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A. L. Frothingham

American Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 18, No. 2. (Apr. - Jun., 1914), pp. 146-155.

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American Journal of Archaeology is currently published by Archaeological Institute of America.

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DIOCLETIAN AND MITHRA IN THE ROMAN FORUM

THE sculptured base of an imperial memorial column that lies somewhat one-sidedly in the Roman Forum near the arch of Septimius Severus has suffered from the contempt with which works of the decadence are usually treated. I am not aware that it has ever been adequately described or illustrated. If, however, I am right in my interpretation of part of its reliefs it is of unique importance from the religious and historical points of view. I believe that it contains a representation of the god Mithra as the patron deity of the Roman Empire, in a scene of imperial sacrifice where Diocletian officiates, so confirming the Carnuntum inscription in which Diocletian and his associates proclaimed Mithra the protector of the empire, *fautor imperii sui.*[1]

If this is true then it is the first and only Roman work of art which officially recognizes the Mithraic supremacy. That it does so in Rome itself and in the very Forum in a triumphal imperial monument makes it doubly important; as well as that it does so only a few years before the triumph of Christianity.

There appear to have been originally two of these large bases of white marble supporting columns more than a metre in diameter. Dr. Hülsen[2] supposes that they were placed by Diocletian in front of the Curia, when he rebuilt it, on either side of the stairway leading up to it from the Forum. One of these bases was discovered about 1500 A.D., and had the inscription AUGUSTORUM| VICENNALIA|FELICITER. It is described as having reliefs representing a sacrificial scene. It has been destroyed, and we have no drawings and no further traces of it. The second, and apparently companion, base was excavated in 1547 in front of the Curia (S. Adriano) and still remains not far from the site of its

[1]The references to the standard work of Cumont on Mithra are to *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* and to the English translation of its introduction *The Mysteries of Mithra* (1910). The present study of the base was made in April, 1912, in Rome.

[2] See in *Röm. Mitt.*, 1893, p. 281; cf. *The Roman Forum*, 97–98. The inscription is *C.I.L.* VI, 1203; the lost inscription of the other base is 1204–1205.

discovery. It is inscribed CAESARUM|DECENNALIA|FELICITER. Hülsen has cleverly seen the implication that we have here a single monument in two parts, dedicated in the year 303 A.D. at the time of the triumph of Diocletian in Rome, which preceded his abdication. The two Augusti, Diocletian and Maximian, then celebrated the twentieth and the two Caesars, Constantius and Galerius, the tenth anniversary of their accession. There was not only a triumphal arch erected to Diocletian at that time

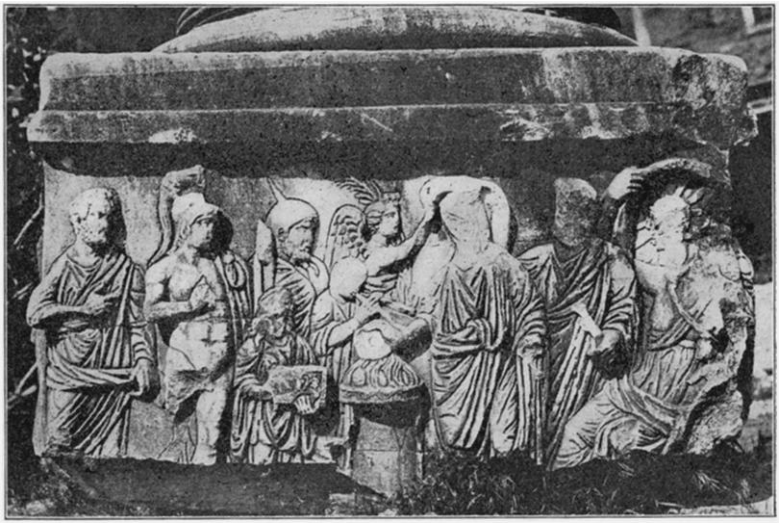

FIGURE 1.—ROME; MAIN FACE OF BASE OF MEMORIAL COLUMN OF DIOCLETIAN AND HIS COLLEAGUES, IN THE FORUM
(From author's photograph)

on the *Via Lata*, the so-called *arcus novus* of the *Notitia*, but the memorial statue on these columns in the Forum; apparently the two Augusti on one column and the two Caesars on the other; or, more probably, perhaps, an Augustus on each column.[1]

I shall not give here a full description of the sculptures on the base that remains, as I expect to do this elsewhere, but only what

[1] It is allowable to suppose a group of two statues on each column for this late period, though it would not be allowable for an earlier period. The idea of two emperors or Caesars standing in close fraternal embrace was current at just this time. Such a composition is the porphyry group at Venice, and another porphyry group of three imperial statues of Constantine and his two sons is described by Codinus (*topog.* 174) as in the Curia or Senate house of Constantinople.

is necessary for the explanation of what I believe to be the Mithraic element in the scene.

All four sides are carved in low relief. One of the faces has a central shield with the inscription CAESARUM | DECENNALIA | FELICITER and at either corner a trophy with captives and a Victory. The other three faces, instead of being independent of each other, are carved as a single continuous scene, an imperial *suovetaurilia* sacrifice, such as always came at the close of a triumph. The centre of the scene is on the face directly opposite the inscription.

FIGURE 2.—DETAIL OF THE BAS-RELIEF, WITH BUST OF MITHRA
(From author's photograph)

This face (Fig. 1) is the only part which will be discussed. The face to the left is filled by the sacrificial animals and an attendant: the face to the right by the audience of people present at the sacrifice.

The central scene has the usual combination of real and ideal figures. The most peculiar feature, for anyone who takes the trouble to examine it closely, will at once be recognized to be the radiate head with its nimbus in the upper right-hand corner (Fig. 2). The ruined condition of the upper part of this right-hand end of the relief is probably one of the reasons why its Mithraic character has never been suspected. All the heads

have been hammered off. This was evidently done with intention, and by persons who were quite aware of the identity of the figures they mutilated. There was no such mutilation of the figures on the other faces of the base. It was confined, even on this face, to the part representing the divinities (Roma and Mithra), the sacrificing Emperor, the figure behind him and the two acolytes (*camilli*) assisting at the sacrifice. The mutilation was probably the work of Christian fanatics of the fourth or fifth century and due to hatred of Diocletian on account of his persecutions.

There are nine figures. Beginning at the right is an ideal female figure, with breasts exposed and strap over shoulder, seated and holding high over her head with raised right arm an arch of drapery within which is framed the detached bust of a youth whose head is surrounded by a nimbus bisected by sun-rays. Her head, which was in the round, is entirely destroyed, so that we cannot say whether or not it was helmeted; probably it was not, as the costume does not allow of it. The head of the Sun-god is so mutilated that we can hardly do more than trace the free curly locks that we associate with the type. It is in the centre of the arch held by Roma and does not extend behind or beside her figure. It is as a medallion floating in the air, after a fashion familiar to Hellenistic and Roman art for ideal personages.

The next figure was evidently bearded, though the face is entirely destroyed. His left hand held a scroll or wand and his right seems to have held up something behind and above the shoulder of the sacrificing figure. The figure standing at the flaming altar and pouring out a libation can be only an Emperor or a Caesar: under the circumstances it hardly seems possible that he could be a Caesar. He is being crowned by a Victory holding a palm. The two usual camilli with flute and *acerra* are assisting. Back of the second is a figure in a cap-like helmet, probably a flamen wearing the *apex*. Then comes Mars and finally another bearded figure robed like the sacrificer and the figure back of him.

The scene is discussed by Hülsen and Thédenat.[1] Hülsen thinks it is Diocletian sacrificing to Roma and Mars, and he does not even mention the bust of the Sun-god. Thédenat thinks

[1] Thédenat, *Le Forum Romain*, pp. 262–263; Hülsen, *The Roman Forum*, p. 98.

the person sacrificing is some Caesar, but as he does not accept Hülsen's ascription of the base to Diocletian and leaves its date quite uncertain, he proposes no identification. He merely believes that the figure back of the sacrificer is the second Caesar, whoever he may be. He notices the Sun-god head but mistakes it for a figure of Apollo. Apollo is never represented in this way.

The sacrificing figure seems certainly to be Diocletian himself. The fact that this base was dedicated to the Caesars and not to the Augusti would not prevent it. The triumph was Diocletian's. The Victory would hardly have been represented as crowning any but him: nor would any but he preside over the *suovetaurilia*. The other Augustus, Maximian, accompanied Diocletian, but neither of the Caesars was present in Rome at the time, so they would not have been represented as taking any active part. It seems just possible, however, that they may be represented in the two figures not yet referred to—the one behind the emperor and the one on the extreme left.

In regard to the question of the style of the relief as bearing on the question of date and on the identification of the scene with part of Diocletian's triumph, I may say that it entirely agrees with Dr. Hülsen's date of 303. It agrees in this much, at least, that the date is a *terminus* below which we could not go. A glance at the friezes of the arch of Constantine and at the consular statues of the second quarter of the fourth century, so decidedly inferior to this scene, will emphasize this point. The only question might be whether the excellent poses of the figures and the relatively good execution of the Mars might not indicate a slightly earlier date—somewhere in the latter part of the third century. On the other hand the crudity of the drapery and the heavy lines dividing the figures from the background preclude a much earlier date, so that on the whole it is safe to say that the style confirms the ascription to Diocletian made on the basis of the inscription.[1]

We now come to the *crux* of my argument: the figure and bust at the extreme right. This is evidently the object of adoration.

[1] The technical characteristics have been discussed by Riegl (*Spätrömische Kunstindustrie*, p. 81), whose views are adopted by Mrs. Strong (*Roman Sculpture*, p. 323). The heavy silhouette cut into the background around the figures is hardly so great a novelty as Riegl supposes. It is quite a prominent feature as early as the stately figures of the Provinces which decorated the so-called "Temple of Neptune" basement of the time of Antoninus Pius.

Mars has nothing to do with the scene except as a spectator.[1] Roma is holding aloft the image of the god to whom the emperor is sacrificing. And he is the Sun-god.

The only real question is whether the Sun-god here represented is Sol-Helios or Mithra; and the question is one about which there may easily be two opinions; all the more in that these two so frequently merge into one another. To judge merely from the image itself it would seem more likely that it is Sol, King Sun. Such an image is the charming bust of the Sun, *Sol Sanctissimus* (Fig. 3), from the Capitoline altar.[2] But before entering into the question whether or not Mithra was represented in Roman art with a nimbus and sun-rays, something must be said about Diocletian's religious affiliations, as known from other sources, and especially as to the particular form of the Sun-god to whom he did allegiance.

FIGURE 3.—BUST OF THE SUN-GOD ON ALTAR IN CAPITOLINE MUSEUM
(Photograph Moscioni)

The inscription of Carnuntum already referred to is explicit. It says:

D(eo) S(oli) i(nvicto) M(ithrae)
Fautori imperii sui
Iovii et Herculii
religiosissimi Augusti et Caesares
Sacrarium restituerunt

[1] He is a spectator, in the same way in the scene on the Beneventum arch' where Trajan is founding the *alimenta* for the education of poor children. Mars had provided the wherewithal, so he is present; but there is no act of worship. There are plenty of other cases of the sort, in the Boscoreale cups, the Ara Pacis, etc.

[2] Helbig, *Führer*[2], 769; Reinach, *Rép. Rel.* III, 187; Strong, *Roman Sculpture*, pl. 96, p. 312.

This official declaration by the rulers of the empire of their allegiance to Mithra was comprehensive.[1] It seems to have been made in 307 A. D. when there was an imperial conference at Carnuntum between Diocletian and the active ruling Augusti, Galerius and Maximian, after the killing of Severus by Maxentius. It was at this conference that Licinius the elder was created Augustus. There were then three Jovian Augusti (Diocletian, Galerius, and Licinius) and one Herculean Augustus (Maximian); one Jovian Caesar (Maximian) and one Herculean Caesar (Constantine). The four Augusti present enlarged this Mithraic temple and dedicated it for themselves and on behalf of the two absent Caesars. The Mithraeum which they then rebuilt is by far the largest that has yet been found in the Roman empire and this great permanent camp of Carnuntum was probably the centre of Mithraic cult in the north of Europe. The date of the inscription is probably four years later than that of the Roman base here illustrated. Its statement regarding Mithra may be taken not as revolutionary and novel but as the statement of a fact that may have existed for some time. What was true in 307 was true in 303 and probably even earlier; under Diocletian Mithra was *fautor imperii*.

For other emperors the prevalent Sun worship took different aspects. Aurelian adopted the Syrian form, centred at Emesa, which had been also the god of Heliogabalus; Constantine preferred the association with the Hellenic Apollo; Diocletian selected the Persian Mithraic system, because he was more oriental than western.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that the bust of the Sun-god in the present relief is Mithraic. The only question is: does it represent Mithra himself or the visible Sun to whom Mithra entrusted the direction of the material world. In Mithraic reliefs the Sun and Moon are nearly always represented, and in the form of busts or heads suspended in the air in very much the fashion of the bust on the base. Mithra himself has usually no nimbus or rays. An examination of Cumont's *T. et M.* will make it amply evident that in the scene of Mithra sacrificing the bull, or the birth of Mithra, or the labors of Mithra, he hardly ever has a radiate head. At the same time there is an evident

[1] Cumont, *T. et M.* II, p. 146, inscr. No. 367(= *C.I.L.* III, 4413: for description, *ibid.* II, p. 491; cf. Bormann in *Arch. Epig. Mitth. aus Öster.* XVIII, pp. 169–196.

reason for this. During all the period of his labors and exploits Mithra, like Heracles, was not a divine being but a hero. His apotheosis to the divine sphere, like that of Heracles, came afterwards; and only after his translation, in the chariot of the Sun, could he have been represented with the nimbus. This explanation seems supported by the fact that the most important group of representations of Mithra with a nimbus and radiate head is on the Scythian coins of Bactria, struck for Kings Kanerkes and Hooerkes between 87 and 129 A.D.[1] In these coins Mithra is represented standing nimbed and radiate as the protector of the King. Another important instance of a radiate and nimbed Mithra is on a relief at Nimrud-Dagh on the temple connected with the funeral monument of King Antiochus of Commagene (69–34 B. C.).[2] Here also Mithra stands in front of the King as his protector.

It would seem, therefore, as if Mithra in his aspect as eternal and invisible Sun-god, protector of Kings, was figured with sun rays and nimbus and had been so figured for three or four hundred years before Diocletian. He is referred to in this aspect as the Seven-rayed Mithra, seven being the sacred Mithraic number.

Another strong argument in favor of this interpretation is the arched drapery which Roma is holding over the bust, so that the head is quite overshadowed by it. This gives an effect corresponding exactly to that of the Mithraic reliefs of the sacrifice of the bull, which is enclosed in the section of a grotto or cave, symbolizing the subterranean character of Mithraic worship. This would parallel in outline and meaning the overhanging arch of Roma's drapery, which, while it would suit Mithra, would be quite out of place for the visible Sun-god.

Therefore, while I do not exclude the bare possibility that the bust on the base may represent the visible Sun, the satellite or sub-ego of Mithra, such an identification would have many reasons against it. Not the least of these is the fact that in the Mithraic system, to which Diocletian and his colleagues certainly professed allegiance, the visible Sun was a subordinate of Mithra, and only the supreme deity of the system would have been set in the place given to this bust, as receiving the homage

[1] Gardner, *Coins of the Greek and Scythian Kings of Bactria and India* (1886): cf. Cumont, *T. et. M.* p. 186 and *M. of M.* p. 19.

[2] Humann and Puchstein, *Reisen in Nord Syrien u. Klein Asien*, pl. xi: cf. Cumont, *T. et. M.* p. 188 and *M. of M.* p 14.

of the Roman Empire, from *Roma et Augustus*. It was Mithra himself, who was the real *Sol invictus*, the *Sol invictus Mithra*[1] of so many inscriptions, the intellectual Sun of Julian; not the material sun that went its daily rounds in obedience to the laws of the Universe established by the Supreme being, Ormuzd, and his mediator and creative agent Mithra.[2] This ascription of the highest honor to Mithra is implied in a passage of Julian's Hymn to Helios when he says: "If after this I should say that we also worship Mithra and celebrate games in honor of Helios every four years, I shall be speaking of customs that are somewhat recent." He refers to the games instituted by Aurelian.

There is a curious little relief in the Museum at Terracina which, though certainly connected with Mithraism, belongs to a small group which Cumont decided to omit. It illustrates the fact that Julian's theory of the two suns was not unknown to the thought and practice of the age. The upper part is occupied not by the two customary busts but by three. In the centre is the Moon-goddess, with the crescent back of her shoulders. She is flanked by two youthful male busts, each with radiate head. These two Sun-gods evidently correspond to Julian's Intellectual Sun and Material Sun. Below, in the centre the newly-born Mithra seems to rise from the tripod cauldron of birth and re-birth, and is flanked by his two doubles, the Dioscuri on horseback, facing toward the centre and each trampling upon a prostrate human body, while behind each rises a serpent, the emblem of fertile nature. The date of this tablet is uncertain. It might antedate Julian by about a century.

I will close by quoting the final sentence of the Emperor Julian's *Caesars* (336) in which this last of the imperial sun-worshippers refers to his personal beliefs and hopes. He says of himself: "As for thee" [*i. e.* Julian] Hermes said to me, "*I have granted thee the knowledge of* THY FATHER MITHRA. *Do thou keep his commandments and thus secure for thyself a cable and a secure*

[1] Julian, *Hymn to the Mother of the gods*, 172 D: cf. Damascius, 294, and Proclus on the Timaeus, I, 11. Julian says that the god of the seven rays lifts up the souls of men.

[2] Julian in fact distinguishes (1) a Sun *in posse* in the bosom of the Good, the original Being; (2) an invisible and immaterial Sun (Mithra-Helios) who rules the intellectual gods; (3) a visible and material Sun, who rules the stars and shines on the world. See Or. IV, 155 B.

anchorage throughout thy life; and when thou must depart from the world thou canst with good hope adopt him as thy guardian god."

Is this not also the idea that underlies the scene on the base of the memorial column of Diocletian and his colleagues in the most sacred centre of the Roman world?

A. L. FROTHINGHAM.

PRINCETON, N. J.
FEBRUARY, 1914.