

Roger Beck: *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire. Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006. p. 285. £ 84.00. ISBN 978-0-19-921613-0.

In this book Roger Beck, who is to be counted among the leading specialists of Mithraism, provides a challenging approach to his favourite scholarly subject. Tantalizing and obscure at the same time, Mithraism attracted in the past century the interest of great historians of ancient religions, from Franz Cumont to Maarten J. Vermaseren, Robert Turcan, Ugo Bianchi, and Reinhold Merkelbach. Consequently, the interpretation of Mithraic cult underwent profound changes, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, Cumont's original idea of an Iranian core to be outlined in the mysteries of Mithras (whose testimonies date back only to Roman age, and more specifically to the imperial period) was sometimes denied in favour of a different perspective, emphasizing archaeological evidence, astronomical theories, Platonic exegesis, or comparisons with other mystery cults, not to say that the very idea of 'oriental' religion itself has been questioned lately. Thematic congresses and a specifically dedicated journal contributed furthermore to this reshaping of the scholarly paradigm of the mysteries of Mithras, which profited from scholars such as John Hinnells, Manfred Clauss and Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin. The first chapters of the present book provide a useful recalling of the main points at issue, not without criticism.

Indeed, after his seminal studies about Mithraism and astronomy, Beck has been pursuing for some years a new investigative path, which resulted also in a collection of studies.¹ The novelty of this approach, sometimes met with scepticism or bitter censure,² is undoubtedly represented by the application of the cognitive paradigm to an ancient religion like that of Mithras. I must admit that at first such an approach is surely puzzling for historians of ancient religions – namely of religions that are no more practised or, when surviving, are often deeply different – insofar they have to reckon not only with scant and sometimes biased sources, but, what's more, they do not have at their own disposal living believers or devotees, whose reactions and feelings might be investigated by means of psychology or neurological science.

Cognitivism, however, seems nowadays one of the most challenging and vivacious (though occasionally pursued with fanatical zeal) perspectives in religious studies, so that, notwithstanding the aforesaid difficulties, some scholars, especially in the Anglo-American world, faced themselves with new interpretations

1 Beck on Mithraism: *Collected Works with New Essays*. Aldershot 2004.

2 See the review by A. Mastrocinque, *Gnomon* 80, 2008, 424–428. Less dismissing are Peter Edwell's judgements in [BMCR 2006.12.08](#) and Jan Bremmer's one retrieved at http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5299_5579.pdf.

of ancient religious phenomena by means of contemporary anthropology.³ In particular, they rely on Roy Rappaport's *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge 1999), Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained. The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York 2001) and Harvey Whitehouse's *Modes of religiosity. A cognitive theory of religious transmission* (Oxford 2004), not to mention studies that now have acquired the status of 'classics', like those of Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York 1973) and Dan Sperber (transl. by A. L. Morton), *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge 1975).

Mystery religions are especially suitable for an approach combining patterns of an iconic tradition with cognitive processing and political associations, in order to grasp an idea that might recall the initiate's experience of ancient Mithraism. The ultimate result is either to consider mysteries as autonomous system acting on the devotee, or as something apprehended and accepted by the initiates. This is surely possible thanks to the peculiar character of mysteries, which allowed for an individual and personal relationship between humans and gods, an experience that, so to summarize, escaped the traditional framework of a doctrinal mode of religiosity, even though a similar statement was already expressed by ancient theorists: "the initiates were not required to learn anything specific, but rather to experience an emotional state" (Aristot. philos. fr. 15 Ross = 87 Turchi, cited by Casadio in the aforementioned paper). Besides, it does not seem a mere chance that a groundbreaking book such as Arthur Darby Nock's *Conversion*, in which the author investigated the progressive development towards a private understanding of religion and communication with the divine, was conceived under the influence, among others, of the phenomenologist school.⁴ In this sense Christianity as a clear example of personal religion is often used as a point of comparison throughout the book. Furthermore, following the path investigated by contemporary anthropologists, Beck provides a provoking attempt at comparing the Mexican Chamulas' ritual practice and that of the Mithraists. In doing that he probably aims at reproducing the model

3 Ad did Luther Martin and Richard Gordon in various studies devoted to Mithraism, and Giovanni Casadio who likewise discussed Dionysiac cult from the same perspective (though with some caveats): see his *Dionysus' Image in the Post-Modern Age*, in L. H. Martin and P. Pachis (eds.): *Imagistic Traditions in the Graeco-Roman World. A Cognitive Modeling of History of Religious Research. Acts of the Panel held during the XIX Congress of the IAHR, Tokyo, Japan, March 2005. Thessaloniki 2009*, 89–112.

4 For a recent global evaluation of A. D. Nock see G. Casadio: *Ancient mystic religion. The emergence of a new paradigm from A. D. Nock to Ugo Bianchi. Mediterraneo Antico* 9/2, 2006 [2008], 485–534; S. Price: *The Conversion of A. D. Nock in the Context of his Life, Scholarship, and Religious Views. HSPH* 105, 2010, 317–340.

of smallscale or regionally fragmented ritual traditions and cults in which “the tendency for revelations to be transmitted through sporadic collective action, evoking multivocal iconic imagery, encoded in memory as distinct episodes, and producing highly cohesive and particularistic social ties”, this being the so-called imagistic form of religion (to recall here Whitehouse’s terminology), whereas the doctrinal one should be recognized in the codification of a body of memorized and standard doctrines, shaping world views shared by larger communities performing routinized forms of worship.

Obviously this book is not meant as a manual or a ‘companion to Mithraism’; rather, it presupposes that readers are already familiar with the manifold sources (both primary and secondary literature) discussed by the author. Beck’s style is often dense and difficult, even though he attempts at being as clear as possible, especially when he explains line-by-line ancient texts (sometimes repeating them for the sake of clarity), or when he summarizes the complexity of cognitive postulates.

Besides, because of this new theoretical approach, Beck tends to discard or even criticize previous interpretations of Mithraism, without neglecting, however, those who privileged a social interpretation of Mithraic cult. In particular he charges his predecessors for having neglected the importance of iconography per se. Only by considering the great symbolic fresco of the tauroctony and the deep meaning it conveys, Mithraism can be interpreted as a sophisticated cognitive experience. Conversely, too often Mithraic doctrine has been interpreted by its modern exegetes as a mere intellectual construction, reflecting more the elitist perspective of the sources rather than the initiate’s own feelings. The main thesis of the book aims at stressing the importance of the Mithraeum and its iconography as a whole. In particular, while rejecting the idea of a specific Mithraic doctrine, Beck concentrates his attention on what the initiates or the worshippers of Mithras were supposed to perceive during their rituals and when they observed the deep symbolic iconography of their shrine. Due to the overwhelming astronomical imagery, Beck is in a good position to emphasize a ‘language of star-talk’ as a means of understanding how this process could take place. Beck relies not only on his previous studies but discusses at greater length one of the most interesting, though controversial, books on that subject, namely David Ulansey’s *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (New York 1989/1991) – an essay that suggested to read Mithraic cosmology as related to the doctrine of the precessions of the equinoxes developed in Greek astronomy during the second century. According to this reading, the tauroctony symbolizes the setting of the equator while the equinoxes cross Scorpio and Taurus.

Among ancient texts, Beck stresses the importance of a late witness by the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry (*De Antro Nympharum* 6 and 24), whom he credits to represent a faithful account of Mithraic initiation. Beck reads this

passage as a ‘gateway text’ functioning as a tool for a better underscoring the experiences of an adept of Mithraism. Moreover, this text provides precise references to the ‘geography’ of a Mithreum, namely the deep cosmology and symbolic iconography it entangles, not exempt from the surrounding culture of Greece and Rome and (partially) of Iran. No need to say that astrological speculation plays a crucial role, as it does the more general idea of earth and human life reflecting the planetary order and the universe, developed, among others, in Plato’s *Timaeus* and in Pythagorean lore. Beck is going to reinforce his arguments with further explanation in the chapter dedicated to the ‘star-talking’ theology.

Beck displays a lavish knowledge of ancient astronomical writers and these passages should be regarded as the most successful of the book. After evidencing in the Tauroctony the representation of constellations such as Taurus, Canis Maior, Hydra, Scorpio, Corvus, Gemini, Crater, Leo, Spica, Beck goes further on in explaining that in all reliability the two torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates represent the extreme borders of Taurus and Scorpio, the two constellations among which all the others are located. They furthermore are meant to represent the two solstices, when the sun rises or declines.

After these first four chapters, the book provides a transitional section in which the new cognitive reading is put forward, by means of a detailed explanation of its theoretical premises, that is reconstructing the purpose implied in Mithraic symbolism. Because of the impossibility of a practical performance of a Mithraic ritual, Beck substitutes it with the iconography of its monuments, supposed to reflect the seven grades of the initiation. Here Beck deals at greater length with the notion of ‘star-talk’, that is a pre-ordered symbolic language that a Mithraist could perceive while observing the structure of a Mithreum with its lavish gathering of astronomical imagery and the very representation of the struggle between Mithras and the bull. Supposedly, he was able to understand the whole construction because of a particularly predisposed mental structure, not without the assistance of exegetes or interpreters that provide helping a correct interpretation of the star-talk language. Indeed, according to Beck, who employs the modern metaphor of a cosmonaut, the Mithraeum, conceived as a smallscale representation of the universe itself, functioned as a conveyor of souls, that allowed the worshipper to re-cognize (in a literal sense) the experience of the descent of the soul from the heavenly spheres and its way back. One must notice, though, that the ascensional pattern is a common feature of many late antique salvation religions, albeit one cannot deny the massive insistence on astronomy/astrology pursued by Mithraists.

All these interpretations rely on the current tendency to stress the role of visual knowledge in the transmission of culture, since there are significant differences between the ways in which word and image operate. Notwithstanding some excesses, like the theory of the so called “epidemiology of representa-

tions”, which presumes to set up the ways in which mental representations would propagate within a society, the usage of iconography is more salient than the one based on texts and narrations, to generate an effective belief tradition, not to say that often the iconic description of the physical world was instrumentally used as reflex of the metaphysical divine realities.

However, when dealing with cognitivism Beck seems more speculative, in spite of his being truly convicted and in spite of trying to dismiss some problems that might arise, for example about signs supposed to convey precise meanings. Conversely, he introduces a much more persuasive discussion about the deep role that astrology played in ancient culture and that gods were believed to communicate with humans through heavenly signs. The examples he proposes, mainly drawn from Patristic sources (Origen, Augustine, but also the Elenchos ascribed to ‘Hippolytus’, Zeno of Verona, and Maximus the Confessor), are particularly remarkable and ought to be considered among the most convincing pages of the book.

The final chapters resume and discuss a theme Beck already proposed in previous contributions, that is the individuation of the ‘missing link’ between Iranian Mithraism and Roman Mithraism in the royal house of Commagene, whose fondness for astronomy is well known. Two points deserve specific attention. The first one is an attempt at further interpreting the astral lion and the dexiosis represented on Antiochus’ I Nimrud Dagi monument. Beck suggests to connect this relief with the simultaneous presence of three planets plus the moon in Leo, an astral conjunction that took place on July 5th (or 7th according to other scholars) 62 BC.⁵ Furthermore, considering that two lunar eclipses (both of them visible from Commagene) had taken place little time before, in 63 BC, Beck suggests that the court astronomers might have interpreted the dramatic succession of astral signs as symbolizing the Sun’s final overwhelming of the Moon. The figural representation is probably a commemoration of this crucial event, to be interpreted as a star-sign favouring Antiochus’ ascent to the throne, the lion symbolizing, in addition, the Sun in Leo’s house. As already stated elsewhere Beck tends to ascribe the invention of Helios-Mithras and therefore the strong emphasis on solar cult and attributes to the Commagenian milieus that shaped the mysteries.

As for the second link between Commagenian dynasts and Roman government, Beck emphasizes the role of the last king, Antiochus IV, and of his entourage in transmitting the bulk of knowledge to Roman intellectual aristocracy, when they came as exiles in Rome after having been deposed by the emperor Vespasian. It is worth recalling here the famous witness of Statius’

5 On this problem see also the cautious paper by S. Heilen: *Zur Deutung und Datierung des ‚Löwenhoroskops‘ auf dem Nemrut Dağı*. *Epigraphica Anatolica* 38, 2005, 145–158 (also available at <http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/ifa/EpAnat/38%20pdfs%20web/038145.pdf>).

Thebaid 1, 719, the first literary source dealing with Mithras and equating him with a sun-god: quite opportunely Beck discusses this passage and the interpretation provided by the late scholiast Lactantius Placidus. An ultimate link is individuated by Beck in the name of the astronomer Antiochus of Athens, who is probably to be identified with C. Iulius Antiochus Epiphanes Philopappus, an Athenian magnate, consul suffectus in 109, grandson of Antiochus IV and, curiously enough, of the prominent astronomer and philosopher Tiberius Claudius Balbillus.

One cannot help noting, however, that, despite the attractiveness of Beck's suggestion and the impressive collection of passages meant to prove its veridicity, his arguments are highly speculative and must be cautiously evaluated. As for Antiochus' *dexiosis*, for example, some scholars incline to consider it not a divine investiture, but, more simply, the assistance and protection granted to the king by the gods. In addition, as intriguing as it may be, the role of Posidonius in connection with Commagenian dynasty ought to be further clarified. It is true, on the contrary, that recent archaeological findings have reinforced the idea of setting the origin of the Mithraic mysteries in Commagene rather than in Rome, albeit the question is far from being solved, as it is the other one about the derivation of Mithras' solar character.⁶ Therefore, the old idea of an Iranian background to be found in the mysteries of Mithras can be regained and asserted on new grounds thanks to the mediation of Commagenian kings. I was wondering whether a text such as the Avestan hymn to Mithras edited by Gershevitch in 1959 can offer further hints to a better evaluation of the switching from the worship of Mithras as solar and warrior god in Iranian religion to his new shaping in a Hellenized and Romanized milieu.

To sum up, this is not an easy book (nor it is expected to be), whose stimulating complexity surely compels the reader to reflect on a thorny matter. Nonetheless, in spite of a profound, from time to time esoteric, doctrine, there are some parts that are highly hypothetical or speculative and some statements that necessarily need qualification or further demonstration. A suspicion may thus arise, namely that all this should be read as an erudite construction where hypotheses tend to replace here and there the solidity of *Realien*. The author, however, deserves our greatest admiration for displaying an immense know-

6 The discovery of two mithrea in Doliche (today Keber Tepe) has been documented and discussed by A. Schütte-Maischatz/E. Winter: Doliche. Eine kommagenische Stadt und ihre Götter. Mithras und Iuppiter Dolichenus. Bonn 2004. For Antiochus' *dexiosis* see: G. Petzl: Antiochos I. von Kommagene im Handschlag mit den Göttern. Der Beitrag der neuen Reliefstele von Zeugma zum Verständnis der Dexioseis, in: G. Heedemann/E. Winter (eds.): Neue Forschungen zur Religionsgeschichte Kleinasiens. Bonn 2003 (AMS 49), 81–84, together with an inscription edited by C. V. Crowther/M. Facella: New Evidence for the Ruler Cult of Antiochus of Commagene from Zeugma, *ibid.* 41–80.

ledge of quite technical sources and, much more, for having accepted the challenge of reinterpreting a controversial matter from totally a different perspective, therefore demonstrating the vitality of intelligent scholarly research and the necessity of confronting oneself with new interpretative paradigms.⁷

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⁷ The author of the present review wishes to acknowledge the fruitful discussion about Commagenian, Mithraic, phenomenological and cognitive topics she entertained with Frederick E. Brenk, Margherita Facella, Gian Mario Cazzaniga, and Giovanni Casadio.