

**Barbarians No More.
Revisiting the Eastern Contributions to Early
Greek Philosophy**

Constantin C. Lupașcu

"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania

Abstract: We often assume that our present world alone has experienced the phenomenon of globalization and that it is necessarily a feature of the modern age. And in this we like to imagine the world of the past as made up of homogeneous monolithic blocks with rigid and well-defined impenetrable boundaries. Nothing could be further from the truth. The ancient world enjoyed an interconnectedness as tight if not tighter than ours is today. Nowhere do we see this connection better than between the Greek and the Persian world. The conflict between the two serves as the starting point of the archetypal conflict between the Orient and the Occident. However, at the same time, Persian culture served as a foundation for Greek moral philosophy and by extension, had a major influence on later Jewish, Christian and Islamic philosophy. The transition from mythological to philosophical knowledge occurs in Greek thought when it encounters these Magi. In this regard, we shall see that Plato had a special relationship with the Magi, and the Magi in turn held Plato in high regard. However, Plato's example is by no means an isolated case. We have other equally famous examples of Greek philosophers who we are told went to study in Persia before Plato, namely Pythagoras and Democritus.

It is with great sadness that we see this Religion of Light is today in danger of extinction. Zoroastrians rarely receive converts. And their numbers are rapidly dwindling. However, there is still hope for reform. Where Zoroastrianism might eventually die as a religion, it might live on as a moral philosophy unbounded by geography, ethnicity or politics just as it was in ancient times.

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, Magi, Plato, Ancient Greek Theology, Ancient Persian Philosophy

The Absent God of Hellenic Theology

Unlike other organized religions of antiquity, which relied on a foundation of sacred narratives, be them oral and written, the ancient Hellenic religion lacked any proper religious scripture. There is no authoritative canon of gods. No cohesive way of performing a ritual and its associated customs. And there was no central institution to organize the religious life of the ancient Hellenes, not even within their own cities. Each Hellenic community worshiped the gods according to their own local rituals and customs. And there were frequent clashes over how to properly worship each god.

What we have instead is an extremely rich mythological culture, which is only superficially united in a bundle of common beliefs. Hellenic theology relies fundamentally on its myths as its main form of propagation. And each myth in turn takes on variations depending on who, when and why recalled it. But even in this utter lack of “orthodoxy” we see that there are certain beliefs in ancient Greece that are quite obviously not part of this mythological tradition. Herodotus in his *Histories* refers to Homer and Hesiod as “οὗτοι δὲ εἰσὶ οἱ ποιήσαντες θεογονίην Ἕλλησι καὶ τοῖσι θεοῖσι τὰς ἐπωνυμίας δόντες καὶ τιμὰς τε καὶ τέχνας διελόντες καὶ εἶδεα αὐτῶν σημήναντες”¹ (hoṗtoi dè eisì hoi poiēsantes theogoníēn Hállēsi kaì toῖsi theoῖsi tàs epōnumías dóntes kaì timás te kaì tékhnas dielóntes kaì eídea autōñ sēménantes) - the ones who laid out for the Greeks the descent of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms. Our primary source that we will refer to in understanding the religion of the ancient Greeks is therefore Hesiod. Although Homer long before him discusses the Greek gods in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he does so to an audience already familiar with the personalities of these deities, therefore he does not go into detail about their identities. While Hesiod makes his presentation as an introduction to someone not yet familiar with the Greek pantheon. However, Herodotus also informs us about a very important aspect of the Greek religion that we must keep in mind. He readily admits that the religion of the ancient Greeks has close ties to those of Egypt and the Middle East of the time. He

¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Alfred Denis Godley* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1920), 2.53.2.

* Wherever I considered necessary some translations I have done myself in order to better convey the literary meaning of the fragments, as is the case here.

claims that the Pelasgians, the indigenous inhabitants of the Aegean Sea, did not invoke the gods by name, because they did not know them. As was the custom then and in many other places, the names of the gods were taboo. The Pelasgians had received the names of the gods from the Egyptians,² and asking the oracle at Dodona if it would be proper to use these names that “τῶν βαρβάρων ἦκοντα”³ (tôn barbárōn hékonta) - from the barbarians had come, the oracle told them to use the names as their own.⁴ Hence the rest of the Greeks would later inherit these names from the Pelasgians.

Nonetheless this borrowing doesn't stop there. Herodotus also claims that the legendary soothsayer Melampus learned the art of divination from the Egyptians, and that he was instructed in the worship of Dionysus by Cadmus of Tyre and those who came with Cadmus from Phoenicia to the lands in continental Greece they called Boeotia.⁵

What we want to highlight in these accounts of Herodotus, before turning to the Greek creation myth in Hesiod, is the open and very cosmopolitan nature of Greek religion. And Herodotus' account is not the only place where we find these examples. There are many more records elsewhere in ancient Greek literature that tell us how the Greeks readily adopted foreign gods and customs, which they later appropriated by Hellenizing them.

Today we call this phenomenon *interpretatio graeca*. This concept traces its origins to Tacitus' *De Origine et Situ Germanorum Liber* where he states that the Germanic tribes of the Nahanarvali worshipped “sed deos interpretatione Romana Castorem Pollucemque memorant”⁶ - deities which are rendered in the Roman language as Castor and Pollux, and which the Nahanarvali themselves called Alcis. This is the origin of the concept of *interpretatio romana*, which was applied by the Greeks before them and from which *interpretatio christiana* would later be derived. Pliny the Elder would later reinforce this translatability when he says that the gods have “nomina alia aliis gentibus”⁷ - different names for different people. This is because the Greeks, and later the Romans, did not see foreign gods, but their own gods as seen by foreigners. It is important to remember this aspect for later on when

² Ibid., 2.50.1.

³ Ibid., 2.52.3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 2.49.2-3.

⁶ Tacitus, “De Origine et Situ Germanorum Liber,” in *Opera Minora*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 43.4.

⁷ Plinius, *The Natural History*, trans. Harris Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 2.5.15.

we will be discussing the trials of Anaxagoras and Socrates. For now, let us see what the Hellenistic mythos tells us about the making of the world.

The Greek creation myth is recorded with great skill by Hesiod in his *Theogony* or *The Birth of the Gods*. Hesiod tells us that “ἔξ ἀρχῆς [...] πρότιστα Χάος γένηται”⁸ (ex arkhês [...] prôtista Kháos génetai) - at first Chaos came to be. Here Hesiod uses the verb γένηται (génetai) - to be born or to be produced. We note that this is not a verb of atemporal existence, but a verb of becoming in time. Because the Greek language knows two concepts of being,⁹ A hard or strong “to be”. Eternal and immutable. And a weak mutable “to be”. In any case γένηται (génetai) is not a form of the verb εἶμι (eimí) - to be or to exist, but of γίγνομαι (gígnomai) - to come into being or to become. Therefore, Chaos is not outside time. This indicates the impermanence of this chaos. After all, why did something that would have existed eternally needed to appear? Hesiod does not tell us where this Chaos came from. Or, more importantly, how it got there. We recognize, however, that Hesiod is not seeking an explanation on the making of the world, but merely a description of a state of matter at a certain point in this primordial time. We highlight this fact to show that a very important element is missing here. The Greek genesis myth is not based on an eternal and unchangeable principle. But on a mutable principle. And still not even that. Chaos is neither the principle for the making of the world nor its ordering reason as was the case with the Egyptians and Zoroastrians. Here Chaos is absolute nothingness and emptiness. Absence par excellence.

After introducing this primordial inhospitable Chaos, Hesiod introduces Gaia. Gaia is the embodiment of the solid principle of earth, and the first anchor at the beginning of creation. In Hesiod’s words “πάντων ἔδος ἀσφαλὲς αἰεὶ ἀθανάτων, οἳ ἔχουσι κάρη νιφόντος Ὀλύμπου”¹⁰ (pántōn hédos asphalés aiei áthanátōn, hoí ékhousi kárē niphóntos Olýmpou) - the forever immovable foundation (seat) of all the immortal ones, who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus. She is also the ancestral, often parthenogenic - “ἄτερ φιλότητος ἐφίμερος”¹¹ (áter philótētos ephímeros) - without the yearning of love - originator of all life. In this succession we see

⁸ Hesiod, “Theogony,” in *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 116.

⁹ For a short clarification, see Charles Kahn, “The Greek Verb ‘To Be’ and the Concept of Being,” in *Foundations of Language* 2, no. 3 (August 1966), 245–65.

¹⁰ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 117-18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

that Chaos is neither the progenitor of Gaia, nor its partner and counterpart. Gaia comes into existence *αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα*¹² (*autár épeita*) - following and besides Chaos, not out of it. And her counterpart is Uranus, which she *ἐγείνατο*¹³ (*egeínato*) - beget herself to be her equal. However, inexplicably Hesiod tell us that Chaos begets Erebus and Nyx: “Ἐκ Χάεος δ’ Ἐρεβός τε μέλαινά τε Νύξ ἐγένοντο”¹⁴ (*Ek Kháeos d’ Érebós te mélaina te Núx egénonto*) - Out of Chaos came forth Erebus and black Night. A fundamentally different formulation from, for example, the Gospel of John 1:1: *Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος* (*En archē ēn ho Lógos*) - In the beginning there was the Word. And John 1:3: *πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο* - (*panta di’ autou egeneto*) - all things through Him came into being. Or even the Genesis 1:1: *Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν* (*En archē epoiēsen ho theos ton ouranon kai tén gēn*) - In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. Heaven and earth did not create themselves through spontaneous generation.

Other deities that appear at this point in the account of Hesiod are Tartarus, the deep abyss. A personification of the (hellish) afterlife. And Eros, the personification of love and desire. And from here on Hesiod’s narrative runs genealogically from generation to generation of deities to Zeus and the rest of the Olympian gods. Zeus himself is by no means an absolute transcendental deity. He was not the first of the gods. He was not even the first among his siblings. In fact, he was the last, but *μητιόεντα* (*mētíóenta*) - most well advised, of them.¹⁵ His generation, the younger Olympian gods, comes after the Primordial gods and the Titans. He rose to power during the *Τιτανομαχία* (*Tītānomakhíā*) - the Titanomachy against the Titans of Mount Othrys, not so much through his own abilities as through the conspiracy of Rhea, his mother, and Metis against Cronos, his father.

The underlying idea that permeates Greek religion is that of dominion. The gods have, they are not. They are neither principles of their domain. Zeus is not the principle of heaven any more than Poseidon is the principle of water, for neither heaven nor water come from the gods. The gods merely put their hold on them when they divided the world after the defeat of the Titans. The gods of the Greeks are in a constant state of becoming. They gain, and more importantly lose, attributes. One thing the Greek gods are

¹² Hesiod, *Theogony*, 116.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 457.

particularly susceptible to is passion. And the passion of a god often brings damnation to the loved and much suffering to the lover.

The creation of man has no privileged place in Greek mythology. In Hesiod's narrative, the human being makes its appearance very late. And there are not one, but five races of men each with its own Age. Four of them corresponding to four increasingly less noble, but increasingly stronger, metals: Gold, Silver, Bronze and Iron.¹⁶ Between the Bronze and Iron Ages Hesiod places a Heroic Age.¹⁷ This age is remarkable as the only one that improves the human condition in relation to the others, which are strictly degressive. Ovid later in his *Metamorphoses* reiterates Hesiod's periodization for the Romans, but omits the Heroic Age,¹⁸ which is specific to the Greeks. It is relevant to mention that man had to be created multiple times because it had suffered multiple extinction events.

As such nowhere in Greek mythology do we find the figure of a (capital C) Creator deity. None in the Olympian pantheon are Creator gods, and they do not embody creation. They only shape an already existing creation. And then only bashfully and perfunctorily. In this respect, they are closer to the artificer god, the *δημιουργός*¹⁹ (dēmiourgós) in Plato's *Timaios*. Or the inferior, proud and jealous, god who creates the material world in the Gnostic tradition. Similarly, nowhere in Greek mythology do we find the idea of a "good" god. Greek gods are by no means moral, neither by our standards today nor by those of the ancients. In fact, we see that the Greek gods are amoral and often immoral. And they respect no cosmic law other than their own wills. The transition from mythological to philosophical knowledge begins with the awareness of this absence of this good god, which leaves Greek thought without a transcendent principle on which to base its morality. This search for an entirely good uncreated Creator will force the Greeks to look elsewhere. As the structures of their animistic mythology prove insufficient for Greek philosophy, which is very abstract and essentially principled, ancient Greek philosophy did not naturally derive from Greek mythology, but rather against it. And not nurtured by the products of Greek culture, but under the influence

¹⁶ Hesiod, "Works and Days," in *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 109-74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 158-60.

¹⁸ Ovidius, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 1.89-150.

¹⁹ Plato, "Timaios," in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 28a.

of two outside forces, Egyptian and Persian thought. Although in the following, we will only concern ourselves with the Persian heritage of the two.

Meeting the Religion of Light

But before exploring such possible Persian influences, a few words about the antiquity of these teachings are necessary. The fundamental scriptures of the Zoroastrians, the *Avesta*, are ancient. Although Zoroastrianism enters our recorded history in the 6th century BC, its origins could reach back in time over two millennia before this date. Or even more. How do we know this? Because of the language in which they were written. A language we have retroactively named Avestan, because the *Avesta* is the only place where this language is used, and to which the Zoroastrians themselves refer as *Zand*, or [the language of] exegesis. Avestan is closely related to Vedic Sanskrit - the language in which the Indian *Vedas* were written - the oldest preserved Indo-Aryan language that we know of. This close connection with Vedic Sanskrit proves the origins of the *Avesta* to be truly ancient, as it was written long before any other texts in Hebrew or Greek. This is why we do not even need to speculate on how long these teachings had survived as oral traditions before being committed to writing.

While so far we have relied almost exclusively on Greek (and Roman) sources, in what follows we will explore Persian sources. The information we have about Zoroastrianism comes from two accounts. Firstly, from the Avestic literature, and then from the Pahlavi literature, both named after the languages in which they were composed. The *Avesta* is the older of the two, and consists of the *Yasna*, the *Visperad*, the *Vendidad* and the *Yasht*. At the core of the *Yasna* we find the *Gathas* (*Yasna* 28-34 and 43-54), hymns believed to have been composed by Zoroaster himself, which are the most sacred parts of Zoroastrian worship. The Pahlavi writings are interpretations of the *Avesta* and consist of the *Denkard* and *Bundahishn*. About these latter sources, even though they are the most complete and richest Zoroastrian writings, we are certain that they were influenced by Middle and Neoplatonic philosophy during the Hellenistic period and then by Christianity and Islam and therefore we will not make use of them here.

Without further ado, what is Zoroastrianism? Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest surviving religions, with teachings older than Buddhism, older than Judaism and much older than Christianity or Islam. It is also the first abstract religion to refer to principles rather than anthropomorphized deities.

Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion within the framework of a dualistic cosmology of good and evil. Their God, Ahura Mazda, the embodiment of Light and Wisdom, is the first entirely benevolent creator god in the history of religions. In extreme contrast to the petty and self-interested pagan gods who could not be further from morality. It is the first religion in which we find the theme of a struggle between a principle of good and truth in battle with a principle of evil and lies. The idea of corruption, of sins and the eventual renovation of the world. Themes that are familiar to us today in our modern theology but were radical in the age of polytheism.

We call it Zoroastrianism after their prophet Zarathushtra Spitama, whose name was known in Greek as Zoroaster the Shining. The Persians themselves called it *Mazdayasna*, from *mazda* - wisdom and *yasna* - worship, thus the worship of wisdom. Their god's name is Mazda, to which Zoroaster sometimes attaches the title Ahura. Ahura is related to the Vedic word Asura which means “mighty” or “great”. In the context of Zoroastrianism, Ahura means “supreme”, “highest” or “ultimate”. Therefore, Ahura Mazda can be translated as the “ultimate wisdom”. Although Zoroastrianism and the Vedic religion share a vocabulary of divine and demonic beings, they are reversed between the two. *Ahura* comes to represent the good in Zoroastrianism, while *Asura* comes to represent evil in the Vedic religion. Whereas the *Daevas* come to represent evil in Zoroastrianism, while the *Devas* represent the good in Vedic religion.

Ahura Mazda is proclaimed by Zoroaster as the uncreated spirit²⁰, most wise²¹ and benevolent, father of *Vohu Manah*²² - *Good Thoughts*, creator and upholder of *Asha*²³ - *Truth* and of all things in the universe²⁴. Asha or Arta is a concept of cardinal importance for Zoroastrian theology and doctrines. It represents truth, order, righteousness and existence. In its meaning as existence, Asha denotes a hard understanding of reality, as opposed to imaginary existence or illusion. Asha is the second of the Amesha Spenta, the six “unending” or “immortal” “furtherings” or “strengthenings” of

²⁰ In *Yasna* 30.3 and *Yasna* 45.2 Zoroaster refers to Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu as *mainyû pouruyê* - first, first of all or primal, primordial spirits.

²¹ *Yasna* 1.1.

²² *Ibid.*, 31.8.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ In *Yasna* 44.7 Zoroaster refers to Ahura Mazda as *vispanām dâtârem* - Creator of the entire world.

Ahura Mazda through which he creates the universe.²⁵ Although they are more commonly translated as the “Bounteous Immortals,” they can also be translated as the more familiar Holy Spirit(s). Asha is also closely associated with fire. It is often called the fiery emanation of Ahura Mazda and the purifying fire of judgment.²⁶ The concept of Asha is mirrored directly in Greek philosophy through Heraclitus’ concept of *Logos* and Anaxagoras’ concept of *Nous*.

In opposition to the wholly benevolent god of creation is the evil spirit, Angra Mainyu. Angra Mainyu is not a proper name, and neither is Ahura Mazda, who is also often referred by Zoroaster as Spenta Mainyu. This evil spirit is referred to as *angra*²⁷ - destructive, or *aka*²⁸ - properly evil, *mainyu* - spirit. Angra Mainyu mirrors Ahura Mazda exactly, but in antithesis. The nature of this evil god and his relation to Ahura Mazda has brought much controversy and given rise to a myriad of heresies. In “orthodox” Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda is the only god, while Angra Mainyu is an inferior being. He is not even opposed to Ahura Mazda himself, but to his aspect of Spenta Mainyu. While in later Zurvanism²⁹ he is the equal, but opposite, of Ahura Mazda, with which he is locked in perpetual struggle. This interpretation is permitted by two verses in the *Yasna*. First in *Yasna* 30 where Zoroaster names the two at “tâ mainyû pouruyê yâ yêmâ”³⁰ - two primal Spirits which are twins and that these spirits “manahicâ vacahicâ shyaothanôî hî vahyô akemcâ”³¹ - in thought and in word, in action they are two: the good and the bad. And in *Yasna* 45 where Zoroaster again names the two “anghêush mainyû pouruyê”³² - spirits at the beginning of the world, one *spanyâo*³³ - bountiful and one *mainyû*³⁴ - destructive. The belief in the Zurvanite interpretation of creation was an apostasy and was violently opposed by Zoroastrians.

The echo of this evil god is still resonant to this day. In Manichaeism - of which Augustine of Hippo was a disciple until his conversion to Christianity, Marcionism, Bogomilism,

²⁵ *Yasna* 31.3; 44.7; 51.7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.4; 34.4; 36.1-4; 46.7; 47.6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.8; 27.1; 45.2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.3; 32.5.

²⁹ For a more detailed exposition on Zurvanism, see Robert Charles Zaehner, *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

³⁰ *Yasna* 30.3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 45.2.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Catharism, Paulicianism and other forms of Gnostic Christianity. Ahriman is the assumed devil in Christianity, not the heavenly accuser in the Books of Job and Zechariah. All interpretations of the scriptures where the devil is given agency carry the Zoroastrian image of the evil god.

In the eschatological and soteriological context of Zoroastrianism, the world was created by Ahura Mazda, but corrupted by Angra Mainyu.³⁵ Zoroastrians believed that the world would undergo a renovation after the final conflict at the end of time - a scenario similar to the Last Judgement in Christianity - in which evil will be vanquished and all creation purified. This concept bears the name *frašō karəti*³⁶ - making most excellent. In the context of the *Yasht* 19 and in general in an eschatological context *frashem* is understood as renovation,³⁷ that is, to bring the world back to its most excellent state before Angra Mainyu's corruption.

Humans are endowed with free will to choose between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. They have an active part in this cosmic conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil. And play a decisive role in tipping the balance in favor of one spirit or the other. From these principles of good and evil, the Zoroastrian profession of faith can be subsumed into the triune creed of "humatāca, hūxtāca, hvarštāca"³⁸ - *good thoughts, good words, and good deeds*. One who follows this creed is called *ašāvan*³⁹ - one who possesses or walks the path of truth. His opposite, the one who succumbed to the *druj* - the lies of Angra Mainyu, is called *drəvant*⁴⁰. In *Yasna* 30⁴¹ we see a glimpse of what the afterlife means to a Zoroastrian. After the *frashēm kerenāun* - the renovation of the world, the followers of *ašā* will receive happiness in the presence of Ahura Mazda in this now perfect world. While the followers of *druj* will be utterly destroyed together with their master. It should be noted that the Zoroastrians did not believe in reincarnation or μετεμψύχωσις (metempsychōsis) - the transmigration of souls, but in the resurrection of the dead, as Christians do.

³⁵ *Vendidad* 1.1-20.

³⁶ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1979), 26-9.

³⁷ *Yasht* 19.11.

³⁸ *Yasna* 0.4; 4.1; 4.3; 11.17.

³⁹ Maneckji Nusserwanji Dhalla, *History of Zoroastrianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 45-50.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴¹ *Yasna* 30.6-11.

My Brother's Keeper

Before discussing this intermingling of ideas between the two worlds, we need to present the attitudes of the two towards each other. And since we have no records that survive Alexander's burning of Persepolis, we have to rely exclusively on Greek sources. For his deeds, in the Zoroastrian tradition, the Macedonian is the embodiment of the evil god's agent on earth. And his reign together with his invasion as the "Race of Wrath" marks the beginning of a new cycle of the changing of the ages that ushers in the Age of Darkness. With this, we can draw a tentative conclusion that, at the time, the Persians thought very little of the Greeks. An image that will be partly rehabilitated in later periods. Especially with the medieval romance of the persianizing Alexander - the *Eskandar-Nâmeh*.⁴²

In antiquity there was an account by Ctesias of Cnidus titled *Persica*. Ctesias was a Greek physician and historian at the court of Artaxerxes II, who is supposed to have had access to the Persian royal archives and who was praised as having the most accurate recounting of Persian society and history. Sadly, it did not survive into the present day. Nevertheless, we are not interested in the position of the Persians towards the Greeks, as we are following the reverse direction of influence.

The classic and most popular narrative today is that of the enmity between the Greeks and the Persians. This conflict would also serve as the ideological root of the civilizational divide between the so-called Occident, following in the Hellenistic tradition, and the Orient. A position also fervently promoted by Ancient Greek propaganda. Especially after the dissolution of the Achaemenid Empire and the triumph of Alexander. However, the situation we actually see in the ancient sources available to us is quite different. With many Greeks finding refuge among the Persians. And even more of them coming here enticed by the promise of knowledge.

One of the earliest records that might convince us of a much closer relationship between the two nations is Herodotus' account of Xerxes' siege of Argos.⁴³ After occupying the Isthmus of Corinth and on his way to Athens, Xerxes sends a message to the city of

⁴² For a more detailed analysis of the changing views of the Persians on Alexander, see Mino Southgate, "Portrait of Alexander in Persian Alexander-Romances of the Islamic Era," in *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 97, no. 3 (July - September 1977), 278-84. For a further reading on his depiction as an agent of evil, see especially the sources indicated in Note 1.

⁴³ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7.150.1-3.

Argos. In this message, he reminds the Argives of their common ancestry and their kinship. What he is referring to here is the myth of Perseus. Perseus is one of the legendary heroes of the ancient world and the founder of Mycenae. He is the son of Zeus and Danae,⁴⁴ daughter of King Acrisius of Argos and his queen Eurydice. It Perseus who kills and decapitates the gorgon Medusa, whose gaze turns people to stone. He also rescues Andromeda, daughter of King Cepheus of Ethiopia and Queen Cassiopeia, from the sea monster Cetus. Andromeda is the one whom Perseus marries and through her he gives birth to the Perseid dynasty.⁴⁵ He is a Greek hero who belongs to Greek mythology, but we see that here Perseus is also claimed by the Persians at the same time. It is true that the Perseid dynasty was at the heart of one of the most important Greek civilizations, but not through Perseus' firstborn, but through his secondborn, Electrion, for Perseus and Andromeda had a total of nine children, seven boys and two girls. Perseus' firstborn, Perses, was left in Ethiopia to succeed his grandfather Cepheus, who had no male descendants.⁴⁶ From this son of Perseus, Perses, the Persian tribe thus claims its origin and name.⁴⁷ Or so the Greeks say.

This account is reinforced in the *First Alcibiades*, when Socrates discusses with Alcibiades the ruling dynasties of Sparta and Persia. And it is not by chance that he chooses these two, for he names Achaemenes, the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty, as a direct descendant of Perseus and also a relative of Heracles, from whom the dynasty of the kings of Sparta stems, thus linking the ruling dynasties of Argos, Sparta and Persia.⁴⁸

Thus, Xerxes shows his intention not to engage the Argives, whom he recognizes as being the Persians' ancestors. Considering that invading the lands of his own forefathers is unjust and unnatural, Xerxes asks them not to take part in the forthcoming battles, nor to support the Lacedaemonians or the Athenians with provisions or armaments, saying that the Argives should not become enemies of the Persians by helping their enemies but should continue to lead their lives in peace. It seems that the Argives were moved by his speech, remaining neutral and later enjoying the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.61.3.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., Cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 1.2.1.

⁴⁸ Plato, "Alcibiades I," in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 120e; 121a.

gratitude of the Persians.⁴⁹ For this, Argos would be accused of *μηδιζω*⁵⁰ (mēdízō) - medism by the other Greeks. However, it would benefit from an alliance with the Persians on very favorable terms offered to them by Artaxerxes I.⁵¹

Medism here represents the act of sympathizing with the Persians and was a very serious accusation in the Greek world at that time that could be levelled at any Greek who was found to have ideas or beliefs similar to or adopted from the Persians. Similarly, any Greek who sided with or aided the Persians in battle could be accused of medism. To be found guilty was tantamount to betraying one's country or blaspheming its gods. The punishment was exile or even death. Although a sentence issued for medizing alone was unusual, when associated with a charge of *προδοσία* (prodosía) - treason or *ἀσέβεια* (asébeia) - impiety it was considered an augmented form of these criminal charges.

Regardless, the philo-Persianism of the Argeads will be shared by their cadet house in Macedonia. Macedonia has always been regarded as being on the fringes of the Greek world. And the Macedonians themselves were often controversial because they were not considered to be properly Greek.⁵² This stigma went so far that Alexander I was even denied participation in the Olympics on the grounds that he was a *βαρβάρων* (barbárōn) - barbarian.⁵³ This estrangement from the Greek world will only increase with the campaign of the Persian general Megabazus as during the reign of Amyntas I, Macedonia became a vassal state of the Achaemenid Empire. And with the marriage of his daughter, Gygaea, to another, Persian general, Bubares, the mixing of the Greek dynasty with the Persian nobility began.⁵⁴ Subsequently, after the campaign of the Persian general Mardonius, Macedonia was added to the Persian Empire as a fully subordinate client kingdom, becoming, together with the Thracians and Paeonians, part of its administrative system as the satrapy of Skudra. From this moment on Herodotus refers to the ruler of Macedonia not as *βασιλέως* (basiléōs), but as “Ἑλλήν Μακεδόνων ὑπάρχος”⁵⁵ (Héllēn Makedónōn húparkhos) - Greek viceroy of Macedonia. During the Second Persian invasion of

⁴⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7.150.3.

⁵⁰ For an extensive study of the term and its implications, see David Graf, “Medism: The Origin and Significance of the Term,” in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 104 (1984), 15-30.

⁵¹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7.151.1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.138.1-3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.22.2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.21.2; 8.136.1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.20.4.

Greece, he counts the Macedonians on Xerxes' side in his campaign.⁵⁶ And names Alexander I as Xerxes' envoy to the Athenians to negotiate a peace after Mardonius failed to do so.⁵⁷ A peculiar thing that Herodotus notes is that Mardonius deposed all the Ionian tyrants and set up democracies in their cities.⁵⁸ In the following decades, Philip II of Macedonia developed the institutions of the Macedonian royal court, presumably in emulation of those of the Persian Empire. He was also an important actor in imperial politics, sheltering a number of prominent Persian exiles. Alexander, his son, also became acquainted with these exiles in his youth. Philip's influence grew so much in both the Greek and Persian worlds that he was seen as a potential unifier of the Greeks, as well as a challenger to the Persian throne. So far that the Athenian Isocrates called him a god if he succeeded in subduing the Persian emperor.⁵⁹ This did not materialize however, as Philip was assassinated by Pausanias of Orestis, one of his bodyguards.

Though undoubtedly the most Persian Greek is Alexander himself. The one who, through his excellence, represented the archetype of the Greek ideal, upon arriving in Persia and coming into immediate contact with Persian culture, will commit an unthinkable gesture. He will adopt this Persian culture, ostensibly negating all the efforts of his mentor, Aristotle. We won't delve too deeply into the reason why Alexander does all this, for such a paradox was much more common in the Greek world than one might think. On the one hand, the Greeks considered the Persians a barbaric civilization, but at the same time they had a tremendous fascination for them. This metamorphosis should not surprise us, however, as Alexander was never entirely culturally Greek. He was the first product of Hellenistic culture. And its most important herald. But at the same time, being its prototype, it was to be expected that he could not fully appropriate it. Bertrand Russell calls him a semibarbarian.⁶⁰ The scion of a dynasty fixated on proving its Hellenism. In this context, the military arm that paved the way for Athenian culture, as the *πανελληνιο* (panellénio) was the massive ethno-political project of the Athenians. And when he was brought face to face with Persian culture, he did not experience himself as a Greek among strangers, but as very familiar with a

⁵⁶ Ibid., 7.185.2; 8.34.1.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 8.140A.1/8.140B.1 - 8.142.1.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 6.43.3.

⁵⁹ See Isocrates, "Panegyricus" and "To Philip," in *Isocrates*, trans. George Norlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

⁶⁰ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1961), 101.

culture he had already encountered, since Macedonia had been hosting Persians for some time, and many of them had married into Macedonian households and settled there.

We can interpret Alexander's gesture as the dialectic that brought the Ionians and the Dorians together. A process that he took to its logical extreme and applied it to the Greeks and Persians as a whole. In the end he married the vices of a highland chieftain with those of an oriental despot when he adopted himself into Darius' house. Then to formalize the weddings at Susa to symbolically unite Persian and Greek cultures. And with this we may argue that, in essence, Alexander is not the first of the Hellenes, but the last of the Achaemenids.⁶¹

Apart from the story of Alexander, the Persians were renowned for the hospitality and tolerance with which they treated those who took refuge among them. And this encouraged many Greek thinkers fleeing from their own country to take refuge at the Persian court. The policy of the Achaemenids was to offer shelter in their territories to all peoples and cultures, especially from the Greek world and the later Roman Empire. This cultural and religious tolerance would transform the intellectual life of Persia into a highly cosmopolitan one, bringing together Greeks, Jews, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians and Indians. It is worth mentioning that these guests and refugees often brought with them a rich literature that the Persians will care for and keep in their libraries. Many of these writings will come to exist only in Persia and nowhere else in the world.

The most outstanding example of such a Greek refugee is that of the Athenian archon and war hero Themistocles. After having fought in the First Greco-Persian War against the Achaemenid emperor Darius the Great, Themistocles was ostracized by his fellow Athenians in collusion with their Spartan conspirators. After his Greek brethren refused him shelter, Themistocles was ultimately forced to flee to Persia. This is an account given by both Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*⁶² and Plutarch in his recount of the life of

⁶¹ For a detailed explanation of this idea, see Robin Lane Fox, "Alexander the Great: 'Last of the Achaemenids?'" in *Persian Responses: Political and Cultural Interaction with(in) the Achaemenid Empire*, ed. Christopher Tuplin (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 267-311.

⁶² Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Charles Forster Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 1.137.3-38.6.

Themistocles.⁶³ After giving an emotional speech in front of Artaxerxes I, Themistocles was well received at the Persian court. Having learned the language and customs of the Persians, he was made a ruler of the province of Magnesia on the Maeander River in Asia Minor. And was given the income of three cities: Magnesia for bread, Lampsacus, the richest wine country, for wine, and Myus for provisions.

Other notable Greeks that fled to Persia are Hippas, the last tyrant of Athens, Demaratos, the Spartan king, and eventually Alcibiades, Athenian statesman and general, and the pupil of Socrates. Another famous example of a defector was Pausanias, regent of Sparta, who, after the death of Leonidas, was involved in a plot to bring Sparta and the rest of Greece under the rule of Xerxes. Pausanias began to adopt Persian customs and dress like a Persian aristocrat in order to marry his daughter. To which the Persian emperor apparently agreed.⁶⁴ Just as there were prominent Greeks native to the Achaemenid Empire, such as Artemisia of Caria and her father Lygdamis, satrap of Halicarnassus. Or Mentor and Memnon of Rhodes, brothers-in-law of Artabazus II, satrap of Hellespontine Phrygia, and famous Greek Achaemenid generals, who faced Alexander in the defense of Asia Minor. One important aspect we should keep in mind here. That the Dorians were more likely to persianize than any other Greek tribe was. Argos, Macedonia and Sparta were Dorian states. So were Halicarnassus and Rhodes Dorian colonies. Herodotus the historian was a Halicarnassian. While Aristotle the philosopher was a Macedonian, the son of Nicomachus, personal physician and friend to King Amyntas III of Macedonia.⁶⁵

There were many more Greeks in the Persian army as either soldiers, officers or even generals. In addition, the Persians employed many foreign workers⁶⁶ and merchants. The inscription of Darius at Behistun⁶⁷ enumerates the provinces of the empire

⁶³ Plutarch, "Themistocles," in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 27.1-29.7.

⁶⁴ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.128.3-129.3.

⁶⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 5.1.1.

⁶⁶ Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions**, DSf 30-35; 40-45; 45-49.

** Reproductions of the inscriptions together with their phonetic translation and rendering in Persian, English and French can be found in Ralph Norman Sharp, *The Inscriptions of Old Persian Cuneiform of the Achaemenian Emperors* (Costa Mesa: MAZDA Publishers, 2018).

⁶⁷ Ibid., DB 1.12-7.

including Ionia. In all, 23 provinces. The inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam⁶⁸ mentions both Ionia and petasos-wearing Ionians. The inscription at Susa⁶⁹ mentions the Ionians both “[those] who are by the sea and [those] who are across the sea.” From this we may infer that in Darius’ eyes his dominion extended to mainland Greece as well. Xerxes’ inscription at Persepolis⁷⁰ again mentions the Ionians, likewise those who dwell by the sea and those who dwell across the sea, as part of the Achaemenid Empire. The inscription of Artaxerxes (debated whether it is the IInd or IIIrd) at Persepolis⁷¹ yet again mention both the Ionians and petasos-wearing Ionians as part of the Empire. This is the Achaemenid Empire at its greatest expansion after the Peace of Antalcidas that ended the Corinthian War in Greece and before the Macedonian conquest. The treaty, which was dictated to the Greeks by Artaxerxes II,⁷² effectively nullified all the gains the Athenians had made since the First Greco-Persian War and turned Macedonia into a vassal and Sparta into an ally of the Achaemenid emperor. Indeed, this reflects the height of Persian influence in Greece.

That the Greeks themselves had an extensive knowledge of the Persians is evident from the numerous references to them in Greek literature. Many Greeks have written favorably about Persians and we see that they are very present in the Greek cultural space. Aeschylus writes the tragedy of *The Persians*, which sympathizes with the foreigners, and with which he won a prize at the Athens theatre competitions. Pericles, the στρατηγός (stratēgós) of Athens, presented the play at the Greater Dionysia in support of Themistocles, who had been ostracized by Cimon. Phrynichus, his contemporary, also wrote two plays about the Persians some 20 years before Aeschylus. He was fined for this and a law was passed forbidding further performances of his plays. Xenophon, a student of Socrates, and later the commander of one of the largest Greek mercenary armies in the Achaemenid Empire, the Ten Thousand, who also fought on the side of Cyrus the Younger, will write a book called *Cyropaedia*, in which he will discuss the figure of the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great, with emphasis on the education that the Magi provided him. He also wrote *Anabasis*, which follows the journey of the Ten Thousand on their campaign. The book is one of the most detailed descriptions of the Persian countryside and the

⁶⁸ Ibid., DNa 15-30.

⁶⁹ Ibid., DSe 14-30.

⁷⁰ Ibid., XPh 13-28.

⁷¹ Ibid., AP 23; 26.

⁷² Xenophon, “Hellenica,” in *Xenophontis Opera Omnia*, ed. Edgar Cardew Marchant (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 5.1.31.

daily lives of the common people living in the empire. It was considered one of the most famous adventures of the time, aside from Homer's. In response to, and inspired by the writings of the elder Xenophon, Plato will write *Politeia - The Republic*. Or vice versa. That Xenophon did so in response to Plato. The exact dates of publication cannot be precisely determined. What is known is that the two were written in close proximity to each other and that they communicate. One thing that is certain though is that Xenophon, although somewhat obscure today, vastly eclipsed Plato as the better author well into the Renaissance. Of Plato's students, many, including Aristotle, Eudoxus of Cnidus, Hermodorus of Syracuse, Heraclides of Pontus and Philip of Opus, drew on the traditions of Persian wisdom.⁷³ With Hermodorus allegedly even preserving a Platonized version of the Persian religious traditions.⁷⁴ And Heraclides writing a work called *Zoroaster*.⁷⁵ Although he seems to have been in contact with the Zurvanites rather than the orthodox Zoroastrians. Nonetheless, it is proof enough that the Academy had access to, at the very least, Greek descriptions of Zoroastrianism in various forms and from several sources. And as we have shown throughout this study so far, the Persians also abound in the historical writings of Herodotus or Thucydides.

Judging by all the above, we have to contradict the traditional narrative of the bitter enmity between Greeks and Persians by showing the true nature of their connection. That the Persians were a living and well-known part of Greek culture, and the Greeks were no strangers to them. And in this, one cannot help but notice that the Greeks were not much different from the Persians, who were also of Indo-European descent and with whom they shared a kinship of blood.

The Magi and the Tradition of the Journey East.

Diogenes Laertius, in the *Prologue* to his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, states that there are some who recognize that philosophy began with the barbarians and names the Persian Magi as being among them.⁷⁶ He also informs us of two books, written by Aristotle, now lost. One in which he names the Magi as

⁷³ Phillip Sidney Horky, "Persian cosmos and Greek philosophy: Plato's associates and the Zoroastrian Magoi," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 37, ed. Brad Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 51.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.1.1-2.

the first philosophers - *On Philosophy*, and one in which he deals specifically with magic - *Magicus*.⁷⁷ For him, as for his contemporaries, magic was not sorcery, but the philosophy or wisdom of the Persian Magi. Astronomy, astrology, algebra, geometry, medicine and herbalism on one hand. But also their intimate knowledge of the divine.

Indeed, probably the most effective vector for spreading the interest for Persian culture in the ancient world were the Magi. With this being said, we cannot distil a Greek theology from their mythology any more than we can separate the philosophy of the Magi from their religion. Probably best known today from the New Testament narrative, the Magi were the main bearers of Zoroastrianism and its most important representatives. Their reputation was so widespread that even in Christianity, they are a source of legitimacy for the infant Christ. Enigmatic figures who often vacillate between the esteem of those who had knowledge of them and the mythologizing of those who did not, the Magi were the ethnic and social priestly class of the Achaemenid Empire, like the Brahmins in Indian society or the tribe of the Levites in Jewish society. They were the ones in charge of performing the rituals and sacrifices in accordance with the tenets of their creed. At least from the reign of Darius I, which we know was a practicing Zoroastrian, the Magi were the formal priesthood of the empire. They also comprised the most erudite social stratum of the Persians, serving as scribes, accountants in the empire's administration or advisors to the emperor or the satraps. They are addressed by the epithet of "wise men", often from the East. Although not all the Magi were from Persia proper, and most of the ones we know of were Medes. In Greek, they are usually referred to as *μάγοι* (*mágoi*) but also as *σοφοί* (*sophoí*) or *φρόνιμοι* (*frónimoi*), both meaning sagacious or wise. The latter two will be the preferred appellatives in the Christian New Testament. In Hebrew they are called חֲכָמִים (*hakamim*) - wise, and the term is used to refer to the Chaldeans or astrologers and soothsayers in general. As in Genesis 41:8 where we are told that Pharaoh "וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיַּיְצִרָא אֶת-כָּל-חַרְטֻמְמֵי מִצְרַיִם, וְאֶת-כָּל-חַכְמֵי הָעֵץ" (*wayyišlah wayyiqrā 'ēt kāl-ḥarṭummē mišrayim wā'ēt kāl-ḥākāmehā*) - and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Or in Daniel 2:12, where Nebuchadnezzar "וַאֲמַר, לְהוֹבְדָאֵהּ, לְכֹל, חַכְמֵי בָבֶל" (*wa'amar- ləhōwḇādāh ləḵōl ḥakkimē Bābel*) - and gave a command to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. This title would be attached to the Magi after the extension of the priestly class to the other provinces of the empire, including the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 1.1.7; 1.1.8.

Chaldeans and Egyptians, as was the case with the Greeks, where the designations of Medes, Persians and Chaldeans were conflated.

Their influence was so widespread throughout Asia Minor that we find them not only in Chaldea and Babylon, but also as far as Egypt, Samaria, Ethiopia and India. We also find them in Anatolia, at the court of Sardis. And during the wars between the Greeks and the Persians, we meet them in the company of Darius and later Xerxes. After the war, they are present in Athens itself. The Magi were not always Zoroastrians, but they were among the first to adopt the teachings of Zoroaster. Zoroaster was received in the Greek world in two guises. As a prophet of the Persian religion and as a philosopher, founder of astronomy and magic. According to Zoroastrian teachings, the Magi sought knowledge and to this end travelled throughout the Achaemenid Empire and beyond. And it is precisely their wisdom that the ancient Greeks in turn travelled East to gain. The contact between the two gave rise to a generation of Greek thinkers that Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont famously called *les Mages hellénisés*⁷⁸ - the Hellenized Magi: Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, an ultimately Plato.

The distinguishing marks that set them apart from the other tribes were their dress, their vegetarian diet and their worship of *atar* - the aspect of the holy fire, the visible presence of Ahura Mazda. The practice of fire worship was the most obvious aspect noticed in their rituals, which is why they were often called *πυρολάτρης* (*pyrolátrēs*) in Greek, and in their native tongue *atašparast* - fire-worshippers or *ātarvahšā* - the fire kindlers. Although this refers to only one of the types of priestly designations of the followers of Ahura Mazda. While the lighting of the fire was a key element in Zoroastrian worship, the most important part of the ritual was the presence of light.

What was most evident in Persian philosophy was its dualism. Diogenes Laertius recounts that Aristotle in the first book of his dialogue *On Philosophy* declares that the Magi believe in “δύο κατ’ αὐτοὺς εἶναι ἀρχάς, ἀγαθὸν δαίμονα καὶ κακὸν δαίμονα: καὶ τῶ μὲν ὄνομα εἶναι Ζεὺς καὶ Ὀρομάσδης, τῶ δὲ Ἄδης καὶ Ἀρειμάνιος”⁷⁹ (δύο κατ’ αὐτοὺς εἶναι ἀρχάς, ἀγαθὸν δαίμονα καὶ κακὸν δαίμονα: καὶ τῶ μὲν ὄνομα εἶναι Ζεὺς καὶ Ὀρομάσδης, τῶ δὲ Ἄδης καὶ Ἀρειμάνιος)

⁷⁸ For an in-depth consideration on this idea, see Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont, *Les Mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la Tradition grecque* (Paris: Société d'Éditions 'Les Belles Lettres', 1938); Alternatively, for a brief summary, see Chapter I, Issue 5, “Pseudo-zoroastrian literature and the Mages hellenises,” in *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 35-8.

⁷⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.1.8.

καὶ Areimánios) - two principles, the good spirit and the evil spirit, the one called Zeus or Oromasdes, the other Hades or Arimanius. One particular thing Diogenes wants us to know about them is that the Magi “περὶ τε δικαιοσύνης λόγους ποιεῖσθαι”⁸⁰ (perí te dikaiosúnēs lógous poieĩsthai) - make arguments of justice. Also, according to him all this is further confirmed by Hermippus in his first book about the Magi, Eudoxus in his *Voyage round the World*, and Theopompus in the eighth book of his *Philippica*.⁸¹

What the Greeks explicitly learned from the Persians we do not,⁸² and cannot know. But we can see the noticeable change of direction in their philosophical concerns. They moved away from attempting to understand the world in a physicalist manner towards a deep preoccupation with the soul and the divine.

In ancient schools there was a tradition that knowledge was divided into knowledge that could be publicly disclosed, often to a paying customer, and knowledge that was arcane. Kept hidden. Both physically secluded in guarded places. And through a rhetoric that is elusive to an uninitiated reader. A tradition widely practiced both within and without the Greek world. Zoroastrians followed it. The Jews. The Romans. And later by the Christians through the *μυστήριᾶ* (mustéria) - mysteries and *sacramenta* – the sacraments. The most famous we know of being the Eleusinian mysteries, Mithraism, the cult of Isis and the cult of Sol Invictus. Of the Greek schools, the most infamous was that of Pythagoras, who even famously rejected Plato, leading to a long-standing rivalry between the two schools. And in mainland Greece, Plato’s own Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum. Unfortunately, because of this obscurity, most of this knowledge died along with its bearers. What we do know are accounts of them obtaining and transmitting this knowledge via biographical sources and sometimes their own testimony.

The divorce between Greek religious and cultural values began only after their maturing philosophical thought considered the religion of the classics inadequate to serve as its foundation and source of inspiration. To be Greek was to respect the customs and the gods of the Greeks. But what then of these Greeks who did not? Virtually none of the ancient Greek philosophers we know of subscribe to what we might think of today as an orthodox

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.1.7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1.1.8.

⁸² For an analysis of the reception of Zoroaster's teachings, and especially his misinterpretations, by the Greeks, see Phiroze Vasunia, “The philosopher’s Zarathushtra,” in *Persian Responses: Political and Cultural Interaction with(in) the Achaemenid Empire*, ed. Christopher Tuplin (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 237-65.

Hellenistic religion. They all had their own interpretation of the gods, the world, the soul and such. They were what one might call *αἱρετικοί* (hairetikoi) - heretics. Possessing an understanding that diverges from the norm. So, we have to ask then what prompted this particular development. The shortcomings of Greek ethics and, by extension, of its theologically-based morality are best exposed in Plato's *Euthyphron*. A dialogue that comes just prior to Socrates' trial and deals with the nature of justice and piety. In it, Euthyphro believes he knows what is good based on the authority of the gods. The things and persons that are dear to the gods are considered good. The things and persons that are hated by the gods are considered bad or evil. And the two cannot be the same, as they are the exact opposites of each other.⁸³ What one god considers good and just, another considers bad and unjust. But as the gods are pernickety and often quarrel with each other, and even start wars over things they disagree on, in pleasing one god, one is bound to arouse the anger of another.⁸⁴ This is what is known as the *Euthyphro dilemma*. Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?⁸⁵

Here, in the context of the trial of Socrates, we may wonder what god could have been so alien to the horizon of understanding of the Greeks, and so fundamentally different from their world, that they could not interpret and identify it with a god of their own? What new god did Socrates believe in, if he believed in one at all, that could not have been another Zeus or Apollo? Socrates wished, among other things, to innovate Greek theology.⁸⁶ For all other aspects of their society were closely intertwined with it. Including the judicial system, of which he was now a victim. What he sought was an ethical system based on an universal and immutable principle - an *αρχή* (arkhé), different from that of the monists, and to which one could arrive at rationally, akin to mathematical principles, in order to supersede the vicissitudes of the gods.

There seems to have been a legacy of accusations of impiety that began around the acquaintances of Pericles. All of them connected, in one way or another, with teachings from the East. First against his friend, the legendary sculptor Pheidias.⁸⁷ Later

⁸³ Plato, "Euthyphron," in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 7a.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7b-8a.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 10a.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3b.

⁸⁷ Plutarch, "Pericles," in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), 31.2-5.

against Aspasia the Milesian,⁸⁸ sister-in-law of Alcibiades of Scambonidae, and lover of Pericles.⁸⁹ For her part, Aspasia was renowned as a skilled politician and an extraordinary orator.⁹⁰ She was often an aide and advisor to Pericles in matters of state. Plato names her as Socrates' tutor in rhetorics.⁹¹ And Socrates often visited her with his students and thought her speeches were wonderful.⁹² Next was Anaxagoras. By one account, he was prosecuted by Thucydides, Pericles' adversary, and charged with treasonable correspondence with the Persians, as well as impiety. For this he was sentenced to death in absentia.⁹³ One might think that these accusations were made by Pericles' political enemies. And in the case of Pheidias this may have been the case. But surely in the case of Aspasia and Anaxagoras there was something in their teachings that turned one away from the religious customs of the mainland Greeks. Indeed, Anaxagoras came to Athens from Clazomenae in the Persian Empire following the battle of Salamis. According to some sources, he may have been a soldier in the Persian army.⁹⁴ He is the first philosopher to settle in the city and open a philosophical school. We can even consider him the father of Athenian philosophy. One of his most important students was Pericles himself.⁹⁵ Plutarch certainly believes that the greatest benefit Pericles gained from his association with Anaxagoras was that it elevated him above superstition.⁹⁶ We know Socrates was acquainted with his philosophy. Diogenes Laertius names Anaxagoras as one of his tutors. And later on, Archelaus the Athenian, who was himself a former pupil of his.⁹⁷ In *Phaidon* Socrates admits that he had encountered the principle of nous from a man reading from a book by Anaxagoras and he was pleased with this theory of causes, because it seemed to him right that “νοῦς ἐστὶν

⁸⁸ Ibid., 32.1-3.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 24.1-7.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 24.3.

⁹¹ Plato, “Menexenos,” in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 235e-236a.

⁹² Ibid., 235e. Cf. Plutarch, “Pericles,” 24.3.

⁹³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2.3.12.

⁹⁴ Frederick Charles Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 66.

⁹⁵ Plato, “Phaidros,” in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 270a.

⁹⁶ Plutarch, “Pericles,” 6.1.

⁹⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2.5.19.

ὁ διακοσμῶν τε καὶ πάντων αἴτιος”⁹⁸ (noûs estin ho diakosmôn te kaí pántōn aítios) - the mind is what arranges and causes all things. Later in his trial, he points out to Meletus that he has mistaken him for Anaxagoras.⁹⁹ And that all the things he is accused of can be easily bought in the market through his books.

Later on, when Aristotle discusses in his *Metaphysics* the goodness and unity of the first principle he contrasts the views of the polytheistic Greek poets with those of Pherecydes of Syros, called θεολόγον¹⁰⁰ (theológon) - the theologian by Plutarch, and of the Persian Magi, who identified this prime generator with the “πρῶτον ἄριστον”¹⁰¹ (prôton áriston) - Foremost Good, and of Empedocles and Anaxagoras, who both referred to a first principle, the former identifying it with φιλίαν (philián) - love and the latter with νοῦν (noûn) - the mind.¹⁰²

What is revolutionary in Anaxagoras’ cosmogony is indeed the introduction of the mind. This is not, however, the mind that the ordinary human being possesses, for it was present at the moment of creation. Rather it was this divine mind that first ordered and separated the primordial elements of the universe, while at the same time being apart from them and not originating in any of them. This concept appears to be virtually identical to the Zoroastrian Asha. For it was through Asha that Ahura Mazda created the world. The idea of an intermediary spirit of the universe acting as a principle in the creation of the world and as a regulating principle of existence is as foreign as one can get to the Greek imaginary.¹⁰³ All the more so if we consider the understanding that the later Neoplatonic tradition gave to this concept. That of divine reason as the first emanation.

It should not come as a surprise to us that the spark that ignited what is perhaps the most famous school of philosophy in history was carried here by a foreigner. According to the account of

⁹⁸ Plato, “Phaidon,” in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 97b-c.

⁹⁹ Plato, “Apologia Socratous,” in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 26d.

¹⁰⁰ Plutarch, “Sulla,” in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), 36.3.

¹⁰¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and George Cyril Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 14.1091b.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ For a detailed consideration of the Persian influences on Anaxagoras, see Ruhi Muhsen Afnan, “The Medism of Anaxagoras,” in *Zoroaster’s Influence on Anaxagoras the Greek Tragedians and Socrates* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969), 39-73.

the later Clement of Alexandria: “Ου μόνης δε φιλοσοφίας, άλλα και πάσης σχεδόν τέχνης εύρεταί βάρβαροι”¹⁰⁴ (Ου μόνēs de philosophías, άλλα και pásēs skhedón tékhnēs εύρεταί bárbaroi) - Not only of philosophy, but also nearly all the arts were founded by barbarians. And that “[...] των παρ’ Ἑλλησι πρεσβυτάτων σοφών τε και φιλοσόφων, ὡς δε οι πλείστοι αυτών βάρβαροι το γένος και παρά βαρβάροις παιδευθέντες”¹⁰⁵ (tōn par’ Hállēsi presbutátōn sophōn te και philósophōn, ὄs de οι pleístoi autón bárbaroi το γένος και παρά barbárois paideuthéntēs) - of the eldest Greek wise men and philosophers, most of them were barbarians by birth and educated alongside barbarians. One finds truth in his statement if one takes a moment to trace the origins of the figures he mentions. And let us not forget, however, that mathematics is, at its core, essentially a barbarian science that does not originate in the Greek world. Among the Greeks it begins with Thales of Miletus, and is introduced to the Athenians by Pythagoras.¹⁰⁶ Of the most prominent Greek philosophers, Clement states that Plato and Pythagoras openly praised the barbarians for their wisdom.¹⁰⁷

It is Pythagoras who initiates the tradition of seeking wisdom outside the Greek world. Considered an obscure figure during his lifetime, we have very few contemporary bibliographical sources, and those that do exist are often contradictory. The point where all these sources agree, however, is Pythagoras’ education. He began his academic career by going to Egypt, then part of the Achaemenid Empire. His father, a famous jeweler on the island of Samos, fashioned three expensive gifts for him to give to the Egyptian priests to ensure that they would welcome him into their ranks to teach him.¹⁰⁸ So impressed they were with Pythagoras that they allowed him to participate with them in their rituals in Memphis.¹⁰⁹ After learning geometry and the three forms of interpretation of writing from the Egyptians, he goes to Phoenicia, where he is taught astronomy by the Magi,¹¹⁰ and then goes to Babylon where he learns their purification rituals and the virtues

¹⁰⁴ Clement of Alexandria, “Stromateis,” in *Clementis Alexandrini Opera*, ed. Wilhelm Dindorf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869), 1.16.74.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.15.66.

¹⁰⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.1.13.

¹⁰⁷ Clement of Alexandria, “Stromateis,” 1.15.68.

¹⁰⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.1.2.

¹⁰⁹ Porphyry of Tyre, “The Life of Pythagoras,” in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, trans. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1987), 8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6; 12.

that are worthy of man's respect.¹¹¹ We don't know much about the customs of the Egyptian priests, but we do know about those of the Magi. They had a vegetarian diet¹¹² and did not eat the flesh of dead animals because any kind of corpse was considered contaminated by Ahriman.¹¹³ They very often practiced purification rituals by ablution and fire. And their libations were made from uncooked products. They did not touch certain types of plants, which they also considered impure. A peculiar practice that Pythagoras also had, when he chose to die at the hands of his persecutors rather than run through a field of beans,¹¹⁴ which he considered to be the plants of Hades.

After finishing his training, Pythagoras returned home to Samos to establish a school there, the Semicircle of Pythagoras,¹¹⁵ which will attract many local personalities. But finding that the city had fallen under the tyranny of Polycrates and fearing that he himself might fall victim to it, he left for Croton, a colony of Magna Graecia in present-day southern Italy. We could argue that, after his failed experience in Samos, Pythagoras founded in Croton a cult and, at the same time, a school of philosophy similar to the oriental Orphic, or Mithraic ones, or even better, to the cult of the Magi. The followers of Pythagoras were divided into two categories: *ακουματικοί* (*akousmatikoi*) - the listeners and *μαθηματικοί* (*mathēmatikoi*) - the learners. The *akousmatikoi* were interested in hearing his esoteric doctrines. That of the gods, death and the afterlife. And were deeply involved in matters of moral teaching, concerning such aspects as harmony, justice, ritual purity, and moral conduct. The knowledge they had access to was strictly oral and would never have had a written basis. The *mathematikoi*, on the other hand, were interested in his exoteric, what today we would call scientific, knowledge. Namely arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. One could belong to both simultaneously or sequentially. The latter eventually became closely associated with Plato and were given refuge in his school.

However, Pythagoras diverges from the beliefs of the Magi, for the Persians, like the Greeks, did not believe in the transmigration of the soul. The aim of philosophy in the process of *metempsychosis* was to train the soul to remember as much as possible from previous lives, in order to accumulate even more

¹¹¹ Ibid., 11-2.

¹¹² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.1.6.

¹¹³ Robert Charles Zaehner, *The Teachings of the Magi* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1956), 110.

¹¹⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.1.39-40.

¹¹⁵ Porphyry of Tyre, "The Life of Pythagoras," 9.

knowledge in the lives that follow. The ultimate goal of this accumulation of knowledge is not known to us.

Lastly, we must consider that Pythagoras is the first to call himself *φιλόσοφον*¹¹⁶ (*philósophon*), a lover of knowledge, and not *σοφόν* (*sophón*), holder of knowledge. The difference in terminology also points to a difference in paradigm regarding knowledge. *Σοφία* (*sophiā*) in Greek is synonymous with *mazda*, and the relationship that arises between the philosopher aspiring to approach knowledge is the same as the relationship between the Magi and Ahura Mazda. A concept we see very similar to *Ἁγία Σοφία* (*Hagía Sophía*) which although present in the Christian tradition, is itself not found in the New Testament. Pythagoras also claims that from the Magi he learned that the soul of God is truth and his body is light.¹¹⁷ And we likewise know that the only god he worshipped was Apollo, the sun god.

Another such account of an even more famous journey we know of is that of Democritus. A native of Abdera in Persian Thrace, then an important and wealthy metropolis. As a child he is said to have been schooled by the Persian Magi. When Xerxes came to his city, he was so well received by the locals that he bestowed upon them a host of gifts and privileges.¹¹⁸ Among these privileges was that Democritus's father had him educated with an imperial Magian.¹¹⁹ Because of his erudition and curiosity he will pursue such knowledge in almost all the known world. Clement of Alexandria reproduces a claim by Democritus bragging that: “ἐγὼ δε τῶν κατ’ ἐμαυτὸν ἀνθρώπων γῆν πλείστην ἐπεπλανησάμην, ἱστορέων τὰ μήκιστα, καὶ ἀέρας τε καὶ γῆας πλείστας εἶδον καὶ λογίων ἀνθρώπων καὶ πλείστων ἐσῆκουσα καὶ γραμμέων συνθέσιος μετὰ ἀποδείξιος οὐδεῖς κὼ με παρήλλαξεν, οὐδ’ οἱ Αἰγυπτίων καλεόμενοι Ἄρπεδονάπται, σὺν τοῖς δ’ ἐπὶ πάσιν ἐπ’ ετε ὀγδώκοντα ἐπὶ ξείνης ἐγενήθη”¹²⁰ (*egō de tōn kat’ emautōn anthrōpōn gēn pleīstēn epeplanēsāmēn, istorēōn ta mēkista, kai aéras te kai géas pleístas eídon kai logiōn anthrōpōn kai pleístōn esékousa kai grammēōn sunthésios metá apo déixios oudeís kō me paréllaxen, oud’ oi Aiguptiōn kaleómenoi ‘Arpedonáptai, sun tois d’ epí pásin ep’ ete ógdōkonta epí xeinēs egenēthēn*) - I have roamed over the most ground of any man of my time, investigating the most remote parts.

¹¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1.1.12; Cf. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, ed. Max Pohlenz (Leipzig: Teubner, 1918), 5.8.

¹¹⁷ Porphyry of Tyre, “The Life of Pythagoras,” 41.

¹¹⁸ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 8.120.1.

¹¹⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 9.7.34.

¹²⁰ Clement of Alexandria, “Stromateis,” 1.15.69.

I have seen the most skies and lands, and I have heard of learned men in very great numbers. And in composition no one has surpassed me; in demonstration, not even those among the Egyptians who are called Arpenodaptae, with all of whom I lived in exile up to eighty years. For he went to Babylon, and Persis, and Egypt, to learn from the Magi and the priests.¹²¹ This is also supported by Diogenes Laertius.¹²² Pliny the Elder also recounts about Democritus that he “post Pythagoram Magorum studiosissimus quanto portentosiora tradit”¹²³ - next to Pythagoras, he has acquired the most intimate knowledge of the learning of the Magi. Pliny himself, throughout his *Natural History*, shows that he was very knowledgeable of the arts of the Magi and knows and tells of many plants and how they were used in their rituals. Democritus is the most representative figure of the Greek quest for the East. As such, he has often been held up as a Greek who managed to acquire the wisdom of all the learned foreigners.

Another important native of Abdera worth mentioning was Protagoras. Who, though older than him, became the pupil and ward of Democritus.¹²⁴ He too came to Athens to teach virtue and rhetoric as a sophist. And was acquainted to Socrates and Pericles. As with Anaxagoras, in the end he was charged with impiety and the Athenians expelled him and burned his works in the agora.¹²⁵ A fate that we know Socrates too will come to suffer on the same charges of atheism as the two. And later even Aristotle because of his association with Alexander. Strangely Plato was never accused of impiety. Instead, he was regarded as holy and pious not only by Greeks but also by foreigners.

The last and most important figure we will discuss as making this journey is Plato himself. For this we will attempt to piece together the disparate, and often conflicting, accounts of his life. He was born as Aristocles in Athens, the son of Ariston and Perictione. He was related on his father’s side to Solon the Lawgiver and on his mother’s side to Codrus, the last basileus of Athens. This privileged status gave him the opportunity to enjoy the best education that could be offered at the time. In his native city he studied grammar with the famous professor Dionysius the Grammmarian (not to be confused with the later Dionysius Thrax). He is then trained in gymnastics by Ariston of Argos, from whom he is said to have received the nickname Πλάτων (Plátōn) - broad. In

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 9.7.35.

¹²³ Plinius, *The Natural History*, 24.102-160.

¹²⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 9.8.50.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 9.8.52.

addition to this he also receives an artistic education in music, painting, and poetry.¹²⁶ After completing his early studies, he became a student of Socrates. Even though his time with Socrates is very brief, the influences he will have had on Plato will be found in every one of his works. Following Socrates, Plato will be taught by Cratylus, a radical Heraclitean.¹²⁷ Most probably from him he will also learn about the remnants of the Pythagorean school in Italy, for there was a famous rivalry between the Heraclitians and the Pythagoreans. And also by Hermogenes the Parmenidean.¹²⁸ From them he learned the doctrines of Heraclitus and Parmenides, which we will later see in two of his dialogues, *Cratylus* and *Parmenides*.

After his apprenticeship with the two, he went in search of the Pythagoreans, which led him to Syracuse in present-day Sicily. Here he will be introduced to Dionysus, the tyrant of the city, his brother Dion and his son Dionysus II. Becoming the tutor of the latter. Using either Dionysus or Dion's influence, Plato manages to come into possession of several Pythagorean treatises from Philolaus, Pythagoras' successor and most esteemed student.¹²⁹ Possibly unable to understand the teachings of the Pythagoreans, for we have already mentioned that they were a hermetic school, hiding what they knew from the eyes of the uninitiated, Plato sets out to meet them. He finds Philolaus, Archytas and Lysis (not to be confused with Lysis from the later dialogue), with whom he will form close friendships. Most likely, he learns of Pythagoras' journey from them and sets off for Egypt.¹³⁰ Plato is first initiated into the teachings of the Egyptian priests on the interpretation and representation of sacred images, and on the afterlife and death.¹³¹ We find this knowledge in several dialogues, but especially in the last part of *Gorgias*, where Plato describes the episode of the judgment of the soul after death. For Hades in Greek mythology is one-dimensional, and all souls end up there indiscriminately, where the Egyptian afterlife began with the famous judgment of hearts.

¹²⁶ Olympiodorus the Younger, *Life of Plato*, trans. Michael Griffin (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 2.32-86.

¹²⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 3.1.6. Cf. Anonymous, *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, trans. Leendert Gerrit Westerink (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1962), I.4.4-5. Cf. Olympiodorus the Younger, *Life of Plato*, 2.87-89.

¹²⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 3.1.6.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.1.6; 3.1.9; 8.1.15; 8.7.84.

¹³⁰ Anonymous, *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, I.4.8-9.

¹³¹ Olympiodorus the Younger, *Life of Plato*, 2.134-138.

He also learned of geometry and the hieratic art.¹³² After his time in Egypt, Plato decides to travel to Persia to seek out the Magi. He met them in Phoenicia.¹³³ And from them he learnt the doctrine of Zoroaster.¹³⁴ Plato made such a good impression on them that of all the Greek philosophers he had the closest relationship with them.

In completing his studies, Plato is said to possess a knowledge that was *οἰκουμενικός* (oikoumenikós) - that is, bringing together the knowledge of all the peoples of the world.¹³⁵

In the meantime, Plato inherited an estate from a relative - the garden of Hekademos - an olive grove somewhere in the immediate vicinity of the city walls of Athens.¹³⁶ Plato first establishes there a *musaeion*, a cultural institution dedicated to the muses.¹³⁷ This would later be known as the Academy. But as an institution it did not come into being during Plato's lifetime, but only under the leadership of his nephew Speusippus.¹³⁸ For in Plato's time, it served as a meeting place for Plato and his associates. At his invitation, many of the great thinkers of the time would come to Athens and take part in the discussions at the Academy.

An account in *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* states that: “ὄρα δὲ καὶ τὴν ὑπεροκὴν ἣν ἔσχεν πρὸς Πυθαγόραν; αὐτὸς μὲν γὰρ ἀπῆλθεν εἰς Περσίδα τὴν τῶν μάγων ὠφεληθῆναι θέλων σοφίαν, οἱ δὲ μάγοι διὰ τὸν Πλάτωνα Ἀθήναζε παρεγένοντο τῆς ἐξ αὐτοῦ μετασχεῖν φιλοσοφίας γλιχόμενοι”¹³⁹ (Hóra dè kaì tèn huperokhèn hèn éskhen pròs Puthagóran; autòs mèn gàr apêlthen eis Persída tèn tòn mágōn ôphelêthênai thélōn sophían, hoi dè mágoi dià tòn Plátōna Athénaze paregónonto tês ex autoũ metaskheîn philosphías glikhómenoi) - His superiority to Pythagoras is also worth notice; Pythagoras travelled to Persia when he wanted to learn the wisdom of the magi, but the magi came to Athens because of Plato, eager to be initiated in his philosophy.

The Romans were greatly interested in the orientaling aspect of Greek philosophers. Marcus Tullius Cicero, in mourning

¹³² Anonymous, *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, I.4.9-10.

¹³³ Olympiodorus the Younger, *Life of Plato*, 2.139-144.

¹³⁴ Anonymous, *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, I.4.10-11.

¹³⁵ See Note 58 in Olympiodorus the Younger, *Life of Plato and On Plato First Alcibiades* 1-9, trans. Michael Griffin (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

¹³⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 3.1.7. Cf. Olympiodorus the Younger, *Life of Plato*, 2.145-146.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.1.1.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Anonymous, *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, I.6.19-22.

the death of his daughters, often refers in his meditations to the journey of the three referred to above and their ardent passion for learning.¹⁴⁰ Plato is also accused of bringing the teachings of the Magi to Athens. Aeneas of Gaza, a Neo-Platonic philosopher and later a convert to Christianity, in his dialogue *Theophrastus*, appreciates him for he believes that it is thanks to him that the philosophies of the Chaldeans and the Egyptians were introduced to the Greeks.¹⁴¹ And also for disclosing the teachings of Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Empedocles.¹⁴² As a result of his searchings, Plato would develop a philosophy in which the absent god of mythology would be found, professed through the existence of a singular god whom he identified with the good. After his death, and through his followers, his thought will continue through Platonism until it finally reaches Christianity.

Funeral rites are, as we are well aware, a particularly important aspect of a person's life, both from a cultural and religious point of view. Let us now relate several peculiarities related to Plato's death that appears in several sources.¹⁴³ A fragment from the *Index Herculanensis* quoting Philippus of Opus, astronomer and posthumous editor of Plato's *Nomoi - The Laws*, states that "[...] γεγηρακῶς ἤδη Πλάτων ξέν[ο]ν ὑπεδέξ[α]το Χαλδα[ῖον] ἐπ[ὶ]οιδάς] τινὰς [...]"¹⁴⁴ (gegērakōs édē Plátōn xén[o]n hupedéx[at]o Khalda[ion] ep[ōidás] tinas) - in his old age Plato received a stranger that has come from Chaldea who sang him a certain [song]. And so begins the Platonic tradition that, on Plato's deathbed, he was not comforted by one of his Greek peers, but by the hymn of one of his Eastern associates. Diogenes Laertius in tells of an account he picks up from the *Memorabilia* of Favorinus that Mithradates the Persian set up a statue of Plato in the Academy on

¹⁴⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, ed. Claudio Moreschini (Munich and Leipzig: K. G. Saur Verlag GmbH, 2005), 5.19.50; 5.29.87. Also, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, 4.19.44.

¹⁴¹ Aeneas of Gaza, "Theophrastus," in *Aeneas of Gaza Theophrastus with Zacharias of Mytilene Ammonius*, trans. John Dillon, Donald Russell, and Sebastian Gertz (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 8.18-20.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* 8.20-21.

¹⁴³ Many more anecdotes regarding the life and especially the death of Plato are diligently gathered by Alice Swift Riginos in her work *Platonica: The Anecdotes Concerning the Life and Writings of Plato* (Leiden: Brill, 1976). However, we have been concerned more with the Ancient primary sources she records. Nevertheless, she remains one of the main modern biographical sources consulted regarding the death of Plato.

¹⁴⁴ Siegfried Mekler, ed., *Academicorum Philosophorum Index Herculanensis* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1902), Col. III.37-41.

which he inscribed the following: “Μιθραδάτης Ὀροντοβάτου Πέρσης Μούσαις εἰκόνα ἀνέθηκε Πλάτωνος, ἣν Σιλανίων ἐποίησε”¹⁴⁵ (Mithradátēs Orontobátou Pérsēs Músais eikóna anéthēke Plátōnos, hén Silaniōn epoiēse) - Mithradates the Persian, the son of Orontobates, dedicated to the Muses a likeness [statue] of Plato that Silanion made. Praising Plato’s advanced age at the time of his death, Seneca relates in his 58th *Letter to Lucilius* that: “Ideo magi, qui forte Athenis erant, inmolaverunt defuncto, amplioris fuisse sortis quam humanae rati, quia consummasset perfectissimum numerum, quem novem novies multiplicata componunt”¹⁴⁶ - For this reason the Magi, who happened to be in Athens at that time, sacrificed to him after his death, believing that his length of days was too full for a mortal man, since he had rounded out the perfect number of nine times nine.

So, we have to ask, was Plato one of the Magi? Ancient biographers would certainly have us believe so. In reality, the answer is much more nuanced. He certainly was acquainted with them. There is evidence to this in his own writings. As to whether he was formalized into their institution, this is something we cannot know with certainty. In antiquity, the Magi were an organization very similar to our academic community today. They associated themselves with many foreign thinkers whom they considered worthy. This would be more evident in Sassanid times. For now, what we can say with confidence is that the Persians had an important contribution to the philosophical awakening of the Greeks. It made them question and examine their age-old myths. And their worldview grounded in them. To abandon their materialistic pursuits and to inquire into the matters of the soul. Even though Greek thought has yielded exceptionally unique features, it cannot be denied that in its infancy it was shaped by its encounter with the wisdom from the East. The greatest contribution of the Persians was the reformation of the Greek cosmology and polytheistic theology and the introduction of a principled ethical system, together with a belief in one supreme good God. Indeed, it is not without reason that Zoroastrianism holds the distinction of being the first monotheistic religion of our world.

¹⁴⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 3.1.25.

¹⁴⁶ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, trans. Richard Mott Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), 58.31.

The Fate of Zoroastrianism Today

Since its heyday as the official state religion of two of the world's largest empires - the Achaemenid and Sassanid - Zoroastrianism has experienced a steady but certain decline. Today we may consider it a highly endangered religion. Mary Boyce placed their numbers in 1976 at no more than 129,000 souls.¹⁴⁷ More recently, according to a survey compiled by Roshan Rivetna, in 2012 the global population of Zarathushtis, that is the people who profess the Zoroastrian faith today, is between 111,691 and 121,962.¹⁴⁸ The majority of them are concentrated in India, within the Parsi and Irani communities of Mumbai. With sizeable minorities in their homelands of Iran and northern Iraq. And a diaspora mostly settled in the United States. Other smaller but noteworthy communities are in the United Kingdom, Canada and Pakistan. The latter being an important center of reformation for modern Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrianism faces effectively the same problems that all the other religious communities face. Unfortunately, because of their small numbers and strict eligibility rules, these problems are far more accentuated. They are an endogamic religion and rarely accept outside converts. Moreover, they are staunchly fundamentalist and highly ritualized in their worship, which makes it even more difficult for the newer generations to inherit their teachings. Thus, they have fallen prey to the demographic trap of low birth rates and high rates of marriages outside their community. On top of that, the Parsis of India, though originally rural and agrarian, are today an urban and highly educated population. Eager to learn, they were among the first in India to embrace Western education, industrialization and technology.¹⁴⁹ This has created a massive divide between the conservative rural Zoroastrians and the more liberal urban ones. Which, in turn, led to a demand for reform from the latter. Modernizing forces within Zoroastrianism, who have had access to Western comparative anthropology want a return to the purified and rational religion of the ancient *Avesta*. The conservatives' response is that modernizing their religion by eliminating or modifying their rituals, even if they admit that they are outdated and obsolete, to facilitate their transmission, would lead to a loss of their ethno-religious identity.

¹⁴⁷ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 226.

¹⁴⁸ Roshan Rivetna, "The Zarathushti World - A 2012 Demographic Picture," in *FEZANA Journal* (Fall 2013).

¹⁴⁹ James Emerson Whitehurst, "The Zoroastrian Response to Westernization: A Case Study of the Parsis of Bombay," in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 37, no. 3 (1969).

Two important figures of this reformation were Kharshedji Rustomji Cama (not to be confused with Hormusji Cama) and Maneckji Nusserwanji Dhalla.¹⁵⁰ Their claims were that modern Zoroastrianism has deviated so far into dogma and has been so heavily influenced by Hinduism that it is no longer Zoroastrianism. Kharshedji Cama was a supporter of the reformist publication *Rast Goftar - The Herald of Truth* and the founder of *Zarthoshti Din ni Khol Karnari Mandali - The Society for Promoting Research on the Zoroastrian Religion*. His main objectives were that Zoroastrianism should be cleansed of all unnecessary rituals and be opened for the world to study. Maneckji Dhalla was more concerned about the problem of the dwindling number of Zoroastrian believers. He proposed an even more radical idea. That of transforming Zoroastrianism from a conventional religion into a universal ethics system as “the highest religion.”¹⁵¹

Unfortunately, these reforms have not had the desired effect within the Zoroastrian community. The doctrinal clashes and the inability of Zoroastrian theology to commit to either a monotheistic or a dualistic religious system have made many disillusioned with their ancestral faith. Young Zoroastrians often fall into skepticism and uncertainty, and subsequently into agnosticism.¹⁵² They choose to live a secular life, refusing to follow in the footsteps of their forefathers.

It would seem, however, that Zoroastrianism still has its share of contributions to make to our world. If not as a religion, then at least as a philosophical system intimately concerned with the problems of good and truth in this post-truth age of dishonesty and deceit. Zoroastrianism is at its core a religion of principles and not of gods. This move towards philosophy would thus bring it closer to its roots. And emerging from isolation and actively participating in global issues would realign Zoroastrians with their original mission of being stewards of creation. The tradition of the ancient Magi could still live on in the quest for the rejuvenation of our world so that their fight against the darkness of ignorance should not die with them. Paraphrasing Dhalla may the breath of Vohu Manah

¹⁵⁰ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 214; James Emerson Whitehurst, “The Zoroastrian Response to Westernization.”

¹⁵¹ Maneckji Nusserwanji Dhalla, *The Saga of a Soul: An Autobiography*, trans. Gool and Behram Sohrab H. J. Rustomji (Karachi: Dastur Dhalla Memorial Institute, 1975), 215-20.

¹⁵² James Emerson Whitehurst, “The Zoroastrian Response to Westernization.”

help us to discern the signs of the age we live in and enable us to be in harmony with it.

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Constantin C. Lupaşcu
"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi
Department of Philosophy
Bd. Carol I, No. 11, 700506, Iaşi, Romania
<c.c.lupascu@gmail.com>