

# INTRODUCTION

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The skin of historiography is often made of very thick leather. And its weight is closer to a kilo of lead than a kilo of feathers. More than a century after the publication of Franz Cumont's *Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, and despite several decades of deconstruction, the category of "Oriental Cults," while no longer operative, remains very much alive. Many scholars, no doubt for the sake of convenience, still lump together the eggs of Mithras, Isis, Mater Magna and Jupiter Dolichenus - to name but a few of the divine powers featured in John North's "marketplace of religions". The use of quotation marks, the use of "cosidetti" or "so called" don't change a thing. In a way, they underline the persistence of a concept that will soon be several centuries old.

A concept which, since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has had to coexist with less vast fields of research which, in the end, also raise questions. "Mithraic studies," like "Isiac studies," to whose development I am no stranger, have structured territories which, in turn, undoubtedly deserve to be partly deconstructed, perhaps in order to be delimited – if not defined – differently. By excluding the homeland of Isis and her kin from their field of investigation for so long, the Isiac studies – "ex Aegypto," that is – have deprived themselves of a fundamental part of the datas enabling us to better apprehend the fascinating phenomenon of the success of the goddess, her husbands Sarapis and Osiris and the other members of her divine circle throughout the Greco-Roman empire, of which Egypt is obviously a part. By neglecting Egypt – voluntarily – the scholars of whom I was one have deprived themselves of many keys to analyzing the phenomenon they studied, on several levels. Not only did they ignore the evolution of the cult of these ancestral divinities on Egyptian territory during the Greco-Roman period, thus depriving themselves of highly fruitful elements of comparison with what was happening on the other side of the Mediterranean, but they also ignored an essential aspect of their field of study, namely what happened to Alexandrianized, Hellenized and Romanized forms – in short, forms outside traditional Egypt – when they returned to the Nile valley after their wanderings in the East, Greece or the West. Not to mention

Sarapis, whose cult “in Aegyptō” has never been the subject of the slightest synthesis, the majority of works on the god having focused on his origins and his disappearance in the flames of the Alexandrian Sarapieion. The same applies to Mithra. While the hypothetical origins of Roman Mithra have filled pages and pages of scholarly and illusory reflections, very few have ventured to analyze the cult of Roman Mithra, not in Persia, of course, but in Roman Syria for example, despite the fact that documentation has grown considerably in recent decades around the mithraea of Sidon, Dura and Hawarte, not to mention isolated monuments like the extraordinary relief now in the collections of the Israel Museum. Or on the shores of the Pontus Euxinus, between Trapezus and Colchis, Mithraic lands par excellence, where various ways of worshipping Mithras coexisted and intersected during the Imperial period, assuming that it was always the same divine power that hid behind the same theonym. Polytheism is plural not only because of the sheer number of divinities that nourish it, but also because each divinity has a multitude of manifestations, often designated by cult epithets and materialized by an infinite number of representations, anthropomorphic or otherwise.

One way out of these various compartmentalizations may well be to give priority to multi-scalar studies, which allow us to envisage the plural networks that structured the Greco-Roman world; for polytheism is not a stack of gods, carefully labeled and endowed with a single prerogative. To understand it, we need to think in terms of relational networks, of a nebula charged with divine dust, worked by complex gravitational phenomena. The world of the gods, in other words, is alive with movement and turmoil; it is effervescent and bubbling, despite the constant efforts of sovereign gods such as Amun, Marduk, Baal, Yahweh, Zeus and Sarapis to subject it to their authority. These fluid relational networks, never static, are built vertically, between different levels, on different scales, whether the approach is from the general to the particular or from the particular to the general; horizontally, allowing the comparative analysis of case studies of the same level; but also transversally, giving rise to three-dimensional glocal studies. Within ancient polytheisms that form a system, through the permanent interaction of the multiple components they nourish within their breasts (humans, animals, monuments, objects, places, moments, rituals, words, images, gestures, divinities), this type of investigation proves extremely fruitful, as recent work on the cults of Mithra and Isis has shown.

The organizers of the superb symposium that brought us together in Zagreb in September 2022 understood this perfectly, inviting participants to study documentation at different levels, from the most local to the most global, within a deliberately limited space, between the Danube and the Adriatic Sea. This approach led to some fascinating discussions, of which the beautiful book you are holding in your hands is the perfect outcome.

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