

## **Symbolism and Artistic Representations of God Mithras in Greek-Roman World**

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**Abstract:** *Mithra's history is an unique and paradoxical one. Unique because this god was a stranger to the pantheon of the Greeks and Romans, but not to their Indo-European ancestors. Accepting a god of allogeneic appearance, wearing Persian trousers and a phrygian cap, the sons of legendary she-wolf re-established a tradition, at least in part, with an ancient religious hereditary patrimony. But Mithra's cult, as the Latin Occident had received it, also incorporated a part of Greek culture, and even though the god kept the Asian costume, his myth and his symbolic images, he had settled in the syncretic pantheon of the Hellenized Near East. The iconographic environment corresponding to the god Mithra highlights its cosmic dimension. The Sun, represented in the form of a bust or standing on its quadriga, has the Moon as his pair, from where we have the humble principle of which the bull is the owner. The portraits of the main winds, Eurus, Zephyrus, Notus and Boreas, often appear in the four corners of the panel. The arched edge of the grotto is sometimes overlapped by seven planetary busts, but often also by the orbit of sacrifice. The seven planets sometimes correspond to seven altars and seven trees or seven knives which perhaps evoke the celestial resemblance of tauroctonia.*

**Key-words:** *Mithras; Greek-Roman Art; Greek-Roman Mythology; Greek-Roman World; Greek-Roman Civilisation.*

Mithra's name comes from a root, *mei* - which involves the idea of exchange, combined with an instrumental suffix. As a result, it is a way of exchange, a "contract" that regulates human relationships and is at the basis of social life. In Sanskrit, *mitra* means friend or friendship, as well as *mihir* in Persian. In Zend, *mithra* accurately designates the "contract," which ended by being divinized, following the same process as Venus, the "charm" of the Romans. We can find Mithra invoked alongside Varuna in an agreement concluded in 1380 BC. between the king of the Hittites, Subbiluliuma and the King of Mitanni, Mativaza. This text was discovered in 1907 at Boghazkoy in the royal archives of the ancient hitit capital, about 150 km from Ankara. It is the oldest testimony to Mithra in Asia Minor.

In Vedic literature, Mithra is the one who "brings together all beings". He also watches the code of good behavior. "It takes care of its peoples" and plays its role in the cosmic order, because it "sustains heaven and earth". He sees everything, like the sun, what is his great eye. It is a benevolent god, close to the people, a bright and fair god, offering lush vegetation, harmony and health. He will continue to be a guarantor of the sacrament, and at the same time a protector or promoter of animal and vegetable life, as we can see from the perceptions of his Greco-Roman adepts (Turcan 1998, 225).

In the Avestic literature, X-th Yasht or hymn dedicated to Mithra invokes him as a "god of warriors... terrible for the perjury... armed with a powerfull lightning feared by Angramainyu (the Avestan-language name of Zoroastrianism's hypostasis of the *destructive spirit*)." He is in this hypostasis a "warrior with white horses, with fast arrows... whose long arm hits all those who break his deal". We will recognize this hypostasis later in Roman paintings and reliefs of worship. He also appears in this X-th Yasht as a solar god, "the aura that rises on Mount Hara and embraces the whole Aryan countryside with his eyes". This vision of light from behind a stony peak prefigures Mithra's image of the petrogenite, rising

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from the rock, with the sword and the torch on his hands (Turcan 1998, 225-226). The same hymn presents it passing in front of Verethragna (the god of victory in Persian mythology), the yazata, or the genius of victory, which takes the form of a wild boar: another vision of the god hunter who will reappear, for example, in the Mithraeum of Dura-Europos. Mithrian religion was considered to be typical for male societies united by force and community exercises around the killed trophy, as we can see later Mithra and Sol sitting at the table in front of the stabbed bull. If we add that Mithra is celebrated as responsible for fecund rain and prosperity, "careful to cattle and fecundity," this Yasht gives us the impression that much of the components of the future god of mysteries are installed in the image of the believers (Turcan 1998, 226-227).

The rosette carved on the front of the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargades was interpreted as a solar symbol of Mithra (Duchesne-Guillemin 1974, 17). It is certain that in the old Persian language the name Missa had to correspond to Mithra in Avesta language, Mithra being a preserved form in the language. So Cyrus would have remained faithful to the cult of a Medic god. The name of Cautes, the tidal dadophor of the ascending sun in Mithrian iconography, seems to have also had a Medic heredity. In fact, Mithra seems to have benefited from a living and tenacious tradition in the Northern Iranian sector and at the borders of Armenia.

It was also possible to compare the myth of Diorphos, a son of Mithra, who had risen from the rock, to Sozryko's Ossetian legend, a substitute for an ancient solar god. At the end of the seventeenth century, traveler Jean Chardin saw in a monastery in Mingrelia a ceremony that reminded strangely of the myth of Mithra Taurocton (Schwartz 1975, 417-418). It was said that St. George had stolen a bull. "Immediately, a young man... pulls the ox out of the church, kills him and cuts it in several pieces." In a popular Armenian legend, on the banks of Lake Van a mountain opens. In the cavern, Meher, in fact Mithra, his horse and his black raven, remain locked in until the Exaltation night, when the manna descends from heaven. Then Meher goes out to take a heavenly manna and will live from it for a year in the grotto that closes behind him. Two candles burned beside him, like the two torch carriers that flanked him on the Roman Mithrae worship panels. When the wheel of the universe that turns day and night will stop under his eyes in the cave, Meher will come out and his reign will begin in the same time with the end of the world (Windengren 1968, 238).

After the Roman legions brought Mithra's cult into Europe under Pompey (the 1st century BC), the Iranian god would have a great prevalence in the Empire, in the form of the mithraic mysteries, requiring secret initiations, appealing through the aura of mysticism; called by the Romans Mithras, the god is worshiped in almost whole Late Empire, when he also consecrates his festive celebrations; its Roman sanctuaries, respectively the mithraeum type, were natural or artificial groves in the memory of the original mythical cave; the god was represented as a destroyer of a fabulous bull and as a savior of mankind.



Fig.1. *Painting (fresco) with the image of Mithra killing the bull, source of image: <https://www.crystalinks.com/mithraism.html>*

Mithra's golden legend is part of a history of the world and creation illustrated by reliefs and painted panels, where various scenes of images surround the god. Unfortunately, these images have no legends and do not succeed in a constant order. Here is the narrative cycle that could be reconstructed from the Osterburken stella. Originally, a god identifiable with the ancient Saturn, then the Earth and Heaven that the Atlas carries, comes out of chaos. The three Parcae, goddesses of destiny, already dominate the world. Saturn's reign succeeds that of Jupiter, who receives from the hands of his father the absolute weapon, the lightning, which he serves immediately to defeat the Giant, which, in the name of an evil power, seek to take possession of the world. Mazdean writings were telling the demons of shadows trying to assault the world. Since then, Saturn has been resting. To another god will come the task of Creation, which the evil spirit tried to prevent by the help of drought and thirst. This saving god is Mithra, which miraculously appears from a rock. From now on, he is the one who has the responsibility of the Cosmos, as illustrated by the images in which the god holds the orbit of the zodiac, such as the Trier stella or the image of a Mithra-Atlas on a relief from Neuenheim and the fresco in the Barberini palace. Thanks to his bow, from an arrow blow, he makes the water from which the thirsty shepherds drink with greed. The trees produce fruits that the god harvests, and the fields produce wheat that he also harvests. On several painted panels we see a ray from the Sun that touches the Taurocton, whose gaze is toward the astral of the day. It seems that the Sun participates in the action of the salvation god inspired by the Olympians, which we see on several stars presiding over the sacrifice. But, at the same time, we have the impression that a kind of rivalry opposes Mithra at the beginning, who is trying to get in his cart, possibly to replace him. Due to the fact that Mithra bears the name of "the unconquerable Sun", we are entitled to assume that he acquires through his apostles the prerogatives of the astral. Thus, he appears radiate-headed on several monuments. In any case, the Sun must make an oath of faith, and Mithra then gives him a kind of investiture. Holding his head with one hand, he raises with one another a hard-to-define object, identified

with a phrygian cap, a rhyton or a bull thigh. In fact, it must be a military bag that Mithra throws on the shoulder of the Sun, this image corresponding to the consecration of the astral of the day, the third degree of initiation, because the bag is among Miles's symbols on a mosaic in the sanctuary Ostia of Felicissimus. This alliance is sealed above an altar, where they straighten up their right hands and cool the meat that they will share over the victim's body.

In his portraits, Mithra is regularly flanked by two characters dressed like him in Persian clothes, with trousers, a short tunic or a tight tunic with a Phrygian belt and cap. One of them raises the torch, the other lowers it. But there are exceptions, one example being some stellas in Pannonia, Noricum or Dacia. In these stars, the dadophors pick up symmetrically and in parallel their fiery torches. It is Cautes and Cautopates, which, where they are in the characteristic position, personify the sunrise and sunset, following its diurnal and annual revolutions. Also, the image of the first is often shown under the solar bust and the other under the bust. Frequently, we find them reversed, and this detail is not the least important of those that deconcentrate the exegetes of mithriacal iconography. It happens that the dadophors keep one bull head and the other a scorpion, signs that mark the beginning of the warm season and the cold season (Vermaseren 1978, 38-39). A whole symbolism of colors highlights these meanings. Between Cautes and Cautopates, Mithra could appear as the Southern Sun or Midday Sun.



Fig.2. Basorelief with the image of Mithra killing the bull, source of image:  
[http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/images/cimrm736\\_KunsthistorischesMuseumMithrabulSacrifice.jpg](http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/images/cimrm736_KunsthistorischesMuseumMithrabulSacrifice.jpg)



Fig.3. Painted basorelief with the image of Mithra killing the bull, source of image: <https://strangenotions.com/exploding-mithras-myth/>

The general type of tauroctonia has been fixed and completed gradually. The first dated copy depicts two small dadophors behind the bull, and Cautes, instead of lifting his torch, straightens the tail of the victim, perhaps adorned with spice.

Subsequently, this iconography was enriched and overloaded with various motifs related to myth and rite. It is not excluded that, in some communities, the accent was placed on the elements of an astrological theme, but we can not verify that this theme has fundamentally determined the common scheme of all painted or sculpted tauroctones. In any case, the planetary week that we use, and which the Mithrians seem to have adopted, was of astrological origin. It is not sure that he would be sanctified on Sunday, the Sun's day, as F. Cumont thinks, but the planets of the planetary gods, arranged in the weekly order of the days of the week, above or below Mithra Taurocton, Moon, Sun or Saturn of Venice.

As we can see, the Mithraism involves a true theocosmogony and at the same time a doctrine of the soul. In the time of the Antoninians, when Stoicism had the prestige of an official philosophy, it is not surprising that this cult has flourished with more and more numerous followers among the servants of the Empire (Drâmba 1999, 126). However, identifying Mithras with Zeus and Iupiter, or even with Oromasdes on a denar that the image of Tarpeia is reinterpreted as a Mithra petrogenitus, remains striking. It follows that the saving and, to a certain extent, restorer of Creation ended by equating the Creator or even replacing it. Furthermore, Porphyrios, plagiarizing Eubolus and Numenius, considers Mithras a demiurge. In fact, after the evil giants have been defeated, Mithra is the one responsible for the creatures of Oromasdes, this case not being unique in the history of religions (Turcan 1998, 264).

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