

THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRA.¹

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THE ORIGINS OF MITHRAISM.

[CONTINUED.]

IT was undoubtedly during the period of moral and religious fermentation provoked by the Macedonian conquest that Mithraism received approximately its definitive form. It was already thoroughly consolidated when it spread throughout the Roman empire. Its dogmas and its liturgic traditions must have been firmly established from the beginning of its diffusion. But unfortunately we are unable to determine precisely either the country or the period of time in which Mazdaism assumed the characteristics that distinguished it in Italy. Our ignorance of the religious movements that agitated the Orient in the Alexandrian epoch, the almost complete absence of direct testimony bearing on the history of the Iranian sects during the first three centuries before our era, are our main obstacles in obtaining certain knowledge of the developments of Parseeism. At most we can attempt to unravel the principal factors that combined to transform the religion of the Magi of Asia Minor, and endeavor to show how in different regions varying influences variously altered its original character.

In Armenia, Mazdaism had coalesced with the national beliefs of the country and also with a Semitic element imported from Syria. Mithra remained one of the principal divinities of the syncretic theology that issued from this triple influence. As in the Occident, some saw in Mithra the genius of fire, others identified him with the sun; and fantastic legends were woven about his name. He was said to have sprung from the incestuous intercourse of Ahura-Mazda with his own mother, and again to have

¹ Extracted by the author from his *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra* (Brussels: H. Lamertin). Translated by T. J. McCormack.

been the offspring of a common mortal. We shall refrain from dwelling upon these and other singular myths. Their character is radically different from the dogmas accepted by the Occidental votaries of the Persian god. That peculiar admixture of disparate doctrines which constituted the religion of the Armenians appears to have had no other relationship with Mithraism than that of a partial community of origin.

In the remaining portions of Asia Minor the changes which Mazdaism underwent were far from being so profound as in Armenia. The opposition between the indigenous cults and the religion whose Iranian origin its votaries delighted in recalling, never ceased to be felt. The pure doctrine of which the worshippers of fire were the guardians could not reconcile itself easily with the orgies celebrated in honor of the lover of Cybele. Nevertheless, during the long centuries that the emigrant Magi lived peacefully

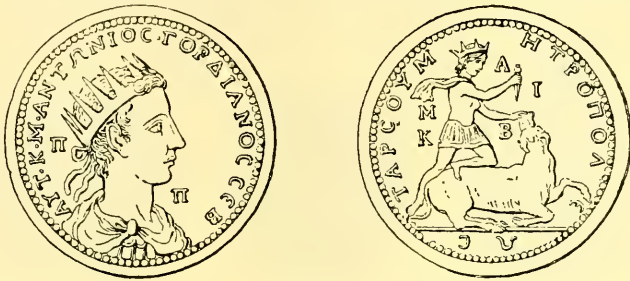


Fig. 1.

MITHRAIC MEDALLION OF BRONZE FROM TARSUS, CILICIA.

Obverse: Bust of Gordianus III., clad in a paludamentum and wearing a rayed crown. Reverse: Mithra, wearing a rayed crown and clad in a floating chlamys, a tunic covered by a breast-plate, and anaxyrides (trousers), seizes with his left hand the nostrils of the bull, which he has forced to its knees, while in his right he holds aloft a knife with which he is about to slay the animal.

among the autochthonous tribes, certain amalgamations of the conceptions of the two races could not help being effected. In Pontus, Mithra is represented on horseback like Men, the lunar god honored throughout the entire peninsula. In other places, he is pictured in broad sinuous trousers (*anaxyrides*), his attitude reminding us of the mutilation of Attis. In Lydia, Mithra-Anâhita became Sabazius-Anaitis. Other local divinities also lent themselves to identification with the powerful *yazata*. It would seem as if the priests of these uncultured countries had endeavored to make their popular gods the compeers of those whom the princes and nobility worshipped. But we have too little knowledge of the

religions of these countries to determine the precise features which they respectively derived from Parseeism or imparted to it. That there was a reciprocal influence we definitely know, but we are unable to ascertain its precise scope. Still, whatever the influence may have been, it was apparently not very profound, and it had no other effect than that of preparing for the intimate union which was soon to be effected in the West between the Mysteries of Mithra and those of the *Great Mother*.



Fig. 2.

IMPERIAL COINS OF TRAPEZUS (TREBIZOND), A CITY OF PONTUS.

Representing a divinity on horseback resembling both Men and Mithra, and showing that in Pontus the two were identified.

a and *b*. Bronze coins. Obverse: Bust of Alexander Severus, clad in a paludamentum; head crowned with laurel. Reverse: The composite Men-Mithra in Oriental custom, wearing a Phrygian cap, and mounted on a horse that advances toward the right. In front, a flaming altar. On either side, the characteristic Mithraic torches, respectively elevated and reversed. At the right, a tree with branches overspreading the horseman. In front, a raven bending towards him. (218 A. D.)

c. Obverse: Alexander Severus. Reverse: Men-Mithra on horseback advancing towards the right. In the foreground, a flaming altar; in the rear, a tree upon which a raven is perched.

d. A similar coin, with the bust of Gordianus III.

When, as the outcome of the expedition of Alexander, the civilisation of Greece spread through all Hither Asia, it impressed itself upon Mazdaism as far east as Bactriana. Nevertheless, Iranism, if we may employ such a designation, never surrendered to Hellenism. Iran proper soon recovered its moral autonomy, as

well as its political independence; and generally speaking, the power of resistance offered by Persian traditions to an assimilation which was elsewhere easily effected is one of the most salient traits of the history of the relations of Greece with the Orient. But the Magi of Asia Minor, being much nearer to the great foci of Occidental culture, were more vividly illuminated by their radiation. Without suffering themselves to be absorbed by the religion of the conquering strangers, they combined their cults with it. In order to harmonise the barbaric beliefs with the Hellenic ideas, recourse was had to the ancient practice of identification. They strove to demonstrate that the Mazdean heaven was inhabited by the same denizens as Olympus: Ahura Mazda as supreme being was con-



Fig. 3.

BACTRIAN COINS.

On the coins of the Scythian kings Kanerkes and Hooerkes, who reigned over Kabul and the North-west of India from 87 to 129 A. D., the image of Mithra is found in company with those of other Persian, Greek, and Hindoo gods. These coins have little direct connection with the Mysteries as they appeared in the Occident, but they merit our attention as being the only representations of Mithra which are found outside the boundaries of the Roman world.

- a.* Obverse: An image of King Kanerkes. Reverse: An image of Mithra.
- b.* The obverse has a bust of King Hooerkes, and the reverse an image of Mithra as a goddess.
- c.* Bust of Hooerkes with a lunar and a solar god (Mithra) on its reverse side.
- d.* Bust of Hooerkes, with Mithra alone on its reverse.
- e, f, g.* Similar coins.

founded with Zeus; Verethraghna, the victorious hero, with Hercules; Anâhita, to whom the bull was consecrated, became Artemis Tauropolis, and the identification went so far as to localise in her temples the fable of Orestes. Mithra, already regarded in Babylon as the peer of Shamash, was naturally associated with Helios;

but he was not subordinated to him, and his Persian name was never replaced in the liturgy by a translation, as has been the case with the other divinities worshipped in the Mysteries.

The synonymy ostensibly established between appellations having no relationship did not remain the exclusive diversion of the mythologists; it was attended with the grave consequence that



Fig. 4.

TYPICAL REPRESENTATION OF MITHRA.

(Famous Borghesi bas-relief in white marble, now in the Louvre, Paris, but originally taken from the Mithræum of the Capitol.)

Mithra is sacrificing a bull in a cave. The characteristic features of the Mithra monuments are all represented here: the youths bearing an upright and an inverted torch, the snake, the dog, the raven, Helios, the god of the sun, and Selene, the goddess of the moon. Owing to the Phrygian cap, the resemblance of the face to that of Alexander, and the imitation of the *motif* of the classical Greek group of Nike sacrificing a bull,—all characteristics of the Diadochian epoch, the original of all the works of this type has been attributed to an artist of Pergamon.

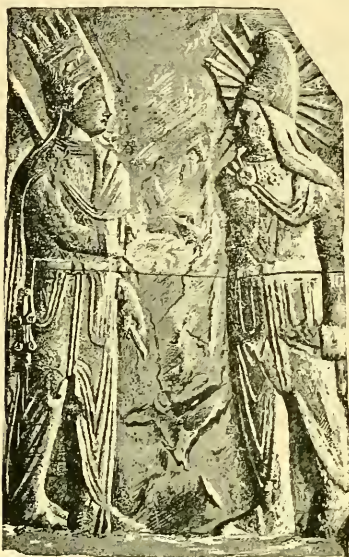
the vague personifications conceived by the Oriental imagination now assumed the precise forms with which the Greek artists had invested the Olympian gods. Possibly they had never before been

represented in the guise of the human form, or if images of them existed in imitation of the Assyrian idols they were doubtless both grotesque and crude. In imparting to the Mazdean heroes all the seductiveness of the Hellenic ideal, the conception of their character was necessarily modified; and, pruned of their exotic features, they were rendered more readily acceptable to the Occidental peoples. One of the indispensable conditions for the success of this exotic religion in the Roman world was fulfilled when towards the second century before our era a sculptor of the school of Pergamon composed the pathetic group of Mithra Tauroctonos, to which universal custom thenceforward reserved the place of honor in the apse of the *spelæa*.

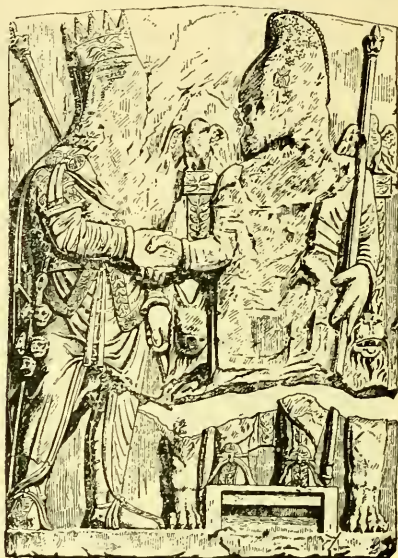
But not only did art employ its powers in softening the repulsive features which these rude Mysteries might possess for minds formed in the schools of Greece. Philosophy also strove to reconcile their doctrines with its teachings, or rather the Asiatic priests pretended to discover in their sacred traditions the theories of the philosophic sects. None of these sects so readily lent itself to alliance with the popular devotion as that of the Stoa, and its influence on the formation of Mithraism was profound. An ancient myth sung by the Magi is quoted by Dion Chrysostomos on account of its allegorical resemblance to the Stoic cosmology; and many other Persian ideas were similarly modified by the pantheistic conceptions of the disciples of Zeno. Thinkers accustomed themselves more and more to discovering in the dogmas and liturgic usages of the Orientals the obscure reflections of some ancient wisdom, and these tendencies harmonised too much with the pretensions and the interest of the Mazdean clergy not to be encouraged by them with every means in their power.

But if philosophical speculation transformed the character of the beliefs of the Magi, investing them with a scope which they did not originally possess, its influence was nevertheless upon the whole conservative rather than revolutionary. The very fact that it invested legends which were oftentimes puerile with a symbolical significance, that it furnished rational explanations for usages which were apparently absurd, did much toward insuring their perpetuity. If the theological foundation of the religion was sensibly modified, its liturgic framework remained relatively fixed, and the changes wrought in the dogma were reconciled with the reverence due to the ritual. The superstitious formalism of which the minute prescriptions of the Vendidad were the expression is certainly prior to the period of the Sassanids. The sacrifices which

the Magi of Cappadocia offered in the time of Strabo are reminiscent of all the peculiarities of the Avestan liturgy. It was the same psalmodic prayers before the altar of fire; and the same bundle of sacred twigs (*baresman*); the same oblations of milk, oil, and honey; the same precautions lest the breath of the officiating priest should contaminate the divine flame. The inscription of Antiochus of Commagene in the rules that it prescribes gives evidence of a like scrupulous fidelity to the ancient Iranian customs. The king exults in having always honored the gods of his ancestors according to the tradition of the Persians and the Greeks; he ex-



MITHRA AND KING ANTIOCHUS
OF COMMAGENE.



AHURA MAZDA AND ARTAGENES.

(Bas-relief of the colossal temple built by Antiochus I. (69-34 B.C.) on the Nemrod Dagh, a spur of the Taurus Mountains.¹)

presses the desire that the priests established in the new temple shall wear the sacerdotal vestments of the same Persians, and that they shall officiate conformably to the ancient sacred custom. The sixteenth day of each month which is to be specially celebrated, is not to be the birthday of the king alone, but also the day which from time immemorial was specially consecrated to Mithra. Many, many years after, another Commagenean, Lucian of Samosata, in a passage apparently inspired by practices he had witnessed in his

¹ See *The Open Court* for March, 1902, p. 173.

own country, could still deride the repeated purifications, the interminable chants, and the long Medean robes of the sectarians of Zoroaster. In addition, he taunted them with being ignorant even of Greek and with mumbling an incoherent and unintelligible jargon.

The conservative spirit of the Magi of Cappadocia, which bound them to the time-worn usages that had been handed down from generation to generation, abated not one jot of its power after the triumph of Christianity; and St. Basil has recorded the fact of its persistence as late as the end of the fourth century. Even in Italy it is certain that the Iranian Mysteries never ceased to retain a goodly proportion of the ritual forms that Mazdaism had observed in Asia Minor time out of mind. The principal innovation consisted in substituting for the Persian as the liturgic language, the Greek, and later perhaps the Latin. This reform presupposes the existence of sacred books, and it is probable that subsequently to the Alexandrian epoch the prayers and canticles that had been originally transmitted orally were committed to writing, lest their memory should fade forever. But this necessary accommodation to the new environments did not prevent Mithraism from preserving to the very end a ceremonial which was essentially Persian.

The Greek name of "Mysteries" which writers have applied to this religion should not mislead us. The adepts of Mithraism did not imitate the Hellenic cults in the organisation of their secret societies, the esoteric doctrine of which was made known only after a succession of graduated initiations. In Persia itself the Magi constituted an exclusive caste, which appears to have been subdivided into several subordinate classes. And those of them who took up their abode in the midst of foreign nations different in language and manners were still more jealous in concealing their hereditary faith from the profane. The knowledge of their arcana gave them a lofty consciousness of their moral superiority and insured their prestige over the ignorant populations that surrounded them. It is probable that the Mazdean priesthood in Asia Minor as in Persia was primitively the hereditary property of a tribe, in which it was handed down from father to son; that afterwards its incumbents consented, after appropriate ceremonies of initiation, to communicate its secret dogmas to strangers, and that these proselytes were then gradually admitted to all the different ceremonies of the cult. The Iranian diaspora is comparable in this respect, as in many others, with that of the Jews. Usage soon distinguished between the different classes of neophytes, ulti-

mately culminating in the establishment of a fixed hierarchy. But the complete revelation of the sacred beliefs and practices was always reserved for the privileged few; and this mystic knowledge appeared to increase in excellence in proportion as it became more occult.

All the original rites that characterised the Mithraic cult of the Romans unquestionably go back to Asiatic origins: the animal disguises used in certain ceremonies are a survival of a very widely-diffused prehistoric custom; the practice of consecrating mountain caves to the god is undoubtedly a heritage of the time when temples were not yet constructed; the cruel tests imposed on the initiated recall the bloody mutilations that the servitors of Mâ and of Cybele perpetrated. Similarly, the legends of which Mithra is the hero cannot have been invented save in a pastoral epoch. These antique traditions of a primitive and crude civilisation subsist in the Mysteries alongside of a subtle theology and a lofty system of ethics.

An analysis of the constituent elements of Mithraism, like a section of a geological formation, shows us the stratifications of this composite mass in their regular order of deposition. The basal layer of this religion, its lower and primordial stratum, is the faith of ancient Iran, from which it took its origin. Above this Mazdean substratum was deposited in Babylon a thick sediment of Semitic doctrines, and afterward the local beliefs of Asia Minor added to it their alluvial deposits. Finally, a luxuriant vegetation of Hellenic ideas burst forth from this fertile soil and partly concealed from view its true original nature.

This composite religion, in which so many heterogeneous elements were welded together, is the adequate expression of the complex civilisation that flourished in the Alexandrian epoch in Armenia, Cappadocia, and Pontus. If Mithridates Eupator had realised his ambitious dreams, this Hellenised Parseeism would doubtless have become the state-religion of a vast Asiatic empire. But the course of its destinies was changed by the defeat of this great adversary of Rome. The *débris* of the Pontic armies and fleets, the fugitives that had been driven out by the war and that had flocked in from all parts of the Orient, disseminated the Iranian Mysteries among that nation of pirates that rose to power under the protecting shelter of the mountains of Cilicia. Mithra became firmly established in this country, in which Tarsus continued to worship him until the downfall of the empire. Strong in the consciousness of his protection, these audacious mariners boldly pillaged the most venerated sanctuaries of Greece and Italy, and the Latin world rang for the first time with the name of the barbaric divinity that was soon to impose upon it his adoration. [TO BE CONTINUED.]