

Title of the original work

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The invincible god

Of

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Introduction

The history of religions, oggž

The study of religious history certainly cannot claim to count among the most important spiritual forces of our age. Only in the academic ambit is it recognized as an independent discipline.

Taught in university classrooms, cultivated in congresses and confined to scientific journals, it enjoys only the attention of specialists. For the rest, it is excluded from any public discussion, from any lively clash of ideas, like everything that falls within the domain of specialists.

And yet religion is one of the greatest, most incomparable subjects of human life. It belongs to the forces that have created entire worlds, keeping them in constant ferment. There are very few human manifestations without religious roots, not shaped by religious impulses. Even where religion is no longer expressed in an immediate form, it does so indirectly, without losing its own efficacy. Secularized philosophies, only apparently uprooted from their original religious terrain, usually influence the behavior of peoples in a more lasting way, and bind themselves more deeply to

rational, of those that present themselves as related to dogma.

It must be recognized that our times are not favorable to religious studies. Creative energies dry up when between the programmatic defense of the existing and its radical negation, between ecclesiastical restoration and atheistic propaganda, between servility and contempt, there are no other alternatives; when the word is silent, because the pros and cons of a miserable apologetics and an almost equally miserable critique have long since run out. It is dialogue, in its vital progress, that makes spiritual history what it is. But how can a dialogue take place if there is no material on which one could sensibly dialogue? The unscrupulous investigation of that aspect of spiritual reality, which is hidden in an even modest expression, constitutes the premise for understanding religious history; and the acknowledgment of even what succumbs, the premise of evaluation. But how can understanding and values arise when, presuming to possess indisputable criteria of truth, one feels superior to all others.

We are all convinced that the advent of a new era in which we hope and for which we are ready to cooperate with all our might must begin with the destruction of outdated forms. If religion really has the place in the historical process that it once was, this destruction will have to begin precisely in its sphere; better to say,

it will have to be implemented there in a more radical and energetic way than elsewhere. And we are convinced of this too: that our hope must rise and fall with the ability to find new religious foundations, instead of integrating, as almost always happens, the acquisitions considered definitive with others of the same kind.

Even what already exists has its task, but it is different from what its current proponents claim. Only when one is ready to die can a new life develop. Mysterious coexistence of death and becoming: it finds its corresponding image in the contrast between conservation and ex novo creation. Only if the forces of reaction fiercely defend every inch of the ground can the seeds of the future prove themselves as such, and the creative element can claim the rank it deserves. Sacrifice alone gives conquest its proper value; and the new can obtain the place that suits it only when it succeeds in wresting this recognition from reaction with a hard struggle. Even subversive and conservative forces come together in that whole which presents life and death as poles, separate yet indivisible.

Premises

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 also religious upheavals.

The starting point is the Arab world, which is appearing in the limelight for the first time. But everything then verges towards Rome and, even if it sometimes moves away from it, it constantly returns there. Among the conservative powers, Rome is certainly not the only one to interfere in events. But she alone has the great task of excluding or welcoming the new forces that are pressing and pressing: of denying or granting them the crown. This is the last phase of the religious history of Rome, in which the old and the new have achieved that unity which alone guarantees historical life. It will be seen how the ordering and formative force, which is the true essence of the Roman religion, was maintained right up to the end.

Such an affirmation will surprise those accustomed to the traditional representation of Roman religious history, according to which it unfolds according to a pre-established scheme. This thesis appears in a complete form in the followers of Wissowa, Deubner and Latte, and was then preserved for a long time, with the persistence characteristic of error.

According to these interpreters, the true Roman religion coincided with the gods and with the feasts gathered in the most ancient calendar of Rome, from the 6th century. to. C. All the rest, the most heterogeneous Greek, Hellenistic, oriental influences only managed to bastardize what at the beginning had been the original creation of Rome. Invaded and suffocated by malignant weeds, this plant headed for a slow but sure death.

The religious history of Rome thus assumed very little importance. If you really wanted to capture the Roman soul, you had to limit yourself to the most ancient expressions. Such a limitation was all the more sensitive as the data available to us for that period are scarce and, what is worse, do not bear the imprint of any worthy historian or poet. The rest - still almost a thousand years, from 510 BC. C. to 394 AD C. (or what other limits you want to set), - would be full of events and contrasts, which compared to the presumed original Roman element represent only a decadence. In historical times only events would have taken place such as to delay, without however being able to prevent it, the definitive fall of the Roman religion.

In the meantime, however, this interpretation has been shown to be incorrect. That series of very ancient cults was far from presenting an exclusive national character: Greek and Etruscan divinities were already welcomed there. Furthermore, as various ethnic groups - Latini, Sabines, and Etruscans - became integral parts of ancient Rome, so too did the phenomenon of an original Roman world disappear. If somewhere the Roman essence was to be sought, it was in the way in which foreign traditions or acquisitions were transformed. The individual deities were far less Roman than the general conception of the divine, which embraced them all. Here Rome consciously differentiated itself from Italy and Greece, and later from

the East.

As soon as this was recognized, the logical consequence was a reversal in the currency of the East.

Once the earliest Roman history was stripped of its claim to represent the one true expression of a national religion, the weight had to shift to later times. True Romanism was not to be found where religion, still closed "in a 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 subsequent centuries of the imperial age form the main object, both of the history of Rome and of that of its religion. Instead of the ancient festive calendar, the contemporaries of those events must count as valid witnesses of the Roman religion: poets, historians, and great politicians.

So far, sacral law, and in general all the institutional forms of religion, have been placed in the foreground. Instead, it must be emphasized that if the great period of Roman religion, its essential imprint, dates back to the centuries in which it had to find itself in struggle and contrast, its essence cannot be sought where it decayed into pure form. What the archaeologist records differs too profoundly from what moves the historian. Tense

in search of the creative element, he needs the background to give prominence to the rest, and so even the fossilized parts of the historical reconstruction can, for once, serve the best. However, not as an autonomous historical argument, but only because it is necessary to highlight the new forces in their particularity, and in some cases in their uniqueness.

The sun god of late antiquity

Already in early antiquity one encounters gods of a solar nature, or who even represent the sun; later they develop to an unusual complexity. They are found in almost all ancient religions, starting with the Egyptian Re up to the Iranian Mitra, from Helios up to the Sol Indiges of ancient Rome. The god we are dealing with now does not belong to the first centuries, but rather to late antiquity. His ascent coincides in part, for a certain period, with that of Mithras, although remaining distinct from it. Mithras arose from the very ancient world of the Indo gods - Iranians, the other from the Arabian peninsula. While the former remained closed in its mysteries, tied to the restricted circle of initiates, the latter gradually managed to free itself from traditional bonds, taking a completely different path.

The history of the ancient sun god, broadly considered, is one of progressive refinement. The cult, of Bedouin origin, established itself in a city

of Syria. Because of its singularity and its absoluteness, it makes noise in the Western world, provoking its most passionate rejection. But its literary representation, Neoplatonic philosophy, and, last but not least, the ability to assimilate Roman religion and the Roman conception of the state, perform the miracle: from the divinity of Elagabalus (218-222 AD), polluted by orgies and oriental superstition, the purest of gods was born, destined to unify once again the ancient religiosity.

This latest creation of paganism was important enough to influence contemporary Christianity. Above all, the Neoplatonic representation of Helios contributed to this. The philosophical transformation, which the sun god always offered the opportunity for, made him into one of the grandest and most unforgettable figures, so that not even his opponent was able to escape his influence. The feast of N a tale still reveals today that it was destined to replace the Christmas day of the sun god, the Unconquered, in F This god exerted lasting influence on Constantine the Great (306-337 AD).

The conversion of Constantine (312) constitutes the event in which all the following considerations will find an outlet. The first Christian emperor is not only a champion of his own religion, but also a milestone in the history of this. Creator of a Christian state, he managed to unite what previously seemed irreconcilable. Due to its importance, Co

Stantino can be compared, within the framework that we have traced, only to Paul and Augustine.

The development of the Christian religion represents one of the greatest subjects of historiography. Today we want to conceive it as the fulfillment of a plan of redemption in which even Constantine receives the place he deserves. And so it happened that the story of a man, to whom Jacob Burckhardt still inflicted a ruthless judgment, later changed into a real apology. Not for one of Costanti's most recent biographers, not even the death sentence by strangulation inflicted on his wife is a title of praise for his hero. From our point of view, however, this aim fails, and with it all the efforts that they tend to do it. Constantine's actions are considered and valued in the same way as those of other men, and we do not ask whether, beyond that, they mean anything, and what they can mean.

This means that such actions are not the fulfillment of a pre-established plan, but the consequence of determined and determining premises; that sometimes they do not follow a direct route but a tortuous path; that Constantine not only promoted, but also followed the circumstances; that finally, it is not a question of justifying it, but of ascertaining its place in history.

That everything is destined to last for a well-defined time, religious and secular history still agree on this.

Give up seeing in history the implementation of a

providential plan does not mean giving up the eternal for the storm. Even the eternal has its importance; only, you have to look for it elsewhere.

Anyone who follows the fates of the sun god of late antiquity cannot free himself from a contradictory feeling. One wonders to what extent all this is religious history, and whether the political constellation has not made a decisive contribution. The alternative can get close to the essential, without however touching it. Religion and the State as poles of human life are, according to Schelling's teaching, "in such a close connection that neither of them, without the other, can have true efficacy. " Understood properly, this means that only pure religion and the pure idea of the state complement each other in a whole; that only if they are completely themselves can they influence each other. In place of the theoretical alternative, the historical opposition appears.

It is precisely the solar religion that can give us an example. What at the outset looks like a confused interweaving reveals itself, looking at it from this angle, as a well-drawn drawing. The very ancient Bedouin Shams was challenged for dominance in the Roman pantheon with the same determination with which everything he demanded was voluntarily granted to the purified and philosophically inspired god. The political reaction forced the god to withdraw into himself, and this was the premise for his definitive aff
Not a fortuitous constellation, but an unceasing one

formative and creative work determined its advance also in the political sphere,

History is history

An age that has lost its foundations is forced to seek something new. Where a crevasse has opened, the vital impulse never ceases to build bridges over the abyss, or to fill it. However, it is necessary to recognize the loss or fracture, and avoid denying the inconvenience by trying to erase it by dint of words. Diagnosis is always the first step towards healing.

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Even historiography is today faced with changed circumstances. In his case, the difficulty we have just mentioned is exacerbated. It carries out the diagnosis, and at the same time is its object; and while it studies and represents world crises, it finds itself in a crisis. Particular historical research and the philosophy of history, history and meta-history, destined for a peaceful neighborly relationship, have become a pair of enemy sisters. History, a common matrix, sure of having given birth to a double development of itself, finds itself faced with an antithesis. Between history and meta-history, the union seems to be transformed into an alternative, tolerance into an incurable divergence. The unifying copula is replaced by the disjunction: not history and metahistory, but history or meta

would say.

There is a temptation to compromise. This does not mean that the truth always lies in the middle: that would be too convenient a device. But perhaps it is worth mentioning that the two members of that couple, at odds with each other, are by their very nature destined for each other. Their individuality develops only against the common background, and only in the shadow of the other does their splendor stand out. Not history or meta-history, therefore, but history as meta-history, and vice versa pour.

We could also listen to a whole series of contemporary historians. Of course, this would give us an overview of the pros and cons, but it would hardly make us want 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.

What is the difference between contemporary historiography and that illustrated by Niebuhr and the more recent Rankc, Bockh, Karl Otfried Miiller and Jacob Grimm? Apart from many aspects of minor importance, the essential difference is in the specialization, which was increasingly affirming itself with the second half of the century. XIX, and gave modern science an imprint such as to irrevocably differentiate it from all previous sciences. The vast subject of

study forced the scholar to limit himself to certain eras and peoples; but we did not stop at this division of labour, and the consequence was that we lost sight of the whole. The two phenomena must be distinguished. While 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 within the limit of specialization consciously disregards the whole. Puts the fragment in its place as such.

One can do without citing the examples on which this statement is based. If desired, the enumeration would be infinite. However, this renunciation entails another distinction between today and yesterday. Particular historical research, which believed itself to be autonomous, freed itself not only from the general historical framework which it was supposed to presuppose, but also from every form of philosophy of history, which, no matter whether it is taken as a basis or as a culmination, it still represents everything. Both sides had to suffer the consequences of this split.

On the one hand there are the great panoramas, attempted by Spengler and Toynbee. They are based on a not inconsiderable specialized science, and yet the criticism has succeeded in demonstrating gaps and misunderstandings at every step. Their most recent followers have now given up competing with specialized science. The lack of specialized knowledge has reached a measure in this philosophy of h

which must be defined as worrying.

Attempts to iron out the difficulties just described have not been lacking. But what is done to address them? Historical journals and collections of world history are beginning, with some insistence, to offer their readers general overviews. The missing unity is achieved by dividing all the matter among specialized historians, who then give an overview. Or to put it another way: we try to construct, by adding together the particular stories, a kind of general story. But when can a spiritual unity ever arise from the addition of so many fragments?

On the one hand, the philosophy of history, which risks being emptied of all content; on the other, a contentism that lacks unity and philosophical formation. Do not think that such a lack can safeguard historiography from prejudices and biases. Prejudices also influence non-philosophical spirits, only that they are precisely non-philosophical prejudices, that is, not studied in depth and not clarified. How else could certain historical judgments of qualified specialists be explained, expressed with a philistinism that remains uncensored only because those concerned are now resigned to the inevitable?

The lack of philosophical content produces another consequence. It becomes increasingly 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 gone

increasingly limited to recording the various theories that have found grace in the face of criticism, its survival has become problematic.

Even the great systematic works of collection, scientific lexicons, editions of texts find increasingly scarce collaborators, and even when there are, they must resign themselves to being exploited, without obtaining any recognition for their work. The dissolution of a philosophy of history which also assigns its place to this work, within the framework of common ends, damages 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 what is divided back into unity? Of course, the solution does not simply consist 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 seeks to hide the hotbed of new wars. We need to find a new basic concept.

So far we have talked about the opponents of the philosophy of history. Now it should be remembered that the picture drawn by Spengler and his followers represents only one possibility among others. Indeed, it would be unfair to consider the philosophy of history merely an overview of all human history, or of its presumed fundamental features. Neither extension nor abstraction form the cha

philosophical knowledge of history. It must not shy away from the concrete and the particular: a limited period of history, if studied with the necessary depth, can sometimes give more to the philosophy of history than a "panorama" of world perspectives.

After all, one has to ask oneself whether particular research cannot grasp the outline of a historical phenomenon, its unrepeatability and general validity with that immediacy which too often remains denied to the historical panorama supported by general concepts. Who does not remember the pleasure one feels when contemplating ancient coins? In the smallest space we have a picture of the history of art, which is revealed 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 reveals itself not only in the whole, but also in every detail, in the same way that the part lives in the whole, and in the whole. So that the philosophy of history must deal not only with the whole, but also with the particular in all its fullness. A similar need also requires the counterpart: the particular investigation must let a spark of that divine spirit that pervades everything shine.

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

constructive parts. Only where specialized inquiry and philosophy form a whole does historiography arise; even the humblest routine is ennobled, while the philosophy of history is kept from getting lost in the generic. Otherwise, the particular inquiry no longer makes sense and the philosophy of history cannot be validated.

Chapter one

The sun god of Emesa

Asia as a historical formation is a life that takes place in large spaces, in the midst of an oppressive nature, almost fearful in its grandeur. Here the measure that allows man to become aware of himself and to experience the harmony between existence and nature, which elsewhere spreads richly and happily, seems to be lacking. Rivers, mountains and deserts take on such dimensions as to deprive those who live there of any freedom of action. Immeasurable is winter in its frost, in the cold breath of its storms; immeasurable the summer in the heat and the heat, the spring in its flowering. And this applies not only to climatic fluctuations but also to natural disasters. The man seems to be given in the hands of their cruel moods. The further one enters the continent, the more these phenomena take on an inhuman character.

If you want to start Asia from the Hellespont, Syria is included. But the bizarre nature has arranged that a thin strip of land is joined to this continent, where everything takes place in reverse. Uniformity becomes variety, monotony comes alive, and relentlessness turns into serene joy.

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

One can understand Syria only by considering it as a crossroads; only if we carefully observe the intertwining of individualities in their development, if we grasp the nuances, the particularities and sometimes even the profound differences. Everything seems to have its own law: the landscape, the customs and the historical formations born in this country.

Syria and its breakdown

The geographical element is already 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 the neighbors is decisive. It should be added that two mountain chains - Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon - always create new landscapes in their evolution, also made different by settlements and crops: then the variety, the mutability of the picture, the particularity, and, if you like, the contrast, reveal again as the determining form. Certainly this must have also influenced the men who inhabited these countries, the gods and religions that were born there.

The Mediterranean coast differs from the interior, Phenicia from Coele-Syria and the northern lowlands. On the sea rise Tire, Sidon, Byblos and Ugarit - places of very ancient civilization, which is only now beginning to reveal its treasures to us. Open to traffic and navigation, ready to welcome foreign influences, everywhere prosperous and well cultivated, this land nurtures a lively and industrious people, quick to seize their advantage and to 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 peasant of the western slope of Lebanon takes advantage of every good opportunity. Its fields stretch up to the top, surmounting the slope with well-built terraces and exploiting the life-giving water everywhere. Meadows and fields, groves of plane trees, mulberry trees and olive trees, and in the midst the vineyards and the humble huts of farmers and tenant farmers: and above all intensive agriculture in the smallest space produces a rich harvest: magnificent fruits, olive oil and a heavy, sweet wine. Sometimes the plants reach a splendid luxuriance, especially in the coastal plain.

An island off the Phoenician coast formed Berito, the city of the grammarian Probus (end of the 1st century AD), who drew ancient Latin literature from a long oblivion. Home to a school of Roman law, ancient Beirut had a reputation as the "seat of the Ausonic laws," an almost Italian enclave. Another am

particular environment formed the coast on the border with Asia Minor. While the south was marked by the customs of the Phoenicians and their past, the north was affected by the Hellenistic colonization. Here stood the metropolis of Antioch on the Orontes and its port Seleucia; inland Apamea, military base and homeland of the great Posidonius (c. 135-51), and in the extreme south Laï dicea - all dynastic foundations of the Seleucids.

Laodicea is characterized by memories of the Roman age: columns with sumptuous capitals, round arches and vaults, the curved framework of an imposing construction of the Severi. Ruins of Roman farms and villages, of Christian churches and convents are scattered across the countryside. Modern stone houses, well built, are inspired by ancient forms and complement them.

Lebanon and its northern foothills distinguish the interior from the coastal plain. Once again the scenario changes. Anyone who has crossed the mountain peaks believes he is in another country. The marked urban character, where Phénicia and the coastal area of northern Syria meet, changes into rural. Now, however, the small intensive cultivation has been eliminated from the large estates with extensive cultivation. The chessboard of fields and meadows is just here and there enlivened by thickets of walnut, apricot and pear trees, in the severe frame of poplars. Uniformity dominates, no longer the luxuriance and variety of forms.

Where the sea is missing, which animates and opens up the horizons, which excites and enchants, man lacks the fa

adaptability and industriousness. Instead, the ability to work as such is valued and required, and in the heavy daily toil, less open and ready to assume responsibility, the farmer submits to the command of strangers. Harder, more tenacious, but also more Qttuso, it transforms 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 the cereal crops, there are vineyards. The hills of Zahle and Shto ra give a fine wine. The earth does not feed only permanently settled populations. In autumn, the Bedouins appear to graze the dromedaries and goats on the fields after the harvest. Coming from another world, they bring their shapes and pass them on to the natives. The huts inhabited by the peasants of the Orontes and Leontes are inspired by the tent in the desert.

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

gradually the cultivated and irrigated land is lost in the steppe, the fertile area in the desert. Further on we can see the uncultivated plateau, south-west of Aleppo and along the bank of the Euphrates, on which the desert stops with dunes and banks of often bizarre shape. Already the wealthy landowner favors the forms of a chivalrous and lordly existence - that is to say, E

An area between the cultivated land and the steppe is formed by the eastern border area, which is reached by crossing the Anti-Lebanon. To the south it is bounded by the lavic rubble and the desolate rocky peaks of Leggja and Hauran, where the volcanic stone gives the houses its gloomy appearance. Damascus follows, and, at the edge of the desert, the oasis of Palmyra; then, northeast of the Anti-Lebanon, Homs and the neighboring cities. Deserts and lush gardens are often in direct contact. Whoever enters Damascus returning from Hamad will never be able to forget this contrast and the moving impression it conveys.

This difference is also noticeable in the population. Bedouins and farmers, shepherds and citizens meet together; there are also sedentary Arameans and nomadic Arabs. Again the human type is transformed. The desert and the implacable harshness of the struggle for existence that characterize the life of the Bedouins resemble the squalid immensity of the volcanic landscape, on the slopes of the Hermon, now bathed in sun, now covered in snow. They cause the wild pugnacity of the Druze and the religious fanaticism

citizen, who in antiquity as today left his mark on Hama and Homs. Withdrawn and passionate, indomitable and cunning, as dangerous in open battle as in ambush, full of the most relentless xenophobia, the inhabitant of this region has retained its characteristics to this day.

The Gods of Syria

Like the landscape and the population, the gods of Syria also have a distinctive imprint. There has always been an essential diversity among them, depending on whether they came from the coast, from the central plains or from the eastern border near the desert.

The beautiful Adonis, mourned by the women of Byblos on the banks of the river which took its name from him, belonged to the divinities of the city. In spring, when, according to legend, Adonis received the fatal wound while he went hunting, the waves of the river are tinged with red: this kicked off the funeral ceremonies. The main holiday fell only in the middle of summer. The union of Adonis with the goddess of love, his death and resurrection were commemorated; the "gardens of Adonis" were sown, which were then carried out with the dead god and thrown into springs. Vegetation, in its growth and death, was everywhere connected to

1 Pots with plants of rapid growth and short life. [Ed]

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

With a tiring march one ascends the declining bank of the river of Adonis. Dark gorges that close the view alternate with wide panoramas, where the coast and the shining eye of the sea appear. Finally we arrive in a large valley, formed by gray rock walls, which surround the newcomer like an amphitheater.

Here the river is born, and the source is also the origin of life. From the sides of a rocky wall the river flows into the light; it bursts out from the bowels of a gloomy cave in a mighty waterfall, and then plunges towards the sea in its deeply engraved bed.

An extraordinary impression, further enhanced by the landscape in which the birth of the river takes place.

Everything around looks like stone: masses of rocks and pebbles, which rise in vertical walls, almost

always hidden by clouds; impassable, steep, closed; distant and barren. In the midst of this deadly rigidity,

sacred water gushes forth, which awakens life, and makes plants grow abundantly wherever it passes.

Rocks and lush greenery, death and prosperity coexist here: this inconceivable yet true miracle, which causes life-giving water to flow from the dead stone, appears to us in the moving picture of nature, in divine creation itself.

Where death and life, sterility and exuberance are intertwined together, the hierodula appears.² As a hetaera, who is rooted in worship, she brings together both spheres: soft pleasure and the gratuitousness which dominates her actions. Usually the woman precedes the man, the goddess her lover. Even today, at the fountain of Adonis, his memory survives, not that of Adonis. The inhabitants display lighted candles in honor of the local lady, as they expect salvation and help from her. To get rid of it, according to the ancient custom, they hang shreds of cloth from the sacred tree, a wild fig tree not far from the temple.

Adonis was not alone. From Gaza came Balmarcodes, the lord of dances, and Marnas, the god of water and rain. In her honor the unbridled aquatic festival of Maiuma was celebrated, where naked women could be seen swimming, and in which young nights with a clear mind took part, who then returned home so different ... All these cults possessed the soft and lustful character precisely of greenery festivals. The fecundity of the feminine, Syrian shores, the smile, to quote Barrès, they expressed it thus. Aphrodite and Adonis belonged to the same group of Cybele and Attis, of Isis. and of Osiris.

Very different are the gods who arose in northern Syria or in the internal plains. Atargatis was honored throughout

² Sacred prostitute. [Ed]

in the center and north of the country. His most famous sanctuary stood not far from the Euphrates, at Bambyke-Hierapolis. Again the feminine element stands out. Alongside Atargatis, his companion Hadad disappeared, both in Bambyke and in the places of worship of Lebanon (unlike what happened in the Mesopotamian Hatra). Even in Baalbek, where Atargatis Venus, together with Jupiter-Hadad and Mercury-Shamash formed a trinity, sacred prostitution was in vogue. And at Bambyke the goddess received from her male worshipers an even more radical sacrifice than that which forced the maidens to sell their youth to the first comer. Added to this was the wildest lust. In fact, the Syrian Luciano (c. 120-180) informs us, women desire eunuchs, and these are crazed for women; no one is jealous, indeed such behavior is common.

The mendicant priests of Atargatis have rarely found favorable reviews. Apuleius (2nd century) describes their ecstatic dances to the stirring sound of the riacio flute, their public confession of sins, the flogging in front of the astounded crowd, and the wounds they inflicted on their arms with the sword - all with the intent to collect fat gifts. A slave of the goddess boasts of having brought home, on her orders, no less than seventy sacks full of presents. Luciano's irony spared very little of the shrine of Bambyke, but where the citizen and the man of letters saw only an object of ridicule, a shrew

priestly caste ruled over the hearts of believers. From Syria and surrounding regions men flocked to Bambyke for the spring festival; from Arabia and Babylon, from Cappadocia and Cilicia whole treasures came to the sanctuary. The temple of Baalbek with its monolithic columns of imposing dimensions and the splendor of its halls, was considered one of the wonders of the world. Even down there, grains of leather from all countries flowed.

Bambyke and Baalbek formed sanctuaries-states, characteristic of the East .. The central power of Rome had not dared to touch their prestige, nor their riches. They remained places of a cult with very ancient roots, of a fervent cult, to which the population was attached with passionate obstinacy. Only rarely, and with great caution, was one penetrated into their existence. The attentions of emperors also turned to these temples. Trajan (98-117) questioned the oracle of Baalbek. Antoninus Pius (138-161), Caracalla (211-217) and Philip Arabo (244-249) enlarged and completed the construction of the temple.

The gods of the Phoenicians were like those of the interior: all divinities strong and active, responding to the Semitic religion. They demanded all of man's life; they just 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 how in the daily toil of the fields the course of nature dominated in the

its continuity, thus the ineluctability of destiny is expressed in the divine image. The Phoenician goddesses took hold of their worshipers with the natural exclusivism of women, while the Baalim of the interior reigned as arbiters of fate, and, under the influence of Babylonian speculation, their claim to domination changed into absolute omnipotence. The goddesses, powers of love and fecundity, desired to be both lords and mothers: the Baalim were lords of the universe and eternity, rulers of space and time.

Alongside the Phoenician and central Syrian deities, there was a third group. Its place of origin was further east, in the Syrian border area, which faces the Arabian desert. To this belonged the Jupiter of Damascus and that of Doliebe, in the corner between Asia Minor and the Euphrates. Next to him Dusares and, also a native of central Arabia, the sun god of Emesa.

Lupiter Damascenus also enjoyed imperial favors. If Antoninus Pius and Caracalla had turned their care to the temple of Baalbek, Septimius Severus (193-211) and Odenathus (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 arrangement is still preserved today, essentially, in the Umayyad mosque). The architectural form is the traditional one of eastern Syria.

chances - in Dumeir, in Si and in Kasr Rabbah - the same constructive scheme returns.

On the other hand, the remains of the temple of Jupiter Dolichenus are much more modest. Only the grave of an Islamic sheikh and a pond filled with untouchable fish at the village of Samkoj mark the site of the shrine.

But precisely in this worship of the god on the mountain peaks and in the maintenance of the sacred fish, Doliche has preserved the most ancient customs. The god is represented in Persian clothes; this takes us back to an age in which Roman influences were still far away. In fact we must not overlook the derivation from the Hittite and Hurrian Teshup, the storm god of Asia Minor. Up to the third century can be traced the image of this god who shoots arrows, mounted on the back of a bull.

Dusares and the sun god of Emesa, who in the history of the third century. d. C. had to leave deep traces, they lead us beyond the borders of Syria.

Helios of Emesa

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

The trinity of Baalbek, Jupiter-Hadad, Venus-Atargatis, Mercury-Shamash, was, in its hierarchical order, more recent. Indeed, at first the god of the sun, that is Shamash, stood at the top; only under the influence of Babylonian, or, as it was called in late antiquity, Chaldean speculation, did Hadad become lord of destiny, and take 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 body of the supreme god. In the Palmyrene pantheon, Helios, the sun god, stood next to Bel; here too he was messenger and mediator, while Bel enthroned as lord of the world in the empyrean. From his servile task the sun-god drew his name: like Malakbel, messenger of Bel," he is assumed in the trinity of Palmyra, and then equated with Mercury.

The religion of fate, of Babylonian origin, and its twin sister, astrology, were also widespread in Emesa. Julia, later married to the emperor Septimius Severus (193-211), had been warned by her horoscope that one day she would be united with a sovereign; she was born of the lineage of the priests of Emesa. In the Ethiopian novel by 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 north-east of the city have brought to light astrological tables in cuneiform writing.

And yet the god of sun of Emesa is not done

take away, like Shamash in Baalbek and Palmyra, the first place. Coins and inscriptions show that he did not turn into Jupiter, Baal or Bel at all, but remained the sun god. Deus Sol Elagabalus or Invictus Sol Elagabalus are names of unequivocal meaning; and it is understood that in an inscription "great Helios" of Emesa is para of Cordova, the Egyptian sun-god. He was also called "progenitor," as the inhabitants of Emesa sometimes claimed descent from the name sun, or, as they simply said, by the god."

The other deity, Dusares, was also united with the sun. Supreme god of the Nabataeans, of their caravan trade. Like all solar gods, Dusares bore the attribute of Invincible; he was conjunct Mithras, and his birthday fell on December 25th. In the likeness of the divine lord of Emesa he possessed a sacred stone.

This form of worship is also known for the lunar god of Karrhai, and generally for the gods of Arab origin. The name of these stones, "betyls," means that they were the abodes of the gods, not the gods themselves. In Emesa the sacred stone had the shape of a cone, with a circular base and a pointed top. Reliefs carved on the surface showed an eagle with a snake in its beak: the symbol of the sun. Here too the stone was not identified with the sun; represented its image

³ Arab population that in the first century. to. C. and in the first century. d. C. dominated eastern Jordan.

gine. And yet the god was interpenetrated in it, was somehow connected to the stone, as is also known from the numerous stone blocks venerated in pre-Islamic Arabia.

We hear of these above all when Muslim zeal is about to destroy them. The priests of the ancient Arab deities begged them to battle the representatives of the new religion around the stones. 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 at his stone is worthless. For having lost such a battle - it was not a question of sacred stones, but of three trees that belonged to her - will no longer be honored from now on," sounds the sentence of the victorious prophet Mohammed (569-632).

The stones are not tied to a specific place: they are mobile. New gods are imported by obtaining sacred stones as gifts 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 Elagabalus (218), they wanted to eliminate the foreign cult, the stone was sent back to its Syriac homeland.

Next to the cult of the stone is the cult of the mountains, also a very ancient form. "Elagabalus" was originally the name of the god himself, and means lord of the mountain." It was the fortified fortress of Emesa, where the god had his abode. From t

nura in which the city is scattered, the citadel rises to the south-west, right in front of the northern foothills of Lebanon. Here was the temple, the top of which, according to the words of an ancient source, competed with the wooded peaks of the mountain.

The comparison with Dusares comes back again. Southeast of the Dead Sea, already at the gates of Arabia proper, stands Petra. Capital of the Nabataeans, it belonged to a people who engraved their inscriptions in the Aramaic dialect, but who were Arabs, as its very name shows. In the middle of a rocky valley, enclosed between the steep red and violet walls of a massif of primordial grandeur, Petra seems removed from the landscape that surrounds it. Only the stony bed of a stream, deeply engraved between the steep walls, makes the passage possible. More than giving a sense of security, this enchanted place far from men seems to have been created to make one feel the proximity of the divinity. Among the throng of tombs, caves and temples, the square of sacrifices, carved out of the top of the rock, makes a great impression. 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 could have been like.

It is no coincidence that we have drawn the examples taken from the Arab world. As mentioned, the Nabataeans and their god Dusares originated here. The god of Emesa will take us to the same environment.

An Arab god

From the time of Pompeius' 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 has been added to it near present-day Homs. The iron helmet, with an artistically wrought silver mask and gilt ornamental bands, perhaps belonged to one of those men; and the sun-shaped rosette fixed on the forehead also demonstrates this.

The Emesa dynasty was of Arab origin. The title of Sampsiceramo (which contains a reference to the sun god) bears witness to this, but also the names given to the rulers: Iamblichus, Aziz, Soemo. The same goes for Mesa and Mamea, Soaemias. The priesthood of the sun was a hereditary prerogative of the house, as usually among the Bedouin bloodlines. The high priest's emasculation and abstinence from pork could also point her in the same

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

to their divinity in favor of those they found among the natives. So did the inhabitants of Safa, welcoming Dusares. However we must remember the presence of a male Shams in Palmyra. This, perhaps, influenced(on Emesa.

The derivation of the cult of Emesa from Arabia is also made clearer by the relationships with other deities. From the already mentioned inscription of Cordova there are, next to the "great Helios" Elagabalus of Emesa, Aphrodite and Athena. Under the first is a lunar deity of Arab origin, perhaps also the lady of the morning star al-Uzza, of the same provenance. Athena is assimilated, in the inscription, to the Arabic Allath. As "mother of all gods" this had spread throughout the Arabic-speaking territory, up to Palmyra; sometimes she was honored together with al-Uzza. In Taif, near Mecca, Allah had his sacred area, in which it was forbidden to cut trees and hunt animals. There was also the sacred stone, in the cavity of which the treasure of the goddess was kept. Again the great Arabian explorer Ch. M. Doughty⁴ was shown in this city a stone connected with the name of Allath. The passage of the goddess is also witnessed in the Hauran, in Palmyra and in the vicinity. Even Emesa has handed down his image, in a long dress with a scepter

Everywhere the world of Bedouin divinities is found in the neighboring Syrian territory. Registrations of

⁴ CHARLES MONTAGU F DouGHTY (1 843- 1 926) : his fame is le gate to the Travds in Arabia Deserta, published in 1 888.

the Hauran give 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.

A singular procession can be seen on a relief on the ceiling of the temple of Bel in Palmyra. A dromedary carries an object wrapped in veils. The retinue is made up of girls and women who are also veiled. In front of the dromedary, facing backwards, stands a man who holds the animal's reins high above his head. At the head of the procession, an animal without harness, a donkey or a mule. Every detail of the representation has its importance.

We recognize the girls wrapped in cloaks, lined up around the image of the god, from a verse by the Arab poet Imru ul-kais. In 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 high and shaped like a pavilion. Surrounded by the women of the tribe, she is carried as a living ensign into the midst of the fray. With songs, gestures, insults and if necessary ecstatic stripping of her body, she drags the soldiers along with her. Nothing is more ignominious than leaving the dromedary and the girl to the enemy. Aiscia, the "mother of the faithful," in the "battle of the dromedary rides" to the same

8 Mohammed's wife, m. in 678.

way before the ranks of his own.

Even one of the tribe's sacred objects - an idol, a sacred stone, under a canopy or wrapped in precious cloth - may take place on the dromedary instead of the girl. The women of the tribe always form the retinue, inciting the combatants with songs, cymbals and tambourines. It is also known of them that at the decisive moment they throw off their clothes and excite the warriors with gestures and poems.

And even goddesses can play that part. An envoy of Mohammed is about to cut down the three sacred trees of al-Uzza. Two have already fallen, when the goddess herself, in ecstatic excitement, comes before the destroyed bull, "Throw yourself with violence against the enemy, and do not be afraid!" the priest recommends. "Drop the veil and lift the dress there" Incited also to strip naked, as mortal women do not hesitate to do in the decisive battle, she stands in defense of her property.

Such things were not unknown even in Emesa. The women of the priestly house, who no longer use the sedan chair on the dromedary, but a cart, get out of it in an important battle and with their words and their cries of pain induce the soldiers to resist. And here too rapturous enthusiasm drives the fighters to new attacks and victory. The battle yes. decides thanks to this particular offensive method.

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

mediary. And as on the relief at Palmyra, the bearer of the sacred weight faces it, holding the reins in his hand, so the high priest of the sun god precedes the chariot with the sacred stone, "walking backwards, looking the god and holding the reins of the horse."

The animals chosen to carry or pull the god find their way by themselves. This is true for the pair of horses that drag 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 the coronation of Napoleon moved through the streets of Paris towards Notre Dame, it aroused the ridicule of the populace, because at the head trotted a mule without a rider ... It was the ultimate expression of this cult

Historic location

Already once an Arab had mentioned the god of the sun. The Nabatean lambulo had composed, in the last twenty years of the second century. to. C., a utopian novel that depicted a new social order. An order in which everything takes place in the best and most natural way, where the community of women and goods is in force, and humanity is placed under the divine government of Helios. It is the solar state that

Sicilian slaves who rose up under the leadership of Eunus,⁶ and in Asia Minor the followers of Aristonico of Pergamum⁷ planned to act, before falling under the harsh attack of Rome. But from Syria now the sun god comes forward with new demands.

This time it was not a question of a social programme, and even less was there any thought of presenting a utopian one. The original element had been maintained here quite differently than in the Nabataean imbued with literature and philosophy. Of Arab origin, the sun god of Emesa and his priestly college remained deeply linked to the religious world of pre-Islamic paganism. The local characteristics: a circle of chosen devotees, the abode of the god in the sacred stone, the ties to home, country and race - all these are typical of that stage of evolution. Traces of it had also been preserved in Emesa. Not the freedom from the earth and from man, but precisely the bond with them formed the character of the god.

The history of pre-Islamic Arabia is still to be written. In it religion would assume an important place. So far interest has been confined to the century immediately preceding the appearance of Mohammed, and only occasionally have we turned to earlier times (with the exception of southern Arabia).

⁶ Slave originally from Syria who promoted the first war of the slaves (135-132 BC) and was proclaimed "king" by his followers.

⁷ Rome's war against the pretender Aristonicus of Pergamum yes took place in the years 132-129 a. c.

And yet it should be evident that, in importance, they are slightly inferior to the Islamic centuries and their immediate antecedents.

Especially the third century. d. C. shows an increase in Arab life that has something amazing. Arab state foundations such as Hatra, Hirah and Palmyra grew in importance and dared to play an autonomous role between the great powers, Rome and the Sassanids.

That the attempt proved premature, resulting in the destruction of two of these states, does not detract from their importance. Even within the Roman Empire, the Arabs distinguished themselves. Foot and horse archers, originally from the Arab-Syrian border area, Bedouins or semi-Bedouins, rose to the highest ranks in the Roman army. They were found at almost all frontiers. Detachments from Emesa and Chalcis, from Damascus and Palmyra settled at the Numidian limes . Arab tribes immigrated to Egypt, forming their own district. This, and the conquest of the Nile country by the Palmyrene army (268-271), must be regarded as the prelude to the feat achieved by 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 the Roman border, and which heralds in structure and ornamentation the great buildings that one day the Umayyads would erect in the same region.

But far more important was the ascent to the imperial throne.

Roman period, 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 of the Hauran (244-249) - who seized the supreme dignity.

Second chapter

Elagabalus

The rise of the Arab element, often young and sometimes revolutionary, took place within the framework of already existing structures. These were represented by the empire, which once again, and for centuries, closed in on itself and preserved the heritage of ancient culture.

Rome welcomed, in this inheritance, great and petty elements, immortal and already withered. The empire had grown into such a unity of destinies that it was forced to suffer consequences it had not caused, burdens for which it was not responsible. The counterpart of the Hellenistic heritage accepted by Rome was that it found itself exposed to the political and religious offensive of an Orient that had by now never been reawakened.

The victorious campaign of Alexander (336-323 BC. C.) made oriental wisdom seem to succumb to the Hellenic spirit. As long as the foreign domination lasted, the vanquished saw something incomprehensible in the new civilization, and gladly accepted a superiority to which, from the beginning, they had nothing to oppose. Only when the surprise had passed did the reaction come: just three generations after the death of the conqueror it was in full swing

course. The most powerful and relevant 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, there was a revolt against the power that had assumed his inheritance: against Rome.

It was a battle of two continents, of two civilizations, and - it could not be otherwise - also a battle of gods. These appeared in oracles, and reflected world events as in a mirror. The sentences sounded like dominion over Asia or Europe, conquest of the East or the West, war of defense or revenge. The Apocalypses foretold a Last Judgment that would bring the long-coming doom, destruction, to the Macedonians or Romans. But it wasn't just the thirst for revenge, the primordial hatred of Asia towards the smallest but most fortunate continent. One thought not only of punishing, but also of conquering; not only to destroy, but also to transform and possess. The gods of the East were preparing to snatch from the hearts of Westerners what had hitherto belonged to the lords of Olympus and the Capitol. In an irrepressible flow, so it seemed, they went

, hitherto closed spheres.

The Appearance of Oriental Gods in Rome

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

The Roman world was able to defend itself in various ways against this offensive. The ritual of the imported gods was always stripped of essential parts. During the Augustan age an energetic counterattack was planned against the oriental religions. Until the third century. d. C., as we will see, the Roman form was preserved with victorious strength.

Furthermore, the foreign invasion did not form a unitary movement. Egypt and Asia Minor, Syria, Iran and Mesopotamia were countries of different characters and customs. As the countries and the peoples, so the gods were different. So that now one, now the other appeared in the limelight, and, indeed, they followed one another in an order accurate.

The gods of Egypt and Asia Minor dominated in the first two centuries of the imperial era. Isis and Serapis, then Cybele and took first place; in Rome temples were erected to them, and coins were minted with their effigy. Interestingly how

the lovers of the two goddesses remained in the background: Attis is rarely seen, and Osiris is completely absent. In both cases a conservative attitude emerges, since amorous passions had always been extraneous to the gods of Roman religion; Rome responded, that is, by depriving foreign cults of essential elements. Only towards the end of the second century. the picture began to change.

At first, under the Severans, the Egyptian gods grew further in importance. They seemed to have reached the height of their power. Already Septimius Severus (193-211) devoted his attention to Serapis. During a trip to Egypt, which impressed him deeply, he visited the famous temple of the god in Alexandria. He had himself depicted - something no other emperor before him had dared to do - as Serapis. Caracalla followed his father's example. Once again Serapis was the center of attention. The emperor stopped in the temple of the god, when in Alexandria he let his soldiers free to kill and plunder. To Serapis he dedicated the sword with which he had killed his brother Geta. In Rome, on the Quirinal, a temple dedicated to the Egyptian god was built, which surpassed all the others in splendor. An inscription designates Caracalla as "philosarapis"; another speaks of the god Zeus Serapis Helios alone, invincible lord of the world."

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All this seems at first a development of the elements that had characterized the first two emperors

coli of the imperial age. And yet there is something new.

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

A goddess was joined to the two African gods: I a Caelestis, the lady of Carthage. Serapis too, even the emperor, came from that continent, and we have seen how the African of origin had himself represented in the image of the African god. Thus, under a superficial analogy with the previous century, a change had taken place. Until then, despite their Egyptian origin, Serapis and Isis could claim to be universal divinities. Isis was equated with almost all female deities of Greek and Eastern religions. She was the goddess of ten thousand names, the "One who was all." Serapis was also Zeus, Helios and Dionysus; he was invoked as Pan theus. But under Settimi or Severo the adoration of Se rapide became the expression of African origin. From universal god he had transformed himself 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, maintained his rank. But as Caracalla's origin was less simple than that of his father, so were his favorite gods.

Three countries, says a contemporary, had contributed to the character of this emperor. Of Gaul, where he was born, he had the levity, the cowardice and the mad temerity; the roughness and indomitability of the African father; to his mother he owed that ductility which was typical of the Syriac people. These three elements were recognizable in the religious tendencies of Caracalla. Next to Serapis was the Celtic Granus, assimilated to Apollo. But the sun god of Syria also cast his rays for the first time.

Caracalla wore, like the sun, the attribute of Invincible, and was once even invoked as in vitro lord of the sun. On his coins we find the crown of rays and the solar lion; Caracalla is represented there with the sunny gesture of the right hand al zata.

The gods of Egypt had scarcely 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 set about becoming lord of the empire.

The Ascent of Elagabalus

Under Caracalla the sun god bore no denomination that hinted at his origin. Only it was known that it came from Syria; but the city was not yet undermined. However, the sun god of Emesa was undoubtedly thought of. In fact, the wife of Septimius Severus, mother of Caracalla, came from Emesa. She belonged to the priestly lineage of the city.

Septimius Severus cultivated astrology from the beginning. Once an astrologer had announced to him his great future, and a trustee of the emperor set out in search of a bride who was born under the same sign. He found it in Giulia Domna, a name which in itself expressed the idea of sovereignty. If the emperor was originally from a Phoenician colony in North Africa, she was born in Syria, from whose shores the Phoenicians had once sailed westward. With his marriage Septimius Severus returned to the origins of his lineage.

In a marriage concluded on such premises, the female element naturally had a great deal of prominence. Julia was not only the emperor's wife: she wanted to reign herself. Busts and coins show us the interesting face of this woman, plump, but with hard contours, with a strongly curved nose; above the massive chin, a full and sensual mouth. Her beauty, it was said, was only surpassed

from his debauchery. Yet the emperor tolerated her to his side, and her power over him was great. Eastern coins show her in a pomp that usually belonged only to magistrates.

With the assumption of the title of "mater castrorum," Giulia Domna was linked to the armed forces and recognized as the legitimate heir of the wife of Marcus Aurelius (161-180), who had borne the same title.

Giulia Domna brought the relatives of Emesa, especially her sister, to the imperial palace: Giulia Mesal Septimius Severus, really, tried to prevent a collateral dynastic line from establishing itself in this way. Mesha's two daughters were married to Syrian knights, not senators. However, the husband of Soaemias, the eldest daughter, had a brilliant career. Under Caracalla, when, moreover, the period of greatest splendor for the knights began, the representation of the two supreme offices fell into his hands.

For a long time Mesa lived at court, as the empress's sister, without ever appearing in the foreground, and exploiting her position to set aside a fortune. Soemiades' husband, her son-in-law, was almost always employed in financial administration. He had to procure the means to implement the sharp increase in military pay under Caracalla; he was also the first to publicly declare, alongside his titles, the salaries he received. It's easy to imagine where Mesa's heritage came from.

And yet the sudden catastrophe came: Caracal

he was assassinated (217) and a new man, Macrinus, ascended the imperial throne (217-18). Giulia Domna continued to be honored as before, but her life had lost all meaning; soon follow the son to the grave. Mesa, affected by the decree of expulsion of the new emperor, returned to her homeland, to Emesa, taking all her possessions with her; he knew his role wasn't done yet. Like Letizia Bonaparte, she made possible the rebirth of her family with these riches. But unlike Bonaparte, he carried out his plan himself.

Eastern Syria had always paid its homage, alongside Giulia Domna, also to her sister. Now, at home, Mesa returned to live with her relatives, but, having tasted dominion, she found it unbearable to adjust to the life of a subject; it was no less unbearable to her than to Giulia herself. But while she gave up and disappeared, Mesa did not let herself be set aside. Emesa became not only his asylum but also the place where he prepared his plots. In secret he could follow the mistakes of Macrinus with malicious joy: the soft *joie de vivre* which estranged the hearts of soldiers from him; the passion for the theater and games, the negligence of business, the sumptuous clothes, not very soldierly. And soon Mesa reappeared openly o

His plan was based on the particular relations of his hometown. While Giulia Domna had moved further and further away from her origins, among Me

sa and his bonds had never loosened. Emesa meant for her both the effective and spiritual homeland.

Moreover, the city was, as it is today, one of the most fanatical in all of Syria. The worship of the sun god formed the center and meaning of existence for the inhabitants. While Giulia Domna had turned, on the imperial throne, to the then fashionable philosophy, Mesa and her family were followers of the fatherland Shams, a divinity as strong and alacritic as all those of her lineage. Mesa herself was the daughter of the sun priest Bas sia, and she was anxious that her two grandchildren assume the same priestly dignity.

In the vicinity of Emesa was a legion intended to keep the restless city in obedience.

Whenever the soldiers arrived in Emesa, they saw the son of Soaemias, Elagabalus, in all the splendor of the highest 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, Mesha revealed for the first time the true origin of his nephew.

Caracalla, as a young man, had made his two cousins mothers: Elaga balo was born from the union with Soemiade. The shrewd woman hoped for the soldiers' old affection for Caracalla, who had one day been their idol and was still on everyone's lips: and she was not mistaken. Skillful helpers seconded her, and her treasures did the rest.

One night Mesa appeared with his men in the camp

chin of the troops. Everything was prepared, the soldiers acclaimed Elagabalus emperor and set about to fight for him. The news spread rapidly: the aversion against Macrino, the memory of the rich donations that Caracalla had one day offered the soldiers, and Mesa's money facilitated an ever wider membership. Macrino didn't worry much: he sent the prefect of his guard, Giuliano, with troops, to put down the revolt of Emesa. Elagabalus was shown to the soldiers from the top of the city walls: and they understood that he was in fact a descendant of Caracalla. To demonstrate the origin of Elagabalus with the resemblance, a youthful portrait of his father was exhibited and in reality the portraits that have come down to us attest to this resemblance. Macrinus' soldiers lost all desire to fight. Soon they revolted against Giuliano; they cut off his head and sent it to their ex-emperor, whose insignia they had abandoned. In the decisive battle before the walls of Antioch, fortune seemed to favor Macrinus once more. The suitor's hosts began to waver. Then Mesha and Sohemiade got out of the carriage in which they were accompanying the army. Their prayers and invocations managed to induce the fugitives to stop. Elagabalus did even more: with ecstatic enthusiasm he threw himself into the fray, dragging his men with him. But only the cowardly flight

he tried to disappear unnoticed, but along the way he succumbed to his fate; the same happened to his son Diadumenianus, who was preparing to fight the Parthians.

Elagabalus i m pcratorc

The enterprise was unexpectedly successful. Mesa had achieved his goal. Elagabalus himself (218-222), a pious man who was the architect of his own destiny, had been dragged along by events. A rapid ascent had led the young man from the priestly state to the supreme dignity of a world empire. It would take extraordinary qualities to go through such a change without inner damage, to adapt to the changed tasks of the new position. But the darling of fortune was not capable of this: even on the throne he felt himself completely a servant of his god.

And he behaved accordingly, completely absorbed in his celestial lord; and his mother encouraged him in this way.

As emperor he bore the name of Antoninus, which 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 transfer of name was in a certain sense legitimized by the way of life of the emperor, completely dedicated to the service of the

his god. Everything had been conceived in such a way as to make the latter the lord of Rome: even among the Roman gods he was to occupy the place due to him.

The emperor was therefore not happy with having married him to the sky goddess of Carthage, and preferred to unite him with the most venerated 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 fallen from the sky of the sun god of Emesa reached Rome. On the capitals of the columns of the temple it was seen how this stone, and with it the god, was married to Minerva and to the celestial lady of Carthage. Inside the temple Elagabalus celebrated, together with his mother and grandmother, secret ceremonies which each time represented a scandal for Roman sensibilities. Syriac chants rang out; there is talk of sacrifices of children and other things unheard of in Rome, and daily instead in the emperor's homeland.

During public ceremonies, tombs were sacrificed on numerous altars, and the oldest and most precious wine was poured. The emperor himself danced as a priest around the altars, accompanied by choruses of female sires with cymbals and timpani. All around, senators and knights took their places. They formed the spectators of these curious ceremonies, while the holders of the highest offices, in Syriac costume,

dressed in white linen, they participated in the sacrifices.

Another sanctuary was erected in front of the city . At midday the imperial priest carried the sacred stone in a cart to his rural home. Six horses in white, shiny cloaks pulled the chariot, on which no one had to get on or hold the reins. These were secured around the sacred stone, since the god himself, it was believed, guided the way. Elagabalus preceded the chariot, facing backwards, never to take his face off his master. The road was strewn with gold dust, and bodyguards made sure the emperor did not fall.

The imperial pontiff gave his god several wives. He had the effigy purported to come from Troy - of Pallas Athena, or, as she was called in Rome, Minerva - removed from the custody of the Vestals, and transported it to the temple of Helios. The virgin goddess was to be entrusted to the sacred stone. But Minerva, due to her warlike nature, proved to be unsuitable, and was replaced with the goddess of Carthage. Elagabalus likewise married a whole series of wives, and then separated from them. Among these was - an unprecedented case - a Vestal Virgin. In the marriage between a priest and a priestess he perhaps found a way to legitimize his behavior.

In all this Rome saw only a profane nation of its religion and its traditional institutions. Elagabalus' actions aroused the sde

general misconception of his contemporaries: the life he led seemed due only to his natural instincts and all sorts of things were said and believed about him. The portraits of the emperor traced by contemporary or later historiography have up to now strengthened this judgment.

Even Elagabalo's way of appearing in public was not made to reconcile Roman sensibilities. When he was a young priest in Emesa he presented himself sumptuously, with his precious diadem, the purple and gold robe, under which he wore, in the oriental way, long trousers of the same material. To this was added the flower of youth, a delicate and attractive figure, a little feminine; was compared born to the young Dionysus. But even as emperor he did not want to give up this way of presenting himself.

Then the holder of the supreme dignity was seen dancing, amidst the sound of tambourines and the flute, surrounded by sire women, around the altar of his god.

With his face painted, adorned with necklaces and soft Chinese silk robes, he seemed entirely devoid of manly character. Only because he was forced, so it was said, did he put on the toga.

But it is certainly not only by reading the hate-filled portrayals of senatorial historiography that we can understand Elagabalus' behavior. In the demonstrations which gave rise to the strongest reprimands, we discover impulses of a religious nature. Ela gabalo was caught in the spell of the religious world

I know about his homeland. What moves him finds its correspondence in the Syrian cults or in those that came from the East.

Here are the triclinia versatilia, which with their luxury aroused the most violent aversion: revolving dining rooms, in which a shower of flowers fell on the participants at the banquet. A long way takes us back from these to the cosmic revolving rotunda of the Domus aurea of Nero (54-68 AD), and to the first ancient oriental and Iranian examples. Emperors and priests of the sun gathered in this simulacrum of the astral cosmic order.

Another example: the emperor would have offered himself to amorous pleasure, he would have obtained money from it. Is there the influence of sacred prostitution, then in vogue in Syria? Even among the priests of the celestial goddess of Carthage, whom Elagabalus had given in marriage to her god, such things were usual. Augustine, almost two centuries later, has left us a drastic representation. Spectacles were offered to the virgin goddess, which even a married woman could take home as an enrichment of her knowledge. Opposite to sacred prostitution is the programmatic emasculation, also a very ancient tradition of oriental and even Syriac cults.

We are far from wanting to deny the debaucheries of Elagabalus. But sensuality and religious piety are intertwined in him in a particular way. TE Lawrence thus defined the semi-tis: a people "immersed up

to the eyes in the cloaca, but that with the eyelashes touches the sky. Among the portraits that have been preserved, the latest find is especially impressive. "Full lips, shaded with down, alive and quivering, are of a particularly complex voluptuousness. A primitive, animalistic sensuality mixes with refinement, caprice, mood instability (HP L'Orange). "

But alongside this we can grasp the absolute dedication of the emperor, who only wanted to be a priest of his god; religious fanaticism is felt. The oriental phlegm is not lacking either, expressed in the collected gaze, sunk in dream.

Fall of Elagabalus

When Mesha spread the rumor that Caracalla was the father of Elagabalus, it was welcomed by Soaemias. That didn't mean being blamed for a secret youthful past. His tastes weren't all that difficult. Ganni, the son's master, was of humble origins, and brought up in the house of Mesa. Soaemias immediately gave him her favors, and the son full of understanding sometimes thought of raising the ancient pedagogue to the dignity of Caesar, so that his mother could marry him. But then the aversion of the pupil won, who feared the unwanted and uncomfortable advice of the teacher. Elagabalus himself struck the first blow against the man who had edu

been the hearts of the soldiers, that she had raised him to victory and to the throne, and that she was his mother's lover.

Both, mother and son, got along very well; they seemed made for each other. But behind this love awakens, fed by deep roots, that demon who does not tolerate, in his frost, to see a stranger win the heart of the other. The relationship between Soemiades and Elagabalus takes place in that sphere which the English writer and visionary DH Lawrence (1885-1930) defined in terms of "Sons and lovers.

"

Once she arrived at the palace and proclaimed Augusta, Soemiade shamelessly indulged in all debauchery. The mother was worthy of the son, the general judgment sounded. Nothing happened without her consent, but where a moderating voice was needed, she kept silent. The sarcasm of the Romans went so far as to give news of a senate of women, of which Augusta had the presidency. There decisions were made about toiletry, greetings and order of precedence, all the little things of women's lives. And this continued to be done even when the emperor had already alienated everyone's hearts, and ruin was at the door.

Even Elagabalus, in fact, no longer set any limits. To the scandalous behavior of the sovereign was now added that of his favourites, companions in revelry. Dancers, actors, coachmen, hairdressers - all of them rose, according to the rank of participant

tion to the orgies of the court, up to the highest offices. Against them and against the debauchery of his nephew, even Mesa's protests could no longer do anything. The warnings of this woman, who had also remained fanatically attached to Rome . to the god of Emesa, they were of no value to Elagabalus; in vain she warned him that an emperor must, in public ceremonies, change his priestly robe for the toga. When Mesa saw him leave in no less than sixty state cars, he complained that the foolish one would ruin them all.

She had noticed how her aversion to the emperor was growing. Again the specter of a life of subjection rose before her.

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

Elagabalus let himself be persuaded. But it was already too late. To the hidden indignation of the people and the senate was added the open revolt of the ga

in the capital. This declared itself for the newly elected Caesar. Extreme necessity brought Soemiades to the fore.

Once before, in a desperate situation, she had fought for her son. When in the battle with Macrino the ranks of her army had retreated, she, together with her mother, had made herself against the fugitives. Now that the soldiers were threatening to abandon Elagabalus and go over to the son of Mamea, Sohemiade was back in the field. A surprising thing happened: the two cousins decided the quarrel in front of the soldiers. In the barracks, in a tumultuous nocturnal assembly, the fate of the Empire was decided. The two mothers were allowed to lead the dispute. So they found themselves facing each other, talking and arguing: they fought for themselves and for their children, for which of them should survive that night. When morning came, the last followers abandoned Elagabalus. He died together with his mother, who held him in her arms until the end. The corpses were beheaded and skinned; the son's trunk was thrown into the Tiber (2

Mesa saw the outcome of what was his doing. When all was done, he reappeared once more and resumed command. He was not scandalized by hearing the memory of the deceased cursed, by hearing of him as a tyrant and a monster. It seemed the

a new and happier government, which would definitely secure the predominance of his house. For another four years he savored the pleasure of this domain; a pitiful fate spared her from seeing its ruin.

Third chapter

Codified religions

With the fall of Elagabalus (222) neither the domination of the dynasty of Emesa nor that of the Orientals on the throne of the empire ended. But it also dragged the sun god with it. The sacred stone was brought back to its homeland, the temple erected by Elagabalus dedicated to another divinity. But what had characterized the history of the house of Emesa after the death of Caracalla was repeated for the cult: rejected within the confines of the homeland, it took advantage of the time to draw on new strength. This time, indeed, the wait lasted for more than half a century.

Indeed, this was certain: instead of a dazzling victory there had to be more radical planning, a more patient method. An unprepared world was not to be seized suddenly, but conquered little by little. It was necessary to make allies, and above all it was necessary to decide on proselytism. At his disposal were two instruments: the late antique novel as a literary force, and neo-Platonism as a philosophical force. With their support, the center of events shifted from the political scene to that of literature and doctrine. The book

it was intended to create history.

The book was not yet as obvious a thing as it is, or seems to be, today. As it grew in spiritual and historical power, it did so in various directions and in distinct spheres. The book could present itself as a custodian of tradition (this chapter will deal with this); but he 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, have tried to make use of both; and the choice made in individual cases characterizes them.

Even the solar religion had to make its choice. To understand it in all its scope, one cannot fail to represent the background against which the decision is made. Even the new orientation must have been surprising, like all the ascent accomplished by the god of Emesa.

Holy books

The founder of Islam was guided by the idea that his preaching was, in essence, one with the most ancient revealed religions. All who believed in the day of judgment and did good deeds would be rewarded by God: not

they had reason to fear. Certainly, to Muhammad - and to him alone - the uncreated word had been communicated by the angel of God, in a perfect and normative form. But the others too: Jews, Sabeans/Christians and Magi² possessed revelations, which in their frankness demonstrated themselves as a written tradition, as a book. They were not Muslims/ but they were important, is, of a honored and tole own¹ers of the book, that written rati as revealed.

Book and writing thus acquired an unprecedented dignity. Vedic hymns and sacred texts of the Strian Zarathu had been preserved for centuries exclusively in oral transmission. From mouth to mouth, from master to disciple, from generation to generation, the tradition, scrupulously cultivated, was kept alive, and appeals continued to it even when written representations appeared alongside it. Even Homer, who knew writing and sometimes betrays his knowledge, banished all forms of writing from his world; he considered her plebeian and unworthy of a hero. It is impossible to imagine Achilles or Hector, Agamemnon or Priam having the necessary tools to write! Gods skilled in writing might have been familiar to the Egyptians and Etruscans, but access to Olympus was forbidden to them. In short, the high an

1 Sect that inhabited Mesopotamian Harran during the Islamic age.

2 The priests of Zarathustra.

3 That is, followers of Islam. [NdT]

antiquities contrasted greatly in the evaluation of the book. Indeed, Muhammad was not alone. It had its predecessors, which stretched back centuries.

Belief in the unity of revealed religions was not unique to Muhammad. It is common to all the preachers and representatives of these religions and it was not by chance that it was also communicated to him. God was one, and however and wherever he spoke to men, this unity had to be expressed in his revelations. In the scene of the transfiguration, which constitutes the center and meaning of his gospel, Mark placed the great prophets of the past, Elijah and Moses, at Jesus' side. The Old and the New Testaments were united, despite all differences, by innumerable threads, and have remained so until today. What is written and how it should be interpreted, so that not one iota of the Law is lost and everything is fulfilled: these are expressions that a Written revelation, both past and present, proves itself here again as an unshakable foundation.

Mohammed's relationship becomes particularly intense with the third great revealed religion, whose character and historical significance have only come to light in our century: Manichaeism. This relationship is all the more surprising, as there is no immediate link.

Mani (ca. 218-276) also had his predecessors, whom he names often and insistently. Buddha, Zarathustra and Jesus are found in this capacity at the beginning of the writing that Mani had specially written for the

Sasanian Shapur I (241-272). The advent of the wisdom and works of God, so he implies, was accomplished "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 land, and in yet another by the work of Jesus in the lands of the West. For to every generation God he communicated right action and right knowledge. therefore Mani recognized in the most ancient prophets his predecessors, and adapted their doctrines to his own. There was only one divine wisdom, independent of temporal, national and linguistic differences.

However, once again, with respect to the ancient tradition, the unrepeatability of the new preaching was claimed. In Mani's opinion, his doctrine was "preferable and better than other, primitive religions. The primitive religions addressed all of humanity and in one language. But my religion is such, that it manifests itself in every country and in every language and can be taught in the most distant countries.

With Mani an era in the history of religions was fulfilled, in which the limits of nationality and language were abolished.

Also another merit was attributed to Mani compared to his predecessors; and here again he met with Mohammed. It was the writing of the authentic and normative books of his religion. These books, he boasted, he had written in his own hand and had taken pains to make conscientious copies of them. Instead Buddha

Rathustra and Jesus had not left any autograph writing, leaving the writing and collection of the sacred scriptures to the disciples and successors. Mani does not speak of a book, but of books. But they too are contrasted with other "books," with revealed writings of other and more ancient religions. This means that Mani found, when he appeared - he preached for the first time in public on the day of the coronation of the Sasanian Shapur I - a whole series of religious of different origins and "books" particular pretensions.

There were the sacred writings of the Zarathustrians, later called the Avesta.' If Mani believed them to be composed of pupils of the founder of that religion, this was due to a tradition according to which the Avesta dates back to Jamaspa, disciple and son-in-law of Zarathustra. Thus Mani knew of the existence of the Avesta, and probably also had a limited knowledge of its contents. But he failed to distinguish the original hymns of the prophets from the mass of more recent literature. He did not yet know the collection and editing, which had become fundamental, of all the writings of the Avesta, which was carried out in those years.

Even the Zarathustrians, in fact, had set about creating the "book" of their religion. While Mani himself had composed the normative writings of his religion, the others had to collect, arrange and present the translation in a legible text.

"Avesta: the mission" entrusted by god, Ahura Mazda, to his prophet Zarathustra.

ancient diction. While Manichaeism preaching was addressed to the whole world, regardless of linguistic and national borders, Iran regained its national religion and a part of its national heritage with the Ave Maria . For this reason the collection was not carried out by a private individual; it was the royal house, which had carried out the renewal of Iran and brought the country and its religion to new splendour, that promoted the codification of the Avesta and lent its support to the enterprise. The new Zarathu Strian church, the advent of the Sasanids and the collection of the Ave sta are contemporary, and animated by the same spirit. There are profound differences between Mani, who already codified his writings while he was alive, leaving it to his successors to preserve and disseminate them, and the editors of the Avesta, who acted on behalf of the king and priests. And yet both, at the same time, in the same country and with an analogous end book" normative for " their communities, created the cultural.

The state church of the Sassanids did not wage its battle only on spiritual grounds. She succeeded in accusing and condemning Mani, whose doctrines they had at first been tolerated, and in part even favored. It is known that one of the founders of the state church and of Zarathustrian Orthodoxy, Karder, was among the judges of Mani. The condemnation of the adversary and the collection of the Avesta were connected. If on the one hand the new universal religion was struck, which w

of high-ranking protectors and had crept up to the sovereign, on the other hand the foundations of the new Zarathustrian faith were laid. To the books of the Manichaeans, Zarathustrian orthodoxy set its own.

In other ways, too, it turned against Mani and what he saw as his merits. First of all it was shown that he knew nothing of the Gathas, original passages from the preaching of Zarathustra. The Gathas now acquired, within the Avesta, the place that gold deserved. They were transcribed with a special spelling fia, staring at every single sound. Thus the opinion, shared by Mani, that everything was only a late transcription was invalidated. The fact of being able to oppose a better writing system to Mani's was decisive.

In this way the root problem was tackled. „ Since it was a question of reproducing the ancient book" in a definitive and unaltered form, it was essential to reproduce the phonetics exactly. Compared to the current way of writing, Mani had created a better reproduction of the vowels. But for the Avesta he had a vocalic alphabet, built according to the principles of the Greek one. For the first time the writing of the Semitic type⁵ was abandoned: not only the consonants, but also the vowels were reproduced clearly. This had important consequences.

The holy book of the Zarathustrians was not supposed to misu

⁵ That is, the primitive graphic system which only considered the consonants.

rare only with Manichaeic books. As will be seen, even among the Jews, Christians, Gnostics and their contemporaries, it can be said throughout the ancient world, the need was felt to definitively establish the fundamental documents of religion - and of civilizations based on them. The codification of the Avesta was only a link in the chain of parallel initiatives which took place during the third century. d. C. It is even more important that not only are all these codifications completed within a century, but that the very appearance of Zarathustra is accompanied by a series of similar and simultaneous events.

In the forefront are the Jewish prophets.

"Epoch of Convergence"

The terms of Zarathustra's life are well established today. Instead of vague hypotheses that moved between the end of the millennium and the seventh century, today we know that he was born in 599-598 BC. C., that his first appearance took place in 569-568, and that he died in 522-521. Zarathustra was, therefore, a younger contemporary than Jeremiah, and older than Deuteronomy. Thus he finds himself between the two men who represent the culmination of Jewish prophetic literature. Prophecy in eastern Iran and Jewish prophecy are two aspects of a historical phenomenon.

It must be added that also in neighboring 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 ancient pre-Socratics appears as a contemporary event. Ancient Rome finally created, in the second half of the sixth century, the state cult of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.

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

The opposition to the great religious creations of previous centuries is common to all. At the end of the millennium, once the great migrations of peoples ended, divine worlds arose which found figurative expression in the epic and hymns. The gods of the Homeric epic and of the Vedas⁸; the pandemonic vision of the Shang and Chou ages, with their shamans and oracles; the ancient Davidic and Solomonic religion of Jehovah; the rich mythological flowering of Ras Shamra⁸ - all this would not lose its importance, even later. And yet here the contrast arises.

and The Vedas are the sacred writings of the primitive Indian religion, of which the first of the four "collections", the Rigveda, dates back to the second millennium BC. c.

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 were also found. to. c.

Neither Buddha, nor Confucius, nor the pre-Socratics, nor Zarathustra and the Jewish prophets denied the force of tradition. But they tried to deepen and purify the related representations. They wished to replace the playful pastimes of the gods with more serious things, the enjoyment of celestial existence and the welcome sacrifices. If until then that world had justified itself with its splendor and its bliss, and had shaped itself according to the model of the earthly kingdoms, now the need was felt for a new justification, and this need did not even stop before the divine.

Characteristics of the new attitude were the demystification of the divine world, a purer conception of the deity, the ethical foundation, conceptual clarity instead of images, the prophetic attitude. These characteristics did not always present themselves with the same breadth and intensity. But in the essence one can perceive everywhere a unity of inspiration. Zarathustra and the Jewish prophets (whom we will discuss first of all) had in common ethical demands, conceptual simplicity and indifference to myth, but also the claim to be heralds and intermediaries of God.

In short, in this period a profound religious movement had unified the countries between the western basin of the Mediterranean and northern China. Even in the third century. d. C., when the preaching of Zarathustra was again exhumed, collected

bro" and established as the foundation of a state church, a spiritual movement united throughout the ancient world. Again it embraced religions and philosophic doctrines, even those which had once been neglected. young and fresh spirit, rich in gems that contained the promise of flowers and fruits; now, what once appeared young and pregnant with the future, had grown tired and was preparing to decline.

In the fixed and defined letter, in the book, what had once been the living breath of God was enclosed and kept.

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 cult use, sacrifices and ritual reading, litanies and prayers. This applies to the Avesta, but also to Jewish books. It is instructive to observe how similar the situation was, and to consider how it was resolved.

In both cases, in fact, various difficulties opposed the planned creation of a "book".

The question of language affected the Jews at the foundations of their religious and national life. A Diaspora that in Egypt and in the neighboring countries of Cyrenaica and Cyprus, but also in Babylon, far exceeded

most importantly the Jews of the motherland, had led to novelties full of consequences. In the West, the Greek translation replaced the national language; one read in Greek what one day had come out of the mouth of the prophets: laws, solemn sermons, words of incitement or angry warnings. Consider that Philo, a strong advocate of his faith and of his people, 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 Hebrews by the targums.⁸ Only the dreadful wars of annihilation waged by Rome against the Jews succeeded in reviving spirits. We remembered the national heritage, too long neglected for the foreign one. Greek was eliminated, instead of translations people turned to the originals and began to restore the place it deserved to the language of the fathers. We were faced, as in Iran, with a national and religious

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

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

disappeared from live use, it became apparent that this system neglected the essentials. It became more and more difficult to designate the right pronunciation, while the cult required a meticulous phonetic reproduction. For a while transcriptions in the Greek alphabet were used. In fact, this vowel writing made it possible to establish everything that the consonant writing of the past had not considered. But the conscious revolt against the Greek, both translation and transcription, was sooner or later to block this road. We were forced to other expedients.

Here we must mention the interesting discovery of manuscripts in caves near the Dead Sea. Among the surprises they procured, one of the greatest was the manuscript of Isaiah (A). Not so much for the lesson it offered - in fact it gives us a vulgar text, the value of which is still debated - as for the writing.

In fact, here we try, through the frequent and, in the second part, regularly practiced use of the *matres lectionis* y and w, to give the necessary means for the pronunciation of the vowels. It was about eliminating the deficiencies that we have seen before.

The dating of the Isaiah scroll to the Maccabean period has now been abandoned; you have to go down several centuries. The attempt to make the consonantal text of the Old Testament legible by introducing vowel letters probably dates back to the period after Rome's wars against the Jews. This is a work of the longed-for rebirth. And it shows us

what were the difficulties that opposed the desired return to the original Hebrew text. This route also proved to be impracticable. The added matres lectionis meant an attack on the traditional and hallowed consonantal text. In this way the door was opened wide to other and possibly more arbitrary modifications. And this was all the more serious since the intention was to establish once and for all the consonantal text in its authentic form.

Already before 220 d. C. Origen had begun his *Esapla*, critical edition of the Old Testament, completing it just before the middle of the century, after twenty-eight years of work. It established, as the remaining fragments of the second column demonstrate, the Hebrew text in the canonical form. Changes in meaning or writing were thus excluded.

The problem of vocalization thus remained unsolved. Only from the fifth century. a practicable road was found - the same traveled by Syriac and Arabic as well. A system of punctuation was introduced, which added vowel marks to the consonantal text. Thus the canonical text remained intact, and the need for vocalization was satisfied.

The Avesta took a similar route. Zarathustrian writings were also written, perhaps as early as the end of the 6th century. to. C., in Aramaic script. Judging by the samples of words and names from the Avesta, there too vowels were little or not considered at all. The application of the matres lectionis was possible, but not very

cata. Alexander the Great took the first step. His vast spirit, which planned the fusion of Macedonians and Iranians, of the new with the ancient people of rulers in a third people richer in the future, could not do without the greatest figure of Iran.

Zarathustra's preaching, his writings or writings attributed to him were to be included in the new political creation and thus be accessible to all.

Alexander had the sacred texts transcribed in the Greek. To make this measure effective, he added another requirement. 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: transcription into the Greek vowel alphabet. The need for it was felt on both sides, since Avestan too began to fade away as a living language in order to survive, like Hebrew, in cultural use. Alexander's feat 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 world could conceive such a thing, and only a king could do it. After his death, the langu(, and the work already done found asylum in the ales sandrina library. However, the attempt bore further fruit. Coins of a ruling house in eastern Iran show, still in the 2nd century of the imperial period, names of Zarathustrian gods' in a Greek version phoneti

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

But as for the Old Testament, also for the mass of Avestan writings the innovation could not resist for too long. In a world where every religion, indeed every nuance of religion, possessed his writings and stubbornly clung to them - Manichaeans and Mandaeans, Jacobites and Nestorians, Sogdians, Christians and Buddhists¹⁰ prove it - no genuine¹¹ follower¹² of Zarathustra could renounce re to his own script in favor of Greek. Scripture meant sacred scripture, and no amount of practical advantage could eradicate it.

But the problem of vocalization still remained unsolved. It was all the more urgent since the Zarathustrian cult also demanded the exact reproduction of its sacred texts. Thus the second step was taken, and it too took place in conjunction with what could be observed in the Hebrew. With the introduction of matres lectionis, that is of vowel letters, an attempt was made to help those who had to read -

10 Manti/d: Babylonian baptismal sect, whose descendants now inhabit the marshy regions of the lower Euphrates. Jacobites: followers of the Syriac-Monophysite church founded by Jacob Baradeo (d. in AD 578).

11 Followers of the East Syriac church founded by Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople (d. c. AD 451).

1 2 Ancestry of north-eastern Iran, around Bukara and Samarkand, whose trades reached as far as China.

"murmur" - 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 Arsacidic period managed to express almost all the vowels and at least hint at the reading of the Tonghian diphthos.

But it didn't stop there. The vowel letters represented, it is true, an aid, but they did not offer the security needed in the reproduction of the sacred texts. Eastern Iran was reached, towards the end of the second century. d. C., to the solution. He kept the external Aramaic graphic form, but by applying the principle of Greek writing, he created the Avestan vowel alphabet, still used today.

When the first Sassanids set about collecting the Avesta, they found it already ready.

Christianity and ancient classicism

Once again we need to broaden the horizon of research. Manichaeans, Zarathustrians and Jews were not the only ones who created their own ^{books} and established their text in canonical form. As we have mentioned, the whole ancient world was preparing for a similar undertaking.

The Christian church did not at first rush to compile a canon of scripture. The evangelicals, the letters of the apostles, the collections of sentences of

vine and apocalypse were certainly classified according to value and importance, but this classification was not binding. Marcion (b. 85 AD) was the first to systematically order what according to him was valid or not. Since the Church was against him, she had to oppose him with its own attempt. From the end of the second century we can see the beginning of a canonical collection. The fragment of Muratori¹³, the canon of Mommsen and that of Claromontanus, and also the homilies of Origen (ca. 184-252), more exegetical works than real sermons, represent various degrees of it. Gradually the "book" of Christians, the New Testament, began to enucleate, to take shape.

The intricate history of the formation of the canons ended only in the 4th and 5th centuries. The Epistle to the Hebrews, John's Apocalypse, the Second Epistle of Peter, the Letters of James and Jude were originally far from being included in the canon. They were accepted only later. On the other hand, the epistle of Barnabas, the first and second epistle of Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter and finally the Acts of Paul were only gradually excluded. In the Easter epistle of Athanasius, dated 363, we find for the first time reported the number of the twenty-seven books still recorded.

The Church also needed a canary text

¹³ n oldest canon of New Testament writings discovered by LA Muratori (1672-1750).

Nico of the Old Testament. On the Jewish side, with the exception of the Torah, there was no Greek translation of the Hebrew original which had acquired general validity. Now this book had to be created. The extant manuscripts of the Septuagint represent only one of many current versions, which became established in the use of the Church towards the end of the second century. So here too a canonical text arose - in the Greek language, since one was unable to deal with the Hebrew (Origen and Jerome remained the exceptions). In addition to the books of the Jewish canon, those were accepted which, due to the Greek language, remained excluded from it (such as the books of the Maccabees and the "additions" to Esther), or of which only translations had been preserved, not the original ginal Hebrew (such as the sentences of Jesus, son of Syracuse).u These Old Testament apocrypha, although of Jewish origin, survived destruction only because they were accepted into the ecclesiastical canon. The title which alludes to the seventy translators (actually seventy-two), originally belonging to a translation of the Torah (presumed to be from the period of Ptolemy I Philadelphus, 285-247), was applied to the collection thus

A particular role was reserved for languages which in this and subsequent periods, especially in ecclesiastical use, reawakened to new life, or ac

14 The book is better known under the title of Ecclesiasticus [NdT]

they conquered literary dignity for the first time. Among them are the Edessa dialect, which forms the basis of Syriac, and other Eastern Aramaic dialects, used in the sacred writings of the Mandaeans, in the original works of Mani, in the targums of the Eastern Diaspora, or in the ideograms of the Middle Ages. Ethiopian, Armenian and later Iberian also belong to it. Here we must particularly mention the Coptic.

In fact, the Manichaean canon found in Medinet Madi, in lower Egypt, is translated into Coptic. A second papyrus, also in the Coptic dialect, reports a modification of Gnostic writings, dating back to the period between the middle of the third and the beginning of the fourth century. Here too, a religious community felt the need to collect the existing material and present it in a form. It drew mainly from the Gnostics of Upper Egypt - Ophites, Barbelognostics and followers of Seth. With the discovery of the papyrus, works known until now only through the refutations of Plotinus (204-270) came to light, such as the apocalypses of Zostriano, Allogenes or Meso, the Egyptian gospel or the Wisdom of

Also in Egypt, the Corpus of Hermetic writings brings us back, the collection of which was carried out towards the end of the third century. The Egyptian Thoth, which the Greeks assimilated to their Hermes, appears there as the herald or receiver of the revelations. Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and Neoplatonic elements are mixed

sides together, and sometimes Jewish and more often Iranian traits are combined. It is not clear whether there was a hermetic community. The mysteries, when we speak of them, mysteries of the word," not of the cult. We must at least mention other collections of the same type, such as the Sibyllines (partly Jewish) or the Chaldean oracles.

A particular role was played by the book Neo-Platonists, etc. This controversy reflects the importance of what we have so far examined.

Their master had preceded them with his polemical writings. When Porphyry (233-301 ca.) stayed with him, between 262 and 269, Platino wrote the treatise, still preserved, against the Gnostics. The rest he left to his disciples to do. Amelius wrote forty books against Zostrianus, and Porphyry proved that an Apica/issi circulating under the name of Zoroaster was a recent forgery. Against the Manichaeans Alexander of Licopolis composed a libello, even before his conversion to Christianity, which took place in 280.

The work of Porphyry against the Christians dates back to the first half of the seventh century. Porphyry knew the critical and exegetical work of Origen, and turned violently against his refined arts, which sought,

through allegorical interpretation, to make Jewish writings acceptable to Christians as well. As a philosopher and critic Porphyry was at least equal to his opponent. He demonstrated the non-authenticity of the Apocalypse of Daniel by providing reasons that still today have lost none of their force. This implacable critical subtlety also applies to the family tree of Jesus, to the contradictions of the Gospels, to the history of the apostles and, last but not least, to the discord between Peter and Paul - particularly opposed by Porphyry.

On the Christian side, the full gravity of the attack is felt. Luciani's review¹⁵ of the neo-testamentary books was compiled - so it seems - with the intention of rejecting him. It eliminated from the text what had given rise to Porphyry's criticism. He tried to rearrange and straighten out, thus creating a basis for the defence, which reproached the adversary, evidently in good faith, for false quotations or interpretations.

As has been mentioned, the Neo-Platonists did not limit themselves in vain to criticism. They felt their doctrine equal in value to the great religions, and behaved accordingly. They pitted one of their own against those of their adversaries, who had fought so passionately. The edition of Plotinus given by Eustochius, faithful companion of the master in his last one

¹⁵ So called by Lucian of Antioch, who suffered martyrdom in 311 in Nicomedia.

hours, only a shadow remains for us. Only thirty years after Platino's death, Porphyry gave the canonical version, referring to the task expressly entrusted to him by the deceased. The need that dominated the century is revealed even in the greatest figures of the time. In this Platinum is similar to his contemporary Mani, although in the rest an abyss saw the two men.

For the writings of Platinum, Porphyry chose, instead of the chronological ordering, the systematic one, thus revealing! what he really cared about. He could refer to the example of Andronicus, who had ordered the works of Aristotle and Theophrastus in the same way. The publisher arranged the fifty-four platinum treatises into six books, nine of them dark, joyfully welcoming the fulfillment of numbers six and nine," as he himself acknowledged. To the collection guaranteed and protected by the sacred numbers, Porfirio added the biography of his master, not even here refusing his tribute to the religious needs of the time.

Interpretation

The religions of the ancient world, during the third century. d. C., have become religions of the "book." Others before us have set chronological terms that

sometimes they go back further, or they go beyond this limit: but the result does not change. It is a movement which involves all religions at the same time. It makes no difference what kind they are, or how far their origin goes. "Modern" religions stand alongside the "ancient," missionary and universal religions alongside those limited to one people. Judaism and Zarathustrism dated in their roots for more than a millennium; now they blossomed into new life, as did the Platonic doctrine. On the other hand, Christianity, Gnosis and Manichaeism were not even two centuries old, or belonged to the present; also the hermetic movement can only have begun in 100 AD. c.

The interpretation remains. It borders on a field in which the fact becomes an omen, the event a historical symbol. One may be led to explain the codification of religious documents by the number and competition of religions, which must have led to mutual limitation, and to accentuate their particularity and essence. Codification would then be an event that could basically have occurred anywhere and anytime. A behavior that is psychologically understandable, and in itself transparent, would have found historical verification - one more verification. This conception does not admit that professions of faith were enough for all of this: formulas which expressed and preserved the bare essentials. Already

this street. But codification was a phenomenon of another kind. He was not just addressing the present, but he was trying to include a great past, and to reduce it to the norm. He was concerned with collecting documents threatened by the danger of destruction. But he didn't just want to preserve, but to bring out the essential and eliminate the unnecessary. He wanted neither formulas nor conservation for conservation's sake: he wanted the canon, and the authentic meaning. - A confirmation of this is offered as soon as one's gaze turns to the Latin West and in particular to Rome.

A similar movement took shape there too. Rome did not possess sacred writings, such as those that the East gathered in its collections. But they were replaced by the classics of literature. Thus began, as Macrobius says, the *sacrum studium litterarum*.

With the advent of the Illyrian emperors in the middle of the third century. d. C. 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 warrior emperors coming from the lands south of the Danube. But to be complete, and, above all, to be successful, the rebirth also had to embrace spiritual Rome.

The Illyrian emperors were not capable of it. They could hardly, turned as they were to action and action alone, recognize the need for spiritual renewal. It compfs itself without their con

Corsican, albeit under the hauberk of the imperial unity forged and guaranteed by the Illyrian emperors. The senatorial nobility, to whom Galliena had forbidden access to military offices, and the circles of citizens of Rome, close to the senate, became the champions of the movement.

It has been believed up to now that the revival began only after the transfer of the imperial seat to 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 written manuscripts of Plautus and Terence, of Horace, Ovid and Juvenal, and of Tacitus's great historical work, date back to the end of the third century. It has been ascertained that the basis of Plautus' editions were manuscripts that had weathered the storms of previous centuries, used in the absence of better models. Even Livy's text, as it preceded the Nicomachean review (palio sixth of Verona), was based on an example - in truth not excellent - which survived the catastrophe.

Everywhere people tried 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 renaissance. Among the senatorial nobility of Rome, literary activity went hand in hand with the fight against Christianity, and in favor of the authentic Roman religion. The *sacrum studium litterarum* 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 impending destruction stands out more. The senatorial nobility did indeed manage to save the Roman classics through the barbarian invasions and the dark ages of the Middle Ages, until, starting in the Carolingian age, there was a series of other revivals, culminating in the fifteenth and the sixteenth century.

The crisis and decline of the Imperium Romanum, which began in the sec. III, they weren't the only ones. Everywhere, in Sassanid Iran as in Han China, peoples who appeared for the first time in the limelight of history arose alongside the aged and fossilized state formations. Young and full of intact vitality, they soon became dangerous adversaries. Their aggressive strength rested on a hitherto unknown mobility. In place of the heavily armed infantry, which had characterized Roman armies, in place of the chariots with their retinue, on which the ancient Chinese mode of warfare was based, cavalry now appeared everywhere. Equipped with heavy armor or only with a bow, it became the weapon that decided the battles.

An attempt was made to remedy the imminent danger with the creation of a cavalry to oppose the opposing one. But, in addition to imitating the enemy, it was necessary to modify what had been a characteristic creation

of the sedentary man - citizen or farmer.

The long lines of fortifications on the borders of the empire no longer fulfilled their function. The enemy continually broke them, invading the frontier camps; penetrated deeply into the interior of the country, plundering it .. The border defenses were powerfully strengthened. Very articulated fortification zones arose in Britain and in North Africa, on the Rhine, on the Danube and on the Euphrates: behind their rigid belt, attempts were made to defend oneself and at the same time to exclude that too mobile enemy.

On the spiritual ground the situation was the same. The Hellenistic novel characterized the literary life of the third century. Its "open" had together form superseded and "closed" and ben deli inherited the imitated one of ancient literature. The dominance of the novel and, inseparable from it, a decadence of form, found a hostile environment in the same century. However different the opinions of the novel's opponents, they all agreed on the need for a more closed style. What had characterized the archaic age, but which had been buried for a long time and brought back a millennium, was reawakened to new life. Not the richness of the individual representations, but the closed and linked form, the geometric and apparently schematic element were the object of research. With the adoption of mou

single combat, heroic destiny acquired a new dignity, which began to be expressed in literature. Alongside the classical world, now aged, arose a world of chivalry also in the ideal sense.

In this everything agrees: the heroic song of the Goti, the songs of the Garamantic bards, on both sides of the Sahara; the runes of the Finns and the sentences to the litterate of the Huns. In the primitive Arabic inscriptions, a still timid and budding poetic world seeks to come to expression; this would occur later in the qasida: in a richer form, but always austere concluded.

Here too an ancient world felt threatened. It hastened to limit and protect its territories: this time in the spiritual field, that is to say, in later times, religious. The means used was the codification of the canonical documents.

In the book was preserved and established what had survived the great past. 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 both what was past and what was still present alike. Every behavior was dictated by the need

18 The Garamantes, in the second century. d. C., migrated from Fezzan to western Sudan. To them belonged the singing of the lute of Gassires annotated by L. Frobenius.

17 Classical form of poetry from pre-Islamic Arabia.

strength to defend and maintain: on the military terrain, as on the spiritual one, the 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.

Fourth chapter

The novel: Heliodorus of Emesa

Helios of Emesa was, by his origins, an Arab god. Shams was especially revered in the central and northern part of the peninsula. It was powerful with 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 bloodlines, 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 that could inspire the "book."

And yet even the religion of a young 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 without writings, without literary efficacy was unthinkable. It was necessary to compete with the world of books, in which the religions of late antiquity had crystallized. Even the Manichaeans and Neo-Platonists, the most modern representatives of these religions and so to speak contemporaries of the rise of Emesa,

they had been forced to create their own " book."

If you didn't have writings at hand that you could use, you had to make new ones. Instead of referring to the ancient and very ancient past, it was necessary to try to make use of the possibilities offered by the present. In place of the sacred tradition, of its literal definition, the free and living word appeared: which demonstrated, interpreted, persuaded, cast into the still available forms of a very rich literary heritage.

In first place are the Ethiopians by Heliodorus, a native of Emesa. The most complete of the novels of the third century. d. C. today no longer enjoys the favor that surrounded him during the Renaissance and the Baroque age. Raphael and Tasso, Cervantes and Calderon, Shakespeare and Racine admired him; at Fontainebleau Amboise Dumas painted two rooms for Henri 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 understand it in its historical premises.

The role of the sun god

The action takes place in Egypt and further south in Ethiopia. At first we find ourselves in Bucolia, that is, in the marshes of the north-western delta of the Nile, where it was formed at the end of the 2nd century AD. C., the state of th

Bucali raiders. Already in 172, it provoked a punitive expedition by the Romans, who failed to destroy it, however. The Bucalis and their strange community soon attracted the attention of the ancient novel. Xenophon had introduced them - in his Histories of Ephesus; even Achille Tazio had not missed that picturesque subject.¹ Heliodorus took it up again, and the influence that knowledge of Xenophon's work had on him cannot be overlooked. But Heliodorus' Bucolia, his Egypt and his Ethiopia are enriched with elements from other sources. Just as in the religious evolution the Egyptian gods were driven out and destroyed by the Syriacs, so too in this novel about life in the Nile valley representations of Syriac origin prevail.

Finally, the author claims to be a Phoenician from Emesa, of the lineage of Helios. This testimony must be taken seriously; the tradition according to which the novel was written, in the Byzantine age, by a Christian bishop of the same name does not hold up against it. The Ethiopians predate the emperor Julian (361-363). Above all, Aelius Dorus was not a Christian. The whole novel is crossed by references to the great god of Emesa, Helios. He is the god par excellence, or, as it is sometimes said, "the fairest of gods."

¹ Xenophon of Ephesus, Greek novelist, probably wrote at the beginning of the second century. d. C, Achilles. Tazio 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. to the 3rd century. Then there is a detail, which must be well underlined. That Helios is the god of Emesa is nowhere stated. This can only be deduced from the hint towards the end, when the author introduces himself as a native of Emesa and scion of Helios. For the rest, he does everything possible not to tie the god to a

This is confirmed by his dealings with other gods. First of all Helios is essentially one with the Greek Apollo. Even more: with the Delphic Apollo. His response informs the two lovers, Teagene and Cariclea, of the dark land of Helios. When their wanderings, as promised, ended among the Ethiopians, the identity of the Ethiopian Helios with the Greek god was proclaimed and assumed great significance through the mouth of Charicles, the Delphic priest. Even when the couple receives the priestly bandages of Helios and Selene, the god's response is once again called to mind. Above all, assistance and help are invoked from Apollo, since he, united with Helios, represents the god of destiny. The action of the novel reveals itself as a "divine economy predestined from the outset.

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

and Ethiopia. But how human things mix with each other - like Homer was actually half Egyptian, son of the god Thoth-Hermes, and like his father he had thick hair on his femur; as the beautiful priestess of Artemis, Charicleia, was an Egyptian princess, - so it is also with the gods.

Hermes is Greek, but next to him stands the Egyptian Thoth. The same happens with Artemis and Isis. Even before Heliodorus, the latter had been assimilated to Demetra, Aphrodite, Hera, Semele, Io, Tyche; Isis was also associated with the Phoenician Astarte, the Syriac Atargatis and the Iranian Anaitis. The hymn of Isis of Andros even records that she had been one with Maia, mother of Buddha. To all these goddesses Aelius Dorus added Artemis.

Artemis is Apollo's sister. Charicleia, adopted daughter of the priest of Apollo, Charicles, is a priestess of the goddess. She wears the clothes and weapons of Artemis. Once Theagenes introduces herself as a priestess of Apollo, and she as a priestess of Artemis of Ephesus. To Chariclea, who as a servant of the virgin goddess is forbidden to marry, is announced by the Apollonian oracle of her future bond with Theagenes.

Apollo and Artemis appear in a dream: the god leads Theagenes by the hand, and the goddess Chariclea. But the network of relationships still extends. Chariclea, who by her origins is an Ethiopian princess, is also an Isidean figure. In the sanctuary of Isis in Syene, the envoy of the king of Ethiopia wants to reveal the secret of

Cariclea to the future adoptive father. And in Memphis, still in the temple of Isis, Cariclea must lay down her two priestly bands before allowing her to marry Tiami. The heroine brings together Isis and Artemis, and this explains the uncertainty of the Bucali, who do not understand whether she is a priestess of the Egyptian goddess or of the Greek one, or even of 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, Kálasiris, and the priest of Apollo, Charicles, sometimes play the same part. Both, the Egyptian from Memphis and the Hellene, watch over the fate of their protégé as guardians. Both also know the power of the "god," they worship and preach him. In short, Heliodorus of Emesa takes advantage of Apollo's bond with Artemis and their assimilation respectively with Helios and with Isis, to take a step forward. He attributes universal validity to the god of Emesa.

Of the Egyptian gods Heliodorus mentions again Osiris and Hor. The greatest of the gods, Serapis, is missing. It can be thought that next to the Greco-Egyptian Helios, who was about to become the supreme god himself, he would hardly have found enough space. Thus Serapis does not appear; perhaps Heliodorus assumed that the reader would recognize Serapis in Helios if need be. The assimilation of the two was the common heritage of the re

Thus the picture outlined so far is confirmed. In the religion of Heliodorus Syriac elements overlap with the Egyptian ones, given by the place of the action. If the assumption regarding the lack of Serapis is correct, the former begin to eliminate the others.

In Ethiopia Helios, Selene and Dionysos form the trinity of Meroe. All three are handed down from the darkness of prehistory; the great celebration of victory is dedicated to them. Helios and Selene, "the purest can " and lu· have a particular position. No woman attend their sa centi, crifice, except the priestess of Selene. The altars of the two divinities are joined together, while that of Dionysus stands between a part. While animals of all kinds are brought to this, without making distinctions, Helios receives a team of four, and Selene a pair of white bulls. Furthermore, to the two astral gods only persons are sacrificed who, by means of a test, have proved themselves virgins; with Dionysus this need disappears.

The Ethiopian Helios also corresponds to the image offered by Helios and Apollo. Next to him stands Selene, and from her the lines of union go back to Isis and Artemis. Isis represents the fertile land of Egypt. For the. initiated into her mysteries she is the earth, and the farmer Isias of Chem mis takes his name from the goddess. This relationship is also expressed in Selene. Like the moon it revolves around the earth, and the Ethiopians offer it bulls, because these animals help man to cultivate the land. Artemis joins her. T

Dothess of Artemis, Chariclea, shines like the moon among the stars. When Chariclea herself leaves the temple of her goddess, she gets into a carriage drawn by a pair of white bulls. The sacrifice that the Ethiopians dedicated to Selene corresponds to this.

In short, for this novel Helios is the god and lord par excellence. The origin of the author already hinted at this trend. In addition to this, he has done everything to enlarge the sphere of power of his god. Helios is lord of the Ethiopians; Helios becomes the Delphic Apollo, and thus this deity too is usurped in favor of Emesa. As every Baal has his Baalath, so also the sun god has his mate. In Greece she is called Artemis, in Egypt Isis and in Ethiopia Selene. The Syriac religions had always tended to expand steadily; everywhere people struggled to move from local to universal validity. A single all-embracing deity, whose supreme revelation was the sun, must have stood at the end of this evolution. From Heliodorus' novel we see how the divine lord of Emesa was about to complete his transformation into universal god.

Perhaps the most interesting thing is the way in which this idea is represented. Eliodoro has something new and personal to say, that's clear. However, the author does not neglect the rules of diplomacy. Emesa is not mentioned even once in the story. You hear about the of God, "

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

Historic location

In Heliodorus, next to the sun god is astrology. The cult of the sun and the doctrine of the omnipotence of the stars correspond. Astrology had quickly established itself in Syria, and Emesa was no exception. Heliodorus often speaks of the will or character of the Fates. Next to them is an impersonally conceived destiny. The locutions seem to be drawn, in terms of language and content, from the Greek world. But how strong the faith in the stars is behind all this is demonstrated by other passages in which things are called by their name. The course of the stars, it is said, ineluctably determines human destiny. Here too the Greek surface hides an oriental core.

Attention is drawn to the name of the Phoenician Hercules. His cult is at home in Tire, but also in the

colonies of Tyre, and in general wherever the merchants of that city arrive on their travels. The Phoenicians sailing towards Carthage offer a sacrifice to Hercules. The god found himself at the center 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 particular position. Next to Helios and Selene he was the third among the Ethiopian gods. Again we come across current ideas in Heliodorus' homeland. Elagabalus had married the sacred stone of Emesa to the goddess of Carthage. "The Africans call this Urania, the Phoenicians instead Astroarch, and believe it to be the moon, says a contemporary historian. The same compares the young ne Elagabalus, for his beauty and delicacy, to God Nisus. It is perhaps a coincidence that so does the Ethiopian trinity of Sun, Moon and Dionysus reappear? Dionysus was venerated in many places in Syria, corresponding to an older indigenous deity.

Once again we must remember the house of the Severi. Its founder was a woman from Emesa.

Heliodorus' novel takes us back to a period in which Syria and particularly the sun god of Emesa were at the center of interest. But with that it is not said All.

Of course, the god and the priestly lineage of the Syriac city appeared together, with Julia Domna, in the global limelight. Helios appears on the dies of emperors

Septimius Severus and Caracalla, on the triumphal arch at Lep tis Magna. But only with Elagabalus did the cult of Emesa acquire general importance. After the death of the imperial priest, and after the failure of the attempt to exalt his god above all others, there was a reaction. But already in 231 Emesa advanced against the legitimate emperor Alexander Severus, a pretender to the throne, supported, like Elagabalus, by sire troops. Under Philip the Arab, in 248-49, the city seems to present a new candidate, Iotapiano, who was followed in 253-54 by a third, Lucio Giulio Sulpicio Uranio Antonino. The emperor Galliena (253-268) restored the sanctuary of the sun god at Emesa, and under his successors Helios appears almost continuously on coins. With Aurelian (270-275), as we shall see, the new ascent of the god to

This is therefore the summary panorama of more than a century of history. Where should helium gold be placed? V arious historical hints give us a sure point of reference. Eliodoro does not yet know the Blem mi² as dangerous adversaries of Rome; this shows that he wrote before the middle of the century. III. Instead he is informed of the new armored cavalry of the Sasanians, which first encountered Rome in the Persian war of Alexander Severus, 232-233. Thus are the chronological limits within which the novel was composed.

² Nomadic tribe settled above Sienc, between the Nile and the Red Sea.

This ascertainment implies, as a decisive result, that Heliodorus wrote after the reign of Elagabalus. The first attempt to raise the god of Emesa to god of the empire had failed. In Rome the emperor and the god were banished. In this picture we must try to understand Heliodorus. In fact, there are notable differences between his novel and the image offered by the solar cult under Elagabalus.

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

The differences with respect to Heliodorus already appear here. Helios was bound to nowhere; it was so little, like the celestial star itself. He neither lived in a sacred stone, nor did he have wives with whom he could celebrate marriage. Of course, also in Heliodorus a moon goddess stands next to the Ethiopian sun god. But nowhere is she named as a bride.

Both gods appear as "the purest and brightest," as opposed to Dionysus, who did not possess such absolute attributes, and who had been likened to Elagabalus. Selene is also linked to caste

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

Human sacrifices were usual in Syriac cults. Commerce sacred prostitution, were considered a holy and primordial tradition. Elagabalus and his offspring were also blamed for it. And here too Elio doro differs. He demonstrates how tradition was abrogated and a new law imposed.

Sisimithres is, in the novel, the head of the Ethiopian gymnosophists. These are descendants of Indian penitents and sages, who carried out their religious practices naked. Sisimithres is also, alongside Kalasiris and Charide, a prophet of the great god Helios and of his will. If Charides had brought the heroine Chariclea to Delphi, Sisimithres had entrusted him with the abandoned daughters of the king of Ethiopia. After the death of Kalasiris, he assumes the guardianship of the two lovers and brings their wanderings to a successful end. Together with Caride he takes part in the triumphal procession which forms the conclusion. But first he takes 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 gymnosophists retreat inside the temple. In their eyes it is an illegitimate sacrifice : even the gods do not

they will never approve it. Sisimithres is right. The celestial splendor that surrounds Charicleia shows that she is under divine protection. After she is recognized as the king's daughter, the Ethiopian people demand her release, since the gods themselves want her to be saved. Theagenes is also left free : as for his mate, the gods refuse his sacrifice. Sisimithres emphasizes 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 which is thus fulfilled.

Elagabalus' feat had been that of an imprudent child, possessed by his god. Even as emperor he only wanted to be a priest of his celestial lord. From Syria he had his colossal image sent there in a priestly garment, for everyone to pay him adoration. Once in possession of sovereignty, he lost all qualms. Regardless of the sensitivity of a different world, the Syriac rite broke into Rome, under the guidance of the imperial priest, in its most exasperated form. Siri 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. The pious things worthy of respect in the eyes of the Romans, so proud of their country, were profaned. In the imagination of Elagabalus the image of the sun god was formed like that of

an all-powerful lord to whom all other gods had to submit. Even the great Jupiter had to retreat before him. A passionate reaction then arose: god and emperor were swept away. The successor of Elagabalus, although coming from Emesa and from the same family, did not dare to continue the cult of the local god in Rome.

In Emesa the god was fanatically worshipped. At no time was his power and future doubted. This is demonstrated by the appearance of ever new pretenders to the imperial throne, even if episodes remained. Eliodoro's novel also demonstrates this: but it is precisely this that makes us understand that we had become more cautious. You 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 the previous enterprises, was bypassed; at first it was limited to conquering the Greek-speaking East. In Eliodoro's novel, Rome and Italy are not even born names. There are Greek, Syriac, Egyptian and Ethiopian divinities, none Roman. But this new Helios could please the Greeks as well as the Orientals. Although unchanged in its true essence, it was removed from the sphere of oriental orgiastic cults, and assimilated to the purest, most distant and brightest of the Olympian gods.

The transformation of the god from Syriac to universal is taken seriously by Heliodorus. So change the p

One that the new Helios occupies within the divine world. His claim to be the first is not laid even in Heliodorus - certainly not. But his god no longer dethrones his rivals, eager for power, to degrade them to slaves of his majesty, but rather submits himself with prudence to the existing order.

Elagabalus had retained the god's Syriac name; posterity made it the name of the emperor. Heliodorus already bore the name of the sun god in his own while he was alive. But as the god had no definite Syriac character, neither did his faithful. Heliodorus corresponds to the aramai "Shams gave," which transcribed into Greek sounds Labysmos. But the author of the novel has renounced this form, choosing instead a Greek name.

Not only in the name of the god, but also in that of man, the opposition to the previous period is evident, when Arab onomastics asserted itself in the lineage of Mesa.

Emesa's name also does not appear in the novel, except at the end. With amazement the reader learns, after having been conquered by the pure god of Heliodorus, after having followed the work of Helios and his cult as far away as Ethiopia, that this is none other than the god of Emesa. It's a surprise that Heliodorus kept aside until the end. It is certainly very skilful, and also effective. But it shows how much

serious were the consequences of Elagabalus' lack of foresight to bear. As it were necessary to be cautious, to gather faithful around the same god in new look.

Chapter five

Philosophy : Porphyry

A novel that is not accepted by large strata, that does not work," falls in its task. This is how one judges today, and also in antiquity it was no other mind. The papyri found in Egypt testify to the diffusion of the Hellenistic novel, and this testimony also concerns Heliodorus' Ethiopians . But the most remarkable fact is that this time the effectiveness was not only in extension. Heliodorus was able to draw into question, if we are not mistaken, the major spiritual currents of his century. philosophy was forced to consider a Helios of a new stamp.

Philosophers certainly assumed a different position vis-à-vis the god from that of the man of letters, who, originally from Emesa, already bore his celestial lord in his name. Even the greatest philosophers of the time came, as will be seen, from the East, and above all 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 overlook him.

It was no longer possible to deny him_the place he deserves

it goes within a philosophical system aspiring to universal validity.

It is clear that Eliodoro's work had laid the necessary premises. It will be shown how philosophy adopted the idea that Helios was contained in other gods. He was the substance from which the others were formed; it was therefore legitimate to compare him to other celestial powers and to recognize him in them. Unlike Heliodorus, philosophers did not assign Helios supreme rank; he had to settle for second place. This fact was then to be resolved full of consequences and - apart from Helios - decisive, even if at first it went unnoticed.

Spiritual crisis

The great political and military crisis, which towards the middle of the third century. AD shocked the Roman Empire and the ancient world in general, it also made history in the history of the spirit. Of the established religions, Christianity and Zoroastrianism strove to become state religions, the former in the Roman Empire, the latter in the territory ruled by the Sasanians of Persia. But the same century, complex and full of future as it was, saw the rise of two other religions: a renewal of Platonic philosophy in the West, and Manichaean doctrine in the East. Almost simultaneously they arose from

they formed a pair of enemy brothers, and yet, together, the "eyes of the world": Rome and the empire of the Sassanids. As these were at once united and divided, so too were the systems that arose w

It was not only the contemporaneity that united Neoplatonists and Manichaeans. The fact that even among the Manichaeans it was a matter of restoring the ancient forms a second link. The never-ending struggle between the father of greatness and the lord of darkness, which occupies the center of the Manichean cosmic myth, was unthinkable without the example of Zarathustra. Like the restorers of Plato (428-7 - 347 BC), also in Iran there was a link with a tradition that counted among the greatest of that country, of that culture, and an attempt was made to renew it in a form suited to the times

Of course, what united the two systems to a certain extent, on the other hand kept them divided. Dualism was decisive for the Manichaean doctrine in the same way that Neoplatonism was determined by the concept of the unity of the divine. In truth, Neoplatonism did not renounce the variety of the divine world, which was a Greek heritage, but emptied it of its meaning, reducing multiplicity to unity. Artemis and Aphrodite - once irreconcilable aspects of life, which in Euripides' *Hippolytus* collided relentlessly, and relentlessly, and created the tragic ^{And} they were coming conflict - now of energy forces of the same celestial power. To the extent that the ancient gods were stripped of their form and at the same time of

divine room, the importance of the one who welcomed them all in his particular, vast nature grew: the god of the sun. But he, too, remained only the visible image and instrument of the great One, which towered over him. As in a pyramid, the whole of the divine world was subjected 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 was from Hamadan in Media; it probably belonged to the royal house of Arsaci di. This can be said with confidence about Mani's mother; she was born from a collateral line of que is home.

The Neo-Platonists also came from a well-defined background. Ammonius Sacca (d. c. 242) and Plotino were Egyptians; Por.firio was a Phoenician; Longinus (d. in 273), Callinico and Amelio, Syrians; Iamblichus (early 4th century) bore an Arabic name. In connection with this origin, it is not enough to speak of the Eastern Roman Empire. Asia Minor, especially Cappadocia, homeland of three great ecclesiastical authors, remains outside of it. Not even in the Semitic origin can one see the common denominator. Instead, it is more pertinent to note that all of the aforementioned came from countries that were to become strongholds of monophysicism. This may come as a surprise, but, on closer inspection, it proves to coexist.

When the Council of Chalcedon (451) accepted the unitary formula of the West, contained in the Tome of Pope Leo the Great (440-461), the two natures of Christ were recognized following his incarnation, despite the uniqueness of the person. Dioscorus and the Egyptian bishops arrayed around their pastor succumbed to the alliance of Rome with the patriarchate of Constantinople. Alexandrian theology had always tended to emphasize the divine nature of Christ over the human, and eventually the Church of Egypt upheld the doctrine of the one divine nature, monophysitism. Cyril of Alexandria (412-444) anathematized those who recognized "the division or the dual nature of the only-begotten Son of God. All the opponents of the 451 law found in agreement, those who condemned the Tome. The acceptance of the Chalcedonian formula led to an incurable rift with Monophysite Egypt and soon also with Syria. In that yes formula

The Monophysites continued the attitude of the Egyptian and Syriac Neo-Platonists. Both supported the principle of divine unity, without however completely rejecting the doctrines which opposed it: neither Neo-Platonism repudiated the multiplicity of the ancient gods, nor the Monophysites the Logos beside the Father. But both devalued that which contradicted uniqueness, and gave it a lower rank. It is the same attitude that is revealed in the Neo-Platonists and the Monophysites, and it is certainly no coi

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

The Arabs remain. Recently the intimate affinity of Monophysitism with Islam has been underlined. He called himself Eutyches, one of the fathers of the monophysite doctrine, a precursor of Mohammed. Mohammed's preaching was in fact inspired by the his companion," and yes, the idea idea of unity, by that God had no one thus placed him on the same line as his Neo-Platonist and Monophysite predecessors and neighbors. Only that the prophet's religious passion knew give much more vigorous relief to what others before him had felt and desired.

Porphyry

The revival of Platonic philosophy marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the ancient spirit. Minds were drawn away from the contemplation of the outside 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 d

Plotinus had introduced this change and had given it the conceptual basis. He had not limited himself to reviving Platonic philosophy: he had also lent it that ascetic garb which it would always wear afterwards. Plotinus also knew how to express

mere the new feeling of life with effective and unforgettable images. However, he was far from exposing his knowledge in a form that everyone could understand. A long exercise was necessary to penetrate the meaning of his treatises, written concisely, by hints, also of an almost ascetic type. The need was therefore felt for a man who would act as a guide to the new philosophy, who would make it accessible and draw the consequences from what the master had stingily traced in his work. This man was Porphyry.

Porfirio, originally from Phoenician Tiro, was actually called Malchos: and Porfirio is the Greek translation of that name, which expresses royalty. Even his spiritual form Porphyry did not find it immediately: first he had to put aside and overcome forms that had never aged. The encounter with Platinus (263) was decisive.

Porfirio, who had just entered the literary world and had already made a name for himself, was able to give it up and become a pupil of the one he recognized as the greatest. In recent years, two Porfirian writings have been found which tell us how important that meeting was; and which allow us to establish in detail what the influence was on Porfirio.

The history of Porphyry's philosophy can be reconstructed through the Arabic reworking of Shahrastani.

1 Author of the "Book of religious parties and philosophical schools"; died in 1153.

For Porphyry, the heritage of Greek philosophy is gathered in a canon of seven philosophers[!, or, as he writes, of seven sages¹ (which have nothing to do with the seven sages with whom the history of Greek thought). They are the "columns of wisdom": starting with Thales, the series continues with Anaximander (610-547: so often confused with Anaxagoras, 500-428), Anaximander (588-525), Pythagoras, Empedocles (ca. 494- 434), up to Socrates and Plato. This closes the canon: Aristotle (384-322), later Porphyry's favorite philosopher, is not included in it.

The author also spoke of this canon in his great chronological work. Its drafting responded to the needs of the time. To an ever increasing extent, the centuries after Christ have been concerned with compiling canons of the ancient poets, orators, philosophers, and their works. An age that did not know or could no longer orient itself in the immense mass of writings of Greek literature, felt the need for a careful choice. The "magic" of the number seven also played its part.

In this form, the history of Porphyry's philosophy would not have taught much. A compendium like so many others, which brought together biographical details in a doxographic register and brought together what elsewhere appeared scattered here and there. But its particular value is to accompany the usual clichés with the study of the original writings of philosophes

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

Porfirio has preserved in his writings valuable information, which only with this first-hand study could he obtain. There are enigmas that Aeschines of Sfetto (ca. 430-354) claims to have gathered from Socrates' boeca itself : true or false, they enrich our picture.

There are fragments of a Pythagorean writing, and, a piece of supreme value, a long passage on the lost song of expiation by Empedocles (ca. 494-434). What Porphyry reports certainly does not offer the original Empedoclean text. It remains a summary of the content, a compendium ... a compendium that is based, but a on the knowledge of poetry.

Here you can see the influence of Platinus. The master, very stingy with quotations, had mentioned twice in a treatise the atonement song of Empedocles, a sure sign of the profound impression he had received from it. Porfirio has collected the indication of Platinus.

Almost all the verses he quotes from Empedocles are taken from the atonement chant. This predilection never left Porphyry. Without the 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 conceivable.

Porphyry finished his history of philosophy precisely in the years in which he lived in Rome, and Platinus in the vicinity. The Influence of the Master on the Spirit of God

disciple, so imbued with literary culture, more erudite than balanced, he was fundamental: only in the dialogue with the older and greater philosopher, Porfirio found his own form. This is also demonstrated by the second writing that we will recall now and which refers to the solar theology of Porphyry.

Written on sol

Even this work has not reached us in the original edition. Macrobius (ca. 400 AD), in the first book of his Saturnalia has preserved vast passages in Latin translation. They deal with the reason why the sun sometimes appears as Apollo, sometimes as Dionysus, or under other names. The answer is placed in the mouth of one of the major representatives of late Roman paganism, a participant in the banquet of the Saturnalia: V ezio Agorio Praetextat With a few additions, he presents Porphyry's doctrine.

The opinion of the poets, so he begins, is that almost all the gods can be traced back to the sun. This is not empty superstition. It agrees with the opinion of the philosophers, and the divine order of the world also speaks in favor of this conception. The different powers of the sun would have given the gods their attributes. The development of this fundamental idea is essentially unitary. Leaning on you

testimonials of poets and philosophers it is shown that Apollo, Dionysus, Ares, Hermes, Asclepius and Igea, Hercules, Serapis and Isis are all one with the sun. This test is eventually extended to another set of deities.

Porfirio's exposition is more philologist than philosopher. This is proved not only by the numerous quotations which form the backbone of the demonstration, but also by the etymological interpretation of the divine names. Abundant use is made of this, and the Phoenician author does not shy away from dealing with Arabic names, such as Hadad. A particularity is constituted by a minute description of the divine images, interpreted according to their symbolic content - in this case, solar. Alongside the 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 a single purpose. Images too are used to show the essential unity of the other gods with the sun.

· What has been preserved in Macrobius of the writing On the sun reveals that Porphyry already in his youth moved with certainty on the terrain of his future great scientific enterprises. The philosophical element is certainly not lacking, but it is neither decisive nor dominant. Porphyry entered the history of the spirit as a critic and philologist, not as a philosopher and systematic. In fact, we have seen how he conducts the demonstrations by quoting philosophers and poets, mostly li

and giving the utmost importance to the etymologies of names.

Also in another work excerpts from Porphyry's writing have been preserved: in the fourth discourse of the emperor Julian, to whom contemporaries and Christian posterity gave the nickname of apostate (361-363). It bears the title *Sul re Helios*. Julian did not use Porphyry directly, but through the Neoplatonist philosopher Iamblichus. He was originally from Chalcis in Syria, therefore a compatriot of Porfirio, and had the reputation of being his disciple. Iamblichus had accepted many of Porphyry's ideas in his writing *On God*, which then flowed from him in Julian's oration.

Certainly Iamblichus and Porphyry, despite the similarities, bore little resemblance. The simple taste of the philological test, as practiced by the older one, did not please the younger one. Like most of the Syrians who had chosen Hellas as their adopted homeland, Iamblichus was a philosopher, or wanted to be. None of Porphyry's etymologies is found in Julian's speech, and it is hardly possible that it was not the same in Iamblichus. Here the contrast with Macrobius is revealed, who had been interested precisely in the grammatical-philological part of Porfirian writing. In fact, just as the predominantly philosophical setting distinguished the samples of late paganism in the Greek-speaking East, so the dress of the philologist and grammarian, guardian of the literary tradition

teraria, distinguished those of the West.

But this contrast between philology and philosophy, between grammar and metaphysics, between literary tradition and systematic thought, which is discovered in the use and reproduction of Porphyry's work, we also find it in the writing *On the sun*. It too is divided into two parts: one in which the art of philological demonstration is applied with real virtuosity, and another which precedes it and which seeks to build a philosophical foundation. Both parts have many links between them, and the second, as is natural, presupposes the other: this has allowed us to recognize that the two parts, which have come down to us divided, first formed a single whole.

Once again we see how strong Plotinus' influence was on Porphyry, and to what extent he determined the work of his disciple. If the philological proof was Porphyry's own creation, the influence of the master can be grasped in the philosophical treatment. This, in fact, is the surprising result: Helios, who before could seem the supreme among all the gods, as if the others were only his hypostases, or, as Porphyry says, his "forces and energies having become autonomous, now came subordinated to a greater god: the spiritual god of neo-Platonic imprint, which includes everything in itself.

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 work of the prov

evidence of God, has eternally existed, never having a beginning, and will hereafter endure forever." The king of the universe embraces the cosmos as "the idea of existing things," as the Unique, or, with Plato, as the Good. He has entrusted the world to Helios, who is like him in all things, but who, as his creature, is subordinate to him. Helios is king and lord, inspired by the supreme and most spiritual Good.

Helios is mediator, says Porphyry elsewhere. He stands between the great One and the other gods, stands between the world of the spirit and that 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 a mediator. in every kind of mediation." A large number of divine demiurges, who are subordinate to Helios and partake of his solar nature, represent the same time half forces. The same time half forces are the energy of the sun, the Hermetic "d" 1 H and I v

writings. Originating in Egypt, they are presented as a revelation of the Egyptian god Thoth-Hermes. What is preserved of them dates above all to the second half of the 3rd century AD, and various elements of the contemporary philosophical-religious heritage can be found here.

Yes but. .

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

course of the moon and the order of the stars. Who their order ...watches? Helios is the greatest of the gods in the sky. To him all the celestial gods give way, as to a king and lord." But here too God and the sun are distinct, and this is only the visible image, the symbol of the other. Helios is, sf, the king of the other gods, but from God, from the One, he remains separate. Helios is closer to God than the moon, and yet, in front of God, he remains in the background, as a mere de miurgo. Or we can say that Helios it is separated from God throughout the cosmos and eternity, as a pure image of the cosmic order. At the moment of creation the fiery substance was divided, and thus the individual gods were born, visible as stars.

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, men who felt they were guardians of the literary tradition and who understood grammar as the conservation of a heritage transmitted to men through history, the first had an influence on the last representatives of Neoplatonism . But not only about them. We will see how these ideas - strange events in history - exerted a decisive influence on Constantine the Great (306-337). His political and ecclesiastical work remains incomprehensible without such premises.

Chapter Six

Aurelian

The Illyrian emperors

The attempt to raise the sun god of Emesa to the rank of god of the empire had failed. The memory of the emperor had been eradicated, and the stone of his god sent back to his homeland. His successor consecrated the abandoned temple of the fallen god to Jupiter Ultor. Alesandro Severo (222-235), although originally from the same family as Elagabalus, bowed his head in the face of the Roman nationalistic reaction, which had revealed itself in all its force. His attitude towards the Roman religion corresponded to the thoughtful respect towards the senate which he displayed: in fact the senators were, at the same time, the priests of Rome, bearers of a cult consciously linked to tradition.

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

of traditional Roman worship. God's aversion went as much to the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris as to the African Dionysus and Hercules.

In Alexander Severus Syriac blood and ostentatious Romanity formed a singular mixture. In the lararium of his palace, next to the images of the deified Roman emperors and of Alexander the Great, there were others of religious prophets: Apollonia of Tyana (1st century AD), Christ, Abraham and Orpheus. The emperor's mother, Mamea, also manifested an inclination towards Christianity, who summoned the celebrated doctor of the church Origen to her in 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 the coins he appears himself as a priest of eternal Rome.

With the cult of the goddess Roma, the emperor embarked on a path that Philip the Arab (244-249) had to continue. He too, of oriental origin, had to suffer the force of nationalistic reaction. In him too the personal tendencies were quite different; and this is shown, among other things, by the friendly tolerance which he extended to Christianity. But as head of state he too bowed to the needs of Rome, and despite his Arab origins he had to resign himself to organizing the celebrations of the millennium of Rome in 248.

This celebration deeply impressed i

contemporaries and posterity. It seemed the dawn of a new eon: under the weight of an uncertain present, we turned to the future, filled it with desires and hopes. A new saeculum}, much larger and richer than it had ever been celebrated in secular festivals, seemed to be announced. The cult of the goddess Roma became faith in the eternity of Rome and in its incessant renewal; Rome was then, even before the victory of Christianity, a sacred city.

Philip was the last Easterner 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 Syriacs, it had enjoyed cautious tolerance and calculated recognition, it now rose to a position of pre-eminence.

The lands on the Danubian border, from which the emperors came, had always known how to combine the preservation of their particular character with an inclination towards Romanism. The Pannonians wanted to be true and authentic Romans. Dacia had defended itself for a long time and desperately against the Roman conquest, but when the inevitable happened, it promptly opened up to the civilization of the victors; nearly all the inscriptions are in Latin; everywhere in the country one encounters the image of the Roman she-wolf, and even today, visiting a Transylvanian village, one is surprised to see it painted or graffitied on the

farmers. The same happened in Noricum, in Dalmazia.

The Illyrians who arrived on the throne strove from the beginning for the maintenance of the Roman tradition and gave support to the movement calling for the restoration of the religion of Rome. Naturally, this conscious defense of Romanity corresponded to the rejection of the Christian religion, which under the scepter of the Orientals had not lacked supporters. Even the gods of Syria lost their support, once the Syrian emperor Jupiter Dolichenus, whose cult had once spread to almost all the frontier provinces, almost overnight lost all followers. The Christian Fathers did not spend a single word to mention him in their polemics against the pagan gods: this shows how insignificant he had become.

The rebirth 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 linked to a specific people, had then freed itself from this link, becoming one of those great spiritual forms which have a destiny of their own. They are subject to a different law from the organic one, which knows only birth, maturation and death: once born, these forms remain lasting. They possess a stimulus to ever new conquests and penetrations; they give the measure and model to the forms of futur

sense the idea of Rome and its state-political counterpart, the Roman Empire, attracted the Illyrians to its

But also the receptivity and the particular nature of these Illyrians must not be overlooked. Unlike the Syrians, they were Indo-Germans of Central European origin, close by language, birth and abode to the Greeks, Italians and Germans. As confirmed by the figures and inscriptions engraved on the rock of V al Camonica, the Venetians closely related to them played a part in the prehistory of the Latins.

In historical times, the Illyrians were scattered throughout the Italian regions. Towards Rome, their receptivity was different from that of the Severans and their successors. They neither sought to exploit the Roman forms, nor to find a compromise with them; they didn't even need to demonstrate respect and respect for the Roman religion. Indeed, these Illyrians managed to make some aspects of the Roman world their own. They felt like his champions, and from sheer conservation they came to create original shapes and types. And this is seen in the story of the sun god.

New ascent of the sun god of Emesa

Heliodorus had fought for his god in literature. The novel as a mission tool was by now commonplace.

Apuleius and Xenophon of

Ephesus, in their novels, had paid homage to Isis, Filostrato had, in the same form, narrated the life of the philosopher and thaumaturge Apollonius of Tyana. In Emesa this road was taken only when political power had to be relinquished.

The novel did not belong to any well-defined literary genre in antiquity, just as it does not belong to you today. This applies to its external form, but also to its internal one. The ages which have a closed view of the world and feel the presence of the divine are ignorant of it; however, those who have seen the shipwreck of an ancient order, who have lost their centre, who wander and seek, know it well. The novel is the expression of an open vision of the world, it has been said, and, even more: it is the creation of a bookish age (Karl Ke rényi). The real experience is replaced by that *li bresca*, and also changes the audience to which it is addressed.

Myth, in the form of epic and tragedy, requires a community of listeners or spectators; the fairy tale itself cannot give it up. The novel, on the other hand, is read, and although aimed at a large circle of readers and often as widespread as any mass consumer good, it leads from community to solitude; when it pursues missionary ends, it aims at conquering the individual.

The novel meant the destruction of previous ties, escape from the community and at the same time escape from an oppressive present, and for this very reason it came to

against the wishes of the time. Thus it happened that the novel, in the II-III century, as shown by the papyri, rose to real power. Its authors, almost 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 Neoplatonic philosophy. It too welcomed the sun god into its system. The great moment seemed to have arrived when Galliena ascended the throne, followed for fifteen years by the series of Illyrian emperors (253-268). While Decio, and also Galliena's father, Valerian, during their common government (253-260) had suffocated Christianity with violence, Gallienus chose another path. The fight had to be fought with spiritual weapons. As allies in the religious battle, Galliena had taken two powers formerly bound by an entente. On one side Eleusis and its priests, coming from great families. The mysteries led to immortality and union with God, and philosophy sought the same thing, albeit by different means. Thus an alliance was also reached with the Neo-Platonists, above all with the leader, Platino.

With Galliena and the Empress Salonina the master was held in great honour; he and his pupils were the real allies in the struggle which the emperor was thinking of leading.

In 268 Galliena succumbed to a conspiracy of its Illyrian generals, from whose ranks the successive emperors emerged. What Galliena had dreamed and desired was, for these men, an alien world: the rebirth of Greek philosophy, of Greek religion, had no place in their conception of the world. It should be added that even Greek culture, as a cultural idea, had distanced itself from the people from which it one day arose. Platinus's followers were mostly Syrians such as Porphyrius, Longinus (d. in 273), Callinicus and others. And in Syria the alliance of philosophers, dissolved after the death of Galliena, tried to reconstitute itself. It was hoped to find a foothold in Zenobia, lady of Palmyra (267-273), and a spirit. Longinus became the guide of Palmyrene policy.

But again the hard fist of the Illyrians destroyed the results obtained. Aurelian (270-275) was against everything that seemed to him non-Roman: to political philosophy and literature, to the fickleness of Sicily and the dreams of power of the queen of Palmyra. His Greek teacher and political adviser, Longinus, was sentenced to death; the emperor himself issued the sentence. The rudder was turned with a steady hand. Even the ideas represented by Heliodorus' novel could not have any influence on the emperor: a mission addressed to individuals was very far from his intentions; he did not care about private desires and longings: a new conception and a new order of the state

were before the eyes. And instead of getting lost in a bookish world, far from reality, it was necessary 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 was holding its breath. Even for the sun god, everything was called into question. Already half a century earlier it had come up against the resistance opposed to its insignia by Rome and its civilization. Of course, much of the ground lost had been regained in the meantime. But Heliodorus himself, who was also ready to make a treasure and, if necessary, a handful of everything for his divine lord, had prudently kept away from the Roman world. In his novel he had represented Hellas, the Nile region and the extreme south of the oecumene, Persia and Ethiopia, but he had not written a word about Italy and its metropolis. Even Porphyry had refrained from making any mention of the gods of Rome or its state cult. The reason for such reluctance was known, and certainly it was right that this s
But now it was realized that the advantage was precarious, until one could set foot in Rome itself. Everything on which tireless propaganda had relied had fallen with Aurelian's verdict, 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 oppose this end.

And instead it was Aurelian himself who favored the new rise of the sun god of Emesa, and made him the lord of the empire. To this historical paradox was added another: the rise of the god arose from the defeat of the Orient and its principal power, Palmira. The overthrow of the Syriac empire had this consequence: the Syriac god regained his old 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.

Near Emesa' came the decisive test between the armies of Aurelian and that of Palmyra. Emesa was both the door and the antechamber of Palmyra. In the battle in front of Emesa the sun god had to decide whether to stand by Aurelian's side or by that of Queen Zenobia. When the battle reached its zenith (as the Roman biography of the emperor relates), the Roman horsemen fell back and were about to flee. Then a divine vision appeared before the army, urging them to resist.

The victor entered Emesa and recognized in the god of the sun the power that had helped his people. In his honor he had a temple built in Rome, on the slopes of the Quirinale.

Aurelian's victory proved that the sun god had decided in favor of the Romans. With this, however, the die was also cast in favor 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 minted coins with the image of the sun god. Ode born, then lord of Palmyra (d. in 267), purged the agitator by order of the legitimate ruler. The city was occupied and suffered very serious damage. Even before that he had always refused his consent to the requests of the "barbarians" of Palmyra.

Since then there was always hostility between the two neighbors. The victorious city demanded that the god be at its side. For the Hebrew author of the Sibylline Book XIV, who wrote under Gallienus, Palmyra meant the city of this god. And his lord, „ Odaenathus, was to him the sun-sent priest, "the terrible and fearful sun-sent lion." When Aureliano was victorious and Zenobia's power was overthrown, the god switched to the side of those who were also supported by the citizenry of Emesa. The gates were opened without resistance to the victor, while the rival city armed itself for the last clash.

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

Mira, Bel and Helios were taken to Rome as booty. 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 possession of the myth; but it also penetrated and shaped the cult of the new god. Aurelian's sun god had a state temple, while Elagabalus had built his sanctuaries on imperial private land. There is no mention of the sacred stone; also missing are the orgiastic ceremonies with which Elagabalus once celebrated his lord. The divine service was performed not by Siri, but by Roman senators, who, equated to the venerable pontiffs, formed, like them, a Roman priestly college. On December 25, the birthday of all the eastern sun gods, a competition dedicated to the Deus Sol Invictus was organized in Rome every four years, with great pomp and magnificence. Furthermore, the new sun god was left without a mate and without descendants, as the Roman gods had always been, in the first line Jupiter Capitolinus. Finally, there was no relationship with the flowering and dying of nature. The new god was the abstract, political-spiritual symbol of the empire, which embraced the whole world: also in th

The god of the empire

The Roman never cared about building the world as an ideal order, free from historical contingencies, subject only to the rules of a ruler's reason. Rather, he preferred to make more tangible and clear what nature or human activity had created before him. He felt the need to conceive the decisions made in certain circumstances as binding; and he employed all his energies to develop them in every sense. An already existing situation, an orientation of ancient date and tradition had to find clear expression.

Especially 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 beginning. The Romans boasted of being more ready to welcome them than other peoples. The union of divine guidance with human obedience to what the celestial powers had established was for the Romans the true cause of their greatness. Everywhere they felt themselves instruments of the gods, and their protection. This awareness gave them an infallible security.

An omen of this kind had been received by Aurelian in the battle before the gates of Emesa, through the appearance of the sun god. Occurred at the height of the battle, it had to have for wine

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

The restoration of the empire was the goal that Aurelianus had decided. Rome's great past, the oecumene, illuminated by a single sun - all this seemed to peremptorily indicate to the emperor his task. The sun itself could embody the unity of the empire. The Greek and Roman worshipers of Apollo could find themselves together with the oriental worshipers of Men, Elagabalus and Mithras. It will be seen that this circle was even more extensive.

The emperor believed himself guided in his exploits by the god of the sun; he also believed that he assumed the scepter at the command of the god himself. During a revolt of his soldiers, Aurelian exclaimed that he owed the kingdom not to them but to his lord and heavenly guide. God granted the purple to the emperors and determined the duration of their government. Aurelian's coins show how the loyalty of the troops, by virtue of divine providence, turns to the sun god as their leader. We see the bust of the sun god above the emperor, and Concordia: the god guarantees the harmony that produces its effects, for the well-being of the empire - and of its regent. The same god also regained the lost Orient for the empire. Aurelian brings unity and peace to the world: and with them he copies the will of the god of

sun, which guides the emperor in all his steps. As "lord of the Roman empire, the sun appears on coins, and as its earthly representative the emperor rules the destinies of the empire and of the world. With the name of "lords" - the inscriptions of Susa, and today also of Hatra, - Apollo and Helios had always been designated in the East.

Elagabalus felt like the human incarnation of his divine lord; and even Aureliano could not be extraneous to similar thoughts. Her diadem was adorned with a star, which was a hint of the heavenly origin of the imperial dignity. Sometimes even Aurelian appears as lord and god, "God," in the same way as the sun. This appellation responded to the creative will that animated the unifier 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 worship a god of their own making. A consistent and sure man like Aureliano had to be completely aware of the magnitude of his task, he had to feel it as a divine imperative. Since the introduction of the sun god, in whom he found guarantee for his deeds, and the guarantee also for the restored empire, was due to a new experience, the cult also took on a new and particular imprint.

The god of the army

All this does not exhaust the image of the new god. Despite its Roman features, Deus Sol In Victus remained a universal power. He combined oriental origins and residence in Rome; he was a god in whose worship many subjects of the empire 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, Germans, Illyrians - behave towards the new god? The question becomes all the more important since, during the third century, these peoples had acquired a position of ever greater preeminence in the army and in the empire. Aurelian himself was an Illyrian, originally from Sirmium, or, according to other reports, from a village in present-day Bulgaria. His mother was said to have been a secret priestess of the sun, which is confirmed by the fact that among the Illyrians and the Thracians, their kindred, there are traces of a cult of this god. In Gorna Schirna, Bulgaria, the consecration of a Thracian couple to the sun and the moon was recently t

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

The original was lost in the sec. XVII, but copies of the century. XV allow us to get a fairly precise idea of this manual. The definitive redaction was completed in 429 or 430, but in many parts situations from the previous centuries are reflected: from the 4th, and, in many cases, also from the end of the 3rd. The miniatures accompanying the manuscript represented the badges and uniforms of the officials, and above all the insignia of the most important sections of the army.

In more than twenty pages, the *Notitia dignitatum* contained almost three hundred insignia of the military detachments of the lower empire, represented in colour. In this ancient heraldic book there are many things that no longer correspond to the conception of classical antiquity. Much space is occupied by the reproductions of symbols of Middle and Northern Europe. We recognize draft animals and ornaments for carts, usual among Asian and Eastern European peoples, or Germanic runes used, according to ancient usage, as symbols and not as phonetic signs. In one of these drawings Wodan appears, in a form that recalls the divine spear bearer of the rock graffiti of BohusHin, eastern Gotland and Val Camonica. An ancient symbol like the elk rune can be found in the insignia of Illyrian or Celtic troops.

Most of the signs refer to the stars, above all to the sun and its course. Are they stars or discs,

that emit rays in every direction. Next to them are drawings in the shape of a wheel, which recall corresponding signs in the graphite 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 we meet the crescent, linked to the solar disk. Concentric circles have a similar meaning: they too are reproduced on the rocks of Scandinavia, among the Celts and the Illyrians. The swastika, also one of the typical symbols of the sun, appears in many variations. We know that a disk that rested on a support in the shape of a rod or a spout was venerated by the Illyrian Pannonians or the 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 the extent.

When did this state of affairs come about, and what was the incentive?

Of course, some of the insignia may have been created or transmitted only in the fourth century. ; of course, over time, many things changed, and the more recent was assimilated to the more ancient, was derived and developed from it. Finally, in the Christian era, probably the meaning of many symbols was lost and misrepresented.

But that rich solar symbolism is documented by monuments dating back to the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century. The arch of Galerius in Salonika gives us some

proof, and so are the recently discovered mosaics of the villa in Piazza Armerina in eastern Sicily.

Some of these symbols already existed in the Cletian and Constantinian god age.

The large number of solar symbols found on the insignia can only be traced back to a unitary, conscious and creative will. For the creator of this innovation, the god was at the center of all thoughts.

An army bearing solar symbols on its insignia could only be that of the sun god. To him it was to belong and obey; he had to fight under his leadership. The meaning is obvious: it can only be Aurelian.

The Celtic, Illyrian, and Germanic sun symbols, which intersected and overlapped in detail in various ways, had passed into military insignia. The emperor himself came from Illyria; Illyrians held high military posts and formed the nucleus of the army. Dalmatian knights and Danubian legionaries belonged to the units that Aurelian led against Palmyra : Pannonians, Mesi and Thracians, closely related to the Illyrians; also men of Celtic stock, from Noricum and Rezia, and Gauls, who were always counted among the valiant pious soldiers. Lastly, Aureliano must be credited with the innovation of having entire tribes of Germans fight in the Roman ranks with their own armaments.

Juthungi, Alemanni and Vandals wore not only their costumes and their weapons, but also their insignia with related religious symbols.

If therefore we admit that the solar symbols were accepted on the insignia of the Roman army by Aurelian, his attitude acquires 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 who was their genius. The growing importance these peoples had assumed in the building and defense of the empire was reflected in it.

The triumph celebrated by Aurelian at the end of his campaigns is narrated in his biography. "There were three wagons," it reads. One had belonged to Odaenathus of Palmyra: it was decorated with silver, gold and gems. The second, which the king of the Persians had given to Aurelian, was finished in the same way. The third had been built for herself by Zenobia, in the hope of seeing Rome from above. In this she was not mistaken, because she entered the city on the chariot, defeated, in the triumphal procession. But there was also a fourth chariot, the narrative continues, which, drawn by four deer, was said to have belonged to the king of the Goths. On it, as many tell, Aurelian reached the Capitoline Hill to sacrifice deer there. In fact he had conquered them together with the chariot and sacrificed them to Jupiter Optimus Maximus."

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

well known connection. In the graphite rocks of Scandinavia and in the finds from the Nordic Bronze Age a stag or a hind is seen pulling the wheel of the sun. Depictions of the kind are also found elsewhere, up to Val Camonica. At Bohuslän the deer is seen beside the unattached chariot. The Gothic chariot drawn by deer belonged to this religious world, as did the man riding the deer on the Germanic and Eastern urns, or the Vandal dioscuroi, whose name bore the origin of divine deer or elk.

Aurelianus does not use the other chariots, but mounts the deer one and offers the deer as victims to Capitoline Jupiter. This does not find correspondence in the Roman cult, but in the Illyrian one. A potsherd from Hallstatt shows the graffiti of a cult chariot, from which a deer is driven as a sacrificed victim. Twice we encounter the same motif on the Strettweg bronze chariot in Styria. Perhaps Aurelianus renewed a patriotic costume when he brought the Gothic deer to the Capitol?

Later historiography, which was unfavorable to him, has handed down to us very little of Aurelianus's personal traits. In contrast to the numerous biographical details of Septimius Severus and Caracalla, Messianus and Elagabalus, almost nothing is known of the great Illyrian at present. One would like to dig deeper into this miserly news; it would already be a lot to have succeeded in grasping the fundamental religious idea of man

Chapter Seven

Constantine the Great

The tortuous road traveled so far by the story of the sun god is nearing its end. Much of what had initially appeared in the foreground lost all significance: Emesa, Syriac or even Arab origin, and the ruling house of Syria no longer mattered.

A renewal under the ancient banners had proved to be impracticable. And yet the political ascent, which 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. Thus the idea of Rome could be reconciled with the Syriac god. The political and religious ideals, whose impassioned reaction had once overthrown Elagabalus, welcomed into their bosom the sun god in his

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

nor of prominence. The succession fell to Neoplatonic philosophy. His thought had taken hold of Helios, adapting it to his own universal system: in doing so, he achieved the surprising result of assigning to the sun god not the first but the second place in the divine hierarchy.

Since then, political and philosophical evolution had followed different paths. What one had raised, 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 post being the office of mediator. As long as politics and philosophy remained divided, the contrast might not appear; but what if philosophy had impressed contemporaries more profoundly than the recent renewal of the state cult; if the neoplatonic innovation had prevailed over the rebirth of the Roman religion?

Both currents influenced the emperor we will now discuss. Both reflected unequivocally on his actions and on what was born of them. In fact the solution, thanks to which the emperor was able to reconcile what was divided and to fuse it into a whole, can rightly be considered his most personal creation.

Aurelian y Constantine

Constantine the Great (306-337) is also one of the Illyrian emperors. His reign marks a historic turning point, because under him the Christian State Church was created. While until then the Illyrian emperors - and this also applies to Diocletian (284-305) and his co-regents - had been the champions of the Roman national idea and of the Roman religion, the Christian state arises under the new emperor. Certainly 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 sovereign had a decisive effect.

In fact, everywhere in Constantine's environment we find images that depict the power of light and the radiant strength of the Most High, and that relate God and the emperor to the sun. In the face of their abundance and the expressions of Constantine, it becomes clear that the ideas of the sun, light and the earth illuminated by it were of particular importance to the emperor up to his last years.

"At the midday hour of the sun Constantine had a vision of the cross, and at the same hour his soul ascended to God. Never, so it was proclaimed, had the splendor of the sun irradiated a greater sovereign. By virtue of the divine commission entrusted to him, the emperor thought he could "eliminate misery and danger from every country illuminated by the sun. The sun and the moon, it is said in one

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

Constantine is compared directly to the rising sun. As Helios spreads his rays over the earth, so the emperor spreads the rays of his noble nature. In the deepest darkness of the night God has made a great light shine in his servant Constantine, it is said elsewhere. He appeared before the fathers assembled at the Council of Nicaea, as a heavenly messenger of God, enveloped in the splendor of his purple cloak, which shone like a ray of light, surrounded by fiery tongues, adorned with glittering gold and precious gems. In battle Constantine's shield and weapons gleamed with gold, his helmet glittered with precious stones.

The image of a solar emperor joins that of the empire. Southwards it extends as far as Blemmia and Ethiopia; from the rising of the sun to the limits of the oecumene, illuminated by the emperor with the rays of his piety. The rising and setting sun thus becomes the direction and the limit. India and Britain

nia, birth and sunset of the diurnal star, they merge.

Even the idea of Christianity, of a unitary humanity, which animates the emperor, receives its imprint from the ideas of sun and light. God lets his light shine upon all: this is the prefiguration of the community and unity of the human race and of 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 forehead.

The monuments confirm and complete the ideas contained in these expressions. In the new city of Constantinople, Constantine had himself reproduced as Helios on a porphyry column. The cross was fixed on the globe which he held in his right hand. The column bore the inscription: Constantine, who shines like the sun "; the gaze of the statue was directed towards the rising star. Even public cults and sacrifices are attested. On a golden medallion from 313 the emperor appears as a twin of the sun god. With his gaze turned upwards, typical of the sun worshiper, and his hand raised in a solar gesture, Constantine was depicted, from 324, on coins and also on the door of his palace. Until 317 he remained on the coined the Constantinians the Sol Invictus; it prote

holds the insignia of the cross. The rising sun also appears later on the dies of the Siscia mint next to the monogram of Christ on the imperial helmet. The star often appears on coins, understood properly as the sun or as a symbol of eternity. For a long time the emperor wore the crown of rays, and as the ruler of the sun is also the ruler of the world, so too Constantine is conceived and represented as such.

The origin of all these representations is unequivocal. Links to the god created by Aurelian, the imperial god Sol Invictus, can be traced without difficulty. Constantine replaced the sun god with faith in Christ, also with the intention of thus creating a bond that united the peoples of the empire. Eusebius was concerned to find the roots of his Christian attitude in Constantine's father. This was with the consent of the emperor and was close enough to the truth. However it was evident that Constantius Chlorus had a particular adoration of the sun. For Constantine himself, alongside the coins, the triumphal arch in Rome offers the necessary testimony. Perhaps there is no other official monument, it has been said, which bears a more consequential and unitary imprint of the cult of the sun. Constantine, before converting to Christianity

¹ Eusebius, bishop of Cesarea (270-339), was also a biographer of Constantine the Great.

to base the idea of his empire on him.

The large medallions of the arch with the images of the sun and the moon demonstrate that the government of Constantine and Licinius (308-324) was based on the cosmocracy of the two stars and therefore, according to the aforementioned words of Constantine, on the regularity and constancy of world events. The sun god first appears as the god of the army, r His bust faces that of the emperor. The latter appears in the gesture of the god, with his right hand raised or open, imperiously facing the enemy during the siege of Verona. Sometimes the heads of the two rulers are surrounded by nimbus, which indicates the solar nature.

Here more than elsewhere Constantine proves to be Aurelian's successor. From the outset it must be remembered that the first Christian emperor was always influenced, at decisive moments, by the example of his pagan predecessor. Of course, if Aurelian is defined as a predecessor of Constantine, the latter should not be considered a mere imitator. We do not intend to diminish in any way the originality and novelty of Constantine's ideal world. Wanting to diminish this man's importance in world history would be a desperate undertaking. Constantine himself felt in bitter antithesis with his predecessor: even this aversion can help us understand his behavior. Aureliano, with his life and his works, pushed him to the greatest decisions. He induced Co

stantino to respond in a Christian sense to the outstanding questions.

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 bestowed the purple on rulers and determined the duration of their rule. The god had also restored the lost Orient to the empire. The emperor saw himself as an instrument of a higher will: Aurelian fulfilled his office as the earthly 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 chose my service as suited to the slow accomplishment of his will, and so I, coming from the British ocean, where the sun is designed by nature to set, and overcoming all perils by a higher power.. I came to the fields of the East, which was imploring from me help that was all the more effective, the more serious were the evils under whose weight it yearned." This is what Constantine writes after defeating Licinius, and continues: "That I am indebted to the great God for all my soul, for my breath, for my most intimate pen Slen, is my unshakeable faith." Eusebius adds

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

Regardless of the Christian meaning that those words assumed, Aureliano too could have said them. Both emperors considered themselves 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 awareness took tangible form in the vision of the cross.

Two reports have come down to us on this vision, both originating in the emperor's intimate circle. According to Lactantius², before the decisive battle at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine was exhorted to place the celestial sign on the shields of his soldiers," and thus begin the battle. The emperor did as he was commanded: placing the letter X across , 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 in itself very understandable. The letter X, placed across, becomes a cross; The upper part is folded into an eyelet and thus becomes a P.³

This interpretation assumes that the sign celestial was the cross. But Constantine is not satisfied

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

³ X and P are the capital letters of the Greek letters chi and rho, initials of Christ's name. [Editor's note].

of the cross: it results in the monogram of Christ. The interpretation is validated by the fact that in the Constantinian and post-Constantinian periods the monogram often appears in the same form of a cross.

Among the coins minted by Constantine, we meet for the first time a monogram of Christ on a silver medallion from Ticinum (Pavia), dated 315. On the front edge of the imperial helmet we see, in a tondo, a normal X with a perpendicularly inserted P. A certain difference from the testimony of Lactantius can also be seen in this; while for Lactantius the cross and monogram are united, they appear in different places in the medallion. The monogram is on the helmet, the cross on the emperor's scepter. This division brings us back to a second version of the miracle of the vision of the cross.

Eusebius narrates, for having told him the emperor himself, of a vision that appeared to Constantine in midday, in Gaul. Unmistakably he hears of a cross, and is promised victory in that sign. In a second nocturnal vision Christ appears next to the cross and summons Constantine to have what he saw reproduced and to make it the banner of his army.

The differences with respect to Lactantius are evident. Not on the eve of a battle does the vision appear, but long before. We speak of two visions, not just one, and the warner, who is not named in Lactantius, is Christ himself. But here too Co

stantino obeys the command. Thus was born the laharum.

Eusebius describes how a beam was fixed transversely to a long rod covered in gold, like a cross. A crown of gold and gems was placed on the top. The crown bore the monogram of Christ, composed of the first two letters of the name, in the same shape as the Ticinum medallion. Later Constantine used to wear this sign on his helmet. Again the cross and the monogram are separate.

According to Eusebius, Constantine receives the order to reproduce the celestial cross, and to this he adds the monogram. This is understandable, because Christ commissioned him in a second night vision. Latin does not say who it was who admonished Constantine in a "dream. But even here the celestial gnus must be reproduced," that is, the cross, and yet the emperor also adds the monogram to it. Is it not clear that Lactantius, in his unnamed admonition, foreshadows the appearance of Christ?

It should be added that the concordance of the sign of the ste with the "celestial trophy of the cross that appears in the sky above the sun" by Eusebius is immediately evident. The vision before the battle at the Milvian Bridge in Lattanzium, and the second vision of Eusebius are parallel to each other. Both have in common the fact of the dream, of the apparition of Christ and of the order imparted by him. Only, in the first case, the cross must be reproduced on the shields, and in the second, transformed into a banner. But here as there the monogram is added

of Christ in one form or another. Next to the labarum is the shield with the Christian symbol.

Not in Eusebius, who only knows the labarum, but in the same expressions of Constantine the same juxtaposition appears. In his letter to the king of the Persians 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 shoulders by bodyguards chosen by the emperor. Instead the words of Constantine: "Always keeping your image before me, I led a victorious army," could rather refer to a shield.

The combination of banner and shield can also be found in the sun god. The reliefs of the Arch of Constantine in Rome show the Sol Invictus and the Victoria three times, reproduced on the military insignia. Under this sign the emperor's army marches against the enemy. It is certain that the form dated back to Aurelian. In fact, it was he who introduced the insignia of the Roman army which refer to the sun and its course, and to the stars in general.

The form of these insignias was by no means limited, as we have already shown, to the traditional types offered by the Orient and antiquity. Aurelian largely accepted the symbolism of the Nordic peoples: Illyrians, Celts and Germans. The important role played by the latter within the army - and it was Aurelian himself who took the decisive step - is expressed in the great esteem in which they are held. Als

bring the Germans into the army Aurelian was a forerunner of Constantine. The latter followed suit, using the Germans for the defense of the empire and trying to favor their religious formation (in the Christian sense this -..olta). Both emperors thus find themselves in the transition between antiquity and the Middle Ages. Except that in the renewer and destroyer of handed down laws and ancient customs" [Ammianus Marcellinus 4], the ties with the Roman world are already failing, while Aurelian had consciously maintained

Constantine's conversion to Christianity seems to mean something totally new in the context of history. As far as Christianity is concerned, the movement had hitherto gone from bottom to top. This time the upheaval begins at the top. The lord of the Roman Empire, the most powerful man of his time, favored its progress. Christ had personally helped him, and Constantine showed his gratitude by giving Christ's followers first equal rights, then pre-eminence over the ancient religions. Here too Aurelian proves to be a forerunner. The raising of the Sol In victus was, in fact, due to his will. Both religious innovations had been accomplished from above, through the personal choice of the sovereign.

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

4 Roman historian (d. around 400 AD), who followed up to 378 the work of Tacitus, which reached the year 96 (the history of the years 353-378 has come down to us).

zi to a changed evaluation of Constantine. Its 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; but paganism still possessed enough creative force to anticipate it even here. The same process took place in Rome which can be observed in its Eastern neighbors during the same period. As in Rome the religion of the sun, so among the Sassanids the purified and renewed Zoroastrianism was Rome and Iran, the two "eyes of the world," together entered a new phase in their religious history.

That paradox does not end there. To the fact that Constantine was determined in his behavior by one of the major opponents of Christianity (since such was Aurelian), another one corresponds, not already political and military, but rather philosophical. Another enemy of Christians, Porphyry, gave him a decisive imprint.

Neoplatonism _

Eusebius' discourse on the thirty-year duration of Constantine's government is embellished with images that represent the power of light and the luminosity of the Almighty. The sight of his divinity is veiled by the splendor of the rays of light; the choirs of an

and saints are illuminated by the great amount of 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 over a dark curtain, which removes the view of the palace of God. In the vestibule, the sun and the moon fulfill the function of torchlights, and bow to the service of the divine will. The all-illuminating sun, it is said later, recognizes God as its only lord and dares not deviate from the path that has been set before it. The moon and the stars behave in the same way: they celebrate God, the giver of all light. Even the Logos 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, earthly image of God and his order, spreads his rays like the sun to the most distant regions of the oecumene. Bearers of the light that emanates from the emperor are the four Caesars: like Helios, Constantine leads the team of four. Finally, after a series of shorter similes, all referring to the same subject, a description of the celestial kingdom is given, where armies of immeasurable light surround the Lord: light that does not come from the sun, but is stronger than its own. flows from an eternal spring. In fact, neither the sun nor the moon illuminates that kingdom, but the Logos, the only begotten son of the Alr

Here is a new note. For the bishop of

Caesarea light possessed the highest and most sublime⁷ essence, and therefore occupied a superior position to that of the sun and the stars. Light was associated with God and the Logos, while the sun was a mere servant of both. For this Eusebius could refer to the biblical story of creation, according to which light was separated from darkness, and only later were the sun and moon created. Furthermore, Sol Invictus was still the supreme divinity of the empire, adversary and competitor of the Christian faith. Eusebius sets things right by making the sun appear as a servant of higher powers and subordinating it to divine light.

In short, while for Aurelian the sun was and remained God, here it becomes image and comparison, sometimes subject and servant of God. These and the sun do not have the same essence, but rather, as we learn from the mouth of Eusebius and sometimes of the same emperor, the sun must bow to God's command. It will be said that this reversal of values is to be attributed to the conversion of Constantine to Christianity. But this overlooks the fact that even before Constantine, in the philosophical thought of the time, God and the sun were separate and the sun was subject to God; that Neoplatonism had already conceived Eusebius' vision in all its details, enclosing it within its philosophical edifice.

We are referring here to the already cited text of Porphyry on the sun. Its decisive effect was that of subordinating the sun to the great god of Neoplatonic imprint.

he became the image of the Most High, mediator between this and the rest of the world, to whom all material care and actions were entrusted. Helios was distinguished from the divine spirit all collected in itself. as primo de miurgo, as an executive body. The drafting of this text is prior to the introduction of Aurelian's god sun king in Rome. However, the Illyrian emperor-soldier did not use the work of the Tyrian scholar at all. It can be deduced that he had never heard of it. It is also difficult to ascertain whether Constantine was familiar with the ideas of Porphyry or was already familiar with the writings of Iamblichus, or had read such works. Instead, there is no doubt that the circle closest to the emperor, i.e. Eusebius and those who were entrusted with the elaboration of the imperial speeches and edicts, as well as the Latin orators of Gaul, who had once spoken before the emperor before cora pagan, were imbued with the doctrines of Porphyry c: of the Neoplaton

By virtue of the decision of the gods, as is said in the speech given before the emperor in 310, at Tre Viri, Constantine was summoned for the salvation of the state. This news was communicated to him, not by means of the imperial courier, but by a celestial messenger mounted in a chariot. The reference to the chariot of the sun is clear, but we are still in the field of rhetorical similarities. Nowhere is it said that Constantine owes the government to his lord and leader (as Aurelian thought). A little later the same speaker

that in the north - he means Britain - the sun does not set. The days are longer, and even the night is not without light. While in the south the sun leans downwards, in the north it passes over men. "Excellent gods," he continues, how is it that previously unknown divine beings always descend from the furthest reaches of the earth and offer themselves up for worship? Thus Mercury from the unexplored sources of the Nile, Free from the Indies, already almost confident of the rising sun, showed himself to the peoples as omnipresent gods. But in truth more sacred than the Mediterranean lands are the places close to the sky, and so now an emperor born closer to the gods is sent to us, 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 orator who spoke before the emperor at the beginning of 313 made an allusion to the sun. In the face of Constantine's campaigns and victories he exclaims: How tireless is your zeal! Where the divine essence (divinitas) works in constant motion! All things have their lull of stillness. Every nine years the earth rests, and sometimes the rivers stop; even the sun rests at night. You instead, Constantine, accumulate only and tirelessly wars after wars, victories after victories. As we see, the emperor surpasses the sun. The speaker does not think of attributing a special rank to the sun. It is superior only to the elementary powers: the earth and the rivers. The divin

without" precedes it in the hierarchy. "

This divine essence also appears as divine spirit." This furthered the victory of Constantine over Maxentius, and put a limit to the furies of you What god, what they will. omnipresent greatness drove you, while your generals not only complained in secret , but were they openly afraid to take that decision which went against the advice of men and the omens of the haruspices, and which would have freed the city? minors designated to this, and who deigns to show himself only to you.

" The deity that is thus called into question has nothing to do with the sun god. The other gods submit to her, whose precise tasks are indicated.

It has been thought that in this passage of the orator a first omen of the future religious turn is expressed. But already the orator who in 311 or at the beginning of 312 speaks before the emperor at Augustodunum knows these ideas, he knows of the divine spirit that governs the whole world; yet he does not speak to an emperor who hints at sympathies for Christianity, but rather this oration describes Constantine's meeting with Apollo: a pagan vision which will later be counterbalanced by the Christian one of the cross.

What is recognized here is quite different: the Neoplatonic conception presented by Porphyry, which also returns among the hermetics, in Iamblichus and in the speech of Giu

plan on King Helios. This Helios is restored to its position of prominence. He has become the image and comparison of God, he occupies second place and acts as a mediator between him and „the other gods, each of which has its own function. These are the minor deities" of the speaker's quote already quoted. And when Mercury and Liberus appear together with the sun-god, when the Indians, from whom Liber comes, are called confidants of the rising sun, "how can one fail to recognize here the concordance with Porfirio ?

The Arch of Constantine

The bas-reliefs of the Arch of Constantine in Rome are filled with images of the sun god and the solar emperor. Once again it is necessary to recall the judgment according to which in no other state monument has the solar religion of a Neoplatonic hue had a more unitary and consequent expression. This judgment goes back to a time when nothing was yet known of Porphyry's writings. Little did they imagine at the time that for Porphyry, and for the Neo-Platonists in general, the god of the sun no longer represented the supreme principle.

Certainly the supreme god, the One, could not appear on the reliefs of the arch like the other gods. God had no 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. In fact he was "image" of the Most High, mediator between him and the rest of the divine and human world. It is therefore no wonder that in the ornamental reliefs, all facing the realm of the visible, Helios rules. And yet there is a place where the supreme god also appears. This is the arch inscription.

Constantine, as it states, 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 the god." Here, too, a first omen of the religious change would be seen. "Instead, it must be said that *divinitas* does not mean deity." It designates the divine nature, and, if contrasted to *humanitas*, the divine nature in antithesis with the human. Constantine won not only by inspiration of the *divinitas* by virtue of the great divine essence, but (of *maximae* magnitude). The divine also by the dexterity of His spirit and *divinitas*. The essence of the human merged in his action. *divinitas*, or, as the speakers say, the divine spirit," determined the spirit of Constantine and made it 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

This is Neoplatonic conception, and nothing else. It is not possible to think that only the inscription of the triumphal arch hints at Christianity, while it represents them

Stations of the bow depict a large number of gods and also the sun god. "Sol and Luna, in these reliefs, do not limit themselves to acting as an external frame for the story, but enclose nature and human life in the system of cosmic laws that emanate from them" [H. P. L'Orange]. The other gods - Apollo, Diana, Hercules Silvanus and Mercury, but also Oceanus, Earth, Lucifer and Hesperus - are subordinated to the cosmic powers, above all to the sun. It is the same picture that we find in Porfirio.

This picture was also present to the speakers with temporary. ^{Divine Essence} ^{era} ^{the forms in which} ^{a supreme god presented himself to men.} This, too, revealed itself as a Neoplatonic concept, and was already expressed in the oratories at a time when no Christian trait had yet appeared in the figure of the emperor.

Thus we arrive at a unitary result. The same cannot be said of the emperor's Christian ideas. Constantine, who lived at the limit of two ages, is influenced by the older one, even when he appears as a forerunner of the new one. It could be shown how strong the influence of the sun god lasted in the Christian years of the emperor, how everywhere phrases and comparisons referring to the sun and its divine light came to light. And, strange enough, not only does the sun remain with its splendor and in its subordination to the Most High, but also the juxtaposition of "instinctus divinitatis" and mentis magni

tudo." Without going too subtle, Eusebius also made use of these concepts several times, translating into Christian terms a thought that originally belonged to Neoplatonism.

Here we must limit ourselves to mentioning that even in the edicts of Milan, which granted freedom of worship to Christianity, or in the famous speech of Constantine, which interpreted Virgil's fourth eclogue in a Christian sense, we encounter several Neo-Platonist elements. For the emperor there could be no insurmountable contrast between Neoplatonic and Christian doctrine. Porphyry was a declared enemy of the Christians.

But the Neo-Platonists and their Christian opponents were brother enemies, with all the exasperation and startling analogies typical of such cases. Porphyry, as an apologist for paganism, believed himself firmly anchored in the ground of the ancient doctrine of the gods; he thought he had only given it a philosophical basis, and refined it. But the acumen he displayed, the treasures of his science and his philological ability had led to an unexpected result. Before the sun god the other gods had passed into the background and had been devalued. And the sun god himself, this extreme great creation of late paganism, had had to give up his place to the One, the Invisible, the Spirit - in other words, to God. Without meaning to, Porphyry had become the pioneer of a new world.

Appendix

The study of religion in late antiquity

The religions of late antiquity, as an independent object of research, are a discovery of our century. Pioneers like R. Reitzenstein, F. Cumont and J. Bidez were able to achieve results that will never lose their importance. However, the study of late ancient religions did not lead to the recognition of it as an autonomous scientific discipline. It has no teaching posts, and at best has given its name to an academic commission. Thus a study begun so promisingly at the dawn of our century seems to be more of an aspiration than a reality. There are many reasons for this fact, even if, in detail, they appear to be of different kinds.

First of all, the sheer breadth of the subject. This means that the documents of late ancient religions are rarely presented in a truly satisfactory form. Editions such as that of Eusebius' ecclesiastical history (Ed. Schwartz), of the Thustrian zara fragments (J. Bidez and F. Cumont), of the hermetic treatises (A.-J. Festugière and AD Nock) rightly have a classical importance but remained isolated. The edition edited by J. Bidez of the

Emperor Julian, could not be completed so far. The examination of the romance literature of late antiquity, of great importance for religious history, was resumed in the footsteps of E. Rohdes, only in recent times (K. Kerényi; F. Zimmermann).

It should be added that the history of late ancient religions can no longer be written with the usual equipment of the classicist. Knowledge of Greek and Latin, although necessary, is not enough by itself. The examination of Manichaean texts found in Central Asia was initiated by FWK Mueller, C. Salemann and FC Andreas, and continued by the latter's disciples. Even just these texts require an uncommon knowledge of oriental languages. Mani himself wrote in the literary Syrian language, and occasionally also in Middle Persian; translations into Parthian and Sogdian, Old Turkish, and Chinese soon followed. The first complete collection of Mani's writings is in the Co. Also in the Coptic translation a vast collection of Gnostic writings has been preserved, extreme products of the inexhaustible land of Egypt. To these are added the writings of the Mandaeans, written in a particular Eastern Aramaic dialect (M. Lidzbarski), and, even more important, the rich literature in Arabic translation. It includes Plato and Aristotle, but also many Neo-Platonist writings, and has recently returned to us a lost work of late antique philosophy. The Arab culture of the pre-Islamic centuries represents a discovery of the last decades. North and So

studied by E. Littmann, N. Rhodokanakis, by the two Ryckmans and by others, allow us to place Muhammad's preaching, from the point of view of religious history, in the environment that belongs to it.

One day the author of the *Dyclinö* and *Fall of the Roman Empirö*, Gibbon, was able to dare to draw an overall picture of late antiquity. Today no one can boast of possessing the philological premises that are necessary even for the history of late ancient religions. So one has to be content with specialized jobs - some certainly of a high standard. Not even in this limited field (from Gibbon's point of view) is it difficult to carry out an overall work.

The particular position of Christianity remains. Certainly no one will ever be able to doubt the profound link of its origins with late ancient religiosity. But few will be willing to draw the consequences to the fullest. To such extreme results is always opposed the claim to be the true religion. Faced with this, a lofty and demanding legacy of European spiritual history was renounced, which is also a commitment: that of facing even forms of ancient tradition, which have become dear to our hearts, with a critical mind and objectivity.

Instead, epigraphy, papyrology and archeology lead almost every year to new, surprising results: for example, the civilizations of ancient Chwarezm or the ostraka of the ancient Parthians of Nisa, both sco

part of Soviet scientists. Recently, a reliable edition of Jenissein's ancient Turkish writings, with their rich religious content (SE Malow), has come out for the first time, and an overall representation of the ancient civilization and religion of southern Siberia has been attempted (A. Kiselew). Excavations at Hatra have shed light on this very ancient Arab state, its temples and its rich world of gods. We have seen so that in Mesopotamia of the second or third century. d. C. a Allah and his companion Allah were worshiped. The language is still Aramaic: only the names of the gods, founders and kings show, in the inscriptions, that they are Arabs.

In the present work we have examined only one particular aspect; we have chosen it so as to illuminate the contrast between the paganism of late antiquity and the nascent 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 the chronological events as such; but it goes further, turning its attention to parallel phenomena and trying to grasp peoples and persons according to their individual characteristics. It is concerned with satisfying, for its part, the need mentioned above.

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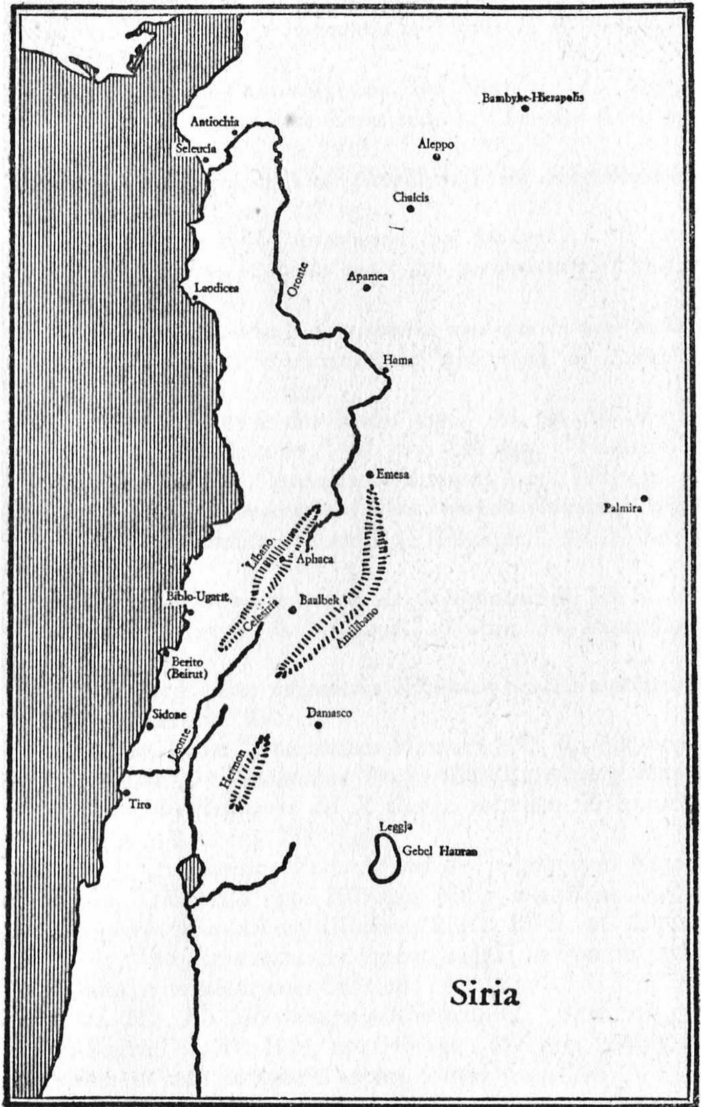
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