Cosmology, Magic and Divination Seminar 4: Magic, Theurgy and Philosophy in Late Antiquity

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Student Activity for Week 4: Magic, Theurgy and Philosophy in the Graeco-Roman World

Student Activity: Divination and Theurgy

- The passages below are taken from the philosopher Iamblichus' *De mysteriis* (*On the mysteries*), one of the most extensive works on theurgy to survive from late antiquity. Iamblichus was a major proponent and advocate of theurgy; he was particularly influential in this regard on later philosophers who also endorsed the practice of theurgy, such as Proclus and the emperor Julian (AD 361-363).

- Read the passages below and consider the following questions: how does Iamblichus characterize and conceptualise divination? What philosophical concepts underlie his explanation of the workings of divination and theurgy? What is the relationship between divination and theurgy? How do divination and theurgy relate to the gods, in Iamblichus' view? Please be prepared to discuss your ideas in the seminar.

Student Activity: Week 4

"… the divinatory power of the gods is bounded by nothing divisible, neither by place, nor by a divisible human body, nor by a soul contained in any single form of divisible entities, but being separate by itself and indivisible, it is wholly present everywhere to those able to share in it. And it both illuminates from without and fills all things, and permeates all the elements: it embraces both earth, air, fire and water, and leaves nothing deprived of itself, neither living beings nor beings governed by nature, but to some it gives a greater portion of its foreknowledge, and to others a lesser portion. And existing itself prior to the totality of things, it is sufficient by its own separateness, to fill all things to the extent that each is able to share in it."

Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 3.12 (129.1-11), trs. Emma Clarke, John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell (Atlanta: SBL, 2003).

"This, then, is one kind of mantic [i.e. divination], which is undefiled and sacerdotal, and truly divine; and 'this does not need', as you say, 'either myself or anyone else as umpire, in order that I prefer it to any others', but it is itself entirely removed from all, supernatural, and eternally pre-existent, neither admitting any comparison nor pre-eminence among many; it is free from all this, and takes precedence over all according to its uniform self. And it is proper for you and everyone who is a genuine lover of the gods to surrender himself to it wholly. For in such a fashion arises, at the same time, both infallible truth in oracles, and perfect virtue in souls. With both of these, ascent to the intelligible fire is granted to theurgists, a process which indeed must be proposed as the goal of all foreknowledge and of every theurgic operation."

- Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 3.31 (178.13-179.8)

Theurgy in Late Antiquity

- **What was theurgy (*theourgia*)? How is it related to philosophy?**
- **Is it possible to distinguish theurgy from magic or from religion?**
- **Was it spiritual purification and, if so, how did it work?**
- **What cosmological and metaphysical notions and frameworks underlie theurgy?**

Neoplatonism

- A philosophical school / movement.
- Pagan philosophers (between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD – 'Late Antiquity').
- Philosophical commentaries on the works of Plato and Aristotle (they considered Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy to be compatible and harmonious), and their own works on philosophical topics.
- Impact of their work: their religious and moral ideals, their conception of reality as spiritual activity or states of consciousness. Philosophy as a way of life.
- They viewed the human soul as a voyager with its ultimate aim the re-ascent to its divine origins.

Important Neoplatonist Philosophers

- **Plotinus (AD 204/05 – 270)**

  Neoplatonist philosopher, founded a Platonic School in Rome. Teacher of Porphyry.
- **Porphyry (AD 234 – c.305)**

  Scholar, Neoplatonist philosopher and student of religions. Student of Plotinus and editor of Plotinus' *Enneads*. Porphyry was the most vocal of these philosophers in his criticism of Christianity.

Important Neoplatonist philosophers

Iamblichus (c. AD 245 – c. 325)

- Neoplatonist philosopher. Possible student and colleague of Porphyry. Established his own Platonic school in Syria. The first Neoplatonist to use and advocate the use of theurgy.

Proclus (AD 410/ 412 - 485)

- Neoplatonist philosopher. He became head of the Academy (the Platonic school) at Athens in AD 437. He made extensive use of theurgy and other types of polytheistic religious rituals.

Neoplatonist philosophers

- Students/followers of Plotinus:
  - Amelius, Firmus Castricius, Amphicleia, Gemina the Elder and Gemina the Younger (see Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* [*Vita Plotini*])
- Students/followers of Iamblichus:
  - Sopater, Eustathius, Aedesius, Arete?, Sosipatra (who was also a renowned prophetess) (see Eunapius' *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* [*Vitae Sophistarum*])
- Students/followers of Proclus:
  - Damascius, Isidore, Marinus (see Marinus' *Proclus, Or On Happiness* and Damascius' *Life of Isidore* or *Philosophical History*)

Female Theurgists and Philosophers in Late Antiquity

- Sosipatra: philosopher, theurgist and prophetess who was associated with the successors of Iamblichus' school – set up her own philosophical school in Pergamon, Asia Minor.
- Asclepigeneia: philosopher and theurgist who trained Proclus in theurgy, she was associated with the Neoplatonic School of Athens.
- Hypatia? Philosopher who lived in Alexandria and may have practised theurgy (evidence uncertain)
- Bibliography relating to these female philosophers and theurgists on next slide.

Bibliography: Female Philosophers and Theurgists

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What was 'theurgy'?

- Literally means 'god-working.'
- Pagan (polytheistic) ritual originally associated with the *Chaldaean Oracles* and used by the later Neoplatonist philosophers (Iamblichus, Proclus).
- Possibly a form of higher magic.
- It covered a range of religious and philosophical practices, including the use of divination and oracles.
- A highly spiritual goal or purpose.
- 'Higher' and 'lower' theurgy: immaterial 'contemplation' (and ritual) and material forms of ritual (but it may be better to think of cumulative and integrated stages of ritual practice)

Temple of Bel, Apamea, Syria (and Palmyra)

- Top and bottom left: remains of small temple, Palmyra, Syria
- Bottom right: butterfly at Apamea, Syria (next to Temple of Zeus-Belos)
- All photographs taken by Leonard George, November 2008

What was theurgy? (2)

- Proclus, *Platonic Theology* 1.25.7-10 (ed. Saffrey and Westerink 113; trs. Dodds 1951, 291), states that theurgy is a: "power greater than all human wisdom and knowledge, embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation, and in a word all the operations of divine possession."
- Theurgy, as opposed to the more vulgar *goeteia* (magic), was supposed to be grander, more exalted and full of deep religious feeling, but the procedures and rituals it uses are very similar (prayer, invocation, divination, sacrifice)
- Theurgy as a lifelong endeavour of devotion and endurance: a way of life or a way of being.

How did theurgy work?
The 'locative' worldview

- 1/ There is a cosmic order that permeates every level of reality.
- 2/ This cosmic order is the divine society of the gods.
- 3/ The structure and dynamics of this society can be discerned in the movements and patterned juxtapositions of the heavenly bodies.
- 4/ Human society should be a microcosm of the divine society.
- 5/ The chief responsibility of priests (and theurgists) is to attune human order to the divine order.

Cosmic Sympathy (sympatheia)

- Heavily based on the idea of Platonic Forms which, literally, 'enform' all physical phenomena.
- Proclus, *On the Sacred Art* (ed. and trs. B. Copenhaver 1988): "the experts in sacred matters start with the sympathy which connects all visible phenomena to both one another and to the 'invisible Powers."
- "Chains" or "series" of things (linked ontologically – in their very being or existence - by *sympatheia*) that are similar in their nature. Proclus asserts that all things are full of gods, and each "chain" increases in number as it proceeds to its lowest expressions in the cosmic realm.
- The role of *theia philia* (divine love); 'supracosmic' sympathy.

Sympatheia and *symbola*

- *symbola* (symbols), the physical expressions of these divine "chains" – ontologically connected to the gods.

- *Symbola* (symbols) embedded in nature (stones, plants, herbs etc); present in certain incantations, concoctions and characters traced on the earth.

- The *symbola* were thought to bear the impress of the god and were able to awaken souls to the divinity they symbolised.

- *Symbola* enabled the theurgist to partake of *sympatheia*, were mixed into the material of telestic statues used by the theurgists, inscribed or placed within statues, worn by the theurgist, spoken by him or otherwise handled by him during theurgic rituals

Types of theurgic ritual / operations

- 1/ *Telestika* - the consecration and animation of cultic statues of the gods (and the theurgist-philosopher as a living statue of the gods: the importance of divine assimilation).
- 2/ Divine possession rituals - involving the induction of a trance state in an individual (oracular divination from the deity).
- 3/ The invocation of a god's epiphany - in order to gain divine information (oracular divination or dream divination directly from the deity).
- The *Chaldean Oracles*: the paradigmatic example of theurgic divination?

Cult statue of the god Sarapis

- National Museum, Alexandria, Egypt
- Limestone statue of the god Sarapis [or alternative spelling: Serapis}
- Dating: Ptolemaic period
- Provenance: Batn Herait
- http://alexmuseum.com/category/greek-and-roman/

Differences between theurgy and magic (*goeteia*)

- 1/ **Goals and purposes and the practitioner's disposition and motivation.**
- The theurgist's inner disposition and motivation, focused on an intellectual or spiritual turning upwards, the turning of the soul towards the noetic realm; the theurgist had to be a philosopher.
- Aim of theurgy: *anagogê*, the raising of the soul to the 'intellectual fire' of the noetic realm while the body is still alive.
- Therefore, theurgy is far more spiritual and intellectual than *goeteia* which was often directed towards practical, concrete and 'everyday' goals and purposes. However, note that theurgy often had practical and concrete goals as well.

Differences between theurgy and magic (*goeteia*) (2)

- 2/ A commonly asserted distinction between theurgy and magic is that **the magician attempts to 'constrain' or 'bind' the gods so that they do his bidding, whereas the theurgist 'invokes' the gods**. The theurgist believed that the gods willingly endowed humans with their theurgic abilities: this ranged from the ability to invoke the gods to the knowledge of the correct *symbola* to use in specific rituals.
- Is this distinction too simplistic? Many magical rituals do not attempt to constrain the gods but rather invoke them with piety, devotion and reverence.
- Similarity with Frazer's view of the distinction between 'magic' and 'religion'

Differences between theurgy and magic (*goeteia*) (3)

- 3/ **Magical practitioners use 'horizontal sympathy' while theurgic practitioners use 'horizontal' and 'vertical' sympathy**.
- Any ritual practitioner who used the sympathy inherent in the soul and natural objects without relating this sympathy to its divine cause and origin is practicing *goeteia* rather than theurgy (see Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 3.28-30).
- *Symbola* are 'vertically' connected to their divine causes, yet each had a 'horizontal' identity in its respective order in the cosmos. However, any ritual that stopped at the horizontal level of *sympatheia* and did not "preserve the analogy with divine creation" was not theurgy but *goeteia*.

Theurgy and Reincarnation

- Receptivity (capacity or suitability): for ritual practices, intellectual discipline and ethical conduct.
- 'Right relationship' or alignment with the cosmos.
- The theory of Recollection
- Reincarnation: a multi-lifelong endeavour
- The human soul as a voyager through time and space, through life and death and life.
- Levels or stages of theurgic ritual - often described as 'higher' or 'lower' but would 'beginning, intermediate and advanced (cumulative) stages' be more appropriate?

Student Activity for Week 5: Divination and Oracles in Ancient Greece

Necromancy and Oracles of the Dead

Please undertake some preliminary research on ancient Greek necromancy and Oracles of the Dead and be prepared to discuss your findings in the seminar.

Questions to consider: What was necromancy and how would you define it? In what contexts was necromancy used and would you describe these contexts as 'religious' or 'magical' or both? What were Oracles of the Dead and where were they located?

See especially Ogden, D., *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

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