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CONTENTS

STUDIES

ANCIENT HISTORY

Diego PIAY-AUGUSTO,

Patricia A. ARGÜELLES-ÁLVAREZ

THE OWNERS OF VILLAS IN THE TERRITORY OF ROMAN
ASTURIAS (SPAIN): ISSUES OF IDENTITY.....3

Lucretiu MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA, Ana HONCU

THE MOBILITY OF MILITARY RECRUITS FROM RURAL MOESIA
INFERIOR: DESTINATIONS, ROUTES, ESTIMATED DISTANCES.....9

ARCHAEOLOGY

Mohammad Hossein REZAEI

ANALYSIS OF BRONZE AND IRON AGES (YAZ CULTURE)
SETTLEMENTS IN GOLBAHAR DISTRICT OF CHENARAN
COUNTY: A LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY APPROACH.....19

Selin GÜR

A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO LINGUISTIC POWER.....34

DAVUT YİĞİTPAŞA, AYNUR YAĞCI

LIFE ACTIVITIES IN THE REGION IN THE NEOLITHIC,
CHALCOLITHIC, AND BRONZE AGES IN THE LIGHT OF THE
STONE TOOLS FOUND IN THE ORDU AND SINOP MUSEUM.....41

Sergey YARYGIN, Ayşe AVLI, Sergazy SAKENOV

KARKARALY KORGANTAS – ANCIENT CULT OBJECT IN
CENTRAL KAZAKHSTAN.....58

Mohsen Heydari DASTENAEI, Ebrahim Roustaei FARSI

INVESTIGATION AND STUDY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE
RESCUE EXCAVATION IN SARI GOL CRYPT AND GRAVEYARD,
NORTH KHORASAN PROVINCE.....69

Sorin COCIŞ, Szilamér-Péter PANCZEL, Katalin SIDÓ

THE TYPOLOGY AND PRODUCTION OF BROOCHES
ON THE EASTERN LIMES OF DACIA SUPERIOR ON THE
BRÂNCOVEŢEŞTI-CĂLUGĂRENI SECTOR.....80

Marius-Mihai CIUTĂ, Florian BOIŞTEANU

A FUNERARY MONUMENT FROM COLONIA AURELIA
APULENSIS, RECOVERED BY AN UNEXPECTED PATH.....101

DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Jordi PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, Oriol

**MORILLAS SAMANIEGO, Manel GARCÍA
SÁNCHEZ, Víctor REVILLA CALVO**

GREEK AMPHORIC EPIGRAPHY IN ROMAN OPEN DATA.....111

NUMISMATICS

Metodi MANOV

THE SILVER AND GOLD COINS OF THE ALEXANDER TYPE IN
THE WEST PONTIC AREA IN THE 3RD CENTURY BC – “PEACE-
MONEY”, “PROTECTION MONEY” OR SOMETHING ELSE.....118

Cristian GĂZDAC, Marius BARBU, Andrei GONCIAR

COINS IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT (V). THE VILLA
RUSTICA FROM RAPOLTU MARE – “LA VIE” (HUNEDOARA
COUNTY, ROMANIA).....129

Dmytro YANOV

DIGITIZATION OF ROMAN COIN FINDS FROM THE SOUTH-
WESTERN UKRAINE: AFE-UKR DATABASE.....138

IN MEMORIAM

Csaba SZABÓ

IN MEMORIAM ROGER L. BECK (1937–2023). HIS LIFE AND
IMPACT ON THE STUDY OF ROMAN MITHRAS.....145

REVIEWS

Csaba SZABÓ

REVIEW: ZSUZSANNA TURCSÁN-TÓTH, ALAPVETÉS AZ
ARTEMIS EPHESIA-SZOBOROK IKONOGÁFIAI ELEMZÉSÉHEZ
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IN MEMORIAM

IN MEMORIAM ROGER L. BECK (1937–2023). HIS LIFE AND IMPACT ON THE STUDY OF ROMAN MITHRAS



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Roger Lyne Beck, professor emeritus of classics in the Department of Historical Studies and former acting principal of the Mississauga campus of the University of Toronto, Canada passed away on 29th April, 2023. Born in London, England (UK), Roger Beck received his BA from Oxford University. Here he was influenced by several important scholars of his age, especially Geoffrey Ernest Maurice de Ste. Croix and Courtenay Edward Stevens. He obtained his PhD in Classical Philology from the University of Illinois in 1971 in Archaic Greek literature (*Meter and Sense in Homeric Verse*). As Professor Emeritus in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga, Beck held several administrative positions, including Associate Dean (1985–91), Vice-Principal Academic (1986–91), Acting Principal (1991–2), Chair of Erindale College Council, and Chair of the Academic Board of the Governing Council of the University. He contributed significantly to the development of UTM's department of Theatre and Drama Studies, and himself occasionally had his own plays and translations performed, for example at UTM's Studio Theatre and the Toronto Fringe Festival¹.

Beck was a world authority on ancient religion, particularly the cult of Roman Mithras. His academic career is inseparable from the study of Roman Mithras, ancient astronomy and recently, cognitive study of ancient religions.

¹ Details from the obituary published by the family on the website of the Department of Classics: <https://www.classics.utoronto.ca/news/memorial>.

In this short obituary and historiographic note, I will focus on the monumental heritage of Roger Beck in the study of Roman Mithras and his long-lasting impact on the scholarship in the last five decades.

Roger L. Beck's academic career begun in the 1970s, when the study of Roman Mithras had a surprisingly intense, new wave: the first congress of Mithraic Studies was held in Manchester in 1971 organised by John Hinnells, the second congress was organised in Tehran in September 1975 and the Journal of Mithraic Studies was launched in 1976². Just three decades after the death of Franz V. Cumont (1868–1947), the patriarchal figure of the Mithras-research and the so-called Oriental cults of the Roman Empire, the 1970s represent the emerge of new, young scholars who questioned some of the major claims of Cumont, especially the Oriental origin and direct continuity of the Indo-Iranian Mithra and the Roman Mithras. Roger L. Beck was not among these scholars in 1971: the leading role at the Manchester congress is occupied by the influential study of Richard L. Gordon (still a 28-year-old PhD student in 1971) on the “doctrine of Cumont” was the real hit and a radical voice at that event³. Nor did Roger Beck attend the second congress organised in September 1975 in Tehran⁴. Here, however, the paper of Stanley Insler (1937–2019) was paradigmatic, opening an entire new wave – almost a subdiscipline – on the complex relation of ancient astronomic traditions and religious iconography in Mithraic research⁵. In his first study on Roman Mithras⁶ Beck was highly influenced by the study of Insler which he read before its publication⁷. Roger Beck's first papers related to the cult of Mithras were published in 1976 and 1977 mostly in the freshly founded Journal of Mithraic Studies, which sadly had a short, but impactful existence⁸. In these papers focusing on the passage of Porphyry (*De Antro Nympharum* 24), the role of the scorpion in the tauroctony, the Ponza zodiac and the astronomical considerations of Cautes and Cautopates, Roger Beck entered in the study of Mithras with a new force, solidifying his leading role in the astronomic interpretation, which

emphasized the role of ancient (often Oriental) astronomic knowledge in the Mithraic iconography⁹. In contrast, at the same period Robert Turcan emphasized the role of neoplatonic philosophical knowledge and the Hellenistic heritage of mystery cults¹⁰, while Gordon's work was focusing on the social aspects and local archaeological and iconographic appropriations of the cult¹¹. In 2004, Beck mentioned, that in the beginning of his career, Ugo Bianchi, Richard Gordon and John Hinnells played a crucial role, all three were considered by Roger Beck as his close friends and colleagues¹². A special role was played by Ugo Bianchi, who organised the third Mithraic congress in Rome in 1978 where Roger Beck “was initiated” as a researcher of Roman Mithras.

Roger Beck was among the first scholars who was able to identify ancient astronomic events which might have influenced the local astronomic features of Mithraic sanctuaries, such as the Sette Sfere Mithraeum in Ostia, the Ponza zodiac or the case of 26th June in the Virunum Mithraeum¹³. His publications on Mithras in the 1980s focused especially on ‘star talk’, which made him an authority in this field. His early ideas on what he later termed ‘star-talk’ theory were summarized in his book of 1988, on the variety of planetary orders evidenced from mithraea¹⁴. The notion of ‘star-talk’ was not yet coined by him in this book.

His 1984 monumental, almost book like chapter (more than 110 pages) on the historiography of Mithraic studies since the work of Franz Cumont is still the most detailed historiographic work in this field¹⁵. Here Beck presented not only the major archaeological discoveries on Roman Mithras since the corpus of Cumont was published but presented also the major theoretical debates and issues of the research.

As an established scholar he was brave enough to write one of his most detailed review-articles in 1987 on Reinhold Merkelbach's monograph on Mithras: in his review, Beck made it clear, that the old, Cumontian era was over and criticized the German scholar's ignorance of the new wave of Mithraic scholarship, especially Merkelbach's complete indifference to the role of astronomy/astrology¹⁶. He rejected Merkelbach's hypothesis¹⁷ – later used also by István Tóth – on the possible existence of a founding person of the Roman cult of Mithras, a religious „genius” from Rome. Later in his career, Beck was less critical with the idea of a founding group however, as we will see in his publications from the late 1990s. In this crucial review, Beck also emphasized those sources, which would later form the basis of his theory on the philosophical background of the founding group: the myths of *De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet* and the *De genio*

² DE JONG 1980.

³ HINNELLIS 1975; GORDON 1975. His critical notes on Cumont's ideas were not unique in that period: two decade earlier, Stig Wikander already criticized Cumont major views on Mithras in 1951, following the critical notes of Toutain and Saxl: WIKANDER 1951, 5–6.

⁴ DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN 1978. On the historical contextualisation of this conference see: REED-STILLMAN 2008, 152–153.

⁵ INSLEER 1978. Merkelbach almost reached this idea, however never wrote it down: MERKELBACH 1965. The tradition of the astronomic interpretation however is not the original invention of Insler: the idea can be found already in the 18th and 19th century literature: DUPUIS 1795; GASQUET 1899, 543.

⁶ Here I need to cite the personal notes of prof. Richard Gordon from his letter sent on 22nd March 2024 evoking the paper of Roger Beck from 1973 presented at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association: „about this paper he always claimed, anticipated (and corrected) Insler's arguments in favour of an Iranian origin by showing that the tauroctony's distribution of stars/constellations did not support an Iranian origin. Unfortunately he never wrote this up as such, so there is only a brief note in the Transactions”.

⁷ BECK 1976 and BECK 1977.

⁸ Founded in 1976 by John Hinnells, the journal had three volumes with 1–2 numbers each till 1980. The journal had a short lived electronic revival in 2000–2004 edited by Richard Gordon. The studies published in this period are hardly accessible on Internet Archive (Way back machine). See also: <https://ancientworldonline.blogspot.com/2010/12/open-access-journal-electronic-journal.html>.

⁹ On the impact and later history of this star-talk theory, see: CHALUPA 2012.

¹⁰ TURCAN 1975.

¹¹ GORDON 1976; GORDON 1980.

¹² BECK 2004, XV–XVI. Prof. Richard Gordon confirmed that the first letter of Roger Beck to him is from 1975 when Beck wrote to Gordon to publish his article in the first number of Journal of Mithraic Studies.

¹³ BECK 1979; BECK 1998a.

¹⁴ BECK 1988.

¹⁵ A continuation of this was published in BECK 2004, 3–31. No similar attempts were made since. See also: BELAYCHE 2013; GORDON 2021.

¹⁶ BECK 1987.

¹⁷ The idea of a “founding genius” appeared in other works before Merkelbach, especially in Martin Nilsson's work: NILSSON 1961, 675.

*Socratis*¹⁸. Just ten years after Insler's paradigmatic article, in this review Beck already claimed, that Insler was wrong in 1978 and was very critical also of Michael Speidel's 'Mithras-Orion'¹⁹. Beck recognized – and here follows Merkelbach and the later works of Cumont²⁰ – that the formative period of the cult is to be located between Nero and Trajan (i.e. 68–97 AD) and remained curious till the end of his life on the mechanisms of founding new religious movements in the early Principate²¹. Beck was critical also of Merkelbach's insistence on the impact of literary traditions (especially ancient novels) as allegories of mysteries. In his study of 1982 he emphasized the objections to such claims²². Beck was also aware on the role of the local communities and the various ways on how iconographic "doctrines" can be adopted, changed and even mistaken by local artists and individual followers of Mithras²³. His openness to new and recently published Mithraic finds is well-reflected by his only study published in a Romanian journal in 1985: after the original publications of the Pojejena reliefs by Nicolae Gudea and Ovidiu Bozu, Beck added some further notes to the local aspects of the Mithraic iconography of Dacia²⁴.

In the 1990s, a century after Franz Cumont's paradigmatic work, Roger Beck summarized again his ideas on the possible origin of the cult, where he made a kind tribute to the great predecessor, arguing, that in many regards, Cumont was right when he tried to connect East and West and the connection between the two worlds could be a "founding group" from Anatolia (probably Commagene)²⁵. Roger Beck's ingenuity in imagining the hypothetical founding group lies in his interdisciplinary approach: already in the 1990s, Beck was open to use methods of religious grouping, social cohesion, religious and cultural anthropology to understand the mechanisms of new religious movements and their historical evolution. This innovative aspect of his research and openness for new, often unusual methods is highlighted also in the introduction to his collected essays written by Luther Martin, a good friend and colleague of Beck²⁶.

Formed and educated as a scholar of ancient Greek literature and history, Roger Beck remained faithful to the sources of antiquity till the end of his life. His works are rich in literary sources, but also aware of the latest archaeological discoveries. After 2004 however, his interest turned to the realms of cognitive studies, especially under the influence of Luther Martin, who became interested in the Roman cult of Mithras in 1997 and published his first relevant cognitive studies around 2004.

Therefore, Beck used extensively this approach in his last, major book in 2006²⁷. Abandoning long time ago the idea of a Mithras-myth and a coherent, central or "founding" story

of Mithras, Beck argued in his book, that the "religion of the cult" is a study of cognition and the so-called doctrine of Mithras cannot be more than a loose web of interpretation. As Alison Griffith argued: by relocating the Mithraic doctrine to the minds of its followers, Beck 'deproblematizes' the search for doctrine from the monuments²⁸. His star-talk theory is presented in "full scale" in his 2006 monograph, which received a mixed reception. Most of the reviewers highlighted his erudition in ancient literary sources and the material evidence of Roman Mithras cult, however his astro-nomic interpretations were considered incomprehensible even for modern minds: as Peter Edwell argued "*some sections of the book contain in-depth and, at times, close to impenetrable detail on astronomical and astrological phenomena*"²⁹. Beck rarely asked the central question of this topic: how much of the astronomical knowledge he presented and systematized, creating his own "doctrine" of the Mithraic cult and mysteries was known by the initiates and local communities? How much of the star talk theory was present in the everyday life of the worshippers? Even if astronomy was part of the vernacular education and "folk religion" of antiquity, the star talk presented by Beck seems to be indeed, impenetrable for most of the readers even today where we can follow his theories with modern computer simulations and astronomical apps (for example, Stellarium Mobile and many others).

Roger Beck entered this path after 2006 and became genuinely engaged in cognitive science and its problematic use in the study of ancient religions. In the book of Olympia Panagiotidou, Beck united his old, star-talk theory with the latest currents in cognitive studies³⁰. Some parts of it were criticized by his long-time colleague and friend Richard Gordon in 2018, however the two scholars seems to agree on some basic points: "*an integrated set of Mithraic doctrines is a chimera; there were no standard rituals of initiation; we cannot generalise from single instances; we cannot confirm any inference about what 'Mithraists' saw in the bull-killing scenario, or how they interpreted it; during transmission narratives could have undergone mutations and transformations; there was no Mithraic 'design-team' negotiating all the details*"³¹. While Gordon abandoned many of his old theories generalising tendencies from his early studies, Roger Beck was 'faithful' to his star talk, but never interpreted the Mithraic tau-roctony and the sacred geography of the sanctuaries so literally as Speidel or Ulansey³². Instead of focusing on "what is Mithras" (i.e. which constellation he represents), Beck was focusing on "where is Mithras" and who was he in the star talk. His answer was permanent since the 1980s: Mithras is the Unconquered Sun, the Sun-in-Leo, the star Regulus³³. In his 1994 article Beck did effectively identify Mithras with Leo³⁴.

Roger Beck loved the stars, astronomy and long footnotes too: his notes are secondary publications, abundantly rich in literary sources and modern references often from

¹⁸ Discussed in detail in his last major book: BECK 2006.

¹⁹ BECK 1987, 302–303.

²⁰ Cumont himself started to believe that this was the real start – the transfer of auxiliary troops back from the East after Vespasian's war. See also: GORDON 1978.

²¹ BECK 1996.

²² BECK 1982a.

²³ BECK 1982b; BECK 1987, 312, especially footnote nr. 48.

²⁴ BECK 1985. Bozu and Gudea published their paper in English already in 1977 in the *Journal of Mithraic Studies*.

²⁵ BECK 1998b; BECK 2004, 295.

²⁶ BECK 2004, XIV.

²⁷ BECK 2006.

²⁸ GRIFFITH 2009.

²⁹ EDWELL 2006.

³⁰ PANAGIOTIDOU-BECK 2017.

³¹ GORDON 2018, 239. This is hardly compatible with the six propositions of the Mithras mysteries proposed by Beck: BECK 2004, 47–49.

³² BECK 2004, 270.

³³ BECK 1988, 99, 235.

³⁴ BECK 1994.

scientists, astronomers or cognitive scholars. In his five decades of researching the cult of Mithras, Roger Beck developed a truly cognitive, metahistorical connection with the dead: he dedicated his selected studies (2004) to the ancient initiates of Mithras and he came to respect both them and their mysteries³⁵. Giovanni Casadio claimed that the spirit of Roger Beck has been that of a pioneer and a marshal at the same time: opening new paths and redressing the balance³⁶.

Roger Beck was indeed, a path-opener, just as Mithras was for the souls of his believers. His kind reviews, prompt replies and rich correspondence (as yet unpublished) evokes a good man, a kind person and a generous, open-minded scholar who helped numerous young scholars in the last decades. His answer to my letter in 2010 had an important impact on my career, something similar to my first meeting with Richard Gordon in 2011: a long-term interest in the Roman cult of Mithras, the Unconquered Sun.

Roger L. Beck passed away on 29th April 2023. His monumental heritage entered the historiography next to the works of Franz Cumont, Maarten J. Vermaseren or Ugo Bianchi and will inspire new generations of scholars interested in the Roman cult of Mithras, ancient astronomy, religion and literature as well.

*“Atque perlata humeris tuli maxima divum
And to the end I have borne the orders
of the gods on my shoulders”³⁷*

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³⁵ BECK 2004, XVI.

³⁶ Laudatio on the cover of BECK 2004.

³⁷ VERMASEREN-VAN ESSEN 1965, 204.

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