



## DIO COCCEIANUS

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**DIO COCCEIANUS**, surnamed Chrysostom (golden-mouthed), a traveling scholar who in his 36th *Oration* (known as the “Borysthenian” or “Olbian” from its dramatic setting), written about 100 C.E., purports to summarize a hymn composed by Zoroaster and sung by the magi “in secret rites” (text and commentary in Bidez and Cumont, II, pp. 142-53; tr. H. Lamar Crosby, *Dio Chrysostom*, vol. 3, Loeb Classical Library, pp. 455-75). The hymn is actually two cosmological myths. In the first (pars. 39-53), the universe is likened to a team of horses corresponding to the elements of fire, air, water, and earth. The team, under the governance of its divine charioteer, usually runs in harmony, but periodic disasters of conflagration and deluge are caused by the fiery ardor of the first and mightiest of the horses and by the sweat of the third. In a final catastrophe the entire universe is consumed and melted down like wax into the horse of fire. The second myth tells of the re-creation of the world from the fructifying union of the gods Zeus and Hera (54-end).

If genuine, the hymns would belong to the Iranian people known as the Magusaeans, the descendants of those left in Anatolia after Alexander’s reconquest. Their communities flourished into Roman times (Boyce, Chaps. VIII-X), and it would have been perfectly possible for Dio, himself a native of Prusa in Bithynia and widely traveled in Asia Minor, to have learned the hymns from them. The fact that the hymns differ widely from any other Zoroastrian liturgical works could be due to the Magusaeans’ divergence from the main stream of the faith and the considerable degree of hellenization that they underwent from the surrounding culture. Cumont (Bidez and Cumont, I,



p. 97), who believed strongly in the hymns' genuineness, argued that the Stoicism with which they are thoroughly imbued, came from the Magusaeans themselves and not from their redactor Dio.

On the other hand, the hymns may equally well be pure inventions by Dio. Greek authors had no inhibitions about enhancing their own material by attributing it to oriental sages, and the setting of the hymns as a myth at the end of a philosophical discourse is precisely the sort of literary context where, by convention, the freest rein could be given to imagination. The problem is that there are no other extant remains of Magusaeen liturgy or doctrine against which Dio's material might be tested, and in their default it is probably sounder to attribute to Dio himself that which is manifestly occidental and in the Greek philosophical tradition. That said, it remains possible that the myths themselves, apart from the cosmogonic and eschatological meanings which Dio imposes on them, may contain kernels of stories actually recited by the Magusaeen magi in a real liturgical context. Something about the ill fit of the interpretations with the underlying narratives (especially the first), an allegorical dissonance on which Dio himself remarks several times, suggests as much.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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