

## *Seven Mithraic Grades: An Initiatory or Priestly Hierarchy?*

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Mithraism was one of many religious cults which proliferated in the society of the Roman Empire. The evidence of its existence begins to appear in our historical sources, rather abruptly, in the last quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.<sup>1</sup> The origins of Mithraism are still debated: the ancients called it Mysteries of Mithras, or, because of its supposed Persian origins, Mysteries of the Persians. The contemporary scholarly consensus is, however, very close to the opinion that Mithraism in its Western form, regardless of possible presence of some authentic Persian motifs, is a product of the Graeco-Roman world and probably had evolved (or had been created) shortly before its first traces became visible in our archaeological material.<sup>2</sup> The cult spread quickly across the Roman world and flourished especially during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, but it finally perished after successful Christianization of the Roman Empire. The last Mithraic

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\* Abbreviations used in the following text are: *AE* = *L'Année Épigraphique*; *ANRW* = Hildegart Temporini – Wolfgang Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter 1974- ; *CIMRM* = Maarten J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* I.-II., Haag: Martinus Nijhoff 1956-1960; *EPRO* = *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain*.

- 1 About this early phase of the existence of Mithraism and the evidence coming down from this period see Reinhold Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Königstein/Ts.: Hein 1984, 147-149; Manfred Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae: Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 1992, 251-252; id., *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, (transl. Richard Gordon), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, 21-22; Richard Gordon, "Who Worshipped Mithras?", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 7, 1994, 459-474: 460-462, 467-468, 470; Roger Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis", *Journal of Roman Studies* 88, 1998, 115-128: 118-119. The oldest Mithraic monuments come approximately from the period 75-125 CE.
- 2 The once almost universally held opinion that Mithraism is best to interpret as a direct continuation of genuine Persian mysteries (cf. e.g. Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, [transl. Thomas J. McCormack], New York: Dover Publications <sup>2</sup>1956; Geo Widengren, "The Mithraic Mysteries in the Graeco-Roman World", in: *La persia e il mondo greco-romano*, Roma: Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, Anno 363 [1966], *Quaderno* 76, 433-456; id., "Reflections on the Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries", in: *Penninitas: Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich*, Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo – Ghezzano 1980, 645-668; Leroy R. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, [EPRO 11], Leiden: E. J. Brill 1968: 179) seems to be now completely abandoned. Even those

communities probably disappeared in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE and in most regions probably much sooner.<sup>3</sup>

The system of seven Mithraic grades belongs among the characteristic Mithraic structures, together with the tauroctony (the main iconographic motif of the cult) and the mithraeum (its sacred architecture).<sup>4</sup> Some roughly analogous grades or rather cultic offices can be found in other Hellenistic mystery cults as well, but in comparison with the system used in Mithraism they have evidently never reached the comparable level of complexity.<sup>5</sup> Even though the existence of Mithraic grades is reliably attested by the combination of independent sources (classical literature, Mithraic inscriptions and iconography etc.), their study is confounded by many difficulties. The main complication arises from the fact that the actual amount of evidence we have about them is very small and sometimes yields very

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scholars still defending the assumption that many authentic Persian motifs found its way into Mithraism acknowledge the fact that Mithraism slowly evolved somewhere in Asia Minor in a creative hotbed of Persian, Greek and local religious ideas and therefore must be seen as a new religious phenomenon (cf. e.g. Robert Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacisme*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres 21993, 94-95; Richard Gordon, "Persei sub rupibus antri: Überlegungen zur Entstehung der Mithrasmysterien", in: Mojca Vomer-Gojkovič (ed.), *Ptuj v rimskem cesarstvu – Mitražem in njegova doba*, [Archaeologia Poetoviensis 2], Ptuj: Pokrajinski Muzej Ptuj 2001, 289-301). Nevertheless, from the beginning of the 1980's a completely different view of Mithraic origins came to fashion: the idea that Mithraism arose or was even created in Italy, most probably in Rome or Ostia (cf. e.g. Maarten J. Vermaseren, "Mithras in der Römerzeit", in: Maarten J. Vermaseren [ed.], *Die orientalische Religionen im Römerreich*, [EPRO 93], Leiden: E. J. Brill 1981, 96-120: 96-97; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 75-77; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 253-255; id., *The Roman Cult...*, 7). Roger Beck ("The Mysteries of Mithras...") has recently tried to reconcile these opposing views in his new scenario of Commagenian genesis of Mithraism.

- 3 Some scholars maintain that Mithraism virtually ceased to exist even shortly before the time when the Theodosian Edicts had been issued (cf. R. Turcan, "Les motivations de l'intolérance chrétienne et la fin du Mithriacisme au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle ap. J.-C.", in: Janos Harmatta [ed.], *Actes du VII<sup>e</sup> Congrès de la Fédération Internationale des Associations d'Études Classiques II. Budapest, 3-8 septembre 1979*, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó 1984, 209-226: 222-223; Luther H. Martin, "Roman Mithraism and Christianity", *Numen* 36, 1989, 2-15: 12). Eberhard Sauer (*The End of Paganism in the North-Western Provinces of the Roman Empire: The Example of the Mithras Cult*, Oxford: Tempus Reparatum 1996; id., "Not Just Small Change – Coins in Mithraea", in: Marleen Martens – Guy de Boe [eds.], *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, Brussels: Museum Het Toreke 2004, 327-353), however, having analyzed coins discovered in some mithraea, claims that in some regions of the Roman Empire Mithraic communities could still operate in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.
- 4 R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press 2006, 7.
- 5 Jaime Alvar, *Los misterios: religiones "orientales" en el imperio romano*, Barcelona: Crítica 2001, 265.

enigmatic information, which makes their interpretation extremely problematic. Therefore, compared with other aspects of Mithraism, for example the cult's architecture, iconography or the social structure of its membership, we are only imperfectly informed about the meaning of Mithraic grades and their role in Mithraic religious life.

The aim of this study is to re-open the problem of Mithraic grades in the light of some new important discoveries, address some crucial questions about their character recently raised and formulate a final statement about their nature, even if necessarily open to further discussion.

### Seven Mithraic Grades: What We Know about Them

At the present time we know, with almost absolute certainty, that Mithraists commonly used a sequence of these seven grades: Raven (*Corax*), Bridegroom (*Nymphus*),<sup>6</sup> Soldier (*Miles*), Lion (*Leo*), Persian (*Perses*), Runner of the Sun (*Heliodromus*) and Father (*Pater*).<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were known only superficially, mostly from isolated references in classical authors<sup>8</sup> and sporadic occurrences in epigraphical testimonies. Moreover, much confusion was caused by the fact that the name of the second Mithraic grade was, due to differing readings preserved in Jerome's manuscripts, incorrectly reconstructed and instead of the now generally accepted title *Nymphus* the emendations *Cryphius* (One who is shrouded) or, exceptionally, *Gryphus* (Vulture) were suggested.<sup>9</sup> Even the number of the grades became the subject of some scholarly controversi-

6 About the translation of the name of this grade see R. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras", *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 3, 1980, 19-99: 48-49. I consider his interpretation and translation much more persuasive than 'bee chrysalis' proposed by Reinhold Merkelbach (*Mithras...*, 88-93).

7 We certainly cannot entirely exclude the possibility that other grades, or intermediate stages of individual grades in this standard sequence, existed in some Mithraic communities. To mention just one instance, frescos and graffiti from Dura Europos contain elsewhere unattested Mithraic titles, e.g. *antipater* (*CIMRM* 57 and 63), *melloleôn* (*CIMRM* 63) or *stereotēs* (*CIMRM* 63). See also n. 12 below.

8 The only source giving the complete sequence is one of Jerome's letters (*Epistula [ad Laetam]* 107.2). Other classical authors reporting some information on Mithraic grades are e.g. Porphyry, *De abstinentia* 4.16; id., *De antro nympharum* 15-16; Tertullian, *De corona militis* 15.3-4; id., *De praescriptione haereticorum* 40.4; id., *Adversus Marcionem* 1.13; Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* 5.2; Ambrosiaster, *Questiones veteris et novi testamenti* 113.11.

9 For the more detailed information about the problems connected with the establishment of the correct reading of Jerome's text, see Bruce M. Metzger, "St. Jerome's Testimony Concerning the Second Grade of Mithraic Initiation", *American Journal of Philology* 66, 1945, 225-233.



**Fig. 1 Reverse side of cult-relief from Konjic (CIMRM 1896.3)**

Taken over from Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, 109, fig. 69.

es,<sup>10</sup> usually instigated by the well-known cult-relief from Konjic<sup>11</sup> (fig. 1) that depicts only six persons, some of them wearing animal masks and thus demonstrably grade holders, or one of Porphyry's texts, which again gives some unusual names for Mithraic initiates unattested elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

Three very important discoveries contributed decisively to the clarification of these ambiguities: (1) graffiti found in the Dura Europos mithrae-

10 William J. Phythian-Adams, "The Problem of Mithraic Grades", *Journal of Roman Studies* 2, 1912, 52-64.

11 CIMRM 1896.3.

12 Porphyry (*De abstinentia* 4.16) speaks about 'Eagles' (*aetoi*) and 'Hawks' (*hierakes*), but evidently in connection with the highest Mithraic grade *Pater*. The existence of a hypothetical female Mithraic grade 'Lioness' (*leaina*) (Jonathan David, "The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?", *Numen* 47, 2000, 121-141: 123-125, 135-137) or 'Hyena' (*hyaina*) (Željko Miletić, "The Nymphus Grade and the Reverse of the Mithraic Cult Icon from Konjic", in: Mojca Vomer-Gojkovič [ed.], *Ptuj v rimskem cesarstvu – Mitražem in njegova doba*, [Archaeologia Poetoviensis 2], Ptuj: Pokrajinski Muzej Ptuj, 283-288: 287), sometimes defended on the basis of this passage, is evidently founded on a blatant misinterpretation of Porphyry's text (cf. Aleš Chalupa, "Hyenas or Lionesses? Mithraism and Women in the Religious World of the Late Antiquity", *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 13, 2005, 198-230: 209-210; Alison B. Griffith, "Completing the Picture: Women and the Female Principle in the Mithraic Cult", *Numen* 53, 2006, 48-77: 51-52).

um in Syria containing the names of six Mithraic grades,<sup>13</sup> one of them being *Nymphus*; this evidence closed the ongoing discussion about the name of the second Mithraic grade in favor of the above-mentioned title;<sup>14</sup> (2) the floor mosaic in the Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia,<sup>15</sup> representing a sequence of squares extending ladder-like up the central aisle, each square depicting three symbols, two of the grade and one of the planet (fig. 2); (3) dipinti of the acclamatory sentences discovered in the Santa Prisca Mithraeum in Rome mentioning the names of all grades, together with a planetary god under whose protection each grade belonged.<sup>16</sup> Especially the finds from Rome and Ostia were of crucial importance, for they helped to establish hitherto unknown and in our literary sources completely omitted connection between the grades and seven planets, moreover in a sequence that is peculiarly Mithraic and does not correspond to any other planetary order known from antiquity.<sup>17</sup>

The overall interpretation of Mithraic grades and their symbolic significance is beyond the scope of this study.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, one fact deserves special attention: the connection of grades with planets and planetary gods evidently had a legitimizing function, because it suitably explains why the-

13 *Korax* (CIMRM 63); *nymphos* (CIMRM 63); *stratiōtēs* (CIMRM 57, 59 and 63); *leōn* (CIMRM 57 and 63); *Persēs* (CIMRM 63); *patēr* (CIMRM 63; including *patēr pateron* [CIMRM 57]); the only grade absent is *Heliodromus*. Cf. also E. D. Francis, "Mithraic graffiti from Dura-Europos", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* II, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 424-445: 439-445.

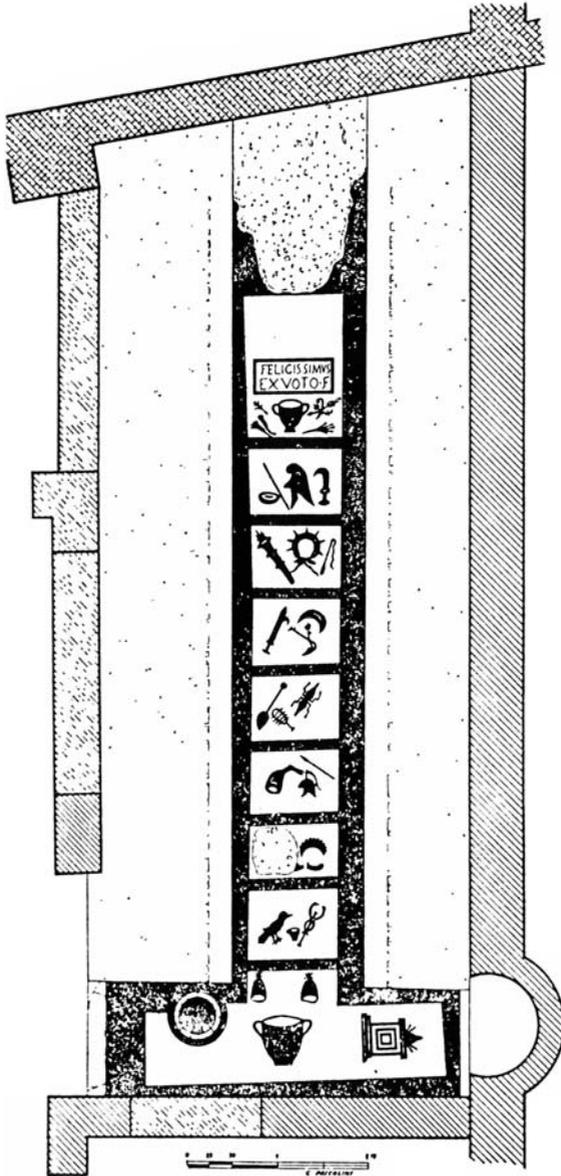
14 B. M. Metzger, "St. Jerome's Testimony...", 226-227; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 77, n. 2.

15 CIMRM 299.

16 Maarten J. Vermaseren – Carolus C. Van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1965, 155-158, 168-169.

17 R. L. Gordon, "Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* I, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 215-248: 229-230; R. Beck, "Mithraism since Franz Cumont", *ANRW* II.17.4, 1984, 2002-2115: 2092; id., *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras*, (EPRO 109), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1988, 2.

18 For an introductory discussion of Mithraic grades see e.g. Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Mithras: Geschichte eines Kultes*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1965: 113-126; R. Turcan, *Mithras...*, 81-83; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult...*, 131-140. For a more detailed interpretation see István Tóth, "Mithram esse coronam suam: Bemerkungen über den dogmatischen Hintergrund der Initiationsriten der Mithrasmysterien", *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis* 2, 1966, 73-79; id., "Das lokale System der mithraischen Personifikationem im Gebiet von Poetovio", *Arheološki vestnik (Acta archaeologica)* 28, 1977, 385-392 (not always entirely convincing); R. L. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary..."; id., "Mystery, Metaphore and Doctrine in the Mysteries of Mithras", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Roma: «L'Erma» di Bretschneider 1994, 103-124; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 77-133 (highly idiosyncratic); J. Alvar, *Los misterios...*, 262-275.



**Fig. 2 Mithraeum of Felicissimu, mosaic floor**

Taken over from Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, 47, fig. 9.

re were seven grades (and not more or less) and possibly sets the progress of an initiate through the hierarchy of seven grades into a cosmological – and no doubt also a soteriological – perspective.

### 1. Raven (*Corax*)

Symbols on the mosaic in the Felicissimus mithraeum: Raven, Cup, The Staff carried by Mercury (*Caduceus*). Tutelary planet: Mercury.

Our information about ravens comes predominantly from the interpretation of Mithraic iconography. We have only one literary remark, written by a Christian author obviously mocking pagan religious attitudes.<sup>19</sup> On the basis of iconography it seems that on some occasions Ravens acted as servants assisting during Mithraic feasts.<sup>20</sup> Whether they donned raven masks on this occasion, as is sometimes claimed,<sup>21</sup> remains dubious. Richard Gordon highlighted raven's connection with divination and also stressed other ambiguous or exceptional properties ravens in the antiquity purportedly had.<sup>22</sup> Raven obviously played some role in Mithras myth, because this bird appears in various contexts on many iconographic scenes and cultic objects.<sup>23</sup> Raven bones have also been discovered in some mithraea or in their vicinity.<sup>24</sup> Due to their sometimes carefully arranged disposal<sup>25</sup> it is possible to conclude that their burial was deliberate and could

19 Ambrosiaster, *Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* 113.11.

20 See especially *CIMRM* 42.13 (Dura Europos); *CIMRM* 397 (Rome); *CIMRM* 1896.3 (Konjic).

21 Cf. F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra...*, 152-154; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult...*, 133.

22 R. L. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary...", 25-32.

23 See especially *CIMRM* 1584; *CIMRM* 988; a clay model of a raven was also perched on the rim of the Mainz Vessel (see Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche, "Der Mainzer Krater mit den sieben Figuren", in: Marleen Martens – Guy de Boe (eds.), *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, Brussel: Museum Het Toreke 2004, 213-227: 216-221 and fig. 10 and 12), the fact which possibly connects this item with the catasterismic myth explaining the origin of the Raven constellation (cf. R. L. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary...", 26-27).

24 Mithraeum in German Wiesloch (see Richard Gordon, "Mithraeum in the vicus of Wiesloch, Lkr. Rhein-Neckar (Baden-Württemberg), Germany", <<http://www.uhu.es/ejms/archreports.htm>>, [15. 5. 2008], *Electronic Journal of Mithraic Studies* 1, 2000, 2; mithraeum in Walbrook (John D. Shepherd, *The Temple of Mithras, London. Excavations by W. F. Grimes and A. Williams at Walbrook*, London: English Heritage 1998, 214); mithraeum in Tienen (An Lentacker – Anton Eryvynck – Wim Van Neer, "The Symbolic Meaning of the Cock. The Animal Remains from the Mithraeum at Tienen [Belgium]", in: Marleen Martens – Guy de Boe [eds.], *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, Brussel: Museum Het Toreke 2004, 57-80: 59).

25 R. Gordon, "Mithraeum in the vicus of Wiesloch...", 3-4.

have deeper symbolical meaning, although we can only speculate about motivations behind this behaviour.

## 2. Bridgroom (*Nymphus*)

Symbols on the mosaic in the Felicissimus mithraeum: Oil lamp, Diadem, (third symbol is unrecognizable). Tutelary planet: Venus.

Bridgroom is doubtless the most mysterious of Mithraic grades. It is again obvious that this grade was marked with many ambiguities.<sup>26</sup> The title itself is a newly coined word used only, as far as we know, in Mithraic contexts. It relates to a person that does not exist in the real world: a bride of male sex. We know almost nothing about the role holders of this grade played in cult's ritual activities. Firmicus Maternus, the Christian author of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, preserved the wording of the ritual greeting that was used by Mithraists on some occasions during which Bridgroom was present: "Hail Nymphus, hail New Light!"<sup>27</sup> Since one of the symbols attested on the floor mosaic from the Felicissimus mithraeum is a diadem, possible equipped with a veil (the common symbol of the goddess Venus), we can speculate that these words were pronounced at some quasi-nuptial ceremony, maybe at the moment when the new Bridgroom became unveiled for the first time before the eyes of the assembled Mithraic community.<sup>28</sup> The second attested symbol, an oil lamp, gives some reasons why Mithraic Bridgrooms were called 'New light' and, maybe, hints at their ritual duties: illumination of Mithraic 'Caves', even though this explanation must remain, again, speculative.

## 3. Soldier (*Miles*)

Symbols on the mosaic in the Felicissimus mithraeum: Lance, Helmet, Bull's Hind-quarter.<sup>29</sup> Tutelary planet: Mars.

26 R. L. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary...", 48-54.

27 Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* 19.1 (English translation R. L. Gordon in M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult...*, 134).

28 R. L. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary...", 52.

29 I am well aware of the fact that this identification is very controversial and has never been, as far as I know, proposed in connection with Felicissimus mosaic. The majority of scholars see in this item either a soldier's sling-bag (e.g. M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult...*, 134) or a Phrygian cap (R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 85, 95). Nonetheless, the very similar objects sometimes appear on the monuments depicting the so-called 'Ob-  
 isance of the Sun' and in some instances is the object Mithras wields conclusively a bull's hind-quarter (cf. e.g. *CIMRM* 390 [Roma, Barberini mithraeum]; *CIMRM* 650 [Nersae]; *CIMRM* 1295.5d [Osterburken]; *CIMRM* 1430.C5 [Virunum]); for a detailed discussion and further evidence see Richard L. Gordon – John Hinnells, "Some New

The initiation into this grade is described in some detail in Tertullian's writing *De corona*:

Are you not ashamed, fellow soldiers of Christ, that you will be found wanting, not by him, but by some Soldier of Mithras? At his initiation in the cave, in the very camp of darkness, a crown is offered to the candidate at the point of a sword, as if in imitation of martyrdom, and put on his head; then he is admonished to put his hand up and dash it from his brow onto his shoulders, as it may be, saying: 'My crown is Mithras!' <sup>30</sup>

Also some scenes depicted on the frescoes from the S. Maria Capua Vetere mithraeum resemble military rituals,<sup>31</sup> but it is uncertain how far we can press this analogy. Franz Cumont claimed,<sup>32</sup> on the basis of another of Tertullian's texts,<sup>33</sup> that Mithraic 'Soldiers' were branded or tattooed on their faces during initiations, but this interpretation is now generally rejected.<sup>34</sup> Besides a rather vague guess that Mithraic 'Soldiers' somehow represented the persistence of an initiate in his service to the deity<sup>35</sup> we know almost nothing about their role in the cult's ritual life and symbolic meaning of this grade.

#### 4. Lion (*Leo*)

Symbols on the mosaic in the Felicissimus mithraeum: Thunderbolt, Rattle (*Sistrum*), Fire-shovel. Tutelary planet: Jupiter.

The lion sometimes appears depicted on the tauroctony, especially in the Rheinian provinces, in a group with a snake and crater,<sup>36</sup> or on various utensils found in mithraea.<sup>37</sup> On some other Mithraic monuments we can

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Photographs of Well-known Mithraic Monuments", *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2, 1977, 198-223: 213-218).

30 Tertullian, *De corona* 15.3 (English translation Richard Gordon in M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult...*, 134-135). For the detailed analysis of Tertullian's testimony see M. Clauss, "Miles Mithrae", *Klio* 74, 1992, 269-274; Per Beskow, "Tertullian on Mithras", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Roma: «L'Erma» di Bretschneider 1994, 51-60: 52-54.

31 Cf. M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I: The Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1971, especially plates XXII-XXIII, XXV-XXVI, XXVIII.

32 Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras...*, 157.

33 Tertullian, *De praescriptione hereticorum* 40.

34 P. Beskow, "Branding in the Mysteries of Mithras?", in: Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae*, (EPRO 80), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 487-501.

35 M. Clauss, "Miles Mithrae...", 270-271.

36 See e.g. *CIMRM* 1083 (Nida/Hedderheim); *CIMRM* 1292 (Osterburken); *CIMRM* 1283 (Neunheim); *CIMRM* 1306 (Fellbach).

37 See e.g. *CIMRM* 988.

identify human figures with a lion head.<sup>38</sup> These depictions lead some scholars to conclude that Mithraic ‘Lions’ donned lion masks on some occasions as well.<sup>39</sup> In antiquity, lions were seen as animals closely connected with fire and heat.<sup>40</sup> It seems that this property was typical also for Mithraic ‘Lions’, since one of the signs related to this grade, attested on the Felicissimus mosaic, is a fire-shovel. We also know, thanks to Porphyry, that Mithraists saw ‘Lions’ to be so ‘hot’ that they must have been purified by honey instead of water:

So in the Lion mysteries, when honey is poured instead of water for purification on the hands of the initiates, they are exhorted to keep them pure from everything distressing, harmful and loathsome; and since he is an initiate of fire, which has a cathartic effect, they use on him a liquid related to fire, rejecting water as inimical to it. They use honey as well to purify the tongue from all guilt.<sup>41</sup>

Yet another important piece of information which can be deduced from above cited text is that Mithraic ‘Lions’ were closely connected with moral issues and they can thus be seen as moral guardians of Mithraic communities. This interpretation seems to be corroborated by the role they performed during Mithraic rituals: they were incense burners and purifiers.<sup>42</sup> On one acclamatory inscription from the mithraeum discovered under the church of Santa Prisca in Rome we can read: “Receive the incense-burners, Father, receive the Lions, Holy One, through whom we offer incense, through whom we are ourselves consumed!”<sup>43</sup> This motif is probably elaborated also on the inscription from Dura Europos mithraeum, which contain the phrase “fiery breath, which is for the Magi too the lustration of holy [men]”,<sup>44</sup> or on the wall painting, no doubt idiosyncratic, from the re-

38 See e.g. *CIMRM* 125 (Rusicadae); *CIMRM* 1896.3 (Konjic).

39 E.g. F. Cumont, *The Mysteries...*, 152-153; M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras...*, 113.

40 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 33-37.

41 Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 15 (cited according to Arethusa edition translation in M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult...*, 135).

42 Cf. Joanna Bird, “Incense in Mithraic Ritual: The Evidence of the Finds”, in: Marleen Martens – Guy de Boe (eds.), *Roman Mithraism: the Evidence of the Small Finds*, Brussel: Museum Het Toreke, 191-199.

43 M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 224-232, lines 16-17: *Accipe thuricremos pater accipe sancte Leones, / per quos thuradamus, per quos consumimur ipsi.*

44 Michael I. Rostovtzeff et al., *The Excavation at Dura-Europos: Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons (1934-4, 1934-5)*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1939, 127, no. 865. English translation R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 36.

cently discovered mithraeum in Syrian Hawarti, where we can see lions tearing apart small human figures of black color.<sup>45</sup>

### 5. Persian (*Perses*)

Symbols on the mosaic in the Felicissimus mithraeum: Persian Dagger (*Akinakes*), Moon Sickle, Star, Plough.<sup>46</sup> Tutelary planet: Moon.

About Mithraic ‘Persians’ we know next to nothing. One passage in Porphyry’s text mentions that “[w]hen ... they [i.e. Mithraists] offer honey to the Persian as preserver of fruits, it is its preservative powers they treat symbolically.”<sup>47</sup> This grade seems to be somehow connected with the fertility, but about its role in Mithraic rituals and further symbolism related to it, we can only speculate.

### 6. Runner of the Sun (*Heliodromus*)

Symbols on the mosaic in the Felicissimus mithraeum: Seven-rayed Crown, Whip, Torch. Tutelary planet: Sun.

In antiquity, this word was used extremely rarely outside of the Mithraic context, even though it is not completely unknown.<sup>48</sup> It seems to mean “runner of the Sun” or “one who proceeds like the Sun”, which is in perfect agreement with the known fact that this grade stood under the protection of this particular planet. There is also an intriguing possibility that Mithraists had in mind also something more specific: a very rare kind of Indian bird which was believed to follow the Sun’s journey across the sky, known from the *Cyranides*, a late antique encyclopedia of magical and occult lore.<sup>49</sup> The Mithraic iconography indicates that holders of this grade served as surrogates of the Sun god in some rituals, especially during the ‘Sacred Repast’ between Mithras and Sol which followed the bull’s sacrifice.<sup>50</sup> One of the scenes depicted on the Mainz vessel, the so-called ‘Pro-

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45 Richard L. Gordon, “Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine”, *Topoi* 11, 2001, 77-136: 109-111.

46 The identification of this symbol is problematic. Some scholars see in it rather a sickle (cf. M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult...*, 136), but I personally consider a plough much more credible alternative (cf. also J. Alvar, *Los misterios...*, 272).

47 Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 15 (Cited according to Arethusa Edition translation in M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult...*, 136).

48 For examples see R. L. Gordon, “Mystery, Metaphore and Doctrine...”, 110-111.

49 *Cyranides* 3.15; first time suggested by R. L. Gordon (“Mystery, Metaphore and Doctrine...”, 111-112).

50 See e.g. *CIMRM* 641 (Fiano Romano); *CIMRM* 1083 (Nida/Hedderheim); *CIMRM* 1137 (Rückingen); *CIMRM* 1275 (Ladenburg). About the Mithraic feasts generally see

cession of the Sun-runner' (fig.4), allows us to conclude that *Heliodromus* was somehow connected with the yearly solar cycle and performed some rituals which acknowledged astronomically important periods like solstices or equinoxes.<sup>51</sup> We can only speculate about the role of *Heliodromi* in other rituals represented on Mithraic iconography, e.g. in the 'Sol's Obeisance'<sup>52</sup> or in the 'Pact of Friendship' (the handshake between Mithras and Sol),<sup>53</sup> but it seems very probable that they took over the Sun god's role here as well.

## 7. Father (*Pater*)

Symbols on the mosaic in the Felicissimus mithraeum: Phrygian Cap, Staff, Dagger (or Sickle), Sacrificial Bowl (*Patera*). Tutelary planet: Saturn.

Mithraic Fathers were indisputable leaders of the community and watched over most, if not all, religious and administrative activities. They provided necessary religious expertise on various aspects of Mithraic ideology, e.g. on the astrological elements<sup>54</sup> or secret knowledge about the (seemingly) paradoxical nature of the universe and processes taking place in it. From the reading of many Mithraic inscriptions it is also obvious that they supervised the setting up of votive offerings to Mithras.<sup>55</sup> In rituals, they performed the role of god's earthly representative, especially during the 'Sacred Repast', a mythical model for the common meal of all Mithraists. In all probability they also supervised the performance of initiatory rituals like those depicted on the wall-painting from the Santa Maria Capua Vetere mithraeum or the Mainz Vessel (the so-called 'Archery of the Father'; see fig. 3) and thus controlled the initiates' progress and advancement in the cult's hierarchy.

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J. P. Kane, "The Mithraic Cult Meal in its Greek and Roman Environment", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies II*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 313-351.

51 R. Beck, "Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel", *Journal of Roman Studies* 90, 2000, 145-180: 154-167; id., "Four Men, Two Sticks and a Whip: Image and Doctrine in a Mithraic Ritual", in: Harvey Whitehouse – Luther H. Martin (eds.), *Theorizing Religions Past: Archaeology, History, and Cognition*, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press 2004, 87-103: 90-95.

52 See e.g. *CIMRM* 1292.5d (Osterburken); *CIMRM* 1430 (Virunum); *CIMRM* 2190 (Bucharest) etc.

53 see e.g. *CIMRM* 1430 (Virunum); *CIMRM* 1584 (Poetovio) etc.

54 *CIMRM* 708.

55 E.g. *CIMRM* 333; *AE* 1979: no. 425.

### Seven Mithraic Grades: Questions Raised

For a very long time it was generally accepted that all Mithraists were obligated to undergo, at least in theory, seven successive initiations and thus gradually ascend from the lowest grade 'Raven' to the highest 'Father'.<sup>56</sup> However, in 1990 the German scholar Manfred Clauss thoroughly investigated and questioned this assumption. In his opinion, the Mithraic system of seven grades does not reflect an initiatory but a priestly hierarchy.<sup>57</sup> 'Rank and file' Mithraists therefore were not expected to be initiated seven times. Such a procedure would have been rather tedious and would have required substantial financial resources and special knowledge they neither had nor were willing to obtain. They satisfied themselves with only one obligatory initiation, which guaranteed their admission into a Mithraic community and gave them right to participate in cultic banquets and other ritual activities.

According to Clauss, it is impossible to argue solely on the basis of Jerome's text that all Mithraists had the obligation to undergo seven successive initiations. However, taking into account that the epigraphically attested term *gradus*<sup>58</sup> together with the floor mosaics in the Ostian mithraeum of Felicissimus are completely consistent with this view, he considers this proposal an acceptable starting point for any further discussion.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, after his minute analysis of the social structure of the Mithraic Mysteries he was able to establish that only about 170 Mithraists out of the total sum of 1058 (ca. 15 %), who we know by name, mentioned any grade.<sup>60</sup> In his opinion, it is rather strange that such a great number of Mithraists decided to withhold information about their initiatory status in their dedications, especially when they otherwise meticulously registered their social standing or military ranks.<sup>61</sup>

56 E.g. F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras*..., 152; M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras*..., 113; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*..., 109; Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1985, 42.

57 M. Clauss, "Die sieben Grades des Mithras-Kultes", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 82, 1990, 183-194; cf. also id., *Cultores Mithrae*..., 275-277; id., *The Roman Cult*..., 131-133. Certain doubts whether the Mithraic system of seven grades was really relevant to all initiates and not only to the distinctive priestly class were raised already before Manfred Clauss by Concetta Aloe Spada ("Il leo nella gerarchia dei gradi mitriachi", in: Ugo Bianchi [ed.], *Mysteria Mithrae*, [EPRO 80], Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 639-648: 641), but she did not pursue this idea any further. Cf. also M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras*..., 113.

58 *CIMRM* 887; L. Apronius / Chrysomachus / ob gradum per/sicum / dedicavit.

59 M. Clauss, "Die sieben Grade...", 184.

60 *Ibid.*, 185. Some individuals made more than one dedication.

61 M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*..., 276.

Moreover, there are some other discrepancies. The distribution of grades that can be connected with the name of any known Mithraist is rather irregular: only two grades are attested profusely (*Pater*: 122, *Leo*: 41), another three only sporadically (*Corax*: 5, *Miles* and *Perses*: 1) and two are completely absent from our epigraphical sources (*Nymphus* and *Heliodromus*).<sup>62</sup> Yet another discrepancy can be found in the regional distribution of the grades. Fully 70,6 % of grade attestations comes from Italy alone (Rome herself contributes some 37,6 %), 13,5 % from the Danubian provinces, 4,1 % from Upper and Lower Germania and the rest (11,8 %) from other provinces of the Roman Empire. If we consider the total sum of all Mithraic dedications, the following pattern of distribution appears: Italy 34,1 % (Rome 12,8 %), the Danubian provinces 43,8 %, Upper and Lower Germania 10,2 % and other Roman provinces 11,9 %.<sup>63</sup> Manfred Clauss explains this regional diversity (especially the overrepresentation of Rome and Italy) in light of his conclusion that the Mysteries of Mithras originated in Italy, most probably in Rome or Ostia, from where they only subsequently spread into other parts of the Roman Empire.<sup>64</sup> The custom of indicating immediate grades was thus more deeply rooted in these regions and membership in the cult could even become part of religious traditions of some families.<sup>65</sup> This conclusion is also further supported by the fact that Mithras is the only deity whose name appears in inscriptions more often misspelled than in its correct form.<sup>66</sup> This state of affairs is again typical for the Danubian and Rhinean provinces, where four names of Mithras out of five are written incorrectly, whereas in Italy this ratio is reversed. This fact attests the existence of a rather rudimentary form of the Mysteries outside Italy and casts serious doubt on the theory that a series of seven strenuous initiations was obligatory to all members of the cult.<sup>67</sup>

These disproportions and irregularities led Manfred Clauss to the conclusion that the great majority of Mithraists were initiated only once and

62 M. Clauss, "Die sieben Grade...", 185.

63 *Ibid.*, 188-189.

64 *Ibid.*, 189-190; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 253-255; id., *The Roman Cult...*, 7-8. But see the critical remarks in R. L. Gordon, "Who worshipped...", 467-468; id., "Persei sub rupibus...", 292.

65 M. Clauss, "Die sieben Grade...", 190.

66 Cf. M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 278. In more than 120 inscriptions, where the god's name is given in an unabbreviated form, we can find no less than 18 erroneous readings, e.g. *Mythrae* = *CIMRM* 1830; *Minitrae* = *CIMRM* 1776; *Motre* = *CIMRM* 1700; *Metras* = *CIMRM* 1443; *Myrthe* = *CIMRM* 1243; *Mytrae* = *CIMRM* 1303 a 1367; *Mithre* = *CIMRM* 1976; *Meteri* = *CIMRM* 1892; *Methrae* = *CIMRM* 522; *Mitre* = *CIMRM* 206.

67 M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 278.

that besides them there was a relatively small group of grade holders, a ‘priestly class’ of the cult:

Die überwiegende Mehrzahl der Mitglieder begnügte sich mit einer Einweihung in den Kult, engagierte sich darüber hinaus finanziell an dem Bau der Heiligtümer wie an ihrer Ausgestaltung durch Altäre, Reliefs und Statuen... Von dieser großen Gruppe läßt sich eine Minderheit abheben. Sie brachte das Engagement auf, sich der sicherlich langwierigen Prozedur der stufenweisen Initiation in die sieben Grade zu unterziehen, um dann die Opfer, den Kultvollzug und die Deutung der Kultlegende durchführen zu können. Dieses Engagement war vor allem dort vorhanden, wo der Mithras-Kult länger verankert war, also in Rom und Italien.<sup>68</sup>

These arguments deserve serious consideration, since they are grounded in a very careful and meticulous analysis of the epigraphic evidence undertaken by one of the leading experts in the field, and contradict, so it appears, our old and well-established understanding of seven Mithraic initiatory grades. The discussion has ended without a conclusive answer. Some scholars expressed their objections to Clauss’s conclusions,<sup>69</sup> but others, as it seems, implicitly accepted the possible correctness of his argumentation.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, from the time when Clauss’s conclusions were originally published some new important evidence has come to light, which could considerably enrich (though certainly not permanently solve) our discussion about the character of Mithraic grades.

### **The Character of Seven Mithraic Grades: A Discussion**

The first question that must be answered is: were Mithraic grades a system of seven initiatory stages linked together in a ladder-like way, ending in a highest and final one, or only isolated priestly functions unrelated to each other? Manfred Clauss is certainly right in one regard: we just cannot simply ‘deduce’ the existence of an initiatory ladder from Jerome’s testimony alone. Nonetheless, the very fact that both pieces of evidence which

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68 M. Clauss, “Die sieben Grade...”, 190.

69 E.g. Reinhold Merkelbach, “Priestergrade in den Mithras-Mysterien?”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 82, 1990, 195-197; R. L. Gordon, “Who worshipped...”, 465-467; R. Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras”, in: John S. Kloppenborg – Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, London – New York: Routledge, 176-185: 180-181.

70 E.g. Fritz Mitthof, “Der Vorstand der Kultgemeinden des Mithras. Eine Sammlung und Untersuchung der inschriftlichen Zeugnisse”, *Klio* 74, 1992, 279-290; Gernot Piccottini, *Mithrastempel in Virunum*, Klagenfurt: Verlag des Geschichtsvereines für Kärnten 1994, 34; M. Martens, “The Mithraeum in Tienen...”, 45; cf. also R. Turcan, *Mithra...*, 81-83.

give Mithraic grades in any kind of structured order, Jerome's letter and the Felicissimus mosaic, seem to be in complete agreement, is probably highly significant. This complete match speaks strongly in favor of the assumption that there indeed was some kind of established hierarchy in which these grades were understood and realized.

Also the meaning of the attested term *gradus* is in perfect accord with the successive nature of Mithraic grades. The most persuasive argument for the final acceptance of the vertically integrated concept of Mithraic grades is, however, their close connection with the planets and planetary gods. In the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos the universe can be seen as a hollow sphere with the Earth in its center. The universe is separated into two main regions, sublunar and superlunar. The superlunar region stretches from the Moon upward and can be further divided into eight spheres: seven of them consist of planets, from the Moon closest to the Earth up to the farthest Saturn. The eighth and highest sphere is the sphere of the fixed stars. It seems that Mithraism was, at least in its soteriological component, especially preoccupied with the destiny of the human soul from the moment it descended from the sphere of the fixed stars into physical existence and eventually returned back after the death and dissolution of its mortal body. This descent of human souls to the earth and their ascent back could be only undertaken (according to contemporaneous views) through the planetary spheres that separated the eighth and highest sphere from the Earth. It is therefore plausible enough to claim that when Mithraists *individually* went through the hierarchical sequence of grades tied up with planets and their tutelary divinities, they realized and reenacted the destiny of human souls generally. This opinion seems to be confirmed by Porphyry's description of the Mysteries and the architecture of their meeting places:

Similarly, the Persians call the place a cave where they introduce an initiate to 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 to Mithras, the creator and father of all; it was located in the mountains near Persia and had flowers and springs. This cave bore for him the image of the Cosmos which Mithras had created, and the things which the cave contained by their proportionate arrangement, provided him with symbols of the elements and climates of the Cosmos. After Zoroaster others adopted the custom of performing their rites of initiation in caves and grottos which were either natural or artificial.<sup>71</sup>

Also the very fact that some grades are attested more frequently than others can be highly significant in this regard. But contrary to Manfred

71 Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 6 (English translation R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult...*, 16).

Clauss's opinion, I am personally inclined to believe that this disproportion is rather compatible with the view that grades were vertically structured, initiatory and mandatory for all initiates than with the concept of priestly hierarchy represented only by few elite Mithraists he proposes. Clauss's argument that the rare attestations of Mithraic grades in the epigraphical evidence *must* indicate that they are priestly offices is seriously flawed in one important aspect: he does not take into account sufficiently problems connected with keeping records of a flexible system of grades on inscriptions meant to be permanent. Clauss studied almost exclusively dedications made in stone or (less often) in metal. But in this system of permanent commemoration and recording, names and social status of a dedicant had a different relevance than his current position in an initiatory hierarchy that was bound to change in the future. Once an inscription was finalized, the execution of any subsequent changes became, due to the properties of media usually used, extremely problematic. The relevance of Clauss's observation that we do not have any conclusive epigraphic evidence of a single moment, when the holder of one grade appears is also attested as the holder of a different one,<sup>72</sup> can thus be successfully questioned. That the situation could look very differently when some other kind of medium was used can be seen from the provisional archaeological report of the excavations in Dura Europos mithraeum, where a staggering amount of graffiti, probably commemorating initiations into various grades, was discovered.<sup>73</sup> Unfortunately, we can only say that this more mundane aspect of the commemoration of these important events in the lives of initiates had only little chance to be preserved in the materials characteristic of the Danubian or Rhinean provinces.

It is probably not fortuitous, too, that the Mithraic grades most often mentioned on inscriptions made in permanent materials are those of *Leo* (Lion) and *Pater* (Father), because they apparently had a special position in the Mithraic initiatory hierarchy. We know that Mithraists who had reached at least the fourth grade of *Leo* were considered to be 'fully initiated' (*metechontes mystai*), in contrast to the 'attendants' (*hypēretountas mystai*), initiates into the three lowest grades from *Corax* to *Miles*,

[t]here [in Mithraism], in order to demonstrate our kinship with animals allegorically, they are accustomed to image us by means of animals. Thus they call those who are initiated into their rites 'Lions', women 'Hyenas', and the attendants 'Ravens'. And with respect to the Fathers [the same is true]; for they are called 'Eagles' and

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72 M. Clauss, "Die sieben Grade...", 183 and n. 5.

73 See M. I. Rostovtzeff et al., *Preliminary Report...*, 118; E. D. Francis, "Mithraic Graffiti...", 440-441.

'Hawks'. The person who is initiated into the grade of Lion is invested in all sorts of animal forms.<sup>74</sup>

Initiates into the 'liminal' grade of Leo were thus more strongly motivated to record in permanent inscriptions this important watershed in their cultic status than were holders of lesser grades. An initiation into the highest Mithraic grade, that of *Pater*, can be then understood as a completion of the ultimate religious goal of the Mysteries, probably closely connected with the future postmortem 'salvation' of an initiate. Taken all this into consideration, the fact that other grades except *Leo* and *Pater* are only rarely attested on permanent inscriptions does not seem to be particularly surprising.

The crucial piece of evidence about the nature of Mithraic grades comes, however, from a literal reading of the above-mentioned passage from Porphyry's philosophical treatise *De abstinetia*. As we can see, speaking about the inner division of Mithraic membership, Porphyry uses the word 'initiates' (*mystai*), not 'priests' (*hiereis*), as we would expect if Clauss's conclusions were correct.<sup>75</sup> In all probability this fact cannot be explained as a problem of terminology: the distinction between priests and initiates was certainly quite common in antiquity and Porphyry could have noted it if he had found it appropriate. But he did not and the term used by him thus provides us with yet another important piece of evidence strongly supporting the view that seven Mithraic grades were initiatory and not priestly.

But even if we accept the view that Mithraic grades were initiatory and hierarchically structured (as I think they were), one question still remains unanswered: were they universal? Is it not possible that this complex and sophisticated system was in reality entertained only in some Mithraic communities, especially in more developed and cultured regions or in Rome and Ostia? And when was this system created or introduced? Were Mithraic grades present in Mithraic religious ideology from the very beginnings of the cult, or must they be seen, rather, as a late and regionally localized innovation that found only limited acceptance in more distant provinces? In fact, this is exactly the position succinctly argued by Robert Turcan, who sees in the connection of the Mithraic grades with the seven planets – very central in my previous reasoning – a late and relatively marginal embellishment of Ostian and Roman Mithraists, which appeared so-

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74 Porphyry, *De abstinetia* 4.16 (Cited according to English translation in Mary Beard – John North – Simon Price, *Religions of Rome II: A Textbook*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, 311).

75 R. L. Gordon, "Who worshipped...", 466.

metimes at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE and has never become particularly widespread.<sup>76</sup>

Turcan's line of argumentation, however, does not seem to be entirely persuasive. It must be admitted that the regional disproportion in the appearance of grades causes some problems, but, again, this may be explained on the grounds of regional differences in the use of epigraphy and selection of information deemed important enough to be transmitted and commemorated in this way. Nonetheless, the existence of grades seems to be now attested also among the Mithraists in Virunum, the regional center of the Roman province Noricum. Six individuals on the so-called *album* from Virunum,<sup>77</sup> a metal plaque registering the membership of one of the local Mithraic communities, is marked with the word PATER or letters PAT (in all probability the abbreviation of the same title).<sup>78</sup> Also some figural monuments indicate that the concept of grades was not completely limited to Rome and Ostia. Persons with raven and lion heads appear on the cult relief from Konjic<sup>79</sup> and a raven-headed person administering a spit with the pieces of meat to the reclining Mithras and Sol during a feast is still visible on the fresco from Dura Europos mithraeum.<sup>80</sup> We can therefore tentatively argue that the system of seven Mithraic grades was probably used in many, if not most, Mithraic communities,<sup>81</sup> but because of its elusive character it is very difficult to prove their presence by the means of archaeology.

But these scattered and inconclusive pieces of evidence still do not disprove another tenet of Turcan's argument: his claim that the introduction

76 Robert Turcan, "Hiérarchie sacerdotale et astrologie dans les mystères de Mithra", in: Rita Gyselen (ed.), *La science des cieux: sages, mages et astrologues*, (Res Orientales 12), Leuven: Peeters Publishers 1999, 249-261.

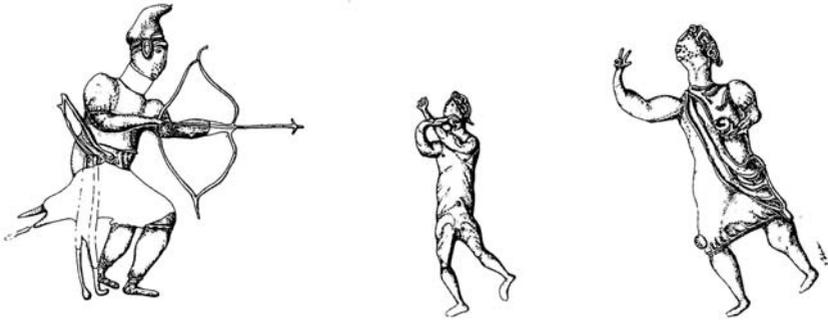
77 *AE* 1994, 1334. By strange irony of fate, this immensely important piece of evidence registering names of 98 Virunum Mithraists was discovered exactly in the very year (see G. Piccottini, *Mithrastempel...*, 9) when the most detailed and profound sociological analysis of Mithraic membership (M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*) was published. The fact that six *Patres* are attested on this monument would have probably changed none of Clauss's main conclusions about the character of Mithraic grades. Nevertheless, this situation can very well demonstrate the fact that the relatively low ration of grades attested in Danubian provinces must not be necessarily explained in terms of their general scarcity. In reality, the disproportion between Rome and provinces along the Danube River could be, albeit partially, caused by the fact that only minimum of evidence attesting their presence here survived.

78 G. Piccottini, *Mithrastempel...*, 35-36.

79 *CIMRM* 1896.3.

80 *CIMRM* 42.13.

81 R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult...*, 72; R. L. Gordon, "Institutionalized Religious Options: Mithraism", in: Jörg Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion*, Malden – Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2007, 392-405: 399.



**Fig. 3 Archery of the Father, Mainz Vessel**

Taken over from Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche, "Der Mainzer Krater mit den sieben Figuren", in: Marleen Martens – Guy de Boe (eds.), *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, Brussel: Museum Het Toreke 2004, 222, fig. 14.

of these grades happened in fact very late, at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Most of the monuments mentioned above fall easily into the time span proposed by Turcan or into the period after it. Fortunately, there is yet another piece of evidence to be discussed: the Mainz Vessel.<sup>82</sup> This large earthenware wine crater, a remarkable representative of the so-called 'snake vessels' (*Schlangengefässe*),<sup>83</sup> was found broken and ceremonially buried under the floor of the Mainz mithraeum.<sup>84</sup> It depicts on its body two separate ritual scenes in which seven persons participate.

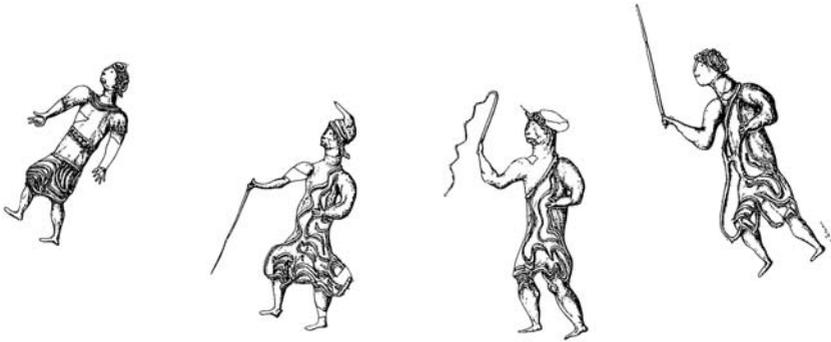
The first scene, 'Archery of the Father' (fig. 3), shows a seated bearded man with a Phrygian cap on his head aiming an arrow at another man, who is naked and proportionally smaller. He is covering his face with arms crossed, in terror or in the act of complete submission. The third participant stands behind the neophyte, hands in a rhetorical gesture. It is generally agreed that this scene depicts an initiation<sup>85</sup> and that it has a mythical

82 About this extremely important find which profoundly increased our knowledge of some aspects of Mithraism see especially Heinz G. Horn, "Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß", *Mainzer Archäologische Zeitschrift* 1, 1994, 21-66; R. Merkelbach, "Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 108, 1995, 1-6; R. Beck, "Ritual, Myth, Doctrine..."; I. Huld-Zetsche, "Der Mainzer Krater...".

83 For other vessels of this type see e.g. *CIMRM* 106; Elmar Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler orientalischer Gottheiten im Römischen Deutschland: Mit Ausnahme der ägyptischen Gottheiten*, (EPRO 40), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1974, no. 15a.

84 I. Huld-Zetsche, "Der Mainzer Krater...", 213-215.

85 E.g. H. G. Horn, "Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß...", 25-28; R. Beck, "Ritual, Myth, Doctrine...", 149.



**Fig. 4 The Procession of the Sun-Runner, Mainz Vessel**

Taken over from Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche, “Der Mainzer Krater mit den sieben Figuren”, in: Marleen Martens – Guy de Boe (eds.), *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, Brussel: Museum Het Toreke 2004, 223, fig. 15.

paradigm in the ‘Archery of Mithras’,<sup>86</sup> an iconographic motif (and no doubt also an important element in Mithras sacred narrative) appearing very often on the side scenes flanking the tauroctony.<sup>87</sup>

The second scene, ‘The procession of the Sun-Runner’ (fig. 4), shows a train of four persons. The first one in the front is wearing a breast-plate. The second and the fourth persons are holding sticks, but each in different direction: the second person holds his stick turned downward, the fourth upward. In the middle of them is yet another person yielding a whip and wearing a tiara with seven rays, a typical headdress of the Roman deity Sol. The interpretation of this scene is complicated. For the majority of scholars it is utterly confusing. In my opinion, the most persuasive interpretation proposed so far is that of Roger Beck,<sup>88</sup> who sees in this procession the symbolic reenactment of the two movements of the Sun, daily (westward across the sky) and yearly (eastward across the band of zodiacal signs),<sup>89</sup> closely connected with the inner structure of the mithraeum as ‘the image of the Cosmos’.<sup>90</sup>

86 E.g. R. Merkelbach, “Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß...”, 2-5; R. Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine...”, 150.

87 See e.g. *CIMRM* 1225 (Mogontiacum); *CIMRM* 1283.2 (Neunheim); *CIMRM* 1292.5a (Osterburken); 1533 (Poetovio).

88 R. Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine...”, 154-167.

89 *Ibid.*, 162.

90 The fact that a mithraeum is an ingenious replication of the Cosmos, as it is explicitly stated by the Greek Neo-Platonist Porphyry (*De antro nympharum* 6), seems to be corroborated by archaeological material. In some mithraea we can find peculiar details which make little sense, unless they are interpreted with Porphyry’s statements in mind.

Two conclusions are central for further discussion. Firstly, it is quite apparent that some of the participants depicted on these two scenes are holders of Mithraic grades.<sup>91</sup> Secondly, this vessel is, according to the corrected dating,<sup>92</sup> relatively old (120-140 CE) and it is even possible that it belongs to the group of the earliest preserved Mithraic material. The fact that this vessel comes from the remote borders of the Roman Empire and was certainly manufactured in the period predating the last quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE sufficiently undermines the persuasiveness of Turcan's arguments for the late origin of the system of Mithraic grades.

### Conclusions

After the careful examination of the old and new evidence relevant to the problem of Mithraic grades, I can venture the following conclusions. Even though a number of the opinions of previous scholarship about many central features of Mithraism have been abandoned in light of recent research, I could not find sufficient reasons for an overall redescription of traditional views on the nature of the Mithraic grades. I firmly believe that (1) they were initiatory and at least theoretically a religious goal of all Mithraists; (2) they were vertically structured and initiation into them imitated the journey of the human soul through the seven planetary spheres of the Ptolemaic Cosmos; (3) they were probably universal or at least realized in the majority of Mithraic communities all over the Roman Empire; (4) they were an integral part of Mithraic religious ideology and were present in it from a very early time.

I think that the real reasons behind recent tendencies to change our understanding of Mithraic grades, so forcefully and ingeniously argued in the works of Manfred Clauss and Robert Turcan, reflect the ingrained tendency among many classicists to minimize the intellectual capacities of Mithraic initiates and operate with a view of a relatively simple mystery cult with little elaborate ideology. This vision of Mithraism as a fraternity of

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91 There is a little agreement among scholars, whether all seven grades are represented on this vessel. For a succinct overview see I. Huld-Zetsche, "Der Mainzer Krater...", 223-226. We can, at least for now, conclude that the presence of Pater, Heliodromus and probably also of Miles seems to be virtually certain. Concerning the rest of the grades, I agree with Roger Beck ("Ritual, Myth, Doctrine...", 153) that we should not necessarily expect one person: one grade correlation.

92 Vera Rupp (*Wetterauer Ware: Eine römische Keramik im Rhein-Main-Gebiet*, Frankfurt: Frankfurter Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte 1987, 54-59), endorsed by H. G. Horn ("Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß...", 32), supposed that this specific type of pottery was not manufactured after the year 125 CE. This *terminus ante quem*, however, must have been slightly modified (see I. Huld-Zetsche, "Der Mainzer Krater...", 225).

brute soldiers, always present in the previous scholarship, gained a new impulse in reaction against some far-fetched, even fantastic astrological interpretations of Mithraic iconography and ‘secret’ meaning encoded in it.<sup>93</sup> Even though we must criticize these astrological over-interpretations as largely unpersuasive, a recent fad destined to fade away eventually, there is also no justification for a far-reaching simplification<sup>94</sup> of an evidently complex Mithraic ideology.

If there was any Mithraic ideology (i.e., reflections on what it meant to be a Mithraist), and there must have been some, it was created and maintained not by prescribed dogmas and teachings, but by axioms and motifs which, put into proper context, led to certain interpretations, more or less recognizable and shared by all Mithraic communities. Roger Beck thinks that there were only two main Mithraic axioms: (1) *Deus Sol Invictus Mithras*, reflecting the paradoxical identity and diversity between Sol and Mithras; (2) Harmony of tension in opposition, common theme in various philosophical schools.<sup>95</sup> These axioms were experienced in various motifs, e.g. male and female, hot and cold, descent and ascent etc. The system of Mithraic grades, and maybe of their antithesis<sup>96</sup> as well, was one of the structures whereby Mithraists could apprehend, rather intuitively, the *real* meaning of these axioms or motifs.

Instead of dead symbols, survivals from the long forgotten Persian past of the Mysteries<sup>97</sup> (if there ever was anything like that), we should rather think of Mithraic grades as a powerful, useful and sophisticated tool for establishing, maintaining and transmitting certain interpretations, values and claims in accordance with the norms and themes that Mithraists deeply cherished. Although we sometimes know only very little about the initia-

93 See especially David Ulansey, *The Origins of Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press <sup>2</sup>1991; Maria Weiss, “Mithras, der Nachthimmel: Eine Dekodierung der römischen Mithraskultbilder mit Hilfe des Awesta”, *Traditio* 53, 1998, 1-36.

94 The most extreme example of this attitude would be the criticism expressed toward David Ulansey’s theories by Noel Swerdlow (“On the Cosmical Mysteries of Mithras [Review Article of Ulansey 1989]”, *Classical Philology* 86, 1991, 48-63: 62) that ends in the following sentence: “[t]hose who ask ‘What was Mithraism, anyway?’ just may conclude that it was nothing much, and perhaps not a serious religion after all ... [i]t must have been no more than ... a rude fraternal cult of soldiers on the frontier, many of them adolescent, and perhaps of ancient veterans back in Rome and Ostia, gathering in their mock grottos to perform the old rites and recall the old days.”

95 R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult...*, 1-8, 10-11.

96 There are some reasons to believe that Mithraic cultic expression for women, ‘Hyenas’, was constructed particularly in regard to its symbolic connotations relating to the world inimical to the values appreciated by Mithraists (cf. R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 57-64).

97 F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras...*, 152-155.



tory grades, they show how a cult, whose members cannot be considered 'first-class' philosophers, were able to express and successfully transmit a rather complex set of inferences about the real nature of the world and the many processes taking place in it, without the necessity of using texts and a verbally expounded exegesis binding for all Mithraists. And that was definitely no small achievement.



## RESUMÉ

**Sedm mithraistických stupňů: iniciační, nebo kněžská hierarchie?**

Studie se zaměřuje na některé dosud nevyjasněné otázky spojené s povahou sedmi mithraistických stupňů, které byly vzneseny v nedávné době. Patří sem především otázka, zda je sedm mithraistických stupňů možné chápat jako iniciační hierarchii, navíc univerzálně přítomnou ve všech mithraistických komunitách. Přestože tento názor byl ve starším bádání všeobecně přijímán, v roce 1990 vyslovil německý badatel Manfred Clauss na základě důkladného rozboru epigrafického materiálu domněnku, že v případě mithraistických stupňů se jednalo spíše o vyšší kněžské funkce, do kterých se nechával zasvětit pouze užší okruh vyznavačů a které byly navíc uplatňovány pouze v některých oblastech Římské říše, především v Římě a Ostii. V roce 1999 do diskuze zasáhl rovněž Robert Turcan se svým tvrzením, že v případě mithraistických stupňů máme co do činění s pozdní a relativně nedůležitou inovací, která se rozvinula mezi římskými a ostijskými mithraisty v poslední čtvrtině 2. století n.l.

Po stručném přehledu našich dosavadních znalostí o mithraistických stupních jsou oba výše zmíněné názory podrobeny kritickému vyhodnocení, mimo jiné i na základě nových důležitých nálezů (mithraistické *album* z Viruna, nádoba z Mohuče, fresky ze syrského mithraea v Hawarti atd.), a odmítnuty jako neodůvodněné. Mithraistické stupně je nadále možné pokládat za (1) iniciační a závazné pro všechny mithraisty; (2) s největší pravděpodobností univerzální; (3) důležitý prostředek k vyjádření některých centrálních náboženských motivů tohoto kultu.

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