

History into fiction: the metamorphoses of the Mithras myths

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Dedicated to Reinhold Merkelbach, whose explorations of ancient narrative and the mystery cults have always seemed to me profoundly well oriented, even when I would not follow the same path in detail.

This article is neither about a particular ancient novel nor about the genre of the ancient novel in general. But it is about story-telling in the ancient world, and about the metamorphosis which stories undergo when they pass through the crucible of religious invention. Its subject, then, is narrative fiction — narrative fiction as the construction of sacred myth and of myth's dramatic counterpart, ritual performance.

The fictions I shall explore are the myths and rituals of the Mithras cult. Some of these fictions, I shall argue, are elaborations of events and fantasies of the Neronian age: on the one hand, events in both Italy and the orient centred on the visit of Tiridates of Armenia to Rome in 66; on the other hand, the heliomania of the times, a solar enthusiasm focused on, and in some measure orchestrated by, the emperor himself.

What I am *not* offering is an explanation of Mithraism and its origins. In the first place, our subject is story and the metamorphosis of story, not religion. In the second place, I would not presume to 'explain' Mithraism, or any other religion for that matter, by Euhemeristic reduction to a set of historical or pseudo-historical antecedents. In speaking of the 'invention' of Mithraism and of its 'fictions', moreover, I intend no disrespect. I would use the same terms for Christianity (in which I happen to believe). By 'invention' I mean, in the literal sense, the *discovery* by its founders of the religion's fundamental truths; and by 'fictions' I mean the stories and the ritual performances in which those truths were expressed. I do not imply that the Mithraists wilfully

or naively misconstrued recent history. Stories from the recent past, I shall suggest, furnished Mithraism not with the substance of its mysteries, but with some of the themes, incident and coloration of its myths and rites.

As a first example of the transformation of narrative in the crucible of religion, let me offer what has already been proposed for the journey of Tiridates to Italy within the Christian story. Tiridates travelled overland in great pomp and at huge public expense, fêted by the cities through which he passed (Dio 63,1–2). Now Tiridates was a magus, he was accompanied by other magi, and the the land journey itself was dictated by religious scruple: as good Zoroastrians they would not pollute the element of water with their bodily discharges.¹ It was thus a notable ‘journey of the magi’, and, as Albrecht Dieterich pointed out long ago (1902), nicely positioned chronologically to serve as the matrix for that other tale of magi on the move, the familiar Nativity story in the second chapter of Matthew’s gospel.

Fiction migrates through religion along a two-way road. The flow of narrative traffic in the other direction, from the fictions of religion to the fictions of secular literature, has been plotted, most recently and most brilliantly, by Glen Bowersock. In *Fiction as History* (1994), Bowersock describes a burst of inventiveness, starting in Nero’s reign, which engendered new forms of literature, principally the prose romance. These works are full of marvels, one of which is the *Scheintod*, the tale of the ‘apparent death’ of one of the characters, usually the heroine. ‘The question we must now ask’, says Bowersock (1994: 119), ‘is whether from a historical point of view we would be justified in explaining the extraordinary growth in fictional writing, and its characteristic and concomitant fascination with resurrection, as some kind of reflection of the remarkable stories that were coming out of Palestine precisely in the middle of the first century A.D.’ Another daring suggestion is that we read not only Achilles Tatius’ story of the origin of wine (2,2–3) but also the last extant episode of Petronius’ *Satyrica* (141), the story of Eumolpus’ cannibalistic will, as plays upon the Christian rite of the eucharist and the myth of its institution (Bowersock 1994: 125–138). With the *Satyrica* we are back in the Neronian age itself.

¹ These magi were of course the genuine priestly article, not — *pace* Pliny (*NH* 30,14–17), our source for the story — mere magicians. Tiridates’ ‘priestly’ status (*sacerdotium*) is also indicated by Tacitus (*Ann.* 15,24).

This alchemy of stories is rich, strange, and rapid, and it seems to operate with a peculiar intensity in the latter half of the first century A.D. One of its products, I suggest, was the myth of Mithras, specifically the stories involving Mithras and the Sun. I shall start with the output as we find it in Mithraic myth and ritual, returning in due course to the postulated input from the history of the Neronian age. The output is first apprehended visually. As is well known, verbal accounts of the Mithras stories are lost, but a rich monumental art, with many narrative scenes, survives. Neither the input nor the output is in itself particularly contentious or ambiguous. The events in question and people's reactions to them are reasonably well documented by the historians Tacitus (*Ann.* 15,24–31), Suetonius (*Nero* 13), and Dio (63,1–7), and by the elder Pliny (*NH* 30,16–17); and the Mithraic scenes are mostly shown in multiple exemplars and are relatively easy to decipher at the literal level.² What is at issue, then, is solely the postulated connection, which is a causal one: that certain Mithraic scenes are as they are because certain anterior historical events, and the construction placed on them by contemporaries, were as they were.

As everyone knows, Mithras caught and sacrificed a bull. On the hide of the slaughtered bull Mithras, together with the Sun god, held a banquet. This banquet is the second most important scene in Mithraic art, after the so-called 'tauroctony'; indeed, the two scenes are sometimes sculpted on opposite sides of the same reversible relief, as is the case with this example from Fiano Romano, now in the Louvre (see below).

It was to replicate this banquet of the gods in ritual that the Mithraists held their cult meal, reclining on the side benches which are such a distinctive feature of all extant mithraea.

² Because the disposition of the scenes on the monuments varies, the order of the episodes in the story of Mithras cannot be reconstructed definitively (Beck 1990). Indeed, there was probably no canonical order. For recent explications by leading authorities in the main line of Mithraic scholarship, see Turcan 2000, 45–61, 95–98; Claus 1990, 71–110.

Fig. 1. The banquet of Mithras and Sol: reverse of a relief from Fiano Romano (V641,³ Musée du Louvre; photo: Chuzeville)



One of Mithraism's notorious paradoxes is that although Mithras is himself Sol Invictus, the 'Unconquered Sun',⁴ he and Sol appear in the banquet scene as separate persons feasting together. Moreover, the two share several other adventures. In another scene, Mithras ascends behind Sol in the latter's chariot (scene 'X').⁵ Then there are scenes in which the two gods are shown entering into a compact of sorts, either as equals with a handshake (scene 'W'), or as liege lord and vassal (scene 'S'). In the latter, Sol kneels before Mithras who brandishes some object aloft.⁶ There is also a scene, less frequent, of the two gods at an altar with pieces of meat on a spit or spits

³ V = Vermaseren 1956–60.

⁴ Recently, M. Weiss (1998) has advanced a theory that Mithras and the Sun are always distinct persons in the Mysteries. On this hypothesis, the formula *Deus Sol Invictus Mithras* refers to the two gods (the Sun God and Unconquered Mithras) in parataxis. Since we are here concerned with the mythic adventures of the two gods, it is unnecessary to make the traditional case for their unity in other contexts.

⁵ Letters refer to Richard Gordon's catalogue of the peripheral scenes on the 'Rhine-type' and 'Raetian-type' monuments (1980).

⁶ Interpreted either as a Persian cap or the haunch of the bull. On the alternatives, see Beck 1987, 310–311.

(scene ‘U’). All these scenes are well exemplified on the monuments here reproduced as figures 2 and 3. The first monument (fig. 2, V1430) is the upper part of the right-hand border of a lost tauroctony from Virunum in Noricum: the third, fourth and fifth scenes from the top are, respectively, ‘X’ (Mithras in Sol’s chariot), ‘W’ (the *iunctio dextrarum*), and ‘S’ (Sol kneels to Mithras). The second monument (fig. 3, V1584) is an altar from Poetovio in Pannonia: it displays on its front a conflation of scenes ‘W’ and ‘U’ (the hand-shake over an altar with a spit of meat).⁷



Fig. 2. Scenes from the Mithras myth: fragment of a relief from Virunum (V1430, Landesmuseum für Kärnten, Klagenfurt; photo: U.P. Schwarz)

⁷ Also a raven swooping down to peck at the meat.

Fig. 3. Scenes from the Mithras myth: altar from Poetovio (V. 1584, Ptuj, Mithraeum III; photo: Pokrajinski Muzej, Ptuj)



Mithras' weapon in the bull-killing is a knife or short sword. But for reasons which will soon be apparent, we should note his other weapon, the bow and arrow. As one might expect of a Persian god, Mithras is a formidable archer.⁸ On the left side of the Poetovio altar (fig. 3, above) his bow, his quiver, and his short sword are displayed together. On the right side the so-called 'water miracle'⁹ (scene 'O') is shown. This scene, in which Mithras wields his bow to elicit water from a rock (normally for a pair of suppliants), is a fairly common one. In the Virumum fragment (fig. 2, above) it is the sixth down from the top.

Two scenes of Mithraic ritual are also germane, for they show the activities of the two gods Mithras and Sol replicated in ritual by their earthly surrogates, the two most senior officers in the cult's sevenfold hierarchy of grades, namely the Father (*Pater*) and Sun-Runner (*Heliodromus*). We have already noted that the feast of Mithras and Sol was replicated sacramentally in the initiates' own banquet. Until recently this was the only Mithraic ceremony of mimesis known to us. Now, however, a pottery vessel from a mithraeum in Mainz has revealed two other such rites, each involving one of the two senior officers. The two rituals are displayed in separate scenes moulded

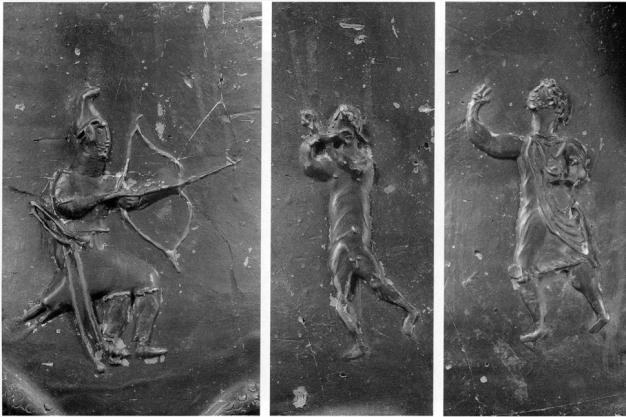
⁸ See esp. the hunt scene in the frescos of the Dura mithraeum, where Mithras appears as a mounted archer (V52); likewise on side A of the Dieburg relief (V1247).

⁹ The term is modern.

in relief on either side of this vessel.¹⁰ Since its pottery type was discontinued by about 125,¹¹ the vessel is one of Mithraism's earliest documents. Rituals do not spring up overnight, so the practices shown were likely in place in the early years of the second century. If I am right, they postdate the historical events to which they allude by a mere half century or so.

In the scene on one side of the vessel (scene A, fig. 4, below), the Father of the Mithraic community, clad like Mithras in Persian dress, imitates the god's archery in a rite of initiation by drawing his bow at the naked initiand (with the mystagogue as the third figure behind).¹²

Fig. 4. Mainz vessel, scene A: 'the archery of the Father' (photo: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Rheinland-Pfalz)



The scene on the other side of the vessel (scene B, fig. 5, below) shows the Sun-Runner in procession; he is the third figure in the file of four, and he is escorted by three other cult members, the one who immediately precedes him bearing a lowered wand and the one who follows a raised wand;¹³ an

¹⁰ The vessel was discovered in 1976 and published by H. G. Horn in 1994. See also Merkelbach 1995. I offer an ampler explication in Beck 2000.

¹¹ The pottery is dated by V. Rupp (1987: 54–9) to the first quarter of the first century. I am told that a somewhat later date, c. 120–40, is now under consideration.

¹² Compositionally, as was pointed out by Horn (1994: 25–28, Abb. 25–26), the scene is very similar to the frescos of initiation in the Capua Mithraeum (Vermaseren 1971: Plates 21–28).

¹³ The wand-bearers play the roles of the esoteric minor deities Cautes and Cautopates, whose function is to symbolize oppositional pairs. On the monuments their regular attributes are torches, one raised (Cautes) and the other lowered (Cautopates). See Beck 2000: 156–157.

initiate in breastplate, probably of the ‘Soldier’ (*Miles*) grade, leads the procession.

Fig. 5. Mainz vessel, scene B: ‘the procession of the Sun-Runner’ (photo: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Rheinland-Pfalz)



That the principal figure is indeed the Sun-Runner, imitating Sol (just as the Father imitates Mithras), is apparent from his attributes: the whip, with which the Sun manages his team of horses, and the rayed solar crown. The latter does not appear well in profile and is indicated only by the single spike at the top of the head.¹⁴ The intent of this ritual procession is less obvious than the intent of the Father’s ritual archery, and it would serve no purpose to discuss it here,¹⁵ for the esoteric ‘meaning’ would be a distraction. What concerns us instead is what we see on the surface, the performance alone as event or ‘happening’: a cult dignitary, with appropriate escort and accoutrements,¹⁶ parades in imitation of the Sun god.

¹⁴ The best representation of the Sun-Runner’s rayed crown is found in the panel for the grade in the floor mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia (V299): the attributes of each of the seven grades are displayed in a sequence of frames running, ladder-like, the length of the aisle. The Felicissimus crown is obviously a stage prop (it has strings for tying beneath the wearer’s chin), which drives home the point that performance in imitation of the Sun complemented telling stories about him in the medium of visual art.

¹⁵ I discuss the ritual’s intent fully in Beck 2000: 154–167.

¹⁶ The Sun-Runner’s escort alludes not only to the esoteric (see above, n.13) but also to the exoteric, the accompaniment of a Roman magistrate by his lictors (see Beck 2000: 165–166).

Through these scenes of myth and ritual there runs a common thread, the deeds and interaction of two sharply differentiated characters. The contrast is conveyed by garb. Mithras and his human counterpart, the cult Father, bespeak the Persian and, for a Roman, the exotic; Sol, in heroic nudity (not of course replicated by his human agent, the Heliodromus) and with expected attributes, signals the familiar home culture. A distinction, then, between ‘us’ and ‘them’; but a distinction without hostility or confrontation. Quite the contrary: feasting together, harmony; yet not parity either; for in one of the scenes Sol kneels to Mithras and is in some manner invested or commissioned by him.

This much for output. For input, we return to the story, the historical story, of Tiridates’ journey to Rome to receive his kingdom and his crown at the hands of Nero. I shall touch later on the ethos of these events and on the personalities of the protagonists. Two incidents, however, require immediate mention, for they are what brings Mithras and Mithraism squarely into the picture. First, at the coronation, Tiridates hailed Nero with the carefully pre-arranged formula: ‘I have come to you, my god, to kneel to you as I do to Mithras too’ (*proskynêsôn se hôs kai ton Mithran*, Dio 63,5,2). Secondly, at some time during this state visit, Tiridates, who was himself a magus and had brought other magi with him, ‘initiated’ Nero into ‘magian feasts’ (*magicis etiam cenis eum initiaverat*, Pliny *NH* 30,6,17).¹⁷ May we, then, relate in some way the various Mithraic scenes of investiture, compact and allegiance to the homage and coronation of Tiridates? Likewise, the banquet scene to the ‘magian feasts’ into which Nero initiated Tiridates?

In fact, scholars have long done so. In 1933, in one of his most thoughtful and elegant articles, Franz Cumont argued that what I have termed input and output are indeed related. But the relationship postulated by Cumont was not direct and causal. Since Mithraism for Cumont was an outgrowth of Mazdaism, incubated long before among the so-called ‘Magusaeans’, the Iranian diaspora in Anatolia, he assumed instead that the cult had already adopted Iranian and Mazdaist concepts of sovereignty and its conferral. Tiridates’ coronation conformed to the same pattern because Tiridates, too, was an Iranian and a Mazdaist. The coronation story and the Mithraic scenes resonate with each other because they are traceable to the same source in Mazdaism, not because the latter were generated out of the former. The same applies to the banquets. For Cumont the ‘magian feast’ of Nero and Tiridates

¹⁷ See above, n. 1.

was necessarily cognate to the Mithraic cult meal since both were manifestations of what at root was the same Mazdayasnian religion.

The Cumontian scenario would be hard to dispute, were the Mithraic myths and rites demonstrably in place in Roman Mithraism at the time of Tiridates' visit. But they are not; there is in fact no evidence for them, or indeed for any element of the Mysteries, prior to the 90's, a generation later.¹⁸ Consequently, a more plausible, yet more exciting, scenario may be entertained: that the scenes of myth and ritual were *constructions* on what happened in those years, fictions created therefrom; they were its ideological children, not its ideological cousins.¹⁹

What was it about the events and ethos of those times that could trigger a metamorphosis into the stories of a new religion? Space precludes rehearsing in full the accounts of Tacitus (*Ann.* 15,24–31), Dio (63,1–7), and Suetonius (*Nero* 13), so I shall highlight instead a few salient features. Consider first the scale and pageantry of events, their huge geographical sweep. The prelude to the climactic event of the coronation was Tiridates' sumptuous progress through the cities of the empire, the magian journey which quite possibly, as we have already noted, spun off into the Christian myth. This in turn was preceded two years before by a massive display of arms in the East, not in the customary destruction of battle, but in a splendid parade of the pride of the Roman legions and the Parthian cavalry as accompaniment to the negotiations for Tiridates' coming investiture (*Tac. Ann.* 15,29). It was an occasion, most unusually, of mutual respect between Rome and Parthia, between 'us' and 'them', expressed notably in the Roman general Corbulo's diplomatic courtesy and Tiridates' lively interest in things Roman (*Tac. Ann.* 15,30).

Tacitus (*ibid.*) gives us some examples of the questions which Tiridates put to his Roman host at a banquet. In a curious coincidence, one of them concerns the very practice which we see in the Fiano Romano Mithraic banquet scene (above, fig. 1). 'Why', asked Tiridates, 'do you light the altar in front of the *augurale* by setting a torch to its base (*subdita face*)?' That is precisely the action performed by one of the torchbearers in the Mithraic scene, though it occurs there in a mythical/magical world in which the fire is set at (elicited from?) the altar's base not by a torch but by a caduceus, and the firing of the altar is no longer constrained by physical realism: a stone

¹⁸ On the earliest evidence, see Beck 1998: 118–119.

¹⁹ For a scenario of the founding of Mithraism in the Flavian age, see Beck 1998.

structure appears to replace the presumed wooden original.²⁰ Mere coincidence? Or could it be that a story about a question asked at a banquet in honour of a Persian prince given by the lieutenant of a would-be solar avatar — the point about Nero will be made below — has somehow, in the alchemy of religious formation, metamorphosed into a detail in a charter myth about a banquet shared by two gods, one Persian, the other occidental and solar, replicated performatively in a cult meal presided over by a ‘Father’ in ‘Persian’ regalia and a so-styled ‘Sun-Runner’? Whatever the case with the detail, the more general causal relationship may well stand: that the story, true or false, of the actual banquet in the actual world played some part in the generation of both the mythic banquet and the performative cult meal. The ‘magian feasts’ of Tiridates and Nero two years later may not have been the sole item of historic input.

My postulate in all this, I emphasize again, is that in newly minted religions, of which Mithraism and Christianity are the prime examples in the Roman empire of the first century,²¹ *stories* about actions in our real world generate and give colour to stories about actions, both mythic and ceremonial, in the larger other world to which the religions offer access. The historicity of stories set in the actual world of specific time and place (Corbulo feasted Tiridates, Tiridates initiated Nero into ‘magian feasts’, Jesus feasted his disciples shortly before his execution ‘under Pontius Pilate’) concerns me as a student of history and of the history of religions in particular, but not as a student of narrative. In the present context, then, we do not need to ask ‘did these events happen?’ but rather ‘were these stories told?’ and, more precisely, ‘were they current when the cult myths and rituals were generated?’ The stories from the 60’s postulated here for Mithraism were certainly told: how else could they have survived in the sources? That they were current in the Flavian age, when Mithraism, in my view, was founded, is for the most part equally self-evident, although of course this or that detail might be an embellishment of our immediate source.

²⁰ We do not know the ‘historic’ answer to Tiridates’ question, for Tacitus does not record it; presumably, it would have been obvious to his Roman readers. In the mythic scene, the reason why the torchbearer ignites the altar base with a caduceus must of course be esoteric to the Mysteries; for an answer, see Turcan 1986. Here, however, our concern is not with ‘meaning’ but with surface changes to the telling or showing of an event.

²¹ From a different point of view, both Mithraism and Christianity are also very *old* religions, the latter a continuation of Judaism, the former a blended development of Graeco-Roman paganism and Iranian Mazdaism.

Let us consider next the aura surrounding the main players on our mid-60's stage: first, Corbulo as the chivalrous paradigm of Roman honour and practical effectiveness;²² next, Tiridates, magus and prince, exceptionally pro-Roman, 'in the bloom', as Dio reports (63,2,1), 'of age, beauty, lineage, and intelligence'. Thirdly, Nero: not of course the degenerate tyrant of the classical historians and the fearful Roman élite; rather, the Nero of public image, of popular imagination, of self-construction — in a word, Nero the showman. *Qualis artifex!* — and his greatest creation his own heroic self. The acid test of such inventions is their resistance to death. Nero is one of those very few whose celebrity, or notoriety, is so vivid and stupendous that it challenges the very fact of their own demise. Surely he can't be dead? He will return! *Scheintod* again. Historically, Neronian pretenders did indeed emerge from time to time — in the East, significantly (Suet. *Nero* 57; Tac. *Hist.* 1,2; 2,8–9); and on the supernatural plane a wild Christian visionary, John of the Book of Revelation, scripted Nero into his apocalypse in the guise of the Satanic beast.²³

Of Nero's showmanship, we should notice particularly its solar spin. Two incidents reveal how Nero was equated with the Sun god, specifically with the Sun as charioteer. On the so-called 'Golden Day' during Tiridates' visit, the purple awning protecting the theatre audience from the sun 'was embroidered', so Dio reports (63.6.2), 'with a figure of Nero driving a chariot, with golden stars gleaming all around'. Secondly, in another context, the aftermath of the great fire and the punishment of the supposed Christian arsonists, Nero paraded among the people dressed as a charioteer (Tac. *Ann.* 15,44). This too was in mimesis of the Sun, representing the triumph of divine over criminal fire. It is, I suspect, the historical precedent for the Mithraic procession of the Heliodromus, now known to us from the Mainz vessel (scene B: above, fig. 5).²⁴

²² Admittedly, as seen through the Tacitean lens (*Ann.* 15,25–31).

²³ Rev. 13. Nero or — better still from my perspective — an imagined Nero *redivivus* is the favoured candidate for the beast whose 'number' is 666 (13:18; Duling and Perrin 1994: 454–455, 458). J.W. van Henten's scepticism concerning Nero *redivivus* is germane only to the Sibylline Oracles (Van Henten 2000). I am grateful to Jan Bremmer for alerting me to this article during ICAN 2000.

²⁴ I argue the case in Beck 2000: 166–167.

It is hard to think of a time more conducive, in retrospect, to the emergence in Rome of so-styled Mysteries of the Persians, or of historical events and players more likely to metamorphose into stories about and rituals commemorating the adventures and relationship of a Persian god and a Sun god, stories and rites of a shared banquet,²⁵ stories of a shared ride in the solar chariot, stories of treaty and investiture. The only surprise is the inversion of precedence. In the historical story the would-be solar avatar is the superior of the Parthian prince. In the cult myth and the cult economy the Persian God rules supreme. There is, however, a curious precedent for the Mithraic dyarchy with Sol as junior partner in the situation which pertained when Nero, while on tour in Greece, left Rome and Italy in charge of a certain freedman. The freedman's name was Helios; 'and so,' says Dio (63,12,2), 'the Roman empire served two autocrats, Nero and Helios' — or, if one prefers, '... Nero and the Sun'.

And what, lastly, of the god's archery, mimed by the cult Father, as seen in scene A of the Mainz ritual vessel (above, fig. 4)? For that we might turn to a strange and overlooked episode in Dio's account of Tiridates' stay in Italy. At Puteoli Nero, through his freedman Patrobius, gave gladiatorial games at which Tiridates, in a show of honour to the latter, 'shot at wild beasts from his elevated seat and, if one can believe it, transfixing and killed two bulls with a single arrow' (Dio 63,3,2). This is not, I emphasize, the origin or the prototype of the Mithraic bull-killing. Mithras kills with a knife, not with an arrow; more important, this 'historical' story simply cannot carry singlehandedly, as cause to effect, the freight for that most central mythic act in the Mysteries. Nevertheless, I do suggest that the episode, or, more precisely, the report of it and the image of a Parthian prince shooting bulls from his seat of honour (*ek tês hedras*), contributed in some manner both to the

²⁵ There is an irony here. Historically, the 'magian feasts' of 66 were a failure. Pliny tells us that Nero found his initiation ineffective and so repudiated it. For Pliny of course this was all about magic, not Mazdaism, since in substance as well as etymologically he construed 'magian' as 'magical'. However, that it was really with things 'magian' that Nero lost patience is suggested by the story in Suetonius (*Nero* 56) that he once urinated on a statue of Atargatis, the Syrian goddess. Nero's gestures, though bizarre, were seldom pointless. Let us allow that Atargatis is here a stand-in for Iranian Anahita, the goddess of the element of water. It is hard to imagine a more dramatic and blasphemous reversal of Tiridates' 'magian' scruples against polluting that element by bodily discharge on a sea voyage to Italy.

(separate) stories of Mithras as bull-killer and as archer and to the ritual practice of *seated* archery by Mithras' surrogate, the cult Father.²⁶

Even as we have it in Dio, the story is highly charged and already so far into the world of the extraordinary that it challenges credibility (*ei ge tōi piston*). Here was a Parthian exercising Parthian skills, not at the margins of empire where Parthian archery symbolized alien menace, but as honoured guest in the empire's heartland and at one of its prime ideological foci, the presidential box at the games. There was no more potent place for the generation of authoritative images; nor, one might conjecture, could there have been an image more potent for nascent Mithraism than that of a 'Persian' prince, the celebrity of the moment, killing bulls with his astounding archery in that (literally) 'spectacular' context. Myth, as Kathleen Coleman (1990) has demonstrated, was the performative idiom of the Roman arena, where executions, to quote from her evocative title, were 'fatal charades ... staged as mythological enactments'.²⁷ From those games at Puteoli, I suggest, new myths were generated. They were generated out of the staging of the archetypal (to a Roman) image of the 'Parthian Bowman' in a context which vividly and violently reversed its moral charge from negative to positive.

Let us suppose, then, that Tiridates-as-archer in the actual world evolved into Mithras-as-archer in the mythic world and into the Mithraic Father-as-archer in the ritual world. Now traffic between the actual world and the worlds of myth and ritual flows in both directions. In fact, while the transmutation of history (or 'history') into myth and ritual is both rare and elusive, the reverse process is both commonplace and readily demonstrable. But it is only so in the obvious and perhaps trivial sense that myths are brought into the actual world every time the story is enacted in theatrical or in ritual performance. Among those re-enactments, however, are certain remarkable instances when, in a deliberate fiction, the mythic world is elided into the actual world and 'myth' really does become 'history'. A mythic narrative is then recognizable in an historical event precisely because the event was programmed and played out as such. The myth of Mithras-as-archer, I suggest, re-enters the actual world in just such an event.

²⁶ Cult doctrine, in due course, was to assign Mithras his 'proper seat' (*oikeian kathedran*) in the heavens, specifically 'at the equinoxes ... on the [celestial] equator' (Porphyry *De antro nympharum* 24).

²⁷ For the gruesome juxtaposition of mythic performance and criminal punishment, see the imaginary but entirely realistic programme of theatrical entertainments in Apuleius *Met.* 10,29–35.

The new ‘hero’ of our archery story is the emperor Commodus, and the venue is once again the arena — but not only the arena. Commodus’ feats in the arena are of course notorious, as is his personation of Hercules there and elsewhere (Edmundson 2001). But Commodus, as Edmundson documents, personated other gods, and the arena was not the sole venue of his creative performances. The *Historia Augusta* (SHA *Comm.* 9) tells us that ‘he polluted the rites of Mithras, when something is said or done there fictitiously for a show of terror, with a real homicide’ (*sacra Mithriaca homicidio vero polluit cum illic aliquid ad speciem timoris vel dici vel fingi soleat*). The figure of the Father as bowman on the Mainz vessel now reveals dramatically the means by which mimetic action designed for terror in Mithraic initiation could be perverted into ‘actual homicide’.

In the same passage we are told that Commodus also had some cripples dressed up as anguipede giants (by swathing them in bandages from the knees down) and that he ‘finished them off with arrows’. Here the location is presumably the arena. Now the battle with the anguipede giants is part of the Mithras myth, quite often represented among the side scenes.²⁸ However, it is there performed not by Mithras but by Jupiter, whose weapon is of course not the bow but the thunderbolt. To add to the complications, the story of disguising and massacring the cripples as anguipedes is also related by Dio (72,20 (Xiphilinus)), who sets it explicitly in the arena but with Commodus in the role of Hercules and his weapon the club, not the bow. Either, then, Commodus himself mixed and matched his roles or else the stories did precisely that on his behalf. From a narrative perspective it matters little which. The point is that Commodus or stories about Commodus relocated the archery of Mithras and of the Mithraic Father from the worlds of myth and ritual and re-actualized them in our ‘real’ world of space and time. Thus, fiction back into history — or ‘history’.

In conclusion, I return to the time when the stories of the Neronian age, in my scenario, underwent their sea change into the stories of Mithraism; specifically, to that passage in the epic of the Flavian age which carries our only testimony both to the story and to the image of the bull-killing Mithras in all of high classical literature, Statius *Thebaid* 1.720–721.²⁹ The reference

²⁸ Gordon 1980: scene ‘B’.

²⁹ The composition of the *Thebaid* predates virtually all extant iconic representations of the bull-killing. Statius’ allusion is thus one of the very earliest testimonies to both image and story. See Gordon 1978: 161–164.

comes at and as the climax of Adrastus' appeal to Apollo in various manifestations, the last of which is Mithras:

... seu Persei sub rupibus antri
indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram.

(... or Mithras beneath the crags of the Persian cave twisting the horns loath to follow.)

Notoriously, if one has in mind the standard image of the tauroctony, this is a misdescription, for Mithras normally grasps the bull's muzzle; he does not 'twist' its horns. Consider, however, solely the climactic hemistich: *torquentem cornua Mithram*. Given that *cornu/-ua torquere* (to 'twist horn') is a not uncommon poetic periphrasis for drawing a bow,³⁰ what would a Roman audience hear in that phrase, 'horn-twisting Mithras', and what might a Campanian poet, who at the time of Tiridates' fabulous feat of bull-slaying Parthian archery at Puteoli was in his teens or twenties, intend by it? Literally, of course, the 'horns' have been so modified in advance that the image of Mithras grasping the horns of an actual animal is inescapable. But that Statius is also playing with the connotations of 'horn twisting' as archery seems to me highly probable, especially when the ultimate referent beyond Mithras, Phoebus Apollo, is himself an archer god. It is not even necessary to suppose autopsy on Statius' part; only that rumour reached him of a princely Persian Bowman 'twisting horn' for the enthusiastic spectators at Puteoli and that the story worked on his poetic imagination, just as it worked on the mythopoeic imaginations of those who constructed the stories and rituals of Mithraism.³¹

³⁰ *ThLL* s. *cornu*, II,3,c; III,5,e.

³¹ This article was first presented as a paper to the International Conference on the Ancient Novel (ICAN 2000) at Groningen on July 27, 2000. I wish to thank Maaike Zimmerman and her colleagues for providing such a stimulating forum and, not least, that rarity in such ventures, a lecture venue where the visuals could be displayed to perfection!

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