From Healer to Hylē: Levantine Iconography as Manichean Mythology

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I am pleased to dedicate this article to David Bivar as a token of gratitude for the collegial kindness and the superb hospitality he and his wife Leslie have shown me on my visits to London, as well as in recognition of his broad-ranging scholarship, whereby he has often addressed issues in the history of Iranian religion through novel iconographic approaches. In keeping with the latter trait, I shall here set forth a problem of Manichean mythology, with an iconographic solution from an unexpected source.

The Manichean myth which I shall discuss takes place after the Third Messenger, emanated by the Light-realm to appear in beauteous male and female forms, induces in the Archons (the demonic forces of Hylē, i.e., greedy Matter) an organism whereby they shed some of the Light-element they had swallowed up in attacking an earlier Light-emissary, Primal Man. The less contaminated Light falls to earth and gives rise to vegetation, while the more contaminated Light falls to earth and gives rise to the animals (or "abortion demons"), which muddle the plants. Then ensue the events of the myth in question, which may be in effect summarized thus from the agreement of the various accounts:

Hyle, speaking inside of or through a male Archon-leader of the animals, promises them counterparts of the beauteous forms which they somehow recall having seen above, and for the creation of their counterparts, the animals are bade to bring their Light-material. The animals do as requested, and their offering is gobbled up by the Archon and his consorts, who copulate and produce Adam and Eve.

The accounts of this myth may be grouped in terms of local traditions into Western, most fully represented by the Coptic text of the Kephalai, and Eastern, attested by Middle Iranian and Syriac texts. The salient differences are:

(1) The name of the male Archon in the Coptic (as well as Greek and Latin allusions to the myth) is Sakla(s). His name and that of his female consort Nebrole should be traced back to a text comparable with that known from the Coptic Nag Hammadi Gnostic codices as "The Great Invisible Spirit" or "The Gospel of the Egyptians," in which the two great demons, named Sakla(s) and Nebrole, are associated with a projection of the image of Adam and Eve. By contrast, the Syriac of the Christian author Theodore bar Qōrī, who probably knew Mani's own account in the original Aramaic, gives the Archon's name as Sāqōm, to which corresponds the Middle Iranian Sāqūm. Scholars usually vocalize the name Ašašqūm, Šaš̱eqūm to bring it into line with Sakla(s). However, the only phonemic equivalence between Sakla(s) and Sāqūm is the l. A simple equation of Sāqūm with Sakla(s) would leave unexplained, in an original Semitic linguistic context, the initial vowel represented by ī in Aramaic/Syriac phonemic distinction between ʾ and ī, and between g and k (k in Aram.-Syra. saqāl is a post-vocalic continuant allophone [x] of the phoneme [k])4; and the different terminations -wun for -sīm. Sāqūm - with normally explained by */sqwI/* > */sqV/* (V = vowel). The spelling Sāqūm, moreover, is identical to what is found in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac for the name of the city of Ashkelon/Ashdod (Ašeqūm) on the southern coast of the Holy Land, which was the locus of cults from the time of the Philistines down to Roman times.

(2) While the Archon in question is not described in the Western material, the Eastern texts indicate that the demon is leptomorphous. This is clearest from the Middle Persian account, in which the archontic couple are several times described as ṯspk̪īr(u)bān, "horn-shaped." Furthermore, the name nmrǔ(y)l in Syriac (Theodore) and West Middle Iranian (alongside Syr. nbra(y)l, cf. Nebrole) for the female Archon is also leontic, with nmrǔ = Aram. nm̱̱rv̱̱, Syr. nm̱̱rv̱̱, "leopard." A variant of this name is found in Mandaeic, where *Nm-routing (Nirra, Nimra) is a designation of the archdemoness Rutha. Such a name is paralleled in Manichaean Medieval Iranian texts not only by Nmartəl/Nmnṟ̱eļ but by another name for the consort of (Sāqūm, i.e., qy̱̱v̱̱ṉ̱, found in Sogdian and Parthian. I explain the name */Pēsūs/ as a calque of *Nimiṟ̱eļ/Nmartəl, in which the verb n-m-y- ṟ̱, as in Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic, is denominally "to be spotted (as a leopard), speckled, mottled," the basic mg. of Ak. pāša-, MPers. pēš, etc. The suffix -ru seems, like -īl, to have designated both benign and malign supernatural beings. Benign beings with names in -ru are the protective spirits bṛṃvaya, gṛṃvaya etc.6 known from a Manichaean Parthian amulet, and cf. perhaps in Mani's odd Middle Persian name mnu̱̱ysv̱̱u, which is more readily explained as Aram. Mnṉ̱ys̱̱u̱̱; the Living Mani ←→ than as a borrowing from Greek Manichaios. The ending -ru-or -īl is also common in lists of demonic beings in Arabic magical texts, for which I have shown a Manichaean Middle Persian component.

(3) Whereas the Coptic says merely that Hyle spoke in(side) the Archon, the Eastern texts stress that Āz (= Hyle) "donned"
the Archon as a "garment" (Sogd.) or as a "garment and veil" or "veil and garment" (MPers.), through which she addressed the animals in the voice of the male Archon.

(4) In the Coptic, Ḥylē bids the animals to bring their "light." In Theodore and the Sogdian account, the animals are instructed to bring their young. These young are then taken and gobbled up.

The Iranian and Syriac texts, in sum, state that Az/Hylē, wearing the lion-shaped Archons Ṣḥîna and Nmērī at as a veil and/or garment, seizes the young of the animals. This odd combination of details, in contrast with the bland Coptic narrative, as well as the strange apparent name Ḡalūlōn (Ashkelon), against the Western Manichean Saka(s) (which, with the name of his consort Nburu(e), are part of the Gnostic core of the tale), require explanation.

As it happens, a figure dressed, head and torso in lion clothing, brandishing a club, and grasping a young animal existed in the Levant in the Achaemenid period, in Phoenicia, within the areas of Sidon and its neighbor Sidon (Lebanese sites resp. Amrit and Bostan esh-Sheikh, sixteenth–fifteenth centuries BCE) and in Cyprus (sixth–fourth centuries BCE).4 The statuary from Amrit occurs alongside inscriptions bearing the name of the Phoenician healing god Eshmun and it is from a sanctuary of Eshmun that the statuary of Bostan esh-Sheikh comes. The almost certain Cypriot origin of the iconography, with its Heraclean aspect, would proceed from the fact that the Phoenician savior-god Melqart, Hellenized as Herakles, had merged with Eshmun on Cyprus.5 This iconography, expressing Herakles’s victory over the Nemean lion, would also have matched an old indigenous Phoenician representation of a healing god brandishing a mace in his right hand and holding a small lion by the hind legs in his left hand.

The latter format is attested for a god whose name is spelled consonantally ṣdrp and who is represented on a stele from the vicinity of Amrit (AO 23 147) possibly dating from the ninth–seventh century BCE.6 As Lipiński notes, the stele’s representation of the god as wearing an Egyptian white crown with a cobra-serpent, bearing a mace, and, most importantly, grasping a lion, accords with the origin of ṣdrp in an Egyptian divinity named ʿsdī “the Savior” (or “Enchanter”).7 He had been represented in the eleventh century BCE grasping a lion as symbol of his control over noxious beasts, was popular among Semitic worshipers in Deir el-Medineh and Gizeh, and was later imported into the Syro-Phoenician area, where he was called ṣdrp.8 “the healing” ṣdr/ṣdrp seems to have become regarded as a local form of Eshmun,9 and both in the Hellenistic period merged as Askлепios.10

It remains to connect the foregoing iconography of the lion-clad, lion-holding god, which parallels the description of the Archon in the Syriac and Iranian versions of the Manichean myth, with Ashkelon, the toponym, seeming to designate that Archon. The spread of the worship of Eshmun throughout Palestine is attested by material from the eighth to the fourth centuries BCE.11 Precisely from the period of the Heraclean statue of the lion-holding healer-god, fifth–fourth centuries BCE, were found many pendants shaped in the symbol of Tanit, goddess of Sarepta, at Ashkelon, for which the occurrence of the same symbol on coinage of Hadrian shows the survival of the cult in the late second century CE.12 It may be posited that the Achaemenid type of cult statue of the healing god, long after his apparent desuetude in Sidon/Sarepta, persisted in Roman imperial Ashkelon—demonstrably a cultic center of the god in question.

In the fifth century CE, Marinus, a native of Nablus, Palestine, informs us that his teacher, the Neoplatonist Proclus, composed a hymn in honor of Asklepios Leontoukhus Askalouidés, “the Askalouite Liongrasping Asklepios” (Marinus Neoplaton. Vita Procli 19). This testimony has been compared with other Late Antique Levantine representations of the domination of Asklepios over lions,13 one on a cup of the late third or early fourth century CE against the coastal Palestine, i.e., from Marîtu Caesarea, and another a rock relief from a central Syrian village called Biaznin, “House of Eshmun.”14 Lipiński sees all these data as belonging to the tradition of ṣdrp/Eshmun represented in the militant format of a Heraclean figure in lion garb grasping a small lion.15

In view of the Manichean texts, it may now be affirmed that it was such a statue at Ashkelon that Marinus mentions in connection with Proclus in the fifth century and which must have been known in Manichean circles in the earlier two centuries. Mani somehow heard of the menacing cub-holding statue, whose face peering out of the lion headdress suggested to Mani the image of Ḥylē/Az/Sdrp dressing in an archontic lion-shape, in which she “raged” (thus the Middle Persian) and, speaking as the Archon, issued the commands whereby the animal young were seized. The name of the cultic center, Ḡalūlōn, replaced the phonetically similar name of the Archon, Saka(s).

Perhaps Mani, for his easier preaching, took up the image of the lion-garbed Askalouite deity in ignorance of its nature. However, it is tempting instead to suggest that as a riposte against Levantine heathendom, Mani intentionally co-opted the image and subverted the valuation of the deity. In this case, it may be further proposed that the cult-image of Asklepios, clothed in lion-garments and grasping a young animal, was well known in the Near East and was used by Mani for his own purposes in preaching to this area, whereas in Western versions (Greek, Coptic, Latin), which had been exposed to the Gnostic figure of Saka(s), the latter name was retained.

I wish to thank Jessica Nitschke for sending me an annotated bibliography on the most recent work on the relevant statuary. The material will be discussed at length in her PhD dissertation, “Perception of Culture: Interpreting Greco-Near Eastern Hybridity in the Phoenician Homeland” (University of California, Berkeley, 2006, Graduate Group in Ancient History and Mediterranean Archaeology, Dept. of Classics).16
Notes


2 Derived from Aramaic ad/δλία "the ignorant one, the fool".

3 Shortly before the account of Sakk(a) and Nebrebul, the Genitive text has a section on the Adama (Adam) as a being of Light: this Graecic figure is the source of Manis's Light-Adamas. The relevant portion of the Genitive text, featuring the Adama, Sakk(a), and Nebrebul, is readily accessible with annotated translation in Bentley Layton, The Genitive Scriptures (New York: Anchor Bible, 1987), 203-14, with analysis and bibliography of the entire text: 107-4. Since this text is connected with a rite of baptism, a related Aramaic vestry has been known to Manis from the religious tradition of his parents, where Manis authentically obtained the mythological materials for his book of Giants, on which see Martin Schwartz, "Manis, Turfan, and Noah's Name". Orames et Sociétés, Magic et Magie, = Or Orientales 14 (Bureaux sur Verviers: Pooters, 2002), 131-151. The recently translated The Gospel of Judas, eds. R. Krauss, M. Meyer, and G. Wurst (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2006) associates the creation of Adam and Eve (as the Manichean myth, a demonic imitation of a divine prototype) with Sakk(a) and Nebrebul, the later being interpreted as "the evil" and identified with Nidabru. Sakk(a) and Nebrebul, are here again proceed by a reference to Adamas. Baptism also figures in the text. The Gospel of Judas seems to go back to a "Seiran" strain of Gnosticism related to that of the Gospel of the Egyptians.

The alternation of spellings of δλία and δλόν within Middle Persian texts merely follows the Manichaean Iranian orthographic variation of δλον in words with the Latin phoneme.

4 For the spellings of Sakk(a), 87εριν, Nebrebul, 87ου, 87υνερβουλ, and psakc, see Samuel N. C. Lieu, Manichaecism in Mesopotamia and the Roman East (Leiden, New York and Köln: Brill, 1994), 203-204 with bibliography.

5 For they, 87εριν, 87υνερβουλ, etc., see W. D. Hennig, "Two Manichean Magical Texts." Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 12 (1947), 50.


11 Lipinski, Diesex, 192-6.

12 Lipinski, Diesex, 197-8; 197, 197, 197.

13 Lipinski, Diesex, 197-8.

14 Lipinski, Diesex, 197-8 and 192.

15 Joyce R. Ruse, suggested to me (in conversation, May 5, 2006) that the demunization of the healing god of Ashkelon may have been motivated by Manis's well-evidenced self-image as a physician.