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IRANISM AND IONISM

IN

SOUTH RUSSIA.



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Iranism and Ionism in South-Russia.

It is difficult to state the comparative influences of one culture on another. Still more difficult and complicated is it to define the sphere and extent of the influence. Among such reciprocal influences of culture at work in the ancient world, the influence of the Iran upon the Roman empire has chiefly attracted in modern times the attention of historical science. It has been attempted to trace these influences in statesmanship, in religion and in the culture and art of the later times of the Roman empire.

But scholars have rarely taken into consideration the fact that the term «Iranism» must be understood in a limited sense. That is to say, Rome stood under the influence not of pure Iranism, but of the particular Hellenistic Iranism, which existed on the coasts of the Black Sea and in Asia Minor and was united and blended with the complicated Greek Ionian culture. It likewise absorbed at the same time many elements of the Semitic and pre-Semitic culture of Mesopotamia and of the upper parts of Tigris and Euphrates. In the Hellenistic times pure Iranism did not exist even in Parthian and Sasanidian Persia, much less in Armenia, the Caucasus, the northern coasts of the Black Sea, Pontos and Cappadocia.

It is necessary therefore, before dealing with the question of the Iranian influence on the Roman empire, to solve the following problem: what aspect did the culture of Parthian and Sasanidian Persia present, and particularly what was the aspect of the complicated culture of the semi-Iranian countries on the Black-Sea coasts?

Ancient historical literature and inscriptions give a very vague and incomplete answer to this question, archaeology a more definite and precise solution. But the archaeological evidence, although

accumulated in great quantities, has been little used by the writers of history, who seem inclined to treat this source with a certain indifference.

The consequence is, that countries, which have left us no legacy of literature, remain unknown to modern science. However such countries play a considerable part in dealing with the problem of cultural influence, as they serve as a medium between the cultures of other nations and form a basis on which new mixed cultures following great ancient civilisations are established.

The question of the origin of modern European culture will be a dark and complicated problem as long as the archaeological materials of the eastern and western Roman empire is not studied in detail. These materials however are not to be used as simple illustrations of ancient life, but as a constructive agency, in the same way as language and literature. These materials must serve to reconstruct the complicated cultural aspect of the separate parts of the Roman empire. Then and only then will it be possible to deal with the questions of the Iranian influence on the growing European culture.

One of the countries in respect to culture and ethnography most closely connected with Iran was the region of the steppes north of the Black Sea, populated in ancient times by Scythian and Sarmatian tribes. The civilisation of these peoples had an original and complex character. On the one hand they were intimately connected with the Ionian culture of the Greek towns on the Black Sea—Olbia, Pantikapaion, Phanagoria, Tanais, on the other hand—their whole life, their statesmanship, their religion were akin to Iran. And reciprocally these tribes imparted to the Greek towns many elements of Iranian culture.

We observe here a very interesting process of the reciprocal action of Hellenism and Iranism. We can corroborate it by studying thousands of rich and interesting memorials discovered in tombs and dwelling places belonging to the above mentioned Scythian tribes. Such memorials fill the glass-cases in the Hermitage; descriptions of them have often appeared in print, but hitherto they have been little studied and never used as historical materials.

The importance of these South-Russian materials is increased by the fact, that only in Russia, are we in possession of rich mate-

rial to illustrate the admixture of Greek and Iranian civilisation. Other countries, where similar unions of rival cultures may be observed have till now given us no material of equal abundance and interest.

The golden age of Greek-Iranian culture among the Scythian and Sarmatian peoples has its date in the IV and III centuries B. C., continuing till the great Celtic and Sarmatian movement, which destroyed the old states.

At the above mentioned time many large and small states sprung into existence in Southern Russia. The greater part of these states were quite independent. They owned important towns built in the steppes, a rich aristocracy and an order of things, which may be called feudal. Many hundreds of tumuli containing the sepulchres of the population surrounded these towns.

There are preserved to us in some of these tombs the remains of many members of the Scythian aristocracy. Their families buried with them a considerable part of their treasures, consisting of arms, furniture, utensiles and clothes. These articles were in many cases adorned with gold and silver and in many cases entirely manufactured of these metals.

The designs are in general purely ornamental, but on many of them we may observe strange barbarian figures engaged in the affairs of daily life or performing acts of religious ritual.

These articles have certainly not been made by the Scythians themselves, but for the greatest part by Greek Ionian artisans at their order. These artisans working for the Scythian aristocrats were obliged to comply with their tastes and to depict in their works of art the views of these nobles with regard to life, religion and society. We cannot doubt therefore, that, although the workmanship and the purely ornamental parts referred to on their articles are purely Ionian, the sense and the signification of the latter representations have nothing to do with Greece and Asia Minor.

The majority of these articles being found in kingly tombs we may naturally expect to find in them a reflection of the Scythian ideas on kings and the kingly power.

In one of these royal tombs in the northern Caucasus in the tumulus of Karagodeuashch among a great quantity of other precious articles has been found a silver rhyton bearing a representation till now unexplained.

We observe two men of Scythian type and in Scythian dress on horseback facing each other. Under the feet of both the horses are represented two men prostrate with their faces downwards. One of the men on horseback holds a long sceptre in his left hand and a large rhyton richly adorned in his right. The other has his right hand raised in a gesture of adoration directed towards the other mounted figure.

The signification of the representation on the rhyton becomes clear, if we compare it with the most usual subjects depicted on the rock-cut reliefs of Sasanidian Persia. The point emphasized in both cases is that the king receives his power from the God. We have only to put the design on the rhyton and that of reliefs side by side and the identity of their composition and signification will become evident.

There can be no doubt that in both are illustrated the same Iranian ideas of kingship. The king is the representative of God on earth: he is king by the grace of God, an idea prevalent in the world till now.

The scene described is not an isolated instance. In the same tumulus has been found a golden triangular plate, constituting a part of the head-dress, belonging to the Queen buried in the tomb. This plate is adorned with three different designs, arranged one above another.

In the lowest row the artist represents a Goddess seated on a throne; behind her stand two priestesses. The Goddess hands a rhyton to a richly dressed young Scythian and takes a sacred vase from the hands of another Scythian; beside her on the left stands her priest.

It is clear that the meaning of this scene is the same, as that of the above mentioned scene depicted on the rhyton, but with this difference. Instead of the God on the former, represented, as giving the symbols of kinglypower, on the latter a Goddess does so.

In the second row a man is observed standing on a car drawn by two horses. He may be the king or the male deity. Above his head a female figure is depicted with the attributes of Tyche, apparently the Persian Hvareno, a divinity personifying the victorious fortune and strength of the king.

The Goddess represented in the act of communicating the power

to the king or of receiving the adoration of the priest appears in many other objects of art belonging to the same period.

We may state therefore, that in the Scythian religion the supreme God shared his powers with a Goddess, who was extensively worshipped.

This Goddess is known to us from many inscriptions and evidences in literature. She was the great female divinity of Asia Minor, the Great Mother, called by many names: Κυβήβη, πότνια Θηρῶν, Ἄρτεμις ecc., who was early confounded with the Persian Anahita and the Semitic Astarte.

In the Bosphorian Kingdom, as also in Arabia, she bore the name of Aphrodite Ourania, and superseded the Ionian Aphrodite Apaturu. A splendid temple to this divinity was erected in the neighbourhood of Phanagoria.

All these objects of art described above belong to the III century B. C. Many other treasures, representing Scythian kings and aristocrats holding rhyta, round vases or sceptres, show that the idea of kingship by the grace of God was widely diffused and strongly implanted in the minds of the upper Scythian classes. The same deductions may be drawn from the frequent appearance of the above mentioned symbols of kingly power found in the Scythian royal tombs.

The kingdom of Bosphorus adjacent to the Scythian monarchies and in uninterrupted relations of friendship with them could not remain uninfluenced by these Iranian ideas. Though founded and developed on a purely Greek-Ionian basis, the Bosphorian kingdom embracing, as it did, Scythian peoples, did not remain unaffected by Scythian elements. The Bosphorian dynasty, although presenting the appearance alternately of an Ionian tyranny and of an Hellenistic kingdom, finally assumed in many points the aspect of a Scythian kingdom. This may be observed for example in the representation of Bosphorian kings on the well known Athenian στήλη erected to honour king Spartokos and his brothers.

If the grave in the famous tumulus of Kul-oba belong really to one of the Bosphorian kings of the III century B. C., it surely shows the great influence of Scythian ideas on Bosphorian kings.

As time advanced this influence grew stronger and stronger. There was only one short interruption in the I century A. D.

That was when the Bosphorian kingdom assumed a Thracian aspect. Subsequently the Bosphorian kingdom resembled more and more nearly its Scythian predecessors. We observe on the coins of the I—II century A. D. the same figures of Scythian or Sarmatian kings, as in the vases previously described of the III century B. C. The kingly tombs of this time are of the same kind, as in the III century B. C. Similar symbols of the kingly power are found there and are represented on contemporary coins and ornaments.

In this respect the two diadems of king Rhescuporis II found in his tomb and that of his wife are of great importance. We observe on these diadems the well known design of a king on horseback, receiving the rhyton from the hands of a mounted God.

The fact that the Bosphorian king by degrees became a Scythian or Sarmatian ruler and that the Iranian notions of kingship succeeded the Greek ideas of tyrant and king reflect a more general phenomenon. Though the official language remained Greek and the external aspect of life likewise, the internal conditions of life changed and became like those of the semi-Iranian states of the neighbourhood. Inscriptions, literary evidence and the wall paintings of the tombs testify, that the Bosphorian kingdom of this time was a feudal monarchy. It had an army of knights, armed and organised like the armies of its Sarmatian neighbours. It had temples, which owned territories containing a population of serfs or hierodouloi ruled by priests. It had large possessions belonging to the aristocracy populated and cultivated by aborigines bound to the soil.

The supreme God on horseback worshipped by the Scythians and Sarmatians was no stranger to the inhabitants of Asia Minor. He appears here as the great Iranian God Mithra and is often represented on horseback.

This image of Mithra may be observed on many coins of Trapezund in imperial times, but it is certainly of earlier date. In Asia Minor this mounted God was worshipped conjointly with the supreme Goddess of Persia and Asia Minor namely Anahita-Artemis.

The symbol of this Goddess was a fish. At the same time Mithra was identified with the Semitic Helios and Anahita with Astarte or Atargatis. The worship of this duality spread westwards.

We may observe their images on many bronze-tablets found in the countries on the lower stretches of the Danube.

In Asia Minor this duality became a trinity. The God acquired a double personalty like other Sun-Gods—the Greek Dioscuroi, the Indian Asvintas and others. This trinity found an extensive worship in the Danube provinces of the Roman empire. It was brought there by oriental soldiers and the mixed semi-oriental population of Dacia and Pannonia.

Valuable evidence of the worship of this trinity is afforded to us in leaden and stone tablets found in Dacia and Pannonia. We here observe two mounted Gods in oriental dress and a Goddess between them, standing behind a table bearing a fish. The mounted Gods are depicted as conquerors, as *θεοὶ ἀνίκητοι*, holding Iranian standards and being crowned by personifications of Victory. Under the hoofs of their respective horses lie a prostrate man, symbolic of evil, and a large fish. This fish can be explained only as the great pre-Semitic world-fish. On the high-plateaus of Armenia we may still observe many megalithic monuments in the form of sacred fishes. A reminiscence of the struggle between the Iranian Mithra and his pre-Semitic rival may be found in the legend of the Armenian Vahagn vainquisher of the Vishap.

When, in the time of Heliogabalus, the Semitic duality became the supreme divinities of the Roman Pantheon, and when later the invincible Helios, the one supreme god of Aurelian, began to dominate the Roman empire, the Mithriac trinity become subordinated to the new Dominus.

This late stage of development created a new type of design on the above described tablets. A complete religious system may be observed here.

Preëminent in the upper row figures the almighty God Helios driving in a car. He holds in the left hand an orb, symbol of the world, while with the right he makes an imperative gesture. In the middle row we observe the Gods, who act as mediators between the Heavens and the earth. These mediators are the two Mithras, conquerors of evil and of the earth; and the third figure is the Earth and Water Goddess. Next a lower row is occupied by scenes representing acts of mystic worship directed to the Gods of the middle row. In the centre of this row the scene represents the sacred meal or the mystical communion with bread, water or wine and a fish. The next scene to the right exhibits the initiation of

two or three naked *mystai* by means of the rite of baptism. A similar scene, where Mithra is baptising Helios, is quite common on the reliefs of Mithra Tauroktonos. To the left of the central scene we observe the act of *kriobolion*, namely that of baptism with blood. Finally on the lowest part are shown the well known Mythriac symbols of the elements, such being represented by the krater, the lion and the snake.

On one of the reliefs described may be observed on a lower row a very curious design of «ostentatio» or «revelatio cryfii». The *κρύφιοι* constituted a grade of mystic service, a class of *mystai* hidden during the divine service. Their «ostentatio» was an act of the greatest importance, as was also the act of their concealment.

The page of history produced to you shows the great importance of the Iranian idea of the mounted god as Vanquisher of Evil. From the coasts of the Black Sea the God, first represented by Ionian artists, moves victoriously westwards to the banks of the Danube. United with the greatest Goddess of the Asiatic world, the Earth-Mother he exhibits a twofold manifestation with the result that a trinity arises, which was worshipped by the Roman soldiers and finally by the Roman emperor himself. This trinity under the supreme God served as mediators between him and mankind, and introduced at the same time into the Roman empire the great idea of kingship by the grace of God.

This worship has features of ritual, which suggest some of the forms of worship to the Christian Trinity. The Communion and the feast of the Holy Sacrament, the baptism with water and blood are common to both.

The culture of the remote Cimmerian Bosporos appears therefore in the closest connection with great ideas even of our own times. The Bosporian tombs and the rich archæological materials found there may elucidate many historical questions of primal importance.

