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TRA *LYRA* E *AULOS*

TRADIZIONI MUSICALI
E GENERI POETICI

A CURA DI LUIGI BRAVI, LIANA LOMIENTO,
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MERCURY WITH LYRE:
A NEW INTERPRETATION
OF A MITHRAIC SCULPTURE FOUND
IN HISPANIA

CLAUDINA ROMERO MAYORGA

ABSTRACT

The finding of a Roman sculpture representing Mercury with lyre in the ancient city of Augusta Emerita (Spain), among other pieces dedicated to the Eastern deity Mithras, has drawn the attention of many scholars to the importance of the mystery cult in the province. The iconographic analysis of the sculpture, the study of the inscription found on the lyre as well as the myth of its creation might offer a new interpretation of the piece.

KEYWORDS: Mercury, lyre, Mithras, Hispania, mystery cults.

AT the beginning of the 20th century, when Mérida's city council, in Spain, decided to build a bullfighting arena in an area called Cerro de San Albín, no one expected to find a deposit of marble statues and fragments from Roman times. According to some scholars, the inscriptions and the iconographic repertoire of the pieces recovered evidenced the existence of the Mithraic cult in the area.¹ This paper will focus on one of the sculptures found in 1913, which represents Mercury with his lyre, now housed in the Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (MNAR inv. n. CE00089) [plate 1].

It is a sculpture in the round, made of white marble from Es-

¹ JUAN RAMÓN MÉLIDA, *Cultos emeritenses de Serapis y de Mithras*, «Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia», LXIV, 1914, pp. 439-456:453; MAARTEN J. VERMASEREN, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1956, n. 780; ANTONIO GARCÍA Y BELLIDO, *Les religions orientales dans l'Espagne romaine*, Leiden, Brill, 1967; JULIÁN MUÑOZ GARCÍA VASO, *El culto de Mithra en Hispania: caracteres específicos*, Madrid, UNED, Tesis Inéditas, 1989; BEATRICE CACCIOTTI, *Culti orientali in Spagna: alcune osservazioni iconografiche*, «Escultura Romana en Hispania», v, 2008, pp. 163-186: 174.

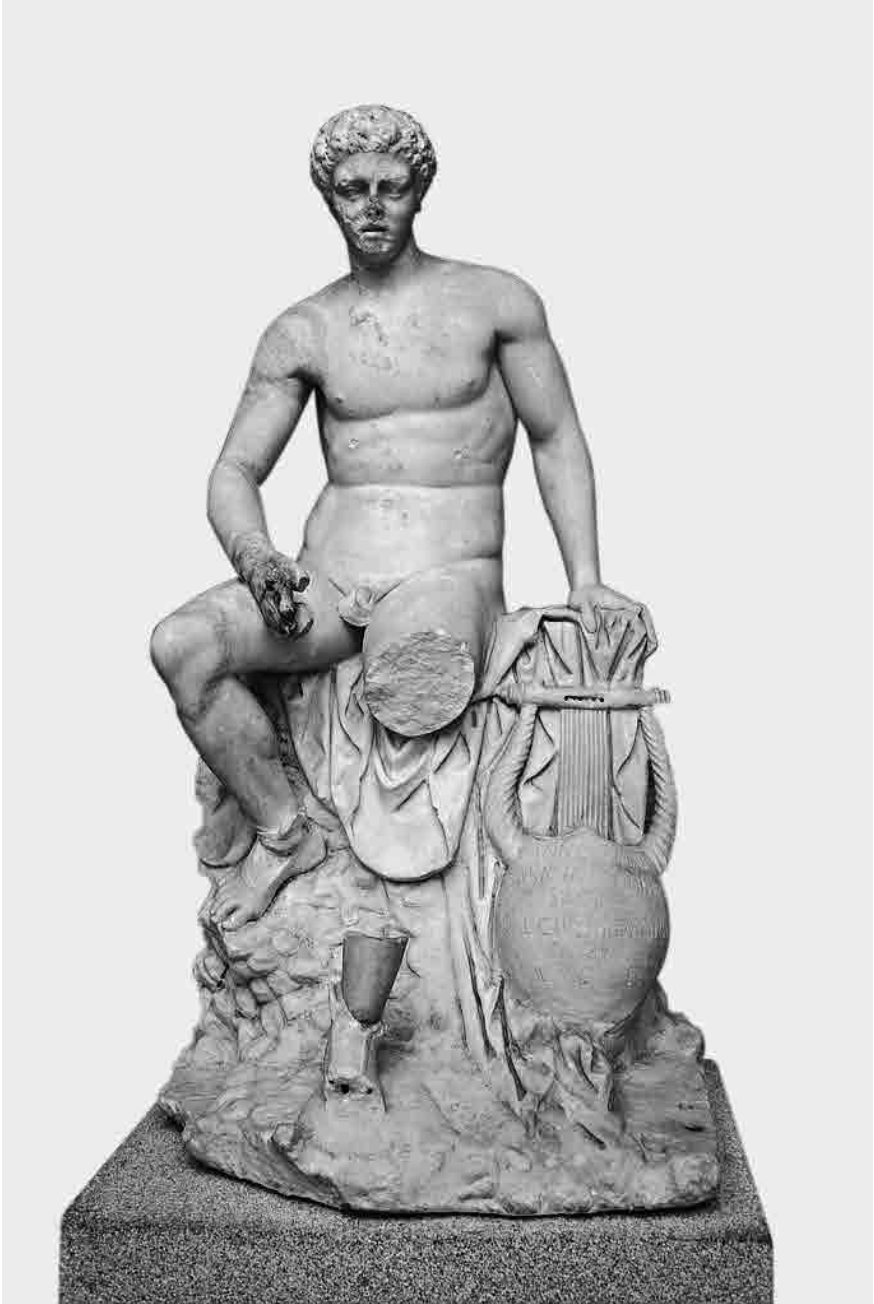


FIG. 1.

tremoz quarry (Portugal)¹ and slightly smaller than the natural size (1.50x0.84x0.66m). Mercury, messenger of the gods, is seated on rocks with his lyre. The divinity is easily recognized by the winged sandals, a frequent attribute in his iconography. The chlamys is spread over the rock formation, with a circular fibula on the left side. García y Bellido suggests that the technique is discrete and that it might belong to a lisipean circle.² When sitting, the god bends his right leg and leaves the left one slightly extended forward. Mercury rests his left arm on the rocks and he might have held in his right hand a caduceus, perhaps made of bronze. Although the head has suffered damage over time, we can see that it leans to the left, his mouth is slightly opened and his curly hair is styled with smooth touches of drill. Mercury is a rotund, portly figure; some researchers highlight the loose anatomical treatment.³ His body is also carved from behind, unlike the rocks that are just barely indicated.

The sculpture corresponds to the iconographic model of 'resting/seating Hermes' as is also the Mercury in bronze found in Herculaneum (now preserved in the Museum of Naples). Cacciotti states that the figure would have been based on a previous model called Hermes Enagonios created around 338-335 B.C. She does not rule out the possibility that, in the Hispanic sculpture, there could have been an animal in the left flank of the rocks. The base presents an abrupt flattening and three perforations, as if the marble had been lowered to add another piece.⁴ In Rome, the iconography of the god inherited the Greek tradition and became more diversified: it was frequent to find beside Mercury a horse, bull, goat, tortoise and rooster. García y Bellido states the possibility that a sculptor named Demetrios, probably of eastern provenance, could have been the author of Mercury.⁵ His name

¹ PILAR LAPUENTE *et alii*, *White marble sculptures from the National Museum of Roman Art (Mérida): sources of local and imported marbles*, «European Journal of mineralogy», xxvi, 2, pp. 333-354.

² ANTONIO GARCÍA Y BELLIDO, *El culto a Mithras en la Península Ibérica*, «Boletín de la Real Academia de Historia», 122, 1948, pp. 283-349: 339.

³ ANTONIO GARCÍA Y BELLIDO, *El culto a Mithras en la Península Ibérica*, cit., p. 338.

⁴ BEATRICE CACCIOTTI, *Culti orientali in Spagna: alcune osservazioni iconografiche*, cit., p. 174.

⁵ ANTONIO GARCÍA Y BELLIDO, *Les religions orientales dans l'Espagne romaine*, cit., p. 33.

appears in the representation of the Dadophor found in Cerro San Albín (MNAR inv. n° CE00655) which was also dedicated to Mithras. Several authors support the Greek origin of the model but do not decide on the location of the workshop.¹

We will focus our attention in the lyre situated by Mercury: according to ancient sources, the musical instrument was created by the god in his childhood, when he was just a few days old.² He made it out of a tortoise he found just outside the cave of Maya, his mother. He took it in, attached some strings of different thickness and was very pleased when he played it for the first time. Apollo, who was angry with him for stealing his cattle, was also struck by the sweet music of the lyre, and asked Mercury to present him with the instrument. To seal the reconciliation between the two gods, Mercury acquired the oracular powers of Apollo, as well as he became the protector of the cattle and animals in the woods. The lyre of the sculpture consists of two tortoise shells, with two antelope horns connected by a bridge that simulates bone, from where strings are attached. Although primitive lyre had three or seven strings, in this case we count up to ten. In the convex surface of the tortoise shell reads the inscription that without mistake links the piece to the Mithraic cult: ANN · COL · CLXXX / INVICTO DEO MITRAE / SACR / G · ACCIVS · HEDYCHRUS / PATER / A · L · P · (*Ann(o) Col(oniae) CLXXX Invicto deo Mithrae sacr(um) G(aius) Accius Hedychrus Pater a(nimo) l(ibens) p(osuit)*)³

The inscription has allowed scholars to date the sculpture in the year 155 AD, as well as it informs of the presence of Gaius Accius Hedychrus as the highest authority in the mithraic cult, the grade of Pater. His name also appears in other pieces found in Cerro San Albín, such as an altar dedicated by a frumentarius (MNAR inv. CE00188); the sculpture of a dadophor (MNAR inv. n° CE00655)

¹ JOSÉ MARÍA BLÁZQUEZ, *Religión y urbanismo en Emerita Augusta*, «Archivo Español de Arqueología», LV, 145/6, 1982, pp. 89-106: 100; MANUEL BENDALA GALÁN, *Reflexiones sobre la iconografía mitraica de Mérida*, in *Homenaje a Sáenz de Buruaga*, Badajoz, Institución Cultural Pedro de Valencia, 1982; MARÍA ANTONIA FRANCISCO CASADO, *El culto de Mithra en Hispania. Catálogo de monumentos esculpidos e inscripciones*, Granada, Universidad de Granada, 1989.

² *H. Hom.*, 4, 2; *Apollod.*, 3, 113; *Paus.*, 5, 14, 8; 8, 17,5; *Philostr. Jun., Im.*, 1, 10.

³ JUAN RAMÓN MÉLIDA, *Cultos emeritenses de Serapis y de Mithras*, cit., p. 454.

and the sculpture of Oceanus (MNAR inv. n^a CE00085). For this reason, researchers have regarded him as a key figure to study the development of the Mithras cult in the city.¹ Another possible explanation could be that the votive offerings had to have his approval or were offered by the Pater of the community himself.²

According to ancient literary sources and some artistic representations, the Mysteries of Mithras had seven initiatory grades: Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus and Pater; each one was guarded by a planetary divinity.³ The god Mercury was the deity of the first degree of initiation, Corax, giving the images found in the mithraeum of Felicissimo in Ostia Antica: there, the mosaic floor corresponding to the Corax grade shows a bird (possibly a crow), a ritual vessel and caduceus.⁴ The importance of this deity in the Mysteries of Mithras is supported by the discovery of almost twenty representations in Mithraic monuments, being the god of the Olympian pantheon more frequently found in this context and, in some communities, he is almost as important as Mithras.⁵ Clauss believes the phenomenon is even more noticeable in Germania and Gaul, since in these territories the cult was firmly anchored in local worships.⁶

The detailed study of the monuments with representations of Mercury in Mithraic context has allowed us to understand the uniqueness of the piece from Merida. The findings show

¹ JUAN RAMÓN MÉLIDA, *Cultos emeritenses de Serapis y de Mithras*, cit., p. 450; MARÍA ANTONIA FRANCISCO CASADO, *El culto de Mithra en Hispania. Catálogo de monumentos esculpidos e inscripciones*, cit., p. 37; JULIÁN MUÑOZ GARCÍA VASO, *El culto de Mithra en Hispania: caracteres específicos*, cit., pp. 834-835; MANFRED CLAUSS, *The Roman Cult of Mithras. The God and his mysteries*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 138; BEATRICE CACCIOTTI, *Culti orientali in Spagna: alcune osservazioni iconografiche*, cit., p. 164.

² MANFRED CLAUSS, *Die sieben Grade des Mithras-Kulte*, «ZPE», LXXXII, 1990, pp. 185-189.

³ Hieron., *Ep.*, 107, 2

⁴ Mitreo di Felicissimus, Ostia Antica Regio v, Insula IX, 1.

⁵ MAARTEN J. VERMASEREN, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, cit., nn. 821; 1048; 1089; 1176; 1178; 1179; 1210; 1211; 1257; 1258; 1284; 1317; 1377; 1381; 1496; 1755; ELMAR SCHWERTHEIM, *Die Denkmäler Orientalischer Gottheiten im Römischen Deutschland*, Leiden, Brill, 1974; VIVIENNE J. WALTERS, *The cult of Mithras in the Roman Provinces of Gaul*, Leiden, Brill, 1974; PETAR SELEM, *Les Religions Orientales Dans La Pannonie Romaine*, Leiden, Brill, 1980; WOLFGANG SPICKERMANN, *Religion in den germanischen Provinzen Roms*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2001.

⁶ MANFRED CLAUSS, *The Roman Cult of Mithras. The God and his mysteries*, cit., p. 158.

that 77% of them are sculptures in the round, illustrating the importance given to the deity in the mystery cult. We also note a slight majority of the seated figures, especially in Germania popular iconography. The chlamys and caduceus are the most common attributes of God, present in almost 70% of the representations and followed by sheep or goats (40%), the marsupius (38%) winged helmet (38%) the rooster (24%) and the tortoise (7%) in descending order.

The dimensions of the Hispanic sculpture of Mercury as well as its treatment as an image in the round, deserve special attention, as it may be indicative of the importance acquired this divinity in the Lusitanian mithraic community. We would also like to emphasize the fact that he is accompanied by the musical instrument already created, which is a significant detail, as the representations of Mercury found in mithraea always show the previous moment, with the tortoise at the foot of god or on the rocks.

That is why we need to emphasize the fact that the votive inscription, which links the monument unequivocally to the Mithraic cult, is in the shell of the tortoise itself (already transformed in a lyre). This detail might strengthen the initiatory nature of the divinity, his role as an introducer of the teachings of Mithras to the neophyte. As ancient literary sources inform us, the discovery of the tortoise by Mercury was a fortuitous and unexpected event that occurred when he was just a baby. The mention of his childhood might hint to the initial ignorance of his divine nature or a highlight of the god's own precocity. However, it could also be understood as a metaphor for those who are not initiated in the cult: a symbol of the ignorance that precedes the knowledge acquired when in contact with Mithras. This theory is reinforced by the fact that Mercury found the tortoise outside the cave, i.e. in the field occupied by the not initiated in the cult. Although this comparison may seem a bit forced, we must not forget that the tortoise appears in numerous representations of Mercury in Mithraic context, even as a symbol of the god himself in the altar found in the mithraeum 1 in Poetovio.¹ We would like to highlight another parallel: Maya's cave as a place of protection, a familiar environment, and the nature of Mithraic temples as spe-

¹ MAARTEN J. VERMASEREN, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, cit., n. 1496.

lea, underground shrines restricted to the followers of Mithras, to those already initiated in the Mysteries.¹

We believe that the designation of Mercury as ruler of the first initiatory degree reflects the traditional conception of the god as a protector of liminal areas: in this case, between the world of the Mysteries of Mithras and that of the uninitiated. Moreover, we consider that the lyre in this case is not only an iconographic attribute of the god, but it could also be a reference to the music as a tool or medium that provides access to a range of knowledge. The lyre allowed Mercury to receive Apollo's teachings, to be initiated by the god into the oracular powers. This notion could also be applied to the mithraic cult, where music, symbolised in this case by the lyre, could have played an important role in the initiation process. According to Celsus, there was an underlying music theory in worship of Mithras that would enable the neophyte to travel through the planets and stars.² This was based on the so-called doctrine of the harmony of the spheres, traditionally associated with the Pythagoreans. According to this, the seven notes of the musical scale were established in relation to the distances between the planets which correspond to musical intervals.³ For some authors, the lyre was conceived a symbol of the universe and its celestial music. Theon of Smyrna, to illustrate the Pythagorean precepts of music, includes a fragment of Phainomena by Alexander of Ephesus where we read: 'They all spread the harmony according to the sounds / Of the seven-stringed lyre, at intervals over each other / Such siren harmonized Hermes, / son of Zeus / The lyre of seven tones, picture of the world formed by divine wisdom'.⁴

Therefore, the chords and the harmony of the musical notes

¹ MANFRED CLAUSS, *The Roman Cult of Mithras. The God and his mysteries*, cit., pp. 42-48; Porph., *antr.*, 6; Stat., *theb.*, 1, 719-720.

² Orig., *Cels.*, 6, 21-22; BEATRICE CACCIOTTI, *Culti orientali in Spagna: alcune osservazioni iconografiche*, cit., p. 174; MANFRED CLAUSS, *The Roman Cult of Mithras. The God and his mysteries*, cit., p. 166; REINHOLD MERKELBACH, *Mithras*, Königstein, Hain, 1984.

³ Plin., *nat.*, 2,18,20; FRANCISCO MOLINA MORENO, *Quinteto para dioses músicos en la mitología griega*, «Estudios Clásicos», XL, 113, 1998, pp. 7-36; WALTER BURKERT, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1972, pp. 350-355; JOSCELYN GODWIN, *Harmony of the Spheres. A sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music*, Rochester, Vermont, Inner Traditions International, 1993, p. 4.

⁴ SH, 26.

would result in the order of the planetary deities governing the Roman week, which has been interpreted as a well-tempered sequence (Solis, Lunae, Martis, Mercurii, Iovis, Veneris, Saturni).¹ Celsus, while investigating the theory of the ascent and descent of the souls to the planets through a scale of materials and colours in the mithraic cult, believed that it might represent certain musical patterns, but did not delve into it.² In case of developing this line of investigation, it would be necessary to revise those mithraic monuments where planetary divinities are represented in the tauroctonies, the main icon of the cult. The sacrifice of the bull by Mithras is frequently accompanied by a pantheon of Greco-roman deities,³ a fact that has been explained by some scholars as an allusion to the concept of Time and life cycles.⁴ However, we believe that their presence could also refer to an itinerary, or a musical scale, that would facilitate the transit of souls through the stars. Roger Beck, nowadays one of the most important researchers in the field of the Mysteries of Mithras, states that the temples and their decoration conformed a sort of 'map' for the initiated, one which provided the means to travel to the plane of the spheres and the fixed stars.⁵ However, other scholars attribute Celsus words to the influence of platonic doctrines in Roman mystery cults.⁶ In any case, we would like to revise the role of music in the Mithras cult which has been traditionally ignored over the past years.

¹ REINHOLD MERKELBACH, *Mithras*, cit., p. 211.

² REINHOLD MERKELBACH, *Mithras*, cit., p. 214.

³ MAARTEN J. VERMASEREN, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, cit., nn. 693; 966, 967; 1128; 1284; 1727; 2202; 2338;

⁴ MANFRED CLAUSS, *The Roman Cult of Mithras. The God and his mysteries*, cit., pp. 158-167.

⁵ ROGER BECK, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*, Leiden, Brill, 1988, pp. 73-84; ROGER BECK, *In the place of the Lion: Mithras in the tauroctony*, in *Studies in Mithraism, Papers associated with the Mithraic Panel organized on the occasion of the XVIth Congress of the International Association for History of Religions, Roma, 1990*, Roma, L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1994, p. 29-50; ROGER BECK, *The Religion of Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 16-26.

⁶ ROBERT TURCAN, *Mithras Platonius: recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*, Leiden, Brill, 1975, pp. 26-51; 129-130; ROBERT TURCAN, *Salut mithriaque et sotériologie néoplatonicienne* in *La Soteriologia del culti orientali nell'Impero romano*, Leiden, Brill, 1982, pp. 173-191.

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