

About the Cult of Tauroctonous Mithra in Olbia

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Some years ago a fragment of a small marble votive slab was found in the south-eastern part of the Roman citadel of Olbia. It was a central upper part of the relief with Tauroctonous Mithra (fig. 1, 2). It was found among limestone rocks of middle and small sizes in the upper humus layer with the materials of the second half of the 2nd - the third quarter of the 4th centuries A. D.¹

The dimensions of this fragment of the slab are: 7,0–8,1x7,0–7,4 sm, the whole thickness - 1,4–1,9 sm, the height of the relief - 0,1–0,4 sm. A frame is preserved in the upper part. It has the form of the right-angled trapezium in profile with bases 0,4 and 0,9 sm wide and height of 0,3 sm. The marble is white tinged with light grey, granular. The slab was broken off from three sides. It was polished, but from the back and upper sides very slightly.

The central part of the composition - the figure of Mithra - was preserved almost completely, except of a part of the right leg, and a part of the cloak. To the right hand from Mithra is seen the head and the chest of the bull, the upright torch of the genius, presumably part of upraised muzzle of the dog on the chest of the bull in the lower right-hand corner of the slab.

Tauroctonous Mithra is depicted in the traditional pose - he is sacrificing the bull in the cave. His clothes are also traditional - a tunic, belt, short cloak, wound round his neck, Phrygian cap on the head. The face and hair of Mithra, his arms are not worked up, they are only outlined. The figure of the bull is even more schematic. His head is thrown back, the neck is braced, the tongue comes out. Mithra is thrusting the dagger presumably into the carotid artery of the bull. Judging by the torch, the genius with the upright torch was placed to the upright hand of Mithra. Evidently, the genius with the inverted torch was put to the left hand of Mithra. As a rule, a snake, a scorpion and a dog were placed below. On the whole, the image was done rather expressively, but a bit schematically, without working at details, maybe, because of the small dimensions of the slab. Evidently the relief was framed from all sides (imitation of speleum?). Preceding from the proportions of the central figure of the composition - Mithra - the presumable dimensions of the slab were: 12,5–13,5x10,5–11,0 sm.

This relief is the first find of such type in Olbia came for certain from the humus layer. Three earlier published fragments of slabs with Tauroctonous Mithra (maybe two from one relief) were taken from the collection of P. O. Burachkov². They all were also small and preserved in fragments. Their thickness was 1,8–2,3

sm. The genius with the upright torch and the front legs of the bull are represented on the first of them: part of the muzzle of the bull, right leg and hand of Mithra, the genius with the upright torch - on the second of them: legs and torch of the genius, standing on the lefthand of Mithra - on the third of them. Presumably the second and the third fragments are from the same relief³.

So, all slabs found in Olbia depicted the most important scene of the mystery of Mithra - the deliverance given by Mithra sacrificing the bull, which personified the dark power. Usually the snake, crawling along the side of the bull or under it, the dog, jumping on the chest of the bull and scorpion, stinging the bull in his groin help Mithra. The genii with the upright and with the inverted torch stand on both sides of Mithra.

It is not difficult to find analogies to reliefs with Mithra from Olbia. They are all traditional and can be dated by the end of the 2nd - the first half of the 3rd centuries A.D. As F. Cumont wrote, the monument of Mithraism constitute a homogenous group, rather important for Roman art but their artistic merit is far below that of their value as a historical documents. Usually they are reflection of compositions of the Hellenistic epoch⁴. Some of the smaller reliefs were situated not in temples, but in dwelling houses. This explains the carelessness with which these slabs were made. To satisfy the incessant demand the workshops must have produced them rapidly and in big quantities. But at the same time there are no two of these pieces which are exactly alike. In accordance with style and composition the marble relief with Mithra from Intercisa⁶ and marble statue of Mithra from Aquincum⁷ are the closest analogies to our slab. On the whole the figure of Mithra on our slab is more similar to those on the bas-relief from Intercisa by his pose and the character of the clothes. But the position of Mithra's arms and the form of his dagger are practically the same as those of the statue from Aquincum. They are dated by the second half of 2nd-3rd centuries A.D. A relief with Tauroctonus Mithra from Dacia (43x36x45 sm) contains the name of Marcus Aurelius and is dated by the time of his ruling (161-180)⁸.

In the region of the northern coast of Black Sea finds of small votive slabs with the relief of Tauroctonus Mithra are known also from Charax⁹ and Chersonese Tauric¹⁰ and undoubtedly were connected with the places of posts of Roman legionaries. It is worth observing that the marble of the slab from Chersonese is identical to those of the slabs from Olbia. It became possible to assume a single center for their production¹¹. In accordance with the character of the slabs, made in high relief, with certain simplicity, without additional symbols, it is possible to suggest that this centre was situated in Moesia Inferior¹².

Mithraism began to spread among Roman legionaries at the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. Then, at the end of the 2nd - the first half of the 3rd centuries, it

occupied the whole Roman Empire, turning into one of the most popular cults first of all in the military environment¹³. The propagation of Mithraism was almost contemporaneously conducted with Christianity, but the first found its strongest points of support in the Danubian provinces and in Germany, whereas the second made the most rapid progress in Asia Minor and Syria¹⁴. It is considered that the penetration of the cult of Mithra into the environment of Roman legionaries took part together with the cult of Thracian horseman through Thracian freelances. All that promoted the Romanization of the population of Roman provinces¹⁵.

The votive slabs with Mithra appeared in Olbia after the establishment of the Roman garrison there. Probably they were taken here by Roman legionaries from Moesia Inferior. The cult of Mithra was not popular among the inhabitants of Olbia. There was no reflexions of it among other kinds of Olbian art¹⁶. Maybe, only the terracotta figurines of Roman warriors with pendant legs in armour served as votives in the cult of Mithra¹⁷. These figurines and their fragments were found not only in Olbia, but also in the environment¹⁸ (fig. 3). Some of them were found in the south-eastern part of the Roman citadel in Olbia, on the same section of excavations, where the above mentioned slab with Mithra was found¹⁹ (fig. 4, 5, 6). They all are similar, but as a rule made in different moulds. Every figurine was made in two parts of the mould. Some of them are with defects. It is considered that these figurines were produced by workshops of Olbia²⁰.

Maybe there was no Mithraeum in Olbia, because all found slabs are small. Evidently they were placed in the dwellings of warriors or on their posts. It cannot be excluded that these slabs were placed in the sanctuary of Thracian gods. M. I. Rostovtsev conveniently considered that there was such a sanctuary in Olbia or in its environment²¹. Especially because the penetration of the cult of Mithra took place together with the cult of the Thracian horseman. Four fragments of reliefs with the Thracian horseman were found in Olbia. They are of small dimensions with the usual image of the horseman in a flying cloak, with a dog, running side by side or before him. Sometime there are a woman, a tree, an altar²². One more limestone relief of local production with a Thracian horseman, a scene of hunting, and a Sarmatian sign was found in the environment of Olbia²³.

Thus the example of Olbia reaffirms the coexistence and connections of two cults: Mithra and the Thracian horseman, which were taken here by Roman legionaries after their establishment in Olbia in the second half of the 2nd century A.D. But their influence on the local population was not strong.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- IAK - Izvestiya Imperatorskoy Archeologicheskoy Komissii.
KSOAM - Kratkie soobscheniya Odesskogo archeologicheskogo muzeya, Odesa.
MIA - Materiali i issledovaniya po archeologii SSSR, Moskva-Leningrad.
OAK - Otcheti Imperatorskoy Archeologicheskoy Komissii.
SAI - Svod archeologicheskikh istochnikov, Moskva-Leningrad.
ZOAO - Zapiski Odesskogo archeologicheskogo obschestva, Odesa.



Fig. 1 Relief with Tauroctonus Mithra from Olbia.

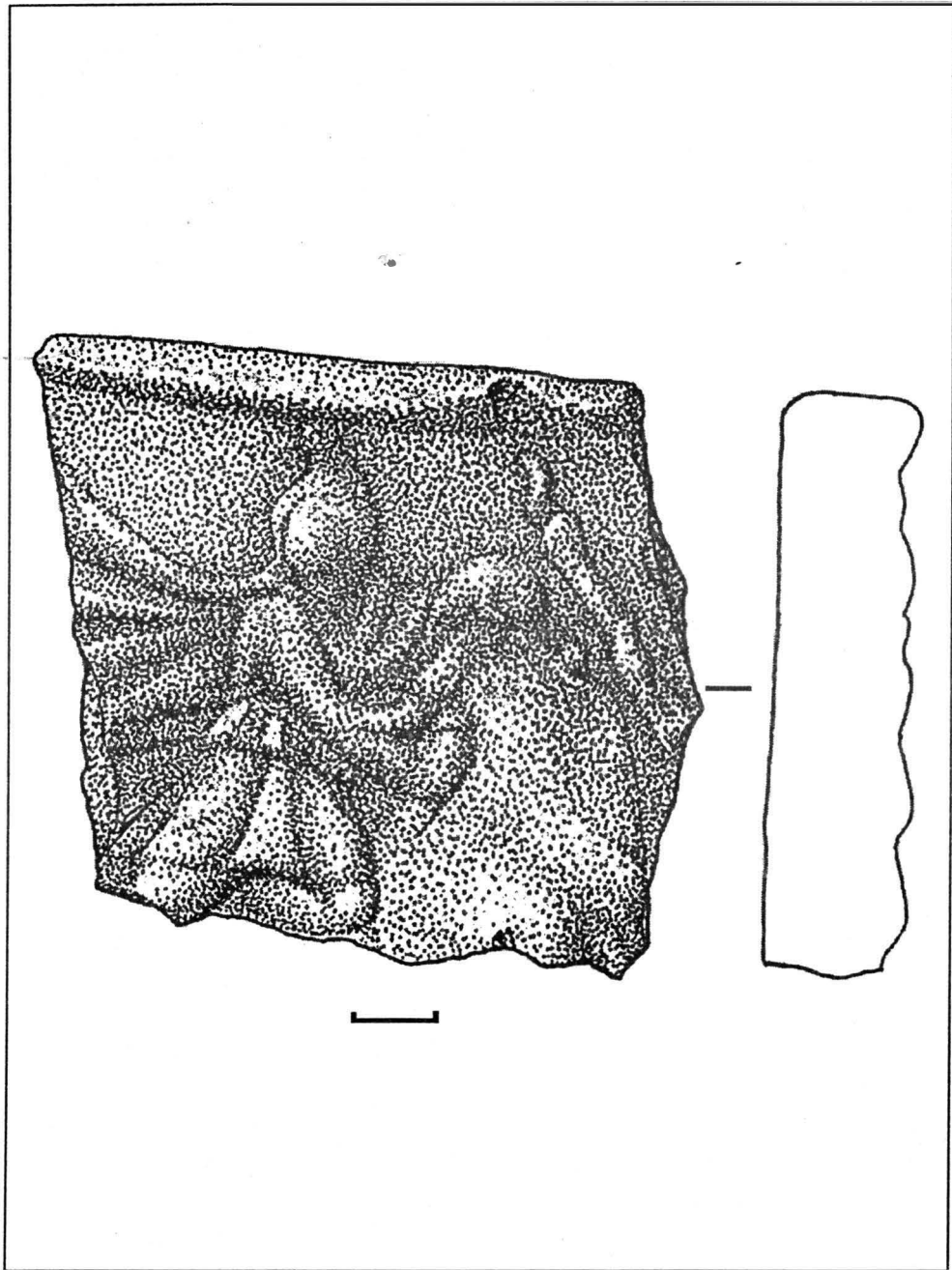


Fig. 2 Relief with Tauroctonus Mithra from Oldif (drawing).



Fig. 3 Terracotta figurine of warrior from Kozirka (Olbian environment).



Fig. 4 Heads of terracotta figurines of warriors (Olbia, section R-25).



Fig. 5 Hands of terracotta figurines of warriors (Olbia, section R-25).

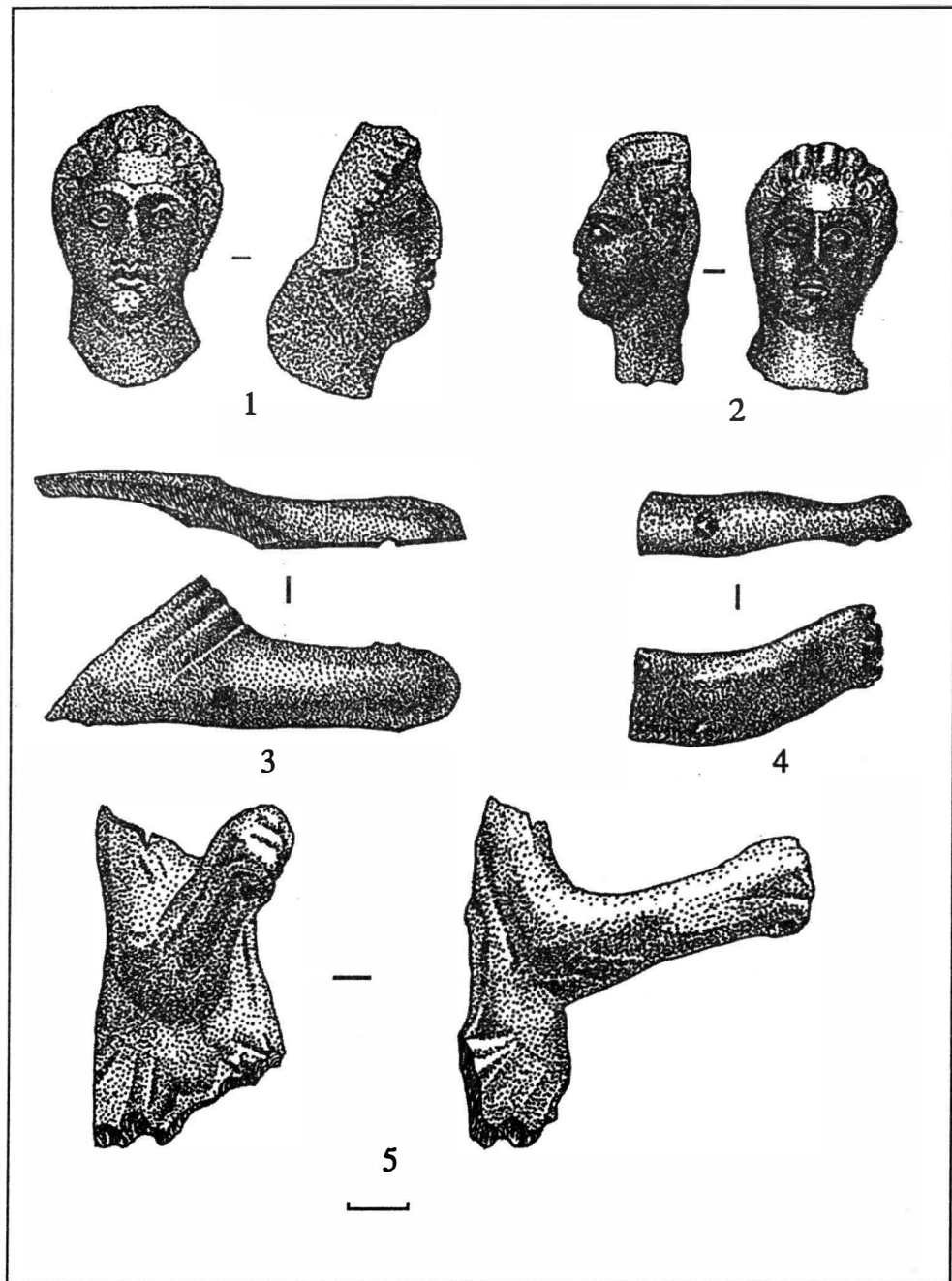


Fig. 6 Fragments of terracotta figurines of warriors from Olbia (drawing).