

IS LION-HEADED MAN ORPHIC CHRONOS?

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ABSTRACT. This paper discusses the identification of god figure depicted as a man with a lion's head, which has been associated with Aion and equated with Orphic god Chronos. The author challenges the equation of Aion with Orphic Chronos, drawing on evidence from Proclus and Damascius, who both distinguish Aion as a separate entity from Chronos. Additionally, the author presents an attempt to illustrate the Orphic god Chronos based on Damascius' description.

KEYWORDS: Chronos, Aion, Orphism, Greek Mythology, Aion, Damascius.

The god-figure featuring a man's body with a lion's head, and bird's wings, entwined by a serpent (figure 1), many statues of which have been excavated, is traditionally identified with Aion.¹ But many scholars further equate this Aion with Time (Χρόνος/Chronos) of the Orphic theogony of Hieronymus or Hellanicus cited by Damascius.² Many scholars have thus drawn the conclusion that the lion-headed man is the Orphic god Chronos.³

¹ It was Zoega who first suggested that the figure should be called Aion, see Zoega 1808, 32 ff.

² Such as Doro 1944, note 118, Pettazzoni 1949 and Barnett 1975. For more recent research, see López-Ruiz 2020, 439.

³ This conclusion has spread widely through many online resources, such as the "Lion-headed god" article of Tertullian project: <https://www.tertullian.org/rpearce/mithras/display.php?page=Aion>, and "Khronos" article in theoi.com: <https://www.theoi.com/Protophenos/Khronos.html>.

However, the equation of Aion with Orphic Chronos is problematic. Neoplatonic philosophers have recognized the difference between Aion and Chronos: Damascius describes Aion as a Phoenician god⁴, while Chronos is an Orphic god:

Damascius. *On First Principles*. C-W II.210.8-11.

ὄθεν πηγὴν μὲν πηγῶν αὐτο (τὸ ἐν πολλὰ) Χαλδαίων παῖδες ἀνευφημοῦσιν, Ὀρφεύς δὲ Μήλτιν σπέρμα φέροντα θεῶν, Φοίνικες δὲ Αἰώνα κοσμικόν, ὡς πάντα ἐν ἑαυτῷ συνηρηκότα.⁵

There is also a Chaldean god called Aion, mentioned by Proclus in his *In Timaeum Commentaria* III.14.3-10:

ἡ τάξις τοῦ αἰῶνος... Διὸ καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν λογίων “πατρογενὲς φάος” εἴρηται, διότι δὴ τὸ ἐνοποιὸν φῶς πᾶσιν ἐπιλάμπει, “πολὺ γὰρ μόνος ἐκ πατρὸς ἀλκῆς δρεψάμενος νόου ἄνθος ἔχει τὸ νοεῖν πατρικὸν νοῦν καὶ νόον ἐνδιδόναι πάσαις πηγαῖς τε καὶ ἀρχαῖς καὶ δινεῖν αἰεὶ τε μένειν ἀόκνω τροφάλιγγι.”⁶

Proclus is also surely conscious of Chronos as an Orphic god elsewhere and thus differentiates Aion from Chronos in his works. In conclusion, though both Aion who is depicted as the lion-headed man and Chronos are gods of time, they are two

⁴ Αἰών (eternity), Hebrew **אֵלֶם** ⁶ Ōlām, Aramaic ⁶ ʿā(a)mâ, Phoenician ʿUlom, is a common title of Semitic supreme gods. For example, it is used in early Canaanite divine names such as Baal and El. See Cross 1962, 236–244. We see the same attribute ascribed to the Israelite god (El/Elohim) when he is called “eternal” (ʿolam) and to Iao, whose name, a late version of Yahweh, was widely used in the Graeco-Roman world (especially in magical texts) and for whom the name Aion was also directly used. Damascius also mentions a theogony attributed to the cosmogony of Mochos, an author mentioned together with Sanchouniathon by Athenaios (second century CE) as “one of those who wrote Phoenician histories”: In this theogony, there appeared an eternity god called Oulomos (Οὐλωμος), from whom heaven and earth came to be. See López-Ruiz 2015, 80 and Ben Guiza 2005, 49–81.

⁵ Chaldeans call it (the One-Many, the origin of multiplicity in Damascius' philosophy) the “Source of Sources,” and Orpheus calls it “Metis, pregnant with the seed of the gods,” and the Phoenicians call it the “Aion of the world” since it has gathered all things into itself. All translations in this paper are mine.

⁶ The order of Aion is said as “light from Father”, because this light of unifying shines all things: “Among many springs from the strength of Father, It is the only one which has the power to perceive the Paternal Intellect and to impart Intellect to all sources and principles, and to whirl them about and keep them forever in ceaseless motion.”

distinguished gods; one is Phoenician god of time, and one is Orphic. The god-figure shown as a lion-headed man with snakes should be identified as Aion and there is no further evidence to identify it as Orphic Chronos.

So how can Orphic Chronos be identified? A famous portrait of this divinity appears in Damascius' *On First Principles*, C-W III.161.3-8. Rather than a man, this portrait depicts an immense serpent with bull and lion heads and a human face that is positioned in the middle of the serpent. One should, then, distinguish such a Chronos from the god-figure represented as a lion-headed man:

On First Principles III.160.16-161.8.

Ἡ δὲ κατὰ τὸν Ἱερώνυμον φερομένη καὶ Ἑλλανικὸν, εἶπερ μὴ καὶ ὁ αὐτός ἐστιν, οὕτως ἔχει. Ὑδὼρ ἦν, φησὶν ἐξ ἀρχῆς καὶ ὕλη ἐξ ἧς ἐπάγη ἡ γῆ... [III.161.3] τρίτην ἀρχὴν μετὰ τὰς δύο γεννηθῆναι ἐκ τούτων, ὕδατος φημι καὶ γῆς, δράκοντα δὲ εἶναι καὶ κεφαλὰς ἔχοντα προσπεφυκυίας ταύρου καὶ λέοντος, ἐν μέσῳ δὲ θεοῦ πρόσωπον, ἔχειν δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ὤμων πτερὰ, ὠνομάσθαι δὲ Χρόνον ἀγήραον καὶ Ἡρακλῆα τὸν αὐτὸν· συνεῖναι δὲ αὐτῷ τὴν Ἀνάγκην, φύσιν οὖσαν τὴν αὐτὴν καὶ Ἀδράστειαν.⁷

Athenagoras' evidence from 300 years earlier than Damascius corroborates the opinion that the appearance of the Orphic Chronos should be a huge snake/dragon, not a man. His description of the Orphic Chronos' appearance is the very same as Damascius' at OFP III.161.3-8.

Athenagoras. *Legatio*.18.4.

Ἦν γὰρ ὕδωρ ἀρχὴ κατ' αὐτὸν τοῖς ὅλοις, ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ ὕδατος ἰλὺς κατέστη, ἐκ δὲ ἐκατέρων ἐγεννήθη ζῶον δράκων προσπεφυκυῖαν ἔχων κεφαλὴν λέοντος, διὰ μέσου δὲ αὐτῶν θεοῦ πρόσωπον, ὄνομα Ἡρακλῆς καὶ Χρόνος. Οὗτος ὁ Ἡρακλῆς ἐγέννησεν ὑπερμέγεθες ὤόν.⁸

⁷ The [Orphic theogony] Hieronymus or Hellanicus reports, even if the latter is not the same personage, is as follows: he said, in the beginning there was water, and there was earth coagulated from mud...The third principle after those two principles, i.e. water and earth, is a serpent with heads of lion and bull grown upon it, in the middle of the serpent is a face of god, and it has wings on its shoulders, this serpent named ageless Chronos or Heracles, the Necessity, who is also Nature and Adrasteia lives with the serpent.

⁸ (According to Ὀρφεύς), water was the origin of all things, and from water mud was formed, and from both was produced an animal, a dragon with the head of lion growing on it, and in the middle of it there was the face of a God, this animal named Heracles and Chronos.

His use of the same word for water (ὕδωρ), its role as the beginning of all things together with mud, and the description of Chronos saying he should be called Heracles indicate that he was familiar with the same theogony as Damascius, who attributed it to Hieronymus or Hellanicus—though whether he had read the work of Hieronymus and Hellanicus, as Damascius had, is unclear. Hence, this is an authentic corroboration of the serpentine appearance of Chronos.

Scholia in Gregorii Nazianzeni also briefly describes this figure of Orphic Time, though he does not directly refer to it as Chronos but as Heracles⁹ (Chronos' alias, as Damascius mentioned):

Scholia in Gregorii Nazianzeni Or. 31 c. 16 (ed. Norden, *Hermes* 27, 1892, 614.)
 ὡς ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ ἰλύος ἀναδοθέντος δράκοντος προσπεφυκυῖαν ἔχοντος λέοντος
 κεφαλὴν, διὰ μέσου δὲ αὐτῶν θεοῦ πρόσωπον, ὃν Ἡρακλῆν φασί.¹⁰

There is another Aion figure that is depicted as a man standing in the Zodiac (Figure 2), but this figure is also clearly different from the Orphic Time Damascius and Athenagoras describe. In conclusion, I agree that the lion-headed man should be identified as Aion or a personification of time, as many scholars have shown, but this figure cannot be Orphic Time (Chronos).

There are, indeed, many similarities between the physical descriptions of the lion-headed man and Orphic Chronos: snakes; human, bull, and lion heads; and wings on the shoulders. Many scholars have demonstrated that these images may originate among Near Eastern deities with theriomorphic features and primordial Greek monsters. Both Guthrie and Bernabé compare the descriptions of Chronos

⁹ West and Brisson offer an interesting explanation of why Chronos is also referred to as Heracles in the Hieronymian theogony, though this relies on several conjectures and is ultimately unprovable. Based on a passage of Porphyry that equates the sun with Heracles, they propose that the signs of the Zodiac could have been assimilated to the twelve labors of Heracles—with the skin of the Nemean lion, for example, representing the sign of Leo, when the sun is at its highest point in the sky—allowing the sun, by association, to become equated with Heracles. Regarding Chronos, although he is rarely (if ever) explicitly identified with the sun in Greek literature, the sun is, of course, a crucial means by which humans measure time. According to their account, Chronos as a winding serpent may signify the course of the sun through the signs of the Zodiac, of which the bull and the lion are two. The association between Chronos and Heracles could thus be a result of these solar aspects, as they are sometimes expressed in Zodiac symbols. See West 1983, 192-193 and Brisson 1995, 199-201.

¹⁰ A dragon which bears the head of lion springs from water and mud, but in the middle of it, there was the face of a God, this dragon is Heracles they said.

with the four-headed, four-winged creatures described by the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel: The four faces of each of these supernatural beings were those of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle (Ezekiel 1: 6–13).¹¹ Brisson compares the figure of Chronos with the Modena relief of Mithras.¹² A famous Greek precedent is provided by the mythical Typhon depicted by Hesiod and Apollodorus, a monstrous sea serpent described as having a hundred snake heads projecting from his shoulders and fire flashing from his eyes: he roars like a bull or lion and hisses like a snake;¹³ and in Apollodorus' rendering, he has wings.¹⁴ Pherecydes, meanwhile, mentions a primordial serpent named Ophion,¹⁵ to which Orpheus himself alludes when singing to the Argonauts in Apollonius' *Argonautica*.¹⁶

Despite these similarities, the figure of Chronos, which has the additional element of the coexisting feminine personification of Necessity (usually depicted as an anthropomorphic goddess¹⁷), is more complex. Damascius' and Athenagoras' descriptions are also insufficiently clear to determine certain details. Damascius' description of “κεφαλάς... ταύρου καὶ λέοντος” (“heads of lion and bull”) can be interpreted in either of two ways: either Chronos has two heads—one lion head and one bull head—or Chronos has many lion heads and many bull heads. Probably due to the complexity, there is no extant picture, to our knowledge, of this abstract

¹¹ See Guthrie 1952, 96–102, West 1983, 191 and Bernabé's commentary on Orphic Fragment 76 B.

¹² See Brisson's “La Figure de Chronos dans la Thogonie Orphique et Ses Antecedents Iraniens,” in Brisson 1995.

¹³ Hesiod, *Theogony* 820–868.

¹⁴ Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.6.3.

¹⁵ Pherecydes of Syros, fr. 78–80.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of Chronos' oriental parallels, see Meinster 2018, 119–150 and López-Ruiz 2006.

¹⁷ For example, the lekythos labeled “Ananke” in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow; see Sidorova, Tugusheva, Zabelina 1985, fig. 83. For modern art representing Necessity as an anthropomorphic goddess, see Gilbert William Bayes' sculpture of the goddess ΑΝΑΓΚΗ. See also *Le Magasin Pittoresque*, 1857, 69: in this illustration of Plato's *Republic* 617c, Necessity is portrayed as an anthropomorphic goddess, seated above the three Moirai. However, West takes Necessity to be “another winged serpent,” the mate of Chronos, who “united” (συνεῖναι) Chronos as two snakes entwined together. This is another possible interpretation. See West 1983, 194–198. However, it leads to a problem, as Damascius goes on to describe how “ὁ δρακῶν γεννάται τριπλῆν γόνῃν”, with the δρακῶν being singular. Therefore, I assume that there is only one serpent and that Necessity is an anthropomorphic goddess, as she is usually depicted, but she have grown upon Chronos' body (thus being “united” with Chronos), as shown in my drawing.

figure. Nonetheless, I offer a rendering here based on the assumption that Chronos has many lion heads and many bull heads (Figure 3).

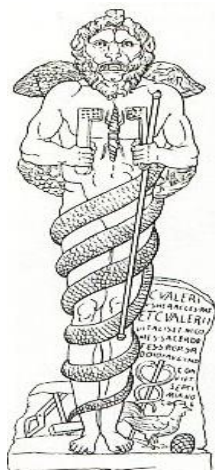


Figure 1. Drawing of the lion-headed figure found at the Mithraeum of C. Valerius Heracles and sons, dedicated 190 CE at Ostia Antica, Italy (CIMRM 312) in Franz Cumont, *TMMM I* (1896, Bruxelles: Lamartin), p. 238



Figure 2. Aion standing in the zodiac, Greco-Roman mosaic 3rd cent. A.D. in Antike am Königsplatz.



Figure 3. Drawing of Chronos

Acknowledgement. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to John Finamore for his invaluable guidance and encouragement throughout my research on Platonism. My thanks also go to Eugene Afonasin for his kind suggestions on the primary edition of this paper.

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