Zoia Barzakh, "Entry on: Gray Kite [Серый коршун (Seryĭ korshun)] by Andrei Valentinovich Shmal'ko [Andrei Valentinov] ", peer-reviewed by Lisa Maurice and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/463. Entry version as of November 01, 2026.

Andrei Valentinovich Shmal'ko [Andrei Valentinov]

Gray Kite [Серый коршун (Seryĭ korshun)]

Ukraine (1997)

TAGS: Electra Hades Laius Mycenae Oedipus Orestes Poseidon Zeus





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Gray Kite [Серый коршун (Seryĭ korshun)]
Country of the First Edition	Ukraine
Country/countries of popularity	Russia; Ukraine; Belarus; Moldova
Original Language	Russian
First Edition Date	1997
First Edition Details	Andrei Valentinov, *Серый коршун* [Grey Kite (Seryĭ korshun)]. Kharkiv: Folio, 1997, 382 pp.
ISBN	9660302118
Genre	Fantasy fiction, Fiction, Historical fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Young adults (15–25)
Author of the Entry	Zoia Barzakh, Bar-Ilan University, zoia_barzakh@mail.ru
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Creators



Andrei Valentinovich Shmal'ko [Andrei Valentinov] , b. 1958 (Author)

Andrei Valentinov is a penname of Andrei Valentinovich Shmal'ko, a Ukrainian Russian-speaking writer for young adults, historian (Ancient Greece and Rome) and archeologist, PhD (History; thesis title *Roman Policy in the Southern Black Sea Region in the 1st Century BC*), Senior Lecturer of Kharkiv State University. For many years Valentinov participated in excavations of Chersonesus, an ancient Greek colony founded in the 7th century B.C. in the south-western part of the Crimean Peninsula. (This experience is reflected in his autobiographical novel *Canis Major* [*Созвездье пса*, 2002]).

Valentinov wrote several novels in co-authorship with Henry Lion Oldie (Oleg Gromov and Dmitry Ladyzhensky, for biographies see the entry *A Hero Must Be Alone*).

The main genre of Valentinov's novels is alternative history, specifically, fictional (alternative) versions of historical events with strong element of fantastic and supernatural. Examples are *The Eye of Power* ([*Око силы*, 1996–2011], fictional history of 20th century Russia), *The Angel of Spartacus* ([*Ангел Спартака*, 2006], fictional history of late Republican and early Imperial Rome), *A Cleric of Auvergne* ([*Овернский клирик*, 1997], France, the 12th century) and *Triumphant Heavens* ([*Небеса ликуют*, 2000], Italy and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the 17th century).

All his novels are characterized by elaborate presentation of relevant historical background, including culture-specific elements of day-to-day reality. The idea of cultural relativity lies in the very structure of Valentinov's world. According to Valentinov's fantastic cosmology, adopted also by H. L. Oldie and fully explained in their coauthored novel *We Have No Other Place to Live* [*Нам здесь жить*, 1999], the Universe is discrete – it consists of mutually isolated *nomoi*, the inhabitants of each of which see the world in their own way. For example, for ancient Greeks centaurs were real, but we would see the same creatures as men riding their horses.

The reading of Valentinov's novels can be considered both as

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entertainment and as educational activity for young adults. It is telling that in his fan-club in the Internet one can find discussions on serious historical problems, betraying rather broad and profound erudition of participants.

Sources:

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Additional information

Summary

Nurgal-Sin, the main character, a Babylonian mercenary ("a gray kite", which is, according to Valentinov, a name for Babylonian elite troops), has almost forgotten his true name, Cleoterus, as well as his native country, Achiyava (Valentinov uses the Mycenaean form of toponym, with digamma). The well-trained and highly-experienced officer has too few good memories of his native land to feel nostalgia: he was sold into slavery as a small child. However, he suddenly finds himself to be a pawn in a big game of the Mycenaean court: having agreed to what appeared to be a job proposal of a mysterious stranger, he is eventually forced to play a role of some Cleoterus, the son of the late king of Mycenae, killed by his own brother, who has now come home and is going to reclaim his hereditary kingdom and punish the usurpers. Worst of all, Ctymene, the sister of the real prince Cleoterus, seriously believes the young man to be her brother. The poor girl displays evident signs of posttraumatic disorder (it comes out later that she had been repeatedly raped by guards at the order of her uncle and his daughter, as a punishment of her murderous attempts against them). She seems almost crazy from lust for revenge. Nurgal-Sin feels natural pity for the girl, but decides to avoid mass slaughter: he has no reason to hate (or love) Mycenaean ruling family and supporters of either party.

During the years of his slavery Nurgal-Sin learned from a certain *habiru* (Valentinov obviously shares the famous identification of *habiru* mentioned in Amarna letters with Israelites and so uses *habiru* as a Babylonian word for Jews) about "the One (sc. God)" and became His devoted supporter. In the novel, he is in constant conflict with those who carry out human sacrifice and practice other bloodthirsty religions.

The last danger the hero has to overcome lies within himself: it is the secret of his birth. First, he believes that he has nothing to do with prince Cleoterus, killed by his father's enemies in his early childhood. But then he gradually learns that there were two boys called Cleoterus, both being grandsons of Hyppolochus, Glaucus' father. One of them was son of Glaucus, heir to the Mycenaean throne; the father of the other one was Laius, Glaucus' soldier and illegitimate son of Hyppolochus by Hyrto, Hecate's priestess, who carries out secret human sacrifices. The name of the second boy's father is chosen deliberately for the sake of intertextual reference to the story of

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Oedipus. The boys were similar to each other, and after the death of Glaucus his small son was sent to the same village where little Cleoterus, son of Laius, lived. Now only Hyrto knew which of the boys was killed and which was saved and sold to slavery, but she refused to tell the secret to Cleoterus, this being a revenge for his ultimate banning of human sacrifices. The last words of dying Hyrto were: “Yes, you will never know it! Every year you will get worse, it will become insanity. Even after death, in the kingdom of Hades, your shadow will not find peace!” Nevertheless, the curses of the old witch, emerged from the shadows of Ancient Greek myths, have no power over Nurgal-Sin, a “grey kite” and a worshipper of the One: he belongs to different *nomos*.

Analysis

This is a historical fantasy fiction. The events take place in Mycenaean Greece. The plot encompasses motives from the myth of Atreidae, as well as intertextual references to other mythological cycles.

The entire book tries to answer the question, posed already by ancient Greek tragedians: is there a way out from the cycle of revenge, crime and punishment, which is the doom of “the cursed family”. The answer of Valentinov is paradoxical: yes, such a way out exists, but only for one who has come from the different *nomos* (in Oldie’s and Valentinov’s sense of the word), both with respect of origin and of mentality.

The opening of the novel reminds us at once of the story of Atreidae family. Indeed, Ctymene, with her crazy lust for revenge, her devoted love for the late father and the brother, saved by miracle to be a revenger, strongly resembles Electra from Sophocles’ and Euripides tragedies of this name. But Cleoterus, or rather Nurgal-Sin, is not an Orestes at all: he was saved not to be educated as would-be revenger of his father, but to be lost in an alien *nomos*. His perception was formed by that *nomos* and stays so till the end: where Greeks, for instance, see centaurs, he sees men riding horses. Moreover, far from being a doomed avenger guided by Apollo, as Orestes was, he has his own religion, quite different from that of the natives and forbidding unnecessary cruelty, as directed by his God, “the One”. This unique position, making him resemble contemporary orthodox Christians, as Valentinov himself is, rather than either a Mycenaean prince or Babylonian mercenary (this improbable characterization is the only serious weakness of this otherwise excellent book) helps him not only

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prevent unnecessary bloodshed when the conspiracy succeeds, but to settle religious uproar in his new kingdom. Glaucus, Cleoterus' father, banned human sacrifices, but several rebellious priests of Zeus and Poseidon (whom Valentinov, true to elaborate "Mycenaean" coloring of his narrative, calls "Dios" and "Poseidaon") continue to perform them secretly, at the same time creating a kind of "blood libel" against innocent rustic healers and quacks, worshippers of nymphs and dryads. Nevertheless, the new Mycenaean w*anakt* (Valentinov have evidently picked this title from Linear B inscriptions, where it sounds like w*a-na-ka*), with his military experience and almost Christian humanism, managed to save innocents and to find and punish real villains. He falls in love with young priestess Thea, who has been framed for human sacrifices, and makes her a high priestess of Rhea and his mistress. These chapters have rather medieval coloring: for example, at the beginning of the episode one of Cleoterus' officers proposes to torture Thea and then to burn her alive, which reminds us of *Malleus Maleficarum* and Holy Inquisition rather than Mycenaean Greece.

By solving the problem of putting an end to a family curse, Valentinov puts another one, that of multiculturalism and cultural relativity. Can problems, raised in Ancient Greek myths and literature, be understood correctly by those with different civilizational and cultural background? And this is the right question to contemplate for young readers interested in ancient history, while the book as a whole is designed to evoke such interest by thrilling yet detailed narrative of the historian.

The novel displays several features typical for young adult fiction. The complicated bonds of mutual love and hatred, with rather ambivalent feelings and complex motivations, is typical for fantasy family sagas, such as *The Game of Thrones* or *The Chronicles of Amber.* The powerful female images in the center of the narrative are also typical for such novels. Here they are Ctymene and Deiotara, two cousins linked by extremely powerful mutual hatred. Deiotara, the daughter of Cleoterus' uncle, who was the first councilor of her father, eventually manages to preserve her high position upon his death and for this purpose makes Cleoterus, whom she believes to be the killer of her father and who loves another woman, to marry her. Ctymene, her main antagonist, also pursues her aims by fair means or foul, but, while the aim of Deiotara is to survive and preserve her status, that of Ctymene is revenge. The distorted personality of Ctymene, who passes instantly from ecstatic love to pure hatred and indignation and is

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ready to kill one whom she just a very short while ago thought to be her beloved brother and savior, provides a powerful representation of the phenomenon of traumatic disorder. The world of the divine in the novel is no less complicated than that of human relationships. This universe encompasses pagan, Jewish and Christian motives and believes. Cleoterus himself is the adept of the One, but he is not the only character who is aware of the possibility of monotheism. Several pagan priests – those of the most sublime ordaining – possess this esoteric knowledge. Tellus the Centaur tells Cleoterus:

"We knew about the One, wanakt. For a long time already among those who are admitted to the highest initiation, there is a rumor that all our gods are only sparks of one fire. This knowledge is still hidden..."

For Cleoterus, however, all the accepted religious beliefs of his time are equally absurd:

"– I do not know, Tellus ... There is a small tribe living far away from here – the habiru. They were first to accept the One, but they think that He is only their God. It's even more ridiculous than your idols ...

– Idols are just a sign, – the centaur shook his grey head. – The initiates know that the gods have different appearances. Someday people will erect idols even to the One – when His hour comes ..."

At the end we learn that the altar of the Unknown God, mentioned by Paul in *Acts* (17:23) was erected upon the order of no one else than Cleoterus. The initial idea of one of the initiates was, however, much more pagan:

"The servant of Dios decided to erect a temple to the One – the first in Ahiyava. At this point I could not keep silent – the One does not need temples and sacrifices. What does Erythus want– to make Him one of the local gods of Mikasa? We still managed to come to an agreement, and now, near the stone with the horseshoe, where Thea and I once saw a fiery tornado, there is a small temple devoted to the Unknown God."

The complex mystic dimension of the world, with divinities of various levels and knowledge of various degree of esoteric knowledge is typical for fantasy worlds. However, here this devise is used to reflect the historian's view on various stages of development of the idea of

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	the divine in Mediterranian world.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Electra Hades Laius Mycenae Oedipus Orestes Poseidon Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Conflict Emotions Family Identity Love Memory Morality Multiculturalism Nation Parents (and children) Psychology Sexuality Violence

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