

NOTES ON THE NEW EDESSENE MOSAIC OF PROMETHEUS

A spectacular mosaic that was made public as recently as 1999 has created a problem of interpretation that must interest anyone concerned with Hellenism in the Near East. I should like to think that the philological reasoning that contributes to its resolution is of the kind that Professor Zaicev exemplified and would have appreciated. His control of ancient languages was subtle and precise, and yet it never inhibited the freedom of his ideas and imagination. The little Edessene puzzle that follows might have intrigued him, and it is offered, at a very late date in the compilation of this Gedenkschrift, as a small tribute to a great man.

For admirers of the mosaic art of Edessa and Osrhoene the publication in 1999 of a new and substantially augmented edition of Han Drijvers' *Old Syriac (Edessean) Inscriptions* in collaboration with John Healey was a major event. The new volume, under the title *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene* in Brill's series *Handbuch der Orientalistik* (no. 42), included several hitherto unpublished mosaics with mythological themes and accompanying Syriac texts.¹ These have recently been republished with extensive commentary and excellent color photographs by Janine Balty and Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet.² Those two scholars, one a specialist in near eastern mosaics and the other a Semitic epigraphist, have been able to add two additional unpublished mosaics that appear to be closely related to the Drijvers – Healey group with its depictions of Achilles, Patroclus, and Briseis. The two new pieces show Hecuba and Priam on one, and Troilos on the other. Altogether these mosaics, from the third century or later, constitute a major accretion to our repertoire of classical mythology in the Semitic East.

One important item in this Balty – Chatonnet group stands apart from the Trojan story. It had been in the hands of an art dealer in New York when Drijvers and Healey published it, but it now reposes in a private American collection. Thanks to the owner Balty and Chatonnet have been able to publish a splendid full-page color reproduction. The piece is an impressive square mosaic illustrating Prometheus' creation of mankind. The space is

¹ See Drijvers – Healey, pp. 211–213 and 221–222, together with plates 66, 67 and 72.

² Janine Balty and Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet. "Nouvelles mosaïques inscrites d'Osrhoène", Fondation Eugène Piot: *Monuments et Mémoires* 79 (2000) 31–72.



New Edessene 'Prometheus' mosaic'

divided into upper and lower registers. In the upper part are five dominating figures, beginning with Zeus on the right enthroned in a royal chair with an arm-rest for his left hand. In the lower register is a scene, overseen by the grandees above, in which Hermes, unnamed but identified by small wings on his head, is propelling Psyche, identified by her butterfly wings, towards the first of three clay statues that have been readied by Prometheus for the introduction of a soul (*psyche*).³ An attentive Eros is the centerpiece of the scene in the lower register.

The whole mosaic is a stunning representation of Prometheus and the gods watching the creation of man. Quite properly Zeus leads off the upper viewing gallery on the right. His identity is guaranteed not only by the throne on which he sits and a nimbus around his head but by a highly legible inscription, *MRLH* 'or *marallahe* 'lord of the gods'. Standing beside him is Hera, looking in his direction across an open space that contains the Syriac form of her name *HR*. One might have expected *HR'*. Disturbance of the tesserae elsewhere allow for the possibility of a tampering here that might have eliminated the *alef*.

Next on the left stands a bearded figure with a round hoop of some kind. To the left beside him is another bearded figure, behind whom stands a woman on the extreme left. Two Syriac words, for which the tesserae of the first (on the right) have been manifestly altered, span the upper space between the head of the man with the hoop and the mid-point of the woman. The second word, to the left, is clear enough, *PRMTWS* 'Prometheus', even if the first is not (we shall return to it). Each of these two words is thus placed over two of the three figures. Therefore, the unmistakable collocation of word and image that exists in the cases of Zeus and Hera is missing here. The words run across the tops of the figures, spreading leftwards from the head of the old man with the hoop. It has been assumed hitherto that the first two of the three figures are named by these two words, and that the woman was simply left unidentified.

Drijvers and Healey did not even venture a reading for the third word, that is – the word before Prometheus, but they offered a tentative transcription of the letters as *QZMSYS*. They assumed, as did Balty and Chatonnet, that, whatever this name was, it applied to the old man with the hoop.

³ Balty, 43–44, doubts that the two figurines farther away from Psyche, in the lower right corner, are clay statues waiting for their animation. She draws attention to the odd angle of the pair, neither standing nor lying, one male and one female tilting backwards towards the earth. She also notes that they are colored in a roseate gray as opposed to the earth-colored figure that Psyche is approaching. We must await the promised interpretation of this part of the mosaic. For the moment the assumption that the tilting couple represents two more clay figures seems the easiest one.

Chatonnet, for her part, transcribed *QR(W?)NWS* for ‘Kronos’, and this interpretation elicited from Balty a thorough discussion of the iconography of the old figure with the hoop. She was compelled to assume that what appeared on the mosaic could be reasonably construed only as a Kronos with the attributes of Aion, and she made appropriate comparisons with representations of the aged figure of Aion, notably at Aphrodisias and at New Paphos (Cyprus). The circular object, which the figure is holding or revolving in his hands, seemed to Balty the zodiacal circle, but she noted that this element is missing in the Aphrodisias relief and the Cypriote mosaic.⁴ Hence there has been a certain *aporia* about both the reading of the Syriac word and the interpretation of the image of the old man.

I believe that this *aporia* can be resolved. First, let it be noted that the identity of Prometheus himself is not in doubt. He is clearly the bearded figure who stands between Kronos /Aion and the unidentified woman. His name is clearly written out in Syriac, but again let it be noted that the name is written out over both his head and the woman’s. The space gave the artist no way of tucking it in close to the image of Prometheus. Similarly the problematic name is likewise written above both the man with the hoop and Prometheus himself. So it would be wrong to force this name upon the man with the hoop.

Although Balty invoked good reasons for thinking of Aion, the hoop as a zodiacal circle was problematic. A passage in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus solves the problem. In lines 422–3 of Book 36 Aion himself appears and is described as follows

καὶ τότε τετραπόροιο χρόνου στροφάλιγγα κυλίνδων
... Αἰών

What the figure in the mosaic is holding in his hands is the wheel of time with its four seasons, not the more complicated circle of the Zodiac. This wheel shows the mosaic figure to be Aion just as definitively as the little wings on the head of Hermes tell us exactly who he is. Hermes’ name does not appear on the mosaic, and neither does the name of Aion. There is no possibility that the letters that begin at the left side of his head could be read as a Syriac rendering of Aion.

But in that mysterious third name in the upper register three letters are so clearly and recognizably formed as not to be in any doubt. These are the initial letter *qof*, the letter *mem* in the middle, and the final letter *sin*. Drijvers and Healey were in complete agreement on this, and even Chatonnet showed herself reluctant to replace a perfectly shaped *mem* with

⁴ Balty – Chatonnet. 35–39.

the *waw* she needed to conjecture the name of Kronos. Therefore the word has a Q in the beginning, a M in the middle, and an S at the end. Between the Q and M is a hasta that could be a *zayin* (which would be meaningless here) or, I suggest, the right part of *resh*. The traces after the *mem* are hopelessly muddled but would be consistent with *yod* and *waw*. This would deliver a reading of *QRMYS*, which I take to be the Syriac for Greek κεράμεύς or κέραμιος,⁵ a description of Prometheus as the potter who made the clay figures that are so arrestingly depicted in the mosaic.

On this argument the placing of the two words for Prometheus as potter across the top of Prometheus' head is designed to show that both apply to him. We have already noted that Aion and Hermes, as well as Psyche herself, had no words to identify them, because their attributes told it all. But what about the woman beside Prometheus? Standing as she does in the upper register that depicts the divine party contemplating the creation of man, she cannot be inconsequential. Here I am convinced that Balty has found the right interpretation by invoking the appearance of Athena as goddess of potters and protectress of Prometheus in other Promethean scenes from postclassical art.⁶ The woman is wearing a peplos. Normally Athena is obvious from her helmet, but just as Hermes is discreetly signaled through the tiny wings on his head, so is Athena, depicted here without a helmet, revealed by her peplos. Janine Balty, with her experienced eyes, has spotted the woman's garment as uniquely revealing the divinity it covers.

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Анализ опубликованной недавно "мозаики Прометея", найденной неподалеку от Эдессы, автор начинает с отождествления центральной фигуры верхнего ряда – старца с кольцом. Рядом с этой фигурой расположена плохо распознаваемая надпись (фрагменты мозаики были сдвинуты), которую читали как *QZMSYS* или *QR(W?)NWS*; надежны только *Q*, *M* и конечная *S*. Для толкования атрибута старца автор привлекает пассаж из Нонна (*Dionys.* 36, 422 сл.), позволяющий установить назначение кольца как колеса четырех времен года, находящегося в руках Эона (Αἰών). Что касается упомянутой надписи, которую пытался толковать как Κρόνος, то она, по мнению автора, относится не к Эону, достаточно определенному своими атрибутами (точно так же не надпи-

⁵ *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Payne Smith) II. 3749 and Supplement p. 312 for *QRMS* and *QRMYS* as Syriac forms of κέραμος and κέραμιον.

⁶ Balty – Chatonnet, 41.

сана и фигура Гермеса). Читая надпись как *QRMYWS*, автор угадывает в этом слове древнесирийское заимствование, восходящее к греч. *κεραμειός*. При таком толковании подпись относится к той фигуре, по другую сторону которой надписано имя Прометея, и может служить указанием на роль, в какой титан выступает в эдесской мозаике: это гончар, создающий первых людей (глиняные фигурки на переднем плане). Крайняя женская фигура верхнего ряда, как предлагает считать автор, – богиня Афина, являющаяся, в частности, покровительницей гончаров.