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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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Contents

Articles & Notes

1. Matteo **Compareti**: Nana and Tish in Sogdiana: The Adoption from Mesopotamia of a Divine Couple **01**
2. Sajjad **Alibaigi**: Additional Remarks about the Function of the so-called Anahita Temple Monument in Kangavar, Kermanshah: A Clue to Solving an Old Problem **08**
3. Daniel T. **Potts**: Between Myth and History: Susa and Memnon through the Ages **15**
4. Nicholas **Sims-Williams**: Two Words in the Sogdian Version of the Antirrheticus of Evagrius Ponticus **36**
5. Kiarash **Gholami**: On the Chronology and Coinage of Two Iranian Lords in the Umayyad Territories **40**
6. Yazdan **Safae**: A Local Revolt in Babylonia during the Reign of Darius III **50**
7. Nina **Mazhjo**: On Lincoln's Savior Mithras **56**
8. Firoze M. **Kotwal**: A Historical Overview of the Parsi Settlement in Navsari **62**
9. Antonio **Panaino**: The End of the *Yasna* between Philological and Theological Problems **72**

Reviews

1. Shervin **Farridnejad**: Mendoza Forrest, Satnam K. 2011. *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers. The Concept of Evil in Early Iran*. Foreword and other contributions by Prod Oktor Skjaervø. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. **86**

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On Lincoln's Savior Mithras

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When speaking of Mithraism, the first image that tends to come to mind is that of the tauroctony, the famous bull-slaying scene depicted on the walls of Mithraea. From the Cumontian approach, the imagery of the tauroctony should be viewed as a narrative portrayal of Mithras' journey to become "the creator of all the beneficent on earth." In this portrayal, Mithra slays the bull, the moon purifies the bull's seed, and from this purified seed, all beneficent beings emerge. Though Cumont's theory has been contested in recent years, this type of interpretation blurs the boundary between life and death: life comes out of death, or put differently, out of death comes life. It is through the divine sacrifice of the bull, through the divine death, that Mithra(s) gives life to all beneficent beings.

Building on work done by Bruce Lincoln, this brief note attempts to examine a new perspective on the role of Mithra(s) as psychopomp and mediator between the realms of death and life in the various cultural contexts of antiquity. The main issue here is to argue how the different imagery of Mithra(s) as mediator and soul saviour in the realm of death has tied to different cultural contexts in which the worship of Mithra(s) has been shaped and arisen. In other words, such a comparative study enables us to locate the various portraits of Mithra(s) in their cultural and intellectual contexts, and to speak about the different forms of Mithra(s) worship in antiquity.

In his book *Death, War, and sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice*, Bruce Lincoln nicely depicts a picture of Mithra(s) as the sun and saviour, which is traced from Iran to Asia Minor and to the Mithraic

mysteries of the Roman Empire (Lincoln 1991: 85). By citing the *Vendīdād* (19.27-33), Lincoln argues that the victory and the salvation from death's bonds depends on the appearance of Mithra. In the *MihrYašt* (10.22 and also 10.93), Mithra(s) appears once more as a god (*Yazāt*) who saves people from death.

Lincoln's point is supported by *Dādeštān ī Menog ī Xrad* (2.115-122), where Mithra accompanied by *Srōš* and *Rašn* performs the role of mediator and assists the souls of the dead when crossing the *Činwad* bridge. Likewise, in the *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* (5:1-3), *Ardā Wīrāz* describes his passing over the *Činwad* bridge easily, triumphantly, and happily by the assistance of *Srōš* and *Ādar*, and under the protection of Mithra, *Rašn*, *Vāyu* and *Wahman*. Similarly, in *Dādeštān ī Dēnīg* (1, 31:11), Mithra accompanied by *Ohrmazd*, *Wahman*, *Srōš* and *Rašn* appears as an arbiter and judges the souls of the dead.

Thus, as the *MihrYašt* and Pahlavi sources report, as the overseer of all covenants, Mithra appears in the judiciary committee in afterlife to judge and punish the souls of the dead who broke the oaths, and to save the ones of the bonds of death who kept all the contracts in their life and did not lie to him.

Alternatively, the Greek sources reflect another narrative of Mithras' role in the realm of dead. In his allegorical interpretation of Homer's description of *the cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey* (xiii, 102-12), Porphyry offers a detailed illustration of the Mithraic cosmology that portrays Mithras (accompanied by *Cautes* and *Caupates*) as overseer of the souls' celestial voyage: (Fig.1)

(24)...because the cave is consecrated to souls and water of Nymphs, and these point are appropriate for creation <genesis> and departure <apogenesis> in relation to souls...Mithras, as marker and lord of creation, is placed on the line of the equinoxes <facing west>, with the north on his right and the south on his left. [*Cautes*] they assign to the south because it is hot, and [*Caupates*] to the north, because of the coldness of the <north> wind. (25) They naturally assign winds to souls coming into creation and departing from it... (Bread et al. 1998:314-15)

Similarly, the Greek Mithraic Liturgy¹ is another source that clearly depicts the souls' voyage to the realm of gods (apogenesis) under the protection of Helios-Mithras:

εὐθέως ἄσπασαι αὐτὸν τῷ πυρίνῳ ἄσπαστικῷ·
 “κύριε, χαίρει,
 μεγαλοδύναμε, με[γα]λοκράτωρ, (640) βασιλεῦ,
 μέγιστε θεῶν, Ἥλιε, Ὁ κύριος τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς γῆς, θεὸς θεῶν,...(655)...
 ταῦτά σου εἰπόντος ἐλεύσεται εἰς τὸν πόλον, καὶ ὄψῃ αὐτὸν περιπατοῦντα
 ὡς ἐν ὁδῷ...(660)...πρῶτον εἰς τὸ δεξιόν·
 «φυλαζόν με προσυμηρι.»
 ταῦτα εἰπὼν ὄψῃ θύρας ἀνοιγομένης καὶ ἐρχομένης ἐκ τοῦ βάθους ζ'
 παρθένους ἐν βυσσίνοις, ἀσπίδων πρόσωπα ἐχούσας. αὗται καλοῦνται
 οὐρανοῦ (665) Τύχαι,...

Though, the wide use of the text has been challenged among scholars, but it is still useful source that reflect a certain personal religious perception and imagery of the god Mithras as soul saviour in the cultural context of late antiquity

*At once, greet him [Hēlios Mithras] with the fire-greeting:
Hail, O Lord, Great power, Great Might, (640) king,
Greatest of gods, Hēlios [Mithras], the Lord of heaven and earth, God of gods...
(655)...After you have said these things, he will come to the celestial pole, and you
will see him walking as if on a road... (660)...say first toward the right:
“Protect me PROSYMERI!”
After saying this, you will see the doors thrown open, and seven virgins coming
from deep within, dressed in linen garments, and with the faces of asps. They are
called the Fates (665) of heaven... (Mayer 1976: 640-665)*

Accordingly, Mithras as the lord of creation sits on the line of equinoxes in order to control the souls' genesis and apogenesis. As Roger Beck previously noted, the belief that the soul's descending to birth from the heaven and ascending back to the heaven, as well as the idea of the celestial gate through which dead get back to the heaven was widespread in antiquity. (Beck 2004: 1) Consequently, the essential idea here is not about judging the souls' deeds in their life, but it is rather about getting back to the heaven, getting back to the original place.

However, these are not the only instances where Mithras appears as the mediator between the material world and the realm of dead. Once again, Mithras appears among the hybrid deities of the ruler cult of Antiochus I of Commagene at Nemrut Dağı² as the god Apollo-Mithras Helios-Hermes. (Fig.2)

If one asks about the reason of this hybridity, Lincoln answers: “The Reason for Mithra's association with Apollo and Helios is immediately clear: all are solar deities.” (Lincoln 1991: 85) And if one asks about Hermes, Lincoln says: “Hermes like Mithra is a psychopomp, a conductor of souls...” (ibid: 85) Then, by referring to the inscription of tomb's sanctuary, he argues that Hermes is the only god who can be psychopomp and conducts the soul of Antiochus to the realm of dead. (ibid: 85) However, my point is that, as Lincoln himself mentions, the inscription does not precisely convey which deity led Antiochus' soul to the heaven:

*Ἐπεὶ δὲ ἱεροθεσίου τοῦδε κρηπεῖδα ἀπόρθητον χρόνου λύμαις οὐρανίων
ἄγχιστα θρόνων καταστήσασθαι προενοήθη, ἐν ᾧ μακαριστὸν ἄχρι [γ]
ἡρως ὑπάρξαν σῶμα μορφῆς ἐμῆς πρὸς οὐρανίους Διὸς Ὀρομάσδου θρόνους
θεοφιλῆ φυγὴν προπέμφαν εἰς τὸν ἄπειρον αἰῶνα κοιμήσεται. (lines 36-44)*

*And as I have taken forethought to lay the foundation of this sacred tomb, which
is to be indestructible by the ravages of time, in closest proximity to the heavenly
throne, where in the fortunately preserved outer form of my person [the body of
my shape], preserved to ripe old age, shall, after the soul beloved by God [beloved
by the gods] has been sent to the heavenly thrones of Zeus-Oromades [Oromas-
des], rest through immeasurable time. (Sanders 1996: 214)*

².The tomb sanctuary built by king Antiochus I on mount Nemrud in south-eastern Turkey-γ

Moreover, even if we accept Lincoln's interpretation, this is the god Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes who performs the role of psychopomp not Mithras or Hermes separately. This is the hybrid god created by Antiochus I who performs the role of soul saviour; the role that was attributed neither to the Iranian Mithra nor to the Greek Hermes.

Now, returning to my pressing hypothesis: the imagery of Mithra(s) as psychopomp and mediator between the realms of life and death has been tied to the different cultural and intellectual contexts that shaped the various forms of Mithra(s) worship. Here, I completely agree with Lincoln when he characterizes Iranian Mithra as a soul saviour, but I cannot follow his picture of Mithra(s) as the sun and saviour traced from Iran to Asia Minor and to the Mithraic mysteries of the Roman Empire. In fact, this sort of universal imagery of Mithra(s) is less significant that it is often made out to be. In other words, my point is that the personification of Mithra(s) as psychopomp is strongly tied to the cultural context in which the god appears and reappears. In other words, speaking about exchange, syncretism, and even appropriation seem to be proper options rather than drawing a universal portray of Mithra(s) and his transition from Iran to Rome through Asia Minor. Thus, the role of Mithras in the center of tauroctony should be seen in the context of the Roman mystery cult vis-à-vis Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism. While, the deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes should be deciphered in the hybrid culture of the Hellenistic era, and finally the role of Iranian Mithra in accompanying the souls of the dead needs to be re-contextualized in the Zoroastrian eschatology.



The Roamn (Roman?) Mithraic Tauroctony, Second Century CE, Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Taken by the author



The god Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes erected in the North terrace at NemrutDağı, today in South Turkey, Taken by the author

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