
Recherches Mithriaques. Quarante ans de questions et d'investigations by
Robert Turcan

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Robert Turcan was a distinguished scholar of ancient Greco-Roman religions, whose researches have focused particularly on the so-called 'mystery' cults and among these on Mithraism. In reviewing this collection of Turcan's articles for *Aestimatio*, there is an obvious threshold question to be posed: Of what conceivable interest could a collection of articles on this topic be to scholars of the history of science in antiquity?

A first answer would be that Mithraism, in its rich archaeological remains, exhibits a great deal of star-lore. In particular, it has been argued, by the present reviewer among others, that the cult's principal icon, which in a very complicated and detailed scene shows the god Mithras sacrificing a bull, served *inter alia* as a map of the constellations. The constellations were those known to, and catalogued by, Greek astronomers.

Secondly and more cogently, a contemporaneous source external to the cult, namely, the philosopher Porphyry, stated that the Mithraic meeting place, the *mithraeum* as we now call it, was designed as 'an image of the cosmos' (εἰκόνα κόσμου) and that its contents 'by their proportionate arrangement' served as 'symbols of the elements (στοιχεῖα) and climates (κλίματα) of the cosmos' [*De antro nympharum* c. 6].¹ There is good evidence, both from further remarks in Porphyry's essay and from excavated *mithraea*, that the cosmos or universe modeled by the *mithraeum* was that conceptualized by Hellenistic astronomers.²

¹ The 'elements' of the cosmos are the stars, constellations, signs of the zodiac, and planets; the 'climates' are parallel zones of celestial latitude [see Beck 2014; 2016, 29–31].

² On the *mithraeum* as 'cosmic model' see, most recently, Beck 2014, 2016, and 2018.

None of this puts the Mithraists on the cutting edge of Hellenistic ‘science’. They were consumers of contemporary cosmology, not trailblazers. The sole postulated exception proved something of a will-o’-the-wisp. David Ulansey in *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries* [Ulansey 1989] argued that the phenomenon of the precession of the equinoxes, discovered by Hipparchus, was encoded in Mithraism with Mithras, identified with the constellation Perseus, as the mover of this cyclical phenomenon. Turcan touched on Ulansey’s hypothesis in a very short article of 1990 that is in this collection, ‘Mithra et l’astronomie’ [179–181], but one cannot say that he took a prominent part in the debate. It is, I think, fair to say that Ulansey’s theory has won few converts in the study of Mithraism and none in the history of astronomy.³

If not astronomy, then what of astrology? May one say that Mithraism’s concern with astrology somehow puts the cultists in the proto-scientific camp? To say so begs the huge question of astrology as a foster mother, as it were, of scientific astronomy. But let that be.

Turcan claimed to discuss astrology in Mithraism in an article of 1999 with the title ‘Hiérarchie sacerdotale et astrologie dans les mystères de Mithra’ [279–302]. Astrology as proto-science, be it noted, plays no part in Turcan’s argument one way or the other. In fact, ‘astrology’ is a mischaracterization of the topic here, unless it is intended in the rather weak sense of lore and learning about the stars. Of astrology in the technical sense of the art of prediction from the stars, together with the theoretical basis on which outcomes (*apotelesmata*) were predicted, there was actually rather little in Mithraism. I have summarized what there was in a contribution [Beck 2015, 290–292] to a major conference on the Star of Bethlehem (University of Groningen, 2014).

The point at issue in Turcan’s article of 1999 is the logic behind the pairing of each of Mithraism’s seven grades of initiation with one of the seven planets. The order in which one ascended the Mithraic grades does not correspond to any of the planetary orders in common use in antiquity: the order of distance outwards from Earth, the order of the days of the planetary week, or the order usually given in horoscopes. Turcan was right to point out that the evidence for the ‘tutelary’ system of planets and grades is quite limited. Indeed,

³ On the *status quaestionis*, see Beck 2004, 235–249.

when Turcan was writing, it seemed to be restricted to Rome and Ostia in the middle of the third century AD. I have, however, argued that the correlation of grades with planets is implicit in the scenes on the Mainz ritual vessel, a recent find when Turcan was writing [Beck 2000, 154 ff. = Beck 2004, 64 ff.]. In his article, Turcan was sceptical of the overly systematized analysis of my monograph *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* [Beck 1988], although I would plead that he has mistaken my *structural* analysis for a *historical* account of the development of Mithraic iconography.

In 2007, Turcan reviewed my second monograph on Mithraism, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* [Beck 2006] at some length [Turcan 2007, 367–376]. The review is unremittingly negative. It is not my intention here to rebut Turcan's critique point by point.⁴ Rather, I shall conclude with some observations on what it is that separates our two approaches so radically. It is not that we have different views on the development of science in antiquity—though it is true we do—but *that we have different views on the application of science, indeed on the applicability of science, to the historical phenomena that we both study.*

Science, in Turcan's view of the academy and its disciplines, has no part to play in the study of historical religions. This applies to the social as well as to the physical and mathematical sciences. The insights and methods of anthropology, on which my book greatly relied, are dismissed as irrelevant; likewise, among the sciences, any concern with *cognition*, the way humans *apprehend* religious symbol systems.⁵

In the conclusion of his review, Turcan states:

⁴ Subsequent to Turcan's review of my book, I have further developed my theory that the *mithraeum* was indeed designed as a model of the cosmos and that this is demonstrably so in a number of *mithraea* in west central Italy (Campania, Latium, including the city of Rome and its port, Ostia, and southern Etruria) in the second and third centuries AD [Beck 2016]. Again, I make the case that these *mithraea* represent a stream of Mithraism known to Porphyry, directly or through intermediaries. It scarcely needs mentioning that Porphyry himself never set foot in a *mithraeum* [Beck 2016, 22].

⁵ On the matter of constellation symbols in the tauroctony, the mathematical sciences seemed relevant, so I consulted statisticians: see Beck 2004, 251–265.

L'histoire des religions n'est pas une 'science' et n'a rien d'intemporel. Elle s'attache plus modestement à pénétrer le sens des données datables, en leur temps (si possible) et dans leur contexte *historique*. [Turcan 2007, 376]

Certainly, not *all* 'histoire des religions' is science-based, but some of it is; and Turcan's inquiries,⁶ impressive though they undoubtedly are, are the poorer for his willful denial of the fact.

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⁶ Early in his career, Turcan composed *Mithras Platonicus: Recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra* [1975]. The downside of this ground-breaking piece of research was that Turcan could never allow there to be authenticity in the literary testimonials to the Mysteries of Mithras. Necessarily, the philosophers had turned Mithraism into something it was not.

blage and publication of issue 2 of volume 18, although it is nominally part of the volume for 2014.)

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