

The sacrifices of Mithras

by

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Abstract:

The origins of Mithras mysteries are debated. Many of the symbols originate from Old Persian religion, but other elements could be traced to other mythologies. The mysteries were probably constructed by various rites and images, like the killing of the bull borrowed from a famous statue of the Greek goddess of Victory, Nike. This was a fitting symbol for these mysteries which appealed to the soldier primarily. Another characteristic was the fact that women were excluded.

The sacrifice of the bull is the standard feature in most of the sanctuaries. Mithras himself forces the bull down with his left knee and seizes the bull's nostrils with his left hand, while he stabs the animal right behind the shoulder. This deed promoted mankind and earth with a lot of beneficial things, a reflection of the old Persian religion like the fact that Mithras performs the sacrifice, although unwillingly. In the mysteries the sacrifice of the bull symbolized a salvation for mankind, who gained the benefit of its blood. The soldiers who shed their blood for the Roman Empire could therefore identify themselves with the slaying of the Bull and the victorious Mithras.

Introduction

Many caverns and buildings are recognized as Mithrea, the cult centres of the mysteries of Mithras. The classical symbols of the cults appear in these rooms, such as Cautes and Cautopates, carrying the torches of night and day, the shepherds, young Mithras born out of the cave and the signs of the zodiac. Most conspicuous of all symbols is, however, Mithras' killing of the bull, a painting or a picture that dominates the visual field.

Nevertheless, the surviving elements of the Mithras cult are complex, obscure and have also been interpreted in many ways. The same goes with the origin of the mysteries, of Mithras correspondence with the Iranian sun god Mitra as well of the meaning of the mysteries themselves. These mysteries moreover differed from other mysteries in many ways, being exclusive for men with seven grades of initiation known as Raven, Male Bride, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Sun-runner and Father; the mysteries were also rather young compared with Demeter's or Dionysos' mysteries. There are a great number of question marks around the mysteries of Mithras - perhaps too many, according to some scholars.¹

The origins of the mysteries

The origins of the mysteries are debated. Scholars like Franz Cumont² and Martin Vermaseren³ claimed an Iranian origin, according to the pattern of the oriental cults that were introduced in Rome in the beginning of the first century B.C. Other like Martin Nilsson⁴ and Reinhold Merkelbach⁵ suggested that Mithraism was a later construction by one intelligent brain, in order to support the growing empire and the power of the emperors. The modern approach of Mithraic studies is occupied by the astronomical and astrological symbols in the mysteries together with the neoplatonist experience, which gave a philosophical understanding of the symbols and the rites as Robert Turcan did in his *Mithras platonicus*.⁶ Ulansey's theory that the religion of Mithras arrived with the captured pirates around 60 BC from Asia Minor, where it was connected with the myth of Perseus, illuminates the fact that it was a compound of many various beliefs and symbols.⁷

In my opinion, the rise of the mysteries of Mithras as a religion for the army underwent the similar process as modern religions do today in what we call New Age. New Age has under few years become a movement, which carries the typical feature of a religion with holy books, holy symbols, holy places and holy animals. Crystals are regarded as holy items and a source to personal power and healing. Findhorn in Scotland and Sedona in Arizona are holy places, visited by pilgrims. The dolphin has become a holy animal, which transfers secret and spiritual messages to mankind. Astrology, meditation and reincarnation are examples of other spiritual exercises. Vegetarianism is one way of living in New Age; the music is often soft and transmits a magic emotion.⁸

Like Mithraism New Age is compounded of many different influences. Another similarity is that it is dominated by only one sex, i.e. women. The cults of the Great Goddess or Wicca are examples of this and adhere to feminism, where women are defined as a different

and special race. These movement or rather religions have developed their own myths and rites during the last two decades, which are spread through books, through circles or covens and, especially, on the web.

The mysteries of Mithras may have become a religion in the similar way with myths, rites and symbols from different parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. Its final form could be a work of many brains, high officers, imperial administrators, who realized that religion could be a useful instrument for the discipline in the army. The claim of high moral standard and the seven grades of initiation to a higher level had the purpose to create officers and gentlemen together with the experiences of higher mysteries, another parallel to modern freemasonry.

The sacrifice of the bull

The sacrifice of the bull is the standard feature in most of the sanctuaries. Mithras himself forces the bull down with his left knee and seizes the bull's nostrils with his left hand, while he stabs the animal right behind the shoulder.

He is wearing a Phrygian cap and a wind-filled cloak, and, most remarkable of all, his head is turned in the other direction as if he would not look at his own deed. Still, this sacrifice is a guarantee of salvation for the participants.

Animal sacrifices were a common component in the Roman religion and sacrifices of a bull represented the most precious gift to the gods. However, it seems that the striking of the bull in the iconography of Mithras could have very old origins and goes back to the Old Iranian religion. In the Pahlavian texts the creation of the world was destroyed by the evil force Ahriman, who poisoned the earth into desert, who changed the fresh water into salt, destroyed the heaven and polluted the fire. The three life-forms of earth, primeval man, primeval bull (or cow) and the herb of life, were killed by the power of the evil forces, but the divine beings pounded the plant up and scattered it all over the world to become more beneficent plants. The seed of the man and the bull were purified in the moon and the sun and more bulls and more men sprang from them. According to this late text it was the evil Ahriman who killed the primeval triad, something that agrees with the teaching of the religious reformer Zarathustra. Zarathustra, who refused other gods except Ahura Mazda, was a fervent enemy of animal sacrifice and this was also forbidden in Iranian religion. For this reason sacrifice was an invention of the evil Ahriman in the Pahlavi tradition.⁹

Before Zarathustra who probably appeared as prophet and founder of a new religion around 1000 BC. we know little about the pre-Zoroastrian religion. According to the oldest sources it was a dualistic system, where the good forces fought against the evil ones. The good god Mitra and Ahura ruled the cosmos against the evil Angra Mainyu, whose name also is known as Ahriman in the Pahlavi sources. The cult was dominated by sacrifices of bulls and drinking of the holy *haoma*, a drink of health

and power and was specially connected with Mitra. The rituals of the holy *haoma* were connected with the myth of the primeval herb like the sacrifice of the man and the bovine.

The myth of Mithras as the bull-slayer, whose deed promoted mankind and earth with a lot of beneficial things, seems to have its origin in the Iranian religion as far back as pre-Zoroastrian age. Still, the bull-slaying god seems to have been formed in Asia Minor under influence of a Greek goddess.

From Nike to Mithras

On the balustrade of the temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis in Athens the goddess of victory is depicted when sacrificing a bull. This Nike *bouthourousa* became popular in Rome under the first century A.D. and is found on the frieze of the Ulphian Basilika at Trajan's Forum and on the Arch of Benevento.¹⁰

We may notice that this bull-slaying Nike does not turn her head away from the stabbing of the animal.¹¹ Mithras does, almost in every depiction. This is perhaps due to his Iranian origin and the Zoroastrian reform. Zarathustra banned the animal sacrifice, especially the sacrifices of the pregnant cow. This was expressed in of the oldest fragments of the Iranian sources, the Gathas. Zarathustra expressed the complaint of the soul of bovine with the following words:

The soul of bovine lamented to you: "To whom have you created me? Who had created me? Rage and violence, maltreatment and plundering oppress me! I have no shepherd but you! So take me to the green pastures!"¹²

According to the tradition Zarathustra cried out against the sacrifice of the pregnant cows and this brought him disapproval from the warrior class, who expelled him from his clan. He fled to king Vistaspa and queen Atossa, who listened to his message. Still, the custom of animal sacrifices survived among the Zoroastrians and most precious among all victims was the holy bull.

The connections between the sun god Mitra and the bull-slayer Mithras are not evident. According to the fragment of the Mithraic mythology, Mithras was the offspring of the sun god Helios and born from a cliff, like the first rays of the sun enlighten the earth in the morning. Mithras then appears as a young man, who catches the Bull and drags him to a cave.

His father, Helios, sends the raven to tell him to sacrifice the bull and spread the blessings of its body to mankind. Mithras performs the sacrifice, although unwillingly. The sacrifice and its blessings reminds of the new creation, which Ahura Mazda once performed after Ahriman's destruction. But it is also a reflection of Zarathustra's protest against the bloody ritual when the bovines were sacrificed to fulfil the claim for meat and blood among the warrior class, when Mithras turns his eyes away from the stabbing of the bull.

The symbols of the cave

The central picture of the bull-slaying Mithras is generally placed in the innermost of a building formed as a cave. Above this act – the creation of cosmos – the zodiac is depicted and the seven planets, corresponding to the seven grades of the mysteries. The entrance of the cave allowed the sunshine to reach the altars certain days of the years and other small apertures in walls enlighten certain parts of the iconography in the sanctuary.

Astrology in its Hellenistic version took a great part of the symbols in the Mithraic mysteries, something that is absent in the other mysteries. In the sacrificial act three other animals appears: a dog and a snake, who lick the blood streaming from the wound, and a scorpion, which attacks the genitals of the bull. These animals are sometimes interpreted as the constellations of Hydra, Canis Minor and the Scorpio, where others tried to seek the Iranian origin in those animals, which were called *khrafstra*. *Khrafstra* were animals under demonic influence and harmful and repulsive to man as the scorpion. Its attack on the bull's testicles could be interpreted as a deed of the evil forces of Angra Mainy, an attempt to destroy the seed, which should benefit the creation.¹³

The snake and the dog represented the good side, which took part of the bull's precious blood. Another explanation of the picture claims that the blood and the semen flowing from the bull connect it with the earth and the netherworld, which it nourishes. The snake belongs to the netherworld, while the dog and the scorpion belong to this world. The dog belonging to Sirius and the hot period, when the earth is resting and the scorpion represent the time of sowing and renewal. The tail of the bull symbolizes the growing and the ripening vegetation depicted as sprouting ears of corn.¹⁴

For this last interpretation speaks other arguments, especially those symbols of astrology, which were important in the mysteries. Four signs of the zodiac were important: Capricorn, Cancer, Aries and Libra. These were also the signs of the four solstices. In Emperor Julian's discourse of Father Helios, homage to the mysteries of Mithras, we find a great number of such allusions. Especially Aries and Libra open the gates between heaven and earth for the souls to ascend or descend into new existences. Another neoplatonist, Proclus, mentions the mysteries of Mithras as a form of astral destiny.¹⁵

Sacrifice and salvation

Sacrifice appears in most religions and as Walter Burkert puts it: "Sacrificial killing is the basic experience of the "sacred".¹⁶ The most holy of sacrifices is the killing of a

big animal like an ox or in extreme situations, the killing of a human being. Blood and violence lurk, indeed, in the very heart of religion.¹⁷

The sacrifice of the bull described in the myth, symbolizes a salvation for mankind, who gained the benefit of its blood and its sperm. This myth contains the similar idea as the sacrifice of God's son in the New Testament: one has to die to save mankind or as the inscription of the Mithreum of Santa Prisca says; *Et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso* "Through shedding your blood you have saved us".

Older theories suggested that the sacrifice was a bribe or a homage to the gods, belonging to dim and distant ages and not compatible to civilized cultures. Still, sacrifice survives as strong and dominating symbols in the World Religions, although the performance of the rite has disappeared in most of them. Especially, the Last Supper ritually repeated in the Eucharist and Jesus Christ's crucifixion is described in terms of a symbolic sacrifice and a salvation.

The sacrifice of the Bull in the mysteries of Mithras played the similar role. There is no evidence of any real sacrifice performed outside the Mithreum – and for practical reason not inside it. The sacrificial meal of the participant was, according to the sources, bread and water. The sacrifice was once and for all performed in the primeval time and thus represented in the cult statue in the Mithreum in the same manner as the crucifix, a memory and a repetition of the salvaging sacrifice.

¹ Merkelbach 1986, 9-23.

² Cumont 1910, 167.

³ Vermaseren 1963, passim.

⁴ Nilsson 1950, 642.

⁵ Merkelbach 1986.

⁶ Turcan 1975, passim.

⁷ Ulansey 1998, 30.

⁸ Hammer 1997, 275-287.

⁹ Boyce 1984, 24.

¹⁰ Turcan 1999, 229.

¹¹ Ulansey suggest that Mithras look away from the killing of the bull originates from the myth of Perseus. Perseus had to turn his face way when he killed the Gorgon to avoid her petrifying glance. Ulansey 1989, 30.

¹² Yasna 29. Translation from N.Söderblom, FRU.

¹³ Cumont 1923, 122.

¹⁴ Giebel 1990, 202.

¹⁵ Näsström 1990, 65-71.

¹⁶ Burkert 1983, 3.

¹⁷ Burkert 1983, 2.

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