The Greek Underworld

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There are several interpretations and descriptions of the Greek Underworld. The most important thing to remember is that with the Greek Underworld, like most Greek Myths, to the Underworld also differs according to context. Below are examples of the Underworld as told by specific people, as well as some excerpts of different aspects of the Greek Underworld that seem to be common among authors.

Homer’s Underworld: A brief Overview

Traveling to the Underworld:

Step 1: Sail to the edge of the world, arriving on the beach of the ocean that encompasses existence.

Step 2: Arrive at the spot where the two rivers of the Underworld, Pyriphlegethon (Fire) and Kokytos (Lamentation) converge into the River Acheron (Groaning).

Step 3: Sacrifice a ram and a ewe. Collect the blood in a vessel to attract the souls of the dead, who upon drinking the blood will gain the ability to speak with living humans.

Homer describes the Underworld in the story of Odysseus. When in the Underworld, Odysseus sees many examples of punishment, most of which are now told as common stories in mythology. Some examples include: Tityos having his liver pecked out by vultures, a punishment for raping the goddess Leto, or Sisyphos who pushes a boulder up a hill for eternity for trying to escape death. One thing that is important about these punishments, is that the crimes are explicitly crimes against the honor of the gods.

Aristophanes’ Underworld: A brief Overview

Aristophanes provides a look into the Underworld in his satirical farce, *Frogs*. This view of the Underworld starts to provide a look into the geographical landscape of the Underworld. There is an account of Dionysus having to take Charon’s Ferry across a bottomless lake. Charon, being the fisherman of the dead. Another important aspect of Aristophanes’ Underworld is the idea that there are different groups of people in different areas of the Underworld. Also, the dead do not lose their identity in the Underworld, according to this account. In fact, the philosophers in the Underworld are fully capable of debating as if they never died.

Rivers of the Underworld

In Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice*, there are many references to ‘the river’. In Greek Myth, there are three common rivers found in the Underworld, however, the River Styx is the river most people associate with the underworld. Plato said that the River Styx flowed into a massive lake. It is a common thought that Charon, the fisherman of the dead, rowed the dead souls over the River Styx to the underworld. Another river, the River Acheron, is also common, and is said by Euripides to be the place where Charon rowed the dead soul of Alcestis. This River, while common, is thought of by less to be Charon’s River of choice. In both cases, the River is something very sacred that shifts within the context of the myth. Both rivers, according to myth, both had locations in the real world. Styx was located in Northern Arcadia, and Acheron was located in the Thesprotian Mountains of Northern Greece. Ideas differ among myths and authors on whether or not one loses their memory and identity when entering the underworld. For example, in *The Odyssey*, the dead fully retain their identities and memories, in Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice*, the dead are supposed to forget their memories when dipped in “the river”. This river is referring to the River Lethe. This was the river that would cause souls to forget their existence if dipped in or drank from. In the overall geography of the underworld, this river was located near the Asphodel Meadows, or the place where the ordinary souls spent eternity.

Erebos

The Greek Underworld was separated into two major parts. The first part was called Erebus, this is where dead souls first went after death. Charon would ferry the souls across the River Styx to the Gates of Erebus. Then the Souls would proceed to Tartarus. This is also the place where the unburied souls spent eternity, they weren’t allowed to proceed into Tatarus, as the gate was guarded by Cerberus, a three-headed dog.

Tartarus

This is the place in the underworld where the rest of the dead would spend eternity, based upon their judgment. According to myth, there were three judges of the dead, who would sentence the soul upon arrival. Tartarus was divided into three parts, The Fields of Punishment, Asphodel Meadows, and the Elysium.

Fields of Punishment

After judgment, those souls who had committed crimes against the Gods would be sent here. This is the place in Tartarus where people like Sisyphus, Tantalus, and Tityos would be found.

Asphodel Meadows

The place where ordinary or indifferent souls went to spend eternity after judgment. These souls did not commit any crimes that would send them to the Fields of Punishment, and they also did not achieve greatness or any other recognition that would set them apart and earn themselves a place in the Elysium.

Odysseus on the Asphodel Meadows

There are Meadows that I can’t describe, the landscape as level as see in dreams, or visions where nothing is thought of
but the moment. It is not clear, and
memory exhausts itself, omitting
something. Silence is a part of it,
and distance reaching in a small space.
Since there are few instances in the
world of such a thing, it fills our sleep
with a pattern for Elysium.
Our friend Achilles walked in these same
fields. There in the whiteness of flowers
where we could not go he thought of us,
pained by death beyond our speaking.

**Elysium (Or Elysian Fields)**
This is part of Tartarus where the virtuous or heroic souls went to rest. It is said that the Ruler of the Elysium is Kronos, Zeus' Father. Inside the Elysium there is said to be a lake, and in the middle of the lake there was the Isle of the Blest. The Isle of the Blest is where distinguished souls went to spend eternity. Achilles is an example of the type of soul that was destined for the Isle of the Blest.