

# Studia graeco-arabica

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2017

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Information on subscription rates for the print edition of Volume 7 (2017), claims and customers service: [redazione@pacineditore.it](mailto:redazione@pacineditore.it)

Web site: <http://learningroads.cfs.unipi.it>

Service Provider: Università di Pisa, ICT - Servizi di Rete Ateneo

ISSN 2239-012X (Online)

Registration at the law court of Pisa, 18/12, November 23, 2012.

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### *Cover*

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḡawī 300, f. 1v  
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *grec* 1853, f. 186v

W. Kroll, *Discours sur les oracles chaldaïques*. Traduction par Henri Dominique Saffrey, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, Paris 2016 (Textes et traditions, 28), XII + 126 pp.

This volume contains the French translation by Henri Dominique Saffrey of the Latin dissertation submitted by Wilhelm Kroll in 1894 to the University of Breslau on the *De Oraculis Chaldaicis*, destined to be the starting point for modern studies on this subject (pp. 1-103). It contains also the “Avertissement” of Father Saffrey (pp. VII-XII) and, as an “Annexe”, Kroll’s paper “Les Oracles Chaldaïques”, published in *Rheinisches Museum* 50 (1895, pp. 105-8).

As Saffrey points out in the “Avertissement”, the dissertation is the “première étude sérieuse de ce texte perdu” and, for this reason, “toujours utile à consulter” (p. X): given the increasing interest in the *Chaldean Oracles*,<sup>1</sup> he embarks on making more accessible this pioneer work. Kroll collected the “Chaldean” quotations from the writings of the Neoplatonists, distinguishing between their original meanings and their interpretations; his conclusion was that the *Chaldean Oracles* featured a religious poem with a basic theology, embedding philosophical (especially Platonic) elements and a ‘cult of Fire’, probably influenced by Oriental religious currents. Saffrey makes some improvements on the original text by Kroll: he uses italics to distinguish more clearly between the comments, the Neoplatonists’ excerpts, and the Chaldean verses. Also, the sections of the dissertation are subdivided into paragraphs with subtitles. The Greek texts are quoted according to the modern editions that were not available to Kroll; the references to secondary manuscripts are eliminated. Finally, Saffrey adds an *Index Locorum*, a bibliography of the editions used and, in the “Avertissement”, eight fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* unknown to Kroll.<sup>2</sup>

In his preface, Kroll provided an overview of the previous researches on the *Chaldean Oracles*. The first editor was Francesco Patrizi in 1591, who attributed the collection to Zoroaster; during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new editions of the *Chaldean Oracles* were made by Thomas Taylor<sup>3</sup> and, then, by Johann Carl Thilo.<sup>4</sup> Kroll found these works defective, lacking as they do of any effort to distinguish the genuine meaning of the fragments beyond the Neoplatonic interpretations. The sources used are listed in the first chapter, “Les sources des Oracles chaldaïques” (pp. 3-12). The most important are the Neoplatonic ones. Philosophers of “Platonic” allegiance, especially after Plotinus, refer to a great number of ‘oracles’ in order to prove their affinity with the theories of Orpheus, Homer, Pythagoras and Plato: Porphyry (quoted by Augustine in the *De Civitate Dei*), Iamblichus, Syrianus, Psellus and, above all, Damascius and Proclus. Some references to the *Chaldean Oracles* are attested also in the anonymous epistle XVII contained in the *Anecdota Graeca* III edited by Cramer and in Hermippus’ *De Astrologia*.

Chapter II, “Les fragments” (pp. 13-96), contains all the Chaldean verses collected by Kroll. Each of them is discussed and compared to others of the same subject, often highlighting the difference between the original meaning and that which is attributed to it in the context where it is quoted. The

<sup>1</sup> Such interest is attested, according to Saffrey, by works like H. Seng, *Un livre sacré de l’Antiquité tardive: les Oracles chaldaïques*, Paris 2016, and by the fact that an entire collection is devoted to the *Chaldean Oracles*: the *Bibliotheca Chaldaica*, published by the Universitätsverlag Winter.

<sup>2</sup> Saffrey refers to OC 6, 134, 135, 159, 227 (OC = *Oracles Chaldaïques* avec un choix de commentaires anciens. Texte établi et traduit par É. des Places, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2010<sup>5</sup> [Collection des Universités de France]); Olymp., *In Alc.*, p. 125.23-24 Westerink; Proclus, *In Parm.* VII 512.16-17, and 20-22 Steel; Proclus, *Theol. plat.* IV 21, p. 64.11-12 Saffrey-Westerink.

<sup>3</sup> Kroll quoted T. Taylor, *Classical Journal* 16 (1817), pp. 333-4, and 17 (1818), pp. 128-33.

<sup>4</sup> Kroll quoted Johann Karl Thilo, *Commentarius in Synesii hymnum secundum*, vv. 1-24, Halle 1842; Id., *Commentatio ad Synesii hymnum secundum*, vv. 22-24, *De triplici silentio philosophico, mystico, divino*, Halle 1843.

chapter is divided into six sections, devoted to the supreme gods, to cosmology, to the minor gods, to human soul's creation, and finally to fire's worship and eschatology. The first section includes fragments concerning the supreme God, his activities and his relationship to the two Intellects, Hecate and the hypercosmic gods. The section devoted to cosmology describes the structure of the Chaldean cosmos, that is divided into three zones: the Empyrean (or noetic world), the ethereal (the heaven of fixed stars) and the material world. The third section exposes the hierarchy of the inferior gods: the ἀρχικοί, ἕργες, συνοχεῖς, τελετάρχαι, angels, demons, heroes, ζῶναι and ἄζωνοι. The section devoted to the human soul shows its links with the Intellects and Hecate, seen as the cosmic soul. The section concerning Fire's worship highlights the existence and the use of the ὀχετοί, suprasensible channels that connect the world to the divine realm. The final section exposes some eschatological rules: the initiate who follows them can ascend to the highest God with his soul (and, if he is a theurgist, also with his body).

The third chapter, "Origine et âge des *Oracles chaldaïques*" (pp. 97-103), lists the philosophical and religious influences of the *Chaldean Oracles* and discusses its period of composition. The Chaldean doctrine combines Platonic theories (the creation of the cosmos, the soul's *anamnesis* and the distinction between two kinds of *eros*) with the 'Pythagorean' ideas on the monad, dyad, human soul and matter, as well as with the Stoic concept of God as divine Fire. The philosophical elements are intermingled with influences from Oriental religions, as the great relevance of Hecate and the 'worship of Fire' suggest. There are also some similarities with Gnosticism and Hermetism: a fact that suggests to date the composition of the *Chaldean Oracles* between the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. The first Neoplatonist to use the *Chaldean Oracles* is Porphyry, and this confirms the date of composition proposed. Porphyry's evidence is important also because he ascribes the composition of the work to Julian, probably the son of the Julian who 'reveals' the *Oracles*; however, nothing more can be said due to the lack of information.

Kroll's paper "Les *Oracles chaldaïques*" (pp. 105-8), published in *Rheinisches Museum* 50 (1895), ends the volume. Saffrey includes this study because it counts as a summary of the dissertation: Kroll exposed synthetically the doctrine of the *Oracles*, giving further information on the date and the context of its composition.

It was Saffrey's aim to make accessible this ground-breaking work, an aim that has been fully achieved for the benefit of an increasing number of scholars and students interested in the spirituality and thought of Late Antiquity. For this Father Saffrey deserves our deep gratitude.

Giulia Guidara