A.D.H. Bivar

MITHRAIC IMAGES OF BACTRIA: ARE THEY RELATED TO ROMAN MITHRAISM?

It is a major question for the understanding of western Mithraism to determine whether it represents a real offshoot of eastern religion; or whether it is to be seen as essentially a western innovation, tricked out with some veneer of oriental mystery, and enhanced by the adoption of an Iranian name, much astrological lore, and several Indo-Iranian technical terms. We have now reached the third in this series of international discussions on Mithraism. Much preliminary ground has been cleared. Yet it is still fair to claim that this central question remains unsettled. For some critics, like my good friend the Secretary-General of our Society, to whom the organisation of our labours owes so much, it is strictly in the western context that the monuments of Mithraism are best examined. ¹ For others, including the present speaker, the adoption of a wider, world perspective could illuminate aspects which the reticence of the western Mithraists has left obscure. I had proposed a thesis that before its passage to the Romans, Mithraism could have enjoyed an earlier grandeur as the religion of the ancient Medes. Evidence in favour of this theory is indeed nearly as scanty as that which inclines against it. Yet certain positive indications which I am about to explore lack explanation on narrower forms of the ‘western hypothesis’. Separately small, their cumulative weight must not be ignored by any valid general theory. At least one quite recent discovery, that of the Xanthos trilingual inscription ² has tended, indirectly perhaps, to point the same way.

The images I have to discuss are the earliest to which the label of Mithra can demonstrably, rather than arguably, be attached.

There are points in common with the Roman image, but naturally also differences. They do not, of course, include the Tauroctony, but I have argued elsewhere that this too can be detected in forms pre-dating the advent of anthropomorphism.  

The items in question come from the area of Bactria, and modern Afghanistan, and date from the last half of the second century B.C. They are far older than any monument of the cult in Italy, or even the well-known sculptures of Commagene. It is surely favourable to the Median theory that the oldest monuments are the closest to Iran. That evidence is to be found both to the east, and to the west, of that kingdom. With such preliminaries I turn to the material.

Since the work of Newell, students of the Graeco-Bactrian coinage have recognised the attributes of Mithra accompanying several of the deities there portrayed. We pass over quickly the representation of the solar chariot appearing on the commoner varieties of Plato’s Bactrian silver (Pl. I, fig. 1b) (I refer here to the minor King of Bactria, not the philosopher whose work sometimes also alludes to our theme). It is possible that the Iranian user of such coinage might understand as Mithra the radiate figure of the charioteer, no less than that the Greek designers of such coinage need have seen no more than a rendering of their own Apollo — depicted perhaps as on the shoulder register of Apulian vases (Pl. II, fig. 2)  

It is interesting, but not conclusive, that the monogram of these issues contains the letters mu and iota. Conceivably they designate a magistrate whose name was compounded with the element Mithra-, and to which the reverse type would cantingly allude. That argument, however, is not to be pressed.

More strictly relevant to the eastern setting is a scarcer variety of Plato first reported by myself from the Kabul Museum in

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3 'Document and symbol in the art of the Achaemenids', Monumentum H.S. Nyberg I, 62.
4 Edward T. Newell, Miscellanea Numismatica: Cyrene to India (ANS Numismatic Notes and Monographs No. 82), New York 1938, pp. 89-91.
5 As on the Thersites Vase at Boston, Ernst Buschor, Greek vase painting London 1921, Pl. XCV, fig. 158 (facing p. 157).