

A RELIEF OF MITHRAS FROM THE VICINITY OF SOFIA

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The object of this article is an excellent example of provincial Roman arts found near the city of Sofia. It is introduced into scientific circulation for the first time¹.

Place of finding

In September 2014 in the Sofia History Museum was given a part of a relief found accidentally in the village of G erman. The fragment had been reused as a step, turn with the image downwards.

Description

Only the lower half of the plate is preserved: 0.69 m of width, maximum height of 0.42 m, 0.10 m of thickness². The relief is made of fine-grained gray-white marble, with precise details submitted.

In the center of the relief in a circular medallion with external dimension of 0.53 meters, a human figure facing right is depicted (Fig. 1). With his left knee he pushes an animal (a bull) to the ground. The right leg is strongly strained to the back. Although the entire upper part of the figure is missing, there is no doubt that the Indo-Iranian god Mithras is represented stepped with his left foot over the bull. The god wears a tunic reaching to the knees and a chlamydia is waving around the shoulders. The garment is represented very detailed, with carefully made pleated folds. Mithras usually wears tight pants – perhaps here is the same, though it is not evident on our relief. The god is wearing boots on his feet. The bull is represented also turn right, squatting on the ground, with front legs under the body. The head is bent upward facing the god. On both sides of Mithras a straight, nude male figure is presented. The bodies are covered with chlamydia, wrapping the shoulders and falling down on the back at beautiful folds. Both figures are facing the scene in the middle of the medallion. The outer hand is placed behind the body and the inner one is lifted up (clearly by the right figure, but for the left it is not well visible). The outer leg steps firmly on the earth and the inner one – eased, slightly bent at the knee and posed behind the

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² The relief, MIS A 7081, is part of the permanent exhibition of the Regional Historical Museum – Sofia.



Fig. 1. Relief of Mithras from the village of Gérman (photo by the author)

other. Thus, the figures look slightly inclined to Mithras and the bull. Depicted are the two torchbearers – Kautes and Kautopates – constant companions of the god. Kautes situated to the right of the relief should hold the torch up (on the missing part of the relief) and Kautopates should keep it down, but it is not clearly visible on the relief.

Under the bull the figures of a scorpion, a snake, a dog and three altars are represented. The dog is turned towards the neck of the bull. Two altars located on the left side of the medallion are in higher relief, while the left is erased. The scorpion is traditionally presented reaching for the genitals of the bull.

The medallion is circled by an embossed frame 0.04 cm of width. In the middle of the frame, into the bottom of the relief a human figure is represented, seating en face, cross-legged. He is dressed in a short hython. His left hand rests on the ground while the right one is raised up, holding a patera or is supporting the frame of the relief. The upper part of the figure is partially damaged and the features of the head could not be distinguished – it is possible to have a hat or a lion skin. Obviously Aion is presented – the god of eternity or Oceanus, who occurs sometimes on the reliefs of Mithras (Vollkommer 1992, 614, No 460).

On both sides of Aion at the bottom of the relief are depicted a female and a male figure, both inclined – respectively to the left and to the right. The female figure is naked, lightly covered with a hymathion around the lower part. The hyma-

thion is wrapped around her at beautiful folds. The head is covered with a veil which the figure holds with her left hand. Her right hand is resting on a jar which water is pouring from. The male figure is presented in the same position. He is only wrapped in hymathion. Part of the head is slightly damaged but evident is the hair falling in waves and the beard.

On the right side of the medallion part of a bull is visible – preserved is the head as well as the right foreleg.

We could only assume that the relief was painted in bright colours (see Cumont 1899, 217; for colouring the reliefs of Mithras see Forrer 1923; Campbell 1968, 39-40; Clauss 2000, 52). Groove (3 x 1.5 cm) for attachment is located on both sides in the width of relief. Probably two similar were situated on now missing upper part of the monument.

Iconography

The relief from Gérman presents a scene of tauroctonia, i. e. killing the bull. It usually occupies the centre of the reliefs and the most part of them. This scene is the most common form of presenting of Mithras. Killing the bull is a canonical scene – Mithras is resting his foot on the back of the bull, is pulling its head back and is about to cut its throat. The act is usually performed in the cave. This is not really a question for murder but for sacrifice. The presence of Kautes and Kautopates points toward a relief from the Roman age, because since that time they have been represented as companions of Mithras (see Vollkommer 1992, 586). Usually both are dressed like Mithras, again with a Phrygian cap, but on our relief they are naked and only covered with a chlamydia. They are represented naked on a relief from the mithreum of Güglingen (Kortüm, Nath 2002, 116-121).

Mostly Oceanus is represented by reliefs of Mithras as a symbol of water as essential for ritual purification. Every shrine should be built near water – a lake, a river or a spring. Generally water is important for the cult of Mithras and mithreums have often been built near springs. But water is usually connected to the 'water miracle' where Mithras pierced the rock with an arrow and water started to flow out of it. This scene is popular on reliefs originating from areas around the Rhine and the Danube River (Vollkommer 1992, 624). Instead of this scene, on the relief from Sofia is represented a river deity. Actually by Homer and Hesiod all river deities spring out of Oceanus (Homer, *Il.*, 14, 434; 16, 174; 21, 2; 21, 195 f.; 21, 223; 21, 380; 24, 693; Hesiod., *Theog.* 337, 367 f.).

Images of rivers are common in Greek and Roman art, but from the Flavian dynasty onwards their representation has been extremely popular. Predominantly they are depicted as men – female figures are rarely represented. Usually large and important rivers like the Tiber, the Nile, the Danube, and the Rhine are depicted (Klementa 1993). Sometimes Oceanus is also represented as an inclined male figure (Klementa 1993, Taf. 25, Abb. 49). Often river deities were worshipped with offerings, altars, and even permanent sanctuaries for them. A river deity is also represented on all autonomous coins of Serdica (see Мушмов 1926, 5).

On reliefs associated with Mithras river deities are rarely represented. These are known from the village of Stuklen (Vollkommer 1992, 605, No. 212), from Ruse (Vollkommer 1992, 605, No.213) and from Sarmisegetusa (Vollkommer 1992, 614, No. 458, 459). Again from Bulgaria is another relief representing Mithras, holding in one hand an urn from which water pours (from Radomir – Vollkommer 1992, 614, No. 466). Perhaps, the images of river deities on the reliefs of Mithras have to be regarded as a local feature. In our case, most likely it is a personification of the Iskar River (Oescus). This river was mentioned by Thucydides and Herodotus. It is more difficult to determine, who the female deity is. Whether she is a river, or rather a personification of the Rila Mountain, from which the Iskar River springs. Actually there are no female river deities known except one image from the Trajan column, which shows feminine features – the Ephrat River (see Klementa 1993, 7 f.).

The scorpion (sometimes is a dog and a snake) is creeping towards the bull because it is supposed that through its blood it exudes a magical power. The scorpion is reaching for the bull's testicles to acquire its power.

It is possible that on the missing upper part of the relief at the corners Sol and Luna were represented which is known from many reliefs of Mithras (for example Vollkommer 1992, 597 ff., No. 105, 108, 113, 114, 128, 132, 136, 151, 153, 156, 159, 161, 172 and many others).

The cult of the god Mithras

The cult of the god Mithras is a mystery one and cannot be directly connected to the Persian god Mithras, but rather is a product of Roman historical context (for the cult see Clauss 2000). Mystery cults are secret cults in the period from 7th century BC to 4th century AD. Two characteristics unite all such cults: the prohibition to share details about the cult out of the secret society and the promise for salvation of the initiated. Participation in such cult does not exclude participation in others, including official ones. Special for the mystery cults is the initiation ritual – initiation, which is precisely the secret mystery. Only insiders know the secret of how to

achieve salvation. In fact, the cult of Mithras offers not the only way to salvation, but one of many, and Mithras is one of many gods.

The cult is strongly linked to the army to which the earliest known monument is connected (Vollkommer 1992, 584). It was also extremely popular among the military. By Emperor Commodus in semi-official imperial titulatura *invictus* was also included – an epithet that Mithras brought from the start.

However, in areas where there was no concentration of Roman troops Mithraism penetrated thanks to merchants, freedmen, craftsmen, slaves who often had Eastern origin (Кацаров 1911, 47-48; Тачева-Хитова 1982, 447-451; Александров 2006, 142-143). It seemed to be inherited or often members of the same craft guild were followers, as is the case with a relief with inscription from Nicopolis ad Istrum (Шаранков 2013).

In the Roman province of Thracia there are three main centres of Mithras' worship – Serdica, Pautalia and Philipopolis (Тачева-Хитова 1982, 446).

Temples of Mithras

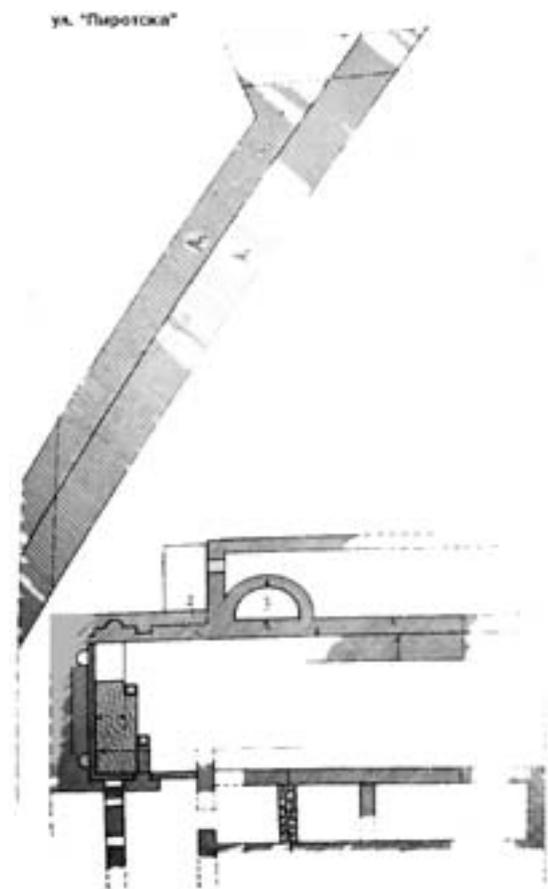


Fig. 2. Plan of the mithreum in Serdica (after Бобчев 1955)

Temples associated with Mithras differ significantly among themselves (see Clauss 2000, 42 ff.). Typical is the elongated nave, usually with east-west orientation, where the entrance is from the east, and the cult statue is to the west. Mithras followers reclined on narrow platforms along both long sides of the cella. There was usually a platform with an altar to the west narrow side of the temple, and above it hung a great relief of Mithras (Велков 1934, 84 сл.; Martens 2004). Temples were mostly small, cave-like, for a small number of followers.

A temple of Mithras is known from the fortified area of the ancient city of Serdica (18.50 x 6.50 m) (Герасимов 1943, 257, № 2; Бобчев 1943, 24, №

26; 1955; 1989, 38, № 6) (Fig. 2). It consists of three parallel rooms – two side ones shorter and narrower, the southern arched (Clauss 2000, obr. 12) (Fig. 3). Here, however, no underground part was unearthed, which is the actual premise of these complexes (Велков 1934, 84). In the northern part a semicircular pool faces the central premise. Water tanks were also found. The western wall is massive, with two small semicircular niches – there usually stands the cult relief image of Mithras. That

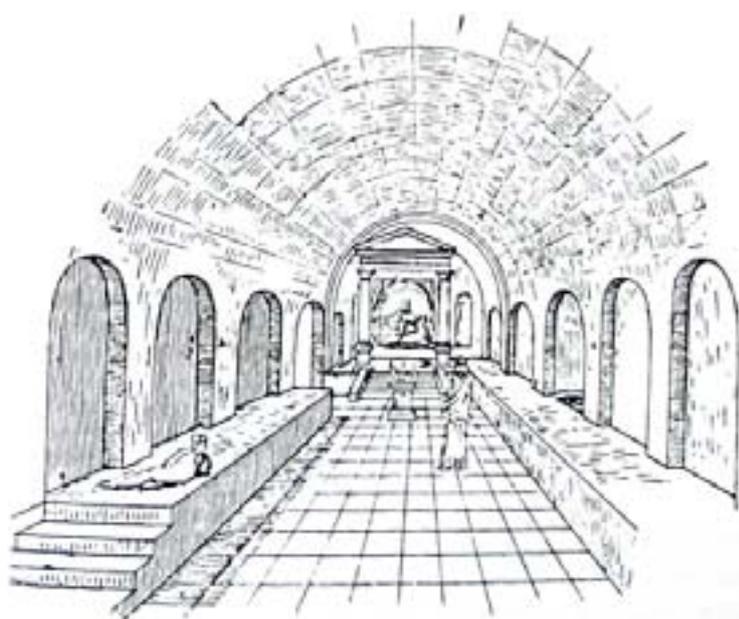


Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the mithreum from Serdica (after Clauss 2000).

is why the western wall of the temple in Serdica is of unusual thickness. Traces of niches (one square) could be seen in the western part of the north and south wall of the middle room. At the bottom of the west wall are holes for three clay pipes, possibly for drainage of the tanks. In the middle room, along the walls traces of benches (podiums) have been found. At about 2.50 meters east of the middle room, in situ, two bases

for columns with a larger diameter than the inner ones have been discovered, i.e. we have a temple in antis. As a plan the mithreum in Serdica shows similarities with that in Riegel (Schatzmann 2004, 12, Abb. 2).

Among the finds in the mithreum in Serdica a marble slab with Greek inscription, a stone vessel (mortar), an Ionic capital, parts of the wall pier, two coins of the emperor Arcadius, etc. were discovered. No materials specifically related to the cult of Mithras have been found on the site – votive tablets, cult vessels, etc. The building could be dated back to the end of 3rd, beginning of 4th century AD. Later reconstructions in the southern area have been also attested. Most likely the relief of the village of Gérman derives also from a mithreum in the vicinity of Serdica, as it is unlikely to have been brought from the ancient city itself. The dimensions of the relief are small, indicating that the temple was of modest size. Logically major centers of worship of Mithras were the towns along the main

roads as Serdica, but there were also smaller ones.

From Bulgaria undoubtedly one of the biggest mithreums unearthed so far is from the village of Kreta (Велков 1934). In the northern cult niche a relief of Mithras was found. All other materials from the sanctuary are associated with Mithras and date back to the 3rd century.

Dating

The earliest references to the cult of Mithras in Roman times were between 90–120 AD onwards (Vollkommer 1992, 584). The earliest initiations are known from Novae, Carnuntum and Rome (Vollkommer 1992, 584), whereas the latest were from around 313 from Rome. In regard to the images with tauroctonia scene, the latest monument was one from Gimeldingen (325 AD, Vollkommer 1992, 603, No 184). Most of the reliefs could be dated from 150 to 250 AD. Around 400 AD any production related to Mithras interrupted. Last forms of worships could be associated with an attempt to counter the spreading Christianity.

Where the relief from Gérman falls? Because we have no other information about its dating, the context of the finding is not original, and the lack of an inscription can only indirectly assume the time of its production. It is a very exquisite piece of art, with fine making and many details. Thus, we could put it rather in the second half of the 2nd century AD.

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A RELIEF OF MITHRAS FROM THE VICINITY OF SOFIA

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RESUME

The object of the article is a relief of the god Mithras found not far from the city of Sofia (in the village of Gérman). It is part of the collection of the Regional Historical Museum of Sofia and is published here for the first time. It represents the scene of tauroctonia, i. e. the act of killing the bull. Such reliefs were in use in the mithrea all over the Roman Empire. Serdica was one of the main centres of Mithras' worship in the province of Thracia. The relief of the village of Gérman presents many particular features, very detailed and careful workmanship and could be dated as early as the second half of the 2nd century AD.

KEYWORDS

Mithras, mithreum, religion, relief, tauroctonia

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РЕЛЕФ НА МИТРА ОТ ОКОЛНОСТИТЕ НА СОФИЯ

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РЕЗЮМЕ

Предмет на настоящата статия е релеф на бог Митра намерен недалеч от София (с. Герман). Той е част от колекцията на Регионален исторически музей – София и тук се публикува за първи път. Представява сцена на тавроктония, т.е. убиване на бика. Подобни релефи са използвани в митреумите из цялата Римска империя. Сердика е един от главните центрове в провинция Тракия, където се почитал Митра. Релефът от Герман представя много особености, изпълнен е много внимателно и детайлно. Може да бъде датиран през втората половина на II в.

КЛЮЧОВИ ДУМИ

Митра, митреум, религия, релеф, тавроктония

АВТОР

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