

# MYTHE RITUEEL VERBEELDING

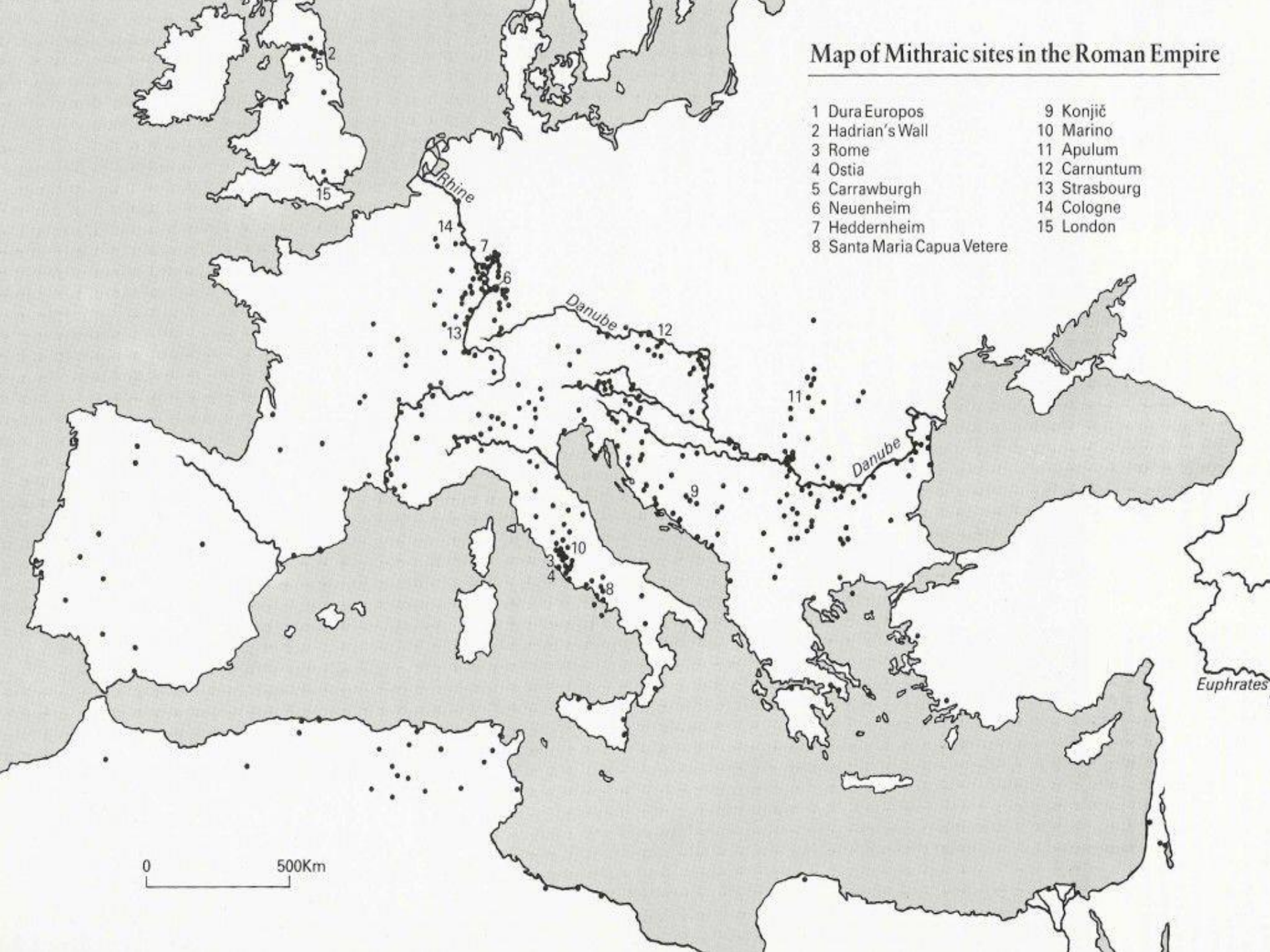
Zoektocht naar de religieuze beleving  
binnen de Mithrascultus

Dr. Lucinda Dirven  
[l.a.dirven@uva.nl](mailto:l.a.dirven@uva.nl)



## Map of Mithraic sites in the Roman Empire

- |                            |               |
|----------------------------|---------------|
| 1 Dura Europos             | 9 Konjič      |
| 2 Hadrian's Wall           | 10 Marino     |
| 3 Rome                     | 11 Apulum     |
| 4 Ostia                    | 12 Carnuntum  |
| 5 Carrawburgh              | 13 Strasbourg |
| 6 Neuenheim                | 14 Cologne    |
| 7 Heddernheim              | 15 London     |
| 8 Santa Maria Capua Vetere |               |



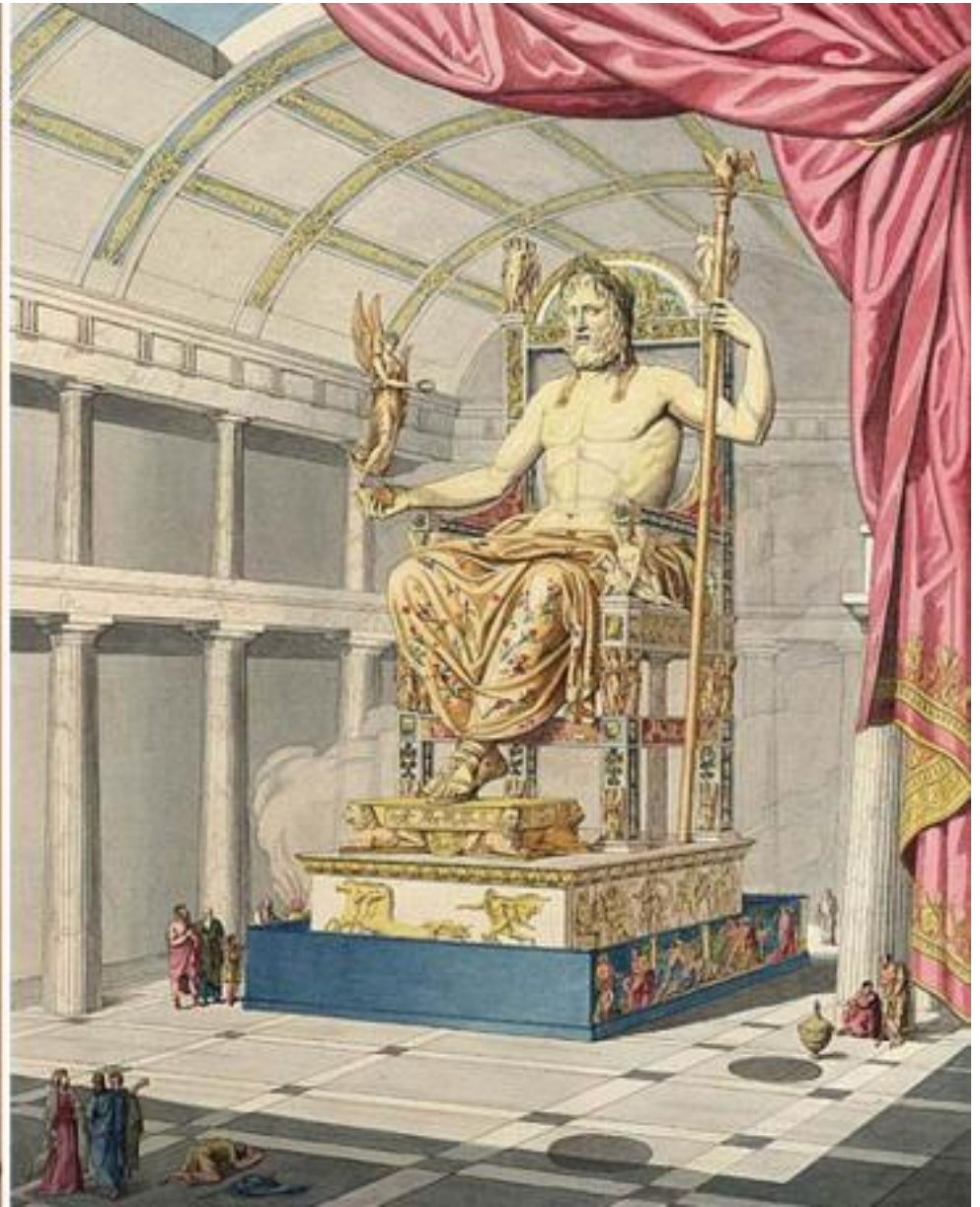






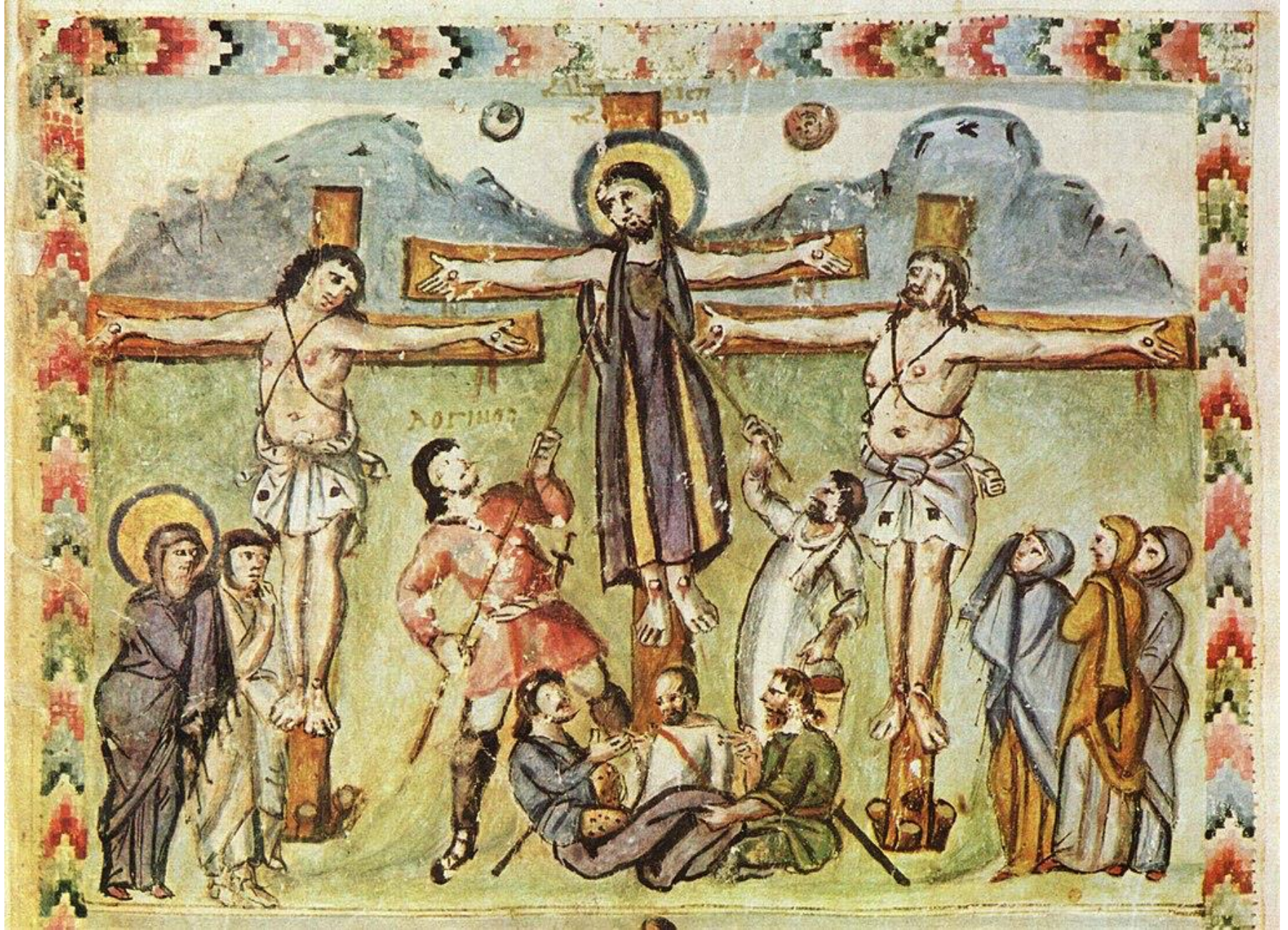
Tauroctonie, Tarquinia, begin 3<sup>e</sup> AD (?)





Griekse cultusbeelden; Athena en Zeus Olympios (naar Phydias, 5<sup>e</sup> BC)





Kruisiging van Christus, miniatuur Rabula Codex, Syrië, 6<sup>e</sup> eeuw





Christus als Goede Herder, Mausoleum Galla Placidia, Ravenna, 5<sup>e</sup> AD





Barberini, Rome





Nersae (Italy), A.D. 172





S.Marino





Sarcofaag van Junius Bassus, 359 AD (Vaticaan, Rome)



OXFORD

# IMAGES *of* MITHRA

*Philippa Adrych, Robert Bracey, Dominic Dalglish,  
Stefanie Lenk, Rachel Wood*



VISUAL CONVERSATIONS IN  
ART & ARCHAEOLOGY

2017



1. Wat is de kern van de Mithrascultus ?  
Welke elementen vinden we nagenoeg overal terug?

2. Waar komt de inspiratie voor de lokale variatie vandaan en  
wie heeft hier zeggenschap over?  
Wie bepaalt hoe een nieuw mithraeum er uitziet?

3. Hoe wordt religieuze kennis doorgegeven  
als er geen centrale autoriteit en geen heilige schrift is?  
Als de afbeeldingen geen illustratie zijn bij een bepaald verhaal,  
wat zijn ze dan wel?



Voorbeelden van lokale interpretatie van de  
Mithrascultus:

Dura-Europos, Dacie (Apulum), Rome, Huarte

Hoe verspreidt de cultus zich? Wie heeft er  
zeggenschap over het uiterlijk van het mithraeum?

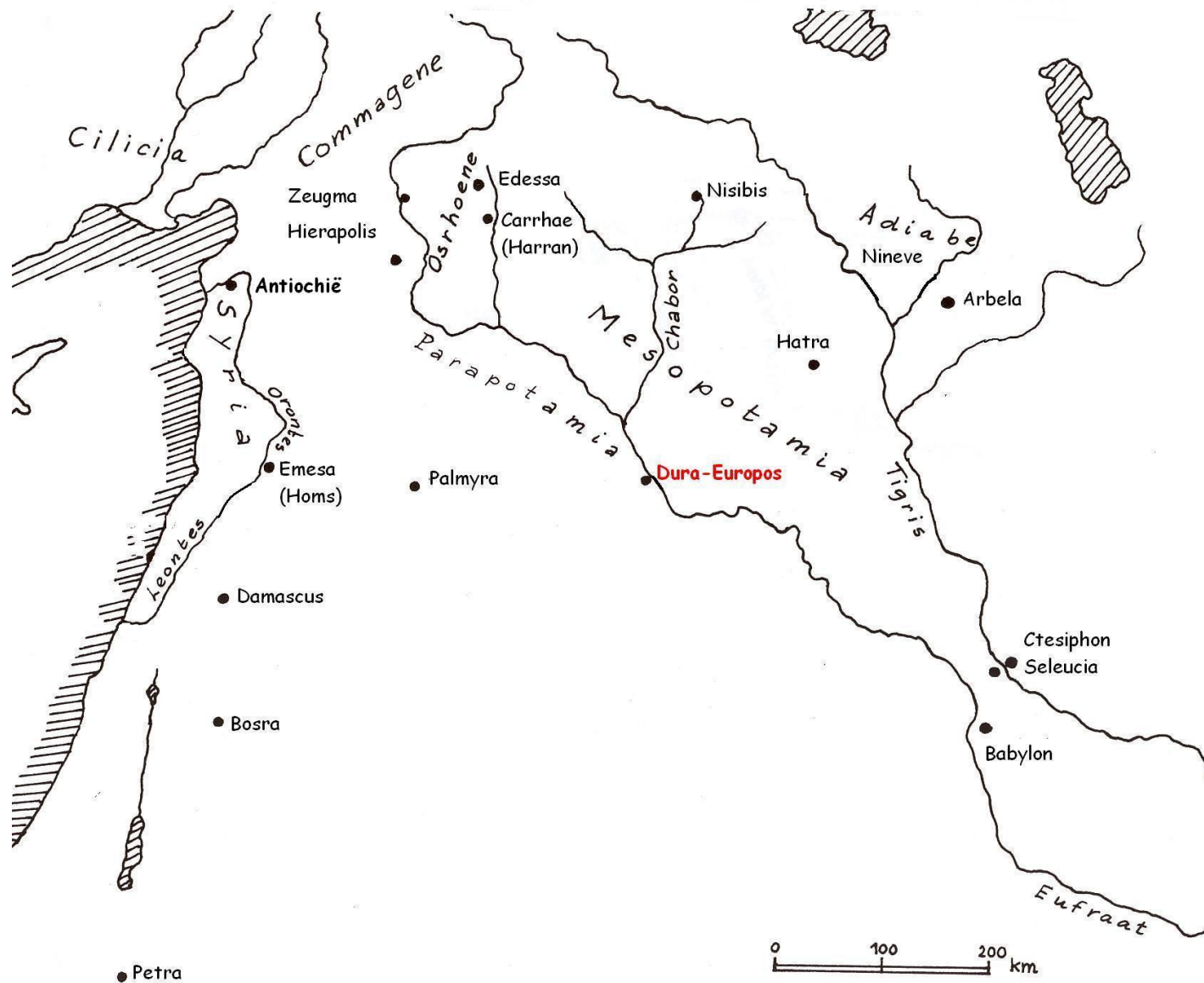
Welke functie vervullen verhalende voorstellingen in het  
mithraeum? Wat leren ze ons over de religieuze  
beleving binnen een mithraeum?



Global plus Local = Glocal

Voorbeelden van lokale interpretatie van een globale cultus







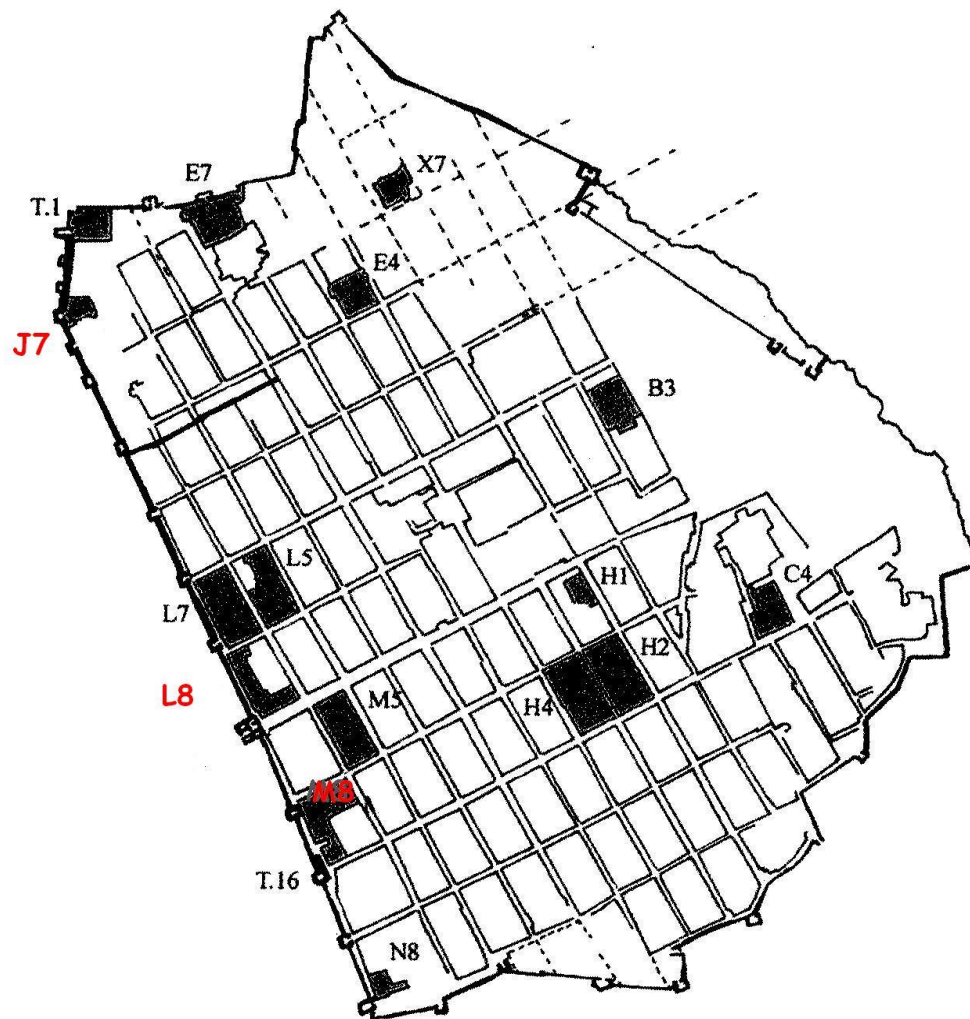
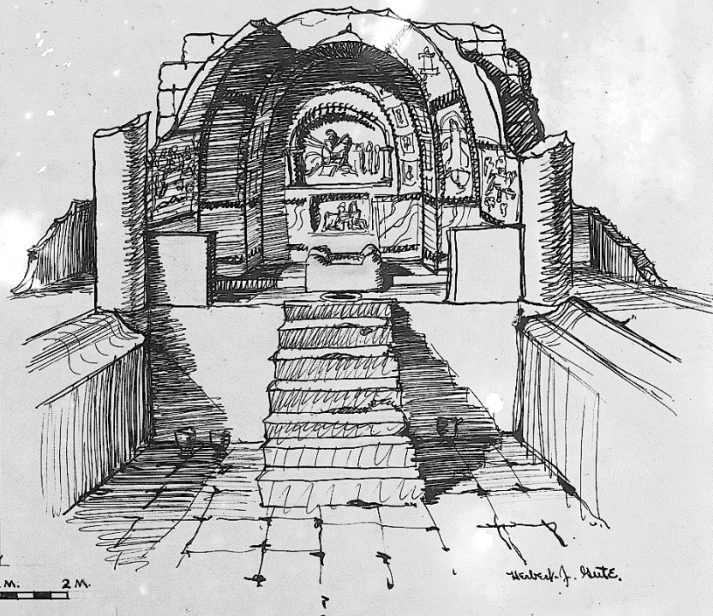
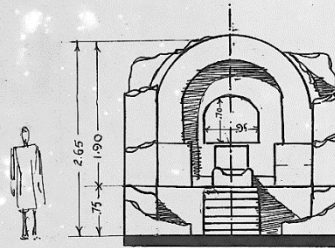


Fig. 1. City plan of Dura-Europos with cult buildings: B3-Temple of Zeus Theos; C4-Temple of Zeus Megistos; E7-Temple of Azzanathkona; H1-Temple of the Gadde; H2-Temple of Atargatis; H4-Temple of Artemis; L5-Temple of Adonis; L7-Synagogue; L8-Tychaeum (?); M5-Building of the Palmyrene relief; M8-Christian building; N8-Temple of Aphlad; T1-Temple of the Palmyrene gods; T16-Temple of Zeus Kyrios; X7-Dolichineum; The Necropolis temple, situated on the plateau about 150 metres north-west of the main gate, falls outside the map.



SKETCH · PLAN · OF · THE  
MITHRAEUM · DURA · 1934  
DRAWN · BY · HERBERT · J · GUTH.



# Reconstructie Dura-mithraeum

## Finale toestand, 240 AD



S.Maria Capua Vetere





Reconstructie cultusnis Dura-Mithraeum, Yale University Art Gallery



Dedicants sacrificing in the cave/ the mithraeum; thereby attending the mythic event

Relief Dura-Europos, 172 AD



Photo credit: Yale University Art Gallery.  
<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/>











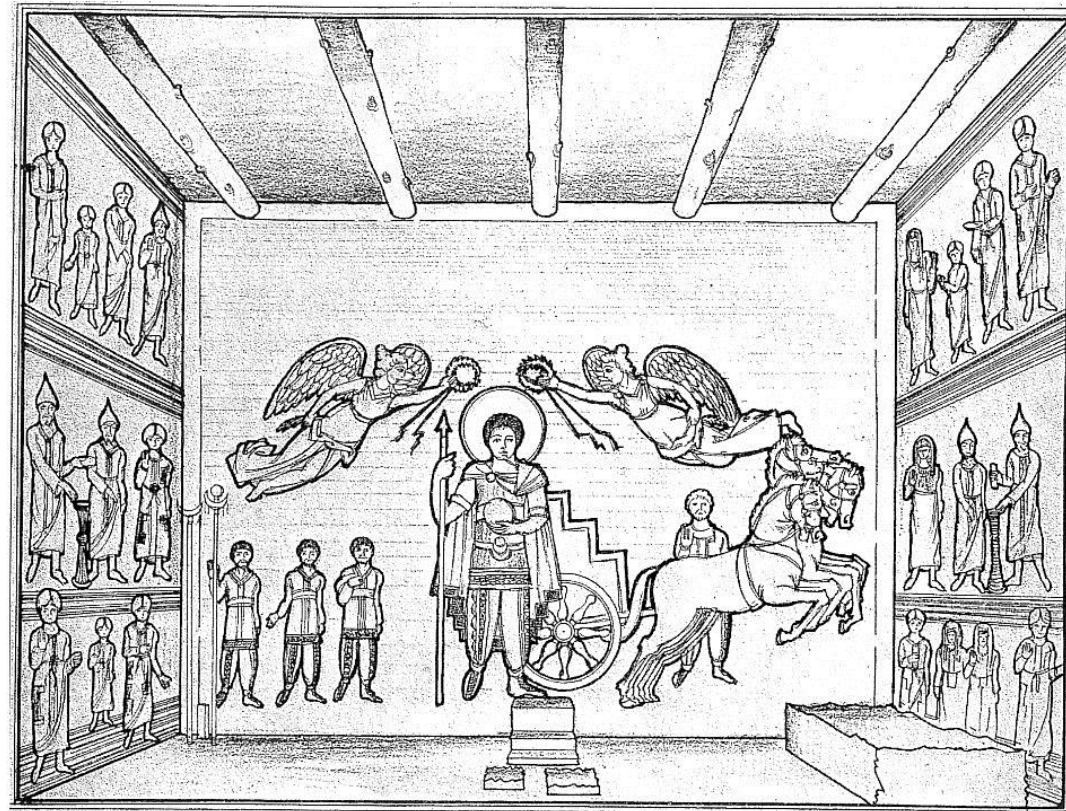








Relief gewijd aan Aphlad uit Dura-Europos 54 AD



Reconstructie van de naos in de Tempel van Zeus Theos in Dura-Europos (sic) met opdrachtgevers op de zijmuren 2e helft 2<sup>e</sup> AD





Portetten van cultus leden













Ruiter in Perzische kleding,  
mithraeum Neuenheim  
(Germania)





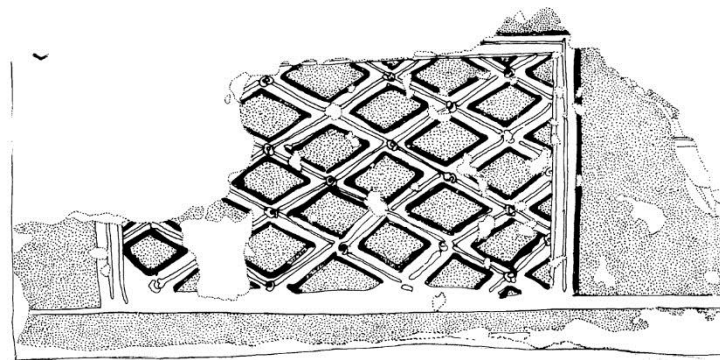




De ruitergoden Arsu en Azidu, relief uit Palmyra, 2<sup>e</sup> AD



Huarte: zuid muur: twee ruiters bewegen naar rechts



Naar wilde dieren op de  
west muur







Apulum, Dacia, tauroctone reliefs





Allard Pierson Museum Amsterdam, relief uit de nalatenschap van Vermaseren, 160-70 AD





Cincinetti, relief uit Rome





Tauroctonie, Rome Vaticaan Museum





Tauroctonie, Academia Belgica, Rome





Tauroctonie, Santa Barbara (USA), Rome









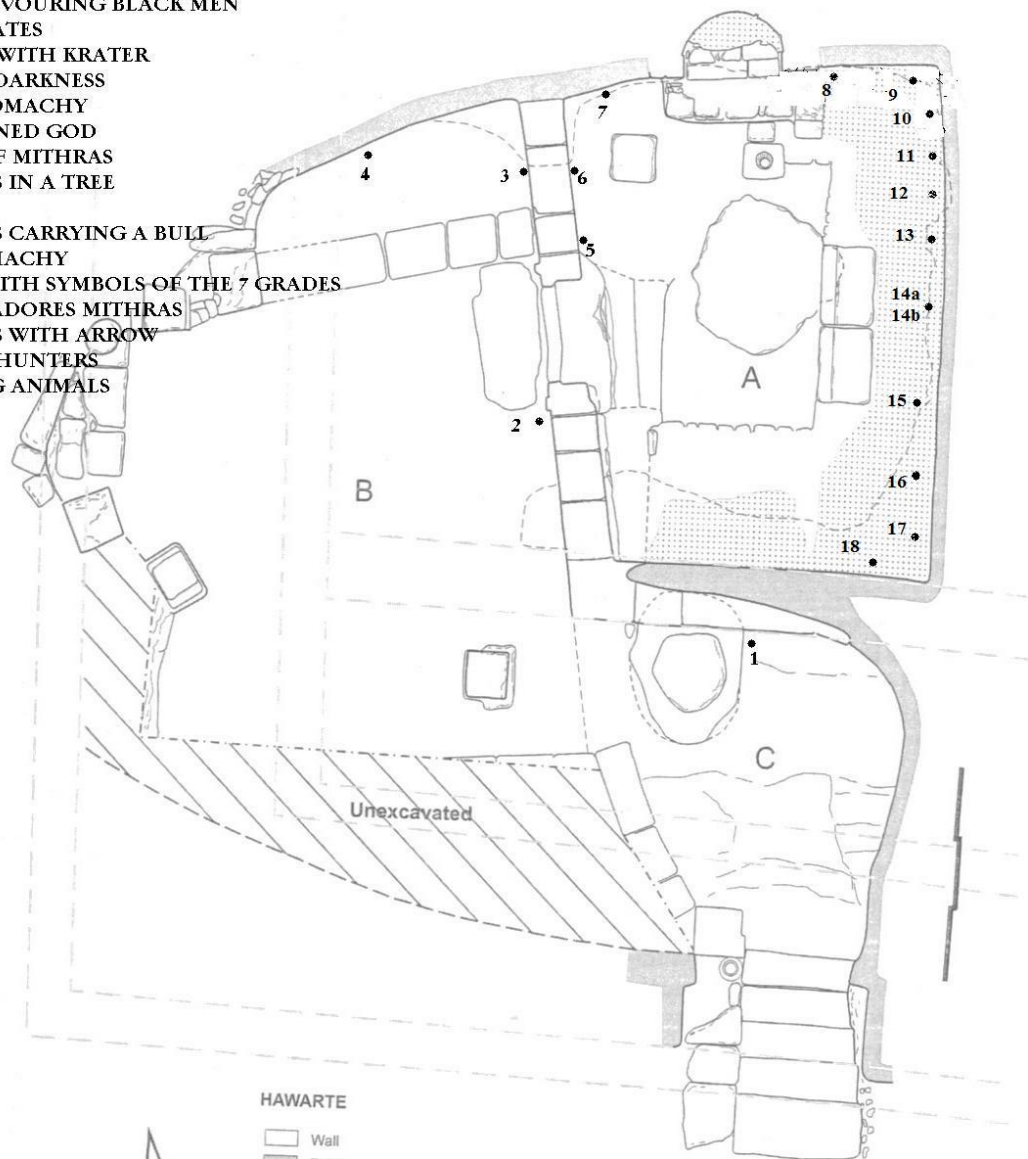




Opgravingen onder de dubbelkerk, juli 2010



1. GUARDIAN LION
2. PERSIAN RIDER
3. PERSIAN RIDER
4. LIONS DEVOURING BLACK MEN
5. CAUTOPATES
6. PERSIAN WITH KRATER
7. CITY OF DARKNESS
8. GIGANTOMACHY
9. ENTHRONED GOD
10. BIRTH OF MITHRAS
11. MITHRAS IN A TREE
12. HELIOS
13. MITHRAS CARRYING A BULL
- 14a. TAUROMACHY
- 14b. PANEL WITH SYMBOLS OF THE 7 GRADES
15. HELIOS ADORES MITHRAS
16. MITHRAS WITH ARROW
17. PERSIAN HUNTERS
18. RUNNING ANIMALS



MITHRAEUM OF  
HAWARTE





Oost muur; Mithras en de stier, tauroctonie, symbolen uit de cultus  
Tekening van Mat Immerzeel





Noord muur; nis, stadmuur (links) en scenes uit het leven van Mithras (rechts)





Oost muur; Mithras en Sol









Vestibule, oost muur. Ruiter in Parthische dracht met twee (?) zwarte figuren





Vestibule, noord muur: zwarte mannetjes worden verscheurd door leeuwen



Invloed van de eerste Vader  
en  
vasthouden aan traditie





Mithraeum van de baden, Ostia; het beeld van Kriton





Mithraeum onder San Clemente, Rome: mithraeum als grot



Gedicht Aebutius Restitutus, primus  
pater mithraeum onder Basilica S.  
Lorenzo in Damaso, Rome

*Hic locus est felix, sanctus piusque benignus  
Quem monuit Mithras mentemque dedit  
Proficientio patri sacrorum  
Utque sibi spelaeum faceret dedicaretque....*

(CIMRM 423)



Re-enactment van de mythe



Het Mithraeum is de grot waar Mithras de stier doodde

Zo ook noemen de Perzen de plaats waar ze iemand in de mysteriën inwijden een grot; hier openbaren ze hem de weg waarlangs de ziel afdaalt en weer terugkeert. Eubulus vertelt dat Zoroaster de eerste was die een natuurlijk grot wijdde aan Mithras, de schepper en vader van alle dingen. De grot bevatte de afbeelding van de kosmos die Mithras had geschapen en de inrichting van de grot verschaftte hem symbolen van de elementen en de kosmos .....

De ant. Nymph. 6 (trans. Arethusa  
edition)





Mithraeum onder San Clemente, Rome: mithraeum als grot

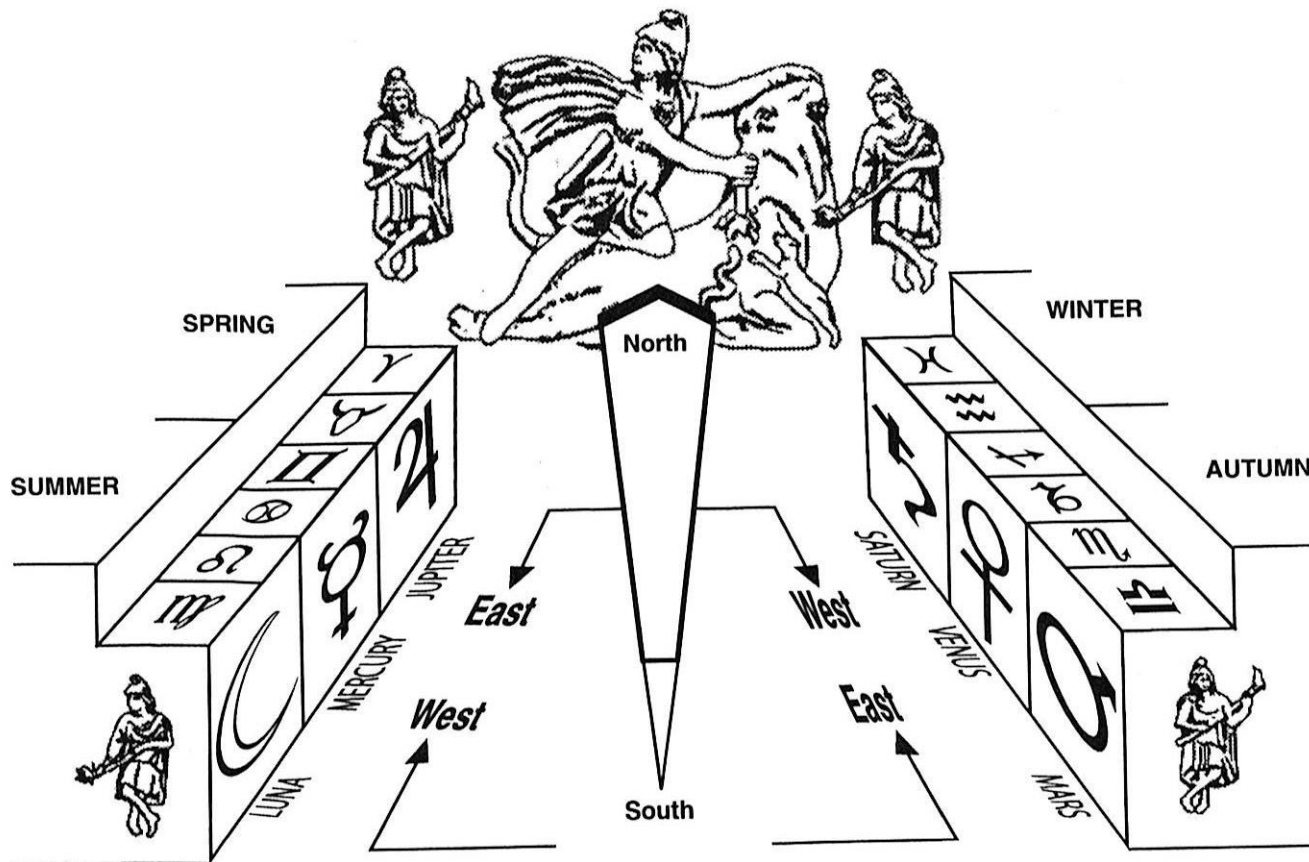


Het mithraeum als grot

Grot = Kosmos







Het Mithraeum als afbeelding van de kosmos: Sette Sfere, Ostia



Het Mithras-heiligdom als imitatie van de grot; de toortsdragers



Cautus, S. Prisca, Rome



Cautus, Sette Sfere, Ostia



Opdrachtgever en  
ingewijden zijn aanwezig  
bij de stierdoding:

Relief Dura-Europos,  
172 AD





Lamp aan het plafond  
van de grot/  
mithraeum

Landesmuseum  
Wurttemberg





Cautes & Cautopates op piededestal: Cultusrelief uit Neunheim





Relief uit Konjica (draaibaar)

Stierdoding

Banket bijgewoond door  
ingewijden







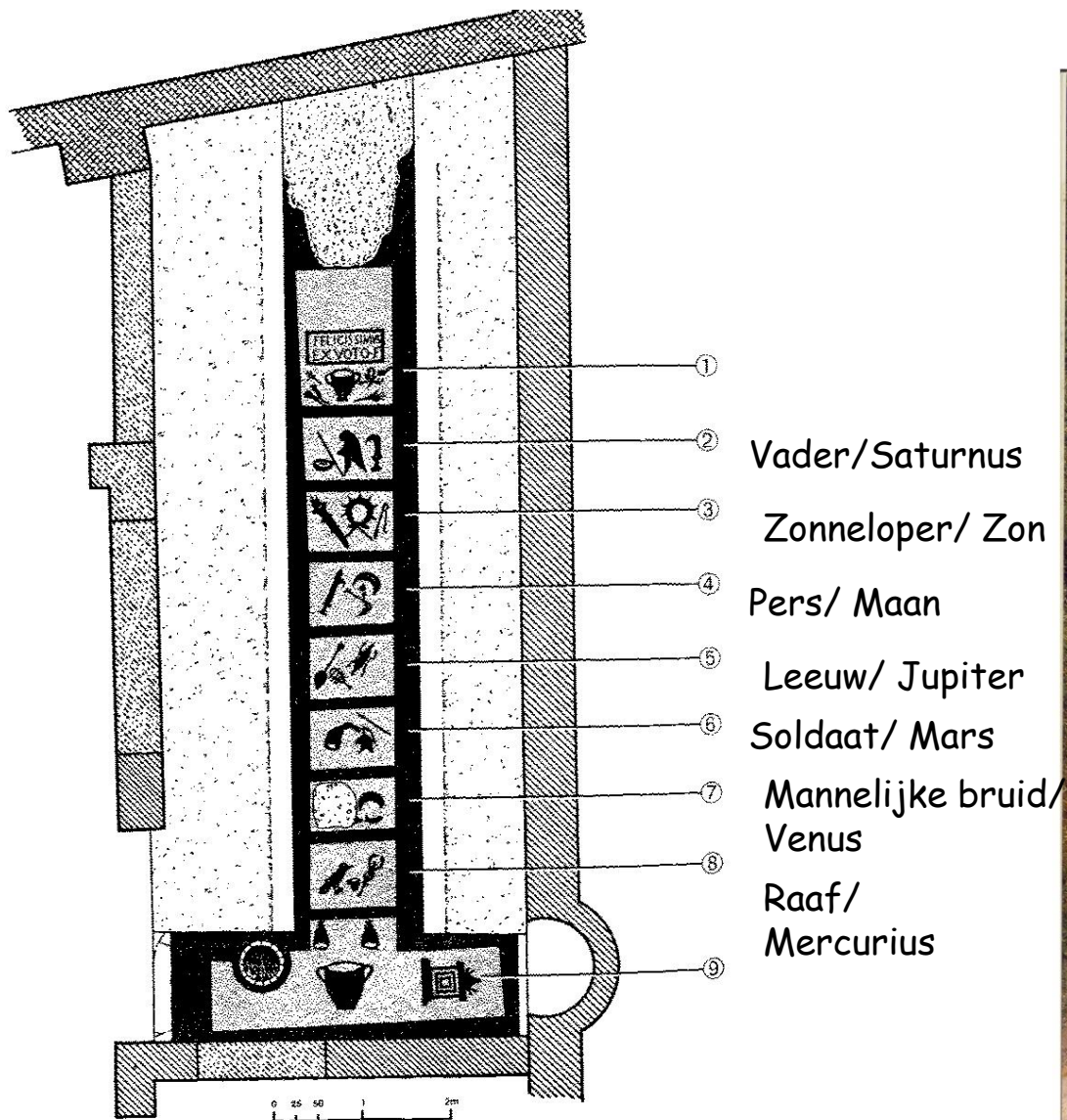
Dura-Europos    Maaltijd van Mithras en Sol





Fresco Barberini mithraeum, Rome; upper right corner: sacred banquet attended by cult members





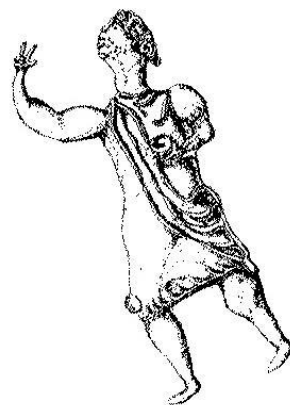
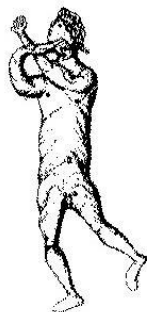
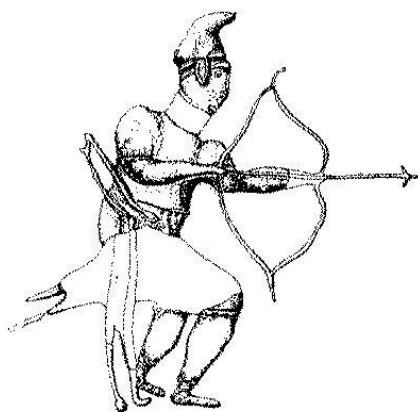
S.Felicissimus, Ostia ca. 250 A.D.

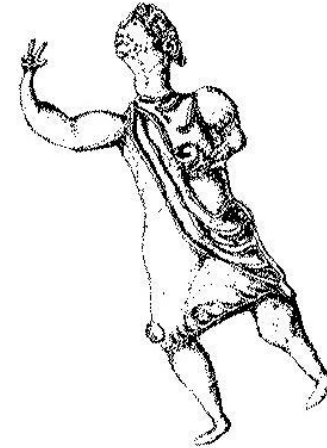
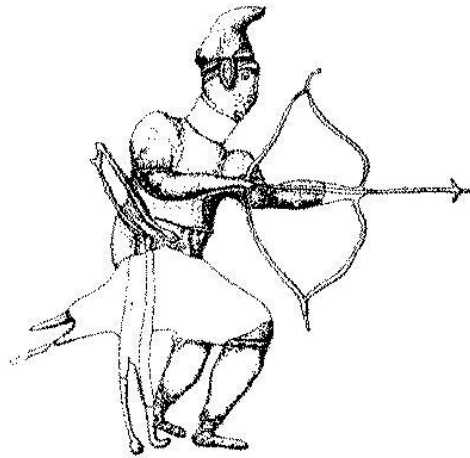




Krater Mainz



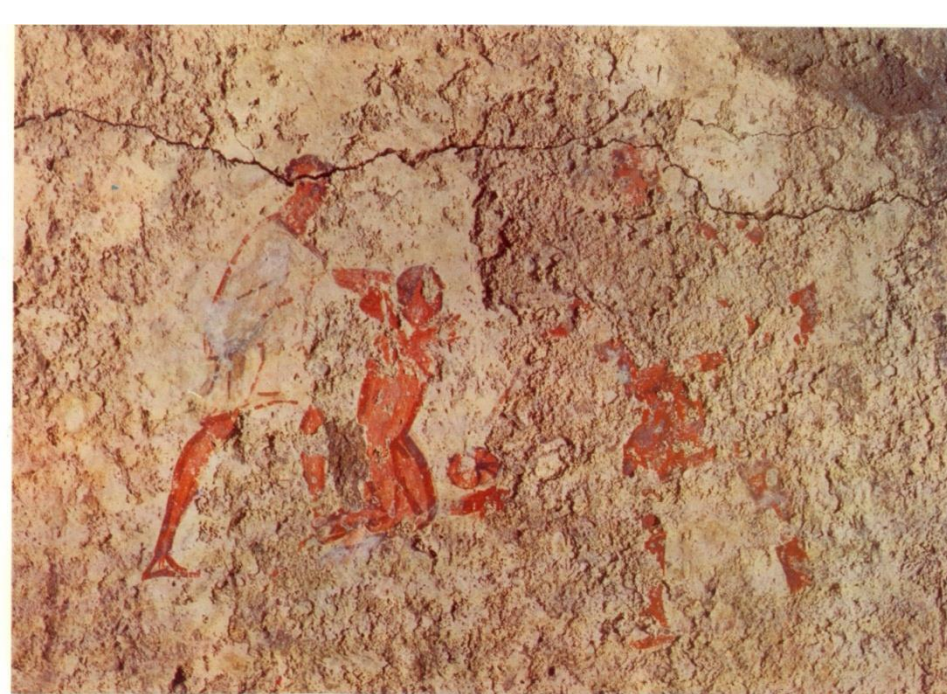




Dura-Europos

Mithras shoots water  
from the rock





S.Maria Capua Vetere

Rituals of initiation performed by  
the Father of the community







San Marino, Pact Mithras en Sol



Relief Rome  
Sundexios Pater/ Mithras en cult member





# Religion in the Roman Empire

Volume 1

No. 1

2015

Editorial 1–7

## Individual Appropriation in Lived Ancient Religion

**Rubina Raja, Jörg Rüpke**

Appropriating Religion: Methodological Issues in Testing the 'Lived Ancient Religion' Approach 11–19

**Lucinda Dirven**

The Mithraeum as *tableau vivant*. A Preliminary Study of Ritual Performance and Emotional Involvement in Ancient Mystery Cults 20–50

**Marlis Arnhold**

Male Worshippers and the Cult of Bona Dea 51–70

**Lara Weiss**

The Consumption of Religion in Roman Karanis 71–94

**Jörg Rüpke**

The 'Connected Reader' as a Window into Lived Ancient Religion: A Case Study of Ovid's *Libri fastorum* 95–113

**John A. North**

Roman Funeral Rituals and the Significance of the *Naenia* 114–133



**Mohr Siebeck**



# Religion in the Roman Empire

*Edited by* Reinhard Feldmeier, Karen L. King, Rubina Raja, Annette Yoshiko Reed, Christoph Riedweg, Jörg Rüpke, Seth Schwartz, Christopher Smith, Markus Vinzent

*The Religion in the Roman Empire* journal concentrates on original research and review articles. Submission of a paper will be held to imply that it contains original unpublished work and is not being submitted for publication elsewhere. All articles are refereed by specialists. Acceptance for publication will be given in writing. When an article is accepted for publication, the exclusive copyright is granted to Mohr Siebeck for publication in a print and an electronic version. Further information on this and the rights retained by the author can be found at [www.mohr.de/RRE](http://www.mohr.de/RRE). Please contact [rights@mohr.de](mailto:rights@mohr.de).

Please send manuscripts and editorial inquiries to:

Prof. Dr. Jörg Rüpke

Universität Erfurt

Max-Weber-Kolleg für kultur- und sozialwissenschaftliche Studien

Postfach 900221

99105 Erfurt / Germany

E-mail: [rre@uni-erfurt.de](mailto:rre@uni-erfurt.de)

## *Full Text Online*

Free access to the full text online is included in a subscription. We ask institutions with more than 20,000 users to obtain a price quote directly from the publisher. Contact: [elke.brixner@mohr.de](mailto:elke.brixner@mohr.de).

In order to set up online access for institutions/libraries, please go to:

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/register/institutional>.

In order to set up online access for private persons, please go to:

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/register/personal>.

*Publisher:* Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, Postfach 2040, 72010 Tübingen  
Can be purchased at bookstores.

© 2015 Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, Tübingen

The journal and all the individual articles and illustrations contained in it are protected by copyright. Any utilization beyond the narrow confines of copyright law without the publisher's consent is punishable by law. This applies in particular to copying, translations, microfilming and storage and processing in electronic systems.

Typeset by Martin Fischer, Tübingen.

Printed by Gulde-Druck, Tübingen.

Printed in Germany.

ISSN 2199-4463 (Print Edition)

ISSN 2199-4471 (Online Edition)

Lucinda Dirven

## The Mithraeum as *tableau vivant*

A Preliminary Study of Ritual Performance and Emotional Involvement  
in Ancient Mystery Cults

### Abstract

The so-called mystery cults invested heavily in emotional experiences in which a feeling of closeness to the divine was the ultimate goal of the initiate. The way this divine closeness was established and envisaged differed from cult to cult. The first part of this contribution discusses ritual, myth, and ritual performance in elective cults and argues that rituals inspired by the cults' sacred narrative played a crucial role in establishing a feeling of closeness to the divine. Following Paul Connerton, I argue that by re-enacting the narrative, those who take part in the cult become contemporaries with the mythic event. The second part of the article sets out to reconstruct the religious experience of the worshippers of Mithras. It can be shown that architecture, iconography, and ritual acts all played a part in actualising the mythological narrative, thereby establishing a collective identity as well as a strong and personal relationship between the individual participant and his god.

**Keywords:** mystery cults, initiation, myth, ritual performance, religious iconography, Mithras

### 1 Introduction

Lived religion, in Jörg Rüpke's sense of individual appropriation of religious traditions, has not been a popular concept in the study of ancient religions.<sup>1</sup> Since Emile Durkheim published his *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* in 1912, the focus in the study of Ancient Mediterranean religion has been on religion as a social phenomenon, a collective and public enterprise. This preference for an approach that seeks the meaning of religion in the social domain is perhaps not surprising, given the incomplete nature of our sources on ancient religion in general and personal religious experience in particular. The indifference regarding individual religious experience was

---

<sup>1</sup> Rüpke 2013.



magnified by the widely-held opinion that ancient religion was not about belief (in the Christian sense of the word) but about practice. According to this view, Greek religion, but especially Roman religion, was not so much about what people believed in, but about what they did.<sup>2</sup> Combined with the dichotomy between thought and action that is typical of our post-Reformation western world, this emphasis on ritual practice tends to turn ancient religion into a largely formal enterprise, devoid of personal emotions, that has little to do with religion as we know it today.

In much of twentieth century scholarship on ancient religion, the so-called ancient mystery cults are seen as the exception to this rule. Unlike civic or public cults, which are characterised as more detached, in these elective cults the close relationship between individual and deity is thought to be at the centre. Until recently, it was common to see the so-called mystery cults as an alternative to the traditional public cults and as forerunners, and ultimately competitors, of Christianity, in which a personal relationship with the supernatural was supposedly central.<sup>3</sup> Walter Burkert's ground-breaking study on mystery cults changed this picture fundamentally.<sup>4</sup> Not only do recent studies stress that mystery cults were always an essential element of ancient Mediterranean religion and should not be seen in contrast to public cults, no one now believes that they competed directly with Christianity.

This does not alter the fact that mystery cults invested heavily in emotional experiences in which a feeling of closeness to the divine was the ultimate goal of the initiate.<sup>5</sup> Crucial to this encounter with the divine was a ritual of initiation, which is what distinguished the mysteries from the public domain.<sup>6</sup> Non-disclosure of these rituals was fundamental, and consequently there are no literary sources that explicitly describe what went on during initiation. We do, however, have some scattered accounts and pictorial representations that express the intense feelings that accompanied the experience of initiation into mysteries. Both the literary testimonies and the pictorial representations emphasise the closeness of the initiate to the divine. The *locus classicus* is Lucius' description, in Apuleius' novel 'The Golden Ass', of his initiation into the mysteries of Isis:

2 Beard, North, Price 1998.

3 Turcan 1992, 18–21 is paradigmatic.

4 Burkert 1987, esp. 1–11, for the refutation of three important stereotypes in the study of mystery cults.

5 Waldner 2013, 226.

6 The uniqueness of this category of cult was already noted by ancient observers, who used the term *myéo* or *teleo* in connection with a personal object and the name of a deity: Burkert 1987, 8–9.

'I reached the boundary of death, and set foot on the threshold of Proserpina, and then I returned, carried through all the elements; in the middle of the night I saw the sun blazing with bright light; *I approached the gods below and the gods above face to face, and worshipped them from near at hand* (my italics).'<sup>7</sup>

In representations related to the mysteries, this proximity is sometimes visualised by the interaction of historical and mythological figures.<sup>8</sup> The Lovatelli Urn, for example, illustrates three successive events from the Eleusian mysteries and ends by representing the initiand standing in front of Demeter and Kore, touching the snake in Demeter's lap without fear. Burkert notes that this scene conceals the secret of the ceremonies by proceeding to a mythical level.<sup>9</sup> This, however, was exactly what the mysteries were all about.

The way this divine closeness was established and envisaged differed from cult to cult. Some texts suggest that the initiates identified with the object of their adoration and/or obtained divine status themselves,<sup>10</sup> whereas others seem to imply that the initiand came eye to eye with the god in an epiphany. The experience possibly even differed from individual to individual. This may be inferred from a passage in Proclus (412–485 CE), in which he describes various experiences during the mysteries (most likely of Eleusis):

'The mysteries ... cause sympathy of the souls with the ritual (*dromena*) in a way that is unintelligible to us, and divine, so that some of the initiates are stricken with panic, being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods, and experience divine possession (*entheiadzein*).'<sup>11</sup>

It is of course impossible to reconstruct the individual emotional experience in each mystery cult. What we can do, however, is investigate how the different cults set out to establish the feeling of divine closeness. In reconstructing these ritual processes we can use literary and archaeological sources for both

7 *Metam.* 11.23.6–8 (trans. Bowden 2010, 166). This passage may be supplemented by a number of other authors. Cf. the compilation in Burkert 1987, Chapter IV: "The Extraordinary Experience".

8 Other well-known examples include the frescos in the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii (Bowden 2010, 130–3) and the floor mosaic in the House of Dionysos in Sepphoris (Talgam, Weiss 2004, 17–8). The Mithraic representations discussed below belong in the same category.

9 Burkert 1987, figs. 2–5, 94–95.

10 A gold leaf from a tumulus grave in Thurii dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE states that the initiand has become a god instead of a mortal: Graf, Johnston 2007, 9. Another telling example is the ritual (of an unknown deity) described by Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanorum religionum* 22.1–4. At the conclusion of the ritual, the priest murmurs (in Greek) that the *mystai* will be saved from their travails, just like the god. For an extensive commentary tradition on this distich see Turcan 1982, 313–317.

11 *In Remp.* II 108, 17–30 (Kroll). Cf. Burkert 1987, 114 with note 161.



mystery religions and public cults. By comparing the mystery cults among themselves we may arrive at a better understanding of the similarities and differences within these cults, and a comparison with the surrounding public cults further helps to visualise the emotional experience in the mysteries.<sup>12</sup> It goes without saying that such a project far exceeds the scope of one article. In order to illustrate my point I shall therefore restrict my discussion to the encounter with the divine in the mysteries of the god Mithras.

Of all mystery cults, the mysteries of Mithras have received the least attention from the point of view of individual experience.<sup>13</sup> Since Franz Cumont started studying the cult more than a hundred years ago, the focus has been on reconstructing a belief system by decoding the symbols of the cult.<sup>14</sup> This is due in part to the material at our disposal for reconstructing the ritual practices and beliefs surrounding Mithras, who was popular in large parts of the Roman Empire from 100–400 CE.<sup>15</sup> Whereas there is a rich array of archaeological remains, consisting of cult buildings, statues, reliefs and paintings, inscriptions and an assortment of small finds, testimonials written by initiates are almost entirely absent.<sup>16</sup> All written information about the cult is provided by outsiders and hence suffers from problems of interpretation. The material remains do, however, display a remarkable degree of uniformity, and this incited Cumont and his followers to reconstruct a Mithraic canon. Nowadays hardly anyone believes in Cumont's idea of a Mithraic orthodoxy and the reality of regional variety is increasingly recog-

<sup>12</sup> The importance of public religions for understanding the mysteries (in this case of Mithras) was rightly emphasised by Klöckner 2011, 200–201. She points out that of late, some of the mysteries have become specialised fields of study, which tends to obscure the context that is crucial to a proper understanding.

<sup>13</sup> Recent exceptions are Gordon 2009 (who focuses on initiation rituals and the internalisation of these rituals) and Klöckner 2011 (an inspiring article in which the author combines the available sources in order to reconstruct the emotional experience of the participants).

<sup>14</sup> Even after Cumont was knocked off his pedestal in the 1970s and a Mithraic doctrine was rejected, symbolism reigned in Mithraic studies. In later works astrology sets the tone: cf. Beck 2006. In his most recent work, Richard Gordon distances himself from the focus on astrology: Gordon 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Although the god is attested in most parts of the Roman Empire, he was not equally popular in all regions. The cult flourished mainly in Italy, Germania, and the region along and near the north-western frontier of the Empire. Instances in Spain, North Africa and the eastern part of the Roman Empire are far more rare. For a recent and up to date map of the spread of Mithraic sanctuaries in the Roman Empire see Witschel 2013, 206–207. For an introduction into the cult see Clauss 2000 (2012) and Gordon 2012.

<sup>16</sup> The most important exceptions are the dipinti from the Mithraeum below Santa Prisca in Rome. Cf. below note 66.

nised.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that worshippers of Mithras shared a material culture that was broadly similar throughout a vast area that stretched from the Antonine Wall to the Euphrates. It is from this material, combined with literary fragments, that I shall attempt in the second part of this article to reconstruct the religious experience of Mithras' worshippers. The material evidence for this cult is particularly telling because it can be shown that architecture, iconography, and ritual acts all played their part in actualising the mythological narrative, thereby bringing the individual participant close to his god. But before beginning such an account, some preliminary methodological remarks ought to be made in order to justify the chosen approach.

## 2 Ritual, Myth and Ritual Performance

Traditionally, scholarship has tended to connect the intense emotional experience and feeling of closeness to the divine in mystery cults with rituals of initiation.<sup>18</sup> In turn, it is customary to compare rituals of initiation with rites of passage, in particular with adolescent initiation rites, where an individual – frequently in a group – goes through a highly charged, disturbing ritual, from which he or she emerges with a new social identity.<sup>19</sup>

Both the fixation on initiation rituals and the equation of initiatory rituals with rites of passage are problematic and do not do justice to the specific emotional experiences within mystery cults. Although our sources suggest that at least some initiation rituals were extremely unpleasant experiences, albeit followed by a feeling of euphoria,<sup>20</sup> these were not the only types of ritual celebrated in these cults. In Eleusis, initiation was the climax of an elaborate ritual cycle,<sup>21</sup> and in the cult of Mithras the most important and

17 On this tension between the universal and the particular in remains from the cult, see Dirven, McCartney 2014.

18 The concept was developed by Arnold Van Gennep and became particularly popular with the work of Victor Turner: Turner 1964 and 1974. For Turner's influence upon the study of ancient religion, see Versnel 1994, 60–74.

19 Cf. Johnston 2004, 105–107 (with some pertinent critical remarks).

20 Particularly revealing (and therefore frequently quoted), is Plutarch's comparison of a near-death experience with the emotions that surfaced during initiation into the mysteries: '[The soul at the point of death] suffers an experience similar to those who celebrate great initiations ... Wandering astray in the beginning, tiresome walking in circles, some frightening paths in darkness that lead nowhere; then immediately before the end all the terrible things, panic and shivering and sweat and bewilderment.' (frg. 178 Sandbach = Stobaeus, *Anth.* 4.52.49). Trans. Burkert 1987, 91–92.

21 For a description of the sequence of events, see Foley 1994, 65–71.



frequently celebrated ritual act – the communal meal – was not a ritual of initiation.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, though there are similarities between initiation rituals and rites of passage, it is important also to note the differences between the two. First, not all initiation rituals were as disturbing as rites of passage. Second, unlike rites of passage, which are a once-in-a-lifetime experience, mystery cults were not mutually exclusive, and people could be initiated into as many mysteries as they pleased. There were even some mysteries, moreover, into which one could be initiated more than once;<sup>23</sup> others (such as the mysteries of Mithras), had a grade system of initiation.<sup>24</sup> The third and most important difference between initiations into the mysteries and rites of passage, however, is the marked social component in the latter type of rituals, as opposed to the individual experience in the mysteries. Since the work of Victor Turner, scholars have tended to emphasise joint emotional experience in rites of passage, especially in the so-called liminal phase, which results in a strong feeling of *communitas* among the participants and a new social identity after the ritual.<sup>25</sup> At the centre of the mystery cults was not this communal experience, but the personal encounter with the divine. This is not to say that the concept of community was of no importance. As Angelos Chaniotis has pointed out, the shared ritual experience of initiation did establish the cult community as an emotional community.<sup>26</sup> It is, however, first and foremost the individual, rather than the group, who aims to achieve a privileged and close connection with the divine. Rites of passage do not explain how this personal relationship is achieved, nor do they enable us to retrieve the different experiences in various mystery cults.

Recently, historians who take a cognitive approach towards religion have opted for a more individual and emotional approach to the mystery cults.<sup>27</sup> Following the classification of the anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse, they

22 We know little about exactly how often Mithras's initiates assembled to celebrate the meal and if and how often this coincided with rituals of initiation. Most scholars assume that the group came together perhaps once a month to share a common meal, whereas initiation rituals were far less frequent: Alvar 2008, 361–364.

23 Cf. the three subsequent initiations (two in the mysteries of Isis, one in the mysteries of Osiris) referred to in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, Book XI. Plural initiation was not uncommon in the mysteries of Eleusis either.

24 On the seven grades of initiation in the cult of Mithras, see Alvar 2008, 364–381, with references for further reading.

25 Above, note 18.

26 Chaniotis 2012, 267–269.

27 For example Bowden 2010 (a book for a wider audience but with some thought-provoking new ideas) and Martin, Pachis 2009, with contributions on Mithras by Roger Beck and Ales Chalupa. The introduction to this volume by Harvey Whitehouse is particularly revealing. Cf. also Beck 2006, 93–94.

qualify mystery cults as an imagistic mode of religiosity that contrasts with a doctrinal mode of religiosity.<sup>28</sup> Imagistic modes of religiosity emphasise sporadic intense events that, once experienced, are never forgotten and are associated with episodic or 'flashbulb' recall. What is characteristic for this mode of religiosity is that it is non-verbal and non-dogmatic; ideas are conveyed mainly through images. Those who have gone through the ritual reflect on the experience but are unable to communicate their experience to others. By contrast, the doctrinal mode of religiosity tends to codify revelation in doctrines, transmitted through standard forms of worship that generally have a low emotional impact. Whitehouse stresses that these contrasting dynamics are often found in one and the same religious tradition, frequently among different social groups.<sup>29</sup>

The available sources do indeed suggest that mystery cults were largely imagistic in nature. Qualifying mystery cults as imagistic does not teach us anything new about these cults; nor does the category enable us to fill in the missing links in our information.<sup>30</sup> It does, however, encourage us to re-emphasise a number of well-known citations in ancient authors that state that the ultimate goal of the mysteries was an individual, personal experience, rather than a religious doctrine.<sup>31</sup> It also follows that it would be better to stop looking for a clear-cut doctrine. Seen in this light, past failures to recover these doctrines are not so much due to the secrecy of the mysteries, but to the fact that doctrine was of minor importance in the first place. This implies that in our search for the ways in which people encountered the divine, we should not focus on philosophical and intellectual ideas, but on action, enactment, and performance within these cults. It is through these actions that we may hope to recover some of the emotions of the participants.

An important insight into the actions that established the immediate encounter with the divine can be found in Plutarch, when he explains the foundation of the mysteries of Isis:

'Nor did she (Isis) allow the contests and struggles which she has undertaken, and her many deeds of wisdom and bravery, to be engulfed by oblivion and silence, but into the most sacred rites (*teletai*) she infused images (*eikones*), underlying meanings (*hyponoiai*) and imitations (*mimemata*) of her experiences at the time (*ton tote pathematon*) and

28 One may wonder, however, how 'individual' this approach really is, since the starting point is that individuals largely react in a similar (even universal) way to religious stimuli.

29 Whitehouse 2000 and 2004.

30 Burkert 1987, 69 already noted that the mysteries are unspeakable, *arrêthe*.

31 Aristotle, for example, emphasized that the initiates were not supposed to learn (*mathein*) something, but to experience (*pathein*) the Mysteries (fr. 15 Rose = Synesius, *Dion* 10 p. 48a).



so she consecrated at once a pattern (*didagma*) of piety and an encouragement (*paramythion*) to men and women overtaken by similar misfortunes.<sup>32</sup>

So according to Plutarch, Isis' own experiences were the inspiration for her mysteries, which consisted of images (*eikones*), implicit meanings (*hyponoiai*), and imitations (*mimēmata*).<sup>33</sup> Greek *eikôn* should be taken here in its widest sense, with reference not only to statues, paintings, and other images, but also to symbolic representations that take shape in the architecture of sanctuaries or other objects. In Plato's day, *hyponoia* was the regular word for what later became known as the allegorical interpretation of myth,<sup>34</sup> and it is certainly used here by Plutarch in that sense, whereas *mimēmata* is generally used to describe ritual performance based upon a mythological narrative.<sup>35</sup>

Plutarch's idea that it was a quasi-biographical narrative that inspired the different elements of Isis' mysteries accords surprisingly well with modern research, in which the close correspondence between myth and mystery cults is frequently remarked upon.<sup>36</sup> Examples include the relationship between various elements in the Eleusinian rituals and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter,<sup>37</sup> the myth of Chthonian Dionysos and initiation into the Orphic-Bacchic mysteries,<sup>38</sup> and various rituals in the cult of Isis and Osiris.<sup>39</sup> Although many acknowledge the relationship, actual research into the subject has been extremely thin on the ground. Nobody has ever assembled all the instances that attest to a relationship between myth and ritual in the

32 *De Iside et Osiride* 27, 361de (trans. Griffith 1970, 159).

33 Schuddeboom 2009, 54 points out that Plutarch uses the term *teletè* many times in various meanings, of which 'mystery' is but one possibility. He argues *op. cit.* 55 that in *Is. et Os.* 361e, the word is used in the general sense of religious ceremony, i.e. a ritual act in which secrecy is not required. This follows from the fact that Plutarch is speaking of the situation in Egypt, where Isis mysteries did not exist. Although correct, the wording does recall Isis aretologies in which Isis claims to have founded the mysteries. This has led interpreters to assume that Plutarch identified these Egyptian rites with the Greek mysteries: Griffith 1970, 390–2; Burkert 1987, 78; Beck 2006, 10.

34 Graf 1993, 184.

35 Parker 1989, 154–155.

36 Even Nilsson 1961, 469, who tried to downplay the role of myth for religion, had to admit that rituals had a pervasive effect upon mystery cults such as those of Dionysos, Meter, Demeter, Isis and Mithras. Cf. Graf 1993, 116, who cites the mysteries as one of the few instances in which myth and ritual are clearly related.

37 Foley 1994, 65. Clement of Alexandria tells of a mystic drama in which the abduction of Persephone and the wanderings and mourning of Demeter were re-enacted: *Protreptikos* 2.12.2. Cf. Richardson 1974, 24–25; Stephanus of Byzantium writes that the lesser mysteries involved 'an imitation of the story of Dionysos': Stephanus of Byzantium, s. v. *Agra*. Cf. Parker 1989, 154–155.

38 Burkert 1987, 73 lists the references.

39 Merkelbach 2001, esp. 150–174, lists numerous instances (not all of them equally convincing).

mystery cults, let alone compared the connection between myth and ritual in the mystery cults to that in public cults.

The reluctance among present-day historians to look into this connection is no doubt a reaction to the over-simplistic presentation of the relationship between myth and ritual by representatives of the evolutionistic myth-and-ritual school that flourished around the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> In its most extreme form, the myth-and-ritual school argued that every known myth originated as an explanation of ritual. In reaction, classical studies stressed the meaning of myths and minimised ritual. Hence ancient historians have tended to downplay the relationship between myth and rituals and to argue that the two are largely autonomous phenomena. According to Fritz Graf, many myths are only linked to the rituals they explain by a general feeling, a mood.<sup>41</sup> Even when the closer relationship between myth and rituals in the mysteries is acknowledged, the relationship is still generally thought to be a loose and playful one.<sup>42</sup>

Recent anthropological studies confirm that myth and ritual do not reflect each other one to one as the myth-and-ritual school argued. At the same time, however, such studies highlight the intimate correlation between myth and ritual and the way they interact in performance.<sup>43</sup> According to performance theory, the efficacy of ritual lies in its non-intellectual aspects: understanding is generated through emotional and behavioural involvement, which is brought about by the simultaneous presence of many media.<sup>44</sup> The anthropologist Stephen Hugh-Jones was one of the first to study how myth and ritual work practically in a given situation. Hugh-Jones observed myth in a performative setting and concluded that myth and ritual only obtain meaning when related to each other. In other words: 'it is in the context of ritual that the potential meaning of myth is made actual'. Myth and ritual may do something quite different when they work together in the same performative setting. Myths do not say the same as ritual, but they say more if related to ritual and vice versa.<sup>45</sup> The emotional impact of the ritual performance of sacred narrative on the participants cannot be overstated. It is by re-enacting the narrative that those who take part in the cult become con-

<sup>40</sup> On the Cambridge school and its critics, see Versnel 1994, esp. 23–48.

<sup>41</sup> Graf 1993, 113–116, with several illustrative examples. He refers to the Homeric Hymn to Demeter as one of the few examples in which an *aition* is supposed to account for all the details of the rituals.

<sup>42</sup> Burkert 1987, 77.

<sup>43</sup> An extremely useful introduction to the power of performance, with ample references for further reading; Kowalzig 2007, 43–53.

<sup>44</sup> On this phenomenon, known as *synaistheia*, see Rappaport 1999.

<sup>45</sup> Hugh-Jones 1979, 260.



temporaries with the mythic event. In an important sociological study, Paul Connerton pointed out that this accounts for the immense mnemonic power of these kinds of commemorative rituals.<sup>46</sup>

### 3 The Mysteries of Mithras

Taking my lead from Plutarch, I propose here to take the sacred narrative of Mithras as the starting point for understanding the *eikones*, *mimēmata* and *hyponoiai* in his mysteries. In the following sections, I shall first discuss the archaeological remains as evidence that a sacred story in which Mithras is the main protagonist must have been central to his worshippers. Subsequently, I shall turn to the question of how this story was important to the Mithraists and how it can be used to reconstruct the cult. I shall argue against Cumont that there was no such thing as *a* sacred story, from which we may deduce the dogma of *the* cult. The archaeological remains are far too diverse for such a hypothesis to hold. The simple reason why we cannot establish the myth and its exact meaning is probably that no such fixed story existed in the first place. We can, however, go some way to retrieving the role that the story or stories that centred on Mithras and his heroic deeds played in both architecture and rituals and from here show how the participants revived the mythical past and established a feeling of closeness with the divine, in a way that recalls Plutarch's description of the mysteries.

To judge from Plutarch's description of the mysteries of Isis, the underlying mythological narrative not only inspired the *eikones* and *mimēmata*, but was also the basis for the *hyponoiai*, or allegorical interpretation of the mysteries. Over the last thirty years, there has been plentiful attention, notably in the work of Richard Gordon and Roger Beck, for this aspect of the mysteries of Mithras, which had strong astrological connotations.<sup>47</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to repeat their important results. My argument is that allegory is yet another level or code for making sense of what is going on, but that it does not replace the more literal level.<sup>48</sup> The stress on

<sup>46</sup> Connerton 1989, esp. 41–71.

<sup>47</sup> The list of publications by both scholars on symbolism in the mysteries of Mithras is long and I confine myself here to some key publications. Gordon 1976 on the sacred geography of the Mithraeum is an important article. Beck 2006 summarizes many important conclusions from his former research.

<sup>48</sup> The Mithraeum no doubt contained various levels of meaning that were probably not appreciated by all initiates. This may be behind the remark of the church father Origen, who notes 'among them (the Persians) are mysteries which are interpreted rationally (i. e. allegorically) by the learned men, but are taken in their external significance by

the symbolic meaning of the mysteries, however, has led recent scholarship to neglect the role of the sacred narrative in establishing contact with the divine. What follows is an attempt to rehabilitate Mithras' story by arguing that it was indispensable in establishing a feeling of closeness to the divine through *eikones* and *mimēmata*.

#### 4 The Narrative of Mithras

If we take our point of departure from the archaeological remains of the cult, there can be no doubt that a sacred narrative in which Mithras was the main protagonist played a prominent role in his sanctuaries. This may be inferred from the image of Mithras killing the bull that is presented in nearly every sanctuary as the central scene in a narrative which centres on Mithras. Minor variations aside, the image of the tauroctony is more or less the same throughout the empire.<sup>49</sup> A clean-shaven deity in Persian attire kneels with his left leg on a bull and pulls the animal's head back with his left hand, while with his right he stabs a dagger in the animal's shoulder. A snake and a dog rear up, eagerly licking the blood pouring from the wound. Below, there is a scorpion grasping the testicles of the bull. The god is frequently depicted looking over his shoulder towards a raven that is approaching from the left-hand side. The scene is commonly flanked by two youthful figures that replicate the central figure, except for the upturned and downturned torches in their hands.<sup>50</sup> The event takes place in a cave that is frequently adorned by, or made of, astral symbols and that is flanked by the busts of the sun and the moon in the upper corners.

The prominent location, ubiquity, and canonicity of this scene unmistakably show that it was of prime importance to the religious experience in

---

rather superficial minds and by the common people. The same may be said of the Syrians and the Indians, and of all who have both myths and interpretative writings', *Contra Celsum* 1.12 [καὶ περὶ Περσῶν· παρ' οἷς εἰσι τελεταί, πρεσβευόμεναι μὲν λογικῶς ὑπὸ τῶν παρ' αὐτοῖς λογίων συμβολικῶς δὲ γινόμεναι ὑπὸ τῶν παρ' αὐτοῖς πολλῶν καὶ ἐπιπολαιωτέρων. Τὸ δ' αὐτὸ καὶ περὶ Σύρων καὶ Ἰνδῶν καὶ τῶν ὅσοι καὶ μύθους καὶ γράμματα ἔχουσι λεκτέον]. I follow the translation by Chadwick 1980, 15. Beck 2006, 4, translates *symbolikōs* as 'symbolically', with a reference to Chadwick, op. cit., who translates 'external significance' instead. The text is crucial for Beck's argument that the mysteries came into being via their symbols. However, it follows from the following sentence on the Syrians and Indians that *symbolikōs* refers to *muthous*, stories.

<sup>49</sup> Literature on the tauroctony is vast. Cf. Turcan 2008 for references to previous publications.

<sup>50</sup> The two frequently hold additional objects as well. On their iconography see Hinnells 1976.



Mithraic temples. Notwithstanding its omnipresence, however, it is not clear how exactly it functioned in the practice of the cult.<sup>51</sup> What is important in the present discussion is that the scene is frequently at the centre of a sacred narrative pertaining to the god and his heroic deeds. This follows from the smaller scenes that are often arranged in strips on two, three, or four sides of the tauroctony and that depict events leading up to the battle as well as events following it. This confirms that regardless of all other possible roles, the tauroctony is definitely an element of a sacred story.

In contrast to the tauroctony, which is consistently represented in essentially the same manner, the surrounding scenes vary as to the choice, sequence, and number of scenes in each relief. In a profound study of these scenes, Richard Gordon counted forty-seven side scenes, and this number has since increased due to new discoveries.<sup>52</sup> Although the number and choice of the small scenes varies with each monument and not all episodes are easy to understand, they may be roughly divided into four themes, which by and large represent events that revolve around the killing of the bull: events before Mithras' birth, events from his early life, events leading up to the killing of the bull, and episodes that follow from the kill and involve Sol.<sup>53</sup> There are ten side scenes, from various of these groups, that appear more frequently than others.<sup>54</sup> In the first group, illustrating events preced-

51 In all probability, the scene had various levels of meaning that need not concern us here since our focus is on the narrative. Roger Beck rightly points out that there is a lot of astrological symbolism in this scene; bull, snake, dog, scorpion, raven – nearly all elements have or might have an astronomical or cosmological significance. But this was by no means its only meaning, nor is it necessary to argue with Beck 2006, 25 that it was the most important one. On the tauroctony as a theophany, see Zwirn 1989, who criticizes the over-symbolic interpretation of the narrative advanced by Gordon in his 1976 article.

52 Gordon 1980a, esp. 203–204 and 211. Cf. Beck 2006, 25. The most important new discoveries are a Mithraic relief now in Jerusalem: de Jong 2000, and the paintings in the Mithraeum at Huarte: Gawlikowski 2007. The latter instance is, in my view, an exception to the corpus because it presents us with new scenes that probably derive from another religious tradition. Cf. below, note 63.

53 This is not to say that there was a fixed reading order in the narrative cycle on the monuments. Richard Gordon convincingly points out that it is impossible to establish any such order. But this does not alter the fact that we may distinguish sequences of events that logically follow from each other. The banquet of Mithras and Sol, for example, logically follows the slaying of the bull. In my view, the actual placement of scenes in reliefs does not contradict the idea that there was a narrative sequence in the story of Mithras. What is it does show is that telling the story through images was not the prime objective of these monuments.

54 Gordon 2012, col. 977. Gordon counts nine scenes and distinguishes three groups for he takes events from Mithras' youth and the killing of the bull as one group. The classification in four groups proposed above derives from Zwirn 1989. Cf. Merkelbach 1984, figs

ing the birth of Mithras, Jupiter's slaying of the giants and the sleeping Saturn are particularly frequent. Popular scenes from Mithras' early life include his birth from a rock and him shooting water out of the rock. In the group that centres on Mithras' dealings with the bull, Mithras riding the animal and dragging it to its place of sacrifice (*transitus dei*) are the most frequent scenes. In the fourth and final group of events, those that take place after the tauroctony, we find Mithras' subjection of Sol, the banquet of Mithras and Sol, the pact of Mithras and Sol (*dextrarum iunctio*), and Mithras entering Sol's quadriga.

Although there can be no doubt that a narrative was of prime importance in Mithraic sanctuaries, it is by no means certain how we should interpret the visual evidence, and what role we should ascribe to these *eikones* in the cult. Since there is no relevant narrative in contemporary literary sources, Franz Cumont, the founder of the modern study of the mysteries, set out to reconstruct the myth on the basis of iconographic material found in Mithraea, which he interpreted in the light of the sacred books of Persian Zoroastrianism. By combining all extant representations – and he was the first to assemble these in a corpus of the monuments – he arrived at a prototype of a narrative cycle that was the illustration of a canonical myth. Subsequently, he used this canonical myth as a means of reconstructing Mithraic doctrine. Apart from the Iranian character of the story, which is now almost universally dismissed, two major objections can be made against Cumont's reconstruction.<sup>55</sup> Cumont presupposes there was a canonical story that was illustrated by numerous scenes. He also assumes that all viewers were familiar with this story, which enabled them to read individual monuments accordingly. The available evidence does not substantiate either of these suppositions.

It is clear that Cumont's hypothesis is based on assumptions derived from the character and functioning of Christian art, in which we find illustrations of a single, unalterable text that are designed to communicate this text to the viewer; the primary intention behind such illustrations is to instruct those who are unable to read the text itself.<sup>56</sup> Since the *communis opinio* today is

---

46, 48, 61, 77, 89, 90, 97, 121, 133, 156, 157, 158 (after Gordon). I take the *dextrarum iunctio* as a tenth scene that is attested fairly frequently (seven instances). Cf. the list in Gordon 1980a, 216. Possibly, the scene in which Mithras and Sol stand before an altar while carrying a spits is a variation on this scene, since the scene is once fused with the *dextrarum iunctio* (CIMRM 650 from Nersae).

55 On Cumont's theory and the arguments brought forward against it, see Gordon 1975 and Beck 1984.

56 Cumont remarked '... il faudra attendre pour retrouver une tentative analogue, les longues compositions dont les mosaïstes chrétiens décoreront les parois des églises'. Cumont 1913, 230.



that no such sacred, canonical text ever existed in the cult of Mithras, we consequently have to abandon the idea that Mithraic images are illustrations to such a text, let alone that they testify to a Mithraic dogma.

Nevertheless, though the story is not fixed, this does not mean that anything goes, for the actors and animals that figure in the various versions of this story are remarkably consistent.<sup>57</sup> This implies that, together with the visual experience and culturally determined preconditions of the viewer, even unique or very rare scenes could be understood and incorporated into the narrative.<sup>58</sup> A telling example can be found in a fairly recently published relief that is now in Jerusalem. In the lower left-hand corner, we see the unique representation of two figures in Persian dress carrying a large cauldron between them on a pole.<sup>59</sup> Despite the fact that this is the sole instance of such a scene, the figures' clothing and headdress allow them to be identified as the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates. The two brothers frequently assist Mithras at important moments in his life, such as his birth, shooting water from the rock, the killing of the bull, or his sacred repast with Sol.<sup>60</sup> The cauldron they are carrying must refer to the sacred repast, in which they are frequently represented as serving Mithras and Sol. So the Jerusalem relief represents Cautes and Cautopates preparing the divine banquet. Confirmation for this interpretation may be found in the paintings from Dura-Europos, where we find another unique scene that is reminiscent of the Jerusalem relief: here we see the two brothers carrying the bull on the pole, rather than the cauldron.<sup>61</sup> To my knowledge, the Mithraeum from Huarte (north-west Syria) is the only monument to feature scenes with figures that are totally unique in Mithraic iconography.<sup>62</sup> As an exception, the late fourth-century

57 A number of reliefs incorporate representations of other, non-Mithraic deities in these scenes. For example *CIMRM* 966; 1128; 1137; 1292. These figures do not, however, interact with Mithras or other figures from Mithras narrative and are not narrative in character. Furthermore, statues of the same deities are regularly found as votive gifts in Mithraea.

58 As modern viewers, we are partly dependent upon the corpus of Mithraic monuments to reconstruct the visual experience of the ancient viewer. Equally important, however, are visual traditions outside the Mithraic corpus, which account for many local differences and interpretations.

59 De Jong 2000, figs. 1–2.

60 On Cautes and Cautopates see Hinnells 1976.

61 Already pointed out by de Jong 2000, 56–57.

62 Gawlikowski 2007, figs. 9–12 with p. 360, who connects the monsters to the *daevas* of the Avesta. Gordon 2001, 114 considers them a specifically local Syrian development. In my view, both the lions and the heads on the city wall can be connected to a Manichaean creation story. The lions recall the appearance of the *asreshtar* or archdemons in the middle Persian story of the creation of mankind (*Mir. Man.* I). The painting of the City of Darkness can be related to the same Manichaean cosmogony and illustrates

paintings from Huarte confirm the rule. The scenes of the city wall with demonic heads, and the black, two-headed demons being devoured by ferocious lions probably derive from another narrative tradition and are foreign elements that are here combined with a Mithraic cycle.<sup>63</sup>

If the narrative scenes are not illustrations to a fixed text, than what are they? In order to retrieve the possible function of these representations in the Mithraeum it is important to typify them more precisely. Although there was no set of fixed rules in representing the narrative, and it is impossible to reconstruct a canonical version of the myth on the basis of the extant material, it is clear that the monuments do all share certain characteristics. The omnipresence of the tauroctony shows that there was at least one deed of the god that was crucial to all his worshippers, all over the empire. In virtually all sanctuaries, Mithras' killing of the bull is part of a narrative cycle that revolves around the killing of the animal and depicts the prehistory and consequences of this deed. There seems to be some agreement about parts of the story that are particularly important. Both the tauroctony and the ten scenes referred to above were frequently featured as ex-votos inside Mithraea. Within the corpus of votive monuments, Mithras' birth from the rock and the scene known as the *transitus dei* are attested far more commonly than the other eight episodes.<sup>64</sup> It is striking that several inscriptions dedicate the monument to Mithras' birth or his rock of birth, or commemorate the god's *transitus*;<sup>65</sup> I am unaware of similar instances from other cults in

an episode from the Second Creation, before the Third Messenger incited the demons to emit their light from which the cosmos was created: Dirven, de Jong (forthcoming).

<sup>63</sup> Gawlikowski 2007; cf. colour plate 2 in Claus 2012.

<sup>64</sup> In Vermaseren's corpus, I counted 34 votive reliefs or altars representing Mithras rock-birth, 8 *transitus* scenes, 1 subjugation of Sol, 3 Sol in quadriga, 2 Mithras shooting water from the rock, 1 pact of Mithras and Sol, 1 Mithras riding the bull, 2 sacred repast. This list is by no means complete, since many Mithraea have been found since Vermaseren published his corpus. Again, the rock-birth is most common, for example the two instances below S. Stefano Rotondo in Rome: Lissi-Caronna 1986, 30–1, pls. XXX–XXXI; idem, 31, pl. XXXII–XXXIII; two in Güglingen, Mithraeum II: Hensen 2013 figs. 42 and 51; one in a Mithraeum in Köln and one in Heidelberg. On the rock-birth see Neri 2000.

<sup>65</sup> CIMRM 1490, on the base upon which stood the rockbirth of Mithras: *Petrae/ genetrici/ Felix/ Prudentius Antoni/ Rufi/ p(ublici) p(ortorii) vil(ici) vic(arius)/ ex viso* (Poetovio); CIMRM 1493, on the front of the base of a statue in white marble of the rock birth: *Naturae dei/ Prudens Primi/ Antoni Rufi p(ublici) p(ortorii)/ vil(ici) vic(arius)* (Poetovio). CIMRM 1652, on the base of a relief representing the rock-birth: *P(etrae) g(enetrici) d(ei)/ Aurelius/ Statorius/ v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* (Aquinoctium); CIMRM 1674, inscribed on an otherwise plain altar: *Petrae/ Genetrici/ P(ublius) Ael(ius) Nigri/ nus sacerdos/ v(otum) s(olvit)* (Carnuntum); CIMRM 1743, inscribed on an otherwise plain altar: *Petrae/ Genetric(i)* (Budapest); CIMRM 1874, inscribed on a plain altar: *Petr(a)e/ genetrici* (Solin); CIL 5.9657, inscribed on a stele: *P(etrae) G(enetrici) A() G()*



the Roman world. It is not exactly clear what conclusions can be drawn from this, apart from the fact that these mythological episodes must have been of primary importance to the dedicants. It can hardly be a coincidence that two verse lines in the well-known dipinti from the Mithraeum below Santa Prisca in Rome also refer to two of the more important events from the narrative: Mithras carrying the bull and Mithras shooting water from the rock.<sup>66</sup> In tauroctony reliefs that depict only a limited number of scenes, too, we tend to see a concentration on the key scenes: Mithras' birth, sometimes combined with the sleeping Saturn, and the *transitus*.<sup>67</sup> Sometimes the same event is even represented twice in one tauroctony relief. Again, the events in question are chosen from the ten most popular scenes: the water miracle,<sup>68</sup> Mithras subjugating Sol,<sup>69</sup> and the *transitus* scene.<sup>70</sup>

We may conclude from the monuments that there was a sacred narrative with a fixed core, but that individual communities had a considerable amount of freedom to visualize and interpret Mithras' story in their own way. Given that there was no such thing as a fixed narrative of Mithras throughout the empire, the variation in the representation of the myth is by no means surprising. In an oral culture, myths are by definition dynamic

---

*v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* (Concordia); Wagner 1956/57, no. 86, inscribed on a plain altar: *Petr(a)/e Gen(etrici){i}* (Wachstein). On the base of a statue of the rock-birth from the Mithraeum below S. Stefano Rotondo is inscribed: *Petram genetricem/ Aur(elius) Bassinus, aedituus/ principiorum cast(rorum) peregr(inorum)/dedicavit hoc in loco et d(ono) d(edit)/ antistante A. Caedicio/ Prisciano eq(uite) R(omano) Patre*: Lissi-Caronna 1986, 33. The latter instance commemorates the dedication of the object itself, whereas the other inscriptions commemorate an event (or ritual?).

CIMRM 1497, inscribed on an altar without representation: *Invict(o) Mithrae/ et transitu dei/ Theodorus p(ublici) p(ortorii)/ scrut(ator) stat(ionis) Poet(ovionensis)* (Poetovio); CIMRM 1495: On the base of a statue of Mithras carrying the bull on his shoulders: *Transitu/ C(aius) Caecina/ Calpurnius/ temp(lum) redemi(t) et restitu(it)* (Poetovio); CIMRM 1900, inscribed on an otherwise plain altar: *Tran[situi] / dei M[ithrae)] / Host[ilius(?)] / [3]ONI* (Skelani).

66 Vermaseren 1965, 193, line 4: *Fons concludit petris qui geminos aluisti nectare fratres*, 'Rock-bound spring that fed the twin brothers with nectar' (an allusion to Mithras causing water to spring forth from the rock) and line 7, p. 200: *Hunc quem aur<ei>s humeris portavit more iuvenum*, 'This young bull which he carried on his wonderful shoulders according to his will', an allusion to Mithras carrying the bull on his shoulders, here used as a moral exemplum.

67 Rock-birth: CIMRM 1727; 1851; 2191. Rock-birth and sleeping Saturn: CIMRM 1656; 2026. Sacred banquet and Saturn or Oceanos sleeping: CIMRM 693. *Transitus*: CIMRM 435

68 CIMRM 1083 (Heddernheim, they are each other's mirror image); CIMRM 1283 (Neuenheim); CIMRM 1301 (Besigheim).

69 CIMRM 1137 (Rückingen).

70 CIMRM 1896 (Konjic).

and are constantly re-presented and re-adapted to their audience.<sup>71</sup> What should surprise us though, and has yet to be convincingly explained, is the relatively high standardisation in the rendering of the sacred narrative. In fact, there is no other contemporary cult in which a sacred narrative plays such a dominant role in both the sacred space and its decoration and which, despite all the differences referred to above, displays such a degree of uniformity over such an expanse of time and territory.<sup>72</sup> Surely this must mean that we should take the visual rendering of the sacred narrative as the starting point for our understanding of the mysteries.

## 5 Myth and Reality in Architecture and Art

Although it is impossible to reconstruct a fixed myth of Mithras, the available evidence does show that Mithras' story was an important source of inspiration for the architecture, rituals, and symbolism of this cult. Not only are representations of the killing of the bull and events related to this sacrifice omnipresent in the Mithraeum, the mythical space of the cave in which this sacrifice took place also inspired the layout of the room in which Mithraists assembled to celebrate their rituals. In the cult image, the killing of the bull is frequently depicted in a cave that is sometimes represented using signs of the zodiac or other astrological symbols.<sup>73</sup> Thanks to Porphyry's *De antro Nympharum*, we know that for worshippers of Mithras the cave in which the bull was killed was claimed to be an *eikôn* of the cosmos.<sup>74</sup> The architecture

<sup>71</sup> Graf 1993, 2–4.

<sup>72</sup> Recent research tends to stress the heterogeneity of the archaeological material, cf. Gordon 2012, cols. 965–966. Although it cannot be denied that there is variation that seems to have been determined largely by the local situation, the similarities should not be forgotten.

<sup>73</sup> Examples of this device that is expressed in a number of ways are numerous. Ceiling of the cave consists of signs of the zodiac: *CIMRM* 1083 (Nida), 1292 (Osterburken); Cumont 1975, 167–9, pl. 23 (Dura-Europos). Ceiling of the cave consists of planets: *CIMRM* 693 (Bononia); signs of the zodiac depicted around the cult niche: Cumont 1975, plate 30 (Dura-Europos); signs of the zodiac depicted in a circle around the tau-roctony: *CIMRM* 75 (Sidon), *CIMRM* 390 (Palazzo Barberini, Rome), *CIMRM* 810 (London); stars inside the cave: *CIMRM* 368 (Rome), *CIMRM* 435 (Rome); stars on the inside of Mithras' mantle: *CIMRM* 181 (Capua Vetere), *CIMRM* 310 (Ostia), *CIMRM* 321 (Ostia).

<sup>74</sup> 'Similarly, the Persians call the place a cave where they introduce an initiate into the mysteries, revealing to him the path by which souls descend and go back again. For Eubulus tells us that Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honour of Mithras, the creator and father of all. ... This cave bore for him the image of the cosmos which Mithras had created, and the things which the cave contained, by their proportionate arrange-



of many Mithraea is inspired by this very notion and likewise takes the form of a cave or the cosmos.<sup>75</sup> This explains the fairly uniform design of Mithraic sanctuaries, which are for the most part dimly lit, rectangular rooms covered with a barrel vault with benches along its lateral walls, in imitation of a cave. In the west, *spelaeum* is the most common term used for a Mithraic temple.<sup>76</sup> A very small number of Mithraea are indeed decorated with astral signs that turn them into a micro-cosmos in imitation of the mythical cave.<sup>77</sup>

The sanctuaries are not just any cave, but are modelled upon and represent the mythical cave in which Mithras killed the bull. Hence in imitation of the cult image, we frequently find the two torchbearers standing on either side of the longitudinal walls of Mithraic temples.<sup>78</sup> So the ritual space in which Mithras' worshippers assembled not only focused on the representation of a mythological event situated in a cave, but concomitantly re-produced the cave itself. In this respect it is highly significant that the cult image depicts the deity in action instead of as a static cult image, as is the convention. Placing the image in this ritual space meant that the participants attended the very act that brought them forth.

In the architectural arrangement of the Mithraeum we see how mythical and historical reality converge. This device is not confined to the architecture of the Mithraeum, but can also be found in its figurative decoration.

---

ment, provided him with symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos.' *De ant. Nymph.* 6 (trans. Arethusa edition). On the importance of this text (especially chapter 24) for the cosmological setting of Mithras, see Beck 1984, 2053–2055.

75 At Santa Prisca the cult niche was lined with pumice to make it look like a natural cave. Cf. Clauss 2000, 51 for similar instances. A number of Mithraea are constructed in its entirety or in part in a natural cave: *CIMRM* 1447 (Zgornka Pohanca); 1882 (Rayanov Grich); 1882, 1883 (both Epidaurum); 2256 (Kreta in Moesia); 2303 (Tirgusor); Huarte (Syria); the Duino Mithraeum near Venice (Italy) and two recently discovered Mithraea in Doliche (Commagene). Cf. the supplementary items on *CIMRM* at [http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=selected\\_monuments](http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=selected_monuments).

76 Clauss 2000, 42–48. By contrast, in the provinces the word *templum* is used.

77 The ceiling of the Mithraeum below S. Maria Capua Vetere (*CIMRM* 180) and Mithraeum III in Dura-Europos were decorated with stars (visible on excavation photographs, kept at YUAG). A symbolic rendering of the cosmos can be found in the Mithraea of Sette Sfere and Sette Porte in Ostia (*CIMRM* 239 and 287). For an extensive analysis of the astrological symbolism in Sette Sfere: Gordon 1976.

78 Figures of Cautopates and Cautes may be placed at the entrance of the Mithraeum, on either side of the cult niche, or on the benches. The best known example is the pair of torch bearers on the end of the benches of the Mithraeum of Sette Sfere in Ostia: Gordon 1976. In the Mithraeum below Santa Prisca in Rome, niches that contained statues of the torchbearers are inset into the lateral walls, next to the entrance: Bjørnebye 2007, 99 note 312 and 109. Cf. the reconstruction of Mithraeum I at Stockstadt in Hensen 2013, figs. 50 and 52. In Mithraeum II at Güglingen statues of Cautes and Cautopates were standing on both stairs leading to the benches alongside the walls: idem, fig. 51.

A unique example is provided by the largest of the two cult reliefs from the Mithraeum in Dura-Europos (Syria), which was dedicated by a certain Zenobius in 171/2 CE. It depicts the usual scene of the tauroctony (with some minor variations), but in this particular case the dedicant and members of his family, or more probably, his military unit, are shown attending the event.<sup>79</sup> This unique feature is easily explained by local cultic and artistic traditions, in which it was common to picture dedicants on cult reliefs.<sup>80</sup> Despite the fact that this is unique for Dura, the innovation is not at odds with the symbolism of the Mithraeum as described above; the presence of Zenobius illustrates the situation in the Mithraeum, in which worshippers face the cult relief; at the same time, it turns them into observers of the original mythological event.<sup>81</sup> A tauroctony that is now in the Landesmuseum Württemberg not only shows an altar next to the bull, but also has a lamp hanging from the ceiling of the cave, thereby indicating that Mithras' mythic cave is in fact identical with the Mithraeum.<sup>82</sup> In a number of tauroctony reliefs, Cautes and Cautopates are represented standing on pedestals.<sup>83</sup> As such, they recall the freestanding statues and reliefs of the two brothers that are frequently placed on either side of the Mithraeum.

After the killing of the bull, the banquet of Mithras and Sol is the most important representation in the sacred narrative.<sup>84</sup> In a number of representations of this banquet, myth and historical reality coincide, thereby illustrating the crisscrossing of mythical past and ritual present. One of the small scenes found in the Mithraeum at Dura-Europos shows Mithras and Sol reclining on the dead bull, being served by the small figure of a man with the head of a raven.<sup>85</sup> The figure is naked apart from the loincloth around his waist. Undoubtedly, this is an initiate of the first grade *corax*, who here serves the two gods at their meal.<sup>86</sup> A fragment of a white marble relief from Rome now in the Schlossmuseum in Mannheim represents the tauroctony

<sup>79</sup> Dirven 1999, 271–272.

<sup>80</sup> Downey 1978, 141.

<sup>81</sup> A similar example is *CIMRM* 1275, in which someone is represented sacrificing below the killing of the bull.

<sup>82</sup> *CIMRM* 1306. Cf. Clauss 2012, pl. 15 (in colour).

<sup>83</sup> *CIMRM* 1447; 1450; 1683; 1791 (Cautopates only); 1907; 1919; 2172.

<sup>84</sup> Hultgård 2004, 299–324.

<sup>85</sup> Cumont 1975, 176–177, pl. 29 (Cumont's description of the figure with the raven's head is imprecise and should not be followed).

<sup>86</sup> The existence of the grade *corax* at Dura is confirmed by graffiti found here: Francis 1975, 441. The representation from Dura seems to suggest that initiates actually wore masks, but apart from this representation and the man-raven on *CIMRM* 397 (Rome) and *CIMRM* 1896 (Konic) as well as three instances of a man with a lion-head on terra siliata from Trier (Clauss 2000, 116–117 with fig. 74) there is no firm proof to this effect.



on the obverse, and the scene of a repast on the reverse. As in Dura, the gods are served by a man in a short cloak with the head of a raven.<sup>87</sup> A comparable representation can be seen in a relief from Konjica, now in Sarajevo.<sup>88</sup> Like the relief from Rome, this is an alterable relief, with the tauroctony on its reverse and the feast of Mithras and Sol on its obverse.<sup>89</sup> The two reclining figures are surrounded by standing figures, two of whom have the head of a raven and a lion, which possibly means they are actually worshippers wearing masks.<sup>90</sup> The two reclining figures can certainly be identified as Mithras and Sol, but to the initiates they may also have looked like the Pater and the Heliodromus of the community. This suggestion is enhanced by the fact that Sol is represented clothed rather than heroically naked, as is usual in Mithraic iconography.<sup>91</sup>

Yet another instance of the convergence of the divine and human world is the procession painted on the left wall of the Mithraeum below Santa Prisca in Rome (two layers, dated to 200 and 220 AD). A row of human initiates of the grades Lion and Heliodromos bring gifts – consisting mainly of bread and wine, with the addition of a rooster – to Mithras and Sol, who are represented reclining in a cave at the far end of the wall, near the cult niche.<sup>92</sup> The figure closest to the gods again has the head of a raven.<sup>93</sup> It is no coincidence

---

All we have to go on are some very biased remarks made by Christian writers: Gordon 2012, cols. 999–1002, on the problems regarding these sources. Cf. below, note 112.

<sup>87</sup> *CIMRM* 397. Cf. Merkelbach 1984, 15, 53; cf. 148a.

<sup>88</sup> *CIMRM* 1896 (Konjic).

<sup>89</sup> That the banquet is a result of the killing follows from several representations (the painting under discussion is one of these) that depict the two gods reclining on the bull.

<sup>90</sup> The status of the two figures with the Phrygian bonnets is not entirely clear. They may either be Cautes and Cautopates, who frequently serve the gods at their sacrificial feast, or representatives of the grade Perses.

<sup>91</sup> In representations of Sol's subjugation, his pact with Mithras, or his ascension, the god is normally depicted naked apart from a mantle. Cf. below, note 98. In representations of the sacred banquet, the god is most frequently naked as well, but there are several exceptions to this rule: Nida/Heddernheim (*CIMRM* 1083), Caetobriga, Hispania (*CIMRM* 798) and the paintings from Dura-Europos (*CIMRM* 42 and 49). In the latter case it is remarkable that Sol is fully dressed while having dinner, whereas he is represented naked in the subjugation scene. This points to a conscious choice of the painter. According to Vermaseren, Sol is also wearing a tunic on a relief from Rüdgingen (*CIMRM* 1137). Since the god's stomach muscles are clearly discernible, I think he is only wearing a mantle.

<sup>92</sup> Vermaseren, van Essen 1965, 148–155, with pl. LV–LVIII. According to Vermaseren, *op. cit.*, 155, the Father and Heliodromus were seated at the far end of the sanctuary close to the painting of the sacred banquet, thereby stressing the congruence between myth and reality. Vermaseren bases his hypothesis on a sacrificial table that was found at the spot.

<sup>93</sup> Ferrua, who studied the paintings before Vermaseren did, claims the figure has the legs of a raven as well: *CIMRM* 483. Body and legs had been lost by the time of Vermaseren's

that the opposite right wall depicts a procession of worshippers approaching an enthroned Pater.<sup>94</sup> Another variation of the idea that myth and ritual converge can be found in one of the side scenes in the painted tauroctony of the Barberini Mithraeum in Rome, in which a large group of men are shown reclining.<sup>95</sup> They are without doubt to be identified as the clientele of the Mithraeum, who are represented here as participating in the mythological narrative. This is similar to a relief from Besigheim that likewise represents a large group of reclining men as part of a Mithraic narrative cycle.<sup>96</sup>

The tauroctony and the banquet are by far the most common scenes in which mythical and historical realities touch. A possible example related to another mythical event can be found on a limestone relief now in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. It represents Mithras slaying the bull, with two other small scenes in the lower corners.<sup>97</sup> The composition on the right-hand side resembles the scene commonly identified as the pact of Mithras and Sol, in which we see the two gods shaking hands (*dextrarum iunctio*) or sharing meat above an altar. On closer inspection, however, the scene on the altar differs in important respects from the usual representations of the scene: the figure of Sol is not only clothed, but also bearded. As a rule, the sun god is represented clean-shaven, and in this particular scene he usually wears only a mantle.<sup>98</sup> This suggests that it is perhaps not Sol who is represented here, but a mortal worshipper. A similar scene can be found on a fragmentary relief from Poetovio.<sup>99</sup> In this latter instance the adjacent representation of Sol's subjugation is equally ambiguous, for here too Sol is depicted with a beard. In some representations of the subjugation of Sol the identity of the sun god is hazy at best; here the god is represented naked, without nimbus or any attributes, so he could easily be mistaken for every man.<sup>100</sup> Normally Mithras

---

later investigation of the Mithraeum: Vermaseren, van Essen 1965, 150. If Ferrua was correct, the raven figure is not a human *corax*.

<sup>94</sup> Vermaseren, van Essen 1965, 155–160.

<sup>95</sup> Schatzmann 2004, 11, fig. 1.

<sup>96</sup> *CIMRM* 1301.

<sup>97</sup> *CIMRM* 350/1. For a better photograph, see Merkelbach 1984, fig. 47.

<sup>98</sup> Unclear: *CIMRM* 1137 (Rückingen); 1194 (Stockstadt). No nimbus, possibly a mantle: 1292 (Osterburken). Radiate with mantle: 1430 (Virunum); 1584 (Poetovio).

<sup>99</sup> *CIMRM* 1579. Cf. Merkelbach 1984, fig 137 for a better picture.

<sup>100</sup> The scene is particularly popular in the provinces Germania, Panonia, Dacia and Moesia (cf. the index in Vermaseren, vol. II). With the majority of the monuments, however, the figures are too small and schematic to identify Sol's appearance. The following monuments are relatively certain: Sol naked with nimbus: *CIMRM* 1083 (Hedernheim). Sol naked with mantle and nimbus: *CIMRM* 1430 (Virunum). Sol naked with mantle, no nimbus: *CIMRM* 1974 (Apulum). Sol naked without nimbus and mantle: *CIMRM* 1292 (Osterburken) where the nimbus is depicted as a solar crown on the ground between the two gods (cf. Merkelbach 1984, fig. 115 for a detail of this



holds an object that is usually identified as a bull's hide or a Phrygian cap, but in a number of instances the god carries sticks or a sword.<sup>101</sup> A very peculiar representation of this scene can be found on a fragmentary relief from Sinitovo (Thrace), in which Mithras is not standing, but seated in a chair with a high back.<sup>102</sup> It brings to mind representations of rituals in which the Father adopts the role of Mithras, and it is to these rituals we shall now turn.

## 6 From Picture to Ritual Reality

The examples discussed above show that mythical past and cultic reality convene in the space of the Mithraeum and in a number of illustrations of the sacred narrative. Of course it does not necessarily follow that this pictorial reality reflects the ritual procedures in the Mithraeum itself. In a number of cases it can be shown, however, that events from the myth that are represented in scenes in or around the tauroctony were indeed played out in the space of the artificial cave or cosmos that was modelled upon Mithras' creative act. As is generally known, the podia on either side of most Mithraea show that communal meals must have been at the centre of these meetings and were the most important ritual celebrated in these temples.<sup>103</sup> Undoubtedly these meals imitated the communal meal of Mithras and Sol that took place after the killing of the bull.<sup>104</sup> A considerable number of illustrations of the mythical event indicate explicitly that the two gods enjoyed their meal in a cave, that is, in the place where the Mithraists celebrated their communal meal as well.<sup>105</sup> The alterable reliefs that depict the tauroctony on one side and the banquet on the other show that mythological representations were indeed associated with and incorporated into the ritual events.<sup>106</sup> We can

---

scene) and *CIMRM* 42.12 (Dura-Europos), where it hovers in the air; *CIMRM* 1128 (Heddernheim); *CIMRM* 1579 (Poetovio); *CIMRM* 2244 (Tavalicavo); *CIMRM* 393 (Barberini Mithraeum, Rome).

<sup>101</sup> In the pendant to the pact of Mithras and Sol on the relief from Rome discussed above note 98, Mithras holds two sticks. In 1137 (Rückingen), Mithras' hand rests on a sword.

<sup>102</sup> *CIMRM* 2334 (Sinitovo).

<sup>103</sup> Gordon 2013, 217–218.

<sup>104</sup> The connection between the banquet of Mithras and Sol and the meal celebrated in the Mithraeum is common knowledge. Incidentally, scholars referred to other scenes as well. Cf. the references and commentary in Gordon 1980a, note 7. Cf. Alvar 2008, esp. 375; Beck 2006, 21–25; Klöckner 2011 and Gordon 2012.

<sup>105</sup> Instances are numerous. See, for example, *CIMRM* 1958; 1935; 1975; 2018.

<sup>106</sup> *CIMRM* 1083 (Nida); 1896 (Konjic) referred to above, note 73, is the best known. Recently a two-sided Mithraic icon with bull killing and banquet was found in Prolozac: Gordon 2013, 218.

assume that these pictures were set up according to the ritual actions that were performed. But our sources suggest there is more to it than that; the initiates do not merely imitate the event, they re-enact it and as such dine together with their gods, who are re-presented by the Pater and the Heliodromus, the two highest grades of the community.<sup>107</sup>

The correspondence of the Father and Heliodromus with Mithras and Sol is shown by the well-known floor mosaic from the Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia, in which the grade of the Father is associated with the Phrygian bonnet of Mithras and the sickle, staff, and patera of Saturn, and the grade of the Sun-runner with the halo of the sun, the torch and the whip.<sup>108</sup> Probably the representatives of the grades wore these attributes while performing their ritual roles; in the mosaic the Sun's crown is depicted with ribbons for attaching it, as is typical of such an attribute. In Göglingen an iron halo was found that was probably worn by the Heliodromus of the community.<sup>109</sup> Last but not least, a number of representations show a male figure wearing Mithras' cap.<sup>110</sup> The context of these representations suggests that this figure should be identified as the Pater of the community.

Although the banquet of Mithras and Sol is undoubtedly the best known and most widespread of the mythological events that served as inspiration for rituals celebrated in the Mithraeum, it is by no means the only one. In addition to the banquet, which underpinned the collective religious experience, we know of several other mythologically inspired rituals that determined individual religious experience, notably in rituals of initiation.<sup>111</sup> Several representations suggest that the Father acted out the role of Mithras and took it upon himself to torment members of his community.<sup>112</sup> The most

107 Schatzmann 2004, 12. On the relationship of Mithras and the Pater see Gordon 1980b, note 2. Gordon stresses that the Father imitates Mithras, but is not identical with him. Here, the element of performance offers an important contribution to the debate. Cf. Versnel 2011, 470–80, who characterises ritual play as 'sincere hypocrisy'. In a nutshell, Versnel argues here that someone or something feels utterly real to the participants during ritual performance, whilst at the same time they realise it is all just play. Versnel's line of argument, which I find very convincing, seems largely to have been inspired by an unpublished paper by Richard Gordon.

108 *CIMRM* 299; Beard, North, Price 1998 II, 305–307.

109 Hensen 2013, fig. 60.

110 Above all the Mainz crater and the paintings from S. Maria Capua Vetere, discussed below.

111 On the role of rituals of initiation in the mysteries of Mithras, see Gordon 2009.

112 This possibly explains remarks by later and highly biased Christian authors such as Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 39.5, who mentions 'the punishments of Mithras, justly applied to those who undergo initiation in things like that'. Cf. *Or.* 4.70 and 89. Cf. Cumont 1896, 15. Elaborations can be found in Gregory's scholiast, known as Nonnus Abbas, PG 36,989; 110; 1072 = Cumont 1896 II, 26–30. Finally, there is the text of



famous instance is provided by the piece known as the snake-crater from Mainz, which depicts a ritual of initiation being performed by the Pater of the community.<sup>113</sup> Not only is he dressed as Mithras, he is also firing a bow, a performance that appears to be inspired by the well-known mythological event in which Mithras shoots water from a rock. Of course it is dangerous to arrive at general conclusions on the basis of one instance from a particular Mithraeum, but there are some indications that this ritual was celebrated more widely. The scene of Mithras shooting water from the rock is one of the most popular narrative scenes; it is especially prominent in the Rhine-Danube area, but can also be found elsewhere.<sup>114</sup> Usually we see Mithras accompanied by the torchbearers, recognisable by their Phrygian caps. In a number of instances, however, Mithras' attendants are bareheaded and are depicted kneeling before their god in supplication.<sup>115</sup> Here, the ritual practice possibly interferes with the representation of the mythological event.<sup>116</sup> In addition, one or two arrowheads that have been found in Mithraea may attest to the actual performance of this ritual elsewhere.<sup>117</sup>

The 'subjugation' of Sol by Mithras may have inspired other rituals of initiation that are featured in rare representations of these rituals painted on the podium of the Mithraeum at Capua Vetere.<sup>118</sup> Here the teletarch is wearing a Phrygian bonnet and may therefore be identified as the Father of the community.<sup>119</sup> The initiate is kneeling on one knee in front of him, in a pose that recalls Sol's in the scenes of his obeisance.

---

Pseudo-Augustine called 'Ambrosiaster': *Qaest. Vet. et Nov. Test.* CXIV, 11 = Cumont II, 7–8. The latter text talks of initiates being blindfolded and hearing the sounds of ravens and lions, while some have their hands tied with chicken guts and are made to stumble into a water basin, whereupon a man comes with a sword to cut the bonds and calls himself liberator. These texts accord well with pictures on the Mainz Crater, the frescoes at Capua Vetere, and several theatrical props, such as the sword from Riegl: Hensen 2013, fig. 59.

113 Beck 2000; Huld-Zetsche 2004, 213–227.

114 Claus 2000, 71–74.

115 *CIMRM* 1225 (Mainz); *CIMRM* 1935 (Apulum); *CIMRM* 1972 (Apulum); *CIMRM* 2244 (Tavalcavo).

116 Admittedly, these bareheaded kneeling figures are fully clothed and not naked like the initiands on the Mainz vessel and the Capua Vetere paintings.

117 Schatzmann 2004, 19. The famous theatrical sword found in the Mithraeum in Riegl was possibly used in another frightening initiation ritual: Hensen 2013, fig. 59.

118 Gordon 2009, esp. 297. Cf. Claus 2012, pls. 10–14 (in colour). A relief, possibly from Rome, described by Vermaseren, *CIMRM* 609, possibly pictured initiation rituals as well. Unfortunately, there are no photographs of the object that was not found by Vermaseren.

119 Gordon 2009, 298 interprets the headdress of one of the figures as a helmet (fig. 16.5b), whereas in my view it is a Phrygian bonnet. Cf. the colour plates of these severely damaged paintings in Claus 2012.

The pact of Mithras and Sol, iconographically represented by Mithras and Sol shaking hands, was ritually expressed by the self-identification of Mithras' followers as *sundexios*: 'he who has engaged himself by means of a handshake'. Manfred Clauss suggests that this term reflects the ritual which celebrated the acceptance of new members into the Mithraic community.<sup>120</sup> If Clauss' suggestion is correct, this was another ritual modelled upon a mythical event. Possibly this ritual is behind the representation on the altar from Rome referred to above, in which Sol's place is taken by a clothed, bearded figure.<sup>121</sup>

The examples listed above are probably far from comprehensive, and it could well be that future discoveries add new instances to this list. Most notably absent are Mithras's rock-birth and Mithras who carries the bull on his shoulders, the two scenes that figure most frequently as votive gifts in the Mithraea.<sup>122</sup> But of course it is by no means necessary to suppose that all scenes from the sacred narrative inspired rituals. The killing of the bull, for example, was certainly never actualised – the cult image fulfilled this role instead. The fact that we cannot relate all narrative scenes to actual rituals is not a decisive argument against the interpretation proposed here, for, as Stephen Hugh-Jones points out, it is by no means necessary that myth and ritual overlap completely.<sup>123</sup> Nor am I arguing that these rituals and their interpretation were necessarily the same in all Mithraea throughout the Roman Empire; variety in the iconography of the cult shows that the myth was not fixed in all its details and provided numerous possibilities for local interpretation and thus for ritual play and flexibility. Fixed elements included the sacred space of the Mithraeum copying a mythological precedent and the ritual banquet that was revived in this cave-like structure. It is difficult to say how frequently and consistently other elements from the narrative were performed. Here, individual communities seem to have enjoyed a greater amount of freedom.

<sup>120</sup> Clauss 2000, 151–152.

<sup>121</sup> According to Merkelbach 1984, 123 all representations of this scene are actually a ritual scene of initiation. Although depictions of mythical events may have alluded to the ritual, it definitely pushes the evidence too far to say that they are in fact ritual scenes.

<sup>122</sup> Above, note 64. This is particularly remarkable since the dedicatory inscriptions of some of these monuments (listed above, note 65) perhaps commemorate a ritual event of some sort.

<sup>123</sup> Above, note 45.



## 7 Ritual Performance and Closeness to the Divine

The re-enactment of Mithras' deeds by the father of the community during the sacred meal and initiation rituals, and his interaction with the other cult members, undoubtedly greatly enhanced the connection of the initiates with their god. In this respect it is important to note that most Mithraea lacked the traditional, three-dimensional cult image that was set up in virtually every contemporary sanctuary in the Roman world, where the cult statue was considered the abode of the deity and served as the focal point for contact with the divine. In fact, in most representations of the tauroctony, Mithras is looking away from the viewer, which contrasts with later Christian icons in which saints establish contact with the spectator through their eyes. From this it does not follow, however, that Mithras' presence was less important to his worshippers than the presence of deities in other cults.<sup>124</sup> If my analysis of the correlation between mythical narrative and cultic reality is correct, it follows that the Mithraic community established this contact in another and probably more effective way: they were not only spectators but participants in a divine drama. In fact, Mithras was re-presented by the Father in his performance of the appropriate rituals.

It is, of course, extremely hazardous to reconstruct the emotion of individual Mithras-worshippers. A comparison with mythical re-enactment in other mystery cults may, however, contribute to our understanding of divine presence in the cult of Mithras. Since other mystery cults have not yet been studied thoroughly from this perspective, only a few preliminary remarks can be made here. First, it is exceptional that in Mithraism the re-creation of the mythical past is a communal effort, in which all present seem to participate. Of course, other mystery cults also involve theatrical performances.<sup>125</sup> Elements of ritual drama seem to have been particularly prominent in the cults of Isis and Magna Mater for example.<sup>126</sup> But unlike what happened in

<sup>124</sup> Contra Klöckner 2011, 215.

<sup>125</sup> Evidence to this respect can be found in Nielsen 2002, one of the few extant studies on cultic theatres and ritual drama. Nielsen argues that this element of ritual drama was especially prominent in new cults, such as the cult of Isis and Mater Magna. Although thought-provoking, the evidence Nielsen cites is slight, and the subject certainly needs further study.

<sup>126</sup> Merkelbach 2001, esp. 147–174, frequently draws attention to the representation of Isis' myths in ritual plays and the impersonation of the gods by the priests. Cf. the interesting comments made by Angelos Chaniotis in his review of this publication in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 97.2.31. Similar practices took place in the cult of the Great Mother. The castrated *galli* are said to impersonate Attis. Because Attis died under a pine tree, this tree is brought into the sanctuary with fillets hanging from its branches. They are said to be the bandages the goddess used to stop the bleeding. At

the cult of Mithras, this role-playing was confined to priests, who performed their divine roles in public. In Mithraic ritual there were no bystanders, only initiates who all played an active part in order to relive the mythical past together.<sup>127</sup> This holds true especially for the most important and frequently celebrated ritual, the communal meal. Second, it is remarkable that participants of Mithraic groups – with the possible exception of the Pater of the community – did not identify with the main protagonist of the cult. In this respect the cult differs from a number of other mystery cults, such as those of Isis or Dionysos, in which participants identified with the god and hoped to be saved accordingly.<sup>128</sup> In the case of Mithras, the initiates were punished by Mithras (represented by the Father), which suggests that they were clearly distinguished from their god.

The connection between narrative, sacred space, iconography, and ritual performance may serve as an explanation for the creation of a collective memory, which in turn explains the relatively high homogeneity of material remains over a large expanse of time and territory. Iconography and inscriptions served as an important mnemonic device for both the mythological narrative and its ritual re-enactment.<sup>129</sup> Looking at the pictures revived the emotions aroused by the rituals, which had in turn been inspired by the mythological narrative.

## 8 Concluding Remarks

The theatricality displayed by the Mithraeum and its participants is truly stunning. Not only was the Mithraeum an artificial cave, copying a mythological precedent, but participants dressed up and acted out their roles (the Father with his Phrygian bonnet, the Heliodromos with his whip and solar crown), dramatising events from the mythological narrative and using the-

---

the same time the tree represents the nymph who lured Attis into infidelity, and for this reason it is cut and killed on account of the wrath of the Meter (Ov. *Fasti* 4.230). Christian authors frequently refer to sacred drama in the mysteries in which priests represent the deities. Robertson 2003, 29–30 lists numerous instances, that should, however, be quoted more reluctantly than Robertson does in his article.

127 There were undoubtedly exceptions. In the Mithraeum in Tienen, for example, it appears that a large crowd (about 100 people) participated in the rituals, probably not all initiates: Martens 2004, 25–48. Interesting though examples like Tienen are, it is important to bear in mind that they are the exceptions to the rule.

128 For instances, see above note 10.

129 For the mnemonic function of the inscriptions and their role in the construction of a cult community that has a privileged connection with a deity, see Chaniotis 2012, esp. 271–272.



atrical attributes such as swords and bows and arrows. The presentation was greatly enhanced by all kinds of lighting effects that were used to illuminate the dark cavern-temples, altars, and cult images and that were crucial in the presentation of the sacred drama.<sup>130</sup> During cultic performances, the Mithraeum became a *tableau vivant*, in which architecture, participants, and ritual acts all worked together to relive the mythological past. This encounter with the divine no doubt made a lasting impression on all present.

## Bibliography

- Alvar, Jaime 2008. *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*, transl. Richard Gordon. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 165. Leiden: Brill.
- Beard, Mary; North, John; Price, Simon 1998. *Religions of Rome*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beck, Roger 1984. 'Mithraism since Franz Cumont.' In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.17.4, eds. Wolfgang Haase, Hildegard Temporini. Berlin: de Gruyter. 2002–2115.
- Beck, Roger 2000. 'Ritual, Myth, Doctrine and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel', *JRS* 90. 145–180.
- Beck, Roger 2006. *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bjørnebye, Jonas 2007. 'Hic locus est felix, sanctus, piusque benignus': *The Cult of Mithras in Fourth Century Rome*. Dissertation, Faculty of Arts, University of Bergen. Norway 2007.
- Bowden, Hugh 2010. *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Burkert, Walter 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chadwick, Henry 1980. *Origen: Contra Celsum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chaniotis, Angelos 2012. 'Emotional Community through Ritual: Initiates, Citizens, and Pilgrims as Emotional Communities in the Greek World.' In *Ritual Dynamics in the Ancient Mediterranean: Agency, Emotion, Gender, Representation*, ed. Angelos Chaniotis. Stuttgart: Steiner. 264–290.
- Clauss, Manfred 2000. *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries*, transl. Richard Gordon. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Clauss, Manfred 2012. *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*. Darmstadt: von Zabern.
- Connerton, Paul 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cumont, Franz 1896. *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, vol. II. Bruxelles: Lamertin.
- Cumont, Franz 1913. *Les mystères de Mithra*. Bruxelles: Lamertin.
- Cumont, Franz 1975. 'The Dura Mithraeum. Edited and translated by E. D. Francis.' In Hinnells 1975. 151–214.

<sup>130</sup> Clauss 2000, 120–130.

- Dirven, Lucinda 1999. *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos. A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria*. Leiden: Brill.
- Dirven, Lucinda; McCartney, Matt 2014. 'Local Idioms and Global Meanings: Mithraism and Roman Provincial Art.' In *Roman in the Provinces: Art on the Periphery of Empire. Exhibition Catalogue Yale University Art Gallery Spring 2014*, eds. Lisa Brody, Gail L. Hoffman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 127–143.
- Dirven, Lucinda; de Jong, Albert (forthcoming). 'The Battle between Good and Evil in the Huarte Mithraeum. Painted Testimonies to Mithraic and Manichaean Interaction in Late Antique Syria.'
- Downey, Susan B. 1978. 'Syrian Images of the Tauroctone.' In *Etudes Mithriaques: Actes du 2e congrès international, Téhéran, du 1er au 8 septembre 1975*. Acta Iranica 17. First Series. Actes de congrès, Vol. 4, ed. J. Duchesne-Guillemin. Leiden: Brill. 135–149.
- Foley, Helene P. 1994. 'Background: the Eleusian Mysteries and Women's Rites for Demeter.' In *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary and Interpretative Essay*, ed. Helene P. Foley. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 65–75.
- Francis, E. D. 1975. 'Mithraic Graffiti from Dura-Europos.' In Hinnells 1975. 424–445.
- Gawlikowski, Michal 2007. 'The Mithraeum at Hawarte and its Paintings', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 20. 337–361.
- Gordon, Richard 1975. 'Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism.' In Hinnells 1975. 215–248.
- Gordon, Richard 1976. 'The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum: the Example of Sette Sfere', *JMS* 1. 119–165.
- Gordon, Richard 1980a. 'Panelled Complications', *JMS* 3. 200–227.
- Gordon, Richard 1980b. 'Reality, Evocation and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras', *JMS* 3. 19–99.
- Gordon, Richard 1996. *Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World: Studies in Mithraism and Religious Art*. Collected Studies 551. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Gordon, Richard 2001. 'Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine', *Topoi* 11. 77–136.
- Gordon, Richard 2007. 'Institutionalized Religious Options: Mithraism.' In *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 391–405.
- Gordon, Richard 2009. 'The Mithraic Body: The Example of the Capua Mithraeum.' In *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, eds. Giovanni Casadio, Patricia A. Johnston. Austin: University of Texas Press. 290–313.
- Gordon, Richard 2012. 'Mithras (Mithraskult)', *RAC* 24. 964–1009.
- Gordon, Richard 2013. "'Glücklich ist dieser Ort ...': Mithras-Heiligtümer und Kultgeschehen.' In *Imperium der Götter: Isis, Mithras, Christus: Kulte und Religionen im römischen Reich*. Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe. Stuttgart: Theiss. 211–218.
- Graf, Fritz 1993. *Greek Mythology: An Introduction*, transl. Thomas Marier. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Graf, Fritz; Johnston, Sarah Iles 2007. *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*. Routledge: London.
- Griffith, J. G. 1970. *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Hensen, Andreas 2013. *Mithras: Der Mysterienkult an Limes, Rhein und Donau*. Die Limesreihe: Schriften des Limesmuseums Aalen 62. Stuttgart: Theiss.
- Hinnells, John R. 1975. *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*. 2 vols. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hinnells, John, R. 1976. 'The Iconography of Cautes and Cautopates, 1: the Data', *JMS* 1. 36–67.



- Hugh-Jones, Stephen 1979. *The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huld-Zetsche, Ingeborg 2004. 'Der Mainzer Krater mit den sieben Figuren.' In *Roman Mithraism: the Evidence from the Small Finds*, eds. Marleen Martens, Guy De Boe. Brussel: Museum Het Toreke. 213–227.
- Hultgård, Anders 2004. 'Remarques sur les repas culturels dans le mithriacisme.' In *Le repas de dieu: Das Mahl Gottes. 4. Symposium Strasbourg, Tübingen, Upsal. Strasbourg, 11–15 septembre 2002*, ed. Christian Grappe. WUNT 169. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. 299–324.
- Johnston, Sarah Iles 2004. 'Mysteries.' In *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 98–111.
- Jong, Albert de, 2000. 'A New Syrian Mithraic "Tauroctony"', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 11. 53–63.
- Klöckner, Anja 2011. 'Mithras und das Mahl der Männer: Götterbild, Ritual und sakraler Raum in einem römischen "Mysterienkult"' In *Kultur der Antike: Transdisziplinäres Arbeiten in den Altertumswissenschaften*, eds. Ulrike Egelhaaf-Gaiser, Dennis Pausch, Meike Rühl. Berlin: Verlag Antike. 200–225.
- Kowalzig, Barbara 2007. *Singing for the Gods: Performances of Myth and Ritual in Archaic and Classical Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kroll, Wilhelm 1965. *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Rem publicam commentarii edidit [et praef. instr. Guilelmus Kroll]*. Amsterdam: Hakkert.
- Lissi-Caronna, Elisa 1986. *Il mitreo dei castra peregrinorum* (S. Stefano Rotondo). Leiden: Brill.
- Martens, Marleen 2004. 'The Mithraeum in Tienen (Belgium): Small Finds and What They Can Tell Us.' In *Roman Mithraism: the Evidence from the Small Find*, eds. Marleen Martens, Guy De Boe. Brussel: Museum Het Toreke. 25–56.
- Martin, Luther H.; Pachis, Panayotis (eds.) 2009. *Imagistic Traditions in the Graeco-Roman World: A Cognitive Modeling of History of Religious Research*. Thessaloniki: Equinox.
- Merkelbach, Reinhold 1984. *Mithras*. Königstein: Hain.
- Merkelbach, Reinhold 2001. *Isis Regina – Zeus Sarapis: Die griechisch-ägyptische Religion nach den Quellen dargestellt*. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Neri, Ilaria, 2000. 'Mithra petrogenito: Origine iconografica e aspetti culturali della nascita dalla pietra', *Ostraka* 9. 227–245.
- Nielsen, Inge 2002. *Cultic Theatres and Ritual Drama: A Study in Regional Development and Religious Interchange between East and West in Antiquity*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Nilsson, Martin P. 1961. *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*. München: Beck.
- Parker, Robert 1989. 'On Dionysos at Agrai', *LCM* 14. 154–155.
- Rappaport, Roy 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richardson, Nicholas J. 1974. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Robertson, Noel 2003. 'Orphic Mysteries and Dionysiac Ritual.' In *Greeks Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*, ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos. London: Routledge. 218–240.
- Rüpke, Jörg 2013. 'Individualization and Individuation as Concepts for Historical Research.' In *The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Jörg Rüpke. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 3–38.

- Schatzmann, Andreas 2004. 'Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer funktionellen Topographie von Mithrasheiligtümern.' In *Roman Mithraism: the Evidence from the Small Find*, eds. Marleen Martens, Guy De Boe. Brussel: Museum Het Torenke. 11–24.
- Schuddeboom, Fejo L. 2009. *Greek Religious Terminology: Telete & Orgia: A Revised and Expanded Edition of the Studies by Zijdeveld and Van der Burg*. Leiden: Brill.
- Talgam, Rina; Weiss, Zeev 2004. *The Mosaics of the House of Dionysos at Sepphoris*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Turcan, Robert 1982. *Firminus Maternus: L'erreur des religions païennes*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Turcan, Robert 1992. *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, transl. Antonia Nevill. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Turcan, Robert 2008. 'Mithras tauroctone: originalités et origines d'une image culturelle.' In *Images et religion dans l'antiquité Gréco-Romaine*, eds. Sylvia Estienne et al. Naples: Centre Jean Bérard. 369–389.
- Turner, Victor W. 1964. 'Betwixt and Between: the Liminal Period in Rites de Passage.' In *Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society for 1964*, ed. June Helm. Seattle: American Ethnological Society. 4–20.
- Turner, Victor W. 1974. *The Ritual Process*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Vermaseren, Maarten J.; van Essen, Carel C. 1965. *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca on the Aventine*. Leiden: Brill.
- Versnel, Henk S. 1994. *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II: Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual*. Leiden: Brill.
- Versnel, Henk S. 2011. *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*. Leiden: Brill.
- Wagner, Friedrich 1956/57. *Neue Inschriften aus Raetien*. Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission. 215–264.
- Waldner, Katharina 2013. 'Dimensions of Individuality in Ancient Mystery Cults: Religious Practice and Philosophical Discourse.' In *The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Jörg Rüpke. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 215–242.
- Whitehouse, Harvey 2000. *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Whitehouse, Harvey 2004. *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Witschel, Christian 2013. 'Die Ursprung des Mithras-Kult: Orientalischer Gott oder westliche Neuschöpfung?' In *Imperium der Götter: Isis, Mithras, Christus: Kulte und Religionen im römischen Reich*. Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe. 200–210.
- Zwirn, Stephen R. 1989. 'The Intention of the Biographical Narration on Mithraic Cult Images', *Word & Image* 5. 2–18.

### Lucinda Dirven

Amsterdam Centre for Ancient Studies and Archaeology  
Ancient History  
Universiteit van Amsterdam  
Spuistraat 134  
1012 VB Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
L.A.Dirven@uva.nl



# Religion in the Roman Empire

Volume 1 (2015), No.1

## Editors

Reinhard **Feldmeier** (Göttingen), Karen L. **King** (Harvard, MA),  
Rubina **Raja** (Aarhus), Annette Yoshiko **Reed** (Philadelphia, PA),  
Christoph **Riedweg** (Zürich), Jörg **Rüpke** (Erfurt), Seth **Schwartz** (New  
York, NY), Christopher **Smith** (Rome) and Markus **Vinzent** (London)

*Religion in the Roman Empire (RRE)* is bold in the sense that it intends to further and document new and integrative perspectives on religion in the Ancient World combining multidisciplinary methodologies. Starting from the notion of 'lived religion' it will offer a space to take up recent, but still incipient research to modify and cross the disciplinary boundaries of 'History of Religion', 'Anthropology', 'Classics', 'Ancient History', 'Ancient Judaism', 'Early Christianity', 'New Testament', 'Patristic Studies', 'Coptic Studies', 'Gnostic and Manichaean Studies', 'Archaeology' and 'Oriental Languages'. It is the purpose of the journal to stimulate the development of an approach which can comprise the local and global trajectories of the multi-dimensional pluralistic religions of antiquity.

## Associate Editors

Nicole **Belayche** (Paris), Kimberly **Bowes** (Rome), Richard L. **Gordon** (Erfurt), Gesine **Manuwald** (London), Volker **Menze** (Budapest), Maren **Niehoff** (Jerusalem), George H. **van Kooten** (Groningen), Moulie **Vidas** (Princeton), Greg **Woolf** (London)



**Mohr Siebeck** [www.mohr.de](http://www.mohr.de)



2199-4463(201503)1:1;1-X