

VII.—MITHRAS *SAECULARIS*, THE HOUSESTEADS
MITHRAEUM AND A FRAGMENT FROM
CARRAWBURGH

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AA¹⁻⁴ = Archæologia Aeliana, Series 1-4.
C = Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum vol. vii.
CIRM = Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis
Mithriacae: M. J. Vermaseren, vols. i and ii.
EE = Ephemeris Epigraphica (vol. ix).
MMM = Textes et Monuments Figurés Relatifs aux Mystères
de Mithra: F. Cumont, vols. i and ii.

The mithraeum at Housesteads was first discovered during stone-robbing in 1809, when it is likely that much of the damage to the tauroctony was inflicted. In 1822 John Hodgson excavated the sanctuary of the temple and in 1898 R. C. Bosanquet uncovered the whole site.¹ The temple is still not without its problems and some day a re-excavation may prove worthwhile. One problem, however, is now purely academic: that concerning the altars of the temple. Added to this there is no up-to-date discussion of the shrine and its sculptures, nor of the exceptional dedication Mithras *Saecularis*.² Both of these are attempted below.

Altogether, taking the stones in Chesters Museum and in the Antiquaries' collection in Newcastle, and adding those listed in the Corpus, the total number of dedications attributed to Housesteads mithraeum is nine. The two main altars, dedicated to Mithras *Saecularis*, and Herion's small

¹AA¹ i p. 263f.: AA² xxv p. 255f.

²The only discussion is a short note by I. A. Richmond in *The Durham University Journal* xxxvi.i (Dec. 1943) pp. 5-6.

altar to Sol are clearly at home in the temple;³ the other six, however, need some explanation. The three altars dedicated to deities other than Mithras need not detain us long. The first⁴ was found by Hodgson in 1822, within the sanctuary of the temple, and is dedicated: *Cocidio [et] Genio pr[ae]sidii* by a soldier of the Sixth Legion. The second and third were found by Bosanquet in 1898⁵ within the nave and are dedicated *IOM et Deo Cocidio [G]enioq(ue) Huis Loci* by troops of the Second Legion and *Marti et Vi[c]to[r]iale* The first two are each some 18 inches in height, the third was originally some 3 feet, but now only the capital and upper shaft remain.

A sanctuary of Cocidius must have existed in the vicinity of Chapel Hill, for three of his four altars from Housesteads were discovered in that area, and its presumed date is second century.⁶ Clearly at sometime in the third century, after the destruction of Cocidius' own shrine in the barbarian invasion of A.D. 197, two of his altars were introduced into the mithraeum either as an inexpensive way of providing the god with small personal offerings, or as a pious way of providing for dedicated objects which had now no temple of their own.⁷ To support this, both the stones show heavy weathering which would suggest a period in the open. A parallel is to be seen in the incorporation of a statuette of a Mother-goddess and an altar to the Mothers in the mithraeum at Carrawburgh, both of which were similarly weathered.⁸ The third altar at Housesteads must have come into the temple in the same way.

The next three altars are more problematic, but it can be shewn that none actually came from the mithraeum.

³ C645=CIRM i 864: C646=CIRM i 863: C647=CIRM i 858/9.

⁴ AA¹ i pl. p. 263 and p. 291 No. 4=C644=CIRM i 867.

⁵ AA² xxv p. 281 No. 8=EE ix 1177=CIRM i 861 and 866. AA *l.c.* No. 9=EE ix 1179=CIRM i 861 and 865.

⁶ AA⁴ xii p. 231 § 5.

⁷ Whereas one might automatically be inclined to accept the first of these possibilities, it would not account for the Mother-goddess in the narthex at Carrawburgh (see note 8).

⁸ AA⁴ xxix p. 30.

(a) Corpus 648. Bruce, in his 1857 Black Gate Catalogue, assigns this altar "probably Borcovicus" and read it Deo⁹ Collingwood's catalogue omitted the "probably" and assigned the stone to the "Mithraic Cave".¹⁰ However, our Vice-President Dr. J. D. Cowen has identified this stone as one presented to the Society in 1822 by the then owner of Great Chesters "from his estate at Walltown". It reads DEO . . . and no more.¹¹

(b) Corpus 649. Hübner saw this stone grouped with those from Housesteads mithraeum, took it to be from the same site, and read it *Sol//i//vic|vivic tuc|* It is listed as uninscribed in the Black Gate Catalogue¹² but was later read and published by Collingwood as *[S]ive deo si|ve [d]eae Cl[audius|*¹³ The stone is, in fact, a square columnar pedestal and not an altar. Its provenance is unknown, although it presumably came from the Wall.

(c) Corpus 650, where it is described as being from Housesteads and now in Chesters Museum. It is, in fact, an erroneous duplication of an altar from Lanchester which reads *Deom|cpsi* and is now in the Museum of Antiquities in Newcastle. It is correctly described in the Corpus as No. 1344c.

Of the sculpture from the temple, three pieces deserve note. The first is the tauroctony or bull-killing slab.¹⁴ This scene has recently been restored and is now on view in the Museum of Antiquities, King's College, Newcastle. My remarks, however, will be limited to the five pieces of the original.¹⁵ Totalling less than a quarter of the whole, these are little on which to base an ambitious restoration, but

⁹ AA² i. p. 263 No. 138.

¹⁰ AA⁴ ii. p. 74 No. 69.

¹¹ Mr. R. P. Wright very kindly supplied me with the information concerning this stone and the next.

¹² AA⁴ ii p. 104 No. 199.

¹³ *Journal of Roman Studies* xvii p. 214 No. 18.

¹⁴ AA¹ i. p. 288.

¹⁵ Hodgson (note 14) records 5 fragments. Collingwood (AA⁴ ii p. 112 No. 276) records an additional piece, part of Mithras' tunic. There are now only 5 fragments, including the tunic, but excluding one of Hodgson's—Mithras' hand and the sword hilt.

enough to give the essential size of the stone and some idea of its composition. On the surviving fragments the only trace of Luna is part of her crescent moon and Sol is lost completely, but as symbolic representations of these two deities are almost non-existent on tauroctonies,¹⁶ busts of them are to be restored. Attending the scene are the torchbearers. Cautes (the survivor) holds a *caduceus* in addition to his torch, an exceptional feature, although not quite without parallel: in the feast-scene which backs a tauroctony from Fiano Romano Cautes strikes at the ground with a *caduceus* bringing forth fire or water.¹⁷ The occurrence of a *caduceus* implies a connection with Hermes *Psychopompus*,¹⁸ a connection which would certainly not be out of place in the case of Mithras *Saecularis*. (This is discussed below more fully.) A final point of note is the great size of the scene. It must have occupied the entire end wall of the sanctuary and is considerably larger than the tauroctonies from York, London and Carrawburgh (to judge from the shelf remaining in that shrine).¹⁹ In fact it may have consisted of two or three separate pieces, to allow handling.

The second interesting stone is the birth-scene of Mithras *Saecularis*,²⁰ now newly restored and on show in the Museum of Antiquities, King's College, Newcastle. Since the stone is described elsewhere in this volume (page 275 and plate XXVII) I propose only to discuss its significance here. As the most important single Mithraic stone from Britain it is not nearly as well known as it should be. It is one of a very small group of birth-scenes which depict Mithras springing from the cosmos, that is, born in space before the creation of the world. Normally he springs from a rock (fig. 1). This stone is unique in Britain and there are only three Continental representations which can compare with it. One, from

¹⁶ *A Typology of Mithraic Tauroctonies*: A. LeRoy Campbell, *Berytus* xi pt 1 pp. 1f.

¹⁷ CIRM i 641 fig. 180.

¹⁸ Cumont, *Revue Archéologique*⁶ xxv p. 189.

¹⁹ CIRM i 835 and ii fig. 254; CIRM i 810 and fig. 218; CIRM i 844 and fig. 223.

²⁰ AA¹ pp. 291f.



FIG. 1. MITHRAS RISING FROM THE ROCK.

Trier,²¹ shows a child-Mithras leaning through the circle of the Zodiac, and holding a globe in his hand. The second, the famous birth-scene from Modena in Italy,²² shows a fully-grown god standing with one half of an egg beneath his feet and the other capping his head (fig. 2). He is goat-horned, winged, encircled by a snake and within a zodiacal band; clearly the scene represents Orphic Phanes in full glory, and the piece is only Mithraic by rededication.²³ The third is a

²¹ CIRM i 985 and fig. 237.

²² CIRM i 695 (with bibliography) and fig. 197.

²³ In spite of beliefs to the contrary this is proven by one of the original dedicators (*Euphrosyne et Felix*) being a woman. Her name has been partly erased, clearly when the stone was rededicated.



FIG. 2. RELIEF OF PHANES (MODENA).

small fragment of an oval border, preserving parts of the two signs Taurus and Gemini only, which comes from Split in Jugoslavia.²⁴ It is now too small to be restored with assurance, but could well have been part of a pierced border to another such scene as ours.

The inscriptions of the principal altars, *To Mithras Saecularis*, show that at Housesteads Mithras has been united with Aeon; that is, the bull-slaying warrior-god, normally the offspring of Jupiter (Ahura Mazda), is united with the Supreme deity or *First Cause* (Aeon, Saeculum or Chronos) from which both Jupiter (Goodness) and Pluto (Ahriman—Evil) sprung. Aeon is by no means exclusive to Mithraism. He is encountered in Orphism, as Phanes, in several Mystery cults and in Gnosticism.²⁵ Nor in a religion as syncretic as

²⁴ CIRM ii 1870, illustrated in *Archæologia Iugoslavica* I p. 39 and fig. 11.

²⁵ Daremberg, Saglio and Pottier: *Dict. des Antiquités* vol. iii pt. 2 p. 1951; Hastings: *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* "Gnosticism" MMM i p. 76; D. Levi: *Hesperia* xiii pp. 271 and 285-90.

Mithraism is our combination of Mithras and Aeon quite unknown: ²⁶ this portrayal, however, is without parallel.

It is usual to attribute the imagery of this stone entirely to Orphic influence, and to support the theory by reference to the two halves of the egg from which the god springs. While it is true that Orphic influence is present, a distinction must be made between Phanes, the Orphic Aeon, part animal, part man, snake encircled, lion-headed and winged, and non-Orphic representations of the god, one aspect of which, as Professor Doro Levi has shewn, depicts him anthropomorphically and standing within the Zodiac, as seen on mosaics from Antioch-on-the-Orontes, Sentinum, Hippo Regius and the *Isola Sacra* of Ostia, and also on the Parabiago lanx. ²⁷ At Housesteads the relief clearly owes as much to *this* god as to Orphic Phanes.

Such a combination as we see at Housesteads shows a dedicator with advanced religio-philosophical leanings, and supports the conclusion that Mithraism was strongly dependent on the senior officers in Wall-forts (if not by and large in military areas) and that it was their participation or opposition which lead to the periods of use or abandonment of the Wall mithraea, for a philosophical concept such as this is not to be expected amongst the ranks of the units attested at Housesteads: coh. I Tungrorum, the cuneus Frisiorum and the numerus Hnaudifridi. ²⁸ The dedicators of the principal altars, however, are another matter: Litorius Pacatianus, a consular beneficiary, and Publilius Proculus a legionary centurion. The second of these dedicated his altar in the year A.D. 252²⁹ which is later in the century than the foundation of the temples at Carrawburgh³⁰ and Rud-

²⁶ Presumably it lies behind the child-Mithras from Trier though that representation is very unusual. Other cases are two groups of altars from Rome, both in Greek: CIRM i 463 (to Zeus Mithras Helios Sarapis) and CIRM i 473-5 (to Zeus Helios Mithras Phanes), the rededicated stone from Modena and possibly the fragment from Split.

²⁷ See Levi: *Hesperia* l.c. for discussion and illustrations.

²⁸ E. Birley: *Research on Hadrian's Wall* p. 179.

²⁹ *ddnn Gallo et Volusino Cos* (sic)

³⁰ AA⁴ xxix p. 28.

chester,³¹ or the inscription of Caecilius Optatus at High Rochester.³² The altar itself is of a different stone from that of the birth-scene, tauroctony, torchbearers or Pacatianus' altar. As Bosanquet's excavation revealed at least two floors in the temple,³³ I suggest that Proculinus' altar marks a re-dedication or refurnishing of the temple, and that Pacatianus' altar, together with the main imagery, belongs to the original dedication some two or three decades earlier. Pacatianus, a *beneficiarius Consularis*, was a man on the governor's staff seconded to a special duty which was possibly fiscal. Such a man is more likely to have held advanced religio-philosophical concepts than the Celtic or Teutonic auxiliaries of the garrison.³⁴

Our stone shows Mithras as Aeon, the timeless master of the Universe, hung within the splendour of the encircling houses of the Zodiac. Hence the appropriateness of Cautes' *caduceus* on the tauroctony, already mentioned. Hence also the appropriateness on this stone of the attitudes of Aquarius and Capricorn. These two signs are placed in opposition to each other, and as both are watery creatures, akin to the Tritons and marine beings which are often placed in the spandrels of tombstones, they have the same psychopompic symbolism as the creatures on tombstones, referring to the journey of the soul to the Isles of the Blessed.³⁵ Here there is an added appositeness in the signs chosen, for Capricorn is one of the "Portals of the Sun". It is the "Portal of the Gods",³⁶ the gate through which the soul returns to its

³¹ AA⁴ xxxii, postulated p. 217.

³² Antoninus Pius; *Northd. County History* xv p. 145 No. 5.

³³ AA² xxv p. 260.

³⁴ The small altar dedicated *Soli Herion v.l.m.* is of interest here. Herion's status is not given; while he could have been an eastern trader from the fort *vicus*, he would equally well have been a slave or servant acquired by Pacatianus in some province where he was more likely to pick up his sophisticated beliefs than in Britain, and Dr. J. C. Mann draws my attention to the possibility of a consular beneficiary serving as a *frumentarius* prior to his promotion. Herion is one of the very few recorded dedicators to Mithras from Britain not apparently an officer or official.

³⁵ Cumont: *Recherches sur la Symbolisme funéraire des Romains* p. 147f.

³⁶ Macrobius: *Comm. in Somn. Scip.* 1. xii, 2; Porphyry: *De Antro nymph.*

rightful abode of immortality, and as such has particular associations with the Timeless God.

Not only is this birth-scene of particular interest, but it may well explain the third unusual carving from the temple (plate XVI, fig. 1). This is a statue discovered in 1892 by Bosanquet and now in Chesters Museum, where it is still labelled: "Stele with the figure of an official sculptured in relief".³⁷ The carving depicts a man standing to attention, dressed in a *tunica* with pleated folds at the waist covering a belt. His head is now missing; his forearms, legs and feet are bare, and his fists are clenched. As a carving the stone is obviously a companion piece to the torchbearers from the temple, two of which stand next to it today. Dr. M. J. Vermaseren, in his recent *Corpus of Mithraic objects* describes the figure: ". . . on his right arm part of a snake(?) . . . Aion".³⁸ Bosanquet, too, thought along similar lines: ". . . hands clenched but much bruised [Held Torches?]"³⁹ However, inspection shows that Dr. Vermaseren's snake does not exist. The figure is now completely devoid of attributes.

The difficulties of identification present themselves immediately. Aeon would be the obvious choice, but representations of the Mithraic Aeon are normally closely akin in form to Phanes: lion-headed, winged, and girt (or adorned) by a snake. Furthermore, he normally carries either a torch or keys.⁴⁰ Even the most debased representations of him have some attributes, and even a human-headed figure from *Argentoratum* has wings and holds objects in both hands.⁴¹ Again, with the exception of the last figure Mithraic Aeon is lion-headed, and his thick mane would still be visible even if his head were lost, as in the case of a statue from Memphis

³⁷ Present museum No. 142. Budge's Catalogue No. 130. AA² xxv p. 261 and fig. 32.

³⁸ CIRM i 855.

³⁹ Note book marked "Roman B" p. 62, now in the possession of the Museum of Antiquities, King's College, Newcastle, and kindly brought to my notice by Dr. D. J. Smith.

⁴⁰ CIRM and MMM *passim*.

⁴¹ MMM ii fig. 214.

which is without apparent attributes but still retains a thick mane and lion's head.⁴²

The key lies in the specific equation of Mithras at Housesteads. It has already been suggested that the sculpture, statuary, and Pacatianus' altar form the original contents of this temple, iconographically conceived as a whole, and that the torchbearers and the statue under discussion are of similar workmanship. Is it not to be expected, then, that as the Aeon of the birth-scene is anthropomorphic, any freestanding figure of him will also be anthropomorphic and not the winged, leonine, snake-encircled deity usually depicted?

Bearing in mind Haverfield's comment on Budge's Chesters catalogue "*optimo concilio inceptum, pessime perfectum*" a stone, from Carrawburgh, described as "Portion of a relief of a man bearing a torch is seen standing by an altar"⁴³ clearly deserves reserve. Inspection, however, revealed the piece to be basically as stated (plate XVI, fig. 2). It is the upper body and head of a figure dressed in a Phrygian cap and apparently holding a lowered torch, but without the altar. Although weathering has defaced the carving there seem to be the thick folds of a cloak around its neck, and it is clearly gazing downwards in the fashion normal to Cautopates.

The fragment, which is 16 inches in height by 11 inches in width, preserves the same rounded back, roughly worked but uncarved, as the Cautes found in the excavation of Carrawburgh mithraeum in 1950.⁴⁴ A direct comparison of the measurements of the two statues is difficult for Cautes lacks a head while the precise point at which Cautopates' waist occurs is difficult to judge. One thing, however, makes it seem unlikely that the two are a pair: behind the right arm and the right-hand side of Cautopates' head is what appears to be a background of stone, as if the whole had been carved

⁴² CIRM i fig. 35.

⁴³ Budge's Chesters Catalogue (1907) p. 322 No. 110.

⁴⁴ AA⁴ xxix p. 32 and pl. x.



FIG. 1. FIGURE OF AEON FROM HOUSESTEADS
(CHESTERS MUSEUM).



FIG. 2. STATUE OF CAUTOPATES FROM
CARRAWBURGH (CHESTERS MUSEUM).

in high relief rather than as a freestanding piece. As this is visible nowhere else on the stone, and the back of the figure is roughly worked in the manner of the freestanding *Cautes* described above, one hesitates to think in terms of a fragment of the tauroctony relief. On the other hand whatever this semi-background has been, it has no apparent counterpart on the (now admittedly headless) *Cautes*.

Two pairs of torchbearers are not unusual. Housesteads had two pairs of freestanding figures, and Rudchester probably had the same.⁴⁵ A suggestion of two pairs here at Carrawburgh was, in fact, made by the excavators⁴⁶ and this stone could be the only remaining portion of that second pair. The temple, in its fourth-century state, contained two raft-like pedestals, one on either side of the sanctuary, for which the excavators postulated statues of lions.⁴⁷ Torchbearers could equally well have occupied these, standing with their backs to the side-walls of the temple, and at Housesteads the *Cautes* from a second pair of torchbearers was discovered lying in the sanctuary.⁴⁸

The find spot of this figure must have been outside the building, which had apparently not suffered post-Roman robbing. Such would indicate a fragment flung from the desecrated shrine in the same manner as the head of the remaining *Cautes* and the body of the remaining *Cautopates*, neither of which was recovered during the excavation.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ AA⁴ xxxii p. 201.

⁴⁶ AA⁴ xxix p. 32.

⁴⁷ *Op. cit.* pp. 31 and 38-9.

⁴⁸ AA¹ i p. 294.

⁴⁹ As well as Dr. Mann and Mr. Wright, already mentioned, I must thank the Misses M. Medd and P. Tylecote, for drawing figs. 1 and 2, and make acknowledgement to the Museum of Antiquities for the use of the block for fig. 1.

