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The Third Symbol of the Miles Grade on the Floor Mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia: A New Interpretation

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The mithraeum of Felicissimus was excavated by Guido Calza and Raissa Calza (née Gourevich) in 1940 during the fascist-period excavations of the ancient harbour-town of Ostia, some 30 km south-west of Rome.¹ It was installed in one of the rooms of a medianum house (Regio V, insula 9.1) during the second half of the third century AD and was one of the last mithraea to be created in the city.² It is famous for its striking

* The preparation of this article was supported by the grant “Application of Interdisciplinary Approaches in the Academic Study of Religion” (APIPR), investigated by the Department for the Study of Religions, Masaryk University, in 2012. – Abbreviations used: *ANRW* = Hildegard Temporini – Wolfgang Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter 1974-; *CIMRM* = Maarten J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis mithraicae* I-II, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff 1956-1960; *ÉPRO* = Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’empire romain; *JMS* = *Journal of Mithraic Studies*; *PGM* = Karl Preisendanz – Albert Henrichs (eds.), *Papyri graecae magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri* I-II, Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner 1973-1974; *RGRW* = Religions in the Graeco-Roman World. – We would like to thank Richard Gordon, Luther H. Martin, Dariusz Frackowiak, Panayotis Pachis and Olympia Panagiotidou for their valuable comments on the first draft of this article. Special thanks are owed to Prof. Martin for his kind corrections and improvements of our English. Needless to say, all the remaining faults are our own.

1 *CIMRM* 299. For a detailed description of this mithraeum and its finds see Giovanni Becatti, *Scavi di Ostia II: I mitrei*, Roma: La Libreria dello Stato 1954, 105-112 and pl. XXIV.2 and XXV; Maria Floriani Squarciapino, *I culti orientali ad Ostia*, (ÉPRO 3), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1962, 52-54 and pl. XXIII.

2 About the nature of the Roman cult of Mithras in this important port town see Dennis Groh, “The Ostian Mithraeum”, in: Samuel Laeuchli (ed.), *Mithraism in Ostia: Mystery Religion and Christianity in the Ancient Port of Rome*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1967, 9-21; John Schreiber, “The Environment of Ostian Mithraism”, in: Samuel Laeuchli (ed.), *Mithraism in Ostia: Mystery Religion and Christianity in the Ancient Port of Rome*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1967, 22-45. See also now the important article by L. Michael White, “The Changing Face of Mithraism at Ostia: Archaeology, Art and the Urban Landscape”, in David L. Balch – Annette Weissenrieder (eds.), *Contested Spaces: Houses and Temples in Roman Antiquity and the New Testament*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2012, 435-492, though he does not report any recent re-dating of the Felicissimus Mithraeum.

mosaic pavement, which has contributed significantly to our knowledge of the Mithraic grades of initiation³ and, together with the evidence from the mithraeum beneath the Church of Santa Prisca on the Aventine in Rome, established their relation, at any rate in some Mithraic speculation, to the seven planets of the Hellenistic cosmos.⁴ At the moment, there seems to be a general consensus that Mithraists aspired to go through a succession of seven initiatory grades⁵ which were arranged, from lowest to highest, in the following order: (1) Raven (*Corax*); (2) Bridegroom (*Nymphus*);⁶ (3) Soldier (*Miles*); (4) Lion (*Leo*); (5) Persian (*Perses*); (6) Runner of the Sun (*Heliodromus*); (7) Father (*Pater*). These grades and this order can be seen as conventional, although it is probable that alternative names, and indeed sub-divisions, were employed locally in communities dispersed across the vast reaches of the Roman Empire, as was apparently the case at Dura Europos in Syria.⁷

3 Until the 1930s, the (full) system of seven Mithraic initiatory grades was known only from Jerome, *Epistula* CVII.2 [ad Laetam].

4 The two layers of wall-paintings with dipinti state explicitly that each Mithraic grade was under the protection (*tutela*) of one particular planet. See Maarten J. Vermaseren – Carolus C. Van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church Santa Prisca in Rome*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1965, 155-172. The mithraeum was first discovered in 1934.

5 The initiatory character of Mithraic grades has been recently questioned by the German scholar Manfred Clauss ("Die Sieben Grade des Mithras-Kultes", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 82, 1990, 183-194; cf. also id., *Cultores Mithrae: Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 1992, 275-277; id., *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, 131-133; id., *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern 2012, 124-126). In his opinion, the Mithraic grades represented rather a system of priestly ranks reserved in principle only for a narrow group of Mithraic elite. His argument, however, fails to persuade many scholars, including us. See e.g. Richard L. Gordon, "Who Worshipped Mithras?" *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 7, 1994, 459-474; 465-467; id., "Ritual and Hierarchy in the Mysteries of Mithras", *ARYS: Antigüedad: Religiones y Sociedades* 4, 2001 [2005], 245-274; 248-253; Aleš Chalupa, "Seven Mithraic Grades: An Initiatory or Priestly Hierarchy?", *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 16/2, 2008, 177-201.

6 This word is a neologism known only from the Mithraic context. It refers to a person who has no real existence outside the symbolic world of the Mithraic Mysteries: a bride of male sex. For a detailed argument why to use this translation and for an exposition of possible ideological implications connected with this grade, see Richard L. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras", *JMS* 3, 1980, 19-99; 48-49. We prefer Gordon's translation to the alternative proposed by Reinhold Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Königstein/Ts.: Hain 1984, 88-93; see chrysalis.

7 The following titles attested on the graffiti and dipinti from the Dura Europos mithraeum in Syria might serve as a very good example of alternative grades or their intermediate stages: *antipater* (*CIMRM* 56, 63), *melloleōn* (*CIMRM* 63), *stereōtēs* (*CIMRM* 63). See Michael Rostovtzeff et al., *The Excavations at Dura Europos: Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work 1933-4 and 1934-5*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1939, 119-124; Franz Cumont, "The Dura Mithraeum", in: John



Fig. 1. Floor mosaic from the Felicissimus mithraeum (CIMRM 299). Photo Darius Frackowiak.

The main part of the mosaic that decorates the floor of the mithraeum aisle is organised as a series of seven panels, which cover the entire area between the two lateral podia where the worshippers reclined for their common banquets (fig. 1). The decoration of the entrance area, and of the area immediately in front of the cult-niche in the back wall, where the tauroctony, the main cult image of Mithras killing the bull, would have been situated, follows a different scheme.⁸ The seven panels contain symbols of the Mithraic initiatory grades. In most cases, each grade is represented by three symbols; in two cases (Persian and Father) by four.⁹ With

Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* I, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 151-214: 194-205.

⁸ The panel nearest to the cult-niche contains an inscription mentioning a man named Felicissimus who paid for the mosaic and after whom this mithraeum was later named by its excavators.

⁹ Richard Gordon, commenting on the first draft of this article, argued that the star inside the lunar crescent simply defines the latter as a planet. In this case there are only three symbols on the *Perses* panel as well.

the exception of the third symbol of the grade Bridegroom (the mosaic in this particular spot is irretrievably ruined), all are very well preserved and quite easily identifiable. For this reason, there is in most cases little disagreement which objects the individual symbols display (table 1).

Mithraic grade	Symbols on the floor mosaic from the Ostian mithraeum <i>Felicissimus</i> (CIMRM 299)
Raven (<i>Corax</i>)	Caduceus (the staff of Mercury), Beaker, Raven
Bridegroom (<i>Nymphus</i>)	Oil lamp, Veil, ¹⁰ [the third symbol is destroyed]
Soldier (<i>Miles</i>)	Spear, Military helmet, Soldier's sling bag (<i>sarcina</i>) ¹¹
Lion (<i>Leo</i>)	Thunderbolt, Rattle (<i>sistrum</i>), Fire-shovel
Persian (<i>Perses</i>)	Moon sickle, Star, Plough (<i>aratrum</i>), ¹² <i>akinakes</i> ¹³
Runner of the Sun (<i>Heliodromus</i>)	Whip, Seven-rayed crown, Torch
Father (<i>Pater</i>)	Dagger, ¹⁴ Phrygian cap, Staff, Libation dish (<i>paterna</i>)

Table 1. Standard identifications of the symbols of Mithraic initiatory grades displayed on the floor mosaic from the *Felicissimus* mithraeum in Ostia (CIMRM 299), ordered from the right to the left.

It seems that in each panel there is a sign for a planet (all on the right), one (or two) rebus-signs for the name of the grade (usually on the left), and a third object which hints at a function of particular grade holders.

A detailed discussion of the Mithraic grades and the symbols that represent them on the *Felicissimus* mosaic is beyond the scope and intentions of this article.¹⁵ Our objective here is much more limited: to propose an

10 Alternatively, a diadem.

11 Alternatively, a Phrygian cap. However, about the correctness of both these identifications see below.

12 According to a different interpretation, this object might be a scythe.

13 *Akinakes* is originally a Scythian sword which was used in antiquity especially by the Persians.

14 Alternatively, a sickle.

15 For a general overview of information about individual Mithraic grades see Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Mithras: Geschichte eines Kultes*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1965, 113-126; Robert Turcan, *Mithra et le mithracisme*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres 1993, 81-91; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 131-140; id. *Mithras...*, 124-133; A. Chalupa, "Seven Mithraic Grades...", 183-188. For a more detailed analysis of individual Mithraic grades, their symbolism and purpose in the Mithraic cult see e.g. István Tóth, "Mithram esse coronam suam: Bemerkungen über den dogmatischen

alternative interpretation of the third symbol on the panel of the Felicissimus mosaic ascribed to the grade *Miles* (fig. 2), since we are of the opinion that this object has been incorrectly identified in previous scholarship.



Fig. 2. Detail of the third mosaic panel from the mithraeum Felicissimus with the symbols of the third initiatory grade *Miles*.
Photo Darius Frackowiak.

Hintergrund der Initiationsriten der Mithrasmysterien”, *Acta classica universitatis scientiarum Debreceniensis* 2, 1966, 73-79; id., “Das lokale System der mithraischen Personifikationen im Gebiet von Poetovio”, *Arheološki vestnik (Acta archaeologica)* 28, 1977, 385-392 (not always completely persuasive); R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”; id., “Mystery, Metaphor and Doctrine in the Mysteries of Mithras”, in: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Roma: «L’Erma» di Bretschneider 1994, 103-124; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 77-133 (a very idiosyncratic and in the end unpersuasive account); Jaime Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*, (RGRW 165), Leiden: E. J. Brill 2008, 364-381.

The third symbol of the *Miles* grade on the Felicissimus mosaic

Since the discovery of the Felicissimus mosaic, the item which is the object of our re-examination had been usually identified either as a soldier's sling bag (*sarcina*)¹⁶ or, much more rarely, as a Phrygian cap.¹⁷ There are, however, some problems which compel us to question the correctness of both these identifications. First, if the object portrayed was really a Phrygian cap, then it is present on the mosaic twice, for it evidently appears also in the panel ascribed to the Father grade. On the latter panel, it is represented in a perfectly conventional manner that leaves no room for doubt about its identity. The same, however, cannot be said about a hypothetical Phrygian cap on the *Miles* panel where it would appear in a rather untypical rendering. Second, a soldier's sling bag makes, according to our opinion, a very poor visual symbol, especially for its iconographic ambiguity; a sling bag by itself has no characteristic contours since its shape always depends on the specific contents it currently carries. *Sarcinae* have never been a typical Roman military symbol and they actually occur very rarely in Roman iconography.¹⁸ Although the presence of this object is of course fully consistent with information we have about the nature of the initiatory grade *Miles* and a vision of service to the god as military service, the question why these ideas should be expressed with the help of such an ambiguous object, in addition to its otherwise complete absence from Mithraic iconography, is left unanswered. It seems that both

16 This interpretation had been already introduced by Franz Cumont in 1945 ("Rapport sur une mission à Rome", *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 89, 1945, 386-420: 416) and later confirmed by Giovanni Becatti (*Scavi di Ostia* II..., 109), who described the relevant object as "una bisaccia di forma simile a un otre, con il fondo piatto e una lunga imboccatura". This identification has gradually become an inherited truth copied from one book to another and has been only rarely, if ever, seriously questioned. See e.g. Maarten J. Vermaseren in the commentary to *CIMRM* 299 (*CIMRM* I, pp. 140-141); id., *Mithras*..., 118; Elmar Schwertheim, "Mithras: Seine Denkmäler und sein Kult", *Antike Welt* 10 (Sondernummer), 1979, 1-76: 68; R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithracisme*..., 87; Mary Beard – John North – Simon Price, *Religions of Rome II: A Sourcebook*, Cambridge: Cambridge 1998, 306; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*..., 134; id., *Mithras*..., 127; Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010, 190; etc.

17 R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*..., 75, 295. It seems that this identification is also accepted, under the obvious influence of Merkelbach's work, by Hans D. Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy"*, (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 18), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2005, 136-137.

18 See the Appendix „*Sarcinae* in the Roman army” below. As far as we know, the only representations of Roman legionaries carrying *sarcinae* occur on a single panel of Trajan's Column (fig. 6). In our view, these objects bear no similarity to the supposed *sarcina* of the Felicissimus mosaic.

Cumont¹⁹ and Becatti²⁰ were influenced in their conclusions by the interpretation of a fresco from the Santa Prisca mithraeum in Rome, discovered in 1934, six years before that of the Felicissimus mithraeum. This fresco (right wall, upper layer of paintings) portrays a procession of Mithraic grade holders bringing offerings to the Father sitting on the throne.²¹ One of the participants in this procession, identified by an inscription as *Miles*,²² carries on his left shoulder an object which is, according to Cumont and Becatti, identical with the item appearing on the third panel of the grade *Miles* on the Felicissimus mosaic.²³ Maarten J. Vermaseren and Carolus Van Essen, the authors of the final publication of the Santa Prisca mithraeum, also agree with this identification and provide the following description of this fresco:

The Soldier (*Miles*) is represented facing the front, but his eyes are looking to the side ... He is clad in a bright brown tunic, which has two rows of purple piping at the wrists. He has a red-brown mantle and holds the mantle of the Lion with his right hand. Over his left shoulder he bears a military bag (*sarcina*), which he holds at its round buttoned-up end with his left hand. Only few traces of his legs remain.²⁴

This description, however, is in fact highly conjectural. The single photograph²⁵ provided by Vermaseren and Van Essen in support of their interpretation is unfortunately only in black and white and the identity of the object is thus almost impossible to verify. The situation is only slightly improved when we consult the only colour photograph (as far as we know) of this very poorly preserved fresco,²⁶ but even with the aid of colour, it cannot be securely identified.

At any rate, everything supports the view that the third symbol of the grade *Miles* on the mosaic was identified as a soldier's sling bag mainly on the basis of its vague similarity with the object carried by the Mithraic Soldier portrayed on the fresco from the Santa Prisca mithraeum. Conversely, the plausibility of the identification of the object carried by the Mithraic Soldier on the fresco from the Santa Prisca mithraeum is almost always supported by the reference to the third symbol in the *Miles*

19 F. Cumont, "Rapport sur une mission à Rome...", 403.

20 G. Becatti, *Scavi di Ostia II...*, 109.

21 M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 155-160 and pl. LIX.

22 Above the head of this person is an inscription NAMA MILITIBUS TUTELA MARTIS ("Hail to the Soldiers, under the protection of the planet Mars!"). See M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 157, fig. 44.

23 G. Becatti, *Scavi di Ostia II...*, 109 and pl. LX.

24 M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 157.

25 *Ibid.*, pl. LX.

26 See Ugo Bianchi, "Documentazione fotografica di mitrei Romani", in: id. (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae*, (ÉPRO 80), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1978, 881-930: [889], pl. II.



panel of the Felicissimus mosaic. This situation is a typical example of circular argumentation, since, in our opinion, there is no independent evidence which would compel us to see any connection between these two representations found in different places. On these grounds we find the identification of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade from the Felicissimus floor mosaic as a soldier's sling bag utterly unpersuasive and open to re-examination.

A new interpretation: Bovine pelvic (or thoracic) limb

In our opinion, the third symbol of the *Miles* grade from the Felicissimus floor mosaic represents a completely different object than a Phrygian cap or a soldier's sling bag. We argue, rather, that it represents a bovine pelvic (or thoracic) limb.²⁷ This possibility was for the first time raised by Helga Jobst²⁸ in 2001 and also – independently – in a preceding study of one of the authors of this article published in 2008,²⁹ but it has never been comprehensively explored as yet. To verify this hypothesis it was necessary to consult two specialists in animal anatomy, Dr. Antonín Glomb³⁰ and Prof. Jiří Rozinek.³¹ According to the expert opinion of the former, the relevant object portrayed on the Felicissimus mosaic is, in all probability, a right bovine pelvic limb (i.e. hind-quarter). The mosaicist, or rather the designer, possessed very good knowledge of bovine anatomy. The image of a pelvic limb is, given the limitations offered by mosaic as a chosen medium, comparatively realistic. It displays a severed right pelvic limb with an inner (medial) area visible. The black and white image is portrayed in an inverse rendering: naked muscles would appear in reality darker, and the subcutaneous tissue covered by fat lighter. Characteristic is the elliptical shape of the muscles, which represent the adductor muscles attached to the *symphysis pubis* of the pelvic bones. It is exactly at this point that the hind-quarter is severed during the butchering process. Further down we can see a characteristic heel hump and, at the distal end of the limb, also

27 We can surely argue with some confidence, that the limb on the Felicissimus mosaic refers to, or evokes, that of the mythical bull slain by Mithras.

28 Helga Jobst, "Ein ägyptisches Astralsymbol im Bilderzyklus der römischen Mithrasmysterien", in: Friedrich W. Leitner (ed.), *Carinthia Romana und die römische Welt: Festschrift für Gernot Piccottini zum 60. Geburtstag*, Klagenfurt: Geschichtsverein für Kärnten 2001, 55-62: 57. Helga Jobst's article was unfortunately unknown to us until October 2012. We wish to thank Prof. Werner Jobst for bringing this article to our notice.

29 A. Chalupa, "Seven Mithraic Grades...", 184.

30 Antonín Glomb, MVDr., Central Military Veterinary Institute at Hlučín.

31 Prof. Jiří Rozinek, Czech University of Life Sciences, Prague, Department of Veterinary Sciences.

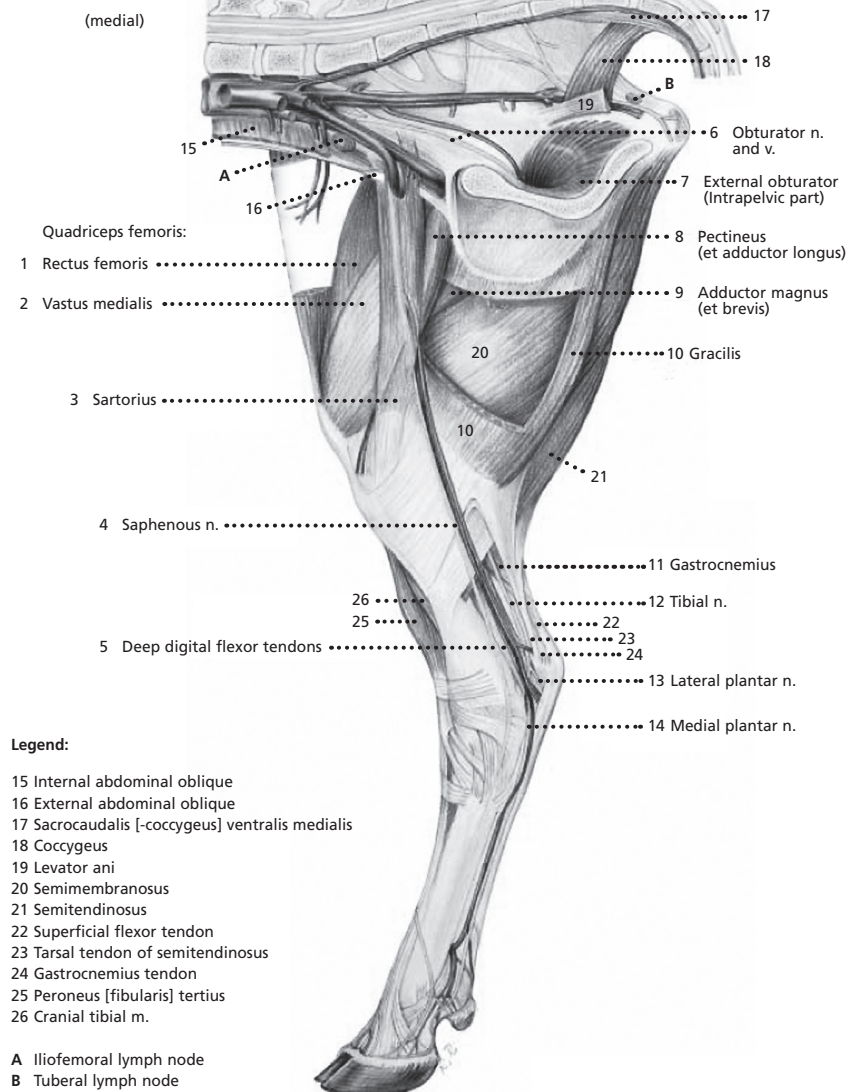
Pelvic Limb

Fig. 3. Anatomical detail of the bovine pelvic limb (*situs medialis*). Taken over from Klaus-Dieter Budras – Robert E. Habel, *Bovine Anatomy: An Illustrated Text*, Hannover: Schlütersche 2003, 17.

a cloven hoof. It is even possible that a little protrusion above the cloven hoof represents a dew claw,³² an atrophied (rudimentary) “second finger” (a cloven hoof is made of the third and the fourth fingers, the second and the fifth fingers are atrophied and transformed into two dew claws; see fig. 3 and 4).

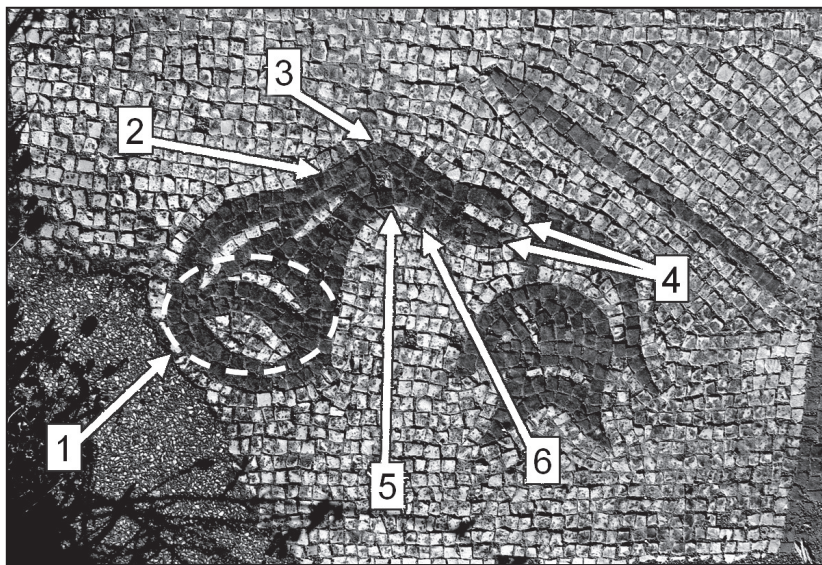


Fig. 4. Anatomical details of bull's limb on the third panel of the floor mosaic from the Felicissimus mithraeum.

- 1) Cut of femoral muscles (*musculi femoris, situs medialis*)
- 2) Achilles tendon (*tendo calcanei*)
- 3) Heel hump (*tuber calcanei*)
- 4) Cloven hoofs (*ungulae*)
- 5) Heel joint (*articulatio tarsi*)
- 6) Dew claw of the second finger (*ungula digiti II*)?

Glomb also admits the possibility that the object portrayed might represent a thoracic limb, in which case, however, the rendering would be very

32 At first we were hesitant about this identification since we could not, unfortunately, view the mosaic in situ and what appears as a black *tessera* on photographs might be in fact a missing piece. However, high resolution photographs kindly provided by Dariusz Frackowiak confirm that this little protrusion is indeed an original black *tessera* and the mosaic is in this particular spot intact.

simplistic and a carpal joint missing.³³ The second expert, Prof. Jiří Rožinek, agrees that the portrayed object is a bovine limb, but he prefers a thoracic limb (i.e. a fore-leg) to a pelvic limb. He argues that thoracic limb was easier to separate during the cutting process and the round distal end of the limb must represent, in this instance, a shoulder blade.³⁴ The question whether a pelvic or thoracic limb is actually represented cannot be decided with absolute certainty. The mosaic as a medium allows only for a schematic rendering of bovine anatomy. However, both experts concluded that the object represented is consistent with the anatomical properties of a bovine limb. Our hypothesis thus survives the first important empirical test.

Bull's pelvic/thoracic limb and other Mithraic evidence

Although the identification of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade from the Felicissimus mosaic with a bull's limb³⁵ might seem initially as somewhat morbid and improbable, the very possibility of this conclusion is actually supported by other Mithraic monuments and sources. For example, on side-scenes flanking some tauroctony monuments, we can very often recognize a scene called "Sol's Obeisance".³⁶ In its typical form it displays a kneeling Sol, frequently naked and bereft of his seven rayed crown,³⁷ who is threatened by Mithras with his right hand raised and ready to strike with an object which, due to the small size of its rendering, usually cannot be clearly identified; Mithras' left hand usually rests on the head of kneeling Sol. In previous scholarship this object brandished by Mithras has been identified predominantly as a Phrygian cap,³⁸ exceptionally as a drinking vessel (*rhyton*)³⁹ or as a club.⁴⁰ However, on some monuments,⁴¹ which display this scene in greater detail than usual, it is

33 Personal communication with Dr. Antonín Glomb.

34 Email communication from Prof. Jiří Rožinek.

35 From this moment on we will use, for the sake of brevity, the term bull's limb instead of the anatomically more correct bovine pelvic/thoracic limb.

36 M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*..., 149-151; id., *Mithras*..., 142-143.

37 On some monuments this typical attribute can be seen lying alongside of kneeling Sol, see e.g. *CIMRM* 42.11 (Dura Europos), 1292.5d (Osterburken).

38 See e.g. F. Cumont, "The Dura Mithraeum...", 175; M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras*..., 77; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*..., 123-124 and passim; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*..., 149-151; id., *Mithras*..., 142-143; R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacisme*..., 87.

39 M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras*..., 77; id., *Mithriaca* III: *The Mithraeum at Marino*, (ÉPRO 16.3), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1982, 16.

40 M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca* III..., 16.

41 See especially *CIMRM* 650 (Nersae), 1292.5d (Osterburken), 1359 (Königshofen), 1430.C5 (Virunum); and also one panel on the fresco tauroctony from the Marino mi-

possible to see that this object is, at least in some cases, the bull's limb.⁴² In fact, this item was identified as such already in 1903 by Albrecht Dieterich⁴³ on the basis of an incomplete monument from Virunum.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, his interpretation was immediately dismissed by Franz Cumont⁴⁵ and contested, at least for a time, also by Maarten J. Vermaseren,⁴⁶ two eminent specialists in the Mysteries of Mithras.⁴⁷ A bull's pelvic limb is also positively present on the altar of Flavius Aper from ancient Poetovio (modern Ptuj in Slovenia) which portrays the scene of the "Pact of Friendship" (*dexiōsis, dextrarum iunctio*; fig. 5).⁴⁸

In addition to figural monuments, a bull's fore-limb is explicitly mentioned in a text preserved in the Great Paris Magical Papyrus which, thanks its separate publication by Albrecht Dieterich in 1903, has been inappropriately known as the *Mithras Liturgy* (PGM IV.475-829).⁴⁹ The ritual is designed to effect an encounter between the subject and various denizens of heaven in order to obtain a revelation.

thraeum, see M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca* III..., pl. 7 (unpaginated colour supplement).

42 Richard L. Gordon – John R. Hinnells, "Some New Photographs of Well-known Mithraic Monuments", *JMS* 3, 1980, 198-223: 213-214, 217, pl. XV-XVII; cf. also Jerry Stewardson – Ernest Saunders, "Reflections on the Mithraic Liturgy", in: Samuel Laeuchli (ed.), *Mithraism in Ostia: Mystery Religion and Christianity in the Ancient Port of Rome*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1967, 67-84: 70; Roger Beck, "Mithraism Since Franz Cumont", *ANRW* II.17.4, 1984, 2002-2115: 2051; H. Jobst, "Ein ägyptisches Astralsymbol...", 56-57; J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*..., 378, n. 668.

43 Albrecht Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner 1903, 77. Dieterich also supported his argument with a reference to one passage from the so-called *Mithras Liturgy* which is mentioned in greater detail below.

44 *CIMRM* 1430.C5.

45 Cf. Franz Cumont, "L'iniziazione di Nerone da parte di Tiridate d'Armenia", *Rivista di filologia classica* (n. s.) 11, 1933, 145-154: 148-149, n. 4.

46 M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras*..., 77; id., *Mithriaca* II: *The Mithraeum at Ponza*, (ÉPRO 16.2), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1974, 22, n. 2.

47 Cf. also R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacisme*..., 98.

48 *CIMRM* 1584. Although the bull's pelvic limb lying at the base of the altar is clearly visible and easily recognizable, Reinhold Merkelbach (*Mithras*..., 374) identifies it, for reasons that escape us, as a dolphin (sic!). – For more detailed information on the "Pact of Friendship" scene which is depicted on some Mithraic monuments see Marcel Le Glay, "La dexiōsis dans les mystères de Mithra", in: Jacques Duschesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques: Actes du 2^e Congrès International, Téhéran, du 1^{er} au 8^e septembre 1975*, Téhéran – Liège: Bibliothèque Pahlavi 1978, 279-303; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*..., 151-152; id., *Mithras*..., 144.

49 A. Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*...; see also Marvin W. Meyer, "Mithras Liturgy", Missoula, MT: Scholars Press 1976; Hans D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including the Demotic Spells*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996, 48-54; H. D. Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy"*...



Fig. 5. Bull's limb at the base of the Flavius Aper altar (*CIMRM* 1584) from the mithraeum III in Ptuj, Slovenia (with a detail).
Photo Aleš Chalupa.

After various preliminaries, the subject encounters seven deities with the heads of black bulls, who are said to be the guardians of the celestial axis,⁵⁰ and later on another deity who is described in the following manner:

[A]nd you will see ... a god descending, immensely great, with a shining face, youthful, golden-haired, with a white tunic and a golden crown and trousers, and holding in his right hand a golden shoulder of a young calf. This is the Bear which moves and

50 *PGM* IV.674-677: “*theoi taurōn melanōn prosōpa echontes ... hūtoi eisin hoi kalūmenoi polokratores tū ūranū*”.

turns the heavenly vault around, in the opposite direction, with its upward and downward seasonal revolutions.⁵¹

The name of the relevant deity is nowhere explicitly mentioned in this passage. Some of the described characteristics are, however, consistent with some known figural monuments of Mithras and his attributes.⁵² Although some scholars expressed well-founded doubts about the relation of this text, as a whole, to the Mysteries of Mithras,⁵³ the possibility that at least some authentic motifs were used by the author – or rather one of several editors – of these elaborate ritual instructions cannot be entirely excluded. In Egyptian mythology and astrology, for example in the planisphere of Denderah, a bull's fore-limb generally symbolised the constellation Mesjetiu, the Great Bear, and it is possible that this piece of astrological lore found its way to some Mithraic communities interested in astrology.⁵⁴ The discovery of a unique ceiling zodiac⁵⁵ on the Island of Ponza in the Tyrrhenian Sea proves that at least this particular community Mithraists attributed some importance to the constellations of the Great

51 *PGM* IV.694-703. English translation by Marvin W. Meyer, re-printed and revised by H. D. Betz, *The "Mithras Liturgy"...*, 56.

52 With the conclusion that the mentioned deity is indeed Mithras agree e.g. Albrecht Dieterich (*Eine Mithrasliturgie...*, 76) or Hans D. Betz (*The "Mithras Liturgy"...*, 182). Reinhold Merkelbach and Maria Totti ([eds.], *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri religiösen und magischen Inhalts III: Zwei griechisch-ägyptische Weihezeremonien: Die Leidener Welterschöpfung, Die Pschai-Aion-Liturgie*, [Abhandlungen der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Sonderreihe Papyrologia Coloniensia 17], Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1992, 243-244) are of opinion that this passage describes syncretistic deity Helios-Mithras. Wolfgang Fauth (*Helios Megistos: Zur synkretistischen Theologie der Spätantike*, [RGRW 125], Leiden: E. J. Brill 1995, 31-33) then sees in him rather a syncretistic fusion of Helios with pantheistic Phanes-Prōtogenos and Alexandrian Aiōn-Agathos Daimon into a cosmic Ruler and Conciliator of Opposites.

53 See e.g. Jaime Alvar Ezquerro, "Mithraism and Magic", in: Richard L. Gordon – Francisco Marco Simón (eds.), *Magical Practice in the Latin West: Papers from the International Conference Held at the University of Zaragoza, 30 Sept. – 1 Oct. 2005*, (RGRW 168), Leiden: E. J. Brill 2010, 519-549: 528-534.

54 Glenn Palmer, "Why the Shoulder? A Study of the Placement of the Wound in the Mithraic Tauroctony", in: Giovanni Casadio – Patricia A. Palmer (eds.), *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, Austin: University of Texas Press 2009, 314-323: 322-323; cf. also H. Jobst, "Ein ägyptisches Astralsymbol...", 59-61; José Lull, *La astronomía en el antiguo Egipto*, Valencia: Universitat de València 2006, 222-223 with fig. 73.

55 For the description of the Ponza Island mithraeum and its horoscope see M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca* II..., 1-11, fig. 6, pl. VII-XX. A very detailed interpretation of this exceptional Mithraic monument is provided by Roger Beck, "Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac I", *JMS* 1, 1976, 1-19; id., "Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac II", *JMS* 2, 1977, 87-147.

and Little Bear (*Ursa Maior* and *Ursa Minor*).⁵⁶ The scene of the “Sol’s Obeisance” then could be considered, at least hypothetically, as a designation of Mithras in the role of Cosmocrator⁵⁷ which subsequently culminates in the “Pact of Friendship” between Mithras and Sol confirmed by their handshake and the “Sacred Repast” on the hide of the slain bull. Although the endeavours to reconstruct any “Myth of Mithras” in the form of a linear narrative from the side scenes flanking the tauroctony has failed completely,⁵⁸ the temporal sequence “Sol’s Obeisance”, “Pact of Friendship” and “Sacred Repast” seems to be a suitable working hypothesis.

Bull’s limb in the Mithraic context: Connecting the dots

If our new identification of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade on the Felicissimus mosaic with a bull’s limb is at least generally plausible, as we believe and have tried to demonstrate above, we can now proceed with a further interpretation of this newly established fact and try to place it into a larger network of information about the symbolic world of the Mysteries of Mithras. However, at this point we must admit that what follows is a preliminary exploration of possibilities rather than a formulation of *the* definitive conclusion.

It seems that at least some episodes from Mithras’ life attested in Mithraic iconography were used as models for ritual activities and converted into rituals (some of them initiatory) performed by the cult members. Roger Beck is even of the opinion that the Mysteries of Mithras shared with early Christianities a “propensity to expressing myth in ritual”,⁵⁹ which makes them rather exceptional in the contexts of the late-antique religious praxis. Mithraic material provides some support in favour of this hypothesis. There is a general agreement that one such ritual derived from Mithras’ sacred story is the “Sacred Repast” which is also

56 R. Beck, “Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac II...”, 120-127. – Hans G. Gundel, “*Imagines zodiaci*: Zu neueren Funden und Forschungen”, in: *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren* I, (ÉPRO 68.1), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1978, 438-454: 449-453, however, considers Beck’s articles an over-interpretation (p. 452).

57 R. Beck, “Mithraism Since Franz Cumont...”, 2051; H. Jobst, “Ein ägyptisches Astralsymbol...”, 60; G. Palmer, “Why the Shoulder?...”, 322-323.

58 See Richard L. Gordon, “Panelled Complications”, *JMS* 3, 1980, 200-227. It seems that these side scenes do not picture the Mithras myth in a “classical” narrative way. The alternative hypothesis would be that they rather display isolated episodes from Mithras’ life and evoke his mighty deeds, although some episodes might be sequentially related in a temporal order.

59 Roger Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 90, 2000, 145-180: 175.

one of the most widespread scenes represented in Mithraic iconography.⁶⁰ The centrality of this event, probably only second in importance after the tauroctony, is further accentuated by the fact that on the large stelae consisting of a jamb and lintel frame enclosing a central panel that could be turned on a vertical pivot, the reverse is always reserved for this motif.⁶¹ In the majority of cases, the scene of the “Sacred Repast” is portrayed in its mythical dimension, with Mithras and Sol, reclining on the bull’s hide, being served by two youths wearing Phrygian caps, in all probability identical to the Mithraic torchbearers Cautas and Cautopates. Some monuments, however, diverge from this convention. In a specific manner, they tend to blend the real cultic practice to the mythical dimension by referring to roles played in this ritual by individual grade holders.⁶² The assumption that Mithraic common meals were an important activity celebrated on a regular basis is supported by the fact that material remains of these feasts, ranging from bones of consumed animals to broken shards of plates and cups, are occasionally discovered in refuse pits in or near excavated mithraea. And, last but not the least, this assumption is also supported by the fact that the ground plan of a Mithraic “cave” is actually an adaptation of the Graeco-Roman dining hall (*triclinium*).⁶³

The second mythical episode which could have been transformed into an initiatory ritual, at least in some local communities, is the “Archery of

60 See e.g. R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*..., 132-133; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*..., 112-113; id., *Mithras*..., 108; R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacisme*..., 78-79; J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*..., 351-358; etc. For a detailed exposition about the character of Mithraic feasts, their ideological background and place in the contemporary cultural context see J. Stewardson – E. Saunders, “Reflections on the Mithraic Liturgy...”; John P. Kane, “The Mithraic Cult Meal in Its Greek and Roman Environment”, in: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies II*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 313-351.

61 See e.g. *CIMRM* 641 (Fiano Romano), 1083 (Nida/Hedderheim), 1137 (Rückingen bei Hanau), 1896 (Konjic). The only exception in this regard is *CIMRM* 1247, a very untypical monument from Dieburg in Germany (on the obverse is here a motif of “Mithras the Hunter”, on the other side a scene with the motif from the Phaethon myth, unique in Mithraic iconography, taken from a scene originally used in Nero’s *Domus aurea*).

62 The most famous and characteristic monument of this “mixed type” is a relief found in the Bosnian town of Konjic (*CIMRM* 1896.3), where we can recognize, in addition to Mithras and Sol, also holders of Raven and Lion grades, portrayed with animal heads. Other monuments which refer to the auxiliary role of Mithraic Ravens in a similar fashion are *CIMRM* 42.13 (Dura Europos), 397 (Rome, Castra Praetoria), and 483-484 (Rome, Santa Prisca) = M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations*..., 150-155, pl. LV-LVIII (for colour photographs see U. Bianchi, “Documentazione fotografica di mitrei Romani...”, [905-909], pl. X-XII).

63 See e.g. M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*..., 113; id., *Mithras*..., 108; R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacisme*..., 74; J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*..., 351.

Mithras”.⁶⁴ This motif also appears quite frequently in Mithraic iconography: Mithras shoots an arrow at a rock-face, from which water then gushes.⁶⁵ In this scene, Mithras is very often accompanied by two youths (occasionally by only one) wearing Phrygian caps, sometimes represented in a supplicatory gesture, or catching the water gathered in their cupped hands.⁶⁶ Their identity as Cautes and Cautopates is guaranteed by one of the lines of verse from *Santa Prisca*.⁶⁷ Until recently, there has been no indication that this particular scene played any role in Mithraic ritual. This situation was, however, dramatically changed by the discovery of a crater (a wine mixing bowl) buried under one of the floor-levels of the mithraeum in the centre of Mainz (ancient Mogontiacum, a major administrative centre of the Roman province *Germania Superior*).⁶⁸ This cult vessel⁶⁹ carries two scenes of ritual created in the expensive and difficult barbotine technique.⁷⁰ One, named by Roger Beck the “Procession of Heliodromus”, can be disregarded here since it has no obvious parallel in Mithraic iconography or Mithraic myth.⁷¹ The other, however, named by Beck the

64 For general information about this scene, known also as “Water Miracle”, see M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 71-74; id., *Mithras...*, 72-74.

65 See e.g. *CIMRM* 42.8 (Dura Europos), 1125 (Mogontiacum), 1283.2 (Neuenheim), etc.

66 See e.g. *CIMRM* 1301.3 (Besigheim), 1292.5a (Osterburken), 1584 (right side of the altar of Flavius Aper from ancient Poetovia, modern Ptuj in Slovenia), 2018.5 (Micia/Veřel), 2023.2 (Micia/Veřel), etc.

67 See n. 75 below.

68 The circumstances of the discovery of this mithraeum, archaeologically never completely explored and now irretrievably lost, are minutely discussed in a recently published monograph by Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche (*Der Mithraskult in Mainz und das Mithræum am Ballplatz*, [Mainzer Archäologische Schriften 7], Mainz: Generaldirektion Kulturelles Erbe Rheinland-Pfalz, Direktion Archäologie 2008).

69 This vessel is approximately 40 cm high, 27 cm in diameter (upper rim) and dated to between 120-150 CE.

70 The first publication of this important Mithraic artefact is Heinz G. Horn, “Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß”, *Mainzer archäologische Zeitschrift* 1, 1994, 21-66. A corrected reconstruction of the vessel with a revised dating (between 120 and 140 AD) was presented ten years later by Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche, “Der Mainzer Krater mit den sieben Figuren”, in: Marleen Martens – Guy de Boe (eds.), *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, Brussel: Museum Het Torenke 2004, 213-227. For an interpretation of the two rituals and the role of the figures displayed on this vessel (in addition to these studies), see also Reinhold Merkelbach, “Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 108, 1995, 1-6; R. Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation...”; R. L. Gordon, “Ritual and Hierarchy in the Mysteries of Mithras...”; Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche, “Der Krater mit sieben Mysteren”, in: ead., *Der Mithraskult in Mainz und das Mithræum am Ballplatz*, (Mainzer Archäologische Schriften 7), Mainz: Generaldirektion Kulturelles Erbe Rheinland-Pfalz, Direktion Archäologie 2008, 99-108; J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods...*, 347-349, 371-374.

71 For an interpretation of this ritual see R. Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation...”, 154-167; id., “Four Men, Two Sticks, and a Whip: Image and Doctrine in a Mithraic Ritual”, in: Harvey Whitehouse – Luther H. Martin (eds.), *Theorizing*

“Archery of the Father”, seems to be particularly relevant to our argument. It portrays three participants in the course of a ritual. The first person, a man with full beard and a Phrygian cap sitting on a folding chair, is aiming an arrow, set to the string of a bow, at another man in front of him. This man, the initiand, is portrayed as proportionally smaller, beardless and naked; he raises his hands, which are apparently tied at the wrist, in terror to protect his face.⁷² Behind the naked man we can see a third person also with full beard and dressed in a tunic. In his left hand, he holds an unidentifiable object. His right hand is raised in a gesture which signals, according to the rules of ancient rhetoric, communication of important information.⁷³ The general identification of roles of the individual participants of this ritual is unproblematic. The sitting man with a bow is, due to his dignified appearance and the Phrygian cap he wears, to be identified as the Mithraic Father.⁷⁴ The man on the right plays the role of a *mystagogos* pronouncing the *legomena* necessary to successful completion of initiation.⁷⁵ This scene plays a crucial role in our argumentation since it pro-

Religions Past: Archaeology, History, and Cognition, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press 2004, 87-103. For critical views of Beck's account, see Richard L. Gordon, “Ritual and Hierarchy in the Mysteries of Mithras”, in: John A. North – Simon R. F. Price (eds.), *The Religious History of the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011, 325-365: 332-334 (a reprinted version of the 2001 article from *ARYS*), and more fully, J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods...*, 347-349.

72 The similar contrast in the size of initiates and initiators is apparent also on another important piece of Mithraic figural art which gives us precious information on Mithraic initiatory rituals: on frescos from the Campanian mithraeum Santa Maria Capua Vetere. The best, but still not wholly satisfactory, publication of this mithraeum and its frescoes is Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I: The Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere*, (ÉPRO 16.1), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1971 (for colour photographs of these initiatory scenes, see pl. XXI-XXIII, XXV-XXVIII and also now the excellent enhanced photos in M. Clauss, *Mithras...*, colour plates 10-14 [unpaginated]). The Mithraic concept of body is discussed in detail in a new article by Richard L. Gordon, “The Mithraic Body: The Example of the Capua Mithraeum”, in: Giovanni Casadio – Patricia A. Johnston (eds.), *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, Austin: University of Texas Press 2009, 290-313), based largely on the interpretation of these frescoes.

73 R. Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation...”, 153-154.

74 The grades of the other two participants remain unclear. Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche (“Der Krater mit sieben Mysteren...”, 108) has argued on the basis of her reconstruction of the vessel that the scene might portray an initiation into the Raven grade. Jaime Alvar (*Romanising Oriental Gods...*, 347-349) argues that the scene portrays an initiation into the Miles grade.

75 The “Archery of Mithras” is also referred to in a line of hexametrical verse from the Santa Prisca mithraeum in Rome (Vermaseren's reading here is, unfortunately, as in many other cases very speculative): “*Fons concludere petris qui geminos aluisti nectare fratres*” (“Rock-bound spring that fed the twin brothers with nectar”), see M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 193-200 [line 4] and pl. LXVII, I. The conclusion that these lines really refer to the “Archery of Mithras” is generally accepted, see e.g. M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras...*, 70; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 113;

vides support for the hypothesis that the mythical episode of Mithras' archery was also adapted – at least in this specific community in Mogontiacum – as a model for a ritual actually performed by local Mithraists during their cultic gatherings.⁷⁶

Since they are acts relatively easy to imitate, the scenes of “Sol's Obeisance” and “Pact of Friendship” may also be considered rituals modelled upon mythical episodes appearing in the side scenes. If this assumption is correct, we might tentatively argue that a bull's limb on the mosaic from the Felicissimus mithraeum could be a reference to the role of this object in Mithraic ritual. In this moment, it is, however, necessary to point out a problem that weakens our argument. A bull's limb appears in a panel belonging to the Miles grade which makes its connection with a ritual performance of the “Sol's Obeisance” very problematic since it is generally assumed – and we cannot but agree with this presumption – that the role of Mithras in Mithraic rituals was played by Mithraic Fathers and of Sol by *Heliodromi*, holders of the two highest initiatory grades. In view of that, a close ritual connection between the bull's limb and the grade of *Miles* would be very difficult to explain.

There is, however, an alternative explanation that a bull's limb does not actually refer to the scene of “Sol's Obeisance” but to a different episode of Mithras' life and for different purposes. Rather than a reference to a Mithraic ritual, it might be a symbolic expression of values appreciated and pursued by Mithraists. From this perspective, a potentially promising candidate would be another scene known from Mithraic iconography, depicting the Persian god holding the bull by his hind legs and dragging the beast backwards into a cave.⁷⁷ This mythical episode is surely alluded to in two lines from the Santa Prisca mithraeum: “*Hunc quem aur<ei>s humeris portavit more iuvenum*” (“This young bull which he carried on his wonderful shoulders according to his will”) ⁷⁸ and, “*Atque perlata humeris t(u)li m(a)xima divum*” (“And to the end I have borne the orders of the gods on my shoulders”). ⁷⁹ This heroic deed is also mentioned by Porphyry, who speaks about Mithras as a “cattle stealing god”, ⁸⁰ and in a *symbolon* quoted by Firmicus Maternus: “Initiate of cattle-rustling, companion by

M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 72; id., *Mithras...*, 73; J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods...*, 88.

76 Roger Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation...”, 148, claims that “there can be no doubt that these figures represent cult members engaged in cult activities”.

77 See e.g. *CIMRM* 42.10 (Dura Europos), 77 (Sidon), 207 (Lanuvium), 966C2 (Pons Saravi), 1247A9 (Dieburg), 1283.14 (Neuenheim), 1494 (Ptuj); M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca* III..., 10 with pl. VII (Marino).

78 M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 200-202 [line 7].

79 *Ibid.*, 204-205 [line 9].

80 Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 18: “*būklopos theos*”.

hand clasp of an illustrious father.”⁸¹ Thanks to monuments especially from ancient Pannonia we know that this scene was known, at least in that area, under the name *Transitus*.⁸² Already in 1966, it was argued by István Tóth, in his article devoted to the interpretation of Mithraic grades, that the prolonged struggle of Mithras with a bull, to which the *Transitus* scene would intrinsically belong, is linked to the grade of *Miles*.⁸³ Although many of his connections of individual grades with particular scenes from Mithras’ sacred narrative are undermined by a certain arbitrariness justly criticized by some scholars,⁸⁴ the new identification of the symbol on the third panel of the Felicissimus floor mosaic we propose above provides some support for his opinions about the *Miles* grade. A similar idea that certain side scenes are an expression of heroic ethos surrounding Mithras as a youthful and invincible deity and modelled on the stories about famous athletes and Olympic winners was also expressed by Richard Gordon.⁸⁵

Conclusions

There seems to be a certain amount of evidence to conclude that the third symbol on the *Miles* panel of the Felicissimus mosaic has been incorrectly identified in the previous scholarship. The traditional identifications, either a military sling bag or a Phrygian cap, are unpersuasive and problematic: a military sling bag is iconographically ambiguous and otherwise absent in Mithraic material; a Phrygian cap is used as a symbol of the highest Mithraic grade *Pater* (this identification would make a Phrygian

81 Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* 5.2: “*Mysta booklopiēs, syndexie patros agauū*.” English translation Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*, Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press 1999, 208.

82 See especially *CIMRM* 1495 (Ptuj). Cf. also *CIMRM* 1497 (Ptuj), 1811 (Sárkezi), 1900 (Skelani), or garbled words *tra[n]osito* (*CIMRM* 1722 [Bad Deutsch-Altenburg]) and *trasito* (*CIMRM* 1737 [Komárno/Komárom]). The most recent discovery is an altar with an inscription *tr[ans](itu[i])* from the Hugarian town of Szombathely, ancient Savaria (in the former Roman province Pannonia Superior), see Endre Tóth – Péter Kiss, *Lapidarium Savariense: Savaria római feliratos köemlékei*, Szombathely: Vas Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága 2011, no. 55; Péter Kiss, “Mithrasaltäre aus Savaria”, in: Irena Lazar (ed.), *Religion in Public and Private Sphere: Acta of the 4th International Colloquium The Autonomous Town of Noricum and Pannonia*, Koper: Littera Picta 2011, 183-191. We wish to thank Darius Frackowiak for information about this latest discovery.

83 I. Tóth, “*Mithram esse coronam suam*...”, 78.

84 R. Beck, “Mithraism Since Franz Cumont...”, 2091.

85 Richard L. Gordon, “Authority, Salvation and Mystery in the Mysteries of Mithras”, in: Janet Huskinson – Mary Beard – Joyce Reynolds (eds.), *Image and Mystery in the Graeco-Roman World: Three Papers Given in Memory of Jocelyn Toynbee*, Cambridge: Alan Sutton 1988, 45-80: 60-64.

cap the only duplicate symbol on the Felicissimus mosaic, since it is also used in the panel of the Father grade) and the rendering of this particular exemplar would be highly irregular. Based on the anatomical analysis of the portrayed object, we argue that it represents either a bull's pelvic or thoracic limb. The strength of this argument can be supported by the fact that a bull's limb appears also on other Mithraic monuments in connection with the scenes of the "Sol's Obeisance" and "Pact of Friendship". It is also mentioned in one passage of *Mithras Liturgy*, whose relevance for the study of the Mysteries of Mithras is, however, very problematic.

The motives and logic behind the choice of the bull's limb as a suitable symbol for the Mithraic initiatory grade *Miles* remain unclear. One possible line of reasoning would be that the bull's limb refers to the role of Soldiers in Mithraic rituals which were modelled on episodes of Mithras' myth where this object played some part. The plausibility of this hypothesis is, however, weakened by the fact that the most promising candidate, the scene of the "Sol's Obeisance", seems to have no obvious connection with the *Miles* grade. The second line of reasoning would be that the bull's limb hints at the image of Mithras' *taurophorus* (where Mithras is portrayed as carrying the bull on his back dragging it by his hind legs) and accentuates his heroic aspect. This scene could then 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*.

Appendix: *Sarcinae* in the Roman army

Toward the end of the second century BC, Gaius Marius carried out a wide-ranging reform of the Roman army, including its logistical organization. The most important improvement to army logistics lay in the fact that from this time on provisions were transported not solely by animal-drawn wagons but were also carried by soldiers. This change dramatically increased the volume of transported supplies.⁸⁶ Plutarch in his *Life of Marius* says:

Setting out on the expedition, he laboured to perfect his army as it went along, practicing his men in all kinds of running and in long marches, and compelling them to carry their own baggage, and to prepare their own food. Hence, in after times, men who were fond of toil and did whatever was enjoined upon them completely and without a murmur were called Marian Mules.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Frontinus, *Strategmata* 4.1.7.

⁸⁷ Plutarch, *Gaius Marius* 13.1. English translation by Bernardotte Perrin, in: Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives IX*, London: William Heinemann 1920, 495.

This practice survived the life of its inventor and remained in use for a very long time. Luggage carried by Roman legionaries was usually called *sarcina*,⁸⁸ *vas* or *fascis*.⁸⁹ The whole luggage consisted of (1) clothing and weaponry (*arma*); (2) personal utensils including cooking ware (*vas*); (3) tools (*instrumenta*); (4) rations (*cibus*).⁹⁰ Part of these items might have been transported by mules, part by the legionaries themselves. Based on archaeological evidence and literary sources, some military historians estimate the total weight of the luggage carried by a single Roman legionary on campaign to be approximately 22 kg.⁹¹ The Roman general Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo alleged that Roman wars are won by axes (*dolabrae*) as well as by swords.⁹² Josephus informs us that each Roman soldier carried with him into war an axe, basket, spade, rope, chain, saw and sickle.⁹³ In addition to these, Roman legionaries had to carry so called *pila muralia*, rectangular stakes 1,5-2 m long with points at both ends, used for building protective palisades around temporary military camps.⁹⁴ Vegetius says that the Roman army was especially trained for long marches with heavy luggage.⁹⁵ The weight of this luggage was arranged, according to Frontinus, in a following manner:

[G]aius Marius had his soldiers fasten their utensils (*vasa*) and food (*cibaria*) up in bundles and hang them on forked poles (*furcae*), to make the burden easy and to facilitate rest.⁹⁶

There is no reason to think that this system underwent many changes from the times of Gaius Marius, as illustrated, for example, by the image of marching legionaries on one panel from the Trajan's Column (fig. 6).

88 Livy XXVIII.2.3, XXXI.27.7, XXXV.4.6; Caesar, *De bello Gallico* II.17.2; Tacitus, *Annales* I.63; Tacitus, *Historiae* II.40, IV.78, 4.34; Frontinus, *Strategmata* I.5.3.

89 Livy, XXVII.27.2; Frontinus, *Strategmata* IV.1.7.

90 Jonathan P. Roth, *The Logistics of the Roman Army at War (264 B.C. – A.D. 235)*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1999, 72.

91 *Ibid.*, 73.

92 Frontinus, *Strategmata* IV.7.2.

93 Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* III.55.

94 Julian Bennett, "The Great Chesters Pilum Murale", *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5, 1982, 200-205.

95 Vegetius, *Epitome rei militaris* I.19.

96 Frontinus, *Strategmata* IV.1.7. English translation by Charles E. Bennett, in: Frontinus, *The Strategems and the Aqueducts of Rome*, London: William Heinemann 1925, 271.



Fig. 6. Legionaries with *sarcinae*. Conrad Cichorius,
Die Reliefs der Trajanssäule: Erster Tafelband:
"Die Reliefs des Ersten Dakischen Krieges", Tafeln 1-57,
 Berlin: Verlag von Georg Reimer 1896, pl. VII, scene IV.
 Photo Marie Pardyová.

However, soldiers here were probably rendered, at least partially, in accordance with artistic stylization. It seems that the author of this panel wanted *sarcinae* to be well visible, while in real life soldiers probably did not carry them so high above; also the poles and tools portrayed were probably shorter since each legionary must have carried his own shield, which made carrying *sarcinae* hung on a staff over his shoulder the most feasible practice.

All these references show that *sarcinae* were only one component of the pack carried by Roman soldiers. They do not seem to be very prominent objects, they are mentioned quite rarely in Roman sources, they are never highlighted as a characteristic symbol of military activity and they definitely did not have a characteristic shape which would make them universally recognizable to Roman observers.



SUMMARY

The Third Symbol of the *Miles* Grade on the Floor Mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia: A New Interpretation

This article deals with the identification and interpretation of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade on the floor mosaic of the Felicissimus mithraeum in Ostia. In previous scholarship, this symbol has usually been identified as a soldier's sling bag or, alternatively, as a Phrygian cap. The authors of this article question these identifications and hypothesize that this object might represent a bull's pelvic limb (i.e. hind-quarter) or, less likely, thoracic limb (i.e. fore-leg). They base their argument on the expert opinion of two veterinarians and also on the fact that a bull's limb is depicted on other Mithraic monuments, notably the altar of Flavius Aper at Poetovio, unlike a soldier's bag. In the second part of the article, the authors tentatively reflect on why the author of this mosaic might have chosen this particular symbol. They suggest either the possibility that this object might have played a role in Mithraic ritual(s) modelled on some episodes from a Mithras myth, or that it refers to the scene of *Transitus* and thus accentuates the heroic aspect of Mithras' personality in the role of *deus invictus*.

Keywords: Mysteries of Mithras; Mithraic ritual; Felicissimus mithraeum; Felicissimus mosaic; Mithraic grades; *Miles* grade; soldier's sling bag; *sarcina*; Phrygian cap; Santa Prisca mithraeum; *Mithras Liturgy*; altar of Flavius Aper; Mainz Vessel; Sol's Obeisance; Pact of Friendship; Sacred Repast; Archery of the Father; *Transitus*.

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