

## “They Make Themselves Immortal”: Worship of the Great God at the Greek colony of Odessos

## 1. Herodotus 4.93-96

But before [Darius] came to the Ister he conquered first **the Getai, who believe in immortality. . . . And their belief in immortality holds that they do not die, but that he who is killed goes to Zalmoxis, a divinity**, whom some of them call Gebeleizis; and **at intervals of four years they send one of themselves, whomsoever the lot may select, as a messenger to Zalmoxis, charging him with such requests as they have on each occasion.** They send him thus: certain of them who are appointed for this have three javelins, and others meanwhile take hold on both sides of him who is being sent to Zalmoxis, both by his hands and his feet, and first they swing him up, then throw him into the air so as to fall upon the spear-points: and if when he is pierced through he is killed, they think that the god is favourable to them; but if he is not killed, they find fault with the messenger himself, calling him a worthless man, and then having found fault with him they send another: and they give him the charge beforehand, while he is yet alive. These same Thracians also shoot arrows up towards the sky when thunder and lightning come, and use threats to the god, **not believing that there exists any other god except their own.**

This Zalmoxis I hear from the Hellenes who dwell about the Hellespont and the Pontus, was a man, and he became a slave in Samos, and was in fact a slave of Pythagoras the son of Mnesarchos. Then having become free he gained great wealth, and afterwards returned to his own land. Since the Thracians are both primitive and rather simple-minded, this Zalmoxis, being acquainted with the Ionian way of living and with manners more complex than the Thracians were used to see, and since he had associated with Hellenes (and not only that but with Pythagoras, not the least able philosopher of the Hellenes), **he prepared a banqueting-hall, where he received and feasted the chief men of the tribe and instructed them meanwhile that neither he himself nor his guests nor their descendants in succession after them would die. They would come to a place where they would live forever and have all things good.** While he was doing and saying these things, he was making for himself meanwhile a chamber under the ground; and when his chamber was finished, **he disappeared from among the Thracians and went down into the underground chamber**, where he continued to live for three years. They grieved for his loss and mourned for him as dead. Then in the fourth year he appeared to the Thracians, and in this way the things which Zalmoxis said became credible to them. Thus they say that he did. As to this matter and the chamber underground, I neither disbelieve it nor do I very strongly believe, but I think that this Zalmoxis lived many years before Pythagoras. However, whether there ever lived a man Zalmoxis, or whether he is simply a native deity of the Getai, farewell to him now. (Macaulay 2004)

πρὶν δὲ ἀπικέσθαι ἐπὶ τὸν Ἴστρον, πρώτους αἰρέει Γέτας τοὺς ἀθανατίζοντας. . . ἀθανατίζουσι δὲ τόνδε τὸν τρόπον: οὐτε ἀποθνήσκειν ἑωυτοὺς νομίζουσι ἰέναι τε τὸν ἀπολλύμενον παρὰ Σάλμοξιν δαίμονα· οἱ δὲ αὐτῶν τὸν αὐτὸν τοῦτον ὀνομάζουσι Γεβελείζιν· διὰ πεντετηρίδος τε τὸν πάλω λαχόντα αἰεὶ σφέων αὐτῶν ἀποπέμπουσι ἄγγελον παρὰ τὸν Σάλμοξιν, ἐντελλόμενοι τῶν ἂν ἐκάστοτε δέωνται, πέμπουσι δὲ ὧδε· οἱ μὲν αὐτῶν ταχθέντες ἀκόντια τρία ἔχουσι, ἄλλοι δὲ διαλαβόντες τοῦ ἀποπεμπομένου παρὰ τὸν Σάλμοξιν τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τοὺς πόδας, ἀνακινήσαντες αὐτὸν μετέωρον ρίπτουσι ἐς τὰς λόγχας· ἦν μὲν δὴ ἀποθάνη ἀναπαρεῖς, τοῖσι δὲ ἴλεος ὁ θεὸς δοκεῖ εἶναι· ἦν δὲ μὴ ἀποθάνη, αἰτιῶνται αὐτὸν τὸν ἄγγελον, φάμενοι μιν ἄνδρα κακὸν εἶναι, αἰτησάμενοι δὲ τοῦτον ἄλλον ἀποπέμπουσι· ἐντέλλονται δὲ ἔτι ζῶντι οὗτοι οἱ αὐτοὶ Θρηῖκες καὶ πρὸς βροντὴν τε καὶ ἀστραπὴν τοξεύοντες ἄνω πρὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀπειλέουσι τῷ θεῷ, οὐδένα ἄλλον θεὸν νομίζοντες εἶναι εἰ μὴ τὸν σφέτερον· ὥς δὲ ἐγὼ πυνθάνομαι τῶν τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον οἰκεόντων Ἑλλήνων καὶ Πόντων, τὸν Σάλμοξιν τοῦτον ἐόντα ἄνθρωπον δουλεῦσαι ἐν Σάμῳ, δουλεῦσαι δὲ Πυθαγόρῃ τῷ Μνησάρχῳ, ἐνθεῦτεν δὲ αὐτὸν γενόμενον ἐλεύθερον χρήματα κτήσασθαι μεγάλα, κτησάμενον δὲ ἀπελθεῖν ἐς τὴν ἑωυτοῦ· ἅτε δὲ κακοβίων τε ἐόντων τῶν Θρηῖκων καὶ ὑπαφρονεστέρων, τὸν Σάλμοξιν τοῦτον

ἐπιστάμενον διαίταν τε Ἰάδα καὶ ἤθεα βαθύτερα ἢ κατὰ Θρηίκας, οἷα Ἑλλησι τε ὁμιλήσαντα καὶ Ἑλλήνων οὐ τῷ ἀσθενεστάτῳ σοφιστῇ Πυθαγόρῃ, κατασκευάσασθαι ἀνδρεῶνα, ἐς τὸν πανδοκεύοντα τῶν ἀστῶν τοὺς πρώτους καὶ εὐωχέοντα ἀναδιδάσκειν ὡς οὔτε αὐτὸς οὔτε οἱ συμπόται αὐτοῦ οὔτε οἱ ἐκ τούτων αἰεὶ γινόμενοι ἀποθανέονται, ἀλλ' ἤξουσι ἐς χώρον τοῦτον ἵνα αἰεὶ περιέοντες ἕξουσι τὰ πάντα ἀγαθὰ. ἐν ᾧ δὲ ἐποίεε τὰ καταλεχθέντα καὶ ἔλεγε ταῦτα, ἐν τούτῳ κατάγειον οἴκημα ἐποίεετο. ὡς δὲ οἱ παντελέως εἶχε τὸ οἴκημα, ἐκ μὲν τῶν Θρηίκων ἠφανίσθη, καταβάς δὲ κάτω ἐς τὸ κατάγειον οἴκημα διαίτατο ἐπ' ἕτεα τρία· οἱ δὲ μιν ἐπόθεόν τε καὶ ἐπένθεον ὡς τεθνεῶτα. τετάρτῳ δὲ ἔτει ἐφάνη τοῖσι Θρηίξι, καὶ οὕτω πιθανά σφι ἐγένετο τὰ ἔλεγε ὁ Σάλμοξις. ταῦτα φασὶ μιν ποιῆσαι. ἐγὼ δὲ περὶ μὲν τούτου καὶ τοῦ καταγαίου οἰκήματος οὔτε ἀπιστέω οὔτε ὧν πιστεύω τι λίην, δοκέω δὲ πολλοῖσι ἕτεσι πρότερον τὸν Σάλμοξιν τοῦτον γενέσθαι Πυθαγόρεω. εἶτε δὲ ἐγένετό τις Σάλμοξις ἄνθρωπος, εἴτ' ἐστὶ δαίμων τις Γέτησι οὗτος ἐπιχώριος, χαίρετω. οὔτοι μὲν δὴ τρόπῳ τοιούτῳ χρεώμενοι ὡς ἐχειρώθησαν ὑπὸ Περσέων, εἶποντο τῷ ἄλλῳ στρατῷ.

## 2. Plato *Charmides* 156d-156e

Such, then, Charmides, is the nature of this charm. I learnt it on campaign over there, from one of the Thracian physicians of Zalmoxis, who are said even to make one immortal. This Thracian said that the Greeks were right in advising as I told you just now: “but Zalmoxis,” he said, “our king, who is a god, says that as you ought not to attempt to cure eyes without head, or head without body, so you should not treat body without soul. (Lamb 1955)

τοιούτον τοίνυν ἐστίν, ὃ Χαρμίδη, καὶ τὸ ταύτης τῆς ἐπαφῆς. ἔμαθον δ' αὐτὴν ἐγὼ ἐκεῖ ἐπὶ στρατιᾷς παρά τινος τῶν Θρακῶν τῶν Ζαλμοξίδος ἰατρῶν, οἱ λέγονται καὶ ἀπαθανατίζειν. ἔλεγεν δὲ ὁ Θράξ οὗτος ὅτι ταῦτα μὲν ἰατροὶ οἱ Ἑλληνας, ἃ νυνδὴ ἐγὼ ἔλεγον, καλῶς λέγοιεν· ἀλλὰ Ζάλμοξις, ἔφη, λέγει ὁ ἡμέτερος βασιλεὺς, θεὸς ὧν, ὅτι ὡσπερ ὀφθαλμοὺς ἄνευ κεφαλῆς οὐ δεῖ ἐπιχειρεῖν ἰᾶσθαι οὐδὲ κεφαλὴν ἄνευ σώματος, οὕτως οὐδὲ σῶμα ἄνευ ψυχῆς.

## 3. Euripides (attrib.) *Rhesus* 962 - 973

[Rhesus] shall not go into earth's dark soil; so earnest a prayer will I address to the bride of the nether world, the daughter of the goddess Demeter, giver of increase, to release his soul; and, debtor as she is to me, show that she honors the friends of Orpheus. And to me for the rest of time he will be as one who is dead and does not see the light; for never again will he meet me or see his mother; but he will lie hidden in a cavern of the land with veins of silver, restored to life, a deified man, just as the prophet of Bacchus dwelt in a grotto beneath Pangaeus, a god whom his votaries honored. (Coleridge 1891)

οὐκ εἶσι γαίας ἐς μελάγγιμον πέδον·  
 τοσόνδε Νύμφην τὴν ἔνερθ' αἰτήσομαι,  
 τῆς καρποποιοῦ παῖδα Δήμητρος θεᾶς,  
ψυχὴν ἀνεῖναι τοῦδ'· ὀφειλέτις δέ μοι  
 τοὺς Ὀρφέως τιμῶσα φαίνεσθαι φίλους.  
 κάμοι μὲν ὡς θανῶν τε κοῦ λεύσσω φάος  
 ἔσται τὸ λοιπόν· οὐ γὰρ ἐς ταῦτόν ποτε  
 οὔτ' εἶσιν οὔτε μητρὸς ὄψεται δέμας·  
κρυπτός δ' ἐν ἄντροις τῆς ὑπαργύρου χθονὸς  
ἀνθρωποδαίμων κείσεται βλέπων φάος.  
Βάκχου προφήτης ὥστε Παγγαίου πέτραν  
ᾤκησε, σεμνὸς τοῖσιν εἰδόσιν θεός.