



MITHRA II. ICONOGRAPHY IN IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

MITHRA

ii. ICONOGRAPHY IN IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

There is no known iconography of Mithra in the Achaemenid period. On coins of the Arsacids the seated archer dressed as a Parthian horseman, which is often depicted on the reverse, has been interpreted as Mithra holding Apollo's favorite attribute, a bow, but the figure is also taken, perhaps more plausibly, as a reminder of Arsaces I, the dynastic ancestor. A coin issue from Susa dating probably from Artabanus II's reign (ca. 128-124 BCE) presents a more convincing example of Mithra in the guise of Apollo, as the Parthian king is shown kneeling in front of a statue of the Greek god (here naked and holding his quiver), a scene which can be compared with Tiridates of Armenia's address to Nero: "I am the descendant of Arsaces ... and have come to thee, my god, to kneel before you as I do before Mithra" (Dio Cassius, 62.5.2). On the reliefs at [Tang-e Sarvak](#) in Elymais (2nd century CE), the rayed deity previously misinterpreted as Helios-Mithra is now held to be Artemis-Nanaia.

The youthful, beardless Apollonian type is prominent in images from other countries of Iranian culture contemporary with the Parthian empire. In the kingdom of Commagene on the upper Euphrates, royal steles carved under Antiochus I between 62 and 37 BCE show the king clasping hands with



“Mithra-Helios-Apollo-Hermes,” who is named in the accompanying Greek inscriptions; the god is dressed in Iranian costume, with rays radiating from a high curved Iranian tiara (which was later on to be adapted as a Phrygian cap in the iconography of the Greco-Roman Mithras). In the Kushan empire Mithra is among the deities most frequently depicted on the coinage, always as a young solar god. This type appears first on the obverse of coins of Soter Megas (ca. 80-100 CE), where his head in profile replaces that of the king, a choice which perhaps echoes the king’s (Mithraic?) title *Soter Megas* “the Savior, the Great” always used instead of his personal name. Here the bare, diademed head with rays is obviously copied from a Hellenistic statue of Apollo holding an arrow (FIGURE 1). After an eclipse under Vima Kadphises, who promoted a Shivaite cult, Mithra reappears prominently under Kanishka I (127- ca. 153), when he is labeled first in Greek as Helios, then in Bactrian as Mihr (written *Miuro*, *Miuro*, *Mirro*, etc.); he keeps a similar position on the coinage of Huviška (ca. 153-91). On these coins he is never shown in a chariot, but standing, always with a rayed nimbus, an Iranian dress (tunic, cloak, boots) and warrior’s attributes (a sword, often a spear). He is most often brandishing a torque (FIGURE 2) or a ribboned wreath, both of which can be interpreted as symbolizing the royal investiture or perhaps more specifically the royal *xvarənah*. In some variants he instead executes an auspicious gesture with two fingers raised (in one case, to the moon-god Māh, written *Mao*).

Another Greek source for the iconography of Mithra in eastern Iran is Zeus. In fact the very first attempts to embody the concept of Mithra are an adaptation of the type of Zeus which is displayed on coins of late Greek rulers of Bactria and Kapisa (the Kabul region). This series starts with coins of Heliocles I (ca. 145-130 BCE), where Zeus has his head fitted with rays, an attribute which is not customary for him, and which in the rare cases when it is accorded him indicates assimilation to a local solar god. Under later kings the god more and more takes on an Iranian look: the tiara appears on the head of the enthroned god, and eventually, on bronze coins of Amyntas and Hermaeus (kings in Kapisa, ca. 95-70 BCE), it displays such characteristic details as tip bent forward, back edge covering the nape, and side-flaps (FIGURE 3). It has been argued that the assimilation of Zeus with Mithra (instead of Ahurā Mazdā, as in Commagene) hinted at Mithra occupying the supreme position in the eastern variant of the Iranian religion, but one might perhaps explain it rather by a reluctance to provide Ahurā Mazdā with human features (cf. *Dādestān ī dēnīg* 18.1-5, where he is said to be visible only through the powers of wisdom). Moreover, some specific attributes of Zeus were liable to find



parallels in the *Mihr Yašt*: the mace-thunderbolt, the “Victorious superiority” (*vanaintī uparatāt*) hailed as a boon of Mithra (*Yt.* 10.33) and which could be recognized in the figure of Nike raised in Zeus’s hand on some of the coin types discussed above. The auspicious gesture executed by the god on some of the coins provides a link with the Apollonian type in favor under the Kushans.

After a long eclipse, the bearded Jovian type of Mithra reappears on coins issued by the first rulers of the new Kushano-Sasanian dynasty in the late 3rd and early 4th century. On a gold coin of Ardašir, first of this line, the god identified by the Bactrian legend *Bago Miuro* is seated on a throne of the Greek type and displays a ribboned wreath. But on later issues the same god, sometimes enthroned with the added attribute of a spear, sometimes emerging in this guise from a fire altar, is always labeled *burz’awand yazad* “the god who possesses the heights” (in Middle Persian or in Bactrian transcription; [FIGURE 4](#)). This can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to bridge the gap with the Irano-Indian god who figures prominently on the coinage of the 3rd-century Kushans: *Wēš (Oēšo)*, whose name and concept come from the Avesta (*Vayuš [uparō.kairyo-]* “Vayu who acts in the heights”) but whose appearance and attributes had hitherto been borrowed from Shiva. Instead, the new syncretic god retained some ancient characteristics of Mithra, like the rays or flames around the head and even a residual tiara topped with a crescent (a detail discernible on some excellent specimens issued in Marv and Herat). At the same time the naked chest, the position of the legs, and the shape of the throne betray the lingering influence of a Greek statue, and it seems possible to suggest that such statues, provided with added attributes, were still visible in Bactrian temples at that time; cf., on another Kushano-Sasanian coin from the same period, the image of the “Anāhid the Lady” which is clearly an enthroned statue of Artemis (Cribb, 1990, pp. 183-84, coin 5).

The only image of Mithra known in Sasanian monumental art, that on Šāpūr II’s relief at Tāq-e Bostān commemorating the victory over Julian the Apostate in 363 ([FIGURE 5](#)), is consistent with the Jovian type. Here the god is standing on a lotus flower, which recently has been convincingly interpreted as a symbol of the *xvarənah* (see [FARR\[AH\]](#)) abiding in the waters (Soudavar, 2003, pp. 53-54). He is placed behind the king, who receives the ribboned ring from Ohrmazd and holds the *barsom* in hand (which explains what the Parsis mistook this image for Zoroaster and still use it as the model for his conventional portrait). Apart from this, the only official depiction of Mithra under the Sasanians is on coins of Hormizd I (272-73): the god, recognizable



from his rays, holds the ring of investiture out to the king across the fire altar.

A third iconographic type, inherited from the Greeks like the two other ones, is that of the charioteer, derived from Apollo-Helios in his quadriga. In the Iranian world it is not documented before the Sasanian period and is never found on coins, although its “frontal” compositional scheme with the horses separating symmetrically appears first with the image of the Greek god on coins of the Greco-Bactrian king Plato (ca. 145 BCE). This type, with various degrees of simplification, underlies the five private seals which constitute the bulk of the Sasanian iconography of Mithra (list with references in Grenet, 2003). The head is always radiated and the face beardless, except in one case. On two seals the horses are reduced to two (in one case the inscription reads *hu-mihrīh ī pahlom* “perfect friendship,” an indirect reference to Mithra’s name; [FIGURE 6](#)); on another one only the chariot remains (with the mask of a horned lion, on which see below), and in one case only the radiated bust (with the explicit inscription *Mihr yazad*). The fifth specimen will be discussed below.

A schematized rendering of Mithra seating on the solar chariot is also to be recognized on several images from the Sogdian sites of Panjikent ([FIGURE 7](#)) and Šahrestān (Ustrušana), as late as the 8th century. On some of these depictions the chariot, which at that time had fallen into disuse in Central Asia as well as in Iran, is replaced by a throne resting on the foreparts of two horses. This is not the case, however, with the most elaborate document of Iranian Mithraic iconography which have come down to us. This is the painted composition which once decorated the soffit of the niche of the 38-meter Buddha at Bāmīan (it was destroyed by the Taliban in 1999, before the Buddhas themselves, but it survives through excellent photographic and graphic records; [FIGURE 8](#)). Probably executed in the second half of the 6th century, it includes no recognizable Buddhist element but, taken as a whole, appears to illustrate the daily epiphany of Mithra as described in the *Mihr Yašt*. The “gold-painted mountain tops” of Mount Harā, in reddish color, frame the composition. The juvenile god is standing on his chariot drawn by four white steers and driven by a winged figure that is most probably Aši. On both sides of the chariot stand two winged female figures: the one to the left is clearly inspired by Athena holding the *gorgoneion* (the head of Medusa), the one to the right is an archer. They can probably be interpreted as the moon and sunlight respectively (although Athena is also known to have provided her image to Arštāt, herself a companion of Mithra). Vāta, the Wind, also



mentioned in the *Mihr Yašt*, is symbolized by two figures in the upper part. The two half-bird, half-human figures with priestly attributes (*padām*, i.e., a covering for the mouth and nose, torch, libation spoon at the belt), flying at Mithra's level, are more difficult to interpret; their belonging to Sogdian Zoroastrian iconography has been proved by recent discoveries (ossuaries from Samarqand, funerary monuments of expatriate Sogdians in northern China), and they have been recently explained (Grenet, 2003) as Srōš's cock manifesting this god's presence in the *Yasna* liturgy (P. O. Skjærvø apud Grenet, Riboud, and Yang Junkai, 2004, pp. 278-79). The presence of this purely Mithraic iconography in such a setting reflects the local importance of this cult, no doubt related to the fact that the Bāmīan region was the focal point of the *Mihr Yašt* (a concept still present in Pahlavi literature; see *G.Bd.* 21A.11.17).

Although executed at a relatively late period, the Bāmīan composition preserves some archaic features which betray an older iconographic tradition, an assumption confirmed by the existence of its abbreviated version on an eastern Sasanian seal from the late 4th or 5th centuries in the British Museum (first published in Callieri, 1990; [FIGURE 9](#)): the figure of the god entirely surrounded by an indented halo is almost similar, but here he is shown emerging directly from Mount Harā, rendered as a triangle of globular rocks (an image which, in its turn, calls to mind some figures of *Mithra petrogenus* in western Mithraism; cf. the *mithrea* at Dura Europus and at San Clemente in Rome). Echoes of the Bāmīan composition are perceptible in Buddhist cave paintings at Kiriš-Simsin near Kucha (the chariot, the winds, the frame of mountains) and at Cave 285 (Pelliot 120) in Dunhuang (the chariot, the moonlight going back to the type of Athena).

The above-mentioned paintings at Šahrestān in Ustrušana offer the only surviving example of the Iranian Mithra taking part in a battle against demons. There are no recognizable analogies in detail with the eschatological battle against Aēšma, demon of Wrath, in which Mithra leads several divine or heroic companions according to *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (7.34); on the contrary, at Šahrestān Mithra appears subordinated to Nana, the high goddess of the Sogdian pantheon.

There is no certain depiction of Mithra on Sogdian ossuaries, despite his role as a judge of the dead, and the deity next to Nana in the lamentation scene at the Panjikent Temple II is not him (*pace* Azarpay, 1981, p. 141), but probably Žimat, i.e., Demeter (Grenet and Marshak, 1998, pp. 8-9). On the reliefs of the stone sarcophagus of Yu Hong, an Iranian or Central Asian from an



unidentified country who died in China in 593, Mithra is, however, likely to be the riding god who meets a sacrificial horse (Marshak, 2001, pp. 254-56; FIGURE 10).

The Central Asian type of Mithra as charioteer deeply influenced the iconography of the Indian Sūrya, including the costume. On the other hand, syncretic developments with Hindu or local cults, already attested at the official level with the Kushano-Sasanian *burz'awand yazad*, continued in Bactria and in the neighboring regions. The main witness is the cave painting at Doḡtar-e Nošervān, to the north of Bāmīan, probably dating from the 7th century (FIGURE 11): the god seated on a throne resting on the foreparts of two horses, with his sword between his legs, conforms to the type of Mithra. This filiation is confirmed by the mask of a horned lion above the wings of his crown, a cluster of animal symbols also found on some Sasanian seals and which appears to allude to the coming of the Sun into Aries, when a festival to the Sun was celebrated (Biruni, *Āṭār al-Bākiya*, tr. M. A. Sal'e, *Abureïkhan Biruni. Izbrannye proizvedeniya* I, Tashkent, 1957, pp. 236-38; this passage is mutilated in Sachau's edition). The eight animal heads protruding from his halo can be viewed as symbols of the directions of space (rather than planets, as in Grenet, 1995). The Bactrian archives from this valley, however, indicate that the local high god was Žun (< Zurw@an?), whose regional importance all along the Indo-Iranian border is also attested by the Chinese traveler Xuanzang, so it appears plausible that at Dokòtar-e Noæerv@an attributes once proper to Mithra have been reused for an even more encompassing religious figure.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

G. Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting. The Pictorial Epic in Oriental Art*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1981.

A. D. H. Bivar, "Mithraic Images of Bactria: Are They Related to Roman Mithraism?" in U. Bianchi, ed., *Mysteria Mithrae, Études Préliminaires aux*



Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain (EPRO) 80, Leiden, 1979, pp. 741-50.

Idem, *The Personalities of Mithra in Archaeology and Literature*, New York, 1998.

M. Boyce and F. Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. III: *Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman rule*, Leiden, 1991, esp. pp. 38-39, 162-63, 331, 337-38, 346.

P. Callieri, "On the Diffusion of the Mithra Images in Sasanian Iran. New evidence from a Seal in the British Museum," *East and West* 40, 1990, pp. 79-98.

M. Carter, "A Numismatic Reconstruction of Kushano-Sasanian History," *American Numismatic Society Monographs and Notes* 30, 1985, pp. 215-81, pl. 47-52, esp. pp. 227-29, 242-44.

J. Cribb, "Numismatic Evidence for Kushano-Sasanian Chronology," *Studia Iranica* 19, 1990, pp. 151-193, pl. I-VIII.

R. Göbl, *System und Chronologie der Münzprägung des Kušānreiches*, Wien, 1984 (esp. pp. 42, 166-67, 172).

F. Grenet, "Mithra au temple principal d'Aï Khanoum?" in P. Bernard and F. Grenet, ed., *Histoire et cultes de l'Asie centrale préislamique*, Paris, 1991, pp. 147-51, pl. LVIII-LX.

Idem, "Bāmiyān and the *Mihr Yašt*," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 7, 1993 [1994], pp. 87-94.

Idem, "Mithra et les planètes dans l'Hindukush central: essai d'interprétation de la peinture de Dokhtar-i Nôshirvân," in R. Gyselen, ed., *Au carrefour des religions. Mélanges offerts à Philippe Gignoux (Res Orientales, 7)*, Bures-sur-Yvette, 1995, pp. 105-19.

Idem, "Mithra, dieu iranien: nouvelles données," *Topoi* 11, 2003, pp. 35-58.

F. Grenet and B. Marshak, "Le mythe de Nana dans l'art de la Sogdiane," *Arts Asiatiques* 53, 1998, pp. 5-18.

F. Grenet, P. Riboud, and Yang Junkai, "Zoroastrian Scenes on a Newly Discovered Sogdian Tomb in Xi'an, Northern China," *Studia Iranica* 33, 2004, pp. 273-84.



A. von Le Coq, *Bilderatlas zur Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Mittel-Asiens*, Berlin, 1925 (repr., Graz, 1977), figs. 220-25.

B. Marshak, “La thématique sogdienne dans l’art de la Chine de la seconde moitié du VI^e siècle,” *Comptes Rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions & Belles-lettres*, 2001, pp. 227-64.

R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Königstein, 1984.

N. N. Negmatov, “Bozhestvennyĭ i demonicheskiĭ panteony Ustrushany i ikh indo-iranskĭe parallely” (The divine and demoniac pantheons of Ustrushana and their Indo-Iranian parallels), in V. M. Masson, ed., *Drevnie kul’tury Srednei Azii i Indii*, Leningrad, 1984, pp. 146-64.

V. Shkoda, “K voprosu o kul’tovykh stsenakh v sogdiĭskoĭ zhivopisi” (On the question of cult scenes in Sogdian painting), *Soobshcheniya Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha* 45, 1980, pp. 60-63.

A. Soudavar, *The Aura of Kings*, Costa Mesa, 2003.

January 13, 2006