

## Orpheus

Orpheus was believed to be one of the chief poets and musicians of antiquity, and the inventor or perfector of the lyre. Orpheus' father was a Thracian king; his mother was the muse Calliope.

### Argonautic expedition

Orpheus joined the expedition of the Argonauts. The centaur Chiron had warned the Argonaut leader Jason that only with the aid of Orpheus would they be able to navigate past the Sirens unscathed. The Sirens lived on three small, rocky islands called Sirenum scopuli and played irresistibly beautiful songs that enticed sailors and their ships to the islands' craggy shoals, where the ships would be wrecked and the sailors killed by the sirens. However, when Orpheus heard the sirens, he drew his lyre and played music more beautiful than theirs, drowning out their alluring but deadly song.

### Death of Eurydice

The most famous story in which Orpheus figures is that of his wife Eurydice (also known as Agriope, the one with the wild face!). While fleeing from Aristaeus, Eurydice ran into a nest of snakes which bit her fatally on her legs. Distraught, Orpheus played such sad songs and sang so mournfully that all the nymphs and gods wept. On their advice, Orpheus travelled to the underworld and by his music softened the hearts of Hades and Persephone, who agreed to allow Eurydice to return with him to earth on one condition: he should walk in front of her and not look back until he had reached the upper world. In his anxiety he broke his promise, and Eurydice vanished again from his sight.

### Death

According to some versions of the story Orpheus forswore the love of women after the death of Eurydice and took only youths as his lovers; he was reputed to be the one who introduced pederasty to the Thracians, teaching them to "love the young in the flower of their youth".

According to a Late Antique summary of Aeschylus's lost play *Bassarids*, Orpheus at the end of his life disdained the worship of all gods save the sun, whom he called Apollo. One early morning he went to the Oracle of Dionysus (there are ongoing discussions whether this is Perperikon in Bulgaria or Mount Pangaion) to salute his god at dawn, but was torn to death by Thracian Maenads for not honoring his previous patron, Dionysus. Ovid (*Metamorphoses* XI) also recounts that the Thracian Maenads, Dionysus' followers, angry for having been spurned by Orpheus in favor of "tender boys," first threw sticks and stones at him as he played, but his music was so beautiful even the rocks and branches refused to hit him. Enraged, the Maenads tore him to pieces during the frenzy of their Bacchic orgies. Later, the story would sometimes be seen from a Christian moralist angle: in Albrecht Dürer's drawing the ribbon high in the tree is lettered *Orfeus der erst puseran* ("Orpheus, the first sodomite").

His head and lyre, still singing mournful songs, floated down the swift Hebrus to the Mediterranean shore. There, the winds and waves carried them on to the Lesbos shore, where the inhabitants buried his head and a shrine was built in his honour near Antissa; .The lyre was carried to heaven by the Muses, and was placed among the stars. The Muses also gathered up the fragments of his body and buried them at Leibethra below Mount Olympus, where the nightingales sang over his grave. His soul returned to the underworld, where he was re-united at last with his beloved Eurydice.

Bulgarian archeologists have discovered, near Tatul, an ancient Thracian tomb that some have described as "the tomb of Orpheus".