

NERO AND THE *MAGI*, RELIGIOUS INITIATION OR INITIATION INTO ROYALTY?

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ABSTRACT

In a passage from his *Naturalis Historia* (30.6.17), Pliny the Elder tells us that the *magi* who accompanied Tiridates of Armenia on his trip to Rome in the year 66 a.D. initiated Nero at special banquets; Pliny does not specify the content of these mystic initiations. This brief information is of interest to us for two different reasons: the first is to study the extent to which the perception that the Greeks and Romans could have of Zoroastrianism as a religion of initiation was accurate; the second is to analyze whether this initiation was a properly religious initiation, or an initiation into royalty: several specialists in ancient Zoroastrianism have consolidated the idea that *magi* are, above all, specialists in royalty. In this sense, we propose that the most significant textual parallel to Nero's initiation would be that of Artaxerxes II, as transmitted to us by Ctesias.

KEY WORDS: NERO, TIRIDATES, *MAGI*, MYSTERY RITUALS.

NERÓN Y LOS MAGOS: ¿INICIACIÓN RELIGIOSA O INICIACIÓN EN LA REALEZA?

RESUMEN

En un pasaje de su *Naturalis Historia* (30, 6, 17), Plinio el Viejo nos cuenta que los magos que acompañaron a Tiridates de Armenia en su viaje a Roma en el año 66 d.C. iniciaron a Nerón en unos banquetes especiales; Plinio no especifica el contenido de dichas iniciaciones místicas. Estas breves informaciones nos interesan por dos motivos diferentes: el primero es estudiar hasta qué punto llegaba la percepción que los griegos y romanos podían tener del zoroastrismo como una religión de iniciación; el segundo es analizar si dicha iniciación era una iniciación propiamente religiosa, o una iniciación en la realeza: varios especialistas en zoroastrismo antiguo han consolidado la idea de que los magos son, ante todo, especialistas en la realeza. En esa dirección, proponemos que el paralelo textual más significativo de la iniciación de Nerón sería la de Artajerjes II, tal como nos la transmite Ctesias.

PALABRAS CLAVE: NERÓN, TIRIDATES, MAGOS, RITUALES MISTÉRICOS.

1. Tiridates' journey to Rome and its religious implications

One of the most glorious moments of Nero's reign was when his eastern policy in his relationship with the Parthian Empire culminated in a double victory, first militarily, thanks to Corbulo¹, and then diplomatically, with the enthronement of an Arsacid prince, Tiridates, on the throne of Armenia, the buffer kingdom between the Roman Empire and the Parthian Empire, whose sovereignty had been in dispute between the two powers since the time of Croesus².

To make it clear that the sovereignty of Tiridates was due to the direct intervention and magnanimous protection of Rome, an elaborate coronation ceremony was organized in Rome, which was accompanied by a huge and very expensive diplomatic trip in which Tiridates traveled from the East to Rome with an entourage that included his sons and those of the other Arsacids: Vologeses, Pacorus and Monobazus³. Three thousand Parthian horsemen accompanied the new king and the journey had to be made by land, because Tiridates, advised by the priests of his court, refused to sail across the Mediterranean so as not to desecrate the sea⁴. Likewise, the nine months that his journey lasted he made it «riding with his wife beside him and wearing a golden helmet instead of a veil, so as not to defy the traditions of her country by letting her face be seen» (αὐτῷ καὶ γυνὴ συμπαρίππευε, κράνος χρυσοῦν ἀντὶ καλύπτρας ἔχουσα, ὥστε μὴ ὁρᾶσθαι παρὰ τὰ πάτρια)⁵ so as not to contravene another religious prescription.

The religious dimension of Tiridates' coronation does not end in the meticulous regulations that the *magi* of Tiridates' entourage imposed on the strenuous but triumphant journey of the Parthian prince, but became even clearer when Nero himself crowned him in the Roman Forum before an enthusiastic crowd⁶. According to Cassius Dio 63.5.2, Tiridates uttered, probably in Greek⁷, the following words:

1 J. F. DRINKWATER, 2019, 135-136.

2 L. GIOVANELLI, 2023, 197.

3 Detailed sources are Cassius Dio 63:1-7, Suetonius, *Nero* 13 and 30 and Pliny the Elder *NH* 30: 16-17.

4 Pliny *NH* 30.16.

5 Cassius Dio, 63, 1-2.

6 The impact of the journey of the Arsacid prince was so great in the Mediterranean world that, since A. DIETERICH, 1902, 1-14, several authors think that it may have influenced the wording of the episode of the worship of the *magi* in Bethlehem included in Mt 2:1-12, cf. R. C. TREXLER, 1997, or A. ADAIR, 2015, 60-70, without attempting to provide an exhaustive bibliography. It is not the intention of this paper to debate the veracity of the episode of the star of the Magi in Matthew's passage: cf. M. R. MOLNAR, 1999, or A. A. MOSHAMMER, 2008. There was the coincidence that throughout Tiridates' journey Halley's Comet could be sighted throughout the Mediterranean basin; on an eventual relationship of Halley's Comet to Matthew's star, v. W. E. PHIPPS, 1986, 88 and R. M. JENKINS, 2004.

7 Greek was the language of the Arsacid imperial family. This fact is well studied in J. A. ÁLVAREZ-PEDROSA, 2022.

Ἐγὼ, δέσποτα, Ἀρσάκου μὲν ἔκγονος, Οὐολογαΐσου δὲ καὶ Πακόρου τῶν βασιλέων ἀδελφός, σὸς δὲ δοῦλος εἰμι- καὶ ἦλθον τε πρὸς σὲ τὸν ἐμὸν θεὸν, προσκυνήσων σε ὥς καὶ τὸν Μίθραν, καὶ ἔσομαι τοῦτο ὃ τι ἂν σὺ ἐπικλώσῃς- σὺ γάρ μοι καὶ Μοῖρα εἶ καὶ Τύχη.

I, sir, am descended from Arsaces, am brother to the kings Vologeses and Pacorus and now your slave. And I have come to you, my god, to worship you as I do Mithra and I will be what you will, for you are my Destiny and my Fortune.

The ceremony was completed with the response of Nero, who promised to make him king of Armenia, gave him his hand, lifted him up, kissed him and stripped him of the tiara, the identifying cap of the Persians, placing in its place a diadem⁸. The kiss was also part of the ancient Persian *proskynesis* ceremony. As can be seen, it was a highly ritualized ceremony, carefully agreed upon by religious specialists on both sides and including elements of both traditions.

The proclamation itself is very interesting, for it contains three distinct parts, all of which reflect some important point of the Zoroastrian royal ideology in which the Arsacid princes were trained, as we shall demonstrate.

The first part, typical of Iranian phraseology since Darius the Great, is the self-identification of the proclaimer through the title: he avoided defining himself as «Great King, King of Kings», titles of his brothers; he then inserted instead the imperial genealogy going back to the founder of the dynasty, Arsaces, and continued with his brothers, who had indeed been kings.

The second part of the declaration contains a reference to famous *proskynesis*, performed in this case before Nero, that typically Iranian gesture of worship that caused so much scandal at the time of Alexander's conquest, but that since the Hellenistic period had become normalized in the relationship of submission to the persons invested in the kingship⁹. It is also interesting the identification that Tiridates made of his tutelary divinity, the Iranian god Mithra, already very popular among the Achaemenid monarchy since Artaxerxes II and later during the whole Parthian period thanks to its hybridization with the Greek god Apollo. Tiridates' reasons for choosing Mithra as a personal divinity were similar to those that motivated Artaxerxes II to do the same: he was a victorious god, young and driven, who sponsored the renewal of a branch of the traditional dynasty.

8 In this particular aspect of the rite, the information provided by Suetonius seems much more detailed than that of Dio, who suppresses, for example, the ritual kiss.

9 L. R. TAYLOR, 1927.

The third point of interest is the link that Tiridates established between Nero and what the ancient translators wanted to identify as the semi-divine figures of Fate and Fortune. F. Cumont (1933, 151) already intuited that there was some kind of counterpart between the terms in the Greek translation of Tiridates' proclamation, *Μοῖρα* and *Τύχη*, and some nuclear element of the Zoroastrian religion. Specifically, he thinks they are identifiable respectively with *Zurvan* «Time» and *Xʷarənah* «glory». Regarding the first term, Cumont echoes the prominence with which an alleged Zurvanism was treated during the first half of the twentieth century as a religion peculiar to the Parthian period or a heresy of official Zoroastrianism, but the popularity enjoyed by Zurvanism during this period has been dismantled in more recent and more solvent scholarly works¹⁰. We think for our part that Tiridates was attempting to translate into Greek an important concept of Zoroastrian religion, namely with the Avestan term *Aši* «the reward»¹¹, which in the recent Avesta is personified in a goddess to whom the whole of *Yašt* 21 is dedicated and is especially connected with Mithra, whose chariot she drives, as we read in *Yašt* 17.16¹². This connection between *Aši* as Mithra's auxiliary and the projection Tiridates made between his personal divinity and Nero himself is interesting. In contrast, *Τύχη* may be, as Cumont proposed, a translation of the complex concept of *Xʷarənah*, originally understood as the glory of kingship, but acquiring a secondary semantic value of «good luck» from the Hellenistic period onward reflected in various translations into non-Iranian languages, such as Greek *τύχη*, Aramaic *gd*, or Sanskrit *lakṣmi* or *śrī*¹³.

2. The *magi* of Tiridates and the «initiation» of Nero

The details of the lavish coronation ceremony of Tiridates are well known because they were part of the excessive propaganda activities of Nero that so scandalized historians of later periods; for years, several studies have argued that the entire propaganda apparatus related to the visit of Tiridates, the erection of the colossal statue of Nero and the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, are directly related to the link that Nero wanted to establish between himself and the god Apollo-Helios through

10 The rise of the hypothesis of Zurvanism as a parallel religion or heresy of Zoroastrianism was developed throughout the twentieth century and was reflected mainly in the work of R. C. ZAEHNER, 1955. Subsequent work by S. SHAKED, 1994, has demonstrated the weak foundations of the sources on which the postulates about Zurvanism were based.

11 Understood as the reward for the meritorious actions of the faithful, v. M. BOYCE, 1975, 225-226.

12 I. GERSHEVITCH, 1959, 217.

13 H. W. BAILEY, 1943, xviii, 22, 39-40.

the use and abuse of the glitter of gold and other strategies of mass propaganda¹⁴. This interpretation has been severely revised by J. F. Drinkwater (2019, 266-270), who claims that the fabulous ceremonial surrounding Tiridates' visit in which gold certainly predominated launched rather a message of a return to a new Golden Age than an identification of Nero's person with Apollo-Helios.

But there is a really interesting aspect of Tiridates' journey to Rome that accompanies the whole religious dimension with which it was impregnated¹⁵. Tiridates carried, as we have already noted, a retinue of *magi* who advised him on the ritual appropriateness of his actions throughout the journey. Tiridates' religious training, like that of any Iranian prince, meant that he was even defined as a «magus» by Roman authors¹⁶. Taking advantage of all this display of religious wisdom, Nero, who like many other Romans of the time was interested in Eastern religions, organized one or more banquets with the presence of Tiridates and his *magi*, as Pliny the Elder (*NH* 30.16) informs us: «(Tiridates) had brought *magi* with him, had initiated that one (Nero) into their banquets» ([*Tiridates*] *Magos secum adduxerat, magicis etiam cenis eum initiaverat*). Although this fact, according to Pliny the Elder, could not be taken advantage of by Nero himself due to his ineptitude, it seems to hint that Nero was «initiated» in some hidden facet of the Zoroastrian religion.

Since the aforementioned article by F. Cumont (1933) the idea has been generalized that the mysteries in which the *magi* of Tiridates initiated Nero were the Mithraic mysteries. Authors, such as the aforementioned Cizek, 1982, assume this as a proven fact. R. Beck (2000, 166-167) has qualified this postulate and considers that the journey of the *magi* to Rome, coinciding with the appearance in the sky of Halley's comet, created an ideal breeding ground for the birth of Mithraism, but denies that Nero was initiated into Mithraism, which, on the other hand, was not a religion distinct from the Zoroastrianism of priestly theology proper to the *magi* of Tiridates' entourage, as Cumont claimed. The dating of the origin of Mithraism is an essential test to gauge this well, since the first inscriptions referring to Mithraic cults can be dated to around 90 A.D.; taking into account that these inscriptions are on the Roman *limes* of Germania and Pannonia, a reasonable time must be given for this cult to become popular among the Roman soldiers stationed in this distant frontier, so the dating of the birth of Mithraism to around 70 in Rome or Ostia

14 E. CIZEK, 1982, 88, 130, L. GIOVANELLI, 2023, 198.

15 On Tiridates' journey and the priestly status he assumes in it, see G. TRAINA, 2024.

16 Pliny the Elder, *NH* 30.16: *Magus Tiridates*; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.24.2. speaks of the obligations derived from a *sacerdotium* of Tiridates himself.

seems the most reasonable¹⁷. Likewise, the first literary reference to Mithra and tauroctony, a central element in the Mithraic cult, appears in *Thebaid* 1.719-720 by Statius, who composed his work between 90-91 AD. Statius' allusion to tauroctony is so poetically elusive: «or (you are called) Mithra, that beneath the rocky Persean cave you twist the indomitable horn of the bull» (*seu Persei sub rupibus antri indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram*), that it forces us to think that the Mithraic cult had reached a cultured public that had to understand what the poet's culteran allusion referred to.

3. Zoroastrianism and initiation

In present-day Zoroastrianism, heir to the priestly theology elaborated during the Sassanid period and outlined in the post-Islamic period, there is no initiation ceremony in the strict sense, that is, one characterized by a remarkable esoteric consistency, celebrated in a fixed place, hidden from most eyes and sacred, and in which the initiate assumes a discourse exclusive to him related to an intense and transforming experience that leads to a reserved salvation¹⁸. What exists is a ritual of passage linked to the age at which the Zoroastrian faithful acquires the use of reason –between 7 and 12 years of age– and which makes him a member of the Zoroastrian community to all intents and purposes: It is the ceremony of the *navjote* (in India) or *sedre-pūsī* (in Iran), that is, the imposition of the cord that every Zoroastrian male or female must wear to characterize themselves and the rest of the world as faithful of that religion¹⁹.

As with other rituals of passage, the catechumen must learn the daily prayers and follow a careful ritual of purification, which includes a repentance for past sins. The public act consists of the covering with the *sudrah* and the *kustīg*, the white sleeveless shirt and cord girded on by all adult Zoroastrians, which is made of seventy-two strands of lamb's wool and is wrapped three times around the waist, over the *sudrah*. All the elements of the garb are symbolic, but far from being marked by the sensory and psychic impact that characterizes initiation into a mystical religion.

17 Although there is evidence that could point to an Anatolian origin for this mystery religion, cf. D. ULANSEY, 1991, we are inclined to favour theories that propose a Roman origin for the Mithraic cult: R. MERKELBACH, 1984, R. BECK, 1998, M. CLAUS, 2000.

18 All these elements are well defined by W. BURKERT, 1987, and G. SFAMENI GASPARRO, 2006, 185-189.

19 The most complete analysis of the *navjote* ritual and an interesting theoretical nuance between what is a rite of passage and an initiation rite can be read in J. A. M. SNOEK, 2004, 77-98.

It is likely that the ceremony of girding the cord is very old, as there is a comparable practice in the Vedic ritual²⁰, but it is certain that there is no reference to *sudrah* or *kustīg* in the classical Greco-Roman texts, so it is likely that it was not a ceremony known to the West of the Persian world.

4. The perception of Zoroastrianism as a religion of initiation in the Greco-Roman world

Classical authors generally agree in their perception of the religion of the *magi*, i.e., the Zoroastrianism of the Parthian period, as a religion of initiation. The idea that the religion of the Iranian *magi* was something secret and rather sinister starts already from a famous quotation of Heraclitus of Ephesus (DK 14) quoted by Clement of Alexandria 2.22.2, in which he compared *mágoi* to bacchantes, leueas and initiates, νυκτιπόλοις «figures that move during the night,» «for they are initiated with impiety into mysteries for human thought.» (τὰ γὰρ νομιζόμενα κατὰ ἀνθρώπους μυστήρια ἀνιερῶστί μουῦνται), although the inclusion of the term μάγοι has raised numerous doubts about the authenticity of Clement's quotation²¹.

In relation to the imperial period, the author who expresses in a clearer way the idea that the *mágoi* were depositaries of an initiatory rite is Dio Chrysostomus, *Discourse* 36.39, who says that the *mágoi* sang hymns containing a myth referring to Mithra-Helios in the secret ceremonies of initiation (ἐν ἀπορρήτοις τελεταῖς). Since speech 36 of Dio Chrysostomus is dedicated to the inhabitants of Boristhenes, at the mouth of Dnieper, in an area in contact with Iranian population where the rhetor himself lived for a season, it is presumable that in this speech the term *mágos* actually referred to Zoroastrian priests and that secret initiation ceremonies could have been a reality known to the inhabitants of Boristhenes²². On the other hand, although the divinity to whom the alleged hymn composed by the *mágoi* is dedicated seems to be a hybridization between Mithra and Helios, this type of analogical identification was frequent in the Parthian period; but there is another element that has more weight when attributing value to the hymn of the *mágoi* collected, adapted and reinterpreted by Dio Chrysostomus, which is the importance that the cosmic order has in it: in that

20 M. BOYCE, 1975, 13, 257-258.

21 An abundant bibliography on the studies for or against the authenticity of Clement's quotation can be found in J. BREMMER, 2008, 236, n. 9.

22 It seems no coincidence that the existence of Orphic mystery cults has been well documented in this area since the 5th century BC, as shown by the bone plates found in Olbia, cf. A. BERNABÉ 2008, 537-546. In these cults, the term *mágoi* is used on several occasions to refer to the officiants, cf. A. BERNABÉ 2006. It is possible that more than one mystery tradition converged in Dio Chrysostomus.

sense, we cannot lose sight of the importance that this cosmic order has in the Zoroastrian religion and in the priestly function, whose main task is to perform the daily sacrifice (*Yasna*) to renew this cosmic order²³.

Thus, we can postulate that for the Greeks and Romans, Zoroastrianism was a religion that involved some kind of ritualized initiation and this was not the ritual imposition of the shirt and cord, but something else, which we will venture to explore.

5. The Persian kings and their religious training

In the same way that the idea that the religion of the *magi* involved some facet of secret initiation, it is common the idea held by Greeks and Romans that the Persian kings need, in order to be kings, a deep and specialized sacral training that had to be transmitted by the *magi*. This is explicitly stated by Cicero (*Div.* 1.91) when he affirms that «no one can become king of the Persians if he has not previously learned the discipline and knowledge of the *magi*» (*nec quisquam rex Persarum potest esse, qui non ante magorum disciplinam scientiamque perceperit*). Another testimony consistent with the Parthian period is that of Apuleius (*Apol.* 25-26), who defends the concept of *magic* as an Iranian priestly discipline claiming that it is an art facing the immortals (*artem esse dis immortalibus acceptam*), pious and famous since the time of its founders, Zoroaster and Oromazdes (*piam scilicet et diuini scientem, iam inde a Zoroastre et Oromaze auctoribus suis nobilem*) and, above all, taught among the first disciplines to him who is to be king (*inter prima regalia docetur*) and so, just as any Persian cannot be a *magus*, as long as he has not learned the priestly ritual science, for the same reason any Persian cannot be king (*nec ulli temere inter Persas concessum est magum esse, haud magis quam regnare*). Tacitus (*Ann.* 15:24.2) also alludes to a priestly function of Tiridates himself (*nec recusaturum Tiridaten accipiendo diademati in urbem uenire, nisi sacerdotii religione attineretur*). However, none of these testimonies explain what this special initiation in science and priestly knowledge consisted of.

We have to resort to an earlier testimony, referring to the Achaemenid period, to postulate in some way what the rite of initiation into kingship was.

When Ctesias of Cnidus, in a testimony preserved by Plutarch (*Art.* 3.3.), as an eyewitness of the fact, tells us all the events related to the enthronement ritual of Artaxerxes II, he narrates the moment of great tension that took place before the rite led by the supporters of Cyrus the Younger, who tried to make a desperate coup at the

23 Cf. C. O. TOMMASI, 2016.

last moment so that Artaxerxes would not be the proclaimed king, but his younger brother. In a ritual context, the strongest argument that the supporters of Cyrus had is to present one of the priests who had trained Cyrus during childhood, claiming that the prince had the proper ritual training to be king.

6. The enthronement ritual of Artaxerxes II

We know some details of the enthronement ritual of an Achaemenid king from the eyewitness account of Ctesias of Cnidus (Ctes. F17 = Plu. *Art.* 3.1-3):

εἰς τοῦτο δεῖ τὸν τελοῦμενον παρελθόντα τὴν μὲν ἰδίαν ἀποθέσθαι στολήν, ἀναλαβεῖν δὲ ἥν Κῦρος ὁ ὁ παλαιὸς ἐφόρει πρὶν ἢ βασιλεὺς γενέσθαι, καὶ σύκων παλάθης ἐμφαγόντα τερμίνθου κατατατραγεῖν καὶ ποτήριον ἐκπιεῖν ὀξύγαλακτος. εἰ δὲ πρὸς τοῦτοις ἕτερ' ἅττα δρῶσιν, ἄδηλόν ἐστι τοῖς ἄλλοις.

For this, it is necessary that the one who is going to fulfill the ritual, upon entering it, takes off his own dress to take the same one that old Cyrus (the Great) wore before he became king, and must, in addition, eat a fig cake, chew terebinth resin and drink a glass of sour milk. If they perform other rites besides these, it is something that remains hidden from the rest.

In particular, we are struck by the structuring of the ritual. In the first part, the ritual provided for a change in the corporeality of the person of the new king, including the assumption of a different garb that links him to the figure of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire. This new garb, therefore, is a material symbol of the dynastic legitimacy of the new king. Arrian (*An.* 6.29.4-7) informs us of the existence of textiles in the tomb of Cyrus, possibly transmitting the oral information of which Quintus Curtius speaks (10.1.30-31) when he said that Alexander thought that the tomb of Cyrus was full of gold and silver, «according to the oral information of the Persians». Specifically, the clothing mentioned by Arrian was composed of a coat (κάνδυς), pants (ἀναξυρίδες), several tunics (στολαί) dyed in luxurious colors -jacinth and purple-, jewels and Persian swords (ἀκινάκαι). It seems very likely that the garments preserved in the tomb of Cyrus were those employed in the ritual of Artaxerxes II since it combines the two identifying signs of Persian clothing in the Achaemenid period: on the one hand, the so-called «habit of court»²⁴, identified with the national clothing of the Persians, whose most characteristic garment was the long pleated tunic, and on the other the «riding habit»²⁵, which was generally assimilated

24 H. SCHOPPA, 1993, 47.

25 A. Sh. SHAHBAZI, 1978, 498-499; L. LLEWELLYN-JONES, 2013, 62.

lated with the Medes²⁶, and whose most marked sign of identity were the pants. The combination of these garments serves to mark the idea of the union between Medes and Persians that gave rise to the Achaemenid Empire and to reinforce the image of a king who combined in a balanced way his warrior function as a horseman and his courtly function as a legislator. In addition to this bodily change marked by the change of clothes, the space where the ritual took place was decisive: the tomb of Cyrus is a small space, with a tiny door, through which the initiate had to come out crouching or almost crawling, which gives the ritual a symbolic content similar to that of a new birth.

The second part of the ritual had to do with the ingestion of symbolic foods, also with a strong identity content. Two of the foods included in the ritual, fig cake and sour milk, the precursor of yogurt, underlined the link of the new king with his tribal past and his food on horseback, highly nutritious, easy to transport and without the need for cooking. The fondness for chewing terebinth resin was already known in antiquity, for, as Nicholas of Damascus (*FGrH* 90.F66.34) conveys to us, the Medes called the Persians τερμινθοφάγοι, «terebinth eaters.» But there may be another reason that incorporates terebinth resin into the ritual: Dioscorides (1.71) and Theophrastus (*HP* 3.15.4; 5.7.7; 9.2.2.2) explain that it was chewed to freshen the breath. If this is so, chewing terebinth has to do with the ritual purity required of the new king, whose breath should not contaminate a sacred precinct such as the tomb of Cyrus the Great; it would fulfill a ritual function similar to the masks that even today the Zoroastrian priests wear in rituals so as not to contaminate with their breath the sacred objects, especially the fire²⁷.

But there is a third part of the ritual, which is often overlooked in the commentaries to this text. It is a secret part which, according to Ctesias, was carried out in addition to the rituals of a public character, which had, as we have seen, a marked identity character. In addition to the public part, there was a ritual section that remained secret to those other than the *magi* and the new king: «If they perform other rites besides these, it is something that remains hidden from the rest» (εἰ δὲ πρὸς τούτοις

26 For example, Herodotus. 1.135: «They wear the clothes of the Medes thinking that they are more beautiful than their own».

27 There have been other attempts to explain the elements of this ritual. Thus, M. BOYCE, 1982, 209 has highlighted the fact that two of them belong to the plant world and one to the animal kingdom. For their part, J. K. CHOKSY, 1989, 62-67 and A. DE JONG, 2010: 546 have pointed out a parallel with the Zoroastrian purification ritual in which the penitent consumes pomegranate leaves, drinks a few drops of consecrated bull urine, recites a confession of sins, undresses to purify himself with water and unconsecrated bull urine and finally puts on some new and pure clothes.

ἔτερ' ἅττα δρωσιν, ἀδελόν ἐστι τοῖς ἄλλοις). This ceremony can indeed be defined as an initiation and had to do with one of the main functions of *magi* as ritual specialists, which was the function of fixing, marking and stabilizing royalty.

7. An alleged Zoroastrian initiation of Nero into royalty and its consequences

At this point, it seems that we can postulate what kind of initiation Nero received at the banquets to which he invited the priests who accompanied Tiridates on his journey to Rome. We will begin with a negative characterization.

It could not have been a rite of passage like the ceremony of imposition of the cord and the tunic that characterize a faithful Zoroastrian. That ceremony is not a secret initiation and its public character would be completely against the interests of Nero, to whom it was convenient to remain a Roman in all his fullness of religious rights and duties. Nor was it an initiation into Mithraism. As we have already anticipated, R. Beck (2000, 166-167, esp. note 95) clarifies and qualifies the postulate of the aforementioned article by F. CUMONT (1933), who argues that Nero was initiated into the Mithraic mysteries at these dinners. In fact, R. Beck refutes that Mithraism as we know it did not exist at the time of the dinners; it is evident that they are related realities: Mithraism developed after the golden year of Nero as an imaginative response to the elaborate propaganda actions of both Nero and the Iranian counterpart. By no means was Mithraism a pre-existing religious reality brought to Rome by the *magi* who accompanied Tiridates, as Cumont thought, but a Roman product in whose creation all the fantastic ceremonies that took place on Tiridates' journey had much to do with.

Ruling out these two options, Nero as initiated in the Zoroastrian religion and Nero initiated in Mithraism, our proposal is that the son of Agrippina was initiated in the secret rites of kingship that the *magi* knew and that every king of Iran must have known, specifically, the secret part of the tripartite ritual that Ctesias describes and that we have previously analyzed²⁸. It is true that the ritual described by Ctesias refers to the Achaemenid kings, but it has such a clear structure that it is very likely that it was maintained with a similar configuration during the Parthian period, that is, as a ritual organized in three parts, two public, change of clothes and ingestion of Iranian national food and a secret one, which Ctesias mentions and which we cannot know.

As confirmation of the present hypothesis we can adduce the consequences of Nero's alleged initiation into royalty.

28 On the perception that the Greeks and Romans had of *magi* as specialists in kingship, see A. DE JONG, 1997, 387-403.

A first consequence, very obvious, is that when Nero felt in danger, he thought of fleeing and taking refuge in the Parthian Empire, according to Suetonius (*Nero* 47) and Aurelius Victor 5.15,14. The authors after Nero, interested in transmitting a very negative image of the prince, make an effort to demonstrate to what extent Nero could be a traitor to the Roman people by surrendering himself to his most bitter enemy, but the initiation he received guaranteed him a safe haven, because of the sacredness of his condition after the initiation he received, according to our postulate.

The most conclusive of the consequences is the fact that Suetonius (*Nero* 57) tells us that Vologeses I sent ambassadors to the Senate to renew the alliance with the Roman people and to ask with great insistence that the memory of Nero be worshipped. Suetonius includes this fact to give an idea of the extent to which Nero's policy had been treacherous and accommodating to the Parthian enemies, but we interpret it differently: Vologeses was aware that Nero had been initiated into the rituals of Iranian royalty and, therefore, his memory was to be respected as that of an equal or even superior in merit.

Another possible consequence of the Neronian initiation in the rituals of the *magi* foreseen for the royalty could be the survival of the glorious memory of Nero that was kept especially alive in the provinces of the East. This was the breeding ground of the «false Neros»²⁹. In fact, in the year of his death, before news of the emperor's death spread, an individual impersonated Nero and dragged a group of followers to an island, an episode which Tacitus (*Historias*, II 8-9) recounts with derision. Ten years later, a certain Terentius Maximus, of whom Dio Cassius 66.19.3 informs us and who passed himself off as the emperor, gained, according to the author, a considerable number of followers among the Parthians. And still twenty years after the death of the emperor, another false Nero, this one unnamed, attained such popularity in the Parthian Empire that, according to Suetonius (*Nero* 57) «only with difficulty was he delivered to us» (*et uix redditus sit*). The success of the false Nero in the Parthian Empire could not be due only to an alleged philo-iranian policy of the late emperor, but to the sacralized prestige that had acquired his person, whose initiation into royalty according to Iranian rituals was known.

8. Conclusions

The passage about the banquets that Nero shared with the *magi* of the court of Tiridates was written by Pliny the Elder with the intention of denigrating Nero, to

29 Cf. J. TUPLIN 1989 for more information and for the relation with the Sibyl's prophecy.

make clear his cultural surrender to the enemy people of Rome and, incidentally, to emphasize his ineptitude because he would not have been able, according to the author, not even to learn those mysteries. However, we believe that we have been able to demonstrate that these initiations were neither initiation into Roman Mithraism, which, as Beck rightly points out, did not yet exist in the year 66, nor initiation into Zoroastrianism, which does not involve any mystical aspect. Starting from the postulate that the *magi* were, first and foremost, specialists in the rituals of maintaining the cosmic order, which is the main purpose of the Zoroastrian daily sacrifice, and in the rituals that legitimized kingship, we postulate that it was into these types of mysteries that Nero was introduced. The proof of the existence of a secret element within the rituals of accession to the throne is provided by Ctesias referring to the moment of the enthronement of Artaxerxes II. It is presumable that the structure of the ritual was maintained during the Parthian period, although the public parts that required elements that no longer existed, such as the clothing of Cyrus the Great, were eliminated. In sum, it is likely that Nero's initiation was more linked to his status as emperor than to a conversion to Eastern religious doctrines, for which he certainly had a notable intellectual curiosity. The relationship between Nero's power in a critical year of his reign and the contribution that the knowledge held by the priests of Tiridates' court could bring to it in the context of imperial Rome reinforces the idea that this episode was part of Nero's strategy to consolidate his authority.

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