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The dress and colour of Mithraism: Roman or Iranian garments?

As a result of the rise of Eastern cults, dress and colour became an identity trait in the sphere of religion, with Mithras dressed in Asian style, in Persian trousers, a star-spangled mantle and a Phrygian cap, combined with all the symbolism of the colours which we can also interpret from the iconography of Mithraism. The aim of our study of the dress and colours of Mithraism is to determine whether in the context of the Roman Empire, the polychromatic ritual dress of Mithras was Roman, Iranian or Phrygian. In short, through the dress of Mithraism we set out to study the construction process of Roman identity on one hand and on the other hand the ways of representing otherness.

In reflecting on the hermeneutic exercise as applied to the study of Mithraic iconography, R. Turcan wrote: “Les images sont un langage dont les éléments sont faits pour être compris en fonction d'un vocabulaire commun au sculpteur et au spectateur de son oeuvre, en l'occurrence au responsable et aux fidèles de la communauté mithriaque”.¹ In view of the paucity of relevant information in the literary sources on the dress and colours of Mithraism it is essential to interpret the iconographic sources and attempt to guess whether both dress and colour hid a symbolic meaning important for the worshippers of the Mithraic communities, for as R. Turcan pointed out, “l'art mithriaque est comme un livre d'images dont le texte serait perdu”² and the Mithraic iconography is like a “Bibles de Pierre”.³

J. Alvar has also drawn attention to the importance of examining, in the mysteries in general, something that has hitherto been neglected – the significance of colours and textures, i.e. sensory perception.⁴ At all events, in the absence of detailed accounts of the “Mysteria Mithrae” or the dress of the god or his worshippers in the literary sources, except for some occasional mentions, such as the one by Lucian about Mithras's dress,⁵ of a kaftan and a tiara, we have to make do with an attempt to decipher the latent meaning in the Mithraic iconography, though without losing sight of the provisional and hypothetical nature of such an interpretation. We can find some help, however, in

a comparative study of the Iranian (Avestan) texts – not much more eloquent than the classical sources, by the way –, and through the iconography of dress among Iranian peoples in Antiquity, a source that is of considerable use in determining whether the dress of the god himself and his assistants, the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates, or the dress of his worshippers, was either typically Roman, or borrowed from the Iranian⁶ or Phrygian culture, or simply the reflection of a stereotyped, generic way of representing an Oriental in the Roman world.

An examination of the dress and colour of Mithraism forces us to take sides in the heated controversy over the Oriental origin of the cult and its rites between, on the one hand, the traditional interpretation upheld by the Belgian scholar F. Cumont and the “école iranisante”,⁷ with L. A. Campbell as its foremost representative, which defines Mithraism as “la forme romaine du mazdéisme or a parsisme hellénisé”,⁸ and, on the other hand, the Occidentalist interpretation, put forward by S. Wikander,⁹ R. L. Gordon¹⁰ and M. Clauss,¹¹ among others, which views Mithraism as a genuine creation of the Roman world, especially in the Danubian territories, in Rome or in Ostia, although this polemic could be resolved with R. Turcan's sensible statement that “si Mithra est iranien, le mithriacisme est gréco-romain”,¹² or with M. Clauss that Mithraism was an independent creation in Roman context.¹³

Nor, in the study of the dress and colour of Mithraism, can we disregard the interpretations given by D. Ulansey, J. R. Hinnells, R. L. Gordon, R. Beck and all those authors who, to a greater or lesser extent, have taken their distance from Cumont's hypothesis concerning the Iranian origin of Roman Mithraism and developed the “new astronomical interpretation of the tauroctony”, an interpretation first put forward by K. B. Stark in 1869, which sees in Mithraic iconography a “cosmological code”,¹⁴ and which should also be considered in relation to the latent symbolism in the colour and dress motifs.

But in a study of the construction process of Roman identity through dress in general, and at a colloquium on “Dress and Religious Identities in the

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Roman Empire” in particular, it is imperative, when looking at the dress and colour of Roman Mithraism, to try to answer the question formulated by R. Beck concerning Mithraism in general: how much is there that is “genuinely Iranian” and how much is there that is “reinvented Perserie”¹⁵ behind the epithet “Persian”? This set of mental tools – “Perserie” – had already arisen before in the forms of representation of Persian Achaemenid otherness in the Greek “imaginaire”.¹⁶ It consisted in a psychological mechanism of appropriation prior to the domination of the eternal border enemy – a defence mechanism that A. Mastrocinque has defined for the Roman world in a revealing way: “Le culte du dieu persan et la parenté entre Romains et Perses posaient les prémisses de l’extension du droit romain sur l’Iran”¹⁷ and a process the reverse side of which were the forms of representation of Parthian and Sassanian otherness,¹⁸ in which the Asian always appeared subjugated, defeated, dressed in barbarian and feminine fashion (“laxae vestes”, “fluxa velamenta”), combined, moreover, with the barbarian garment ‘par excellence’ in the classical imagination: long trousers.¹⁹

In the process of the construction of Roman identity through religion, dress must have been a decisive factor, for, as R. M. Schneider has pointed out: “From antiquity to the present day dress codes have played a key role in visualizing the difference between West and East, friend and foe”.²⁰ In Roman representations of an Oriental, the posture, the dress, the physiognomy and the hairstyle might reflect an ethnic archetype such as the Parthians and Sassanians, or simply a generic “Oriental”, the last-mentioned usually represented as a good-looking youth with long hair and Eastern dress, almost always with a Phrygian cap (πῆλος) and barbarian long trousers (ἀναζυρίδες). In Roman art, the representation of all Eastern peoples was adapted to fit this archetype of the Oriental. This applies to the Parthians and later the Sassanians, although they were both always represented as vanquished,²¹ the Trojans Ganymedes and Paris, the Persians, the castrated “Galli”, many of the representations being of handsome servants and cupbearers, sometimes with the function of table legs, and divine personages such as Attis, Orpheus and, of course, the “deus pileatus” Mithras and his companions Cautes

and Cautopates.²² Unlike the Parthians and the Sassanians, these last-mentioned were never depicted in a humiliating, inferior or submissive position. But this discovery is not new, as F. Cumont anticipated it by a century when, writing about the creation of an archetypal image, of an Orientalising cliché that found in dress its most eloquent feature for representing otherness, he remarked: that the dress of Mithra couldn’t be too accurate to the Persian original model.²³ And it might be advisable to try to put an end to the lack of precision in the use of the terms Persian, Phrygian and Oriental dress in Mithraic historiography.

The hypothesis proposed by D. Ulansey²⁴ is another of those in which Mithras is represented as the archetypal figure of an Oriental. Basing himself on F. Saxl,²⁵ Ulansey believes he has discovered the model for the iconographic representation of Mithras in the Perseus of the Greek world, represented in his constellation as the figure of a young hero armed with a dagger and also wearing a Phrygian cap. According to what we read in Herodotus, Perseus was a hero linked in the Greek imagination with Persia and the Persians as the result of a similar exercise to the one the Romans are supposed to have performed with Mithras, whom they regarded as of Iranian origin.²⁶ As argued by R. Turcan this would also seem to follow from the expression “Persei sub rupibus antri” in Statius’s poem “Thebais”, which it is “la plus ancienne attestation littéraire d’une iconographie mithraïque as tauroctones”.²⁷ Although the passage in question makes no mention of the god’s dress, it does reveal, as R. Turcan has pointed out, that the image of Mithras was already present at that time in the imagination of the Roman epic poet’s audience or readership. Moreover, Statius’s scholiast, Lactantius Placidus, noted that the Persians were the first to worship the Sun in caves, a Sun which according to the scholiast appears “in Persian dress with a tiara” (“Persico habitu cum tiara”),²⁸ in other words, like Mithras with his Oriental “pileus”.²⁹

However, F. Cumont was the first one to determine, thanks precisely to the aid of the god’s Phrygian dress, where and when Mithras’ image was conceived, Orientalising or Iranianising the popular iconography of the Νίκη βουθυτοῦσα. According to Plutarch, we should look to Tarsus, the city in which

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there existed a deeply rooted cult of the hero Perseus, the founder of Tarsus according to a late tradition, present on its coins together with Apollo, and the founder also of other Cilician cities.³⁰ In Cumont's own words: "Le costume phrygien habituellement donné au dieu perse, est un indice précieux pour déterminer le pays où un artiste inconnu créa une fois pour toutes le type du Mithra tauroctone, appelé à une fortune si prodigieuse".³¹ There was also another connection between Perseus and Mithras, namely the fact that the Greek hero appears on the coins of Tarsus together with Apollo, identified with the Sun, the same object that was venerated in the cult of Mithras. Furthermore, on these same coins the combat between the lion and the bull is sometimes depicted, a motif from the ancient Orient that is also latent in the tauroctony and is interpreted as symbolising the triumph of summer over winter and the renewal of life,³² a cosmological process that has also been linked to some of the motifs and colours of the garments in Mithraic iconography.

Nor can we forget that the Romans had direct knowledge of Iranian costume through the dress of the Parthians, although until the 1st century BC this Iranian people was little more to them than the name of an Eastern people and, from the political point of view, an unknown factor.³³ The decorated festal attires of Palmyra were no doubt another important opportunity to deepen their acquaintance.

If we now go on to look at the dress and colour of Mithraism, it should first be remembered that very few items in the surviving Mithraic iconography have any colours and those that do appear only in Italy – Rome and the surrounding area – in the West, and in the Mithraeum of Dura-Europos in the East.³⁴ Nevertheless, an examination of what does exist reveals the following:

1) Mithras is normally wearing an Oriental dress (see pl. 1): a tight-fitting, short tunic with long sleeves ("tunica manicata et succincta"; χιτῶν; old Persian "*sarapiš" and Greek *σάραπις* or *κάπρις*³⁵), an under-garment or shirt reaching almost to the knees worn over the trousers and no opening at the neck, without the typical V-shaped neck and flaps of the Parthian tunic, like the one of the prince or nobleman of Shami; with Persian long, patterned

trousers (*ἀναξυρίδες*; old Persian "*šara-vāra-"; Greek *σαράβαρα*; Latin *sarabara*, the "fluxa ac sinuosa vestimenta" mentioned by Isidorus³⁶) a billowing cape or mantle (perhaps the old Persian "*gaunaka", related to the Avestic "gaona" – which means either "colour" or "hair" –, which was sometimes red in the West-Iranian), but not in the Greek *κάνδυς* or old Persian "*kantuš", as this last-mentioned item is an overcoat with long sleeves, sometimes with a hood, that is never worn by Mithras; or the "palla auro distincta" mentioned by Curtius Rufus, the same sleeveless cloak worn by Darius III in the Alexander mosaic or the enthroned magus, Zoroaster, Hystaspes or Mithra depicted as a horse-archer in the synagogue of Dura-Europos³⁷ and the Phrygian cap (*pileus*), often called Persian cap or a tiara in the historiography. In some of the surviving reliefs, such as the Mithraeum of Deutsch-Altenburg, Mithras's Phrygian cap has holes in it to let in the sun's rays.³⁸ (Fig. 1)

As to the meaning of the colours, the red of the tunic or the billowing cape, as can be seen in one of the most beautiful surviving examples of the iconography of the god at the Mithraeum at Marino (see pl. 2),³⁹ or at the Mithraeum Barberini, has been interpreted as the symbol of blood, fire, vitality and the burning sky or ether,⁴⁰ and of the warrior and the ruler.⁴¹ His billowing cloak is often decorated with the constellations, like a world-mantle,⁴² and the folds in it come round in a semi-circle simulating the image of the firmament, a motif that should be linked to the interpretation arguing in favour of a latent "cosmological code" in Mithraic iconography. Indeed, traces of blue, a symbol of the celestial sky,⁴³ sometimes appear on his billowing cloak and on his tunic, and seven stars are drawn on his billowing cloak, as seven are the degrees of initiation and seven the planets of the universe of the pre-Copernican spheres,⁴⁴ symbols also of the ruler and his astral origin.⁴⁵ In some representations, a circular golden "fibula" holds the cloak on his right shoulder and the garments of the divine hero are frequently embroidered in green stripes, the symbol of the revival of life,⁴⁶ filled in with golden patterns, or the trousers may be decorated with small rosettes, another sun symbol,⁴⁷ and crowns, as can be seen at S. Maria Capua Vetere, in which he is also wearing yellow shoes,⁴⁸ this colour being interpreted as generative heat.⁴⁹ (Fig. 2)

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Fig. 1
Mithraeum of S. Maria
Capua Vetere
Photo: Vermaseren 1971,
pl. III



Whether or not we agree with F. Cumont's interpretation, the fact of the matter is that he is the one who has examined the dress of Mithras in the greatest detail, referring to it sometimes as "le costume perse", others as "le costume phrygien",⁵⁰ and, moreover, locating the creation of the god's iconography not on Iranian soil, but in the Pergamon school, i.e. at the crossroads between East and West that was Asia Minor in antiquity, taking as its model, as we have already seen, a Victory sacrificing a bull (Νίκη βουθυτοῦσα), an extremely popular image since Hellenistic times. F. Cumont picks out as attributes of the god the Phrygian cap, a baggy, long-sleeved tunic, drawn in tightly by a belt from which hangs the scabbard of his weapon, an "akinákes" or Persian dagger. Over the tunic he wears a short mantle, fastened on his left shoulder, the folds of which billow out over his back. On his legs he wears what was no doubt the most barbarian and Oriental feature for the mentality of a Roman: long trousers tied at the ankles and walking boots on his feet. Sometimes the trousers seem to be tucked down into the shoes as the Parthian trousers of Palmyra.⁵¹

As F. Cumont points out, Mithras's tiara is generally similar to a Phrygian cap, although he qualifies this by adding that it seems somewhat more

upright and rigid. Very occasionally it is adorned with long flaps covering the ears, as in the case of Men-Attis, and – this is important for us – not bearing more than a slight resemblance to what, according to F. Cumont, is the true dress of the inhabitants of Iran as described by Strabo (15.3.19), a fact that F. Cumont used as evidence in support of the hypothesis that Mithraic iconography had its origin in Asia Minor rather than Iran, with the exception of the Mithras who is dressed like the Comagenian kings in the bas-reliefs of Nemroud-Dagh.

However the truth is that, as F. Cumont again says, we are confronted with two different costumes of the god. One in which his clothes are floating, not at all drawn in to the body, whereas in the other his clothing clings to his back and to his legs as though it were a pair of leggings. Sometimes, too, he appears with his lower limbs or his genital organs naked, sometimes with his torso naked also; other times he has a simple chlamys fastened at the neck, and yet other times he is wearing a cuirass and a military cloak; sometimes his trousers, belt and shoes are adorned with precious embroidery in stripes and braids – according to F. Cumont, "comme ceux d'un toreador espagnol" – as can be seen at S. Maria Capua Vetere.⁵² In some representa-

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tions the belt holding his dagger is not fastened in the place where his tunic narrows, but the dagger is attached to a long belt, or is held in a harness or simply does not appear. Sometimes, in addition to the dagger, Mithras has a bow and a quiver of arrows on his back. Lastly, F. Cumont reminds us, in connection with Mithras's mantle adorned with a crescent moon surrounded by seven stars, that in the "Avesta" it says Mithras wore "a garment inlaid with stars, made of a heavenly substance..., and on no side can the eye perceive the end of it".⁵³ Here again, then, we have yet another link with the Iranian world and, in the opinion of certain authors, such as L. A. Campbell,⁵⁴ not the last, as the stars and the moon are also symbols of sovereignty on the tiaras of the Sassanian kings.

The conclusion that necessarily follows from this is that Mithras dresses like an Iranian and, although there was an overwhelmingly dominant type in the reliefs, which was even present in the iconography of the magic gems,⁵⁵ in a small bronze statuette of Mithras on horseback in the J. P. Getty Museum,⁵⁶ or in a "sigillata" jar from the "Pons Aeni Mithrae-

um" (Pfaffenhofen am Inn),⁵⁷ the god is not always dressed in the same way and is sometimes even represented naked.

2) If we move on to look at Mithras's assistants, Cautes and Cautopates, they are usually dressed like the god, with a Phrygian cap, a spotted tunic drawn in at the waist, a chlamys draped over the back and held in place on the right shoulder by a brooch, baggy trousers tied at the ankles over the shoes, the feature distinguishing them from the god being the fact that they have no dagger, belt or harness.⁵⁸ At the Mithraeum of S. Maria Capua Vetere (see pl. 3) they are both wearing a red tiara, with Cautes' having a star on one side. Cautes is wearing an embroidered yellow tunic, whereas Cautopates has a grey tunic with a sort of green square on the breast. The trousers of both the god's assistants have green stripes, while their shoes are red.⁵⁹

The contrast between the colours of the costumes of Cautes and Cautopates in the Capua fresco has been interpreted by L. A. Campbell⁶⁰ as the symbol of the seasonal and cosmic cycles, the earth's unproductive period, in the case of Cautes,



Fig. 2
Mithraeum at Marino
Photo: Luther Martin; in
David Ulansey, <http://www.well.com/~davidu/mithras.html>

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symbolised by the gold or yellow of the generative heat and the brown of the earth, whereas the green of Cautopates's dress is taken to symbolise the freshness of the fields, the verdant period of the year. Similarly, the grey of Cautopates's dress in both the Capua and Barberini frescoes has been seen as the symbol of old age or maturity. On the other hand, as the seasons for sowing and harvesting are quite different in Europe from those of Syria and southern Iran, L. A. Campbell⁶¹ believes he has found the reflection of this in the fact that the torchbearers' colours are the other way round from each other in the east and the west, so that in Syria and southern Iran, it is Cautes who wears the green of the verdant season, while Cautopates wears the brown of the barren period; one the green of germination, the other the brown of decay (Fig. 3 a/b).

In regard to the colour symbology, M. J. Vermaseren⁶² has also argued that in the frescoes, such as the one at S. Maria Capua Vetere, considerable play is made of the contrast between light and dark. The white of the dying heavenly bull corresponds to the white of the spheres in which the Sun and the Moon live and sometimes the bull is wearing the typical "dorsuale", a symbol of Roman sacrifice, as

can be seen in the procession of the Mithraeum of the church of Santa Prisca in Rome, in which a white bull being led to the sacrifice is wearing this ritual item.⁶³ The yellow, red and green are brilliant in the case of Cautes, whereas in Cautopates's case they are duller or darker, all of which symbolises that Cautes shares the kingdom of the Sun, whereas Cautopates belongs to the kingdom of the Moon. Similarly, according to the new astronomical interpretation, Cautes, with his torch pointing up and his association with a bull's head, is held to symbolise the spring equinox in Taurus, whereas Cautopates, with his torch pointing down and his association with Scorpio, is held to represent the autumn equinox in Scorpio.⁶⁴ This is a suggestive interpretation, but calls for prudence because of the weakness of the documentary evidence to back it up.

3) The figure of the Mithraic Leontocephalous Kronos is usually represented naked with a snake wound round him and covering his genitals, but sometimes these are covered with a kind of loincloth, or trousers. At other times he is depicted wearing a long dress, a tunic and a cloak, perhaps a chlamys.⁶⁵

4) Sometimes the reliefs contain clothed anthropomorphic representations of the Earth, Water, Fire,

Fig. 3 a/b
Mithraeum of S. Maria
Capua Vetere
On the left Cautes is
wearing an embroi-
dered yellow tunic;
on the right Cauto-
pates has a grey tunic
with a sort of green
square on the breast.
Photo: Vermaseren
1971, pl. IV & V



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Heaven and the Winds. In a few cases the air is also represented by a Phrygian cap.⁶⁶

If we now turn to the seven priestly grades of initiation, what we find is the following: Thanks to the numerous Mithraea that have been found, especially in the Roman West, we know that they had an adjoining antechamber (pronaos) functioning as an “apparatorium” or sacristy, i.e. a room where the ritual objects used in worship were kept and the worshippers probably put on their ritual garments.⁶⁷ Unfortunately we have little reliable information on what exactly this ritual dress consisted in. First, because the literary sources are laconic, almost silent, on this matter, and second, because in most cases the iconography fails to furnish us with univocal or clear proof of the existence of a specific dress for each of the seven grades of initiation of the Mithraic religion. What is most likely, however, is that during the celebration of the ritual meal the Mithraists wore their best clothes and reclined on the coloured pillows of the “triclinia” of the dining-rooms, for example as in the Mithraic communion depicted in the bas-relief discovered at Konjic in Dalmatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina (see below).

1) On certain occasions the members of the Raven class or grade (Κόραξ/ Corax) dressed up as ravens, “flapped their wings like birds, imitating the croak of the raven”, and wore raven masks, like in the Konjic bas-relief, in which those serving the ritual meal are wearing zoomorphic raven and lion masks.⁶⁸

F. Cumont holds that the cloth or leather masks used by some of the initiates in Mithraic worship to cover their faces were imitations of the animal hides originally used by their barbarian ancestors.⁶⁹ We must not forget that among the Iranian riding peoples the use of leather was very common,⁷⁰ even though it is true that it is not easy to conclude from Mithraic iconography whether the god, the torch-bearers or his worshippers wore any leather or hide garments.

2) In one of the frescoes in the Mithraeum of the church of Santa Prisca, in Rome, the face of the Bridegroom or Occult is covered with a yellow veil (flammeum), the same as worn by a Roman bride at the wedding ceremony and which probably symbolised the marriage union (hieros gamos)⁷¹ between the neophyte and the divinity. In the mosaic panel of the Mithraeum of Felicissimus, in Ostia, a diadem

as an attribute symbolised his title and Venus at the same time,⁷² and, once consecrated, he may have been granted the right to lift the veil and see, and be seen by, the other “mystes”.⁷³ Indeed, Cumont thinks the members of this class remained invisible to the rest of the congregation and exhibiting themselves (ostendere) constituted a solemn act.⁷⁴

Indeed, thanks once again to Ambrosiaster or Pseudo-Augustine, we know that the naked mystes (μύστης, sacratus, alumnus) had a blindfold over his eyes (uelatis oculis) and was therefore groping forwards with outstretched hands or, in addition to being blindfold, had his hands bound or tied together with cords made of chicken gut,⁷⁵ information confirmed in the frescoes of the Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere. In fact, as R. Turcan has pointed out, ritual nakedness, blindfolding, mock death and rebirth, and ordeals of physical endurance were typical of mystery religions and secret societies in general.⁷⁶ However, we do have a text that makes explicit mention of diadems. The “Mithras Liturgy”, a Greek magical payrus, “talks of the immortal Aion and master of the fiery diadems”.⁷⁷

3) The attribute of the Soldier (Miles) was the soldier’s slingbag (the “sarcina” that can be seen in the frescoes of the Mithraeum of the church of Santa Prisca), similar to the one brandished by Mithras in the direction of the Sun in the scene known as solemn armament, a ritual that has been interpreted as though the god himself were investing the Sun as a “mile”.⁷⁸ In the Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere, the “miles” is wearing a military outfit, whereas in the one at Santa Prisca he is wearing a chestnut-coloured garment. R. Merkelbach has interpreted the cap worn by the “miles” from Ostia as a Persian cap (“persische Mütze”).⁷⁹

4) The members of the Lion grade (Leo) sometimes wear lion masks and a red cloak, as can be seen at the Mithraeum of S. Prisca. The use of masks has been defined by G. Sfameni Gasparro as a “travestimenti animaleschi”, basing himself on the passage in Porphyrius about the “leones” which says “who is initiated in the Leontic mysteries, is invested with all-various forms of animals”.⁸⁰ This zoomorphic lion masks can be seen in the Konjic bas-relief. It is also relevant to recall here the passage from Ambrosiaster or Pseudo-Augustine according to which the members of this last-mentioned grade roar like lions.⁸¹

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5) Moving on now to the Persian (Perses), he wears a whitish tunic (grey in Santa Prisca) with yellow edgings.

6) The Sun Runner (Heliodromus) also wears a red tunic (at Santa Prisca, a red tunic with yellow belt) and a seven-rayed crown, a symbol that appears in the mosaic of the Mithraeum of Felicissimus, in Ostia.

7) And lastly, the highest degree, Father (Pater), also wears a red tunic with yellow edgings, a purple or red mantle, symbol of the sovereign force and warriorhood,⁸² and an embroidered Phrygian cap, maybe with pearls (as in the mosaic panel of the Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia) as a symbol of sovereignty (see pl. 4),⁸³ red, however, at Santa Prisca (see pl. 5) and S. Maria Capua Vetere, the same cap that Mithras almost always wears in the surviving reliefs (Fig. 4).

It may be possible to establish a connection between an extremely mutilated fragment, known as the "Mithraic Catechism",⁸⁴ and the red mantle and the Phrygian cap. On this fragment, the following is written:

(recto) ...

8 He will say: 'Will you gird?' The (heavenly?)

9 ... (Say): '... death! He will say: Why, having girded yourself, ...?'

10 '... this (has?) four tassels (τέσσαρα κράσπετα).'

(verso) ...

5 (Say): '... red ... linen ([π]ορφύρα λίνω).' He will say: 'Why?' Say:

6 '... red border (πορφύρα ἀκμή); the linen (τὸ δὲ λίνον), however, ...'

7 (He will say): '... has been wrapped?' ...

According to Apuleius, the linen is the purest wrapper to protect the objects of worship⁸⁵ and the fabric used to elaborate the dressing of the

Egyptian priests. There is a possibility that we are dealing with a dress or a fabric related to the worship and the pompons and the red or purple linen, or maybe the possible star on the head to which the red on the top in line 6 of the verso⁸⁶ might be making reference to remind us of the Jews, Persian or Christian priests⁸⁷ or the clothing of the lion in the Mithraeum of S. Prisca, of the father in Capua or of the Mithra himself in the Mithraeum at Marino,⁸⁸ taking into account the objection made by R. Turcan that the linen or the red colour are not the exclusive colour or fabric of the Persian dresses for the worship.⁸⁹ W. M. Brashear went much further and stated that the initiate's linen clothes could have been used in imitation of the swaddling clothes and as a symbol of the birth of the "mystes" into a new life.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, the text is too hacked about and we cannot rely on other Mithraic texts so, as it has been said by R. Turcan, those interpretations are far too risky.⁹¹ However, the fact of the matter is that, as we saw when examining Mithras' and the torchbearers' dress, interpreting the symbolism of the colours is problematical and is not always easy.

Nevertheless, there remains nothing in either the initiates', or the god's, or his torchbearers', Cautes' and Cautopates', Phrygian caps of the piece of cloth that covered the mouth ("pādam") of the Persian magicians so as not to contaminate the fire, which can be seen in Achaemenid and Parthian reliefs and are mentioned in the classical sources. Nor are the worshippers of Mithras the only ones to wear the white of the Persian magicians, who wore the so-called Median costume, i.e. trousers, a rider's tight-fitting tunic and, sometimes, what was called in Greek a κάνδης, a kaftan or overcoat with long sleeves, all white – like the Pythagoras of Elianus⁹² – to differentiate themselves from the similar, but coloured, outfits of the warriors.

If we look at the dress of the initiates in the mysteries in the frescoes, what we discover are usually characters dressed in Roman style, such as the mystagogue in the frescoes in the Mithraeum of S. Maria Capua Vetere, who is wearing a white tunic with two red stripes⁹³ or the man at the Mithraeum San Clemente (see pl. 6). (Fig. 5 and 6)

In short, we do not know much about the ritual dress of the worshippers of Mithras and what information we do have shows neither a single way of

Fig. 4
Mosaic panel of the
Mithraeum of Felicissi-
mus in Ostia (Pater)
Photo: the author, Manel
García Sánchez, Barce-
lona



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dressing nor the same colours in the costumes worn. However, if we try to offer a conclusion about the dress of Mithras, or of Cautes and Cautopates, as G. Widengren⁹⁴ indisputably showed, we observe a continuity with the history of the costume of the Iranian riding peoples between ca. 600 B.C. and ca. 800 A.D., and the same continuity that can be seen in the representation of the Persians, Parthians and Sassanians in art (i.e. in the Sidon Sarcophagus or in the Alexander Mosaic⁹⁵) and in classical literature (i.e. Q. Curtius Rufus or Pompeius Trogus/Justin). This applies to the use of long, tight-fitting trousers and wide, fluttering trousers, manufactured of cloth or leather and patterned with geometrical and coloured designs; to the way of wearing the tunic and the use of the mantle or overcoat, also made of cloth or leather; and also to the cap that descends well over the neck and covers the ears, the so-called Phrygian cap, Turkish “bashlyk”, Greek *κυρβασία* or maybe Iranian “*kurpāsa-“, one of the most characteristic articles of Iranian dress.⁹⁶

If Mithraism was or was not an eastern religion, its dress did not constitute a mark of identity in the Roman Empire, nor can one imagine the worshippers of Mithras in their everyday lives wearing any Iranian garments that would identify them as worshippers of the Iranian god and his mysteries. Indeed, not even its ritual garments can be identified as Iranian, as most of the faithful wore Roman clothes. Moreover, the denomination “Persian” probably encompassed a mixture of “genuinely Iranian” items with others that were the result of “rein-

vented Perserie”, and the creation of the iconography of the god and his worshippers, of their dress and its colours, would most likely have been based on a mixture of direct acquaintance as a result of contacts and clashes on the border with Parthians and Sassanians, information from border identities and the mixed-race consciousness of places such as Palmyra, and, of course, also Orientalising stereotypes and clichés.

However, what is extremely revealing is that an Oriental cult of Iranian origin such as Mithraism should become a Roman cult while retaining the Iranian garments of the god and his assistants. Little does it matter what there is that is genuinely Iranian or stereotyped in the dress of Mithraism, or whether the possible “Perserie” was a psychological mechanism predating the conquest of the fearsome enemy at Rome’s border, something which, by the way, would fit in well with the representation



Fig. 5
Mithraeum of Santa Prisca, Father with red Phrygian cap
Photo: U. Bianchi: *Il mitreo di Santa Prisca*, in: Bianchi (ed.) 2004, p. 41

Fig. 6
Worshipper of the Mithraeum San Clemente
Photo: U. Bianchi: *Il mitreo di Santa Prisca*, in: Bianchi (ed.) 2004, p. 51

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of the humiliated and vanquished Parthian or Sasanian, but very badly with the dignity and heroic character with which the god is always portrayed.

I do not think we can speak of a religious identity in the case of Mithraism, but the important thing is that the Roman Empire, as a universal and multicultural civilisation, as an open society, integrated an Eastern cult from an enemy empire and showed proof, once again, of its enlightened nature, of its religious tolerance, a cultural trait of the utmost

importance in the process of the construction of the Roman identity from which Europe has learned and ought to continue learning to prevent the resurgence of identitarian reactions and the pernicious processes of retribalisation. An illustrative example, in short, of how to make possible today, in the process of constructing the European identity, the “e pluribus unum” (out of many, one), and how to overcome ethnic identities and together build a multicultural identity of integration.

- 1 R. Turcan: Feu et sang: à propos d'un relief mithriaque, in: CRAI 130, 1, 1986, pp. 217-231, p. 220.
- 2 Turcan 2000, p. 93.
- 3 R. Turcan: Note sur la liturgie mithriaque, in: Revue de l'histoire des religions 194, 1978, pp. 147-157, see p.151.
- 4 J. Alvar: Los misterios. Religiones <<orientales>> en el Imperio Romano, Barcelona 2001, p.161.
- 5 With the exception of the cognomen Yperanthes in the Mithraeum of Palazzo Barberini, in Rome, not a single Iranian name appears among the followers of Mithras. Compare M. Clauss: Cultores Mithrae. Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes, Stuttgart 1992, p. 27.
- 6 Cumont 1899, p. 72.
- 7 Cumont 1899, p. 240. Unfounded Cumontian presupposition according to U. Bianchi: Prolegomena I, in: U. Bianchi (Hrsg.): Mysteria Mithrae. Proceedings of the International Seminar on the 'Religio-Historical Character of Roman Mithraism, with particular Reference to Roman and Ostian Sources, Rome and Ostia 28-31 March 1978, Leiden 1979, pp. 22-23, see p. 18.
- 8 S. Wikander: Études sur les mystères de Mithras, Lund 1950.
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- 11 Turcan 2000, p. 95.
- 12 Clauss 2000, p. 7.
- 13 K. B. Stark: Die Mithrassteine von Dormagen, in: Jahrbücher des Vereins von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande 46, 1869, pp. 1-25; R. Beck: Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras, Leiden 1988; Ulansey 1989.
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- 17 García Sánchez, Albaladejo Vivero 2010.
- 18 J. P. V. D. Balsdon: Romans and Aliens, London 1979, p. 221.
- 19 R. M. Schneider: Bunte Barbaren. Orientalenstatuen aus farbigem Marmor in der römischen Repräsentationskunst, Worms 1986; Schneider 2007, p. 51; R. M. Schneider: Die Faszination des Feindes. Bilder der Parther und des Orients in Rom, in: J. Wisenhöfer (ed.): Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse. Beiträge des internationalen Colloquiums, Eutin (27-30 Juni 1996), Stuttgart 1998, pp. 95-146.
- 20 A. Landskron: Parther und Sasaniden. Das Bild der Orientalen in der römischen Kaiserzeit, Wien 2005; García Sánchez, Albaladejo Vivero 2010, passim.
- 21 Schneider 2007, pp. 53 and 76.
- 22 “Ce costume ne peut d'ailleurs prétendre qu'à une fidélité tres relative. Il ne diffère que peu ou point de l'accoutrement dont les sculpteurs grecs affublaient tous les personnages orientaux. Attribué à un esclave scythe par Praxitèle sur la base de Maninée, puis au troyen Pâris, au lydien Pélops, aux phrygiens Mèn et Attis; peut-être même à l'éthiopien Céphée, il fut prêté ensuite à Mithra et devait passer dans la sculpture chrétienne aux mages adorant l'enfant Jésus, aux Hébreux dans la fournaise ou reueillant l'eau du rocher d'Horeb et à d'autres personnages juifs. Lucien nous assure que Mithra porte les vêtements perses, la kandys et la tiare (Lucien fr. a, De hist. conscrib. 39; Bis accus. 27; Navigium 30), mais celles-ci, dans les images conservées du dieu, ne diffèrent pas de la tunica

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- succincta et du pileus ordinaires des barbares asiatiques.(...) Enfin, dans l'ex-voto du roi Attale, les guerriers barbares de Marathon portent un costume perse non moins fantaisiste que celui de notre divinité." Compare Cumont 1899, pp. 179-182. – According to Cumont, in Christian art the Magi regularly wear the dress that Mithras had worn previously, compare Cumont 1899, p. 42, as can be seen in the representation of the Three Wise Men in the Church of S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. Compare Widengren 1956, pp. 256-258. It would be interesting to elucidate the lines of continuity from Mithra to the Three Wise Men.
- 23 Ulansey 1989, pp. 25 and 27.
- 24 F. Saxl: Mithras: Typengeschichtliche Untersuchungen, Berlin 1931, p. 14.
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- 26 Turcan 2000, p. 127 ss.
- 27 Lactantii Placidi qui dicitur Commentarios in Statii Thebaida et Commentarium in Achilleida, recensuit R. Jahnke, Leipzig 1898, pp. 74, 2 ss., 15 s., 18.
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- 30 Cumont 1899, pp. 179-182.
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- 32 H. Sonnabend: Fremdenbild und Politik. Vorstellungen der Römer von Ägypten und dem Partherreich in der späten Republik und frühen Kaiserzeit, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 157.
- 33 Vermaseren 1971, p. 9.
- 34 Widengren 1956, p. 237.
- 35 Widengren 1956, pp. 239 and 254.
- 36 Widengren 1956, pp. 237 and 239.
- 37 Vermaseren 1960, p. 50.
- 38 M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca III. The Mithraeum at Marino*, Leiden 1982, p. 8.
- 39 Vermaseren 1971, pp. 6 and 9; Campbell 1968, p. 39.
- 40 Widengren 1956, pp. 240 and 248.
- 41 Widengren 1956, p. 250.
- 42 Campbell 1968, index s. v. 'cap'; Vermaseren 1971, pp. 6 and 10.
- 43 Clauss 2000, p. 84 s.
- 44 Widengren 1956, p. 247.
- 45 Campbell 1968, p. 39.
- 46 Campbell 1968, pp. 91-92.
- 47 Vermaseren 1971, p. 6.
- 48 Vermaseren 1971, p. 40.
- 49 Cumont 1899, p. 179-182.
- 50 Widengren 1956, p. 243.
- 51 Vermaseren 1971, p. 6.
- 52 Cumont 1899, p. 183. However, there is no mention of the god's dress in the Yasht dedicated exclusively to him. Vid. I. Gershevitch: *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, New York 1959.
- 53 Campbell 1968, p. 94.
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- 57 Cumont 1899, p. 204.
- 58 Vermaseren 1971, pp. 7-8.
- 59 Campbell 1968, p. 39 s.

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- 60 Campbell 1968, p. 40.
- 61 Vermaseren 1971, pp. 9-10.
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- 63 Ulansey 1989, pp. 112-116.
- 64 Cumont 1899, p. 82.
- 65 Cumont 1899, p. 116.
- 66 Cumont 1899, p. 59; Vermaseren 1960, p. 33.
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- 70 Claus 2000, p. 134.
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- 77 ὁ τε τὰ λεοντικά παραλαμβάνων περιτίθεται παντοδαπὰς ζώων μορφὰς.
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- 84 Turcan 1992, p. 559 s.
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