

The Amuletic Design of the Mithraic Bull-Wounding Scene*

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ABSTRACT

Recent research reveals that in the so-called Mithraic tauroctony, the god is, in fact, wounding a bull, not killing it. I argue that the scene combines the overall design of evil-eye amulets with the pose of the goddess Nike performing a military sphagion and I suggest that the scene must have been understood by its creator and by some viewers, at least, to offer protective power in this world, as well as salvific assurance about the next, a dual focus that seems to have been especially strong in Mithraism.

Keywords: Mithras; amulet; evil eye; tauroctony; *sphagion*; Nike; bull; scorpion; snake; dog

I INTRODUCTION

The scene of Mithras kneeling on the back of a bull and driving the blade of his sword halfway into its shoulder has iconic status.¹ A simple example of the type is the relief from the Capitoline illustrated in Fig. 1, which includes the usual trio of animals (scorpion, snake and dog) underneath the bull and five other figures observing the scene from the sidelines: the raven on the end of Mithras' cloak, the flanking torchbearers, and in the upper corners Sol and Luna.²

Monumental versions of these scenes, sometimes measuring nearly 2 m square as the Nedderheim relief in Fig. 2,³ were often painted or carved in relief at the far end of *mithraea*; they usually keep the central scene intact, but place additional witnesses in the

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¹ See, e.g., R. Gordon, 'Authority, salvation and mystery in the mysteries of Mithras', in J. Huskinson, M. Beard and J. Reynolds (eds), *Image and Mystery in the Roman World* (1988), 45–80, at 49; S. R. Zwirn, 'The intention of biographical narration on Mithraic cult images', *Word and Image* 5 (1989), 2–18, at 2; and J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (1995), 211–12. The following abbreviations are used throughout: CIMRM = M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis mithriacae* (1956–60), 2 vols; LIMC = *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*; SGG = A. Mastrocinque (ed.), *Sylloge gemmarum gnosticarum*, Bollettino di Numismatica Monografia 8.2.1 and 2 (2003 and 2008), 2 vols; SMA = C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series 4 (1950); TMM = F. Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* (1896–99), 2 vols.

² H 56 cm, W 86 cm. Fig. 1 is after TMM 2.195, no. 7, fig. 19 = CIMRM 417.

³ H 1.8 m, W 1.76 m. Fig. 2 is after TMM 2 after p. 364 = CIMRM 1083.



FIG. 1. A relief from the Capitoline Museum. (Drawing after TMM 2.195, no. 7, fig. 19)

lower corners and narrative scenes at the sides and along the top separated, as here, in boxes or by trees, while a zodiac arches over the head of the god.

Despite its popularity during the Roman imperial period, the Mithraic icon continues to puzzle modern scholars. Fifty years ago they explained it as a divine model for the bull sacrifices that were thought to be performed by worshippers, but better archaeology and the discovery of many more *mithraea* have revealed that worshippers ate roosters, piglets, sheep and many other smaller animals in Mithraic sanctuaries, but not bulls.⁴ In recent years, moreover, scholars have stressed that some of the standard details in the scene, for example, the scorpion attacking the testicles of the bull or the wheat sprouting from its tail, clearly demand some kind of symbolic, rather than literal, interpretation; an approach that has found increasing support in the recent ‘astrological turn’ in Mithraic studies, which focuses on the most elaborate monuments, like the one in Fig. 2, where the added stars and zodiac suggest more complex interpretations of the central scene, for example, that the scorpion and the bull refer to the zodiac signs Scorpio and Taurus, or that the entire scene can be read as some kind of star map.⁵ Others assume that the two-person vignettes in the additional narrative scenes on the periphery — some of which include Mithras dragging a bull or reclining on a bull-skin at a feast with Sol — comprise a connected biography or myth about Mithras in which the stabbing of the bull serves as his crowning heroic achievement.⁶ A third approach

⁴ The small dimensions, narrow entrances and underground locations of most *mithraea* would, in fact, have also prevented the sacrifice of such a large animal; see Elsner, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 212 n. 44, and R. Gordon, ‘Small and miniature reproductions of the Mithraic icon: reliefs, pottery, ornaments and gems’, in M. Martens and G. de Boe (eds), *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds* (2004), 259–83, at 259.

⁵ See e.g. R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (2006), 190–239, who reviews most of the older scholarship. R. Gordon, ‘Panelled complications’, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 3 (1980), 200–27, sees an elaborate ‘sacred geography’ in the communal versions that alludes to the planets, the stars and the seasons and seems based on the idea that the Mithraic cave was a model for the whole cosmos.

⁶ Zwirn, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 8–10, and M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries*, trans. R.



FIG. 2. The Nedderheim Relief. (*Drawing after TMM 2, after p. 364*)

suggests that the image has cosmogonic meaning: that by killing the bull Mithras releases into the universe the bull's creative force, a force illustrated by the ears of wheat that sometimes sprout from its tail.⁷

All of these different approaches — old and new, literal and symbolic — agree, however, on one central fact: Mithras is depicted in the act of killing or sacrificing the bull. Indeed, scholars by convention call this scene a tauroctony ('bull-slaying scene'), a nice-sounding Greek noun that appears nowhere in Mithraic inscriptions or literary testimonia and in fact nowhere in ancient Greek.⁸ There is, moreover, a major problem with understanding

Gordon (2001), 74–9, give a good review of this approach. For the feasting scene, see Claus, *ibid.*, 110–11, and Appendix A to this article.

⁷ Summarized with bibliography by Claus, *op. cit.* (n. 6), 79–85.

⁸ LSJ offer only the verb ταυροκτονέω ('to kill a bull') and the adjective ταυροκτόνος ('bull-slaying'), both of which are poetic words that show up in Aeschylus and Sophocles and refer to the standard sacrificial slaughter of bulls. The word ταυροβόλιον, on the other hand, offers a good contrast, as it and related words show up frequently in both Greek and Latin inscriptions connected with the worship of the Magna Mater and clearly refer to the ritual killing of a bull by stabbing it in the chest or ribs with a large spear.

the scene as a sacrifice: in an article published in 2009, Glenn Palmer, after much research on the anatomy of the bull, concluded that a downward stroke into the shoulder of a bull would not be fatal, at least not in the short run.⁹ And since this vertical stroke is repeated in 80 per cent of the extant images,¹⁰ it seems that Mithras is, in fact, caught in the act of wounding a bull, not killing it.¹¹

I begin, then, with the inconvenient fact that the central design does not depict a sacrifice, real or symbolic. Instead, drawing on parallels from contemporary amulets used against the evil eye, I offer a new reading of the central Mithraic icon as a design that combines the overall structure of these amulets with the popular scene of the goddess Nike performing a special military ritual known as the *sphagion*. My argument makes no assumptions about or reconstructions of any underlying Mithraic beliefs or mythology and instead depends entirely (and perhaps naively) on a formal and comparative analysis of the images. Along the way I offer explanations of some of the most puzzling details: (i) that Mithras draws back the neck of the bull, but does not slit its throat; (ii) that he never looks at the bull; and (iii) that the scorpion attacks the bull with its annoying pincers, rather than its deadly tail. I conclude by suggesting that this iconic scene must have been understood by its creator and by some viewers, at least, to offer protective power in this world, as well as salvific assurance about the next — a dual focus that was common to most mystery cults, but which seems to have been especially strong in Mithraism.¹²

This study is divided into three parts. In the first, I focus on the smaller and often ignored household and personal versions of the Mithraic icon in order to show that some of these images, at least, were probably used as amulets. In the second, I examine a series of amulets designed to ward off the evil eye and argue that the overall design of these amulets — with animals attacking the eye from below and man-made weapons from above — offers a neglected but important parallel for the formal arrangement of the figures in the central Mithraic scene. And in the third section, I contrast the icon with similar images of the goddess Nike attempting to kill a bull, a scene which — all scholars agree — was the iconographic source of Mithras' posture on the back of the bull. By focusing on some important dissimilarities between the two scenes, I show how the creator of the icon was forced to make crucial changes in the Nike model in order to fit it into the design borrowed from the evil-eye amulets. I conclude by suggesting that, although in the largest communal monuments there were many accretions around the periphery of the central image, each with its corresponding mythical, astrological or

⁹ G. Palmer, 'Why the shoulder?: A study of the placement of the wound in the Mithraic tauroctony', in G. Casadio and P. A. Johnston (eds), *Mystic Cults in Magna Graeca* (2009), 314–23, at 314–16 with fig. 17.2, shows how the bull's shoulder blade blocks any access from the shoulder region to the heart and major blood vessels, and he argues that an attack on the shoulder with a short sword or dagger would more likely enrage the animal than kill it. Palmer connects the shoulder wound with one of the mythological vignettes in the side-scenes, in which Mithras holds the foreleg of a bull as he challenges the authority of Sol, and he argues for Egyptian mythological and astronomical influence (the foreleg = the Little Dipper).

¹⁰ Palmer, *op. cit.* (n. 9), 314.

¹¹ See Appendix A for further arguments against the sacrificial interpretation.

¹² W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (1987), 16–17, discussing the votive inscriptions, stresses the practical benefits that Mithraic worshippers thought they received in this world: 'Mithras is the *deus invictus*, and soldiers, who knew what victory means, were prominent among his followers' (p. 17). This combination of protection in this world and salvation in the next seems to have been a regular feature of mystery religions: see Burkert, *ibid.*, 12–29 for a general discussion; C. A. Faraone discusses evidence dating as early as the late Classical period for this feature of the Samothracian mysteries ('Twisting and turning in the prayer of the Samothracian initiates (Aristophanes *Peace* 276–79)', *Museum Helveticum* 61 (2004), 30–50) and the Orphic ('Mystery cults and incantations: evidence for Orphic charms in Euripides' *Cyclops* 646–48?', *Rheinisches Museum* 151 (2008), 127–42; and 'A Socratic leaf-charm for headache (*Charmides* 155b–157c), Orphic gold leaves and the ancient Greek tradition of leaf amulets', in J. Dijkstra, J. Kroesen and Y. Kuiper (eds), *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity. Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer* (2010), 249–70).

cosmogonical spin, the central scene itself remained relatively unchanged and available as a protective device in the sometimes dangerous lives of the men who worshipped the god.

II THE BULL-WOUNDING SCENE IN MINIATURE

Although the large communal monuments have attracted the most scholarly attention over the years, there are numerous smaller versions. Mithraic icons of such small size are, in fact, often found inserted into the side-walls of *mithraea* as votives. Stylistic analysis reveals, moreover, that these smaller versions sometimes travelled far from the Central European sites of their manufacture to Rome and the East, where they were eventually dedicated in contexts that suggest military personnel: a good example is a rudely worked and badly weathered marble medallion, roughly 4 ins in diameter and of Dacian style, that ended up in a *mithraeum* in Caesarea Maritima in Palestine.¹³ Because it was found in a sanctuary, scholars rightly assume that it was a votive, but it is difficult to explain how a medallion carved in Central Europe ended up in Palestine. Normally, when someone made a vow — for example, a soldier hoping to return alive from an expedition — he would, upon his safe return, commission the work locally, whether it be a small statuette, an altar or a relief like the one from Caesarea. As a result, most votives are produced in local media and in a local style. But this one and a number of others found in Mithraic sanctuaries were made in a place far away, suggesting that their owners carried them along on campaign and eventually dedicated them at the end of their service.

The question then arises: before arriving in Caesarea from Dacia, was this medallion used in private worship? Or was it, in fact, a personal amulet used to protect its owner? Gordon, the one scholar who has studied these smaller icons in detail, suggests, in fact, that they were originally designed for private or domestic worship, but he rightly worries that it is not ‘easy to imagine the kinds of ritual that might have been celebrated within such a small group’.¹⁴ Indeed, the Mithraic mysteries were notoriously restricted to men and celebrated in special underground or sunken dining chambers with no windows. Thus it seems unlikely that they could be performed, for example, in the dining-room of a private house. A beautifully etched bronze brooch from Ostia (Fig. 3) has a diameter similar in size to that of the Caesarean tondo and it is equally difficult to contextualize.¹⁵ Like the other smaller images it presents a simplified scene: the two torchbearers have been replaced by birds, a rooster on the right and a raven on the left, while another raven rests on the tail of the bull. One could argue, of course, that this was an ornament worn by a Mithraic officiant during a secret ceremony, but we cannot, I think, rule out the idea that it might have also been used as an amulet or even worn into battle.

The question of the utility of these smaller images is more easily settled in cases where the scene is accompanied by inscriptions. A prehistoric stone axe-head (a so-called ‘thunderstone’) from Argos, for example, was in Roman times engraved with two scenes (Fig. 4).¹⁶ It is roughly 4 ins tall and 2 ins wide. In the lower half we see the standing figures of Athena and Zeus in a scene reminiscent of a gigantomachy like the one on the Altar of Zeus at Pergamum: the goddess is about to stab a tiny snake-footed ‘giant’ with her spear, while her father looks on holding a sceptre topped by an eagle, his usual

¹³ It is 7.5 cm in diameter. My discussion follows Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 273–5, who illustrates the piece in his fig. 14.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 265–7; the quote is from p. 267.

¹⁵ The photograph in Fig. 3 is used with the permission of the Ashmolean Museum.

¹⁶ *CIMRM* 2353, for which see the discussions of A. Delatte, ‘Études sur la magie grecque III: Amulettes mithriaques’, *Le Musée Belge* 18 (1914), 5–20, at 8–9; and A. Mastrocinque, *Studi sul mitraismo: Il mitraismo e la magia* (1998), 25–7. Fig. 4 is after A. B. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion* 2.1 (1925), 512 fig. 390.



FIG. 3. An etched bronze brooch from Ostia (colour image online). (Photograph used with the permission of the Asmolean Museum)

attribute.¹⁷ In the upper register we find a simplified version of the Mithraic icon: the bull is surrounded by animals, which do not lick its blood, the scorpion seems to be missing, and a bird rests on the bull's extended front leg. The god, moreover, holds his sword over the upraised head of the bull, instead of plunging it into his shoulder. This second scene is encircled by two words inscribed in Greek, *Bakazichuch* and *Papapheiris*, magical names for solar deities that appear often on other amulets.¹⁸ The parallelism between the two scenes on this axe-head is also noteworthy: in both powerful divinities (Mithras, Athena and Zeus) threaten powerful adversaries (a bull and a snake-footed giant). Because this object is unique, it is difficult to say what it was used for, but the parallel scenes of divine triumph, the magical inscriptions and the well-documented use of inscribed thunderstones to protect ancient houses from lightning¹⁹ all suggest that this Argive stone was also used as a protective amulet.

¹⁷ There are, however, some eastern features: Zeus holds a wilted *ankh*-sign in his left hand and Athena holds or supports with her left hand a tall ribbed rhyton. See Delatte, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 8–9, and Mastrocinque, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 26–7.

¹⁸ *Bakazichuch* translates the Egyptian phrase 'son (or "soul") of darkness', even though it is often used, somewhat paradoxically, to describe solar deities, here presumably Mithras; see Delatte, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 10. Mastrocinque, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 26–7, explains the appropriateness of the name 'son of darkness': since in Egypt the sun travels through the underworld every night, it too is associated with darkness. The second word *Papapheiris* has yet to be fully deciphered. Delatte, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 10, and Mastrocinque, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 26–7, review the debate and try to connect it with other solar names of Egyptian orientation, like *Phiri* and *Paphieti*.

¹⁹ C. A. Faraone, 'Inscribed Greek thunderstones as house- and body-amulets in Roman imperial times', *Kernos* 27 (2014) forthcoming, discusses the widespread tradition of using thunderstones (prehistoric axes) to protect houses and people from lightning strikes and gives a detailed analysis of similarly inscribed axe-heads from Ephesus, Pergamum, Smyrna, Thessaly and Herculaneum.

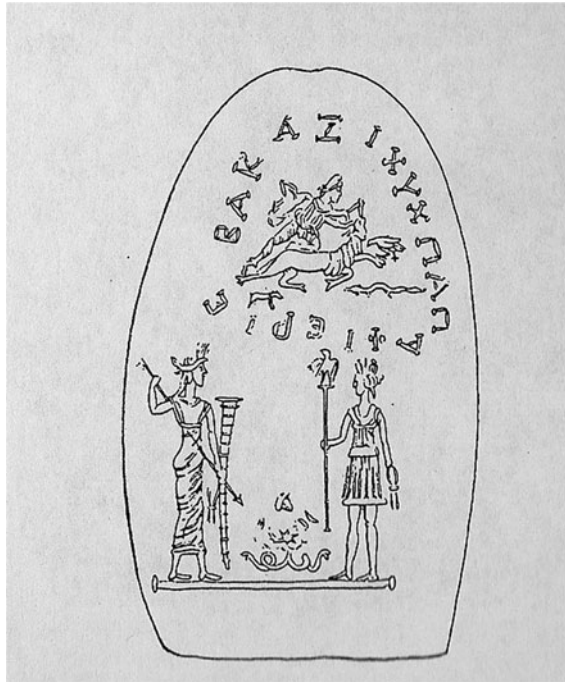


FIG. 4. A prehistoric stone axe-head ('thunderstone') from Argos. (Drawing after Cook (1925), 512 fig. 390)

Gemstones, fitted for finger-rings or pendants, also carry simple versions of the Mithraic scene and seem to have been used as body amulets (see Appendix B for the numbered gems below). On two similar gems (Nos 7 and 11) we find the lower part of the bull surrounded by stars, a dog, a snake and a raven, but the scorpion appears only on No. 11. There are no torchbearers or other internal witnesses. We get a fuller version of the scene on a gem in Florence (No. 2; see Fig. 5), on which two birds, seven stars and various weapons (e.g. thunderbolt, sword, *harpê*, arrow) seem to float over the god and the bull.²⁰ Below we see the dog charging the bull from the right and beneath it a dolphin or fish; there is, moreover, a turtle to the left beneath the bull's tail. Note also how the bull turns its head to look at Mithras, a pose that we never find on the larger versions. On the reverse of this gem we find seven magical words each inscribed in a circle around a star, while a lion walks in profile. A gem from Udine (No. 3) is similar in design, especially with regard to the twisting bull's head and the unorthodox animals below (a dolphin and a turtle). A broken gem (No. 10) in Paris has the Mithraic icon on one side and the magical palindrome *ablanathanalba* on the reverse, a word that appears on many amulets.²¹ Here, too, as on many of these gems, the dog and snake do not lick the blood from the wound: they simply confront the bull.

Until quite recently,²² scholars have generally overlooked these miniature scenes, whose iconography differs from the monumental scenes in three important ways. Of the eighteen

²⁰ SGG vol. 1 no. 256 (= SGD vol. 2 no. Fl 52). Fig. 5 is after A. Maffei, *Gemme antichi figurate* 2 (1707), pl. 217.2.

²¹ Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), 25–7.

²² Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), 25–7; Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4), 275; and J. A. Ezquerro, 'Mithraism and magic', in R. Gordon and F. Marco Simón (eds), *Magical Practice in the Latin West: Papers from the International Conference held at the University of Zaragoza, 30 Sept.–1 Oct. 2005* (2009), 519–49.



FIG. 5. Red jasper gem in Florence. (Drawing after Maffei (1707), pl. 217.2)

extant examples collected in Appendix B: (i) seven show only the god and the animals; (ii) on eight the scorpion is missing; (iii) on eleven the animals abstain from licking the blood; and (iv) eight have magical texts or symbols.²³ There seems, in short, to be some correlation between the use of a simplified and more banal version of the central scene and the appearance of a magical text, but does this mean that only those inscribed with magical texts are amulets?²⁴ Gordon suggests that all these gems were probably used as ‘portable versions of the central cult icon, which initiates could choose to have made either for protection or private devotion’ and that ‘they functioned as an extension of the principle of the small house-relief’.²⁵ In the end, however, he believes that the gems in particular ‘with their idiosyncrasies and deviations from the standard iconic repertoire’ seem to represent various kinds of ‘personal reinterpretation’ of the icon.²⁶

III AMULETS AGAINST THE EVIL EYE

There is, in fact, good evidence that the amuletic use of these smaller Mithraic scenes was the conscious design of its original creator, rather than the subsequent deviance of various

²³ Appendix B Nos 1, 4, 6–7, 11, 15 and 17 show only Mithras and the animal(s). Nos 1–3, 5–6, 12, 15 and 17 lack the scorpion. On Nos 1–3, 6, 9–12, 14 and 16–17 the animals do not lick the blood. Those with magical inscriptions include Nos 1–2, 4–6, 9–10 and 13.

²⁴ Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 4), calls many of these gems ‘amulets’. Mastrocinque, *op. cit.* (n. 16), 25–7, has suggested that all of them (inscribed and uninscribed alike) were magical and that this Mithraic practice goes back to much older Persian traditions. Ezquerro, *op. cit.* (n. 22), argues that the inscribed ones are magical and the rest not.

²⁵ Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 275.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 278.

private owners: the close similarities between the Mithraic icon and a popular series of amulets against the evil eye (*baskania*), which was thought to be the palpable injury of human envy (*phthonos* or *invidia*) that occurred when a jealous person gazed upon a luckier or more beautiful one — a gaze that could bring bad luck, illness and even death.²⁷ The most familiar ancient amulet against the evil eye was an image of the ‘all-suffering eye’ (*ho polupathês ophthalmos*),²⁸ which appears, for example, on the early Byzantine medallion in Fig. 6.²⁹ A stylized eye sits at the centre of the composition surrounded by attackers: heraldic lions from the sides, an ibis, a snake and a scorpion from below, and three daggers from above. The encircling inscription reads: ‘Seal of Solomon, chase away every evil from the one who bears this!’ Some of these amulets show a trident or the club of Herakles hovering above the eye instead of knives.³⁰ On a carnelian gem in Rome we see a similar arrangement: on the sides and bottom a variety of animals — including a dog, a scorpion, some kind of bug or crustacean, and a turtle — while a thunderbolt of Zeus descends from the top.³¹ On a similar chalcedony gem, a scorpion and snake threaten the eye from below, a lion and goat(?) from the sides, and from above a three-pronged thunderbolt and a military sword.³²



FIG. 6. An early Byzantine amulet for the evil eye. (Drawing after Schlumberger (1892), 75–6 no. 1)

²⁷ K. M. D. Dunbabin and M. W. Dickie, ‘*Invidia rumpantur pectora*: the iconography of Phthonos/Invidia in Graeco-Roman art’, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 26 (1983), 7–37.

²⁸ The Greek phrase first appears in ch. 18 of the *Testament of Solomon*, now thought to date to the first or second century A.D. In the text the demon who casts the evil eye (*baskania*) on everyone says that he is prevented from doing so when the ‘all-suffering eye’ is engraved (18.39). For discussion of the passage see S. Giannobile, ‘Inscrizione su un medaglione di Gela’, *JAC* 5 (2002), 189–91, at 179–80.

²⁹ Fig. 6 is after G. Schlumberger, ‘Amulettes byzantines anciens destinés à combattre les maléfiques et malades’, *REG* 5 (1892), 73–93, at 75–6 no. 1. For a recent survey of these Byzantine amulets, see T. Matantséva, ‘Les amulettes byzantines contre le mauvais oeil du Cabinet des Médailles’, *JAC* 37 (1994), 110–21.

³⁰ Schlumberger, *op. cit.* (n. 29), no. 10; J. Engemann, ‘Zur Verbreitung magischer Übelabwehr in der nicht-christlichen und christlichen Spätantike’, *JAC* 18 (1975), 22–48, at 26, discusses the descent over the eye of Zeus’ thunderbolt and Heracles’ club.

³¹ *SGG* 2 no. RoC 4.

³² *SGG* 1 no. 290. A slightly garbled Homeric verse on the back of this gem suggests that another deity was imagined as joining in the attack (*Iliad* 5.291): ‘[Athena directed the missile (βέλος)] to the eye near the nose and pierced the white teeth.’

A similar scene appears in larger dimensions on a roof-tile from the synagogue at Dura-Europos (Fig. 7).³³ Here we can easily make out the two snakes assaulting the sides of the eye, while some kind of beetle approaches from below and three blades or wedges are driven in from above, labelled successively with the vowels *iota*, *alpha* and *omicron*, which spell out the name *Iaô*, the usual Greek way of rendering the name of the Jewish god Jahweh, albeit with the common mistake of *omicron* for *omega*. The animals once again attack from the sides and below, while the god revered in the synagogue propels sharp weapons down from above.

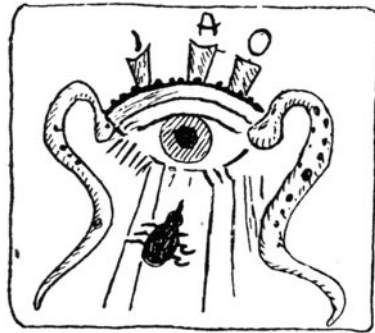


FIG. 7. A roof-tile from the synagogue at Dura-Europos. (Drawing after du Mesnil (1939), fig. 96 no. 1)

A similar cast of characters populates a well-known relief from Britain (Fig. 8) that once sat at the entrance of an important building of the Severan period.³⁴ Here, again, animals threaten the eye from below — from left to right: a leopard or a lion, a snake, a scorpion, a crane and a raven — while two human figures abuse it from above: the one on the left (in a Phrygian cap with his back to the viewer) defecates upon the eyebrow, while another figure dressed in a gladiator's *subligaculum* stabs downwards into it with a trident, while brandishing a short sword in his left hand.³⁵ These two persons appear to exchange glances, but neither looks directly at the gigantic eye below.

Another important place for displaying the all-suffering eye is in floor mosaics near entrance-ways, for example, one found in the vestibule of a Roman house near Antioch-on-the-Orontes (Fig. 9).³⁶ In this version the animals are more numerous and attack from almost every direction; the centipede is a new addition and the dog catches our eye, because its posture and placement on the lower right recall the dog that jumps up at the Mithraic bull.³⁷ Weapons again descend from above and in this case they include a sword as well as a trident.³⁸ On the left a pipe-playing dwarf walks away from the eye, while his giant phallus emerges backwards from between his legs and joins

³³ Fig. 7 is after Comptes du Mesnil du Buisson, *Les peintures de la synagogue de Doura-Europos* (1939), fig. 96 no. 1 = E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (1953), no. 1066.

³⁴ Fig. 8 is after J. Millingen, 'Some observations on an antique bas-relief, on which the evil eye, or fascinum, is represented', *Archaeologia* 19 (1821), 70–4, at 74 pl. 6. The stone is roughly 2 ft square, i.e. as large as some of the Mithraic icons.

³⁵ I give Millingen's description (*ibid.*, 70).

³⁶ Fig. 9 is after D. Levi, 'The evil eye and the lucky hunchback', in R. Stillwell (ed.), *Antioch on-the-Orontes III: The Excavations 1937–39* (1941), 220–32, at pl. 56 no. 121.

³⁷ For similarly placed leaping dogs on other evil-eye amulets, see Engemann, *op. cit.* (n. 30), fig. 2 and pls 11c and 12c–d.

³⁸ The Greek text *καὶ σὺ*, 'the same to you', is common on evil-eye amulets and aims to turn the jealous and destructive glance back upon its owner.

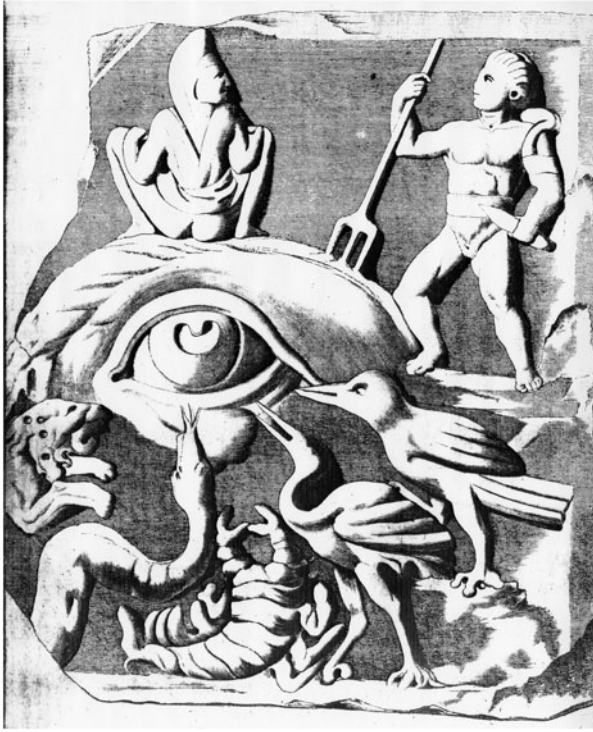


FIG. 8. A relief from the entrance of a Severan building in Britain. (Drawing after Millingen (1821), 74 pl. 6)

in the assault;³⁹ the dwarf, however, has turned his body away and does not look at the scene behind him.

The motif of the all-suffering eye shows up often, then, on both house and body amulets. It is important to note, moreover, that none of these images gives us the impression that the eye is to be killed. This is most obvious in the case of the scorpion, which, as in the Mithraic scenes, almost always approaches the eye headfirst with its lethal tail flattened and pointed away.⁴⁰ The eye, in short, is wounded or harassed from all sides by a frightening array of animals and weapons, but it remains unblinking and unperturbed, much like the Mithraic bull, which usually shows no discomfort at the various attacks against it, despite the blood spurting from its shoulder. These amulets aim, in short, to threaten and confront the eye, but not to destroy it, a fact that underscores a common presumption underlying much apotropaic ritual in the ancient world: danger or sickness can be driven out, surrounded, bound up or buried, but can never be completely destroyed.⁴¹ There is, moreover, a consistent internal logic to the placement of the

³⁹ For other scenes of phalli threatening the eye, see R. B. Bandinelli (ed.), *The Buried City at Leptis Magna* (1966), pls 196 (a centaur attacks the top of an eye with his trident and the bottom with his phallus) and 197 (a large phallus with equine haunches attacks the eye).

⁴⁰ J. R. Hinnells, 'Reflections on the bull-slaying scene', in idem (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* (1975), 2. 290–312, at 298, points out with regard to the Mithraic scene that except for the Sidon relief (CIMRM 1400; illustrated in Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6), 90 fig. 55), the scorpion always turns its tail away from the bull and never aims to inject it with its deadly venom.

⁴¹ This seems to be a feature of many ancient Greek protective rituals: to remove or chase away disease and danger, for example, by *pharmakos*-rituals, fumigation or exorcism, but not to destroy them entirely; see C. A. Faraone, 'Hipponax Frag. 128W: epic parody or expulsive incantation?', *Classical Antiquity* 23 (2004), 209–45.



FIG. 9. Vestibule mosaic from a Roman house near Antioch-on-the-Orontes. (Photograph after Levi (1941), pl. 56 no. 121)

attackers, despite great variations: gods or heroic figures with manufactured weapons (or the weapons alone) generally attack from above; terrestrial or winged animals from the side (e.g. dogs, felines and birds), and subterranean dwellers from below (e.g. snakes, scorpions or insects).

It should be clear by now that these evil-eye amulets provide helpful parallels for the organization of the Mithraic icon: in both the attackers are generally divided into two groups, the dangerous animals (i.e. 'natural' predators) that approach or lunge up from the sides or below, and the man-made weapons (i.e. 'cultural' predators) that descend from above and in a number of cases seem to be propelled either by a divine force, such as Jahweh or Zeus, or by a heroic one, such as Herakles or the gladiator on the relief in Britain, who jabs at the eye with his trident. We also saw similarities in the specific types of animals that attack the eye (the dog, the snake, the scorpion and a variety of birds) as well as their relative positions: the snake, scorpion and other non-mammals are usually placed below, the dog on the right side and the lion on the left. The main differences are: (i) the animals in the Mithraic scene attack a bull, not an eye; (ii) the types of animals and their relative positions on the larger communal images, at least, seem to have been fixed (snake, scorpion and dog); and (iii) in most of the larger versions the snake and the dog lick the blood that spurts from the wounded bull's shoulder, but the eye never bleeds. These differences are not so stark, however, when we take into account the smaller Mithraic monuments, like the Argive thunderstone or the gems discussed earlier, where we do find greater variation in the types of animals (the scorpion is often missing) and the snake and dog sometimes simply confront the bull, rather than lick the blood from his wound.

IV THE GODDESS NIKE AND THE BATTLEFIELD SPHAGION

In nearly every version of the iconic scene Mithras attacks the bull vertically from above with a short military sword or dagger, like those divine or heroic weapons that strike the evil eye from on high. And like the human figures in the evil-eye scenes, Mithras almost always averts his gaze from the object of his attack. His pose above the bull, however, is quite complicated: he kneels on the bull's back and pulls back its head, as if he is ready to slit its throat, a posture that was apparently borrowed from well-known scenes of the goddess Nike and the bull, such as on the third-century B.C. mirror cover from Megara illustrated in Fig. 10.⁴² This scene is popular in the Classical period, rare in Hellenistic times and becomes fashionable again in the Roman Empire, especially during the reign of Trajan.⁴³ Some of the earliest versions of Nike and the bull are those carved in relief on the parapet of the fifth-century Athena Nike temple near the entrance of the Athenian acropolis, but we also find early examples of Nike killing smaller male animals in the same fashion on coins from the Greek East.⁴⁴ It seems, in fact, that in all of these representations Nike is performing a special kind of military ritual known as a *sphagion*, during which a single soldier on behalf of the army kills an uncastrated male animal just prior to a battle while facing the enemy or their territory.⁴⁵ Aside from the Nike scenes, it is only rarely illustrated in Greek art.⁴⁶

⁴² Gordon, op. cit. (n. 1), 65–6 and D. Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (1989), 30–1. For the general evolution of the scene, see LIMC s.v. 'Nike' nos 169–72. The Megarian mirror case (14.5 cm in diameter) is in the British Museum; Fig. 10 is after C. Smith, 'Nike sacrificing a bull', *JHS* 7 (1886), 275–85, pl. D.

⁴³ Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6), 79.

⁴⁴ Smith, op. cit. (n. 42), and M. H. Jameson, 'The ritual of the Athena Nike parapet', in R. Osborne and S. Hornblower (eds), *Ritual, Finance, Politics. Athenian Democratic Accounts Presented to David Lewis* (1994), 307–19, at 320–4.

⁴⁵ M. H. Jameson, 'Sacrifice before battle', in V. D. Hanson (ed.), *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Battle Experience* (1991), 197–227. Most of the discussion has focused on the famous Athenian frieze. T. Hölscher, *Griechische Historienbilder des 5. und 4. Jhs. v. Chr.* (1973), 68–9, for example, suggested that Nike is sacrificing the bull to the war-dead, and E. Simon, 'La decorazione architettonica del tempio di Atena Nike sull'acropoli di Atene', *Museum Patavianum* 3 (1985), 271–88, argued that the hero Theseus was the recipient. In a later study Simon, 'An interpretation of the Nike temple parapet', in D. Buitron-Oliver (ed.), *The Interpretation of Architectural Sculpture in Greece and Rome*, Studies in the History of Art 49 (1997), 127–43, at 139, claimed that in a parallel scene on an Apulian volute krater in Ruvo, Iris — in a posture like Nike's — is offering a chthonic sacrifice to 'the three heroes who surround the offering' and stressed that 'it is clear that they are heroic receivers of this chthonic offering'. But the chthonic status of the three figures is not at all clear from the scene on the vase. T. Hölscher, 'Ritual und Bildsprache zur Deutung der Reliefs und der Brüstung um das Heiligtum der Athena Nike in Athen', *MDAI(A)* 112 (1997), 143–65, reviews the various interpretations of the ritual and revives an old interpretation of P. Stengel, *Opferbräuche der Griechen* (1910), 113–16. Jameson's interpretation, however, makes the best sense of the imagined locale of Nike's actions. Perhaps because they were thinking of the Parthenon frieze as a parallel, both Simon (op. cit. (1997), 140: 'nobody could imagine ... anywhere on the parapet the beginnings of battles') and Hölscher (op. cit. (1997), 153: 'Nike ist in der Tat nicht eine Göttin des Kampfes') insisted that the balustrade scenes are a model of or for celebrations in Athens, but Jameson is right to stress that a parallel scene in the same frieze (the erection of trophies) always takes place on the battlefield. The creative leap of the balustrade sculptor was, then, (i) to imagine that the goddess Nike and not a simple soldier performed these rituals; and (ii) that in the case of the *sphagion*, she performed it most heroically on the largest and wildest sacrificial animal in the Greek repertoire, an uncastrated bull. Jameson stresses the fact that on nearly all *sphagia* scenes the animal seems to be uncastrated.

⁴⁶ The best illustration is a fragment of a late Classical cup in the Cleveland Museum of Art (CVA 26.242), which shows a helmeted soldier pressing his knee into the back of an uncastrated ram and piercing its throat with his military sword. Jameson, op. cit. (n. 45), 218–19, commenting on this cup and two other versions of the scene, notes that the absence of the altar, fire and the usual officiants reveals that this is not a normal sacrifice to be followed by a communal meal, but rather a *sphagion*. He also points out that 'the sacrificer may be a *mantis*, but he is also a member of the fighting force, since he wears a helmet and carries a sword ... which he will shortly use in battle'. M. A. Flowers, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (2008), 163–4, points out in addition that the soldier here is beardless (i.e. a younger man) and wears no other armour except his helmet, but he agrees



FIG. 10. A third-century B.C. mirror cover from Megara. (Drawing after Smith (1886), pl D)

The similarities in the poses of Nike and Mithras are most obvious in the manner in which both kneel on the back of the bull and wrench back its head, often placing their fingers into its nostrils. There are, however, two important differences: Nike either slits the bull's throat or more often, as we see in Fig. 10, is about to do so; in the earlier Greek versions, this is clear from the manner in which she grips the knife with the blade protruding between forefinger and thumb, ready for a horizontal slicing motion.⁴⁷ In the Mithraic scenes, on the contrary, the blade nearly always emerges from the opposite side of the god's fist, near the smallest finger, and is engaged in a vertically downward stroke. It is true that in Roman imperial reliefs Nike sometimes holds her weapon in the same manner as Mithras, as she leans over the head of the bull in order to stab it in the front of its throat,⁴⁸ but it is crucial to note that in every extant image the goddess seems to be going for the jugular. She is, moreover, always looking forward towards the bull's head or throat, rather than away like Mithras.

I suggest, then, that the Mithraic icon reflects two well-known designs: the popular image of Nike performing a battlefield *sphagion* and the equally popular image of the all-suffering eye. The combination of these two quite different scenes demanded some

that 'this scene possibly depicts a seer in the moment of performing *sphagion* before battle'. There is one other interesting detail: the man is barefoot, a detail that suggests he is performing an important ritual.

⁴⁷ Palmer, op. cit. (n. 9), 315. See, e.g. *LIMC* s.v. 'Nike', nos 170-1 and 714-18; for the Roman period, see ibid. s.v. 'Victoria', nos 258a, 259 and 281, and a frieze from the Basilica Ulpia illustrated in Jameson, op. cit. (n. 44), 323 fig. 18.10.

⁴⁸ See, e.g. *LIMC* s.v. 'Nike', nos 257 and 258b.

important alterations, however, most notably in the interaction of Mithras and the bull: the god does take the same position as Nike by placing his knee on the back of the animal and by pulling up its muzzle and baring its neck for the fatal blow. But that blow never comes and instead the god strikes the animal vertically in the shoulder. It seems, in fact, that the creator of the Mithraic image purposely altered the place of the sword's entry into the body, as well as its limited penetration, in order to align the god's attack with the downward and limited thrusts of the divine or heroic weapons at the top of the evil-eye amulets. The second important deviation from the Nike scenes is the direction of Mithras' gaze,⁴⁹ for in nearly every instance he looks away: sometimes he gazes at the back of the bull's head, but much more often out at the viewer or over his shoulder at the raven or Sol. This averted gaze of Mithras is odd, and when scholars look for parallels in narrative art, they usually cite the death of Medusa, in which Perseus, just as he kills her, has his head turned away in similar fashion to prevent any harm from befalling him, if he should happen to glance at her face.⁵⁰ We have, in fact, seen this same motif earlier in some of the evil-eye scenes, in which those anthropomorphic figures that attack the eye — for example, the ithyphallic dwarf in Antioch or the gladiator in Britain — do so without ever looking directly at the eye. In these non-Mithraic images, then, the attacker's gaze is averted from some deadly danger: the evil eye or the petrifying gaze of the Gorgon, in both instances to protect themselves from danger. I suggest that the usually turned-aside gaze of Mithras can be explained in the same manner. The two ways, then, in which Mithras deviates from the pose of Nike can both be explained as conscious alterations aimed at fitting the *sphagion*-scene more comfortably into the overall apotropaic design of the evil-eye amulets.

There are, however, two features of the bull-wounding scene that the amulets and Nike scenes cannot fully account for, but which both seem to be natural extensions of the logic of the *sphagion*-scene: the emphases on the bull's blood and on its genitals. In most of the monumental versions of the Mithraic icon, for example, the artist calls attention to the blood dripping or running from the wound by having the snake and the dog leap up to lick it, a detail that may, in fact, recall how the *sphagion* ritual focuses intently if not exclusively on the flow of blood from the victim.⁵¹ The scorpion's emphasis on the bull's testicles, on the other hand, marks the animal as especially wild and dangerous, and therefore fit for a military *sphagion* (see the end of n. 45), rather than the typical domesticated animal that was usually castrated, while still young, and then at some later point sacrificed and eaten in communal sacrifice. The question remains, however, why these details are so exaggerated in the Mithraic scene. Some suggest, in fact, that the blood and testicles point to Mithras' essentially creative rôle in the cosmos and claim that by killing the bull the god releases the creative energy of life into the cosmos, a fact that is thought to be illustrated by the ears of wheat that sprout from the end of its tail. The eagerness of the animals to consume the blood of the bull is thus explained as a thirst for this newly released life-force.⁵² It has not been noticed, however, that only animals of low or ambiguous status (the snake and the dog) lick the blood and, if we recall that the blood of the bull was believed to be a notorious poison in the Greco-Roman world,⁵³ might we

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Ulansey, *op. cit.* (n. 42), 30.

⁵⁰ F. Saxl, *Mithras: Typengeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (1931), 14 and Ulansey, *op. cit.* (n. 42), 30. The latter sees close mythological and astrological similarities between the Greek hero Perseus and Mithras.

⁵¹ The blood was over-painted red on the Cleveland cup (see n. 46) to emphasize the bleeding, from which seers sometimes took omens. The animal was not, however, butchered, cooked or eaten; see Jameson, *op. cit.* (n. 45).

⁵² See, e.g., Clauss, *op. cit.* (n. 6), 80–1, who summarizes the interpretation as follows: 'We can explain why the dog, the serpent and the scorpion are so eagerly pushing their way towards the bull ... by assuming that the dying beast is emitting some sort of magical force ... imagined to reside in the animal's blood, hide and seed, often too in the tail, as is shown by the corn ears that shoot up from it.'

⁵³ See, e.g., Strabo 1.3.21; Plutarch, *Flaminius* 20.5; *Moralia* 168 (= *De superstitione* 8); cf. *idem*, *Themistocles* 31.5. I am grateful to Philippe Borgeaud for reminding me of this fact and providing the references.

come to the opposite conclusion, namely that the scene actually provides an *aition* for the existence in the world of venomous snakes or rabid dogs?

V SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

The question arises, finally, of the historical relationship between the Mithraic icon and the evil-eye amulet. Already in the nineteenth century, some scholars independently noted these similarities and came to the opposite conclusion, namely, that the Mithraic monuments influenced the design of the evil-eye talismans.⁵⁴ They were able to make this claim because in those days scholars erroneously believed that the Mithraic cult practised in Roman times had evolved directly from much older Persian practices. In recent years, however, it has become apparent that the Roman cult probably originated in central Italy sometime in the second half of the first century A.D. and its connection with the Persian cult of Mithras is far less clear. Can we, then, argue for the opposite process, namely that the Mithraic icon imitates the evil-eye amulets? Unfortunately, the earliest examples of Mithras stabbing the bull in the shoulder date to the start of the second century A.D., at the same point in time when we also begin to find the motif of the all-suffering eye.⁵⁵ One cannot, in short, claim with any authority that one scene precedes the other historically, at least not from the available evidence.

Some scholars have suggested, however, that the Mithraic monuments evolved over time from a simple form with Mithras and the animals to the more complex monuments, like the one in Fig. 2, and that this evolution reflects ‘a kind of syncretism or conflation of symbolic elements’ that were added to the basic image of Mithras and the bull.⁵⁶ The central scene is thus understood as the most important image, while the surrounding materials are to be interpreted as ‘symbolic accretions’ or ‘variable additions’: first the internal audiences to the scene (the torchbearers, then the Sun and Moon above, and more rarely the Ocean and Earth below),⁵⁷ but especially the side-scenes ‘in ladders’ illustrating other vignettes of Mithras’ life.⁵⁸ Elsner suggests, moreover, that the resulting ‘pleonism’ on the larger monuments ‘offers not only an oversignification of symbolic elements ... but also the endless possibility of over-reading — for an excess in viewers’ interpretations’.⁵⁹ His impression dovetails nicely with those scholars who speak more generally of mixture and *ad hoc* invention in Mithraic cult and iconography, for example Gordon, who remarks: ‘the dominant impression is one of eclecticism. Whatever their ultimate origins — the Mysteries as a developed religion were constructed from ideas borrowed from different sources and mixed in a bricolage.’⁶⁰

⁵⁴ See e.g. Millingen, *op. cit.* (n. 34), or P. Bienkowski, ‘Malocchio’, *Eranos Vindobonensis* (1893), 285–303, at 293–4. C. Bonner in *SMA* (1950), 98 n. 39, noted Bienkowski’s remarks, but was not convinced.

⁵⁵ Some scholars think that a statue found in Ostia may have been carved in the first century and then repaired in the second (V 230 = *LIMC* 98, where Simon is given credit for the date), but in this case Mithras has a different pose — he holds the knife aloft, the bull has not (yet) been stabbed and the only animal present is a snake. Similar in gesture and date are five terracotta figurines from Panticapaeum, in which Mithras is assimilated to Attis (see Gordon *apud* Claus, *op. cit.* (n. 6), 157 in the caption of fig. 114).

⁵⁶ Elsner, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 220.

⁵⁷ The members of this internal audience vary considerably; most scholars, for example, refer to the torchbearers as being a standard part of the composition, but as J. R. Hinnells, ‘The iconography of Cautes and Cautopates’, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2 (1976), 36–67, at 38 shows, there are important regional variations: the torchbearers are standard in the monuments from Central and Eastern Europe, commonly omitted in Italian ones and a feature of a minority of images from Rome itself — and when they do appear on the Italian peninsula it is with Cautes on the left and Cautopates on the right, i.e. the reverse of the position found in Central and Eastern Europe.

⁵⁸ See the summary in Elsner, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 220–1.

⁵⁹ Elsner, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 220.

⁶⁰ Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 48. For a case study, see *ibid.*, 65–6, where he detects such bricolage already in the earliest of the bull-slaying scenes.

This seems especially true of the sequence of side-scenes, some of which depict Mithras performing heroic labours like those of Heracles, Theseus or even deified athletes such as the famous Milo.⁶¹ These scenes were once thought to illustrate (along with the bull-wounding scene) individual vignettes from some kind of sequential biography of Mithras, for example, the scenes of him cutting fruit, dragging the bull, shooting an arrow, or playing the rôle of Atlas.⁶² But when counted individually these side-scenes are statistically rare⁶³ and never add up to a consistent Mithraic mythology or biography. They seem, in fact, to get attached to the sides of the icon by a somewhat random process of bricolage in order 'to familiarize the unfamiliar Persian god and to assimilate him to the patterns of classical heroes'.⁶⁴ The central image of Mithras and bull, in short, was probably never part of any sacred biography, but rather it had some other, original meaning connected, I suggest, with its amuletic design. The side-scenes, on the other hand, were later and sporadic additions that perhaps attempt, albeit unsuccessfully, to create a narrative around this central image, a story of how Mithras, like Heracles, made the transition from an invincible conquering hero to a god.⁶⁵

Mithraic scholars have, for the most part, been fascinated by the complex, communal versions of the icon. This is only natural, of course, because there is so little textual data for Mithraic beliefs and one depends on the iconography alone to make sense of the cult and the ideas and beliefs that may lie behind it. In this essay, however, I have tried to ignore the peripheral images and to read the bull-wounding scene in isolation as a free-standing image. Gordon and Elsner have stressed for different reasons how this central scene departs from the norm of the Greco-Roman cult statue, which traditionally depicted a divine personality in repose. This change from a traditional cult-statue in the round to sculptural relief was, however, widespread in the religious art of the Roman imperial period:⁶⁶

In new cults such as those of Mithras, ... such reliefs take over the role traditionally played by the cult statue. The idea of the god's salvific action in the world ... was best conveyed through narrative ... [and] narrative is best handled in relief form.

Elsner expresses the same idea differently, when he says that the central relief of Mithras and the bull 'energized the static cult image by making the deity performative', but in the end he finds it odd that 'the ritual action is now the cult image and the worshipped deity his own worshipper'; he, too, concludes that 'the sacrifice of the bull is salvific', although he acknowledges that the scene differed greatly from the norms of Greco-Roman civic sacrifice.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 60–4: 'such stories were the raw materials from which the Mithras figure was created.'

⁶² Zwirn, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 4–5.

⁶³ For example, out of roughly 460 extant examples of the icon (Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 261) only eight include the banquet scene = 'feast scene' in the table in Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 5), 226.

⁶⁴ Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 5), 220 and *op. cit.* (n. 1), 49, proposes a schematic orientation of episodes to the right and left according to astronomical or astrological codes, while Zwirn, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 2–4, defends a vague sense of 'biographical intention' according to which 'the sense of sequence occurs, if not an absolute order', giving as examples several scenes involving Mithras and Sol. He rejects as unlikely, however, the idea of a pre-existing full biography, invoking Kermodé's notion of a 'narrative kernel' as a source for further and further elaboration.

⁶⁵ Zwirn, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 9, drawing on the work of Saxl, *op. cit.* (n. 50), describes the relationship a bit differently as between 'theophany (centre) and temporal dimensionality (frame)', and he suggests that this 'juxtaposition and contrast of visual modalities reveal the inherent and inseparable "dualism" of the divine nature of Mithras. The relative scale of the central image removes it from the narrative matrix'. Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 5), 219–20, also demonstrates that the side images were not understood to be part of a fixed sequence or continuous narrative about Mithras, but rather that they were generally concerned with ritual and the organization of ritual space.

⁶⁶ Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 260.

⁶⁷ Elsner, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 216; see also Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 69.

I would agree with all of this, except the insistence that the ritual action of Mithras constituted some bizarre form of standard sacrifice, one that ended in a communal feast. This sense of radical innovation depends, as we have seen, on two long-standing, but erroneous assumptions: (i) that Mithras can kill the bull by striking it in the shoulder; and (ii) that in his actions Mithras is imitating a depiction of a normal sacrifice performed by Nike. But Mithras does not in fact aim to kill the bull nor does Nike sacrifice her bull for the usual communal meal. So when Elsner sums up the Mithraic icon by saying that ‘the sacrifice of the bull is salvific’,⁶⁸ I would alter two of his terms and assert instead that ‘the wounding of the bull is apotropaic’. By rejecting the idea of traditional sacrifice, moreover, we remove the peculiar self-reflexivity that has always troubled the traditional sacrificial interpretation, according to which ‘the god ... performs the sacrifice instead of ... being its recipient’.⁶⁹ In fact, a military *sphagion* did not require a god at all, for it operated automatically without any divine audience or recipient.

One final detail remains to be discussed. If, as now seems probable, the bull represents some danger or enemy that needs to be averted or contained, what threat was it? Given the notorious paucity of confessional or other kinds of Mithraic texts, I can only offer suggestions. The parallels with the scenes of military *sphagion* suggest, on the one hand, that the bull may have represented in some way or other dangers that many Mithraic worshippers faced in their quotidian military lives. The parallels with the evil-eye amulets, on the other hand, point in another direction that could be useful to all of the god’s worshippers: the bull may represent some kind of persistent and unconquerable danger or disease that can be contained or harassed, but never conquered. Indeed, Gordon has stressed that in many of the peripheral narrative scenes Mithras imitates traditional culture heroes, like Heracles and Theseus, who make the world safer by conquering forces of mayhem and destruction, such as the Nemean lion or the bull of Marathon.⁷⁰ The bull, then, may represent some kind of generalized danger against which the god leads the attack.

Given the absence of any solid textual evidence for Mithraic myth and beliefs and given the wide variation in the images that crowd the periphery of the larger Mithraic icons, it is impossible to insist on a single interpretation for each monument that depicts Mithras and the bull. I will suggest nonetheless that, just as the roof-tile from Dura-Europos apparently protected the synagogue and its worshippers from envy by depicting Jahweh driving three blades down into the evil eye, the Mithraic icon functioned in a similar manner, except that it replaces Jahweh with Mithras and for envy substitutes some deadly danger represented by the bull. This same amuletic design would, of course, have been useful and usable for those who worried about astronomical or cosmic disasters as well. Indeed, given the evidence in the more complex Mithraic monuments for the creative reinterpretation and extrapolation of this icon along various astrological, cosmogonical or mythological vectors, it would be foolish to insist that it continued to be viewed throughout the Empire simply as an amulet to protect against bodily harm. But one can say this: because the iconic centrepiece remained essentially unchanged for at least two and a half centuries and because many of the miniature versions show only the central scene of Mithras and the animals, the protective power of this scene was always recognizable and therefore always available to individual male worshippers, not only when they gazed at the larger monuments during their communal ceremonies in the *mithraeum*, but also when they placed smaller versions in their homes or on their individual bodies.

⁶⁸ Elsner, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 212.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 60–4.

APPENDIX A: EVIDENCE FOR THE SACRIFICIAL HYPOTHESIS

The sacrificial interpretation of the Mithraic icon was embraced by Cumont and others before him, but it rests on surprisingly shaky foundations, for example, on the claim that Nike and Mithras are both performing a traditional form of communal sacrifice on their respective bulls, an idea that no longer holds currency (see nn. 45–6 above). Another weak datum is the unique and fragmentary Latin inscription from the Santa Prisca *mithraeum*, of which only the words *sanguine fuso* can be securely read.⁷¹ The only remaining argument for the sacrificial nature of the icon is important: its apparently special affinity with another scene occasionally found in the *mithraea*, that of the banquet of Sol and Mithras seated on a bull-skin. In the past scholars have interpreted this banquet as the next vignette in the mythical adventures of Mithras, after the ‘slaying’ of the bull.⁷² It is indeed clear that in a handful of *mithraea* the banquet-scene (unlike the other side-scenes) did have some special relationship with the icon, because the banquet scene is occasionally engraved on the back of reliefs of Mithras-and-the-bull; the two-faced stones were apparently designed to be swivelled or otherwise reversed.⁷³ Thus it appears that in a few Mithraic sanctuaries the scene of Mithras and the bull was turned around at certain times of the year and replaced for some interval of time by the feasting scene on the bull-skin. Thus it may well be that in some Mithraic communities, at least, the iconic scene was closely connected in the minds of some worshippers with the banquet scene. Here, then, is a good case for local bricolage. But within the rich data-set of Mithraic monuments this variation is statistically rare and probably tells us more about a few epichoric attempts to reinterpret the icon as a sacrificial scene, than a widespread Mithraic understanding of the scene as a sacrifice.

APPENDIX B: LIST OF GEMS OR AMULETS DEPICTING MITHRAS AND THE BULL

1. Argive thunderstone (scene oriented right) with only Mithras (facing forward; stabs at throat over bull’s head), animals (dog, snake, bird on bull’s foreleg; no blood-licking) and two magical words (*CIMRM* 2353 = Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), no. 2).
2. Red jasper in Florence with full scene on obverse (oriented left): Mithras (facing outwards; stabs at throat over bull’s head), bull (facing him), animals (dog, dolphin, turtle; no blood-licking), torchbearers, Sol/Luna, weapons and birds above. Reverse: lion walking left; above seven stars, each encircled by a magical word (*CIMRM* 2354).

⁷¹ M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God* (1963), 102–3, sums up the sacrificial theory as follows: the initiates ate bull’s flesh and drank bull’s blood, so they could be reborn ‘just as life itself had been created anew from the bull’s blood’. This inscription is sometimes quoted in heavily restored form as *et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso* (‘and you have saved us by spilling eternal blood’), see e.g. Elsner, op. cit. (n. 1), 359 n. 40, who quotes others; but S. Panciera, ‘Il materiale epigrafico dallo scavo del Mitreo di S. Stefano Rotondo (con un addendum sul verso terminante ... *sanguine fuso*)’, in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae: Atti del Seminario Internazionale su ‘La Specificità Storico-Religiosa dei Misteri di Mitra, con Particolare Riferimento alle Fonti Documentarie di Roma e Ostia’*, EPRO 80 (1979), 87–127, at 103, has shown that the first four words are not visible and probably never were.

⁷² See, e.g., Hinnells, op. cit. (n. 40), 304–5: ‘the clear link between the bull slaying and ritual meal scenes’, but he can only cite a handful of banquet scenes in which the bull-skin appears. See also Zwirn, op. cit. (n. 1), 8–10.

⁷³ Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6), 52, mentions ‘a few’ double-faced cult-images, including the massive one from Heddernheim (depicted above in Fig. 2), which has the feast of Sol and Mithras on the reverse; the scene depicted in his fig. 72, however, shows a bull collapsed on its belly, on which he remarks: ‘the significance of the bull’s death is suggested by representing it unflayed.’ It is true that the four other figures in the scene have implements for the feast, but it is unclear, in fact, whether the bull is dead or asleep! His only other example of double-sided relief which includes the bull skin (his fig. 71) is the badly defaced example from Ruckingen; see J. P. Kane, ‘The Mithraic cult-meal in its Greek and Roman environment’, in J. R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* (1975), 2.313–51, at 344–51, for a more detailed discussion.

3. Yellow carnelian with full scene (oriented left): Mithras (facing outwards; stabs at throat over bull's head), bull (facing him), animals (dog, dolphin, turtle; no blood-licking), torchbearers, Sol/Luna, weapons and birds above — no inscription. It is nearly identical with No. 2, except the reverse is blank — it has no magical words (*CIMRM* 2355).
4. Half of a broken yellow jasper (scene oriented right) with only Mithras (facing backward; stabs at bull's shoulder) and the animals (at least one bird and the scorpion); on reverse Eros and Psyche with magical names connected with erotic magic, e.g. *Neixaroplêx*, and *iaeô*-palindrome on bezel (*CIMRM* 2356 = Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), no. 4).
5. Jasper (colour not recorded) with Mithras and bull, with dog, snake and raven (no scorpion) and only one torchbearer on the right, who is animal-headed; seven stars in the background; on the reverse magical names, *Neixaroplêx*, and *Iaô* and *Asôniêl* on the bezel (Delatte, op. cit. (n. 16), 12–13 = *CIMRM* 2359 = Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), no. 5).*
6. Red and green jasper with Helios in his chariot and magical words (*ablanathanalba* and *tukseui*) on obverse; on reverse (scene oriented right) a standing Mithras stabs a standing bull with no others present (*CIMRM* 2361 = *SMA* 71 = Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), no. 3).*
7. Rock crystal (scene oriented right) with only Mithras (facing forward with three stars on his cloak; stabs at shoulder) and animals (dog, snake, scorpion) — no inscriptions (*CIMRM* 2362 = Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4), fig. 17).
8. Yellowish chalcedony (scene in grotto oriented right) with Mithras (facing forward; stabs at shoulder), animals (raven on cloak, dog, snake, scorpion), one torchbearer (holds two torches), and Sol/crescent moon above — no inscriptions (*CIMRM* 2363).
9. Hematite rectangle (scene oriented left) with Mithras (facing backward; stabs at throat over bull's head), animals (long-eared dog, snake, scorpion, bird; no blood-licking), Sol/Luna, two altars (replacing torchbearers), and bird behind Mithras (raven?); on reverse *anguipede* with *Iaô* inscribed inside of shield (*CIMRM* 2364 = *SMA* 68 = Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), no. 6).
10. Half of a broken black jasper (scene oriented right) with Mithras (facing backward; stabs at shoulder), animals (dog, snake, scorpion; no blood-licking), and one torchbearer (presumably one of a pair); near Mithras' radiant crown perhaps the end of the name of the Egyptian sun-god Re (*[Ph]rên*); on back the magical palindrome *ablanath[analba]* (*CIMRM* 2365 = *SMA* no. 69 = Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), no. 9).
11. Greenish-black jasper (scene oriented left) with Mithras (facing forward; knife lifted over bull's head), animals (dog at bull's throat, snake, scorpion approaches from behind with bird above; no blood-licking), and seven stars — no inscriptions; on reverse a Cabirus with hammer (*CIMRM* 2366 = *SMA* no. 70 = Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), no. 10).
12. Unspecified gem from Nemea (scene in grotto oriented left) with Mithras (facing forward; knife lifted over bull's head), animals (dog, snake; no blood-licking), seated and mourning torchbearers, and Sol/Luna — no inscriptions (*CIMRM* 2367 = Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4), fig. 18).
13. Red and green jasper (scene oriented left) with Mithras (facing backward), animals (dog, snake, scorpion, raven), torchbearers, and Sol/Luna; on reverse a nonsense inscription: *Kênaolasaga* (*TMM* 2 no. 8 = Mastrocinque, op. cit. (n. 16), no. 11).
14. Brownish-red jasper from Carnuntum (scene in grotto oriented left) with Mithras (facing backward; stabs shoulder), animals (dog, snake, scorpion; no blood-licking), mourning torchbearers, Sol/Luna and small altar in front of bull — no inscriptions (*CIMRM* 1704 = D. Schön, *Orientalische Kulte im römischen Österreich* (1988), no. 35).
15. Cornelian from Carnuntum, no photograph, but according to the description: Mithras kneels on bull inside grotto with sword about to strike; snake and raven only; no torchbearers; seven stars and crescent moon across the top of the grotto's ceiling — no inscription (Schön, op. cit. (1988), no. 36).
16. Dark red jasper from Viminacium (scene oriented left) with Mithras (facing forward; knife in bull's head or neck), animals (dog before bull's chest, snake and scorpion below; bird above bull's head; no blood-licking), torchbearers, and Sol/Luna — no inscriptions. The reverse is blank (E. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die antiken Gemmen des Kunsthistorischen Museums in Wien* vol. 2 (1979), no. 1376).

17. Orange carnelian ringstone (scene oriented left) with only Mithras (facing forward; stabs shoulder) and snake (no blood licking) — no inscriptions (*AGDS Munich* 1.3 no. 2654).
18. Heliotrope (scene oriented left) from a ring found in a medieval grave with full scene in grotto with canonical animals and blood-licking, torchbearers, raven, Sol, Luna, krater and seven stars — no inscriptions (Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 4), fig. 19).

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