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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v10i4
ISSN 2360 266x
ISSN–L 2360 266x

Design & layout: Francisc Baja

Editura Mega | www.edituramega.ro
e-mail: mega@edituramega.ro
IN MEMORIAM

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

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/memoriam.
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 began 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 1976. 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 emergence 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 event. Nor did Roger Beck attend the second congress organised in September 1975 in Tehran. 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 astronomical traditions and religious iconography in Mithraic research. In his first study on Roman Mithras Beck was highly influenced by the study of Insler which he read before its publication. 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 existence. In these papers focusing on the passage of Forphyry (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 astronomical interpretation, which emphasized the role of ancient (often Oriental) astronomic knowledge in the Mithraic iconography. In contrast, at the same period Robert Turcan emphasized the role of neoplatonic philosophical knowledge and the Hellenistic heritage of mystery cults, while Gordon’s work was focusing on the social aspects and local archaeological and iconographic appropriations of the cult. 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 colleagues. 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 Mithraeum. 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 mithraea. 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 field. 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/astrology. He rejected Merkelbach’s hypothesis – later used also by István Töth – 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 apparat and the De genio

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2 DE JONG 1980.
3 HINNELLS 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 Saal: WIKANDER 1951, 5–6.
5 INSLE 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 Philiological 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“.
9 On the impact and later history of this star-talk theory, see: CHALUPA 2012.
10 TURCAN 1975.
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.
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.
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 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 and modern references often from 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 studies. Some parts of if 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.” 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 Ulansky. 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 Regulus. His openness to new and recently published historical evolution. This innovative aspect of his research and the mechanisms of new religious movements and their his- torical interpretation 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.” 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).

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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 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 2006. 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 ‘depolarmatizes’ the search for doctrine from the monuments. 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 astrophological phenomena.” 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).

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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 come to respect both them and their mysteries. Giovanni Casadío 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 balance.

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”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very thankful for prof. dr. Richard Gordon for his kind help and personal notes on Roger Beck and his legacy. This study is part of the Joint Excellence in Science and Humanities fellowship of the author (Glocalisation and Urban Religion: the case studies of Apulum and Carnuntum) hosted by the Austrian Archaeological Institute (Austrian Academy of Sciences – OAI-ÖAW) in December 2023-August 2024.

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