Hymnus invicto: The structure of Mithraic cult images with multiple panels

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The meaning of the Mithraic tauroctone reliefs and frescoes has puzzled scholars for over a century now. The amount of literature dedicated to Mithraic art in general or to various aspects of particular monuments is truly overwhelming. Each concrete detail of Mithraic cult images tends to generate a great number of diverging opinions often bordering on wild speculation[1]. This interpretive crux arises, in part, from the fact that we do not have much to go on besides the images. In other words, there is no extant literary source that would help us to produce a plausible interpretation of the significance attributed by Mithraists to the complex visual representations of their god. Surviving references to the Mithraic cult in Porphyry[2] and early Christian writers[3] are, unfortunately, too inconclusive to be of much help.

It is beyond doubt that Mithraic art is laden with complex symbolism. The image of Mithras slaying the bull, which was a focal point of any Mithraic temple (*mithraeum*) from Syria to Britain, invariably contains a number of elements that urge the viewer to interpret the whole scene as a mythical and symbolic representation of the creation of the existing world order. Mithras, who is himself identified with the Invincible Sun (*Sol Invictus*) by innumerable inscriptions[4], often wears a cloak studded with stars. Figures of Sol and Luna often appear at the two upper corners of the cult image. Depictions of the four winds, the twelve planetary gods and/or the twelve Zodiac signs are also quite frequent. On all surviving tauroctone images, the bull's tail turns into ears of corn, and various animals – a scorpion, a snake, a dog, and a lion – cling to his body partaking of his blood and semen. In most of the images, the figure of Mithras is flanked by two torchbearers – one raising, the other lowering the torch – whose names are known from inscriptions to be Cautes and

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1 Here are some of the most significant book-length studies of the Mithraic mysteries: F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra*, Brussels 1902; M.J. Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God*, London 1963; A. Schütze, *Mithras. Mysterien und Urchristentum*, Stuttgart 1972; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Königstein 1984; P. Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries. Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, Oxford 1989; R. Turcan, *Mithra et le Mithraïcisme*, Paris 1993; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, New York 2000.

2 Porphyry, *The cave of the nymphs in the Odyssey; a revised text with translation by Seminar Classics 609, State University of New York at Buffalo* (= Arethusa Monographs 1), Buffalo 1969.

3 E.g., A.S. Geden, *Mithraic sources in English*, Hastings 1990.

4 M.J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, The Hague 1956-60 (henceforth *CIMRM*) *passim.*

Cautopates. Their respective positions to the left and to the right of the bull-slaying god often (but not always) correspond to the placement of the anthropomorphic figures of Sol and Luna at the upper left and right corners. Does Cautes then symbolize light and Cautopates darkness, as many have suggested?[5] Or are Cautes and Cautopates two manifestations of the solar god Mithras himself – the rising and the setting sun, as seems to be indicated by some inscriptions?[6] Or are they simply mythical companions of Mithras assisting him in his deed and imbued with some other significance? Or can all these possibilities be reconciled? Similar questions can be asked about any of the elements of the Mithraic cult image that I have listed above. Depending on how one answers these questions, one can reconstruct the myth of Mithras, along with its theological implications, in a variety of ways. However, in the absence of any relevant textual material, any such reconstruction would have to remain purely arbitrary.

Some of the most elaborate Mithraic cult-images have the central panel surrounded by a series of smaller ones. There have been a number of attempts to extract a coherent story from these complex paneled Mithraic reliefs – each of them implemented with a certain degree of plausibility, in spite of the lack of reliable external evidence. The idea underlying most of these reconstructions, namely that one can fruitfully employ Iranian material as a key to many problems posed by Mithraic imagery, has been generally abandoned and replaced by a much more sober view that the Mithraic mysteries are a product of the late antique syncretistic mind, with Rome being their most probable birth place[7]. A more recent tendency to read Mithraic images against the background of Greek astrology[8] or Neo-Platonism[9] has been quite successful in elucidating some possible connections between the mysteries of Mithras and their cultural environment, although most conclusions in this field remain purely speculative.

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5 E.g., R.L. Beck, *Cautes and Cautopates: some astronomical considerations*, JMS 2, 1, 1977, pp. 1-17.

6 *CIMRM* 836 = *CIL* VII 1344*c Deo M*(*ithrae*) / *C*(*auto*)*p*(*ati*) *S*(*oli*) *I*(*nvicto*); Vermaseren, *Mithras* (see note 1), pp. 72-73.

7 A.D. Nock, *The Genius of Mithraism*, JRS 27, 1937, pp. 108-114, repr. in his *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Z. Stewart, Oxford 1972, pp. 452-458. See also M.P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, Bd. 2, Munich 1966, and M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, New York 2000. The idea of the Persian origin of the Roman mysteries of Mithras has been resuscitated in a modified form by R.L. Beck, *The Mysteries of Mithras: a new account of their genesis*, JRS 88, 1988, pp. 115-128.

8 E.g. R.L. Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*, EPRO 109, Leiden 1988.

9 R. Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus: recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*, EPRO 47, Leiden 1975. See also A. Blomart, *Mithra et Porphyre: Quand sculpture et philosophie se rejoignent*, Revue de l'Histoire des Religions CCXI-4, 1994, pp. 419-441.

Mithraic art is indeed mind-boggling and strange, and scholars will probably never stop trying to decipher the story that it tells, no matter how unattainable this goal might be. What I think can potentially produce more tangible results, which would at the same time be highly relevant to our overall understanding of the late antique religious mentality, is not the question, 'What is the central myth of Mithraic mysteries and how is it related to doctrines and rituals of the cult?' but rather, 'Do the Mithraic images with multiple scenes represent a story at all and, if so, how do they represent it? Do we deal with a pictorial narrative here or with a completely different kind of visual discourse?' An attempt to answer these questions can help us better understand the function of the tauroctone image in Mithraic rituals.

The intuitive reaction of any viewer looking at the side panels of Mithraic cult images would be to interpret them as representing some sort of mythical narrative about the deeds of Mithras. The analogies are close at hand: vases representing deeds of Theseus and Heracles, and, even more closely, the *Tabulae Iliacae*[10]. Cumont[11] was the first to interpret the side panels as a narrative by distinguishing several major episodes that appear on many of Mithraic reliefs and frescoes. The way he reconstructed the succession of the individual episodes sounds quite plausible. A number of them depict the stage preceding the birth of Mithras: one scene showing a reclining figure tentatively identified by Cumont as Saturn[12], another scene supposed to represent Jupiter fighting against the giants[13]. The next stage is the birth of Mithras from the rock[14]. What follows are various exploits accomplished by Mithras. One of them is the so-called 'water-miracle', where Mithras produces water out of the rock of a cave by shooting an arrow against it[15]. The next episode shows Mithras' encounter with the bull. This episode takes up a few panels: we see the bull peacefully grazing[16], Mithras on the bull's back[17], the bull on Mithras' back[18], the Torchbearers carrying the dead bull[19]. The culmination of this series – the killing of the bull – is represented on the central panel. The next stage of the story is the encounter between Mithras and the Sun (*Sol*). It often consists of a number of panels as well: Sol kneeling before Mithras who holds the bull's haunch[20], Sol

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10 See the parallels in F. Saxl, *Mithras. Typengeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Berlin 1931.
11 F. Cumont (see note 1), pp. 104-149.
12 *CIMRM* 42, 194, 390, 650, 723, 966, 1083, 1283, 1292, 1359, 1400, 1430.
13 *CIMRM* 42, 194, 390, 650, 723, 966, 1083, 1292, 1359, 1400, 1430.
14 *CIMRM* 42, 194, 390, 650, 966, 1083, 1161, 1247, 1283, 1292, 1301, 1400, 1430.
15 *CIMRM* 42, 194, 390, 966, 1083, 1225, 1283, 1292, 1294, 1301, 1359, 1400, 1430.
16 *CIMRM* 1283, 1292.
17 *CIMRM* 42, 194, 966, 1137, 1247, 1283, 1292, 1400.
18 *CIMRM* 42, 1137, 1283.
19 *CIMRM* 42.
20 *CIMRM* 42, 194, 390, 650, 729, 1083, 1137, 1400, 1579.

and Mithras standing by an altar[21], Mithras and Sol shaking hands (*dextrarum iunctio*)[22], Mithras and Sol feasting together[23], Mithras entering Sol's chariot[24].

It is quite likely that the story known to practicing Mithraists ran along similar lines. However one has to be aware of the fact that most of the identifications proposed by Cumont and later accepted by other scholars are tentative and can in many cases be subjected to doubt. Thus, as I pointed out at the beginning, it still remains unsolved what exactly is depicted on each of the side panels of Mithraic cult images.

Side panels pose other questions as well. Cumont paid almost no attention to the arrangement of the individual side panels on the surviving monuments nor did he give any explanation of the numerous scenes that do not fit into the narrative frame. If we consider the position of the same scene on various monuments, we will see that it varies considerably. Some scenes tend to occur next to each other, thus forming short narrative sequences (e.g. Mithras and the bull, Mithras and Sol), but the arrangement of the whole is never the same. Furthermore, on some cult images thematically related panels are separated by incongruous episodes that interrupt the apparent narrative flow. Additionally, there are no monuments that have exactly the same selection of scenes. The number of overlapping scenes is relatively great, but all in all there is only one scene that occurs on all surviving monuments[25].

There have been a number of attempts to explain this situation. Most of them use Cumont's assumption as their starting point: what is represented on the side panels is a series of illustrations of an epic style narrative relating the deeds of Mithras, whose primary purpose was to instruct the neophytes unfamiliar with the story. Saxl[26] assumed that each individual extant monument represents a certain degree of deviation from the original prototype that contained all episodes of the narrative that were supposed to be read in a certain direction. He thought that this massive distortion occurred as the cult migrated from its birthplace in Asia Minor to the West. This theory is clearly untenable both because very few people now believe in the origin of the cult in

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21 *CIMRM* 390, 650, 1510, 1579.
22 *CIMRM* 194, 650, 1292, 1400, 1430.
23 *CIMRM* 42, 390, 966, 1137, 1247, 1292, 1400.
24 *CIMRM* 390, 1083, 1247, 1283, 1292, 1294, 1400, 1430, 1579.
25 R. Gordon, *Panelled Complications*, JMS 3, nos. 1-2. Henley on Thames 1980, repr. in his *Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World: Studies in Mithraism and Religious Art*, Aldershot 1996, diagrams on pp. 212-218.
26 F. Saxl (see note 10).

Asia Minor and because the discrepancy between different monuments is too great to allow for such a reductive explanation.

E. Will[27] tried to distinguish several types of Mithraic reliefs, each one characterized by a particular reading order. He postulated that each of them was typical for a certain geographical area. However, he had to admit that this hypothesis did not account for a great number of exceptions that did not follow the imposed narrative sequence.

R. Gordon[28] analyzed all of the completely or partially extant Mithraic reliefs with multiple panels and concluded that they do not represent any narrative sequence at all. He refuted Saxl's argument that the original narrative order was distorted during transmission, and noted that it would be disrespectful for us to think that ancient initiates did not know the sense of their own mysteries. He pointed out that, despite the fact that there is a certain amount of regularity in the way some of the individual scenes are arranged, it is still virtually impossible to establish a particular reading order for most of the monuments. Furthermore, he noted that some side panels do not fit into any narrative structure at all and that some find themselves in completely different surroundings on different monuments[29]. One would have to know the meaning of each particular episode depicted on the side panels beforehand in order to understand the meaning of the whole. According to Gordon, the side panels must therefore have served a different purpose. He assumes that they might represent particular parts of the ritual performed in the *mithraeum* or illustrate certain aspects of the Mithraic theology. He tries to corroborate this point by referring to the fact that one of the panels depicts a banquet which is also represented on the back of some of the tauroctone reliefs where it clearly refers to a ritual rather than a mythical scene. He also allowed for a possibility of a deeper symbolic meaning of the seemingly disorderly arrangement, since most of the scenes occur either on the left or on the right side, which would clearly correspond to the Mithraists' obsession with the orientation of their temples. The last supposition has later been refuted by S. Zwirn[30], who has pointed out that there are a few examples of the same scene represented on either side. Additionally, even the positions of the two torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates, who are thought to symbolize light and darkness respectively, are reversed on some of the cult images[31].

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27 E. Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain*, Paris 1955.
28 R. Gordon (see note 25).
29 *Ibid*. See diagrams on pp. 212-218.
30 S. Zwirn, *The Intention of Biographical Narration on Mithraic Cult Images*, Word and Image 5, 1989, pp. 2-18.
31 E.g., reliefs from Rome (*CIMRM* 350), Bononia (*CIMRM* 693), and Nida (*CIMRM* 1083).

R. Merkelbach[32] thinks that the side panels have a ritual significance too. He points out that some of the scenes represented on the side panels also occur as free-standing statues, from which he concludes that all these scenes may in some way be symbols of different grades of initiation. According to Merkelbach, all human figures depicted on the side panels are not gods, but rather initiates performing various rituals. Merkelbach uses this assumption as a basis for a detailed reconstruction of what he thinks happened during the initiation rites and of the symbolic significance individual actions may have had. This approach obviously makes the very notion of narrative completely irrelevant for the discussion of the side panels, but it does not seem to offer any improvement instead, since the changing order of individual episodes still remains unexplained.

S. Zwirn[33] admits all the difficulties involved in analyzing Mithraic reliefs. Nevertheless he returns to the notion of narrative as the primary purpose of the side panels. He analyzes the complex Mithraic cult images in terms of the viewers' perception, and postulates that late antique viewers, familiar with such monuments as funerary *sarcophagi* and triumphal arches, would inevitably recognize a biographical intention in Mithraic art as well. This is probably true, but it does not explain why Mithraic artists chose to represent these multiple images in this particular way and what motivated their choice of individual episodes.

Each of the studies I have mentioned above has undoubtedly made an important contribution to our understanding of how the side panels are arranged on the surviving monuments. None of them, however, has offered a satisfactory explanation of why they are arranged in the way they are. R. Gordon has, in my opinion, quite conclusively demonstrated the intrinsic failure of any attempt to interpret the side panels as a narrative sequence. His own and R. Merkelbach's attempts to interpret the side panels as scenes of ritual or illustrations of religious concepts could clearly be one way of dispensing with the notion of narrative in the Mithraic reliefs. But their hypotheses are not supported by any conclusive evidence. Additionally, getting rid of the idea of narrative should not necessarily imply that there has to be no rationale behind the arrangement of the individual scenes. Unfortunately, Merkelbach completely ignores this issue, while Gordon only offers a tentative explanation that does not seem to hold true under further scrutiny.

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32 R. Merkelbach (see note 1), pp. 75-132.
33 S. Zwirn (see note 30), p. 8.

Another weakness of this approach is that it completely rejects the idea that the side panels reflect a certain mythical story. However, the fact that the bull-slaying scene at the center of the Mithraic cult image is thematically and stylistically linked with other panels depicting interactions between Mithras and the bull suggests that the tauroctone scene is the culmination of the events on the side panels. There is also no alternative to the interpretation of a male figure emerging from the rock as an episode of Mithras' mythical biography, since he is known from some inscriptions to have been born from the *petra genetrix*.[34]

Thus, it appears to me that the side panels, along with the central tauroctone icon, depict different episodes of the Mithraic myth, but they depict them in a non-narrative order. Nevertheless I do not think that the arrangement of the side panels is simply done at random and is not governed by any reason at all. In order to uncover the logic behind this seemingly irrational arrangement, we have to ask ourselves whether there is any other form of religious art, be it visual or literary, that would be characterized by the same disregard for chronological cohesiveness.

Many interpretations of the side panels have been based on the assumption that they represent a canonic written narrative, which also played a certain role in the Mithraic ritual. Cumont was absolutely sure that there existed a vast corpus of Mithraic literature and deplored its irretrievable loss. It seems likely, however, that this idea is not based on anything but a deep-rooted uncritical assumption that most of the nineteenth century historians of ancient religion never subjected to doubt. Much of the ancient evidence was viewed, as it were, through the prism of a modern *interpretatio Christiana* that was unable to detach itself from the familiar contemporary forms of religion. One of the most blatant examples of this tendency is the treatment of 'Orphism' in 19th and early 20th-century handbooks of ancient religion. It was invariably represented as the Orphic 'church' relying on a set of canonic sacred writings often called the 'Orphic Bible'[35]. Cumont seems to interpret Mithraic mysteries along similar lines. Later, however, it has been repeatedly shown that this Christian model contradicts other knowledge about ancient mystery cults[36]. Burkert emphasizes the fact that mystery doctrines were kept secret from the uninitiated and were most likely transmitted orally. Furthermore, from the texts

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34 See *CIMRM* 1127.

35 For the criticism of this approach, see U. von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, *Der Glaube der Hellenen*, Bd. 2, Berlin 1932, pp. 192-204; I.M. Linfort, *The Arts of Orpheus*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1941.

36 W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge/Mass.-London 1981, pp. 30-65.

whose relation to a particular cult can be demonstrated we cannot draw the conclusion that sacred narratives played a role in any mystery ritual. Thus, what an ancient *mystes* would probably have known is the story that the cult is based on rather than a sacred written narrative with a canonical status.

It does not mean that the mythical background and the doctrines of the mysteries were not reflected in any kind of text at all. Mystery initiation rituals (often referred to in ancient sources as *dromena*) were accompanied by utterances (known as *legomena*). These were kept absolutely secret and did not survive therefore, except for a few references made by initiates who converted to Christianity and did not feel obliged to keep the secret[37]. Texts that did survive are some prayers and hymns originating from a few different contexts, which either predate Mithraic monuments or are roughly contemporaneous with them. I think instead of looking for answers to problems posited by Mithraic reliefs in hypothetical sacred narratives, whose existence we cannot prove, we could benefit much more from analyzing these surviving samples of religious literature.

Ancient religion was very loosely organized and the boundaries between various cults were very fluid. Apuleius, for instance, says in his Apology that he was an adept of numerous mystery cults[38], and a number of 4th century AD inscriptions identify some devotees of *Di Magni* as priests of numerous other gods including Mithras[39]. All these cults belonged to the same cultural milieu, and they exerted a considerable amount of influence on each other or drew on the same basic ideas. It seems to be quite legitimate therefore to use the material of one such cult to elucidate certain basic features of another.

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37 *Ibid*.

38 Apuleius, *Apologia (= De Magia)* 55: *Sacrorum pleraque initia participavi. eorum quaedam signa et monumenta tradita mihi a sacerdotibus sedulo conservo. nihil insolitum, nihil incognitum dico. vel unius Liberi patris mystae qui adestis scitis, quid domi conditum celetis et absque omnibus profanis tacite veneremini. at ego, ut dixi, m u l t i i u g a s a c r a e t p l u r i m o s r i t u s e t v a r i a s c e r e m o n i a s studio veri et officio erga deos didici.*

39 *CIMRM* 514 (376 AD): *Diis magnis / Ulpius Egnatius Faventius / v*(*ir*) *c*(*larissimus*) *augur pub*(*licus*) *p*(*opuli*) *r*(*omani*) *q*(*uiritium*) *pater et hieroceryx d*(*ei*) *s*(*olis*) *i*(*nvicti*) *M*(*ithrae*) / *arch*(*i*)*bucolus dei Liberi / hierofanta Hecatae sa / cerdos Isidis percepto taurobolio criobolioque / idibus augustis d*(*ominis*) *n*(*ostris*) / *Valente Aug*(*usto*) *V et Valentinia / no Aug*(*usto*) *co*(*n*)*s*(*ulibus*) *feliciter / Vota Faventius bis deni suscipit orbis Ut mactet repetens aurata fronte bicornes*. Cf. *CIMRM* 513, 515, 516, 520, 522, 523, 524.

The most significant collection of ancient hymns related to a religious cult (as opposed to purely literary hymns) are the so-called Orphic Hymns[40]. This is a collection of 87 relatively short hymns addressed to a great number of deities. There has been a long debate as to the possible date of the collection with suggestions ranging from the 1st century BC up to the early Byzantine period. The most commonly accepted period now is the 1st century AD. It is likely, however, that these hymns incorporate much older material. Since some of the rare epithets attested in the hymns are also mentioned in inscriptions from Asia Minor, it has been assumed that the collection as a whole originates from there. The cult the Hymns originate from has not been clearly identified, but since they contain numerous mentions of *mystai* we can assume that it was a mystery cult. The hymns are characterized by henotheistic/pantheistic tendencies and identify a lot of different gods with each other. Each of the hymns consists of an invocation, a central part, and a final prayer. The central part is normally just a series of epithets sometimes expanded into participial constructions or relative clauses. Some of the epithets epitomize, as it were, excerpts from a certain mythical narrative. Thus, behind each individual hymn there are a number of mythical stories, but their purpose is not to tell these stories, but to praise the gods. Therefore the order in which the epithets are arranged is anything but chronological.

Let us take, for instance, Hymn 29 to Persephone:

Φερσεφόνη, θύγατερ μεγάλου Διός, ἐλθέ, μάκαιρα,
μουνογένεια θεά, καχαρισμένα δ᾽ ἱερὰ δέξαι,
Πλούτωνος πολύτιμε δάμαρ, κεδνή, βιοδῶτι,
ἣ κατέχεις Ἀίδαο πύλας ὑπὸ κεύθεα γαίης,
Πραξιδίκη, ἐρατοπλόκαμε, Δηοῦς θάλος ἀγνόν,
Εὐμενίδων γενέτειρα, ὑποχθονίων βασίλεια,
ἣν Ζεὺς ἀρρήτοισι γοναῖς τεκνώσατο κούρην,
μῆτερ ἐριβρεμέτου πολυμόρφου Εὐβουλῆος,
Ὡρῶν συμπαίκτρειρα, φαεσφόρε, ἀγλαόμορφε,
σεμνή, παντοκράτειρα, κόρη καρποῖσι βρύουσα,
εὐφεγγής, κερόεσσα, μόνη θνητοῖσι ποθεινή,
εἰαρινή, λειμωνιάσιν χαίρουσα πνοῇσιν,
ἱερὸν ἐκφαίνουσα δέμας βλαστοῖς χλοοκάρποις,
ἁρπαγιμαῖα λέχη μετοπωρινὰ νυμφευθεῖσα,
ζωὴ καὶ θάνατος μούνη θνητοῖς πολυμόχθοις,

[40] The most recent book on the Orphic Hymns is A.-F. Morand, *Études sur les Hymnes orphiques*, Leiden 2001. It has detailed discussions of most of the debated issues and a vast bibliography.

Φερσεφόνη· φέρβεις γὰρ αεὶ καὶ πάντα φονεύεις.
κλῦθι, μάκαιρα θεά, καρποὺς δ᾽ ἀνάπεμπ᾽ ἀπὸ γαίης
εἰρήνῃ θάλλουσα καὶ ἠπιοχείρῳ ὑγείᾳ
καὶ βίῳ εὐόλβῳ λιπαρὸν γῆρας κατάγοντι
πρὸς σὸν χῶρον, ἄνασσα, καὶ εὐδύνατον Πλόυτωνα. 20

We learn enough about Artemis from this hymn to be able to name her essential qualities and attributes and to reconstruct some elements of her mythical biography. These elements, however, are not arranged in a chronological order. The hymn tells us a lot about Artemis' genealogical affiliations, but references to her parents and her offspring are scattered throughout the text among other epithets that depict her unchanging qualities and cannot be arranged into any kind of temporal progression. Chronological order seems to be largely irrelevant here. Moreover, individual episodes can be alluded to more than once in different ways, for instance Artemis' birth from Zeus in ll. 1 and 7 and her marriage to Pluto in ll. 3 and 14.

This form of address to gods is also attested in magic incantations known as Magic hymns. These hymns are preserved on magical papyri from Egypt and date from the Imperial period[41]. In contradistinction to the Orphic hymns, whose primary goal is to secure the overall well-being of the initiates both in their earthly existence and in the afterlife, the Magic hymns are designed for a much more specific purpose of attracting or harming particular individuals through the mediation of the gods that they invoke. Despite these obvious differences, both groups of hymns present a similar structural arrangement of the invocation. In the Magic hymns we also have long series of epithets combining attributes of gods with references to myths.

Such hymns must have been much more widespread than it might appear from the evidence originating from just two different cult contexts. There are two anonymous epigrams in the *Anthologia Palatina* that replicate a similar hymnal structure in a rather playful way, i.e. they arrange the epithets alphabetically.

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Μέλπωμεν βασιλῆα φιλεύιον, εἰραφιώτην,
ἁβροκόμην, ἀγροῖκον, ἀοίδιμον, ἀγλαόμορφον,
Βοιωτόν, βρόμιον, βακχεύτορα, βοτρυοχαίτην,

41 *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, hrsg. und übers. von K. Preisendanz, 2. Aufl. von A. Henrichs, Stuttgart 1973-74 (= *PGM*), vol. II, pp. 237-266.

γηθόσυνον, γονόεντα, γιγαντολέτην, γελόωντα,
Διογενῆ,
…
ὥριον, ὠμηστήν, ὠρείτροφον, ὠρεσίδουπον.
Μέλπωμεν βασιλῆα φιλεύιον, εἰραφιώτην.

9,525

Ὑμνέωμεν Παιᾶνα, μέγαν θεὸν Ἀπόλλωνα,
ἄμβροτον, ἀγλαόμορφον, ἀκερσεκόμην, ἁβροχαίτην,
βριθύνοον, βασιλῆα, βελεσσιχαρῆ, βιοδώτην,
γηθόσυνον, γελόωντα, γιγαντολέτην, γλυκύθυμον,
Διογενῆ,
…
ὠκύπον, ὠκυεπῆ, ὠκύσπορον, ὠρεσιδώτην,
Ὑμνέωμεν Παιᾶνα, μέγαν θεὸν Ἀπόλλωνα.

These epigrams reduce the disorderly arrangement of the epithets to absurdity by superimposing an artificial order on them which is absolutely irrelevant to the meaning. It really makes the impression of a parody, which would be meaningful only if the original form were widespread enough to be well known to a chance reader[42].

Another set of texts that show the same kind of disregard for chronological order comes from yet another mystery cult. These are the so-called Isis aretalogies[43]. In their full form they are all transmitted on inscriptions, although Diodorus Siculus quotes an abridged version of a similar text (I 27). The earliest example of this text is the inscription from Maroneia dating from the 2nd century BC[44]. It is a prose encomium of Isis praising her for various benefactions that she has bestowed upon humanity. Here Isis is addressed in the second person. A much more common form of this text preserves the general tone and the structure of the earliest example, but turns it into a first person account told by Isis herself. These texts are often referred to in modern scholarship as 'self-revelations' of Isis. There are a number of surviving representatives of this group – the most complete one in prose as well as a number of

[42] There are other literary adaptations of this form of hymnal poetry, for instance, Nonnos, *Dion.*, 40,369-410, 44,191-216; the end of book 1 of Statius' *Thebais* (and probably elsewhere). All these passages also identify numerous deities with each other and accidentally the name of Mithras is mentioned in two of them (Nonnos, *Dion.* 40,399 and Statius, *Theb.* 1,720).

[43] See discussion in F. Solmsen, *Isis among the Greeks and Romans*, Cambridge/Mass. 1979, pp. 27-52.

[44] Y. Grandjean, *Une nouvelle arétalogie d'Isis à Maronée,* EPRO 49, Leiden 1975.

poetic adaptations of it. They all replicate more or less the same confused order of the earliest extant monument while expanding or reducing the number of Isis' achievements. I would like to quote an excerpt from the longest and most complete version of the text (Isis aretalogy from Cumae)[45]:

…
3 Ἶσις ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ τύραννις πάσης χώρας καὶ ἐπαιδεύθην ὑπὸ Ἑρμοῦ καὶ γράμματα εὗρον μετὰ Ἑρμοῦ, τά τε ἱερὰ καὶ δημόσια, ἵνα μὴ τοῖς αὐτοῖς πάντα γράφηται.
4 Ἐγὼ νόμους ἀνθρώποις ἐθέμην, καὶ ἐνομοθέτησα ἃ οὐθεὶς δύναται μεταθεῖναι.
5 Ἐγώ εἰμι Κρόνου θυγάτηρ πρεσβυτάτη.
6 Ἐγώ εἰμι γυνὴ καὶ ἀδελφὴ Ὀσίριδος βασιλέως.
7 Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ καρπὸν ἀνθρώποις εὑροῦσα.
8 Ἐγώ εἰμι μήτηρ Ὥρου βασιλέως.
9 Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἐν τῷ τοῦ Κυνὸς ἄστρῳ ἐπιτέλλουσα.
10 Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ παρὰ γυναιξὶ θεὸς καλουμένη.
11 Ἐμοὶ Βούβαστος πόλις ᾠκοδομήθη.
12 Ἐγὼ ἐχώρισα γῆν ἀπ᾽ οὐρανοῦ.
13 Ἐγὼ ἄστρων ὁδοὺς ἔδειξα.
…
57 Χαῖρε Αἴγυπτε θρέψασά με.

Here we see a list of cosmogonic and civilizing activities accomplished by Isis which are presented in an absolutely jumbled order. It would be natural to assume that the separation of the earth from the sky (12) must have preceded the invention of writing (3) or the founding of the city of Boubastos (11), etc., which is, however, not the order in which individual statements occur in Isis' self-revelations. They are all presented as a sequence of timeless events with an equal significance ascribed to each of them. It would be a clear folly to assume that the surviving Isis aretalogies distort the order of a more logical sequence of some hypothetical prototype. I think one can be fairly certain that there never was a written text representing Isis' activities in the form of a narrative chronologically arranged. The lack of order here appears to be deliberate and quite appropriate to the main objective of the text, i.e. the praise of Isis. Nevertheless one can see that behind the lack of order there is an approximation of a notional narrative one could construct out of individual statements by re-arranging them.

45 M. Totti, *Ausgewählte Texte der Isis- und Sarapis-Religion*, Hildesheim-New York 1985, pp. 1-4.

Both the relative chronology of the Isis texts and their similarity to the Orphic Hymns suggest that the second person form preceded the self-revelation format. Thus we are dealing here with another example of an essentially hymnal text originating from yet another cult context which displays a similar kind of non-narrative structure as the Orphic Hymns.

The conclusion I would like to draw from this survey of some of the surviving ancient hymns and related texts is that the confused order of the side panels on the Mithraic reliefs might have been inspired by similar texts. Just as the Orphic hymns addressed to the same deity can freely draw on a vast number of traditional epithets incorporating as many or as few of them as seemed appropriate, Mithraic reliefs are also very inconsistent in their choice of individual scenes. Just as in some of the Orphic Hymns simple epithets can be replaced by much longer participial phrases or relative clauses containing somewhat more detailed information, individual episodes in the Mithraic reliefs can be expanded to occupy a number of panels (Mithras and the bull, Mithras and Sol). Just as in the Orphic Hymns we have numerous epithets describing attributes and qualities of gods rather than episodes from their mythical biographies, some of the Mithraic reliefs contain panels that could not fit into any kind of narrative structure at all[46]. Just as in the Orphic Hymns the same epithet can be repeated within the same hymn, there are repeated scenes on some of the Mithraic reliefs[47].

We do not have any extensive hymns from the Mithraic mysteries, but some of the extant inscriptions suggest that hymns were recited there. There are a few short fragments surviving on the frescoes from the *mithraeum* at Santa Prisca tentatively identified by Vermaseren as hymns[48]:

> *Nubila per ritum ducatis tempora cuncti*
> You must suffer through hard (cloudy) times together.
>
> *Dulcia sunt ficata avium sed cura gubernat*
> Sweet is the birds' liver, but care prevails.
>
> *Fecunda Tellus cuncta qua generat Pales*
> The land where Pales generates everything is fertile.
>
> *Accipe thuricremos, pater, accipe, sancte leones*

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46 For instance, on a few Mithraic reliefs we have a depiction of a sitting lion. Could it be a sort of visual epithet of Mithras, a comparison with a lion?

47 For instance, on the relief from Neuenheim, *CIMRM* 1283.

48 M.J. Vermaseren, *Mithras in der Römerzeit*, in: Idem (ed.), *Die orientalischen Religionen im Römerreich*, EPRO 93, Leiden 1981, pp. 96-120 (translations are mine).

Holy father, receive the incense-burning lions.

Per quos thuradamos per quos consumimur ipsi
Through which we sacrifice the incense, through which we ourselves are comsumed.

Fons concluse petris qui geminos aluisti nectare fratres
Spring concealed in rocks, you nourished the twins with nectar.

Hunc quem aur(eis) humeris portavit more iuvencum
This calf that he carried on his golden shoulders in the right way (?).

Et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso
You saved us too by spilling the blood that makes us immortal.

There are a few dedicatory inscriptions that identify Mithras not only with the Sun, but with a number of other gods as well, which is exactly what happens in the Orphic (and other) hymns. Incidentally, the same inscriptions contain a number of epithets applied to Mithras in the manner of the Orphic Hymns.

CIMRM 463. Εἷς Ζεὺς Μίτρας Ἥλιος κοσμοκράτωρ ἀνείκητος. Διὶ Ἡλίῳ μεγάλῳ Σαράπιδι σωτῆρι πλουτοδότῃ ἐπηκόῳ εὐεργέτῃ ἀνεικήτῳ Μίθρᾷ χαριστήριον.

CIMRM 474. Διὶ Ἡλίῳ Μίθρᾳ.

CIMRM 475. Διὶ Ἡλίῳ Μίθρᾳ Φάνητι.

Even this meager evidence would suffice to suggest that prayers similar to the Orphic Hymns might have been used in the mysteries of Mithras. However, even if we did not have this evidence, just the fact that the cult of Mithras is known to have appealed to the same kind of people as were active adherents of other mystery cults where hymns similar to the Orphic ones were used would indicate that this particular hymnal form was well familiar to the worshippers of Mithras. The fact that one of the inscriptions cited above identifies Mithras with the Orphic divinity Phanes might be significant as well (*CIMRM* 475).

Finally, there is one more piece of evidence that may corroborate my hypothesis about the structural connections between hymns and Mithraic cult images, even though I am truly at a loss as to how to interpret it: it is a small relief depicting Mithras with a torch (as Cautes?), at the bottom of which there is an inscription saying *Hymnus inbicto* (*CIMRM* 646, *CIL* 3865), instead of *invicto*. This relief does not have any side panels. What it might indicate is that, just as

a hymn, any Mithraic cult image was conceived of as a kind of timeless portrait of the god drawn in order to propitiate and praise him. It could be either expanded by any number of episodes depicting Mithras' beneficent activities or qualities, or reduced to a bare minimum of the tauroctone scene or any other representation of the god.

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