

BOOK REVIEWS

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ROME AND ASIA

Aus Spätantike und Christentum

BY FRANZ ALTHEIM

(Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1951.) Pp. 169.

Asien und Röm, neue Urkunden aus Sasanidischer Frühzeit

BY FRANZ ALTHEIM AND RUTH STIEHL

(Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1952.) Pp. 87.

Attila und die Hunnen

BY FRANZ ALTHEIM

(Baden-Baden: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1951.) Pp. 215, 16 pl., 1 map.

The works of F. Altheim cover a very large period of time, from the Indo-European migrations until the Avar and Arab invasions. Although he is interested in studying the classical period of Rome, it is obvious that Altheim is pre-

occupied with the problem of migrations. This problem, however, can only be examined within the framework of Eurasia, and this is why he attempts to tear down the traditional divisions of ancient history. He readily reiterates

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that, toward the beginning of our era, three great empires existed in Eurasia: Rome, Persia and China. Nomadic peoples wandered throughout these empires and played the role of mediators between these various civilizations. According to this view, the barbarians assumed a position similar to that of the classical peoples.

The Roman Empire erected a firm barrier against migrations, whether from the north or from the east; this is what is meant by the "Roman peace." But this truce was a precarious one. In spite of a desperate defensive struggle, Europe was once more submerged. The Eastern Empire alone knew the glory of preserving for another thousand years the achievements of Rome. The three works that we review here are devoted precisely to the critical period from the third to the fifth century. We find at times, expressed in the same terms, pages that the author had published previously. Typical of this ebullient study are the repetitions and digressions which occur frequently.

In the very beginning of the book entitled *Aus Spätantike und Christentum*, we encounter research on the oriental origins of the solar theology that so greatly influenced paganism and perhaps even the Christianity of the decadent Empire. In 1913, F. Cumont wrote a study on this fine subject that has remained a classic.¹ In it he showed that heliolatry had evolved along with scientific and philosophical progress. The sun was first considered the lord of nature, man's creator and his savior, until the supreme God supplanted it and

it was there reduced to the rank of a demiurge. According to Cumont, the role of the Semites in the elaboration of this theology had been a decisive one; we have not forgotten his striking conclusion "The same Semitic race that caused the fall of Paganism is also the race that made the most strenuous efforts to save it."

Altheim's theories develop within the same framework. In the beginning there is a critical investigation of the sources. Macrobius, in Book I of *Saturnalia*, places in the mouth of Betius Praetextatus, "the pope of paganism," a dissertation destined to prove that the sun is the supreme God and that most of the great gods—Liber, Mars, Mercury, Attis—are simply other names for the sun or for solar virtues. Wissova had suspected that Macrobius' source was a neo-Platonist of the fourth century. Actually, according to Altheim, this source is Greek: it is Porphyry's book on the sun. One could object that, in the passages of Porphyry that Eusebius preserved for us, it is not the sun which is the supreme God, but thought, identical with Jupiter. In a letter to Anebon, Porphyry identifies the sun with a demiurge. But these objections are not decisive ones. Porphyry is not very original, and he might have followed various sources in several different works. P. Courcelle, whose name deserved to have been cited, gave evidence of the extraordinary vogue which the writings of Porphyry enjoyed in pagan circles of the fourth century. Macrobius, who surely came from a Greek family, could read his writings in the original text. Finally, one observes in Praxiteles' speeches the minute

1. *Mémoires de l'Académie des sciences et belles-lettres*, XII, 2, 1948.

description and the symbolic interpretation of divine statues. However, Porphyry's treatise on *The Sun* is contemporaneous with another book by the same author on *The Divine Images*.

The Temple of the Sun in the Field of Mars—whose anniversary falls on December 25—was founded by Aurelius following the vision he had of the Sun of Emesa which, during the course of the war against Zenobia, earned him a victory over the Sun of Palmyra. Altheim takes this occasion to develop an interesting study of the pressure which the Arabs exerted upon the Roman Empire of the third century. He quotes from J. Carcopine's researches on "*the boundary of Numidia and its Syrian guard*"; he recalls the conquest of Egypt by the Palmyrians; he attributes to an Arab prince of the third century the creation of the enigmatic palace of Mschatta. One can readily see how this digression on the role of the Semites tallies with Cumont's remark which we cited earlier.

Finally, Altheim proposes to demonstrate that it was the cult of the sun, and not Christianity, that marked the decisive moment in religious evolution. Therefore he analyzes with care the crisis of 312, which, he says, paved the way for the religious policies of Constantine's father, Constantius Chlorus, who was probably a sun-worshipper. It is regrettable that Altheim did not avail himself of H. Stern's study which appears in his edition of the *Calendar of 354* and concludes thus: "Constantius Chlorus was the first to make use, in his monetary issues, of the nimbus, doubt-

less the solar symbol of that time."² Altheim studies other monuments of the same period which he believes offer evidence of the sun's eminent position—the Arch of Constantine in Rome and the patera in Parabiago. But above all he compares the emblem that Constantine had had engraved upon his soldiers' shields the day before the battle of Pons Milvius with the solar symbol that Aurelius ordered placed upon all shields the day after his vision of Emesa.

We have analyzed Altheim's study in detail because we wanted to point up the persuasiveness of his method and its dangers. His arguments are uneven in quality and some of them do not stand up on examination. He observes that the translation of the Latin word *indiges* by the Greek word *genarches* "cannot be prior to the time when the god of Emesa was introduced into Rome" (p. 44, n. 1.). But this translation was already to be found in Diodorus of Sicily.

He calls our attention to the two images of the sun and moon which can be seen on the sides of the Arch of Constantine; the presence of these celestial bodies, the forces of the cosmos, supposedly prove the triumph of a cult that was neo-Platonic in form. Yet I can contribute an observation that does not seem to have been made: on the surface of the Arch of Orange that overlooks the city, an Attic relief on the right portrays the bust of a veiled woman which probably represents the moon; the relief on the other side has

2. "Le Calendrier de 354," *Bibliothèque arch. et hist. de l'Institut français de Beyrouth*, LV, 1953, 148.

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disappeared but it is permissible to surmise that it portrayed the sun. If this is so, the symbolism of the Arch of Constantine originated prior to neo-Platonism and to the Syrian influences, for the inscription on the arch bears the date of the year 26 A.D.

On the patera at Parabiago—and we must accept the date as being some time in the fourth century, which A. Alföldi claims is correct—does the sun really occupy the place of honor as Altheim maintains? Not at all; the rather small images of the sun and the moon at the very top merely constitute necessary accessories to the composition.

Does the transfer of Syrian troops to the boundaries of Maghreb offer proof of Semitic penetration in the third century? Since J. Carcopine's study of this problem we have been surprised to discover that Syrian troops were in Maghreb as early as the first half of the second century; in Gemallae, in the extreme south of Algeria, as early as 126, and in El Kantara in 169.³

And now I come to the most serious problem, that of the origin of the Constantinian emblem, the Chrismon. We are aware of the extraordinary abundance of research to which it gave rise, particularly since H. Grégoire expressed the view that the supposed Christian emblem was actually a Celtic symbol seen by Constantine on the Temple of Apollo in Gaul. Personally, I subscribe to this brilliant hypothesis which Altheim expressly condemns, and yet which seems to be in accordance with his own views. The two most recent studies on the subject maintain

3. J. Baradez, *Fossatum Africae* (Algiers, 1949), p. 103; L. Leschi, *Libyca*, II, 1954, 179.

that Constantine had the firm intention of placing a Christian emblem on the shields.⁴ What, precisely, is Altheim's opinion? It is not easy to determine. He merely affirms that the cross of 312 is like Aurelius' sun-drop.

But, setting aside these details, we have said that, in essence, Altheim's thesis agrees with Cumont's. However, it would have been worth his while to note that this thesis was challenged by M. P. Nilsson who contrasts the antiquity of the solar cult in Egypt, on the one hand, with the tardy appearance of the solar calendar in Syria, on the other.⁵ Above all, one must take into account the originality of Greek philosophical speculation in regard to the solar cult as well as in regard to the cult of mysteries, as P. Lambrechts has demonstrated. "One must not look to the Orient," M. J. Noiville writes, "if one wishes to understand Aurelius's policies and his success."⁶ And so Altheim's thesis, presented with such brilliance, is nonetheless questionable in many of its details, and his general concept, which I believe to be accurate, should have been substantiated against those claims that recently have shaken Cumont's thesis.

The second work, by Franz Altheim and Ruth Stiehl, *Asien und Röm*, also begins with a critical study of the texts. This time the authors are concerned

4. A. Alföldi, "Das Kreuzzepter Konstantins des Grossen," *Gazette numismatique suisse*, IV, 1954, 81. C. Cecchelli, *Il trionfo della croce* (Rome, 1954).

5. "Sonnankalender und Sonnenreligion," *Archiv für Religionswiss*, XXX, 1953, 141.

6. *Revue des Etudes anciennes*, 1935, 135.

with two Persian parchments from Doura which C. Bradford Welles entrusted to them. The first parchment, which mentions Emperor Quietus and apparently alludes to his fall, is dated in the fortieth year of King Sapor's reign. Now a controversy has recently arisen over the date of Sapor's advent—240 according to W. Ensslin, March, 242 according to Maricq. Since the fall of Quietus occurred in 261, one must presume that, according to the Sassanian computation, the first year of Sapor's reign began on September 22, 241, and that Quietus fell a little prior to September 22, 261. The chronological uncertainty about events in the third century is such that the acquisition of this new manuscript will be most welcome.

The second parchment gives the authors the opportunity to study once again the inscriptions on the synagogue at Doura, on which the artists engraved the dates of their works. One of these inscriptions is dated the eighteenth year of Sapor's reign, and it proves that the city did not fall in 256 or 257, as was generally believed, but in 260 at the very earliest. The artists who adorned the synagogue dared, on the eve of disaster, to use the chronology of the Persian kings because they were traitors, a fifth column, who were paving the way for foreign occupation.

This impressive thesis does not carry conviction. The erection of the synagogue dates from 245; would they have waited during the critical years that began in 254 to decorate it? The *res gestae divi Saporis*, that beautiful inscription in which King Sapor enumerates his victories, seems to confirm that 256 was the date of the conquest of Doura. If the

inscriptions were dated according to the local era of Doura, which starts in 232, the year eighteen would take us to 250, and then we would have no reason to doubt. It is true that the painting indicates this eighteenth year as the year of pestilence; but pestilence could well have ravaged Doura before the year 260, which has remained a famous one in history. If one prefers the date of 250 to that of 258, a very daring structure collapses.

Before taking up Altheim's work on the Huns, let us stop to examine a chapter of his book, *Aus Spätantike und Christentum*. In it the author studies an inscription found in Hungary, west of the middle basin of the Theiss, near tombs whose material dates from the third century. By its alphabet it recalls the north-Italic inscription and, by its language, it would belong to the Oriental Ossetic group, that is to say, the Alani. Thus this tiny text allows us to conjecture that the country once occupied by the Sarmatian Jazyges had been overrun, as early as the third century, by the Alani. In it Altheim finds a confirmation of his much-discussed thesis, according to which Emperor Maximus was born in Thrace at the end of the second century, of an Alani mother, in conformity with the suspect testimony in *Histoire Auguste*. The Alani, who, the ancients said, were of Caucasian origin, are the vanguard of the peoples of the steppes. Therefore, it is very important to assemble the slightest indications of their progress. Hadrian had an Alani horse, Borysthena, whose grave we are rather surprised to find in Apt. Moreover, Hadrian is the first emperor who intro-

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duced formations of mounted archers into the Roman army. E. Salin, in 1951, published a description of a burial stock which he discovered at La Bussière-Etable, near Châteauponsac in the Limousin.⁷ One can recognize the armor of a warrior, perhaps a Roxolani, which testifies to the influence of Pontic art. Now, according to the author, this tomb dates from the second century. Altheim did not know this fine study; but he would doubtless have done well to discuss the communication that Alföldi sent to the Archeological Congress that met in Berlin in August, 1939.⁸ In it Alföldi explained that, in the days of Marcus Aurelius, a commercial route through Dacia united the Sarmatians of Hungary with the Roxolani, or red-haired Alani of Wallachia; there was no question of any Alani being in Hungary at that date. Therefore it would seem to us that to speak of the Alani as overrunning Hungary as early as the second century is premature.

On the heels of the Alani, a Persian people, came the Huns who were related to the Turks, as Paul Pelliot has testified. Altheim's work on the Huns is an answer to the rather alarmed curiosity of the contemporary world. The catastrophes that accompanied the fall of the Roman Empire, the movements of peoples which changed the face of Eurasia, remind one of the upheavals that we are witnessing today. The attention of scholars has been drawn to the crisis of the fifth century. Alföldi is working on a book about the

Huns in which he defines, at the outset, the archeological material.⁹ E. A. Thompson wrote *A History of Attila and the Huns* once criticized by Altheim as being too subservient to the sources; which could, of course, be considered high praise. E. Salin studied the Huns' tombs and remarked that their occupants' very bones are terrifying.¹⁰ One finds the main themes of Altheim's new book in an article of his published as early as 1949.¹¹

Thompson begins the history of the Huns in 357, the date when they crossed the Volga and destroyed the Gothic kingdom of Hermaneric. He believes we know nothing of an earlier period. On the other hand, more than one third of Altheim's book is devoted precisely to the period prior to 357. He maintains that both the identity of the Huns and that of the peoples of the steppes, the Hsiung-Nu, whose monuments are known to us thanks to the Chinese annals, is certain. For a long time there has been controversy over the legitimacy of this identification.¹² A recent study by Maenchen-Helfen denies its legitimacy.¹³ However, the publication of five Sogdianian letters by Sir Aurel Stein contributes a new fact: the Sogdianians call the nomads of the steppes

9. "Funde der Hunnenzeit und ihre ethnische Sonderung," *Archeologia Ungarica*, 1932.

10. *A History of Attila and the Huns*, Oxford, 1948; reviewed by F. Altheim, *Gnomon*, 1949, 253.

11. *La Civilisation mérovingienne*, I, 259, Paris, 1950.

12. "Die Wanderung der Hunnen," *Nouvelle Clio*, I, 1949, 71.

13. "Huns and Hsiung-Nu," *Byzantion*, XVII, 1944-45, 222.

7. *Monuments Piot*, XLV, 1951, 89.

8. *Bericht über den VI internat. Kongress für Archäologie*, Berlin, 1939, 523.

xwn, a word which we can recognize as denoting Hun. Marie Bussagli believes that this argument¹⁴ proves the identity of the Hsiung-Nu and the Huns. This theory, which has been frequently advanced, is regarded as valid by René Grousset, for example. And so, in order to understand the origins of the Hunnic civilization, it is necessary to seek information from the archeological documents of Asia; the bronzes of the Ordos desert, which would represent the incunabula and their civilization; the burial stock of Noin-Ula, discovered by the Kozlov expedition in the Keroulen steppes; the objects that were traded at the time of the Roman Empire in the great market-places of Lou-Lan, near Lob Nor; the discoveries that were the result of S. P. Tolstov's expedition among the Chwarezmians of the Oxus. And in Altheim's book we also find curious objects—bronzes from Ordos, tapestry from Noin-Ula, relics from China or Hungary. But these are hardly more than the backdrop that creates the atmosphere. However, we believe that Altheim was correct in thinking that the civilization of the Huns developed in the early centuries and that they were in contact with China, Persia and Iberia at one time or another.

If, however, one persisted in believing that the identity of the Huns and the Hsiung-Nu is doubtful, what would remain? One would have to consider seriously Ptolemy's text which places the *Chounoi* between the Don and the Volga, and one would also be obliged

to refer to Philostorgius' text, which indicates that Mont Riphées—that is to say, apparently, the region of the Urals—is their country. One could perhaps recall, if he wished to lend credence to this theory, the influence that the *mix-Hellène* of the Pontic region exerted upon the Huns. In order to decide, it would be necessary to explore archeological data more methodically.

From 170 on, the Chinese annals themselves are mute. Altheim, conjecturing, explains the Huns' migrations by the pressure that apparently had been exerted at that time upon the Yue-Tchi, the Sacae and the Sarmatians; even the Mediterranean civilization seems to have felt the repercussions of this pressure. We find here a remarkable theory that Altheim presented as early as 1936;¹⁵ he emphasized the significance of the events of the year 168 B.C. (*das Epochenjahr*), when the great invasions were already beginning.

The analysis of Hunnic civilization which this book gives us is of great interest. The Huns are, the author says, semi-nomadic; they are engaged in a certain form of agriculture and belong to a social structure of the Pacific type. Besides the dangerous power of their cavalry of mounted archers, which was their essential strength, they also supposedly possessed heavy cavalry—a hypothesis that no document seems to substantiate. At the time of the invasions the Huns had a feudal structure, scholars have observed, and a bureaucracy developed in its midst. Unfortunately, too many features of this brilliant picture

14. "Osservazioni sul problema degli Unni," *Rendiconti dell'Accad. dei Lincei*, V, 1950, 212.

15. F. Altheim and A. Szabo, "Eine Vorläuferin der grossen Völkerwanderung," *Welt als Geschichte*, II, 1936, 315.

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are speculative, due to the lack of source material. Thompson had already noted that sheep are never mentioned although they must have been one of the nomads' principal possessions.

Altheim refuses to delve into the political events that are part of the history of the Huns from 357 on. He is mainly interested in their relations with the Germans. During the course of the last war he had already devoted a careful study to the history of the kingdoms created by the Goths in the Ukraine and to the Goths' extensive relations with the people of Finland and of the Urals. The hatred that existed between the Goths and the Huns was a decisive factor in the conflict of forces of the fifth century. It was the Goths who created the portrait of the tyrant, Attila. When the Huns invaded Gaul, what was to be the attitude of the Germans in this great duel between the Occident and the Orient? Altheim had already emphasized, in an earlier book, the tragic meaning of this choice. "The problem of destiny that the Germans faced at that time has lost nothing of its pressing nature." There is no doubt that the Huns would have been victorious if the Visigoths had refused to join forces with Rome.

And so, in the second half of his book, Altheim's tale runs parallel to Thompson's, but it moves more rapidly. It is surprising that he does not say a word about the first Hunnic invasion in 395, which was such an important one. He does full justice to Priscus' admirable account, which he considers one of the masterpieces of Hellenistic history, and he provides us with an excellent commentary on it. We know that at

times Priscus speaks of the Huns and at other times of the Scythians without explaining the significance of these terms. Thompson subscribes to Bury's opinion and believes that the word Scythian is a more general term in this context, and that the Huns are a species of Scythians. Altheim suggests a different interpretation which, however, he is not positive is the right one. In Priscus' thinking the term Hun might denote *Herrenvolk* and Scythian the mass of conquered peoples. Those that Priscus meets in Attila's immediate entourage and whom he calls "the first of the Scythians" would not be, therefore, the true Huns. Among these groups of conquered peoples are the Germans. The solution suggested by Altheim might resolve a difficult problem. Odoacer—who put an end to the Western Empire—is the son of Edeco, who is probably the person Priscus met as Attila's adviser. Reynolds and Lopez recently reached the conclusion that Odoacer must have been a member of the Hunnic, not of the German, race.¹⁶ But it is quite likely that Odoacer can be placed precisely in the category of supposed "Scythians" which the Germans constituted.

Altheim did not explore, as did Thompson, the cause of the very easy victories that Attila won in Gaul. The latter stresses the presence, in 450, of a Bagaudae doctor, Eudoxius, at Attila's side. Who are the Bagaudae? Proletarians, Gallic patriots, outlaws whom Rome treated as people without a country. Aëtius protected the interests of the

16. R. L. Reynolds and R. S. Lopez, "Odoacer German or Hun," *American Historical Review*, LII, 1946, 36.

landed aristocracy and opposed the Bagaudae. "On the banks of the Loire," Thompson writes, "many eyes turn with hope toward the east." Attila's victory can therefore be explained by a certain form of treachery. W. Ensslin condemns this interpretation¹⁷ which Altheim does not even mention.

Speaking generally, Thompson was more concerned with economic problems. It is important to note, of course, that in 435, the Huns were clamoring for the reestablishment of commercial privileges. The conflict of 444 began with scuffles in the market-place. Later, Attila demanded the transfer of all market-places from the Danube to the city of Naissus. Unfortunately, we do not know how the scale of these markets was established; Thompson surmises that the Huns spent gold which they received in the form of tribute. On the other hand, Altheim reproaches Thompson with entirely neglecting the religious factor. According to legend, Attila rediscovered the god of war's sword which the Scythian kings worshipped and from then on he believed in his divine power. "It was a fiendish, irrational force that pushed Attila ahead" (p. 130). "Like all those of his race, he believed himself inspired, led by higher powers, and perhaps he was." It is too bad that we know hardly anything about the Huns' religion.

Finally, we must note the beauty of the tale of Attila's death, which the author describes for us. He stresses the originality of the *lied* that was sung at his grave, of which Jordanes has given us the Latin version, "*ein echtes hun-*

nischer Dichtung." It is true that he can find nothing of its kind in the Turkish texts, but he believes that Gorgias has provided a comparable term, the bilingual of Mzscheta, which he studied,¹⁸ and which he immediately concluded was influenced by Gorgias. This rather banal chant doubtless was not worth so much attention. The book does not end with Attila's death; it goes on to discuss the Avar and Turkish invasions, resituating them within the framework of Eurasia.

What has remained of the Huns' wanderings? What was the historic role of this people who disappeared like a meteor? Altheim attributes to them the creation of the proto-Bulgarian alphabet, which derived, through their offices, from the Aramean alphabet employed by the Sogdianians. We would not dare to follow him on this difficult terrain. Because of the terror they inspired, the Huns pushed the western Germans into an alliance with the Western Empire, and in this way gave the medieval period its historical form. Their essential achievement is, perhaps, that from the port of Sungaria to the Russian steppes, they opened up a new route through Eurasia.

The books we have just discussed illustrate clearly the method peculiar to their author. Altheim maintains that each era realizes an idea and has a style of its own. A small text—a chapter from Macrobius, a parchment from Doura, Attila's threnody—is found to be filled with deep significance. He would say,

18. "Die Bilinguis von Mzscheta," *Mélanges Grégoires*, I (*Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire orientales et slaves*), Brussels, 1949.

17. *Byzantin. Zeitschr.*, 1952, 72.

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for example, that the Huns gave form to the *Lebensstil* at the time of the invasions. Economic factors are outweighed in his opinion by mysticism. Although he is greatly interested in archeological relics, he does not care to confine himself to the patient methods of archeologists. His vision of the past is not always confirmed by the documents.

On the other hand, he has given new life to the ancient historians' palette. Thanks to his efforts, the personality of the barbarian appears in all its powerful diversity and originality: a classical temple or a book on Roman law interests him less than a palace in the Syrian

desert or a mural painting in an Oriental temple. And this is so because he does not feel that he is dealing with dead things; the ardent tone of his books shows that he incorporates the past with the present. To help us to understand what the armored barbarian soldiers were like he shows us a picture of Tibetan soldiers. He emphasizes the geographical uniformities that determine the form of life and that orient the migrations. This deep feeling for the immediacy of history enlivens all his books and makes the reading of them passionately interesting; even, at times, disquieting.