REVIEW ARTICLE/DISCUSSION

MERKELBACH'S MITHRAS

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THE LAST—AND ONLY PREVIOUS—comprehensive monograph on Mithraism appeared in the final year of the nineteenth century. That was the first volume of Franz Cumont's *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* (the second volume, published three years earlier, being the dossier of literary and monumental data on which Cumont founded his reconstruction of the cult).[1] Since then there have been one or two short popular —nothing derogatory intended—books on the god and his cult[2] and of course numerous studies of particular aspects of both (Beck 2002–2115), but nothing definitive or for which a claim to definitiveness might be made. Now, however, some eighty-five years later, a second monograph has appeared which is both ample in itself and comprehensive in its coverage of the various topics, Reinhold Merkelbach's *Mithras* (Königstein 1984). It is a fair and necessary question to ask if it too is definitive for its times, if it presents, insofar as current knowledge admits, a full and reliable portrait of god and cult which we can carry with confidence into the twenty-first century.

First, some of the book's undeniable excellences. It is extraordinarily well produced, handsome in both type and lay-out and with a generous weight of paper. The organization into many short, clearly headed subsections makes it easy to consult on particular topics, yet its overall coherence and flow of argument have not been significantly compromised. The illustrations, so essential for this religion known almost entirely from its visual remains, are lavish and of high quality: 169 on 139 pages of plates. For their achievements on the production side both author and publisher (Anton Hain) are to be highly congratulated. The book is a joy to use and to handle.

Some cautions must, however, be added about the illustrations. First, though numerous, the illustrations are of course not exhaustive. The book does not, then, replace M. J. Vermaseren's *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis mithriacae* (The Hague 1956, 1980, hereafter *CIMRM*) even for the sculptures and frescos, let alone for the archaeological descriptions of mithraea or for the epigraphy, neither of which is set out systemati-

References to my survey "Mithraism since Franz Cumont," *ANRW* 2.17,4 (1984) 2001–2115, are abbreviated to Beck.

[1]Vol. 1 (Brussels 1899), vol. 2 (Brussels 1896).

[2]Both up-to-date and excellent is Robert Turcan's *Mithra et le mithriacisme* in the "Que sais-je?" series, no. 1929 (Paris 1981).

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cally. Merkelbach's *Mithras* does not of course pretend to supplant Vermaseren's *CIMRM*, but it is worth pointing out explicitly that the latter work remains the indispensable tool for scholarly research on Mithraism. Secondly, while it is true that Merkelbach has included virtually all the important works of Mithraic art known when *CIMRM* was published,[3] he has not been as successful with the discoveries of the last quarter-century.[4] Some German monuments have been added, notably the Köln rock-birth and the Ladenburg banquet scene (Abb. 97, 118), but there are no illustrations of, for example, the copious S.Stefano Rotondo material (mithraeum of the Castra Peregrinorum),[5] the reversible relief with zodiac from Banjevac in Dalmatia,[6] the bull-killing relief from Intercisa in Pannonia,[7] the great fresco at Marino in the Alban hills,[8] or the newly recovered portion of the Ottaviano Zeno relief (*CIMRM* 335).[9] Difficulty in obtaining pre-publication photographs might account for some of the omissions, but it is nevertheless disappointing that so good a dossier should not be fully up-to-date. The third concern is a more serious one. The illustrations are accompanied throughout by detailed descriptions of the monuments. More often than not, these descriptions are tendentious, in that they include a good deal of interpretation of the symbols, much of it very speculative and idiosyncratic to Merkelbach's own reading of the meaning and equations of Mithraic iconography. The trouble is that these interpretations are almost always presented as plain fact, inseparable from the identification of the visual object. Thus, to cite the simplest of examples, Abb. 45 (p. 301) shows the back of the altar of the S.Clemente mithraeum, a surface occupied solely by a huge snake writhing upwards. The text reads: "Die Schlange der Rückseite des . . . Altars, Symbol des zweiten Mystengrades." Whether the snake, here or elsewhere, symbolizes the second of the seven grades of initiation is not immediately at issue. The point is that it is not a given of the monument, nor even an obvious or widely accepted reading. The descriptions of the more

[3]The extra illustrations of the monuments of the syncretistic royal cult of Commagene (Abb. 1–14) are a welcome addition. The cult is important because it affords us a rare glimpse of Mithras in transit, as it were, between Iran and Rome.

[4]For a summary of these, see the various regional surveys in Beck 2013–48.

[5]See E. Lissi Caronna, "La rilevanza storico-religiosa del materiale mitriaco da S.Stefano Rotondo," in *Mysteria Mithrae*, ed. U. Bianchi (Leiden 1979) 205–218 with figs. The mithraeum is now published: *ead., Il Mitreo dei* Castra Peregrinorum (Leiden 1986).

[6]See L. Zotović, "A Mithraic Relief from Banjevac," *JMithrSt* 2 (1978) 189–191 with Pls. II and III.

[7]See R. L. Gordon, "Chronique - Hungary," *JMithrSt* 1 (1976) 200–201, with Pl. VI.

[8]M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca III: The Mithraeum at Marino* (Leiden 1982), esp. Pls. III–IX. This useful work also contains photographs of several Mithraic sculptures, mostly from Rome, illustrations of which were previously nonexistent or hard to come by: Pls. XXIV–XXXII.

[9]M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca IV: Le monument d'Ottaviano Zeno et le culte de Mithra sur le Celius* (Leiden 1978), esp. Pls. XIX–XXIV.

complex reliefs weave together physical fact and interpretative fantasy in a way that renders them quite dangerous to all but the highly sceptical or well-trained. Misdescription that finds in the monuments what theory indicated is one of the book's more serious defects, and we shall return to it.

The text of the book has a double core, each half of which is an elaboration of an aspect of Mithraism which Merkelbach has treated previously. One is the cult's unique structure of seven grades of initiation, the subject of his recent monograph.[10] The other is the teachings of Mithraism, which Merkelbach sees as those of a cosmic and astral religion derived from Platonism and centred on a doctrine of the soul's celestial ascent, and which was the subject of a much earlier article.[11] What unifies these two parts in the present work is the argument that the grade structure and the cosmology are the characteristics which distinguish Mithraism as a new mystery cult in its western context.

To establish that argument—and because this is a book about the god wherever he is found—Merkelbach must first review the earlier Mithra of Iran (9–39) and of the Anatolian border cultures of the Hellenistic age which were the probable agents of transit of the god's worship from East to West (43–72). The indebtedness of the Roman mystery cult to earlier forms of Mithra worship in the East is the most ingrained, and certainly the most contentious, problem of Mithraic scholarship. Merkelbach adopts a middle and, in its broad outlines, sensible position. Rightly gone—we shall probably never see it again—is Cumont's old view of Mithraism as "la forme romaine du mazdéisme" and his reconstruction which found in its gods and powers the barely metamorphosed counterparts of the Iranian pantheon. But Merkelbach sees numerous Iranian elements, especially of lore and myth, surviving in the western cult. The bull-killing is of course the most important of these. It is indisputably a cosmogonic act in both traditions, and certain shared concomitant details, such as the Moon's involvement in the story, establish the linkage. This is generally well treated by Merkelbach (9–14, 193–206), and it is interesting, after the minimalist position current in recent years, to see the parallels and possible influences everywhere exploited to the limits—and beyond. Orientalists may well question his revival of H. Lommel's theories that Mithra was the original bull-killer in the East before ever he became so in the West and that the bull slain by him was the mythic source of the sacred drink haoma (13 f., 204 f.).

Preceding the two chapters on the grades there is a brief but important programmatic chapter (75–77) in which Merkelbach introduces his two fundamental criteria of Mithraism as a "new religion" and puts forward the

[10]R. Merkelbach, *Weihegrade und Seelenlehre der Mithrasmysterien* (Opladen 1982, Rheinisch-Westfälische Ak. der Wiss., Vorträge G 257).

[11]R. Merkelbach, "Die Kosmogonie der Mithrasmysterien," *Eranos-Jhb.* 34 (1965) 218–257.

significant hypothesis that its mysteries were essentially created by a single individual of genius and created in a specific place, the city of Rome. The profile of this hypothetical founder is somewhat elaborated later (109): he must have been from an eastern province or border state (e.g., Pontus, Armenia) to have known intimately the Iranian myths which he wove into the new lore of the grades of initiation; yet he must also have been Greek-speaking and Greek-educated to have blended into the mysteries that ample component of Platonic philosophy. We learn further (160 f.) that the mysteries were likely created in the milieu of, and specifically for, the imperial bureaucracy at its centre in the capital.

Before considering further these important propositions, let us sketch in briefly the remaining plan of the work. The two chapters on the grades (2 and 3) are followed by a short chapter (4) on "Kultstätten und Kultzeremonien," a somewhat unsatisfactory—for reasons to be explained below (note 30)—mixed bag which includes the structure of the mithraeum as well as initiation rites (principally as reconstructed from the frescos of the Capua mithraeum) and the cult's sacred calendar.[12] Next are two considerable chapters (5 and 6) on the development and history of the cult and the social groups to which it appealed. These topics are generally well handled, and the data on the chronological and geographical spread of the monuments, which is the essential evidence in these matters, are nicely set out. The familiar story of Mithraism's progress among the military and the civil service of the European frontier zones is retold with style, and, as mentioned, there is a strong—and proper—emphasis on the cult in the capital. Mithraism is portrayed, in the phrase of one of the chapter headings, as "Die Religion der Loyalität," and that is the dynamic which accounts for the cult's somewhat lopsided success in Roman society of the second and third centuries. Next comes a brief chapter (7) on ethics, followed by the two substantial chapters (8 and 9) on the second major focus of the book, the cosmology of the mysteries and the lore on the destiny of souls. The final chapter (10) relates Mithraism's rapid collapse as empire and—more importantly—emperor turned to Christianity. Merkelbach rightly dismisses the eclectic and upper-class Mithraism of the late fourth century in Rome as essentially rootless. Quite early in the century the religion was as good as dead throughout the empire.

Overall and at a distance Merkelbach's portrait is a plausible and satisfying one. If not indisputably right, it cannot be said to be demonstrably wrong in any of its major features—with one exception to be taken up later. At closer

[12]That hoariest of "facts" about Mithras is once again deployed (141): that he was born on December 25th. In truth, the only evidence for it is the celebration of the birthday of "Invictus" on that date in the Calendar of Philocalus. "Invictus" is of course Sol Invictus, Aurelian's sun god. It does not follow that a different, earlier, and unofficial sun god, Sol Invictus Mithras, was necessarily, or even probably, born on that day too.

quarters, however, one is disturbed by a certain eccentricity—and I mean that in a literal sense. Merkelbach stands apart from the main stream, or indeed any stream, of scholarly inquiry on Mithraism. In itself this is no offence. Merkelbach's topic is Mithras, not scholarship on Mithras, and if he can render the definitive account without regard to the literature, then so much the worse for the literature: it is deservedly superseded. The risks of this approach, however, are considerable and obvious: unconscious repetition of what has already been said better or more fully elsewhere, unawareness of arguments that militate against one's own position, failure to take into account and exploit the findings and theories of others. Into all these dangers Merkelbach falls.

It is not, fortunately, the primary material with which Merkelbach seems unfamiliar. A few new monuments and mithraea appear to have been overlooked,[13] but Merkelbach generally shows a broad and thorough grasp of the monumental and archaeological data, including recent discoveries such as the mithraeum of the Castra Peregrinorum which is given its proper place in the scheme of Mithraism's history in the capital (177–179). Rather, it is the interpretative literature, which in one way or another attempts to make sense of the enigmatic primary data, which has been largely ignored. Over the last dozen or so years there has beeen a good deal of it, in large measure emanating from the three international congresses and the *Journal of Mithraic Studies* which was an offshoot of the first of those.[14] From all that activity Merkelbach stood entirely aloof. In retrospect, that stance was as unfortunate for the participants as for Merkelbach himself. His *Mithras* shows in equal measure how much he had to offer to them and how much they to him. Inevitably, the congresses and the journal were not entirely free of factionalism, and Merkelbach's aloofness may have had something to do with *parti pris* or fastidiousness. But again, it may be only a matter of a particular style of independent working, for there are other and earlier studies, apart from that movement, to which Merkelbach to the detriment of his work paid scant attention.

It is in the later chapters that these omissions are more particularly felt. In the earlier part on the grades Merkelbach is after all advancing a very novel theory—that the iconography is systematically permeated with symbols of the grades—and so necessarily breaks company with past and contemporary scholarship. Yet even there, as we shall see, the side scenes to the tauroctony

[13]E.g., the Banjevac and Intercisa reliefs (above, 297 with nn. 6 and 7); also there is no mention of the Caesarea mithraeum in the discussion of natural and artificial lighting effects (134–136): see R. J. Bull, "The Mithraeum at Caesarea Maritima," *Études Mithriaques* (Leiden 1978) 75–89, 79 with figs. 1 and 3.

[14]Congresses: Manchester 1971, Tehran 1975, Rome 1978; proceedings published respectively as *Mithraic Studies*, ed. J. R. Hinnells, 2 vols. (Manchester 1975); *Études Mithriaques* (Leiden 1978); *Mysteria Mithrae*, ed. U. Bianchi (Leiden 1979); *JMithrSt* 1 (1976), 2 (1977–78), 3 (1980).

have always posed certain problems of order and structure which Merkelbach ignores. And on the grades themselves, for an understanding of their place in the cult's ideology and of what progress through them will have meant for the initiates, R. L. Gordon's long article of 1980,[15] unmentioned by Merkelbach, is in my opinion a much more penetrating study.

Let us look first at the two chapters on the cosmology of Mithraism and its teaching on the celestial destiny of souls. With the general findings of this section I can have no quarrel, for it takes what I am convinced is the proper view: that Mithraism was a thoroughly *learned* religion drawing on, adapting, and expressing in its visual symbolism—no doubt also in its lost oral traditions and written texts—the philosophy and "science" of its Graeco-Roman intellectual setting. With the emphasis in places one might perhaps disagree. For example, Mithras' killing of the bull is treated almost exclusively as a cosmogonic act,[16] which it certainly is; but it is also *salvific*, as the painted text from the S.Prisca mithraeum shows (see pp. 145 and 199): *et nos servasti . . . sanguine fuso*. This latter aspect, the sense in which Mithras has "saved us by the blood shed," is scarcely explored at all. Again, Merkelbach looks for Mithraism's philosophical sources directly to Plato himself, especially the *Timaeus* for cosmology and the *Phaedrus* for the doctrine of the soul's ascent; and for parallels in thought on both these themes he makes extensive use of Boethius. That, however, is to cast one's net unnecessarily wide in time, both early and late. More cogent material is to hand in more nearly contemporary sources, especially in Plutarch who was writing in virtually the same generation as the founding of the Mysteries: see in particular the myths of the *De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet*, the *De genio Socratis*, and the *De sera numinis vindicta*.

Nevertheless, the general tenor of these chapters is, I believe, correct. What is amiss is that Merkelbach's failure to take cognizance of recent literature has left them, on the one side, somewhat superficial and out-of-date and, on the other, vulnerable to formidable objections which had already been made and which remain unfaced and unanswered. On the latter, much of the argument for the philosophical foundation and content of the Mysteries depends on being able to take at face value, as real fragments of Mithraic doctrine, the testimonia embedded in the Neoplatonists, especially in Porphyry's *De antro nympharum*. A decade ago that assumption was challenged by Robert Turcan in his painstaking *Mithras Platonicus* (Leiden

[15]R. L. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras," *JMithrSt* 3 (1980) 19–99.

[16]Merkelbach speaks throughout of the "Stieropfer." The question of whether the bull-*killing* is also a *sacrifice*, and in what sense, should not perhaps have been begged. Best on Mithraic concepts and practice of sacrifice is R. Turcan, "Le sacrifice mithriaque: innovations de sens et de modalités," *Le sacrifice dans l'antiquité*, (Vandoeuvres-Geneva 1981, *Entretiens Hardt* 27) 341–380.

1975). The essence of Turcan's case is that most of the testimonia, far from being accurate reports of what the Mithraists taught and believed, are mere reflections of what it suited the Neoplatonists, for their own philosophical purposes, to read into the Mysteries. That argument is not met by Merkelbach (though he is aware of Turcan's work). Until it is, the testimonia remain suspect. Consequently, the reconstruction of Mithraic teaching, insofar as it is based on them, is much more tentative and uncertain than Merkelbach supposes it.[17]

Astronomy and astrology, it is increasingly recognized, played a part in the teachings of the Mysteries. It had to be thus, if the core of their soteriology was the initiate's progress through seven grades controlled each by its own planet and the eventual return of the soul to the heavens whence it had descended. Merkelbach had covered the Mysteries' cosmic lore in his article of 1965 (above, n. 11), which was an excellent survey in its day. Unfortunately, the material in the new *Mithras* is part repetition and part expansion of that article, and it neither offers an advance in interpretation of its own nor shows any real awareness of, or willingness to take into account, the work of others in the interval.[18] To those familiar with the literature, this will be particularly apparent in the superficial treatment of the iconography and underlying doctrines of the zodiac and other constellation symbols (215–221).[19] But perhaps the most egregious example is the handling of the two

[17]The following Mithraic—or "Mithraic"—doctrines are particularly open to challenge: Mithras as demiurge (Merkelbach p. 232), the triple Hekate as an image of the soul (234 f.), and the passage of souls through the gates of the solstices (238–240). Another important work by Turcan which likewise goes unanswered is his article "Salut mithriaque et sotériologie néoplatonicienne," *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell'impero romano*, eds. U. Bianchi and M. J. Vermaseren (Leiden 1982) 173–191. Turcan there called in question the assumption that Mithraism was much concerned with the other-worldly destiny of inidividual souls; Mithraic salvation was rather, he contended, on the Zoroastrian pattern of man's participation in the collective struggle of the good creation against the forces of evil. Merkelbach's chapter on Mithraic cosmology and the bull-killing (8), with its strong Iranian emphasis, would fit quite well with that view; the chapter on Mithraic lore on the soul's celestial journey (9) less so. Again, I stress that it is not a matter of who is right—finally, I believe Merkelbach is—but of covering, in a work which aims at comprehensiveness, the important current theories and insights. Also important for the Iranian dimensions of the bull-killing is J. R. Hinnells, "Reflections on the Bull-Slaying Scene," *Mithraic Studies* (above, n. 14) 290–312.

[18]Let me admit explicitly that my own work falls largely within this area and that it is somewhat galling to have a decade of quite fruitful research, for whatever reason, completely overlooked. I appreciate that my objectivity, or at least my sense of proportion, may therefore be open to question here.

[19]On the zodiac, see my "Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac," *JMithrSt* 1 (1976) 1–19, 2 (1978) 87–147; also my "Sette Sfere, Sette Porte, and the Spring Equinoxes of A.D. 172 and 173," *Mysteria Mithrae* (above, n. 14) 515–530. On the constellation symbols, see my "Cautes and Cautopates: Some Astronomical Considerations," *JMithrSt* 2 (1977) 1–17; also the overview of the scholarship in Beck 2081 f. Merkelbach does make some use of M. P. Speidel's unfortunate *Mithras-Orion* (Leiden 1980: see my review, *Phoenix* 36 [1982] 196–198), but in a limited way

paredrial powers, the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates, who flank the scene of the bull-killing (207 f.). Considerable work has been done on the details of their iconography (particularly the highly significant reversal of their positions between northern and southern monuments), on their complex astronomical significances, and on the subtle symbolism of opposition at different levels of reality which they convey.[20] Of all this work Merkelbach seems quite unaware.[21]

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in an earlier context (130 f.). S. Insler's much superior—but ultimately mistaken—"A New Interpretation of the Bull-Slaying Motif," *Hommages Vermaseren*, eds. M. B. de Boer and T. A. Edridge (Leiden 1978) 519–538, he ignores. The correspondences between elements in the composition of the tauroctony and various constellations pose an unrecognized problem for Merkelbach. If the elements are what they are (i.e., dog, scorpion, etc.) because each symbolized a certain constellation (Canis Major/Minor, Scorpius, etc.), why need one look for an alternative system to explain their logic as a set? Yet that is precisely what Merkelbach does in the earlier chapters: the elements of the tauroctony are found to be symbols each of a different grade of initiation. At least the double determination needs explaining. (Post-Merkelbach is D. Ulansey's theory on the constellations in the tauroctony: "Mithras and Perseus," *Helios* 13 [1986] 33–62; see also his "Mithraic Studies: A Paradigm Shift?" *Religious Studies Review* 13.2 [1987] 104–110.)

On the positive side, it should be mentioned that the section on the planets (208–215) is somewhat fuller and more satisfactory than that on the zodiac, although the analysis is flawed (i) by a misreading of the order of the planets on the Brigetio plate (*CIMRM* 1727: the order of course follows the days of the week from Saturn on the left to Venus on the right, not from the Sun to Saturn [209—Merkelbach does, however, give the correct order in the description accompanying the illustration, Abb. 143]), and (ii) by the inclusion of a number of monuments where it is very doubtful whether the gods in question are in fact "planetary" at all (208, n. 46: *CIMRM* 1128, 1137, 1430, 1797, 2202, 2338, 2340). Merkelbach's reading of the fragment from Dieburg, *CIMRM* 1271, is excellent (209, with description to Abb. 119) and its identifications should probably be preferred to mine (Beck 2038, n. 57). Also useful is his report of recent doubts about the genuineness of part of the planetary sequence in the important Bologna relief, *CIMRM* 693 (*ad* Abb. 71). On all matters concerning the planets see my *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* (forthcoming from Brill).

[20]See esp. J. R. Hinnells, "The Iconography of Cautes and Cautopates, I: the Data," *JMithrSt* 1 (1976) 36–67; R. L. Beck, "Cautes and Cautopates: Some Astronomical Considerations" (above, n. 19); R. L. Gordon, "The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum: The Example of Sette Sfere," *JMithrSt* 1 (1976) 119–165, at 126–130. Merkelbach mentions, of course, the usual and obvious associations of Cautes with the Sun and Cautopates with the Moon and the diurnal and seasonal connotations of the pair. Oddly, Cautopates is associated with moonset but not with sunset. A reading is offered for tauroctonies on which Cautes (the torchbearer with the raised torch) is found on the right below Luna: clockwise from upper left—Sol = sunrise, Luna = moonset, Cautes = sunrise, Cautopates = moonset. For Merkelbach, Cautes' primary identification is with the morning star and Cautopates' with the evening star. This "fact" is asserted, but it is nowhere established; neither is the surprising remark that the torchbearers ". . . heissen auf Lateinisch Hesperus und Lucifer" (207)—as scarcely needs saying, scores of inscriptions name them in Latin Cautes and Cautopates! The torchbearers' main significance for Merkelbach is that they are the "Repräsentanten" of the fifth and sixth grades of initiation (see below).

[21]It would be churlish not to comment on the strengths as well as the weaknesses of this section of the book. As always with Merkelbach, there are a number of fine perceptions along

As already mentioned, the two chapters (5 and 6) on the history of the cult, its spread, and its ethos are generally competent and persuasive, yet here too certain omissions have left them rather less solid than they appear at first sight. First, the ethos of Mithraism as a religion of "loyalty" and its peculiar appeal to those in the empire's structures of service (soldiers, bureaucrats, freedmen) has already been well covered by R. L. Gordon,[22] and the reader will find little new in Merkelbach's treatment—though he will find it well presented. Secondly, some important and detailed work by P. Beskow and I. Toth on Mithraism at its great centre in Poetovio and among the customs officers headquartered there has been overlooked.[23] Thirdly, and of much greater importance, no consideration is given to any of the other hypotheses for the formation and diffusion of the cult within the empire. For Merkelbach, Mithraism was founded in Rome and spread outwards from there. I happen to agree that this is the most likely scenario,[24] but other possibilities have been advanced and these should not be ignored, most notably Beskow's recent thesis of transfer from Anatolia to the Crimea and thence up the Danube.[25] The problem is that the earliest Roman monuments are not demonstrably much—if at all—earlier than some of the monuments elsewhere in the empire.[26] Diffusion from the capital must, then, have been unusually rapid—if that is what in fact took place. Merkelbach's reconstruction is persuasive but it is not beyond doubt nor self-evidently correct, which is the way he presents it.

In principle, much could be learned of the transmission of the cult not

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the way: for example, the observation (222) that since Mithra's day in Iran fell in the middle of each month (the 16th) and since in the middle of each (lunar) month the full Moon sets as the Sun rises, the presence and composition of Sol and Luna on the tauroctony may allude to precisely that fact, i.e., the simultaneous rising of the Sun and setting of the Moon on Mithras' day. The section on the Moon in the bull-killing is generally excellent, though one may perhaps remain sceptical of the novel suggestion that in the composition the bull is deliberately curved to intimate the lunar crescent (202 f.).

[22]R. L. Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society: Social Factors in the Explanation of Religious Change in the Roman Empire," *Religion* 2 (1972) 92–121.

[23]P. Beskow, "The *portorium* and the Mysteries of Mithras," *JMithrSt* 3 (1980) 1–18; I. Toth, "Das lokale System der mithraischen Personifikationen im Gebiet von Poetovio," *Arheološki vestnik* 28 (1977) 385–392.

[24]One of the last works of the late Professor Vermaseren ("Mithras in der Römerzeit," *Die orientalischen Religionen im Römerreich*, ed. M. J. Vermaseren [Leiden 1981] 96–120, at 96–103) began to explore this question of the actual founding of the Mysteries in Rome. Vermaseren, of course, was always particularly concerned with Mithraism in the city, from his dissertation of 1951 (*De Mithrasdienst in Rome* [Utrecht]) through his major publication of excavations of the S.Prisca mithraeum (M. J. Vermaseren and C. C. van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome* [Leiden 1965]).

[25]J. Beskow, "The Routes of Early Mithraism," *Études Mithriaques* (above, n. 14) 7–18.

[26]Especially the Melichrisus monument (*CIMRM* 2268–69) from Novae in Moesia inferior, datable to ca A.D. 100 from the dedicator's master, P. Caragonius Philopalaestrus. See R. L. Gordon, "The Date and Significance of *CIMRM* 593," *JMithrSt* 2 (1977–78) 148–174, at 153 f.

merely from the dating of the monuments but from the analysis of their formal elements and in particular from the composition of the large complex reliefs with their many side scenes surrounding the bull-killing. Patterns of development ought to be discernible therefrom. In practice, however, this approach has in the past yielded disappointingly little fruit—though not for want of its application. L. A. Campbell's typology of tauroctonies, the only full one on offer, has proved arbitrary and ineffective, and in any case his regional distinctions were aimed at identifying ideological variations rather than a chronology and patterns of influence.[27] The earlier work of E. Will, and of F. Saxl before him, did at least deal objectively and in detail with the main types of complex reliefs, but their conclusions on transmission now command little credence—or attention.[28] All the more reason, then, that Merkelbach should have taken a fresh look at the possibilities inherent in this approach or at least have explained why his predecessors were moving down a blind alley. He has done neither. Yet a promising new beginning is to hand in R. L. Gordon's minute analysis of the composition and arrangement of the side scenes in the complex Rhine and Italian monuments.[29] Undoubtedly, part of the reason for Merkelbach's neglect of this approach is that he had already dealt with the side scenes in the earlier chapters as vehicles of the cult's lore of the grades. It would not then have occurred to him to cover the same ground again in the very different context of the cult's historical development and spread. In Mithraic studies (as no doubt in others) one must be extraordinarily careful that the chosen structure of the work does not foreclose important lines of inquiry. So much of the evidence is multivalent, and the inquirer, especially in a comprehensive work, must not be afraid to travel the same ground more than once for different perspectives.[30]

[27]L. A. Campbell, "Typology of Mithraic Tauroctonies," *Berytus* 11 (1954–55) 1–60; *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* (Leiden 1968).

[28]E. Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain* (Paris 1955); F. Saxl, *Mithras: Typengeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Berlin 1931).

[29]R. L. Gordon, "Panelled Complications," *JMithrSt* 3 (1980) 200–227.

[30]The same problem affects the earlier chapter (4) on "Kultstätten und Kultzeremonien." Mithraism's central event, liturgical and social, was undoubtedly the cult meal—that, after all, is why the mithraeum is so distinctively designed with benches for feasting. Yet Merkelbach's chapter skips it altogether. The reason is that *representations* of the banquet are evidence (some of the best, in fact) for Merkelbach's thesis that the content of Mithraic iconography concerns the grades; the banquet is thus dealt with, though not very fully, in the chapter before (3, at 132 f.). The best treatment of the banquet remains J. P. Kane's "The Mithriac Cult Meal in its Greek and Roman Environment" (*Mithraic Studies* [above, n. 14] 313–351). On the structure of the mithraeum, with which Merkelbach's chapter 4 is also concerned, the best treatment—though it is by no means error-free—is in my opinion R. L. Gordon's exploration of the disposition of symbols within a single example, the mithraeum of Sette Sfere at Ostia ("The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum," *JMithrSt* 1 [1976] 119–165). It evokes, as does no other study, what a mithraeum is *about* as a physical instrument of salvation through the replication of the cosmos in miniature—a time and space machine, in effect. Neither of these two studies is noticed by Merkelbach.

One important additional conclusion Merkelbach does draw from the various scenes of the monuments. The iconography is not merely evidence for the lore of the grades but also shows, through its organization of so much disparate material (much of it the pre-existent Iranian myths) into a coherent, if enigmatic and complex, new structure, the hand and mind of a single individual—Mithraism's unknown founding genius (109). I am of two minds on this key proposition. On the one side, as will soon be apparent, I am not convinced that the iconography is in fact the vehicle for the grade structure. For me, then, the proposition lapses in a formal sense with its premise. On the other side, however, Merkelbach has posed a question which it was important to ask, and his answer may well be true regardless of his, or any, thesis on the content of the monuments. Indeed, it ought to be possible to analyse in a structuralist fashion both the design and the content, even without a clear or final understanding of the latter's meaning, to establish the likelihood of a founding inventor of the Mysteries. That would be a task for the future, but meanwhile Merkelbach is to be commended for raising the question of what it might have meant actually to *make* the Mysteries and to have attempted the characterization of a founding father.[31] Till now, Mithraism has generally been treated as if it somehow evolved Topsy-like from its Iranian precursor—a most implausible scenario once it is stated explicitly.

I turn now to the most novel and provocative part of the book, chapters 2 and 3 (of the major section on Roman Mithraism) which deal with the seven grades of initiation. Merkelbach's thesis here can be simply stated: that the grades are "in" the monuments in the sense that the scene of the bull-killing is a composite of their symbols and that most, if not all, of the side scenes represent aspects of individual grades or transitions from a lower to a higher grade. The chapters, then, are not only a treatment of the grades but also a full explication of the iconography, which is always—because necessarily—the core of any study of the Mysteries.

Whatever one's reservations, one's first comment must be a positive one. The instinct to look to the life of the cult for the key to the iconography was a sound one.[32] Whatever that intricate array of scenes may finally be found to have meant, it will have been something of real significance to the initiates. What better working hypothesis than the unique hierarchy which defined the initiates' progress within the Mysteries?

But while the hypothesis is excellent in conception, in execution it is unsound and marred by demonstrable inaccuracies in the reading of the

[31]In my survey (Beck 2097 f.) I suggested this question of the invention of the Mysteries as the first desideratum of future research. I am therefore delighted to see that Merkelbach anticipated it.

[32]Again, I am glad to see another of my desiderata for Mithraic research attempted, if not achieved (see preceding note: *ibid.*).

monuments. First, it badly lacks a theoretical and critical framework. We are never told why the received and superficially quite plausible interpretation of the scenes as (for the most part) events in the life story of the god Mithras will no longer serve. The answer, as Gordon's "Panelled Complications" made clear (above, note 29), is that the scenes are not organized on the monuments in any sequence that admits a *narrative*. Indeed, they vary in the most bewildering way, both in the ordering and in the selection, from monument to monument. But if that problem complicated the old narrative interpretation, it equally compromises Merkelbach's new reading. For while it is possible to assign, with more or less plausibility, this or that scene to this or that grade (or transition between grades), it is nowhere obvious that the progression as a whole is exemplified anywhere on the monuments. And yet order and progress were of the essence of the Mithraic grade system. Why then are they not manifested on the monuments? Or why, if the grades are indeed present, are they so hopelessly and pointlessly confused? These are unanswered questions in Merkelbach. It is here than one misses desperately a proper *structural* analysis of the composition of the complex monuments, not to mention some recognition of the work by Gordon, Will, and Saxl already noted.[33]

An analysis of the central scene, the bull-killing itself, is more promising. A standard tauroctony has ten elements. By treating four of these as pairs of equivalent symbols (Cautes ~ Sol, Cautopates ~ Luna), the number may be reduced to eight. If the bull is excluded as a special case, victim as opposed to agent or participant, we are left with the requisite seven.[34] Mithras may be assigned to the Pater, the torchbearers and luminaries to the next two senior grades, and the animals to the four grades below. This, though the analysis is not so overtly structural, is what Merkelbach does:

Mithras	Pater
Cautes (Sol)	Heliodromus
Cautopates (Luna)	Perses
Dog	Leo
Scorpion	Miles
Snake	Nymphus
Raven	Corax

The fit for the three highest grades is quite satisfactory. Their connotations and what we know of their roles in the life of the cult correspond well

[33]Above, nn. 28, 29; also H. Lavagne, "Les reliefs mithriaques à scènes multiples en Italie," *Mélanges de philosophie, de littérature et d'histoire offerts à Pierre Boyancé* (Paris 1974, Coll. de l'École franç. de Rome 22) 481–504.

[34]The count overlooks, as perhaps it should not, the strangest feature of the tauroctony: the bull's tail metamorphosed into an ear or ears of wheat. Arguably, this is a distinct element of content and composition.

with the postulated symbols. Likewise, that the raven of the tauroctony should denote the Raven grade is eminently reasonable—in itself. The difficulties arise with the animal symbols of the remaining three grades. The connections offered are remote and the logic tenuous and implausible.[35] The dog signifies the Lion grade because Mithras in the scene of the hunt is accompanied impartially by dogs or lions, which are thus equivalent symbols.[36] The scorpion signifies the Soldier because Scorpius in astrology is the domicile of Mars. The snake signifies the Nymphus, which Merkelbach ingeniously reads in the sense of "pupa," because the snake is equally a symbol of rejuvenation through the shedding of its skin.[37] Not only are these linkages rather far-fetched in themselves (and disturbingly dissimilar from each other), but they also bear little relation to the known symbolism and associations of the three grades in question, for example the Nymphus' primary connotations of light and androgyny. Three misses—or strikes on the extreme edge of the target—out of seven is not a score to inspire confidence. One wonders, especially since the tauroctony's composition does not *compel* the belief that one is dealing necessarily with an ordered set of seven constituents, if the postulated correspondences are not after all coincidences, or at the most secondary or tertiary meanings set on elements whose selection and composition were really determined by factors altogether different. This is where the astronomical and astrological hypothesis is so much stronger, for it can be demonstrated with much more cogent logic that the correspondences with constellations in the pattern of a star map is the common factor behind the choice and disposition of the elements of the tauroc-

[35]The animal symbolism *per se* is quite appropriate. The Mithraists, we know, made extensive use of it (Porph. *ibid.*, Ambrosiaster *Quaest. vet. nov. test.* 114). On Merkelbach's linking of symbols with grades, see also my comments on his earlier *Weihegrade und Seelenlehre* (above, n. 10) in Beck 2091 f.

[36]Particularly awkward are those complex monuments, mainly from the Rhine area, which contain, among the supplementary symbols in the main scene, a lion. Why, then, the *two* Leo symbols, the lion as well as the usual dog? Somewhat lamely, Merkelbach suggests (100) that this is because most Mithraists occupied that rank. On the other side, Merkelbach's explication (79) of the sistrum as the Leo's symbol on the pavement of the Felicissimus mithraeum (a puzzling and unparalleled detail) I find among his most felicitous: an allusion through Isis and her search for Osiris at the time of the mid-summer rising of the Dog Star to the sign of Leo and the heat which it brings, and thence to the planetary Jupiter who is the guardian of the Mithraic Leones.

[37]The Nymphus is the most obviously paradoxical of the grades, for the name itself is a sort of non-word for a non-thing—a male bride: see esp. Gordon (above, n. 15) 48 ff. Merkelbach's bold suggestion of the insect pupa as the term's primary connotation within the Mysteries has virtually no support from the monuments. He finds (84) a bee's pupa on the unusual Roman relief *CIMRM* 334, but all past authorities have read it as an ant. However, the theory does fit well with the known associations of the Nymphus grade with renewal. Also (88–90), the play of symbols and associations in Porphyry's *De antro* between water nymphs, bees, and souls, all centred around the word "nymph," *might* have as a background a Mithraic connotation of the Nymphus as pupa—*if* the *De antro* is in fact as thoroughly coloured with the doctrines of the Mysteries as some (Merkelbach and the present reviewer among them) suppose.

tony (above, note 19). *Why* that theme was chosen is another—and as yet unanswered—question. Merkelbach's hypothesis has of course the advantage that, if right, it would need no further explanation: to set the grades symbolically within the bull-killing would have been self-evidently appropriate for the Mysteries.

To support his interpretations, Merkelbach offers an analysis of certain unusual monuments which, he contends, are particularly rich in grade symbols (82–85). It is here that the book's most troubling defect manifests itself. The symbols are all too often misread, not in the secondary sense that they are misinterpreted as to their meaning, but in the primary sense that they are misdescribed as to what they actually are in appearance and intent. Thus, on the engraved gems *CIMRM* 2354–55 what is clearly an eagle is described as a dove, symbol of the Nymphus via the tutelary planet Venus;[38] on the floor mosaic of the Sette Porte mithraeum (*CIMRM* 288) the mass of rock from which a snake emerges is described as a lion—for the Leo;[39] and on the bronze plate from Ostia *CIMRM* 234 the sacrificial knife is described as a sickle—for the Perses. The mistakes are doubly disturbing in that Merkelbach does not for the most part trouble to mention or dispute the generally accepted reading.[40] His *Mithras* is for this reason a dangerous—indeed, an

[38]Plausible, however, is the suggestion that the objects flanking Cautopates are an upright and an inverted Phrygian cap. Omitted from the description are the small object (lion mask?) superimposed on the palm branch and Sol's whip (the latter mentioned in the description to Abb. 166). On the reading of the scorpion as a tortoise, see below. The illustration (Abb. 166) is—unusually—much inferior to *CIMRM*'s. Finally, I would be wary of putting too much weight on an exact interpretation of these two monuments. They are magical gems, and the plethora of symbols may be mere apotropaic overkill, having nothing to do with the Mithraic grades. They are also private, and thus possibly idiosyncratic, objects, unlike most tauroctonies which were common at least to the members of the cell—hence in a sense official.

[39]Merkelbach does, however, correctly read the bird on this mosaic as a raven (in place of *CIMRM*'s eagle, following Becatti). His spear and crescent are certainly preferable to *CIMRM*'s thunderbolt (also after Becatti), but better still is Gordon's ard ([above, n. 15] 30 with n. 88). In the description in the text (83), but not in the description to the illustration (Abb. 37), Merkelbach omits altogether the figures of Jupiter and Saturn on the same mosaic floor. They are of course part of a set of six planetary gods, four of which appear on the benches, and perhaps they are omitted for that reason. But their presence on the pavement is awkward. Merkelbach finds symbols of the first five grades there, and Saturn and Jupiter are close by. Though Saturn would serve admirably as the symbol of the highest grade, the Pater, Jupiter can in no way function for the sixth, the Heliodromus. For Jupiter is the tutelary planet of the fourth grade, whose "lion" symbol is already accounted for, while it is Sol, who is altogether absent from these mosaics, who presides over the sixth. Merkelbach accordingly ignores the two planetary gods on the pavement and suggests that symbols of the two senior grades, now lost, were elsewhere in the mithraeum, either on the main cult icon or on separate altars. This sort of selective use of evidence just will not do.

[40]A further example is the bee's pupa (symbol of the Nymphus) which Merkelbach finds in *CIMRM* 334 in place of what has hitherto been seen as an ant (above, n. 37). Note also the misreading of the steer's leg on the front of the Poetovio altar *CIMRM* 1584 as a dolphin, one of the postulated symbols of the Perses (116).

almost impossible—book for any but the most wary expert to use without following Merkelbach into error.[41]

Perhaps the most egregious example of the suppression of alternative readings concerns the scene in which Mithras initiates or in some way commissions the kneeling Sol (123). Mithras holds in his right hand an object which Merkelbach states, as a matter of simple fact, is a Phrygian cap. The reading is important to Merkelbach since the Phrygian cap, an item of oriental attire, may be taken as a symbol of the grade of Perses. The scene is interpreted, then, in line with Merkelbach's general theory that all Mithraic scenes concern the grades, as the initiation of the Perses into the next grade, that of Heliodromus. The Pater (Mithras) has removed the Perses' Phrygian cap and is replacing it with the Heliodromus' rayed solar bonnet. No one would suppose from Merkelbach's treatment that the object held in Mithras' right hand could be other than a Phrygian cap, let alone that another reading might have been widely suggested—as it has. Starting with A. Dieterich's proposal for the scene on the Virunum relief (*CIMRM* 1430),[42] the object has frequently and systematically been read as a steer's forequarter. There is in fact good reason for such a seemingly bizarre identification: in Egyptian astronomy a steer's foreleg is the polar constellation Ursa Major; it is thus the symbol of control over the cosmos exercised at the pole, and as such it is carried by the supreme god of the *Mithrasliturgie* who is arguably a solar deity with elements of Mithras himself.[43] But the real warrant for the identification is that in most instances where some degree of detail is recognizable *the object looks like a leg of meat while it does not look like a Phrygian*

[41]Illustrative of Merkelbach's tendentious treatment of the monuments at its worst is his analysis (226) of the "Aion" figure at Merida, *CIMRM* 777. On the figure's left hip Merkelbach finds a dog's head; broken off from the right would have been a wolf's, which with the lion's head on the chest would have completed the three heads of Cerberus which Macrobius tells us (*Sat.* 1.20.13) symbolized past, present, and future on the Alexandrian statue of Sarapis-Jupiter-Pluto. In the description to the illustration (Abb. 77) Merkelbach says that the surviving head is the wolf's and that it is set against the god's leg. In fact there is neither dog's head nor wolf's: against Mithras' *leg* is a tree trunk aginst which is set a *billy goat's* head (a buck's according to *CIMRM*, but mistakenly); against his *hip* a horn-like projection presumably for some attachment (*three* projections also on the god's right from where the snake crosses his thigh, knees, and calves). Nothing, then, except the lion's head intimates the three heads of Cerberus. In an astonishingly arbitrary fashion, the interpretation is extended to the famous Modena figure *CIMRM* 695: the ram's head on the god's left flank is in place of a wolf's, the goat's on his right in place of a dog's! In all this there is no mention of the *actual* Cerberus with dog's, lion's, and ram's head at the feet of the Castel Gandolfo figure *CIMRM* 326.

[42]A. Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*[3] (Leipzig and Berlin 1923, repr. Stuttgart 1966) 77.

[43]Dieterich *ibid.* 76 f., text p. 12 lines 16–19; the full case, now supported by the Ponza zodiac, is set out in Beck, "Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac: II," *JMithrSt* 1 (1976) 87–147, at 120–127. It is not of course necessary to the argument that the "Mithrasliturgie," so called by Dieterich, actually be a Mithraic liturgy; at the most it need merely be contaminated with stray Mithraic thought.

cap.[44] That is why in instance after instance *CIMRM* describes it as a piece of meat or by some such term. Surely, these identifications by the standard reference work should have been noted and argued against, not ignored.[45]

Clearly, the moral here is that the actual physical appearance of the objects on the monuments, closely scrutinized and compared, should be the starting point for the analysis and interpretation of the scenes. Seldom, though, is this an entirely straightforward business, and Mithraic studies badly stand in need of some canons of procedure here. Too often we merely assert—or counterassert—that a shape on a monument looks like such-and-such an object, therefore it is that object. Merkelbach is certainly as guilty of this simplism as any Mithraic researcher in the past, and notably so because so many of his interpretations depend on these identifications.

First, in more instances than we might care to admit, because of small size or crude workmanship it is difficult to say with certainty or even any probability what an object is or appears to be. Here, of course, comparison is of the essence. In most instances one can say with confidence that the object is—or is intended to be—such-and-such because on larger or better worked exemplars of the same scene it is unambiguously such-and-such. The gem stone *CIMRM* 2355 furnishes an instance where, I believe, Merkelbach has gone astray in this regard. He rightly observes (82, note 11) that the scorpion is missing from its usual place at the bull's genitals, possibly because of

[44]The data is presented case by case by Gordon in J. R. Hinnells and R. L. Gordon, "Some New Photographs of Well-Known Mithraic Monuments," *JMithrSt* 2 (1977–78) 198–223, at 213 ff. The presentation is exemplary except for the omission by oversight of the important Quadraro relief (*CIMRM* 321). Only on the object in the Dura fresco (*CIMRM* 42) would I be less sanguine than Gordon in discerning the steer's leg. The monuments where the steer's leg is most apparent—and the Phrygian cap least plausible—are in my view *CIMRM* 390, 650, 1128, 1359, 1430, 1579, 2334, and the Marino fresco. Most of these monuments I have examined in person, as has Gordon. The clearest and most unambiguous steer's leg is that which lies before the altar in the scene of the compact between Mithras and Sol on *CIMRM* 1584 (Merkelbach's dolphin! [above, n. 40]). It is this which above all validates the steer's leg as the object in the standard commissioning scene.

[45]Once it is appreciated that there is an alternative to the Phrygian cap, the weaknesses in Merkelbach's interpretation of the scene become quite apparent. (1) The scene seldom actually resembles a coronation or investiture with the rayed solar bonnet. At Marino, for example, Mithras cannot be *removing* the "Phrygian cap," for Sol's head *already* carries the nimbus and rays. Equally clearly, Mithras is *brandishing* the object, whatever it is, over Sol. (2) On Merkelbach's interpretation, the object is that which is *superseded*, the insignia of the grade *left*. It should not then have prominence over the new insignia, the rayed solar crown or bonnet. Yet it does (see, again, Marino): it is the object which is common to virtually all instances of the scene and which is carried in Mithras' right hand (*CIMRM* 350 being the sole clear exception), almost always aloft. (3) The Phrygian cap is the emblem of the Pater himself, not of the Perses (see the symbols of the Felicissimus pavement, *CIMRM* 299). There is at least an unaddressed ambiguity here. (4) On Merkelbach's interpretation there are *two* scenes which refer to the transition from the fifth to the sixth grade, since the scene traditionally read as Mithras climbing behind Sol in the latter's chariot is also taken in this way. The duplication is not explained.

the tiny size of the work. Nearby, however, he finds what he identifies as a tortoise, and subsequently (87 f.) an ingenious rationale links that creature as symbol to the first grade. Now I will readily admit that the minute object on 2355, as far as it resembles either, looks more like a tortoise than a scorpion. But tortoises on Mithraic monuments are singularly rare: apart from the four instances where the creature accompanies Mercury there is a sole example, *CIMRM* 1496. Scorpions, however, are altogether standard, and it is surely more credible that on 2355 the object is simply a scorpion which has been somewhat offset from its usual place.[46]

Second, one must bear in mind the possibility of misunderstanding on the part of the designers and artists. An object may be vague because the artist had no clear conception of what he was meant to be executing, whether because it was unclear or ambiguous on a copied exemplar or because the Mithraist commissioning the monument was himself uncertain as to the orthodox iconography—if such existed.[47] Such, I suspect, is not infrequently the case on the cruder northern monuments, especially the Danubian. In such instances—if they can be recognized—one could not attach any significance to what an object "is" or seems to be, because the artist or the Mithraic designer might himself have had no clear or accurate conception. Paradoxically, we may ourselves have a better idea of what Mithraic iconography intended it to be than the original executor of the piece. The problem is compounded by our lack of real knowledge of how the iconography was transmitted as the cult spread.[48]

Third, there is the possibility of a deliberate ambiguity in which certain symbols are treated as equivalent. It may be that the object in the commissioning scene is legitimately now a Phrygian cap and now a steer's leg—or

[46]Even this is not the end of the matter. One must consider also the particular nature of the monument. *CIMRM* 2355 is a magical gem stone. It is thus a personal rather than a cult object, hence an unreliable guide to *official* iconography and the doctrine which underlies it. Thus even if the object really is a tortoise, it may signify little. See above, n. 38.

[47]Virtually no work has been done on this sort of error and ambiguity in Mithraic iconography. An excellent start is R. Turcan's "Représentations des vents dans l'art funéraire et mithriaque," *Iconographie classique et identités régionales*, eds. L. Kahil *et al.* (Athens 1986, *BCH* Supp. 14) 119–128, exploring the attributes (club, thunderbolt, or conch shell?) carried by the Winds leading the Sun's horses in the Dieburg Phaethon relief (*CIMRM* 1247).

[48]The Dura side-scenes with their fairly close conformity with western exemplars suggested to Rostovtzeff and Cumont the use of pattern books or illustrated sacred texts, while F. Drexel inferred from the individual and self-contained sculpted scenes from the first Stockstadt mithraeum that that had been the original mode of transmission: references in Beck 2016, 2038. The open question is the extent to which *verbal* doctrine (whether written or oral) and explication of the symbolism controlled the iconography. More work needs to be done on aberrations (i.e., monuments which have obviously "got it wrong"); see, e.g., my study of monuments where, exceptionally, both Cautes and Cautopates carry raised torches, thereby obliterating the essential polarity of the pair: "The Mithraic Torchbearers and 'Absence of Opposition'," *EMC* NS 1 (1982) 126–140.

even by blurring of detail *both*. The obvious example of such ambiguity is the bull-in-a-boat scene common to many Danubian reliefs: what the bull rests on is *both* a boat *and* the lunar crescent. There may be other, less recognizable doublings. The subtlety of Mithraic iconography should not be underestimated—an error to which, one should in fairness add, Merkelbach is *not* generally prone.

Several of these considerations come to the fore in Merkelbach's reading of the Roman relief *CIMRM* 350, and I select it as a final example of the difficulties and dangers in the reading of the monuments. 350 has two unusual subsidiary scenes below the main field of the bull-killing—or rather, two unique variants of subsidiary scenes, the commissioning of Sol (left) and the *iunctio dextrarum* (right). In the commissioning Mithras holds neither Phrygian cap nor steer's leg, and there is no solar bonnet either on Sol's head or nearby. In the *iunctio dextrarum* there is no actual joining of hands and the second person is certainly not Sol but a figure who is fully clothed, shaggy-haired and bearded, and appears to be elderly. Merkelbach interprets each scene as a stage in the initiation of a Leo by a Pater. What is carried by the Mithras figure on the left is a thunderbolt, symbol of the Lion grade, and the object in the same person's hand on the right is a bowl containing honey with which, we know from Porphyry (*De antro* 15), the hands of the Lions were ritually cleansed. This is ingenious and elegant in its economy of interpretation. However, the thunderbolt is quite illusory: Merkelbach has wishfully so read the coincidental grouping of a short sword, its sheath, and the folds of Mithras' garment. On the other side, while the object in Mithras' hand does indeed resemble a bowl, the scale of the work is too small to tell for certain, and the alternative of a dagger (*CIMRM*) remains possible. What should be noted is the peculiar gesture of Mithras' *other* hand, touching the second figure on the top of the wrist of the extended right arm. The gesture is precisely that of Mithras in the *iunctio dextrarum* scene on the Marino fresco.[49] It cannot plausibly be seen as part of an ablution. *CIMRM* 350 remains quite enigmatic. It is certainly expressive of that theme of *exchange* between two parties which runs through much of the iconography, but it is mistaken or premature to try to fix a precise meaning where the details are elusive, unparalleled, and at the threshold of readibility.[50]

We have seen that Merkelbach's theory on the grades suffers both from the lack of an overall structural analysis of the monuments and from frequent misreading of their content. What, finally, of the general credibility of his interpretations of the scenes? First, on the positive side, it is refreshing to

[49]See M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca III* (above, n. 8) Pl. 8; again, there is no actual *iunctio*.

[50]In the description to the illustration (Abb. 47), Merkelbach identifies the two small busts below Sol and Luna as Hesperus (Phosphorus and Hesperus intended?). Rather, since they have wings on their foreheads, they are wind gods. I should add that in the scenes below Merkelbach, as usual, makes no mention of other readings.

see the scenes in a new light, not merely as events in the story of Mithras but—arguably—also as elements in the life of the cult. The extra dimension is welcome, even if very hypothetical, and perhaps Merkelbach should have gone further in exploring how the two sides coexist, how in one and the same scene both a narrative event and an event of cult life coalesce, and how one and the same person may be both an initiate and a figure of myth. There are points where Merkelbach confronts this fruitful paradox (e.g., 119, on Sol and the Heliodromus), but they are rare.

In assigning the various scenes to the various grades Merkelbach is to some extent the victim of his order of presentation. Understandably, he chooses to start with the lowest grade and proceed up through the others in the sequence of initiation. But by an unfortunate chance it is not until the later scenes, related to the higher grades, that the matches carry much conviction. Especially plausible are those scenes involving two parties in some exchange or mutual enterprise (for example, the joint episodes of Sol and Mithras),[51] but these tend to be late in the postulated sequence and concern the higher grades, by which point the reader's scepticism will—or should be—thoroughly inflamed by earlier implausibilities. Of course, the best warrant for Merkelbach's case is the banquet. Few would deny that this is an event that takes place on two planes. At the divine level it is the feast of the victorious Mithras shared with the Sun god on the hide of the slaughtered bull; at the human level it is the feast of the initiates, more precisely the feast of the Pater shared with the Heliodromus and attended by the other grades. It is a classic instance of an event of both myth and cult, and collectively the monuments well reflect that ambivalence. Yet Merkelbach discusses it—and that rather perfunctorily—only at the very end of the section on the final grade, the Pater (132 f.—see above, note 30). It could have made much of his case for him at the start by establishing at one key point the interdependence on the monuments of those merging worlds of sacred story and cult activity.

Of the earlier scenes I mention two as especially implausible in their grade ascriptions. The scene of Mithras hauling the bull which he grasps by its hind legs over his shoulder with its front legs dangling behind him on the ground, a scene known from dedicatory inscriptions as the *transitus*, Merkelbach ascribes to the passage from the second to the third grade (92 f.): this for no better reason than that a snake, as an unusual detail, is present in the scene in *CIMRM* 435 and 1083—and the snake is the creature of the second grade, the Nymphus. Yet the ascription of the snake as symbol to the Nymphus was itself very tenuous (above, 297). Furthermore, the full title of

[51]One great advantage of Merkelbach's reinterpretation of the scenes is that it obviates the apparent inconsistency, implicit in the old strictly narrative reading, that Mithras seemed to be sometimes superior to Sol but sometimes inferior. In the bull-killing itself, Merkelbach rightly insists that Sol's message to Mithras is not a command but a *timing*, i.e., *when* to slay (130).

the scene, which Merkelbach fails to mention, is *transitus dei*: here it is explicitly the god who "passes over," not the initiate. Lastly, all the other episodes in this sequence of encounters of Mithras with the bull prior to the killing are ascribed to the Heliodromus. Why this exception? The second scene is the birth of Mithras from the rock. This Merkelbach also ascribes to the transition from Nymphus to Miles (96 f.), and the reason is the same: a snake is sometimes found coiled round the rock which gives birth to the god. But whereas the *transitus* was placed in the section on the Nymphus, the rock-birth is allotted to that on the Miles. Why the distinction—and why the duplication? Merkelbach offers no answer; indeed, he sees no problem. One is left with the impression that in these earlier sections of this fundamental chapter the grades are frequently little more than portmanteaux for scenes which, for completeness' sake, cannot be omitted. It would be healthier to admit that some scenes in their surface appearance—which is virtually all we have to judge on—seem to have nothing at all to do with the grades.

Finally, I should mention some confusion over the identity of the figures in several of the scenes. Iconography ought to be a controlling factor here. Thus, a figure in Persian dress, one would think, should be either a Perses or a Pater, and one would not expect to find either of those two grades clad differently. In general, Merkelbach follows this distinction. There are, in consequence, many Perses, for of course the figure in the side scenes usually is in Persian dress—traditionally taken to be Mithras himself. Thus, for example, the miscellany of scenes on the top register of Danubian reliefs is allotted to the Perses under the compendious heading of "Hirtenleben" (111 f.). But the distinction does not always hold. Thus, the figure in Persian dress whose trials with the bull prior to the killing fill a number of scenes is a Heliodromus (124 ff.), and likewise the figure in the scene of the separation of heaven from earth (120);[52] conversely, the naked figure on the Dieburg Phaethon relief (*CIMRM* 1247), usually interpreted as Phaethon himself, becomes a Perses (117 f.). These ambiguities are not systematically confronted or explained, and they erode the general plausibility of Merkelbach's attributions of scenes and persons.[53]

For all the reasons discussed in the latter part of this review, Merkelbach cannot be said to have made his case that the Mithraic grade structure, through symbol and allusion, permeates Mithraic iconography both in the

[52]Thus Merkelbach interprets this elusive scene of a kneeling figure with one arm extended up, the other down: e.g., in the second panel from the bottom on the right of the Barberini fresco (*CIMRM* 390).

[53]Even less credible is the allocation of the *same* scene to *different* grades. The scene of the hunting Mithras is generally allotted to the Perses (the bow being a Persian weapon), but the Dura and Neuenheim exemplars (*CIMRM* 52, 1289), for special reasons, are ascribed to the Heliodromus (111).

bull-killing and in the mass of subsidiary scenes. The book thus fails to reach its mark in respect of the first of its major theses. Nevertheless, and to end on a more positive note, it must not be judged a failure *tout court*. Lively, provocative, well-ordered, its ideas will deservedly command attention, even where they do not carry conviction. It will always be worth consulting on points of detail, which are invariably ingenious and frequently felicitous too.[54] In sum, it is not unlike the author's great work in another, though contiguous, area: *Roman und Mysterium*.[55] Few now believe—or indeed ever did believe—its thesis that the ancient novels were thoroughgoing texts of the mystery religions. But fewer still fail to consult *Roman und Mysterium*—or to consult it with profit. I hazard the prediction that the same will be true of Merkelbach's *Mithras*.

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[54]For example: 120 on the στερεωτής of the Dura graffiti as Heliodromus *qua* celestial "Befestiger;" 121 on the Capua Cupid and Psyche (*CIMRM* 186) as an allegory of the Heliodromus initiating the Nymphus; 122 on the solar connections of the lizard in *CIMRM* 435 and the crocodile in 1861.

[55]R. Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike* (Munich 1962). On the pairing of the *Babyloniaca* of Iamblichus with Mithraism, see my "Soteriology, the Mysteries, and the Ancient Novel," in Bianchi (above, n. 17) 527–540; also the appendix to Merkelbach's *Mithras* (253–258).