

13 *mitra* – headscarf (pls. 20–22)

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The word *mitra* has various meanings depending on the different registers of language. In the case of women, the term designates a kind of headscarf without chin straps.¹ The linguistic problem is similar to what we face with the term *palla*. The word *mitra* takes on different meanings in literary and neutral language.² Although the *mitra* has attracted much attention in archaeological research (and even received a monograph³), a correct linguistic definition and social description is still missing in dictionaries and research. For this reason, the following discussion will also include the Greek sources and Greek fashion.

13.1 Terminology and appearance

The Latin term *mitra* (μίτρα) is a Greek loanword. In Greek poetry, the word μίτρα is sometimes used metaphorically to describe various garments which have the appearance of a broad band.⁴ This is an exclusively literary usage and hence excluded from the following discussion. In neutral language, the term μίτρα is confined to the headwear of men and women. In the case of men, it refers to a headband. However, this is not a normal headband, and those who wear it are not normal men. It takes on the quality of a crown since we are dealing with the god Dionysus⁵ (above all), victors in competitions, and rulers. In the case of women, the term μίτρα (*mitra*) primarily denotes a kind of headscarf and not a headband. Usage of the Latin loanword *mitra* roughly corresponds

¹ Against ThLL VIII s.v. *mitra* col. 1160.25: “*pilleolus incurvatus et in angustum desinens, qui redimiculis a mento alligatur*”; and OLD s. v. *mitra*: “an oriental headdress fastened with ribbons under the chin.”

² For a definition of the terms ‘neutral’ and ‘literary,’ see Introduction to part B p. 227.

³ H. Brandenburg, Studien zur Mitra, Münster 1966; R. Tölle-Kastenbein, Zur Mitra in klassischer Zeit, *Revue archéologique* 1977, 23–36; M. Papadopoulou, Headdress for success. Cultic uses of the Hellenistic mitra, in: C. Brøns/M.-L. Nosch (eds.), Textiles and Cult in the Mediterranean Area in the first Millennium BC, Oxford 2017, 65–74.

⁴ In general, the usage of Homer and the Hellenistic poets is to be separated from the other evidence, cf. LSJ s.v. μίτρα I. The latter apply the term metaphorically to the girdle and the breast-band of women and wrestlers.

⁵ Strab. 15.1.58 p. 711 C.: Διονυσιακὸν ... τὸ μιτροῦσθαι.

to that of the Greek term. In Latin sources, we hear many times of (1) Dionysus' *mitra*,⁶ (2) the *mitra* worn by women,⁷ and (3) exotically or femininely dressed men.⁸

The jurist Ulpianus (ca. 170–223/8 CE) tells us that at least three types of *mitra* were distinguished in Latin:⁹ the *mitra*, the *semimitra*, and the *mitra calautica* or (if the emendation is correct) rather *calvatica*. Much like with different types of *tunica*, all of these types could be referred to with the same generic word: *mitra*. The first term—simply *mitra*—clearly refers to the headband because this is the basis of all other types. The second—*semimitra* (half-*mitra*)—is only attested in Ulpianus. It probably designated a headband that only had the full breadth of a *mitra* at the front, whereas the rest consisted of a thin band that served as a fastening at the back of the head. The third—*mitra calautica* (*calvatica*)—is also attested with young women in Afranius¹⁰ and in Cicero.¹¹ It designates the female headscarf and is the type usually referred to in our Latin (and Greek) sources by the simple generic name *mitra*.

A detailed description of the female headscarf (from now on *mitra*) is rare, but we can identify it without doubt through the archaeological evidence.¹² It consists of a large headband wound around the occiput (*calva*) and functions as a sort of cap. There is only one text which is more explicit as to its form. It is a short passage in Vergil and has caused considerable problems in research. In the fourth book of the *Aeneid* (the ‘Dido-tragedy’), the Numidian king Jarbas mocks his Trojan rival Aeneas out of disappointed love, and he calls him an effeminate Oriental:

Verg. Aen. 4.215–217
*et nunc ille Paris cum semiviro comitatu
 Maeonia mentum mitra crinemque madentem
 subnexus, rapto potitur.*

And now that Paris with his eunuch followers, his chin and perfumed hair bound with a Lydian *mitra*, grasps the spoil.

6 Prop. 3.17.30: *cinget Bassaricas Lydia mitra comas* [a Lydian *mitra* will gird Dionysus’ hairs]; 4.2.31 (Vertumnus): *cinge caput mitra, speciem furabor Iacchi* [Gird my head with a *mitra*, and I will look like Dionysus], Sen. Oed. 413, Phaed. 756, Herc. F. 471; Val. Fl. 2.271; Stat. Ach. 1.715.

7 For parallels, see below.

8 Lucilius F 71 M. (= 71 Christ./Garb.): *cheridotae auratae* [cice] *thoracia mitrae* [tunics with long sleeves and adorned with gold, decorative cuirasses, *mitrae*]; cf. D 4 pp. 630–634.

9 Digest. 34.2.25.10.

10 Afranius, Consobrini F 4: *cum mitris calvaticis* [with headscarves], cf. A 7 pp. 154–155.

11 In travesty, Cic. in Clod. et Cur. F 23: *cum ... calvatica* (T; *calautica* Nonius p. 861.3–4 L.) *capiti accommodaretur* [when a *mitra calvatica* was put on your head]; cf. A 10 p. 203. Servius ad Verg. Aen. 9.613 p. 363.1–2 Thilo/Hagen: *mitrae feminarum, quas calauticas dicunt* [*mitrae*, which are called *calauticae*, belong to female dress].

12 Cf. p. 690.

Jarbas refers not to a *mitra*, but to a *tiara*, the familiar Phrygian cap.¹³ He catachrestically calls this a *mitra* and thereby insinuates that Aeneas is dressed in female headwear. Jarbas uses a feature of anti-Trojan polemic found elsewhere in the *Aeneid*.¹⁴ However, Jarbas does not use the ‘correct’ word. In neutral language, a *mitra* is not a *tiara*, and we should be careful not to identify them (as has been done in past research).¹⁵ There is some similarity. Both *tiara* and *mitra* are a kind of cap, but there are also differences. The main one is that the *tiara* is (as in Vergil) fastened to the chin by a strap, whereas the *mitra* is not. It has no fastening straps at all. The archaeological evidence is clear on this. We should also refrain from adopting Jarbas’ polemic concerning the *tiara*. The historical, non-literary *mitra* was not an ‘orientalizing’ garment, but a thoroughly Hellenistic-Roman article of clothing.

The material of the *mitra* was linen or cotton.¹⁶ In Varro, we hear of a fine *mitra Melitensis*. More important was its artificial colour, which is often noted in Greek and Latin sources. It is a usual characteristic of this garment. A *mitra* could have different colours, among them purple and gold. It was often multi-coloured.¹⁷ Like other accessories, we should not forget that the *mitra* did not only fulfill a dress function, but it was also used to add a touch of colour to female attire, which was usually dark (*pullus*) and only showed the natural colours of the material.

13.1.1 Social usage

In Imperial times, Roman jurists debated in the context of last wills whether a *mitra* was an item of clothing or an ornament. In contrast to his colleague Julius Paulus (1st half 3rd century CE),¹⁸ Ulpianus numbered the *mitra* amongst the garments because it was produced in order to cover the head rather than adorn it (*magis capitis tegendi quam ornandi causa comparata*).¹⁹ The truth probably lies in the middle, and a *mitra* likely had functions of both a garment and an ornament. Ulpianus ultimately comes

¹³ Vergil himself knew the difference and that the Trojan cap was a *tiara*, cf. Verg. Aen. 7.246–247: *hoc Priami gestamen erat ... sceptrumque sacerque tiaras* [this was Priam’ dress ... a scepter and a sacred *tiara*]; cf. Brandenburg (n. 1) 63–64.

¹⁴ The actual term *tiara* or *pilleus* is also replaced by the polemical *mitra* in Verg. Aen. 9.616: *et tunicae manicas et habent redimicula mitrae* [their tunics have sleeves and their *mitrae* a band].

¹⁵ Against ThLL and OLD s.v. *mitra* (see n. 1).

¹⁶ Varro Men. 433: *aliae [mitrā] reticulum aut mitram Melitensem* [other women a hairnet or Maltese *mitra*]; cf. A 9 p. 192; Brandenburg (n. 1) 55–56; Tölle-Kastenbein (n. 1) 28.

¹⁷ Sappho F 98.10–11 Lobel/Page (ποιχίλος); Pherecrates F 106 K.-A; Menander Peric. 823 (χρύσεος); Prop. 2.29.15 (*Sidonius* = *purpureus*); Ovid. Met. 14.654 (*pictus*); Iuven. 3.66 (*pictus*); Plin. NH 35.58 (*versicolor*); Pollux 4.151, 154 (ποιχίλος). See also Prop. 4.5.73 where a *mitra* is said to have lost its colour.

¹⁸ Digest. 34.26.2.

¹⁹ Digest. 34.23.2.

back to social codes, and he defines the *mitra* as a typical female garment that cannot be used by men without breaking with gender norms:²⁰

muliebria (sc. vestimenta) sunt, quae matris familiae causa parata sunt, quibus vir non facile uti potest sine vituperatione, velut ... mitrae.

Female garments are those provided on behalf of the *mater familiae*, which a man cannot use without blame, like ... *mitrae*.

As our other sources show, the social code expressed by Ulpianus is valid for the Graeco-Roman *mitra* in general. The *mitra* was a female headscarf, and it was worn by all sorts of women.²¹ This holds especially true for our Greek sources. In his definition, however, Ulpianus focuses more closely on *matres familiae*. He seems to mirror Roman social behaviour in Imperial times when the *mitra* evolved into an item of clothing that was worn above all by elderly *matronae*. Our other evidence implicitly supports this supposition. The elegant mistresses of Latin Love elegy do not wear a *mitra*, but show their hair in public; Ovid gives no tips for arranging the *mitra* or any other headwear, but only for styling hair. There is only one exception to this general rule in Love Elegy. In Propertius, Cynthia wears as *mitra*, but in special circumstances. It is a private situation in Cynthia's boudoir. She is wearing a purple *mitra* in bed as a night cap in order to protect her coiffure.²² She removes it at once when she is disturbed by her lover, Propertius, and gets up. This shows that a mistress can wear a *mitra* in a functional manner, but she will not wear it in front of her lover.

The nature of our evidence changes when an old woman (*anus*) is concerned. In Ovid, the *mitra* figures three times as headwear typical of old women. Ceres and Vertumnus both put it on when disguising as an *anus*; the old prostitute Anna wears a *mitra* on her gray hair; in Propertius, an old procuress (*lena*) receives her old *mitra* as a grave gift.²³ For this reason, we may assume that a *mitra* was worn in public by older 'normal' *matronae*. This also perfectly squares with the Roman archaeological

20 Digest. 34.23.1.

21 See below, and ThLL VIII s.v. *mitra*, col. 1160.10–1161.36.

22 Prop. 2.29.15–16: *quae cum Sidoniae nocturna ligamina mitrae || solverit* [when she had loosened the straps of her purple *mitra*]; for a similar usage, cf. Aristoph. Thesm. 257–258 (n. 31); Plin. NH 35.140 (n. 33).

23 Ovid. fasti 4.517–518 (Ceres): *simularat anum mitraque capillos || presserat* [she had imitated an old woman and put a *mitra* on her hair]; Met. 14.654–656 (Vertumnus): *picta redimitus tempora mitra || ... adsimulavit anum* [he had put on a coloured *mitra* and imitated an old woman]; fasti 3.669 (Anna): *illa levi mitra canos redimita capillos* [she had wrapped her grey hairs with a light *mitra*]; Prop. 4.5.71–72: *exsequiae fuerant rari furtiva capilli || vincula et immundo pallida mitra situ* [for funeral gifts she had the stolen bands that bound her scanty hair and a *mitra* that had lost its colour through foul neglect]. See already in the 2nd half of the 2nd century BCE the poet Antipater of Sidon (Anth. Pal. 7.423.4): ἄνδεμα δ' αὖ μίτρας τὰν πολιοχρόταφον [but the *mitra* in turn the woman with grey hairs on the temples].

evidence, where we do not find the *mitra* outside of this social group. For example, it is not attested with the elegant women of the imperial household.

13.2 History

The regular female headscarf called *mitra* originated in Lydia (μίτρα Λυδία). It is attested first in archaic Greek poetry.²⁴ In Classical Athens (5th century BCE), the *mitra* was a fashionable garment among all sorts of young and fashion-conscious women. We see it on red-figure vase paintings, and it is a commonplace female garment in Old Greek Comedy.²⁵ The painter Polygnotus painted hetaeras in diaphanous robes with colourful *mitrae* on their heads.²⁶ In New Comedy, there was even the standard mask of the διάμιτρος ἑταίρα (diamitros hetaira) with a coloured *mitra*.²⁷ It was already an exclusively female garment in Hellenistic times. Men using *mitrae* are wearing Oriental clothes²⁸ or (in the majority of cases) are disguising themselves as women.²⁹ Pentheus has a *mitra* in Euripides,³⁰ Mnesilochos in Aristophanes,³¹ Hercules when serving Omphale,³² and Jupiter in a birth travesty.³³ Men in *mitra* are either effeminate or mocked as such.³⁴ Republican Roman literary sources relying on Greek literature mirror Greek cultural behaviour: In Catullus, the beautiful heroine Ariadne is wearing a

²⁴ Alcman F 1.67 Page/Davies; Sappho F 98.10–11 Lobel/Page; cf. Brandenburg (n. 1) 53–56.

²⁵ Aristoph. Thesm. 163, 257–258 (n. 31); F 332.2 K.-A. (p. 467 n. 3); Pherecrates F 106 K.-A. Menander Peric. 823: χρυσῆ τε μίτρα [a golden *mitra*].

²⁶ Plin. NH 35.58: *Polygnotus ..., qui primus mulieres tralucida veste pinxit, capita earum mitris versicoloribus operuit* [Polygnotus, who was the first to paint women in a translucent garment, covered their heads with *mitrae* in variegated colours].

²⁷ Pollux 4.151, 154.

²⁸ Hdt. 1.195, 7.90.

²⁹ Brandenburg (n. 1) 63.

³⁰ Euripides, Bacch. 833: ἐπὶ κάρατι δέ 'έσται μίτρα [on your head will be a *mitra*].

³¹ Vgl. Aristoph. Thesm. 257–258: (Eur.): κεκρυφάλου δεῖ καὶ μίτρας. (Ag.): ἡδὶ μὲν οὖν || κεφαλὴ περίθετος, ἦν ἐγώ νύκτωρ φορῶ. [(Eur.): We need a *kekryphalon* and a *mitra*. (Ag.): Here you have a cap that I wear at night]; 941–942: ἵνα μὴ ἐν κροκάτοις καὶ μίτραις γέρων ἀνὴρ γέλωτα παρέχω [in order not to be mocked as an old man wearing *crocotae* and *mitrae*]. The κεφαλὴ περίθετος is presumably a night cap worn by Agathon to protect his coiffure (against Austin/Olson ad loc.). On a similar use of a *mitra*, see also Prop. 2.29.15; Plin. NH 35.140.

³² On the archaeological evidence, see LIMC VII s.v. Omphale 23, 33; St. Oehmke, Entwaffnende Liebe. Zur Ikonologie von Herakles/Omphale-Bildern anhand der Gruppe Neapel-Kopenhagen, JdAI 115 (2000), 147–157.

³³ Plin. NH 35.140: *Iove Liberum parturiente depicto mitrato et muliebriter ingemescente* [Jupiter in child bed with Dionysus, depicted as wearing a *mitra* and moaning like a woman].

³⁴ RAC 4 (1950) s.v. effeminatus, col. 631 (H. Herter); Brandenburg (n. 1) 56; on Priapus: LIMC VIII s. v. Priapus 69, 76, 85, 86, 89, 118, 172–178; on Hermaphroditus: LIMC V s.v. Hermaphrodit 5; St. Oehmke, Das Weib im Manne, Berlin 2004, 68–69; on Eros: S. Mollard-Besques, Musée Nationale du Louvre, vol. II (1963), pls. 61, 210.

mitra when she is left on Naxos by Dionysus (A 11);³⁵ in Lucretius, the beautiful mistress requires it (A 10);³⁶ in Cicero (A 10), Clodius equips himself with a *mitra* when disguising as a female musician.³⁷

As to real life, the fashion of wearing a *mitra* migrated to Rome in the third or second century BCE. It is among the first Greek garments grafted onto Roman dress culture, predating the second wave of Greek luxury clothing in Imperial times. In his short history of headwear terms, Varro explicitly attributes the *mitra* to this earlier period.³⁸ Other literary evidence also suggests that the *mitra* was adopted early on in Hellenization. The term *mitra* is missing in Plautus and Cato, but it occurs as a fashionable garment in a Togata of Afranius. It is mentioned by Cicero, Catullus, and Lucretius. Cicero's description of Clodius' dressing in it at a female dinner party (though influenced by Greek literature) shows that it was considered an elegant article of clothing by young women. In early Imperial times, it was a 'normal' dress item, and it was by no means a special Oriental fashion. Inflation, however, caused devaluation. Our sources show that widespread use caused the *mitra* to no longer be fashionable in Imperial times. After all, Imperial Rome is not Classical Athens. In contrast to Athens, a *mitra* in Rome became the dress of mature women, who were the only ones to still wear the *mitra* in public. Young and elegant Roman women used it only in private. In this sense, the *mitra* had transformed from Greek fashion into common Roman female headwear by the end of the second century CE.

³⁵ Cat. 64.63: *non flavo retinens subtilem vertice mitram* [she did not keep on her blond head the fine *mitra*].

³⁶ Lucr. 4.1129: *et bene parta patrum fiunt anademata, mitrae* [the wealth of the fathers won by honest means becomes hairbands and headscarves].

³⁷ Cic. in Cur. et Clod. F 22–24; de harusp. resp. 44.

³⁸ Varro LL 5.130: *mitra et reliqua fere in capite postea addita cum vocabulis Graecis* [the *mitra* and nearly all other headwear was added later together with the Greek terms].