

The prose text of the Derveni Papyrus quotes from and usually offers comments on Heraclitus, Homer, an anonymous hymn, and, most extensively, a dactylic poem attributed to Orpheus, who is identified as the author of the "hymn" in col. 6. On archeological grounds, the papyrus was written before 330 BC, a likely date for the entombment and cremation of the body holding the papyrus in its hands. The date of composition could have been up to a century earlier, and of course any author cited therein would be still earlier, such as we know to be true of Homer and Heraclitus. I myself, in a not altogether small minority, favor a late fifth-century date for composition, which would entail that the poem the author cites without question as that of Orpheus was written probably no later than the mid-fifth century and possibly as early as the late sixth century.

However one thinks of this poem, as a hymn, a didactic poem, a hexameter epic, it thus becomes a significant addition to our poems of these sorts from this time period. Yet the now huge literature on the Derveni Papyrus focuses almost exclusively on its contribution to religion, especially ritual, its poetic nature being ignored. True, it is not the greatest of poems, but it does have its charms, as well as some textual problems that are best solved by considering it first as poetry. My proposal, then, for this panel is to discuss it as such, ignoring as much as possible its religious content. A new text, apparatus, and translation will be distributed.