

Ritualized Body and Ritualized Identity:

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Being one of the Roman mystery cults, Mithraism was organized around particular initiation rituals, which all new initiates had to pass before entering the Mithraic brotherhood. Relying on Bell's concept of "redemptive hegemony," this research examines the aim of Mithraic initiation rituals in relation to cultic hegemony and the redemption promised by the Roman mystery cult of Mithras. This paper argues that how the initiates internalized the cultic concepts and doctrine through ritual performance and acquired a ritualized body and a ritualized identity. Here, I suggest that the Mithraic ritualization was a social process that legitimized the cultic hegemony within the ritualized bodies and sustained the hierarchical power structure and secrecy of the Mithraic brotherhood.

Introduction

Originally the Indo-Iranian god of contract, Mithras, appeared in the Roman world as the central figure of the Roman mystery cult of Mithras. The question of Mithras' origin has been the subject of Mithraic studies longer than a century.¹ However, the issue of origin is not the only difficulty in Mithraic studies. The diversity of extant primary sources generally complicates interpretations of the Roman cult of Mithras as well. While the evidence for the worship of the god in Iranian context is based on literary sources (texts and royal inscriptions), the primary sources for the mystery cult of Mithras in the Roman Empire are mostly limited to artifacts dating from the first four centuries CE, and some texts and commentaries written by Roman authors.² For decades, scholars have, however, interpreted the extant Roman artifacts only in the light of Persian texts and royal inscriptions.

Thus, the surviving evidence regarding Mithraic initiation rituals is very limited; the seven initiation grades and their hierarchical nature have frequently been discussed by scholars mostly in relation to the Mithraic mysteries and the cultic doctrine. Accordingly, the discussion on the Mithraic initiation can be grouped into two main questions: 1) what initiation rituals did the Mithraists perform? 2) How were these initiation rituals connected to the Mithraic dogma and liturgy? Indeed, the initiation rituals are remarkable in the historiography of Mithraism, since its modalities are crucial to grasp the cultic doctrine and to find ways to interpret the cosmological and liturgical concepts, which are expressed through the initiation rituals. As Roger Beck puts it, "what is remarkable about the Mithraists' action is not the strangeness of the ritual or its intent but the integration of the ritual and its sacred space of performance and stage set."³ However, more recent research on Roman Mithraism focused on initiation rituals in relation to the socio-religious aspect and the power structure of Mithraic

brotherhood rather than on trying to understand them as isolated phenomena in relation to the cultic doctrine.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore how the Mithraic initiation rituals prepared individuals for entering the cultic society, and how it sustained the hierarchical structure and religious authority of the Mithraic brotherhood. The main aim is to comprehend the Mithraic initiation rituals as an act of social performance in which an initiate internalized the Mithraic doctrine, distinguished himself from others, and ultimately acquired a new cultic identity as a Mithraist. In other words, I intend to look at the Mithraic ritualization as a process which indoctrinated the initiate through unfolding and reproducing the Mithraic theology and cosmology as well as maintained the social structure and the religious hegemony of Mithraic brotherhood.

Here, I argue that Bell's practice theory offers an insightful way to approach the issue at hand, and therefore utilize it to discuss how Mithraic initiates internalized Mithraic concepts and values through performing the initiation rituals, and how this cultic procedure sustained the socio-religious structure of Mithraic brotherhood. Practice theory focuses on what is done as a ritual and interprets ritualization as a productive process where an individual acquired a consensus on meanings and values through his participation in the ritual. According to practice theory, this consensus is the main aim of the ritualization.⁴ Viewed from this perspective, ritualization is a strategy by which an individual internalizes meanings and values, obtained a new ritualized identity and differentiates himself from others. For Bell, the ritual that produces this consensus is established by a reliable source, which she calls "redemptive hegemony." Bell notes that "Practice is: 1) situational; 2) strategic; 3) embedded in a misrecognition of what it is in fact doing; and (4) able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world,

or what I will call “redemptive hegemony”.⁵ It is through the concept of “redemptive hegemony” that Bell analyzes ritual power and power relations that are reproduced and localized through ritualization: “redemptive hegemony suggests that relations of dominance and subjugation characterize human practice. These relations, however, are present in practice using the practical values, obligations, and persistent envisioning –as both an assumption and an extension of the system– of a state of prestige within this ordering of power.”⁶ In this sense, redemptive hegemony as a system of power relations imposes a framework for action through a ritual performance that distinguished ritualization from other forms of social practice.⁷

Here, I begin by examining the Mithraic vessel from Ballplatz (Mainz)—an archaeological artifact that comprises one of the primary sources on this subject, and I move on to review the dominant interpretation of the data that the vessel bears of the Mithraic initiation rituals. Then, I return to Bell’s practice theory and attempt to define the aim of performing initiation rituals in the context of the Roman mystery cult of Mithras.

As mentioned above, material evidence that reveals the details of Mithraic initiation rituals are rare. As Beck notes, in the extant remains “Mithraists depicted myth rather than ritual, things done by their god, not things done by themselves as initiates.”⁸ Indeed, the Roman cult of Mithras focused on the mythological narrative of the god’s acts. The Mithraic cult vessel of Ballplatz, therefore, is an extraordinary source, as it illustrates some unique scenes of the initiation rituals as the imitation of the god’s action, and provides information on where initiates, initiators, and *mystagogues* are positioned in performing the initiation rituals. In this way, it provides an important centerpiece for the discussion of actual ritual acts and their performative background, values, and meanings.

Archaeological Evidence: The Cult Vessel of Mainz

The pottery vessel known as the “Mithraic vessel of Ballplatz” and dated to 120–140 C.E. was unearthed in 1976 at the Mithraeum in Roman Mogontiacum, the modern city of Mainz on the west bank of the river Rhine in Germany. The report of this excavation was published in 1994.⁹ Following this report, Roger Beck published an article entitled “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel” in the *Journal of Roman Studies* in 2000. Later, in 2008, Huld-Zetsche provided more details on the Cultic vessel of Mainz in her book *Der Mithraskult in Mainz und das Mithräum am Ballplatz*. As Huld-Zetsche notes, the cult vessel of Ballplatz represents seven masculine figures in two scenes, which will be treated separately below.

Scene A: The Imitation of Mithras’ Water Miracle

Scene A consists of three figures. The first man on the left wears a Persian cap (the cap of Mithras) and kneels, holding in his hands a drawn bow. The second figure on the right wears a short garment and gazes at the smaller figure with his mouth open. In front of him and in the middle of the scene stands a naked figure, smaller than the other two.¹⁰ One can think of the small naked figure as a Mithraic initiate, the seated bowman dressed in Mithras’ garb as the Mithraic father, and the last figure standing on the right as the *mystagogue* guiding the initiate throughout the cultic rituals.¹¹ Beck interprets this ritual as the replication of Mithras’ water miracle taking place in the real world in which the boundary between the sphere of the Mithraeum and the sphere of divinity breaks.¹²

Undoubtedly, the Persian cap of the first figure identifies him as a Mithraic father. The Persian cap is the specific headgear of Mithras, and also the sign for the grade father. Regarding the third figure, the *mystagogue*,

Beck argues that the details of the hand's gesture and his open mouth reveal some similarities to the iconography of the orator's handbook. He believes that this iconography refers to speech, not a specific version of the speech, but speech in itself: "It makes clear something that we might perhaps assume but could not otherwise know for certain, that the ritual has *legomena* as well as *dromena*, things said which match the things done."¹³ For Beck, the act depicted here is "the representation of reason through language."¹⁴ Thus, these gestures and the open mouth may recall the sacred linguistic performance and the significant role of the *Logos Spermatikos*—the reason which creates all things in the cosmos.

However, it appears that speech is not only the presentation of reason -*Logos Spermatikos*- through language, as Beck argues, but also a tool by which the Mithraic redemptive hegemony, as the reliable source of power in the Mithraic brotherhood, was deployed to create the cultic reality and the framework of action and also to impose its dominance through the process of ritualization. In other words, the Mithraic ritualization uses language to create the reality, to produce the cultic meanings and values, and to give a consensus on those meanings and values through ritual performance. Language is the tool that localized power relationships within the ritualized bodies, within the Mithraic social bodies.

Scene B: Mystagogue Indoctrinates New Initiate

This scene, which is bigger and placed on the opposite side of the vessel, depicts four standing males. The first figure wears a breastplate. The second man, wearing the Persian cap, holds a rod positioned downwards. The third person brandishes a whip, while the last figure represents a standing man who holds a rod positioned upwards.

Beck proposes that this scene portrays a part of

the initiation rituals, which trains the initiate in Mithraic cosmology. Accordingly, the two figures holding the upward and downward rods resemble the Mithraic torchbearers *Cautes* and *Cautopates* and imitate their role in accompanying the Sun who is identified with the third figure in this scene.¹⁵ Then, based on Porphyry (*De antro Nymphs.*), Beck points out the way *Cautes* and *Cautopates* - the second and fourth persons with the raised and lowered torches - are positioned in the scene and resemble the equinoxes, the gates through which the human souls enter and leave the world: "up and down, paired in spatio-temporal opposition: sunrise and sunset, moonrise and moonset, spring equinox and fall equinox, [...]and so on; hence, they signify oppositions of genesis and apogenesis, [...]and, esoterically, the descent of souls into mortality and their ascent into immortality."¹⁶

In this sense, the first figure here is the initiate into the cult, the second and fourth persons represent *Cautes* and *Cautopates* on their seats at the world's gates, and the third figure is *Heliodromus* (the Sun Runner) who imitates the role of the god Mithras in controlling the ascending and descending paths- the souls' genesis and apogenesis. Beck thus concludes that scene B depicts the stage of the initiation rituals, in which knowledge of the Mithraic doctrine is imported to initiates: "nothing, then, precludes reading Scene B of the Mainz vessel as a representation of initiates miming within their Mithraeum the cosmology and the destiny of souls ascribed to them in the *De antro.*"¹⁷ For Beck, performing this ritual in the reality of Mithraeum broke the boundary between the actual reality of the Mithraeum and the world of divinity,¹⁸ and enabled the initiate to grasp the Mithraic cosmology and to internalize the Mithraic beliefs and concepts.¹⁹

Recontextualizing the Initiation Rituals: Ritualized Bodies and Social Identities

However, while Beck's interpretation sees these scenes as the imitation of the god's deed

and ties the ritual performance to the Mithraic doctrine and theology, an alternative scenario may contextualize the initiation rituals in the perspective of socio-religious structure of cultic society, and to interpret the initiation grades in relation to the religious hegemony and power structure of Mithraic brotherhood.

In a somewhat controversial approach, Manfred Clauss suggested that the Mithraic initiation grades were indeed priestly grades of Roman Mithraism. Clauss uses a regional approach and argues that only 17% of the evidence from Rome and Ostia²⁰ reveal any details regarding initiation grades, in Danubian provinces only 15%, and only one record among more than 100 inscriptions of Dacia. According to Clauss, the archaeological data shows that the initiation grades did not concern all Mithraists but instead articulated a hierarchy that shaped the priestly system of the Mithras cult. For Clauss, from this interpretation arises questions of how the complex Mithraic cosmology was understandable for all initiates. In his opinion, this was not the case. Rather, Clauss states that Mithraic cult practice was not understandable for all initiates, yet was simple for the priestly initiates who already had a high level of knowledge of the Mithraic astrology and cosmology.²¹

Gordon, however, criticizes Clauss' interpretation and argues that if all the members who underwent the seven grades of initiation were priests, there would be no need for such hierarchical categories. In other words, it would have been nonsensical to create different titles for the members if they were all priests. Gordon argues that, contrarily, the Mithraic hierarchy incorporated a set of initiation rituals that indoctrinated new initiates (members) and established authority in the hands of those who were qualified to employ this set of rituals.²² Accordingly, the 'Mithraic fathers' would be the main characters of the cultic community.

Albeit, the question remains how the Mithraic

fathers used this set of initiation rituals to train the initiates and to legitimize their hegemony. According to Gordon, the key to answering this question is the body. Gordon's focus on the body is unique among recent works and deserves more attention, particularly because he takes Bell's practice theory into account.²³ Drawing on Bell, Gordon links the bodily experience of humiliation and subjugation to the promise of redemption: "the liberation is freedom from the power of death; humiliation is a necessary precondition to salvation."²⁴ Through performing the initiation rituals by the *Mystagogus*, the initiate experienced abasement and liberation, humiliation and redemption—which is exactly what mystery cults promised to their initiates.²⁵ Then, by emphasizing the role of the ritualized body as the mediator between the world of ritual and the world of everyday life, Gordon suggests that the bodily experience of humiliation ultimately tied the procedure of ritualization to the real world of cultic society and justified the hierarchical structure of Mithraic society and the power of initiators which was perceived as redemptive power. He mentions: "what the initiate subjectively feels is that this social order based upon deference and subjugation of the inferior is right and proper, indeed redemptive; and he responds by dedicating his votive in honor of Mithras thankfully in *honorem domus divinae, pro salute d.n.imp..., pro sal.Augg. nn., or num. aug.*"²⁶

Taking these issues into account, it is time to address the proper contextualization of the Mithraic initiation rituals, and the final function of these bodily rituals in the Mithraic brotherhood. Addressing this, Bell argues that the boundary between "the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human" is broken "in a few careful minutes" of performing ritual.²⁷ Thus, the Mithraic initiates experienced a special relationship with the divine realm in the minutes of ritualization and obtained a consensus on the cultic meanings and values which abstracted them from their former situation and identify them with their ritualized bodies. It was

through ritualized bodies that the initiates acquired ritualized identity and experienced the redemption promised by the cult.

Furthermore, the Mithraic society was a brotherhood, but, more importantly, a mystery brotherhood. Thus, it can be argued that the Roman Mithraic brotherhood's resilience relied on training individuals not only to understand the Mithraic meanings and values, but also to preserve the absolute secrecy about the cult. Therefore, the Mithraic brotherhood needed a systematic authority for controlling, handling and balancing its internal structure. This concentrated authority, which Gordon identifies with the Mithraic priesthood, is exactly what Bell calls "redemptive hegemony."²⁸ In other words, the Mithraic priesthood, through their authoritative social position, established a set of rules and practices - the Mithraic initiation rituals - which enabled them to legitimize their hegemony over the cultic society. In the context of Roman Mithraism, then, ritualization should be regarded as a process of socialization where the initiates became prepared to enter the brotherhood and experience the Mithraic redemption. In Bell's words, the Mithraic ritualization was more than just an individual process—it was a social process in which the Mithraic society reproduced its social structure and imposed.

Endnotes:

- 1 See Gordon 2017; Beck 2006, 28-30; Beck 2004, 3-23.
- 2 Such as Porphyry, Procluse and Origen.
- 3 Beck 2000, 164.
- 4 Bell 2009, 90.
- 5 Bell 2009, 81.
- 6 Bell 2009, 84.
- 7 Bell 1990, 310.
- 8 Beck 2000, 149.
- 9 The report of this excavation was published entitled "Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß" in the first volume of *Mainzer archäologisch Zeitschrift*. Later in 2008, argued
- 10 Beck 2000, 175.
- 11 Beck 2000, 149-50.
- 12 Merkelbach also believes that this scene represents the "Water miracle", but he does not further elaborate his thoughts or provides an interpretation. See Merkelbach 1994.
- 13 Beck 2000, 154.
- 14 Beck 2000, 153.
- 15 Beck 2000, 157.
- 16 Beck 2004, 90.
- 17 Beck 2004, 161.
- 18 It is necessary to mention that Beck's astrological-cosmological interpretation relies on Porphyry's essay (*De antro nympharum* 24-5) and mainly on the platonic discourse (See *The Republic* 10.614). In this sense, Beck sees ancient mystery cults as the production of the Roman culture in Antiquity. In Antiquity, ancient astrology was a quite common theme in religious and philosophical schools. Amongst these, Mithraism internalized ancient astrology in its cosmology and doctrine more than other mystery cults. See Beck 2006, 129-33; Beck 2004, 92-3.
- 19 Beck 2004, 164.
- 20 Half of the archaeological evidence comes from Rome and Ostia.
- 21 Clauss 2001, 132.
- 22 Gordon 2001, 253-4.
- 23 See Gordon 2009.
- 24 Gordon 2001, 260.
- 25 See Johnston 2004, 98-99.
- 26 Gordon 2001, 266.
- 27 Bell 1997, 78.
- 28 Bell 1997, 81.

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