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A Comparative Analysis of Mithraic Imagery: The Regional Adaptation of the Tauroctony in Dacia

Abstract of the bachelor's Thesis, 2025

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Abstract: Mithraism, like other cults, sought to elucidate the origins of the Universe. In this context, The Cosmos is forged through symbolic imagery in the Mithraic iconography. Given the paucity of textual sources by initiates, scholars interpreted the myth through Mithraic imagery. The central iconographical representation of the cult, the tauroctony, displays the sacrifice of the bull by Mithras and each zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motif that frames the sacrifice carries an astral signification. This paper examines regional adaptations of the tauroctony, particularly from Dacia, focusing on their deviations from the Roman canon of representations. In this regard, the Dacian additional motifs indicate the reconstruction of the myth inside the territory.

Keywords: tauroctony, Mithraism, imperial art, provincial art, Dacia.

Introduction

The Mithraic Mysteries have long attracted scholarly attention due to the scarcity of contemporary textual sources. This lack of written evidence has allowed extensive interpretation of the artistic representations. Researchers such as Franz Cumont, Robert Turcan, Maarten Jozef Vermaseren or Robert Beck tried to unveil the mysteries, supporting distinct hypotheses particularly regarding the cult's artistic representations.

One prominent example of such artistic heritage is the tauroctony. It represents the central representation in Mithraic sanctuaries, depicting the moment of utmost importance in Mithras' mythological narrative, the sacrifice of the bull. It is a symbolic act in which Mithras forges the renewal of nature. Although there are differences in representation across the Roman Empire, the tauroctony has a general structure that is respected in every region.

Currently, the tauroctonies are stylistically split into eight categories according to Campbell¹ which stress upon the regional dissimilarities between the *Mithras Taurophorus* representations. This analysis reflects Dacia's deflection from the iconographic canon and the possible symbolism of the additional motifs.

¹Campbell, 1968, 1-3.

Origin of the tauroctony

The first tauroctony was sculpted in Rome and dedicated by Alcimus, slave of Tiberius Claudius Livianus. The presence of the earliest tauroctonies in Rome suggests that this iconographical representation originated in Latium. The mythical narrative of Mithras killing the bull is unique to the Roman Empire. Hence some scholars support that the cult was created within Rome by clerics and high officials who were highly acquainted with the Eastern religions.²

But this hypothesis may be contested by the first epigraphical evidence, an inscription of Sacidius Barbarus of the *Legio XV Apollinaris*, discovered in Carnuntum, Pannonia. It is also worth noting the similarity in representation between the Hellenistic-Iranian sculptures (Fig. 1) and the Mithraic ones. In both regions, Mithras is depicted wearing *anaxyrides*, *gaunaka* and a Phrygian cap (Fig. 2). It should be mentioned, as well, that *Legio II Adiutrix* had a numerous Mithraic following. Moreover, the annexation of vassal kingdoms such as Commagene, Cappadocia, Pontus, and Cilicia certainly played a role in the spread of the cult within the Roman Empire.³

The tauroctony is the depiction of Mithras killing the bull, accompanied by other zoomorphic motifs. The name reinforces this practice, being a Greek compound word from ταῦρος (bull) and κτόνος (killing). Thus, it is highly similar to the word *taurobolium* that is associated with the cult of Cybele. Franz Cumont highlights that the worship of Mithras and the cult of Cybele interrelate.⁴ While the cult of Magna Mater is heavily associated with femininity and allows female devotees, Mithraism seems to only have male followers. This is mainly a point of consensus between the scholars⁵ but epigraphical evidence could prove that there may have been female participants in the mystery practices.⁶

The mythic narrative of sacrificing the bull has parallels in older religions such as Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. In Hindu tradition, the celebration of *Navaratri* commemorates the fight between Shakti and Mahishasura⁷ – asura with an ox appearance – and it bears

²Clauss, 2000, 22.

³Moga, 2007, 220.

⁴Cumont, 1903, 179.

⁵This conclusion is not only based on the premise of the proximity between the temples but also on the Mithraism's close connection to the military domain. Although we may consider the cult created in Rome, the military aspect can also be seen in the epigraphical evidence and in the third rank, *Miles*, of the sacred hierarchy. It is also worthy to note that the epigraphical records strongly suggest the abundance of male followers in the cult but there are a few rather feminine names that raise the problem of a generalisation (their connection with the Mithraic cult remains uncertain).

⁶Szabó, 2010, 50.

⁷Valipour, 2023, 108.

conceptual similarity with the Mithraic dichotomy of good and evil. However, arguably closer similarities are found in Zoroastrianism, where the killing of *Goshurvan*⁸ or *Srishok*⁹ facilitates the rejuvenation of nature. In both mythologies, death becomes the precondition of a new existence, emphasizing a cyclical perspective of time. Understanding the possible roots of the Mithraic beliefs contributes to unravelling the meaning of the tauroctony.

Deciphering the Mysteries of Mithras: Symbolism of the Tauroctony

The tauroctony is a point of convergence between the sacred and the profane realms, Mithras acting as the mediating figure that bridges the celestial and terrestrial worlds. The motifs found in the central representation of the Mithraic cult constitute symbols of time and outline the Cosmic dimension of the Mithraic religion.

Tauroctony reliefs and frescoes incorporate zoomorphic motifs such as the raven, the serpent, the bull, the scorpion and the dog, that may have an astral significance according to Vermaseren. Notably, the bull indicates the Age of Taurus. In astrological terms, such ages correspond to the constellation in which the Sun rises during the spring equinox. Thus, the presence of the other zoomorphic figures symbolizes the constellations of *Canis Minor*, *Hydra*, *Corvus* and *Scorpius* – star clusters that laid on the celestial equator¹⁰ during that epoch.

David Ulansey notes that Mithras represents the constellation *Perseus*, pointing to the similarities between the two mythological figures such as: the *pileus*, the Persian origin¹¹, the Perseus position in the Mithraic hierarchy, the *petrogenesis* and the proximity of the Perseus and the Bull constellation. Another noteworthy observation is given by similar gestures in the iconographic representation of both heroes: Perseus doesn't look towards Medusa's gaze the same way Mithras doesn't look towards the bull.¹² This hypothesis may be contested on the basis that Mithras is a solar deity, and thus not associated with a specific constellation. On this matter, Mithras being represented distinctively from Sol may indicate he was not considered a sun God but a hero that received solar attributes as an outcome of the bull sacrifice. But a strong

⁸More commonly called *Gavaevodata* represents the primordial bull created by Ahura Mazda and killed by Ahriman. After the bull dies, a multitude of grains and healing plants grow from the ground. From the bull's semen, purified by the light of Moon, a bull and a cow emerge. Information taken from Valipour, 2023, 109.

⁹The Iranian eschatological concepts embody Saoshyant – the Saviour of the World – killing Srishok, the last animal that must be sacrificed for the reconstruction of the Cosmos. Information taken from Faraji, 2015, 988.

¹⁰The *celestial equator* is the projection of the equator onto an imaginary sphere of large radius, having Earth at its center, named the *celestial sphere*. Where the *celestial equator* and the *ecliptic* intersect is the constellation in which the Sun enters during the spring (vernal) equinox.

¹¹Romans believed that Mithras is originary from Persia, while Perseus is the legendary founder of the Perseid dynasty.

¹²Ulansey, 1991, 22-30.

counterargument is that Perseus is not on the celestial equator during the Age of Taurus unlike the other zoomorphic motifs.

The two figures that sit in parallel are called *dadophori*. The one who holds the torch up is Cautes and the one who holds the torch down is Cautopates, tracing the symbolism of dusk and dawn. In the upper corners, Luna and Sol are seen. The representation of the sun and the moon is analogous to the diurnal-nocturnal dichotomy, reinforcing their symbolic association with time. The ideas of Mithraism are influenced by stoicism, where the cyclical perspective of time is conveyed through *palingenesis*.¹³

Tauroctonies of Rome

As previously mentioned, the first sculptures of Mithras are observed inside Rome. Consequently, the capital of the Roman Empire dictated the canon representation of tauroctonies. (fig. 3)

Tauroctonies in Rome seldom include iconographic insertions that diverge from the canon. However, these dissimilarities prove that a prototype is inexistent. In comparison to the periphery, tauroctonies of Rome include additional small motifs that are related to the symbolism of the tauroctony. Such motifs are trees consequently put alongside burning altars (Fig. 4), Sol holding a globe (Fig. 6), zodiac signs, Aion (Fig. 7) or additional zoomorphic figures. Burning altars are linked to Zoroastrianism¹⁴ and trees to the rebirth of nature. The zodiac signs show the ecliptic, but with Aion they represent the cyclical nature of time. Sol holding the globe symbolizes his control over the Universe. In the tauroctony of Collezione Torlonia, Pegasus, winged horse born from the blood of Medusa, is represented in the upper left corner. In addition, the narrative myth of Mithras is viewed only on frescoes – a characteristic specific to Rome (Fig. 7).

The frescoes and reliefs are characterized by advanced techniques, high-quality materials, and a classical manner of depicting figures. Carrara marble was frequently used in Rome, allowing meticulous execution and precision. The fine incisions give depth to the characters and clothing while demonstrating great attention to detail. The figures are idealized and proportionally balanced, traits characteristic of imperial art.

¹³*Palingenesis* is the eternal recreation of the Universe. Numerous stoics mention the concept of *epkyrosis* - the destruction of the Universe through fire and its rebirth from water.

¹⁴Shenkar, 2024, 379.

Mithras slaying the bull is the central figure of the composition surrounded by zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs. In the tauroctony of Tor Cervara, the diagonals are prominent, stressing upon this subject (Fig. 6). According to one study by Dominique J. Persoons, the position of Cautes and Cautopates is linked to the chiasma of Plato.¹⁵ By tracing the diagonals, the dichotomy between the terrestrial and the divine alongside the cyclical nature of time are emphasized.

The balanced composition results from the interplay between dynamic and static elements. The serpent, the position of Mithras, the bull's gestures, the torches, the cave are dynamically traced and counterbalanced by the triangular position of Mithras and the symmetry of Cautes-Cautopates and Sol-Luna (Fig. 7 and 8).

Tauroctonies of Dacia

Campbell's fourth group corresponds mainly to Dacia, describing it as a convergence between type II, characteristic of Thrace, and type III, representative of the lower Danubian regions.¹⁶ Therefore, he described the Dacian tauroctonies as three register, having a round top stele. Other scholars recently suggested that the three-register division is an innovation originating from Dacia, not Thrace.¹⁷ It is also to be noted that the two characteristics mentioned by Campbell are observed separately, tauroctonies having the appearance of round top stele or having three horizontal lines that divide the myth's narrative, showing the different ways of representing the myth across the territories. The division into registers is first found in Germania, element that suggests the communication between this region and the Danube Provinces. In this respect, it is difficult to include all tauroctonies in one category with rigorous rules as Dacian artistic representations exhibit significant regional variation. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the similarities and the distinctions between them. The prominent deviation from the canon found in Dacia suggests the reconstruction of the myth inside the territory.

One aspect that is found in a majority of tauroctonies from Dacia is the inversion of Cautes and Cautopates. The cause likely stems from the oral transmission of the cult which led to variations in the iconographical details. The lack of textual testimonies strongly concludes that Mithraism was propagated orally, feature also observed in Rome, as well, where Cautes and Cautopates are both represented holding the torch down (Fig. 4).

¹⁵Persoons, 2024, 35.

¹⁶Campbell, 1968, 3.

¹⁷Nemeti, 2005, 212.

In comparison to the balanced composition of the tauroctonies in Rome, in Dacia the reliefs frequently incorporate more static elements such as architecture (Fig. 9, 10, 11) carved with horizontal and vertical lines that confer the composition equilibrium. The motif of the *aedicula-naiskos* in the Dragu tauroctony (Fig. 9) displays an additional noteworthy feature – the columns exhibit a Solomonic appearance.¹⁸ In Dacia, certain columns are sculpted having half of their surface fluted and the other half spiral. Thus, the way of representing the column entirely as a spiral constitutes an innovation. Another aspect about the Dragu tauroctony is the presence of Hesperus near Mithras, a figure that is also sculpted on the Mitreo di Santo Stefano tauroctony in Rome (Fig. 12). The *Bull in the House* motif is most prevalent in Dacia, although it can also be observed on reliefs near the Rhine River. In the relief found in Dieburg, Germania Superior, Mithras is throwing stones at the bull enclosed within a sanctuary. In Dacian tauroctonies, the *Bull in the House* is represented in a simplified manner. Furthermore, the bull appears to be in a boat. Zsolt Kiss mentions that this motif could indicate the moment the Taurus constellation reappears in the crepuscular light.¹⁹

In the tauroctony of Apulum, it is remarkable to point out that the two rams represent a unique motif that has never been observed in other tauroctonies. It may be argued that the ram highlights the previous age before the Age of the Taurus – the Age of Aries or because the Aries is the first sign in the zodiac. It still warrants attention as to why they are a pair and why they are represented resting. In the tauroctony of M. Aurelius Timotheus or the one from Dragu (Fig. 11), it is a singular *lazy* ram. About the tauroctony of Dragu, there is another zoomorphic motif with a noteworthy significance. Above the ram, a goat is sculpted. Goats were eaten during the Mithraic feasts, as osteological evidence proves.²⁰ Sheep are also the third most eaten animal in Dacia.²¹ But the motif could symbolize the constellation Capricorn. This constellation is described by Porphyry as a gate through which the souls ascend (and the Cancer constellation is the gate through which they descend).²²

The pair of *lion-krater* can also be observed. Not only are the Leo and Crater constellations in proximity of each other on the sky and on the celestial equator but they also represent the elements of fire and water.

¹⁸Solomonic columns were developed during the reign of Constantine the Great.

¹⁹Kiss, 2023, 3.

²⁰Vermaseren, 1963, 102.

²¹Marian and Haimovici, 2001, 337.

²²Porphyry, *On the Cave of Nymphs in the Thirteenth Book of the Odyssey*, 11.

In tauroctonies of Sarmizegetusa (fig.13) and Apulum, Cautopates can be seen holding the bull's tail. The workshops of Sarmizegetusa and Apulum are distanced and stylistically different, this motif showing a possible interaction between the sanctuaries situated in different regions. In the tauroctony from Turda, two mythological episodes have been identified that cannot be found in other regions. These are Mithras riding a bovine and Mithras holding an object above the head of Sol, who kneels before the god. The latter depiction is highly unusual, as it is normally Sol who offers the solar attribute to Mithras after the latter performs the sacrifice of the bull.

Regarding the manner of execution, the sculptures from Dacia differ from the tauroctonies of Rome through their deep incisions and more abstract execution. The draperies are rigid, carved with deep grooves, and the facial features are simplified. For example, the contour of the eyes is observed but the eyelids are not represented. In Apulum, the eyes were made through small punctiform incisions. In contrast, the tauroctonies from Rome are characterized by meticulous workmanship, fine incisions, and harmonious proportions, while the facial features are rendered in a classical manner. The simplified manner of depicting the figures in Dacia is a result of the sculptures' reduced dimensions and the varied local materials from which they were made. It may also reflect stylistic influences from the neighbouring provinces.

Conclusions

The earliest tauroctonies appear in the imperial capital, emphasizing that the canon representation was created in Rome. While all the representations of *Mithras Tauroktonos* present recurrent zoomorphic motifs of the snake, scorpio, raven, dog and the selenar-solar motifs of Cautes-Cautopates and Sol-Luna, additional figures are frequently observed.

In Rome, the added elements reinforce the symbolism of the tauroctony. Aion and the zodiac sign represent the cyclical perspective of time, Pegasus is an allusion to Perseus, and the trees suggest the nature's revival. Although the symbolism of the figures is still debated among the scholars, the motifs carved in Dacian sculptures tend to have a more mysterious significance.

Regarding the manner of representation, tauroctonies of Rome highlight the traits of the imperial art. The balanced composition is marked by the juxtaposition of the dynamic and static lines. The diagonals and the symmetry of the lunar-solar figures emphasize the placement of Mithras in the centre of it. The material often used was Carrara marble that allows elaborate incisions and a superior finish, details such as the drapery are carved meticulously.

In Dacia, additional motifs such as the rams resting or the goat in the superior register impose difficulties regarding the adaptation of the myth. Choosing to interpret the tauroctony as a representation of constellations, these figures could symbolize the star clusters of Aries and Capricorn. Through reliefs, communication between Germania and Dacia is suggested, both including registers that detail the myth's narrative that are not found in Rome. Contrary to Campbell's division, three-register tauroctonies are first sculpted in Dacia.

There is another common element that is found both in the tauroctonies of the provinces near the Rhine River and Dacia and that is the *Bull in the House*. This motif illustrates the bull trying to hide from Mithras while the hero throws stone at him. Notably, in Dacia, the bull sometimes seems to be in a boat, suggesting a change in the narrative. Other elements that are distinctive from the canon representation of the tauroctony and from Rome is the inversion of Cautes and Cautopates, Cautopates holding the bull's tail and the lion-krater motif. The inversion of Cautes-Cautopates highlights the oral diffusion of the cult, while the lion-krater figures represent two constellations on the celestial equator and the elements of fire and water. The sacrifice of the bull is often sculpted in a temple, tracing a more static composition compared to the tauroctonies in Rome. In the Dragu relief, the columns are also sculpted in a fascinating manner, in a spiral, similar to Solomonic columns that will be created one century later.

The Dacian sculptures exhibit defining characteristics of the provincial art. The materials are local, extracted from nearby quarries. In this regard, the local marble or limestone used doesn't have the same crystalline structure as *marmor lunense* that is able to hold delicate details. The figures in the reliefs are rendered in a more abstract manner, having profound or inconsistent incisions and the clothes shows deep grooves.

This iconographical analysis emphasized the distinct motifs between the tauroctonies of Rome and the tauroctonies of Dacia. Hypotheses were proposed regarding engrossing figures such as the rams and goat sculpted in the Dacian reliefs. In this way, the differences between the imperial art and the provincial art have also been noted.

Besides that, the divisions of the tauroctonies based on regional differences have been discussed, underlining that for a division to be made, the similarities must be more prominent than the dissimilarities. Considering the regional variability of Dacian sculptures, broad generalizations about the styles are not entirely justified.

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Annexes



Fig. 1



Fig. 1 – detail



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

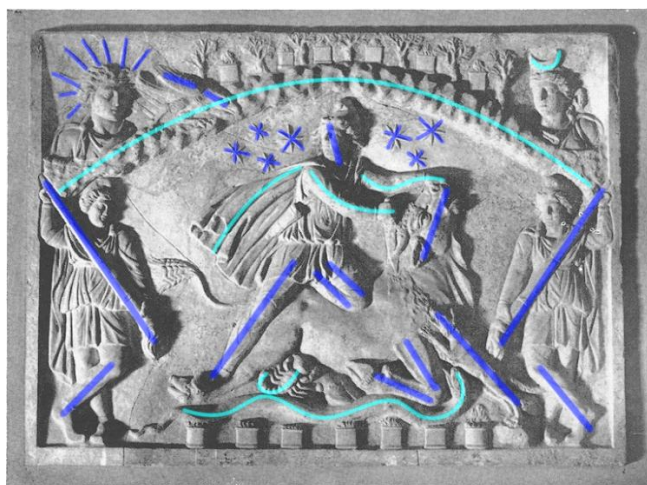


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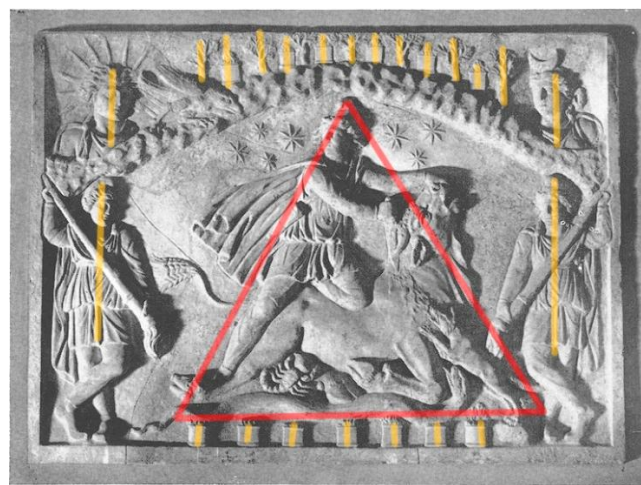


Fig. 10



Fig. 11

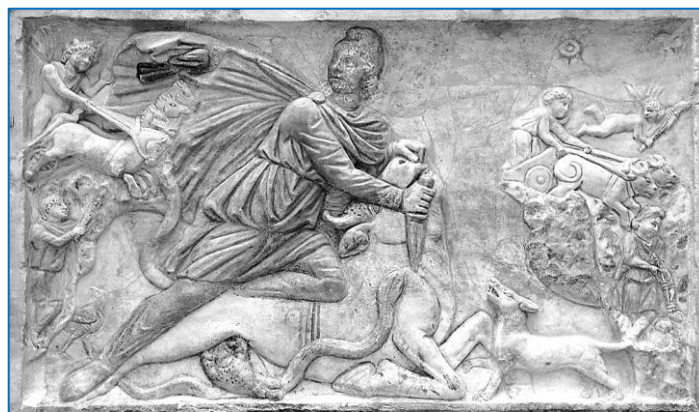


Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16