

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Tauroctony: New Possibilities in the Worship of Mithras

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On display in the Roman galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is a cast bronze plaque depicting a relief of the Roman god Mithras in the act of killing a bull (Figure 1).¹ The object is relatively small — when compared with other representations of its kind — measuring only about fourteen by twelve inches and is most likely from Italy. The museum dates it to the late second or early third centuries. This dating is assumed to be assigned for two reasons: this period is when Mithraism was at its height and the plaque is naturalistic in style, a characteristic that is often ascribed to the Antonine era. There is no other reason to limit the plaque's date or date of use to this period. The bull-killing scene — or tauroctony — is the most common visual representation related to the religion. It was central to Roman Mithraism. Generally, in this theme Mithras sits astride the bull wearing a Phrygian cap, a typical indication of the Eastern origin of its wearer. The god is either in the act of striking the bull or has just done so. The beast is associated with cosmic chaos, which was later replaced by celestial order after Mithras' heroic deed.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art's tauroctony, Mithras is shown with the bull in accordance with the standard representations. In the upper left is a bust of Sol, and on the upper right is a bust of Luna. The god wears an Eastern-style costume of Phrygian cap, tunic, and leggings. He pulls back the nose of the bull as he plunges the dagger into its neck. A dog and a snake lap at the blood of the bull, while a scorpion snaps at its genitals. The busts of Sol and Luna in the top corners denote the cosmic setting.²

This scene represented the cult myth that is integral to what scholarship understands of Mithraic belief. The bull, which represents cosmic chaos, threatens life on earth

through its existence. Mithras must therefore hunt it down and kill it. When the god finally overpowers the bull, he drags it into a cave before stabbing it. By killing the bull, Mithras both restores order and creates life, sometimes illustrated by a stalk of wheat growing from either the tail or the wound. Supporting the god in his work are two Greco-Roman symbols of abundance and rebirth: the scorpion and the snake.³ Through this single action Mithras has offered salvation to mankind by providing life to sustain all creatures.

The cave where the bull-slaying occurs later becomes the *locus* of worship for members of the cult. Within the context of these mysteries, the mithraeum is an extension of the first mythical cave of Mithras, and therefore complements the tauroctony.⁴ The place of worship mimics the setting from the actual deed of the god, thus, the killing of the bull reoccurs symbolically during each meeting of the cult. Often the tauroctony scene is depicted under an arch, alluding to this original cave, although this is not the case in the Metropolitan Museum of Art representation.

The religion's appeal lay in that fact that, in Mithraism, there were seven levels of initiation and any male who wished could become a follower of Mithras. Senior levels, or "grades," were not limited to people of means or power. This created a possibility for social mobility within each cult cell, which would not have been so attainable in life.⁵

Adding to the popularity of Mithraism was the fact that Mithras was seen as a savior figure to his followers. Through Mithras and his seven grades, the soul was thought to be able to attain a higher state of being.⁶ Participating in the cult allowed one's soul to begin its ascent (back) to the heavens while still on earth.⁷

The image of the tauroctony itself was essential to Ro-

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¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997.145.3.

² Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 83; Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 224.

³ Though it is unclear why exactly the scorpion does so, it is noted in the first century CE by Manilius (*Astronomica* 4.704-9) that each sign of the zodiac is associated with specific body parts and that the scorpion is associated with the genitals. "*Scorpius inguine regnat*" or "Scorpio rules the groin." On the snake see John Hinnells, "Reflections on the Bull Slaying Scene," in *Mithraic Studies*, ed. John Hinnells (Manchester:

Manchester University Press, 1975), 2:295-98. On the scorpion see Hinnells, "Reflections," 298-300. In the Greco-Roman tradition the scorpion was a symbol of abundance and good fortune. The snake is "reborn" with the shedding of its old skin, etc.

⁴ Turcan, *Cults*, 218. See also Porphyry, *De Antro Nympharum* 6, trans. Robert Lamberton, *Porphyry on the Cave of the Nymphs* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1983), 24-25.

⁵ Richard Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society," in *Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World* (Great Yarmouth: Gailliard, 1996), 104.

⁶ Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society," 96-8; Burkert, 111-12.

⁷ Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16; Gordon, "Mithraism and

man Mithraism. Roger Beck notes that it was one of the few characteristics that defined the worship of Mithras.⁸ Without a tauroctony, one could not have a mithraeum. Yet, the objective of this discussion is to ask: could one have a tauroctony without a mithraeum? These cave-like spaces have generally been seen as integral to the worship of Mithras as has the worship of the god through the mystery cult. The possibility that this object was used in a traditional mithraeum cannot be ruled out, but there are several other potential functions that must be explored. These include its use in a domestic mithraeum, as an object for private devotion, or as a portable icon.

A first explanation for this plaque's existence is that it was simply an auxiliary piece of ornamentation in a mithraeum. The main niche icon was the focal point of the room, and therefore needed to be seen by all the members. The entire shrine is oriented towards the main niche icon, so if the Metropolitan Museum of Art plaque was used in a mithraeum, it is much more likely it served a secondary function.⁹ This could mean it either decorated the wall of the main cult room or perhaps even another, less important area. The six holes in the relief, three on either side, imply that it was attached to a wall at one point. The size, though not uncommon by any means, would have been too small for the cult niche of a standard mithraeum.

Due to the lack of any inscription, especially since inscribed votive reliefs were commonly found in mithraea, one purpose that can be eliminated with confidence is that the relief was used as a votive object within a mithraeum. Of course, the dedicator may have inscribed cult furniture, stone altars, and reliefs with precautionary purposes or wishes.¹⁰ Richard Gordon sees the dedicatory inscription as necessary within a group, such as a cult community, since it validates the individual's piety among his fellow worshipers. Within a more private context, however, the need for an inscription vanishes.¹¹ Therefore, it is plausible that this relief could have been used for personal devotion.

Before arguing this point, another type of mithraeum may be examined. Initially, during its heyday in the second and third centuries CE, the cult was not popular among members of the equestrian or senatorial ranks. This was partially because they did not wish to associate with the lower classes who participated in the mysteries, but also because these aristocrats tended to be more traditional in their religious choices, preferring the state cults of their ancestors.

However, Alison Griffith notes that, in the fourth century, adherents from the senatorial class would sometimes construct a private mithraeum in or on the grounds of their homes in Rome.¹² These domestic mithraea would have been used by the men of the senator's household, such as sons, servants, and perhaps even clients. On contemporary inscriptions, the senators mentioned as adherents are all named as *pater* or even *pater patrum*.¹³ In these cases, mithraea were a family affair, confirming the patriarch's place at the top of his domestic hierarchy. Multiple senators would not have participated in the same cell because that would have undermined their individual authority. During the fourth century, paganism and the old ways were being gradually replaced by a burgeoning Christian empire. These men were faced with an increasing loss of both power and, with it, their traditions. The grade structure of Mithraism allowed them to continue, at least in their own small circles, a modified form of ancient Roman customs.¹⁴

In general, these domestic mithraea were reduced in scale from standard mithraea, since there seems to have been no set requirement regarding size, and smaller dimensions would have been more practical in a private home, especially within the urban limits of Rome itself. Whereas standard mithraea had permanent stone dining couches, domestic mithraea would have been more likely to have moveable decorations and smaller fixtures since no stone couches and little decoration have been found within them.¹⁵ Private mithraea were more akin to *sacella*, a type of domestic shrine that has been found at Pompeii and other locations. These

Roman Society," 97. See also Porphyry *De Antro* 6.

⁸ Beck, *Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 21.

⁹ M.J. Vermaseren, *Die Orientalischen Religionen im Römerreich* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 99.

¹⁰ Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society," 98-99.

¹¹ Richard Gordon "Small and Miniature Reproductions of the Mithraic Icon," in *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, ed. Marleen Martens and Guy De Boe (Brussels: Het Torenke, 2004), 264.

¹² Three such mithraea are the Via Giovanni Lanza mithraeum, the mithraeum of Nummi Albini, and that of Alfenius Ceionius Iulianus Kamenius. See M.J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), CIMRM 360, 395, 516. For more on these mithraea see also Alison Griffith, "Mithraism in Private and Public Lives of the 4th-c. Senators in Rome," *Electronic Journal of Mithraic Studies* 1 (2000): 2-6.

¹³ These inscriptions come from what was once a temple to the Magna Mater. It was thought to have possibly housed a small Mithraic shrine. Only inscriptions remain and the exact site is unknown. The inscriptions date to between 305-390 CE. See Griffith, "Mithraism in Private," 2, 8; and Jonas Bjørnebye, "*Hic locus est felix, sanctus, piusque benignus*": The Cult of Mithras in Fourth Century Rome" (PhD diss., University of Bergen, 2007), 70.

¹⁴ Griffith, "Mithraism in Private," 16-27. The last known reference to Mithras is on the epitaph of Kamenius from 385 CE. One pertinent example of the senatorial struggle with the loss of their pagan values is found in the third *relatione* of Symmachus from 384 CE, who wrote to Valentinian II requesting the return of the statue of Victory to the senate after its removal by the Emperor Gratian. For more on this see R.H. Barrow, *Prefect and Emperor: The Relationes of Symmachus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

¹⁵ Bjørnebye, "*Hic locus est*," 67-68. An exception is the Gallo-Roman villa mithraeum in Switzerland. The building is large with a main cult area of about 30 x 30 feet. See Thierry Luginbühl, et al., "Le Mithraeum de la Villa d'Orbe-Boscéaz," in *Roman Mithraism* (see note 11), 109-133.

were separate rooms reserved for worship of specific deities.¹⁶ Yet, there are so many small-scale tauroctonies that it seems impossible that they all came from private mithraea. Richard Gordon is one of the few scholars to address this problem, defining “small finds” as “archaeological finds whose information-potential is easily overlooked.”¹⁷ Gordon examines the reliefs compiled by M.J. Vermaseren in his 1960 *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriae* (CIMRM).¹⁸ Of the two hundred and fourteen reliefs in this volume that are complete enough to study, Gordon places fifteen percent into the “small” category.¹⁹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art plaque fits into this group as well.

Gordon sees these smaller-scale objects as far too common to be ignored and views the miniaturization of the Mithraic icon as the natural consequence of its privatization. Although he warns that it cannot be shown decisively that tauroctonies were used as personal icons in domestic settings, it is a sound possibility. In the *Corpus*, the only tauroctony proven to be from a domestic setting is from the Via Giovanni Lanza mithraeum.²⁰ After comparing these small-scale reliefs to the minimum size necessary to be used in an average mithraeum, Gordon concludes that the fifteen percent could have been used for private devotion.²¹

The nature of these smaller objects may have encouraged meditation and reflection to a greater degree than the larger items due to the necessity for the viewer to observe them at a closer range. Gordon adds that these small finds reveal that the mithraeum was not the single form of the cult that existed, as was previously thought, and that home worship may well have been quite common and may account on some level for the cult’s prevalence over such a large area.²²

The tradition of domestic worship was a part of everyday life in the Greco-Roman world: each family offered daily sacrifice to household deities known as Lares and Penates. By offering small portions of daily meals to the gods, the

worshippers believed that the gods would ensure the protection and continuation of the family name.²³ Those who could afford them had domestic shrines dedicated to these household deities along with other gods of personal choice. The domestic mithraeum found on the Via Giovanni Lanza was a separate room, but the family also had a large traditional domestic shrine, or lararium, right outside the door leading to the mithraeum.²⁴ Being a devotee of Mithras did not preclude the worship of other gods.

In the ancient world, representations of deities were necessary for their proper worship: people believed that cult statues in temples were embodied by their respective gods. These statues were synonymous with the deity itself.²⁵ In a domestic context, household gods could take the form of wall paintings or three-dimensional objects; therefore, if an individual wished to worship Mithras outside of a mystery cult, a personal icon such as a painting, statuette or a small relief would have been requisite.

Due to the pervasiveness of these smaller tauroctonies, it should be noted that Franz Cumont in 1902 also believed that reliefs of this size could have been used, not only in the mithraeum, but also in the home.²⁶ Cumont suggested that these pieces were mass-produced by workshops because of a consumer demand for them. Although, in general, craftsmen would work when commissioned, some would have allowed stock to build up in cases of popular items.²⁷ If private devotion were a religious choice, surely there were inexpensive items readily available as well as finer pieces such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art plaque.

It is apparent that two potential locations for cult objects are the home and the mithraeum, but may there have been other possibilities? Epigraphic evidence shows that soldiers were devotees of Mithras, although the exact numbers may not be as impressive as usually implied.²⁸ It is unlikely that these men would opt not to practice their religion if their

¹⁶ George K. Boyce, *Corpus of the Lararia of Pompeii* (Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1937), 18.

¹⁷ Gordon, “Small and Miniature Reproductions,” 259.

¹⁸ Though this *corpus* is out of date, it is still the most complete catalogue. In personal correspondence with the author on March 13, 2010, Richard Gordon noted that an updated volume is anticipated in about three years.

¹⁹ Gordon “Small and Miniature Reproductions,” 264-6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 264; CIMRM 357.

²¹ Gordon, “Small and Miniature Reproductions,” 266. Gordon’s statistics consider only reliefs and do not address the various Mithraic statuettes found throughout the empire or tauroctonies that were not included in Vermaseren’s *Corpus*.

²² *Ibid.*, 263, 266, 278.

²³ For further information on domestic cults see D.G. Orr, “Roman Domestic Religion: The Evidence of Household Shrines,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. 2, no. 16, pt. 2 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1978), 1662-1570.

²⁴ For more information about the mithraeum and lararium see S. Ensoli Vittozzi, “Le sculture del ‘larario’ di S. Martino ai Monti: Un contesto recuperate,” *Bulletino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale in Roma* 95 (1993): 221-43; J. Calzini Gysens, “Mithra, Spelaum (Via G. Lanza 128; Reg. V),” in *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, ed. E.M. Steinby (Rome: Quasar, 1993), 3:260-1. The mithraeum was a lower room and outside the door leading to it was found a lararium with a statue of Isis-Fortuna and statuettes of Serapis, Jupiter, Venus, Mars, Hercules and Hekate, etc.

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of Roman viewing see Jas Elsner, *Roman Eyes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

²⁶ Franz Cumont, *Les Mystères de Mithras* (Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1902), 180-1; Beck, *Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 21.

²⁷ S.M. Treggiari, “Urban Labour in Rome: *Mercennarii* and *Tabernarii*,” in *Non-Slave Labour in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1980), 55.

²⁸ Yann Le Bohec, *The Imperial Roman Army* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994), 250. Although we do have considerable epigraphic evidence for Mithraism (versus the Egyptian cults, for instance) being practiced by the army, it seems that these devotees are only repre-

legion were moving from camp to camp. In the impermanent situations of a campaign or other travel, there would have been no mithraeum available.

Though somewhat heavy, the Metropolitan Museum of Art plaque would have been ideal for transport. It would have been less likely to chip than stone, and unlike the few other existing bronze plaques which are extremely thin, it would have been able to withstand the perils of travel.²⁹

Two tauroctonies found in Rome but made in the Danube region appear to support this theory. The first is stylistically attributed to Moesia Superior, but was found in the Shrine of Jupiter Dolichenus on the Aventine.³⁰ Mithras is in the act of stabbing the bull with his two torchbearers to either side. He looks out at the viewer, which is common for tauroctonies from the region. The other, attributed to Dacia, has only the remains of the torchbearers and some auxiliary scenes along the top.³¹ Its significance lies in its find spot — in the barracks of elite soldiers in Rome. It is reasonable to assume that a piece of property such as this could have been carried by its owner (or owners) over great distances and then used by him and other adherents until an actual mithraeum could be built in the new location. Additionally, it is possible that in some cases a mithraeum may never have been built, if there were not enough members to fill the grade requirements.³²

Even if this were not the function of the Metropolitan Museum of Art plaque, there is no reason to suppose the relief could only have served as a secondary piece of ornamentation within a mithraeum. It could even have had various uses over its lifespan. This is proven by other examples such as at the Dura Europos mithraeum where stone reliefs

from previous periods were maintained even after they no longer served as the main cult tauroctony.³³

Owing to its value as a cast bronze and because of its importance as a devotional object, the owner would undoubtedly have treasured it, traveled with it, and meditated with it wherever life took him. Once his travels were completed or he arrived in a more permanent situation, the plaque could have been added to the cult objects of a Mithraic community.

If, however, the piece was used in a mithraeum from the beginning, it seems more likely that it functioned as an object of secondary ornamentation in a typical mithraeum or as a cult icon in a private domestic mithraeum. Yet, the lack of inscription implies that the most probable function of the relief was that it was an object of private devotion: domestic or portable or both. One may speculate that it could have been intended to travel. The holes may have been present from its inception, although they also might have been added once the plaque and its owner found a permanent home.

The existence of objects of this kind clearly implies that there may have been more than one way to worship Mithras: in a congregation with grades, in smaller groups, or even alone. These possibilities break with the earlier conviction that Mithras was only worshipped in a mithraeum and with the proper grade structure. Due to the new interest in and study of other smaller Mithraic objects, there are potential solutions to the mystery of its function that would not have been considered ten or fifteen years ago. The Metropolitan Museum of Art tauroctony is an ideal piece for exploring new hypotheses.

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sentative of a fraction of the enlisted men and that the traditional Greco-Roman deities were more popular. It is also impossible to determine the number of simple soldiers who may or may not have practiced Mithraism since the majority of the inscriptions come from low officers.

²⁹ For examples of other bronze tauroctonies refer to CIMRM 1216 and 1727.

³⁰ CIMRM 469; Gordon, "Small and Miniature Reproductions," 265; M. Hörig and E. Schwertheim, *Corpus Cultis Iovis Dolicheni* (Leiden:

E.J. Brill, 1987), 233.

³¹ Gordon, "Small and Miniature Reproductions," 265; E. Lissi Caronna, *Il mitreo dei Castra Peregrinorum* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 36-37.

³² Gordon "Small and Miniature Reproductions," 264-5.

³³ Susan Downey, "Syrian Images of Mithras Tauroctonos," in *Études mithriaques*, ed. Duchesne Guillemin Jacques (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 136-7; Gordon, "Small and Miniature Reproductions," 260n16.



Figure 1. Plaque of Mithras slaying the bull, mid-2nd to early 3rd century CE, mid-Imperial, Antonine or Severan Roman, bronze, 14 x 11 5/8 x 1 3/4 inches (35.6 x 29.5 x 4.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1997 (1997.145.3) © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, New York, New York.