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# ROMAN MITHRAS, MITHRA OF COMMAGENE, AND MIIRO IN THE KUSHAN EMPIRE – A STUDY IN COMPARATIVE ICONOGRAPHY

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Jaan Lahe

The Studies in the Roman cult of Mithras – having lasted for more than a century – have progressed through many changes.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of time, the number of new sources has grown and many of the previous positions have been reconsidered. Without a doubt, the biggest breakthrough in research on the Roman cult of Mithras has been the revision of the positions of Franz Cumont (1868–1947), which began in the 1970s and has, in a sense, been ongoing to this day. As a result of this, many of the long-term dominant positions held in research have been abandoned – for example the notions that the Roman Mithras was identical with the Iranian Mithra and the Roman cult of Mithras was based on Zoroastrian dualism;<sup>2</sup> the notion that the followers of the cult were largely Roman legionaries<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See about History of Mithraic Studies: Roger **Beck**, “Mithraism since Franz Cumont” – *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.17.4 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984), 2002–2115; Beck, “Mithraism after Mithraism since Franz Cumont, 1984–2003” – Beck, *Beck on Mithraism. Collected Works with new Essays* (Aldershot: Burlington, 2004), 3–30; Richard **Gordon**, “Von Cumont bis Clauss” – *Imperium der Götter. Isis, Mithras, Christus. Kulte und Religionen im römischen Reich* (Karlsruhe: Badisches Landesmuseum, 2015), 237–242.

<sup>2</sup> See Gordon, “Franz Cumont and the doctrines of Mithraism” – *Mithraic studies. Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*. Vol. II. Ed. John R. **Hinnells** (Manchester: Manchester University Press. Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 215–248; Gordon, “The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum: The Example of Sette Sfere” – *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, 1 (1976), 119–165; Hinnells, “Reflections on the Bull-slaying scene” – *Mithraic studies*. Vol. II, 290–312; Hinnells, “The Iranian background of Mithraic iconography” – *Acta Iranica*, 1, 242–250.

<sup>3</sup> See Gordon, “The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras: a critical view” – *L’armée romaine et la religion sous le Haut-Empire romain*. Ed. Catherine Wolff (Paris: De Boccard, 2009), 379–350; Manfred **Clauss**, *Cultores Mithrae. Die Anhängerschaft des*

and, as opposed to the previous research that underlined the unity of the cult, greater attention has been paid nowadays to the specific regional characteristics.<sup>4</sup> The cult of Mithras has begun to be viewed mainly in the context of Roman religion and Roman society.<sup>5</sup> Also, the notion of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, of the so-called “oriental religions”, that were seen as opposites of the “West” or the Graeco-Roman religion, has been largely revised,<sup>6</sup> but this notion of the “oriental religions” was a basis for the studies of Cumont.

As a result of these definitely positive changes, today’s understanding of the Roman cult of Mithras is closer to the truth than the one presented to contemporaries by Franz Cumont, Jean Reville (1854–1908), or the early Maarten J. Vermaseren (1918–1985), yet this development is accompanied by an approach that denies any possible contacts between the Roman cult and oriental traditions. In the 1970s, when international congresses dedicated to the cult of Mithras were held in Manchester (1971),<sup>7</sup> Teheran

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*Mithras-Kultes* (Heidelberger Althistorische Beiträge und Epigraphische Studien. Bd. 10) (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), 267–269; Elmar **Schwertheim**, *Die Denkmäler orientalischer Gottheiten im römischen Deutschland* (EPRO 40) (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 269–270.

<sup>4</sup> See Claus, *Mithras. Kult und Mysterium* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> See Gordon, “Mithraism and Roman Society. Social Factors in the Explanation of Religious Change in the Roman Empire” – *Religion* 2 (1972), 92–121.

<sup>6</sup> Walter **Burkert**, *Antike Mysterien. Funktionen und Gehalt* (München: Beck, 1991), 10–12; Robert **Turcan**, *The Cults of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 7–10; Christoph **Auffarth**, “Zwischen Anpassung und Exotik. ‚Mysterien‘ und ‚Orientalische Kulte‘ in der Religion der Antike” – *Verkündigung und Forschung* 2 (2007), 19–30; Auffarth, “Religio migrans: Die ‚Orientalischen Religionen‘ im Kontext antiker Religion. Ein theoretisches Modell” – *Mediterranea* 4 (2007), 333–363; Corinne **Bonnet**, “Die ‚Orientalischen Religionen‘ im Laboratorium des Hellenismus: Franz Cumont” – *Trivium* 4 (2009), <https://journals.openedition.org/trivium/3452>; *Religions orientales – culti misterici: Neue Perspektiven – nouvelle perspectives – prospettive nuove*. Ed. Corinne Bonnet, Jörg **Rüpke**, Paolo **Scarpi** (Potsdamer altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 16) (Stuttgart: Steiner 2006); Jaan **Lahe**, “Die „orientalischen Religionen“ im Römerreich als ein Problem der Religionsgeschichte” – *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 2012, 20 (2), 151–195.

<sup>7</sup> See *Mithraic studies. Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, Vol. I-II. Ed. John R. Hinnells (Manchester: Manchester University Press. Rowman and Littlefield, 1975).

(1975)<sup>8</sup> and Rome (1978),<sup>9</sup> the presentations covered the cult of Mithra in other cultures alongside the Roman Empire – in the Kingdom of Mittani,<sup>10</sup> in the Ancient India,<sup>11</sup> in Iran,<sup>12</sup> in the Kushan Empire,<sup>13</sup> in Hellenistic Asia Minor<sup>14</sup> and in Manichaeism.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, it was due to the influence of Cumont's ideas – as Cumont had presented the Roman cult of Mithras as a part of the larger religion of Mithra that extended from the Atlantic Ocean to India – but on the other hand, different scholars tried to give the Roman cult of Mithras a wider intercultural context in their studies in other cultural spaces. As this approach was abandoned in the decades that followed, studies in the cult of Mithras and the cults of Mithra in other religions proceeded in isolation, as it has been to this day. But this situation is not good.

<sup>8</sup> See *Études Mithriaques. Actes du 2e Congrès International Téhéran, du 1er au 8 septembre 1975*. Ed. Jaques **Duchesne-Guillemin** (*Acta Iranica*, Vol. 17) (Teheran & Liège: Bibliothèque Pahlavi, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> See *Mysteria Mithrae. Proceedings of the International Seminar on the 'Religio-Historical Character of the International Seminar on the Roman Mithraism, with Particular Reference to Roman and Ostian Sources'*. Rome and Ostia 28–31 March 1978. Ed. Ugo Bianchi (*Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain*, 80) (Leiden: Brill, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> See Harold Walter **Bailey**, "The second stratum of the Indo-Iranian gods" – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> See Paul **Thieme**, "The concept of Mitra in Aryan belief" – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 21–39; Jan **Gonda**, "Mitra in India" – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 40–52; Helmut **Humbach**, "Mithra in India and the Hinduized Magi" – *Études Mithriaques*, 229–254.

<sup>12</sup> See Ali A. **Jafarey**, "Mithra, Lord of Lands." – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 54–61; Richard Nelson **Frye**, "Mithra in Iranian history" – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 62–67; Ilya **Gershevitch**, "Die Sonne das Beste" – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 67–89; Mary **Boyce**, "Mihragān among the Irani Zoroastrians" – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 106–118; Frye, "Mithra in Iranian Archaeology" – *Études Mithriaques*, 205–212; Roman **Grishman**, "Le culte de Mithra en Iran" – *Études Mithriaques*, 213–214; Thieme, "Mithra in the Avesta." – *Études Mithriaques*, 501–510.

<sup>13</sup> See Humbach, "Mithra in the Kusana period" – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 135–141; David W. **MacDowall**, "The role of Mithra among the deities of the Kusana coinage" – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 142–150; MacDowall, "Mithra's Planetary Setting in the Coinage of the Great Kushans" – *Études Mithriaques*, 305–316.

<sup>14</sup> See Friedrich Karl **Dörner**, "Mithras in Kommagene" – *Études Mithriaques*, 123–134; Duchesne-Guillemin, "Iran and Greece in Kommagene" – *Études Mithriaques*, 187–200.

<sup>15</sup> See Gershevitch, "Die Sonne das Beste" – *Mithraic studies*, Vol. I, 67–89; Werner **Sundermann**, "Some more Remarks on Mithra in the Manichaean Pantheon" – *Études Mithriaques*, 485–500.

We do not have any reason to return to Cumont's concept of the "Religion of Mithra" – it is out of date – but disregarding the intercultural context has in no way contributed to the better understanding of the Roman cult of Mithras. No culture has been formed and developed in isolation, especially with Roman culture having developed through interaction with other Mediterranean (including the eastern-Mediterranean) cultures. Today, we are much more knowledgeable about the Romans' contacts with other cultures than a hundred years ago. Therefore, I find it positive that in the last few years there has been a re-emergence of scholars who are trying to view the Roman cult of Mithras in a wider context. In April of this year the collection *Images of Mithra* was published by Oxford University Press as a result of the work of a group of young British scholars – Philippa Adrych, Robert Bracey, Dominic Dalglish, Stefanie Lenk and Rachel Wood. These scholars look at the figure of Mithra in different cultures and find connections between them. In the past five years, my own studies have proceeded in the same direction. My goal is to understand the Roman cult of Mithras in as broad of an intercultural context as possible, which is why my article has been dedicated to the figure of Mithra not only in the Roman Empire, but three different regions – the Roman Empire, the Hellenistic Kingdom of Commagene (in Asia Minor and North Syria) and the Kushan Empire. In this, I am not only looking for similarities, but also potential contacts and communication between the different cultures.

## 1. MITHRAS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE, MITHRA IN THE KINGDOM OF COMMAGENE, MIRO IN THE KUSHAN EMPIRE – WHAT IS THE COMMON LINK BETWEEN THEM?

### *1.1. The Name of the gods*

If you were to ask what connects the god Mithras worshipped in the Roman Empire, the god Mithra in Commagene and the deity named Miuro or Mirro in the Kushan Empire, then first, it is the name of the god. Regardless of the different forms of the name used in these three regions (moreover, different name forms are also found in the Roman

inscriptions: Mithra,<sup>16</sup> Mitra,<sup>17</sup> Mitrha,<sup>18</sup> Methra,<sup>19</sup> Mytra,<sup>20</sup> Mythra,<sup>21</sup> Mithta<sup>22</sup>) it is certain that they are the different forms of the same name of a god. They are all based on the Indo-European god name Mitra, which had already been verified in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. In the Vedas, his name exists as Mitra, in the Avesta *Miθra*, in the Old Persian language as Mithra, in Middle Persian as Mihr, in the Greek sources as Mithra, Mithras or Mithres and in the Roman sources as Mithra or Mithras. Miiro/Mirro is the Bactrian form of the Old Persian god's name, and in the Kushan Empire it was written in Greek letters.

According to the radical position, which has a particularly large number of supporters among contemporary German scholars, the link is limited to only the gods' names.<sup>23</sup> If this were true, then not only would this be an important link between the said gods, because a name is an important element of the identity of a creature, be it human or godly. However, when we compare the sources of the Roman Empire, Commagene and Kushan, we can see that there are many more similarities between these gods. As the main sources are depictions of the deities, we must focus on the iconography used in the three regions.

### 1.2. *The Clothing of the gods*

When we look at the depiction of Mithras on monuments dating from the era of the Roman Empire and monuments originating from the Hellenistic Kingdom of Commagene, we see many similar features. While in case of the Roman Mithras, we can speak of different manners of depiction, the

<sup>16</sup> CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 463.

<sup>17</sup> CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 516; 563; Vol. 2, No. 1805.

<sup>18</sup> CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 574; 625.

<sup>19</sup> CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 522; 766.

<sup>20</sup> CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 149; 566; 841; 863; Vol. 2, No. 1151.

<sup>21</sup> CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 138C; Vol. 2, No. 1338; 1790; 1841; 1917; 1927; 1962.

<sup>22</sup> CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 17.

<sup>23</sup> See Clauss, *Mithras*, 13–18; Andreas **Hensen**, *Mithras. Der Mysterienkult an Limes, Rhein und Donau* (Limesmuseum Aalen. Zweigmuseum des Archäologischen Landesmuseum Baden-Württemberg. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2013), 24; Christian **Witschel**, "Die Ursprünge des Mithras-Kults. Orientalischer Gott oder westliche Neuschöpfung?" – *Imperium der Götter*, 201–210.

most common of them is certainly the depiction of Mithras wearing long trousers, a Persian jacket, cloak and a Phrygian cap (Photo 1). Most of these garments are mentioned by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century satirist Lucian in his famous description of Mithras in his work “The Gods in Council”.<sup>24</sup> It is a stereotypical depiction of Oriental peoples, to which many parallels can be found from Roman art. We could mention a marble sculpture depicting a barbarian, located at the Naples National Archaeological Museum, dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Photo 2) or the wall mosaic from the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Ravenna depicting three magi on their way to worship baby Jesus (Photo 3). The Phrygian cap is an item distinctive of Perseus, Attis (Photo 4), Sabazios (Photo 5), Ganymede, Orpheus, Paris and many other characters from ancient mythology, which is meant to emphasise their Oriental origins.

If we proceed from Rome to the Kingdom of Commagene and look at the reliefs from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC depicting the local king in *dexiosis* with gods, then in the case of the depictions of the god Mithra, many similar features can be seen with the Roman depictions of Mithras. Accordingly, Mithra is depicted in the relief on the Nemrud Dağı (Photo 6), and in the relief found from Arsameia (see Photo 7), together with King Antiochus I, wearing long trousers, a cloak on the shoulders and a headdress highly reminiscent of the Phrygian cap. The latter is surrounded by a diadem. While Mithra’s headdress is actually a Persian tiara, there is a clear similarity between the two headdresses, and Eleonore Dörner has demonstrated convincingly that the Persian tiara originates from the Phrygian cap.<sup>25</sup> Long trousers and a cloak flowing from the shoulders are also worn by the god Miro on the gold coins of the Kushan emperor

<sup>24</sup> *Deor. conc.* 9: “Ah; and out of consideration for him I suppose I must also abstain from any reference to the eagle, which is now a God like the rest of us, perches upon the royal sceptre, and may be expected at any moment to build his nest upon the head of Majesty? –Well, you must allow me Attis, Corybas, and Sabazius: by what contrivance, now, did they get here? and that Mede there, Mithras, with the candies and tiara? why, the fellow cannot speak Greek; if you pledge him, he does not know what you mean. The consequence is, that Scythians and Goths, observing their success, snap their fingers at us, and distribute divinity and immortality right and left; that was how the slave Zamolxis’s name slipped into our register” (*The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, trans. by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1905) 168 = <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/wl4/wl430.htm>).

<sup>25</sup> See Eleonore Dörner, “Deus pileatus” – *Études Mithraïques*, 115–122.

Kanishka, originating from the area of ancient Bactria (present day Afghanistan) and dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.<sup>26</sup> Only, instead of a Phrygian cap, he is wearing a diadem (Photo 8).

### 1.3. Dexiosis

Another important iconographic motif connecting the Mithras of Rome and the Mithra of Commagene is the scene depicting Mithra in *dexiosis*. In the reliefs from the Roman Empire era, the god Mithras is in *dexiosis* with the sun-god Helios/Sol (Photo 9). Most scholars share the opinion that this scene should be interpreted as the gods concluding a pact of friendship.<sup>27</sup> But in relation to this, it is important to remember that the followers of Mithras also called themselves *syndexii* – “those connected by the shaking of hands (with the right hand)”.<sup>28</sup> Just like the common meal of the participants of the cult was an imitation of the meal of Mithras and Sol, the *dexiosis* of the worshippers of Mithras was probably an imitation of the *dexiosis* of the two gods. It should also be stressed that just like there are two gods in *dexiosis* in the Roman reliefs of Mithras, it is depicted just the same in the reliefs of Commagene, because like many other Hellenistic rulers, King Antiochos I of Commagene was elevated to the status of a deity and the title of “god” (*theos*) was a part of his official titlature.<sup>29</sup>

The *dexiosis* scene was relatively rare and noteworthy in Ancient Art. Often at least one of the parties of the *dexiosis* is a deity in these scenes. So is a dexiosis scene on a clay seal originating from the same area of the Kingdom of Commagene, more specifically from Doliche (dated at 27 BC or 21 AD). This depicts the local city god, who later became

<sup>26</sup> At the British Museum, Inv. No. 1894, 0506.16.

<sup>27</sup> See Franz **Cumont**, *Die Mysterien des Mithra. Ein Beitrag zur Religionsgeschichte der römischen Kaiserzeit*. Autorisierte Deutsche Ausgabe von Georg Gehrich. Fünfte Auflage. Unveränderter Nachdruck der von Kurt Latte besorgten dritten, vermehrten und durchgesehene Auflage von 1923 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 120; Clauss, *Mithras*, 144.

<sup>28</sup> See CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 54; No. 60; 63, 7; No. 423; CIMRM, Vol. 2, 63 a.; **Firmicus Maternus**, *De err. prof. rel.* 5.

<sup>29</sup> See Jörg **Wagner**, “Die Könige von Kommagene und ihr Herrscherkult” – *Gottkönige am Euphrat. Neue Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in Kommagene*. Ed. Jörg Wagner (Darmstadt/Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2012), 43–60.



known in the Roman Empire as Jupiter Dolichenus, in *dexiosis* with the Roman emperor, either Augustus or Tiberius (Photo 10). The depiction symbolises Doliche submitting to Roman rule. It is likely that local priests acted as intermediaries in the capitulation of the city, which is why the event is depicted as a conclusion of an alliance between the city god and the emperor who is the embodiment of Roman rule. The second *dexiosis* scene is found on a relief from Palmyra, located in the Capitoline Museums in Rome. The relief likely originates from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and it depicts two Palmyrian gods: Malakbêl, the god of the sun, and Aglibôl, the god of the moon (Photo 11).

The great German Mithras scholar Manfred Clauss has pointed out the fact that *dexiosis* was not a common greeting in Roman culture, but instead a special gesture expressing a close relationship between two people. In particular, *dexiosis* was associated with the conclusion of agreements and alliances.<sup>30</sup> While there are different opinions on the interpretation of the *dexiosis* scene in the reliefs of Commagene – some scholars, for example, have interpreted it as nomination, the delivery of the king's powers from the god<sup>31</sup> – it is still certain that also the reliefs of Commagene depict the alliance between the king and the god. All gods, with whom the king is depicted in *dexiosis*, including Mithra, were the gods protecting the king and the kingdom.<sup>32</sup> Here it is important to be reminded that from the Acheminid era Mithra had special ties to royal power. Acheminid inscriptions mention him as a God that vested power in the king and this guaranteed that power.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, sources from the

<sup>30</sup> Clauss, *Mithras*, 144; s. about *dexiosis*: Stephen D. Ricks, “Dexiosis und Dextrarum Iunctio – The Sacred Handclasp in the Classical and Early Christian World” – *The FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006) (<http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1446&index=21>).

<sup>31</sup> See Bruno Jacobs, “Das Heiligtum auf dem Nemrud Dagi – Zur Baupolitik des Antiochos I. von Kommagene und seines Sohnes Mithridates II” – *Gottkönige am Euphrat*, 77–87.

<sup>32</sup> See Philippa Adrych, Robert Bracey, Dominic Dalglish, Stefanie Lenk, and Rachel Wood, *Images of Mithra (Visual Conversations in Art and Archeology, 1)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 140.

<sup>33</sup> See The inscriptions A2Sd; A2Ha; A2Hb (Rüdiger Schmidt, *Die Altpersischen Inschriften der Achaimendiden*. (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2009), 194–197).



Sassanid era<sup>34</sup> and Kushan empire<sup>35</sup> confirm that Mithra was one of the gods that participated in the royal investiture and protected royal power. The Roman Mithras was also a protective god – he defended his followers in both this life as well as the afterlife. Although in the Roman empire, Mithras (unlike Sol Invictus<sup>36</sup> with whom followers of Mithras identified as their God), was never one of the state gods, inscriptions show that the followers of Mithras also prayed to their God to protect the Emperor and the State.<sup>37</sup>

#### 1.4. The solar nature of the gods

An important trait connecting the Roman Mithras, Commagenian Mithra and Kushan Miuro was the solar nature of the gods. While the Roman Mithras and Helios/Sol, the god of sun, are depicted as different, but closely related characters, of whom the latter has a crown of rays as his iconographic distinguishing element – a symbol originating from Greek art that can be seen on vase paintings from as early as 5<sup>th</sup> century BC – we have sufficient grounds to argue that the two gods are identical. It is also confirmed by numerous inscriptions with the text “Mithras Sol” or “Mithas Sol Invictus”.<sup>38</sup> We also know of some reliefs, where Mithra’s

<sup>34</sup> The rock relief Tāq-e Bostān: Friedrich **Sarre**, Ernst **Herzfeld**, *Iranische Felsreliefs. Aufnahmen und Untersuchungen von Denkmälern aus alt- und mittelliranischer Zeit* (Berlin: E. Wasmuth, 1910 199–200, Abb. 92/3). See about the interpretations of this relief: Michael **Stausberg**, *Die Religion Zarathustras: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Rituale*, Bd. 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 2014; Attilio **Mastrocinque**, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 52; Adrych, Bracey, Dalglisch, Lenk, and Wood, *Images of Mithra*, 97.

<sup>35</sup> The reliquary casket of Kanishka (at the British Museum, inv. no. 1880.270). S. about the interpretations of the figures on the lid of the casket: Adrych, Bracey, Dalglisch, Lenk, and Wood, *Images of Mithra*, 110–111.

<sup>36</sup> See about Sol Invictus: Gaston **Halsberghe**, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972); Steven E. **Hijmans**, “The Sun which did not rise in the East. The Cult of Sol Invictus in the Light of Non-Literary Evidence” – *Babesch. Bulletin Antieke Beschaving*, Vol. 71, 1996, 115–150.

<sup>37</sup> See Clauss, *Mithras*, 45–56.

<sup>38</sup> CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 171; 361; Vol. 2, No. 2259; 2260; 2265 and „The Mithras-Litugy“, L. 481 (see Text: Hans-Dietrich **Betz**, *The “Mithras Liturgy”. Text, Translation and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005): HELIOS MITHRA; CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 178; 578; Vol. 2, No. 2296; 2235: HELIOS MITHRA ANIKETOS; CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 140; 429; 574; 594; Vol. 2, No. 1965: SOL MITHRA; CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 247;

head is surrounded by a crown of rays (as in Carnuntum (Photo 12) and in Carrawbrough); as well as depictions where Mithra's face is golden, as can be seen in a relief discovered under the Santo Stefano Rotondo church in Rome, which is on display at the Baths of Diocletian (Photo 13). From the same place, Mithra's gilded head has been found (Photo 14). This is certainly an indication of the solar nature of Mithras. In the Kingdom of Commagene, Mithra being identical with the sun is confirmed by five inscriptions that equate Mithra to Apollon and Sol<sup>39</sup> and reliefs where Mithra's head is surrounded by a crown of rays (Photo 6). On coins from Kushan, Miuro's head is also surrounded with a halo of rays (Photo 8), and on some of the coins the name Miuro has been replaced with the name of the Greek god Helios (Photo 15). The halo of rays is the distinguishing element of Miuro on the lid of the Kanishka reliquary (Photo 16).

Mithra's solar nature is a trait that takes us back in time to at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. India's Rigveda, which dates from that period of time, includes passages describing the god Mitra shining like the sun.<sup>40</sup> While in the Vedas, Mitra exhibits certain traits common to a sun god, he is not mainly a sun god, but a god who, with his partner Varuna, guards the order of the world, referred to as *rita*.<sup>41</sup>

In the Avesta, Mithra is in the first line the defender and the guardian of *asha*, truth and order – the fundamental principle of earlier Indo-Iranian religion, as well as of Zoroastrianism; it is an Iranian equivalent of *rita*. Mithra watches over contracts and treaties – he blesses those who do not betray their contractual word and he punishes those who do betray it and do not acknowledge the sacredness of solemn vows.<sup>42</sup> Though Miθra

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873; 1541; 1631: DEUS SOL MITHRA; CIMRM, Vol. 1, Nr. 134; 152; 153; 160; 416; 422; 436; 470; 566; 639; 688; 706; 708; 717; 754; 863; 873; 890; 138D; Vol. 2, Nr. 1015; 1151; 1293; 1417; 1453; 1507; 1524; 1527; 1531; 1532; 1538; 1543; 1585; 1588; 1590; 1592; 1596; 1614, 1615; 1617; 1637; 1698; 1729; 1813; 1814; 1821; 1936; 1937; 2278; 2377: DEUS SOL INVICTUS MITHRA.

<sup>39</sup> See Friedrich Karl Dörner, John H. Young, "Sculpture and Inscription Catalogue." – *The Hierothesion of Antiochos I of Commagene*. Ed. Donald H. Sanders (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 175–360.

<sup>40</sup> See RV I,2,5,13; I,152,1; VII,64,1.

<sup>41</sup> RV I,2,8; I,23,5; V,63,1 u. 7; V,65,2; V,67,4; V,68,4; V,69,1; VII,64,2; VII,66,10, 12, 13 and 19; RV I,2,8; V,68,4; VII,60,5 S. about *rita*: Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens. I Veda und älterer Hinduismus* (Die Religionen der Menschheit, 11. 2., überarbeitete und erg. Aufl.) (Stuttgart et al.: Kohlhammer, 1979), 79–80

<sup>42</sup> Thieme, "Mithra in the Avesta." – *Études Mithriaques*, 501–510.

is closely associated with the sun in the Avesta, he is not the sun. Miθra's association with the sun is clearly defined in *Yasht* 10.13: He is the first of the spiritual gods to rise over the mountain range Harā before the swift-horsed, immortal sun. Thus, in the Avesta Miθra and the sun are two different gods. The sun is called *Hvar* and it is almost always mentioned together with the moon (*Māh*). The identification of Miθra with the sun is first explicitly attested in a Greek source: Strabo (first century B.C.) states that in their worship the Persians call the sun Mithres.<sup>43</sup> Curtius Rufus has Darius III invoke the sun, Miθra, and the Fire before the battle.<sup>44</sup> It appears that in Achaemenid times there was no consistent identification of Miθra with the sun, but in the Sassanid period this identification is generally attested. This is corroborated by the Taq-e Bostan rock relief from the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD on which Mithra is depicted with a halo crown of rays around his head (Photo 17); Mithra's identity with the Sun is also confirmed by coins and seals from the Sassanid era, on which Mithra is also depicted wearing a halo of rays.<sup>45</sup> The identicalness of Mithra and the sun is evident also in the fact that the Middle Persian word *mīhr* means both Mithra and the sun.<sup>46</sup> The solar nature of the Roman Mithras is, then, a trait that connects this god directly to the Iranian tradition as well as the Hellenistic Commagenian religion. This leads us to the most important question – how to explain the iconographic parallels described?

### 1.5. How to explain iconographic parallels?

It is clear that the Roman Mithras, Commagenian Mithra and the Kushan Miīro are three different deities, between whom many differences can be found. For example, neither Commagenian nor Kushan sources refer to Mithra as the creator of the world, as he is represented in Roman sources<sup>47</sup> and, what is most important, nowhere besides the Roman Empire is

<sup>43</sup> *Geographica* 15.13.732.

<sup>44</sup> *Historia Alexandri* 4.13.12.

<sup>45</sup> See P. Gallieri, "On the Diffusion of the Mithra Images in Sasanian Iran. New evidence from a Seal in the British Museum" – *East and West* 40 (1990), 79–98; Frantz Grenet, "Mithra ii. Iconography in Iran and Central Asia" – *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mithra-2-iconography-in-iran-and-central-asia>.

<sup>46</sup> Frye, "Mithra in Iranian history" – *Mithraic Studies*, Vol. I., 66

<sup>47</sup> CIMRM, Vol. 1, No. 463, 1.

Mithra depicted as slaying a bull, which indicates that this event was only known in the Roman legacy of the cult of Mithra. However, it is clear that detailed ties exist between the three gods that they cannot simply be random, but can instead be explained by cultural contacts and by a common Indo-European heredity.

First, it must be stressed that all monuments mentioned originate from a relatively short period of time, the period between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to the 4<sup>rd</sup> century AD. While the geographical area in which the monuments have been discovered is huge, the regions in which the monuments originate are related to close cultural contacts. The Kingdom of Commagene was directly adjacent to Rome and its territory was later added to the Roman Empire. The territory of the Kingdom of Commagene was the meeting place of Hellenistic culture and the Iranian cultural space, which had expanded to Asia Minor during the Achaemenid period, when a significant part of the area had been annexed to the Achaemenid Empire. Rome's early contacts with Asia Minor have already been proven, which is why it is very likely that certain components from Iranian religious heritage may have reached the Romans precisely through Hellenistic Asia Minor. It may not be accidental that the satirist Lucian, who has, as one of the ancient authors, given us a description of the appearance of the god Mithra, came from Samosata, from the territory of the Kingdom of Commagene. While the Kushan State was spatially far from the Roman Empire and the two states lacked a shared border (Parthia was between them), the Kushan Empire was also a meeting place of Hellenistic culture and the Iranian cultural space. If the former had arrived in the area through the Greco-Bactrian State conquered by the Kushans, then a significant part of the territory of the Kushan State belonged to the Iranian cultural space, due mainly to the many peoples who lived there, like Scythians and Parthians, being Iranian-speaking. While the ethnic origin of the Kushan tribes is not clear and there are different hypotheses, many scholars also regard Kushans as members of Iranian tribes and liken them to the Tocharians.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> K. Enoki, G. A. Koshelenko and Z. Haidary, "The Yüeh-chih and their Migations" – *History of Civilizations of Central Asia. Vol. 2. The Development of Sedentary and Domestic Civilizations: 700 B. C. to A. D. 250.* Janos Harmatta, B. N. Puri ja G. F. Etemadi, eds. (Paris: Unesco Publishing 1992), 173–174; Krishna Chandra Sagar, *Foreign Influence on Ancient India* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1992), 163.

When it comes to the Kushans' religion, it is evident from inscriptions and coins that, among the gods, they worshipped nearly all of the more important Iranian gods (including Ahura Mazdā), but the Kushans were probably not Zoroastrians.<sup>49</sup> Both the Kingdom of Commagene and the Kushan Empire are characterised by the entwining of the elements of Hellenistic and Iranian culture. It is now common to refer to such entwining as syncretistic, though it is debatable what this term can be applied to.<sup>50</sup> The spread of Hellenistic culture among Romans does not need further commentary, but it cannot be overlooked that regardless of the spatial distance, the Kushan Empire had close contacts with the Roman Empire.<sup>51</sup>

What can be concluded from all this? Certainly not the Iranian origin of the Roman cult of Mithras. Instead, everything we currently know about this cult speaks of the fact that the Roman cult of Mithras was not an ancient oriental cult that had arrived in the Roman Empire, as the followers of the cult thought and how they wanted to display it, but a new mystery cult formed during the era of the Roman Empire.<sup>52</sup> However, without the said intercultural contacts, the Roman cult of Mithra would not have existed in the form we know it, for as one of the most important components of the cult, the personality of the god Mithras is tied to other, earlier, oriental religious traditions, and has probably been moulded into what we know of it today due to intercultural contacts. Although each religious and cultural phenomenon should be viewed in its direct context, it is important that intercultural contacts are not overlooked. I hope that in future the scholars of the cult of Roman Mithras will once again work more closely with the scholars of other cults and cultures, as was the norm just a few decades ago. I believe that both parties would benefit from this.

<sup>49</sup> Humbach, "Mithra in the Kusana period", 138.

<sup>50</sup> See Kurt **Rudolph**, "Syncretism: From Theological Invective to a Concept in the Study of Religion" – *Syncretism in Religion*. Ed. J. S. Jensen, 68–85; Bonnet, Rüpke, "Einleitung" – *Trivium. Revue franco-allemande de sciences humaines et sociales – Deutsch-französische Zeitschrift für Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften* 2009, 4, 15: <http://trivium.revues.org/3516>.

<sup>51</sup> See MacDowall, "The role of Mithra among the deities of the Kusana coinage" – *Mithraic studies*, 142–150.

<sup>52</sup> Clauss, *Mithras*; Witschel, "Die Ursprünge des Mithras-Kults", 200–210.



1. Polychrome tauroctony relief from the mithraeum of S. Stefano Rotondo. Baths of Diocletian Museum, Rome (Photo: Jaan Lahe).



2. Kneeling barbarian. Part of the Farnese collection. National Archaeological Museum, Naples (Photo: Jaan Lahe).





3. Journey of the Magi, mosaic, Basilica Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna (Wikipedia).

4. Statue of Attis. Museo Archeologico Ostiense, Ostia (Photo: Jaan Lahe).





5. God Zeus-Sabazios. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



6. Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes *dexiosis* stele, Nemrud Dağı (Cumont, *Textes et monuments*, 1903).

7. Fragmentary stele of Antiochus and Mithras-Helios, Arsameia on Nymphaios (Wikipedia, Ste.caneva).



8. Obverse and reverse of gold coin of Kanishka, showing Miiro. British Museum, London (BM 1894,0506.16).





9. Mithras and Sol *dexiosis* scene (Vermaseren, Mithras, 1965).



10. Seal from Doliche (Haider/Hutter/Kreuzer, Religionsgeschichte Syriens, 1996).



**11.** Bas-relief of Malakbél and Agliból. Capitoline Museum, Rome  
(Photo: Jaan Lahe).

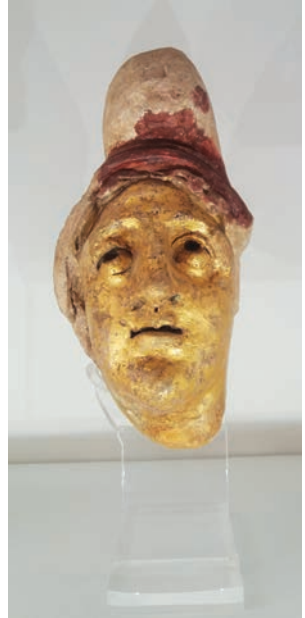


**12.** Reconstruction of mithraic frieze.  
Archaeological Museum of Carnuntum  
(Everystockphoto, TyB).





**13.** Mithras. Part of the tauroctony relief from the mithraeum of S. Stefano Rotondo (Photo: Jaan Lahe).



**14.** Gilded head of Mithras from a Roman mithraeum, Baths of Diocletian Museum, Rome (Photo: Jaan Lahe).

**15.** Obverse and reverse of gold coin of Kanishka, showing Helios. British Museum, London (BM 1888,1208.537).





16. Shak-ji-ki-Dheri casket. British Museum, London (Wikipedia).

17. Mithra (left) attends the investiture of Ardashir II (centre).  
Tāq-e Bostān I, relief of Ardašir II (Wikipedia, Philippe Chavin).

