ATTILIO MASTROCINQUE

The Mysteries of Mithras

Orientalische Religionen
in der Antike
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Mohr Siebeck

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Ägypten, Israel, Alter Orient

Oriental Religions in Antiquity

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(ORA)

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A Different Account

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

After many years of writing and reflecting on the subject, I still feel that I have something more to say about the mysteries of Mithras. In fact, my research on Mithraism and the Roman Emperors has produced some interesting results: For one, there is something remarkable about the character of Mithras. That is, whenever we encounter him, I found that his nature seemed so similar to that of a king or a ruler that people were often allegedly unable to distinguish the one from the other. This peculiarity accompanies Mithras throughout his history from his Hellenistic beginnings to his final adventures across the Roman Empire. This interplay of alter egos could even assume a threefold aspect, for Mithras was also very similar to the sun-god, and rulers, as well, were thought to be akin to the sun-god, so that in the end, we find a remarkable triangulation between Helios, Mithras, and Ruler. My study of this of ability of the ancients to create a dual personality in Mithras and the Emperor exposed some well-known and important features of the Roman imperial ideological system; as a consequence, I was forced to abandon the established scholarly orthodoxy about Mithraism, and to look for an entirely new approach to the study. My research resulted in a complete academic "heresy" of sorts, but I preferred not to mitigate the impact of this totally new approach, but to keep moving forward on this new interpretative path. Many things appeared better explained by adopting a brand new chronology and by giving a fresh meaning to the study of Mithraism. By continuing to proceed along this way, many of my suspicions about my ideas of Mithraism were confirmed, for example the significance of the sistrum as a symbol of Jupiter. Therefore, I undertook to examine anew almost everything about Mithraism, and about the relationship between Mithraism and the Imperial ideology. This proved so important that even some marginal issues, such as the role of women, or the use of gimmicks, could be seen in an entirely different light. Changes that occurred in the Severan Age gave a higher role to the Augustae and to women altogether, and I have been compelled to look more closely to see if Mithraism could also have been affected by this new Imperial ideology. Even if no satisfactory result could be obtained in this case, the questions raised by my enquiry will force us to examine things differently, going forward. If gimmicks too were meaningful not only to entertain initiates, they could also be seen to produce an unexpected surprise by finally exposing the "truth" that lay behind them. In Persia Mithras was the god of Truth! This, too, at the highest level, could also be seen to uncover something about the Imperial ideology, as well.

I profitted from an old-fashioned education that emphasized studying ancient history along with philology and archaeology, even though many scholars nowadays are convinced that a historical and philological approach to ancient religions has nothing more to say, and that new research fields are more promising such as those of sociology, an-

thropology, and cognitivism. This is probably true, but under one condition: no matter our approach, we still need, in the end, to know what we truly are dealing with.

The comparative method of religious studies enjoys scant favour, nowadays. But the mysteries of Mithras can only be explained by means of comparative methodologies and by supposing that the iconographic and ritual features of this cult were not restricted to, but also recurred out of, the Mithraea. The most important discoveries about Mithraism was hitherto made possible thanks to the comparative method, and one needs to remember, for example, that the greatest contributions of Cumont, Saxl, Gordon, Beck, and Turcan all depended upon the comparative approach to religious studies.

The so-called "eastern cults" (among whom Mithraism is always included) in the Roman Empire are still scarcely known, and it is a pity that a great and important European project, led by two illustrious scholars from France and Germany, was not funded. It would have been the occasion to create a new corpus of Mithraic documents, thanks to the cooperation of many specialists from all over Europe and the Near East. The international workshop of research, which Franz Cumont created at the end of the 19th century, was about to be reinaugurated. This is the only way of coping with topics so difficult as the cults of Egypt and the Near East which were spread, accepted, and greatly transformed within the Roman Empire. Their dynamics are mostly hidden to us, and we see only their results, thanks to the scanty remains in literature, inscriptions, and the archaeological record.

Now my only concern is to understand the Mithraic iconography by means of the comparative method. In this study I will present the most important documents and give a short commentary on them, and then pass on to envisage a long series of hitherto unknown features of this fascinating Persian god. If this new approach produces its desired effect, the reader will end up understanding a small part of what the Mithraic devotees came to know and experience after their initiation in a Mithraeum. But Mithras was both the god of truth and the god of deception (at least in discovering and condemning it), and one can never be too sure that he (or she) will not have fallen victim to his deception but one more just because a single researcher might have been found unworthy of uncovering the truth.

I am able to present this research thanks to the Alexander-von-Humboldt-Stiftung, which supported my activities in Heidelberg at the Seminar für alte Geschichte und Epigraphik.

I wish to thank my colleagues in Heidelberg, and especially Kai Trampedach, Christian Witschel, and Joachim-Friedrich Quack, who also accepted this work in the ORA series, and many thanks also to my friends Raffaella Bortolin, Darius Frackowiak, Roy Kotansky, Marina Piranomonte, Alfonsina Russo Tagliente, Gabriella Scapaticci, Simona Carosi, and Giovanna Bastianelli, with whom I discussed many problems concerning Mithras and Mithraism. I am also grateful to the Museums which kindly provided me with photographs, and, in particular, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques, Paris; Brukenthal National Museum, Sibiu; Soprintendenza Archeologica della Campania, Salerno; Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Cologne; Museum Schloss Fechenbach, Dieburg; Civic Museum, Frankfurt; Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe; National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden; Lobdengau-Museum, Ladenburg; Ormož Regional Museum, Ptuj; National Museum of Roman Art,

Mérida; Soprintendenza Speciale per il Colosseo, il Museo Nazionale Romano e l'Area Archeologica di Roma, Rome; Musei Civici and Museo della Centrale Montemartini, Rome; Museum des Römerkastell, Saalburg; National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo; Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier; Museo Civico Maffeiano, Verona.

Contents

Abbreviations

AE	*L'Année épigraphique*
AJA	*American Journal of Archaeology*
AJPh	*American Journal of Philology*
AMS	Asia Minor Studies
ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt. Festschrift J.Vogt,* eds. H. Temporini and W. Haase, Berlin, and New York 1972–
ANSMN	*American Numismatic Society. Museum Notes*
ARG	*Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*
ARYS	*Antiguedad, Religiones y Sociedades*
BCAR	*Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma*
BGN	Beiträge zur Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften
BCH	*Bulletin de correspondence hellénique*
BICS	*Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*
BMRP	British Museum Research Publications
Bull.ép.	*Bulletin épigraphique* (in *Revue des Études Grecques*)
CC	Corpus Christianorum (series Latina et series Graeca)
CCAG	Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum
CFC	Convegni della Fondazione Canussio
CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*
CIMRM	M.J. Vermaseren, *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae*, I–II, The Hague 1956 and 1960
CQ	*The Classical Quarterly*
CRAI	*Comptes rendus de des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
DHA	*Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne*
EFH	Entretiens de la Fondation Hadt
EJMS	*Electronic Journal of Mithraic Studies*
EPRO	Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain, Leiden 1961–
FGH	*Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, ed. F. Jacoby, Berlin and Leiden 1923–
FARG	Forschungen zur Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte
GCS	Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte
HUTh	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
HThR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IGR	*Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes*, ed. R. Cagnat, I–V, Paris 1901–1927
IGUR	*Inscriptiones Graecae urbis Romae*, ed. L. Moretti, Rome 1968–1979
IK	*Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien*, Bonn 1972–
ILLRP	*Inscriptiones Latinae liberae rei publicae*, ed. A. Degrassi, Florence 1957–63
ILS	*Inscriptiones Latinae selectae*, ed. H. Dessau, Berlin 1892–1916
Inscr.It.	*Inscriptiones Italiae*

ISK	Instituttet for Sammenlignende Kulturforskning
JA	*Journal Asiatique*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JbAC	*Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*
JdI	*Jahrbuch des archäologischen Instituts*
IGLS	*Inscriptions grecques et latines de Syrie*, I–XVII, Paris and Beirut 1929–2014
JMS	*Journal of Mithraic Studies*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JNG	*Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte*
JRA	*Journal of Roman Archaeology*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
KUB	*Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköi*, Berlin 1921–1990
LIMC	*Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae*, Basel 1981–2009
LTUR	*Lexicon topographicum urbis Romae*, ed. E.M. Steinby, I–V, Rome 1993–2007
MAAR	Memories of the American Academy in Rome
MAPhS	Memories of the American Philosophical Society
MAS	Mainzer archäologische Schriften
MCAAS	Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences
MDAI(I)	*Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts (Istanbuler Abteilung)*
MDAI(R)	*Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts (Römische Abteilung)*
MedAnt	*Mediterraneo Antico*
MEFRA	*Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome (Antiquité)*
NHC	Nag Hammadi codices
NHS	Nag Hammadi Studies
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
OGIS	*Orientis Graeci inscriptiones selectae*, ed. W. Dittenberger, Leipzig, 1903–1905
OA	Orbis Antiquus
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
ORA	Orientalische Religionen in der Antike
PawB	Potsdamer altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge
PEFR	Publications de l'École Française de Rome
PGM	*Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, eds. K. Preisendanz and A. Henrichs, Munich and Leipzig 1973
PL	Patrologiae cursus completus (series Latina), ed. J.P. Migne, Paris 1866–1911
RdA	*Rivista di Archeologia*
RE	*Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, eds. C. Pauly, G. Wissowa, and W. Kroll, Stuttgart 1892–1980
PLRE	*The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, eds. A.H.M. Jones, J.R. Martindale, and J. Morris, I–III, Cambridge 1971–1992
REA	*Revue des Études Anciennes*
REL	*Revue des Études Latines*
RGRW	Religions in the Greek and Roman World
RHR	*Revue de l'histoire des Religions*
RIC	*The Roman Imperial Coinage*, eds. C.H.V. Sutherland et alii, I–X, London 1923–1994
RPC	A. Burnett, M. Amandry, and P.P. Ripollès, *Roman Provincial Coinage*, I, London and Paris 1992
RO	Res Orientales
RPAA	*Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia di Archeologia*
RPh	*Revue de Philologie*
RRC	M.H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage*, Cambridge 1971

RVV	Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAG	Scripta Archaeologica Groningana
SC	Syllecta Classica
SCO	*Studi Classici e Orientali*
SEG	*Supplementum epigraphicum Graecum*
SGG	*Sylloge gemmarum gnosticarum*, ed. A. Mastrocinque, I–II, Rome 2004 and 2008
SIG^{3}	*Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum*, ed. W. Dittenberger, 3rd ed., Leipzig 1915–1923
SMSR	*Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni*
SNG	*Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum*
STAC	Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum
TAPhS	Transactions of the American Philosophical Society
TGF	Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta
TMM	F. Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, I–II, Brussels 1896–1898
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZPE	*Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*

List of illustrations

Chapter 1

Basic Elements of Mithraism

§ 1. Character and Bias of Ancient Sources on Mithraism

The mysteries of Mithras were an allegedly Persian cult. This is supported by the observation that the fifth initiatory grade was that of the Perses, i.e. "the Persian". Between 81 and 92 CE the poet Statius knew of a Persian cult, in which the solar god Apollo was called Mithras and was represented as a god who tames a bull:

... seu te roseum Titana vocari
gentis Achaemeniae ritu, seu praestat Osirim
frugiferum, seu Persei sub rupibus antri
indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram.

It is right to call you either rosy Titan, according to the Achaemenid ritual, or Osiris Bringer-of-the-Harvest, or Mithras, who beneath the rocky cave of Perseus strains at the reluctant-following horns.[1]

Here the mention of Perseus evoked the origin of the Persians from Perseus' son, Perses,[2] who was the alleged ancestor of the ancient Persian kings, who were also called, after him, the Perseidae.[3] Porphyry, in the 3rd century CE, credits Zoroaster (Iranian, Zarathustra), the great prophet of Iranian Mazdaism, with the foundation of the first Mithraic cave.[4] Celsus, in the 2nd century CE, speaks of the mysteries of the Persians by alluding to the Roman Mithraism.[5] Firmicus Maternus in the 4th century CE argued against the practice of Mithraism because it urged the Romans to abide by Persian laws.[6] He adds, in his *de errore profanarum religionum*, that the Persians and their Magi worshipped fire and that their prophet handed over this cult to the Romans along

[1] Stat., *Thebais* I.717–720. The scholium confirms the words of the poet by saying that the Persians were the first worshippers of Mithras-Sol who created his cultic caves, where the god is represented in Persian attire holding the horns of a bull: *Persae in spelaeis coli Solem primi invenisse dicuntur. Est enim in spelaeo Persico habitu cum tiara et utrisque manibus bovis cornua comprimens*: "the Persians are said to have been the first to worship the Sun in caves. Mithras is in fact in a cave, dressed as a Persian, wearing a tiara, grasping the horns of a bull with his hands". According to Lucian., *Deorum concilium* 9, Mithras was a Mede.

[2] Her. VII.61; 150.

[3] Her. I.125.

[4] Porph., *de antro* 6; for the text, see below, p.25.

[5] Celsus, *apud* Orig., *contra Celsum* VI.23.

[6] Firm. Mat., *de err.* 4: *Cur haec Persarum sola laudatis? Si hoc Romano nomine dignum putatis ut Persarum sacris, ut Persarum legibus serviat*: "Why do you praise only those things among the Persians? If you deem worthy of the Roman name to be slave of Persian rites and laws".

with a god who stole a bull; this god, it turns out, was Mithras, a deity who was long worshipped in the darkness of some obscure caves.[7]

The great Belgian scholar Franz Cumont, who founded the scientific study of Mithraism, was therefore certain that the cultic and doctrinal bases of Mithraism had to be sought within the Iranian religion, i.e. within Mazdaism. In fact, Iranian monotheism, a sometimes standardly accepted tenet of Mazdaism – with Ahura Mazda as supreme god and Arihman as his evil counterpart – actually admits the worship of two lesser deities, Mithras and Anahita.

fig. 1: Marble relief in Verona, Museo Civico Maffeiano, discovered in Anzio (2nd cent. CE); *CIMRM* 204. Photo Mastrocinque, with the permission of the Civici Musei di Verona.

Mithras, on the other hand, was also worshipped independently in India. The modern study of Mithraism, therefore, is thus based on three categories of documents: the Iranian and Indian texts (archaeological documents are scarce); the Greek and Roman texts dealing with the mysteries of Mithras; and the monuments and inscriptions from the Mithraic caves.

[7] Firm. Mat., *de err.* 4: *Persae et magi omnes qui Persicae regionis incolunt fines ignem praeferunt ... virum vero abactorem bovum colentes sacra eius ad ignis transferunt potestatem, sicut propheta eius nobis tradidit dicens:* Μύστα βοοκλοπίης … *Hunc Mithram dicunt, sacra vero eius in speluncis abditis tradunt, ut semper obscuro tenebrarum squalore demersi gratiam splendidi ac sereni luminis vitent*: "Persians and all the Magi who inhabit the Persian territory prefer the fire among all the elements… They worship a male god as a cattle thief and connect his cult with the power of fire, as his prophet unveiled to us by saying: 'O initiate of the theft of the bull, united by the handshake of the illustrious father'… They call him Mithras. They transmit the secret rites always in hidden caves, and they want to be surrounded by sombre and sad darkness and avoid the blessing of splendid and peaceful light".

In his famous book *Les mystères de Mithra*[8] Cumont wrote:

Notre situation est à peu près celle où nous serions s'il nous fallait écrire l'histoire de l'Église au Moyen Âge en ne disposant pour toute ressource que de la Bible hébraïque et des débris sculptés de portails romans et gothiques.

We have already quoted the passage from Firmicus Maternus[9] in which an unnamed prophet of Mithraism is mentioned. We do not know who this prophet was, but in the frescoes from the Mithraeum of Dura Europos we have our most likely candidates in the two Magi who are therein depicted, most probably Zoroaster and Osthanes – the one, the Father of Mazdaism himself, and the other, the celebrated Magus of king Xerxes – i.e. the two most famous Magi of all time.[10]

But we do not know of the existence of any prophetic book written by Zoroaster (Zarathustra), apart from the Avestan *Gathas* (religious songs), or of any written by another authoritative Magus of Persian Zoroastrianism, a book that could be considered the Bible of Mithraism; but Firmicus had such a text at his disposal and apparently consulted it. On the other hand, late apocryphal works by Zoroaster and Osthanes are known, but these deal with secret properties of minerals, plants, animals, stars, and similar topics. We will see that such works were written by certain learned scholars, who stood in a direct relationship with Mithraism and that Roman Mithraists probably read such books. They were certainly not secret, in the sense of being kept from public view, as many copies of them were widely circulated in the ancient world. We will deal with such 'secret' books in some forthcoming chapters.

Early approaches to the study of Mithraism were based mostly on examining the ancient Avestan traditions. Many scholars perused the *Avesta* and later Iranian works, and the Indian Sanskrit *Veda* as well, but they discovered very few comparisons with the Roman Mithraism. The Iranian origin of Roman Mithraic iconography and rituals proved a misleading hypothesis.[11] However, we will see that some important Iranian features were kept, even if transformed, within Mithraism, but this is far from being a simple transfer of religious beliefs from Iran to Rome.

Greek and Roman sources cannot be approached in an uncritical fashion. The only aim of the Christian writers was the disapproval and rebuttal of Mithraic paganism.

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[8] F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra* (3rd ed., Brussels 1913), new ed. by N. Belayche, A. Mastrocinque, and D. Bonanno, Bibliotheca Cumontiana. Scripta maiora III, Turin 2013, 6. Transl. McCormack: "Our predicament is somewhat similar to that in which we should find ourselves if we were called upon to write the history of the Church of the Middle Ages with no other sources at our command than the Hebrew Bible and the sculptured *débris* of Roman and Gothic portals".

[9] On the possible sources of Firmicus (either original pagan texts or anthologies by Christian authors) see F. Massa, "Confrontare per distruggere. Firmico Materno e l'origine diabolica dei culti orientali", *SMSR* 79, 2013, 493–509, part. 502–503.

[10] J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque*, I, Paris 1938, 39 and pl. I; *CIMRM* 44; F. Cumont, "The Dura-Mithraeum", in *Mithraic Studies*, ed. J.R. Hinnells, I, Manchester 1975, 182–184.

[11] See G. Widengren, *Synkretistische Religionen*, in *Religion, II: Religionsgeschichte des Orients in der Zeit der Weltreligionen*, eds. J. Leipoldt, G. Widengren, A. Adam, B. Spuler, E.L. Dietrich, J.W. Fück, and A. von Gabain, Handbuch der Orientalistik, I.8, Leiden and Cologne 1961, 44–55; R.L. Gordon, "Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism", in *Mithraic Studies*, I, 215–248.

They thought that the Devil inspired this cult and introduced into it some alleged imitations of the Christian sacraments. Those authors were scarcely interested in knowing and understanding the mysteries of Mithras, on its own terms, and one could hardly believe that they had ever been true initiates. They took pleasure in describing the cruelty of the initiatory rites, this is true, in the same manner in which they excessively described the suffering of their own martyrs, because the Devil was, of course, behind all such pagan rites. But many bits of information about Mithraism from Christian authors were not false, especially those of Tertullian. They knew something of the Mithraic rituals, but they did not explain either what their true meaning was, nor what the social and moral purposes were that the Mithraic practitioners aimed at.

Very few pagan authors even discussed Mithraism, probably because it was such a secret cult. However, some philosophers were highly interested in looking for philosophical verities within certain religious practices and their inherited prophecies. The middle Platonists, and above all the Neopythagorean Numenius, were engaged in comparing (or contrasting) the more highly credited religious belief-systems of their days, even those of Judaism or those in respect of Egyptian cults, if only to discover some primeval principles contained therein. Following this philophical stream, Porphyry wrote, in the second half of the 3rd century CE, the most important philosophical passages we have at our disposal concerning Mithraism. He could use the previous works of Pallas (Hadrianic age ?), who produced, according to Porphyry, the best work on the mysteries of Mithras, and of Eubulus (a near-contemporary of Pallas),[12] who was interested in both Mithraism and Persian religion and wrote a treatise in many books. From those philosophers we get a particular image of a kind of philosophical and Platonizing Mithraism. However Robert Turcan[13] emphasized that these philosophers were probably not initiates of Mithraism but added their own interpretations to what amounted to a lesser philosophical cultic system. As Jaime Alvar underscored,[14] "there is no evidence that they narrated a complete or coherent myth of Mithras. Moreover it is striking that his cult is completely absent from Clement of Alexandria, Arnobius and pseudo-Hippolytus, which might well imply that there was no documented narrative for them to get their teeth into".

Our most important information comes from Porphyry's *de abstinentia* and *de antro Nympharum*. This latter proves far more reliable than the former when addressing the various tenets of Mithraism. Richard Gordon,[15] in fact, analyzed the *de antro* and no-

[12] R. Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus: recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*, EPRO 47, Leiden 1975, 23–43. However J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods. Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*, RGRW 165, Leiden and Boston 2008, 75, n. 155 noticed that "this date is simply an inference from Porphyry, who says that according to Pallas Hadrian abolished human sacrifice (*De abstin*. 2, 56)".

[13] Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus*; R. Turcan, "Le sacrifice mithriaque", in *Le sacrifice dans l'antiquité*, eds. J. Rudhardt and O. Reverdin, EFH 27, Vandoeuvres and Geneva 1981, 341–380 = *Recherches mithriaques*, 50.

[14] Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 75–76.

[15] R. Gordon, "The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum: the Example of Sette Sfere", *JMS* 1.2, 1976, 119–165 = *Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World*, Aldershot 1996, 119–165.

ticed several important features that were confirmed from what we can garner from the Mithraic monuments (i.e. the Mithraea).

The works of the emperor Julian ("the Apostate", 361–363 CE), another Platonistic thinker, were written after the triumph of Christianity, during the short period of the revival of paganism. At this stage the mysteries of Mithras had almost everywhere disappeared, for at least several decades, but some cultivated groups of the upper classes had tried to revive it again by returning to practicing the cult in the caves. We will see that the position of several modern scholars in trying to dissociate Julian from Mithraism, as much as possible, is not a safe assumption. Julian was actually interested in Mithraism insofar as he was fond of every pagan mystery cult in general, especially solar cults. He knew all about, or almost all about every pagan cult and especially about his own favorite, that of the sun god, Helios-Sol. However he was open to either accepting or modifying – and even refusing some aspects of – the most important pagan doctrines. We have scarce information from Julian, who mentions Mithras in several occasions, but what he does describe about the sun god would not contradict what we know of Mithraic doctrine.

This threefold conceptual foundation, based on Iranian and Indian texts, on archaeology, and on Greek and Latin authors, misses a fourth "leg", and this book aims at providing its readers with this fourth element, namely, the element of what we might call the 'Imperial ideology'. The study of Mithraism must stand on a table of four legs.

Authors of the Augustan Age, and the inscriptions and sources concerning the Roman Imperial cult, including public monuments and coins, are all very useful in helping to understand what stood at the very heart of Mithraism. Without Virgil, we would be as baffled by Mithraism as we would be if we were to stand face-to-face with the Rosetta stone without its Greek parallel translation.

Cumont was aware of the importance of the study of this 'Imperial ideology',[16] because the god Mithras was a supporter and sponsor of kings and emperors. But he was convinced that the core of Mithraism rested in its ancient Mazdean roots. Recent research on Mithraism has contributed to the conclusion that we should let emperors and their Imperial ideology stand alone, for scholars scrupulously separate *Sol/Sol invictus* from Mithras, and they suppose that the emperors were disinterested in Mithraism, altogether. On the other hand, recent research has also noticed that Mithraism was perfectly well integrated everywhere within the social context of the Roman Empire, and that it was even more at home in the Western provinces than in the Eastern ones.

§ 2. The Seven Grades of Initiation

First of all we must describe the most important features of the mysteries of Mithras; thereafter we will sketch the main problem of the similarities between Christianity and Mithraism, in order to be as free as possible from preconceived notions of what these supposed 'similarities' looked like. In point of fact, several ancient authors, both Chri-

[16] On the Mithraism as a support to the Imperial ideology cf. also J. Gagé, *"Basiléia". Les Césars, les rois d'Orient et les "mages",* Paris 1968, chap. VII.

stians and Pagans, induced modern scholars to conceive of Mithraism as a counterpart to Christianity. Many scholars thought that they were simply two different forms of a shared religion whose common aim was to reach paradise after death.

But we start with the basic notions of Mithraism. First of all, it is necessary to clarify that the true name of this cult was "the mysteries of Mithras", and not Mithraism, which is a neologism.[17]

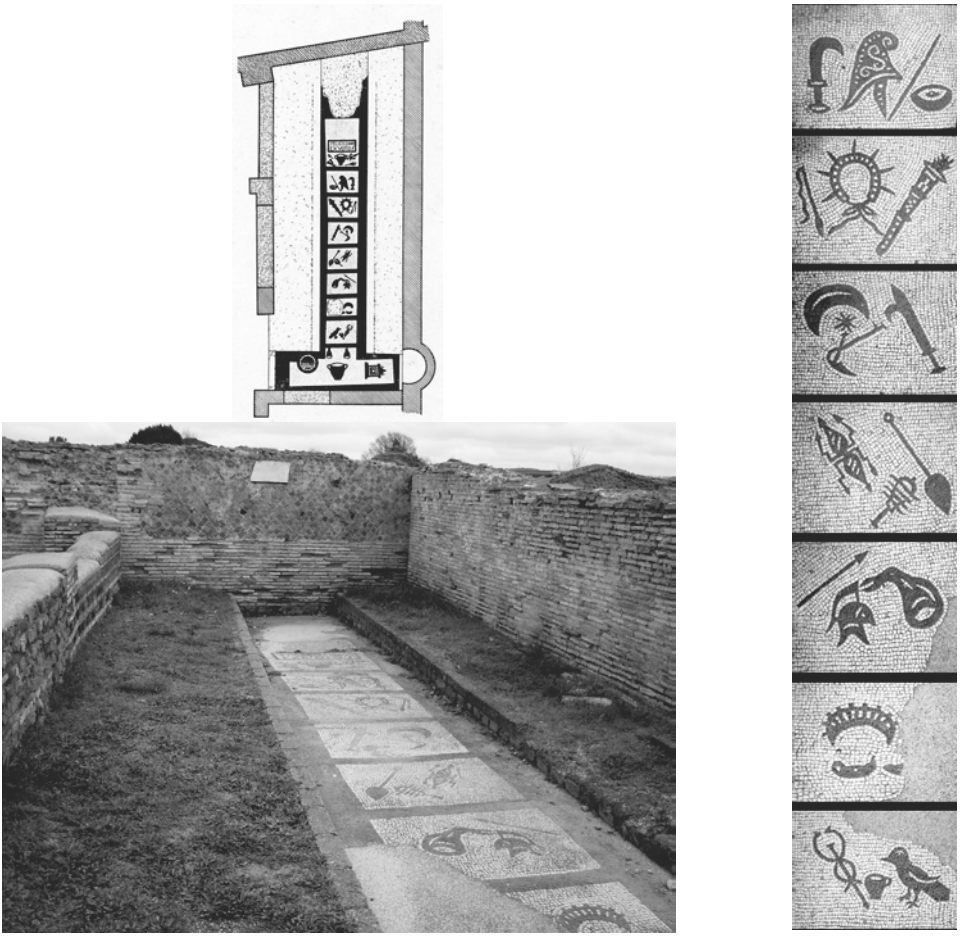

fig. 2: Ostia, the Mithraeum of Felicissimus and the symbols of Mithraic grades (second half of the 2nd cent. CE); *CIMRM* 299. Photo and rendering Mastrocinque.

[17] R. Gordon, "Institutionalized Religious Options: Mithraism", in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. J. Rüpke, Oxford 2007, 392–405, esp. 394, opportunely writes: "In my view, it is best, where possible, to avoid the term 'Mithraism,' since it falsely suggests that the cult was somehow a separate religion. This is one aspect of the older view of the 'oriental religions' that supposedly exposed the failure of traditional civic cult ... At least in later antiquity the cult was known as the mysteries of Mithras".

The most famous feature of the mysteries of Mithras was its well-known series of seven initiations, each of which corresponded to one of the seven planetary gods. Jerome mentions those grades in his description of a Mithraeum in Rome destroyed in 366–367 CE:

Ante paucos annos propinquus vester Graccus (*sic*) *nobilitatem patriciam nomine sonans, cum praefecturam gereret urbanam, nonne specum Mithrae et omnia portentosa simulacra quibus Corax, Nymyphus*,[18] *Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, Pater initiantur subvertit, fregit, excussit*.[19]

A few years ago did not your kinsman Gracchus, whose name is famous for its nobility, in charge as *praefectus urbi*, destroy, break, and demolish the cave of Mithras and all the sensational idols, to the cult of whom Corvus, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, and Pater were initiated?

As far as these initiatory grades go, Corvus is the raven; Nymphus is the male form of *nymphe*, "bride"; Miles is the soldier; Leo the lion; Perses the Persian, or Perses, the son of Perseus; Heliodromus is he who runs with the sun, probably the driver of the chariot of the Sun; and Pater is the Father of the community.

The mosaic of the Mithraeum of Felicissimus (fig. 2) at Ostia (2nd century CE)[20] confirms this initiatory series. The term *gradus* (grade) itself could also indicate a rung in a ladder or a level in a series of passages.[21]

The symbols of each of the seven grades are depicted on this mosaic in the following manner:

CORAX: beaker, and herald staff.
NYMPHUS: lamp, diadem with precious stones, and … (mosaic damaged).
MILES: a pouch (also interpreted as the hind-quarter of a bull),[22] helmet, and spear.

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[18] The manuscripts of Jerome have Gryphus, Chryphius, or Nymphus. Chryphius is documented two times elsewhere, and the form Nymphus recurs on many inscriptions and literary sources: see B.M. Metzger, "St. Jerome's Testimony concerning the second Grade of Mithraic Initiation", *AJPh* 66, 1945, 225–233; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Hain 1984, 77, n. 2. A. Blomart, "Les Cryphii, les Nymphi et l'initiation mithriaque", *Latomus* 51, 1992, 624–632, does not identify Cryphii with Nymphi.

[19] Hieron., *Ep.* 107.2 *ad Laetam* (CSEL 55, 292 Hilberg).

[20] *CIMRM* 299.

[21] See *CIMRM* 887: *L(ucius) Apronius Chrysomallus ob gradum Persicum dedicavit.* On the Mithraic hierachy: M. Clauss, "Die sieben Grade des Mithras-Kultes", *ZPE* 82, 1990, 183–194, part. 184; cf. M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, Engl. transl., New York 2000, 131–140. In this article Clauss puts forward a hypothesis according to which the grades were restricted to the higher priestly hierarchy, whereas the majority of the members was initiated only once. On the other hand, R. Turcan, "Hiérarchie sacerdotale et astrologie dans les mystères de Mithra", in *La science des cieux: sages, mages, astrologues*, ed. R. Gyselen, RO 12, Bures-sur-Yvette 1999, 249–259 = *Recherches mithriaques*, 279–302, maintained that the system of the seven grades was a later expedient to correlate the Mithraism with the seven planets, and was adopted only in some geographical areas. Arguments against these two theories can be found in R.L. Gordon, "Ritual and Hierarchy in the Mysteries of Mithras", *ARYS* 4, 2001, 245–273, part. 248–253.

[22] On the hind-quarter of a bull cf. A. Chalupa and T. Glomb, "The Third Symbol of the Miles Grade on the Floor Mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia: A New Interpretation", *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 21.1, 2013, 9–32; see also R.L. Gordon, "The Miles-frame in the Mitreo di