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PAGAN MONOTHEISM AND THE CULT OF ZEUS HYPYSISTOS¹

Анстракт: Освен бројните дискусии околу преносот на политеистичките религиски идеи во рамките на христијанството и обратниот процес на влијание, друга научна тема сè почесто привлекува внимание, онаа околу монотеистичката мисла во античкиот политеистички систем. Паганскиот монотеизам се разгледува како религиски модел на почитување на единечно и апстрактно божество кое стои како контраст на антропоморфните божествени фигури на конвенционалното паганство. Сепак, кога се говори за пагански монотеизам, се јавува проблемот на терминологијата. Овој феномен може да се разгледа и низ локален пример – оној на Севс Хипсистер, чиј култ досега е потврден во нашата земја со три натписи од долината на Вардар. Наследството на овој култ е широко распространето по Источниот Медитеран и Блискиот Исток. Имајќи го предвид проблемот на терминологијата, религискиот феномен на Севс Хипсистер е најдобро дефиниран како хенотеизам – форма на верување развиена во рамките на античкиот политеизам, каде што е изолиран единечен бог, спасител од земните и космички стеги, почитуван со апсолутна предаденост.

Apart from the numerous discussions among scholars about the transmission of polytheistic religious ideas into the realm of Christianity and the reverse process of influence, another topic attracts attention – one about the monotheistic thought within the polytheistic systems of the antiquity. The origin of monotheism within the frames of paganism in general is an area that increasingly draws researchers of religious phenomena together.² Besides the effect that the Christian doctrine and religious practice had over the flexible polytheistic system, the roots of the mono-

¹ This paper was originally presented at the symposium “Byzantine Cultural-Historical Heritage and Macedonia”, *Days of Justinian I*, 11-12 May 2009, Skopje.

² The inspiration for this particular topic initially came from the seminar “Pagan Forms of Monotheism in Late Antiquity” held at Oxford University in 1996. The proceedings were later published as *Pagan Monotheism and in Late Antiquity*, Ed. by P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede, Oxford 1999. This discussion continued later with the edition of *One God. Pagan monotheism in the Roman Empire*, Ed. by S. Mitchell – P. Van Nuffelen, Cambridge 2010.

theistic protology can be looked for separately. The starting point is that the monotheistic ideas in antiquity are spreading as tendencies to worship a sole, non-anthropomorphical, abstract deity which stands in contrast to the anthropomorphic god figures of conventional paganism. This paper deals with general introductory issues of the phenomenon in question, studying some already recognized examples, but also focusing on the cult of Zeus Hypsistos, in particular, as one of the local manifestations, and later delving into a better understanding of it and looking for an explanation of the pertaining terminology.

Pagan monotheistic forms, independent from Judaism and Christianity, started spreading especially among the learned and the intelligentsia, bearing in mind that the evolution of gods correlates to higher intellectual and moral standards. If we are to search for the monotheistic thought within Classical Greek philosophy, we will find it among many of its thinkers. West³ recognizes the roots of the idea of a highest and sole godly element among the Hellens even in archaic times, in the writings of Anaximander who separates the Infinite Intellect as a primary principal, out of which all other manifestations branch out and into which they all return. Anaximander, simultaneously, also considers Time as the highest godly principal, not to identify these two separate principals with each other. However, what seems to be the first declarative monotheistic claim according to West, as well as according to Nilsson⁴ before him, is recognized in Xenophanes in the fifth century. It is now for the first time that we meet the important religious slogan *εἷς θεός* – One is God. Xenophanes places this sole god above all others, without avoiding the dominant religious conception of his time – divine pluralism. The monotheistic preachings in Classical and Hellenistic philosophy are from then on found more often, recognized through the *Demiurg* of Plato in *Timaeus* and in the *Unmoved Mover* (*κινούμενον κινεῖ*) of Aristotle in the 12th book of his *Metaphysics*.⁵

Observed through this prism, it can freely be said that ancient Greek philosophy, along with most of its thinkers, defines the highest divine paradigm and, in a certain manner, paves the way towards Christianity and towards sublimating all divine elements

³ M. L. West, "Towards Monotheism", in P. Athanassiadi, M. Frede (ed.), *Pagan Monotheism and in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1999, 30–31.

⁴ M. P. Nilsson, "The High God and the Mediator", *The Harvard Theological Review*, 56/2 (1963), 101–102.

⁵ Searching for monotheistic elements in the philosophy of the antiquity, Frede refers in detail to these philosophical concepts (1999). More on the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle see J. G. Defilippo, "Aristotle's Identification of the Prime Mover as God", *The Classical Quarterly* 44/2 (1994), 393–409.

into one manifestation. Even some of the early Christian apologetes saw the time of Hellenism as an historical period when mankind fermented the Christian message. So, the martyr Justin explains the divine continuity by seeing the “barbarians” enlightened by the same Logos, later embodied in human form and named Jesus.⁶ The conflict between paganism and Christianity in late antiquity is often perceived as a conflict of similar interests, bearing in mind that the dominant elements of the leading cults in those times were soteriology and eschatology.⁷ Salvation and the idea of redemption on Judgment Day were common religious messages among the Christian fathers, but also among some of the preachers of the polytheistic doctrine in late antiquity.

Solar worship, especially embodied in the image of the unconquered sun or *Sol Invictus* is also perceived as an expression of the monotheistic belief.⁸ Further on, the oriental cults that spread towards the West as a systematical oecumenal message were also symptoms of the monotheistic belief in the antiquity. Their mysteries, formulated during time as complete religious systems, were an organic part of the monotheistic articulation in pagan times. The worshipers, besides the public cultic forms created around gods such as Demeter, Dionysus, Cybele or Isis, also celebrated the secret ones.⁹ The initiates surrendered themselves and devoted their souls only to one god that assured the deepest religious experience through the revelation of the *holy secret of creation* during the secret rituals. The role of the divine figure as the only mediator of the “secret” is what positions these cults among the late antique religious systems with recognizable monotheistic tendencies.

The gradual transition from polytheism to monotheism was preached in several oracles in late antiquity. Above all others, we see it in the monistic character of the Chaldaean prophesies within which system light is the most spiritual, widely present, and unre-

⁶ M. Frede, “Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Later Antiquity” in P. Athanassiadi, M. Frede (ed.), *Pagan Monotheism and in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1999, 57.

⁷ A. H. M. Jones, “The Social Background of the Struggle between Paganism and Christianity”, in A. Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford 1963, 17–37.

⁸ G. H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, Leiden 1972.

⁹ The mystery cults of the antiquity were studied by several scholars. See some general works: R. Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen: Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen*, Leipzig 1920; U. Bianchi, *The Greek Mysteries (Iconography of Religions XVII, 3)*, Leiden 1976; Burkert 1987; H. Bowden, *Mystery Cults in the Ancient World*, Thames and Hudson, London 2010.

achable element.¹⁰ The collection of pagan prophesies of the late fifth century called “Tübingen theosophy” is often cited among the Christians as a testimony of recognition of the supremacy of the Christian faith among pagan gods.¹¹ In this way, converting the pagans into Christians seemed more natural. They were presented with a god, not foreign to them: a Creator and Ruler of all things. What was unknown to them was the actual concept of converting.¹²

The last of the Neo-Platonists that wrote in the time of Justinianus, Olympiodorus (*Gorg*, 246), does not differ much from the Christian theology while explaining his belief. He states that they, the non-Christians, are also aware that the first cause is God, without a name, and above all other things that originated from him. In his defense of the accusations of idolatry, he explains the idols as reminders of the non-material force that certainly brings him closer to the arguments of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, after which, as we know, the icons were in use again. However, while speaking of monotheism in pagan conditions, it is necessary to bring carefulness into the study and try to separate systematic religion from philosophy. Religion is one step behind in the adjustment to philosophy, therefore the ancient monotheistic ideas that we have isolated must not be explained as dogmatic, but as just some of the transitional steps towards the supremacy of the established monotheistic religious system. Most importantly, it should be taken into account that the first serious monotheistic theology happened when the Jewish religion became familiar with Alexandrian philosophy, recognized through the words of Philo of Alexandria.¹³

While explaining the relationship between paganism and monotheism, the problem of the contemporary terminology and the need for some essential classification arises; this will open up a clearer perception. Interestingly enough, the root of the word

¹⁰ The Chaldaean oracles, known to us by the writings of Proclus and Damascius, are in fact a Collection of moral and ritual rules and instructions with a canonical status gained in the third century. For this so called “Bible of the Neoplatonists” see Atanassiadi, P., “The Chaldaean Oracles: Theology and Theurgy”, in P. Athanassiadi, M. Frede (ed.), *Pagan Monotheism and in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1999, 149–184.

¹¹ S. Mitchell, “The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians”, in P. Athanassiadi, M. Frede (ed.), *Pagan Monotheism and in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1999, p. 86.

¹² R. MacMullen, “Two Types of Conversion to Early Christianity”, *Vigiliae Christianae* 37/2 (1983), 174–192.

¹³ J. W. Martens, *One God, One Law: Philo of Alexandria on the Mosaic and the Greco-Roman Law*, Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden 2003, pp. 77–80.

paganism comes from *paganus* that originally means a peasant, an uneducated man coming usually from a rural setting. This term, in time, began to be used in a pejorative form and to denote the opposition of a Jew or a Christian. Also, the words Hellene and Hellenism throughout late antiquity and in Byzantine time became synonyms for pagan and paganism, respectively.¹⁴ On the other hand, Christianity has also been observed through the prism of divine plurality, out of which a question arose whether the believe of the Holy Trinity in early times is in fact a belief in a divine triad defined as tritheism.¹⁵ In the 60s, Bausani¹⁶ pointed out the importance of the typological differences and divided monotheism as primary, the one born in pre-monotheistic times, and secondary, the one developed in a dominant polytheistic environment. Also, instead of polytheism, he chooses to speak of religiosity of the archaic culture. The idea of primary monotheism and the term ur-monotheism have been recently abandoned, so while referring to pagan monotheism it is more often spoken of as a religious evolution.

After we have laid out the basic chronological, conceptual, and terminological parameters, let us try to isolate a local example of this phenomenon. The divine occurrence of Zeus Hypsistos protrudes out of the general picture of pagan monotheism in late antiquity, as evidenced on several monuments from the Republic of Macedonia. The cult appears in the second century BC, and it existed until the late fifth century. Usually, in older literature, Zeus Hypsistos is connected to Judaism, although the worship of this cult is most often examined as an example of the inclination towards the recognition of a sole and abstract deity among the pagans. Zeus Hypsistos, actually, brings together the monotheistic doctrine with the traditional pagan cultic practice.

The heritage that this cult left within the borders of Republic of Macedonia is not particularly opulent. We have only three inscriptions from the Valley of the River Vardar,¹⁷ dated from the

¹⁴ “Introduction”, in P. Athanassiadi, M. Frede (ed.), *Pagan Monotheism and in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1999, pp. 4–7.

¹⁵ The question of tritheism in Christianity is especially studied by R. Swinburne (*The Christian God*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1994). The author is stepping away from the explanation of trinitarianism and arguments his way towards the recognition of three separate divine entities, infinitive and mutually interdependent from their existence.

¹⁶ A. Bausani, “Can Monotheism be thought? (Further Considerations on the Typology of Monotheism)”, *Numen* 10/3, 1963, 167–201.

¹⁷ Inscription from the Drenovo, ancient Euristion, *Δι Υψίστω Π. Αἴλιος Πουβλινός κατ' εὐχὴν ἀνέθηκεν* (Düll 1977, n°164); a column with an inscription from the village of Vešje, *Διι Υψίστω Οὐαλέριος Σευήρος ὑπὲρ Οὐλίαις Μεγίσ-*

second century AD, from which we do not learn much of the nature of this god, apart from some basic information about the dedicants and their piety. Three more monuments must be mentioned that haven't been connected to the cult so far, but are very indicative; two oltars with reliefs of eagles and a statuette of an eagle¹⁸, from the vicinity of the previously mentioned finds. However, the heritage that this cult left in the entire region of Ancient Macedonia is especially valuable. Out of twenty-five inscriptions, nineteen are devoted to Zeus Hypsistos, while the other six carry the form Theos Hypsistos.¹⁹ Now the problem of separation of the mentioned epigraphical variations arises, but also the question of whether there is an actual need for it. If we take the results of the epigraphy, we will see that the term Hypsistos is very often read as a neutral epithet, applicable to other deities as well. We should also consider the possibility that Theos is a synonym for Zeus, positioning in this way the Olympic god as the highest divine.²⁰ The most indicative moment of the abstract character of Zeus Hypsistos is the nonexistence of a defined iconography. Monuments erected in his honor are mostly epigraphical; very seldom does an eagle appear, which besides being an attribute of Zeus, signifies also other supreme or solar deities.²¹ The anthropomorphic image is a rarity among the monuments left by the Hypsistarians.

The scientific thought that hovers over this religious phenomenon goes in the direction of separating the Jewish cult of Hypsistos from the one worshiped within paganism. The general opinion that the cult of Hypsistos comes out of direct influence with Judaism is more often abandoned in later times. Instead, the cult can be seen as a reflection of a more refined religious conception if compared to the traditional polytheism, and as an aspiration towards divine amalgamation and unity. Even according to Schürer,²² one of the greatest experts of Judaism from the late 19th

της της συμβίουκαι Ουλίπιον Δομερίας Γαϊου Μαξίμου των τέκνων (Bitrakova 1999, 240), and an inscription from the necropolis of Marvinci, *Διι Υψίστω Κόνιτος Έρριοι Πολλίων και Ρουβελλήνη Μαξίμα και Έρριοι Πολλίων και Πρόκλα τα τέκνα αυτών εκ των ιδίων* (Bitrakova 2006).

¹⁸ S. Düll, *Die Götterkulte Nordmakedoniens in Römischer Zeit*, München 1977, nos^o 160, 181, 165.

¹⁹ In his detailed catalogue Mitchell unfortunately does not include the inscriptions from R. Macedonia (1999, 128–147).

²⁰ C. Roberts, T. C. Skeat, A. D. Nock, “The Gild of Zeus Hypsistos”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 29/1 (1936), p. 59.

²¹ J. Ustinova, “The Thiasoi of Theos Hypsistos in Tanais”, *History of Religions*, 31/2 (1991), p. 180.

²² Schürer, E., “The Juden in Bosporanischen Reiche und die Genossenschaften der σεβόμενοι θεόν ὕψιστων ebendasselbst”, *Sitzungsberichte der königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* 1 (1897), p. 207.

century, the elements that construct the syncretistic cult of Zeus Hypsistos are the monotheistic fashion of the theological *κρίνει* of Imperial times, combined with Jewish propaganda. He sees the cult, more precisely, as a neutralization of both Judaism and polytheism, so as a cult that does not belong to either of the two systems. Perhaps, the methodological approach of Mitchell²³ would be more appropriate who, instead of separating two different religious environments with the use of similar theological ideas, joins them together through the phenomenon of Hypsistarianism. Certainly, the cult must be viewed within the context of the cultures where it emerges because, after all, there are always local differences in the tradition onto which the cult builds itself. Among the local researchers, only V. Bitrakova Grozdanova²⁴ has paid the most attention to the cult, mainly relying on the attributions and theories of M. Tačeva Hitova.²⁵ She agrees that the roots of the cult are to be looked for in the Balkans, in the ancient Macedonian tradition of the syncretized Zeus Sabazius Hypsistos.²⁶

Archaeologically, the cult is affirmed in a rather wide geographical context in the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East. So far, we know for certain of four temples - one in Serdica,²⁷ in Oenoanda in North Lycia,²⁸ at Phnyx near Athens,²⁹ and on the island of Delos,³⁰ while there are inscriptions alluding to the existence of temples on Sciatos, in Odesa and in Phrygia, still not materially confirmed.³¹ Over ninety inscriptions that mention Zeus Hypsistos were found, twice less than the ones devoted to Theos Hypsistos; a bit less than 300 all together. Judging by the opulence of finds from Ancient Macedonia, the cult was in deed widespread and accepted; a statistic factor which sets a firm basis in favor of the theory that this cult was, after all, developed autochthonously,

²³ 1999, p. 115.

²⁴ 1999, 210, 240, 244.

²⁵ M. Tačeva Hitova, "Dem Hypsistos geweihte denkmaler in den Balkanlandern", *Balkan Studies* 19 (1978), 59–75.

²⁶ Ustinova also argued on the possible relation of Hypsistos and Sabazius (1991, 167).

²⁷ Tačeva Hitova 1978, pp. 60–1.

²⁸ A. S. Hall, "The Klarian oracle at Oenoanda", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 32 (1978), 263–8.

²⁹ B. Forsen, "The Sanctuary of Zeus Hypsistos and the Assembly Place on the Phnyx", *Hesperia* 62/4 (1993), 507–521.

³⁰ The discussion whether the temple on Delos was at all in service of Zeus Hypsistos or always existed as a synagogue is still open. See M. Trümper, "The Oldest Original Synagogue Building in the Diaspora: The Delos Synagogue Reconsidered", *Hesperia*, 73/4 (2004), 513–598.

³¹ Mitchell 1999, p. 99.

from local roots. Zeus Hypsistos is known as *Summus Deus* in Latin translation,³² although rarely attested to in the Latin West.

One of the main social peculiarities that brings this cult closer to the mystery cults of late antiquity is the grouping of the worshipers in religious communities or *collegia*, in accordance with the need for stability and stronger attachment to a particular location.³³ The worshipers devoted to Zeus Hypsistos were the ones from the common people, honoring their god with simple and humble monuments, expressing their true devotion, not their financial strength. It was a cult celebrated without great gatherings or ceremonies, there was no blood sacrifice, while the temples were usually out in the open and far from city walls.³⁴ We learn from Epiphanius (*Panarion* 80. 1–2) that later on, the Masilians took over the practice of building open temples, distant from the cities. One of the important characteristics of this religious phenomenon is that the Hypsistarians lit lamps in the niches of the temples.³⁵ Fire and light were key elements in their belief, bringing them closer to the philosophy of the Stoics who identified Zeus with a sort of fire, active, intelligent, and creative. The Stoics differed two inseparable divine aspects – the divine and creative one and the material one. Thus, they joined the absolute God with Zeus, who, in this case is the active and creative intellect.³⁶ This God has accentuated soteriological and healing powers, so, often on the monuments devoted to him there are body parts that were healed by his divine intervention.³⁷ Considering the behavior of the worshipers, one can easily detect Encratism, another of the religious trends of the time, especially present in the teachings of the Manihaeans.³⁸ The worshipers of Zeus Hypsistos embraced abstinence and moderation as part of their religious practice.

³² This term is known from a Hellenistic or early Imperial apocryphal text where it was used to denote and explain Theos Hypsistos, as well as the Jewish god in the West (Mitchell 1999, p. 125).

³³ Roberts, Skeat, Nock 1936, p. 46 (1).

³⁴ Mitchell 1999, 94, pp. 105–8.

³⁵ Roberts, Skeat, Nock 1936, p. 49; Ustinova 1991, p. 178; Mitchell 1999, pp. 91–2.

³⁶ Frede 1999, p. 51.

³⁷ Mitchell 1999, pp. 106–7.

³⁸ Within the context of recognizing monotheistic elements in the late antique religious systems, the reflection that the theological monotheistic concept cohabitated with the dualism of the Manihaeans is especially interesting. See Scibona, C. G., “How Monotheistic is Mani’s Dualism? Once More on Monotheism and Dualism in Manichaean Gnosis”, *Numen*, 48/4 (2001), 444–467.

While speaking of the time of the Hypsistarians, it is important to underline the unstable historical moment of overlapping and interlacing of their beliefs with the ones of the Jews and the Christians. The Hypsistarians provoked Christian thought and practice in the time of the early Byzantine Empire. They infiltrated themselves within the orders of the Novatian church, where they also dictated their theology.³⁹ Several Christian bishops recognized the religious habits and spiritual tendencies of the Hypsistarians as similar and compatible to the ones of the evangelized world. Gregory of Nazianzus (*Or.* 18. 5) in the fourth century states that the Pantocrator was the only god that the Hypsistarians worshiped. He studied the teachings of this cult through his father who was a member of the religious community of Hypsistos and became a Christian bishop just before his death. Gregory of Nazianzus further says that the Hypsistarians do not differ much from the “true believers” by behavior, but only by name. Gregory of Nyssa (*Refutatio Confessionis Eunomii*, 38) places the Hypsistarians among the Jews and witnesses and confirms their worship of the Pantocrator, but not of the God the Father. In the fifth century, the twilight of the Hypsistarian teaching, Cyril of Alexandria (*De adoratione in Spiritu et Veritate* 3. 92) makes a notice that the followers of Theos Hypsistos in Palestina and Phoenicia called themselves *Theosebei* (θεοσεβείς). Theosebes is in fact a technical term used among the worshipers of Theos Hypsistos and found almost without exception everywhere where there were devotions to the god.⁴⁰ The Theosebei were close to the monotheistic belief, accepted the religious ideas of the Jews and the prophecies of the Old Testament, however, they did not entirely convert. For them, it was more important to preserve their moral, religious, and intellectual traditional values within the frames of religious pluralism.

As for the end, let us consider one last and brief conclusion and return to the problem of terminology opened while explaining the general classification. If we take into account that monotheism is a belief in one God and a rejection of all others, then the belief of one sole god of those living in religious pluralism, and also of those belonging to the community of Zeus Hypsistos is most precisely defined by the term henotheism, created in the 19th century and defined as a worship of one god among many, separated from the others, but not negating their existence. This term derives from the well known statement *Heis ho Theos* “One is God”. With the latest interpretation of the meaning of henotheism given by

³⁹ Mitchell 1999, 123–4.

⁴⁰ Mitchell dedicates a whole chapter of his work where he locates this term in relation with the Hypsistarians and concludes that it is most often present in the period between the second and the fourth century (1999, 115–121).

Versnel,⁴¹ we can also explain and define Hypsistarianism – it is a form of belief developed in the polytheistic environment where one god singles out, a savior and releaser of worldly and cosmic chains, worshiped through absolute devotion.

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⁴¹ H. S. Versnel, “Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion”, Vol. 1: *Ter Unus: Isis, Dionysos, Hermes: Three Studies in Henotheism*, Vol. 6, Leiden: Brill, Vol. 6, 1999, 35–38.

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