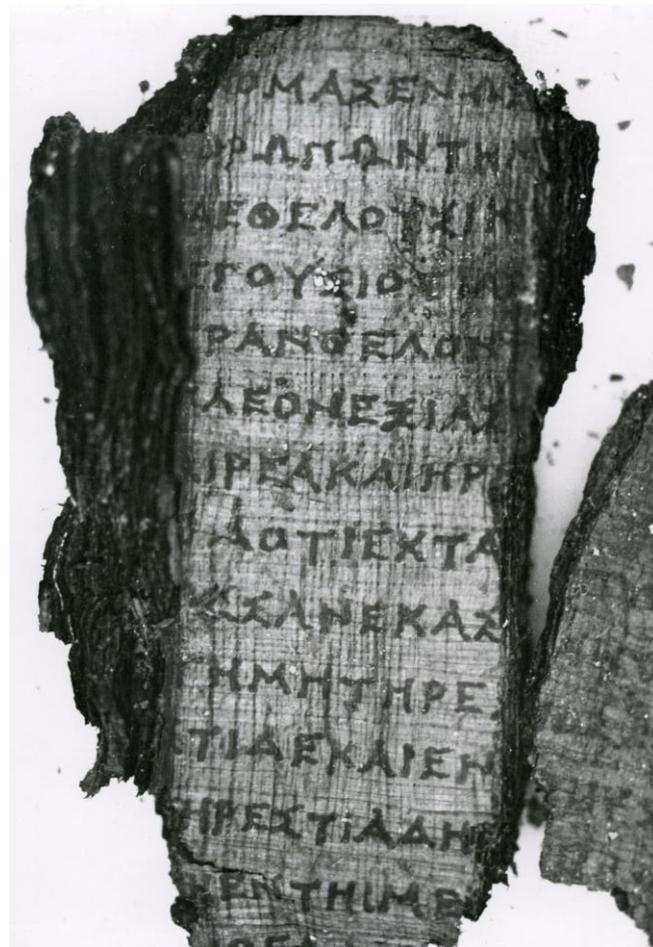


Nomination form  
International Memory of the World Register

**THE DERVENI PAPYRUS**



**The oldest ‘book’ of Europe**

2014-53

# Nomination form International Memory of the World Register

## The Derveni Papyrus

### 1.0 Summary (max 200 words)

The Derveni Papyrus is the oldest known European book. Since its discovery in 1962 it has been treated as the most significant philological find of the 20th century. The script of the Papyrus can be dated between 340-320 BC, but the book copied in it was much older, written probably around 420-410 BC. The dialect used is Attic with Ionic features or Ionic with an Attic overlay. The retrieved text consists of 26 columns and is divided in two parts: The first part (columns I-VI) describes eschatological religious practices related to the final destiny of the soul after death. In the Column VII, which serves as a bridge connecting the two parts, the author addresses prospective initiates. In the second and more extensive part (columns VIII-XXVI) the author gives an allegorical commentary on a hexametric poem ascribed to the mythical singer and sage Orpheus, which was used in ritual by the initiates, the target audience of the author. The Orphic poem, essentially a theogony, is interpreted by the author as a coded cosmogony. The Derveni Papyrus is of immense importance for the study of Greek religion and philosophy, since it proves the early dating of the Orphic poems, which had been widely doubted in the past and offers a distinctive version of Presocratic physics. The text of the first book of western tradition has a global significance, since it reflects universal human values: the need to explain the world, the desire to belong to a human society with known rules and the agony to confront the end of life.

### 2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

Hellenic Committee for the UNESCO Programme 'Memory of the World'.  
Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki

### 2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

The Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki is the custodian of the item nominated for inclusion in the Memory of the World Register and is in consulting relation with the Hellenic MoW Committee.

### 2.3 Contact person(s) (to provide information on nomination)

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Prof. Panayotis Nicolopoulos  
President of the Hellenic MoW Committee  
Honorary Director of the National Library of Greece

Maria Ekaterini Papachristopoulou-Tzitzikosta  
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### 2.4 Contact details

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### **3.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage**

#### **3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated**

**If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should be given**

**THE DERVENI PAPYRUS, THE OLDEST 'BOOK' OF EUROPE**

**Institution: ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF THESSALONIKI, GREECE**

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#### **3.4 History/provenance**

In 1962, in Derveni, about 10 kilometers northwest from Thessaloniki (Central Macedonia-Greece), seven tombs of the late 4<sup>th</sup>-early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC were discovered, bringing to light some of the most important artefacts known from ancient Macedonia. Among them was the Derveni krater, a unique bronze relief vessel, considered as the masterpiece of the metalware of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. The tombs were part of the rich cemetery of the ancient city of Lete.

Tomb A, the first of the unearthed tombs, had a size of 2.07 X 0.90 m. It was constructed by large poros blocks laid in isodomic masonry. The interior of its walls was coated with white plaster, decorated with a garland of blue leaves and berries on a red ground. The tomb belonged to a man and contained more than one hundred artefacts. Close to the center of the tomb were found: a bronze volute krater with cremated remains wrapped in a cloth; parts of two wreaths, one gold with oak leaves, the other with gilded clay berries and leaves. The tomb also contained a number of vases made of metal (basins, jugs, situlae etc), clay, alabaster and glass, metal strigils, parts of a breastplate, fragments of ivory objects, necklace beads, pigments and a number of buttons and sheets from the decoration of the clothes of the deceased.

On top of the covering slabs the remnants of the funeral pyre were found. Scattered among the ashes the remains of the couch on which the Macedonian nobleman was cremated were discovered, along with a pair of greaves, spearheads and spearbutts, sheets from a breastplate or shield, parts of a harness, parts of a wreath, pottery sherds, two glass eyes from an ivory sculpture, parts of wooden furniture, small boxes and fragments of their decoration and parts of at least six clay column capitals. The capitals were part of the wooden orthogonal structure on which the couch was laid for the pyre.

At the northwestern corner of the pyre debris and inside a layer of burnt mud stood out a strange roll with a height of only 9.4 cm. After removing the clay, archaeologists were astonished by what turned out to be one of the rarest types of finds in Greece: an ancient Greek papyrus, preserved due to its partial carbonization by the funeral pyre.

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### **4.0 Legal information**

#### **4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)**

Name	Address
Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki	M. Andronikou 6, 546 21, Thessaloniki, GR <a href="http://www.amth.gr">www.amth.gr</a>

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Telephone	Facsimile	Email
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### 4.3 Legal status

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The Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki is a state museum of the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports. It has been an autonomous unit since 2001.

The protection of the Papyrus is regulated by the Greek Law 3028/2002 on the Protection of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in General.

### 4.4 Accessibility

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a. The Derveni Papyrus is displayed in the permanent exhibition *The Gold of Macedon* in a showcase designed according to the guidelines of UNESCO, with special care for the control of temperature and the humidity. The fragments of the Papyrus are in sealed glass frames, from which they cannot be removed.

The Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki ([www.amth.gr](http://www.amth.gr)) occupies a distinct place not only on Greece's, but also on Europe's cultural map. It is the largest museum in Northern Greece and one of the most important nationwide. Its collections cover all chronological periods from prehistory to late antiquity and derive from all over Northern Greece. They include unique masterpieces of Greek art, the most famous of all being the Derveni Crater. In 1979, one year after professor Manolis Andronikos discovered the tomb of the great Macedonian King Philip II in Vergina, the temporary exhibition of the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki entitled *Treasures of Macedonia* was granted the first prize of the European Museum Forum. The Exhibition comprised findings from the Royal Tombs of Vergina and other sites in Macedonia.

The Museum offers to its visitors the chance to read, both in hard copy and in .pdf format, all the necessary information in many languages, since it publishes brochures in 21 different languages, including the Braille system, which constitutes a pioneering initiative reflecting its policy on accessibility. The Museum is equipped with wheelchair ramps and elevators, which further complements this policy and ensures full access to its 9 permanent exhibitions. Furthermore, the exhibition *The Gold of Macedon*, which comprises the Derveni Papyrus, will be equipped, within 2015, with Braille labeling.

The A.M.Th., from 2006 onwards, organizes temporary exhibitions and undertakes activities focusing on communication with the public and more specifically on educational programs and cultural events (antiquarian, musical, literary and artistic) either organized by the Museum itself or hosted in co-operation with other important institutions. Likewise, special care is provided for underprivileged groups, such as Roma, immigrants, people with disabilities and special needs, drug abusers, people with mental health issues and prisoners kept in the prisons of Thessaloniki, a policy which demonstrates the Museum's commitment to the promotion of UNESCO's Education and Information for All Programs.

Apart from these initiatives, it is worth mentioning that the Museum's permanent exhibition is entirely based on ICT technologies targeting to an interactive experience; moreover, there is free wireless internet access within the Museum's premises and its webpage is up-to-date and user-friendly; two mobile applications (for android and i-phone) are available through the Museum's webpage; an Auditorium with modern audiovisual equipment (Capacity: 120 persons), as well as two halls reserved for hosting various events, are also available.

As a consequence, the aforementioned policy framework ensures high visibility and full accessibility of both the Museum and, especially, of the Derveni Papyrus.

b. Following the publication, in 2006, of the Greek text of the Papyrus (Kouremenos, Th., G. M. Parássoglou, & K. Tsantsanoglou, (eds), *The Derveni Papyrus. Edited with Introduction and Commentary*. Studi e Testi per il Corpus dei Papiri Filosofici Greci e Latini 13, Firenze 2006), the Center for Hellenic Studies of the University of Harvard made the text available online:

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#### 4.5 Copyright status

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Describe the copyright status of the item(s) / collection

The copyright belongs to the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki.

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#### 5.0 Assessment against the selection criteria

##### 5.1 Authenticity.

The authenticity and the provenance of the Papyrus is beyond any doubt, as it was found in 1962 during an excavation conducted by Professor Petros Themelis, then an archaeologist of the Greek Ministry of Culture. The results of the excavation have been published in 1997.

##### 5.2 World significance

Among the valuable literary Greek manuscripts of ancient times, the Derveni Papyrus holds a unique position: It is the oldest book ever found in Europe, it has a proven beyond doubt provenance and an archaeological context. Its content is of paramount importance for understanding Greek religion and philosophy of the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The Derveni Papyrus is not connected only with Greek philosophical thought but also with Persian theology. In column VI, two types of ritual performers are mentioned: the *mystai* and the *magoi*. The *Magoi* teach the religious practices to the *mystai* (initiates). The identity of the *magoi* is not clear. Some scholars believe that the *magoi* mentioned in the text are the well-known Persian caste of Zoroastrian priests or their Greek followers. Other specialists see in the Persian word *magoi* another word for charlatans or orphic priests. Although there is still controversy on the subject, the use of a word of Persian origin for a ritual performer shows that eastern doctrines influenced Greek Philosophy, especially the Ionian school.

Greek and Roman written sources narrate many stories on Orpheus, the most famous singer of antiquity: His mother was the Muse of epic poetry, Calliope from Pieria and his father was the Thracian king Oeagrus or the God of the sun and music, Apollo. With the lyre as his weapon, Orpheus followed the Argonauts. When his wife, Eurydice died bitten by a snake, Orpheus descended into the Underworld to bring her back to the land of the living. Persephone agreed to let Eurydice to return back on the condition that Orpheus would not look back at her until they were both under the light of the sun. But Orpheus turned back and so Eurydice returned to the Underworld. After that Orpheus went mad. Different accounts exist about the death of the poet. According to one of them maenads, devotees of Dionysus, attacked and killed Orpheus. His head and lyre were cast into the river Hebros and landed on the isle of Lesbos. According to other sources Dionysos or Zeus killed Orpheus, or the latter killed himself because he failed saving Eurydice. From Plato (*Republic* 10.620a) we learn that the soul of Orpheus selected the life of a swan and from Pausanias that the grave of Orpheus was in Dion (9.30.9-11). Orpheus, the son of a Thracian King and of a Muse from Macedonia (Pieria) is closely connected with both these areas. Most of the ancient writers agree that Orpheus was of Thracian descent and ancient iconography usually depicts him with Thracian outfit. If Thrace was the homeland of Orpheus, Macedonia was one of the places where his cult flourished, combined with the cult of Dionysos. It is not without significance that Macedonia was also the place where Orpheus was buried. The sympotic vessels from the rich graves in Macedonia, the wall paintings of the Macedonian tombs, the orphic-bacchic gold tablets found in graves, all point to the direction that a great part of the Macedonians, especially the members of the privileged upper class, were familiar with the orphic-dionysaic mysteries and tried to ensure through them a better life after death.

The official *editio princeps* of the Derveni Papyrus by Kyriakos Tsantsanoglou and George M. Parássoglou, with translation, papyrological apparatus, and photographs, and the first full commentary

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by Theokritos Kouremenos, has given to our knowledge about the Papyrus a secure textual foundation. But, as new technologies connected with photography and conservation are constantly improving, we cannot exclude the possibility that in the future more words from the text will be discerned. Therefore the possible disappearance or destruction of the Derveni Papyrus will constitute a very harmful impoverishment of the European cultural heritage. The example of the Herculaneum papyri is very didactic: almost two centuries after their discovery the multispectral imaging technology helped scholars to transcribe many texts. That proves beyond any doubt that items such as the Derveni Papyrus must be kept intact for future generations.

In 2013 on the occasion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art the Derveni Papyrus was exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki together with three art works of the contemporary Thessaloniki artist Dimitris Xonoglou. In this exhibition entitled *Mediterranean Palimpsestes. Three enigmas of decay and incorruption. An open dialogue between Dimitris Xonoglou and the Derveni Papyrus*, the artist was inspired by the universality of the Derveni Papyrus and created works that comment on the issue of decay and incorruption of both our external and internal world.

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### 5.3 Comparative criteria:

***Does the heritage meet any of the following tests? (It must meet at least one of them.)***

#### 1 Time

The book copied in the Derveni Papyrus was written in the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and offers to us the oldest orphic theogony and cosmogony that echoes the thought of great Ionian philosophers. For the Greek world the final decades of the 5<sup>th</sup> century were the end of the so called 'Golden Age', during which the Athenian democracy was established, masterpieces of art, drama and poetry were created and Greek philosophy flourished in an way unparalleled ever since.

#### 2 Place

The Derveni Papyrus contains crucial information about burial rites, the philosophical aspirations and generally about the spiritual climate in Macedonia, the Kingdom that flourished during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and gave birth to Alexander the Great, one of the most important figures in the history of Greece, Europe Asia and Africa.

We should not forget what Plutarch narrates that happened in the early spring of 334 BC, just before the expedition of Alexander the Great:

*Moreover, when he set out upon his expedition, it appears that there were many signs from heaven, and, among them, the image of Orpheus at Leibethra (it was made of cypress-wood) sweated profusely at about that time. Most people feared the sign, but Aristander bade Alexander be of good cheer, assured that he was to perform deeds worthy of song and story, which would cost poets and musicians much toil and sweat to celebrate.*

Plutarch, *Alexander*, 14

Translation: Bernadotte Perrin (Loeb Classical Library edition Cambridge, MA and London 1919)

The fact that the Papyrus was found in the tomb of a noble, which contained many rich burial offerings, allows us to set it in a burial context and to understand in depth the funeral customs of the Macedonians and the structure of their society. Although no other papyrus was ever found in a tomb in Macedonia, it is very interesting to mention here that a papyrus, interpreted usually in the ancient iconography as a symbol for someone with intellectual activities, is depicted in the wall paintings of three cist graves of Macedonia dated around the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (one in Derveni, one in Agios Athanasios and one in Pella).

#### 3 People

The first part of the Derveni papyrus is dedicated to the way people should treat dead souls. Present is

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here the universal fear of death and the response to it in a specific cultural context. The second part of the text, a theogony, with many features of a cosmogony, pictures clearly the way that a certain group of religious practitioners, the 'Orphics', tried to interpret the world and explain the genealogy of the Gods and the way that the world came in to existence. The effort to establish a theogony and a cosmogony based on mythological, natural, rational or scientific criteria is an element encountered in every human society from Antiquity up to today.

#### **4 Subject and theme**

Orpheus was a mythical figure, a poet and a great singer, whose name became attached to some of the most elusive cult rituals of antiquity. He taught a new religion based on the immortality of the soul and its journey after death. The followers of Orpheus did not eat meat and tried to achieve purity and pursue a peaceful life. In the Hellenistic and Imperial period Orpheus was thought to be the author of various theogonic poems titled "Hymns", "Sacred Stories" or "Sacred Discourses" (Ἱεροὶ Λόγοι). Orpheus' followers relied heavily on arcane books and special diets, both of which were unfamiliar to the mainstream of Greek religion, where "things done" (dromena) or rituals were more important than "things said" (legomena).

The enigmatic orphic poem cited in the Derveni Papyrus offers a distinctive version of Presocratic physics and many clues about the Parmenidian revolution in cosmology. It quotes Heraclitus of Ephesus and reveals his influence at several points. Its terminology shows a special connection to the Atomists, and especially to Leucippus, the forerunner of Democritus of Abdera. But it's most obvious debt is to the philosophical doctrines of Anaxagoras and his followers, notably Diogenes of Apollonia. The book copied in the Papyrus is probably a "vademecum", a handbook for the prospective initiates of the mystery cult which was thrown into the pyre to serve as evidence for the guardians of Hades. The allegorical method used in it was known to us only from much later texts. Also important is the emphasis of the text on monotheism, which was more usual in the fourth rather than in the fifth century BC.

Modern interest in mystery cults and more specifically in the Orphic tradition is based on the perception that Orphism was the basis for Christian Theology because of their common elements (monotheism, the survival of the soul after death, the special diets, the impurity of the mortals from which only believers are saved). Although current scholarship generally attributes the parallelisms between the orphic mysteries and Christian practices to the spiritual unity that began to emerge in the Mediterranean in the second century BC, it is obvious that any text related to orphism is an integral part of Christian and European cultural tradition.

#### **5 Form and style**

The retrieved text consists of 26 columns and is divided in two parts: The first part (columns I-VI) describes eschatological religious practices related to the final destiny of the soul after death. In Column VII, which serves as a bridge connecting the two parts, the author addresses prospective initiates. In the second and more extensive part (columns VIII-XXVI) the author gives an allegorical commentary on a hexametric poem ascribed to the mythical singer and sage Orpheus. Apart from the rarity of the legible ancient Greek papyri and the theological and philosophical importance of the content of the Derveni Papyrus, the text itself has a great linguistic value, as it combines the Ionic and the Attic dialect. The orphic poem is written in dactylic hexameter.

#### **6 Social/ spiritual/ community significance:**

Today, the Derveni Papyrus is not venerated as holy. But, as one of the greatest artefacts ever found in Macedonia, the Papyrus is part of the western cultural heritage and has an emotional hold on people that consider Greek thought as the basis on which the European civilization was founded.

### **6.0 Contextual information**

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## 6.1 Rarity

Very few Greek texts, apart from inscriptions on stone and graffiti, have been materially preserved from the archaic and classical centuries. In fact, most ancient texts disappeared before the end of Antiquity. Outstanding among the scanty finds are the orphic texts on gold plates found in Southern Italy, Thessaly, Macedonia and Crete, the Olbia bone-fragments and, of course, the Derveni Papyrus, which is the only item of this kind ever found in Greece in a condition that allows the reading of the text.. We must keep in mind that the Greek climate, unlike the climate in Egypt or Palestine, is unsuitable for the preservation of papyri.

## 6.2 Integrity

In total 266 fragments of the papyrus exist. Although a substantial part of the roll has been reconstructed (a total of 2.60 meters of roll, or 3 meters if the severely damaged first columns are included), both the papyrus and the book it presents have not been saved intact. First, because almost the entire bottom half of the roll was destroyed by the fire (preserved height of the roll: 9.4 cm.). A total of 26 columns of text have been reconstructed in various degrees, but only the upper part of each column is legible. Second, because the ending of the book is not preserved in the surviving end of the Derveni papyrus. Given that the commentary on the Orphic hymn is incomplete, it is clear that at least one more roll existed, in addition to the one discovered. Third, because the opening part of the book is also missing; we know this from the sparse Greek numbering of the columns, which exceeds our numbering by a factor of 30. Hence, our column V is numbered as 35 in the papyrus itself, which implies that 30 columns came before it. The roll discovered could not have possibly included those preceding columns. We are not certain whether or not the other rolls perished also in the pyre.

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