

## Bringing light into darkness Aby Warburg and Fritz Saxl in conversation on Mithras

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Warburg's and Saxl's research interests intersected in a number of areas, among them ancient religions and astrology. As early as 1910 the Viennese student Saxl, reading art history for one term in Berlin, found his way to Warburg in Hamburg to talk to him about astrological images and Warburg shared with him his ideas about the peregrinations of ancient images.

In the early 1920s Saxl, by now acting director of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg, continued to pursue the topic of how late antiquity art and images melded into early Christian presentations of the new faith. In Hamburg in 1922, for his postdoctoral qualification, the so-called «Habilitation», Saxl had presented his research on the images of gods of antiquity in the late Renaissance<sup>1</sup>. In a lecture to the Religionswissenschaftliche Gesellschaft in Berlin also in 1922<sup>2</sup> he spoke about images of Oriental and Greek mystery cults and notably in his inaugural lecture at Hamburg University he concentrated on «The Dialogue in Christian Art»<sup>3</sup>. In the article *Frühes Christentum und spätes Heidentum in ihren künstlerischen Ausdrucksformen* (Saxl [1923]) he discussed three major research topics: first, the pictorial presentation of dialogue in Christian art, especially the dialogue of philosophers, secondly, Greek and

<sup>1</sup> It was published under the title *Antike Götter in der Spätrenaissance. Ein Freskenzyklus und ein Discorso des Jacopo Zucchi*, in vol. 8 of *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg*, Teubner, Leipzig-Berlin 1927.

<sup>2</sup> Warburg Institute Archive [WIA]. General Correspondence [GC], O. Dempwolff to F. Saxl, 24.5.1922. Dempwolff forwarded the Minutes of the meeting of the Religionswissenschaftliche Gesellschaft, Berlin on 11.5.1922 with a summary of Saxl's lecture «Griechisches und Orientalisches in Kultbildern hellenistischer Mysterienreligionen und des frühen Christentums». Dempwolff's view was that the individualising aspect of Christianity triumphed over other salvation mystery religions.

<sup>3</sup> F. Saxl, «Der Dialog in der christlichen Kunst», on 26 July 1922, Hamburg University.

Oriental influences and expressions in cult images of Hellenistic mystery religions, Mithraism and Christianity and thirdly, how the idea of the king of the world was presented in images.

He pursued his research into mystery cults further, in particular Babylonian and Iranian cosmogonies and the Christian creation story in order to understand the origin of image types. He corresponded with a number of experts on the history of religion, on comparative religion, on early Christianity and exchanged with them his views on images and practices of Mithraism<sup>4</sup>. Mithraic cult images show the birth of Mithras from a rock, the sun chariot, the bull slaying scene, a lion-headed figure entwined by a serpent, the meal of the Blessed, i.e. the banquet of the initiates with Sol/Helios as well as the twelve scenes of the zodiac surrounding the central motifs. As written sources of the cultic practices or the theology of Mithraism are nearly non-existent, it is a matter of explaining the images, their arrangement, their development, either painted or sculpted, in order to find meaning in them. Even today there is no firm body of evidence of the precise meaning of a number of images, so that Saxl's interpretation remains one of a number of possible interpretations. Saxl commented in a letter to Professor Franz Boll, a friend of Warburg's and Saxl's, on the research into Assyrian seal cylinders by Otto Weber [Weber (1920)]. There he had found images which paralleled the representations on Mithras reliefs, the bull sitting in a hut; for the first time, it would be possible to demonstrate «in the form of an image [*in effigie*]»<sup>5</sup> how Oriental thought flowed into Occidental thought.

Warburg and Gertrud Bing, the deputy librarian of the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, stayed for many months in Italy in 1928 to 1929. The exchange of letters between Warburg and Saxl permits us a close look at the research activity and interest of both scholars at that time. Warburg, surrounded by his books and pictures in Palace Hotel in Rome, was engaged in his work on the Mnemosyne Atlas, a huge collection of images to document the movement of images, of ideas, of concepts<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Otto Dempwolff, Hugo Greßmann, Richard Reitzenstein, Bernhard Schweitzer, Franz Boll, Valentin Müller, Robert Eisler. Saxl had discussed the Mithras topic with Erwin Panofsky for many years and Panofsky in fact read the final drafts of Saxl's lecture «The Ascension of Mithras and the Ascension of Christ» in 1929. All translations from German into English are by Dorothea McEwan.

<sup>5</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to F. Boll, 25.11.1920.

<sup>6</sup> Photographs pinned on mobile walls were the vehicles used by Warburg to present images related by form or contents. This method gave Warburg the opportunity to arrange and re-arrange images in a sequence to make visible the development of an image, its transformation and connections.

Mithras and Mithraea were included into this collection in Table 8, «Ascent to the sun»<sup>7</sup>. It was clear to Warburg that without an in-depth study of the Mithras mysteries the fight between paganism and Christianity could not be understood<sup>8</sup>.

In 1929, Saxl, juggling his duties as librarian and academic teacher in Hamburg, was revising his article *Frühes Christentum* of 1923, which he thought «incomplete [unvollständig]»<sup>9</sup>. He wanted to respond to recent scholarship in order to show whether or how pagan and Christian architecture were related. Triggered by Warburg's request for sending him the book by the German archaeologist Friedrich Behn on the Mithras shrine in Dieburg in Southern Hesse, Germany (Behn [1928]), Saxl mentioned the surprising or not so surprising synchronicity in Warburg's request with Saxl's own renewed Mithras studies. He went on to state what interested him most – apart from the «hundreds of unsolved problems of Mithras research»: the reception of classical antiquity by the mystery cults in late antiquity. He saw examples of the reception of classical topics into Christianity in the baptism of Christ, which followed the model of the Eleusinian initiation rites and the presentation of Christ, which could be traced back to the presentation of Orpheus. The question regarding architecture was: which of the new religions used solutions of classical antiquity? Saxl found the images in the basilica-type underground building in Viale Manzoni in front of the Porta Maggiore in Rome as foreign to Christianity as the Mithraic, Isis and Attis cult images. These traditions gave priority to naturalistic elements and this idea did not seem to Saxl to have entered Christianity. However, there was one tradition which had accepted the same symbols as Christianity: Buddhism, when Buddha was represented as Rhetor, that is, as philosopher, talking to his disciples, or when the reliefs of the lament for the death of Christ or the death of Mary show the same pictorial language for the death of Buddha. In short, the principle of selection had been effective – different religious currents had selected different symbols or images for their cultic practices<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Warnke, Brink (2000): «Auffahrt zur Sonne», 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> WIA, Family Correspondence [FC], A. Warburg to Mary Warburg, 29.3.1929.

<sup>9</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to Friedrich Drexel, 7.1.1929.

<sup>10</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 18.2.192; «Neben hundert ungelösten Problemen der Mithras Forschung...». Despite Saxl's enthusiasm for Buddha in this letter, Buddha was mentioned only once by him in Saxl (1931): 107, when he simply stated that both the image of Christ and the image of Buddha had its origin in the image of the pagan philosopher.



Apart from the Mithras research shared by both scholars, the exhibition project of the *History of Astrology and Astronomy* in the newly built Planetarium in Hamburg was keenly discussed at the same time. Warburg suggested frequently that models should be made to illustrate how humankind grappled with understanding its place in the cosmos. This could – in Warburg’s view – best be done by replicas of cult places, like a Chinese temple of the heavens, a Mithras sanctuary, the Sphaera Barbarica in the Salone in Padua, an Egyptian grave chamber etc<sup>11</sup>. For the

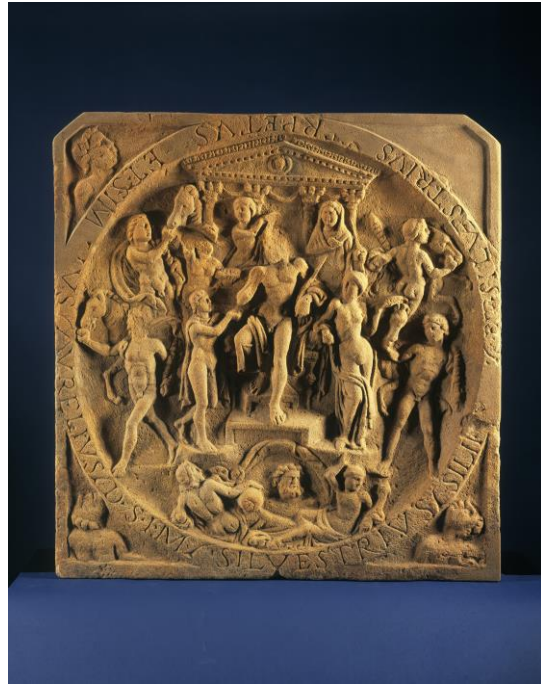
Mithras sanctuary he wanted to commission a model of the two-sided relief in red sandstone in the Mithraeum in Dieburg. This stone was particularly interesting not only for its pictorial programme, but also for the fact, that a hole was carved out in the middle of the lowest register of the stone. According to Warburg, it might have been the place into which a handle or pivot could be inserted to turn the stone around in order to show the onlooker the other side<sup>12</sup>. He asked Saxl’s view, what he thought of the «Drehzapfen», the pivot, and whether it was permissible to conclude that the initiates were first shown the relief side with the fall of Phaeton and afterwards the other side, the victorious chase of Mithras and his conquest of the sun god<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, 11.2.1929 and A. Warburg to F. Saxl, W. Gundel and E. Wind, 26.3.1929. The exhibition was opened on 15.4.1930 in the Hamburg Planetarium.

<sup>12</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, W. Gundel and E. Wind, 26.3.1929. Also A. Warburg to F. Saxl, 17.4.1929.

<sup>13</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, 2.5.1929. Warburg was sure that his discovery about the use of the hole in the stone with the two reliefs would stand up to research and went as far as asking Saxl whether he had credited Warburg for the solution to the riddle of the hole in the Dieburg reliefs. WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, 4.6.1929.

In the spring of 1929 the exchange of research queries and research findings on Mithraism intensified. Greek and Oriental influences in cult images in mystery religions took up a large part of the discussion. The image of Mithras killing the primordial bull thereby releasing the seeds of creation was well-known. Less well-known was the image of Nike killing the bull, which in Saxl's understanding could be traced back to the fights of the centaurs: when Nike grabs the snout of the bull, it correlates to gripping the head of the centaur. The motif to brace one's knee against the falling opponent, to grab his head with



the left hand and to strike him with the right hand, was interpreted as the «basic motif of Greek cruelty [*Grundmotiv griechischer Grausamkeit*]»<sup>14</sup>. However, this motif like the Mithras motif of killing the bull went back to oriental motifs. Equally important was the fact that the sacrifice, the killing of the bull, had to be shown to take place in a landscape. In this, the scenes on Mithras reliefs strikingly resembled Alexandrian fountain reliefs. The cult of nature in which nymphs play a large part, with grottoes as their cultic sites, found expression in the Mithraic cult. He saw the cult in Italy being more bucolic and less didactic than in northern Europe. The reason for this was that Mithras monuments in Italy were basically monuments showing the killing of the bull and did not fulfil the didactic use of the myth<sup>15</sup>.

A few days later, Saxl made observations on a Mithras *tauroktonos* (slaughter of the bull) relief of the usual type in the Palace of the Conservators in Rome, originally found on the Esquiline Hill, Rome, which had been discussed by Franz Cumont (Cumont [1903]: 88-89) and Henry Stuart Jones (Jones [1926]: vol. 2, Scala V, 4). Saxl wondered whether two men standing at the lower right at an altar and holding a knife showed a Persian fraternisation scene, a blood brotherhood and whether the semi-circular marking on the body of the bull might present a half moon. The sculpture also featured in upper left Sol,

<sup>14</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 19.3.1929.

<sup>15</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 22.3.1929.

in upper right Luna, and the dog, serpent and scorpion. If his interpretation proved right, he would have documentary evidence, that the scene of the killing of the bull meant the fight between sun and moon<sup>16</sup>.

The Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg had a monthly lecture programme, the invitation to give a lecture there was sought after and prestigious. At times it happened that the proposed lecturer had to cancel and arrangements for a replacement had to be made. The Italian art historian Arduino Colasanti (1877-1935) had been invited to talk about «Giovanni Pisano und sein encyclopädischer Bilderkreis» on 27 April 1929, but cancelled his lecture two weeks beforehand. As Saxl was in the midst of his Mithras research he without further ado volunteered to give a lecture on «The Ascension of Mithras and the Ascension of Christ»<sup>17</sup>. Warburg, despite his quip to Saxl that he «gives too much sugar to his black horse» or over-interprets Mithras images<sup>18</sup>, was excited. For him, it went without saying that Mithras was a legend of salvation: «But who is saved by whom?». Warburg gave his opinion that the carvings on the back of the stone relief in Dieburg showed the legend of the fall of the driver of the sun chariot, Phaeton, the son of the sun god Helios. Mithras, the bull killer, somehow managed to liberate Phaeton and appointed him in turn to become the «real driver of the chariot of light»<sup>19</sup>.

This interpretation was also Saxl's view (Saxl [1931]: 78)<sup>20</sup>. It was only natural that Saxl sent a summary of his lecture in a letter to Warburg:

Dear Professor,

Thank goodness, the lecture is over and once again I start to reply to letters and to do everything a librarian has to do; but the last week I have done nothing else but only attended to blessed Mithras.

He is blessed, indeed, or better, holy, because he occupies a strange in-between position, as he is first the messenger of Helios and then conquers him and become Helios himself. I hope that with Panofsky's assistance I have left behind the time when I found it impossible to

<sup>16</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 26.3.1929.

<sup>17</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 16.4.1929 («Die Himmelfahrt des Mithras und Christi Himmelfahrt»).

<sup>18</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, 3.4.1929 («dass Sie in Mithrasangelegenheiten Ihrem Rappen zuviel Zucker geben»).

<sup>19</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, 21.4.1929 («Aber wer wird von wem erlöst?»; «als eigentlichen Lichtlenker einsetzt»).

<sup>20</sup> Saxl further explained that the reliefs in other mithrea on the Danube showed the creation of the world, the entrapment of light by darkness, baptism, ascent to heaven and the banquet, that is, the symbolic acts of Mithras through which he becomes the sun god and through which he brings certain salvation (Saxl [1931]: 81).

interpret consistently the reliefs and with them the myth. You see, one can get quite far in interpreting the myth without Cumont's<sup>21</sup> fertile imagination, if one enlists the myth of Heracles as prototype. Preceding his myth is a cosmogony, beginning with chaos and ending with the fight of Zeus with the giants. Without doubt, these things were called chaos, Zeus and giants in the Occident. The cosmogony was Greek, even if it represented – perhaps only partly – Iranian thought in Greek form. In essence, this is how Cumont saw it, a disguised Persian scene only instead of a Greek one. However, I believe, that in this time of syncretism one has to stress the Greek much more than the Oriental element.

Be that as it may, what followed after this cosmogony was the next act, the birth of Mithras from a rock, then the travels into the land of Helios, where he collects the fruits of the tree (of knowledge) – the apples of the Hesperides. Thereafter he reaches the land of the moon and there he finds the bull of light, the carrier of the seed and of the light. Mithras brings him down to earth, where he sacrifices him at the command of Helios. And now, the main difference I have with Cumont, but which leads me to believe, that the story becomes intelligible, is the following: when I say to myself, if this scorpion on earth devours the seed of the bull, as it is shown in all monuments, then it means that in this act of creation the light is brought down into the dark cave on earth and mixes there with darkness. It is no coincidence, that the early Christian opponents of Mithras railed against the view that this sun god accomplishes the deed in a dark cave on earth. But this, indeed, is supposed to be the unfathomable mystery, that the creation of the world means the mixing of light and dark.

Until this point Mithras is the agent of the sun god, merely the hero who, following the example of Theseus or Heracles, has to catch and kill a bull; but now he takes up the fight with Helios, baptizes him, ascends with him to heaven and celebrates with him the meal of the Blessed. In the same way stand apotheosis and the meal in heaven at the end of Heracles's career. Now, this Mithras is a redeemer god, who again ascends with the human being from earth to heaven, as he has ascended to heaven with Helios.

The development is also easily explained, if looked at from a genetic point of view. In the Iranian context Ormuzd<sup>22</sup> creates the «ur» bull in the first break of the fight with darkness. In the second fight this «ur» bull is killed by evil and Ormuzd can do nothing else but administer a narcotic to soothe the dying. The soul of the bull ascends heaven in order to complain bitterly. However, after Ormuzd has made it clear that he cannot avert evil, the soul consents and plants sprout from the dead body of the bull.

Here, in fact, evil kills the bull, the good element only drugs the bull; and it is now that the myth travels to the West, where Mithras becomes identical to the sun god. In the Avesta<sup>23</sup> Mithras is only the god of the wide pastures, a military god together with lighting, which gives power and might and which gives the soul the power of resurrection after death.

In the Babylonian context Mithras becomes identical to the sun god and here he is also in the spell of a religiosity, which presented the killing of the bull as one of the main topics in sculpture just as in literature, where Gilgamesh kills the bull of heaven.

<sup>21</sup> With reference to Cumont (1903).

<sup>22</sup> Also Ahura Mazda, the god or higher divinity in the old Iranian religion.

<sup>23</sup> The Avesta are the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, in the Avestan language.

The two motives, the connection with the sun god and with the myth of the hero killing the bull, enter the Iranian cosmology and travel further west. Now the myth of the deeds of Mithras reaches an area, where the deeds of Heracles were alive, where Heracles was identical with the sun, where his deeds took place in the zodiac; new traits are now added, like the travels to the Hesperides. Most importantly, this religion has to face up to the religion of Helios. In this way the myth is born which first comprises the motif of the bull of light, who is brought down to earth and thereby creation comes about, secondly presents the killing of the sun by a hero (instead of by evil) and finally thirdly the strange re-duplication of these two presentations of Helios. In this way the myth of the killing of the bull is stuck onto the myth of the Persian sun god who first fights the Greek myth and then gets reconciled with it: together they ascend the heaven in the solar chariot.

The points of contact with Christianity are astonishingly manifold. Christ is the sun of salvation, god from the very beginning, who by command of his father (dove) descends to earth (in the Mithras cult the messenger of Helios is the raven), links himself with suffering and returns to heaven. In the same way Mithras descends with the bull from the realm of the sun to earth, where he has to kill the bull and where he links him to evil, where he enters into matter and later ascends to heaven.

The recurring motifs with the ascension into heaven are always the three pictorial topoi, baptism, ascension and meal of the Blessed.

But here is also the essential difference of the symbols. In the cosmological religion of Mithras the heaven of light has to sacrifice the bull of the moon, in order to perform the creation. Mithras is a god of light in this Iranian world, in which evil is divinely strong, as is goodness. He is a god mediating between light and darkness. The element of the light, which Mithras brings down and which is in the seed of the bull, is putrefied here below by the poisonous scorpion. In this way creation contains the mixture of darkness and light, but Mithras becomes the sun god and helps the human being after death to lead parts of light up to total light.

In Mithraism the suffering is the creation. In the old Iranian understanding the spirit of the bull sacrifices itself consciously, there the spirit is the divine voluntarily suffering. In the Greek-Roman understanding it is hunted and suffers death reluctantly. The hero, who fulfils the sacrifice and thereby creates the fruit, is the god of cultivation, not the bull. This god of cultivation fulfils the sacrifice in a divine feast. He becomes the sun god, the light symbol of power and fertility, the symbol of the eternal equal exchange of light and darkness, of birth and resurrection.

In Christianity the god is he who sacrifices himself on earth, he takes on the suffering of the creatures on earth and thereby redeems the world.

In the life of Mithras his ascension into heaven as sun god follows the descent into the cave on earth and the accomplishment of the creative sacrifice. Christ unites both in himself, he is Mithras the god as he is himself the suffering creation.

I think, that everything here is as logically as well as historically explicable from the types of images, so that my interpretation could be correct.



Panofsky has helped me surprisingly much. I had all the elements covered, but then it was a question of establishing the sequence of images. Panofsky with his unerring logic has helped me and in one evening has achieved it superbly. It is a fact that at this moment he is not only in Hamburg, but possibly anywhere in the world the only person who has a feeling for the history of an image and the history of ideas and can combine both...<sup>24</sup>.

This summary skillfully tied together a number of research findings and topics discussed between Warburg and Saxl. Warburg by return of post congratulated Saxl, addressed him with a title of a figure found on many Mithraic cult images, the «Dadophoros» or torch bearer, who illuminated the way into the grotto so graphically and convincingly. Surely nobody in Hamburg was sorry not to hear Colasanti, «the fascist fanfare [*Fascistische Fanfare*]»<sup>25</sup>!

Many of the lectures in the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg were published in the series *Vorträge*. However, Saxl did not think that his Mithras lecture would fit. He had formed the opinion that he should rather write a new article with good photographs from the important Mithraic monuments in Ostia and Vienna, Osterburken and Neuenheim, a district of the city of Heidelberg. More importantly, he was convinced that some of the views he held previously, for instance on the Mithraic ascent into heaven, did not play as great a part in contrast to the title of his lecture<sup>26</sup>.

Two weeks after Saxl's lecture, Warburg visited the subterranean Mithraeum in Capua. It made a deep impression on him<sup>27</sup>. He found the experience of going down into the dark space below street level «inhumanly interesting [*unmenschlich interessant*]» and forthwith wanted to scrap the architectural models of Chinese and Babylonian cult structures for the Planetarium exhibition in Hamburg and concentrate on models of Mithras and the Salone in Padua<sup>28</sup>. His «expedition to the unknown sources of heliotropism», originally or mainly a botanical term for the motion of plants in response to the direction and stimulus of the sun, but used here for explaining the Mithraic creation myth flowing from heaven to earth and back to heaven, stunned him. He explained in great detail the paintings, Mithras killing the bull and a woman in a chariot

<sup>24</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 30.4.1929. An untitled and undated collection of papers, pp. 16, first line «Ausgehen von einem Bild des erhöhten Herrn», is kept in WIA, Saxl Cupboard, box «Mithras I». It might have been the collection of cues and keywords as well as references for the images used in this talk. The lecture text is no longer extant, if ever it had existed.

<sup>25</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, 2.5.1929.

<sup>26</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 2.5.1929.

<sup>27</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to Federico Hermanin de Reichenfeld, Italian art historian, 22.5.1929. The visit took place on 17.5.1929.

<sup>28</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, n.d., after 17.5.1929.

drawn by two wild asses. The expedition had the strongest impact on Warburg, he ranked it amidst the greatest results of his time in Italy<sup>29</sup>.

Saxl attested the woman in a chariot drawn by two wild asses, as described by Warburg, as Luna, whose chariot was often shown as being pulled down into the abyss. The grave in the hypogeum in Viale Manzoni was «fairly unambiguously [*ziemlich eindeutig*]»<sup>30</sup> not Christian, the images there were the product of an interesting interpretation of Homer by a writer of allegories. In short, he knew his subject and understood the messages of its visual language. Overall, Saxl's research had so far progressed – he mentioned that he had written fifty pages – that he could attempt to produce convincing explanations. Mithras is called down from heaven to the cave in the earth in order to create the world by killing the bull. Mithras is the hero, he overcomes the sun god and becomes a second Helios who ascends the heaven with Helios. The myth is the model for the fate awaiting humans – the soul is forced down from heaven to the earth, but in the end, by the help of god, it can get back to heaven again<sup>31</sup>. Or, in Warburg's words: «You were killed and you were awakened to life again»<sup>32</sup>.

And so the arguments went to and fro, some were discarded, others were developed further. Panofsky advised him to lengthen the text and Saxl agreed as he himself was not yet satisfied with his «coffee house product [*Kaffeehaus-Produkt*]»<sup>33</sup>. Warburg urged him to send the research findings to Teubner publishers right away<sup>34</sup>. Lengthening the research text into a fully developed «product» resulted in Saxl's book *Mithras*, which he published in 1931 (Saxl [1931]).

After Warburg's return from Italy to Hamburg in June 1929 the correspondence dies down, only to resume when Saxl spent some time in London in the autumn of 1929. He once more identified the two main theses of his work: a) that the origin of the representation of Mithras in the cave can be found in the image of the grottoes of the nymphs and b) that the altar tablets with their additional scenes on the sides of the altar offer something basically new, which is related to Christianity – it is pictures of the life of the saviour; it is no coincidence that there are no Greek images of the life of Zeus;

<sup>29</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to KBW, 22.5.1929 («Expedition zu den unbekanntenen Quellen des Heliotropismus»).

<sup>30</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 27.5.1929.

<sup>31</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to Arturo Farinelli, 31.5.1929.

<sup>32</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to KBW, 21.5.1929 («Du warst getötet und erstandest wieder zum Leben»).

<sup>33</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 1.6.1929.

<sup>34</sup> WIA, FC, A. Warburg to Mary Warburg, 2.6.1929, telling her to give Warburg's request to Saxl.

Mithras thereby becomes on the one hand more human, as close as Jesus, but becomes on the other hand through his ascent into heaven as distant as Christ. Saxl was certain that the whole idea of the ascent of the soul has *ex post* been read into the syncretistic mixture of Persian and Asia Minor bodies of thought under Greek influence<sup>35</sup>.

Warburg replied with his own interpretation: «I seem to think, that the *tertium comparationis* lies in the idea of the sacrifice between father and son. Sol relinquishes in sinful clemency the reins of the regiment to his son and Mithras, the conqueror of Sol, by the sacrifice of the bull joins the world together again. The element of the sacrifice of the bull must have been introduced by the soldiers who before the battle and before the slaughter requested more than a myth: a blood splattered cultic reality»<sup>36</sup>.

Saxl did not further develop this thought, but continued with his detailed research into the relationship of Mithraism with the old mystery religions. He realized that there were points of contact between Mithras and Dionysos, the images of the krater and the lion and snake on the Mithras images led straight into Dionysian thought<sup>37</sup>. And then, in October 1929, Saxl wrote from London that his work was nine tenth finished, although he could continue for much longer. Whilst not having been able to solve the role Phaeton played, the Prometheus motif had become clear to him: «The bull, which Mithras takes with him from heaven to earth, is essentially nothing else but the heavenly fire of Prometheus». This explained why Helios was involved in the story – Mithras succeeded with the theft of the bull, but Helios demanded its slaughter on earth. The ethical corollary was: «Work, so that the light is liberated heavenwards again».

In a handwritten addition to the typed letter Saxl commented on the decision by Panofsky to stay in Hamburg and not to accept the call to Heidelberg University. With Panofsky in Hamburg, the University was «consolidated», the foundation of 1919 had

<sup>35</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 18.9.1929 («Mithras rückt dadurch dem Menschlichen einerseits so nahe wie Jesus, andererseits durch seinen Aufstieg in den Himmel so fern wie Christus»).

<sup>36</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, 26.9.1929 («Mir will immer scheinen, dass das *tertium comparationis* im Opfergedanken zwischen Vater und Sohn liegt. Sol überläßt in freventlicher Nachsicht dem Sohn die Zügel des Regiments und Mithras, der Sieger über Sol, zwingt durch das Stieropfer die Welt wieder in die Fugen. Das taurobolische Element muss durch die Soldaten hineingekommen sein, die vor der Schlacht und vor dem Schlachten mehr als Mythos verlangten: eine blutpraktizierende kultliche Realität»). *Taurobolium, Bluttauf*e or blood baptism, is the ritual dousing with the blood of the slaughtered bull, in order to allow the strength of the animal to enter the person; see Cumont (1903): 136-137. For heliolatry as the worship of the sun, see Cumont (1903): 139.

<sup>37</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 26.9.1929.

developed enough weight to convince professors like Ernst Cassirer and Erwin Panofsky to stay in Hamburg. Saxl suggested to Warburg one single step which would show Panofsky, that «we like him, need him and regard him with favour»: would Warburg know a way to get Panofsky an invitation to lecture in America? It was a personal quest for Panofsky as well as for his wife, and Saxl knew how grateful Panofsky would be and that Panofsky himself would never approach Warburg<sup>38</sup>. Two weeks later, Saxl wrote to Panofsky that Warburg would forward Panofsky's lecture request to his contacts in the USA, when a good opportunity arose<sup>39</sup>.

Panofsky continued to assist Saxl with the illustrations<sup>40</sup>, Warburg was pleased that Saxl's work had progressed so much and promised to do everything to have it published as soon as possible<sup>41</sup>, but nine days later Warburg was dead. It brought many changes, not least on the personal level for Saxl, as the intensive exchange of ideas between these two scholars had come to an end. Saxl published the book on Mithras in 1931. In it he expounded that the Mithras images had turned into cyclical presentations where the killing of the bull constituted both the triumphal beginning of the cosmic events and the triumphal high point of the life of the saviour<sup>42</sup>. Since then a number of Mithraea have been discovered and/or further investigated and not all of Saxl's findings and hunches have been vindicated. What is left – apart from the book publication – is the enthusiastic correspondence between two scholars which shows how both wrestled with the images of Mithras in the absence of literary monuments of the cult apart from the writings of

<sup>38</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 13.10.1929. WIA, GC, F. Saxl to A. Warburg, 13.10.1929 («Der Stier, den Mithras vom Himmel auf die Erde bringt, ist im Grunde nichts anderes als das himmlische Feuer des Prometheus»; «Arbeite, damit das Licht wieder nach dem Himmel befreit wird»; «konsolidiert»; «daß wir ihn mögen, brauchen und ihm wohl wollen»). The request is neither mentioned in the correspondence of Panofsky (see Wuttke [2001-2011]) nor in the Library Diary (see Michels, Schoell-Glass [2001]). In the *Tagebuch*, however, is one mention by Warburg, that he needed to thank Panofsky for his loyalty to stay in Hamburg (10.10.1929, 546).

<sup>39</sup> WIA, GC, F. Saxl to E. Panofsky, 23.10.1929.

<sup>40</sup> WIA, GC, E. Panofsky to F. Saxl, 16.10.1929.

<sup>41</sup> WIA, GC, A. Warburg to F. Saxl, 17.10.1929.

<sup>42</sup> Saxl (1931): 53. In this book Saxl most methodically discussed the various forms of Mithras images: the representation of the victorious god, the bull fight and the Nike images, variations of the Mithraic bull sacrifice, Mithras symbols, historical effects of Mithraic symbolism, the mis-en-scène of the central image, the composition of the Mithras reliefs, the religious meaning of the images of Mithras, character of the cultic god, Mithras as Olympic and as heroic figure, Mithras as the god of nature, Mithras as saviour, Mithras steals the bull, Mithras sacrifices the bull, the myth of the creation of the world and the myth of the sun, Mithraic elements in Christian art, the topic of salvation in the development of Mithraism and Christianity, cosmological presentations in Mithraic and Christian art and the restitution of old motifs in the art of late antiquity.

their opponents. The multi-layered images found in Mithraea had to suffice to construct the origins, transformation and travel routes of the cult.

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#### Illustrations

Dieburg, Mithraeum, two-sided relief (Museum Schloss Fechenbach, Dieburg Fotostudio Gelfort)