

# CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF MITHRAIC ICONOGRAPHY: TAUROCTONY RELIEF WITH LOWER FRIEZE FROM MOESIA SUPERIOR

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*Cuvinte cheie:* Mithras, tauroctonie, călăreț, taur, iconografie, cult, Moesia Superior

As a part of the antique archaeological collection of the National Museum Kruševac a marble icon consisting of a few fragments is preserved, its width being 23.4 cm, height 17.7 cm and thickness 3.5 cm. Although only the bottom half of the relief has been preserved, the representation of tauroctony, the bull-slaying, can be clearly recognised as the central visual representation of the cult of god Mithras (Fig. 1). It is an incidental find from the site of Mogile in the village of Nozrine near Aleksinac in Serbia, which has not been systematically investigated; yet the archeological material and the remains of the architecture point out that a small Roman settlement (*vicus*) with a sanctuary might have been situated there, located near the main road *Horreum Margi – Naissus*<sup>1</sup>.

As above mentioned, the representation of tauroctony occupies the central part of the relief, where we can perceive the figure of Mithras, preserved up to the waist and frontally positioned facing the spectator. The deity is clad in chiton, his left leg bent in knee pressing the back of the bull, while the right foot stands on the ground. The bull is almost entirely forced to the ground, his front hooves bent under his body and his head drooping, while bellow, all along his

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century two sarcophagi were found here in the tomb along with a luxurious copper vessel, a copper head, some pottery and silver coins of Marcus Aurelius, while a bit later there is a record of the remains of a building and a tomb made of brick, as well as the fragments of a gravestone and stone plastics (Вулић 1934, 49; Јовановић 1980, 5; Рашковић 2013). Also, on this site, several votive icons dedicated to various deities were found (Рашковић 2013, 64; Васиљевић 2017), which points at the possibility that a small sanctuary was situated there.

body, lies a snake with a raised head, most probably looking at the direction of the bull's wound. Left and right from Mithras' figure there are partially preserved figures of the torch-bearers in various positions. The left torch-bearer, Cautopates, is represented in a smaller proportion compared to the right one. He holds torch pointed downward, while his other hand points at the bull's tail. We can see Cautes' left foot, which either seems to be stepping forward or, alternatively, this is a simplified typical representation of a torch-bearer with crossed legs. Behind Cautes' leg, we can discern a dog, which is a standard detail on such representations, along with a snake<sup>2</sup>. Although the scene has not been entirely preserved, we can say that all the common motives connected with tauroctony (or at least its lower part) are present here, so that this can be considered a typical representation of god Mithras in the act of cosmogony, where he saves the world from the destruction through his symbolic slaying of the bull<sup>3</sup>.

Below the tauroctony, there is a rectangular space where four scenes are placed. These are divided by plastic consoles similar to pillars (Fig. 2). Here the following images are sequenced: a figure on whose head we can discern a Phrygian cap while riding an animal (a bull or a horse); a figure stepping forward who is taking a swing by his right hand while his left hand is stretched towards the head of another kneeling figure; then two figures sitting at a table and finally two figures in a one-horse chariot. Apart from the first scene, which will be discussed later in greater detail, the next three are an illustration of a cult ritual i.e. the mythological cycle of Mithras and Sol. They represent an almost standard iconographic repertoire of Mithras' icons with a lower frieze, which

<sup>2</sup> Campbell 1968, 12, 15; Зотовић 1973, 88; Зотовић 1979, 90.

<sup>3</sup> F. Cumont, as a founder of the scientific approach to Mithraism, held that the cult of god Mithras was inspired by the characters from Iranian mythology and its traditional setting based on the conflict between good and evil, but the later authors have rejected that standpoint. Having defined tauroctony as a star map where each figure symbolises a particular constellation, it was how they interpreted all the other visual representations on the cult artefacts of god Mithras, as well as cult practices along with functions of Mithraeum (Cumont 1903; Gordon 1975, 215–248; Hinnells 1975; Beck 1976, 95–98; 1988; Ulansey 1989). Led by such approach, R. Merkelbach deduced that Mithraism was a solely Roman cult designed by intellectuals from the circles close to the Roman court, introducing it as a new teaching based on contemporary philosophical and scientific understanding. Although this author admits that the main character of this cult was inspired by an epichoric Iranian deity, which is confirmed by its iconography, he holds that the Mithraic doctrine is based on the ideas of neoplatonic philosophy, as well as soteriology aspects of Greco-Roman cults and the influences of Hellenistic and Roman astronomy and astrology, rather than the Iranian religion whose influence on it was less prominent, which is an approach accepted by the majority of researchers nowadays (Merkelbach 1984, 153; Turcan 1996, 204–205; Beck 1998, 119).

are traditionally recognised in the literature as typical of the Roman provinces along the Danube<sup>4</sup>.

It is held that this type of votive reliefs is concentrated in the area of Moesia Superior, Moesia Inferior, Thracia and Dacia, while its iconography is likely to have been formed in the border regions of Moesia Superior and Moesia Inferior from where it had spread towards the territories of the above mentioned provinces, since the second half of the 2nd century<sup>5</sup>. As it is the case with our sample, the three scenes typical of the lower frieze of such reliefs are identified as follows: the motif of initiation rite, the so-called banquet scene of Mithras and Sol and the departure of the deity to the heaven i.e. immortality in Sol's chariot. On this occasion we will briefly take a look at their interpretation, with the aim of the better perception of the entire narrative of the four-part frieze of the analysed relief.

In the older literature the second scene in our frieze had been interpreted as a conflict between Mithras and Sol. F. Cumont believed that this scene depicted the final moments of the gigantic battle of the above mentioned deities i.e. the act of Sol's final submission to Mithras<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, M.J. Vermaseren pointed out that this act was often portrayed on the reliefs from the Balkans area<sup>7</sup>. This interpretation has been largely rejected in accordance with the rationale of L.A. Campbell, who recognises the ritual of initiation (*telete*) in the scene, taking place in a Mithraeum.<sup>8</sup> Thus the left standing character is interpreted as

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<sup>4</sup> According to the typology of L.A. Campbell all Mithraic reliefs are classified into eight groups (I-VIII), along with several subtypes labelled by letters A to E (Campbell 1968, 1–3). As the find we are discussing here has not been entirely preserved, it is hard to define to which group it belongs because it can be classified as type II, III or IV, which apart from the main field with tauroctony has only either the lower frieze or the friezes below and above the main scene. In addition, the reliefs of the group VII usually possess a three-part frieze below the main scene of tauroctony, which corresponds to the frieze on our sample, if we exclude the first representation. As to the subtype, we can classify our sample as A, which applies to all tauroctonies where Mithras is depicted frontally, with his left leg bent at his knee which he uses to press the bull which is proportionally small compared to the deity, with his legs bent under his body. This subtype is typical of the South East Europe. However, in the more recent literature such a complex typology has been progressively abandoned, so that some authors categorise Mithraic reliefs as simple, containing only tauroctony, and complex, which contain side images with motifs of rites or the myths about Mithras (Lipovac-Vrkljan 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Najdenova 1989, 1417–1419; Гавриловић-Витас 2017, 200–201.

<sup>6</sup> Cumont 1903; Кокић 1932, 6; Зотовић 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Vermaseren 1960, 80.

<sup>8</sup> The initiation rites in Mithraism included the passage through the seven grades of initiation (Raven (*Corax*), Bride (*Nymphus*), Soldier (*Miles*), Lion (*Leo*), Persian (*Perses*), Courier of the Sun (*Heliodromus*) and Father (*Pater*)). The progress was achieved by performing proper ritual acts, in which the initiate was led by the mystagogue, i.e. the mysta in the highest grade of Father

a mystagogue of the highest rank (*Pater*), performing the rite over a kneeling initiate<sup>9</sup>. Through the comparative analysis of such scenes on the reliefs from Southeast Europe, the same author identified four types of rites: the standing character i.e. mystagogue places his hand on the head of the kneeling individual (*devotio*), afterwards the mystagogue pours the water from the horn onto the head of the neophyte (*infusio*), then the mystagogue places a bull's femur onto the head or the shoulders of the neophyte (*purgatio*) and finally in an act of coronation (*consecratio*), the mystagogue puts a radial crown onto the head of the neophyte<sup>10</sup>.

The most important source for understanding the iconography of the rite and the doctrine about the levels of sanctification can be found in the frescos from the Mithraeum below the church of Sta. Maria Vetere in Capua, which reveal as many as five different images of such ritual acts<sup>11</sup>. Here one can see the neophyte in several poses, as he kneels, lies or walks, in most scenes blindfolded, while the second mystagogue is usually behind him. In one of the scenes there are three figures: the neophyte on the right is depicted as he kneels, blindfolded and with his hands tied on his back, while behind him a mystagogue stands clad in a white robe with red details, seemingly placing his hand on the neophyte's shoulder. Standing in front of them with his legs apart, there is a figure representing *Pater*, clad in red and with a Phrygian cap, similar to Mithras, who is swinging his left arm towards the neophyte, holding an object similar to a dagger<sup>12</sup>. This very part of the performance, which refers to the figures of *Pater* and the neophyte, may have become as an iconographic pattern for the initiation rite in the composition on the lower friezes of the Mithraic reliefs this paper deals with<sup>13</sup>.

However, it is not possible to assert with confidence that such representations refer to a specific rite, such as those from Capua, but they rather reflect a general image of the initiation into the cult. Also, the relationship between this scene and the mythological representations of the story about Sol and Mithras has not been resolved until now. According to the above mentioned, we are closest to the assumption that the rite depicted on the relief from Nozrina, may be of the *purgatio* or *consecratio* type, as it can be perceived that the mystagogue holds an elongated object above the neophyte's head, the nature of which cannot

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(*Pater*), with the aim to save his soul and be reborn after death (Turcan 1996, 237; Clauss 2000, 133; Beck 2006, 114).

<sup>9</sup> Campbell 1968, 291.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell 1968, 292–293.

<sup>11</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 187–195.

<sup>12</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 188, tab. 21, fig. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Selem 1987, 135.

be clearly defined. In addition, the mystagogue seems to be swinging his other hand, but as it almost enters the plastic console which divides the scenes in the frieze, it is not clear if he holds another object in it, which could point at a combination of several variations of the rite. It is interesting to mention that in the marble icon of god Mithras with a lower frieze, which was found in the nearby village of Ražanj, there is an iconography similar to this one which was identified as *purgatio*, while also the other representations from the cycle of Mithras and Sol are partially analogous to our sample<sup>14</sup>.

Besides the scene with the initiation rite, in the lower frieze there is usually a representation of the feast of Mithras and Sol, as it is the case here as well. We can see an utterly simplified representation of two figures in profile, facing each other, probably at the table. Many authors believe that along with tauroctony, the holy feast (*convivium*), is the most important visual motif of Mithras' cult<sup>15</sup>. What additionally attests to this are two-sided reliefs, which depict tauroctony on one side in the central field, while on the other side there is the image of the feast, as can be seen in the sample from Konjic in Dalmatia<sup>16</sup>. The importance of this dignified meal is accentuated by the assumption that the two-sided icons were turned according to the need during the service in a Mithraeum<sup>17</sup>. The images of the holy feast appear in two forms: the meal shared by two people, normally Mithras and Sol or the Pater and the Heliodromus, as the two highest levels of initiation; alternatively, rather less often, it is represented as a feast with a few characters of the different level of initiation into the cult. However, in whatever manner it is depicted, the holy feast is almost always interpreted as an image of the unity among the believers and the community with the deity<sup>18</sup>.

The holy feast of Mithras and Sol typically appears on the reliefs that originate from the areas near the Rhine, the Sava and the Danube, in a few standard iconographic variations: the feast takes place on the body of the bull or the characters sit on the bull<sup>19</sup>, while also the table can be covered with the bull's skin<sup>20</sup>. On a slightly better crafted relief, the figures are depicted in reclining position in accordance with Roman customs, propped by one arm while giving a toast by another<sup>21</sup>. In analogy to the scene on the relief we discuss here, very

<sup>14</sup> Гавриловић-Витас 2017, 189, 198, сл. 1–2.

<sup>15</sup> Miletić 2007, 134; Selem 2008, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1895–1899; Зотовић 1973, 29–31, бр. 35, сл. 19; Merkelbach 1982, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Gabričević 1952, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Selem 2008, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1038, 1275a.

<sup>20</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1137, 1292.

<sup>21</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 2000.

often there are utterly stylised characters in the form of the two contours at the table<sup>22</sup>. If the composition of the frieze permits, the entire scene can be placed under a vault which bears associations to a cave, emphasising the sanctity of the act as well as symbolic relation to the practice in a Mithraeum, where communal meals of the believers took place<sup>23</sup>.

The cycle of Mithras and Sol on Mithraic icons is based on a strong solar component of this cult which had been emphasized since the 1st century, although at the time the solar cult was not widely spread in the Roman religion. This is attested by the standard addressing Mithras as Sol *Invictus*, along with the representation of Sol and Luna in the upper part of the tauroctony. Furthermore, on the friezes of the reliefs around the main scene normally there are illustrations of the above-mentioned cycle explaining to the believers in an allegorical manner the universal system that is reflected in the liturgical rites<sup>24</sup>. It can be concluded that Mithras starts the cycle because he prompts cosmogony, while Sol ends it, as it is attested by the last scene on the lower frieze of Mithraic icons, depicting Mithras and Sol in his chariot while they leave for heaven, i.e. immortality. Although this image is sometimes named apotheosis<sup>25</sup>, it could rather be interpreted as glorification of the deities because the scene deals with the two gods<sup>26</sup>, which would confirm the approaches to Mithraism as a religion of communion<sup>27</sup>. Sometimes in front of the Sol's chariot there is a reclining figure of Oceanus, which can be replaced by waves or hydria motif<sup>28</sup>. As to our sample, in the last scene of the lower frieze one can clearly recognize two figures in a chariot and one horse, while due to the damage to the relief in the bottom right angle, it is impossible to confirm whether or not there was the above mentioned symbol of Oceanus.

After the interpretation of the more or less standard scenes in the iconography of the lower frieze of Mithraic icons, we will go back to the initial image of the sample from Nozrina. Namely, the scene with a figure riding an animal placed in the lower frieze with the representations of initiation and the cycle of Mithras and Sol, is known to be present only in the case of a few reliefs from the province of Moesia Superior, mostly identified as Mithra riding a bull. It was found in one sample from the vicinity of Viminacium, which consists of two small fragments, embellished on both sides, where partially preserved

<sup>22</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1740, 1975, 2338; Гавриловић-Витас 2017, сл. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Selem 2008, 10; Гавриловић-Витас 2017, сл. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Miletić 2007, 134.

<sup>25</sup> Зотовић 1973.

<sup>26</sup> Гавриловић-Витас 2017, 199, нап. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Selem 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Vermaseren 1960, 104; Campbell 1968, 325; Clauss 2000, 152.

representations of a lower frieze and a small part of tauroctony can be discerned<sup>29</sup>. Based on these, the front part of the icon has been reconstructed, where below the main field there is a sequence of scenes: a standing figure depicted frontally with an arm raised in greeting, then Mithras riding a bull, the feast of Mithras and Sol and the departure of the deities to heaven in a chariot<sup>30</sup>. Although only the right rear leg of an animal and a detail of the rider's fluttering robe are preserved, this scene was interpreted as Mithras riding a bull, probably due to the fact that on the reverse side of one fragment the front part of a figure of a galloping bull is clearly visible. This scene is considered an iconographic novelty among the known icons in the region of Moesia Superior and it is interpreted as a solar symbol<sup>31</sup>. Mithras riding a bull is usually found on the reliefs which are embellished with a large number of scenes around the tauroctony, as a part of the cycle about the bull hunting which encompasses the scenes of a grazing bull, Mithras carrying the bull on his shoulders, Mithras riding a bull or pulling it behind him while holding it on his back (*taurophorus*)<sup>32</sup>. The scenes depicting him are found in the iconography of a few Mithraic reliefs from Singidunum, where only one sample contains a representation of Mithras riding a bull in the lower frieze along with other scenes of the story about Mithras and Sol<sup>33</sup>.

Also, a closer analogy to the sample in Nozrina in terms of the choice of the motif can be noticed on the relief of a Mithraeum in the village of Biljanovce near Kumanovo. This is a typologically different monument because the central image is placed in a circular medallion, while in the lower frieze the following scenes are visible: Mithras riding a bull, the initiation rite (interpreted as the conflict between Mithras and Sol), the feast of Mithras and Sol, the departure of the deities in a chariot<sup>34</sup>. It is interesting to mention that some of the previous authors which researched the Biljanovce Mithraeum, identified the first scene in the lower frieze of this monument as Mithra on the horseback<sup>35</sup>. However, such possibility is rejected due to the general lack of analogies on Mithraic icons and according to a very similar parallel found on a circular relief from Sisak which depicts the deity on the bull<sup>36</sup>.

Despite the fact that Mithra on the bull is a scene which makes integral part of the pictorial cycle showing the deity's bull hunt and appears somewhat more

<sup>29</sup> Зотовић 1979, Т. I, сл. 1–2, Т. II, сл. 1–2.

<sup>30</sup> Зотовић 1979, 89–91, сл. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Зотовић 1979, 90–92, Т. II, сл. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1283, 1920, 1935.

<sup>33</sup> Бојовић 1978, 136, Т. I, 2, Т. II, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Зотовић 1973, 16–17, сл. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Кокић 1932, сл. 5–7.

<sup>36</sup> Зотовић 1973, 17, сл. 14.



frequently on Mithraic reliefs, due to certain iconographic details we would not rule out the possibility that on the Nozrina relief Mithra actually rides a horse. Here we can recognize a fast trotting animal with reins, while the leaning figure of the rider also attests to the speed. Furthermore, the animal has an elongated muzzle and it is lean, which does not correspond to the standard robust representation of a bull. In similar cases, the bull is depicted free, without reins, sometimes even prancing while he pulls lying Mithras; or alternatively it is represented in a passive posture<sup>37</sup>, neither of which corresponds to our representation.

Mithras riding a horse, in the light of the rich repertoire of this cult's iconography, is not among the common visual patterns. One of the most famous such representations is to be found on a fresco in the Mithraeum in Dura-Europos, where Mithras is pictured as a hunting horse rider (Fig. 3). More precisely, there are two hunters on horseback, depicted on the side walls around the central niche with tauroctony, of which the left figure is much better preserved. It represents a rider who gallops towards the niche, holding a bow aiming at deer and a wild boar, while under the horse's hooves there is a snake along with a lion in front of it. The other scene with a horseman is similar, except that the figure rides away from the niche<sup>38</sup>. These scenes were traditionally interpreted as images of Mithras hunting on a horse, inspired by the royal hunt from the Persian tradition, and it was held that such iconography might have been brought by soldiers i.e. archers from Palmyra who founded this Mithraeum<sup>39</sup>. However, recently, another interpretation was suggested, stating that these characters only resemble Mithras iconographically while in fact these are dadophores, Cautes and Cautopates, which is deduced by the analogy with the frescoes recently discovered in the Mithraeum of Huarte, in the proximity of Apamea<sup>40</sup>. It was proposed that their origin can be searched out and identified among armed rider gods in Syria, frequently worshipped in pairs among the seminomadic population of the Syrian–Mesopotamian steppe<sup>41</sup>.

It is evident that the frescoes of the riders from Dura-Europos cannot represent a proper analogy to the scene on our relief, especially bearing in mind that here we do not deal with a deity with the attributes associated with hunting. The motif of Mithras riding a horse also appears in the group of Roman coins from Trabzon (*Trapezous*) dated to the first half of the 3rd century as well as on German reliefs. On the reverse side of these coins Mithras with a Phrygian cap

<sup>37</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 42, 1283, 1920, 1935.

<sup>38</sup> Dirven 2016, fig. 3.1.

<sup>39</sup> Cumont 1975, 186–192; Rostovtzeff 1939, 112–115; Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 52.

<sup>40</sup> Gawlikowski 2007; Dirven 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Downey 1978, 148.



is represented riding a horse, while there is a tree behind him and an altar in front of him<sup>42</sup>. The origin of this cult in Trabzon is linked to its former presence in the Pontus region, so that the similar iconography on the coins is noted in the finds from the Histria (*Istros*), from the time of Septimius Severus. Among the coins from Trabzon, a sample from the reign of emperor Geta stands out. It represents Mithras riding a fast trotting horse, which is very similar to our sample<sup>43</sup>.

It seems that the image of Mithras riding a horse was particularly present in Eastern Germanic areas. The importance of this motif in this region is emphasised by the fact that in some samples it is found in the central part of the monument instead of the scene of tauroctony<sup>44</sup>. However, the German representations of Mithras the horseman often bear associations of hunting, depicting the deity with a bow and arrows, along with numerous hunting animals<sup>45</sup>. In addition, on German reliefs we can note a connection of such hunting scenes with the portrayals of the holy feast, as mutually conditioned. This is reflected in their arrangement as they are often placed next to each other, or sometimes the two are equal and placed one above the other in the central field of two-sided icons<sup>46</sup>. Among such Germanic reliefs, only a sample from Neuenheim can be singled out as a monumental representation of Mithras riding a horse without the attributes directly connected to hunting (Fig. 4).

The significance of these reliefs from Germania for the general study of Mithras' iconography was pointed out by F. Cumont who considered them to be a possible analogy to the frescoes in Dura-Europos<sup>47</sup>. In our opinion, it is especially important he emphasized the susceptibility of Mithras' cult to syncretism<sup>48</sup> as well as proneness to autochthonous influences in which he saw resemblance between Mithras and the Germanic deity Wotan<sup>49</sup>. The existence of certain visual patterns in one area's tradition certainly is not negligible as a

<sup>42</sup> Vollkommer 1992, no. 207–320; Keles 2008, 217–218, fig. 19–22.

<sup>43</sup> Keles 2008, fig. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1247a, 1289.

<sup>45</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1137, 1247a, 1292.

<sup>46</sup> Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1083, 1137, 1292; Dirven 2016, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Cumont 1975, 188.

<sup>48</sup> This refers to the relief from Dieburg and Osterburken in particular, where, apart from the usual scenes from Mithras' iconography, there are also numerous figures of Roman deities and allegorical representations (Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1247, 1292). Given that the Mithraeum from Dieburg is dated to the rather late period, somewhere around the half of the 3rd century, it makes it more open for the influences of syncretism which dominated in the Roman Empire.

<sup>49</sup> Francis notes that this idea gained little traction, and was overshadowed by the potential transfer of equestrian imagery from Mithraea in the East, which he emphasized in the editor's preface to this Cumont's work (Cumont 1975, 151).

possible influence on the formation of such atypical visual breakthroughs, in a seemingly conservatively developed iconography of the cult spread in such a wide geographical area. To this attest a large number of grave stelae which belong to the soldiers from the Roman cavalry units, usually depicted riding a horse, which are found in Germania<sup>50</sup>.

After this short overview of the monuments with representation of Mithras riding a horse, we note that this scene from Nozrina does not have adequate visual parallels, especially bearing in mind that its position is in the lower frieze. The more detailed understanding of it is made difficult because the monument is damaged, so it is not known if there may have been an upper frieze, which would clarify the wider iconographic context of the representation. Although we must be reserved because of the simple contours, we can still take a hint of some details, such as the unclear shape on the rider's back which can be a fluttering cloak or an addition such as a quiver. If there had been a quiver then our scene would be closer to the Germanic iconography of Mithras the hunter riding a horse, which illustrates the belief of some researchers that Mithraism is based on an act of faithfulness and solidarity among the believers i.e. the unanimity of the group consisting of men, hunters, who dedicate a feast to this concept<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, it is interesting to note the way this rider almost embraces the animal round its neck, which bears associations to the motif of Mithras riding the bull while holding its horns, or alternatively the figure may be squeezing the animal's neck while almost lying on it, suggesting that this may be an unusual synthesis of the two iconographic patterns.

At the very end of our paper we must wonder at what might be the cause of the appearance of such scene among the standardised motifs of the lower frieze of the Mithraic icons. Namely, we pointed out the very similar iconography of Mithras riding a horse depicted on the reverse side of one coin from Trabzon, from the period of emperor Geta (211 AD), which could be inspired by the older iconographic pattern from Pontic coins from Histria (*Istros*). Given the mobility of Roman soldiers, it is not impossible that this visual pattern might have been transferred to this area, primarily through the recruits from Thracia. In the area of the village of Nozrina, from where the find we discuss originates, Thracian population was epigraphically confirmed through the inscription on the votive relief with the depiction of Sol/Appollo<sup>52</sup>. Also, there are known votive inscriptions of Thracian dedicants i.e. the soldiers of the cohort II *Aurelia Dardanorum* from Ravna (*Timacum Minus*)<sup>53</sup>, as well as mansio *Praesidium*

<sup>50</sup> Anderson 1984; Mackintosh 1986; Hope 2000.

<sup>51</sup> Merkelbach 1984; Selem 2008.

<sup>52</sup> Veljković, Vasiljević 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Petrović 1995, 70–71, 92–93, cat. 13, 44.

*Pompei*<sup>54</sup>, so that is why we presume that its veterans may have settled in the nearby vicii in the Aleksinac depression. Moreover, in this area multiple finds of a deity known as *Heros Equitans* or Thracian horseman were recorded<sup>55</sup>, and one fragment of a votive icon which is ascribed to this cult was found on the same site as this marble relief of god Mithras<sup>56</sup>.

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Finally, we would like to emphasize that the Mithraic icon from Nozrina, perfectly attests in favour of the one recent scholar view<sup>57</sup>, which supported the previous opinions about the particularity of the iconography of the so-called Danube reliefs, but disagreed with assertions about their consistency, pointing out that on the monuments of the Mithraic cult from the Roman provinces of the central Balkans there are certain visual distinctiveness. This is supported by both proposed interpretations of the first scene on the lower frieze of Nozrina relief: an untypical picture of Mithras on horseback or Mithras riding a bull, which is not given as a part of the standard story about the deity's bull hunt. Though this relief reproduces the established pattern of tauroctony in the central part, indicating respect for conventional iconographic rules of the Mithra's cult across the Roman Empire, such detail also contributes to the earlier thesis which stands that Mithraic monuments from the mentioned area demonstrate the lack of control in the cult practice<sup>58</sup>. Therefore, we hope that some new findings from this territory will further clarify the nature of this iconographic setting and its possible meaning.

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<sup>54</sup> Ђорђевић, Рашковић 2004, 36.

<sup>55</sup> Јовановић 2007, 175–183.

<sup>56</sup> Also kept in the antique archaeological collection of the National Museum Kruševac.

<sup>57</sup> Гавриловић-Витас 2017, 202.

<sup>58</sup> Зотовић 1973, 134.

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CONTRIBUȚIE LA STUDIUL ICONOGRAFIEI MITRAICE:  
RELIEF CU REPREZENTAREA TAUROCTONIEI ȘI CU  
FRIZĂ INFERIOARĂ DIN MOESIA SUPERIOR

*Rezumat*

Această lucrare prezintă un relief de marmură pe care este reprezentat zeul Mithras, care face parte din colecția arheologică antică a Muzeului Național Kruševac. Este o descoperire întâmplătoare pe locul Mogile, din satul Nozrine, de lângă Aleksinac din Serbia unde, conform materialului arheologic și a datelor din literatură, ar putea fi amplasată o mică așezare romană (*vicus*) cu un sanctuar. Relieful se păstrează fragmentar, dar scena tauroctoniei este clar recunoscută în partea centrală, în timp ce dedesubt este o friză bine conservată, cu patru scene, care ilustrează ritul inițierii cultului și ciclul mitologic al lui Mithras și Sol. Întrucât scena sa inițială poate fi interpretată ca reprezentându-l pe Mithras călare, ceea ce nu este atât de comun în iconografia unor astfel de frize, i-am acordat o atenție deosebită. Am presupus că ar putea fi o descriere a lui Mithras pe un taur, care este un detaliu binecunoscut din iconografia mitraică, dar nu am exclus posibilitatea ca scena să reprezinte, în mod atipic, zeitatea călare. În afară de frescele de la mithraeumul din Dura-Europos, imaginile vizuale ale acestei zeități pe un cal sunt prezente doar pe reliefurile germane și pe monedele romane de la Trabzon (*Trapezous*). Prin urmare, am încercat să pătrundem în originea și semnificația imaginii lui Mithras călare din acest monument, luând în considerare posibilele analogii.



Fig. 1. Votive relief of the god Mithras from Nozrina (photo: National Museum Kruševac). / Relieful votiv al zeului Mithras din Nozrina (foto: Muzeul Național Kruševac).



Fig. 2. Detail of the lower frieze of the votive relief of the god Mithras from Nozrina (photo: National Museum Kruševac). / Detaliu al frizei inferioare a reliefului votiv al zeului Mithras din Nozrina (foto: Muzeul Național Kruševac).



Fig. 3. Mithras the hunter, fresco from the Mithraeum of Dura-Europos (according to Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 52). / Mithras vânătorul, frescă din Mithraeumul de la Dura-Europos (după Vermaseren 1956–1960, nr. 52).



Fig. 4. Mithras riding a galloping horse, votive relief from Neuenheim (according to Vermaseren 1956–1960, no. 1289, fig. 338). / Mithras călare pe un cal în galop, relief votiv din Neuenheim (după Vermaseren 1956–1960, nr. 1289, fig. 338).