

Interview with Attilio Mastrocinque: the material culture as source for the investigation about the religious practices and conceptions in Antiquity*

Entrevista com Attilio Mastrocinque: a cultura material como documento para a investigação das práticas e concepções religiosas na Antiguidade

Attilio Mastrocinque, après des études universitaires à Venise puis à Naples, est devenu professeur d'histoire grecque, d'abord à la faculté de Lettres et Philosophie de l'université de Trente, puis, à partir de 1995, à la faculté de Lettres et Philosophie de l'université de Vérone, où il est titulaire, depuis 2002, de la chaire d'histoire romaine. Il a été directeur des fouilles de l'université de Vérone dans la ville romaine de *Grumentum*. Il est un expert reconnu sur les pratiques religieuses dans le monde gréco-romain et a de nombreux travaux sur ce sujet et d'autres thèmes du monde antique. Mastrocinque est l'auteur de *Les intailles magiques du département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques* (2014), *Bona Dea and the Cults of Roman Women* (2014), *Des mystères de Mithra aux mystères de Jésus* (2009) et de nombreux articles sur le monde antique.

1. *Hariadne da Penha Soares: Ma première question concerne votre formation. Quelle a été votre motivation pour devenir un spécialiste de l'antiquité classique?*

Attilio Mastrocinque: When I was attending the Gymnasium, I had a vocation to be an archaeologist and I was already passionate about the classical antiquity. It was a matter of feeling more than a plan for a career. During the University studies I met Piero Treves, professor of Greek and Roman history, who had been persecuted by the Fascism and had come back to Italy from England and from the exile, after the end of the war. I became his pupil, even though he was no more studying classical antiquity but, instead, the culture of the 19th century in Europe. My first article was devoted to Aeschylus which was subsequently published in the review *Prometheus*. It was a pleasure for me to study in libraries such as that of San Marco, the "Marciana" library, in Venice, and to write down my first articles. I could become an archaeologist only later on, when I attended the archaeological research run by my wife, and then in Iasos (Turkey), when I joined the Italian mission.

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2. *Les chercheurs de l'antiquité trouvent, de plus en plus, un champ riche des possibilités de recherche lors de l'interaction avec l'archéologie. Comment ce processus se reflète dans sa carrière universitaire, en tant que spécialiste de l'antiquité classique et conservateur?*

R: The ancients used this expression: "to explain Homer through Homer", that is, limit one's research to a very narrow field. A philologist or a historian of the Greek and Roman antiquity may limit his research field to the ancient authors, but the risk is that of lacking of fresh resources for new discoveries. Many historians make a large use of epigraphy and/or papyrology; several of them resort to numismatics, whereas philologists are more rarely involved in these parallel disciplines. Archaeology is often the research field of different researchers because it requests a specific training and, above all, a sort of vocation, or, at least, love for objects and monuments. Moreover, there are different kinds of archaeologists, namely those who carry out their research in libraries and museums, and those who love digging and working on the field. Several archaeologists are able to do both, but cross-border researchers are few, who dare pass from archaeology to history or philology, and vice-versa. I had the chance of being one of them and I profited of my studies in philology, epigraphy, and history for interpreting many difficult and puzzling texts on magical gems. This is a typical research field where competences from different sciences are requested. It were requested, to tell the truth, also the knowledge of Egyptology and Semitic languages, and this is not my case. Other archaeological approaches prove often helpful for both historians and philologists. At present, the specialists of ancient religions are profiting from archaeology in order to contextualize cults, sacrifices, magical performances, cultic places... This a proof of the benefits which an interdisciplinary research can produce.

3. *En 2014, vous avez publié le livre «Les intailles magiques du département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques», qui comprend les collections des gemmes et des objets de nature magique de la Bibliothèque Nationale de la France. Parlez-nous sur l'idée de publier le travail et les motivations pour mener cette recherche.*

R: I started with a team supported by the Italian Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (including an Egyptologist) in order to study and publish magical gems from drawings in books and other documents dating from the 16th to the 18th century, and then the magical gems in Italian collections, In this way we published two volumes of the *Sylloge gemmarum Gnosticarum*. I had also an excellent advisor for analyses of gemstones, Lorenzo Lazzarini, of the University of Architecture in Venice. After that, when I was teaching in Paris, I met

by chance Irène Aghion at the École Pratique. She had been supervisor of the collection of glyptic artefacts in the Cabinet des Médailles and we agreed that a new publication of the magical gems in the Cabinet was a great desideratum. I was then introduced to Mathilde Avisseau, the conservator of the glyptic collection, and the director, Michel Amandry. We were happy with this project and I started with my long-lasting work. I spent many weeks in Paris to photograph and study every piece. Other gems, unknown to Delatte and Derchain (the previous editors of the collection) were taken into account, new readings occurred to my mind, and some connections between different specimens allowed better readings. The work of writing and editing lasted long, but the time was also an opportunity for improving my work. I also profited from my visits in Berlin and Ann Arbor where I could see and study the local collections of magical gems.

4. Les enquêtes et les recherches sur les croyances et les pratiques de la magie dans l'Antiquité sont des questions qui ont suscité un grand intérêt parmi plusieurs chercheurs. Les œuvres classiques et modernes explorant le thème ne se limitent pas à la recherche dans le domaine de l'histoire, couvrant des études d'Anthropologie, d'Archéologie, de Sociologie et des études sur religion. À votre avis, à quoi est due cet intérêt dans les études de la magie et des pratiques magiques dans l'Antiquité?

R: It is true that, since the publication of the *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (1986) and of the volume *Magica Hierà* (1991), the number of studies in ancient magic grew up enormously. The translation of the Bible and its publication by Gutenberg had a similar effect (*si licet parva maioribus componere*). I think that the major impetus towards this research field occurred because many scholars realized that new discoveries are possible in this submerged part of the ancient culture. Like an iceberg, ancient magic is an existing but still largely unknown domain. In the past, ancient magic was despised because the related objects are ugly, the texts and symbols were often written by almost illiterate people and filled with mistakes, solecisms, and weird things. Now several clues have been discovered in order to understand a different logic, some peculiar thoughts and combinations between different cults, different domains of nature, different cultures. In this period, one could suspect that we are deciphering a hidden cultural treasure. These are several reasons why ancient magic represents a shared interest among many scholars and many readers.

5. La publication du livre «Les intailles magiques du département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques» (2014) a demandé dans une large mesure, la connaissance et la recherche pour le catalogage et commentaires sur chaque pièce. Parlez-nous un peu plus sur le travail

d'organisation et catalogage des pièces. Quelles ont été les principales difficultés rencontrées dans l'exécution des travaux?

R: I followed the typological order of Campbell Bonner, Armand Delatte, and Philippe Derchain's publications, by starting with Egyptian gods and finishing with the inscriptions. I met difficulties in recognizing a few stones, because it was impossible to take gems to a laboratory for crystallographic and chemical analyses. In several cases a specialist from the Museum of Natural History helped me in the task of recognizing gemstones. I was already trained with photography of gems, but I improved my skill and also the use of a photographical column combined with the control of the camera from my computer proved helpful. Then I used many photographs to obtain one good image, and this was necessary in several cases, such as those of gems with convex surface, with two or three different colours, strong clear/dark contrast, transparent or semi-transparent stones... I also succeeded in contrasting the black and white background and rendering the colours in a satisfying way.

In cataloguing the gems the original notes by Henry Seyrig and Wilhelm Froehner were important to reconstruct the history of the collections and of the single pieces.

Obviously, the reading of texts has been the major concern. Only few pieces bear semitic inscriptions and, in this case, I have been helped by Christophe Batsch and Roy Kotansky. In particular, one gem was baffling every effort (no. 519) and Roy was able to recognize the mistakes and finally to read the 5 lines of Hebrew words.

6. L'étude des amulettes et de la nature magique des objets nous permet ouvrir une fenêtre sur la piété et la croyance populaire dans l'Empire Romain. Quelles sont pour vous les possibilités offertes par les études d'artefacts magiques et d'autres objets de la culture matérielle comme un document dans l'enquête de la religiosité dans l'antiquité gréco-romaine?

R: Magical objects tell a story of private beliefs, sometimes of hidden or even forbidden religious practices. Olympus and "classical Greece" were often distant from the life of experts in magical arts and of their customers. Contemporary studies (especially these of Christopher Faraone) recognized some elements of the logic and the style of magic in the so-called classical Greece, and even in revered authors such as Homer and Euripides. Our view of classical world proves false, because some beliefs of what we classify as "magic" were shared by almost everyone in Greece and Rome, they were part of the mentality of the ancients. For example, ritual curses, prayers against bleeding, apparently odd forms of divination were part of what we depict as Olympic religion, classical culture...

7. *Des gemmes et des objets de caractères magiques ne sont pas traditionnellement d'objet d'attention des savants classicistes, qui ont considéré les objets et la magie que les revêtait bien coupée de la religion traditionnelle des anciens. Dans quelle mesure l'introduction des artefacts magiques comme sources historiques a renouvelé l'historiographie sur la vie quotidienne dans l'antiquité?*

R: Nowadays almost no one among the scholars of Greek and Roman religion distinguishes between religion and magic. We are, instead, engaged in reconstructing why we are used to classifying one or another phenomenon as magic or religious. Research is focussing now also on us ourselves, on our European thought, on Christian thought as different from pagan thought. The subject proves as interesting as the object in a research in ancient magic. We have already got rid of ancient prejudices concerning primitive thought as inferior to the modern one, and now our effort is that of getting rid of our modern, European mentality in order to face the ancient magic from different points of view, as nearer as possible to the mentality of the ancients.

8. *Des croyances, des pratiques, des symboles, des textes et des artefacts magiques, ne sont que devenus des objets d'étude à partir des réflexions de Frazer dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle. Sur la magie, l'une des hypothèses les plus récurrentes, la considérais comme un phénomène distinct de la religion et parfois, opposées à la religion, comme «superstition», le domaine du profane et du mal. Pour vous, la magie correspond à un système de l'altérité, de différenciation religieuse?*

R: The approach to a definition of "magic" by Marcel Mauss proved seminal. Many scholars want to understand the phenomenon of magic in antiquity by means of a sociological method and approach. Unfortunately, many research was scarcely based, because sociology implies a deep knowledge of persons, social environment, economic situation, shared beliefs, and social rules, and very rarely we have at our disposal such a good and detailed knowledge of the environment wherein magical arts were practiced. The best use of a sociological approach has been that of Faraone in his book on ancient love magic.

In the past I was engaged in the study of Gnosticism (*From Jewish Magic to Gnosticism*) and the involvement of many gnostic leaders in what was deemed to be magic. The polemic between "orthodox" Christians and members of gnostic sects resorted to the charge of magic as the opposite of religion, and this was important to the birth of our idea of magic as the contrary of religion. But this is not the real nature of things but the result of a doctrinal (and also political) polemic.

9. *L'archéologie est associée à la défense du patrimoine et à la préservation de la mémoire d'un peuple, d'une société. En ce moment, vous êtes conservateur d'un projet pour l'étude archéologique de Grumentum et la valorisation culturelle du site archéologique de la ville. Pourriez-vous nous dire un bref aperçu sur le complexe monumental conservé dans la ville?*

R: Actually I have finished my Grumentan project by publishing, after ten years, a large volume in the series of the British Archaeological Reports. In this case, one among the major tasks has been that of keeping united the team, especially that of young researchers who study the finds and the different zones of the field activities.

After one year rest, I have been invited to dig in Tarquinia, on the Etruscan and Roman city. The offer was very important and exciting and I accepted gladly. At present, I am organizing the second campaign.

10. *C'est indéniable la connaissance de l'archéologie dans la compréhension du passé, dans la construction de la mémoire collective, dans la gestion des actifs de la société et le renforcement de la citoyenneté. En tant que commissaire du projet par l'étude archéologique, historique, épigraphique pour l'appréciation culturelle du site Grumentum, quels sont les plus grands défis et opportunités pour les études archéologiques dans la ville?*

R: Universities and professors are able to improve the knowledge of an archaeological site; they can also help to preserve them, but the task of inviting and encouraging the citizen to know them, to know history and art is shared with the administration of the cultural heritage and the territory, that is, the Soprintendenze, the Comuni and the educational organizations, such as elementary school, high school (at least in Italy). Specialists of archaeology should be aware of their task in front of the society and are invited (or should be invited) to explain quickly, after the excavation, clearly, and possibly with simple words what the meaning of their discoveries is. How our knowledge of history, of art, of culture is affected by the new discoveries. Unfortunately not always they are up to the task, and not always the supporting organisations (such as Universities, Soprintendenze, Municipalities...) allow them to work in a suitable and satisfactory way.