

MITHRAS DEMIOURGOS
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Summary: Roman Mithraism has been subject to philosophical interpretations and influences over the years. In this paper, I will present the important case of Mithras as a Demiurge by following the Platonic doctrine of the three Gods and its evolution, and after Plato, in three further phases.

A. Plato in the *Timaeus* and in the dialogue *The Sophist* (both written in 360 BC) debated three fundamental divine figures: the Being, who accounts for the early Idea and the source of all the other ideas, as well as the early cause of the world; the Demiurge, who was born from the Being and accounts for the acting Power creating the perceivable world; the *Anima Mundi* (the Soul of the World or the World Soul), who was born from the other two Gods and is the “mother” shaping all of beings.

B. Later, Middle Platonism (lasted from I century BC to II century AD and on which the *Chaldean Oracles* were based) identified the Being as the First God and the source of every indistinct idea; the Demiurge as the Second God featuring the early Idea in order to create the world; and the *Anima Mundi* as the unifying principle from which all of organisms are shaped.

C. Finally, in Neoplatonism (lasted from III century to VI century AD and on which the Porphyry’s *De Antro Nympharum* is based) this doctrine was fitted together with Mithraism: Mithras was the Demiurge and the Goddess Hecate was identified with the *Anima Mundi*.

This paper contributes to the current state of knowledge on this topic with a full detailed analysis of the connected different phases of Platonism in order to reach the identification of Mithras as the Demiurge.

Key words: Being, Good, Father, Archetype, Demiurge, Tauroctony, Soul, Hyperuranium

Among Mystic Cults in the Hellenistic period, the last-born – Mithraism – was influenced by different philosophies and mysteriosophies of that time, particularly by its predecessors, Orphism, Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Stoicism. Because of its mystic nature, our knowledge about Mithraism’s contents, in the absence of sacred texts, is limited to archaeological remains and epigraphic sources. It is possible, however, to retrace these contents by an accurate analysis of the aforementioned sources.¹

Porphyry (234–305 AD), who wanted to impose Platonic doctrine onto real and ancient religious belief, wrote the *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda* and was influenced by the Middle Platonist philosopher Numenius (2nd century AD). He developed the ethical and religious tendencies of Neo-Platonism. Furthermore, he stressed Plotinian dualism between body and soul and gave a greater importance to

¹ As I tried to do in ROMAGNOLI, D.: *Mithra, storia di un dio. Vol. 4: L’Impero romano 2: Il mitraismo in età imperiale*. Palermo 2016.

mystical experiences and ascetic practices introducing oriental magical and mystery elements. In his *De antro Nympharum* he describes the cave of which Homer speaks in *Odyssey*, XIII 102–112. In his commentary on Homer's verses, the cave seems to be a metaphoric image of a Mithraeum, and Mithras a Demiurge in the act of creating the Cosmos. R. L. Gordon in his article *The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum: the Example of Sette Sfere*, quoting Eubulus, says that "the first Mithraeum was conceived by Zoroaster as an image or likeness of the Cosmos".² This article is important because Gordon proved that Porphyry's description of the Mithraeum as a rational representation of the cosmos, arranged in right- and left-hand symbols, fits the form and the features of the extant Mithraea. Previously, Robert Turcan strongly argued³ against the reliability of Porphyry as a testimony to ancient Mithraism, because he was a non-initiate who speculated on a cult from an etic, or outsider's, point of view.

The aim of this article is to understand why Mithras was the creator. For this purpose, I will try to show how long it took for the Iranian God to finally acquire, according to Platonism through its various phases, the role of the Demiurge, even if the philosophical survey of Plato's School, which did not have a direct knowledge of the Mithraic mysteries, could have leapt to redundant conclusions.

It is necessary to start from the theory of the Three Gods, i.e. of the Three Principles, which was illustrated in the creation myth, as Plato explained in the *Republic* and here it is summarized.

Being, the Good, the early Idea, the act of intelligence was intended as the first and fundamental principle: it is the Sun of the intelligible world⁴ dominating the visible and perceivable world that reflects it. It is the thing without which the Ideas (the essence of things, the purpose and the model aiming to get the perfection), would neither exist nor be intelligible. Being unites all of them according to mutual links and creates a whole organized by reciprocal relationships.

The Demiurge is the second principle, the artisan/crafts god characterized by goodness and by the Good without envy to spread and multiply, and the *aitia* – the cause of the world and its ruler⁵ (this idea has already been found in Plato's *Timaeus* and in the *Laws*). The Demiurge is placed in a higher level, as the same as that of the Being, where the Platonic ideas find their own place (namely the *topos hyperouranios* evoked by Middle Platonism's doctrine). Plato in his *Phaedrus* dialogue places them in a separate world, known as the "hyperuranium" (from the Greek words *ὑπέρ*, "beyond" and *οὐρανός* "sky") intended as "the world beyond heaven".

The *Anima Mundi* is the third principle and (according to *Timaeus*) is originated from the Demiurge. She is the visible, bodily and tangible expression/mother of any generation giving form to all bodies⁶ and (according to fragment 56 of the *Chaldean*

² GORDON, L. R.: *The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum: the Example of Sette Sfere*. *JMS* 1 (1976) 120.

³ TURCAN, R.: *Mithras platonius: Recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*. Leiden 1975.

⁴ Plato in *Republica*, VI describes the image of Good identified with the Sun, see REALE, G.: *Platone alla ricerca della sapienza segreta*, Milan 2013.

⁵ ABBAGNANO, N.: *Storia della Filosofia*. Vol. I: La filosofia antica, la patristica, la scolastica. Turin 1958, 112.

⁶ ROMAGNOLI (n. 1).

Oracles) is the Second Demiurge moving the skies.⁷ She has a soul, an intelligence and a her own life, and according to fragment 41 of the *Chaldean Oracles* and to Proclus' *In Timaeum* III.316.10D, her model lasts to eternity.⁸ She is equated with a single living organism taking shape by her gathering principle. In fact, any living form distinguishing herself from the others on the basis of its individual peculiarities, appears to be gathered by the common universal Soul.⁹

Furthermore, *Chora* or the indeterminate extent of space accounts for the already existing matter ruled by chaos. She limits the Demiurge's action and she's the mother, the nurse, probably the womb and the receptacle in which all of visible elements of creation, such as water, air, earth and fire come into being. She is "an invisible and formless species, all embracing" (*Tim.* 51a–b), she partakes of the intelligible, and, in order for the philosophers, to define her presence, her indeterminacy is problematic. By *ananke*-necessity and by the model of Ideas (eternal and intelligible archetypes),¹⁰ she makes the world¹¹ and all the perceivable universe and the other principles of generation by giving form to bodies and all of things (copies and imitations of ideas).¹² All of this can explain the transition from the intelligible to the perceivable world.

The influence of Middle Platonism in its final phase (contrary to Hellenistic philosophies such as the rational pantheism of Stoics, and the Epicurean sensism, atomism and indifference to Gods), appears in the *Chaldean Oracles*, handed down by the Syrian Julian the Chaldean and/or his son Julian the Theurgist (both lived in II century AD). This philosophy follows on the heels of the *Philebus* and the *Timaeus* (Middle Platonists considered this work as the most important of Plato's *Dialogues*), of Book X of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and, above all, of the philosopher Numenius of Apamea's ideas (lived in 2nd century AD) in his *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda*. He identifies three perfectly differentiated supernatural entities or "intellects": the first intellect is the absolute Good, the Monad (in Pythagoreanism, it is the original unit by which the series of numbers is derived), the origin of the guiding spirit of the universe (the human thought can only partially perceive it); the second intellect, having originated from the first one, is comparable to the Platonic Demiurge and is the Dyad moving the universe and things coming-into-being; the third intellect, made by the second one, is the Triad and is comparable to the world interpreted as matter or as Hecate (according to *Chaldean Oracles*), being the result of the perfect interaction between the Monad and the Dyad. They would have initially created the cosmic soul and produced the perceivable world by instilling life in the lifeless matter (ambiguously thought of as an independent principle). We cannot

⁷ KROLL, G.: *Oracula chaldaica*, P. 30 = Proclus, *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria* 6–8; LEWY, H.: *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*. Cairo 1956¹, Paris 1978², 84 n. 65; 159 n. 350.

⁸ See also ROMAGNOLI (n. 1) 341.

⁹ FERRARI, F. (ed.): *I miti di Platone*. Transl. by M. Vegetti. Milan 2006, 309.

¹⁰ ADORNO, F. – GREGORY, T. – VERRA, V.: *Manuale di Storia della Filosofia*. Vol. I. Rome–Bari 2006, 73.

¹¹ ADORNO–GREGORY–VERRA (n. 9) 73.

¹² ADORNO–GREGORY–VERRA (n. 9) 65.

exclude, however, that it may have been thought by the First Father/First God/the Monad, and then put in action and distinguished by the Second Father/Second God/the Dyad or the Demiurge.¹³

In connection with the cosmos and its relations, the human being has two souls, but just one of them is the *logistikón*, “the rational soul” suffering a contamination when it appropriates a body inasmuch matter is negative in itself. According to Plato’s *Theaetetus* 172b, the Middle Platonists state that the human aim is to achieve both the *bios theôretikos*, “the contemplative life” as described by Aristotle, and the *homoiôsis theô*, “the assimilation to God” by *metriopatheia*, “the moderation of the passions” allowing the wise man to distance himself from the perceptible world just enough to devote himself to contemplation.¹⁴ These concepts are later developed by the *Chaldean Oracles*, along with the Stoic idea of “primordial fire” as the fundamental substance of the universe, that will be then converted in the *epekeina*, “the fire lying beyond”.¹⁵ According to fragment 37 of the *Chaldean Oracles*, the concepts of will and execution or Βουλή τε τέλος τε, “will and purpose”, coincide in the First God and are considered as his faculties (the work of both Julians represents the previous moment as well as the transition point from Middle-Platonism to Neoplatonism beginning with Plotinus).¹⁶

Plutarch, in *De Iside et Osiride*, 46, writes:

The great majority and the wisest of men hold this opinion: they believe that here are two gods, rivals as it were, the one the Artificer of good and the other of evil. There are also those who call the better one a god and the other a daemon, as, for example, Zoroaster the sage, who, they record, lived five thousand years before the time of the Trojan War. He called the one Oromazes and the other Areimanius; and he further declared that among all the things perceptible to the senses, Oromazes may best be compared to light, and Areimanius, conversely, to darkness and ignorance, and midway between the two is Mithras: for this reason the Persians give to Mithras the name of ‘Mediator’. Zoroaster has also taught that men should make votive offerings and thank-offerings to Oromazes, and averting and mourning offerings to Areimanius. They pound up in a mortar a certain plant called omomi, at the same time invoking Hades and Darkness; then they mix it with the blood of a wolf that has been sacrificed, and carry it out and cast it into a place where the

¹³ ABBAGNANO (n. 4) 103–104; LEEMANS, E. A.: *Studie Over den Wijsgeer Numenius van Apamea met uitgave der fragmenten*. Bruxelles 1937; MARTANO, G.: *Numenio d’Apamea un precursore del neo-platonismo*. Rome 1941¹, Naples 1960².

¹⁴ ROMAGNOLI (n. 1) 428. I am talking about the contemplation of the Good, the Idea (or the archetype), such as the earlier and primordial form of a thought of all ideas, where the soul will be grasped.

¹⁵ These ideas were part of Theurgy (a practice of rituals typical of Ancient Greco-Roman religion, which originated from a Sumer-Babylonian tradition), whose meaning comes from the verb θεωργία-theurgía “to act as God”. Its aim was to help human beings and, in the case of the mysteries (among which those of the Persian God), to transform, by means of *unio mystica*, “the mortal nature of myste-initiate” into a divine nature.

¹⁶ *Plotini Opera*. 3 vols. Edd. P. HENRY – H. R. SCHWYZER. Paris–Brussels 1951–1973.

sun never shines. In fact, they believe that some of the plants belong to the good god and others to the evil daemon; so also of the animals they think that dogs, fowls, and hedgehogs, for example, belong to the good god, but that water-rats belong to the evil one; therefore the man who has killed the most of these they hold to be fortunate.

This passage is descriptive of Persian Zoroastrianism rather than of Mithraism,¹⁷ and is important because it testifies to a triadic system of Persian religion in which Mithras is the second god.

We can find a further development of this doctrine in Neoplatonism by teachings of philosopher Plotinus (born in Lycopolis and lived in 205–270 AD). By keeping the two concepts of will and purpose even, in *Enneads* VI 9. 6. 40 he conceives the One, the First God without the Second God (both in Neoplatonism and especially in late Middle Platonism, however, the borders between the First and the Second God are uncertain). According to *Enneads* I 7. 1; V 3. 17; VI 9. 6. 46 and VI 9. 6. 40, the One or the First God is ineffable;¹⁸ he is beyond intellect and thought, beyond the principle of himself,¹⁹ beyond Being and not Being. He does not know himself or does not think about himself;²⁰ he does not have any will²¹ and he is beyond action; he is inactive (these ideas will be developed and achieved later, in *Enneads* V 8. 13. 9; III 9. 1. 11–15 and V 5. 2. 1–2).²²

For the purpose of understanding *homoiôsis theô*, “assimilation to God”, the reading of the Iamblichus’ *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* is fundamental. It is a ten-books essay consisting of an epistolary relationship between Anebo and Abammon, where the first one is identified with Iamblichus under false pretences. This work examines the rituals allowing the *unio mystica* between the *myste*, the initiate, and God/The One (we wonder if the mysteries of Mithras could have applied this practice of theurgical rites). All of this becomes possible by the exact implementation of divination, of sacrifices, of theurgical practices and of the evocation of various Gods as well as spiritual figures. Furthermore, the essay examines and considers the differences between Gods, angels, demons, archons and the rational soul by splitting them into types, classes, brightness, and qualities. Finally, this work also analyses the mutual relations among these divine figures and the Theurge (probably the *Pater* in the mysteries of Mithras) and the *myste*-initiate.

According to Plato, the Anima Mundi (who will be identified with Hecate in the Chaldean Oracles) generates every human and animal soul by blending within the

¹⁷ Cf. DE JONG, A.: *Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*. Leiden 2015, 157–204; cf. also GORDON, L. R.: Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism. In HINNELLS, J. R. (ed.): *Mithraic Studies I*. Manchester 1975, 215–248, here 226.

¹⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads* I 7. 1; V 3. 17; VI 9. 6. 46 and VI 9. 6. 40.

¹⁹ Plotinus, (n. 18)

²⁰ Plotinus, (n. 18).

²¹ Plotinus, (n. 18).

²² Plotinus, (n. 18).

crater (from which she has been created by the Demiurge's action) the indivisible essence with the divisible essence of the "remnants".²³ Therefore, according to the *Corpus Hermeticum's* fourth book known as The Crater, during their baptism the *mystai*, or "initiates", "remember" their place of origin, the crater, and their fraternity with the Anima Mundi, the World Soul.²⁴ By confirming Plato's theory, and in harmony with Middle Platonism, all that is shown in the Chaldean Oracles at the fragment 95: "... ἐγκάρδιον ἐνθείς – This 'mark' [the X] belonging to the essence of souls [the Demiurge] 'placed in the heart' as a specific character of each soul. These are doctrines of theurgists and gods showing the most unknown things [to the most of people]",²⁵ asserting that the Demiurge put into each soul the specific "character – or seal, or mark X". In his comment, Porphyry affirms that this mark is the Anima Mundi's icon²⁶ (Proclus ascribes this interpretation to both Julians).

As a second Demiurge, in addition to generating/creating souls and by having many forms in itself and none of its own (inasmuch she has to host all of them), Hecate shapes matter and all of the bodies as well as the human form. Unlike Aristotle, who called it ὕλη, "matter" in the *Phys.* I 9. 192a, 31–32, Plato, at section 50 of the *Timaeus*, had called it ὑποδοχή, "receptacle". The *Chaldean Oracles* tell us how this process happens: by jumping down and bearing the force of its flame, the lightning sows its *logoi spermatikoi*, "*rationes seminales*", "seminal reasons" in order to fecundate Hecate's seven wombs/planets/worlds.

If it is true, as Campbell confirms,²⁷ that Porphyry's *De Antro Nympharum* accounts for a metaphorical description of a Mithraeum, we may realize in this work the full connection between Neoplatonism and Mithraism, where Mithras is the expression of Being; the Demiurge would be the force implemented by Mithras and the tauroctony would be the creative act. Nonetheless Porphyry speaks of Mithras as the Demiurge but not of the tauroctony as a creation. Evidently Porphyry, as a non-initiate, had some difficulties in explaining the tauroctony, and resorted to the Vergilian myth of Aristaëus who, sacrificing cattle and leaving the carcasses, caused them to give birth by them to new swarms of bees (*bougonia*) (Vergil, *Geo.* 4. 530–566).

Iamblichus (245–325 AD) wrote *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* (*The Egyptian Mysteries*), which was supposed to describe the practice of theurgy by allowing the initiate to release his own soul from material bonds and to return to the *ochema* "the astral vehicle containing and taking the soul to the hyperuranic world". Once the soul will have ascended beyond the planets to the empyrean, it will arrive at the *hyperuranium*, the world of ideas, by obtaining its *bios theôretikos*, the contemplative life. At least, after having met Mithras, it will have assimilated within the

²³ MERKELBACH, R.: *Mithra. Il signore delle grotte*. Genova 1998², 225.

²⁴ *Corp. Herm.* 4, *The Crater*.

²⁵ TONELLI, A. (a cura): *Oracoli Caldaici*. Milan 1995; *Orac. Chald.* P. 47 n. 1 = *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Rem Publicam commentarii*. Vol. I–II. Ed. G. KROLL. Leipzig 1899–1901. French transl. A.-J. Festugière. Paris 1970, II 143, 23; LEWY (n. 7) 252–253 n. 23.

²⁶ Porph. *In Plat. Tim.* LXX 61–62 (cf. SODANO, A. R.: *Porphyrii in Platonis Timaeum Commentariorum Fragmenta*. Napoli 1964).

²⁷ CAMPBELL, L. A.: *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*. Leiden 1968, 55 ff.

One/Good/hypercosmic Sun in order to achieve its *homoiôsis theô*, “assimilation to God”.

If the Demiurge’s figure is hermaphroditic and the Persian God is male, we wonder what role Mithras can have in the *Chaldean Oracles* schema. On the basis of philosophical summary given by Neoplatonism, it would seem that the Persian God, by myth and tauroctony, represents an element of the Demiurge. In other words, he is *energeia*, “action”: he implements the essence of *dynamis*, “the power (female element) of the creation of the world”. He is also the (male) demiurgic act performed by the Demiurge which has a hermaphroditic nature.

Similarly, Firmicus Maternus, in *De errore profanarum religionum* 5. 1 asserts:

Persae et Magi omnes qui Persicae regionis incolunt fines ignem praeferunt et omnibus elementis ignem putant debere praeponi. Hi itaque ignem in duas dividunt potestates, naturam eius ad utriusque sexus transferentes, et viri et foeminae simulacro ignis substantiam deputantes. Et mulierem quidem triformi vultu constituunt, monstruosis eam serpentibus inligantes.

All of Persians and Magicians, who inhabit into Persian region, prefer fire and retain that it must be preposed to all of elements. Thus they divide fire in two powers and transfer its nature to both sexes by attributing to its *simulacrum* the male and female nature. They portray a threefold-faced woman, which is wrapped by monstrous snakes. [Hecate].

Attilio Mastrocinque, in his forthcoming book, *The Mysteries of Mithras. A Different Account*, analyzes the sequence of scenes depicted on several Mithraic predellas and demonstrates a strict connection between a sleeping Saturn on a rock and Mithras’ birth from a rock.²⁸ As many authors claim, sleeping Saturn, emasculated by his son Jupiter, the succeeding ruler of universe, is dreaming of Victory. By moving his sun-chariot and aiming at Saturn, Mithras becomes the Victory of that dream and the image of her, who can be found as a winged Victory in some Mithraea. The image of Mithras’ victory is the tauroctony. After his victories in the Civil War and in the battle of Actium, which Augustan poets celebrated and assimilated to those of Gods in the Gigantomachy and Titanomachy, Augustus, believed by people to be Apollo’s son, became Emperor and a new Golden Age began. By identifying himself with Apollo, he wanted to restore the Saturn’s reign, whose ruler would have been Apollo-Mithras, i.e. Augustus himself. Finally the image of tauroctony is substituted for that of Victory in the act of the fundamental triumph which created the Roman Empire and gave an end to Civil Wars.

²⁸ MASTROCINQUE, A.: *The Mysteries of Mithras. A Different Account*. Tübingen 2017. See also MASTROCINQUE, A.: *Des mystères de Mithra aux mystères de Jésus* [Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 26]. Stuttgart 2009, 74–81.

The hypothesis attributing a cosmogonic sense to Mithraic tauroctony cannot be sustained, because in the *Avesta* the myth of the bull killed by Ahriman is only related to the growth of plants and medications.²⁹ The reasoning of some modern authors is often circular: Mithras killing the bull = creation; Mithras is a Persian; and therefore the Persian myth should speak of Mithras as a creator killing the bull. According to this wrong opinion, it has been asserted that the bull-slaying by Mithras gives rise to the end of the old world in order to give place to a new creation.

Conclusions

In the *De antro Nympharum*, Porphyry asserts that Mithras is the creator, inasmuch as Platonism hypothesized a *deuteros theos* as a creator. The creator acts in the cosmos and the cave is its image. But Porphyry, “in a Vergilian key”, intends the tauroctony not as a creation but as a generation of bees.

Therefore, the image of the tauroctony does not represent the creation but the victory. In the Augustan Age, as A. Mastrocinque confirms, it was the image of the Augustus-Sol-Mithras’ victory in the Civil War, substituting for that of winged Victory.

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²⁹ CUMONT, F.: *Les Mystères de Mithra*. Paris 1902², 113, cfr. CUMONT, F.: *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra [MMM]* Vol. I–II. Brussels 1894–1896, I 179 ff., 186 ff. quoted in ELIADE, M.: *Storia delle credenze e delle idee religiose*. Vol. II. Milano 2006.