

# MITHRAS CULT IN MOESIA INFERIOR: THE ANALYSIS OF SOME RELIEFS FROM THE NORTHERN PART OF THE PROVINCE

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**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Mithras, Sol, Moesia inferior, iconografie, relief votiv.*

**Keywords:** *Mithras, Sol, Moesia inferior, iconography, votive relief.*

**Rezumat:** *Publicarea unui relief mithriac de la Castelu/Medgidia, cu inscripție în limba greacă și reprezentarea scenei tauroctoniei, oferă ocazia analizei iconografice în contextul analogiilor existente în Moesia inferior și în alte provincii romane. Este astfel posibilă evidențierea unor particularități ale reliefulor mithriace din regiune.*

**Abstract:** *The publication of a Mithras relief from Castelu/Medgidia, bearing a Greek inscription and a simple tauroctony scene, offers an opportunity for its iconographical analysis in the context of analogies existing in Moesia inferior and other Roman provinces. Therefore, it is possible to highlight the specifics of the Mithras reliefs from the region.*

The Mithras cult was one of the most widespread in the Roman provinces in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century, with Moesia inferior being no exception<sup>1</sup>. The occurrence of dedications in Greek, especially in the Greek cities on the Black Sea coast and their hinterland, was characteristic for this region. One of the best-known examples in the literature is the find from the so-called La Adam cave/ Gura Dobrogei (Târgușor commune, Constanța County): most probably the hidden inventory of a rural mithraeum<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the cult places and their inventories found

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<sup>1</sup> CIMRM II 2247-2315; COVACEF 2000-2001; BOTTEZ 2006; BĂRBULESCU & BUZOIANU 2009, p. 401-402; BOTTEZ 2018.

<sup>2</sup> ALEXANDRESCU 2016 (with literature).

outside the fortress in Novae<sup>3</sup> and in the quarries in Kreta, near Oescus<sup>4</sup>, are of great interest for the Mithraism studies.

The fact that many of the finds, be they inscriptions or representations with or without inscriptions, were found in secondary use and/or in a very fragmentary state, or are old finds in the museum collections, makes it difficult to evaluate the evidence with regard to the cult life, the circle of dedicants, or chronology. Nevertheless, some information can be gained, from the finds that were published long ago and newly evaluated, but also from a relief documented in private ownership, which is published here for the first time.

### Mithras relief from Castelu/Medgidia (Constanța County)

More than 30 years ago F. Topoleanu documented in Tulcea a Mithras relief in private property<sup>5</sup>, the provenance of which was indicated to be in the Castelu/Medgidia area (Constanța County). Shortly afterwards, he presented it in the context of a 'Pontica' conference<sup>6</sup>. The present whereabouts of the relief are unknown. Therefore, the information presented here and the available illustration (**Fig. 1**) remain the only documentation of this very important piece.

The relief is made of limestone and was in relatively good condition. It had slight bumps on the edges and an almost complete erosion of the surface, especially in the area of the inscription and in the lower left corner. F. Topoleanu observed remains of mortar on the surface, which he held as an indication of the slab being reused as building material.

In the only existing picture, it can be seen in several places that there were certain material-related holes in the representation field, especially in the area of the bull's body. It is therefore also conceivable that the surface was prepared for a colour version of the relief to conceal the unevenness of the rock.

The slab with the relief has a rounded upper edge and is 31 cm high, 24.7-25.5 cm wide and 7.5 cm thick.

The inscription was placed in two areas: on the upper rounded edge of the plate (line 1) and on its lower rectangular edge (lines 2-3)<sup>7</sup>:

Ἀγα[θῆ] τύχη·  
relief

θεῶ Μίθρα Ἐρ<μ>όδωρος Θεο<δῶ>ρου ὑπ-  
ὲρ αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν ἰδίων ἀνέθητο

<sup>3</sup> TOMAS & LEMKE 2015 (with literature).

<sup>4</sup> VELKOV 1934.

<sup>5</sup> Private property of the family professor Mioara and Nicolae Rusali (Tulcea), to which F. Topoleanu is indebted for the permission for study and publication of the relief from Castelu/Medgidia.

<sup>6</sup> The presentation is mentioned by BĂRBULESCU & BUZOIANU 2009, 401, note 84. Inscription and relief also considered by BOTTEZ 2018, p. 249-250.

<sup>7</sup> The reading of the inscription is made based on the estampage of F. Topoleanu and on the not very good available illustration (**Fig. 1**). For the reading, C.-G. Alexandrescu is indebted to prof. Alexandru Avram.

Translation: 'With good fortune! To the god Mithras, Her<m>odoros, son of Theo<do>ros, had made the dedication on his own expenses'.

The height of the letters varies: 1-1.2 cm (line 1), 0.5-0.8 cm (line 2), 1 cm (line 3).

For the middle-voice verb form ἀνέθητο instead of the more usual ἀνέθηκε(ν) a good parallel is offered by one of the inscribed altars in the mithraeum from the quarry in Kreta, near Oescus<sup>8</sup>, bearing a dedication Ἡλίου Μίθρα.

The slightly deepened field of representation is occupied by the tauroctony group, with the Sol and Luna busts in the left and right corners, respectively, and the over-dimmed raven on a branch/tree left of Mithras, in a quite lowered position. The dog and the scorpion (?) can be seen right to the bull, jumping up/crawling and very schematically depicted. Mithras looks frontally to the viewer, wears the simple Oriental dress, with visible long trousers, and Oriental curly hairstyle and shows a kind of smile. Mithras holds down the bull with his left leg, which is bent at an angle and the knee presses down on the bull's spine. The bull's rump and right hind leg are restrained by Mithras' right leg, which is almost fully extended. With his left hand, Mithras pulls back the head of the bull by the nostrils. In his right hand he holds the knife, which seem to have been pulled back from the bull, after the deadly plunge.

Above the group, below the upper edge of the representation field, a row of seven simple altars is depicted.

It can be observed that the snake does not seem to be depicted (or at least is not visible on the existing illustration). Further of significance is the absence of the Dadophori, a usual element of the tauroctony composition.

As data on its finding context is lacking, the relief from Castelu/Medgidia can be analysed only based on the information it bears, i.e. from the point of view of epigraphy, iconography, material, shape and dimensions.

### **Epigraphy: name of the dedicant**

The relief in private property is an interesting case among the finds from Moesia inferior, since it is also accompanied by an inscription. It is true that many reliefs from the area, which are not very numerous, are fragmentary and, therefore, their initial inscription might be lost. The record or, more precisely, the preservation of the dedicant's name is also rare. Up to now, only in the case of La Adam cave, Novae and Silistra/Balcic<sup>9</sup>, the names of dedicants have been preserved on the reliefs dedicated to Mithras.

Since the inscription on the relief from Castelu/Medgidia entered the literature on the basis of the 1990 presentation<sup>10</sup>, the dedicant was read as Ἐρμύδωρος Θεοδότου and immediately linked to a list from Tomis<sup>11</sup>, dated 198-201/202 AD. However, based on the lecture of the available documentation of the inscription, the name is rather Ἐρ<μ>όδωρος Θεο<δ>ώρου, which, to our knowledge, has not

<sup>8</sup> VELKOV 1934, fig. 74; IGBulg II 595.

<sup>9</sup> La Adam cave: CIMRM 2306-2307; ISM II 374; Novae: IGLNovae 38; Silistra or Balcic: CIMRM 2313-2314.

<sup>10</sup> BĂRBULESCU & BUZOIANU 2009, p. 401, note 84 (see above note 6).

<sup>11</sup> ISM II 83, l. 29.

yet been recorded as such in the region<sup>12</sup>. The name of the dedicant can also be <Ἡ>ρόδωρος, a name well attested in Histria<sup>13</sup>.

The inscription and iconography of the relief from Castelu/Medgidia do not provide sufficient arguments for more precise dating within the chronological frame of the second-third century AD.

### On the provenance of the relief

The vague information on the finding of the relief from Castelu/Medgidia can be of use considering the available data on the Roman-era settlements in the area<sup>14</sup>. Even if available, the information is also of fortuitous character and limited to notes and exceptional finds. N. Harțuște mentions in Medgidia, on the southern bank of the Carasu Valley, "a couple of hundreds meter from the cement factory, in the area of the old quarry, an extended early medieval settlement and a part of a Roman building, located on the line of the Roman ditches have been destroyed. [...] The Roman material consisted of ceramic, marble bases and shafts of columns, ashlar etc."<sup>15</sup>. He extensively presents only the medieval artefacts.

Further significant finds are the inscriptions and a Tetrarchic milestone<sup>16</sup>. There is also a funerary stela with Greek inscription reported from Castelu<sup>17</sup>. The mentioned persons might be *liberti* of Oriental origin, settled on the territory of Tomis. An older epigraphic find, with disputed provenance, is a dedication mentioning a *vicus I Urb*[...]<sup>18</sup>. One option for its provenance is Medgidia.

It is not wise to make speculations on all this (for instance, if all or some of those inscriptions were brought from Tomis for being reused etc.), but at least the hypothesis seems plausible that the relief was found *in situ* or near its initial display in a rural settlement or a villa on the territory of Tomis, along the important communication route from Tomis to Axiopolis in the Carasu Valley. Even more so, when looking at other sites in the *chora* of this town, like Nisipari<sup>19</sup> and Târgușor<sup>20</sup>, conventionally named after the modern villages in the area, where rich epigraphic and iconographic evidence came to light, highlighting the habit of the ancient rural communities, even if the state of their proper archaeological investigation is up to now rather poor.

### Material and shape of the Mithras reliefs

Several reliefs from the area of Oescus and Durostorum<sup>21</sup> were made of

<sup>12</sup> Ἡρόδωρος is epigraphically attested within the Lower Danube area especially for the second and early third century: LGPN online [last seen on 01.04.2020].

<sup>13</sup> ISM I 185, 193, 207, 209, 212, 363.

<sup>14</sup> The exact location of the different finds and investigated settlement nuclei have not yet been systematically mapped – BĂRBULESCU & BUZOIANU 2009, p. 389 (with literature); cf. also the RAN, s.v. Medgidia.

<sup>15</sup> HARȚUCHE 1971, p. 252.

<sup>16</sup> BĂRBULESCU 2001, p. 56-57.

<sup>17</sup> BĂRBULESCU & BUZOIANU 2009, p. 389-390, no. 1.

<sup>18</sup> BĂRBULESCU 2001, p. 56-57, 164-165.

<sup>19</sup> BĂRBULESCU 2001, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> BĂRBULESCU 2001, p. 52-54.

<sup>21</sup> IVANOV 2006, p. 159, fig. 4.

limestone and obviously locally produced. Within the territory of the Greek city of Istros, an assemblage of reliefs, altars and a cult table (some of them bearing inscription) are known from the La Adam cave<sup>22</sup>. Most probably the finding place is not the initial cult place but only a hiding solution for the inventory of a cult place on a rural estate to which all pieces belonged to, as the inscriptions stated. The large relief from La Adam cave measures 47.5 x 56 x 13 cm and its inscription mentions it was carved by Phoibos, a Nicomedian. The fact that the inventory and the main relief of this mithraeum are made of local Jurassic limestone is relevant to the existence of sculptor workshops in the region, which, even if of Microasiatic origin, were willing and able to work the local stones. The presumable location of Phoibos' workshop was in one of the Greek cities, that could provide sufficient trade requests.

Medium-sized high reliefs of limestone (over 50 x 50 cm) were found in Troesmis<sup>23</sup>, Oescus<sup>24</sup>, and Durostorum<sup>25</sup>. A fragment of a further large relief from Axiopolis was made of marble, being dated, on an epigraphic basis, back to the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>26</sup>.

Altars of limestone and sandstone of rather small dimensions are quite frequent. An example is an altar from Novae, bearing the depictions of Cautes and Cautopates on the sides<sup>27</sup>, which is considered to be the earliest mithraic monuments from Novae (100 AD), set up by the slaves working in the customs district of *ripa Thraciae*.

Mithras-related monuments considered to have been found in Oescus build an impressive group. Unfortunately, they are not systematically and synthetically published, and therefore their investigation is not easy. In her 1987 paper, V. Najdenova published two fragmentarily preserved monuments from Oescus, a statuary group or better said a tauroctony group in high relief, and a Mithras head<sup>28</sup>. Najdenova points out the characteristics of the Mithras related monuments from Oescus and their singularity among the other monuments of the province. Statues and especially high relief statuary groups are known only from Oescus, and, in her opinion, they are early dated in the evolution of the cult in the region

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<sup>22</sup> There seems to be a mistake in the literature considering the large relief from the La Adam cave as being carved in marble: ALEXANDRESCU VIANU 2008-2009, p. 57, T3. The stone provenance analysis made by dr. A. Baltres in 2012 concluded that the large relief and the table from La Adam cave (ISM I 374 and 375) are made of the same homogenous Jurassic calcarenite, while the two small altars (ISM I 376 and 377) from the same finding spot are made of the same homogenous Jurassic calcarenite. The difference between the two materials is the grain size, which is larger in the altar and table. All materials come from the Casimcea Syncline in Central Dobruja.

<sup>23</sup> ALEXANDRESCU 2017, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> NAJDENOVA 1987, fig. 6.

<sup>25</sup> ISM IV 108.

<sup>26</sup> ISM IV 218. Due to further related finds from the area of Axiopolis, also of marble, it is to be assumed that at that date the members of the local Mithras cult community were able to provide quite expensive inventory.

<sup>27</sup> CIMRM 2268-2269; IGLNovae 35.

<sup>28</sup> NAJDENOVA 1987, fig. 6 (tauroctony group) and fig. 7 (head). However, in there a correlation between text and the published illustration is missing.

(first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century)<sup>29</sup>.

As for the area around Oescus, it is known that a Mithras cult place<sup>30</sup> functioned in the quarries of Kreta. The site was destroyed soon after being discovered (1933) and the only recorded finds are the cult relief (CIMRM 2257) with its basis (**Fig. 2**) and several altars and bases bearing Greek inscriptions, as well as five anepigraphic altars (possible traces of paint are not mentioned) and a stone basin. All monuments are made of local sandstone. The relief is said to have been located in a small niche. This site and its findings are important for the cult of Mithras from several points of view. For the purposes of this analysis, we are going to use the details of the relief and its basis, and especially its dimensions: height 60 cm, width 92 cm, depth 16 cm. There seems to be a preference for this middle-size reliefs, particularly when carved in local plates of about 50-60 x 60-90 cm. The number of finds and their finding spots make plausible the existence of several cult places in the surroundings of the military centers along the Danube and in the Greek cities on the Black Sea shores<sup>31</sup>.

Mithras on the relief from Castelu/Medgidia resembles slightly the Mithras figure on the large relief from La Adam care (**Fig. 3**), underlining the idea that its sculptor was directly connected to the Nicomedian artists.

The relief from Castelu/Medgidia seems to be the smallest one among the Mithras reliefs made of local stone (limestone or sandstone) known up to now. Its dimensions are more similar to some marble reliefs found mainly in the Greek cities and in Oescus<sup>32</sup>. It was most probably a simple votive relief in a cult place in the country side.

### **Iconography: tauroctony**

It is common knowledge that there are no identical Mithras-reliefs, each one being more or less recomposed using the necessary and canonic elements<sup>33</sup>. However, there are certain situations where the reliefs were part of an ensemble of reliefs or of relief and statuettes, the elements and participants being thus depicted within a cult place. The practice can be exemplified in the mithraea in Ostia and Rome, as well as in those in Dura and Poetovio. Moreover, it can be observed the individuality of the concept, execution and iconography. In such cases, if the evidence from a certain region is overviewed, it is possible to highlight, that the different kinds of monuments related to Mithras can be very

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<sup>29</sup> NAJDENOVA 1987, p. 196. One further example of sculpture in the round would be from Novae, 'a small ovoid stone monument' (TOMAS & LEMKE 2015, p. 229, fig. 2 and 4), which seems to be lost now. See also KREMER 2012, cat. 87.

<sup>30</sup> VELKOV 1934.

<sup>31</sup> RUSCU 2003-2004: especially in Histria and Tomis, while for Callatis and Odessos the evidence is rather scarce.

<sup>32</sup> Many of the marble reliefs found in Moesia inferior are fragmentarily preserved, but allow the assumption of original dimensions of about 40-50 x 50-60 cm.

<sup>33</sup> BOSCHUNG 2015, p. 226-227: It is thus apparent that initially, at the time of the creation of the cult in Rome there were two competing versions of the bull-killing Mithras, one sculpted in the round and one flat/ on relief, which emphasized more strongly the oriental features of Mithras. The latter became very fast obligatory; it regularly took the place of the cult image.

particular from the point of view of iconography, dimensions, materials and chosen shapes. Those are certainly depending also on the number of members of a cult community, on their economic potential and on the society they were living in (urban or rural settlements). Furthermore, the example in Dura, even if exceptional, offers insights into the religious practice of an outpost of the Roman world, where different cults existed within a small area of the settlement and most probably shared the local artists for building and decorating (including providing cult related elements) their temples<sup>34</sup>.

Even though it appears to be very simple at first sight, the relief from Castelu/Medgidia offers the opportunity for discussing some elements of the tauroctony depiction, as well as its additional elements.

The Mithras reliefs with the tauroctony scene have been investigated from different points of view, based on various criteria for typologies<sup>35</sup>. The Empire wide analyses have, however, concluded that there is a great variation to be seen, with almost no two reliefs being the same.

In the tauroctony on the Castelu/Medgidia relief, the bull is crashed, with all legs down, while slightly trying to lift its front left leg again<sup>36</sup>. As the knife is entirely visible, it can be assumed that the depicted moment is that after the killing of the bull.

Despite the schematic and unproportioned depiction of individual elements, the tauroctony group on the Castelu/Medgidia relief is similar to those already known in the region. Mithras looking frontally<sup>37</sup> and wearing recognizable Oriental dress is to be seen on the reliefs in La Adam cave, Histria, Troesmis, Oescus and Kreta, while in few cases he looks back over his right shoulder: Stejaru, Tomis, Durostorum, Mircea Vodă (Tulcea County)/Acunaru, Nicopolis ad Istrum. In the last group the predominance of marble reliefs is significant, which might have been imported as such. The example from Nicopolis ad Istrum (CIMRM 2264-2265) and its recently reevaluated frame and inscriptions<sup>38</sup> also provide an eloquent example of the *mise-en-scène* of otherwise overlooked small size mithraic votives.

Despite the generally mentioned thesis that the Mithras reliefs from Moesia inferior are using the, 'Danubian type'<sup>39</sup>, with scenes from the mythos around the tauroctony scene, the overview of the evidence allows the observation that the simple tauroctony relief of Roman/Italic origin is more frequent, both among the small- and medium-size reliefs as well as on larger highreliefs<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> ELSNER 1998, p. 211-212.

<sup>35</sup> CAMPBELL 1954; VOLLKOMMER 1991; VOLLKOMMER 1992, p. 622-623; BOSCHUNG 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Like VOLLKOMMER 1991, 'Typ C/Teiltyp 2'.

<sup>37</sup> It is a common way of depicting Mithras on the reliefs from Moesia inferior: CIMRM II; NAJDENOVA 1987.

<sup>38</sup> SHARANKOV 2013.

<sup>39</sup> COVACEF 2000-2001, p. 383.

<sup>40</sup> Those two main so-called types are also to be found in the Mithras reliefs from Dacia. There, the 'Danubian reliefs' with three registers of depiction and additional scenes of the mythology are the most popular. The simple tauroctony reliefs, most probably products of a workshop in Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, are following the Italic model

**Iconography: tauroctony without the Cautes and Cautopates figures**

Among the usual figures on the Mithras reliefs are the torch bearers, Cautes and Cautopates<sup>41</sup>. The relief from Castelu/Medgidia is the third example from this province bearing the tauroctony scene without Cautes and Cautopates. The other two examples are in Oescus (CIMRM 2251) and Mircea Vodă/Acbunar, on the territory of Troesmis (CIMRM 2289). Only the Acbunar relief is made of marble and might have been imported as such. The other two are of limestone and most probably locally made.

Among the Mithras-relief within the Empire, the analogies are only a few, and limited to Rome and the Rhine-region<sup>42</sup>. In those three examples the reliefs are of medium to large sizes (50 x 90 cm – 137 x 118 cm) and highreliefs. They have been recovered in reuse and therefore their dating is as general as the late second - first half of the third century AD. From Dormagen, most probably from the same mithraeum, comes another Mithras relief (CIMRM 1014-1015), similar in size and making with the above mentioned one, only with several typical elements of the tauroctony like the Dadophori, but also the snake with the crater. On the relief in Fellbach, near the snake and the crater, the lion figure is depicted, while in the background, above Mithras, there is a burning lamp hanging. On the relief from Rome, in the foreground, there is a reclining woman figure (Tellus).

Further within the mithraeum in Dura, one of the gypsum reliefs (the small and elder one) present the same situation. In this case it is important to point out its location within the cult place and the additional painted decoration, together with which the iconographic element of the cult might have been eventually fulfilled<sup>43</sup>. A possible completion between relief and painting or relief and further sculpture might also be the case with two reliefs in Carnuntum, where the Cautes/Cautopates figures are missing<sup>44</sup>.

In other words, in the case of the relief from Castelu/Medgidia, the missing figures of Cautes and Cautopates can not be further interpreted. There are many possible hypotheses, including the inclusion of the relief in a more complex assemblage like the one in Nicopolis ad Istrum (CIMRM 2264-2265)<sup>45</sup>.

The idea of the influence and widespread of iconographic compositions from Oescus to other sites along the Danube is confirmed by finds from Troesmis and its territory, meaning that most probably the soldiers of *legio V Macedonica* and the different civilians moving with them also brought certain preferences with regard to the Mithras-related depictions. The limestone tauroctony group from Troesmis (**Fig. 7**) shows similarities with one from Oescus<sup>46</sup>, but it is not identical, as the Dadophori were depicted, while in Oescus it seems that only Mithras and the bull occupied the plinth of the relief.

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with local execution in Bucova marble and other local stones. See SICOE 2014 (with literature).

<sup>41</sup> VOLLKOMMER 1992, p. 625-626; HANNAH 1996.

<sup>42</sup> Rome (CIMRM 598), Dormagen (CIMRM 1012-1013), Fellbach (CIMRM 1306-1307). See also CIMRM 603-604; 607; 641; 2196.

<sup>43</sup> ELSNER 1998, p. 212-215, fig. 140.

<sup>44</sup> KREMER 2012, cat. 191 and 192.

<sup>45</sup> SHARANKOV 2013.

<sup>46</sup> NAJDENOVA 1987, fig. 6.

The large relief from Mircea Vodă/Acbunar has similar dimensions with one of the reliefs in Oescus, with one marble relief found in reuse in Plevna, and also with that from the Kreta mithraeum, even if they are only medium sized<sup>47</sup> compared to the reliefs from other regions. Therefore it can be postulated that they were among the main cult reliefs. This is only a hypothesis, as more examples of *in situ* found reliefs are needed in order to make such identifications and the regional differences also play an important role in the matter. How many cult places might have functioned around the fortresses and later towns in Oescus and Troesmis and on their territory escapes our knowledge for the time being. But the better known situations on the Rhine-border and in Pannonia (Poetovio and Carnuntum<sup>48</sup>) offer an idea of the possible reality<sup>49</sup>.

### Iconography: the seven altars

The relief from Castelu/Medgidia features further the row of seven altars, representing the seven planetary gods and the planetary multiplication of the tauroctony, and ensuring the renewal of the world and souls<sup>50</sup>.

On a marble relief from Tomis (**Fig. 6**), which was unearthed four years ago<sup>51</sup> and was recently published<sup>52</sup>, the seven altars appear outside the rounded and deepened representation field with the main scene. There the seven simple altars are depicted individually, five are distributed between the Sol and Luna bust and two are placed below the busts. On the upper border, to the left of Mithras, the raven seems to also be depicted, between two altars. From Silistra, it is known a limestone relief<sup>53</sup> presenting good similarities in composition and execution with the new find from Tomis, especially in the tauroctony group, but also significant differences (**Fig. 9**).

The seven altars also appear on a fragmentary, but high-quality marble relief from Histria (**Fig. 5**), which presents the rare particularity of having the bust of

<sup>47</sup> Mircea Vodă/Acbunar: CIMRM 2289; Oescus: CIMRM 2247; Plevna: CIMRM 2255; Kreta: VELKOV 1934, fig. 71.

<sup>48</sup> Poetovio: the analysis on epigraphic and iconographic evidence allowed conclusions on chronology and changes of the cult. SELEM 1980, p. 167-171; for the situation in the territory of Poetovio see PRELOŽNIK & NESTORVIĆ 2018. - Carnuntum: KREMER 2012, p. 330-337, 384-387.

<sup>49</sup> From the mithraeum in Novae the evidence on reliefs and sculpture is not very fortunate, as most of them are very fragmentarily preserved (TOMAS & LEMKE 2015). Most probably, more than one Mithras cult place existed in Novae and its surroundings. Therefore, it is no reason to consider the only known mithraeum as the only possible provenance of the reused blocks bearing inscription and fortuitous finds of reliefs. The same tendency of the scholars can be observed in the area of Troesmis, as all Mithras related inscriptions were considered to come from the site in Mircea Vodă/Acbunar, due to the concentration of votive reliefs found there: i.e. ISM V 169 and 221.

<sup>50</sup> NEMETI 2012, p. 159-160; TURCAN 1981, p. 364-365; MERKELBACH 1998, p. 208-209.

<sup>51</sup> Dimensions 30 x 22 x 4 cm. Website MINAC, Find of August 2016 (<http://www.minac.ro/exponatul-lunii.html>), excavation made by A. Mototolea and T. Potârniche (May 2016) in the area of the Constanța County Court.

<sup>52</sup> BOTTEZ 2018, p. 247-249, fig. 2. The announced dedicated publication of this find and of its finding context will be of great interest for the study of the Mithras cult in the main city of the province.

<sup>53</sup> IVANOV 2006, p. 159, fig. 4.

Luna in the left upper corner of the plate<sup>54</sup>. The row of seven altars over the tauroctony group can also be seen on the small marble Mithras relief from Nicopolis ad Istrum (CIMRM 2264-2265), mounted into a larger limestone slab<sup>55</sup>.

One of the largest Mithras reliefs from the province was found in reuse in Troesmis (**Figs. 7 and 8**). Recently it was possible to reevaluate the documentation of this piece and its present state of conservation. Cumont mentions that, at the time of his visit, it was walled in one of the walls of the University of Bucharest, while the National Museum of Antiquities functioned there<sup>56</sup>. During the different troubles of moving the collection to the new location, it seems that the relief suffered further damage. On the old illustration, published by Bordenache in the catalogue of the collection (**Fig. 7**), several details are still observable, like the rest of a row of altars above the tauroctony group and the fact that the bull was wearing a dorsal band<sup>57</sup>.

Two further analogies for the seven altars are recorded in the old collections of the National Museum of Antiquities in Bucharest: a limestone relief (now in the Lapidarium of the Archaeological Institute in Bucharest)<sup>58</sup> and a mould formed brick relief (now in MNIR)<sup>59</sup>. It is not possible to establish whether the pieces come from Dobruja (Moesia inferior) or from southern Dacia, as there is no information about their entrance in the collections.

In the case of the brick relief (**Fig. 10**), of which about a third of the right half is preserved, the tauroctony scene (still preserved are the Luna bust, Cautes and the hand of Mithras pulling back the bull by its nostrils) seems to have been made out of a mold, while on the upper border altars among trees were incised *ante cocturam* (two altars and two trees are still visible).

In the case of the relief (**Fig. 11 a-c**), the analysis of the stone did not allow a more precise determination of its provenance<sup>60</sup>. On the preserved part, there can be seen Mithras within the tauroctony, wearing a detailed rendered Oriental hair-dress and dress and a crown of rays on the background of a nimbus. There seem to have been 12 rays depicted. On the upper border of the relief are depicted the seven altars alternating with (palm/fig) trees. This way of representation is rare, similar to the relief from the proximity of the church Santa Lucia in Selci (Rome, Esquilin)<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> ALEXANDRESCU VIANU 2000, cat. 189.

<sup>55</sup> On this complex find see SHARANKOV 2013.

<sup>56</sup> CUMONT 1896, p. 272, no. 124.

<sup>57</sup> The dorsal band is to be seen also on one highrelief from Oescus (NAJDENOVA 1987, fig. 6) and on one relief from Mircea Vodă/Acbunar – see also ALEXANDRESCU 2017, p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> BORDENACHE 1969, cat. 201. Dimensions: preserved height 40 cm; preserved maximal width 33 cm; depth about 15 cm.

<sup>59</sup> PETOLESCU 1977, p. 154-155, fig. 2: dimensions height 27.5 cm, preserved width 12 cm, depth 4.5 cm. It was not possible prior to the presentation of this manuscript to localize and see this fragment. All information is based on the above mentioned publication.

<sup>60</sup> The geologist dr. A. Baltres (Bucharest) kindly analysed the material and described it as Jurassic limestone, apparently brecciated, with clasts of different colour and grain size. He considers the sand present on the surface of the relief as an effect on the material from the environment the piece layed in.

<sup>61</sup> CIMRM 368; MERKELBACH 1998, fig. 50.

It is the largest Mithras relief in the region and possibly also one of the latest, which is to be discussed in connection with Sol Invictus and representations of Mithras as Sol. The crown of rays in the Mithras cult (as an attribute of the Heliodromos) and the figure of the sun beside Mithras are to be naturally kept apart from the representation on this relief.

The best-known other examples with Mithras Tauroctonos wearing the crown of rays come from Italy: the relief from Pisignano, the one from Macerata<sup>62</sup> and the unique bronze brooch from Ostia, now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford<sup>63</sup>. Furthermore, a head with Oriental dress, interpreted as Mithras, was found in a well in the small settlement of Sindelfingen, in Southern Germany<sup>64</sup>. There are two holes for metallic stabs that can be assumed to have been fixing a crown of rays<sup>65</sup>. The most relevant example is to be found however in the large relief found in the so-called mithraeum III from Carnuntum, where the crown of rays Mithras is wearing is considered to be an addendum of the late phase of use of the cult place, contemporary with the important epigraphic evidence on the relation between the Mithras-Sol cult and the official cult of the emperors<sup>66</sup>.

In the case of the relief in Bucharest, even if an in depth analysis cannot be made here, it must be observed the association of the crown with twelve rays and the row of the seven altars on the same large relief, that can be assumed to have been the main relief in a Mithras cult place<sup>67</sup>.

The cult of Mithras Sol and Sol Invictus is well documented in Moesia inferior through inscriptions<sup>68</sup> and recent studies that approached the subject<sup>69</sup>. The depictions that might stay in direct relation to this topic need to be also investigated<sup>70</sup>, this being also the reason for our excursus on this relief.

The fact that the row of seven altars occurs more frequently on Mithras reliefs from Moesia inferior and also on some examples in Dacia<sup>71</sup>, as the only additional element to the tauroctony group, can only be registered as an observation for the time being.

### **Iconography: the Sol and Luna busts**

Once considered the best documented finds from the province as well as the analogies of the row of seven altars, there is an additional iconographical detail

<sup>62</sup> CIMRM 692 and 690-691.

<sup>63</sup> CIMRM 318.

<sup>64</sup> SCHWERTHEIM 1974, p. 207, cat. 168, pl. 49.

<sup>65</sup> C.-G. Alexandrescu is indebted to Dr. Nina Willburger and her colleagues from the Württembergisches Landesmuseum Stuttgart for kindly examining the piece on her behalf and confirming the information from the literature.

<sup>66</sup> KREMER 2012, cat. 189 and p. 382-385.

<sup>67</sup> On the backside of the fragment there is a cavity (with a diameter of about 13 cm; about 8.5 cm deep) with rests of shard rich pink/reddish mortar (**Fig. 11 c**), which served to attach the relief to the wall.

<sup>68</sup> COVACEF & BARNEA 1973; COVACEF 2000-2001, p. 384-385.

<sup>69</sup> COVACEF & BARNEA 1973; BOTTEZ 2006; BOTTEZ 2018, p. 256.

<sup>70</sup> Generally on the matter see HALSBERGHE 1972.

<sup>71</sup> For example the two reliefs from urban centers: SICOE 2014, cat. 233 (small size, from Romula) and cat. 39 (large size, from Apulum). – see also NEMETI & NEMETI 2004-2005, p. 115-118 (but with to radical conclusion on the 'Danubian' monuments).

that drew attention. On the relief in Histria (**Fig. 5**) and on the large relief from La Adam cave (**Fig. 3**) the places of the Sol and Luna bust are exchanged. This detail, which was initially interpreted as a possible misunderstanding on the part of the artist, was observed on other reliefs in Moesia inferior and Dacia and discussed accordingly<sup>72</sup>.

In some cases, the differences (male/female bust) or attributes (nimbus with a crown of rays or crescent) are not very evident. For example, this can be seen on a fragmentary relief from Stejaru (Tulcea County), made of marble (**Fig. 4**)<sup>73</sup>. The original relief was very well worked out and showed the main group with Mithras looking over his right shoulder. The presence of the raven next to the bust would suggest the identification as Sol, but this is not a compelling indication<sup>74</sup>.

In the case of the large relief from the La Adam cave (**Fig. 3**), a lot of information about the cult community and sculptor of the relief (Phoibos from Nikomedia) is known from the inscription and the accompanying finds<sup>75</sup>. The quality of the relief leaves no doubt about the identification of the busts of Luna and Sol. Further it is clearly visible the fact that Cautes holds an egg, while Cautopates has a scorpion in his left hand.

This deliberate 'inverted' placement of the two busts can also be found, among others, on the small relief dated by the inscription in the Mithraeum in Dura Europos<sup>76</sup> and on a complex relief from Sidon (now in Paris)<sup>77</sup>. In both cases however, there is additional information at hand, both on the finding context and on further reliefs and statues found, together with inscriptions and dating evidence. The same inversion is to be seen on one relief from Potaissa, in Dacia, while a lions mask<sup>78</sup> is depicted on the background, above Mithras. This way, it is possible to try and find a hypothesis for interpretation of individual finds of the so-called Mithras reliefs, accepting the differentiation intended by the dedicant, depending on the location of the relief within the cult place, on the individual occasion of the dedication, or even on the available reliefs and/or sculptors providing the plates.

The question arises whether this inversed location was intended or if it was just a mistake. And the answer can only be hypothetical. In our opinion, there is

<sup>72</sup> Moesia inferior: NAJDENOVA 1987, p. 194. - Dacia: NEMETI & NEMETI 2004-2005, p. 115, 118.

<sup>73</sup> The relief was brought to F. Topoleanu by a worker during the rescue excavation within a tumulus in Stejaru (1983): TOPOLEANU 2010, p. 167. It was said to have been fortuitously found during ploughing. The tumular necropolis is located at about half distance between the villages Stejaru and Vasile Alecsandri. - The relief is now in the collections of ICEM Tulcea, inv.no. 52702. Dimensions: preserved height 18 cm; preserved width 21 cm; depth 5-5.7 cm. Preserved is the left upper corner of the plate. On the Roman rural settlement nuclei in Stejaru commune, Vasile Alecsandri village see for the time being the information in the RAN 161375.01-04 as well as 161357.01 [last seen on 15.05.2020].

<sup>74</sup> For example on the reliefs from La Adam cave (**Fig. 3**), Histria (**Fig. 5**), Donja Plemenščina near Pregrade (CIMRM 1468-1469).

<sup>75</sup> See also the comment RUSCU 2003-2004, p. 27-28.

<sup>76</sup> CIMRM 37; MERKELBACH 1998, fig. 15 (168/9 n. Chr.).

<sup>77</sup> CIMRM 75; MERKELBACH 1998, fig. 18.

<sup>78</sup> SICOE 2014, cat. 5; NEMETI & NEMETI 2004-2005, p. 117.

an argument regarding at least some of the relief as intended, being thus customized reliefs.

Of interest to the matter are the additional elements of the composition and the more or less standard presence of the Dadophori and their attributes. There are hints on the intended direction for the reading of the depiction, as well as on the general astronomical content of the composition<sup>79</sup>. Of course, the analysis can consider only the entirely preserved reliefs and it is feasible when different additional symbolic elements occur.

The relation between Sol and Cautes and Luna and Cautopates are clear. The placement in the composition of those four figures builds a problem when it comes to interpreting the depiction, or even to its reading<sup>80</sup>. Most puzzling are examples of compositions that seem to neglect the meaning of the figures and their attributes, like one relief in Vințu de Jos, Dacia, with two Cautes figures and Luna to the left of Mithras, while Sol is to his right<sup>81</sup> or on the small relief from the La Adam cave<sup>82</sup>. It is not the place here to open the discussion on the figures of Cautes and Cautopates, on the busts of Sol/Luna and further symbolic elements from the mythos on the Mithras reliefs, but it must at least be stated, that those differences from the usual composition of the tauroctony scene have most likely an intentional character and can play an important role to the message of the relief<sup>83</sup>.

### **Mithras dedications and reliefs – Mithras cult communities**

As far as the possible overview of finding places of votive reliefs and inscriptions within the territory of Moesia inferior allows, it can be observed that there are some concentrations along the Danube line (Oescus, Novae, Ruse, Durostorum, Axiopolis, Carsium, Capidava, Troesmis), on the shores of the Black Sea (Histria, Tomis, rare finds in Callatis and Odessos) and very rare in the interior of the province (Tropaeum Traiani, singular finds in Ulmetum, Nalbant, Stejaru, Nicopolis ad Istrum). Especially in the case of singular finds, without documented finding situation or found in reuse, the interpretation needs to be reserved. This is most certainly also a situation due to the state of research. The finds of the so-called cult sites are quite rare, as in Novae<sup>84</sup> or Kreta<sup>85</sup>. In Histria the location of the mithraeum is not known, but its existence at an early date is epigraphically attested<sup>86</sup>. Further mithrea are rather assumed to have existed, based on several finds of inscriptions and/or reliefs from the same area. Thus, on closer examination, the find from La Adam cave and the one from Mircea Vodă/

<sup>79</sup> BECK 1988, p. 11-12, 20-21, 73-85.

<sup>80</sup> HANNAH 1996, p. 187.

<sup>81</sup> CIMRM 2001-2002; SICOE 2014, cat. 65. Both torchbearers with the same attitude are to be seen also on CIMRM 2247 (Oescus). On double Cautes and double Cautopates see VOLLKOMMER 1992, p. 625 (no. 569-572, respectively no. 673-677).

<sup>82</sup> CIMRM 2305.

<sup>83</sup> See also BECK 1988.

<sup>84</sup> TOMAS & LEMKE 2015 (with literature).

<sup>85</sup> VELKOV 1934; KAZAROW 1935, p. 25-26; CIMRM II p. 354, no. 2256 (with literature).

<sup>86</sup> CIMRM 2296; ISM I 137; RUSCU 2003-2004, p. 22-26.

Acbunar could both be interpreted as a hiding place for a rural sanctuary inventory<sup>87</sup>. Nevertheless, the assumption of Mithraic cult sites in the vicinity of their hiding places is justified.

For individual reliefs bearing the tauroctony, it is also attested the practice of being dedicated in sanctuaries of other gods<sup>88</sup>. In the region of interest here this was certainly the case with the so-called sculptures hoard from Tomis<sup>89</sup>. Furthermore, there is scarce information on the findings of a Mithras relief together with votive reliefs for other deities<sup>90</sup>, but the state of publication does not allow interpretation.

However, there are some general statements possible, which individualize Moesia inferior compared to the neighbour province Dacia, at least in respect to iconography and shape and dimensions of monuments. The chronological frame of the cult evidence within the territory of interest is quite wide: from the early – mid second century AD (in Novae, Oescus and Histria) up to the late third - early fourth century AD (Axiopolis and Novae). Local lithic materials are commonly used, while imported marble seems to be an exceptional choice. The shape and dimensions of monuments are rather modest compared to other regions. However, the iconography completes the image of cultic communities, without complex evidence of manifested cultic aspects. The so-called Danubian reliefs, bearing more than the tauroctony scene from the Mithras mythos, are only a few and limited to small size marble votive plates<sup>91</sup>.

The examples from the mithraea of Dura Europos, Poetovio and Carnuntum<sup>92</sup>, where the systematic archaeological investigation of the sanctuaries and the epigraphic evidence have provided insights into both the chronology and the cult community, as well as possible alterations of the cult images, also point to the unfortunate situation in the area of the northern Moesia inferior, in which case the monuments of the Mithras cult have been preserved without their original context. The situations in Histria, Novae and Nicopolis ad Istrum, point out to the existence of lasting cult communities. From the military sites along the Danube frontier, the cult widespread to their hinterland and to the Greek cities on the shores of the Black Sea<sup>93</sup>, the members of the cult communities being soldiers, administrative staff and civilians from urban and rural settlements. Furthermore,

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<sup>87</sup> ALEXANDRESCU 2016; ALEXANDRESCU 2017.

<sup>88</sup> The temple of Isis from Cyrene, the Dolichenum on the Aventine in Rome and in a temple of Zeus Bronton, South of Rome: TOYNBEE 1986, p. 59-60. All contexts seem to be of late date, while the sculptures are stylistically dated earlier, hence the debate on the interpretation of such finds.

<sup>89</sup> ALEXANDRESCU VIANU 2009, p. 33.

<sup>90</sup> See for example KAZAROW 1935, p. 27, no. 9 (for CIMRM 2295).

<sup>91</sup> Their detailed analysis is planned for a further study. Novae (2 examples - CIMRM 2267; IGLNovae 38); Ruse (1 example - CIMRM 2272); Mircea Vodă (Tulcea County) (3 examples - CIMRM 2291, 2292; ALEXANDRESCU 2017, p. 17-19); Tomis (3 examples - CIMRM 2297, 2298-2299; ALEXANDRESCU VIANU 2009, p. 33, fig. 19); Histria (1 example - ALEXANDRESCU VIANU [2000], cat. 190); Callatis (1 example - CIMRM 2310).

<sup>92</sup> MERKELBACH 1998, p. 167; KREMER 2012, p. 330-337, 382-387.

<sup>93</sup> CLAUSS 1992, p. 220-229; BOTTEZ 2006, p. 299; BĂRBULESCU & BUZOIANU 2009, p. 401; TOMAS & LEMKE 2015, p. 237-238.

the evolution of the cult and its relation to the official cult of the emperor in Moesia inferior and later Scythia minor are also subjects for discussion<sup>94</sup>.

The combined analysis of iconography, inscriptions and the dimensions and material of the current evidence highlights the wide chronological frame of the Mithras cult in the region under review, the available quality of reliefs and sculptors as well as the economic and cultural potential of the individual members of the cult communities. The observations on depictions provide useful hints on the regional preferences and the provenance of iconography and chosen/practiced cult aspects. The state of research and the state of preservation of the finds might hinder the approach to this aspect of the ancient life in the region, but must not stop the investigation.

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|             |   |
|-------------|---|
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| MINAC       | Muzeul de Istorie Națională și Arheologie, Constanța.   |
| MNA         | Muzeul Național de Antichități, part of Institutul de Arheologie "Vasile Pârvan" Bucharest.   |
| MNIR        | Muzeul Național de Istorie a României, Bucharest.   |
| IAB         | Institutul de Arheologie "Vasile Pârvan", Bucharest.  |
| ICEM        | Institutul de Cercetări Eco-Muzeale "Gavrilă Simion", Tulcea.   |
| RAN         | Repertoriul Arheologic Național.  |
| IGBulg      | G. Mihailov, <i>Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae</i> , Sofia, 1958-1997.  |
| IGLNovae    | J. Kolendo, V. Božilova, <i>Inscriptiones grecques et latines de Novae (Mésie inferieure)</i> , Bordeaux, 1997.   |
| ISM I       | D. M. Pippidi, <i>Inscriptiones Scythiae Minoris Graecae et Latinae, I. Inscriptiones Histriae et viciniae</i> , București, 1983.   |
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| LGPN online | Lexicon of Greek Personal Names (LGPN), <a href="http://www.lgpn.ox.ac.uk/">http://www.lgpn.ox.ac.uk/</a> .   |

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<sup>94</sup> BOTTEZ 2006, p. 299.

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**Fig. 1 - Relief from Castelu/ Medgidia. Limestone. (Photo F. Topoleanu).**



**Fig. 2 - Relief and its base from the Kreta mithraeum (CIMRM 2256-2257). Sandstone. (after VELKOV 1934, fig. 71).**



**Fig. 3 - Large relief from La Adam cave (ISM I 374). Limestone. (Photo C.-G. Alexandrescu).**



**Fig. 4 - Relief from Stejaru. Marble. (Photo C.-G. Alexandrescu).**



**Fig. 5 - Relief from Histria. Marble. (Photo C.-G. Alexandrescu).**



**Fig. 6 - Relief from Constanța. Marble. (After BOTTEZ 2018, fig. 5).**



**Fig. 7 - Relief from Troesmis (old photo). (After BORDENACHE 1969, no. 180).**



**Fig. 8: Relief from Troesmis (today). Limestone. (Photo C.-G. Alexandrescu).**

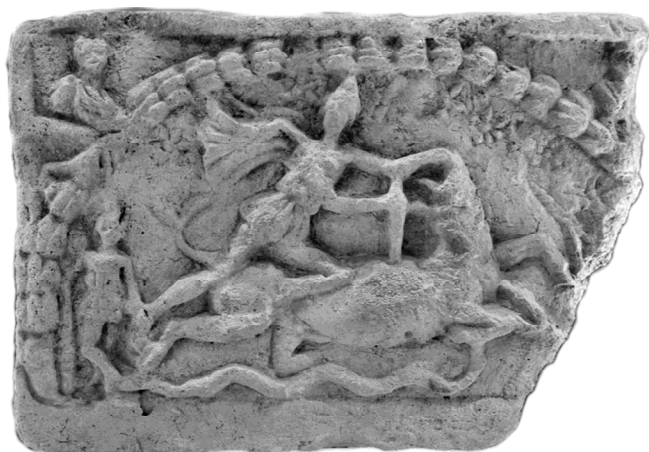


Fig. 9 - Relief from Silistra. Limestone.  
(After IVANOV 2006, color plate III).



Fig. 10 - Relief of unknown provenance. Brick. (After PETOLESCU 1977, fig. 2).



Fig. 11 - a-c: Relief of unknown provenance MNA L463. Limestone.  
(Photo C.I. Nicolae).