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Migration of Objects, Ideas, and Meanings: The Case of the Mithras Cult

Abstract

This article explores the complex nature of Mithriac images, and the important role images have played in the Mithras cult. The first part of the article reflects upon the role of the Mithraic images. The preference of the visual mode of expression is justified by the double nature that cult images have embodied: cultic and votive. In the absence of religious texts, the highly standardized iconography of Mithraic images served didactic purposes, and moreover, to establish a common cultural identity among the cult members. Stone medallions, carried about and transferred to considerable distances, are further evidence of the overall coherence of Mithraic visual codes. Both cult icons and miniature stone medallions testify to the primacy of the images, and, as argued in the second part of the article, to the essentiality of the refined dynamics of migration of objects, ideas, and meanings. Dominated by images, Mithraic culture is treated as an example of 'the pictorial turn.'

Key words: *Mithras cult, Mithraic art, tauroctony, Mithraic medallions, 'imagetext', 'pictorial turn'*

> *The uses of images in different periods as objects of devotion or means of persuasion, of conveying information or giving pleasure, allows them to bear witness to past forms of religion, knowledge, belief, delight, and so on. Although texts also offer valuable clues, images themselves are the best guide to the power of visual representations in the religious and political life of past cultures.*[1]

The Centrality of the Image

The pertinence of the images for the study of the Roman cult of Mithras has long been acknowledged.[2] The reason for their importance is twofold:

1 P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, London 2001, 13.

2 M. Clauss asserts that "der Mithras-Kult ist ein Beispiel für den Bilderreichtum der Antike," in: *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, Darmstadt 2012 (1990), 26; R. Heyner similarly characterized the cult as "einen besonderen Bilderreichtum," Aus dem Felsen geboren…Die Ikonographie des Mithras-Kultes, in: *Imperium der Götter. Isis, Mithras, Christus. Kulte und ReligionenimRömischen Reich*, ed. C. Hattler, Darmstadt 2013, 219.

first, it stems from the mere nature of the evidence, which subsequently determined the direction Mithraic scholarship has taken.[3] The lack of Mithraic sacred texts, accompanied by some sporadic references in contemporary ancient sources, is contrasted with the abundance of monuments, including various media such as reliefs, sculpture in the round, frescoes, pottery, etc. Starting with Franz Cumont, a founding father of the modern study of Mithraism, and his seminal work on the cult of Mithras, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, the iconography of the 'monuments figurés' served as a starting point for reconstructing the myth of Mithras, and ultimately for establishing the cult's doctrines and beliefs.[4] While the 'Cumontian approach' has recently received some criticism,[5] it remains the starting point of any study dealing with the cult of Mithras.[6] Perhaps the most direct expression of his methodology can be found in the words of Robert Turcan:

> Le mithriacisme nous est accesible sourtout et directement par l'iconographie. C'est dire l'importance des monuments figurés qui doivent servir de base à toute discussion sur les origines, la formation et la signification du culte gréco-romain de Mithra.[7]

Second, the focus and the essential element of each *mithraeum* was the cult image representing tauroctony, i.e. Mithras killing the bull.[8] Placed prominently at the end of the *mithraeum* (fig. 1), "a dramatic and strikingly memorable image," whose "ubiquitous presence" was the only standard component of the cult apart from the *mithraea* itself, it naturally became

3 An overview of Mithraic scholarship is offered by R. Beck, Mithraism since Franz Cumont, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.17.4 (1984), 2002-2115; id., Mithraism after 'Mithraism since Franz Cumont,' 1984-2003, in: *Beck on Mithraism. Collected Works with New Essays*, ed. J. Hinnells, Aldershot 2004, 3-23; A. Mastrocinque, Note panoramique sur les mystères de Mithra après Cumont, in: F. Cumont, *Les Mystères de Mithra*, eds. N. Belayche and A. Mastrocinque, Torino 2013, LXIX-LXXXVIII.

4 F. Cumont, *Texteset monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, Brussels 1896, 1899; F. Cumont, *Les Mystères de Mithra*, Brussels 1903.

5 R. Beck, Old Ways: The Reconstruction of Mithraic Doctrine from Iconography, in: id., *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire. Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, Oxford 2006, 16-25; A. Mastrocinque, Note panoramique, LXXIII-LXXVIII; a critical reassessment of the iconological approach to images has recently been offered by K. Lorenz, *Ancient Mythological Images and Their Interpretation. An Introduction to Iconology, Semiotics, and Image Studies in Classical Art History*, Cambridge 2016; it is no longer common to talk about the 'Mithraic doctrine,' as we do not possess knowledge of any "systematic and coherent body of teaching transmitted to the initiates," R. Beck, Four Stages on a Road Describing the Mithraic Mysteries, in: *Beck on Mithraism. Collected Works with New Essays*, ed. J. Hinnells, Aldershot 2004, xxii.

6 N. Belayche, L'homme de Mithra, in: F. Cumont, *Les Mystères de Mithra,* eds. N. Belayche and A. Mastrocinque, Torino 2013, XIII-LXVIII.

7 R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacisme*, Paris 1993, 45.

8 R. Beck, *Old Ways*, 21; R. Gordon, Institutionalized Religious Options: Mithraism, in: *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. J. Rüpke, Oxford 2007, 398.

the focus of scholarly investigations as well.[9] The central role that images played in the cult of Mithras has led scholars to conclude that "Mithraism's chosen medium of expression was visual art."[10]

What made the images quintessential for the cult of Mithras? According to Margalit Finkelberg, there were two types of cult images in ancient Greece: 'images of gods which functioned as cult objects but were not intended as objects of contemplation,' and 'images especially designed as objects of contemplation but which were not regarded as cult objects proper.'[11] This distinction between 'cult image' and 'votive image', and between 'image of the god' and 'image offered to the god' was transformed in ancient Rome into the distinction between 'the images of the gods' (*simulacra deorum*) and 'the ornaments of temples' (*ornamenta aedium*).[12] The further change in the nature of the cult image in late antiquity was examined by Jaś Elsner, who, by comparing the imagery of the official Roman religion and the cult of Mithras, argued that Mithraic cult icons embodied both cultic and votive functions.[13] The cult icon became "a simulacrum of a spiritual journey which those viewers could be reasonably expected to see themselves as making."[14] Elsner explained the exceptional importance of images for the cult of Mithras in terms of reversal:

> Where Roman religious art imitated Roman sacrificial practice, Mithraic ritual imitated the Mithraic cult image. It is this fundamental reversal that catapulted images in the mystery cults into a position of incomparable importance, for the image is no longer parasitic on actuality, but rather, religious practice becomes in some sense a mimesis of the cult icon.[15]

What actually happened with the nature of the cult icon is what Elsner calls "the most remarkable and radical change in society that the Western

9 L. H. Martin, Performativity, Narrativity, and Cognition. "Demythologizing" the Roman Cult of Mithras, in: *Rhetoric and Reality in Early Christianities*, ed. W. Braun, Ontario 2005, 196-197.

10 R. Beck, The Mysteries of Mithras, in: *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, eds. J.S. Kloppenborg and S. G. Wilson, London 1996, 176.

11 M. Finkelberg, Two Kinds of Representation in Greek Religious Art, in: *Representation in Religion. Studies in Honor of Moshe Barasch*, eds. J. Assmann and A. I. Baumgarten, Leiden 2001, 38-39.

12 S. Estienne, *Simulacra Deorum* Versus *Ornamenta Aedium*. The Status of Divine Images in the Temples of Rome, in: *Divine Images and Human Imaginations in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. J. Mylonopoulos, Leiden 2010, 257.

13 J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer. The Transformation of Art From the Pagan World to Christianity*, Cambridge 1995, 212.

14 Ibid., 88.

15 Ibid., 241.

world has seen."[16] Essential to this change was the transformation of the nature of the art from literal into symbolic; the image was no longer a god but a symbol of the god which required 'mystical viewing', wherein a cult icon became "a text in its own right – a particular polysemic arrangement and commentary that demands to be read within the ideology of its time and in its own unique way."[17]

a) Cult Image - Tauroctony

What did the Mithraic cult icons look like? If one observes the various tauroctonies from across the Roman Empire (fig. 2), the relative uniformity of Mithraic art becomes apparent. It has usually been described as "repetitive, provincial, often poorly executed, above all, eclectic and derivative."[18] Some scholars regard this 'stereotypical' nature of Mithraic art as a tool of the cult's claim to legitimacy.[19] The emergence of the rich plurality of the cults on the so-called 'religious market'[20] of the Roman world served as an impetus for their self-definition and self-affirmation, achieved through the uniformity of their art and iconography (observable particularly in the case of the Mithras cult), which furthermore contributed to the establishment of a common cultural identity among the cult's adherents.[21]

The iconographical stability of Mithraic art allows one to define its basic elements easily (fig. 2). Mithras, typically dressed in an 'oriental suit', i.e., long-sleeved tunic, long trousers with boots, a cloak and a Phrygian cap on his head, is usually shown pressing the back of the already slumped bull with his kneeling left leg, while his right leg is stretched backwards over the bull's rump and right hind leg. With his left hand Mithras grabs the bull by its nostrils and pulls his head backwards, while with his right

16 Ibid., 245.

17 Ibid., 88, 124, 218-219. More about this point later in the text.

18 R. Gordon, Viewing Mithraic Art: The Altar From Burginatium (Kalkar), Germania Inferior, *Antigüedad: Religiones y Sociedades* 1 (1998), 227.

19 R. Gordon, A New Mithraic Relief from Rome, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 1/2 (1976), 171; J. Elsner, *Roman Eyes. Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text*, Princeton 2007, 250.

20 J. North, The Development of Religious Pluralism, in: *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, eds. J. Lieu, J. North and T. Rajak, London 1992, 174-193. For a critical review of the "religious market model" see G. Woolf, Isis and the Evolution of Religions, in: *Power, Politics and the Cults of Isis. Proceedings of the Vth International Conference on Isis Studies, Boulogne-sur-Mer, October 13-15, 2011*, eds. L. Bricault and M. J. Versluys, Leiden 2014, 62-92.

21 J. Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, 250, 255, 258, 268.

arm he stabs the bull in the shoulder with a dagger.[22] If not looking at the wound, Mithra is directing his gaze either towards the observer or, over his right shoulder, towards the raven perched on his billowing cloak, or sometimes shown standing on a rim of a symbolically indicated cave, or towards the Sol in the upper left corner of the composition. The bull's tail occasionally appears to end in an ear of wheat. Torchbearers, Cautopates and Cautes, flank the two main actors of the scene, standing with their legs crossed and holding lowered and raised torches respectively. On most of the compositions, Cautopates is on the left side, directly below Sol (represented as a bust or as a full figure in a *quadriga* drawn by the horses), while Cautes stands on the right side, below Luna (also represented as a bust or drawn in a *biga* by oxen). Besides the raven, a dog, a snake, and a scorpion are found among Mithras' usual companions. The dog and the snake are shown striving towards the blood dripping from the bull's wound, while the scorpion pinches the bull's genitals. In addition to the basic type of the cult icon, showing exclusively the scene of the tauroctony, a complex type of the cult icon, found particularly in the German provinces and in the Danube region, elaborates the myth with additional scenes surrounding the central tauroctony (fig. 2. b).[23]

Regardless of its general uniformity and normativity, Mithraic art simultaneously demonstrates a vast array of iconographic motifs and a myriad of variations in its compositions, wherein some regional features and elements of style can be detected.[24] Although until quite recently Mithraic art was not perceived as a particularly valuable contribution to Roman

22 The placement of the wound on the bull's shoulder is unique to the Roman cult of Mithras, following G. Palmer, Why the Shoulder?: A Study of the Placement of the Wound in the Mithraic Tauroctony, in: *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, eds. G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston, Austin 2009, 314-323; it has been argued recently that Mithras is not killing, but wounding the bull instead, in C. A. Faraone, The Amuletic Design of the Mithraic Bull-Wounding Scene, *Journal of Roman Studies* 103 (2013), 96-116.

23 The two basic types of Mithraic cult reliefs were established by E. Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain. Contribution à l'histoire de l'art de l'Empire romain*, Paris 1955; R. Gordon, *Institutionalized Religious Options*, 398.

24 See for example G. L. Vrkljan, "Posebnosti tipologije i ikonografije mitrijskih reljefa rimske Dalmacije" [Typological and iconographical particularities of the Mithraic reliefs in the Roman province of Dalmatia], Ph.D. diss., University of Zagreb 2001; id., Some Examples of Local Production of Mithraic Reliefs from Dalmatia, in: *Religija i mit kao poticaj rimskoj provincijalnoj plastici: akti VIII. Međunarodnog kolokvija o problematici rimskog provincijalnog stvaralaštva*, eds. M. Sanader and A. R. Miočević, Zagreb 2005, 249-258. Ž. Miletić, Typology of Mithraic Cult Relief from South-Eastern Europe, in: *Religija i mit*, 269-274; G. Sicoe, Lokalproduktion und Importe: Der Fall des mithraischen Reliefs aus Dakien, in: *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, eds. M. Martens and G. de Boe, Brussels 2004, 285-302; id., *Die mithräischen Steindenkmäler aus Dakien*, Cluj-Napoca, 2014; C. Sagona, *Looking for Mithra in Malta*, Leuven 2009; A. Hensen, *Mithras. Der Mysterienkult an Limes, Rhein und Donau*, Darmstadt 2013.

(classical) art, in light of the recent post-colonial turn in archaeology and the growing importance of the study of provincial art, it is now considered an important source for our understanding of local social, religious, civic, and cultural identities.[25] Various departures from the 'canonical image' are considered to have the ability to "personalize the images and make them more potent," wherein the "seemingly shared repertoire" of iconographic motifs and style can be used in order to "invent unique identities or imagined traditions," and to further "elaborate their own peculiar ideas and beliefs."[26] Despite the multifarious local visual idioms employed, the unique and innovative tauroctony scene remains recognizable across the Roman Empire with a high degree of consistency and coherence, an exceptional case in the "religious market" of the time.[27]

The ensuing question refers to the idea behind every tauroctony that, regardless of the local facets, connected each Mithraic community into one coherent and universal cult.[28] According to Roger Beck, "Mithraic mysteries, across their axioms, motifs, domains, structures, and modes, communicated symbolically in a peculiar *idiom*. This idiom is a form of jargon of one of Graeco-Roman culture's most pervasive languages, the

25 R. Gordon, *Viewing Mithraic Art*, 227; *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art*, eds. S. Scott and J. Webster, Cambridge 2003; *Roman in the Provinces. Art on the Periphery of the Empire*, eds. L. R. Brody and G. L. Hoffman, Chicago 2014; *Beyond Boundaries: Connecting Visual Cultures in the Provinces of Ancient Rome*, eds. S. E. Alcock, M. Egri, and J. F. D. Frakes, Los Angeles 2016.

26 L. Dirven and M. McCarty, Local Idioms and Global Meanings: Mithraism and Roman Provincial Art, in: *Roman in the Provinces*, 127; A. Chalupa, Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Found? Larger Theoretical Assumptions Behind Roger Beck's *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire*, *Pantheon* 7/1 (2012), 13; contrary to what L. Dirven and M. McCarty argue in their article, esp. note 24, by saying that variations should be seen as a result of local artistic traditions, and not as an expression of deviant religious notions (Hawarte being an exception), I am more inclined to accept the opinion of A. Chalupa; for the discussion on Hawarte frescoes as evidence of the adaptation of the Mithras cult to local needs see R. Gordon, Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine, *Topoi* 11/1 (2001), 77-136; R. Beck, *Mithraism After*, 7.

27 On the uniqueness of Mithraic sacrifice in the Graeco-Roman world see R. Gordon, Authority, Salvation and Mystery in the Mysteries of Mithras, in: *Image and Mystery in the Roman World. Three Papers Given in Memory of Jocelyn Toynbee*, eds. J. Huskinson, M. Beard and J. Reynolds, Cambridge 1998, 49; for the innovative elements of the tauroctony composition see L. H. Martin, *Performativity, Narrativity, and Cognition*, 197; on the discussion about recognizability of tauroctony see L. Dirven and M. McCarty, *Local Idioms and Global Meanings*, 125-136.

28 Not all scholars agree on the existence of a set of common core features, for example see L. H. Martin, Reflections on the Mithraic Tauroctony as Cult Scene, in: *Studies in Mithraism: Papers Associated with the Mithraic Panel Organized on the Occasion of the XVIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, ed. J. R: Hinnells, Rome 1990, 217-224; id., *Performativity, Narrativity, and Cognition*, 196; id., Ritual Competence and Mithraic Ritual, in: *Religion as a Human Capacity. A Festschrift in Honor of E. Thomas Lawson*, eds. T. Light and B. C. Wilson, Leiden 2004, 261; id., The Amor and Psyche Relief in the Mithraeum of Capua Vetere: An Exceptional Case of Graeco-Roman Syncretism or an Ordinary Instance of Human Cognition?, in: *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, eds. G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston, Austin 2009, 287.

language of astronomy and astrology."[29]According to the widely accepted interpretation offered by Beck, tauroctony represents an organized and coherent symbolic system, a so-called 'star-talk,' wherein tauroctony serves as a map of the heavens, i.e. a map of a soul's celestial journey towards immortality.[30] An apparently intricate and specifically Mithraic idiom, 'star-talk' was indeed comprehensible to the initiates who learned how to 'read' the turoctony.[31]

b) Small and Miniature Reproductions of Mithraic Icon

A conference focusing on the evidence of the so-called 'small finds' in Roman Mithraism, held in Tienen (Belgium) in 2001, marked an important turning point in the study of the Roman cult of Mithras.[32] On that occasion, scholarly attention focused on the broad range of small finds (coursewares, archaeofloral and –faunal records, timber, pollens, food remains, animal by-products, etc.), whose potential has traditionally been neglected and which rarely appeared in publications.[33] 'Minor' or 'small' finds have opened some new perspectives in the study of the Mithras cult, and have made scholars think anew about some long established hypotheses.[34] One

29 R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 7.

30 R. Beck, A Note on the Scorpion in the Tauroctony, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 1 (1976), 208-209; id., Cautes and Cautopates: Some Astronomical Considerations, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2 (1977), 1-17; id., *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*,Leiden 1988; id., In the Place of Lion: Mithras in the Tauroctony, in: *Studies in Mithraism: Papers Associated with the Mithraic Panel Organized on the Occasion of the XVIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, ed. J. R: Hinnells, Rome 1990, 29-50; id., *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*; various responses to Beck's notion of "star-talk" have been published in *Pantheon* 7/1 (2012), 3-124.

31 R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 66; L. H. Martin, "Star Talk": Native Competence; Initiatory Comprehension, *Pantheon* 7/1 (2012), 59-69.

32 *Roman Mithraism*, eds. M. Martens and G. de Boe; an important study on small finds appeared recently, *Small Finds and Ancient Social Practices in the Northwest Provinces of the Roman Empire*, eds. S. Hoss and A. Whitmore, Oxford 2016.

33 Exemplary of such approach are, for example, publications dealing with the Mithras cult in Dalmatia. K. Patsch published only a short catalogue of small finds from the *mithraeum* in Konjic, see: Mithraeum u Konjicu [Mithraeum in Konjic], *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja u Sarajevu* 4 (1897), 629-656; id., Archäologisch-epigraphische Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Römischen Provinz Dalmatien III, *Wissenschaftliche Mitteilungen aus Bosnien und der Herzegowina* 6 (1899), 186-211; small finds from another important *mithraeum* in Dalmatia have been published in a form of a short list, see D. Sergejevskij, Das Mithräum von Jajce, *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja u Sarajevu* 49/1 (1937), 11-18; B. Gabričević, the author of the first comprehensive study of the Mithras cult in the Roman province of Dalmatia, dedicated a paragraph to the Mithraic motifs on the "instruments and jewelry," only to conclude that there are no such objects preserved, see id., *Mitrin kult na području rimske Dalmacije* [Mithras cult in Roman Dalmatia], Ph.D. diss., University of Zagreb 1951, 58.

34 See for example C. Szabó, Notes on the Mithraic Small Finds from Samizegetusa, *Ziridava Studia Archaeologica* 28 (2014), 135-147; N. Silnović, To Carry the Universe in One's Own Pocket: A Miniature Mithraic Relief from the Archaeological Museum in Split, (forthcoming 2017).

such important and novel contribution was made by Richard Gordon who identified a whole new class of "small and miniature reproductions of the Mithraic icon."[35] Although admitting that these objects form only a small segment of all the known Mithraic images, Gordon nevertheless pointed to some crucial questions that their existence has raised. On the one hand, Gordon asked whether we can talk about one single significance of the iconography of the Mithraic reliefs, while on the other hand, he expressed his doubt about the organized Mithraic community as the only form of the cult; finally, and perhaps of greatest importance for the present discussion, Gordon questioned the validity of the assumption of the "centrality in Mithraic practice of the temple focused upon a cult-relief."[36] In the first, and so far the only comprehensive study of small and miniature reproductions of Mithraic icon, Gordon distinguished three main classes of these objects, according to their context and function:

1) house-reliefs (small and very small reliefs and statuettes, whose dimensions are less than 0.50 x 0.45m),
2) images – emblems (pottery and various utilitarian objects used in the ritual),
3) images for devotional use:
   a) stone medallions,
   b) personal ornaments,
   c) gems as private icons.[37]

Even though, as previously stated, the total number of these objects is negligible in comparison with the total amount of preserved Mithraic images, they cannot all be treated here due to the space limitations of this study. Therefore, the focus will be placed on the first subgroup of the third class of small and miniature reproductions of the Mithraic icon, namely the stone medallions. Since there are very few of them known today, and since, as it will be argued, their nature seems to support the main idea of the present paper, they appear to be a logical choice.

As noted by Gordon, images utilized for devotional use fulfilled the needs of the personal or individual cult of piety, and due to their miniature size, they could have been easily carried about and transported

35 R. Gordon, Small and Miniature Reproductions of the Mithraic Icon: Reliefs, Pottery, Ornaments and Gems, in: *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, eds. M. Martens and G. de Boe, Brussels 2004, 259-283.

36 Ibid., 260. More about this point further in the text.

37 Ibid., 263.

considerable distances.[38] So far, only four of them have been identified (fig. 3): two come from northern Dacia (CIMRM 2187, 0.15 x 0.12m; CIMRM 2246, 0.13 x 0.10 x 0.04m),[39] the third one was found in Lentia (today Linz (Austria), CIMRM 1415, diam. 0.15m), while the remaining one was found in Caesarea Maritima in Palestine (diam. 0.075m) (fig. 3). What they all have in common is that they are all made of marble, they are less than 0.015m thick, they have a circular or oval shape, and, according to Gordon, they were all designed in Moesia Superior or southern Dacia.[40]

Medallions from Lentia and Caesarea Maritima were found as votives in *mithraea*, the latter one most probably mounted on the wall beneath the main cult-fresco by a military or custom official.[41] The first two, according to Gordon, belonged to the veterans who had returned home from their posts somewhere along the Danube.[42] As is evident, the persons carrying these miniature medallions belonged to the most mobile members of Roman society. Besides the army, recent studies have emphasized the importance of the custom officials in the local spread of the cult of Mithras.[43] Together with the movement of military and customs

38 Ibid., 263, 273; Gordon further emphasized that 15% of all Mithraic images were intended for private religious purposes, ibid., Mithras (Mithraskult), *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 24 (2012), 780; on the growing importance of the notion of personal religion see J. Rüpke, Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning 'Cults' and 'Polis Religion,' *Mythos* 5 (2011), 191-204; R. Raja and J. Rüpke, Appropriating Religion: Methodological Issues in Testing the 'Lived Ancient Religion' Approach, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1/1 (2015), 11-19; J. Kindt, Personal Religion: A Productive Category for the Study of Ancient Greek religion?, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 135 (2015), 35-50.

39 CIMRM = Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae I-II*. Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956-1960.

40 R. Gordon, *Small and Miniature Reproductions*, 273.

41 Ibid., 273; id., *Trajets de Mithra*, 93; R. Bull, A Mithraic Medallion From Caesarea, *Israel Exploration Journal* 24 (1974), 190; although Bull is of the opinion that the medallion did not have a purely decorative role, but a central role in liturgy instead, Gordon is right to conclude that it could not have been visible from the podia, suggesting that it was dedicated as a personal memento after the long journey from the Danube to Palestine.

42 R. Gordon, *Small and Miniature Reproductions*, 274.

43 For example, we know of Titus Iulius Saturninus, member of *publicum portorii Illyrici*, who is attested on Mithraic inscriptions in Apulum (Dacia), Poetovio (Noricum), and Senia (Dalmatia), see M. Abramič, Opaske o nekim spomenicima starog Poetovija, *Časopis za zgodovino in narodopisje* 28 (1933), 140; M. Glavičić, Natpisi antičke Senije, *Radovi Filozofskog fakulteta u Zadru* 33 (1994), 68-69; id., *Kultovi antičke Senije*, Zadar 2013, 95-97. C. Szabó, The Cult of Mithras in Apulum: Communities and Individuals, in: *Culti e religiositá nelle provincie Danubiane*, ed. L. Zerbini, Bologna, 2015, 413; on the importance of the customs ofiicials for the spread of Mithras cult see P. Beskow, The Portorium and the Mysteries of Mithras, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 3/1-2 (1980), 1-18; on the recent re-evaluation of the Mithras cult as predominantly 'military religion' see R. Gordon, Who worshipped Mithras?, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 7 (1994), 463; R. Beck, Four Men, Two Sticks, and a Whip: Image and Doctrine in a Mithraic Ritual, in: *Theorizing Religions Past. Archaeology, History, and Cognition*, eds. H. Whitehouse and L. H. Martin, Walnut Creek 2004, 88; R. Gordon, The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras. A Critical Review, in: *L'arméeromaine et la religion sous le Haut-Empire romain: Actes du quatrième Congrès de Lyon (26-28 octobre 2006)*, eds. C. Wolff and Y. Le Bohec, Lyon 2009, 379-450.

personnel, easily transportable objects like our miniature medallions, along with the accompanying religious ideas, could have been disseminated across the Empire.

Another striking feature of these objects is the mediocre to poor quality of their execution, which appears to be standard for these types of reliefs.[44] Nevertheless, despite their miniature size and superficial treatment, these medallions encapsulate all the necessary elements of the tauroctony, and are even further elaborated with subsidiary scenes placed in the lower register.[45] In their iconography they are indistinguishable from the cult-relief, and moreover, according to Gordon, since they are all made of stone, they allude to and derive their legitimacy from the cult-icon.[46] Finally, the fact that miniature medallions retained strong iconographic uniformity while found scattered among remote provinces of the Roman Empire, reveals that the cult maintained an overall coherence.[47]

Migration of Objects, Ideas, and Meanings

Both cult icons and stone medallions are a testimony to the vital role that images have played in the Roman cult of Mithras. Moreover, as the complete absence of sacred texts indicates, images had an important didactic role, and were therefore instrumental in representing the cult's fundamental claims.[48] Mithraic images are in this sense a type of Mitchell's 'imagetexts,' standing at the crossroads between visual and textual.[49] As suggested by the highly unified iconography of the Mithraic images, observable on cult icons and miniature stone medallions as well, both "iconic and performative imagery" were used for the transmission of Mithraic knowledge.[50] It has recently been argued that during a ritual a *mithraeum* became a place of re-enactment of the sacred narrative depicted on the cult relief, a *tableau*

44 R. Gordon, *Small and Miniature Reproductions*, 266.

45 In their division of the main field and the lower register subdivided in three fields, medallions follow the so-called Danubian relief scheme; the scenes on the lower register fields are as follows: scene 2) and 3) are the same on all four medallions, and they show Mithras and Sol dining, and Mithras ascending Sol's carriage; CIMRM 1415: 1) Unrecognizable; CIMRM 2187: 1) Lion's head; CIMRM 2246: 1) Upper part of Mithras' body; Caesarea Maritima: 1) Sol kneeling before Mithras. CIMRM 2246 has even a representation of Mithras *taurophorus* (Mithras carrying the bull on his back) added to the main scene.

46 R. Gordon, *Small and Miniature Reproductions*, 260.

47 R. Gordon, *Institutionalized Religious Options*, 400.

48 Ibid., 260.

49 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, Chicago 1994, 91, 327.

50 L. H. Martin, *Ritual Competence*, 260-261.

vivant.[51] As mentioned earlier in the paper, Elsner has similarly noted that in the case of the Mithras cult religious practice becomes a mimesis of the cult icon, thus making the cult participants contemporaries with the mythic event, which, in turn, resulted in "establishing a collective identity and a closeness to the divine."[52] Entering a *mithraeum* meant entering a "special world," a world of a "shared and highly specialized culture."[53] By witnessing the dramatic performance, which was surely an intense emotional experience, members of the cult became familiar with the 'special' narrative of the myth and the specific visual codes used to represent it.[54] Possessing a distinct visual language helped members of the cult to define their collective identity, which, in turn, could have been successively transmitted only through "action, enactment, performance."[55] In this sense, cult icons, and particularly miniature stone medallions, are transformed into symbols, a 'visual catechism' whose function is to evoke.[56] This is further corroborated by the example of miniature medallions, a type of memory aid evoking the emotional experiences, ritual practices, and "iconic and performative imagery" witnessed at the *mithraeum*.[57] The interconnectedness of iconography, sacred narrative, ritual space, and performance might account for the high degree of visual coherence established across space and time.[58]

As it becomes apparent, the idea of migration was deeply embedded in the cult of Mithras. On the one hand, one can talk about the migration of people, i.e. members of the cult, mostly belonging to the military and customs personnel. By travelling across the Empire, they carried with them not only religious objects like miniature medallions, but a whole set of associated religious ideas

51 L. Dirven, The Mithraeum as *tableau vivant*. A Preliminary Study of Ritual Performance and Emotional Involvement in Ancient Mystery Cults, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1/1 (2015), 20-50.

52 Ibid, 20, 45-46; J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 241.

53 R. Gordon, *Viewing Mithraic Art*, 228, 258.

54 On the emotional involvement during the Mithraic ritual see R. Gordon, The Mithraic Body: The Example of the Capua Mithraeum, in: *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, eds. G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston, Austin 2009, 289-313; ibid., Temporary Deprivation: Rules and Meaning; in: *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*, eds. R. Raja and J. Rüpke, Malden 2015, 194-206.

55 R. Gordon, The Mithraic Body: The Example of the Capua Mithraeum, in: *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, eds. G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston, Austin 2009, 290; on the close relationship between group identity and specific visual codes see M. Bal and N. Bryson, Semiotics and Art History, *The Art Bulletin* 73/2 (1991), 174-208.

56 On the evocative properties of Mithraic images see R. Gordon, *Small and Miniature Reproductions*, 263, 258; id., *Viewing Mithraic Art*, 228, 236; id., Reality, Evocation and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 3 (1980), 19-99; R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 157-164; id., *Beck on Mithraism*, xxii.

57 R. Gordon, *Trajets de Mithra*, 93.

58 L. Dirven, *The Mithraeum as tableau vivant*, 46.

and experiences. On the other hand, asattested to by the highly homogeneous visual repertoire, the migration of "threads and continuities of the dense network of Mithraic meanings"was an essential facet of the cult.[59]

The Mithras cult, as shown in the previous discussion, was a culture dominated by images, and a world in which images substituted the words. Mitchell described such a state as "the pictorial turn."[60] Contrary to the idea that 'the pictorial turn' is unique to the contemporary world, Mitchell himself claimed that there were other 'pictorial turns' in history.[61] We can certainly recognize one of them in the Mithraic culture.

Abbreviations

CIMRM Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionumet Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae I-II.* Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956-1960

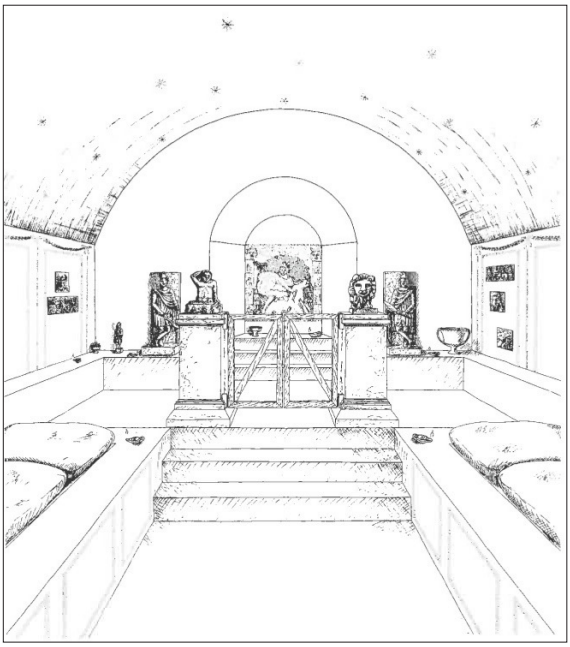

Fig. 1: Reconstruction of the Mithraeum II in Frankfurt-Heddernheim (M. Clauss, Mithras. Kult und Mysterium, Darmstadt 2012, 55)

59 R. Gordon, *Viewing Mithraic Art*, 258.

60 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 11-34.

61 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago 2005, 348-349.

Fig. 2: a) Tauroctony from the mithraeum below S. Stefano Rotondo (Castra Peregrinorum), Rome; 0.905 x 1.48 x 0.075m; end of 3rd century CE (Imperium der Götter, ed. C. Hattler, Darmstadt 2013, 250); b) Tauroctony from Heidelberg-Neuenheim; 2.26 x 2.40m; second half of 2nd century CE (Imperium der Götter, ed. C. Hattler, Darmstadt 2013, 224); c) Tauroctony from Dura–Europos; 0.67 x 1.05 x 0.10m; ca. 170-171 CE (http://media.artgallery.yale.edu/duraeuropos/dura.html; accessed August 15, 2016); d) Tauroctony from Prološac Donji, Postranje (Dalmatia); 0.58 x 0.53 x 0.13m; second half of 3rd/beginning of 4th century CE (Lj. Gudelj, Od svetišta Mitre do crkve sv. Mihovila, Split 2006, 2)

Fig. 3: a) White marble medallion from Dacia; 0.15 x 0.12m (G. Sicoe, Die mithräischen, 329); b) Mithraic medallion from Caesarea Maritima; diam. 0.075m (R. Bull, A Mithraic Medallion, plate 30); c) Marble relief found at Kadine-Most, Moesia Superior; 0.13 x 0.10 x 0.01m (CIMRM, fig. 622); d) Circular relief from Linz; diam. 0.15m; (CIMRM, fig. 362)