

Recent Reflections on the Cult of Mithras

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Abstract. The article deals with the recent interpretations of Mithraism, analyzing the ideas of two historians of religion who are very influential today, Richard Gordon and Roger Beck, in order to individualize the interpretative vein and the method of anthropologic extraction that has led to the current understanding of the Mithraic cult.

Keywords: Mithras, religion, astrology, anthropology, method.

Rezumat. Reflecții recente despre cultul lui Mithras. Acest articol tratează interpretările recente ale mithraismului, analizând ideile a doi istorici ai religiilor foarte influenți azi, Richard Gordon și Roger Beck, pentru a remarca curentul interpretativ care i-a influențat și metoda de inspirație antropologică care au condus la înțelegerea curentă a cultului mithraic.

Cuvinte cheie: Mithras, religie, astrologie, antropologie, metodă.

Today, like in the past, Mithraic studies are fashionable and almost a sub-discipline in the field of religious science. The interpretation of Mithraic reliefs, statues, and inscriptions owes much to Cumont's narrative, to the Persian/Iranian referents and to the symbolic-allegoric language of the personifications. Starting from an older idea that K. B. Starck formulated in 1869¹, specialists have noted the similarities between the Mithraic icon, the bull-slaying scene, and ancient Uranography: Mithras, the bull, the dog, the snake, the scorpion, the raven, the Dadophores, the krater, the lion, and the grain ear are the Equatorial constellations and the southern *paranatellonta* (the constellations located immediately south of the line of the Celestial Equator): Perseus / Orion, Taurus, Canis Minor, Hydra, Scorpius,

¹ Starck 1869, 1-25.

Corvus, Gemini, Crater, Leo, and Spica (Alpha Virginis)². During the 1980s-1990s it was fashionable for one to gloss on the margin of this astral image carved on the reliefs that came to explain a Mithraic astrologizing theology that envisages the taurochtony icon as a celestial *via salutis*. Several decades have passed since the hypotheses expressed by Stanley Insler³, David Ullasney⁴, Roger Beck⁵, Michael Speidel⁶ and others⁷, but few relevant new artifacts have been found since and few remarkable explanations and interpretations have been formulated.

Among the artifacts one can mention the pot from Mainz, discovered in 1976 and published only in 1994, a vessel with relief figures that depicts seven characters engaged in a ritual that remains unknown, a ritual used by the Mithraic communities on the Rhine during 120-140 AD⁸. Another exceptional discovery is a bronze plaque (*album*) from Virunum (Klagenfurt, Austria) that contains 98 anthroponyms (names of members of the local Mithraic community in 183-201 AD). 34 of the 98 mentioned names are those of people who paid for the rebuilding of the sanctuary in 183 A.D. On June 26th 184 A.D. the Mithraists from this sanctuary in Virunum gathered on the occasion of the death of several adepts (*mortalitatis causa convenerunt*). The other names in the *album* are those of people from the annual cohorts of new members from the period between 184 and 201 A.D.⁹. The discovery of the Mithraeum in Tienen (Belgium) was important for the knowledge of the interior design of a sacred area and its ritual equipment¹⁰.

Various interpretative approaches have contributed with new elements to the understanding the cults of Mithras and the Mithraic ritual in the Roman Empire. One should mention the contributions of Walter Burkert¹¹, Reinhold Merkelbach¹², Manfred Clauss¹³, Jaime

² Speidel 1980, 1-18; Beck 1988, 20-21; Ullasney 1989, 15-39, 44-66.

³ Insler 1978, 519-538.

⁴ Ullasney 1989.

⁵ Beck 1988.

⁶ Speidel 1980.

⁷ Beck 1984, 2081-2083.

⁸ Horn 1994, 21-66; Beck 2004, 9-10.

⁹ Beck 1998, 335-344.

¹⁰ Martens 2004; Martens 2004 a.

¹¹ Burkert 1992.

¹² Merkelbach 1984.

¹³ Clauss 2001.

Alvar¹⁴, Attilio Mastrocinque¹⁵ etc. I shall not insist on these works, as their conclusions start from the traditional methods of the archaeologists and historians of Classical Antiquity (either Claus's «out fashioned Empiricism», Burkert's phenomenological comparativism, or Alvar's sociologizing explanations)¹⁶.

I shall rather discuss the recent interpretations of two *patri patrum* of the Mithraic sub-discipline, two historians of religion who are very influential today, i.e. Richard Gordon and Roger Beck, in order to individualize the interpretative vein and the method of anthropologic extraction that has led to the current understanding of the Mithraic cult. Both Richard Gordon's pioneering article *Reality, Evocation, and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras* (1980)¹⁷ and Roger Beck's recent synthesis work entitled *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire. Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (2006)¹⁸ pay tribute, in their interpretation, to the methodological direction inaugurated by Clifford Geertz, American reformer of Cultural Studies, with the publication of his work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)¹⁹.

The 1980s marked for Mithraic studies the abandonment of Cumontian narration and authors publishing during this period were very innovative in their interpretations. Giving up the unique reference field – the Old Persian religion – and revealing the existence of two other reference fields of the Mithraists (at least equally important as the one suggested by Franz Cumont) are mostly due to R. Gordon and R. Beck.

Applying Clifford Geertz's «thick description» method, Richard Gordon analyzed the structure of the Mithraic grades in connection to the generalized «encyclopedic knowledge» of the Greek and Roman world, the sum of knowledge in the area where the Mithraic cult appeared and developed. The author noted how much the structure of the hierarchy of grades owes to the popular Greek-Roman culture, the *encyclopedia* of that era. He explained this through the fact that in order to attract interest the new religions and cults were forced to elaborate

¹⁴ Alvar 2008.

¹⁵ Mastrocinque 1998.

¹⁶ Beck 2004, 4-5, 14-17.

¹⁷ Gordon 1980.

¹⁸ Beck 2006.

¹⁹ Geertz 1973.

postulates that might seem absurd to the environment in which they propagated. Thus, there was an issue of validation that determined the need to connect to a pre-existing field of reference, a cultural *agreement* on what must be considered real and what must not be considered so. The more absurd the postulates of the cult, the more real must the references to the «real» world be in order to persuade the possible adepts. In order to elaborate a self-sufficient network of symbolic meanings (as each symbol was explained by reference to another from the same set), the new cults had to cannibalize an entire series of common and trivial beliefs from the society in which they existed. Otherwise they would have disappeared or would have been restricted to a handful of adepts²⁰. Clifford Geertz, following Max Weber, believed that man is an animal suspended in certain networks of meaning that he had woven himself and defined religion as «a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seemed uniquely realistic»²¹.

Analyzing the hierarchy of the grades in Mithraic mysteries from this perspective, Richard Gordon observed that the *absurdity* of some of the grades – Corax, Leo – can be understood by analyzing the structural homologies between the role that such grades played in the economy of the cult and the opinions on the actual ravens and lions as members of the natural kingdom inside the Greek-Roman «encyclopedic knowledge». Gordon's investigation reveals the way in which the entire network of Mithraic symbols, far from being Old Persian allegories and borrowings, was in fact connected to the Greek-Roman world and thus formed an essential reference field for the Mithraism of the Imperial Era²².

Another reference field perceived by modern people and fundamental for the understanding of ancient Mithraic mysteries is the sum of astrological knowledge. The symbolic language in which the constellations are represented as characters of the taurochtonic icon is defined as «star talk». Extra information – groups of altars and ritual objects, characters of the Aion – Kronos type, zodiac signs, and busts of the planetary gods – open the path to deciphering these symbolic codes and the messages hidden inside them by connection to the structure of

²⁰ Gordon 1980, 22-23.

²¹ Geertz 1973, 90.

²² Gordon 1980, 25-64.

the grades and the patronage of the planets over them. Such decipherings must lead to isolating certain soteriological messages regarding the astral journey of the initiate's soul into post-existence, along Celsus's planetary ladder²³. Due to the high number of possible combinations of the astronomical data and the ambiguous symbolism of the image in general, it is hard to say to what degree this is positive science and where does the astrologizing mumbo-jumbo begin.

In my opinion, Roger Beck's exceptional book *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* published in 1988²⁴ remains essential to the understanding of the «star-talk» in Mithraism.

R. Beck's most recent synthesis work²⁵, entitled *The Religions of the Mithras Cult*, is declaredly oriented towards applying Clifford Geertz's anthropological method in the study of the Mithraic cult in order to reconstitute the theological aspects of Mithraism to modern knowledge. The author accepts the fact that «thick description» cannot be applied to reading the Mithraic icon, but that it is useful in understanding the written texts, the ground plan of the sanctuaries, and the structure of the initiation grades²⁶. As privileged gateway Beck chose Porphyrius's text *De antro Nympharum*, 29, that contains the list of the main Mithraic oppositions and tried to formulate the ultimate sacred «axioms» or postulates of Mithraism, in the style of Shema Israel or the Christian «Christ is Lord». He only suggested two *axioms*:

1) Deus Sol Invictus Mithras (in the sense that the god's ritual title and the consecrated dedicatory formula establish the fact that the divine power in the center of this cult is a god, i.e. the Sun, is undefeated, and is called Mithras, and

2) «Harmony of tension in opposition», in Porphyrius, *De antro*, 29 who takes over one of Heraclitus's expressions (Fr. 51 DK), an axiom that is iconographically expressed through the image of Mithras as archer from the pot from Mainz, where a *pater* imitates Mithras's gesture of shooting an arrow while sitting during the ritual of initiation²⁷.

After enumerating certain oppositions (mortal - immortal, south- north, left -right, night - day) Porphyrius stated, literally, that καὶ διὰ τοῦτο παλίντονος ἡ ἄρμονία καὶ τοξεύει διὰ τῶν ἐναντίων / thus

²³ Beck 1988; Beck 2006, 153-256.

²⁴ Beck 1988.

²⁵ See also the reviews of Edwell 2006 and Tommasi Moreschini 2010, 107-113.

²⁶ Beck 2006, 67-71.

²⁷ Beck 2006, 5-6.

«harmony is made of oppositions and is reached through opposites»²⁸. I do not believe that Porphyrius's Platonizing allegory held a central place in the Mithraic doctrine and I rather envisage this choice as a simple personal preference on the part of Roger Beck.

The effort of dealing with the Mithraic cult from an anthropological perspective also triggers one comparison outside the sphere of ancient religiosity. Beck compared Mithraism, irrelevantly so in my opinion, to the religion of the Chamula population in the Chiapas Plateau of Mexico, a religion he saw as a syncretism mix of «Maya» solar cult and Christianity²⁹.

As for the third field of reference, Beck broke with Cumont, as for the latter Mithraism was the Roman form of Mazdeanism and preferred to interpret the Iranian elements encountered in Roman Mithraism rather as a *Perserie* (an imitated Persianism, built by the founders of the mysteries)³⁰.

The purpose of analyzing these more or less recent reflections of the two above mentioned historians of religions (who are currently among the most entitled people in the world to understand and interpret Mithraic mysteries) was to stress the fact, noted by Beck as well, that Mithraic studies have reached a dead end. After Cumont's great challenge set in the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the 20th century and the late, coordinated reply of the representatives of the astrologizing direction during the 1970s-1980s, nothing significant has been produced in the beginning of the twenty first century. All means of analysis of the reference fields – Iranian religion, the Greek-Roman cultural environment, and ancient astronomy and astrology – have been explored and exhausted. The great explanations that privilege the Old Persian religion or the astrological constructs are now out dated³¹ and one notes a return to Empiricism, positivism, and sociological approaches. Richard Gordon and Roger Beck are exceptions, attempting to break this blockage by turning to the methods of American Cultural Anthropology.

²⁸ Beck 2006, 83, renders the same fragment thus: «And so there is a tension of harmony in opposition / and it shoots from the bowstring through opposites».

²⁹ Beck 2006, 77-81.

³⁰ Beck 2006, 28-30.

³¹ Recently Faraone 2013, 96-116, has tried to establish a connection between the Mithras bull-slaying scene and the amulets against the evil-eye with the image of «all-suffering eye».

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