

## Article

# The Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani: Material Documentation for Religious Entanglement

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**Abstract:** In this article, I place the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani on the axis of time of the Mithraic Saturn/Kronos prototype. Entangled in that prototype are astrology, concepts of death, and time perceptions. As a symbolic choice, its style reflects politico-religious and cultural colonial appropriation by Rome's elite of the Severan period and demonstrates a syncretistic complexity adapted to Roman esthetic values. By surveying these issues and identifying the iconographic changes the statue has undergone, I reveal the elements of that colonial appropriation. The movement of the serpents and the astrological reliefs on the body depict Western philosophical concepts of the movement of the soul between the constellations after death and the unbounded (circular) nature of Aionic time entangled with Eastern concepts of the procession of time and Leontocephalic divinities.

**Keywords:** leontocephaline; Mithra; appropriation; Saturn; time; henotheism; religion; art; Severan period; Aion



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## 1. Introduction

There is a leontocephaline statue on each side of the entrance to the Vatican library: one is the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani (Figure 1), and the other the Leontocephaline from Mithraeum in Ostia (Figure 2). Both are dated to the end of the second century, beginning of the third century C.E. This is a wonderfully poetic curatorial choice, because these enigmatic figures, once considered anathema to the Christian church, are syncretized images symbolizing a combination of world perspectives and religious approaches in one figure. They symbolize the accumulated knowledge of the Vatican library, not all of it necessarily Christian-related. This article aims to unfold the complexity of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani by exploring its syncretistic combination of different perceptions of time and death.

This article asks colonialist questions and reveals the depth of Eastern elements and concepts within this statue in relation to its Romanized style, looking for the level of entanglement as defined by Stephanie M. Langin-Hooper [1]. Although the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani adopts a provincial iconography and thus Eastern ideas, I maintain it is a transformation consistent with Roman elite philosophy and presented in Romanized style. This demonstrates stylistic awareness with colonialist aspirations.

The Leontocephaline prototype is unique, evident from the first centuries of the first millennia. Its iconography combines the head of a lion with the body of a man; it has massive wings and a serpent wrapped around its body. In most cases, it holds keys and stands on a globe. Considered part of the Mithraic mystery [2,3], it is even more intriguing in its role as part of the Imperial Roman Capitol artistic milieu.

The Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani has a winged naked male human body, originally with exposed genitals later replaced by a fig leaf. Its head was most likely that of a lion—the residue of its mane is all that remains of the original head [4]. Its legs are bound together by a serpent coiled five times around its body—the probably accurate reconstruction shows the tail of the serpent touching the globe on which the statue

stands, its head resting on the lion's mane [5]. The numerous pieces of evidence of the Leontocephaline type sustain the accuracy of this reconstruction [6]. Between the serpent's coils are astrological reliefs; on its torso are the signs of Arius and Libra, and on its hips the signs of Capricorn and Cancer [7]. Its right arm is raised laterally and vertically, its left arm held close to its body, with the forearm stretched forward at a right angle. It can be assumed that it held keys in hands that were reconstructed intelligently in the *adlocutio* pose typical of the iconography of Roman deities [8].

The positioning of the hands, the Romanized style, and the reliefs on the torso and hips, alongside conceptual ideas embedded in the statue, are deviations from the leontocephaline prototype and testify to its adaptation to Roman artistic tendencies and preferences. These changes are suggestive of Eastern and Western entanglement of religio-philosophical concepts that merge into a syncretic image, adjusted to Roman concepts and esthetic values [9].



**Figure 1.** Leontocephaline from Villa Albani, white marble statue, H. 155 cm, Br. 37 cm (base), Vatican Museum, Rome (190–225 C.E.).



**Figure 2.** Leontocephaline, marble statue, H. 160 cm, Br. 52 cm, from Mithraeum in Ostia, biblioteca in the Vatican Museum (190 C.E.).

## 2. The Leontocephaline Prototype

An examination of the sources and various origins of the Leontocephaline type reveals a panorama of religious syncretism. The intended or arbitrary combination of Babylonian, Assyrian, and Persian deities with those of Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor was fused in the Roman melting pot and colored in Roman hues. This syncretistic phenomenon was common in the historic-religious context of the Roman Empire period, as various cults reached and were successfully absorbed in the Roman Capitol [10–14]. An ongoing debate on syncretism identifies the fusion of elements and concepts from different cultures in one object as usually originating from the popular-folk level of religiosity and manifesting individualized “subjectivized” approaches to them (Anita M. Leopold and Jeppe S. Jensen summarize the leading approaches and the difficulties in defining ‘syncretism’) [15]. This is evident from the differentiation between each sculpture in the Leontocephaline prototype group, but will be analyzed in this article only in regard to the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani as only one point along a long evolutionary axis.

Research into the Leontocephaline iconographic type was initiated by Franz Cumont, who identifies it with the cult of Mithras. He associated it with two fragmented statues of the prototype with the inscription “Arimanius”, the evil god in the dualist Zoroastrian religion [3] (Volume 1, p. 116. figs. 221–222) [16]. Cumont claims that the image from Brittany is a later Zarvan or Mazdaist variation of the Zoroastrian Arimanius, which thrived in Rome at the beginning of the first millennium [17,18]. Cumont sees a resemblance between the Mithraic Leontocephaline zoomorphic figure and that of Arimanius when depicted attacking Ahura-Mazda, such as in the well-known relief from Persepolis. Cumont projected Arimanius’s negativity on the Mithraic Leontocephaline. The Leontocephalic Nergal Babylonian demon confirmed Cumont’s projection. He identifies it as a divinity appearing in Mithraic texts as Kronos, Saturn, Aion, or Saeculum, who represents eternal time in the Mithraic mystery, claiming that this image was a response to the evolving astronomical knowledge in Persia and Babylon [16] (pp. 106–109) [19]. There is a contradiction in Cumont’s assertions because, whereas he saw the development of the Mithraic Leontocephaline Arimanius as reflecting astronomy and astrology molding time into a regulated, organized, and rhythmic eternal cycle, the Zoroastrian Arimanius is a chaotic god characterized by disorder. The Mithraic Leontocephaline is represented as the conductor of the cosmic orchestra of stars and planets, and thus could not be chaotic nor evil [20–22].

Howard M. Jackson proves that the Leontocephaline introduced into the Roman Empire is not malicious. He provides sufficient evidence of it being the Mithraic Kronos/Saturn and to sustain that the iconography of this prototype does not project evil, but cosmic domination—a *cosmocrator*—representing cosmic order. This transformation in the meaning of the lion-zoomorphic probably occurred in Asia Minor just prior to its acceptance in Rome. Jackson claims Mithraic Saturn was an elevated god in the cult, functioning as a Demiurgus, and refutes Katherine M. D. Dunbabin’s claim that the Leontocephaline was another, equal god [23,24]. I mostly agree with Jackson; however, he does not refer to the dating and chronological development of the visual sources, apart from one dated example (Figure 2). I endeavor to place the Leontocephaline from Villa Albani in a timeframe, and by so doing mine the unique information it offers.

In the Barbarini fresco, Mithraic Saturn appears immediately above the most popular Mithraic scene of the *Tauroctony*—Mithras struggling with the taurus (Figure 3). The leontocephalic Saturn stands on the cosmic globe in the center of the sky, ruling over the movement of the stars—imaged as altars, and the planets—imaged as the zodiac constellation symbols [25]. It should be noted that astrology was much revered in ancient cultures, not merely for organizing time, but also for dominating faith. For example, in his treatise *On the Creation*, Philo of Alexandria explains that the stars are a signal to humans of their life events [23] (pp. 18–21). Thus, when Saturn is represented as conducting the stars and planets, it symbolizes control over the circular order of time, control over faith, and his function as a *cosmocrator*. Standing on the globe also manifests control over the earth.



Jaime Alvar agrees with Jackson and Roger Beck, claiming that Mithraic Saturn is a god that controls faith [13] (p. 78).



(a)



(b)

**Figure 3.** The Barberini Fresco, from the cult-niche in Cecchelli, Rome (2–3 century C.E.). (a) The entire fresco; (b) The detail presenting the Leontocephaline (now broken).

There are many visual influences on the zoomorphic combination of a man and a lion, such as the Egyptian gods Aker, Bes, Mios, and Chanoubis (Chnum, Chnoumis) [26,27].

Jackson identifies many Leontocephaline images from Leontopolis as the solar god Mios [27] (pp. 108–122). Images of Chanoubis, particularly those on magical amulets, also connect this leontocephalic image to that of the serpent, since it occasionally appears as an Agathos Daimon—a serpent’s body with a lion’s head, such as the image on the second to third centuries C.E. amulet from the Newell Museum in South Dakota. The consensus in the Roman Capitol was that Agathos Daimon was beneficent and protective, just as serpents were also considered to be the spirits of the *genius paterfamilias* [28].

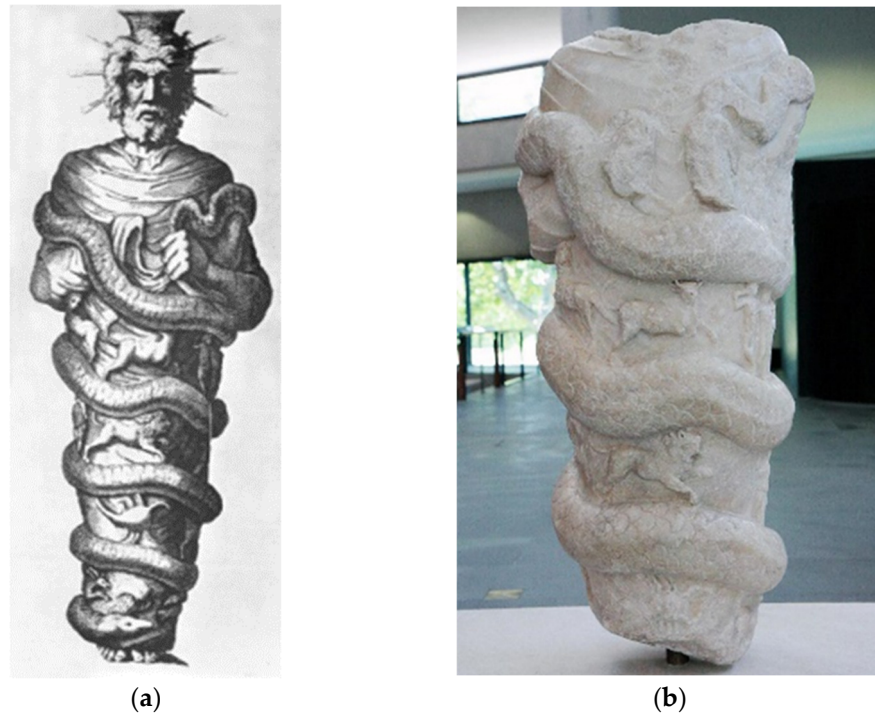
The image of the serpent is highly important to an understanding of the Leontocephaline prototype. The coiled serpent is a visual manifestation of the collision of ancient cultures. A serpent is the messenger of the underworld, yet a symbol of healing and triumph over death [29]. I contend that the Hermes *Psychopompos* Caduceus is a quintessential symbol that accommodates two contradictory belief systems on death: on the one hand, people were buried or cremated, which confined them back to the earth; yet, on the other hand, the perception gradually developed that the soul was elevated and brought into a celestial sphere. These contradictions were reconciled in a symbol of the two serpents, manifesting the eternal movement of the soul in a closed figure eight, yet with wings that would lift the soul to the heavenly realm [29] (p. 268). The syncretic god Serapis, a synthesis of the Greek Hades with the Egyptian Osiris, is sometimes depicted with the body of a serpent, emphasizing the connection of the image of the serpent with concepts of death. Asclepius’s and Hygieia’s serpents are other manifestations of the serpent as a healer, or more precisely as a mediator between the sphere of the living and the sphere of the dead. As the container of *paterfamilias* souls, the circular serpent was a metaphor for the movement of the soul.

Roger Beck maintains that the serpent in the Leontocephaline prototype manifests the eternal cycle of time. He claims that the structure of the coiled serpent as a spiral around a conus is the visual manifestation of an integration between two time systems: the linear and the circular [25] (pp. 54–57). This identifies the Leontocephaline as Aion, who is also associated with death and rejuvenation—the circular movement of the soul in and out of the material world, but simultaneously with the expectation of salvation—that gradually became more accepted in the Roman Capitol during the first centuries C.E [30].

The serpent’s coiling around the body of a god associated with death and salvation evokes another meaning in its association with the shrines of Osiris. In a statue of Jupiter-Sol-Serapis (now in poor condition) (Figure 4), the body of the god was wrapped in shrouds that were echoed by a serpent coiled around it. Since the monolithic closed form of the body was incompatible with the Roman esthetic style, the coiled serpent was transformed into a deliberately chosen sign to symbolize Osiris shrines, with the naked body of the human beneath it visible. Yet, the coiled serpent still encases the human body, giving it a monolithic appearance, which is typical of Egyptian sculptures but not consistent with the fundamental esthetic of Hellenic art—opening the figure to the space that surrounds it, so that it becomes as far removed as possible from the stone’s monolithic image. The Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani achieves the Hellenic esthetic aspiration. When stretched to the sides, the statue is opened to the space around it, adjusting it not only to the iconography of Roman gods but also to the Roman esthetic style. The typical Egyptian manifestation of the Uraeus cobra crowning a king or god was also transformed into the image of the serpent’s head resting on the lion’s mane in the Leontocephaline prototype, as depicted in the example from Muti’s gardens (Figure 5). Since the head of the Villa Albani Leontocephaline did not survive, we can only assume the restoration is correct.

The Jupiter-Sol-Serapis statue also reflects the well-attested association of the serpent with the sun and fire, fundamental to the Leontocephaline prototype. Jackson maintains that the lion, as an astrological sign associated with the sun, had a liturgic function in the purification ritual in Mithraism. He claims that Leontocephaline statues emitted fire to purify the believer. In the Palazzo Colonna relief (Figure 6), the fire emitted from the Leontocephaline jaws is directed toward an altar, and serpents ascend the fire from the altar. Porphyry of Tyre (234–305 C.E.), a Roman neo-Platonic philosopher who lived in

Phoenicia and was a pupil of Plotinus and probably participated in the Mithraic cult [31], adopted Aristo's perception of fire's upward motion, and suggested it was a metaphor for the ascension of the soul from matter to spirit [32]. Thus, the serpent's ascent from the flames and from the Leontocephaline wings symbolize the movement of the soul from matter upward. The holes in Leontocephaline statues and reliefs in the jaw area support Jackson's assertion that fire was emitted from their jaws [23] (p. 28).



**Figure 4.** Jupiter-Sol-Serapis, marble statue, H. 95 cm, W. 4 cm, from Arelate, and its sketch as completed, Museum le Président, Bon (1–4 century C.E.). (a) A sketch of the statue; (b) The statue's current condition.



**Figure 5.** Leontocephaline, white marble statue, H. 79 cm, Br. 20 cm (base), from Muti's gardens near Villa Ludovisi, Lateran Museum, Rome, No. 318A (3–4 century C.E.).





**Figure 6.** Leontocephaline, white marble relief, H. 75 cm, Br. 65 cm, from the stairs leading to the garden of Palazzo Colonna, Roma (2–4 century C.E.).

A vase that probably contained water was found in the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres. It is encircled by a serpent and engraved with the constellations. Richard Gordon maintains its iconography symbolizes the soul's elevation to higher spheres [33]. Joanna Bird suggests that a similar vase adorned with tiny images of a serpent and a lion is evidence that members of the cult from the lion grade of initiation (one of seven) oversaw the lighting of the liturgical incense [34]. Some vases with serpents on them have holes and were probably illuminated by fire from the inside. She finds that the Leontocephaline prototype iconographic formulas are connotated with the notion of serpents and vases as containers of the soul. One example of this is the Leontocephaline relief from the Mithraeum in Ostia (Figure 7). Gordon maintains that the vase symbolizes the confining vessel for the soul; its opening, like the lion's mouth, is the gate through which the soul passes in order to be released from its materialistic constraints and transported to other spheres.

This contention is supported by the writings of Porphyry. His book *the Numenius of Apamea* discusses a portion from the thirteenth book of Homer's *Odyssey* called "*The Cave of the Nymphs*", in which he surmises that since the vase and the bowl are made of clay (matter) and contain honey or water, they symbolize the container of the soul [32] (pp. 37–41(6–7)). Only a small portion is presented here:

"But the stony bowls and amphorae are in the most eminent degree adapted to the Nymphs who preside over the water that flows from rocks. And to souls that descend into generation, and are occupied in corporeal energies . . . [32] (pp. 37(6))"

To conclude this section, the iconology of the Leontocephaline prototype is a visual representation of syncretism, and even henotheism, which entangle divinities related to time and faith, and a translation of philosophical concepts of the process of death and salvation into a visual iconography. This image entangles several religious iconographies from various locations in the Roman Empire and beyond and adjusts them to the visual preferences of Roman esthetics. The next step in this study is to examine the specific issues identified in the statue of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani.





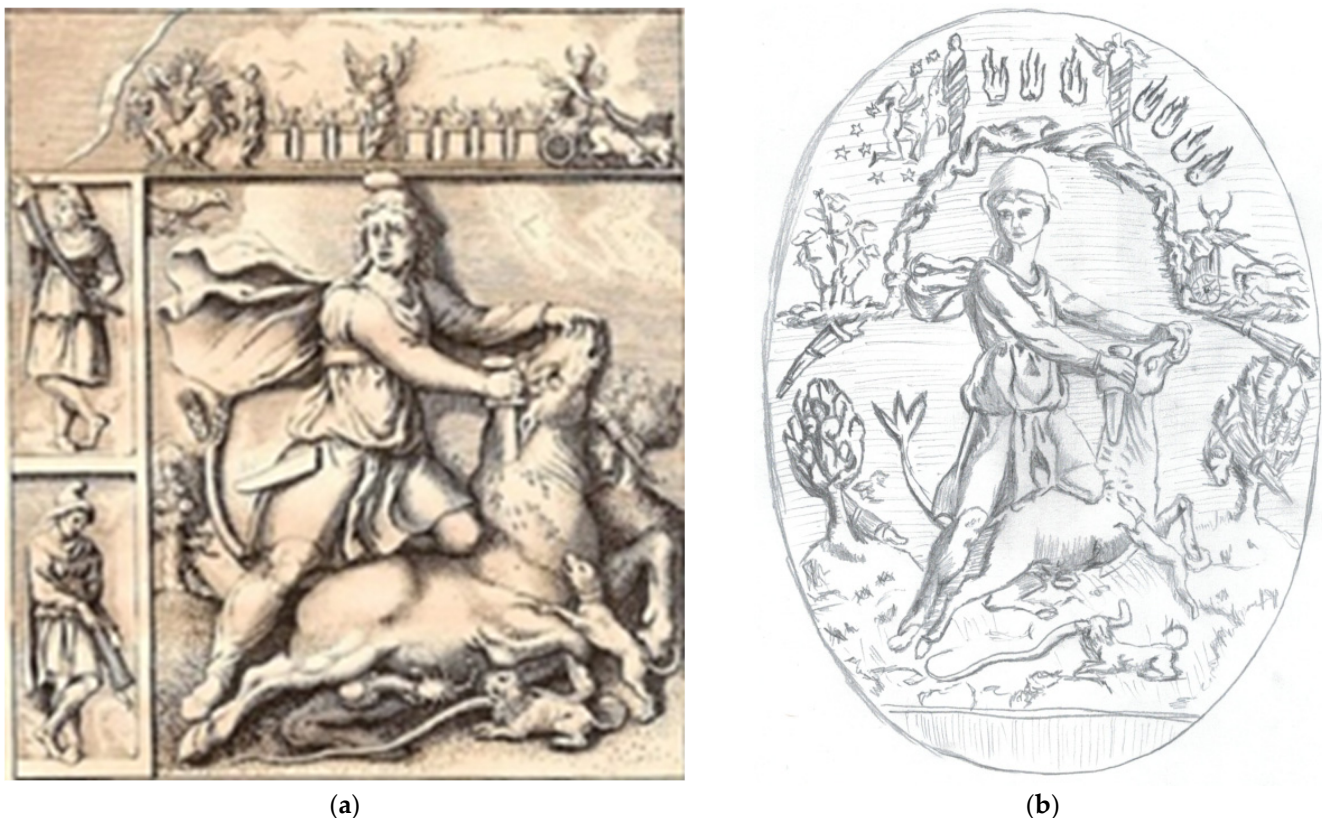
**Figure 7.** Leontocephaline, marble relief, H. 107 cm, Br. 40 cm, D. 2.5 cm, found in the Mithraeum in Ostia, Museum Chiaramonti XIV, 3, Vatican museum, Rome (2–3 century C.E.).

### 3. The Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani: Entanglement of Meaning

This part aims to identify and seek the meanings of iconographic aspects of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani that deviate from the traditional iconography of the Mithraic Saturn, suggesting that it represents an iconographic entanglement of Eastern and Western religio-philosophical concepts and time systems (The terms east and west here are simplifications of the geo-political origin of ideas as touched upon in the previous section. ‘east’ refers to everything between Persia, Asia Minor and Egypt, whereas ‘west’ refers to central Rome—mainly the capitol).

In his book *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*, Beck investigates the now lost Ottaviano Zeno using two early modern sketches of it (Figure 8a,b). He associates the Leontocephaline with, among other things, Saturn/Kronos, the supreme god of the Mithraic theology, with the highest grade in the Mithraic mystery hierarchy, the

last day of the week (Saturday), and the location of the star Saturn as the (then known) furthest planet and called “the night-time sun” [25] (pp. 15–34, 64–77, 85–100, particularly p. 87). The Mithraic Saturn/Kronos is superior to gods such as Jupiter and Sol. Gordon’s investigation of Mithraism suggests a hierarchical vertical axis in which the Saturn grade was the highest and in which in the temple functions as a gateway to the heavens. Jackson also notes that, over time, the Mithraic Saturn became elevated above all other gods. He particularly notes the example of the Gnostic false demiurge Yaldabaoth/Yahweh who is portrayed as a Leontocephaline. Thus, the Leontocephaline Saturn/Kronos is a demiurge (The term “Demiurge” was used by Plato in the *Timaeus* to describe a god who is above all others, detached from others, and the god of creation. This doctrine was later developed in middle and neo-Platonism) [23] (p. 19) [35–37].



**Figure 8.** (a)—The Monument of Ottaviano Zeno, from the Ladréry print, Reproduced from Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca* IV, Pl. XII. (b)—The Monument of Ottaviano Zeno, from the DE Caylus intaglio design, reproduced from Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca* IV, Pl. XXV.

The Villa Albani Leontocephaline is associated with astrology not only with regard to the prototype but also by the bas-reliefs on it: the signs of Arius and Libra on its thighs, not only symbolizing two opposite astrological constellations but also the beginning of the Roman year (Merces) and the middle (September), the equinoxes, the beginning of spring, and the beginning of autumn. The signs of Capricorn and Cancer on its chest symbolize not only two opposite constellations, but also the solstice events of the year and the beginning of summer and the beginning of winter. (The importance of the changing seasons in the Roman culture and art can be seen in George M. A. Hanfmann’s study of the *Season Sarcophagus in Dumbarton* [38], and the seasons’ iconographies was highly popular in the Leontocephaline prototype [3] (Volume 1, pp. 143–144).

The Leontocephaline statue from Ostia (Figure 2) also has the signs of the seasons on its wings, but it is closer in style to peripheral art of the Roman Empire; it is difficult to judge whether it was created in the Roman Capitol with stylistic awareness of peripheral

art, or was delivered from outside the Capitol, having been made in the periphery. In any event, zodiac signs are common features of the Leontocephaline prototype to indicate the movement of time, such as the Barberini Fresco (Figure 3) in which the Leontocephaline stands on a globe between a strip of zodiac signs, or the Leontocephaline from the Galleria degli Uffizi (Figure 9) that has a similar strip on the globe on which it stands. The zodiac cycle is typically an attribute of Aion and stresses that aspect of the Leontocephaline and its iconology of time. However, the specific choice of these signs and the specific order in which they appear alludes to a different time system.



**Figure 9.** Leontocephaline, white marble relief, H. 115 cm, Br. 35 cm, from the Galleria degli Uffizi (2–4 century C.E.).

Sacha Stern's book *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism* distinguishes between two time systems. He notes that the Eastern time system, as reflected in biblical texts, relates to



process—the seasons were indicated by the processes of agriculture; sowing, growing, and harvesting; day and night were indicated by the sun’s progress in the sky; a period was indicated by an event, etc. He contrasts this time system with the chronologic progress of time that can be mathematically broken down into equal quantified units [39]. I contend that the movement of the serpent on the body of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani and the zodiac signs on its body are a reference to both time systems. The chronological one was previously discussed regarding the movement of the serpent as a cylinder—linear and circular [25] (pp. 54–57). The other refers to the Eastern procession of time, indicated by the serpent’s movement, like the movement of the soul in the cosmos in the process of elevation from matter, metamorphosis, and descent back to matter.

In his article “Aion”, Doro Levi studies a mosaic from Antioch in which Aion is depicted in his typical chronological time system iconography on one side, with three figures representing the three ages on the other, as related to chronology (Cronos), which he claims represent the passing of time; a young man, a man in his prime, and an older man. Levi views the dichotomy between Aion and Kronos/Cronos as mirroring the different time philosophies. He suspects that the Leontocephaline type as Aion and Cronos is related to the older, bearded image of time, which indicates the demiurgic eternal continuity of time, but is also related to death and the process of blooming and wilting. Levi identifies the Mithraic time god as having both positive and negative aspects. Unlike Aion, who endlessly rotates the wheel of time and stays young forever, an Eastern time divinity must submit to the progress of time and be the manifestation of a process, in this case the process of reincarnation [30] (pp. 269–314). The Mithraic concept of the essence of the universe may also be indicated by the most popular Mithraic scene of the *tauroctony*; the slaying of the taurus by Mithra as the beginning of life. So, a Mithraic divinity of time also encapsulates themes of both genesis and apogenesis [40].

Numenius of Apamea’s (second century C.E.) philosophical assertion of the movement of the soul after death was quoted by both Porphyry and Macrobius (fifth century C.E.), presenting the neo-Platonic and neo-Pythagorean concepts of the afterlife movement of the soul [32] (pp. 43–45(10–11),41).

Porphyry writes as follows:

“Theologians therefore assert that these two gates are Cancer and Capricorn; but Plato calls them entrances. And of these theologians say that Cancer is the gate through which souls descend; but Capricorn that through which they ascend [32] (pp. 44(11)).”

Macrobius, who was a fifth century C.E. Neo-Platonist and considered a bridge between the classical world and the Middle Ages, also writes as follows:

“So while the souls which are about to descend are yet in Cancer they are still in the company of the gods because in that constellation they have not yet left the Milky Way. But when in their fall they reach Leo they assume the primary form of their future state. . . . From there—that is, from the borderland where the Zodiac and the Milky Way intersect—the descending soul is drawn out in its precipitous rush from a sphere, which is the only divine shape, into a cone, just as a line is born of a point, and evolves from an indivisible state into dimensionality [41] (Volume 1, pp. 4–5 (1.12.4–5)) (Translation provided in [23] (p. 26)).”

Both texts indicate that Capricorn and Cancer are the exit and entrance gates for the soul in its after-death journey out of and back into matter—the globe. Macrobius specifically states that the constellation of Leo is where the soul metamorphoses into its new incarnation. Porphyry takes a more Neo-Pythagorean view in indicating the soul’s movement between the gates of Capricorn and Cancer, but also as passing through the spherical gates of the sun and the moon. The soul’s passing through the gate of the sun is also linked to Leo, since the Leo zodiac constellation is ruled by the sun [21] (pp. 155–159).

Taking all these aspects together, I contend that the iconography of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani combines Eastern and Western philosophical aspects of time.

This unique iconography indicates an artistic awareness of these aspects, as a visual debate on the progress of the soul after death, reincarnation, and salvation. The movement of the serpent on the naked human body of Saturn indicates the chronological time system. Its ascent from matter indicates death and the release of the soul from matter. The coiled movement of the serpent symbolizes the movement of the soul upward toward the heavens and the cycle of time and passing of the seasons. As the serpent moves upward it travels between the constellations, rising from Capricorn till it reaches Leo, where its transformation occurs. The wonderful thing about a serpent's movement is that it is limbless, so the same movement can also indicate the descent into matter. It returns through the gate of Cancer and regains material form in its descent to earth. The serpent on the head of the lion emphasizes the metamorphoses, which gains further emphasis in a Renaissance sketch of a statue that has not endured, in which the serpent is clearly shown in the lion's mouth (Figure 10) [23] (pp. 32–34).



**Figure 10.** Leontocephaline, sketched by Bartoli from a description found in a Mithraeum, Rome (16 century C.E.).

This aspect of the importance of the lion and the lion's mouth is also evident in the Aion from Strasbourg relief (Figure 11) that depicts a bearded Aion, which Levi sees as bordering between the youthful Aion and Saturn. Behind the figure, a lion stoops over a vase enwrapped by a serpent [30] (pp. 283–284). The lion's mouth is prominent, stressing that the soul that rises from the vase (matter) reaches the lion mouth. Roman sarcophagi regularly exhibit lions' heads with open mouths in the corners, which might indicate a similar symbolism to that of the Leontocephaline. I agree with the scholarly consensus that the lion/Leo and its jaws are a crucially important symbol representing a sphere where the transformation of the soul occurs after death.



**Figure 11.** Aion, sandstone relief, H. 65 cm, Br. 41.5 cm, D. 16 cm, found in Argentoratum in Upper Germany, Archaeological Museum, Strasbourg (3–4 century C.E.).

To further establish the connection between the iconography of the Villa Albani's Leontocephaline and neo-Platonic philosophy, I return to Macrobius's interpretation, in which he examines the connection between numbers and the neo-Platonic description of the layers of the soul:

"Indeed, the Soul is free from contamination with anything material, owing itself only to its Creator and to Itself, and being endowed with a single nature; when it pours itself forth to animate the immense universe, it does not permit any division of its singleness. You see how the monad, sprung from the First Cause of things, everywhere undiminished and always indivisible, maintains the continuity of its powers even in regard to the Soul [41] (p. 101(6.9))."

His descriptions visualize the movement of the soul as if in a funnel; arriving from the infinite to be poured down to material. This allegorical shape also features in the image of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani. Its upper body is large and open to the space around it, and the lower part shrinks, contracts, becoming a more compacted and denser sphere which forms an unstable base. Thus, the demiurge Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani is a visualization of the neo-Platonic cosmos.

This joint perception of astrology in Eastern and Western parts of the Roman Empire made it an easy matter for artists to emphasize the similarities and entangle them in one figure, thus presenting the henotheistic aspect of the Leontocephaline prototype and of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani in particular.



#### 4. Henotheism

At this point I turn the debate toward the phenomenon of henotheism. Erik Peterson, Arthur D. Nock, Crystal J. Addey, and Henk Versnel, assert that henotheism is the belief in a single overarching god that stands above a pantheon of gods, but does not rule out their existence [9,42–44]. Campbell Bonner, on the other hand, regards it as a fusion of several divinities into one, but does not consider it superior to other beings [26] (pp. 175–176). I consider the henotheism of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani as a middle ground between them: it is a syncretism of different divinities, combining different belief systems and resulting in a god whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The definition of the Mithraic Saturn as a demiurge and its cosmocratic role alongside its image as the cosmos, elevate it above all other gods. In the Mithraic mystery, Saturn is far above Mithras, who has a semi-human nature. Alvar rightly identifies the growing dichotomy between a human-like god and an elevated and detached demiurge as a religious trend during the Roman Imperial period and as particularly relevant to the Mithraic mystery. Mithraic Saturn is a creator and destroyer, the highest in the hierarchy of the gods [13] (pp. 74–105) [45,46].

The henotheism phenomenon is a feature of the Leontocephaline prototype, such as the Leontocephaline statue from the Mithraeum in Ostia (Figure 2), in which additional attributes are presented, such as the hammer of Vulcan, the caduceus of Mercury, to indicate these gods' assimilation with him, yet his superiority to them. In the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani the entanglement with other divinities is more organic, to the point where the statue becomes a crossroads of various belief systems and their philosophical bases, and not a collection of attributes of different divinities. The henotheistic aspect of the Leontocephaline type is further highlighted in gnostic texts, such as *"Pistis Sophia"* and *"The Apocrypha by John"* in which Yaldabaoth/Yaltabaoth—portrayed as a Leontocephaline—falsely presents himself as the supreme and only god [27] (pp. 16, 27–28, 34–38).

#### 5. Dating

Only the Leontocephaline statue from the Mithraeum in Ostia (Figure 2) is ascribed a precise date on the stele next to it indicating the year 190 C.E., but not in terms of the year of the Emperor's rule. During the excavation of the Mithraeum in Ostia, another Leontocephaline was found next to it (Figure 7), a sign of the popularity of this figure among the Roman Capitol elite. A comparison of the style of the two Leontocephalines from the Mithraeum in Ostia shows that they were not made by the same workshop. The Leontocephaline statue (Figure 2) was designed with its upper body leaning precipitously forward, an indication that it was designed to fit a curved niche—suggesting a local workshop that constructed it to fit a specific location. The Leontocephaline relief (Figure 7), on the other hand, is portable and was probably brought from a different location. This is supported by the dark shade of the marble from which it was made, which is atypical of local Roman production. Shipping it would require a considerable financial investment, hence its patron must be rich. Neither is designed in the typical central Roman style, and both have Eastern stylistic features, which in the case of the Leontocephaline statue (Figure 2) might indicate a stylistic eclecticism with a tendency toward Eastern orientalism, intentionally imbued by a local artist [47].

The style of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani is highly informative. It is clothed in the Roman style, and the high quality of the workmanship and the material suggests it was sculpted in a local workshop in the Capitol. Its wing feathers in high relief, together with the high quality of the bas-reliefs, the signs, and its somewhat blurry borderlines, is reminiscent of artistic features typical of the ruling period (193–211 C.E.) of Septimius Severus (145–211 C.E.). There are similarities in images in The Arch of Septimius Severus from the Forum Romanum that indicate that it was formed around the same time. That style persisted until the end of Caracalla's rule (217 C.E.), after which the typical style was fundamentally changed.

The Severan period is eloquently described by Zahra Newby as "art at the cross-roads" [48]. The art of the Severan period tended to syncretize the East and the West

both stylistically and conceptually. This is typical of the Severian period environment in central Rome. Cumont claims that the Mithraic mystery gained popularity in the Capitol of Rome from 138 to 180 C.E., due to the exposure of the Roman elite in the Antonina period to foreign ideas, particularly Greek, and other sematic influences (Cumont's stereotyped writings need to be read with extreme caution but are nevertheless appreciated and valuable here) [16] (pp. 33–34, 82–83) [49]. Septimius Severus occupied Babylonia and Persia between 195–197 C.E. and was receptive to the provinces' ideas and cults. Yet, like the adaptation of Septimius's portraits to Roman style, these provincial ideas were adjusted to Roman concepts. Neo-Platonic philosophy also thrived among the Roman elite during this period. The Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani brings together exotic ideas from various parts of the Empire and adjusts them to Roman style as a sign of both Roman superiority and pluralism.

Daniel Unger's book *Redefining Eclecticism in Early Modern Bolognese Painting* develops a theory of stylistic consciousness and stylistic choices in Italian Baroque art as a message in their own right. Unger's stylistic eclecticism theory is valid for the Severan artistic period and particularly recognizable in The Arch of Septimius Severus, the different parts of which were designed in different styles to enhance their conceptual message [50] (see also [48] (pp. 201–249)). The Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani demonstrates how ideas that migrated from the East were consciously appropriated and deliberately presented in Roman form, even though other stylistic choices were available [51]. I maintain that this imparted a colonial message of domination and ownership; so that the statue presents an esthetic henotheism adjusted to Roman philosophical ideas.

The hands in the adlocutio gesture are another adjustment of the statue to the visual semiotic language of the Roman Capitol. The artist chose to use familiar iconography to indicate a divine figure, demonstrating an appropriation process that mirrors the politico-religious environment during the Severan period [13,45,47,52–55].

## 6. Entanglement

Colonization theories are useful in analyzing the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani. This article follows Langin-Hooper's "*Problematizing Typology and Discarding the Colonialist Legacy: Approaches to Hybridity in the Terracotta Figurines of Hellenistic Babylonia*" which contends that a micro-investigation of hybrid and cross-cultural objects from a postcolonial perspective shows how a particular object is not only part of a larger type, but also discrete. Each object Langin-Hooper studies alludes to a specific social group and micro-phenomena of a social fabric. She states that entanglement should be applied to an object's analysis, aiming to decipher the relative influences from one side or the other [1] (pp. 28, 95–114). In that regard, Langin-Hooper's theory is an applicable methodology that answers the aspiration of Valentino Hasparini and Rochard L. Gordon to use material evidence for the understanding of particular groups and individual interpretation of religions [56]. I contend that the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani is an entanglement of ideas from Persia, Egypt, Asia Minor, and elsewhere, merged into a unified Romanized image and presented in a Roman esthetic form. From the colonial perspective, Eastern concepts presented in a syncretic image are entangled with Western neo-Platonic and neo-Pythagorean concepts, not as equals, but as appropriations, presenting Eastern ideas as if they were Roman [57].

It is hard to conclude that this was the religious perspective of the individual artist, but since this sculpture has complex contemporary philosophical aspects, it is safe to surmise that those scholarly Roman men may have offered guidance to the artists, to manifest Roman philosophical concepts alongside Roman aesthetic values and iconographic concepts more robustly than the prototype's Eastern toned-down iconographies.

The Eastern iconography of the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani, particularly the zoomorphic representation of a god, is adapted to Roman esthetic values and tradition. Its astrological features are adjusted to the Roman concept of the movement of the soul through the constellations. The adlocutio pose and the formation of a funnel-shaped statue mirror Roman concepts of the cosmic travel of the soul and its return to matter. The wing

feathers are realistic and elaborate, reduced to two wings to adjust its image to that of Aion's as he is presented in the pedestal of Antoninus Pius's column (Figure 12) as a human with two proportionately large wings open to either side. In contrast, the Leontocephalines from the Mithraeum in Ostia (Figures 2 and 7), which although probably made in Rome, have a more Eastern orientalism esthetic approach that stresses the origin of the type as distant from the center of Rome [58]. The Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani is in alignment with the Roman stylistic genre, with ambiguous attributes that leave only minor hints as to its Eastern origins. The Eastern ideas that remained had already been accepted by the Roman elite. This statue is the culmination of the appropriation process of the Leontocephaline type, as it was absorbed, processed, and transformed for the Roman elite.



**Figure 12.** The apotheosis of Antoninus Pius and his Wife Faustina, marble high relief on the pedestal of Antoninus Pius's column, Field of Mars, Rome (c. 161 C.E.).

This Severan period manifests an overall tendency to create henotheistic divinities and absorb oriental belief systems, while retaining a colonialist attitude toward them. Newby eloquently described the art of the Severan period as a crossroads of many kinds of arts from panhellenic sources, which tended to absorb all kinds of arts and ideas into an explicit concept [48]. Hence, many visual ideas were set aside while others were stressed to form a coherent entangled conceptual image [13,54,59]. The entanglement of various cultural beliefs and ideas was destined to be dramatically changed, perhaps because henotheism had become too complex and sophisticated to endure. Some images, such as the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani, manifested too many complex ideas bound up in one image, and had to be reduced and condensed to manifest only the main issues. Thus, the reliefs of the constellations and the postural change were the very essence of this complex henotheist deity entangled with central Rome beliefs, reduced to manifest only the essential religious concepts. Nonetheless, it is an organic unity that is demonstrably striving for simplicity and compactness.

To conclude, the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani manifests stylistic and philosophical issues that identify the time and location of its creation: it documents the henotheistic and syncretic tendencies during the Severan period; it is infused with concepts of the



movement of time as a process of decline and decay, the Western concept of eternal chronological time and the movement of the soul after death in reincarnation and salvation. These concepts are contained in an image that fuses many divinities from various pantheons in the Roman melting pot.

The Romanized entanglement of the statue, alongside the religio-philosophical ideas it portrays, demonstrates an entanglement of conscious colonialist stylistic awareness. This allows the statue to demonstrate a specific Roman elite belief system of colonialist appropriation. Placing the Leontocephaline from the Villa Albani on an axis is a first step toward outlining the evolution of this prototype corpus. Such a study can instruct the process by which foreign images and ideas were assimilated and appropriated by the Roman Capital. It raises the question of whether this line of imagery was abandoned or continued in some way, and why? This might shed light on why, eventually, this evolving entangled visualization system was abandoned, and a different visualization system was adopted with a fundamentally different iconographic thread and esthetic values.

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