



HERACLEITUS OF EPHESUS

HERACLEITUS OF EPHESUS, Greek philosopher traditionally credited as the first to have written on the magi. Heracleitus, son of Blosson, may be regarded as Ephesus' most eminent native son during the early Persian period. He flourished ca. 500 B.C.E. (Diogenes Laërtius 9.1), and came from a venerable aristocratic line with whom the sacerdotal office of *basileus* was hereditary; but he is said to have relinquished this rank in favor of his brother. Further biographical details are derived from traditions of questionable historicity. Thus, he is credited with having called upon the tyrant Melankomas to resign (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.65.4 St.); he is said to have declined the request of Darius I to introduce him to Greek culture (the [alleged] correspondence between them, which probably first appeared in the second century C.E., is to be found in Diogenes Laërtius 9.13 f.).

Heracleitus's philosophical reflections were set down in a prose work, usually quoted in later times by the title *peri physeōs*. It is said to have consisted of three parts: one on the Universe, one on Politics, and one on the Gods (Diogenes Laërtius 9.5 f.). Tradition has it that he himself deposited it in the Temple of Artemis. There are many indications that the work as a whole bore the character displayed by its surviving 35 fragments (ed. with German tr. in Diels and Kranz I, DK 22). These take the form of Sentences and Aphorisms, often difficult to understand in content, which not only earned the author the sobriquet of the "Dark One" (*skoteinos*), but also have given rise, up to the present day, to highly divergent interpretations. Heracleitus's thought is characterized by an unequivocal rejection of any static concept (regardless of



its basis) of world and nature. His questioning goes not to the origin (*archē*) of things, but to the order (*logos*) which informs everything, and which has always existed and is visibly present everywhere and to everybody. This perceptible order consists in the uninterrupted, abrupt conversion of objects into each other. At the same time, they are not discrete, self-subsistent things, but two sides of the same thing. In political affairs, Heraclitus criticizes the mediocrity of the mass, while stressing the importance of commitment to the “Law” (i.e., the constitution) of the Polis.

Among other things, the role he assigns to fire as the archetype of constant flux has led scholars to seek Iranian roots in Heraclitian thought. In frag. 14, Magi are mentioned together with various people who engage in Bacchanal rituals; the authenticity of this fragment is, however, debated.

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