

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.
Assistant Editor: T. J. MCCORMACK.

Associates: } E. C. HEGELER.
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VOL. XVI. (NO. 8)

AUGUST, 1902.

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REVERSE OF THE GRAND MITHRAIC BAS-RELIEF OF
HEDDERNHEIM, GERMANY.

(See the Frontispiece to the *June Open Court*.)

Frontispiece to the August Open Court.

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MITHRA AND THE IMPERIAL POWER OF ROME.¹

BY PROFESSOR FRANZ CUMONT.

THANKS to the relatively late epoch of their propagation, the Mysteries of Mithra escaped the persecutions that had been the destiny of the other Oriental cults that had preceded them in Rome, especially that of Isis. Among the astrologers or "Chaldæans" who had been expelled from Italy at various times under the first emperors, there may possibly have been some that rendered homage to the Persian gods; but these wandering soothsayers who, in spite of the pronouncements of the senate, which were as impotent as they were severe, invariably made their appearance again in the capital, no more preached a definite religion than they constituted a regular clergy. When, toward the end of the first century, Mithraism began to spread throughout the Occident, the haughty reserve or outspoken hostility which had anciently characterised the attitude of the Roman policy toward foreign missionaries began to give way to a spirit of benevolent tolerance, where not of undisguised favor. Nero had already expressed a desire to be initiated into the ceremonies of Mazdaism by the Magi whom King Tiridates of Armenia had brought with him to Rome, and this last-mentioned prince had worshipped in his person an emanation of Mithra himself.

Unfortunately, we have no direct information regarding the legal status of the associations of the *Cultores Solis invicti Mithræ*. No text tells us whether the existence of these brotherhoods was at first simply tolerated, or whether, having been recognised by the

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

State, they acquired at the outset the right of owning property and of transacting business. In any event, it is unlikely that a religion that had always counted so many adherents in the administration and the army should have been left by the sovereign for any length of time in an anomalous condition. Perhaps, in order to acquire legal standing, these religious societies were organised as burial associations, and acquired thus the privileges accorded to this species of corporations. It would appear, however, that they had resorted to a still more efficacious expedient. From the moment of the discovery of traces of the Persian cult in Italy, we find it intimately associated with that of the *Magna Mater* (Great Mother) of Pessinus, which had been solemnly adopted by the Roman people three centuries before. Further, the sanguinary ceremony of the *taurobolium*, or baptism in the blood of a bull, which had, under the influence of the Mazdean belief, been adopted into the liturgy of the Phrygian goddess, was encouraged, probably from the time of Marcus Aurelius, by grants of civil immunities. True, we are still in doubt whether this association of the two deities was officially confirmed by the senate or the prince. Had this been done, the foreign god would at once have acquired the rights of Italian citizenship and would have been accorded the same privileges with Cybele or the Bellona of Comana. But even lacking all formal declaration on the part of the public powers, there is every reason to believe that Mithra, like Attis, whom he had been made to resemble, was linked in worship with the Great Mother and participated to the full in the official protection which the latter enjoyed. Yet its clergy appear never to have received a regular donation from the treasury, although the imperial *fiscus* and the municipal coffers were in exceptional cases opened for its benefit.

Toward the end of the second century, the more or less circumspet complaisance with which the Cæsars had looked upon the Iranian Mysteries was suddenly transformed into effective support. Commodus was admitted among their adepts and participated in their secret ceremonies, and the discovery of numerous votive inscriptions, either for the welfare of this prince or bearing the date of his reign, gives us some inkling of the impetus which this imperial conversion imparted to the Mithraic propaganda. After the last of the Antonines had thus broken with the ancient prejudice, the protection of his successors appears to have been definitively assured to the new religion. From the first years of the third century onward it had its chaplain in the palace of the Augusti, and its votaries are seen to offer vows and sacrifices for

the protection of Severus and Philippus. Aurelian, who instituted the official cult of the *Sol invictus*, could have only sentiments of sympathy with the god that was regarded as identical with the one whom he caused his pontiffs to worship. In the year 307 A. D., Diocletian, Galerius, and Licinius, at their conference in Carnuntum, dedicated with one accord a temple to Mithra *fautori imperii sui*, and the last pagan that occupied the throne of the Cæsars, Julian the Apostate, was an ardent votary of this tutelary god, whom he caused to be worshipped in Constantinople.

Such unremitting favor on the part of monarchs of so divergent types and casts of mind cannot have been the result of a passing vogue or of individual fancies. It must have had deeper causes. If the rulers of the empire show for two hundred years so great a predilection for this foreign religion, born among the enemies whom the Romans never ceased to combat, they were evidently compelled to do so by some reason of state. In point of fact, they found in its doctrines a support for their personal policy and a staunch advocacy of the autocratic pretensions which they were so energetically endeavoring to establish.

We know the slow evolution which gradually transformed the principate that Augustus had founded into a monarchy existing by the grace of God. The emperor, whose authority was theoretically derived from the nation, was at the outset simply the first magistrate of Rome. By virtue of his office solely, as the heir of the tribunes and as supreme pontiff, he was already inviolable and invested with a sacred character; but, just as his power, which was originally limited by law, ended after a succession of usurpations in complete absolutism, so also by a parallel development the prince, the plenipotentiary of the nation, became the representative of God on earth, nay, even God himself (*dominus et deus*). Immediately after the battle of Actium, we see arising a movement which is diametrically opposed to the original democratic fiction of Cæsarism. The Asiatic cities forthwith made haste to erect temples in honor of Augustus and to render homage to him in a special cult. The monarchical memories of these peoples had never faded. They had no understanding for the subtle distinctions by which the Italians were endeavoring to overreach themselves. For them, a sovereign was always a king (*βασιλεύς*) and a god (*θεός*). This transformation of the imperial power was a triumph of the Oriental genius over the Roman mind,—the triumph of the religious idea over the conception of law.

Several historians have studied in detail the organisation of

this worship of the emperors and have shed light on its political importance. But they have not discerned so clearly perhaps the nature of its theological foundation. It is not sufficient to point out that at a certain epoch the princes not only received divine honors after their death, but were also made the recipients of this homage during their reign. It must be explained why this deification of a living person, how this new species of apotheosis, which was quite contrary to common sense and to sound Roman tradition, was in the end almost universally adopted. The sullen resistance of public opinion was overcome when the religions of Asia vanquished the masses of the population. These religions propagated in Italy dogmas which tended to raise the monarchs above the level of humankind, and if they won the favor of the Cæsars, and particularly of those who aspired to absolute power, it is because they supplied a dogmatic justification of their despotism. In place of the old principle of popular sovereignty was substituted a reasoned faith grounded on supernatural influence. We shall now essay to show what part Mithraism played in this significant transformation, concerning which our historical sources only imperfectly inform us.

Certain plausible appearances have led people to suppose that the Romans drew all ideas of this class from Egypt. Egypt, whose institutions in so many directions inspired the administrative reforms of the empire, was also in a position to furnish it with a consummate model of a theocratic government. According to the ancient beliefs of that country, not only did the royal race derive its origin from the sun-god Râ, but the soul of each sovereign was a double detached from the sun-god Horus. All the Pharaohs were thus successive incarnations of the great day-star. They were not only the representatives of divinities, but living gods worshipped on the same footing with those that traversed the skies, and their insignia resembled those of these divinities.

The Achæmenides, who became masters of the valley of the Nile, and after them also the Ptolemies, inherited the homage which had been paid to the ancient Egyptian kings, and it is certain that Augustus and his successors, who scrupulously respected all the religious usages of the country as well as its political constitution, there suffered themselves to be made the recipients of the same character that a tradition of thirty centuries had accorded to the potentates of Egypt.

From Alexandria, where even the Greeks themselves accepted it, this theocratic doctrine was propagated to the farthest confines

of the empire. The priests of Isis were its most popular missionaries in Italy. The proselytes whom they had made in the highest classes of society became imbued with it; the emperors, whose secret or avowed ambitions this attribute flattered, soon encouraged it openly. Still, although their policy would have been favored by a diffusion of the Egyptian doctrines, they were yet impotent to impose this tenet at once and unrestrictedly. From the first century on they had suffered themselves to be called *deus noster* by their domestic servants and their ministers, who were already half Oriental, but they had not the courage at that period to introduce their name into their official titles. Certain of the Cæsars, a Caligula or a Nero, could dream of playing on the stage of the world the rôle which the Ptolemies played in their smaller kingdom. They could persuade themselves that different gods had taken life in their own persons; but enlightened Romans were invariably incensed at their extravagances. The Latin spirit rebelled against the monstrous fiction created by the Oriental imagination. The apotheosis of a reigning prince encountered obstinate adversaries even in a much later time, among the last of the pagans. For the general acceptance of the doctrine a far less crude theory than that of the Alexandrian epiphany was needed. And it was the religion of Mithra that furnished this doctrine.

The Persians, like the Egyptians, prostrated themselves before their sovereigns, but they nevertheless did not regard them as gods. When they rendered homage to the "demon" of their king, as they did at Rome to the "genius" of Cæsar (*genius Cæsaris*), they only worshipped the divine element that resided in every man and formed part of his soul. The majesty of the monarchs was sacred solely because it descended to them from Ahura Mazda, whose divine wish had placed them on their throne. They ruled "by the grace" of the creator of heaven and earth. The Iranians pictured this "grace" as a sort of supernatural fire, as a dazzling aureole, or nimbus of "glory," which belonged especially to the gods, but which also shed its radiance upon princes and consecrated their power. The *Hvarenô*, as the Avesta calls it, illuminated legitimate sovereigns and withdrew its light from usurpers as from impious persons who should soon lose their crowns and their lives. On the other hand, those who were deserving of obtaining and preserving it received as their reward unceasing prosperity, great fame, and perpetual victory over their enemies.

This peculiar conception of the Persians had no counterpart in the other mythologies, and the foreign nations of antiquity

likened the Mazdean "Glory," not very correctly, to Fortune. The Semites identified it with their *Gadû*, the Grecians translated his name by Τύχη, or Tyche. The different dynasties that succeeded the fall of the Achæmenides and endeavored to trace back their genealogy to some member of the ancient reigning house, naturally rendered homage to this special Tyche whose protection was at once the consequence and the demonstration of their legitimacy. We see the *Hvarenô* honored alike, and for the same motives, by the kings of Cappadocia, Pontus, and Bactriana; and the Seleucids who long ruled over Iran were also regarded as the *protégés* of Fortune, who had been sent by the supreme god. In his burial inscription, Antiochus of Commagene appears to have gone so far as to identify himself with the goddess. The Mazdean ideas concerning monarchical power thus spread into Occidental Asia at the same time with Mithraism. But, like this latter, it was interwoven with Semitic doctrines. The belief that fatality gave and took away the crown again made its appearance even among the Achæmenides. Now, according to the Chaldæans, destiny is necessarily determined by the revolution of the starry heavens, and the brilliant celestial body that appears to command all its comrades was considered as the royal star *par excellence*. Thus, the invincible Sun (ἥλιος), identified with Mithra, was during the Alexandrian period generally considered as the dispenser of the *Hvarenô* that gives victory. The monarch upon whom this divine grace descended was lifted above ordinary mortals and revered by his subjects as a peer of the gods. After the downfall of the Asiatic principalities, the veneration of which their dynasties had been the object was transferred to the Roman emperors. The Orientals forthwith saluted in the persons of these rulers the elect of God, to whom the Fortune of kings had given omnipotent power. According as the Syrian religions, and especially the Mysteries of Mithra, were propagated in Rome, the ancient Mazdean theory, more or less tainted with Semitism, found increasing numbers of champions in the official Roman world. We see it making its appearance there, at first timidly but afterwards more and more boldly, in the sacred institutions and the official titles of the emperors, the meaning of which it alone enables us to fathom.

Since the republican epoch the Fortune of the Roman people had been worshipped under different names at Rome. This ancient national cult soon became impregnated with the beliefs of the Orient, where not only every country but every city worshipped its own divine destiny. When Plutarch tells us that Tyche forsook

the Assyrians and the Persians, crossed Egypt and Syria, and took her abode on the Palatine Hill, his metaphor is true in quite a different sense from that which he had in mind. Also the emperors, imitating their Asiatic predecessors, easily succeeded in causing to be worshipped by the side of this goddess of the state, that other goddess who was the special protectress of their own person. The *Fortuna Augusti* had appeared on the coins since Vespasian, and as formerly the subjects of the Diadochi so now those of the Cæsars swore by the Fortune of their princes. The superstitious devotion of these rulers to their patron goddess was so great that in the second century at least they constantly had before them, even during sleep or on voyages, a golden statue of the goddess which on their death they transmitted to their successor and which they invoked under the name of *Fortuna regia*, a translation of *τύχη βασιλείως*. In fact, when this safeguard abandoned them they were doomed to death or at least to reverses and calamities; so long as they preserved it, they knew only success and prosperity.

After the reign of Commodus, from which dates the triumph at Rome of the Oriental cults and especially of the Mithraic Mysteries, we see the emperors officially taking the titles of *pius*, *felix*, and *invictus*, which appellations from the third century on regularly formed part of the imperial protocols. These epithets were inspired by the special fatalism which Rome had borrowed from the Orient. The monarch is *pius* (pious) because his devotion alone can secure the continuance of the special favor which heaven has bestowed on him; he is *felix*, happy, or rather fortunate (*εὐτυχής*), for the definite reason that he is illuminated by the divine *Grace*; and finally he is "invincible" because the defeat of the enemies of the empire is the most signal indication that his tutelary "Grace" has not ceased to attend him. Legitimate authority is not given by heredity or by a vote of the senate, but by the gods; and it is manifested in the shape of victory.

All this conforms to the ancient Mazdean ideas, and the employment of the last of the three adjectives mentioned further betrays the influence of the astrological theories which were mingled with Parseeism. *Invictus*, *Ἀνίκητος*, is, as we have seen, the ordinary attribute of the sidereal gods imported from the Orient, and especially so of the Sun. The emperors evidently chose this appellation to emphasise their resemblance to the celestial divinity, the idea of whom it immediately evoked. The doctrine that the fate of states, like that of individuals, was inseparably conjoined with the course of the stars, was accompanied with the corollary

that the chief of the planetary bodies was arbiter of the Fortune of kings. It was he that raised them to their thrones, or deposed them from them ; it was he that assured them their triumphs and afflicted upon them their disasters. The sun is regarded as the companion (*comes*) of the emperor and as his personal savior (*conservator*). We have seen that Diocletian revered in Mithra the *fautor imperii sui*, or patron guardian of his empire.

In assuming the surname of *invictus* (invincible), the Cæsars formally pronounced the intimate alliance which they had contracted with the Sun, and they tended more and more to emphasise their likeness to him. The same reason induced them to assume the still more ambitious epithet of "eternal," which, having long been employed in ordinary usage, was in the third century finally introduced into the official formularies. This epithet, like the first, is borne especially by the solar divinities of the Orient, the worship of whom spread in Italy at the beginning of our era. Applied to the sovereigns, it reveals more clearly than the first-named epithet the conviction that from their intimate companionship with the Sun they were united to him by an actual identity of nature.

This conviction is also manifested in the usages of the court. The celestial fire which shines eternally among the stars, always victorious over darkness, had as its emblem the inextinguishable fire that burned in the palace of the Cæsars and which was carried before them in the official ceremonies. This lamp, constantly illuminated, had also served the Persian kings as an image of the perpetuity of their power ; and it passed with the mystical ideas of which it was the expression to the Diadochi, and from them on to the Romans.

Also, the radiate crown which, in imitation of the Seleucids and the Ptolemies the emperors had adopted since Nero as the symbol of their sovereignty, is fresh evidence of these politico-religious tendencies. Symbolical of the splendor of the Sun and of the rays which it gave forth, it appeared to render the monarch the simulacrum of the planet-god whose brilliancy dazzles the eyes.

What was the sacred relation established between the radiant disc which illuminated the heavens and the human image which represented it on earth? The loyalist zeal of the Orientals knew no bounds in its apotheosis. The Sassanid kings, as the Pharaohs before them, proclaimed themselves "brothers of the sun and the moon"; and the Cæsars were almost similarly regarded in Asia as the successive Avatars of Helios. Certain autocrats approved of being likened to this divinity and caused statues to be erected that

showed them adorned with his attributes. They suffered themselves even to be worshipped as emanations of Mithra. But these insensate pretensions were repudiated by the sober sense of the Latin peoples. As above remarked, the Occident studiously eschewed such absolute affirmations; they were content with metaphors; they were fond of comparing the sovereign who governed the inhabited world and whom nothing that occurred in it could escape, to the celestial luminary that enlightened the universe and controlled its destinies. They preferred to use obscure expressions which admitted of all kinds of interpretations. They conceded that the prince was united with the immortals by some relation of kinship, but they were chary of precisely defining its character. Nevertheless, the conception that the Sun had the emperor under his protection and that supernatural effluvia descended from the one to the other, gradually led to the notion of their consubstantiality.

Now, the psychology taught in the Mysteries furnished a rational explanation of this consubstantiality and supplied it almost with a scientific foundation. According to these doctrines the souls pre-existed in the empyrean, and when they descended to earth to animate the bodies in which they were henceforward to be enclosed, they traversed the spheres of the planets and received from each some of its planetary qualities. For all the astrologers, the Sun, as before remarked, was the royal planet, and it was consequently he that gave to his chosen ones the virtues of sovereignty and called them to kingly dominion.

It will be seen immediately how these theories favored the pretensions of the Cæsars. They were lords of the world by right of birth (*deus et dominus natus*), because of having been destined to the throne by the stars from their very advent into the world. They were divine, for there were in them some of the elements of the Sun of which they were in a measure the passing incarnation. Descended from the starry heavens, they returned there after their death to pass eternity in the company of the gods, their equals. The common mortal pictured the emperor after his death, like Mithra at the end of his career, as borne heavenward by Helios in his resplendent chariot.

Thus, the dogmatology of the Persian Mysteries combined two theories of different origin, both of which tended to lift princes above the level of humankind. On the one side, the ancient Mazdean conception of *Hvarenô* had become the "Fortune of the King," illuminating him with celestial grace and bringing him vic-

tory. On the other hand, the idea that the soul of the monarch at the moment when destiny caused his descent to the terrestrial spheres, received from the Sun his dominating power, gave rise to the contention that he shared in the divinity of that planet, and was its representative on earth.

These beliefs may appear to us to-day as absurd, or even as monstrous, but they nevertheless controlled for centuries millions of men of the most different types and nationalities, and united them under the banner of the same monarchical faith. If the educated classes, who always preserved through literary tradition some remnant of the ancient republican spirit, cherished a measure of skepticism in this regard, the popular sentiment certainly accepted these theocratic chimeras, and suffered themselves to be governed by them as long as paganism lasted. It may even be said that these conceptions survived the smashing of the idols, and that the veneration of the masses as well as the ceremonial of the court never ceased to consider the person of the sovereign as endued with essence superhuman. Aurelian had essayed to establish an official religion broad enough to embrace all the cults of his dominions and which would have served, as it had among the Persians, both as the justification and the prop of imperial absolutism. His hopes, however, were blasted by the recalcitrance of the Christians. Yet the alliance of the throne with the altar, of which the Cæsars of the third century had dreamed, was realised under another form, and by a strange mutation of fortune the Church itself was called upon to support the edifice whose foundations it had shattered. The work for which the priests of Serapis, of Baal, and of Mithra had paved the way was achieved without them and in opposition to them. Nevertheless, they had been the first to preach in Occidental parts the doctrine of the divine right of kings, and had thus become the initiators of a movement of which the echoes were destined to resound even "to the last syllable of recorded time."