

## Endnote

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1. Sacré-Coeur de Montmartre
2. Pietà in Italian language
3. tauroctonie in French: tauroctony in English
4. ritual instruments and containers available in European sanctuaries that today can also be seen in the crypt and transept of churches, including holy well and water pond, large stones for baptism, Bowl and the holy grail, cane and sword, red cape and hat in ritual ceremonies, which all are the remains of Mithraic rituals have ever left in Christian traditions.
5. Mithraïsme, Mithriacisme
6. Cripte
7. Mithraeum, Mithrayum
8. this pattern is evident in it's pristine and virgin form in The churches of Caucasus region. Armenia as the first Christian base in the world which the first churches have been built on the remains of it's temples or Mithraic Temples was directly converted to churches, shows all the given features.
9. Sacred cattle were existed in beliefs of Indians, Egyptians, and other ancient nations, such that these beliefs are derived primarily from the community life dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry.

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art. Continuity of these beliefs can be seen in artworks of Christianity which were generally depicting male and female gods or kings and queens.

As an exemplar we can point to early Christian illustrations where virgin Mary and Jesus were appeared as king and queen; While the eastern version of them are also noticeable: Mother and child with black hair and brown faces. However, later these characters appear as European races with white skin and blond hair in Western paintings. In early Christian imagery, grandeur and authority of Mary and Jesus attracts attention while during the suffering of Christ, pieta is gradually gained popularity but retains previous pattern and characters appear in place of the altar. Both the pieta and cattle slaughtering

scenes imply sacred and effective narratives. In term of orientation, whether in Mithraic temple or church's altar, they are located in the East facing the West Entrance (especially in the early Christian basilicas). Special importance of the subject is about positioning of the sacred narratives within the two religious places (sanctuary and the church).

Frants Komen, one of the pioneer researchers in the field of Mithraism believed to " abandon the Mithraic rituals and to be a follower of Christianity" that shows cutting ties to the past. In contrast, Romans not only have not removed past religions but also have added some new sections to it (Simon, 1978: 461). The concept thoroughly discussed in this article, is the exact result of this mixing.

## Conclusion

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“Pieta” expresses pains and suffers of Jesus Christ and sympathizes with Mary that depicts the mother and child in a symbolic way in Christian religious art. Survey of numerus samples shows that it's composition and positioning in the cavernous space, is derived from Mithraic cattle slaughtering scene, which is one of the manifestations of the continuity of religious art and beliefs transferred from a ritual to another one. The main topic of Mithraic tradition is to sacrifice sacred cattle and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the main topic in Christianity which both scenes have been depicted in the sanctuary and the church. As conversion of Mithraic temples

into churches, Mithraic reliefs were also replaced by the statues of Jesus and Mary in sanctuaries. In this way, the sacred scenes of cattle slaughtering having the same triangle forms, gradually were appeared as Pieta in cavernous sanctuaries of churches. By appearing in paintings, sculptures and reliefs, the scene of Pieta has gradually turned into an independent art which placed in the main and side sanctuaries of the churches. According to architecture of Mithraic churches and temples, the transformation and continuity of Mithraic culture and art, as well as remaining customs and objects, is evident in Christianity.

alignment of Mithra and the cattle was similar to the pieta. During a research trip along with students of art, architecture and landscape in the summer of 1387 (2008) in one of the squares of Madrid (Spain) the sculpture of Bull Riding goddess was visited in which the alignment of goddess and the cattle was toward right and similar to the pieta of

In religious literature of ancient Iran, cattle death begets life and Mithra becomes the creator of the creatures by killing the cattle (vermazren, 2004). Therefore, recreation and transformation of this legend as pieta is not so farfetched as many painting of Virgin Mary, Jesus and saints are derived from previous arts in Christian



Fig. 6. Mithraic Cattle Slaughtering. Sun and moon symbols in both sides of the altar, Painting on plaster, Mithraic sanctuary in Marino city, Italy, around the 2nd century AD.  
Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mithraic\\_mysteries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mithraic_mysteries)



Fig. 7. The statue of the Bull Riding goddess, a square in Madrid, Spain Source: Shohreh Javadi, 2007.

the sacred heart church of Paris. The statue has appeared in cow with a fish tail (Fig.7). Later, in the summer of 1388 (2009) a building entrance being demolished and reconstructed in the city of Brussels (Belgium) has been observed with motifs like the cattle slaughtering. Since the tight schedule deprived us to conduct more research, we limited to take pictures (Fig. 8). The statue of the goddess could be seen with flowing cape raised holding the neck of the cow and returning his face to the opposite. Wheat spike grown from oxtail as in Mithraic reliefs. The orientation of God and the cattle is as the same as Mithraic sacred sacrifice scenes. The author points out that with little changes, the subject of human and cattle has mentioned in a different way but similar to each other in pre-Christian art which is related to Mithraism. However, the cow is considered as a symbol of fertility and sacred animal<sup>9</sup> relating the Iranian Anahita.



Fig. 8. The statue of the Bull Riding goddess, Brussels, Belgium. Source: Shohreh Javadi, 2007.

ground, they were built in cavernous form or underground. Therefore, the sanctuary or the place of the statue and Mithraic relief are created in cavernous shape. Then the sanctuary found its way to the church and gained popularity in Christian art and culture.

After the formation of Christian art and the creation of the first churches on the remains of Mithraic temples, we can observe similarities in architecture, ornaments and motifs in the two religious monument.

Temple and the church is dark inside, and a little light shines from the ceiling's window. Mithraic temples are quite dark and a window under the roof shines the light to the Mithra's statue from the East. It also goes this way in the first basilicas and then some windows are added around the church and the altar. In the early Christian basilica and church architecture, we see rectangular location that the wide central corridor ends to the altar and the narrow corridors are on either side of it. The altar in the East and in opposite the entrance is located in West, meaning east-west direction of the church<sup>8</sup>. The main altar is decorated statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus motifs. Location, the context and the repetition of the altar, actually brings up the circumstance and the process of the altar formation in minds. The statue of mother, son, apostles and other elements are present in the cavernous frame according to previous model. "Sajjadi" writes in his book, "The evolution of the altar": different views are provided about the origin of the altar and where and when they used for the first time. Many researchers, particularly orientalist attribute its origin to the sanctuaries of Mithraic temples and some others think they were under influence of churches (Sajjadi, 1996: 93). Obviously churches were also under influence of Mithraic temples or the Mithraic temple has turned into churches.

### Comparing pieta with cattle slaughtering

There was a concave and cavernous altar at the Sacred Heart of Paris church (Sacre Coeur) at the neighborhood of Mont-marte, and in corner

of the crypt, which led to track and compare the role of the pieta to the scene of cattle slaughtering (Fig. 5).

by more reflection on movements and specially the cavernous form of the altar, consistency and transformation of the old beliefs and customs of the community will be crossed in minds. Transformation of Mithraism through Christianity also implied from several other signs. The continuity of their rituals is obvious in Christian and even Islamic traditions, throughout the East and West. The samples can be signs of the moon, sun and stars in the Dodo Cavernous Church in Armenia (Aravieh area Gardash): half body of Jesus Christ while two half spiritual bodies Can be seen on the sides of his head and the motifs of the sun and moon is clear.

The scene compared to the Mithraic reliefs shows a similarity and influence of those elements and identical composition. In many of Mithraic cattle slaughtering scenes, two human characters are present as half bodies carrying crown of moon crescent and sun (Fig. 6).

### Pieta in Christianity and sacred cattle slaughtering in Mithraism

Field study findings of other sculptures and cattle slaughtering reliefs has reviewed in which the



Fig.5. Pieta in sanctuary. Stone statue of Pieta, crypt of sacred heart church (Sacr -Ceoure), Paris, France.

Source: Shohreh Javadi, 2005.



Fig. 3. Pieta Martynngov painting, by Giovanni Bellini, Venice Academy Gallery, Italy, oil on cardboard, 1505 AD.  
Source: [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietà\\_Martinengo](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietà_Martinengo)



Fig. 4. The unbeatable Sun. rocky reliefs of cattle slaughtering, Mithra slaughtering male cattle facing the sun, Sun and moon carved on both sides are clear. Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy.  
Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mithraic\\_mysteries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mithraic_mysteries)

art and culture was developed with a Mithraic background. However, strong roots of Mithraic traditions and tenacity of it's followers made it difficult to thrown away. Hence, Christianity was developed with a Mithraic background. There are several reasons to study Mithraic traditions. On the other hand, being accustomed with Roman

world and the ability to combine and admit the integrated numerous foreign and also being aware of rituals and symbols added to the official religion of the empire, were important.

the coincidence of multiple religions and rituals in Roman society, and even in individuals draws attention (Guerry, 2008). from the beginning, Mithraism was a ritual for small groups and categories, it could be implied from the Mithraic small temples that already are existed in Europe. actually, Mithraic temples were located in caves. in the inside there were platforms on both sides of the Corridor for Mithraism Followers to sit (today, this pattern could be seen in the Crypts<sup>6</sup> of many European churches that are allocated to the graves of saints, kings, scientific and political characters). The sanctuary was located at the end of the corridor, showing slaughtering cattle, and two torches were shining on both sides. Pictures of a snake drinking blood of the cattle, a dog jumping to the cattle's wound, a scorpion and a crow reminding Mithraism, were seen in the sculptures of cattle slaughtering (Vermazern, 2004).

Mithraic reliefs slaughtering sacred cattle on the stone sanctuary's walls of the cave, are one of the Mithraic temples<sup>7</sup> feature that could always be observed in the altars. stone cave that has seen tens. Some of these temples still remain in European and Asian countries that famous examples include Santapriska Church in the city of Rome.

In addition, Mithraic related caves are found in France (Bourg Saint Andéol), Germany (Schwartzerden), Yugoslavia (Cavtat Epidaurum and Nefertara) and other numerus churches in Italy showing Mithra in a state of sacred sacrifice. Mithraic reliefs with a central theme of cattle slaughtering (Tauroctonie) in a cavernous altar have always been existed. According to Mithraic legends, the sacred cattle slaughtering is taking place in cave; and the scene is repeatedly shown in the altars of temples.

Mithraic temples have always been shaped in natural caves or otherwise in case of flat



Fig.1. The stone sculpture of Pietà, by Michelangelo, St. Pierre Cathedral of Vatican, Rome, Italy. Source: [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_Pietà](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Pietà) - 99 May 1498)

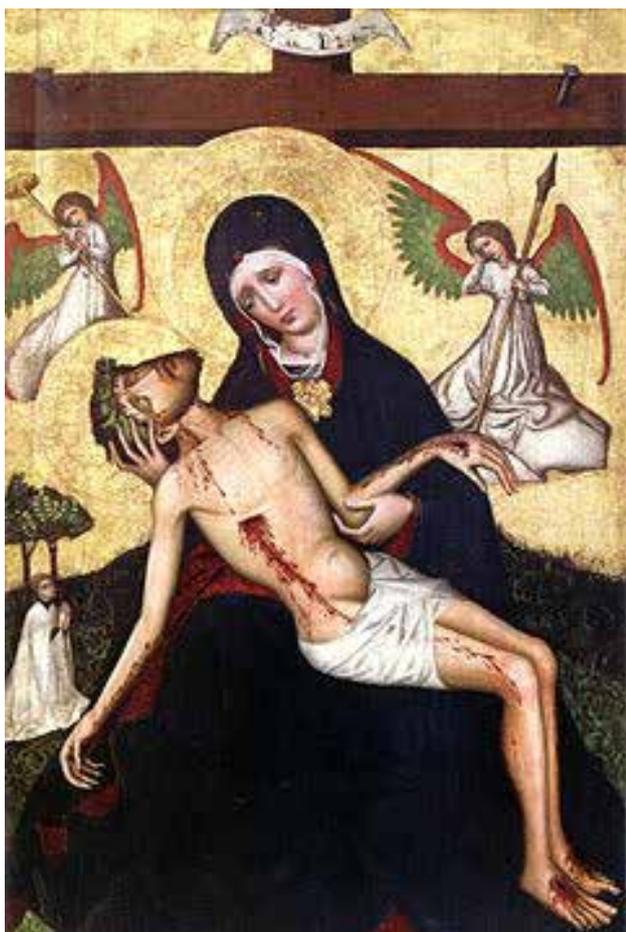


Fig. 2. Tubadzin pietà (a village in Poland), National Museum of Warsaw, Poland, 1450 AD. Thermal paint on wood. Source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kraków\\_Pietà\\_of\\_Tubądzin.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kraków_Pietà_of_Tubądzin.jpg)

Mithraic tradition, was existed in almost all of the sanctuaries. similarly, the scene of pieta, one of the central themes of Christianity, has also appeared in the church altars.

below scene in the cavernous sanctuary, in a fixed pattern shows the Mehr as the main character slaughtering the victim.

The arrangements are in such a way that all the elements are placed in a triangular frame.

The same pattern appears later in Christian art as the sculpture of Mary and Jesus appears in cavernous place and with rounded and sometimes sharp arches (triangles). There are numerous examples of Mithraic sculptures slaughtering cattle existed in sanctuaries and museums of the world; some of the most famous examples will be introduced and compared with the scene of pieta in the following (Fig. 3-4). The influence of cattle slaughtering on the pieta's scene, is one of the important and well-known manifestations which represents the consistency of rituals across the time.

In order to initiate the subject and to conduct a comparative study on the two given examples, it is required to clarify a few points regarding Mithraic ritual (Mithraism) and its continuity in Christian culture.

### **The Worship of Mehr<sup>5</sup> (Mithraism)**

For about 5 centuries (from the 2nd century BC to the 3rd century AD), Mithraism has been spread throughout the Roman Empire and countless sanctuaries were established in the region. During Roman–Persian war, the ancient Romans took "Mithra" (which was a symbol of bravery and victory over the enemy) to their homeland and praised her and kept the statues of the myth in their temples. Roman emperors became a patron of Mithra, god of the sun and war, and thus Mithra gained such a power and glory that sometimes considered as important as Jesus Christ, and similar accounts of the two Prophet's life was narrated.

After that, having Christianity accepted as the main religion of Roman empire, Christian

## Introduction

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Years of study and research about the Mehr art and culture along with the field research in Iran, Europe, Asia and Africa brought valuable results in understanding Mithraic art and architecture that it's most important part is the subject of this paper. Examining numerous pictures and motifs of sacred cattle slaughtering scenes infers the integration of all these scenes with animal-plant and constellation elements. However, the multiplicity of these elements and signs prevented direct focus on the main issue of cattle slaughtering.

But a visit to the Church of the Sacred Heart

in the Monte-Mart<sup>1</sup> neighborhood of Paris in 1384 (2005), caused a fundamental progress in the process of these researches. Observation of pieta<sup>2</sup>'s statue in the Church Crypt, resulted to monitor the comparison of pieta's portrait with the cattle slaughtering<sup>3</sup>. portrait of pieta in the cavernous space of the altar had such resemblance to the scene of Mithraic cattle slaughtering that the author amazed at the degree of imitation and being affected; and this writing has triggered in his mind. The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether the role of Mithraic cattle slaughtering has developed and transformed in the context of pieta.

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## Hypothesis

Despite portraying the suffering of the Christ, "Pieta" has previous history of Mithraic ritual and art.

## Literature review

Some articles and books have been published on the Western Mithraism; some of them have been translated into Persian, which includes comments of western Mehr researchers like "Komen", "Vermazren", "Humbakh" and "Zener". Their comments were included in the introduction of Mehr temples, reliefs and sculptures of the sacred cattle slaughtering scene, however a research with comparative approach had not conducted regarding pieta and the holy sacrifice so far.

Pieta, depicting pains and suffers of Jesus Christ and Sympathizing with Mary patience, has appeared in a fixed pattern in art history.

The word "pieta" has an Italian origin and in essence, means pity (<http://fr.wiktionary.org>). It also means suffering and distress, and literarily refers to sculpture or painting of immaculate heart of Mary which embraced the dead body of his son (<http://atilf.fr>).

many paintings and sculptures regarding given

issues have left Form 7-8 to 19th centuries. Most of these artworks, specially the most ancient ones have drawn in the altar or triangular form. Among these artworks which were portrayed in the forms of statues, reliefs and paintings, a pieta scene of the 8th century on the memorial stone of revolution in an old monastery and an oil painting cited in Warsaw Museum (15th century) could be found (Fig. 1- 2).

After official foundation of Christianity by Constantine in the 4th century and by trying to remove the old rituals and customs, Christian art and culture gradually have established.

Pieta and sacred cattle slaughtering were gradually developed in Christianity and Mithraic rituals, respectively.

In early Christianity, the first basilicas were built in the vicinity of the former temples or on the ruins of them. As the church architecture and decorations were under the influence of Mithraic temples, some customs, tools and equipment, ritual vessels and clothes has been transferred to the new religion<sup>4</sup>;

The central theme of Mithraism, the ritual scene of sacred sacrifice or the cattle slaughtering which plays a key role in explaining of the

# “Pieta” in Christianity and Holy “Cattle Slaughtering” in Mithraism

Assessment of Consistency of Ritual Belief and Art in the History  
through Analysis of Reliefs and Paintings

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## Abstract

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Pieta have had a special place in Christian art depicting suffers of Mary and Jesus as the mother cradling the body of son, and carrying him on the knees. Old samples of pieta scenes have seen in the context of triangular arrangements which reminds the reliefs of Mehr killing cattle or religious victim in Mithraic temple which was existed centuries before the formation of Christian art and architecture. Religious scene of pieta in a triangular church sanctuary – evoking caves – of which the sun and the stars show off on it’s ceiling, repeatedly have been portrayed. The influence of cattle slaughtering on pieta’s scene, is one of the important and well-known manifestations which represents the consistency of belief and ritual art across the time, it also verifies the transformation of Mehr religion in Christianity.

## Keywords

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Pieta, Cattle slaughtering, Mithra, Jesus and Mary, Mehr religion, Christian art.