

TRAVELLING SOULS?

Greek shamanism reconsidered

In Chapter 2 we firmly tied the rise of the soul to Pythagoras. Yet Greek tradition also knew of males from the Archaic period, who went round purifying and healing but who, reputedly, could also fly, go into trances, perform feats of bilocation and let their soul travel. This activity of the soul was considered to be so foreign to Greek culture that more than forty years ago these 'miracle workers' were called 'Greek shamans' and their psychic excursions explained from contacts with Scythians (section 2). In my *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (1983) I raised a number of objections to this shamanistic interpretation, which have been widely accepted among both classical and non-classical scholars.' However, in 1989 the early modern historian Carlo Ginzburg dismissed my objections in his fascinating book *Ecstasies*; in 1993 a dissertation supervised by Walter Burkert on Scythian shamanism completely ignored the discussions about the use of the term 'shamanism'; in 1994 Peter Kingsley severely took me to task for even questioning 'the postulation of shamanic influences on the Greeks from the North and East', and in 1996 shamanism once again returned as explanation for the traditions about Abaris and Aristean (sections 2 and 3) in an authoritative new classical encyclopedia.' Evidently, the tide is turning and the whole matter deserves to be looked at again. In this chapter, therefore, I will first sketch the historiography of the problem (section 1), then pay special attention to Meuli and Dodds, the pioneers of 'Greek shamanism' (section 2), thirdly look at the miracleworkers in more detail (section 3) and, finally, draw some conclusions about the postulated rise of the soul in the Archaic period (section 4).

1. Historiography

Shamanism came only very gradually to the attention of the Western world. In a learned study of the European discovery of shamanism Ginzburg has stated that it was only in 1704 that for the very first time the Dutch merchant Evert Ysbrants Ides registered the existence among the Siberian Tunguses of a '*schaman* or diabolical artist', a word of apparently unknown etymology.' Ides

was the son of a Dutch immigrant in the Danish town of Glückstadt, in modern Schleswig-Holstein, who had founded a merchant house in Moscow.⁵ Here, in 1691, he met Czar Peter the Great, who, the following year, entrusted him with a mission to the emperor Kangxi of China. After a trip of 18 months through Siberia and Mongolia, Ides and his mission of more than 250 noblemen, advisors, merchants and soldiers, reached Beijing in 1693. His main achievement was that every three years the Russians were allowed to do business in Beijing with a caravan of at most 200 members. Ides' own account was published posthumously in Dutch in 1704. He described the Tunguse shaman and provided the first illustration of a shaman in action."

However, Ginzburg has overlooked that Ides' own description of the expedition had been pre-empted by the secretary of the embassy, Adam Brand, a merchant from Lübeck, who already published his own account in 1698. This report proved to be extremely popular in Western Europe and was already translated into English in the same year: *A Journal of an Embassy From Their Majesties John and Peter Alexowits, Emperors of Muscovy, &c, into China, Through the Provinces of Ustiugha, Siberia, Dauri, and the Great Tartary to Peking, the Capital City of the Chinese Empire. Performed by Everard Isbrand. Their Ambassador in the Years 1693, 1694, and 1695. Written by Adam Brand. Secretary of the Embassy . . .* (the title is a bibliographer's nightmare), shortly to be followed by Dutch (Tiel, 1699), French (Amsterdam, 1699) and Spanish (Madrid, 1701) translations. Brand mentioned that 'where five or six Tunguses live together. . . they keep a shaman, which means a kind of priest or magician'. In 1698, then, Europeans could read the word *shaman* for the very first time.'

After the expedition of Ides, Siberia increasingly drew scholarly attention and in the literature of the eighteenth century the shaman became a familiar figure." It was only now that scholars could look at the well-known passages in Herodotus about the Scythians, which we will discuss in a moment, with fresh eyes. In 1712 the famous German geographer Engelbert Kämpfer (1651–1716) identified the plants that the Scythians used for their purification as hashish." And in 1802 a Polish count, Jan Potocki (1761–1815), identified the Scythian seers with 'les Schamanes de la Sibérie', soon to be followed by the classical scholar Christian August Lobeck (1781–1860), who now called the ancient miracleworkers (section 3) 'sciamani'.¹⁰ Yet it would take until the end of the nineteenth century before shamans would again attract the attention of classicists. Then two giants of German *Altertumswissenschaft*, Erwin Rohde (1845–98) and Hermann Diels (1848–1922), compared reports about Dionysiac ecstasy and the *Jenseitsreise* of Parmenides, respectively, with those about shamans, without, however, claiming more than a phenomenological resemblance. This is particularly clear in the case of Diels who explicitly rejected historical connections between Greece and the shamanistic cultures.¹¹ It is probably from Rohde's classic work *Psyche* that a young Swiss who in 1911–12 followed lectures in Munich, amongst others with Rohde's

biographer Otto Crusius (1857–1918),¹² first learned about shamanism – namely Karl Meuli.”

2. Meuli and Dodds

Meuli (1891–1968) was both a professor *extraordinarius* of the University of Basel (and since 1942 *ordinarius*) in Classics and Folklore and a teacher of Classics at the local *Humanistisches Gymnasium* and continued in this combination until his retirement in 1957. He was an enormously learned classicist, whose oeuvre stands at the crossroads of classics, folklore, ethnology, psychology and the history of religion. His work often started from a passage in a classical author and then reached out into regions usually not visited by Hellenists, in particular the nomadic and shamanistic cultures of Central Asia and Siberia. Meuli was also fascinated – obsessed would not be the wrong word – with mourning customs and ideas about the dead, and this interest led him in the early 1920s to the funeral customs of the Scythians as described by Herodotus in a famous passage, which we will quote shortly. In search of possible explanations Meuli stumbled on shamanism and in particular became interested in the shaman's journey into the Beyond, since in his own dissertation on the Argonauts and the *Odyssey* he had reached the conclusion that the oldest version of the Argonautic epic also treated of a journey into the Beyond.¹⁴

The fascination with shamanism found its expression in 1935, when Meuli published his seminal article ‘Scythica’.¹⁵ Here a classical scholar analysed in detail, and with assured mastery of the relevant literature, “Herodotus' remarks about Scythian funerals and seers in the light of shamanism and subsequently he postulated a Scythian background for two archaic miracle workers, Aristeas and Abaris. But how did Meuli arrive at this result?

Let us take a close look at his method, starting with one of his key texts, Herodotus 4.73.2–75.2:

After a burial the Scythians clean themselves in the following manner: having cleansed and rinsed their heads they go about their bodies in the following manner: on a framework of three sticks, meeting at the top they stretch pieces of woollen felt, taking care to get the joins as perfect as they can, and inside this little tent they throw red-hot stones in a censer in the middle of the sticks and the felt.

There grows hemp (*kannabis*) in Scythia, a plant resembling flax, but much coarser and taller. It grows wild as well as under cultivation, and the Thracians make clothes from it very like linen ones – indeed, one must have much experience in these matters to be able to distinguish between the two, and anybody who has never seen a piece of cloth made of hemp, will suppose it to be of linen.

The Scythians, then, take the seed of the hemp, creep into the tent,

and throw the seed on to the hot stones. Thrown on the fire it begins to smoke, giving off a vapour unsurpassed by any Greek vapour-bath. The Scythians enjoy it and howl with pleasure.

(tr. Aubrey de Sélincourt, modified)

This is a very important description of *cannabis* which perfectly fits the facts. Hemp is indeed much taller than flax and can grow up to 15 feet high (flax only 3–4 feet high). People with a wider choice of fibres prefer linen for clothing and hemp for ropes and sails, since the latter is coarser. Herodotus' detailed description strongly suggests that *cannabis sativa* was still fairly unknown and spread from Thrace to the Greek world; virtually at the same time it may have also reached Greece from the East, since the word *qu-nu-bu* starts to appear only in Neo-Assyrian cuneiform texts."

This is all very interesting for botanical specialists, but where are the shamans in this passage? To arrive at his shamanistic interpretation, Meuli adduced a scene from the classic description of Siberia by Wilhelm Radloff, in which during a purification ceremony a shaman guided a soul of a recently deceased woman to the underworld whereby the singing of the shaman reached its climax in wild shouting ('wildes Schreien').¹⁸ Now Meuli was too honest a scholar not to observe that in Herodotus' description all classic characteristics of shamanism are lacking; there is no mention of spirits and not even of a drum, an indispensable part of Siberian shamanism. "' He therefore suggested that the Scythians did not yet have professional shamans but knew an older stage of shamanism, family shamanism ('Familien-Schamanismus'), which could still be observed in modern days among palaeo-Siberian peoples, such as the Goldi, Votyak and Ostyak. However, among all these tribes hereditary shamanism is well attested and the conclusion seems therefore justified that Meuli over-interpreted this Herodotean passage."

Moreover, Meuli could hardly have known that in 1929 Russian archaeologists had started important excavations in the Pazyryk valley in the Altai, some 200 kilometres North of the Chinese border and only 150 kilometres West of Mongolia. Here they uncovered a number of sixth- and fifth-century tumulus-shaped graves, kurgans, in which they found the bodies of Scythian chiefs with their favourite wives or concubines. Despite their isolated geographical position, these nomads had extensive commercial relations, witness the presence in their graves of Chinese mirrors, Iranian carpets, and cowrie shells from the coasts of the Indian Ocean." Hardly surprisingly, the graves had already been plundered in antiquity, but the robbers were interested only in gold, silver and metal, and they left many objects which have been perfectly preserved due to the permafrost. In 1949 the excavators discovered in one of the graves two bundles of six sticks which had been tied together at the end and covered with felt and leather, respectively, to make them into tents. A pouch with hemp seeds was tied to one of them and underneath the small tents (only about 1.20 metres high) there were two small bronze censers – one

square, the other round – which were filled with stones and contained partly carbonised hemp seeds. These findings clearly corroborate Herodotus, but they hardly favour Meuli's shamanistic thesis, since the presence of two censers demonstrate that both the chief and his female partner used hashish in daily life."

Curiously, the use of hemp for ecstatic purposes remained limited to the Scythians and the peoples North of Greece. Herodotus (1.202) also relates that the Massagetae near the Caspian sea used fruit of a certain tree, which they threw on the fire and which made them drunk – probably a garbled reference to the use of cannabis, which can reach great heights. The only other possible reference is never mentioned in the relevant literature. According to a Greek dictionary in Roman times, the *Antiatticista*,²³ which recorded words acceptable to use by those who wanted to write correct Greek, Sophocles mentioned the word *kannabis* in his tragedy *Thamyras* (F 243 Radt). This drama about the defeat of the Thracian singer Thamyras in a singing match against the Muses contains references to ecstatic dancing (F 240, 245),²⁴ but unfortunately we can hardly be certain about a single scene, except that apparently Thamyras broke his lyre after his defeat (F 244). As (1) the dictionary explicitly mentions that the word *kannabis* occurred in Herodotus and Sophocles, (2) the latter's debt to Herodotean ethnography is considerable²⁵ and (3) the *Antiatticista* would hardly select *kannabis* as a routine reference for clothing,²⁶ the conclusion seems reasonable that Sophocles somehow connected the Thracian Thamyras with an ecstatic use of cannabis." It fits in with this conclusion that Posidonius mentions Thracian 'smoke-walkers' (*kapnobatai*) and that Pomponius Mela reports the use of certain seeds by the Thracians which results in a *similis ebrietati hilaritas*,²⁸ seeds which my learned countryman Isaac Vossius (1618–89), who was still unacquainted with hashish, had interpreted as tobacco!" The Greeks themselves used cannabis only for medicine and cooking, as sometimes still happened in the Middle Ages,³⁰ and it would last to the crusades before Western Europe would learn again about its ecstatic use through a Muslim sect, whose use of hashish gave them a name which is still feared: the Assassins."

When we now return to the Scythian use of cannabis after a funeral, we observe that among American Indians vapour-baths and the use of narcotics are well attested as traditional means of purification." The same, then, may well have been the case among the Scythians. I had already written these lines, when I noticed that the same suggestion had been made by one of the earliest scholars, who constantly compared Red Indian customs to those of the ancient Greeks, Father Joseph François Lafitau (1681–1746), who worked in Canada for many years as a Jesuit missionary. Even though he interpreted the classical references to hashish as tobacco, he already compared Herodotus' report about sweating Scythians to Indian use of sweat baths for purification purposes and, in a way, pre-empted Meuli and Dodds by comparing Indian healing priests to Orpheus (below)."

Meuli's second argument for the existence of Scythian shamanism focused on a special kind of Scythians, the Enarees." According to Herodotus (1.105), the Scythians were punished with the 'female disease', from which their descendants are still suffering, after robbing the temple of Aphrodite, probably the Greek interpretation of Astarte," in Ascalon.³⁶ The Enarees return later as seers, who prophesy in a manner different from other Scythian seers.³⁷ We learn more about them and their disease from the treatise *Airs, Waters, Places* (ca. 400 BC), which mentions that 'the rich Scythians become impotent and perform women's tasks on an equal footing with them and talk in the same way. Such men they call Anarieis' (22).³⁸ Whereas Herodotus provides a more traditional, religious explanation, since the Greeks regularly ascribed aberrant sexual behaviour to the wrath of Aphrodite, as for example in the case of the Lemnian women,³⁹ the enlightened author of *Airs* explains this strange behaviour from too much horse-riding and wearing trousers, in other words from behaving in a very un-Greek manner.⁴⁰

It is always difficult to know whether Greek authors are reporting an ethnographic 'fact' or interpreting other cultures to their own prejudices and stereotypes. However, in this case we are fortunate that around 1800, a visitor to the Nogay tribe in the Caucasus reported the existence of cross-dressing eunuchs, whose condition arose after a serious illness or because of old age:

When an incurable debility succeeds to sickness, or old age advances, the skin of the whole body becomes extraordinarily wrinkled; the few hairs of the beard fall off, and he appears perfectly like a woman. He becomes incapable of conjugal duties, and his senses and actions have lost every thing manly. In this situation he must renounce all male society; he lives with the women; he dresses like them; and one might wager a thousand to one, that he was really an old woman, and certainly a most ugly one!"

Apparently, these males were suffering from some chronic, physical disease, which has recently been persuasively interpreted as Klinefelter's syndrome. This disease can culminate in total impotence and eunuchism as the result of a genetically determined defect in the mechanism controlling the absorption of iron. And precisely the regions to the north and east of the Black Sea, in what is now Russia and the Ukraine, have very rich iron deposits." If this disease is indeed in the background of Herodotus' description, as subsequent travellers who knew their Herodotus claimed," the Scythian seers must have used their disease to make the most of their dramatic change in life.

Meuli, on the other hand, compared the Scythian seers with those shamans who dress up as women and concluded that this proved 'the existence of an authentic shamanism. In addition to a primitive family shamanism, which we may assume, there existed a powerful and feared class of professional shamans; they reached their ecstasy via the vapour-bath and the intoxicating smoke of

hashish.' I have quoted Meuli here, since all of this is clearly very wrong. First, as Meuli himself observed, in our evidence transvestite shamans are virtually restricted to the most Eastern groups of palaeo-Siberians, the Chuckchee, Kamchadal and Koryak.⁴⁴ Secondly, Meuli has to assume the co-existence of an older family shamanism with a younger professional shamanism. In other words, virtually every Scythian must have been a shaman. Thirdly, as is clear from my quote, by combining the two Herodotean passages about the funeral and the Enarees Meuli makes the latter into ecstatic shamans, whereas Herodotus only describes them as seers. I conclude, therefore, that Meuli has not proven the existence of Scythian shamanism."

Meuli himself was of course of a different opinion and he now proceeded to link this non-existent Scythian shamanism with two figures, Aristeas and Abaris, whom Herodotus connected with the area North of Greece, and who, for that reason, always have been privileged in studies of 'Greek shamanism'. A poem which purported to be written by Aristeas told of journeys to fabulous peoples and of gold-guarding griffins fighting with the one-eyed Arimaspi.⁴⁶ Meuli interprets the griffins as deriving from North-Asiatic mythical figures," but this is hardly likely. In addition to the fact that the Scythian griffin originated in the Ancient Near East,⁴⁸ the passage surely is a double of Herodotus' report about gold-guarding ants in the Bactrian desert. This story is well attested in ancient Indian sources, and in modern times parallels have been recorded in Tibet and Mongolia. It probably derives from Dardiscan where the burrowing of marmots in the gold-bearing soil was regularly exploited." However, Herodotus explicitly ascribes this story to the Persians, and as the motif of the gold-guarding griffins is absent from Central Asiatic mythology the conclusion seems not improper that Aristeas located the gold-guarding griffins in the North, although they were derived from the East, where they were also located by 'Aeschylus' (PV 803–9) and Ktesias (*FGrH* 688 F 45h).

Meuli's second Scythian miracleworker is Abaris, of whom Herodotus relates that he was a 'supposed Hyperborean, who carried an arrow over the whole world without taking any food' (4.36). It is important to notice that in the oldest layers of our tradition (Herodotus, Lycurgus and, probably, Aristotle) Abaris is not yet of Scythian origin but is only reported to come from the mythical Hyperboreans carrying an arrow.⁵⁰ It is only a pupil of Aristotle, Heraclides Ponticus, and later authors who make him into a Scythian, probably in analogy to the wise Scythian king Anacharsis, and let him fly on the arrow." According to Meuli, the earliest tradition was a rationalistic expurgation, but, on the contrary, it seems historically more responsible to consider the flying to be a later novellistic 'Aussclimückung der Sage'.⁵² Now Meuli explained the Hyperborean Apollo not from Scythian traditions, but from certain Finno-Ugrian (*nota bene*: non-Iranian) peoples, the Vogul and the Ostyak, for whose beliefs he does not know of any other Siberian parallels. These peoples worship a Heavenly Father, who lives in a golden house, whom Meuli not only identified as the ultimate source for the legend of Pythagoras'

golden thigh (sic) but also with the Scythian Apollo Oitosyros (Her. 4.59), and he concluded that the Abaris legend has its roots in the representations of authentic, palaeo-Scythian belief. However, it should be clear from my summary of his argument that Meuli did not adduce any proof at all for a Scythian origin of Abaris nor for the existence of a Scythian shamanism;⁵⁵ neither has the existence of Iranian shamanism in historical time been demonstrated. Even its most ardent contemporary advocate can only adduce visionary journeys of a relatively late date, not earlier than those by the famous *magos* Kirdir in the third century AD, as proof of Iranian shamanism – visions which probably have been influenced by descriptions of those in Hellenistic, Jewish and Christian sources."

Still, demonstrating the existence of Scythian shamanism was not the ultimate aim of Meuli's article. Having discussed Aristean and Abaris he concluded his article with a paragraph about the origins of Greek epic poetry, which starts with another sleight of hand: 'The existence of Scythian shamanistic poetry, which anyway was to be assumed in such a developed shamanism, may now be considered proven'.⁵⁵ From this mistaken starting point Meuli proceeded to deduce a shamanistic origin for Greek epic: the ultimate explanation of the subject of his dissertation. However, the greatest authority on Greek religion in the middle of this century, Martin Nilsson (1874–1967), immediately rejected the idea – and rightly so.⁵⁶ In Greek mythology it is only the myth about Heracles' fight with Geryon in which we may find a shamanistic pattern," but the background of the myths of the Argonauts, the Calydonian Hunt, and the Trojan War lies unmistakably in rites of initiation."

Meuli returned to shamanism and the Greeks twice. In a 1940 introduction to a selection from the national Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*, he compared the shaman-like songs of its hero Vainamoinen to those of Orpheus, whose powerful singing he explained from his background in the archaic hunting culture of the Thracians. Even more explicitly he proposed this shamanistic interpretation of Orpheus in a paper read in 1950, which was published only in 1975, although it had escaped Meuli that a comparison between Orpheus and shaman-like Lapplanders had already been made by a notable former rector of the university of Uppsala, Olof Rudbeck (1630–1702), around 1700. Meuli's hope to present this suggestion in a more detailed manner was never fulfilled."

Despite the absence of any convincing evidence, then, the persuasive rhetoric of Meuli, who always worked long at the composition of his studies, and his impressive erudition were sufficient to convince many a reputable scholar, in particular the Regius Professor of Greek of Oxford, E. R. Dodds (1893–1979).⁶⁰ Unlike Meuli, who after his dissertation virtually only published articles, Dodds invested most of his scholarly time in books, of which three – his commentary on Euripides' *Bacchae* (1944), *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) and *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (1965) – are still being reprinted and translated, thus making him the most influential English

classicist of the twentieth century in international terms. Dodds wrote with literary skill and without jargon. As a result, his works are still attractive to read, even though his regular use of psychoanalytic insights does not wear well, as his successor as Regius Professor, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, rightly observed.⁶¹

In the course of the years, the study of human irrationality in all its manifestations had become the dominant centre of Dodds' life's interest: in 1961 – j he even became the president of the English Society for Psychical Research. " One may also speculate that this interest helped Dodds to become Regius Professor in 1936, since his predecessor and teacher, Gilbert Murray (1866–1957), shared this interest in psychic phenomena and even experimented in telepathy. So when in 1949 Dodds was invited to take up the most prestigious Visiting Chair in Classics, the Sather Professorship in Berkeley, a subject was not hard to choose. In six months he had prepared his lectures and in 1951 the result appeared as *The Greeks and the Irrational*."

Dodds' most important sources of inspiration were Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and, especially, Erich Fromm's (1900–80) study *The Fear of Freedom* (New York, 1941), which is also the title of Dodds' last chapter. With them lie shared the belief that the irrational in mankind is knowable and with Fromm he saw human history as an evolutionary process passing from irrationality to rationality. In his book Dodds sketched a transition within Greek society from shame culture to guilt culture, which he connected with a new relationship between body and soul, such as could be observed, according to him, in the course of the archaic age. In contrast to Homer, later texts start to speak of a divine character of the soul, which can now can speak to its owner with a voice of its own. 'By crediting man with an occult self of divine origin, and thus setting soul and body at odds, it introduced into European culture a new interpretation of human existence, the interpretation we call puritanical' (p. 139). It is this new development which Dodds then attempted to explain by an influence from the shamanistic aspects of Scythian culture, as postulated by Meuli.

In some ways, though, Dodds was much bolder than Meuli, since he postulated a shamanistic background not only for Aristeeas and Abaris, but also for Epimenides, Pythagoras, Empedocles and, clearly independently of Meuli, Orpheus. He thus constructed a 'tentative line of spiritual descent which starts in Scythia, crosses the Hellespont into Asiatic Greece, is perhaps combined with some remnants of Minoan tradition surviving in Crete, emigrates to the Far West with Pythagoras, and has its last outstanding representative in the Sicilian Empedocles' (p. 146). These shamanistic figures, according to Dodds, 'had *some influence* (italics mine) on the new and revolutionary conception of the relation between body and soul which appears at the end of the archaic age' (p. 142). In this quotation Dodds still seems to waver, since there were apparently also other influences to be taken into account. However, ten pages on, all doubts have disappeared: 'Any guilt-culture will, I suppose, provide a soil favourable to the growth of puritanism,

since it creates an unconscious need for self-punishment which puritanism gratifies. But in Greece it was, apparently, the impact of shamanistic beliefs which set the process going' (p. 152).

Dodds, then, had used shamanism for totally different purposes than Meuli. It remains his great merit that he connected the new ideas about the soul with ritual practices and oral traditions, even though he had accepted – lock, stock and barrel – Meuli's postulated Scythian influence, as have Walter Burkert and Carlo Ginzburg in the case of Aristeas and Abaris.⁶⁵ However, as his basis – the presupposed Scythian shamanism – is unsound and scholarship has since rejected his views about the transition from shame culture into guilt culture,⁶⁶ we are still left with the question as to how *we* then analyse the ecstasies of the Archaic period. Let us look once again at those figures who are usually quoted in connection with Greek 'shamanism'.

3. Greek 'shamans'

Dodds brought a variety of Greek figures into connection with shamanism: Orpheus, Aristeas and Abaris, Hermorimos of Klazomenai, the Cretan Epimenides, Pythagoras and the Sicilian Empedocles, to which Burkert has added the Crotoniates Phormio and Leonymus. This group constitutes a heterogeneous collection of miracleworkers, whose origins, functions and traditions must be differentiated in order to reach a proper understanding of their positions in the Archaic period. In my analysis of the early Greek concept of the soul I have studied those motifs which have been considered as deriving from shamanism, such as the flight of the soul, bilocation and trance.⁶⁷ Here I will take into account the results of my earlier study, but concentrate on the dates and functions of the so-called 'shamans'. In this way it might be established when psychic excursions are first attested in Greece. In this investigation I will pay particular attention to the transmission of the traditions about 'shamans', since no scholar seems to have wondered about the channels along which our knowledge of them has been handed down and what distorting influences these may have exerted. It is only in such a way that we can gain a proper picture of the traditions about the activities of their souls.

The oldest figure of those connected with 'shamanism' by Dodds is Orpheus, who, unlike the others, is never included in ancient catalogues of 'shamans';⁶⁷ evidently, the modern 'shamanistic' perception of Orpheus was not shared by ancient scholars. In order to support his argument Dodds argued that Orpheus 'combined the professions of poet, magician, religious teacher, and oracle-giver'; with his music he summoned birds and beasts to listen to him, and he recovered a stolen soul.⁶⁸ These arguments are not very persuasive. To start with, in the oldest tradition Orpheus is neither a poet nor a magician nor a religious teacher. He is first and foremost a musician, and even the story about his wife Eurydice was originally intended to show the power of his music, not to illustrate a shamanistic power over the dead. Moreover, Eurydice

was not a stolen soul, neither did Orpheus go into trance to carry her back: clearly, Dodds intentionally but wrongly portrayed his activity shamanistic as fully as possible."⁷¹

The oldest historical figure is Epimenides from Crete, where a third-century homonym has recently turned up in an inscription."⁷² He was a relatively shadowy figure until at the end of the nineteenth century his name appeared in the papyrus which gave us most of Aristotle's *Athenaion Politeia* and which established him as a purifier at the turn of the seventh century BC."⁷³ Stories about him were already circulating in the time of Xenophanes (B 20 DK) – hardly a century later. He was reputed to have lived an extremely long life and never to have slept, although competing traditions claimed that he had slept for over seven or 50 years.⁷⁴ Other traditions mention that he always searched for roots (presumably for magical practices) and never ate or only very small portions of a magical food, *alimon*, which lie preserved in an ox's hoof. The practice is compared by Burkert with Akkadian practices and thus points to the East rather than the North. Near Eastern influence, particularly in Crete, is hardly surprising since we know from the Old Testament that the Philistines were closely connected with Crete."⁷⁵ Considering the close connection of Nymphs with ecstasy and the explicit connection of Epimenides with ecstatic prophecy by Cicero (Epimenides *FGrH* 457 F Sc), it looks significant that the name of his mother is given as the Nymph Blaste (Suda s.v.), that according to a certain Demetrius (DL 1.114) lie had received his special food from the Nymphs, and that Theopompus (*FGrH* 115 F 69) mentions that he once was building a temple for the Nymphs when he was rebuked by a heavenly voice calling out: 'Epimenides, not to the Nymphs but to Zeus!'"⁷⁶

Epimenides, then, clearly shows signs of certain ascetic and ecstatic practices, but what about his soul? The notice in the *Suda* that 'as often as he wanted, his soul left and entered his body', is, as Dodds noticed, probably taken from a notice about Aristetas and certainly not original."⁷⁷ Admittedly, Diogenes Laertius (1.114) mentions a series of rebirths, but lie is unable to adduce ancient authorities, his wording excludes a quotation from Epimenides himself, and the notice probably derives from the increasing absorption of Epimenides into the Pythagoras legend.-" In other words, it is unlikely that Epimenides himself practised psychic excursions.

Purifiers were a well-known phenomenon in the Archaic period and Crete in particular was renowned in this respect."⁷⁸ In addition to Epimenides, in 670 the Cretan Thaletas delivered Sparta from a plague, Apollo went to Crete to be purified from the blood of the dragon he had killed, and late Orphics still prescribed that purifying materials should come from Crete.⁷⁹ The prominence of Crete in purification probably derives from its geographical position. It is a recurring feature of magicians and medicine men that they are not part of the native population but belong to an adjacent people. Within Greece, we find a position comparable to that of Crete in the somewhat later traditions concerning Thessalian witches: instead of those to the South of Greece, it was

now those in the far North who were out of the ordinary and apparently capitalised on their reputation."⁷⁹

We already noticed that the traditions about Abaris flying on his arrow are late. Various sources place him around the time of Croesus, and there seems to be no reason strongly to doubt this chronology. Abaris' main activity was as a purifier and *mantis* in the case of the plague. In addition to a divine legitimation – he claimed to be a priest of Hyperborean Apollo – he presumably practised a kind of fasting, since according to Herodotus (4.36) he abstained from eating. And like Epimenides, Abaris became drawn into the Pythagorean orbit: later traditions related that he had given his arrow to the Master himself.⁸⁰

In the first half of the sixth century we also find two figures, Phormio and Leonymus, who seem to have been connected with Sparta before becoming associated with Pythagorean Croton. Both figures are reported to have made ecstatic journeys in order to be healed, but it is important for us to note that in neither case a journey of the soul is mentioned, but both are said to have travelled in the body.⁸¹

So when do psychic excursions become firmly attested? Our oldest example seems to be Aristeas of Proconnesus, the present island of Marmara. Except for one or two anecdotes, ancient tradition knew only the name of his father, Kaystrobios (a typically Ionian name)⁸² and his epic, the *Arimaspeia*. Evidently, Herodotus (4.13–15) thought of Aristeas as belonging to the first generations of colonists, but more recent investigations have persuasively put Aristeas later in the second half of the sixth century.⁸³

According to Herodotus (4.14), Aristeas told how he had 'taken by Apollo' (*phoebolamptos*) travelled to the Issedones. The expression, which is unique, suggests a kind of ecstasy but not a psychic excursion, since Herodotus reports nothing about his soul but relates that Aristeas' body had miraculously disappeared:⁸⁴ evidently, Aristeas' experience still resembled the way Phormio and Leonymus imagined their journey, viz. in person.⁸⁵ Herodotus (4.15) continues with telling that 200 years later Aristeas appeared in Metapontum, the city where Pythagoras had died. Here he ordered an altar for Apollo and an adjacent statue for himself, the place of which now has been probably identified by archaeologists.⁸⁶ Aristeas also told the Metapontines that he had accompanied the god in the shape of a raven. The bird returns in Pliny (*NH* 7.174), who mentions that Aristeas' soul left his mouth in the shape of a raven.⁸⁷ This is obviously not a very credible account and seems to combine Herodotus' raven with another account about psychic excursions, which clearly originated only after Herodotus. As was the case with Epimenides, the only other more extensive notice in this respect is found in the *Suda* (s.v.), where the wording ('they say that his soul, whenever he wanted, left and returned') is again, as Burkert observed, hardly original.⁸⁸

This leaves us only one other possible early example of a psychic excursion in the archaic period. It was told of Hermetimos of Klazomenai that his soul

was absent for many years and in different places foretold future events. Eventually, it would return into the body 'as into a sheath'. In the end his wife betrayed him and his enemies burned his 'stiff body' in order to prevent the return of his soul. The inhabitants of Klazomenai felt they had to atone for this crime and they founded a sanctuary for the heroised Hermorimos from which women, naturally, are excluded 'till the present day'."

Curiously, hardly any scholar seems to have wondered about the antiquity of this story. The only exception is Nilsson who, referring to the sources Pliny and Plutarch, has suggested that the story was a product of their times. And indeed, Hermotimos' story can hardly be very old. Its aetiological character is obvious; the story type of burning a body in order to prevent the return of the soul can be paralleled in India, and the exclusion of women looks like a calque on traditions about Orpheus, whose sanctuary was also forbidden to women because of his death at their hands." In fact, we have no comparable case of a heroic cult in the Archaic period, when the heroisation of private persons seems to have been limited to founders of colonies and famous athletes." Now Aristotle mentions that Hermotimos had a theory of the *nous* before Anaxagoras. We do not know what this implies, but somehow this tradition may have stimulated the development of the legend." Although the young Aristotle was greatly interested in paranormal matters, and, as an Arabic source tells us, in his early dialogue *Eudemos* wrote about a Greek king whose soul was caught up in ecstasy while his body remained inanimate, he is not likely to have invented the story.⁹³ On the other hand, Heraclides Ponticus, a pupil of Plato but with some Peripatetic leanings, mentions that Hermotimos was a reincarnation of Pythagoras (fr. 89 Wehrli) and this surely presupposes our story, just as the name of Heraclides' fictitious character Empedotimos of Syracuse, who was the protagonist of a lost dialogue on the soul or Hades, seems to be a conflation of the names of Empedocles and Hermotimos.⁹⁴ If anyone, the inventive Heraclides with his preference for fantastic stories must have been the origin of the legend of the seer with his psychic excursion.

4. Conclusion

What then have we learned? The so-called Greek 'shamans' appear to be a mixed group, but there seems to be no reason to doubt the existence of these purifiers and seers, who in the late Archaic period practised fasting and, probably, certain techniques of ecstasy. Modern scholars have erroneously ascribed Scythian and shamanistic influences to these figures, since they have been led astray by notices about psychic excursions, which proved to be later interpretations, not contemporary reports. In various recent publications my compatriot Jaap Mansfeld has stressed the fact that we virtually always read the pre-Socratics through the distorting prisms of later philosophical schools.⁹⁵ The same observation may now be made regarding the traditions of the Archaic miracleworkers, who fascinated the Greek imagination, as is also

demonstrated by the use that pseudepigraphers made of Orpheus, Epimenides, Aristeas, and Abaris as figureheads for their *Theogonies*.⁹⁶ For different reasons, later philosophical schools in Greece – the Pythagoreans (Epimenides, Aristeas, Abaris, Phormio, Leonymus) in particular, but also the Platonists (Hermetimos, Abaris) and Peripatetics (Hermetimos) – appropriated these persons, kept the stories about them alive, and reinterpreted them in the course of the centuries by adapting them to their own, later doctrines about the soul.⁹⁷ Evidently, in the Archaic period legends still only told of miraculous movements in the body by these purifying seers: the soul rises only to prominence with Pythagoras, as we saw in Chapter 2. The resulting transformations of their rrrndirions make that we see these figures only 'through a glass darkly', except for one thing which we can now see very clearly: they were no shamans and they practised no psychic excursions."⁹⁸