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Mithras, Milites, and Bovine Legs

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In their article, “The Third Symbol of the *Miles* Grade on the Floor Mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia: A New Interpretation”, Aleš Chalupa and Tomáš Glomb argue that one of the three symbols associated with the Mithraic initiatory grade of *Miles* on the floor mosaic in the Felicissimus Mithraeum has been misinterpreted.¹ In addition to an image of a helmet and a spear in this mosaic, clear references to accessories appropriate to a *soldier*, there is a third, no less distinct but nevertheless equivocal, image that has most often been interpreted as a *sarcina* or soldier’s sling bag or, less often, as a Phrygian cap. This understanding groups the sling bag with the helmet and spear as images appropriate for an initiatory grade that is named by and associated with military service.

Chalupa and Glomb correctly question the identification of the ambivalent image of the third Mithraic initiatory grade as a Phrygian cap since this image appears in another grade from the same mosaic (that of the Father) in an unambiguous and characteristic form and would be, therefore, the only image to be employed twice in the Felicissimus mosaic.² The authors also question the identification of this ambivalent image as a *sarcina* because, (1) it is a poor visual representation of anything since the shape of a sling bag depends upon its contents and, more convincingly, (2) because confirmation of this identification rests upon a circular argument whereby a similar image, carried by a Mithraic Soldier portrayed on a fresco in the Santa Prisca mithraeum in Rome, is identified with reference to the image from the Felicissimus mithraeum and vice versa.³

Contrary to previous interpretations of the ambiguous image associated with the Mithraic grade of *Miles* represented on the Felicissimus mosaic, Chalupa and Glomb argue that this figure represents, rather, a bovine limb. They argue this interpretation resourcefully by consulting two specialists in animal anatomy who confirm that this image strikingly represents the shape and muscular structure either of a bovine pelvic or thoracic limb.

* 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 *Ibid.*, 14.

3 *Ibid.*, 14-16.

And, the authors confirm this identification with reference to other Mithraic monuments, especially the Altar of Flavius Aper from ancient Poetovio.⁴ Although other scholars have also identified the image on this altar as a bull's leg, in my opinion, its interpretation is as equivocal as is that of the Felicissimus mithraeum. While it certainly conforms to the anatomical characteristics of a bull's limb argued by Chalupa and Glomb, it could also represent the ambiguous shape of a sarcina, depending upon the penchant of the viewer. Nevertheless, Chalupa and Glomb have, in my opinion, presented a credible new interpretation of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade as represented on the floor mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum, an interpretation that will need to be carefully considered in future research.

If the identification of the third symbol of the *Miles* grade as a bull's limb is correct, the question remains why a bull's leg should have military associations? Here Chalupa's and Glomb's arguments become less convincing. They suggest such a relationship by citing the so-called *Mithras Liturgy*, a text from a fifth-century Greek magical papyrus from Egypt, which describes a "god", the characteristics of which are "consistent with some known figural monuments of Mithras."⁵ The figure is portrayed as holding in his right hand the "golden shoulder of a young calf," which is identified in the text as "the Bear which moves and turns the heavenly vault around." Chalupa and Glomb then refer to Egyptian mythology and astrology to suggest a role for Mithras as Cosmocrator,⁶ a role also proposed previously by David Ulansey.⁷

Although most scholars reject the *Mithras Liturgy* as reflecting the practices or beliefs of any actual Mithraic community, Chalupa and Glomb nevertheless suppose that this association of Mithras with the bovine limb might have "found its way to some Mithraic communities interested in astrology."⁸ Since there was but one documented Mithraic cell in all of Roman occupied Egypt, this supposition is, without further evidence, rather weak.⁹ However, the authors refer to a zodiac on the stuccoed ceil-

4 *Ibid.*, 20.

5 *Ibid.*, 22.

6 *Ibid.*, 22-23.

7 David Ulansey, *The Origin of Mithraic Mysteries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989, 95-98.

8 A. Chalupa – T. Glomb, "The Third Symbol...", 22.

9 There is anecdotal and some archaeological evidence for the existence of a mithraeum in Memphis. The later Christian apologetic reference to a mithraeum in Alexandria has not been confirmed by any archaeological evidence. See Luther H. Martin, "The (Surprising Absence of a) Mithras Cult in Roman Egypt", in: Afe Adogame – Magnus Ehtler – Oliver Freiberger (eds.), *Alternative Voices: A Plurality Approach for Religious Studies*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 2013, 100-115.

ing of the mithraeum on the island of Ponza that represents the constellations of the Great and Little Bear in its center, i.e., in the pole position. However, these somewhat tenuous associations of Mithras with the Northern pole and again with Egyptian representations of that pole by a bull's limb fails to offer any convincing explanation for why this image would become associated with Mithras' *Milites*.

I find Chalupa's and Glomb's arguments in the third section of their paper, in which they attempt to locate the bull's limb in "a larger network of information about the symbolic world of the Mysteries of Mithras,"¹⁰ to be the more problematic. Although they fully acknowledge that their arguments in the section are only a "preliminary explorations of possibilities,"¹¹ I find their attempt problematic because of their methodological *essentialization* of a Mithraic story or myth. Essentialization is the assumption that certain categories represent an underlying unity that gives them a distinctive identity¹² – whether that essentialization is intentional or not.¹³ Thus the authors speak, for example, of "Mithras' sacred story,"¹⁴ of Mithras' "sacred narrative,"¹⁵ of "episodes from Mithras' life",¹⁶ of a "Mithras myth,"¹⁷ as though there was some cohesive Mithraic story, narrative or myth about the life of Mithras that was commonly shared among all Mithraic cells. They then attempt to locate the image of a bull's leg in this "biography of Mithras," which *they* suppose to have existed but for which there is little to no historical documentation, even at a regional level.¹⁸

10 A. Chalupa – T. Glomb, "The Third Symbol...", 23.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Susan A. Gelman, *The Essential Child: Origins of Essentialism in Everyday Thought*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press 2003, 3.

13 I have argued elsewhere that the essentialization of categories is a general cognitive proclivity of *Homo sapiens* which must be explicitly guarded against by historians in their historiographical reconstructions, see Luther H. Martin, "'The Devil is in the Details': Hellenistic Mystery Initiation Rites: Bridge-Burning or Bridge-Building?", in: Birgitte Bøgh – Jacob Engberg – Anders-Christian Jacobsen (eds.), *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity: Shifting Identities, Creating Change*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, forthcoming. Even Chalupa himself has explicitly challenged any essentialization of categories: Aleš Chalupa, "Why Would Anyone Become A Mithraist?": in: Birgitte Bøgh – Jacob Engberg – Anders-Christian Jacobsen (eds.), *Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity: Shifting Identities, Creating Change*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, forthcoming.

14 A. Chalupa – T. Glomb, "The Third Symbol...", 23.

15 *Ibid.*, 28.

16 *Ibid.*, 23.

17 *Ibid.*, 29.

18 The authors correctly reject, for example, any endeavor "to reconstruct any 'Myth of Mithras' ... from the side scenes flanking the tauroctony", see A. Chalupa – T. Glomb, "The Third Symbol...", 23.

In their discussion of a scene on the recently discovered cup from a mithraeum in Mainz, Chalupa and Glomb provide an example of how unrelated Mithraic images might become incorrectly associated by locating them in a synoptically-supposed Mithraic “symbolic world.” The Mainz cup portrays an image of an initiating Father drawing a bow and aiming an arrow at an initiate. The authors (following other scholars) associate this image with those portraying Mithras shooting “an arrow at a rock-face, from which water then gushes.”¹⁹ The only thing these two images would seem to have in common is a bow, from which, however, the initiating Father aims at an initiate but from which Mithras shoots an arrow into a rock. As Chalupa and Glomb themselves maintain, however, “independent evidence” is required in order “to see any connection between ... representations found in different places.”²⁰ By their bow-centric methodology of association, the authors might also have referenced the hunting scene from the Dura-Europos mithraeum in which Mithras is portrayed, astride his horse, aiming an arrow from his drawn bow at his prey in a typical Roman representation of a hunt (*CIMRM* 52).

More accurately, the scene on the Mainz cup has been compared with the initiation panels from the mithraeum in Capua Vetere. Although the initiating Father in this latter representation threatens the initiate with a stick-like object, a spear or sword (?), rather than with a bow and arrow, the scenes are comparable in portraying a dominant initiator threatening a submissive initiate, who is represented in both scenes as smaller than the initiator, blindfolded and naked and, therefore, vulnerable. Of course, this tells us nothing about a specifically Mithraic initiatory context since this dominant-submissive relationship between initiator and initiate, together with similar motifs of threat, and of blindfolded and nude initiates, are common representations of initiation into the Graeco-Roman mysteries.²¹ In other words, Chalupa and Glomb commit the historiographical fallacy of attempting to explain the significance of some target problem – in this case, an association of bovine legs with the Mithraic grade of *Miles* – by situating it in its presumptive context, the “larger network of information about the symbolic world of the Mysteries of Mithras.”²² The fallacy, of course, is that the context is presumed rather than itself being subject to explanation.

19 *Ibid.*, 25.

20 *Ibid.*, 16.

21 Luther H. Martin, “Aspects of ‘Religious Experience’ among the Graeco-Roman Mystery Religions”, *Religion and Theology* 12, 2005, 349-369; id., “Cognitive Science, Ritual, and the Hellenistic Mystery Religions”, *Religion and Theology* 13, 2006, 383-395.

22 A. Chalupa – T. Glomb, “The Third Symbol...”, 23.

Rather than supposing any coherent world of Mithraic symbols in which seemingly common but widely-distributed finds of decentralized Mithraic cells might be located, I suggest that it might be more profitable to speak of a network of relationships between and among Mithraic cells, a model that has already been productively employed in historical studies of the ancient Mediterranean world,²³ suggested as the model for early Greek religion,²⁴ and for the successes of early Christianity.²⁵ Apparently similar Mithraic images might first be tracked within this network and their relationship more eloquently compared.

Most succinctly, network theory is part of complexity theory which explains the internal organization of decentralized patterns where none previously existed.²⁶ Network models attempt to map specific patterns of social ties between related nodes (which may be delimited as individuals, groups, or clusters of groups). These nodes are not necessarily contingent but are measured by “degrees of separation”, that is, by the number of nodes which must be traversed to reach a target node, rather than by physical distance. These “short links” can have a relatively small number of connections; in fact, the minimum requirement to stay connected is but one link per node.²⁷ For example, we know there was but a single link between the Mithraic cell on the Greek island of Andros and that at the Roman garrison of the Praetorian Guard from which members of the Andros guard had been deployed.²⁸ Rather than assuming a generalized Mithraic world of symbols in which to locate Mithraic finds, in other words, we might first establish those “short links” (or greater degrees of separation) between nodes by which a Mithraic network might be defined. For example, we know that at each of the sites where legio V Macedonica was stationed, from 167 AD until the second half of the third century, Mithraic dedications and finds are attested.²⁹ And, L. Valerius Fuscus,

23 Irad Malkin, *Small World: Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press 2011; Irad Malkin – Christy Constantakopoulou – Katerina Panagopoulou (eds.), *Greek and Roman Networks in the Mediterranean*, London: Routledge 2011.

24 Esther Eidinow, “Networks and Narratives: A Model for Ancient Greek Religion”, *Kernos* 24, 2011, 9-38.

25 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996; Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: How Everything is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life*, New York: Plume 2003, 3-5, 7, 19, 129, 136.

26 John Gribbin, *Deep Simplicity: Bringing Order to Chaos and Complexity*, New York: Random House 2004, 125.

27 A.-L. Barabási, *Linked...*, 18.

28 *CIMRM* 2350.

29 E.g., in Dacia at Potaissa (*CIMRM* 1921, 1929), and in Pannonia at Poetovio (*CIMRM* 1590, 1592, 1594, 1596); see Charles M. Daniels, “The Role of the Roman Army in the

who dedicated the Altar of Flavius Aper to which Chalupa and Glomb refer, served in the legio V Macedonica.³⁰ And the emblem of the legio V Macedonica was the bull – as it was, however, of most of the Roman legions claiming their origin from Caesar!³¹

Of course, the emblem of an intact bull as an emblem of strength and power is something other than that of a detached bovine limb (an image of which may or may not be portrayed on the Altar of Flavius Aper). However, images of detached limbs of bulls (one of which Chalupa and Glomb have argued was associated with the Mithraic grade of *Miles* at the Felicissimus Mithraeum), images conforming precisely to the anatomical features identified by Chalupa and Glomb for bovine legs, were often used in the carved legs of Roman furniture, as they had been in Assyria, Egypt, and Greece, as representations of strength.³² Even as Chalupa and Glomb have selectively associated images of bows in Mithraic imagery, one might, without evidence more precise than an artificially constructed and essentialized “network of information about the symbolic world of the Mysteries of Mithras,” associate these functional emblems of bovine strength with the ambiguous image borne by (some of) the Mithraic *Milites* as a representation of martial strength; both are, after all, common to a Roman context of instrumental culture.

Assuming a Mithraic network of social relations is as tentative as assuming a Mithraic network of symbolic information. However, by mapping what we know of the empirical evidence, i.e., of dates and geographic sites of Mithraic finds and of their epidemiology, e.g., as a consequence of military redeployments, it may be possible to reconstruct something of a Mithraic network with more confidence than it is simply to assume one and to locate Mithraic imagery within that context. Nevertheless, Chalupa and Glomb are to be commended for their credible identification of the ambiguous image associated with the grade of *Miles* in the Felicissimus Mithraeum as a bovine leg and for reopening, thereby, a larger discussion about explanations for the diffusion of Mithraism and of its (supposedly) analogous Mithraic images throughout the Roman Empire.

Spread and Practice of Mithraism”, in: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies II*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 249-274: 251.

30 *CIMRM* 2286; C. M. Daniels, „The Role of the Roman Army...”.

31 Lawrence Keppie, *The Making of the Roman Army: From Republic to Empire*, London: Routledge 1998, 120.

32 E.g., <<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/100004096>> [16 March 2013].



SUMMARY

Mithras, Milites, and Bovine Legs

In their new interpretation of “The Third Symbol of the *Miles* Grade on the Floor Mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia,” Aleš Chalupa and Tomáš Glomb present a convincing argument that this symbol represents a bovine leg. Less satisfying is their conventional historiographical method by which the significance of a target problem is assumed to become clear when located in its historical context, in this case, an assumed but never explicated “symbolic world of the Mysteries of Mithras.” As an alternative, I have suggested network theory as providing an empirically based possibility for tracking relationships between Mithraic cells and, thus, between similar imagery. Nevertheless, Chalupa and Glomb are to be commended for their credible identification of the ambiguous image associated with the grade of *Miles* in the Felicissimus Mithraeum and for reopening, thereby, a larger discussion about explanations for the diffusion of Mithraism and of its (supposedly) analogous Mithraic images throughout the Roman Empire.

Keywords: Mysteries of Mithras; Felicissimus mithraeum; Felicissimus mosaic; *Miles* grade; bovine legs; Mithraic network.

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