

Anastenaria : Some Essential Points



INTRODUCTION

May 21 is, in all Orthodox countries, the feast of two coupled saints Constantine and Helena, who are respectively Emperor Constantine the Great and his mother Empress Helena.

In some villages in Macedonia, they are the object of a very special ritual called “Anastenaria” practiced by brotherhoods of believers called “Anastenarides”, who came from Bulgarian Thrace in the 1920s. They are Christians and claim it, but their worship bears the memory of the incessant political and cultural changes of this region (Orpheus, Romans, barbarian invasions (the Goths, the Huns ...), Byzantium, Bulgaria ,then the domination by the Ottoman kingdom from 1396 to 1878).

Christianity has not been able to erase the traces of previous eras, which irritates the Church, swinging from time to time between moral condemnation and repression.

It is therefore a step back in time that this ritual invites us, a true spiritual journey to the sources of our civilization.

HISTORY

Constantine and Helena lived in the 4th century. At that time the majority of the citizens of the Empire were still pagans and the triumph of Christianity was not certain at all. However Constantine (280-337) made it a political lever. After having signed in 313 with the pagan Licinius an “edict of tolerance” which granted freedom of worship to all religions, he favored the Christianization of the Empire and split it into the Western Roman Empire, the capital of which was Rome and the Roman Empire of Orient, very Christian empire whose capital, Byzantium later became Constantinople.

The hagiography used the history of the two emperors to make them both converge to the **Cross**:

- Constantine, in 312 sees in the sky a luminous sign which one supposes to be the Chi Ro symbol with a motto in Greek: " [έν τούτω νικά](#) " (Be victorious by this). He immediately reproduced the motto in the banners and shields of his soldiers. And the sign keeps its promise: Constantine will therefore always be victorious, both over his pagan rivals and the barbarians.
- Hélène exhumed the Cross of Christ from the earth, discovered during the excavations that, according to legend, she undertook in Palestine under Golgotha.

When the Cross is buried and horizontal, it represents the death of Jesus, on the instrument of his torture. Exhumed and upright vertically, it evokes his return to life after his death, it symbolizes the resurrection.

The cross of Constantine symbolizes a victory over his pagan enemies, represented as wicked therefore assimilated to Evil. It represents the victory of Good over Evil.

The cross of Helena is a victory over death, which for Christians means eternal life.



DANCE

The ritual permits the faithful to dance with the icon. It has a shaft that allows them to take it in hand and start dancing with it. Sometimes it is brandished like a banner or carried over the shoulder like soldiers do. This is what is evoked by the sign which adorns the back of the icon, its face usually hidden: it is accompanied, like the sign seen by Constantine, by the inscription "NIKA" which actually enjoins his faithful, to win with the help of his power. The icon clearly recalls the "labarum", the victorious banner bearing the symbol of the victory cross and the portraits of the imperial family.

At some moments, the ritual becomes a real dance of love that puts the faithful in ecstasy. What kind of strange soldiers are these peaceful "Anastenarides", who sometimes brandish the icon and sometimes press it against their cheek, in a mystical union with the Beloved who combines sword and love.

The dance puts the faithful in a state of *enthusiasm*, which does not prevent them from being aware of the outside world, it is not unconsciousness, but rather *over consciousness* ... access to another reality, vaster than that of the ordinary world.

C THE SACRIFICE

In the morning, the icons are bathed, purified (baptized) in the water of a basin, then the sacrifice takes place. It is the most trying part of the ritual and concerns a bull, goat or lamb, called the 'victim': "Kourbani"

The victim is led to the sacrifice pit, followed by the musicians, the chief "archianastenis" carrying a candle, and the "Anastenis" women who accompany the victim to death. At the edge of the pit, two officiants seize it, lay it on its side, its head facing east, hold it down and slit its throat.

The victim empties itself of its blood, which waters the earth to fertilize it, to make it alive. The skin, split along its entire length is thrown into the pit with all that symbolized its bodily life (the blood) and its former life (its "old skin").

They also throw the head with the eyes and the ears (thus its organs of the senses), and the bones, stripped of their flesh which is put to cook in cauldrons for the evening meal.

Which can be understood as: the soul is immortal and will reincarnate for another life if it has been purified to remedy the congenital taint, the titanic nature of the man.

D. DANCING ON THE EMBERS

Some Neoplatonists, known as Neopythagoreans, are inspired, as Pythagoras did, by the Egyptian Mysteries which practiced theurgy, a religious magic causing divine manifestations. Here it is the incombustibility that appears supernatural. In general it is the apparition of the gods, who dispense gifts and revelations.

The philosopher Jamblique gives several examples practiced at the time of Constantine and Hélène, including that of inspired people insensitive to fire and physical pain, signs of the presence of the god in their body:

“Here is a capital proof: Many approach the fire because the fire does not touch them due to divine inspiration... because at that moment they are not living animal life. And some who go through pins do not feel them, nor others who hit their backs with an ax; still others who slash their arms with daggers have no conscience of it. Their activities are in no way human, for what is inaccessible becomes accessible under the effect of “thoporia”, and they throw themselves into the fire, they walk through the fire ... like the priestess of Castabala. All this shows that in their enthusiasm they lose consciousness of themselves and that they live neither human nor animal life ... but take in exchange another more divine life which inspires them and completely possesses them”(Jamblique Les mystères d'Egypte, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1993, p. 79, III, 4).

CONCLUSION

The fire of the Anastenarides must burn that part of oneself that must be burned in order to be able to rise spiritually from its ashes. It is a fight against our bad inclinations, materialism, selfishness, envy. They seek the victory of the forces of good (the divine) over the forces of evil (the titanic nature of man whom Christianity has called Satan). So the “Anastenarides” say they destroy the devil by trampling him with their bare feet until the embers almost extinguish ... never complete however, as if there should always remain the germs ready to revive and fight should be periodically renewed. They nevertheless derive physical and moral benefits from it, which one of them sums up: "I am becoming holy, I am becoming strong". As in the Ancient Mysteries, mysticism and therapy are inseparable.

Bibliography

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