



CUMONT, FRANZ VALÉRY MARIE

CUMONT, FRANZ VALÉRY MARIE (b. Aalst, Belgium, 3 January 1868, d. Brussels, 20 August 1947), classical philologist and historian of religions, whose research resulted in a substantial contribution to the understanding of Mithraism and other oriental religions in the Roman empire. After studying in Ghent, Bonn, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, and Paris Cumont was appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Ghent (and curator at the Musée du Cinquantenaire, Brussels), where he remained until 1910. When in that year the Belgian minister of education, a member of the Catholic party and a supporter of the church, refused to appoint him to the chair of history of religions, Cumont, a man of independent means, left Belgium for Paris and then Rome, where he devoted the rest of his life to intensive study of the religions of imperial Rome. After his death his extensive library was bequeathed to the Accademia Belgica in Rome.

Although Cumont's publications number about one thousand, only those bearing on Iranian studies will be singled out for discussion here. Of his monumental *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* (Brussels, 1896-99) one scholar has remarked: "It is not every man who has the ability and the good fortune to succeed both in establishing a subject and in dominating it for the next half-century" (Gordon, p. 215). This work was not superseded until Maarten Vermaseren published *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (2 vols., the Hague, 1956-60).



Cumont extracted from *Textes et monuments* a compendium of Mithraic studies, *Les mystères de Mithra* (Brussels, 1900), which was twice reprinted (Paris, 1902; Brussels, 1913). His lectures as guest professor at the College de France in 1905 and at the University of Oxford in 1906 were published under the title *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (Paris, 1906), with one chapter on Mithraism. The notes to the fourth edition (Paris, 1929; repr. 1966) are so abundant that the book must be considered a separate work. The first installment of his *Recherches sur le manichéisme* (Brussels, 1908), however, became obsolete in 1933 with the discovery of the Manichean *Homilies*; Cumont reviewed its publication in *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 118, 1938, pp. 224-26. In an article entitled “La fin du monde selon les mages occidentaux,” published earlier in the same journal (103, 1931, pp. 29-96), he had connected the Dieburg relief, Dio of Prusa’s testimony, and the Apocalypse of Hystaspes with both Mazdaism and Mithraism.

In hopes of solving the problem of the origin of the Mithraic mysteries, Cumont visited Asia Minor, Syria, and Mesopotamia. But, although he was always interested in Persia as the ultimate source of Mithraism, he remained a classicist, with no knowledge of any Iranian language. In 1932 he published “L’adoration des mages et l’art triomphal de Rome” (*Memorie della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, 1932, pp. 81-105), in which he traced the iconography of the wise men hastening from the east with offerings in their veiled hands to classical monuments and ultimately to the Persepolis reliefs. In 1938 he published with Hellenist Joseph Bidez *Les mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d’après la tradition grecque* in two volumes, the second of which is a critical edition of all the texts—primarily in Greek—that had been circulated in antiquity as by Zoroaster or some other “magus”; the first volume is a long introduction in which Cumont tried to show the role of hypothetical Western (hellenized) magi, or *magousaîoi* (a term derived from OPers. *maguš* with addition of a suffix *-aîoi*, analogous to *Ioudaîoi*, *Pharisaîoi*, etc.), as they were first called in Eusebius (*Praeparatio Evangelica* 6.10.16.275.cd), in shaping a religious milieu favorable to the rise of Mithraism. Following Émile Benveniste, Cumont believed the basis of Mithraism to be “a primitive form of [Zurvanite] Mazdean dualism, not transformed and purified by Zarathustra’s reform.” The genuine Iranian doctrinal content in Greek works attributed to Zoroaster, Hystaspes, or Ostanès (whose name is unattested in Iranian sources) is, however, extremely small, as definitively proved by Roger Beck.

In 1942, in *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions*, pp. 284-300, Cumont



published “Le coq blanc des Mazdéens et des Pythagoriciens,” suggesting a connection between Avestan veneration for the [cock](#) and the Pythagorean *ákousma*, which forbade sacrifice of a white cock. In his last book, *Lux Perpetua*, published posthumously in 1949, he tried to show that the belief in celestial immortality, though probably based on a simple association of earthly fire with the fire of heavenly lights, had been borrowed by Greek philosophers from “Maguseans.” This belief then supposedly gradually spread, owing to Pythagorean, Platonic, and Stoic influences, from the cultivated elite to the general population.

In 1934 a Mithraeum was discovered at Dura-Europos by the combined French and American expedition, and Cumont promptly visited the site, where he worked for some time with his friend M. I. Rostovtzeff. His contribution to the final report, which never appeared, was also published posthumously, in an English translation with notes by E. D. Francis under the title “The Dura Mithraeum” (Hinnells, I, pp. 151-214; II, pls. 21-30).

The importance of Cumont’s work has been universally acknowledged, though, as Francis noted in his preface to this last article, “Cumont sometimes pressed his conclusions beyond the available evidence, and what many *epigoni* have on occasion taken to represent an unassailable judgement may rest on little more than an imaginative interpretation of unusually problematic data. Indeed, the increasing realisation on the part of Mithraic scholars that so little in their field is clearly understood or invites consensus accounts, at least in part, for the considerable renewal of interest in this ancient cult” (pp. 151-52).

The chief objection that can be raised against Cumont’s reconstruction of the hypothetical Mithraic *hieròs lógos* is that in Iranian sources Mithra never kills a bull. Cumont also seems to have underestimated the importance of astronomy in the genesis of Mithraism: He noted in *Textes et monuments* (I, p. 202) that “it is probable, although no author mentions it, that the animals [attending the tauroctony] had been brought into relation with the celestial bodies that they symbolized for the astronomers,” but he considered this association a secondary, late development: “This refined symbolism reflects the spirit of an epoch in which the fantastic combinations of astronomy were generally accepted.”

Despite the advances that have been made in recent years, Cumont’s immense work remains a lasting contribution to the study of Iranian religion.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

The most detailed available biography of Cumont was written by Louis Canet as a foreword to Cumont's *Lux Perpetua*, Paris, 1949, pp. vii-xxx (with a good portrait). See also J. Ries in *Dictionnaire des religions*, ed. J. Vidal et al., Paris, 1984, pp. 362-63; F. De Ruyt, in *Biographie nationale* 39, suppl. 11, Brussels, 1976, cols. 211-22; and G. Sanders in *Nationaal Biographisch Woordenboek* 1, Brussels, 1964, cols. 361-66. Objections to Cumont's theories have been reviewed by R. L. Gordon, "Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism," in J. R. Hinnells, ed., *Mithraic Studies* I, Manchester, 1975, pp. 215-48; J. Hinnells, "Reflections of the Bull-Slaying Scene," *Mithraic Studies* II, pp. 290-312; D. Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, New York, 1989, on which see J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "Sur l'origine des mystères de Mithra," *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, 1990, pp. 281-85; and R. Beck, "Zoroastrian Epigrapha," in Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* III, pp. 491-565. See J. R. Hinnells, *Mithraic Studies*, 2 vols., Manchester, 1975.

(Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin)