9-2020

Landscape and Lore: River Acheron and the Oracle of the Dead

LaShante St. Fleur
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

LANDSCAPE AND LORE:

RIVER ACHERON AND THE ORACLE OF THE DEAD

BY

LASHANTÉ ST. FLEUR

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020

Landscape and Lore: River Acheron and the Oracle of the Dead

By

LaShanté St. Fleur

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree in Master of Arts.

_____	_____
Date	Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis Thesis Advisor
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Landscape and Lore

River Acheron and the Oracle of the Dead

By

LaShanté St. Fleur

Advisor: Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

In order to explore the cultural relationships between people, landscape, memory and ritual, this master's thesis focuses on the Acheron River in Epirus, Greece, long believed to harbor an entrance into Hades, the Greek underworld. Various entrances into the *chthonic*, or subterranean land of the dead, are peppered throughout Greece, with each tied to their own local myths, legends, folklore and cults. According to those traditions, Hades could be accessed from several terrestrial rivers thought to be connected to Oceanus, the primordial world-encompassing river surrounding all of creation. Flowing forth from River Ocean were all above- and underground rivers and streams. Today, the most popular is the River Styx, though in antiquity, Acheron was the most important river linking the realms of the living and the dead. Interest in Acheron resurged after Greek archaeologist Sotirios Dakaris' 1958 discovery of a much-contested Epirote site, controversially dubbed "the Acheron Necromanteion," or Acheron Oracle of the Dead. This thesis paper will investigate the cultural processes by which Epirus' River Acheron became so important in antiquity, and what the Acheron Necromanteion represents for concepts of death connected not only to Epirus' natural environment and chthonic cult practices, but Panhellenic mythic tradition as a whole.

ABBREVIATIONS

Aesch. Seven	Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*
Apollod.	Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Library*
Ap. Rhod.	Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*
Aristoph. Frogs	Aristophanes, *Frogs*
Call. Hec.	Callimachus, *Hecale*
Diod. Sic.	Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*
Eur. Alc.	Euripides, *Alcestis*
HH 4	Homeric Hymns, *Hymn 4 to Hermes*
Hdt.	Herodotus, *Histories*
Hes. Th.	Hesiod, *Theogony*
Hes. WD	Hesiod, *Works and Days*
Hom. Il.	Homer, *Iliad*
Hom. Od.	Homer, *Odyssey*
Ov. Met.	Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
Paus.	Pausanias, *Description of Greece*
Pl. Phd.	Plato, *Phaedo*
Pl. Rep.	Plato, *Republic*
Plin. Nat.	Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*
Plut. Thes.	Plutarch, *Theseus*
Q. S.	Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Fall of Troy*
Strab.	Strabo, *Geographica*
Thuc.	Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*
Virg. A.	Virgil, *Aeneid*
Xen. Anab.	Xenophon, *Anabasis*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Acheron River Canyon, Epirus, Greece. Wikimedia Commons, 1994.

INTRODUCTION

Myths are origin stories. They recount foundational and even primordial tales from the remote past in order to explain how the world, its peoples, societies and customs came to be. The celebrated mythologist Edith Hamilton says that myths "lead us back to a time when the world was young and people had a connection with the earth, with trees and seas and flowers and hills, unlike anything we ourselves can feel."[1] Indeed, as the setting of innumerable stories about gods and heroes believed to have somehow shaped or reshaped the earth, the striking features of natural landscapes have inspired new lore since time immemorial, from Hesiod's *Theogony* to Homer's *Odyssey*. Across the world, journeying storytellers and natural historians have sought out places of wonders and marvels, following rumors and hearsay about awesome and even awful mountains, caves, rivers and lakes believed to have supernatural associations. Any place of high seismic, volcanic or hydraulic activity could inspire entire religions to spring forth from

[1] Hamilton, 1969: 3.

them, with cult centers and temples marking sites where people were convinced that the gods of nature must be present and directly exerting their influence. This was especially the case for the gods of the earth's subterranean, or *chthonic* regions,[2] whose powers manifested anywhere that the ground shook and split open, fiery gases seeped, or rivers and lakes suddenly appeared and disappeared from underground. Ancient Greeks connected stories about death and the afterlife to those phenomena, developing new ideas about the underworld, Hades,[3] and establishing lasting reputations for those locations as part of the Hadean landscape in Greek mythic tradition. Old lore can also be used to identify new locations. Age-old ruins found in areas of purported supernatural activity could easily be misidentified, claimed or outright appropriated as *the* site of some famous location from Greek myth. In Epirus, the Acheron River (Fig. 1) and its so-called Acheron Necromanteion exemplify the lasting cultural impact landscape and lore have in Greek society, where the natural environment inspires myths, and mythic associations can also be imposed upon sites through misidentification.

Book 11 of Homer's epic poem, the *Odyssey,* is called the *Nekyia,* meaning the chapter "on necromancy," because it recounts the famous scene where the wandering hero Odysseus made his harrowing journey into the underworld to speak with the souls of the dead. The *Odyssey* was composed during the late eighth century B.C., thus making the *Nekyia* the earliest extant account on necromancy in both Greek epic and all of Western literature. While Odysseus' necromantic rites are described in lurid detail—replete with blood sacrifices and prayers to the chthonic powers of the underworld—Homer speaks only vaguely of the underworld's geographic and topographic features, [4] going only so far as to name the Hadean river Acheron, where

[2] *Chthonic*, Latinized from Greek *khthónios* (χθόνιος), "in, under or beneath the earth."
[3] *Haidês* (Ἀιδης), "the invisible or unseen."
[4] I say that "Homer speaks," despite being aware of the longstanding debates about Homer's identity or even existence as anything other than a compiled inherited tradition, rather than an actual person who lived and

Odysseus disembarks along its banks and ventures down into *domos Haidou*, the house of Hades.[5] It was left to the audience's imagination to try and deduce *where* on earth Odysseus was throughout many of his extraordinary adventures,[6] with this particularly hellish episode as the most extraordinary and mysterious of them all. Set in one of the oldest and most celebrated of all Greek epic poems, Odysseus' haunting scene on the banks of the Acheron River did more than inspire novel ways of thinking about the topography of the Greek underworld and the afterlife spent therein. It also helped revolutionize new understandings about death in not only pagan religion, but ultimately the concept of Hell in Greco-Roman influenced Christianity as well. Those Homeric notions eventually became part of widespread chthonic mystery cult rituals and lore, which centered around reenacting the journeys between the lands of the living and the dead that had been conducted by gods and heroes immortalized in Greek epic tradition.

As various accounts of Hades developed, several rivers bearing the name Acheron throughout the Mediterranean were identified as *the* Homeric river of Hades, in Greece,[7] Italy,[8] Asia Minor,[9] and Egypt.[10] However, the earthly river most consistently associated with its mythic counterpart is the Acheron River in Thesprotia, Epirus (Fig. 2). Herodotus, the fifth century B.C. author and father of Western history, identified it as the site of a popular *necromanteion*,[11] or oracle of the dead.[12] The gods Hades[13] and Persephone, king and queen of

performed epic poetry (as in the case of Hesiod). For the sake of this paper, I lean more towards treating *Homer* as a single person, with the *Homeric tradition* as the general culture derived from Homer's *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, the *Homeric Hymns*, etc.

[5] Hom. Od. 10.513-514.

[6] Hooper, 2016: 57.

[7] Thesprotia, Epirus (Hdt. 5.92G, 8.47; Paus. 1.17, 5.14; Plin. Nat. 4.1; Strab. 6.1, 7.7, 8.3; Thuc. 1.46); Hermione, Peloponnese (Paus. 2.35; Apollod. 2.5).

[8] Avernus, in Campania, Italy (Strab. 1.2).

[9] Bithynia, Turkey (Ap. Rhod. 2.352, 2.726; Diod. Sic. 14.31; Xen. Anab. 6.2).

[10] Memphis, Egypt (Diod. Sic. 1.96).

[11] *Necromanteion*, from Greek *nekuomanteîon* (νεκυομαντεῖον), "oracle of the dead."

[12] Hdt. 5.92.

[13] Hades is both the name of the Greek god of the underworld, and the underworld itself, similar to how in Norse mythology Hel/Hela is the name of the goddess of the underworld, and her underworld realm.

the underworld respectively, held prominent cult status in the chthonic traditions of Thesprotia, and its neighboring Epirote region of Molossus.[14] Ancient observations of Epirus' Acheron River and its Acherusian Lake found it to have mysterious and even dangerous properties,[15] that further served to earn it a coveted spot as the prime candidate where the people believed Odysseus had travelled in Homer's *Odyssey*.

However, modern misconceptions about these mysterious cult practices also led to the wildly popular yet incorrect misidentification of the so-called "Acheron Necromanteion," or Acheron Oracle of the Dead, a fourth century B.C. site in Epirus excavated in the 1950s-1970s by Greek archaeologist Sotirios Dakaris.[16] As archaeologist Eleni Kotjabopoulou notes, because the site's proximity to the confluence of the Acheron and Cocytus rivers in northwestern Greece "conformed to the topographic layout and mystic ambiance implied in the ancient texts about the entrance to Hades,"[17] the ruins of the necromanteion were hailed as the place where the hero Odysseus had communed with the souls of the underworld. However, reevaluations of the excavations and site starting in the late 1970s up to the present day revealed that the ruins were actually the site of a Hellenistic fortified farmstead.[18] Misidentifications like this not demonstrate how old landscapes are still inspiring new ideas about cult and lore to this very day. Fourth more, they also represent enduring preconceptions and cultural attitudes towards associating Epirus' River Acheron and its environs with the underworld and chthonic traditions that it did not originally have, before such notions were popularized -- by the archaeologists who discover such

[14] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 9; Ogden, 2001: 181.
[15] Callan, 1899: 339; Connors and Clendenon, 2016: 172; Domínguez, 2015: 130; Skene, 1848: 144.
[16] Dakaris 1958, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1986, 1990, 1991, 1993.
[17] Kotjabopoulou, 2018: 31.
[18] Baatz 1979, 1982, and 1999; Haselberger 1978, 1980; Wiseman 1998; Ogden 2001, 2004; Kotjabopoulou 2018.

sites and publish conclusions based on those deeply embedded connotations, and by the Homeric traditions themselves.

Through the examination of primary sources, from epic poetry and myth; to travelogues; to figurative art, this thesis paper compiles a history of the Acheron River's development as part of the Hadean landscape. Although the archaeological evidence at Dakaris' site argues against its identification as a necromanteion, having been largely debunked by more recent scholarship, the history of the site's association with the underworld is still worth exploring, in order to see the development and interplay of those associations at work. This thesis is organized into three chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of Acheron in Greek culture. Chapter 1 examines the Acheron River's influence on both the Homeric and Epirote lore and landscape, from the first mention of Acheron in surviving Greek epic poetry, to its enduring presence in the historical accounts and cultural geographies of classical, late antique, and modern times. Chapter 2 then goes beyond Epirus, to examine Acheron on the Panhellenic level, and how ideas about Hadean geography and the afterlife itself were received and developed in other locales and cultural spheres of influence. Finally, Chapter 3 considers the Acheron Necromanteion site itself and compares the finds excavated there to the ancient chthonic traditions Homer popularized in his epics. Dakaris is neither the first nor the last person to connect a particular location to the underworld and extrapolate those associations with ancient ruins, communities, practices or histories in that immediate area as part of a shared cult tradition. I argue that we can interpret Dakaris' assumptions as part of a much longer chain of memory that created Acheron's Epirote reputation in the first place.

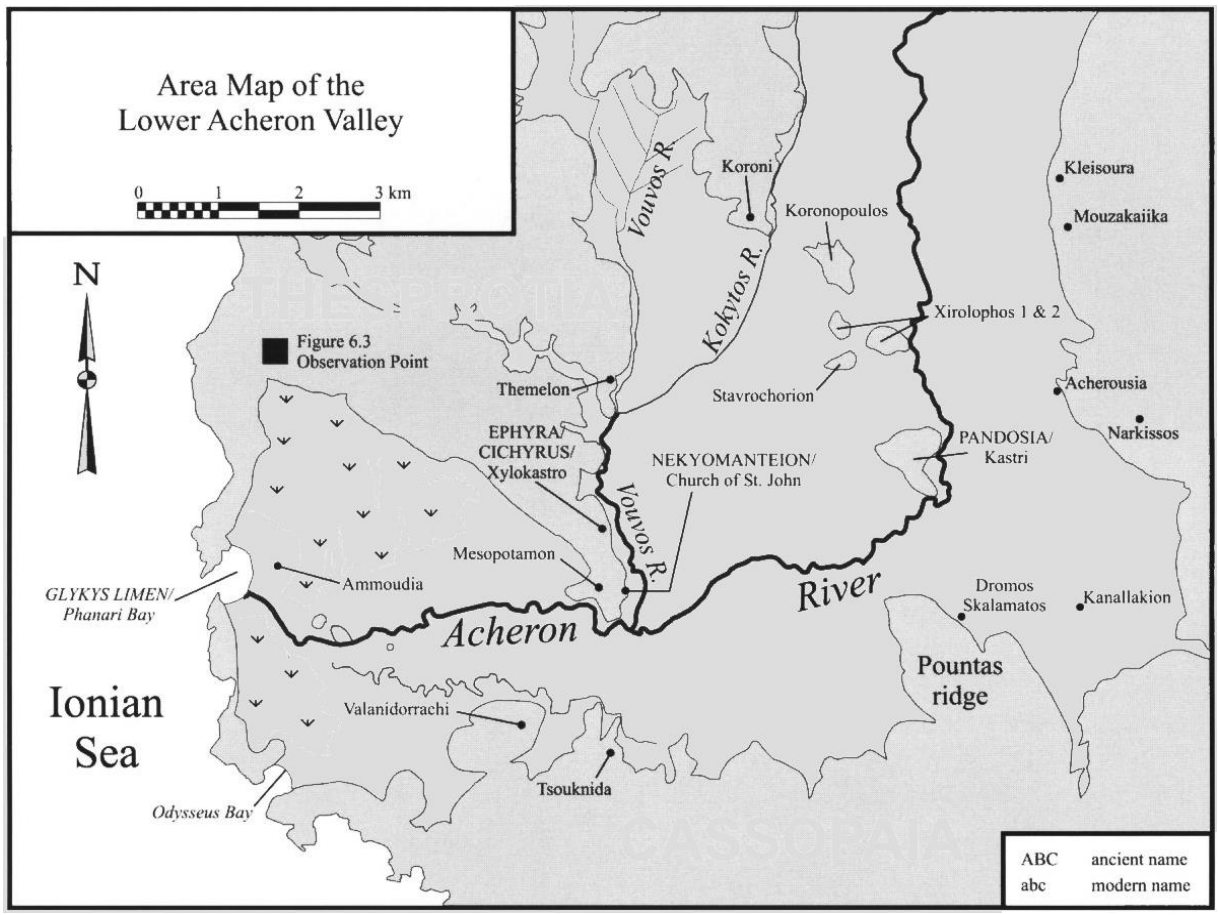

Figure 2: Epirus' Lower Acheron Valley (Author after Besonen, 2003: 201).

1 WHEN ACHERON BECAME HADEAN

The name *Acheron* is Latinized from the Greek *Akhérōn*[19] or *o ákhea rhéōn*,[20] meaning the "stream of pain."[21] Together with the Cocytus, "stream of wailing;" Pyriphlegethon, the "fire-flaming;" Styx, the "river of hatred;" and Lethe, "the stream of forgetfulness," Acheron and the other rivers of the underworld define what the ancient Greeks thought of the conditions of the Hadean afterlife: an endless limbo of grievous pain, wailing, fire, hatred, and mindless oblivion. Though the Greek Hades and the Christian Hell are markedly distinct from one another, it cannot be denied that ancient Greek understandings about death and the afterlife certainly made far-

[19] *Akhérōn* (Ἀχέρων), "Acheron."
[20] *O ákhea rhéōn* (ὁ ἄχεα ῥέων), "stream of pain."
[21] Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary, 1879*.

reaching contributions to religious traditions the world over, that resonate to this day. Historians and religious authorities have devoted much critical and in-depth research analyzing how such notions influenced later Christian concepts about Hell.[22] This paper focuses on the development and impact of such ideas in antiquity, particularly in the case of the river Acheron. Analyzing the earliest association of the river Acheron with Hades is crucial for understanding and interpreting how the underworld developed in Greek literary, geographic, mythic, and religious tradition. To do that, we must first start with Homer's eighth century B.C. epic poem, the *Odyssey*, where the Acheron was first ever recorded in history.

1.1 Homer's *Odyssey*

In the *Odyssey*, the Trojan War hero Odysseus is desperately trying to get back home to Ithaca after years lost at sea. In Book 10 he is instructed by Circe, a goddess of sorcery, to consult the dead seer Tiresias for directions, and commune with the chthonic powers at the very entry to the underworld itself along the Acheron and Cocytus rivers:

> " 'And who shall guide me [Odysseus] upon this voyage—for the house of Hades is a port that no ship can reach.'
>
> " 'You will want no guide,' [Circe] answered, 'Raise your mast, set your white sails, sit quite still, and the North Wind will blow you there of itself. When your ship has traversed the waters of Oceanus, you will reach the fertile shore of [Persephone's] country with its groves of tall poplars and willows that shed their fruit untimely; here beach your ship upon the shore of Oceanus, and go straight on to the dark abode of Hades. You will find it near the place where the rivers Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus (which is a branch of the river Styx) flow into Acheron, and you will see a rock near it, just where the two roaring rivers run into one another.' "[23]

Odysseus' extraordinary determination to find a way back to his home, wife and son is underlined throughout the *Odyssey*, but particularly in Book 10, when he is instructed by Circe

[22] For an especially thorough analysis, see Bernstein 2020 and Segal 2004.
[23] Hom. Od. 10.501-515.

on how to find the way to the underworld, and in Book 11, the *Nekyia*, wherein Odysseus enters the land of the dead itself. This portion of the *Odyssey* is a classic example of the journey to the otherworld as a literary motif, wherein the mythic geography has no basis on reality, and is merely the vehicle by which the hero's mettle is tested.[24] Odysseus must brave entering the land of the dead and emerging on the other side as a man worthy of finding the route back to Ithaca, across the waters of Oceanus, at the very ends of the earth itself.

1.1.1 Primordial Waters

> "[The ghost of] my mother [Anticlea] came up…and spoke fondly to me, saying, '[Odysseus], how did you come down to this abode of darkness while you are still alive? It is a hard thing for the living to see these places, for between us and them there are great and terrible waters, and there is Oceanus, which no man can cross on foot, but he must have a good ship to take him.' "[25]

Though Book 11 of the *Odyssey* provides us with the very first reference to Acheron, Cocytus, and the other rivers of the underworld, nowhere does Homer state where Odysseus is when he first embarks on this Hadean journey, nor where he is geo-spatially once he arrives at the "dark abode of Hades." However, there are a few clues, which inspired analysis by later audiences who thought deeper about the particulars of the Hadean landscape. The first to be addressed here is *Oceanus* (Fig. 3). According to Greek cosmology and mythic tradition, the entire world was encircled by the great River Ocean (or Oceanus), the primordial source from which all waters

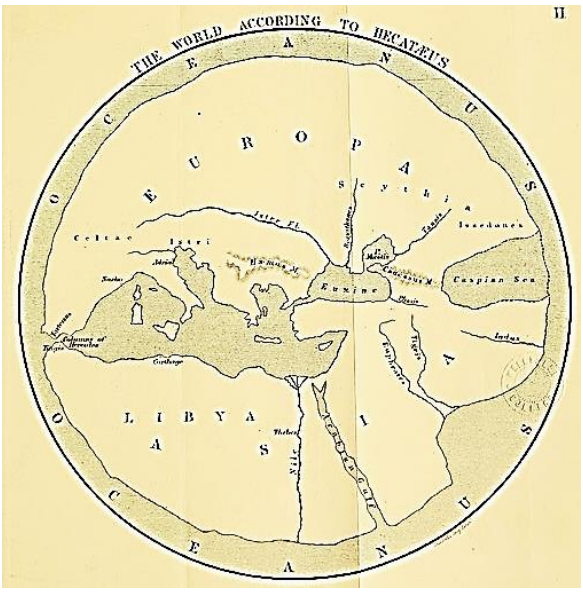

Figure 3: Edward Bunbury's reconstruction of Hecateus' representation of the world (c..550 BC – c.476 BC), with Oceanus encircling the Greek ecumene. History of Ancient Geography Vol 1, 1879: 149.

[24] Garry and El-Shamy, 2017: 193.
[25] Hom. Od. 11.152-158.

flowed, and upon which the disc of the earth's surface floated. Though the rest of the souls of the dead lingered in the underworld as aimless shades, the demigods (dead heroes) lived forever in Elysion, the lands of the blessed, somewhere on the far west or, in Odysseus' case, far northern shores of River Ocean. In the *Odyssey*, the Elysian Fields are described as an idyllic paradise by the sea-god Proteus, the prophetic Old Man of the Sea. Having foretold the fates of certain Trojan War heroes as they returned home or were lost at sea, Proteus promised the shipwrecked king Menelaus, Helen of Sparta's husband, the following:

> "As for your own end, Menelaus, you shall not die in Argos, but the gods will take you to the Elysian plain, which is at the ends of the world. There fair-haired Rhadamanthus reigns, and men lead an easier life than anywhere else in the world, for in Elysium there falls not rain, nor hail, nor snow, but Oceanus breathes ever with a West wind that sings softly from the sea, and gives fresh life to all men."[26]

The poet Hesiod, a contemporary of Homer who was also composing during the late eighth century B.C., also shares this understanding of the world's cosmology. Hesiod's poem *Works and Days* tells of "an abode apart from men, and made [the souls of the god-like race of hero-men] dwell at the ends of earth. And they live untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep-swirling Ocean, happy heroes for whom…these last equally have honor and glory."[27] Both poets agree that whereas common humans exist as mere shades in the earth, heroes are exceptional, and are afforded residency on the very best real estate the afterlife has to offer, in the Elysian Fields, the isles of the blessed beyond the shores of Ocean. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the river Acheron is only ever mentioned the one time, when Odysseus ventures into Hades to speak to the dead seer Tiresias. It is in crossing River Ocean that Odysseus enters the lands of the dead, and disembarks at the confluence of the rivers

[26] Hom. Od. 10.559-565.
[27] Hes. WD. 169-169d.

Pyriphlegethon, Cocytus, and Acheron. This detail is especially important when considering what Homer understands of Hadean geography in the poem composed before the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*.

In Book 23 of Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles is visited in his sleep by the restless phantom of his beloved comrade Patroclus:

> "Bury me [Patroclus] as quickly as may be, [Achilles,] let me pass through the gates of Hades. The souls, the images of dead men, hold me at a distance, and will not let me cross the river and mingle among them, but I wander as I am by Hades' house of the wide gates."[28]

Though it can be debated that the unnamed river Patroclus' soul was trying to cross was the Acheron, it seems more likely that in the *Iliad* Homer was actually referring to the River Ocean. Oceanus is an otherworldly river just as vaguely oriented as Acheron in Homeric tradition, with no real-world geographical markers. But River Ocean had already been established as part of the Hadean landscape, before the Acheron's first appearance in the *Odyssey*, the sequel to the *Iliad*.

Though little is said directly about Acheron in the earliest records, much can be gleaned about its associations with Ocean and Elysion. These connections to Acheron become expanded upon from the fifth- to second centuries B.C., as ideas about the geography of Hades became grounded in new philosophical discourses about cycles of life, death, afterlife, and rebirth. However, before that development can be explored, there is still the issue of tracing how Acheron changed from being a Homeric metaphysical river, to an actual physical river found in Epirus, Greece. According to Daniel Ogden, the Homeric Acheron and Cocytus "took their names from these Thesprotian rivers rather than vice versa, and…there is no indication that the Thesprotian rivers had any other names in antiquity."[29] If that is the case, then the ties to

[28] Hom. Il. 23.70-74.
[29] Ogden, 2004: 44.

Acheron, Thesprotia, and the Homeric tradition around Hadean landscapes must be further examined.

1.1.2 Contextualizing Epirus

Though Homer's poems are the earliest surviving literary source for Greek concepts about life, death and the afterlife, such thoughts were probably informed by an older inherited tradition that only emerge from the off-hand ways that Homeric concepts are referred to—as a matter of course, as though contemporaneous audiences were already familiar with such ideas and required no further explanation. In the *Odyssey*, Circe told Odysseus that when his ship had "traversed the waters of Oceanus, [he would] reach the fertile shore of [Persephone's] country with its groves of tall poplars and willows that shed their fruit untimely.'"[30] The first Hadean landmark Odysseus encounters in the land of the dead is the goddess Persephone's fields of poplars and willows. As will be examined below, it is this grove of willows and poplars in particular that clue the audience as to the nature of Persephone's grove, and allow later authors to draw parallels to Thesprotia, Epirus as the prime candidate for giving the elusive River Acheron geo-spatial context.

The Greek word for poplar trees used in Homer's *Odyssey* is αἴγειρος (*aígeiros*). According to the second century A.D. geographer Pausanias, the tree got its name because "Heracles found the white poplar growing on the banks of the Acheron, the river in Thesprotia, and for this reason Homer calls it 'Acheroid'"[31] in the *Odyssey*. *Acheroid* (Ἀχερωίδα) or *acherōïs* (αχέρωις) and *aígeiros* (αἴγειρος) are thereby linguistically linked to a tradition around poplar trees being part of the Hadean topography. The connection between Heracles and Acheron is itself in reference to mythic variants of Heracles' twelfthLabor, in which the hero

[30] Hom. Od. 10.508-510.
[31] Paus. 5.14.2.

enters the underworld to capture Cerberus, the hound of Hades. Some accounts situate Heracles' return from the underworld,[32] in the Peloponnesian cities of Hermione or Tainaron, but Pausanias' account is obviously informed by versions where Heracles alights in Thesprotia, Epirus, instead. To be further unpacked from Pausanias' account of the poplar tree is yet another embedded story, in which white poplar trees first grew in the underworld's Elysian Fields. One of Hades' earliest lovers before his marriage to Persephone, the Oceanid[33] Leuke, was abducted by the god and brought down into the house of Hades. Leuke eventually died, her body metamorphosing into a copse of white poplar trees, which were also called *leúkē* (λεύκη, "white").[34]

Classicist William Brockliss draws on etymological connections between the "fertile shore of [Persephone's] country" (*Od*. 10.507-8) and other lands sacred to goddesses mentioned in the *Odyssey* who also dwelled in the mystical isles of Oceanus near Elysion. These isles each "possesses the sort of fertile earth that would be good for farming,"[35] but were held as sacrosanct, its flora and fauna not to be domesticated on pain of death. This is very much in keeping with the inviolability of ancient Greek cult sanctuaries protected by *asylia*,[36] so that "everything inside sacred territory was owned by the god—and the possessions of divinities were of course taboo for human beings.[37] If there ever was an Acheron sanctuary or necromanteion, as the historian Herodotus ascribed,[38] then this explains why Pausanias surmises that because of this tradition around poplars—beloved by Hades, growing in the grove of Persephone along the

[32] *Anabasis* (ἀνάβασις), "a going up, an ascent."
[33] The Oceanids being the 3000 daughters of Oceanus, the River Ocean in its personified form as a primordial water god. These water nymphs, and Leuke, are thereby further connected to Hadean traditions connected to Oceanus, as seen in subsection 1.1.1 on Primordial Waters.
[34] Cook, 1904: 297.
[35] Brockliss, "Fertility and Formlessness: Images of Death in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*," 2013.
[36] *Asylia* (ασυλία), "'prohibition against stealing;" hence "asylum" in English.
[37] Sinn, 2002: 72.
[38] Hdt. 5.92.

shores of the rivers Ocean and Acheron in Thesprotia, and introduced to the rest of Greece by Heracles after his journey—"it is no wonder that the white poplar grew first by the Acheron."[39] The necromanteion would not only serve as a conduit for communication between the living and the dead, but it would also be a sanctuary dedicated to the chthonic gods of the poplar trees, and a physical link between the Homeric underworld and the cult traditions of Thesprotia, Epirus.[40]

1.1.2.1 Acherusian Lake

The reputation of the *Acherousia Limnê*, or Acherusian Lake (Fig. 4), is of great interest when it comes to understanding the ways that claims of Epirus' Acheron River being Homeric and Hadean were legitimized in antiquity. In his account of the Thesprotian landscape, Pausanias' travelogue mentions the River Acheron, its Acherusian Lake, and its tributary, Cocytus (the aforementioned river of wailing), which he calls "a most unlovely stream."[41] Pausanias was convinced that "because Homer had seen these places…he made bold to describe in his poems the regions of Hades, and gave to the rivers there the names of those in Thesprotia."[42] Historian Daniel Ogden agrees.[43] In the eighth century B.C., Homer gave the earliest account of the Cocytus and Acheron rivers; however, he made no mention of an Acherusian Lake at all. Despite this, later accounts of the conditions of Thesprotia's marshy swamplands, floodplains, and, in particular, Acherusian Lake would further cement Acheron as *the* Hadean river of lore.

Writing in fifth century B.C., Thucydides gives the earliest account of "the Acherusian lake [that] pours its waters into the sea. It gets its name from the river Acheron, which flows

[39] Paus. 5.14.3.
[40] This is also interesting, because the poplar of Hades was a recognized substitute for the oak of Zeus, both trees being deemed as sacred at Zeus' oracle at Dodona (located between Thesprotia and Molossus, cities both sacred to Hades). This association supports theories about Chthonic Zeus of the Earth being just another form of Hades, or vice-versa. For more on the issue of Zeus and Hades, see Fairbanks, 1900: 245-6.
[41] Paus. 1.17.5.
[42] Paus. 1.17.5.
[43] Ogden, 2004: 44.

through Thesprotis and falls into the lake."[44] To study the evolution of the now-extinct lake, archaeologists Besonen, Rapp and Jing conducted field observations from 1992 to 1994, with sediment cores taken from the lower Acheron valley (see Fig. 2). Their laboratory results revealed that the Acherusian Lake had formed between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C., sometime after Homer's first mention of the Acheron River, but before Thucydides' first mention of the Acherusian Lake that Acheron poured into.[45] Today, the lake no longer exists, its marshes mostly having been drained and backfilled for agriculture after World War 1,[46] though some regions are still reed-covered swamps.[47]

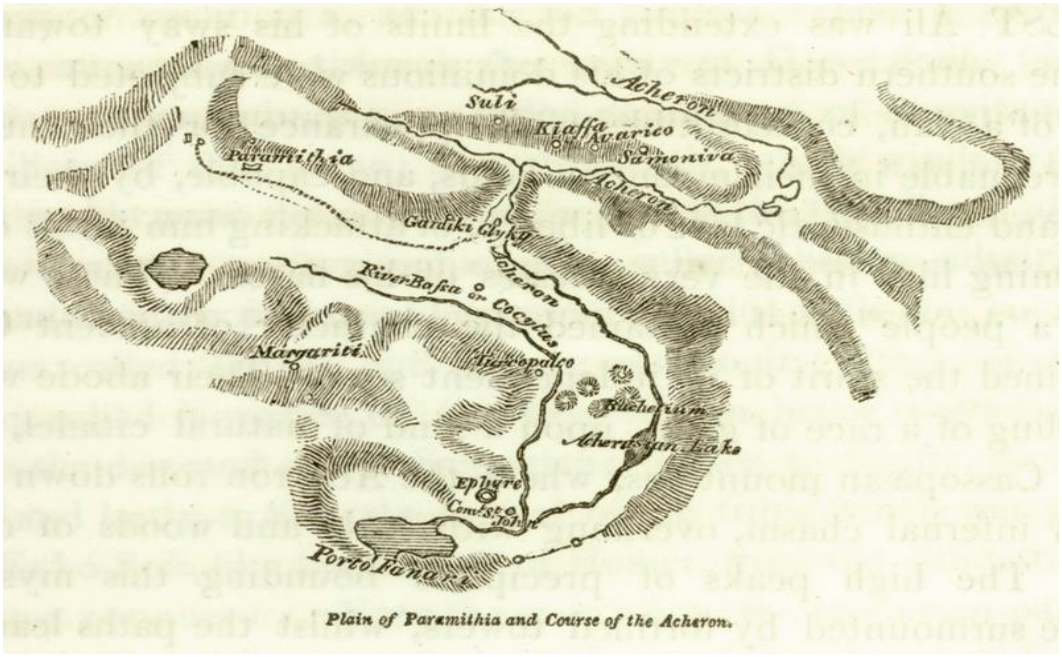

Figure 4: Course of the Acheron River, with Acherusian Lake (bottom right). Thomas Smart Hughes, 1820.

The Acherusian Lake and its environs had a longstanding reputation as a dangerous and even hellish area, so there would naturally be a necromanteion in the vicinity. In comparing different accounts of the story of the hero Orpheus, who went to the underworld to try and save

[44] Thuc. 1.46.
[45] Besonen, Rapp and Jing, 2003: 229.
[46] Besonen, Rapp and Jing, 2003: 202.
[47] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 87.

his dead wife Eurydice, Pausanias recounts that "others have said that…for [Eurydice's] sake [Orpheus] came to Aornum in Thesprotis, where of old was an oracle of the dead."[48] *Aornum*,[49] or *aornos*[50] meaning "birdless," is used to denote the deadly nature of toxic swamps and lakes that emitted mephitic[51] vapors "which resembled the deadly Hadean breath (or the breath of the hellhound Kerberos)."[52] Birds were said to not fly over such regions, as the vapors were deadly enough to kill smaller avian creatures, mammals and insects, and even make cattle and people sick.[53] Aornum is also the Greek origin of the more popular Latin variant, Avernus, the name of the volcanic crater lake in Campania, Italy, famously hailed as the entrance to the underworld in the Roman poet Virgil's first century B.C. epic, the *Aeneid*. The Hadean exploits of Odysseus were transferred by the Romans to their local Italian lake and hero Aeneas, thereby appropriating the Greek tales as their own.[54] As Lake Avernus' notoriety grew throughout the first and second centuries A.D., Epirus' Acherusian Lake started being referred to as Aornum, with even Pausanias using it interchangeably in his descriptions of Thesprotia.

In addition to its reputation as a toxic lake, the Acherusian swamplands were also known to breed malaria. In 2003, archaeologists Besonen, Rapp and Jing corroborated Sotirios Dakaris' theory that "the birth of the lake and associated swampy areas may have given rise to the malarial epidemic"[55] that led to drastic population declines in Epirus' southwestern regions near the lake, prior to the fifth century B.C. The nineteenth century British travelogue author James Henry Skene makes a direct connection to the Acherusian Lake and the "infernal" underworld,

[48] Paus. 9.30.6.
[49] Aornum (Ἄορνον), "without birds, birdless."
[50] Aornos (ἄορνος), "without birds, birdless."
[51] *Mephitic*, from Mephitis/Mefitis, the Roman goddess of volcanic gases, chthonic fume seepage, and geogenic stenches. (Pfanz, et al, 2014: 93).
[52] Pfanz, et al, 2014: 93.
[53] Pfanz, et al, 2014: 93.
[54] Strab. 5.4.5.
[55] Besonen, Rapp and Jing, 2003: 230.

explaining that "pestilential vapour emanates from it, but malaria is common here, and the ancients, ignorant of the nature of the marsh miasma, may have attributed its effects to deadly effluvia emitted by the infernal lake."[56] Indeed, paired with its mother river Acheron's appellation as the "river of pain," the malarial Acherusian Lake easily fit Hadean applications for inexplicable natural phenomena "associated with pain and death…attributed to the deadly necrotic and chthonic forces living at unpleasant places of no return."[57]

1.1.2.2 Theseus and Pirithous

To the ancient Greeks, the underworld is a prison, with the god Hades is its warden, personified as the very bowels of the earth itself, to which he gave his name. Hesiod's *Theogony* and Homer's *Iliad* both understand Tartarus to be the deepest part of the underworld, a dark dungeon holding at bay the Titans, the rival prior generations of nature gods forsaken by Zeus. The worst human blasphemers and offenders against the gods are also eternally punished in Tartarus, including the infamous Ixion, Sisyphus and Tantalus. Theseus, the Athenian hero famous for slaying the Minotaur of the Labyrinth, also did a stint locked up in the house of Hades, but was one of a select number of mortals who miraculously managed to return from the place of no return alive. Certain variants of this story, as recounted by Pausanias and Plutarch, situate Theseus' Hadean incarceration in Thesprotia, Epirus specifically, thus demonstrating "how intertwined these stories became as a broader Hellenic culture overlay the regional observances."[58]

Most variants of the story agree that prior to the Trojan War, when Helen of Sparta was still a young girl, Theseus planned to kidnap her and make the celebrated beauty his child

[56] Skene, 1848: 144.
[57] Pfanz, et.al, 2014: 113.
[58] Bernstein, 2020: 88.

bride.[59] In exchange for his help, Theseus' cousin Pirithous, wanting a wife of his own, decided to kidnap (or rescue?) the goddess Persephone, whom Hades himself had stolen away to become his queen of the underworld. However, while these variants say that Theseus and Pirithous descended into the house of Hades by crossing the River Acheron, Pausanias and Plutarch offer a less mythologized and more politicized rationale behind the story. According to Pausanias, the armies of Theseus "invaded Thesprotia to carry off the wife of the Thesprotian king…and both he and Peirithous…were taken captive."[60] Theseus and Pirithous were then kept prisoners in Thesprotia's capital city until Heracles arrived and rescued them, on his way to collect Cerberus, the hound of Hades (Fig. 5). Pausanias does not name the Thesprotian king or his wife, but Plutarch does, though he makes a more convoluted claim that Theseus went to Epirus in pursuit of "the daughter[61] of Aïdoneus[62] the king of the Molossians. This man called his wife Phersephone [sic], his daughter Cora,[63] and his dog Cerberus."[64] Daniel

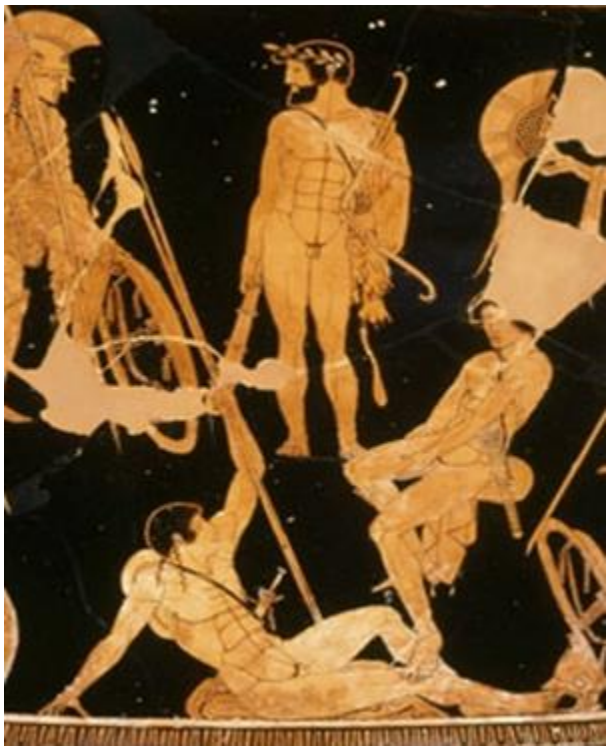

Figure 5: Heracles (top center) enters Hades, where Pirithous (seated, bottom right) and Theseus (bottom center) are being imprisoned. Niobid Krater, c.460-450 B.C. Louvre.

[59] Diod. Sic. 4.63.4; Pl. Rep. 391c-d; Apollod. E1. 23 – 24.
[60] Paus. 1.17.4.
[61] There is much that can be said about why Plutarch made Kore Hades' daughter and Persephone Hades' wife: connections between Chthonic Zeus of the Earth and Hades being one and the same (thus making father Zeus and father Hades the same as well); the cult practice of kings taking on the names and persona of gods during reenactments of the sacred marriage; the multiplicity of fertility goddesses who might have been absorbed into Persephone/Kore's cult; etc. For more on the issue of Zeus and Hades, see Fairbanks, 1900: 245-6.
[62] *Aidoneus* (Αιδωνευς), "the unseen one;" a variant of *Haidês* (Ἀιδης), "Hades."
[63] Cora or Kore, "the girl," a euphemism for Persephone.
[64] Plut. Thes. 31.4.

Ogden notes that Plutarch would have been aware that the chthonic gods of Epirus were more broadly "known as "Molossian gods,"[65] even though it was in Thesprotia, neighboring Molossus, that the cult had its central seat, due to the Acheron Necromanteion Herodotus[66] and Pausanias[67] say once existed there.

***

This chapter on Acheron's conceptualization and contextualization has analyzed how place descriptions from Homer's *Odyssey* were received and interpreted on the local level, with Epirus as the focal point of reconciliations between metaphysical Hadean geography and the physical Greek landscape. Though Homer's *Odyssey* is our earliest source that introduces the concept of the River Acheron as one of the underworld's major rivers, it is through even earlier descriptions of the primordial River Ocean that audiences get some of the first detailed depictions of Hadean geography. From Hesiod and Homer's paradise of Elysion, exclusive to dead heroes; to the *Iliad's* concerns over the unburied dead not being able to cross over an as yet unnamed river into the underworld proper, we see a vague, amorphous shape emerging from the earliest epic poetry, that eventually shaped later developments about Greek ideas about the afterlife. Indeed, it is the primordial River Ocean that the *Odyssey's* eponymous hero Odysseus must first cross, in order to enter the realm of the dead, where we get our first mention of the River Acheron. At the confluence of Acheron and Cocytus, Odysseus performs his necromantic rites to commune with the dead in the underworld. Homer's scant inclusion of topographic landmarks, like the convergence of the two rivers themselves, and Persephone's grove of polar trees, proved to be vital context clues that helped later thinkers like Pausanias and Plutarch rationalize where

[65] Ogden, 2001: 181.
[66] Hdt. 5.92.
[67] Paus. 9.30.6.

Odysseus' chthonic adventure could have plausibly taken place within the bounds of the Greek landscape. From the presence of a similarly named river and lake, to Epirus' broader regional connections to the chthonic traditions of the neighboring Molossians, Thesprotia became ever more linked to Hadean geography, as Homer's myths became grafted on to the Greek landscape. In Chapter 2, we shall see how these chthonic traditions were further applied, both to regions beyond Epirus, where other rivers named Acheron could also be found; and to the more holistic cultural traditions of Panhellenic Greece, where the Acheron returned to the vague Homeric otherworld of figurative rather than literal Hadean geography.

2 IMAGINING THE AFTERLIFE

Ideas and traditions about death, the afterlife, Hadean geography, and its denizens saw what was likely their greatest phase of development during the sixth and especially fifth centuries B.C. The Greco-Persian wars of 499-449 B.C. ravaged the city-states. The Acropolis of Athens was sacked by the Persians in 480-479 B.C., which drastically affected artistic inspiration and especially pottery production,[68] upon whose surfaces so much precious information about ancient Greek culture was painted. Greece had not yet recovered from the devastation wrought after the Persians were finally beaten, when the Peloponnesian forces of Sparta fought against Athenian hegemony in the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C., during which the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides lived and wrote). This time Athens was roundly defeated, but Sparta's victory was bittersweet, coming with untold casualties dealt to both city-states, including a near total economic meltdown that led to widespread poverty and famine for years afterwards.

[68] Byvanck, 1948: 162.

Adding to the war's death toll was the emergence of the devastating plague of 430 B.C., during the second year of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides details the dispiriting conditions during the early years of the war, as the Greeks suffered "not only their men killed by the disease within but the enemy also laying waste their fields and villages without."[69] The plague "never came into Peloponnesus,"[70] but it hit Athens especially hard, and caused a near total breakdown of Athenian society, particularly in the polis' religious sphere. Though sick and injured war refugees crowded temples as their only shelter, society's faith and morals were worn ragged as disease and battle took both the pious and superstitious without prejudice.[71] Innumerable people perished, but could not be buried with traditional funerary rites, as evinced in the careless inhumation of bodies found in the mass graves at Kerameikos, an Athenian cemetery excavated in 1994-95, dating back to the Peloponnesian War.[72]

It was under this oppressive social, religious, political and economic climate that new practices and traditions related to death and the afterlife emerged, as societies were forced to adjust with the changing times. In the following subsections, we shall see how those developments influenced new understandings of the River Acheron's place and role in Greek chthonic culture.

2.1 Hadean Art

In the ancient world, death was everywhere. Human concerns about fatal dangers to be encountered in the wilderness and poleis alike often manifested themselves in chthonic cult traditions dedicated to appeasing and safeguarding against the world's unknown forces.[73] The

[69] Thuc. 2.54.
[70] Thuc. 2.54.
[71] Thuc. 2.53.
[72] Baziotopoulou-Valavani, 2002: 190; Scholl and Mannack, 2010: 94.
[73] Dimakis, 2015: 33.

threat of death was all but omnipresent, and is reflected in the wide array of grave goods upon which images of the *prothesis*,[74] *ekphora*,[75] and graveside attendance are depicted.[76] The painted imagery of death, mourning and ritual observance are even more common on white-ground *lekythoi* (funerary jars used to anoint dead bodies with oil). Of the surviving pottery found thus far, the artistic imagery of death far outnumbers representations of life's other two major transitions, birth and marriage.[77] What is far rarer, however, are portrayals of what the Greeks imagined the afterlife was like upon arrival in the underworld for the "ordinary dead."[78] Instead, the most popular subjects include those of mythic heroes who daringly entered the house of Hades, or the eternal punishments of sinners in Tartarus who committed crimes against the gods (the aforementioned Theseus and Pirithous, Sisyphus, the Titans, and so on).[79]

Unfortunately, what was perhaps the most famous image of the underworld no longer exists, the now-lost fifth century B.C. mural at Delphi by the celebrated painter Polygnotos of Thasos. Pausanias' eyewitness account provides an extremely detailed description of what is referred to as Polygnotos' Nekyia, one portion of the mural where the artist painted Odysseus' communion with the shades of the seer Tiresias, his comrade Elpenor, and his mother Anticlea.[80] In addition to this, Polygnotus' Nekyia also boasted other images, including a portion where Pausanias describes that "there is water like a river, clearly intended for Acheron, with reeds growing in it…[and] on the river is a boat, with the ferryman [Charon] at the oars."[81] Following Pausanias' descriptions, two separate reconstructions of Polygnotos' Nekyia were done, by

[74] *Prothesis*, the laying out of the corpse, similar to the modern wake.
[75] *Ekphora*, the funeral procession.
[76] Mannack, 2012: 57; Von Bothmer, 1972: 3.
[77] Oakley, 2012: 496.
[78] Martin, 2020: 27.
[79] Scholl and Mannack, 2010: 86.
[80] Paus. 10.29.9.
[81] Paus. 10.28.1.

classicists Carl Robert in 1892 (Fig. 6),[82] and Mark D. Stansbury-O'Donnell's reanalysis in 1990.[83]

Figure 6: Cropped section of Carl Robert's 1892 reconstruction of Polynotus' Nekyia mural, featuring Charon (right) ferrying souls across the Acheron. Wikimedia Commons.

Aside from Persephone, the hellhound Cerberus is the most popular Hadean denizen depicted in Greek art, particularly in sixth century B.C. black-figured pottery. The monster is nigh invariably paired with the hero Heracles, who drags Cerberus out of the underworld during Heracles' most harrowing twelfth Labor. The messenger god Hermes[84] and the ferryman Charon

[82] Robert, *Die Nekyia des Polygnot*, 1892: 86-87.
[83] Stansbury-O'Donnell, 1990: 220.
[84] I hesitate to refer to Hermes as "Hadean." Though the titles are often ambiguous and malleable, there are still marked differences between Olympian, Hadean and chthonic entities. Gods from Mount Olympus can have connections and access to the underworld, and be given chthonic roles and observances, all without ever taking residence in the underworld proper: Zeus Chthonios ("of the earth"), Zeus Katachthonios ("under the earth"), Zeus Plousios ("wealth-bringing"); Dionysus Chthonios; Hermes Chthonios, Hermes Psychopompos ("the conductor of souls"); and Demeter Chthonia, to name a few. Hades, though technically an Olympian by blood relation, is neither an Olympian in residency norhas Olympian throne nor altars (HH 4. 126-134). Sacrifices to Hades are always chthonic, never Olympian (*Od.* 11.24-51). This is not the case with his nephew Hermes, who can receive both. Being the messenger god of liminality, Hermes ventures freely between the worlds of the living, dead and divine. However, unlike Hades, Hermes has his own throne on Mount Olympus, where he officially resides. As such, I cannot see Hermes being considered Hadean in the same respects as Cerberus, Charon, or even Hermes' fellow "Olympians" by blood, his uncle Hades and half-sister/cousin/aunt-in-law Persephone. I felt it necessary to give my stance on this, especially since it can be argued that Hermes, not Cerberus is the most popular "Hadean" figure, as he appears in more Greek art set in the underworld than Cerberus, Charon, and Hades combined. However, a similar argument can also be made for and against Persephone, she being yet another deity who navigates between worlds. However, Persephone contrasts with Hermes in the fact that *she has her own throne in the underworld*, despite splitting seasonal residency between Hades and Olympus. Even when her throne is temporarily empty during the spring and summer months, Persephone still lives in Hades for a time, while Hermes never does.

also frequently feature, as psychopomps who help souls cross over into the underworld. Thanatos and Hypnos, the personifications of death and sleep, were also depicted as guiding heroes and warriors who died on the battlefield.[85] However, for all of this visibility of the underworld in Greek artistic imagery, the god Hades himself barely ever appears, keeping true to his name's meaning as the Invisible One. Though Hades is occasionally present on sixth-century B.C. black-figure pottery (see Fig. 10), he is most frequently depicted on fifth-century B.C. red-figured[86] works restricted to the period of the Peloponnesian War,[87] and is almost exclusively paired with his wife Persephone (Figs. 7 and 10). Moreover, this scarcity of imagery is especially the case for depictions the particulars of the house of Hades itself.

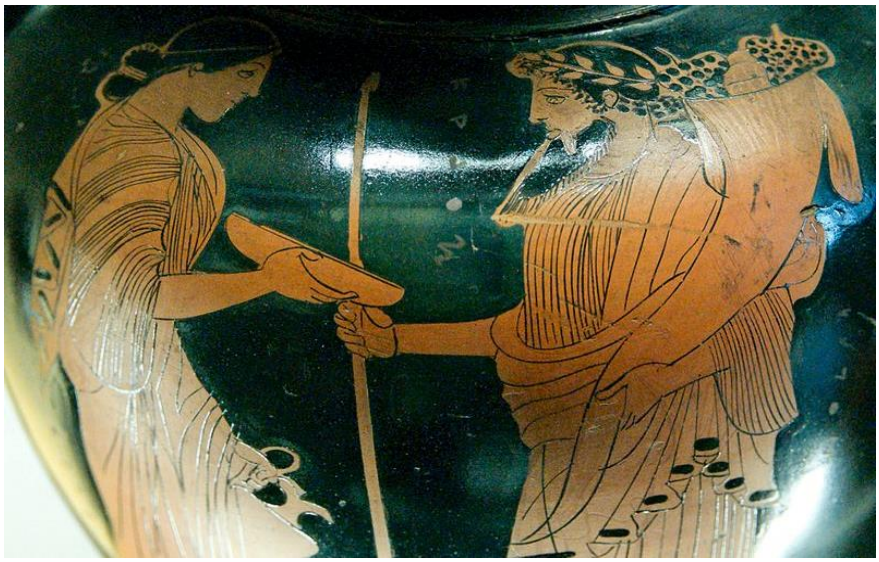

Figure 7: Persephone and Hades, who holds the cornucopia (horn of plenty) in his capacity as Plouton, the chthonic lord of riches in or under the earth. Oionokles Painter, c. 470 B.C. Wikimedia Commons.

Hades' unseen and invisible underworld of shadows and shades from epics and myth remained as such in Greek visual media. Classicist Bridget Martin suggests that generally, fifth-century Greeks "did not wish to portray the afterlife, cognizant or otherwise, whether for

[85] For more on the lack of landscapes and cityscapes in Greek art, see Hurwit 1991.
[86] On Apulian red-figured pottery in particular, from ancient Greece's Italian colony of Apulia.
[87] Scholl and Mannack, 2010: 92.

aesthetic or preferential considerations."[88] The focus of archaic and classical Greek imagery is on human form, and narratives to be readily understood and appreciated by the viewer.[89] Beyond the perfunctory inclusion of a few reeds, rocks, and perhaps a single tree as topographic markers setting the scene as being vaguely outdoors (Figs. 6, 9, 14, 16), Greek art provides no imagery of the Hadean landscape—or any landscapes earthly, infernal, or heavenly.[90] When Acheron does appear in Greek art, it is personified as an anthropomorphized river god, as seen in the fifth century B.C. grave monument pediment relief analyzed by Andreas Scholl and Thomas Mannack in 2010 (Fig. 8). Otherwise, neither the River Acheron nor any of the other rivers of the underworld ever feature as landscapes in Greek visual media. It is only through contextualizing the human, divine or infernal figures present that viewers can identify scenes as taking place on the River Acheron, as seen in the case of the ferryman, Charon, to be examined below.

Figure 8: The anthropomorphized personification of Acheron, on the extremely weathered pediment fragment of an Attic grave monument from late 5th cent. B.C. Miletos. Scholl and Mannack, 2010: 85.

2.2 Charon, the Ferryman

One of the most important developments of the fifth century B.C.'s evolving ideas about the afterlife was the introduction of the otherworldly ferryman Charon to the Hadean tradition. Charon is a psychopomp,[91] meaning an immortal entity charged with guiding the souls of the dead across the liminal borders of the River Acheron, into the house of Hades.

[88] Martin, 2020: 27.
[89] Hurwit, 1991: 43; Lynch, 2017: 127, 129.
[90] Hurwit, 1991: 43; Lynch, 2017: 129.
[91] *Psychopomp*, Latinized from the Greek *psūkhopompós* (ψῡχοπομπός), "conductor of souls."

Charon's earliest literary appearance occurs in the fifth-century B.C. works of Pindar, Euripides, Aeschylus\ and other famous poets of the time, wherein "the ferry of Acheron"[92] is a "two-oared boat in the [Acherusian] lake. Charon, the ferryman of the dead, his hand on the boat-pole, calls"[93] souls of the dead into "the unseen land where Apollo does not walk [through] the sunless land that receives all men."[94] At the same time, the ferryman also starts being depicted in visual art. In response to the Peloponnesian War's overwhelming death toll, and the collapse of existing funerary traditions, Athenians began painting Charon's likeness on the grave offerings he appears most frequently: marble and clay white-ground lekythoi (Fig. 9).[95] By being depicted on offerings to the dead, the psychopomp could help guide lost souls to Hades "in a deliberate act of purification from miasma"[96] caused by so many unburied bodies of those who died of war or plague. The ferryman is thus a reflection of fifth century anxieties over the fate of restless souls in the afterlife (hearkening back to Homer's Patroclus and Elpenor), as well as the state of funerary rites that had been abandoned due to the chaos of warfare and disease.

Figure 9: Charon (left) guides a shade (right) across the reeds of Acheron. c. 420-400 B.C. lekythos by the Reed Painter. Perseus Digital Library.

[92] Pindar's *Fragments*, "The Felicity of the Gods," 599.
[93] Eur. Alc. 252.
[94] Aesch. Seven. 848.
[95] Scholl and Mannack, 2010: 96.
[96] Scholl and Mannack, 2010: 96.

There is no mention of Charon before the fifth century—he does not appear in literature,[97] epigraphy and numismatics,[98] archaeological art and artifacts from funerary customs[99]—and certainly not two hundred years prior in the foundational works of Homer or Hesiod (who, moreover, never mentions Acheron either). Granted, Charon's omission in mythic poetry might have been a tacit concession to the fact that eighth century B.C. audiences were already aware of Charon's role and function, and naming him outright was either unnecessary, or discouraged.[100] But without hard evidence in favor of this, it is safe to say that modern pop culture is inaccurate both in its misconceptions about Charon ferrying souls over the River Styx, when Greek primary sources explicitly say that it was Acheron;[101] and in its persistent depictions of Homer's Greeks already being familiar with the entity who provided the sole conveyance across the Acheron for those properly buried, particularly in its inclusion of the tradition of paying "Charon's fee," the two coins placed on the eyes or in the mouth of the dead.[102] As demonstrated in subsection 1.1.1 on Primordial Waters, I find it more convincing to attribute Oceanus to any Homeric concept of an otherworldly river or body of water that needed to be crossed in order to gain entry to the underworld. Acheron was mentioned just once by Homer, and even then, only after the River Ocean had already been crossed by Odysseus. However,

[97] The fifth-century B.C. authors Aeschylus, Euripides, Pindar, and Timotheus provide the earliest literary references to Charon as the ferryman over Acheron, with Aristophanes closing out the fifth century into the fourth in his vivid portrayal of Charon in the *Frogs*.
[98] Stevens, 1991.
[99] Scholl and Mannack 2010; Stevens 1991; Sullivan 1950; Vermeule 1979.
[100] As calling out the names of powerful chthonic entities was often avoided by the use of epithets instead.
[101] The modern imagery of Charon on the Styx comes to us from the Romans, most importantly through Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, both composed in the 1st century B.C. The aforementioned cultural transplant of the Acherusian Lake (as Aornos) from Greece to Italy (as Lake Avernus) made Greece's Acheron all but obsolete as Roman traditions became significantly more popular. In the *Aeneid*, Lake Avernus featured as the terrestrial portal into the underworld for the hero Aeneas, with "the waters of Tartarean Acheron" (Virg. *Aen.* 6.295) in the metaphysical underworld, where Charon remained posted. However, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "Orpheus implored in vain the ferryman to help him cross the River Styx again, but was denied," and failed to bring his dead Eurydice back to the land of the living with him (Ov. *Met.* 10.1). And so, it is that Roman, rather than Greek, tradition that was passed on into modern times, in which Charon and the Styx have become so closely associated.
[102] Stevens, 1991: 215.

Charon's popularity was certainly firmly cemented after the fifth century B.C. As such, his associations with the Acheron River and Acherusian Lake after that time are well worth looking into, to further understand how the ancient Greeks addressed funerary customs on the local level outside of Epirus.

2.2.1 Hermione's Acherusiuan Lake

Though Thesprotia's River Acheron and Acherusian Lake in Epirus were the most prolific bearers of the name of the Hadean river of pain, they were not the only ones to have such a name. Several bodies of water throughout the ancient Mediterranean were identified as *the* Homeric river of Hades. Of particular interest is the Acherusian Lake said to have been located in the ancient Peloponnesian city of Hermione (modern day Ermioni) in the southeast Argolid. According to Pausanias' eyewitness accounts, a temple dedicated to the agricultural goddess Demeter Chthonia was located in Hermione, and behind that temple was the Acherusian Lake,[103] along with two temples dedicated to the god Hades. Though it is unknown whether either temple had a necromanteion, what is known is that one temple was dedicated to his local euphemism Clymenus,[104] with the other dedicated to Plouton (see Fig. 7), where chthonic rites were of course observed. In addition, Pausanias passes along yet another local variant of Heracles' labors, which claims that it was in Hermione that the hero-god descended into the underworld, through a chasm near the temple of Clymenus, and emerged with Cerberus in tow in the nearby town of Troezen.[105] Similar to Epirus' Thesprotian equivalent, Hermione's Acherusuan Lake

[103] Paus. 2.35.10.
[104] *Klymenos* (Κλύμενος), "the famous, renowned." The personification of fame or infamy, possibly related to a local hero cult where a man from Hermione would serve as an intermediary for Hades, standing in as the underworld god during chthonic rituals; thereby pairing the local Clymenus with a maiden representing Persephone (Merker, 2000: 333). It is also possible that the cult to Demeter Chthonia, being aboriginal Dryopian in origin (Hdt. 8.43), was a grafting of Demeter and Hades' Hellenic cults with those of Chthonia and Clymenus, similarly paired siblings from local Hermione lore.
[105] Paus. 2.35.10.

thus links the Greek landscape together the with regional folklore, as well as the very oldest traditions about chthonic entrances to the underworld.

In the surviving fragments of the sixth-century B.C. poet Lasus of Hermione's *Hymn to Demeter*, Lasus sings of Demeter and the Maiden, wife of Clymenus.[106] The Maiden is Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus, whose abduction, rape and marriage to Hades is one of the oldest and most celebrated stories from Greek myth. The tale's earliest known source Hesiod's eighth to seventh-century B.C. *Theogony*, as "Persephone, whom Aidoneus carried off from her mother,"[107] was taken down into the underworld to be Hades' queen (Fig. 10). The location of the abduction varies with different retellings, but according to Pseudo-Apollodorus it was in the vicinity of Hermione, as it was from the Hermionians that her mother Demeter first learned of Persephone's abduction.[108] In addition to Demeter's gratitude to the Hermionians for them having helped her find Persephone, the people of Hermione were "so confident of their proximity to the underworld that they thought it superfluous to include the coin of passage in the mouths of their dead"[109] as payment to the ferryman Charon for conveyance into the underworld. The fourth-century B.C. poet-scholar Callimachus gives a now fragmentary account of the local dead receiving such special

Figure 10: Hades carries off Persephone, while Demeter (right) clings to her daughter in vain. 6th cent. B.C., by the Leagros Group. British Museum.

[106] Lasus, *Fragments, 307*.
[107] Hes. Th. 914-915.
[108] Apollod. 1.5.1.
[109] Bernstein, 2020: 90.

dispensations, paying "no coin as fare, which it is the custom for others to carry in dry mouths."[110] This is corroborated by the geographer Strabo four centuries years later, when he reports that "the descent to Hades in the country of the Hermionians is a short cut; and this is why they do not put passage money in the mouths of their dead."[111]In addition to evolving ideas about Charon, the fourth century B.C. saw another alternative to passage across the Acheron, not only in religious funerary traditions, but in the philosophical schools of thought that were emerging alongside them.

2.3 Plato's Afterlife

By the fourth century B.C., the River Acheron had been cemented as the most important river of Hades.[112] It was featured in many poems and plays and appeared in the *Phaedo*, Plato's seminal dialogue *On the Soul*. Here, it ultimately took on new form as the river of life, death, and rebirth. In the *Phaedo*, we see concepts about the conditions of the afterlife start to shift, moving away from the Homeric visuals of pained, wailing, listless and bloodthirsty shades locked forever in the house of Hades, to souls that actually had a chance to re-cross the uncrossable Acheron, and return to the land of the living in a new, reincarnated existence.

The *Phaedo* provides radical yet foundational notions of classical dualities concerning the body and the soul, life and death, mortality and immortality, the temporal and the eternal, and the human and the divine.[113] According to Plato, and the teachings of his late mentor Socrates, "souls existed previously, before they were in human form, apart from bodies, and they had intelligence."[114] This seemingly non-empirical knowledge is a chain of memory ultimately

[110] Call. Hec. 278.
[111] Strab. 8.6.12.
[112] Scholl and Mannack, 2010: 77.
[113] Segal, 2004: 228.
[114] Pl. *Phd.* 76c.

derived from the past lives souls cycled through, from one reincarnation to the next. The *Phaedo* connects philosophy with metaphysical Hadean topography when Socrates explains the cycle of life, death and rebirth in the following passage:

> "[112e] ….Among the many are four streams, the greatest and outermost of which is that called Oceanus, which flows round in a circle, and opposite this, flowing in the opposite direction, is Acheron, which flows through [113a] various desert places and, passing under the earth, comes to the Acherusian lake. To this lake the souls of most of the dead go and, after remaining there the appointed time, which is for some longer and for others shorter, are sent back to be born again into living beings."[115]

According to the *Phaedo*, souls are judged after death, and receive their due punishments or rewards, based on their misdeeds or merits. The souls of those who lived neither well nor ill are ferried down the Acheron River, and in the Acherusian Lake "they dwell and are purified"[116] by its waters, absolved of any wrongdoings, and returned to the earth after a year to be reborn.[117] However, the souls of those who in their lives never repented for "sacrilege, or wicked and abominable murders, or any other such crimes, are cast by their fitting destiny into Tartarus, whence they never emerge."[118] In 1971, Classicist Hendrik Wagenvoort surmised that these new notions about the purifying function of Acheron as a river of death *and* life came about because post-Homeric thinkers "wished to open a prospect of a happy life after death also for men of good will who had not done so very much harm in their lives."[119] Naturally, such new notions were to widely vary and conflict as more schools of thought developed.[120] Socrates gives this dialogue to his pupils before he himself is to be executed for spreading unorthodox teachings and ideas. But rather than merely having all souls forever conscripted to the limbo of dank and

[115] Pl. Phd. 112e-113a.
[116] Pl. Phd. 113d.
[117] Pl. Phd. 114a.
[118] Pl. Phd. 113e.
[119] Wagenvoort, 1971: 134.
[120] Segal, 2004: 228.

gloomy Hades—except for the elect semi-divine heroes[121] of Elysium—people who followed the teachings of the philosophical schools in the of fourth century B.C. and afterwards could look forward to the possibility of being purified, and getting another chance at life, as opposed to total finality of Homer and Hesiod's eternal death sentence.

***

As we have seen in this chapter on developing notions of the afterlife, ancient Greek poets and writers promoted a chthonic culture dedicated to both honoring and maintaining the dead. The house of Hades was a prison, a subterranean jail with impenetrable gates guarded by the monstrous hellhound Cerberus. However, historian Alan Bernstein points out that even in Homer's day, "the porosity of the boundary between life and death"[122] made it so that the dead could return to the world of the living, under extreme circumstances. The observation of proper funerary customs served to ensure that restless souls of the unburied dead did not return to haunt or harangue the living (Patroclus, Elpenor and, as we will see in the following chapter, Melissa). Bernstein further states that the underworld was ordered "in imitation of society…[with] a whole bureaucracy of specialized officials…to administer the dead."[123] Hadean figures like the ferryman Charon had to be paid a fee in funerary customs dating from the fifth century B.C. onwards, obols buried with the deceased so that they could cross the River Acheron unmolested. However, people in some locales eschewed such practices altogether, due to their close proximity to Hadean entrances of their own, as seen in the case of Hermione. Writers like Plato pushed the envelope of instilling confidence that death and the afterlife were somehow negotiable, by teaching alternative notions of absolution and purification in the waters of the

[121] With the exception of a scant few favorites, like Castor and Pollux, Orion, Perseus, and of course Heracles, who dwelled in the heavens of Olympus after their death and apotheosis.
[122] Bernstein, 2020: 87.
[123] Bernstein, 2020: 92.

Acherusian Lake. In the waters of Acheron, the worthy dead could be reincarnated and reborn to live out new lives, once they had been cleansed of the sins of their previous life. These are just some of the ways that the tensions between the uncertainties of life, death, and the afterlife were reconciled by the peoples of ancient Greece. The final aspect of chthonic cults to be explored in this paper concerns another tradition that seems to have emerged during the sixth century B.C.: that of the oracle of the dead, called a *necromanteion*.

Necromanteions were liminal spaces that bridged the gap between the realms of the living and those of the dead, most commonly found in caves or lakeside precincts that were established entrances to the underworld.[124] As oracles of the dead, necromanteions were founded on the ancient Greek belief that the souls of the dead had otherworldly wisdom, with knowledge of the past, present, and future that they could impart to those initiated in necromantic mysteries.[125] Plato's *Phaedo* demonstrates how these chains of consciousness and memory could persist from one life to the next. In the following chapter, we will look more closely at the traditions around the Acheron Necromanteion itself, to see the chthonic cult rituals in practice.

3 THE ACHERON NECROMANTEION

The first chapter of this thesis paper examined the River Acheron's geo-spatial context, as various historians and geographers from antiquity parsed out where Odysseus' figurative journey into the underworld might have literally taken place. Though several rivers and lakes bore the name Acheron, Thesprotia's stood out as the one with the strongest and most enduring cult presence, thanks in no small part to its regional relation to the nearby Molossian indigenous chthonic cults, and the support of ancient scholarship from the celebrated historians Herodotus

[124] Ogden, 2004: xxv.
[125] Ogden, 2004, xvii.

and Thucydides, and geographer Pausanias. Those identifications were based on the topographical features of Epirus' rivers and lakes, and the presence of an ancient necromanteion in their vicinity. This final chapter will now look at that necromanteion in more detail.

Figure 11: Prodromos Monastery, with the storage rooms of the excavated Acheron Necromanteion ruins exposed directly beneath the church.

In northwestern Greece, Epirus' River Acheron flows through Thesprotia, into the Ionian Sea (see Fig. 2). Near the confluence of Acheron and Cocytus rivers, and just outside the modern-day village of Mesopotamos—where Thesprotia's ancient capital Ephyra once was—is the hill of St. John Prodromos (John the Baptist). The hill is named for the 18th century Prodromos Monastery, an early-modern building which stands in ruins on its summit. The monastery was excavated from 1958 to 1977 by Greek archaeologist Sotirios Dakaris, who discovered the remains of a late fourth- or early third-century B.C. stone block edifice directly underneath, which had been burned down by Romans in 168 B.C. (Fig. 11).[126] Dakaris famously identified this Hellenistic labyrinthian vaulted complex as the Acheron *Necromanteion*, or

[126] Dakaris 1958, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1986, 1990, 1991, 1993.

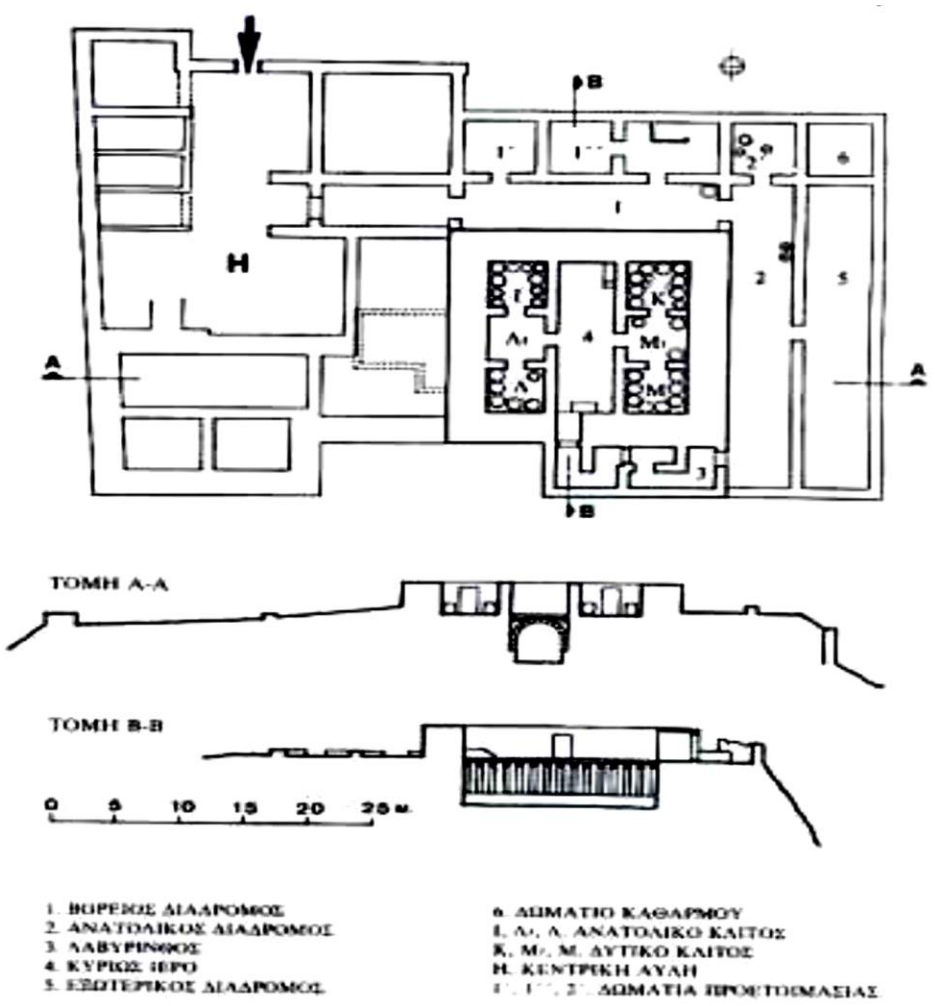

Figure 12: " Ground-plan sketch of the 'Nekromanteion' building complex with the assigned 'religious functions' of the different compartments (after Dakaris 1993: 15)."[127] *The arrow at H marks the site's entrance via the north corridor, with the eastern corridors at 5; 4 being the central hall; and 3 being the labyrinthian corridors to the south.*

Acheron's Oracle of the Dead, believing it to be the starting site of the Trojan War hero Odysseus' famous necromantic journey into "the dark palace of Hades,"[128] from Books 10 and 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*. Desperately trying to get back home to Ithaca after years lost at sea, Odysseus consulted the dead seer Tiresias for directions, communing with chthonic powers at the very entry to the underworld itself along the Acheron and Cocytus rivers—supposedly in the very same region as Dakaris' archaeological ruins found under the Prodromos Monastery.

[127] Kotjabopoulou, 2018: 32.
[128] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962.

Though portions of the site have been exposed to the open air, the roof and ceilings of the storage rooms long gone, much of Dakaris' necromanteion is still directly under the Prodromos Monastery itself (Figs. 11–12). The storage rooms connect to corridors on the north and east sides, which lead to a labyrinthian array of passages on the south that opened to the site's central hall. The walls of this central chamber in particular are noteworthy for being almost three meters thick. However, directly underneath the hall is the site's most striking feature: a vaulted crypt-like chamber, its stone ceiling supported by 15 arches (Fig. 13). According to Dakaris, the central hall was the inner sanctuary of the temenos, the religious grounds, with the subterranean crypt underneath "'corresponding' to Hades,"[129] in the very underworld itself.[130] In Dakaris' view, visitors would have entered via the site's north corridor (see Fig. 12), and over the course of several days, slowly meandered through the passages as they underwent various stages of physical and mental preparation before their séance with the dead.[131] Dakaris argues that necromanteion would have utilized its dizzying arrangement of halls and corridors so that visitors to Acheron's oracle of the dead would get "the impression of wandering through the gloom of Hades."[132]

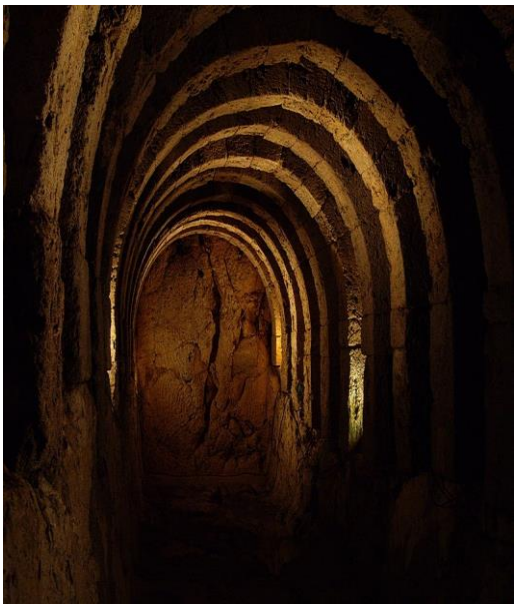

Figure 13: Dakaris' vaulted crypt of Hades. Wikimedia Commons.

[129] Kotjabopoulou, 2018: 32.
[130] Ogden, 2004: 19.
[131] Wiseman, 1998: 13.
[132] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 88.

Artifacts found at the site date no earlier than the fourth to third centuries B.C., contemporary with the erection and use of the complex. In the east corridor, floor pits full of burned wheat, beans and legumes, and the bones of sheep and cattle were found. In the numerous auxiliary storage rooms throughout the site, there were also assorted holding jars for liquids; the remnants of agricultural tools like sickles and shovels; and weapons like spear- and arrowheads. By Dakaris' interpretation, these were all votive offerings, typical of sacrifices and gifts for chthonic gods, with the beans being hallucinogenic, and the iron tools and weapons having "a powerful apotropaic effect"[133] against potentially evil spirits that would be summoned by the oracle. Rooms for sleeping (ritual incubation) allowed visitors under the influence of hallucinogenic food and beverages to contact the dead through prophetic dreams; and there were also rooms for purification baths afterwards. In the central hall were several loose stone blocks, which Dakaris surmised would have been used with assorted pieces of bronze ratchets and rings and iron points, that would allow for wily priests hiding within the hollow recesses of the 11-foot thick walls to operate the cranes and counterweights as part of contraptions that would dangle effigies in front of the visitors behind smoke fumes. The general environment and influence of hallucinogens would give the overall impression that the ghosts of the dead had arisen.

As sensational as Dakaris' archaeological site was, however, his interpretations did not appear to be in keeping with descriptions and functions of other known necromanteions, or even Homer's description of necromantic rites Dakaris believed had been practiced at the site. In order to highlight the problems with Dakaris' Acheron Necromanteion, we shall first look at Homer's examples from the *Odyssey*, and then examine other examples of necromancy associated with

[133] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 90.

Acheron, as well as compare Dakaris' necromanteion with other known sites in the ancient Greek world, in order to see what lines up and what does not.

3.1 Odysseus' Necromancy

Necromancy is closely associated with the observances paid in tomb cults, ancestor cults, and hero cults,[134] wherein they all followed the traditional ritual format of digging a pit, pouring libations, holocaustic animal sacrifices, offerings of crops and blood, and prayers to the dead for knowledge, protection, or other otherworldly powers.[135] In Homer's *Odyssey*, blood sacrifices were the paramount requirement for summoning up the dead from the earth, so that hungry ghosts[136] could drink the life-blood (*haimakouria*, or "blood-sating"[137]), and briefly regain their consciousness and ability to speak to the living.[138] The process by which Odysseus summoned the dead is described in the *Nekyia* as follows:

> "I [Odysseus] drew my sword and dug the trench cubit each way…. When I had prayed sufficiently to the dead, I cut the throats of the two sheep and let the blood run into the trench, whereon the ghosts came trooping up…they came from every quarter and flitted round the trench with a strange kind of screaming sound that made me turn pale with fear. When I saw them coming I told the men to be quick and flay the carcasses of the two dead sheep and make burnt offerings of them, and at the same time to repeat prayers to Hades and to [Persephone]; but I sat , where I was with my sword drawn and would not let the poor feckless ghosts come near the blood till Teiresias should have answered my questions."[139]

The River Acheron's association with blood sacrifices dates back at least to Homer's *Odyssey*, as it was by its banks that Odysseus' necromantic blood sacrifices to the souls of the dead were conducted. The Acheron River has been featured as the central setting in many classical stories set in the underworld, perhaps most gorily in *The Frogs*, the fifth century B.C.

[134] For more on Greek cults, see Larson 2007 and Ogden 2004.
[135] Ogden, 2004: 7.
[136] The precursor to blood-drinking vrykolakas and, of course, vampires.
[137] Ogden, 2004: 7.
[138] Hom. Od. 11.140-155.
[139] Hom. Od. 11.24-51.

comedic satire by the Greek playwright Aristophanes. In its one and only appearance in *The Frogs,* Acheron is described as a grisly cliffside river "dripping with blood…[with] hounds of Cocytus (i.e. Furies) running round;"[140] which scholar Daniel Ogden argues denotes "a rocky outcrop over the river on which or from which blood offerings are made into it."[141]

When it comes to identifying the archaeological site in Epirus as the Acheron Necromanteion of Homeric lore, Dakaris himself admits to certain inconsistencies between his site and those of traditional death oracles and necromantic practices. While in his view, some aspects of the archaeological site bore similarities to chthonic cult practices, Dakaris points out that "in the *Odyssey* the sacrifice and the offering of libations and barley were carried out in one place, whereas here the offerings were made in three different places,"[142] which can very well be seen as evidence against all of the labyrinthian rooms of the site being used the way Dakaris claimed. Let us look for a moment at the setting of Odysseus' necromancy, to get a better sense of how the ancient Greeks would have visualized ghostly seances, versus what Dakaris' site suggests.

Recall that in the *Nekyia*, Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*, the titular hero Odysseus sailed across the River Ocean to the house of Hades at the edge of the world, where, at the confluence of the Acheron, Cocytus and Phlegethon rivers, he performed the necromantic rites to summon the ghost of the dead seer, Tiresias. Dakaris noted that Odysseus carried out his offerings and libations "in one place."[143] Though Homer often refers to the underworld proper as the "wide-gated house of Hades,"[144] this does not denote an actual building indoors, as evinced by the

[140] Aristoph. Frogs. 471-473.
[141] Ogden, 2001: 176.
[142] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 92.
[143] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 92.
[144] Hom. Od. 11.567.

numerous underground rivers flowing throughout the Hadean landscape, including the Acheron River. Ancient writers and artists alike understood that Odysseus was out of doors—not in an actual house, palace, temple, or any other constructed edifice or building—as demonstrated in the fifth century B.C. Attic red figure *pelike* (vase or jar) by the Lykaon painter in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (Fig. 14).

Figure 5: "Odysseus and Elpenor on the Boston Pelike," with Hermes (far right). Drawing by L.D. Caskey (1934: 342).

Art historian Mark D. Stansbury-O'Donnell notes in his reconstruction of the fifth century B.C. artist Polygnotus' contemporaneous Nekyia mural (Fig. 15) that the Lycaon painter's pelike "approximates its composition,"[145] thus giving us a clue as to what the original Nekyia mural might have looked like at Delphi.

[145] Stansbury-O'Donnell, 1990: 222.

Figure 6: The cropped section of Stansbury-O'Donnell's reconstruction of Polygnotus' Nekyia mural, featuring (left to right) Anticlea, Tiresias, Elpenor, and Odysseus.

On the pelike's obverse, the vase depicts a scene from the *Odyssey* where Odysseus communes with the ghost of his recently fallen comrade, Elpenor, who, like Patroclus in the *Iliad*, bemoans his lack of a proper burial.[146] Some details are hard to see on the vase or even in photographs, but they appear more clearly in Lacey Davis Caskey's drawing of the *pelike*, published in 1934, where one can better see the "contours of the rocky landscape, the reeds behind Elpenor and the pit with the blood of the sheep dripping into it."[147] The reeds in particular can barely be seen in photographs provided by the MFA (Fig. 16), which is unfortunate, considering their importance in contextualizing where Odysseus was, as according to Caskey, "the reeds suggest the proximity of the rivers"[148] Acheron and Cocytus, where Elpenor strands at their confluence. The addition of reeds to Hadean landscape imagery is particularly vital in the face of Chapter 2's aforementioned standard Greek inclination to not depict landscapes in

[146] Hom. Od. 11.51-84.
[147] Caskey, 1934: 339.
[148] Caskey, 1934: 339.

figurative art very much at all, thus leaving it to the viewer to already know where certain scenes take place.

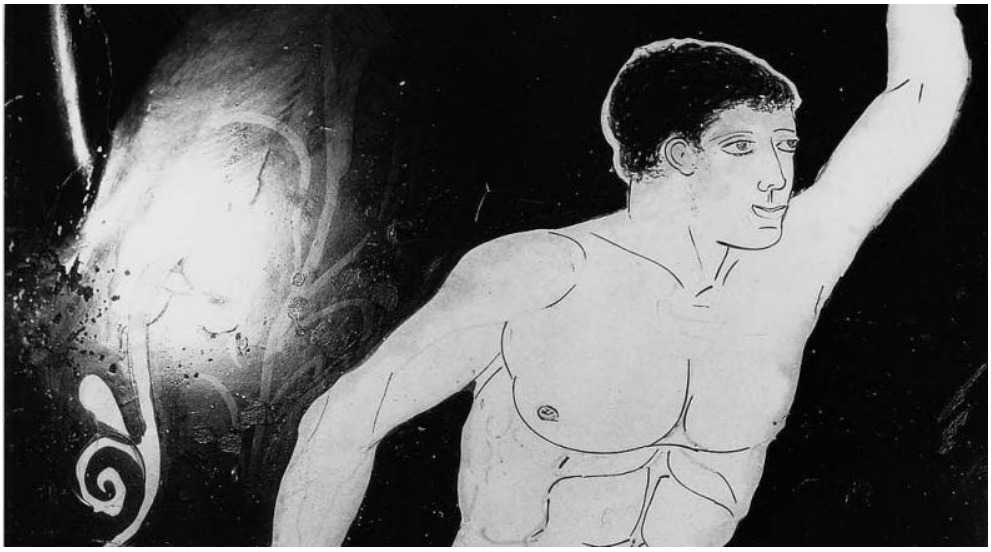

Figure 7: The river reeds behind Elpenor can barely be seen in certain light, behind his right elbow. Boston MFA.

Though Dakaris' Acheron Necromanteion does indeed stand near Epirus' own intersection of the Acheron and Cocytus, what was unusual was the sheer overabundance of indoor chambers and rooms in the site itself. If they were supposed to be used as Dakaris described, this contradicts Homeric understandings of how chthonic offerings were to be carried out: at the riverbank itself, and out of doors. And it certainly does not match the ancient cult traditions of other known necromanteions, either.

3.2 Other Necromanteions

In his studies on ancient Greek and Roman necromancy at other oracles of the dead known in antiquity, Daniel Ogden refers to "the big four:"[149] Epirus' Acheron Necromanteion, the aforementioned Lake Avernus in Italy, Tainaron in the Peloponnese, and Heraclea Pontica in Asia Minor. The fifth-century B.C. oracle of the dead at Heracleia Pontica was based in an

[149] Ogden, 2004: 17.

elaborate cave system in the Greek colony of Bithynia, near their own River Acheron and Acherusian Lake. The cave oracle, and the city itself, was dedicated to the demigod Heracles, whom, as Apollonius of Rhodes recounts, the locals believed had entered the underworld through their karstic Cave of Hades during his final labor to fetch the hellhound Cerberus.[150] Heracles' katabasis at the oracle of Bithynia was mirrored by the hero's anabasis at the oracle of the dead in Tainaron, in the Peloponnese. The necromanteion at Tainaron, on the Mani Peninsula of Laconia, was the most popular of the death oracles known throughout the ancient Mediterranean (Fig. 17). Tainaron's Spartan oracle was operational from the seventh century B.C. to the second century A.D,[151] its longevity due in large part to it having been integrated into the state-sponsored temple of Poseidon that used to stand nearby.[152] According to mythic tradition, the hero-god Heracles' Hadean anabasis (where it was said that he had dragged the hellhound Cerberus up from the underworld) had taken place at one of three potential sites: the River Acheron in Epirus, the similarly-named River Acheron in the Peloponnesian town of Hermione, or the caves of Tainaron.[153]

Figure 8: Gates of Hades at Tainaron. Oracleofthedead.com.

Daniel Ogden points out that both the Heraclea and Tainaron necromanteions were situated in natural caves modified by tooling or walling,[154] with man-made niches and platforms

[150] Ap. Rhod. 714-752.
[151] Ogden, 2004: xxv.
[152] Ogden, 2004: 22.
[153] Paus. 3.25.5.
[154] Ogden, 2004: 18.

for votive offerings carved into the stones so that their caves looked something like temples.[155] This is in stark contrast with the building Dakaris discovered, which was an entire complex, neither cavernous nor chthonic at all, apart from the vaulted crypt, which Dakaris said was used for incubation, where visitors would sleep and receive visions under the influence of hallucinogenic food and drink.[156]

Then there is the matter of the Dakaris' interpretation of the metal artifacts as cranes, used in a house of horrors where priests hidden in the thick walls of the building would have rigged up fake effigies on a complicated array of weights and pulleys, to make visitors to the oracle believe they were seeing ghosts. But these machinations would not have been necessary at all. Dakaris erroneously put the emphasis on visitors' experiences coming to the oracle, when in actuality, as suggested by historic accounts of actual consultations to a necromanteion at the Acheron, clients would not have visited the site at all, but instead sent correspondences which were relayed between messengers and the oracle's priests. Visitors would not have slept at the necromanteion, rather it would have been the priests themselves who communicated with the dead. We see evidence of this in the case of the Spartan regent Periander and the ghost of his wife, Melissa, as recounted in Herodotus' *Histories*, detailed below.

3.3 Periander and Melissa

In Homer's *Iliad*, restless shades could visit loved ones in dreams, as seen in the case of Patroclus' ghost, who begged Achilles for a proper burial.[157] This forms the basis of necromantic incubation, the process by which scholars Pfanz et al. describe as priests having "immersed

[155] Q. S. 289.
[156] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 88.
[157] Hom. Il. 23.70-74.

themselves in the natural environmental phenomena of the site"[158] (such as inhaling mephitic vapors). In order to evoke chthonic entities, priests would fall asleep inside either a tomb or cave, and thereby receive visions from the dead.[159] Acheron's earliest literary connection with a necromanteion in Thesprotia, Epirus is attested by Herodotus, the fifth century B.C. Greek historian. Herodotus gives us the sole account of the sixth century B.C. Spartan regent Periander of Corinth, who was in control from 625 to 585 B.C.,[160] and who famously consulted a necromanteion by the River Acheron in order to appease the restless ghost of his wife, Melissa. Herodotus describes the event as such:

> "Periander had sent messengers to the Oracle of the Dead on the river Acheron in Thesprotia to enquire concerning a deposit that a friend had left, but Melissa, in an apparition, said that she would tell him nothing, nor reveal where the deposit lay, for she was cold and naked. The garments, she said, with which Periander had buried with her had never been burnt, and were of no use to her….[3] When this message was brought back to Periander…immediately after the message he made a proclamation that all the Corinthian women should come out into the temple of Hera. They then came out as to a festival, wearing their most beautiful garments, and Periander set his guards there and stripped them all alike, ladies and serving-women, and heaped all the clothes in a pit, where, as he prayed to Melissa, he burnt them. [4] When he had done this and sent a second message, the ghost of Melissa told him where the deposit of the friend had been laid.[5]"[161]

Richard Stoneman further explains that Periander sent his enquiry about his missing money to Thesprotia's oracle, because that was the most significant site associated with the cult of the dead.[162] The priests made contact with Melissa's ghost, who scorned Periander because he had kept her funeral robes, rather than burning them during her funeral rites, which left her cold and naked in the dank gloom of Hades. Only after the tyrant had made offerings to Melissa of the festival garments of the Corinthian women did the ghost of his wife finally impart to the

[158] Pfanz et al, 2014: 95.
[159] Ogden, 2004: 11.
[160] Bernstein, 2020: 94.
[161] Hdt. 5.92G.
[162] Stoneman, 2011: 70.

necromanteion's priests where the extra money had been hidden. Though Herodotus gives no indication of the means by which Melissa's ghost was summoned, the most important detail to mark is the fact that it was the *priests* who communicated directly with the ghosts, not visiting client consulters who needed to be tricked with elaborate smoke and mirror crane effigies, as posited by Dakaris.[163]

The necromanteion was still active in Herodotus' day, though by the time Pausanias made passing mention of it in the second century AD., the Thesprotian necromanteion "of old"[164] was already defunct. Though this matches the date of Dakaris' necromanteion having been destroyed by the Romans in 168 B.C., the timing is coincidental at best. However, what is perhaps the strongest evidence of a chthonic cult's possible presence at the site of Dakaris necromanteion also ties back to the Peloponnese, at the time when Periander was consulting at Herodotus' Thesprotian oracle of the dead.

3.3.1 The Persephone Figurines

During Dakaris' excavation of one of the six rooms immediately adjoining the central hall, he found a deposit of six terracotta figurines representing the goddess Persephone, wearing the distinctive *polos* headdress from her standard iconography (Fig. 18).[165] In the same room, a terracotta figure of the hellhound Cerberus was also found, along with fragments of black and red-figured pottery. Dakaris dated the pottery to the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. respectively, with the Persephone figures themselves dating "to about the middle of the sixth century, the time

[163] Ogden, 2001: 177.
[164] Paus. 9.30.6.
[165] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 92.

of Periander."[166] What is more, Daniel Ogden points out in passing that the pottery Dakaris found was made in Corinth, not Epirus.[167] This is noteworthy probably because of its relevance counterarguments to Dakaris' theories about Epirus having originally been a colony of Elis, the Peloponnesian city-state that included Olympia, the site of ancient Greece's Olympic Games.

Figure 9: Terracotta statuette of Persephone. Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 91.

In his geography of Greece, Pausanias doubled down on his aforementioned theory that poplar trees and Thesprotia's River Acheron were connected, when he described the cult rituals of the Eleans. Pausanias surmised that "the Eleans are wont to use for the sacrifices to Zeus…preferring the white poplar, I think, simply and solely because Herakles brought it into [southern] Greece from Thesprotia…[when] Heracles sacrificed to Zeus at Olympia."[168] However, archaeologist Adolfo J. Domínguez disagreed with Dakaris' theory, and found that though there is "no proof of colonial foundation of this nature in all of Epirus…there is some strong and consistent archaeological evidence that confirms the presence of Corinthian colonies in the area."[169] Indeed, it bears noting that one of Persephone's most significant cult centers was in Corinth.[170] Nevertheless, Daniel Ogden admits that the Persephone statuettes in Dakaris' sixth-century deposit "give pause for thought, but she was in any case the local goddess, and I do not deny that the real nekuomanteion was somewhere close,"[171] as we have

[166] Caskey and Dakaris, 1962: 92.
[167] Ogden, 2004, 55.
[168] Paus. 5.14.2.
[169] Dominguez, 2017: 80.
[170] Dimakis, 2015: 33.
[171] Ogden, 2004: 20.

already seen from Herodotus' account, and the connections made in Chapter 2 between Thesprotia and Molossus being part of a greater regional tradition dedicated to Persephone and Hades, rulers of the underworld.

3.4 The "Necromanteion" Debunked

As early as the 1970s, further skepticism about Dakaris' Epirote archaeological site drew several archaeologists to reevaluate Dakaris' finds. With all of the evidence taken into account, various archaeologists have since resolved that the site he had discovered was not a necromanteion at all, but rather, was a defensive keep.[172] The central hall is actually all that remains of what was once a two-story tower before the site's destruction in 168 B.C., the hall's 11-foot thick walls used for the tower's support, rather than as hidey-holes for priests to rig cranes and dummies.

1n 1979, German archaeologist Dietwulf Baatz published his analysis of the stone weights and metal points, wheels, and ratchets Dakaris believed to be part of dummy contraptions to fool visitors into thinking they were seeing ghosts. Baatz determined that the iron and bronze pieces were actually part of third century B.C. missiles and catapults (Fig. 19), to which "Dakaris accepted the identification of the bronze rings as catapult parts, but…still considered them pieces of a lifting device for images of the dead, implying that they had served both functions,"[173] and that they must have

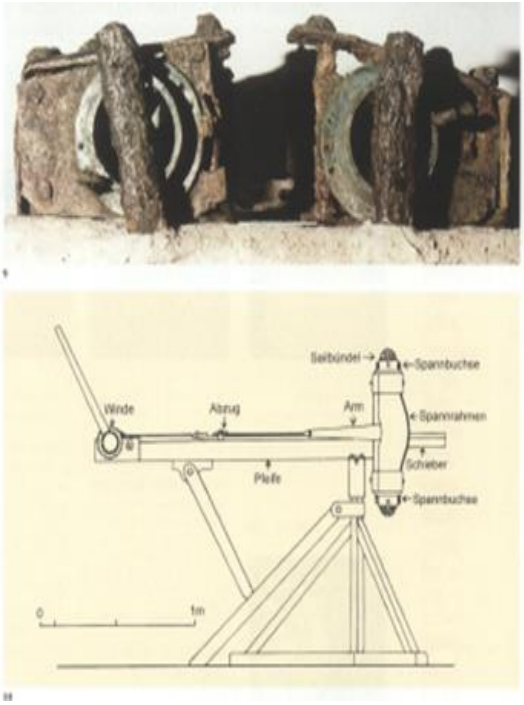

Figure 19: Metal pieces and catapult. Baatz, 1999: 155.

[172] Ogden, 2004: 21.
[173] Wiseman, 1998: 15.

been "reused for his crane."[174] The catapults, iron weapons and farming implements were not for religious use at all, but were identified instead as part of the military defense of this fortified farmstead and its central tower keep, not sanctuary. Additionally, Daniel Ogden argued that the rooms with stores of food, beverages, and burnt faunal remains were merely part of the provisions kept to withstand a siege, seeing Dakaris' subterranean crypt into Hades as little more than a cellar or cistern.[175] The hallucinogenic beans and legumes were further studied, and it was reasoned that "the toxicity of lupine seeds is mitigated by boiling them in water,"[176] to be eaten as a dietary staple, not to induce visions in dreams.

3.4.1 The Site Today

Despite the site by the River Acheron having been debunked as a necromanteion from Homeric lore, Dakaris' sensational find sparked what is still a thriving tourist industry in Thesprotia. Boatmen dress as Charon, and "ferried tourists from Ammoudhia upstream to visit the Oracle of the Dead."[177] To this day, the Acheron Necromanteion is open to the public as an attraction for sightseers who want to walk the halls of the house of Hades. However, this has drawn the censure of some scholars, who feel that, in light of its identification as a fortified farmstead, Epirus' cultural authorities should take more serious proactive steps to better inform the public of the site's change in status, and change the name to something more appropriate and accurate to its true function as a fortress, not as a necromanteion that was part of a chthonic cult sanctuary (Fig. 20).

[174] Ogden, 2004: 21.
[175] Ogden, 2004: 21.
[176] Wiseman, 1998: 17.
[177] Wiseman, 1998: 14.

Figure 20: The site still advertised as the so-called "necromanteion" in 2012. Flickr.

Greek archaeologist Eleni Kotjabopoulou is particularly critical of Epirus' Ioannina Archaeological Museum, which is in charge of safekeeping, exhibiting, and promoting the site itself, and the artifacts on display. In a 2018 paper challenging the myths propagated by museum institutions, Kotjabopoulou argues that a radical re-assessment is needed for the so-called "necromanteion." In the wake of modern Greek nationalism and the construction of a core national identity, ancient ruins and artifacts are crucial memoranda that connect the land, people, and culture. As Kotjabopoulou notes, the Acheron Necromanteion is a "strong asset in the construction of the local narrative,"[178] not only providing a tangible link to Greece's Homeric past, but also incorporating Epirus into that lauded history, raising it from relative obscurity in Greece's underdeveloped rural northwest to become the focal point of a reinvigorated tourist industry.[179] At the site and its related museum exhibits and public attractions, visitors continue to be willfully misled into participating in the perpetuation of wrong information, which

[178] Kotjabopoulou, 2018: 34.
[179] Kotjabopoulou, 2018: 34.

Kotjabopoulou's paper deems as everything but an exploitative abuse of scholastic knowledge and governmental authority.

In light of controversy surrounding the site's status, some small steps were made. The legends on the site's visitor maps and brochures have been updated, omitting Dakaris' original religiously orientated labels for the "main temple," "rooms of preparation" and the like.[180] But its re-identification as a fortified farmstead is only mentioned as barely more than a cursory footnote. Despite these strides, the official name of the site has not been changed, and is still marked as such on everything from readily accessible public databases to maps (Fig. 21). Kotjabopoulou affirms that so much more still needs to be done to overcome the obstinate inflexibility of institutionalized dogmas that use and abuse the past to its own ends, whereby knowledge is "offered as an authoritative, ready to be accepted wholesome, static product and value, [that] remains a remarkably resistant tradition."[181]

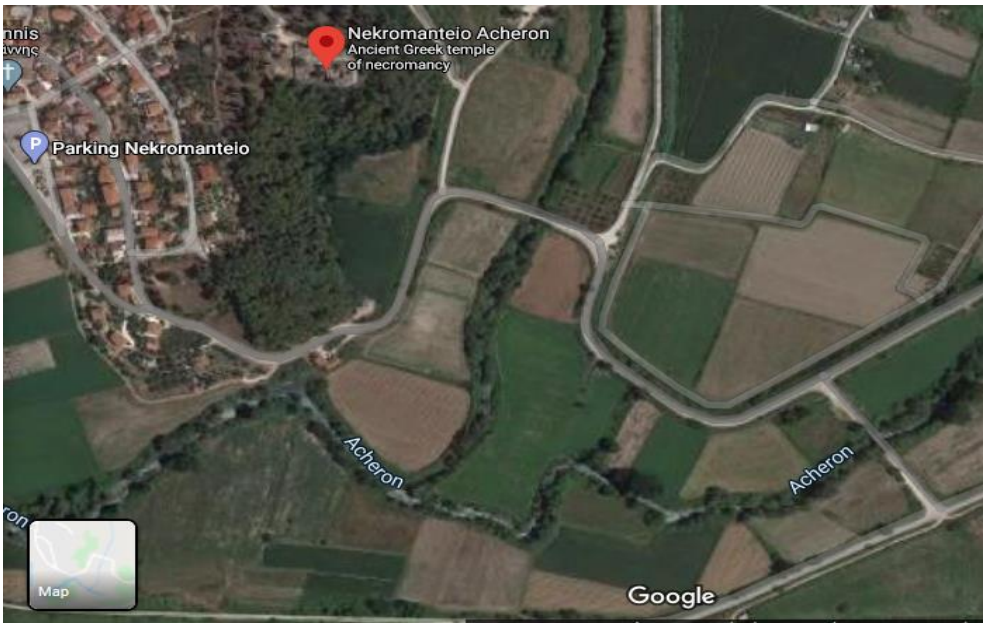

Figure 21: Dakaris' necromanteion, and the Acheron River. Image captured with Google Maps, 2020.

[180] Kotjabopoulou, 2018: 40.
[181] Kotjabopoulou, 2018: 39.

4 IN CLOSING

Landscapes are intimately, integrally and often inextricably linked to local cultural identity and cult traditions. National narratives often embrace the natural environment and the landscape as the setting of key historical, legendary, folkloric, and mythic events from bygone ages, that nevertheless continue to have deep and resonating meaning for both the region's inhabitants, and the interconnected world at large. In the case of the "Acheron Necromanteion," the fortified farmstead was misidentified as an oracle of the dead because it was located at the confluence of two rivers long believed to be part of Hadean geography, Acheron and Cocytus, as featured in Homer's *Odyssey*. Archaeological evidence supported this tradition, as Sotirios Dakaris did indeed find figurines of the goddess Persephone, Queen of the underworld, which correlated with historical accounts describing visits to a necromanteion in that area. However, though Dakaris' excavations in the 1950s-1970s disappointingly turned out to not be an oracle of the dead after all, archaeologist Eleni Kotjabopoulou rightly states that it cannot be denied that Dakaris contributed enormously to the continued research, rescue, and preservation of Greek antiquities; bolstering and promoting local Epirote exposure and popularity to the world; and inspiring revitalized interest in ancient Greek religion.[182] To this day, the case of the Acheron Necromanteion remains an important example of how landscapes can inspire lore, knowledge, and understandings about the past, present, and even future, based on the lasting associations between Greece's natural topographical features and its chthonic cult traditions.

[182] Kotjabopoulou, 2018: 28.

5 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Aeschylus. *Aeschylus, with an English translation by Herbert Weir Smyth, Ph. D. in two volumes. 1. Seven Against Thebes*. Herbert Weir Smyth, Ph. D. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Aesch.%20Seven (accessed August 2, 2020).

Anonymous. *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White*. Homeric Hymns. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1914.

Apollodorus. *Apollodorus, The Library, with an English Translation by Sir James George Frazer, F.B.A., F.R.S. in 2 Volumes. Includes Frazer's notes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1921), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Apollod (accessed August 2, 2020).

Aristophanes. *The Frogs*, by a First Classman of Balliol College. 2d ed. Oxford: A.T. Shrimpton and Son, etc., etc., 1895.

Butler, Samuel. *The Odyssey: Rendered into English Prose for the Use of those who cannot Read the Original*. Longmans, Green, and Company 89 Paternoster Row, 1900.

Callimachus. *Hecale.* Attalus. http://attalus.org/poetry/callimachus3.html (accessed August 2, 2020).

Euripides. *Euripides,* with an English translation by David Kovacs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Eur.%20Alc (accessed August 2, 2020).

Campbell, David A., ed. *Greek Lyric: Stesichorus, Ibycus, Simonides, and Others*. Vol. 3. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), Loeb Classical Library. https://www.loebclassics.com/view/lasus-fragments/1991/pb_LCL476.307.xml (accessed August 2, 2020).

Hobbes, Thomas. *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury. Thucydides*. tr. Thomas Hobbes. (London. Bohn, 1843), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Thuc (accessed August 2, 2020).

Lattimore, Richmond, ed. *The Iliad of Homer*. CUP Archive, 1962.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses.* Arthur Golding (London. W. Seres, 1567), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Ov.%20Met. (accessed August 2, 2020).

Pausanias. *Description of Greece with an English Translation by W.H.S. Jones, Litt.D., and H.A. Ormerod, M.A., in 4 Volumes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1918), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Paus (accessed August 2, 2020).

Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 1 translated by Harold North Fowler; Introduction by W.R.M. Lamb* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1966), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plat.%20Phaedo (accessed August 2, 2020).

Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 5 & 6 translated by Paul Shorey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1969), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plat.%20Rep (accessed August 2, 2020).

Pliny the Elder. *The Natural History, Pliny the Elder*. John Bostock, M.D., F.R.S. H.T. Riley, Esq., B.A. (London: Taylor and Francis, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street, 1855), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plin.%20Nat (accessed August 2, 2020).

Plutarch. *Lives, Volume I: Theseus and Romulus. Lycurgus and Numa. Solon and Publicola.* Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Loeb Classical Library 46. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), LacusCurtius. http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Theseus*.html (accessed August 2, 2020).

Sandys, John Edwin. *The Odes of Pindar including the Principal Fragments*. ed. by T.E. Page *and W.H.D.* Rouse Loeb Classical Library 79. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1961.

Siculus, Diodorus. *Library of History, Volume I: Books 1-2.34.* Translated by C. H. Oldfather. Loeb Classical Library 279. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), LacusCurtius. http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/home.html (accessed August 2, 2020).

Seaton, Robert Cooper, ed. *Apollonius Rhodius, The Argonautica*. Vol. 1. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), Sacred Texts. https://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/argo/argo21.htm (accessed August 2, 2020).

Strabo. ed. H. L. Jones, *The Geography of Strabo* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1924), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Strab (accessed August 2, 2020).

Fairclough, Henry Rushton, and Seldon Lester Brown, eds. *Virgil's Aeneid* (BH Sanborn, 1914), Theoi. https://www.theoi.com/Text/VirgilAeneid6.html (accessed August 2, 2020).

Way, Arthur Sanders, ed. *The Fall of Troy*. Vol. 19. Heinemann Young Books, 1913.

Xenophon. *Xenophon in Seven Volumes, 3.* Carleton L. Brownson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; William Heinemann, Ltd., London, 1922), Perseus Digital Library. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Xen.%20Anab (accessed August 2, 2020).

Secondary Sources

Baatz, Dietwulf. "Wehrhaftes Wohnen: Ein Befestigter Hellenistischer Adelssitz Bei Ephyra (Nordgriechenland)." *Antike Welt* 30, no. 2 (1999): 151-55.

Baziotopoulou-Valavani, Effie. "A mass burial from the cemetery of Kerameikos." *Excavating Classical Culture: Recent Archaeological Discoveries in Greece*. Beazley, 2002: 187-201.

Bernstein, 2020, Alan E. *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020.

Besonen, Mark R., George Rapp, and Zhichun Jing. "The Lower Acheron River Valley: Ancient Accounts and the Changing Landscape." *Hesperia Supplements* 32 (2003): 199-263.

Brockliss, William. Homeric Imagery and the Natural Environment. Hellenic Studies Series 82. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013.

Byvanck, A. W. "The Development of Attic Art during the Transitional Period from the 6th to the 5th Cent. B.C." *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, 1, no. 3 (1948): 161-97.

Callan, Hugh. “Albania and the Albanians in 1898.” *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 15, no. 7 (1899): 337-350.

Caskey, L. D. "Odysseus and Elpenor on a Pelike in Boston." *American Journal of Archaeology* 38, no. 3 (1934): 339-340.

Caskey, John L., and Sotirios I. Dakaris. "The Dark Palace of Hades." *Archaeology* 15, no. 2 (1962): 85-93.

Cook, Arthur Bernard. “The European Sky-God.” *Folklore* 15, no. 3 (1904): 264-315.

Dimakis, Nikolas. “Ancient Greek Deathscapes.” *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 27-41.

Domínguez, Adolfo J. “Constructing an Eleian Ethnic Identity in Southern Epirus: The Inscription of Cassope (Seg 36, 555) Reconsidered.” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 204 (2017): 79-88.

Fairbanks, Arthur. “The Chthonic Gods of Greek Religion.” *The American Journal of Philology* 21, no. 3 (1900): 241-59.

Garry, Jane, and Hasan M. El-Shamy. *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook.* Routledge, 2017.

Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes. 1942.* New York: Back Bay (1969).

Hooper, Anthony. “Extensions for the House of Hades.” In *Reflections on Plato’s Poetics: Essays from Beijing*, edited by Benitez Rick and Wang Keping. Australia: Academic Printing and Publishing, 2016: 55-64.

Kotjabopoulou, Eleni. “Challenging Myths in the Museum: The Acheron Oracle of The Dead in the Ioannina Archaeological Museum.” Museumedu, Autumn 2018: 23-49.

Lewis, Charles T. Ph.D, and Charles Short, LL.D. *A Latin Dictionary. Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin dictionary. revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by. Charlton T. Lewis, Ph.D. and. Charles Short, LL.D* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), Perseus Digital Library. http://perseus.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.0:489.lewisandshort (accessed August 2, 2020)

Merker, Gloria S. *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: Terracotta Figurines of the Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods*. Vol. 18. ASCSA, 2000.

Ogden, Daniel. *Greek and Roman Necromancy*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Ogden, Daniel. "The Ancient Greek Orackles of the Dead." *Acta Classica* 44 (2001): 167-95.

Pfanz, Hardy, Galip Yüce, Francesco D'Andria, Walter D'Alessandro, Benny Pfanz, Yiannis Manetas, and George Papatheodorou. "The Ancient Gates to Hell and their Relevance to Geogenic CO2." *History of Toxicology and Environmental Health. Toxicology in Antiquity* 1 (2014): 92-117.

Robert, Carl. *Die Nekyia des Polygnot*. Vol. 16. M. Niemeyer, 1892.

Scholl and Mannack, 2010, Andreas, and Thomas Mannack. "Hades and Elysion: Images of the Afterlife in Classical Athens." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement* (2010): 71-96.

Segal, Alan. *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*. Image, 2010.

Sinn, Ulrich. "Greek Sanctuaries as Places of Refuge." In *Greek Sanctuaries*, edited by Robin Hagg and Nanno Marinatos. Routledge, 2002: 83-100.

Skene, James Henry. "Remarkable Localities on the Coast of Epirus." *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 18 (1848): 139-144.

Stansbury-O'Donnell, Mark D. “Polygnotos's Nekyia: A Reconstruction and Analysis.” *American Journal of Archaeology* 94, no. 2 (1990): 213-35.

Stevens, Susan T. “Charon's Obol and Other Coins in Ancient Funerary Practice.” *Phoenix* 45, no. 3 (1991): 215-29.

Sullivan, Francis A. “Charon, the Ferryman of the Dead.” *The Classical Journal* 46, no. 1 (1950): 11-17.

Vermeule, Emily. *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*. Vol. 46. Univ of California Press, 1979.

Von Bothmer, Dietrich. “Greek Vase Painting: An Introduction.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 31, no. 1 (1972): 3-9.

Wagenvoort, Hendrick. “The Journey of the Souls of the Dead to the Isles of the Blessed.” *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, 24, no. 2 (1971): 113-61.

Wiseman, James. “Insight: Rethinking the ‘Halls of Hades.’” *Archaeology* 51, no. 3 (1998): 12-18.