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MITHRAS IN APULUM – AN ICONOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

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Cuvinte cheie: Mithras, artă provincială, religie antică, iconografie antică.

Key words: Mithras, provincial art, ancient religion, ancient iconography.

This short paper attempts to recreate the iconographic profile of Mithras in one city of Roman Dacia, Apulum, second only to the capital Sarmizegetusa in terms of the number of attested worshippers of Mithras. By offering an overview of almost 20 figurative monuments discovered in Apulum and its *territorium*, I attempt to retrieve the specificity of the most popular god of the Roman army. I am not, therefore, primarily interested in his iconography throughout the Empire, and not even on a province-wide level. Indeed, I would ideally like to recapture, through a grass-roots approach, his local face, the way he was perceived in this city. Granted, it would be remiss to attempt this for every Roman city, but in this particular case, the endeavour seems entirely justified, given the abundance of Mithraic art in the area. Many of the monuments are exhibited today in the collections of the National Museum of Unification in Alba Iulia (ancient Apulum), and I will focus on them.

While Mithras was originally an ancient Indo-Iranian god of light and truth, of fertility and contractual obligations, his mystery cult was a Greek, rather than Oriental, cosmic and solar religion, probably designed by an elite group in Commagene or perhaps in Rome or Ostia¹. By the time of Trajan, it was already popular among the legions and spreading quickly along military infrastructure lines, especially in the Rhine and Danube provinces. Mithras had by now drifted a long way from his Oriental roots - also from an iconographic point of view, as the pair *Cautes* and *Cautopates* is a Roman creation².

Flourishing during the 2nd and 3rd c. (all dates herein are CE) from Britain to Arabia, the Mithraic mysteries were the last religion to come to prominence in the Roman Empire. When it disappeared towards the end of the 4th c., with Rome as its last stronghold, one of the main former competitors of Christianity was wiped from history – and much of the information about it can

¹ Beskow 1980; Merkelbach 1984 on origins; monuments in Vermaseren 1956-1960; *status quaestionis* in Mithraic studies, Beck 2006; Clauss 1992; idem 2012.

² Vollkommer 1992, p. 583-586.

now only be culled from Christian sources. The cult excluded women, and its sworn brothers belonged to seven grades or ranks (*Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, Pater*), each under the protection of a planet. The shrines of *Deus Sol Invictus Mithras* were natural or artificial caves with a central cult image, showing the triumphant god slaying a bull, a sacrifice with cosmogonic implications. The tauroctony scene, which was not necessarily inspired by the image of the winged Nike slaying the bull, had a canonical form, so that reliefs from Hadrian's Wall remain similar to those in Dura Europos. It draws however on a vast array of symbols and - as often argued, although less intensely of late - it may be a star-map based on Babylonian and Hellenistic astrological conceptions, related to the constellations Perseus and Taurus³. The *mithraea* themselves must have been conceived of as "images of the cosmos" (Porphyry, *De antr. nymph.*, 6).

A Mithraic doctrine seems to never have existed, unless merely as an eclectic Mithraic worldview, centered around loyalty and the unfathomable destiny of the soul. This religion never aimed to build the universal church of Mithras, and amounted probably to not much more than a freemasonry-style military fraternal cult. At the same time, not only did it retain traces of the original Iranian dualism, but may have incorporated some Platonist and Stoic speculations. Modern research has, since the 70s, moved gradually away from Cumont's conviction that this was substantially an Oriental religion (a Roman form of Mazdaism)⁴, and later also from astrological interpretations⁵. A welcome recent trend is to steer clear of the heavy bias towards iconography, and balance it out with the archaeological study of *mithraea*⁶, and even of the ritual meal concluding worship⁷. Indeed, since written sources tell us next to nothing about Mithraic theology, archaeology carries the burden of proof for most research theses. Some 1.150 sculptures (around 700 tauroctonies, about a half of which complete) came down to us from the ancient world, together with some 1.000 dedicatory inscriptions, found in over 420 sites, including 200 sanctuaries. Mostly they come from Britannia, the Rhine and Danube provinces, Illyria and Italia, almost to the exclusion of the East, Spain, and Northern Africa⁸.

From Dacia, some 180 Mithraic reliefs are known (at least 64 locally produced), as well as some other 70 cult monuments⁹. Four sanctuaries have been excavated in the whole province and the existence of 15 more is

³ Speidel 1980.

⁴ Gordon 1975.

⁵ Clauss 2012.

⁶ Gordon 1976; Lenk 2017, or, closer to Dacia, Bottez 2007.

⁷ Martens 2009.

⁸ Vollkommer 1992, p. 622-626.

⁹ Sicoe 2014.

conjectured. With at least 50 monuments (almost 70 if we count those that are probably, but not certainly, Mithraic) and at least 30 worshippers (more than a quarter of those known in Dacia), the cult of Mithras is one of the most popular cults in Apulum¹⁰. By Apulum are meant here both *Colonia Aurelia Apulensis* and *Municipium Septimium Apulense*). The Mithraic communities of Apulum are also the second largest civilian and military group among the Mithraic communities of the province. Although 5 or 6, if not more, sanctuaries must have existed in Apulum, the seven Mithraic ranks or other internal hierarchy remain however unattested here. A key role in the spread of the Mithraic cult to Apulum must have been played by the *Publicum Portorium Illyrici*, particularly through the *conductores* in charge of salt mining in Apulum, who had close ties with Poetovio, where this cult is particularly well attested¹¹.

In what follows, I will provide a quick overview of the Mithraic figurative monuments discovered in Apulum (a few in its *territorium*) and currently exhibited in the National Museum of Unification in Alba Iulia. This entails presenting 12 of the more important pieces and, due to constraints of space, listing 6 more, which are either very fragmentary or less relevant. I will refer to each piece first by its number in Sicoe's (2014) excellent catalog, which brings together all Mithraic monuments from Dacia. To this catalog one should add now the finds from *Mithraeum III* in Apulum¹², as well as CIMRM 1938¹³, and an inscribed column found on the black market¹⁴. In many cases, the dates of the pieces presented below are not as precise as one would want, *i.e.* for nos. 19, 29, 41, 45, 48-50, 63, roughly mid 2nd-late 3rd c. However, locally produced reliefs found in Dacia are generally late Antonine or Severan.

Five quite detailed and well preserved marble reliefs of tauroctonies are part of the museum's collection. Nos. 30, 40, and 41 (as per Sicoe's catalog) are visually organized in three registers, a type of scheme which may have originated in Dacian workshops¹⁵.

In **no. 30** (CIMRM 1958-1959, 0.63 × 0.74 × 0.03 m, 3rd c.; **Fig. 1**), the central register is, as always, dedicated to the bull-slaying scene. Mithras, astride the bull, pulls its head up by the snout and thrusts a sword/dagger in the kneeling animal's shoulder. The tauroctony is framed by two pilasters. These have been described as columns previously¹⁶, but, although in very low relief, it is still visible that the artist chose not to round off their body. Above the scene there is

¹⁰ Szabó 2015a; idem 2018.

¹¹ Szabó 2015a.

¹² Egri *et alii* 2018.

¹³ Szabó *et alii* 2014.

¹⁴ Szabó 2018.

¹⁵ Pioariu 2000-2001.

¹⁶ E.g. Sicoe 2014 *ad loc.*

an arching bough of leaves, alluding to the cave entrance. The god does not seem to turn his head back to look at the raven and is shown almost frontally instead. He also does not wear Persian trousers (*anaxyrides*), but low boots instead, a detail typical for Dacia, where Mithras is often seen wearing such hunter boots. A dog and a snake dart upward to the bull's wound, a raven is perched on the bough, the scorpion is absent. Cautes bears an upright torch, but also supports another torch on his left shoulder, Cautopates (inverted torch lost) carries a bow. Both have low boots and crossed legs. In fact, in art they are always shown standing, with only three exceptions, of which two from Dacia, where Cautes is seen riding¹⁷. Left *predellae*: bust of Sol wearing the radiate crown, Mithras Taurophoros, carrying the bull on his shoulders. Right *predellae*: The god born out of a rock, with Phrygian cap, dagger and torch, also lion on top of krater. Upper register: Mithras sitting and shooting arrows at a rock to produce a stream, behind him an Oriental-clad figure touches his shoulder, then Mithras climbing up a tree in order to reach the bull's Moon-barge carved next to it, bull in a house, *kline* with a bearded man in a cloak, with cup and dagger (Saturnus/Oceanus). Lower register: Mithras and Sol in a grotto for the sacred repast (banquet), tripod, *kline*; Sol in *quadriga* helps Mithras in; naked bust of Oceanus entwined by snake. The inscription reads: *D(eo) i(nvicto) M(ithrae) T(itus) Aur(elius) F(abia) (tribu) Marcus vet(eranus) leg(ionis) XIII g(eminae)*. The relief's lower left corner is broken off. The presence in this and the next relief of vignettes not only to the left, but also to the right of the bull-slaying scene is typical of Dacian monuments, which are more symmetrical than those from other Danubian provinces¹⁸. The combination of a natural locale (suggested by leaves creating a sort of wreath above the scene) with the built environment (pilasters/columns) is, according to Sicoe 2014 (p. 131-132), only seen in Dacia. Possible exceptions to this are however the gilded silver foil plaque from Stockstadt and the tauroctony from Jajce, Dalmatia, where the gutters of the pediments atop the columns are heavily decorated with leaves.

No. 40 is an anepigraph relief (CIMRM 1972, 1.20 × 1.00 × 0.08 m, early Severan; **Fig. 2**). Lower left corner broken off. Central register: bull-slaughtering scene, the beast tied with a strap. Mithras has not plunged the dagger in yet, but the bull appears to be in its death-throes: its tail jerks up as *the god* constrains its rump with his extended right leg and wrenches back its head, making the throat rattle, as suggested by the clearly marked dewlap. Mithras is wearing low boots, no Persian trousers, and the scabbard fastened on his right shoulder. Raven perched on the billowing cape, snake gliding along the bottom, dog leaping up at the wound, scorpion missing, only its pincers seize the bull's

¹⁷ Vollkommer 1992, p. 625.

¹⁸ Pioariu 2000-2001.

genitals. Cautes carries two torches, Cautopates grasps the bull's tail which has already turned into ears of wheat. Both have crossed legs. Left predellae: Mithras Bouklopos riding the stolen bull, then carrying the bull. Right predellae (less elaborate than the left ones): bearded god (Saturnus/Oceanus), Mithras' birth, lion squats by a krater. Upper register: Sol in a *biga* (both horses visible), Mithras shooting an arrow (water-miracle), believer kneels and waits for the water to spring forth; bull in Moon-barge, goat in a hut whose roof is set afire by Mithras, row of altars, person with staff; pig and ram (?); Luna in a *biga* pulled by oxen (both visible). Lower register: ascension in a *quadriga* (all four horses visible), Mithras with dagger, Sol with torch, Saturnus/Oceanus sitting, entwined by snake, raising arms. From the banquet scene in the left lower corner, the relief only still shows a part of the vault above it. This relief was produced by Dacia's main Mithraic workshop, Sarmizegetusa, home to the largest Mithraic civil community in Dacia. The workshop's output (31 reliefs) accounts for about half of all Mithraic reliefs produced in Dacia. The marble can be traced back to the Bucova quarry, the main quarry of Roman Dacia, less than 20 km from Sarmizegetusa. The absence of the moon crescent, the presence of the row of altars and the lion, as well as the peculiarity that Cautes carries two torches, are all typical for this particular workshop. It is worth noting that Sol and Luna in a chariot are known from only half a dozen examples in the whole Mithraic corpus. Apulum, the second largest workshop in Dacia, seems to have imported from Sarmizegetusa very few Mithraic pieces, among which this relief and possibly no. 39 (*infra*). The use of low boots in Dacian Mithraic iconography seems to emphasize the god's nature as a hunter, also reflected in the choice of certain episodes (e.g. Mithras Taurophoros and Bouklopos, Mithras climbing the tree or lighting up the roof¹⁹).

The last of the three-tiered reliefs is **no. 41** (CIMRM 1975-1976, 0.33 × 0.23 × 0.045 m, 150-300; **Fig. 3**). It is a typical tauroctony, scabbard visible on the hip, dog jumps to drink the blood, snake slithers on the ground, scorpion and raven absent. The torch-bearers do not have their legs crossed. Both of them hold, apart from the torch, a *pedum*, a detail typical for Mithraic art in the Lower Danube area²⁰. No predellae are present here, only busts of Sol and Luna. Upper-register: water-miracle, bull in barge, bull in house. Lower register: Sol kneels before Mithras, banquet, ascension of both and bust of Saturnus/Oceanus. Inscription: *Deo invicto Mit(h)r(a)e / Euhemerus ex voto / posuit*.

Two further reliefs consist almost exclusively of the tauroctony. **No. 39** (CIMRM 1973, 1.13 × 1.45 × 0.10–0.23 m, mid-Antonine; **Fig. 4**) is the largest Mithraic relief in the Museum. In a cave, Mithras slays the bull, who is strapped

¹⁹ Sicoe 2014, p. 84.

²⁰ Pioariu 2000-2001.

and whose tail is turning into ears of wheat. Scorpion, snake and bull present as usual, the raven poised on one of the stalks framing the composition. Cautes also holds what may be a bucranium, Cautopates what may be a scorpion (this is typical for Dacian Mithraism, possibly an iconographic invention of Dacian workshops²¹). Mithras as well as both torch-bearers wear the Oriental costume. It is rare to find the god wearing Persian trousers on Dacian monuments (only one other example is known, very likely from Sarmizegetusa). In the upper corners are Sol's and Luna's draped busts, with radiate crown and crescent on the shoulders, respectively. One of the rays is longer and pierces the roof of Mithra's grotto, almost brushing Mithra's cape. The arch above the tauroctony is decorated with seven smoking altars, between which are scattered daggers, trees, as well as staffs bearing Phrygian caps. The blue-veined marble, probably from Bucova (unfortunately few of the Mithraic pieces from Dacia have been subjected to petrographic analysis), suggests that this relief also comes from Sarmizegetusa. This is corroborated by the presence of the altars and *anaxyrides*. Another remarkable statue recently found in Apulum - a Cautes with a bull-head (not in the museum) - may have the same provenance²².

The last of the main five reliefs comes from Lopadea Nouă, 40 km from Alba Iulia (*territorium Apulense*). No. **62** (absent from CIMRM, 0.43 × 0.36 × 0.04,5 m, 170-190; **Fig. 5**) features Mithras Tauroktonos shown frontally. The scabbard is fastened to his shoulder, which, if we do not count Italy, is almost exclusively a Dacian characteristic (also on no. 29 *infra* and on many others Dacian examples from other sites). The dagger is as long as a sword. All four animals present. Both Cautes and Cautopates carry two torches. Bust of Sol to the left, of Luna (with crescent) to the right. Inscription: *M(arcus) Au(relius) Maximus Flam(en) M(unicipii) A(pulensis) v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*. Particularly Cautopates has here a distinctly ethnic look, and one wonders if, in Dacia, the iconography of characters wearing the Phrygian cap did not bear some special relationship with that, surely rare, but certainly of some local relevance, of *pileati* Dacians. This might explain also the exceedingly rare (a *unicum* for Dacia) bust of Mithras (CIMRM 2004-2005, no. 63, 0.42 × 0.22 × 0.10 m) wearing a Phrygian cap, with no other representation and a Mithraic inscription, on a stele discovered in Oarda de Sus (less than 10km from Alba Iulia), probably from the *territorium* of Apulum.

Four fragmentary marble tauroctony reliefs are worth mentioning. No. **29** (CIMRM 1954-1955, 0.45 × 0.36 × 0.10–0.33 m): Mithras and the bull are to some extent preserved and the relief also shows the dog and snake, albeit not the scorpion. Above Cautes, a bust of Luna. Inscription: *Anulinus imag(inifer)*

²¹ Vollkommer 1992, p. 626; Sicoe 2014, p. 55.

²² Szabó 2015b.

l(egionis) XIII g(eminae). **No. 43.** (absent from CIMRM; 0.13 × 0.33 × 0.12 m): the bull is strapped in, dog and snake present, scorpion's pincers visible. The banquet is broken off, part of the ascension is still visible (Sol with a torch helping Mithras, who holds a dagger, to climb up the chariot). **No. 44.** (CIMRM 1981-1982, 0.135 × 0.24 m) preserves part of the kneeling bull, the dog, part of the snake and a Cautes' crossed legs; inscription *.....imus b(ene)ff(iciarius)co(n)s(ularis) v(otum)*. On **No. 45.** (CIMRM 1979-1980, 0.27 × 0.095 × 0.03 m.; nos. 44 and 45 are poorly preserved): the raven, *kline* (or krater?) and Sol's radiate crown are still recognizable; inscription *Soli invi[cto Mithrae ---]*.

Three limestone statues show Mithras Petrogenitus. All date from the second half of the 2nd c or the 3rd c. This is the second most popular subject of Mithraic art, after the tauroctony, and was also part of the typical decoration of sanctuaries; the god's birth from a tree or the split shell of the cosmic egg are exceedingly rare. On **no. 48** (CIMRM 1991, 0.50 × 0.33 m; **Fig. 6**) we witness his birth out of a rock around which coils a serpent, its head seen in profile, mouth wide open, fangs and beard visible. Mithras' torso muscles are well rendered, but the head and arms are missing. The same scene features on two other statues, **no. 49** (CIMRM 1994; **Fig. 7**) and **no. 19** (CIMRM 1949), the latter without a human body, the snake's head seen from above, and the rock carefully rendered like a conglomerate of pebbles. Finally, six other minor Mithraic monuments can be grouped here as *varia*. **No. 50** (CIMRM 1985) is a limestone statue base (1.18 × 0.35–0.44 × 0.30–0.38 m) showing Cautes with a torch riding the bull, with ears of wheat under the beast. Fragmentary limestone statues are **no. 31** (CIMRM 1957, Cautes), **no. 32** (CIMRM 1956, Cautopates), while **nos. 254** (CIMRM 1987) and **255** (CIMRM 1988) are statue fragments showing a head with a Phrygian cap, possibly Mithras'. **No. 63** was already mentioned above.

It must be said that some important monuments found in Apulum are now in museums in other Romanian cities. A large bull-slaying relief, with a splendid frontal representation of Mithras' face is now in Arad²³, while the only *ronde-bosse* tauroctony from Dacia, found in *Municipium Aurelium/Colonia Aurelia* but certainly imported, is now in Sibiu. As far as non-figurative, epigraphic, Mithraic monuments are concerned, the MNUAI collection includes altars (nos. 33, 34, 35, 36, 53), statue bases (nos. 21, 37 - the former however also bearing a dolphin and a trident on each side), and a capital (no. 38).

The Mithraic community in Apulum was indeed epigraphically and artistically inclined in the 2nd and 3rd c. Although it had slightly fewer members

²³ Szabó *et alii* 2014.

than that in Sarmizegetusa, it included the only one of Mithras' worshippers of senatorial rank known from Dacia²⁴. The Mithraic monuments exhibited in the NMU show that, while the cult of Mithras was the most popular religion in the Roman army²⁵, civilian worshippers were very numerous. More importantly, the 18 figurative monuments discussed above typify the degree of provincial flexibility allowed for within the cult's overall iconographic unity across the Empire.

Acknowledgments.

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MITHRAS ÎN APULUM – UN STUDIU DE CAZ ICONOGRAFIC

REZUMAT

În acest articol sunt analizate monumentele de artă mithraică aflate în colecția Muzeului Național al Unirii din Alba Iulia, în încercarea de a stabili un profil iconografic al lui Mithras la nivelul orașului Apulum și în *territorium*. E vorba în primul rând de 5 reliefuri de marmură de foarte bună calitate și cu un grad de conservare corespunzător; trei dintre ele sunt organizate în trei registre, celelalte două constând doar din scena tauroctoniei. Alte 4 reliefuri fragmentare ale tauroctoniei sunt prezentate rapid, urmate de 3 statui de calcar ale lui Mithras Petrogenitus și, doar ca mențiuni, de 6 monumente mithraice minore.

Comunitatea mithraică din Apulum era foarte activă epigrafic și artistic în secolele II-III p.Chr. Aici sunt atestați cei mai mulți adoratori ai zeului din toată provincia Dacia cu excepția capitalei Sarmizegetusa, iar din comunitatea de la Apulum făcea parte singurul adorator de rang senatorial al zeului cunoscut din Dacia. Cele 18 monumente mithraice aflate azi în Muzeul de la Alba Iulia, un eșantion semnificativ al celor 50 de monumente mitraice sigure provenind din Apulum, sugerează că, deși cultul lui Mithras era cel mai popular din armata romană, comunitatea – din care cunoaștem cel puțin 30 de indivizi în Apulum - avea și o puternică dimensiune civilă. Mai mult, aceste monumente dovedesc remarcabila flexibilitate a artei provinciale în cadrul unei iconografii a cultului totuși standardizate la scara Imperiului.

²⁴ Carbó García 2010; Szabó 2015a.

²⁵ With Iuppiter Dolichenus; Gordon 2009.

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Note: All figures are captures from 3D models created by Călin Şuteu for the National Museum of the Union in Alba Iulia, Romania, as part of the national programme Pantheon 3D.

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Fig. 1. Three-register tauroctony, Sicoe 2014, catalog no. 30. 3rd c.



Fig. 2. Three-register tauroctony, Sicoe no. 40. Early Severan.

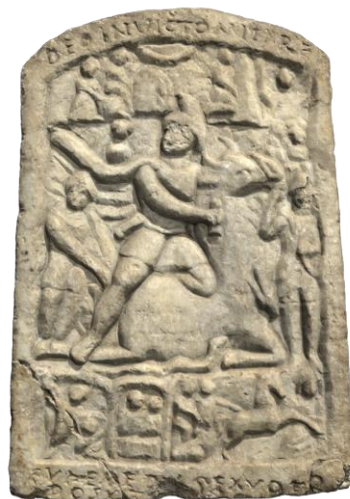


Fig. 3. Three-register tauroctony, Sicoe no. 41. 150-300.



Fig. 4. Mithras Tauroktonos, Sicoe no. 39. Mid-Antoine.



Fig. 5. Mithras Tauroktonos, Sicoe no. 62. 170-190.



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