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## THE RITUAL PRESENTATION OF SYMBOLS OF DIVINITY: POWER IN THE ISIAC AND MITHRAIC MYSTERIES

**Summary:** One of the most important moments in the Isiac and Mithraic mysteries is certainly that which involves the ritual presentation to the initiates of a symbol which served to explain the essence of the divinity. For the Isiac cult, we have the benefit of the famous Herculaneum fresco where a priest is shown presenting, in a very ritual context, a sacred urn, doubtless containing Nile water, the very symbol of Isis. As for the Mithraic cult, we have a by no means less famous source : the text of St. Justin the Martyr which indicates that holy water and bread were shown. Our paper will analyse these two vital source documents and seek to establish, in so far as is possible, the theological content of these acts, as much by reference to the highest degree of initiation into the Mysteries of Eleusis as by consideration of the offering of bread and wine in the Christian eucharist.

**Key words:** Mithra, Isis, divinity, symbol, rite, water, bread, wine, Christianity

Without a shadow of a doubt, a certain unity existed between the principal Mystery Cults of Antiquity. Walter Burkert even spoke of “community” (*koinè*) between these cults.<sup>1</sup> In effect, Apuleius affirms in the *De Magia* that he himself was initiated into most of the mystery cults operating at the time<sup>2</sup> and, in Book XI of his *Metamorphoses*, Lucius is initiated into the Mysteries of Isis by a priest called Mithra.<sup>3</sup>

The fundamental reason for this unity is certainly that which was advanced by Franz Cumont: in his book entitled *Lux Perpetua*, he notes that the promise of salvation, of a life after death, revealed by all the Mystery cults to their initiates was very much a new and critically important departure from the traditional, public religions in the cities of the ancient world.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, regarding all the Mystery cults, he writes: “The Oriental mysteries propagated in the West united in the promise of securing

<sup>1</sup> BURKERT, W.: *Les cultes à mystères dans l'Antiquité*. Paris 1992, 55.

<sup>2</sup> Apuleius, *De magia* 55. 8: *Sacrorum pleraque initia in Graecia participavi*.

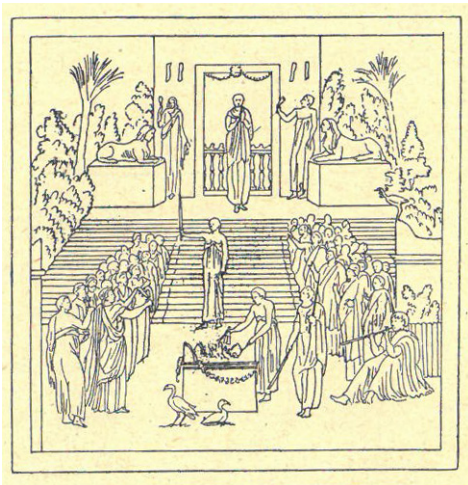
<sup>3</sup> Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI 22. 3: *ipsumque Mithram illum suum (i. e. Isidis) sacerdotem*.

<sup>4</sup> CUMONT, F.: *Lux Perpetua*. Paris 1949, 3.

holiness in this life and felicity in the next, while they imparted to their initiates the knowledge of certain rites and required submission to certain precepts”.<sup>5</sup> This is evidently a correct analysis. But another reason is – I think – a certain liturgical community that existed between them.

In this paper, a rite will be described which is directly comparable in Isiac and Mithraic traditions: the solemn presentation by a priest at the culmination of the liturgy of sacred objects symbolising the power of the divinity. The sources of both rites will be briefly addressed: the one is in the form of an iconograph, the other is a text, and, in conclusion, this paper will endeavor to situate this rite in respect to the Mysteries of Eleusis and in relation to the Christian Eucharist.

It is certain that the Isiac liturgy involved a moment when a priest solemnly presented to the faithful an urn, a *hydria*, doubtless containing Nile water. This rite is attested and illustrated in remarkable detail in a famous fresco from Herculaneum, conserved in Naples Museum (figs a–b).<sup>6</sup>



Towards the back of the image, before the *naos* of the temple, one can see a priest robed in white. He has both hands covered by a cloth and carries, against his chest, a vase which is surely made of gold. To his right stands a priestess, perhaps playing the role of Isis, with a sistrum in her right hand. To his left there is a black priest who is perhaps fulfilling the role of Anubis and also holds a sistrum. A sphynx and palm trees are also visible to left and right. At the centre of the scene are the faithful, arranged in two sets of parallel rows of twenty persons each. Between them stands a man, obviously a priest, his right arm extended in a gesture of authority.

<sup>5</sup> CUMONT, F.: *After Life in Roman Paganism*. New Haven – London – Oxford 1922, 33.

<sup>6</sup> M N inv. 8919 = Plate 40 in TRAN TAM TINH, V.: *Le culte des divinités orientales à Herculaneum*. Leiden 1971.

This may well be a choir-master having the two sets of rows sing a hymn at the moment of the presentation of the sacred Nile water. In any case, it is certainly a collective prayer as the raised hands signify, a prayer of glorification of the deity, perhaps in the form of acclamations. In the foreground there is a flute player dressed in white and another tending the sacrificial fire.<sup>7</sup>

The scene has often been the subject of commentary by various specialists. In 1971 Vincent Tran Tam Tinh made the observation that the urn was a jug, an *hydria*, a view which he supported by reference to that which Apuleius states<sup>8</sup> in § 11 of Book XI of *Metamorphoses*, when he describes the Isiac procession. The following scene constitutes the principal element of this procession:<sup>9</sup>

Another was there that bare in his bosom (thrice happy he!) the venerable figure of the godhead, not formed like any beast, bird, savage thing, or human shape, but made by a new invention, and therefore much to be admired, an emblem ineffable, whereby was signified that such a religion was at once very high and should not be discovered or revealed to any person: thus was it fashioned of shining gold; it was a vessel wrought with a round bottom, and hollowed with wondrous cunning, having on the outside pictures figured like into the manner of the Egyptians.<sup>10</sup>

A vessel in a rounded form is clearly visible in the fresco. It is known from other sources, notably Plutarch<sup>11</sup> and Vitruvius,<sup>12</sup> that the Isiacs had a genuine veneration for water, as for them, water was the underlying principle of the universe.

V. Tran Tam Tinh considers that the vase held by the priest on the fresco symbolizes the presence of Isis and Osiris, which would explain as much the devotion manifested by the faithful as the covered hands with which the priest is holding the vase.<sup>13</sup> Michel Malaise goes even further and, based upon the fact that the Egyptians identified Osiris with Nile water, considers that the conservation of this water at the heart of the sanctuaries ensured the real presence of the god amongst the faithful.<sup>14</sup>

In the absence of firm textual evidence, it would appear prudent to hold with that to which Vitruvius attests about a ceremony which resembles in many respects that which is represented in the fresco:

<sup>7</sup> For the analysis of the rite, see TRAN TAM TINH (n. 6) 29–38.

<sup>8</sup> See TRAN TAM TINH (n. 6) 37.

<sup>9</sup> Translation of ADLINGTON, W.: *The Golden Ass, Being the Metamorphoses of Lucius Apuleius*. Revised by L. GASLEE. London – Cambridge, MA 1965 [LCL], *ad loc.*

<sup>10</sup> Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI 11. 3–4: *Gerebat alius (sacerdos) felici suo gremio summi numinis venerandam effigiem, non pecoris, non avis, non ferae ac ne hominis quidem ipsius consimilem, sed sollerti repertu etiam ipsa novitate reverendam, altioris utcumque et magno silentio tegendae religionis argumentum ineffabile, sed ad istum plane modum fulgente auro figuratam: urnula faberrime cavata, fundo quam rutundo, miris extrinsecus simulacris Aegyptiorum effigiata...*

<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, *De Iside* 36.

<sup>12</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture*. Transl. by F. GRANGER. Vol. II. London – Cambridge, MA 1962 [LCL], VIII *praef.* 4.

<sup>13</sup> TRAN TAM TINH (n. 6) 38.

<sup>14</sup> MALAISE, M.: L'expression du sacré dans les cultes isiaques. In RIES, J. (éd.): *Homo Religiosus III*. Louvain-la-Neuve 1986, 70.

Hence also those who fill priesthoods of the Egyptian tradition show that all things are from the principle of water. Therefore, after carrying water in a vessel (*hydria*) to the precinct and temple with pure reverence, they fall upon the ground, raise their hands to heaven and return thanks to the divine goodwill for its invention.<sup>15</sup>

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A rite comparable in certain respects is attested to in Mithraism and has, of course, been analyzed by many specialists. It is mentioned by Justin the Martyr around 150 AD. In the first book of his *Apologia*, Justin makes a long account of the Eucharist which the Christian community was wont to celebrate after new members joined the cult by means of their baptism.<sup>16</sup> He concludes his remarks with the idea that the devil had counterfeited this practice in the cult of Mithras. He writes: “It is precisely this that evil demons imitated in the tradition of the Mysteries of Mithras. In fact, in these ceremonies of initiation, bread and a cup of water are presented, accompanied by ritual, spoken responses which are known or must be learned”.<sup>17</sup> Tertullian confirms part of this rite. In *De praescriptione hereticorum* XL 1–5 he also asserts that the devil had counterfeited Christian rites in pagan cults in order to subvert people. He goes yet further: “And if I well remember Mithras, he marks the foreheads of his adherents and celebrates the oblation of the bread”.<sup>18</sup>

We do not have any information as to the significance the Mithraists gave to this rite. Even so, one can certainly conjecture that the water and the bread were considered by them to be precious benefits afforded to humanity by Mithras. In fact, a number of Mithraic reliefs depict a rock from which water bursts forth by operation of the arrows of Mithras. One may think, as recalled by Attilio Mastrocinque, that in the Mystery doctrines, primitive man had no knowledge of water and that Mithras gave him this particular gift.<sup>19</sup>

So on a relief, probably realized in Aquilae in the 3rd century AD, we see Mithras shooting an arrow at the rock: the trajectory of the arrow is symbolized by a line. We can also see the springing water and Mithras collecting it, perhaps to give it to mankind.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Vitruvius VIII *praef.* 4: *Ex eo etiam qui sacerdotia gerunt moribus Aegyptiorum ostendunt omnes res e liquoris potestate consistere. Itaque cum hydria aqua ad templum aedemque casta religione profertur, tum in terra procumbentes manibus ad caelum sublatis inventionis gratias agunt divinae benignitati.*

<sup>16</sup> Justin, *Apologia* I 65–66.

<sup>17</sup> Justin, *Apologia* I 66. 4: ὅπερ καὶ ἐν τοῖς τοῦ Μίθρα μυστηρίοις παρέδωκαν γίνεσθαι μιμησάμενοι οἱ πονηροὶ δαίμονες· ὅτι γὰρ ἄρτος καὶ ποτήριον ὕδατος τίθεται ἐν ταῖς τοῦ μουμένου τελεταῖς μετ’ ἐπιλόγων τινῶν, ἢ ἐπίστασθε ἢ μαθεῖν δύνασθε.

<sup>18</sup> Tertullian, *De praescriptione hereticorum* XL 4: *Et si adhuc memini Mithrae, signat illic in frontibus milites suos. Celebrat et panis oblationem.*

<sup>19</sup> MASTROCINQUE, A.: *Des Mystères de Mithra aux Mystères de Jésus* [Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 26]. Stuttgart 2009, 108.

<sup>20</sup> See in CUMONT, F.: *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*. Vol. II. Bruxelles 1886, 336, fig. 213.

As far as the bread is concerned, it must be remembered that the principal Mithraic motif of Mithras putting to death the sacrificial bull, the Tauroctony, shows the animal at the crucial moment of world history with a tail ending in three ears of wheat: it was obviously considered that the bull's blood had fertilized the earth and had made plant life grow, in which wheat assumed pre-eminent importance as a foodstuff for mankind.<sup>21</sup>

The formulae of which Justin spoke could well signify, as Robert Turcan wrote, that a consecration of the water and the bread was involved.<sup>22</sup> The word *oblatio* as used by Tertullian clearly indicates that there was an "offering" of bread in the liturgical sense of the term, perhaps with a meaning close to the "oblation of the bread" in the Christian context. No matter what, it is clear that the water and the bread took on a particularly important religious significance in Mithraism.

Water and bread were shown to the faithful for the purpose of veneration, as appears from the verb employed by Justin: they were, so he says, "presented", *τίθεται*, to the assembly. Perhaps what then happened was in accord with Justin's testimony about the Christian liturgy immediately after the consecration of bread and wine: "All the people express their agreement by their acclamations".<sup>23</sup>

Can more be said about the mystical state of these offerings? Franz Cumont speaks of the "oblation of bread and water with which undoubtedly wine was afterward mixed".<sup>24</sup> He thinks that, once completed, the offering had a mystical and powerful effect upon the initiates, notably at Mithraic banquets, the importance of which is well recognized:

These feasts are evidently the ritual commemoration of the banquet which Mithra celebrated with the Sun before his ascension. From this mystical banquet, and especially from the imbibing of the sacred wine, supernatural effects were expected. The intoxicating liquor gave not only vigor of body and material prosperity, but wisdom of mind; it communicated to the neophyte the power to combat the malignant spirits, and what is more, conferred upon him as upon the god a glorious immortality.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, suggests the author, the banquet in the course of which the offerings were presented was the occasion of the renewal of the alliance which united the initiates with the god and which united each other, notably by means of the gesture of the *dextrarum iunctio*.<sup>26</sup> "as a sign of his pact with the Sun-god, Mithras gives his right hand to the companion and the initiate is the imitator of Mithra who, by giving

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the famous relief of Heddernheim, published in REINACH, S.: *Répertoire de reliefs grecs et romains*. Vol. II. Paris 1912, 93.

<sup>22</sup> TURCAN, R.: *Les rites orientaux dans le monde romain*. Paris 1989, 228.

<sup>23</sup> Justin, *Apologia* I 65. 3: *πᾶς ὁ παρὼν λαὸς ἐπευφημεί*.

<sup>24</sup> CUMONT, F.: *The Mysteries of Mithra*. New York 1956<sup>2</sup>, 158.

<sup>25</sup> CUMONT: *The Mysteries* (n. 24) 160.

<sup>26</sup> About the *dextrarum iunctio* in Mithraic context, see VERMASEREN, M. J.: *Mithras, the Secret God*. London 1963; about this gesture overall, see FREYBURGER, G.: *Fides. Etude sémantique et religieuse depuis les origines jusqu'à l'époque augustéenne*. Paris 2009<sup>2</sup>, 140 sq., 194 sq.

his right hand in accordance with Persian custom, concludes the pact and confirms the oath”.<sup>27</sup>

I am not going to pronounce further on this matter<sup>28</sup> and will resist the temptation to offer personal opinion as to the precise religious role of the Mithraic offerings, as I did earlier in respect to those of Isis. However, it seems to me to be important to assert that there existed a notable liturgical parallelism between the Isiac and Mithraic rites: symbols of divinity power were presented in both cases.

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I now would like to draw more specific conclusions relating the Isiac and the Mithraic Mysteries, on the one hand to the Mysteries of Eleusis, and on the other to Christianity.

The Mysteries of Eleusis were probably the model for the ulterior Mysteries. Now in Eleusis one of the principal phases of the ritual of initiation (certainly the most important) was the presentation before the new initiates of the sacred objects: the *hiera*.<sup>29</sup> We do not, in fact, know exactly what these objects were, but we do know that they were carefully hidden from the eyes of the profane. It is known that the initiates were presented with an ear of wheat, as a symbol of the gift of Demeter. Besides, the principal rite in the second degree of the initiation of Eleusis gave this practice an even greater importance as it was called *epopteia*<sup>30</sup> “contemplation”, i.e., of the *hiera*, and doubtless of the ear of wheat.<sup>31</sup>

The Mysteries of Eleusis, Isis and Mithra all share a solemn presentation to their initiates of the gift considered to be the greatest of the all gifts offered to mankind by the divinities: wheat in the Mysteries of Eleusis, water in those of Isis, and bread and water in those of Mithras. The solemnity of the presentation of these elements suggests that they had a sacred character in each of these Mysteries. It seems to me, as has been shown, to be somewhat hazardous, given the state of current documentation on the subject, to be more specific as to the nature of this sacred character. The important feature of this enquiry has been to show the existence of a rite of presentation of symbols of divine power in each of the three Mysteries.

Christian liturgy involved, and still involves, such a presentation to the faithful with the role of the sacred bread and wine. However, the Christian eucharist possesses a very specific theological content and a particular religious significance without link to the Mysteries of Eleusis, Isis and Mithras. Specifically the consecrated bread and wine are considered as the body and the blood of Christ himself. But there was doubtless a certain community of liturgical forms between Christianity and those three Mystery cults. So all these religions bear common witness as to how strong was

<sup>27</sup> CUMONT: *The Mysteries* (n. 24) 175.

<sup>28</sup> About the astral and cosmic beliefs in Mithracism, see BECK, R.: *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire. Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*. Oxford 2006, 102–189.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. FREYBURGER, G. – FREYBURGER, M.-L. – TAUTIL, J.-C.: *Sectes religieuses dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine*. Paris 2006<sup>2</sup>, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. DIMOU, A.: *La déesse Korè-Perséphone: mythe, culte et magie en Attique* [Collection Recherches sur les Rhétoriques Religieuses]. Turnhout 2016, 188.

<sup>31</sup> DIMOU (n. 30) 188.

the desire of the faithful to be in the presence of the divine mystery in a new and much closer way than the traditional, public, city religions afforded.<sup>32</sup>

But other similarities existed between the “pagan Mysteries and the Christian Mysteries”<sup>33</sup> concerning the rites themselves and the conception of salvation.<sup>34</sup> It would seem that, thanks to liturgy and certain attitudes operating within the respective religious communities, the Isiac or Mithraic believer could move more easily towards Christianity than a pagan who had only knowledge and experience of his city’s public cult.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. FREYBURGER–FREYBURGER–TAUTIL (n. 27) 2–22 and 168.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. LOISYM, A.: *Les myst res pa ens et le myst re chr tien*. Paris 1930<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. JAIME, A. ET AL.: *Cristianismo primitivo y religiones misticas*. Madrid 1995, *passim*.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. FREYBURGER, G.: Les religions   myst res dans l’Empire romain. In LEHMANN, Y. ( d.): *Religions de l’Antiquit *. Paris 1999, 342–343.

