FRANZ ALTHEIM'S "EURASIAN PERSPECTIVE"

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The non-specialist Italian reader did not become aware of part of the production of Franz Altheim (1898-1976) - Latinist, historian of the ancient world, archaeologist - until the beginning of the 1960s, when Der unbesiegte Gott (1) and Gesicht vom Abend und Morgen: Von der Antike zum Mittelalter (2) have been translated. In fact, very little had appeared in Italy in previous years about this scholar. And yet, Franz Altheim, pupil of Walter F. Otto and companion of Leo Frobenius and Károly (Karl) Kerényi, was one of the "first and most authoritative interpreters of the rock inscriptions of Val Camonica, datable between the 4th and the 1st century BC, but testifying to the presence of an older Indo-European culture" (3),

Julius Evola, who chronicled Italien und die dorische Wanderung in a timely and "enthusiastic" manner (8), became interested in Altheim from the 1940s, also recommending the author for his "Extremely valuable and organic" (9) and made him collaborate with the "Diorama Filosofico", the cultural page of the Cremona newspaper Il Regime Fascista (10). Evola himself, who had met the author of Italien und die dorische Wanderung when the latter was collaborating with the Deutsches Ahnenerbe - probably in Halle, where one of his lectures "certainly met with the immediate sympathy of the prof. Altheim" (11) - in the mid-1950s he again published a work by the

Returning to the study of the carvings in the Camonica valley, it should be noted that Altheim had found formal similarities in them with the rock art of Bohuslän, in southern Sweden, which had been the subject of in 1936 of a study by a mission of the Deutsches Ahnenerbe (15) directed by Herman Wirth (1885-1981). Commenting on certain passages of Italian und Rom translated by himself, Adriano Romualdi (1940-1973) summarizes Altheim's thesis in these terms: "Altheim wishes to underline the stylistic link which binds the North and the South along an axis which marks the direction of the urn fields. It is an axis which links the Germanic world and the Latin world on the one hand, but which, on the other hand, is linked to Doric Greece" (16).

But the graffiti of Val Camonica refer to broader horizons: the figure of the horse-drawn chariot with four wheels and one or more levels is a product of what Altheim calls "the Eurasian knightly world" (17), since a similar chariot type is also attested in Crimea and Achaemenid Persia. Other elements that appear in Italy at the same time as the equestrian technique also come from the same cultural sphere, such as "rattles and bronze plaques, pendants and bells (whose origin, through the Halstatt civilization , goes back to the shamanism of the knightly tribes of Eurasia) (...) Even the myth of the wolf-children, embodied in Rome by Romulus and Remus, ultimately derives from the shamanic world" (18).

It is obvious that Altheim's historical research was directed towards a "broadening of horizons in the Eurasian perspective" (19), an objective which he explicitly stated in an essay in 1939: "We must get used to thinking not a culture, but to cultures, empires and large spaces" (20). On the other hand, if the investigation of European protohistory already refers us to a broader geographical scenario, the need to refer to the Eurasian dimension becomes even more evident if we want to consider the historical processes that marked the transition from ancient age to medieval age. Thus, Altheim, like other researchers, such as the Hungarian András (Andreas) Alföldi (1895-1991), invites us to "look beyond the borders of empire, towards those nomadic tribes of non-Germanic origin - Sarmatians, Huns, Slavs - who contributed directly or indirectly to changing the way of life in Europe after the third century of our era" (21). The ancient world indeed been invested by a single great movement which “started from the nomadic horsemen of the Euro-Asian steppes, embraced at the same time empires of ancient civilization such as Siam and China and dragged behind it the Germans of the East; it invaded the Arabian Peninsula and took its final form in North Africa, until finally reaching the Roman Empire" (22). (21). The ancient world was indeed invaded by a single great movement which "started from the nomadic horsemen of the Euro-Asian steppes, embraced at the same time empires of ancient civilization such as Siam and China and dragged behind it the Germans of the East; it invaded the Arabian Peninsula and took its final form in North Africa, eventually reaching the Roman Empire" (22). (21). The ancient world was indeed invaded by a single great movement which "started from the nomadic horsemen of the Euro-Asian steppes, embraced at the same time empires of ancient civilization such as Siam and China and dragged behind it the Germans of the East; it invaded the Arabian Peninsula and took its final form in North Africa, eventually reaching the Roman Empire" (22).

Altheim's studies of the Huns (23) refer to this period of crisis, in which "the face of evening and morning" appears. After the publication of Hunnische Runen, in which the runic inscriptions of pure gold objects found in 1791 in the Hungarian locality of Nagyszentmiklós (today Sânnicolau Mare, in Romania, south of the course of Maros and north of Viminacium) are identified as Huns, the book Attila und die Hunnen was born.

Explicitly recalling the historiographic perspective of Polybius, which embraces the ecumene politically unified by Rome - "all the space comprised between the pillars of Hercules and the gates of India or the steppes of Central Asia" (24) - , Altheim signals to today's historiography the need to take into account the substantial unity of the Eurasian continent, paradoxically highlighted by the recent events of the Second World War. The latter in fact, "with its fronts in Europe, Africa, the Pacific and Asia, has singularly demonstrated to all the unity without barriers of everything in this space which is part of historical development" (25). Thus the Huns, protagonists of a Trans-Eurasian cavalcade that started from the shores of Lake Baikal to end in the Catalaunian Fields, if they conditioned the destiny of the Middle Kingdom in Asia for centuries, they opened the way in Europe to invasions and settlement of a whole series of related peoples: Avars, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Khazars, Cumans, Pechenegs. "The crowning achievement was the advance of the Mongols. The history of the Huns prefigures in an exemplary manner the destinies of the other Turkic peoples" (26). Anyway, the Hunnic Volkerwanderung triggered a whole chain of historical events: "the beginning of the invasions, the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the attempt to merge the peoples of horsemen and newly arrived Germans into a political and cultural unity,

In the figure of Attila, the leader of Asian origin who founded an empire in Europe, echoes that of Alexander the Great, the descendant of Achilles who carried Greek civilization to the Indus, the Syr -Darya, Aswan and the Gulf of Aden, ushering in a new phase in the history of Eurasia.

The monograph on Alexander (28) begins thus: "Alexander and Asia represent, in universal history, two poles which, in appearance, have nothing in common. (...) However, Alexander is inconceivable without "Asia. The man of action needed a field of activity; matter was necessary for the man who was born to shape. The most important thing is that Asia has never forgotten the conqueror who seized her with a passionate gesture: (...) the seed he sowed in the fertile soil of this continent was to live on" (29). Altheim's book is therefore not limited to recalling the campaign of conquest of the Macedonian sovereign, but above all outlines the story of a spiritual heritage transmitted to the East. Because "the Asiatic Hellenism not only signifies a new, more important stage in the triumphal march of Hellenism: it also signifies the Hellenization of the peoples of Central Asia. (...) Until the Middle Ages, Greek writing and forms were constituent elements of the Asian civilizations that were born on such fertile soil. No outside intervention has ever penetrated so deeply into the life of the East" (30).

Altheim does not neglect the geopolitical point of view either, presenting Alexander's empire as an attempt to link the countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean with those bordering the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean: "Like the later caliphs, Alexander was faced with the need to unite a South European maritime empire with a South Asian maritime empire by means of a land bridge: Iraq" (31).

While the book on Attila and the one on Alexander have never been translated into Italy, Der unbesiegte Gott has had two different Italian editions to date. The first, that of Feltrinelli, was preceded by a review of the German edition written by Evola for "Roma" in 1957, during a period of intense contact between the two scholars (32). Evola sees in Altheim's study (published the same year in the encyclopaedic series of the Hamburg publisher Rowohlt) the demonstration of the fact that "the irruption of a foreign element in Rome", in this case the gradual penetration of a solar cult "already widespread among the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean, especially in Syria", does not mean that Rome " after being purged of its most fallacious and equivocal traits, the cult born among the nomadic peoples of Arabia became a Roman state cult, and the Sun god "fused with the most characteristic god of pure Roman tradition, Capitoline Jupiter" (33). This fact, which René Guénon could have defined in terms of "a providential intervention from the East" in favor of Rome, could occur because the sun worship of late Roman antiquity represented the re-emergence of a common primordial heritage. after being purged of its most fallacious and equivocal traits, the cult born among the nomadic peoples of Arabia became a Roman state cult, and the Sun god "fused with the most characteristic god of pure Roman tradition, Capitoline Jupiter" (33). This fact, which René Guénon could have defined in terms of "a providential intervention from the East" in favor of Rome, could occur because the sun worship of late Roman antiquity represented the re-emergence of a common primordial heritage.

But the solar theology elaborated by the neo-Platonists is not unrelated, according to Altheim, with Islamic monotheism. "Muhammad's message, he writes, was in fact centered on the concept of unity and ruled out that the deity could have a 'companion', thus following in the footsteps of his Neoplatonic and Monophysite antecedents and colleagues. The religious impetus of the Prophet thus succeeded in bringing out with increased force what others before him had felt and longed for (34).

Notes:

1) F. Altheim, Der unbesiegte Gott, Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1957. Première éd. it .: Il dio invitto, Feltrinelli, Milan 1960. Second edition: Deus invictus. Religions and the end of the ancient world, Introduction by Giovanni Casadio, Afterword by Luciano Albanese, Edizioni Mediterranee, Rome 2007.

2) F. Altheim, Face of the evening and morning. From Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Fischer Library, Frankfurt am Main – Hamburg 1955. Ed. it.: Dall'Antichità al Medioevo. Il volto della sera e del mattino, Sansoni, Firenze 1961.

3) E. Montanari, Introduction to the History of Roman Religion, Settimo Sigillo, Rome 1996, p. 15. (Chez le même éditeur: F. Altheim, Romanzo e decadenza, Settimo Sigillo, Rome 1995).

4) F. Altheim - E. Trautmann, From the origin of the runes, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1939.

5) F. Altheim - E. Trautmann, Italy and the Doric Migration, Pantheon, Amsterdam 1940.

6) F. Altheim, Italy and Rome (réédition de: Italy and the Doric Migration de 1940), 2 full., Pantheon, Amsterdam-Leipzig 1941; 2ème ed. 1943; 3ème ed. 1944.

7) F. Altheim, History of the Latin Language, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1951.

8) A. Branwen, Ultima Thule. Julius Evola and Herman Wirth, Editions under the banner of Veltro, Parma 2007, p. 89.

9) J. Evola, review of: Italien und die dorische Wanderung, “Bibliografia Fascista”, XVI, 2, February 1941; available today in: J. Evola, Esplorazioni e disamine. The writings of "Bibliography Fascist", vol. II, Edizioni all'insegna del Veltro, Parma 1995, p. 108. Besides this review, another had already been published the previous year: J. Evola, Ricerche sulle origini. The "Doric" migration in Italy, "Il Regime Fascista", XV, November 1, 1940, p. 3; available today in: J. Evola, Il “mistero hyperboreo”. Writings on the Indo-Europeans 1934-1970, Fondazione Julius Evola, Rome 2002, pp. 53-55.

10) F. Altheim, On the Roman conception of the divine, “The Fascist Regime”, July 26, 1942.

11) G. Casadio, Franz Altheim: from the history of Rome to universal history, introduction to F. Altheim, Deus invictus, cit., P. 28.

12) Par exemple: F. Altheim, Cesare, “Monarchia”, 1, April 1956; texte disponible aujourd'hui in: J. Evola - F. Altheim, The religion of Caesar, “Quaderni del Veltro”, Editions of Ar, Padua 1977.

13) "(...) of this major work (by Altheim), a translation is being prepared by the publisher Bocca" (J. Evola, "Italia" volle dire la "terra dei tori"?, "Roma" , 17 June 1955; article readable today in: J. Evola, I testi del Roma, Edizioni di Ar, Padua 2008, pp. 238-239).

14) F. Altheim, Storia della religione romana, Settimo Sigillo, Roma 1996 (German ed.: Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1956). The edition mentioned by Evola in “Bibliografia Fascista” is the one in three volumes, published in Berlin between 1931 and 1933; the edition being translated in 1955 was probably the one in two volumes, published in Baden-Baden between 1951 and 1953.

15) On the activities of the Ahnenerbe, see C. Mutti, The SS in Tibet, Effepi, Genoa 2011, pp. 5-9. With regard more particularly to the support provided by the Ahnenerbe to Altheim's research, cf. V. Losemann, The "Dioscuri": Franz Altheim and Karl Kerényi. Stages of a friendship, in: AA. VV., Károly Kerényi: encounter with the divine, edited by L. Arcella, Settimo Sigillo, Rome 1999, pp. 17-28. On Altheim's relations with the Ahnenerbe, several pages exist in an ad hoc monograph, of a rather journalistic nature, initially intended for a North American audience: H. Pringle, Il piano occulto. The secret sect of the SS and the search for the Aryan race, Lindau, Turin 2007.

16) A. Romualdi, Franz Altheim and the origins of Rome, in: The Indo-Europeans. Origins and migrations, Ar Editions, Padua 2004, p. 165.

17) F. Altheim, Storia della religione romana, cit., p. 30

18) F. Altheim, Storia della religione romana, cit., pp. 29-30.

19) G. Casadio, Franz Altheim: from the history of Rome to universal history, cit., P. 15.

20) F. Altheim, The Soldier Emperors, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1939, p. 12.

21) A. Momigliano, Christianity and the decline of the Roman Empire, introduction to: AA. VV., The conflict between paganism and Christianity in the fourth century, Einaudi, Turin 1968, p. 8.

22) F. Altheim, From Antiquity to the Middle Ages. The face of the evening and of the morning, cit., P. 10.

23) F. Altheim, Hun runes, Niemeyer, Halle 1948. Attila and the Huns, publishing house for art and science, Baden-Baden 1951. F. Altheim - R. Stiehl, The first appearance of the Huns. The Age of the Isaiah Scroll. New document from Dura-Europos, publishing house for art and science, Baden-Baden 1953. F. Altheim - HW Haussig, The Huns in Eastern Europe, publishing house for art and science, Baden-Baden 1958. F. Altheim et alii, history of the Huns , 5 full., De Gruyter, Berlin 1959-1962.

24) F. Altheim, Attila and the Huns, Payot, Paris 1952, p. 5.

25) F. Altheim, Attila et les Huns, cit., p. 6.

26) F. Altheim, Attila et les Huns, cit., p. 225

27) F. Altheim, Attila et les Huns, cit., p. 6.

28) F. Altheim, Alexander and Asia. History of a spiritual legacy, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1953.

29) F. Altheim, Alexander and Asia. History of a spiritual legacy, Payot, Paris 1954, p. 5.

30) F. Altheim, Alexander and Asia. History of a Spiritual Legacy, cit., p. 9.

31) F. Altheim, Alexander and Asia. History of a Spiritual Legacy, cit., p. 157.

32) Between 1954 and 1958, Evola sent eighteen letters to Altheim, now kept in private archives.

33) J. Evola, New explorations of Roman times. The unconquered God, “Rome”, June 24, 1957; disponible aujourd'hui in: J. Evola, I testi del Roma, cit., pp. 317-319.

34) F. Altheim, God invincible. Le religioni e la fine del mondo antico, cit., pp. 115-116.

Source

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