

Ritual Expertise: A Comparative Analysis between the Derveni Papyrus and Religious Rituals in Greece and Persia

Throughout the poorly preserved early columns of the Derveni Papyrus there is attested a cryptic ritual, most clearly represented in the fragmentary first six columns, and the true purpose and context of which is highly contested. It is in these rituals that significant confusion arises, centered around the use of the word μάγοι (*magoi*). This word refers to the priestly caste of Achaemenid Persian society, or to a mysterious group of Greek ritual practitioners and sorcerers. The use of the word μάγοι is used most often with a severely negative connotation, with the suggestion of dark magic and sorcery and other corrupting influences (Betegh, 2004). Contrary to these other contexts, the word μάγοι in the Derveni Papyrus is used with a neutral or even self-ascriptive connotation that suggests a deeper connection.

The aim of this paper is to analyze these types of ritual practice, in particular the presence of water and milk libations, many knobbed cakes as votive offerings, and the expulsion of δαίμονες (*daimones*) (*DP*, col .6.7-8). In order to do this, I will approach the textual and archaeological evidence for these practices in both Greece and Persia, and to look at the relationship between these types of rituals. I will consider what type of relationship can be established between these two religious practices, and how these rituals may exist in parallel. There are some observations of similarities between Orphic rituals and understanding and contemporary Zoroastrian ritual practices, but more work can be done to understand these connections, and to understand their origins in the context of both material and literary culture (Russell, 2001).

The most interesting question that arises from this type of work, and one which the paper will focus on extensively, concerns the identity of the μάγοι and how the word is being used in

the context of the Derveni Papyrus. The connotations of this word are highly flexible, and a solid interpretation of the context can lend proper insight into both the identity of the μάγοι, as well as the background of the author of the Papyrus. The intellectual traditions and blended religious environment of the broader Mediterranean world form a backdrop for the traditions that influence the highly educated author. Exploring this background thoroughly allows for proper understanding of the contents and significance of the rituals in the early columns, which is vital for limiting the possibilities of the meaning of an otherwise highly cryptic and poorly understood text. By looking at the attestations of ritual practices in Persia, such as the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, as well as Zoroastrian practices in Persian controlled Ionia, a more clear picture arises of a multi-cultural and highly influential system of beliefs that agree on multiple theological points, as well as philosophical underpinnings (Hallock, 1969; Russell 2001).

The paper focuses on the consequences of drawing legitimacy for this practice from other places, especially in the context of Greek understanding of those practices. Persian and Greek overlap in religious literature has been attested from the Achaemenid Empire, and even earlier, and parallels in both cosmological and geographical understanding are documented (West, 1997). It is the nature of the cross-cultural dialogue which needs to be understood to the best of our evidential understanding, and how the two realms of belief are interacting with one another, as well as in the mind of the Derveni Papyrus Author.

Bibliography

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