Approaches to the Historiographies and Iconographies of the Roman worship of Mithras

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a flexible conception of the Roman worship of Mithras, in which it can be seen to have been influenced by contemporary religious, cultural, and artistic traditions and innovations. It builds upon a model familiar in Mithraic studies: a sustained examination of existing Mithraic scholarship, combined with an interrogation of the surviving evidence. In particular, it responds to a recent call to use the material evidence more centrally in Mithraic studies; its methodology is rooted in empiricism and contextual analysis. Each chapter takes either a single or a cluster of connected historiographic theories about the worship of Mithras, and contrasts them with the textual and material evidence that has traditionally been used to support them.

This thesis interrogates the nature of the worship of Mithras in the Roman world. Building from a definition of religion – and an understanding of what might have been the constituent features of ancient forms of worship – it covers constructions of the origins of Mithraic practice, its membership, sacred space, possible meanings in mythology and ritual, and the relationship between god and worshippers. It ends with an emphasis on cultural and religious borrowings and appropriations. It hopes, through its focus on material culture, and on flexible approaches to ancient religious practices, to act as a possible case study for other cults in the Roman Empire.

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Abbreviations

CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*
CIMRM	*Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*
CMRED	*Corpus Monumentorum Religionis Equitum Danuvinorum*
MFC	'Mithraism since Franz Cumont'
MII	*Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*
RIB	*Roman Inscriptions of Britain*
TMMM	*Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*

Introduction

Why do Mithraic historiographies and iconographies go hand in hand in the title of this thesis? After all, they seem to represent different theoretical approaches to the subject. The former is grounded in the history of the field of Mithraic studies, the historians who have shaped it, and their interpretations of Mithraic evidence. The latter is more often the province of archaeologists and art historians, rooted in the analysis of material culture, and – where possible – the context of its production and use. Nonetheless, they also represent two of the most distinctive features of the Roman worship of Mithras and its modern discipline: the significant voices that have shaped the scholarship, and the abundance of Mithraic art and visual material.

Work on Mithraic worship has often similarly been split into two main camps: the historical and theoretical versus the material. Franz Cumont, the founder of the field, catalogued Mithraic art and monuments in addition to outlining his theories about Mithraism as a religion; in so doing, he provided an exegesis of the material culture.[1] Subsequent years, however, have seen a more definitive separation between historical and material cultural approaches.[2] Archaeological surveys have tended to be narrow in geographical focus and localised in their conclusions, thus demonstrating a sensitivity to the limits of what we can draw from material evidence in isolation. Historical approaches by contrast have, to a large

[1] Cumont 1896-1899; for a detailed discussion of his theories, see Chapter I, 25-30. The only other significant pieces of scholarship to emulate Cumont were the work of Leroy Campbell, who created a typology for the distinctive tauroctony scenes that are so emblematic of Mithraic visual culture, and explained these types through exegesis (Campbell 1954; 1968). For more on Campbell's work, see Chapter I, 35-36; 61 f.181; 86 f.248; Chapter IV, 208; 213 f.610.

[2] Even Vermaseren's *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, which gave a detailed account of all the Mithraic finds known at that date, gave very little by way of historical, cultural or religious context (Vermaseren 1956-1960).

extent, been driven by prevailing theoretical trends.[3] In a few cases, the material evidence has been subsumed into the prevailing argument, and used as illustration; in others, it has hardly been used at all.[4]

One aim of this thesis is to respond to a call from Richard Gordon, who has been one of the most prominent figures within Mithraic scholarship since 1975:

> Instead of treating the archaeological and discursive texts on which Burkert based his projected "extraordinary experience", it might thus be possible to replace idealised norms with variety – the different projects of religious specialists, ambivalent communication, individual sense-making, varieties of evocation. It is not so much that 'there is no evidence' as that one needs to be asking somewhat different questions of the material available. The sheer disruptive mass of the archaeology must take a central place in such a project.[5]

This thesis proposes a more flexible conceptualisation of Mithraic worship, one in which it can be seen to be influenced by contemporary religious, cultural, and artistic traditions and innovations. Central to this argument is the interrogation of these "idealised norms", and the emphasis instead on a variety that takes many forms: variety in iconography, in community, and in interests and enthusiasms.

The quotation from Gordon does not, however, acknowledge the need for a sustained examination and critique of existing scholarship – the historiographic component of this thesis – in order to understand where these idealised norms arise in traditional accounts of

3 Two such trends have been astrological interpretations of Mithraic evidence and the current interest in the cognitive science of religion.
4 See, for example: Beck 2006 in his selection of sites relevant for astrological interpretations (discussed here in Chapter III, 186-188; 196); Mastrocinque 2017 in his theory of an Augustan Mithraism; Ulansey 1989 on astrology; for an example of very little attention to material evidence, see Martin 2015. I should be clear that by no means all Mithraic historians have overlooked material culture; for some brief examples, see: Hinnells 1975a; Kane 1975; Sauer 1996; Gordon 2001a; 2001b; 2011; 2013.
5 Gordon 2016, 725.

Mithraic worship, and why they appear.[6] Without this recognition of the prevailing themes in the field, and how they have shaped discussion of the material evidence, it would be difficult for the archaeology to take centre stage. This thesis therefore starts with a historiographical account of the current state of the discipline. Each chapter takes a different historical question – such as the origins of Mithraic worship, or Mithraists made their spaces sacred – as its starting point, and investigates the relevant scholarship. Each chapter then proceeds to examine the evidence cited in support of these historiographic positions – both textual and material – to explore the extent to which it does corroborate them.

The archaeological case studies also tend to have a regional focus, which highlights the archaeological and artistic evidence that best illustrates – or counters – the historiographic trends. The selection of archaeological case studies is not intended to be exhaustive, nor to act as a catalogue to Mithraic monuments and art. Instead, it acts as a showcase for both the most famous examples of Mithraic material culture – the objects, art, and architecture that many historians have used to support their arguments – as well as other, perhaps more obscure, examples. Without being a catalogue, this thesis has, however, allowed me to create a personal data set within the chapters; this has the benefit of making coherency and variation more visible.[7]

i. Methodology

My basic methodology in this thesis is rooted in empiricism. I examine textual and material evidence for Mithraic worship side by side, and compare them with traditional

[6] In such a critique, this thesis follows the approach advised by Simon Price: "Our job as historians is not to take pot shots at famous scholars from the past, but to seek an understanding of how they came to hold the positions they did." (Price 2010, 334).
[7] For more on the subject of variation and uniqueness in iconography, see Chapter I, 59-61.

historiographic arguments. Where possible, I have relied on autopsy in my descriptions of the archaeological material; I have been fortunate to be able to travel to see a large number of the examples I use in this thesis. In selecting the historical questions that form the subject of each chapter, I have been informed by what I consider to be important constituent parts of ancient religious behaviours, and of religion more broadly.

This makes it necessary for me to define my understanding of religion. I would argue that it is a form of interaction between the human and the 'other', perhaps a supernatural other: this dialogue can be constructed in terms of action, belief, and emotion, is both social and personal, and involves a sense of belonging. As such, it usually has certain characteristic components: an interest in origins, in constructions of space, in a mythology or narrative, in a conceptualisation of the 'other' (often, but not always, a god or gods), and a community of members.[8] I therefore chose to pursue questions relating to: origins – both of the field of Mithraic studies, and of Roman worship –; membership, and the rules applied to it; constructions of sacred space – both the constructions of Mithraists, and the constructions of modern scholars –; meaning in mythology and ritual; the relationship between worshippers and the god.

My understanding of ancient religious activity is also informed by the idea that belief – and an acceptance of the existence of belief – is important. While the predominantly archaeological evidence for Mithraic practice makes it difficult to access or reconstruct beliefs – if this is even the primary aim of historians and archaeologists – we should not fall into the trap of thinking that Mithraists did not have some sort of religious belief underlying

[8] This definition draws heavily on the suggestions in Laneri 2015 (for the "emotional, ideological and practical elements", and some of the ideas behind a set of characteristics; Laneri 2015, 1) and Gradel 2002 (for the idea of a dialogue, and the stress that not all religions emphasise gods; Gradel 2002, 5).

their actions.[9] Where my approach may differ from some earlier Mithraic scholars is that I take the *religiosity* of Mithraic worship seriously. Richard Gordon, at his most structuralist, specified that he saw religion as a "rational enterprise"; little wonder, then, that his construction of Mithraic activity centred for a long time on finding order and consistency.[10] Likewise, the influence on Franz Cumont of a Christian legacy in discussing religion understandably led to his interest in narrative cohesion and creation myths.[11] My emphasis on belief does not give my account any superior explanatory powers to those of previous scholars; rather, it represents a slight shift in focus, and a hope that my account has not been shaped by a preconception of how religions ought to look.[12] It does not mean that I aim to reconstruct *what* Mithraists may have believed; rather, I start from the assumption that they did believe something.

The Lived Ancient Religion (LAR) project in Erfurt was an important influence on this thesis as well.[13] This project originally aimed to provide a "new theoretical framework" for approaching methodological questions.[14] By the end of the project, LAR claimed that it did "not pretend to be either a distinctive methodology or a general theory of religion, but is an eclectic approach marked by a specific range of interests".[15] Nonetheless, its stress on the multi-sensory experience of religious activities and beliefs, rather than on symbol structures

9 See Renfrew 1985, 12 for a useful approach to belief and archaeology: "The archaeologist, it should be remembered, cannot observe beliefs; one can only work with material remains, the consequences of actions. In favourable cases… these remains are the results of actions which we can plausibly interpret as arising *from* religious belief."
10 Gordon 1976, 119. For more on Gordon's constructions of Mithraic activity, see Chapter III, 186-188; 195.
11 See Chapter IV, 207.
12 Though, in the interests of complete transparency, I should perhaps disclose at this point that I am a practising Anglican.
13 The idea of exploring 'lived ancient religion' was inspired by Meredith McGuire's sociological book *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, which explores the realities of vibrant modern religious experiences, rather than relying on meeting expectations of what religion should look like (McGuire 2008). The LAR project ran from 2012-2017 and was funded by the European Research Council.
14 Rüpke 2011, 193.
15 Albrecht et al. 2018, 3.

pointed me towards a methodology for incorporating visual culture more centrally into my discourse.[16]

Being aware of the importance of cultural contextualisation for Mithraic material evidence, and thinking about historical questions related to the study of ancient religion more broadly, I was first influenced by a contextual archaeological model of methodology. Ian Hodder's emphasis on both originary context and the context of the contemporary archaeologist or historian has great relevance to a field that has traditionally been dominated by significant personalities, who bring their own, sometimes complicated, contexts into their scholarship.[17] The acknowledgement that contemporary attitudes – in Hodder's work often post-colonial, but in the field of Mithraic studies often based on personal religion – influence research therefore provided a model for critique. This then led to the application of hermeneutics, inspired by the German school of hermeneutics, and their stress on *Verstehen* (understanding).[18]

My interest in contextualisation and awareness of the importance of empiricism led me towards the natural sciences, and the model of contextual empiricism advocated by Helen Longino.[19] This argues against the objectivity of science, highlighting the fact that contextual factors will always have an impact upon the scientist involved, and will therefore have an influence on the epistemic outcomes of the scientific work. It emphasises the limitations of empiricism when it comes to choosing between multiple hypotheses, and

16 Raja & Rüpke 2015a, 14.
17 Hodder 1987; 1991. There are, however, several areas in which I would disagree with Hodder. First, in the selectivity with which he establishes which contexts are most important; second, in his prioritisation of recovering meaning from objects.
18 For a good overview of the history of German hermeneutics, and the differences between hermeneutic archaeology and contextual archaeology, see Johnsen & Olsen 1992.
19 Longino 1990. On the role of contextualism within epistemology, see DeRose 1999.

underlines the idea that social factors will contribute to the decision of which hypothesis is most likely to be plausible; at the same time, it allows for the validity – though not necessarily the equal validity – of multiple hypotheses. Perhaps most important for this thesis, it suggests that the best means of achieving a degree of objectivity is through the sustained critique – and, hopefully, approval – of a community with equal intellectual credentials. In other words, through the kind of examination of historiographic hypotheses and their evidence presented in this thesis.

ii. The structure of the thesis

The structure of this thesis takes as its core the constituent features of religious behaviours outlined above. Chapter I engages with theories surrounding the origins of the Roman worship of Mithras. This is perhaps the most obvious place to open: with the idea of beginnings and creation. It is, however, also methodologically important for any survey of Mithraic scholarship and historiography: the origins debate introduces the key figures who created the field as it exists today – namely, Franz Cumont, Richard Gordon, and Roger Beck –, and some of their main interests. This section is complemented by a section that is more archaeologically focused, examining the evidence for Roman Mithras in the East of the Roman Empire, looking in particular at the sites of Dura-Europos and Hawarti, and including finds from Seeia in Syria, Sidon and a relief in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. It will question whether these examples display a distinctly eastern flavour, and what they contribute to the arguments on Mithraic origins. This first chapter, with its equal focus on major scholars and visual material, sets the tone for the rest of the thesis.

Chapters II-IV concentrate on whether we are justified in looking for – or, even, expecting to find – any norms for Mithras worship. They take as their basis the claim that three components of the worship of Mithras were characteristic of Mithraic belief and practice: the seven grades, the sacred space of the *mithraeum*, and the tauroctony scene.[20] Chapter II focuses on the first of these: the traditional understanding that there was some sort of seven-grade hierarchy, which may have been connected to initiation. The chapter centres on Italy, starting with the cases of Rome and Ostia, before widening to include the *mithraeum* in Santa Maria Capua Vetere. The second chapter also introduces a key theme of the thesis: namely, the reliance of many scholars upon the few surviving literary texts that appear to discuss Mithraic worship, sometimes at the expense of what the archaeological record suggests. It also emphasises the role played in the reconstruction of initiation rituals by the burgeoning field of cognitive studies.[21]

The idea of a sacred geography, instantiated within the spaces that we call *mithraea*, is the subject of Chapter III. It assesses the spaces that constitute the most extensive kind of evidence of Mithraic activity that has survived. It contrasts certain examples found in Italy, such as the man-made Sette Sfere and Sette Porte in Ostia, with the natural caves used as Mithraic sites in the Balkans. Continuing the questions around the usefulness of norms encountered in the previous chapter, Chapter III applies them to the concept of a perfect or idealised Mithraic sacred space. The historiographical component opens with the literary account of Mithraic space given by Porphyry in his third-century *De antro nympharum*, and the subsequent reactions to this in modern Mithraic scholarship, focusing in particular on

[20] This is claimed by Chalupa 2008, 178. For a fuller discussion of the idea of norms, see Chapter II.
[21] This is a field that has gathered pace in recent years, in the work of Luther H. Martin, Roger Beck, and Olympia Panagiotidou. For full references and discussion, see Chapter II, 134-137.

the field of astrological interpretations. The chapter proceeds to examine the conception of the *mithraeum* as a cave, and of the cave as a likeness of the cosmos.

Chapter IV examines the importance of meanings, and the ways in which they might be communicated through mythology and ritual. It takes as its material example the tauroctony scene, looking not only at the bull-slaying image itself, and its concomitant sacrificial and possible astrological connotations, but also considering the side-scenes that often surround it in the material from Germany and the Danubian provinces. There are two main archaeological focuses: the story of Mithras and the bull, and the example of reversible or two-sided reliefs, many of which show a banquet scene between Sol and Mithras. These are compared, and their potential significance – including liturgical – is explored. The historiographical focus is on the interest that Mithraic scholarship has taken in the communication of meanings, in the reconstruction of ritual behaviours, and in the idea of a mythology of Mithras and the bull.

Chapter V is a more contained regional study of examples of Mithraic activity in Britain. It considers examples of Mithras' apparently being worshipped alongside other gods – or at least sharing space with them – through two main approaches: first, syncretism, and, second, collection and antiquarianism. It particularly focuses on the supposedly secretive or hidden aspects of Mithraic worship, considering how widespread knowledge of Mithraic iconography might have been, and how other religious practices and traditions might have been associated with Mithras. It also suggests appropriation and borrowing as a model for understanding certain Mithraic behaviours and approaches to material culture; this is a concept that has yet been little explored in Mithraic scholarship.

The conclusion explores this idea of appropriation and borrowing still further, broadening it to apply to wider issues of Roman religion. Cultural borrowing is a concept very familiar to art historians, and those who specialise in material culture; it can also be found in the field of Roman religion and its history, and in the religious activities of the Roman provinces, through the study of syncretism. It returns to one of the key questions raised in this introduction: the extent to which the Roman worship of Mithras can be seen as a unified or consistent religious phenomenon. This, in its turn, feeds into the problems of categorisation that surround practices like those seen in Mithraic activity; is it a mystery cult, and what would make it so?

iii. Terminology: neologisms

Throughout this thesis, I avoid the word 'Mithraism', unless quoting the work of others. This frequently leads to more circumlocution than is entirely elegant, but – as this study will show – this is a sacrifice worth making. The use – or avoidance – of the term 'Mithraism' is, to my mind, more than a simply cosmetic choice; it cuts to the heart of one of the most contentious subjects in Mithraic studies.

As a description of the Roman worship of Mithras, 'Mithraism' appears neat and uncomplicated. As with any '-ism', however, its usage cloaks a number of variations and difficulties. Gods with etymologically closely connected names were known in a variety of cult contexts around the Mediterranean and in the East. In Indo-Iranian cult, a divine being is invoked as Mithra in the Avestan yašts, in the Vedic tradition he is Mitra, and in Strabo's *Geography* there is reference to the sun-god Mithres.[22] In the Sasanian (AD 224-651)

[22] E.g. Yašt X (see Gershevitch 1959); Strab. 15.732.

tradition, he was known as Mihr, and the god Miiro appears in the Kushan Empire (c.AD 30-230). These names do not all refer to one identical god, nor – more importantly – to one coherent religious system, although certain attributes and conceptions of divinity might have moved alongside the similar name.[23] Even within a single polity – the Roman Empire – where the naming of Mithras is more or less consistent, is there sufficient evidence for the use of the catch-all 'Mithraism'?[24]

As a term, it is somewhat awkward. It suggests religious belief with a clear version of doctrine and ritual; it also implies a single systematic and coherent cult, an '-ism'.[25] In 2001, Richard Gordon suggested that the importance of local character in creating variation within 'Mithraism' meant that one could almost be justified in speaking of 'Mithraisms', just as we now speak about Greek and Roman religions, Judaisms, Gnosticisms and Christianities.[26] Gordon was speaking here in the context of new Mithraic discoveries in Syria, which have a very distinct character.[27] In an article of 2007, Gordon went even further, saying that 'Mithraism' is a neologism best avoided, except in cases where periphrasis becomes too awkward, because it "falsely suggests that the cult was somehow a separate religion".[28] Most recently, Gordon has acknowledged that "a coherence… may well never have existed."[29] The coherence of religious practice, and perhaps even of belief, implied by the term Mithraism was therefore rejected by one of the pre-eminent Mithraic scholars of the 20th century.

[23] For further reading on this subject, see Adrych et al. 2017, *passim*.
[24] It is interesting to compare the use of 'Mithraism' with the use of the term 'Imperial cult'. Ittai Gradel argues that the use of 'Imperial cult' is flawed because it gives "the impression of a neat and independent category" (Gradel 2002, 7). I broadly agree with his position, though some may find it too nominalist.
[25] See, for example, Beck 2006. On the question of whether the worship of Mithras is a religion or a cult, see Sfameni Gasparro 1994.
[26] Gordon 2001a, 100.
[27] These are the finds from Hawarti, published by Gawlikowski 1998; 2007; Hawarti is discussed at length in Chapter I, 69-83.
[28] Gordon 2007a, 394.
[29] Gordon 2017c, 669.

The dismissal of this idea has, however, not been accepted by all historians working on Mithraic worship.[30] It is worth asking why this might be the case. The archaeological evidence does not speak in favour of a uniform or cohesive single cult; the construction of such a picture is heavily reliant on non-Mithraic textual sources, and on Christianising expectations of how an organised religious movement should appear.[31] We should be increasingly more specific when choosing our terminology; it is hardly justified to condemn 'Mithraism' in one breath, and yet continue to use it for the sake of ease and readability.

This thesis follows Gordon in arguing that the terminology of 'Mithraism' should be abandoned, and even that 'Mithraisms' should be avoided. This latter still adheres to the pernicious '-ism', albeit pluralised, which still implies a rigidity and singularity of purpose in each respective version of the cult. The phrase 'the Roman cult of Mithras' poses similar dangers; it too conveys the impression of a defined version of Mithraic belief and practice, which the evidence cannot confirm or deny.

As a proposed solution, I shall mainly use the term 'the Roman worship of Mithras' in this thesis. This has the dual benefits of being both specific – in its geographic and temporal scope – and broad; the word worship accommodates religious beliefs and practices, and yet is sufficiently flexible to allow for Mithras to be placed alongside other gods, and to elide with local cults as well as maintaining a discrete identity. The use of 'Roman' should not be taken to involve an emphasis on the city of Rome, although in any exploration of an empire-wide phenomenon this cannot wholly be avoided. 'Mithraism' is somewhat too

30 For example, Mastrocinque 2017, *passim*; Panagiotidou & Beck 2017, *passim*.
31 I would argue that the same is true of a variety of forms of worship usually identified as cults: Isis, Serapis, Magna Mater and others. See, for example, Gasparini & Veymiers 2018 on cults of Isis.

redolent of Mazdean Mithra, and of the concomitant elision of these various forms of worship made by Franz Cumont in his first creation of the field of study. That this field has survived could, perhaps ironically, be seen largely as the result of a convenient '-ism' label, however. My emphasis on worship also places the religious elements of Mithraic practice firmly at the centre of investigation.

There are certain neologisms that I am more prepared to use, despite not necessarily being entirely convinced of their value. These are '*mithraeum*', for the sacred space of Mithraic worship; 'Mithraist', for the worshipper; 'tauroctony', for the bull-slaying that appears on reliefs, frescoes and in statue-form around the Roman Empire.[32] I prefer the word '*mithraeum*' to '*templum*' or '*spelaeum*' – terms that epigraphic evidence shows were actually used by Mithraic practitioners – because it occupies a kind of neutral ground on the thorny question of how Mithraists conceived of their own space.[33] 'Mithraist' is similarly preferable to '*syndexioi*', the only term that survives to suggest how worshippers might have described themselves, but not in sufficient quantity for us to use it without some reservations.[34] The word tauroctony is not without its detractors; there is no evidence that it was used by Mithraists, or even that they saw the main scene that tends to dominate their sacred spaces as being primarily about the bull.[35]

32 Though the word tauroctony can be interpreted in a variety of ways: see Chapter IV, 210.
33 For further discussion of this question, and the use of the terms *spelaeum* and *templum*, see Chapter III, 159-163. For Gordon's opinion of the term *mithraeum*, see Gordon 2007a, 395.
34 *Syndexioi* is attested on the Mithraic Proficentius inscription from Rome (Vermaseren 1956-1960, number 423: Vermaseren 1956-1960 is henceforth *CIMRM* when identifying an object or site, but volume and page numbers are cited if pertinent to discussion), described in greater detail in Chapter III, 159-160; it also appears as a rather mocking description in Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 5.2.
35 For a key opponent of the term, see Gordon 2007a, 395. Nonetheless, there is no other adequate means of reference without lengthy periphrasis. On the convenience of the term, and its use in avoiding other potential pitfalls, see Chapter IV, 210-211.

iv. Terminology: definitions

I have already attempted a definition of religion: my formulation of it above should be understood throughout the rest of this thesis. There are several other terms that appear periodically in the subsequent chapters, my use of which I should therefore define now. First, historiography, which I comprehend as the examination of the body of scholarship that has comprised the study of Mithraism/the Roman worship of Mithras, since its creation as a discipline by Franz Cumont. When I talk about the 'historiographical component' of chapters, it should therefore be interpreted as involving a survey of what has been written on a particular Mithraic question.

Second, and also in reference to my overall title, the term 'iconography'. What originally arose as a term used to describe collections of art developed over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries into something rather more complex.[36] Erwin Panofsky outlined a distinction between iconography and iconology, in which the former is descriptive while the latter is explanatory of the symbolism depicted.[37] I use the term in a simple form, as a description of the collection of images and symbols associated with Mithras-worship, and found on archaeological objects and spaces.

Third, a note on the term 'mystery' or 'mysteries'. I explain below how the worship of Mithras has traditionally been categorised as a 'mystery cult' and the ways in which this categorisation influenced thought and scholarship over the course of the 20th century. This is not to deny that there was any 'mystery' element at all to Mithraic worship; while it is

[36] See the definition for iconography in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture* (Murray 1996, 237).
[37] Panofsky 1955. His suggestion has not been without its critics, among whom was Ernst Gombrich.

difficult to reconstruct rituals and ideas about the importance of secrecy, it is likely that some aspects were kept relatively hidden. The two-sided reliefs discussed in Chapter IV, for example, suggest that there may have been moments of revelation as part of ritual behaviour. Nonetheless, it is also possible that Mithraic worship was far less secretive than has traditionally been thought; the question of religious insiders and outsiders will recur throughout this thesis. If we could see *mithraea* as less secret and exclusive than they have traditionally been configured, then the extent to which one is an outsider becomes important.[38]

v. Categorisation: mystery cults

The Mysteries of Mithras play a key role in Walter Burkert's 1987 work *Ancient Mystery Cults*, in which he compares the cults of Eleusis, Dionysus, Magna Mater, Isis, and Mithras. Yet in several chapters, the worship of Mithras is seen as exceptional when compared to these other mysteries; this is made explicit when Burkert discusses ideas of salvation, and of hierarchy and social structure.[39] Nonetheless, Mithras-worship is quite firmly embedded in scholarly consciousness as a 'mystery cult' because it was described as such in antiquity: in the mid-second century, Justin Martyr uses the term 'Mysteries of Mithras', as did Origen in his third-century polemic against Celsus.[40] In addition, the Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre twice refers to the 'Mysteries of Mithra' in *De abstinentia ab esu animalium*; the name, therefore, was not confined to Christian apologetic, although we should not assume from Porphyry's use that it was the most common means of describing Mithraic worship.[41] This ancient label has endured; certain elements of actual Mithraic

38 See Chapter II, 143; Chapter III, 167-169.
39 Burkert 1987, 27-28; 41-43; 47.
40 Justin, *Apol.* 1.66; *Dialogue with Trypho* 70; Origen *C. Cels*. 6.22.
41 Porphyry *De abst.* 2.56; 4.16.

activity – as far as they are recoverable from archaeology – do seem to align with the picture presented by other, less contentiously-titled mystery cults, such as those of Eleusis, but other elements most decidedly do not: the question of a Mithraic belief in salvation is an obvious example.[42]

The interest in the category of mystery cults is, in part, due to a Christiano-centric view of Roman religion that looks for a bridge between traditional polytheistic practice and the eventual success of Christianity and monotheism.[43] The modern positioning of Mithraic worship within the category of 'mystery cults' has several possible underlying reasons, alongside its labelling as such in the ancient world: membership appears to have been limited to initiates, and there may have been complex rites of initiation. Furthermore, the tauroctony has been linked to fertility and salvation.[44] These can all be seen as determiners of the category, and are significant within its development.[45]

The last two reasons however, relating to initiation, and generation and salvation, cannot easily be confirmed by the archaeological evidence. For example, while the idea of fertility seems likely, based on the images of the bull's blood or tail turning into ears of wheat on the tauroctony scenes, the concept of a Mithraic belief in after-death salvation, which largely hinged on a now-repudiated text from the Santa Prisca *mithraeum* in Rome, no longer carries much weight in current debates.[46] It is, of course, also possible that there was

[42] For an explanation of the modern use of the term 'Mysteries of Mithras', see Beck 1984a; 2004. In his latest work, Attilio Mastrocinque suggests that he will avoid the term 'Mithraism', preferring 'Mysteries of Mithras' instead (Mastrocinque 2017, 6); in much of his subsequent discussion, however, he does continue to use 'Mithraism'. For more on salvation in reference to the tauroctony scene, see Chapter IV, 214-216.
[43] See Price 2010 on A.D. Nock; see also Adrych & Dalglish (forthcoming b).
[44] On the tauroctony and salvation, see e.g. Clauss 1990b, 89-92 = Clauss 2000, 79-84; for a critical discussion of the idea, see Adrych et al. 2017, 32-35; 57.
[45] For a discussion of the scholarship on this category, see Bremmer 2014, vii-xiv. For a review of Bremmer 2014, and a discussion of his position in relation to the field, see Gordon 2016.
[46] For a lengthy discussion of the *dipinti* from Santa Prisca, see Chapter II, 121-125.

a Mithraic belief in salvation in this life; again there are few, if any, concrete hints towards this in the visual or epigraphic material, as Burkert pointed out.[47]

Categorising Mithraic worship as a mystery cult carries with it certain risks; it can lead to the expectation of 'mystery' features, such as secrecy and seclusion. Burkert demonstrates the dangers of his own approach, saying: "The Mithraea must have been much less accessible in their time than in modern excavations, museums, and publications".[48] But why so? It is certainly true that the high visibility of reliefs and statues in museums and publications is likely to expose Mithraic art to more people than would have viewed it in the Roman world, but is it necessarily true that sacred spaces were somehow inaccessible?[49] Is there a requirement to see *mithraea* as private and secretive spaces? While scholarship on Mithras has undoubtedly been helped by the attention it has received as one of the mystery cults of the ancient world, a certain amount of damage has been done by the expectations that the category has raised. Before the tag 'mystery cults' was attached to Mithras-worship quite so firmly, however, Franz Cumont saw it as an 'Oriental' cult, originating in the East, and evolving from Avestan and Mazdean practices. Cumont's evidence was carefully tailored to fit his theory, and his proposal of Mithraic origins subsequently dominated the field for half a century.[50]

vi. The nature of the evidence

For the past one hundred and twenty-five years of Mithraic scholarship, one of its defining characteristics has been the lament that there is so little textual, and especially literary

47 Burkert 1987, 27-28.
48 Burkert 1987, 42.
49 For more on this subject, see Chapter III, 167-169.
50 For more on Franz Cumont and his theory of the origins of Mithraic worship, see Chapter I.

textual, evidence; a statement to this effect appears in many articles and handbooks on the subject.[51] Those who work on Mithras worship are, for the most part, ancient historians or historians of ancient religion, and as such, they are affected by the usual preferences of ancient history as a discipline. One marked tendency within this field is that of privileging the surviving literary textual accounts over those given by material evidence.[52]

Scholarship on the various forms, practices, and beliefs that are commonly grouped together under the blanket heading of Roman religion does not disguise a dependence upon written sources. Varro's *Antiquitates rerum humanum et divinarum*, imperfectly transmitted through the works of St Augustine, thus becomes a source on Roman religion, priesthoods, sites, and calendars, despite the polemical nature of his Stoical arguments and the Christian frame of his survival and reception. Plutarch's essay *De defectu oraculorum*, with its nods to Platonic dialogues, and its clear rhetorical aims, was persuasive in its picture of a declining oracular tradition in mainland Greece; the archaeological evidence from oracles in Asia Minor instead painted the picture of a thriving custom.[53] The Roman worship of Isis has also been compared favourably to that of Mithras owing to the existence of Apuleius' darkly comical *Metamorphoses*, Book XI of which appears to take a more serious turn in describing Isiac beliefs and rituals.[54]

51 Some brief examples: Clauss 2000, 15: 'a pitiful remnant of literary testimony' (although this emphasis is given by Gordon's translation; the original German is far less emotive (Clauss 1990b, 25); Alvar 2008, 75: 'the wretchedly inadequate literary sources'; 344: 'The lack of reliable literary sources makes it almost impossible to reconstruct Mithraic rituals with any confidence'; Bremmer 2014, 125: '…whereas with Isis we at least have Apuleius, we lack any such narrative about the Mysteries of Mithras'.
52 For an excellent summary of the dangers of a too-rigidly disciplinary approach, and the traditional concerns of each discipline, see Gordon 1979. One obvious exception might be the study of epigraphy, which in the last ten years has heavily emphasised the materiality of the stones.
53 Fontenrose 1988, 20-25; Dignas 2013.
54 Bremmer 2014, 125.

When we come to the worship of Mithras, the natural inclination towards texts on the part of historians is somewhat confounded; the written material that we have at our disposal frequently forms part of Christian apologetic or polemic. This therefore requires a greater reliance on the architectural and artistic evidence. Nonetheless, from Franz Cumont through to contemporary Mithraic scholars, there is still a discernible inclination to privilege the textual accounts, and to use the visual and material evidence simply as supplementary and secondary evidence. Cumont never gave up on his expressed hope that the future would hold 'the discovery of a Mithraist's library'.[55] More recently, Roger Beck has bewailed the 'undervaluing of the admittedly very small body of literary testimony to the mysteries in favour of an almost exclusive concentration on the monumental, that is, iconographic, testimony'.[56]

This quotation appears to be a rather strong programmatic statement from Beck. Despite the fact that evidence for Mithraic worship is overwhelmingly archaeological and visual, he attempts to resurrect the importance of the literary sources, even though they are non-Mithraic in origin. I would argue that, far from the textual evidence being undervalued, it exerts a predominant position in the analysis of many aspects of Mithraic practice and belief.

One might reasonably ask why such primacy should be given to the literary sources, even allowing for the tendencies of ancient history as a discipline. Is the archaeologically-heavy evidence for Mithraic worship problematic as a primary source? The question of how to use text, image, and object to gain an understanding of ancient religion is one that has permeated

[55] Cumont 1975, 186.
[56] Beck 2006, 3.

the scholarship on Mithras, as well as that on mystery cults and ancient religion more broadly.[57]

[57] See, for example, Gordon 1979, 5-34. Certain scholars have engaged particularly constructively with this question, and with the inclusion of material evidence: Jaś Elsner is one of the most prominent (see Elsner 1995; 2007; 2012b), alongside Michael Squire (Squire 2009), Verity Platt (2010), Platt & Squire (2010); Estienne 2008 is an edited volume that pushes towards interesting new models for thinking about material culture; the output of LAR is also instrumental in moving forward discussions of material culture within a historical framework.

Chapter I. Communities of origin: Mithras in the East

One of the most divisive areas of Mithraic scholarship has been the issue of the historical basis for the Roman worship of Mithras. Was it a continuation or development of an Eastern Mithra cult? Or was it "essentially a Western innovation, tricked out with some veneer of Oriental mystery"?[58] This question has set historians at loggerheads for several decades. Richard Gordon made a good case for setting it aside temporarily in the 1970s, but new archaeological finds have caused the problem to appear periodically.[59] Franz Cumont, Mithraism's founding father, felt that the worships of Mithras, Mithra and Mihr shared a "community of origin"; the intention of this chapter is to examine the case for an eastern origin of the Roman worship of Mithras, and to situate the surviving archaeology in its local context.[60]

In this discussion, the archaeological evidence for Mithras in the east of the Roman Empire plays a crucial part. The lack of textual evidence requires an examination of the physical evidence for the cult, in the form of *mithraea* as well as sculptures, frescoes, inscriptions, and small finds. It is in the iconography of the cult, and its variation in subject according to region, that outside influences may be at their most visible. An approach that focuses on material culture, which any exploration of Mithraic iconography must inevitably entail, offers a visual narrative of variation within the cult. A paratactic account of the *mithraea* in

58 Bivar 1979, 741.
59 Gordon 1975, 247: "…it was Cumont himself who insisted that Mithraism is important only as an aspect of a larger problem, and he would surely have approved an attempt to widen the range of discourse about the cult. But we can only do that by recognising that the Magi cannot tell us anything important about the Western cult of Mithras and starting from there?" New archaeological finds in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire tend to revive the discussion of origins: the most famous example is probably the *mithraeum* at Hawarti, discussed below, 69-83.
60 Cumont 1913, 18.

the East may allow for some glimpses of the absorption and assimilation of local cultural practices – and perhaps even religious practices – to come to light.

The first half of this chapter examines historiographical accounts of the origins of Mithraic worship. It starts with Franz Cumont, essentially the founder of the field of Mithraic studies. It then discusses several other prominent figures in Mithraic scholarship over the course of the twentieth century, with an emphasis on Richard Gordon and Roger Beck, and their opinions on the possible genesis of Roman Mithraic activity. Origins – the subject of this chapter – should therefore be understood both as cultic origins and as the foundation of the modern field of study. In fact, the two are inextricably interwoven; any analysis of the work of Franz Cumont and the other key figures of Mithraic study requires that we begin with origins.

The second half of the chapter explores examples of *mithraea* from the east of the Roman Empire. I shall focus in particular on the *mithraeum* at Dura-Europos, which is familiar to most Mithraic scholars, and on the *mithraeum* at Hawarti, a site more recently excavated. It is particularly unfortunate that neither of these *mithraea* has yet seen the publication of a definitive archaeological report.[61] The chapter concludes with an examination of whether there is anything substantive in the sites and visual culture from these eastern *mithraea* that might mark them out as particularly distinctive from western examples, and whether this is likely to be attributable more to a standard Mithraic practice of incorporating local customs, or to a different 'eastern' flavour to Mithraic worship.

[61] The absence of a final report for the Dura *mithraeum*, and the problems caused by this, are noted in Gnoli 2016, 127-128.

I.I. Origins

Without a retrospective on the work of the last century, and a critique of some of its findings, it would be difficult to comprehend why the issue of the origins of the cult is such a tinderbox. A recapitulation of Mithraic scholarship on the origins debate has perforce to begin with Franz Cumont's seminal *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, which enjoyed both canonical stature and acclaim for half a century after its publication in 1896.[62] It quickly became the most important piece of scholarship on the Roman cult of Mithras, its rituals and its origins. For over half a century, Cumont indubitably dominated the field of Mithraic study. He was the first scholar to compile all the available sources on Mithraic worship, and he went about this in a methodical manner. As Roger Beck stated in 1984, "[Cumont's] findings were – or appeared to be – scientifically grounded in the first complete gathering of all the literary, epigraphic and iconographic evidence of the texts and monuments currently available".[63]

The implication of this quotation is that Cumont's method, and his findings, were not quite so accurate or scientific as they seemed at first glance. As Beck continued, "the development, the structure and the theology of the cult were together documented and delineated so as to yield a single brilliant picture, all of a piece."[64] Cumont's ability to produce such a 'single brilliant picture' – one that was so persuasive for over half a century – now seems difficult to imagine. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, it was manageable for one man singlehandedly to create an entire Mithraic corpus from the narrow

62 Henceforth *TMMM*.
63 Beck 1984a, 2003.
64 Beck 1984a, 2003.

pool of evidence, and to allow that corpus to convey his theories about the development of the Roman worship of Mithras from Indo-Iranian cult.

Cumont's stance on the origins of the Roman worship is neatly encapsulated in this much-quoted passage:

> The basal layer of this religion, its lower and primordial stratum, is the faith of ancient Iran, from which it took its origin. Above this Mazdean substratum was deposited in Babylon a thick sediment of Semitic doctrines, and afterwards the local beliefs of Asia Minor added to it their alluvial deposits. Finally, a luxuriant vegetation of Hellenic ideas burst forth from this fertile soil and partly concealed from view its true original nature.[65]

It was a Hellenic and Hellenistic version of the cult that Cumont considered to be the key moment of crystallisation for the Roman worship of Mithras:

> It was undoubtedly during the period of moral and religious fermentation provoked by the Macedonian conquest that Mithraism received approximately its definitive form. It was already thoroughly consolidated when it spread throughout the Roman Empire. Its dogmas and its liturgical traditions must have been firmly established from the beginning of its diffusion. But unfortunately we are unable to determine precisely either the country or the period of time in which Mazdaism assumed the characteristics that distinguished it in Italy.[66]

Fundamental here is Cumont's assumption that Mazdaism was still the form of Mithraic worship found in the Roman Empire. He saw Roman Mithras as a natural evolution of Mazdaism into a form of worship both familiar and acceptable to Roman culture.[67] Cumont clearly believed, first, that this 'Mazdean Mithraism' was an essentialist and uniform reality, along the lines of 'Christianity' or 'Judaism', and second that in order to become tolerable

65 Cumont 1899, 240, trans. McCormack 1903, 30-31.
66 Cumont 1899, 234, trans. McCormack 1903, 15.
67 Cumont 1899, 236-237.

in Roman eyes, Mazdaism had to pass under a Hellenising lens. This is an example of Cumont's Christianising approach to the study of Mithras.[68]

Without even appearing to be conscious of it, many of the assumptions that he makes about the cult as a religion spring from his thoughts about the origins and doctrines of early Christianity. Here, for example, the 'Hellenising lens' under which Mazdaism has to pass is comparable to the way in which Jewish-Christian doctrine had to pass through a Greek filter to reach its Gentile audience. In the case of his 'Mithraism', Cumont believed the process of Hellenisation was achieved because the cult lent itself to syncretism; Mithras could easily be interpreted as a sun-god, on a level with Helios and even Apollo.[69] This solar syncretism will become important later when looking at the Hawarti *mithraeum*, which also raises questions about the growing importance of solar henotheism.[70]

In short, Cumont put together a persuasive, though highly speculative, vision of an evolving cult from Mithra to Mithras. This vision was one which flowed from Indo-Iranian beginnings through to the worship of Mithras visible in the Roman Empire. He claimed that the magi acted as guardians of the cult, ensuring that it survived many changes of regime, and was successful in spreading around the Middle East to Commagene, Armenia and Pontus, as well as ultimately to Italy and Rome herself. Cumont built upon the existing archaeological and textual testimonies to Mithraic worship, together with those for cult to Mithra, and adduced his own deductions about a development and formation of a single cult. This was done in a manner intended to align with all the evidence that he had himself

[68] For more on this Christianising approach, and Cumont's application of it to Mithraic mythology, see Chapter IV, 207-208.
[69] For more on syncretism in Mithraic worship, in particularly with solar aspects, see Chapter I, 82-83; Chapter V, 266-268; 276-281.
[70] Rostovtzeff 1938, 66; see below pages 82-83.

collected, and which was also presented in *TMMM*. He even went so far as to claim that all Roman Mithraic practices could be traced back to "Asiatic" points of origin.[71]

Could there be a more emphatic statement of his model of a linear development of the Roman worship of Mithras from Eastern influences? Cumont certainly appears to have considered it as a Hellenised form of the Mazdean cults of Persia and Parthia. It is this belief, and the assumptions that Cumont made from his supporting evidence, that would later prove to be the main targets of attack by a post-war generation of scholars. Beck's comment on the persuasive but unreliable nature of *TMMM* has been quoted above, but it was the question of the historical roots of Mithraic worship that became the galvanising point in the refutation of Cumont. Although Cumont's theories about origins and continuity were challenged, his assumptions about the fundamentally essentialist nature of 'Mithraism' as a real and tangible entity were continued even by such sceptical and careful scholars as Beck and Gordon. They were able to see the weakness of his arguments about historical roots and genesis, yet still adopted the language of a single form of 'Mithraism'.[72]

The post-war refutation of Cumont began with Stig Wikander's book *Études sur les Mystères de Mithras*. Wikander was a Swedish historian of religions, and a specialist in Indo-Iranology. In this, Wikander makes reference to Cumont's view on origins almost at the outset, in what appears as a rephrasing of Cumont's theory of origin, quoted above.[73] Noticeably, though, Wikander glosses over one important strand in Cumont's collection of

71 Cumont 1899, 239-240.
72 It was only twenty-six years after the publication of 'Franz Cumont and the doctrines of Mithraism' (Gordon 1975), his first refutation of Cumont, that Gordon raised the idea of 'Mithraisms', and questioned the unity of the Roman cult (Gordon 2001a).
73 Wikander 1951, 6: Elements of popular Iranian religion, Babylonian doctrines, the autochthonous cults of Asia Minor, and Hellenic ideas enter into its structure. But the important element is the cult and myths of Iran. The name of Mithras already clearly indicates this origin.

origins: the "thick sediment of semitic doctrines" has been disregarded. Wikander may have had good reason for this: his book was published in the Swedish Exegetical Yearbook in 1951, at a time (after the Second World War) where theories of Semitic history and influence were still highly provocative, and could easily be tainted with a now discredited Aryanism.[74] It was perhaps for this reason that many of his works on Iranian history and religion in the post-war period were written in French, rather than the German he had preferred before the war. The avoidance of any mention of Semitism, especially in connection with Persia (with its Aryan connotations), also prevented the return to what might be seen as a National Socialist search for origins in this post-war era.[75]

Wikander continued with an attack on Cumont's beliefs about the evolution of Indo-Iranian Mithra-worship. He posited instead a Balkan formulation of the cult that would become the Roman Mysteries, though Gordon would later describe this as a "rather half-hearted suggestion".[76] Wikander also put forward an etymological opposition to Cumont, arguing that the name Mithras is different from the Mithra of Avestan cult, and that therefore no link should be read between the two.[77] Wikander devotes a substantial portion of the book to appraising Cumont's evidence for a Mithra-cult growing alongside the established cult of Anahita, and concludes that such evidence is tenuous at best. Wikander's work of the 1950s, then, destroyed a link in Cumont's chain of development, but by no means constituted a full-bodied refutation of *TMMM*.

[74] Wikander had written his dissertation on '*Der arische Männerbund*', and had a strong interest in Aryanism. For more on Wikander's political and scholarly leanings, see Timuş 2007.
[75] For a discussion of this kind of response to political sensitivities, particularly in the work of Cumont, see Elsner 2016. Cumont himself was by no means a subscriber to Nazi ideology – as Elsner makes clear in his discussion of polysemy and meanings – but he was not averse to using Aryanist generalisations.
[76] Gordon 1975, 217.
[77] This seems a rather weak argument, and indeed Beck acknowledges it as such in 'Mithraism since Franz Cumont' (henceforth *MFC*). Here, Beck reviews Wikander, and comes to the conclusion that this strand of his rebuttal is "clearly excessive", while his Balkan contention is "weakly put" (Beck 1984a, 2064).

This step was left to the English ancient historian, Richard Gordon. In his 'Franz Cumont and the doctrines of Mithraism', published in 1975, Gordon set out to deconstruct the edifice of Cumontian Mithraism. In this, it was his aim to be as systematic as he claimed Cumont was not. He began by reviewing *TMMM*, and specifically Cumont's aims and interests as far as he discerned them. Gordon made several important comments about Cumont's failure to connect the belief-system of the Roman worship of Mithras to its organisation, or to account for the variety of initiates to the cult. It was on the question of the historical roots of the cult, though, that Gordon really made his refutation of Cumont tell, stating categorically that Cumont's theory of a Roman cult derived from the heritage of the magi in Anatolia "will no longer need to be taken seriously".[78] He also denied the validity of the Zoroastrian element of Cumont's argument:

> […]it will be very difficult even to maintain that there is a coherent Zoroastrian base to Western Mithraism, whether or not we assume that Zoroastrianism to have been based largely on knowledge of actual practice or upon knowledge of the Magian literature current in the East under the name of Zoroaster, some of which certainly described Zoroastrian beliefs, sometimes accurately.[79]

Gordon did not entirely refute Cumont; he acknowledged the similarities between certain aspects of Roman Mithras and the Avestan cult of Mithra. He agreed that there was a degree of continuity between an Anatolian cult of the god and the Roman form of worship. Where he differed was in drawing any link between these two strands: his stance was that the Mithras of the Western cult shares some attributes with the Indo-Iranian god, but that the singular form of worship cannot be argued to have derived from the Avestan cult.

78 Gordon 1975, 218.
79 Gordon 1975, 218.

By the end of the article, Gordon presented himself as disenchanted with the origins debate, referring to Schneider's 1939 argument that many oriental cults saw a development of their organisation and doctrines when they came into contact with Greek culture.[80] Such an argument was, of course, redolent of Cumont's own view (quoted above) that it was the interaction with Hellenic ideas that proved to be a key point in the development of the Western from the Magian cult. Gordon developed this line of reasoning into a new claim: suggesting that the "offspring" of a parent religion "may well have consciously distorted those original meanings and relationships for a novel purpose".[81] He closed the article with the plea that "perhaps we can forget origins for a while?"[82]

This was a vain request: Roger Beck would go on to discuss the origins of the Roman Mysteries at length in *MFC* in 1984, and other Mithraic scholars have been understandably unwilling to disregard the issue.[83] Indeed, Gordon's desire to put the question of origins aside for a while may simply be a reflection of the fact that he recognised the near impossibility of finding a concrete answer.[84]

Roger Beck is the other main contributor to the origins debate, not only in *MFC*, but also in a subsequent article which aimed to suggest a new possibility for the origins of the Roman cult.[85] Much of *MFC* served as a review of Mithraic scholarship since the publication of

[80] Schneider 1939. Carl Schneider's (1900-1977) arguments are, of course, tainted by his political interests. A German theologian of the New Testament, in 1939 he became a member of the Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben (the Institute for the study and elimination of Jewish influence on German church life), an organisation founded by the German Christians movement. As such, it was in his interests to discredit the influence of Semitic and eastern doctrines upon the West. As mentioned above, Wikander's decision to bypass Cumont's mention of a Semitic part in Mithraic evolution is likely to have been a reaction against the work of men such as Schneider.
[81] Gordon 1975, 245.
[82] Gordon 1975, 247.
[83] See Chalupa 2016 for a recent and thorough account of Mithraic scholarship on the question of origins.
[84] See also Gordon 2017a, 433.
[85] Beck 1998.

TMMM, but Beck took the opportunity to present a few of his views on the continuing plausibility of Cumont's arguments. Beck entitled an entire section of the article "*La forme romaine du mazdéisme?*", questioning whether there were links between ancient Mazdaism and the Roman form of Mithraic worship.[86]

Beck also laid out his idea of the range of possible views on the genesis of the Roman Mysteries. While he acknowledged that this range contained many subtleties and permutations, he nevertheless separated it out into three major strands: that the Mysteries were an evolution of the Indo-Iranian cult; that they were entirely a Western invention; or that they were given definition in Hellenistic Anatolia. Beck avoided giving his own opinion on the issue, though he did state that there was sufficient evidence to make the argument that the Mysteries passed through a key developmental stage as part of the royal cult in Commagene in the first century BC.[87] Beck was here keen to emphasise the importance of syncretism to the development of Mithras-worship, and demonstrated an inclination towards a theory of evolution rather than one of invention.

He used this idea of the cult in Commagene in his 1998 article 'The Mysteries of Mithras: A new account of their genesis'. He posited that this particular cult could have spread to Rome, and developed into the worship of Mithras as we understand it today, through contact between Commagenean nobility and the men under Vespasian's command.[88] Beck acknowledged in his opening to the article that he would fall short of comprehending how the cult was transmitted: admitting that he would mainly focus on "the where and when of its physical traces and the who of its adherents", which he described as key components of

86 Beck 1984a, 2064.
87 Beck 1984a, 2072.
88 For a brief description of Mithra (though not Mithras) in Commagene, see Chapter V, 266-268.

the story, but not the story itself.[89] Throughout this article, Beck revealed his continued preoccupation with the question of origins; he attempted to fill the gap left by the refutation of Cumont's theory, remaining convinced that there was a single version of "the story" to be told.

The main uniting factor in the rebuttals of Cumont written by Wikander, Gordon and Beck is that their accounts of the subject of the origins debate start with acknowledgements of Cumont's position for many years as the leader of the field of Mithraic study.[90] The key term from the three descriptions of Cumont is that of founder, and perhaps even of founding father. Wikander, Beck and Gordon all owe their ability to refine research into the Roman Mysteries to the base level set by Cumont. In this sense, they can be seen as Cumont's children, along with every other committed Mithraist.[91] Nonetheless, having noticed the holes in Cumont's argument about the origins of the cult, and the areas in which he had speculated with very little evidence, they recognised the need to challenge the established view. It was entirely necessary for the advancement of the field to confront many of the assumptions that Cumont had made in *TMMM*. Cumont's use of Iranian texts to supply the lack of Mithraic literary sources had to be questioned and rejected. His assumptions and speculations had disguised a real lack of knowledge, and had persuaded historians and archaeologists to read more into the evidence than existed.

This is particularly noticeable in Leroy Campbell's *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*.[92] Campbell did not entirely agree with Cumont; in fact, he notably disagreed with Cumont's

89 Beck 1998, 117.
90 Wikander 1951, 5; Gordon 1975, 215; Beck 1984a, 2003. Gordon's is without doubt the most critical of the three comments; in it, he established himself as the most prepared of these historians to find fault with Cumont.
91 See Elsner 2016 for a reference to the Oedipal nature of Gordon's refutation of Cumont.
92 Campbell 1968. For more on Campbell, see below, 61 f.181; 86 f.248; Chapter IV, 208; 213 f.610.

mythological narrative of the life of Mithras portrayed in the rock-birth and other scenes. Campbell instead argued for a more symbolic reading of the iconography. He also rejected Cumont's vision of a Zoroastrian conflict between good and evil, represented on the tauroctony by the dog on one side and the snake and scorpion on the other. Campbell unquestioningly accepted, however, Cumont's emphasis on a continuing Zoroastrian and Mazdean theology. In their accounts of the book, both Beck and John Hinnells underlined how problematic this was as a reading of the theology of the Roman Mysteries.[93] Hinnells found several faults with Campbell's reading of Mithraic iconography, and to his mind this was the most serious mistake. In general, though, Hinnells was positive about Campbell's impact on the field of Mithraic scholarship and iconography, and he praised Campbell for asking the right questions. Beck was less full of praise in *MFC*, criticising the neatness with which Campbell presents the movement of 'Mithraism' between very different cultures.[94] This concern fits into the greater pattern of *MFC*, in which Beck problematizes Cumont, and those who have followed him too closely without regard for further evidence. Beck draws to our attention the fact that Cumont "left no – or very few – loose ends" in his coherent representation of Mithraism.[95]

I have quoted above Cumont's statement that all the rites of the Roman Mysteries were derived from Zoroastrian practice; the rebuttal of this was central to Beck and Gordon's arguments. Cumont adduced very little evidence for his assumption. Beck and Gordon argued that this was because such evidence is in very short supply; there was in fact little concrete link between the cult practices of the Roman Mysteries and those of Mazdean cult.

93 Beck 1984a; Hinnells 1968.
94 Beck 1984a, 2066.
95 Beck 1984a, 2003.

Israel Roll confronted the problem with Cumont's version of an Oriental cult head on, pointing out that there was little evidence in the East for any non-Roman version of Mithraic worship.[96] It is certainly possible that the Roman worship of Mithras *was* an alien religious phenomenon in the eastern as well as the western parts of the Empire. The lack of connecting iconographic evidence between the Iranian and Roman cults indicates that the appearance of Mithras in the tauroctony might have been highly unfamiliar to the inhabitants of Syria and Asia. In order for Mithras to be seen as an Oriental god in Italy and in the western half of the Empire, all that was required was a perception of his being eastern, which was provided by the well-known identification of Mithras as a Persian god, and his customary attribute of the Phrygian cap.[97]

Another key part to the origins debate is the idea, mentioned above as one of Roger Beck's three strands of Mithraic development: that the worship of Mithras along the Roman model originated in the West. This theory is particularly advocated by Reinhold Merkelbach in his seminal 1984 work, *Mithras*, and supported by several others, including – perhaps most influentially – Manfred Clauss.[98] This is, in fact, a point with which Roll concludes his article: "It is certainly not my intention to deny that the Mysteries interpreted themselves as an Oriental cult. What I would suggest is the possibility that they were, in fact, an Occidental one."[99] The lack of evidence in the East for the formation of the Roman Mithras does not preclude his being associated with the Orient in Rome, though it certainly adds weight to the theory that there must have been a major transitional period in which some aspects of the Mazdean cult were borrowed and became part of western Mithraic worship. It is, though,

96 Roll 1978, 53.
97 E.g. Stat. *Theb.* 1.719-720, which contains a reference to the Persian cave, or the Persean cave. For this text in relation to Mithraic sacred space, see Chapter III, 170.
98 This theory, and the importance of Rome and Ostia, is outlined more fully in Chapter II, 94-101.
99 Roll 1978, 62.

by no means necessary to believe that the Roman Mithras cult, which we know from archaeological evidence in Italy and the western provinces, underwent its entire formative process outside the Eastern Mediterranean. The use of a few Persian words and the importance of astrology, which may have had a Zoroastrian basis, certainly suggest that the idea of an eastern genesis was, to a degree, a constituent part of the Roman worship of Mithras.

I.II. Beyond origins: Mithraic archaeology in the East

Instead of looking for origins, it is perhaps more helpful to look for parallels. If the Roman worship of Mithras was more of an Occidental than Oriental cult, as Roll suggests, then this supports the theory that the examples of *mithraea* located in the East of the Empire may prove to be of particular interest. Are there instances in which eastern religious and cultural practices – particularly in terms of iconography and mythography – are visible within the material culture of *mithraea*? If so, this might go some way towards demonstrating that the Roman Mithraic worship was not simply a product of the Occident with trappings of the Oriental. A paratactic investigation, laying out examples of Eastern *mithraea*, along with features they share not only with their local region but also with western *mithraea*, will shine some light onto the similarities and discrepancies between them, in terms of art, mythography, and perhaps even the motivations of worshippers.[100]

[100] I say mythography here to draw a distinction from mythology, or – more specifically – narrative mythology. While the representation in artistic format of what appear to be myths is something that can be discussed, it is rather more difficult to access a narrative form of mythology through images. For further discussion, see Chapter IV, 205-208.

I.II.i. The example of Dura-Europos

The search for these parallels begins with the *mithraeum* at Dura-Europos. Dura must surely be considered as one of the best cities to study as a meeting point between eastern and western culture and religion. Despite years of Macedonian and subsequently Roman hegemony, the archaeological work at Dura suggests that the city retained its eastern identity, particularly with regard to its artwork.[101]

The position of Dura-Europos on the banks of the Euphrates, and commanding the desert routes, made it an important centre of trade in the region, and brought the city many associated social benefits. As well as enjoying comparative prosperity during the Roman period of power, Dura can be seen as a sort of cultural crucible, where the early Indo-Iranian culture combined with Semitic, Parthian, Hellenistic and Roman elements. Indigenous inhabitants, Macedonian, Parthian and Roman settlers, and the Palmyrenes living in the city all influenced one another, and there are few places where this is clearer than in the art of the religious buildings. This mixture of influences upon the religious and artistic culture of Dura-Europos sounds quite similar to Cumont's description of the stages in the development of the Roman cult of Mithras, quoted above. Would Cumont have seen Dura as an ideal example for an examination of the many influences that, in his opinion, created Roman

[101] For a full introduction to the archaeological, social, religious and artistic history of Dura-Europos, see Kaizer 2016; this comprehensive and detailed account includes a chapter on the *mithraeum* by Tommaso Gnoli. Rostovtzeff 1938 also provides a good starting point, although it is now obviously a period piece. For an account that comes from a very different perspective, Wharton 1995 offers an approach to urban space and religious framework at Dura and elsewhere; in addition, Lucinda Dirven has written about religious interaction between Palmyrenes and Durenes in the city (Dirven 1999). Lisa Brody and Gail Hoffman's *Dura-Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity*, published in 2011, was designed to accompany and enhance an exhibition in the Yale University Art Gallery; it contains short chapters on a range of subjects, including discussions of the *mithraeum* and Palmyrene presence within the city.

Mithraic worship? At any rate, the *mithraeum* at Dura can be seen as an excellent starting point for an assessment of the appearance of Roman Mithras in the East.

The *mithraeum* was situated in the west of the city, in the area behind the brick wall that served to delineate the Roman military quarter (Plan 1). The location of the building alone, therefore, indicates that the form of Mithraic worship in the city was along the lines of the cult practised in the western half of the Roman Empire, and that we might be less likely to find a particularly eastern flavour to it. It also points towards the Roman garrison stationed at Dura having been the dominant body among the Mithraists in the city.[102] The *mithraeum* was preserved by virtue of having been built against the outer wall of the city; when Dura came under Sasanian assault in AD 256, many of the buildings along this perimeter were filled with earth to create a defensive embankment.[103] These tactics failed, and the city fell to Sasanian conquest, but the *mithraeum*, along with the synagogue and a Christian chapel, remained intact under the rubble.[104]

The *mithraeum* at Dura had three major architectural phases, which saw it transformed from a small shrine to a larger complex with an elaborate cult niche.[105] The first phase of the building is thought to date to AD 168: this is the date on which a relief was dedicated by the commander of the Palmyrene archers stationed in Dura, and it seems plausible that the entire *mithraeum* could be associated with this dedication. A second relief, dating to AD

[102] On the army as an institutionalising force, using Dura-Europos as a test-case, see Pollard 1996. He questions whether the army acted as a force of 'Romanisation' within the city, or whether it was effectively cut off from the civilian population, and whether the cults of Mithras and Jupiter Dolichenus were therefore army cults (Pollard 1996, 222).
[103] Baird 2014, 126.
[104] On the dating of the fall of Dura-Europos, see MacDonald 1986.
[105] See Baur, Rostovtzeff & Bellinger 1929-1944, 64-82 for Henry Pearson's full account of the development of the *mithraeum*. He describes the architecture of the early/first-phase (64-70), middle/second-phase (70-76) and late/third-phase (76-82) *mithraeum*, complete with detailed figures outlining the different building phases and their impact upon the sacred space within the sanctuary. See also *CIMRM* 34 for Vermaseren's account, which is based primarily on the Preliminary Report.

170 or thereabouts, was also dedicated by another *strategos* of the Palmyrene archers. The early structure of the building was very simple, and echoed in appearance many other *mithraea* found across the Roman Empire. It probably consisted of a narrow nave, flanked on each side by a bench, from which two columns rose to support the roof. This nave led, at the far end of the *mithraeum*, to a raised platform, which was reached by a short flight of steps. In front of this platform stood the main cult altar, along with two smaller altars at its side, while two cult reliefs of the tauroctony scene were attached to the rear wall. There was a small well on the platform, probably to provide water for use in ritual and feasting.[106]

The second architectural phase took place in around AD 210, according to a painted inscription by the centurion Antonius Valentinus.[107] In this, Valentinus claims to be restoring the *mithraeum*, which suggests that the earlier building may have been partially destroyed by the conversion of the northern part of Dura into a larger military camp. This period, under Septimius Severus and Caracalla, saw the growth in the strategic importance of Dura, and therefore a corresponding growth in the size of the garrison stationed in the city. This increased number of soldiers may have been another reason for the enlargement of the *mithraeum*; there may well have been several new members. The second phase of construction saw the sanctuary almost double in size: the dividing wall between the *mithraeum* and an anteroom was knocked down, extending the nave and the bench along

106 The importance of access to water for use in ritual and feasts has become widely accepted in Mithraic scholarship. See Clauss 1990b, 81-82 = Clauss 2000, 73; Lenk 2017, 76-78. For a discussion on water in private spaces within Dura-Europos, and the suggestion that water was at a premium, see Koloski-Ostrow 2011, 255-257; Baird 2014, 99-102.

107 Baur, Rostovtzeff & Bellinger 1929-1944, VII/VIII 85-88. Also *CIMRM* 53: 'On behalf of the health and safety of our Lords Emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla and Geta, under the procurator of the *Augusti* Minucius Martialis, the *templum* of Sol Invictus Mithras was restored by Antonius Valentinus, centurion and *princeps* of the vexillations of the *legio IV Scythica* and the *legio XVI Flavia Firma*' (*Pro sal(ute) et incol(umitate) d(ominorum) / n(ostrorum) imp(eratorum) L(uci) Sep(timi) Severi Pii / Pert(inacis) et M(arcus) Aurel(i) Antonini [[et L(uci) Sept(imi) Geta[e]]] / Aug(ustorum) tem/plum dei Solis Invicti Mithrae sub Minic(io) Martiali [p]roc(uratore) Aug(ustorum) / rest(itutum) ab Ant(onio) Valentino (centurione) princ(ipe) / pr(aeposito) ve[x(illationum) leg(ionum) III]I Scyt(hicae) / et XVI Fl(aviae) F(irmae) P(iae) F(idelis)*.)

the north wall. The back wall of the *mithraeum*, on which were placed the tauroctony reliefs, was turned into a highly decorated arched niche, which would surely have drawn the eye of the initiates even more than before. The frescoes on the walls of the *mithraeum*, and the paintings from the south bench, probably also date to this period of construction.

The dating of the third phase of the *mithraeum* is unclear, but is thought to have been around AD 240. The nave was lengthened, and two new columns were erected on each side of the nave to support the new vaulted ceiling. Two anterooms were added to the north of the complex, and a gap was created in the northern bench to allow access to a door. The platform in front of the cult niche was raised and extended out to the first columns, and a new arch was created between them. These stages of architectural development in the *mithraeum* suggest the growing importance of Mithraic practice at Dura, and perhaps suggest that there was an increase in the numbers of initiates worshipping the god.

As mentioned above, the frescoes on the northern and southern walls of the *mithraeum* are likely to date to the second architectural phase. The number of frescoes is part of what makes Dura stand out; although *mithraea* in Italy, such as Capua Vetere, Santa Prisca in Rome, and the Mitreo delle Pareti Dipinte in Ostia make extensive use of frescoes, only the *mithraeum* at Hawarti can compare with Dura.[108] Perhaps the most noteworthy fresco (Figure 1) is that found on the southern wall of the sanctuary, which had an almost identical copy facing it on the northern wall.[109] Its interest lies not only in its excellent state of preservation, but also in its unusual nature. The fresco depicts a hunter on horseback,

[108] Indeed, Hawarti far surpasses Dura, as shall be seen below. In the Preliminary Report on the *mithraeum*, Marcel Aubert points out that none of the Dura paintings are frescoes in the 'true' sense; they were actually painted *al secco* on a surface of plaster and mud brick (Baur, Rostovtzeff & Bellinger 1929-1944, VII/VIII 115).
[109] Baur, Rostovtzeff & Bellinger 1929-1944, VII/VIII 112-115; *CIMRM* 52.

galloping to the right, and in the process of drawing his bow.[110] He is dressed in Parthian costume, with trousers, belted tunic and cloak. This figure is usually identified as Mithras, though there is no concrete evidence for this assumption.[111] He appears to be hunting deer and antelope, all of which have already been pierced by the god's arrows. The two deer have crescent moons curving from their antlers. The action of the painting is drawn forwards, in the direction of the moving hunt, by a snake which darts under the hooves of the horse. In addition to this snake, a dog and a lion also accompany the hunter; a dog and snake are usual companions for the god in the tauroctony reliefs, where they lap at the bull's blood, though the inclusion of a lion is less usual.[112]

There is some interest in creating a fairly realistic hunting scene, despite the inclusion of seemingly symbolic companions. There are several animals being hunted down by Mithras, and there is a strong attempt at recreating the rural landscape with plants and trees; the possibility of the fresco serving a more ornamental than symbolic purpose should not be overlooked. Rostovtzeff draws a parallel between the fresco in the *mithraeum* and a painting in a private house in Dura.[113] This latter painting also depicts a hunting scene, in which a man identified as Bolazeos is shown on horseback, in the act of drawing his bow, pursuing a pair of onagers. The name Bolazeos suggests Palmyrene origins; is it too much of a leap to see a link between a Sasanian interest in hunting scenes, hunting mosaics in Palmyra, and the Palmyrene dedications in the *mithraeum*?[114] The hunter's tunic and trousers in the fresco are distinctively Irano-Palmyrene, while the bow is similar to Palmyrene weapons found at

110 For more discussion of Mithras as a hunter, see Chapter IV, 237-238.
111 For a recent discussion of these frescoes, see Dirven & McCarty 2014, 133-134: the figures are here re-identified as Cautes and Cautopates, rather than Mithras. This reading is, in part, based on a comparison to frescoes from Hawarti; it has not gained widespread popularity, though it is a useful reminder that we should not take the identification of figures for granted.
112 Though a lion often appears underneath the bull, together with a snake, in scenes from tauroctony reliefs from Germany. See also below, 62-63; Chapter II, 115; Chapter IV, 241.
113 Rostovtzeff 1938, 92-96.
114 Harper 2008, 79-81.

Dura, with its "set-back handle", curving limbs and "straight bow ears".[115] The choice of a hunting scene to decorate the walls of the *mithraeum* may well have been influenced by the dress, weaponry and interests of the Palmyrene archer cohort who seem to have constituted the first worshippers in this sanctuary.[116]

The Dura *mithraeum* is unusual in having two tauroctony reliefs, which seem to have enjoyed an equal status, despite one being significantly larger and of better quality than the other. According to their inscriptions, they seem to have been commissioned and sculpted within a few years of each other, which has led some scholars to assume that they must originally have come from two separate Mithraic foundations within Dura, which were merged at a later date.[117] In favour of this reading is the fact that the older relief had inset bronze staples in its top corners, suggesting that it may originally have been covered by a curtain.[118] This might allow the later relief to assume a greater significance; it is entirely possible, however, that the curtain may have been intended to give the earlier relief an epiphanic sense of mystery. One argument against the separate *mithraea* theory is the fact that the inscription on the later relief seems to refer to the older dedication.[119] A second, and perhaps even more important point, is that there does not appear to have been any problem in a *mithraeum* containing multiple versions of the tauroctony scene: examples can be found in several *mithraea*, including those under the church of San Stefano Rotondo and under the Circus Maximus in Rome, the Walbrook *mithraeum* in London – although this may

115 James 2010, 191.
116 Hunting, as a subject for the iconography of the royal houses of Persia and Parthia, was very popular. It is attested in the reliefs of the Assyrian kings, as well as in the minor arts of the Achaemenids. It was also prevalent in Sasanian art, on the reliefs at Tāq-e Bostān and in silverware (for a discussion, see Cohen 2010, 82-93). Hunting was therefore an important motif in the East, and this artistic tradition would certainly have been known to the Palmyrene archers at Dura, and to the painter of the Dura frescoes.
117 See Gnoli 2016, 131-132.
118 Downey 1977, 23.
119 See below 47.

point to accumulation over time –, and Vulci.[120] Indeed, there is yet another tauroctony scene, this time a fresco, above the archway surrounding the niche at Dura.

These reliefs both provide an insight into the identity of their dedicators, and the character of the Mithraic community in Dura. The older relief is made from white gypsum, and measures 42 by 57 centimetres (Figure 2).[121] An inscription in Palmyrene attests to the identity of the dedicator, and the date of the relief:

> A good memorial; made by Ethpeni the strategos, son of Zabde'a, who is in command of the archers who are in Dura. In the month Adar of the year 480.[122]

This first inscription is reinforced by a second in Greek (*CIMRM* 38), which simply repeats Ethpeni's name and rank. The Palmyrene language must therefore be understood as having been prioritised in this instance; it provides greater information, and perhaps suggests that many of the initiates must have at least been able to understand this language.

The relief itself shows the tauroctony scene that is familiar from Mithraic remains all around the Roman Empire: Mithras, dressed in Phrygian cap, cloak, tunic and trousers, is depicted in the act of killing the bull.[123] The dog and snake rise to lap up the blood from the bull's neck, and the raven is shown in flight, just to the left of the god's head. There are also representations of the sun and moon: to the right of Mithras' head is a sun disc, with the rays carved into the pattern of a star, while to his left is a crescent moon, which bears a nine-

120 For further discussion of the assemblage at the Walbrook *mithraeum*, see Chapter V, 291-294. On San Stefano Rotondo, see Lissi-Caronna 1986; on the Circus Maximus *mithraeum*, see *CIMRM* 434; on Vulci, see Sgubini Moretti et al. 1998.
121 Baur, Rostovtzeff & Bellinger 1929-1944, VII/VIII 92-94 on the relief; 83-84 on the inscription; *CIMRM* 37.
122 *CIMRM* 39. The date 480 refers to Seleucid-era dating, which was in use in many regions of Hellenistic heritage, including Dura.
123 For a more detailed discussion of the bull-slaying motif, see Chapter IV, 209-216.

pointed star. The centres of the sun and star have been damaged with tools, perhaps to remove precious stones, and a further drill hole for such a stone can be seen in the knot of Mithras' cap.[124]

The scorpion is missing from the usual group of animals that surrounds the bull, though our lack of understanding of the symbolic purpose of the scorpion prevents us from comprehending what this could mean. Another noticeable difference from typical representations of the scene is that, while traditionally Sol is represented to the left of the god, and Luna to the right, here the order of the two is reversed. There is no explanation for why the order should have been changed in this relief, nor are there any other astrological symbols shown upon it. More significant, however, is Mithras' action in – or method of – killing the bull. In this Ethpeni relief, Mithras is depicted reaching around the bull's neck, either to slit its throat or to plunge the dagger in through its dewlap. In general, the iconography of the cult instead prefers to show the god plunging the dagger into the bull's shoulder.[125] This certainly means that the Ethpeni relief is unusual, but the scene is not necessarily rendered more graphic by this method; in fact, it is barely possible to see the dagger at all.[126]

124 This damage to the relief is worthy of note. Considering the excellent preservation of much of the rest of the *mithraeum*, how are we to account for it? Presumably, if there were precious stones in the relief, then they might have been removed prior to the abandonment and filling-in of the *mithraeum*, as the city prepared for the Sasanian siege. It is highly unlikely that it was an act of hostile iconoclasm, otherwise there would surely have been other damage to the reliefs and perhaps to the frescoes.

125 Glenn Palmer (Palmer 2009) states that 70% of Mithraic tauroctony scenes show the god stabbing the bull in the right shoulder with a short dagger, an action which, he argues, could not possibly hope to succeed in killing the bull. Christopher Faraone (Faraone 2013), whose article uses much of Palmer's data, raises this figure to 80%. While Palmer accepts that the bull-slaying scene is symbolic and probably not indicative of actual cult practice (316; cf. Elsner 1995, 214-215), Faraone argues that the scene represents merely a "bull-wounding" rather than actual slaughter. It is therefore unfortunate that Faraone makes no mention of the Ethpeni relief which, as an anomaly to the general trend of stabbing the bull through the shoulder, presents an obstacle to his argument. In the Dura *mithraeum* at least, there was clearly the belief that Mithras was engaged in the slaughter of the bull, rather than in simply wounding it.

126 Though Susan Downey points out that the preliminary report on the relief by Campbell and Gute, written before the colours faded, makes mention of a red painted background to the wound, presumably meant to represent blood (Baur, Rostovtzeff & Bellinger 1929-1944, VII/VIII 92-94) (Downey 1978, 23). This would have made the scene rather more graphic than it now appears.

The second relief from Dura, the Zenobius relief (Figure 3), is equally unusual, though for different reasons.[127] Like the Ethpeni relief above which it was found, it too is made from gypsum, though it is much larger than the older relief, and the carving is of superior quality.[128] A Greek inscription below the relief identifies the patron as Zenobius Eiaeibas, son of Iariboles and commander of a unit of archers:

> Zenobius, also called Eiaeibas, son of Iariboles, commander of the archers, made this for the god Mithras two years later.[129]

The words 'two years later' seem to refer to the date of AD 168 given on the Ethpeni relief, and therefore allow us to date the Zenobius dedication to around AD 170.[130] It is possible that the counting system was Roman, however, which would give a date of AD 169 instead. The choice of a Greek rather than Palmyrene inscription may point to a diminution of the Palmyrene character of the Mithraic community at Dura. Nonetheless, in order fully to understand the reference to 'two years later', the reader would have to be able to comprehend the Palmyrene script on the Ethpeni relief below.[131]

It is generally thought that Zenobius was also a Palmyrene in charge of the auxiliary archer unit from that city, just as Ethpeni had been. While the name Zenobius is of Greek origin, his second name Eiaeibas is Semitic, indicating that Zenobius was from an eastern (or at least Hellenised) family, and thereby reinforcing the impression that he was a Palmyrene

127 Baur, Rostovtzeff & Bellinger 1929-1944, VII/VIII, 95-100 on the relief; 84 on the inscription; *CIMRM* 40.
128 Ethpeni relief: Height 0.42m, Breadth 0.57m, Depth 0.10m. Zenobius relief: Height 0.67m, Breadth 1.05m, Depth 0.10m.
129 The Greek reads: Θεοῦ (sic) Μίθραν ἐπόησεν Ζηνόβιος ὁ καὶ Εἰαειβᾶς Ἰαριβωλέους / στρατεγὸς τοξοτῶν ἔτους δευτέρου πυ, *SEG* XV 851.
130 For more on the dating of these inscriptions, see Mastrocinque 2004, 161-179.
131 For more on this, see Adrych 2017, 53.

commander. The inscriptions from the two reliefs therefore suggest that the worship of Mithras in the city was, at least in the beginning, sponsored by patrons with Palmyrene connections, and that many of the initiates would have been drawn from the archer cohort.[132] The fact that the Zenobius relief did not replace the earlier one also indicates a sense of cohesion among the community; this might be cohesion among either the Palmyrene or the Mithraic community: both were presumably small and well-knit.

The main action of the relief shows Mithras as he prepares to sacrifice the bull. With his left hand, he pulls back the bull's head, holding its mouth closed, while with his right he pierces the neck with a dagger. This is the more conventional method of bull-killing; the action is reminiscent of Nike bull-slaying scenes found in sculptures and amulets, and indeed there have been occasions when representations of Nike and Mithras have been confused.[133] The god sits on the bull's back, his left leg pressing down on its right shoulder, in order to force it into submission. Both of the god's feet touch the ground, allowing him to face the relief's viewer and draw them into the moment of sacrifice.[134] Mithras is depicted in his usual Eastern costume: Phrygian cap, tunic, trousers, and a cloak swept back over his right shoulder. The dog and snake that are usually found in tauroctony scenes are also present, springing up to lap up the blood from the bull's wound, while the raven is shown perched on the god's cloak. A bust above the head of Mithras shows a bearded god, possibly Saturn, while on either side of this are traces of two missing busts, probably of Sol and Luna. The damage has unfortunately prevented us from knowing whether the reversal of

[132] For the Palmyrene presence in Dura from at least 33 BC, see Dirven 1999, 32; 199-202; Smith 2013, 151.
[133] The British Museum has two such statue groups (Museum Numbers: 1805,0703.4 and 1805,0703.5), each showing a winged Nike slaying a bull. When these were first acquired by the Museum, they were in fact labelled as depicting a "female Mithras", so iconic to the Roman cult had the tauroctony become. For a detailed discussion of possible precursors to the tauroctony model, and a reference to these British Museum Nike figures, see Dalglish 2017a, 25-30.
[134] This frontal portrayal is also a common element in Parthian painting.

sun and moon depicted on the Ethpeni relief would have been repeated here.[135] This entire scene is framed by the representation of two round columns, with an arch above which features the symbols of the zodiac running from Aries on the far left, to Pisces on the far right.

To the right of the god, three human figures are shown (Figure 4): the dedicator Zenobius is represented performing some sort of cult action, possibly placing incense onto a *thymiaterion* with his right hand, while upon a ledge supported by two crouching men are the smaller figures of two companions.[136] Each character is identified by an inscription in Greek, naming them as Zenobius, Barnaadath and Iariboles respectively.[137] This is a unique portrayal of Mithraic worshippers, and in particular a patron of the cult, on the main relief.[138] Traditionally, the sacrifice of the bull by Mithras is interpreted as being on behalf of the

135 As in the Ethpeni relief, the damage is noteworthy. In the Zenobius relief, though, although it probably also concerns the images of Sol and Luna, the damage cannot be argued away as an attempt to remove precious gems. In the Ethpeni relief, the holes were made by a blow from a chisel, which did not destroy the rest of the motif. In the case of the Zenobius relief, what we believe to have been the busts of the two gods were completely obliterated. There is no explanation for this; was it done deliberately, was it accidental as the *mithraeum* was filled with debris to provide a defensive bulwark, or was it an accident of excavation?

136 See Elsner 2012a, 147-153 on examples of incense sacrifice at Dura: this is a common iconographic feature in the visual culture of Dura-Europos. For more on the use of incense across Mithraic worship, see Bird 2001; 2004. The latter is an account based on a range of finds, including small finds such as censers, but it is somewhat generalising in its conclusion, particularly about the relationship of the Lion grade to the practice of incense burning.

137 There has been much debate about the identity of both the standing and the kneeling figures. Cumont claimed that the Barnaadath and Iariboles were the sons of Zenobius, while the kneeling figures were his grandsons, but there is no evidence to support this (Cumont 1975, 167). Despite the repetition of the name Iariboles from the main inscription, as Lucinda Dirven points out, Iariboles was a common Palmyrene name and therefore should not be over-interpreted (Dirven 1999, 271). Rostovtzeff claims that Barnaadath and Iariboles are Zenobius' ancestors, and that the kneeling figures beneath them are *atlantes*, portrayed simply as an architectural feature to support the ledge on which the others stand (Rostovtzeff 1938, 187). These kneeling figures are also described as *atlantes*-like in *CIMRM* 40, and it is this identification that I have followed here, although I avoid labelling Iariboles and Barnaadath as relatives of Zenobius. Dirven herself claims that all four of the figures represent members of the Mithraic community at Dura, and that they have no connection at all to Zenobius (Dirven 1999, 271; 2011, 212). Downey believes that the kneeling figures are caryatids, and suggests that Barnaadath and Iariboles were more likely to have been living members of Zenobius' family than deified ancestors, based on other evidence of patron dedications from Dura (Downey 1977). It is also possible that the two standing figures are statues of gods, raised on bases, and that it is to these unidentified deities that Zenobius is performing sacrifice. According to this theory, the names Barnaadath and Iariboles would refer to the kneeling figures, who could now be seen to be engaging in an act of worship.

138 There is a possible parallel on a relief found in Ladenburg, Germany (*CIMRM* 1275), although this figure seems unlikely to be a patron; he certainly is not identified by an inscription, as Zenobius is.

initiates into the cult; this act of sacrifice by the god is a main way in which the cult of Mithras is distinguished from other cults, both civic and private, in which the worshipper is expected to perform sacrifice to the god. Although there is little evidence to show whether sacrifice took place as a standard part of Mithraic ritual, the comparatively small size of *mithraea*, which on average would have held between 20 and 30 worshippers, would probably have prevented the slaughter of a bull.[139] This means that Mithras' sacrifice is a symbolic act, and it places the god at the centre of cult ritual and performance. The depiction of Zenobius in this relief, engaged in a sacrificial act, therefore allows the patron to appropriate some of the performative element of sacrifice to himself and away from the god, and, in so doing, he blurs the boundary between human and divine ritual action.

This boundary is also challenged by the costume of Mithras and Zenobius. There are striking similarities in dress between the two figures, and particularly between Mithras and Zenobius' companions. All are wearing long-sleeved striped tunics (though Zenobius' right sleeve is rolled up to allow him to perform the sacrifice), and the standing figures are also wearing a shorter tunic like the god, and have their cloaks swept back over their right shoulders. By dressing Mithras in the familiar clothing of the eminent men of Dura, was the artist perhaps inviting the viewer to draw comparisons between the god and Zenobius? Was Zenobius therefore assimilating himself to the god, by placing himself at the centre of Mithraic activity in Dura? Zenobius' inclusion not only of his name on the inscription, but also of his portrait, ensured that his dedication and his generosity would continue to be remembered by future worshippers within the *mithraeum*. Again, it reinforces the sense that there was a strong Palmyrene identity among the worshippers of Mithras at Dura; that

[139] Elsner 1995, 212.

Zenobius was prepared to put himself so prominently on display within the *mithraeum* indicates that he played no small role in the hierarchy of the cult.

Around the two cult reliefs runs a series of thirteen frescoes depicting scenes that appear to be associated with Mithras (Figure 5).[140] Each of these scenes is presented in a trapezoidal frame, and altogether they fill the arch-shaped interior of the cult niche. Starting at the bottom left of the arch, we skip the first two scenes, which have unfortunately been lost. The next scene shows Mithras, wearing his usual Phrygian cap, emerging from a flaming rock, and carrying a torch. Then, in the subsequent scene, we see a veiled and shrouded god, carrying the *harpe* associated with Saturn, reclining against a rock. This may remind the viewer of the bust above the god on the Zenobius relief, tentatively identified as Saturn. Another image of Saturn occupies the keystone position in this group of frescoes. The god is shown beardless, veiled, nimbate, and holding his *harpe*. Saturn and his sickle are therefore hardly unusual features in the decoration of a *mithraeum*.[141]

Nor is the subject of the next two scenes in the sequence uncommon; Jupiter in the higher painting is represented in the act of hurling his thunderbolt at two anguipede giants in the lower. This scene clearly shows a battle between the god and the giants; although one of the latter is already struck and falling down, the other prepares to retaliate by casting a boulder at Jupiter. The scene has parallels in other *mithraea*, though it is not an altogether ubiquitous feature of the 'Mithras-myth', a story pieced together from the side-panels of various tauroctonies.[142] What the scene does highlight, however, is the interest of the Roman cult

140 *CIMRM* 42.
141 For further examples, see 66-67 below; Chapter III, 197; Chapter IV, 219.
142 E.g. *CIMRM* 390, the tauroctony fresco from the Barberini *mithraeum* in Rome (Vermaseren 1982, 67-84). The image of Jupiter engaged in a struggle with anguipede giants is prolific throughout the Greco-Roman world: it appears on coins, statues and reliefs. In fact, Gordon describes the motif as "absolutely banal" with

in the theme of divine justice, and in the gods taking action. Cumont was, perhaps, inclined to over-interpret the purpose of the inclusion of justice scenes within the Mithraic context; he used such images to argue his theory of an Iranian origin to the cult, seeing in them a recreation of a Persian myth in which the god Ahura-Mazda defeats evil in the form of the demonic Zurvan. As Gordon suggests, this connection is stretched at best.[143] The prevalence of the Jupiter battle scene throughout the Roman Empire is just as likely to have influenced the Roman worshippers of Mithras as the Iranian myths connected to Mithra. Nonetheless, the inclusion of this scene at Dura does underscore the importance of justice in the cult, a subject to which I shall return later when looking at the *mithraeum* in Hawarti.[144]

The other side of the arch shows a series of frescoes more explicitly concerned with Mithras. We see the god shooting at a rock (the water-miracle that is a common motif of Mithraic iconography), riding the bull, and dragging it into the cave where he would slaughter it. There is also an image of the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates – who are otherwise barely present within this *mithraeum* except, perhaps, in the rider frescoes discussed above – carrying the carcase of the bull on a pole, perhaps in preparation for a feast. This is a unique scene in the mythography surrounding the slaughter of the bull, though it may refer to the same mythological idea represented in a Syrian relief now in the Israel Museum at Jerusalem, where Cautes and Cautopates are shown carrying a cauldron.[145] This banquet is depicted in the arch: Mithras and Sol are shown sitting and feasting on the bull, while being served by a raven (Figure 6).[146] Mithras and Sol feature in another scene from this archway, where a naked Sol is portrayed kneeling in front of Mithras, who holds a Phrygian cap and

regard to its widespread popularity (Gordon 1975, 225). For more on the conventional reading of Mithraic mythography as a narrative, see Chapter IV, 207-208; 217-218.

143 Gordon 1975, 224-225.

144 See below, 69-83.

145 Israel Museum Inventory 97.95.19; Gordon 2001b; see below, 65-69.

146 For more on this particular scene, see Chapter IV, 242-245.

places his left hand on Sol's head, and in a damaged fresco from the south bench of the nave. This second scene is perhaps another representation of the banquet motif, which would make it particularly appropriate as a decoration for the benches on which the initiates are thought to have reclined and eaten a ritual meal.

The outer curve of the arch is decorated by a fresco of Mithras accompanied by Cautes and Cautopates (Figure 7).[147] Only a few fragments of this painting can now be discerned; it is probable that the image of the god shows a second tauroctony scene.[148] Mithras and his torchbearers are flanked by seven cypress trees and seven burning altars and, in the branches of the tree closest to Cautes, a small pink figure was painted.[149] It is unknown who this figure is supposed to represent. In the mythography that surrounds the god, he is usually said to have been born, fully-formed, from a rock; this *saxigenus* motif is probably the scene from the archway fresco, and it is a popular subject for Mithraic statues.[150] There are several other examples of this cypress motif that appear in reliefs from Germany.[151] In these, the emerging figure can often be seen to be wearing a Phrygian cap, which has led to his identification as Mithras, though there are of course other figures who wear this cap; a deity equally likely to be portrayed in this fashion is Attis.[152]

147 *CIMRM* 45.
148 Baur, Rostovtzeff & Bellinger 1929-1944, VII/VIII 111-112.
149 This figure was attested in the third report of the excavation of the *mithraeum*, although it has now been lost. Similarly, this report claims that there were originally eight altars, but that one of them had been obliterated.
150 E.g. *CIMRM* 1991 and two statues from San Stefano Rotondo in Rome. Cumont struggles to reconcile the rock-birth and this apparent 'rebirth' in a cypress tree. For more on the tree-birth as a variant to the rock-birth, see Turcan 2000, 96.
151 E.g. *CIMRM* 1083, the Heddernheim relief; *CIMRM* 1247, the Dieburg relief, in which a cypress tree forks into three heads all wearing Phrygian caps; *CIMRM* 1283, the Neuenheim relief. Cumont uses the Dieburg relief to discuss the "threefold nature" of Mithras, in terms which are clearly drawn from Christian perceptions of the Trinity (Cumont 1975, 186). These reliefs are all discussed in more detail in Chapter IV.
152 Although a pine would perhaps be more conventional than a cypress in depictions of Attis, it may be more difficult to distinguish between the two trees in such a small image. For portrayals of Attis in art, see Vermaseren 1966, 35; Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 27.1. Other notable figures who wear a Phrygian cap are Ganymede, Paris and Aeneas.

It is the painted figures who appear on the jambs of the arched niche (Figure 8) that are perhaps the most interesting for this examination of the Dura *mithraeum*.[153] They are the figures of two men, dressed in Palmyrene costumes of long-sleeved, richly-decorated tunics over trousers, with cloaks. Both men wear the Phrygian cap that is so emblematic of Mithras, and both are seated on throne-like chairs. Each holds a black staff in his right hand, and a white scroll in his left. Cumont believed that these figures represented magi, and this was therefore a helpful crutch for him in his theory that the Roman cult of Mithras had been preserved by a diaspora of Persian magi.[154] Rostovtzeff goes a step further, and claims that they are "two prophets of Mithraism – probably Zoroaster and Osthanes".[155] Vermaseren argued in *CIMRM* 42 that the figures represent two *patres* of the Durene community, with their Phrygian caps perhaps suggestive of ritual dress; this reading is supported by Richard Gordon.[156]

We may ask whether this rapid move to seeing Zoroastrian priests and prophets is evidence for the Cumontian tendency to over-interpret the archaeological material to support Cumont's own beliefs about the cult. It may seem so at first glance, but in fact two pieces of evidence from the Dura *mithraeum* indicate that 'magi' were in some way involved in Mithraic worship here. One of these, a *graffito*, simply acclaims a member of the community, saying: "*Nama Maximus magus*" – "Hail Maximus the Mage". The second inscription is more detailed, and far more difficult to interpret: "πυρωτὸν ἅσθμα τὸ καὶ μάγοις ᾗ ν[ί]πτρον ὁσ<σ>ίω[ν]".[157] Its references to fiery breath and the lustration of the holy have been seen as referring to some sort of initiation rite, though this of course remains

153 Baur, Rostovtzeff & Bellinger 1929-1944, VII/VIII 110-111; *CIMRM* 44.
154 Cumont 1975, 182-192.
155 Rostovtzeff 1938, 97. Rostovtzeff's ideas are obviously heavily influenced by Cumont; there is no hint at identification on the frescoes, and they are highly unlikely to represent any figures of Zoroastrian tradition.
156 Gordon 2011, 341-344.
157 "Fiery breath which for magi too is the lustration of holy men". Gordon 1979-1980, 36.

speculative. Cumont believed that these *magi* acted as priests within the cult, and saw the term as being interchangeable with those found in inscriptions from the western half of the empire, which commonly refer to *sacerdotes*.[158] While this is possible, the act of aligning the role of the *magus* with that of a priest is once more redolent of Cumont's search for the essential nature of the Mithras cult, which in itself speaks of an inherent Christianisation.

What the inscriptions prove beyond doubt though, even without seeing the two figures as magi, is that the term *magus* had significance to the members of the Mithras cult in Dura, and that the Avestan word '*nama'* was also in use.[159] The attestation of the very Roman name Maximus in the first inscription suggests that he was part of the military garrison, and therefore that the position of *magus* was not restricted to those of eastern birth. Nonetheless, I would agree with Cumont in saying that the use of the term was probably influenced by the location of Dura-Europos, and its proximity to the ancient centre of the Avestan cult. This is an example of what Dirven and McCarty call "a system of sign-substitution"; certain features of Mithraic practice are given a more familiar and localised Durene or Palmyrene flavour.[160]

After this somewhat descriptive tour of the *mithraeum*, can we detect any elements that stand out as being particularly unusual, and indicative of a strong eastern influence that differentiate them from western examples? Overall, Jaś Elsner summarises the position of Dura among other *mithraea* with great clarity:

158 Cumont 1975, 203. For a brief discussion of the terminology applied to Mithraic 'priests', see Clauss 1990b, 145-146 = Clauss 2000, 138-139.
159 The use of this term is by no means confined to Dura. It famously appears in the *dipinti* of Santa Prisca in Rome, where what are presumed to be grade-holders are commended to a tutelary planet. For more on the Santa Prisca frescoes and *dipinti*, see Chapter II, 120-125.
160 Dirven & McCarty 2014, 134. By contrast, Dirven specifically argues against this kind of reading in reference to the figures of Barnaadath and Iariboles accompanying Zenobius on the later relief; her suggestion that these are members of the Mithraic community rather than Zenobius' relatives is counter to the Durene practice of showing family ties (Dirven 2011, 212).

> Although a number of aspects of the Mithraic decorations are unique (or at least very unusual) within the rich iconographic repertoire of Roman Mithraism, including the two figures in Persian costume described by Cumont as Magi and the scene of Mithras hunting, in other respects the Dura mithraeum reflects the relatively standard iconography of the cult throughout the Roman empire. The style of the Mithraic images and the Persian dress point towards the east and have resonances with the other arts of Dura, while the stereotypical nature of the iconography aligns the mithraeum and its worshippers with a cult which was specific to the Roman empire[...][161]

I agree that, for the most part, the Dura *mithraeum* fits into the general pattern of western *mithraea*, insofar as one can really be discerned. It certainly cannot be regarded as a proponent of a peculiarly eastern form of the cult; it is indeed highly unlikely that such a thing existed. Cumont's determination to fit the *mithraeum* into an eastern mould led to his over-stressing the importance of the *pater* figures and the hunting scene; he felt that these served to

> strongly emphasize the Iranian character which this cult has generally preserved and which is given further prominence by its Semitic setting so close to the Parthian frontier.[162]

Rather than being representative of the preservation of an Iranian character within the cult itself, the appearance of Palmyrene and Persian dress in the frescoes, and the use of the term *magus*, is indicative of the ability of the Roman cult to absorb local traditions and practices. These give the *mithraeum* at Dura a very oriental appearance; the artistic style is peculiar to the area and is repeated in private houses in the city.[163] Michael P. Speidel questions whether this synthesis of oriental and occidental is a possible attempt by the army to win over an overtly Persian version of the god to the Roman side along the lines of Veii,

[161] Elsner 2007, 268. For more on this Durene style, see Perkins 1973, 114-126; DeLeeuw 2011, 195.
[162] Cumont 1975, 207.
[163] See above, 43-44.

Carthage and Emesa.[164] This is a rather extreme view of the process of absorption and incorporations that seems to be visible in Dura. There is no suggestion that the soldiers who worshipped Mithras in this *mithraeum* considered him to be the god of their enemy; the hunting scene seems to indicate the opposite, that Mithras was thought of as engaging in the everyday activities of the worshippers themselves.[165] The proximity to the land of the Avesta may have caused the use of '*nama*' to be more pertinent, but there is otherwise no real sign that the Mithras of the Dura *mithraeum* was any more Persian than he was Palmyrene or even Roman. The truly unique feature can be found in the inclusion of the patron on the Zenobius relief, but this ostentatious display can hardly be accused of betraying a peculiarly eastern character.

The assemblage of images within the *mithraeum* as a whole, however, could be argued to be particularly eastern. The combination of the possible 'magi' and the Avestan word *nama*, alongside the Zenobius relief and the hunting frescoes – with their distinctively Palmyrene bows –, could together point towards an eastern flavour to Mithraic worship at Dura. The discussions of each individual image, however, have indicated that a holistic view might not necessarily be profitable; they come from different phases of the construction and decoration of the *mithraeum*, and they probably indicate strong individual interests, rather than necessarily group interests.[166] On the whole, the iconography and motifs of Dura are

164 Speidel 1978, 480-481. He refers to the examples cited in Livy 5.21-22, Macrobius *Saturnalia* 3.9, *HA Aurelianus* 25.

165 For a discussion of worshipping the god of one's enemy in relation to Mithras, see Turcan 2001.

166 Nor are these individual interests necessarily religious; the location of a *mithraeum* does not require that all iconography is religious in character, or equally religious in character. For a strongly structuralist approach to ascertaining the religiosity of a site, see Renfrew 1985; see also Renfrew 2011, 681: "As in other areas of the study of early religions, the subject is beset with methodological problems, not least in the problem of deciding what is properly to be termed 'religious' in those cases where the archaeological record documents what may reasonably be regarded as ritual practice, with public performance and the practice of feasting. The religious component often cannot easily be distinguished from activities which are certainly to be regarded as social, but which might not be focused upon the divine. There are problems of definition here."

not vastly dissimilar from those of western *mithraea*, the difference comes in the form taken by the local influences upon the worshippers themselves.[167]

It is by no means unusual to find that *mithraea* absorb something from the local culture. Zenobius' appearance on the tauroctony relief also reveals the extent to which Durene artistic traditions were capable of influencing Mithraic art. Pierre Leriche argues that the inclusion of the patron was a common feature of bas-reliefs in religious contexts in the art of Dura.[168] He cites the reliefs of Seleucus Nicator as an example of this, though Rostovtzeff had already clarified that, as the founder of Dura, the Seleucid king should be interpreted more as a heroised and semi-divine figure, rather than as a mortal.[169] More pertinent to Leriche's argument would have been the Conon fresco from the temple of the Palmyrene gods (Figure 9), though this is of course a painting rather than bas-relief, and there are no gods featured.[170] Conon was a prominent figure in Durene society, and this places him on a par with Zenobius in the Mithraic relief.

Rostovtzeff suggests that the combination of a statue, with a scene of worship or sacrifice to the god involved, is a common feature in Dura. He believes that this is one of the "deeply rooted traditions of Durene religious art" that filtered through into the Mithraic iconography in the city.[171] Nor was this influence limited to the East. Friedrich Behn thought that the hunting scene from Dieburg was inspired by a syncretism of Wotan and Mithras.[172] Peculiar to the Crimean Peninsula is the syncretistic treatment of Attis and Mithras, which shows a

167 Downey believes that "it is the style of the reliefs and paintings [from Syria], not the iconography, which is local" (Downey 1977, 225). While this is true to an extent, there are certainly iconographic motifs that appear in Syria that are unparalleled elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Downey is also mistaken in the context of the Zenobius relief; that differs not just in style, but also in iconography.
168 Leriche 2001, 99.
169 Rostovtzeff 1938, 78.
170 For discussions of this scene, see Cumont 1924, 16-18; Breasted 1924, 44-45; 76-88.
171 Rostovtzeff 1938, 78.
172 Behn 1928. For further discussion of the Dieburg relief, see Chapter IV, 221-222.

god engaged in the act of killing a bull, but dressed in Attis' traditional costume.[173] Gordon believes that the cult always developed certain local characteristics, and that this is particularly pronounced in the traces of Mithraic activity in Syria. He is, however, keen to stress that this does not mean that there was an original and authentic oriental character to the cult, as Cumont would undoubtedly have believed had he had access to much of the more recent archaeological evidence from the region.[174]

I.II.ii. Uniqueness and variation in Mithraic iconography

What are the ways in which a pronounced Syrian character manifests itself? In discussing a Mithraic relief of unknown origin now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Gordon claims that it "illustrates a Syrian Mithraism in a general sense, that is to say by the insouciance with which it breaks with unspoken norms".[175] Does this mean that there is a higher proportion of unique scenes in Syrian iconography than in that from other regions? The example of Dura-Europos provides us with two motifs that are absent from any other Mithraic imagery: the inclusion of the patron on the Zenobius relief, and the scene of the dadophores carrying the bull on a pole. It also places an emphasis on frescoes that is unparalleled, except in the case of Hawarti.

The idea of uniqueness in Mithraic iconography feeds into that of variation. Does a unique scene on a relief or fresco carry with it any particular implications? Likewise, does variation in Mithraic material culture – in art, objects and space – deny any kind of essential

173 See Clauss 1990b, 163-164 = Clauss 2000, 156-157.
174 Gordon 2001a, 99.
175 Gordon 2001a, 105. Gordon justifies the analysis of the relief as Syrian because of its close parallels to the iconography of the Dura reliefs, and because the name Absalmos, which appears on the relief's inscription, is of Aramaic origin and found around the Syrian region (Gordon 2001b).

coherence to Mithraic worship across the Roman Empire? Both questions acknowledge the problematic nature of 'iconography' as a term, and the history of its use.[176] If 'iconography' can refer to an assemblage of images, then its use in relation to Mithraic material culture is less problematic than a Panofskian definition, requiring an understanding of description.

First, let us look at the potential implications of a unique scene on a Mithraic tauroctony scene. As mentioned in the reference to Gordon above, Mithraic material culture often absorbs local cultural and artistic traditions, and reflects these in its output.[177] The assessment of uniqueness requires that we start from an accepted standard version, a Mithraic prototype.[178] This prototype remains the same in almost every tauroctony; the variations usually occur in the nature of additions. These can alter in level (whether the variation is substantial and intrinsic to the composition of the tauroctony, or whether it is a smaller detail); in character (for example, the addition or subtraction of a figure; colour or its absence); and in time and location. Variation therefore could be said to have existed on a sliding scale of importance: artistic, cultural, and religious. It could act as a signifier of encounter between different traditions, as we see in Zenobius' western-looking tauroctony scene, coupled with a distinctively Durene inclusion of the patron offering incense. It could also, however, point towards a singular version of Mithraic worship, as we might see in the discussion of the *mithraeum* at Hawarti below. Variation and uniqueness in Mithraic iconography do not necessarily imply something, but nor should we assume the opposite:

176 For my definition of iconography in this thesis, see Introduction, 18.
177 This is prevalent in Mithraic finds from Syria and the eastern Mediterranean, as discussed in the rest of this chapter, as well as in reliefs from Germany, the Balkans, and Roman Dacia, some of which feature in Chapter IV.
178 The main requirement is Mithras, kneeling on the bull's back, and stabbing it with a dagger. A range of companions may feature: the dadophores Cautes and Cautopates; the raven, scorpion, dog and snake; Sol and Luna. There may be additional scenes that seem to refer to a wider story of Mithras, the bull, or a wider mythological universe.

> If a visual idiom was held in common, the various meanings and significances created by (or freighted upon) any given image are supposed to be "local": things that look the same do not always mean the same.[179]

To return to my second question above, does variation in Mithraic material culture – in art, objects, and space – deny any kind of essential coherence to Mithraic worship across the Roman Empire? It clearly implies that there was an element of iconographic and formal coherence in tauroctony scenes, from which local communities and artists could deviate, but maintain a recognisability; this act of recognition applied not only to worshippers in antiquity, but to archaeologists and ancient historians today.[180] The criteria for iconographic coherence would be difficult to establish, but the instant recognisability of a tauroctony scene – regardless of geographic location – might be a key component. Iconographic coherence, however,– such as it may have been – does not necessarily indicate religious coherence.[181] Iconographic coherence is not necessary for a uniform religion – one need only think of iconography in Christian churches, or Renaissance depictions of the Virgin and Child here –; equally, religious coherence is not necessary when we see remarkable consistency across religious images. While it is not easy to reconstruct meaning and belief from symbols and iconographic sets, material culture can lead historians and archaeologists towards plausible hypotheses.[182]

179 Dirven & McCarty 2014, 129.
180 Dirven & McCarty 2014, 128-130.
181 Although this was the argument made by Leroy Campbell, in *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, which built on the typologies that he had created in his earlier work on the *Typology of Mithraic Tauroctones*, and extended it to a more comprehensive survey of how iconographic motifs and stereotypy could be seen as an image-based doctrine: Campbell 1954; 1968. For more on typology and stereotypy in the tauroctony scene, see Chapter IV, 213-214; 224-226.
182 Colin Renfrew points out that the study of iconography is one way of saving archaeologists from feeling pessimistic about their abilities to reconstruct belief (Renfrew 1985, 14). Nonetheless, the art historian Whitney Davis emphasises the inaccessibility of belief from iconography on the same level as that enjoyed by the ancient viewer: "We can correct our world-seeing as we apply it to historical pictures. But this only gives us the ability to enter the great loop of visuality at the opposite end from historical viewers. At best we can "think" the picture "seen" by them." (Davis 2004, 22).

I.II.iii. Unique features in Syrian Mithraic iconography

Although no *mithraeum* has been found at the site, two tauroctony reliefs from Seeia in Syria, found in 1916, certainly contain unique features (Figures 10 & 11).[183] The first was discovered in the ground, near a temple of Dusares, while the second was by the entrance to a grotto. These two reliefs are almost identical as regards the presentation of the main bull-slaying scene, though *CIMRM* 89 is in substantially worse repair than the other. Both are made from basalt and are rectangular in shape; the second was inserted into a larger basalt block. The harsh linearity of the composition recalls the Ethpeni relief from Dura; the quality of the Dura relief and those from Seeia also seems comparable, many of the details of Mithras' face and dress are crudely portrayed.

The first unique feature is that, in both reliefs, the bull's tail droops down to the ground rather than curving upwards. Both reliefs are broken on the left-hand side, and we therefore cannot tell whether the tail would originally have ended in ears of corn. Frothingham, who first published them, reminds his readers that the bull's tail, especially when it ended in ears of wheat or corn, was a symbol of fertility and food production.[184]

The second unique feature of the Seeia reliefs may offer an explanation for drawing attention away from the bull's tail. The snake, which is a common attendant in tauroctony scenes, is usually depicted as drinking the bull's blood. In the two Dura reliefs, it is shown springing up alongside the dog to lap at the wound in the bull's neck. In the Seeia reliefs,

183 Frothingham 1918, 54-62; *CIMRM* 88 and 89.
184 Frothingham 1918, 58. There are many other examples of this scene, several of which will be described in this thesis. A noteworthy parallel is a tauroctony statue group now in the British Museum, where the blood dripping from the bull's wound turns into ears of corn (*CIMRM* 593); for further reading see Adrych et al. 2017, 32-34.

however, the snake is shown with the scorpion at the bull's genitals. While the scorpion grips the bull's testicles with its pincers, the snake drinks the bull's semen direct from its penis. Frothingham discusses the possible meaning of this action, coming to the conclusion that it indicates a heightening of the moment of fertility caused by the death of the bull. He suggests that the scenes in which the snake is shown drinking from a vase also allude to this idea, of drinking the bull's semen, but that they represent it in a more euphemistic fashion. The Seeia reliefs, however, use no third-party vessel, but show the scene with the "customary directness of oriental sexual mysticism".[185] The date of Frothingham's article, written in 1918, perhaps accounts for his view of a European reticence at showing overtly sexual imagery. His suggestion that the depiction of the snake drinking straight from the bull's penis is an example of oriental candour is confounded by a fresco from beneath the tauroctony scene at Hawarti. In this fresco, the snake and a lion are shown holding a *krater* beneath the bull's testicles (according to the likely reconstruction of the damaged tauroctony); there is no oriental frankness here.[186] Nonetheless, he is right to point out the importance of the snake's unusual position; it is very likely that it represents a variation on the theme of fertility from the sacrifice of the bull.[187]

The strong similarities between the two Seeia reliefs, in terms of composition and quality of sculpture, invites questions about the process of the commission of Mithraic art. The consistency in the basics of the tauroctony scene around the Roman Empire suggests several possibilities: that certain components were considered essential, and were therefore stressed in the communication of a 'brief' to the artist; that Mithraic iconography might have been

185 Frothingham 1918, 61.
186 There are parallels to this scene on the Dieburg and Heddernheim reliefs, as well as in a relief from the Doliche *mithraeum*, *CIMRM* supplement.
187 A smashed tauroctony relief, recently discovered in Syria, which was on display in the Damascus National Museum in 2009, also shows the snake drinking the bull's semen; this suggests a regional particularity.

less secret or exclusive than has generally been understood, with the result that even highly localised artists were able to respond accurately to the request; that the formal relationship between the tauroctony and other similar scenes – such as bull-slaying Nike – lent itself towards easy communication.[188] Ultimately, very little evidence of Mithraic workshops and commissions is available, also partly owing to the frequent lack of archaeological context for reliefs.[189]

Also unusual are two sculptures from the Sidon *mithraeum*: *CIMRM* 82 and 83 (Figures 12 & 13).[190] These are statues of the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates, who are depicted in symmetrical poses. While the stance and dress of the two figures matches that on countless dadophore sculptures, including others from Sidon itself, a unique feature of these statues is that they carry double-headed axes in addition to their torches.[191] There is a parallel to the torchbearers carrying weapons as well as torches, on the Israel Museum relief described below. Much of the other sculpture from Sidon is similar to that found across the Roman Empire; the tauroctony relief is particularly fine, made from Parian marble, and executed to a very high quality. All of the sculptures show great plasticity of form, and are very unlike the Syrian reliefs from Seeia and Dura in style and technique, though this could point towards a degree of antiquarianism in Late Antiquity.[192]

188 For more on the idea of a less secretive Mithraic iconography, see Chapter V, 275-277; on a formal repertoire from which the tauroctony scene might have been drawn, see above, 59-61.
189 With certain exceptions: Walters 1974, 38-41, on Mithraic pottery from Gaul; Sicoe 2014, 2 on a possible Sarmizegetusa workshop. The deployment of comparative material is beyond the scope of this thesis, and indeed true comparative material – for other 'mystery cults' – is often lacking. A location-based comparandum could be the case of Aphrodisias: see Smith 1987; Smith 2011.
190 For a discussion on the dating of the Sidon sculptures, see Will 1950.
191 Chalupa 2010, 58-59.
192 For more on the idea of antiquarianism in the Sidon finds, see Chapter V, 288-291.

I.II.iv. The Israel Museum relief

The Israel Museum relief contains many seemingly unique features of Mithraic iconography (Figure 14). The main action of the relief shows a tauroctony scene; Mithras constrains the bull, kneeling on its back and forcing its head back to expose the dewlap, while plunging a dagger into its neck. The dog leaps at the bull's head, the snake rears up in the right-hand corner, and the raven watches the scene from above. As in the reliefs from Dura, there is no sign of the scorpion near the bull's genitals, though an indistinct shape above the bull's tail may have been intended to represent it.

This scene takes place within a recessed 'cave', which also contains several other figures on rocky ledges. Above the bull's tail, a naked figure is seated beneath a grapevine, raising his hands up to the fruit. He is wearing a Phrygian cap, which suggests that he could be identified as Mithras. Indeed, both Albert de Jong and Richard Gordon think that it is a depiction of a "fat naked baby", and that the scene may therefore represent an episode from the infancy of the god.[193] Unfortunately, there has been a significant amount of weathering or damage to this part of the relief, and this makes any identification problematic. A roughness around the chin may indicate that the figure is actually bearded, which, taken together with the clusters of grapes, might suggest a Dionysus with a *pilleus* rather than a Mithras.[194] All that can be said with any degree of certainty is that the figure is naked and wearing a cap. Bearing in mind the fluidities of the Roman worship of Mithras, visible as much in the East as in the West, there is little need to pursue a positive identification as an

193 De Jong 1997; Gordon 2001b.

194 Another possibly bearded Mithras is visible on a relief found on Capri, and now in the Naples Archaeological Museum (Figure 15), *CIMRM* 172. It is difficult to tell whether the roughness around the chin was intentional, or is the result of exposure; the rest of the relief, however, is in remarkably good condition.

infant Mithras by pushing the argument further than the evidence can bear.[195] There is certainly no need to avoid considering the figure as a deity or character outside the narrow confines of Mithras and his torchbearer attendants Cautes and Cautopates.

The next figure, above and slightly to the right of the first, is far more readily recognisable. Mithras appears to be depicted in the moment of his rock-birth, wearing the Phrygian cap; his hands are resting on the rock rather than raised upwards.[196] Above him is a reclining figure, dressed in a Phrygian cap and Parthian costume. He is bearded, and appears to be holding an unidentifiable object in his right hand. Both Gordon and de Jong think that this object is a *harpe*, a suggestion which would indicate that this is a representation of Saturn, a common participant in Mithraic mythography. If this is Saturn, then the decision to clothe him in Parthian dress is, according to Gordon, a unique detail, and may well be evidence of local cultural influence. Saturn's role within the Mithraic myth is usually interpreted as representative of the world prior to the birth of Mithras; hence, in cases where a series of scenes have been seen as telling a cosmogonic story, Saturn and Jupiter are usually pictured before the rock-birth of Mithras.[197] Following this theory, de Jong identifies the figure as "dreaming Saturn", who is in the process of ordering the world.[198]

[195] On the fluidity of Mithraic worship, and its possible combination with that of other gods, see Chapter V.
[196] There are parallels for this unusual representation, e.g. *CIMRM* 1083 from Heddernheim. There is no stereotypical iconographic form of this part of the Mithras myth; while the god's hands are more commonly raised upwards, they are sometimes outstretched on either side, as in the rock-birth scene at Hawarti, or even with one raised and one resting on the rock (*CIMRM* 1283 from Neuenheim). Sometimes, as here, Mithras is not holding anything in his hands, at other times he holds various objects, such as a burning torch (Dura, *CIMRM* 390 from the Barberini *mithraeum*), a dagger (*CIMRM* 1292 from Osterburken, the Barberini relief, the Neuenheim relief) and even a globe (Neuenheim). There is also variation in the depiction of the rock itself. The Dura scene shows a blazing rock, the Hawarti scene shows rocks piled vertically on top of each other, and a relief from Housesteads suggests that Mithras was born from a cosmic egg (*CIMRM* 860).
[197] This is a view held by Cumont in *TMMM*, in his chapter on the doctrine of the Mysteries. Gordon, however, points out that "we have no idea whatever of the relation between these events and Mithras himself, because we have no literary account of these myths, and the iconography is wholly opaque" (Gordon 1975, 224). While the lack of a literary account is by no means as debilitating as Gordon suggests in this passage, he is entirely correct to state that it is difficult to interpret the iconography. In this Israel Museum relief, for instance, there is no identifiable cosmogonic order to the scenes that surround the bull-slaying.
[198] De Jong 1997, 55. Nothing in the figure confirms or denies de Jong's suggestion; indeed, the identification as Saturn is not in itself secure.

The fourth of these scenes is common within the mythography of the cult, and is therefore more easily identifiable. It shows two figures: one, wearing a Phrygian cap, stands in front of the other, who is kneeling as if in reverence. This appears to be a version of the investiture scene, in which Sol acknowledges the power of Mithras by paying homage to him. Here, in what Gordon describes as a "unique variant" on the scene, Mithras places his left hand on Sol's head, while holding the sun-god's jaw with his right hand. The weathering to the relief has made it difficult to see the details of this scene, but it seems likely that, as Gordon says, this is a new version of a common image, and one that is unattested elsewhere in Mithraic iconography.

So much for the scenes within the 'cave'. Above this, at the apex of the arch of the cave, are seven stars, with a bust of Sol to the left, and a bust of Luna to the right. At the base of the relief is a Greek inscription, which reads:

ἐκ τῶν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπὶ Ἀβσάλμου[199]

Both Gordon and de Jong take this inscription to mean: "because of the things (received) from the god, in the time of Absalmos".[200] Gordon uses this name to corroborate the supposed Syrian origin of the relief. He interprets the phrase "in the time of Absalmos" as referring to one of the *patres* of the cult.

[199] *CIMRM* supplement, Israel Museum Inv. 97.95.19.
[200] Another interpretation might be: "it was paid for by the god's money, while Absalmos was *pater*". See also an inscription from Hawarti below.

There are five or six scenes, depending upon interpretation, around the edges of the relief. Starting at the bottom right, we see the banquet of Sol and Mithras. Sol is shown wearing the radiate crown, while Mithras wears the Phrygian cap; both are holding *rhyta*. Above this, there is a depiction of what is presumably Mithras *taurophoros*: a figure, wearing a Phrygian cap and loin-cloth, drags the bull by its hind legs. In the top right of the relief, Cautopates, dressed in Parthian costume and Phrygian cap, carries a reversed torch in his right hand, and a spear in his left. Opposite him, in the top left, stands Cautes. He too is wearing Parthian dress and holding a spear in his left hand and torch in his right. The scenes are generally divided from one another by a horizontal rim, but this is not the case with the final group of three figures, which nonetheless appear to be involved in two different actions.

Two of the figures, raised slightly on blocks, and dressed in Parthian costume and Phrygian caps, carry a cauldron suspended on a pole. This is a unique scene in the mythography of the cult; it presumably shows Cautes and Cautopates preparing for the banquet of Sol and Mithras. Gordon suggests that it may follow on from the unique Dura scene, in which the two torchbearers carry the carcase of the bull on a pole. Sitting on a rock beneath these two figures is the third, also wearing Parthian dress, and holding an unidentifiable object in his right hand.[201] A stream flows at this figure's feet, and there are seven boulders lying on the ground in front of him. Gordon, de Jong and Robert Turcan have all made attempts at understanding the scene but, in my opinion, it should simply be classed as one of these breaks with the 'norm' that Gordon sees as being typical of Syrian iconography.[202]

[201] De Jong suggests that the figure is Saturn, and that the object should be recognised as his *harpe*. It is, however, just as possible that the object is a torch.
[202] Gordon covers the range of possibilities in his review of de Jong (Gordon 2001b). For more on Mithraic 'norms', see Chapter II.

There clearly are several scenes on this relief that have a unique character, and that adapt the more common versions of the Mithraic myth. The fact that there are parallels to the Israel Museum relief in the *mithraeum* at Dura-Europos strengthens Gordon's case that Syrian art challenges the implicit norms of Mithraic iconography. This theory, though, brings us back to an earlier point: can we assume that there are norms, and that these should be used as a benchmark for the assessment of other Mithraic symbolistic art? The idea that there could be a standard iconography for the cult, from which the Syrian evidence deviates, returns us to the question of whether there was a coherent iconography, at least for the tauroctony scenes.[203]

I.II.v. The example of Hawarti

Following the excavations of a church in the Syrian village of Hawarti – a hilltop site 15km north of Apamea in Syria – in the 1970s, during which archaeologists had removed a mosaic from the floor of the nave, the ground beneath this area collapsed.[204] This revealed a large cavern underneath the church, which had previously gone unnoticed. Robbers, attracted by the prospect of looting, ventured into this cavern, discovering a series of underground chambers, and stealing a fresco from one of the walls. The recovery of this painting drew increased attention to the site, and photographs of the fresco and of one of the ceilings from the chambers caught the eye of the Polish archaeologist Michał Gawlikowski. Gawlikowski was convinced that these frescoes contained Mithraic iconography, and he assembled a team

[203] The theory of a standard iconography for the cult is set forth by Cumont and is partially based upon the evidence of Dura-Europos. He argues that the similarities between the images there and those in Rome and Ostia, indicate "l'unité foncière de cette religion d'un bout à l'autre de l'empire" (Cumont 1945, 420). Cumont and Rostovtzeff agreed that Dura was mainly in alignment with the iconography of western 'Mithraism', but that the areas in which it differed suggested "the idea of an East/West dichotomy" (Downey 1978, 139). In so far as we can discuss accepted norms of representation of Mithraic scenes, and of Mithras himself, there seems to have been something of a prototype, to which consistent adherence was not required.

[204] This was the excavation led by Marie-Teresa and Pierre Canivet (Canivet 1987).

in the hope of salvaging what was left of the artwork and establishing whether Hawarti had in fact been the site of a *mithraeum*.

This site has turned out to be one of the most unusual *mithraea* excavated to date. Does this mean that it should be seen as typical of Syrian 'norm-breaking', or does it stand alone as an example of nothing more than the interests of those who worshipped within it? Hawarti is the only example of a *mithraeum*'s being almost completely painted for which we have evidence; the *cella* was covered in frescoes on all four walls and on the ceiling, leaving only a niche at the far end of the space bare and unadorned. While there are other *mithraea* that use frescoes as a decorative medium, with Dura being the obvious example, Hawarti is exceptional in this regard, as far as we know. It is no less remarkable for the subjects of its paintings. The emphasis, as far as it can be interpreted, seems to be on a struggle against evil; this struggle is strongly suggestive of the Zoroastrian Mithra, a point that cannot help but bring back to mind the origins debate.

Despite the many unusual features of the sanctuary – the frescoes and their subject, and the presence of a *bothros* for sacrificial remains in the floor of the main cult room – Gawlikowski remained in little doubt that the site had, at some time, been used for the Roman cult of Mithras. The builders of the *mithraeum* had exploited the natural caves that riddle the hills surrounding Hawarti; according to Gawlikowski, the earliest recognisable form of the *mithraeum* would have consisted of two parallel chambers, enlarged from existing grottoes, with the main cult room being divided from its vestibule by a partition of natural rock.[205] The *mithraeum* had suffered extensive damage, presumably at the hands of

[205] Gawlikowski 2007. For a detailed survey of the architecture of the rooms in the *mithraeum*, see Majcherek 2003, 327-333.

the Christians who later built their own church on top of the site. Several of the frescoes had crosses carved into them, possibly an act of iconoclasm to neutralise them.[206]

It is not possible to give an accurate date for the first Mithraic activity on the site; one of the best ways by which we can suggest a date is through two altars, one found within the *mithraeum* itself and the other above ground. The first of these, which is cylindrical, bears the inscription: "ἐπὶ Μάρκου Λονγίνου", while the second, an octagonal altar that bears the same text, also includes the date of AD 142/3. The contents of the *bothros*, which included several oil lamps as well as a large *krater*, have been dated by the Hawarti restoration team to the second half of the first century AD.[207]

Taken together then, the evidence of the altars and the *bothros* indicates that the site was in use for some kind of religious purpose, possibly Mithraic, during the second century. This tentative date reinforces the theory that the cult of Mithras in the East was diffused roughly contemporaneously with its spread in the West. The attempts of Stig Wikander and Per Beskow to provide a more western account of the origins of the cult were, in part, fuelled by the lack of early evidence for the cult in the eastern half of the empire.[208] Dura was the only Syrian *mithraeum* that had been found at the point at which both Wikander and Beskow were writing, and its supposed date of around AD 168 did nothing to dispel the idea that the cult of Mithras in the East was "a later back-formation from the cult in the West".[209] The dating of pottery from the *mithraeum* at Caesarea Maritima, however, confounded this idea;

206 Majcherek 2003, 328.
207 Majcherek 2003, 332.
208 Wikander 1951 suggests a Balkan formation of the cult; Beskow 1978 posits a Botsporan origin based on the evidence of terracotta tauroctony plaques found in the Crimea, which he dates to the first century AD; Beck clearly rejects this theory in his article 'The Mysteries of Mithras: A new account of their genesis', in which he assembles the earliest evidence for the Roman cult (Beck 1998, 118-119).
209 Beck 1998, 118.

while the sanctuary itself had been dated to the third century AD, this new evidence suggested that the worship of Mithras on the site had started far earlier.[210] This placement of the Caesarea *mithraeum* in the same period as finds from Germania Superior and Noricum indicates that the cult of Mithras, in its eastern manifestations, may have been inspired by local customs as much as by Italian imported practice. The cave at Doliche in which twin *mithraea* were discovered in 1997 appears to have been in use during the first century AD; on the evidence of a coin, *Mithraeum* I was originally dated to AD 25, but Richard Gordon has since argued against this dating, based on insecure stratigraphy and the dangers of depending too much upon one find.[211]

The possible dating of Hawarti to the middle of the second century AD contributes to the impression that the cult of Mithras was no latecomer to the east of the Roman Empire, but rather that it had been present there for some time. Indeed, if we trust in the date, it places the sanctuary at Hawarti earlier than the *mithraea* discovered in Ostia – the earliest of which is dated to AD 162 –, a place which was thought to have had a strong impact upon the formation of the cult.[212]

Not only does the worship of Mithras at Hawarti appear to have started quite early, it also seems to have extended up until the late fourth or early fifth century. This date was obtained from the evidence of coins and fragments of glass and pottery; the latest coins associated with the floor level of the *mithraeum* date to Arcadius (*Augustus* from AD 383), while the

210 Beck 1998, 118. Roll, in his survey of eastern *mithraea*, only considers the Caesarea *mithraeum* as a third century example (Roll 1978, 55). This, together with the evidence from Dura, led him to conclude that the iconography of eastern *mithraea* reveal a strong and consistent Italian influence, rather than any particular local character (Ibid. 62).
211 Schütte-Maischatz & Winter 2004, 189-195; Gordon 2007b, 602-610. For more on the twin caves at Doliche, see Chapter III, 182-184.
212 For the dates of the Ostian *mithraea*, see White 2012, 441-443; Table I.

glass and pottery is thought to be early fifth century.[213] This would make the *mithraeum* perhaps the last known to be in continuous use from across the Roman world.[214] Beck thinks that this point may account for some of the "extreme iconographic divergence" of the images in the main room; he says that it would be tempting to consider this as a feature of "the breaking apart of a religion in its dying days".[215] While the dating of the latest layer of frescoes is unclear, Gawlikowski believes that it is at least the fifth layer of paint in the *mithraeum*, which suggests the conclusion that these images date to a late period in the life of the community. The unusual subject of the frescoes could therefore be attributed to this later date, in which time could have weakened the adherence to a 'standard' iconography, but Beck concedes that it is more probable that location has played the major part in determining the theme of the paintings.[216]

Why, then, was Beck tempted to see these frescoes as diverging from a Mithraic 'norm' of decoration and iconography? The wall paintings at Hawarti dwell in particular on the themes of good and evil, justice and punishment. While some of the iconography is familiar, such as the gigantomachy scenes featuring Jupiter, much of it is unique within the Roman cult. One reason for Beck's temptation is that the subject reminds the modern viewer of many of the attributes of the Zoroastrian and Avestan Mithra. Having rebutted Cumont's origins theory, Beck is understandably cautious when faced with a *mithraeum* that, on the surface at least, appears to provide a missing link between the Roman cult of Mithras and an eastern cult practice.

213 Gawlikowski 1998, 201. The glass and pottery could postdate the activity of the *mithraeum* though, and merely indicate the date when the Christians walled it up.
214 For the reference to the dating of the Sidon *mithraeum*, see above, 64 f.190.
215 Beck 2004a, 8-9. It is important to note that, once again, Beck refers to the cult of Mithras as a religion, and implies a coherency to its iconography that seems rather unlikely to have existed. Although he acknowledges that there may yet be discoveries of second and third century *mithraea* that were "equally divergent monuments", discoveries which would render the late date of Hawarti irrelevant, nonetheless it is clear that Beck's impulse is to see Hawarti as a breakaway from a standard of Mithraic iconography (Ibid. 9).
216 Beck 2004a, 9, following Gordon 2001a.

Gordon is just as circumspect in his 2001 article, 'Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine', in which he discusses Hawarti. His interest in the site is largely focused on the representations of evil in the frescoes, and the possible influences upon this Mithraic community that could have created such iconography. He also raises the question of whether we can interpret the justice and punishment themes as indicating a previously unconsidered moral dimension to the cult.[217] Some of these questions could perhaps be answered if we knew who the worshippers at Hawarti were. The Greek inscription above mentions a 'Marcus Longinus', a very Roman-sounding name, though the choice to write in Greek may suggest non-Italian origin. This aside, there is no evidence as to the identity of the Hawarti worshippers.

There is, without a doubt, a strong sense of punishment and even violence in the paintings, which accounts for Gordon's question about morality. On the north wall of the vestibule chamber, there is a symmetrical composition of two creatures facing each other (Figure 16). Gawlikowski interprets them as lions, based on the feet, although it is possible that they could represent mixed mythological creatures.[218] Each is portrayed in the act of dismembering a small black man wearing short skirts, while another man stands just behind. The bodies of the lions themselves are poorly preserved, though the lower halves of the human bodies are in a better state of conservation. What is still clearly visible though, is the graphic nature of the lions' attack; the severed head of one of their victims is shown, dripping with blood. The action is brought brutally to life, and is made even starker by the incongruous dado of laurel crowns and foliage beneath. Gordon suggests that the lions might represent the *leo* grade, which was associated by Porphyry of Tyre with a cathartic

217 Gordon 2001a, 115.
218 Gawlikowski 2000, 312.

and purificatory role, and would therefore perhaps have been the grade most connected to punishment.[219]

This theme of punishment seems to be continued in another fresco from the vestibule. On the walls flanking the entrance to the main *cella* are a further two mostly symmetrical compositions. Each depicts a white horse, with rich harness, and a man in Persian dress standing in front of it (Figure 17).[220] Both frescoes also show an elaborate golden *thymiaterion*, surrounded by a coiled snake. While the paintings differ slightly in terms of colour (the man on the right wears a blue tunic, while his counterpart wears a red), the main variation is that the fresco on the left shows the man holding a cane and double chain, which is attached to a crouching Janus-headed black man. The chains bind his wrists, and he wears a double slave collar. Gawlikowski dubs this figure a "monster", presumably because of his double head and crouching position, but there is little else monstrous about him.[221] Gordon posits the idea of a dancing demon, along the lines of the figure that is supposed to have protected the temple of Zeus Belos at Apamea against the Christians in AD 386.[222] I incline towards Gawlikowski's reading of the scene; while he clearly sees it as an example of good overcoming evil, I would interpret it as another punishment image, though this leaves the significance of the Janus heads unclear.

The motif of heads seems to have been an important part of the Mithraic iconography at Hawarti. One of the most striking scenes comes from the main *cella*, and depicts what

219 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 15. See also a *dipinto* from Santa Prisca, Chapter II, 124-125.
220 Gawlikowski suggests that the figure in Persian dress is supposed to represent Mithras, with the white horse associated with the Mithra of Avestan tradition (Yašt X.26) (Gawlikowski 2007, 353). This may be stretching some of the possible eastern connections slightly too far.
221 Gawlikowski 2007, 353.
222 Gordon 2001a, 111-112.

Gawlikowski calls the "city of darkness" (Figure 18).[223] The painting shows an architectural view, of a city gate with red ramparts. Surmounting this wall are four hideous heads, with unkempt hair and wrinkled faces. Their eyes have been gouged out; Gawlikowski thinks that this was the action of the Christians who marked other paintings with crosses, and that this was a means of averting the evil caused by the eyes of these demons.[224] Yet the initiates themselves may have been responsible for the damage. It makes little sense that the Christians should have attacked the eyes in this fresco, but left the others intact, whereas it seems quite plausible that gouging out the eyes of these ghastly heads would have added to the general effect of the scene. It leaves the overall impression of severe punishment, and of justice. Each of the heads is being struck by a ray of golden light, as is a fifth head which appears to have been knocked from the wall onto the ground. Gawlikowski describes the scene as "strikingly Zoroastrian in spirit", and in the original archaeological report celebrated the first discovery of the opposition of good and evil, light and dark, that characterises the Avestan Mithra.[225] In Yašt X, Mithra is specifically associated with striking off the heads of his enemies, those who lie, and those who deserve punishment.[226] Is it a re-enactment of this idea that is being portrayed in the Hawarti fresco? Gordon was reluctant to agree to this in his 2001 article, but did not completely reject the possibility that this scene is the strongest link between the Roman cult of Mithras and an ongoing Avestan tradition. The association of Mithras with the sun, and therefore with the rays of light seen in this fresco, is more Roman than Avestan. The syncretism of Mithras and Sol, through which Mithras is often addressed as Mithras Sol Invictus or some variation thereupon, was a feature of the Roman cult rather than a conventional component of Avestan belief. The

223 Gawlikowski 2007, 355.
224 Gawlikowski 2007, 355.
225 Gawlikowski 2007, 355; Gawlikowski 1998, 203.
226 Yašt X.37. Yašt VI also mentions Mithra striking the heads of the old gods with his cudgel, though this does not seem to be the scene invoked in the Hawarti fresco.

rays of light striking the heads on the wall could therefore be interpreted as a convergence of two separate traditions.

The 'city of darkness' fresco is immediately to the left of the cult niche in the main room, and can therefore be presumed to have been highly visible. Directly to the right of the niche, and continuing the theme of divine punishment (or justice) is the gigantomachy scene mentioned above (Figure 19). A large figure, probably that of Jupiter, is shown wearing a *himation* and sandals, and carrying a stick. His right arm is missing, but, from his posture, Gawlikowski reconstructed that he appears to be in the act of hurling a thunderbolt. A naked and winged anguipede giant appears on either side of the figure of the god, but while one is defiantly raising his hand against Jupiter, the other is already shrinking away. The fact that the god is carrying a stick is reminiscent of the horseman scene from the vestibule, in which the man in Persian dress carries a cane; it could be interpreted as a symbol of chastisement.

The damage done to the *mithraeum* by the Christians, and probably by the looters as well, means that several of the frescoes have been lost or are beyond the powers of reconstruction. Nonetheless, there are at least four scenes which show the themes of punishment, and perhaps justice. It is difficult, and would probably be a mistake, to overlook the strong resonances with the Avestan tradition of Mithra. As early as 1975, before the discovery of Hawarti, Gordon granted that: "it can be shown that in some respects the Mithras of the mysteries was conceived with attributes similar to some of those of Avestan Mithra".[227] The emphasis on the punishment of evil at Hawarti, as represented by the anguipede giants and monstrous heads, as well as by the perhaps demonic figures from the vestibule, certainly highlights some Avestan attributes. In Yašt X, Mithra is acclaimed as protector, guardian

[227] Gordon 1975, 218.

and sustainer, with special powers over contracts, the truth and fertility, and he is called the punisher, the killer and the butcher. These qualities do not need to be seen as contradictory; he is the protector, and in order to carry out this function he punishes and even kills transgressors.

One of the problems of relying on the Yašts in this way, however, lies in the unreliability of their dating. They denote a literary Avestan tradition that, while it might have remained unchanged, was not necessarily representative of the living visual tradition of Parthia in the Roman period.[228] Even within Avestan literary texts, there is not necessarily a standard perception of Mithra.[229] It is important to remember that the distinction of attributes made in the Yašts might not have reflected contemporary religious practice; the Mithra who punished transgressors in Yašt 10 might have been transformed into a sun god by the third century AD, or was quite possibly flexible enough to be considered as both.

As mentioned above, Gordon takes a particular interest in the presentation of 'Evil' at Hawarti, where there is an opposition between good and evil, and where Mithras is clearly connected to light against darkness, through syncretism with Sol. The focus on the theme of punishment and the polarisation of good and evil in these frescoes neither confirms nor denies his suggestion of a possible moral dimension to the cult of Mithras. The paintings may simply reflect a local tradition associated with the Avestan Mithra, and which was incorporated into the Roman cult without necessarily indicating that the initiates were preoccupied with thoughts of morality. Nevertheless, as Gordon acknowledges, the emphasis on evil and punishment supports Ernest Will's belief that the worship of Mithras

[228] Wood 2017, 97-103.
[229] Wood 2017, 100.

was more widespread that had previously been thought, and that it was not entirely independent of an Iranian tradition.[230] This adds a new facet to the issue of local character within the Roman cult. In the east of the empire, when the cult came into contact with ancient Iranian and Avestan traditions which had continued some form of Mithra-worship, it absorbed features that Cumont would have seen as part of its heritage.[231] Avoiding a return to Cumontian theories on its origins, the case of Hawarti and its local influences perhaps can be seen as conclusive evidence for the need to speak of a plurality of forms of the worship of Mithras in the Roman Empire. The iconography in this particular *mithraeum* is distinct from any other yet discovered, and this is probably not a feature of its date or distance from Rome, but of its proximity to ongoing traditional approaches to the role of a god with a shared name – Mithras, Mithra, or Mihr – in the East.[232]

The Hawarti frescoes not only emphasise punishment and justice; there is a strong case for interpreting a series of paintings from the eastern wall of the main *cella* as a fluid mixture of different religious traditions and personages (Figure 20). Following the gigantomachy described above, there is the image of a youthful god, probably Jupiter, enthroned within a laurel wreath. He is blond and bare-headed, and is shown wearing a *himation* and holding an orb and sceptre. The juxtaposition of this scene with that of the gigantomachy suggests that the viewer should understand a cosmogonic sequence. This divine figure has defeated the giants, and now rules over a peaceful world which is ready for the birth of Mithras. This is indeed the next scene in the sequence; a naked Mithras emerges from the rock, arms outstretched, and holding the Phrygian cap with which he is associated in his left hand. A

230 Gordon 2001a, 116: "l'accent mis par les fresques de Hūarte sur le problème du mal a confirmé de façon inattendue l'intuition ancienne de Will sur la spécificité du culte de Mithra en Syrie". Will 1952, 68-9.
231 In Beck's review of Gordon's article on Hawarti, he praises Gordon for rejecting "the implication which scholars of an earlier generation might have drawn, that the *Yasht* and its teaching had all along been lurking undetected in the doctrines of occidental Mithraism" (Beck 2004a, 9).
232 On the idea of shared names, see Adrych et al. 2017, 1-4.

snake is shown coiling around the rock; this, along with Mithras being shown holding rather than wearing the cap, is a unique variant on the rock-birth scene.

Immediately to the right of this is an elongated cypress tree framed by two garlands. A small naked figure is shown in the branches of the tree, with a Phrygian cap suspended above its head. Gawlikowski interprets this figure as Mithras, presumably based on the presence of the Phrygian cap, though the identification is by no means certain. As discussed above, other gods wear the Phrygian cap in their iconography, and the use of the cypress tree again suggests the possibility that this is a representation of Attis.

Following this scene, there is a depiction of a tall divine figure, which fills the entire frame. He wears a long-sleeved golden robe, over which is a belted red tunic, and has a seven-pointed radiate crown. His left arm has been damaged, but the right is outstretched, with the palm facing outward. Gawlikowski reads this position as one of prayer, and believes that the scene shows homage to Mithras, saying: "The attitude of this majestic god is reverent and full of admiration".[233] This seems to be a case of over-interpretation. The god's pose could just as easily be an act of blessing as prayer, and the facial expression does not seem to show any particular admiration. Indeed, as the right eye has been damaged, it is difficult to reconstruct the god's gaze, which may not have been in the direction of Mithras *saxigenus* at all. The radiate crown suggests that the god could be identified as Helios, and indeed Gawlikowski believes that this whole series of frescoes "was intended to express Mithra's identification with various gods of other myths, here perhaps Apollo, Attis, and Helios".[234]

[233] Gawlikowski 2007, 356.
[234] Gawlikowski 1998, 203.

The frescoes continue with depictions of Mithras dragging the bull, a much-damaged tauroctony opposite the entrance into the *cella*, a portrayal of the homage of Sol in which Mithras crowns the kneeling sun-god, and several hunting motifs. This order of the scenes draws the viewer's attention back to the tall figure of Sol described above. The appearance of Sol in Mithraic mythography usually comes after the tauroctony itself. This order is maintained at Hawarti in the homage scene taking place after the bull-slaying. This suggests that the lone figure of Sol from earlier in the series, before Mithras has even subdued the bull and dragged it to the cave, is anomalous. One explanation could be that the frescoes are not a series at all; there is no progression of ideas to be read from their order, and the appearance of Sol before the tauroctony is therefore irrelevant. The case can be made, however, to support Gawlikowski's syncretic reading. The depiction of the rock-birth, the figure in the cypress tree, and the sun-god may all be part of a separate series of paintings, intended to celebrate syncretism within the Roman worship of Mithras. They may, however, also reveal the fluidity of Roman religious practices, suggesting that there was nothing incongruous in representing several different gods in a space that seems primarily intended for only one.[235]

The Walbrook *mithraeum* in London provides a famous example of the ostensible inclusion of several other gods alongside the pattern of Mithraic worship.[236] There could be non-syncretistic explanations for the presence of these sculptures of other gods in the *mithraeum*, including that they may have post-dated its use as Mithraic sacred space, or that the sanctuary may have been used for storage or as a safe place following the destruction of other cult centres. The possibility, however, that they indicate that the Roman worship of

[235] For more on this idea, see Chapter V.
[236] See Shepherd 1998 on the excavation of the Walbrook *mithraeum*. For more on the collection of sculptures at Walbrook, and the possibilities of a culture of collecting, see Chapter V, 291-294.

Mithras was flexible enough to accommodate the worship of other divinities should not be overlooked.[237]

The collection of gods from the Walbrook *mithraeum* does not seem to follow any coherent pattern. By contrast, the possible grouping of Mithras, Attis and Sol in Hawarti does appear to follow a pattern, that of a growing trend towards solar syncretism, and ultimately solar henotheism. Attis, although primarily associated with Cybele, developed an identification with the sun.[238] Mithras was of course associated with the sun, and frequently given the epithet Sol Invictus. Could this group of frescoes therefore be seen as an indication of an increasing shift towards solar henotheism in the East during the second and third centuries AD? This was a suggestion made by Rostovtzeff in 1938:

> […] there is found a kind of religious koine, familiar to all the Semites and to the semitized Greeks and Iranians throughout Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Arabia. This koine was probably evolved in the Hellenistic epoch and accepted both by the Parthians and the Romans. The greatest creation of the koine was solar henotheism, which in this period became more and more accentuated.[239]

If solar henotheism was becoming particularly prevalent in the Semitic east, does this then explain the group of frescoes at Hawarti? This apparent trend towards solar henotheism does not have parallels in Mithraic iconography found at other sites; it is interesting to speculate on what the influences could have been that caused the appearance of this unusual iconography. Chapter V will discuss the role that particularly charismatic individuals might have had upon Mithraic communities; could this have been the case at Hawarti?[240]

237 There is also a parallel with the Mithra found in Commagene, see Chapter V, 266-268.
238 Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.21.7. This first book makes an attempt to derive all worship from the sun, and perhaps reveals a fifth-century interest in solar henotheism. See also Johnston 1996, 43.
239 Rostovtzeff 1938, 66.
240 Chapter V, 285-295.

It is difficult to see the *mithraeum* at Hawarti as typical of anything other than itself. It is so very different from other *mithraea* in so many ways: its overwhelming use of frescoes, its thematic emphasis on good and evil, the *bothros* in front of the cult niche in the main *cella*, and the possibility that it reveals a growing interest in solar syncretism.[241] It certainly seems to transcend Gordon's description of Syrian Mithraic iconography as something that insouciantly breaks artistic norms. So little of the *mithraeum* conforms to 'norms' at all, except at a rather basic level.[242] Did the point at which the Roman worship of Mithras came into contact with other thriving forms of Mithra-worship produce a radically distinct version of the cult? The case of Hawarti might seem to point in that direction, but there is no reason to require an ongoing tradition cross-fertilising a Roman religious practice. As mentioned above, individuals could play important roles in directing the beliefs and rituals of *mithraea*; equally, an isolated community, sequestered in the hills, might well have developed their own particularly fluid approach to their gods. We can only speculate – with an eye on both material and literary evidence –, and perhaps wonder whether other sites like Hawarti might await excavation.

I.III. Conclusions

Both Israel Roll and, more recently, Aleš Chalupa have conducted examinations of Mithraic archaeology from the East of the Roman Empire. Roll was looking primarily for origins, examining the archaeological evidence from the East to assess whether there were any hints that an iconography of the cult could have originated there and spread to Rome, or remained

241 The use of frescoes may, of course, have been paralleled in other *mithraea* from the region, which have not survived in a comparable state of preservation. The Dura *mithraeum* may well have been decorated with more paintings than survived, or could be conserved by the excavators.
242 For further discussion of 'norms' and 'normativity', see Chapter II, 89-94.

as a peculiar variation on 'standard' Mithraic imagery. His conclusion, that the eastern archaeology does not support Cumont's view of an eastern genesis, appears correct (especially since he was writing before the discovery of Hawarti); the vast majority of the finds are either of a late date, or come from an explicitly Roman context, such as the *mithraeum* in the military quarter of Dura-Europos. Part of Chalupa's aim was also to assess "whether Syrian monuments can help us clarify the problem of Mithraic origins"; he too returns the answer that it cannot.[243]

Both also determine that there is no evidence to support a reading of an 'eastern' or 'Syrian' version of the Roman cult.[244] Roll states that: "The Mithraic monuments from the Orient do not provide evidence for a genuinely local variant"; he argues instead that the evidence all seems to point to an Italian source of Mithraic iconography.[245] Chalupa is, broadly speaking, of the same opinion, though he allows for more subtlety:

> The answer to the first [question], whether there is a distinctive "quality" in Syrian Mithraic monuments which would justify us postulating the existence of a special Syrian variety of Mithraism distinguishable from its typical Western form, must be negative. Although the existence of many idiosyncrasies cannot be denied and there could even have been some generic similarities expressed especially in "artistic conventions", we can still argue, having a larger picture in view, that monuments of Syrian Mithraism generally follow the pattern known from the Western provinces of the Roman Empire.[246]

What are these "generic similarities" expressed in the Syrian evidence? There are strands of parallels that can be drawn out from a catalogue of the finds: the hunting scenes from Dura and Hawarti; the absence of the scorpion from the Dura reliefs, and possibly from the

243 Chalupa 2010, 65.
244 Roll 1978; Chalupa 2010.
245 Roll 1978, 62.
246 Chalupa 2010, 64.

Israel Museum relief as well; the inclusion of a *thymiaterion* in the horse and rider fresco at Hawarti and the Zenobius relief at Dura; the depiction of Jupiter and gigantomachy scenes at Dura-Europos and Hawarti; the unique actions of the dadophores in carrying the bull on a pole and preparing a cauldron in the Israel Museum relief and one of the Dura niche frescoes. There appears to be an emphasis at Hawarti and Dura on assimilating 'Mithraic' iconography to local polytheistic imagery; this can, for example, be seen in the throat-cutting of the Ethpeni relief at Dura. Above all, there is a similarity in the way in which local traditions seep into the Mithraic iconography: the Durene custom of including a portrait of the patron performing sacrifice appears on the Zenobius relief; there seem to be references to the Avestan traditions in some of the frescoes from Hawarti. These, in and of themselves, do not constitute sufficient evidence for a separate cult, a 'Syrian Mithraism'.

Drawing such a conclusion, however, is not the aim of this chapter. Both Roll and Chalupa acknowledge that they were looking for "*a* genuinely local variant", and "*a* special Syrian variety of Mithraism" (emphasis added). Neither seems to have considered the possibility that the evidence would suggest multiple variations from a 'standard' iconography, if such a thing can be said to have existed, beyond the level of the most basic prototype. Are the iconographic variations – both within Syrian 'Mithraism' and indeed across the whole archaeological corpus of Mithraic evidence – sufficient to argue in favour of a reading of a plurality of forms of the Roman worship of Mithras?[247] Is there the possibility that there were potentially as many different forms of Mithraic worship as there were *mithraea*?

The examples discussed from eastern *mithraea* comprehensively argue against any lingering assumptions of a single essential cult of Mithras. In some cases, the variation

[247] For more on the limits of variation, see 59-61 above.

seems to go even further: to point in the direction of a different character to Mithraic worship in a particular location. I have already stated that Hawarti stands alone as an example of its strong emphasis on light and darkness, solar syncretism, and punishment. Can something similar be said of Dura-Europos, that the combination of Palmyrene and Parthian customs, Durene artistic and religious traditions, and Roman cult produced an exceptional version of Mithraic worship?

It is worth considering the question of the transmission and endurance of ideas and motifs.[248] When it comes to transmission over time as well as space, Simon Price used the cult of Mithras as a key example in his account of *Religious Mobility in the Roman Empire*, assessing the movement of members of elective cults, and tracing their involvement in the material culture of worship.[249] He looked in detail at the bronze tablet discovered at Virunum, in modern Austria, which lists the members of a *mithraeum*; the different hands of the engraver appear to chart the changing fortunes of the Mithraic community over time.[250] Price's emphasis on the material culture of Mithraic evidence is one that I am keen to follow in this thesis; what it also highlights, however, are the limits of this kind of evidence. We frequently have only a fragmentary record of Mithraic communities, relying on star objects like the Virunum tablet – dedications by individuals, many of whom appear

[248] Campbell's *Typology of Mithraic Tauroctones* and *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* considered regional aspects of the transmission of features on tauroctony scenes, such as compositional style and symbols (Campbell 1954; 1968), but these accounts are somewhat flawed, and limited by the corpus available at the time. Campbell believed strongly in Cumont's account of Mithraic origins, and this colours his work: one of his tauroctony subtypes, for example, is labelled 'Iranian'; the refutations of Cumont from the 1970s would surely have affected Campbell's understanding of Mithraic origins. Campbell also argued for the chronological evolution and elaboration of tauroctony scenes based on a comparison between the sites of Dura and Poetovio; subsequent finds definitely disprove this theory, as well as the dangers of comparing two sites so geographically distant from one another. Richard Gordon gave a rather damning summary of Campbell's *Typology*: "Founded upon a tangle of indefensible assumptions and executed in a cloud of errors, it deserves simply to be ignored" (Gordon 1980, 201). This fails to appreciate the close material analysis that Campbell provided; nonetheless, Gordon is correct to emphasise that Campbell's assumptions clouded his interpretations.

[249] Price 2012.

[250] Price 2012, 9-10; *AE* 1994, c. 1334.

only once or twice in the epigraphic record are far more common. This makes it harder to build a more overarching understanding of how Mithraic worship may have spread.

In the cases where names appear more than once, it can be possible to trace the physical movement of individuals or communities, or the evolution of Mithraic groups over time. This requires a strong regional emphasis, of the kind we can see in current work on Mithraic networks in Roman Dacia.[251] The prolific archaeological excavations at Apulum, and reinterpretations of previous finds at Sarmizegetusa, have allowed for new interpretations about the interconnectivity of Mithraic groups within the Roman province of Dacia.[252] This kind of localised focus is necessary for the continued discovery and detailed interpretation of new finds; it also affords scholars who are primarily interested in a larger-scale picture of Mithraic activity around the Roman Empire a vital building block in constructing their accounts.[253] This includes the kind of theoretical work proposed by Luther Martin, who has used network theory as a model for analysing the movement of Mithraists, and therefore the transmission of certain ideas and iconographic themes.[254] He analyses the small group structures that are traditionally understood to have been inherent in Mithraic communities, and suggests that the reconstruction of Mithraic networks may in some instances be safer than the reconstruction of Mithraic contexts.[255]

Martin also emphasises the importance of the tauroctony scene as a point of 'kinshipping', through which the repeated use of an iconographic form allowed for social claims of kinshp

[251] In particular, the work of the Apulum *Mithraeum* III Project. See especially McCarty, Egri & Rustoiu 2017.
[252] Szabó 2014.
[253] As is, for example, more the emphasis of this thesis: it analyses regional evidence for different aspects of the constituent features of Mithraic worship.
[254] See Martin 2013, 229-242; 2018, 230-234. As mentioned above, network theory and its application in Mithraic scholarship is necessarily limited by the evidence available. It is not safe to assume that interconnected communities in Roman Dacia were replicated in other provinces of the empire.
[255] Martin 2018, 234.

between Mithraic communities. Of course, certain regions had stronger local visual traditions than others – this can clearly be seen, for example, in Palmyrene funeral portraiture –; does this indicate that they were more likely to seep across into more overtly Mithraic iconography? Or is the very idea of a traditional Mithraic iconography wrong in itself? The Syrian evidence is outstanding in its use of unique features in Mithraic art, thus shining a spotlight onto the variations. The examples of Dura and Hawarti, should perhaps be seen not as anomalous, but as indicative of a genuine possibility that each province, town and *mithraeum* might have interpreted the cult of Mithras in its own way, and in a way that had meaning for them. As discussed above, an emphasis on variation requires a concomitant understanding of certain levels of normativity; aspects of this are the subject of the next chapter.[256]

[256] See Chapter II, 89-94.

Chapter II. 'Normative Mithraism': Mithras in Italy

> The need, however, is not for more religious reconstructions of greater completeness and complexity, but for a distinction between those elements which can be supported by careful argument from the available evidence, and those others which, however plausible to some contemporary writers, cannot be shown to have such support.[257]

This chapter turns to the idea of scholarly expectations and reconstructions of ritual and belief, and how evidence is often interpreted in light of them. One of the questions raised in the introduction concerned what scholars have traditionally looked for in studying the Roman worship of Mithras. Chapter I, in its discussion of Franz Cumont and the foundation of the sub-discipline, indicated that – for Cumont at least – 'Mithraism' constituted a religion, a mystery cult, and a normative system that spread across the Roman Empire. Richard Gordon and Roger Beck began to move the field away from Cumont's views, but still kept to the idea of a religion for many years. In current scholarship, the worship of Mithras is still generally regarded as a mystery cult, with certain relevant expectations; these in turn lead scholars toward a certain kind of reconstruction of both ritual and belief.[258] These are some of the considerations that we should bear in mind as we approach one of the main questions underlying this chapter: what defines Mithraic worship in the imagination of western scholarship of the last 120 years?

In particular, is there any mileage in the concept of a normative Mithraism? Does such a thing even exist? Some difficulties of terminology have already been extensively discussed in the introduction to this thesis, albeit in a fairly abstract manner. Even though the word "Mithraism" itself has, quite rightly, gone out of vogue in recent years, it nonetheless best

257 Renfrew 1985, 11.
258 For more on the kind of expectations inherent in the category of 'mystery cults', see Introduction, 19-21.

conveys the dangers inherent in looking for religious or ritualistic norms where none might exist.[259] It suggests a unity, coherence, and singularity that, despite the overt rhetoric against 'Mithraism' or even against the overt search for 'norms', is still implicit in much work on the worship of Mithras.

The phrase 'normative Mithraism' could be said to be almost too generalising: a straw argument established simply for the purpose of destroying it. It is certainly true that it is not a phrase that appears in Mithraic scholarship in that form, although the ideas underlying it are frequently discernible, if not made explicit. Roger Beck perhaps comes the closest to using it, in his article on the Mainz cup:

> I concluded that [the scenes on the Mainz vessel] are not one-off ideological 'sports' but rather expressions of wide-spread, even normative, Mithraic ritual and doctrine. What is untypical about the Mainz vessel is not the ritual actions which it depicts but the artefact's garrulity in showing such scenes at all. The fact of the matter is that while none of the mysteries had core orthodoxies, at least one – Mithraism – did have extensive norms reinforcing its religious identity over time and space.[260]

Why, then, could the term be useful? The answer lies, in part, in the difficulty of finding sure ground from which to discuss Mithraic worship: in analysing the tauroctony, it can be easy to fall into universalisms about myths and beliefs or formalistic generalisations like the creation of stereotypes; in examining hierarchy and the status of worshippers, it can be easy to make assumptions about initiation, and what it might have entailed. In short, in challenging one set of traditional views, scholars often find themselves repeating others, without even being aware that they are doing so.[261]

[259] On the problems with the term 'Mithraism', see e.g. Gordon 2007a, 394; Dirven & McCarty 2014, 128.
[260] Beck 2000, 172.
[261] Perhaps the use of the term 'Mithraism' is the most obvious example – while substantial sections of articles have been written against it, its utility as a shorthand expression means that it continues to be deployed, even by the most established scholars. See Introduction, 14-17.

II.I. Norms and stereotypes

The use of stereotypy is both attractive and concerning.[262] For the purposes of comparison, it is almost essential, so that scholars can notice what is different or unusual, and hopefully assess the degree of importance that we should attach to this. This is why arguments from stereotypy are often dangerous; it is left to the modern viewer and modern scholars to decide what counts as conventional, and that which appears unusual. Stereotypy of the tauroctony scene, for example, allows us to note the absence of the scorpion from the Dura-Europos Ethpeni and Zenobius reliefs; what it cannot do, however, is explain whether this is a standard feature of 'eastern' reliefs, or a phenomenon isolated to one site.[263]

Similarly, stereotypy in examining religious beliefs and rituals can be useful. This is the underlying idea behind 'normative Mithraism'. In the discipline of ancient religion, assumptions about a given religion's constituent and requisite parts are frequently made. One could, however, almost go so far as to say that it is especially pertinent for the study of Mithraic worship. On the basis of formalist material stereotypy – of sacred space, and the cult image –, scholars have then constructed a substantive stereotypy of ritual, cult, and belief. These two kinds of stereotypy are not, however, necessarily compatible; is it possible to infer normativity, or *a* religion from the archaeological evidence for Mithraic practices?[264] In practice, this means that reconstructing Mithraic worship has relied to a

[262] For more on stereotypy, and the scholars who have used it, see Chapter IV, 213-214; 224-226.
[263] See Chapter I, 46.
[264] This is not to say that it is impossible to use archaeology to infer religious activities: ancient forms of worship in particular, without a strong scriptural tradition, *must* to a large extent be written from material evidence. For more on the impact that this has had on the writing of Roman religious art and archaeology, see Adrych & Dalglish (forthcoming b). Rather, my emphasis here is on the burden of expectation that has traditionally been laid on Mithraic material evidence, and the interest in using it to paint a coherent picture; as

large extent on the historian's and archaeologist's imagination, and therefore on his or her personal models of what religion 'is': for example, the Christianising formulations of Franz Cumont, or the structuralist formulations of the early work of Richard Gordon.[265] Archaeology can interpret objects, and occasionally even infer beliefs from them; repeated discoveries of tauroctony scenes for example, could give the legitimate inference that Mithraists believed this scene – and possibly a moment that it recalled – was central to their religious activities. It is the reconstruction of beliefs beyond this, admittedly somewhat basic, point that can lead to assumptions based on possible comparanda, or on the personal inclinations of the historian or archaeologist involved.[266]

These scholarly inclinations are, however, by no means confined to the kind of detailed interpretations required by, say, astrological considerations; they are often far more general, and less overt, and thus do not appear to weigh scholarship down with the load of their preconceptions. Nonetheless, several tendencies, and the assumptions that result from them, have had a profound, and not necessarily beneficial, impact on the study of Mithraic worship.[267] For instance, there are many who have consistently held to the idea that, even if it was not a religion, the worship of Mithras at least involved a cult, with certain expectations as to the normative decoration and symbolism that would delineate Mithraic sacred space.[268] The construction and presentation of 'Mithraism' as a religion, or even as a mystery cult, has relied on building up a concrete assemblage of Mithraic practices, rituals

this chapter explains, you can tell a story of normativity from archaeological evidence, but its validity may be open to question.

265 For my own understanding of 'religion' in this thesis, see the Introduction, 8-9.

266 This chapter proceeds to discuss such assumptions, with particular reference to membership and hierarchy, and induction or initiation. Chapter III discusses inclinations about sacred space and its possible meanings; Chapter IV discusses the tauroctony, the construction of mythology, and ritual activity.

267 On historians and intellectual assumptions in the field of the history of religion, see Price 2010, 318.

268 For recent examples, see Beck 2006, 102-118; Chalupa 2008, 177-178; 198-200; Clauss 1990b, 57-69 = Clauss 2000, 48-60.

and beliefs, in so far as they can be pieced together.[269] This assemblage – itself a modern scholarly synthesis, and certainly a construction from various disparate fragments of evidence – is what I mean by the term 'normative Mithraism".

The dangers of searching for, and, indeed, expecting to find norms, are perhaps not immediately apparent. Closer scrutiny of the influence that they have had on Mithraic scholarship, however, makes these dangers increasingly evident. Of course, looking for common aspects between localities can certainly be seen as a positive and important method towards understanding community relationships and social organisation. The idea of norms can be rather too seductive in its promise of answers. It can suggest that seeing parallels in two or more different places amounts to a unifying aspect of religious activity. As appealing as the prospect of finding answers to questions of ritual and belief may be, extrapolating too far from the existing evidence can lead towards the creation of a false picture of a normative religion, or, in this case, of a normative mystery cult.

Two particular examples of this 'normative Mithraism' have been the universality of the so-called seven grades of initiation, and the idea of an idealised Mithraic space.[270] Along with the tauroctony image, these have traditionally been seen as the least variable of the constituent parts of Mithraic worship that can be deciphered from the existing evidence. It is now eighteen years since Roger Beck argued that these should be seen as Mithraic norms, which gave the worship of Mithras a unified and coherent appearance across the Roman

[269] The possible inaccessibility of beliefs should not require historians to avoid them altogether. For a framework of inference that can help archaeologists towards the interpretation of actions that have potentially been inspired by beliefs, see Renfrew 1985, 12: quoted in full at Introduction, 9.
[270] For a full discussion of idealised Mithraic space, see Chapter III.

Empire.[271] For the most part, the idea that these grades are important and replicable parts of the cult has endured since then. The more archaeologically-focused section of this chapter will therefore interrogate the evidence for these characteristic features of Mithras-worship, looking in particular at the cases of Rome and Ostia, in combination with the wider picture in Italy, which were central to the formulation of Beck's theory.

II.II. The importance of location

This chapter aims to examine whether there really is a case for seeing a 'normative Mithraism' in Italy, one that can be applied to other Mithraic evidence from around the Roman Empire, and used to supplement the gaps in our knowledge about ritual practice and belief.[272] Some of the key components of the way in which 'Mithraism' has traditionally been constructed come from the material evidence found in Rome and Ostia; as mentioned above, the main ones on which this chapter will focus are: the traditionally-named seven grades, and their possible relationship to initiation.

Although there are *mithraea* scattered across Europe and beyond, from England to Algeria, and from Portugal to Syria, it is the sites in Italy, and especially in Rome and Ostia, that have garnered the most attention.[273] This Italo-centricity has, in itself, created problems of

[271] Beck 2000, 171-172. It is also heavily implied within the structure of Beck's *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, in the headings of chapters 7 and 9, and in chapter 5.5 (Beck 2006).

[272] Italian iconography and sacred space have often been used in this way: see the Capua Vetere frescoes (below, 143-147) or the Sette Sfere *mithraeum* (Chapter III, 194-196).

[273] This is, in part, owing to a density of evidence. In this sense, the worship of Mithras in Italy is comparable to Simon Price's work on the 'Imperial cult' in Asia Minor. Despite considerable variations from city to city, Price argues that an 'imperial cult' is still discernible (Price 1984, 20). As this chapter goes on to explore, the case of Mithraic worship, with important levels of variation within space, iconography, and perhaps ritual, is rather more complicated. These complications arise from various factors: the visibility and public nature of worship within an 'imperial cult' setting is very different from the more private Mithraic activity (though this does not necessarily mean that all Mithraic worship was secret or hidden; for more on this see Introduction, 21; Chapter III, 167-169); the interest of the emperor, imperial court, and imperial administrators in 'imperial

interpretation and emphasis, some of which will be explored over the course of this chapter.[274] The centre of the Roman Empire, Rome and her port city, along with other locations around Italy, are the best places to start an examination of what might constitute a normative Mithraic practice. Rather than examining the *mithraea* based on their geographic location, separating them into the Roman, Ostian, and then wider Italian evidence, this chapter will look at our two major components of Mithraic worship in turn. There has already been extensive scholarly analysis of the two main sites, with White's and Sonnemans' work on Ostia, and Jonas Bjørnebye's work on Rome, standing out in particular in recent years; there is consequently little need for another catalogue of their *mithraea*.[275] What is lacking, though, is a more thematic survey of the kinds of evidence for 'Mithraism' that the two locations can be seen to offer.

Why might Rome and Ostia be good places to find normative Mithraism? One answer, at least partly, lies in the historiographic tradition of writing on Mithraic worship. Ostia in particular has traditionally been considered as one of the best locations for the study of Mithraic conceptions of worship and sacred space.[276] The reasons for this are, to an extent, political, at least within the contained world of Mithraic scholarship; this relates to the theories of Mithraic origins discussed in the first chapter.

In the general movement away from Cumont's posited eastern origin for Mithras-worship in the scholarship, seen throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and still continued today, Rome and Ostia have often been suggested as the possible sources of a western form

cult' activities, compared to what is generally held to have been a lack of state interest in Mithraic activities; the large-scale nature of benefactions and euergetism associated with the 'imperial cult' in Asia Minor contrasted with the smaller-scale financial support of Mithraic worship.

[274] Centripetalism could, of course, be seen as linked to the idea of a real and unified religion.

[275] White 2012; Sonnemans 2017; Bjørnebye 2007.

[276] For a neat summary of this, see Bjørnebye 2007, 55.

of worship. There was an interest on the part of those scholars who had opposed Franz Cumont's theory of an eastern genesis in locating the *genius* for Mithraic cult activity in the western half of the Roman Empire, and in clearly Roman sources.[277] The Townley tauroctony in the British Museum is one of our earliest surviving pieces of Mithraic evidence, and has a provenance in Rome; could this suggest therefore that Mithras-worship as we understand it was formed in Italy?[278]

This was certainly Reinhold Merkelbach's opinion and, following on from him, that of Manfred Clauss.[279] Clauss states unambiguously, in the opening pages of his most accessible work on Mithras, that: "The mysteries of Mithras came into being in Rome or in Ostia."[280] This reveals the lasting scholarly preoccupation with Mithraic origins, in attempting to understand the central point of Mithras-worship, and how it spread from there around the Roman Empire. For this reason, taking Italy and Rome in particular as the point of birth is obviously an attractive idea. It maps onto a wider trend in the study of Roman religion, in which the city of Rome is often configured as a principal location for religious activity and endorsement.[281] This conception of Rome's role is due, in part, to the pervasive popularity of Roman religion as being 'embedded' in wider society; if religion was so inextricably linked to wider societal concerns and influences, then surely Rome was the most important place in Roman religion, as the powerhouse of the state.[282] Furthermore, an

277 See Chapter I, 31; 34-35; 37-38.
278 *CIMRM* 593. See also Gordon 1978; Dalglish 2017a, 18-21.
279 For more on this aspect of the origins debate, see Chapter I, 37-38.
280 Clauss 1990b, 18 = Clauss 2000, 7.
281 As a mode of thought, it is also distinctly Christiano-centric, something that is not altogether unusual in Mithraic scholarship. The trend towards emphasising the importance of Rome mirrors the work of de Rossi and the Christian Archaeology school over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See de Rossi 1864-1877.
282 Selected works in favour of "embeddedness" include: North 1976; 1979; Beard, North & Price 1998. For arguments against it see in particular Nongbri 2008. For a sociological and underpinning perspective, Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* has obvious application to the concept of embeddedness (Durkheim 1912).

emphasis on the sacral importance of Rome gives weight to the idea of a recurring Christiano-centrism visible in Mithraic scholarship, with its focus on a cult with eastern origins, possible initiation, and a heavily symbolic art.

There have been many arguments against 'embeddedness' and, at any rate, it is taken to apply to traditional Roman religion, and the concept of a state pantheon, rather than to the stereotypically far more elusive and selective Mithras-worship.[283] Nonetheless, as a model, it highlights the religious fascination with the city of Rome, and this is pertinent for studies of Mithras. The idea of a centralised authority for Mithraic worship has waxed and waned in scholarly acceptance, but receives most attention in the work of those who claim that, and then seek to explain how, the central tauroctony image remains fundamentally the same across the Empire. The scholarly invention of an embedded stereotypy of cult has been used to explain another scholarly invention, the stereotypy of the tauroctony image. The high density of Mithraic evidence found in and close to Rome allows scholars to deploy traditional methods of approaching Roman religious phenomena, in terms of geographic location.

The problem of Romano- and Italo-centrism in Roman religion is widespread.[284] It does not automatically follow that what was important to Rome and Italy in terms of religious practice and ritual was of equal importance in the provinces. The emphasis on Rome can also be explained by the priority that ancient historians tend to give to textual sources and written evidence – and frequently the educated elite who wrote them – much of which comes from, or was heavily influenced by, the city of Rome. This is particularly problematic with

[283] For a direct reference to the embeddedness of Mithraism, see Beck 2006, 71-72.
[284] Though, as a model, this was very ably countered by the Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion project of Hubert Cancik and Jörg Rüpke. This resulted in the publication of several important volumes, particularly in 1997 and 2009.

Mithraic worship due to the lack of texts and the indications that there were few members of relatively high social rank. The interest in Roman and Ostia therefore seems more than ever to be due to the fact that they have traditionally been seen as a natural starting place for a centrifugal impetus in the spread of Roman religion.

Perhaps the greater reason for Ostia's importance is the fact that there are so many *mithraea* in the town. There have been sixteen identifications of *mithraea* in Ostia, as well as other archaeological finds that bear a close relation to them, with a probability of several more in the remaining unexcavated part of the city.[285] The large number of *mithraea* has caused no small degree of surprise among scholars: Leonard Boyle described it as an "extraordinary concentration".[286] This high number of sites has allowed us to build up a clearer picture of the consistencies and varieties in Mithraic practice – perhaps even belief – and sacred space within this town. As ever, though, a note of caution should be sounded when it comes to applying this understanding to other parts of the Roman Empire. The concentration of sites in Ostia is almost unparalleled, except in Rome.

For example, extrapolating from the high density of *mithraea* in Ostia, calculations have been made about the possible number of Mithraic sites in Rome. Perhaps most notoriously, Filippo Coarelli gave a supposedly conservative estimate of 680-690 based on the calculation of one *mithraeum* for every two hectares, and a much greater estimate of 2000, based on population density.[287] This estimate has not been widely supported by scholars; nor, though, have any such suggestions been made for other cities.[288] A special case has

[285] Indeed, the most recent identification of a mithraeum – the Mitreo dei Marmi colorati – has come from the Ostia Marina project.
[286] Boyle 1989, 69.
[287] Coarelli 1979, 77.
[288] Before Coarelli, Vermaseren estimated the number of *mithraea* in Rome to have been about one hundred, although he states that they would not all have existed simultaneously (Vermaseren 1951, 93).

clearly been believed for the position of Mithras-worship in Rome and Ostia. In his thesis on the worship of Mithras in fourth-century Rome, Jonas Bjørnebye identifies sixteen locations with the remains of *mithraea*, as well as numerous Mithraic artefacts that were not found *in situ*.[289]

Nevertheless, there are clear dangers in looking too closely, and too narrowly, at the Roman and Ostian evidence. These dangers relate in part to the extent and limits of our understanding of Mithraic beliefs and practices. This is a key part of examining the evidence from Italy; much of what we know about the worship of Mithras has been derived from Roman and Ostian *mithraea* and associated finds. There are many cases where these examples have been used to reconstruct an idea of what was typical – and even essential – for Mithras-worship. Looking again at evidence from Ostia and Rome allows us to examine just how essential these features of Mithraic practice might really have been, and to assess whether a coherent picture can be gained from these two locations, as well as elsewhere in Italy.

In the case of Ostia, it is visible from a glance at the plan (Plan 2) that the fifteen *mithraea* are dispersed evenly throughout the town, covering all five regions. There is little or no uniformity in the kind of buildings occupied by the *mithraea*. While Plan 2 shows the distribution of *mithraea* very clearly, it does not show how they relate to the buildings around them. Michael White's recent revised dating indicates that most of the *mithraea* can be dated to the third century, which places them after both the Trajanic and Antonine building booms of the second century.[290] For this reason, as well as perhaps for reasons of

[289] Bjørnebye 2007.
[290] White 2012, 445. I shall follow White's dating of these mithraea in this thesis; he has provided a systematic and plausible account of how Mithraic worship might have looked in Ostia, and how different groups of

finance or privacy, *mithraea* tend to have been situated in established buildings, converted to the purpose. The former, and in some cases continued, uses of these buildings varies greatly: the Mitreo delle Sette Porte took over the *cella* of a converted *horreum*, the Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra took over a service corridor underneath the baths, and the Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana used two ground floor rooms in a conventional *insula*.[291]

There are at least thirteen identified *mithraea* in Rome, along with several others that have now vanished, and several suggested sites (Plan 3). Rome's character as an ancient city has, of course, not survived in quite the same way as that of Ostia; it is impossible to reconstruct from these examples of *mithraea* whether the worship of Mithras was as comprehensively spread across the city as in the port town, or whether the distribution was so even. As was the case in Ostia, the *mithraea* in Rome were usually sited in existing buildings: in houses, in baths, and possibly in a granary.

The Roman *mithraea*, then, can tell us comparatively little about the way in which they fitted into the religious landscape of Rome; their importance in reconstructing an idea of Mithras-worship as a possible religion lies elsewhere. Some of the most famous *mithraea* are located in Rome, and their reasons for being well known are due to more than just a good state of preservation. In many cases, it is these *mithraea*, along with those of Ostia, which have traditionally been used to advance an understanding of the different structures, rituals and beliefs that have been called 'Mithraism'.

Mithraists might have evolved over time, reusing material from earlier mithraea, and moving location within the town.

[291] For accounts of each Ostian *mithraeum*, see Becatti 1954, 93-99 (Sette Porte); 29-38 (Terme del Mitra); 9-15 (Caseggiato di Diana).

This understanding is supplemented by the few texts that exist on Mithraic worship. The examples of both Ostia and Rome shine an intriguing light onto the relationship between textual and material evidence, and their perceived usefulness to Mithraic scholars. Aside from the debate over Mithraic origins, perhaps one of the reasons why Rome and Ostia have received so much attention is the fact that the better-known *mithraea* from the two sites seem to support certain literary evidence for the Roman worship of Mithras. The accounts of the Christian writers Tertullian and St Jerome, for example, which seem to describe the traditionally-named seven grades and initiation into them, have played a key role in the reconstruction of Mithraic hierarchy.[292]

Given the wealth of visual and epigraphic evidence from Rome and Ostia, is it justified to rely so heavily on written accounts? This is a question that applies not only to scholarship on the worship of Mithras, but to work on the so-called mystery cults more generally. These cults are often richer in archaeological than textual evidence, and therefore provide excellent case-studies for those scholars interested in incorporating material evidence more widely, and more intrinsically, into their understandings of ancient religious forms.[293]

II.III. The Seven Grades

The so-called seven grades of initiation are one of the best-known features of Mithraic worship and its organisation. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, in his recent article on the function of the grades, the Czech scholar Aleš Chalupa saw the seven grades as ranking alongside the distinctive tauroctony scene and the sacred geography of the

[292] Tert. *De bapt.* 5; *De corona* 15; Jer. *Ep.* (107) *Ad Laetam*.
[293] One theoretical model for taking a visual and material-heavy approach to the worship of Mithras is Harvey Whitehouse's model of imagistic religion (Whitehouse 2002; 2004a). For more on this, see below, 134-137.

mithraeum itself as "characteristic Mithraic structures".[294] In spite of this, there was in fact scant evidence for them when Cumont first published his seminal *Textes et Monuments*.[295] Nevertheless, they are often accepted in handbooks to Roman religion, or in more specific guides to the so-called mystery cults, almost without further question.[296] As with many other aspects of Mithras-worship, however, there is little certainty attached to our understanding of how these grades worked, or what they really represented. The construction of Mithraic worship as a mystery cult in a large part relies on the element of initiation; to what extent were these grades initiatory, if at all?[297] And was the number seven consistent across the spread of Mithraic worship?[298]

It was not until nearly the middle of the twentieth century that much of what is now generally accepted about the seven grades was pieced together. This section will examine the Roman and Ostian evidence for the grades, upon which many common assumptions have been based, and assess whether the testimony of certain Italian *mithraea* is sufficient to extrapolate to a wider context for Mithraic worship. In particular, the *Mitreo di Felicissimus* in Ostia, and that of *Santa Prisca* in Rome, have often been seen as integral to our comprehension of the order and structure of the grades, as well as their astrological significance. Yet even these two examples do not present an entirely coherent picture of the grades; to what extent, then, should we trust that they are a reliable witness to broader Mithraic practice?

294 Chalupa 2008, 178.
295 Cumont 1896-1899.
296 For select examples from handbooks to Roman religion, see MacMullen 1981, 122; Beard, North & Price 1998a, 285; Beard, North & Price 1998b, 305-306; North 2000, 70-71; from handbooks to 'mystery cults', see Burkert 1987, 98-99; Alvar 2001, 262-275; Bowden 2010, 190-193.
297 For early work that accepted that there were seven grades, but questioned their function, see Aloe Spada 1979; Clauss 1990a.
298 Turcan 1999 questions the spread of a seven-fold grade system outside Rome and Ostia.

Before the discovery of the *mithraeum* at Dura-Europos in the 1930s, the best account of the names and sequence of these grades was found in the letters of St Jerome, though there were other isolated attestations in other ancient texts and in Mithraic inscriptions.[299] Saint Jerome's letter to Laeta gives the names of the grades as: *corax* (raven), *nymphius* (often translated as male bride; alternatively read as *cryphius* or even *gryphus* in the various manuscripts), *miles* (soldier), *leo* (lion), *Perses* (Persian), *heliodromus* (sun-runner), and *pater* (father); this list supported the names previously found on inscriptions from around the Roman Empire, including in the *Mitreo degli Animali* and the *Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana* in Ostia.[300]

Aside from the point that Jerome was a Christian polemicist, and unlikely to have been privy to genuine Mithraic beliefs and practices, the extent to which we can trust this list is debatable. Jerome was fond of tables and of listing names and people; this might have appealed to his erudition. It is entirely possible that Jerome included names in this list that he had heard in connection with Mithraic practice, but that were not necessarily linked to the idea of initiation; it is important to note that this is the only strong literary link between the grades and initiation.[301]

Jerome's letter also appeared to support some of the evidence from Porphyry's *De abstinentia* and *De antro nympharum*, who claims that his source was an actual Mithraist called Eubulus.[302] Porphyry mentions the lion, crow, and Persian grades, as well as a

299 Jer. *Ep.* (107) *ad Laetam*.
300 *CIMRM* 282: *d(onum) d(edit) / M. Cerellio / Hieronymo patri / et sacerdoti suo / eosque antistes s(upra) s(criptus) / deo libens dicavitd(onum) d(edit) / M. Cerellio / Hieronymo patri / et sacerdoti suo / eosque antistes s(upra) s(criptus) / deo libens dicavit; CIMRM 220: M. Lollianus / Callinicus pater / aram deo / do(num) ded(it); CIMRM 222: [M(arco L]olliano Callinico patre / [P]etronius Felix Marsus / signum Arimanium do(num) ded(it).*
301 E.g. *Chron.*; *De vir. ill.*
302 For a discussion of Eubulus and Pallas, both purported by Porphyry to be genuine Mithraic sources, see Turcan 1975, 23-43.

possible reference to the Fathers.[303] It is worth noting, though, that Porphyry includes the female grade of lioness (or hyena, depending on the manuscript tradition), and seems to refer to the father grade as eagle or hawk. These are not attested elsewhere; while a tomb in Oea was once thought to raise intriguing possibilities about a Mithraic husband and wife, the latter of whom might have been called a *lea*, scholars are now more likely to err on the side of caution, and indeed there is no secure link between the site and Mithraic practice.[304] There is certainly no indication found in other sources that the *patres* were otherwise known as eagles or hawks. Porphyry's interest in finding animal names for the Mithraic grades is unsurprising, given that the particular text in which he alludes to them is his *De abstinentia ab esu animalium*; this is therefore a salutary lesson that Porphyry may be an unreliable source for Mithraic practice, and that he primarily pursues his own interests in what is, after all, a polemic in support of vegetarianism.

The graffiti found in the Dura-Europos *mithraeum* are at least demonstrably Mithraic in provenance. They give evidence for six grades, clarifying the name of the second rank as *nymphus*, and missing out the *heliodromus*, but also introducing certain grades that are not found elsewhere: *antipater* and *melloleon*.[305] The six grades attested at Dura are: *corax* (*CIMRM* 63), *nymphos* (*CIMRM* 63), *stratiotes* (*CIMRM* 57; 59; 63), *leo* (*CIMRM* 57; 63), *Perses* (*CIMRM* 63) and *pater* (*CIMRM* 63). Despite the inconsistencies with Jerome's account, these graffiti are frequently seen as some of the best evidence for the names of the grades; they mainly take the form of acclamatory expressions, perhaps suggesting progressions within a Mithraic hierarchy.[306] The subsequent discovery of a black and white

303 Porph. *Abst.* 4.16; *De antr. nymph* 15.
304 On the apparent absence of women within Mithraic practice, see Chalupa 2005 for a good summary of the evidence; on the case of Oea, see Chalupa 2005, 203-204. For further summaries, see David 2000; Griffith 2006; Gordon 2011.
305 *CIMRM* 57; 63.
306 Gordon 2011, 334-336.

mosaic on the floor of the *Mitreo di Felicissimus* in Ostia laid out the sequence of the grades in hierarchic form, seemingly in the shape of a ladder, and indicated their alleged planetary connections and ritual duties, although the actual grade names themselves are absent.[307] The excavation of the Santa Prisca *mithraeum* in Rome further enriched the picture, and increased scholarly awareness of the potential roles and associations of each grade.[308] Here, a series of *dipinti* was found, which shows scenes of a Mithraic procession accompanied by captions that link the grades to certain tutelary deities.

The smaller finds of a limestone relief at Konjic in Bosnia, and a pottery cup from Mainz in Germany also suggest that there were several grades. The identity of the figures on both objects is disputed, but it is probable that some of them at least depict Mithraic worshippers in specific grade-roles. The Konjic relief (Figure 21) shows a raven-headed and a lion-headed figure serving at the ritual meal between Mithras and Sol, possibly in reference to the *corax* and *leo* grades, while the Mainz cup shows two scenes, one of which has been linked to possible initiation rituals.[309]

II.III.i. The Mitreo di Felicissimus

I shall take the *Mitreo di Felicissimus* in Ostia as my starting place for setting out the seven Mithraic grades, in their traditional form, and with their traditional names. I should note here that there are already several treatments of the seven grades, along with their characteristic iconographies, but these works are frequently less critical of the discrepancies that I wish to draw out in this review.[310]

307 *CIMRM* 297.
308 *CIMRM* 476.
309 Konjic relief, *CIMRM* 1896; on the Mainz cup, see Beck 2000, 148.
310 Notably Clauss 1990b, 138-147 = Clauss 2000, 131-138); Chalupa 2008; Bowden 2010, 190-193.

The Felicissimus *mithraeum* (Figure 22) consists of a rectangular room, on an East-West axis, and with an aisle flanked by two *podia*. It is thought to have been created from a room in a second-century *domus*, and was modified in the second half of the third century; the entrance was moved from the west wall, which leads out onto the street, and placed in the north wall, thereby providing an ante-room, and presumably making access to the space more private. By entering through the door in the north wall, there would have been no clear line of sight to the end of the aisle, which is likely to have had either a niche or representation of the tauroctony. Its size is about the average for Ostian *mithraea*, with an estimated capacity of 26-33 worshippers.[311]

The mosaic floor of this *mithraeum* has a claim to being one of the most famous pieces of Mithraic art (Figure 23), largely for its apparent sequential presentation of Mithraic grades; as such, it is almost ubiquitous in handbooks on the subject. The form that the mosaic takes has most often been described as ladder-like; while plausible, this is itself a reading of the visual material strongly associated with a literary source. In *Contra Celsum*, Origen quotes a supposedly Mithraic teaching about a ladder of seven gates, leading to an eighth gate at the top, through which the soul ascends.[312] The ladder as a means of the soul's ascent, can also be tied into the initiatory passage from Porphyry about the ascent and descent of souls.[313] This neo-Platonic emphasis might not have had such a strong effect on Mithraic scholarship were it not for the later Christian support for it, most prominently seen in John

311 This estimate of the number of worshippers is taken from White 2012.
312 Origen *C. Cels.* 6.22: "And Celsus, wishing to display his intellectualism still further, in opposition to us, sets out certain Persian mysteries, among which he says: These things are spoken of enigmatically in the tenets of the Persians, and in the rites of Mithras, which are celebrated among them. For there is in the latter the representation of two heavenly orbits – the one fixed, and the other allotted to the planets, and the journey of the soul through them. And this is the sign: there is a ladder with seven gates, and at the top of it an eighth gate…".
313 Porph. *De antr. nymph* 6: "So the Persians also call this place a cave, in which they initiate the initiand into the rites in the downward journey of the soul and its return…".

Climacus' seventh-century *Ladder of Divine Ascent*.[314] The interpretation of the Felicissimus mosaic as a ladder, with a concomitant suggestion of hierarchy and progression – through grades, as well as, perhaps, through the planetary sphere – could perhaps therefore be seen as a prime example of text overwhelming image.

Access to the room is past a small basin set into the floor, and ringed around with black mosaic (Figure 24). The first thing one sees, on entering the main room, is a small semi-circular niche set into the south wall. In front of this is the mosaic representation of an altar with a burning fire on its top, perhaps indicating an original function of the niche; this is oriented towards the South, and is therefore designed to be seen from the entrance (Figure 25). By contrast, the mosaic at the start of the aisle, before the sequence commonly thought to refer to the seven grades begins, is aligned towards the East, and was therefore clearly intended to be seen as part of the visual programme of the rest of the aisle. It shows a *krater*, with two helmets or Phrygian caps above it, both surmounted by a star (Figure 26).[315]

II.III.i.i. Corax, or the Raven grade

The first section of the ladder is thought to show the *corax* grade (Figure 27). There has been some damage to the top left of this section, but the representations of a bird, cup and *caduceus* can still clearly be discerned. The bird is presumably the raven of the grade's name; there is a similar mosaic depiction of a bird in the *Mitreo degli Animali*, also in Ostia. Based on the iconography of the *caduceus*, the raven grade has been linked to Mercury as both planet and tutelary deity.

314 John Climacus, *Scala paradisi*.
315 For a discussion of the possible significance of the krater as a liminal symbol, and its potential role as a vessel for the regenerating soul, see Gordon 1976, 124.

The cup perhaps refers to an element of Mithraic mythography in which a raven-headed man acted as a cupbearer or servant at the feast of Mithras and Sol; there are a few examples of this scene from diverse areas of the Roman Empire, such as the Konjic relief and a fresco from the Dura *mithraeum* (Figure 6).[316] There is also the question of whether the *corax* grade was meant as a reference to the raven that is usually present in the tauroctony scene; did holders of the grade understand themselves as having a particular connection to this element of Mithraic myth? This question is one that will be repeated with the *leo* and *heliodromus* grades, and of course lacks an answer. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the name raven certainly had more than one connotation within Mithraic iconography, practice and belief.

The *corax* grade is the third most widely attested in epigraphy after the *pater* and *leo*. Three inscriptions from Rome also suggest a slightly special status for the Raven grade. The first two were found on the Aventine in 1931.

The first is an inscription on a marble stele:

> To Zeus Helios great unconquerable Mithras and the gods dwelling with him, Castus Pater and Castus son, holy Raven, gave two bronze lamps with six wicks and dedicated them with the following attendants: L. Saturius Sporus, and Pactumeius Lausus, Fathers, Modestus, Paralius, Agathemerus, Felix, Apamenius, Keloidi (?), Lions [317]

316 For further discussion of this scene as a possible part of Mithraic ritual, and the potential role of Mithraists within it, see Chapter IV. Manfred Clauss suggests that this may have been a traditional ritual role performed by holders of the raven grade, but there is little strong evidence to support this (Clauss 1990b, 140 = Clauss 2000, 133). See also Bremmer 2014, 134 on the menial role of the raven: "It is important that Pallas (mentioned above) tells us that the Ravens had to serve. In other words, the lowest grade had to perform menial tasks, just as in Greek symposia the youths had to do the wine-pouring and the washing up."

317 *CIMRM* 473: Διὶ Ἡλ[ί]ῳ / μεγάλῳ / Μίθρᾳ ἀνει/κήτῳ καὶ τοῖς / συννάοις θε/οῖς δωρόν / ἀνέθηκαν / λύχνους χαλ/κοῦς ἑξαμύ/ξους / δύο Κάστος πατὴ[ρ] / καὶ Κάστος υἱὸ[ς] / ἱερὸς κόραξ / καὶ καθιέρωσα[ν] /

It is generally assumed that these two Casti are related, and are in fact father and son, though the term *pater* could obviously refer to the Mithraic grade as well (and in fact, may be doing both jobs here, hence why it remains untranslated above), which raises interesting questions about family ties within Mithraic communities. More relevant to this paper, is the fact that the Raven grade is explicitly described as *hieros* – not quite the language we might expect to find talking about a lower grade, especially as it is not used to refer to the Fathers and Lions in the rest of the inscription.

The second was found on a marble pilaster:

> To Zeus Helios unconquerable Mithras, Castus Father and Castus son, holy Raven.[318]

It is perhaps unsurprising that the Raven grade is *hieros* again here, since it was presumably part of the same dedication by the Casti. It's possible, of course, that if his father held a high rank within this group of Mithraists, then some of that glory could be reflected onto Castus son, by describing his grade as *hieros*.

But in fact, this description is not limited to this Aventine group. One of a series of marble altars or statue bases found near the Campus Martius commits us even more firmly to the idea of sacred Ravens:

ὑπηρετόυντων / Λ. Σατυρίου Σπό/ρου καὶ Πακτουμ(ηίου) / Λαύσου πατέρων / Μο[δ]έστου, Παραλί/ου. Ἀγαθημέρου, / Φήλικος, Ἀπαμη/νίου, Κηλωήδι / λεόντων.

[318] *CIMRM* 474: Διὶ Ἡλίῳ Μίθρᾳ / ἀνεικήτῳ Κάστος / πατὴρ καὶ Κάστος / υἱὸς ἱερὸς κόραξ.

> …Aurelius Victor Augentius, outstanding man, and Father of Fathers, admitted his son Aemilianus Corfinius Olympus into the holy Raven grade…[319]

Here the term for holy raven (*hierocorax*) has been blended into one, perhaps in conscious imitation of the Eleusinian *hieroceryx*, which has been attested in Mithraic inscriptions from Rome as an extra title for the *Father* grade. It is perhaps worth noting that the idea of a "holy Raven" has again come up in the context of a father and son, though the use of the term *filius* could of course have its own ritual connotations. If it is a familial connection though, the Raven grade might be less ritually well-connected, but this particular Raven certainly had good social connections.[320] The label *hieros* is not attached to any of the other grade names in inscriptions or graffiti; it is also pretty interesting that three of the five inscriptions where we find the Raven grade describe it as *hieros*. This is rather different from the menial impression that we might have had simply from a strict hierarchic reading of the grade structure.

So much for the members of the Raven grade; let us go back to the *Felicissimus* mosaic and take another look at the symbols associated with the Raven. Richard Gordon asks why a representation of a raven would have been seen as a symbol for this grade; the Soldier grade does not have a depiction of a soldier, and the Lion grade does not show a mosaic lion. He accepts that it could have been to remind initiates what the grade was called, but then suggests "a less derisive, and desperate, hypothesis".[321]

[319] *CIMRM* 403: *D(ominus) n(ostris) Valente V et Valentiniano / iuniore primum aug(ustis) VI idus april(es) / tradidit hierocoracia Aur(elius) Victor / Augentius v(ir) c(larissimus) p(ater) p(atrum) filio suo Emiliano / Corfini(o) Olympio c(larissimo) p(uero) anno tricensimo / acceptionis suae felic(iter)*. The name Corvinius is particularly interesting here, as it obviously bears close resemblance to the Latin *corvus*; a coincidence, or a deliberate pun?

[320] It is also worth noting that the son in this case is only thirteen years of age; this act of welcoming him into the circle of Mithraists therefore seems to be more along the lines of strategic social jockeying for position often seen in religious benefactions, rather than as evidence for a particularly youthful adherence to Mithras.

[321] Gordon 1980, 25. For another possible reason, see Chapter IV, 241-245 on the idea of dressing up as a part of ritual performance.

The grade name is not the only kind of raven known to us from Mithraic iconography. The raven is one of the animals traditionally present in the tauroctony, along with a scorpion, snake and dog. We usually find the raven to the left of the scene, perched on Mithras' wind-swept cloak, or just to the side. Is the Raven grade therefore named after this attendant at this, the most iconic moment of Mithraic visual culture? Overall, the bird seems to have had some sort of ritual significance; there have been various finds of what appear to be raven bones in *mithraea* around the Roman Empire, including a left wing-bone in the Walbrook *mithraeum* in London.[322]

Gordon lays out various Roman ideas about the significance of ravens, and how these might fit into the Mithraic context.[323] One of the suggestions relates to the constellation Corvus, and its catasterismic story.[324] Roger Beck has suggested that we might be seeing a reference to this in a mosaic from the Sette Porte *mithraeum* in Ostia, although his reading of the scene, and in particular his identification of the bird as a raven rather than an eagle, has been widely disputed.

More plausible is Gordon's emphasis on the Roman belief that ravens could talk and were capable of rational thought and understanding.[325] Gordon suggests, based on this, that the raven's ambiguity between the human and animal worlds made it suitable as a mediator

[322] Shepherd 1998, 214.
[323] Gordon 1979-1980, 26-32.
[324] Ovid *Fasti* II, 243-266; cf. Gordon 1979-1980, 26-27: Apollo sent a raven to fetch him some water in a cup. When the bird reached a pool however, it became distracted by some ripening figs, and waited until they were ready to eat. Realising how much time had passed, the raven quickly caught a water-snake as well as water in the cup, and returned to Apollo with the explanation that the snake had prevented it from gathering the water. Apollo, seeing through this excuse, cast the raven into the heavens, and set it with its back to the Hydra and Crater constellations.
[325] Pliny *Naturalis Historia* 10.121-123.

between gods and men, and as a messenger between the divine and mortal realms.[326] This feeds into Porphyry's analysis of Mithraic worship as being connected to the ascent and descent of souls through heavenly spheres, and could perhaps explain why Raven would be the name attached to the first grade, the marker between the uninitiated and the Mithraist. Gordon's suggestion was built upon two premises: first, an unquestioning acceptance of the utility of Porphyry; second, the liminality and 'otherness' of ravens. While Gordon accepted the limitations of his argument, which he characterized as "at least suggestive", others have been less cautious in presenting a similar case.[327]

We could even see the connection to Mercury, indicated by the presence of a *caduceus* as a symbol of the Raven grade in the Felicissimus mosaic, as further corroboration of the role of the Raven as a messenger and intermediary. The case of the symbols connected with (what is, after all, only *assumed* to be) the Raven grade on the Felicissimus mosaic shows how their interpretation can easily lead from one conjecture to another.[328] The combination of bird, cup and *caduceus* can be woven together to create a picture of the Raven as a liminal role between initiated and uninitiated, as a messenger and a server at meals. Looking back to the actual mosaic panel, however, reminds us how flimsy the basis for much of this guesswork is.

II.III.i.ii. Nymphus, or the male bride grade

326 Gordon 1979-1980, 26.
327 Gordon 1979-1980, 28. For this lack of caution, see Bremmer 2014, 134 (above, 108 f.316).
328 This is where the contextual empiricism model suggested in the Introduction becomes relevant: it allows for fruitful conjecture, based on careful analysis of the evidence within a controlled context. In this case, it would prioritise the context of material culture, with textual evidence playing a secondary role. See also, for a positive model and emphasis on controlled context, Renfrew 1985, 5-16.

The second section of the floor is assumed to refer to the *nymphus*. The damage to this section of the mosaic is more severe, and some of the iconography has been lost (Figure 28). The surviving symbols appear to represent a diadem in the shape of a crescent moon, and a lamp.

Dipinti from Santa Prisca associate this grade with the tutelary deity Venus (perhaps unsurprisingly, considering the connotations of marriage inherent in the term 'male bride' or, as it is sometimes rendered, bridegroom); this would presumably explain why a diadem was seen as an appropriate symbol to represent the grade. Clauss suggests that the lamp may refer to an acclamation of the grade preserved in Firmicus Maternus, in which the *nymphus* was hailed as the new light.[329] There is, however, no certain indication that Firmicus Maternus was referring to actual Mithraic practice at this point; the association between light and the grade, although possible, must therefore be phrased more tentatively. Evidence for this grade is very slight; there are no inscriptions attesting to it aside from the graffito from Dura-Europos, and the *dipinti* in Santa Prisca.

II.III.i.iii. Miles, or the Soldier grade

The next section of the Felicissimus floor is thought to show the *miles* grade. Again, there has been some damage to this part of the mosaic, but the symbols themselves have survived (Figure 29). There is no argument about the identification of two of these symbols, the helmet and spear, both of which speak to the martial character of the grade. They may also refer to Mars, the tutelary deity assigned to the grade by the Santa Prisca *dipinti*.

[329] Clauss 1990b, 141 = Clauss 2000, 134; Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 19.1.

The third image, however, is much more controversial. It is most commonly described as a bag, perhaps used for slingshots, that would have been carried by Roman soldiers; other identifications have seen it as a Phrygian cap and even as the hind leg of a bull.[330] I find the suggestion of it as a Phrygian cap the least plausible of these possibilities; the seventh panel shows this kind of cap, also in profile view, in great detail. This image bears no particular resemblance to the symbol in the *miles* section, and it seems unlikely that the mosaic would feature two such formally different Phrygian caps, at least if they were both intended to be identified as such.

Chalupa's suggestion of the bull's hindquarter is more believable, though perhaps carries no greater weight than the traditional identification. Richard Gordon is highly in favour of Chalupa's suggestion, however, and sees it as a symbol of the role played by the *miles* grade within Mithraic ritual.[331] He argues that, as the *nymphus* was connected to light, and as the *corax* acted as a cup-bearer, so the *miles* served as a butcher for the communal meal. While the first half of this argument, namely the support of Chalupa's reading, seems plausible, the desire to extrapolate from that to find a coherent set of meanings, related to cult ritual, in the symbols of the mosaic seems rather more far-fetched. Nonetheless, the case of this ambiguous third symbol makes it clear that there was no fixed set of iconographic attributes attached to each grade.[332]

330 Clauss 1990b, 141 = Clauss 2000, 134; Merkelbach 1984, 85; Chalupa 2008, 184.
331 Gordon 2013.
332 This returns us to the idea of a core iconography, with variations, already described in reference to the tauroctony scene (Chapter I, 59-61). The choice of which attributes to emphasise might have been left to the Mithraic patron; this kind of idiosyncratic approach is explored further in Chapter V. One worthwhile comparison is to Renaissance commissions of religious images by patrons interested in representing their families (Gilbert 1998).

There is little evidence suggesting why the Soldier grade should have received its name. The Roman worship of Mithras is, of course, inextricably linked in the minds of most people – historians and laymen alike – with the Roman army.[333] The parallels between the metaphoric Soldier of Mithras and Soldier of Christ were not lost on Tertullian, who compares the two in *De corona*.[334]

II.III.i.iv. Leo, or the lion grade

The fourth grade is the *leo*. This grade is frequently considered to be one of the most important within the Mithraic hierarchy; it is the most commonly found name on Mithraic inscriptions after the grade of *pater*, which has been taken to indicate some sense of pride or achievement among those who attained the rank.[335] The iconography on the Felicissimus mosaic shows a shovel, a *sistrum*, and a thunderbolt; this last symbol, combined with evidence from Santa Prisca, has conventionally associated the grade with Jupiter (Figure 30).

The lion is a complicated figure within Mithraic iconography, and we should be no means read every depiction of a lion as an intended representation of the *leo* grade. Lions sometimes appear, together with snakes, on tauroctony scenes from Germany, drinking from a *krater* placed beneath the bull.[336] They can also appear with little other context, on the side-panels of reliefs, such as *CIMRM* 2338 from Turowite in Bulgaria (Figure 31). In addition, several *mithraea* have contained statues of a lion-headed body, sometimes

[333] This ranges from academic scholarship, such as Speidel 1980; Clauss 1990b, 43-46 = Clauss 2000, 34-37, to fictional accounts, such as Rosemary Sutcliffe's *Eagle of the Ninth* or Bernard Cornwell's *Warlord Trilogy*.
[334] Tert. *De corona* 15; see also 141 below.
[335] Clauss 1990a, 186; 1990b, 143 = Clauss 2000, 136. Richard Gordon recently suggested that "the contexts and roles of the lion in the cult would be a good topic for a dissertation (Gordon 2017a, 424f.).
[336] See for example CIMRM 1083; 1283; 1292.

entwined by a snake, and sometimes identified as Aion[337]. This representation presumably was intended to have no connection to the grade of *leo*, which would suggest that lions may have held some other significant role within Mithraic mythography and iconography.

The *leo* grade is frequently interpreted as having had a liminal role within initiation into Mithraic worship.[338] This understanding is partly based on Porphyry's description of the grades and their animal associations, that has already been outlined; Porphyry seems to group the *corax*, *leo* and *pater* grades together to show who took part in Mithraic rituals.[339] This might explain why the grade is so frequently attested in the epigraphic evidence; it might also suggest a reason for the importance given to the grade in a series of frescoes from the Santa Prisca *mithraeum*.[340]

II.III.i.v. Perses, or the Persian grade

The fifth section of the Felicissimus mosaic is assumed to show the *Perses* grade. Its associated symbols here consist of a crescent moon, star, scythe and sword (Figure 32). Porphyry describes the Persian as the guardian of fruits, but only the scythe seems possible to relate to such a possible role.[341] Due to the Felicissimus mosaic, the Persian grade is most commonly associated with Luna, due to the crescent moon; the Santa Prisca *dipinti*, however, state that this grade was connected to Mercury rather than Luna. Unfortunately, the corresponding caption for the *corax* grade has not been preserved in the Santa Prisca

337 As Aion, see CIMRM 545; 902. For statues not identified as Aion, see for example CIMRM 78; 312; 665; 776; 1138.
338 See, for example, Clauss 1990b, 143 = Clauss 2000, 136.
339 Porph. *Abst.* 4.16.
340 See below, page 123-125.
341 Porph. *De antr. nymph*. 15.

mithraeum, so we have no way of knowing whether both grades were held to have a connection to Mercury, or whether at Santa Prisca the raven was associated with Luna.

Should we be surprised that within the relatively small distance between Rome and Ostia there were differing views on which grade was linked to which planet or deity? On the contrary, I would argue that this example strongly indicates that these associations were more flexible than much scholarship on the subject would suggest. Handbooks, or quick guides to the seven grades, generally place the Persian under the protection of Luna rather than Mercury, suggesting that the Santa Prisca *dipinti* are anomalous.[342] It seems rather strong to dismiss the Santa Prisca association, and incline to the Felicissimus association, on the basis of this one piece of evidence.

II.III.i.vi. Heliodromus, or the Sun-runner grade

The sixth grade is that of the *heliodromus*. The accompanying iconography on the Felicissimus mosaic shows a blazing torch, seven-rayed crown with ribbons, and a whip (Figure 33). Both the imagery of the whip and radiate crown, and a *dipinto* from Santa Prisca, associate this grade with Sol; this is rather unsurprising, given the obvious connections between Sol and Helios. The *heliodromus* is perhaps the least attested of all seven grades. As mentioned above, there is no reference to it at Dura-Europos, and there are no inscriptions recording an initiate at this level.

The discovery of the Mainz cup has generally been held to have provided an additional instance of a *heliodromus*, although the identification of the figures here as grade-holders

[342] For example, Clauss 1990b, 143-144 = Clauss 2000, 136.

is by no means so certain as has been widely claimed.[343] This cup seems to show a processional scene, in which four figures parade towards the left. reading from left to right, they show a figure in a cuirass, a figure wearing a Phrygian cap and carrying a downturned stick, a figure carrying a whip and probably wearing a radiate tiara, and finally a figure carrying an upturned stick. It is the third of these that has been identified as the *heliodromus*, on the basis of the whip and radiate tiara, which are attributes of Sol (Figure 34).

II.III.i.vii. Pater, or the Father grade

The final grade is the *pater*. The mosaic shows a *patera*, staff, Phrygian cap, and a *falx* (Figure 35). This last image is a common attribute of Saturn, and indeed the evidence from Santa Prisca identifies Saturn as the planet, or tutelary deity, associated with this grade. The Phrygian cap can easily be explained if we see the *pater* as in some way a representative of Mithras, taking on the god's role in a re-enactment of the ritual meal, for example, though such an argument, as outlined above, is dubious. The *patera* is perhaps a more interesting symbol. Most examinations of the Felicissimus iconography overlook it, perhaps dismissing it as a standard part of ritual and sacrificial paraphernalia, and therefore suitable for the highest grade of Mithraic initiate. Nevertheless, there is also the more intriguing possibility that it was intended as a humorous play on the words *pater* and *patera*.

The final part of the mosaic, having run through the list of Mithraic grades, shows another *krater*, this time flanked by representations of branches, and an inscription recording the

[343] Beck 2000; Gordon 2011, 332-334; Chalupa 2008, 196-198. On the Mainz cup more generally, see below 147-149.

benefaction of Felicissimus (Figure 36). This presumably lay just in front of the niche and altars.

As already mentioned, the rank of *pater* is the grade most often found in Mithraic inscriptions; this is unsurprising if the attainment of the grade indicates that its holder had reached the point of highest prestige within the Mithraic community.[344] Despite the preponderance of the grade *pater* in inscriptions, those that record the names of grades only account for around 16% of all Mithraic epigraphy. This is one of the reasons why scholars, in recent years, have become cautious about seeing the full number of seven grades as a consistent feature of Mithraic structure. Outside the Italian peninsula, there are very few instances where more than the *leo* and *pater* grades are recorded, with Dura-Europos being an obvious exception.

The example of the Felicissimus mosaic, often used as a guide to the seven grades of Mithraic initiation, has already indicated several inconsistencies in iconography and planetary associations. A simple comparison with the Santa Prisca *dipinti* shows that, although there is an overwhelming number of similarities between the two, there is a sufficient difference for us to remember to be cautious in using the evidence from one site to supply a framework for others.

To illustrate this point, one might cite another black and white mosaic from Ostia. Just as with the Felicissimus *mithraeum*, the aisle of the *Mitreo degli Animali* (Figure 37) is marked out by a mosaic, which may have had a connection to the grades of initiation. The image of interest shows a naked man carrying a fire shovel in his right hand and a sickle or knife in

[344] Clauss 1990a, 186; 1990b, 144-145 = Clauss 2000, 137.

his left (Figure 38). Based on the symbols shown with the grades in the Felicissimus mosaic, which associate the fire shovel with the *leo* grade, and the knife with the *Perses* grade, this figure has been interpreted as an amalgamation of the two, as a *Leo-Perses*.[345] Would such a speculation have been made, if it were not for the evidence taken from the Felicissimus *mithraeum*, which has then been used to create a template for grade attributes? Is there any reason to assume such a systematic meaning to the symbols of Mithraic worship across different *mithraea*? Perhaps too much effort can be given to making the decorative iconography found in *mithraea* fit into a wider and overarching framework of Mithraic association.

II.III.ii. The Mitreo di Santa Prisca

The Santa Prisca *mithraeum* was discovered in 1934, beneath a Christian church, but went unexcavated until the 1950s. It occupies the basement of a first century AD house; the date when this space was converted into a Mithraic sanctuary is unclear, but graffiti gives us a *terminus ante quem* of AD 202, while Maarten Vermaseren, who excavated the site, dated the earliest frescoes to the AD 190s.[346] It is these frescoes for which the *mithraeum* is famous; there are relatively few painted *mithraea* from the western half of the Roman Empire, with the *mithraea* at Marino and Capua Vetere, and the Barberini *mithraeum* in Rome, being other significant examples. The *mithraeum* underwent a subsequent restoration and enlargement, dated by Vermaseren to the AD 220s, which saw a second layer of painting added over the first frescoes.[347]

345 See the Ostia Antica website: http://www.ostia-antica.org/regio4/2/2-11.htm.
346 Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 177.
347 Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 173.

The main room is preceded by an antechamber, and is conventional in shape and appearance; it consists of a rectangular room on an east-West axis with a central aisle, two *podia*, and a niche at the far end. The frescoes run along the north and south walls; the repainting has obliterated most of the early frescoes on the south wall, but fragments of text can still be read on the north wall. In general, the state of preservation of the frescoes is rather bad; there was probably some damage caused when the *mithraeum* was filled in with stones and detritus, perhaps in the Middle Ages, and the damp has caused the stucco to peel off the walls. The background colour is white, with red borders.[348]

What remains of the upper layer of frescoes can be split into three thematic groups. The first, occupying the half of the south wall closest to the niche, appears to show a representative figure of each of the seven grades (Figure 39). The remainder of this wall, and most of the painting on the north wall, is taken up by a processional series of frescoes, accompanied by *dipinte*. The final section is commonly described as a representation of a cave, with several figures shown inside the cave (Figure 40).

Starting on the south wall, the figure closest to the niche is seated. He is wearing a Phrygian cap, long-sleeved red tunic, and red cloak.[349] He is making some sort of gesture with his right hand, and may have originally held an object in his left. The accompanying *dipinto* reads: *nama [Patribus] / ab oriente / ad occidente(m) / tutela Saturni*. Although the name of the grade itself is missing, the attribute of the Phrygian cap, and the fact that the figure is seated and therefore clearly in a position of authority, would probably suffice to indicate

348 This is common in the decoration of ancient buildings, including *mithraea*. Obvious parallels can be found in the *mithraea* of Santa Maria Capua Vetere, in the Pareti Dipinte and Sette Porte in Ostia, and even as far afield as Dura-Europos.
349 On the possible significance of the colours, see Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 170-171.

that this is a representation of the *pater* grade, even without the addition of the following six figures.

The next figure is also dressed in a red tunic and cloak, and has a radiate crown. He is standing, facing the viewer, with his right hand raised in greeting to the *pater*, and his left hand holding a globe. Fragments of *dipinti* from both the upper and lower layers of painting survive, and each supplies certain letters that are missing from the other. The upper text reads: *[na]ma H[eliodromis] / tute[l]a S[ol]is*; the under-layer reads: *nama H[el]iodrom[i]s / t[utela Solis]*.

The third figure has been badly damaged, but drawings from the time of the excavation show him to be holding a branch, or perhaps ears of corn, in his right hand, and a sickle in his left. A *dipinto* above him reads: *[na]ma Persis / tutela [Mer]curis*. As mentioned above, this text places the grade under the protection of Mercury rather than Luna, indicating that there may have been no consistent assignment of grade to deity, or perhaps suggesting that either the worshippers at the Felicissimus or the Santa Prisca *mithraea* has altered a standard association.

The next figure is dressed in red, and appears to be holding an object, tentatively identified by Vermaseren as a fire shovel, in front of him with both hands. Presumably Vermaseren's reading of the object is based upon the attribute given to the *leo* grade in the Felicissimus mosaic, and perhaps also on the figure from the Animali *mithraeum*. His accompanying *dipinto* reads: *nama L[e]on[i]b[us] / tutela Iovis*. The *leo* is followed closely by a figure in a white tunic, who reached forward to grasp the tunic in front with his right hand. He appears to be carrying a bag over his left shoulder (the bag, as mentioned above, is seen as a

traditional attribute of the *miles* grade), and has arrows hanging from his belt. He is identified by a well-preserved *dipinto*: *nama Militibus / tutela Mart[is]*.

The sixth figure is veiled in yellow, and carries a burning lamp in his right hand; this latter symbol is consistent with the iconography found in the Felicissimus mosaic for the *nymphus* grade. As with the *heliodromus* grade, two layers of *dipinti* can be traced. The upper layer reads: *n ama Nym[phis] / tut / ela Veneris*; the lower layer reads: *[n]a[m]a Nymph[is] / tut[ela Ve]n[eri]s*. Only traces survive of the figure that comes after the *nymphus*, and there are no fragments of a *dipinto*.

This scene, which is set within its own red border, tells us relatively little new about the seven grades, following on from the Felicissimus mosaic. What it does indicate, though, is how easily attributes for each of the grades could be taken to be normative; the shared instances of the lamp for the *nymphus* grade, or the fire shovel for the *leo*, can quickly become part of a fixed set of symbols to accompany each grade. It is very tempting then to see this as a normative way of portraying the grades, especially in cases where the archaeological evidence may only be fragmentary. The challenge comes in using these symbols flexibly to supplement the range of possibilities that we encounter in deciphering new visual and iconographic material, rather than expecting to see them as a replicable and transferrable standard.

The processional series on the south and north walls was called "the Procession of the Lions" by Maarten Vermaseren, in an allusion to the Mithraic grade-name. The procession on the south wall shows six male figures, identified as *leones* by *dipinti*, carrying offerings or driving sacrificial animals before them. From left to right, they show: an indistinct figure,

of whom only traces remain; a young man with a white bull; a young man carrying a cockerel, and accompanied by a *dipinto* reading *nama . . . Leon[i]*; a man driving a ram; a youth carrying a *krater* in both hands, and with a *dipinto* reading *nama Nicephoro Leoni*; finally, a youth driving a pig, and the *dipinto nama / Theodoro Leoni*. The figures are all moving to the left, that is, towards the niche at the end of the aisle.

The procession scene from the north wall shows seven figures, though these are less well preserved. Again, only traces of the first figure remain, though he may be carrying a loaf of bread; the second figure carries a *krater*, and has a *dipinto* above his head acclaiming him *nama He[li]odoro Leoni*; the third is carrying a dish, on which is a loaf of bread cut into six segments, and above him is the *dipinto nama Gelasio Leoni*; figure four is badly preserved, but the *dipinto* above him reads *nama Phoebo Leoni*; the fifth and sixth figures are also badly damaged, though the latter may be carrying four lighted candles; the seventh figure carries a cockerel; the eighth, like the sixth, seems to be carrying a bunch of four candles in his left hand, while he holds a single lighted candle in his right.

This procession can be combined with another fragment of text, in hexameter verse, from the Santa Prisca site, which reads:

> receive the incense-burners, Father, receive the Lions, Holy One, through whom we offer incense, through whom we ourselves are consumed.[350]

Together, they present an interesting picture of the importance of the *leo*. The connection to fire and incense appears to corroborate Porphyry's account in *De antro nympharum*,

[350] *CIMRM* 485: "*accipe thuricremos pater accipe sancte leones / per quos thuradamus per quos consumimur ipsi*".

which explicitly associates the grade with fire and purification.[351] Similarly, an inscription from the Dura-Europos *mithraeum* refers to the "lustration of holy [men]" through "fiery breath", though there is no direct link to the *leo* grade.[352]

The Santa Prisca procession scene, if we read it as a reflection of ritual action – though this is, in itself, something of a leap –, suggests that the *leo* grade may have had a special significance within Mithraic activity, at least in the specific community at Santa Prisca. Why should this grade be singled out for particular attention? Manfred Clauss has suggested that there may have been a large number of worshippers who held the grade at the time, and adduces the example of a *leonteum* from Umbria as further evidence.[353] Unfortunately, the possible reasons for why this grade is so prominent in Santa Prisca are fragmentary, and it would be as problematic as it is difficult to attempt to piece them together to form an answer.

The fact that both series of depictions show processional scenes, involving the movement of men with names clearly associated with the traditional Mithraic grades, may also suggest an idea of movement from grade to grade. The nature of the grades has been disputed by Mithraic scholars; were they a hierarchic structure – as the identification of the Felicissimus mosaic might support – through which a Mithraist could move, eventually hoping to become a *pater*? Or were they instead a group of names given only to those who expressed particular interest; this is what Manfred Clauss has described as a priestly class.[354] The conception of the grades as an initiatory, hierarchic or priestly structure is a subject to which I shall return later, before addressing the idea of initiation itself.

[351] Porph. *De antr. nymph*. 15.
[352] Translation from Gordon 1979-80, 36.
[353] Clauss 1990b, 143 = Clauss 2000, 136.
[354] Clauss 1990a, 186.

II.III.iii. The Mitreo delle Pareti Dipinte

The frescoes from Santa Prisca are well worth comparing to similar paintings, thought to represent certain grades, from the second-century *Mitreo delle Pareti Dipinte* in Ostia. Only fragments of the wall decoration from this *mithraeum* survive, but those that do are mainly in good condition. These particular frescoes are Mithraic in provenance; they cover earlier paintings that seem to predate the use of the space for Mithraic worship. The figures thought to show the grades run along the right-hand wall; the first figure seems to show a veiled woman, wearing a *tunica* and *himation* (Figure 41). Her left hand is adjusting her hair or veil, while her right hand is holding up an unidentifiable object; from her gaze towards this object, and her naturalistic pose, it may be a mirror. On the basis of the veil, the figure may be intended to represent the *nymphus* grade, though it may just as well depict the tutelary deity of the grade Venus, or indeed a range of other female deities.

The next figure is separated from the first by a stucco column. He is dressed in a long red cloak, has a nimbus, and is carrying a spear in both hands. To his right is a stylised tree, beyond which is the figure of another man, naked except for a red cloak, and holding an upturned burning torch (Figure 42). Unfortunately, the area covering his head has been damaged, so it is impossible to tell whether he too was nimbate, or whether he had a radiate crown or cap. The first of these two men has been identified as *miles*, and the second as *heliodromus*. The first identification may be reasonably secure, if we are looking at a progression of the grades; the *miles* follows on from the *nymphus*, and the spear is a traditional attribute of the grade. The classification of the third figure as a *heliodromus* though is far less certain; the blazing torch is a conventional symbol for the grade, but an upturned torch is equally associated with Cautes. Furthermore, according to the order of the

grades set out at both the Felicissimus and the Santa Prisca *mithraea*, there are two intervening grades between *miles* and *heliodromus*; where are the *leo* and the *Perses*?

A fourth figure, wearing a red Phrygian cap, violet cloak and green tunic, and holding a downturned torch, is more clearly identified as Cautopates, who ordinarily would have no place at all in a sequence of Mithraic grades (Figure 43). The rest of this panel has been destroyed, but further along the wall, beyond the masonry column that divides the *podium* in two, there is another panel divided into four. In each of its sections, there is the figure of a man, one of whom is holding an upturned torch.

Vermaseren and Van Essen, in their report on the Santa Prisca excavation, drew explicit comparisons between these two *mithraea* of Santa Prisca and Pareti Dipinte. They argued that the similarities between the two in size, appearance, appropriation of space and decorative programme indicated a dialogue between Mithraic worshippers in Ostia and Rome, and suggested that Santa Prisca was modelled on the earlier Ostian sanctuary.[355] They also tried to find consistencies in the uses of colour on the clothing of the grade members, not only between the two layers of painting in Santa Prisca, but also between the Roman and Ostia *mithraea*.[356] They see the choice of colours as symbolic of the different roles of the grades, with the *pater*, for example, wearing red clothing because he is associated with Mithras and the slaughter of the bull; they even go so far as to call the painter of the upper layer of frescoes at Santa Prisca as "the most correct", based on their construction of symbolic meanings. This demonstrates the perils of reading too much from the existing evidence; three layers of paintings do not amount to sufficient evidence to create

[355] Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 26-27.
[356] Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 169-171.

a coherent picture of how worshippers may have understood the symbolism behind certain colours. The proximity of Rome to Ostia, and the similarity between Santa Prisca and Pareti Dipinte, makes a search for such norms tempting, but dangerous.

II.III.iv. Conclusions

What can the *mithraea* of Felicissimus, Santa Prisca, Animali, and Pareti Dipinte tell us about Mithraic conceptions of structure and nomenclature, usually described as seven grades, and about the influence they had on ritual? When viewed through a narrow lens, they appear to tell us quite a lot, and most of it supports the textual accounts given by Porphyry and Jerome.

Both the *Mitreo di Felicissimus* and the *Mitreo di Santa Prisca* show seven grades, laid out hierarchically from *corax* to *pater*. They both indicate a connection to seven planets, though they do not completely agree on the exact links between grade and tutelary planet or deity. They both show attributes for each grade, and enough of these are held in common that they suggest an established mode of depiction. The Santa Prisca paintings imply that processions, offerings and the sacrifice of animals may have been part of Mithraic ritual. Finally, both show how these grades were commemorated in the permanent physical decoration of Mithraic space intimates that they were an important feature of promoting Mithraic identity. The examples of the Animali and Pareti Dipinte *mithraea* do much to support this reading of the evidence for the grades.

The story that the Santa Prisca and Felicissimus *mithraea* tell is appealing. It suggests coherency, unity and uniformity, of a kind that is often lacking within our evidence for

Mithraic worship. It is, unfortunately, deceptive. The picture that these sites present is limited, almost in its entirety, to Rome and Ostia; the main exception is the Mainz cup from Germania Superior. The rest of the evidence from around the Empire is insufficient for scholars to see seven grades as normative for Mithras-worship; even in the graffiti from Dura-Europos, there are multiple grade names but no clear list that indicates how many were being used at the same time. As mentioned above, outside the Italian peninsula, the occurrence of grade names other than *leo* and *pater* is rare, although a raven-headed figure is attested in non-Italian iconography.[357]

Several scholars have come to the conclusion that the seven grades were not so coherent nor so uniform as the Roman and Ostian evidence suggests. Per Beskow argued, based on the graffiti from Dura-Europos, that the seven grades originated there, and were subsequently exported to the Italian peninsula.[358] More plausibly, Robert Turcan has suggested that the complex hierarchy of the grades, and their astrological connections, was confined to the area surrounding Rome and Ostia.[359] In fact, the link between the grades and tutelary planets or deities is only attested in Rome and Ostia, and only in the few *mithraea* described in this chapter.[360] Nonetheless, the seeming coincidence of this has frequently led scholars to see the astrological factors as an intrinsic part of understanding the grades.[361]

There clearly was a structure within Mithraic worship by which its members seem to have identified themselves and referred to each other. This has most commonly been described

357 For more on the raven-headed figure, see Chapter IV, 241-245.
358 Beskow 1978, 11-12.
359 Turcan 1999, 249-259.
360 Out of at least sixteen identifiable *mithraea* in Ostia, and sixteen in Rome.
361 For example, Chalupa 2008, 192-5. Chalupa does acknowledge Turcan's argument, but his interest in the astrological features of Mithraic belief leads him to dismiss it rather too quickly.

as a grade-system, because it has been assumed that it carried with it connotations of hierarchy and progression.[362] Yet the very fact that there exist countless Mithraic inscriptions, in which the dedicant is named but does not provide his grade name, might suggest that it was not so important to Mithraists as we might have imagined. Manfred Clauss offers an explanation for this, namely that Mithraic membership could have consisted of a twofold system, in which only certain individuals, to whom he refers as 'priests', chose to rise through a system of grades.[363] He argues that:

> Initiates could take on rôles of this sort if they had sufficient interest, enough leisure for the instruction, and adequate financial resources, if only to be able to spare the time it all took.[364]

This statement seems to assume a standardised set of criteria for the higher ranks of Mithraic worship: they had to be educated, prepared to acquire an esoteric knowledge of ritual and astrology, and – presumably – able to afford any necessary expenditure. This appears to raise the idea of a universal cult again; can we safely assume, however, that Mithraic *patres* across the Roman Empire had a uniform set of qualifying attributes? It seems to be the case that, in certain *mithraea*, astrological concerns carried a degree of importance for the Mithraic community that used them.[365] This is not necessarily the case for all *mithraea*, though; it is logical, therefore, to consider that astrological knowledge may not have been required among all *patres*.

362 Based largely upon Porphyry's account of the transmigration of souls in *De antr. nymph.* 5-6; see further Chapter III, 173-174.
363 Robert Turcan concurs with this idea of a "priestly hierarchy" ("*hiérarchie sacerdotale*": Turcan 1993, 81-83).
364 Clauss 1990, 139 = 2000, 132.
365 For selected examples of such *mithraea*, see Chapter III.

Reinhold Merkelbach has been particularly critical of Clauss' 'priestly-grade' theory, arguing that it is inherently Christianising in its vision of a mass of members who have been initiated, and only a select few who acquired the knowledge to become priests.[366] Merkelbach acknowledges the lack of epigraphic testimony to certain grades, especially the fifth and sixth grades of *Perses* and *heliodromus*, but instead offers a theory locating these grades within the composition of the tauroctony scene, or its side-scenes.[367] More recently, in his summary of the question, Chalupa came down heavily in favour of a traditional reading of a structure of seven initiatory grades, which were integral to Mithraic practice, ascent through which was the goal of all Mithraists, and which were universalised across the Roman Empire.[368] Neither Clauss' nor Chalupa's argument seems quite sufficient. Merkelbach's complaint about the Christianising nature of a twofold system carries a great deal of weight, but Chalupa's points about universalism and uniformity move too far in the opposite direction. Rather than a system accessible to all Mithraists, or a twofold hierarchy accessible only to those with the most money and leisure, it seems instead plausible to try to find a middle-ground between the two.

In certain places – and in particular in those described so far in this chapter – this structure was significant, was connected to the number seven, and carried with it some associations with astrology. Nevertheless, I would sound a note of caution against those who would argue that:

> the connection of grades with planets and planetary gods evidently had a legitimizing function, because it suitably explains why there were seven grades (and not more or less)[369]

366 Merkelbach 1990, 195.
367 Merkelbach 1990, 195-197.
368 Chalupa 2008, 198.
369 Chalupa 2008, 181-183.

The idea that there were seven grades is almost entirely linked to evidence that is provably from Rome and Ostia: the two *mithraea* of Felicissimus and Santa Prisca. Even the account of Jerome could plausibly have been based on his experience during his stay in Rome, and based on his potential experience, or awareness, of Mithraic worship within the city. Nor can we really say that it was limited to Rome and Ostia, rather, it seems to have been limited to two particular *mithraea*, as far as the existing archaeological evidence can attest. In fact, the emphasis on the number seven in these two sites may well be because there was a particular interest among these specific communities in creating links between the grades and seven planets; links that could very easily have been idiosyncratic. In this sense, Chalupa's statement, quoted above, could be correct, but only in its application to two *mithraea*. There is no reason to believe that the belief in seven grades was confined to Rome and Ostia, but nor is there a concrete reason to export it more widely.

What, then, of the Mainz cup, and the paintings from the *Mitreo delle Pareti Dipinte*? They may well be intended to show seven Mithraic grades, and the interpretation of the Mainz cup in this light is very plausible. It is important to remember, however, how easy it is to fall into the trap of expecting to see something. Is it possible that scholars have read the Mainz cup as showing seven figures representing seven grades simply because the idea of the grades has been handed down as a Mithraic norm? Similarly, we may only see the attributes of the figures on the frescoes in the Pareti Dipinte *mithraeum* as referring to seven grades because we are familiar with them from the Felicissimus mosaic and the Santa Prisca paintings; even though the existing panels in the Ostian site are fragmentary, the belief that they must originally have shown seven figures is strong, and appears largely to have been based upon the expectation of seeing them.

As early as 1912, William Phythian-Adams expressed concerns about the importance of the number seven to this grade structure:

> Yet in the present inquiry we are at once confronted with a glaring instance of unfounded conjecture. St. Jerome has given us seven grades. There were seven planets. What more need be said? In fact, a very great deal.[370]

The evidence of the Felicissimus and Santa Prisca *mithraea*, when combined with other evidence from around the Roman Empire, does not seem sufficient to describe the seven grades as a Mithraic norm, or as characteristic of the Roman worship of Mithras. I would suggest, that instead of looking for *the* seven grades of Mithras-worship, scholars should instead accept that there may have been a changing and flexible number, sometimes seven, sometimes more, and sometimes fewer. Whether they can really be described as grades, and whether they can properly be described as initiatory, is a subject for the next section.

II.IV. Initiation

Initiation is the stereotypical marker of modern perceptions of mystery cults. It reinforces the impression of secrecy and closed communities, and conjures ideas of humiliation rituals and mystagogues. Walter Burkert sees initiation ceremonies as synonymous with mystery cults; providing an extra level of participation for the religious insider.[371] The categorisation of Mithraic worship as a mystery cult has therefore created the expectation that it involved initiation, and that evidence of this should be there to be found in the archaeological record.

370 Phythian-Adams 1912, 54. The purpose of this article was not only to cast doubt on the fixity of the number seven, but also to find other possibilities for grades and grade names.
371 Burkert 1987, 8.

The idea of initiation, almost more than any other component of mystery cults – or similar secretive societies – has caught the imagination of scholars and non-academics. The lines between fictionalised accounts of Mithraic initiation, scholarly suppositions, and the surviving evidence are easily blurred. This is particularly the case when this evidence is, as with so many sources on the worship of Mithras, composed of non-Mithraic textual accounts on the one hand, and complex, esoteric art and artefacts on the other.

II.IV.i. The appeal of cognitive science

The understanding of initiation as a requirement of mystery practices has, in part, been fuelled by the rising interest in the field of cognitive science and the exploration of psychological effects upon worshippers in the Roman world. Maarten Vermaseren was keen to compare the conclusions drawn by modern anthropological investigations with his own picture of Mithraic activity.[372] Since then, Luther Martin, Harvey Whitehouse, Roger Beck, and Olympia Panagiotidou have led the field in drawing out the cognitive aspects of Mithraic worship, emphasising the role of collective memory and social dynamics in building the identity of Mithraists.[373] This idea of social dynamics in one to which I shall return in Chapter IV, when looking at the possible evidence for rituals other than initiation within the space of the *mithraeum*.[374]

372 Vermaseren 1963, 129.
373 Beck 2004b; Whitehouse 2004b; Martin 2014, 272-297; 2015; Panagiotidou & Beck 2017.
374 Chapter IV, 242-247.

The attraction of using the cognitive science of religion (CSR) when thinking of the worship of Mithras, and in particular applying it to initiation, is fairly easy to comprehend. In Martin's own words:

> The relentless problem of all historiography is its instantiation of the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent, that is, that the truth of the antecedent may be argued from the truth of the consequent, for all historiography proceeds, by definition, as a reconstruction of past events (and causes) on the basis of surviving historical remains. As I have argued elsewhere, the appealing feature of cognitive models is that they go behind the familiar metaphors, typologies, or sets of concepts – themselves based on descriptions of historical remains – to advance theoretical explanations for historical formations that are grounded in universal features of human cognition.[375]

The Roman worship of Mithras may certainly be categorised as a field that has had a tradition of being weighed down with burdensome typologies and sets of concepts: the origins debate, and the seven-grade structure are two encountered so far in this thesis. In the above quotation, Martin is clearly right in arguing that attempting to reconstruct Mithraic worship based on the surviving evidence is deeply problematic.[376] This is part of the same characteristic lament of the lack of textual sources that we have already come across, and will appear again in subsequent chapters.[377] It also leads into a dominant question throughout this thesis: how do we overcome the desire for more texts, and use the evidence that we do have. As mentioned in the Introduction, this is a question that applies not only to the field of Mithraic studies, but to the use of material culture more widely and more centrally in the history of ancient religion.[378] This thesis aims to be part of the solution: it

375 Martin 2015, 42. For the reference to "elsewhere", see Martin 2002, 31: "Given the incomplete data that are characteristic of the historical record generally, from both literate as well as nonliterate societies, social scientists at least since Marx have suggested that well-articulated social scientific models might be employed to correct or even to supplement the historical record."
376 Though, of course, a reconstruction is not necessarily the goal of scholarship on this subject, and is certainly not the aim of this thesis.
377 Explicitly, Beck 2006, 3; see also Introduction, 21-24; 22 f.51.
378 Introduction, 22.

endeavours to remove some of the weight of past assumptions, and to create new avenues of thinking interpretively, contextually and empirically about the material evidence.

It is the subsequent part of Martin's statement that gives some grounds for concern. The thought that the "universal features of human cognition" could indeed allow us to advance beyond the limitations set by our evidence is obviously a compelling one. Martin proposes that we see the worship of Mithras as an imagistic religious phenomenon, building in part upon a description offered by Manfred Clauss, but mainly on the anthropological and cognitive work of Harvey Whitehouse.[379] As part of this, he suggests that the experience of a Mithraist undergoing initiation should be accessible to us through the human cognitive insight into fear, humiliation, and vulnerability; he argues that these experiences are directly comparable in this sense to those witnessed by anthropologists working in Papua New Guinea.[380] Martin also promotes the psychological model of episodic – and, in particular, 'flashbulb' – memory as a means of comprehending what an initiatory rite might have been like, rather than the conventional approach of trying to understand belief.[381]

This certainly seems appealing; if we accept that we cannot recreate Mithraic belief, then such an entry point into ritual must surely be valuable. Nonetheless, as mentioned several times already, there are obvious dangers in thinking in terms of universals. Can the initiation rites of the Roman worship of Mithras, as performed during the first to fourth centuries AD really be compared – even in the sphere of human experiences and emotions – to the practices of a twentieth century tribe in Papua New Guinea? After all, Mithraic initiates

379 Martin 2014, 273-280; Clauss 1990b, 21-22 = Clauss 2000, 11-12; Whitehouse 2000; 2002; 2004a.
380 Martin 2014, 279-281.
381 Martin 2014, 280-282. The imagistic mode of religiosity proposed by Whitehouse may also be useful in considering the transmission of the tauroctony scene, and other Mithraic iconography, as an example of episodic memory.

were in no way cut off from the rest of the world – though, admittedly, service on Hadrian's Wall might sometimes have felt like that – and these supposed initiatory rituals were entirely voluntary, as was Mithraic membership *tout court*. Rather than young boys facing a coming-of-age process necessary for their survival within the community, Mithraists were mostly rather older.

While the work of cognitive scientists and anthropologists might enhance some of our understandings of Mithraic rituals, it can never fill in the gaps left by our lack of evidence. It seems, in many ways, to be a mechanism for avoiding the problems posed by a religious phenomenon heavy with material culture; rather than using the evidence we have in the ways most appropriate to it, the cognitive science of religion seems instead to try to find ways to answer our questions despite a lack of sources, and sometimes by making comparisons that can seem slightly too anachronistic.[382] Social structures and cultural patterns as they exist today cannot be unproblematically mapped onto the ancient world; Panagiotidou's attempt to do so ends up accepting as empirical fact the theories suggested by her methodology.[383]

382 The question of how to use our evidence in the way most appropriate to it is, of course, a tricky one. A contextual and empirical approach is important, as is a focus on starting from material culture. Julian Droogan provides a good framework for bringing different disciplines engaged in religious materiality together; he suggests a theoretical grounding for how a materiality of religion might look (Droogan 2013). Hutchings & McKenzie 2016 also offers a useful approach – though not rooted in the ancient world – for scholars of religion how to think and talk materially. A similar anachronism to that found in the cognitive scientific approach to Mithraic scholarship exists in discussing text and image; Squire 2009 provides several case studies for working successfully with both, with a period-sensitive and critical method. Perhaps most relevant for this thesis is his emphasis in Chapters 1 & 2 on the importance of images in the Graeco-Roman world, and their subsequent historical downplaying in years of Protestant scholarship; this relates directly to the problems of the weight given to textual accounts that we encounter in Mithraic scholarship. An excellent example of a recent attempt to redress this balance is Friese & Kristensen 2017 on pilgrimage in the ancient world and material culture, in which archaeology and visual evidence is placed at the forefront of analysis.

383 For a robust criticism not only of Panagiotidou 2017, but also the applicability of CSR to Mithraic rituals more broadly, see Gordon 2018.

II.IV.ii. The textual evidence for initiation

The sources for accounts of Mithraic initiation are also almost overwhelmingly Christian, with the exception of an extract from Porphyry.[384] Although my method, in general, has preferred to start with the material evidence, this section will begin by examining these textual sources. After all, this is the prism through which many Mithraic scholars have approached the archaeological remains, and has undoubtedly acted as the framework and guiding force behind their interpretations of it. This section of the chapter looks at the material evidence that has been argued in support of initiation, and the textual accounts that have been used to underpin it, to see whether the two match up, and whether they provide a strong argument for our understanding of possible Mithraic initiation. Of course, textual and material evidence can easily address different aspects of religious behaviours and activities, but when material evidence is used as a crutch for historical arguments from literary sources, this is a case for strong critical investigation.

Many scholars approach the subject of initiation, just like other 'norms' of Mithraic activity, by looking at Porphyry or, rather, by believing Porphyry's claim that he has been informed by the works of the supposed Mithraist Eubulus.[385] The relevant passages of Porphyry in this case are found in *De antro nympharum*. The first, to which I shall return when examining conceptions of Mithraic sacred space, relates explicitly to the cosmological conceptions of initiation that were part of Mithras-worship's interest for Porphyry:

384 For the origins of the term 'Mysteries of Mithras', see Introduction, 19-20.
385 See Beck 2006, 17; Ch.4. Beck makes clear his belief that Porphyry's *De antr. nymph.* is "an obvious entry point to an interpretation of the mysteries", and particularly to initiation. See also Bremmer 2014, 132-134.

> So, the Persians too, by celebrating the mysteries of the descent and ascent, initiate the initiate; they call this place a cave.[386]

This reference to the Persians, and the fact that the passage then goes on to discuss Mithraic sacred space, allows for the identification of this extract as a comment on Mithraic initiation. The second passage from Porphyry does not explicitly refer to the worship of Mithras; nonetheless, the fact that he has openly claimed to be discussing Mithraic practices at other points in the work has led scholars traditionally to interpret it as an allusion to Mithras-worship:

> When therefore in the Leontic rites, honey instead of water is poured onto the hands of the initiates for washing, they are urged to keep their hands clean from all things painful and harmful and foul; since he is an initiate of cleansing fire, they use a liquid similar to it, rejecting water as inimical to fire. They also purify the tongue from all error by honey. And when they offer honey to the Persian, as the guardian of the fruits, they symbolically assert its property as a preservative.[387]

The lions mentioned in this passage do not necessarily refer to the *leo* grade; the Greek refers to the Leontic rites, rather than mentioning a specific ritual role. The term 'the Persian' could be intended as a reference to Mithras himself, although 'guardian of the fruits' would be an unusual epithet for the god, if this were the case; equally, it could denote the *Perses* grade. The combination of lions and Persian in the same few lines certainly creates a suggestion that the worship of Mithras is being discussed, though this association is undoubtedly heavier in the minds of those who expect the 'seven' grades to be found together, as part of a concrete whole. There is no suggestion in this passage, if we accept

386 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 6: οὕτω καὶ Πέρσαι τὴν εἰς κὰτω κάθοδον τῶν ψυχῶν καὶ πάλιν ἔξοδον μυσταγωγοῦντες τελοῦσι τὸν μύστην, ἐπονομάσαντες σπήλαιον <τον> τόπον.
387 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 15: ὅταν μὲν οὖν τοῖς τὰ λεοντικὰ μυουμένοις, εἰς τὰς χεῖρας ἀνθ' ὕδατος μέλι νίψασθαι ἐγχέωσι, καθαρὰς ἔχειν τὰς χεῖρας παραγγέλλουσιν ἀπὸ παντὸς λυπηροῦ καὶ βλαπτικοῦ καὶ μυσαροῦ, καὶ ὡς μύστῃ καθαρτικοῦ ὄντος τοῦ πυρὸς οἰκεῖα νίπτρα προσάγουσι, παραιτησάμενοι τὸ ὕδωρ ὡς πολεμοῦν τῳ πυρί. καθαίρουσι δὲ καὶ τὴν γλῶσσαν τῷ μέλιτι ἀπὸ παντὸς ἁμαρτωλοῦ. ὅταν δὲ τῷ Πέρσῃ προσάγωσι μέλι ὡς φύλακι καρπῶν, τὸ φυλακτικὸν ἐν συμβόλῳ τίθενται.

that it is talking about Mithraic activity, that there was movement between different grades; we only hear about one possible grade, and the ritual characteristics associated with it. The concept of Leontic rites, however, certainly carries with it a strong whiff of mystery and initiatory practice.

The wider passage concerns the ritual uses of honey, and this extract indicates that different foods played important roles in Mithraic practice. The Christian apologist Justin Martyr also mentions the role of food within Mithraic ritual in an initiatory context:

> For at the initiatory rites bread and a cup of water are set out accompanied by certain formulae, as you know or may ascertain.[388]

The Christian use of bread and water is now sufficiently firmly ingrained in western minds to need no further introduction; rather than showing Porphyry's neo-Platonic interest in the uses of certain foods, Justin Martyr is rather more concerned with the possibility that Mithraists were deliberately subverting Christian rites.[389]

Justin Martyr is by no means the only Christian author who claims to be aware of Mithraic rituals, or to suggest that they were mockeries of Christian practices. Tertullian mentions an initiation rite of washing, although it is unclear whether he is explicitly referring to a Mithraic practice. The passage is drawn from *De baptismo*, and Tertullian's interest is therefore unsurprisingly on the parallels between this kind of ritual performance and the Christian sacrament:

388 Justin Martyr *Apol.* 1.66.
389 For further suggestions on Justin Martyr's interests in his comparison of Mithraic and Christian initiation, see Roselaar 2014, 189-191.

> But they deceive themselves with barren waters. For it is also through washing that some are initiated into the rites of an Isis or a Mithras.[390]

This idea of washing could easily be a Christian speculation on pagan non-baptism, or even anti-baptism; Tertullian could here be viewing a common practice through the lens of Christian theology. He also describes a supposed initiation rite, and does so in terms which seem both to praise and to condemn Mithraists:

> Be ashamed as Christ's fellow-soldiers to be open to reproach not only from Christ himself but from any soldier of Mithra. For to him when he is initiated in a cavern, a veritable home of darkness, a crown is offered on a naked sword, as if in parody of martyrdom; this then is placed on his head, and he is enjoined with his own hand to lift it from his head and voluntarily to transfer it to his shoulder, declaring that Mithra is his crown.[391]

It is unclear whether the soldier in this passage is a reference to the *miles* grade, or simply a generic term used to describe Mithraists, or indeed any followers of a god. Or, indeed, an attempt to create a direct comparison between the 'true' soldiers of Christ and the 'false' soldiers of Mithras. While this passage therefore indicates that initiation was a part of Mithraic ritual, and that it involved certain tests of character, but there is no clear way of knowing whether this was an initiation into a specific grade.

It is the idea of these initiatory tests that has really captured the modern imagination when it comes to mystery cults. In the sixth or seventh century, pseudo-Nonnus the mythographer

390 Tert. *De bapt.* 5.
391 Tert. *De corona* 15. For a brief discussion of Tertullian, and his possible information about the worship of Mithras, see Beskow 1994. Another passage of Tertullian not included here has sometimes been thought to refer to initiation: *De praescr. haeret.* 40.3-4. This mentions the mark of Mithras on the forehead of his worshippers; scholars briefly wondered whether this was a reference to branding, but this was refuted by Beskow in 1979. See also Renaut 2007.

– in his commentary on Gregory Nazianzen – discusses these tests, and paints a picture of a truly gruelling set of ritual practices:

> No one can therefore be initiated in his mysteries without first passing through the stages of the torments. There are stages in the torments, there being eighty of them, having a lower grade and an ascent. For first they suffer the lighter torments, then the more drastic, and then the even more drastic. Then, after going through all the torments in this way, the initiand is initiated.[392]

Thanks to Ambrosiaster, we have access into a more specific account of what these extreme tests might have involved:

> They are tricked in the cave when they have their eyes blindfolded.
>
> Some, their hands tied with chicken guts, are thrown down over troughs filled with water; then someone approaches with a sword, who calls himself their liberator, and cuts through the bonds mentioned above.[393]

These passages, along with several other (less detailed) accounts, combine to present a picture of some sort of process of initiation.[394] The extract from Ps.-Nonnus suggests that, rather than a single initiatory moment into Mithraic worship, there was an ongoing series of tests and rituals, perhaps with fresh rites to move between grades. While Ps.-Nonnus' version is rather extreme, and speaks to the kind of organised Mithraic activity that much of this thesis argues against, it is still possible that there was more than one initiation into Mithraic activity, even if there was no coherent grade system replicated across the Roman Empire.

392 Ps.-Nonnus *Commentary on Gregory Nazianzen, in Julianum imperatorem invectivae duae*, trans. Nimmo Smith 2001. This part of the commentary refers to Gregory's vitriolic fourth sermon, in which he rejoices over the death of Julian the Apostate (Nimmo Smith 2001, xxvi).
393 Ambrosiaster *quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* 113.11.
394 One suspects that the more gruesome and exotic the depiction, the better, especially in a polemical Christian account.

The textual evidence certainly supports a reading of Mithras-worship as an initiatory cult very much in keeping with popular conception of what mystery cults should consist of: secrecy, trial and hierarchy. In combination, the texts seem to emphasise variety of initiation, ranging from baptism to physical ordeals; they also hint at different kinds of initiation between grades. These texts represent the voices and opinions of outsiders, the majority of whom were Christian apologists who pursued their own interests in their writings, and who had a virulent and polemical prejudice against Mithraists. Just how useful can these sources really be, then, in their description of Mithraic initiation?[395] As indicated already, it is difficult to predict how much of Mithraic iconography, ritual and belief might have been visible or communicated to a religious outsider.[396] Initiation is usually accepted as one of the more secretive elements of mystery cults in the ancient world: we can think of Pausanias' refusal to speak further of Eleusis; this does not, however, mean that any Mithraic initiation was necessarily hidden from observers, or not widely known.[397] In any case, the avenue of thinking of multiple kinds of initiation, perhaps dependent upon location, is worth remembering.

II.IV.iii. The frescoes from the mithraeum at Santa Maria Capua Vetere

First, it is thanks to these sources that we think of Mithras-worship as initiatory at all. Nonetheless, there are sufficient references to initiation, in sufficiently disparate sources, for at least some level of initiatory practice to appear to have been a part of Mithraic ritual.

[395] An important point of comparison would be the scepticism with which most ancient historians now treat Apuleius' account of Isiac initiation, notwithstanding the apparent accuracy of the description of the more public elements of Isis cult activity, which would have been visible to insiders and outsiders alike.
[396] See Introduction, 18-19.
[397] Paus. 1.38.7.

How far, however, does the textual presentation, which in some cases goes into great detail, coincide with or serve to elucidate the material and visual evidence for initiation?

Much of this evidence comes from the second-century *mithraeum* at Santa Maria Capua Vetere in Italy, where a series of frescoes has traditionally been interpreted as depicting scenes of initiation.[398] The *mithraeum* was excavated in 1922, and was found in a good state of preservation. The space is L-shaped, and consists of a long *cryptoporticus* leading to the traditional rectangular room, which is flanked by *podia* (Figure 44). The original *podia* only extended to 1.4m, and contained a well and basin in addition; a subsequent redecoration of the *mithraeum* extended the benches to 8.35m, and perhaps suggests a greater number of members using the space. Unusually, the wall at the end of the room also contains a bench, though the semi-circular space above it is decorated with a fresco of the tauroctony scene, in a more standard use of this part of the *mithraeum*. The three-bench formation may have been designed to facilitate Mithraic meals, and to replicate the design of a *triclinium*.

The entire *mithraeum* was originally stuccoed and painted, although the frescoes have now significantly deteriorated, and much of the detail described by Vermaseren is no longer visible. There are still bands of red paint that mark out different panels on both walls of the *mithraeum*, the ceiling is painted with stylised stars or flowers (Figure 45), and a representation of a torchbearer on each wall (Figures 46 and 47).

Running along the front of the right-hand *podium*, frescoes show groupings of either two or three men.[399] One of these men is naked, his bare skin emphasised by the use of red ochre;

398 *CIMRM* 187-194. For a detailed report on the excavation and decoration of the *mithraeum*, see Vermaseren 1971.

399 Clauss identifies five panels from these frescoes as scenes of initiation, perhaps each into a particular grade (Clauss 1990b, 111-112 = Clauss 2000, 103). Beck disagrees with the idea of identifying different grade

he has been interpreted as the initiand. Accompanying him, are a figure traditionally identified as an assistant mystagogue – he wears a white tunic, and engages physically with the initiand – and occasionally a man usually described as the main mystagogue – he is dressed in a red cloak, and carries a sword or staff.

The first scene (Figure 48) shows the assistant mystagogue leading the initiand, who is blindfolded with a white cloth.[400] He is still blindfolded in the second scene (Figure 49); here, he is kneeling on one knee, with his hands tied behind him.[401] The assistant stands behind him, and stretches out a hand, perhaps to keep him in place; the main mystagogue, wearing a Phrygian cap as well as his red cloak, extends the sword or staff towards the kneeling figure. These scenes both bring to mind the passages of Ambrosiaster, particularly with regard to the blindfold, and to the tied hands of the initiand.

In the remaining three scenes, the initiand is no longer blindfolded; if we read the scenes as a linear progression, then perhaps this could indicate that he has successfully negotiated his way through certain parts of an initiatory process. In the third scene (Figure 50), the initiand is still kneeling on one knee, with a sword lying on the ground next to him; the assistant is in the act of placing a crown of leaves on the initiand's head.[402] The panel heavily recalls the passage of Tertullian on the crown ceremony described above. Clauss identifies the next scene in the sequence as one showing the initiand kneeling on both knees (Figure 51); the assistant holds him in position, with one foot on his calves, and both hands on his

initiations from the frescoes (Beck 2000, 146), on the grounds that there is insufficient evidence for this; I am broadly inclined to agree with him on this subject.

400 *CIMRM* 187.

401 *CIMRM* 188.

402 *CIMRM* 191

shoulders.[403] In front of the initiand is a circular object, to which the mystagogue is pointing with his staff. The actions of the assistant in his scene are far closer to the kind of difficult test that popular imagination constructs for mystery initiations.

The final scene (Figure 52), according to Clauss' order, shows the initiand lying prostrate on the ground.[404] The mystagogue and the assistant stand at his head and feet respectively. Clauss sees this as the dramatic climax of the frescoes, in which the initiand faces a ritual death before being reborn as an initiated member of Mithraic worship.[405] Clauss has a consistent interest in narrative throughout his work; despite seeing the tauroctony as part of an imagistic religion, he still points to it as the culmination of an epic struggle between Mithras and the bull.[406] Similarly, he has put together a fairly convincing initiatory story from the frescoes of Santa Maria Capua Vetere.

Nonetheless, without the literary accounts, would these necessarily have been seen as initiation scenes, rather than just scenes of some sort of esoteric Mithraic ritual, or even representations of an obscure Mithraic myth? They seem to represent real ordeals of the flesh, rather than the fasting and abstinence described in many other textual accounts of initiations, such as Apuleius' description of Lucius' entrance into the mystery worship of Isis.[407] And why decorate the fronts of the *podia* with these scenes, rather than the walls of the *mithraeum*? This last is perhaps an argument slightly in favour of their having an initiatory character; you have to be kneeling on the floor to see them, just as the initiand in

403 *CIMRM* 194. The order of this and the subsequent scene has been altered by Clauss to construct a better story of initiation. It is Clauss' order that I have followed here, to continue the idea of an initiatory narrative, though it is not necessarily a construction that I agree with.
404 *CIMRM* 193.
405 Clauss 1990b, 112 = Clauss 2000, 103.
406 Clauss 1990b, 8 = Clauss 2000, Foreword (xx). One chapter is entitled in the English translation "The Sacred Narrative"; in the original German, however, the word used is "Mithras-Legende" (Clauss 1990, 71), which has a rather different emphasis.
407 Apuleius *Metamorphosis* 11.23.

the frescoes. Perhaps this suggests that an initiand would have knelt, and been surrounded by these scenes, as he was inducted into the worship of Mithras.

II.IV.iv. The Mainz cup[408]

Aside from the frescoes in the Capua Vetere *mithraeum*, there are very few other material sources that suggest Mithraic initiation. While there is an abundance of iconographic depictions of different grades, only the Mainz cup seems to show a similar kind of imagery to the Capua Vetere frescoes. On one side of this cup, as already discussed, there appears to be a procession of four figures. Roger Beck sees this as an initiation scene, in line with Porphyry's reference to the ascent and descent of souls, although this reading has not gained common acceptance.[409]

The other side of the cup, however, is more widely held to show a scene of initiation (Figure 53). In this scene, a naked figure, presumably an initiand, is shown with his arms crossed in front of his face. He is flanked by two figures, probably mystagogues, one of whom is aiming an arrow at him. The arrangement of this scene, with an initiand flanked by two other figures, who appear to be subjecting him to some sort of trial, is very reminiscent of at least two of the Capua Vetere paintings. It was this similarity that led H.G. Horn, in the original publication of the Mainz cup, to identify it as a scene of initiation.[410]

408 For a reading of this cup, and brief outlines of its previous historiography, see Huld-Zetsche 2004. For more detailed arguments, see Horn 1994, 21-66; Merkelbach 1995, 1-6; Beck 2000, 145-180. For a cognitive perspective, albeit of the procession scene, see Beck 2004b.
409 Beck 2000, 154-167.
410 Horn 1994, 25-28.

This already starts to build up a picture of an interconnected web when it comes to material evidence for initiation scenes: one leads to the identification of another, so the possibility of error, in constructing an edifice on unsure foundations, is more able to creep in. Why, however, should this scene on the Mainz cup be so strongly interpreted as initiation, rather than a representation of the so-called water miracle, a popular element of side-scenes in tauroctonies throughout Germany and along the Danube.[411] In this story, a figure in a Phrygian cap aims an arrow at a rock, from which spurts a stream of water; kneeling figures are often portrayed in front of him.[412]

Like the sword in the Capua Vetere frescoes, the bow and arrows on the Mainz cup bring a real air of danger to the scenes; they might be represented in a purely figurative way, but the thought that weapons might have been a part of initiation rituals makes them seem more ominous. It is partly thanks to the frescoes and the cup that a sword found in the *mithraeum* at Riegel in Germany has often been interpreted as having a role in initiations. This sword (Figure 54) is curved into a semi-circle in its middle, perhaps in order to simulate a man's having been pierced through by it. Again, the evidence can be built up into a neat picture, almost regardless of that picture's accuracy. Luther Martin suggests that the danger of the scenes shown on the Capua Vetere frescoes and the Mainz cup might have been exaggerated for imagistic effect; to make their viewers fear what might happen during their initiation process.[413] It is equally plausible, of course, that they bear very little relation at all to an actual initiation ritual; just as acts of martyrs adorn the walls of churches around the

411 This is a case of overlooking one hypothesis (that of a depiction of the water miracle, for example) in favour of a hypothesis built on external factors, namely the narrative force of initiation within Mithraic scholarship. A stronger foundation for seeing this as an initiation scene would have been through the acknowledgement and discussion of viable alternatives. See also Renfrew 1985, 3; 11 for discussions of the dangers of ignoring complexities in the evidence.
412 See Figure 55 from Besigheim for a possible parallel.
413 Martin 2014, 280.

Christian world, so might these scenes have been intended to have an exhortatory and slightly terrifying effect on their Mithraic viewer.

II.IV.v. Conclusions

So much for the artistic evidence. In addition to the Capua Vetere frescoes and the Mainz cup, there are several inscriptions which seem to provide material evidence of Mithraic initiation. In particular, six statue bases or altars found in Rome, unfortunately now lost, apparently had inscriptions recording the dates of initiation into certain grades.[414] The formula of the inscriptions is fairly uniform, with a Mithraic father committing members into their respective grades.[415] The grade names given do not align exactly with those found elsewhere; the elision of the word *hierocorax* evokes the ἱερός κόραξ (sacred raven) of *CIMRM* 474, a Greek inscription found on the Aventine hill in Rome.[416] These inscriptions indicate that there was some level of ceremony attached to the conferral of a (new) grade status upon a Mithraist, though it is unclear whether (further) rituals of initiation were required.

One inscription that seems to suggest the idea of initiation as rebirth is a graffito found in the Santa Prisca *mithraeum* in Rome.[417] This commemorates the date on which an unnamed Mithraist was 'born at dawn' (*natus prima luce*); again, assuming that this graffito does refer to initiation, it is unclear whether, this was a first entrance into Mithraic worship, or

414 *CIMRM* 400-405.
415 The Latin reads *tradidit leontica* or *tradidit Persica* etc. as relevant. The use of the term *leontica* is reminiscent of the passage from *de antro nympharum* cited earlier in this chapter; the leontic rites referred to there may well be the *leontica* described in these inscriptions, a part of initiatory ritual.
416 Though, as mentioned above, 110, it might equally be a corruption of the Greek term *hieroceryx*, the sacred herald connected with the mysteries of Eleusis.
417 *CIMRM* 498.

whether it represented a progression through the grades. The idea of birth brings one of the frescoes of Capua Vetere back to mind, in which the initiand may be involved in enacting his own ritual death; it is noticeable that the reference is to birth, rather than to any kind of rebirth.

Thus far, the textual and material sources largely appear to support each other, particularly when we think of the group of scenes from the Capua Vetere frescoes. There is however, a significant interpretive gap; we choose to read the frescoes as depicting scenes of initiation trials because we are already familiar with the accounts of Ambrosiaster and Tertullian. Without these texts, would we have quite so securely identified these paintings as initiatory? This is one of the major problems with privileging textual over material accounts, or giving texts a primary exegetical place – especially when these are polemical assaults by Christian opponents of Mithras; the inherent subjectivism of historians in assessing material culture can often be subsumed into an assumption of knowledge based on literary sources.[418] We also want to find scenes of initiation precisely because this is how 'mystery cults' are configured in our minds; our belief that initiation was important to these 'mysteries' therefore goes hand in hand with our expectation of finding it.

It is also worth bearing in mind that – despite the spread of the worship of Mithras to almost every part of the Roman Empire – this is the only evidence we have for how Mithraists may themselves have pictured their initiation rituals. If initiation rituals were so central to Mithraic activity, why are there so few depictions of them? If we believe that initiations were intended to be kept secret, could we imagine that they were too private to show even within the confined space of a *mithraeum* – or that *mithraea* were more accessible than has

[418] On inherent subjectivism, see Squire 2009, 8; Price 2010, 318; Rampley 2017.

traditionally been portrayed, and that these scenes were too secret to risk being seen – and that therefore communities that did depict them were deviant, rather than examples of a norm?[419] Or is it possible that other material evidence does show scenes of initiation, but that they have not been recognised as such because they bear little resemblance to the pictures painted by the literature? A relief found in Besigheim, Germany, is perhaps a good example of this (Figure 55).[420] Several scenes on this relief, showing figures kneeling in front of a man in eastern dress and wearing a Phrygian cap (that is to say, the standard costume in which Mithras is depicted), have traditionally been interpreted as mythological. The standing figure is usually identified as Mithras, yet there is also the possibility that he represents a Mithraic *pater* taking on the role of Mithras for an initiation ritual. We might ask whether mythology, play acting, and ritual can really be separated out – and whether modern scholars should even attempt it – and whether the art of Mithraic worship might not be intended to evoke all three.[421]

In order to see all these fragments of evidence – the snippets of text, the inscriptions, the Capua Vetere frescoes, and the Mainz cup – as linked, it requires a certain kind of mind-set, an expectation of what 'Mystery cults' should 'normatively' involve. This is the kind of approach that has built up the case for Mithraic initiation rituals from disparate sources; it is similar to traditional readings of Mithraic sacred space and the so-called seven grades.

As I argued above, there is a more compelling case for not seeing the grades as a coherent and systematic structure; much of the perception of 'seven grades of initiation' still stems

419 On outsiders and initiation, see above 143.
420 *CIMRM* 1301.
421 An interesting comparison is the depiction of tragedy versus myths on Greek pots: for two opposing arguments, see Giuliani 1995; 1996; Taplin 2006.

back to the Felicissimus mosaic. It is this floor that provided, in visible form, the ladder of the grades, with all the attached intimations of progression and movement between them.

The traditional accumulation of evidence in support of Mithraic initiation seems, at first glance, to be strong. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that much of the argument is overwhelmingly based on literary sources, all of which demonstrably had their own agenda in giving accounts of Mithraic initiation. A dependence upon Christian polemical accounts in particular is inherently less reliable than Mithraic visual sources, even if it is somewhere on the scale from difficult to impossible for us to interpret the latter. The main material source is the *mithraeum* of Santa Maria Capua Vetere, to which has been added the Mainz cup as a complement; the example of the seven grades should have shown us how dangerous it can be to build a structure upon such infirm grounds. While I broadly agree with Burkert that some sort of initiation seems likely, the evidence for its character and procedure is less easy to pin down. Was it the humiliating and test-based experience described in almost grotesque detail by ps.-Nonnus and Ambrosiaster? And did it have any particular connection to a hierarchic vision of the grades? The evidence does not allow for a definitive reading in either direction, but does perhaps warn us against applying our own expectations for how initiation should look onto how Mithraic initiation was actually structured.

Chapter III. All the world's a cave: *mithraea* in Italy and the Balkans

The perceived character of the Roman worship of Mithras has been immeasurably influenced by the study of *mithraea* as sacred spaces. They are perhaps the best remaining evidence for Mithraic practices, and many traditional ideas about ritual and belief have found their source from these sites. All *mithraea* are often thought to look quite similar, particularly with regard to their physical layout; it would be tempting, therefore, to assume that they could provide a clear guide to how Mithraists conceived of their sacred spaces. Over five hundred *mithraea* have been found, scattered around the entirety of the Roman Empire, from near the Antonine Wall in Scotland to Tiddis in Algeria, and from Lugo in Spain to Dura-Europos in Syria.

In spite of the sheer number of sites, and the clear range of geographical locations, the individual differences between *mithraea* have frequently been overlooked in favour of their similarities; in fact, both are equally important.[422] In considering constructions of space, then, I shall not only be looking at the preferences of the Mithraists themselves – in so far as we are able to determine them –, but also at the concepts of an idealised Mithraic space in modern historiography. This chapter therefore aims to explore both the physical and theoretical constructions and limitations of sacred space in *mithraea*; the physical elements can mainly be found in the ancient archaeological material – and, also, in modern restorations of sites – while the theoretical come from the wealth of modern Mithraic scholarship.

[422] For a good recent article on the subject of unity and diversity in the *mithraeum*, see Hensen 2017.

Much of what has been written about Mithraic conceptions of sacred space has been based on non-Mithraic writing, a trend also seen in the previous chapter concerning ideas around a grade-system and initiation. This chapter will examine the textual sources that appear to describe Mithraic space, focusing in particular on Porphyry's account in *De antro nympharum*, and comparing these texts to the archaeological remains of sites in Italy and the Balkans. Porphyry's famous phrase "εἰκόνα τοῦ κόσμου" ("likeness of the cosmos") has given rise to an entire subsection of Mithraic study that explores cosmological and astrological themes within the decoration and layout of *mithraea*.[423] These themes form a major feature of the work of Roger Beck, and of some of the early work of Richard Gordon.

A discussion of sacred spaces also lends itself particularly well to the themes of idealisation and normativism that were encountered in the previous chapter and will reappear in the subsequent one. Just as Mithraic iconography varies according to region, so *mithraea* themselves often vary from each other in frequently quite subtle detail, even within the confines of a relatively restricted geographic area.[424] While it is appealing to look for – or, indeed, construct – one perfect example of Mithraic space, and use it to inform our readings of others, this not only ignores the richness of variety, it also runs the risk of overlooking the element of choice that individual Mithraic groups may have had. Whether we see frescoes, mosaics, sculpture and architecture as decoration, or as something more inherently *meaning*ful, they appear as manifestations of the interests – or perhaps the beliefs – of their particular group of worshippers.

[423] Porph. *De antr. nymph*. 6.
[424] See, for example, Table 1 on comparisons of *mithraea* within Ostia.

The concept of idealised sacred space in the ancient world is hardly unfamiliar; many reliefs show portrayals of sanctuaries or rural shrines that have no real counterpart, but stand for a more perfected version of a typical space. The Mitreo delle Sette Sfere in Ostia, discussed in detail in this chapter, has been described as "something like a code-key" for the interpretation of other sites.[425] The same *mithraeum* was more recently used as an example by Roger Beck; he carefully avoided describing it as the 'ideal *mithraeum*', but this is precisely the implication of his language elsewhere.[426] We might ask how any one site, from the many hundreds that have been discovered across Europe and beyond, could be conceived of as 'ideal'. When Richard Gordon described the Mitreo delle Sette Sfere as a 'code-key' *mithraeum*, was he evoking it as the encapsulation of Mithraic sacred space in antiquity? Or did he instead see it as the perfect reflection of his own understanding of what Mithraic practices demanded of their spaces? In either sense, an idealised view of Sette Sfere is replete with methodological problems, but the latter is rather more complicated and concerning than the former. In particular, the idea that Mithraic practices demanded a certain appearance from their sacred spaces in closely connected to the historiographical tendency in Mithraic studies towards astrological interpretations not only of *mithraea*, but of the tauroctony scene as well. This focus on astrology is explored later in this chapter, with specific reference to the *mithraea* of Sette Sfere and Sette Porte in Ostia, and Ponza.

425 Gordon 1976, 120.

426 In Beck 2006, 103, he says: "By 'ideal mithraeum' I mean just that; I do not mean the mithraeum that all mithraea should have been but, with the exception of Sette Sfere, failed to be." Here, Beck is explicitly saying that he does not see Sette Sfere as the model *mithraeum* and the example that best accords with the works of Porphyry. In Beck 2000, 160, however, in which he had previously drawn this distinction, the role assigned to Sette Sfere was far more ambiguous: "The mithraeum in my diagram is thus a composite of the ideal mithraeum as intimated in the *De antro* and actual mithraea as represented principally by Sette Sfere." Although Sette Sfere is not openly described as the ideal site for a study of the form of *mithraea*, this is the idea that seems to lie beneath much of Beck's outward statements.

Today, the discovery of a new *mithraeum* tends to cause a flurry of interest, especially if it is situated in the ancient Near East.[427] Nonetheless, this interest is often based on the finds within, or the decoration of, the *mithraeum*, rather than on the space itself. Except in the cases of unusually large sites, such as the Crypta Balbi or the supposed *mithraeum* in the Baths of Caracalla in Rome, or the Marino *mithraeum*, the actual physical structure of the *mithraeum* is frequently overlooked, especially if it is found within an urban context.[428] The cases of *mithraea* located in natural caves, which is particularly a feature of sites found in the Balkan regions, are an obvious exception. Many of the excavation reports on these sites, however, are published in Serbo-Croatian, or even in Russian, which unfortunately has to an extent limited wider dissemination of the finds.

Another important exception must surely be the *mithraeum* at Walbrook in London, which has been of perennial interest since its excavation in 1954 (Figure 56).[429] The original site was discovered among foundation work for the development of an office block; as a result of the clear public interest in the *mithraeum* itself, the site was reconstructed in 1962, at a distance of a few metres.[430] This project came under criticism for its building methods, particularly in the use of concrete to fill in the gaps in the masonry, its anachronistic reconstruction, and the fact that several important features of the original building, including the wooden benches, were discarded and lost. The major archaeological and artistic finds – including a head of Mithras, along with several statues, pottery, and silverware – went on display in the Museum of London. In 2010, the original Walbrook site was acquired by

427 See, for example, reports from Diyarbakır province in south-eastern Turkey of the discovery of a *mithraeum* beneath Zerzevan Castle: https://www.dailysabah.com/history/2017/05/02/1700-year-old-temple-reveals-ancient-religion-in-east-anatolia (accessed January 2018).
428 For more on this, see 167-168 below.
429 For more on the sculptural finds from this particular site, see Chapter V, 291-294.
430 For a good account of the movement of this *mithraeum*, and its various constructions, see Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) 2017.

Bloomberg, to be the location of their new European headquarters; they demonstrated an interest in restoring the remains of the *mithraeum* to its original location, and in providing a new exhibition space dedicated not only to the Roman finds and archaeology, but also to providing insights into the history of the 1954 excavation.[431] In this example, the physical structure of the *mithraeum* has enjoyed a renaissance in prominence; the poor quality of the 1962 reconstruction drew attention to the need for the safeguarding of ancient monuments, and the most modern restoration has been highly sensitive to these details. Structurally, the building is unusual among *mithraea* for its apse at the end of the central aisle, but it is rather more famous for its excavation history than its actual physical form.[432]

Comparative works on the Ostian *mithraea* must also be added to these cases.[433] Dennis Groh's chapter on 'The Ostian Mithraeum' in the edited volume *Mithraism in Ostia* examines how a typical *mithraeum* might appear: a rectangular room, with *podia* on either side of a central aisle, which usually leads towards a niche set into the far wall.[434] In giving this general account, however, Groh takes account of variations in the physical structure of the fourteen *mithraea* in his survey, mentioning the square shape of the Mitreo di Fructosus, as well as the dividing wall in the middle of the right and left *podia* in the Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra and the Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana.[435] He acknowledges that all fourteen *mithraea* were adaptations of buildings, rather than new constructions, and he sees this as a limitation to the architectural constructive imagination of Mithraists. Michael White compared the Ostian *mithraea* in 2012, re-dating several of them in the process, and

431 Nicholson 2015; MOLA 2017,
432 On the unusual nature of this apse, see Shepherd 1998, 225.
433 Including, most recently, Sonnemans 2017.
434 Groh 1967.
435 Groh 1967, 10; 19.

assessing the use of non-Mithraic decoration; his survey also looks at the physical structures of the *mithraea*, paying particular attention to the previous function of the buildings.[436]

The link between Groh and White's work is surely in the concentration of *mithraea* in Ostia, already discussed in Chapter II.[437] With such a large number of sites within a relatively small area, it is comparatively easy to move beyond similarities, and look instead at variations, including in architectural layout. In regions where *mithraea* are fewer in number, scholarly focus has tended instead to be on decoration – and particularly in portable items, such as stone reliefs, statues, and small finds – rather than on structure. This focus on decorative elements is also a feature of the condition of *mithraea* at excavation, and the ability of archaeologists to preserve a site that might be earmarked for demolition and development.[438]

This chapter looks at both physical and conceptual constructions of sacred space, following the basic outline: exploring the idea of the *mithraeum* as a cave, and then considering this cave as Porphyry's "likeness of the cosmos".[439] It starts with the natural cave *mithraea* that can be found in the Balkans, Italy, and the east of the Roman Empire; it then moves to other Italian sites, looking at possible astrological connections in the *mithraea* of Sette Sfere and Sette Porte in Ostia, then examining the *mithraea* of Vulci and Ponza. It questions whether these examples display a substantial difference in Mithraic approaches to sacred space, or whether they feed into similar themes of sacred geography and the importance of the cave motif.

436 White 2012, 441-443.
437 Chapter II, 98.
438 Such as the famous case of the *mithraeum* in the Ballplatz in Mainz, which was never properly excavated, and was demolished (Huld-Zetsche 2008). Here, only the small finds were able to be preserved, and even the size of the site has only been estimated.
439 Porph. *De antr. nymph*. 6.

III.I. Terminology

As mentioned in the Introduction, there is a substantial question over how modern scholars should describe Mithraic sacred spaces. I have chosen to use the term '*mithraeum*'; this is somewhat problematic, since the word existed in Greek in the ancient world, but cannot provably be connected to the Roman worship of Mithras.[440] There are several terms attested epigraphically that were used by Mithraists to refer to their sacred spaces: *antrum*, *templum* and *spelaeum* are the most commonly used, of which either *templum* or *spelaeum* is usually preferred.

Why then, given that there are examples of how Mithraists described their spaces, do I choose instead to use a neologism? It is the term most often employed by other Mithraic scholars in discussing concepts of space, as well as specific sites, but that in itself should not be sufficient to determine my choice. One possible reason it is so useful is because it appears to maintain a careful neutrality between *templum* and *spelaeum*; there are several strong motivations for the cultivation of this neutrality.

First, the term *spelaeum* is most attested from Rome and Italy, while *templum* is more likely to be found in epigraphy from the Roman provinces.[441] In fact, the number of inscriptions referring to the *mithraeum* as *spelaeum* is more than two times higher in Italy than in the provinces.[442] One of the best-known examples of Mithraic epigraphy is the poem composed

[440] The fifth-century church historian Socrates Scholasticus refers to a *mithreion* when discussing religious violence in Alexandria, but there is no proof that this is indeed a site used by worshippers of Mithras (*Ecclesiastical History* III.2.3). Two papyri have also been found in Egypt, dating from the third century BC, which refer to a *mithraion*; this is generally taken to mean a temple to the Persian Mithra (Harris 1996).
[441] Lavagne 1978, 272; Clauss 1990b, 51 = Clauss 2000, 42.
[442] Lavagne 1978, 272.

by the *pater* Proficentius, and discovered on a marble slab under the church of San Lorenzo in Damaso in Rome. This inscription, which also attests that the term *syndexioi* was used by Mithraists to refer themselves, also celebrates the dedication of a *spelaeum*:

> This site is blessed, holy, godly and propitious,
> Which Mithras bestowed, and brought to the attention
> Of Proficentius, Father of the rites,
> That he should create and dedicate a spelaeum for him,
> And now, with swift labour, he has performed this welcome task,
> That he began under a good omen, solicitous
> That the happy *syndexi* should forever be able to come together to perform their vows.
> Proficentius composed these little verses,
> The most worthy Father of Mithras.[443]

When it comes to a choice between *spelaeum* and *templum*, therefore, a preference for one over the other appears to favour either an Italo-centric or a provincial-centric model for approaching the subject of Mithraic sacred space. It is presumably the greater familiarity of writers with the Mithraic world of Rome and Ostia that led to the stress that the literary sources place upon the use of *spelaeum*, and it is these literary sources that have traditionally been used to provide much of our evidence for Mithraic conceptions of sacred space. Henri Lavagne, in a paper on the importance of the cave, argued that the question of *spelaeum* versus *templum* is "not without importance, since it touches upon the role that Rome was able to play in the diffusion of Mithraic imagery".[444]

[443] *CIMRM* 423. Manfred Clauss has a slightly different translation (Clauss 2000, 42). The original Latin reads: *Hic locus est felix sanctus piusque benignus / quem monuit Mithras mentemque dedit / Proficentio patri sacrorum / utque sibi spelaeum faceret dedicaretque / et celeri instansque operi reddit munera grata / quem bono auspicio suscepit anxia mente / ut possint syndexi hilares celebrare vota per aevom / hos versiculos generavit Proficentius / pater dignissimus Mithrae*.

[444] Lavagne 1978, 271: "La question n'est pas sans importance puisqu'elle touche au problème de la part que Rome a pu prendre dans la diffusion de l'imagerie mithriaque".

Secondly, a preference for *spelaeum*, with its emphasis on a 'cave-like' nature of Mithraic space, gives further primacy to textual over material evidence. As I discuss in the next section of this chapter, much of the literature that is used by many modern scholars as a guide to Mithraic practice and belief emphasises the importance of the *mithraeum* as a cave, and of that cave as a likeness of the cosmos.[445] It is worth noting, however, that even scholars who use *mithraeum* rather than *spelaeum* may still fully believe in the astrological arguments for interpreting Mithraic spaces.[446]

Finally, an inscription from Ostia seems to suggest that Mithraists might have had a more ambivalent, or perhaps more flexible, approach to naming their sacred sites. Two pieces of a marble cornice were found in a collegial temple, which also housed a *mithraeum*; this is known as the Mitreo di Fructosus, thanks to the name of the dedicator on the inscription:

[…]RIVS FRVCTOSVS PATRON CORP S[TUPPATORVM]

[TE]MPL ET SPEL MT A SOLO SVA PEC FECI[447]

The text was restored by Vermaseren to read: …rius Fructosus, patron of the guild of flax-makers / built the temple and cave of Mithras alone and at his own expense.[448] What could this inscription reveal to us about the way in which Mithraists conceived of their spaces? It is possible that *templum* and *spelaeum* were technical terms, denoting different kinds of space, and that the Fructosus site combined both. This was a theory espoused by the Italian archaeologist Visconti in the 1860s. He argued that the term *spelaeum* referred to cave

445 Porph. *De antr. nymph*. 6.
446 Especially Beck 2006, 102-152.
447 *CIMRM* 228.
448 Vermaseren 1956-1960 I, 118. The Latin would therefore read: "…*rius Fructosus patron(us) corp(orationis) s[tuppatorum – te]mpl(um) et spel(aeum) M(i)t(hrae) a solo sua pecunia feci(t)*".

sanctuaries in which initiations took place, while *templum* referred to a space reserved for more public liturgies.[449] He suggested that, as the worship of Mithras became more official during the course of the second and third centuries, so there was a gradual shift from *spelaeum* to *templum*.[450] Franz Cumont disagreed with Visconti, proposing instead that *spelaeum* was a technical term, whereas *templum* was more general.[451] This argument was overturned by Henri Lavagne in 1978, who charted the difference between Italian and provincial terminology and made it clear that the epigraphic evidence indicated different attitudes rather than different categories.[452]

Nonetheless, the reasons why a particular term might have been preferred still remain elusive. If there was no category distinction between *spelaeum* and *templum*, why does the Fructosus inscription record that the *mithraeum* was both? Is this evidence that even Mithraic worshippers themselves could have been unsure as to the correct terminology for their own sacred space? *Mithraea* often had ancillary rooms alongside them, perhaps as spaces where food could be prepared, or in which activities lower down a scale of religiosity took place: did the term *spelaeum* apply to these as well, or only to the principal room, in which we find the *podia* and tauroctony scene? The Fructosus *mithraeum* had a corridor running horizontally just in front of its entrance; it is possible that the ambiguity in terminology might have been intended to refer to both spaces.

It seems more likely, however, that certain Mithraists – particularly those in the melting-pot society of ancient Ostia – might have been aware that both terms existed, and not particularly rigid in ascribing one over the other to their creations of sacred space. With all

[449] Visconti 1864, 152.
[450] Visconti 1864, 152-153.
[451] Cumont 1896-1899 I, 57.
[452] Lavagne 1978, 272.

these factors in mind, therefore, it seems not only safest but also most methodologically sound to use *mithraeum* as a term of art while still not losing sight of the complexities of terminology that appear to have existed in the Roman world of Mithraic worship as well as in modern scholarship on the subject.

III.II. The physical space of a *mithraeum*

One of the most consistent features of the worship of Mithras from across the Roman Empire is the layout of *mithraea*; although the exterior and previous functions of the sites vary considerably, the interiors are frequently very similar. The principal room of a *mithraeum* is usually rectangular in shape, with a central aisle flanked by *podia*, and leading towards a niche or raised platform at the far end of the room from the entrance (Figures 57-59).[453] Manfred Clauss points out that even *mithraea* within the same town or city look almost alike when it comes to layout, but reminds his readers that they can differ with regard to decoration and execution.[454] As stressed in the introduction to this chapter, however, it is by teasing out these subtle differences that individual *mithraea* take on a character – and perhaps even a meaning – of their own.

We cannot necessarily extrapolate a general model for how a *mithraeum* should look; the customary layout of the main room could just reflect a general tendency for rooms to be rectangular spaces, and the *podia* could simply be practical requirements for a religious

[453] When a *mithraeum* is square rather than rectangular in shape, this is usually considered to be noteworthy; for a brief discussion of this, see Bjørnebye 2015, 228. For concrete Mithraic examples, see the *mithraeum* of the Castra Peregrinorum in Rome, the Mitreo di Fructosus in Ostia (*CIMRM* 226), or the *mithraeum* at Jajce in Bosnia (*CIMRM* 1901). In addition, at Jajce, only one *podium* is distinguishable, on the left of the room as you look towards the rear wall.

[454] Clauss 1990b, 54 = Clauss 2000, 46. Clauss uses the example of *mithraea* in Budapest, but the same applies to sites in Ostia and Rome.

practice that clearly involved some sort of meal.[455] Chapter IV examines in greater detail the role of a cult meal within Mithraic ritual, through examination of two-sided reliefs; these suggest that – in the German and Danubian provinces, and in scattered examples from central Italy – the meal was seen as an intrinsic part of Mithraic performative custom.[456] This could separate *mithraea* from other forms of cult that may have involved meals, but perhaps without such strong emphasis as in Mithraic practice.

Decoration – and its execution – does not form a separate chapter in this thesis; it is instead a persistent theme in each chapter. Chapter I assessed whether decoration differed sufficiently in the East to suggest a particularly Eastern flavour to Mithraic worship, and explored the importance of variation and uniqueness in iconography; Chapter II looked at possible depictions of grades and initiation within *mithraea*; this chapter explores the idea of a Mithraic 'cave' – both natural and man-made –, and how this could have been emphasised within sacred space; Chapter IV will focus on the tauroctony scene, and in particular on the story of Mithras and the bull; Chapter V will analyse the juxtaposition of Mithras with other deities, both in inscriptions and sculpture. One of the reasons why the subject does not constitute a chapter in its own right is that this thesis is keen to avoid as much standardisation as possible, and to highlight variation and individuality across *mithraea*.[457] While we might expect to find certain features replicated within *mithraea*, such as the *podia* mentioned above, we should also expect to see the decoration reflecting the interests of diverse groups of worshippers. This is a subject to which this chapter will return,

455 A useful comparison could be to dining benches in Roman tombs; see Ingle 2017.
456 Chapter IV, 226-245.
457 This is also reflected in the regional case studies of each chapter; Mithraic material in each section is primarily studied in relation to other examples in geographic proximity, to build a more detailed picture of similarity and variation within a more narrowed spectrum. For further on the subject of variation, see Chapter I, 59-61.

when it approaches the historiographical trend towards astrology, and a concomitant desire on the part of certain scholars to read Mithraic decoration through the astrological lens.

A further area in which *mithraea* can vary greatly – and in a manner that would clearly have shaped the worship experience of the Mithraists – is in their interior architectural features. To a large extent, this depends on the previous function of the *mithraeum*; in urban locations, they were often located in rooms in houses, warehouses, or grain stores.[458] The third-century Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra (Figure 60), in Ostia, was constructed in what is thought to have been a service corridor underneath the bath complex; this means, first, that the vaulted ceiling of the space is very low, giving the impression of a cave-like space, and secondly that the *podia* are split into two halfway along their length by an arch.[459] There are grilles in the ceiling of the *mithraeum* that would have allowed for a small infiltration of light, but the overall impression the space must have been somewhat gloomy and confined. Apart from the *podia*, there is nothing fixed within the space that marks it out as particularly Mithraic, although there are three pedestals for altars or statues set into the floor of the central aisle; on one of these was found a statue of Mithras on top of the bull, and holding his dagger aloft (Figure 61).[460] The size and weight of the statue suggest that the space had become permanently Mithraic; it would have been difficult to remove the statue after every gathering. Nonetheless, the lack of any fixed Mithraic decoration might point towards the idea that this group of Mithraists was perhaps less concerned with the details of their surroundings than others.

458 For the previous functions of Ostian *mithraea*, see Table 1.
459 *CIMRM* 229; Becatti 1954, 29-38.
460 *CIMRM* 230.

The *mithraeum* underneath the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome was located in one of the rooms in a substantial urban *domus*, which today constitutes a large network of underground corridors and chambers beneath the modern church (Figure 62).[461] The *mithraeum* is thought to have formed part of the basement of the house, which itself dates to the Flavian period, although the *mithraeum* itself is considered to be Severan.[462] The ceiling of the *mithraeum* is vaulted – understandably, given that it occupied the basement –, and this makes the room feel confined. The ceiling also has a slightly peculiar feature: eleven holes, four rectangular, and seven circular. Vermaseren interpreted the four rectangular shafts as being designed to bring light or air down into the *mithraeum*, while the remaining seven were intended to represent what he considered the importance of the figure seven – 'seven grades', and seven planets – in Mithraic practice.[463] This seems somewhat speculative; there is no secure reason to assume that the circular holes were later additions to the room by Mithraists, in fact, they may have been an original feature of the basement space before the *mithraeum* was established. Unlike in the Terme del Mitra in Ostia, the San Clemente *mithraeum* does not have any architectural features to divide the room still further, though there are the customary *podia* either side of the central aisle.

The second-century Mitreo delle Pareti Dipinte in Ostia (Figure 63), was also part of an urban house. By contrast, it was situated not in a basement, but in the domestic area and peristyle of a house.[464] The ceiling has not survived, but the height of the frescoes on the walls indicates that there would have been a relatively high ceiling. There is little indication of how much natural light would have been able to penetrate the room; the entrance was in

461 This *mithraeum* has been described by Jonas Bjørnebye as the "archetypical *mithraeum* in Rome" owing to its accessibility and its standard formula as regards the layout of sacred space (Bjørnebye 2007, 10).
462 Bjørnebye 2007, 41-42.
463 Vermaseren 1956-1960 I, 156-157.
464 *CIMRM* 264; Becatti 1954, 59-68.

the far-right corner, as you look towards the rear wall of the *mithraeum*, and access to the previous peristyle was bricked off, presumably to create the *mithraeum*. Nonetheless, it is clear that the general atmosphere of the room must have been very different from that of the Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra.

Another crucial factor in influencing the Roman worshippers of Mithras must surely have been the size of the *mithraeum*; this also feeds into the questions surrounding our modern expectations of a 'mystery cult' already explored in the Introduction and previous chapter.[465] The characterisation of the worship of Mithras as secretive and shadowy – which originated in Christian textual accounts and was continued into scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – paints the picture of small groups of men meeting in equally small spaces for their rituals.[466] To a large extent, this was borne out by the archaeological finds: *mithraea* from around the Roman Empire tend to be relatively restricted in size, and unable to accommodate a particularly large community of worshippers. Michael White suggested numbers of Mithraists for the Ostian *mithraea*, based on measurements of the *podia*, the average height of Roman men, and the average space required to recline; his mean community size was around 20.[467]

Certain *mithraea*, however, were much larger, although these have tended to be the exception. Jonas Bjørnebye made the case for "a group of large, seemingly 'semi-public' mithraea" in the city of Rome: the Crypta Balbi, Castra Peregrinorum, and the possible Terme di Caracalla *mithraea*.[468] The sites at Marino in Italy, and at Carnuntum III are exceptionally long, with the main room of the first measuring 29 metres, and the second

[465] Introduction, 19-21; Chapter II, 91-94; 133-134.
[466] Burkert 1987, 7; Clauss 1990b, 51 = Clauss 2000, 42.
[467] White 2012, 441-443; 471-474.
[468] Bjørnebye 2015, 228.

measuring 23 metres; they are both quite narrow, however, which means that the probable number of worshippers they could have accommodated is not comparable to their length.[469] It is difficult to assess the extent to which such *mithraea*, and especially those in Rome, really were semi-public. The *mithraeum* at Marino is partially formed from a natural cave buried deep within the hillside; its size, therefore, does not mean that it would necessarily have been particularly visible. The examples from Rome and Carnuntum, however, are more likely to have been visible, and thereby, perhaps also more likely to have been well-known in their neighbourhoods.

Again, this returns us to the idea of a secretive practice required by the term 'mystery cult' in modern imaginations; in fact, there is no reason to require that *mithraea* should have been so concealed from the public gaze as we might expect. A tauroctony relief at the *mithraeum* at Močići in Croatia, for instance, was carved on the exterior of the site, over the entrance; this would probably have made the scene visible to those outside the Mithraic community, although the *mithraeum* is not easily accessible.[470] Several *mithraea* in Ostia were located near bustling streets; the entrance is often located out of the line with the main axis of the *mithraeum*, preventing a clear view into the space, but it is unreasonable to suppose that residents of the surrounding area would have been unaware of the nature of the site and those who worshipped there.[471] Furthermore, the textual accounts of Mithraic sacred space, explored below, make clear that non-Mithraists were aware of the kind of spaces in which the god was worshipped.

469 For the Marino *mithraeum*, see Vermaseren 1982; for Carnuntum, see *CIMRM* 1682; Clauss 2000, 43. There are several theories about the length of the *mithraeum* or *mithraea* of Sarmizegetusa: it was first estimated by Király at 44 metres (Király 1887, 16); for a short survey of the problems of these, see Szabó 2014, 136-137.
470 Lenk 2017, 71-72.
471 In particular, the Mitreo presso Porta Romana (Figure 64) and the Mitreo di Felicissimus (Figure 22).

The size, layout, and visibility of *mithraea* clearly must all have been factors that affected the worship experience of Mithraists. They were not, however, sacred sites *per se*; they did not occupy ground holy to Mithraists by association with Mithras, unless, as might have been the case in the Proficentius inscription above, it had been seen in a dream or vision.[472] For the most part, urban *mithraea* simply reused existing spaces; *mithraea* in more remote locations, or on the outskirts of settlements were, however, more likely to have been constructed for the purpose of Mithraic worship, and their locations perhaps chosen with this in mind.[473] How, then, might Mithraists have made their spaces sacred?[474] One popular theory has been in the understanding of the *mithraeum* as a cave, either making use of a natural site, or recreating the impression of a cave: this will form Part IV of this chapter; another theory, building from the first, is in the idea of this cave's being a likeness of the cosmos, and this forms Part V.

III.III. The textual evidence for Mithraic sacred space

First, however, it is important to examine the textual sources that appear to provide information about Mithraic conceptions of sacred space. As was made clear in the previous chapter, these sources are not themselves Mithraic; instead, they were written by both Christian and non-Christian outsiders to Mithraic practice, with varying degrees of interest, bias and hostility. It is therefore important to remember that most of these texts were

[472] Beck 2006, 106.
[473] For case studies of the proximity of certain *mithraea* to running water, for example, see Lenk 2017.
[474] This chapter is primarily concerned with exploring the substantial scholarship on Mithraic sacred space as a cave, and assessing its evidentiary base. There were of course other ways in which Mithraists could sacralise their spaces; for an overview of the discussion of decorative elements in this thesis, see 164-165 above; on Mithraic small finds, see Martens & De Boe 2004. For an interesting comparison to early Christian uses of existing spaces, see Kilde 2008, 13-38.

composed with only an outsider's understanding of what constituted sacrality to Mithraists, and which elements within a *mithraeum* were important in terms of religious meaning.

The earliest probable reference can be found in Statius' *Thebaid* I:

> Whether it is preferable to you to be called Rosy Titan,
> In the custom of the Achaemenian people, or
> Fertile Osiris, or Mithra(s) twisting the horns angry to follow
> Beneath the rocks of the Persian cave[475]

Statius was writing in the Flavian period, and the first book of the *Thebaid* is dated to around AD 80; this would make it a very early reference to the Roman worship of Mithras from the city of Rome.[476] It is therefore possible – though perhaps not probable – that Statius was referring instead to Avestan Mithra, who could still be rendered as Mithram in the accusative case in Latin. Statius is certainly emphatic about the Persian character of this god, and of the cave (*antrum*) associated with him; if the poem is a reference to Roman Mithras, it is of course plausible that, in the early days of the arrival of his worship in Rome, he was more explicitly characterised as an eastern deity than was the case over the course of the following centuries. The allusion is presumably to the story of Mithras and the bull, and can therefore be understood as mythological; it is not necessary to interpret this section of the *Thebaid* as a description of contemporary Mithraic practice.[477]

There are also two references to a cave (*σπήλαιον*) in Justin Martyr's second-century *Dialogue with Trypho*:

[475] Stat. *Theb.* I, 717-720: "*seu te roseum Titana vocari / gentis Achaemeniae ritu, seu praestat Osirim / frugiferum, seu Persei sub rupibus antri / indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram*". Parentheses added.
[476] Our earliest material evidence from Rome is probably *CIMRM* 593, a statue of Mithras stabbing the bull, dated to AD 98-99; for more on this statue, see Chapter I, 62 f.184.
[477] On the *Thebaid* as a reference to Mithraic mythology, see Chapter IV, 265-266.

> And when those passing on the mysteries of Mithras say that he was born from a rock, and they call that place a cave, in which those who believe in him are initiated…[478]

> …saying that through those words, those who impart the Mithras mysteries are possessed by the devil to say that they are initiated by one another in that place called, amongst themselves, a cave.[479]

These passages both clearly refer to Mithraic practice, and specifically to the practice of initiation within a cave.[480] They come from sections of the *Dialogue* in which it is explained that the Mithraic mysteries are based on corrupted readings of the Old Testament, and in particular of Isaiah. There is no mention of a Mithraic mythological basis for calling their space a cave, and nor should we expect to find them in a Christian polemical account of how even diabolic cults borrow from the Old Testament. It is perhaps unsurprising that Justin Martyr should have encountered the term *spelaeum* as a descriptor of Mithraic sacred space: he was teaching in Rome during the middle of the second century, and, as stated above, it is in Rome and Italy that we find the emphasis on the *mithraeum* as a *spelaeum*. These passages also suggest that Mithraic activity in Rome at this time was not particularly secretive, and that even non-Mithraists could become familiar with certain terminology.

The Christian apologist Tertullian also considered the *spelaeum* to be a place of initiation:

> Blush, his fellow-soldiers, no longer judged by him, but by some soldier of Mithras. Who, when he is initiated in a cave, in a true fortress of shadows…[481]

478 Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 70: Ὅταν δὲ οἱ τὰ τοῦ Μίθρου μυστήρια παραδιδόντες λέγουσιν ἐκ πέτρας γεγενῆσθαι, καὶ σπήλαιον καλῶσι τὸν τόπον, ἔνθα μυεῖν τοὺς πειθομένους αὐτῳ.
479 Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 78: διὰ τοὺς λόγους ἐκείνους τοὺς τὰ Μὶθρα μυστήρια παραδιδόντας, ἐν τόπῳ ἐπικαλουμένῳ παρ' αὐτοῖς σπήλαιῳ, μυεῖσθαι ὑπ' αὐτῶν, ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐνεργεθῆναι ἐιπεῖν.
480 Visconti's opinion that *spelaeum* referred to a space in which initiations took place was clearly based on these passages, see 161-162 above.
481 Tert. *De corona* 15: "*erubescite, commilitones eius, iam non ab ipso iudicandi, sed ab aliquo Mithrae milite. Qui cum initiatur in spelaeo, in castris vere tenebrarum*…".

Tertullian was writing at around the start of the third century and, although he was probably living in North Africa at the time, rather than in Rome, he himself states that he was familiar with the works of Justin Martyr.[482] This might suggest that he based his reference to Mithraic sacred space on the account given by Justin Martyr, although he may have encountered Mithraic worship for himself among the soldiers in Carthage. The phrase "*castris vere tenebrarum*" has become almost the epitome of perceptions of *mithraea* as gloomy underground spaces.[483]

The fourth-century Christian writer Firmicus Maternus also emphasised the dark and secretive nature of *mithraea*:

> They call him Mithras, and – in truth – they impart his sacred rites in secret caves, so that always plunged into the dark filth of shadows they avoid the grace of a glorious clear light.[484]

This passage emphasises the idea of *mithraea* as being hidden away, although in the mouth of a Christian polemicist this may more reflect the suggestion that Mithraists have something to hide, rather than reality. Tertullian's fortress of shadows has developed into a more sinister space, and one more corrupted with darkness and grime; again, it is unclear whether Firmicus Maternus' shadows refer to the flickering lamplight with which many *mithraea* were presumably lit, or to a symbolic darkness compared to the true light of Christian belief.

482 Tert. *Adv. Valent.* 5.
483 Clauss 1990b, 53 = Clauss 2000, 44; Lenk 2017, 72.
484 Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 5: "*Hunc Mithram dicunt, sacra vero eius in speluncis abditis tradunt, ut semper obscure tenebrarum squalor demersi gratiam splendidi ac sereni luminis vitent*".

By far the most influential literary source on Mithraic sacred space, however, has been Porphyry's *De antro nympharum*.

> So, the Persians too, by celebrating the mysteries of the descent and ascent, initiate the initiate; they call this place a cave. Zoroaster first, as Eubulus said, dedicated a cave in the mountains near Persis, with flowers and streams, to the honour of the creator of all and father Mithra, which bore an image of the cosmos, which Mithras had fashioned, inside which at regular intervals there were symbols of the natural elements and zones. And after Zoroaster had done this, the practice endured among others of performing the rites in antra or spelaea, either natural or man-made.[485]

In this passage, Porphyry seems to be referring both a myth about Mithra as a *demiourgos*, and to contemporary practice. The emphasis on Persian mountains and Zoroaster distances the account from Roman Mithras, and it is ambiguous whether Porphyry is indeed discussing Roman practices in the creation of sacred space, Avestan customs that had endured for some time but had subsequently faded away, or Zoroastrian traditions that were in contemporary practice.

Porphyry's interest in the idea of a Mithraic cave is unsurprising given this is a treatise that explores the nature of the Homeric cave of the nymphs as an allegory for the generation of souls; he claims to be using the Mithraist Eubulus as his source, which gives him a sense of authority that nonetheless should not entirely be trusted. His description has given rise to an interpretation of the *mithraeum* in which the descent and ascent of souls could be taught; this has been popular among scholars interested in the neo-Platonic ideas of the soul that

485 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 6: "οὕτω καὶ Πέρσαι τὴν εἰς κὰτω κάθοδον τῶν ψυχῶν καὶ πάλιν ἔξοδον μυσταγωγοῦντες τελοῦσι τὸν μύστην, ἐπονομάσαντες σπήλαιον <τον> τόπον. πρώτου μέν, ὡς ἔφη Εὔβουλος Ζωροάστρου αὐτοφυὲς σπήλαιον ἐν τοῖς πλησίον ὄρεσι τῆς Περσίδος ἀνθηρὸν καὶ πηγὰς ἔχον ἀνιερώσαντος εἰς τιμὴν τοῦ πάντων ποιητοῦ καὶ πατρὸς Μίθρου, εἰκόνα φέροντος αὐτῷ τοῦ σπηλαίου τοῦ κόσμου, ὅν ὁ Μίθρα ἐδημιούργησε, τῶν δ' ἐντὸς κατὰ συμμέτρους ἀποστάσεις σύμβολα φερόντων τῶν κοσμισῶν στοιχείων καὶ κλιμάτων. μετὰ δὲ τοῦτον τὸν Ζωροάστρην κρατήσαντος καὶ παρὰ τοῖς ἄλλοις, δι' ἄντρων καὶ σπηλαίων εἴτ' οὖν αὐτοφυῶν εἴτε χειροποιήτων τὰς τελετὰς ἀποδιδόναι".

could have been contained in Mithraic belief.[486] Porphyry's passage, and, in particular, its underlining of astrological and symbolic motifs, have also been used to give weight to the historiographical trend of Roger Beck's 'star-talk' and other associated astrological interpretations. These texts all make use of the theme of a cave – mostly with reference to initiation –; this concentration of literary testimony should not be disregarded, nor, however, should it be taken to mean that *mithraea* necessarily had to be cave-like.

III.IV. The *mithraeum* as a cave: the Balkans, Italy, and the East

Mithraic mythology places the pivotal moment of slaughter – or sacrifice – within a cave; this is the scene with Mithras and the bull that is ubiquitous to *mithraea* across the Roman Empire. In several tauroctony scenes, the main action is set within a stylised grotto, or an arched recess, often left rough to suggest the rocks of a cave. This is the case with a marble relief now in the Vatican Museums, dedicated to the God Sol Invictus by the Imperial slave Atimetus (Figure 65).[487] The cave is indicated by an arch of rough stones around Mithras, the bull, and the attendant dog, snake, raven and scorpion; the busts of Sol on the left and Luna on the right appear on the outside of the cave, distancing them from the action.

In the Atimetus relief, the entire scene is in bas-relief; in a limestone relief from Mauls in Austria, however, Mithras and the bull are depicted in sunken relief, thus adding to the sense that the death of the bull took place within a recessed space (Figure 66).[488] In the Mauls relief, the arch of the cave is again depicted by rough rocks; it is somewhat distorted out of

[486] On *De antro* and its "Platonic exegesis of Homer", see Turcan 1975, 62-89. For Celsus' version of Mithraic Platonism, see Origen *C. Cels.* 6.21-22. Beck argues against the *mithraeum* as a place for teaching this model; instead, he emphasises that to Mithraists it actually *was* the cosmos, and that therefore it acted as an actual site for the transmigration of souls (Beck 2006, 113).
[487] *CIMRM* 546.
[488] *CIMRM* 1400.

shape, however, by the peak of Mithras' cap, and by the large roundels of Sol and Luna. While the Atimetus relief could conceivably depict a real cave, albeit with the addition of the sun and moon gods, the cave on the Mauls relief is set more firmly into the world of symbolic representation by its framing of side-scenes to the left and right, and by the addition of a *tabula ansata* underneath. The Konjic relief from Bosnia takes this symbolic depiction a step further; the tauroctony scene is set within the simple architectural frame of a smooth geometric arch, on the rim of which runs an inscription (Figure 67).[489] The setting on this relief is definitely that of a man-made space, without even a particularly strong emphasis on identifying that space as a cave.

Nor is it only reliefs that appear to place the scene within a cave; the fresco tauroctonies on the rear wall of the *mithraea* of Santa Maria Capua Vetere and Marino also have painted rocks framing the action (Figures 73 and 72). The effect is particularly heightened in the case of the Capua Vetere scene as the fresco fills the entire space of the rear wall, right up to the barrel roof, which gives the impression of a cave within a cave.[490] By contrast, the Marino painting is set within a rectangular frame; one side of the grottoised arch of the cave appears to be supported by a pillar, which makes the cave seem an artificial construction rather than a natural phenomenon.[491] At the Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana, in Ostia, the elaborate niche – which would probably originally have held a tauroctony relief – had an arched roof that was inlaid with pieces of pumice, on which traces of blue paint remain (Figure 68).[492] This was presumably intended to act as a representation of a cave, into which the scene of Mithras and the bull could be set.

489 For more on this relief, including the inscription, see Chapter IV, 240-242.
490 *CIMRM* 181.
491 Vermaseren 1982, 4-11.
492 *CIMRM* 216.

These examples suggest that there was a strong interest, among certain Mithraic communities, in setting Mithras' slaughter of the bull within the context of a cave. This is by no means the normal method of depiction, and should not be interpreted as normative practice: there are many more reliefs, sculptures and paintings of this scene that make no reference at all to the idea of a cave.[493] Nonetheless, the passages from Statius and Porphyry, placing an important action by Mithra/s within a cave appear to be borne out by various pieces of material evidence, not just confined to Italy, but present in Austria and Bosnia as well. It is less clear, however, that Mithraic sacred space should necessarily seek to reconstruct this cave architecturally. The passages from Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Firmicus Maternus all refer to ongoing Mithraic activity within a cave; is it possible to find this idea corroborated by archaeological evidence, rather than merely in inscriptions describing sites as *spelaea*? This part of the chapter explores cases where Mithraists seem to have made use of natural caves for their sacred spaces.

III.IV.i. The Močići *mithraeum*, *CIMRM* 1882

The phenomenon of using natural caves – or recesses within natural rock formations – and developing them into *mithraea* is particularly noticeable in central Europe and the Balkans.[494] One particularly well-known example – in chief, for its unusual positioning of the tauroctony scene – is the *mithraeum* near Močići in Croatia (Figure 69).[495] There are

[493] It is unfortunate that many Mithraic reliefs do not have a reliably attested findspot; it is therefore often difficult to assess whether reliefs were already within cave-like spaces, or whether any representation of a cave on the relief meant that viewers were looking at a cave-within-a-cave. It is worth asking whether the depiction of an arch – as, for example, on the Zenobius relief from Dura-Europos – was intended to denote a cave, or was a reference to the architectural features within the *mithraeum* itself. The frescoes from Capua Vetere and Marino both refer to caves-within-caves. Ultimately, it is impossible to reconstruct why some communities might have chosen to materialise a cave on their reliefs, while others did not.

[494] Zotović 1973, 152-154.

[495] For the best account of this *mithraeum*, including an attempt at reconstructing its layout, see Rendić-Miočević 1953; on Močići as an example of a *mithraeum* with a rock-carved relief, and for a discussion of its unpublished archaeological report, see Lenk 2017, 71-72.

two parts to this *mithraeum*: a natural cave, and an open-air space in front of the cave, encircled by a ring of stones, and containing a square well.[496] In addition to the tauroctony, there are the feet in relief of a standing figure; Rendić-Miočević assumed that these belonged to Silvanus, and that the sanctuary was originally dedicated to Silvanus before being taken over by worshippers of Mithras; the feet are, however, now in such bad condition that it is difficult to identify them at all, and the association of the site with Silvanus remains conjecture.[497]

Bruno Bijađija has highlighted the interesting fact that the action of the tauroctony takes place beneath a gabled, rather than an arched roof.[498] It is noteworthy that, although Mithras and the bull are in slightly sunken relief, there does not appear to have been any weight attached among the Mithraists of Močići in placing their tauroctony scene in the context of a cave – either the natural cave that constituted half of the *mithraeum*, or the artificial cave of a symbolic representation on the relief itself. It is possible that the gabled roof was intended to mimic an actual gabled wooden roof covering the outer part of the *mithraeum*; no traces of any such structure remain, but it would be highly unusual to find an open-air Mithraic sanctuary.[499]

The site was fairly difficult to reach, which perhaps added to its desirability as a place to worship Mithras. Only the tauroctony scene links the cave to Mithras; there is no evidence of *podia*, a niche on the rear wall of the cave, or any other overtly Mithraic decorative feature. An important question remains: did the worshippers at Močići choose this site for

496 Bijađija 2012, 81; Lenk 2017, 71.
497 Rendić-Miočević 1953, 271-276; Zotović 1973, 154; for the argument against reading the figure as Silvanus, see Bijađija 2012, 82.
498 Bijađija 2012, 81.
499 Zotović 1973, 153; Lenk 2017, 72 f.18.

their *mithraeum* thinking of the supposed significance of a cave, or simply because it was a convenient location, perhaps already connected with the veneration of a divinity, and with a natural source of water attached?

III.IV.ii. The Rožanec *mithraeum*, *CIMRM* 1481

The exact structure of a probable *mithraeum* at Rožanec (Figure 70), in Slovenia, has never definitively been established. The site is in a mountain valley, near a forest, and at one point contained a semi-circular basin for water.[500] Zotović, in his categorisation of different *mithraea* in the former Yugoslavia, labelled it as a "semi-*spelaeum*", because it is partly formed from natural rock, and then seems subsequently to have been enhanced by human hands.[501] Three sides of the *mithraeum* – the east, north, and west – are formed of rocks, which the south side merges into a chestnut forest; it is assumed that the main entrance into the space was from this south side, although Petar Selem states that there is another entrance through the rocks to the north.[502]

One of the notable features of this *mithraeum* is that the tauroctony relief, carved into the living rock on the west wall of the site, does not align with the supposed north-south axis of the space, and therefore would not have been positioned on the rear wall of the *mithraeum*.[503] The relief itself is quite crudely carved, and has a tripartite structure: in the centre, framed by an arch, Mithras kills the bull, attended by the scorpion, raven, snake, and

[500] Selem 1980, 78-79; Lenk 2017, 67 fig. 3.5.
[501] Zotović 1973, 153-154.
[502] Selem 1980, 78; Lenk 2017, 71.
[503] Selem 1980, 79; Lenk 2017, 71. Selem suggests – and Lenk agrees – that one possible reason for this is that the north interior wall of the *mithraeum* would have been too rough to have supported a rock-carved tauroctony scene. Lenk rightly questions "why the community here still preferred a rock carving rather than the more flexible option of a slab or statue"; one speculative answer might be that there was originally more than one tauroctony scene within the *mithraeum*.

dog; in a large niche to his left is Cautopates, with downturned torch, and above him the bust of Sol; in a large niche to Mithras' right is Cautes, whose torch is now missing, and above him Luna.[504] Above the main scene is an inscription recording the dedication to Deus Invictus Mithras.

Again, it is difficult to determine whether the site was chosen thanks to its natural cave-like properties, or whether it was just considered to be a suitable place for a more remote and private worship. The two examples discussed so far – Močići and Rožanec – both suggest a stronger characterisation of Mithraic worship as secretive, or at least isolated, than the *mithraea* of Rome and Ostia; this is only to be expected in a more rural environment, but the question then arises of whether this isolation was intrinsic to the location, or whether it was thought to be particularly desirable.

III.IV.iii. The Jajce *mithraeum*, *CIMRM* 1901

Like the Rožanec site, the *mithraeum* at Jajce in Bosnia was classified by Zotović as a "semi-*spelaeum*" (Figure 71).[505] An archaeological report on the *mithraeum* was published by Dimitrije Sergejevski in 1937; he dates it to the fourth century based on the evidence of the coin deposits.[506] The *mithraeum* consists of a single room, cut into the rock and soil nearly three metres below floor level; a flight of steps provided access down into the site. The room has an irregular shape, more an elongated trapezoid than a rectangle, and only one *podium*, on the left side as you look towards the rear wall.

504 *CIMRM* 1482; Selem 1980, 79-80.
505 Zotović 1973, 153-154.
506 Sergejevski 1937, 17.

This *mithraeum* is notable for the number of its finds, which include a rock-carved tauroctony, six limestone altars, a freestanding statuette of Cautopates, and assorted coins and lamps. The tauroctony relief itself is made from limestone, and shows the conventional bull-slaying scene of Mithras, bull, and attendant animals. The action takes place under the representation of a gabled roof; the loss of the upper structure of the Jajce *mithraeum* means that we cannot know whether this was an intentional reference to the actual roof over the site. The altars range in size – the smallest measuring 0.18m high, and the largest 0.83m –, detail and quality; only one of them bears traces of an inscription, of which only the letters INV – presumably for INVICTO – can now be discerned.[507]

The Jajce *mithraeum* was located near the river Pliva; the associated dampness has caused much damage to the site, especially since its excavation.[508] The worshippers who chose this site clearly felt an importance – or perhaps even a requirement – to situate their *mithraeum* below ground level, in a space as close to a cave as they could create. The fact that the tauroctony relief is hewn from the living limestone rock adds to this impression, as does the irregular, and therefore more naturalistic, shape of the room. The example of Jajce, unlike those of Rožanec and Močići, more clearly indicates a strong interest in making a *mithraeum* into a cave.

III.IV.iv. The *mithraeum* at Marino

Outside the urban developments of Rome and Ostia, several Italian *mithraea* were also situated inside natural caves and grottoes. The *mithraeum* at Santa Maria Capua Vetere

[507] Sergejevski 1937, 11-18.
[508] According to the blog: merlinandrebecca.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/the-most-bosnian-town.html, accessed 09/11/2017.

(Figure 44) was constructed in a semi-subterranean *cryptoporticus* near the site of what is thought to have been a Capitolium.[509] As mentioned above, the Mithraists in Capua Vetere made full use of the barrel roof, with both the tauroctony scene and a fresco lunette of Luna in her *biga* rising to the height of the ceiling. The *mithraeum* at Marino, which was discovered accidentally in 1963, is still more impressive in its use of artificially enlarged caves inside the Alban Hills in the Italian province of Lazio.[510]

The natural cave, originally enlarged to act as a cistern, consists of a large anteroom from which, by means of a small flight of steps, there is an entrance into the long, narrow principal room.[511] The left *podium* still exists, but only traces of the right bench remain. The aisle leads up to a large tauroctony fresco on the rear wall (Figure 72), in front of which stood a large altar with a dedicatory inscription to INVICTO IDEO (*sic*) by Cresces, *actor* of Alfius Seberus.[512]

The tauroctony fresco bears striking similarities to both the Capua Vetere painting (Figure 73), and the scene from the Barberini *mithraeum* in Rome (Figure 74).[513] All three are located in rooms with barrel roofs, and are slightly unusual for the choice of fresco as a medium. They are also notable for the busts of Sol in the top left-hand corner; in each case, either one or two rays from Sol's *nimbus* enter the main action of the scene, as if casting light onto it. The example from Marino is particularly striking, as it seems to hint at a greater sense of interaction between Sol and Mithras; while Sol's head is not particularly directed

509 *CIMRM* 180. For a full description of the site, see Chapter II, 143-147.
510 The site was discovered when Vittorio Zoffoli set about the enlargement of his wine cellars; it is perhaps interesting to note that the network of caves in the hillside is still used by the residents of Marino today.
511 Vermaseren 1982, 4-7. According to Vermaseren, the principal room – or cult room – of the *mithraeum* is 29.2m long, and only 3.1m wide.
512 Vermaseren 1982, 19.
513 On this comparison, and for a suggestion that the three belong to the same period, see Meyboom 1982, 35.

towards Mithras, the ray almost is aimed at Mithras' face, and seems to act as a line of sight between the two. In general, however, the rays around Sol's crown on the Marino fresco vary in length.[514]

The example of Marino suggests that Mithraists may have taken advantage of the opportunity to use caves where possible as locations for *mithraea*. There is also the possibility, however, which is perhaps supported by the fact that the caves are still used in the modern day, that the network of caves in the hills was a convenient place in which to house a sanctuary site.[515] The area surrounding Marino was extensively quarried by the Romans for peperino, and we can speculate that at least some of the Mithraists at Marino may have been involved in the operation of these quarries.[516] It is therefore impossible to tell whether the location of the *mithraeum* in a natural cave system was due to convenience, tradition, religious imperative, or an uncertain combination of these.[517]

III.IV.v. Twin *mithraea* at Doliche

The use of natural caves as the setting for *mithraea* is by no means confined to Italy and the Balkans; although examples from Spain, France, Germany and Britain are limited, there is

514 For a comparison to the Fiano Romano two-sided relief, see Chapter IV, 229-231.
515 Drawing on a suggestion by Thomas Ashby, Giulia Rocca points out that there might have been a domestic complex originally using the cistern, and that the *mithraeum* might therefore not have been an isolated site (Rocca 2012, 612). The topography of these caves is too uncertain to reconstruct any other previous uses during the Roman period; there are no other attested sanctuaries within them, but for other finds relating to 'oriental cults' in Marino, see Rocca 2012, 612-613. For other cults in the Graeco-Roman world that used natural caves, see Larson 2001, 226-267 (on caves of the nymphs); Ustinova 2009, 55-58 (on caves of the nymphs and Pan); 109-120 (on Apollo).
516 Heiken, Funiciello & De Rita 2005, 213-214.
517 Roger Beck sees the tauroctony fresco, and its depiction of Mithras with stars in his cloak as "the Marino experience" – a-cave-within-a-cave – although he does not ascribe it to a conscious decision on the part of the Mithraists (Beck 2006, 106-107). It seems slightly jarring to dismiss the idea of this as a conscious decision: Beck argues on the one hand for the incredibly complex astrological readings of Mithraic sites and, by extension, complex scientific and philosophical interests on the part of the Mithraists using them, but on the other hand does not see Marino as a deliberate game played with the ideas of sacred space.

a stronger tradition of underground *mithraea*, or *mithraea* in grottoes, in the east of the Roman Empire. The case of Hawarti in Syria, already discussed at some length in Chapter I, was an example of a *mithraeum* cut down into the living rock, which then became the foundation of a Christian church.[518] A *mithraeum* has also been found near the Roman harbour in Caesarea Maritima (Figure 75); it was originally part of a series of barrel-vaulted spaces for the storage of grain, but was later converted into a *mithraeum*.[519]

In Doliche, in the former kingdom of Commagene in modern Turkey, two *mithraea* were discovered in 1997, carved side by side into the living rock of an abandoned Roman quarry (Figure 76).[520] They were found within a single cave, although the presence of two rock-carved tauroctonies suggests that they were intended to be separate sanctuaries.[521] Richard Gordon suggested that the presence of two *mithraea* was an indication of the popularity of the Roman worship of Mithras in Doliche, with the idea that when one site had reached its maximum possible number of worshippers, another was created.[522]

Gordon adds that the appropriation of a natural cave by the Mithraists at Doliche is noteworthy, because such usage is not often seen in Mithraic sacred space.[523] He states that the inconvenience of such sites would outweigh their "ideological value", and even posits that Mithraists familiar with cities might have considered caves as "uncomfortable, and even uncivilised".[524] I would argue instead that, in cases where using natural caves and grottoes

518 Chapter I, 69-83.
519 For archaeological reports on the site, see Hopfe & Lease 1975; Bull 1978; on the problems of dating the *mithraeum* phase, with a close analysis of the ceramic finds, see Blakely 1987.
520 For a full discussion of the sites, see Schütte-Maischatz & Winter 2001; 2004.
521 On the contribution of the finds at Doliche to an assessment of Mithraic rock-carved reliefs, see Lenk 2017, 67 fig. 3.5; 73.
522 Gordon 2001a, 89.
523 Gordon 2001a, 89: "Comme les fouilleurs l'ont noté, les fidèles de Mithra n'ont pas souvent exploité des grottes naturelles comme sanctuaires…".
524 Gordon 2001a, 89. By contrast, Beck states that "where feasible [mithraea] were sited in natural caves", although he does not give examples or statistics (Beck 2006, 105).

was practicable – or even traditional, as was possible in Marino – then several communities of Mithraists demonstrably preferred these locations for their *mithraea*. This was a phenomenon repeated where the landscape – mountains, hillsides, or quarries – allowed for it, in several different provinces across the Roman Empire. As mentioned before, however, this inclination on the part of some communities is not sufficient for the understanding the *mithraea* were necessarily *supposed* to be caves.

III.V. The cave as a likeness of the cosmos

The previous part of this chapter established that some Mithraists preferred natural cave settings for their *mithraea*; this part explores whether Porphyry's statement that Zoroaster's cave was a "likeness of the cosmos" was also replicated in *mithraea*.[525] This fragment of text, combined with certain archaeological case studies, has given rise to an entire field of work on astrology and the zodiac in relation to modes of viewing *mithraea*, and to the construction of the idea of a perfect Mithraic space.[526] This section examines the four Italian *mithraea* that have traditionally been used to support the argument for an astrological Mithraic space – the Sette Sfere and Sette Porte *mithraea* in Ostia, and the sites at Ponza and Vulci – and considers whether the picture they present might justify an expectation that a *mithraeum ought* to be a likeness of the cosmos.

To what extent, however, does this expectation really exist? There has been a definite interest in Mithraic scholarship not only in cataloguing *mithraea*, and examining their finds, but in deciphering their meaning. Richard Gordon claimed in 1976 that understanding how

525 Porph. *De antr. nymph*. 6.
526 The field of astrological interpretations of the worship of Mithras is not confined to sacred space; it is also applied to readings of the tauroctony scene, for which see Chapter IV, 211-212.

the sacred geography of a *mithraeum* – in this case, the Mitreo delle Sette Sfere – functioned allows scholars better to characterise the rules by which Mithraic worship operated, and which allowed the practitioners of Mithraic mysteries to claim religious and astrological authority.[527] As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Mithraic sacred spaces are one of the best surviving points of entry that we have into Mithraic practice and, possibly, belief; surely it should therefore make sense to analyse them in order to find meaning. This, of course, depends on whether we believe that it is possible to reconstruct meaning – or meanings – from the remnants of sacred space.[528]

III.V.i. Astrological trends in Mithraic studies

It is not the aim of this section of the thesis to analyse the astrological and astronomical merits, accuracy, and utility of this particular field of Mithraic scholarship; that would require a historian of science and astronomy, or of ancient astrology. Rather, it explores the application of the astrological lens to the study of Mithraic sacred space, particularly in terms of its reliance upon readings of Porphyry of Tyre, including passages that are acknowledged to have survived only in a corrupt form.[529] In so doing, it does not look at the vast body of *mithraea* that do not reinforce these astrological theories; instead, it analyses the *mithraea* most commonly cited in support of them, and examines whether they can bear the weight that has been placed upon them.

First, a brief overview of the interest of Mithraic scholars in astrology. Franz Cumont was fascinated by the possibilities of Mithraic astrology. He explicitly saw this through the lens

527 Gordon 1976, 145. Gordon's interest in the possible meanings of the *mithraeum*, now described as "implications of the symbolic space" has continued, as demonstrated in Gordon 2017a, 422-423.
528 For the idea of the generation of multiple meanings, see Gordon 1976, 119.
529 Beck 1994a, 106-107.

of a continuation of Babylonian and Mazdean astrology, centred around the zodiac; rather than seeing astrology as a necessary component of Roman Mithraic worship, Cumont considered it to be an intellectual pursuit for the most advanced initiates, and secondary to the myth of Mithras and the bull.[530] The post-Cumontian trend towards astrology has, by contrast, tended to give it an increasing importance in the recreation and interpretation of Mithraic beliefs.

This later astrological model has been one of the major defining trends in Mithraic scholarship since the mid-1970s, when Beck's articles on the zodiac from the Ponza *mithraeum*, and Gordon's article on *The sacred geography of a* mithraeum*: the example of Sette Sfere* were published.[531] These articles were very much products of their time. Beck's work on the *mithraeum* at Ponza was partially the result of Maarten Vermaseren's publication in 1974 of what had, for a century, been a neglected site, and also of what has since been a lifetime's interest in questions of ancient astrology.[532] Richard Gordon's article – more theoretical in its approach and proposed application – was almost certainly influenced by three major factors. First, his exposure to the structuralist theories of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet in Paris in 1967-1968; second, by the publication in 1975 of George Steiner's *After Babel*, which paved the way for new theories about approaching cross-cultural and cross-linguistic meanings; third, the publication, also in 1975, of Dan Sperber's *Rethinking Symbolism*, which moved away from structuralism towards the fields of cognitivism, anthropology and semiology.[533]

530 Cumont 1903, 130-131.
531 Beck 1976a; 1976b; 1978; Gordon 1976.
532 Vermaseren 1974; for Beck's work on non-Mithraic astrology, see Beck 2007; 2010.
533 Steiner 1975; Sperber 1975. Gordon acknowledges, and briefly discusses, the work of both in the article.

The dangers of too strong a structuralist approach became evident in Gordon's article. The arguments against using structuralism have often been on the basis of its anachronistic and ahistorical approach, that it studies not so much the individual object or site, but rather the underlying codes that make it intelligible to us. Gordon used the example of Sette Sfere – a single *mithraeum*, with only one other that is markedly similar – to create a model for *mithraea* across the Roman Empire. Gordon was eager to extrapolate from the example of Sette Sfere to explain the presence of the zodiac in other *mithraea*, and to create a unifying and richly symbolic code. According to this code, the astronomical symbols of the *mithraeum* belonged to an overlying language, intelligible to the Mithraic initiates, which had the power to create a new and fictive religious environment.[534]

From the 1970s, the emphasis on Mithraic astrology gathered pace. The 1980s saw the publication of two seminal works: Beck's *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* in 1988, and David Ulansey's *The origins of the Mithraic mysteries: cosmology and salvation in the ancient world* in 1989.[535] The focus on astrology became particularly dominant in the field of Mithraic studies, and lasted until at least 2006, when Beck published *The Religion of the Mithras cult in the Roman Empire: mysteries of the unconquered sun*.[536] This dominance became such that scholars writing about the Roman worship of Mithras, who chose not to engage with the subject, could potentially face criticism. This was the case with Beck's review of the second edition of Manfred Clauss' *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, in which Beck highlights that:

534 The nature of Gordon's semiotic approach therefore tends towards the belief in an overarching religious framework to Mithraic worship, a position that has been problematised during the decades since 1976, as well as in this thesis, and that Gordon himself has subsequently abandoned.
535 Beck 1988; Ulansey 1989. The latter is more a discussion of the role of astrology in interpreting the composition and protagonists of the tauroctony scene; see Chapter IV, 211-212.
536 Beck 2006. Since this date, the trend of astrology has gradually declined, while an interest in cognitivism has grown in its stead. For the field of cognitive Mithraic studies, see Chapter II, 134-137.

> On the massive presence of astral symbolism in the cult's monuments Clauss, unfortunately, has nothing to say; likewise, nothing on the testimony of Porphyry (*De antro nympharum*), borne out by considerable archaeological evidence that the mithraeum was designed as an "image of the cosmos" for "initiation into the descent and return of souls" and accordingly furnished with "symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos." Those who have argued, as has the present reviewer, that this evidence should be taken seriously are summarily dismissed in the Introduction (8-10).[537]

Beck makes two points very clear in this passage: first, that he regards the inclusion of astrology – and astrological symbolism – as necessary to any study of Roman Mithras, and second, that he bases much of his understanding of the meaning of *mithraea* on Porphyry's *De antro nympharum*, and in particular on the phrase "εἰκόνα τοῦ κόσμου". Beck continues, in the review, to censure the absence of plans of the Sette Sfere, Sette Porte, and Vulci *mithraea* from Clauss' book, arguing that they present "cogent evidence… supporting, at least for central Italy, Porphyry's statement about the mithraeum's design and function".[538]

The idea of an astral symbolic language – 'star-talk', to use Beck's own term –, which could be shared between *mithraea* and Mithraists, possesses a certain intellectual allure.[539] Gordon argued for the deliberate polysemy of religion, in its ability and desire to reinvent itself to appeal to new members and retain its old adherents.[540] According to this idea, the symbolic Mithraic language is not static; it constantly evolves to embrace new meanings. The model is seductively simple; it allows for a variety of iconographies and symbols within Mithraic sacred space and unites them by the means of a cognitive framework.

537 Beck 2013.
538 Beck 2013.
539 Beck 2006, 7-8.
540 Gordon 1976, 119.

III.V.ii. The place of the zodiac

The signs of the zodiac seem to play a variety of roles within the possible formulations of sacred space, both within a *mithraeum*, and on the tauroctony scene. They speak a particular kind of astrological language, and act as symbols that Roger Beck described as "unilingual", and as "referents in one culture only".[541] Cumont, however, regarded the zodiac as one of the major Babylonian involvements in his evolving Avestan mysteries, arguing:

> This was the capital doctrine that Babylon introduced into Mazdaism: belief in Fatality, the conception of an inevitable Destiny controlling the events of this world and inseparably conjoined with the revolution of the starry heavens.[542]

These two approaches to the symbolic language of the zodiac, to a large extent, act as microcosms for the views of the respective scholars on the nature of Mithraic worship: Cumont saw it as being a descendent of eastern philosophy, religion, and astronomy, while Beck saw it as a product of a specifically Hellenistic world, with Graeco-Roman influences. Cumont saw the signs of the zodiac as one of the elements to be worshipped, along with the planets, while Beck saw them as evidence of the sophisticated intellectual interests of Mithraists, and as a means of deciphering Mithraic belief.

III.V.ii.i. The zodiac in the tauroctony

> *...The sheer banality of the zodiacal sequence on reliefs persuades us that we comprehend their significance – their familiarity reassures.*[543]

[541] Beck 2006, 29.
[542] Cumont 1903, 124.
[543] Gordon 1976, 119.

Earlier in this chapter, I examined possible representations of caves, or allusions to cave-like *mithraea*, in tauroctony scenes; there are also several important examples that depict the signs of the zodiac, in what could be a reference to conceptions of sacred space. In the Zenobius relief from Dura-Europos (Figure 3), described in Chapter I, the zodiac runs over the main action of the Zenobius tauroctony, in the form of an arch.[544] The same iconography appears in the tauroctony fresco from the Barberini *mithraeum* (Figure 74) mentioned above, and on the large two-sided relief from Nida/Heddernheim (Figure 97), discussed in Chapter IV.[545] In the Zenobius example, the columns on either side of the arch give the impression of an architectural space, whether real or imagined; there are no such additions to the Nida/Heddernheim and Barberini tauroctonies.

What, then, could be the purpose of the zodiac, depicted as an arch, in these scenes? In all three examples, the sequence of signs runs from Aries on the far left to Pisces on the far right; this is not particularly surprising to astrologers, since Aries is the first astrological sign in the zodiac, occupying the first sector of thirty degrees. What it therefore suggests is that the Mithraists who commissioned these scenes – or the creators of them – had an understanding of the zodiacal sequence, and an interest in portraying it; the inclusion of the zodiac on the tauroctony was not simply for show. The depth of a possible meaning to the inclusion of the zodiac should not, however, be overstated; the casting of horoscopes was popular in the Roman world, and many people had a basic knowledge of the astrology underpinning them.

[544] Chapter I, 49.
[545] Chapter III, 120; 181; Chapter IV, 230; 232-235.

The depiction of a zodiac arch over the tauroctony scene could therefore be interpreted as a way of placing Mithras' slaughter – or sacrifice – of the bull within a cosmic setting. This idea is strengthened by reliefs that show the zodiac not just set above the tauroctony, but encircling it. The marble relief found in the Walbrook *mithraeum* in London places Mithras and the bull, the dog, snake, scorpion and raven, as well as Cautes and Cautopates within the circular frame of the signs of the zodiac (Figure 133).[546] A similar composition can be seen on the Sisak relief from Croatia (Figure 77), and on the Trier relief from Germany (Figure 78).[547] Signs of the zodiac also surround the tauroctony – although not in a circular frame – in a marble relief from Sidon (Figure 131).[548] There is no convention in these reliefs about the position in which Aries is found.

Are these reliefs intended to place the tauroctony moment, quite literally, within a likeness of the cosmos, symbolised by the zodiac? Without a clear mythological account, describing the killing of the bull, it is difficult to know what Mithraists thought about what this act could have represented.[549] The use of the zodiac as a frame could have been intended to have a deliberate – and perhaps astrological – meaning; it could, however, simply have been used as a device for breaking up the space within a relief, and assigning a special importance to the tauroctony scene without that importance automatically requiring a complex astrological reading. Parallels can be found from around the Roman world, particularly in mosaics, and especially prevalent in the eastern Mediterranean; they often have a connection with the sun, personified as a sun-god.[550]

546 *CIMRM* 810. For a fuller description of the finds in the Walbrook *mithraeum*, see Chapter V, 291-294.
547 *CIMRM* 1472; 985.
548 *CIMRM* 75. The finds from Sidon are detailed in Chapter V, 288-291.
549 The possible mythology around the bull-slaying scene is discussed in the next chapter.
550 See, for example, the use of the zodiac as a framing device in Jewish synagogue mosaics (Hachlili 1977; 2002); a mosaic from Münster-Sarnsheim showing the sun-god surrounded by the signs of the zodiac; a section of the ceiling from the Temple of Bel in Palmyra. For a list of comparanda to the Jewish mosaics, see Hachlili 2002, 229-232.

As Chapter IV will show, the division of space within tauroctony reliefs is something that varies greatly according to region, interest, and preferences. There are many other ways of separating scenes without using the signs of the zodiac; they clearly had some significance to the worshippers in certain *mithraea*. It is the assumption that that significance must be redolent of a deeper and more intricate astrological interest, however, to which I take exception. To return to the quotation from Richard Gordon at the start of this subsection: the presence of the zodiac on reliefs is not necessarily banal; it opens up a rich discussion about the placement of iconography, and how subtle differences could have different meanings. It is not reassuring, but nor does it have to accompany a complex astrological reading.

III.V.ii.ii. The mithraeum at Ponza

The *mithraeum* on the Italian island of Ponza was discovered at some point before 1867; an unpublished manuscript in Rome, dated between 1867-1869, describes the site, and its famous zodiac.[551] The *mithraeum* was then largely neglected and forgotten, until Vermaseren investigated it in 1969, subsequently publishing the report of his findings in 1974. The site is now underneath an eighteenth-century palazzo, and can be reached by a flight of steps.[552] Vermaseren says that the principal room is uneven, with a rough floor, two *podia*, and a crudely carved niche in the rear wall.[553]

551 Vermaseren 1974, 5 n.2.
552 Vermaseren 1974, 5-6.
553 Vermaseren 1974, 6.

It is for its stucco representation of the signs of the zodiac on the ceiling of the niche, however, that the Ponza *mithraeum* is particularly well-known (Figure 79).[554] It is composed of three concentric circles: the innermost shows a large and a small bear – presumably Ursa Major and Ursa Minor –, the next contains a snake, whose head points towards the niche, and whose body cups the two bears, and round the final ring runs the zodiac, divided by borders in between each sign. As Beck points out, the divisions of space marked out by these borders are very unequal, depending on the size of the sign; Scorpio has by far the largest section.[555] Around the outside of the zodiac are two figures – both mid-stride, and moving in opposite directions, one of whom appears to be blowing a horn –; there may have been a further figure, but damage to the ceiling prevents any further restoration of the scene.[556]

Vermaseren suggested that the presence of the zodiac, in such a prominent position, and evidently connected to actual observation of the heavens through the inclusion of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, indicated that an influential Mithraic *pater* connected to the *mithraeum* must have been learned in astrology, and devoted to watching the heavens.[557] Beck, who disagrees with Vermaseren's specific astrological interpretations of the site, offers "a range of possible meanings" of the combination of symbols, particularly of the snake, which he suggests might be the eclipsing dragon of Syrian astronomy.[558]

554 Beck 1976a; 1978.
555 Beck 1976a, 3.
556 Beck identifies these as wind gods, although there is little evidence upon which to proceed towards any identification (Beck 1976a, 2).
557 Vermaseren 1974, 9.
558 Beck 1976a, 9-11. One obvious problem is that Beck bases much of this reading on the size of the snake/dragon, which he claims is larger than the constellation Serpens would allow for; this seems a somewhat dangerous basis for interpretation, given the unequal zodiac signs and other evidence in the *mithraeum* of a lack of attention to the fine details of measurement. Beck himself acknowledges the speculative nature of his hypothesis, albeit not along these grounds.

Unlike the signs of the zodiac around tauroctony reliefs, which could be argued to represent the moment of bull-killing enclosed within the cosmos, the Ponza zodiac seems more to reflect a particular astrological interest than a desire to make the whole *mithraeum* into a likeness of the cosmos. The generally poor state of preservation of the *mithraeum*, and the loss of the tauroctony scene itself, mean that further attempts to understand the site would probably yield nothing new. Nonetheless, the example of Ponza seems to highlight an important point: the inclusion of the zodiac in a Mithraic context – whether on the tauroctony scene, or elsewhere within a *mithraeum* – did not necessarily have to have one meaning. It could have been a reference to a belief that Mithras was, in some way, an ordainer and sustainer of cosmic order. In some cases, it could indicate a specific astrological interest, in some it could simply have been seen as appropriate decoration or a spatial signifier, and in others it could have been a detailed map to reveal sacred geography.

II.V.iii. The Mitreo delle Sette Sfere, Ostia, *CIMRM* 239

This last point – the idea of sacred geography – has been made most explicit in the case of the Sette Sfere *mithraeum* in Ostia (Figure 80).[559] It was discovered between 1885-1886, and has been dated to the second half of the second century AD.[560] It consists of a small rectangular room, with a *podium* on either side of a central aisle, leading towards a tauroctony relief on the rear wall. Like many of the *mithraea* in Ostia, the Sette Sfere *mithraeum* uses black and white mosaic extensively for decoration: the floor of the aisle is divided by seven black mosaic arches, which have given the site its modern name; there is a small mosaic dagger by the entrance to the site; the fronts of the *podia* show figural

559 Most notable, of course in the title of Gordon's 1976 article.
560 Becatti 1954, 123-124; White 2012, 441.

depictions of deities, or references to planets, as well as Cautes and Cautopates; the top edges of the *podia* depict the signs of the zodiac.

Gordon saw this *mithraeum* as the means to deciphering the disparate clues about sacred space given in other *mithraea*, and unifying them to read a coherent language of symbolism, based on Porphyry's *De antro nympharum*. He went so far as to state this explicitly, saying:

> Sette Sfere is the only excavated mithraeum which tells us much about Mithraic beliefs about sacred space: for the most part a few isolated symbols were deemed adequate – which functioned as signs of the full range of possibilities. Benches, niches, odd statues, all are part of a language largely non-intelligible to us. But Sette Sfere provides something like a code-key.[561]

The idea of Sette Sfere as a code-key inevitably turns it into an idealised *mithraeum*, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter. It places a primacy not only on astrology as the means to deciphering meaning within Mithraic sacred space, but also upon Porphyry as the crucial source who explains it to the modern viewer. Gordon created a diagram in his article (Figure 81); it follows Porphyry's "likeness of the cosmos", and a further passage in which he places Mithras at the seat of the equinoxes.[562] The image of the tauroctony scene at the top of the diagram reflects the position of the niche, which is oriented to the north; the diagram therefore clearly shows that the sacred geography inside the *mithraeum* had a different ritual than actual orientation. The signs of the zodiac run along the topmost edge of the *podia*, and accord with the division of the seasons.

[561] Gordon 1976, 120.
[562] Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 24. The text is highly corrupt, and exists in various formulations; for a fuller account, see Chapter IV, 211.

Roger Beck interpreted the composition of the astrological symbols at Sette Sfere to place the vernal equinox at the far end of the *mithraeum*, thus giving Mithras his seat at the spring equinox in accordance with Porphyry, and placing the autumnal equinox at the entrance to the site.[563] Furthermore, he calculated that for both this *mithraeum*, and the Mitreo delle Sette Porte in Ostia, the precise mapping out of space and light corresponded to the vernal equinoxes of AD 172 and 173 – roughly the time to which both sites have been dated.[564]

Beck described Sette Sfere as "the most cosmologically garrulous of all extant *mithraea*"; this statement is certainly emphasised in his chapter on the *mithraeum* as a symbol system, in his 2006 book on *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire*.[565] In this chapter, Beck refers to the Sette Sfere *mithraeum* almost to the exclusion of any other. He includes brief discussions of the Sette Porte, Capua Vetere, Ponza and Vulci *mithraea* in relation to possible astrological symbolism, and has a digression to the Marino *mithraeum*; the only *mithraeum* outside of Italy that he mentions in any detail is that of Dura-Europos, although he also includes a list of *mithraea* with barrel vaulted ceilings.[566] In spite of Beck's claims to the contrary, Sette Sfere acts as his idealised *mithraeum*, it forms the model for his blueprint of a *mithraeum*. There is no attempt to draw in the *mithraea* from Germany or Britain, or even the natural caves of the Balkans and Central Europe, in order to justify his cosmological model of the *mithraeum* as a likeness of the cosmos as a blueprint for other sites.

563 Beck 2006, 108.
564 Beck 1979, 515-529.
565 Beck 2006, 108.
566 On Sette Porte, 114; Capua Vetere, 111; Ponza, 109; Vulci, 111; 114-115; Marino, 106-107; Dura-Europos, 111; barrel-vaulted *mithraea*, 105.

III.V.iv. The Mitreo delle Sette Porte, Ostia, *CIMRM* 288

The Mitreo delle Sette Porte (Figure 82) is often paired with Sette Sfere in discussions of Mithraic astrology; in part, this is thanks to the emphasis they both seem to place on the number seven. Sette Porte received its name from the mosaic representation of a gateway, at the entrance to the *mithraeum*; there is a large central archway with an *oscillum* hanging from the keystone, on each side of this archway are columns supporting three smaller arches, which are topped by stone battlements. Entering the *mithraeum* presumably therefore involved passing through this symbolic arch.

Towards the far end of the site are further mosaic depictions of a snake and bird – possibly an eagle – either side of a *krater*; mosaic borders around a basin and two marble slabs placed into the floor, all connected to water pipes; the figure of a standing man, holding a staff and thunderbolt, and therefore probably Jupiter; a bust of a bearded man with a harpe, presumably Saturn. By the entrance, on the front edges of the *podia*, is the representation of a figure with crossed legs, standing on a mosaic statue base. He is presumably intended to be either Cautes or Cautopates, both of whom are usually shown cross-legged. Further along the *podia* are figures identified as Mercury with his *caduceus*, a Venus *anadyomene*, Luna with a crescent moon, and Mars with a cuirass, spear and helmet.[567] The rest of the front and top edges of the *podia* are decorated with mosaic vegetal motifs.

Both Gordon and Beck have interpreted these figures as representations of the planets – adding in Mithras on the tauroctony relief as the seventh, even though no relief was found at Sette Porte –, although there is no explanation as to why at Sette Porte some are shown

[567] Becatti 1954, 93-99; Gordon 1976, 140.

on the benches and some on the mosaic floor.[568] Gordon saw the arrangement of planets as a likeness of the cosmos and as a horoscope of the cosmos, referring in particular to a creation event.[569] Beck instead saw them as a reference to the specific vernal equinoxes of AD 172 and 173, disagreeing with Gordon.[570]

The fact that the two did not agree on an interpretation of Sette Porte does not present an academic problem *per se*, but it does introduce something of a methodological complication. The so-called representations of the planets at Sette Porte are found scattered around the *mithraeum*, rather than arranged neatly as at Sette Sfere, requiring a reliance upon the latter in order to reconstruct the cosmic model. The readings of both *mithraea* then relied upon a corrupt passage from Porphyry, himself not a Mithraist. There is no evidence, apart from Beck's dating of the *mithraea*, that they were designed to be connected; they are located in very different parts of Ostia, in buildings that originally had very different purposes.[571] What does clearly connect them, however, is the desire on the part of both Beck and Gordon to find a cosmological likeness in the layout of *mithraea*: Beck, because it fulfilled his interest in Mithraic astrology; Gordon, because it provided some sense of rationality and order for a historian keen to find that "religion is a rational enterprise".[572] While this is not too significant in the case study of the Sette Sfere and Sette Porte *mithraea*, it becomes much more important when these sites, which have been used to inform each other, based on a neo-Platonic non-Mithraic account, start to stand in scholarship as starting points for considering Mithraic sacred space.

568 Beck 1979, 515-529; Gordon 1976, 140.
569 Gordon 1976, 140.
570 Beck 1979, 515-517.
571 See Table I.
572 Gordon 1979, 146; 119. For his views on religion more widely, see Gordon 1979-1980, 20-21.

III.V.v. The Vulci *mithraeum*

The examples of Sette Porte and Sette Sfere were subsequently both used in the attempt to understand the unusual details of the *mithraeum* excavated near a Roman villa at Vulci, in 1975 (Figure 58).[573] The *mithraeum* is rectangular in shape, and takes the customary form of a central aisle flanked by *podia*; in the case of Vulci, however, these *podia* are raised to over a metre from the ground, and supported by a series of arches. There are six arches on each side of the aisle, with a smaller niche at the centre of each *podium*. Anna Maria Sgubini Moretti compared this arrangement of space, with its apparent emphasis on the number seven, to the arches in the aisle of Sette Sfere, and the seven-arched gateway of Sette Porte, suggesting that each side had representations of seven planets.[574]

Gordon argued that the central niches were too small for this to have worked, and posited instead that the twelve large arches would have held symbols of the signs of the zodiac.[575] The two smaller niches would therefore have been 'soul-gates', entrances and exits into the *mithraeum* for the descent and ascent of the soul of the initiate; Gordon made the point that "virtually all excavated *mithraea*" have these niches, and argued that this was their purpose, a suggestion that has been approved by Beck.[576] Much of the rest of the Vulci *mithraea* was deliberately destroyed in the fourth century, which leaves very few further clues to how its internal geography might have been composed. There may well originally have been representations of the zodiac in the arches, or a barrel-vaulted ceiling; these, however, are speculations based upon comparisons. While the number twelve does seem indicative of the

573 For the preliminary report, see Sgubini Moretti 1979; for a catalogue of the finds, see Sgubini Moretti, Ricciardi & Perfetti Sacapticci 1998.
574 Sgubini Moretti 1979, 266. The influence of the contemporary work of Beck and Gordon on the Ostian *mithraea* is clear.
575 Gordon in Moretti 1979, 277.
576 Gordon 1976, 132; Beck 2006, 111.

signs of the zodiac, there is no concrete basis to assume that they must have been part of the decorative scheme of the Vulci *mithraeum*.

III.VI. Conclusions

When Richard Gordon wrote in 1976 that Sette Sfere was the only *mithraeum* to tell us much about Mithraic sacred space, he chose to prioritise one particular kind of iconography, one branch of Mithraic symbolism. In so doing, he overlooked the value even of the other Ostian sites; he seems to have had little interest in those that lacked the sophistication of Sette Sfere's astronomical symbolism, and its apparent confirmation of Porphyry's *De antro nympharum*. The edifice that both Beck and Gordon subsequently constructed, of what made Mithraic space sacred – that is to say, its representation of the cosmos – was built upon one reference in an ancient author. This suggest that astrological interpretations are a subfield in which only the right kind of evidence is included, while other kinds are either fitted into an astrological frame or otherwise overlooked.[577]

The very variety of Ostian *mithraea* might be seen to disprove any unified approach towards understanding them; it is difficult to believe in the plausibility of a system or structure to the different symbolisms shown across the *mithraea*, despite the fluidity of meanings allowed for in Gordon's astrological argument. There is no discernible likeness of the cosmos in the Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra, the Mitreo degli Animali, or the Mitreo delle

[577] Technically, according to Renfrew's idea of an archaeology of religion, this approach is acceptable; these interpretations *are* "supported by careful argument from the available evidence" (Renfrew 1985, 11). The problem, however, lies in the fact that not all the available evidence has been used – only that which suits the inclinations of the historian involved. While the *corpus* of Mithraic evidence is now so vast that it would be difficult for one scholar to master it completely; this is where a contextual and hermeneutic archaeological method becomes important. It is comparable to the 'religious ritual' position outlined by Elsner, in which he argues that the jump from 'a ritual object' to 'a *religious* ritual object' is often made too quickly (Elsner 2012b, 6-13).

Pareti Dipinte, which are in the very same town as the examples of Sette Porte and Sette Sfere. Around the rest of the Roman Empire, there is again little visible evidence that there was a coherent attempt to recreate a cosmic or planetary order, at least not in the richly astrological and symbolic sense understood by Beck and Gordon, in Mithraic sacred space.

The ubiquity of Porphyry, as the principal source for approaching *mithraea* with an eye to interpretation, is clearly a foundational problem. It returns us to the continuing problem of textual versus material evidence; only two *mithraea* conform to Beck's notion of a blueprint for Mithraic sacred space, and yet he sees them as the key to interpreting others that are less visually sophisticated. Much of the field of astrological interpretations of Mithraic sacred space has been built on Porphyry's account, even though the vast majority of *mithraea* do not appear to align with it. This raises the question of how texts can, or should, be used to illuminate the archaeological evidence of sacred space. The case of Porphyry's "likeness of the cosmos" is only one example of how scholars can seize upon a textual idea, and use it to construct a theory that may not bear such close resemblance to the actuality of the physical remains.

One of these assumptions is that the textual accounts for Mithras-worship, which are important records of reaction to and perception of the cult in the ancient world, can be treated almost as source-books for reconstructing beliefs and rituals. The archaeological evidence for Mithraic activity is rich, and should not be downplayed in an attempt to balance the scarcity of literary material. Roger Beck has worried that scholars over-interpret the archaeological material, but also that there is "an undervaluing of the design of the

mithraeum, in comparison to the iconography of the 'figured monuments', as a store and expression of ideological meaning".[578]

Beck argues that using Porphyry's *De antro nympharum* is a far more secure way of discovering meanings; he uses this text as a valid ancient interpretation of Mithraic worship, implying that there was a correct way of reading this material in the ancient world, that this meaning could be universally applied, and that this way of reading is still accessible to us today.[579] I would argue instead that *De antro nympharum* – a text, it cannot be emphasised often enough, that has a major focus on, and therefore a large bias towards, the philosophical meaning of caves – has created expectations in Mithraic scholars; these expectations affect terminology, reconstructions of physical space, interpretations of iconography, and have contributed to one of the most significant trends in the study of Mithraic worship. I argue that the field should be unafraid to move away from these expectations.

[578] Beck 2006, 4.
[579] Beck 1994a, 106-110; 2006, 103.

Chapter IV. Finding meaning in Mithras: mythology and ritual

A key recurring point raised in this thesis so far is that Mithraic scholarship has, for a long time, struggled to comprehend an ancient religious practice through material and visual remains. Modern attitudes towards religious practices often hinge on belief; this has proved to be a more complicated subject in the study of ancient religion. Simon Price outlined the problems of accessing 'belief' in the Graeco-Roman world in his monograph on the Imperial cult in Asia Minor; he argued that it is a Christianising term, and that emphasis should be placed on ritual instead: orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.[580] This impulse was very much of its time – the 1980s and early 1990s –; subsequent approaches to ancient religion have attempted to revivify, and justify, an interest in belief.[581]

Is accessing belief necessarily important: considering that Mithraic studies tend to rely on material rather than textual evidence, is an interest in belief perhaps too text-focused? This chapter does not aim to uncover what Mithraists might really have believed. Instead, its emphasis is on meanings, in so far as they can be accessed through mythology and certain ritual behaviours. Although Mithraic mythology has left little resonance in the written record, an overwhelming number of reliefs and frescoes seem to point in the direction of a Mithraic narrative. As a field of study, however, it has been comparatively under-researched. Richard Gordon has recently persuasively argued that "the central question of the communication of meaning in the cult of Mithras is now firmly on the agenda"; mythology and ritual are two avenues of approach into the communication of meanings that are both well-attested in the material evidence.

[580] Price 1984, 10-11.
[581] See, for example, the work of the Lived Ancient Religion project (discussed in the Introduction 9-10).

The first half of this chapter looks at mythology, the nature of the tauroctony, and certain unusual scenes that seem to relate to a story of Mithras and the bull. For a long time, the tauroctony was understood as the climactic moment of a Mithraic myth, and this led to an interest in the earliest scholarly studies into Mithraic worship in piecing that mythology together, despite the lack of textual evidence.[582] The English translation of Manfred Clauss' handbook to Mithras has a chapter entitled "The Sacred Narrative".[583] This chapter begins:

> The story of Mithras' saving action barely finds mention in any literary source. To reconstruct it, therefore, we must rely mainly upon the numerous details of the cult-images.[584]

Clauss' emphasis on reconstruction – in this case of the mythology underlying the tauroctony scene – is a subject to which this chapter shall frequently return. Not only has a version of the story of Mithras and the bull been reconstructed over the course of Mithraic scholarship, but there has also been an attempt to recreate an understanding of certain rituals that might have been associated with the tauroctony.

The second half of the chapter looks in detail at one possible aspect of ritual accessible through the material record: reversible reliefs, and the supposed banquet between Sol and Mithras that often appears on one side of them. This banquet scene has given rise to speculations of various ritual actions, from recreating the meal itself, to dressing up and mask-wearing by Mithraists. This chapter questions the extent to which this kind of restoration and reconstruction appears valid, in the light of archaeological and artistic evidence.

582 See Cumont 1903, 130.
583 Clauss 2000, 62. See Chapter II, 146 f.406.
584 Clauss 2000, 62.

IV.I. Mithraic mythology

One of the most enduring legacies of the Greek and Roman worlds is its mythology. Greek and Roman myths can be seen across all media of material remains, from statues to sarcophagi, from the decorative to the functional, and from the expensive to the quotidian. Myth in the ancient world exists just as much in the visual repertoire as in the textual, although the former can be harder to interpret. Much of this mythology might not make much sense to the modern viewer without the vast resources of exegetic texts and literature that have survived from the ancient world; inhabitants of that ancient world, however, more accustomed to a culture of mythological orality, would not necessarily have needed to rely upon such learning. While narrative friezes of Hercules's labours, for example, could be partially understood – a man battles or subdues a series of monsters – without a text such as Peisander's lost *Heracleia*, or the *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus, the character of Eurystheus would be harder to understand, as would the reason behind the labours. Texts have often been used to draw out the meanings that even the most narratological visual scenes cannot explain.

Take the relief of Cassia Priscilla, now in the Museo Nazionale in Naples (Figure 83). It consists of a central panel, showing Omphale and Hercules, who are identified by inscribed labels beneath the figures. Around them runs a series of side-scenes, much like the kinds of Mithraic scenes that will be discussed later in this chapter. The number of these side-scenes could be rather difficult to determine, without a knowledge of Hercules' labours; there are clearly three scenes on either side of the central panel – these are marked out by borders to distinguish one from the other – but the number of scenes above is more complicated. In

this long rectangular panel, there are no borders to separate the labours, and so the viewer is forced to rely on their prior knowledge in order to understand fully what they are looking at. Similarly, the episode in the centre of the top panel might be indecipherable without an understanding of the myth behind the relief; a male figure is shown, carrying a boar over one shoulder, while a second figure, arms raised above his head, emerges from a cauldron or vase. This is a representation of the Labour of the Erymanthian Boar; Hercules is presenting it to Eurystheus who, overcome with terror, cowers in a large pot. Without knowledge of the story however, this scene would be much harder to make out; Eurystheus could be rising out of the pot rather than hiding in it, and indeed a fanciful imagination could see in this a scene of cannibalism, with a man being boiled in a cauldron.

This example then raises the question of how to understand what appear to be Mithraic mythological scenes, which in most cases are not accompanied by texts. For Franz Cumont, mythology was a key component of the recreation of Mithraic worship. In the absence of texts to explain some of the most popular recurring Mithraic scenes, he turned to Avestan texts, and Zoroastrian myth. This was part of his larger understanding of 'Mithraism' as a form of worship originating in Mazdaism, which had evolved over time into recognisably Roman cult.[585] Cumont's section on Mithraic doctrine in *TMMM* makes it clear that he sees Mazdean mythology, combined with mythographical scenes from *mithraea* around the Roman Empire, as a key to piecing together Mithraic beliefs.[586] He draws links between Mazdean and Graeco-Roman deities, such as Ahura-Mazda and Sol, Verethragna and Hercules and, most obviously, Mithra and Mithras, and is explicitly interested in drawing out a pantheon and hierarchy of Mithraic gods in the Roman Empire.[587]

585 See Chapter I, 28-30.
586 Cumont 1903, 130-137.
587 Cumont 1903, 20-23; 104-107.

This was myth-building of the most obvious kind; Cumont drew together often wildly disparate sources, in an attempt to make sense of the common iconography of *mithraea*. He not only used texts that did not belong to the historical, or even the geographical moment of Roman Mithraic activity, he also conflated monuments and imagery from around the Roman Empire. Thus, any regional differences in the iconography were blunted, blurred, or ignored entirely, in favour of creating a pan-Mithraic narrative, which was developed to encompass as many scenes as possible. This is because, in Cumont's own words:

> Contrary to the ancient Graeco-Roman paganism, which was an assemblage of practices and beliefs without logical bond, Mithraism had a genuine theology, a dogmatic system, which borrowed from science its fundamental principles.[588]

Cumont's Mithraic mythology is itself a timeless and idealised version of a Catholic Christianity. His myth of Mithras and the bull, which will be described in greater length below, was a seductively comprehensive story. It was sufficiently capacious and expandable to include most of the elements of Mithraic iconography, and to explain them in a way that made religious sense to a readership who were used to centuries of Christian narrative, and the Nativity story in particular. This Christian influence upon Cumont is most visible in his account of the birth of Mithras from a rock, an event witnessed by shepherds, who then paid homage and brought gifts to the divine infant.[589] Nonetheless, in spite of its beguiling charms, Cumont's myth is, quite simply, no more than a mythological fantasy; it is one of the supreme examples of scholars building an attractive and – in its time – believable story from the available evidence, and thereby creating what have come to be modern-day Mithraic 'truths'. Moreover, Cumont's narrative is somewhat dependent on creating a

[588] Cumont 1903, 105-106
[589] Cumont 1903, 131-132

scripture that is not only anachronistic but inappropriate for Mithraic practice in particular, and much of ancient religion in general. Cumont's mythic reality actually concerned mythology, but there are many other examples of this kind of creation of narrative among Mithraic scholars; the subject of ritual practice is one of the most obvious, and will be discussed at length below.

Cumont's creation of a coherent Mithraic mythology based on Mazdean origins was widely accepted for many years after the publication of *TMMM*, perhaps most notably in Leroy Campbell's book *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*.[590] It was Richard Gordon's 1975 article, *Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism*, that dealt the deathblow to the assumption that Roman Mithraic worship was an evolution of a Magian tradition of Mazdaism.[591] Gordon's aim was to direct the field away from Cumont's theory of the origin of Mithraism; what he simultaneously effected, however, was an embarrassment about the subject of Mithraic mythology. His article only mentions *MII* twice, but both references are quietly damning, mainly on the basis of Campbell's almost wholesale acceptance of Cumont's theories.[592] Explorations of astrology became the new academic fashion in writing about Mithraic activity; this is a trend that continues today, largely in the work of Roger Beck.[593]

The replacement of mythology with astrology, however, led to a rather different scholarly assessment of Mithraic art and iconography. Rather than the tauroctony and its side-scenes

590 Campbell 1968, hence *MII*.
591 Gordon 1975; for discussion of the debate over Mithraic origins, see Chapter I. At the same time, John Hinnells published an article called 'Reflections on the bull-slaying scene' in the second volume of Mithraic Studies, which also argued that Cumont's theoretical constructions were incompatible with the evidence of the tauroctony itself (Hinnells 1975a).
592 Gordon 1975, 220 n.18; 224 n.35.
593 See Chapter III, 185-188; 196; 198; 200-202 for more on Beck's "star-talk".

being the focus of attention as objects, their face value was often overlooked in favour of finding underlying ritualised or symbolic meanings and narratives.[594] While the emphasis on astrology led to a much-needed examination of the nature of Mithraic sacred space, as described in the previous chapter, these spaces were mainly considered as useful in so far as they could confirm preconceptions about the role of astrology within Mithraic belief and ritual.

It is in the realm of possible Mithraic ritual that a second kind of mythologizing can be found: the assumption by scholars of a conscious evocation of different levels of reality on the part of the sculptor (and presumably also of the commissioner) of Mithraic iconography. This involves a certain degree of creativity on the part of both the scholar and the viewer of a piece of Mithraic art; to what extent do the scenes depicted indicate Mithraic ritual, and how involved do we think that Mithraists would necessarily have been in the performative aspects of their iconography. While it has long been dismissed that Mithraists would have been likely to sacrifice a bull on a regular basis, there are other rituals shown in Mithraic art that might have been a common feature in *mithraea* around the Roman Empire.[595]

IV.I.i. The tauroctony scene

The tauroctony scene is often seen as a defining marker of the specifically Roman worship of Mithras. It is one of the main characteristic features of Mithraic sacred space, indeed its presence or absence is perhaps the thing most likely to contribute to the classification of a space as a *mithraeum* or not. Thus, when a narrow space with side benches is found, but

[594] On the relationship between Mithraic myth and ritual, see Martin 1994, 217: "The study of Mithraism, like that of religion generally, has privileged the category of myth over ritual, that is, of modalities of ideation or belief over social behavior or action." On levels of access and reading of scenes, see Davis 2004.
[595] On the sacrifice of an actual bull in *mithraea*, see Chapter I, 49-50.

which lacks a representation of the tauroctony, it is less likely to be definitively labelled as a *mithraeum*, so necessary has the scene become to Mithraic sanctuaries.[596]

The term 'tauroctony' is frequently used in three major, and subtly different, ways.[597] First, it refers to Mithras' slaughter of the bull, either as an actual event or as a fictive reality. Second, it refers to the depiction of this specific scene in Mithraic iconography, in which it tends to follow a specific iconographic pattern or model. Third, the term is used to describe the entire relief, statue or painting of the bull-slaying and any additional scenes; it thus becomes a synechdochic reference, which ascribes the greatest importance to the image of Mithras and the bull. This weight given to the scene seems justified on the basis of the large number of archaeological finds, and its frequent position as the focal point of Mithraic sacred space.

The word tauroctony is itself a neologism, just as the '*mithraeum*' discussed in the previous chapter. It has enjoyed mixed popularity among Mithraic scholars, but its sheer convenience – especially as a means of circumventing the more laborious 'bull-slaying' or 'bull-stabbing' – has so far guaranteed its survival.[598] The avoidance of the word 'slaying', no matter how implicit it is in the term 'tauroctony', also makes it possible to sidestep Christopher Faraone's recent argument that we are looking at a bull-wounding rather than actual slaughter.[599] Nonetheless, the use of the term 'tauroctony' differs from the use of '*mithraeum*' in one key area. Epigraphic testimony to the words that Mithraists used in naming their sacred spaces has survived, alongside the somewhat limited value of the

596 For example, the case of the Sacello dei Tre Navate in Ostia; this site was included in Becatti's survey of the *mithraea* of Ostia, simply based on its physical resemblance to Mithraic sites, but with the added note that there was no sign of a tauroctony (Becatti 1954, 69-75).
597 See Introduction, 14-17 for a brief discussion of the use of neologisms in this thesis.
598 Gordon 2007a, 395.
599 Faraone 2013. For more on Faraone's argument, and his influences, see Chapter I, 46 f.125.

literary sources; scholars have chosen not to employ either *spelaeum* or *templum* as the most common descriptors of the sites themselves, and have rather preferred a new term, and one that makes the supposed religious dedication of the space supremely obvious.

When it comes to the bull-slaying scene, however, there is even less written evidence. The literary sources, some of which are only potentially referring to Mithraic practice, discuss the theft of the bull rather than its death, or are highly cryptic. Statius' famous mention of Mithras in the *Thebaid* mentions "*indignata… cornua*" (angry horns), which is usually interpreted as an allusion to an original tauroctony moment in a Persian cave.[600] If we turn to Porphyry's *De antro nympharum*, there are two passages that might be relevant to a discussion of Mithras and the tauroctony. The first mentions a god who is also a cattle-thief; this god is often assumed to be Mithras, based on a knowledge of Mithraic mythography, but Mithras is far from being the only god to steal cattle in Mediterranean mythology.[601]

The second passage is perhaps more pertinent, especially when considering the iconography of the conventional bull-slaying.[602] Porphyry interprets the two gates of Homer's cave to fit his interest in the transmigration of souls through the lens of astrology; according to this model, he assigns Mithra – or Mithras – a position near the equinoctial circle. Most interesting, though, are the subsequent sentences, in which Porphyry appears to be referring to the image of Mithras as seen in the bull-slaying scene; he mentions the god with the sword of Aries, and on Venus' bull. This description of Mithras is strikingly similar to the familiar presentation of the god on the tauroctony; could it be possible that Porphyry had

600 Stat. *Theb.* I.719-20. For more on this excerpt, in reference to Mithraic sacred space, see Chapter III, 170.
601 Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 18. Perhaps the most obvious example is the infant Hermes stealing the cattle of Apollo; there is also the case of Hercules and the Cattle of Geryon.
602 Porph. *De antr. nymph*. 24.

seen a relief or painting showing the scene, and interpreted it according to his neo-Platonic and astrological interests?

An emphasis on astrological references in the tauroctony became particularly popular in Mithraic scholarship from the 1970s onwards. It is most prominent in the work of David Ulansey and Roger Beck; Richard Gordon was an early proponent, but has more recently sought to distance himself from increasingly complex astrological readings of the scene.[603] This emphasis sees the tauroctony as a star-chart, with the actors in the scene identified as constellations. Thus, bull becomes Taurus, the scorpion Scorpio, the dog Canis, and so on. In 2006, Beck proposed seeing Mithras as the sun, and the bull as the moon, with the tauroctony representing the ultimate triumph of the sun over the moon.[604] The prioritisation of astrological points of reference in Mithraic practice, and particularly in the tauroctony, were dominant in the scholarship for many years; while there are several major problems with applying these theories in a general or universal manner – a subject to which I shall return later in this chapter – nonetheless, the very fact that there was an interest in uncovering the *meaning* of the tauroctony suggests that the scene might have enjoyed a preeminent position in scholarly thoughts about Mithraic art and belief.[605]

Moreover, the tauroctony usually seems to have had a preeminent position as the focal point of a *mithraeum*; it tends to occupy a space towards or on the rear wall, either as a relief, statue or painting. One of the most obvious examples of this are the frescoes that can be found on the rear wall of at least three *mithraea* in Italy: those of Santa Maria Capua Vetere, the Barberini in Rome, and Marino.[606] The two tauroctony reliefs from Dura-Europos

603 Ulansey 1989; Beck 1988; 1994b; 2006; Gordon 2017b, 433.
604 Beck 2006, 190-239.
605 Beck 2006, 4.
606 *CIMRM* 181: *CIMRM* 390; Vermaseren 1982; see Chapter III, 120; 180-182.

discussed in Chapter I, with the complex series of frescoes that surrounds them, also serve as an example of how Mithraic communities could use the space of a *mithraeum* to draw attention to the image of Mithras.[607]

What is perhaps more interesting, however, is that the main scene shown on the tauroctony, Mithras' killing of a bull, is an act that separates Roman Mithraic worship from the world of Zoroastrian and Iranian myth. According to the *Mihr Yašt*, Mithra is the guardian of cattle, and the "lord of the wide pastures"; such an attribute hardly seems to be commensurate with the best-known image of Mithras from the Roman world. Could the guardian of cattle, really become the slaughterer of the bull? And could the lord of wide pastures become best-known for his actions within a cave? Side scenes from a number of tauroctony reliefs show Mithras hunting the bull, and subsequently dragging it over his shoulder.[608] The main tauroctonous image of Mithras usually shows him in the act of plunging a dagger or sword into the bull's shoulder, while variations even include a dramatic throat-slitting scene.[609] Even though there is no single version of a Mithraic mythology, these episodes conjure a picture of the god that is far from his being the preserver of cattle.

The stereotypy of the bull-slaying scene is a subject that has been much discussed in relation to the idea of a unified and uniform Mithraic religion.[610] Along with the standard layout of

[607] Chapter I, 44-54.
[608] For example, the reliefs from Nida/Heddernheim (*CIMRM* 1083); Neuenheim (*CIMRM* 1283); Mauls (CIMRM 1400); Cluj (*CIMRM* 1920); Alba Iulia (*CIMRM* 1958).
[609] On the Ethpeni relief from Dura-Europos, *CIMRM* 37. For more discussion, see Chapter I, 45-46.
[610] This led to a branch of Mithraic scholarship interested in the typology of reliefs: Campbell 1954; Will 1955; Lavagne 1974; Turcan 1976. The subject of stereotypy appears notably in Gordon 1976, 171: "The stereotypy of the bull-slaying scene is not in itself, then, evidence of the coherence of Mithraic doctrines over a wide range of the Empire (though apparently minor details may be): it is evidence only of the dominance of the true form of iconographic 'meaning'." Here Gordon takes a stance against seeing the tauroctony as suggestive of a coherent Mithraic doctrine. Gordon is elsewhere interested in the idea of a "hesitancy" in the creation of a stereotyped iconography, which is perhaps slightly at odds with his argument above; see Gordon 1978, 149.

Mithraic spaces, the appearance of the tauroctony is notably consistent across the Roman Empire.[611] While the companions to the scene vary, the composition of Mithras and the bull seldom changes; the god kneels upon the bull's back to subdue it, the bull faces towards the right, while Mithras usually looks out of the scene at the viewer, or back over his right shoulder.[612]

The tauroctony scene therefore can be seen almost as a pictorial summary of some of the key interests in modern Mithraic scholarship. It encompasses the debate over the origins of Mithraic activity in the Roman Empire; it is one of the central elements of the refutation of Franz Cumont in the 1970s; it can be fitted into three of the major trends in the scholarship: mythology, astrology, and cognitivism. All of this, however, relates to how scholars can use the tauroctony. An emphasis on interpretation does not necessarily put the tauroctony at the centre of attention; it becomes an interpretive tool, and loses much of its symbolic power thereby.

One major symbolic strand to the tauroctony that has been suggested frequently over the course of Mithraic scholarship is that of salvation. Cumont saw the death of the bull as a regenerative moment: the body of the bull supports new plant life, wheat springs from its tail, and its blood is preserved as a sacred drink.[613] By extension, Mithras therefore becomes

In an article from 1980, however, he sees the stereotypy of the image as important for its religious role: "Precisely because the religious image is a means of legitimation, it must be stereotyped, reproducible: in an important sense divinity exists as image not as idea, as theological statement." (Gordon 1980, 222).

611 Elsner 2007 (250; 255; 258) sees the stereotypical nature of the tauroctony scene as a means of promoting a Mithraic identity. Repetition is an important means of establishing identity in the Roman world: through spaces, such as the layout of cities, and through iconography – we need only think of imperial portrait types.

612 It is this position that is so reminiscent of Nike's bull-slaying iconography, for which see Chapter I, 48; 64. For more on the standard image of the tauroctony as a prototype, and the implications of variations from it, see Chapter I, 59-61.

613 Cumont 1903, 136-137. For images of the bull's tail turning into ears of wheat, see tauroctony scenes from Capua Vetere (*CIMRM* 181); Sarrebourg (*CIMRM* 966); Neuenheim (*CIMRM* 1283) and many others. Note that on the Townley tauroctony statue from the British Museum (*CIMRM* 593), the blood flowing from the bull's wound turns into grain.

the bringer of this fertility through his slaughter of the bull, which in turn becomes invested with a sacrificial potency.[614] The suggestion that the death of the bull brought about increased fertility is supported by Mithraic iconography; that this could then lead to salvation is a further interpretive step that certain scholars have been prepared to take.[615]

This interpretation seemed to be validated by the discovery of a famous *dipinto* in the *mithraeum* beneath the church of Santa Prisca in Rome. The original team of excavators, which was led by Maarten Vermaseren and Carel van Essen, read the fourteenth line of this painted inscription as: "and you saved us, after shedding the eternal blood".[616] What could be clearer than this, as a doctrinal statement of Mithraic worshippers? It clearly suggests that sacrifice, presumably the sacrifice of the bull, was seen as a salvific action, on behalf of future initiates. It is, unfortunately, an incorrect reading of the text. After cleaning, all that could be confidently restored of this line were the words 'shed' and 'blood'; the elements of salvation and timelessness were lost.[617] Nonetheless, this reading has not been so widely disseminated as the original, or false, one; even recently there have been certain scholars who make use of it as evidence for a salvific aspect to Roman Mithraic practice.[618]

614 The idea of fertility is also emphasised in those reliefs where a *krater* is placed beneath the bull's genitals, as though to catch its semen: see, for example, the reliefs from Nida/Heddernheim (*CIMRM* 1083); Osterburken (CIMRM 1292); the reconstruction from Königshofen (*CIMRM* 1359). It is worth comparing these examples with the reliefs from Seeia (*CIMRM* 88-89), in which the snake drinks the bull's semen (see Chapter I, 62-64).

615 The influence of Christianity and Christianising expectations obviously cannot be overstated here. In particular, in the idea that salvation is likely to refer to a life after death, rather than to the possibility of a 'better' or 'healthier' life in this world; on this latter approach, in regard to the worship of Cybele, see Sfameni Gasparro 1985.

616 Vermaseren & van Essen 1965, 218. The Latin was read as: *et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso*.

617 For the more accurate reading of the dipinto, see Panciera 1979, 102-103; figs. 10-13.The new reading only provides an insecure "*sanguine*" and a more secure "*fuso*".

618 For an account of this, see Alvar 2008, 134-135. Most recently, Attilio Mastrocinque has defended the original reading of the *dipinto*, arguing that the letters have now degraded to such an extent that they are no longer legible (Mastrocinque 2017, 33).

How important, though, were ideas of salvation to Roman worshippers of Mithras?[619] Richard Gordon once stated it was a fundamental characteristic of the Mithraic mysteries, although he has since changed his position.[620] By contrast, Roger Beck did not advance salvation as one of his three characteristics of Mithraic practice in 2000; the intervening years, including the revision of the Santa Prisca *dipinto*, clearly led to a diminution of the emphasis on salvation among Mithraic scholars.[621] Epigraphic evidence, such as the dedication to Mithras *adiutor* on an altar from Angera, which might have been interpreted as salvific, could simply have been a reference to help in this life, rather than the next.[622] Without the focus on salvation, interest in the tauroctony returned to its narrative function, and to its possible ritual suggestions.[623]

IV.I.ii. Mithras and the bull

The main action of any tauroctony scene takes place between Mithras and the bull; there are frequently attendants at this, and often even additional tableaux featuring some of the same characters. It is on the god and the bull, though, that the viewer's attention is usually fixed. It may be this emphasis on Mithras and his slaughter, or perhaps even his sacrifice, of the bull that has led to scholars to think in terms of a salvific element to the action; Franz

619 See Adrych et al. 2017, 33-34; 57.
620 Gordon 1978, 151.
621 Beck 2000, 171-172.
622 *CIMRM* 717.
623 My examination of the tauroctony in this chapter explores its possible role in the communication of meaning to Mithraists, focusing on narrative, and concomitant ideas about mythology and mythological reenaction. A more art historical approach to investigating the communication of meaning might follow visual strategies such as a comprehensive iconological analysis; that is beyond the scope of this thesis – and indeed the expertise of the author –, although I do delve into ideas of exegesis, and Cumont's attempt to provide a scriptural interpretation of the tauroctony scene. Of course, the uncovering of *meaning* from tauroctony scenes could be argued to be just as problematically tendentious as the reconstruction of belief from archaeology (see Chapter II, 91-92): beyond a certain level, conclusions become speculative and can lead to dangerous assumptions. I should note that my aim is not to arrive at an answer to the question of what the tauroctony scene might have meant; rather I wish to examine reactions to the scene within scholarship – including a desire among certain scholars to find meaning – and to assess the possible significance of repetition, juxtaposition and choice of motifs, including in creating Mithraic communities.

Cumont famously described this moment as one in which "an extraordinary prodigy came to pass".[624] In many cases, however, the tauroctony is supplemented by side-scenes placed around it; these can be found across the spread of Mithraic practice in the Roman Empire, but there is a particular concentration – of reliefs of a similar composition and with similar narrative emphases – in the provinces of Germany and along the Danube.[625]

Cumont describes his story of Mithras and the bull in somewhat embellished detail:

> The untamed bull was grazing in a pasture in the mountains; the hero, resorting to a bold stratagem, seized it by the horns and succeeded in mounting it. The mettlesome quadruped, breaking into a gallop, carried his rider into a furious race. But he, although thrown from his seat, did not loosen his grip, but allowed himself to be carried along, hanging from the horns of the animal. The bull, finally exhausted, let itself be captured. Its conqueror, seizing it by the hind legs, dragged it backwards to the cave that served as his home over a path scattered with obstacles… But it is clear that the bull succeeded in escaping from its prison to roam the countryside. So the Sun sent his messenger, the raven, to carry to his ally the message to kill the fugitive. Mithras fulfilled this cruel mission with a reluctant heart but, submitting himself to the will of heaven, he chased the wandering beast and managed to catch it at the moment when it returned to the cave it had left.[626]

This narrative sounds plausible enough, at least within the simultaneously pastoral and heroic world of Mediterranean and Near Eastern mythology. It is not, however, derived from any Mithraic source; there is no monument or relief that claims to set out this story in this sequence. Instead, Cumont has pieced together different scenes from different reliefs, and attempted to weave them together into a persuasive whole. Nowhere, for example, is there an indication that the bull has escaped, and that Mithras is pursuing it for a second

624 Cumont 1903, 136.
625 It was once thought that these side-scenes were indicative of a particular regional distinctiveness in the reliefs from Germany and along the Danube, but they are also found especially around tauroctony frescoes from Italy, as in the Barberini and Marino *mithraea*.
626 Cumont 1903, 135-137.

time; such an account would require a linear progression from scene to scene, and this is something that is rarely to be found in Mithraic art. Instead, the more common format is for a series of panels surrounding a main scene, which do not necessarily follow a formally logical sequence.[627]

The following section of this chapter aims to examine traditional pictorial accounts of Mithras and the bull, to see whether they seem to display a standardised version of a narrative myth. It will analyse Cumont's version of the story, and assess whether it is visible in selected Mithraic reliefs. These reliefs have, in part, been chosen because they contain unusual motifs, repeated on a local level, but not found elsewhere in Mithraic iconography. As mentioned above, one reading of repetition might be that the scenes gain a level of authority through reiteration; alternatively, the local emphasis might serve to enhance a particular identity among certain groups of Mithraists, in this case, in Roman Dacia.

IV.I.iii. The Neuenheim relief, CIMRM 1283

A *mithraeum* was excavated in the Neuenheim area of Heidelberg in 1838.[628] Among several notable finds was a large sandstone relief showing the tauroctony surrounded by side-scenes (Figure 84). The bull-slaying scene is itself slightly unconventional, and certain features are certainly worth noting before an examination of these side-scenes. The basic composition of the scene is not particularly unusual: Mithras' clothing, his position half-astride the bull, and the placement of the scorpion and dog align with their customary depictions.

627 For a detailed discussion of the problems of 'reading' Mithraic side-scenes, see Gordon 1980.
628 Schwertheim 1974, 183-184.

The panel of scenes to the left of the tauroctony shows, from top to bottom: the birth of Mithras from a rock – unusually, he is depicted without his Phrygian cap – holding a globe in his left hand and a dagger in his right; two male figures, one standing each side of a detailed brick-work altar – one is veiled and cloaked, holding a *harpe* in his left hand, and proffering a thunderbolt to the second figure, who wears a cloak and diadem, and holds a sceptre in his left hand – commonly identified as Saturn and Jupiter; a semi-nude male figure reclining on his left elbow on a cluster of rocks; a figure in 'eastern' dress and Phrygian cap, kneeling on one knee, and carrying a large globe over his head. Aside from the familiar image of Mithras being born from a rock, the other scenes do not entirely fit into the mythology created for Mithras by Cumont; indeed, it is not always possible to identify the characters involved.[629]

It is the panel of scenes to the right of the tauroctony that is of especial myth-building interest, however; could Cumont have based his version of the bull-hunt and ultimate bull-slaughter on a series like that found at Neuenheim? The top scene shows the bull grazing alone; it is not wearing a dorsal, indicating that the scene comes before any suggestion of sacrifice. The second panel shows a figure in 'eastern' dress and Phrygian cap – presumably Mithras – carrying the bull over his shoulders by all four legs; the god is walking towards the left, but looking back over his left shoulder.[630] The third scene is one of action: the bull is leaping towards the right, out of the frame of the scene; the figure in Phrygian cap has his arms wrapped around its neck, and is stretched out along its back, seemingly clinging on

629 Jupiter and Saturn frequently appear in the side-scenes of Mithraic reliefs, and can be associated with their own particular narrative moments.
630 A so-called Mithras *transitus* scene.

desperately. The final panel, however, is more suggestive of subjugation; Mithras is walking towards the right, dragging the bull behind him by its hind legs.[631]

The first, third and fourth scenes are all recognisable from Cumont's narrative of Mithras and the bull, albeit with subtle differences.[632] Such a narrative, however, relies upon seeing these scenes as following a logical progression, an assumption that would not necessarily be made about those on the left of the relief. Is such an expectation realistic; why should the sculptor have been adhering to a narrative in one set of scenes, and not in another? The scenes might now read like a visual progression through a story, because we are familiar with Cumont's myth; without that as the underlying framework though, there would be less prescriptive an understanding of what the relief might be 'telling' its viewer.

A similar sequence can be read from the obverse of a relief found at Rückingen.[633] There, five scenes in a horizontal arrangement display: a bull, depicted frontally and facing the viewer, with a naked figure standing beside it; a partially damaged scene, which may have shown Mithras carrying the bull; Mithras carrying the bull on his shoulders; Mithras being carried along with the bull; finally, a victorious Mithras *taurophoros*, who has succeeded in capturing the bull. Neither set of scenes, either from Neuenheim or from Rückingen, gives any indication of a capture and subsequent escape, but they certainly can be read as alluding to a narrative in which the capture of the bull has been a lengthy and difficult process.

631 It is interesting to note that there is only one instance of this scene discovered so far that shows Mithras dragging the bull to the left. It appears on the Israel Museum relief, which contains several other peculiarities (see Chapter I, 65-69).
632 Such as, for example, the depiction of Mithras holding the bull by the neck as he is carried along with it, rather than by the horns. The Neuenheim relief might be compared in this regard with a scene from the marble relief from Mithraeum III at Nida/Heddernheim described below, or an altar found at Rudchester in Britain, which depicts a naked figure walking beside a bull, and holding by its horns (*CIMRM* 839).
633 CIMRM 1137; see 235-239 below.

IV.I.iv. The Dieburg relief, *CIMRM* 1247

A two-sided sandstone relief was found in a *mithraeum* in Dieburg in 1926 (Figure 85).[634] One side shows a hunting scene in a central panel; a figure, presumed to be Mithras, is seated aside a galloping horse, and wielding a bow. Underneath the horse, three dogs are bounding towards a small animal on the right, tentatively identified by Vermaseren as a hare.[635] Framing the action, are two torchbearers, each standing on a *krater*. Around this panel are eleven others, all with borders between them.

The topmost central panel (Figure 86) could show three separate scenes, although it has traditionally been read as two.[636] First, a male figure, wearing a Phrygian cap – and therefore assumed to be Mithras –, stands with his foot upon a pile of rocks. With his left hand, he appears to be throwing something – perhaps a rock – at a building to the right. This building contains the possible second scene of the three, although it is usually paired with the first. The building appears to be a temple: it has two round columns with capitals, flanked by two square pillars; above these is a triangular pediment, in which we can see a bird standing on a stone, with a round-cheeked bust on either side. A bull is lying down in the temple, behind the two round columns, and looking in the direction of Mithras. The third scene shows Mithras *taurophoros*; the Phrygian-capped figure from the first scene strides to the right, carrying a rather diminutive bull over his shoulder.

Unusually, there is another scene of Mithras *taurophoros* from this same side of the relief, in the right-hand panel, and the second scene from the top; if the scenes are meant to be

634 *CIMRM* 1246. See also Behn 1926. For a discussion of the other finds in this *mithraeum*, see Chapter V, 221-222.
635 Vermaseren 1956-1960 II, 104.
636 Vermaseren 1956-1960 II, 105.

read in a clockwise direction – which is, in fact, the direction in which Vermaseren describes them – this panel is only separated by one other scene from the previous depiction. This second version looks rather more realistic; the figure, again wearing a Phrygian cap, is almost buckled under the weight of the bull. The animal itself is also a more natural size, so that the figure is dragging, rather than carrying, it. Should the duplication of this scene perhaps suggest that the topmost sequence has some special significance? Its position on the relief certainly gives it a certain prominence. It is also, however, possible that, rather than looking at duplication, these scenes refer to two separate episodes. The Dieburg relief might support Cumont's suggestion that the bull regains a moment of liberty, before being finally subdued and dragged away to the cave and its own sacrifice.

IV.I.v. Five Dacian examples

The bull also appears within a temple-like structure on five reliefs from the Roman province of Dacia, in modern-day Romania: one from Sibiu, three from Alba-Iulia, and one from Cluj. The composition of these Dacian examples is strikingly similar. The side scenes, together with the tauroctony scene, make up a three-tiered composition, in which the episode of the bull in the temple always takes place immediately above the head of Mithras. While many decorative elements certainly differ between reliefs, what these examples do suggest is a degree of local autonomy and transmission of iconographic ideas.

The Sibiu relief (Figure 87) is perhaps the most intricate of the reliefs, although the lack of borders to separate the panels means that the figures can be a rather confusing jumble.[637] In the topmost series of scenes, from left to right, we see a bust – probably of Sol, though it

[637] *CIMRM* 1935.

lacks any solar attributes –; a seated figure in a Phrygian cap aiming an arrow at a person kneeling in a front of a rock; above this, a bull's head inside a double-lunette, commonly identified as a boat; the bull inside a colonnaded temple, above a row of seven altars; two animals, rather damaged, that Vermaseren identifies as a ram and a dog; a standing figure, with a torch or staff in his left hand; a reclining figure swathed in a mantle; and a bust of Luna with a crescent moon behind her.[638]

In the central section of this relief, to the left of the main tauroctony but not divided from it, are two scenes of Mithras riding a bull, and Mithras dragging it behind him. Why is Mithras *taurophoros* here separated from the scene of the bull in a temple? The composition of the relief invites the viewer to see the small scenes immediately surrounding the tauroctony as somehow more intrinsically connected with the moment of bull-slaying, though this may not be what was intended; could this suggest that the bull in the temple was not part of a tauroctony myth in Sibiu?

As in the relief from Sibiu, animals identified by Vermaseren as rams appear on the relief from Cluj (Figure 88) and two of those from Alba Iulia (Figures 89 and 90).[639] In all cases, they appear to the right of a scene showing a bull inside a small building, often reminiscent of a temple in appearance. Common to all five Dacian reliefs are scenes showing a figure assumed to be Mithras aiming an arrow at a rock, or at another kneeling figure. Reading from left to right, then this scene always precedes the appearance of the bull in the boat. This is not to say, however, that they should be read in any strict order, or that they were necessarily intended to convey a narrative. They might suggest some sort of local adherence

638 For a fuller description, see Vermaseren 1956-1960 II, 277-278.
639 *CIMRM* 1920; *CIMRM* 1958; *CIMRM* 1972. The third Alba Iulia relief mentioned above, *CIMRM* 1975, does not show a ram.

to a particular version of Mithraic myth. It is impossible for us to reconstruct how this episode fits into the larger traditional narrative, and why it had particular significance in this region. The Dieburg example, with its additional details, may be yet another version.

IV.I.vi. Conclusions

My tactic above – of reading reliefs in a search for narrative – is rather an old-fashioned approach. What it serves to do, however, is highlight some of the dangers of reconstructionism: first, the problem of building a narrative from incomplete evidence, or without using the full range of evidence available; second, the problem of a reliance upon typology, and the expectation of religious authority.

First, a strict examination of the Dieburg relief, and the five Dacian reliefs listed above, with an aim towards the reconstruction of narrative, suggests that Cumont's version of the story of Mithras and the bull was missing certain elements. Where is the moment when the bull takes its place on a boat, or seemingly hides from Mithras inside a temple? Should we see the emphasis on these scenes in the tauroctonies from Dacia in terms of mythology or narrative, or might it indicate something rather different: we could be looking at an example of the replication of unusual motifs within a local context, or the creation of an aspect of Mithraic community identity.[640]

Second, as mentioned above, scholarship on typologies of Mithraic reliefs has rather gone out of fashion. In part, this may be because these typologies did not always distinguish

[640] This relates to the question of commission and patronage discussed in Chapter I, 63-64; Chapter II, 114 f.332; Chapter III, 190; Chapter V, 294-296.

between the purely artistic and compositional elements, and features that seemed to be religiously important. While the Dacian reliefs above can be grouped together based on their tripartite structure (compositional), can they also be grouped on the basis of their emphasis on particular scenes (what we might tentatively call religious importance)? As Richard Gordon said, quoted above, the stereotypy of tauroctony reliefs lends them some religious authority and legitimation; why, though, should we be expecting to find religious authority and legitimation in a Mithraic setting?[641] This seems to ascribe a function to tauroctony reliefs – and, indeed, to tauroctony frescoes and statues – that there is no reason to assume they had.

This raises the question of what function tauroctony reliefs may have had. Luther Martin has argued for a cognitive role, in which the tauroctony represented an imagistic mode of religiosity, and which aligned with ritual theory.[642] According to Richard Gordon, they had a role in transmitting religious authority, and legitimising Mithraic practice. There is, however, a certain danger to prioritising questions of function and ritual significance when looking at material like a tauroctony scene:

> The use of material culture as evidence from which to infer ritual is one thing; the assumption that the ritual (whether a specific ritual, a ritual process or a culture that was in certain ways ritually invested) is what gave rise to the evidence of the material culture before us, is quite another. In other words, there is a danger of circularity in inferring ritual from archaeologically attested artifacts and then arguing that the ritual, which is the result of the inference from those objects, was in some sense the cause of those objects.[643]

641 See 213 f.610 above.
642 On imagistic versus doctrinal modes of religiosity, see Whitehouse 2002; 2004.
643 Elsner 2012b, 5.

Repetition does not necessarily mean transmission of authority, or of doctrine; it might have a tantalising scent of religious legitimacy attached to it, but this could be just one hypothesis within a range of possibilities. The remarkably consistent depiction of the overall tauroctony scene around the Roman Empire, and wherever Mithraic activity occurred, *is* suggestive of a degree of legitimation and reassuring familiarity. The repetition of particular motifs within or surrounding the scene – such as the appearance of the bull in a boat – could, however, be a matter of whimsy or coincidence just as much as it could indicate religious authority.

IV.II. Two-sided reliefs

This half of the chapter examines ideas about Mithraic mythology as depicted in the iconography, and scholarly imagination as to how rituals might have reflected this mythology. It concerns the possible portrayal of different levels of reality – fictive or otherwise – on Mithraic monuments, and the access that Mithraists might have had into the stories or rituals that they show. The most obvious examples of this are five seemingly reversible reliefs that depict both the tauroctony and a representation of the 'cult meal', the main aspect of Mithraic ritual on which most scholars agree.[644]

These two-sided reliefs come from the Castra Praetoria in Rome, Fiano Romano near Rome, Nida/Heddernheim and Rückingen near Frankfurt am Main, and Konjic in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[645] Proximity to the city of Rome is a possible connection between the first two, although they differ considerably in terms of composition. The Nida/Heddernheim and Rückingen reliefs, however, are stylistically very similar, certainly as regards the depiction

644 See Hinnells 1975a, 304-305; Clauss 1990b, 117-122 = Clauss 2000, 108-113.
645 *CIMRM* 397; *CIMRM* 641; *CIMRM* 1083; *CIMRM* 1137; *CIMRM* 1896.

of the banquet scene between Mithras and Sol. A sixth two-sided relief was found in Dieburg, which may have links to both the Nida/Heddernheim and Rückingen reliefs, although the Dieburg piece shows neither a tauroctony nor a banquet scene; another was discovered in the Non Valley in Italy, again depicting neither a tauroctony nor banquet.[646] What links all seven, however, is that they were presumably intended to be viewed on both sides. This may have involved rotating them at certain moments of, presumably liturgical, significance; it is even possible that there could have been ritual processions around the reliefs, giving an equal weight to both sides at the same time. It is also worth questioning whether Mithraic worshippers were always the intended viewers of these reliefs, or whether a side that faced a statue of Mithras, and was therefore visible to the god, could have gained an additional importance.[647]

The Castra Praetoria and Konjic reliefs give little indication of how they were turned, or whether they were affixed to the back wall of a *mithraeum* at all, as is most common with tauroctony scenes. These details could have offered a clue as to how often the reliefs might have been rotated; clearly, if they were usually fixed to a wall, then it might suggest that one side was more likely than the other to have been on display. We can compare this, for example, to a relief from Sarrebourg in France, which had iron hooks to attach it to a wall.[648] By contrast, the Dieburg, Rückingen and Nida/Heddernheim reliefs all had pivots, so they could easily be revolved; this might indicate that both sides were important to their respective Mithraic communities, or that rotating the reliefs to see the opposite side was a frequent occurrence. Unfortunately, many of the reliefs discussed here were not found in

646 *CIMRM* 1247; *CIMRM* 729.
647 For further reading on two-sided icons (albeit Byzantine, rather than Roman) and their processional and liturgical uses, as well as the importance of revelation and concealment in cult objects, se Elsner 2015, particularly 35-37.
648 *CIMRM* 966.

their original context, and thus we cannot glean any significance from their exact position within the *mithraeum*.

From seven examples of two-sided reliefs, it is interesting that five indicate that the meal shared between Mithras and Sol was a focal point for devotees, and one that might even have had joint prominence with the depiction of the tauroctony scene itself. In the side scenes around the bull-slaying discussed above, Mithras and Sol appear frequently together, with the meal standing out as the most common representation of the two of them. It has been suggested that the scene had a sort of mimetic quality; this seems particularly plausible given the conventional format of *mithraea*, and the overwhelming archaeological evidence that meals of some sort took place within them.[649] Is it possible that the reliefs were rotated to coincide with meals shared between Mithraists themselves? According to Manfred Clauss, the traditional position of the tauroctony scene, at the head of a *triclinium* layout, indicates that Mithras enjoyed the place of greatest honour, as the host of a ritual meal.[650] If we were to incline towards Clauss' interpretation, how much more potent would this positioning be if the symbolic host were presiding over his own feast, on the reverse of the main tauroctony image for the *mithraeum*?

This certainly seems to be the view of Luther Martin, who sees the Mithraic meal as a moment in which Mithraists – perhaps following some sort of hierarchic structure – used the action of the meal as a means of attaining the most direct connection with Mithras.[651] In this, he is closely adhering to the theory of ritual forms laid out by Lawson and McCauley, who would characterise the Mithraic meal as a 'special agent ritual'; the focus being on

649 As well as the well-documented archaeological remains from Tienen in Belgium, there is the graffito evidence from Dura-Europos that hints at the purchases for communal meals, *CIMRM* 64.
650 Clauss 1990b, 122 = Clauss 2000, 113.
651 Martin 2015, 48-49. The Eucharistic overtones of this idea cannot be overstated.

action, rather than passive experience.[652] Martin has occupied the vanguard of a growing movement among Mithraic scholars towards the study of cognitive religiosity, and the exploration of social networks.[653] This trend could, perhaps, be described as a renaissance of interest in questions of belief and *praxis*; an emphasis on cognitive science gives a pronounced weight to a religiosity of ritual within the Mithraic context. Do the two-sided reliefs particularly lend themselves to a theory of special agent ritual? Of the five listed above, three more obviously lend themselves to a world of mythology that seems to bear little relation to an actual Mithraic meal.

IV.II.i. The Fiano Romano relief, *CIMRM* 641

In the 1920s, a white marble Mithraic relief was found in the town of Fiano Romano, to the north of Rome. It had been placed into a bricked-over recess; in the opinion of Franz Cumont, who was the first to publish on the relief in detail, this had been done to preserve it from violence at the hands of the "enemies of paganism".[654] It was found in an excellent state of preservation, presumably thanks to the care taken in concealing it; there was only a small amount of damage to the top of the relief, resulting in a small crack, and Sol's right thumb has been broken away on the reverse.

The obverse of the relief shows the familiar tauroctony scene (Figure 91). The carving is of good quality, particularly in the details of Mithras' face and hair, and the bull's expression. The god's head is tilted back over his right shoulder, lending him almost a sense of detachment from his act. Unusually, the length of the object indicates that he is striking the

652 Lawson & McCauley 2002, 26.
653 See above, Chapter II, 134-137.
654 Cumont 1946, 183.

bull with a sword, rather than the more customary short dagger. The bull's tail appears to end in a cluster of ears of grain, although these are less clearly defined than in other examples. The dog, snake and rather blockish scorpion are all present at the scene, as is the raven to the top left, next to a bust of Sol. These busts of Sol and Luna, identified by their respective radiate crown and crescent moon, are divided from the rest of the action by a rocky border; this is perhaps intended to represent a Mithraic grotto, the cave identified by Porphyry as the scene of the original bull-slaying. Sol's crown has twelve short rays around his head, and a longer thirteenth which extends down towards Mithras. This is similar to the composition seen in the painted tauroctonies from the Barberini, Capua Vetere, and Marino *mithraea*.[655]

A depiction of the feast between Mithras and Sol is on the reverse of the relief (Figure 92). Its composition is slightly unusual when compared to the other examples of double-sided reliefs outlined below. The scene is divided into two horizontal sections by the carcase of the slaughtered bull; this serves almost to separate the sphere of gods from that of their attendants. A bust of Luna is in the top left corner, removed from the action by a rocky border; she faces to the left, rather than looking towards the feast itself.[656] Mithras reclines on the right of the pair; he wears a Phrygian cap, and carries a long stick, or torch, in his left hand. Sol is on the left, carrying a whip in his left hand and wearing a radiate crown. As on the obverse of the relief, his hair is parted in the centre; this suggests that the Sol who represents the opposite of Luna is the same character as the participant in the feast, on this

[655] For a discussion of the Marino *mithraeum*, and a comparison of the Capua Vetere and Barberini tauroctony scenes, see Chapter III, 180-182.

[656] Franz Cumont suggested that this might have been due to the sculptor simply copying an artistic model, where according to convention – and as in fact is the case on the obverse of this same relief – Luna occupies the right corner and Sol the left (Cumont 1946, 187). This seems somewhat unlikely: the Luna of the obverse is portrayed in a more frontal pose than the Luna of the reverse; the sculptor does not just repeat her position and appearance from one side to the other. Cumont suggests that Luna's gaze is unlikely to be particularly symbolic in this context; nonetheless, it does seem likely to have been an artistic choice – or the choice of the patron – and therefore the possibility of a symbolic reason for her averted eyes should not be discounted.

relief at least. Sol is mostly nude – the muscles of his chest are clearly visible above the bull's back – but wears a cloak fastened at his right shoulder.

Sol reaches down with his right hand towards the lower half of the scene, where an attendant is offering him a drinking horn. This attendant is dressed in the stereotypical 'eastern' costume that usually characterises Cautes and Cautopates – a Phrygian cap, cloak, tunic and trousers – and is carrying a long torch or stick in his left hand. A second attendant stands, with legs apart and knees slightly bent, on the far right of the scene, below the figure of Mithras. He is dressed identically to the first, and also carries a long torch in his left hand. In his right hand, he holds a *caduceus*, which he points downwards towards a circular altar entwined by a snake.

Aside from the altar, there is little about the scene to suggest the 'real' world of Mithraic practice and the performance of ritual. The torchbearers are often shown to play a role in this feast between Mithras and Sol, and the action of one here, passing a drinking horn to Sol, aligns with this context. Even the altar, wrapped as it is in the coils of a snake, is distanced from any kind of reality, and has perhaps been depicted with symbolic intent.

The presence of attendants at the banquet is a feature of all five of the two-sided reliefs. The reverses of the Nida/Heddernheim and Rückingen reliefs are, as is the case with Fiano Romano, split into two sections horizontally. In these two German examples, however, the gods are not separated from their attendants; in both cases the upper part of the reverse is occupied by a hunting scene, while the banquet takes place in the lower register.

IV.II.ii. The Nida/Heddernheim relief from *Mithraeum I*, *CIMRM* 1083

A staple image for any guide to the Roman worship of Mithras is the reversible relief from *Mithraeum I* in Nida/Heddernheim. This sandstone relief (H. 1.80, B. 1.76, D. 0.22) is intricate in its level of detail, and has several unusual iconographic features. Sufficient traces of pigment remained on the original monument for a (somewhat imaginative) colour reconstruction, which can now be found in the Archaeological Museum in Frankfurt (Figure 93).[657] The central panel of the relief was movable, while the scenes around the side remained fixed in place. This panel could be moved by means of a pivot at the top and a socket at the bottom, allowing for ease of movement by a swinging action.

The two tableaux that could be changed (Figures 93 and 94) included more than just the tauroctony and meal respectively; there were additional scenes that presumably were intended to complement the main image on each side. The movable sides are very similar in terms of structural composition (Figure 95); a comparison of the two next to each other shows that both are divided by an arch, in the same position on each. This arch is possibly meant to represent the mythological cave, in which Mithras was supposed to have killed the bull. It is interesting to note that while the arch on the tauroctony side is ornamented with a zodiac running, left to right, from Aries to Pisces, that on the banquet side is left plain.[658] This might suggest that greater symbolic weight was attached to the tauroctony scene, and it was therefore more suitable to decorate this side with astrological signs; as we are thinking along the lines of a reversible relief, however, it is also possible that this indicates that the tauroctony side was more often on display.

[657] My thanks to Carsten Wenzel for his kind permission for photography in the museum.
[658] When the signs of the zodiac are depicted on Mithraic monuments, this is their most frequent order. See, for example, the reliefs from Osterburken (*CIMRM* 1292). See Chapter III, 189-192.

Much of the action of the bull-slaying scene itself is far more symbolic than realistic. Rather than kneeling on the bull to subdue it, Mithras seems more to be perching on top, his right foot resting on the bull's right hind hoof. While the bull's left foreleg stretches down to the ground to take its weight, the right is awkwardly curled beneath the animal, and rests on a small lion crouching underneath. Its tail ends in three ears of grain. The animal's suffering, however, is realistically portrayed: its eye rolls back, and its mouth lolls open. The wound inflicted by Mithras' dagger is well-detailed, with gouts of blood dripping from it.

The action of the tauroctony is possibly intended to take place within the mythological cave. The scene is slightly recessed, and set under the arching zodiac; there is no indication, however, that there was any attempt to make a grotto roof for a cave within the relief as is the case, for example, in the Mauls relief (*CIMRM* 1400) and the Borghese relief now in the Louvre collection (*CIMRM* 415).

On the other side, we see the banquet scene between Mithras and Sol. There was some considerable damage to the top of the panel, with the result that the hunting scene above the meal is only partly identifiable. Much of the bull itself was also damaged, along with some of the clothing of Sol and Mithras. Most notable is that Mithras and Sol appear to be feasting over the carcase of the bull itself, rather than over its hide, as is more common. The bull is a stark white, standing out against the darkness of the rest of the scene; this might also be intended to emphasise the dramaticism of the moment, and to highlight the role of the bull as a sacrificial victim.[659] On the colour reconstruction of the relief, the bull's wound has been painted red, perhaps to remind the viewer of the moment of bull-slaying shown on the

[659] On the bull as a victim, see Hinnells 1975a, 305.

other side of the relief; there is, however, only a faint mark on the original relief that might have been meant to show the wound.

The bull has collapsed onto the ground facing right, occupying almost half of the scene. Four figures surround the bull; from left to right: an attendant, two figures, presumably of Mithras and Sol, and a second attendant. Both of these attendants wear Phrygian caps, tunics and cloaks, and are carrying baskets filled with either fruit or loaves of bread. These figures are much smaller than those of Mithras and Sol; the two latter are shown reclining behind the bull, and were clearly intended by the sculptor to occupy the prominent position in the scene. 'Mithras' is identifiable by his Phrygian cap; he holds a drinking horn in his right hand, and makes a gesture over the bull with his left. His gaze is directed towards a bunch of grapes being proffered by 'Sol'. Between the two is a dagger, with its blade pointing downwards. A Phrygian cap is draped over the hilt, surrounded by a crown with seven rays.[660] To the right of the dagger is 'Sol', holding the grapes in his right hand and a long whip in his left. The whole scene is set inside an arched niche, which had surviving traces of a dark background, possibly designed to evoke the idea of a Mithraic cave.

Above the arch is a hunting scene. A figure, only surviving from the waist down, stands in the centre of the action, facing forwards. To the left are two dogs, leaping upwards and outwards, a crouching animal – perhaps another dog – and a boar lying down; to the right are two more dogs, one leaping out and one inwards, above an ox. The hunting motif is one

[660] It is perhaps worth noting that in this scene, 'Mithras' is still wearing his Phrygian cap, whereas 'Sol' is not wearing a radiate crown; the cap and crown hanging over the dagger could therefore be seen as a symbolic representation of friendship between the two. Perhaps 'Mithras' was depicted in the cap because without it he was less readily identifiable; this could be significant for thinking about whether we are really looking at a portrayal of the two gods, or of worshippers enacting their roles.

that recurs in reliefs from around the German and Danubian regions, not only in the case of Mithras, but also with the Thracian Rider and the Danubian Rider-Gods.[661]

IV.II.iii. The Rückingen relief, *CIMRM* 1137

The reverse of a relief found in Rückingen is stylistically and thematically very similar to that from Nida/Heddernheim. This relief was discovered in 1951 near Rückingen, about 16 miles from Frankfurt am Main; there was little trace of the *mithraeum* in which it was presumably located, but it was found near a well that may have served the sanctuary.[662] The relief (H. 1.09, B. 0.65, D. 0.22) is made from sandstone, and is sculpted on both sides; it would originally have revolved by means of a pivot.

The tauroctony side of the relief (Figure 96) is split into two main sections by a horizontal rim. Below this, is the bull-slaying scene itself. As on the Nida/Heddernheim relief, the scene takes place within an arched recess; again, the signs of the zodiac from Aries to Pisces run along the arch. In the spandrels above, there are two busts: Sol appears on the left, accompanied by a raven, while Luna is on the right, along with an oil lamp with two wicks.[663]

Mithras is accompanied in the moment of slaying the bull by a dog, snake, and scorpion; the raven at the side of the bust of Sol is presumably intended to represent the one traditionally present at the scene. There are traces of a *krater* underneath the bull, but no

[661] For further reading on the Thracian Horseman or Rider, see Dimitrova 2002; on the Danubian Rider-Gods, see *CMRED*.
[662] Schwertheim 1974, 101.
[663] These busts are uniformly identified as Sol and Luna (e.g. Vermaseren 1956-1960 II, 80; Schwertheim 1974, 102), though it is perhaps worth noting that they do not have their usual attributes of radiate crown or crescent moon.

indication that there was originally a lion, unlike in the Nida/Heddernheim relief. Framing the action are Cautes and Cautopates, holding torches and short sticks; they wear tunics, trousers, cloaks and Phrygian caps, and are cross-legged. The bull's tail ends in three ears of wheat.

The second row, from left to right, shows another, smaller scene of a kneeling Sol and Mithras. To its right is a row of four small frontal busts, perhaps intended to show the four seasons, as on the Nida/Heddernheim relief. The next four scenes in the row seem to show a sequence of Mithras and the bull, as described above on pages 216-218; this culminates in an image of Mithras *taurophoros* at the start of the third row. The remaining scenes in this row show a figure in 'eastern' dress and Phrygian cap standing in front of a tree, from which emerge three further Phrygian-capped heads; Sol ascending in a *quadriga*; a raven; a naked male figure seizing what appears to be a female figure by the arm. In the fourth row: two standing figures, perhaps Saturn and Jupiter; a naked figure, perhaps Sol, holding a globe; a standing female figure with a globe; Luna, and a male figure approaching her; Sol and Mithras joining hands; a scene of the banquet between Sol and Mithras, at which they are attended by a servant. The presence of female figures on the relief, apart from that of Luna, is unusual, though by no means unparalleled; the other scenes show common moments in the tableaux that often surround a tauroctony.

Compared to the Nida/Heddernheim relief, the reverse of the Rückingen relief (Figure 97) is slightly closer to a world that might allude to Roman reality.[664] Mithras and Sol appear to recline on a *kline* draped in the bull's hide, rather than on the bull itself as on the Nida/Heddernheim relief. Both wear tunics and capes fastened at the shoulder. Sol reclines

[664] *CIMRM* 1137; Schwertheim 1974, 103-104.

on the right of the pair of gods, with a drinking horn in his right hand, and his left hand touching the bull's tail, while Mithras is on the left. At Mithras' side is a sword, pointing downwards, with a nine-rayed crown around its hilt. Two attendants in eastern dress flank the scene; the figure on the left offers a basket to Mithras. In front of the bull is a small circular table with three feet; it is the presence of this common piece of Roman furniture that seems to bring an element of reality – or even of mundanity – to the scene, though the miraculous ears of wheat springing from the bull's tail mean that we are hardly looking at the world of the conventional Roman *triclinium*.

The hunting scene above is slightly better-preserved than that from Nida/Heddernheim. In the centre is a figure on horseback riding to the right, presumably intended to be Mithras; he carries a lasso in his left hand. Circling this figure, beginning in the top left corner, are a dog, a boar behind the horseman, a horse lying down, a foal, a boar, a deer, and an ox. The depiction of Mithras as a hunter on horseback is repeated in the Dieburg relief, and in two other German monuments from Neuenheim and Osterburken.[665]

The portrayal of Mithras as a hunter is not in itself unusual.[666] After all, the central story in the reconstructed mythography of the cult, the pursuit and capture of the bull, makes the god stand out as a successful hunter of wild beasts. In this scene, however, there is no reference to the bull. If anything, the fresco suggests that we are instead looking at a recreational hunt. The choice of a hunting relief in place of the traditional tauroctony at Dieburg has prompted speculation as to the motivation of the initiates. Friedrich Behn, who was the first to offer an account of this relief in 1928, thought that it was a peculiarly

[665] *CIMRM* 1247; 1289; 1292.
[666] For a possible parallel, see the hunting frescoes from Dura-Europos, Chapter I, 43-44.

Germanic manifestation of the cult, in which the god was approximated to Wotan.[667] The discovery of the Dura frescoes brought an end to this theory. If the identification of the rider as Mithras is correct, then it should be accepted that the portrayal of the god as an equestrian hunter, though not commonplace, was not restricted to Germania. Nor, though, can it be seen as an eastern innovation.[668]

The hunting scene depicted in the Dieburg relief is far more heavily symbolic: the figure of the god is flanked by the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates, following the traditional model of a tauroctony already outlined, while the lone tree behind the horse is a slight concession to the supposed pastoral nature of the hunt. The damage to the relief has made it very difficult to ascertain Mithras' prey – long ears would perhaps suggest a hare – but the emphasis of the scene is focused far more upon the god than upon a naturalistic rendition of a hunt.

This point about realism – or, rather, its lack in the case of Dieburg – is echoed in the feasting scenes. All three reliefs mentioned – from Fiano Romano, Nida/Heddernheim, and Rückingen – clearly placed an emphasis on the depiction of the meal between Mithras and Sol. All three show a drinking horn in addition to food.[669] Nonetheless, apart from the tripod table on the Rückingen relief, there is little to place the scenes in the reality of the Roman worship of Mithras. This is not the case with the final two reversible reliefs, from the Castra Praetoria in Rome and Konjic. These examples are more suggestive of fictive realities, in which a Mithraist might have seen a more deliberate attempt to evoke, through iconography,

667 Behn 1928; for further discussion of Mithras and Wodan, see Davidson 1978, 99-110.
668 Though a similar scene appears in the frescoes from the *mithraeum* at Hawarti in Syria.
669 For a discussion of the role of wine in Mithraic ritual, and the possible similarities to Christian practice, see Cumont 1903, 137.

the kinds of rituals in which he was participating. My interest here is not so much in the action of Mithraists, as in the possibility of re-enactment depicted on Mithraic reliefs.

IV.II.iv. The Castra Praetoria relief, *CIMRM* 397

Another two-sided relief, made from white marble (H. 0.20, Br. 0.16, D. 0.04), was found in the Castra Praetoria in Rome (Figure 98). While it is only fragmentary, the obverse clearly shows a tauroctony scene; as on all the two-sided reliefs described thus far, the bull's tail ends in ears of wheat. The reverse of the relief (Figure 99), however, hints at a more complicated depiction of Mithras' banquet than the Fiano Romano or German reliefs.

Mithras is shown reclining at a table – possibly covered with the bull's hide, judging by a small bull's head at the right corner of the table –, and leaning on his left elbow. He holds a drinking horn, and in front of him is placed a small tripod table, with a plate of loaves. To the right is a figure with a downturned torch, presumably Cautopates; the head has been lost, as has any trace of a framing figure of Cautes to the left of Mithras. To the right of the torchbearer is a human figure with a raven head and wearing a short cloak who is offering a cup. The raven head is suggestive of both the raven present at the tauroctony scene and the Mithraic grade; the details of furniture might, in this case, point towards a representation of the latter, and to the world of representation rather than mythology. There is no way to discern whether the head is supposed to indicate a semi-human figure, or whether it refers to a mask.

IV.II.v. The Konjic relief, *CIMRM* 1896

Another raven-headed attendant appears on the reversible relief from Konjic, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This limestone relief (Figure 67) is one of the most famous pieces of Mithraic iconography from the Roman province of Dalmatia. The obverse of the monument is remarkable in itself: it is divided into three main sections by two vertical frames. The central panel shows the bull-slaying itself, although extensive damage means that much of the detail has been lost. Above Mithras and the bull is an arch, on which is written the inscription: *deo Soli inv[ict]o Meter[ae]*.[670] In the panels to the left and right of this central scene are shown two figures, who are almost symmetrical; both are dressed in 'eastern' costume, and both are dragging an animal, which they hold by the hind legs, behind them.[671] Above these figures are indications of further panelled side-scenes, but these have been lost through damage.

It is the scene on the reverse, however, that has made the monument particularly well-known: it shows a group of figures, frequently thought to be Mithraic worshippers (Figure 21). The upper part of the relief has been lost, and some of the detail has been damaged, which unfortunately prevents a full reconstruction of what would have been visible. Framing the action are two twisted Corinthian columns, which perhaps supported an arch; this is a common motif within Mithraic iconography, perhaps intended to represent the cave of the tauroctony, and even the *mithraeum* itself.[672]

[670] *CIL* 14617.
[671] These animals were identified by Vermaseren as bulls, and therefore the figures as a mirrored pair of Mithras *taurophoros*, but closer examination by Merkelbach showed that the figure on the left is dragging a pig, while the animal on the right is a ram (Vermaseren 1956-1960 II, 265; Merkelbach 1984, 381).
[672] For more on the subject of *mithraea* as caves, and the representation of caves on reliefs, see Chapter III, 174-184; 174-176.

Two figures are seated, or reclining, at a table, with their right hands raised above their heads. The table in front of them is covered with a bull's hide, and in front of that are four loaves, scored with crosses, on a tripod. We therefore seem to be looking at the meal shared by Sol and Mithras, according to the myth. Damage just above their heads prevents us from seeing whether the figures originally had the Phrygian cap or radiate halo that usually serve to identify them as Mithras and Sol.

What suggests that we are looking at more than the mythological story, however, is the presence of four more figures, all wearing tunics, two on each side of the table. On the far left is a man wearing a raven-head, with a cloak over his tunic, and carrying a dish in his right hand; the figure next to him is wearing what appears to be a Phrygian cap and is carrying a drinking vessel. Just in front of him crouches a diminutive lion, who is wildly out of proportion with the rest of the scene. On the far right we see a man offering a cup, while the man to his right is wearing a lion-head; damage to this part of the relief means that any further details about these two figures has been lost.

These figures imply that we are viewing not a mythological meal between gods, but rather a 'real' feast, a part of Mithraic ritual, in which this mythological moment was evoked or even re-enacted. Maarten Vermaseren suggested that there were three types of depiction of the meal: one involving just Mithras and Sol (or with mythological attendants), one in which Mithraic initiates waited on the gods, and one that involved human Mithraists alone. In his contribution to the second volume of *Mithraic Studies*, J.P. Kane develops this idea.[673] He argues that, instead of seeing the second type as one involving a blurring between the human

[673] Kane 1975, 345-47.

and divine worlds, it should perhaps be interpreted instead as a re-enactment of the mythological scene, performed by cult members. In such a context, he suggests that the Pater and Heliodromus grades would have taken on the roles of Mithras and Sol, and dressed accordingly in Phrygian cap and radiate crown.

It is presumably to reinforce this impression that two of the attendants on the Konjic relief are dressed in raven and lion-heads; it is worth noting, however, that they do not fit neatly into the world of the tauroctony myth. None of the other tauroctony reliefs found in what is now Bosnia, such as at Jajce or Golubic, seem to have any reference to a lion being present at the death of the bull.[674] This is in contrast to, for example, several German reliefs which show the lion and snake either side of a *krater* within the frame of the tauroctony moment. If we emphasise regional sensitivities towards iconography, however, as this thesis has largely attempted to do, we should be wary of reading ideas from the Neuenheim, Osterburken or Nida/Heddernheim reliefs onto the Konjic image.

IV.II.vi. Banquet and ritual re-enactment: conclusions

The suggestion that at Konjic we are looking at a re-enactment of the meal, rather than an emphasis on myth, is reinforced by the architectural framework of the scene. The two columns, together with the tripod table, combine to give a solidly Roman impression; this does not appear to be an attempted recreation of a mythological past. In this context of re-enactment, then, what are we to make of the raven-headed and lion-headed attendants? Are we to assume that, in order to build this mythic world of the meal of Sol and Mithras, Mithraic worshippers actually dressed in this way?

[674] *CIMRM* 1902; *CIMRM* 1910.

While we cannot rule out that Mithraists dressed up for their own pleasure and amusement, it is perhaps more plausible that this idea of dressing up – in this case, of putting on a raven mask or headdress – would have had a ritual purpose.[675] The evidence for what any of the Mithraic grades might have done in a ritual context is scarce, to say the least; as with much of Mithraic scholarship, it has traditionally depended on the piecing together of disparate sources to create an attempt at an answer, with all the dangers that such an approach entails.

There are four material sources that might point towards an element of dressing up among Mithraic Ravens, three of which also clearly place an emphasis on service and cup-bearing.[676] First, there is a fresco from the third-century restoration *mithraeum* at Dura-Europos in Syria, which seems to show a ritual meal between Sol and Mithras (Figure 6). They are seated, or reclining, behind the body or hide of the slaughtered bull; they can be easily identified from comparison with the other frescoes in this series, and because Sol is radiate and nimbate, while Mithras is wearing his usual Phrygian cap. At the bottom left of the scene, there is a human figure, with a raven-head. He is half-naked, his beak is slightly open, and he is proffering meat to Sol and Mithras from a long spit.

The second piece of evidence is a painting from the third-century redecoration of the Santa Prisca *mithraeum* in Rome (Figure 100). There has been extensive damage, so it is now very hard to discern much at all from the scene, but drawings made before the deterioration of the walls suggests that we are looking at another banquet scene between Sol and Mithras,

675 Dressing up and its opposite – stripping off – are well-known in Roman religious practices. See, for example, the festival of the Lupercalia (North 2008; McLynn 2008).
676 As discussed above, Chapter II, 108 f.316.

where they are again being served by a man, fully dressed, with the head of a raven.[677] The third and fourth examples are the Castra Praetoria (Figure 99) and Konjic (Figure 21) reliefs already discussed.

The question is whether these meals all show the same event, and whether the role of the Raven is the same in each. The Dura fresco fits into Kane's third category of banquet scenes, in which the human attendants of the Roman Mithraic re-enactment 'bleed' into the mythological story; thus, a Raven grade-holder would be participating in the meal between the gods. In the Dura fresco, the Raven is definitely human – and with human feet –, which places the scene in the world of re-enactment, but he is semi-naked, which in turn distances the scene from the 'reality' of Mithraic ritual practice, if we can go so far as to use that expression. The case of Santa Prisca is different again from the 're-enactment' of the Konjic relief, and the 'transferral' of Dura; the fact that the figure is clothed suggests a contemporary part of ritual, but the raven-feet introduce a new, and more eerily realistic, element to the dressing-up box.

If we follow Kane's argument, then the ritual role of the Raven varies slightly from case to case: is he serving the gods, or is he serving men dressed up as – or pretending to be – gods? Of course, answering this question requires far more insight into the minds of Mithraic Ravens, not all of whom may have had the same ideas about their roles, than we are capable of having, if indeed that were our aim. It would necessitate an understanding of just how far Ravens entered into the mythic reality of possible re-enactment scenes.

[677] Vermaseren claims that this figure has raven's feet as well as a raven's head, but the photograph in *CIMRM* does not show this detail, and the fresco is now too damaged to corroborate this claim (Vermaseren 1956-1960 I, 198; Fig. 140).

How seriously, however, should we should read these kinds of evidence as a source-book for Mithraic ritual? While I agree with Kane's assessment of the levels of myth evoked, which is emphasised by the architectural details present in the scene for example, I would suggest that the dressing up should not be read entirely literally. Ambrosiaster may well have written that some Mithraists flap their wings and croak like birds, but we should not automatically assume, when we find evidence like the example of the reliefs from Konjic and the Castra Praetoria, that Mithraic Ravens were so frequently in the habit of dressing up as our Christian polemic sources might have indicated.

This is narrative-making of a scholarly kind, and is a trap into which Mithraic scholars, with so few texts to draw upon, are unfortunately all too prone to fall into. It is entirely possible that the Raven on the Konjic relief, like the Lion, is simply shown in a particular manner to make him easy for the viewer to identify. They distinguish them from the raven of the tauroctony, perched on Mithras' cloak, or from the other diminutive lion present in the meal scene; they are clearly marked out as grade-holders. Anyone, looking at the relief, would surely have had a fairly good idea of what the job attached to the Corax grade involved, within the ritual context of this meal. He is a server, possibly a cup-bearer; we can take away from this, strong suggestions of his ritual role, but not necessarily of his ritual dress.

IV.III. Conclusions

This chapter has aimed to give some insight into why the study of Mithraic mythology has gradually declined in popularity among scholars. Without a literary or textual source upon which to rely, and rejecting the narrative created by Cumont, they have increasingly tended to look elsewhere to find meaning in the tauroctony, particularly in astrology. This approach

however, seems to overlook one key point: it is not necessarily the case that we have lost a textual account of a Mithraic myth, rather, it seems plausible that one may never have existed at all.

With this in mind, should scholars really expect to be able to access *meaning* in the tauroctony scene?[678] It is certainly tempting to try; the reliefs, statues, and frescoes showing Mithras in the act of slaying the bull almost act as the defining symbols for the Roman worship of Mithras, and they constitute a vast part of our surviving Mithraic evidence, so it is only natural to want to uncover as much as possible about them and from them. This does not, however, mean that what scholars may *want* tauroctony scenes to tell us, and what they may actually be *able* to tell us, are the same.

Elsner's suggestion that reliefs might allow us to access aspects of community identity, and identity-building, is a direction in which the analysis of tauroctony scenes may allow us to move. The evidence of the reliefs discussed in the first half of this chapter suggests that there was no one version of a Mithraic myth; there appears to have been many, with different possible emphases that could reflect the interests of a group of worshippers, or of a particular region. This should hardly be surprising given the rich world of Mediterranean mythology that had informed the cultural space surrounding Mithraic worship.

Nonetheless, answering *why* a community might have chosen certain scenes, or chosen to emphasise certain aspects of ritual behaviours, is rather more problematic. We return to

[678] This is clearly a mythologising impulse, and one further reinforced by Christian imagery. We can access meaning in the crucifixion, because we know the story behind it, and therefore variations and subtleties stand out. Similarly, our knowledge of the myth of Hercules and Omphale, referred to at the beginning of the chapter, allows us to find meaning in the Cassia Priscilla relief.

Elsner's point about the dangers of circular arguments, quoted above.[679] Variation in iconography could find its roots in cross-pollination between Greek and Roman standard myths and more overtly Mithraic narratives. The tauroctony scene as a communicator of meaning is an important avenue for future research, but this chapter has outlined some of the dangers of expecting too much from a reading of the iconography.

[679] Page 225-226.

Chapter V. An island full of gods: Mithras in Britain

The final chapter of this thesis is the most overtly regional in focus, examining instances of Mithraic activity in Britain. As in the previous chapters, the archaeological evidence presented is selective, and chosen to correspond to the two main theoretical angles: syncretism and collection.[680] Both are enhanced by exploring the identity of individuals involved in Mithraic activity in British sites, some of whom seem almost tantalisingly accessible, and the social characterisation of Mithraic worship in Britain. Comparisons to Mithraic discoveries in other provinces are drawn where appropriate – particularly to the finds in the *mithraea* of Dieburg in Germany, Sidon in Lebanon, and Merida in Spain –, but the principal area of investigation remains Britain itself.

The subject of Mithraic practice in Britain is by no means a neglected area of study: new finds continue to come to light, with the discovery of a possible *mithraeum* at Inveresk in 2010 among the most recent, while sites such as the Walbrook *mithraeum* in London remain of perennial interest.[681] Nonetheless, the majority of the Mithraic evidence from Britain lacks the appeal of the spectacular; few works of great Mithraic art have been found. This has had the result that Mithras in Britain is usually studied by scholars working in Britain – among whom Eberhard Sauer and Martin Henig are perhaps the most prominent – and is therefore quite insular in its focus.[682]

One benefit of this insularity is that connections between British finds tend to be drawn out in detail. This allows some of the subtleties of Mithraic worship in the province, which

680 The problems of the term syncretism and its definition are approached on 253-256 below.
681 The reconstruction of the Walbrook *mithraeum* in recent years, together with its new display space inside the Bloomberg building, has led to a flurry of news articles and increased public interest. See Chapter III, 156-157.
682 Sauer 1996; 2003; Henig 1980; 1984; 1995; 2002.

might otherwise be missed, to become more noticeable. Given the relatively small size of Britain as a province, together with the low number of Mithraic sites and finds, we might expect to see fairly consistent trends, particularly in Mithraic iconography. In fact, parallels and links, particularly in the area of iconography and dedicatory formulae, can tend to be somewhat speculative – though no less interesting and valuable for that. A large part of this chapter will concentrate on the possibilities of a syncretic worship of Sol-Mithras (or Mithras-Sol), and consider the theories behind it, and the scholarship that has informed it.

Contrary to the examples of Italy, Germany, Dacia and Pannonia – the regions and provinces that formed the basis of the three previous chapters – instances of the worship of Mithras in Roman Britain are, for the most part, military in nature. The construction of Mithras as a soldiers' god is certainly reinforced in the evidence from Britain; many of the forts along Hadrian's Wall have a *mithraeum* nearby, and many Mithraic inscriptions have strong connections to the legions. This suggests that the interest of this chapter could be in the social composition of Mithraists – a return to the question of who worshipped Mithras, and why.

This is a significant aspect of the chapter; its first main focus, however, is on that perennial subject for religion in Roman Britain – syncretism.[683] This is an area of scholarship that has attracted much attention over the years, with the most famous example probably being that of Sulis Minerva in Bath.[684] There are many ongoing debates about the extent to which this is an example that truly points towards syncretism, but it reveals a lasting fascination with

683 For comparable literature looking at Roman Gaul, see Derks 1998.
684 For a detailed excavation report of the temple of Sulis Minerva, and an account of the finds, see Cunliffe 1985-1988.

the encounter between native British and Roman religious ideas and practices.[685] This is not quite the kind of syncretism – if, indeed, such a concept is really applicable to ancient religion – that is relevant when thinking about the worship of Mithras. In the latter case, the associations that we see in Roman Britain tend to be between Mithras and either other Roman deities, or with the Zoroastrian Oromasdes.[686] Nor is there any real indication that Mithraic worship was adopted among either non-military Roman citizens in the province or native Britons.

Nonetheless, the idea of a strongly syncretistic approach towards Mithraic worship in Britain has been particularly pervasive since the excavation of the Walbrook *mithraeum* in London in 1954.[687] There, the numerous statues depicting gods other than Mithras – including heads of Serapis and Minerva, and a statuette of Mercury – hint at a lack of exclusivity in worship, and a comfort in sharing sacred space. This is by no means a unique example of its kind. The Dieburg and Merida *mithraea* – to name but a couple – offer important parallels.[688]

To what extent, though, are we justified in assuming that this is syncretism – that it points towards fluidity in worship, and perhaps a multiplicity of divine identities? Is syncretism the only explanation for the finds in the Walbrook, Dieburg, Sidon, and Merida *mithraea*? These examples may indicate something far less religious in nature: an interest in, or even culture of, collection. This idea of collection constitutes the second major theme of this chapter. The evidence from Merida suggests that one man in particular, Gaius Accius

685 Watts 2002, 7. Rather than using the word syncretism, David Shotter instead prefers to describe the pairing of Roman and Celtic deities as *interpretatio romana* (Shotter 2004, 80; 83-84). See also Ando 2005 on *interpretatio romana*.
686 For a possible Apollo-Mithras, see below 261-281. For Mithras Oromasdes, see *CIMRM* 827.
687 The excavation report was finally published by John Shepherd in 1998.
688 See Clauss 1990b, 57; 164-169 = Clauss 2000, 48; 157-162.

Hedychrus, might have been the driving force behind the assemblage of images of gods there. There is another, clearly influential, patron, who dedicated several of the Sidon finds. While there is no corresponding figure of obvious responsibility at either Dieburg or Walbrook, it is still possible that the communities using the *mithraea* had, at some point in the history of the site, a similar impulse. Furthermore, the most northerly example used in this thesis – the Inveresk site near the Antonine Wall in Scotland – may also reveal the handiwork and enthusiasms of a single sponsor, with an interest that was broader than simply Mithraic.

This emphasis on individual motivations, and the possibility that we could be looking at antiquarian impulses to collect and re-use sculpture, return us to the theme of social composition and character, though not necessarily in a strictly Mithraic context. The role of the *pater* in driving the creative and decorative nature of a *mithraeum* has often been assumed in Mithraic scholarship.[689] The importance of an individual in shaping Mithraic behaviours and practices has not always been acknowledged to its full extent, except in the more unusual cases.[690] Peculiar and particular relationships with Mithras, or approaches to the god, should not be overlooked, however; it is not only the most obviously uncommon – or even unique – examples that might reveal the tendencies or interests of one man, or group of men.[691]

Rather than accepting that in Britain we can see examples of a syncretic Mithraic theology, a more flexible investigation, and a focus on worshippers themselves, might open up more

689 Gordon 2011, 337-339.
690 For work on these unusual cases, see Adrych et al. 2017, 57-60; Gordon 2000, 736-742 (738-740 in particular).
691 The example of Zenobius in Dura-Europos, discussed in Chapter I, indicates the extent to which local practices and forms of patronage were capable of filtering into Mithraic practice.

possibilities. After all, the people using the site that is most often described as the Walbrook *mithraeum* were not always Mithraists; the report of the excavation, which was not published until substantially after the 1950s excavation, in 1998, makes it clear that the building had a post-Mithraic life.[692] Just as a *mithraeum* did not always have to be used for Mithraic activity, so Mithraic finds do not always indicate cult practice.[693] The discovery of a statue of Cautopates in Tyre does not necessarily point to Mithraic cult activity in the town; the statue could have been part of a collection of religious objects that were considered to be particularly suited to an underground setting.[694] In the same way, the presence of a Minerva head in the Walbrook *mithraeum* does not have to point to her being worshipped alongside Mithras in any meaningful way.

Mithras in Britain is not necessarily different from Mithras in any other part of the Roman Empire; suggesting as much is not the aim of this chapter.[695] As with all the other provinces at which this thesis has looked, there are elements of local cultures – particularly artistic and religious – that understandably and unsurprisingly have seeped into the ways in which Mithras was represented on the island. This is evident in several reliefs found in Britain, perhaps the most notable of which was found in York in 1747.[696] This relief (Figure 101) is made from local dolomitic limestone, and was presumably carved by local craftsmen; the work is rather crude, the figures and animals are out of proportion, and the facial features are blockish. The angularity of Mithras and the torchbearers' limbs is particularly reminiscent of a relief carved on a Mithraic altar from the Carrawburgh *mithraeum* in

692 Shepherd 1998, 227-229.
693 See the discussion of the possible *mithraeum* at Inveresk later in this chapter.
694 Gatier (forthcoming).
695 For a brief description of the dangers of localism, see Conclusion, 302.
696 *CIMRM* 835; Wellbeloved 1842, 80.

Northumberland (Figure 102), in which a figure is shown, facing forwards, his arms held at a rigid angle, and out of proportion with the muscularity of the rest of his body.[697]

There does not appear to be any peculiarly British flavour to the reliefs, altars and statues found within the province – some of which, in fact, had been imported from elsewhere within the Roman Empire. What, then, makes Britain of interest for the study of Mithras? First, it has been described as "the military province par excellence"; where better to look for the soldiers' god?[698] A second answer surely lies in the insularity already mentioned, which has bred a certain intensity of focus on the evidence that exists. Some of the theories explored in this chapter – and especially those surrounding the finds of the Inveresk *mithraeum* – suggest that this intensity can lead to an increased speculative fervour; others, hopefully, point towards the importance of placing British finds within a wider Mithraic context, as well as within their own local characteristics.

V.I. Syncretism, and the search for a definition

> *A feature of religion in Roman Britain which has frequently drawn comment by scholars is its syncretic nature, this is, the conflating of native cults with those of Rome.*[699]

This quotation, from Dorothy Watts' *Religion in Late Roman Britain* does not, however, as discussed above, provides one possible definition of syncretism. There is, however, somewhat more to the term; it does not just involve the conflation of native cults and Roman religious practices and beliefs; there are several different angles of approach into the subject.

697 *CIMRM* 847-848.
698 Barrett 2000.
699 Watts 2002, 115.

In addition, syncretism seems more subtle than the word "conflating" above quite conveys; one does not necessarily have to equal the other, or even appear to in the eyes of practitioners. There must surely be appropriate areas of similarity and of dissimilarity for the term to be applicable. With this in mind, we should ask whether certain instances of the worship of Mithras in Roman Britain can really be seen as syncretic, and what it might mean to label them as such.

Difficulties surrounding the definition and use of the term 'syncretism' have existed for centuries. Perhaps its most notable moment came with the syncretistic controversy from 1640 to 1686, in which the growing schism between the Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed Churches – and the possibility for any *rapprochement* between them – came under increased scrutiny owing to the endeavours of the German Lutheran theologian Georg Calixt.[700] Syncretism therefore had strong theological connotations, until the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* increasingly used it from the 1890s as a term for the study of religion from a historical perspective.[701] In particular, it became associated with Hellenism, and has since proceeded to encompass or touch upon such ideas as imperialism, colonialism, creolisation, and even multiculturalism.[702]

Nonetheless, even the use of the term as a tool for historians is not without its problems, and its critics. One significant criticism is that it is a word used by outsiders to the particular religions – or, more pertinently in this case, forms of worship – in question; it often gives the sense of the detached and observant historian, rather than reflecting the possible realities

700 Wallmann 1961.
701 Leopold & Jensen 2004, 21-22.
702 For syncretism and imperialism in Roman Britain, see Mattingly 2006. For a seminal article on syncretism within the western Roman provinces and its comparability to post-colonial studies and theories, see Webster 1997, discussed further below.

of religious amalgamations to those living them. It often implies imposition and awareness on the part of practitioners, when unconsciousness and a natural compromise might in fact be just as plausible. A preference for a phrase like syncretic impulses, on the other hand, might give slightly too much agency to the religious insider, and might even suggest a certain naivety on the part of the historian.

A second, language-based point, and one especially pertinent in a thesis that conscientiously avoids the use of the word 'Mithraism', is its dependence on an '-ism'.[703] In this instance, the term seems to carry with it the burdens of being replicable, recognisable, and almost of consisting of a single moment in time. It also suggests one kind of syncretism, along the lines of the definition provided by Watts above. Would we therefore be more justified in talking about syncretisms? Again, this feels too concrete a word for a concept that appears to be based on a degree of nebulousness and mutability.

The third criticism, and the most important, is the question of whether syncretism is a valuable concept – not merely whether it is a valuable word. This hinges on the idea of syncretism as a process, either gradual or sudden, which at least removes the problem of the single moment in time mentioned above. Robert Baird questioned whether the term was useful as a historical phenomenon, or whether the kinds of change and assimilations that it involves are instead a natural part of historical endeavour.[704] Baird also interrogated the harmoniousness of syncretism as a process, suggesting instead that a level of incommensurability and conflict was necessary in order for the term to be truly effective.[705]

[703] For further thoughts on Mithraism and other –isms, see Introduction, 14-17.
[704] Baird 1991.
[705] Baird 1991, 52: "Usually, when the concept of syncretism is applied, it connotes an element of conflict or inconsistency. Care must still be taken, however, lest the term be used in a manner which is meaningless. To say that syncretism is what takes place when one brings two conflicting ideas or practices and unites them into a harmonious whole is to say nothing coherent. If the two original ideas or practices are in conflict, then they

The idea of a conflict, or even a paradox, is one to which this chapter will return with a more detailed examination of possible syncretism between Mithras and the Sun.

One strong argument in favour of the use of the term is that it requires an element of comparison, whether this is between ideas that are in conflict or in harmony. In Jane Webster's 1997 article on syncretism in the Roman provinces – including Roman Britain – the author makes it clear that she considers a comparative model necessary for approaching an understanding of syncretism.[706] As Webster emphasises, this might sometimes involve comparing two things that do not seem – at first glance, at least – to lend themselves towards comparison: this might be for reasons of chronology or categorisation, amongst others.

This is crucial to a thesis that explores whether 'the Roman worship of Mithras' can really be said to exist as a category in the way that it has traditionally been discussed. In asking this question, it becomes difficult to base the grounds for comparison simply on the grounds of a shared Mithraic label; syncretism, along with geography, iconography, and even mythology, thereby is a valuable tool, in that it allows for comparison of objects and possible practices. In consideration of this, I shall continue to use the term in this section of the chapter, assessing how useful it is as a means of approaching Mithraic worship in Britain.

cannot, without modification, produce a harmonious unity. If a harmony is produced, then it follows that either the two original elements were only apparently in conflict, or that changes have been effected so that it is not actually the two conflicting elements that produce the harmony but a modification of these elements that produces elements no longer in conflict. To say that two genuinely conflicting concepts were harmonized is a contradiction."

706 Webster 1997. While much of the theory underlying this article is highly valuable, the emphasis is on colonialism and Roman-versus-native cultures, rather than the kind of model visible in the worship of Mithras and its relationship with existing Roman religious structures. The applicability of post-colonial discourse to Roman archaeology and ancient history is perhaps less convincing in hindsight, but Webster's appeal to contextualise the 'Romano-Celtic' record still ring true (Webster 1997, 334-335). For an interesting contemporary account of colonialism and Romanisation, see Woolf 1997.

V.I.i. A possible mithraeum in Inveresk, East Lothian

In 2010, East Lothian council planned the expansion of a cricket pavilion in Lewisvale Park, near Inveresk. As the site was so close to Inveresk's Roman fort, which had seen a substantial amount of urban development outside the fort itself, the building work on the pavilion was monitored. In the course of excavations, a team of archaeologists came across a sunken rectangular pit, which contained two benches. In the aisle between these benches, they found two altars: one dedicated to Sol, and the other to Mithras, as well as an altar base. This seemed to prove that the archaeologists were looking at what had once been a *mithraeum*, perhaps constructed of wood that had since rotted away.

As the excavation report itself states, this structure could therefore be the first *mithraeum* found in Scotland, and the earliest with reasonably secure dating in Britain.[707] Inveresk acted as one of the many fortifications protecting the Antonine Wall, and as such, Roman activity in the area can be dated from AD 140. The end date of Roman occupation is slightly more difficult to gauge; while the Antonine Wall itself was largely abandoned in AD 165, Fraser Hunter has suggested that Inveresk might have remained occupied to guard Dere Street until AD 180.[708] Some items of Flavian pottery were found in the vicinity of the fort, but no traces of a Severan occupation, which indicates that any Roman presence had been withdrawn from Inveresk by the end of the second century.

The evidence of the two altars seems to support the idea of a planned withdrawal. Analysis after the excavation indicated that the altar base had originally belonged to the Mithras altar.

[707] Hunter, Henig, Sauer & Gooder 2016, 119.
[708] Hunter 2014, 29. The importance of Inveresk to Dere Street is emphasised by Ian Richmond in a posthumous excavation report on the Antonine fort (Richmond 1980, 298).

The distance between the base and the altar, the fact that the two altars are lying side-by-side and pointing towards the East, and the relatively low level of damage all suggest that the altars were deliberately and carefully placed face down, rather than toppled in some sort of act of destruction.[709] The altars both have inscriptions commemorating the same dedicator; it has been suggested that they point towards the dedicator having been a centurion, and therefore the altars have also been dated to the period of Antonine occupation.

V.I.i.i. The Sol altar

The first altar of the pair (Figure 103) is mostly exceptional for the carved head of a solar god with wavy hair on its face. He has a crown of six rays surrounding his head, all of which were pierced to allow light to shine through, as were his eyes and mouth. The back of the altar contains a hollow recess, presumably to allow for a lamp to be placed inside. A panel in the capital on the face of the altar has the following inscription:

SOLI C CAS FLA

Roger Tomlin has suggested supplying the reading: "To the Sun, the centurion Gaius Cas(sius?) Fla(vianus?) (dedicated this altar)".[710] The altar has interesting similarities to one from Carrawburgh mentioned above (Figure 102).[711] The Carrawburgh altar is somewhat more detailed: it shows the head and partially clothed torso of a youthful male figure with

[709] Compare, for example, the case of the *mithraeum* at Carrawburgh, where there are signs that the statues and relief were deliberately destroyed (Sauer 1996, 39-40). For further work on the destruction of Mithraic sites, see Sauer 2003, 79-88.
[710] Hunter, Henig, Sauer & Gooder 2016, 141. The Latin would therefore read: *Soli G(aius) C(assius) Fl[a(vianus)] (centurio)*.
[711] *CIMRM* 847.

curly hair. He has seven rays around his head, which were pierced as on the Inveresk altar. This was originally thought to be a depiction of Mithras, rising from the rock.[712] If this were correct, it would be an unusual depiction of a rock-birth scene; Mithras is more normally shown with his hands in the air, as at Carnuntum (Figure 104) and Aquincum (Figure 105), and usually wearing a Phrygian cap.[713] It seems likely instead that the original excavators – Richmond and Gillam –, and subsequently Wright, mistook the disproportionate muscles of the figure's torso for rocks. The figure is holding an object in his right hand, identified as a whip; this identification seems to be a little more secure – the object certainly appears to be a multi-thong type of *flagrum*. The lack of Phrygian cap, and the possible presence of a whip, suggest that we might be looking not at Mithras, but at Sol.[714] An inscription beneath the figure reads:

DEO INVICTO
MITRAE M SIM
PLICIUS SIMPLEX
PREF V S L M

This was rendered by Richmond and Gillam as: "To the Unconquered God Mithras, M(arcus) Simplicius Simplex, prefect, fulfilled his vow freely and deservedly".[715]

There is a further parallel to the Inveresk Sol altar from Bingen in Germany (Figure 107).[716] This is more similar iconographically to the Inveresk example than the Carrawburgh; the face of the altar shows the radiate bust of a solar god, set within a slightly recessed frame.

712 Wright 1950, 115.
713 *CIMRM* 1687 (Carnuntum) *CIMRM* 1756 (Aquincum). A parallel to the Carrawburgh altar could be seen in a rock-birth from Güglingen, Germany (Figure 106).
714 Vermaseren 1956-1960 I, 295.
715 *RIB* 1546; Wright 1950, 115. The Latin would therefore read: *Deo Invicto Mit(h)rae M(arcus) Simplicius Simplex Pr(a)ef(ectus) v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*.
716 *CIMRM* 1241.

The head itself has been destroyed, so all traces of features have been lost, but it is clearly visible that the rays were pierced, and that there was space for a lamp within the altar. The god wears a cloak, and carries a long thin whip. The inscription on the Bingen altar is unusually divided into two parts. On the architrave above the bust, it reads:

IN H D D SOLI

While, beneath the bust, the rest of the inscription reads:

INVICTO MITRAE
ARAM PRIVATI SE
CUNDINUS ET TER
TINUS ET CONFINIS
EX VOTO PRIVATI
TERTINI V S L M

The excellent preservation of the inscription means that no real restoration of the lower part of the text was required. The text on the architrave required a little more interpretation, but was suggested as: "To the honour of the Imperial House and to Sol / Unconquered Mithras, the citizens Secundinus, Tertinus and Confinis dedicate this altar according to the vow of citizen Tertinus; they freely and deservedly fulfilled the vow".[717]

The Carrawburgh and Bingen examples seem to show altars dedicated to Mithras – albeit Mithras with his epithet of Deo Invictus in Carrawburgh, and Sol Invictus at Bingen – but with the iconography and representation of Sol. The fact that there was another pierced altar in Britain suggests that the Inveresk example was not particularly unusual, although Hunter,

[717] See *CIMRM* 1315; 1319 for parallels to the opening formula.

Henig and Sauer point out that the quality of the carving is perhaps slightly better than might have been expected.[718] The Bingen altar provides a particularly interesting parallel in terms of its inscription; on the Inveresk altar, the dedication is also on the architrave of the altar, also with a strong emphasis on SOLI.[719]

Above the architrave on the Inveresk altar are four female busts; the variations of clothing and foliage between the four suggest that they represent the four seasons. On each side of the altar is a carved wreath, with a rosette at the top and ribbons dangling from the bottom. The excavators have suggested that these are a reference to the Mithraic crown described in Tertullian's *De corona*, but I see little strong reason to tie the iconography of this Sol altar so closely to alleged Mithraic practice.[720]

V.I.i.ii. The Mithras altar

The second altar discovered at the Inveresk site was dedicated to Mithras (Figure 108). It was found lying face down, and with several substantial cracks, which had been caused during the centuries between burial and excavation. Like the Sol altar, it is made from sandstone, and was carved to an almost exceptionally high standard for Mithraic finds in Britain.

Aside from the inscription on the altar, there is little to link it to the worship or iconography of Mithras. The space for the inscription is quite large, taking over the whole shaft of the front face of the altar (Figure 109). It reads as follows:

718 Hunter, Henig, Sauer & Gooder 2016, 131.
719 For a detailed survey of pierced altars, see Wortmann 1969.
720 Hunter, Henig, Sauer & Gooder 2016, 131.

DAEO
INVICT[O] MY
C CAS
FLA

The reading has been rendered by Roger Tomlin as: "To the Unconquered God Mithras, G(aius) Cas(sius?) Fla(vianus?) (dedicated this altar)".[721]

This altar was presumably dedicated by the same person as the Sol altar; again, his *cognomen* is significantly abbreviated. This seems particularly mysterious, since there was ample space for a longer dedication, and especially for a full version of his name. The black arrows added onto the inscription indicate where the scribe had marked out further lines for writing; it seems rather strange that these were not used, and that the names of both the dedicator and the dedicatee were shortened to such an extreme.

The dedication to *Deo Invicto Mithrae* seems clear to restore, indicating that we are in fact looking at 'an altar of Mithras'. Little else, however, in the decoration of the altar supports such a reading. The back of the altar is plain, but the front and both sides are decorated. The left-hand side (Figure 110) shows a mythical creature, thought by the excavators to be a griffin.[722] It has eagle wings and the body of a lion, although somewhat surprisingly with the addition of swollen teats; erosion has made it impossible to see whether it has talons on its front feet. It is seated upon a tapered object, identified by the excavators as a torch, but

721 Hunter, Henig, Sauer & Gooder 2016, 141. The Latin would therefore read: *D<a>eo Invict[o] My(thrae) G(aius) Cas(siu?s) Fla(vianus?)*.
722 Hunter, Henig, Sauer & Gooder 2016, 133.

which could also be a base or podium.[723] Beneath this object is a circular object with a long handle, probably a *patera*.

The right side of the altar has an even more unusual combination of images for a Mithraic altar (Figure 111). Within a rectangular frame, there is a large *cithara* with seven strings, underneath which are a plectrum, and a jug. So far, there has been little to suggest the iconography of a Mithraic object. The *patera* and jug are somewhat generic for the decoration of Roman altars; while they can appear on altars dedicated to Mithras, they by no means act as signifiers of Mithraic iconography. They are more likely to represent the activities that would have surrounded the altar as a performative object in religious practice: the pouring of libations, either of water or of wine. As mentioned in Chapter II, the inclusion of a *patera* on a Mithraic object might occasionally have been intended as a punning reference to the *pater* grade, but the ubiquity of the symbol on altars throughout the Roman world, and with any or no dedication, would seem to preclude such a reading in this instance.[724]

The *cithara* is almost unparalleled within a Mithraic context; the only other example comes from the *mithraeum* of Merida in Spain, which is itself an unusual site, to which I shall return later in this chapter. A statue from this *mithraeum* (Figure 112) shows a youthful Mercury, seated on a rock, against which leans his lyre.[725] The body of the lyre is inscribed with the following:

ANN COL CLXXX
INVICTO DEO MITHRAE

[723] Hunter, Henig, Sauer & Gooder 2016, 133.
[724] Chapter II, 118.
[725] *CIMRM* 780

SACR
C ACCIUS HEDYCHRUS
PATER
A L P

Vermaseren suggested the reading: "In the 180th year of the colony, to the Unconquered God Mithras, Gaius Accius Hedychrus, Father, made this dedication with a willing spirit".[726] At Merida, the lyre is clearly not intended to be seen as a part of Mithras' iconography; it belongs to Mercury, but has been dedicated to Mithras.[727] The Merida example therefore cannot be interpreted as a straightforward comparison to the Inveresk altar.

It is only on the front face of the Inveresk altar that we find a reference that seems to belong within the normal world of Mithraic iconography. Although this is largely dominated by the inscription, above it is a finely carved frieze; this is divided into bands of decoration, including a twisted rope design, leaves and flowers. It has a scroll top, and a small relief of a bird. There may originally have been a matching pair of birds, but the other side of the capital top was damaged, and so the design has been lost. The excavators identified this bird as a raven, a bird which, as has been described in previous chapters, has clear links to possible Mithraic practices and, seemingly, beliefs.[728] This identification of the bird seems rather speculative, and to be based mainly on an expectation that a raven is the kind of bird most likely to have been portrayed on a Mithraic altar.

726 CIMRM 781. The Latin would therefore read: *Ann(o) col(oniae) CLXXX Invicto Deo Mithrae sacr(um) C(aius) Accius Hedychrus Pater a(nimo) l(ibente) p(osuit)*.
727 For further reading on the myth of Mercury and the lyre, and its possible relation to Mithraic mythology and practice, see Romero Mayorga 2016, 199-206.
728 Hunter, Henig, Sauer & Gooder 2016, 133; Chapter II, 107-112; Chapter IV, 243-245.

Assuming that we are looking at a raven, however, then there is another god with whom the raven is commonly associated: Apollo. Once that tantalising possible connection has been made, then the rest of the iconography on the altar begins to make some kind of coherent sense. The *cithara* and *plectrum* align with the imagery surrounding Apollo *Citharoedus*. The griffin is also associated with Apollo; a griffin supposedly pulled the chariot of Apollo. The iconography seems to be pointing in the direction of Apollo, rather than of Mithras, in spite of the epigraphic evidence.

V.I.ii. Looking for Apollo-Mithras

The excavations at Inveresk uncovered an altar, covered in imagery that seems to refer to Apollo, but that has a dedication to Mithras. Is this sufficient to talk about some sort of syncretic understanding of the two gods, some sort of Apollo-Mithras? In the excavation report, Fraser Hunter, Martin Henig and Eberhard Sauer wrote:

> The identification of Apollo with Mithras in his role as god of light is readily paralleled.[729]

They provide three major parallels from Britain, of which the first two are particularly relevant, since they are also in the form of altars. Nor is an association between Apollo and Mithras unique to Britain; it is even possible, if you look closely, to discern it in the scarce literary evidence for Mithraic practice, in the famous passage from Statius' *Thebaid*, Book I:

Or Mithras, twisting the horns angry to follow

[729] Hunter, Henig, Sauer & Gooder 2016, 153.

Beneath the rocks of the Persian cave[730]

Leaving aside the thorny anachronism of Statius including Mithras in an account of the Theban war between the sons of Oedipus, it is worth questioning why he might have been included as an appropriate epithet of Phoebus Apollo in Adrastus' prayer to that god.[731] It perhaps suggests some degree of understanding of Mithras as an associate of Sol in Rome in the 80s and 90s AD, when Statius was composing his poem, and perhaps even of him as identifiable with Apollo. This notwithstanding, explicit connections between Apollo and Mithras in epigraphic or literary evidence are still rare; iconographic connections are more easily found, because both gods have links to light and the sun, to ravens, and even to archery.

The possibility of an identification between Mithras and Apollo is, however, by no means confined to the Roman worship of the god. A *stele* from Nemrut Dağı, in modern Turkey, apparently shows a syncretic formulation of several gods: Apollo-Mithra-Helios-Hermes.[732] Nemrut Dağı is not within a Roman context, and it dates far earlier than any evidence for Roman Mithraic practices. Nonetheless, it seems to point towards an understanding that a god called Mithra – who, it should be stressed, should not be assumed to be the same god as Roman Mithras – could somehow be compared to, or elided with, solar deities, and even with Apollo.[733]

730 Stat. *Theb.* I.719-20; for the original Latin, see 170 f.475.
731 See Griffith 2001.
732 For a full account of this site, see Dalglish 2017b, 128-140. Versluys 2017 also takes a material approach, using Nemrut Dağı as a case study.
733 For more on names and labels relating to Mithra/Mithras/Mihr/Miiro, see Adrych et al. 2017, 1-4; 164-166.

The Belgian classicist and orientalist, Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, described the site of Nemrut Dağı as: "a monument of Graeco-Iranian syncretism and the cult of god-kings".[734] The *hierothesion* – or holy place – on Nemrut Dağı, constructed for King Antiochus I in the first century BC, is by far the best-known monument of the ruler cult in Commagene.[735] Antiochus' *hierothesion* at Nemrut Dağı consists of a terraced tumulus; on the east and west terraces, there are five limestone statues of enthroned gods, accompanied by *stelae* showing Antiochus and these gods in an act of *dexiosis*.[736] One of these statues, identified by a Greek inscription on the rear of the throne, apparently shows a syncretic god called Apollo-Mithra-Helios-Hermes.[737] The unifying connection between these gods seems to be their link to the sun; the statue perhaps reveals the importance of the configuration of light (and dark) in the royal cult of Commagene. The decapitated head of the statue (Figure 113) was found below the terrace; it shows a beardless god in a Persian tiara.[738] Little has survived of the rest of the statue; only the god's legs can be seen, dressed in tunic and trousers. Thus far, the iconography seems predominantly eastern, despite the use of Greek names for the gods in the statue's syncretic title.[739]

The *stele* (Figure 114), showing the king engaged in *dexiosis* with a god, seems far more consistently eastern in appearance. The god is dressed in a cuirass and cloak, with trousers or a gathered tunic underneath. Again, he is wearing a Persian tiara decorated with stars, with a diadem set around its base, and ribbons hanging down to cover his ears.[740] Around the tiara is a radiate crown, with long tapering rays set on a circular disc. The god's facial

734 Duchesne-Guillemin 1978a, 188.
735 For a detailed account of the archaeological work at Nemrut Dağı, see Dörner & Dörner 1989.
736 *CIMRM* 29; 30.
737 *CIMRM* 32.
738 Humann & Puchstein 1890, 295; Adrych et al. 2017, 134-135.
739 A fuller description of the 'eastern' or 'Hellenistic' iconography of these statues can be found in Dalglish 2017b, 143-153. See also below note 741.
740 Humann & Puchstein 1890, 321-2; Adrych et al. 2017, 129-130.

features do not appear to be particularly Hellenistic; the high degree of emphasis given to the eyes seems Persian in style, especially when compared to a Hellenistic *stele* from Sofraz Köy (Figure 115), in which Antiochus I takes the hand of Apollo-Mithra-Helios-Hermes.[741] In this Sofraz Köy *stele*, the god is depicted naked, rather than in Persian dress.

The combination of four names is unique to Commagene, and in particular to the royal cult. This suggests that, rather than looking at a popular conception of divine identity and attributes, in the cases of Nemrut Dağı and elsewhere in the kingdom, we see the ideas and vision of Antiochus I. The choice of deities – or, at least, of their names – indicates that Antiochus might primarily have been interested in solar gods and solar iconography. The link to the sun is obvious for Apollo and Helios, although less so for Hermes; what is pertinent here is that Mithra was thought to have belonged to this grouping. Should we therefore work on the assumption that he was believed – by Antiochus, if by no-one else – to have strong solar connections? The radiate crown shown on the *dexiosis stele* is one of the most characteristic markers of a solar god in the Greek, Hellenistic and Roman worlds; Apollo-Mithra-Helios-Hermes wears his as a defining attribute.

The site of Nemrut Dağı dates to almost a century before the first evidence of Roman Mithras, and almost a century before Statius' *Thebaid*. Does Antiochus' interest in combining Apollo and Mithras make it more plausible that they might be combined, or – at least – not seen as entirely incompatible, in the Roman world?

741 This *stele* is now in the archaeological museum of Gaziantep, Turkey. Dominic Dalglish has compiled a table of Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes *stelae* in Commagene, which helpfully lays out the differences between the reliefs, including in details of 'Persian' or 'Greek' dress, formulations of name, and type of site (Dalglish 2017b, 147).

V.I.iii. The Rudchester altars

Hunter, Henig and Sauer's first Apollo-Mithras parallel is one of a group of five altars found in a *mithraeum* near the Roman fort of Vindobala, modern-day Rudchester in Northumberland. The *mithraeum* was first discovered in 1844, and drawings were made of the monuments by Thomas Surridge in 1853; it was then forgotten, until its rediscovery and more complete excavation by John Gillam, Iain MacIvor and Eric Birley.[742] The site certainly has the characteristics of a *mithraeum*: it consisted of a sunken rectangular nave, leading to a masonry apse, and lined with masonry benches; it therefore seems safe to assume a Mithraic context for the altars.

All five altars are made from sandstone, but vary in size and decoration; four of them are inscribed. All four are dedicated to gods with different formulations of name: one question that might be worth asking is the degree to which these could be versions of the same god, or simply a conventional cluster of associations that surrounds a god like Mithras.

Of the four inscribed altars, the first (Figure 116) was dedicated to:

DEO INVICTO
MYTRAE P AEL TI.VLLVS PRAE
V S L L M[743]

This is clearly an altar dedicated to Mithras, despite the unusual spelling of the god's name. The dedicator appears to have been a prefect, with a restored reading of: "To the

[742] Gillam, MacIvor & Birley 1954.
[743] RIB 1395; CIMRM 841. The Latin would therefore read: *Deo Invicto Mytrae P(ublius) Ael(ius) Ti[t]ullus Prae(fectus) v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) l(aete) m(erito)*.

Unconquered God Mithras, Publius Aelius Ti[t]ullus, prefect, fulfilled his vow freely, gladly and deservedly".

The second (Figure 117) has the inscription:

DEO SOLI INVIC
TIB CL DEC.MVS
CORNEL ANTO
NIVS PRAEF
TEMPL RESTIT[744]

On this altar, there is no explicit mention of Mithras; while it is certainly the case that *Deus Sol Invictus* is one of his prime epithets, this does not necessarily entail that the altar was dedicated to Mithras. The restoration simply reads: "To the Unconquered Sun God, Tib(erius) Cl(audius) Dec[i]mus Cornel(ius) Antonius, prefect, restored the temple'.

The third (Figure 118) has been the subject of several different readings by excavators, and over the subsequent years since its discovery. The fullest, and probably the most secure version reads:

SOLI
APOLLINI
ANICETO
[…]
APON[I]VS
ROGATIANVS
[…]

[744] RIB 1396; CIMRM 842. The Latin would be restored as: *Deo Soli Invic(to) Tib(erius) Cl(audius) Dec[i]mus Cornel(ius) Antonius Praef(ectus) templ(um) restit(uit)*.

It can therefore be restored as: "To Sol Apollo Unconquered, Aponius Rogatianus…". This third altar is of especial interest in the search for some kind of syncretic British Apollo-Mithras. The altar itself is not particularly fine; it is, in fact, the least decorated of the four inscribed altars found at Rudchester. Like the Inveresk Mithras altar, it has an inscription on the shaft, and then a scroll top, in this case carved with six-pointed stars. The inscription is unusual for its use of the epithet *anicetus*, which is the Greek rendering of the Latin *Invictus*. So, this altar could appear to be dedicated to a blending of Sol Invictus and Apollo.

A brief sample of some of the versions (Figure 119) indicates the extent to which the altar has eluded a secure reading. The most accepted current reading of the inscription supplies MITHRAE in the line beneath ANICETO, thus giving a dedication to Sol Apollo Unconquered Mithras.[745] There seems to be little strong evidence for adding Mithras into the formula; while Sol Invictus Mithras is an accepted epithet, a dedication to Sol Invictus alone – or, in this case, to Sol Apollo Anicetus – seems equally plausible. The space where MITHRAE is restored has been completely obliterated, and is now unreadable. So why might MITHRAE have been read onto this inscription, when it seems clear that the damage to the altar has been present since the Victorian excavation?

Perhaps one explanation is that the altar was found within a clearly Mithraic context; there can be little doubt that this space was used at some point as a *mithraeum*. Among three other altars, however, only one of which is explicitly dedicated to Mithras, there seems to be little justification for expecting to find Mithras mentioned in an altar inscription. In fact, the fourth altar is simply dedicated to DEO.

[745] *RIB* 1397; *CIL* VII 543; *CIMRM* 843.

This fourth altar is the most detailed of the finds at Rudchester. The dedication is set within a foliate wreath on the main shaft of the face of the altar (Figure 120). From this hangs a *tabula ansata* recording the name of the dedicator:

DEO

L SENTIUS
CASTUS
LEG VI D P

This is most often read as: "To the God, Lucius Sentius Castus (centurion) of the Sixth Legion set this up as a gift".[746] Beneath his inscription is a relief showing a male figure, dressed in a short tunic and facing the left, standing between two carved columns. Behind him is a bull, and he appears to be holding it – or perhaps dragging it – by the horns. This might be a reference to the impression of Mithras that we are given by the passage of Statius above; here, certainly, a figure seems to be twisting the horns of a bull.

This relief, then, might suggest that the dedication of this altar was intended to be to Mithras; unfortunately, a bust set at the top of the altar was destroyed prior to excavation, and it is impossible to restore it. The depiction of a bull does not, however, necessarily point to a Mithraic dedication. Bulls were a conventional part of animal sacrifice within the Roman world, for those who could afford them.

These four Rudchester altars provide an important parallel to the pair found at Inveresk, although perhaps not quite in the way implied by Hunter, Henig, and Sauer. Rather than reinforcing the impression that the Mithras altar at Inveresk might point towards a syncretic

[746] CIMRM 839-840; CIL VII 544; RIB 1398. The Latin could therefore be restored as: *Deo L(ucius) Sentius Castus (Centurio) Leg(io) VI d(ono) p(osuit)*.

Apollo-Mithras, they instead support the idea that altars to different gods could comfortably co-exist even within a Mithraic space. While the differences between Deus Invictus Mithras, Deus Sol Invictus, Sol Apollo Anicetus and Deus might seem quite slight, nonetheless there is no concrete reason to assume that they were all intended to refer to Mithras.

V.I.iv. The Whitley Castle altar

The second parallel suggested for the Inveresk altars is an altar found at Whitley Castle in Northumberland (Figure 121). It is made from buff sandstone, and was found in 1837 during drainage construction. The inscribed face of the altar had been extensively weathered by this point, but R.P. Wright's attempts to read it in the 1940s yielded the following:

D[E]O
APO[LLI]N[I] G
[… …] IUS
[…]
[..] C[O]H . NE[R]

He restores this to read: To the God Apollo, G(aius) of the (Second) Cohort of Nervians.[747] The letter G following APO[LLI]N[I] has traditionally been interpreted as the *praenomen* of the dedicator, but it seems equally plausible to me that the altar could have been dedicated to Apollo Grannus.[748] Whether this speculation is justified or not, the altar clearly has a strong suggestion of a dedication to Apollo, no mention of Mithras, and no Mithraic context. What is it about this altar, then, that lends itself to the search for Apollo-Mithras in Britain?

747 *RIB* 1198; Wright 1943, 36-38.
748 See also *RIB* 2132, an altar of Apollo Grannus from Inveresk; this is mentioned in greater detail on 278-279 below.

The carving on the altar is of quite high quality, and in fact much of its decoration has survived, despite centuries of exposure in a Northumberland field. Each of its four faces has a sculpted panel, with the two panels on the front and back being more elaborate. The front panel shows a semi-naked figure facing out towards the viewer. He holds a thin, stick-like object in his right hand, while his left rests on a rectangular shape. He has been identified as Apollo *Citharoedus*: the shape on the ground is his *cithara*, and he holds a plectrum. This seems to be a conjectural reading, at the very best. The object appears to be too blockish and rectangular to be intended as a *cithara*. While there may be a discernible trace of a crescent shape above it, which could be the handles, and there are faint marks of lines that could have been its strings, there are grounds for concern about the definite identification of this figure as Apollo *Citharoedus*.

The left face of the altar shows a sun god (Figure 122), more easily identifiable thanks to the halo of rays around his head. Again, he is mostly nude, except for a cloak around his shoulders; his right hand is raised, and he holds a whip in his left hand. The whip and radiate halo seem to point in the direction of an identification with Sol rather than Apollo, but solar attributes could easily refer to both.

The right panel (Figure 123) is considerably more eroded, but appears to show two male figures. The first man, facing left, holds a jug in his left hand and a cup or drinking horn in his right. He is approaching the second figure, who is slightly elevated on a platform, and is holding some sort of staff or sceptre in his right hand. This scene seems indicative of a libation; the fact that the figure on the left is placed on a platform suggests that he represents a statue of a god, rather than a more realised encounter between god and worshipper. Wright

suggested that this god was intended to represent a local version of Apollo, perhaps the Apollo-Maponus attested on several altars from Corbridge.[749]

Nothing so far about this altar has suggested a connection to Mithras, or Mithraic iconography. It is on the rear face of the altar, however, that the link has been thought to lie. This panel is perhaps the most elaborate, in terms of composition (Figure 124). In the centre of the scene is a figure, facing forwards, and standing on a platform. He is clothed in a tunic and cloak, and is holding a sceptre in his right hand. On either side of him is a torchbearer; the figure on the left is pointing his torch down to the ground, while the figure on the right is raising his aloft. These have traditionally been identified as the two Mithraic torchbearers, Cautes and Cautopates, whose images appear on Mithraic reliefs from around the Roman Empire, and frequently have statues and even altars dedicated to them. What makes these torchbearers so distinctive is their customary pose, framing the action – frequently, this is the action of the tauroctony scene itself, although in this case, the main figure is given increased emphasis by their position –, and with one upturned and one downturned torch. If we are looking at Cautes and Cautopates in this scene, then is the central figure supposed to represent Mithras?

This is slightly more problematic. Aside from the torchbearers, nothing about this figure is suggestive of Mithras. There is no Phrygian cap, the most common iconographic 'label' for Mithras, and this is clearly not the fault of erosion, because it's clear that there wouldn't have been space for anything between the top of his head and the frame of the panel. Wright put forward the possibility in 1943 that this is a scene of Mithras' rock-birth, in which he is sometimes shown without a Phrygian cap, and in which he often holds a dagger or torch.

[749] Wright 1943, 37. This seems to be a slightly fanciful idea; there is nothing to identify the god in any way, and no particular reason to assume that he is supposed to depict a local rather than classical Apollo. For the Corbridge altars, see *RIB* 1120-1122.

Aside from the convenience of such a possibility, however, there is nothing in the panel to support this. In rock-birth scenes, Mithras is usually depicted from the waist up; on the Whitley altar, the figure is standing fully upright. Rather than on a pile of rocks, this figure stands on a platform, of the kind seen on the libation panel.

The argument for a syncretic reading of the altar would say that each panel seems to show different aspects of solar divinity: Apollo, in the guise of Apollo *Citharoedus*; a straightforward Sol, with his whip and radiate halo; a libation scene – to a local version of Apollo, such as Apollo Maponus, perhaps; and finally, Mithras with Cautes and Cautopates. Why, though, should this final figure be read as Mithras at all? He is carrying a sceptre, like the figure in the libation scene; like him, he is also on a platform. This might indicate that we are not looking at Mithras at all, but rather twinned torchbearers, who iconographically resemble Cautes and Cautopates, together with a more abstract form of solar divinity.

One argument against this would be the exclusivity of Cautes and Cautopates iconography, which, although it is often found without any context, is rarely found in a non-Mithraic context. Nor does the idea that Mithraic torchbearers could be found on a monument dedicated to Apollo align with the common conception of Mithraic iconography as somehow secret and private, in keeping with its usual categorisation as a 'mystery cult'. If Mithraic sacred spaces, and the images that decorated and defined them, were as private and exclusive as Mithraic scholarship traditionally portrays them, then how could Cautes and Cautopates appears outside of a *mithraeum*?[750]

[750] On the problems of categorisation of mystery cults, and Mithraic secrecy, see Introduction, 19-21.

One possible explanation is that the Whitley Castle altar did originally belong to a *mithraeum*, and that its dedication to Apollo runs parallel to the altars already discussed at Rudchester. The examples of both Inveresk and Rudchester have indicated that there was no perception of a need for a sole focus on Mithras within Mithraic space. Another suggestion could be that Mithraic iconography was in fact less secretive than is often imagined; it is also possible that *mithraea* themselves were not exclusively preserved for the worship of Mithras, and that many gods could have been honoured within the same space.

This idea of a more fluid approach to both iconography and space is not necessarily an argument in favour of a syncretic reading; in fact, it is rather the opposite. Instead of eliding Sol and Mithras, or Apollo and Mithras, it suggests that the worship of all three could have co-existed, without the need for assimilation. Rather than conflation, we are perhaps looking at cross-fertilisation of iconographic themes.

V.I.v. A syncretic Apollo?

It might therefore be reasonable to ask why the idea that the Whitley Castle altar represents a syncretic understanding of Apollo-Mithras has been so popular.[751] In part, this may be because Apollo often appears in syncretic forms in Britain, as indeed he does elsewhere in the empire. A series of altars have been found at Corbridge dedicated to Maponus-Apollo or Apollo-Maponus; Maponus was a Celtic god, who seems to have been commonly associated with properties of youthfulness.

[751] Clauss 1990b, 163 = Clauss 2000, 156; Mastrocinque 2017, 139.

To add complexity to the picture from Inveresk, an altar was discovered in St Michael's churchyard there in the 1500s, and subsequently either destroyed or lost.[752] This altar had been dedicated to Apollo Grannus by Quintus Lucius Sabinianus, the *procurator Augusti*.[753] The association of the Celtic Grannus with Apollo is attested throughout Germany and Gaul, although this is a rare find from Britain. It might suggest that there was a particularly strong interest in Apollo in the Roman fort at Inveresk during the few years of its occupation.

This Apollo-Grannus altar from Inveresk might provide us with something of a clue to reading the Mithras altar from the nearby site of the supposed *mithraeum*. Is it possible that the Mithras altar was originally intended to have a dedication to Apollo? This would certainly explain the highly unusual iconography. Nowhere else do we find either a *cithara* or a griffin in reference to Mithras; why should they suddenly appear as attributes of a syncretic Apollo-Mithras on the borders of empire in second-century Scotland? Nor are they the kind of attributes that you would expect a syncretic Apollo-Mithras to emphasise; any such link is more likely to be based on solar aspects, rather than on the lyre.

Furthermore, the space for the inscription perhaps adds weight to this argument. There was clearly space for more writing; the lines had already been marked out for the text. Why, then, were they not used, especially since the inscription itself is so abbreviated? Is it possible that an altar had been commissioned for Apollo, and then was no longer required, but rather than wasting such a fine piece of craftsmanship, it was appropriated for a dedication to Mithras? Rather than a deliberate fusion of Mithraic and Apolline iconography

752 For a discussion of this discovery, and the apparent interest of both Mary, Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I in the find, see Keppie 2012, 29.
753 *RIB* 2132.

– difficult to argue, in any case, when the only really Mithraic image is a possible raven – we could instead be looking at the reuse of an existing object.

Hunter, Henig, and Sauer's theory of an association between Apollo and Mithras in Britain looks far less secure after even a brief run-through of the evidence than it might at first glance. There is no monument that comfortably ties together the association, or identification, of Apollo with Mithras in Roman Britain – though the worship of the two may well have existed side-by-side, even within the same space, as seems likely from the example of Rudchester. This chapter has hopefully suggested that two of the parallel cases of an Apollo-Mithras association elsewhere in Britain – at Rudchester and at Whitley Castle – are both deeply problematic. Both have dedications to Apollo, neither has any really secure link to Mithras. In fact, the Whitley Castle altar might even be seen as an exact inversion of the Inveresk altar. The first is dedicated to Apollo, but might have Mithraic iconography. The second is dedicated to Mithras, but seems to have distinctly Apolline imagery.

The third possible parallel suggested is a small statue found in the *mithraeum* at Carrawburgh (Figure 125). Richmond and Gillam, the original excavators, identified this as a mother goddess, based on the seated posture, and seemingly generous feminine proportions.[754] Hunter, Henig, and Sauer posit that, instead of a mother goddess, which would be an unusual divinity to find in a *mithraeum*, we are instead looking at a seated Apollo *Citharoedus*, holding his box-like lyre in his lap. I would argue that, although this could possibly be an Apollo *Citharoedus* as suggested, there is no reason to exclude the possibility of a goddess statuette in a Mithraic space. The head of a Minerva was found in

[754] Richmond & Gillam 1951, 30.

the Walbrook *mithraeum* in London, why, then, should there not have been space for a mother goddess in Carrawburgh?[755]

V.I.vi. Conclusions

The search for a possible understanding of an Apollo-Mithras in Roman Britain did not entirely support the idea of syncretism within Mithraic worship. Instead, it raised questions about the fluidity and flexibility of iconography and dedications, and about the likelihood of sharing spaces and conceptions of gods. The emphasis placed on syncretism by the excavators in Inveresk suggests a bias towards thinking of Mithras as an exclusive god, whose sacred space was not open to non-Mithraists. The next section of this chapter, on collecting and antiquarianism will address similar questions, from a slightly different perspective.

This is not to say that Mithras was not seen as a syncretic god, or, perhaps, as a god with syncretic possibilities. To return to Baird's understanding of syncretism, outlined earlier in this chapter, there has to be an element of conflict, or of a lack of harmony, in order for syncretism to exist. This can be seen in the fluid labelling of Mithras as Sol Mithras, or Mithras Sol Invictus – and numerous variations upon this formula – in many inscriptions and dedications from around the Roman Empire. Sol is a figure within Mithraic mythology; he seems to appear towards the end of the story of Mithras and the bull: the two gods share a meal, sometimes Sol receives Mithras into his chariot, sometimes Sol kneels before Mithras as if in supplication. The identification of Sol with Mithras would therefore seem

[755] For more on the head of Minerva, see below 291-292.

to present something of a conflict; is Sol part of the story, or is Sol Mithras himself? Solar analogies thus appears to be a characteristic part of Mithraic iconography and mythology, whether on the mountain-top of Nemrut Dağı, or on Hadrian's Wall.

V.II. Collecting gods

If the groupings of altars and imagery at places like Inveresk, Rudchester and Whitley Castle do not necessarily point towards syncretism, then what might be other potential reasons for placing them together? One answer might be the idea of collection and assemblage, on a sliding scale of religious sensibility. We should not automatically rule out a religious impulse, or theological understanding to this phenomenon, but sacred spaces could have served other purposes besides worship, and distinctions between religious, aesthetic, and identity-based motivations are difficult to disentangle in the Roman period.[756]

The idea of several gods in one space is not unknown in the Roman world; there are several temples recorded as having been dedicated to at least two deities, such as temples of Roma and Augustus, despite Livy's statement that the advice of the pontifices was that temples should be dedicated to only one god.[757] Nor is the concept entirely unfamiliar within the group of religious phenomena that have come to be known as 'mystery cults': Attis could be worshipped alongside Cybele, and Serapis alongside Isis. The suggestion that Mithras could have been worshipped in a collective with other deities is rather more unusual, especially if those deities are connected to traditional civic cult activity, rather than figures

[756] For a discussion of this in relation to mythological sculpture in sixth-century Sagalassos, see Jacobs 2016, 100: "It is now commonly accepted that these statuettes or statuary groups were purchased and displayed by both pagans and Christians (or Jews) alike, either for aesthetic reasons, as moral *exempla*, or as expressions of status, rank, and education."

[757] Examples of temples to Roma and Augustus could be found in Ostia and Athens, see also a possible example in Cassius Dio 51.20.6-8; Liv. 27.26; Suet. *Aug.* 52.

who might have been associated with Mithras in his mythology. 'Mystery cults' are characterised as secretive and closed off; we might therefore expect not to see other gods sharing sacred space with Mithras. Still less might we anticipate assemblages of gods to suit an aesthetic or eclectic taste.

This section of the chapter explores the possible reasons behind the accumulation of materials in certain *mithraea*. This general subject has received increased attention in recent years, particularly from art historians. Ideas of collectors – especially those with an educated and antiquarian interest –, reuse, and the afterlife of objects in Late Antiquity and into the Renaissance have gradually transformed modern appreciation of the reception of Greek and Roman sculptures.[758] There seems little reason, however, not to extend this further back in time, and to be prepared to encounter similar enthusiasms in the finds from *mithraea*. The four sites discussed in this section are the Dieburg *mithraeum*, the Merida finds, the statues from a possible *mithraeum* in Sidon, and the Walbrook *mithraeum* in London. There seem to be slightly different motivations behind the assemblage of objects at certain of these sites, ranging from a self-promotional creation of sacred space at Merida, to a changing – or broadening – function of sacred space in London.

V.II.i. The Dieburg *mithraeum*, *CIMRM* 1246

The Dieburg and Stockstadt *mithraea* are probably the two most famous examples from Germany of sites that contain a large number of finds, some of which are overtly linked to the worship of Mithras, and others that are less obviously connected. Manfred Clauss chose

[758] In particular, the work of Lea Stirling (Stirling 2005; 2008); Troels Kristensen (Kristensen & Stirling 2016); Amelia Brown (Brown 2016a; 2016b).

Stockstadt as his example of richness within the sculptural repertoire of a *mithraeum*; I shall therefore, for the sake of variety, describe the finds from Dieburg.[759] It was excavated in 1926, when it became part of the cellar of a new construction.[760] In form, it resembles many other *mithraea* from around the Roman Empire: it is rectangular in shape, with two *podia* running most of the length of the room. Traces of a *pronaos* remain, which suggest that it must originally have been constructed from wood; the rest of the *mithraeum* was made from stone, though only the foundation layers were intact.[761]

The large two-sided relief, showing a hunting scene on one side, and an enthronement roundel on the other, was discussed above.[762] This relief appears to have been the largest sculpture within the *mithraeum*, which therefore makes it surprising that the tauroctony scene does not appear. Nonetheless, inscriptions on both sides of the relief, as well as several side scenes on the hunting side, reveal a strong Mithraic connection. These inscriptions suggest that the dedicants were Silvestrius Silvinius, Silvestrius Perpetus, and Aurelius Nepos.[763] Several other finds from within the site are also obviously Mithraic: there is a depiction in red sandstone of Mithras' birth from the rock, in his left hand he holds a dagger, and in his right he raises a torch.[764] Another relief in sandstone has been identified as Mithras dragging the bull behind him; the head has been lost, so the main identifying feature for Mithras is no longer visible, but the suggestion is probably correct.[765]

759 Clauss 1990b, 57 = Clauss 2000, 48.
760 Vermaseren 1956-1960 II, 103.
761 Behn 1926, 685.
762 Chapter IV, 221-222.
763 *CIMRM* 1247; Finke 1927, 61.
764 *CIMRM* 1248.
765 Schwertheim 1974, 163, following Behn and Vermaseren.

A number of finds, however, seem to have little connection to the kinds of Mithraic scenes and stories that were described above in Chapter IV. There are, respectively, a relief and a statue of a *genius*: both hold cornucopias in their left hands, and make a libation from a *patera* on an altar with their right hands.[766] The relief, which is more detailed than the statue, also has an inscription on the base:

D I M
PRISCINIVS SEDVLIVS
PRIMVLVS FRATRIS
V S LL M

This has been read as: "To the unconquered god Mithras, Priscinius Sedulius and Primulus, brothers, fulfilled their vow freely, gladly, and deservedly".[767] There is also a relief showing Hercules with his usual attributes of a lion skin and club.[768] There is another inscription on the base of this relief, restorations of which suggest that it was dedicated by Petronius Perpetuus:

[D] I M
[PET]RONIVS PERPE
[TV(V)]S EX IVSSV
V S L M[769]

This dedication would be rendered as: "To the unconquered god Mithras, by his command, Petronius Perpetuus fulfilled his vow freely and deservedly".[770] The site also yielded a statue of an enthroned female figure with a child on her lap; a fragmentary relief showing a

766 *CIMRM* 1253; 1255-1256.
767 Finke 1927, 60. The Latin would therefore read: *D(eo) i(nvicto) M(ithrae) / Priscinius Sedulius / Primulus fratris / v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) l(aetus) m(erito)*.
768 *CIMRM* 1252.
769 *CIMRM* 1252; Finke 1927, 60.
770 This would render the complete Latin as: *[D]eo i(nvicto) M(ithrae) / [Pet]ronius Perpe/[tu(u)]s ex iussu / [v(otum) s(olvit)] l(ibens) m(erito)*.

woman with a diadem; and a possible Minerva.[771] There were several other finds of fragmentary reliefs, and broken altars and pottery; one of the altars, which was relatively complete, also had an inscription:

DEO XANC
TO MERCV
RIO PRISC[I]
NIVS SED
VLIVS V
S L L M[772]

This appears to be another dedication by Priscinius Sedulius, who was attested on the *genius* relief. It would be translated as: "To the holy god Mercury, Priscinius Sedulius fulfilled his vow freely, gladly and deservedly".[773] We can therefore get a picture from the Dieburg *mithraeum* that certain individuals, among whom Priscinius Sedulius appears to have been most prolific, were engaged in the worship not only of Mithras but also of other gods. The fact that the names of none of the dedicants of the large two-sided relief are repeated elsewhere in the *mithraeum* suggests that there was not one single influential individual setting up dedicatory sculptures and altars at Dieburg; the choice of different gods therefore also appears not to have been an individual decision.

V.II.ii. The Merida finds, *CIMRM* 772-797

The opposite seems to hold true for the marble sculptures found at Merida in Spain, which were discovered during between 1902 and 1913.[774] These may originally have belonged to

771 *CIMRM* 1262; *CIMRM* 1261; *CIMRM* 1260; see also Schwertheim 1974, 166.
772 *CIMRM* 1267; Finke 1927, 59-60.
773 This would give the full Latin reading: *Deo sanc/to Mercu/rio Prisc[i]/nius Sed/ulius v(otum)/ s(olvit) l(ibens) l(aetus) m(erito)*.
774 Vermaseren 1956-1960 I, 272-276

a *mithraeum*; inscriptions from the statues allow them to be dated to AD 155, and clearly point towards Mithraic activity, but do not necessarily require there to have been a Mithraic sanctuary at that date within the town. The Merida sculptures are remarkable for their variety, but also for their high quality of carving, something that is not seen particularly frequently in Mithraic art. Alongside the three statues discussed below, there are also: a possible torchbearer, although much of the arms is lost; a winged leontocephaline figure with a serpent twining around him; a naked Aion, also entwined by a serpent, with a lion's head on his breast; a male head with wavy hair, suggested to be a Serapis; a Venus *pudica* accompanied by a Cupid astride a dolphin; a second, more damaged Venus; and a statue of a semi-nude male, draped in a cloak from the waist down; a statuette of a seated god; a statue of a male, leaning against a tree trunk; statues of a man and a woman, each dressed in a *chiton*.[775]

One of the statues from Merida has already been described in this chapter: the Mercury figure, with his lyre.[776] As mentioned above, this statue was dedicated to Mithras by the *pater* Gaius Accius Hedychrus; his name is attested in inscriptions from two other statues: a standing figure thought to be Mithras, and a reclining water god, perhaps Oceanus. The Mithras statue (Figure 126) shows a man wearing a tunic and cloak, both depicted in very fine detail. His weight rests on his left leg, while his right is slightly bent in front of him. He is leaning against a support, carved to represent a rock, alongside which is a dolphin diving down into a pool of water. The head has been lost, which prevents a more secure identification as Mithras, but Vermaseren was able to see traces of a Phrygian cap.[777] On the base of the statue is an inscription in both Latin and Greek:

[775] *CIMRM* 775-777; 783-790. Many of the identifications were suggested by Paris 1914.
[776] See 263-264 above.
[777] Vermaseren 1956-1960 I, 272.

INVICTO SACRVM C CVRIVS AVITVS
ACCI HEDYCHRO PA ΔHMHTPIOS EΠOIEI[778]

This is translated as: "To the Unconquered, Gaius Curius Avitus, when Accius Hedychrus was *pater*, gave this votive. Demetrios made (the statue)".[779] An inscription was also carved onto the left thigh of Oceanus (Figure 127):

G ACC HEDYCHRUS
P PATRVM[780]

This would therefore indicate that Hedychrus was not just a *pater*, he was also a *pater patrum*, a term that has been understood to denote a more senior member of Mithraic hierarchy.[781] These three examples indicate that Hedychrus was clearly a highly influential figure within his community at Merida; whether it was at his insistence or not, his name was even included on dedications made by others, as we see in the case of the Curius Avitus inscription. His name also appears on an altar dedicated by Marcus Valerius Secundus, a *frumentarius* for the VII *Gemina* legion.[782]

Might this also hint at some sort of explanation for the assemblage of statuary found at Merida? The high quality of the sculptures speaks to wealthy donors, and to a certain degree of aesthetic sensibility. While the statues were not all dedicated by one man, they do appear to have been installed under his auspices, and perhaps with his permission. Is it possible,

778 *CIMRM* 774.
779 The original text would therefore read: *Invicto sacrum C. Curius Avitus / Acci(o) Hedychro pa(tre).* Δημήτριος ἐποίει.
780 *CIMRM* 779.
781 For a discussion of this particular example, see Clauss 1990b, 145; 168 = Clauss 2000, 137-138; 161-162.
782 *CIMRM* 793.

then, that these statues were deliberately collected, and intended for display together? The inscriptions on the three statues described all carry with them religious overtones, either through a dedicatory formula, or through the addition of the term *pater patrum*; these are not only religious identifiers, but also indicate a certain degree of pre-eminence attached to Mithraic practice. This does not mean, however, that the sculptures from Merida can only be read as religious pieces. Their place within a possible *mithraeum* in Merida could have been as much about their artistic merit as their religious significance; they do not necessarily indicate that the various gods depicted received worship equal to that of Mithras, or even that they received religious honours. It is also important to state that there may have been little distinction made in the eyes of the viewers between religious objects and *objets d'art*.

V.II.iii. The finds from Sidon, *CIMRM* 74-86

The case of the sculptures, in both bronze and marble, which were found in Sidon appears to be a parallel to the Merida example. The finds, especially a somewhat unusual tauroctony relief, are of very high quality, and one individual patron seems to be singled out as being of particular influence. There is very little secure information about the *mithraeum* from which these sculptures might have originated; the merchant Edmond Durighello wrote a description of his visit to the site, and mentions that he sent certain works of art to Paris, of which nine were known to be in Paris in the early 1880s, in the collection of Louis de Clercq.[783]

[783] Baratte 2001, 205-206; Durighello & Reinach 1888, 91-93. A recent article by Jean-Marie Saint-Jalm suggests a location for Durighello's *mithraeum*, but as yet this is only a proposal (Saint-Jalm 2013).

Three of the statues have inscriptions on their bases, which allowed for the dating of this *mithraeum* to the year 500; there has been some debate over which calendar this year corresponds to, but the most widely accepted suggestion is that of Ernest Will, who dates the site and its sculptures to AD 389.[784] The first inscription can be found on a tauroctony statue (Figure 128):

ΦΛ ΓΕΡΟΝΤΙΟΣ ΠΑΤΗΡ ΝΟΜΙΜΟΣ ΤΩΝ ΤΕΛΕΤΩΝ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΩΝ ΑΦΙΕΡΩΣΑΤΩ ΤΩ ΦΕΤΕΙ[785]

This translates as: "Flavius Gerontius, *pater nomimos* of the rites of the god, dedicated this in thanks in the year 500". The detail and quality of the carving are both very high: the sculptor has depicted the snake's scales, and the dog's fur, claws and collar. Despite this careful attention to intricacies of detail, however, the scene as a whole is somewhat unrealistic; Mithras is detached from the action, gazing over his right shoulder with an impassive expression, while the bull looks placid even as it is mortally wounded.

Flavius Gerontius appears on inscriptions from two other statues: a winged leontocephaline figure, entwined by a snake (Figure 129), and a hekateion, on which the triple goddess is surrounded by dancers (Figure 130). In each of these inscriptions, Gerontius is again described as *pater nomimos*. This term is unattested from any other Mithraic site, although there is a parallel in an inscription connected to the worship of Hecate in Tomis.[786] It is difficult to understand what *nomimos* might mean in this context; was Gerontius the *pater*

784 Will 1950.
785 *CIMRM* 76.
786 See Bărbulescu & Cateia 2007 for this term, the inscription, and its possible meanings. It is possible that the hekateion in the Sidon finds could create a link between the two attestations of the term, but I would be wary of trying to force links when the two could be entirely unrelated. Without a stronger tradition of *patres nomimoi* in the worship of Hecate, it seems more sensible to err on the side of caution and simply note the parallel.

according to custom, or specific rites, or does the term denote an honorific title? In any case, the fact that Gerontius was responsible for at least three major dedications indicates that he was a man of some influence and means. Five further statues were in the de Clercq collection: a Mithras *taurophoros*, two figures of Cautes and Cautopates with torches, and the two torchbearers again, this time with two-headed axes.

The tauroctony bas-relief from Sidon (Figure 131), made of Parian marble, is one of the most exceptional pieces of Mithraic art that has survived. The tauroctony scene itself is mostly unremarkable: Mithras, kneeling on the bull's back, stabs it behind the right shoulder; the dog leaps up towards the wound, the snake reaches out its tongue. Somewhat unusually, the scorpion stings the bull's testicles rather than grasping them between its pincers; two ravens are shown, one on either side of the scene, rather than the customary one. Where the relief stands out, however, is in its depiction of the signs of the zodiac running around the scene, the busts of the four seasons in the corners – each with an appropriate identifying emblem: Autumn, for example, has a basket of grapes indicating the vintage – and busts of Luna and Sol above Mithras and the bull. Unlike the side scenes discussed in the previous chapter, the zodiac is not separated from the main action of Mithras by any borders or framing, instead they run around the scene in what sometimes appears to be a somewhat cramped arrangement. It is noteworthy that the emblem for Scorpio is the same scorpion attendant in the tauroctony itself.

Unlike in the Merida finds, the majority of those from Sidon – with the exception of the hekateion, and the possible exception of the leontocephaline figure, although his iconography can be found in many *mithraea* – are overtly Mithraic. This does therefore indicate a more strongly religious association in the pieces; this does not mean, however,

that they were not intended to act both as objects of veneration and as some sort of Mithraic sculpture gallery.[787] In fact, the high quality of the carving might even point towards their having enjoyed this dual function.

V.II.iv. The Walbrook *mithraeum*, *CIMRM* 814

The discovery of the Walbrook *mithraeum* in London was described above, pages 156-157. At first, it was not identified as a *mithraeum*; excavators simply saw it as a Roman temple, and were unaware of its particular associations.[788] It has been dated to the mid-third century, which makes it roughly contemporaneous with the Rudchester and Carrawburgh *mithraea* mentioned in this chapter. It was the discovery of a statue head, though to be of Mithras, and recognisable from its Phrygian cap, that connected the site with the worship of the god (Figure 132).[789] The Walbrook excavation instantly achieved national fame, in part thanks to the excellent state of preservation of the main building structure, and in part because of the large number of objects recovered from the site.[790]

One group of sculptures attracted especial attention. These were found buried in two pits beneath the latest floor level of the site; it is likely that subsidence, and the poor quality of the original foundations, led to the need for worshippers to keep raising the floor of their temple, and in so doing, they often buried sculptures and other objects.[791] The head of

[787] As a parallel, we might here consider Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, which describes temples in a way that allows them to function as both site of religious reverence and ritual, and as a location for the assemblage of important religious, political and decorative sculpture. Two key works on Pausanias are Elsner 1992; 2007, 29-48.
[788] MOLA 2017, 83.
[789] *CIMRM* 815.
[790] For further reading on the excavation, and its popularity in Britain at the time, see 157 f.431 above. On the preservation of the building, see Shepherd 1998, 63.
[791] Shepherd 1998,

Mithras belonged to this group, as did a head of a female figure – identified as a Minerva – ; two statue hands, usually thought to be of Mithras *tauroctonus*; a Serapis head, bearing the distinctive *modius*; a statuette consisting of a seated male figure with a ram and tortoise, identified as a Mercury.[792] It has been suggested from the style and quality of carving, and from the material used, that all but one of these works – the exception being one of the statue hands, which is described as being a "provincial piece" – were made in Italy during the course of the second century AD.[793]

To these have been added a further group of three sculptures, which were originally discovered in 1889 during construction.[794] This group includes a tauroctony relief, dedicated by Ulpius Silvanus (Figure 133); a statue of cloaked figure sacrificing at an altar; and a water god.[795] These have been dated to roughly the same period as the first group described, and appear to have the same provenance in Italy. A pair of altars was found at the same floor level, although one of these has subsequently been lost.[796]

Thus far, the finds have seemed to be consistent with the diversity of deities seen in the Dieburg and Merida *mithraea*, as well as in other sites not described in detail in this thesis.[797] The published report suggests that the inclusion of a possible Minerva is unique among *mithraea* although, as mentioned above, there could be another example from Dieburg.[798] The statuette of Mercury, accompanied by a ram and tortoise, resonates with the Mercury

792 Shepherd 1998, 166-171. These can be found in *CIMRM* 818-821.
793 Shepherd 1998, 166-171; on the statue hand, 171. Shepherd's report suggests that the marble came from Carrara.
794 Shepherd 1998, 171-176.
795 *CIMRM* 810-811; 812; 813.
796 Shepherd 1998, 176.
797 Such as the *mithraeum* at Stockstadt.
798 Shepherd 1998, 167.

from Merida; at Merida, the god is shown with his lyre, but at Walbrook, the scene alludes to the mythological story behind the creation of the lyre from a tortoise shell.[799]

Other finds from the Walbrook *mithraeum*, however, originally appeared to complicate this picture. Archaeologists discovered a Dionysiac statuette group – consisting of Bacchus, Silenus on a donkey, a satyr, a maenad, and a panther – as well as assorted silverware, including a particularly fine silver box and strainer.[800] The assumption that these all belonged in some sense to the Mithraic use of the site led to some slightly forced interpretations; Joanna Bird suggested several uses for the strainer, such as a herb infuser "to induce a ritual hypnosis", or a container for honey, following Porphyry's comment that honey was used to purify those participating in the 'Leontic' rites.[801] Subsequent dating analysis and stratigraphical work, however, have placed the Dionysiac group and the strainer in a later phase of the building, perhaps related to Bacchic ritual and worship.[802]

Even without the addition of these objects, however, the finds from the Walbrook *mithraeum* still appear to be a somewhat eclectic combination. One question in particular springs to mind: how did these sculptures find their way to Britain? Were they imported individually, and bought or accumulated over time within the *mithraeum*, or might they have formed part of the personal collection of an individual Mithraist, who then chose to display them within his space of worship? Ralph Merrifield argues that the dating of the *mithraeum* to the mid-third century, compared with the suggested date of the sculptures to the mid-second, represents:

799 *HH* 4, lines 20-54.
800 On this casket and strainer, see Toynbee 1963.
801 Bird 1986, 49-50; Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 15. Merrifield 1998 also suggest Mithraic uses for the strainer.
802 On the Dionysiac group, see Shepherd 1998, 188-190; Toynbee 1986, 39-42; on the silver strainer, see Henig 1995, 156. On the possible Bacchic phase of the building, see Henig 1998, 230-232

> A collection of several generations that could hardly have been assembled by a nouveau-riche… it now seems most likely that the Walbrook Mithraeum was built by a Roman official from a well-established family, who had come to Britain in the course of his career and had brought his religion and his heirlooms with him.[803]

This interpretation requires that we see these sculptures as a coherent collection, and that they belonged to one family. It is equally plausible that they may have been imported by someone, and later sold and purchased by a Mithraist. Nor is it necessary to assume that the Ulpius Silvanus who dedicated the tauroctony relief was the patron who dedicated the statues and statuettes. Merrifield's version of events also intimates that the sculptures – aside from those that are overtly Mithraic – did not have a primarily religious function; they were heirlooms rather than objects of veneration. These statues could actually have been plundered from other temples around London by an acquisitive Mithraist, who thought he had the perfect space in which to display them. As we have seen from the examples of Dieburg, Sidon and Merida discussed above, it is impossible to say with any certainty to what extent the accumulation of objects within Mithraic sacred space could indicate plurality of devotion.

V.III. Conclusions

This chapter has, both implicitly and explicitly, questioned the extent to which we can continue to view the Roman worship of Mithras as a 'mystery cult'. The example of the Whitley Castle altar suggested that Mithraic iconography might not have been so secretive as we had previously imagined; the Rudchester altars indicated that approaches to dedications and naming might have been very flexible; the Dieburg, Merida, Sidon, and

[803] Merrifield 1983, 187.

Walbrook finds all point towards a comfort in allowing Mithras to share space with other gods. These cases gave the impression of an adaptable god, and adaptable worship, in which individuals could shape the appearance and decoration of a *mithraeum*, and where Mithras could conceivably have been one god amongst many. In fact, without the secure identification of a *mithraeum* in the case of the Merida sculptures, it is possible that a statue of Mithras existed outside of a Mithraic context.

The second half of the chapter – looking at assemblages of sculptures and gods – moved the discussion away from syncretism and into themes familiar from Late Antiquity: antiquarianism, and aesthetic spoliation and collection. The fact that individuals, who clearly possessed wealth and exerted influence, can be found in the cases of Merida and Sidon, gives further weight to this idea. Interest in the reuse and 'afterlives' of Classical sculpture into Late Antiquity has burgeoned over the past decade, particularly in examining reuse and spoliation in the context of Greece and the eastern Mediterranean.[804] What can be more difficult to ascertain is the original context of much of the sculpture discussed in these works; if a statue was moved in Late Antiquity – in sixth-century Sagalassos or Corinth, for example – then the archaeologist, art historian and ancient historian alike all find it challenging to ascribe an original nature to it. Mythological sculpture is a prime example: it could have been luxury art in a wealthy house, or it could have been taken from a temple or *temenos*.[805] The boundaries between 'religious' and 'decorative' art are thus blurred: Mithraic sculpture could be both religious and decorative; the one does not preclude the other, except in so far as scholars have not tended to discuss Mithraic material culture in

[804] See 281 f.756; 282 f.758 for brief examples.
[805] On mythological statues and statue groups, and their reuse in Sagalassos, see Jacobs 2016.

aesthetic terms. The assumption has widely been made that a Mithraic find indicates a Mithraic findspot – a *mithraeum*, used for ritual and religious purposes.

My suggestion, of a *mithraeum* that could act as a locale for both veneration and visual aesthetics – in terms of assemblage, and perhaps even of commission – is therefore new. This is not to argue for a reduced religious character to the worship of Mithras in the Roman world, rather, it is an attempt to broaden how we conceive of that worship, and to reframe the distinction between art historical and historical approaches to religious objects into a more malleable conception.

The subject of aesthetics in ancient art received a great deal of attention from art historians over the course of the twentieth century, but somewhat less from historians of religion.[806] The two disciplines often had very different objectives in looking at the same object: art historians might have been more interested in aesthetics and quality of craftsmanship, religious historians in meanings and symbolism. This divergence in approach was neatly summarised by Richard Gordon, who stated that when these scholars look at religious art, "incompatible perspectives simply take turns, they do not meet".[807] This idea exemplifies some of the problems caused by modern categorisations and division into disciplines; one object could be classified in entirely different ways, dependent upon who was looking at it. An art historian or archaeologist could overlook – or even dismiss – its religiosity, whereas a religious historian could be uninterested in its artistic value.[808] This is one reason why the

806 For a summary of the positions of Hegel, Gombrich, Kris & Kurz, and Kristeller on this topic, see Adrych & Dalglish (forthcoming a).
807 Gordon 1979, 51.
808 Kiernan 2016, 200: "It is only comparatively recently that Classical archaeology has started to treat sculpture as part of the ancient built environment and not just as art." See also Elsner 2007, 29: "… but in general it is fair to say that the religiousness of antiquity's religious art is skirted by the art historians and left to the experts on religion."

better integration of two such fields is so important in ensuring that religious material culture receives its due from scholarship.

Conclusion

As outlined in the Introduction, this thesis has combined historiographical analysis of themes within Mithraic scholarship with an exploration of relevant material culture. For a model, it draws upon a strong tradition in Mithraic studies: as described in Chapter I, robust exploration of existing scholarship, in close comparison with the evidence of the material culture, have previously been an important part of the field.[809] Nonetheless, this kind of account has not been attempted in recent years, in spite of the continued flourishing of Mithraic studies.

This thesis has ranged from some of the earliest scholarship on Mithras, looking at Franz Cumont's theory of origins in the first chapter, to the new trend towards using the cognitive science of religion to access Mithraic ritual and material culture. In terms of the art and objects themselves, it has covered some of the best-known archaeological sites and their finds, as well as one of the most recent excavations, the case study of Inveresk in the final chapter. Throughout this survey, it became clear to me that I would not provide one new answer to historical questions, nor emphasise one dominant methodology for incorporating this material culture into wider thematic research.

Instead, several positive strands are visible in this thesis. First, I have identified certain helpful methodologies for discussing Mithraic material culture without the weight of a

[809] These kinds of critiques are visible in Gordon 1975 and Beck 1984.

narrative or theoretical expectation. My approach might broadly be described as common-sense empiricism, in that it aims to look at the evidence more closely. Rather than starting with the material itself, I have tended to begin with established scholarship on (what might be called) theological themes: origins, membership, initiation, sacred spaces, mythology, the relationship between divinity and worshippers. I have then examined the material evidence that has most commonly been used to support each argument – such as the Sette Sfere *mithraeum* for astrological theories in Chapter III –, and assessed it to uncover the range of possible premises that it can yield.

For this reason, the contextual empiricism model discussed in the Introduction has been invaluable: it emphasises the influence that modern contexts have on research, it allows for the validity of multiple hypotheses, and it relies on both synthetic observational experience and the sustained critique of a community to verify its conclusions.[810] While, as yet, it has mainly been used in the philosophy of science, it has far broader application for those interested in epistemic integrity.[811] For a more explicitly archaeological method, I have been influenced by contextual archaeology, which argues for the rigorous analysis of the contexts of historians and archaeologists themselves (along the lines of the historiographic components of this thesis), as well as a hermeneutic model.[812] A useful model for prioritising contextual history, with a strong focus on case studies, and multi-sensory experience, has been the work of the Lived Ancient Religion project.[813]

Second, I have suggested new avenues of research, and new ways of thinking about Mithraic evidence. The most innovative of these was the case studies of assemblage and collection

[810] See Introduction, 10-11.
[811] It has also been applied to feminist theory in science; see Potter 2006, 97-130.
[812] See Introduction, 10.
[813] See Introduction, 9-10.

in Chapter V; it is an attempt to provide a precedent for thinking non-religiously about Mithraic finds, and considering them outside the confined world of the *mithraeum* itself. Building on a suggestion from Richard Gordon, Chapter IV looked to the tauroctony scene as a communicator of meaning, and as a potential point of access into certain Mithraic rituals; this is an area that would be ripe for further exploration in the future. I also identified several examples in which Mithraists appear to have enjoyed playing with ideas of sacred space: this was visible in the *mithraeum* at Marino, and in the context of caves-within-caves.

Third, I have proposed a new conceptualisation for approaching the worship of Mithras, and possibly other similar religious formulations in the Roman world: that of cultural borrowing and appropriation. A clear theme binding all the chapters together has been the visible trend in the worship of Mithras to borrow and appropriate religious and artistic ideas – and sometimes physical objects themselves – from their local environment and from other cultures. This is a concept very familiar in the art history of the later Roman world, as well as in archaeology and Late Antique history.[814] In applying the idea of borrowing and appropriation to Mithraic worship, I found the work of Elsner on spoliation to be highly influential; his article on the Arch of Constantine, and its function both as an object of different varieties of spoliation and as an object designed to display spoliation, was key in framing reuse and appropriation as innovative and antiquarian in interest.[815]

Chapter I introduced the idea of both religious and artistic borrowings. In Dura-Europos, the Zenobius relief reflected the tendencies towards portraiture on religious dedications that was evident in the city, as well as the traditional Palmyrene and Durene frontalism of

814 For a good overview of the different interests of archaeologists, historians, and art historians in approaching *spolia*, see Esch 2011 (though he here takes historians to be medievalists and historians of late antiquity, rather than of the classical world).
815 Elsner 2000, in particular 153-162.

Mithras' posture.[816] The frescoes from the Hawarti *mithraeum* may show the influence of Zoroastrian concepts of light and dark and punishment; they certainly point towards the inclusion of other gods within the space of the *mithraeum*. Other gods were also prominent in Chapters IV and V; they were apparent constituents of Mithraic mythological scenes on reliefs from Germany and along the Danube in Chapter IV, and were portrayed alongside Mithras in *mithraea* in London, Dieburg and Merida in Chapter V. Chapter III delved into the physical reuse of spaces for *mithraea*, both man-made buildings and natural caves; this in turn led into the possible Mithraic appropriation of philosophical and astrological ideas from the East.[817]

It was Chapter V, on the culture of collection and antiquarianism that can be seen in certain *mithraea*, and advocating the understanding of a Mithraic sharing of space rather than syncretism, that paved the way most completely to my conclusion. I would argue that, just as the idea of Mithraism and a universal cult has increasingly been abandoned in favour of more flexible terminology and greater variation between Mithraic groups and regions, so we should stop thinking of Mithras as a monolithic god. This is not necessarily the same as pushing for a plurality of Mithrases; I would instead suggest that Mithras was a god adaptable to different situations. Over the course of this thesis I have demonstrated how the worship of Mithras was constantly being recreated and repurposed to suit the needs and interests of Mithraists. The worshippers at Sette Sfere in Ostia appear to have been keen on elements of astrology; the worshippers in Nida/Heddernheim and Konjic seem to have placed emphasis on feasting; those along Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall wanted shared spaces for multiple gods – or multiple forms of the same one.[818]

816 Chapter I, 48 f.134.
817 Chapter III, 184-189.
818 Chapter III, 194-196; Chapter IV, 232-235; Chapter IV, 240-242; Chapter V, 257-280.

Fourth, in examining the visual material in detail, I have created a data set that has helped me to see coherence and variation across the evidence. This has, in turn, allowed me to draw attention to new details, embedded within the discussion in each chapter. Perhaps most obvious was the analysis of the two altars from Inveresk, described in Chapter V.[819] Evidence of pierced altars from around the Roman world led to a deeper contextualisation of the 'Sol altar', while a comparative survey of links between Apollo and Mithras in Britain cast some doubt on the identification of the 'Mithras altar'.

The model that I follow in this thesis – a critique of historiography, side-by-side with an examination of texts and material culture – is important, particularly at this time in Mithraic studies. There is a discernible gap between those who focus primarily on material culture on the one hand, and those who take a more theory-heavy approach on the other. Even handbooks to Mithraic studies, like Clauss' seminal 1990 book *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien*, which sets out to give equal weight to historiographic tendencies and material evidence, gives much more emphasis to the former than the latter.

On the material-cultural side, a significant strand of scholarship on Roman religion has, in recent years, focused on surveying the corpora from fairly narrow geographic limits, such as *The Bibliography of Roman Religion in Dacia*, or *Culti e Religiosità nelle Province Danubiane*.[820] Mithraic scholarship is also reflecting this inclination; this focus removes the need to provide large-scale answers to the traditional questions of Mithraic historians, and allows for Mithraic art and archaeology to be placed at the centre of research.[821] This has

819 Chapter V, 258-265.
820 Boda & Szabo 2014; Zerbini 2015.
821 See, for example, Sicoe 2014; Kloeckner 2014; Campos Méndez 2015.

gone alongside a recent enthusiasm in Eastern European countries, particularly in Romania and Hungary, to publish in their native languages rather than English or German; there is a clear movement towards localism and regionalism. Regional studies allow trends in material evidence to become apparent; this was evident in the tauroctony reliefs from Germany and the Danubian regions in Chapter IV. In this thesis, I have tended to draw the material examples used in each chapter from one geographic region – or, as in Chapter III, from two regions in order to compare sacred spaces –; this approach is intended to avoid geographical conflation.[822]

Increased localism is to be welcomed for the richness of detail that it can open up in a particular region; one of its downfalls, however, may be that it restricts more comparative attempts at piecing together evidence from across – for example – the Roman Empire. Unless the scholar or scholars in question have engaged with work from other areas, it becomes more difficult for them to argue whether something is unique to their geographical area, or whether it is connected to other trends in visual material from elsewhere. There is also a danger that certain themes, such as the idea of eclectic or highly personal collecting and antiquarianism, as discussed in the previous chapter, could be overlooked entirely.

The other major strand of Mithraic scholarship in recent years has tended to focus on theoretical methodologies – the trend towards using the cognitive science of religion stands out in this category –; this has often been multi-regional in approach, but has also frequently made little real use of material culture, except as illustration.[823] A third category has been surveys concentrated on particular historical periods, such as fourth-century *mithraea* in

[822] See Renfrew 1985, 15-16 on the importance of localism.
[823] For example, Martin 2015; Mastrocinque 2017; Panagiotidou & Beck 2017.

Rome and Ostia, or the decline of Mithraic worship in the third and fourth centuries.[824] My thesis has aimed to combine both historical theory and material culture: while the first two chapters are heavily influenced by the past 125 years of Mithraic scholarship, Chapters III and V attempt to strike a balance between historiography and archaeology, while Chapter IV looks at the subject of mythology, largely overlooked by Mithraic historians in recent years. By bringing material culture into closer conversation with historical themes, it has hopefully held these themes more directly accountable to the physical evidence.

A critique of the historiography has also allowed me to identify certain problems that have developed in discussions of Mithraic worship. This thesis does not set out to be destructive, even in the areas where it demonstrates scepticism; rather, its aim is to demonstrate the viability of other hypotheses – in some cases, new hypotheses – in addition to those that have traditionally been accepted. These are, broadly speaking, the same concerns about Mithraic scholarship put forward in the Introduction: ideas of universalism and consistency across Mithraic finds, questions about categorisation and the expectations that arise from it, and the way in which material culture has traditionally been undervalued in comparison with literary sources.

The assumption of a universalised 'Mithraism' continues to plague Mithraic scholarship, even though few would accept that it is a feature of their own work. This thesis has undoubtedly fallen victim to it several times; it is a pervasive idea, and it is almost impossible to disentangle its tendrils completely. It has perhaps been most visible in the repeated instances of the example of one *mithraeum* standing for many, itself parallel to one stereotypical tauroctony standing for all. It was notable in Chapter III, in the discussion of

[824] Bjørnebye 2007; Walsh 2016.

the Ostian *mithraea* of Sette Sfere and Sette Porte, and their astrological inclinations.[825] It could also be seen in Chapter II, in the persuasive account of initiation supplied by the frescoes of Santa Maria Capua Vetere.[826] In Chapter I, we saw Cumont's joy at finding the frescoes of the magi in Dura-Europos, and his conviction that this find must somehow support his theory that Roman Mithras was an evolution of Mazdean Mithra.[827] It was even visible in the first half of Chapter V, the narrowest section geographically speaking; it explored a case where scattered examples that seemed to speak to a syncretic Apollo-Mithras had been woven together to create a coherent account. The variation in Mithraic material evidence argues against universalism; Chapter I discussed different kinds of variation, and their importance; Chapter IV emphasised that prototypes and stereotypy – in this case, the overwhelming regularity of the tauroctony scene – are not sufficient to argue for religious uniformity or legitimation.[828]

I have demonstrated that expectations from the categorisation of Mithraic worship as a 'mystery cult', and expectations of a monolithic coherency have often gone hand in hand in older accounts. In Chapter IV, this was visible in the idea of salvation; according to Burkert, this is a conventional feature of mystery cults, and scholars were therefore looking to find it in the worship of Mithras. The discovery of a *dipinto* in Santa Prisca, apparently testifying

825 Chapter III, 194-198.
826 Chapter II, 143-147.
827 Chapter I, 54-55.
828 Chapter I, 59-61; Chapter IV, 213-214; 224-226. There is, of course, just as much variation – if not more – in the material evidence of world religions, such as Buddhism and Christianity. The problems of attempting to compare these to Mithraic worship are numerous: first, the geographical spread is much broader, which accounts for greater variation; second, their spread and success are in part thanks to scriptures, which place them in a different category from Mithras-worship (indeed, the former are securely religions, whereas the latter is not); third, both have a longer weight of history attached to their life as religions and their study. The case of Buddhist art is itself a case where text and material culture have not always been given equal weight in discussion; see DeCaroli 2008.

to salvation through the eternal blood of the bull, therefore became evidence for Mithraic salvation throughout the Roman Empire, until Silvio Panciera's rereading of the original.[829]

It is the primacy given to literary over material sources, however, that has proven to be one of the most comprehensive problems in Mithraic studies. In fact, it might almost be described as *the* problem of Mithraic scholarship. It is heavily associated with Christianising ideas about how to approach religion – through the medium of texts – and through these in turn to expect a measure of conformity and orthodoxy. The problems of relying too heavily upon texts are most closely tied into the idea of a 'normative Mithraism', discussed over the course of Chapters II-IV. The texts that seem to refer to Mithraic practice and belief are not sufficiently nuanced to represent local variations or changes over time; instead, they present a monolithic cult, without the sensitivity that a Mithraic practitioner might have included. This has been a stumbling block to several areas of Mithraic research, with the traditional conception of the 'seven grades', initiation, and sacred space being perhaps the most obvious examples. In all three cases, textual sources have dictated the way in which the Mithraic material culture has been approached, and the way it has subsequently been displayed and assessed in scholarship.

This was the main reason why each chapter looked at both historiography and material culture, comparing the two, and assessing whether both told the same story. It is too much, however, to expect visual material to tell a simple story, or one that is particularly consistent; this is not in the nature of the evidence. Material culture, as much as texts, is open to subjective readings and difficulties of interpretation.[830]

[829] Chapter IV, 214-216.
[830] On the conflict between description and interpretation, and the need for some degree of historical knowledge, see Panofsky 2012 (originally given as a talk 1931; trans. Elsner & Lorenz in 2012).

Conceptions of – and approaches to – Mithras were capable of fluidity according to location, time period, interests and community: this is surely true of many ancient gods, though it is importantly far less true of the Christian one.[831] In a sense, it is possible that Mithras – like these other gods – became whatever the worshipper wanted from him. In Hawarti he could be a god of punishment; in Merida one god among several; in Ptuj, both Mithras *taurophoros* and Mithras *transitus*.[832] Not all of these formulations had to apply consistently across the Roman Empire, or even across the same region. Perhaps one reason why answering questions about the Roman worship of Mithras has been so difficult, is that the god who was apparently at its centre is himself frequently intangible. Nonetheless, the idea of a shared god – and an instantly recognisable imagery – is the main means of uniting the various forms of worshipping Mithras.

831 For another ancient example, see the descriptions of Isis in the aretalogies of Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 11.
832 Chapter I, 73-79; *CIMRM* 1494 & 1496.

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