

OSTANES

OSTANES, legendary mage in classical and medieval literature. He is first mentioned by Hermodorus, as quoted in Diogenes Laertius (*Prooemium* 2, as punctuated by R. Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, 3rd ed., Leipzig, 1927, p. 172; the common attribution of this reference to Xanthos of Lydia must be mistaken, for he could not have referred to Alexander). Hermodorus, a disciple of Plato, mentions Ostanes as one of the names common in a supposed line of magi that ran from Zoroaster down to Alexander's conquest. He dates Zoroaster 5,000 years before the fall of Troy and puts Ostanes first among the names of members of the line; there is no indication that he knew anything about the actual date or career of any particular Ostanes.

Which Ostanes (OIr. **(H)uštāna*, reflected also in Elamite and Babylonian, 'With a good status/rank') of those known (Justi, *Namenbuch*, p. 52b: one the son of Darius II and the grandfather of Darius III; another a participant in Alexander's expedition to India), if any, gave rise to the legend of the magus is uncertain. So is the content of the legend(s), about which our present information comes from the 1st century C.E. and later. Pliny (d. 79 C.E.) in his *Natural History* (30.3ff.) was skeptical of the pretended succession, but thought the first man to write an extant account of magic — which he identified with the practices of the magi — was an Ostanes who had accompanied Xerxes on his expedition to Greece (30.8-11). The works of Xerxes' Ostanes made the Greeks "rabid" to learn more of the subject; Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, and Plato traveled to study and returned to teach it. This misinformation probably came from Alexandrian scholarship, which had also produced the works of Ostanes that Pliny had read or read about. Of such works an *Oktateuch* — i.e., a work in eight books — is referred to by Philo of Byblos, a generation or so after Pliny; he says it taught that god was a hawk-headed [snake?] (the sort of monster frequent on magical gems) with all the Greek philosophic virtues (so Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* I.10.52). Pliny refers to Ostanes as describing the different sorts of magic — divination from water, air, stars, lamps and other instruments, as well as necromancy (*Nat.Hist.* 30.14), the use of human bodies and various animal substances for divination and medicine (28.5ff., 69, 256, 261). From the end of the 1st century on, he is often referred to as an authority on necromancy and other forms of divination, astrology, the manufacture of amulets, and secret names and magical properties of plants and stones. These references, like Pliny's, are commonly supposed to reflect works fathered on him in the Hellenistic period. No doubt they often do so, but forgery did not stop with the Roman annexation of Alexandria. Both Ostanes's legend and his literary output increased throughout imperial times; by the Byzantine period he had become one of the great authorities in alchemy; much medieval alchemical material circulated under his name.

Bibliography:

K. Preisendanz, "Ostanes (8)," in Pauly-Wissowa XVIII, 1942, col. 1610-1642, is credulous and apologetic, but valuable for the author's great knowledge of the literature. Little better is J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les Mages hellénisés*, Paris, 1938, I, pp. 165-212; II, pp. 265-356 (the essential collection of data).

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