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The Eastern Contaminations on the Porphyrian Thought in the *Philosophy from Oracles*: Magic, Demonology, Theurgy

1. The *Philosophy from Oracles*

One of the works where the Eastern influence in the thought of Porphyry is most evident is the *Philosophy from Oracles*. This work was probably written shortly after the return of the philosopher from Sicily,¹ to join the program of political and religious unification of the Emperor Aurelian, who wanted to eliminate the centrifugal forces that threatened the unity of the empire. Christianity is considered one of the main responsible for the evils of Rome and a great threat to the unity of the empire. Porphyry develops his anti-Christian program, which provides a *pars destruens* in the *Contra Christianos*,² where the philosopher disproves the historical-philological evidence of Christianity and claims the consequent falsity of the Scriptures; and a *pars construens* made by the *Philosophy from Oracles*, where Porphyry emphasizes that the philosophy followed by the great philosophers of the past as Pythagoras and Plato comes from the oracles of the gods. In addition, in the oracular work, addressed not to Christians but to the polytheist *cives Romani*, there is an invitation to discover the depth and truth of the cult of the gods in the Roman *oikoumene*, who are responsible for the greatness of Rome.³

It is therefore possible that the work was written between 273 and 275 in Rome,⁴ or anyway between the return of the philosopher from Lilybaeum⁵ until his

¹ Cfr. PORPH., *Vita Plotini* 11; EUNAP., *Vitae sophistarum ac philosophorum* IV, 1, 7-8.

² Cfr. G. MUSCOLINO, *Porfirio, il Contra Christianos. Per una nuova edizione dei frammenti*, Salerno 2009, p. 467.

³ Cfr. ID., *Porfirio, Filosofia rivelata dagli oracoli. Con tutti i frammenti di magia, stregoneria, teosofia e teurgia*, Bompiani, Milano 2011, pp. CXXIV-CXXVI; ID., *Porfirio: la Philosophia ex oraculis. Per una nuova edizione dei frammenti*, Macerata 2013, pp. 362-383.

⁴ For the date of Porphyry's work entitled *Philosophy from Oracles*, see: *Porphyrii De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda, librorum reliquiae*, edidit G. Wolff, Berlin 1856 (Hildesheim 1962), p. 38; J. BIDEZ, *Vie de Porphyre le philosophe néo-platonicien*, Gent 1913 (Hildesheim-New York 1980), pp. 15-16; P. DE LABRIOLLE, *La réaction païenne. Étude sur la polémique antichrétienne du I^{er} au VI^{ème} siècle*, Paris 1934, p. 233; L. VAGANAY, s.v. *Porphyre*, «Dialogues Théologiques Chrétiens» t. 12, (1935), col. 2556; P. BENOIT, *Un adversaire du Christianisme au III^{ème} siècle: Porphyre*, in

death around 305, when the Emperor Diocletian abdicated to retire at his residence in Dalmatia.⁶

From the remaining fragments, we know that the work was originally divided into three books: according to G. Wolff,⁷ the first editors of the *Philosophy from Oracles*, in the first book, maybe entitled *On the gods*, Porphyry writes about the hierarchical order of the gods, the qualities that characterize each of them, the functions they have, the sacrifices that must be made to please them. In the first book he also talks about piety, religion, statues and votive offerings. In the second book, probably entitled *On the Demons*, Porphyry covers issues related to the nature of angels and demons, and deals with concepts such as practical theosophy, astrology and destiny.⁸ Finally in the third book, entitled *On the Heroes*, Porphyry writes about heroes and divine men such as Heracles, the Dioscuri, Orpheus, Pythagoras. Among these, the philosopher also includes Christ, considered however neither a god nor a demon, but only a divine man, a hero.⁹ Today, it is impossible to follow the division of the work suggested by Wolff: in fact, only six fragments contain the exact indication of the three books of *Philosophy from Oracles*;¹⁰ the others fragments were arbitrarily placed by Wolff without any philological justification.¹¹

Until 307, which is the date of the death of Galerius, Porphyry's anti-Christian theology, composed by the *Contra Christianos*¹² on the one hand and the *Philosophia ex oraculis* on the other, became a *manifesto* for the Greek-roman religion and a harsh

«Revue Biblique» 54 (1947), pp. 546-547; R. BEUTLER, s.v. *Porphyrios* in Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll, *Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, t. II, 1953, p. 287; F. ROMANO, *Porfirio di Tiro. Filosofia e cultura nel III secolo d.C.*, Catania 1979, pp. 108-109; A. R. SODANO, *Porfirio, Lettera ad Anebo*, Napoli 1958, p. XXII; A. R. SODANO, *Porfirio. Vangelo di un pagano*, Milano 1993, p. 218; J. J. O'MEARA, *Porphyry's Philosophy from Oracles in Augustine*, Paris 1959, pp. 33-34; A. SMITH, *Porphyrian Studies since 1913* in W. Haase (Hrsg.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, t. II: *Principat*, Band 36: *Philosophie, Wissenschaften, Technik*, 2. Teilband: *Philosophie (Fortsetzung); Aristotelismus*, Berlin-New York 1987, p. 733; R. L. WILKEN, *Pagan criticism of Christianity: Greek Religion and Christian Faith*, in W. R. SCHOEDEL & R. L. WILKEN (eds.), *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition, in honorem R. M. Grant*, Paris 1979, p. 133; G. MUSCOLINO, *Porfirio: la Philosophia ex oraculis*, cit., pp. 74-90.

⁵ Lilybaeum is today's Marsala in Sicily.

⁶ Cfr. EUNAP., *Vitae sophistarum ac philosophorum* IV, 2, 6.

⁷ Cfr. PORPHYRII *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda*, cit. p. 42.

⁸ Cfr. *ibid.*

⁹ Cfr. *ivi*, p. 43.

¹⁰ For the first book see EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* IX 10, 1; IV 23, 1, 3. For the second book see P. F. BEATRICE, *Anonymi Monophysitae Theosophia. An Attempt at Reconstruction*, Leiden 2001, pp. 17-18; PHIOP., *De op. mundi* 200, 3 ed. Reichardt. For the third book see PHIOP., *De op. mundi* 201, 1; EUSEB., *Dem. ev.* III 6, 39.

¹¹ For the analysis of this problem and the suggestion of a new edition of fragments of the *Philosophy from Oracles*, see G. MUSCOLINO, *Porfirio: la Philosophia ex oraculis. Per una nuova edizione dei frammenti*, cit., pp. 181-298.

¹² Cfr. ID., *Porfirio, Contro i Cristiani, nella raccolta di A. von Harnack, con tutti i nuovi frammenti in appendice*, Milano 2010².

attack against Christianity, considered only as a *superstition*.¹³ But when the new religion with the Edict of Milan of 313 A.D. becomes *religio licita*, the oracular work is considered a threat not only by Christian apologists, but also by the state of Rome which, from Constantine onwards (except for the brief parenthesis of the Emperor Julian) will become a Christian state. For these reasons, certainly the *Philosophy from Oracles* must have been outlawed, along with the *Contra Christianos*, not only by the first edict of Constantine of 324 A.D.,¹⁴ but also by those who follow it during the entire fortieth, fiftieth and sixtieth century. The difference between the oracular work and the writing against the Christians is that, while the latter shows in a philological and historical way the unresolved problems of the Scriptures and all that goes with it, the *Philosophy from Oracles* directly attacks the supposed divinity of Christ. In the third book of the work¹⁵ in fact Porphyry shows an oracle of the goddess Hecate, who says that Christ was certainly a divine man, full of piety, and loved by all the gods, but he is neither the first God nor the Son of God as Christians believe. Christians, because of their extreme ignorance, have committed the worst mistake: to consider a simple man, a god. It is clear that a work that denies the divine nature of Christ, cannot survive in a century that from the Council of Nicea onwards is committed to the pursuit of heresy. There are traces of the oracular work until 536 A.D.,¹⁶ the last alleged date after which there won't be any news for over a thousand years until Lucas Holste in 1630¹⁷ will make the first compilation of all the works of Porphyry, including also collect fragments related to the *Philosophy from Oracles*. The first critical edition of the work is done in 1856 by Gustav Wolff,¹⁸ the last one, by Andrew Smith, in 1993.¹⁹

Among the topics covered within the oracular work, magic, demonology and theurgy have particular importance.

2. Magic

Magic was born in the East, and early arrived to Egypt. Following astrology, magic takes as its principle the dogma of universal *sympatheia*, which means that there are strong and consistent relationships of forces between objects, people and words. Considered a religious science as originally created, developed and practiced

¹³ Cfr. L. F. JANSSEN, *Superstitio and the Persecution of the Christians*, in «Vigiliae Christianae» 33 (1979), pp. 131-159.

¹⁴ Cfr. GELAS., *Hist. eccl.* II. 36; Socrat., *Hist. eccl.* I. 9.

¹⁵ Cfr. PORPH., *Phil. ex orac.*, apud EUSEB., *Demon. ev.* 3. 6. 39-7. 2; 345 F. Smith.

¹⁶ Cfr. *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* III p. 119, 26; 121, 22-26 (*Collectio Sabbathica* 41, *annus* 536 d.C. 43 T. Smith).

¹⁷ Cfr. L. HOLSTENIUS, *Dissertatio de vita et scriptis Porphyrii philosophi*, Roma 1630.

¹⁸ Cfr. G. WOLFF, *Porphyrii, De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda, librorum reliquiae*, edidit G. Wolff, cit.

¹⁹ Cfr. A. SMITH, *Porphyrii philosophi, Fragmenta*, fragmenta arabica D. Wasserstein interpretante, Stuttgardiae et Lipsiae 1993.

in the temples, magic remains for a long time the prerogative of the priests.²⁰ From the East and from Egypt it came in Greece and Italy, overlapping to the popular cultural substrate made of elementary knowledge, that sometimes intersects with childish beliefs, irrational, superstitious, able to generate spells, hexes, love potions and talismans. This type of practice, which is fed to popular belief, is not called magic but sorcery.²¹

The magician, thanks to his erudition and its practices, is able to manage and control the forces and energies that affect earth and heaven:²² not only he dominates the blind resistance of matter, but also the powers that are in a different dimension, identified with the spirits or with the demons or with the gods;²³ these forces obey the magician, and are unable to resist his power and knowledge. In particular, with regard to the demons, they not only have to submit, but also to grant his requests. Especially in Egypt the magician, during the sacred rituals, manages to get in touch with the Divine and the world of the dead through the prayers, the liturgy,²⁴ and the proper diction of words and magical syllables that are able to animate an object or figure.²⁵

Among the Chaldeans the magicians play an important role next to the king: he listens to their advice, their predictions about future actions, which affect not only the king but also important events for the state; they are also part of a very influential priestly caste.²⁶

Once in Rome, magic became of great interest to the intellectual élite, so that in the second century A. D. no one had doubts about its strength and its importance.²⁷ In the third century, Neo-Platonism, which from Porphyry onwards increasingly focused its attention on demonology,²⁸ puts the practice of theurgy alongside magic. However, the difference between magic and theurgy is clear: the first is the art coming from the Persian people who took the name of *magi* (*magoi*);²⁹ the second is

²⁰ Cfr. PORPH., *De abst.* IV, 16, 1 and M. Donà, *Magia e filosofia*, Milano, 2004, p. 19.

²¹ Cfr. F. CUMONT, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, Paris 1963, pp. 169-170; G. MUSCOLINO, *Porfirio, Filosofia rivelata dagli oracoli*, cit., pp. CXXXVI-CLIV.

²² Cfr. ID., *Porfirio, Filosofia rivelata dagli oracoli*, cit., pp. CXXVIII-CXXXV; M. Donà, *Magia e filosofia*, cit., p. 14.

²³ Cfr. E. LEVI, *Storia della magia*, Roma 1985, p. 45 and M. DONÀ, *Magia e filosofia*, cit., pp. 14-15.

²⁴ Cfr. B. de RACHEWILTZ, *Il Libro dei morti degli antichi Egizi*, Roma 2001, p. 15.

²⁵ Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 16-17.

²⁶ Cfr. F. CUMONT, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, cit., p. 173; M. DONÀ, *Magia e filosofia*, cit., p. 22.

²⁷ Cfr. F. CUMONT, *L'adoration des Mages et l'art iconografique de Rome*, in «Atti dell'Accademia Romana di Archeologia» III, vol. III, fasc. III (1932), pp. 81-105.

²⁸ Cfr. PORPH. *De abst.* II, 37-43. See A. Monaci Castagno, *Il diavolo e i suoi antenati: a proposito di alcuni studi sulla demonologia giudaica e cristiana*, in «Rivista di Storia della Letteratura Religiosa» 29/2 (1993), pp. 383-413.

²⁹ Cfr. PORPH., *De abst.* IV, 16, 1.

the art developed probably under Marcus Aurelius with Julian called the Theurgist.³⁰ From the third century onwards, the magic begins to take even a negative meaning so that it was often seen as a dangerous and abject art. It is possible that this negative value draws its origins from the Persian dualism that sees Ahura Mazda (Ormuzd) and Ahriman, respectively gods of Good and Evil, the principles that govern the world:³¹ the magician, in order to save men from the spells of Ahriman and the evil demons, must relate to them not only threatening them, so that they give up any unfortunate man under their domination, but also asking them to go against potential enemies. To do this the sorcerer must give sacrifices of blood, feed the demons with fumigations of meat of sacrificed animals, make special potions etc.³² These ongoing relationships with evil demons make the magic and the sorcerer associated to witchcraft, to *goeteia*, or black magic.³³ Fearing that the rituals may harm the official religion, the Roman state soon attacks magic, and condemns to the expulsion from Rome, the crucifixion or the abandon to wild beasts anyone who was discovered practicing magical rituals. From the fourth century onwards, the Church too continues the persecution of magic and its followers, leading a smear campaign against this art, considered the exclusive preserve of the demons of the Roman world. However, despite centuries of persecution and defamation, the magic still existed, immersed in occult circles and esoteric associations.³⁴

Now Porphyry – before dealing in the *Philosophy from Oracles* with such topics as magic, demonology and theurgy – in the preamble warns the reader that certain topics are to be revealed exclusively to an audience of initiates. Porphyry in fact solemnly swears that what he is going to write truly corresponds to the oracles of the gods, and that he has not added or subtracted anything to the words revealed by the gods. He recommends to ward off the profane, not to disclose these secrets in any way and to be careful not to be seduced by glory, easy money, or some form of flattery that would result from revealing the oracles.³⁵

These divine responses, seen by Porphyry as the most ineffable of mysteries,³⁶ are only for those who have devoted their lives to the salvation of the soul, to contemplation and to ascetic life.

After this introduction, Porphyry argues that magic is an art directly inspired

³⁰ Cfr. R. GRECO, *Pagani e cristiani a Siracusa tra il III e il IV secolo d.C.*, in «Kokalos» 16 (1998), p. 26; M. DONÀ, *Magia e filosofia*, cit., p. 20.

³¹ Cfr. F. CUMONT, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, cit., p. 175; R. Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus. Recherches sur L'Hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*, Leiden 1975, p. 13; E. Dodds, *Pagans and Christians in an Age of Anxiety. Some Aspects of religious experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, Cambridge 1965.

³² Cfr. PORPH., *De abstin.* II, 42, 3. See also G. Muscolino, *Porfirio, Filosofia rivelata dagli oracoli*, cit., pp. CXXXVI-CLIV.

³³ Cfr. PORPH., *De abstin.* II, 41, 5. See also my forthcoming paper: G. Muscolino, *Porphyry and Black Magic*, in I.S.N.S. Tenth International Conference, 20-24 june, University of Cagliari 2012.

³⁴ Cfr. F. CUMONT, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, cit. pp. 176-177.

³⁵ Cfr. PORPH., *Phil. ex orac., apud Euseb., Praep. ev. 4. 7. 2-8.1; 304* F. Smith.

³⁶ Cfr. *ivi, apud Euseb., Praep. ev. 4. 8. 2; 305* F. Smith.

by the gods who, thanks to the horoscopes, predict the fate of men. They have revealed in mysterious words this art to the king of the magicians, the magician Ostanes, who teaches the worthy men the art of invoking the gods and asking for their divine responses.³⁷

Among the most important features of magic, the main seems the ability to dissolve the bonds of Fate and thus make men free from subjection to necessity. Magic can free from the snares of *Ananke*: it is considered by Porphyry the best gift the gods have given to some men in order to counteract the force of *Eimarmene*.³⁸

3. Demons

After developing the theme of magic, Porphyry spreadly speaks of demons: these beings are souls living in the intermediate level between the Divine (i.e. the One, the *Nous* and universal Soul) and the human; they were born from the universal Soul and have the power to govern large *sublunary* areas. They have a *pneumatic* body (*pneuma*) that, unlike the earthy body of men, is made of air or fire.³⁹

Porphyry, as in *De abstinentia* II, 37-43, divides demons into good and bad, even if in the *Philosophy from Oracles* he gives them slightly different functions.

Good demons reveal to men the divine power inherent in the oracles and indicate the way that Porphyry likes to call *theosophy*.⁴⁰ Theosophy is that special knowledge about the gods, their functions and their hierarchy, the proper ritual to honor them, the importance to be assigned to each of them. The good demons, when properly invoked and honored with the right sacrifices, easily show themselves to men and communicate the Divine by giving useful tips and warnings.⁴¹

In addition to the good demons Porphyry covers in depth the bad ones that, because of their characteristics and their evil, should be feared for their dangerousness. They feed on the blood of sacrificed animals and the fumigations of fat burning during the combustion, with which they feed their *pneuma* responsible for their evil nature.⁴² In fact, they are hungry for sacrificial victims: in an oracle given by Porphyry, Apollo explains how to sacrifice to these demons. After doing the libations, a pyre is lit on which an animal with a black coat must be sacrificed when the blood, black for its violent spill, drip on the pyre. At the same time libations must be done with a black wine and after it with drops of sheep milk.⁴³ A variant of this

³⁷ Cfr. F. CUMONT, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, cit, p. 218.

³⁸ Cfr. PORPH., *Phil. ex orac.*, apud Euseb., *Praep. ev.* 4. 3. 5-4. 3; 339 F. Smith.

³⁹ Cfr. G. MUSCOLINO, *La demonologia di Porfirio e il culto di Mitra*, in «Mediaeval Sophia» 7 (2010) p. 103, <www.mediaevalsophia.net>.

⁴⁰ Cfr. PORPH., *Phil. ex orac.*, apud EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* 4. 6. 2-7. 2; 303 F. Smith.

⁴¹ Cfr. *ivi*, apud Anonymi Monophysitae *Theosophia* ed. Beatrice, I, pp. 17-18; 325 F. Smith. See G. Muscolino, *Porfirio, Filosofia rivelata dagli oracoli*, cit., pp. CLIV-CLXIII.

⁴² Cfr. M. DI PASQUALE BARBANTI, *Ochema-Pneuma e Phantasia nel Neoplatonismo*, Catania 1998, pp. 107-116.

⁴³ Cfr. PORPH., *Phil. ex orac.* (apud EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* IV 19, 8-20, 1; 329 F. Smith).

ritual is to make libations with wine, milk and water, to offer the fruit of the tree sacred to Zeus, that is the acorn, and then to bake the entrails of the sacrificial victim with plenty of wine.⁴⁴ Another ritual requires instead the sacrifice of a black lamb after digging a pit into which the blood of the victim is poured, so that the evil demons can drink the liquid, and then covering the pit throwing in the victim. The sacrificial lambs must be black because the earth and the nature of hell is black, while the number must be three because it corresponds symbolically to the terrestrial and material nature. The victim must be buried because evil demons live underground. Finally, they must be honored in specific places, days and hours.⁴⁵

This class of demons is subject to the most troubled and violent passions: it hates the human race urging men to war and strife, and loves the rituals that resemble the orgiastic ones or a *Sabbath* of witches, with the use of drums, flutes, wild rhythms, screams reminiscent of the female ones.⁴⁶

The deities leading the evil demons are Serapis and Hecate, which Christian apologists identify with Satan, Devil or Beelzebub.⁴⁷ Serapis has the force of attraction and repulsion that is often attributed to Hades and reveals that the demons, when they appear to the magician, take forms of animals, often of horrible creatures in order to scare him. Serapis is represented as a dog with three heads representing three natural elements like water, earth and air.⁴⁸

Hecate is also referred to as the queen of evil demons: she is presented with three bull heads throwing golden darts. The tripartite head, like Serapis, symbolically represents the three elements of nature; the goddess also represents the ether under the form of fire, and is often depicted seated in the sky on a bright chariot, while the earth is guarded by numerous packs of his black dogs, that are the symbol of evil demons. The goddess is driven by two strong passions: anger and lust that leads to sexual pleasures.⁴⁹

Porphyry shows an oracle that reveals the ways to drive the evil demons away: as they are attracted by blood and the smoke of the fat of sacrificial victims, they get dangerously close to those that feed on the sacrificed victims and in general to those who eat meat, getting in their bodies. Once entered men, the demons led them to lust, excite sexual appetites and immoderate eating, and enchant the unfortunate men disorienting them with nonsense sounds and words just for the sake of deceiving. From these behaviors a prudent person can easily understand the presence of evil demons within the body of someone. For this reason the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Chaldeans, the Jews and in general the sage and the wise in things pertaining to the Divine perform rituals to drive these evil demons away before the sacrificial banquet. In fact, after the ritual of purification and the prayers, the priests have a

⁴⁴ Cfr. *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Cfr. *ivi, apud* EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* 4. 9. 3-7; 315 F. Smith.

⁴⁶ Cfr. *ivi, apud* EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* 5. 6. 2-7. 2; 308 F. Smith.

⁴⁷ Cfr. *ivi, apud* EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* 4. 22. 15 -23. 2; 326 F. Smith.

⁴⁸ Cfr. *ivi, apud* EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* 4. 23. 6; 327 F. Smith.

⁴⁹ Cfr. *ivi, apud* EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* 4. 23. 7-9; 328 F. Smith.

habit of slamming into the temples some leather straps, of killing the victim on a paving stone before making the sacred ritual. The priests drive the demons away, while the blood of the victim begins to pour on the altar, clapping their hands up so that, once the evil demons are gone, gods can approach more easily to men and to the altar of sacrifice. Even men's houses can be haunted by evil demons, so some purification rites have to be done before the invocation of the gods, just as the bodies of those who eat meat may be infested by evil demons that, during lunch, can approach and enter the person who is eating. For these reasons, purification and prayer before meal are used in order to invoke and thank the gods, as well as to expel the evil demons.⁵⁰

Finally Porphyry explains why the demons and even the gods themselves, from their spiritual dimension, go down to men and answer to their calls and their prayers. All these spiritual beings are forced to answer because all beings are subject to the *anankài* that is the proper performance of the ritual and the prayer. They are subject to Fate and cannot avoid to accomplish this task, although in varying degrees, depending on the nature and characteristic of the individual demon or the individual god. Porphyry refers to this need as a compelling persuasion, an invincible power, an insurmountable yoke that pushes the devil or the god to leave the divine level and get closer to earth and to mortals.⁵¹

4. Theurgy

Another important theme developed by Porphyry in the *Philosophy from Oracles* is theurgy.⁵²

Before talking about the theurgy, it is important to point out that the first work who contains this noun is the *Oracula chaldaica*. Comprising two hundred twenty seven fragments, almost exclusively in the hexametric style, the work contains warnings, invocations, revelations of some deities, among which the goddess Hecate. It is possible that the work was written around the second century A.D. under the Emperor Marcus Aurelius by Julian called the Chaldean and his son Julian the Theurgist, but not all scholars agree with this attribution.⁵³ It is also necessary to

⁵⁰ Cfr. *ivi, apud* EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* 4. 23. 2-6; 326 F. Smith. On the *Chaldean Oracles* as a source of the *Philosophy from Oracles* see G. MUSCOLINO, *Porfirio: la Philosophia ex oraculis. Per una nuova edizione dei frammenti*, cit., pp. 344-362.

⁵¹ PORPH., *Phil. ex orac., apud* EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* 5. 7. 6- 8.7; 347 F. Smith.

⁵² Cfr. G. MUSCOLINO, *Filosofia rivelata dagli oracoli*, cit., pp. CLXIII-CLXXXVIII.

⁵³ Cfr. G. FOWDEN, *Pagan Versions of the Rain Miracle of A.D. 172*, in «Historia. Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte» 36 (1987), pp. 83-95; R. LAMBERTON, *The Neo-Platonist and their Books*, in M. FINKELBERG & G. G. STROUMSA (ed.), *Homer, the Bible and Beyond. Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World*, Leiden 2003, pp. 195-211; D. S. POTTER, review to R. MAJERCIK, *Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Leiden 1989, in «Journal of Roman Studies» 81 (1991), pp. 225-227; Id., *Prophets and Emperors: human and divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, Cambridge 1994; J. VANDERSPOEL, *Correspondance and Correspondent of Julius Julianus*, in

point out that the text, which was received in a fragmentary condition, does not allow us to distinguish the authentic content of the oracles from the succeeding Neoplatonic exegesis.

The first critical edition of the text was made in 1894 by W. Kroll,⁵⁴ revived in 1971 by Édouard des Places;⁵⁵ but crucial, and in many respects unsurpassed, remains the study of Hans Lewy, edited for the first time in the 1956.⁵⁶

According with the *Chaldean Oracles*, it is necessary to dwell briefly on the meaning of the noun *oracle*, *theurgy*, and the adjectives *Chaldean*, and *theurgist*.

While the term *oracle*, is tantamount to the answer given by the gods to a private citizen or a person who holds a public office, for the work entitled *Chaldean Oracles* – starting with Porphyry considered a kind of holy book containing words revealed by the gods – it is employed the Greek term *loghion*.⁵⁷

Regarding instead the adjective *Chaldean*, it is necessary to mention that the ancient religious beliefs from Babylon, Syria and Iran would be the cultural *milieu* in which a primitive Babylonian priesthood bases its knowledge for the reading of the stars and the prediction of the future: these priests are the Chaldeans.⁵⁸ The authority and prestige of the wisdom of the East are growing not only with the formation of the Empire, but also with the increased interest in the Greek-Roman world to the culture and religion of ancient Persia. Legendary characters such as Zoroaster, Hystaspes and Ostanes take on a mythical profile, which aims to enhance its abilities, and miraculous: Zoroaster became the guide of wisdom and knowledge for philosophers

«Byzantion» 79/2 (1999), pp. 396-478; ID., *Merkabah, Mysticism and Chaldean Theurgy*, in M. P. DILLON (ed.), *Religion in the Ancient World. New Themes and Approaches*, Amsterdam 1995, pp. 511-522.

⁵⁴ Cfr. W. KROLL, *De oraculis Chaldaicis*, Breslau 1894 (rist. Hildesheim 1962).

⁵⁵ Cfr. É. DES PLACES, *Oracles Chaldaïques, avec un choix de commentaires anciens*, Paris 1996³ (1971¹). See also R. MAJERCIK, *Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Leiden 1989; F. GARCÍA BAZÁN, *Oráculos caldeos: con una selección de testimonios de Proclo y Pselos y M. Itálico. Númenio de Apamea, Fragmentos y testimonios*, Madrid 1991; A. TONELLI, *Oracoli caldaici*, Milano 2008².

⁵⁶ Cfr. H. LEWY, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, troisième édition par M. Tardieu avec un supplément «Les Oracles chaldaïques 1891-2011», Paris 2011.

⁵⁷ In the *Philosophy from Oracles* Porphyry use the noun *loghia* to point out that his oracular collection would come also from the *Chaldean Oracles*. The Neoplatonic tradition from Porphyry onwards, uses the noun *loghia* to indicate the *Chaldean Oracles*. See also JULIAN THE EMPEROR (*Or. VIII*, 16, [175c]), PROCLUS (*In Tim. I*, 408, 12 e *III*, 89, 22) and PSELLUS (*Philosophica minora*, [Duffy 1992], *Opusculum* 44, 33). For Julian the Emperor see A. PENATI, *L'influenza del sistema caldaico sul pensiero teologico dell'imperatore Giuliano*, in «Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica» 4 (1983), p. 546, footnote 25; for Iamblichus and Psellus see A. BUSINE, *Des "logia" pour philosophie: à propos du titre de la Philosophie tirée des oracles de Porphyre*, in «Philosophie antique» 4 (2004), p. 160; S. I. JOHNSTON & T. HEINZE, *Oracula chaldaica*, in *Der neue Pauly*, Bd. IX, Stuttgart-Weimar 2000, coll. 1-2.

⁵⁸ Cfr. H. LEWY, *Chaldean Oracles*, cit., pp. 426-427.

as Pythagoras and Plato.⁵⁹ In the second century A.D. the noun Chaldean is connected with the two founders of theurgy: Julian the father, called the Chaldean, and his son Julian, called the Theurgist. Wisdom Persian, Assyrian-Chaldeans and theurgy are the terms that the Neo-Platonic philosophers, starting with Porphyry,⁶⁰ consider a *unicum*.

The adjective Theurgist is a neologism created by the Chaldeans,⁶¹ which, however, occurs only one time in the fragments of *Oracula chaldaica*,⁶² although it seems that Julian the Theurgist had written a work entitled *Theurghika*.⁶³ The adjective theurgist differs from theologian because while the latter indicates the speaker around the gods and divine things, the first indicates the man who evokes the gods and act on them.⁶⁴ According to Iamblichus,⁶⁵ repeating some ritual actions ensures the contemplation and the union with the Divine, and it is not important if the officiate doesn't understand the meaning of the deeds, because the latter are encompassed by the divinity.

Theurgy consists of rituals that are intended for mystical-religious purposes, and this is what distinguishes it from the common magic. Theurgy shows two types of processes: one involves the use of symbols; the other requires the participation of a *medium*.⁶⁶ The first practice, known also as *telestike* as well as symbolic, aims at consecrating (*telein*)⁶⁷ and animating some magic statuettes to get oracles from them. The second practice aims at making the spirit incarnate within the *medium* so that, thanks to changes in personality, the spirit can give responses.⁶⁸ It is interesting to underline that this temporary incarnation of the deity inside the *medium* is not automatic for a spontaneous act of grace of the spirit, but for a specific call from the theurgist, who constraints the spirit to enter into the *medium* and to obey.⁶⁹ Theurgy, albeit with variations dependent on individual operators, and with the differences characterized by the historical period when it is practiced, performs an essential task for purifying the soul, even if limited to the *pneumatic* soul, excluding the rational

⁵⁹ Cfr. PORPH., *Vita Pyth.* 12, 7. See also T. HOPFNER, *Orient und griechische Philosophie*, Leipzig 1925, pp. 1-8, and J. BIDEZ & F. CUMONT, *Les mages Hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe, d'après la tradition grecque*, vol. I, Paris 1938.

⁶⁰ Cfr. PORPH., *Phil. ex orac., apud EUSEB., Praep. ev. IX*, 10, 4; 324 F. Smith.

⁶¹ Cfr. F. CUMONT, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, cit., p. 174.

⁶² Cfr. *Orac. cald.* fr. 153 des Places.

⁶³ Cfr. H. LEWY, *Chaldean oracles*, cit., pp. 4-38.

⁶⁴ Cfr. *ivi*, p. 39.

⁶⁵ Cfr. IAMBLIC., *De myst.* II, 11.

⁶⁶ Cfr. M. DI PASQUALE BARBANTI, *Proclo tra filosofia e teurgia*, Acireale 1993², p. 150.

⁶⁷ Cfr. PORPH., *Phil. ex orac., apud Euseb., Praep. ev. 5. 12. 1-2*; 317 F. Smith.

⁶⁸ Cfr. *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Cfr. PORPH., *Phil. ex orac., apud Euseb., Praep. ev. 5, 8*; 347 F. Smith. H. Lewy (*Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, cit., p. 39) points out that: «The Chaldean theurgist did not confine themselves to a theoretical exposition of the relationship between God, the world and man; as their very name implies (*theurgos* meaning *worker of divine things*), they were also the initiators into the rites and the mysteries of a sacramental community, the priests of which were able by their magical craft to render the higher powers subject to their will».

soul that can purify itself only through philosophy.⁷⁰

The *Philosophy from Oracles* presents both sides of theurgy: Porphyry lists some oracles concerning both the *telestic* method of the animation and production of the statues, and the incarnation of the spirit of the god or demon within a *medium* that would speak in state of *trance*.⁷¹

Porphyry lists an oracle that describes exactly how the statue of the goddess Hecate has to be prepared. The methods of preparation have been personally told by the goddess who warns that only if the ritual is strictly complied the theurgist can see her. The exterior of the statue must be made of wood previously purified and then covered with wild rue woven so that it can contain a mixture of domestic lizards or tarantulas pulverized and mixed with myrrh, incense and resin. This must be done necessarily in the night during the waxing moon and accompanied by a prayer the goddess has revealed to the adept. The goddess reassures the theurgist that even if she has many forms, the dust of lizards or tarantulas is sufficient for the proper production of the simulacrum. Finally, the exterior of the statue has to be formed by the intertwining of some sprigs of laurel to give the idea that they grow up. Once the statue has been built in the prescribed manner, the theurgist must do a number of prayers to the goddess who promises to appear in dreams to respond to its questions.⁷²

Porphyry mentions another oracle, revealed by Hecate, providing instructions to build a larger statue made of Parian marble or engraved ivory depicting the goddess wearing a white robe, golden sandals, a belt made by long and sinuous snakes that move, leaving the chiton of the goddess completely candid. The appearance of the statue should be similar to Demeter, the goddess of fruit.⁷³ The symbol of Hecate is the wax of three colors: white, black and red, and the statue must represent the goddess who wields a whip, a torch, a sword, and must be dressed in a dress surrounded by a snake.⁷⁴

Porphyry also reports an oracle of Serapis, describing the procedures for the construction of his statue: the power of the god who enters the simulacrum is represented by a light so strong that it obscures the fires of braziers lit in honor of the god. The face of Serapis has the long hair tied back, a broad and radiant forehead and a beard around the chin.

Finally, the philosopher also provides a description of the statue of the god Pan, represented with horns, goat legs and feet and strongly pronounced masculine attributes that symbolize the sexual bestiality.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Cfr. G. REALE, *Storia della filosofia greca e romana*, Milano 2004, vol. 8, p. 323 and P. ATHANASSIADI, *Philosophers and Oracles: Shifts of Authority in Late Paganism*, in «Byzantium» 62 (1992), pp. 45-62.

⁷¹ Cfr. F. HARTMANN, *Magia bianca e nera. La scienza della vita Finita e Infinita*, Roma 2005, p. 16.

⁷² Cfr. PORPH., *Phil. ex orac., apud EUSEB., Praep. ev. 5. 12. 1-2; 317* F. Smith.

⁷³ Cfr. *ivi, apud EUSEB., Praep. ev. 5. 13. 3-4; 319* F. Smith.

⁷⁴ Cfr. *ivi, apud EUSEB., Praep. ev. 5. 14. 2-3; 320* F. Smith.

⁷⁵ Cfr. *ivi, apud EUSEB., Praep. ev. 5. 13. 1-2; 318* F. Smith.

After the description of the *telestic* method, Porphyry provides important information on the other theurgical method called of *medianic trance*. In this case the god or demon, raised by the theurgist, speaks through a *medium* who, for the temporary incarnation (*eiskrinein*) of the spirit, is in a state of mental alteration. The presence of the god can also occur inside the statue that represents him.

In the *Philosophy from Oracles* there are some responses that describe the god penetrating inside the statue, the incarnation of the demon within the body of the *medium* who receives the spirit as a *recipient* (*katokos* or *dokeus*);⁷⁶ and finally some prayers to the spirit so that it goes back where it came from and leave the *medium's* body.

In a fragment reported by Firmicus Maternus, Porphyry speaks of Serapis who after being called, enters the body of a man and answers the questions of the theurgist (*Serapis vocatus et intra corpus hominis conlatus*).⁷⁷

Porphyry also tells about the god Apollo who, invoked by the prayers of the theurgist, comes down to the mortals, and gets inside the body in the form of pure and light cloud or an imperceptible puff. Once inside the body the god pervades all the parts using the soul of the *medium* as the seat for his own operations, and the human voice as an instrument to let his word be heard.⁷⁸ Interestingly, according to Porphyry, the gods or the demons, when they are invoked, are *forced* to obey the invocation because this is a necessity, a force of the Destiny they cannot defeat. Once the séance is finished and the god or demon has answered the questions of the theurgist, the spirit must be dismissed quickly as over staying inside the body of the *medium* would cause substantial psychological damage. It was known that some *mediums* during the séance experience anesthesia, resistance to fire, while others move in a convulsive way, have spasms or remain still; others bite their lips or hum. In all cases the *medium* is very tired after the presence of a spirit.

To finish the séance the theurgist has to call the spirit to leave (*apolysis*)⁷⁹ the body with these formulas, "Rise up from here. Stop proclaiming the oracles from the bottom of the mysterious cave" If the god is slow to leave or unruly, some formulas can be used: «Spread out the cloud of linen that covers me, and loose the

⁷⁶ H. LEWY (*Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, cit., p. 41) notes that: «It is a noteworthy fact that this term (i. e. *dokeus*) is only found in the Chaldean Oracles and in the two verses quoted by Porphyry (*apud* EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* V 9, 6); it is not encountered in any Greek text independent of Chaldean tradition. It appears to have been a neologism coined by the Chaldeans, who systematically derived from the verbe employed in their terminology *nomina agentis* designating either the officiants of their cult or cosmic powers».

⁷⁷ PORPH., *Phil. ex orac.*, *apud* FIRMICUS MATERNUS, *De errore profan. relig.* 13. 4-5; 306 F. Smith.

⁷⁸ Cfr. *ivi*, *apud* EUSEB., *Praep. ev.* 5. 8, 11-12; 349 F. Smith.

⁷⁹ H. LEWY (*Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, cit., p. 41) emphasizes that: «The conjuration which ended with the god being *loosed* began with his being *bound*. The power of the magician consists in binding and in loosing. For this reason, the formula of the invocation (*epiclesis*) is often followed in the magical papyri by the formula that *looses* (*apolysis*) the demon and send him back to his own place without his doing any harm. In the Chaldean mysteries both rites, the invocation and the *loosing* were probably performed by the *callers*».

recipient».⁸⁰ Or: «Naiads, nymphs of the fountains and you Muses, release Apollo; sing Phoebus who throws his arrows».⁸¹ With these prayers and invocations the spirit leaves the body of the *medium* and the séance is over. Porphyry warns against such operations because (especially if the theurgist is young or inexperienced) evil demons or *antitheoi* may approach and can cause severe damage to the operator and the *medium* himself.⁸²

5. Final considerations

After this brief digression on matters relating to magic, demonology and theurgy, it is now possible to give some final considerations. The knowledge of issues from the East proves incontrovertibly the interest of the philosopher of Tyre not only for philosophy, but also for the complex of notions rooted in the culture and traditions of different peoples, which cannot properly be called scientific knowledge. After all, the *cliché* of the rationalistic influence exercised by Plotinus on his disciple should be reduced in the light of a more careful reading of the *Vita Plotini* – where Porphyry states that in Plotinus' school they practiced magic rites,⁸³ invoked the gods,⁸⁴ and Gnostics and Christians were admitted⁸⁵ – as well as of the historian Eunapius of Sardis, and in general of the literary production of the philosopher himself. That Porphyry was not concerned exclusively with matters of philosophical interest during his stay in Rome is known; bringing into Neo-Platonism his extensive knowledge of magic, demonology and theurgy, he gives to this philosophical current a fideistic aspect that will be amplified by the following Neo-Platonist, until the historical end of Neo-Platonism when the Academy is closed in 529 A. D.

Maybe Porphyry is the one who understood that philosophical rationality by itself cannot give all the answers a *civis Romanus* of the third and fourth century needed. At that time he could no longer address only to philosophers, because the vast majority of people yearned for answers, wanted some assurances, needed hope. A hope that necessarily had to be placed no longer *here*, that is in the strength and security of an empire that was rapidly changing, but a safer and more peaceful *beyond*. For these reasons it was necessary to resort to the fideistic cultural tradition.⁸⁶ Porphyry turns to magic, the ancient art of the people of the Magi, but also caters to the Iranian doctrines that seek to justify the presence of evil in the world with the principles of Good and Evil, personified by the gods Ahura Mazda

⁸⁰ PORPH., *Phil. ex orac., apud EUSEB., Praep. ev.*, 5. 8, 13- 9. 9; 9.12; 350 F. Smith.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Cfr. PORPH., *Epist. ad Aneb.* 2, 3, and G. MUSCOLINO, *Porfirio, Filosofia rivelata dagli oracoli*, cit., p. CLXXXVI.

⁸³ Cfr. PORPH., *Vita Plotini*, 10, 15-30.

⁸⁴ Cfr. *ivi*, 10, 35-40.

⁸⁵ Cfr. *ivi*, 16.

⁸⁶ Cfr. G. MUSCOLINO, *Porfirio il Contra Christianos. Per una nuova edizione dei frammenti*, cit., pp. 461-462.

(Ormuzd) and Ahriman. Even the use of theurgy, which opens a way for the hope of salvation for the masses, is a way that can be used to try to respond to the increasingly pressing need for certainty and stability. Magic, demonology and theurgy with its rituals, its formulas, its prayers involve everybody, not only philosophers, to believe in a better life in the beyond. With Porphyry there is a historic turning point in Neo-Platonism and perhaps even in Western thought that turns quickly towards the East, which from the third century onwards seems the only reassuring horizon in a world of rapid and distressing change.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Cfr. E. DODDS, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety. Some aspects of religious experience from Marcus Aurelius to Costantine*, cit.