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THE KLARKASH-TON CYCLE

Clark Ashton Smith's
Cthulhu Mythos Fiction

Edited and Introduced by Robert Price
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A Chaosium Book
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Introduction to The Klarkash-Ton Cycle

The Atlantean High Priest Klarkash-Ton

In a number of Cthulhu Mythos stories we read over the naive narrator's shoulder as he peruses some ancestor or predecessor's notebook or grimoire. Usually the excerpt from the book is a broad enough hint as to what is to come around the next bend in the plot, though the narrator is not yet in the position to see that. And just in case the reader is similarly dense, some Mythos scribes, especially August Derleth, like to supply marginal notes on the notebook like "Same as Ithaqua?" Or "Check Alhazred." It's almost like the answer to a puzzle printed upside down on the bottom of the same page. Well, once I had a real-life Mythos moment of exactly this type. I was paging through a new sorcerous specimen I had added to my collection of talismans and periapts. The item in question happened to be an ancient tome called *The Dunwich Horror*, Armed Forces Edition. I saw that a previous owner of the book, coming upon the passage in "The Whisperer in Darkness" which mentions "the Commorion myth-cycle preserved by the Atlantean high priest Klarkash-Ton," had scribbled in the margin "Clark Ashton Smith?" Bingo!

Smith first signed his letters to his new friend Lovecraft simply "C.A.S." Next he signed himself "Tsathoggua the Primordial," just as HPL sometimes used the signature "Cthulhu" or "Grandpa Cthulhu." Soon he made of his initials a kind of mystery-cult name, "Ci-Ay-Ess," subjoining his titles as "the evangelist of Tsathoggua, and the archivist of Mu and Antares." And then, starting with his letter of June 27, 1930, he is "Klarkash-Ton." He would even initial his sculptures "KA," having

forgotten, I guess, that it was “Klarkash-Ton,” not “Klark-Ashton”! (Similarly, Lin Carter used to abbreviate himself not as “L.C.” but as “L.X.” When asked why, he’d say the X stood for “excellent”!) Thus it is obvious that HPL’s fictive characterization of Smith as Klarkash-Ton, preserver of the Commoriom myth-cycle is drawn from Smith’s own nickname plus his self-designation as archivist of lost civilizations.

Have you ever wondered what sort of a priest Klarkash-Ton was? What eldritch entity it was before whom he groveled? Why, Tsathoggua of course! HPL mentions him in this and that letter as “high priest of Tsathoggua” and such. He even makes him the seventh incarnation of the sorcerer Eibon! It makes sense, since Klarkash-Ton preserved the myths of Hyperborea (Commoriom) and presumably the fragments of the *Liber Ivonis* which the Averoni brought with them from foundering Atlantis to Gaul.

The Clark Ashton Smythos

Will Murray (“The Clark Ashton Smythos” in *The Horror of It All: Encrusted Gems from The Crypt of Cthulhu*, pp. 68-70) coined this happy phrase for Smith’s unique contribution to and understanding of the Cthulhu Mythos. In an exchange of letters with August Derleth after the death of their friend Lovecraft, Smith replies to Derleth’s trial balloons in which the younger man, the first Mythos buff, I suppose, set forth his notorious theology of the Mythos, making the Old Ones evil foes of the blessed Elder Gods as well as elemental forces of earth, air, fire and water. Smith, like Robert E. Howard, seems to have shared Lovecraft’s outlook to a great degree, so his reactions to the emerging Derleth Mythos are especially worthy of note.

“As to classifying the Old Ones, I suppose that Cthulhu can be classed both as a survival on earth and a water-dweller; and Tsathoggua is a subterranean survival. Azathoth, referred to somewhere as ‘the primal nuclear chaos’, is the ancestor of the whole crew but still dwells in outer and ultra-dimensional space, together with Yog-Sothoth, and the demon piper Nyarlathotep, who attends the throne of Azathoth. I shouldn’t class any of the old ones as *evil*: they are plainly beyond all liminary human conceptions of either ill or good. Long’s Chaugnar Faugn, the Rhan-Tegoth of Hazel Heald’s opus, “The Horror in the Museum”, and the Ghatanothoa of her later tale “Out of the Eons”, belong, I should venture to say, among the spawn of Azathoth and the brethren of Cthulhu and Tsathoggua. Rhan-Tegoth and Ghatanothoa, I’d be willing to gamble, were created by HPL in