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MITHRAS, NEOPLATONISM, AND THE STARS

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Abstract: The main ideas of this study (which is a continuation of my former article entitled “*Mithras, Sol Invictus, and the Astral Philosophical Connections*”) are the following:

I. The dichotomy and differences between the two main groups of theories regarding the origins of the Roman mystery cult of Mithras, namely the school of the great Belgian scholar Franz Cumont, who considered Mithraism in the Roman world as an essentially Iranian cult adapted to the new cultural Hellenistic-Roman context, and the theory of the 19th century German scholar K. B. Stark (revived in the 1970s by academics like R. Beck, J. R. Hinnells, S. Insler, R. Gordon, and A. Bausani, who considered that the Roman cult of the solar god Mithras was a new mystery cult which was born in the Roman world because of the Hellenistic scientific discovery of the precession of the equinoxes.¹ My conclusion is that the Roman cult of Mithras, fused with the cult of *Sol Invictus* (the Hellenistic-Roman cult of the Unvanquished Sun), has more things Iranian than the name of the central deity of this initiation-mystery cult (despite its undeniable Hellenistic-Roman and astrological-astronomical elements).

II. The astral element as a potent religious component of the religious and philosophical mentality of the so-called “mystery religious and initiation cults” in the Roman Empire is seen in Roman Mithraism as a ladder for the journey of the soul through the astral spheres towards perfection or possibly towards liberation (these are modern interpretations, since we do not have any consistent Mithraic religious-liturgical text).

III. The role of Neo-Platonist philosophy in the religious and philosophical landscape of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE of the Late Roman Empire and its possible relationship with the Roman cult of Mithras.

Keywords: *Mithras, Sol Invictus, Iran, Greek-Hellenistic Astronomy, Greek-Roman Planetary gods, Mysteries, Neoplatonism, Rome.*

This small study is an analysis of certain essential (and controversial) points of the history of Mithraism that can shed some light on the doctrine or religious ideas of this mystery cult, which has left its mark on the Roman Empire, especially during the 2nd and 3rd centuries after Christ.

The name of *Mithras* in Latin and Ancient Greek is of Indo-Iranian origin. It is the name of the sun god or rather of a solar god; in the *Rg-Veda* we encounter

¹ *Vide* Bausani 1979; Beck 1976 (1 and 2); Beck 1977; Beck 1978; Beck 1984; Gordon 1972 (a. and b.); Gordon 1976; Gordon 1978 (a. and b.); Hinnells 1975 (a. and b.); Hinnells 1979; Insler 1978.

the god *Mitra* (meaning Friend/Pact in the Vedic language), who is another name for the god *Surya* (the Sun). This god is mentioned in one of the hymns of this oldest of the four *Vedas*. Ancient Iran has also a god called *MiPra*-(*Mithra*) in the *Avesta*, an ancient god who was not relegated by the prophet *Zaraḅuštra* (Zarathustra/Zoroaster of the ancient Greeks) to the rank of the *daeva*- (ancient gods, which became demons in Mazdeism/Zoroastrianism), but he is on the side of the Supreme Creator God *Ahura-Mazdā* and therefore on the side of Good, Truth, and Righteousness, as opposed to the Principle of Evil, Lies, and Injustice (*Angra Mainyu*). The Avestan god *MiPra*- (ancient Persian *Miça*-) is also a solar god and a protector of oaths, compacts, pastures, and herds of cattle, like his Vedic counterpart.²

It appears that, apart from the name, there is little connection between the Roman god *Mithras* and his Iranian counterpart *Mithra*. It is true, nevertheless that in both Parthian Arsacid Iran and in Armenia the god *Mihror Meh(e)r* was worshipped by kings, nobles, and commoners (*Mihr* is the Parthian or Arsacid *Pahlavī* form of the ancient Iranian word *Mithra*; we do not analyze here the disputed question of the religion professed by the ancient Persians and especially by their “Kings of kings” during the age of the Achaemenid dynasty; it seems however that Darius III Codomanus, according to Q. Curtius Rufus, believed both in *Ahura Mazdā* and in *Mithra*, under the Latin names of *Iuppiter* and *Sol* respectively; Plutarch in his *Life of Alexander/Vita Alexandri* mentions clearly *Mithras*/Μίθραϝ as an Iranian god worshipped by the Persians from the times of the Persian “King of kings” Darius III Codomanus and Alexander the Great, King of Macedon and Asia, if not even before *vide* Curt. III 3; IV 10; Plut., *Alex.* 30, 4).³ The king of Pontus, Mithridates (or Mithradates) VI Eupator, the implacable enemy of the Romans, like many of his princely and royal ancestors, bore a name that signified “the gift of Mithra”; *nomen omen*, as the ancient Romans said, and even more so for a royal and dynastic name. In Commagene (Southeastern Anatolia, at the frontier of Syria) the impressive sculptures and royal reliefs of Nemrud Dagħ include a representation of syncretic Greek and Iranian gods (*Zeus-Oromasdes*, *Heracles-Artagnes/VerePragna*, *Mithra-Apollon-Helios*) as divine protectors of the Hellenistic-Iranian royal dynasty of the kingdom of Commagene.⁴ The first classical testi-

² Eliade 1991, 280-282, 294-301; Eliade, Culianu 1993, 235-236, 269-277 [esp. p. 276, for *Mithra* as one of the three gods (along with Sraoša and Rašnu) that judged the souls of the deceased, before they passed the Cinvant bridge]; Wald, Slușanschi, Băltăceanu 1987, 162-163.

³ *Vide* Ulansey 2001, 16-19 for the Cumont thesis of the Iranian origins of Mithraic mysteries.

⁴ Eliade 1991, vol.II, 294 (n.1): The name of Mithridates or (rather and more correctly) Mithradates, meaning something like “given by Mithra/the gift of Mithra”, a name given to many

monies of the existence of a cult of Mithras in the Roman Empire or in the Anatolian regions subject to indirect Roman rule were Statius' poem *Theb.* (I 716 ssq.) and Plutarch's *Pomp.* (24, 7).⁵ Statius (*Theb.* I 719-720) mentions the Persian cave of Mithra and the sacrifice of the bull (the above-mentioned verses begin interestingly enough with an invocation addressed to the god *Phoebus Apollo*), while Plutarch in his *Life of Pompey* mentions, of the pirates of Cilicia, that they performed the strange rituals of the god Mithras on the mountain Olympus of Lycia, and that these weird Mithraic rites have endured until Plutarch's day, according to the very words of this author of Chaeronea. We can infer from these statements that around the 1st century BC – 1st century CE the cult of Mithras, probably structured as it would be known in the Roman Empire during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, was already in existence. This cult of Mithras endures in the Roman Empire well into the 4th century CE, although the distinction between *Mithras* and *Sol* (the ancient Roman sun god, who was gradually identified or overlapped with the Greek sun god *Helios*, with *Phoebus Apollo* as the divine force of the solar light, as well as with Semitic solar deities such as *Shamash* and *El Gabal* from the city of Emesa in Syria) was more and more blurred or even became non-existent as time went by.

Modern theories about the character of the Mithras cult could well be grouped into two main categories: the first one, originating from the Belgian scholar Franz Cumont, considers that the Roman cult of Mithras is an essentially Iranian cult, which has been brought to the Hellenistic and later Roman World via the so called "*Mages Hellenisés*" from Anatolia (a vast land where Hittite, Lydian, Phrygian, Carian, and Lycian Anatolian cultures interacted with the ancient Greek and ancient Iranian cultures, a contact which was especially intense during the Achaemenid and Hellenistic times) and, although it assumed in time a Hellenistic-Roman character (a Greek and later a Latin form of an Iranian god), it is essentially an Iranian-born cult.⁶ This thesis presupposes the existence of an intermediary group, the so-called Hellenized Iranian Magi who were the transmission link between ancient Persia and Parthia and the Roman Empire, and were therefore located in Armenia and Asia Minor, lands where the Iranian and the Greek cultural spheres intermingled for centuries during the Achaemenid and especially during the post-Achaemenid (Hellenistic) period. The existence of such a priestly group based upon Iranian religion and Greek

kings of Pontus (Hellenized Iranians from Northeastern Asia Minor) points to a worship of Mithra in those Anatolian mountains, near the Caucasus and south of the Black Sea (*Pontus Euxinus*/Πόντος Εὔξεινος).

⁵ *Vide* Sanzi-Sfameni 2009, 98-99, n. 51-52; Sanzi 2013, 28-29, n. 37-38; Strootman 2016, 225.

⁶ *Vide* Ulansey 2001, 16-18 (n. 3).

culture, despite its great plausibility, has never been demonstrated with historical, epigraphic, or archaeologically sound proofs. The great erudition and scholarly logic of Cumont nevertheless gave birth to the Cumontian School in the interpretation of Roman Mithraism, a school which has dominated the scholarly approaches on this long-lost religion for almost three quarters of the past century.

Another line of interpretation of the Mithraic religious phenomenon was born very early, in the 19th century, within the work of the German scholar K. B. Stark. According to Stark's view, the figures or iconographical characters that made up the central scene of the Mithraic tauroctony were planets or even stars and constellations (astral bodies in any case). This fact suggested further that it represented, in this myth, a map of the night sky, and therefore the cult of Mithras had an astronomical-astrological basis.⁷ This thesis, largely forgotten during the first three quarters of the 20th century, has been reconsidered beginning with the 1970s. In 1971, during the First International Congress of Mithraic studies (Manchester), John R. Hinnells and Richard Gordon had advanced the hypothesis that Roman Mithraism was a totally new cult (in relationship with the old Iranian cult of the god *Mithra*), using as the central divine character—a god bearing an Iranian name and detailed elements of a Hellenistic-Iranian imprint to give them an esoteric and exotic flavor, in order to attract new adepts.⁸ J. R. Hinnells maintains nevertheless that a central Iranian nucleus (presumably of religious ideas) was still present in the Roman cult of Mithras.⁹

The subsequent scholarship has been divided between these points: an Iranian Hellenized religious cult adapted to the new conditions of the Roman Empire and to the Roman *forma mentis* or an entirely new mystery cult, born either in the Near East or even in Italy and Rome and that spread to the provinces, especially the provinces of the European *limes* of the Roman Empire, from *Britannia* and the two *Germaniae* (*Inferior* and *Superior*) to the *Pannoniae*, *Daciae*, and the two *Moesiae* (*Superior* and *Inferior*, respectively).¹⁰ In 1973, the Canadian classical scholar Roger Beck advanced the idea that the Mithraic tauroctony and the animal figures that appear alongside Mithra (the sacrificed Bull, the Dog, the Snake, the Raven, and the Scorpion), as well as the ear of wheat sprouting from the Bull's tail in the moment of sacrifice, were in fact the constellations of *Taurus*, *Canis Minor*, *Hydra*, *Corvus*, *Scorpius* or *Scorpio*, and *Spica*, respectively, and he gradually developed this hypothesis into a theory; this theory was defended in the Second Congress of Mithraic Studies (in

⁷ *Idem*, 24-26.

⁸ *Vide* Sanzi-Sfameni 2009, 200-201 (n. 4-7).

⁹ *Vide* Ulansey 2001, 21 (n. 4).

¹⁰ Ulansey 2001, 13-16; Sanzi-Sfameni 2009, 15-17, 99-102, 199-209.

1975 at Teheran) by the Iranologist Stanley Insler. He (Insler), however, unlike Beck, argued that these constellations represented in the Mithraic tauroctony were those visible in the heliacal setting of the *Taurus* constellation, and that therefore, in a precise astronomical moment of the solar year (while Beck simply referred to constellations visible to the naked human eye during the whole astronomical year). Insler instead refers to the constellations of *Taurus*, *Scorpio*, *Hydra*, *Corvus*, *Krater/Kylix*, *Leo Maior*, and *Canis Minor*, and has put these star clusters into relationship with the animals, plants, and objects which appear on the Mithraic relief scenes of the tauroctony (the Bull, the Scorpion, the Snake, the Raven, the Cup, the Lion, and the Dog).¹¹

The theories of Stark, Beck, and Insler proved to be seminal. Beck in fact has noticed that along the ecliptic, between the stars Aldebaran and Antares (in the constellation of *Taurus* and *Scorpio* respectively), there appear all the constellations corresponding (in name and approximate form) to the animals represented in the Mithraic tauroctony. In 1978 at Rome, during an International Seminar on Mithraism, the great Italian scholar Alessandro Bausani advanced another idea, based also on the Beck-Insler theory, but also on the ideas of the science historian Willy Hartner, that Mithras' sacrifice of the Bull represented in fact an age-old Near Eastern and Middle Eastern mythological and iconographical *topos* of the battle between Bull and Lion, a myth going back to ancient Sumer (the confrontation and deadly combat between the hero Gilgamesh, the Lion, and the bull-like monster Khumbaba, an epic fight that saw the death not only of Khumbaba, but also of Enkidu, Gilgamesh's brother in arms).¹² Moreover, this mythical battle would have reflected the apex of the Lion constellation's astronomical procession in the sky, when the Lion (*Leo*) "kills" the Bull (*Taurus*) that descends below the horizon (which fact is also a precise moment of the astronomical year). As David Ulansey rightly remarks, although Bausani's theory refers to a precise moment in time (during the astronomical year), not all the constellations visible at that particular moment were present in the plastic representations of the Mithraic tauroctony, inside the *mithrea*.¹³ Michael Speidel, an historian of ancient Rome, considers that the Mithraic bull-slaying episode represents the equatorial summer constellations from *Taurus* to *Scorpio*, but that *Mithras* himself is represented (according to Speidel's own theory) by the constellation of *Orion*.¹⁴

¹¹ *Idem* (2001), 28-29; *Idem* (2009), 202-203.

¹² The problem that remains here is the following: in the *Epic* of Gilgamesh the Bull metaphor is applied sometimes even to Gilgamesh and to Enkidu also.

¹³ Ulansey 2001, 30-31.

¹⁴ *Idem*, 31-33; Sanzi-Sfamini 2009, 202-203.

The thesis of David Ulansey about the astronomical character of the Mithraic mysteries is much elaborated, but we must here focus only on the essential ideas, which are the following:

1. The origin of the Mithras cult in the Roman Empire cannot be reduced to the transfer of an Iranian god to the Hellenistic and then to the Roman world. Even in the most Cumontian of perspectives, a changed cultural, ethnic, and religious setting would mean a different cult form at least, if not a different religion altogether.

2. There are iconographical, narrative (philosophical), and scientific testimonies (breakthroughs in ancient Greek astronomy and mathematics during the Hellenistic age, namely the discovery of the astronomical phenomenon of the precession of Spring and Autumn Equinoxes by the 3rd and 2nd centuries astronomers Aratus of Soli and Hipparchus) and the philosophical theories of the Stoics from Tarsus, like Athenodorus in the Augustan Age (likewise the ideas of other philosophers, from Plato's *Timaeus*, a dialogue about the creation and structure of the Universe, and the writings of Posidonius of Apamea and Philodemus of Gadara to the astronomical theories of the age), that all give credence to the idea of the apparition of a new cult which in fact had as a central mystery the precession of the equinoxes.

3. The precession of the equinoxes (from Bull/*Taurus* and Scorpion/*Scorpius* to Ram/*Aries* and Balance/*Libra*, about two millennia before the birth of Christ, along with the apparition of the cult of Mithras in the Roman Empire) was the central part of the Mithraic cult; moreover, on iconographical grounds based on the Mithraic reliefs of the tauroctony and from Greco-Roman art, Ulansey has concluded that the hero Perseus, worshipped at Tarsus as a local god, was identified with Mithras, seen by these intellectual founders as the deity able to move the Heaven's canopy and cause the precession of equinoxes. All these religious concepts have appeared in a world where the heliocentric theory ideated by Aristarchus of Samos was not a diffused idea and the geocentric conception of the Universe, with all its astronomical paraphernalia, was still prevalent (the astronomer and geographer Ptolemy from the 2nd century CE being the best known figure of this geocentric astronomical school); in that perspective, Ulansey thinks that a group of intellectuals (astronomers and Stoic philosophers) from Tarsus has in fact ideated a new god, named Mithras, who was responsible for the displacing or moving of the whole sky of the so called "fixed stars", in order to explain the phenomenon of equinoctial preces-

sion, in the mental boundaries created by a geocentric conception of the Cosmos.¹⁵

The problem of considering the Mithras mysteries in the Roman Empire as being entirely a cult reflecting the scientific discovery of the precession of the equinoxes is that the central character, Mithras, is not merely a cosmic god, but primarily a salvation deity. Another substantial objection to the exclusive astronomical character of Mithras is his lack of exact identification with a precise constellation: both Michael Speidel and David Ulansey identify the figures represented in the scene of Mithras slaying the Bull with the visible constellations located on (above) and below the celestial equator. The celestial position of the *Taurus* constellation during the Spring Equinox and of the *Scorpio* constellation during the Fall Equinox had been established some two thousand years before Roman Mithraism ever took shape; during the Greco-Roman Age, in the 1st millennium BC, the Age of the Bull had been long before replaced by the Age of the Ram, with the Spring and Fall equinoxes taking place under the constellations of the *Aries*/Ram and of the *Libra*/Balance respectively. Mithras himself has been identified by Michael Speidel with the constellation of *Orion*, while David Ulansey prefers rather the constellation of *Perseus*; while *Cautes* and *Cautopates*, the two *Dadophoroi*, were seen by them as personifications of the spring and fall equinoxes respectively.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ulansey 2001, 16-23, 24-33 (esp. 30-32), 34-39 *ssq. passim*..

¹⁶ Ulansey 1991, 93 *apud* Sanzi-Sfameni 2009, 204, n. 12; Ulansey 2001, 58-62 (the moment when the constellation of the Lion/*Leo* was above the constellation of the Bull/*Taurus*, being the climax of the battle between Lion and Bull; during the beginnings of the Christian Era, in the 1st century CE, the Spring and Fall equinoxes began to fall at the end of the zodiac signs of *Pisces* and of *Virgo* respectively); for the moment when the constellation of *Perseus* rose above the Bull, *vide* Ulansey 2001, 59-63 (see especially 60-61 and 62-63). The problem that arises with this interpretation is why the name chosen for this supposedly hyper-cosmic deity responsible with the precession of the equinoxes would be Mithras, and neither Perseus nor Orion, the names of the constellations involved in this astronomical phenomenon?! The Heavens was the abode of the sky gods and of some deified heroes of Greek-Roman mythology, such as Heracles, Perseus, and Orion, but none of them became the central god of the new mystery cult, but only the obscure new god with a clearly old Indo-Iranian name, Mithras. This fact in itself deserves some explanation: if Mithraism in the Roman Empire would have been only a new-born Hellenistic-Roman mystery cult of astronomical-astrological origins, why was the name of the central deity of this cult that of an age old Indo-Iranian solar god? There must have been a bit more of Iran in the Roman god Mithras than merely a divine name: that was so because, for a simple new mystery cult with essentially Greek-Roman roots in mythology and astronomy-astrology, the Greek heroic names (Orion or Perseus) of constellations involved in the phenomenon of the precession of equinoxes would have been much more appropriate, and not the name of a foreign Parthian-Persian (Iranian) solar deity, as Mithras truly was for most Romans in the 1st century BC, when Plutarch first writes about this cult of *Persian mysteries* among the pirates of Cilicia.

The astronomical character of the Roman cult of Mithras is further reinforced by the seven degrees of Mithraic initiation: *Corax*, *Nymphus/Cryphius*, *Miles*, *Leo*, *Perses*, *Heliodromus*, and *Pater*. These seven degrees were under the protection of seven Roman gods and seven planets (in fact six visible Planets and our star the Sun) respectively: *Mercurius*, *Venus*, *Mars*, *Iuppiter*, *Luna*, *Sol*, *Saturnus* (in Greek terms *Hermes*, *Aphrodite*, *Ares*, *Zeus*, *Selene*, *Helios*, and *Kronos/Chronos*), corresponding to the planets (or star in the case of the Sun): Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Moon, Sun, and Saturn. Every degree had a special initiation ritual.¹⁷ The Christian saint and martyr Justin the Philosopher (*Iustinus Philosophus*) sees in his *Prima Apologia* (First Apology) the Mysteries of Mithras (namely the offering of a loaf of bread and a cup of water, instead of holy wine) as a demonic parody of the Christian Sacrament of the Holy Communion (the Rite of the Eucharist).

In the same time period, the testimony of the philosopher Celsus and of the Neoplatonist philosophers (for example Porphyrius in his *De antro nympharum*) underlined the partnership between *Sol* and *Mithras* as they ascend together in the chariot to (or beyond) the Heavens. In the same vein, the treatise of Origenes entitled *Contra Celsum* (Κατὰ Κέλσου) gives the image of the so-called “doctrine of the Persians” (*doctrina Persarum*) and of initiation into the Mysteries of Mithras, by the symbolic configuration of the planets’ sphere and of the “sphere of fixed stars”, as well as the celestial stairway with seven gates and the final eighth gate. There is a correspondence between the gates and the gods, as well as the metals: the first gate is made of lead, the second of tin, the third of bronze, the fourth of iron, the fifth out of a metal alloy, the sixth of silver, and the seventh of gold. The first metal is attributed to *Kronos* (Saturn), because the lead symbolizes the slowness of this planet (we would have expected here *Hermes-Mercurius*, the patron and divine protector of the Mithraic *Corax* degree); the second metal, to *Aphrodite* (*Venus*), because of the brilliance of tin (this truly corresponds to *Nymphus/Cryphius*); the third to *Zeus-Iuppiter*, because of the solidity of the base of the bronze gate (here anyone would have expected *Ares-Mars*, the divine patron and protector of the Mithraic *Miles*); the fourth to *Hermes-Mercurius*, because of the resistance of iron; the fifth to *Ares-Mars*, because many metals are included in this alloy, which is a variegated and composite substance. The sixth gate, of silver, corresponds to *Selene-Luna* (the Moon, associated with *Artemis-Diana-Hekate* in Greco-Roman mythology); and the seventh the gate of gold, to the Sun (*Helios-Sol-Apollo*).

¹⁷ Sanzi 2013, 32-33: this is confirmed by Hieronymus’ epistle *Ad Laetum* and the inscriptions painted on the *Mithraeum* of Santa Prisca in Rome.

The problem is here that Justin's path is the Christian ethics of renunciation of the world's sinful ways (sinful according to Christian doctrine), confession and remission of sins, and Eucharist respectively. It is more a moral-spiritual path of a religion devoid of many initiation steps, a religion of mystery and initiation for sure, but quite simple in the beginnings: the main initiation ritual being Christian Baptism (after a pre-initiation period of apprenticeship, the catechumenate, in the Early Christian Church) and the main Christian mystery being Eucharist, communion with God (Christ) in the form of consecrated bread and wine, representing the Holy Body and Holy Blood of Jesus Christ Resurrected. The Seven Sacraments of Christianity were not yet systematized in the Early Christian Church and Religion of the period of Saint Justin Martyr and Origenes; yet Baptism, Confession and Forgiving of sins, as well as Eucharist already existed (the last being founded by Christ Himself). The Christian Religion was open to all, men, women, and children alike, of all ages, social-juridical status and backgrounds; by contrast, the Roman Cult of Mithras has an elaborate seven steps initiation, it was open only to men, who were subjected to tough physical and psychological initiation tests and ceremonies (rituals).

Celsus as a non-Christian Greek philosopher and worshipper (or at least a "man in the know") of the ancient gods of Greece, Rome, and of the Hellenistic East (among them Mithras), saw Christianity more of a *superstitio* than as a true *religio*, which was supposedly sanctioned by a long historical tradition behind it, with age-old myths and rituals to refer to. Celsus' perplexion facing Christianity was the astonishment of every decent pagan intellectual of the Graeco-Roman world: polytheistic religion and myths for the people at large, respectful adoration of the old gods was to be expected from the learned men and women of noble birth, philosophical knowledge and esoteric mythology as a path to the mysteries of the Universe and of the One True God hiding behind the so many gods and goddesses was eventually meant for the truly initiated people. One God who sends His Own and Only Son in the world to suffer and die for the sake of all men and women, to be reborn after three days, only for the benefit of humankind, for saving humankind from a mysterious original sin and from eternal death (not to mention the mystery of the Holy Trinity, One God in Three Persons and Aspects/*Hypostaseis*), all these were a bit too much for a Greek philosopher or for a Roman lawyer or military man; and why the other gods, who were previously seen as manifestations of the True God for some Greek philosophers, to be seen as evil demons, instead of benevolent *daemones*? Why no more animal and bloody sacrifices?! So many dilemmas and unanswered questions and problems for any honest heathen intellectual or even for any ordinary person who had been educated in the values, rites, rituals, and ceremonies of the old religion of the gods; all these things that even today

are hard for us to understand, with our 21st century cultural background, were more so puzzling for a 2nd or 3rd century CE Greek philosopher or Roman intellectual. Christianity is now more than two millennia old; we should keep in mind that in Origenes' days Christianity was not even three centuries old and back then, as now, it was not a monolithic religion, with only One Church and interpretation of the Faith.

This is the way to Heaven for the (Mithras') initiate's soul in Origenes' Apologetic Christian critique of Celsus' philosophy, but we can see that this succession of heavenly metal gates does not reproduce the succession of planets presiding over the seven degrees of Mithraic initiation. For Celsus' stairway begins with lead, associated with Saturn, while the last (supreme) degree of Mithras' mysteries is *Pater*, under the sign of Saturn (*Kronos/Chronos*); the second gate, associated with Venus (*Aphrodite*, both the goddess and the planet), is made out of tin (normally, copper would have been the normal metal for Venus-*Aphrodite*, *Kypris* and *Kypros* being the surname of the goddess of love and the name of the island of Cyprus respectively, the birthplace of Aphrodite, as well as one of the Greek names for copper); the third gate made out of bronze (Gr. *χαλκός*); one would expect that this would correspond to *Miles* and be under the protective shield of Mars (*Ares*), but instead it is under the aegis of Jupiter (*Zeus*); the fourth gate is under the sign of *Hermes*, whose metallic element is iron (one would expect here *Jupiter-Zeus* as patron of the *Leo* initiate of Mithras and bronze as metallic alloy of the gate, iron being usually associated with *Mars-Ares* and not with Mercury-*Hermes*); the fifth gate, created from a metal alloy, is associated with *Ares-Mars*, and not with the Moon/*Luna-Selene*, as Mithras' fifth initiation degree of *Perses* presupposes); the sixth gate, of silver, corresponds (from the point of view of the metal used) with *Selene-Luna* (the Moon), and not with *Helios-Sol* (the Sun), as the Mithraic degree of *Heli-odromus* presupposes; finally, the seventh gate is made out of gold and corresponds (as metal used) to the Sun (*Helios-Sol*), when anyone could have suspected here would be the gate corresponding to *Pater*, under the sign of Saturn (*Kronos/Chronos*). The eighth gate could have eventually represented the way to liberation from this world, a way out of this Universe or *Kosmos*.¹⁸

¹⁸ Sanzi 2013, 34-36 (esp. 35-37: Mithras is seen in the inscription from Carnuntum A D 307 by the *religiosissimi Iovii et Herculii* Diocletianus, Maximianus, Galerius, and Licinius, as the *fautor imperii sui* and the worship of Mithras by the Emperor Julian the Apostate/*Iulianus Apostata*, vide Sanzi 2013, 36-37 and p. 57, n. 61: CIMRM II, n. 1698 “*D(eo) S(oli) I(nvicto) M(ithrae) fautori imperii sui/Iovii et Herculii/religiosissimi/Augusti et Caesares/ sacrarium/restituerunt.*” The Latin of this dedicatory inscription suggested to me that, for the persons who ordered this inscription to be cut *Mithras* and *Sol Invictus*, he had become by the 4th century

To conclude our overview of the cult of Mithras, the inscription from Carnuntum shows not only the adoption of Mithras by the former and reigning Tetrarch emperors as a personal divine protector, but also as a deity protecting both the imperial power of the reigning emperors and the *Imperium Romanum* or the Roman Empire as a whole. He is a strange god, with an Iranian name that was correlated with and vanquished the Sun god (*Sol*), but then forged a divine partnership with *Sol* (*Helios-Apollo*) and eventually ascends to Heavens in the chariot of the Sun.¹⁹ Mithras, moreover, became the *Sol Invictus*, the Invincible Sun, according to the same inscription at Carnuntum. He presides over the salvation of his worshipers, who underwent hard initiation rituals in order to advance through the ranks and achieve individual salvation of the soul (a very soldier-like mentality, proper to most Roman military men, and also to many Roman civil servicemen and befitting a warrior god of Eastern/Indo-Iranian origin); he is correlated with astronomy (very technical concepts like the celestial equator, the ecliptic or the apparent movement of the Sun, the dating of equinoxes, *etc.*), with Cosmic Time (we do not dwell here on the possible correlation between Mithras and the *Leontocephalos* god of Time), with astral bodies and possibly also to the way out of this Cosmos. His demise appears as strange as his ascension and age of glory; a new Eastern religion which owes many doctrinal elements and concepts to Mithraism and Neoplatonism, namely, Christianity vanquished or rather absorbed the Mysteries of Mithras (although officially it abhorred them). My modest conclusion could be paradoxical: the complex Roman divine figure (essentially a pair of two gods merged into one) *Mithras Sol Invictus* is a complete metamorphosis of the Old Indo-Iranian Sun god into a salvation deity connected with astral bodies, with the afterlife destiny of human souls, and also with the life-founding sacrifice of the cosmic bull, contrary to the ideas expressed in the Iranian Zoroastrian story of Creation known as the *Bundahishn* ('*primal creation*'). This sole element (namely the sacrifice of the Primordial cosmic Bull by Mithras' dagger, instead of the intervention of the Evil Principle *Angra Mainyu*, the enemy of Good, Truth, and Righteousness *i.e.* of *Ahura Mazda* the Creator God) is essential, in my humble opinion, in making the Roman Mithras a new astral god born out of the rock (*Mithras petrogenitus*, "Mithras born out of stone"), and not a simple continuation of his supposed Persian forefather.²⁰

AD one and the same deity or solar god. *Mithras* has thus come full circle, becoming the sun god in the Roman Empire, as he has ever been a kind of sun god in Ancient Iran.)

¹⁹ Ulansey 2001, 112-120.

²⁰ Albrile 2015, 151-170 (especially 158 for astronomical connections in Zoroastrianism and in Greek thought, 167-168 for the soteriological role of the sacrificial Bull and the future Savior

There remains, however, a great unsolved problem: why did the founders of Roman Mithraism choose a strange god of Eastern origin, from Parthia/Persia, Media, Armenia, and Eastern Anatolia to be the central figure of their cult, when the constellations either of *Orion* or of *Perseus* were allegedly central in the astronomical configuration linked with the replacing of the Age of the Bull with the Age of the Ram or with the myth of the Lion conquering the Bull? Why should the *Orion* or the *Perseus* constellations to be religiously identified with *Mithras*, an Eastern solar god of Iranian origin? Why was the central god of these mysteries not simply called *Orion* or *Perseus* (or even *Sol* or *Apollo*), godly characters much more central to Greek-Roman mythology and instead called by a strange Iranian name? It is weird that in a Greek and Roman mythology full of known solar and stellar godly figures such as *Apollo* (Ἀπόλλων), *Helios/Sol*, or even the deified hero *Heracles/Hercules* with his twelve labors (so akin to the passing of the sun through the twelve known signs of the zodiac during the solar year) not to speak again of *Orion* and *Perseus*—that the central god of Hellenistic-Roman religious mysteries associated with astronomical phenomena is named *Mithras*, after a foreign and exotic god of the Parthians, Persians, and of other Iranians?! It is true that *Mithras*, at least in later iconographical representations, was associated with *Sol*, and somehow the cults of *Mithras* and of *Sol Invictus*, respectively, were fused, according to modern historians. The problem of the choice of *Mithras* as the central divine character of essentially Greco-Roman religious mysteries based upon astrology and astronomy is not solved by simply admitting the choice of an Iranian name as a technique of “religious marketing strategy”, intended to attract more followers by choosing an exotic name for the central deity of the cult. Why not, if we speak of exotic gods’ names, choose a solar god of Semitic or Egyptian origin, such as *Shamash* or *Atum (Aton)* the divine sun disk, or even *Amun-Re (Ammon-Ra)*, identified by ancient Greeks and Macedonians with *Zeus* from the times of the oracle of Siwah in Libya, visited (according to Arrian’s *Anab.* III 3-4) by *Perseus*, by *Heracles*, and, last but not least, by Alexander the Great in the year 332 BC? The very name of *Mithras* is a testimony in favor of Cumont’s old thesis, while the astronomical and astrological symbols present in Roman Mithraic iconography and in the critical comments of the Christian Church Fathers is a testimony in favor of Stark’s astronomical and astrological thesis about Roman Mithraism. Both ideas contain perhaps some element of truth concerning Mithraism and the true proportion between the Iranian origin and the astro-

of Humanity, *Saošyant, passim*). For the discussion on the theories concerning Mithraism and ancient Astronomy-Astrology *vide* Gnoli 2010, 77-86.

nomical Hellenistic development of the Roman cult of *Mithras* will remain forever the last standing Mystery of *Mithras*.

The astral connections of Roman Mithraism, as delineated in the above-mentioned pages, appears only in the iconography of the *Mithraea* and in the polemic texts of the early Christian apologetic authors and Church Fathers, as we do not possess any Mithraic literary text (except short inscriptions) to elucidate our problems of the true role of the planets, of the planetary gods, and of the stars and constellations in the Roman cult of Mithras (as well as in the Armenian and Iranian-both Parthian and Persian-cult of Mithras). We are however in the possession of a consistent corpus of indirect or circumstantial evidence of the role of astral bodies (comets, stars, and planets) in the religious beliefs of the Persian *magoi*, evidence which is present in writings as diverse as the Gospel of St. Matthew (2.1-12), the Zoroastrian extant scriptures, or the early Christian and Gnostic texts.²¹ According to the early Syriac Christian extant literary narrative of the *Cavern of Treasures*, the *magoi* have been watching the Star signaling the birth of a World Savior/*Salvator Mundi*/Σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου (the *Saošyant*- of the Iranian Mazdean-Zoroastrian Faith) for two years before the Birth of Christ. These *magoi*, initially seen in this source as distinct from both the Chaldean learned clergymen and from the Persian “sages/wise men”, are eventually qualified in this text as “Chaldean *magoi*”, implying that they were heirs to the Babylonian astronomical and astrological knowledge.²² This “Chaldean” epithet could also imply that the Median, Persian, or Parthian *magoi* had also absorbed in time the astronomical, mathematical, and astrological lore of the Mesopotamian civilizations (Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian). Their journey to Bethlehem takes them first to the East, to Bactria

²¹ Albrile 2009, 157-174: the idea appears of the Persian or Chaldaean Magi as skillful astronomers and astrologers at the beginnings of the Christian Era at the latest (*op. cit.*, 157-159 *ssq.*). According to the Aramaic Christian text known as *The Cavern of Treasures* (preserved in a Syriac and in an Arab translations), the Magi know about the Birth of a *Redemptor Mundi* two years before his actual Birth. According to the theory going back to Franz Cumont’s “*Mages Hellenisés*”, the Hellenic and then the Roman West learned about Zarathustra/Zarathuštra (Zoroaster) via the so called *Maguseans* (the Hellenized and Aramaicized Iranian *Magi* of Anatolia, Armenia, and of Northern Syria and Mesopotamia *vide Id.* 157-158). In the sacred Zoroastrian *Pahlavī* scripture *Bundahišn*, where the Universe is divided between *menok* (the realm of the Spirit, the Kingdom of Ahura-Mazdā, the Creator God seen as the Supreme Good and Everlasting Truth and Righteousness) and *getik* (the material world, created by Ahura-Mazdā/Ormazd nevertheless, but subject to the corruption of the Lies/*Druj* brought in by the Evil One, *Angra Mainyu/Ahriman*), there is the division between the sphere of the stars belonging to the material world of mixture (*getik*) and the sphere known as the one of the “unmixed stars” (*spihr i agumēzišn*) *vide op. cit.*, 157.

²² *Id.*, 160.

and Gandhāra, to the Mountain of Nūd/Nūr (the Mountain of Light).²³ The Easternmost Iran, at the frontiers of both Central Asia and India, proves to be their first destination point. Jerusalem and Bethlehem, in Palestine, in the Kingdom of Judaea ruled over by King Herodes the Great, will be their final destination points. They had first noticed the Star when they were in Persia (*Parsā*/Fars/Περσίς), so that therefore, although these *magoi* have been qualified in text as “Chaldaeans”, they were in fact Persians or, more broadly speaking, Iranians. They went first to the East in search of the Star and, after ascending the Mountain of Light (known later in Christian and Islamic times as the Mountain of Victory or *Mons Victoralis*/*Jabal-al Fātih*, in what is now Nūristān/former Kafiristān, at the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Hindukush Mountains), they searched and found there the remnants of Noah’s Ark; they had been guided there by the prophecy contained in the *Testament of Adam to his son Seth*.²⁴ The Star (perhaps either a Super Nova or a Comet?!) was in the Ancient World a celestial sign of royalty, of spiritual as well as of worldly (kingly) power. We should not forget the previous example

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Albrile 2009, 160-163 *ssq.* The *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*, a writing attributed to a Gothic (Arian Christian?) Archbishop with a very Roman-Latin name, Maximinus (and not belonging to Saint John Chrysostomus, as it has been previously thought among many scholars) as well as the Koranic *tafsir* know of this mountain located, (during the time of the AD 0 *magoi*) not within the borders of the Arsacid Kingdom of Parthia, but within the realm or empire of the *Kushāna* dynasty spanning over Bactria up to the Oxus/Amu-Daria and over North-western and Northern India. This was a space where Indian, Iranian, Greek-Roman (Hellenistic), Central Asian, and even Chinese cultures and religions met together, where Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, and possibly also Zurvanism as an offshoot of the Mazdean-Zoroastrian religion of Ancient Iran met with Buddhism, with Vedic-Brahmanism (Old Hinduism), with Jainism, as well as with the cult of the Olympian Hellenic gods brought in by Macedonian and Greek conquerors of Alexander the Great and Seleukos I Nikator, and later by the Greek Kings of Bactria and conquerors of Northern-western-central India. There, in the half mythical “land of the Sun/ἡλίου χώρα, they had known the image of the future *Saošyant*, the *Redemptor* or *Salvator Mundi*/Σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου Jesus Christ as having the luminous icon of the Avestan *Zurvan Akarana* or *Pahlavī Zurvān Akanārag*, the infinite space-time of the Universe, the Αἰὼν of Hellenistic religions and philosophies (*vide op. cit.*, 161-162 *ssq.*). Despite all the Babylonian influences with their astronomical and mathematical lore, the magi or *magoi* who had come to visit King Herodes the Great in Jerusalem and later went to Bethlehem to worship the newly born “King of the Jews” (in fact the “Great King” and Savior of the World, *Saošyant* according to the teachings of the Iranian Prophet and religious reformer Zoroaster or Zōroastrēs/Zarathuštra) were the main heirs to that already age-old Iranian Zoroastrian tradition, of course heavily influenced by the wisdom of the Chaldeans, Babylonians, and Assyrians, in their turn cultural heirs of the age old Mesopotamian civilizations of Sumer and Akkad (*vide* Albrile 2014, 133-140). The Iranian origin of these *magoi* is clearly reflected by the Early Christian Byzantine iconography of the mosaics and paintings of the churches from Palestine to Italy, from Jerusalem and Bethlehem to Ravenna and Rome (*vide* Albrile 2014, 133).

of the *sidus Iulium*, the Julian Star, which was a comet that appeared in the sky after Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March 44 BC, a fact immediately speculated on by young Octavian's war propaganda as being Caesar's soul going to Heavens to join the immortal gods: in this case, nevertheless, we are dealing with a celestial body, a "star" that has appeared in the night sky after the death of a famous world ruler, as a kind of *apotheosis* of the dead $\kappa\omicron\sigma\mu\omicron\kappa\rho\acute{\alpha}\tau\omicron\rho$ or *dominus mundi* (and not a Star appearing at the approaching Birth of a *Salvator Mundi*). They were looking at a Star which had a special form of appearance; in the center it included the Icon of a Virgin Maiden holding in her arms a baby boy, a Child wearing on His Head a royal crown (*tagā*), which, according to Saint Ephrem the Syrian, is the royal insignia of the "Sons of King": this is essentially the Holy Image of Christian Icons with the Madonna (Holy Virgin Mary Mother of God) and Child Jesus. We should keep in mind that this text is an Aramaic-Syriac early Christian source: the original Aramaic version is lost and there is only the Arabic and the *Karshuni* (Syriac written in Arabic characters) versions of the *Cavern of Treasures* that are actually still preserved: the content of text is, however, thoroughly Christian and it seems (according to this text) that the *magoi* had seen in Persia the Icon of Our Lady with Child (Baby Jesus) as it is depicted in countless Christian churches nowadays²⁵. There is also the problem of the moment of the apparition of the star: according to the 16th century CE hypothesis formulated by the famous astronomer Johannes Kepler, the *magoi* had spotted the Star on the 22nd of June of the year 7 BC, when the planets Saturn and Jupiter were in astronomical conjunction; but they knew that a new world religion, ideated by a World Savior, would be born only when Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars were all in astronomical conjunction, a fact that would only take place in March or early April 6 BC, when the Holy Ghost had caused Saint Virgin Mary to conceive Jesus; and Jesus Christ was born in late December 6 BC or early January 5 BC, when the *magoi*, following the Star, had finally arrived in Jerusalem. We can see that this Hypothesis of Kepler's is one of the first (if not the very first) which acknowledges the computation error of the Christian monk Dionysius Exiguus, a native of *Scythia Minor* (present day Dobrudja, in Romania) in the 6th century CE, who has calculated the Birth of Christ with an error of 4 to 6 years in respect to the real moment in time (the true year 0 of the Christian Era/AD 0, according to the corrected Dionysius's chronology, being in fact located between the years 6-4 BC, therefore with a chronological computation error of four, up to six, years).²⁶ The idea of celestial/astral bodies connected with the Sphere of the

²⁵ Albrile 2009, 161-162.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Divine or the Realm/Kingdom of God (or of the gods, in polytheistic religions and cults) is age-old: it is encountered in Babylon and in Egypt (the *ka-thasterismos*/καθαστηρισμός or transformation of the human soul into a star); the ascension to the Heavens appears abundantly in Old Iran; in Greece the myths of Perseus, Orion, and Herakles, the hero-god, provides the first known cases of ἀποθέωσις before the times of Homer, Hesiod, Empedocles of Akragas, and Pythagoras of Samos.²⁷

We should turn again to Mithras and to Iranian mythical and epic heroes (probably former gods and demigods before the religious reform operated by Zarathuštra) like the Avestan (or Old Persian?) Verethragna/ Vərəθraγna/Vereþragna (Pahlavī Wahrām/New Persian Bahrām) Θραετᾶona/Thraetāona/Þraetāona, sometimes identified with similar Greek (and also Roman) heroes like Heracles (or Hercules to the ancient Romans): seen from a Greco-Roman perspective, Verethragna was an Iranian *intepretatio Herculis*; from an Iranian perspective, it was of course vice versa: the mighty Greek hero who became the 13th Olympian god, Heracles, was a Hellenic version of their own hero or deity, Verethragna. The Zoroastrian Apocalypse, known as the *Zand i Wahman Yasn* or simply *Wahman Yašt*, links the beginning of the era when the Iranian Heracles-Wahrām rules with the sign of the falling of a star (*stārag*) from Heaven (*azsmān*): this hero is known as “the noble warrior” (*kay*) and other celestial portents will be the astrological exaltation of the “star” (planet) of Jupiter (*stārag i Ohrmazd*) and the astrological descent of the so-called “star” (*i.e.* planet) of Venus (*stārag i Anāhīd*).²⁸ Through these astrological/astronomical phenomena, the hero Verethragna/Heracles-Wahrām will gain power (*xwadāyīh*).²⁹ This ascent to power of Verethragna is included in the Zoroastrian scheme of the “*Magnus Annus*” or cosmic cycle of 12,000 years, divided into four stages of 3000 years each; this was in fact a flowing of time in the Universe done according to the twelve signs of the Zodiac. In the Zoroastrian Apocalypse of *Zand i Wahman Yasn*, the history of the Universe is linked to the existence of the four cardinal astronomical points or *cardines*/κέντρα in Greco-Roman astrology of Babylonian-Mesopotamian origin. This Babylonian-

²⁷ Culianu 1981, 20.

²⁸ *Vide* Albrile 2014, 136-137. The problem is here which was the *stārag* or astral body associated in Iranian Zoroastrian religion and mythology with Vereþragna/Wahrām: if it was the planet Mars and if it bore the same meaning for the Parthians and Persians as for the Greeks and Romans, namely the planet dedicated to the war god (Ares/Mars), then the Iranian hero could be equated not only with Heracles/Hercules, but also with Ares/Mars. Despite being an essentially positive hero, like the solar hero Heracles for the ancient Greeks, Macedonians, and Romans, Vereþragna/Wahrām was definitely not the *Saošyant*, the Savior of the World, according to Zoroastrian religious thinking.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Mesopotamian astrology has also deeply influenced Iranian culture of Pre-Islamic times; the *Pahlavī* culture had also borrowed the Babylonian-Greco-Roman idea of the *cardines*/κέντρα and called them *mēx*, known as the ascending point at the horizon in the East, the *medium caeli* (*zenith*), as the highest point in the sky and the descending point at the horizon in the West, and the *imum caeli* (*nadir*) or the point opposite to the *zenith* on a perpendicular (vertical) line, respectively. Those points are considered by the *magoi* astrologers as the cardinal points of a horoscope.³⁰ The Iranian ideas of dualistic Zurvanism and the Hellenistic-Roman philosophies interested in soteriology, like the Neoplatonism of Ammonius Sakkas and Plotinus, as well as of the philosopher Porphyrius in the 3rd century CE, and the new religion of Christianity interfered in the Roman Empire, and especially in the lands of the Near East and of the Middle East subject to the Roman Eagle, on the borders of Parthia/Persia. The different Dualistic Gnostic Doctrines of early Christianity and Late Greek-Roman Paganism, like the gnosis of Basilides, of Valentinus, and of the Gnostic philosopher and theologian Iustinus (Justin the Gnostic) from the 2nd and the 3rd centuries CE, with their combination of Judaeo-Christian, Hellenistic, and Iranian-Babylonian philosophical-theological theories, astrological ideas, and religious concepts are the living proof of the cultural melting pot of the Near East.³¹

³⁰ *Vide* Albrile 2014, 137.

³¹ *Id.*, 133-136. The birth of Manichaeism in the early 3rd century AD area of Babylon and Mesopotamia under Parthian rule and the subsequent spreading of Manichaeism from Mesopotamia, Parthia, and Persia and into the Roman Empire was also part of this melting pot of metaphysical and religious ideas of varied origins (Judeo-Christian, Neo-Platonist, Gnostic Christianity, Zoroastrian, Zurvanistic, and Mithraic cults from Iran as well as from the Roman Empire, Buddhism from India, Eastern Iran, and Central Asia). The spiritual problems of the age had been solved by the double way which was in fact a single way of philosophy combined with religion, philosophical speculation and religious meditation, prayer, and ritual practice. Those two ways were not incompatible and were not seen as mutually exclusive in Antiquity; on the contrary, they were in fact complementary and merged into one. The triumphant official Christian Church in Byzantium (Constantinople) and Rome had inherited this double way of philosophy combined with religion and had chosen to place emphasis on the religious side. The Christian Theology, nevertheless, could not survive without a massive borrowing of Greek philosophical concepts (ideas from Neo-Platonism and Platonism, as well as from Neo-Pythagoreanism, especially in what would become the Eastern Branch of Trinitarian Nicean Christianity, the Greek-Orthodox Church of Byzantium, as well as the powerful influence of the philosophy of Aristotle upon Christian Catholic Theology of the Church of Rome: Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus in the Greek Christian East, and Aristotle, either via Latin translations from the Greek original or via the Latin translation from Arabic Islamic interpretations of Aristotle, like that of Averroes; there was also an influence of Platonist and Neo-Platonist ideas on the Western/Latin Christian Church during the Early Middle Ages (Joannes Scottus Eriugena, for example). The Iranian ethical dualism had also its impact on Christian ethics and theological debate, but the Greek philosophical thinking

It is not our task here to delve deeply into the difficulties of the different trends and schools of Gnosticism that bloomed in the first three or four centuries of the Christian era. The final problem is the place occupied by Neoplatonism in the religious landscape of Late Antiquity and the relationship of this philosophy with the religion of Roman Mithraism. There it is hard to find any direct common element between the worshippers of the “Roman” god Mithras and the Neoplatonist philosophers. Both the Mithraic adepts and the Neoplatonist philosophers, however, were in search of a spiritual truth that lay beyond them or rather within them. The Mithraists searched probably through their spiritual development to transcend the limits of the κόσμος or rather of the “Heaven of the Fixed/Immovable Stars”; the disciples of Plotinus and Porphyrius tried hard through Spiritual Enlightenment (via philosophical meditation combined with mystical-religious practices) to make their individual Soul ascend to the sphere of the Νοῦς or Spirit and to the One. They considered themselves members of elite brotherhoods: the tough initiation proofs and tests involved in the steps or degrees of Mithraic religious initiation, which were perhaps both psychic and physical, and the twofold path proposed by Neoplatonists (philosophical thinking/meditation and mystical contemplation) in order for the individual soul to ascend to the Supreme Good, the One (τὸ ἓν) were frankly speaking of ways accessible and intelligible to few select individuals. Their elitist mentality was the common ground between Neoplatonists and Mithraists. This mentality of elite groups is perhaps one of the reasons that can explain the ultimate defeat of the mystery religions and of all the initiation cults of non-Christian origin in the Roman Empire, faced by a much more popular and inclusive mystery religion of Eastern origin, Christianity.

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and the Roman juridical mind were paramount in defining Christian Theology and Canonical Church Law.

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