

THE MYSTERY OF MITHRAS

EXPLORING THE HEART OF A ROMAN CULT

Edited by Laurent Bricault, Richard Veymiers and Nicolas Amoroso
with the collaboration of Laure Barthet, Margaux Bekas, Pascal Capus,
Alexandra Dardenay, Wolfgang David and Carsten Wenzel

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

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ERNEST PIGNON-ERNEST'S *PICASSO-MITHRA*

Cat. I.10

Charcoal and graphite

H. 215 cm; W. 372 cm

1992

Paris, Galerie Lelong & Co.

Bibliography: PLEYNET & PIGNON-ERNEST
1993, 112-114; LE BIHAN 2018, 101, ill. 78.

This large drawing created with charcoal and graphite presents a compelling image of a Picasso *tauroctonos*, shown heroically nude, like an aging but still vigorous athlete, mastering a powerful bull. Pablo Picasso thus appears posed as Mithras, holding the animal's head back while preparing to slaughter it with his knife. The Mithraic quality of the scene is reinforced by the added presence of a dog, serpent, scorpion, ear of wheat and star in a crescent moon, which together form a collage of superimposed motifs.

Such a visual and material montage is characteristic of the work of the contemporary visual artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest, one of the precursors of "Street Art" in France. If his work is often *engagé*, it is also imbued with various references that he plays with in his creative search. His *Picasso-Mithra* was conceived in 1992 for an exhibition presented in the chapel of Saint-Martin du Méjan in Arles. In a city with such old bullfighting traditions, and one also notable for its famous running of the bulls, he decided to employ the cult of Mithras, which would have been active in the ancient city. In this way Pignon-Ernest reconnected with his Neapolitan work, having already engaged with this theme in 1990 as part of an ephemeral work, set up in the middle of the street, associating a celebrated Mithraic tauroctony scene (*CIMRM* 548) with the Veil of Veronica, which was marked with a Christic face. Such a visual association finds its inspiration in local traditions which evoke, in a single place, Christian rites succeeding those of Mithras. Such was the case, for example, with the *Crypta Neapolitana*, the subterranean tunnel constructed by the Romans beneath the Pausilippo hill, to the west of the Bay of Naples.

Such connections fascinate Pignon-Ernest, and so one finds them again expressed in his *Picasso-Mithra*, which was intended to be displayed in the chancel of the church Saint-Martin du Méjan. To convey these, the artist had recourse to a highly significant medium, a Möbius strip measuring 2 x 10 m forming one and the same continuous plane. The graphic design likewise expresses this idea of continuity, since the image of *Picasso-Mithra* was initially placed opposite a Crucifixion (it was removed in 2018 on the occasion of the exhibition at the Palais Lumière at Évian-les-Bains). As for the choice of Picasso, it reflects at the same time the strong influence of the Spanish artist on the work of Pignon-Ernest and the considerable place that the figure of the bull occupied in his work. Picasso had deeply explored the theme of the Minotaur as well as that of bullfighting, of which he was an avid devotee, having attended fights at Arles and elsewhere.

Richard Veymiers





MEDALLION WITH MITHRAS AS RIDER

Cat. II.13

Bronze

D. 4.8 cm; 52.35 g

Turkey, Trabzon (Trapezus,
province of Pontus)

216-217 C.E. (reign of Caracalla)

Musée royal de Mariemont, inv. Ac.2021/47

Bibliography: Peus Auktion 392
(2007), lot 4.574; Gadoury (2020), 43,
lot 175.

This bronze medallion associates the image of Caracalla with that of Mithras as a rider. On the right, the emperor's laureate, draped and cuirassed bust is surrounded by the titulature *AYT KAI M AYP ANTΩNEINOC CEB* ("Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus"). On the reverse, Mithras, wearing a Phrygian cap, rides a horse advancing towards the right. Behind him stands a tree; before him have been erected a flaming altar and tall column on which a raven is perched. Around this scene runs the legend *TPAIIEZOYNTION*, signifying that the object was issued in the name of "the citizens of Trapezus". The date is inscribed as *ET PNT*, which corresponds to "year 153" of the city, or 216/217 C.E.

Situated on the south coast of the Black Sea, in the Roman province of Pontus, the city of Trapezus issued a civic coinage, essentially for regional use, over more than a century. The iconographic type most frequently used is the figure of Mithras. At first represented as a bust, sometimes with the headstock of a horse, he appeared in the form of rider god beginning in Severan times, as early as 194/195 C.E. If he could be shown as a hunter in painted or sculpted scenes at *Mithraea*, here he rides a horse, in the mould of certain Thracian and Anatolian divinities.

This singular image of the god on the coinage indicates the existence of a public cult at Trapezus, probably different in form from the private cults devoted to him in the West. With that said, this medallion attests to a second life of this monetary object that, inserted into a wearable setting, became a personal jewel, one that was unique, and undoubtedly served as an object of religious devotion.

Richard Veymiers & Laurent Bricault





INTAGLIO WITH MITHRAS AS RIDER

Cat. II.14

Red Jasper

H. 1.1 cm; W. 1.5 cm; Th. 0.28 cm

End of 2nd or 3rd cent. C.E.

Antiquities market (Mariaud de Serres,
Paris c. 1987)

Hamburg, Collection W. Skoluda, inv. R084

Bibliography: Unedited.

This intaglio of red jasper, today kept in a private German collection, features Mithras as a rider, draped and wearing a Phrygian cap, riding a horse that advances towards the left on a ground line. Before him, next to a small, flaming altar, Cautes stands towards the left, wearing a Phrygian cap and holding a lit torch that is angled upwards. A small figure raising his arms appears in the field, at the level of Mithras's face. Behind the god, another figure standing towards the right and also wearing a Phrygian cap, with his arms lowered, must correspond to Cautopates, despite the absence of a torch. Beside him to the right, there stands a leafy tree, in which is perched a raven turned towards the left.

This unusual scene, very rare in ancient glyptic art (several gems found in modern Georgia feature a similar composition), was in fact inspired by a coin type belonging to the civic mint at Trapezus, in the Roman province of Pontus, on the south coast of the Black Sea (Cat. II.13). This type, which seems to borrow at the same time from Roman Mithras and the Thraco-Anatolian rider-gods, is attested under multiple combinations between 194/195 and 244/245, from the reign of Septimius Severus to that of Philip the Arab. Certain variants, struck under the reigns of Caracalla and Elagabalus, show Mithras as a rider beside a tree and an altar, flanked by Cautes and Cautopates, composing an image quite close to the one on the intaglio.

Richard Veymiers





CULTIC SNAKE-VASE WITH MITHRAIC APPLIQUÉ

Cat. IV.10

Clay

H. 26.8 cm; D. (mouth) 21 cm

Zeughausstraße, Cologne (Colonia
Claudia Ara Agrippinensium,
province of Germania Inferior)

Middle of 2nd cent. C.E.

Köln, Römisch-Germanisches
Museum, inv. 58, 289

Bibliography: RISTOW 1974, 22, no. 14, pl.
XVI, figs. 18-19; AMAND 1984, 208-209,
C-Köln-5, pl. III, fig. 2.

This brownish vase, covered with a light ochre, was discovered in a fragmentary state during the excavations undertaken in 1958 at 2/2a Zeughausstraße, in the northern suburbs of Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium, beyond the city wall. It features two curved *ansae* and terminates in a lip that extends into the interior with a flat rim pierced by seven holes. One of the *ansae* is surmounted by the figure of a reclining lion with a bushy mane. The other *ansa*, reconstructed, features the head of a serpent with a scaly body that undulates about the base of the neck and wraps its tail around the first *ansa*. The body is decorated with seven (six preserved) double crosses painted in a brown colour. In addition, one side features three full-length figures with slip applied, with some of the details enhanced using a brown colour. At the centre, Sol(-Mithras), turned towards the left and leaning on his right leg, is shown nude, dressed only in a simple mantle that floats behind him. On his head he wears a crown of seven rays, and he holds a globe in his left hand and extends his right hand in front of himself over a flame. Before him, on the left, Cautopates, wearing a Phrygian cap, tunic and short mantle, holds a lowered torch in his two hands; behind him, on the right, Cautes, adopting an appearance resembling that of his twin, holds a raised torch.

Vases of this type, with *ansae* that feature one or more serpents, were frequent in the Rhine valley and on the *limes*, and were frequently associated with the cult of Mithras (see Cat. IV.9). Several have thus been recovered at Cologne, the capital of the province of Germania Inferior. Besides this delicately decorated example, excavations undertaken in 1958 on Zeughausstraße unearthed the remains of a large crater with two *ansae* that each supported a crested serpent (inv. 58, 220). Another vase (inv. 27, 628), in addition featuring a raven on the edge of the lip, comes from one of two *Mithraea* that have been discovered in the ancient city, to the northwest of the residential quarter. Particularly unusual is the lid of a vessel with green glaze (inv. 3781), the exact provenance of which is not known, which takes the form of a hollowed out crown at the centre of which is found a small snake-vase.

Dirk Schmitz & Richard Veymiers





MITHRAIC INTAGLIO

Cat. V.13

Heliotrope

H. 1.75 cm

Petersberg, Flintsbach am Inn
(Duchy of Bavaria)

2nd-3rd cent. C.E. (reused in the
first half of the 13th cent., or even
earlier)

Munich, Archäologische
Staatssammlung, inv. E 2007/27

Bibliography: MEIER 2001; GORDON
2004a, 276-277, fig. 19; MEIER 2008;
FARAONE 2013, 21, no. 18; MEIER 2015.

This heliotrope gem (a green jasper dotted with red spots) was discovered in a medieval tomb that came to light near the entrance to Saint Peter's Abbey on the Madron, a Benedictine monastery on the mountain also called Petersberg, which looks down upon the valley of the Inn, near Flintsbach, in the Bavarian Prealps. This burial, dating to the first half of the 13th century, received the remains of a man of mature age, buried face down in the attitude of a penitent. Other than two *denarii* from Regensburg issued in the name of Duke Otto II (1231-1253), it contained, below the level of the pelvis, a capsule formed by two coins initially attached together: a bracteate of Emperor Frederick II (1215-1250) and a *denarius* of the patriarch Berthold V of Aquileia (1218-1251). It was also within this atypical container that the ancient gem was carefully preserved.

Dating to the 2nd or 3rd century, this high-quality intaglio represents Mithras slaughtering the bull inside an arch, evoking the entrance to a cave, atop which a raven is perched. A scorpion with a disproportionately long tail grips the bull's testicles, while a dog stands near the bleeding wound. Below, a serpent crawls towards a crater. Cautes, on the left, with a raised torch, and Cautopates, on the right, with a lowered torch, each stand, their legs crossed, on one side or the other of the cave. Above this scene, two large busts face forward: Luna with a crescent on the left and Sol with a radiant crown on the right. Seven stars with eight rays appear in the field.

The way in which this rich individual came into possession of this engraved stone 1,000 years later can only be a matter for speculation: a local discovery? a commercial network? And so on. As the container reveals, from all signs the object had great value and must have served as an amulet. Contemporary written sources – notably Medieval lapidaries – inform us that heliotropes were believed to contain a drop of Christ's blood and thus had multiple powers, notably protecting their bearer against poison and the Devil. The engraved image itself also had significance. During this era it must not have been perceived as that of Mithras Tauroctonos. It is more likely that this stone, engraved with the sun, moon and seven planetary stars, would have been considered to have astrological value. Some have attempted to establish a connection with the total solar eclipse that occurred in southern Germany in 1133. Nothing is less certain than this.

Brigitte Haas-Gebhard & Richard Veymiers

