EUHEMERISM AND RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE ROMAN NEAR EAST[*]

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The modern study of religious life in the Roman Near East must necessarily be based in the first place on those sources that archaeology has brought to light: a combination of both Classical and Semitic epigraphy, visual materials ranging from sculptures to coinage and from frescos to mosaics, and the ruins of the manifold cult centres and sanctuaries dotted around the Levantine lands. Literary sources are generally perceived as limited with regard to the information they provide. The geographical overviews of the Near East as given by Strabo and Pliny the Elder, for example, are not very enlightening when it comes to religion, and the references to cult centres and local mythologies in the *Geography* and the *Natural History* respectively have above all been treated as quarries by scholars interested in individual sites.[1] In contrast, the treatise *On the Syrian Goddess*, ascribed to Lucian of Samosata and a brilliant imitation of the style of Herodotus, counts as the main literary source, even if - or perhaps better precisely because - it is not so much a realistic representation of the cult of Atargatis at her 'home' sanctuary in Hierapolis, the Holy City of Manbog, but instead may count as "emblematic of religious life in the Near Eastern lands" as a whole.[2] The two other literary sources originating in the Near East itself and dealing with Levantine cults, which form the starting point of the present contribution, are supposed to be even more problematic. Firstly, the *Phoenician History*, written in Greek in the second century AD by Herennius Philo of Byblos (substantial fragments of which are preserved through Eusebius' *Gospel Preparation*), a text claiming to be a translation of a Phoenician work by a certain Sanchouniathon that was

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[1] T. Kaizer, 'Cult centres and local mythologies in Strabo's and Pliny's Near East' in R. Raja (ed.), *Contextualising the Sacred in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East: Religious Identities in Local, Regional and Imperial Settings* (forthcoming).

[2] As I argued in id., 'Introduction' in id. (ed.), *The Variety of Local Religious Life in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* [*Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 164] (Leiden - Boston, 2008), p.1-36, at p.28-9. The main study is of course the indispensable J.L. Lightfoot, *Lucian, On the Syrian Goddess. Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford, 2003).

allegedly produced before the Trojan War.[3] Secondly, a rather bizarre section on Near Eastern cults that forms part of a Syriac text known according to its title as the *Oration of Meliton the Philosopher*, possibly dating from the first half of the third century AD and known to us through the same single manuscript that contains also the celebrated *Book of the Laws of Countries*.[4] Both the *Phoenician History* and the *Oration of Meliton the Philosopher* are potentially problematic on various levels, especially with regard to questions of authorship and of the origins of the information that they transmit. In the present article, however, the focus will be only on one specific issue. As has long been recognised, both the *Phoenician History* and the Syriac text have a peculiar way of presenting the divine world that is known amongst scholars as 'Euhemeristic', after the early Hellenistic author Euhemerus of Messene, according to whom the gods were originally mortal rulers who had been deified by their people in acknowledgement of their services to mankind.[5] But the strong Euhemeristic tendencies in both sources have also invariably caused scholars to observe that their presentation of the divine world was set in an artificial framework that had very little, if anything, to do with the actual cultic realities on the ground.

The Euhemeristic approach in Philo's *Phoenician History* is first pronounced explicitly in a passage in which Eusebius, basing himself on the information provided by Porphyry in the latter's work *Against the Christians*, records how Sanchouniathon 'goes on to theologise not about the God who is above all nor even the gods who are in the heavens, but about mortal men and women, and even these were not cultured in their manners, in which case they might have been worthy of respect because of their virtue or of emulation in their philosophy, but rather he talks of men and women who had every vice and wickedness, [and] he testifies that it is

[3] A.I. Baumgarten, *The* Phoenician History *of Philo of Byblos. A Commentary* [*ÉPRO* 99] (Leiden, 1981); A. Kaldellis and C. López Ruiz, 'Philon (790)' in I. Worthinton (ed.), *Brill's New Jacoby* (Brill Online) - whose text and translation of Philo I follow in what follows. Cf. M.J. Edwards, 'Philo or Sanchuniathon? A Phoenicean cosmogony' in *CQ* 41 (1991), p.213-20; C. Bonnet, '*Errata, absurditates, deliria et hallucinations*. Le cheminement de la critique historique face à la mythologie phénicienne de Philon de Byblos: un cas problématique et exemplaire de *testis unus*' in *Anabases* 11 (2010), p.123-36.

[4] The Syriac *Oration* was first published by W. Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum* (London, 1855). See now J.L. Lightfoot, 'The *Apology* of Pseudo-Meliton' in *SEL* 24 (2007), p.59-110; ead., 'Pseudo-Meliton and the cults of the Roman Near East' in C. Bonnet, V. Pirenne-Delforge and D. Praet (eds.), *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain: cent ans après Cumont (1906-2006). Bilan historique et historiographique* (Brussels - Rome, 2009), p.387-99.

[5] The standard work on Euhemerus is M. Winiarczyk, *Euhemeros von Messene. Leben, Werk und Nachwirkung* (Munich - Leipzig, 2002), and now also id., *The* Sacred History *of Euhemerus of Messene* (Berlin - Boston, 2013).

precisely these very people who were and still are deemed to be gods by everyone in both the cities and the countryside'.[6] Later in Eusebius' work, when we finally get Philo himself speaking, this typical interpretation is conveyed again, though this time, naturally, in more positive words: 'the most ancient among the barbarians, especially the Phoenicians and the Egyptians, … regarded as the greatest gods those who had made inventions that made life easier or who had benefited the nations in some way. They considered them to be benefactors and the cause of many good things, and worshipped them as gods.'[7] This theory is then elaborated in the manifold examples that follow the passage, perhaps most clearly in Philo's description of Hephaistos, 'who also invented the hook, bait, line and raft, and was the first of men to set sail. Hence they honoured him even as a god after his death'.[8] The "Hellenistic speculation" in Philo has been described by E. Gruen as "wrapping itself in the name of Sanchuniathon in order to give the aura of distant antiquity" and hence "asserting Phoenician priority in the invention and transmission of ancient tales regarding the origins of the gods and the universe,"[9] but it is considered noteworthy that Greek authors are not recorded to have answered back to such declarations of Phoenician primacy.[10]

Like Euhemerus before him, Philo identifies two different classes of gods: alongside the gods who had started out as humans and had subsequently been deified are the so-called 'eternal' gods, "forces of nature, such as the sun, moon, stars, and winds", that played the part of bringing order into the world of which the 'mortal gods', the gods known from mythology who

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[6] Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 1.9.22: οὐ τὸν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸν οὐδὲ μὴν θεοὺς τοὺς κατ᾽ οὐρανόν, θνητοὺς δὲ ἄνδρας καὶ γυναῖκας, οὐδὲ τὸν τρόπον ἀστείους, οἵους δι᾽ ἀρετὴν ἄξιον εἶναι ἀποδέξασθαι ἢ ζηλῶσαι τῆς φιλοσοφίας, φαυλότητος δὲ καὶ μοχθηρίας ἁπάσης κακίαν περιβεβλημένους θεολογεῖ· καὶ μαρτυρεῖ γε τούτους αὐτοὺς ἐκείνους εἶναι τοὺς εἰσέτι καὶ νῦν θεοὺς παρὰ τοῖς πᾶσιν νενομισμένους κατά τε τὰς πόλεις καὶ τὰς χώρας.

[7] Ibid. 1.9.29: οἱ παλαίτατοι τῶν βαρβάρων, ἐξαιρέτως δὲ Φοίνικές τε καὶ Αἰγύπτιοι … θεοὺς ἐνόμιζον μεγίστους τοὺς τὰ πρὸς τὴν βιωτικὴν χρείαν εὑρόντας ἢ καὶ κατά τι εὖ ποιήσαντας τὰ ἔθνη· εὐεργέτας τε τούτους καὶ πολλῶν αἰτίους ἀγαθῶν ἡγούμενοι ὡς θεοὺς προσεκύνουν.

[8] Ibid. 1.10.11: εὑρεῖν δὲ καὶ ἄγκιστρον καὶ δέλεαρ καὶ ὁρμιὰν καὶ σχεδίαν, πρῶτόν τε πάντων ἀνθρώπων πλεῦσαι. διὸ καὶ ὡς θεὸν αὐτὸν μετὰ θάνατον ἐσεβάσθησαν.

[9] E.S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton - Oxford, 2011), p.342. Cf. ibid.: "In particular, Philo preserves a Phoenician version of the Kronos legend that corresponds in part to the account in Hesiod's *Theogony* but differs in most essentials - including the introduction of a Euhemeristic analysis that has the gods originate as men."

[10] Ibid., p.343: "If there was a Greek response to these Phoenician claims, we do not have it. Hellenic writers preferred to cite Hesiod and let it go at that."

had been 'downgraded', as it were, to human status, were of course incapable.[11] But Philo shared more than just "a theory about the origins of religion" with Euhemerus (or with other 'Euhemeristic' authors for that matter, such as the third-century BC Dionysius Scytobrachion): as A. Baumgarten has shown in his commentary on the *Phoenician History*, the number of corresponding minor details strongly suggests that "the Euhemeristic school had certain historiographic commonplaces or canons."[12] For example, both Euhemerus and Philo claim that a mysterious hieroglyphic source forms the foundation for their reports, and - similarly to Dionysius - they present Atlas and Kronos as brothers of each other (thus in contrast to what Hesiod tells us in the *Theogony*). In his brief discussion of Philo, F. Millar noted how "it is precisely when a work written in this period appears to offer a window into the meaning and nature of 'Oriental' cults that it is at its most deceptive."[13]

As regards the Syriac *Oration of Meliton the Philosopher*, nine *historiolae*, little chapters on the gods of the nations that are characterised by their "sheer localism", present themselves as "a badly-integrated collection of disparate data" in the midst of a Christian polemic aimed against idolatry.[14] A few of the entries deal with deities elsewhere in the ancient world, such as the second one, where it is stated how 'the people of Acte worshipped king Dionysus (*dynwsws mlk'*) because he originally introduced the vine into their country.'[15] But the largest part of the so-called Euhemeristic section is occupied by five entries on the Near East, that expound why the Phoenicians worshipped Belti queen of Cyprus (who had had love affairs with first Ares and then Tammuz); the Elamites Nanaia, daughter of the king of Elam (who had been led away in captivity); the Syrians Atti (because of her involvement in healing); the Mesopotamians the Hebrew woman Kutbai (who had rescued an Edessan nobleman); and the inhabitants of Manbog the Thracian magus Orpheus under the name of Nebu and the Persian magus

[11] A.I. Baumgarten, 'Euhemerus' eternal gods: or, how not to be embarrassed by Greek mythology' in R. Katzoff, D.M. Schaps and Y. Petroff, *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg* (Ramat Gan, 1996), p.91-103, with the quotation from p.91 and his concluding remarks at p.102-3.

[12] Baumgarten, *The* Phoenician History *of Philo of Byblos*, p.81-2. Cf. ibid., p.243 for a table of collected passages.

[13] F. Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC - AD 337* (Cambridge, MA - London, 1993), p.278-9.

[14] Lightfoot, 'Pseudo-Meliton and the cults of the Roman Near East', p.394 and p.392, respectively.

[15] Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum*, p.24, lines 20-1.

Zaradusta under the name of Hadaran (because of their magianism).[16] It has been noted by J. Lightfoot that the polemic tone of the *Oration* seems to disappear completely in the Euhemeristic section, and that the *historiolae* (including the Near Eastern ones) "rest principally on *favourable* traditions about the culture hero in question"; the account of Orpheus-Nebu at Manbog in particular may count as "a *missed* opportunity for polemic."[17]

I will not investigate here what the *contents* of the stories, both as recorded by Philo and in the Syriac *Oration*, can teach us about local mythologies in the Roman Near East. Instead, I will focus on the question of whether their Euhemeristic interpretations could have reflected any cultic reality after all. In other words, can the view purported in Philo and Meliton, namely that the gods were mortals who had become deified in recognition of their contributions to civilization, truly be downplayed as a literary phenomenon only, as is commonly done? It must be emphasised that it will of course be well nigh impossible to prove that there *was* cultic reality reflected in the Euhemeristic accounts: any search in the actual cultic life of the Roman Near East for evidence of a mortal past of the region's divine inhabitants is seriously hampered by the nature of the sources: neither the thousands of often formulaic dedicatory inscriptions nor the variety of sculptures, frescos, mosaics and depictions on coinage have the tendency to hint at such theological aspects of Near Eastern religion.

In 1983 P. Veyne famously asked "Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?",[18] and in more recent years scholars have again emphasised the place occupied by mythology at the heart of Graeco-Roman religious culture. D. Feeney has shown how both the well-known and the lesser known stories about the ancient gods functioned as vital components of the continuous *re*-production and *re*-negotiation of Roman religion,[19] and J. Rives has argued that "myth remained a vital and pervasive way of envisioning the divine world, and as such constituted a crucial element of the Graeco-Roman religious tradition."[20] Even the so-called 'intellectual' layers of the population of the ancient world continued to provide a place for myths in 'real' religious life,

[16] Ibid., p.25, lines 1-22. Cureton's translation is now reproduced by Lightfoot, 'The *Apology* of Pseudo-Meliton', p.83-4, with commentary on the Near Eastern *historiolae* at p.86-105.

[17] Ead., 'Pseudo-Meliton and the cults of the Roman Near East', p.393.

[18] P. Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs myths?* (Paris, 1983), translated in English by P. Wissing as *Did the Greeks believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (Chicago, 1988).

[19] D. Feeney, *Literature and Religon at Rome. Culture, Contexts, and Beliefs* (Cambridge, 1998).

[20] J.B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA - Oxford - Carlton, 2007), p.32.

by applying certain academic, or rather rational, tactics to them, of which Euhemerism is only one example. Other approaches could involve a view of myths that maintained that the stories were not about the real gods but about *daimones* instead, and "the most common strategy was to treat myths as allegories, in which the gods and their deeds were symbolic representations of philosophical truths."[21] One specific example of the 'rationalizing tendencies' in the context of Classical mythology in a Near Eastern context is the rather unorthodox interpretation of the myth of Andromeda at Iope as given by the Augustan mythographer Conon, whose *Narratives* are preserved in the ninth-century *Library* of Photius. Here, we read the following interesting take on the myth: 'When Phoinox abducted Andromeda in his ship - which was called *Ketos*, either because it resembled the animal or by chance - Andromeda, thinking she was being abducted without her father's knowledge, wailed aloud and dolorously called upon people to come to her assistance. Perseus, who just happened to be sailing by, put in, and overcome with pity and love for the girl at first glance, destroyed the ship Ketos and killed the sailors who had been all but petrified with terror. And this is for the Greeks the Sea Monster of myth and the men hardened into stones by the Gorgon's head.'[22] However, whereas Conon the mythographer adds a layer of rationality which he explicitly explains as such, as an alternative (and, assumingly, better) way of reading the traditional myth, the so-called 'rationality' of Euhemerism is of a different quality altogether. In fact, it could be said that claiming that the gods were mortal rulers who were deified after their death is not rational at all when one realises that the whole notion of 'divinity' is not an *absolute* concept (as in Christianity: you either are God or you are not God), but a *relative* one instead. Or, as I. Gradel has put it, "divine worship was the highest possible honour known in antiquity, expressing a maximum status gap between the recipient and the worshippers, but it made no gods in the absolute - and irrelevant - sense."[23] Euhemerism, therefore, "did not affect the divinity of the gods in question,

[21] Ibid., p.31.

[22] Conon, *Narr.* (40), apud Phot. *Bibl.*, Cod. 186, p.138b-139a (Bekker) = *FGrH* I, 26, F1: Φοίνικος δ' ἁρπάσαντος νηΐ (Κῆτος δ' αὕτη ἐκαλεῖτο ἢ μίμησιν ἔχουσα τοῦ ζῷου ἢ κατὰ τύχην), ἡ Ἀνδρομέδα, ὡς κατὰ ἄγνοιαν τοῦ πατρὸς ἁρπαζομένη ἀνωλοφύρατό τε καὶ μετ' οἰμωγῆς τοὺς βοηθήσοντας ἀνεκαλεῖτο. Περσεὺς δ' ὁ Δανάης κατὰ δαίμονα παραπλέων κατίσχει καὶ πρὸς τὴν πρώτην ὄψιν τῆς κόρης οἴκτῳ καὶ ἔρωτι συσχεθεὶς τό τε πλοῖον, τὸ Κῆτος, διαφθείρει καὶ τοὺς ἐμπλέοντας ὑπὸ ἐκπλήξεως μόνον οὐχὶ λιθωθέντας ἀναιρεῖ. Καὶ τοῦτο Ἕλλησι τὸ τοῦ μύθου κῆτος καὶ οἱ παγέντες εἰς λίθους ἄνθρωποι τῆς Γοργόνος τῇ κεφαλῇ. Transl. M.K. Brown, *The* Narratives *of Konon. Text, Translation and Commentary of the* Diegeseis [*Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 163] (Munich - Leipzig - Brown, 2002), p.272-8. Cf. T. Kaizer, 'Interpretations of the myth of Andromeda at Iope' in *Syria* 88 (2011), p.323-39, at p.330-1.

[23] I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford, 2002), p.29.

or their worship."[24] Perhaps it is worth thinking in this context also of the widely spread cults of poets in the Hellenistic world, and of the way in which the Homeric heroes could be linked with cities in this same period.

The theory that the gods were rulers of times long gone by who were commemorated with divine honours following their death will, in any case, have achieved more popularity after Quintus Ennius, in the first half of the second century BC, presented his interpretation of it in Latin in the form of his *Euhemerus*,[25] so much so that its protagonist was incriminated with atheism and destruction of traditional religion. Cicero, towards the end of the first book *On the Nature of the Gods*, has Cotta say the following: 'There are also those who teach that brave and famous and powerful men have been deified after death and that these are the gods whom we have now become accustomed to worship and reverence and to whom we pray. Are not such men devoid of all religious feeling? This line of thought has been especially developed by Euhemerus: and our own Ennius has been his foremost disciple and interpreter. Euhemerus describes how these deified heroes died and where they lie buried. Does such a man seem to you to have strengthened religion or to have utterly undermined and destroyed it?"[26] Plutarch, who wrote not so long before Philo, expresses similar sentiments about Euhemerus when he states in his *On Isis and Osiris* how he 'of himself drew up copies of an incredible and non-existent mythology and spread all manner of atheism throughout the world, by converting all the gods of our belief into the names of generals, admirals and kings'.[27] Why would these charges against 'Euhemerism' have been necessary *unless* these views had actually enjoyed a certain spread and popularity? The comment by P. Veyne, that "the idea that the gods are worthy men who have been divinized or taken for gods is everywhere and extends far beyond

[24] Ibid., p.31.

[25] N. Goldschmidt, *Shaggy Crowns: Ennius'* Annales *and Virgil's* Aeneid (Oxford, 2013), p.94, discussed how in *Aeneid* 8 Virgil draws on Ennian/Euhemeristic notions in Evander's description of prehistoric Latium. Cf. B. Graziosi, *The Gods of Olympus: a History* (London, 2013), p.126.

[26] Cic., *Nat. D.* 1.119 (42): *quid, qui aut fortis aut claros aut potentis viros tradunt post mortem ad deos pervenisse, eosque esse ipsos quos nos colere precari venerarique soleamus, nonne expertes sunt religionum omnium? quae ratio maxime tractata ab Euhemero est, quem noster et interpretatus et secutus est praetor ceteros Ennius; ab Euhemero autem et mortes et sepulturae demonstrantur deorum; utrum igitur hic confirmasse videtur religionem an penitus totam sustulisse?*

[27] Plut. *Mor.* 360A: … ὃς αὐτὸς ἀντίγραφα συνθεὶς ἀπίστου καὶ ἀνυπάρκτου μυθολογίας πᾶσαν ἀθεότητα κατασκεδάννυσι τῆς οἰκουμένης, τοὺς νομιζομένους θεοὺς πάντας ὁμαλῶς διαγράφων εἰς ὀνόματα στρατηγῶν καὶ ναυάρχων καὶ βασιλέων …

the work of Euhemerus",[28] is extremely welcome in this regard, although it is not easy to back up so confident a claim.

The principle of gods as formerly mortal kings worshipped after their death is attested with regard to the ancient city of Damascus in two different sources.[29] The Augustan author Pompeius Trogus, whose *Philippic Histories* are known only through the epitome of Justin, informs the reader that 'the name of the city was given by king Damascus, in honour of whom the Syrians consecrated the sepulchre of his wife Arathis[30] as a temple, and regard her since then as a goddess worthy of the most sacred worship.'[31] And Josephus in the *Antiquities* - in a passage that serves in fact as the only instance to explain the major local cult of Zeus *Damaskènos* in ancient terms[32] - describes how the deities 'Adados' and 'Azaelos' had formerly ruled the land as kings and how, up to his own time, the Syrians and Damascenes 'honoured [them] as gods because of their benefactions and the building of temples with which they adorned the city of Damascus. And they have processions every day in honour of these kings and glory in their antiquity, not knowing that these kings are rather recent and lived less than eleven hundred years ago.'[33]

These passages can be (and have been) easily explained as a "morass of confusion" or "an extraordinary example of logical confusion".[34] But different problems have been encountered in the cult of Obodat the god, who - if he is indeed, as is often alleged, the deified Nabataean king Obodas (either I or III) - would serve as one of our strongest examples of 'Euhemerism' in

[28] Veyne, *Did the Greeks believe in their Myths?*, p.141 n.71.

[29] Cf. Millar, *The Roman Near East*, p.314-6.

[30] Very plausibly a corruption of the divine name Atargatis, as noted by ibid., p.315, with reference to Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.4.27: αἱ δὲ τῶν ὀνομάτων μεταπτώσεις, καὶ μάλιστα τῶν βαρβαρικῶν, πολλαί· καθάπερ τὸν Δαριήκην Δαρεῖον ἐκάλεσαν, τὴν δὲ Φάρζιριν Παρύσατιν, Ἀταργάτιν δὲ τὴν Ἀθάραν, Δερκετὼ δ' αὐτὴν Κτησίας καλεῖ ('The changes in names, and particularly in those of the barbarians, are numerous: for example, they called Dareius "Darieces", Parysatis "Pharziris", and Athara "Atargatis", though Ctesias calls her "Derceto"').

[31] Just. *Epit.* 36.2.2: *nomen urbi a Damasco rege inditum, in cuius honorem Syri sepulcrum Arates, uxoris eius, pro templo coluere, deamque exinde sanctissimae religionis habent*.

[32] Cf. Millar, *The Roman Near East*, p.315.

[33] Joseph, *AJ* 9.4.6 (93): ὡς θεοὶ τιμῶνται διὰ τὰς εὐεργεσίας καὶ τῶν ναῶν οἰκοδομίας, οἷς ἐκόσμησαν τὴν τῶν Δαμασκηνῶν πόλιν. πομπεύουσι δ' αὐτοὶ καθ' ἑκάστην ἡμέραν ἐπὶ τιμῇ τῶν βασιλέων καὶ σεμνύνονται τὴν τούτων ἀρχαιότητα, οὐκ εἰδότες ὅτι νεώτεροί εἰσι καὶ οὐκ ἔχουσιν οὗτοι οἱ βασιλεῖς ἔτη χίλια καὶ ἑκατον.

[34] Thus Millar, *The Roman Near East*, p.315.

actual cultic life.[35] 'Obodat the god' first appears in Petra in AD 20, and is also attested at the site of Oboda in the centre of the Negev, where he is worshipped in Greek as Zeus Oboda, and where a Nabataean graffito proclaims that 'Obodat lives'. But it is a fourth-century source, Uranius, cited a few centuries later by Stephanus Byzantius, who is said to have recorded that it was at 'Oboda, a place of the Nabateans … … … where Obodas the king, whom they deify, is buried.'[36] The evidence from Oboda itself, however, all dates from long after the demise of the Nabataean kingdom in AD 106. In fact, "the first secure appearance of Obodas the god is not until AD 267/8."[37] The same deity is also mentioned, alongside Dusares, as 'god of the Arabs' by Tertullian (*Ad nat.* 2.8) and Eusebius (*De laud. Const.* 13.5), who both aim to demean those who adhere to their cults, "claiming that they are worshipping mere mortals who have become gods".[38] While "it is possible, then, that Uranius is here influenced by a wider Christian tradition that saw Obodas as originally a mortal, and so made a link with the Nabataean king of that name",[39] it is of course equally feasible that the royal name was copying the divine one, or indeed that the geographical name gave expression to a special connection with a deity who is known in the Nabataean period only from inscriptions found at Petra.

The debate on the deification of a Nabataean king should in any case make one think carefully about the realm of the ruler cult. And here is an important link with Euhemerism, according to whose doctrine it is achievement on earth that qualifies a ruler for apotheosis. As is well known, B. Bosworth has argued convincingly for influence of Euhemerus' Hellenistic theories (through Ennius) even on what is the most famous documentation of ruler cult in the Roman world, the *Res Gestae* of Divus Augustus: "excellence on earth elevates mortals to the divine."[40] And this excellence on earth, a ruler's achievements, should be in the areas of conquest and, even more importantly, benefactions to mankind.

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[35] For full discussion and all further references, see P. Alpass, *The Religious Life of Nabataea* [*RGRW* 175] (Leiden - Boston, 2013), p.156-9.

[36] Steph. Byz., s.v. Ὄβοδα, χωρίον Ναβαταίων. Οὐράνιος Ἀραβικῶν τετάρτῳ "ὅπου Ὀβόδης ὁ βασιλεύς, ὃν θεοποιοῦσι, τέθαπται" (ed. Meineke, p.482).

[37] Thus Alpass, *The Religious Life of Nabataea*, p.157.

[38] Ibid., p.158.

[39] Ibid.

[40] B. Bosworth, 'Augustus, the *Res Gestae* and Hellenistic theories of apotheosis' in *JRS* 89 (1999), p.1-18, with the citation from p.6.

Previously, an explicit link between Euhemerus and the Hellenistic ruler cult had been postulated by H. Dörrie, for whom the *Sacred History* presented the king's validation to act as a patron for his people.[41] In this context, it is worth mentioning briefly the activities of king Antiochus I of Commagene, both at his own 'tomb sanctuary' (*hierothesion*) on top of Nemrud Dag and via *dexiôsis* reliefs erected throughout his kingdom.[42] The king's own colossal likeness was seated amongst the equally gigantic figures of a set of deities who, according to the accompanying inscriptions, were the ultimate embodiment of the notion of syncretism: Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, Zeus-Oromasdes, and Heracles-Artagnes-Ares. But the long monumental inscription engraved on the back of these statues, which at first glance seems to be the legal outpourings of a megalomaniac ruler, could also in fact be said to provide - at least from the king's perspective - the evidence necessary to qualify him for divine status. The inscription proclaims how 'the great king Antiochus, the god, the righteous one, the manifest, friend of the Romans and the Greeks … has recorded for all time the deeds of his clemency.'[43] The text of the sacred law that follows stipulates how the gods ought to be honoured with sacrifices and festivals 'as was the primitive rule and the common custom of all mankind, while in addition my own just consideration has further devised still other and especially brilliant marks of respect',[44] including of course sacrifices in Antiochus' own honour. The decree that ordered all the kingdom's inhabitants to partake in this royal cult was distributed throughout Commagene, and versions of it have been found at various places, alongside the well-known reliefs showing how the king shook hands with the deities supporting the dynasty. One of the more recently discovered versions of this law comes from an inscription from Zeugma, which is particularly important because it directly addresses - for the first time - the peculiar hand-

[41] H. Dörrie, *Der Königskult des Antiochos von Kommagene im Lichte neuer Inschriften-Funde* [*Abh. Akad. Wiss. Göttingen, Phil.-Hist.* 3.60] (Göttingen, 1964), p.218-24, or, as paraphrased by Winiarczyk, *Euhemeros von Messene*, p.111, "eine Art Fürstenspiegel", and by Veyne, *Did the Greeks believe in their Myths?*, p.141 n.71, "a political utopia and mirror for princes".

[42] For all references to the reign of Antiochus, see M. Facella, *La dinastia degli Orontidi nella Commagene ellenistico-romana* [*Studi ellenistici* 17] (Pisa, 2006), p.225-97. Cf. M.-J. Versluys, *Nemrud Dağ and Commagene under Antiochos I. Material Culture, Identity and Style in the Late Hellenistic World* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

[43] *IGLS* I.1, lines 1-10: Βασιλεὺς μέγας Ἀντίοχος Θεὸς Δίκαιος Ἐπιφανὴς Φιλορώμαιος καὶ Φιλέλλην ... ἔργα χάριτος ἰδίας εἰς χρόνον ἀνέγραψεν αἰώνιον.

[44] *IGLS* I.1, lines 32-6: ὡς ἀρχαιός τε νόμος καὶ κοινὸν ἀνθρώπων ἔθος· ἔτι δὲ ἐμὴ δικαία φροντὶς προσεξεῦρε τιμὰς ἐπιφανῶς γεραράς.

shake.[45] The common bombastic self-presentation is followed by Antiochus' statement that he has 'engraved for all time, by the providence of the deities, on sacred *stelai* this depiction of his own thought and law of common piety.'[46] He then explains how he 'set up in sacred stone of a single compass alongside images of the deities the representation of my own form receiving the benevolent right hands of the gods, preserving a proper depiction of the undying concern with which they often extended their heavenly hands to my assistance in my struggles.'[47] In further gratitude, the king then 'established an appropriate regulation concerning the sacred observances for them to be everlasting, so that all the inhabitants of my kingdom might offer together with the sacrifices required by ancient and common law also new festivals in reverence of the gods and in my honour.'[48] The new royal sacred decrees of Antiochus are thus presented as literally building on the 'ancient and common law', while at the same time enhancing and embellishing the traditions by now including the king himself.

However, doubts have long been expressed whether any direct influence on the part of Euhemerus on Antiochus' royal cult can actually be shown. In a review of Dörrie's monograph on Commagene's royal cult, H. Pleket criticized it for its "obsession with Euhemerus",[49] and S. Price added that "the parallels adduced [by Dörrie] are not sufficiently close or striking to support the argument."[50] But even if it is considered too far-fetched to assume an active link between Antiochus I and Euhemerus' theories, something peculiar certainly went on at Commagene. As A. Kropp has noted recently (with reference to the above-quoted inscription from Zeugma), whereas "*Dexiosis* reliefs … express divine help rather than self-divinization …

[45] Published by C. Crowther and M. Facella, 'New evidence for the ruler cult of Antiochus of Commagene from Zeugma' in G. Heedemann and E. Winter (eds.), *Neue Forschungen zur Religionsgeschichte Kleinasiens* (Bonn, 2003), n°BEc, p.45-53.

[46] τοῦτον τύπον ἰδίας γνώμης νόμον τε κοινῆς εὐσεβείας εἰς χρόνον ἅπαντα προνοίαι δαιμόνων στήλαις ἐνεχάραξεν ἱεραῖς.

[47] ἐν ἱεραῖ τε λιθείαι μιᾶς περιοχῆς ἀγάλμασι δαιμονίοις χαρακτῆρα μορφῆς ἐμῆς δεχόμενον θεῶν εὐμενεῖς δεξιὰς παρέστησα, μίμημα δίκαιον φυλάσσων ἀθανάτου φροντίδος ἣ πολλάκις ἐμοὶ χεῖρας οὐρανίους εἰς βοηθείαν ἀγώνων ἐξέτειναν.

[48] περὶ δὲ ἱερουργιῶν ἀϊδίων διάταξιν πρέπουσαν ἐποιησάμην, ὅπως σὺν αἷς ἀρχαῖος καὶ κοινὸς νόμος ἔταξεν θυσίαις καὶ νέας ἑορτας εἷς τε θεῶν σεβασμὸν καὶ ἡμετέρας τιμὰς ἅπαντες οἱ κατ' ἐμὴν βασιλείαν ἐπιτελῶσι.

[49] H.W. Pleket, in *Mnemosyne* 21 (1968), p.444-7, at p.446.

[50] S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1984), p.38. Cf. ibid., p.38 n.60: "Euhemerism is important only in its stress on the benefactions of the gods."

… apotheosis *is* bluntly expressed by Antiochos' epithet *Theos*, as well as in ritual prescriptions that demand equal worship of king and gods, and his visual appearance on Nemrud Dağı as a colossal figure among his divine 'peers'".[51]

It might appear strange to end an article on Euhemerism and Roman Near Eastern religion with some remarks about Palmyra, since there was of course no 'royal cult' in the Commagenean mould at Palmyra, nor indeed - before Zenobia - actual kingship.[52] But in 2003 the Polish excavators discovered a new mosaic, consisting of two main panels, which has cast light on the relativity and the fluidity of the concept of divinity.[53] The first panel depicts the Greek hero Bellerophon, wearing eastern clothes with so-called Parthian trousers and riding the winged horse Pegasus, in the act of slaying the chimaera, with two eagles flying above the hero carrying a wreath with which they crown him. The second panel ostensibly depicts a common hunting scene, with the horseman, again dressed in so-called Parthian trousers, engaged in a fight with two Persian tigers, and similarly crowned with a wreath by an eagle flying above him. The second mosaic is accompanied by an inscription which, uniquely for this medium, is in the local Palmyrenean Aramaic dialect, and refers to the artist who has laid the mosaic. However, the inscription is believed to be a later correction to an earlier text, written in a slightly bigger letter type, and of which two letters are preserved which originally read the word for 'lord' (*mr[n]*). The key to the problem, as M. Gawlikowski has ingeniously shown, is that in third-century Palmyra this title was used only for the leading citizen Odaenathus and his elder son Herodian. From this, it has been argued that the hunting scene is an allegory for the victory which the Palmyrenes won over Shapur's armies in 260, and which earned Odaenathus and Herodian the Persian title 'King of Kings'.[54] If the hunter on the second panel is Herodian, Bellerophon is of course Odaenathus. It is easy enough to understand how the Persian tigers

[51] A.J.M. Kropp, *Images & Monuments of Near Eastern Dynasts, 100 BC - AD 100* (Oxford, 2013), p.359.

[52] Cf. J.-B. Yon, 'Kings and princes at Palmyra' in T. Kaizer and M. Facella (eds.), *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East* [*Oriens et Occidens* 19] (Stuttgart, 2010), p.229-40.

[53] For the official publication see now M. Gawlikowski and M. Żuchowska, 'La mosaïque de Bellérophon' in *Studia Palmyreńskie* 11 (2010), p.9-42, and for further discussion M. Gawlikowski, 'L'apothéose d'Odeinat sur une mosaïque récemment découverte à Palmyre' in *CRAI* (2005), p.1293-1303. Cf. id., 'Der Neufund eines Mosaiks in Palmyra' in A. Schmidt-Colinet (ed.), *Palmyra. Kulturbegegnung im Grenzbereich*[3] [*Sonderbände der Antiken Welt*] (Mainz, 2005), p.29-31.

[54] For a full analysis of this title in a Palmyrene context, cf. T. Gnoli, *The Interplay of Roman and Iranian Titles in the Roman East (1st-3rd Century A.D.)* (Vienna, 2007), p.81-94. It is now also discussed in the context of a 'crisis of identity' by A.M. Smith II, *Roman Palmyra. Identity, Community, & State Formation* (Oxford - New York, 2013), p.175-81.

stand for the neo-Persian Sasanians, but also the Chimaera can be explained in this manner: the famous *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, 'predicting' Odaenathus' victories over both neo-Persians and Roman usurpers, states how 'the one who was sent by the sun (i.e. Odaenathus), a mighty and fearful lion, breathing much flame; then he with much shameless daring will destroy the well-horned swift-moving stag (i.e. Quietus) and the greatest beast, venomous, fearful and emitting a great deal of hisses, and the sideways walking goat (i.e. Callistus?)'.[55] Gawlikowski thus convincingly interpreted the mosaic as an allegory commenting on contemporary events in the third century. The victory over Shapur by the Palmyrenes can certainly be called unique: in fact it was considered so unique that both Odaenathus *and* his son assumed the Sasanian title of King of Kings. According to an inscription on the arch at the beginning of the central colonnade, Herodian was honoured by the chief magistrates of what was at the time still very much a Roman *colonia*, for having received the regalia that went with the title in acknowledgement of his victory over the Persians near the Orontes.[56] For Odaenathus, the honour may only be attested posthumously,[57] but since it is extremely unlikely that only the son was crowned as King of Kings but not the father during the latter's lifetime, the conclusion must be that they shared in this exceptional mark of distinction (having indeed previously shared the position of 'head of Palmyra'[58]).

Would it be going too far to view the assumption of the title of Shapur (who himself of course remained King of Kings as far as the Sasanians were concerned) as a practical joke on the part of the Palmyrenes? Did they not have the right to decorate themselves with tiara and diadem once they had defeated the King of Kings, in the same way that a boxer nowadays receives the championship belt on being victorious against the incumbent World Champion? But the mosaic

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[55] *Oracula Sibyllina* XIII, lines 164-9: τότ′ ἐλεύσεται ἡλιόπεμπτος δεινός τε φοβερός τε λέων πνείων φλόγα πολλήν. δὴ τόθ′ ὅ γ′ αὖτ′ ὀλέσει πολλῇ καὶ ἀναιδέϊ τόλμῃ εὐκεράωτ′ ἔλαφόν τε θοὸν καὶ θῆρα μέγιστον ἰοβόλον φοβερὸν συρίγματα πόλλ′ ἀφιέντα τοξοβάτην τε τράγον. Transl. M.H. Dodgeon and S.N.C. Lieu (eds.), *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, AD 226-363. A Documentary History* (London - New York, 1991), no.4.3.2. Cf. D.S. Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire. A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford, 1990), p.341-6.

[56] *IGLS* 17.1, no.61, on which see M. Gawlikowski, 'Odainat et Hérodien, rois des rois' in J.-B. Yon and P.-L. Gatier (eds.), *Mélanges en l'honneur de Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais* [*Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 60] (2007), p.289-311, at p.295, with a minor suggestion by T. Kaizer, 'Old and new discoveries at Palmyra' in *JRA* 21 (2008), p.652-64, at p.659-60. Cf. M. Gawlikowski, 'Odainat of Palmyra between Rome and Persia' in E. Dąbrowa (ed.), *Hortus Historiae. Studies in Honour of Professor Jozef Wolski on the 100th Anniversary of his Birthday* (Cracow, 2010), p.467-79.

[57] As emphasised by Millar, *The Roman Near East*, p.162.

[58] Cf. Gawlikowski, 'Odainat of Palmyra', p.468.

depiction of the Palmyrene leader as Bellerophon was perhaps more than simply allegorical. It could be postulated that Odaenathus' unique victory over Shapur may also have contributed directly to his acquisition of divine, or rather heroic, status (both Bellerophon and the hunter are crowned with wreaths by eagles), and that this - in Palmyrene terms unprecedented - apotheosis may even have soon led to the murder of both father and son.[59]

The episode might even throw light on a different issue, namely the fact that once their city came under the influence of the Roman empire (probably from the early years of the reign of Tiberius onwards[60]), the Palmyrene gods - or at least a substantial number of them - started to be dressed with a cuirass worn also by Roman emperors.[61] Occasionally, as with the famous fresco from Dura-Europos depicting the sacrifice by the military tribune Julius Terentius at the head of his auxiliary unit, *cohors XX Palmyrenorum*, this has led to scholarly confusion with regard to the question of *who* precisely were depicted: Palmyrene gods or Roman emperors?[62] Even if, as far as I am concerned, the peculiar iconography (Aglibol's crescent, Arsu's small round shield) on the Terentius fresco leaves no doubt that in this case the figures represented Palmyrene gods, they could indeed be said to have been depicted in the style of Roman

[59] The murder of Odaenathus and his son is explained in the literary sources with such a variety of mostly contradictory reasons that it seems impossible to decide upon which account to follow. Thus T. Kaizer, 'Odaenathus von Palmyra, Römischer Orient, 267/68' in M. Sommer (ed.), *Politische Morde. Vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart* (Darmstadt, 2005), p.73-9. Since the reasons for the murder were obviously unknown already in Antiquity, I have mischievously decided to postulate here another possible reason, namely societal distress about the apotheosis of the leading citizen and his son. For a very different approach, cf. U. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* [*Oriens et Occidens* 2] (Stuttgart, 2001), 218-30, who is more confident than I am that the details of the murder can be reconstructed by picking and choosing from the available miscellaneous source material.

[60] Cf. H. Seyrig, 'L'incorporation de Palmyre à l'empire romain' in *Syria* 13 (1932), p.266-77. A recently published tombstone of a Roman soldier seems to suggest that an auxiliary unit was based at Palmyra at least by AD 27: M. Gawlikowski, 'The Roman army in Palmyra under Tiberius' in *Studia Palmyreńskie* 11 (2010), p.49-54.

[61] L. Dirven, 'The Julius Terentius fresco and the Roman imperial cult' in *Mediterraneo Antico* 10 (2007), p.115-28, p.122, argued that "this ambiguity was highly functional and probably intentional."

[62] Discussion already raged in the years immediately following on the discovery of the fresco. T. Pekáry, 'Das Opfer vor dem Kaiserbild' in *Bonner Jahrbücher* 186 (1986), p.91-103, reopened the debate by arguing for Roman emperors. O. Stoll, *Zwischen Integration und Abgrenzung: die Religion des Römischen Heeres im Nahen Osten. Studien zum Verhältnis von Armee und Zivilbevölkerung im römischen Syrien und den Nachbargebieten* (St. Katharinen, 2001), p.367-79, and T. Kaizer, 'A note on the fresco of Iulius Terentius from Dura-Europos' in R. Rollinger and B. Truschnegg (eds.), *Altertum und Mittelmeerraum: die antike Welt diesseits und jenseits der Levante. Festschrift für Peter W. Haider zum 60. Geburtstag* [*Oriens et Occidens* 12] (Stuttgart, 2006), p.151-9, have both argued (on slightly different grounds) against this interpretation. Cf. M.K. Heyn, 'The Terentius frieze in context' in L. Brody and G. Hoffman (eds.), *Dura-Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity* (Chestnut Hill, Mass., 2011), p.221-33.

emperors. But once the new divine dress-code had become established, it could of course also be said that Roman emperors, wearing their cuirass, resembled Palmyrene gods.

If (as noted above) the nature of the available evidence cannot be expected to provide many clear-cut answers about the Roman Near East, in at least a few instances mortals receiving the honour of divine worship (and hence undergoing apotheosis) can be identified in sources other than Philo or Meliton. Perhaps one might think of further occurrences of a blurred boundary between 'human' and 'divine' in the wider region, such as the worship of ancestors in the Nabataean world,[63] and the fact that at Hatra life-size statues of kings and nobles (with their most common pose being that of their raised right hand with the palm turned outwards) occupied the most prominent places in the temples, i.e. as close as possible to the *naos* where the cult image had its place, and should therefore be considered as religious in nature - in contrast to Palmyra, where statues of humans are to be interpreted in honorific contexts.[64] But the Euhemeristic method remains of the greatest value in the context of ruler worship, both in its traditional Hellenistic format and in the form of the so-called 'imperial cult' – though it ought to be observed, with regard to the two literary sources discussed at the outset of this paper, that the *historiolae* in the Syriac *Oration of Meliton the Philosopher* are overall more overt and rigorous in their linking of Euhemerism with royalty than the fragments of Philo's *Phoenician History*. In any case, one should not attempt to interpret religious life in the Roman Near East within an unambiguous and coherent framework, as different worshippers - either in groups or as individuals - could have different approaches and adhere to different, even mutually exclusive, systems to make sense of the world around them. One should therefore at least acknowledge the possibility that the so-called 'Euhemeristic theories' at play in the *Phoenician History* of Philo of Byblos and in the Syriac *Oration of Meliton the Philosopher* were more than just theories and could have played an active role in some of the cultic life within the wider region.

[63] Though the phenomenon of the so-called Ahnenkult remains uncertain. Cf. D. Kuhn, *Totengedenken bei den Nabatäern und im Alten Testament. Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Studie* [*AOAT* 311] (Münster, 2005).

[64] Following the argument by L. Dirven, 'Aspects of Hatrene religion: a note on the statues of kings and nobles from Hatra' in T. Kaizer (ed.), *The Variety of Local Religious Life in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* [*RGRW* 164] (Leiden - Boston, 2008), p.209-46, for whom the statues of humans at Hatra were primarily votive offerings with a religious connotation. Cf. the brief response by J.-B. Yon in his review of the volume, in *Topoi* 16 (2009), p.599-607, at p.606-7.