the ancients. *Quaestiones Homericae* were works devoted to locating problematic passages in Homer, passages in which the gods acted inconsistently and posed a challenge to a rational conception of the world and of the gods. These passages required explanation or rationalization to bring them into coherence with a given writer’s philosophical worldview.

By the time Porphyry was writing, Homeric interpretation was a very well-established genre of easily-recognized conventions. Yet Porphyry stood at a crossroad of traditions, where the precepts of his teacher Plotinus were guiding philosophy in a new direction. The Platonic tradition after Plotinus became a ferment of Neoplatonism, Neo-Pythagoreanism, Stoicism, theurgy, and magic. This blend found a unique expression in every major thinker of the period of transition from high empire to late antiquity, and even those like Porphyry who rejected the ritual and cultic components of theurgy exhibited a fascination with these same practices. Plotinus himself was opposed to the theurgic schools and especially to Gnosticism, but his Neoplatonism involved basic structures that resembled those of theurgy and mystery cult. Through a hierarchical series of studies and contemplations, an individual could eventually achieve assimilation to the divine One, which was ineffable and immanent, and which interacted with mortals

through a process of immaterial emanation. This process consisted of divine descent simultaneous with mortal ascent resulting in an intermingling of human and divine entities.

At this moment of a significant shift in traditions of thought, Porphyry wrote his own Homeric Questions, which more or less follow the template for the genre with the addition of his own Neoplatonism, and the result was a new use of poetry as a tool of contemplation. In his essay *On the Cave of the Nymphs in Homer's Odyssey*, or *De antro nympharum*, Porphyry approaches a passage from Book 13 in the Odyssey that had long history of puzzling the Homeric commentators<sup>1</sup>:

αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ κρατὸς λιμένος τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη,  
ἀγγόθι δ' αὐτῆς ἄντρον ἐπήρατον ἠεροειδές,  
ἶρὸν νυμφάων αἰ νηιάδες καλέονται. (5)  
ἐν τῷ κρητῆρες τε καὶ ἀμφοροῖες ἔασιν  
λαίνοι· ἔνθα δ' ἔπειτα τιθαιβώσσουσι μέλισσαι.  
ἐν δ' ἴστοι λίθιοι περιμήκεες, ἔνθα τε νύμφαι  
φάρε' ὑφαίνουσιν ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι·  
ἐν δ' ὕδατ' ἀενάοντα. δῦω δέ τέ οἱ θύραι εἰσὶν, (10)  
αἱ μὲν πρὸς βορέαο καταβαταὶ ἀνθρώποισιν,  
αἱ δ' αὖ πρὸς νότου εἰσὶ θεώτεραι· οὐδέ τι κείνη  
ἄνδρες ἐσέρχονται, ἀλλ' ἀθανάτων ὁδός ἐστιν.

At the harbor's head a branching olive stands  
with a welcome cave nearby it, dank with sea-mist,  
sacred to nymphs of the spring we call the Naiads.  
There are mixing-bowls inside and double-handled jars,  
crafted of stone, and bees store up their honey in the hollows.  
There are stone looms as well, where the nymphs weave out  
their webs from clouds of sea-blue wool—a marvelous sight—  
and a wellspring flows forever. The cave has two ways in,  
one facing the North Wind, a pathway down for mortals;

---

<sup>1</sup> Porphyry himself cites his forebears Cronius and Numenius, as well as Artemidorus the Geographer, as commentators who either interpreted this passage allegorically or attempted to locate the cave.

the other, facing the South, belongs to the gods,  
no man may go that way...  
it is the path for all the deathless powers.<sup>2</sup>

This passage was ripe with meaning for the Neoplatonist Porphyry, from its watery nymphs to its twin gates, and in it Porphyry found deep wisdom regarding the generation of souls into bodies and the mingling of the human and divine. His interpretation of this passage is an eclectic blend of Neoplatonic philosophy, Mithraic symbolism, and cosmology. This paper will examine the ways that Porphyry models a philosophical mode of reading with the *De antro nympharum*. First, the paper will define the ancient modes of allegorical reading that led to Porphyry's mode of reading, drawing on both ancient rhetorical guides and modern literary theory. Next, the paper will trace a history of Homeric commentary, allegory, and denunciation with special attention to the authors and perspectives most essential to Porphyry's tradition, such as Plato's attack on poets. The paper will then explore the relationship of Porphyry's philosophical method to the mystery cults popular in the high imperial and late antique periods, both more broadly and with regard to his contrast with Iamblichus, Plotinus' student who set up a theurgic school in Syria. This section will also examine in depth the relationship between poetic-imprecatory language, its human practitioners, and the divine. Overall, this study argues that the *De antro nympharum* establishes Porphyry as a philosophical guide analogous to the mystagogue who leads the neophyte through the appropriate stages toward divine revelation, which in the context of Porphyry's Neoplatonism meant an assimilation with

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Fagles, (New York: Penguin, 1996) 289-90.

the divine. The *De antro nympharum* itself offers a specific place for this ascent to occur, in the cave that Homer describes and that his verses evoke in the mind of the reader.

### **Vita et Opera Porphyrii**

A brief overview of Porphyry's life and studies presents a useful trajectory for understanding his concerns and his approaches in *De antro nympharum*. Although he was profiled by later authors, the best source for Porphyry's own life is his *Vita Plotini*, which he included as the preface to his edition of the *Enneads*. He was probably born in 234 C.E., studied at Athens with the Platonist Longinus, and then spent six years studying with Plotinus.<sup>3</sup> Porphyry credits Plotinus with helping him out of depression by advising, either in person or through another student, that he should spend some time in Sicily to recover. The two would not meet again, as Plotinus died while Porphyry was in Sicily. The unreliable secondhand account of Eunapius claims that Porphyry taught in Rome, but other than a probable trip to his hometown of Tyre in the late 260s or early 270s attested in a letter to his old teacher, Longinus, little is known of his life after Sicily. Porphyry's death date is unknown, but at *Vita Plotini* 23.13 he gives his age at the time of editing the *Enneads* as sixty-eight, which dates that edition to around 302 C.E. with his birth in 234.

---

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Smith, "Porphyrian Studies Since 1913," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 36.2 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1987) 719-722 provides a biography of Porphyry drawing together numerous ancient sources. Porphyry, *Vit. Plot.* 5,1-6 indicates around six years of study with Plotinus. The following biography is summarized from the *Vit. Plot.* and from A. Smith's reconstruction of Porphyry's life.

Porphyry's works spanned Neoplatonic themes in the tradition of Plotinus and older Pythagorean themes, and sometimes he indulged a mystical vein that Plotinus likely disapproved of. Among other works, he wrote a *Vita Pythagorae* and a *De abstinentia* on vegetarianism, a probably early *De philosophia ex oraculis*, commentaries on Plato's *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* and on Aristotle's *Categories*, a treatise *Contra Christianos* and one against Iamblichus, and a number of Homeric commentaries which survive variously, including the *De antro nympharum* which is the subject of the current study. Andrew Smith in his overview of Porphyrian studies of the twentieth century observes that a good deal of Porphyry scholarship focused on resolving a chronology of his changing viewpoints.<sup>4</sup> In general, Porphyry seems to have been more uncritically interested in religious phenomena earlier in his life, but his study with Plotinus tempered or quelled this interest. Under Longinus, before working with Plotinus, Porphyry developed his literary skills, his philology and exegesis. Later in his life, he returned to a certain extent to his more mystical interests. This modern conception of Porphyry as rather fickle in his ideas comes primarily from Iamblichus, Proclus, Eunapius, and Augustine, however, and of these authors, the only one who was Porphyry's contemporary, Iamblichus, was explicitly hostile towards his views. Iamblichus's animosity was probably the basis for Proclus's poor opinion of Porphyry, since both Iamblichus and Proclus criticized Porphyry as insufficiently mystical.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Smith 1987, 722-729 outlines these viewpoints by theme.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Bidez, *Vie de Porphyre, le philosophe néo-platonicien: avec les fragments des traités Peri agalmatōn et De regressu* (Hildesheim: G. Olm, 1964). A. Smith 1987, 722-723.

The ancient characterization of Porphyry as fickle plays into another modern characterization, that of his unoriginality. A lack of originality may arise as much from his dutiful and lengthy citations—a practice not all ancients shared—and from the spotty survival of his texts as from a real lack of personal insight. As noted above, a significant portion of his remaining works are commentaries on major philosophical texts and on Homer, which is not unusual. Commentaries on existing texts became more and more prevalent in later antiquity. This paper focuses on one prime example of Porphyry’s Homeric exegesis, the *De antro nympharum*, which employs the philological methods evident in his *Quaestiones Homericae* but, as this paper argues, with a specific philosophical goal. Porphyry’s manner of reading Homer in *De antro nympharum* was not simply philological, but allegorical, discovering cosmic truths in Homer’s text, and constructed a mystic-esoteric use of the Homeric text and its exegesis as contemplative aids.

### **Allegory and Metaphor for the Ancients**

Allegory and metaphor, now and in antiquity, are intimately related tools of interpretation. Cicero in the *Orator* related the two, saying, “*Iam cum fluxerunt continuo plures translationes, alia plane fit oratio; itaque genus hoc Graeci appellant allegorian: nomine recte, genere melius ille qui ista omnia translationes vocat.*”<sup>6</sup> Allegory was composed of many metaphors flowing from one to the next so that the cumulative effect

---

<sup>6</sup> Cicero, *Orator* 94.

was of a whole narrative beyond or below the literal narrative. The effects of these tools could vary widely based on the intention of author and reader; metaphor finds its first definition in the context of discourses on rhetoric which tend to treat it as a decoration for speech, *ornatus* or κόσμος.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle at *Poetics* 1457b7 is the first to identify μεταφορά in terms familiar to a modern reader, and he calls it “the introduction of an alien term” that nevertheless seems to fit in its new place. Along similar lines, the Greek verb ἀλλαγορεύειν translates literally as “to speak of other things”, and it became the standard term for seeking a continuous series of meanings beyond the literal narrative, as in Cicero’s definition.<sup>8</sup> Simile was another closely related device, and Homeric scholiasts often took a minutely detailed textual approach to Homeric similes.<sup>9</sup> These types of criticism were not unlike the modes of close reading familiar to modern scholars with their focus on the more sensory effects, rather than the more symbolic effects, of poetic language. Allegory with its emphasis on underlying meanings was the technique most intriguing to the philosophers, although in many cases they read just as closely as the scholiasts.

---

<sup>7</sup> Doreen Innes, “Metaphor, Simile, and Allegory,” in *Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition*, ed. G. R. Boys-Stones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 7-27. Innes identifies three key categories of figurative speech: metaphor as stylistic ornamentation, continuous metaphor, and extended allegorical interpretation, which is generally the realm of philosophers rather than rhetoricians and which concerns itself with what Plato called ὑπόνοια, “underlying thought” at Republic 378d. Isocrates 9.9 refers to metaphors along with neologisms and strange words as κόσμοι in the noun form. Aristotle does likewise at Rhetoric 1408a14, referring to εὐτελεῖ ὀνόματι ἐπὶ κόσμος, “embellishment attached to an ordinary word” (trans. Freese, 1947) in his discussion of style in oratory.

<sup>8</sup> Dawson 1992, Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian* 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Innes 2003, 7-10.

Allegorical reading allowed the ancients to achieve one of several basic goals. The first is to challenge the literal sense of a text with an alternate meaning—for example, Augustine of Hippo’s reading of the *Genesis* story as a metaphorical account to account for scientific advances in the understanding of the cosmos. The second either endorses or revises culture by imposing a new meaning on a text, for example in later Christian readings of the Old Testament flood story as representing baptism, and the Old Testament in general as a prefiguration of the New Testament.<sup>10</sup> The third “textualizes” cultural meanings and endows them with a certain authority by rooting them in a literary canon, and this third form of allegory is the most common in the Stoic and Neoplatonic tradition of viewing Homer as an early philosopher. Taken together, these readings can be characterized as apologetic, appropriative, or subversive.<sup>11</sup> These ways of reading tend to arise in moments of cultural shift; world views change faster than the literary canon possibly could. Texts like the Homeric epics, although they were subject to a certain degree of editing, were central to a respectable, genteel person’s education, regardless of the charges leveled against Homer by various philosophers.<sup>12</sup> As philosophical thinking grew more sophisticated—in some cases, as Plato’s, sophisticated enough to denounce

---

<sup>10</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “Allegory and Reading God’s Book: Paul and Augustine on the Destiny of Israel,” in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 136-149. Multiple levels of allegory, both challenging the original meaning of the text and imposing new meanings on the text to pass a judgment on culture, are evident in Augustine’s writings.

<sup>11</sup> Dawson 1992, 36-7. Morgan 2000, 63 n40 offers a succinct summary of these categories which builds on Dawson’s argument in the context of the Presocratic philosophers and the development of allegorical reading, which she views as originally apologetic because of the conflict between early philosophers’ emphasis on ethical consistency and mythology’s decided lack of apparent ethical consistency.

<sup>12</sup> Philosophical opposition to Homer will be discussed in a later section. Too (2010) discusses the importance of the “authentic” Homeric to a Greek civic identity.

Homer's world as false and unjust—some thinkers found it easier to resolve apparent inconsistencies in Homer by non-literal interpretations. This process could appear to a more critical reader as a form of rationalization, or to an optimistic reader as a form of cultural negotiation.<sup>13</sup>

These non-literal interpretations fall on a spectrum in terms of how purely allegorical they are. Dawson in his 1992 study has offered a limited definition of allegory to refer to non-literal narratives that interpreters construct on top of literal narratives. This definition draws a distinction between allegorical reading as the construction of a narrative and other non-literal forms of interpretation, such as Stoic etymological reading or the discovery of individual symbols within a text.<sup>14</sup> For the most part, this definition is useful; given the quantity and variety of interpretative literature that survives, some criteria must be applied to restrict a given study. Dawson's criteria are for the most part well-rooted in the traditions and techniques of ancient reading, some of which employed more narrative interpretations than others. Yet there exists some tension to be explored in this definition; the degree to which any given interpretation is narrative is somewhat slippery to measure, and given the self-awareness that the ancients employed in their rhetorical and philosophical criticism, it is perhaps prudent to fall back on the terms they themselves offered.

Cicero, quoted above from the *Orator*, describes allegory as a large number of metaphors that flow continuously. This definition offers elements of a narrative in its

---

<sup>13</sup> Whitman (ed.) 2000 offers the neutral-optimistic definition of allegory, whereas Morgan (2000) offers the definition of allegory as apologetic rationalization.

<sup>14</sup> Dawson 1992. Innes 2003. Whitman 2000.

sequentiality. In *Poetics*, Aristotle describes a plot or narrative as a series of events that necessarily occur as consequences of each other and which come to an end at the event with no necessary consequences.<sup>15</sup> Of course, Aristotle provides this definition specifically regarding tragedy and, to a somewhat lesser extent, comedy and epic, rather than in the context of textual interpretation. Here his views on metaphor become especially relevant, however. A metaphor is an alien term that nonetheless finds a certain belonging in its new situation. The way that these metaphors flow together, to maintain Cicero's image, almost requires a degree of discomfort for the reader, because the individual metaphor is composed of the juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar terms. The allegorical narrative stretches the sense of the literal narrative it rests on. Allegorical interpretations of Homer, as will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, often seem less than narrative in their stitching together of physics and metaphysics, cosmology and theology. Yet even as these interpretations veer into abstract and esoteric territory, they remain committed—as in Porphyry's *De antro nympharum*—to handling the elements of Homer's poem in sequence and treating them as the surface of deeper meanings. Although the interpretations offered by Porphyry and other philosophers on Homer sometimes seem less than narrative in a strict sense, they qualify as allegories for their sequential, continuous character and for their consistent emphasis on the text as containing hidden meanings beyond its literal meaning.

### **History of Homeric Allegory**

---

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450a15-39 discusses the role and value of plot in tragedy.

From an early date, readers of Homer focused on the truth or falsity of the poems. Theagenes of Rhegium was grappling with the place of Homer in an educated reader's mind in the sixth century BCE, although his texts are lost. Like the later allegorists, Theagenes seems to have imbued the Homeric epics with the tenets of his own philosophy. Many later thinkers in antiquity ascribed to Theagenes the innovation of associating of particular elements and abstractions with particular deities, such as Apollo and Hephaestus with fire or wisdom with Athena.<sup>16</sup> The goal of this interpretation is unclear, but perhaps Theagenes had in mind a defense of Homer, since Homeric detraction and denunciation was itself an early genre.<sup>17</sup>

Among the first of these detractors was Xenophanes, the sixth century philosopher whose travels took him, apparently, to Magna Graecia and therefore possibly into contact with Theagenes.<sup>18</sup> Xenophanes' criticism of Homer was a part of his larger critique of Greek religion as arbitrary and misguided. Xenophanes considered the Homeric and Hesiodic gods culpable for theft, adultery, and deception. Moreover,

---

<sup>16</sup> Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Druckerei Hildebrand, 1961) 51-52, A1-4 collects the late scholiasts' references to Theagenes's career as one who wrote on Homer. Donald A. Russell and David Konstan, *Heraclitus: Homeric Problems* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005) 6-30. Jean Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et Société en Grèce ancienne* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1980) 212. Vernant places Theagenes of Rhegium at the beginning of the allegorical tradition as potentially the originator of a mode of reading that relocates cosmology, physics, metaphysics, and morality into the Homeric epics. Kathleen Freeman *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Companion to Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966) 41 offers a summary of the ancient attitude to Theagenes.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan 2000 argues that before the Stoics there is no strong sense of authors legitimizing their own views by sourcing them in Homer, but this became relatively standard practice in later authors.

<sup>18</sup> Xenophanes alludes to his own travels in 21 B 8 D. Diogenes Laertius, *Vit. Phil.* IX.18ff describes Xenophanes' travels to Sicily and Elea.

anthropomorphic gods were no more than reflections of human narcissism, as Ethiopians had dark-skinned gods, Thracians had fair-complexioned gods, and for that matter, horses probably had horse-shaped gods.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of whether Xenophanes and Theagenes had any direct contact, these two modes of reading had significant interplay in later ages. The readiness with which the ancients identified sixth-century Theagenes as the originator of allegorical or metaphorical reading of poetry speaks to the antiquity of the genre, even if he was not its true inventor.

As metaphorical reading and allegory became solid techniques in the textual critic's repertoire, particular styles of reading emerged—even exegesis as a competition of gentility, as in Plato's *Protagoras*, which offered a Platonic response to the Sophistic mode of reading.<sup>20</sup> Each philosophical school had its own particular mode of reading Homer, which often played into a means of legitimizing or authorizing its own viewpoints. For example, Stoic interpretation relied on etymological arguments to recover the original meanings of poetic texts that had grown obscure over time as later poets added “invented” elements of language and plot. Lucius Annaeus Cornutus' *Theologiae Graecae Compendium* of the first century CE provides a key example of this kind of Stoic reading. Its method provides one of the key elements of theological-

---

<sup>19</sup> Frag. 21 B 11, 12, 15, 16 D. Freeman 1966: 88-104 provides a useful overview of Xenophanes' life and philosophy, especially his animosity towards the poets. Kathryn A. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 47-62 explores Xenophanes's skepticism towards the value of mythological discourse in general, and Homeric and Hesiodic portrayals of anthropomorphic gods in specific. Morgan addresses both Xenophanes's philosophical disagreement with these poets and his disagreement over how poetry ought to portray deities in the first place.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Protag.* 338e6-339a3. Morgan 2000, 89-101 discusses the qualities of this competitive exegesis in greater detail.

cosmological allegory. Cornutus sought out the true derivations of the names and epithets of the gods to discover their original meanings, which explained the qualities of the cosmos. This method resembles allegory in its stitching together of hidden meanings to articulate a system, but it does not rest fundamentally on a narrative—even a short one, like the brief description that captures Porphyry’s attention in *De antro nympharum*, which Porphyry places in the context of the greater narrative of the *Odyssey*.

Cornutus did not approach the Homeric poems with the assumption that Homer wrote intentional allegories. For Cornutus and the Stoics, Homer’s verse encoded the wisdom of sages of even greater antiquity than Homer himself. Homer was not the only poet to slip great, ancient insight into his works; Hesiod and others composed similarly. Key to this conception of the ancient poets is that they were not by necessity aware of the value of the insights contained in their poems.<sup>21</sup> Rather, they were generations closer to the unknown sages who had a far more comprehensive and authentic understanding of the cosmos than anyone after, either in Homer’s day or in the sophisticated world of the early Principate. Sometimes the kernel of a cosmic truth was buried in the etymology of a divine name, and sometimes it was buried in a myth that would need to be interpreted allegorically to make complete sense of it.

Porphyry’s interpretation of Homer includes elements very much in accordance with Cornutus’s type of interpretation, but functions in the context of his Neoplatonic conception of the cosmos. Whereas for Cornutus, being a Stoic, the cosmos was

---

<sup>21</sup> Dawson 1992, 23-38 contains a detailed discussion of Cornutus’ methodology. Lucas Siorvanes, “Perceptions of the *Timaeus*: Thematization and Truth in the Exegetical Tradition,” in *Ancient Approaches to Plato’s Timaeus*, (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2003), 161-164.

ultimately material and the highest goal was to achieve happiness through ethical conduct and taming of the passions, for Porphyry the sensible world was not the ultimate reality, but it was a necessary and true consequence of the One.<sup>22</sup> Homer's conceptions of the gods could therefore be interpreted as symbolic representations of the intelligible reality perceptible through proper contemplation. In the *Homeric Questions* attributed to Porphyry, the philosopher cites two lines of the *Odyssey* describing Circe and these beasts with the minds of men and spins these lines into several pages of rational discourse heavily influenced by Neoplatonic and Neopythagorean ideas. Circe is, rather than a character the force of metempsychosis through which souls pass into and out of γένεσις, the world of becoming where souls and bodies come together. Porphyry supports this reading with other Homeric references. For instance, Circe is the daughter of Helios, the sun, who himself represents this cycle of death and rebirth.<sup>23</sup> The hierarchy of Homeric gods thus comes to serve a complex Neoplatonic framework of intermediary powers that have particular bearings on the relationship between humans and the One.

This Porphyrian methodology was built out of a Stoic framework for which Cornutus was not the first, but certainly a key source. In his *Contra Christianos*, Porphyry lists key figures in the development of allegorical exegesis, and alongside the predictable set of Platonists and Pythagoreans—including Numenius and Cronius, whom he cites frequently in *De antro nympharum*—he adds only two Stoics, Cornutus and

---

<sup>22</sup> The relationship between Porphyry's and Plotinus' philosophy and Porphyry's reading of Homer will be discussed in greater depth below.

<sup>23</sup> Keaney and Lambertson 1996, Lambertson 1979, 108-134.

Chaeremon.<sup>24</sup> Cornutus was important for Porphyry not only for his contributions to allegorical methodology, but also for his views on the ancients as philosophers, another key question for Greek philosophers from an early point. This question was borne not out of Homer, but Hesiod, and specifically Hesiod's account of the ages of humankind. Broadly speaking, this account posed a problem for the philosophers because the gods appeared spiteful towards humanity: why was it necessary for the happy, prosperous Golden Age to end? Why were humans recreated in poorer materials, and to greater toil?<sup>25</sup>

This matter has a twofold implication for reading Porphyry. First, the conception of an originally happy race of people who were once close to the gods but became full of vice over time—whether through external corruption or because of an inborn seed of wickedness—resonates with the Neoplatonic project of divine assimilation.<sup>26</sup> By cultivating the intellect in contemplation, which began on a rational discursive level and ascended to a non-rational, non-discursive level, a philosopher could return to the original immaterial state of the soul before its descent into a body. Second, the Neoplatonists were concerned with maintaining a pure line of succession not only beginning with Plato, but also extending farther back into the distant reaches of antiquity to the ancient sages, like Homer and Hesiod and, even older, Orpheus. Individuals differed on the dynamics of

---

<sup>24</sup> G. R. Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of its Development from the Stoics to Origen*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 49-59. Porphyry, *Contra Christianos*, fr. 39, 30-35 Harnack.

<sup>25</sup> Boys-Stones 2003, 3-27 summarizes the reception of Hesiod's ages and the attitude of the ancients toward their ancestors' wisdom and virtue (or absence of it).

<sup>26</sup> For a closer look at the ancient debate about the state of virtue and vice in the original class of people, see Boys-Stones 2003, 28-43.

these ancients' wisdom, which could be rational philosophical wisdom or divinely-inspired wisdom of hazier origin. In any case, the general Neoplatonic tendency was, in keeping with the general current of Greek philosophy, to privilege old knowledge as purer. For the Neoplatonists, though, this model of original purity became another manifestation of the descent from the One that Plotinus argued for.<sup>27</sup> Just as the multiplicity of the cosmos originated in the purity of the One, the Intellect, and the Soul, the multiplicity of ideas and thinkers originated in a very ancient class of humans who lived in closer contact to the divine than present humans. This notion of progression from a class of wise ancients contributed to one of the key features of Neoplatonic thought, its heavy reliance on the commentary form.<sup>28</sup> By weaving new philosophical innovations into exegesis on existing texts, the Neoplatonists could keep the decadence and corruption of later, more sophisticated ages at bay and maintain a close link to the purer expressions of truth from previous generations.

The greatest and most authoritative opponent of Homer was probably Plato, whose works are full of distrust for language and writing on a basic level, although they are also riddled with philosophical myths and didactic allegories. He was so unimpressed with the etymological arguments popular among the Sophists<sup>29</sup> that he spent the whole of the *Cratylus* concocting absurd etymologies to prove that an innate or divinely-appointed origin for words was ridiculous and false, and so applying etymological arguments to

---

<sup>27</sup> Lucas Siorvanes, "Perceptions of the *Timaeus*: Thematization and Truth in the Exegetical Tradition," in *Ancient Approaches to Plato's Timaeus*, (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2003), 155-174.

<sup>28</sup> Siorvanes 2003, 164-166.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the interpretative modes of the Sophists, see Morgan 2000, 89-131.

ancient poetry was clearly not a good use of time. Plato's rejection of the poets comes into sharp focus at *Republic* 377d3-e4, when Socrates explains just what is so offensive about Homer, Hesiod, and their peers: “Οὗτοι γάρ που μύθους τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ψευδεῖς συντιθέντες ἔλεγόν τε καὶ λέγουσιν,” which Socrates finds fault in just like he does “ὅταν εἰκάζη τις κακῶς τῷ λόγῳ περὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἡρώων οἳοί εἰσιν, ὥσπερ γραφεὺς μηδὲν εἰκότα γράφων οἷς ἂν ὅμοια βουλευθῆ ἰδέσθαι.”<sup>30</sup> Poets present such bad likenesses of the gods and heroes that if not for the names attached, they would be unrecognizable. The very concept of gods striving against each other was inimical to Plato, and to present this trope over and over merely encouraged the guardian-class to strive against each other and make war in supposed imitation of the gods that rule the cosmos.<sup>31</sup> The offenses of the poets on these counts are numerous, and Plato finds Homer a prime culprit.

Yet myth itself was not to be blamed—rather, the fault lay with poetical fancies. Plato used myth in a variety of ways, and his chief concern was that a myth needed to follow a rational λόγος if it was to be of any use, but did not need to be verifiable in an historical or investigative sense. It was deliberately symbolic and intended for symbolic interpretation. In *Republic*, Socrates argues that origin-myths (more precisely, τίς τῶν ψευδῶν, a highly distrustful metonym) that proclaim some sort of autochthony for the residents of a city are extremely useful for a city's well-being.<sup>32</sup> A suitable origin-myth

---

<sup>30</sup> *Republic* 377d3-e4. “For, it seems, these poets composing untrue stories both told and keep telling them to mortals.” “Whenever someone represents badly in his speech about the gods and heroes, whatever they are, just like a painter painting portraits of no resemblance to likenesses he wishes to paint.”

<sup>31</sup> *Republic* 378b6-e3.

<sup>32</sup> *Republic* 414b7-e7. Here Socrates gives the example of the “Noble Lie,” which emphasizes the didactic role of myth.

did not inspire people to hold false notions about justice or the gods, but merely anchored their sense of belonging in their city; it had an immediate pragmatic goal. While there were many types of myth in Plato's writings, one key type for understanding *De antro nympharum* is the family of didactic myths, which often contained a moral or cosmic meaning. This form, which especially appealed to the Neoplatonists, became over time the myth as expresser of inexpressible meanings—perhaps even the ultimate meaning, the ineffable One of which all the cosmos is a consequence. This notion finds its root in Plato's use of myth to bridge the gap where language failed but meaning persisted.<sup>33</sup> The process of moving from concrete to abstract intelligible knowledge required an inventive use of language and reason, and symbolic narratives had the capacity to effect that ascent.

The reader of *De antro nympharum* cannot help but associate Porphyry's treatment of Homer's cave with perhaps the most famous cave in antiquity: Plato's.<sup>34</sup> The cave, along with the sun and the line, of *Republic* operates on a different level than Porphyry's, but there are some important connections between the two. Plato's cave is a model of human experience in the material world and its meaning pertains simultaneously to the individual soul and to the role of individual soul in a political community. The only way to achieve philosophical enlightenment is to leave the cave, and the enlightened have a responsibility to return to the cave and ensure that those still dwelling in it, if they are not fellow guardians, live well-ordered lives according to the guardians' knowledge of the Good. Porphyry follows Plato in that he too argues that the

---

<sup>33</sup> Morgan 2000, 179-184.

<sup>34</sup> Republic 506d-518b.

enlightened have a role as teachers, but his ultimate concern is not particularly political, and as this paper will argue, Porphyry fashions a role for the teacher of philosophy analogous to that of the mystagogue, a guide to higher, unseen realms of contemplation.

Porphyry's cave had two other features that distinguished it from Plato's. First, the cave is not merely an argumentative construct or a symbolic narrative with a solely didactic purpose: it exists in the real world. The question of the cave's location had been a longstanding issue for Homeric commentators, and some did believe it was a Homeric invention, but Porphyry disagreed and his argument became something like a methodological sketch in the first portion of *De antro nympharum*. This section of his argument will be useful to examine in some detail now. Porphyry outlined the angles that his predecessors had taken with this problem—for instance, Cronius declaring that the cave had to be a fictive invention because it was full of too many bizarre obscurities, like the ἰστοὶ λίθαιοι περιμήκεες, the huge stone looms, with which the nymphs did their weavings (*De ant.* 3.19-20). These weavings themselves baffled Cronius since Homer describes them as sea-purple, ἀλιπόφυρα, when their color defines them as visible, but nymphs' weavings should not be visible to the senses of embodied mortals.

Because of these inconsistencies and oddities, the cave must be an invention. Porphyry countered this line of argument by citing Artemidorus the Geographer to come up with a preliminary hypothesis that the cave was not entirely invented. He cited also the very ancient practice of establishing shrines in caves, which struck him as a major insight from the ancients because caves made for a good model of the cosmos. They were physical, composed of the earth itself, but they were also hollow and therefore

representative of the connection between the material and immaterial realms (*De ant.* 4-5). Overall Porphyry disagreed with Cronius and anyone who thought similarly because cave-shrines had a long tradition in Greece and because of the numerous others, such as Artemidorus of Ephesus the geographer, who had located the cave. Porphyry determined that even if the Homeric cave represented an embellishment on the actual cave on Ithaca, there was certainly a real cave in the sensible world upon which this poetic cave depended.<sup>35</sup> Homer's cave as it appears in Porphyry's essay is a poetic embellishment whose existence requires the existence of a physical cave, and the physical cave—as Porphyry points out—is a symbol of the cosmos and the ἐγκοσμίων δυνάμεων, the “encosmic powers” (*De ant.* 9.1-2).

These “encosmic powers” suggest the next area of departure from Plato's cave to Porphyry's. This term, “encosmic”, appears also in Porphyry's commentary on the *Timaeus* and several times in Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis*, always referring to the things that permeate the cosmos, such as the soul that according to the Neoplatonists (as in a similar way for the Stoics, to whom Porphyry also points) was all-present in the material world.<sup>36</sup> Before Porphyry and Iamblichus, however, the term is extremely rare, with only a handful of other references in the fragments of Thales, Democritus, Pseudo-Archytas, Clinias, and the *Septem Sapientes Apophthegmata*, and in these uses the word is

---

<sup>35</sup> This relationship will come to resemble the relationship between the sensible and intelligible worlds as Plotinus defines them—the sensible world depending on the intelligible world, not representing a falsehood or a distraction but rather existing as a necessary consequence of the intelligible world. The relationship between Porphyry's cave of the nymphs and Plotinus' philosophy will be explored later on.

<sup>36</sup> *De Mysteriis* 3.28.31, 5.3.5, 5.20.2, 5.20.12. Porphyry In *Platonis Timaeum commentaria* book 2 frag. 69.6.

consistently found in similar contexts to the later usages.<sup>37</sup> From the fourth century onward, though, ἐγκοσμίος becomes a common word among Neoplatonist philosophers and theologians such as Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Syrianus. Proclus found the term especially useful for describing the gods and other deathless powers that populate the Neoplatonic cosmos, and this takes on particular significance in Porphyry's discussion of the dual gates of the nymphs' cave (*De ant.* 20-31). While this word has a handful of occurrences in the philosophical tradition before Porphyry and Iamblichus and so therefore is probably not a neologism by someone in later circles, it seems apparent that the meaning had a new relevance for the Neoplatonists, who saw the One, the Intellect, and the Soul as all-pervading.

Porphyry is careful to note that Homer didn't label these gates as belonging to humans on one side and the gods on the other. Rather humans, ἀνθρώποισι and ἄνδρες, descend through one northerly entrance, while the other southerly entrance is the path for immortals, ἀθανάτων ὁδός ἐστιν (*Od.* 13.110-112, *De ant.* 23.1-6). Porphyry interprets this to mean that souls, which are the immortal portion of a human, may pass through the immortal gate on their journey away from the material world and towards the divine realm. The gate for humans, or as Lambertson's 1983 translation renders the word, mortals, he interprets as the gate where souls descend into γένεσις. At this point, it appears Porphyry's mystical side gets the better of his rational side, and he appeals to the Zodiacal significance of dual gates in north and south, as well as the testimony of his

---

<sup>37</sup> Thales. Frag. 3, 7. Democritus Frag. 5, 65. Clinias 108.28. *Septem Sapientes Apophthegmata* Div. 5.18.8.

forebears Cronius and Numenius, to argue more forcefully for his own interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Porphyry equates the northern gate with the Tropic of Cancer and the southern gate with the Tropic of Capricorn, and as ancient attestation to the appropriateness of this relationship he cites the Roman Saturnalia, which occurs while the sun is in Capricorn. For this piece of insight, he credits the founder of the Saturnalia with the same kind of insight that Homer had; Porphyry seeks the meaning that αἰνιξαμένου τοῦ νομοθέτου, that the founder was hinting at. (*De ant.* 23.6-24.9). This is the same verb that Porphyry began his interpretation with, in that case with regard to Homer. For Porphyry, the ancient festival of the Saturnalia contains a cosmic insight identical to the one Homer had when he described the gates of the nymphs' cave. This relation of the cave's gates to the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn has a further significance beyond its Zodiacal or astrological meaning; it also roots the cave yet more firmly in the realm of physical experience with geographical terminology.

This dual meaning marks still another example of Porphyry's insistence on the cave's nature as both real and poetic. Despite its materiality, which Porphyry argues for in the introduction of the *De antro nympharum*, the cave stands for the very process of γένεσις, which has no one geographic location but instead occurs anywhere a soul comes into or leaves a body. In this respect, it resembles Plato's cave, which is "located" wherever an individual attains knowledge of the Forms and then brings that knowledge back to those still dwelling in the cave. The soul ascends through the northerly gate and

---

<sup>38</sup> This distinction between mystical and rational is based in the ancient opposition of ritual and logical processes, which came into sharp focus with Plotinus's refutation of the Gnostics.

rejoins the divine, and perhaps even the World Soul, which exists everywhere in the cosmos. In this regard, the cave itself is *encosmic*; it can represent all the features of the cosmos that pertain to the interactions between mortals and immortals.

These *encosmic* powers take on different forms in the various philosophers; for example, Iamblichus is much more detailed about the organization of these daimons and deities than Porphyry is, and this divine hierarchy comprises much of his *De Mysteriis*. Yet for Porphyry, too, the cosmos is full of immaterial connections to the divine. The cave on Ithaca is no exception: it is a home for Naiad nymphs, which Porphyry says are a conventional name for “the powers set over the waters” (*De ant.* 10.8-9). These nymphs are δυνάμεις, and they possess a specific realm of command over the waters, which Porphyry considers a way of referring to the power of γένεσις as mentioned below in his discussion of Circe in his Homeric questions. For Porphyry, Homer’s Naiads are an embedded piece of philosophical insight, and the lines of the *Odyssey* that evoke them have an effect on the philosophically-inclined reader beyond simply providing a mysterious, picturesque diversion.

In other words, Porphyry treats the cave of the nymphs as a model of the cosmos itself, a microcosm, and he embeds this link in the very ancient, well-attested practice of establishing shrines in caves. While Plato’s cave is itself a symbolic tool, it lacks the totality of Porphyry’s cave because Plato’s cave represents a model of human experience, whereas Porphyry’s represents a model of mortal souls coming into and out of bodies, of the relationship more broadly between the material and immaterial, and also a model for the individual pursuit of philosophical enlightenment through contemplation. Moreover,

Porphyry's cave exists in the realm of the senses. It is a natural feature that manifests key qualities of the Neoplatonic cosmos. These key qualities, like the Naiad nymphs, provide a link between the material and immaterial worlds. The Naiads are also the mechanism of the soul's rebirth into bodies; no comparable mechanism exists in Plato's cave, which is restricted to exploring the limitations and possibilities of the soul within a body.

Moreover, the linguistic echoes between Porphyry and Iamblichus in their joint concern with things encosmic hints at a greater level of interchange between the two than their antagonistic dialogues suggests. Exploration of this relationship will prove fruitful, and will bring the connections between Porphyry's cave and Plato's into better focus.

### **The Mysteries and Philosophy**

“The mysteries,” τὰ μυστήρια, were at their core a religious phenomenon, and of great antiquity.<sup>39</sup> The ancients themselves referred to the sacred rites of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis as mysteries, and there were many others throughout the Greek world, such as the rites of Samothrace.<sup>40</sup> The mysteries were kept strictly secret and scholars can reconstruct very little of any particular mystery rite or cult because the ancients kept to their silence so well. Moreover, much of the apparent exegesis on the mysteries comes from later Christian authors who tended to have a less than favorable

---

<sup>39</sup> Heraclitus, frag. 14.4 cites the mysteries.

<sup>40</sup> The mysteries of Eleusis, although modern scholars have often sought esoteric meaning in them, were from an early point a major, integral component of the Athenian festal year, and this is reflected even in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.

perspective on the older traditions, so it is best to use caution when reading these accounts for historical detail on individual rituals. For example, one key source on mystery rites is Clement of Alexandria, the late second century Christian allegorist who had a tendency to emphasize the goriest details of myth and ritual to degrade traditional Greco-Roman religious practices and myths. Clement made good use of the Phrygian rites for Cybele and Attis because of their bloody myth and ritual, and in case that was not startling enough he ties in his account of the castration of Ouranos, which he possibly thinks is Zeus's doing.<sup>41</sup> Clement connects all these rites because of their dubious thematic relationship—they are all sensational to him in the same way—and even though he cites the sacred objects of the Phrygian mysteries, his accuracy regarding both the identification of the objects and the connections between the myth and the ritual are unclear.

Although the mysteries differ from one another depending on place and time, and although there is a vast gulf between the Eleusinian rites celebrated by every Athenian and the Mithraic rites celebrated by men in small, seemingly voluntary groups across the Roman world, there are a few common themes among them that will come into sharper focus with a general typology of mystery rituals. One of the basic features of these rituals is the presence of “things done, things said, and things revealed,” δρώμενα, λεγόμενα, δεικνυμένα. These categories are broad, but some distinctions are possible. The δρώμενα could include elements of procession, as in the Eleusinian rites, which involved both a long procession to Eleusis itself and a more restricted entry into the closed-off space

---

<sup>41</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2.15.1-5.

where the rites apparently occurred. The λεγόμενα seem to have had a range of hymns and possibly vows offered to the god. The δεικνυμένα were on a material level sacred objects restricted from the view of non-initiates and shown to initiates as perhaps the culmination of the ritual. Here again, a disproportionate amount of testimony comes from Clement of Alexandria, but in the case of the Eleusinian rites these objects seem to have been along the lines of an ear of wheat, a phallus, and perhaps a few other objects.<sup>42</sup> Non-initiates became initiates through the proper observance of these rituals, led by a mystagogue, and at least in the case of the Eleusinian rites there were two levels of initiation: the μυστής was the initiate of the first, “Lesser” mysteries, and the έποπτής the initiate of the second, “Greater” mysteries. The mystagogue was essential to the proper performance of the ritual; without guidance, an initiate could not hope to achieve a divine revelation. In this regard the mystagogue resembles the teacher of philosophy, who has some claim to authentic knowledge—for instance, through succession in the case of the Platonic Academy—and who reveals this knowledge to students of philosophy through a progression of education and reasoning. After Plotinus, this progression made a leap to a more esoteric level as the abandonment of discursive reasoning became essential for philosophical enlightenment.

For a long time scholars have sought some sort of Christian teleology in these rites: the standard line has been that they offer salvation in the afterlife, of one sort or another. This may have become the case later in antiquity, but for the most part it seems

---

<sup>42</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*.

untrue.<sup>43</sup> Even language that seems terribly obvious—for instance, calling Isis savior, σωτηρ—does not often hold up to examination. The epithet “savior” seems to apply especially to deities who have proven themselves efficacious against disease. The salvific promise is not for a life after, but for the present life. These scholars have looked for something like a conversion experience in the mysteries, whereby an initiate experiences a change in total worldview as a result of a ritual. The world is never the same after this experience because the initiate has accepted a new set of guiding moral principles and abandoned the old ones. Early scholars of mystery religions applied this theory to the practices they studied, regardless of scanty evidence for the psychology of a mystery initiate. As early as the 1930s, though, Nock criticized this tendency and posited a different point of origin for the conversion experience: philosophy. According to Nock, Greek philosophical schools such as Epicureanism offered precisely this experience of casting off old moral precepts and taking up new ones, even principles radically at odds with the traditional religious-moral complex.<sup>44</sup> Only much later did Greco-Roman mystery cults potentially absorb this conversion experience, and this was in the context of the eclectic late antique world where theurgy, astrology, and religious practice came together in various ways, sometimes in a seemingly self-conscious revival of the old ways.

Some of the confusion surrounding the conversion experience in the mysteries and in philosophy lies in the terminology involved in discussions of these cults. The

---

<sup>43</sup> Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933), pp. Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (New York: Cosimo, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Nock 1933.

terms “mystic” or “mystical” can have very foggy meanings. While these terms can retroject anachronistic notions of metaphysical revelation into older ritual practices, like the Eleusinian rites in the Classical period, by Porphyry’s day the more theoretically-laden, esoteric set of meanings is appropriate.<sup>45</sup> It took some centuries for (philosophical) conversion to a new moral or cosmic paradigm to become a part of the religious mysteries, but as in the Heraclitus fragment noted above, philosophy from an earlier point had been described as having its own mysteries. These mysteries were, like the Eleusinian mysteries, ineffable, but not in the same way. Initiates of mystery cults were forbidden to speak of the rites under threat of divine vengeance, and the utter silence of the sources—even those authors who expressed great interest in the cults, like Pausanias—on the details of the rituals is a testament to how seriously the Greeks took this stipulation. In the case of philosophy, however, the ineffability of the mysteries seems, especially over time, to be less about secrecy and more about the impossibility of expressing cosmic truths in narrative discourse either because of the indeterminacy and changeability of language, or because the nature of the cosmos was simply too much grander than language could ever describe. As has been discussed, these two notions had gained significant traction by Plato’s day, and the latter especially would become central to Neoplatonic doctrine.

---

<sup>45</sup> Giulia Sfameni-Gasparro, “Mysteries and Oriental Cults: A Problem in the History of Religions,” in *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, ed. J. A. North and S. R. F. Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 276-312. Sfameni-Gasparro draws a series of distinctions in the conception of the mysteries, generally following a trajectory of less- to more-esoteric as time went on.

It is important to note that Porphyry does not rely much on these terms in his discussion of the nymphs' cave. He discusses the cave in terms of ritual and he does involve the Persian mystagogues in his examination of caves as cosmic symbols, but this particular terminology is not necessary for his argument. He uses *μυστικῶς* once adverbially and *συμβόλων μυστικῶν* once adjectivally in *De antro nympharum* (4.4, 4.21). The adverbial form describes Cronius's conception of Homer's placement of the olive tree near the cave; Lamberton (1983) translates this as "for some mysterious reason," and this translation catches some of the sense of Cronius's indecision or lack of precision in his exegesis, according to Porphyry. The usage is probably not incidental, though, because a few lines later Porphyry refers to the ancients' founding of cave-shrines which wouldn't be done *ἄνευ συμβόλων μυστικῶν*, without mystic symbols. Lamberton again translates *μυστικῶν* as "mysterious," but given the word's occurrence in a cultic scenario, the original ritual meanings are clearly present. The more esoteric meanings seem to be present, too, since for one thing Porphyry was no stranger to esoteric philosophy and for another the word occurs in the context of determining the true relationship between the real-world cave and the poetic cave.

Along these lines, Porphyry's use of terms related to *μύστης* and *μυσταγωγέω* is relatively limited and specific. He uses the word *μύστης*, initiate to the mysteries, twice in the *De antro nympharum*: first when he discusses the Persian mystagogues in the beginning (*De antro*, 6.9) and then when he explains the role of the bees in Homer's description of the stone amphorae (*De antro*, 15.12). Once again, Porphyry sets the poet's imagery into the context of Mithraic ritual, which had become extremely prevalent in the

Mediterranean after the start of the first century. The relationship between the bees and amphorae to the Mithraic ritual, as well as to Porphyry's theology, is based on similarities between objects and their meanings. The amphorae are similar to a ritual bowl used by initiates to the Mithraic mysteries, which symbolizes fountains and the generative power of the nymphs, whom Porphyry considers a symbolic version of the soul, whose coming into being is characterized by an increase in wetness. The word μύστης in this section literally refers to the Mithraic initiates, in particular the ones who use fire for ritual purification. Porphyry's exegesis on Homer is thoroughly intertwined with his explanation of the Mithraic rites; by describing one, it seems, he describes the other.

One of the key aspects of Homer's cave, for Porphyry, is that it is full of natural features that mimic the products of civilization. It is as if the cave of the nymphs is a natural location that contains an essence of the divine, the way that Iamblichus' *onomata barbara* "hang" from the divine beings.<sup>46</sup> This question of the cave's material-spiritual nature leads Porphyry back to his initial question: is the cave real, or is it Homer's invention? While Porphyry thinks he has found the correct cave in the real world, as he discussed early on, he still considers any given cave εικόνα καὶ σύμβολον, image and symbol, of the κόσμος (*De antro*, 21.4). Κόσμος for Porphyry is the appropriate term for

---

<sup>46</sup> Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 204-226). Struck delineates the theological points that Porphyry and Iamblichus shared in common, and also their divergences. Iamblichus believed that certain words or phrases "hang" from their divine referents, and their use provokes the emanation from divine being to human. Similarly, certain practices contained a direct link to a divine entity, and by carrying them out the theurgist put himself into communication or contact with this divine entity.

the whole world, the universe, which includes both the material world that humans inhabit and perceive, as well as the divine realms which can only be represented metaphorically and, according to Porphyry, contemplated meditatively. A real-world cave that has the features Homer describes would still provide the basis for the theological contemplation that Porphyry argues is the key to the divine.<sup>47</sup> In locating the cave of the nymphs geographically, Porphyry discusses the theologians—θεολόγοι,<sup>48</sup> distinct from the philosophers and from the ancients, another class of those particularly well-connected with the divine—who consider the two entrances to the caves linked metaphorically to the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, and therefore heavenly as well as earthly (*De antro*, 29.12).<sup>49</sup> In the interpretative tradition of the nymphs' cave, this duality is longstanding; the twofold gate is itself (*De antro*, 29.11-15). Porphyry says even Plato considered a double gate to be a pathway to heaven, εἰς οὐρανόν (*De antro*, 29.11).

Porphyry in this way modifies Plato's cave model to construct a model for a conversion experience, a re-ordering of the cosmos in accordance to a new set of

---

<sup>47</sup> Kevin Corrigan, "Religion and Philosophy in the Platonic Tradition" in *Religion and Philosophy in the Platonic and Neoplatonic Traditions: From Antiquity to the Early Medieval Period* eds. Kevin Corrigan, John D. Turner, Peter Wakefield (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2012) 19-34. In the context of a larger argument about the flexible nature of Platonism, Corrigan characterizes Porphyry as the proponent of a much simpler theology than Iamblichus', one based in meditative contemplation.

<sup>48</sup> Porphyry maintains this distinction between philosophers, theologians, and ancients throughout, and while he does not define the role of theologian in specific terms, the theologians he cites seem particularly concerned with astrological matters. Due to this concern, and their connection to the Mithraic symbolism that Porphyry draws on, it is likely that these theologians are initiates to Mithraism and perhaps other esoteric mysteries who have written on issues similar to Porphyry's topic.

<sup>49</sup> Georg Luck, "Studia Divina in Vita Humana: On Cicero's Dream of Scipio and its Place in Graeco-Roman Philosophy" in *Ancient Pathways & Hidden Pursuits: Religion, Morals, and Magic in the Ancient World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 86-97. This essay on Cicero's use of Platonic and Stoic philosophies in his Dream of Scipio places Cicero's treatise in a key role in the blending of these two philosophical traditions.

principles that demand a particular set of morals from the adherent.<sup>50</sup> For Plato, the actual experience of this conversion or enlightenment—the psychological or spiritual details—is either irrelevant or inarticulable, and he prefers to describe by way of allegory. Porphyry in a sense borrows Plato’s cave when he writes on the nymphs’ cave in Homer. No philosophically-inclined reader would have been able to read his essay without having Plato’s allegory in mind, especially given Porphyry’s reference to Plato’s interpretation of a double gate, and in this light the *De antro* leads the reader simultaneously through the *katabasis* of the Orphics, down into the literary cave, and the ascent of the Platonists, upward towards the transcendent meaning encoded in Homer’s text. In the conception of the later Platonists, Plato, after all, is one of those philosophers especially gifted with divine wisdom, just like one of the ancients. On the other hand, Homer, after the Stoic tradition, possesses by his very antiquity a greater level of insight to the divine, and for Porphyry it is prudent to understand Homer’s sometimes elliptical wisdom by way of Plato’s often more straightforward framework. The contemplative person cannot reach transcendence simply through reading either Homer or Plato, but by steadily working through the complexities that each presents—at times apparently in conflict, but to the contemplative these conflicts will resolve themselves in an experience of the divine intellect.

Porphyry was not himself a theurgist, but theurgy attracted him at points in his life and an esoteric-mystic thread runs through his philosophy. In the vein of Plotinus, Porphyry believed that through contemplation, it was possible for mortals to achieve

---

<sup>50</sup> A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933).

assimilation to the divine. This contemplation took many stages and great patience, and while it began with rational discourse in the form of studies like astronomy and mathematics, an aspiring philosopher eventually needed to abandon the tools that discourse provided to attain pure thought itself—a wordless, inexpressible state that stood closer to the One.<sup>51</sup> The way that Porphyry (by way of Plotinus) conceived of these philosophical tools bringing students of philosophy closer and closer to the One marks a key formal similarity between philosophical contemplation and religious ritual in Porphyry’s contemporary, Iamblichus. The tension between these two philosophers is not the construct of modern scholars; they left behind evidence enough in Porphyry’s *Letter to Anebo*, in which he denounced theurgy and mystery ritual practice. Most scholars today believe that Anebo was a not-so-veiled Egyptian pseudonym for Iamblichus, which falls in line with the general sentiment in antiquity that the rituals of theurgy came from the east and especially from Egypt.<sup>52</sup> Iamblichus did not let this denunciation pass without comment and responded in turn with his *De mysteriis*.<sup>53</sup> The two philosophers did rely on similar backgrounds; for instance, Porphyry’s fundamental notion of *genesis*, the process of souls condensing into bodies, is rooted not only in Plato’s philosophy of soul, but also in Pythagorean ideas about metempsychosis and the return of souls.

Iamblichus was the author of a treatise that survives in fragmentary form *De vita pythagorica* and Porphyry was the author of a *Vita Pythagorae*. However, whereas

---

<sup>51</sup> Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 25-66. Rappe provides a detailed overview of Plotinus’s views on discursivity and its opposite.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> Emma C Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell, *Iamblichus: De Mysteriis* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

Iamblichus found a mystic trigger in theurgical rituals and incantations that resisted discursive interpretation, Porphyry sought discursive meaning in the tools he used for philosophical contemplation.

For both Porphyry and Iamblichus, students of one of the great teachers in the history of philosophy, the system of contemplation—or divine invocation, in the case of Iamblichus—was not an intuitive system. There had to be a teacher and there had to be precepts of some sort. For Iamblichean theurgy, the teacher took on a role at times indistinguishable from the mystagogue, the priest who led neophytes through mystery rituals for the purpose of an initiation. Porphyry belonged to a long tradition that could trace its origins back to Plato himself, but as unspeakable divine assimilation became part of the Platonic tradition with Plotinus, the role of the teacher changed. While Neoplatonists from Plotinus onward continued the progression of studies with the purpose of attaining higher contemplations, those higher contemplations that fell beyond the capabilities of discourse and reason required special types of preparation.<sup>54</sup> Allegory, which brought the reader to a new level of real meaning beyond the apparent level, itself provided an excellent model for the relationship between the sensible world and the intelligible world.

Although Porphyry must have been well acquainted with the tradition of Homeric interpretation, the only thinkers he cited in any depth are Cronius and Numenius, two Platonists of one or two generations before his own.<sup>55</sup> He referenced others when

---

<sup>54</sup> Rappe 2000, 1-21, 117-142.

<sup>55</sup> Lambertson 1983 5-12.

pertinent; for instance, Artemidorus of Ephesus had theorized about the location of the cave, so Porphyry quoted Artemidorus during the course of that discussion.<sup>56</sup> When Porphyry explained the relationship of the Naiad nymphs to the cycle of *genesis*, he quoted Heraclitus' line, "A dry soul is wisest."<sup>57</sup> While some modern commentators have called Porphyry an unoriginal thinker whose ideas mostly belonged to others, *De antro nympharum* is not a simple amalgam of his predecessors' Homeric interpretations.<sup>58</sup> In fact, Porphyry typically did not agree with previous interpretations on this passage. Moreover, he seemed not to view a rigorous knowledge of older commentary as crucial for correct interpretation, although knowledge of philosophy is. The passage stands nearly on its own in his essay in terms of the history of its scholarship, and rather than build up a scaffold of the history of commentary around the passage, Porphyry saw in it many threads of philosophy woven through. To understand the passage appropriately, a reader had to be able to see these threads, and once they were revealed the text could take on a greater purpose.

In the tradition of Cornutus, Porphyry saw Homer's verse as containing keen insights about the metaphysical composition of the world encoded into narrative poems. These complex poems took on two essential roles for Porphyry: on the one hand, he uses Homer's verse to elucidate and inform philosophy, and on the other, he uses these philosophical progenitors like Cronius and Numenius to elucidate and inform Homer.

---

<sup>56</sup> In this case, Artemidorus the Geographer, not the author of the *Oneirocritica*.

<sup>57</sup> Heraclitus the Presocratic, not the Grammarian who was the author of a set of Homeric Questions rooted in the idea that the Homeric epics contained historical truths. For more on the historical approach to Homeric exegesis, see Lawrence Kim, *Homer between History and Fiction in Imperial Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Lamberton, *ibid.*

Each of these aspects of his discussion feeds into his greater argument about the nature of the soul and the cosmos. Multiple levels of teaching occur in the *De antro nympharum*. Homer taught both Porphyry and any other reader divine truths, but Homer's divine truths were easily misunderstood, even by a skilled reader. By reading Porphyry's interpretations, a student of philosophy could bypass wrong interpretations and come to a deeper understanding of both Homer and the cosmos. Porphyry therefore functions as the teacher through the mediation of his essay. Once a student has reached the level of truth that Porphyry has laid open with this essay—and his others on Homeric questions—still further contemplations remain unexplored. Some of these contemplations might have been rational and discursive, but others might have been beyond that point, unreachable through allegorical reading, but perhaps requiring the understanding that allegorical reading provided in order to be discovered.<sup>59</sup>

The relationship between poetry and the divine was by no means a new notion to the Greeks of Porphyry's day, or even Plato's. The Homeric Hymns, which date starting from the mid-sixth century BCE, indicate that from an early point in Greek history poetically-minded praise and narrative were an effective way to invoke a god. Plato himself composed the *Cratylus* in critique of the notion that the names of things were divinely-ordained, and that the truth of this matter was attainable through etymological arguments similar to Cornutus's. By the time Porphyry and Iamblichus were writing, the

---

<sup>59</sup> As discussed above, this was essentially Plotinus' perspective on the relationship between the rational and the non-discursive. While rational discourse could not lead to divine assimilation, it was nonetheless a necessary step, without which no student of philosophy could hope to reach an experience of the divine.

mechanisms behind this incantation-invocation phenomenon were fairly well-schematized. While Porphyry and others attacked theurgy and magic alike as hubristic. For Iamblichus and the Syrian Neoplatonists of his school, theurgical invocation was separate from magical coercion. Instead, he treats the practices of theurgy as containing a form of similarity to the gods and divine powers, who exist in a complex hierarchy leading from the individual human up to the divine One.<sup>60</sup> His theurgical pantheon rests on a Plotinian foundation, but it embellishes Plotinus' hierarchy to fit identifiable gods and powers in a somewhat more concrete way than Plotinus' or Porphyry's method. The divine similarity of theurgic practices appeals to these powers, who turn toward the theurgist in emanation as the theurgist's soul ascends to meet the divine. Varied types of actions contain this similarity: nonsense phrases like the *onomata barbara*, intelligible prayers, statues, fumigations, and other practices familiar from religious ritual all have power to invoke particular divine powers.

Porphyry rejected these practices as ineffective, but not only on accusations of superstition or charlatanism. Theurgy was a non-discursive practice at its core and its rites resist the application of logical interpretative frameworks. Theurgy bore typological similarities to Porphyry's Neoplatonic contemplation, according to Porphyry it did not rest on a logical framework. By providing philosophical tools like Homeric interpretation, Porphyry admitted that divine revelation could not take place in an

---

<sup>60</sup> Iamblichus spends a significant portion of his argument in *De myst.* describing the levels of divinity, from humans to heroes to daimons to gods and finally, the intellect. Each level of divine being interacts differently with the human, whose soul contains a small piece of the divine, and through these interactions the human ascends nearer to the intellect.

intellectual and sensory vacuum. Approaching the divine through the mediating lens of Homeric poetry allowed Porphyry to construct a complicated and vetted theology while leaving some leeway for individual interpretations. Iamblichean mysteries and theurgy with its repetitive ritual practice offered a similar concrete framework with room for individual practitioners to adjust rituals, but while the goal was the same—a revelatory experience of the mysteries of reality—the path was very different.

### **Language and Transcendence**

Although Porphyry and Iamblichus took essentially different views on the proper way to approach the divine, these differences of mode can often inform one another. One key point of contact between Porphyry and Iamblichus is their reliance on language specifically to promote a connection to the divine. Each has a distinct use of language, but the two are more closely related than they first appear. The role of *onomata barbara* was key in Iamblichus' theurgy. These phrases were very similar to the *voces magicae* of magical practice, which were words or phrases of dubious meaning and etymology that seem to have held some coercive power over gods or spirits. While scholars have connected some of these phrases to an intelligible meaning, like the formula *ista pista sista* to *ista pestem sistat*, “stop that pestilence”,<sup>61</sup> most of them are very far removed from sense both for us and for the ancients. Commonly the creators of such phrases

---

<sup>61</sup> H. S. Versnel, “The Poetics of the Magical Charm: an Essay on the Power of Words” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* eds. Marvin Meyer and Paul Allen Mirecki (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 108

would repeat a word with one letter removed until only a single letter remained, or create a corrupted palindrome of a line of Homer.<sup>62</sup> Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* wrote that these phrases must have held immense power over the gods, and this immense power was connected to their meaninglessness for humans. These words were intended for divine ears, and perhaps were even secret names for divine powers, like Iamblichus' *onomata barbara*.<sup>63</sup> The *voces magicae* were very widespread in antiquity, and the earliest reference to them comes from Cato the Censor's *De agricultura* in an instance of what is traditionally considered "sympathetic" magic, and what Versnel calls magic functioning by analogy.<sup>64</sup>

Porphyry explicitly denounced Iamblichus' *onomata barbara* and all his other rituals as mere magic in the *Letter to Anebo*. He had no patience for "meaningless" (ἄσημα) words and he did not care for the use of foreign (βάρβαρα) words or names for gods over Greek ones.<sup>65</sup> Porphyry, as far as he believed pure contemplation was the key to the divine, needed a meaningful system to organize this mental contemplation. Greek words and Greek names were naturally superior to variously meaningful ones, which may have been foreign and which may have signified different things to different people. After all, the gods themselves did not adhere to such boundaries as Greek versus Egyptian, so people would do best to refer to them at least in their own language to avoid

---

<sup>62</sup> Versnel, op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> Versnel, op. cit. and Iamblichus, de Myst.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Letter to Anebo 22, in Versnel op. cit. 109, and Struck 2002.

pretense and achieve a purer connection.<sup>66</sup> For Iamblichus, though, there was a mystery in the meanings of these words that lay deeper than, for instance, Plato's argument of nature versus convention in the *Cratylus*, a key dialogue for the Neoplatonists. These names have a "symbolic stamp" of their closeness to the gods, which makes them especially effective.<sup>67</sup> This is again the mechanism of likeness that pervades Iamblichus' thought. Peter Struck notes that Iamblichus refers to particular talismans or amulets that promote invocation of the gods by their proximity to the practitioner, but that he dismisses their efficacy.<sup>68</sup> There is something unique about ritual words and names in Iamblichus' reckoning, as there is something unique about Homeric poetry for Porphyry: each of these contains some similarity to the gods much greater and much more powerful than ordinary speech. In the respect that Porphyry views poetic language as having a special power over human experience, an inductive power leading to divine transcendence, his beliefs regarding the value of Homer are not so dissimilar from Iamblichus' beliefs on the value of secret divine names. In each case, the correct approach sparks a mystic, ineffable divine experience that bears significant similarity to the mystery and mystic-esoteric religions of the Greek world leading up to and through this period.

The Orphic tradition was another longstanding Greek tradition that offered a privileged place to the text, especially in the form of hymns to the gods and of narrative

---

<sup>66</sup> Peter Struck, "Speech Acts and the Stakes of Hellenism," in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* 390-1.

<sup>67</sup> "συμβολικὸς χαρακτήρ", *de Myst.* VII.4.16-18. Both words carry a sense of being marked and therefore corresponding to that which marks.

<sup>68</sup> Struck 2002, 393.

cosmogonies and theogonies. The Orphic cosmogonies offered a different explanation for origins than the traditional Homeric or Hesiodic narratives, and they have long been interpreted as an outsider religion more like a forerunner of Christianity than anything in its contemporary Greek context.<sup>69</sup> While much of the Orphic tradition remains mysterious despite some tantalizing early evidence, like the fourth- or third-century BCE Orphic hymns, some certainties reveal themselves. There was no self-defined group of “Orphics” wandering the Classical world, but there were people who passed down Orphic knowledge from generation to generation, not unlike the way that ancient medical doctors passed knowledge on. Like the doctors, these practitioners of Orphic ritual employed their knowledge frequently for healing purposes, and if a particular ritual was effective for an individual, that ritual would become a standard for that person; if it was ineffective, the practitioner might modify or abandon it in favor of rituals that did work. One of the key components of Orphic ritual was the recitation of the cosmogony and theogony for a healing purpose. The mechanism behind this seems to have been a sympathetic—or analogic, after Versnel’s preferred framework—establishment of order, so that if the sick or otherwise afflicted person heard over and over again the appropriate order of the cosmos, their body would comply with that proper order and cease to be ill.<sup>70</sup> For the Orphics, then, as for the later theurgists, words had an efficacy to them. This efficacy is, at least originally, much more closely linked with the material world than it would be for Iamblichus or Porphyry. However, the function of poetic speech to cause a

---

<sup>69</sup> Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, *Orphism and Christianity in Late Antiquity*. (de Gruyter: Göttingen, 2010).

<sup>70</sup> Walter Burkert, *op. cit.*

re-ordering effect on the body provides an analogy for Porphyry's use of Homeric poetry to re-order the soul, and orient it towards the divine.

In the Roman period leading up to and contemporary with Porphyry's writing, Orphic literature and practice is much better attested. By this time, Orphic literature was routinely interpreted in either an exegetical manner, remaining close to the mythic narratives, or in an allegorical manner that diverged from the myth. The followers of Orphic wisdom, then, were very used to the kinds of allegorical reading that Porphyry employs in his treatment of Homer, and these methods were an important component of their understanding of the divine. At this later point in the Orphic tradition, there was a strong intellectual and esoteric thread to the hymns, theogonies, and rituals, and in this regard these poetic texts and their interpretations belonged to the ferment that produced Porphyry's philosophy, too.<sup>71</sup> Like the adherents of the better-understood mysteries like those of Eleusis and Samothrace, the followers of Orpheus seem also to have taken some sort of oath of secrecy. This oath would have protected the forms of rituals and perhaps also the symbolic meanings of hymns and rituals alike from outsiders. Ancient commentators pointed to particular lines of hymns as referencing a god or gods as witnesses, depending on their ideology; a Neo-Pythagorean commentator saw reference to the Ogdoad, the eight deities ranking just below the One or Intellect, whereas a Christian apologist saw reference to the Christian Trinity.<sup>72</sup> This late Orphic tradition provides evidence for a marrying of practices associated with mystery cults and the

---

<sup>71</sup> Herrero de Jáuregui, 35-7.

<sup>72</sup> Herrero de Jáuregui, op. cit. 38-40.

intellectual tradition of philosophical, allegorical readings of texts and rituals.

Iamblichus' writings provide the most direct and clearest application of this ritual-

intellectual ferment to the Platonic tradition, but he was not alone in his project.

### **Porphyry's Cave and Philosophy in Later Antiquity**

This study has so far touched on some of the essential features of the Neoplatonic cosmos particularly with relation to Iamblichean theurgy, but Porphyry's philosophical method, including the use of Homeric interpretation found in *De antro nympharum*, owes just as much to Plotinus' teachings. In her 2000 study of Neoplatonic discursivity, Sara Rappe writes, "[Plotinus] wants to lead the mind out of its habit of looking at the world as essentially outside of the self, as composed of a number of objects with discrete essences that are known in all sorts of ways, but primarily through the senses and through thinking about essences."<sup>73</sup> Plotinus' cosmos intimately relates the sensible and intelligible realms, but it also intimately relates the elements of these realms with each other. He finds unity in the connection of individual souls to the World Soul, and this unity through likeness to the World Soul also means that individual souls are essentially like each other—even that bodies are like each other. Porphyry's cave-as-microcosm again finds particular relevance. The material cave, if one were to seek it out, contains a series of features that are highly suggestive of the true nature of the cosmos, but it is not necessary to behold the cave with the senses in order to understand its meaning. The poetic version of the

---

<sup>73</sup> Rappe 2000, 44. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.12.15.

cave is sufficiently present—sufficiently real. As a reader follows along with first Homer’s passage, and then Porphyry’s explanation of it, the cave comes to be in the reader’s mind; the words do not just evoke poetically, but also invoke the nymphs’ cave. On a most basic level, this invocation brings together a mysterious cave on Ithaca and a philosophically-inclined reader so that the reader is present in the cave, a location in the material world, but in an immaterial manner.

The use of reading found in Porphyry’s *De antro nympharum* has two key precedents than Plotinus’s writings, and these influenced Plotinus’s ideas as well. First, the Pythagoreans seem to have restricted their wisdom to an inner circle by means of enigmatic dicta, the ἄκουσματα intended to make little sense to outsiders, but which acted almost as shorthand or mnemonics for those who had been schooled in the Pythagorean worldview according to Iamblichus.<sup>74</sup> This was not quite the textual exegesis so important to Stoic commentators on ancient poetry, or to the later Neoplatonists, but it provided a very ancient and directly philosophical model for verbal maxims that held higher encoded meanings. Second, the Stoic *meditatio* and *confessio* had an important influence on Neoplatonic modes of reading. The *meditatio* and *confessio* were reading exercises designed to disengage the reader from unproductive distractions and subjective experience, and instead promote the viewpoint of a “spectator” possessing uncompromised calm and attention. Seneca’s *Moral Epistles*, Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*, and Augustine of Hippo’s *Confessions* all provide key examples of the genre. Unlike the Pythagorean ἄκουσματα, these Stoic genres aimed less

---

<sup>74</sup> Rappe 2000, 13-14. Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 29.

at the revelation of cosmic knowledge and more at the taming of the soul with the ultimate goal of cosmic enlightenment. However, the soul had to be appropriately prepared for this kind of cosmic enlightenment, and the *meditatio* and related genres aided in this goal.

In recent decades, some effort has been made towards the recovery of Porphyry's weightier ideas, especially his metaphysics, which are not as evident in the works that survive. At the same time, as noted earlier, scholars have spent a certain degree of energy on the chronology of his works.<sup>75</sup> Despite their efforts, Porphyry's metaphysics and a chronology of his works remain elusive. Some posit that he composed the exegetical and philological works during his early study with Longinus in Athens, but this hypothesis rests only on the knowledge that Porphyry learned philology with Longinus. The temptation to set these works during this time is perhaps understandable, but there is no reason to assume that Porphyry stopped doing philology when he came into contact with Plotinus. Minutely philological methods, like the previously-discussed Stoic etymology, were central to the writing of commentaries in general. As mentioned earlier, commentaries were a very popular philosophical genre in late antiquity, and there is some reason to set Porphyry at the beginning of this tradition.<sup>76</sup> It is entirely plausible that Porphyry's interest in exegesis and textual interpretation continued throughout his lifetime, and in fact the *De antro nympharum* includes elements that hint at a metaphysical system influenced by Plotinus.

---

<sup>75</sup> A. Smith 1987, pp.

<sup>76</sup> A. Smith 1987, pp.

Plotinus's absence from explicit mention from the text does not necessarily indicate his absence from Porphyry's thought process, either, since contrary to his usual tendency towards extensive citation, in the *De antro nympharum* in general, Porphyry only cites other thinkers sporadically where he requires some clarification or some other viewpoint to oppose with his own. Cronius and Numenius appear several times, therefore, and Artemidorus the Geographer appears once, but otherwise Porphyry cites only Homer, Hesiod, Orpheus, Plato, and "the theologians", οἱ θεολόγοι, whose role has been discussed above. The ancient poets appear in what might be considered a somewhat more philological capacity; for instance, when Porphyry is uncovering the meaning of the amphoras of the cave that are filled with honey. After making a connection to Mithraic cult he draws a connection between honey with its physical properties of cleansing and preservation—of both food and dead bodies—to the nectar that the gods consume.<sup>77</sup> Here he invokes the ancient authority of Homer's description for nectar, νέκταρ ἐρυθρόν, because ἐρυθρόν is the color of honey.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Orpheus's authority can verify this connection between honey and divine nectar, because in an Orphic fragment that Porphyry quotes, Zeus gets the opportunity to castrate Kronos when Kronos is in a drunken stupor after consuming honey, ἔργοισιν μεθύοντα μελισσάων ἐριβομβέων,

---

<sup>77</sup> It is worth noting that Porphyry's discussion of the Mithraic ritual use of honey is briefer than his discussion of "honey in literature", and that his interpretation of the Mithraic ritual serves almost as an introduction to the lengthier discussion of honey as discussed by the ancient poets. In other words, the theologians or the Mithraic initiates might have a good grasp on the nature and symbolism of honey, but they do not represent the primary authority that Porphyry's analysis rests upon. Rather, they are at best tapping into the same divine insight as the ancients, or more probably drawing on cosmic truths at least partly through the wisdom of the ancient poets that Porphyry cites.

<sup>78</sup> Il. 19.39, Od. 5.93

“drunk with the works of buzzing bees” (*De ant.* 15.4-16.23).<sup>79</sup> In short, Porphyry is concerned much more with the ways that the ancients used words in constructing his Homeric interpretation, and less with the ways that either other commentators have interpreted them or that other philosophers have used the concepts, and there is no reason to date *De antro nympharum* based on Plotinus’s lack of presence or on the dates of Porphyry’s study in Athens.

The allegory practiced in *De antro nympharum* at many points indicates a Neoplatonic—and therefore at least somewhat Plotinian—perspective.<sup>80</sup> There are numerous elements of *De antro nympharum* that have ritual connections, but as this paper has argued, many of these elements are pulling the contents of mystery rituals into a symbolic framework that the ancient poets, and in particular Homer, established with their verses full of secret wisdom. Moreover, Plotinian practices of reading drew on older Stoic practices of reading that emphasized the ways that reading could detach the subjective self and allow purer contemplation of the divine. This act of reading was itself analogous to a ritual practice both in its repetitive nature and in its reliance on words, especially versified words. *De antro nympharum* is a Neoplatonic teaching text, one that manipulates the world of ritual and incantation to create a style of reading that fosters contemplation of and assimilation with the divine in the tradition of Plotinus.

## Conclusions

---

<sup>79</sup> Orph. frag. 154, Kern.

<sup>80</sup> Longinus, partly for what is known about his methods and partly for his stewardship of the Academy in Athens, is generally considered a tail-end Middle Platonist.

This paper has examined the role of Porphyry's *De antro nympharum* in the greater context of Homeric commentary and interpretation, as well as in connection to Neoplatonism's attitudes towards ritual, magic, and theurgy. Porphyry figures himself as a figure analogous to the mystagogue, who leads his readers as philosophical initiates to the true meaning of Homer, himself a sort of mystagogue. He draws in a variety of mystery ritual practices alongside the insights of ancient poets and other philosophers, including Plato, in his interpretation of Homer. The result is a text that offers to the student of philosophy a guide for the appropriate way to approach divine contemplation, and even a place—a metaphysical, poetic place where souls pass into and out of bodies—in which to perform that contemplation. This use of the text as contemplative aid finds a very early precedent in the Orphic recitations of cosmogonies to re-order a diseased body as well as in the Pythagorean use of semi-public sayings with secret meanings attached which were only available to the members of the group. It also has more recent roots in the Stoic *meditatio*. Some modern scholars have considered Porphyry to be a second-rate thinker. However, the ferment of literary genres and ritual practices that the *De antro nympharum* puts to use in a Neoplatonic philosophical context belies that assumption. The *De antro nympharum*, though perhaps rather opaque at first, exemplifies the eclectic world of late antique thought, where even the exegesis had its own encoded meanings.

## **Bibliography**

Joseph Bidez. *Vie de Porphyre, le philosophe néo-platonicien: avec les fragments des traités Peri agalmatōn et De regressu*. Hildesheim: G. Olm, 1964.

G. R. Boys-Stones. *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of its Development from the Stoics to Origen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Emma C Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell. *Iamblichus: De Mysteriis*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

Kevin Corrigan. "Religion and Philosophy in the Platonic Tradition." In *Religion and Philosophy in the Platonic and Neoplatonic Traditions: From Antiquity to the Early Medieval Period* edited by Kevin Corrigan, John D. Turner, Peter Wakefield. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 19-34 2012.

Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*. New York: Cosimo, 2007.

Herman Alexander Diels. *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Berlin: Druckerei Hildebrand, 1961.

Robert Fagles, trans. *The Iliad of Homer*. New York: Penguin, 1996.

Paula Fredriksen. "Allegory and Reading God's Book: Paul and Augustine on the Destiny of Israel." In *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, edited by Jon Whitman, 125-149. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

Kathleen Freeman. *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Companion to Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.

John Henry Freese, trans. *Aristotle: The Art of Rhetoric*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947.

Doreen Innes. "Metaphor, Simile, and Allegory." In *Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition*, edited by G. R. Boys-Stones, 7-27. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Robert Lamberton. *Porphyry: On the Cave of the Nymphs. Translation and Introductory Essay*. Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1983.

----- . *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Georg Luck. "Studia Divina in Vita Humana: On Cicero's Dream of Scipio and its Place in Graeco-Roman Philosophy." In *Ancient Pathways & Hidden Pursuits: Religion, Morals, and Magic in the Ancient World*, 86-97. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Kathryn A. Morgan. *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

A. D. Nock. *Conversion*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933.

Sara Rappe. *Reading Neoplatonism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Donald A. Russell and David Konstan, trans. *Heraclitus: Homeric Problems*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005.

Giulia Sfameni-Gasparro. "Mysteries and Oriental Cults: A Problem in the History of Religions." In *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, edited by J. A. North and S. R. F. Price, 276-312. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Lucas Siorvanes. "Perceptions of the *Timaeus*: Thematization and Truth in the Exegetical Tradition." In *Ancient Approaches to Plato's Timaeus*, edited by Robert W. Sharples and Anne Sheppard, 155-174. London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2003.

Andrew Smith. "Porphyrian Studies Since 1913." In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt II* 36.2, 719-787. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1987.

Peter Struck. *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

----- . "Speech Acts and the Stakes of Hellenism." In *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, edited by Paul Allan Mirecki and Marvin W. Meyer, 386-403. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui. *Orphism and Christianity in Late Antiquity*. de Gruyter: Göttingen, 2010.

Jean Pierre Vernant. *Mythe et Société en Grèce ancienne*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1980.

H. S. Versnel. "The Poetics of the Magical Charm: an Essay on the Power of Words." In *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, edited by Paul Allen Mirecki and Marvin W. Meyer, 105-158. Leiden: Brill, 2002.