

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.  
Assistant Editor: T. J. McCORMACK.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER.  
MARY CARUS.

VOL. XIV. (NO. 6)

JUNE, 1900.

NO. 529

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CHICAGO

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AUGUSTE COMTE.

French Philosopher.

(1798-1857.)

Frontispiece to *The Open Court*, June, 1900. Courtesy of the *Société Positiviste*, Paris.

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## THE TOMB OF VIBIA.<sup>1</sup>

AN IMPORTANT MONUMENT OF DIONYSIAN MYSTERIES.

BY DR. ERNST MAAS.

Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Marburg.

THE triumph of the Orphic religion, which promised a better Beyond, began in the Hellenic world with the ascendancy of the Eastern Greek and Ionian culture. The once pious belief in the ancient gods had decreased among the people and had vanished, for the greater part, among the educated. The condition of the Ionians in the sixth century was desperate. The nations of the East tottered, kingdoms perished; nowhere was any secure footing, nowhere salvation for this life. Besides, their freedom was gone. Passionately seeking peace for their tortured souls, they clung to the Orphic promises for the future.<sup>2</sup>

But many surrendered themselves to the joys of this world, to the measureless voluptuousness that is engendered by pessimism; and indeed the earliest vestiges of a materialistic conception of life among the Greeks point to Ionia. This remarkable aberration of the Greeks as a people has been ignored or underrated by the historians of Greek ethics and philosophy, because it manifested itself rather in practical life than in theories. As the monument which I

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Ernst Maas's *Orpheus*.

<sup>2</sup> The oldest and for this reason important testimony for the spreading of the Orphics over the region of Ionian culture is given by Xenophanes of Colophon (about 538 B. C.) in the Scholia to Aristophanes' *Knights*, v. 408: "They called 'Bacchus' not only Dionysus, but they called 'bacchi' all those who performed the orgiastic rites, yea even the branches carried by the initiated." Thus Xenophanes in his "Silli" records that "pine-trees stand there densely around the house." (Codex Venet.: "a pine-tree"; Lobeck I., p. 308A: the bacchi of pine-trees densely around the house; Wachsmuth, *Sillographi*, 2. edit., p. 188: the "bacchi" of pine-tree.) Surely the expression "bacchi" (*βάκχοι*) refers to Dionysian mysteries; undoubtedly not to branches carried in the hand or placed around the head, but to branches which used to be placed around or before the house.

propose to discuss is related not only to the Orphic religion but also to that hedonistic materialism, the entire matter must be explained briefly. The tomb is by some accident situated in the vicinity of the Christian catacombs without being connected with them; but this is no argument for the assumption which is sometimes made that it is Christian.

The head priest of Sabazius<sup>1</sup> and other gods, a certain Vincentius, had erected in Rome a family sepulchre for himself and his wife Vibia. The inscription reads: "Vincenti hoc (ostium) quætes quot vides; plures me antecesserunt, omnes exspecto. Manduca bibe lude et veni at me; cum vives, benefac; hoc tecum feres."

"Numinis antistes Sabazis Vincentius hic est,  
qui sacra sancta deum mente pia coluit."

[“This is the entrance (which [*quod*] thou seest) of the rest (*quietis*) of Vincentius. Several have preceded me, all I expect. Eat, drink, frolic, and come unto me. As long as thou livest thou shalt act righteously (*benefac*): this thou wilt take with thee.

“This is Vincentius, head priest of the god Sabazius,<sup>2</sup> who revered with pious mind the sacred rites of the gods.”]

Vincentius' maxim of life expressed in the inscription of the tomb, reads: "Eat, drink, frolic and come to me. As long as thou livest, thou shalt act righteously: this thou wilt take with thee." The dead is introduced saying: Who shall come to him into Elysium after a life full of material joys? The individual behest appears not to be directed to any definite person. Elsewhere, indeed, it is not the reader of the inscription, but the survivor, who addresses the departed: "I pray, prepare unto me an hospitable dwelling there," and from the grave comes the answer: "Come unto me; everything is prepared;" but there it is the inquirer that is indicated. It seems that in the case in hand the addressed are not the priests of the mystic rites of Sabazius, but any reader whatsoever of the inscription.

The dead exhorts: eat, drink, frolic. Parallel to this, though differing widely, is an old passage which even the first editor of the inscription has remembered. It is the so-called inscription on the tomb of Sardanapalus, a monument which existed solely in the imagination not of the Assyrians but of the Eastern Greeks and about which, although it is only the expression of an idea, there has been much discussion.

<sup>1</sup> Sabazios is one of the names of Dionysus, or Bacchus.

<sup>2</sup>The form "Sabazis" is shortened from Sabazius; so we find "Sabos" in Hymn. Orph. XLIX., verse 2, etc.

According to Aristobulus,<sup>1</sup> this is the original of the maxim of Vincentius: σὺ δέ, ὦ ξένε, ἔσθιε καὶ πίνε καὶ παίξε, ὡς τᾶλλα τὰ ἀνθρώπινα αὐκ ὄντα τούτου ἄξια (meaning the gesture of ἀποκροτεῖν) "O stranger, eat, drink and frolic, since nothing else in human life is worth 'this' [i. e., a snap of the finger.]"

Here are some parallel passages which express the same sentiment :

Ion of Chios addresses (Athenaeus X. 477D = Fragm. 1) Dionysus :

χαῖρε· δίδου δ' αἰῶνα, καλῶν ἐπιήρανε ἔργων,  
πίνειν καὶ παίζειν καὶ τὰ δίκαια φρονεῖν :

[“Be greeted ! grant long space of life, furthering noble deeds, to drink and to sport and to mind just things.”]

The second line we find in more ancient, probably sacred, poetry ; this becomes evident from Empedocles, v. 415 f.

ἦν δέ τις ἐν κείνοισιν ἀνὴρ περιώσια εἰδώς  
παντοίων τε μάλιστα σοφῶν ἐπιήρανος ἔργων·

[“But among them there was a man of immense knowledge (knowing immense matters) and furthering (accomplishing) manifold very wise deeds.”]

In Ion fr. 2. (Athenaeus X. 463. B. v. 7 f.) the admonition is repeated :

πίνωμεν, παίζωμεν, ἴτω διὰ νυκτὸς αἰοιδή,  
ἄρχεῖσθω τις· ἐκὼν δ' ἄρχε φικοφροσύνης·

[“Let us drink, frolic, let song resound all night long, let some one dance ; willingly (gladly) begin (to indulge in) gaiety.”]

But even this was not the original of the inscription on the tomb of Sardanapalus ; the original inscription was by no means harmless, but monstrously materialistic. It read : “Eat, drink, indulge in love, for nothing else is even worthy of contempt.” The frivolity contained in these words appeared to be too strong in the eyes perhaps of many contemporaries and undoubtedly of later generations. By changing the third of these commandments the materialistic character of the maxim was preserved and adapted to feebler spirits. This modified form of the maxim of the debauchee of the Greek legend which has preserved but very little of the historical King of the Assyrians was also extant.

The Assyrian Asurbanipal was fated to become the carrier of that moral—or immoral—ideal which the inclination and desire of the Greeks in Asia Minor needed then for their own practical life.

<sup>1</sup>*Apud Strab.* XIV., p. 672; *Athen.* XII., p. 530A; *Arrian Hist. Alex.* II., 5, 4.

“How long will you revel?” an old Ionic poet warned his fellow-countrymen in time of danger. And who is not impressed by Herodotus’ description of the Ionic catastrophe, as if there was a host of little imitators of Sardanapalus who indulged to the last moment, even upon the ruins of their sinking homes, in sensual vices without stirring a finger for freedom.

“They have learned their follies (*ἀφροσύναι*) from the Lydians,” Xenophanes rebuked them (fragm. 3); and Ninus was considered in early periods the very type of a “city of folly.”

The beginning of the fatalistic conceptions date back to the time of Homer; the serene world depicted in the epos of Homer keeps aloof intentionally each disquieting thought of death and the hereafter in order that it may enjoy with undiminished vigor the present. Akin to this hedonistic time is, at least in some features, the Augustinian epoch; still more akin to it is the time of the Italian Renaissance which has taken such an important part in creating the ideas and sentiments of our days.

For a procession with Dionysus and Ariadne the following verses, typical of his age, were composed by Lorenzo the Magnificent: “How beautiful is youth that flies everywhere; who wants to be merry, let him be merry: there is no certainty about the day to come.”

As in that epoch of modern history, so during the time of the downfall of the Ionian Cities man freed himself from the restrictions of patriotism, of religion and of the ancient customs; this came about not through any fault of his, but rather through historical necessity. And as the element of individual culture was handed on by the Italians to the other nations of the Occident, so it has been given over before, in the fifth century B. C. by Ionia to the West, especially to Athens.

Only the beginnings of this development are defined in the Homeric view, and only in the chaos of perishing Ionia, within the sphere of Ionic licentiousness, could the prototype of Sardanapalus-Asurbanipal (like Hercules in subjection to Omphale) have been created in the form of fiction besides many other clearly defined types, especially Croesus. Similarly in certain Arabic tales a prince satiated by all enjoyments seeks recovery from his surfeit and his melancholy, but the fable here takes a somewhat different turn.

J. Burckhardt, in his classical work: *Die Kultur der Renaissance*, 4. edit. II., p. 240 ff. says:

“Somewhere the poetry of the Renaissance had to depict the wild egotism which had become insensible to dogmatism . . . . .

Now Pulci draws the figure of the giant Margutte who, in the face of every religion, unreservedly professes the most hedonistic egotism and all vices and who claims but one virtue: that he had never committed any treason . . . . Margutte belongs necessarily to the poetry of the world imaged in the fifteenth century . . . . In other poems also giants and demons, heathens and Mohammedans, have put in their mouths what no Christian knight is permitted to say."

These epochs interpret one another.

Æschylus already knew the defiantly egoistic story of Sardanapalus and made an effective use of it in his drama "The Persians." The most powerful scene in this glorification of the victory of the Greeks over the Persian intruder Xerxes is the appearance of the ghost of Darius, denouncing the folly of Xerxes; the spectators must have been deeply moved by Darius's condemnation of the expedition of Xerxes as an act of insolence and godlessness.

Darius counsels two ways of salvation: the avoidance of an expedition of revenge against Greece and the refusal to renounce even in misfortune, a life full of pleasure.

Darius censures Xerxes and advises him, like the most pious and most patriotic Greek, henceforth to leave the Greeks in peace; but the maxim at the conclusion of the scene is as un-Hellenic and realistic as possible; it is Sardanapalic. It seems doubtless that Æschylus intended to depict the king, who bears otherwise the character of a Greek, as an Oriental, as a Sardanapalus, in the lines 840 ff.: "But ye, O aged men, be merry though in the midst of troubles, and indulge yourselves in pleasure day by day, since wealth is of no avail to the dead."

But it is not only the hedonistic maxim which is the same in the epitaph of Sardanapalus and in the drama of Æschylus. As Sardanapalus utters his admonition from the grave, so Darius conjured from his tomb by the chorus addresses the members of the chorus, representing Persian grandees and satraps. The dead kings are earnest and true: Darius and the Assyrian have tasted the life after death, before they give counsel to the living. But the legend must be older than Æschylus: he is the oldest witness for Athens, but not the only one. Aristophanes in his comedy *The Birds* introduces a messenger of the Athenian Demos whom Peisthetæros receives in the airy city of the birds with an exclamation of surprise, saying "Who is this Sardanapalus here?" The poet must have believed that his Athenian audience was familiar with the name and connected therewith some definite idea. The Sardanapalus legend accordingly was in those days not unknown in Athens.

Herodotus in one place promises to tell the story of Sardanapalus and the destruction of Nineveh, but did not keep his promise; if it was ever put into writing, it was certainly not published. It is possible, however, that the people became familiar with the subject of the Ἰσχυροὶ λόγοι through the public lectures which Herodotus is known to have given. Others who quote the Sardanapalian sentence did not content themselves with mitigating the frivolity of the inscription; they idealised the type, each after his own fashion.

Here are instances. We read (Epigr. 1129, Kaibel):

“πῖνε” λέγει τὸ γλύμμα “καὶ ἔσθιε καὶ περιέκειο  
ἀνθεα · τοιοῦτοι γεινόμεθ’ ἐξαπίνης.”

[“Drink, says the engraved inscription, and eat and deck thee with flowers. On a sudden we become such (i. e., revellers).”]

The epitaph of Bacchidas (Athen. VIII. 336. B.) expresses this still more vigorously and reminds us of Aeschylus, Persae, v. 840 ff.:

πιὲν φαγὲν καὶ πάντα τᾷ ψυχᾷ δόμεν·  
κῆγὼ γὰρ ἔστακ’ ἀντὶ Βακχίδα λίθος·

[“To drink, to eat, and to let our soul indulge in everything; I stand here, a stone instead of Bacchidas.”]

See also *C. I. L.* VI. 3, 17985a (19683) *animulam colui nec defuit unquam Lyaeus*: “I cultivated my little soul, and never Lyaeus (i. e., Bacchus, deliverer from care; wine) was missing.” Similarly the epigr. 267 (Kaibel).

Life a Feast: Bion (Stab. Flor. V. 67, Lucratius III. 936 f. Horace, Sat. I. 1. 117 ff. Heinze: On Horace as an Imitator of Bion p. 20 f.). 614 Kaibel (Rom):

εὐφρανθεὶς συνεχῶς γελᾶσας παίξας τε τρυνφήσας·  
καὶ ψυχὴν ἱλαρῶς πάντων τέρψας ἐν ἀοιδαῖς  
οὐδένα λυπήσας, οὐ λοῖδορα ῥήματα ῥίψας,  
ἀλλὰ φίλος Μουσῶν Βρομίον Παφίης τε βιώσας κτλ·

[“Cheerful forever, laughing, frolicking and living luxuriously and joyously delighting the souls of all by songs, afflicting none nor casting about slanderous words, but living as a friend of the Muses, of Bromios and of the Paphian goddess (Aphrodite)].

Thus, the Orient here has again been Hellenised, as was done in many similar instances and these modifications of the inscribed maxim have also been preserved, especially in epitaphs, through all phases of the history of antiquity, so that side by side with absolute materialism its modifications and manifold contrasts continue to exist. Here are some instances.

It is interesting to observe how the priest of Sabazius has appropriated to himself one of the Hellenised forms of the Sardanapalic maxim, even with energetic polemics. The words of the inscription of Vicentius "As long as thou livest, act well; this thou wilt take with thee (after life)," have their analogies in the variations of the maxim of Sardanapalus, though used with an essentially different meaning.

Thus the maxim had been transformed already in the fifth century: "Know that thou art mortal; therefore indulge in the delights of feasting; naught thou wilt have in death. For I too am cinders who have been once the king of mighty Nineveh. Mine is but that which I have enjoyed in eating, drinking, embracing; the blessing of fortune I have had to leave behind me."

In early days protest was raised also against this form of the maxim. It has not been abolished which is proved by the epitaphs in Greek and Latin, and many passages in literature. Also Vincentius protests; he declares: Thou shalt act well, as long as thou livest; thy good deeds accompany thee into the after life where they prove their value in peculiar wise." The belief is extraordinarily ancient; the type is the common possession of all civilised nations.

In the Vedas the dead are addressed: "Walk on the old paths on which our ancestors strode . . . Unite thyself with thy forefathers and with Yama, with the reward for thy sacrifices and good works in the highest heaven."<sup>1</sup>

Many popular legends of the Germanic and Romanic tribes are based upon the presupposition that the good and the sinful deeds of a man are actually laid up in the "other world"; there everything is not only recorded but stored.

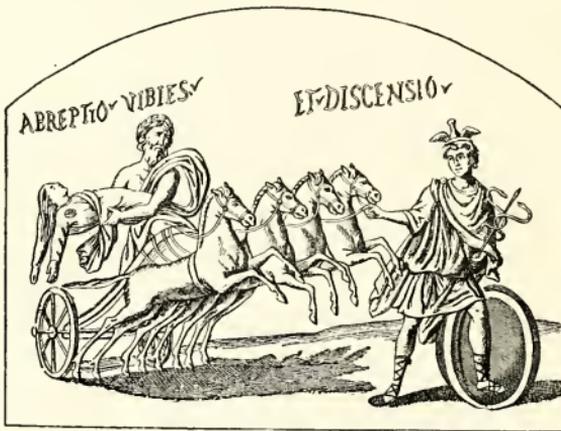
In pictures of Egyptian books of the dead we see, even to-day, how the deeds of the departed, represented as merchandise, are literally weighed on the scale by the judge of the lower world. According to the belief of modern Greeks this business is the task of one of the Archangels. In the Paulinian Apocalypse the Lord says to a punished soul: "Knowest thou not that a man's deeds, the good and the wicked, stalk before him, as soon as he has died?" Who would not be inclined to consider this image as typically Christian, if it stood alone. Who does not know the words of the heavenly voice (Revel. XIV. 13): "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth, yea, saith the spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them." But the use of this

<sup>1</sup> Oldenberg, p. 573 f.

beautiful allegory was not limited to the Christians (cf. Pindar, *Isthm.* III, 4 ff.; Plato, *Rep.* X. p. 614 c., *Gorgias* 524 e ff; Lucian, *Catapl.* 24 ff.)

The inscription on the tomb of Vincentius must have originated in a narrow, definite sphere. We shall understand its spirit better if we consider the pictorial ornament of the tomb. It is a remarkable monument that is not yet sufficiently appreciated. The mural paintings represent with vivid and deep feeling the hopes and the expectation of the joys in the other world, cherished by the devotees of Sabazius.

Vibia, the goodly spouse of the Sabazius priest Vincentius, snatched away by the god of death, according to an ancient conventional scheme which was also employed in representations of



THE RAPE OF VIBIA AND HER DESCENT.

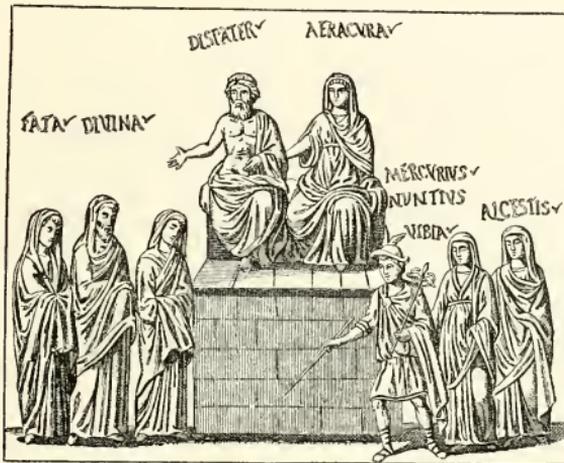
the rape of Proserpine—this ‘*abreptio Vibies*’ is the subject of the first image. The fundamental idea: the rape of death’s bride, is as such, of course, no original one. Every woman who dies is wedded to Hades, according to ancient views. The idea that the God of death is thought of as driving in a chariot is Homeric, for Pluto is said “to drive his splendid team.” Men and youths, after their death, enter the bridal chamber of Persephone. Both poetry (especially the *Cornelia-Elegy* of Propertius) and inscriptions on tombstones, reiterate this idea in countless variations.

The second picture represents Vibia conducted by Hermes to the three Fates, to receive their judgment, and passing by the throne of Dispater and of *Æracura* (or *Juno inferna*), the god and goddess of the nether world. Vibia is accompanied by *Alcestis*, the

prototype of a true wife who has willingly sacrificed herself for her husband.<sup>1</sup>

The doctrine of the departed souls' being conducted solemnly to the nether world is neither specifically Greek nor Orphic. Mani taught: "If death approaches the righteous, the 'primordial man' (*Urmensch*) sends to him a god radiant of light, in the shape of the 'leading sage'; three gods accompany the sage and carry the water-vessel, the garment, the fillet, the crown, and the wreath of light. With them the virgin approaches who resembles the soul of the righteous," etc.<sup>2</sup>

The Italian Renaissance adopted from Antiquity the notion of a mythological escort and employed it in art and poetry.<sup>3</sup> Accord-



BEFORE THE TRIBUNAL OF THE RULER OF THE NETHER WORLD.

ing to the poem by Bernardo Pulci on the death of the older Cosimo, the latter is received in Heaven by Cicero, who likewise was called

<sup>1</sup>Probably Plato did more to immortalise the conjugal love of Alcestis than Hesiod and Euripides (*Sympos.* 7, p. 179C): "And when Alcestis had accomplished this deed, she seemed not only to men but even to gods to have fulfilled a work so noble, that the gods (who granted to but few of those who had performed many noble exploits, the boon that their souls could reappear from Hades) allowed her soul to come up from Hades, for they admired Alcestis."

This is evident in the inscription *C. I. C.* III. 6336, where the departed tells of herself: "My Asiatic home is (the island) Aphrodisias; on account of Piety, whose name I have honored. And I was that Alcestis who in olden times loved her spouse, and gods and mortals bore testimony of her chastity (*sophrosyne*)."

Propertius has v. 7. v. 63 ff. different types of conjugal love: Besides Andromeda and Hypermnestra his Cynthia dwells in Elysium conversing with others about their lives.—One remembers also Virgil and Dante.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Kessler, Mani, p. 398 f.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. J. Burckhardt, II. 4. p. 149 ff., 299.

“Father of the Fatherland,” by the Fabians etc.; Nicolo dell’ Arca, a clay-modeller, is welcomed there by Praxiteles, Phidias, and Polyclethus. The Catholic Church has even nowadays not yet given up the allegory.<sup>1</sup>

The three Fates (called *Fata Divina* in our picture) are the Moirai of the Greek nether world. But the middle Fate seems to be bearded and surpasses the others in stature. Which divine being does this figure represent? Perchance one of the judges of the nether world, Minos, Æacus or Rhadamanthys. It is impossible to think that it represents Sabazius whose consecrations Vibia like her husband must be supposed to have received. Besides, the entire feasting assembly of the pious Sabazius priests—seven per-



THE LOVE FEAST IN THE ELYSIAN FIELDS.

sons, among whom is Vincentius—is represented in another part of the great picture.

Probably inscriptions, such as “O unhappy fate which has taken thee from us!” (“*O Fatum infelicem, qui te nobis abstulit!*”) guide us to the right track. We may here be confronted with a male Fate, a “Fatus,” as in the Vibia-picture!

Since the god of fate occurs not only on Roman but also on Greek monuments, one should not think of the origin of this type as Roman. Two Moirai at the side of Zeus or of Apollo Moiragetes (the leader of fates) may be noticed upon Delphic and other Greek monuments.

The fourth picture is divided into two sections. At the left Vibia is guided by the “Angelus bonus” to the “blessed,” the “*bonorum iudicio iudicati.*” The “Angelus” or even “the blessed”

<sup>1</sup> Cf. E. Zola, Lourdes, II. p. 124. R. Koehler, Aufsätze, p. 50 ff.

must not at all be considered to be of Christian or Jewish origin. The “*boni*” are, by euphemism, the inexorably severe inhabitants or judges of the nether world and appear as such also elsewhere, being otherwise called benign fates (*benigna Fata*), *Di manes* (the spirits of the dead) the indispensable gods (*θεοὶ χρηστοί*) etc.

The “good messenger” or Angel belongs to the ancient Greeks as well as to the Christians, which is a clearly proven fact. (Cf. *Indogermanische Studien* von Brugmann und Streitberg, I, p. 157, ff.; Plato speaks of the Angel of Elysium: Rep. X. 619 B; as for St. Michael as conductor of souls, see R. Koehler, *Aufsätze*, p. 51.)

At the right the blessed, with crowns on their brows, are resting in a flowery meadow: some feasting, among whom is Vibia;



THE SEVEN PRIESTS, VINCENTIUS AMONG THEM.

some playing dice. It almost looks like an illustration of Pindar's wonderful *Threnos* or of Virgil's *Nekyia*. By adorning his wife's tomb and his own with pictures, Vincentius believed that he would secure, for himself and his wife, who probably had died before him, the realisation of happiness in the life after death. This same idea has since remotest antiquity induced many to build their tombs during their life and to equip and decorate them for another life. Some of the Egyptian tombs containing painted images of the other world belong to the second millennium B. C., according to the views of scholars. The much more recent Greek celebration of mysteries aimed to represent to the initiated joyous expectations regarding the other world and thus to give visible form to the religious ideal of the believers. This has been preserved as far as to

the great festivals celebrated during the ages of the Renaissance and even, partially, to our days.

The beautiful saying that "their deeds accompany the dead," is also Greek and by no means a late conception; the saying itself, its explanation through the picture of Alcestis, even the common conception upon which both are based, can, by means of a literary document, be proved with absolute certainty to have prevailed before the spreading of Christianity. They are certainly due to the poetry of the world beyond, and to the religion of the Greeks of the classical period. The Sabazius priests have derived the verses, the composition of the pictures, and their ethics from the Orphics.