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Mithras and Charles S. Peirce: History Needs Theory

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Aleš Chalupa and Tomáš Glomb¹ suggest a new interpretation of the third symbol of the grade *Miles* displayed on the Felicissimus mosaic floor.

After an informative introduction,² their article seems to be structured in two main parts. In the first part, they question the traditional identifications of the third symbol of the *Miles* panel as a military sling bag or Phrygian cap.³ In the second part they offer a new interpretation of this symbol as a bovine pelvic (or thoracic) limb. In order to verify their suggestion, they look for evidence in the wider context of the Mithras' cult.⁴ However, this structure seems a bit loose, since their argumentation in the first part is not tightly related to the second part and their arguments in the second part seem tentative.

The way in which Chalupa and Glomb approach the third *symbol* of the *Miles* panel brings to the fore the matter of the interpretation of the signs of the Mithras cult by modern scholars. What modern scholars might suggest for an ancient cult, such as Mithraism, is restricted by the nature of the extant evidence as well as by their own cognitive abilities to extract interpretational inferences from this evidence. At this point, a theoretical framework could offer valuable tools to the researchers in order to better understand the evidence at their disposal. In the case of Chalupa and Glomb's interpretational attempt, the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce⁵ could offer a more valid terminology and a clearer methodological structure to their argumentation.

From a Peircean perspective, the authors' reference to the third *sign* of the *Miles* panel of the Felicissimus mosaic floor as a "symbol" seems quite simplistic. According to Peirce, *symbols* are the higher product of the in-

1 Aleš Chalupa – Tomáš Glomb, "The Third Symbol of the *Miles* Grade on the Floor Mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia: A New Interpretation", *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 21/1, 2013, 9-32.

2 *Ibid.*, 9-13.

3 *Ibid.*, 14-16.

4 *Ibid.*, 16-28.

5 James Hoopes (ed.), *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce*, Chapel Hill – London: The University of North Carolina Press 1991; Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*, London: W.W. Norton 1997, 69-101.

terpretive process since referential capacity follows an ordered ascent from iconic to indexical and from indexical to symbolic interpretation of signs.⁶

At the first interpretative level, a *sign* can be recognized as an *icon*. According to Peirce, the first level of the referential process is iconic interpretation, which is based on the recognition of a *similarity* between two objects.⁷ In the first part of their article, Chalupa and Glomb focus on the visual features of the third symbol of the *Miles* panel as it is displayed on the Felicissimus mosaic, and attempt to figure out what this *sign* resembles in appearance. Thus, in Peirce's terms, they make a first interpretive attempt by which they could have recognized the third *sign* of the *Miles* panel as an *icon*. In their opinion, this particular *sign* appears *similar* to a bovine pelvic (or thoracic) limb.⁸ To confirm this *similarity*, they asked for the opinion of two specialists in animal anatomy, who supported their suggestion. On the contrary, the conventional iconic interpretation of the *sign* as a soldier's sling bag seems weak. According to their view, there is no obvious *similarity* between the depicted object and a sling bag as a referential object. Further, the *similarity* of the *sign* with a Phrygian cap is weakened by a more realistic depiction of this object on the panel of the Father grade.⁹

Recognizing the *sign* as an *icon* of a bovine pelvic (or thoracic) limb, they attempt to integrate this *icon* into the Mithraic context. Their endeavor corresponds to tracing its possible *indexical* references at the second interpretive level. At the *indexical* level of interpretation, *similarity* is not an adequate relationship. On the contrary, a *spatial* or *temporal co-occurrence* or a *natural contiguity* of two (or more) objects establishes specific *indexical* associations according to which the first object becomes an *index* of the other.¹⁰ Given the significance of the bull in Mithraism, Chalupa and Glomb suggest that the depicted bovine limb points to the bull slaughtered by Mithras in the tauroctony.¹¹ Then, they attempt to locate similar representations of the bull's limb in Mithraic iconography from various mithraea.¹²

Chalupa and Glomb admit that their investigation is preliminary and far from leading to definite conclusions.¹³ However, the weakness of their argument at this point could be counterbalanced by theoretical considera-

6 T. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species...*, 92-93.

7 J. Hoopes (ed.), *Peirce on Signs...*, 251-251.

8 A. Chalupa – T. Glomb, "The Third Symbol...", 16-19.

9 *Ibid.*, 14-16.

10 T. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species...*, 77-78.

11 A. Chalupa – T. Glomb, "The Third Symbol...", 19-28.

12 *Ibid.*, 19-23.

13 *Ibid.*, 23.

tions. Their attempt to trace associations between the bull's limb and the grade of *Miles* in the Mithraic iconography could be valuable. The display of this particular sign of the *Miles* panel on the Felicissimus mosaic would obviously have *indexical* references for the mithraists who used to visit this particular mithraeum. Although there are certain difficulties in tracing the *indexical* associations between the *Miles* grade and bull's limb in the Mithraic iconography, Chalupa and Glomb's interpretation could open a discussion which might lead to further investigation and more secure conclusions.

Chalupa and Glomb's suggestion of the potential symbolic meanings of the bull's limb in the Mithraic context corresponds to a third, *symbolic* interpretive level. In Peirce's view, a *symbolic system* recodes the already known *indexical* references in a higher-level referential system that overcomes the isolated correlations between a *sign* and an object.¹⁴ Thus, Chalupa and Glomb argue that this particular object had a special role in the episodes from Mithras' life and might be a symbolic expression of the heroic ethos of the god, which would inspire the members of the *Miles* grade. Particularly, the scene of Taurophorus Mithras, in which Mithras is portrayed carrying the bull over his shoulders, might "symbolize an ethos of invincibility and perseverance in the service for a deity, expressed in the concept of the worship as *sacra militia* and imitated by Mithraic *Milites*".¹⁵ In this view, the *sign* of the bull's limb might acquire *symbolic* significance, surpassing its potential *iconic* and *indexical* associations and acquiring a salient significance in the Mithras cult.

Chalupa and Glomb acknowledge that "[t]he motives and logic behind the choice of the bull's limb as a suitable *symbol* for the Mithraic initiatory grade *Miles* remain unclear".¹⁶ This acknowledgement seems reasonable, since their argumentation might be difficult to confirm and, further, it is unclear what their interpretation would offer to the general study of the Mithras cult. However, a theoretical framework for their argument might render a more plausible interpretation for the third sign of the *Miles* panel that might imply the potential inferential processes leading to the perception, conception and conceptualization of that *sign* panel by the initiates. In particular, the new interpretation of the third symbol of the *Miles* panel on the Felicissimus mosaic floor, articulated by Chalupa and Glomb, could be supported by the basic principles of the semiotic process as outlined by Charles S. Peirce, a process which takes place in cognition and communication and which generates multiple symbolic expressions. From

14 T. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species...*, 93, 99-100.

15 A. Chalupa – T. Glomb, "The Third Symbol...", 29.

16 *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).



this perspective, the interest is transposed from looking for definite conclusions to an attempt to understand the processes by which this specific visual representation could convey specific principles and beliefs within the framework of the mithraic mysteries.

In conclusion, a theoretical framework offers not only a base for framing the historical data but, further, a structure to the thought and interpretive attempts of the researchers. Thus, although Chalupa and Glomb have not reached conclusive findings, their argumentation could seem plausible if it is seen from Peirce's theoretical perspective. The integration of a theoretical framework to their interpretation could offer them the tools to look for further evidence, which might support their argumentation. Perhaps, it could also open further discussion which, in addition to taking into account all the new data, might be enhanced by cognitive insights.



SUMMARY

Mithras and Charles S. Peirce: History Needs Theory

This article is a response to Aleš Chalupa and Tomáš Glomb's article "The Third Symbol of the *Miles* Grade on the Floor Mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia: A New Interpretation". Their interpretation is viewed from a theoretical perspective. Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs is applied not only to the historical evidence but mainly to the authors' interpretive attempt. The term "*sign*" is suggested as more accurate than the term "*symbol*". Thus, Chalupa and Glomb's interpretation of the third sign of the *Miles* grade, as it is displayed on the Felicissimus mosaic, might be structured according to the ascent from the iconic to the indexical, and from the indexical to the symbolic interpretive level. It is suggested that an appropriate theoretical framework might support their interpretation and surmount the weaknesses of their argumentation.

Keywords: Mithraism; Mithras cult; Mithraic grades; *Miles* grade; *Miles* panel; Felicissimus mosaic; Charles Sanders Peirce; theory; sign; icon; symbol; interpretation; inferential processes.

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