



THE MYSTERY OF MITHRAS

EXPLORING THE HEART OF A ROMAN CULT

MUSÉE ROYAL
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THE MYSTERY OF MITHRAS

EXPLORING THE HEART OF A ROMAN CULT

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THE MYSTERY OF MITHRAS. EXPLORING THE HEART OF A ROMAN CULT

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FROM THE CAPITOLINE HILL TO LOUVRE-LENS

THE MODERN JOURNEY OF A MITHRAIC RELIEF

Laurent Bricault & Richard Veymiers

At the heart of the Louvre-Lens Museum's Gallery of Time, among the 200 works selected to retrace some 5,000 years of history, there stood in 2021 a great Mithraic relief in marble that caught all of the visitors' attention.¹ This visually arresting monument was installed there in 2012 in order to be displayed as part of the exhibition that accompanied the museum's official opening.² This newfound visibility marks the culmination of the most recent restoration, which began in 1998.³

Measuring 2.54 m in height and 2.75 m in width, the relief today is constituted of three marble blocks, leaving hollowed out the back of the cave that serves as the scene's framework (fig. 1). The composition is developed in two levels. Beneath the vault of the cave, Mithras stabs the bull, flanked by his acolytes the dadophori, and also in the presence of the dog, serpent, and scorpion, and a bird. Above the tauroctonic god, in the background, three trees separate the chariots of the Sun and Moon, each preceded by a nude *genius*. On the left, Phosphorus ("the bearer of the Dawn's light") accompanies the Sun. On the right, Hesperus ("the Evening") guides the Moon. Several inscriptions are engraved on the body of the bull.⁴ Under the knee of Mithras there runs the text of a dedication by two individuals, probably freedmen, addressing "God Sun unconquered Mithras" (*Deo Soli invict[o] Mitrhe [sic] C[aii] Aufidii Ianuarius [et ---]*). In

addition, there are short exclamations honouring other figures, among them a certain Sebesius (*Nama Sebesio* and *Nama [---]ne CS*).

This colossal monument, which was set up during the 2nd century in a *Mithraeum* located in the heart of Rome, below the Capitoline Hill, has known many lives since its rediscovery in the 15th century, exposing it to the view of millions of people. Its modern history has endowed it with a prestigious pedigree, which for a long time has made it the most famous monument from the Roman cult of Mithras. To reconstruct this astonishing journey is to write a biography that leads us to the vibrant artistic and antiquarian worlds of Renaissance Italy, to meet one of the most illustrious families of Rome's aristocracy, and finally into the heart of the manoeuvrings conducted under Napoleon I in order to enrich France's imperial collections.

OLDEST TESTIMONIES

It is in the Rome of the *Quattrocento*, under the pontificate of Martin V (1417-1431), that our Mithraic relief appears to have made its reappearance. The humanists of the era were passionate about classical Antiquity, from which they would rediscover texts and material remains in the course of their quest for the origins of Christian Rome. Such was the case with Nicolò Signorili, a scribe in the service of Martin V, for whom around 1425 he achieved a *Descriptio Urbis Romae*, a veritable contemporary panorama of the city. In a passage pertaining to the

¹ Musée du Louvre, inv. Ma 1023 (= MR 818). See *CIMRM* 415.

² Hence its presence in the guide by MARTINEZ *et al.* 2012, 119.

³ On this restoration process and its various phases, see ROGER 2014, 254-255.

⁴ *CIL* VI 719 = *CIL* VI 30819.



Fig. 1 Marble tauroctony relief, Capitoline Mithraeum, 2nd cent. C.E. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. Ma 1023 (exhibited at Louvre-Lens since 2012).

Capitoline Hill, he mentions the presence of a sculpted marble showing a man atop an animal at the place called “lo perso”.⁵ The antiquarian culture of the time undoubtedly was not sufficiently developed for the figure represented in this manner to be identified.

Although the ancient monuments and their drawings had never ceased to circulate during the Middle Ages, their original meanings were often lost, but this did not at all prevent their use and reappropriation. The configuration of Mithras Tau-roctonos (fig. 2) thus makes, for example, a surprising appearance among the classical motifs reused with fantastic imagination between 1172 and 1189 in the capitals of the cloister adjoining the Cathedral of Monreale in Sicily.⁶

⁵ Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. Chigiano I, VI, 204, fol. 18v-19r. See VALENTINI & ZUCCHETTI 1953, 201.

⁶ As is noted already in PANOFSKY 1960, 96-100, fig. 78.



Fig. 2 Historiated marble capital from the cloister of the cathedral Santa Maria Nuova di Monreale (Sicily), 1174-1183.

AN INSPIRATION FOR ARTISTS

The relief from the Capitoline Hill remained visible throughout the 15th century, retaining the attention of other observers, since it is found in a poem entitled *Antiquarie prospetiche Romane*, which was written a little before 1500 in honour of Leonardo da Vinci. The anonymous author, who presented himself as a Milanese painter,⁷ indicated a spectacular marble work beneath the Capitoline Hill, which he identified as a nymph slaughtering a bull.⁸

In the first half of the *Cinquecento*, artists – notably the Mannerists – seized upon this powerful configuration that clearly lent itself to multiple readings.⁹ The pose of a figure mastering a bull was particularly suitable for one of the labours of Hercules, the hero's capture of the Cretan bull. The Capitoline relief was thus a source of inspiration for Baldassare Peruzzi at the Villa Farnesina (around 1508) and later for Giulio Romano at the Palazzo del

Te (around 1526-1527) in their reconstitution of the Herculean cycle.¹⁰

The connection appears even more directly in the particularly expressive work of the Bolognese painter Amico Aspertini, who revisited Antiquity through rather free and sometimes disconcerting sketches. One of his notebooks, created in the years 1530-1535 during a visit to Rome, presents his version of a sculpted scene (fig. 3) showing Hercules, nude and bearded, battling with a bull before a cave.¹¹ Around the hero there appear for the first time two standing men, along with a dog, serpent and scorpion. Above, to either side of the arch marking the cave's entrance, are two chariots in motion facing each other.

⁷ The identity of the individual hiding behind the pseudonym of *prospettivo Milanese dipintore* remains a mystery, even if some have identified him as Donato Bramante.

⁸ Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, Vol. Inc. 1628, Carta 4: V° - Col. II, tercet 131. See GOVI 1876, 53.

⁹ BOBER & RUBINSTEIN 1986, 85, no. 46; BARKAN 1999, 169-173.

¹⁰ See, for example, MAURER 2015, 215-218, fig. 6.8, regarding the work of Giulio Romano in the Sala dei Cavalli.

¹¹ London, British Museum, Sketchbook I, fol. 40. See BOBER 1957, 69-70.

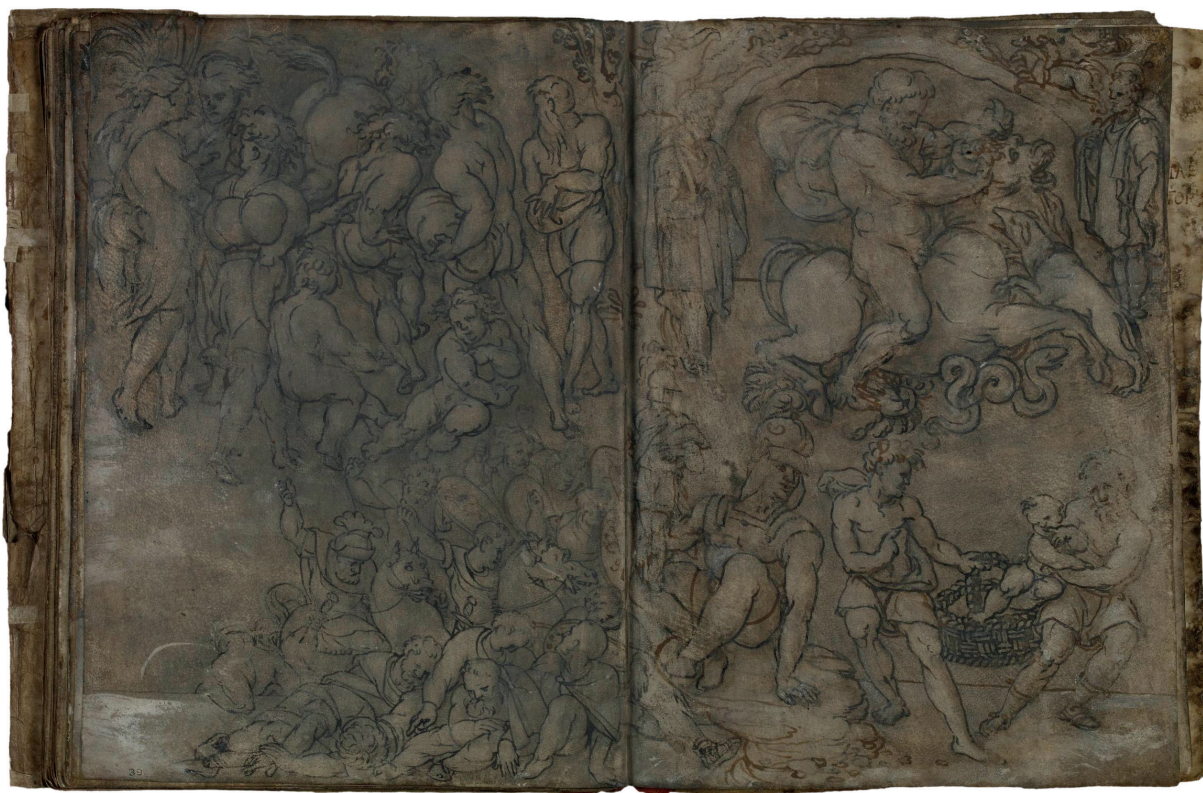


Fig. 3 Drawing by Amico Aspertini, 1530-1535. London, British Museum, Sketchbook I, fol. 40.

An unexpected echo of this creative burst is to be found in France, in the Val d'Oise, at the heart of the Château d'Écouen. In the chamber reserved for King Henry II, the decoration of the fireplace painted in 1549-1551 attests to the influence of the Capitoline relief on a scene associated with an episode from the Old Testament.¹² Saul, the first king of Israel, is there represented stabbing a bull, in an identical pose, before giving battle to the Ammonites.¹³

¹² As is rightly noted by GORDON 2004b, 31, fig. 12 (*contra* TURCAN 1997, who had detected Mithraic inspiration, while associating it with another monument).

¹³ Écouen, Musée national de la Renaissance. See BÉGUIN *et al.* 1995, 67 and 99-100. This biblical episode pertains to *I Samuel* 11:7.

¹⁴ On the Europe of the antiquarians, see, for example, MOMIGLIANO 1983, 244-293 and SCHNAPP 1993, 121-177.

¹⁵ SMETIUS 1588, fol. 21, no. 15 [reproduced by GRUTER 1602, XXXIV, no. 6].

A TREASURE FOR ANTIQUARIANS

During this era, the posterity of ancient monuments such as the Capitoline relief was assured beyond the Italian peninsula by the descriptions and the copies made by antiquarians present in Rome.¹⁴ The Flemish scholar Martinus Smetius was one of these. Secretary to Cardinal Rodolfo Pio de Carpi, he made an important collection of inscriptions there in the years 1545-1551. In his compilation published in Leiden in 1588 with the help of his friend Justus Lipsius, he mentions the Capitoline relief and its dedication – which bears the name of Mithras – and assigns it to a sanctuary of the god set in the depths of the hill, precisely beneath the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli.¹⁵



Fig. 4 Drawing by Pighius (*Codex Coburgensis*), 1550-1555. Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg, Hz. II, no. 178.

In a drawing made by one of his contemporaries (fig. 4), the Dutch Stephanus Vinandus, known as Pighius, who lived in Rome in the years 1547-1555, the inscriptions are reproduced where they were engraved on the relief. Benefitting from the patronage of Cardinal Marcello Cervini, he undertook the creation of a collection of inscribed and figurative monuments that he copied with the aim of faithfully reflecting their condition, even if it was fragmentary. The Capitoline relief appears there without any restoration, as it could be seen *in situ* at its sanctuary in the mid-16th century.¹⁶ The head and arms of Mithras are missing, while the bull and dadophori have also some lacunas.

Not all antiquarians, however, had the same approach. The Neapolitan Pirro Ligorio had a very different ambition for the encyclopaedic project on which he was working concurrently. Having arrived in Rome in 1534, he became interested very early on

in the monuments from Roman times, which earned him to enter the service of Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este in 1549. It was during his Roman years, and notably between 1550 and 1555, that he conceived the first part of a colossal work, the *Antichità romane*. Inside a book devoted to inscribed statues, in a chapter essentially dedicated to Mithras, there appears his drawing of the Capitoline relief accompanied by a note specifying its location (fig. 5).¹⁷ The monument is restored in its entirety. Mithras's head is turned towards the rear, in the direction of the raven, just

¹⁶ The drawing appears in both manuscripts preserved in the antiquarian oeuvre of Pighius: 1/ *Codex Berolinensis*: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. lat. fol. 61, fol. 1v – fol. 2r. See JAHN 1868, 190, no. 72. 2/ *Codex Coburgensis*: Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg, H. II, no. 178. See MATZ 1871, 470, no. 53; WREDE & HARPRATH 1986, 20, no. 14.

¹⁷ Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli "Vittorio Emanuele III", Codex XIII B.7, fol. 11v, p. 22 (in the middle of *Libro XXXIII delle Antichità di Roma, di Pirro Ligorio nel qual si tratta delle inscriptions di statue and with the legend In opera dentro al Monte Capitolino dedicato dalli antichi, in un speleo over grotta*). See MANDOWSKY & MITCHELL 1963, 59-60, no. 9, pl. 9; ORLANDI 2008, 25.



Fig. 5 Pages from Book 34, Chapter 8 of Pirro Ligorio's *Antichità romane*, c. 1550-1565. Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli, Codex XIII B.7, fol. 11v & 12r, pp. 22-23.

as in the Roman bas-relief that Ligorio illustrates on the preceding page.¹⁸ As is often the case, he turns to other sources to reconstruct an incomplete work and thus to illustrate the text in his chapter.¹⁹ His goal was to make the classical world come back to life with the aid of gripping images, while offering models to his contemporaries, especially artists and their patrons.

The drawings of Ligorio, still unedited, have aroused the interest and even the envy of those who shared his passion for Antiquity. Some members of the Farnese circle, to which he belonged, thus appropriated them. Such was the case with the French artist Étienne Dupérac in a luxurious album, composed towards 1575, where one finds a rather embellished drawing of the Capitoline relief.²⁰ In the 17th century, the European scholarly network known by the name “Republic of Letters” in turn seized upon Ligorio’s oeuvre.²¹ The Turinese antiquarian Cassiano Dal Pozzo made great use of it in the vast, encyclopaedic project that he designed around 1630 under the name *Museo Cartaceo*.²² It should come as no surprise that the Capitoline relief is represented in it, though in a truncated form.²³

¹⁸ As is remarked upon by RUSSELL 2007, 255-257, figs. 1 and 3. The bas-relief illustrated in fol. 11r, p. 21, of Codex XIII B.7, with the indication *Nella casa de’ Cinquini gintilhuomini romani*, is today preserved at the Hermitage Museum (MANDOWSKI & MITCHELL 1963, 59, no. 8, pl. 8a; *CIMRM* 603).

¹⁹ On Ligorio’s restorations, perhaps encouraged by Cardinal Ippolito II d’Este himself, see MANDOWSKI 1952-1954. On the Capitoline relief in particular, see SCHREURS 2000, 36-37.

²⁰ The drawing appears in the two known exemplars of this album entitled *Illustrations des fragments antiques*: 1/ Paris, Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des dessins, inv. 26419r. See GUIFFREY & MARCEL 1910, 68-69, no. 3880. 2/ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms français 382, fol. 44. See MILLER 2001, 87, fig. 3b.

²¹ MILLER 2000.

²² On this Ligorio heritage, see RUSSELL 2007.

²³ London, British Museum, Franks II, fol. 34, no. 347. See VERMEULE 1960, 25-26, no. 347.

²⁴ Flaminio Vacca, *Memorie di varie antichità trovate in diversi luoghi della città di Roma*, 1594. For the passage in question, see NARDINI 1820, 12, no. 19.

²⁵ PIGNORIA 1647, 293.

²⁶ On the collection of antiquities of Scipione Borghese, see KALVERAM 1995.

²⁷ KALVERAM 1995, 60-61, no. 192, and 262, no. 229, fig. 47. On the relief’s relocation, see Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Archivio Borghese 4173.

²⁸ This restoration is detailed in a note from 4 May 1618 (Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Archivio Borghese 4174).

²⁹ On its emplacement, see FABRÉGA-DUBERT 2009, I, 82-83.

³⁰ On these allegorical interpretations, see the contribution of R. Gordon in this volume, 51-60.

³¹ MANILLI 1650, 44.

³² MONTELATICI 1700, 165-167.

AN ACQUISITION BY THE BORGHESE FAMILY

In the meantime, the relief itself had started a new phase in its history. In his memoirs dating to 1594, the sculptor Flaminio Vacca recounts that his master, the Florentine Vincenzo de Rossi, around 1550 had descended beneath the Capitoline Hill in order to see for himself the famous relief, which he identified as Europa on the bull.²⁴ He next points out that since then the entry to subterranean area had been filled in. As for the relief, it had been removed from its original setting, which is to be learned from the Paduan scholar Lorenzo Pignoria, who in 1606 saw the marble, quite damaged, at the Piazza del Campidoglio.²⁵

In this particularly visible location, the relief caught the attention of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, who had constructed a sumptuous palace to the north of Rome to house and display his collections (fig. 6).²⁶ He acquired the monument in May 1617 with the purpose of decorating his exterior architecture, with facades encrusted with ancient reliefs.²⁷ Sawed into two parts, perhaps after its extraction from the subterranean area beneath the Capitoline Hill, the marble required significant restoration to fulfil this function. It was the workshop of Belardini Radi that accomplished this task and filled all of the gaps.²⁸ Thus restored, the relief was installed in the side facade of the gable to the northwest of the villa, at the centre of the attic separating the ground floor from the first floor (fig. 7).²⁹

The Mithraic scene is here interpreted as an allegory for agriculture, conforming to the scholarly readings of the time.³⁰ It was still described in this manner in the guide to the Villa Borghese written by Iacomo Manilli in 1650³¹ and in that of Domenico Montelatici fifty years later.³² Embellished with a new drawing, the description by the latter had an important influence on the antiquarian works of the 18th century. It informed the treatise that the Italian archaeologist Filippo Della Torre devoted to Mithras in 1700, one of the earliest scholarly



Fig. 6 Watercolour by Johann Wilhelm Baur showing Rome's Villa Borghese, 1636. Rome, Galleria Borghese, inv. 519.



Fig. 7 Reconstruction of the decor on the west facade of the Villa Borghese as it appeared in 1807. From FABRÉGA-DUBERT 2009, leaflet.

studies of the subject.³³ Montelatici's influence is next seen in the famous *Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures* that the French Benedictine monk Dom Bernard de Montfaucon published between 1719 and 1724 with the stated goal of bringing together all aspects of Antiquity in a single work.³⁴

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR NAPOLEON

The Capitoline relief remained in the facade of the Villa Borghese for the length of the 18th century, where it could be observed by scholars such as

³³ DELLA TORRE 1700, 160-161.

³⁴ MONTFAUCON 1719, II.2, 379-380, pl. CCXVII, fig. 1. On Mithras in Montfaucon, see LATTEUR 2021 and, in this volume, Cat. I.3.

³⁵ On the circumstances of this acquisition, see FABRÉGA-DUBERT 2009 and FABRÉGA-DUBERT 2011.

³⁶ On this process, see FABRÉGA-DUBERT 2009, I, 505, and II, 50, no. 007.

³⁷ Hence its presence in the inventory of 1810 (MARTINEZ 2004a, 467, no. 0945). On the antiquities of the Louvre under Napoleon, see also MARTINEZ 2004b.

³⁸ BOUILLON 1825, III, 18-21, pl. 16, Mithras (2).

³⁹ VISCONTI 1817, 25-26, no. 59; VISCONTI & CLARAC 1820, 41-42, no. 76; CLARAC 1841, 286-308, no. 57.

Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Georg Zoëga. At the beginning of the 19th century, Camilo Borghese, overwhelmed by debt, was forced to sell part of his collection. Attentive to enrich his imperial museum, Napoleon I in 1807 undertook the acquisition of some 700 pieces that were carefully selected by Dominique Vivant Denon and Ennio Quirino Visconti.³⁵ The decor from the facades was purchased for the sum of 300,000 francs, 20,000 of which were for our relief alone. It took three days, from the 29th to the 31st of March 1808, to take down the relief and put it in crates.³⁶

Having arrived in Paris, the work was installed in the Louvre among the antiquities in the Hall of Seasons, where it remained throughout the 19th century (fig. 8).³⁷ It was then engraved by the Neoclassical artist Pierre Bouillon in his *Musée des antiquités*³⁸ and described several times in the catalogues of the conservators E. Q. Visconti and Frédéric de Clarac.³⁹ At the same time, in the context of the multiple investigations that he undertook



Fig. 8 Postcard showing the Louvre's Hall of Seasons, produced by the Maison Neurdein, Paris, 1906.

regarding Mithras, the diplomat and archaeologist Félix Lajard in 1828 published a booklet exclusively devoted to the Borghese relief.⁴⁰

With new Mithraic discoveries multiplying, this relief began to lose its appeal. Its multiple restorations disqualify it from being considered an exceptional piece. In 1869, Wilhelm Fröhner, then conservator, did not hesitate to return to the more faithful drawing that had been made by Pighius in the mid-16th century.⁴¹ Scholarly interest in this partially authentic relief from that point on seemed

more limited. However, as Franz Cumont had reported in 1896,⁴² it nevertheless remained one of the most famous objects in the Mithraic corpus. These few pages have provided an account of the remarkable story of how it reached its celebrated status.

⁴⁰ LAJARD 1828.

⁴¹ FRÖHNER, I, 495-501, no. 569. The drawing of Pighius until then had rarely been reproduced (see, for example, BEGER 1692, 97-98, no. XXI).

⁴² In addition, he published the first photograph (CUMONT 1896, 193-195, no. 6, fig. 18, pl. I).