



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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COINS AND GEMS: MITHRAIC MINIATURES

Laurent Bricault & Richard Veymiers

The images featured on ancient coins and gems present a series of technical, stylistic and iconographic analogies. In these two media, which are of similar format, one finds rather flat, miniaturised figures, sometimes reproducing recognizable sculpted representations. Moreover, one can sense the same concern on the part of their designers for offering compositions that would be easily identifiable by those who would later be examining them. With that said, such analogies must be viewed cautiously, with each of these media evolving in very different spheres – public and official for one, private and more intimate for the other.

MITHRAS IN ROMAN PROVINCIAL COINAGE

The Roman cult of Mithras was categorised among the *sacra privata*, which is to say the cults not officially recognised by the authorities. As such, it did not leave any trace in Roman Imperial coinage, unlike, for example, the cults of Isis or the Magna Mater (Cybele). The only coin issues that featured Mithraic iconography were provincial and civic. These date to the 2nd and 3rd centuries and were struck, in one case, in the name of the citizens of the city of Tarsus, in Cilicia, and in the other cases, in the name of those of Trapezus, in Pontus.

A large bronze medallion from Tarsus, issued during the reign of Gordian III (238-244 C.E.) (fig. 1) and known from just a few examples that all have the same obverse and reverse dies, features on the reverse a radiant figure, dressed in a breastplate, a short skirt with folds and a flowing mantle, preparing to slay with a sword thrust a bull that she has grabbed by the nostrils with her left hand. This type seems to have been inspired by a coin that was struck by the city in the name of Caracalla (211-217 C.E.), which on the reverse shows Artemis in a similar pose killing a deer.

The die that was used to strike the obverse of the bronze from Gordian times was likewise used for contemporary coins featuring on the reverse either Selena in a chariot, Apollo, Herakles, or the Tyche of Tarsus. Within such a series of images on coins, that of Mithras Tauroctonos,¹ as exceptional as it may be, fits coherently. The date of this issue is difficult to narrow down, even if it is tempting to link it to the expedition undertaken by the young emperor against the Persians in 242 C.E., which probably saw him pass through the Cilician city. One might therefore suppose of finding in this coin issue, with its strong solar connotation (the bust of Gordian III, on the right, is itself also radiant), a form of *evocatio* effected by means of this military campaign, and of recognising in this very Roman (without Phrygian cap and *anaxyrides*, the traditional Persian pants) and very imperial Mithras a sort of *captatio* of a god who was perceived, in these particular circumstances, as originating in enemy territory.²

The other city that made use of Mithras's image in its coins' iconography was Trapezus, for the duration of the local mint's years of operation, from the local year 50 (113/114, during the reign of Trajan) to the year 181 (244/245, during the reign of Philip the Arab).³ Under Trajan, a prominent type was frequently used that featured a bust of Mithras to the right, radiant and wearing a Phrygian cap (fig. 2), which was later accompanied by a protome of a horse in the background beginning in the time of Antoninus Pius. Following this, from the time of the Severans until the closure of the mint, the civic authorities repeatedly made use of a second type instead representing Mithras as a rider surrounded by various elements arranged in different combinations, such as an altar, a tree, a serpent, a bird (undoubtedly a raven) perched on a column, and even the dadophori Cautes and Cautopates (fig. 3 and Cat. II.13).

However, these iconographic types, although they are Roman rather than Iranian, are distinct from standard Roman Mithraic images, in which Mithras as a rider is rarely attested relative to the ubiquitous tauroctony, a scene which is completely lacking from the coinage of Trapezus. It seems that in this case we are dealing with a hybrid iconography, which at the same time borrows from Roman Mithras and the Thraco-Anatolian rider gods. This particular type of civic coin iconography was sufficiently popular to give birth to carved adaptations, as is attested by an unedited gem from the Skoluda collection (Cat. II.14). This shows that there was undoubtedly a cult of Mithras at Trapezus, one officially recognised by the city and thus enjoying a completely different type of visibility

¹ On the image of Mithras Tauroctonos, see the contribution of D. Boschung in this volume, 133-141.

² TURCAN 2001.

³ WOJAN 2006; DALAISON & RÉMY 2013.



Fig. 1 Bronze coin from Tarsus, reign of Gordian III, 238-244 C.E. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, inv. CM.LK.2595-R.



Fig. 2 Bronze coin from Trapezus, reign of Trajan, 113/114 C.E. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, inv. FG 452.



Fig. 3 Bronze coin from Trapezus, reign of Elagabalus, 218/219 C.E. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Art Museums – Arthur M. Sackler Museum, inv. 1983.56.143



Fig. 4 Engraved plates from L. Agostini's *Gemme antiche figurate*. From AGOSTINI 1669, nos. 77-78.

⁴ On Mithraic gems, see, among others, DELATTE 1914a; SANZI 2002; GORDON 2004a; FARAONE 2013.

⁵ AGOSTINI 1669, 39-42, no. 33, with a commentary associating the engraved stone with the famous bas-relief acquired by the Borghese family. See, with respect to this, the contribution of L. Bricault & R. Veymiers in this volume, 77-85.

⁶ MONTFAUCON 1719, I.2, 381-382, pl. ccxvii, fig. 2. On the place of Mithras in this antiquarian oeuvre, see our Cat. I.3.

⁷ See, previously, the list provided by FARAONE 2013, 19-20, nos. 1-18 (Appendix B).

⁸ Perugia, Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria, inv. 1563: VITELLOZZI 2010, 74-75, no. G 29.

⁹ Berlin, Staatliche Museen – Antikensammlung, inv. 32.237: WEISS 2007, 323, pl. 91, no. 676.

¹⁰ Bad Deutsch-Altenburg, Museum Carnuntinum, inv. 17752: CIMRM 1704; DEMBSKI 2011, 41, no. 28.

from that of the cult in the Roman West. But from this local cult we have no surviving material traces.

GEMS AND MINIATURE TAUROCTONIES

If the Mithraic tauroctony only appears among coins in a single issue from Tarsus dating to the reign of Gordian, it is much more common in the other miniature medium, that of carved stones.⁴ Certain exemplars have long been known. One of the plates in the collection of gems by the antiquarian Leonardo Agostini that was published in Rome in 1669 as a tribute to Cosimo III de' Medici reproduces a heliotrope intaglio representing a tauroctonic scene that at the time was already recognised as such (fig. 4).⁵ This engraved stone, particularly elaborated, subsequently reappeared in a number of antiquarian collections, notably in the famous *Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures* that was published in Paris in 1719 by the Benedictine monk Dom Bernard de Montfaucon.⁶ Other exemplars appeared over time, increasing the number of representations of the tauroctony in the glyptic corpus to more than twenty stones.⁷

The myth's main scene and the one having a central cultic role in all of the Mithraic sanctuaries, the tauroctony is the image that was naturally adopted by gem engravers. Whatever the medium that was used (relief, painting, etc.), this would not necessarily be an identical copy. The engravers of gems enjoyed great freedom, were not constrained to follow any official rules, and could demonstrate continuous inventiveness. Even when they were inspired by a common plan, they could recompose it, subtract from it, or add new details to it, or even combine it with other scenes, as a result creating original images. Each stone thus proves to be unique. An intaglio of green jasper (fig. 5), preserved at Perugia, incorporates six (or rather, originally, seven) stars around the god in a tauroctony scene, accompanied by a serpent, scorpion and dog.⁸ On a heliotrope that belonged to the German archaeologist Heinrich Dressel (fig. 6), the scorpion is missing, but the scene is engraved in the setting of a cave, in the presence of a raven and busts of Sol and Luna.⁹ A red jasper (fig. 7), discovered at Carnuntum in Pannonia Superior, shows Mithras Tauroctonos with a dog, scorpion and serpent within in a cave, flanked by busts of Sol and Luna and figures of the dadophori, Cautes et Cautopates.¹⁰ Before the bull and to the left of the whole scene there is a small altar – pointing back, as it were, to the cult from which this mythological image is the object.



Fig. 5 Green jasper, 3rd cent. C.E.
Perugia, Museo Archeologico Nazionale
dell'Umbria, inv. 1563. From VITELLOZZI
2010, 75, no. G 29.



Fig. 6 Heliotrope, 2nd-3rd cent. C.E.
Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antiken-
sammlung, inv. 32237, 416.



Fig. 7 Red jasper, 3rd cent. C.E.
Bad Deutsch-Altenburg, Museum
Carnuntinum, inv. 17752.



Fig. 8 Heliotrope, 2nd-3rd cent. C.E. Florence, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 15110.

¹¹ Florence, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 15110: *CIMRM* 2354; *MASTROCINQUE* 2007, 56-57, no. Fi 59. The afterlife of this stone among the antique dealers of Europe has led to the creation of various copies (see, for example, *ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL* 1986, pl. 128, no. 736, for a *pâte de verre* of the 17th-18th cent. preserved at Würzburg).

¹² Some see here symbols of the seven grades of Mithraic initiation (*MASTROCINQUE* 1998, 1-15; *MICHEL* 2004, 99-100).

¹³ *CHMEA*, *KANTEY*, *KONTEY*, *KONPEY*, *ΚΗΡΙΑΕΥ*, *ΔΑΡΥΝΚΩ* and *ΛΥΚΥΝΕ*. On the formula "Semea", which one finds, among others, in the magical papyri, see *MICHEL* 2004, 103.

Several examples (see also Cat. II.11 and V.13) suffice to attest the variety of possible combinations and iconographic richness of the glyptic corpus. Still preserved at Florence, the heliotrope that once belonged to the Medici bears one of the most elaborate tauroctony scenes (fig. 8).¹¹ Mithras Tauroctonos is here accompanied by the dadophori and the usual animals (dog, serpent and, no doubt originally, scorpion). Above can be seen a raven, as well as busts of Sol and Luna, in a field sprinkled with stars and various symbols (in our view a palm branch, turtle, *harpē*, sword, lightning bolt, eagle, caduceus, arrow, *rhyton*, radiating crown, cornucopia) that have given rise to many interpretations.¹² On the stone's reverse is engraved a walking lion, with some unidentifiable element in its mouth. Around him, seven stars are each surrounded by a Greek word corresponding to the secret name of one of the seven planetary divinities (Sol, Luna, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Mercury and Mars).¹³ All of the elements grouped together on this amulet suggest that the engraver, or his associate, wished to assemble in



words and images, in a true tour de force, the clues revealing both the story of Mithras and the extent of his cosmic power.

MITHRAS IN THE “MAGICAL” AMULETS

The gem from Florence belongs to a well-defined category of intaglios that modern specialists have described for more than a century as “magical”.¹⁴ This term is assigned to stones that are engraved or incised, often on both faces, or even on a bevelled edge, which regularly mix strange images and rarely intelligible words, which come from diverse traditions (notably Greek, Egyptian and Jewish). Unlike the common gems that served as seals,¹⁵ these are read normally rather than in retrograde, since they were used as amulets after having been consecrated by a magician in response to specific needs. With that said, the purpose of these amulets usually escapes us, since the same type could feature a variety of incantations, according to the effect desired by the user.

¹⁴ Until DELATTE 1914b, 21-22, such engraved stones were attributed to the Gnostics. On magical gems, the standard reference is now MICHEL 2004. One should also consult the synthetic study in ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 2007.

¹⁵ Even if certain ones may have been magically charged without the characteristic signs being engraved.

The supreme god of ancient magic was none other than the Sun, which could take on very diverse forms. Mithras is one of these manifestations, or one of his possible associates, with whom the god is portrayed rather rarely.¹⁶ A rectangular hematite, having belonged to the collection of George Spencer, 4th Duke of Marlborough (1739-1817), thus combines the representation of a tauroctony with one of the most popular images of the Sun in the magical corpus.¹⁷ On the reverse is engraved the figure called the “alectorocephalous anguipede”, a hybrid being with legs in the form of serpents, the head of a rooster and the torso of a man, wearing a breastplate, brandishing a whip, and holding a shield on which is inscribed the name *laô*, which is the Hellenistic Greek pronunciation of Yahweh.¹⁸

Besides the traditional magical gems, we know of more unusual stone objects that also bear the image of Mithras. A Neolithic axe head of green serpentine, thought to come from the Argolid in the Peloponnese, was reused during the Imperial Period as a magical amulet.¹⁹ Its surface, carefully polished, was then engraved with two figural scenes (fig. 9). In the lower part, two standing divinities commonly identified as Zeus and Athena flank a small, serpent-footed figure in a composition echoing the Gigantomachy, the titanic combat of the Olympians against the Giants. The upper register features a minimalist tauroctony in which Mithras, stabbing the bull, is surrounded by the serpent, dog and raven. This motif of a triangular pattern, which matches the shape of the object itself, is surrounded by two inscribed words, *bakazichuch* and *papapheiris*, magical names often accompanying a solar divinity.²⁰ A dozen of these axes engraved centuries after their initial making have been found in the Mediterranean basin. During the Roman era, and even during the early Middle Ages, these stones were used to protect buildings and individuals from thunderstorms and lightning.²¹ They thus most often bear names or images of solar or celestial gods, masters of thunder and lightning, as is the case with Mithras.²²

This quick survey of little-known evidence²³ raises the question of the reason such objects exist and the circumstances of their creation, but also their appeal for those who used them. Private objects reflecting individual identity, the gems – like the jewels in which they were set – were generally meant to be worn and seen. The choice of their images and the message that they convey were determined by this desire for display and thus for communication, which could seem paradoxical for a cult often described as “secret”

¹⁶ See, for example, the list provided by MICHEL 2004, 311, no. 38.

¹⁷ Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, inv. 42.868: CIMRM 2364; BOARDMAN *et al.* 2009, 266, no. 626.

¹⁸ On this figure with multiple names (among which one also finds *Abrasax*), see recently ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL 2016.

¹⁹ Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 10082: DELATTE 1914a, 5-11; CIMRM 2353; MASTROCINQUE 1998, 25-27; GORDON 2004a, 275, fig. 16; FARAONE 2013, 5-7, fig. 4, 19, no. 1.

²⁰ ΒΑΚΑΖΙΧΥΧ and ΠΑΠΑΦΕΙΡΙΣ. The first means in Egyptian “the son of darkness”, which fits Mithras quite well, as a solar god emerging from the stone in order to restore life on earth, while the meaning of the second remains enigmatic (FARAONE 2013, 6, n. 18).

²¹ On these “thunderstones”, see FARAONE 2014.

²² GORDON 2006.

²³ A proper catalogue of these small objects remains to be done.

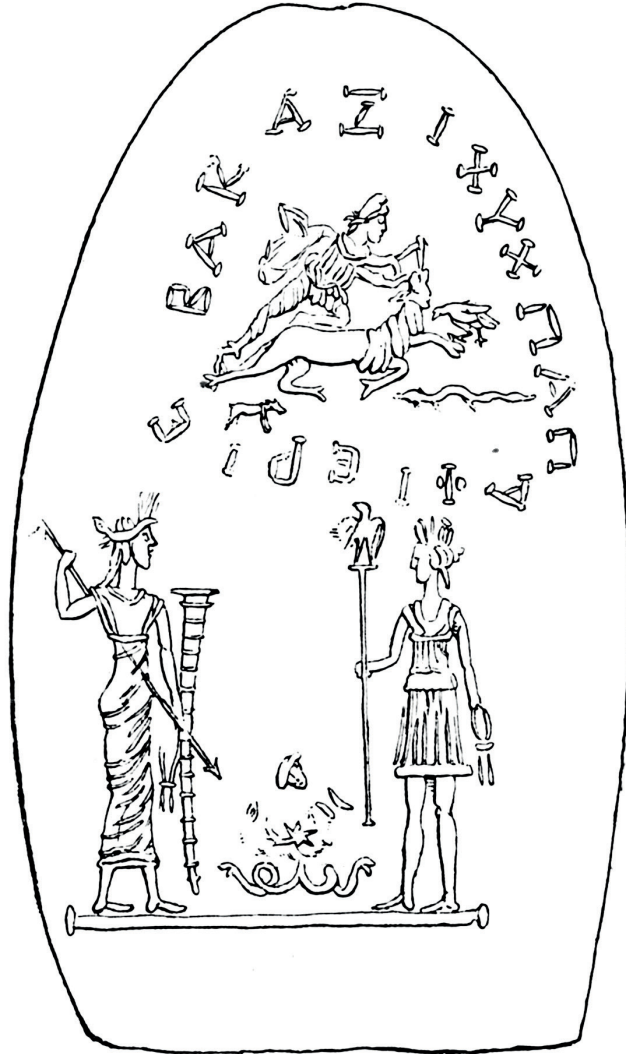


Fig. 9 Axe head of serpentine said to be from the Argolid, 2nd-3rd cent. C.E. Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. 10082.

or “mysterious”.²⁴ Certain Mithraic gems could have served as a medium for the expression of an individual’s devotion, even of signs of recognition between *syndexi*,²⁵ while others remained outside of all religious preoccupations – as personal seals, souvenirs of a journey, or pieces of jewellery. Those who employed magical amulets were not necessarily more likely to be adherents of the cult of Mithras. Indeed, no “tauroctonic” gem has ever been discovered in the context of Mithraic cult.

²⁴ However, Mithraic-type gems are very few in number compared to those bearing the image of Sarapis, Isis, Jupiter or Cybele, which number in the hundreds, or even the thousands.

²⁵ On this term, by which worshippers of Mithras called themselves in certain communities, see the contribution of N. Belayche in this volume, 312-313.