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# Did the Mithraists Inhale? - A Technique for Theurgic Ascent in the Mithras Liturgy, the Chaldaean Oracles, and some Mithraic Frescoes

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# Did the Mithraists Inhale? A Technique for Theurgic Ascent in the Mithras Liturgy, the Chaldaean Oracles, and some Mithraic Frescoes

The so-called Mithras Liturgy, claimed Franz Cumont, is "neither Mithraic, nor a liturgy."<sup>1</sup> Cumont and the scholars, such as Turcan, who followed him denied that this bizarre text from the Great Paris Magical Papyrus had anything to do with Mithraism, much less that it was, as Albrecht Dieterich had claimed in his 1903 study, the liturgical text from an actual Mithraic ritual. Extrapolating the theology of Mithraism in the Roman Empire from Persian parallels of questionable date and relevance, Cumont and his followers reconstructed a picture of Mithraism firmly rooted in the Persian traditions of the worship of Mithra rather than in the murky, magical traditions of the contemporary "Platonic Underworld" (as Dillon has called it), where Neoplatonic philosophical ideas mingled with magical ritual techniques to create such hybrids as the Chaldaean Oracles.<sup>2</sup> Recent analyses of the Mithraic monuments, however, by scholars such as Beck, Gordon, and Hinnells, have shown increasing evidence for the convergence of Neoplatonic ideas with Mithraism as it was practiced in Mithraea throughout the Roman Empire, and this evidence presents a picture of Mithraism as a religious movement that incorporated many of the same ideas and motifs found in other contemporary movements influenced by Platonic thought.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"La Mithrasliturgie n'est pas une liturgie et n'est pas mithraïque," in A. Harnack, *Die Mission u. Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten II* (Leipzig, 1924) p. 941. I would like to thank Hans Dieter Betz, Sarah Johnston, Fritz Graf, Chris Faraone, Matthew Dickie, and the other members of the Mithras Liturgy Seminar for their critiques on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank John Finamore, who organized the APA panel at which this paper was presented, and the other panelists, John Dillon and Peter Struck, for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup>Dillon, John, *The Middle Platonists*, Duckworth: London, 1977, p. 384. Turcan, for example, would dismiss the testimony of Neoplatonists such as Porphyry and Origen as merely Neoplatonic reinterpretations of Mithraism rather than reflections of any actual Mithraic practices. (Turcan, Robert, *Mithras Platonicus: Recherches sur l'Hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*, E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1975.) Turcan's arguments are based on the idea, which goes back to Cumont, that, if a feature does not have sufficient Persian parallels, it cannot be Mithraic. However, as Beck has pointed out, "Turcan, while demonstrating amply that the various testimonies are consistent with Neoplatonism, does not prove that they are also inconsistent with the Mysteries. He thus fails to counter the perfectly plausible argument that in much of the respective cosmologies, anthropologies and soteriologies Neopythagoreanism and Neoplatonism on the one side and the Mysteries of Mithras on the other converged." (Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*, E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1988, p. 81.)

<sup>3</sup>Cp. Beck, Roger, "Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac I," *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, vol.I.1 (1976), pp. 1-19; *ibid.*, "Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac: II," *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, vol.II.2 (1977), pp. 87-147; *ibid.*, "Mithraism since Franz Cumont," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Part II: Religion, Volume 17.4, Walter de Gruyter, New York, 1984, pp. 2002-2115; *ibid.*, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*, E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1988; Gordon, R.L., "Franz Cumont and the doctrines of Mithraism," in *Mithraic*

(continued...)

This new evidence calls for a re-evaluation of the status of the Mithras Liturgy with regard to the Mysteries of Mithras, as well as a re-evaluation of the connections between the Neoplatonic currents and Mithraism. In my paper, I would like to sketch the connections between three apparently very different points - the section of a fourth century A.D. Greco-Egyptian magical papyrus known as the Mithras Liturgy; the iconography of several Mithraic monuments in Italy dating to the second and third centuries A.D.;<sup>4</sup> and the theurgy of the Chaldaean Oracles, a collection of enigmatic verses from the late second century A.D., of which only fragments remain in quotations by Neoplatonic philosophers. The motif of the ascent of the soul on the rays of the sun provides a link between all three points, but the composer of the Mithras Liturgy made use of other motifs, both from the rituals of the Mithraic Mysteries and from the theurgy of the Chaldaean Oracles. Not only do several features of the Mithras Liturgy show close parallels with the evidence remaining for the practices of Mithraic cult, as recent analyses by Beck indicate, but the Mithras Liturgy has strong parallels with the ritual practices, cosmology, and theology of the Chaldaean Oracles. In his analysis of the symbolism of the zodiac on the ceiling of the Ponza Mithraeum, Beck explicitly makes a connection between a feature of the Mithras Liturgy and Mithraism as it is revealed by the Mithraic monuments. In the Mithras Liturgy, the epiphany of the greatest god, Helios Mithras, is preceded by the appearance of seven asp-faced Fates and seven bull-faced Pole Lords, representing the stars in the constellations of Ursa Minor and Major respectively. (ll. 662-678) The appearance of the deity who follows corresponds with that of Mithras in the monuments: "Youthful, golden-haired, with a white tunic and a golden crown and trousers, and holding in his right hand a golden shoulder of a young bull."<sup>5</sup> Although he is lacking his Persian cap, the Persian trousers are sufficient to identify this entity as Mithras. The shoulder of a bull that he carries is explained as the Bear that makes the heavens turn round.<sup>6</sup> The constellation of the Ursa Major, which the Egyptians represented as a bull's shoulder,<sup>7</sup> turns the celestial pole, and thus makes the whole universe revolve. Beck's analysis of the zodiac in the Ponza Mithraeum shows that

<sup>3</sup>(...continued)

*Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, John R. Hinnells, ed., Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1975, pp. 215-248; *ibid.*, "Reality, evocation, and boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras," *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, vol. III (1980), pp. 19-99; *ibid.*, "The sacred geography of a *mithraeum*: the example of Sette Sfere," *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, vol. I.2 (1976), pp. 119-165; Gordon, R. L. and Hinnells, John R., "Some New Photographs of Well-Known Mithraic Monuments," *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, vol. II.2 (1978) pp. 213-219.

<sup>4</sup>The Barberini fresco (CIMRM 390) has been dated to 220-250 A.D.; the Ponza Mithraeum to slightly after 212; the Sette Sfere Mithraeum (CIMRM 242) dates in the Antonine period, around 160-180; and the Felicissimus Mithraeum (CIMRM 299) dates to the second half of the third century.

<sup>5</sup>ἑωτέρων, χρυσοκόμαν, ἐν χιτῶνι λευκῇ καὶ χρυσῷ σετφάνῳ ἀναξυρίσι, κατέχοντα τῇ δεξιᾷ χειρὶ μῶσχου ὄμιον χρύσειον. (697-700) For my citations from the Mithras Liturgy, I will rely on the text in Preisendanz, Karl, and A. Henrichs, eds., *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2nd. ed., 2 vols. Teubner: Stuttgart, 1973-4. and the translations by Marvin Meyer in Betz, Hans Dieter, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1986.

<sup>6</sup>μῶσχου ὄμιον χρύσειον, ὃς ἐστὶν Ἄρκτος ἢ κινούσα καὶ ἀντιστρέφουσα τὸν οὐρανόν. A golden shoulder of a young bull: This is the Bear which moves and turns heaven around. (700)

<sup>7</sup>cp. Plutarch, *De Is. et Os.* 359d.

the association between this shoulder of a bull and the constellations of the Bears around the celestial pole played a part in Mithraic iconography. On the Ponza ceiling, Ursa Major is placed *at* the celestial pole of the zodiac rather than in its proper place *near* the pole, and Beck argues that this placement is deliberately calculated to make the identification between Ursa Major as the Bull's Shoulder and the shoulder of a bull which Mithras holds in his hand in a number of monuments.<sup>8</sup> (See, for example, the bottom right side panel in the Barberini fresco in figure 1.) The placement of the Bears on the Ponza zodiac is thus a symbol of Mithras' role as *cosmokrator*, the ruler of the universe who makes the cosmos revolve around the celestial pole. That this imagery and role of Mithras seems also to be symbolized by the numerous representations of Mithras holding the shoulder of a bull in other Mithraic monuments thus validates the Mithras Liturgy as a document containing Mithraic elements. To quote Beck, "It shows that one of the most particular, and seemingly non-Mithraic, features of the *Mithrasliturgie*, the emphasis on the constellations of the Bears and on the setting of the supreme god at the pole, is in fact Mithraic after all."<sup>9</sup>

Although he does not explicitly make the connections, some of Beck's analyses of other monuments also help shed light on the enigmatic Liturgy, in particular, upon the confusion regarding the figures of Mithras Helios, the supreme deity, and Helios, his subordinate, which has long puzzled commentators on the Mithras Liturgy. The sun in the Liturgy is called both Helios and Aion, while the supreme deity seems to be referred to as Helios Mithras, Mithras as the sun. The magician, as he ascends through the heavens, encounters first the sun, Helios, and then the sun, Helios Mithras. Strikingly, evidence from Mithraic monuments suggests that the Mithraic Mysteries also had a progression of planets which culminated with two suns, the first of whom was Helios and the other of whom was Mithras Helios, identified in the planetary sequence with Saturn. In the depiction of the grades of initiation in a number of Mithraic monuments, most clearly in the Mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia (fig. 2), the succession of planets culminates with Saturn at the highest level, rather than the Sun, a surprising sequence in a cult whose supreme deity had the epithet Sol Invictus, the Sun Unconquered.<sup>10</sup> Beck's analysis of the order of the altars in the Ottaviano Zeno monument (CIMRM 335) leads him to a rather startling explanation of this placement. "Saturn can be set at the head and the Sun

<sup>8</sup> "The polar symbol that the god of the *Mithrasliturgie* carries is the *Stierschenkel*. Now the *Stierschenkel* is the Egyptian constellation corresponding to Ursa Major, and it is Ursa Major (its size clearly identifies it as such) that, contrary to proper *astrothesie*, has been placed at the pole and the centre of the Ponza zodiac." Beck, "Ponza Zodiac II," p.126. Beck, confirming the hypothesis of Dieterich denied by Cumont, has recently identified the object which Mithras is holding during the so-called investiture of Sol scenes as the shoulder of a bull, rather than a Phrygian cap, as Cumont suggested. Beck, Roger, "Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac: II," p.124-127. See also Gordon, R. L. and Hinnells, John R., "Some New Photographs of Well-Known Mithraic Monuments," pp. 213-219, for a discussion of some of the specific monuments on which this motif occurs.

<sup>9</sup>Beck, "Ponza Zodiac II," p. 125.

<sup>10</sup>The Mithraea of Felicissimus at Ostia and of Sa. Prisca in Rome depict the initiation grades along with the planetary symbols, cp. Beck, *Planetary Gods*, pp. 1-11. Two other Mithraea, Sette Sfere and Sette Porte in Ostia, have been discovered which also have mosaics depicting seven levels that are linked both with the planets and with the grades of Mithraic initiation. The iconography and the meaning of these mosaics has been analyzed by several scholars, most importantly Gordon ("The sacred geography of a *mithraeum*: the example of Sette Sfere," pp. 119-165.) and Beck, *Planetary Gods*, pp. 12-14.

relegated to second (or penultimate) place *because Saturn is the sun*. Therefore when we see Saturn we also see the Sun (and vice versa): and so, arcanelly and by paradox and enigma, it is still the Sun that we find at the head."<sup>11</sup> A variety of sources, both ancient and modern, support this identification of Saturn and the Mithraic Sun. The most important of these is the astronomer Ptolemy, who says that the inhabitants of Greater Asia - that is, the region between India and the Middle East, including Babylonia and Assyria - worship Saturn under the name of Mithras Helios.<sup>12</sup> Beck does not draw any parallels here with the Mithras Liturgy, speculating instead that Saturn may be an under-world sun, parallel to the Mesopotamian Shamash, but this identification of Saturn with Mithras as a superior sun in Mithraic monuments would seem to indicate that another important feature of the Mithras Liturgy is grounded in Mithraism.<sup>13</sup>

Not only does the magician of the Liturgy seek to encounter both Helios as the sun and Mithras as the higher sun, but the ascent itself is accomplished by means of the rays of the sun. After the preliminary prayer, the first ritual action of the magician in the Mithras Liturgy is to draw in pneuma from the rays of the sun and to rise up on these rays. "Draw in breath [pneuma] from the rays, drawing up three times as much as you can, and you will see yourself being lifted up and ascending to the height, so that you seem to be in mid-air."<sup>14</sup> This instruction to inhale pneuma is later repeated in the ritual, when the magician has reached the doors of the sun and is looking in through the doors to the world of the gods. (629) Although the references to this ritual practice are brief in the Mithras Liturgy, no other mode of ascent is ever mentioned. The sun's rays are clearly the primary means by which the magician in the Liturgy raises himself to the world of the gods through the inhaling of pneuma, as well as the path by which the pneuma from the divine realm comes down to the magician.

Beck's analysis of the Barberini fresco, CIMRM 390, (figure 1) shows that this motif of

<sup>11</sup>Beck, *Planetary Gods*, p. 86.

<sup>12</sup>σέβουσι τε γὰρ τὸν μὲν τῆς Ἀφροδίτης Ἴσιν ὀνομάζοντες, τὸν δὲ Κρόνου Μίθραν Ἥλιον. For they revere the star of Venus under the name of Isis, and that of Saturn as Mithras Helios. (Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, II.3.64, text and translation from Loeb edition.) Beck also cites the Platonic *Epinomis* (987C), the Eudoxus Papyrus (col.5), Diodorus (2.30.3), Hyginus *De Astron.* 2.42, 4.18, Servius (*in Aen.* 1.729), and Simplicius (in *de Caelo*, p. 495.28-29 Heiberg), as well as Bouché-Leclercq, *L'astrologie grecque*, p. 93, n.2; Franz Boll, *Sphaera*, p 313, n.3; Boll, "Kronos-Helios," *Archiv f. Religionswiss.* 19 (1919), pp. 342-346; and Cumont, "Les noms des planètes et l'astrolatrie chez les Grecs," *L'Antiquité Classique* 4 (1935), pp. 5-4, at p. 14, n.2. (cp. also Nonnos, *Dionysiaca* 40. 400-1, which identifies Kronos with the Mithras Helios of Babylon) Vermaseren, following a different line of argument based on iconography, also identifies Mithras with Saturn as Aion. (Vermaseren, M.J., *Mithraica III: The Mithraeum at Marino*, E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1982, pp. 73-4, 85.)

<sup>13</sup>Beck nevertheless points out some interesting ramifications for the identification of Saturn as another Sun within the Mithraic Mysteries. "The identification of Saturn with the Sun intimates that in the sequence of the Mithraic *symbolon* the beginning and end are in some sense the same, that one returns to the starting point, but at a higher level; thus, while overtly the metaphor of the ladder [in Origen *Contra Celsum* 6.22] signals rectilinear progress (ascent straight up), the *symbolon* in its beginning and end also hints at the ascending spiral of the helix, which is the metaphor of that other Mithraic symbol of celestial ascent, the snake-encircled figure." (Beck, *Planetary Gods*, p.88.)

<sup>14</sup>ἔλκε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀκτίνων πνεῦμα γ' ἀνασπῶν, ὃ δύναμα[σ]ται, καὶ ὄψῃ σεαυτὸν ἀνακουφίζόμενον [καὶ] ὑπερβαίνοντα εἰς ὕψος, ὥστε σε δοκεῖν μ[έ]σον τοῦ ἀέρος εἶναι. (539-541)

ascent on the rays of the sun had its place in Mithraism. The fresco depicts the familiar Mithraic tauroctony - Mithras slaying the bull with Cautes and Cautopates on either side holding torches. The sun in the left hand corner sends a ray down to Mithras, and the signs of the zodiac arch above Mithras' head. The zodiac, however, runs from right to left, instead of the standard pattern of left to right. Beck speculates that the order is here reversed so that the sign of Capricorn will fall in the correct place in the picture, between the Sun and Mithras. "It is through Capricorn that the ray extending from Sol to Mithras (a not unusual feature of the more elaborate tauroctonies, especially the frescoes) pierces the arc of the zodiac... The ray from Sol to Mithras passes not only through the symbol of Capricorn, but also through the tip of Cautes' torch."<sup>15</sup> Beck compares this symbolism with Porphyry's account in the *Cave of the Nymphs* (23-4), in which Capricorn (the astrological house of Saturn) is the gate in the south of the cave which corresponds to apogenesis, the ascent of the soul from the material world. Furthermore, Porphyry links the Mithraic torchbearer Cautes with the south wind, which is associated with the process of apogenesis, in contrast to Cautopates, whom he ties to the north wind and genesis. Porphyry also links the process of apogenesis to the sun and that of genesis to the moon. "The theologians make the 'gates' of souls the sun and the moon, the ascent taking place through the sun and the descent through the moon."<sup>16</sup> The presence in the Barberini fresco of the ascent on the path of the sun that appears in Porphyry suggests that this apogenetic function of the sun's ray did indeed have a place in Mithraism. The sun ray appears in more than fifteen extant Mithraic frescoes, although the ray in the Barberini fresco is the only one to signal its function explicitly as the path of apogenesis by passing through Capricorn and the torch of Cautes.<sup>17</sup>

In seeking evidence to support this interpretation of the fresco, Beck inadvertently brings up a piece of evidence that further illuminates the Mithras Liturgy, a reference to the theurgic practices of the Chaldaean Oracles. Beck links the idea of the soul's ascent by the sun with a passage from the *Hymn to Mother of the Gods* of the Emperor Julian, which describes the anagogic powers of the rays of the sun. "It has also been demonstrated that the god's rays are by nature uplifting; and this is due to his energy, both visible and invisible, by which very many souls have been lifted up out of the region of the senses, because they were guided by that sense which is dearest of all and is most nearly like the sun."<sup>18</sup> Julian goes on to comment, "And

<sup>15</sup>Beck, *Planetary Gods*, pp. 92-3.

<sup>16</sup>καὶ τῶν θεολόγων πύλας ψυχῶν ἥλιον τιθέντων καὶ σελήνην, καὶ διὰ μὲν ἡλίου ἀνιέναι, διὰ δὲ σελήνης κατιέναι. Porphyry, *De Antro Nympharum* 29 (translation from Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, Robert Lambertson, trans., Station Hill Press: Barrytown, New York, 1983, p.37.)

<sup>17</sup>Campbell (*Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1968, pp. 102-103) provides a list of fifteen monuments which have this sun ray extending from the sun to Mithras in the tauroctony. Recent discoveries (e.g. at Marino) have increased this number. Campbell also links the solar ray to the raven which appears in other tauroctonies, but then tries to link both to the Avestan Cista. The standard explanation of the sun's ray is based on no evidence beyond the scene itself, either in contemporary texts or in Persian sources. "The ray linking Mithras to Sol may have to do with the latter's instruction to the former to kill the bull - so, generally, it is interpreted, although actually the mandate is an inference from the scene, not an explicitly attested 'fact' of the story." (Beck, *Planetary Gods*, p. 95)

<sup>18</sup>δέδεικται δὴ καὶ ἀναγωγὸν φύσει τὸ τῶν ἀκτίνων τοῦ θεοῦ διὰ τε τῆς φανεράς ἐνεργείας καὶ τῆς ἀφανοῦς, ὑφ' ἧς παμπληθεῖς ἀνήχθησαν ψυχαὶ τῶν αἰσθήσεων ἀκολουθήσασαι τῇ φανοτάτῃ μάλιστα ἡλιοειδεῖ. (172cd - text and translation from Loeb edition.)

if I should touch on the secret teaching of the Mysteries in which the Chaldaean, divinely frenzied, celebrated the God of the Seven Rays, that god through whom he lifts up the souls of men, I should be saying what is unintelligible, yea wholly unintelligible to the common herd, but familiar to the happy theurgists."<sup>19</sup> Beck claims that Julian is here revealing **Mithraic** doctrine about the ascent of the soul on the sun's rays. Although Julian was probably a Mithraic initiate who could have known of the function of the sun's rays in Mithraism,<sup>20</sup> this passage seems to be referring fairly explicitly to Chaldaean theurgy rather than to Mithraic doctrine. Moreover, while the motif of the ascent of the sun's ray in the Mithras Liturgy has its parallel in Mithraic monuments, the ritual technique of ascent in the Mithras Liturgy actually finds its closest parallel in the theurgic practices of the Chaldaean Oracles.

Like the magician of the Mithras Liturgy, the theurgist of the Chaldaean Oracles draws in pneuma coming down from the upper realms on the rays of the sun and thus seeks to ascend to the soul's place of origin, the pneumatic world of the Father, and to free his soul from the constraints of the body and the material world.<sup>21</sup> A fragment of the Oracles, preserved in Psellus, describes the goal of the theurgist. "Seek out the channel of the soul, from where it <descended> in a certain order to serve the body; <and> seek <how> you will raise it [the soul] up again to its order by combining (ritual) action with a sacred word." That is, [Psellus comments,] seek the source of the soul, from where (the soul) had been led astray and has served the body; and how someone, raising it up and awakening it by means of telestic rites, might lead it back up from where it has come."<sup>22</sup> That this ascent is accomplished in the Oracles by the inhaling of pneuma is made clear by other surviving fragments. Inhaling pneuma frees the soul from the constraints of the material world. "Those who, by inhaling, drive out

<sup>19</sup>εἰ δὲ καὶ τῆς ἀρρεήτου μυσταγωγίας ἀψαίμην, ἣν ὁ Χαλδαῖος περὶ τὸν ἐπτάκτινα θεὸν ἐβάκχευεν, ἀνάγων δι' αὐτοῦ τὰς ψυχάς, ἄγνωστα ἐρῶ, καὶ μάλα γε ἄγνωστα τῷ συρφετῷ θεουργοῖς δὲ τοῖς μακαρίοις γνώριμα. (172de, text and translation from Loeb edition.)

<sup>20</sup>Even this is debated. Athanassiadi claims that Julian was a Mithraic initiate and that the passage refers to Mithraic doctrines. (Athanassiadi, Polymnia, "A Contribution to Mithraic Theology: The Emperor Julian's *Hymn to King Helios*," *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., vol. XXVIII, pt.2, October 1977, pp. 360-371.) Turcan, on the other hand, argues that he was not a Mithraic initiate and points out correctly that the passage in question refers to the Oracles rather than Mithraism (*Mithras Platonicus: Recherches sur l'Hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*, E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1975, pp.118-119.) Beck summarizes the debate (Beck, "Mithraism Since Franz Cumont," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Part II: Religion, Volume 17.4, Walter de Gruyter, New York, 1984, p. 2053.)

<sup>21</sup>As Lewy asserts, "Theurgical elevation, known as ἀναγωγή, is the chief mystery of the Chaldaean sacramental community, its goal being the immortalization of the soul." (Lewy, Hans, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, ed. Michel Tardieu, Études Augustiniennes: Paris, 1978, pp. 177-8.) Johnston also discusses theurgical ascent in the Chaldaean Oracles and the Mithras Liturgy. (Johnston, Sarah Iles, "Rising to the Occasion: Theurgical Ascent in its Cultural Milieu," in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg, E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1997, pp. 165-194.)

<sup>22</sup>δίξο <καὶ ψυχῆς ὀχετόν, ὅθεν ἐν τινι τάξει σώματι θητεύσασ' <ὑπέβη καὶ πῶς ἐπὶ τάξιν αὐθις ἀναστήσεις, ἱερῷ λόγῳ ἔργον ἐνώσας. Τοῦτ' ἔστιν' ζῆτει τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς ψυχῆς, πόθεν παρήχθη καὶ ἐδούλευσε σώματι καὶ πῶς ἂν τις ταύτην ἀναστησάμενος καὶ ἐγείρας διὰ τῶν τελεστικῶν ἔργων ἐπαναγάγῃ ὅθεν ἀφίκετο. Frag. 110 (Text and translations of the Chaldaean Oracles from Majercik, Ruth, *The Chaldaean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1989.)

the soul, are free."<sup>23</sup> Another fragment of the Oracles describes the effect of inhaling the pneuma, the lightening of the soul. "And (the order of angels) causes a separation with matter by "... lightening (the soul) with a warm breath [pneuma]," and causing a rising up through the anagogic life. For the "warm breath [pneuma]" is the sharing of life."<sup>24</sup> Here the verb, lightening - *κουφίζουσα*, recalls the *ἀνακουφίζόμενον* used in the Mithras Liturgy. Stripped of his material constraints, the theurgist is made light enough to ascend to the heights, "For the divine is accessible not to mortals who think corporally, but to all those who, naked, hasten upward toward the heights."<sup>25</sup> Again, the phrase, *πρὸς ὕψος*, in the Oracle recalls the *εἰς ὕψος* of the Liturgy.

As other fragments of the Chaldaean Oracles show, the rays of the sun provide the connective pathway by which the theurgist rises to the heights: "You must hasten toward the light and toward the rays of the Father, from where the soul, clothed in mighty intellect, has been sent to you."<sup>26</sup> Majercik describes these rays of the Father as the ultimate source of the rays of the visible sun, "the 'noetic' or intelligible rays of Aion - the transmudane sun - whose 'light,' in turn, would derive from the intelligible fire of the Father; these 'noetic rays,' then, descending from the Father via Aion to the visible sun."<sup>27</sup> These rays are also described in terms of fire, since they ultimately come forth from the Primal Fire of the Emyrean Father down through the hypercosmic (or transmudane) and encosmic (or mundane) suns to the lower worlds. Proclus cites the Oracles to answer his question "How does the order of angels cause the soul to ascend? 'By making the souls bright with fire.'"<sup>28</sup> Another fragment describes the rays as "flowering flames" which souls draw in from the Father, "Drawing in the flowering flames which come down from the Father."<sup>29</sup> Both the Mithras Liturgy and the Chaldaean Oracles use the verb, *ἔλκω*, to draw in, although the rays are described by the different images of *ἀκτίνα*, "rays", and *πυρσοὺς ἀκμαίους*, "flowering flames". In the Chaldaean Oracles, the process of the ascent is thus accomplished in the same manner as in the Mithras Liturgy. The ritual action of inhaling pneuma from the rays of the sun is combined with some magical words like the preliminary prayer of the Mithras Liturgy, and the magician ascends into the upper realms.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup>*ψυχῆς ἐξωστήρες ἀνάπνοοι εὐλυτοὶ εἰσιν.* Frag. 124.

<sup>24</sup>*καὶ ἀμιγῆ ποιεῖ πρὸς τὴν ὕλην τῷ "... πνεύματι θερμῷ κουφίζουσα ..."* καὶ ποιούσα μετέωρον διὰ τῆς ἀναγωγῆς ζωῆς τὸ γὰρ "πνεῦμα τὸ θερμὸν" ζωῆς ἐστὶ μετάδοσις.. (Frag. 123.)

<sup>25</sup>*οὐ γὰρ ἐφικτὰ τὰ θεῖα βροτοῖς τοῖς σώμα νοοῦσιν ἀλλ' ὅσοι γυμνήτες ἄνω σπεύδουσι πρὸς ὕψος.* (Frag. 116.)

<sup>26</sup>*χρῆ σε σπεύδειν πρὸς τὸ φάος καὶ πρὸς τατρὸς ἀγίας, ἔνθεν ἐπέμψθη σοι ψυχὴ πολλὴν ἐσσαμένη νοῦν.* (Frag. 115.)

<sup>27</sup>Majercik, p. 39. Majercik, following Lewy (pp. 151 and n.313), translates as "transmundane" and "mundane" the *ὑπερκόσμιον* and *ἐγκκόσμιον* of Proclus. "*διχῶς ἄρα θεωρήσομεν τὸν ἥλιον ... ὡς ἐγκκόσμιον καὶ ὡς ὑπερκόσμιον.*" (Proclus, *In Timaeum*, III.82,31.)

<sup>28</sup>*ἡ δὲ τῶν ἀγγέλων μερὶς πῶς ἀνάγει ψυχὴν; "τὴν ψυχὴν φέγγουσα πθρί..."* (Frag. 122.)

<sup>29</sup>*πυρσοὺς ἔλκουσαι ἀκμαίους ἐκ πατρόθεν κατίοντας.* (Frag. 130.)

<sup>30</sup>*ἱερῷ λόγῳ ἔργον ἐνώσας.* Combining (ritual) action with a sacred word. (Frag. 110.) The use of *voces magicae* in the Mithras Liturgy and the Chaldaean Oracles is a fascinating topic in itself, but unfortunately beyond (continued...)



The Liturgy's description of the magician's ascent into those upper realms reveals further influence of the Chaldaean Oracles or a similar cosmological system. One of the reasons Cumont rejected a Mithraic origin for the Liturgy is the lack of correspondence between its cosmology and the cosmology of seven planetary zones he envisioned for Mithraism.<sup>31</sup> Although the planets are mentioned, they play only a secondary role,<sup>32</sup> and the cosmos seems instead to be divided into three sections. While this tripartite division does not correspond with Cumont's vision of the Mithraic world, nor with the standard pattern of the Hellenistic ascent as found, for example, in Origen or the *Corpus Hermeticum*,<sup>33</sup> it does resemble the cosmology underlying the Chaldaean Oracles. Not only does the general tripartite division correspond, but individual aspects of each of the realms indicate that the two cosmological systems are closely related.

In the Mithras Liturgy, the first realm is the material world, the earth, which the magician leaves at the beginning of the rite. The second is the realm of the astral deities, the rising and setting gods, through which the magician passes to get to the doors of the sun.<sup>34</sup> In this realm, the magician sees the *aulos* of the winds and the course of the visible gods, the planets and the stars, before he reaches the endpoint of the realm, the disk of the sun, whose doors provide the gateway to the next realm. The third realm is the realm of the gods, into which the magician does not go, but from which various deities descend to meet with the magician.<sup>35</sup> Only two features of this world are mentioned in the text, the depth of the world

<sup>30</sup>(...continued)

the scope of this paper. Lewy suggests, "We may accordingly conclude that the utterance of the magical formula effected the contraction of the solar light into consistent rays, which descend towards the earth and lift up the soul of the initiate toward the 'heart', that is to say the sun." (Lewy, p. 196.)

<sup>31</sup>"Cette description fantastique du monde céleste ne répond nullement à celle que nos sources nous font du paradis mithriaque, divisé en sept zones superposées. De même, dans les noms qui sont donnés aux dieux, et dont je n'ai pas la prétention de fournir l'étymologie, je n'ai découvert aucune analogie avec les appellations perses ou même chaldéennes." Cumont, Franz, *Textes et Monuments Figurés relatifs aux Mystère de Mithra*, H. Lamertin, Libraire: Bruxelles, 1899, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup>The reference to the seven immortal gods of the world, *τοὺς ἀθανάτους θεοὺς τοῦ κόσμου*, (620) is the only trace of this seven-zone cosmology in the Mithras Liturgy.

<sup>33</sup>Cp. Origen *contra Celsum*, VI.22, 31; *Corpus Hermeticum* I.25.

<sup>34</sup>*τοὺς πολεῦοντας ἀναβαίνοντας εἰς οὐρανὸν θεοῦς, ἄλλους δὲ καταβαίνοντας*, the presiding gods rising into heaven, and others setting. (545) As he rises, the magician sees the courses of the stars and planets, the disk of the sun and the pipe of the winds. *ἡ δὲ πορεία τῶν ὀρωμένων θεῶν διὰ τοῦ δίσκου, πατρός μου, θεοῦ, φανήσεται, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ὁ καλούμενος αὐλός, ἡ ἀρχὴ τοῦ λειτουργοῦντος ἀνέμου*. Now the course of the visible gods will appear through the disk of god, my father; and in similar fashion the so-called "pipe", the origin of the ministering wind. (548-550) The magician ascends through this realm, avoiding an encounter with the divine entities that dwell there, and finally reaches his destination, the doors of the sun. *καὶ τοῦ δίσκου ἀνυγέντος ὄψη ἄπυριν κύκλωμα καὶ θύρας πυρίνας ἀποκεκλεισμένας*. And when the disk is open, you will see the fireless circle, and the fiery doors shut tight. (583-585)

<sup>35</sup>*ὄψη ἀνεφυγίας τὰς θύρας καὶ τὸν κόσμον τῶν θεῶν, ὃς ἐστὶν ἐντὸς τῶν θυρῶν, ὥστε ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ θεάματος ἡδονῆς καὶ τῆς χαρᾶς τὸ πνεῦμα σου συντρέχειν καὶ ἀναβαίνειν. στὰς οὖν...* You will see the doors open and the world of the gods which is within the doors, so that from the pleasure and joy of the sight your spirit runs ahead and ascends. So stand still... (625) The exact meaning of *τὸ πνεῦμα σου συντρέχειν καὶ ἀναβαίνειν* (continued...)

from which the deities come and the presence of the celestial pole. After the magician has requested that Helios announce him to the higher god, Helios departs and journeys to the celestial pole.<sup>36</sup> This celestial pole is the location of Mithras, who holds in his hand the shoulder of a bull which is identified with the constellation of the Bear. The Bear is that which moves and turns the celestial pole around, and, by it, the heavens.<sup>37</sup> Besides the celestial pole, the realm of the gods is characterized only by the depths out of which the seven asp-faced maidens (and presumably the seven bull-faced) pole-rulers come.

This last detail might seem unremarkable were it not that the Empyrean Realm of the Chaldaean Oracles, the realm of the truly real, is also characterized by such depths. "For according to the Oracle, '... the real is in the depth.'"<sup>38</sup> The celestial poles also are mentioned in connection with the Father who dwells in the depths of the Empyrean, sending out his pneuma to the lower worlds. "For from him leap the girdling flower of fire and the powerful breath situated beyond the fiery poles."<sup>39</sup> This deity, like Mithras in monuments such as the Ponza ceiling, is conceived of as a true *cosmokrator*, connected with the celestial pole which makes all the worlds go round. His Empyrean realm, when it is described, can only be characterized by such terms as *βάθος* and *βυθός*, terms signifying the ineffable nature of the noetic realm.

Just as, in the Mithras Liturgy, the magician enters a region of the cosmos where he encounters the winds, the astral deities, and the sun before he reaches the realm of the gods, so too in the second, Ethereal Realm of the Chaldaean Oracles the winds, moon, and sun are the standard features.<sup>40</sup> This realm also contains all of the planets and the fixed stars, but the seven

<sup>35</sup>(...continued)

is unclear, especially as it is immediately followed by *στὰς οὐν*. (627-8) Perhaps the magician is running ahead and ascending up to the very threshold of the doors at which point he stands still. In any case, the fact that, for the succeeding epiphanies, the doors are opened and the deities come out and down seems to imply that the magician is waiting outside the gates for the inhabitants of the world of the gods to appear.

<sup>36</sup>*ταῦτα σου εἰπόντος ἐλεύσεται εἰς τὸν πόλον, καὶ ὄψῃ αὐτὸν περιπατοῦντα ὡς ἐν ὁδῷ*. After you have said these things, he will come to the celestial pole, and you will see him walking as if on a road. (656-7)

<sup>37</sup>*μόσχου ὦμον χρύσειον, ὃς ἐστὶν Ἄρκτος ἢ κινούσα καὶ ἀντιστρέφουσα τὸν οὐρανον*. A golden shoulder of a young bull: This is the Bear which moves and turns heaven around. (700)

<sup>38</sup>*κατὰ γὰρ τὸ λόγιον "...τὸ δ' ἀτρεκὲς ἐν βαθεὶ ἐστὶ"*. (Frag. 183.) The planetary deities are said to have noetic understanding of the highest realm, which is described as a Paternal Depth. *"οἱ τὸν ὑπέρκοσμον πατρικὸν βυθὸν ἴστε νοοῦντες."* You know the supermundane, Paternal Abyss by perceiving it. (Frag. 18.) "In the *Oracles*, the terms *βάθος* and *βυθός* are used alike to designate both the realm of the Father as well as the world of matter." (Majercik, p. 18.)

<sup>39</sup>*τοῦδε γὰρ ἐκθρόσκουσιν ... καὶ ὑπεξωκὸς πυρὸς ἄνθος ἠδὲ κραταιὸν πνεῦμα πόλων πυρίων ἐπέκεινα*. (Frag. 35.)

<sup>40</sup>*καὶ τῶν λογίων ... πανταχοῦ μετὰ τὸν ἥλιον τὴν σελήνην ταπτόντων καὶ μετὰ τὴν σελήνην τὸν ἀέρα ... "αἰθερίος τε δρόμος καὶ μῆνης ἄπλετος ὄρμη," φησί "ἠέριοί τε ροαί ..." καὶ πάλιν "αἰθῆρ, ἦλιε, πνεῦμα σελήνης, ἠέρος ἀγοί." καὶ ἐν ἄλλοις "ἠλιακῶν τε κύκλων καὶ μηναιῶν καναχισμῶν κόλπων τ' ἠερίων ..." καὶ ἐξῆς "...αἰθρησ μέρος ἡελίου τε καὶ μῆνης ὄχετων ἠδ' ἠέρος... αἰθρης {μέρος} ἡελίου τε σεληναίης τε καὶ ὄσ<σ>α ἠέρι συννήχονται ..." καὶ ἀλλαχοῦ "καὶ πλατὺς ἀῆρ μηναιῶς τε δρόμος καὶ ἀείπολος ἡελίοιο. And the *Oracles*...everywhere place the moon after the sun and the air after the moon: "The ethereal course and the boundless impulse of the moon," they say, "and airy streams..." And again: "Ether, sun, breath of moon, airy leaders." And in other (verses): Of solar circles and lunar soundings and airy hollows..." And next: "... portion*

(continued...)

planetary spheres, while they are mentioned, are of lesser importance than the sun, which has the pre-eminent place in both the Chaldaean Oracles and the Mithras Liturgy. The primary division of the realms in both the Liturgy and the Oracles is made not between the seven planetary spheres, but between the Material, Ethereal, and Empyrean realms.

In the Chaldaean Oracles, each of these realms is presided over by a ruler or Teletarch who helps to guide the ascending soul beyond its realm. A fragment of the Chaldaean Oracles identifies the three realms and assigns a ruler to each. "The first (Teletarch)... guides the '...wing of fire...' the middle (Teletarch)... perfects... the ether... the third (Teletarch)... perfects matter."<sup>41</sup> Majercik identifies each of these rulers and their function in the transmission of the salvific pneumatic light, "the Empyrean Teletarch is associated with Aion (the transmudane sun) as the intelligible source of light; the Ethereal Teletarch is associated with Helios (the mundane sun) as the direct source of the earth's light; the Material Teletarch is associated with the moon and, as such, rules the sublunar world traversed by the rays of the visible sun."<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that, although Hekate, the moon, is the ruler of the Material world, she has her place as the moon in the Ethereal world and serves as a intermediary between the sublunar and celestial worlds, just as Helios, the sun, serves as the intermediary between the

<sup>40</sup>(...continued)

of ether and sun and channels of moon and air..." <Portion> of ether, sun, and moon and all those things which swim with the air..." And elsewhere: "... and expansive air, the course of the moon and the eternal orbit of the sun." (Frag. 61.)

<sup>41</sup>ὁ μὲν πρῶτος (τελετάρχης)... ἡμιοχεῖ τὸν "...ταρσὸν τοῦ πυρός..." ὁ δὲ μέσος... τελειοῖ... τὸν αἰθέρα... ὁ δὲ τρίτος... τὴν ὕλην τελειοῖ. (Frag. 85.)

<sup>42</sup>Majercik, p. 12, drawing on the speculations of Lewy, pp. 143-4. The order of the realms is set forth in another puzzling fragment. ἐν τούτοις ἱερὸς πρῶτος δρόμος, ἐν δ' ἄρα μέσσω ἡέριος, τρίτος ἄλλος δς ἐν πυρὶ τὴν χθόνα, θάλλπει. ἀρχαῖς γὰρ τρισὶ ταῖσδε λάβροις δουλεύει ἅπαντα. Among these is the first sacred course. Next, in the middle, is the course of air. Another, the third, is the one which heats the earth by fire. All things serve these three turbulent rulers. (Frag.73.) The interpretation of this passage, however, is extremely vexed. It clearly refers to the three worlds, but different commentators have disagreed as to which was which. Lewy connects the first with the Empyrean ruled by Aion as transmudane sun, the second with the Ethereal ruled by Helios the mundane sun, and the third, taking the adjective, ἡέριος, with the material ruled by the moon as Hekate. Tardieu, however, takes the adjective, ἡέριος, with the second, making the airy world the Ethereal, and makes the third the Material world. Majercik, p. 171, objects to this, arguing, "'Airy' is regularly associated with the moon and, thus, with the Material (not Ethereal) World. (Cf., e.g., the sequence in fr. 61: ether, sun, moon, air.) Similarly, the 'third, other course which heats the earth in fire' must allude to the sun, which rules the Ethereal (not Material) World." I would tentatively propose an alternate solution. Since ἡέριος is describing the realm rather than the ruler, it would seem most appropriate to the Ethereal world, where, as Fragment 61 points out, the air and winds are. The moon may be the ruler over the sublunar, Material World, but it is still properly part of the Ethereal World itself. A similar argument can be made regarding Majercik's next point. The fire that warms the earth could refer to the fiery pneuma that comes ultimately from the transmudane sun of the Empyrean. Thus, the third course would be the highest, the Empyrean; the second would be the middle, the Ethereal; and the first would be the lowest, the Material. Of course, this means that ἱερὸς must be applied to the Material World, but this seems to me less troublesome than the other interpretations. The issue is discussed in Lewy, pp. 139-40; Tardieu, Michel, "La Gnose Valentinienne et les Oracles Chaldaïques," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism, I: The School of Valentinus*, Bentley Layton, ed., E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1980, pp. 213-214; and Majercik, pp. 170-171. Ultimately, I must concur with Majercik, p. 171, "None of the solutions so far proposed is entirely satisfactory. The fragment, as it stands, remains a puzzle."

Ethereal realm and the Empyrean.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, in the Mithras Liturgy, the magician encounters two primary figures during his ascent, who correspond to the Teletarchs of the Ethereal and Empyrean realms, the mundane and transmundane suns of the Chaldaean Oracles. The first is the sun god, addressed as Helios (640), but also as Aion (594). The magician meets this deity at the end of his journey through the Ethereal Realm. This Helios is clearly superior to the other planetary and astral deities that the magician has encountered already, and he is described in superlative terms, "Great Power, Great Might, King, Greatest of gods, Helios, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, God of gods: mighty is your breath [pneuma]." <sup>44</sup> The magician appeals to Helios to assist him to ascend to a meeting with an even more supreme god, for although he is the ruler of this realm, Helios is subordinate to the greatest god, whose epiphany occurs later. Through the mediation of Helios, the magician of the Liturgy encounters this superior deity, Mithras Helios, who descends to the doors of the sun from the realm of the gods, the depths of the Empyrean. In the Liturgy, then, Helios seems to correspond to the Teletarch of the Ethereal Realm, the mundane sun, in the Chaldaean Oracles, while Mithras corresponds to the Teletarch of the Empyrean, the transmundane sun. The transmundane sun in the Oracles seems to have been addressed as Aion,<sup>45</sup> but, in the Liturgy, this name is applied instead to Helios, since the higher sun is given the attributes of Mithras in the Mithraic Mysteries.

The third Teletarch of the Oracles, the moon, plays no role in the Liturgy. Hekate may be invoked in the beginning prayer to Pronoia and Psyche, but not in her aspect as the moon, nor does the magician encounter the moon at any point in his ascent. Even when the phase of the moon is specified for the making of the amulet and the time of the performance of the ritual, it is the time of the new moon, when the moon is absent.<sup>46</sup> The association, mentioned in Porphyry, of the sun with apogenesis and the moon with genesis may account for this puzzling absence of the moon in the Mithras Liturgy. If the moon is the power connected in Mithraism with genesis, then the magician would want the influence of this power completely removed during a ritual of apogenesis, of the ascent of the soul from the Material World.<sup>47</sup> The absence

<sup>43</sup>Cp. Lewy on the position of the moon, p. 143 and n. 288. Johnston discusses the mediating functions of Hekate in the Oracles (Johnston, Sarah Iles, *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldaean Oracles and Related Literature*, Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1990, pp. 59-61).

<sup>44</sup>μεγαλοδύναμε, με <γα>λοκράτωρ, βασιλεῦ, μέγιστε θεῶν, "Ἡλιε, ὁ κύριος τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς γῆς, θεὲ θεῶν. (639-641).

<sup>45</sup>Cp. Fr. 49 from Proclus *In Tim.* III. 14, 3-10, which refers to the "Father-begotten light" (πατρογενὲς φῶς) that pertains to the "order of Aion" (ἡ τάξις τοῦ αἰῶνος) a unifying light that shines on all things.

<sup>46</sup>This time is described as ἐν ἀρπαγῇ τῆς σελήνης, (753) in the making of the amulet, and as τῇ συνόδῳ τῇ γενομένῃ λέοντι, (780) for the σύστασις. The latter time is further specified as the new moon according to the gods' reckoning, τῇ ἐν λέοντι κατὰ θεὸν νομηρίᾳ, (787) perhaps to make absolutely certain of the absence of the divine power of the moon.

<sup>47</sup>Hansman discusses the lunar connections of the bull in the tauroctony and its associations with genesis (Hansman, "Some Possible Classical Connections in Mithraic Speculation," in *Mysteria Mithrae*, Ugo Bianchi, ed., E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1979, pp. 601-613.). In light of the possible connections of the moon in Mithraism with the Bull of the tauroctony, could the tauroctony be regarded as a triumph of the forces of apogenesis, represented by Mithras Sol Invictus, over the forces of genesis, symbolized by a lunar bull? The speculation is intriguing, but sufficient evidence is wanting.

of the moon in the Mithras Liturgy may then suggest that the ritual was adapted from a Chaldaean theurgical tradition to reflect these ideas about the role of the moon in genesis.

In summary, a number of features of the Mithras Liturgy bear a close resemblance to the theurgic practices of the Chaldaean Oracles. Not only are the underlying cosmology and theology similar, but the central ritual practices of inhaling pneuma for ascent on the sun's rays also closely correspond. These similarities in the ritual can be used to gain a better understanding of the ἀπαθανατισμὸς ritual of the Mithras Liturgy. The confusion over the form of the cosmos through which the magician is ascending can be clarified by comparison to the tripartite structure of the cosmos of the Chaldaean Oracles, and the problems with identifying Mithras, Helios, and Aion in the Mithras Liturgy can perhaps be reconsidered in the light of the Oracles' Teletarchs. (See diagram, figure 3.)

This evidence also calls for a re-evaluation of the status of the Mithras Liturgy with regard to the Mysteries of Mithras. I have demonstrated that the Mithras Liturgy shows close parallels with the ritual practices, cosmology, and theology of the Chaldaean Oracles. Following Beck and Gordon against Turcan, I would argue that these platonizing elements should not be ruled out *a priori* as non-Mithraic, but compared with the evidence of the monuments. The ascent on the rays of the sun and the presence of two suns, Helios and Mithras Helios, the latter as a *cosmokrator* holding the bull's shoulder, have strong parallels within the evidence remaining for the practices of Mithraic cult. These parallels suggest that Mithraism made use of some of the same ideas and motifs found in contemporary movements in the so-called Platonic Underworld.

The Mithras Liturgy, then, does seem, *contra* Cumont, to be in some sense truly Mithraic. Can Dieterich's original claims for the text as preserving a ritual from the Mysteries of Mithras be supported? The Mithras Liturgy employs the ritual technique found in the Chaldaean Oracles of inhaling pneuma to ascend on the rays of the sun. Should we imagine a congregation of Mithraists seeking to ascend to an encounter with their Sol Invictus by following this ritual and, in a word, inhaling? Despite the Liturgy's use of Mithraic imagery and theology, the answer must be no. The Mithras Liturgy is not a public work, a *litourgos*, but a ritual for a single magician, which the redactor of the Great Paris Magical Papyrus culled from some source connected with the theurgic tradition of the Chaldaean Oracles. As was the practice for this kind of magico-religious craftsmen, this ritual was handed down, not in a communal context as the ritual of a group of worshippers, but as a trade secret from master to pupil, a relationship depicted as that of parent to child.<sup>48</sup> Still, the practice of inhaling pneuma to ascend on the

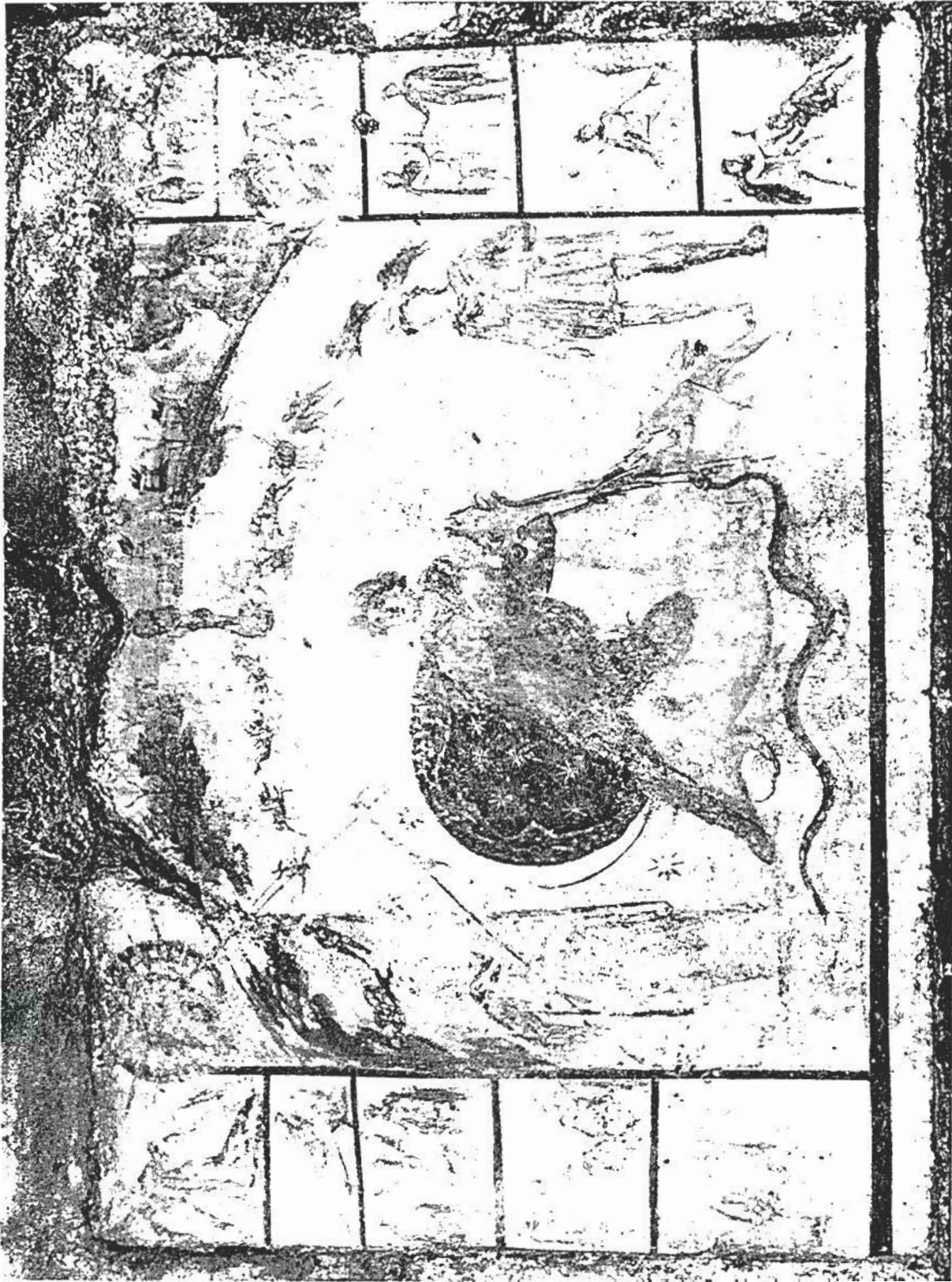
<sup>48</sup>"Theirs is an esoteric knowledge handed down in personal succession, normally from father to son or to a spiritual heir, a disciple and adopted son." (Burkert, p. 6) cp. the address to the magician's "daughter," in line 479. Compare Burkert's description of the Orpheotelest as a religious craftsman as opposed to a member of a religious sect or community, "At the level of religious craftsmanship, the problem of normative self-definition is non-existent. There is tradition, there is trial and error, but there is no norm or any form of control from the inside. It did not matter for an Orpheotelest whether he himself or his colleague was truly 'Orphic,' but whether he was good at his profession." (Burkert, Walter, "Craft Versus Sect: the Problem of Orphics and Pythagoreans," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition, Volume Three: Self Definition in the Greco-Roman World*, Ben F. Meyer and E. P. Sanders eds., Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982, p. 10.) What Burkert says of the wandering religious technicians such as the Orpheotelests would hold true of the magicians as well. There was no sense of orthodoxy

sun's rays might not have seemed so strange to a group of Mithraists. The author of the Mithras Liturgy reveals his familiarity with many of the features of Mithraic cult practice and is likely to have been an initiate. However, he was also a theurgic magician, a religious craftsman in a syncretistic age, who had no qualms about bringing together elements from a variety of sources to achieve his magical, religious, and philosophic ends.

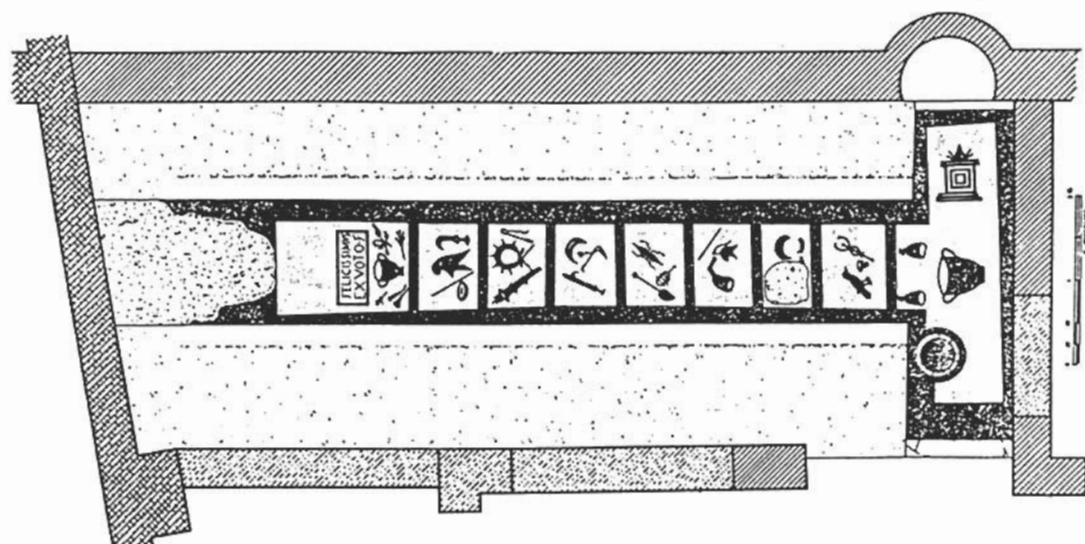
Radcliffe Edmonds

<sup>48</sup>(...continued)

to restrict the use of Mithraic or other elements in a spell, but merely the craftsman's impulse to use the best tools available.

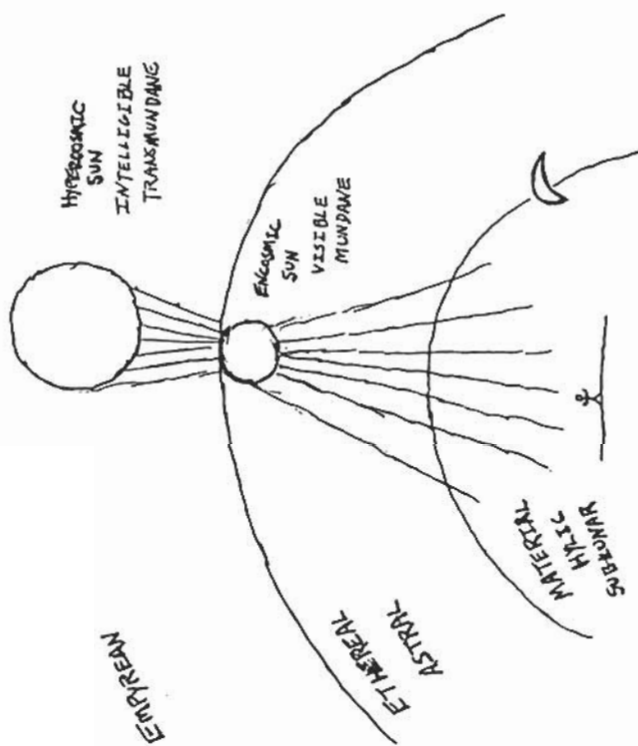


Barberini Fresco (CIMRM 390) 220-250 CE



Planet - Initiation  
Grade

- VII. Saturn-Pater
- VI. Sol-Heliotromus
- V. Luna-Perses
- IV. Jupiter-Leo
- III. Mars-Miles
- II. Venus-Nymphus
- I. Mercury-Corax





# The Ancient World

## Mystery Religions and Philosophy of Late Antiquity

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