

BOOK REVIEW

**NAGEL, SVENJA; QUACK, JOACHIM FRIEDRICH;
WITSCHER, CHRISTIAN (EDS) *ENTANGLED WORLDS:
RELIGIOUS CONFLUENCES BETWEEN EAST AND WEST IN
THE ROMAN EMPIRE. THE CULTS OF ISIS, MITHRAS, AND
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This volume is the collection of a series of contributions to a conference held at the *Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg* in 2009, which involved a great number of scholars from different fields, such as archaeologists, philologists and historians. The most relevant feature of this work is to have finally managed to deal with the topic of the so-called “oriental cults” from different perspectives through a multidisciplinary approach.²

The editors have arranged the essays into five sections plus a short introduction at the beginning, in which Joachim Friedrich Quack and Christian Witschel explain the methodology and the purposes of the whole work.

The first section, “The Concept of ‘Oriental Cults’ in Recent Debates”, includes two contributions with contrasting ideas, which represent the two main trends of the current research on this theme. In “The ‘Romanization’ of ‘Oriental Cults’”, Jaime Alvar tries to build a new theory about the “oriental religions” on

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² “Oriental cults” is an old historiographical category, highly criticised in the second half of the 20th century and hardly examined by scholars through the system of teamwork, which is typical of the current research. Authors who aim at writing a general work about this topic run the risk of relying on a vast secondary bibliography about specific aspects of the cults, as proven by Alvar, Jaime. *Romanising Oriental Gods. Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*. Translated by Richard Gordon. Leiden: Brill, 2008 (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 165). The majority of scholars, on the contrary, chooses to examine each cult in a separate monograph, creating works that in some cases became crucial to the research on the topic, such as Merkelbach, Reinhold. *Mithras*. Königstein: Anton Hain Verlag, 1984; and Roller, Lynn E. *In Search of God the Mother. The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. This kind of book, however, is usually written by a single author, who can hardly master all types of sources with the same degree of expertise, due to his/her specialisation in a certain field. For this reason, I believe that a collective work, which takes advantage of the scholars’ specialised knowledge and lets the reader draw more general conclusions about the topic, can be a good compromise between the two aforementioned alternatives.

the ruins of Franz Cumont's thought. Nevertheless, by using the concepts of "universalization" and "differentiation", the Spanish scholar acknowledges the results achieved by those exponents of the ongoing debate who are mainly critical of Cumont's theses. However, despite the great balance between old and new ideas, Alvar's work seems to be bound to outdated theoretical models, such as the supposed great appeal of the "oriental cults" on women and slaves.³ On the other hand, Julietta Steinhauer ("Osiris *mystes* und Isis *orgia* – Gab es ‚Mysterien‘ der ägyptischen Gottheiten?") tries to demonstrate that Romans did not conceive the cult of Isis and of other Egyptian deities as a mystery-cult. Therefore, by means of the examination of epigraphic and archaeological sources together with the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, she gathers new evidence to undermine Cumont's theory of "mystery" as the real common feature of "oriental cults".⁴

The second section of the volume is entitled "Origins and Diffusion of 'Oriental Cults' within the Imperium Romanum: The Case of Jupiter Dolichenus". It is introduced by Engelbert Winters' "The Cult of Jupiter Dolichenus and its Origins. The Sanctuary at Dülük Baba Tepesi near Doliche", an excellent summary of the main historical phases of the long life of the sanctuary dedicated to this god in his supposed homeland. In "The Cult of Jupiter Dolichenus in the East", Michael Blömer re-examines new and old sources regarding the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus in the Near East. The scholar makes a clear distinction between his worship in Asia Minor, where the god was perceived as a local deity linked to Doliche, and the western territories under Roman rule, where his cult lost its local character to become a religion of the empire. However, the most interesting approach to the topic is that of Mihály Loránd Dészpa ("Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus and the Re-Imagination of the Empire: Religious Dynamics, Social Integration, and Imperial Narratives"), who pays particular attention to the role of Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus as a means of social integration in the multicultural society of the Roman Empire. Special emphasis is given to the construction of a "social identity" by means of oriental languages and certain denominations of the god used on some inscriptions. Nevertheless, Dészpa stresses the close relationship between this cult and the imperial

³ This approach was criticised more than two decades ago in Takács, Sarolta A. *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World*. Leiden: Brill, 1995 (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 124), pp. 5-7.

⁴ She is very critical of those scholars, like Alvar, who still conceive "mystery-religions" as an all-encompassing category.

authority. The great value of this text lies in presenting many case studies without overlooking the formulation of a more general synthesis from the examined sources.

The four contributions of the third section (“Expanding from Egypt into Globality: The Case of Isis and Osiris”) share a common theme: the relationship between universal and local in Egyptian cults. Ian Moyer’s “The Hymns of Isidorus at Medinet Madi: Global Currents in a Local Context” introduces this topic through the examination of the four hymns engraved by the poet Isidorus on the columns of the temple of Hermouthis and Isis at Medinet Madi, in which Isis was worshipped in both her local and universal form. In “One for All and All for One? Isis as *una quae es(t) omnia* in the Egyptian Temples of the Graeco-Roman Period”, Svenja Nagel, through a detailed review of a great number of papyri and inscriptions, aims at explaining how Isis could be considered as *una* and *panthea* at the same time by Roman worshippers. The study of an unpublished demotic papyrus from the Austrian National Library (“New Light on the Universality of Isis, pVienna D. 6297+6329+10101”) enables Martin Andreas Stadler to describe the intricate interrelations between the Isis-hymns of Greek and Egyptian tradition. Stadler also mentions a problem that is unluckily deeply rooted in the studies about the Hellenistic and Roman Isis: the exclusion of demotic sources. They are thus examined in detail, although with reference to the myth of Osiris, in J. F. Quack’s contribution (“Resting in Pieces and Integrating the Oikoumene. On the Mental Expansion of the Religious Landscape by Means of the Body Parts of Osiris”), which demonstrates that the god’s scattered limbs were the only unifying religious elements of the Egyptian nomes.

Three essays are gathered under the title of the fourth section, “The Visual Conceptualization of ‘Oriental Gods’”. In an illuminating contribution entitled “Egypt as Part of the Roman *koine*: Mnemohistory and the Iseum Campense in Rome”, Miguel John Versluys explains how Romans not only perceived, but also constructed the Egyptian otherness, partly re-elaborating this foreign culture for their own purposes. Darius Frackowiak (“Mithräische Bilderwelten. Eine Untersuchung zu ausgewählten ikonographischen Elementen im römischen Mithraskult”) then examines a great number of Mithraic reliefs and sculptures, all linked to the central episode of tauroctony and to other events and

secondary characters of the god's myth. Despite the lack of sources for the identification of the real origin of Mithraism among Romans, the author stresses that its strength was its flexibility, which made it suitable for various categories of worshippers. The same quality is attributed to the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus by Ralf Krumeich ("Zwischen Orient und Okzident. Bilder des Jupiter Dolichenus und der Juno Regina aus dem Osten und Westen des Römischen Reiches"), who analyses the variable iconography of the god and of his consort in both the Eastern and Western provinces.

The fifth and final section of the volume contains four contributions focused on "Changing Forms of Sacred Space, Sanctuaries and Rituals". Kathrin Kleibl ("An Audience in Search of a Theatre – The Staging of the Divine in the Sanctuaries of Graeco-Egyptian Gods") interestingly compares the sanctuaries dedicated to the Egyptian gods to the Roman theatres. Isiac rituals, in fact, had many theatrical features, while the hierarchical distinction among worshippers alludes to that of the audience of a theatre. This, however, did not exclude the possibility of a spiritual transformation, which was the core of the cult and had nothing to do with the Roman conception of drama. Florence Saragoza's "Exploring Walls: On Sacred Space in the Pompeian *Iseum*" analyses the individual parts of the *Iseum* of Pompeii, giving an overall interpretation of the sanctuary. In the well-structured contribution "*Templa et spelaea Mithrae. Unity and Diversity in the Topography, Architecture and Design of Sanctuaries in the Cult of Mithras*", Andreas Hensen tries to find out the elements that could identify a Mithraeum with a high degree of probability. Therefore, he carries out a detailed examination of the archaeological finds and the architectural structures of the existing Mithraea, in order to determine some recurrent features of the Mithraic sanctuaries. Finally, Richard Gordon ("From East to West: Staging Religious Experience in the Mithraic Temple") explains the symbolic meaning of the space of Mithraea, separating a spatio-temporal and a ritual-dynamic level, respectively called "condensation" and "narrativity". Gordon asserts that only rethinking former perspectives and creating new interpretative categories, "the central question of the communication of meaning in the cult of Mithras is now firmly on the agenda".

The concept of "oriental cults" is nowadays an outdated paradigm, but it still gains support from some scholars. In contrast to this situation, the cults of

Isis, Mithras and Jupiter Dolichenus are treated in this volume as entities that have nothing (or little) to do with each other. The major quality of the contributions is the detailed examination of every kind of source, which, however, does not exclude general considerations about the topics. The multi-disciplinary approach is thus very useful, enabling scholars to have a broader understanding of the religious and social dynamics of these cults, as well as allowing a re-examination of old questions in the light of this new methodology.