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Mithras rediscovered. Notes on CIMRM 1938

Csaba Szabó, George Valentin Bounegru, Victor Sava

Abstract: The present study analyzes a recently rediscovered relief of Mithras Tauroctonos from Apulum. The relief was found in 1905 in Apulum (Alba Iulia, Gyulafehérvár) by Béla Cserni, the first director of the local museum. The artifact was shortly mentioned in some notable catalogues (CIMRM 1938, Popa 1978, 331, Sicoe 2014, 147, nr. 18), but without further details about its exact location and fate. Recently, the relief was found in the deposit of the Museum of Arad. In this study the authors present the adventurous discovery and rediscovery of the relief and its iconographic features, reflecting on the Mithraic material of Apulum.

Keywords: Mithras, Apulum, Dacia, Roman religion, Béla Cserni.

The present relief of Mithras Tauroctonos was a well known artifact, cited numerous times in the abundant literature on the Mithraic material of the Roman province of Dacia¹. First time described by Marteen Vermaseren in his monumental corpus (CIMRM 1938), his work was cited continuously without the picture of the artifact, known later as a “disappeared” object². Based on some recently found literary and photographic sources, the authors identified and rediscovered the relief in the deposit of the Museum of Arad. Due to the new data and the iconographic features, the relief can be analyzed in details and interpreted in its own archaeological and iconographic contexts, serving new details for the rich Mithraic material and religious life of Apulum³.

There and back again: the story of the discovery and rediscovery

The adventurous story of the relief begun in 1905, when Béla Cserni⁴ found the artifact in Marospartos (Partoș – Colonia Aurelia Apulensis) where it was used as a bench in front of a house⁵. The original location of the relief and the exact place of the house is unknown, but we can presume that it was in a sanctuary in the NV part of the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis⁶. The great number of the Mithraic monuments from Apulum discovered in the 18–19th centuries⁷ urged Béla Cserni, the pioneer of the archaeological excavations and museology of Apulum to study more carefully the cult of Mithras in Apulum⁸. For this purpose, he contacted Franz Cumont, the “patriarch” of the Mithraic studies, well known at that time also by the Hungarian scholarship⁹. Cserni’s letter from 31 July, 1912 presents eight Mithraic monuments from Apulum¹⁰. Most of them were already published in CIL or the Corpus of Cumont, but the nr. 4. was mentioned first time by him in this letter. Cumont replied in two letters to Cserni in 4th

¹ On the bibliography of the Mithraic studies of Dacia see: Boda, Szabó 2014, 110–115.

² Popa 1978, 331, Sicoe 2014, 147, nr. 18.

³ About the cult of Mithras in Apulum see: Szabó 2013a, 43–73.

⁴ He was born in Slovakian speaking territory of the Austrian Empire in 1842 as Adalbert Čierný. However, during his academic activity, he wrote, signed and manifested every paper and work as Béla Cserni. The Romanian historiography cite him nowadays as Adalbert Cserni, his contemporaries (Alexandru Borza, Virgil Cucui, Constantin Daicoviciu, Ioan Berciu, Cloșca Băluță) used his Hungarian name.

⁵ About the discovery of the piece and the first description of it by Cserni: Popescu 2000, 48–49, nr. 18. The original letters is accessible online at the Digitized Archivum of Franz Valerie Cumont with numbers CP235–236.

⁶ From the topographical maps of Béla Cserni about the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis and his activity in the Partos in the first years of the 20th century we can presume that the relief was found in the NV part of the Colonia. See: Moga et al. 2000, 169, fig. 1, Dreghiciu-Mircea 2006, 12, fig. nr. 5.

⁷ About the discovery of the votive artifacts of Apulum see: Szabó 2014a, 53–82.

⁸ About his activity see: Dreghiciu-Mircea 2006, Moga 2010, 5–11.

⁹ Franz Cumont had a rich correspondence with Géza Kuun too: Popescu 2000, 44–45.

¹⁰ Some of the monuments entered in 1903 in the custody of the new Museum as a donation of the Batthyaneum Library: Moga, Mârza 1993, 422.

September, 1912 and 29th September, 1912 asking for photos of the new monuments and sending his book about the mysteries of Mithras¹¹. In his response from 21^h November, 1912 Cserni mentions again the monument: “*Mithras relief what I found in 1905 as a bench in front of a house in Maros Portus (Col. Apul.). The face of Mithras is so well preserved, that I never saw something like that before. Severely battered*”¹². The picture of the monument sent by Cserni for Cumont is currently missing, but another picture taken by the Hungarian archaeologist between 1905 and 1916 solved the identity of the CIMRM 1938. The picture¹³ (Fig. 1.) shows the interior of the new lapidarium, established by Cserni and reorganized many times¹⁴. The relief stands behind of the famous machete of the “big thermae” of Apulum (in reality the only detailed plan of the *praetorium consularis*). From this, we can presume the size of the relief.



Fig. 1. Photo of Béla Cserni about the lapidarium of the Museum of Alba Iulia taken between 1905 and 1916 (inedit picture from the Archive of the Museum of Unification, Alba Iulia).

The fate of the artifact between 1916 and 1958 is unknown. It is possible, that in the time of the reorganization of the Museum and its inventorial system after 1947 the object was still in the Museum of Alba Iulia. The inventory number of the relief (205/II) could indicate this. In 1958, when Marteen Vermaseren visited Alba Iulia, the object was already in the Museum of Arad, where numerous Roman artifacts were transported in 1951¹⁵. His short report about the relief (CIMRM 1938)¹⁶ however is still detailed enough to identify the object. He probably had a photo or the oral report of Alexandru Popa

¹¹ Cumont 1910. See also: Ciobanu 1994, 247–250. Important to mention, that Radu Ciobanu suggested in his article, that the relief mentioned by Cserni in 1912 could be the CIMRM 1938, but he doesn't know the picture of Cserni from the lapidarium.

¹² Original letter: CP 236 (AB I/5). See also: Popescu 2000, 49.

¹³ The document was part of the exhibition organized by George Bounegru in May-June 2009 about the life and activity of Béla Cserni entitled „Muzeul se întoarce acasă” in cooperation with the „Avram Iancu” General School from Alba Iulia, the former seat of the first museum.

¹⁴ Moga, Mârza 1993, 428.

¹⁵ In 1951 a number of artifacts, outside Arad County, were recorded in the collection of Museum of Arad. According to the inventory register of the archaeological department one can see that Roman artifacts were brought in Arad from Gilău (inv. no. 12298–12319), Colonia Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa (inv. no. 12320–12325) and Porolissum (inv. no. 12326). Unfortunately it is not clear how these artifacts were brought in the collection of Museum of Arad, but we suspect that it was about an exchange between the Museum in Cluj-Napoca and the one from Arad. The Mithraic relief in question was not registered in the Museum of Arad and we have no documents on how and why the relief was brought here. However we can assume that in the context of exchanges between museums, occurred in the early 1950s, the relief in question arrived in Arad.

¹⁶ Vermaseren 1960, 279.

and Constantin Daicoviciu who were his guides in Romania during his stay in the country and Alba Iulia¹⁷. The precision of the dimensions indicate, that Vermaseren had exact sources about the piece, but never saw it¹⁸. All of the references which deals with the relief after Vermaseren cites his laconic report about the piece, without taking in account Cserni's and Cumont's letters and the photography.

Putting together all the known sources, the authors of this article found the relief in the deposit of the Museum of Arad. The size and iconography of the artifact corresponds with the description of Vermaseren and Cserni and it is identical with the relief appeared on the photo.

Description and context of the discovery

The relief is one of the biggest known representations of Mithras Tauroctonos in Dacia and the biggest of its type. The upper part of the relief is fragmentarily preserved, the edge and the framework of the relief – possibly represented as a simple, undecorated niche – is missing. Similarly, the Phrygian cap of Mithras and the bust of Luna in the right corner is fragmentarily preserved. The face and cloak of Mithras, the radius of Sol and some parts of the raven is beautifully carved and well preserved. The face of Mithras is represented in an unusual, frontal position, not turning to Sol, but staring towards the viewer – a very rare iconographic feature. His face – as Cserni mentioned in his second letter – is extremely detailed, one of the most beautiful features of the provincial art from Dacia. Even the cheeks and eyelids are carved.

Cautopates is entirely battered, similarly to the bull, who's legs and horns are the only identifiable parts. The inferior part is also severely damaged. There are no traces of the dog and the scorpion. Cautes appears fragmentarily, but with clear lines of his attribute and shape. The relief is unepigraphic. It is possible, that as many of the reliefs of this size, it never was marked with an inscription (CIMRM 1972, 1973) but in his actual condition it is impossible to determine.

The actual size of the relief corresponds almost perfectly with the details given by Vermaseren in his corpus: height 62–77 cm, length 101–104 cm, thickness 9–12 cm (Fig. 2 – 3). The original height could be around 80 – 90 cm. The backside of the relief is not carved, intended only for a frontal view, as the majority of the Mithraic reliefs¹⁹. If the relief was used as a bench in the 20th century it explains the severe damage of the central surface²⁰.



Fig. 2. The Mithraic relief (CIMRM 1938). Frontal view.

¹⁷ Vermaseren 1960, Introduction.

¹⁸ There are no other, existent reliefs of this size unphotographed in his catalogue.

¹⁹ There are few exceptions where the reliefs were rotatable: CIMRM 1083, 1896.

²⁰ The entire surface is severely damaged, which could indicate also the possibility, that the relief was never finished. However, the beautifully carved face of Mithras, his vesture and the elaboration of Cautes could suggest a later, post-Roman destruction of the monument.

The exact provenience of the relief is unknown. Cserni mentions in both letters that it was found in front of a garden in the territory of the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis. However, his excavations and works focused mainly on the North part of the city²¹ it is not sure, if the relief comes from this part of the city. On his first map appear some points also in the South part of the Colonia (nr. 33 – 34²²). The majority of the provenience of the Mithraic material from Apulum is uncertain. 14 Mithraic monuments were discovered surely in the Partoş (Colonia Aurelia Apulensis)²³, only four of them having an exact place of discovery²⁴. Several other monuments which have a less precise provenience could be discovered also in the territory of the Colonia. The presence of multiple altars and central cult reliefs indicate also the existence of several sanctuaries of Mithras in the Colonia, as Cumont and Cserni already suggested in their work²⁵.



Fig. 3. The Mithraic relief (CIMRM 1938). Backside.

Iconographic features and functionality

The relief represents Mithras Tauroctonos with the scene of killing the bull. Mithras is represented in his Oriental dress, with carefully carved cloak, fibula and folds on his shoulder. His belt is very wide and emphasized. He holds with his left hand the mouth of the bull, the standard iconographic position of the bull killing scene. Although, his right hand is missing, we can presume from the distance of his right shoulder and the back of the bull that his arm was slightly disproportioned and very far from the neck of the animal. The head and legs of the bull seems also very small and disproportional. Mithras Tauroctonos position is very unusual, staring on the viewer and not towards Sol. This iconographic “anomaly” appears very rare in the Mithraic narrative and could be interpreted as a “mistake” of the *lapidarius* or an individual interpretation of the worshiper²⁶. There are however some analogies from Dacia for this unusual position of Mithras²⁷. All of them are small or medium sized reliefs with very

²¹ He excavated the NE corner of the city wall in 1904 and identified numerous Roman buildings of the N part of the Colonia: Szabó 2014b.

²² Moga et al. 2000, 169. Fig. 1.

²³ CIMRM 1935, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1944, 1947, 1949.

²⁴ IDR III/5, 709, 720, Haynes 2005, 44 = Szabó 2013a, 65, nr. 25, Sicoe 2014, 148, nr. 22.

²⁵ Cserni 1901, 335.

²⁶ Mithras stare at the bust of Sol or – very rare in the Italian reliefs – on the bull: CIMRM 415, 534, 556, 587, 593, 662.

²⁷ Sicoe 2014, nr. 3, 42, 103, 104, 111, 116, 118, 129, 197, 232, 240.

rudimentary elaboration. The raven seems to stay on a small platform, separately presented from the cloak of Mithras. The size of the bird is disproportional and beautifully elaborated. The bust of Sol is well preserved, however his face is severely damaged. From the twelve radius, nine are preserved. The longest one is pointing towards the scene of Tauroctony. This motive appears also very rare in Dacia²⁸. Cautopates is totally missing from the relief, however his present is self-understood due to the space between the edge of the relief and the scene of the tauroctony. Cautes appears with upraised torch in his right arm, showing towards Mithras. His Phrygian cap is partially preserved, his face is battered. He wears an Oriental dress²⁹. His left arm is severely damaged, but it could represent Cautes with the *bucranium*, holding the head of the bull. This representation is very rare in the Mithraic iconography and could be a local invention of the communities from Dacia³⁰. In some cases, in the left hand of Cautes appears a *krater*, a *pedum*, a cock, a torch, a stick, a *pelta* or a bow. In Dacia Cautes most commonly appears with two torches or with a torch and a bull³¹. In our case, the left hand lies on his lower body, which indicate the presence of a *bucranium*. His legs are not cross legged, which is also a rare position for Dacia, representing only 15% of the iconographic analogies from the province³².

As a typology, the monument is a single registered cult-relief (Sicoe type I.³³). Most of examples of this type from Dacia and other provinces are small sized *ex votos*³⁴. Single registered reliefs of this size are usually represented in the *spelaeum* form (Sicoe 2014, nr. 39, 188) imitating the Mithraic cave. The fragmentary nature of the monument doesn't allow to analyze the form and the frame of the relief. If it was a simple, rectangular niche than it is the biggest of its kind in Dacia.

The large size of the relief suggest a central presence in the sanctuary, usually identified as "cult relief" or Kultbild in the classical Greco-Roman sanctuaries³⁵. As the latest studies proved, the role of a Mithraic relief – even if it can considered a central element of a sanctuary or just a decorative *ex voto* or altar – have different connotations and strictly integrated in a "star talk" or at least, a narrative with philosophical meaning³⁶. Even if there are analogies for the existence of two central reliefs and tauroctonies in a single sanctuary³⁷, in most of the cases there is a central representation of the tauroctony and the small ones are *ex votos*, decorating the walls or even, private houses – if we accept the existence of a private sphere of this cult³⁸.

In this context, the recently rediscovered relief is one of the six, large sized tauroctonies from Apulum. Two of them were found possibly in the same sanctuary (CIMRM 1958, Sicoe 2014, nr. 43³⁹) in the so called Oriental area of the Municipium Septimium Apulense. The statuary representation of Mithras Tauroctonos (CIMRM 1947) and the middle sized relief (CIMRM 1935) were found in the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis. The two other central reliefs (CIMRM 1972, 1973) were discovered before the 18th century, without a precise location. This could indicate, that in the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis were at least four sanctuaries⁴⁰. From the Municipium Septimium Apulense we know at least two mithraea now⁴¹.

²⁸ Sicoe 2014, nr. 39, 102, 108, 109.

²⁹ Veliciu 2004, 3.

³⁰ Sicoe 2014, 53, Szabó 2014c.

³¹ Hinnells 1976, 44.

³² Idem, 40.

³³ Sicoe 2004, 287.

³⁴ Sicoe 2014 nr. 6, 56, 62, 65, 67, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 87, 88, 92, 97, 178, 179, 180, 185, 197, 204, 208, 217, 229. About the role and functionality of the small size reliefs see: Gordon 2004, 259–283.

³⁵ About the problematic definition of cult relief, Kultbild and their role in the sacred geography of a mithraeum see: Nicolae 2011, 67–79, Szabó 2013b, 45–65.

³⁶ About the Mithraic star talk and its critics see: Chalupa 2012, 5–17. About the Mithraic narrative: Nagy 2012, 37–58.

³⁷ The case of Dura Europos (CIMRM 37, 40) and the discovery of Kaftal from Apulum: CIMRM 1935, 1937, 1947: Szabó 2013b, 51–55.

³⁸ Latteur 2011, 741–754.

³⁹ The two reliefs were found in different times. The discoverer of the second, fragmentary piece, Cloșca Băluță presumed, that the piece could come from the same spot, where in 1930 Virgil Cucui identified an important Mithras sanctuary at the field of Oancea: Szabó 2014a, 64–65.

⁴⁰ The function of the building excavated recently near the shrine of Liber Pater, cited in some works as a possible mithraeum is not yet clarified: Szabó 2014a, 69.

⁴¹ The sanctuary on the field of Oancea and the recently found mithraeum: Ibidem.

Conclusion

Lying almost sixty years unobserved in the deposit of the Museum of Arad, the Mithraic relief from Apulum was considered for a long time a disappeared monument, cited and known in the Romanian and international scholarship due to Vermaseren's short remark on the artifact.

In this article the authors presented the adventurous discovery and rediscovery of the relief based on the correspondence of Franz Valerie Cumont and Béla Cserni and on the photograph of the relief from the first lapidarium of the museum. The iconographic analysis of the relief shows a common type of relief but in an unusual size and elaboration. If the relief was ever used as a central element of the internal geography of a sanctuary, it must be a highly elaborated work. The existent features – such as the *bucranium* in the hand of Cautes – could indicate a local workshop and a provincial interpretation of the Mithras narrative, however the elaboration of the relief and some iconographic features are unusual for Dacia.

The size of the relief and its meticulous elaboration suggest that it was a central relief of a sanctuary in the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis, where numerous other Mithraic monuments were found. At the recent state of the research we can presume the existence of at least six sanctuaries in the conurbation of Apulum, making it one of the most important Mithraic centers in Dacia and in the Danubian provinces.

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Abbreviations

ActaArchHung	Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae. Budapest.
ActaHist	Acta Historica. Szeged.
Acta Siculica	Acta Siculica. Sfântu Gheorghe.
Aluta	Aluta. Revista Muzeului Național Secuiesc Sfântu Gheorghe.
Alba Regia	Alba Regia. Annales Musei Stephani Regis. Székesfehérvár.
AMN	Acta Musei Napocensis. Cluj-Napoca.
AMP	Acta Musei Porolissensis. Muzeul Județean de Istorie și Artă Zalău. Zalău.
ATS	Acta Terrae Septemcastrensis. Sibiu.
AISC	Anuarul Institutului de studii clasice Cluj Napoca. Cluj-Napoca.
AnB S.N.	Analele Banatului – serie nouă. Timișoara.
Apulum	Apulum. Alba-Iulia.
AÉ	Archaeologiai Értesítő. Budapest.
Areopolisz	Areopolisz. Történelmi- és társadalomtudományi tanulmányok Odorheiu Secuiesc / Székelyudvarhely.
ArhMed	Arheologia Medievală. Iași.
ArchRozhl	Archeologické Rozhledy. Praga.
ArhVest	Arheološki Vestnik. Ljubljana.
Banatica	Banatica. Muzeul Banatului Montan. Reșița.
BHAUT	Bibliotheca Historica et Archaeologica Universitatis Timisiensis.
BAR International Series	British Archaeological Reports, International Series. Oxford.
BAM	Brukenthal Acta Musei. Sibiu.
BMMK	A Békés Megyei múzeumok közleményei, Békéscsába.
CAH	Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae. Budapest.
Cerc. Arh.	Cercetări Arheologice. București.
CIL	Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum.
CIMRM	Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae.
CCA	Cronica Cercetărilor arheologice din România. București.
Crisia	Crisia, Muzeul Țării Crișurilor. Oradea.
Dacia N.S.	Dacia. Recherches et Découvertes Archéologiques en Roumanie, București; seria nouă (N.S.): Dacia. Revue d'Archéologie et d'Histoire Ancienne. București.
DissArch	Dissertationis Archaeologicae (Budapest).
Dolg	Dolgozatok. Szeged.
EphNap	Ephemeris Napocensis. Cluj-Napoca.
EL	Erdővidéki Lapok. Barót/Baraolt.
EM	Erdélyi Múzeum. Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca.
Isis	Isis. Erdélyi Magyar Restaurátor Füzetek. Cluj-Napoca / Kolozsvár.
JbRGZM	Jahrbuch des Römisch- Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz. Mainz.
Marisia	Marisia. Studii și materiale. Arheologie – Istorie – Etnografie. Târgu-Mureș.
MCA	Materiale și Cercetări Arheologice. București.

MFMÉ StudArch	A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve. <i>Studia Archaeologica</i> . Szeged.
MFMÉ MonArch	A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve. <i>Monumenta Archeologica</i> . Szeged.
OpArch	<i>Opuscula Archaeologica</i> . Zagreb.
OpHung	<i>Opuscula Hungarica</i> . Budapest.
Pontica	<i>Pontica</i> , Constanța.
PZ	<i>Prähistorische Zeitschrift</i> . Berlin.
RMM-MIA	<i>Revista Muzeelor și Monumentelor – seria Monumente Istorice și de Artă</i> . București.
Sargeția NS	<i>Sargeția NS. Deva</i> .
SlovArch	<i>Slovenská Archeológia. Nitra</i> .
Soproni Szemle	<i>Soproni Szemle kulturtörténeti folyóirat</i> . Sopron.
StudCom	<i>Studia Comitatus</i> . Tanulmányok Pest megye múzeumaiból. Szentendre.
ŠtudZvesti	<i>Študijne Zvesti Arheologického Ústavu Slovenskej Akademie Vied</i> . Nitra.
Stud. și Cerc. Num.	<i>Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie</i> . București.
SCIVA	<i>Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche (și Arheologie)</i> . București.
StComSatuMare	<i>Studii și Comunicări. Satu Mare</i> .
Thrac-Dacica	<i>Thrac-Dacica</i> . București.
VMMK	<i>A Veszprém megyei Múzeumok Közleményei. Veszprém</i> .
VTT	<i>Veszprémi Történelmi Tár. Veszprém</i> .
Ziridava	<i>Ziridava, Complexul Muzeal Arad. Arad</i> .