
THE ROMAN CULT OF MITHRAS

The God and his Mysteries

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CHAPTER 8

The sacred narrative

The story of Mithras' saving action barely finds mention in any literary source. To reconstruct it, therefore, we must rely mainly upon the numerous details of the cult-images. In the Rhine- and Danubian provinces especially, they constitute regular 'picture-books', though we perforce thumb through them with more curiosity than comprehension. We also cannot now reconstruct a satisfactory chronological succession of the god's exploits. I therefore propose to present them in a sequence that I have chosen myself, within the framework offered on the one hand by the birth of Mithras, and on the other by the high point of his achievement, the slaying of the bull.

ROCK-BIRTH

The sequence of images from the mythical account of Mithras' life and exploits begins, so far as we can make out, with the god's birth. The literary sources here are few but unmistakable: Mithras was known as the rock-born god.⁷⁷ The inscriptions confirm this nomenclature: one even reads: *D(eo) O(mnipotenti) S(oli) Invi(cto), Deo Genitori, r(upe) n(ato)*, 'To the almighty God Sun invincible, generative god, born from the rock'.⁷⁸ Mithras is here invoked as the all-powerful, invincible sun-god, as creator-god, and as rock-born.

An unidentified writer of the second century AD, for convenience termed Pseudo-Plutarch, relates the following story (*De fluviis* 23.4). Mithras spilled his seed onto a rock, and the stone gave birth to a son, named Diorphos, who, worsted and killed in a duel by Ares, was turned into the mountain of the same name not far from the Armenian river Araxes. Here we have a version of the rock-birth combined in folk-loric manner with Greek myth and given a bit of local colour.

Mithras also appears in the archaeological record as the rock-born god. Many images represent the god growing out of a rock with both arms raised

aloft. This symbolism is particularly striking at Rayanov Grich (Croatia), because the representation of the rock-birth there is carved from the living rock (V 1852). After the bull-slaying, the rock-birth is the most frequently represented event of the myth, either as a detail on reliefs or, quite commonly, as a free-standing image. This fact confirms the significance of the rock-birth for the individual worshipper: it is the fundamental precondition for all the subsequent exploits, and thus the warrant of salvation. For the *petra genetrix*, the fecund rock, whose image was accorded particular reverence in mithraea, had given life to Mithras.

Just this reverence for the god's birth is shown by the Mithraist who carefully turned an early imperial coin into a medallion celebrating the rock-birth. Perhaps in connection with Augustus' legislation on morals, the Roman *triumvir monetalis* Turpilianus in c.18 BC had the unchaste Vestal Tarpeia (Propert. 4.4) represented on a silver denarius (fig. 21). The illustration shows her, arms aloft, being pressed to death by the Sabine shields (cf. Livy 1.11.5–9). In the second or third century AD, a coin of this type caught the imagination of a Mithraist from Verulamium in Britain (St Albans). It then took only a few changes to turn the denarius into a memento of Mithras' rock-birth (fig. 22).



21. Silver denarius of P. Petronius Turpilianus, IIIvir monetalis (c.18 BC); rev. showing Tarpeia crushed by the Sabine shields: cf. CRBM 1: 6, nos. 29–31; RICG 1: 2, no. 8 (mint of Rome). In the early history of Rome, Tarpeia betrayed the Capitol to the Sabines, and for her pains was pressed to death by their shields.



22. Verulamium/St Albans: rev. of reworked denarius of the same type found beneath the wall of Building IV.1 (second half of second cent. AD, V 827). The moneyer's name and the female features have been erased. In place of the obv. type, a new inscription in Greek was expertly cut: Μίθρας Ὠρομάσδης Φρήν: RIB II.1,1 no. 2408.2 (see Henig, RRB, 189 fig. 91). The names of the Persian high god, represented as a winged solar disk, and the Demotic Egyptian name of the sun-god, Prē, are here linked with Mithras.

The most common representation of the birth shows Mithras naked, his sole clothing the phrygian cap; and wielding a torch and a dagger (figs 25, 30, 32). His most important exploits are thus adumbrated already at his birth. With his torch he brings light: he is *genitor luminis*, creator of light (V 1676), and, as sun-god, himself also that light. With the aid of the dagger he creates life, by killing the bull. Very occasionally, as on a relief from Colonia Agrippina (Cologne) in Germania Inferior, only the latter is emphasised (fig. 23). We cannot tell for certain whether an unusual monument from Vetren (Bulgaria) also represents this adumbration of the bull-slaying, or is simply clinging to familiar models: both the shape and the manner of the relief are closely similar to those of other Mithraic reliefs of the eastern Danubian area. At the top, right and left, are the busts of Sol and Luna, with Cautes and Cautopates below them; but in the centre, where the bull-slaying normally is, we find the Rock-birth.⁷⁹



23. Colonia Agrippina/Cologne: Rock-birth from Mithraeum II, found in 1969. In this instance, most unusually, Mithras holds a bunch of wheat-ears in his l. hand, rather than a torch.

The rock from which Mithras is born symbolises the kosmos just as does the cave, both the mythical cave, where Mithras will slay the bull, and the mithraeum-cave, where the rituals take place and the cult-myth is reproduced through the reliefs. For that reason, Mithras is represented inside a temple on the Rock-birth, *p(etram) genetricem*, which Senilius Carantinus, who came from the area around modern Metz, *c(ivis) Mediom(atricus)*, dedicated *Deo In(victo) Mi(thrae)* at Nida (V 1127, fig. 24; see also p. 96).



24. Nida/Heddernheim: votive from Mithraeum III. The 'roof' is cut to represent tiles; the acroteria probably represented wind-gods (fig. 20). This key monument labels the eagle-thunderbolt-orb group on the lateral face shown as *Caelum*, Heaven (cf. fig. 29), and the reclining deity with vase, on the opposite face, as *Oceanus*.

Light comes from the firmament, Mithras is the god of light, the new light which bursts forth each morning from the vault of heaven behind the mountains, and whose birthday is celebrated on 25 December. A late antique Syriac commentator describes this festival, and correctly observes that it later developed into the birthday of Christ:

It was in fact customary among the pagans to celebrate the festival of the Sun's birthday on 25th December and to light bonfires in honour of the day. They even used to invite the Christian population to these rites. But when the teachers of the Church realised that Christians were allowing themselves to take part, they decided to observe the Feast of the true Birth on the same day.⁸⁰

It may be that the Mithraists also celebrated the birthday of their god in public in a similar manner.

Normally, just Mithras' naked torso appears in representations of his birth, but occasionally he is shown more or less entire, as, for example, on a relief from Rome (fig. 25), where, with his thighs pressed together, he appears to be being impelled upward out of the rock as though by some magical force (V 353).



25. Nr Piazza Dante, Rome: rock-birth relief found with four other pieces in the Mithraeum of Primus. All had been carefully concealed when the Mithraeum ceased to be used (see also figs 44, 65). Mithras emerging from the rock evokes a long Graeco-Roman iconographic tradition of earth-born deities: C. Bérard, *Anodoi* (Neuchâtel, 1974).

The multi-layered quality of Mithraic symbolism, which I have already stressed, reappears in the case of the rock: represented and understood not only as the kosmos but also as the earth, on many images it is encircled by a serpent (p. 100), a creature associated with the earth (figs 26, 28). Another exploit of Mithras known to us is the so-called water-miracle or miracle of the rock (pp. 71–4). This is sometimes adumbrated in representations of the rock-birth: one at Romula in Dacia (Reșca, Romania) served as a water-spout (V 2170, fig. 27; see also p. 72). Among the elementary necessities – which thus also symbolised life – promised and bestowed by Mithras is the water that he caused to flow from the rock. Just as the god himself gives life, so too does the rock: the upper rim of the rock is decorated with flowers on a relief from Bingium (Bingen) in Germania Superior (V 1240, fig. 28).



26. Poetovio/Ptuj: rock-birth statue from *Mithraeum I* (V 1492). The base bears a dedication *Naturae dei*, 'To the god's birth'. This is an uncommon sense of *natura*, perhaps translated from the Greek *genesis* (cf. V 793, *Emerita, Lusitania: aram genesis invicti Mithrae*).



27. Romula/Reșca, Romania: rock-birth statue. The hole is 9 cm in diameter.



28. Bingium/Bingen: rock-birth relief. Euboulus describes Zoroaster's first cave in Persia, dedicated to Mithras, as 'flower-strewn and furnished with springs' (ap. Porphyry, *De antr. nymph.* 6) (see also fig. 45).

The significance of the rock-birth for the later events of the myth is emphasised by the fact that on several monuments Mithras is attended at his birth by the most important of the subsidiary figures that occur regularly on the bull-slaying reliefs. I have already mentioned the serpent; the dog, serpent and raven appear on an important relief from Augusta Treverorum (Trier) in Gallia Belgica (V 985, fig. 29; see also p. 84). The two



29. Altbachtal, Augusta Treverorum/Trier: rock-birth relief within an aedicola. The infant god is presented proleptically as 'maker of everything, and Father' (Euboulus, see fig. 28), and supports, or turns, the half-zodiac containing the spring and summer signs, Aries to Virgo. In the spandrels are the wind-gods (cf. fig. 20).

torch-bearers are also often to be found at the rock-birth. Sometimes they just stand there (fig. 59), but sometimes they help Mithras – on a relief from Poetovio, it looks as though they were carefully lifting him out of the rock (V 1593, fig. 30; see p. 70). There are, incidentally, no grounds for calling these two figures ‘shepherds’, in the wake of the Christian nativity story.⁸¹



30. Poetovio/Ptuj: rock-birth relief from Mithraeum III (mid-third cen.). Saturnus is being crowned by Victoria.

If the torch-bearers might attend Mithras’ birth, and even assist at it, then what of their ‘birth’ too? That thought may have produced the representation of a triple tree-birth in the mithraeum at Dieburg, Germania Superior (fig. 31). On the other hand, one may well wonder what Mithras’ head in a tree might signify.

31. Dieburg: panel from r. jamb of the complex relief (V 1247. 10): tree with three branches each ending in a head in a phrygian cap. The only close parallel occurs on the complex relief from Rückingen (V 1137. 3b), though elsewhere a single bust emerges from a tree (e.g. figs. 16, 33, cf. V 1510. 2). In two other scenes, Mithras is approaching a tree, looking up (V 1292. 2; 1958. 2). The motifs at Dieburg and Rückingen may therefore represent the ‘real’ or esoteric meaning (whatever that was claimed to be) of an element of the cult myth.



There sometimes occurs on the Rock-birth a reclining divinity who is to all appearances fast asleep (figs 16, 30). His head is generally covered, and is pillowed on his arm. In the corpus of Graeco-Roman myth there were many traditions concerning Saturn sleeping and dreaming, a deity from early times often equated with the Greek Kronos. In his dreams, the god pondered the world-order of the future. We may guess that, for Mithraists, the birth of their god was the most important of these prophetic dreams.

I have mentioned several times that the cult of Mithras was open to a variety of contemporary religious and philosophical influences. Whereas in relation to the Bull-slaying we are unable to grasp the significance of major differences in treatment, this is not the case with many of the by-scenes, in particular the Rock-birth.

Although Mithras is usually represented as a youth when he rises out of the rock, the relief from Augusta Treverorum (Trier), which I have already mentioned (p. 68, fig. 29), shows him as a child. In other words, Mithras manifests his nature and capacities from the very first moment of his existence: already at birth, as a dedication at Rome declares, he is ruler of the world, *kosmokrator*.⁸² With one hand he revolves or supports the planetary circle that spans the *kosmos*, six of whose signs are represented (p. 84). In the other hand, he holds the world-globe, which, like the four wind-gods in the corners, represents the four cardinal directions of the universe. In this version of the rock-birth, the entire cosmic order is set up already. Analogous compositions are much more common in relation to the bull-slaying (pp. 87–90).

We can discern the influence of Orphic speculation in a Greek inscription from one of the numerous *mithraea* in Rome, on a statue-base dedicated Διὶ Ἡλίῳ Μίθρα Φάνητι, that is to *Deus Sol Mithras Phanes*.⁸³ Phanes is the embodiment of unlimited light, an Orphic deity who emerged from the cosmic egg. There is also literary evidence for the syncretism of Mithras with Phanes.⁸⁴ In this community, therefore, Mithras' identification with the sun-god (p. 146) grounded an allusion to the Orphic-Platonic ideas current among the intellectual élites. Mithras-Phanes is also known to us in iconographic form: a relief from Vercovicium (Housesteads) on Hadrian's Wall shows Mithras emerging from the cosmic egg, which is represented both as such and by the shape of the zodiacal ring (fig. 32, cf. fig. 123).⁸⁵

Both complex and straightforward notions thus find a place next to one another in the cult-myths about Mithras' birth, and are partially interwoven – a point that could be made about any ancient cult. In the case of the birth, some elements are invariable, but variants, regional or local idiosyncrasies, are admissible as well. On a number of reliefs the rock is made to resemble an ovoid pine-cone. This thought was pursued further, for example, at Nida,

where Mithras, of whom only the bust is visible, is spying out from – that is, probably, being born out of – what may be a pine-tree (fig. 33, cf. fig. 31).

The choice of ideas that were current in a Mithraic congregation depended in many ways upon its priests at any given time. Beyond that, the dedicator of a relief or inscription, possibly even the sculptor, could contribute his own ideas or pick up stimuli from elsewhere. This is the case not merely with the rock-birth but for all aspects of the cult-myth.



32. Vercovicium/Housesteads: Rock-birth with Mithras as Phanes (V 860), perhaps the equivalent of the Mithras Saecularis in the same mithraeum (V 863–4 = RIB 1599–1600). The zodiacal sequence begins with Aquarius (bottom l.) and ends with Capricorn (r.).
 33. Nida/Heddernheim: panel from the complex relief from Mithraeum I (V 1083. 1), Mithras ?being born from a tree. At Dura-Europos the figure is represented as a little pink child (V 45). In the Mithraeum at Emerita (Spain), a lion emerges from an acanthus-leaf (V 791). Images such as these seem to allude to an iconographic stereotype known from Anatolia and Syria: E. Will, *Le relief cultuel* (Rome-Paris, 1955), 208.

WATER-MIRACLE

The theme of the water-miracle is elaborated mainly in the Rhine-Danube area. Mithras is usually represented sitting on a stone and aiming a flexed bow at a rockface, in front of which there kneels a figure. Another figure sometimes grasps Mithras' knees in supplication, or stands behind him with