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The Bull's Limb Theory Reloaded

DARIUS FRACKOWIAK*

Analogous to the discussed article by Aleš Chalupa and Tomáš Glomb,¹ the present review also is divided into two parts, the first part dealing with the interpretation of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade on the floor mosaic of the Mitreo di Felicissimo in Ostia, the second with its contextualization within the framework of Roman Mithraism.

The treated issue is a good example of how errors can be perpetuated in the Mithraic research for decades without comment or scientific criticism (see soldier's sling bag theory or Phrygian cap theory). First, we have to compliment the authors that they have worked out this hitherto neglected aspect of Mithraism for the first time in such a thorough and convincing way, and that they have not hesitated to look beyond the confines of their own discipline (which ought to be a standard for a modern scholar). Their interdisciplinary cooperation with specialists in animal anatomy has enabled interesting new perspectives. The presented argumentation and interpretation of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade on the floor mosaic of the Mitreo di Felicissimo in Ostia as a bull's limb is highly convincing. The strongest argument in favour of their interpretation is the existence of the so-called second finger (dew claw), which is a separately worked *tessera* and thus completely intentional. For why should a soldier's sling bag or a Phrygian cap possess a dew claw? This new discovery enables us to confirm the long-forgotten and suppressed theory of Dieterich dating from 1903² and to reinterpret the object in Mithras's hand in the scene of "Sol's Obeisance" as a bull's limb. (By the way: It is really an irony of fate that Dieterich dedicated his *Mithrasliturgie* to Franz Cumont, who was responsible for the circumstance that Dieterich had fallen into oblivion.)

However, we should be careful in generalizing such phenomena. As recent research on Mithraism illustrates (see for example the studies by Manfred Clauss),³ Mithraism had no strictly organized, supraregional

* Abbreviation used: *CIMRM* = Maarten J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis mithriacae* I-II, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff 1956-1960.

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 Albrecht Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner 1903, 76-78.

3 E.g. Manfred Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern 2012.

structures and also no “Holy Scripture” or “Mithraic Bible”.⁴ The various cult communities had the possibility to design the rituals and iconography according to their specific religious needs. And they were very creative. There were not only regional but even merely local differences (the mithraeum at Hawarte can be taken as the most extreme example)⁵ and the attribute in Mithras’s hand could vary in some cult communities. In the aforementioned Hawarte⁶ for example, Mithras clearly holds a torch in his right hand and also the shape of the object at the relief from Osterburken⁷ is quite different from a bull’s limb. Caution is necessary.



Fig. 1. Sol’s Obeisance from Osterburken (CIMRM 1292.5d).
Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum.
Photo Darius Frackowiak.

4 Cf. Rainer Vollkommer, “Mithras”, in: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* VI/1, Zürich: Artemis & Winkler 1992, 623: “... am ehesten würde man natürlich denken, daß eine Art Heilige Schrift im Umlauf war, in der die Stiertötung eine entscheidende Rolle spielte und die mit Bildern ausgeschmückt war.”

5 Cf. Michal Gawlikowski, “The Mithraeum at Hawarte and Its Paintings”, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 20, 2007, 337-361.

6 *Ibid.*, 346.

7 CIMRM 1292.5d.

The second part of the article concerning the contextualization of this new discovery within the framework of Roman Mithraism, however, poses some problems, which can be sketched only very briefly in the present review. First, the direct comparison of Roman Mithraism with Christianity and the hence resulting assumption that cult rituals have to imitate the god's myth is questionable. So far, the only clear evidence of such an adaption is the scene of the "Sacred Repast". Further unambiguous examples do not exist. The connection between the "Archery of Mithras" and the scene on the cult vessel from Mainz with the "Archery of Mithras" is indeed anything but certain. The only similarity is the person with a bow, but this is insufficient as an argument. However, there remains an information gap between a test of courage, in which a Mithraic father shoots an arrow at an initiand, and the miracle of the god Mithras, in which water falls down from a rocky heaven. Without further finds it will not be possible to clarify a relationship between these two phenomena in a satisfactory way.

A similar problem arises in the connection of the bull's limb in the *Miles* grade with the *Transitus*-scene (Mithras *taurophorus*). Also in this case we do have a significant information gap between the bull's limb as an astrally connected attribute of Mithras in his role of Cosmocrator and on the other hand the carrying of the (not fragmented) bull as an expression of "the concept of the worship as *sacra militia*".⁸ The relationship between these two phenomena is quite hypothetical and at this point we have to admit that we just do not know an answer.

Moreover, we should be aware that we do not know whether the bull's limb as a symbol for the grade of *Miles* was really common throughout the Roman Empire. The only known evidence is the floor mosaic of the Mitreo di Felicissimo in Ostia and it cannot be excluded that this is an exclusively Ostian phenomenon. In this case, one would at least not have to look desperately for a connection between *Miles* grade and bull's limb.

Concluding, it can be stated that this article by Aleš Chalupa and Tomáš Glomb is the most comprehensive and most elaborate study of the role of the bull's limb in the cult of Mithras, which has the potential (in the near future) to end definitely the tiresome debate about this strange object in Mithras's hand.

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



SUMMARY

The Bull's Limb Theory Reloaded

The present review is divided into two parts, the first part dealing with the interpretation of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade on the floor mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia, the second with its contextualization within the framework of Roman Mithraism. The interpretation of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade as a bull's limb offered by Aleš Chalupa and Tomáš Glomb is highly convincing. The contextualization of this new discovery within the framework of Roman Mithraism, however, poses some problems, which are briefly discussed here.

Keywords: Roman Mithraism; Felicissimus mithraeum; bull's limb; Sol's Obeisance; Dieterich, *Mithras liturgy*; *Miles* grade; Archery of Mithras; *Transitus*-scene.

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