

RLB284 – Hellenistic Religions: Cosmology, Community, Cognition  
autumn 2010

## Weekly paper 10

### Mithra and Odin: Brothers in arms?

Reading: Fischer, S. 2005. *Roman imperialism and runic literacy : the westernization of Northern Europe (150-800 AD)*. Uppsala.

Kaliff, A. – Sundqvist, O. 2004. *Oden och Mithraskulten. Religiös ackulturation under romersk järnålder och folkvandringstid*. Occasional Papers in Archeology 35, Uppsala.

In their study, *Oden och Mithraskulten*, Kaliff and Sundqvist work with the old idea of south-eastern origin of the cult of Odin and the possible influences from Mithraism. According to this idea, the intensive contacts and "cultural exchanges" on the Rhine Limes during the 1st - 4th century led (among other things) to a "religious acculturation" of the cults of the Roman military (Mithraism being one of the most favourite) and those of the Germanic warrior elites. According to Kaliff and Sundqvist were both the cult of Mithras and the cult of Odin ideologically based in close-knit brotherhoods, valuing conformity, loyalty and devotion to one's leader. In this way, both the Mithraistic cells and the war-bands consecrated to Odin (such as the Berserker and Ulfhednar) represent the "old Indo-European Männerbund". Another similarity they see in Mithras' and Odins function as a "saviour" or "psychopompos", escorting the souls to the afterlife.

Similarities in iconography are further analysed, as a material evidence of the assumed influences. Animals appearing in Odinic context are similar to those, that appear on the tauroctony (snake, wolf/dog) or are otherwise associated with Mithraism (raven - being one of the initiation grades). Most attention is focused on the C-bracteates, golden pendants depicting a quadruped animal and a human-like figure, often represented only by a head above the animal. Other stylized animals are occasionally added, most commonly a bird (raven?). The animal and the human figure are usually interpreted as a rider on a horse and the overall image as a depiction of Odin. Identification of the large animal as a horse is not always accepted, since the form is highly stylized and from its head some curved, horn-like objects often protrude. Since these cannot be ears

(depicted at the back of the head), the animal is sometimes identified as a goat or a buck (in fact, a reindeer calf may have simple unbranched antlers that look like horns), but usually not as a bull, since it has no prominent place in Norse mythology.

Since the human figure appears to be standing behind the animal and its hand sometimes reaches for the animal's neck or flank, Kaliff and Sundqvist consider the image to be inspired by the tauroctony and the animal being originally a bull. They do not doubt that the human figure is Odin or other Nordic deity and that the picture is depicting a Nordic mythical motive. However, they consider the iconography to be inspired by Germanic warrior-elites, returning from their service in the Roman military, where they encountered and some of them could even be initiated into the cult of Mithras.

Svante Fischer (*Roman imperialism and runic literacy...*, 99-102) does not share this opinion and warns against attributing too much agency to Mithraism in relation to the North. He considers the recent attention Mithraism received in Nordic archaeology to be disproportionate and the new theories to be not adding to a verifiable causality. In fact, in his eyes, Mithraism failed to become a cohesive ideological factor for the Romanitas and was not accepted by recruits of Germanic origin, who instead formed a bond directly to the person of the Emperor through the imperial cult. By the time when Germanic warriors formed almost the entire Roman military, most of the high-ranking Mithraists were already dead and the remaining cells became isolated and strongly bound to local authorities. There is little evidence, that Mithraism ever became anything more than an "abstract cosmic doctrine" to the outsiders.

Indeed the theory of mithraistic influences as presented by Kaliff and Sundqvist has many flaws. It is a fact that the iconography of bracteates was influenced by Roman templates, mostly portraits of emperors from coins, but all the animals and other features that should be inspired by tauroctony could be more easily explained by other means. The central figure is more of a portrait rather than an agent interacting with the animal below, in the few cases where the hands are visible their position differs from those used in tauroctony and position of legs, used by Mithras to keep the bull down is never similar (in most cases legs are not visible at all). Even if this picture would be one of a sacrifice, no link to Mithraism is needed since bull was a universal sacrificial animal, in this case the figure would probably represent the sacrificer - the king or chieftain, being in a similar position as the Roman emperor in the imperial cult. There are also significant distances between the Rhine Limes mithraea and the bracteates of Northern Europe, not only spacial but temporal as well, since the bracteates appear mostly in the 5th - 7th centuries. Too long after the decline of Mithraism for the tauroctony to be simply "remembered" or transmitted through non-durable materials, only to appear again "in gold" later.

This "iconographic" theory really doesn't do the trick, and I think Fischer is right in his

scepticism about mutual influences between Mithraism and old Germanic religion(s). What might be interesting and should be explored further are the similarities, that are more independent from cultural contacts, those that stem from similar social conditions (I consider the "männerbund" to be a universal type of group, not only "Indo-European", the contemporary Chinese Triades and Japanese Yakuza for example form similar cells with similar initiatory rites and vows taken, where Guan Di is taken as a witness, a guarantor of the brotherly code and a divine punisher of anyone who would break it, in this sense I believe his function to be similar to that of Mithras) and from universal human cognition (adherence to imagistic mode of religiosity).