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Is there somebody else out there? Polemics and counter-polemics on ancient astral religion

Problems and research questions: Manifold Roman ritual practices were addressing or using the sun or moon, stars or other celestial or meteorological phenomena in the sky for a variety of religious purposes: astrology or other forms of divination, from lightning for instance, or simple prayer. The 'sky' in all its agency, its movements, meteorological activities supplied in many cultures a privileged and easily ritualised axis for a vertical resonance, in particular for large-scale political rituals. However, before the advanced imperial period, astral cults were not accorded any relevance for Roman religion, above all in scholarship that treated all these phenomena separately. Against this background a doctoral project might ask: Which role did ritual practices concerning the sky play in establishing vertical, transcendent and encompassing, relationship with a horizon beyond the actual social and spatial boundaries? Who were the agents of such rituals, patrons and further participants, and which type of power relations were involved? Which materialities were employed in such rituals addressed to unreachable addressees?

Two **hypotheses** inform this research: a) On an intellectual level, criticism (and defence) of astrology and *katasterismos* forms part of discourses and practices constituting not only the resonant or mute character of relationships with the cosmos, but also relationships of power. And b) on a larger social scale the cosmic dimension of self—world-relations is appropriated and articulated in ritual practices and objects such as representations (paintings, lamps, jewellery worn on the body, horoscopes written on tables or papyrus) involved in the entertaining of such relationships. In both cases issues of gender find an expression in such practices and conceptualisations.

How could the topic be **approached**, given the high technicality of many of the relevant texts? I suggest analysing protreptic, apologetic or polemical passages of or against astrological texts, but also references on relationships of self and cosmos and narratives about *katasterismoi*. That is to say, it is necessary to combine the focus on literary texts with epigraphic and archaeological evidence, cutting across the usual thematic boundaries of 'astrology and divination', 'religion', 'emperor/ruler cult', 'sun worship' or 'calendar'.

In reading this literary and non-literary evidence the theory of mute/resonant relationships can be used to interpret and compare conceptualisations of interaction, loss of human volition and the critique of such postulation of interaction and attribution of agency to both humans and cosmos. The concepts of (precarious) knowledge and primitive intellectuals can be used to socially locate the status of such discourses which were rarely official and established.

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