

Iamblichus جمبليڪ العنجري

Iamblichus (Ancient Greek: Ἰάμβλιχος, from Aramaic *ya-mlku*, means "He is king", c. 245-c. 325) was a Neo-Platonist philosopher who determined the direction taken by later Neoplatonic philosophy, and perhaps western Paganism itself. He is perhaps best known for his compendium on Pythagorean philosophy.

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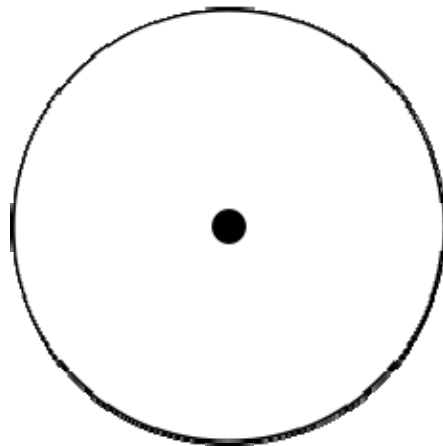
Iamblichus' life

Iamblichus was the chief representative of Syrian Neo-Platonism, though his influence spread over much of the ancient world. The events of his life and his religious beliefs are not entirely known, but the main tenets of his beliefs can be worked out from his extant writings. According to the biographers Eunapius, he was born at nowadays Anjar. He was the son of a rich and illustrious family, and he is said to have been the descendant of several priest-kings. He initially studied under Anatolius of Laodicea, and later went on to study under Porphyry, a pupil of Plotinus, the founder of Neo-Platonism. It was with Porphyry that he is known to have had a disagreement over the practice of Theurgy, the criticisms of which Iamblichus responds to in his attributed *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* (*On the Egyptian Mysteries*).

Around 304, he returned to Syria to found his own school at Apameia (near Antioch), a city famous for its Neoplatonic philosophers. Here he designed a curriculum for studying Plato and Aristotle, and he wrote grand commentaries on the two that survive only in fragments. Still, for Iamblichus, Pythagoras was the supreme authority. He is known to have written the *Collection of Pythagorean Doctrines*, which, in ten books, comprised extracts from several ancient philosophers. Only the first four books, and fragments of the fifth, survive. Iamblichus was said to have been a man of great culture and learning. He was also renowned for his charity and self-denial. Many students gathered around him, and he lived with them in genial friendship. According to Fabricius, he died during the reign of Constantine, sometime before 333. Only a fraction of Iamblichus' books have survived. For our knowledge of his system, we are indebted partly to the fragments of writings preserved by Stobaeus and others. The notes of his successors, especially Proclus, as well as his five extant books and the sections of his great work on Pythagorean philosophy also reveal much of Iamblichus' system. Besides these, Proclus seems to have ascribed to him the authorship of the celebrated treatise *Theurgia*, or *On the Egyptian Mysteries*. However, the differences between this book and Iamblichus' other works in style and in some points of doctrine have led some to question whether Iamblichus was the actual author. Still, the treatise certainly originated from his school, and in its systematic attempt to give a

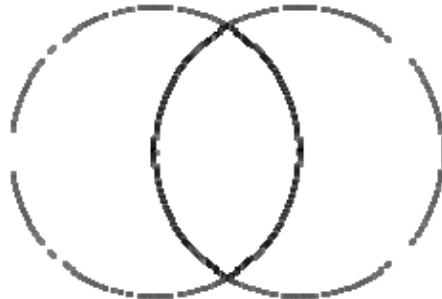
speculative justification of the polytheistic cult practices of the day, it marks a turning-point in the history of thought where Iamblichus stood. As a speculative theory, Neo-Platonism had received its highest development from Plotinus. The modifications introduced by Iamblichus were the detailed elaboration of its formal divisions, the more systematic application of the Pythagorean number-symbolism, and, under the influence of Oriental systems, a thoroughly mythical interpretation of what Neo-Platonism had formerly regarded as notional. Iamblichus introduced the idea of the soul's embodiment in matter, believing matter to be as divine as the rest of the cosmos. This was the most fundamental point of departure between his ideas and those of his Neoplatonic predecessors, who believed that matter was a deficient concept. It is most likely on this account that Iamblichus was looked upon with such extravagant veneration. Iamblichus was highly praised by those who followed his thought. By his contemporaries, Iamblichus was accredited with miraculous powers. The Roman emperor Julian, not content with Eunapius' more modest eulogy that he was inferior to Porphyry only in style, regarded Iamblichus as more than second to Plato, and claimed he would give all the gold of Lydia for one epistle of Iamblichus. During the revival of interest in his philosophy in the 15th and 16th centuries, the name of Iamblichus was scarcely mentioned without the epithet "divine" or "most divine".

Iamblichus' Cosmology



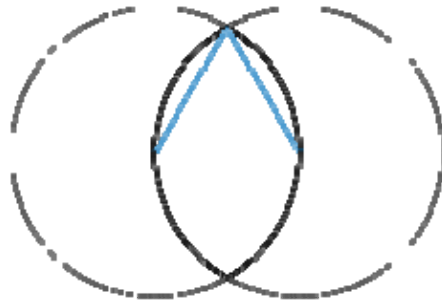
The Monad.

At the head of his system, Iamblichus placed the transcendent incommunicable "One", the *monad*, whose first principle is intellect, *nous*. Immediately after the absolute One, Iamblichus introduced a second super-existent "One" to stand between it and 'the many' as the producer of intellect, or soul, *psyche*. This is the initial *dyad*. The first and highest One (*nous*), which Plotinus represented under the three stages of (objective) being, (subjective) life, and (realized) intellect, is distinguished by Iamblichus into spheres of intelligible and intellective, the latter sphere being the domain of thought, the former of the objects of thought. These three entities, the *psyche*, and the *nous* split into the intelligible and the intellective, form a *triad*.



The Dyad.

Between the two worlds, at once separating and uniting them, some scholars think there was inserted by Iamblichus, as was afterwards by Proclus, a third sphere partaking of the nature of both. But this supposition depends on a merely conjectural emendation of the text. We read, however, that in the intellectual triad he assigned the third rank to the Demiurge.^[5] The Demiurge, the Platonic creator-god, is thus identified with the perfected *nous*, the intellectual triad being increased to a *hebdomad*. The identification of *nous* with the Demiurge is a significant moment in the Neoplatonic tradition and its adoption into and development within the Christian tradition. St. Augustine follows Plotinus by identifying *nous*, which bears the *logos*, with the creative principle. Whereas the Hellenes call that principle the Demiurge, Augustine identifies the activity and content of that principle as belonging to one of the three aspects of the Divine Trinity -- the Son, who is the Word (*logos*). Iamblichus and Plotinus commonly assert that *nous* produced nature by mediation of the intellect, so here the intelligible gods are followed by a triad of psychic gods.



The Triad.

The first of these "psychic gods" is incommunicable and supramundane, while the other two seem to be mundane, though rational. In the third class, or mundane gods, there is a still greater wealth of divinities, of various local position, function, and rank. Iamblichus wrote of gods, angels, demons and heroes, of twelve heavenly gods whose number is increased to thirty-six or three hundred and sixty, and of seventy-two other gods proceeding from them, of twenty-one chiefs and forty-two nature-gods, besides guardian divinities, of particular individuals and nations. The realm of divinities stretched from the original One down to material nature itself, where soul in fact descended into matter and became "embodied" as human beings. Basically, Iamblichus greatly multiplied the ranks of being and divine entities in the universe, the number at each level relating to various mathematical proportions. The world is thus peopled by a crowd of superhuman beings influencing natural events and possessing and communicating knowledge of the future, and who are all accessible to prayers and offerings. The whole of Iamblichus complex

theory is ruled by a mathematical formalism of triad, hebdomad, etc., while the first principle is identified with the monad, dyad and triad; symbolic meanings being also assigned to the other numbers. The theorems of mathematics, he says, apply absolutely to all things, from things divine to original matter. But though he subjects all things to number, he holds elsewhere that numbers are independent existences, and occupy a middle place between the limited and unlimited. Another difficulty of the system is the account given of nature. It is said to be bound by the indissoluble chains of necessity called fate, and is distinguished from divine things that are not subject to fate. Yet, being itself the result of higher powers becoming corporeal, a continual stream of elevating influence flows from them to it, interfering with its necessary laws and turning to good ends the imperfect and evil. Of evil no satisfactory account is given; it is said to have been generated accidentally in the conflict between the finite and the infinite.

Theurgy

Despite the complexities of the make-up of the divine cosmos, Iamblichus still had salvation as his final goal. The embodied soul was to return to divinity by performing certain rites, or Theurgy, literally, 'divine-working'. Some translate this as "magic", but the modern connotations of the term do not exactly match what Iamblichus had in mind, which is more along the lines of religious ritual. Still, these acts did involve some of what would today be perceived as attempts at 'magic'. Though the embodied souls are dominated by physical necessities, they are still divine and rational. This contains a conflict, being part of an immortal, divine nature, as well as genuinely part of a material, imperfect mortal domain. The personal soul, a kind of 'lost' embodied soul, has lost touch with its deeper, divine nature and has become self-alienated. In this conflict can perhaps be glimpsed Iamblichus' ideas about the origin of evil, though Iamblichus does not comment on this himself. This was also the area where Iamblichus differed from his former master, Porphyry, who believed mental contemplation alone could bring salvation. Porphyry wrote a letter criticizing Iamblichus' ideas of Theurgy, and it is to this letter that *On the Egyptian Mysteries* was written in response. Iamblichus' analysis was that the transcendent cannot be grasped with mental contemplation because the transcendent is supra-rational. Theurgy is a series of rituals and operations aimed at recovering the transcendent essence by retracing the divine 'signatures' through the layers of being. Education is important for comprehending the scheme of things as presented by Aristotle, Plato and Pythagoras but also by the Chaldean Oracles. The theurgist works 'like with like': at the material level, with physical symbols and 'magic'; at the higher level, with mental and purely spiritual practices. Starting with correspondences of the divine in matter, the theurgist eventually reaches the level where the soul's inner divinity unites with God.

Clearly Iamblichus meant for the masses of people to perform rituals that were more physical in nature, while the higher types, who were closest to the divine (and whose numbers were few), could reach the divine realm through contemplation.