

Gordon, Richard L.

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The Miles-frame in the Mitreo di Felicissimo and the Practicalities of Sacrifice

RICHARD L. GORDON*

Messrs. Chalupa and Glomb are to be congratulated on their critical assessment of the traditional arguments that identified the third object depicted in the *Miles*-panel of the floor-mosaic of the Mitreo di Felicissimo as a “military bag”.¹ As they point out, there are no convincing iconographic parallels; the utilitarian objects carried on the legionaries’ stakes on Trajan’s column² bear no resemblance to the item in this panel (their fig. 6). This assessment can be strengthened by taking into consideration an undoubted example of a carry-bag, namely the image of Mercury that adorns one of the silver dishes found in a hoard at Berthouville (département Eure) before 1916 (fig. 1 here).³ It shows Mercury, as god of wealth and prosperity, holding a bag full of coins in front a tall base on which stands a cockerel (one of Mercury’s animals) on a heap of (no doubt silver) coins. Although the mouth-part of the bag bears some resemblance to the analogous part of the “bag” in the Mitreo di Felicissimo, the remainder makes clear how differently that “bag” is represented: there is no counterpart to the swollen belly of the true bag carried by Mercury, and there is no attempt to render the surface stripes or marks that are so prominent at di Felicissimo.

* 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 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.

3 François Baratte, *Römisches Silbergeschirr in den gallischen und germanischen Provinzen*, Aalen: Limes Museum Aalen 1984, 85, no. 8.



Fig. 1. Silver dish from Berthouville (département Eure). Mercury and the money-cock. François Baratte, *Römisches Silbergeschirr in den gallischen und germanischen Provinzen*, Aalen: Limes Museum Aalen 1984, 56, fig. 8.

I am therefore convinced that Dr. Antonín Glomb is correct to identify the object, in the quaint language of the veterinary profession, as a “right pelvic bovine limb”, i.e. the right-hand hind-quarter of a bull. Nevertheless, as the authors recognise, the new fact raises a new problem, namely the significance that Felicissimus, or the (knowledgeable) designer of the mosaic floor, attributed to the (bull’s) hind-quarter. Their suggestion that it alludes to an admittedly important moment in Mithras’ struggle with the bull, which was indeed central to the self-stylisation of Mithraists as “initi-

ates of a bull-theft”,⁴ seems to me rather weak, inasmuch as there is no direct evidence in its favour, although I fully accept the general point that elements of this myth were appropriated by Mithraists in devising plausibly motivated ritual performances. In my view, our two authors would have done better to follow up the implications of the bull’s hind-quarter that lies on the ground in front of the sacrificial altar represented, in a sort of *mise-en-abîme*, on the front of the altar dedicated by Flavius Aper at Poetovio (their fig. 5).

Rather than move straight to another ritual, namely “Sol’s Obeisance”, where Mithras appears to be threatening Sol with the bull’s hind-quarter, we ought to step back and think about the realities of sacrifice, to which this representation at Poetovio alludes. Killing the animal was only a preliminary to the butchery and subsequent cooking, which involved (1) the extraction of the blood, (2) disembowelling and extraction of the noble *exta*, i.e. heart, liver, lungs, (3) removal of the hide or skin, (4) removal of the major limbs, head and tail, (5) roasting of noble *exta* of cattle, (6) preparation of smaller cuts, which in the case of cattle were boiled, (7) production of blood-sausage etc.⁵ Of these stages, whose handling differed somewhat between cattle, sheep/goats, pigs and wild animals, Mithraic evidence alludes to at least four: on the fresco in the Barberini Mithraeum in Rome and the altar of Flavius Aper in Mithraeum III at Poetovio (Ptuj), in both of which Mithras and Helios/Sol are roasting “meat” on spits over the altar-flame, alludes to the extraction and roasting of the noble *exta* of cattle;⁶ the flaying of the bull is an essential pre-condition for the feast of Mithras and Helios/Sol, in which the two gods recline on the bull’s hide, as at Heddernheim I or Lopodunum/Ladenburg;⁷ the severed head and tail of the bull, together with the *victimarius’* knife, are represented in the floor-mosaic at the Mitreo degli Animali, the earliest of the Ostian mithraea, now dated to the last decade of the second century AD (*CIMRM* 279; fig. 2 here); a torchbearer is represented boiling meat in a cauldron on the relief of Absalmos now in Jerusalem.⁸ This Mithraic concern with sacrifi-

4 A. Chalupa – T. Glomb, “The Third Symbol...”, 27-28.

5 Cf. Jean-Louis Durand, “Bêtes grecques”, in: Marcel Detienne – Jean-Pierre Vernant (eds.), *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, Paris: Gallimard 1979, 133-181; the Roman rules were however slightly different.

6 Barberini: *CIMRM* 390, scene R3 (incorrectly described by Vermaseren); Poetovio: *CIMRM* 1584. These spits recur in images of the feast between Mithras and Sol, e.g. at Dura-Europos (*CIMRM* 42.13).

7 See Jaime Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cult of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*, (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 165), Leiden: E. J. Brill 2008, 354, n. 593.

8 *Ibid.*, pl. 11; cf. *L’Année épigraphique* 1999, no. 1675.

cial procedure has been quite wrongly neglected in the scholarship in favour of supposedly more interesting “initiatory” rituals.



Fig. 2. (Severed) head of a bull, with the tail, and a *victimarius'* knife for chopping and skinning. Floor-mosaic of Mitreo degli Animali (CIMRM 278). Photo: Richard L. Gordon.

Anyone who has been to a shambles in an unmodernised Mediterranean country, say Anatolia in the 1960s or Morocco today, will be familiar with the sight of severed hind-quarters of various animals (of course in Muslim countries, not those of pigs) hanging on butchers' hooks. There are plenty of such images in the funerary art of Roman-period butchers (fig. 3 here).



Fig. 3. Scene from a butcher's shop, Ostia (detail). Note the cuts of meat hanging on hooks. From Ostia, now Museo Torlonia, Visconti inv. no. 379. The inscription is *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* XIV.9685. Photo: Alinari 46966.

To my mind, the representation of a severed hind-quarter, even on the floor of a mithraeum, would have evoked in the first instance not the idea “Mithras carting off the bull” but precisely such an image of a butcher’s shop, and thus, secondarily, the butchery of the Mithraic bull, precisely as in the image on the altar of Flavius Aper.

Now if we consider the objects represented in the four lower panels of the Felicissimus mosaic we can make out a sort of programme, such that one element evokes the name of the grade (raven = *Corax*; [...] ⁹ = *Nymphus*; spear = *Miles*; sistrum = *Leo*), and a second evokes the guardian planet (caduceus = Mercury; diadem = Venus; helmet = Mars; thunderbolt = Jupiter). What then of the third object? Judging from the three other panels, it evoked a responsibility considered proper to the grade: the cup in the *Corax* panel evokes serving at the feast, a role that is explicit in several representations of the mythical feast;¹⁰ the lamp in the *Nymphus* panel evokes the role of light in the cult, and specifically lighting lamps; the fire-shovel in the *Leo* panel evokes their role in the tending of fire. By implication, the severed hind-quarter in the *Miles* panel evokes the role of this grade in Mithraic sacrificial practice, namely butchery of the animals required for the communal meal. In public “civic” sacrifice, of course, this was the task of the *victimarius*, who was a slave; but in the Mithraic context, or at any rate in Felicissimus’ view, serving the god, and the group, was understood differently.

We do not, of course, need to conclude that this new fact legitimates the idea that “Mithraists ate beef”, in imitation of Mithras’s bull-sacrifice. At any rate in the provinces, they preferred an “Italian” diet, and ate relatively expensive items, such as piglets and cockerels. The image of a bull’s hind-quarter in the Mitreo di Felicissimo simply reminds us that in religious contexts we never have to do with mere or pure documentation of observable “facts”, but with images that serve as references or signs. In this case, the bull’s hind-quarter serves as a sign referring back to Mithras’ mythical sacrifice, and to the secondary claim that it was the first members of the grade *Miles* who performed the task of butchery.

⁹ Not surviving.

¹⁰ J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods...*, 356.



SUMMARY

The *Miles*-frame in the Mitreo di Felicissimo and the Practicalities of Sacrifice

The recognition by Messrs. Chalupa and Glomb that the “military bag” in the *Miles*-frame of the floor-mosaic of the Mitreo di Felicissimo in Ostia is in fact a butcher’s cut is an important correction of detail in that it serves to focus attention upon a theme in the iconography of the Roman cult of Mithras that has been wrongly neglected in favour of supposedly more important “mystery” themes. In the light of the sacrificial scene on the altar of Flavius Aper (Poetovio), the interpretation as a bull’s hind-quarter rather than shoulder is to be preferred. The scene at Ostia is perfectly in keeping with other evidence suggesting that (junior) Mithraic grades fulfilled specific manual tasks within the cult, in the case of Miles, butchery of sacrificial animals.

Keywords: mysteries of Mithras; Mithraic ritual; Felicissimus mithraeum, Ostia; *Miles* grade; sacrificial practice.

Max-Weber-Kolleg für kultur-
und sozialwissenschaftliche Studien
Universität Erfurt
Postfach 900221
D-99105 Erfurt
Germany

RICHARD L. GORDON

richard.gordon@uni-erfurt.de