Franz Altheim

The unconquered god

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Christianity *and* cults solar

The unconquered god
by Franz Altheim
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from first-hand research and ingenious insights
born in the margins of recent archaeological
discoveries an unprecedented panorama of
imperial Rome
from Septimius Severus to Constantine

a new Ariadne's thread for unexplored paths through political,
religious and cultural events
of a fermenting, fictional age of transition:

the gradual establishment of the cult of a solar deity, which
originated in Syria and spread throughout the Empire,
constitution:l the necessary precondition for the triumph of
Christianity

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The god unconquered

by

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The history of religions, oggz

The study of religious history certainly cannot claim to count among the most important spi ritual forces of our time. It is only in the academe that it is recognised as an au tonal discipline. Taught in university lecture halls, cultivated at conferences and confined to scientific journals, it only enjoys the attention of specialists. For the rest, it is excluded from any public discussion, from any lively clash of ideas, like everything else that falls within the domain of specialists.

And yet religion is one of t h e greatest, most incomparable themes of human life. It is part of the forces that have created entire worlds, keeping them in constant ferment. T h e r e are very few human manifestations without religious roots, not shaped by religious impulses. Even where religion no longer expresses itself in an immediate form, it does so indirectly, without losing its effi ciency. Secularised philosophies, only seemingly unravelled from their original religious terrain, they usually influence the behaviour of peoples in a more du ratural way, and are more deeply linked to the ir-

rational, of those presented as being related to dogma.

It must be acknowledged that our times are not favourable to religious studies. Creative energies dry up, when there is no alternative between the programmatic defence of what exists and its radical negation, between ecclesiastical restoration and atheistic propaganda, between servility and contempt; when the word falls silent, because the pros and cons of a miserable apothecary and an almost equally miserable criticism have long since been exhausted. It is dialogue, in its vital pro gress, that makes spiritual history what it is. But how can a dialogue take place if the subject matter on which one could sensibly dialogue is missing? The unprejudiced investigation of that aspect of spiritual reality, which is concealed in a still modest expression, is the premise for the understanding of religious history; and the recognition even of that which succumbs, the premise for evaluation. But how can understanding and values arise when, presuming to possess incontestable criteria of truth, one feels superior to all other conceptions?

We are all convinced that the advent of a new era, in which we hope and for which we are ready to work with all our might, must begin with the destruction of outdated forms. If the religion really has the place in the historical process that it once had, this destruction must begin in its own sphere,

it must be implemented there more radically and energetically than elsewhere. And of this, too, we are convinced: that our hope must rise and fall with the ability to find new religious foundations, instead of integrating, as almost always happens, acquisitions deemed definitive with others of the same origin.

What already exists also has its task, but it is different from what its current advocates claim. Only when one is ready to die can a new life unfold. Mysterious co-presence of death and becoming: it finds its corresponding image in the contrast between preservation and creation from scratch. Only if the forces of reaction vigorously defend every inch of ground, can the germs of becoming prove themselves, and the creative element can claim its rightful rank. Only sacrifice gives conquest its rightful value; and the new can only obtain its rightful place when it succeeds in wresting this recognition from reaction by means of a hard struggle. Even the subversive and conservative forces come together in that whole which presents life and death as poles, separate yet indivisible.

Background

The events that we will see unfold in the following pages are taken from the past. They take us back to a period of historical, and even religious, upheaval.

The starting point is the Arab world, which appears in the limelight for the first time. But everything then turns towards Rome and, although it sometimes moves away from it, it constantly returns to it. Among the conservative powers, Rome is certainly not the only one to interfere in events. But it alone has the great task of excluding or accommodating the new forces that press and press: of denying or granting them the crown. This is the last phase of Rome's religious history, in which the old and the new have reached that unity which alone guarantees historical life. It will be seen how the ordering and shaping force, which is the very essence of Roman religion, was maintained to the very end.

Such a statement will come as a surprise to those who are addicted to the traditional representation of Roman religious history, according to which it unfolds according to a pre-established pattern. This thesis appears in for ma compiuta in the followers of Wissowa, Deubner and Latte, and was then preserved for a long time, with the tenacity typical of error.

According to these interpreters, the true Roman religion coincided with the gods and festivals collected in Rome's oldest calendar, from the 6th century BC. C. All the rest, Greek, Hellenistic, oriental influences more hetero geneous, they only succeeded in bastardising what at the original creation of Rome. Invaded and suffocated by malignant weeds, this plant came to a slow but sure

death.

The religious history of Rome thus assumed very little importance. If one really wanted to understand the Roman soul, one had to limit oneself to the oldest expressions. Such a limitation was all the more sensitive because the data at our disposal for that period is scarce and, what is worse, does not bear the mark of any historian or poet of value. The remainder — still almost a thousand years, from 510 B.C. to 394 A.D. (or whatever other limits one wishes to set) — would be full of events and contrasts, which in relation to the supposedly original Roman element only represent a decadence. In historical times, only events would have taken place that would have delayed, but could not have prevented, the definitive fall of the Roman religion.

In the meantime, however, this interpretation has been shown to be wrong. That series of very ancient cults was far from having an exclusively national character: Greek and Etruscan deities were already accepted there. Moreover, to the extent that various ethnic groups — La tini, Sabines and Etruscans — became integral parts of ancient Rome, the phenomenon of an original Roman world also disappeared. If anywhere bi dreamed of searching for the Roman essence, it was in the way in which foreign traditions or acquisitions were transformed. The individual deities were far less romable than the general conception of the divine, which embraced them all. Here, Rome differed consciously from Italy and Greece, and later from the Roman Empire.

the Orient.

As soon as this was recognised, a reversal in ztoru currencies occurred by logic.

Once the oldest Roman history was spoiled by the claim to represent the only true expression of a national religion, the burden had to shift to later times. True Romanity was not to be found where religion, still closed "in the modest bud," refused to open up, but rather where it was forced to defend itself in the face of the gravity of the times and secular events. Not the barely graspable beginnings, but the last two centuries of the republic and the following centuries of the imperial age form the main subject, both of Rome's history and that of its religion. Instead of the ancient festive calendar, the contemporaries of those events - poets, historians, and great politicians - must count as valid witnesses of Roman religion.

So far, the sacred law, and generally all the institutional forms of religion, have come to the fore. Instead, it must be emphasised that if the great
of the Roman religion, its essential imprint, date back to the centuries in which it had to find itself
in struggle and contrast, its essence cannot be sought where it decays to pure form. What the archaeologist records differs too prominently from what moves the historian. Tense

in search of the creative element, they need the background to make the rest stand out, and so even the fossilised parts of the historical reconstruction can .once in a while serve the best. Not, however, as an autonomous historical argument, but only because it is necessary to emphasise the new forces in their particularity, and in some cases i n their uniqueness.

The Sun God of Late Antiquity

Already in early antiquity one encounters gods of a solar nature, or even representing the sun; later they developed to an unusual complexity. They are found in almost all antiquity religions, starting with the Egyptian Re to the Iranian Mithras, from Helios to the Sol Indiges of ancient Rome. The god in question here does not belong to early se coli, but rather to late antiquity. His rise partly coincides, for a certain period, with that of Mithras, while remaining distinct from it. Mithras arose from the ancient world of Indo-Iranian gods, the other from the Arabian peninsula. While the former remained closed within its mysteries, bound to the restricted circle of initiates, the latter gradually freed itself from traditional constraints, taking a completely different path.

The history of the ancient sun god, considered in broad strokes, is one of gradual flux. The cult, of Bedouin origin, settled in a city

of Syria. By its singularity and absoluteness it rattles the Western world, provokes its most passionate revulsion. But its literary representation, neo-Platonic philosophy and, last but not least, the assimilating capacity of Roman religion and the Roman conception of the state, accomplish the miracle: from the divinity of Elagabalus (218-222 A.D.), a poll born of oriental orgies and superstition, the purest of gods is born, destined to unify ancient religiosity once again.

This last creation of paganism was important enough to influence contemporary Christianity. Above all, the Neo-Platonic representation of Helios contributed to it. The philosophical transformation, to which the sun god always offered an opportunity, made him one of the greatest and most unforgettable figures, so that not even the adversary could escape his influence. The feast of Christmas still reverberates today that it was destined to replace, in Rome, the Christmas day of the sun god, the Invictus. This god exerted a lasting influence on Constantine the Great (306-337 A.D.).

Constantine's conversion (312) constitutes the event in which all the following considerations will be reflected. The first Christian emperor is not only a champion of his religion, but also a milestone in its history. As the creator of a Christian state, he succeeded in uniting what had previously seemed irreconcilable. Because of his importance, Co-

Stantine can only be compared, within the framework we have outlined, to Paul and Augustine.

The development of the Christian religion represents one of the greatest objects of historiography. Today one would like to conceive of it as the fulfilment of a plan of redemption in which Constantine also receives his rightful place. And so it came to pass that the story of a man, on whom Jacob Burckhardt still inflicted a merciless judgement, later turned into a true apologia. For one of the most recent biographers of Constantine no, even the death sentence by strangulation inflicted on his wife is a title of praise for his hero 1 From our point of view, however, this aim fails, and with it all the efforts that tend to realise it. Constantine's actions are considered and evaluated in the same way as those of other men, and we do not ask ourselves whether they mean anything beyond that.

This is to say that such actions are not the fulfilment of a predetermined plan, but rather the consequence of determined and determining premises; that sometimes they do not follow a direct path but a tortuous one; that Constantine not only promoted, but also followed circumstances; that finally, it is not a question of justifying him, but rather of ascertaining his place in history. That everything i s destined to last for a definite time, on this religious and secular history still agree.

Renouncing to see in history the implementation of a

providential plan does not mean renouncing the eternal for the temporal. The eternal also has its importance; only, it must be sought elsewhere.

Those who follow the destinies of the solar god of late antiquity cannot rid themselves of a contradictory feeling. One wonders to what extent this is religious history, and whether the political constellation has not made a decisive contribution to it. The alternative may come close to the essential, but without touching it. Religion and the state as poles of human life are, according to Schelling's teaching, "so closely connected that neither, without the other, can be truly effective. "To understand it properly, this means that only the outspoken religion and the outspoken idea of the state complete each other as a whole; that only if they are completely themselves can they influence each other. In place of the theoretical otherness, the historical opposition appears.

It is precisely the solar religion that can give us an example of this. What at first appears as a convoluted plot, reveals itself, when viewed from this angle, as a well-traced design. The ancient Bedouin Shams was challenged for dominance in the Roman pantheon with the same decision with which the purified and philosophically imprinted god was voluntarily granted everything he demanded. The political reaction forced the god to withdraw into himself, and this was the premise for his definitive assertion. Not a fortuitous constellation, but an incessant

formative and creative work also determined his advancement in the political sphere,

History

An age that has lost its foundations is forced to look for something new. Where a crack has opened up, the momentum of life does not cease to build bridges over the abyss, or to bridge it. It is necessary, however, to recognise the loss or fracture, and to avoid denying the inconvenience by trying to erase it with words. Diagnosis is always the first step towards guan'gẇne.

Historiography is also faced with changed circumstances today. In its case, the difficulty we have just mentioned is exacerbated. It carries out diag nosis, and at the same time is the object of it; and while it studies and represents world crises, it finds itself in çrisis. Particular historical research and the philosophy of history, history and meta-history, destined for a peaceful neighbourly relationship, have become a pair of enemy sisters. History, a common matrix, sure to have given birth to a dual development of itself, is confronted with an antithesis. Between history and meta-history, union seems to turn into alternative, tolerance into irreconcilable divergence. In place of the unifying copula, disjunction takes over: not history and meta-history, but history *or* meta-history, one says.

would say.

There is a temptation to compromise. This is not to say that the truth always lies somewhere in between: that would be too convenient an expedient. But perhaps it is worth remembering that the two members of that pair, at odds with each other, are by their very nature destined for each other. Their individuality only unfolds against the common background, and only in each other's shadow does their brilliance shine through. Not history or meta-history, then, but history *as* meta-history, and vice versa.

We could also listen to a whole sene of contemporary historians. Of course, this would give us an overview of the pros and cons, but it would hardly provide a solution. It should be added that the importance of current historiography is *adhuc sub iudice,* and that it alone cannot give us an idea of how this split came about. Therefore, it would be better to go back to the great ages of historiography of the past and compare them with today's historiography.

What is the difference between contempo ranean historiography and that illustrated by Niebuhr and the more recent Rankc, Bockh, Karl Otfried Miiller and Jacob Grimm?

Apart from many less important aspects, the essential difference is in the specialisation, which became more and more established with the second half of the 19th century, and gave modern science an im readiness to differentiate it irrevocably from all previous science. The vast subject matter of

study forced the scholar to limit himself to certain epochs and peoples; but he did not stop at this division of labour, and the consequence was that he lost sight of the whole. The two phenomena must be distinguished. Whereas the division of labour, made necessary by the excess of material, presupposes a whole that is subdivided, the mentality that places the meaning of scientific activity in the limit of specialisation consciously disregards the whole. It puts the fragment in its place as such.

One can do without citing the examples on which this statement is based. If one wished, the enumeration would be endless. However, this renunciation entails another distinction between today and yesterday. The search for history, which believed itself to be autonomous, has freed itself not only from the general historical framework that it was supposed to presuppose, but also from all forms of the philosophy of history, which, no matter whether taken as a basis or as a crowning achievement, still represents the whole. Both sides had to suffer the consequences of this split.

On the one hand, there are the grand overviews, attempted by Spengler and Toynbee. They are based on a not despicable specialised science, and yet critics have managed to demonstrate gaps and misunderstandings at every turn. Their more recent epigones have now given up competing with specialised science. The lack of specialised knowledge has reached, in this philosophy of history, a measure

which one must... describe as worrying.

Attempts to iron out the difficulties now described were not lacking. But what is being done to address them? Historical journals and collections of world history begin, with some insistence, to offer their readers
general overviews. The missing unity is achieved by dividing the entire subject matter among specialised historians, who then give an overview. Or to put it another way: an attempt is made to fabricate, by adding the particular histories together, a kind of general history. But when can a spiritual unity ever arise from the addition of so many fragments?

On the one hand, the philosophy of history, which is in danger of being emptied of all content; on the other, a content that lacks unity and philosophical formation. One should not believe that such a lack can safeguard historiography from prejudice and bias. Prejudices also influence non-philosophical spirits, only they are precisely non-philosophical prejudices, i.e. not deepened and not clarified. How else would one explain certain historical judgments by qualified specialists, expressed with a philistinism that remains incensed only because those concerned have resigned themselves to the inevitable?

The lack of philosophical content produces an other consequence. It becomes more and more difficult to interest young scholars in certain research. For Jacob Grimm, phonetics was a vital expression of the spirit of language. But since this discipline has become

increasingly limited to the recording of the various theories that have found favour in the face of criticism, its survival has become problematic. Even the great systematic collecting works, scientific les sices, and editions of texts find fewer and fewer collaborators, and even when they do exist, they must resign themselves to being exploited, without receiving any recognition for their work. The dissolution of a philosophy of history that also assigns this work its place within the framework of the common goal harms precisely those scholars who see in this dissolution the triumph of their special and particular interests.

But how can one reconcile what is discordant, bring to unity what is divided? Certainly the solution does not consist simply in bringing opposing points of view closer together. A compromise, even if it could be found, would resemble a false peace, which only on the surface would try to conceal the fire of new wars. A new basic con cept must be found.

So far, we have spoken of the opponents of the philosophical story. We should now recall that the qua dro outlined by Spengler and his epigones represents only one possibility among others. Indeed, it would be unfair to consider the philosophy of history merely an overview of the whole of human history, or of its alleged fundamental traits. Neither exten sion nor abstraction form the character of co-

philosophical knowledge of history. It must not run away from the concrete and the particular: a limited period of history, if studied with the necessary pro fondity, can sometimes give more to the philosophy of history than a 'panorama' of world perspectives. After all, one has to wonder whether particular research cannot grasp the contours of a historical phenomenon, its unrepeatability and general validity with that immediacy that is too often denied to the historical panorama based on general concepts. Who does not remember the pleasure one feels when contemplating ancient coins? In the smallest space one has a picture of the history of art, which reveals itself in full evidence to the sensitive eye.

Things and ideas are one. This must be remembered when it comes to reconciling the supposed contrast between history and the philosophy of history. History not only reveals itself in the whole, but also in each particular, in the same way that the part lives in the whole, and in the whole. Hence, the philosophy of history must deal not only with the whole, but also with the particular in all its fullness. Such a requirement also demands a quid pro quo: the particular investigation must shine forth a spark of that divine spirit that pervades the whole.

This means that particular research devoid of philosophical content is best left unpublished. But it also means that there is no philosophy of history if it excludes the particular study in its own

construction parts. Only where specialised investigation and
philosophy form a whole, historiography is born; even the most humble *routine* is ennobled, while the philosophy of history is kept from getting lost in the generic. Otherwise, particular research no longer makes sense and the :philosophy of history cannot be validated.

The solar god of Emesa

Asia as a historical formation is a life that takes place in large spaces, in the midst of an opulent nature, almost frightening in its grandeur. Here, there seems to be a lack of that measure that allows man to become self-aware and experience the harmony between existence and nature, which elsewhere spreads rich and happy. Rivers, mountains and deserts take on such dimensions that those who live there are deprived of all freedom of action. Smi surate is the winter in its frost, in the cold breath of its storms; immeasurable is the summer in its heat and ar sura, the spring in its blossom. And this applies not only to climatic fluctuations, but also to natural catastrophes. Man seems to be given over to their cruel moods. The deeper one goes into the continent, the more these phenomena take on an inhuman character.

If one wants to start Asia from the Hellespont, Syria is included in it. But the bizarreness of nature has arranged for a thin strip of land to be joined to this continent, where everything unfolds in reverse. Uniformity becomes variety, monotony comes alive and inexorability turns into serene leti-

aunt. Syria is, roughly speaking, a Mediterranean country, united by fraternal ties to Italy, Greece and the Aegean Islands. The transparency of the colours is the same; the variety of tones is diluted in the same light, in the same air.

One can only understand Syria by viewing it as a crossroads; only if one carefully observes the interweaving of individualities in their development, if one grasps the nuances, the particularities and sometimes even the profound differences. Everything seems to be marked by its own law: the landscape, customs and historical formations born in this country.

Syria and its distribution

The geographical element alone is full of contradictions. Bounded to the west by the sea, to the east by the Arabian desert, Syria is a transit country. This means that the character of its neighbours is decisive. Add to this the fact that two mountain ranges — Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon — create ever new landscapes in their course, which are also made different by settlement and cultivation: then the variety, the changeability of the picture, the distinctiveness, and, if you like, the contrast, reveal themselves again as a determining form. Certainly this must also have influenced the people who inhabited these countries, the gods and religions that were born there.

The Mediterranean coast differs from the interior, Phoenicia from Celesiria and the northern plains. On the sea are Tyre, Sidon, Biblo and Ugarit — places of ancient civilisation, which is only now beginning to reveal its treasures. Open to traffic and navigation, ready to welcome foreign influences, and above all prosperous and well cultivated, this land nurtures a lively and industrious people, quick to seize their advantage and take advantage of it without too many scruples. Just as the Phoenician merchant knew how to adapt to the most diverse conditions, so too the farmer on the western side of Lebanon takes advantage of every good opportunity. All the way up he spreads out his fields, supe rating the slope with well-constructed terraces and exploiting the life-giving water everywhere. Meadows and fields, groves of plane, mulberry and olive trees, and in between the vineyards and the humble huts of the farmers and tenant farmers: and over all the blue sea and its refreshing breeze. Intensively practised agriculture in the narrowest space produces a rich harvest: magnificent fruit, olive oil and a heavy, sweet wine. Sometimes the plants reach a splendid luxuriance, especially in the coastal plain.

An island in the interior of the Phoenician coast formed Beirut, the city of the grammarian Probus (end of the 1st century A.D.), which brought ancient Latin literature out of a long oblivion. Home to a school of Roman law, ancient Beirut had a reputation as the 'seat of Auso-Nic laws,' an almost Italic enclave. Another am-

particular environment formed the coast on the border with Asia Minor. While the south was marked by the Phoenicians and their past, the north was influenced by Hellenistic colonisation. Here stood the me tropolis of Antioch on the Orontes and its port Se leucia; inland Apamea, military base and home of the great Posidonius (c. 135-51), and in the far south Laodicea — all dynastic foundations of the Seleucids. Laodicea is characterised by reminders of the Roman era: columns with sumptuous capitals, round arches and vaults, the curved framework of an imposing Severan building. Ruins of ruined farms and villages, of Christian churches and monasteries are scattered around the countryside. Well-built modern stone houses are inspired by ancient forms and complement them.

Lebanon and its northern spurs distinguish the interior from the coastal plain. Once again, the scenery changes. Those who have crossed the peaks of the mountains believe they are in another country. The pronounced urban character, where Phoenicia and the coastal area of northern Syria intertwine, changes to rural. Now, however, the small intensive cultivation has been eliminated by the extensively cultivated latifundia. The chequerboard of fields and meadows is barely enlivened here and there by thickets of walnut, apricot and pear trees, in the severe frame of poplars. Uniformity dominates, not more luxuriance and variety of forms.

Where there is no sea, which animates and opens

the horizons, which excites and enchants, man is deprived of the fa-

adaptability and industriousness. Instead, the ability to work as such is valued and demanded, and in the heavy daily grind, less open and ready to take on responsibility, the farmer bends to the co mmovement of strangers. Harder, more tenacious, but also more Qttuso, he turns into the fellah.

The depression between Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon, the Bekaa plain and the Orontes valley form the most prosperous region of Syria. Alongside cereal crops, there are vineyards. The hills of Zahle and Shto ra give fine wine. The land does not only nourish the settled populations. In autumn, Bedouins appear, to graze the drome dari and goats in the fields after the harvest. Arriving from another world, they bring their forms and translate them to the natives. The desert tent is the inspiration for the huts inhabited by the peasants of the Orontes and Leontes.

Further north, in the Aleppo plain, a new transformation takes place. The labourers' huts, as well as the white, healthy farmers' houses that gave the interior and the coast their characteristic appearance, disappear. In their place comes the beehive-shaped hut, made of stone and clay. Already attested in antiquity, these white-plastered domes assemble in more or less numerous groups. Sometimes they are surrounded by a wall; elsewhere they rise on top of an ancient pile of ruins (tell). Peasants and shepherds live here together, as they flatly

flat the cultivated and irrigated land is lost in the steppe, the fertile area in the desert. Further on, one can see the uncultivated plateau, south-west of Aleppo and along the banks of the Euphrates, on which the desert comes to a halt with dunes and banks of often bizarre shapes. Already the wealthy landowner prefers the forms of a chivalrous and lordly exi stence — that is, Bedouin.

A middle ground between cultivated land and steppe is formed by the eastern border area, which is reached by crossing the Anti-Lebanon. To the south, it is bounded by the desolate rocky peaks of Leggja and Hauran, where the volcanic rock gives the houses their bleak appearance. This is followed by Da masco, and, at the edge of the desert, the oasis of Palmyra; then, to the north-east of the Anti-Lebanon, Homs and the vi cine cities. Deserts and lush gardens are often in direct contact. Whoever, returning from Hamad, enters Dama sco, will never forget this contrast and the moving impression it communicates.

This difference is also noticeable in the population. Bedouins and farmers, shepherds and citizens meet together; sedentary Arameans and nomadic Arabs also meet. Again, the human type is transformed. The desert and the implacable harshness of the struggle for existence, which characterise the life of the Bedouins, submerge into the bleak immensity of the volcanic landscape, on the slopes of Hermon, now flooded with soil, now covered in snow. They provoke the wild pugnacity of the Druze and the religious fanaticism of the

citizen, who in ancient times as today has made his mark on Hama and Homs. Close and passionate, indomitable and cunning, dangerous in open battle as in ambush, full of the most implacable xe nofobia, the inhabitant of this region has retained his characteristics to this day.

The gods of Syria

Like the landscape and the people, the gods of Syria have a distinguishing mark on them. There has always been an essential diversity between them, depending on whether they came from the coast, the central plains or the eastern border near the desert.

To the deities of the c[illegible]sts belonged the beautiful Adonis, mourned by the women of Biblo on the banks of the river after which he was named. In the spring, when, according to legend, Adonis received his mortal wound while hunting, the waves of the river were dyed red: this started the funeral ceremonies. The main feast fell only in midsummer. They commemorated the union of Adonis with the goddess of love, the
his death and resurrection; they sowed the "gardens of Adonis, "[1] which were then taken out with the
dead god and thrown into the springs. Vegetation, in its growth and death, was everywhere connected to

1 Pots with fast-growing, short-lived plants. *[Ed.]*

Adonis, and sometimes this union is expressed with primordial violence. The fountain of Adonis at Aphaca, high above Lebanon, still conceals all the horror that the coexistence of flowering and wilting, of life and death, poles of nature, arouses.

With a strenuous march, one ascends the declining bank of the Adonis River. Dark gorges that close the vi is alternating with wide vistas, where the coastline and the shining eye of the sea emerge. Finally, one arrives at a large valley, formed by grey rock walls, which surround the newcomer like an amphitheatre. Here the river rises, and the source is also the ori gine of life. From the sides of a rock face, the river bursts out into the light; it bursts from the bowels of a dark cave in a mighty waterfall, and then rushes towards the sea in its deeply incised bed. An extraordinary impression, further enhanced by the landscape in which the river's birth takes place. Everything around seems like stone: masses of rocks and pebbles, rising up in vertical walls, almost always ce late by clouds; impassable, steep, closed; lonely and sterile. In the midst of this mortal rigidity, there gushes forth the sacred water, which awakens life, and makes plants grow copiously wherever it passes. Here, rocks and lush greenery, death and prosperity coexist: this miracle, inconceivable and yet true, that from the dead stone brings forth life-giving water, appears to us in the moving picture of nature, in divine creation itself.

Where death and life, sterility and exuberance are entwined together, the hierodula appears.2 As an ether, who is rooted in worship, she brings together both spheres: the soft pleasure and the gratuitousness that dominates her actions. Usually the woman precedes the man, t h e goddess her lover. Even today, at Adonis' spring, her memory survives, not Adonis'. The inhabitants display lit candles in honour of the local si gnora, as they expect salvation and help from her. To capture her, they hang shreds of cloth according to ancient custom from the sacred tree, a selective fig tree not far from the temple.

Adonis was not alone. From Gaza came Balmar codes, the 'lord of dances,' and Marnas, the god of water and rain. In his honour, the wild aquatic festival of Maiuma was celebrated, where naked women were seen swimming, and in which clear-minded young men participated, who then went home so different All these cults possessed the soft and lustful character proper to festivals of vegetation. The fertility of the Syrian shores, the 'feminine smile,' as Barrès puts it, of that sea were expressed in this way. Aphrodite and Adonis belonged to the same line-up as Cybele and Attis, Isis. and Osiris.

Quite different were the gods that arose in northern Syria or in the inland plains. Atargatis was honoured everywhere

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2 Sacred prostitute. *[Ed.]*

in the centre and north of the country. Its most famous shrine stood not far from the Euphrates, at Bam byke-Hierapolis. Again, the female element stands out. Next to Atargatis, her companion Hadad disappeared, both in Bambyke and in the cult sites of Lebanon (in contrast to the Mesopotamian Hatra). Even in Baalbek, where Atargatis Venus, together with Jupiter-Hadad and Mercury-Sha mash formed a trinity, sacred prostitution was in vogue. And at Bambyke, the goddess received from her male worshippers an even more radical sacrifice than forcing maidens to sell their youth to the first comer. To this was added the most unbridled lust. Women in fact, the Syrian Lu cian (c. 120-180) informs us, 'desire eunuchs, and they lust after women; no one is jealous, even though such behaviour is esteemed very pious'.

The mendicant priests of Atargatis found seldom favourable judgements. Apuleius (2nd cent.) describes their ecstatic dances to the exciting sound of the flute, their public confession of sins, their drudgery before the astonished crowd and the wounds they inflicted on each other's arms with swords — all in an attempt to collect rich gifts. One of the goddess's slaves boasted of having brought home, on her orders, no less than seventy sacks full of gifts. Lucian's irony spared little of Bambyke's sanctuary, but where the citizen and scholar saw only an object of ridicule, a cunning and powerful

priestly caste ruled over the hearts of the believers. From Syria and surrounding regions men flocked to Bambyke for the spring festival; from Arabia and Babylonia, Cappadocia and Cilicia whole treasures arrived at the shrine. The temple of Baalbek, with its monolithic columns of imposing dimensions and the splendour of its halls, was considered one of the wonders of the world. Skin from all countries was also found there.

Bambyke and Baalbek formed sanctuary states, characteristic of the East. The central power of Rome had not dared touch their prestige, nor their wealth. They remained places of worship with very ancient roots, of a fervent cult, to which the population was attached with passionate obstinacy. Only rarely, and with great caution, did one penetrate into their existence. The care of the emperors also turned to these temples. Trajan (98-1 17) questioned the oracle of Baalbek. Antoninus Pius (138-161), Caracalla (211-217) and Philip the Arab (244-249) extended and completed the temple construction. The gods of the Phoenicians were like those of the interior: all strong and alacrity gods, responding to the Semitic religio sity. They demanded all of man's life; only, they did it differently. While the divinities of the coast presided over the events of birth and death, the peasant docility of the interior was expressed in perseverance; and as in the daily toil of the fields, they dominated the course of nature in the

its continuity, so that in the divine image the inevitability of destiny is expressed. The Phoenician goddesses took possession of their worshippers with the natural exclusivism of women, while the Baalim of the interior towered as the arbiters of destiny, and, under the influence of Babylonian speculation, their need for domination changed into absolute omnipotence. The goddesses, the powers of love and fertility, wished to be both lord and mother: the Baalim were lords of unity and eternity, rulers of space and time.

Next to the Phoenician gods and those of central Syria, there was a third group. Its place of origin was further to the east, in the Syriac border area, facing the Arabian desert. To this belonged the Jupiter of Damascus and that of Do liebe, in the corner of Asia Minor and the Euphrates. Alongside him was Dusares and, also from central Arabia, the sun god of Emesa.

The lupiter Damascenus also enjoyed im perial favour. If Antoninus Pius and Caracalla had turned their attention to the temple of Baalbek, Septimius Severq (193-211) and Odenatus (t 267), the lord of Palmyra, took care of the god of Damascus. His temple and the adjoining market were articulated in a square courtyard with propylaea flanked by towers (the layout is still preserved, in its essentials, in the Umayyad mosque). The architectural form is traditional in eastern Syria. Everywhere in the vi-

cinances – at Dumeir, at Si and at Kasr Rabbah – the same pattern returns.

Much more modest, however, are the remains of the temple of Iupiter Dolichenus. Only the tomb of an isla mico sheikh and a pond full of untouchable fish near the village of Samkoj mark the site of the sanctuary. But it is precisely in this worship of the god on the mountain peaks and in the maintenance of sacred fish that Doliche has preserved the oldest customs. The god is depicted in Persian clothing; this takes us back to an age when Roman influences were still far away. In fact, one should not overlook the derivation from the Hittite and Hurrian Teshup, the storm god of Asia Minor. Until the 3rd century, one can trace the image of this god hurling thunderbolts, mounted on the back of a bull. Dusares and the solar god of Emesa, who in the history of the 3rd century A.D. were to leave traces profond e, there con- ducing beyond the borders of Syria.

Helios of Emesa

From the first glance, the links with the Baalim of Baalbek and Damascus are clear. Iupiter Heliopolitanus and Iupiter Damascenus also reveal a concordance in name. The question could also be raised for the god of Emesa, whether he is to be compared to Iupiter. But, as we shall show, things are different for him.

The trinity of Baalbek, Iupiter-Hadad, Venus-Atar gatis, Mercury-Sham.ash, was, in its hierarchical order, more recent. At first, in fact, the sun god, i.e. Shamash, stood at the top; only under the in-flux of Babylonian, or, as it was called in late antiquity, Chaldean, speculation did Hadad become the lord of destiny, and take the first place. Shamash, later equated with Mercury, had to settle for a servile role: as the messenger of the gods Hermes or Mercury became the executive organ of the supreme god. In the pantheon of Palmyra, Helios, the sun god, stood next to Bel; here, too, he was put and mediator, while Bel towered as lord of the world in the empyrean. From his subservient task the sun god drew his name: as Malakbel, 'messenger of Bel,' he is assumed in the Palmyra trinity, and then equated with Mercury.

The religion of fate, of Babylonian origin, was also widespread in Emesa, as was its twin sister, astro logia. Julia, later the wife of Emperor Septimius Severus (193-211), was warned by her horoscope that she would one day be united with a ruler; she was born of the lineage of the priests of Emesa. In the Ethiopic roman zo of Heliodorus, which reports many aspects of the religious world of Emesa, it is said that the course of the stars ineluctably determines human destiny. Excavations to the northeast of the city have unearthed astrological ta vols in cuneiform writing.

And yet the god of the· sun of Emesa did not make himself

taking away, like Shamash in Baalbek and Palmyra, the first place. Coins and inscriptions show that he did not turn into Iupiter, Baal or Bel at all, but remained the sun god. Deus Sol Elagabalus or Invictus Sol Elagabalus are names of ine quivocal meaning; and it is understandable how, in an inscription from Cordova, the 'great Helios' of Emesa is para goned to Re, the Egyptian sun god. He was also called 'progenitor,' as the inhabitants of Emesa sometimes declared descent from the sun in his name, or, as they simply put it, 'from the god. The other deity, Dusares, was also united with the sun. Supreme god of the Nabataeans,[3] he is found throughout the area of their caravan trade. Like all solar gods, Dusares bore the attribute of Invincible; he was joined to Mithras, and his natal day fell on 25 December. Like the divine lord of Emesa, he possessed a sacred stone.

This form of worship is also known for the lunar god Karrhai, and generally for the gods of Arab origin. The name of these stones, 'betili,' means that they were the dwellings of the gods, not the gods themselves. At Emesa, the sacred stone was cone-shaped, with a circular base and pointed top. Reliefs carved on the surface showed an eagle with a serpent in its beak: the symbol of the sun. Here too, the stone was not identified with the sun; it represented its image.

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3 Arab population that dominated eastern Jordan in the 1st cent. B.C. and the 1st century A.D. dominated eastern Jordan.

gine. And yet the god was interpenetrated there, he was somehow joined to the stone, as is also known from the numerous stone blocks worshipped in the pre-Islamic Ara bia.

One hears of these especially when Muslim zealots are about to destroy them. The priests of the ancient Arab deities beg them to give battle around the stones to the representatives of the new religion. They will lose their cult and their prestige if they fail to defend the stone, and with it their 'home'. "A god who does not fight by his stone is a 'worthless thing. "Al-Uzza, for having lost such a battle – it was not a matter of three sacred stones, but three trees that belonged to her – "henceforth she will not be honoured any more," sounds the judgment of the victorious prophet Muhammad (569-632).

Stones are not tied to a specific place: they are mobile. New gods are imported by making sacred stones or by removing them from already existing shrines. When the cult of the sun god was transported to Rome, the sacred stone of Emesa migrated to the banks of the Tiber. When in Rome, after the assassination of Elaga balo (222), the foreign cult was eliminated, the stone was sent back to its Syriac homeland.

Next to the cult of stone stands, also in a very ancient form, the cult of mountains. 'Elagabalus' was originally the name of the god himself, and means 'lord of the mountain. "This was the fortified fortress of Emesa, where the god had his abode. From the pia-

nura in which the city is scattered, the citadel rises towards the south-west, just opposite the septentrional foothills of Lebanon. Here was the temple, the summit of which, in the words of an ancient source, competed with the wooded peaks of the mountain.

The comparison with Dusares comes up again. Southeast of the Dead Sea, already at the gateway to Arabia proper, lies Petra. Capital of the Nabataeans, it belonged to a people who inscribed their inscriptions in Aramaic dialect, but who were Arabs, as its very name proves. In the midst of a rocky valley, nestled between the steep red and violet walls of a mas sicch of primordial grandeur, Petra seems to be a part of the surrounding landscape. Only the stony bed of a stream, cut deeply into the steep pa nets, makes it possible to pass through. Rather than giving a feeling of security, this enchanted place is far away from men and seems created to make one feel the presence of divinity. Among the crowd of tombs, caves and temples, the square of the sa criphics, cut into the top of the rock, makes a great impression. An altar and slaughter bench, a sunken basin in which the blood of the sacrificed animal flowed, two 'ba tyloi' a short distance away, give an idea of what an alpine cult of the ancient Semites might have been like.

It is no coincidence that we have taken our examples from the Arab world. This is where the Nabataeans and their god Dusares originated. The god of Emesa will take us into the same environment.

From the time of Pom peo's eastern expeditions (66-62), Emesa was under a dynasty whose members bore the name or title of Sampsige branch, Sampsiceramo (or similar). The funerary monument of one of these prince-priests is known, and more recently a find near present-day Homs. The iron helmet, with an artistically crafted silver shroud and gilded ornamental bands, may have belonged to one of these men; the sun-shaped rosette attached to the forehead also proves this.

The dynasty of Emesa was of Arab origin. Evidence of this is provided by the title Sampsiceramo (which contains a reference to the sun god), but also by the names given to the rulers: Giamblico, Aziz, Soemo. The same goes for Mesa and Mamea, Soemias. The priesthood of the sun was a hereditary prerogative of the lineage, as was usual among Bedouin lineages. The emasculation of the high priest and the abstinence from meat of maia could also point in the same direction.

The Arab origin of the sun god remained a peculiarity of Emesa. In fact, sun cults among the Bedouins possessed, by comparison, very little importance. In the inscriptions of Arab nomads found in the Safa, south-east of Damascus, a goddess Shams appears; sometimes also in a male version. Almost always the nomadic tribes, on becoming sedentary, renounced

their deities in favour of those they found among the natives. So did the inhabitants of Safa, welcoming Dusares. However, one must remember the presence of a male Shams in Palmyra. This, perhaps, influ(on Emesa.

The derivation of the cult of Emesa from Arabia is also made clearer by its relations with other deities. The above-mentioned inscription from Cordova shows, alongside the 'great Helios' Elagabalus of Emesa, Aphrodite and Athena. Under the former is a lunar divinity of Arab origin, perhaps also the mat star lady al-Uzza, of the same origin. Athena is assimilated in the inscription to the Arabic Allath. As 'mother of all gods', she was spread throughout the Arabic-speaking territory, as far as Palmyra; she was sometimes honoured together with al-Uzza. In Taif, near Mecca, Allath had his sacred area, where it was forbidden to cut down trees and hunt animals. There was also the sacred stone, in whose cavity the treasure of the goddess was stored. Again, the great Arabian explo rator Ch. M. Doughty [4] was shown in this city a stone connected with the name of Allath. The passage of the goddess is also testified in the Hauran, in Palmyra and in the vicinity. Emesa too has traman given her image, in a long dress with a sceptre. Everywhere the world of the Bedouin goddesses punished in the neighbouring Syrian territory. Inscriptions from the

4 CHARLES MONTAGU F DouGHTY (1 843- 1926) : his fame is the gated to the *Travds in Arabia Deserta,* published in 1888.

The Hauran gives us an idea of this pantheon. It contains not only Shams, al-Uzza, and Allath, but also – in the pre-Islamic period – the name of Allah, the male companion of the latter dca. Both arose in the Mesopotamian Hatra.

On a relief on the ceiling of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra one can see an unusual procession. A dromedary carries an object wrapped in veils. The retinue is formed by maidens and women who are also veiled. In front of the dromedary, facing backwards, stands a man holding the reins of the animal high above his head. Leading the procession is an unclothed animal, a donkey or a mule. Every detail of the representation has its importance.

The maidens wrapped in cloaks, lined up around the image of the god, we recognise from a verse by the Arab poet Imru ul-kais. In the battle, especially at the decisive moment, one of these girls takes the place of the divine image, and sits on the saddle of the dromedary, which is tall and padi glion-shaped. Surrounded by the women of the tribe, she is carried as a living sign in the middle of the fray. With songs, gestures, insults and, if necessary, ecstatically denuding her body, she drags the soldiers with her. Nothing is more ignominious than leaving the dromedon and the maiden to the enemy. Aiscia,[5] the "mother of the faithful," in the "battle of the dromedary" rides at the same

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[5] Wife of Muhammad, d. in 678.

manner before the ranks of his own.

One of the sacred objects of the tribe – an idol, a sacred stone, under a canopy or wrapped in precious cloth – may also take its place on the dromeda rio, instead of the girl. The women of the tribe always hand the retinue, inciting the fighters with songs, cymbals and tambourines. They are also known to throw off their robes at the decisive moment, and enthuse the warriors with gestures and poetry.

And even goddesses can play that part. An in viate of Muhammad is about to cut down the three sacred trees of al-Uzza. Two of them have already fallen, when the goddess herself, in ecstatic excitement, steps in front of the destroyer, "Rise up violently against the enemy, and do not be afraid!" the priest recommends. "Let h e r veil fall and raise her dress l" Incited too to strip naked, as mortal women do not hesitate to do in the decisive battle, she stands in defence of her property. Such things were not unknown even in Emesa. The women of the priestly house, who no longer serenade themselves on the dromedary, but on a chariot, in an important battle descend from it and with their words and cries of pain induce the solos to resist. And here too, ecstatic enthusiasm leads the combatants to new attacks and victory. The battle is decided by this particular method of offensive.

We also find the procession of the sacred stone, also transported on a cart instead of on the dro-

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medary. And as on the relief of Palmyra, he who leads the sacred weight stands facing it, and holds the reins in his hand, so does the supreme priest of the sun god precede the chariot with the sacred stone, " walking backwards, looking at the god and holding the reins of the horse. "

The animals chosen to carry or pull the god find their way on their own. This is true for the pair of horses dragging the sacred stone, for the dromedary with the veiled idol, and also for the donkey, or mule, which in the Palmyra relief precedes the dromedary and its guide. When the papal procession of 1804 for Napoleon's coronation moved through the streets of Paris towards Notre Dame, it aroused the derision of the people because a mule without a rider trotted at the head... He was the last expression of this cult.

Historical position

An Arab had already once mentioned the sun god. The Nabataean Iambulus had composed, in the last two decades of the 2nd century BC. C., an uto pistic novel that depicted a new social order. An order in which everything takes place in the best and most natural way, in which the commonality of women and goods prevails, and mankind is placed under the rule of Helios. It is the solar state that the

Sicilian slaves insurgent under the leadership of Euno,[6] and in Asia Minor the followers of Aristonicus of Pergamum[7] so gned to implement, before falling under the harsh at tacco of Rome. But from Syria now the sun god comes forward with new demands.

It was not, this time, a social programme, let alone a utopian one. The original element was p r e s e r v e d here far differently than in the Nabataean imbued with literature and philosophy. Of Arab origin, the solar god of Emesa and his priestly college remained profoundly linked to the religious world of pre-Islamic paganism. The local characteristics: a circle of chosen devotees, the dwelling of the god in the sacred stone, the ties to home, country and lineage — all this is typical of that degree of evolution. Traces of this were also preserved in Emesa. Not freedom from t h e earth and man, but the bond with them formed the character of the god.

The history of pre-Islamic Arabia is still to be written. In it, religion assumes an important place. So far, interest has been limited to the century immediately preceding the appearance of Maomet to, and only occasionally has interest been turned to more ancient times (with the exception of southern Arabia).

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6 A slave from Syria who promoted the first slave war (135-132 B C) and was proclaimed 'king' by his followers.

7 Rome's war against the pretender Aristonicus of Pergamum took place in the years 1 32 -129 BC.

And yet it should be evident that, as im portance, they are only slightly inferior to the Islamic centuries and their immediate antecedents.

Above all, the 3rd century A.D. shows an increase in Arab life that has something astonishing about it. Arab state factions such as Hatra, Hirah and Palmyra grew in importance and dared to play an autonomous role between the great powers, Rome and the Sasanids. That the attempt proved premature, ending in the destruction of two of these states, does not detract from their importance. Even within the Roman empire, the Arabs distinguished themselves. Archers on foot and horseback, originally from the Arab-Syrian border area, Bedouins or semi-Bedouins, rose in the Roman army to the highest ranks. They were to be found on almost every frontier. Detachments from Emesa and Chalcis, from Damascus and Palmyra were established near the Numidian *limes*. In Egypt, A r a b tribes immigrated, forming their own district. This, and the conquest of the Nile country by the army of Palmyra (268-271), must be seen as a prelude to the success of the first caliphs four hundred years later. Another premonitory sign is the castle of Mshatta built by an Arab prince in eastern Jordan, not far from t h e Roman border, and which heralds in its structure and ornamentation the great buildings that the Umayyads would one day erect in the same region.

But far more important was the accession to the throne im-

perial Roman, in the same century, of men in whose veins Arab blood flowed. They came from the priestly house of Emesa, and after the fall of this dynasty it was again an Arab — Philip, son of a Bedouin sheikh from Hauran (244-249)
- to seize the supreme dignity.

Elagabalus

The rise of the Arab element, often young and sometimes revolutionary, took place within the framework of existing structures. These were represented by the empire, which once again, and for centuries, enclosed and preserved the heritage of ancient culture. Rome incorporated, in this inheritance, elements both great and mean, immortal and already withered away. The empire was created in such a unity of destinies, that it was forced to suffer consequences it had not caused, burdens it was not responsible for. The counterpart of the Hellenism welcomed by Rome was to find itself exposed to the political and religious offensive of an East that had now never been awakened.

Alexander's victorious campaign (336-323 BC). C.) made the wisdom of the East seem to be at odds with the Hellenic spirit. As long as the foreign domination lasted, the conquered saw in the new civilisation something incomprehensible, and grudgingly endured a superiority they had nothing to oppose. It was only when the surprise had passed that the reaction came: barely three generations after the death of the conqueror, it was in full swing.

course. The most powerful and significant was that of the East. It turned against the ancient victor, who no longer seemed insurmountable. But, as well as against the great Macedonian and his successors, it turned against the power that had taken over: against Rome.

It was a battle of two continents, two civilisations, and — it could not have been otherwise — also a battle of gods. These appeared in the oracles, and reflected world events as in a speck. The sentences sounded domination over Asia or Europe, conquest of the East or West, war of defence or revenge. The apocalypses foretold a universal judgement that would bring to the Macedonians or the Romans the long-unfolding chastisement, destruction. But it was not only the thirst for vengeance, the primordial hatred of Asia towards the smaller but more fortunate continent, that burst forth. It was not only to punish, but also to conquer; not only to destroy, but also to transform and possess. The gods of the East were about to wrest from the hearts of Westerners what had hitherto belonged to the lords of Olympus and the Capitol. In an incoercible flow, so it seemed, they were moving into spheres hitherto precluded.

The victorious campaign that brought the gods and cults of the East to Rome originated at the end of the 3rd century.
a. C. Hesitantly at first, then at an ever more rapid and vast pace, that foreign world invaded Rome, until the religion of its fathers was overwhelmed and king pushed into the background... This, at least, is the traditional qua dro. And yet it needs some rectification.

Romanity was able to defend itself in various ways against this offensive. The ritual of the imported gods was always deprived of essential parts. During the Au gustean age, a vigorous counter-attack was planned against the eastern religions. Until the 3rd century A.D., as we shall see, the Roman form was victoriously preserved.

Moreover, foreign invasion did not form a unified mo t. Egypt and Asia Minor, Syria, Iran and Me sopotamia were countries with different characters and customs. As the countries and peoples, so were the gods different. Thus, one appeared in the limelight now, the other in the limelight, and, indeed, they succeeded each other in a specific order.

The gods of Egypt and Asia Minor dominated the first two centuries of the imperial era. Isis and Se rapides, then Cybele took first place; temples were erected to them in Rome, and mo nets were coined with their effigies. It is interesting to note how

the lovers of the two goddesses remain in the background: Attis is rarely met, and Osiris is completely absent. In both cases, an attitude is brought to light.
to conservative, since amorous passions had always been foreign to the gods of the Roman religion; that is, Rome responded by depriving foreign cults
of essential elements. Only towards the end of the 2nd century did the picture begin to change.

First, under the Severans, the Egyptian gods grew in importance. They seemed to have reached the peak of their power. Already Septimius Severus (193-211) dedicated
his attention to Serapis. During a trip to Egypt, which made a deep impression on him, he there
he built the famous temple of the god in Alexandria. He had himself depicted — what no other emperor before him had dared — as Serapis. Caracalla followed his father's example. Once again Sera pide was the centre of attention. The emperor stood in the temple of the god, when in Alexandria he let his soldiers loose to kill and plunder. To Se rapides he dedicated the sword with which he had killed his brother Geta. In Rome, on the Quirinal, a temple dedicated to the Egyptian god arose, which exceeded
for splendour all the others. A Caracalla designa inscription as 'philosarapis'; in another tes
of the "only god Zeus Serapis Helios, invincible si lord of the world. "

At first glance, this seems to be a development of

the elements that characterised the first two se-

the imperial age. And yet there is something new.

Alongside Serapis, Septimius Severus raised two African deities to the highest rank: Hercules and Dionysus, bringing them both to Rome from his native city Leptis Magna. Beneath the Greek names were two Phoenician cults, but two centuries of uninterrupted worship in the adopted city of Greater Sirte had set them on the new continent. The imperial example was followed by the private cult.

The two African gods were joined by a goddess: Iuno Caelestis, the Lady of Carthage. Serapis, too, came from that continent, and we have seen how the African of origin had become represented in the image of the African god. Cosf, under a superficial analogy with the previous century, a change had taken place. Until then, Serapis and Isis could claim, despite their Egyptian origin, to be universal deities. Isis was equated with almost all the female deities of the Greek and Eastern religions. She was the goddess of ten thousand names, the 'One who was everything. ' Serapis was also Zeus, Helios and Dionysus; he was invoked as Pan theus. But under Septimius Severus, the worship of Se rapides became the expression of his African origin. From a universal god he had turned into the representative of a continent and a people. The new principle, once in force, was to have unpredictable consequences, even for the Egyptian gods themselves.

Under Caracalla (211-217) Serapis, as we have said, retained his rank. But just as Caracalla's origin was less simple than his father's, so were the gods he favoured.

Three countries, says a contemporary, had contributed to the character of this emperor. From Gaul, where he was born, he had the lightness, cowardice and foolhardiness; from his African father the roughness and indomitability; to his mother he owed that pliability that was proper to the Syriac people. These three ele ments were recognisable in Caracalla's religious tendencies. Next to Serapis was the Celtic Gran nus, assimilated to Apollo. But the solar god of Syria also cast his rays for the first time. Caracalla bore, like the sun, the attribute of Invit to, and was once even invoked as the lord of the sun. On his coins one finds the crown of rays and the solar lion; Caracalla is depicted with the solar gesture of the al zata right hand.

The gods of Egypt had just reached the height of their importance, when others of Syriac origin announced themselves alongside them. If Septimius Severus could expose the African Serapis to worship, being of African origin, Caracalla did the same with the Syriac god, invoking his mother's blood. Not even ten years later, this god was about to become ruler of the empire.

Under Caracalla, the sun god bore no name that hinted at his origin. Only it was known that he came from Syria; but the city was not yet named. However, he was undoubtedly thought to be the sun god of Emesa. For it was from Emesa that the wife of Septimius Severus, mother of Caracalla, came. She belonged to the city's priestly lineage.

Septimius Severus cultivated astro-logy from the very beginning. An astrologer had once foretold his great future, and a trustee of the emperor went in search of a bride born under the same sign. He found her in Julia Dom na, a name that in itself expressed the idea of sovereignty. If the emperor came from a Phoenician colony in North Africa, she was born in Syria, from whose shores the Phoenicians had one day sailed west. With her marriage Septimius Severus returned to the origins of his lineage.

In a marriage concluded on such premises, the female element was naturally very prominent. Julia was not only the emperor's wife: she wanted to reign herself. Busts and coins tell us strangely of this woman's interesting face, plump, but with hard contours, a strongly curved nose; above the massive chin, a fleshy, sen sual mouth. Her beauty, it was said, was surpassed only

from his debauchery. However, the emperor had her at his side, and his wife's power over him was great. Eastern coins show her in a pomp that was usually only enjoyed by magistrates. With the assumption of the title 'mater castrorum,' Julia Domna was linked to the armed forces and recognised as the legitimate heir of the wife of Marcus Aurelius (161-180), who had borne the same title.

Julia Domna brought the pa rents of Emesa to the imperial palace, especially her sister: Julia Mesal Septimius Severus actually tried to prevent
thus established a collateral dynastic line. Mesa's two daughters were married to Syrian knights, not senators. However, the husband of Soemias, the eldest daughter, pursued a brilliant career. Under Caracalla, when the heyday of the knights began, the representation of the two supreme offices ended up in his hands.

For a long time, Maesa lived at court, as the empress's sister, without ever appearing in the foreground, and using her position to set aside a fortune. Soemiade's husband, her son-in-law, was almost always busy with financial administration. He had to provide the means to implement the sharp increase in military pay under Caracalla; he was also the first to publicly declare the salaries he received, in addition to his titles. It is easy to imagine where Mesa's wealth came from. And yet came the sudden catastrophe: Caracal-

he was assassinated (217) and a new man, Macrinus, ascended the imperial throne (217-18). Julia Domna continued to be honoured as before, but her life had lost all meaning; she soon followed her son to the grave. Mesa, affected by the new emperor's decree of expulsion, returned home to Eme sa, taking all her possessions with her; she knew that her role was not yet over. Like Letizia Bonaparte, she made the re-birth of her lineage possible with these riches. But unlike Bo naparte, she implemented her plan in person.

Eastern Syria had always paid its homage, alongside Julia Domna, to the so rella. Now, at home, Mesa returned to live with the pa rents, but, having tasted domination, it was unbearable for her to adapt to the life of a subject; it was no less unbearable for her than for Julia herself. But while she renounced and disappeared, Mesa did not allow herself to be pushed aside. Emesa became not only her asylum, but also the place where she prepared her plots. In secret, he could joyfully follow Macrinus' mistakes: t h e soft joie de vivre, which estranged him from the hearts of the soldiers; the passion for theatre and games, the neglect of business, t h e pompous, un-soldierly clothes. And soon Mesa reappeared openly on the scene (218).

His plan was based on the particular relations of his hometown. While Julia Domna had
increasingly estranged from its origins, between Me-

she and her bonds had never loosened. Emesa meant both the actual and the spiritual homeland for her. Moreover, the city was, as it is today, one of the most fanatical in all of Syria. For the inhabitants, the worship of the sun god formed the centre and sense of exi stence. While Julia Domna had turned, on the imperial throne, to the then fashionable philosophy, Mesa and her family were followers of the patriarch Shams, a divi nity as strong and industrious as all those of her lineage. Mesa herself was the daughter of the sun priest Bas sia, and she cared for her two grandsons to assume the same priestly dignity.

In the vicinity of Emesa stood a legion destined to keep the restless city in obedience. Whenever the soldiers arrived in Emesa, they saw the son of Soemias, Elagabalus, in all the splendour of the supreme priestly rank. Youth and beauty, and an imposing bearing won him the hearts of those simple men. To some of his relatives who served in the legion, Mesa r e v e a l e d f o r t h e first time the true origin of his nephew. Caracalla, as a young man, had made mothers of his two cousins: from the union with Soemias was born Elaga balo. The cunning woman hoped for the soldiers' old affection for Caracalla, who had once been their idol and was still the talk of the town: and she was not wrong. Clever helpers seconded her, and her treasures did the rest.

One night Mesa appeared with his people in the camp.

troops. Everything was prepared, the soldiers acclaimed Elagabalus emperor and set out to fight for him. The news spread quickly: the aversion against Macrinus, the memory of the rich dowries that Caracalla had once offered to the soldiers, and the money of Mesa facilitated an ever-growing support. Macrinus did not care much: he sent the prefect of his guard, Julian, with troops to crush the rebellion in Emesa. The soldiers were shown Elagabalus from the top of the city walls: and they realised that he was indeed a descendant of Caracalla. To prove the origin of Elagabalus by the resemblance, a youthful portrait of his father was m a d e , and in fact the portraits that have come down to us attest to this resemblance. Macrinus' soldiers lost all desire to fight. They soon turned against Julius no; they chopped off his head and sent it to their former emperor, whose inseparability they had abandoned. In the decisive battle before the walls of Antioch, fortune once a g a i n seemed to favour Macrinus. The pretender's ranks began to falter. Then Maesa and Soemias got out of the chariot in which they were accompanying the army. Their prayers and invocations succeeded in inducing the fugitives to stop. Elagabalus did even more: with ecstatic impetus he threw himself into the fray, dragging his men with him. But only the cowardly escape of Macrinus decided the battle. With a false beard and disguised

tried to disappear unnoticed, but on the way soc fought his fate; the same happened to his son Diadumenianus, who was about to fight the Parthians.

Elagabalus impcratorc

The feat was unexpectedly successful. Mesa had achieved its purpose. Elagabalus himself (218- 222), pious than the author of his own destiny, had been carried away by events. A rapid rise had led him from the priestly state to the supreme dignity of a world empire. It would h a v e taken extraordinary qualities to overcome such a change without inner damage, to adapt to the changed tasks of the new position. But of this Fortune's favourite was not capable: even on the throne he felt himself to be a complete servant of his god. And he behaved accordingly, all wrapped up in his heavenly lord; and his mother encouraged him on this path.

As emperor he bore the name Antoninus, in which he expressed his descent from Caracalla. But contemporaries and posterity called him Elagabalus. In truth he never bore this name: 'God of the mountain' was an attribute of the Helios of Emesa, not of his priest. But this translation of no me was in a certain sense legitimised by the emperor's way of life, completely dedicated to the service of the

his god. Everything had been conceived so as to make the latter the lord of Rome: even among the gods ro mani he was to occupy his rightful place. The emperor was therefore not happy about marrying him to the sky goddess of Carthage, and preferred to unite him with the most revered relics of the Roman religion. He had the stone of the Great Mother, the shields of the Salii and the sacred fire of Vesta brought to the temple of the new god.

This temple was built as soon as the stone that fell from the sky of the solar god of Emesa h a d reached Rome. On the capitals of the temple's columns, one could see how this stone, and with it the god, spoiled with Minerva and the celestial goddess of Carta gine. Inside the temple, Elagabalus celebrated, together with his mother and grandmother, secret ceremonies that each time represented a scandal for Roman sensibilities. Syriac songs resounded; child sacrifices and other things that were unheard of i n Rome, but everyday in the emperor's homeland were spoken o f.

During public ceremonies, eca tombs were immolated on numerous altars, and the oldest and finest wine was poured. The emperor himself danced as a priest around the altars, accompanied by choruses of sire women with cymbals and timpani. Around them sat senators and knights. They formed the spectators of these curious ceremonies, while the holders of higher offices, in Syriac costume,

clad in white linen, they participated in the sacrifices. Another shrine was erected in front of the city. At high noon, the imperial priest carried the sacred stone, in a chariot, to his home agre ste. Six horses with white, shiny coats dragged the chariot, on which no one was to ride or hold the reins. These were secured around the sacred stone, as the god himself, so it was believed, led the way. Elagabalus preceded the chariot, facing backwards, never to turn his face away from his lord. The road was sprinkled with gold dust, and bodyguards took care that the emperor did not would fall.

The imperial pontiff gave his god several spo se. He had the effigy of Pallas Ate na, or, as she was called in Rome, Minerva, removed from the custody of the Vestal Virgins and taken to the temple of Helios. The virgin goddess was to be entrusted to the sacred stone. But Minerva, due to her warlike character, proved unsuitable, and was replaced with the goddess of Carthage. Similarly Elagabalus joined a whole series of wives, and then separated from them. Among them was — an unprecedented case — a vestal. In the marriage between a sa cerdote and a priestess he perhaps found a way to legitimise his behaviour.

In all this, Rome saw only a profa-nation of its religion and traditional institutions. The actions of Elagabalus aroused the sde-

general opinion of his contemporaries: the life he led seemed to be due only to his natural instincts, and all kinds of stories were told and believed about him. The portraits of the emperor drawn by contemporary or later historiography have so far reinforced this judgement.

Even Elaga balo's manner of appearing in public was not made to appeal to Romanian sensibilities. When he was a young priest in Emesa, he appeared sumptuously, with his precious diadem, his robe of purple and gold, under which he wore, in the Oriental custom, long trousers of the same fabric. Added to this was the flower of youth, a delicate and pleasing figure, somewhat feminine; he was paragus born to the young Dionysus. But even as emperor he did not want to renounce this way of presenting himself. One then saw the holder of supreme dignity dancing, amidst the sound of tambourines and flute, circled by sire-women, around the altar of his god. With his painted face, adorned with necklaces and soft robes of Chinese silk, he seemed completely devoid of manliness. Only because he was forced, so they said, to wear a toga.

But it is certainly not only by reading the hate-filled representations of senatorial historiography that we can understand Elagabalus' behaviour. In the manifestations that gave rise to the strongest ram pogies, one discovers impulses of a religious nature. Elagabalus was caught in the spell of the religious world.

his homeland. What moves him finds its correspondence in Syrian cults or those from the East.

Here are the *triclinia versatilia, whose* luxury aroused the most violent aversion: revolving dining rooms, in which a shower of flowers fell on the banqueting par ticipants. A long road takes us from these to the revolving cosmic rotunda of Nero's 'Do mus aurea' (54-68 A.D.), and to the earliest ancient Oriental and Iranian examples. Emperors and priests of the sun gathered in this simulacrum of the cosmic astral order.

Another example: the emperor is said to have offered himself for amorous pleasure and to have made money from it. Is there here the influence of sacred prostitution, just then in vogue in Syria? Even among the priests of the goddess Ce leste of Carthage, whom Elagabalus had given in marriage to his god, such things were customary. Augustine, almost two centuries later, has left us a drastic account of this. The virgin goddess was offered spet tacoli, which even a married woman could take home as an enrichment of her knowledge. Facing sacred prostitution is the pro grammar of emasculation, also an ancient tradition of Eastern and also Syriac cults.

We are far from denying Elagabalus' debauchery. But sensuality and religious piety are intertwined in him in a special way. T. E. Lawrence defined the Semites in this way: a people "immersed up to

eyes in the cloaca, but with his eyelashes he touches the sky. " Among the portraits that have been preserved, the last one found is especially impressive. "The pious lips, shaded with hair, alive and quivering, are of a particularly complex voluptuousness. A primitive, animal sensuality is mixed with refinement, whimsy, moodiness' (H. P. L'Orange). But alongside this one can detect the absolute dedication of the emperor, who only wanted to be a priest of his god; one can sense religious fanaticism. Nor is there any lack of oriental phlegm, expressed in the collected gaze, sunk in the dream.

Fall of Elagabalus

When Mesa spread the rumour that Caracalla was the father of Elagabalus, this was welcomed by Soemias. This did not mean being blamed for a secret youthful past. Her tastes were not so difficult. Ganni, the son's teacher, was of humble origins, and brought up in the house of Mesa. Soemias immediately bestowed his favours on him, and the sympathetic son sometimes thought of raising the ancient pedagogue to the dignity of Caesar, so that his mother could marry him. But then he overcame the aversion of the schoolboy, who feared the unwanted and uncomfortable advice of the mae stro. Elagabalus himself vibrated the first blow against the man who had educated him, who had conquered him.

hearts of the soldiers, who had raised him to victory and the throne, and who was his mother's lover. Both, mother and son, were very much in agreement; they seemed made for each other. But behind this love rises again, fuelled by deep raisons d'être, that demon who will not tolerate, in his jealousy, to see a stranger conquer the heart of the other. The relationship between Soemias and Elagabalus takes place in that sphere that the writer and visionary in glese D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) defined in ter mini of " Sons and lovers. "

Once at the palace and proclaimed Au gusta, Soemias unashamedly indulged in all debauchery. The mother was worthy of her son, she sounded the general verdict. Nothing happened without her consent, but where a moderating voice was needed, she was silent. The sarcasm of the Romans went so far as to give notice of a senate of women, of which the Au gusta had the presidency. There, decisions were made about the toilet, the salutation and the order of precedence, about all the little things of female life. And they continued to do this even when the emperor had alienated everyone's hearts and ruin was at the gates.

Even Elagabalus no longer set himself any limits. To the scandalous behaviour of the ruler was now added that of his favourites, fellow revelers. Dancers, actors, coachmen, hairdressers . all of them rose, according to their degree of participation.

the orgies of the court, up to the highest offices. With them and against the debauchery of his nephew, neither could the protests of Mesa do anything any more. The warnings of this woman, who even in Ro ma had remained fanatically attached . to the god of Emesa, were of no value to Elagabalus; in vain she admonished him that an emperor should, in public ceremonies, change his priestly garb for a toga. When Mesa saw him leave with no less than sixty state chariots, she complained that the thoughtless one would ruin them all. She had noticed how her dislike for the emperor was growing. Again the spectre of a life of subservience rose before her.

In this emergency, she made the decision to eliminate Elagabalus and replace him with the docile son of her second son, Mamea. Mesa had lived only for her family, and no decision could have been harder for her. But it was essential to cut off the dead branch, so that the others could be saved. With polite speeches she was able to convince Elagabalus to adopt his 12-year-old cousin as his son and proclaim him Caesar. In this way, he said, he would be able to devote himself completely to the priesthood, and honour his god with orgies and secret ceremonies, while the other would be left with the secular administration.

Elagabalus allowed himself to be persuaded. But it was already too late. To the concealed indignation of the people and the se born was added the open revolt of the garrison

in the capital. This declared itself for the newly elected Ce sare. Extreme necessity summoned Soemias in pri mo plano.

Once before, in a desperate situation, she had fought for her son. When, in the battle with Macrinus, the ranks of his army had trembled, she, together with her mother, had turned against the fugitives. Now that the soldiers were threatening to abandon Elagabalus and move on to Ma mea's son, Soemias was back in the field. A surprising event occurred: the two cousins decided to fight the soldiers. In the barracks, in a tumultuous night-time assembly, the fate of Im pero was decided. The two mothers were allowed to lead the con tention. So they faced each other, talking and arguing: they fought for themselves and their children, for which of them should survive the night. When morning came, the last followers abandoned Elagabalus. He died together with his mother, who held him in her arms until the very end. The corpses were decapitated and flayed; the trunk of the son was thrown into the Tiber (222).

Mesa saw the outcome of what was his work. When
everything was accomplished, he reappeared once more and resumed his command. He was not shocked to hear the memory of the deceased cursed, to hear him referred to as a tyrant and a monster. It seemed the age of

a new and happier government, which would definitively secure the dominance of her country. For another four years, she savoured the pleasure of this dominion; a merciful fate spared her from ruin.

Codified religions

With the fall of Elagabalus (222) neither the rule of the dynasty of Emesa nor that of the Orientals on the throne of the empire came to an end. But it also took the sun god with it. The sacred stone was brought back, the temple erected by Elagabalus dedicated to another deity. But what had characterised the history of the House of Emesa after the death of Caracalla was repeated for the cult: rejected within the borders of the homeland, it took advantage of the time to attract new forces. This time, indeed, the wait lasted for more than half a century.

This in fact was certain: instead of a dazzling victory had to be replaced by more radical planning, a more patient method. An unprepared world was not to be seized suddenly, but to be conquered little by little. Allies had to be made, and above all, a decision had to be made to proselytise. Two tools were available: the novel of the late antiquity as a literary force, and neo-Platonism as a philosophical force. With their support, the centre of events shifted from the political scene to that of literature and doctrine. The book

was destined to create history.

The book was not yet as obvious a thing as it is, or seems to be, today. When it grew in spiritual and historical po tence, it did so in various directions and in distinct spheres. The book could present itself as the guardian of tradition (this chapter will deal with this); but it could also announce the new and spread it. The codification of the traditional element formed the conservative aspect, but alongside it appeared the missionary, if not revolutionary aspect. The religions of declining antiquity, spiritual powers of their time, sought to make use of both; and the choice made in individual cases characterises them.

The solar religion also had to make its choice. To understand it in its full extent, one cannot overlook the background against which the decision was made. The new orientation was also to be surprising, as was the entire rise of the god of Emesa.

Sacred books

The founder of Islam was guided by the idea that his preaching was, in essence, one with the most ancient revealed religions. All those who came to the Day of Judgment and performed good works would receive a reward from God: not

had reason to fear. Certainly, to Muhammad — and to him alone — had been communicated by the angel of God the uncreated word, in perfect and normative form. But the others too: Jews, Sabeans/ Christians and Magi2 possessed revelations, which in their bluntness proved to be a written tradition, a book. They were not *muslims,* but they were important, honoured and removed as 'possessors of the book,' i.e. of a revealed writing.

Book and writing thus acquired an unprecedented dignity. Vedic hymns and sacred texts of the Zarathu strians had been preserved for centuries exclusively in oral transmission. From mouth to mouth, from teacher to disciple, from generation to generation, the carefully cultivated tradition was kept alive, and it continued to be invoked even when written representations appeared alongside it. Even Homer, who knew writing and sometimes tra disce knowledge of it, banished all forms of writing from his world; he considered it plebeian and unworthy of a hero. It is impossible to imagine Achilles or Hector, Agamemnon or Priam equipped with the necessary to write! Gods skilled in writing could be made milestones to the Egyptians and Etruscans: but access to Olympus was forbidden to them. In short, the high and the low

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1 Sect that during t h e Islamic era inhabited the Harran Mesopotamian.

2 The priests of Zarathustra.

3 That is, followers o f Islam. *[Ed.]*

antiquity contrasted greatly in their assessment of li bro. Muhammad, in fact, was not alone. He had his predecessors, going back centuries.

The belief in the unity of revealed religions was not exclusive to Muhammad. It is common to all preachers and representatives of these religions, and it was not by chance that it was also communicated to him. God was one, and wherever he spoke to men, this unity' had to be expressed in his revelations. In the scene of the transfiguration, which constitutes the centre and focus of his gospel, Mark placed the great prophets of old, Elijah and Moses, at Jesus' side. The Old Testament and the New Testament were united, despite all differences, by innumerable threads, and so they remain t o this day. What is written and how it is to be inter preted, sf that not one iota of the Law is lost and all is fulfilled: these are expressions that always return. The revelation put down in writing, both past and present, proves itself here as an unshakeable basis. Muhammad's relationship becomes particularly intense with the third great revealed religion, whose character and historical significance only came to light in the 20th century: Manichaeism. This relationship is all the more surprising because there is no immediate link.

Mani (ca. 218-276) also had his predecessors, whom he names frequently and insistently. Buddha, Za rathustra and Jesus are found in this capacity at the beginning of the scripture that Mani had specially drafted for the

Sasanian Shapur I (241-272). The advent of God's wisdom and works, so he implies, took place "in a certain age through the mediation of a messenger, who is Buddha, in the countries of India, in another age through the work of Zarathustra in Persian lands, and in yet another age through the work of Jesus in the lands of the West. " For "to every generation God has communicated right action and right knowledge. " Therefore Mani recognised in the most ancient prophets his preceptors, and adapted their doctrines to his own. Divine wisdom was one, independent of temporal, national, and linguistic di versities.

Once again, however, the unrepeatability of the new preaching was asserted with respect to the ancient tradition. In Mani's opinion, his doctrine was "preferable and better than other, primitive religions," because it addressed the whole of humanity. "The primitive religions were only in one country and one language. But my religion is such, that it manifests itself in every country and in every language and can be taught in the farthest countries. "With Mani, an era in the history of religions was completed, in which the limits of nationality and language were abolished.

Mani was also credited with another merit compared to his predecessors; and here again he met with Muhammad. It was the writing of the authentic and normative books of his religion. These books, so he claimed, he had written in his own hand and had taken care to make conscientious copies of them. Instead Buddha, Za-

rathustra and Jesus had left no handwritten scriptures, leaving the disciples and successors to write and collect the holy scriptures. Mani does not speak of a book, but of books. But they too are contrasted with other 'books,' with writings from other and more ancient religions. This means that Mani found, on his appearance — he preached for the first time in public on the day of the coronation of the Sasanian Shapur I — a whole series of religious 'books' of different origins and particular claims.

There were the sacred writings of the Zarathustrians, later called *Avesta.'* If Mani considered them to have been composed by scholars of the founder of that religion, this was due to a tradition, according to which *the Avesta* was written by Jamaspa, Zarathustra's disciple and son-in-law. Mani therefore knew of the existence of *the Avesta,* and probably also had limited knowledge of its contents. But he could not distinguish the original hymns of the prophets from the mass of more recent literature. He was not yet familiar with the collection and editing, which had become fundamental, of all the writings of the *Avesta,* which was carried out in those years.

The Tsarathustrians, too, had set out to create the 'book' of their religion. While Mani had composed the normative writings of his religion himself, the others had to collect, organise and present in a readable text the tra-

Avesta: the 'mission' entrusted by god, Ahura Mazdah, to his prophet Zarathustra.

ancient diction. While Manichaean preaching appealed to the whole world, regardless of linguistic and national boundaries, Iran regained its national religion and part of its national heritage with the Ave *sta.* For this reason, the collection was not made by a private individual; it was the royal house, which had carried out the renewal of Iran and had brought the country and its religion to new splendour, that promoted the codification *of the Avesta* and offered its support. The new Zarathu strian church, the advent of the Sasanids and the collection of the *Avesta* are contemporary, and animated by the same spi rite. Between Mani, who codified his writings during his lifetime, leaving it to his successors to preserve and disseminate them, and the editors of the Avesta, who acted on behalf of the king and the priests, there are profound differences. And yet both of them, at t h e same time, in the same country and with similar purpose created the normative 'book' for their cultural communities.

The Sasanian state church did not only conduct its battle on spiritual ground. It succeeded in accusing and condemning Mani, whose doctrines had at first been tolerated, and in some cases even favoured, by the Sasanian state church.

-rite. It is known that one of the founders of the state church and Tsarathustrian orthodoxy, Karder, was among Mani's jurists. The condemnation of the adversary and the racialisation *of the Avesta* were linked. While on the one hand, the new universal religion, which had b e c o m e a joyous

had been protected by high-ranking protectors and had crept up to the ruler, on the other hand, the foundations of the new Tsarathustrian faith were laid. To the books of the Manichaeans, Tsarathustrian orthodoxy contrasted its own.

In other ways, too, they turned against Mani and what he considered his merits. First of all, it was shown that he knew nothing about the *Gatha,* original passages of Zarathustra's preaching. The *Gatha* now acquired, within the Avesta, the place that was due. They were transcribed with special spelling, which fixed every single sound. It was thus the opinion, shared by Mani, that everything was just a late transcription. It was decisive that he was able to contrast a better writing system with that of Mani.

gold invalidated

In this way, the problem was tackled at its roots. As it was a matter of reproducing the ancient 'book' in a definitive and unaltered form, it was indispensable to reproduce the phonetics exactly. Compared to the current way of writing, Mani had created a better reproduction of vowels. But for the *Avesta, there* was a vowel alphabet, constructed according to the principles of the Greek one. For the first time, the Semitic script5 was abandoned: not only consonants, but also vowels were clearly reproduced. This had important consequences.

The holy book of the Tsarathustrians was not meant to measure-

5 That is, the primitive graphic system that only considered sonorous cones.

only with the Manichaean books. As will be seen, even among Jews, Christians, Gnostics and their contemporaryists, one can say throughout the ancient world, there was a need to definitively establish the fundamental documents of religion — and civilisations based on them. The codification of *the Avesta* was only one link in the chain of parallel initiatives that took place during the 3rd century AD. Even more important is the fact that not only did all these codifications take place within the space of a century, but that the very appearance of Zarathustra was accompanied by a series of related and simultaneous events. At the forefront are the Hebrew prophets.

"Age of convergence"

The terms of Zarathustra's life are now well established. Instead of vague hypotheses moving between the end of the millennium and the 7th century, we now know that he was born in 599-598 B.C., that his first appearance occurred in 569-568, and that he died in 522-
521. Zarathustra was, however, a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, and older than Deuteroisaiah. He thus stands between the two men who represent the pinnacle of Jewish prophetic literature. Prophecy in eastern Iran and Jewish prophecy are two aspects of one historical phenomenon.

It must be added that even in neighbouring India

Buddha was a younger contemporary of Zara thustra, while Confucius' work in China falls in the same years. For Greece, the appearance of the most anti-Cyprian pre-Socratics as a contemporary avenue. Ancient Rome finally created, in the mid-6th century, the state cult of Jupiter Otimo Maximus.

The coincidence in time is usually significant. The accumulation of coincidences, including big names, shows that one is in an era pregnant with creative decisions. And the temporal coincidence of those we have named is completed with that spi ritual.

Common to all is the contrast to the great religious creations of the previous centuries. Once the millennium had come to an end and the great migrations of peoples were over, divine worlds arose that found figurative expression in epos and hymns. The gods of the Homeric epics and the *Vedas*[8] *;* the Pandemonic vision of the Shang and Chou ages, with their shamanF and oracles; the ancient Davidic and Solomonic religion of Yahweh; the rich mythological flourishing of Ras Shamra[8] — all this would not lose its importance, even later. And yet here the contrast arises.

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he *Vedas* are the sacred writings of the early Indian religion, of whose four 'collections' the first, the *Rigveda,* dates back to the 2nd millennium BC.

[7] Shamans: sorcerers and visionaries.

[8] Ras Shamra: ancient Ugarit on the Syriac-Phoenician coast, where the remains of a sacred poem from the 18th-14th century BC were also found. C.

Neither Buddha, nor Confucius, nor the pre-Socratics, nor Zara thustra, nor the Hebrew prophets denied the power of traction. But they sought to deepen and purify their representations. They wished to replace with more serious things the playful amusements of the gods, the enjoyment of the heavenly existence and the sacred figments so well accepted. If, until then, this world had been justified by its splendour and its bliss, and had been modelled after the earthly kingdoms, there was now a need for a new justification, and this need did not stop even before the divine.

Characteristics of the new attitude were the demythisation of the divine world, a purer conception of divinity, ethical grounding, conceptual clarity instead of images, and a prophetic attitude. These characteristics did not always present themselves with the same breadth and intensity. However, a unity of inspiration can be discerned everywhere in the es without. Zarathustra and the Hebrew prophets (of whom we shall speak first) had in common the ethical requirement, conceptual simplicity and indifference to myth, but also the claim to be heralds and interme diaries of God.

In short, at this time a profound religious movement had unified the countries between the western Mediterranean basin and northern China. Even in the 3rd century A.D., when the preaching of Zarathu stra was again exhumed, collected in a 'li-

bro' and established as the foundation of a state church, a spiritual motion united the entire ancient world. Again, it embraced religions and philosophical doctrines, even those that had once been neglected. Only, whereas a millennium before, a young and fresh spirit had been awakened, rich in buds that held the promise of blossoms and fruits; now, that which had once appeared young and full of promise had grown weary and was preparing for decline. In the letter fixed and defined, in the "book" was enclosed and guarded what had once been the living breath of God.

Judaism and the Avesta

Many of the languages in which the sacred books of the ancient world were written were different from those of everyday use. They survived only in the use of worship, sacrifices and ritual reading, litanies and prayers. This applies to the *Avesta,* but also to the Hebrew books. It is instructive to observe how the situation was similar, and to consider how it was resolved. In both cases, in fact, the planned creation of a 'book' was opposed by various difficulties.

The question of language touched the Jews at the very foundations of their religious and national life. A Diaspora that in Egypt and the neighbouring countries of Cyrenaica and Cyprus, but also in Babylonia, far exceeded

in importance to the Jews of the motherland, had led to novelties full of consequences. In the West, Greek translation replaced the national language; one read in Greek what had once come out of the mouths of the prophets: laws, solemn sermons, words of incitement or angry warnings. Consider that Philo, a staunch advocate of his faith and his po polos, no longer understood Hebrew and had to resort to Greek translations. In the eastern diaspora, even in Palestine itself, the ancient language was replaced by Aramaic dialects, and the original Hebrew by *targums.8* Only the frightful wars of annihilation waged by Rome against the Jews succeeded in reawakening spirits. The national heritage, too long neglected for the foreign one, was remembered. Greek was eli minated, instead of translations they turned to the originals and began to restore the language of the pa dri to its rightful place. There was, as in Iran, a national and religious renaissance.

Hebrew was fixed in a script that conside raced the word as a consonant structure. As long as the language was generally spoken, this type of graphic reproduction was sufficient, as it still is today in Semitic languages. The transition from Phoenician to Aramaic script had taken place without difficulty, and the latter had then been transformed into the particular Hebrew form. But now that Hebrew was

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8 Translations of the Hebrew text of the Bible into Aramaic.

disappeared from living use, it became evident that this system neglected the essentials. It became increasingly difficult to designate the correct pronunciation, while worship required meticulous phonetic reproduction. For a while, transcriptions in the Greek alphabet were resorted to. This vowel script made it possible to capture everything that the consonantal script of the past had not considered. But the conscious rebellion against Greek, both translation and transcription, had sooner or later to bar this road. Other expedients were forced upon us.

Here one must mention the interesting discovery of manuscripts in the caves near the Dead Sea. Among the surprises they provided, one of the greatest was the manuscript of Isaiah (A). Not so much for the lesson it offered — in fact it gives us a vernacular text, the value of which is still debated, — but for the writing. In fact, an attempt is made here, through the frequent and, in the second part, regularly practised use of the *matres lectionis* y and w, to give the necessary means for the pronunciation of vowels. It was a matter of eliminating the deficiencies we saw earlier.

The dating of the Isaiah Scroll to the Maccabean period has now been abandoned; one has to go back several centuries. The attempt to make the consonantal text of the Old Testament readable by introducing vowel letters probably falls in the period after Rome's wars against the Jews. This is a work of the long-awaited revival. And it shows us

what the difficulties were that stood in the way of a bra matory return to the original Hebrew text. This route also proved impracticable. The added *matres lectionis* meant an attack on the traditional and consa crated consonantal text. This opened the door to other and possibly more arbitrary modifications. And this was all the more serious, as the intention was to establish the consonantal text in its authentic form once and for all.

Already before 220 AD Origen had begun his *Hexapla, a* critical edition of the Old Testament, completing it shortly before mid-century, after twenty-eight years of work. It established, as the remaining fragments of the second column strangely demonstrate, the Hebrew text in its canonical form. Modifications in the sense or writing were thus excluded.

The problem of vocalisation thus remained unresolved. It was not until the 5th century that a viable way was found
- the same as Syriac and Arabic. A punctuation system was developed, which added vowel signs to the consonantal text. Thus the canonical text remained intact, and the need for vocalisation was satisfied.

The Avesta took a similar route. The Zarathustrian writings were also written, perhaps as early as the end of the 6th century BC. BC, in Aramaic script. Judging from the samples of words and names *in the Avesta,* vowels were also given little or no consideration

there. The application of *matres lectionis* was possible, but not very practical.

cata. Alexander the Great took the first step. His va sto spirit, which envisaged the fusion of Macedonians and Iranians, of the new with the ancient rulers into a third, richer people of the future, could not ignore the greatest figure of Iran. The pre dication of Zarathustra, his writings or those attributed to him, had to be included in the new political creation and thus be accessible to all. Alexan dro had the sacred texts transcribed into the Greek alphabet. To make this measure effective, he added another pre scription. The new Iranian recruits, whom he planned to include in his army, had to learn to write Greek.

Alexander repeated what others had recently begun with the *Torah: the* transcription into the Greek vocal alphabet. The need for this was felt on both sides, as Avestic was also beginning to break out as a living language to survive, like Hebrew, in cultural usage. Alexander's undertaking was of colossal proportions. More than two million verses of the *Avesta* had to be transcribed into the Greek alphabet. Only a spirit carrying a mon do could conceive such a thing, and only a king could implement it. After his death, the undertaking langu(, and the work already done found asylum in the Ales sandrian library. However, the attempt bore further fruit. Coins of a ruling house of eastern Iran mo strange, still in the 2nd century of the imperial age, names of Tsarathustrian gods' in a phonetic Greek version.

faithful. And in Turfan, the expedition of A. v. Le Coq found remains of manuscripts from the 10th century, in a dialect of eastern Iran, but written in Greek.

But as with the Old Testament, so too with the mass of Aestian writings, innovation could not persist for too long. In a world in which every religion, indeed every religious shade, possessed its own writings and stubbornly clung to them — Manichaeans and Mandeans, Jacobites[10] and Nestorians,[11] Sogdians,[12] Christians and Buddhists prove this — no true follower of Zarathustra could renounce his own writing in favour of the Greek. Scripture meant sacred writing, and no practical advantage could eradicate it.

But the problem of vocalisation still remained unsolved. It was all the more urgent, as the Zarathustrian cult also demanded the exact reproduction of its sacred texts. So the second step was taken, and it too took place at the same time as what could be observed in Hebrew. With the introduction of *matres lectionis*, i.e. vocalic letters, an attempt was made to come to the aid of those who had to read —

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[10] *Manti/d:* Babylonian baptismal sect, whose descendants live today in the swampy regions of the lower Euphrates. *Jacobites:* followers of the Syriac Monophysite church founded by Jacob Baradeus (d. in 578 AD).

[11] Followers of the Eastern Syriac Church founded by Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople (d. c. 451 AD).

[12] A people from north-eastern Iran, around Bukara and Samarkand, whose trade reached as far as China.

"murmuring" — the hymns, litanies, prayers *of the Avesta.* It also went beyond the practice followed in the scroll of Isaiah. The text of *the Avesta* of the late Arsacid pe riod managed to express almost all the vowels and at least hint at the reading of the dit tongues.

But it did not stop there. Vowel letters were, it is true, an aid, but they did not offer the security needed in the reproduction of sacred texts. In eastern Iran, a solution was reached t o w a r d s t h e end of the 2nd century AD. Mante nend the outward Aramaic graphic form, but ap plicating the principle of Greek writing, the Avestic vowel alphabet was created, which is still used today. When the first Sasanids set out to collect *the Avesta, they* found it already ready. ,

Christianity and ancient classicism

Once again, the horizon of research must be broadened. Manicheans, Zarathustrians and Jews were not the only ones to create their 'books,' to establish their text in canonical form. The entire ancient world was preparing itself, as we have mentioned, for an ana logous undertaking.

The Christian church did not initially rush to compile a canon of scripture. The gospels, the letters of the apostles, the collections of judgments of-

vines and apocalypses were certainly classified according to value and importance, but this classification was not binding. Marcion (85 A.D.) was the first to systematically order what he thought was valid or not. As the Church was opposed to him, it had to oppose his own attempt. From the end of the second century, the beginning of a canonical collection can be seen. Muratori's fragment,[13] Mommsen's canon and that of Claromontanus, and also Origen's homilies (ca. 184-252), more exegetical works than actual sermons, represent different degrees of it. Gradually, the 'book' of Christians, the New Testament, began to take shape.

The intricate history of the formation of the canons was only concluded in the 4th and 5th centuries. The letter to the Hebrews, the *Apoca/issi* of John, the second letter of Peter, the letters of James and Jude were in origine far from being included in the canons. They were only accepted later on. On the other hand, only gradually were the epistle of Barnabas, the first and second epistles of Clement, the *Pastore of* Hermas, *the Apocalypse of* Peter and finally the *Acts* of Paul excluded. In Athanasius' Easter epistle of 363, we find for the first time the number of the twenty-seven books still recognised today.

The Church also needed a cano-

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[13] An oldest canon of New Testament writings discovered by L. A. Muratori (1672-1750).

nical of the Old Testament. On the Jewish side, with the exception of the *Torah, there was* no Greek translation of the Hebrew original that had acquired general validity. Now this book had to be created. The manuscripts of the Septuagint that have come down to us represent only one of the many current versions that came into use in the Church towards the end of the second century. Cosf here, too, a canonical text arose — in Greek, since it was not able to compete with Hebrew (Origen and Jerome remained exceptions). In addition to the books of the Judaic canon, those were accepted that were excluded from it because of the Greek language (such as the books of the Maccabees and the "additions" to Esther), or of which only translations had been preserved, not the Hebrew original (such as the sentences of Jesus, son of Syrac).u These Old Testament apocrypha, although of Hebrew origin, survived the di struction only because they were accepted into the ecclesiastical canon. The title alluding to the seventy translators (actually seventy-two), originally pertaining to a translation of the *Torah* (supposedly from the period of Ptolemy I Fi ladelphus, 285-247), was applied to the collection thus put together.

A special role was reserved for languages, which in this and the following period, especially in ecclesiastical use, were revived, or ac-

14 The book is better known under the title *Ecclesiasticus*.

quisted literary dignity for the first time. These include the dialect of Edessa, which forms the basis of Syriac, and other eastern Aramaic dialects, which are used in the sacred writings of the Mandeans, in the original works of Mani, in the *targums* of the eastern diaspora or in the ideograms of Middle Persian. Ethiopian, Armenian and later Iberian also belong to it. Coptic must be particularly mentioned here.

In fact, the Manichaean canon found at Medinet Madi in Lower Egypt is translated into Coptic. A second papyrus, also in Coptic dialect, reports a modification of Gnostic writings, dating from the mid-third to early fourth century. Here too, a religious community felt the need to collect the existing material and to pre sent it into a 'book. "They drew mainly from the Gnostics of Upper Egypt — ophites, barbelogno stics and followers of Seth. With the discovery of the papyrus, works have thus far only come to light through the refutations of Plotinus (204-270), such as the apocalypses of Zostrian, Allogene or Meso, the Egyptian gospel or the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ.*

Egypt also brings us the *Corpus of* Hermetic writings, the collection of which was implemented towards the end of the third century. The Egyptian Thoth, which the Greeks assimilate
to their Hermes, he presents himself as the announcer or receiver of revelations. Pla tonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and Neoplatonic elements are mixed in.

sides together, with sometimes Jewish and more often Iranian traits. It is not clear whether a hermetic community existed. The mysteries, when they are mentioned, are 'mysteries of the word,' not of worship. We should at least mention other collections of the same type, such as the sibylline (partly Jewish) or the Chaldean oracles.

A special role was played by the Neo-Platonists there. They too, as will be seen, had their 'book,' underpinned by a vigilant polemic against the books of other religions. The Neo-Platonists fought Gnostics and Zarathustrians, Manichaeans and Christians, and the importance of what we have examined so far is reflected in this polemic.

Their teacher had preceded them with his polemical writings. When Porphyry (c. 233-301) stayed with him, between 262 and 269, Pliny wrote the treatise, still preserved, against the Gnostics. He left the rest to his disciples. Amelius wrote forty books against Zostrian, and Porphyry proved that an *Apoca/issi* circulating under the name of Zoroaster was a recent forgery. Against the Manichaeans Alexander of Lycopolis composed a li bello, even before his conversion to Christianity in 280.

Porphyry's work against Christians dates back to the first half of the seventy-year period. Porphyry was familiar with the critical and exegetical work of Origen, and turned vio lently against his refined arts, which sought,

through allegorical interpretation, to make even Jewish writings acceptable to Christians. As a philosopher and critic Porphyry was at least equal to his opponent. He demonstrated the inauthenticity of Daniel's Apocalypse by providing reasons that have lost none of their validity even today. This relentless critical subtlety is also applied to the family tree of Jesus, the contradictions of the gospels, the history of the apostles and, not least, the discord between Peter and Paul — particularly opposed by Porphyry.

On the Christian side, the full gravity of the attack was felt. Lucian's recension[15] of the Neo-Testamentary books was compiled — so it seems — with the intention of rejecting it. It eliminated from the text what had given occasion for Porphyry's criticism. He tried to rework and straighten it out, thus creating a basis for the defence, which he reproached his opponent, evidently in good faith, with false quotations or interpretations.

As mentioned above, the Neo-Platonists did not limit themselves to criticism. They felt that their doctrine was equal in value to the great religions, and they acted accordingly. They opposed their own 'book' to those of their adversaries, whom they had so passionately fought. The edition of Plotinus given by Eustus Chio, a faithful companion of the master in his last

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5 So called by Lucian of Antioch, who suffered martyrdom in 311 in Nicomedia.

hours, remains for us only a shadow. Only thirty years after the death of Platinus, Porphyry gave the canonical version, referring to the task expressly entrusted to him by the deceased. Even in the greatest fi gures of the time, the need that dominated the century is revealed. In this Platinus is similar to his temporary con Mani, although in the rest an abyss saw the two men.

For the writings of Platinus, Porphyry chose the systematic instead of the chronological order, thus revealing what he really cared about. He could refer to the example of Andronicus, who had ordered the works of Ari Stotele and Theophrastus in the same way. The publisher arranged the fifty-four treatises of Platinus into six books, nine each, "welcoming with joy the completion of numbers six and nine," as he himself acknowledged. To the collection guaranteed and protected by the sacred numbers, Porphyry added the biography of his master, not refusing even here his tribute to the religious requirement of the time.

Interpretation

The religions of the ancient world became religions of the "book" during the 3rd century AD. Others before us have set chronological terms that

sometimes go back further, or go beyond this limit: but the result does not change. It is a movement that involves all religions at the same time. It makes no difference what kind they are, or how far back they go. Modern' religions stand alongside 'ancient' ones, 'missionary and universal' religions alongside those that are limited to a single people. Judaism and tsarathu sm date back, in their roots, to more than a millennium; now they flourish to new life, as do platonic doctrine. By contrast, Christianity, gno si and Manichaeism were not even two centuries old, or belonged to the present; even the er metic movement can only have begun in 100 AD.

That leaves interpretation. It trespasses into a field in which the fact becomes an omen, the event a historical symbol. One can be induced to explain the codification of religious documents by the number and competition of religions, which had to lead to a mutual limitation and accentuate their particularity and essence. Codification would then be an event that after all could have occurred anytime and anywhere. A psychologically comprehensible, and in itself transparent, behaviour would have found a historical verification - a verification of more. This conception does not admits that professions of faith were sufficient for this: formulas that expressed and preserved the strict essentials. Already the 4th century had

this straoa. But codification was a different kind of phenomenon. It did not only address the present, bensf it sought to include a great past, and to reduce it to a norm. It was concerned with collecting documents threatened with destruction. But he did not only want to preserve, but rather to bring out the essential and eliminate the unnecessary. He wanted neither formulas nor preservation for the sake of preservation: he wanted the canon, and authentic meaning. - A confirmation of this is offered as soon as one turns to the Latin West and Rome in particular. There, too, a similar movement emerged. Rome did not possess sacred writings, as the East did in its collections. But clas sical literature replaced them. Cosf began, as Ma crobium, the *sacrum studium litterarum.*

With the advent of the Illyrian emperors in the middle of the 3rd century A.D. the idea of Rome entered a decisive phase. The renewal of the empire, which under the attacks of internal and external enemies could already be considered lost, was the work of the warlike emperors from the lands south of the Danube. But to be complete, and, above all, to be successful, the rebirth had to embrace spiritual Rome as well.

The Illyrian emperors were not capable of this. It was difficult for them, focused as they were on action and action alone, to recognise the need for spiritual renewal. It was accomplished without their con-

course, albeit under the umbrella of imperial unity forged and guaranteed by the Illyrian emperors. The senatorial nobility, whom Galliena had forbidden access to military posts, and the citizen circles of Rome, close to the senate, became the champions of the movement.

It was believed until today that the renaissance only took place after the transfer of the imperial seat on the Golden Horn, and the construction of the new capital Constantinople. This thesis is no longer tenable. The editions that have come down to us in the canonical manuscripts of Plautus and Terence, Horace, Ovid and Juvenal, and the great historical work of Livy, date back to the end of the 3rd century. It has been ascertained that the editions of Plautus were based on manuscripts that had survived the tempestuousness of the previous centuries, used in the absence of better models. Even Livy's text, insofar as it preceded the Nicomachean recension (palio sesto of Verona), was based on a copy – admittedly not an excellent one – saved from the catastrophe. Everywhere an attempt was made to preserve and repair what still existed.

As with the *Avesta* and the Old Testament writings, the creation of canonical texts was the premise of a national revival. Among the senatorial nobility of Rome, literary activity went hand in hand with the struggle against Christianity, and in favour of the authentic Roman religion. The *sacrum studium lit terarum* thus stands, in its essence,

alongside the

other codifications of the century. Here, however, the need to preserve the great monuments of the spiritual past from an impending di struction stands out. The senatorial nobility actually managed to save the Roman classics through the barbarian invasions and the dark centuries of the Middle Ages, until, starting with the Carolingian age, a series of other revivals took place, culminating in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The crisis and decline of the Imperium Romanum, which began in the 3rd century, was not the only one. Everywhere, in Sasanian Iran as in Han China, peoples were rising up alongside ageing and fossilised state formations, appearing for the first time in the limelight of history. Young and full of intact vitality, they soon became perico lous adversaries. Their aggressive strength rested on a hitherto unknown mobility. In place of the heavily armed infantry, which had characterised Roman armies, in place of the war chariots with their retinues, on which the ancient Chinese way of fighting was based, cavalry now appeared everywhere. Armed with heavy armour or just a bow, it became the weapon that decided the bounty.

An attempt was made to remedy the impending danger with the creation of a cavalry to oppose the avaricious cavalry. But, in addition to imitating the enemy, it was necessary to change what had been created characteristic

of sedentary man — citizen or farmer. The long lines of fortification on the borders of the empire no longer fulfilled their function. The enemy was constantly breaking them, invading the frontier camps; penetrating deep into the interior of the country, plundering it. . The border defences were powerfully reinforced. Highly articulated fortification zones arose in Britain and North Africa, on the Rhine, the Danube and the Eu frate: behind their rigid belt, they sought to defend themselves and at the same time exclude that ne mico too mobile.

On the spiritual terrain, the situation was the same. The Hellenistic novel characterised literary life in the 3rd century. Its 'open' form had both surpassed and inherited the 'closed' and well-delivered form of ancient literature. The predominance of the novel and, inseparable from it, a decadence of the form, found an opposing environment in the same century. As different as the opinions of the novel's avowers were, they all agreed on the necessity of a more closed style. What had characterised the archaic age, but had long since lain buried, was revived and brought back a millennium. It was not the richness of individual representations, but rather the closed and bound form, the geometric and seemingly schematic element that was the subject of research. With the adoption of mounted combat, chivalry,

the singular contest, heroic destiny acquired new dignity, which began to express itself in literature. Alongside the aged classical world, a chivalrous world also arose in an ideal sense.

In this, everything agrees: the heroic song of the Go ts, the songs of the Garamantian bards, on both sides of the Sahara; the runes of the Finns and the al litterate sentences of the Huns. In the primitive Arabic inscriptions, a still timid and budding poetic world tries to find expression; this would occur later in the Qasida:' in a richer form, but still austerely closed.

Here, too, an ancient -world felt threatened. It hastened to limit and protect its territories: this time in the spiritual field, i.e., in later times, in the religious one. The means it resorted to was the codification of canonical documents. In the book, what had survived from the great past was preserved and established. Even where the present was concerned, as in Mani and Plotinus, an attempt was made to make it indestructible, absolutely valid. A petrifying breath transformed what was past and what was still present in the same way. Every behaviour was dictated by the exigency to

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[18] The Garamanti, in the 2nd century AD, migrated from the Fezzan into western Sudan. To them belonged the lute song of Gassires noted by L. Frobenius.

[17] Classic form of the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia.

to defend and maintain: on the military terrain, as on the spiritual one, events ran parallel. What can be grasped is the end of an era and the beginning of a new one: the transition to the Middle Ages.

The *novel: Heliodorus of Emesa*

Helios of Emesa was, by his origins, an Arabo god. Shams was worshipped mainly in the central and northern part of the peninsula. He was powerful among the Bedouins and in sacred areas, where they made pilgrimages and performed sacrifices. To put it another way, the god and his cult came from young lineages, with little or no historical past. Therefore, there were no sacred writings that had been handed down and derived their authority from tradition. Everything was still fluid, there was nothing solid and well-defined to inspire ␣ book. "

And yet even the religion of a Jovian people could not neglect the book if it wanted to make its influence felt in the Greco-Roman world or gain recognition there. A 'mission' without speeches and writings, without literary effectiveness, was unthinkable. One had to compete with the world of books, in which the religions of late antiquity had crystallised. Even the Manicheans and Neo-Platonists, the most modern representatives of these religions and so to speak contemporaries of the rise of Emesa,

were forced to create their own 'book. "

If one did not have writings at hand that one could resort to, one had to make new ones. Instead of referring to the ancient and ancient past, bi dreamed of trying to make use of the possibilities offered by the present. Instead of the sacred tradition, of its literal definition, the free and living word appeared: demonstrating, interpreting, persuading, and cohesive in the still available forms of a very rich literary heritage.

In first place are the *Ethiopics* of Heliodorus, native of Emesa. The most complete of the novels of the 3rd century A.D. today no longer enjoys the favour that surrounded him during the Renaissance and Baroque ages. Raphael and Tasso, Cervantes and Calderon, Shakespeare and Racine admired it; at Fontainebleau Amboise Dumas painted two rooms for Henry IV with scenes from the novel. Only now is this work beginning to be understood. Its dating, disputed until a few years ago, has made it possible to take it in its historical premises.

The *role of the sun god*

The action takes place in Egypt and, further south, in Ethio pia. At first we find ourselves in Bucolia, i.e. in the swamps of the north-western Nile delta, where the state of the

Bucali marauders. As early as 172, it provoked a punitive spi tion by the Romans, who did not, however, succeed in destroying it. The Bucali and their strange community soon attracted the attention of the ancient novel. Xenophon had introduced them - in his *Ephesian Stores;* Achilles Tatius also did not miss this picturesque subject.1 Heliodorus took it up, and one cannot overlook the influence that knowledge of Xenophon's work had on him. But Heliodorus' Bu colia, his Egypt and Ethiopia are enriched by elements from other sources. Just as in the religious evolution the Egyptian gods were caci ed and destroyed by the Syriacs, so too in this ro mance on the life of the Nile valley representations of Syriac origin prevail.

At the end, the author claims to be a Phoenician from Emesa, of the lineage of Helios. This testimony must be taken seriously; in the face of it, the tradition, according to which the novel was written in the Byzantine era by a Crianrian bishop of the same name, does not hold water. The *Ethiopics* predates the emperor Julian (361-363). Above all, Helios doro was not a Christian. The entire novel is punctuated by allusions to the great god of Emesa, Helios. He is the god par excellence, or, as he is sometimes called, 'the most beautiful of gods. "

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1 Xenophon of Ephesus, a Greek novelist, probably wrote at the beginning of the 2nd century AD, Achilles. Tatius in the second half of the same century.

This brings us back to the time when the god of Emesa was known to the reader, i.e. the 3rd century. There is then a parti cularity, which needs to be well emphasised. That Helios is the god of Emesa is nowhere stated. It is only inferred from the hint towards the end, when the author introduces himself as a native of Emesa and scion of Helios. Otherwise, he goes to great lengths not to tie the god to any particular place.

This is confirmed by his relations with other gods. First of all, Helios is essentially one with the Greek Apollo. More so: with the Delphic Apollo. His response gives news to the two lovers, Tea gene and Cariclea, of the dark land of Helios. When their wanderings, as promised, come to an end with the Ethiopians, the identity of the Ethiopian Helios with the Greek god is proclaimed and takes on great significance through the mouth of Charicles, the Delphic priest. Even when the couple receives the priestly bandages of He lios and Selene, the god's response is once again called to mind. Above all, assistance and help is invoked from Apollo, since he, united with He lios, represents the god of destiny. The action of the rodeo is revealed as a divine 'economy' predi cepted from the very beginning.

Greece is for Heliodorus a beautiful and distant land, of which Theagenes and Chariclea, their companion Knemon and even the priest of Memphis, Kalasiris, remember with nostalgia on the banks of the Nile. Im mediately present, however, are only Egypt

and Ethiopia. But as human things mingle with each other — as Homer was actually half Egyptian, son of the god Thoth-Hermes, and like his father had a thick hair on his femur; as the beautiful priestess of Artemis, Cariclea, was an Egyptian princess, — so too are the gods. Hermes is Greek, but next to him stands the Egyptian Thoth. The same happens with Artemis and Isis. Already before Heliodorus, the latter was assimilated with De metra, Aphrodite, Hera, Semele, Lo, Thyche; the Phoenician Astarte, the Syriac Atargatis and the Iranian Anaitis were also likened to Isis. The hymn of Isis of Andros even recalls that she had been one with Maia, mother of Buddha. To all these goddesses Helios doro added Artemis.

Artemis is Apollo's sister. Cariclea, adopted daughter of Apollo's priest Caricles, is priestess of the goddess. She wears the robes and weapons of Artemis. Once Theagenes presents himself as Apollo's priest, and she as the priestess of the Artemis of Ephesus. Cariclea, who as a servant of the virgin goddess is forbidden to marry, is told by the Apollonian oracle of her future liaison with Theagenes. In a dream Apollo and Artemis appear: the god holding Theagenes by the hand, and the goddess Cariclea. But the web of relations extends further. Cariclea, who by her origin is an Ethiopian princess, is also an Isis figure. In the sanctuary of Isis at Syene, the in viate of the king o f Ethiopia wants to unveil the secret of

Cariclea to her future adoptive father. And in Memphis, again in the temple of lside, Cariclea is to lay the
ue priestly bandages, before allowing the marriage with Tiami. The heroine brings Isis and Artemis together, which explains the uncertainty of the Bucalians, who do not understand whether she is a priestess of the Egyptian or the Greek goddess, or even a goddess in the flesh. Even to the Ethiopians Cariclea appears, in her Delphic guise, as a goddess.

More could be added. The priest of Isis, Kalasiris, and the priest of Apollo, Charicles, sometimes play the same part. Both, the Egyptian of Memphis and the Hellenian, watch over the fate of their protégée as guardians. Both also know the po tence of 'god,' worship him and preach him. In short, Heliodorus of Emesa exploits Apollo's link with Artemis and their assimilation with Helios and Isis, respectively, to take a step forward. He attributes universal validity to the god of Emesa.

Of the Egyptian gods, Heliodorus still names Osiris and Hor. The greatest of the gods, Serapis, is missing. One would think that next to the Greek-Egyptian Helios, who was about to become the supreme god, he would hardly have found enough space. Thus Sera pide does not appear; perhaps Heliodorus assumed that the reader would recognise Serapis in Helios if need be. The assimilation of the two was a common patriotism of the religion of the imperial age.

Cosf confirms the picture traced so far. In Heliodorus' religion, Syriac elements overlap with Egyptian ones, given by the place of action. If the assumption regarding the absence of Serapis is correct, the former begin to eliminate the latter.

In Ethiopia, Helios, Selene and Dionysus form the tri nity of Meroe. All three are handed down from the darkness of prehistory; the great victory festival is dedicated to them. Helios and Selene, 'the purest and brightest,' have a special position. No women, except the priestess of Selene, are allowed to attend their sa crificio. The altars of the two deities are joined together, while that of Dionysus stands to one side. While animals of ogri kind are brought to it, without distinction, Helios receives a four-piece throw, and Selene a pair of white bulls. Moreover, to the two astral gods only persons are sacrificed who, by means of a test, have proved themselves virgins; with Dionysus this requirement disappears.

The Ethiopian Helios also corresponds to the image offered by Helios and Apollo. Next to him stands Se lene, and from her the lines of union go all the way back to Isis and Artemis. Isis represents the fertile land of Egypt. For those initiated into her mysteries, s h e is the earth, and the farmer Isias of Chem mis is named after the goddess. This relationship is also expressed in Selene. As the moon she circles the earth, and the Ethiopians offer her bulls, because these animals help man to cultivate the land. Artemis joins her. The sacer-

dotess of Artemis, Cariclea, shines like the moon among the stars. When Cariclea herself leaves the time of her goddess, she mounts a chariot drawn by a pair of white bulls. This corresponds to the sacrifice that the Ethiopians dedicated to Selene.

In short, for this novel Helios is the god and lord par excellence. The author's origin already hinted at this tendency. In addition to this, he did everything to enlarge the sphere of power o f his god. Helios is lord of the Ethiopians; Helios becomes the Delphic Apollo, and so this deity is also usurped in favour of Emesa. As every Baal has his Baalath, so too the sun god has his companion. In Greece she is called Artemis, in Egypt Isis and in Ethiopia Selene. Syriac religions had always tended to expand constantly; from local validity, they struggled t o achieve universal validity. A single divinity that everything ab bracciava, and whose supreme revelation was the sun, had to be at the end of this evolution. From Heliodorus' novel we see how the divine lord of Emesa was about to complete his transformation into a universal god.

What is perhaps most interesting is the way in which this idea is represented. Heliodorus has something new and personal to say, that much is clear. However, the author does not disregard the rules of diplo mazia. Within the tale, Emesa is not mentioned even once. One hears about the 'god,' the

power and importance of Helios and Apollo, who hold everything in their hands. Several times the Ethiopian god is called, according to the custom of Emesa, 'progenitor'. Only the final part gives us the solution. The author has Helios in his name, and in that of his father, Theodosius, there is 'god' *tout court.* The two deities are one alone; father and son belong to the same lineage, that of Helios. And where does this Helios come from? From Emesa, where the descendants of the sun also come from, and where Heliodorus himself is at home.

Historical position

In Heliodorus, alongside the sun god stands astrology. Sun worship and the doctrine of the omnipotence of the stars correspond. Astrology was soon established in Syria, and Emesa was no exception. Heliodorus often speaks of the will or character of the Moires. Next to them is a fate con cepted impersonally. The phrases seem drawn, in language and content, from the Greek world. But how strong the belief in the stars is behind all this is shown by other passages in which things are called by their names. The course of the stars, it is said, ineluctably undermines human destiny. Here too, the Greek surface conceals an eastern core. Attention is drawn to the name of the Phoenician Hercules. His cult is at home in Tyre, but also in the

colonies of Tyre, and generally wherever merchants from that city arrived on their travels. The Phoenicians sailing towards Carthage offered a sacrifice to Hercules. The god found himself at the centre of interest when the emperor Septimius Severus transplanted him and Dionysus, the gods of his homeland, the Phoenician colony of Leptis Magna, to Rome.

Dionysus also acquires a special position. Next to Helios and Selene he was the third among the Ethiopian gods. Here again we come across ideas that were common in Heliodorus' homeland. Elagabalus had spo sed the sacred stone of Emesa with the goddess of Carthage. "The Africans call this *Urania,* the Phoenicians instead *Astroarchus,* and believe it to be the moon," says a contemporary historian. The same compares the Jovian Elagabalus, because of his beauty and delicacy, to God Niso. Is it by chance that the Ethiopian trinity of Sun, Moon and Dionysus reappears in this way? Dionysus was venerated in many places in Syria; he corresponded to an older indigenous deity.

Once again, the house of the Severans must be mentioned. Its founder had been a woman from Emesa. Heliodorus' novel takes us back to a time when Syria and particularly the solar god of Emesa were at the centre of interest. But this does not tell the whole story.

Certainly, the god and the priestly house of the Syriac city appeared together, with Julia Domna, in the limelight worldwide. Helios appears on the

coinage of emperors

Septimius Severus and Caracalla, on the triumphal arch at Lep tis Magna. But only with Elagabalus did the cult of Emesa gain general importance. After the death of the im perial priest, and after the failure of the attempt to elevate his god above all others, t h e r e was a reaction. But already in 231 Emesa advanced, against the legitimate emperor Alexander Severus, a pre-tender to the throne, supported, like Elagabalus, by Syrian troops. Under Philip t h e Arab, in 248-49, the city seemed to present a new candidate, Iotapia no, who was followed in 253-54 by a third, Lucius Julius Sulpi cio Uranius Antoninus. Emperor Galliena (253- 268) restored the sanctuary of the sun god in Emesa, and under his successors Helios appears almost without interruption on coins. With Aurelian (270-275), as we shall see, came the new rise of the god. This, then, is the summary overview of more than a century of history. Where is Helios doro to be placed? Various historical hints give us a sure point of reference. Heliodorus does not yet know the Blem mi2 as dangerous adversaries of Rome; this shows that he is writing before the middle of the 3rd century. Instead he is informed about the new armoured cavalry of the Sasanids, who clashed with Rome for the first time in the Persian war of Alexander Severus, 232-233. Cosf is set the chronological limits, within which

which the novel was composed.

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2 Nomadic stitpe settled above Sienc, between the Nile and the Ro,so Sea.

This ascertainment implies, as a de cisive result, that Heliodorus wrote *after* the reign of Elagaba lo. The first attempt to elevate the god of Emesa to god of the empire had failed. In Rome, the emperor and the god were banned. Within this framework, one must try to understand Heliodorus. In fact, there are considerable differences between his novel and the image offered by the sun cult under Helagabalus.

The sacred stone was the 'house,' that is, the dwelling and place of worship of the god. Where the stone was, there was also the god. He dwelt in Emesa, as long as the stone remained there; he moved to Rome as soon as the idol was transported there. In midsummer it was carried in a public procession to a second shrine in front of the city gates. This god possessed a series of wives, who were entrusted to him one after the other. All of Rome and all of Italy were to solemnly celebrate his nuptials.

Here already appear the differences with Heliodorus. Helios was not bound to any place; he was as little bound as the celestial star itself. He did not dwell in a sacred stone, nor did he have wives with whom he could have celebrated marriage. Of course, even in Heliodorus a moon goddess stands beside the solar god Ethiopian. But nowhere is she mentioned as a bride. Both gods appear as 'the purest and most luminous,' as opposed to Dionysus, who had no such absolute attributes, and who had been paragons to Elagabalus. Selene is, moreover, linked to the caste

Artemis, sister of Apollo. Only virgin victims are offered to the two astral gods. And the goddesses choose as priests two creatures untouched by physical love, Theagenes and Chariclea.

Human sacrifices were customary in Syriac cults. Like sacred prostitution, they were considered a holy and primordial tradition. Elagabalus and his lineage were also blamed for this. And here, too, Heliodorus differs. He shows how the tradition was abrogated, and a new law imposed.

Sisimithres is, in the novel, the leader of the Ethiopian gimnoso fisti. These are descendants of the Indian penitents and sages, who performed their religious practices naked. Sisimithres is also, next to Kalasiris and Ca ride, a prophet of the great god Helios and his will. If Carides had brought the heroine Ca riclea to Delphi, Sisimithres had entrusted him with the abbandoned daughters of the king of Ethiopia. After the death of Kalasiris, he assumed the guardianship of the two lovers and brought their wandering to a successful end. Together with Cari de, he takes part in the triumphal ﬂ:orteo that forms the conﬂ clusion. But first he performs his decisive action and precipitates events.

Indeed, when Theagenes and Chariclea are chosen as victims by the Ethiopians for the gods Helios and Selene, Sisimithres refuses to witness the sacrifice. To avoid the sight of the human sacrifice, the gymnoso fists retreat inside the temple. In their eyes this is an illegitimate sacrifice: even the gods do not

will ever approve it. Sisimithres is right. The celestial splendour surrounding Cariclea proves that she is under divine protection. After she is recognised as the king's daughter, the Ethiopian people demand her liberation, as the gods themselves de sider that she be saved. Theagenes is also set free: as with her companion, the gods refuse her sacrifice. Sisimithres emphasises this revelation of the divine will, and no one dares to oppose it. The ancient custom of human sacrifice is abolished, Theagenes and Chariclea become priests of Helios and Selene. It is the opening towards a purer form of worship that is thus accomplished.

Elagabalus' feat had been that of a reckless fan, possessed by his god. Even as emperor he only wanted to be a priest of his heavenly lord. From Syria he had his colossal image sent in priestly garb, for all to worship him. Once in possession of sovereignty, he lost all scruples. Without heeding the sensibilities of a different world, the Syriac rite burst into Rome, under the leadership of the imperial priest, in its most exasperated form. Syriacs were the ceremonies, the servants of the god and his worshippers.

The gods of Rome and their sacred symbols were placed at the service of the newcomer. Pious things worthy of respect in the eyes of the Romans, so proud of their homeland, were profaned. In the imagination of Elagabalus the image of the sun god was formed as that of

an all-powerful lord, to whom all other gods had to submit. Even the supreme Jupiter had to recoil before him. An impassioned reaction then ensued: god and emperor were swept aside. n Elagabalus' successor, although from Eme sa and the same family, did not dare to continue the cult of the local god in Ro but.

In Emesa, the god was fanatically worshipped. At no time was his power and future i n doubt. This is shown by the appearance of ever new pretenders to the imperial throne, even if they were mere episodes. The novel of Heliodorus also proves this: but it is precisely this that makes us realise that people had become more cautious. People knew how to respect the feelings of others. Alongside the attempt to conquer the throne, propaganda by literary means intervened. The Roman world, which had wrecked previous endeavours, was circumvented; at first it was limited to conquering the Greek-speaking East. In Heliodorus' novel, Rome and Italy are not even named. There are Greek, Syriac, Egyptian and Heliopian gods, none Roman. But this new Helios could have pleased the Greeks as well as the Orien ts. Although unchanged in its true essence, it was removed from the sphere of oriental orgiastic cults, and assimilated to the purest, most distant and shining of the Olympian gods.

The transformation of the god from Syriac to universa is taken seriously by Heliodorus. This changes the po-

s1z10ne that the new Helios occupies within the divine world. His claim to be first is not laid in Heliodorus either — certainly not. But his god no longer dethrones his rivals in his eagerness for power and degrades them to slaves to his majesty, bensf he prudently submits to the existing order. Elagabalus had kept the god's Syriac name; posterity made it the name of the impe rator. Heliodorus bore the no me of the sun god in his own while he was alive. But just as the god had no definite Syriac character, neither did his faithful. Heliodorus corresponds to the Aramai co " Shams gave, " which transcribed into Greek sounds Iabsymsos. But the author of the novel has dispensed with this form, choosing a Greek name instead. Not only in the name of the god, but also in the name of the man, the contrast to the earlier period, when Arabic onomastics became established in the Mesa lineage, is evident.

Even the name of Emesa does not appear in the roman zo, except at the end. To the reader's astonishment, after having been conquered by Heliodorus' pure god, after having followed the work of Helios and his cult all the way to distant Ethiopia, that this is none other than the god of Emesa. It is a surprise that Heliodorus kept aside until the end. It is certainly very clever, and also effective. But it shows how

serious were the consequences of Elagabalus's providence to be borne. How it was necessary to be cautious, to gather the faithful around the same god in a new guise.

Philosophy: Porphyry

A novel that is not w i d e l y received, that 'does not go,' fails in its task. This is how it is judged today, and even in antiquity it was no other way. The papyri found in Egypt testify to the defusion of the Hellenistic novel, and this testimony also concerns the *Ethiopics* of Heliodorus. But the most remarkable fact is that this time the effectiveness was not only in extension. Heliodorus was able to draw on, if we are not mistaken, the major spiritual currents of his century. Philosophy, too, saw itself obliged t o consider a newly moulded Helios.

The philosophers certainly assumed a different position before the god from that of the man of letters, who, originally from Emesa, already bore his heavenly lord in his name. The greatest philosophers of the time also came, as will be seen, from the East, and especially from Syria. However, they did not present themselves as heralds of a local cult, let alone as propagandists. Rather, Helios had acquired such importance that it was no longer possible to neglect him. It was no longer possible to deny him_his rightful place.

within a philosophical system aspiring to universal validity.

That Heliodorus' work had laid the necessary premises is evident. It will be shown how philosophy embraced the idea that Helios was contained in other gods. He constituted the substance from which the al tri were formed; it was therefore legitimate to compare him to other celestial powers and to recognise him in them. Unlike Heliodorus, the philosophers did not assign Helios the supreme rank; he had to be content with second place. This fact was later to become full of consequences and — apart from Helios — decisive, even if it went unnoticed at first.

Spiritual crisis

The great political and military crisis, which shook the Roman empire and the ancient world in general in the mid-3rd century A.D., also made its mark in the history of the spirit. Of the established religions, Chrysianism and Zoroastrianism were about to become state religions, the former in the Roman Empire, the latter in the territory ruled by the Sasanids of Per sia. But the same century, complex and eventful as it was, saw the rise of two other religions: a renewal of Platonic philosophy in the West, and the Manichean doctrine in the East. Almost simultaneously they arose from the two great states,

which

formed a pair of enemy brothers, and yet, together, the 'eyes of the world': Rome and the Sasanian empire. As these were at once united and divided, so too were the systems that arose within them. It was not only contemporaneity that united the Neoplatonists and Manicheans. The fact that even among the Manichaeans it was a question of restoring the ancient forms a second bond. The never-ending struggle between the father of greatness and the lord of darkness, which occupies the centre of the Manichaean cosmic myth, was unthinkable without the example of Zarathustra. Like the restorers of Plato (428-7 - 347 B.C.), in Iran, too, a tradition that counted among the greatest in that country, in that culture, was revived, and an attempt was made to revive it.

novate it in a form suited to the times.

Of course, what to some extent united the two systems, on the other hand kept them divided. Dualism was decisive for Manichaean doctrine in the same way that Neo-Platonism was determined by the con cept of the unity of the divine. In truth, Neo-Platonism did not renounce the variety of the divine world, which was the Greek heritage, but it emptied it of its meaning, reconciling multiplicity to unity. Artemis and Aphrodite

- once irreconcilable aspects of life, which in Euripides' Hippolytus clashed implacably and implacably, and created the tragic conflict — now became 'forces' and 'energies' of the same heavenly power. To the extent that the ancient gods were

stripped of their form and at the same time of their so-

divine room, the importance of the one who welcomed them all in his particular, vast nature grew: the sun god. But he too remained only a visual image and instrument of the great One, who towered above him. As in a pyramid, the whole of the divine world was subject to him, "the idea of existing things. "

Mani wrote in the new Syriac literary language. However, by origin, he was not Aramean, but Iranian. His father came from Hamadan in Media; he probably belonged to the royal house of Arsaci di. This can be said with certainty about Mani's mother; she was born from a collateral line of that house.

The Neo-Platonists also came from a well-defined background. Ammonius Sacca (d. in c. 242) and Plotinus were Egyptians; Por.firius was Phoenician; Longinus (d. in 273), Callinicus and Amelius, Syrians; Giamblicus (early 4th cent.) bore an Arabic name. In support of this origin, it is not enough to speak of an Eastern Roman Empire. Asia Minor, especially Cap Padocia, home of three great ecclesiastical authors, remains outside it. Not even in the Semitic origin can the common denominator be seen. Instead, it is more perti nent to observe that all of the Sunnomes came from countries that were to become strongholds of mo no.fisism. This may come as a surprise, but, looking at it more closely, it turns out to be an essential cohesive factor.

When the Council of Chalcedon (451) accepted the unified formula of the West, contained in the *Tome of* Pope Leo the Great (440-461), the two natures of Christ were recognised following his incarnation, despite the oneness of the person. Rome's alliance with the patriarchate of Constantinople succumbed to Dioscorus and the Egyptian bishops lined up around their pastor. Alexandrian theology had always tended to emphasise the divine nature of Christ over the human one, and in the end the Church of Egypt upheld the doctrine of the one divine nature, the monophysism. Cyril of Alexandria (412-444) anathematized those who recognised "the division or du
nature of the only-begotten Son of God. I- n this all the opponents of the formula agreed
of 451, those who condemned the *Tome* of Leo. The acceptance of the formula of Chalcedon - led to an irremediable rift with mono.fisite Egypt and soon also with Syria.

The Monophysites continued the attitude of the Egyptian and Syriac Neo-Platonists. Neither supported the principle of divine unity, but did not entirely reject the doctrines that contradicted it: Neo-Platonism did not repudiate the multiplicity of the ancient gods, nor did the Monophysites repudiate the Logos alongside the Father. But both devalued that which contradicted uni city, and assigned it a lower rank. It is the same attitude that is revealed in the Neo-Platonists and the Monophysites, and it is certainly no coincidence that both pro-

came from Egypt and Syria. The passionate aspiration for unity was as characteristic of the men of these countries as dualism was of Iran.

That leaves the Arabs. Recently, the intimate affinity of Monophysitism with Islam has been emphasised. Eutychas, one of the fathers of the monophysite doctrine, has been described as a forerunner of Muhammad. Muhammad's preaching was in fact inspired by the idea of unity, by the idea that God had no companion, " and thus stood in the same line as his Neo-Platonic and Monophysite predecessors and neighbours. Only that the religious passion of the prophet was able to give a much more vivid emphasis to what others had felt and desired before him.

Porfirio

The revival of Platonic philosophy marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the ancient spirit. Minds were diverted from contemplation of the external world. What it offered seemed only ephemeral mutability, decadence, materiality and transience. Only the inner world, the soul, gave the guarantee of dealing with the eternal, with the immutable divine.

Plotinus had introduced this change and given it conceptual foundations. He did not merely reawaken Platonic philosophy: he also gave it the ascetic guise that it would always wear later on.

Plotinus was also able to express

mere the new feeling of life with effective and unforgettable images. However, he was far from expounding his knowledge in a form that everyone could understand. A long exercise was necessary to penetrate the meaning of his treatises, which were written concisely, in hints, also of an almost asce tic nature. Therefore, the need was felt for a man who would be a guide to the new philosophy, who would make it accessible and draw the consequences from what the master had so aptly outlined in his work. That man was Porphyry.

Porphyry, a native of the Phoenician Tyre, was actually called Malchos: and Porphyry is the Greek translation of that name, which expresses royalty. Porphyry also did not find his spiritual form immediately: he first had to set aside and overcome outdated forms. His encounter with Platinus was decisive.

(263). Porphyry, who had just entered the literary world and had already made a name for himself, was able to renounce it and make himself the pupil of the one he recognised as the greatest. In recent years, two writings by Porfirius have been found that tell us how important that encounter was; and which allow us to establish in detail what the influence on Porfirius was.

The history of Porphyry's philosophy can be reconstructed through Shahrastani's Arabic reworking. [1]

[1] Author of the 'Book of Religious Parties and Philosophical Schools'; died 1153.

For Porphyry, the patrimony of Greek philosophy is gathered in a canon of seven philosophers, or, as he writes, seven sages1 (which have nothing to do with the seven wise men with whom the history of Greek thought was usually coined). They are the 'wisdoms of wisdom': beginning with Thales, the series continues with Anaximander (610-547: so often confused with Anaxagoras, 500-428), Anaximenes (588-525), Pythagoras, Empedocles (ca. 494-434), up to Socrates and Plato. With this the ca none closes: Aristotle (384-322), later Porphyry's pre ferent philosopher, is not included.

The author also spoke about this canon in his great chronological work. Its editing responded to the needs of the time. To an ever increasing extent, the centuries after Christ were concerned with compiling canons of the ancient poets, orators, philosophers, and their works. An age that did not know how or could no longer find its way through the immense mass of writings in Greek literature felt the need for an attem pt choice. The 'magic' of the number seven also played its part.

In this form, Porphyry's history of philosophy would not have taught much. A compendium like so many others, it combined biographical details with a doxographical account and gathered together what appeared scattered here and there elsewhere. But its particular merit is to accompany the usual common places with the study of the original writings of the philosophers; an-

that where such a thing was not at all obvious: to Plato's contemporaries and predecessors.

Porphyry preserved precious information in his writings that only this first-hand study could provide. There are enigmas that Aeschines of Sphethys (ca. 430-354) claims to have collected from Socrates' own mouth: whether true or false, they enrich our picture. There are fragments of a Pythagorean writing, and, a piece of great value, a long passage on the lost atonement song of Empedocle (ca. 494–434). What Porphyry reports is certainly not the original Empedoclean text. It remains a summary of the content, a compendium..., but a compendium that is based on knowledge of the poem. The influence of Platinus can be detected here. The maestro, who was very stingy with quotations, had mentioned Empedocle's song of atonement twice in a treatise, a sure sign of the deep impression he had received from it. Porphyry took up Pliny's indication. Almost all the verses he reports of Empedocle are taken from the atonement song. This predilection no longer abandoned Porphyry. Without knowledge of the Empedoclean model, his doctrine of the soul, and the exhortation to abstain from the pleasures of the flesh, pillars of his philosophy, are not conceptable.

Porphyry finished his history of philosophy precisely in the years when he lived in Rome, and Platinus in the Viennese. The influence of the master on the spirit of the di-

s disciple, so imbued with literary culture, more erudite than balanced, was fundamental: only in the dialogue with the older and greater philosopher did Porphyry find his own form. This is also demonstrated by the second paper we will now recall, which refers to Porphyry's solar theology.

The writing on the sol

This work, too, has not come down to us in the original version. Macrobius (ca. 400 A.D.), in the first book of his *Saturnalia,* has preserved extensive passages in Latin translation. They deal with the reason w h y the sun sometimes appears as Apollo, sometimes as Dionysus or under other names. The answer is put into the mouth of one of the greatest representatives of late Roman pa ganism, a participant in the Saturnalia banquet: Vettius Agorius Pretestatus (d. in 384). With a few additions, he presents the doctrine of Porphyry.

The opinion of the poets, so it begins, is that almost all gods can be traced back to the sun. This is not empty superstition. It agrees with the opinion of the philosophers, and the divine ordering of the world also speaks in favour of such a conception. The different powers of the sun would have given the gods their at tributes. The development of this fundamental idea is essentially unitary. Leaning on the theses

evidence from poets and philosophers shows that Apollo, Dionysus, Ares, Hermes, Asclepius and Hygieia, Er cole, Serapis and Isis are one with the sun. This proof is eventually extended to another set of divi nities.

Porphyry's exposition is more of a philologist than a philosopher. This is proven not only by the numerous citations that form the framework of the demonstration, but also by the etymological interpretation of the divine names. There is abundant use of this, and the Phœnician author does not shy away from also tackling Aramaic names, such as Hadad. A special feature is a minute description of the divine images, interpreted according to their symbolic _ in this case, solar - content. Alongside images of Egyptian and Greek gods, some of Syriac origin also appear. Names and attributes on the one hand, cultural images on the other, are subordinated to one and the same goal. Images are also used to show the essential unity of the other gods with the sun.

- What has been preserved in Macrobius' writing *On the Sun* reveals that Porphyry already in his youth moved confidently on the terrain of his future great
of scientific enterprises. The philosophical element is certainly not missing, but it is neither decisive nor dominant. Porphyry entered spiritual history as a cri tician and philologist, not as a philosopher and systematist. Indeed, we have seen how he conducts his demonstrations by quoting philosophers and poets, mostly verbatim,

and giving utmost importance to the etymologies of names.

Excerpts of Porphyry's writing have also been preserved in another work: in the fourth discourse of the im perator Julian, whom his contemporaries and Christian posterity gave the nickname apostate (361-363). It bears the title *On King Helios*. Julian did not use Porphyry directly, but through the Neo-Platonic philosopher Giamblichus. The latter was originally from Chalcis in Syria, thus a compatriot of Porphyry, and was reputed to be his disciple. Giamblichus had taken up many of Porphyry's ideas in his writing *On God*, which then flowed into Julian's oration.

Certainly Giamblicus and Porphyry, despite their points of contact, bore little resemblance to each other. The simple flavour of philological proof, as practised by the older m a n , appealed little to the younger man. Like most of the Syriacs who had chosen Ellas as their adopted homeland, Giamblicus was a philosopher, or wished to be one. None of Porphyry's etymologies are to be found in Julian's oration, and it is very unlikely that this was not the case in Giamblicus as well. Here the con trast with Macrobius is revealed, who was interested precisely in the grammatical-philological part of the Porphyrian writing. In fact, as the predominantly .philosophical distinguished the champions of the late paganism in the Greek-speaking East, so the dress of the fi lologist and grammarian, guardian of the literary tradition, was a

terary, distinguished those of the West.

But this contrast between philology and philosophy, between grammar and metaphysics, between literary tradition and systematic thought, which we discover in the use and reproduction of Porphyry's work, we also find in the writing *On the Sun.* It too is divided into two parts: one in which the art of philosophical demonstration is applied with true virtuosity, and another that precedes it and seeks to construct a philosophical foundation. Both parts have many addendums between them, and the second, as is natural, presumes the other: this has made it possible to recognise that the two parts, which have come down to us divided, first formed a whole.

Once again we see how strong Plotinus' influence was on Porphyry, and in what mi sura he determined the work of the disciple. If the philological proof was Porphyry's own creation, the influence of the master can be seen in the philosophical treatment. This, in fact, is the surprising result: Helios, who before might have seemed the supreme of all gods, as if the others were merely his hypostases, or, as Porphyry says, his "forces and energies" that had become autonomous, was now subordinated to a greater god: the spiritual god of the neo-Platonic imprint, who encompasses everything in himself.

"This divine and supremely beautiful cosmos," Porphyry now writes, "held together from the lofty vault of heaven to the edge of the earth by the prov-

vidence of God, has eternally existed, without ever having begun, and in the future will endure for ever. "The king of the universe embraces the cosmos as the "idea of existing things," as the One, or, with Plato, as the Good. He has entrusted the world to Helios, who is in everything similar to him, but who, as his creature, is subordinate to him. Helios is king and lord, instituted by the supreme and most spiritual Good.

Helios is a mediator, Porphyry states elsewhere. He stands between the great One and the other gods, he stands between the world of spirit and the world of perception. There is a demiurge, who is the first of his kind (proturgos), that is Helios, and under him other gods, who, also solar, act as demiurges on behalf of Helios. Helios appears there as an emanation of the one God and "is placed in the middle, as mediator. in all kinds of mediation. "A great number of divine demiurges, who are subordinate to Helios
and participate in its solar nature, represent

at the same time the 'strength' and 'energy' of W.

This doctrine is also reflected elsewhere: in the Hermetic writings. Originating in Egypt, they appear as revelations from the Egyptian god Thoth-Hermes. What is preserved of them dates mainly from the second half of the 3rd century A.D., and various elements of the contemporary philosophical-religious heritage are to be found there. Helios in particular plays an important part
Sima:-

"If you want to see God, think of the sun, think of

the

course of the moon and the order of the stars. Who observes their order...? ? Helios is the greatest of the gods in heaven. To him all the celestial gods give way, as to a king and lord." But even here God and the sun are distinct, and this is only the visual image, the symbol of the other. Helios is, sf, the king of the other gods, but from God, from the One, he remains separate. He lios is closer to God than the moon, and yet, before God, he remains in the background, as a mere de miurgo. Or it can be said that Helios is separated from God across the cosmos and eternity, as pure im magine of the cosmic order. At the moment of creation, the fiery substance was divided, and thus the individual gods, visible as stars, were born.

In short, the fragment of Porphyry preserved in Macrobius was preceded by another, which dealt with the position of the sun god in the universe. If the second part had influenced the representatives of late Roman paganism, the men who felt themselves to be the guardians of the literary tradition and who tended grammar as the preservation of a heritage transmitted to men through history, the first influenced the last representatives of Neo-Platonism. But not only on them. We shall see how these ideas — strange vicissitudes of history — exerted a decisive influence on Co stantine the Great (306-337). His political and ecclesiastical work remains incomprehensible without such premises.

Aurelian The Illyrian Emperors

The attempt to raise the solar god of Emesa to the rank of god of the empire had failed. The memory of the emperor had been extirpated, and the stone of his god sent back home. The successor consecrated the abandoned temple of the fallen god to Jupiter Ultor. Although he came from the same family as Elagabalus, Alexander Severus (222-235) bowed his head in the face of the Roman nationalist reaction, which had revealed itself in all its strength. His attitude towards the Roman religion corresponded to the thoughtful deference to the senate that he flaunted: for the se nators were, at the same time, the priests of Rome,
bearers of a cult consciously linked to tradition.

Representative of this group was the historian Dion Cassius (ca. 150-235); he belonged to the emperor's closest circle of friends. In his work, Dione has Maecenas deliver a speech in front of Augustus, but the historian has the situation of his time in mind, and the speech is somewhat his programme of government. Dione warns against foreign religions, and calls for the preservation of

of the traditional Roman cult. Dione's aversion was as much to the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris as to the African gods Dionysus and Hercules.

In Alexander Severus, Syriac blood and ostentatious Romanness formed a singular mixture. In the lararium of his palace, next to images of the deified Roman emperors and Alexander the Great, one could see others of religious prophets: Apollonia of Tyana (1st century A.D.), Christ, Abraham and Orpheus. Inclined towards Christianity manife was also the emperor's mother, Mamea, who called the celebrated church doctor Origen to Antioch and allowed Hippolytus to dedicate a treatise on immortality to her. However, Alexander did not fail to venerate the priesthood and the past of ancient Rome. On coins he himself appears as a priest of eternal Rome.

With the cult of the goddess Rome, the emperor set out on a path that Philip the Arab (244-249) was to continue. He too, Oriental by origin, had to suffer the force of nationalistic reaction. Personal tendencies were also quite different in him; and this is demonstrated, among other things, by the friendly tol lerance he accorded to Christianity. But as head of state he too bowed to the demands of Rome, and in spite of his Arab origin he had to resign himself to organising the celebration of Rome's 1000th anniversary in 248.

This celebration deeply impressed the

contemporaries and posterity. It seemed to be the dawn of a new eon: under the weight of an uncertain present, people were looking towards the future, filling it with desires and hopes. A new *saeculum}* far greater and richer than had ever been celebrated in secular festivals, seemed to announce itself. The cult of the goddess Ro ma became faith in the eternity of Rome and in its ceaseless renewal; Rome was then, even before the victory of Christianity, a sacred city.

Philip was the last Oriental on the Roman throne. With Decius (249-251), who dethroned him, an almost uninterrupted series of emperors from the Illyrian lands on the Danube was inaugurated. With them, the idea of Rome entered a decisive stage. If, under the Syrians, it had benefited from cautious tolerance and low recognition, it now rose to a position of pre-eminence.

The lands on the Danubian border, from which the emperors came, had always been able to combine the con servation of their particular character with an inclination towards Romanity. The Pannonians wanted to be true and authentic Romans. Dacia had long and desperately defended itself against the Roman conquest, but when the inevitable came to pass, it readily opened up to the civilisation of the victors; almost all the inscriptions are in Latin; the image of the Roman she-wolf is everywhere in the country, and even today, when visiting a Transylvanian village, one is surprised to see it painted or graffitied on the wall of a house in the Pannonian region.

peasants. The same happened in Noricum, in Dal Mazia.

The Illyrians who came to the throne worked from the beginning for the preservation of the Roman tradition and supported the movement demanding the restoration of the religion of Rome. This conscious defence of Romanity naturally corresponded with the rejection of the Christian religion, which under the sceptre of the Orientals had not lacked supporters. The gods of Syria also lost their support once the Syrian emperors disappeared. Iupiter Dolichenus, whose cult had once spread to almost all the frontier provinces, lost all followers almost overnight. The Christian Fathers did not spend a single word on him in their polemics against the pagan gods: this shows how insignificant he had become. The revival of the Roman form under the Illyrian emperors derived from the strength, and, if one may say so, from the inexhaustibility of the idea of Rome, which was originally bound to a specific people, but was then loosened from this bond and became one of those great spiritual forms that possess their own destiny. They are subject to a different law than the organic one, which knows only birth, maturity and death: once born, these forms are kept enduring. They possess a stimulus to ever new conquests and penetrations; they give the measure and the model to the forms of future times. In this

sense the idea of Rome and its state-political counterpart, the Roman Empire, attracted the Illyrians to it. But the peculiar nature of these Illyrians should not be overlooked either. Unlike the Syrians, they were Indo-Germans of Mittel-European origin, close in language, birth and habitation to the Greeks, Illyrians and Germans. As the figures and inscriptions engraved on rocks in the Camonica Valley confirm, the Veneti closely related to them played a part in the prehistory of the Latins. In historical times, the Illyrians were scattered throughout the Italic regions. Their attitude towards Rome was different from that of the Severans and their successors. They sought neither to exploit Roman forms, nor to compromise with them; neither did they need to show deference and respect for the Roman religion. On the contrary, these Illyrians managed to truly make certain aspects of Romanity their own. They felt themselves to be its champions and, from sheer preservation, came to create original forms and types. And this can be seen in the history of the god of the sun.

New rise of the solar god of Emesa

Heliodorus had fought for his god in the literary field. The novel as an instrument of mission was now commonplace. Apuleius and Xenophon of

Ephesus, in their novels, had paid homage to Isis, Philostratus had, in the same form, narrated the life of the philosopher and thaumaturge Apollonius of Tyana. In Emesa, one had only embarked on this path when political power had to be renounced. The novel did not belong to any well-defined literary genre in antiquity, just as it does not belong to it today. This applies to its external form, but also to its internal form. Ages that have a closed view of the world and feel the presence of the divine ignore it; those, on the other hand, who have seen the wreckage of an ancient order, who have lost their centre, who wander and search, know it well. The novel is the expression of an open world-view, it has been said, and, even more: it is the creation of a bookish age (Karl Kerényi). The real experience is replaced by the literesque one, and the target audience also changes. Myth, in the form of epos and tragedy, requires a community of listeners or spectators; the fabula itself cannot renounce it. The novel, on the other hand, is read, and although aimed at a large circle of readers and often disseminated like any mass consumer good, it leads from community to solitude; when it pursues missionary aims, it aims at the the conquest of the individual.

The novel signified the destruction of prior bonds, escape from the community and at the same time escape from an oppressive present, and for this very reason it was in-

against the desires of the time. So it was that the novel, in the 2nd-3rd centuries, as the papyri show, rose to real power. Its authors, here always of oriental origin, seized with zeal and sensitivity this instrument of liberation, which was offered to them. Indeed, the decline of an old world and the advent of a new one, which they represented, seemed to determine each other.

The novel, with Porphyry, was succeeded by the Neoplatonic philosopher. It too welcomed the sun god into its system. The great moment seemed to have arrived when saH to the throne Galliena, followed for fifteen years by the series of Illyrian emperors (253-268). Whereas De cio, and also Galliena's father Valerian, during their joint rule (253-260) had violently suppressed Christianity, Gallienus chose another path. The fight was to be fought with spiritual weapons. As allies in the religious battle, Gallienus had taken two powers bound together by an understanding. On the one hand w a s Eleusis and its priests from the great families. The mysteries led to immortality and union with God, and philosophy sought the same thing, albeit by different means. Cosf also reached a n alliance with the Neo-Platonists, especially with the leader of the school, Platinus. Among Galliena and the empress Salonina, the teacher was held in great honour; he and his pupils were the true allies in the struggle that the emperor planned to wage.

In 268, Galliena succumbed to a conspiracy of her Illyrian generals, from whose ranks the succeeding emperors emerged. What Galliena had dreamt of and desired was, for these men, an extra-neo world: the revival of Greek philosophy, of Greek religion, had no place in their world view. It should be added that even Greekness, as a cultural idea, had moved away from the people from whom it had once sprung. The followers of Platinus were mostly Syrians like Porphyry, Longinus (d. in 273), Callinicus and others. And in Syria the alliance of philosophers, dissolved after the death of Galliena, sought to reconstitute itself. They hoped to find support in Zenobia, lady of Pal mira (267-273), and a spiritual centre in her court. Longinus became the political leader of Palmyra. But again the hard fist of the Illyrians destroyed his achievements. Aurelian (270-275) was against everything that seemed un-Roman to him: against philosophy and political literature, against the fickleness of riakas and the dreams of power of the queen of Palmyra. His Greek teacher and political advisor, Longinus, was sentenced to death; the emperor himself passed the sentence. The helm was turned with a firm hand. Even the ideas represented in Heliodorus' novel could not have any influence on the emperor-king: a mission for individuals was far from his intentions; he did not care about private desires and nostalgia: a new conception and a new organisation of the state were of no importance to him.

were before his eyes. And instead of getting lost in a bookish world, far from reality, one had to forge this reality, as he saw it — a political and military reality.

It was a fateful moment, pregnant with decisions for the future, and it almost seemed as if the world held its breath. Even for the sun god, everything was called into question. Already half a century before, he had bumped up against the resistance put up against his banner by Ro ma and his civilisation. Certainly, in the meantime, much of the lost ground had been regained. But Heliodorus himself, who was ready to treasure and, if necessary, lay waste to his divine overlord, had prudently kept his distance from the Roman world. In his novel, he had portrayed Hellas, the Nile region and the extreme south of the ecumene, Persia and Ethiopia, but had not written a word about Italy and its metropolis. Even Porphyry had refrained from any mention - of the gods of Rome or its state cult. One knew the reason for such reluctance, and certainly it was right that one should do so. But now it was realised that the advantage was precarious until one could set foot in Rome itself. Everything on which tireless propaganda had rested had fallen with the verdict of Aurelian, and this verdict had been pronounced in the name of the new idea of Rome. Even the fall of the god seemed a matter of time. Nothing seemed to stand in the way of this end.

Instead, it was Aurelian himself who favoured the new rise of the solar god of Emesa, and made him lord of the empire. This historical paradox was followed by another: the rise of the god was born out of the defeat of the East and its main power, Palmyra. The overthrow of the Syriac empire had this consequence: the Syriac god regained his ancient positions in Rome. Of course, before starting this new, victorious campaign, he had to renounce his origins: the god of Emesa became a Roman god, with a new myth. A myth that was Roman, and, as such, also had to be historical.

At Emesa' came the decisive test between Aurelian's army and that of Palmyra. Emesa' was both the gate and the antechamber of Palmyra. In the battle before Emesa the sun god had to decide whether to stand by Aurelian's side or that of Queen Zenobia. When the battle reached its climax (as the Roman biography of the Emperor tells us), the Roman horsemen retreated and were about to flee. Then a divine vision appeared before the army, inciting it to resist. The victor entered Emesa and recognised in the sun god the power that had helped his people. In his honour he had a temple built in Rome, on the slopes of the Quirinal.

Aurelian's victory proved that the god of sun had decided in favour of the Romans. With this, however, the die was also cast in favour of Emesa.

Its territory bordered that of Palmyra, but the two cities were not on friendly terms. Under Gallienus, in 260, one of the pretenders to the throne of the East had presented himself in Emesa, where he had struck coins with the image of the sun god. Ode nato, then lord of Palmyra (d. in 267), eliminated the agitator by order of the legitimate ruler. The city was occupied and suffered severe damage. Even before, he had always refused his consent to the demands of the 'barbarians' of Palmyra.

From then on there was always hostility between the two neighbours. The victorious city demanded that the god be at its side. For the Hebrew author of the 14th Sibylline Book, writing under Gallienus, Palmyra meant the city of this god. And its lord, Odenatus, was for him 'the priest sent from the sun,' the 'terrible and fearful lion sent from the sun. "When Aurelianus won the victory and Zenobia's power was overthrown, the god took the side of those who were also supported by the people of Emesa. The gates were opened to the victor without resistance, while the rival city armed itself for the last, desperate battle.

When Aurelian transplanted to Rome the cult of the god who had sided with him, this did not come by force, as with a vanquished city. Emesa was not an adversary like Palmyra, but a follower of Rome. The temple of the sun was honoured and received rich gifts, while the gods of Pal-

mira, Bel and Helios, were brought to Rome as bot tins. It is very significant that nothing betrays a participation of the priests of Emesa in the establishment of the Roman cult.

The Roman form not only took over the myth; it also penetrated and shaped the cult of the new god. Aurelian's solar god had a state temple, whereas Elagabalus had built his shrines on imperial private land. There is no mention of the sacred stone; the orgiastic ceremonies with which Elagabalus had once celebrated his si gre are also missing. The divine service was performed not by Sirians, but by Roman senators, who, equated with the venerable pontiffs, formed a Roman priestly college like them. On 25 December, the natal day o f all the eastern sun gods, an agon dedicated to *Deus Sol lnvictus* was organised in Rome every four years, with great pomp and magnificence. Inol three the new sun god was left without a companion and without descendants, as the Roman gods had always been, Jupiter Capitolinus being in the forefront. Finally, any relationship with the flowering and dying of nature was missing. The new god was the abstract, poly tic-spiritual symbol of the empire, encompassing the whole world: also in this similar to Capitoline Jupiter.

The Roman never cared to construct the world as an ideal order, free of historical contingencies, subject only to the norms of a regimented reason. He preferred rather to make even more tangible and clear what nature or human activity had created before him. He felt the need to conceive decisions that had matured in certain circumstances as binding; and he employed all his energies to develop them in every sense. An existing situation, a long-standing orientation and tradition had to find clear expression.

Above all, normative for the Romans were the instructions given by the gods to the responsible heads of state at decisive moments. These suggestions, according to the Roman view, had guided the community from the very beginning. The Romans boasted that they were more ready for them than other peoples. The unification of divine guidance with human obedience to what the heavenly powers had established was for the Romans the true cause of their greatness. After all, they felt themselves to be instruments of the gods and their protectors. This consciousness gave them an infallible security, the sense of a historic mission.

Aurelian had received such an omen in the battle before the gates of Emesa, through the appearance of the sun god. Occurring at the culmination of the battle, it must have been for the victor.

cite a binding importance. But general considerations must also have prompted the emperor to turn his attention to the sun god.

The restoration of the empire was the goal that Au. relian had set himself. The great past of Rome, the ecumene, illuminated by a single sun — all this seemed to point t h e emperor peremptorily to his task. The sun itself could embody the unity of the empire. Greek and Roman worshippers of Apollo could be found together with Eastern worshippers of Men, Elagabalus and Mithras. It will be seen how this circle was even more extensive.

The emperor believed himself to be guided in his undertakings by the sun god; he also believed that he had assumed the sceptre at the command of the same god. During an uprising of his soldiers, Aurelian exclaimed that it was not to them, but to his heavenly lord and guide that he owed the kingdom. God granted the purple to emperors c determined the duration of their rule. Aurelian's coins show how the loyalty of the troops, in virru of divine providence, turned to the sun god as their leader. One can see the bust of the sun god above the emperor, and Concordia: the
god guarantees the concord that produces its effects, for the well-being of the empire - and of its ruler. The same god also restored to the empire
the lost East. Aurelian brings unity and peace to the world: and with it the will of the god of the

sun, which guides the emperor in all his steps. As the 'lord' of the Roman empire, the sun appears on coins, and as his representative the emperor rules the destinies of the empire and the world. By the name of 'lords' — the inscriptions of Susa, and today also of Hatra, bear witness to this — Apollo and Helios had always been designated in the East. Elagabalus had felt himself to be the human incarnation of his divine lord; and Aurelian too was no stranger to such thoughts. His diadem was adorned with a star, a hint of the celestial origin of the imperial dignity. Sometimes Aurelian also appears as "god" or "lord and god," in the same way as the sun. This appellation reflected the creative will that animated the unificator and restorer of the empire.

In religious reforms one cannot think only of political ends, neither for Aurelian, nor, before him, for Augustus, or later for Constantine. They did not have a god of their own making. A man as consistent and confident as Aurelian must have been fully aware of the greatness of his task, must have felt it to be a divine imperative. Since the introduction of the sun god, in whom he found a guarantee for his actions, and a guarantee for the restored empire as well, was due to a new experience, the cult also took on a new and special character.

All this does not exhaust the image of the new god. Despite his Roman features, Deus Sol In victus remained a universal power. He combined Eastern origins and residence in Rome; he was a god in whose cult many of the empire's subjects could meet. For the followers of Apollo and Mithras, of Helios and the Syriac Baalim there was no difficulty here. But how did the inhabitants of the northern Roman provinces — Celts, Hierarchs, Illyrians — behave towards the new god? This question is all the more pressing, as during the 3rd century these peoples had acquired a position of increasing prominence in the army and the empire. Aurelian himself was an Illyrian, originally from Sirmio, or, according to other reports, f r o m a village in present-day Bulgaria. His mother was said to have been a secret priestess of the sun, which is supported by the fact that there are traces of a cult of this god among the Illyrians and Thracians, their apheni. In Gorna Schirna, Bulgaria, the consecration of a Thracian couple to the sun and the moon was found in an inscription.

The answer is offered to us by the lower imperial manual dealing with the state and the army: the *Notitia dignitatum.* It consists of a list of all the offices and military divisions of the empire, and is contained in a 9th century manuscript from Speyer.

The original was lost in the 17th century, but copies from the 15th century give us a fairly accurate idea of this manual. The definitive drafting
was completed in 429 or 430, but in many parts it reflects situations from earlier centuries: from the 4th, and in many cases even from the end of the 3rd. I
niatures with which the manuscript was accompanied represented the badges and uniforms of the officers, and especially the insignia of the most important sections of the army.

In more than twenty pages the *Notitia dign itatum* with
held almost three hundred insignia of the mi litary detachments ˙ of the lower empire, depicted in colour. At
This ancient heraldic book contains many things that no longer correspond to the conception of classical antiquity. Much space is taken up by reproductions of symbols of Middle and Northern European origin. One recognises draught animals and chariot ornaments, which were common among the Asian and Eastern European peoples, or Germanic runes used, according to ancient usage, as symbols and not as phonetic signs. In one of these designs, Wodan appears, in a form reminiscent of the divine spear bearer of the rock graffiti of BohusHin, eastern Gotland and Val Camonica. A symbol as ancient as the elk rune is found in the insignia of Illyrian or Celtic troops.

Most signs refer to the stars, especially to the sun and its course. They are stars or

discs,

that emit rays in every direction. Next to them are wheel-shaped designs, reminiscent of corresponding signs in graffiti rocks, or the Celtic wheel, the undoubted symbol of the sun. Germans and Celts found themselves in this sign, and it was no stranger to the Illyrians either. Among the Germanic troops one finds the crescent moon, linked to the sun disc. Concentric circles have a similar meaning: they too are reproduced on the rocks of Scandinavia, among the Celts and the Illyrians. The hooked cross, also one of the typical symbols of the sun, appears in many variants. Of a di sco that rested on a support in the shape of a rod or spout, it is known that it was worshipped among the Illyrian Pannoni or Paioni as a symbol of the sun.

Solar symbolism, in its various expressions, informs almost half of the insignia found in the *Notitia dignitatum*. No other symbol or object of representation is reproduced to this extent. When did this state of affairs come about, and what was the incentive?

Certainly, some of the insignia may only have been created or passed on in the 4th century; certainly, in the course of time, many things changed, and the newest was assimilated into the oldest, was inferred and developed from it. Finally, in the Christian era, the meaning of many symbols was probably lost and misrepresented. But that rich solar symbolism is documented by monuments dating back to the late 3rd and early 4th century. The Arch of Galerius in Thessaloniki gives us

proof, and so do the recently discovered mosaics of the villa of Piazza Armerina in eastern Sicily. Some of these symbols already existed in the Diocletian and Constantinian age.

The large number of solar symbols found on the insignia can only be traced back to a uni tary, conscious and creative will. For the creator of this innovation, the god was at the centre of all thoughts. An army that bore the solar symbols on its insignia could only be that of the sun god. It had to belong to him and obey him; it had to fight under his leadership. The meaning is clear: it could only be Aurelian.

The Celtic, Illyrian and Germanic solar symbols, which intersected and overlapped in detail in various ways, were passed on to the military insignia. The emperor himself came from Illyria; Illyrian natives occupied the highest military posts and formed the nucleus of the army. The units that Aurelian led against Palmyra included Dalmatian horsemen and Danubian legionaries: Pannonians, Mesians and Thracians, closely related to the Illyrians; also men of Celtic stock, from Noricum and Rhaetia, and Gauls, who were always counted among the most valiant soldiers. Finally, Aurelianus is credited with the innovation of having entire tribes of Germans fighting in the Roman ranks with their own armaments. The Huns, Alemanni and Vandals carried not only their own costumes and weapons, but also their own insignia with their religious symbols.

If we therefore admit that the solar symbols were accepted on the insignia of the Roman army by Aurelian, his attitude gains new light. The new god had, despite its oriental origin, a universal character. The emperor, raising Helios of Emesa to god of the empire, created him ex nova in Roman form. At the same time, however, he gave the Illyrians, Celts and Germans the god that was theirs. The growing importance that these peoples had assumed in the building and defence of the empire was reflected in his pantheon.

The triumph celebrated by Aurelian at the end of his campaigns is recounted in his biography. "There were three chariots," we read. "One had belonged to Odenatus of Palmyra: it was adorned with silver, gold and gems. The second, which the king of the Persians had given to Aurelian, was similarly finished. The third one Zenobia had built for herself, hoping to see Rome from the top of it. In this she was not mistaken, for she entered the city on the chariot, victorious, in the triumphal procession. But there was also a fourth chariot,' the narrative continues, 'which, drawn by four cer vi, was said to have belonged to the king of the Goths. On it, as many say, Aurelian reached the Capitol, to sacrifice the deer there. In fact, he had conquered them together with the chariot and sacrificed them to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. "

What concerns the first three chariots remains uncertain. But the deer chariot of the king of the Goths fits into a

well-known connection. In the graffiti rocks of Scandina
:street and in finds from the Northern Bronze Age a deer or doe can be seen pulling the sun wheel. Such depictions are also found elsewhere, as far as Val Camonica. At BohusHin, the deer is seen next to the unattached chariot. The Gothic chariot pulled by deer belonged to this religious world, as did the man riding the deer on the Germanic urns, or the Vandalic dioscuri, whose name originated from divine deer or elk.

Aurelian does not use the other chariots, but mounts the deer chariot and offers the deer as victims to Capitoline Jupiter. This is not reflected in the Roman cult, bensf in the Illyrian one. A Hallstatt sherd shows the graffito of a cultic chariot, from the front of which a deer is led as victim sa crificate. Twice we encounter the same motif on the bronze chariot from Strettweg in Styria. Perhaps Aurelian renewed a national custom when he brought Gothic deer to the Capitol?

Later historiography, unfavourable to him, has handed down very little of Aurelian's personal traits. In contrast to the numerous biographical details of Septimius Severus and Caracalla, of Mesa and Elagabalus, almost nothing is known of the great Illyrian. One would like to dig deeper into this meagre information; it would already be a lot to have managed to grasp the fundamental religious idea of the man.

Constantine the Great

The tortuous path travelled so far by the history of the sun god is coming to an end. Much of what had first appeared in the foreground lost all im portance: Emesa, the Syriac or even Ara ba origin, and the ruling house of Syria no longer counted. A renewal under the ancient banner had proved unfeasible. And yet the political rise, which had seemed to have ended after the fall of Elagabalus, had begun again. Helios had truly become the supreme lord and god of the empire; only this time the change had been brought about not by a Syrian, but by an Illyrian who had ascended the imperial throne. So the idea of Rome could be reconciled with the Syriac god. T h e po lytic and religious ideals, whose passionate reaction had one day brought down Elagabalus, welcomed the sun god in his Roman form into their bosom.

Political events had gone hand in hand with religious ones. For a long time now, the image of the god and his cult h a d been freed from its original bonds, purified and elevated. The novel of Heliodorus had initiated this process, but in the meantime it too had to give up its position.

of pre-eminence. The succession fell to Neo-Platonic philosophy. Its thought had taken over Helios, adapting it to its own universal system: in doing so, it achieved the surprising result of assigning the sun god not the first, but the second place in the divine hierarchy.

Political and philosophical evolution had since taken different paths. What the one had elevated, the other had placed on a lower plane; the dominant role assigned by the former corresponded to a servile function in the latter, the supreme place to the office of mediator. As long as politics and philosophy remained divided, the contrast might not appear; but what would have happened if philosophy had impressed its contemporaries more deeply than the current renewal of the state cult; if neo-Platonic innovation had prevailed over the re-birth of the Roman religion?

Both currents influenced the emperor who will now be discussed. Both were unequivocally reflected in his actions and in what came out of them. Indeed, the solution by which the emperor managed to reconcile what was divided and merge it into a whole can rightly be considered his most personal creation.

Constantine the Great (306-337) was also one of the Illyrian emperors. His reign marked a historical turning point, because under him the Church of the Cri stian state was created. Whereas until then t h e Illyrian emperors — and this also applies to Diocletian (284-305) and his co-regents — had been the champions of the Roman national idea and the Roman religion, under the new emperor the Christian state emerged. Of course the decisive step was not taken suddenly, nor was he insensitive to the influence of previous history; on the contrary, the very idea of a divine solar ruler had a decisive effect on Constantine.

Indeed, everywhere in Constantine's environment one finds images depicting the power of light and the radiant power of the Most High, and relating God and t h e emperor to the sun. In v i e w o f their abundance and Constantine's expressions, it becomes clear that the ideas of the sun, light and the earth illuminated by it were of particular importance to t h e emperor until his last years.

"At the 'meridian hour of the sun' Constantine had the vi sion of the cross, and at the same hour his soul ascended to God. Never, so it was proclaimed, had 'the splendour of the sun' shone on a greater ruler. By virtue of the divine commission entrusted to him, the emperor thought of 'removing misery and danger from every sunlit country. The sun and the moon, it is said in one

written, they follow a course set by God. They are the sign of God's firm will. Constantine speaks of Good Friday as the light that shines brighter than the day and the sun. The 'day of the Lord' is the day of light, and as such, the feast of the Lord. Phrases such as 'from darkness to light, from error to truth' and the like return several times. In contrast, the temple of Adonis of Aphaka, with its sacred prostitution, is not worthy of the sunlight and is torn down.

Constantine is directly compared to the sun na scente. As Helios spreads his rays over the earth, so does the emperor the rays of his noble nature. In the thickest darkness of night God shone a great light into his servant Constantine, it is said elsewhere. He appeared before the fathers assembled at the Council of Nicaea as a heavenly messenger of God, wrapped in the splendour of his purple cloak, shining like a ray of light, surrounded by fiery tongues, adorned with glittering gold and precious gems. In battle, Constantine's shield and weapons sent glimmers of gold, his helmet sparkled with precious stones.

The image of a solar emperor is united with that of the empire. To the south it extends as far as Blemmia and Ethiopia; from the rising sun to the limits of the ecumene, illuminated by the emperor with the rays of his piety. The rising and setting sun thus becomes the direction and the limit. India and Britan-

nia, birth and sunset of the diurnal star, cornpond.

The idea of a Christianity, of a unified humanity, which animates the emperor, also receives its imprint from the ideas of sun and light. God shines his light on all: this is the prefiguration of the community and unity of the human race and its faith. Constantine speaks of the 'joy of pure light,' of the 'sweetness of community,' referring to that of faith. Faith pleasing to God, the guardian of us all, must shine in the light in its unity. The Christian church appears to the emperor as a building resting on twelve columns and with a star-shaped frieze on the front.

Monuments confirm and complete the ideas contained in these expressions. In the new city of Constantinople, Constantine had himself depicted as Helios on a porphyry column. On the globe he held in his right hand was the cross. The column bore the inscription: 'Constantine, shining like the sun'; the statue's gaze was turned towards the rising star. Even public cults and sacrifices are attested. On a gold medallion from 313, the emperor appears as the twin of the sun god. With his upturned gaze, typical of the sun worshipper, and his hand raised in a sun gesture, he was depicted Co stantine from 324 on coins and also on the gate of his palace. The Sol Invictus was retained on Constantinian coinage until 317; it protects the emperor who

holds the insignia of the cross. On mints of the Siscia mint, the rising sun also appears later, next to the monogram of Christ on the imperial helmet. The a stro often appears on coins, either as the sun itself or as a symbol o f eternity. For a long time, the emperor wore the crown of the sun, and as the ruler of the sun is also the ruler of the world, so too is Constantine conceived and presented as such.

The origin of all these depictions is unequivocal. Links to the god created by Aurelian, the imperial god Sol Invictus, can be traced without difficulty. Constantine substituted the sun god for faith in Christ, also with the intention of creating a bond that would unite the peoples of the empire. Eusebius' took care to find in Constantine's father the roots of his Christian attitude. This was done with the emperor's consent and was quite true. However, it was evident that Constantius Chlorus had a particular adoration for the sun. For Co stantine himself, next to the coins, the triumphal arch at
Rome offers the necessary testimony to this. There is no
perhaps another official monument, it has been said, bearing a more consequent and unified imprint of the sun god. Constantine, before converting to Christianity, was a follower of the sun god and thought to

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1 Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (270-339), was besides the rest the biographer of Constantine the Great.

base the idea of his empire on him.

The large medallions in the arch with images of the sun and the moon show that the rule of Co stantine and Licinius (308-324) was founded on the cosmocratia of the two stars and thus, in the quoted words of Constantine, on the regularity and constancy of world events. The sun god appears first of all as the god of the army, next to Victoria. His bust is facing that of the emperor. The latter appears in the god's gesture, with his hand raised or open, turned imperiously to the ne king during the siege of Verona. Sometimes the heads of the two kings are surrounded by nimbuses, indicating a solar nature.

Here more than anywhere else, Constantine proves to be a successor to Aurelian. From the very beginning it must be said that the first Christian emperor was always influenced at decisive moments by the example of his pagan predecessor. Certainly, if Aurelian is defined as Constantine's predecessor, he must not be considered a mere imitator. We do not in any way diminish the originality and novelty of Constantine's ideal world. To want to diminish the importance of this man in world history would be a hopeless undertaking. Constantine himself felt himself to be in bitter antithesis to his predecessor: even this aversion can help us understand his behaviour. Aurelian, with his life and works, drove him to the greatest decisions. He induced Co-

stantine to answer the outstanding questions in a Christian sense.

The vision of the cross

Aurelian believed himself guided in his actions by the sun god. To him he attributed his power; he was the god who granted the purple to rulers and determined the length of their rule. The god had also brought the lost East back to the empire. The emperor saw himself as an instrument of a higher will: Aurelian fulfilled his office as a representative of the sun.

In this way, the fundamental idea of the Constantinian monarchy was anticipated. The emperor is a servant, indeed a slave of God. God has chosen him among others as an instrument; he is the 'thundering herald of God. "God has chosen my service as suitable for the fulfilment of his will, and so I, coming from the British Ocean, where the sun is destined by nature to set, and overcoming all dangers by a superior power ... reached the fields of the East, which implored from me a more effective help, the more serious the evils under whose weight it yearned. "Cosf writes Constantine after defeating Licinius, and con tinues: "That I am indebted to the great God of my whole soul, of my breath, of my innermost pen Sleń, is my unshakeable faith." Eusebius adds

that God called Constantine to the imperial throne and is biH the time of his reign in three decades and more.

Regardless of the Christian meaning those words took on, Aurelian could also have said them. Both emperors saw themselves as executive organs of their god, they felt placed in the hands of an Almighty, who implemented his will in the world and in history. For Constantine, this con sideration took tangible form in the vision of the cross.

Two reports have come down to us about this vision, both originating in the circle of the emperor's intimates. According to Lactantius,[2] before the decisive battle at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine was urged to place the 'heavenly sign' on the shield of his soldiers and thus begin the battle. The emperor did as he was commanded: "By placing the letter X transversally, he rounded off the upper part, and thus reproduced the monogram of Christ on the shields". This is the unanimous tradition, and any change would risk distorting the context, which is i n itself very understandable. The letter X, placed across, becomes a cross; the upper part is folded into a loop and thus becomes a P.[3]

This interpretation assumes that the 'heavenly sign' was the cross. But Constantine is not content

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2 Ecclesiastical writer from North Africa (d. after 317).

3 X and P are the capital letters of the Greek letters *chi* and rho, initials of the name of Christ. [Ed.]

of the cross: this results in the monogram of Christ. The interpretation is validated by the fact that in the Constantinian and post-Constantinian pe riods the mo nogram often appears in the same form as the cross.

Among the coins minted by Constantine, one encounters for the first time a monogram of Christ on a silver me daglion from Ticinum (Pavia), dated 315. On the front rim of the imperial helmet one can see, in a ton do, an X in *normal* position with a P inserted perpendicularly. A certain diversity from Lactantius' testi moniation can also be seen in this; while for Lactantius the cross and monogram are united, in the medallion they appear in different places. The mo nogram is on the helmet, the cross on the sceptre of the im perator. This division brings us back to a second version of the miracle of the vision of the cross.

Eusebius recounts, having been told by the emperor himself, of a vision that appeared to Constantine at high noon in Gaul. Without any possibility of er rore he hears of a cross, and victory is pro posed to him in that sign. In a second nocturnal vi sion, Christ appears next to the cross and urges Constantine t o reproduce what he has seen and make it the insignia of his army.

The differences with Lactantius are obvious. Not on the eve of a battle does the vision appear, but long before. Two visions are mentioned, not just one, and the warner, who is not named in Lactantius, is Christ himself. But even here Co-

Stantine obeys the command. Thus the laharum was born. Eusebius describes how a long, gold-covered pole was attached transversely to a beam, in the form of a cross. On the top was placed a crown of gold and gem me. The crown bore the monogram of Christ, composed of the first two letters of his name, in the same form as the medallion of Ticinum. Later Constantine used to wear this sign on his helmet. By again the cross and monogram are separated.

According to Eusebius, Constantine received the order to re-produce the heavenly cross, and to this he added the mo nogram. This is understandable, because Christ instructed him to do so in a second night vision. Lat tantius does not say who it was who admonished Constantine in a dream. But here too the "heavenly se gn," i.e. the cross, must be reproduced, and yet the emperor also adds the monogram. Is it not clear that Lactantius, in his unnamed admonisher, adumbrates the appearance of Christ?

It should be added that the concordance of the "sign cele ste" with Eusebius' "trophy of the cross appearing in the sky above the sun" is immediately evident. The vision before the battle at the Milvian Bridge in Lat tantius and the second vision of Eusebius are parallel to each other. Both have in common the fact of the so gno, the apparition of Christ and the order he gave. Only, in the first case, the cross must be reproduced on the shields, and in the second transformed into a ves sillo. But here as there the monogram is added

of Christ in one form or another. Next to the labarum stands the shield with the Christian sign.

Not in Eusebius, who only knows about the labarum, but in Constantine's own expressions does the memento appear. In his letter to the king of the Per sians he speaks of the god, whose sign is carried 'on the shoulder' by the army devoted to him. With this he drapes the labarum, carried 'on the shoulder' by bodyguards chosen by the emperor. By contrast, the words of Constantine: 'Always keeping thy image before me, I led a victorious army,' could rather be referred to a shield.

The juxtaposition of banner and shield is also found in the sun god. The reliefs of the Arch of Constantine in Rome show three times the Sol Invictus and the Victo ria, reproduced on the military insignia. Under this se gnum the emperor's army marches against the ne mico. It is certain that the form dated back to Aurelian. It was in fact he who introduced the army insignia ro mano referring to the sun and its course, and the stars in general.

The form of these insignia was by no means limited, as we have shown above, to the traditional types offered by the East and antiquity. Aurelian largely embraced the symbolism of the Nordic peoples: Illi ri, Celts and Germans. The important role played by the latter in the army — and it was Aurelian himself who took the decisive step — is expressed in the high regard in which they are held. Even in the incor-

bringing the Germans into the army Aurelian was a precursor of Constantine. The latter followed his example, using the Germans for the defence of the empire and trying to foster their religious education (in the Christian sense this -. olta). Both emperors thus find themselves in the transition between antiquity and the Middle Ages. Only in the 'renewer and destroyer of the laws of Tranman date and ancient customs' [Ammianus Marcellinus4], the links with Romanity were already severed, whereas Aurelian had consciously maintained them.

Constantine's conversion to Christianity seemed to mean something totally new in the context of history. As far as Christianity was concerned, the movement had until then been from the bottom upwards. This time the upheaval starts at the top. The ruler of the Roman empire, the most powerful man of his time, favoured its progress. Cri sto had personally helped him, and Constantine showed his gratitude by first giving the followers of Cri sto equal rights, then pre-eminence over the ancient religions. Here too Aurelian proved to be a forerunner. The raising of the Sol In victus was, in fact, due to his will. Both religious innovations came from above, through the personal choice of the ruler.

If what has been said is not incorrect, we find ourselves dinan-

4 Roman historian (d. around 400 A.D.), who followed until 378 the work of Tacitus, up to the year 96 (we have the history of the years 353-378).

to a changed assessment of Constantine. His importance in universal history rests on the implemented unity of state and church. Now it must be added that decisive forms were anticipated by Aurelian. It was not Christianity that brought these innovations; bensf paganism still possessed enough creative force to anticipate them here. The same process took place in Rome as in its eastern neighbours at the same time. As in Rome the religion of the sun, so with the Sasanids the purified and renewed Zoroastrianism was elevated to state religion. Rome and Iran, the two 'eyes of the world,' entered together into a new phase of their religious history. The paradox did not end there. To the fact that Co stantine was determined in his behaviour by one of the greatest adversaries of Christianity (for such was Aurelian), there corresponds another, not political and military, bensf philosophical. Another ne mico of the Christians, Porphyry, gave him a decisive.

Neoplatonism

Eusebius' discourse on the thirty-year duration of Constantine's rule is infused with images representing the power of light and the radiance of the Almighty. The sight of his divinity is veiled in the splendour of rays of light; the choirs of angels

and of the saints are illuminated by the great light; in the highest heaven every divine and spiritual light pays homage to the Lord with its songs of praise. But, in front, the firmament is stretched out like a dark curtain, removing the palace of God from view. In the vestibule, the sun and the moon fulfil the function of towers, and bend themselves to the . service of the divine will. The sun that illuminates everything, it is then said, recognises God as its only lord and does not dare to deviate from the path that has been set for it. The moon and the stars behave in the same way: they celebrate God, the extinguisher of all light. The Logos, too, was once light — light that surrounded the Father and distinguished the perfect creation from brute matter: which, with its rays, shone brighter than the sun. The emperor, the earthly image of God and his order, spreads its rays like the sun to the farthest regions of the ecumene. The bearers of the light emanating from the emperor are the four Caesars: like He lios, Constantine leads the four-man shoot. Finally, after a series of shorter similes, all referring to the same subject, a description is given of the heavenly realm, where armies of boundless light surround the Lord: light that does not derive from the sun, but is stronger than his own and springs from an eternal source. For neither the sun nor the moon illuminates that realm, bensl the Logos, the only-begotten son of the mighty Onni.

There is a new note here. For the bishop of

Caesarea light possessed the highest and spm tüal essence, and thus occupied a higher position than the sun and the stars. Light was associated with God and the Logos, while the sun was merely the servant of both. Eusebius could refer for this to the biblical account of creation, according to which light was separated from darkness, and only later were the sun and moon created. Moreover, the Sol Invictus was still the supreme deity of the empire, the opponent and competitor of the Christian faith. Eusebius set things right by making the sun appear as the servant of higher powers and subordinating it to divine light. In short, while for Aurelian the sun was and remains God, here it becomes the image and paragon, sometimes the subject and servant of God. These and the sun do not have the same essence, bensf, as we learn from the mouth of Eusebius and sometimes the emperor himself, the sun must bend to God's command. It will be said that this reversal of values can be attributed to Constantine's conversion to Christianity. But this overlooks the fact that even before Constantine, in the philosophical thought of the time, God and the sun were separated and the sun was subject to God; that Neo-Platonism had already conceived Eusebius' vision in all its details, enclosing it within its fi losophical.

We refer here to Porphyry's already cited writing on the sun. Its decisive effect was to subordinate the sun to the great god of the Neo-Platonic mould. The sun

He became the image of the Most High, the mediator between this and the rest of the world, to whom all material cares and actions were entrusted. Helios was distinguished from the divine spirit all gathered within himself. as the first de miurgo, as the executive organ. This writing predates the introduction of the god alone king of Aurelian into Rome. However, the Illyrian emperor-soldier did not use the work of the scholar from Tyre at all. It can be deduced that he had never heard of it. It is also difficult to ascertain whether Constantine was familiar with Porphyry's ideas or already knew the writings of Jacoblichus, or had read such works. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the emperor's inner circle, i.e. Eusebius and those entrusted with the drafting of speeches and imperial edicts, as well as the Latin orators from Gaul, who had once spoken before the still pagan emperor, were steeped in Porphyry's doctrines and the neo-Platonic environment of the East.

By virtue of the decision of the gods, as it is said in the speech before the emperor in 310, at Tre viri, Constantine was called for the salvation of the state. This news was communicated to him not by the imperial courier, bensf by a celestial messenger mounted on a chariot. The reference to the chariot of the sun is clear, but we are still in the field of rhetorical similes. Nowhere is it mentioned that Constantine owes the government to his lord and duke (as pen sava Aurelianus). A little later the same orator states

that in the north – he means Britannia – the sun does not set. The days are longer, and even the night is not without light. While in the south the sun inclines downwards, in the north it passes high over men. "Great gods,' he continues, 'how is it that divine beings who were first descended always come down from the farthest ends of the earth and offer themselves for worship? So Mercury from the unexplored sources of the Nile, Liberius from the Indies, already almost confidants of the rising sun, showed themselves to people as omnipresent gods. But in truth holier than the Mediterranean lands are the places close to heaven, and so now we are sent an emperor born closer to the gods, since he comes from the ends of the earth. "Again, the allusion to the sun remains a rhetorical image, and never rises above the oratorical game.

Even the speaker who at the beginning of 313 speaks dinnan

to the emperor, he alludes to the sun. In the face of Constantine's campaigns and victories he comes out in this exclamation: 'How indefatigable is your zeal l Here the divine essence *(divinitas)* works in constant motion l All things have their pause of stillness. Every nine years the earth rests, and sometimes the rivers pause; even the sun rests at night. You, on the other hand, Co stantino, only accumulate wars upon wars, victories upon victories. "As can be seen, the emperor surpasses the sun. The speaker does not think to give the sun a special rank. It is only superior to the elementary powers: the earth and the rivers. The

'divine ex-

without "preceding him in the hierarchy.

This divine essence also appears as a 'divine spirit. " This favoured Constantine's victory over Maxentius, and set a limit to the fury of the tyrant. "What god, what omnipresent greatness prompted you, when your generals were not only secretly complaining, but openly fearing, to make that decision which went against the advice of men and the omens of the haruspices, and which would have liberated the city? Thou dost indeed possess secret understandings with the divine spirit, who leaves the care of us mortals to the lesser deities to this designate, and who deigns to show himself only to thee. "The deity who is so called upon has nothing to do with the sun god. The other gods, whose precise duties are indicated, are subordinate to her.

It has been thought that in this passage of the orator there is an early foreboding of the future religious turn. But the orator who in 311 or early 312 spoke before the emperor at Augustodunum already knew these ideas, knew of the divine spirit that governs the whole world; yet he was not speaking to an emperor who hinted at sympathies for Christianity, but rather this oration describes Constantine's encounter with Apollo: a pagan vision to which the Christian vision of the cross would later be counterpointed.

What we recognise here is something else: the Neo-Platonic conception presented by Porphyry, which also returns among the Hermetics, in Jamblicus and in the discourse of Giu-

lian on King Helios. This Helios is restored to his position of pre-eminence. He has become the image and pa ragion of God, occupies second place and mediates between him and the other gods, each of whom has his own position. These are the 'minor deities' of the speaker's already quoted sentence. And when Mercury and Liberius appear together with the sun god, when the Indians, from whom Liberius comes, are called "confi dentes of the rising sun," how can one fail to recognise here the concordance with Porphyry?

The Arch of Constantine

The bas-reliefs of the Constantinian arch in Rome are filled with images of the sun god and the solar emperor. Again, one must remember the judgement that in no other state monument has the solar religion of neo-Platonic hue had a more unified and consequential expression. This judgement dates back to a time when nothing was yet known of Porphyry's writings. It was not realised at that time that for Porphyry, and for the Neo-Platonists in general, the sun god no longer represented the principle on which the sun was based.

Certainly the supreme god, the One, could not appear on the reliefs of the arch like the other gods. God could not have a visible form, nor did he have a name. His image was reflected in the whole of creation.

The sun god, on the other hand, could be reproduced. For he was the 'image' of the Most High, the mediator between him and the rest of the divine and human world. It is therefore no wonder that in ornamental reliefs, all aimed at the realm of the visible, Helios rules. And yet there is one place where the supreme god also appears. This is the inscription on the arch.

Constantine, sof it is stated, won *instinctu divinitatis.* Hitherto these words have been interpreted to mean that the victory over Maxentius, and the liberation by the emperor, were traced back to the inspiration of god. "Here, too, an early portent of religious change would be expressed ...

It must be said, however, that *divinitas does* not mean "deity. "It designates the divine nature, and, if contraposed to *humanitas,* the divine nature in antithesis to the human. Constantine won not only by inspiration of the divine essence, but also "by virtue of the greatness of his spirit" *(mcntis magnitudinc). The divine* and the human merged in his action. "The essence of vina," or, as the orators say, "the divine spirit," determined Constantine's spirit and made him great. A Hermetic expresses the same thought when he states that in men God is the spirit, so that many men must be considered divine, and their human nature similar to the divine.

This is neo-platonic conception, and nothing else. It is not possible to think that only the inscription on the triumphal arch hints at Christianity, whereas the representations of the

tions of the arch depict a large number of gods and also the sun god. "*Sol* and *Moon,* in these reliefs, do not merely frame the story externally, but encapsulate nature and human life in the si
of cosmic laws emanating from them' [H.
P. L'Orange]. The other gods — Apollo, Diana, Hercules Sylvanus and Mercury, but also Ocean, Earth, Lucifer and Hesperus — are subordinated to the cosmic powers, especially the sun. It is the same picture we find in Porphyry.

This picture was also present to orators with temporary. "Divine essence" and "divine spirit" were the forms under which a supreme god presented himself to men. This was also revealed as a neo-Platonic conception, and in the orators it was already expressed at a time when no Christian traits had yet appeared in the figure of the emperor.

This leads to a unified result. The same cannot be said of the emperor's Christian ideas. Co stantine, who lived on the edge of two ages, is influenced by the older one, even when he appears as an an tesignan of the new one. It could be shown how strong the influence of the sun god lasted in the emperor's Christian years, how everywhere phrases and comparisons referring to the sun and its divine light came to light. And strangely enough, not only does the sun remain with its splendour and in its su bordination to the Most High, but also the juxtaposition of "instinctus divinitatis" and "mentis magni-

tudo. "Without being too subtle, Eusebius also used these concepts several times, translating into Christian terms a thought that originally belonged to Neo-Platonism.

Here we should mention that even in the edicts of Milan, which granted freedom of worship to Christianity, or in Constantine's famous speech, which interpreted Virgil's fourth epilogue in a Christian sense, one encounters several Neo-Platonic elements. For the emperor, there could be no insuperable contrast between Neo-Platonic and Christian doctrine. Porphyry was an avowed enemy of the Christians. But the Neo-Platonists and their Christian contradictors were enemy brethren, with all the exasperation and sor ing analogies typical of such cases. Porphyry, as an apologist for paganism, believed he was firmly anchored in the ground of the ancient doctrine of the gods; he thought he had only given it a philo-Sophic basis, and refined it. But the acumen he spied, the treasures of his science and his pro-logical ability had led to an unexpected result. In the face of the sun god, the other gods had fallen by the wayside and had been devalued. And the sun god himself, this ultimate great creation of the late paganism, had had to give way to the One, the Invisible, the Spirit — in other words, to God. Unwittingly, Porphyry had become the pioneer of a new world.

The Study of Religion in Late Antiquity

The religions of Late Antiquity, as an au tonome object of research, are a discovery of our century. Pioneers such as R. Reitzenstein, F. Cumont and J. Bidez were able to achieve results that will never lose their importance. However, the study of tar do-ant religions did not lead to its recognition as an autonomous scientific discipline. It has no teaching chairs, and at best has given its name to an academic committee. Sof a study that began so promisingly at the dawn of our century seems to be more of an aspiration than a reality. There are many reasons to explain t h i s , although in detail they appear to be of different kinds. First of a l l , the enormous vastness of the subject.

This makes it rare for documents of late antique religions to be presented in a truly sodden form. Editions such as Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History (Ed. Schwartz), the Zara Thustrian Fragments (J. Bidez and F. Cumont), and the Hermetic Treatises (A.-J. Festugière and A. D. Nock) are justifiably of classical importance, but have remained isolated. The edition edited by J. Bidez of the literary heritage of the im-

perator Julian, could not yet be completed. The examination of the fictional literature of late antiquity, of great importance for religious history, was only taken up again in the footsteps of E. Rohdes in recent times (K. Kerényi ; F. Zimmermann).

It should be added that the history of late antique religions can no longer be written with the usual paraphernalia of the classicist. Knowledge of Greek and Latin, however necessary, is not enough on its own. The examination of Manichaean texts found in Central Asia was begun by F. W. K. Mueller, C. Salemann and F. C. Andreas, and continued by the latter's disciples. Even these texts alone require an uncommon knowledge of Oriental languages. Mani himself wrote in Syrian literary lin gua, and occasionally also in God-Persian; translations into Parthian and Sogdian, Ancient Turkish and Chinese soon followed. The first complete collection of Mani's writings is in the Coptic language. Also preserved in Coptic translation is a va sta collection of Gnostic writings, extreme products of the inexhaustible land of Egypt. In addition to these are the writings of the Mandeans, written in a particular eastern Aramaic dialect (M. Lidzbarski), and, even more im portant, the rich literature in Arabic translation. It includes Plato and Aristotle, but also many Neo-Platonic writings, and has recently restored to us a lost work of late antique philosophy. The Arabic culture of the pre-Islamic centuries represents a discovery of the last decades. North and South-Arabian inscriptions,

studied by E. Littmann, N. Rhodokanakis, the two Ryckmans and others, allow us to place the preaching of Muhammad, from the point of view of religious history, in its proper setting.

One day, the author of the *D€clin€ and Fall of the Roman Empir€,* Gibbon, could dare to draw a comprehensive picture of Late Antiquity. Today, no one can boast of possessing the philological premises that are necessary even for the history of late antique religions. So one has to make do with specialised works — some certainly of a high standard. Not even in this limited field (from Gibbon's point of view) is it possible to do comprehensive work.

The particular position of Christianity remains. Certainly no one will ever doubt the deep connection of its origins with late antique religiosity. But few will be willing to draw the consequences to the full. Such extreme results are still opposed by the claim to be the true religion. In the face of this, a lofty and challenging task of European spiritual history has been renounced, which is also a commitment: that of facing even forms of ancient tradition, which have become dear to our hearts, with a critical and objective mind.

Epigraphy, papyrology and archaeology, on the other hand, yield surprising new results almost every year: for example, the civilisations of ancient Chwarezm or the ostraka of the ancient Parthians of Nisa, both of which have been discovered in the past.

by Soviet scientists. Recently, a reliable edition of the ancient Turkish writings of Jenissein, with their rich religious content, has been published for the first time (S. E. Malow), and a comprehensive portrayal of the ancient civilisation and religion of Southern Siberia has been attempted (A. Kiselew). Excavations in Hatra shed light on this ancient Arabian state, its times and its rich world of gods. They have shown that in Mesopotamia of the 2nd or 3rd cent.
d. A Allah and his companion Allath were worshipped. The language is still Aramaic: only the names of the gods, founders and kings show, in the inscriptions, that they are Arabs.

In this paper, we have examined only one particular aspect; we have chosen it so as to illustrate the contrast between the paganism of late antiquity and the emerging Christian state church. In addition to religious history, the investigation touches the political sphere, but also that of literature and philosophy. It does not limit itself to narrating chronological events as such; it goes further, turning its attention to parallel phenomena and trying to grasp peoples and people according to their individual characters. It is concerned with fulfilling, for its part, the requirement mentioned above.

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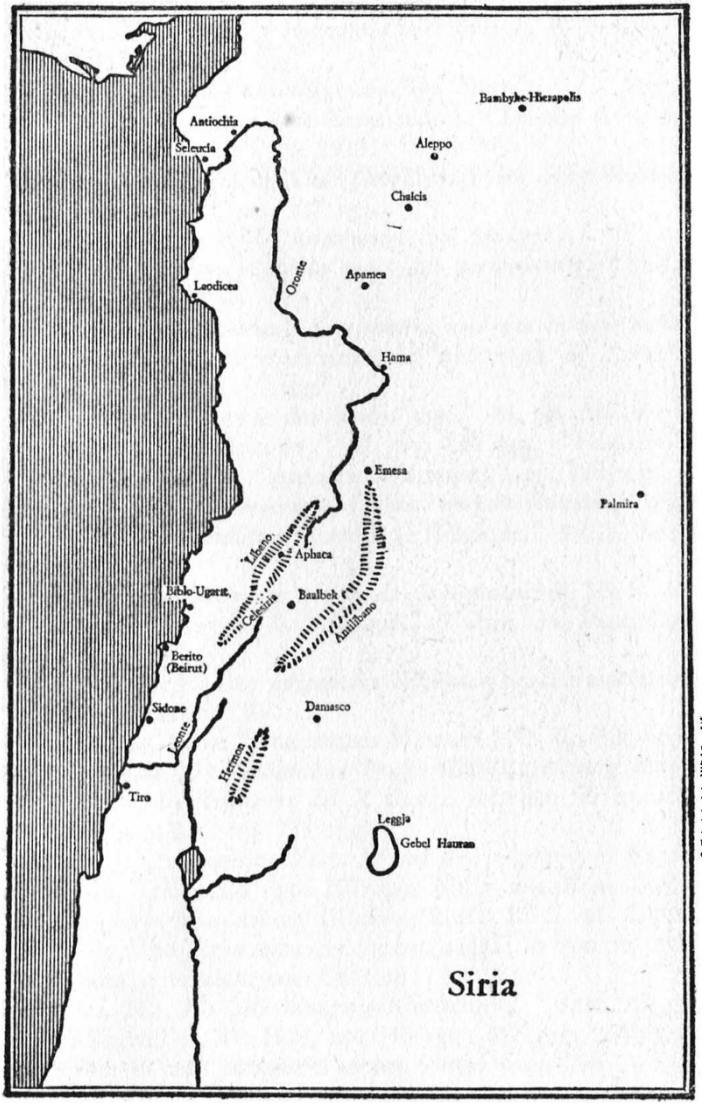
Maps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Aphaca
Byblo-Ugarit
Celesiria
Baalbek
Antilibano
Berito
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Siria

Il Dio del Sole
nel bacino del Mediterraneo

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