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Michonis Lecture

Pagan Angels in Late Antiquity

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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- The pre-Islamic Byzantine world experienced numerous paganisms, both polytheistic and, in view of their gods' hierarchy, occasionally quasi-monotheistic.**
- In the Quran, Prophet Muhammad called *mushrikun* those who shared their gods and had to be pagans, in some or other form. Historians studying the ideas of these *mushrikun* have access to accounts on the angels to whom pagans appealed for heavenly intercession to help them and reveal heaven's invisible operations. The name of these Late Antiquity pagan angels derives from the Hebrew *mal'ak* in the Bible, which became *angelos* or messenger in the Septuagint. Muhammad considered himself a *rasul* (messenger) of Islam in pagan Arabia, where *malak* (without an alif) was the Arabic word for angel. The Prophet was well aware that the Arabs around him expected angels to confirm his message but he had not seen any. Muhammad presented himself only as a *rasul*, not as a *malak*. In Greek, such a messenger was no longer called *angelos*, as other terms had replaced this ancient word, for example *apostolos* among Greek-speaking Christians and *nuntius* in Latin, where *angelus* only meant angel. What is striking about these title transitions is the use of the words *angelos* and *angelus* as epithets of pagan gods. These are angel-gods seen in the epigraphy in Lebanon, Jordan and Asia Minor, and in Latin in western Italy and in Romania. The angel-gods suggest that the traditional interpretation of a divine name, like Malakbêl in Palmyra, is best explained as Angel-Bêl rather than Angel of Bêl.
- A coin from Al-Ji near Petra depicts the angel-god Idarouma, one hand raised, who received a Hauranese dedication in Sammet el Baradan. The inscription specifies that the dedication was made to Ilaalge, god of Gaia (Al-Ji), and his angel Idarouma. The

image of this angel with a raised hand on a coin, where usually only gods were depicted, proves that this is an angel-god. It can be compared to the Theion Angelos (Theion Angelikon) of Caria in Asia Minor. The new, increasingly popular perspective, whereby pagan angels and even angel-gods are minor divinities at the service of a single great god – and consequently that Late Antiquity paganism was just a pagan monotheism – is still unfounded. The Quran admits no such supposition, and the Quranic goddesses of the pre-Islamic pantheon (al Lat, al Uzza, al Manat) can in no way be identified as Allah's daughters. The Late Antiquity pagans who sided against the Prophet were entirely polytheistic.

The Michonis Foundation collection

By decree on 10 March 1903, M. G. Michonis bequeathed a sum to the Collège de France to be used, “whenever possible, for a foreign scholar or thinker appointed by the professors or the Administrator of the Collège de France and who, circumstances permitting, will one in three times be a philosopher or a historian of religious sciences, to give a series of lectures”. The execution of M. Michonis' will began in 1905. In 2013, Glen W. Bowersock of the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton) and of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres was invited to the Collège de France by Professors John Scheid, Denis Knoepfler and Michel Zink. On 30 September 2013, he delivered a lecture titled “Pagan Angels in Late Antiquity”.

An audio recording of the lecture is available at www.college-de-france.fr, on Prof. John Scheid's page.

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