

## VIEWING MITHRAIC ART: THE ALTAR FROM BURGINATIUM (KALKAR), GERMANIA INFERIOR

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Despite its undoubted fascination for some historians of religion, Mithraic art has not in general been highly regarded. It is repetitive, provincial, often poorly executed, above all, eclectic and derivative. Mithraic artefacts, 'produits commerciaux d'un travail mercenaire',<sup>1</sup> are prominently displayed mainly in those provincial museums grateful for any authentic ancient sculpture; otherwise, if not actually lost or mislaid, they mostly gather dust in vaults and repositories. But, given a different art history, things might alter. It has, for example, recently been argued that Mithraic art is important because it represents a significant step in the slow transformation of ancient into late antique art.<sup>2</sup> This process is envisaged as one in which form ceases to evoke shared, public meanings that in turn summarize densely inter-related cultural values, and yields meaning solely to those who know, who hold a key issued to the few only. To understand such art, you must be instructed, initiated as we say - it requires special exegesis. Form exists mainly to illustrate knowledge constructed elsewhere.

As a way of formulating an art history based not upon aesthetic criteria but upon viewer's response - a move we can surely welcome, - the thesis has merit; but it gains much of its plausibility in choosing to oppose a very broadly conceived category 'ancient art' to a narrowly conceived 'Christian art'. If we were to take as our terms of comparison 'ancient religious art' - even of the Archaic period - and Christian art, it would already look shakier. For ancient religious art of all periods often required special knowledge for its interpretation, its resistance to cursory inspection being a figure for the implied value of

I have used the following abbreviations:

CIMRM = M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (The Hague, 1956-60), 2 vols.; Schwertheim, *Denkmäler = D. Schwertheim, Die Denkmäler orientalischer Gottheiten im römischen Deutschland* EPRO 40 (Leyden, 1974).

<sup>1</sup> F. Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs au culte de Mithra* (Brussels, 1894-99), 213-20, at 216.

<sup>2</sup> J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: the transformation of art from the pagan world to Christianity* (Cambridge, 1995), 210-21.

the insight withheld. The extent to which special exegesis was required, however, was closely dependent upon the location of the artefact on the continuum civic → private religion, that is, upon the degree of institutional specialisation within the religious sector. For it certainly seems to be the case that the invention of the cult-relief and the development of the mythological sarcophagus mark, in their different ways, an increase in the degree to which exegesis was required.<sup>3</sup> Mithraic art fits into this schematic picture, for virtually none of its claims was comprehensible without the structure of initiatory knowledge which was the indispensable adjunct to the figurative language.

We must nevertheless beware of exaggerating the difference between an art that requires exegesis and one that makes use of techniques of allusiveness and suggestion familiar to us from classical art as a whole. The cult of Mithras without question constructed a special world, whose difference from the wider world is emblematised by the temple, called the *spelaeum*, cave, a space entirely at odds with the norms encapsulated in the civic temple, a space where, on the one hand, nature is an emblem or metaphor, and, on the other, artifice seeks to imitate nature.<sup>4</sup> But a good deal of Mithraic art is not so much pedagogic or instructive as evocative, in much the same way as other Hellenistic and Roman religious art also is. Such art does not require exegesis in the ordinary sense, nor is it amenable to it. Rather, it evokes for the worshipper an entire set of experiences, a religious life, a project, a rôle. It is an art that does not so much privilege an exegete as evoke a world of imbricated associations, closely linked to personal meanings generated by the experience of ritual performance.

We can illustrate this claim by examining a modest monument from Germania Inferior found some fifteen years ago, but hitherto almost completely neglected in general discussion of the mysteries. What survives is the base for a bronze statue (*aes*) in the form of a votive altar, in the red sandstone of the North Eifel, a stray find ploughed up in 1983 near the site of the auxiliary castellum at Burginatium (Alt-Kalkar) near Kalkar in the Landkreis Kleve, Nordrhein-Westfalen, in the Rhine valley just by the Dutch border.<sup>5</sup> It thus enjoys the distinction of being the most northerly *in situ* Mithraic find on the Continent. The face is occupied by a dedicatory inscription of some interest, since

<sup>3</sup> E. Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain* BEFAR 183 (Paris, 1955); M. Koortbojian, *Myth, Meaning and Memory on Roman Sarcophagi* (Berkeley, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Porphyry, *de antro nymph.* 6, p. 8.20-23, Arethusa, p. 44.27-46.2, Simonini = F. Cumont and J. Bidez, *Les mages hellénisés* (Brussels and Paris, 1938), 2: 29, frg. B18 = Numenius frg. dout. 60 des Places.

<sup>5</sup> H. 116, W. 76, D. 33 cm, now in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, inv. nr. F 1/84; further details in H. G. Horn, 'Eine Mithras-weiheung vom Niederrhein,' *Ausgrabungen im Rheinland 1983/84* Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn: Kunst und Altertum am Rhein nr. 122 (Cologne and Bonn, 1985), 151-55 = id., *Das Rheinische Landesmuseum Bonn: Berichte aus der Arbeit des Museums* 4 (1985), 50-1. The fuller publication by Christoph Rüger referred to there seems never to have appeared. I am grateful to Dr. G. Bauchhens for assistance in obtaining photographs.

its reference to Mithras commanding a specific votive helps to resolve a minor puzzle in the Mithraic epigraphy of the area:

D(eo) I(nvicto) I(mperatori)  
 Ulp(ius) · ( Am(---) · ( p(ater)  
 s(acrorum) aes · ex ius-  
 su · ip·sius

Letter heights: l.1: 7.5 cm; remainder: 6 cm.

One or two remarks on this text are in order before I pass on to my main concern.<sup>6</sup> The first editor, H. G. Horn, suggested, without offering his reasons, that the first line be expanded *D(eo) I(nvicto) I(mperatori)*.<sup>7</sup> Fairly good grounds may in fact be offered for this choice. In the northern part of Roman Germany there occurs a small group of texts which almost certainly use the word *imperator* as an epithet for Mithras and related divinities. One, from the mithraeum at Durnomagus (Dormagen), on the Rhine somewhat to the South of Burginatum, reads *d(eo) S(oli) i(nvicto) imp*.<sup>8</sup> Two others come from mithraeum I at Taunum (Friedberg) on the *limes*, one addressed *Soli invicto imp.*, the other *Virtuti (dei) invicti imp.*<sup>9</sup> Since the middle of the last century, there have been two main views of the most appropriate expansion of *imp*. One, which apparently goes back to Fr. Fiedler, proposed (*ex imp(erio)*), taken to be the equivalent of *ex iussu*.<sup>10</sup> Hettner<sup>11</sup> and then Cumont accepted this, and, on the authority of the latter, specialists in Mithraic studies have done the same.<sup>12</sup> The other view was

<sup>6</sup> The other inscriptions from Burginatum are collected in *CIL* XIII 8.661-84.

<sup>7</sup> Horn (op. cit. n.5), 154.

<sup>8</sup> *CIL* XIII 8.523 = *CIMRM* 1.013 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 8a. The view that *CIL* XIII 8524 = 1015 = 8b should be read *Deo Soli imp. SI* has long been abandoned.

<sup>9</sup> T. Goldmann, 'Der Mithraskult und die Mithräen in Friedberg,' *Archiv der historischen Geschichte und Altertumskunde* NF 2 (1895), 311-4. *CIL* XIII 7571a = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 86f (Wiesbaden) is surely irrelevant in this connection; cf. E. Sauer, *The End of Paganism in the NW Provinces of the Roman Empire: the example of the Mithras cult* BAR Int. Series 634 (Oxford, 1996), 11f.

<sup>10</sup> Fr. Fiedler, 'Durnomagus und dessen Denkmäler der Römerzeit,' *JVA* 21 (1854), 29-56, at p. 47f., suggesting *imp(erio)* or *imp(ensa sua)*. I have not been able to consult the original publication by G. Dorow, *Tübinger Kunstblatt* 2 (1821), 359 n°90.

<sup>11</sup> F. Hettner, *Katalog des königlich rheinischen Museums vaterländischer Alterthümer bei der Universität Bonn* (Bonn, 1876), n° 70 (the Dormagen text), showing that *imp.* before the dedicatory's name did in some cases mean (*ex imp(erio)*).

<sup>12</sup> Cumont, *Textes* (op. cit. n°.1) 2: 473 ad n. 248b, cf. 158, n°. 462; *CIMRM* 1.013 with note; 1.063, 1.065; Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 8a; 47g, h. I have not seen Susanne Korn, *Die Mithräen von Friedberg (Wetterau)* unpublished (Magisterarbeit 1997), Frankfurt aM. In two other possibly relevant cases, *CIMRM* 1455 = *CIL* III 5.195 *ex imp[...]* (Celje; Noricum) and 1.970 = *CIL* III 14.475, *ex i]mperi(o)* (Apulum *canabae*), the form excludes any doubt of the intention, but it is precisely this absence which makes the North German group interesting. The Celje text is not in D. Schön, *Orientalische Kulte im römischen Österreich* (Vienna, 1988), and is anyway considered to belong to the cult of the Mater Magna by G. Alföldy, *Epigraphische Studien* 8 (Düsseldorf, 1969), 2 n°3.

that of Th. Goldmann, who conducted the final excavation at Friedberg, and held that Mithras was given the name or epithet *imp(erator)* in this area because he was identified with the emperor M. Aurelius.<sup>13</sup> Zangemeister, when preparing this part of the Corpus in 1905, supported Goldmann's expansion, though perhaps not his reasoning.<sup>14</sup> The new inscription's use of the expression *ex iussu* tends strongly to confirm Goldmann's and Zangemeister's suspicion of (*ex*) *imp(erio)*. That in itself, however, would not support the expansion *imp(erator)* in any of these cases. But in 1978 Peter Herz published a fragmentary Mithraic text from Mogontiacum (Mainz), whose invocation he read as *[De]o Invicto | [conserv]ato[ri]*.<sup>15</sup> Now *conservator* would be an unattested (though not an implausible) epithet for Mithras, and, given the wider context sketched above, it seems much more likely that the word should be read *impera]tor[ri]*. Herz's inscription offers, we may guess, the full form of *imp.* for which everyone has been waiting.

Given its provenance from North of Dormagen, then, the most likely expansion of *D I I* in the new text is *D(eo) I(invicto) I(mperatori)*, which we may take to have been a locally fashionable epithet for a period at the end of the second and early third centuries, illustrating incidentally how individuals might bring with them new knowledge of Mithraic practice from elsewhere as they moved about. Three of these texts (those from Dormagen and Friedberg) are by serving soldiers, and the invocation *Virtuti (dei) invicti imp(eratoris)* clearly implies a conscious allusion to imperial theology. We may surmise that just as the epithet *invictus* comes in this period to be included in the informal (and sometimes the formal) nomenclature of the emperors, so *imperator* came to seem a suitable means of expressing Mithras' contribution, through victory, to the wellbeing, preservation, salvation of the world.<sup>16</sup> The word is another aspect of the confluence between cult

<sup>13</sup> Goldmann (op. cit. n° 9), 312f.

<sup>14</sup> *CIL XIII* 7399, 7400: 'imperio non recte interpretatus est Cumont'. This view has been accepted by the military epigraphers, e. g. G. Alföldy, *Die Hilfstruppen der römischen Provinz Germania Inferior* Epigraphische Studien 6 (Düsseldorf, 1968), 182 n°. 53 (the Dormagen text); E. Schallmayer et al., *Der römische Weihebezirk von Osterburken, I: Corpus der griechischen und lateinischen Beneficiärer-Inschriften des römischen Reiches* (Stuttgart, 1990) nos. 103-4 (Friedberg texts). H. Dessau, however, who constructed the Religion index for *CIL XIII*, seems to have had his doubts: under *invictus imp(erator)* he writes 'si vere imp. ita intellegendum'.

<sup>15</sup> P. Herz, *Mainzer Zeitschrift* 73/4 (1978-9), 278 n°. 6 = *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2 (1978), 184 n°. 1 = *AE* 1979: 426 = Franz, *CSIRGerm. Sup.* 2/4 n°. 111, pl. 92.2.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. Alföldy, *Die monarchische Repräsentation im römischen Kaiserreich* (Darmstadt, 1970), 208; on acclamation of emperors by troops, J. B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army, 31 BC-AD 235* (Oxford, 1984), 122-28. I am thinking principally of informal acclamations to Caracalla such as the well-known rock-cut '*Invicte imp. Antonine Pie Felix Aug. multis annis imperet!*' at Berytus: *CIL III* 207 = *ILS* 5.865a; cf. VI 674 = 3.543, by a member of the imperial *familia*. There is a striking coincidence between the abbreviation IMP of imperial titlature, clearly visible from a computer-generated index such as *ILLPRON* (1986), 2: 330f., and the abbreviation at Friedberg and Dormagen.

and imperial theology already pointed out by Manfred Clauss in relation to Sol Invictus.<sup>17</sup> We shall have cause to examine other similar links in what follows.

Another possible approach should however be discussed briefly. *Deo I I M*, which might obviously be related to the new text, occurs once elsewhere, at Monastero near Aquileia. Mommsen, followed by Cumont and Vermaseren, considered that *invicto* had most likely been iterated here by mistake.<sup>18</sup> T. Nagy, followed by Manfred Clauss, suggested *I(nvicto) I(nsuperabili)*.<sup>19</sup> Against *insuperabilis*, despite its highly appropriate connotations (its semantic range extends from 'unconquerable' to 'highest'), we must count the fact that it is otherwise attested as an epithet of Mithras only on a late fourth- or fifth-century fragmentary metrical inscription found by Lanciani on the Quirinal in Rome.<sup>20</sup> The most plausible account of the Monastero invocation, however, is to my mind Alföldy's, who suggested *Deo i(nvicto), i(nvicto) M(ithrae)*, a parataxis of two common, though normally separate, titles for the god.<sup>21</sup> But this will not do for our text from Burginatum. If we reject *imperator*, the only word that has a better claim than *insuperabilis* is the preternaturally rare *indeprehensibilis*, which, according to the dictionaries, occurs in the required sense 'that cannot be caught (unawares)', only on a late-second century Mithraic relief, found by Robert Fagan at Ostia in the late XVIIIth century.<sup>22</sup> The evidence for the epithet *indeprehensibilis* as a Mithraic term thus derives from a period much closer to that of the Burginatum altar than *insuperabilis*. But the decisive objection must be that it is found uniquely at Ostia, and is thus to be counted as part of a local Mithraic 'idiolect' there.<sup>23</sup> A similar argument must apply to *insuperabilis*.

After some hesitation, I accept Horn's and Clauss' expansion of *p(ater) s(acrorum)*,<sup>24</sup> since that title is explicitly attested in the first half of the third century at Bingium (Bingen) in Germania Superior;<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> M. Clauss, 'Sol Invictus Mithras,' *Athenaeum* 78 (1990), 423-50.

<sup>18</sup> Resp.: *CIL* V 805; Cumont, *Textes* (op. cit. n.1), 123 n°. 169, 'le sens est douteux'; *CIMRM* 741.

<sup>19</sup> *ArchErt* 85 (1958), 111, cf. *CIMRM* 2: 34 s. v. 741; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae* HABES 10 (Stuttgart, 1992), 62 n°.10.

<sup>20</sup> *EE* 4. 866 = *CIMRM* 376.

<sup>21</sup> G. Alföldy, 'Eine Mithras-inschrift aus Aquileia, *CIL* V 805,' *ZPE* 29 (1978), 157-60 = *AE* 1978: 360.

<sup>22</sup> *CIL* XIV 64 = *CIMRM* 311. The correct reading is *sig(num) · indeprehensivilis · dei*; dated from *CIL* XIV 65 = *ILS* 4212 = *CIMRM* 313 (A. D. 190).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. R. L. Gordon, 'Mystery, metaphor and doctrine in the Mysteries of Mithras,' in J. R. Hinnells (ed.) *Studies in Mithraism* (Rome, 1994), 103-24, at 119-21.

<sup>24</sup> Horn (op. cit. n°. 5), *ibid*; Clauss (op. cit. n°. 19), 98. Clauss rightly rejects Horn's proposed expansion of the cognomen to Am(andus). There are several other possibilities.

<sup>25</sup> *AE* 1923: 34 = *CIMRM* 1.243 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 108c. *Pater sacrorum* is mainly a late fourth-century term, but does occur rarely in Mithraic contexts during the third century: *AE* 1950: 199 = *CIMRM* 423.3 (S. Lorenzo in Damaso, Rome); *CIL* III 6.128 = *AE* 1900: 15 = *CIMRM* 2.250 (Oescus, Moesia Inf.); compare *CIL* VI 507 = *CIMRM* 523 (Rome, A. D. 313), preserved only in a copy.

but *p(ecunia) s(ua)* cannot be excluded, though it would be unusual to find it in this position in the dedication.<sup>26</sup> The purely decorative interpunct within *ipsius* makes the last line optically longer and so emphasizes the reference back to the god's intervention. Allusion to the god's personal command, transmitted typically in a dream, is not common in Mithraic epigraphy except in the Danubian provinces, occurring only twice in the whole of Italy, for example.<sup>27</sup> In the German provinces the only cases hitherto known are at Mainz, at Dieburg in the Agri Decumates and possibly Günzburg on the Danube near Ulm (Raetia).<sup>28</sup> The cutting and organisation of the text suggest a date in the first third of the third century A. D.



In the present context however the significant feature of the altar is its lateral faces (the back was left rough). The right hand side shows (fig. 1), beneath a moulding, a schematic victory crown in laurel, with fillet and central disk, surmounted by seven rays. Within the crown is a lighted lamp with a high base and vertical handle. Supporting these is a staff with a slightly thickened top perhaps suggesting a whip; beside it, at the bottom, is a globe with a schematic representation of the celestial equator crossing the ecliptic. This symbolism evidently refers, in a very general manner, to the place of Helios-Sol in the cult. On the left side (fig. 2), we find a bow in the resting position but armed with an arrow, and below it a krater, apparently thought of as made of metal, with a high base similar to that of the lamp on the other side, and elaborately decorated with repoussé whorls, encircled by a snake, whose crested head is about to enter its mouth. This face evidently links Mithras' water miracle with the krater, which occurs on a number of representations of the feast-scene, and thus refers to Mithras' saving acts. The two lateral faces thus contrast, while uniting, Helios-Sol and Mithras.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> See the photograph in Horn, fig. 85. In l.2, *AM·P* are crammed closely together; there is no interpunct after *p* or *s*; but *AM·PSAES* is not an intelligible cognomen. The absence of interpunct might support the reading *p(ecunia) s(ua)*, since one would expect *p(ater) s(acrorum)* to have been emphasized visually.

<sup>27</sup> *CIL* V 8997, re-read by Pais, *Suppl.* 892 = *CIMRM* 704 (Novara); *AE* 1950: 199 = *CIMRM* 423: *Hic locus est felix, sanctus, piusque benignus | quem monuit Mithras mentemque dedit | Proficientio patri sacrorum | utque sibi spelaeum faceret dedicaretque...* (S. Lorenzo in Damaso, Rome). The only case in Spain seems to be the recently re-read text *AE* 1984: 487 (Emerita Aug.).

<sup>28</sup> Mainz: *AE* 1979: 426 l.7 (see above, n° 15); Dieburg: *CIMRM* 1.252 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 123e = H. Castritius, M. Clauss, L. Hefner, *Die römischen Steininschriften des Odenwaldes* (Breuberg-Neustadt, 1977) n° 148 (*ex iussu*), and doubtless 1251 = 123d = 187 (*ex [iussu]*); Günzburg: *CIL* III 5.865 = *CIMRM* 1.395 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 181, where the last line was virtually unreadable, and the stone has disappeared.

<sup>29</sup> An apparently analogous thought seems to be offered by the pair of 'foundation altars dedicated at Trier by the *pater* Martius Martialis, one of which shows Mithras' phrygian cap crossing a dagger, the other Helios-Sol's radiate crown: *CIMRM* 986-7 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 190c-d with pl. 53.



1. Altar from Burginatum, right hand side (photo: Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn)



2. Altar from Burginatum, left hand side (photo: Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn)

Now 'listing' highly charged images is common in Mithraic art. Elsewhere in Germania Inferior, there is a fragmentary altar from the NE civilian settlement at Cologne (Mithraeum II), whose left hand side bears a similar globe framed by two rods or whips, arranged on a garlanded altar.<sup>30</sup> The well-known monument from the Altbachtal at Trier (fig. 3), showing Mithras petragenes within the six Northern or summer signs of the zodiac, is surmounted by a false pediment showing the snake and krater in the centre, flanked to the left by a lion, to the right by a group: lightning bolt, globe and cup.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the closest analogies to the Burginatium monument come however from the Danube area: a small votive altar from Mithraeum I at Poetovio (Ptuj) in Dalmatia 'lists' a star, raven, bow, phrygian cap and dagger (in descending order) on its left face (fig. 4).<sup>32</sup> From Carnuntum there is a small votive altar showing the raven above a snake, from whose coils grows an ear of wheat; on the right face, a lion.<sup>33</sup> Similar 'lists' can be found on ritual vessels and gems.<sup>34</sup>

It seems to me wrong to suppose that a precise programme lies behind such images: they evoke no single ritual nor any specific incident in mythical narrative. On the other hand, they are not merely random. They function much more as do, say, the icons of public sacrifice that adorned the entablature of the temple of Vespasian in the Forum Romanum,<sup>35</sup> or the Arcus Argentariorum in the Forum Boarium,<sup>36</sup> or indeed any representation of state sacrifice (which are, in my view, only in the most diffuse sense records of actual events). In the case of the altar from Burginatium, the individual objects evoke a whole range of Mithraic imagery and ritual practice without being reducible to any brief statement or credo. They amount in fact to a

<sup>30</sup> G. Ristow, *Mithras im römischen Köln* EPRO 42 (Leyden, 1974) 25f. n°. 23, with pl. IV, fig. 5 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 11b with pl. 4 = R. Merkelbach, *Mithras* (Königstein/Ts., 1984), fig. 98.

<sup>31</sup> CIMRM 985 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 190b with pl. 53 = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n°. 30), fig. 90; cf. R. L. Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* EPRO 109 (Leyden, 1988), 39-42. Note also at Trier, Schwertheim, 197 (front) [fig. 16 here].

<sup>32</sup> CIMRM 1.496 = P. Selem, *Les religions orientales dans la Pannonie romaine* EPRO 85 (Leyden, 1980), 102f., II.37 with pl. XXI.

<sup>33</sup> CIMRM 1.706 = M. Krüger, *CSIRÖsterr.* 1/3 (1970) n°. 183, pl. 20 = Schön, *Österreich* (op. cit. n°. 12), 52 n°. 53.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., from outside the city wall of Cologne, a krater showing Mithras with the torchbearers, snake and stars: Ristow (op. cit. n°. 21), 22 n°. 14, fig. 19 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 15a with pl. 5; a krater with scorpion, ladder with 3 rungs, snake, from Friedberg: CIMRM 1.061 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 471; a shard at Mainz showing Mithras behind a bull: Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 94, pl. 23 (top); black-glaze vessel with various figures, from the Altbachtal, Trier, now lost: Schwertheim 193, fig. 25. Gems: CIMRM 2.354 (Florence); 2.355 (Udine).

<sup>35</sup> H. Stuart Jones, *The Sculptures of the Museo Capitolino* (Oxford, 1912), 261f., pl. 61 = Stanza dei Filosofi n°. 100, 104; also R. Turcan, *Religion romaine* Iconography of Religions 17 (Leyden, 1988), 2: 17f. fig. 8 (fragment in the Tabularium). The altar of Vespasian from Pompeii (I. Scott Ryberg, *Rites of the State Religion in Roman Art* (Rome, 1955), fig. 38b) offers an abbreviated, but in principle similar, 'list'.

<sup>36</sup> Turcan, *ibid.*, p. 18 n°. 10.



3. The false pediment on the petragenes monument with zodiac, Trier, *CIMRM* 985 (detail)



4. Mithraic list, altar from Poetovio I, right hand side, *CIMRM* 1.496 (detail)

kind of 'visual catechism', each in turn acting as a tacit stimulus to an implied discourse which would ultimately, given time enough and patience, comprehend the entire fictive world constructed by the Mysteries. Much the same might be said of images relating to the sacrifice, the central ritual act in Graeco-Roman religious practice.

In the space available to me here, I can only very rapidly sketch this suggestive or evocative mode. It may also seem that in what follows I am simply making the best of the fact that we, as students of Graeco-Roman mystery religions, necessarily -if we are to keep within the limits of what we can possibly know rather than delight a crowd with pretty stories- remain outside the world evoked by such imagery, peering into a window, hardly able to catch even a word of the conversation. But the very fact that the Mithraists found themselves compelled to use items taken from the wider range of Graeco-Roman iconography means that we can often guess the gist, even if we cannot overhear the details:

I have observed that the primary reference of the images on the right hand panel is to Helios-Sol. But as we look more closely, it becomes clear that the situation is more complicated. For the crown refers also to the idea of victory. As a *στέφανος ἐπινίκιος*, it glances both at Mithras-Sol's epithet *Invictus* and to the claim that motivates the Mithraic choice of the imagery of Nike-Victoria to give iconic form to Mithras' foundational act.<sup>37</sup> This latter allusion, to the significance of Mithras' victory over the bull, becomes explicit in those cases where the victor's crown is used as a frame for the bull-killing icon, as it does repeatedly in Germany and in the Danube area, though not in Italy (fig. 5).<sup>38</sup> This frame-crown alludes in turn both to the '*clupeus votarum*' of imperial victory imagery,<sup>39</sup> and, more loosely, to the medallion, the characteristic honorific frame of the Principate. The force of the Mithraic crown-as-frame is derived partly from its association with these public, imperial, images. That such associations were at least partly conscious is suggested by the discovery at Stockstadt I of a small relief depicting Victoria inscribing a trophy-shield, resting on a

<sup>37</sup> Cf. N. Kunisch, *Die stiertötende Nike: typengeschichtliche und mythologische Untersuchungen* (Diss. Munich, 1964).

<sup>38</sup> *CIMRM* 1.216 = Schwertheim 117g (Stockstadt II). Note also: 1.128 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 62l = I. Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Heddernheim* (Frankfurt aM, 1985), 80 n°. 42 (Heddernheim III) [Schwertheim says 'Ährenkranz', but Frau Zetsche rightly takes it to be a 'Blattkranz']; 1.475 (Siscia); 1.797 (Budapest); 1.815 (Sárkeszi); 2.044 (Sarmizegetusa); 2.202 (Biljanovac); 2.241 (Pautalia); 2.292 (Acunur). *CIMRM* 1.958 (Apulum) (= R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacisme* 2 (Paris, 1993), pl. 5), and perhaps 1926 (Potaissa), cf. 2.159 (Dierna), neatly reconcile cave with wreath.

<sup>39</sup> E. g. the '*clupeus votarum*' on the cut-down relief in Florence probably commemorating Hadrian's *vicennalia* of 137: Ryberg, *Rites* (op. cit. n°. 27), 131f. with fig. 71; T. Hölscher, *Victoria Romana* (Mainz, 1967), 117f. The device derives from the *clupeus* voted to Augustus in 27 B. C., depicted held by Victoria on the Belvedere altar (12-2 B.C.): M. Beard, J. North, S. R. F. Price, *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge, 1998), 1: 187, fig. 4.3(c).



5. Crown as 'cave', *CIMRM* 1.216 (Stockstadt II, detail)

post.<sup>40</sup> This image is borrowed, directly or indirectly, from one of the many coin-types that seek to convey the central rôle of imperial victory, as *Victoria Augusta*, in maintaining the collective well-being, *salus*, of the Empire.<sup>41</sup> It has even been suggested that, at any rate in the first crisis of the Empire in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the type of *Victoria* inscribing connotes a real or actual victory as opposed to the purely routine invocation of a stereotype.<sup>42</sup> The Stockstadt relief, which must have been especially commissioned, suggests that one Mithraic community at least saw a connection between the Mithraic claim about Mithras' act and the political theology which represented imperial victory as the guarantor of the moral and political order.

Celebration of Mithras' victory is also conveyed by other images. Beneath a *Nama* dipinto at Dura-Europos, the name ΜΙΘΡΑΣ is enclosed in a crown with long fillets (fig. 6), as at Burginatum.<sup>43</sup> A petra-

<sup>40</sup> F. Drexel, *Das Kastell Stockstadt* ORL Abt.B, 3 n°. 33 (Heidelberg, 1910), 87f. n°. 25 with pl. XV.5 = *CIMRM* 1181 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* n°. 116u.

<sup>41</sup> E. g. J. R. Fears, 'The theology of Victory at Rome: approaches and problems,' *ANRW* II.17.2 (1981), 736-826 at 812f.

<sup>42</sup> A. Bianchi, 'La "Vittoria" nella propaganda monetaria dell'età di M. Aurelio (161-80),' *Annali Ist. Ital. Numism.* 18/19 (1971-2), 153-73.

<sup>43</sup> M. I. Rostovtzeff, F. E. Brown, and C. B. Welles (eds.) *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work 1933-34 and*

genes statue probably from Rome shows the infant god gesturing with his left hand towards a similar crown enclosing the word *Nama* (fig. 7).<sup>44</sup> These images evoke at one level the practice, well-established in the Greek-speaking world since the mid-fourth century B. C. (though individual examples can be found earlier), of awarding crowns to persons of particular civic or military distinction, a practice which was extended to the gods' statues.<sup>45</sup> They draw too upon the non-specific image of Victoria extending a wreath.<sup>46</sup> But in context they must also allude to one of the very few Mithraic rituals of which we know anything, the offer of a crown on the point of a sword, and its rejection by the initiate into the grade Miles, Soldier, with the utterance '*Mithras est corona mea*'.<sup>47</sup>

This ritual is clearly a sign of difference. Both in the Greek and the Roman worlds it was common at sacrifice for the participants to wear crowns. We also know that the wearing of crowns came to be a means of constructing difference in some mystery-cults: at Eleusis, whereas ordinary initiates wore a simple crown of myrtle, the hierophants (and of course emperors) wore a strophion as well; in the mysteries at Andania the cult-personnel wore different headgear from the crowns of ordinary participants.<sup>48</sup> That is, the idea that status might be shown by playing variations on the theme of the crown was available within the thought-world of the Mysteries of Mithras. But the immediate ins-

1934-35 (New Haven, 1939), n<sup>o</sup>. 848, pl. XLIX.2 = AE 1.935: 159 = CIMRM 54. The same device at Vindobala (Rudchester) on Hadrian's Wall, with DEO within, the whole enclosed in palm branches: CIMRM 839 = RIB 1.398 = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n<sup>o</sup>. 30), 332 fig. 86a.

<sup>44</sup> CIMRM 590 = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n<sup>o</sup>. 30), 318 fig. 68, now in the Dept. of Classical Archaeology, Trinity College Dublin. The gesture perhaps allows one to infer that Mithraists were inclined to construe this word as analogous to the acclamations by troops after victory, in the Principate the virtually exclusive right of the emperor.

<sup>45</sup> M. Blech, *Studien zum Kranz bei den Griechen* RGVV 38 (Berlin, 1982), 153-61 (honours), 216-67 (crowns for gods); 295-302 (offerings to temples); cf. L. Robert, 'Sur un décret d'Ilion et sur un papyrus concernant les cultes royaux,' *AmStudPapyr (Essays in honor of C. Bradford Welles)* 1 (1966), 175-211, at 182 n<sup>o</sup>. 40 on OGIS 219 l.40f. The practice was also extended in honour of the dead, e. g. L. Robert, 'L'enterrement d'un athlète à Naples,' *AC* 37 (1968), 406-17 (esp. ll.38-46 of that text); hence the self-crowning of the dead on funerary stelai: Fr. Chamoux, 'Une stèle funéraire de Cyrène,' *Bull. Soc. nat. Ant. fr.* (1988), 113-20.

<sup>46</sup> This type first appears on denarii from the Eastern mint, at the time of Actium: BMC 1: 99 n<sup>os</sup>. 602-4, pl. 14.18f., 15.1, probably in allusion to a statue outside the atrium of Octavian's house. Note the lamp showing Victoria in this stance from the Mitreo della Via dei Cerchi (formerly called Circo Massimo or Palazzo dei Musei di Roma): A. M. Colini, *BCR* 1931: 172f. = CIMRM 445.

<sup>47</sup> Tertullian, *de corona militum* 15.3, with the commentary by M. J. Vermaseren, *The Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere* (Mithriaca 1) EPRO 16.1 (Leyden, 1971), 38-41, rightly suggesting that the crown may also have an eschatological, or at any rate, a post mortem connotation.

<sup>48</sup> Eleusis: G. E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, 1962), 209, 211, 216 with fig. 88; K. Clinton, *The Sacred Officials of the Eleusinian Mysteries* Transactions of the American Philosophical Society n. s. 64,3 (Philadelphia, 1974), 36-38 n<sup>o</sup>. 24, also 45f.; emperors: IG II/III.3 3.592 l.21 (Antoninus Pius); 3.632 l.19f. (Commodus); Andania: Syll.<sup>3</sup> 769 l.14; cf. Blech, *Kranz* (op. cit. n<sup>o</sup>. 45), 308-12.



6. Dipinto with 'Mithras' enclosed by crown, Dura-Europus, *CIMRM* 54 (detail)



7. 'Nama' enclosed by crown, *CIMRM* 590 (detail)

piration of the Mithraic ritual was surely the practice in the Roman army of awarding *coronae aureae* to individual soldiers in recognition of their merit or bravery.<sup>49</sup> Josephus describes an occasion after the fall of Jerusalem when they were bestowed at a parade at which the soldiers' names were read out in public; and we may take it that this was the standard procedure.<sup>50</sup> The Mithraic ritual would thus have drawn upon a ceremonial central to the construction of military loyalty, hierarchy and honour.

Indeed, the crown at Burginatium does not merely allude to Mithras victorious and invincible, in a sense it stands in for him: it suggests that the declaration *Mithras est corona mea* might also be read as the proposition *corona (mea) est Mithras*. Moreover, Tertullian stresses that this ritual was important in the definition of a specifically Mithraic identity: *atque exinde numquam coronatur, idque in signum habet ad probationem sui, sicubi temptatus fuerit de sacramento ... si deiecerit coronam*, 'and afterwards he is never crowned again, and this is the sign of his passing (the test), whenever he is tested in relation to what he has sworn ... if he pushes away the crown'.<sup>51</sup> The refusal to be crowned was a permanent one, a repeatedly renewed sign of membership in the Mysteries.<sup>52</sup> For that reason, the right hand of the Miles on the Mainz cult-vessel (*Schlangengefäß*) - which is one of the most important Mithraic finds of the past quarter-century- is held in a gesture of oath-taking.<sup>53</sup> The repeated oath is a ritual test of determination to 'put Mithras first' expressed in the absence of a crown. The crown at Burginatium thus connotes Mithras' personal relation to the individual initiate and the latter's religious aspiration.<sup>54</sup> We shall return to the removal of the crown; but at this level it is a condensed sign for the entire Mithraic religious life, for putting Mithras first, for

<sup>49</sup> V. A. Maxfield, *The Military Decorations of the Roman Army* (London, 1981), 80f., with her pl. 2a, 6a, 7b.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph. *BJ* 7.14f., with A. K. Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War 100 B.C. - A.D. 200* (Oxford, 1996), 162f. On the occasion of Tertullian's *de corona* (written? Autumn 211), see still R. Freudenberger, 'Der Anlaß zu Tertullians Schrift *De corona militis*,' *Historia* 19 (1970), 579-92, though he mistakenly assumes that all the soldiers had to wear crowns at a donative parade. Only those who had earned them were required to do so.

<sup>51</sup> *Cor.* 15.4. I take *probatio* in *OLD*'s sense (1), 'passing, inspection'; cf. Beard, North, Price (op. cit. n. 39): '[he] has that as a mark of his initiation, whenever he is put to the test at the oath-taking': 2, 312, text 12.5e. The Mithraic initiate had to push the crown onto his shoulder; initiates at Eleusis of course had their right shoulders bare.

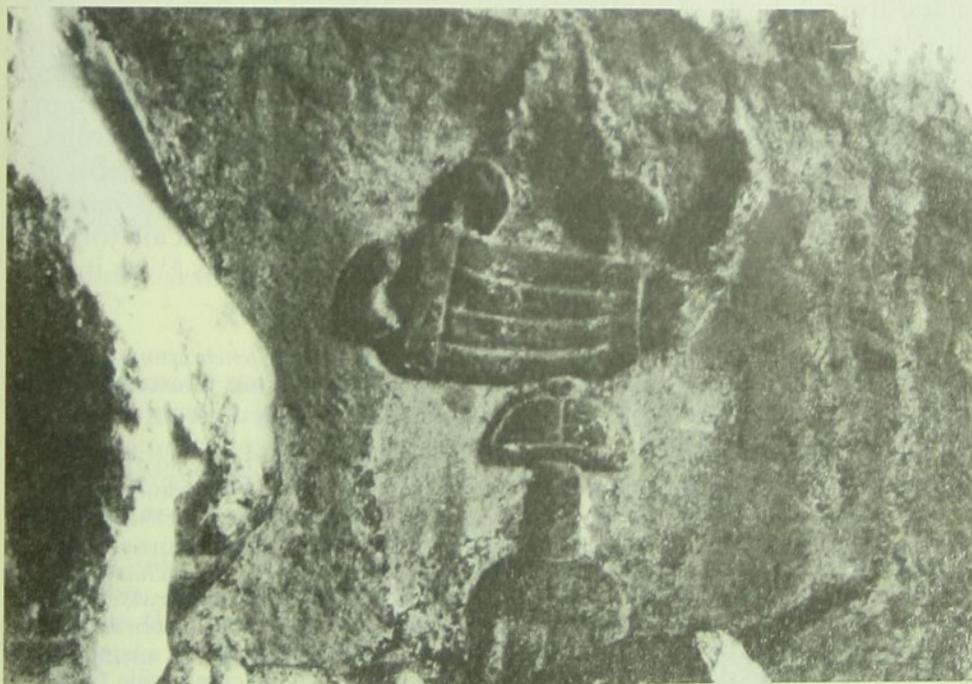
<sup>52</sup> Thus none of the participants in the procession at Sta. Prisca wears a crown. Freudenberger (op. cit. n. 50), rather oddly thought that the Mithraic interdiction must also have been played out in real life.

<sup>53</sup> H. G. Horn, 'Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß,' *Mainzer archäologische Zeitschrift* 1 (1994), 21-66, at 23 with pl. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Panel V, right podium, at S. Maria Capua Vetere (*CIMRM* 191) remains tantalisingly indecipherable. Vermaseren concluded that it must illustrate an otherwise unknown ritual of preliminary initiation rather than Tertullian's *Miles* ritual, since the initiate is not shown as rejecting the crown: (op. cit. n. 47), 36-42. But I am not convinced that the inference is justified.

an emotional commitment fired by the tests through which the initiate had to pass.<sup>55</sup>

Within the crown is a lighted lamp. One important parallel is to be found on a bull-killing relief from Fellbach, far to the South of Burginatum, in the Agri Decumates (fig. 8).<sup>56</sup> Inconspicuous beside Mithras' head, a lighted lamp hangs suspended from the ceiling of the cave. At one level, it evokes the Mithraic claim that the mithraeum, albeit a human construction, denotes the historical cave in Persia where Mithras killed the bull: the lamp is a sign of that claim, which implies the continuous presence and activity of tauroctonus Mithras, denoted at Fellbach by the anomalous sword suspended below the lamp, directly above the 'real' sword Mithras is plunging into the bull.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the lamp, being an emphatically human invention,



8. Lamp and sword in cave, Fellbach, *CIMRM* 1.306 (detail)

<sup>55</sup> Cf. R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: a sociologist reconsiders history* (Princeton, 1996), 167-74, with the rather oblique comments of T. E. Klutz, 'The rhetoric of science in *The Rise of Christianity*,' *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), 162-84 at 177f.

<sup>56</sup> *CIMRM* 1.306 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 161 = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), 348 fig. 109.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. the mosaic sword on the floor of Sette Sfere at Ostia: G. Becatti, *Scavi di Ostia: I Mitrei* (Rome, 1954), 48; and the sequence of six swords over the Ottaviano Zeno relief, *CIMRM* 335 = M. J. Vermaseren, *Le monument d'Ottaviano Zeno et le culte de Mithra sur le Célius* *EPRO* 16.4 (Leyden, 1978), 50, with R. L. Gordon, 'The sacred geography of a mithraeum: the example of Sette Sfere,' *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 1.2 (1976), 119-65 at 124f. [= id., *Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World* (Aldershot, 1996), n°. VI].

alludes also, like the crown-as-frame, to the artificiality of the cave, its patently symbolic quality. Its light, on the other hand, recalls one of the key thematic axes of the mysteries, the complex interplay between light and darkness. It alludes immediately to Paulinus of Nola's paradox:

Quid quod et Invictum spelaea sub atra recondunt,  
 Quemque tegunt tenebris audent hunc dicere Solem?  
 Quis colat occulte lucem sidusque supernum  
 celet et infernis nisi rerum causa malarum?<sup>58</sup>.

- a paradox which is in fact central to the ability of the mithraeum to mediate between Here and There, as evidenced for example in the 'childish' Mithraic habit of hollowing out altars so that images, both of Helios-Sol<sup>59</sup> and of Luna in the form of a crescents,<sup>60</sup> could be illuminated from behind, as in the case of an altar from Bingen (fig. 9).<sup>61</sup> At this level, the lamp at Burginatium alludes to the entire calendar of ceremonies, celebrating Mithras as *gen(itor) lum(inis)*,<sup>62</sup> centring upon the ritual illumination and extinction of lamps, which was a primary, concrete, manifestation of the religious life of the community, a matter of which we know virtually nothing and whose sole recoverable token is the mass of Mithraic lamps, candle-holders, braziers and other sources of illumination, all too often ignored by excavators but increasingly valued precisely for their cultic implications.<sup>63</sup> An impor-

<sup>58</sup> 32.113-15 ed. Hartel. Thanks to Tertullian's *in castris vere tenebrarum* (cor. 15.3), this is the one point about Mithras which entered fourth-century Christian *paideia*: Firmicus Maternus, *De errore* 5.2; 19.1f.; Ambrosiaster, *Comm. in epist. Ephes.* 5.8; *Quaest. vet. nov. test.* 114; Rufinus, *HE* 11.22.

<sup>59</sup> E. g. *CIMRM* 847 (Brocolitia) = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), fig. 87. The same is sometimes true of the lionhead, e. g. *CIMRM* 382 = 543; 544 (Rome).

<sup>60</sup> Collected by D. Wortmann, 'Ein Mithrasstein aus Bonn,' *BJ* 169 (1969), 410-23, to which must be added the new altar from Mundelsheim in Baden-Württemberg, D. Planck, 'Römischer Gutshof mit Mithras-Heiligtum,' *Führer zu archäologischen Denkmälern in Deutschland*, 22: Heilbronn und das mittlere Neckarland zwischen Marbach und Gundelsheim (Stuttgart, 1991), 184-90, fig. 69. Note that on the obverse of the Rückingen relief (*CIMRM* 1.137a = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 85a, pl. 18), a lamp with a handle (not two wicks) has been carved in the syncline above the cave beside Luna.

<sup>61</sup> *CIMRM* 1.241-2 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 108b, pl. 24 = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), 361 fig. 124 (Bingium/Bingen). At Stockstadt I, Drexel found a small hollowed altar in which a lamp had been placed together with a lump of rock crystal, to increase the light-effect: *Stockstadt* (op. cit. n. 40), 91f. n°. 49 with pl. XV.12 = *CIMRM* 1.198 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 116am. It is uncertain what allusion was intended by the pierced altar in the Barberini mithraeum at Rome (*CIMRM* 392).

<sup>62</sup> *CIMRM* 1.676 = Schön, *Österreich* (op. cit. n. 12), 21 n°. 12, with M. Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien* (Munich, 1990), 74.

<sup>63</sup> Turcan, *Mithra* (op. cit. n. 38), 76. Note the item 'lamp wicks' in one of the account-lists at Dura: *CIMRM* 64 = Rostovtzeff et al. (op. cit. n. 43), n°. 861. To limit myself to Germany and Raetia, quantities were found at Dormagen (*CIMRM* 1.016), Friedberg (1.069), Hedderheim III (1.132), Stockstadt II (1.222), and Königshoffen (*CIMRM* 1373). Of the more recent excavations, several lamps were found at Krefel-Gellep: R. Pirling, *Römer und Franken am Niederrhein* (Mainz, 1986), 33; Riegel: P. Filtzinger et al., *Die Römer in Baden-Württemberg* (Stuttgart, 1976), 464f.; Martigny: F. Wiblé, 'Le mithraeum de Forum Claudii Vallensium/ Martigny (Valais),' *Archäologie der*



9. Pierced altar from Bingen, *CIMRM* 1.241, detail of Helios/Sol

tant feature of such ceremonies was clearly the celebration, reproduction, of the alternation between night and day, winter and summer, solstice and solstice: the lamp's flame also alludes to the flame of the torchbearers' torches, themselves derived from the torch Mithras was carrying as he came into the world.

The lamp could however also be evoked in a slightly different direction, signalled by the representation of one in the Nymphus-frame in the mosaic of Felicissimus at Ostia, Reg. V.<sup>64</sup> Here again, by connoting the presence and absence of light, it is linked both to heavenly sequences (above all, to Venus, *tutela* of the grade, as star of evening and morning) and to ritual ones, in particular to a ceremony of unveiling -derived, like the non-crowning of Miles, from an important existing ritual in the public sphere, in this case marriage- depicted both at Sta. Prisca in Rome and perhaps at Pareti dipinte in Ostia.<sup>65</sup> It

Schweiz 18.1 (1995), 2-15 at 12; also a single iron lamp at Mundelsheim: D. Planck, 'Ein römisches Mithräum bei Mundelsheim, Kr. Ludwigsburg,' *Archäol. Ausgrabungen in Baden-Württemberg 1989* (Stuttgart, 1990), 177-83 at 180.

<sup>64</sup> Becatti, *Mitrei* (op. cit. n. 57), 109, with pl. XXV = *CIMRM* 299; Clauss, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 62), 141.

<sup>65</sup> Resp. C. C. van Essen and M. J. Vermaseren, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Sta. Prisca* (Leyden, 1965), 157 (wall I.2, top layer); 169 (lower layer); Becatti, *Mitrei* (op. cit. n. 57), 67.

is this moment of revelation which is marked by the *logion* preserved by Firmicus Maternus, with which the other initiates greet the new Nymph: 'Behold Nymphos! Hail Nymphos! Hail New Light!'. The simple lamp is a nodal point, through which the grand theme of cosmic change can be imaginatively linked with the individual's own ritual experience of growth and change. Moreover, as 'new light' - which must have been expressed concretely in the act of lighting a lamp - the initiate himself replicates the cosmic work of Mithras as light-bringer, and in so doing imitates the god. The lamp at Burginatum alludes also to that ritual self-identification.

The rod -or perhaps whip- and the seven rays on this face of the Burginatum altar obviously allude to Helios-Sol.<sup>66</sup> The number of rays evokes other sequences of seven items, usually flaming altars, but also other objects (trees, Phrygian caps, steps, stars, lamp-mouths), all of which allude directly or indirectly to the grade-system and so to the sequence of the planets on which it was founded. That allusion I cannot here pursue. But the fusion of rays and crown does obviously also evoke both the narrative of Mithras' encounter with Sol and the Mithraic investiture ritual(s) which depended upon it. One of the narrative scenes at Dura-Europos, for example, shows Mithras 'investing' Sol by holding an object, variously interpreted as the hind-leg of the bull or as a Phrygian cap, over his head (fig. 10).<sup>67</sup> In a gesture that recalls that of the Miles discussed earlier, without being identical to it, Sol has taken off his solar crown, which is shown behind him. The same motif appears in one of the narrative panels at Osterburken, where the solar crown, with six rays, lies on the ground between Sol, humbly kneeling, and Mithras, whose left hand grasps his sheathed sword.<sup>68</sup> At one level, this must be the Mithraic account of the source of Helios-Sol's cosmic power as *Sol socius*.<sup>69</sup> At another, however, as appears from the solar crown in the Heliodromus-frame in the mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia (which also has seven rays), it alludes to the ritual rôles of the grade Heliodromus.<sup>70</sup> The Mainz cult-vessel, which shows Heliodromus wearing his solar crown in procession (fig. 11), confirms the ritual use of the solar crown, no doubt to reproduce (in some sense) the sun's annual journey.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> For the wider Graeco-Roman iconography, cf. N. Yalouris, s. v. Helios, *LIMC* 5 (1990) 1.005-1.034.

<sup>67</sup> Rostovtzeff et al. (op. cit. n. 43), 106f. n<sup>o</sup>. 8 = *CIMRM* 42.11 (inaccurate description).

<sup>68</sup> *CIMRM* 1.292 5d, not noted by Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* n<sup>o</sup>. 148, RHS 4 (p. 194). The scene is enlarged by Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), 353 pl. 115.

<sup>69</sup> *AE* 1969/70: 442 = Ristow, *Köln* (op. cit. n. 30), 25f. n<sup>o</sup>. 23 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 17f. n<sup>o</sup>. 11b (Cologne II); cf. *CIMRM* 1.207 = Schwertheim, 116ak (Stockstadt I); 1.793 (Aquincum); 1.833 (Sárkeszi).

<sup>70</sup> Becatti, *Ostia* (op. cit. n.57), p. 111 with pl. XXV.2, cf. Claus, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 62), 144. There is this much truth in Merkelbach's remarks: *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), p. 123f.

<sup>71</sup> Horn (op. cit. n. 53), 23f.



10. Narrative panels at Dura-Europus, with solar crowns, *CIMRM* 42.11-13



11. Heliodromus on Mainz cult-vessel, face B (detail)

At the same time, as the Dura panels make evident (fig. 10), the solar crown is also prominent at the second 'theophanic' moment of the mysteries, the feast-scene. Some detailed images of this scene, as at Dura-Europos, show Helios-Sol once again wearing it. The clearest of these is the reverse of the Fiano Romano relief from near Rome (fig. 12), where indeed Helios-Sol is placed in the centre, stretching out his hand to receive a rhyton from one of the torchbearers.<sup>72</sup> But more commonly the solar crown plays a different rôle in the feast-scene. On the reverse of the complex reliefs from Heddernheim-Nida I and Rückingen, it is the dagger, that bears it.<sup>73</sup> On the feast scene from Lopodunum/Ladenburg (between Mannheim and Heidelberg), Sol holds up a rhyton against the background of what is apparently intended to represent some kind of cult-furniture, a disk on a stand: it is the disk that carries solar rays.<sup>74</sup> This iconography is certainly one means of representing the salvific consequences of the killing of the bull, expressed in verse form at Sta. Prisca, *et nos [s]ervasti [...] sanguine fuso*<sup>75</sup> -consequences themselves celebrated in the Mithraic feast understood as a reproduction of the primal meal between Mithras and Helios-Sol. But it is also a means of 'showing' the unity of Sol and Mithras, a unity which is conveyed by other means on the Burginatum altar.

There is no space here to pursue in detail the implications of the staff or whip and the globe, which appear in a very similar collocation on an altar at Cologne cited earlier.<sup>76</sup> At one level, they are merely the routine images which connote Helios-Sol as 'parent of gods and father of all'.<sup>77</sup> More specifically, and within the Mysteries of much greater importance, the quartered globe alludes to the double movement of the universe (the eastward movement of the planets, the westward of the heavenly bodies generally), as well as the crossing of the ecliptic and the cosmic equator, the equinoctial points which are Mithras' 'proper seat'.<sup>78</sup> But just as the globe also refers within the economy of

<sup>72</sup> *CIMRM* 641, rev.; note also 798 (Troia, Sextubal: Lusitania) [see fig. 18]; 988 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 206 (Trier).

<sup>73</sup> *CIMRM* 1.083b = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 59a(B); 1.137b = 85a. At Heddernheim, the dagger is surmounted by a phrygian cap and then the rays.

<sup>74</sup> Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 144, pl. 44.

<sup>75</sup> van Essen and Vermaseren, *Santa Prisca* (op. cit. n. 65), 217, with S. Panciera, 'Il materiale epigrafico dallo scavo di S. Stefano Rotondo,' in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae* EPRO 80 (Leyden, 1979), 103-5. I see no good reason to doubt *[s]ervasti*. The RVA are admittedly ligatured, but in 1939, when Ferrua read the line, the paintings were fresh; many details had already become unclear by the time Vermaseren and van Essen began work in 1952, and they had deteriorated much further by the late 1970s.

<sup>76</sup> See n. 30 above.

<sup>77</sup> Sophocles, frg. 752 Radt; cf. *CIMRM* 354 (Rome), apparently dedicated *C(auto)p(ati)*. On the upper layer of paintings at Sta. Prisca, Heliodromus wears a solar crown and carries a blue globe: van Essen and Vermaseren, *Sta. Prisca* (op. cit. n. 65), 156; cf. Sol at the feast scene, p. 150, 154.

<sup>78</sup> Porphyry, *de antro* 24, p. 24.9f., Arethusa, p. 68.22f. Simonini; cf. R. L. Beck, 'Cautes and Cautopates: some astronomical considerations,' *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2 (1977), 1-19.



12. Helios/Sol and Mithras at feast, Fiano Romano (reverse, detail)

Mithraic imagery to the universal power of Mithras, evoked for example on a relief from Neuenheim-Heidelberg representing him as a cosmic Rider holding a sphere,<sup>79</sup> as well as in the epithet *omnipotens*<sup>80</sup> -and thus alludes to a unity between the distinct figures of Mithras and Sol-, so it also implies those images of the 'lionheaded figure' which show him standing upon the quartered cosmos, and holding a staff (fig. 13).<sup>81</sup> The Mainz cult-vessel, which shows two figures, whom Horn identified, with little justification, as Perses and Nymphus, holding staffs -whose contrasting positions, one up, one down, have rightly been seen as allusions to the torchbearers<sup>82</sup>- suggests that the Mysteries used rods in ritual performances to denote equally Sol's

<sup>79</sup> *CIMRM* 1.289 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 141g = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), 355 fig. 117; note also 334 = Merkelbach, 298 fig. 42 (Rome) and 985 = Merkelbach, 336 fig. 90 (Altbachtal, Trier). At Dura-Europos, Mithras is shown being pulled along by the bull, with a red globe oddly inserted between their bodies: Rostovtzeff et al. (op. cit. n. 43), 106 n°. 6 = *CIMRM* 42 n°. 9.

<sup>80</sup> M. Clauss, 'Omnipotens Mithras,' *Epigraphica* 50 (1988), 151-61.

<sup>81</sup> For the staff, note also *CIMRM* 312 (Ostia); 335 = Vermaseren *Ottaviano Zeno* (op. cit. n. 56), 52 (central figure, upper register); 665 (Florence); 2.321 (Sofia). On the iconography, see still J. R. Hinnells, 'Reflections on the lion-headed figure in Mithraism,' in *Monumentum H. S. Nyberg*, 1 *Acta Iranica*, ser. 2, vol. 1 (Leyden, 1975), 333-69.

<sup>82</sup> Horn, (op. cit. n. 53), 23f, 29; R. L. Beck, 'Ritual, myth, doctrine, and initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: new evidence from a cult vessel,' forthcoming.

whip, the torches of *Cautes* and *Cautopates*, and the authority of the *Pater*.<sup>83</sup> This feature of Mithraic ritual may be alluded to on the reverse of the Fiano Roman relief (fig. 12), where *Sol*, *Mithras* and the torchbearers all carry barely distinguishable rods/whips at the feast. Thus even the most apparently banal of the images on this face of the Burginatum altar can be traced away from their 'primary' reference right through the iconography of the Mysteries, and into its ritual symbolism. It is that dense polyvalence of basic terms that helped to ground the claim to constitute a 'mystery'. But it also provided a thematic coherence between different aspects of the fictive world.



Implicit in all this is that the 'list' on the right face of the Burginatum altar is not arbitrary in its composition -what pre-Romantic list is?- but that the objects depicted all relate more or less closely to the expression in ritual of an issue of fundamental theological interest, the relationship between *Mithras* and *Helios-Sol* in the context of the killing of the bull. At bottom this relationship is a mere narrative given; but it is the kind of fecund puzzle -why is *Mithras* called *Deus Sol Invictus Mithras* if *Mithras* is distinct from *Helios-Sol*?- that keep new religions like the Mysteries capable of stimulating the intellectual interest of their initiates, which is part -though only a part- of their ability to transcend the social and temporal horizon of their foundation. I think we can also point to links between the two objects depicted on the left side of the altar, the bow and the *Schlangengefäß*, which may have motivated their apparently surprising collocation. Once again, I can here merely summarize the essential points, and begin with the bow.

The Mainz cult-vessel has recently provided new evidence which suggests that *Mithras' geste* in the sacred narrative, in which he shoots an arrow into a rock or cliff to produce water,<sup>84</sup> was reproduced in ritual by the *Pater* impersonating *Mithras* (fig. 14). For this figure is clearly sitting on a throne or chair -just as the *Pater* does in the procession of the grades at *Sta. Prisca*<sup>85</sup>- facing two persons, the nearest of whom seems to be lifting his hands up to drink from the water.<sup>86</sup> The scene seems to confirm that one motive for the Mithraic creation of complex panelled reliefs was that moments of the sacred narrative were enacted in ritual performance. We already knew that this was true of the feast scene; now we know it of the water-miracle.

<sup>83</sup> Note also the rods depicted in some of the frescoes of initiation at Capua, e.g. panels II and IV on the left podium: Vermaseren, *Capua* (op. cit. n. 47), 43, 45; and *CIMRM* 609c and e (lost). The rod is one of the four symbols of the grade *Pater* in the mithraeum of *Felicissimus* at Ostia: Becatti, *Mitrei* (op. cit. n. 57), 108. I take it that the lionhead's staff alludes to this fact at some level.

<sup>84</sup> Clauss, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 62), 80-2.

<sup>85</sup> van Essen and Vermaseren, *Sta. Prisca* (op. cit. n. 65), 155 and 158f., with pl. LIX.

<sup>86</sup> Horn (op. cit. n. 53), 23 with figs. 9, 14-16. Horn thought the central figure, who is slightly smaller than the others, had his wrists bound.



13. Lionheaded figure, Museo Torlonia, *CIMRM* 543



14. Mithras/Pater firing bow, Mainz cult-vessel, face A (detail)

This new fact may serve to explain the discovery, uniquely at Dieburg, of a statuette of Mithras holding the bow half-drawn (fig. 15), just as on the Mainz cult-vessel.<sup>87</sup> The decision to create a free-standing image may have been motivated by the significance attributed to the 'shooting' ritual. The existence of the ritual may also explain the rather odd fact that, while in Germany Mithras is shown standing, as at Dieburg, to fire his bow -in naturalistic terms the most practical position-, in the Danube area he almost invariably sits on a rock. We may suggest that this rock alludes in myth-historical terms to the Pater's chair of the ritual re-enactment.<sup>88</sup>

Now the Dieburg statuette shows a hydria, at any rate a wide-mouthed vessel without handles, beside Mithras's right leg. This hydria must represent the water that he caused to flow from the rock. We may take it that the hydria, rather than say a stream, appears here because one was used in the ritual. A specific ritual connection between the *geste* with the bow and the hydria would also account for their appearance beside one another on a small altar from the Altbachtal at Trier (fig. 16).<sup>89</sup>

The ritual re-enactment of the water-miracle was surely also the context of one of the most significant lines at Sta. Prisca, *fons conclusae petris qui geminos aluisti nectare fratres*, 'you rock-bound spring, who nourished the twin brothers with nectar'.<sup>90</sup> The 'brothers' are the figures often depicted in scenes of the water-miracle, sometimes shown drinking.<sup>91</sup> *Nectar* suggests that whereas in the narrative Mithras produced water, as in so many mythological parallels, the water used in the ritual was 'nectar', a divine, miraculously sustaining fluid. This linguistic transposition earth → heaven reproduces the intention that lies behind the modelling of (earthly) ritual upon (mythic) antecedents. Inversely, the twin brothers, the torchbearers, are the model of the Mithraic initiates, who are likewise 'nourished' through

<sup>87</sup> CIMRM 1249 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 123c = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), 357 fig. 121.

<sup>88</sup> Sitting: CIMRM 1.128.10 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 611.10; 1.422.3; 1.740.5; 1935.2; 1958.1; 1972.2; 1974.3; 1975.1; 2000; 2018.5; 2023.2; 2036.6; 2037.2; 2108; 2159; 2202.1; 2214.3; 2226.3; 2244.5; 2272.2; 2292.2; 2315 B3; 2338.2. The fact that Mithras is found standing in the Danubian area (e. g. 2.171.3; 2.223 with the additional fragment) shows that the choice is motivated. The one case in which Mithras is kneeling (Neuenheim: CIMRM 1.282.2 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 141 a6) seeks to reconcile probability with ritual.

<sup>89</sup> Schwertheim 197 (front), cf. n. 31 above.

<sup>90</sup> van Essen and Vermaseren, *Sta. Prisca* (op. cit. n. 65), 193-200 (l.4). It was followed by two, now illegible, lines. The water-miracle type appears in central Italian iconography only on the Marino (see next n.) and Barberini frescoes (CIMRM 390.4).

<sup>91</sup> E. g. M. J. Vermaseren, *The Mithraeum at Marino* Mithriaca 3 EPRO 16.3 (Leyden, 1982), 11, r. panel, scene 8 (Marino); CIMRM 390 L4 = Marino 14 scene 4 (Barberini); CIMRM 1.083A (in syncline) (Heddernheim I); 1.128.10 (Heddernheim III); 1.292 5a (Osterburken); 1.301.3 (Besigheim); 1.422.3 (Lauriacum); 1.430 C6 (Virunum); 1.584 (Poetovio III).



15. Mithras holding bow, Dieburg, *CIMRM* 1.249



16. Altar from Altbachtal, Trier (front), Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 197

the ritual re-enactment; just as the torchbearers provide the model for the initiates in serving at the divine feast.

Rhetorically, *fons concludere petris* ... is a direct address to an inanimate object present only in thought - addressing unusual objects is of course a standard technique in the construction of fictive worlds. But under what circumstances can we imagine Mithraists in a ritual context formally addressing a fountain or stream? I suggest that the address is to a vessel filled with water, commemorating the 'stream' caused to flow by the Father's re-enactment of Mithras' *geste*, and then distributed among those to be initiated. The Mithraic epithet for the stream that Mithras caused to flow, *perennis*, never-failing, is a metaphor for Mithras' implied contract with the initiate.<sup>92</sup> And we may hazard the guess that it is this water that Justin Martyr speaks of as offered 'in the rites (celebrated when a person) is initiated', along with bread, μετ' ἐπιλογῶν τινῶν, with certain utterances. For there too it is evidently understood as a form of nourishment.<sup>93</sup>

It is generally thought that the ritual mentioned by Justin relates to preliminary initiation into Mithraic cult.<sup>94</sup> If that is correct, we may suggest that the ritual in which the Pater re-enacts Mithras' *geste* with the bow is a central (but surely not the sole) ritual of preliminary initiation, just as the *geste* itself is presented in the cult's iconography as the most important preliminary to the tests which Mithras himself undergoes before he can overcome the bull. This ritual involved the consumption of a preliminary kind of nourishment, water, called nectar. It is this ritual, no doubt, that is connoted by the representation of a small cup in the Corax frame in the mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia.<sup>95</sup> We might guess too that the occasion of the dedications made to *fonti perenni* was first initiation. Other rituals surely involved lustration with water, perhaps even by appeal to the same mythical event; the iconography however apparently does not allude to them, focusing solely upon the theme of nourishment.

But there is good reason to believe that the nectar, the nourishment provided by the ritual of the water-miracle, was understood as merely an adumbration or forerunner of the far more ambitious nourishment - both real and symbolic - whose charter was the feast-scene between Helios-Sol and Mithras.<sup>96</sup> The triad snake-krater-lion, particularly on German and Danubian reliefs, demonstrates the intimate

<sup>92</sup> Cf. *CIMRM* 1.465 = Selem (op. cit. n. 32), 78 n°. 3; 1.533 = 107 n°. 44; 1.753 (all *fonti perenni*). Note in each case the personalization of the stream, parallel to the address to it at Sta. Prisca.

<sup>93</sup> Justin, *1Apol.* 66.

<sup>94</sup> J. P. Kane 'The Mithraic cult meal in its Greek and Roman environment', in J. R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* (Manchester, 1975), 2: 313-51 at 315f.

<sup>95</sup> Becatti, *Mitrei* (op. cit. n. 57), 107 fig. 22.

<sup>96</sup> Note the interesting substitution in the Barberini fresco of a 'real' Mithraic meal with seven persons, attended by a larger standing person requiring holy silence, ? a torchbearer: Vermaseren, *Marino* (op. cit. n. 91), 14 correcting *CIMRM* 390 R5.

association between the krater and the death of the bull (fig. 17).<sup>97</sup> From the Mithraic representations of such triads, it seems clear that it is the snake which is more intimately associated with the krater, and that this relationship is the main or primary referent of the imagery of the cultic *Schlangengefäße* used in Mithraic ritual. We might guess that at one level, at any rate, the krater is filled with the blood/vital force of the bull, which is drunk by the earth, signified by the snake.<sup>98</sup> That is, the dyad krater-snake is the complement of the idea conveyed by the sprouting of corn from the bull's tail. But there must also have been another level of interpretation, because there are a number of representations of the snake-krater at the feast-scene (I omit discussion of



17. Lion, snake, krater triad, Heddernheim I, *CIMRM* 1.083a (detail)

<sup>97</sup> The illustration is a detail from *CIMRM* 1.083a = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 59a (Heddernheim I); cf. Huld-Zetsche (op. cit. n. 38), 48 n°. 1. The traditional Cumontian explanation of the triad as a symbol of the four(!) elements is quite baseless.

<sup>98</sup> On *CIMRM* 88 (S\_) = D. Sourdél, *Les cultes du Hauran à l'époque romaine* (Paris, 1952), 93 = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), 282 fig. 22, the snake is sucking the bull's penis; on 335 = Vermaseren, *Ottaviano Zeno* (op. cit. n. 57), 19 with pl. XXIV, it opens its mouth to lick the blood. On a number of German reliefs, the krater is positioned directly beneath the penis: *CIMRM* 1.014 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 8b (Dormagen); 1.149 = 113a (Groß-Krotzenburg); 1.292 = 148a (Osterburken); 1.306 = 161 (Fellbach); also the reconstruction of 1.359 (Königshoffen); cf. Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 17; 203-6. For the equivalence at one level of snake and the fertile earth, note 1.706 (Carnuntum), cited n. 33 above. At Sette Porte in Ostia, the snake emerges from a rock to drink from the krater: Becatti, *Mitrei* (op. cit. n. 57), 98 = *CIMRM* 287.

the lion here). The most important of these is a relief from Troia (Sextubal) in Lusitania, which shows the krater directly before the bull's hide (fig. 18).<sup>99</sup> Here one of the torchbearers is about to take liquid -presumably the bull's blood/vital force, represented as 'blood' → wine- from the krater in a jug (*oenochoe*, *urceus*), with which to fill the rhyton held in the left hand of each god.<sup>100</sup>

This krater encircled by a snake stands in precisely the same position usually occupied by the table furnished with bread-rolls,<sup>101</sup> and occasionally, as at Lopodunum/Ladenburg, grapes and apparently apples.<sup>102</sup> We may guess that the table represents the charter function of the gods' feast, representing it as a model for a Mithraic sacramental meal. The rhyton is the vessel which typically connotes the drinking, especially by divinities, of unmixed wine.<sup>103</sup> Why substitute the krater and snake dyad for the table? Because it refers more clearly to the meaning of the bull's death celebrated by the meal: the quickening of the earth on the one hand, and the 'salvation' of men (qua Mithraists) on the other. A pink marble krater, 60 cm. high, from the mithraeum at Rusicade in N. Africa, encircled by a snake whose head appears to enter by a hole in the top, through which liquid could also be removed, reproduces this Mithraic association between bull-killing, the fertility of the earth and sacramental wine.<sup>104</sup> For it was surely used as the krater from which wine was taken during the ritual banquet, the central focus of the conviviality.<sup>105</sup>

We have therefore two kinds of ritual nourishment, a lower or preliminary one expressed by the water-miracle, and therefore properly

<sup>99</sup> *CIMRM* 798, cited n. 72 above; other examples are 988 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 206 (Trier); 2.320 (Serdica); cf. 2.331 (Bessapara), where the krater, and the lion, stand beside the feast.

<sup>100</sup> Vermaseren *ad loc.*, followed by Kane (op. cit. n. 95), 319, understood the torchbearer to be about to empty his jug into the vessel. There is an analogous scene in the very original *CIMRM* 1.275 = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 138 (Lopodunum), not associated with the feast scene, where a small figure holds a jug towards the snake/krater. The object is identified by Vermaseren as an *acerra*; Schwertheim rightly sees a *Gefäß*.

<sup>101</sup> E. g. *CIMRM* 966B5 (Sarrebouurg); 1.137A 4e = Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 85a bottom row n°. 5; B = 85a reverse (Rückingen); 1.292 5g (Osterburken). The connection between the bull-killing and the sacramental meal is neatly shown by a relief from the mithraeum at Stix-Neusiedl, *CIMRM* 1.658 = Schön, *Österreich* (op. cit. n. 33), 69 n°. 73 = Krüger, *CSIRÖsterr.* 1/3 no.166 pl.10, where Cautes holds up a small bread-roll in his left hand.

<sup>102</sup> Schwertheim, *Denkmäler* 144 = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op.cit.n.30), 356 fig. 118. Note the discovery of carbonised fruit (grapes, plums of several kinds, (crab)apples and berries) in room 3, the kitchen, of the mithraeum at Linz: *CIMRM* 1.421 = Schön, *Österreich* (op. cit. n. 12), 129 n°. 150.4.

<sup>103</sup> F. Lissarrague, 'Around the krater: an aspect of banquet imagery,' in O. Murray (ed.), *Symptomika: a symposium on the symposium* (Oxford, 1990), 198-209, at 202.

<sup>104</sup> Cumont, *Textes* (op. cit. n. 1) 2 n°. 284d = *CIMRM* 128.

<sup>105</sup> Lissarrague (op. cit. n. 104); cf. id, *Un flot d'images: une esthétique du banquet grec* (Paris, 1987), 23-48. Note the account lists from Dura, in one of which 28 den. 11 asses is spent on a jar of wine, making it more expensive than the meat bought: *CIMRM* 65 = Rostovtzeff et al. (op. cit. n. 43), n°. 862.



18. Relief from Troia (Sextubal), Lusitania, *CIMRM* 798 (detail)

connoted by the hydria, or at any rate a water-carrying vessel, a higher one by the feast-scene, properly connoted by the krater. These two ritual levels were certainly seen as linked to one another. A fragmentary relief from Ragodeš/Radesa in Moesia Superior represents a hydria, and then a krater/kantharus encircled by a snake, beside the feast-scene.<sup>106</sup> On the lower register of a relief from Sinitovo (Thrace), the krater with the snake (and lion) is placed next to a figure with his hand on a tree, and seated on a hydria from which water flows.<sup>107</sup> The same idea of two levels represented by different cult-vessels seems to be intended on the mosaic floor of the mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia, where we find a large vessel at the entrance and a smaller vessel by the cult-niche, at the far, privileged, end of the temple.<sup>108</sup> The two are separated by the ladder of initiatory grades. On this reading, the larger vessel, which has no foot, would be a water vessel, the smaller, with a foot, a krater.

Moreover, a thematic connection between the two rituals would convincingly explain the occasional presence of the bow at the bull-

<sup>106</sup> *CIMRM* 2.243.3 = L. Zotović, *Les cultes orientaux sur le territoire de la Mésie Supérieure* EPRO 7 (Leyden, 1966), n°. 23.

<sup>107</sup> *CIMRM* 2.334. Vermaseren takes the figure as Oceanus, but I do not think this can be right; it seems rather to refer to the aftermath of the water-miracle.

<sup>108</sup> Becatti, *Mitrei* (op. cit. n. 57), 106.

killing itself, once in a bow-case on Mithras' back as he kills the bull, slightly more often held by one or both torchbearers.<sup>109</sup> The same perception may account for the careful depiction of bow, quiver and sword on the left face of a well-known altar from Poetovio (Ptuj) III.<sup>110</sup> The other sides then expand upon these two references: on the right face we find the water-miracle, and on the front a scene which is a variant of the feast, a scene in which Helios/Sol and Mithras are roasting meat over an altar, with the bull's haunch lying on the ground.<sup>111</sup> The front scene is the more important; but both moments are depicted.

Now it cannot be a coincidence that the Mainz water-miracle scene (fig. 14) is part of the decoration of a cult-vessel entwined by a snake, a *Schlangengefäß*. I suggest that these cult-vessels, the *Schlangengefäße*, might function in the Mysteries as another means of making the point that the two levels, of preliminary initiation and full participation in the sacramental meal, are closely linked. With regard to its shape and size, the vessel from Mainz is neither a conventional krater nor a conventional hydria. It is simply a coarse-ware vessel of no specific destination.<sup>112</sup> But it combines an allusion to the true krater-entwined-by-a-snake with a depiction of what I have argued to have been a central ritual of preliminary initiation.<sup>113</sup> If so, we might read the the left face of the Burginatium altar, which also sets the bow in relation to the *Schlangengefäß*, as another way of making the same point. Both cult-vessel and altar imply that the *Schlangengefäß* became, or could be used as, a condensed sign both for first initiation and the sacramental meal celebrating the vivification of the earth and human salvation.

It is this condensation, the dual reference of the *Schlangengefäß*, that seems to me to explain the sole ancient account of the significance of the Mithraic krater, taken by Porphyry from Numenius and Cronius. The argument begins with the assertion of an analogy between honey and water, made necessary by the description of the presence of both kraters and amphorae filled with honey in the Cave of the Nymphs in Homer, *Od.* 13.105f. Honey is pure, incorruptible and connected with genesis, coming-into-being; and water, the element of the Naiads to whom the cave is sacred, has the same characteristics.

That is why bees store honey in the kraters and amphorae: kraters are symbols of springs –for example in the cult of Mithras the krater

<sup>109</sup> *CIMRM* 546 (Rome); held by torchbearers at Capua (181); other examples cited by Vermaseren, *Capua* (op. cit. n. 47), 10f., though the object in question may in some cases be a *pedum*.

<sup>110</sup> *CIMRM* 1.584 = Selem, *Pannonie* (op. cit. n. 32), 130, II 91 = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), 374 fig.138; cf. Clauss, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 62), 43f., 67f.

<sup>111</sup> It now seems to me that the raven swooping down from above represents in mythical-narrative terms the notion of Corax serving at the feast.

<sup>112</sup> Horn (op. cit. n. 53), 23 n. 8, with figs. 4-6b; the body of the vessel is 0,39 m. high, 0,36 m. wide.

<sup>113</sup> I omit discussion here of the other side of the Mainz vessel.

stands for the stream; and amphorae are the vessels which we use to fetch water from streams.<sup>114</sup>

Generally speaking, little distinction has been made in Mithraic scholarship between the connotations of different types of vessel in the iconography.<sup>115</sup> This passage in particular has been thought to refer to the practice of putting water into basins at the entrance to mithraea.<sup>116</sup> The argument I have pursued here, which rests heavily on the newly-published cult-vessel from Mainz, suggests that we should distinguish between different sorts of Mithraic vessel shown in the iconography. My claim has been that the krater, at least when it appears at the bull-killing or the feast, is not used for water, but retains its traditional value as a vessel for wine, itself representing the bull's blood (and perhaps semen). In the iconography, another vessel, the hydria, represents, quite properly, the water brought forth by Mithras, that is, the 'stream'.<sup>117</sup> If the claim by Numenius (or Cronius) is not merely a mistake, which is possible but not likely, we might explain it by the dual significance of the *Schlangengefäß* in ritual contexts, both as a receptacle for 'nectar', representing Mithras' miraculous water, and as a receptacle for wine, representing the consequences of Mithras' killing of the bull. In ritual, the *Schlangengefäß* may denote 'nectar' and 'wine'; but, because 'nectar' is really water, what it contained on those occasions was indeed water. That was enough for Numenius, who must have found it otherwise tricky to find evidence for the counter-intuitive claim that a krater, for all that it might contain wine-and-water, could actually signify water rather than wine.<sup>118</sup>

The left face of the Burginatum altar is thus to be read as an allusion to two central rituals in the cult, a ritual of first initiation connoted by the bow, and a sacramental meal, evidently undertaken repeatedly, celebrating the consequences of the killing of the bull, connoted

<sup>114</sup> Porphyry, *de antro* 17 = p. 18.23-27, Arethusa = p. 60.14-19, Simonini. Against these editions, I understand *παρα τῷ Μίθρα* [...] *τέτακται* to refer to a general symbolic equivalence claimed by the cult, not a statement that the krater is placed next to Mithras (say on a relief). It also seems to me quite unnecessary to suppose, with the Arethusa edition, that amphorae are taken as *symbols* of water-carrying vessels -they actually are these (among other uses).

<sup>115</sup> Clauss for example takes what is to me clearly a krater in *CIMRM* 1.765 (Aquincum) as a symbol of water: *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 62), 81f.; note also L. Simonini (ed.), *L'Antro delle Ninfe* (Milan, 1986), 166f. n. 63, 'il vaso d'acqua...', referring apparently to vessels of all kinds in the Mysteries.

<sup>116</sup> Becatti, *Mitrei* (op. cit. n. 57), 85 n. 16; R. Turcan, *Mithras platonius* EPRO 47 (Leyden, 1975), 68. Nevertheless, it is Turcan who has rightly insisted elsewhere on the fact that the krater must have been considered to contain wine, e. g. *Mithra* (op. cit. n. 38), 61f.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. e. g. *CIMRM* 694 = Merkelbach, *Mithras* (op. cit. n. 30), 321 fig. 72, which demonstrates a further value of this water, in the process of genesis, linked with Luna and Cautopates. The value of water in the Mysteries is of course much more complex than I can discuss here, cf. Gordon, 'Sacred geography,' (op. cit. n. 57), 122f.

<sup>118</sup> It is telling that Merkelbach, who holds, like Turcan and I, that the krater is the receptacle for blood and semen, represented in ritual by wine, does not refer to this passage.

by the krater entwined by a snake. We have no choice, if we are to understand the iconography, but to take the route of exegesis, as in Elsner's model with which we started. But that modern necessity does not warrant the assumption that the images were understood in the same way by Mithraists. Rather, once again, I would claim, the bow and the krater evoked for them not so much theological knowledge - though they did - as the ritual experience associated with them, and so the common religious life shared by the imagined community of Mithraists, refracted as it was into the differing rôles represented by the grade-system. The face lays stress on what all share in common, and thus connotes the project all are engaged upon, the construction of a specifically Mithraic life.

An anthropologist has written feelingly on his return from the field about native accounts of their own behaviour: 'There were always numerous problems with Dowayo "explanations". [For example], they missed out the essential piece of information that made things comprehensible.'<sup>119</sup> It is impossible to explain a lived culture directly to an outsider, since one can make due allowance neither for the outsider's collateral ignorance nor for the presuppositions which he or she brings to the task of comprehension. In their artefacts, however, Mithraists were talking to one another, working within a shared, and highly specialised, culture. They did use imagery as the starting-point of exegesis, but their religious art also works evocatively, offering threads and continuities through the dense network of Mithraic meanings. For all we know, it may in practice have been virtually impossible in the fitful light of the Burginatum mithraeum even to see, let alone closely to examine, the objects Ulpus Am(---) chose to depict on his statue-base. But that hardly mattered. These were images familiar to all Mithraists, the inescapable props of the cult. They worked as mnemonic, not as assertion. And what they recalled was a religious life centred around ritual, not a credo.

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<sup>119</sup> N. Barley, *The Innocent Anthropologist: notes from a mud-hut* (London, 1983), 82.