

Thus spake Zaraθuštra: an Avestan eye on Orphic cosmogonies

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1. Starting point: three verses in the reconstructed Orphic poem (Derveni theogony) (West 1983: 115; Bernabé 2002; Bernabé *PEG* II, 3):

[μήσατο δ' αὖ] Γαῖάν [τε καὶ] Οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν [ὑπερθεῖν]
'he contrived the Earth and broad Sky above'
(*OF* 16.1 BERNABÉ; cf. *Pap.Derv.* col. xxii)

μήσατο δ' Ὠκεανοῖο μέγα σθένος εὐρὺ ρέοντος
'he contrived the great strength of wide-flowing Ocean'
(*OF* 16.2 BERNABÉ; cf. *Pap.Derv.* col. xxiii, 4-8)

αὐτ]ἄρ [ἐ]πεὶ δ[ὴ πᾶν]τα Διὸ[ς φρήν μή]σατ[ο ἔ]ργα
'but when the mind of Zeus devised all things'
(*OF* 18.1 BERNABÉ = *Pap.Derv.* col. xxv,14)

2. What is the meaning of (ἐ)μήσατο?

Commentators agree that this verb is essentially used here to convey the idea of creation: MERKELBACH (1967: 29): "hat...geschaffen"; RICCIARDELLI APICELLA 1980: 125 "il verbo ἐμήσατο usato per un atto creativo"; MCCLINTOCK (1988: 143): "nuova creazione maschile e intellettuale"; BERNABÉ (2007: 120) and others.

3. The same verb (again in a creation context) appears twice in the Rhapsodies:

μήσατο δ' ἄλλην γαῖαν ἀπείριτον
'and he contrived another boundless earth'
(*OF* 155.1 BERNABÉ)

μήσατο γὰρ προπόλους <τε> καὶ ἀμφιπόλους καὶ ὄπαδούς
μήσατο δ' ἀμβροσίην καὶ ἐρυθροῦ νέκταρος ἀρδμόν
μήσατο δ' ἀγλαὰ ἔργα μελισσάων ἐριβόμβων
'for she (= Rhea-Demeter – A.N.) contrived attendants, butlers, waiters
contrived ambrosia and red nectar draught,
contrived the gleaming works of buzzing bees'
(*OF* 221.1-3 BERNABÉ)

4. The use of the verb μήδομαι ‘to plan cunningly; to contrive; to devise’ in a creation context is peculiar.

4.1 It is unlikely that the choice of the verb was motivated by a pseudo-etymological connection with Zeus’ epithet μητίετα (note the use of μήσατο with Rhea-Demeter in *OF* 221 above).

4.2 Is it possible that (ἐ)μήσατο refers here not to planning, but to the execution of the plan (viz. ‘made, wrought’)? Unlikely for two reasons:

4.2.1 Contrary to VERDENIUS (1972; 1985: 45), this second meaning is not well established (e.g. NEITZEL 1976: 396, Fn. 26). Whenever the location of the action described by μήδομαι is specified, it is always φρένες or θυμός.

The only secure instance where (ἐ)μήσατο refers to the *act* and not to plan or intention is Hes. *Erga* 95:

ἀνθρώποισι δ’ ἐμήσατο κήδεα λυγρά

‘(by opening the jar) she devised baneful evils for human beings’

However, this part of the verse is a mere repetition of *Erga* 49 where the subject of ἐμήσατο is Zeus and where the verb clearly refers to planning.

4.2.2 More importantly, (ἐ)μήσατο in the Derveni theogony is paralleled by the use of μητίσατο in Parm. B 13:

πρώτιστον μὲν Ἴρωτα θεῶν μητίσατο πάντων

‘first of all gods it’ contrived Eros’

According to Simpl. *Comm. Arist. Phys.* 39.16-18 the subject of μητίσατο is δαίμων (B 12).

The verb μητίσατο is attested in the same meaning in Orpheus’ *Argonautica*:

22-23 (VIAN) = *OF* 99.22-23 (BERNABÉ):

ἅ τ’ ἐν Κυβέλοις ὄρεσιν μητίσατο κούρη

Φερσεφόνην περὶ πατρὸς ἀμαιμακέτου Κρονίωνος

It is likely that Parmenides knew a version of Orphic theogony (WEST 1983: 109-110; BURKERT 2004: 97). The evidence that supports this point of view includes:

- the idea that the whole universe is united in the body of Zeus (who becomes “the only one”, μῶνος ἔγεντο Pap. Derv. col. xvi, 6) which is mirror-imaged by Parmenides’ “unique” *Being*: οὐλον μουνογενές τε (Parm. fr. B 1.4);
- phraseological parallels such as Δίκη πολύποινος (Parm. fr. B 1.14 = *OF* 233 BERNABÉ);
- only in pap. Derv. and in Parmenides the moon is described as spherical (ἰσομελῆ pap. Derv. col. xxiv, 2; Parm. B 8.43-44 εὐκύκλου σφαίρης ἐναλίγκιον ὄγκωι | μεσσόθεν ἰσοπαλές πάντη).

4.3 Intermediate conclusion: both (ἐ)μήσατο and μητίσατο ‘contrived’, ‘devised’ refer to the same Orphic idea of creation as a mental act.

5. What is the origin of this idea?

5.1 Can creation by the power of thought be an inherited motif?

Unlikely: the only Indo-European cosmogonic myth that can be reconstructed with a certain degree of certainty is the one centered on the dismemberment of a divine being and the creation of universe out of its elements (Old Indic *Puruṣasūkta* (RV X 90), Old Norse *Grímnismál* 40-41, Frisian *Code of Emsig*).

In Indo-European terms, the verb for divine creation is *d^heh₁- ‘to establish, to put’:

- Vedic *Dhātṛ*;
- Hittite *nēbiš dēgan dāir* ‘they established heaven and earth’ (KBo xvi.27);
- Old Persian *hya imām būmim adā, hya avam asmānam adā* ‘(Ahuramazdā), who created this earth, who created yonder sky’ (DNa 1, etc.);
- a feeble echo in Greek:
Alcm. fr. 20.1-3 (DAVIES): ὥρας δ’ ἔσηκε τρεῖς ‘established three seasons’
uncertain Hes. *Op.* 173d: Ζεὺς δ’ αὖτ’ ἄλλο γένος θῆκε[εν μερόπων ἀνθρώπων
‘and Zeus created another race of men’

There is no comparative evidence for Indo-European *men- ‘to think’ as a creation verb.

5.2 Can the creation by the power of thought be an import from Egyptian?

Memphite theology for Ptah who produces other gods “by heart and lips” has been cited as a possible source of the Orphic motif (RICCIARDELLI APICELLA 1980: 126; BURKERT 2004: 95): “There comes into being in the heart. There comes into being by the tongue [...] in the form of Atum” (*ANET* 5, line 53ff.).

The Egyptian influence seems unlikely in this case for two reasons:

- the Memphite theology does not assert anything about creation by the force of thought; the text continues: “the Ennead [of Ptah] is the teeth and lips in this mouth, which pronounced the name of everything”. It is therefore creation *by word* or *speech* that has a central place in this theogony (compare *Gen.* 1, 3; *Ps.* 33, 6, etc.).
- it is not quite clear when and how exactly the Memphite creation myth should have reached the Greeks: Memphis, the capital of the Kushite rulers of the XXVth dynasty, was ransacked in the year 671 BCE (i.e. prior to the time when the Greeks resumed direct contact with Egypt) and there is no evidence that would suggest that the Memphite theology or comparable creation accounts ever came in fashion again until the end of the New Kingdom.

5.3 A new solution for the Orphic tradition about the creation by the power of thought is needed.

6. New parallel: a look from Achaemenid Iran.

6.1 Iranian influence on Greek thought that was especially active in the period between 547 (the fall of Sardis) and 480 BCE has been studied and documented (BURKERT 1963; 2004: 99-126; WEST 1971).

- the idea of heavenly abode of a soul
- system of three heavenly tiers
- principle of dualism, etc.

The date of the rise of Orphic theogonies can now be firmly placed into the 6th century (e.g. BURKERT 1998: 390); the Orphic texts could therefore in theory be subject to Iranian influence.

The evidence for this early dating includes bone plaques from Olbia, the gold tablet from Hipponion, Derveni papyrus and the familiarity of Pindar (LLOYD-JONES 1985), Parmenides and Empedocles (RIEDWEG 1995) with Orphic texts.

6.2 The usual pitfall: the Avesta and the religion of Achaemenid Iran.

It can be assumed that some form of Mazdeism was the official religion of the empire: the Persian royal inscriptions and the Elamite texts mention such deities as *Ahuramazdā*, *Naryasanga*, *Ispandāramaiti*, *Fraverti*, etc.; they also mention Lie (*durujiya-*) and Order (*artāvan-*); they stress the importance of discarding the old gods (*daivas*), etc. (See SCHWARTZ 1983; SKJÆRVØ 2005).

6.3 Significant for our purposes is the sequential creation of the spiritual existence (*aṇhu- manaṇhō*) and the material existence (Avestan *aṇhu- astuuant-*) by Ahura Mazdā.

The creation of the elements of the material existence is encoded by the reflex of familiar Indo-European *d^heh₁-:

Y. 37.1: *apascā dāṭ uruuarāscā vaṇ^vhīš*
raocāscā dāṭ būmīmca

‘(Ahura Mazdā) put in their places both the good waters and the plants
put in their places both the lights and the earth’.

But how are the elements of the spiritual existence created?

7. The following passages illustrate the Avestan use of a verb ‘to think’ to describe a technomorphic creation.

7.1 Ahura Mazdā is said to be the father of Truth-Order *Aṣəm* and he is also said to have fashioned many of elements of the world as an artisan (Y. 44, 3-5). The passage below is likely to describe the way *Aṣəm* was created:

Y. 31.19:

gūštā yē maṇtā aṣəm ahūm.biš vīduuā ahurā

‘The healer of existence, the knowing one, who conceived truth,
O Ahura, has listened (to Your teachings?)’ (trans. HUMBACH)

7.2 In the following verses Ahura Mazdā is described as a deity who creates by thinking a formula:

Y. 31.7:

*yastā manṭā pauruiiō raocēbīš rōiθβan x^vāθra
huuō xraθβā dāmiš ašəm yā dāraiaṭ vahištəm manō*

‘He who was the first to conceive (the formula):

“the free spaces intersperse with light”;

a creator, he (conceived) truth with (that) intellect

by which one upholds the best thought.’

(trans. HUMBACH with modification after SKJÆRVØ)

7.3 Further examples of *man-* used to encode Ahura Mazdā’s creation and ordering of the elements of the world:

Y. 54.1 (last sentence of the *Airiiaman Išīia* prayer = V. 11.7, V. 20.11, Y. 27.5):

ašahiiā yāsā ašim yəm išīqm ahurō masatā mazdā

‘I entreat for the invigorating reward of truth

which the Wise Ahura has devised’ (trans. HUMBACH)

(unless *masatā* to *mad-* ‘to measure out’ or ‘to be intoxicated’)

Y. 39.4 (*Yasna Haptaṅhāiti*):

yaθā tū ī ahura.mazdā māṅghācā

vaocascā dāscā varəščā

yā vohū aθā tōi dadəmahī

‘In the same way that you, O Ahura Mazdā, have thought and spoken, established and produced them, (things?) which (are) good, in that way we are giving (them) to you’

Y. 33.6:

ahmāṭ auuā manəṅhā yā vərəziīdiiāi manṭā vāstriiā

‘by that thought, those (actions) which he (= Ahura Mazdā)

thought (as those) to be produced by the forager’ (trans. SKJÆRVØ)

‘aus jenem Denken, wodurch er (= der beste Geist) die Weidewirtschaft auszuüben erdacht hat’ (trans. LOMMEL)

‘by that thought, in which one conceives (the idea of) performing pastoral works’ (trans. HUMBACH)

‘by reason of which he has respected to bring to realization his pastoral duties’ (trans. INSLER)

Bdh. 1.35:

*api-š nazdist +yazdān +x^vatīh dāt nēvak-ravišnīh <i> hān mēnōk, i-š tan
<i> x^vēš patiš, vēh bē kartan kā-š dām u dahišn mēnīt čē-š hač dām-
dahišnīh x^vatāyīh būt* (ed. NYBERG 1929)

‘And his first creation was self-established well-being, that in the world of thought by which he made his body better when he thought the creation, for his being Lord is from establishing the creation’.

7.4 Zoroastrianism thus features a deity able to create by means of thought.

8. A further Iranian trail in Derveni papyrus (col. vi, 2-10):

ἐπ[ωιδῆ δ]ὲ μάγων δύν[α]ται δαίμονας ἐμ[ποδῶν
γι[νομένου]ς μεθιστάγει· δαίμονες ἐμπο[δῶν] ὄντες εἰσὶ
ψ[υχὰι τιμω]ροί. τὴν θυσ[ία]ν τούτου ἔνεκε[μ] π[ροιοῦσ]ι[ν]
οἱ μά[γο]ι, ὥσπερ εἰ ποινήν ἀποδιδόντες. τοῖ[ς] δὲ
ἱεροῖ[ς] ἐπισπένδουσιν ὕδ[ωρ] καὶ γάλα, ἐξ ὧμπερ καὶ τὰς
χοὰς ποιοῦσι. ἀνάριθμα [κα]ὶ πολυόμφαλα τὰ πόπανα
θύουσιν, ὅτι καὶ αἱ ψυχα[ὶ ἀν]άριθμοί εἰσι. μύσται
Εὐμενίσι προθύουσι κ[ατὰ τὰ] αὐτὰ μάγοις.

‘... and the incantation of the magi is able to drive away the *daimones* when they get in the way. Hindering *daimones* are vengeful souls. This is why the magi perform the sacrifice, just as if they were paying a penalty. And on the offerings they pour water and milk, from which they also make the libations. And they sacrifice innumerable and many knobbed cakes, because the souls too are innumerable. Initiates make preliminary sacrifices to the Eumenides in the same way as the *magoi* do’

Who are these μάγοι and what kind of ritual is this?

- TSANTSANOGLU (1997): Iranian magi and Iranian ritual
- WEST (1997): specialist practitioners associated with Babylon and Assyria
- BERNABÉ (2006): Greek religious practitioners and Greek ritual

The first approach allows solving some of the problems this passage raises: whether or not Eumenides here should be identified with Avestan *frauuāšis*, the wineless libation can now be understood as the *parahōm* (Avestan *parahaoma*-) and the cakes (the *miiazda*-offering) are very likely to be the *drōn* (Avestan *draonah*-), see Russell 2001. This observation lends further support to the idea pursued in this paper.

9. This paper argued for an Iranian origin of the Orphic motif “creation by means of thought” (further traces of this idea can perhaps be discerned elsewhere in Greek poetry). Just as it is the case with other works of Greek literature, different traditions fed into the Orphic texts and the context in which these texts evolved can be usefully examined from both diachronic and synchronic comparative perspective.

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