



# TYCHE

## Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte Papyrologie und Epigraphik

Herausgegeben von

Gerhard Dobesch, Hermann Harrauer  
Peter Siewert und Ekkehard Weber

Band 8, 1993

1993



## An Unusual Gift for Mithras' Sanctuary in Salonae

In 1884 Bulić published a small moulded altar from Salonae (inscribed surface measuring 28 × 26 cm), now in the Archaeological Museum in Split<sup>1</sup>, which was included by Hirschfeld in CIL III under the no. 8686 (= ILS 3943) and tentatively supplemented as follows:

*Soli Deo / Sex. Cornel(ius) / Antiochus / stellam / et  
fructifer(am arborem?) ex vis(u) / lib(ens) pos(uit).*

Hirschfeld added no explanation of the words *stella* and *fructifer(a)*. A different interpretation was proposed by the same author when he first edited the text; in AEM he suggested that the word *fructifer()* should be supplemented as *fructifer(um)*, a fruitholder<sup>2</sup>. He remarked that both objects must have probably been of silver or gold, not giving any clarification of the word *stella*. Dessau followed Hirschfeld's reading in CIL. In 1952, Gabričević attempted to give a new meaning to the enigmatic words<sup>3</sup>. According to him, the inscription gives evidence for Mazdaic elements in the religious practice among some Salonitan worshippers of Mithras. *Stella* should thus be understood as the Sun, an effigy in the form of a star with rays, whereas *fructifer(a)* would have been the Moon, which was believed by the Persians to influence favourably all vegetation on earth. Gabričević saw confirmation for his hypothesis — besides other possible parallels — in the relief from Močići in the Hinterland of Epidaurum (present-day Cavtat) on which the Sun is represented as a seven-pointed star. M. J. Vermaseren who subsequently reproduced the inscription in his collection of Mithraic monuments (no. 1876) was convinced by Gabričević's arguments and accepted his proposed interpretation, not adding any further remarks to clarify the unusual words. It should be emphasized, however, that there is apparently no epigraphical evidence that *Luna* had ever been associated with the epithet *fructifera*, although it was believed — and still is — that when the Moon is waxing, it stimulates growth and fertility<sup>4</sup>.

Hirschfeld offered no commentary on the inscription; his explanation of the word *fructifer()* is limited to a short remark only. This, however, is not satisfactory as there are no parallels for it; furthermore, he explained the word in terms of objects accessory to Mithraic cult practices,

<sup>1</sup> Fr. Bulić, Bull. arch. stor. dalm. 7 (1884) 133 no. 23. I would like to thank Prof. Gabriel Sanders who kindly read the text and discussed it with me.

<sup>2</sup> AEM 9 (1885) 10 no. 12: "Die Weihgeschenke sind wahrscheinlich aus Silber oder Gold zu denken; unter *fructifer(um)* ist wohl ein Fruchthalter zu verstehen." His reading was also adopted by Bulić.

<sup>3</sup> B. Gabričević, *Éléments mazdéens dans une inscription de Salone*, Vjesnik arh. hist. dalm. 54 (1952) 51–54 (in Croat. with summary).

<sup>4</sup> See I. B. Carter, *Epitheta deorum*, Lipsiae 1902 (Suppl. to Roscher's *Myth. Lexikon VII*); TLL s. v. *frugifer*. The association of the adjective with trees is most common. As an epithet of a goddess it is characteristic of Ceres. For Luna, however, see for ex. Hor., *Od.* 4, 6, 37–40 (*rite Latonae puerum canentes, rite crescentem face Noctilucam, prosperam frugum celeremque pronos volvere menses*), and Hieron., *Tract. de ps.* CIII 19 (CC 78 p. 186) (*Aiunt, quando crescit luna, crescere et fructus omnes, et quando minuitur, iterum fructus minui*). For the references I am indebted to Prof. Sanders.



not bearing any intrinsic connection with the content of the belief in Mithras. This is less likely, especially if it is considered that Antiochus donated the two objects *ex visu*. As Gabričević rightly pointed out, a certain connection should be sought between the two objects, and this is an additional reason for considering Hirschfeld's proposal as not valid. The interpretation advanced by Gabričević, however, although very ingenious, nevertheless seems to me to be complicated in so far, as it is not clear why *Sol* and *Luna* would not have simply been mentioned by name as elsewhere on inscriptions, especially if the dedicator wanted to avoid ambiguity. Moreover, the expressions *stella* and *fructifera* are not adequate contrasts such as would designate satisfactorily *Sol* and *Luna*. It rather seems that the supplement suggested in CIL should remain a starting point for a new interpretation.

The dedication was erected by one Sex. Cornelius Antiochus whose cognomen was a very common name in the Roman empire<sup>5</sup>, and who may perhaps have been of freedman descent, the Cornelii having been one of the most frequently attested *gentilicia* in both the west and east. He dedicated the altar, after a vision, to the Sun God who must most probably be regarded as Mithras himself<sup>6</sup>. Apart from the altar he donated — evidently to the sanctuary — two items which he described as *stella* and *fructifer*(); the latter abbreviation should most probably be solved to *fructifera arbor*. What do these two gifts signify and how could they be interpreted?

The torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates are sometimes associated with the symbols of a bull's head and a scorpion, which represented — as is explicitly known from certain monuments of the Mithraic cult — the constellations of *Taurus* and *Scorpius*. The bull's head is usually portrayed in close association with Cautes, whereas the scorpion is represented as belonging to the figure of Cautopates. The most interesting figural representations in this sense are the statues of Cautopates and Cautes from the Mithraeum in Sarmizegetusa: Cautopates is holding a scorpion in his left hand (CIMRM 2120), while Cautes is holding a bull's head (CIMRM 2122). A possible and, indeed, very plausible explanation of the association of these symbols with the torchbearers is that they symbolize the equinoxes, Cautes would thus stand for the spring equinox, Cautopates for the autumn equinox<sup>7</sup>. Several representations of the tauroctony seem to suggest that it had taken place during the astronomical situation which had been created when the equinoxes were in *Taurus* and *Scorpius* — the torchbearers symbolizing the equinoxes<sup>8</sup>.

A clue to interpretation of the Salonitan dedication is provided by an interesting marble relief from Rome, now lost (CIMRM 335), on which two trees behind the bull are represented. On the right side, a tree is depicted in leaf, evidently symbolizing the spring; this is additionally supported by the fact that Cautes' raised torch and bull's head are portrayed next to the tree. The tree on the left side is depicted full of fruit, implying most probably the autumn. Next to it, Cautopates' lowered torch and the scorpion are portrayed. Trees were, within various religious contexts, ancient symbols of life which is born and grows and which, inevitably, dies<sup>9</sup>. Alternatively, the tree in fruit could signify the *arbor vitae* which manifested itself in terms of

<sup>5</sup> H. Solin, *Die griechischen Personennamen in Rom. Ein Namenbuch I*, Berlin, New York 1982, 201–206; III 1357; see also G. Alföldy, *Die Personennamen in der römischen Provinz Dalmatia* (Beiträge zur Namenforschung Bh. 4), Heidelberg 1969, 151.

<sup>6</sup> P. Selem, *Recherches récentes concernant la présence mithriaque en Dalmatie*, Historijski zbornik 39 (1986) 193 (in Croat. with summary); M. Clauss, *Mithras, Kult und Mysterien*, München 1990, 153–156. See also R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Königstein/Ts. 1984, 24–25 and 201, and M. Clauss, *Sol Invictus Mithras*, Athenaeum 78 (1990) 423–450.

<sup>7</sup> D. Ulansey, *The Origin of the Mithraic Mysteries*, Oxford 1989, 63–65.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> M. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions*, Paris 1970<sup>2</sup>, 231ff.

the Mithraic cult in two forms, either as the *Frugifera* or as the *Genetrix*<sup>10</sup>. *Frugifera* is depicted only rarely on reliefs, for example on those of Heddernheim (CIMRM 1083), Dieburg (CIMRM 1247), Rükingen (CIMRM 1137), Osterburken (CIMRM 1292), in the last two cases having been combined with the *Genetrix* motif. Nonetheless, this seems to be a less likely explanation for the Salonitan dedication, in so far, as it would not be clear what the role of *stella* could be in association with the *fructifera* and what meaning should actually be ascribed to *stella*.

In view of what has just been said, the explanation of the Salonitan dedication seems to be the following: *stella* should most probably be interpreted as representing the constellation of *Scorpius* — or perhaps one of the stars within it<sup>11</sup> — since it is associated with the *frugifera arbor*, the tree in fruit. Both symbolized the autumn equinox. Cautopates' lowered torch, as an additional symbol, was not needed as the message was clear enough without it. The symbols appear only very rarely in the Mithraic iconography. Study of the Mithraic monuments is not always successful and in the cosmogonic myth of the supreme Sun God Mithras a number of details which were certainly important for Mithras' worshippers lack clear definition. The scarce evidence, nevertheless, indicates that *stella* and *fructifera* from the Salonitan inscription may not be among them.

It remains to be explained in what form Sex. Cornelius Antiochus donated his gift to the sanctuary. It first seemed to me that two options could be considered. It could theoretically be imagined that the scene in question was depicted on the main relief representing the tauroctony, somewhere behind the bull. The dedicator would have contributed his part of the cost of the main relief, in the same manner as later members of Christian communities each contributed a certain amount of money for a specified number of square metres of the mosaic floor of their church. From the dedication on the altar, each member's share would have been made known to the other members of the Mithraic community. This suggested explanation, however, seems not to be valid as the two objects were donated *ex visu*. Thus only the second possibility should seriously be considered. A sculpture, most probably of precious metal, representing a tree in fruit and the constellation of *Scorpius*, was fixed on top of the altar bearing the explanatory dedication. If comparative material is limited to the region of western Illyricum only, an altar may be cited from Hrastnik on the triple border between Italic *regio X*, Noricum, and Pannonia, erected by a customs employee, Eutyches, who donated to the Invincible God *aram cum signo Lunae* (CIL III 5121 and p. 2198 = CIMRM 1484)<sup>12</sup>.

Inštitut za arheologijo  
ZRC SAZU  
Novi trg 5  
Ljubljana

Marjeta Šašel Kos

<sup>10</sup> L. A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* (EPRO 11), Leiden 1968, 366–367.

<sup>11</sup> See a rather complicated explanation proposed by R. Beck, *Cautes and Cautopates: Some Astronomical Considerations*, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2 (1977) 1–17.

<sup>12</sup> The inscription is preserved in the National Museum of Ljubljana, inv. no. 23, the text reading: *D(eo) I(nvicto) M(ithrae) / Eutyches / Iulior(um) / c(onductorum) p(ortorii) p(ublici?) ser(vus contra)scr(iptor) / stationis Boiod(urensis) / ex vik(ario) Benigni vil(ici) / stat(ionis) Atrantin(ae) / aram cum signo / Lunae / ex voto posuit / p(r)r(s) T. Cla(udii) Senil<i>.*