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THE ‘CITY OF DARKNESS’ AND ‘THE TWIN RIDERS’ IN THE MITHRAEUM OF HAWARTE (SYRIA)

Summary: Three pictorial scenes represented on the walls of the newly discovered Mithraeum in Hawarte (Syria) are deeply rooted in the Middle-Iranian religious world. The pictures of the ‘City of Darkness’, and of ‘The Twin Riders’, as well as that of ‘The Lion and the Demons’, can only be explained by their evident Iranic background. Some of these iconographies are not limited to the Syrian area but are spread all around the Roman world, until London and Vienne-sur-Rhône. Moreover, a possible connection with a heterodox doctrine concerning the post-mortem vehiculated by the Pseudo-Macarius is proposed in this contribution.

Key words: Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, Roman religion, ‘Oriental cults’, Hawarte, Ps.-Macarius

As is well known, the Mithraeum of Hawarte, located near Apamea, in Syria, was discovered by chance in Spring 1998. The prompt intervention by Michał Gawlikowski and of his Syro-Polish team ensured the preservation and the spread of the knowledge of this outstanding finding.¹ It was extensively published in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 2007, which exempts me from its description.² For my purpose, it suffices to recall that the wonderful frescoes with which I am about to deal can be dated with good accuracy to the sixties of the 4th century.

Among the works that have been dedicated to this mithraeum, as far as I know, the most important ones are the wide survey of the mithraea in the Near East by

¹ GAWLIKOWSKI, M.: Hawarti: Preliminary Report. *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean (PAM)* 10 (1999) 197–204; GAWLIKOWSKI, M.: Un nouveau mithraeum récemment découvert à Huaré près d’Apamée. *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 144.1 (2000) 161–171; PARANDOWSKA, E.: Hawarte: Conservation of a Mural. *PAM* 14 (2002) 295–299; MAJCHEREK, G.: Hawarte: Excavation and Restoration Work in 2003. *PAM* 15 (2003) 325–334; CHABIERA, A. – PARANDOWSKA, W. – TROCLIIMOWICZ, A.: Paintings from the Hawarte Mithraeum in Syria. In PALÁGYI, S. – BORHY, L. – MAGYAR, M. (eds): *Plafonds et voûtes à l’époque antique*. Budapest 2004, 321–326.

² GAWLIKOWSKI, M.: The Mithraeum at Hawarte and Its Paintings. *JRA* 20 (2007) 337–361.

Richard Gordon,³ and an important analysis by Jaime Alvar.⁴ Since then only some generic references to this mithraeum have occurred in more recent publications dedicated to the oriental cults in the Roman world.⁵ The recent recovery of interest in this subject⁶ has completely overlooked some considerations I had published in 2009 in an article that mainly dealt with Julian's Mithraism.⁷ Thus, I have decided to reintroduce here some of my reflections, which I consider all the more valid in comparison with those new interpretative proposals.

My interest in the Mithraeum of Hawarte specifically focuses on three frescoes, all of them unique in the rich and manifold iconography bound to the cult of Mithras. The latest exegetes agree on the attribution of these unique pictures to the eccentricity of the *pater* who commissioned the frescoes. Thus, the outstanding importance of these frescoes has been limited to the very specific context in which they were produced and eventually found. I do not share this position,⁸ but nevertheless I prefer to leave this issue aside and limit myself to reflect upon the observations that have been proposed on these scenes and juxtapose to them some of my own precise parallels.

1. THE 'CITY OF DARKNESS' (FIG. 1)

This panel is customarily called the 'City of Darkness'. In his latest analysis related to the images in the Mithraeum of Hawarte, Gawlikowski affirms that "several years after their discovery, I was still unable to find any good parallels to them, and the best experts in Mithraism could not either."⁹

This scene shows a great wall at the center of which a black archway is open. Only that central black 'hole' represented by the door breaks the monotony of the lines which simulate the squared blocks of stone building up the wall, which consequently shows no further openings. At its top the wall culminates with a thin border designed with two parallel lines filled with a brighter color than that used for the blocks of the wall. Seven monstrous heads are aligned above the wall, and they lean

³ GORDON, R.: Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine. *Topoi* 11 (2001) 77–136.

⁴ ALVAR, J.: *Romanising Oriental Gods* [RGRW 165]. Leiden 2008, 196ff.

⁵ In CLAUS, M.: *Mithras, Kult und Mysterium*. Darmstadt–Mainz 2012, this mithraeum is mentioned only twice; cf. *Imperium der Götter*. Badischen Landesmuseum Karlsruhe 2013 (in this beautiful catalog the articles concerning Mithras are by C. Witschel, R. Gordon, R. Heyner, D. Frackowiak, M. Claus, pp. 200–265 with nos 157–183), in both books only the 'city of darkness' is depicted, respectively in pl. 2 and p. 241.

⁶ NAGY, L.: The Short History of Time in the Mysteries of Mithras. *Pantheon* 7 (2012) 37–58; GAWLIKOWSKI, M.: Zoroastrian Echoes in the Mithraeum at Hawarte, Syria. *ARAM* 26 (2014) 109–117; DIRVEN, L.: La lotta tra la Luce e le Tenebre nel mitreo di Huarte: interazioni mitraico-manichee nella Siria tardo-antica. *Parola del Passato* 71 (2016) 353–375.

⁷ GNOLI, T.: Giuliano e Mitra. *AnTard* 17 (2009) 215–234.

⁸ Although I am well aware that the mystic cult of Mithra – as much as any other cultic practice in the Roman world – had different approaches in different regions of the empire, I have tried to underscore some oddities in the mithraea in the Roman Near East in GNOLI, T.: Mitrei del Vicino Oriente: una *facies* orientale del culto misterico di Mithra. *Electrum* 24 (2017) 191–212.

⁹ GAWLIKOWSKI: Zoroastrian Echoes (n. 6) 111.



Fig. 1. The City of Darkness (photo by GAWLIKOWSKI [n. 2] 344, fig. 12)

on this border. The eighth head is portrayed at the bottom of the wall in the right inferior corner of the scene.¹⁰ The heads are slightly characterized by some small differences in their somatic traits, and by the different hues of their dark color; but their expressions are all the same: they are suffering and gnashing their teeth.¹¹ All their

¹⁰ In fact, only six heads are discernible at the top of the wall and the plaster is completely lost on its left side. Notwithstanding that it is impossible to distinguish any traces of any head in this badly damaged part of the scene, we shall trust GAWLIKOWSKI: *The Mithraeum* (n. 2) 355, who is the only eyewitness, and he explicitly tells about '7 dreadful creatures' at the top of the wall. Obviously, the number of the heads is meaningful because of the peculiar value that number 7 has in the mysteries of Mithras: in this scene, the heads represented "the hateful eight."

¹¹ Judging from the photo, the dark color of the heads blends from a very dark gray to a dark reddish, without any evident scheme: the first, the fourth and the fallen heads are grey, the others are reddish. The annotation by GORDON (n. 3) 108 on this subject: "des visages noirs (c.-à-d. de démons) se mêlent avec des visages blancs (soit des hommes mortels)" (some black faces [i.e. some demons] are mixed with

eyes were intentionally destroyed in ancient times with an awl;¹² however, it is highly probable that all the heads were looking in the same direction, beyond the upper-left corner of the scene. Identical segments of ocher-colored lines hit each head – also the fallen one – exactly in the same position. The direction of the seven lines is the same: they all come from the upper-left corner of the scene.

Gawlikowski immediately recognized that in this unprecedented scene a struggle between Light and Darkness was depicted. The eight ocher-colored lines that hit the heads were correctly understood by him as *rayons du Soleil* (Sol was beautifully represented in another scene located on another wall of this mithraeum itself). Gawlikowski closed his first description of this scene as follows: “selon toute vraisemblance, il s’agit de démons qui tentent en vain de tenir la Cité des Ténèbres contre de l’assaillant divin. Je ne connais aucun parallèle à cette image surprenante” (“Most probably these are demons who strive in vain to keep the town of darkness against the godly assault. I do not know any parallel of this surprising image.”)¹³

The explanations to this puzzling fresco put forward by Gordon are not convincing in my opinion: he hypothesized that the heads were those of dead prisoners, each one hit by a spear or an arrow,¹⁴ in some sort of representation of the enemies crushed by Mithras, as is shown in the *Mihr Yasht*.¹⁵ This parallel can be accepted only if we assume that the heads in the scene are of beheaded men, and that the lines hitting the heads are arrows or spears (as in various representations of the hunting Mithras, some of which are also found in the Mithraeum of Hawarte). I think this is not the case: Gawlikowski about this special point maintains: “each head is rejoined by an oblique yellow line from above, clearly representing a ray of light. Another similar head, in left profile, rests at the foot of the rampart. Here we see more distinctly that the head is not cut off but, as it were a complete entity: shaggy hair is growing where the neck should be expected.”¹⁶ Alvar agreed with the position of Gordon, but more prudently.¹⁷

Notwithstanding that all the exegetes are convinced of the Iranian background of this scene, the problem of the precise Iranian literary source is not trivial. Finding the source will be the key to decode the meaning of this extraordinary picture. Gordon and the *Mihr Yasht*-connection supported by him maintain that this scene alludes to a specific but ordinary activity of Mithras, i.e. the punishment of the perjurers, and the liars, i.e. people who, in some way, have betrayed a pact which the Iranian deity personified.¹⁸ However, what shall be stressed is that the punishment of the liars is

white faces [i.e. some deadly humans]) is completely speculative, grounded on an assumption that is unsustainable, in my opinion: cf. *infra*. Anyway, the general appearance of the heads is the same.

¹² Description of this intentional damage in GAWLIKOWSKI: The Mithraeum (n. 2) 352.

¹³ GAWLIKOWSKI: Hawarti (n. 1) 167.

¹⁴ GORDON (n. 3) 106.

¹⁵ Cf. GORDON (n. 3) 108, n. 142.

¹⁶ GAWLIKOWSKI: The Mithraeum (n. 2) 355.

¹⁷ ALVAR (n. 4) 197, where both hypotheses are mentioned, the one by Gawlikowski and the other one by Gordon.

¹⁸ The name of this god means ‘contract’. On its etymology, see BARTHOLOMAE, C.: *Altiranisches Wörterbuch*. Strassburg 1904, col. 1183; MEILLET, A.: *Le dieu indo-iranien Mitra*. Paris 1907; GRAY, L. H.:

a mundane activity performed by Mithras, which is imbued with a strong ethical core, but it is deprived of any eschatological implication. Thus, the problem with this interpretation rests upon the fact that it does not combine so well with the iconography observable in this scene.

According to Nagy, the scene of the 'City of Darkness' should have some cosmogonic meaning. This position is taken for granted, and it is presented as a mere starting point for his following the general reconstruction of Mithraic mythology, but without giving any explanation for it. His conclusion, however, diverges completely from what can be deduced from this fresco.¹⁹

Lucinda Dirven also faces this subject.²⁰ She supposes that the 'City of Darkness' represents the second creation in the Manichaean cosmogony, in which the Living Spirit saves the light trapped in the 'Prison of demons' and with this light he creates the cosmos on account of the Father of Greatness. In fact, it is hardly tenable that the yellow lines that hit each head represent light emitted by the heads themselves as maintained by Dirven: first of all, from an iconographical point of view, because there are unlimited examples of heads emitting light, which light surrounds the heads in the form of an aura, sometimes with concentric rays, but is never shown as one single ray directed upwards. In the Iranian world, this aura was known as MP *farrah* and it was also one of the qualities of kingship.²¹ Secondly in the Manichaean cosmogony the emission of light by the demons was sexually stimulated by the Living Spirit and was emitted with their semen, which excludes the possibility that they might have emitted one ray of light from their heads.²² Richard Gordon, in his description of this scene, maintained that the yellow lines should be considered as arrows: what remains indisputable is that these rays of light certainly act as if they were darts hitting from above.

What I think is crucial at this point, is to focus on the status of the heads. The ugly heads are actually a recurrent theme in the Zoroastrian religion. As I have already maintained in my 2009 article, the big horrific gnashing heads that are aligned upon

The Foundations of the Iranian Religions. Bombay 1929, 96ff.; GNOLI, G.: Sol Persice Mithra, in U. BIANCHI (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae*. Leiden 1979, 727; SCHMIDT, H.-P.: Mithra, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition. New York 2006. Also in the exegesis presented here below the *Mihr Yasht* plays a central role, but in connection with other Zoroastrian texts, in particular the *Vidēvdād*, which is helpful to understand which aspects of Mithras are meaningful for us to interpret this scene depicted in the Mithraeum of Hawarte.

¹⁹ NAGY (n. 6) 49.

²⁰ DIRVEN (n. 6). This view was anticipated in DIRVEN, L.: The Mithraeum as *tableau vivant*. *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1 (2015) 33, n. 62. I will further and more deeply discuss this subject in a forthcoming article.

²¹ See G. GNOLI in YARSHATER, E. (ed.): *Encyclopaedia Iranica* IX (1999) 312–319, s.v. "Farr(ah)" with an extensive literature. It is not the case to linger on the Christian haloes.

²² About the Manichaean cosmogony, the most recent and synthetic descriptions are found in W. SUNDERMANN in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* VI 3 (1993) 310–315 s.v. "Cosmogony and Cosmology. iii. In Manichaeism"; W. SUNDERMANN in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition 2009, s.v. "Manicheism. i. General Survey" (www.iranicaonline.org); HUTTER, M.: Manichäismus. *RAC* 24 (2010) 6–47; BAKER-BRIAN, N. J.: *Manichaeism, an Ancient Faith Rediscovered*. London – New York 2011, 114; RECK, C.: Der Manichäismus als Iranische Religion. In PAUL, L. (ed.): *Handbuch der Iranistik*. Hamburg 2013, 171–184, here 176, all with a complete literature.

the city walls in the fresco of the 'City of Darkness' are complete and autonomous entities in themselves, and they perfectly match the fully spiritual status of demons in the Zoroastrian tradition. In the Zoroastrian religion, the material world and physicality in general (MP *gētīg*) are an exclusive prerogative of the forces of good.²³ In Pahlavi texts it is clearly stated that the demons do not exist,²⁴ in the sense that they do not have any material existence, they are not ontological entities but rather psychological phenomena that stick to the physical world to which they do not belong, but which they strive to harm.²⁵ More precisely, as far as the heads and their forms are concerned, the Zoroastrian tradition explicitly distinguishes between 'good heads',²⁶ and 'evil heads', the latter pertaining exclusively to the demons and the wicked people. The etymology of the Avestan word for 'evil head', YAv. *kamərəda-*, (MP *kamāl*) is perfectly clear: the pejorative prefix **ka-* is followed by *-mərəda-* (head, top), as Christian Bartholomae and Manfred Mayrhofer explained.²⁷ Thus it is highly unlikely that the Manichaean archons might be paralleled to the 'evil heads', as the latter have no correspondence in the religious collective consciousness of the Manicheans.²⁸

To explain the general Mithraic context in which the fresco of the 'City of Darkness' was depicted, Zoroastrian testimonies represent the best support, as Mithras is said to hit the skulls, i.e. the 'bad heads' of the demons:²⁹

Yt. 6. 5: "I will sacrifice unto Mithras, the lord of wide pastures, who has a thousand ears, ten thousand eyes. I will sacrifice unto the club of Mithras, the lord of wide pastures, well struck down upon the 'bad heads' of

²³ S. SHAKED in *Encyclopedia Iranica* X (2001), s. v. *gētīg* and *mēnōg*.

²⁴ *Ardā Wirāz Namāg* 5. 7 (GIGNOUX, P.: *Le Livre de Ardā Wirāzi*. Paris 1984, 52 and 53, 159 and n. 1); and *Dādestān-i Dēnīg* 19. 2 (ed. by E. W. WEST [Sacred Books of the East, vol. 18]. Oxford 1882, 44: "concerning Aharman it is said that his is no material existence").

²⁵ SHAKED, S.: Notes on Ahreman, the Evil Spirit and His Creation. *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to G. G. Scholem*. Jerusalem 1967, 227–234.

²⁶ YAv. *vaydāna-* is the head of divine beings and good men. See BARTHOLOMAE (n. 18) s.v.

²⁷ BARTHOLOMAE (n. 18) s. v.; MAYRHOFFER, M. – POHL, H.-D. – SCHMIDT, R. – ZWANZIGER, R.: *Kurzgefasstes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*. Heidelberg 1956–80, s. v.

²⁸ MMP *kamār*, 'head of evil being' occurs once in M4a/II/R/4/ and is related to the heads of the enemies of Manichaeism. See MÜLLER, F. W. K.: *Handschriftenreste in Estrangelo-Schrift aus Turfan, Chinesisch-Turkistan. II Teil* [Abhandlungen nicht zur Akademie gehöriger Gelehrter 2]. Berlin 1904, 57 and BOYCE, M.: *A Reader in Manichaean Middle Persian, and Parthian: Texts with Notes* [Acta Iranica ser. III, vol. 1]. Téhéran–Liège 1975, 190, text dt and n. 1.

²⁹ In Y. 57. 9–10, it is Sraoša, another important *yazata* in Zoroastrianism, who smites the 'bad head' of the demon of wrath: "We worship Sraoša the blessed and the stately, who smites with the blow of victory, and who furthers the settlements, the holy ritual chief, who for the poor among (our) men and women built a mighty house, who after sunset, and with his leveled battle-ax, smites Aēšma bloody wounds, and having struck the 'bad head,' casts him lightly (?) (to the earth), as the stronger (smites) the weaker." Moreover, in Y. 57. 30–31, Sraoša is said to cleave the demons' 'bad heads': "We worship Sraoša the blessed and the stately, who though lofty and so high, yea, even to the girdle, yet stoops to Mazda's creatures, (31) who thrice within the day, and three times of a night, will drive on to that region *Xvaniratha*, called the luminous, as he holds in both the hands and poises his knife-like battle-ax, which flies as of itself, and to cleave the Daevas' 'bad heads', ..." (*The Zend-Avesta* [The Sacred Books of the East, vol. 3]. Transl. by L. H. Mills. Oxford 1887).

the Daevas. I will sacrifice unto that friendship, the best of all friendships, that reigns between the moon and the sun.”

The *Mihr Yasht* also lists a long series of functions of god Mithras, among which one perfectly fits this argumentation: Mithras is YAv. *kamərəḍagan-*, i.e. ‘he who hits the evil heads’.³⁰ To reach a bit farther in the attempt to explain the iconography of this fresco, one more detail is worth highlighting: in *Widēwdād* 19. 44–45 *kamərəḍa-* is joined with the personal name of a demon, *Arəzūra-*, to build a toponym:

W. 19. 44–45: And the evil-doing Daeva, Angra Mainyu, the deadly, said: “What! Let the wicked, evil doing Daevas gather together at the (evil) head of Arəzūra!” They rush away shouting, the wicked, evil-doing Daevas; they run away shouting, the wicked, evil-doing Daevas; they run away casting the Evil Eye, the wicked, evil-doing Daevas: “Let us gather together at the (evil) head of Arəzūra!”

A direct combination between ‘bad head’ and the most devilish place in the world occurs in this passage. It describes the place where the demons meet, and which is understood as the gate of hell.³¹ This is most probably what has been depicted in the ‘City of Darkness’.

To sum up, this fresco in the Mithraeum of Hawarte shows an astonishingly clear correspondence with what the Zoroastrian texts describe: ‘evil heads’ of the demons in a row upon a wall and smitten by light rays as arrows. Underneath them a black door is depicted, which leads to hell. Each ‘evil head’ is hit by a sun-ray which is inevitably flung by *Sol Persice Mithra*.

2. ‘THE TWIN RIDERS’ (FIG. 2)

On the pillars at the entrance of the ritual room two scenes are there that portray two riders who stand before their mounts. The destruction of the mithraeum and the subsequent edification of a church in its place destroyed completely the upper half of these beautiful panels. The scene with the rider on the left pillar is the best-preserved

³⁰ Yt. 10. 36: “well may he (lit. he will be able to) bring them terror and fear: off he throws the evil heads of the men that are false to the treaty, off fly the evil heads of the men that are false to the treaty” (transl. GERSHEVITCH, I.: *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, with an introduction, translation and commentary. Cambridge 1959).

³¹ On YAv. *Arəzūra*, see BARTHOLOMAE (n. 18) s.v.; J. P. ASMUSSEN in *Encyclopedia Iranica* 1 (1987) s.v. “Arzūr”. – W. 3. 7: “O, Maker of the material world, thou Holy one! Which is the first place where the Earth feels sorest grief? Ahura Mazda answered: ‘It is the neck of Arəzūra; whereon the hosts of fiends rush forth from the burrow of the Druj’.” The toponym ‘Head of Arəzūra’ is in W. 19. 45, quoted above. See also the Iranian *Bundahišn* IX 10 (Anklesaria, B. T.: *Zand-Ākāsīh. Iranian or Greater Bundahišn*. Transliteration and Translation in English. Bombay 1956) which tells that the ‘Neck of the Arzūr’ is the gate of hell where the demons gather. This mountain was in the North, in the Zoroastrian geography the seat of Evil. In the Zoroastrian cosmogony Arzūr was a fiend, a son of Ahriman, who was killed by Gayōmard, the perfected first human being, see *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad* XXVII 14–15 (ed. by E. W. WEST [Sacred Books of the East, vol. 24]. Oxford 1885, 58).



Fig. 2. Rider from Hawarte (photo by GAWLIKOWSKI [n. 2] 343, fig. 9)

one of the two, showing quite perfectly the lower half of the picture. The other one, badly damaged all over, differs from the first one very slightly and only for some details. The apparels of the two riders show inverted colors. At the center of the scene on the left pillar, on a layer degrading smoothly from green to brown, a man is depicted in a splendid princely robe. He “is clad in a red tunic and black trousers, both with embroidered and bejeweled golden vertical bands”.³² Behind his shoulders there is a beautiful white male stallion, in an heraldic pose, with its left anterior paw raised. Golden chains with moon-shaped pendants adorn the garment of the horse. The lower extremity of a silk cloth is also discernible. The rider evidently held the horse by the bridle with his left hand, because with his right one the rider holds a *barsom* (a ritual bundle of rods). In front of the horse, near the bottom-right corner, the inferior part of a tripod surely sustaining a *thymiaterion* (a vessel for burning incense) encircled by a snake is visible. The rider holds a dark chain with his right hand, which is attached to the wrists of a small monstrous being. This anthropomorphic naked creature is curled up, in a position that seems to evoke its complete submission to the rider, and it may also be suffering, as the blood flowing from his left wrist testifies. If this picture were complete, the little black monster would be no more than an ornament, an attribute of the main subject, i.e. the beautiful rider and his mount. Anyway, this amazing creature is two-faced, some sort of hideous little Janus, and it is just one of many more such black figures which this mithraeum displays.³³

³² GAWLIKOWSKI: The Mithraeum (n. 2) 353.

³³ See below.

The iconography of these riders is rare, but it is not unique. It represents the re-elaboration of a specific *Darstellungstypus*: that of the Dioscuri.³⁴ However, this very representation is different from all others known until now as far as a Mithraic context is concerned, because only in this case are the riders dressed in rich garments. In all exemplars we know of, all coming from the West, the posture of the characters is the same as this one, but they all are naked and just wear a Phrygian cap. The most important exemplar had to be displayed in the Mithraeum of Walbrook, London (Fig. 3).³⁵ In fact, the relief of a young naked character standing before his mount, wearing a Phrygian cap and a mantle, was discovered not far from that mithraeum, and was long held to be not pertaining to it, but rather to a hypothetic temple of the Dioscuri nearby, which, however, has never been found. This picture of Hawarte helps certify the pertinence of the statue found in Walbrook to the London Mithraeum, if ever this certification should still be needed. There is only one more example of this kind that I am acquainted with, as I wrote in 2009, and it is portrayed on a very small limestone relief coming from Vienne on the Rhône.³⁶ These two are the only examples of Dioscuri portrayed in a Mithraic context together with their mounts. However, if we should enlarge our discussion to the images of the Dioscuri without horses, things would not be better: we should take only two more testimonies into account: *CIMRM* 350, from Rome,³⁷ and 1079, from the outskirts of Darmstadt.³⁸ Anyway, the diffused

³⁴ Cf. WILL, E.: *Le relief culturel gréco-romain* [BEFAR 183]. Paris 1955, 113–114: “L’iconographie des deux Frères n’a pas encore connu d’étude d’ensemble et nous présenterons un simple aperçu des faits tels qu’ils paraissent ressortir des documents actuellement accessibles. On s’aperçoit à cette occasion que l’artiste grec ne se croyait nullement tenu à représenter les Jumeaux en cavaliers. Si, par exemple, nous étudions les documents fournis par la Laconie, un des plus anciens centres de leur culte, nous constatons que les reliefs conservés se divisent en deux groupes: celui où les Dioscures sont représentés par leurs symboles comme les dokana ou les étoiles, et celui où figure le cheval. Mais ce dernier groupe ne les montre encore qu’exceptionnellement montés; le plus souvent, ils se tiennent debout à côté ou devant leur monture. Et ce type, bien loin d’être local, semble avoir été la règle en plus d’une région. Il est un fait qu’à partir du moment où leur image en ronde-bosse se multiplie, c’est-à-dire à l’époque hellénistique, on leur donne l’aspect de deux beaux éphèbes, coiffés du pilos, nus et debout et, au plus, on place un protomé de cheval à leurs pieds. Ou encore, offrant toujours la même apparence, ils tiennent le cheval par la bride, et ce type, qui reprend peut-être la conception d’un grand artiste de la période classique, persiste jusqu’à la fin du monde antique; ainsi ils apparaissent sur des monuments divers d’époque romaine, monnaies, sarcophages ou reliefs. Il va sans dire qu’on peut les voir aussi caracolant côte à côte; ainsi sur les monnaies de Grande-Grèce, de Rome et d’Asie Mineure et sur divers reliefs.”

³⁵ VERMASEREN, M. J.: *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae*. 2 vols. The Hague, 1956–1960 [*CIMRM*] 810–826. Because the statue was discovered ca. 20 m outside the Mithraeum of Walbrook, this artifact was not included by Vermaseren in *CIMRM*. For the hypothesis of an uncatchable shrine of the Castores, cf. SHEPHERD, J. D.: *The Temple of Mithras, London: Excavations by W. F. Grimes and A. Williams at the Walbrook* [Archaeological report 12]. London 1998, 183–184, 230, fig. 214. On the contrary, the precise spot of the finding “about 20 m south of the temple”, near the gates, induces to imagine an original collocation of the riders checking the access to the *spelaeum*, as in Hawarte.

³⁶ *CIMRM* 902. The better description and evaluation is in TURCAN, R.: *Les religions de l’Asie dans la vallée du Rhône* [EPRO 30]. Leiden 1972, 24–28.

³⁷ On this relief in limestone, now in the Museo Capitolino, the identification of the Dioscuri is far from sure. Vermaseren thought of the two brothers in relation to two tiny busts, below the busts of Luna and Sol, in the superior corners of the slab.

³⁸ *CIMRM* 1079: “Two arched niches, in each of which naked Dioscurus is standing, wearing a long shoulder cape and a *pilum* on their heads. Each holds a lance in his r.h. and rests his l.h. on a shield.”



Fig. 3. The Dioscorus from Walbrook, London
 (from J. D. SHEPHERD: *The Temple of Mithras, London: Excavations by W. F. Grimes and A. Williams at the Walbrook* [Archaeological report 12]. London 1998, 183, fig. 214)

Vermaseren does not show any picture of the piece, which is viewable in CUMONT, F.: *Textes et monuments figurés relatif aux mystères de Mithra* [MMM] I–II. Bruxelles 1896–1899, II 362 (h), fig. 247.

attestations of the Dioscuri all over the Roman world should prevent us from considering the Dioscuri from Hawarte as the results of some local idiosyncrasy.³⁹ It is quite dangerous to go too far into such precise identifications of all characters wearing a Phrygian cap that crowd the Mithraic iconographies, many among which might play 'polysemic' roles there.⁴⁰ According to Dirven, the riders from Hawarte should be identified with those characters portrayed while riding in hunting scenes, as in a very damaged fresco in the vestibule of that mithraeum itself, which is possible, but far from certain.

In my opinion, it is preferable to rely upon the kind of iconography which was chosen to portray these two riders. It is evident that the iconographic scheme is the customary one for groups of statues of the Castors. In late antique literature the subject of the Dioscuri is strictly connected with the blue hemispheres, as clearly attested in a very famous passage from the *De Decalogo* of Philo, which is echoed by John Lidus in his *de Mensibus*.⁴¹ As far as Mithraism is concerned, the identification between the Dioscuri and the blue hemispheres is strictly related to the travel of the souls, with which also Cautes and Cautopates were related. Julian took a position against this connection and tried to show that the Dioscuri were an allegorical representation of the tropics, instead. It is better to stress that of these sources, neither Julian, nor Philo, nor John Lidus knew anything about Mithras.⁴² The above-mentioned small plaque from Vienne is the only testimony that shows the Dioscuri as attributes of the great lion-headed god.⁴³ And it is precisely this one bond that links the twins with time, the alternation between day and night, the blue hemispheres and consequently with Cautes and Cautopates. But this is a theory already proposed by Cumont.⁴⁴ Which is the reciprocal relationship between the naked Dioscuri from London and Vienne and those dressed in rich garments from Hawarte? But above all, what does that small deformed two-headed black being enchained and crouched down in the corner mean?

Scene 3 of this mithraeum shows an enormous lion which tears to pieces one of those small horrific black beings, which Gawlikowski defined as 'demons' (Fig. 4).⁴⁵

³⁹ Such marginalization of the frescos from Hawarte inside the 'Mithraic storytelling' is presented by DIRVEN: *The Mithraeum* (n. 20) 31, n. 52: "scenes that probably derive from another religious tradition", i.e. in her opinion from the Manichaean tradition, cf. above.

⁴⁰ About the polysemic value of the Mithraic tauroctony, SAXL, F.: *Mithras: Typengeschichtliche Untersuchungen*. Berlin 1931 is still valuable.

⁴¹ *Iul. Or.* 11. 147A–C; Philo, *Decal.* 56 (p. 68 Nikiprowetzky); Joh. Lyd. *De mens.* IV 17 (p. 78 Wünsch).

⁴² Obviously the Mithraism of Julian is debated: I exposed my opinion in GNOLI (n. 7), with literature, largely coincident with TURCAN, R.: *Mithras platonius* [EPRO 47]. Leiden 1975, 124. MASTRO-CINQUE, A.: *Giuliano l'Apostata, Discorso su Helios re. Testo, traduzione e commento* [Studia Classica et Mediaevalia 5]. Nordhausen 2011, 60–61, starting from different positions, looks like coincide with me, on this subject: "Non c'erano, probabilmente, dei dogmi relativi ai Dioskouroi nel Mithraismo" (61 n. 180).

⁴³ On the lion-headed god, cf. JACKSON, H. M.: The Meaning and Function of the Leontocephaline in Roman Mithraism. *Numen* 32 (1985) 17–45, where little attention was given to CIMRM 902 from Vienne.

⁴⁴ *MMM* I 85–86.

⁴⁵ GAWLIKOWSKI: *The Mithraeum* (n. 2) *passim*.



Fig. 4. Lion and Demon from Hawarte (photo by GAWLIKOWSKI [n. 2] 343, fig. 10)

The bad conditions of the fresco do not allow us to tell if this small black being was also two-headed or not, but I guess that this detail is not so relevant. Gawlikowski, quoting Christensen, affirms about these beings:

I believe, however, that all the black creatures on these paintings should be understood as demons of darkness. They are being fettered and ultimately destroyed by Mithras, conceived as the god of light and justice, or torn to pieces by fierce lions.⁴⁶

Such an interpretation does presuppose a dualistic vision of the world, which is fundamental, e.g., in Zoroastrian doctrine, but so far it has proved to be absent in Roman Mithraism. What can be observed is that black demons do appear also in later Persian miniatures, and rolling heads can be met with in modern Persian lore.⁴⁷ The examples by Christensen, however, are not appropriate in this specific case, because in one of them black demons are mentioned, but they are enormous and dreadful. As I had already hypothesized in 2009, what is portrayed here should rather be personified vices, passions and faults.

⁴⁶ GAWLIKOWSKI: *Zoroastrian Echoes* (n. 6) 112.

⁴⁷ CHRISTENSEN, A.: *Essai sur la démonologie iranienne*. Copenhagen 1941, 55 and 88 (both cited by GAWLIKOWSKI: *Zoroastrian Echoes* [n. 6] 112).

Symeon of Mesopotamia – most probably to be identified with that Simeon who is quoted by Theodoretus and who was condemned at the Council of Ephesus,⁴⁸ and who was one of the sources for the corpus of the writings of Ps.-Makarios –, in a homily dedicated to the day of death tells about a strange doctrine, unattested in any other Christian writer: right after death, the faults of each person are transformed into small demons that come out of the body and prevent the angels of God (i.e. the virtues practiced during life) from getting closer and freeing the soul of the departed. This brief homily has been included among the works of Ephraem Syrus, in a part of the manuscript tradition, and only its Greek version is preserved:

But if in this life (the departed) lived depravedly, living together with the vices of opprobrium and overwhelmed with sensual pleasures and the vanity of this world, then, on the evening of departure from this life, those vices and pleasures he procured will become hideous demons who will arrange themselves around that miserable soul and they will not allow God's angels to approach. On the contrary, they seize it together with the hostile powers of the archons of darkness and they lead that miserable, sad, and weeping (soul) into dark, gloomy, and sorrowful places. There all sinners will wait for the judgement day and the eternal punishment, when the devil will catch them with his angels.⁴⁹

Is it so audacious to identify these δαίμονες πονηροί (cf. also 113. 44: τοῖς δαίμοσιν, τούτέστιν τὰ πάθη ἡμῶν) with the dark little beings of the Mithraeum of Hawarte? This strange doctrine, once more, contains the re-elaboration of those Zoroastrian teachings about the post-mortem, according to which the MP/Prth *ruwān* (the intrinsic soul of human beings, the one that undertakes the trip into the post-mortem), since the moment of his/her departure sits three days next to his/her head. In those three days it experiences fear and terror because of the assaults of the devils, if during his/her life the departed did not act in compliance with the precepts of the Good Religion.⁵⁰

It is impossible, for the moment, to tell more about this heterodox doctrine in Symeon of Mesopotamia and its location in the background of 5th century Christianity. What can be stressed is that it might well have originated in a Syro-Mesopotamian milieu and gotten diffused in a wide range of apocryphal writings variously attributed to the Church Fathers, from Athanasius to Basil, and Theophilus of Antioch.

I do not want to insist too much on this tradition, the study of which has just started and appears to be all but simple. What seems very plausible to me is the linkage of these representations of small black deformed beings in the Mithraeum of

⁴⁸ DÖRRIS, H.: *Symeon von Mesopotamien. Die Überlieferung der messalianschen „Makarios“-Schriften*. Leipzig 1941, 7–9. I owe this indication to my colleague, C. Faraggiana di Sarzana, to whom I publicly express my gratitude.

⁴⁹ Ps.-Makarios, *Hom.* 7 (p. 112. 25 – 113. 38 Strothmann).

⁵⁰ The most recent reflections about Zoroastrian afterlife are found in HUTTER, M.: *The Impurity of the Corpse (nasā) and the Future Body (tan ī pasēn) Death and Afterlife in Zoroastrianism*. In NICKLAS, T. – REITERER, F. V. – VERHEYDEN, J. (eds): *The Human Body in Death and Resurrection* [Deutero-canonical and Cognate Literature]. Berlin – New York 2009, 13–26.

Hawarte to the individual ethical sphere. The representation of the little black man crouched down at the feet of the splendid rider depicted in the left pillar of the ritual room in the Mithraeum of Hawarte seems very much evocative of the adept of Mithras who had reached the highest degrees of initiation and was ready to enter the other world dressed in the splendid garments of a Persian royal prince. He carried with him the core elements of cult: the *tymiatherion*, the *barsom* and a wonderful white horse. He could do this because he had been able to dominate and subjugate his petty vices and dark passions that are embodied by the enchained small dark being at his feet.

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