

# Cult Images and Mithraic Reliefs in Roman Dacia

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**T**HE GERMAN concept of *Kultbild* appears for the first time in literature during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, designating the image of a god which represented the center of the ritual act within a temple.<sup>1</sup> Along with this notion there appeared another one, *Götterbild*, indicating the divinity's image which does not make the object of a religious act, being rather a gift to the god and thus generally understood as the opposite of the cult image.<sup>2</sup> At artistic level, the two concepts are represented by statues, on the one hand, and reliefs, on the other.<sup>3</sup>

The general accepted theory according to which the cult object is represented only by statues, sometimes by statuettes as well, while any other kinds of representations fall into the category of votive objects, is based on the Greeks' belief that divinity had a similar nature with the mortals. Thus, anthropomorphism represented the Greek solution for rendering the divinity. Therefore, the moderns considered that only statues might occupy a central place in the topography of a sanctuary; only these were the objects around which a series of actions related to the religious ritual were performed. Nevertheless, the existence of several cults, such as the cult of the Danube Riders, the Thracian Rider or Jupiter Dolichenus, but also the cult of Mithras, which have the relief as main means of representation, raises the question regarding the nature of the relief: might this be considered a cult image?

Cult images, generally identified with statues, are placed in temples, receiving prayers and gifts, being washed, oiled, dressed or carried in processions. In the Greek world, the first references to these kinds of ritual practices are mentioned beginning with the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>4</sup> Thus, during the first day of the Dionysian feast, which took place in Athens, the divinity's cult image was carried in a ritual procession recreating the god's journey from Eleutherai. The statue was placed in a temple situated along the road to Eleutherai, where sacrifices were performed, and then it was taken back to Athens.<sup>5</sup> Another example of ritual practices in which a deity's statues are involved is the fest in honor of Hera, which took place in the Great Heraion of Samos. On this occasion, celebrating the mythical marriage be-

tween Hera and Zeus, the deity's statue was immersed in a sacred bath symbolizing Hera's return to virginity.<sup>6</sup>

Defining the cult statue as the divinity's sculpted image serving as the main means of representation, and indicating the focus of the religious act performed within the sanctuary or temple, Irene Bald Romano admits that cult images could not have always been distinguished from other sculpted images of deities, namely offerings. She considers that the only way to make this distinction between the two functions of these representations is to identify the attribute associated with the cult image, attribute that makes a direct reference to ritual practice.<sup>7</sup> A cult image replaces the divinity in circumstances ritually created, through words, gestures and accessories,<sup>8</sup> becoming hence a sacred representation.<sup>9</sup> On the Mithraic reliefs discovered all over the Roman Empire, symbols appear even from the beginning on the main scene—*taurobolium*, and continue with the initiations scene or the sacred banquet. Together with these main scenes, symbols like the dog, the snake, the lion or the *kantbaros* are indicators of the existence of a cult with a complex ritual. The ceremony, based on Mithra's myth, appears on most of the reliefs, indicating their cultic character.

Most of the cult images are strongly connected to a temple, the place where the ceremony is performed, and occupy a central position within these manifestations. Nevertheless, neither the existence of the cult image, nor its absence, and not even the presence or the absence of the temple itself are definite factors in the identification of the representations with this character.<sup>10</sup>

A divinity's cult image is not an essential criterion for the performance of the cult. As an example, we mention Zeus' sanctuary at Dodona where the cult statue is not present, a situation that does not preclude the celebration of the cult.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the presence of a cult image is not conditioned by the presence of the sanctuary, as is the case of Cybele's stone image of Daskalopetra, placed in an open space.<sup>12</sup> In what concerns the Mithraic reliefs, the sacred space where the entire ritual was performed is suggested, on the one hand, by the representations of the sacred grotto on the reliefs (*mithraeum*), considered a replica of the Cosmos; on the other hand, the archaeological investigations identified on the territory of the province of Dacia at least three certain *mithraea*—at *Sarmizegetusa*,<sup>13</sup> Decea Mureşului<sup>14</sup> and Slăveni.<sup>15</sup> The *mithraeum* was the place where the reliefs with images of the Mithraic myth were placed, and also the place where the gathering of Mithras's advocates took place. The problem that arises is to what extent and with which elements might these reliefs be identified as cult images (*Kultbild*) or offerings to the god (*Götterbild*).

Two modern terms refer to the function of the divine representations—cult images, understood as a divinity's substitute representation<sup>16</sup>, and a divinity's image as a gift to the god.<sup>17</sup> The latter had the role of disclosing the deity, without being the object of the devotees' adoration. These two expressions highlight, on the one hand, the problem of the ancient people when it came to designating a cultic image and a votive one, and on the other hand, the problem regarding the materialization of these concepts in art.

Analyzing the ancient literary sources, it might be observed that in Greece, as well as in ancient Rome, there was no term that fully corresponded to the modern cult image/votive image dualism,<sup>18</sup> suggesting thus the problem of identifying the characteristic factors through which these terms differ from others that designate representations of ancient gods.

In ancient Greece, a multitude of terms designated the visualization of the divine. No concrete word existed for what we call today *Kultbild*. The rich vocabulary used to indicate divine representations makes difficult the identification of the term used for cult images, considering also the fact that they varied depending on the context. Analyzing the status and functions of the statue of Athena Parthenos, Gabrielle Nick creates a synthesis of the terms used in ancient literature for cult images.<sup>19</sup> According to the author, the term *χαλκόν*, considered to be the earliest, and referring to wooden statues, suggests the nature of the material rather than the function of the object. In the beginning, the word was used to define cult images, but starting with Hellenism, it would be used not only for cult images.<sup>20</sup> Another term that appears in Greek literary sources is *ῥγαλμα*, indicating a statue, but used for divine and human images as well, and referring to cult and also votive objects.<sup>21</sup> Beginning with the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the word would be used only in relation to statues.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, there was no terminological distinction between honorific and religious images. While *ᾠδριάς* and *εἰκὼν* designated honorific images displayed in public places, *ῥγαλμα* was an image belonging to a sacred context,<sup>23</sup> but used for gods and also for mortals.

As to Rome, despite the evidence provided by literary sources of several terms used to generally designate a statue, such as *statua*, *signum*, *simulacrum* or *imago*,<sup>24</sup> the expressions employed in relation to divinities' statues are especially *signum* and *simulacrum*. Nevertheless, neither of them makes direct reference to a certain function, but rather to certain means of representation. Therefore, in order to designate the invisible they used *signum*, the earliest and one of the terms employed most often in inscriptions and also in literature, which nevertheless did not clearly indicate a religious function. As regards the anthropomorphic forms, the word generally used is *simulacrum*, although it refers to divine but also to human statues—the latter category including statues of deceased kings or emperors, images that might be considered as having a divine character.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, there is a distinction between divine representations (designated with the terms *signum*, but particularly *simulacrum*) and human representations, for which *statua* or *imago* are employed, the latter indicating especially parts of the body, such as the bust.<sup>26</sup> As to *simulacrum*, it might refer to works of art displayed in temples, and at the same time images offered to gods. Therefore, these terms do not suggest the function of the object (cultic or votive), but rather the way of representation—most often, statuary.<sup>27</sup>

In the archaeological literature it has been considered that cult images, in the Greek and also in the Roman world, were placed in temples, their position being an indicator of their cultic function. Only these representations were the object of vari-

ous manifestations of veneration,<sup>28</sup> while all the other images were considered offerings to the gods.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, the temple or sanctuary represents the place where the divinity's image could have been found, but one must not overlook the fact that a temple or sanctuary did not represent the only place where the divinity was present. The latter could have been adored within domestic cult organizations, such as the *lararia*.<sup>30</sup> Other examples are the ritual spaces, such as the sacred grotto (the case of the *mithraeum*), the caves, or the presence of various divinities' statuettes in temples dedicated to other gods.<sup>31</sup> An image should not be necessarily placed in a temple in order to become the object of the cultic act, and the presence of images dedicated to different gods, placed at crossroads, comes to support this view.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the images placed in temples, either statues or reliefs, represented gifts for the divinity on behalf of the entire community, incorporated in a cultic act such as bathing or oiling, or simply deposited in temple, without becoming the center of any religious act. On the whole, they were recognized and accepted by the members of the community as images of the cult, beings thus integrated *a priori* in a religious framework.<sup>33</sup>

T. Hölscher rejects the importance of placing the statue in a temple in order to emphasize its cultic character, defining the cult images based exclusively on their involvement within the religious ritual.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the ancient sources regarding a great number of cults are lost,<sup>35</sup> or they did not exist at all. Therefore, this method of identifying cult images appears to be also problematic. Another difficulty is represented by the fact that within the same cult there existed similar manners of representation for votive and cultic objects, Athena Parthenos being a clear example for statuary,<sup>36</sup> while Mithraism offers the same example for reliefs.<sup>37</sup>

Divinities were adored through prayers, sacrificial acts or votive offerings and libations. Consequently, the image given as a gift to the god also represented a cultic manifestation, given that the devotees accessed the sacred through these offerings, creating a relation with the divine world. There is no real difference between the private acts of devotion and the public forms of the cult,<sup>38</sup> since these two manifestations emphasize the same religious gestures, and the nature of the gesture characterizing the deposition of votive offerings is equivalent to praying in front of the god's statue. The receiver of these symbolic acts is, in the end, the deity. It must be kept in mind that there were different kinds of artistic manifestations within the same cult, and thus it is difficult to recognize all their functions, given that there is no clear delimitation between them.

In the ancient world, images had an important religious role, mediating between two different worlds. Thus, it might be considered that, depending on the context, any kind of representation might have had a sacred character. It has been observed that not only statues were connected to the divine world, but the reliefs might have also had the role of mediators—for example, the reliefs with the representations of Cybele's attributes have the role of advertising the goddess' iconography. On the other hand, there is no single cult image belonging to a deity or a cult, for they are

as many as the worshippers themselves. The devotee's reference to the deity and the relation created between them represent the factors that define cult images. Ernest Will's suggestion to recognize all these artistic manifestations as means through which the imagination becomes materialized (*Repräsentationsbild*) seems more adequate.<sup>39</sup> This might explain the existence of several cults which have the relief as their main form of representation. In their case as well one might refer to cult images—images that appear under a different form. The symbols represented on the reliefs, in close connection with the religious practices performed within the cult, are keys to identifying the cultic nature of the object.

More than 250 Mithraic monuments have been discovered on the territory of the province of Dacia,<sup>40</sup> the balance between epigraphic and anepigraphic objects being relatively equal. The most numerous representations come from urban centers such as *Sarmizegetusa*, *Apulum*, *Potaissa* and *Napoca*. Most of them were found at *Sarmizegetusa*, where 35 epigraphic and 84 anepigraphic monuments are known. From a typological point of view, these monuments might be distributed in three categories: reliefs with one register, which have the central area occupied by the scene of the sacrifice; reliefs with two registers, which have the central area similar to that of the first category, while the subsidiary area is occupied by the scenes of the Mithraic myth; reliefs with three registers—the center scene of the *taurobolium*, and the upper and lower registers with scenes from Mithras's mythical life.<sup>41</sup>

Most of the monuments discovered on the territory of the province come from within sanctuaries. The temple of the divinity (*mithraeum*) was placed on a slope, such as the ones at *Sarmizegetusa*<sup>42</sup> or Slăveni.<sup>43</sup> These constructions are mentioned in inscriptions as *aedes*<sup>44</sup> or *templum*.<sup>45</sup> On the territory of Dacia, as a result of archaeological investigations, several *mithraea* are known at *Sarmizegetusa*, Decea Mureșului<sup>46</sup> and Slăveni,<sup>47</sup> while others are only mentioned in inscriptions—at *Apulum* and *Micia*<sup>48</sup>. *Mithraea* are assumed to have existed at *Porolissum*,<sup>49</sup> *Romula*<sup>50</sup> and *Pojejena*,<sup>51</sup> given to the large number of Mithraic objects discovered here.

The scenes represented on the reliefs are full of symbols, and thus the presence of the elements that make reference to the performance of the cult are indicators regarding the function of the objects on which they appear. The central scene of the *taurobolium* recalls the offerings to the gods,<sup>52</sup> themselves cultic acts, creating a special relation between the devotee and the deity. The sacrifice represents the fundamental experience of the sacred.<sup>53</sup> In a Mithraic context, the scene is the symbol of the victory, of the metaphoric recreation of order.<sup>54</sup> In the West, Mithras was known as the genius of the solar light. Thus, on the reliefs, he is accompanied by two human representations of youths—the Dadophores. They are *Cautes*—the one with the torch upwards—and *Cautopates*—with the torch downwards—, representing the beginning and the end, the cyclical nature of time.<sup>55</sup> Mithras was considered the daylight star, its presence announced by the cock. This hypothesis is reinforced by the presence of Sol's and Luna's busts. Another element that makes reference to the manifestations which took place within the cult is the grotto, symbolizing

the *mithraeum*. The souls' upwards journey began from the grotto. The representation of the *mithraeum* is also an allusion to the mysterious character of the cult.<sup>56</sup> Although it is barely represented on the reliefs with only one register, the cave is very strongly suggested on the reliefs with two registers, especially in the case of the reliefs which have the upper part arched—a clear allusion to the cave,<sup>57</sup> a replica of the cosmos. This function of the mithraeum is also suggested by the presence of the zodiacal signs and the stars.<sup>58</sup>

The most symbolic scene of the Mithraic representation is the *taurobolium*—a bull's sacrifice. This is the central part of all Mithraic reliefs. The other parts of the myth revolve around this moment, and in this particular episode take part all the four animals represented in the relief: the dog, the snake, the scorpion and the lion, although they don't always appear together. The dog is present almost every time, licking the blood from the sacrificed animal's wound. Herodotus mentions how the Magi deemed the life of a dog equal to the life of a human, and how Persian men were never buried unless they were attacked first by a dog or a bird of prey.<sup>59</sup> In Greek religion, the dog was Artemis's companion and Hekate's symbol, a chthonic divinity of fertility and the underworld. The dog, just like Cerberus, had the role of guarding the bridge which separated the two worlds.<sup>60</sup> The snake, usually rendered in the lower register, is almost always featured together with the dog, assisting Mithras during his deeds. Campbell considers that this element is the symbol of goodness, similar to Athena's snake. In the Mithraic cult, the snake is the guardian of the souls.<sup>61</sup> The third animal present on the Mithraic reliefs is the raven—a symbol of the reincarnation of the Sky's divine powers. The scorpion appears together with him, as an astrological sign. Its representation near the bull's genitals suggests the idea of fertility.<sup>62</sup>

The Sacred Banquet is another essential moment of the Mithraic cult. Usually, it is placed on the lower register, and is suggested by the presence of two people at a table. They are represented either crouched, or lying on a bench, in the typical position for the banquet. The motive of the sacred banquet is very often accompanied by the presence of the lion, which suggests physical force and vitality. The entire setting is an allusion to the sacred banquet of Sol and Mithras.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, it symbolizes the connection created on the occasion of the initiation process between the initiates and the *Pater patrum*. The practice of participating in a banquet is a common feature of mystery cults, indicating the successful completion of the initiation phases. The integration of the new member within the community of initiates is granted by his presence at the banquet.<sup>64</sup>

The final moment appears on the lower register and suggests the coronation (*apotheosis*). It is represented by a *quadriga* led over the seas, towards the sky, by a human character. This personage, before departing, helps another personage to get in the *quadriga*. The entire scene stands as a testimony to Sol's and Mithras's departure towards the sky. Sometimes, together with the two personages, we also find Oceanus—he is represented lying, with a snake—python or hydra—coiled around him, or with waters bursting from his breast.



The iconographical elements that appear on Mithraic reliefs highlight the fact that they bear an important symbolism, and their presence offers suggestions for recognizing the moments of the Mithraic religious practice. Although the number of statuary representations is rather reduced (less than 5% of the discovered Mithraic objects are statues or statuary groups), the elements that appear on the reliefs are keys for interpreting them as cult images, expressing the ideology of a cult. Even the epigraphic reliefs might be considered cultic objects, as their existence attests to the religious relation between the worshiper and the deity.

Dealing with the subject of cultic images within cults that have the relief as a main form of representation, and giving special attention to the Mithraic cult, Will concludes that the substitution of the relief to statues involves a religious change. This is evident especially in the case of mystery religions, such as the cult of Mithras or the cult of the Danube Rider, or in the case of personal cults, such as the cult of Hero Rider. The necessity of using the relief as a means of representation is induced by the presence of the essential symbols, or adjacent figures: the bull, the horse, the dog, the acolytes, the scene of the sacrifice or of the banquet. The novelty of the rendered subject involved new ways of representation, while the divinities' foreign character facilitated the separation from the traditional means of representation.<sup>65</sup>



## Notes

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15. Constantin C. Petolescu, “Le mithraeum de Slaveni (Dacia Malvensis),” in *Dacia. Revue d’archéologie et d’histoire ancienne*, N.S., 20, 1976, p. 259–263.
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31. Pausanias, visiting the *temenos* of Apollo Ismenios, saw the statues of Hermes and Athena, both worshiped by the Thebans with the epithets Pronaios and Pronaia, cf. Pausanias, *Călătorie în Grecia*, trans. by Maria Marinescu-Himu, Bucharest: Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1974–1982, 9.10.2.
32. Alice A. Donohue, “The Greek Images of the Gods,” p. 36.
33. Joannis Mylonopoulos, *Divine images and human imaginations in Ancient Greece and Rome*, p. 4.
34. Fernande Hölscher, “Kultbild,” p. 52.
35. For the cults of Mithras, of Jupiter Dolichenus, of the Thracian Rider or the Danube Riders, essential is Ernest Will’s *Le Relief cultuel Gréco-Romain. Contribution à l’histoire de l’art de l’Empire Romain*, Paris: E. de Boccard, 1955.
36. For the statue of Athena Parthenos, see Gabriele Nick, *Die Athena Parthenos*.
37. For Mithras’s cult, see Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Königstein, Hain, 1984 and Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries*, revised edition, transl. by Richard Gordon. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.
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39. Ernest Will, *Le Relief cultuel Gréco-Romain*, p. 23.
40. M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religions Mithriaca*, p. 271–383, no. 1916–2190.
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- 4.7 *Ibid.*, p. 215–222.
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### **Abstract**

#### Cult Images and Mithraic Reliefs in Roman Dacia

The use of images in religious rituals might be considered an essential practice, integrating them into the spiritual life of the antiquity. The festivals, in which images were periodically dressed, paraded, washed and worshiped, stand as a proof of the religious dimension of these artifacts. The question that arises is what kind of images might be considered cultic representations and could there be certain features likely to identify these cultic media? The purpose of this paper is to analyze the relationship between the means of representation and the significance of the cults attested on the territory of the province of Dacia, focusing on the relief representations of the Mithraic religion. The generally accepted thought is that a cult object is symbolized only by statues, while relief representations fall into the votive category. It is believed that only statues occupied a central place in the temple, receiving donations and other kinds of manifestations in order to demonstrate the divinity's veneration by the worshiper. This hypothesis is based on the ancient Greeks' belief that the divinity had the same nature as the humans, and thus anthropomorphism was the Greek solution for the representation of the deity. Nevertheless, there are several cults which have the relief as a main form of representation, central among them being the Mithraic cult, and thus the question that arises, and which we try to answer, is whether a representation is a cult image or not.

### **Keywords**

Cult image, Mithras, iconography, votive relief