

## Bull in the House – An Attempt to Interpret a Motif of Mithraic Symbolism

*Numerous works on the Mithras mysteries have been written in recent centuries. Many attempts have also been made to interpret Mithraic iconography, mainly to decipher the central cult image, the bull-killing. Comprehensive works were also produced which attempted to decipher the entire symbolism of Mithras, but as scientific knowledge continued to expand, these findings often lost their timelessness. Attempts to determine the meaning of the other motifs have also been made, with partial results. The subject of this study is the interpretation of an element, the bull in the house, which is mainly depicted as a sub-plot. The aim of the study is to try to explain the meaning of the motif and to reconstruct the probable place of its origin. Vermaseren's two-volume collection *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* was used to collect all the cases containing the motif under study, to create a database of them grouped by location, to compare the different forms of the motif and to isolate these cases, and finally to evaluate the results. In this way, we can gain a clearer picture of the mysterious world of Mithraic religion and come closer to understanding the meaning of this complex and diverse symbolism. The lecture will provide an opportunity to open up new discourses on the subject of Mithras iconography.*

### Introduction

The topic of my presentation is the interpretation of the image of „the bull in the House”, a motif in Mithras symbolism. Over the past year I have studied in detail the major elements of the Mithras symbol system, with particular reference to the representations along the Danube. It is important to clarify that these are not representations of the figure of Mithras in the Persian religion, but of the Roman cult of Mithras.

The aim of my research was to attempt to interpret these representations and to try to determine the origin of the symbol.

To examine the representations, I have drawn partly on textual descriptions and pictorial illustrations in the CIMRM and partly on the online photo databases: *tertullian.org* and *lupa.at*. I also examined all the previous works on the subject in the Mithraic literature.

With the help of CIMRM, I collected a list of reliefs and frescoes containing the motif under study, created a database of the site, the province, the motif before and after the depiction, and also described the occurrence of the motif according to other criteria. I then used a comparative method to investigate the differences and similarities between the different cases of motif representation.

## About the Motif

The "bull in the house" motif<sup>1</sup> is usually depicted as a sub-plot of the Mithras reliefs depicting the killing of the bull. Of the total Roman Mithras monuments, 29 instances of this representation have been found<sup>2</sup>. In one of these cases, the relief fragment from Cologne,<sup>3</sup> the bull is depicted in a vaulted cave instead of a house, but in the course of this study I will examine this case together with the other cases depicting a house, since the bull is not depicted outdoors either. In addition to the 29 examples, several other representations can be classified as belonging to the same motif. In two cases, the bull's house in the motif is only visible, as well as the person attacking it with a torch, but the bull is not (CIMRM 1359 from Königshoffen, Germania, CIMRM 966 from Pons Saravi, Gallia). In two other fragmentary representations, only a fragment of the bull's house remains, so we cannot determine whether the bull was included in these representations (CIMRM 2111, CIMRM 2115 from Sarmizegetusa, Dacia). In addition, three representations have been found in which the bull is depicted without the house, but the similarity in sequence to the bull in the house makes it likely that this is the motif (CIMRM 1815, the disc of Sárkeszi, CIMRM 1283 and CIMRM 1292, the famous reliefs of Neuenheim and Osterburken, from Germania. The 36 reliefs thus assembled are distributed among several Roman provinces and I district of Italy (Rome). Of these, 18 were found in Dacia,<sup>4</sup> while far fewer were found in other provinces. The second largest proportion, but well behind the Dacian ones, was 6 from Germania,<sup>5</sup> 5 from Moesia,<sup>6</sup> 4 from Pannonia,<sup>7</sup> 1-1 from Gaul<sup>8</sup> and Noricum,<sup>9</sup> and 1 from Rome, from the Caelius hill.<sup>10</sup> There are also some depictions of a bull walking to the right, but these do not include the other sub-plots of the tauroctony and cannot be considered as equivalent to the motif.

<sup>1</sup>The "house" element of the bull in the house motif in relief was first recognised by Cumont, for example: MMM, p. 298., Nr. 171.; p. 299-300., Nr. 173.

<sup>2</sup>CIMRM 1019 (Cologne, Germania), 1128 (Nida, Germania), 1247 (Dieburg, Germania), 1422 (Lauriacum, Noricum), 1475 (Siscia, Pannonia), 1740 (Alcsút, Pannonia), 1797 (Aquincum, Pannonia), 1920 (Potaissa, Dacia), 1920, 1935, 1958, 1972, 1974, 1975, 2000 (Apulum, Dacia), 2023 (Micia, Dacia), 2036, 2037, 2042, 2046, 2051 (Sarmizegetusa, Dacia), 2171 (Romula, Dacia), 2214 (Janjevo, Moesia), 2244 (Tavaličev, Moesia), 2191, 2192 (Acunar, Moesia), 2297 (Tomi, Moesia), Lissi-Carrona 1986., 36-38 (Rome), Nemeti-Nemeti 2004 = Nemeti-Cristea 2019., 282. (Pojajena, Dacia).

<sup>3</sup>CIMRM 1019 (Cologne, Germania).

<sup>4</sup>CIMRM 1920 (Potaissa, Dacia), 1920, 1935, 1958, 1972, 1974, 1975, 2000 (Apulum, Dacia), 2023 (Micia, Dacia), 2036, 2037, 2042, 2046, 2051, 2111, 2115 (Sarmizegetusa, Dacia), 2171 (Romula, Dacia).

<sup>5</sup>CIMRM 1019 (Cologne, Germania), 1128 (Nida, Germania), 1247 (Dieburg, Germania), 1283 (Neuenheim, Germania), 1292 (Osterburken, Germania), 1359 (Königshoffen, Germania).

<sup>6</sup>CIMRM 2214 (Janjevo, Moesia), 2244 (Tavaličev, Moesia), 2191, 2192 (Acunar, Moesia), 2297 (Tomi, Moesia).

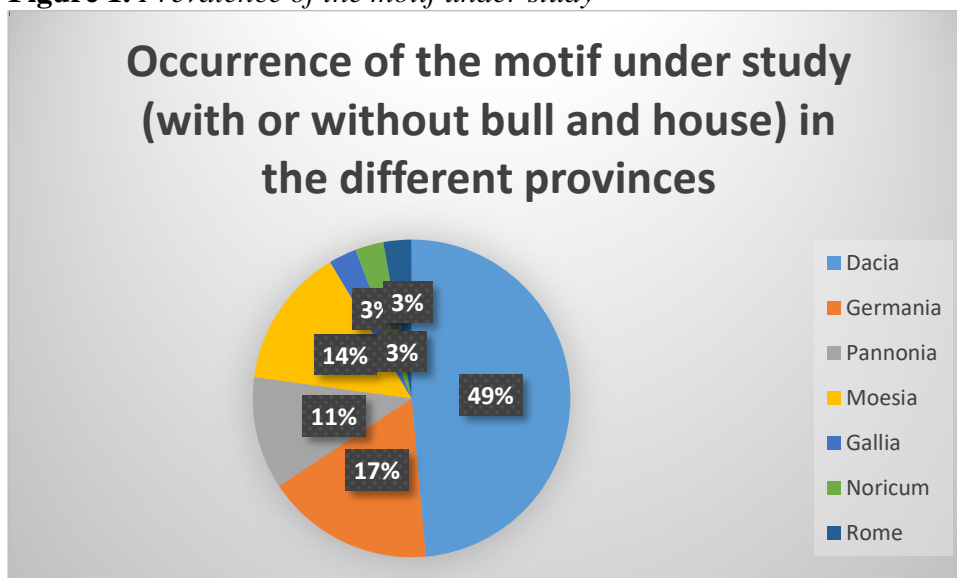
<sup>7</sup>CIMRM 1475 (Siscia, Pannonia), 1740 (Alcsút, Pannonia), 1797 (Aquincum, Pannonia), 1815 (Sárkeszi, Pannonia).

<sup>8</sup>CIMRM 966 (Pons Saravi, Gallia)..

<sup>9</sup>CIMRM 1422 (Lauriacum, Noricum).

<sup>10</sup>Lissi-Carrona 1986., 36-38.

1

2 **Figure 1.** *Prevalence of the motif under study*

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5 If we look only at the cases of the narrower motif, the proportion is even  
6 more towards Dacia: of the 29 cases 15 from Dacia,<sup>11</sup> the second largest  
7 number being the much smaller number of 5 from Moesia,<sup>12</sup> 3 from  
8 Germania,<sup>13</sup> 3 from Pannonia,<sup>14</sup> 1 from Noricum<sup>15</sup> and 1 from Rome.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>CIMRM 1920 (Potaissa, Dacia), 1920, 1935, 1958, 1972, 1974, 1975, 2000 (Apulum, Dacia), 2023 (Micia, Dacia), 2036, 2037, 2042, 2046, 2051 (Sarmizegetusa, Dacia), 2171 (Romula, Dacia).

<sup>12</sup>CIMRM 2214 (Janjevo, Moesia), 2244 (Tavaličev, Moesia), 2191, 2192 (Acunur, Moesia), 2297 (Tomi, Moesia).

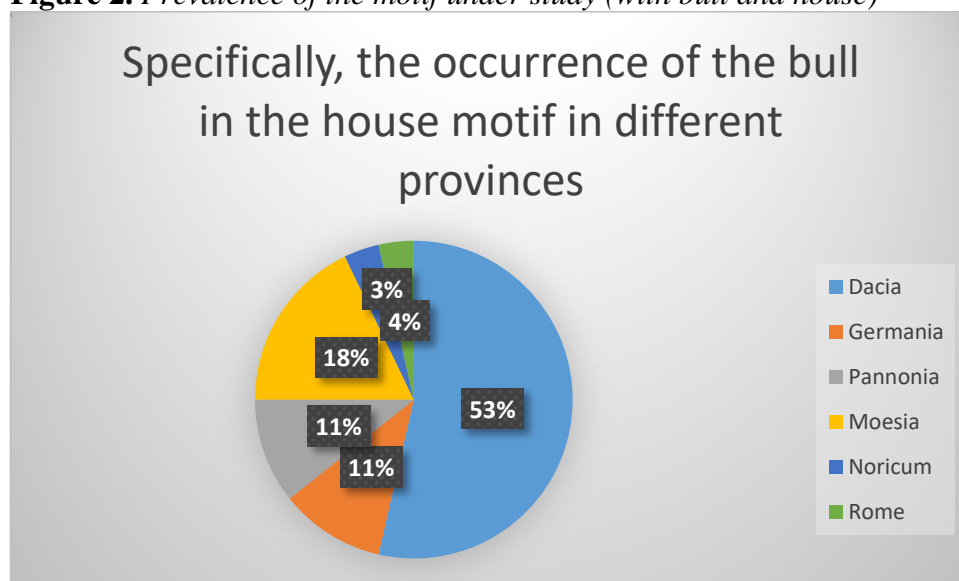
<sup>13</sup>CIMRM 1019 (Cologne, Germania), 1128 (Nida, Germania), 1247 (Dieburg, Germania).

<sup>14</sup>CIMRM 1475 (Siscia, Pannonia), 1740 (Alcsút, Pannonia), 1797 (Aquincum, Pannonia).

<sup>15</sup>CIMRM 1422 (Lauriacum, Noricum).

<sup>16</sup>Lissi-Carrona 1986., 36-38.

1 **Figure 2.** *Prevalence of the motif under study (with bull and house)*



## 2 Interpretations so far

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5 In Levente László's work, he mentions the image of the bull in the house:  
6 he identifies it with the image of the grazing bull, which I personally can agree  
7 with, since it plays a similar role as a subplot of taurotony. He refers to the  
8 house in the motif as a stable represented as a house, citing the cases of  
9 Lauriacum, Apulum, Aquincum and Nida as examples. According to Laszlo,  
10 the depiction of zodiac Taurus in the house represents when the constellation of  
11 Taurus in the northern hemisphere is not visible in the sky for about a month  
12 (from the end of April to October), as the sun then makes its apparent journey  
13 through the constellation, thus obscuring it.<sup>17</sup> In my opinion, it is likely that the  
14 motif has something to do with the question of the visibility of the constellation  
15 Taurus, but the explanation is not correct, more on that later.

16  
17 In his study, Levente Nagy also reflects on this motif, saying that this  
18 depiction indicated a certain astronomical constellation when the planet Venus  
19 was visible in the sign of Taurus.<sup>18</sup> In this case, he either identified the bull  
20 with the constellation Taurus and Venus at the same time, or he believed that  
21 the bull represented Venus and the house, its astrological house, Taurus, which  
22 in my opinion is impossible, since on the one hand it is not logical that in a  
23 system of pictorial motifs a constellation should not be represented by the form  
24 best suited to represent it, and on the other hand in the Tauroctonics and  
25 Mithras taurophorus motifs the bull clearly represents the zodiac bull, Taurus.  
26 It does not, however, exclude the veracity of the writings of Porphyry,<sup>19</sup> since  
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<sup>17</sup>László 2005, 196. (László L.: *A „Mithras-mítosz”* In: László L. – Nagy L. – Szabó Á.: *Mithras és misztériumai*. Budapest, 2005, 169-233.)

<sup>18</sup>Nagy 2012., 20.

<sup>19</sup>Porphyry, 1983., 18., pp. 31.

the symbolism of the Mithras mysteries is characterised by a variety of meanings.

In the iconography of the Mithraic mysteries, a symbol cannot represent two things in one motif. In the context of several different phenomena, it can represent several different meanings at the same time (multiple interpretations), but in a single phenomenon, the bull cannot represent both the Bull and Venus. Just as in the motif of the tauroctony or the water miracle, a certain pictorial element marks only a certain astronomical element.

The motif is also mentioned by Campbell in his *Templum caeleste* ("Celestial Temple"). According to him, the bull represents the celestial bull, the divine bull, and he uses the term *Deus taurus* for this phenomenon, in which he discovered the continuation of the ancient Indian deity Gōṣurvan. According to him, the bull motif is linked to the motifs of rain, boat, wind and light.<sup>20</sup> In my view, the survival of Indian roots in the Mithraic motif set cannot be ruled out, but the use of motifs is predominantly associated with constellations. It is conceivable that this motif set, or some of its elements used to describe the phenomenon (e.g. house), may have been derived from the old East Indian or Persian (and thus even the Phoenician as defined by Campbell<sup>21</sup>) motif system, but not primarily in its old meaning, but used to denote the astronomical phenomenon.

### Examining the Types of Representation of the Motif

The 35 examined reliefs were analysed according to different criteria. The first criterion focused on the iconography, on the similarities and differences in representation. The first such criterion was whether the depiction showed Mithras attacking the house. In only 6 of the 35 cases is the attacking Mithras depicted with certainty<sup>22</sup>, in 2 cases the depiction cannot be determined due to damage,<sup>23</sup> and in 29 cases it is not depicted with certainty.

3 of the 6 cases of Mithras' attack are from Germania,<sup>24</sup> 2 from Dacia<sup>25</sup> and 1 from Gaul.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Campbell 1968, 335-336.

<sup>21</sup>Campbell 1968, 335-336.

<sup>22</sup>CIMRM 966, 1128, 1247, 1359, 1972, 2023.

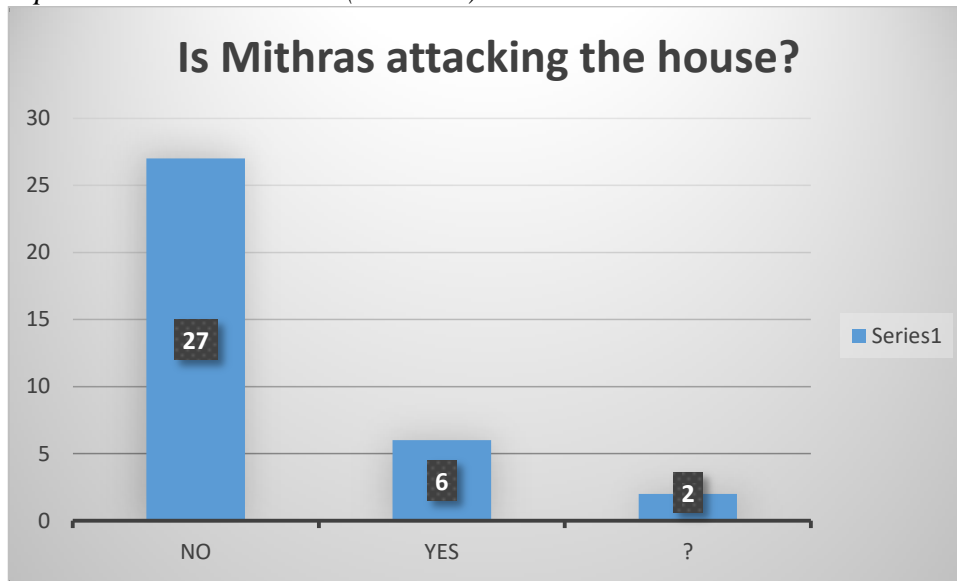
<sup>23</sup>CIMRM 2111, 2115.

<sup>24</sup>CIMRM 1128, 1247, 1359.

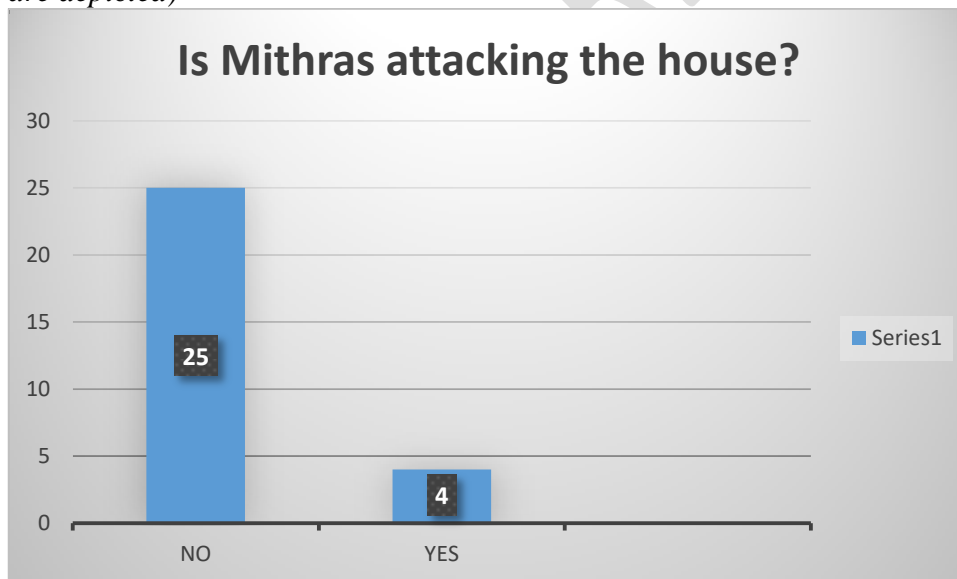
<sup>25</sup>CIMRM 1972, 2023.

<sup>26</sup>CIMRM 966.

**Figure 3.** *Proportion of the image 'Mithras attacking the house' among the representations examined (all cases)*



**Figure 4.** *Proportion of the image 'Mithras attacking the house' among the representations examined (only in the cases where both the bull and the house are depicted)*



Out of the 29 cases where both the bull and the house are shown, only 4 show Mithras attacking.<sup>27</sup>

As I have already mentioned, not all depicted cases have a house in the motif, sometimes the bull is depicted without a house, there are only 3 such cases: 2 from Germania,<sup>28</sup> 1 from Pannonia, which is a disc from Sárkeszi,<sup>29</sup>

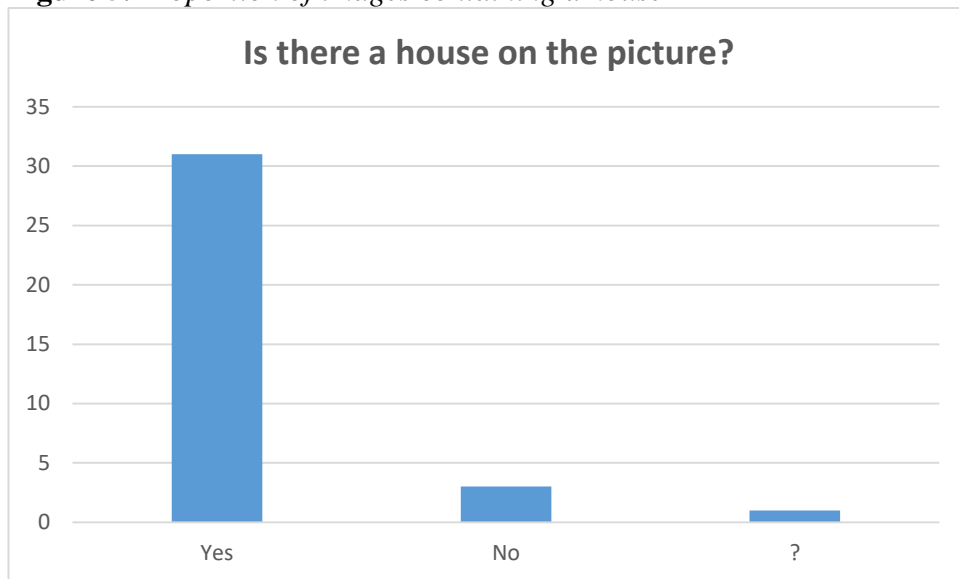
<sup>27</sup>CIMRM 1128, 1247, 1972, 2023.

<sup>28</sup>CIMRM 1283, 1292.

1 and there are two fragmentary depictions where only a piece of the wall of the  
 2 bull's house is visible.<sup>30</sup>

3

4 **Figure 5.** *Proportion of images containing a house*



5

6

7 In some cases, the house is visible but not the bull: there are certainly 2  
 8 such cases, one from Königshoffen in Germania,<sup>31</sup> the other<sup>32</sup> from Pons Saravi  
 9 near Königshoffen, which was a Gallian settlement. The two damaged  
 10 depictions<sup>33</sup> mentioned earlier also do not show the bull, but the position of the  
 11 depiction suggests that it was originally visible.

12

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<sup>29</sup>CIMRM 1815.

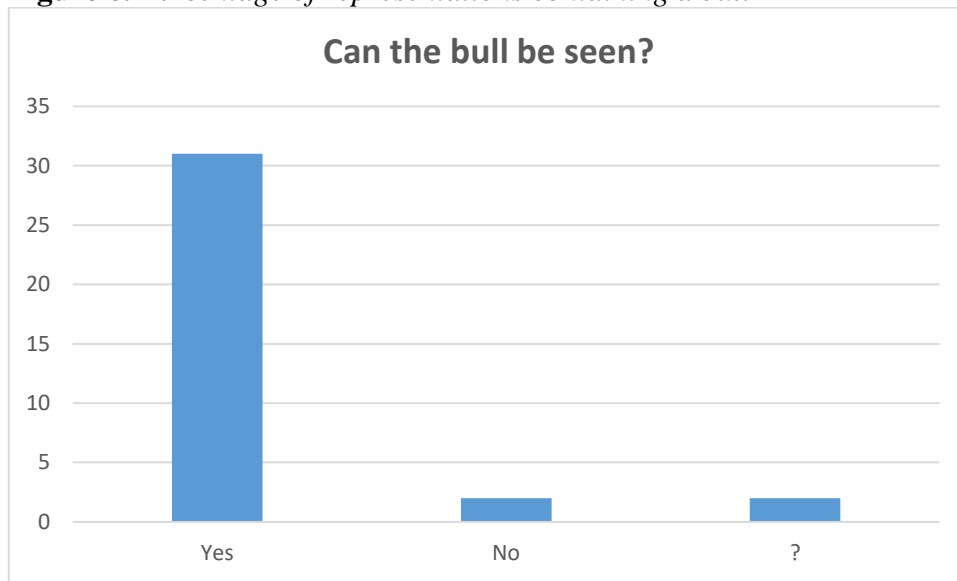
<sup>30</sup>CIMRM 2111, 2115.

<sup>31</sup>CIMRM 1359.

<sup>32</sup>CIMRM 966.

<sup>33</sup>CIMRM 2111, 2115.

1 **Figure 6. Percentage of representations containing a bull**



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4 Summarizing these analyses, it can be concluded that in most cases both  
5 the bull and the house are included in the motif, and that in 6 cases the  
6 accompanying element of the motif is that Mithras attacks the bull's house.<sup>34</sup>

### 7 8 9 **Proving that a motif is separately from other motifs**

10  
11 After collecting 35 illustrations and creating a database, I began my  
12 investigations with the hypothesis that this motif could not be interpreted  
13 together with or as an element of other independent motifs in Mithraic  
14 symbolism, contrary to Vermaseren's view,<sup>35</sup> according to the "bull in the  
15 house" and the "bull in the boat" form a single motif.

16 Therefore I have also examined the motifs preceding and following the  
17 bull in the house motif in the. It is important to note that the analysis also  
18 includes cases where the bull is depicted without a house or where the bull is  
19 not visible.

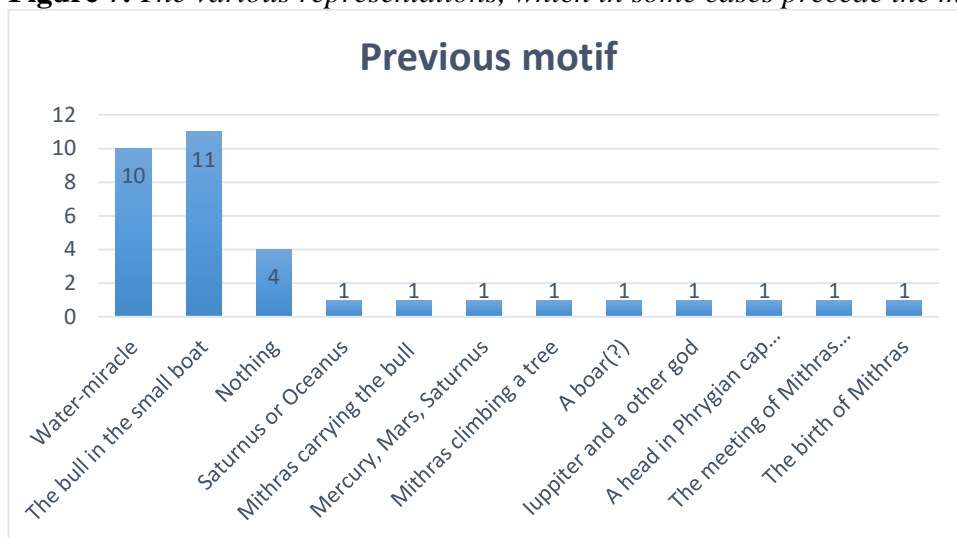
20 For the motifs preceding the 'bull in the house' motif in the order of the  
21 sub-scenes, the following results were obtained:

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23  
24  
<sup>34</sup>CIMRM 966, 1128, 1247, 1359, 1972, 2023.

<sup>35</sup>Vermaseren 1963, 8.



1 **Figure 7.** *The various representations, which in some cases precede the motif*



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3  
4 In 11 of the 35 cases, the leitmotif was the "bull in the boat"<sup>36</sup> and in 10  
5 cases the "miracle of water".<sup>37</sup> In four cases nothing was depicted, two of  
6 which depicted the bull without a house. In the other groups, 1 depicted Saturn  
7 or Oceanus,<sup>38</sup> 1 a wild boar (?),<sup>39</sup> 1-1 Mercury, Mars and Saturn,<sup>40</sup> 1 Mithras  
8 climbing a tree<sup>41</sup> and 1 the birth of Mithras.<sup>42</sup> In another case, where the bull is  
9 depicted without a house, the preceding motif is Mithras carrying the bull on  
10 his shoulders.<sup>43</sup> Another case also shows a head with a Phrygian cap, as in the  
11 previous motif, but only a fragment of the bull with a house survives.<sup>44</sup> Of the  
12 two instances where only the house is depicted without the bull, one shows  
13 Iuppiter and another god,<sup>45</sup> the other the feast of Mithras and Sol.<sup>46</sup>

14 The dispersion is even greater for the motifs following the bull in the  
15 house.

16 The "bull in the house" motif is followed in 4 cases by the bull in the boat  
17 (scapha lunata) motif,<sup>47</sup> in 3 cases by a person walking (shepherd?),<sup>48</sup> or the

<sup>36</sup>CIMRM 1019, 1422, 1920, 1935, 1972, 1975, 2036, 2051, 2171, 2291.

<sup>37</sup>CIMRM 1974, 2000, 2023, 2037, 2046, 2171, 2214, 2244, 2292, 2297.

<sup>38</sup>CIMRM 1475.

<sup>39</sup>CIMRM 2046.

<sup>40</sup>CIMRM 1128.

<sup>41</sup>CIMRM 1247.

<sup>42</sup>Lissi-Carrona 1986., 36-38.

<sup>43</sup>CIMRM 1292.

<sup>44</sup>CIMRM 1972.

<sup>45</sup>CIMRM 1359.

<sup>46</sup>CIMRM 966.

<sup>47</sup>CIMRM 1128, 1475, 2037, 2292.

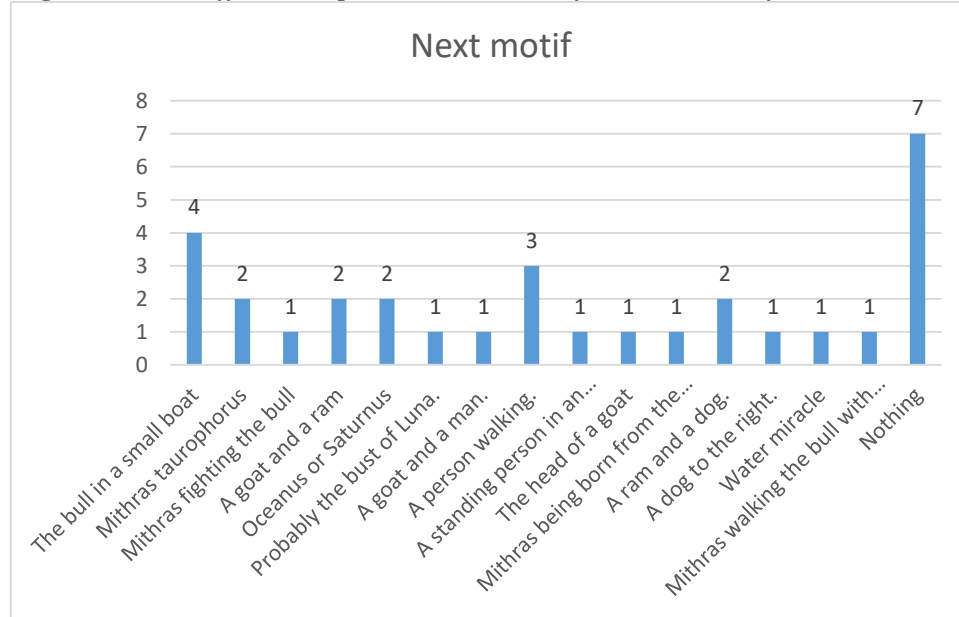
<sup>48</sup>CIMRM 1974, 2000, 2023.

Mithras taurophorus scene,<sup>49</sup> in 2-2 cases by either a goat and a ram,<sup>50</sup> or a bearded god (Oceanus or Saturnus),<sup>51</sup> or a ram and a dog.<sup>52</sup>

The following motifs appear as elements following the "bull in the house" motif only on one relief each: Mithras fighting the bull,<sup>53</sup> Mithras being born from the rock,<sup>54</sup> Luna at her breast,<sup>55</sup> a goat and a man (shepherd?),<sup>56</sup> goat's head, standing man with dog,<sup>57</sup> dog walking to the right,<sup>58</sup> water miracle<sup>59</sup>, Mithras is walking the bull with a rope.

In 8 cases there is nothing following the motif I have studied.<sup>60</sup>

**Figure 8.** *The different representations that follow the motif in some cases*



Summarising these data, in 11 of the 35 cases the bull in the boat is the preceding motif,<sup>61</sup> and in 4 cases the bull in the house is followed by the bull in the boat.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, in 18 cases the bull in the house and the bull in the boat motifs are not directly juxtaposed, which proves that both are independent motifs.

<sup>49</sup> CIMRM 1019, 1247, 1283.

<sup>50</sup> CIMRM 1797, 1920.

<sup>51</sup> CIMRM 1815, 2046.

<sup>52</sup> CIMRM 1935, 2291.

<sup>53</sup> CIMRM 1359.

<sup>54</sup> CIMRM 1975.

<sup>55</sup> CIMRM 2214.

<sup>56</sup> CIMRM 1974.

<sup>57</sup> CIMRM 1972.

<sup>58</sup> CIMRM 2244.

<sup>59</sup> CIMRM 2042.

<sup>60</sup> CIMRM 966, 1292, 1422, 2051, 2111, 2115, 2171, 2297.

<sup>61</sup> CIMRM 1019, 1422, 1920, 1935, 1972, 1975, 2036, 2051, 2171, 2291.

<sup>62</sup> CIMRM 1128, 1475, 2037, 2292.

## 1 An attempt to make sense of the „Bull in the house” representation

2  
3 As I mentioned earlier, several attempts have been made to interpret this  
4 motif. With regard to the interpretations that have been made so far, I think it is  
5 certainly correct that they have sought an explanation of the motif in the world  
6 of astronomical phenomena, but I would like to offer a different solution to the  
7 answer of Levente László and Levente Nagy to decipher the meaning of the  
8 representation. I do not, of course, wish to claim that the interpretative  
9 framework I have outlined is without doubt the only correct interpretation of  
10 this motif, but merely to open up a new perspective in the discourse on the  
11 interpretation of representation.

12 Levente László approached the interpretation well when he linked this to  
13 the question of the visibility of the constellation Taurus, but he, as I mentioned,  
14 saw the motif as indicating the period when the Taurus is hidden in the sky. In  
15 my opinion, the „bull in the house” motif symbolises a phenomenon linked to  
16 some kind of appearance of the Taurus. I see it as a phenomenon when, on a  
17 certain day of the year, the zodiac Taurus reappears in the morning twilight in  
18 the sky after a period of hiding. This is a phenomenon that occurs in the middle  
19 of May each year in the 1-3 century.<sup>63</sup> I will substantiate my claim by  
20 analysing the pictorial representation of the motif.

21 If we look at the classic cases of the motif, in which the bull is found in a  
22 house (or in the Cologne case, in a cave), in virtually all cases the bull sticks its  
23 head out of the house. This symbolises that he wants to get out of the house.  
24 This is illustrated by three reliefs (CIMRM 1740 from Alcsút, Pannonia  
25 inferior, CIMRM 1475 from Siscia, Pannonia superior and Apulum CIMRM  
26 1958-1959 from Apulum, Dacia).

27  
28 **Figure 9.** *Mithraic relief from Alcsút, Pannonia inferior (CIMRM 1740), photo:*  
29 [http://www.epa.uz.ua/02000/02007/00033/pdf/EPA2007\\_bp\\_regisegei\\_30\\_19](http://www.epa.uz.ua/02000/02007/00033/pdf/EPA2007_bp_regisegei_30_19)  
30 [93\\_215-225.pdf](http://www.epa.uz.ua/02000/02007/00033/pdf/EPA2007_bp_regisegei_30_19) (Last download: 2023. 07. 15)



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<sup>63</sup> László 2005, 199.

1 **Figure 10.** *Mithraic relief from Siscia, Pannonia superior (CIMRM 1475).*  
2 *MMM, pp. 326., fig. 193*



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4  
5 **Figure 11.** *Mithraic relief from Apulum, Dacia (CIMRM 1958-1959).* [https://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/images/cimrm1958\\_Alba\\_Iulia\\_National\\_Museum\\_of\\_the\\_Union\\_2011\\_-\\_Votive\\_Relief\\_Dedicated\\_to\\_Mithras\\_by\\_Titus\\_Aurelius\\_Macus\\_Leg\\_XIII\\_Gemina\\_Apulum.jpg](https://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/images/cimrm1958_Alba_Iulia_National_Museum_of_the_Union_2011_-_Votive_Relief_Dedicated_to_Mithras_by_Titus_Aurelius_Macus_Leg_XIII_Gemina_Apulum.jpg) (Last download: 2023.  
8 07. 15.)  
9



10  
11  
12 In most cases, you can also see that the bull has stepped out or is about to  
13 step out with its front legs. Good examples are the Mician fragment CIMRM  
14 2023, the Nida fragment CIMRM 1128, one of the Sarmizegetusa fragments,  
15 CIMRM 2046-2047.  
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- 1 **Figure 12.** *Mithraic relief from Micia, Dacia (CIMRM 2023). MMM, p. 306.,*  
2 *fig. 164*



- 3  
4  
5 **Figure 13.** *Mithraic relief from Nida, Germania (CIMRM 1128). Photo: CIMRM*  
6 *1128*



- 7  
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1 **Figure 14.** *Mithraic relief from Sarmizegetusa, Dacia (CIMRM 2046-2047).*  
 2 *MMM, p. 300. fig. 156*



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 5 Therefore, the interpretation that the motif represents when the bull is not  
 6 visible is not correct, since in most cases the bull sticks its head and part of its  
 7 trunk out of the house, so it is more logical to use it to represent when the bull  
 8 comes out of hiding. So you cannot indicate when it is not visible, because then  
 9 it would either have to hide completely or only the back of the bull would be  
 10 sticking out of the house, because that would indicate that it is missing or gone.  
 11 To interpret the sub-motif of Mithras attacking the house of Taurus with  
 12 stones, sticks or torches, I think that Levente László's interpretation of the main  
 13 motif can be applied, that from the end of April to the end of May the  
 14 constellation Taurus is not visible, because the Sun seems to make its orbit in  
 15 Taurus.<sup>64</sup> In my opinion, there may be some reality in this, in which case these  
 16 two phenomena and the order of their depictions can be interpreted in the  
 17 context of an annual cycle, since first Taurus is in the house, followed by the  
 18 „attack of Mithras”. However, we must not forget that this accompanying motif  
 19 appears in only 6 of the 35 cases,<sup>65</sup> so it may be a special extension in those  
 20 places where it played an important role, as will be discussed in more detail  
 21 later. This is also supported by the fact that the „water miracle” motif precedes  
 22 the „bull in the house” motif in the sequence in many cases<sup>66</sup>.

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 24

## 25 **Dating of the reliefs**

26

27 Of the 35 monuments depicting the motif, only 8 can be dated, 7 of them  
 28 between 170 and 230 AD (two from Germania between 200 and 230 AD).  
 29 Tibor Nagy dates the disc of Sárkeszi to the 3rd century AD.<sup>67</sup> From these we  
 30 cannot draw any firm conclusions as to when the motif might have developed,

<sup>64</sup>László 2005, 202-205.

<sup>65</sup>CIMRM 966, 1128, 1247, 1972, 2023.

<sup>66</sup>E. g.: CIMRM 1740.

<sup>67</sup>Nagy 1958., 9-13.



but we can only be certain that it was in use among the Mithraic believers of the Danube region during the period in question, i.e. the second half of the 2nd century and the first half of the 3rd century.

## **Investigating the geographical location of the motif and the motivations for its emergence**

In the absence of written sources or clear evidence, we cannot say for certain when and where this motif originated and entered into Mithraic symbolism. However, if we look at the occurrence of the motif in relation to the spatial distribution of the Mithras monuments that have been found, two things are striking. The first is the fact that, with the exception of the two cases, all the monuments with this motif have been found in the provinces of Limes (Germania, Pannonia, Noricum, Dacia, Moesia), and that the place of origin is therefore to be found in these provinces, and secondly, that the number of monuments from Dacia stands out, as I have already mentioned, 17. There is only one exception, which was not found from the Rhineland and Danubian provinces but in Rome, the Mithraeum of Caelius, from the Mithraeum under the Cathedral of San Stephano Rotondo, in the present-day Celio hill, which was reconstructed in the 1970s and is therefore not included in Vermaseren's database, but Italian researchers have concluded from an examination of the elements of the relief as a whole that it could have been made by a person who had moved from Dacia to Italia.<sup>68</sup> The second largest number of pieces was found in Germania, 6 in total, with only one piece behind the 5 from Moesia. The number of Dacian artefacts is almost one and a half times greater than the number of Germanic, which is significant even if one takes into account that not all the monuments have survived for posterity. It is striking that three of the Germanic artefacts come from towns on the Rhine and the rest from the Rhine area, so it is possible that Rhine shipping and trade played a role in their spread, or that they come from a particular workshop on the Rhine, but it is certain that the motif was used in the area. In view of these data and the large number of Mithraic monuments in other Danubian provinces, we can conclude that there is a strong possibility that Dacia may have been the area where the motif was developed, although Germania cannot be excluded.

If we take into account the iconographic peculiarities, we can see that regional differences can also be seen in the details of the representation.

The scene of Mithras attacking the house is represented in the finds from Germania, on the relieves from Nida on the Rhine and on the relief, found nearby Dieburg<sup>69</sup>, as well as on the relieves from the Rhine, from Königshoffen. In addition, from Gallian Pons Saravi, close to Königshoffen, the scene is represented on the relief. In Dacia can be found two occurrences of attacking Mithras, one of from Apulum and the other from Micia. Taking these into account, it can be concluded that the accompanying motif of „Mithras

<sup>68</sup>Lissi-Carrona 1986., 36-38.

<sup>69</sup>CIMRM 1247.

attacking the house” is mainly present in Germania, and in particular in the Rhine valley. It can therefore be assumed that the bull in the house motif, present in the Danubian provinces, was extended in this region to include the accompanying scene of the attack by the god. The versions from Königshoffen and Pons Saravia can be considered as a sub-type of the attacking Mithras, on which the bull is not visible, only the house.

The relief from Dieburg shows a more complex representation, since instead of the usual house or stable, the bull is found in a temple-like building with two classical columns and tympanum. The building's tympanum features a goose on a stone and two heads of man, presumably Cautes and Cautopates, which I believe correspond to the constellations Anser and Gemini, a motif that is probably a representation of a more complex astronomical phenomenon.

**Figure 15.** Mithraic relief from Dieburg, Germania (CIMRM 1247). [https://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/images/cimrm1247\\_carolemage.jpg](https://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/images/cimrm1247_carolemage.jpg) (Last download: 2023. 07. 15.)





Another regional type is the variant, also mainly found in Germania, where the bull is depicted grazing or walking without a house. In my opinion, Levente Nagy was right to see that this is identical with the "bull in the house" depiction, but I think that this variant of the motif can also be interpreted in the way I have outlined.

The spatial distribution of the depictions within Dacia is as follows: the largest number of depictions was found in Sarmizegetusa, 7 from a single sanctuary.<sup>70</sup> The second largest number was found in the centre of Dacia Apulensis, Apulum, 6 copies,<sup>71</sup> including 1 case from Marosportus.<sup>72</sup> In total, 2 pieces of the representation were found in Potaissa,<sup>73</sup> 1 piece from Romula<sup>74</sup> and 1 case from modern Pojajena.<sup>75</sup> Taking all this into account, it seems that in Dacia the motif was most widespread in Sarmizegetusa, where all the examples from the city were found in a single shrine. Although we cannot be certain, the possibility arises that the motif may have originated from Sarmizegetusa. In addition to this reliefs found in Sarmizegetusa, other dacian reliefs, identified by certain iconographic features, may have been made in a workshop in this city and, including one from Apulum.<sup>76</sup> Since the reliefs were commissioned by the faithful and initiates and were not influenced by the artistic freedom of the stone carvers, it can be assumed that the iconographic features are an imprint of the Sarmisegetusian version of the religion of Mithras. The only Italian example mentioned earlier,<sup>77</sup> which is believed to have been made by a person of Dacian origin, is another argument in favour of a Dacian origin.

The geographical spread of the motif suggests that it is a local feature, which actually developed in Dacia. The geographical distribution of the places where the reliefs were made suggests that Sarmizegetusa was the place of origin. As in other religions, the central myth of the cult of Mithras did not cover all the details of the cult, but provided a flexible framework to which different local communities could add different details. This was particularly the case in the Danubian provinces, which may explain why in Dacia, for example in Sarmizegetusa, an astronomical phenomenon not observed elsewhere plays a prominent role in the local experience of the cult of Mithras, and why new local motifs emerge in the iconography of the religion.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>70</sup>CIMRM 2036, 2037, 2042, 2046, 2051, 2111, 2115.

<sup>71</sup>CIMRM 1920, 1935, 1958, 1972, 1974, 1975, 2000.

<sup>72</sup>CIMRM 1958.

<sup>73</sup>CIMRM 1920.

<sup>74</sup>CIMRM 2171.

<sup>75</sup>Nemeti-Nemeti 2004., Nemeti-Cristea 2019., 282.

<sup>76</sup>Sicoe 2013, 113-121.

<sup>77</sup>Lissi-Carrona 1986., 36-38.

<sup>78</sup>Szabó 2015., 237-247.

## Summary

We can say, then, that the representation of the „Bull in the house” is an element of Mithraic iconography that has yet to be deciphered. My research has shown that it is a motif in its own right, not part of the 'bull in the boat' image. The spatial distribution of the specimens shows that it was most often found in Dacia, and we can therefore assume that it originated there. Within Dacia, it was most common in Sarmizegetusa, in a shrine, so its origin there is possible, although not certain. The meaning of the motif is, in my opinion, an astronomical phenomenon, the appearance of the constellation Taurus in mid-May. This would fit into the model that applies to many Mithraic motifs, namely that they represent astronomical phenomena associated with festivals. Research has not provided a satisfactory answer as to when this motif may have originated, but it has been shown that it may have been known to Mithras worshippers in Dacia from the mid-2nd century AD until the abandonment of Dacia.

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