

The Origins of the Roman Cult of Mithras in the Light of New Evidence and Interpretations: The Current State of Affairs

ALEŠ CHALUPA*

The origins of the Roman cult of Mithras¹ and the historical circumstances of its formation remain a long-standing and still unresolved prob-

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1 I consider this term less misleading and more neutral than other variants such as “Mithraism” or “the Mysteries of Mithras”. Mithraism, as a modern neologism, implies the structural and conceptual unity of a large variety of evidence which might have, in

lem in Mithraic studies. This question is, however, of crucial importance, since possible answers determine, to a large extent, subsequent interpretations of Mithraic sources, which consist almost entirely of “mute” archaeological evidence in the form of mithraea, figural monuments, dedicatory inscriptions or other artefacts.² If we accept the hypothesis that the Roman cult of Mithras derives from a Persian religious tradition, it is possible to interpret Mithraic sources by direct reference to Persian sacred texts and, thus, at least in theory, to partially reconstruct the cult’s belief and ritual system, which would otherwise be almost completely unknown. However, the turbulent history of Mithraic studies in the 20th century shows that the validation of a direct and uncomplicated descent of the Roman cult of Mithras from a branch of a Persian cultural and religious tradition remains, contrary to the unanimous voice of the Graeco-Roman world, a sensitive and problematic issue. The last study to introduce a plausible scenario for the origins of the Roman Cult of Mithras was published eighteen years ago.³ Since that time, however, several potentially revolutionary discoveries have been reported⁴ and this development provides ample justification for reopening the discussion on this vexed problem in Mithraic studies once again. This article aims to re-evaluate the known Mithraic evidence, dated to the earliest phase of the cult’s existence (75-125 CE), and the major theories of Mithraic origins proposed until now. In addition, it aims, after careful examination of all circumstances, to present some preliminary conclusions concerning the most probable and plausible historical scenarios of the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras.

fact, represented different aspects of the worship offered to the god Mithras in the Roman Empire. The term Mysteries of Mithras, although attested in ancient sources – but surprisingly solely of Christian or neo-Platonic origin (cf. Richard L. Gordon, “Mithras (Mithraskult)”, *RAC* 24, 2012, 964-1009: 980-981) – is also problematic since it disproportionately emphasizes only one of many multifarious aspects of the Roman cult of Mithras.

- 2 By identifying these sources as “mute” I am making an argument that the particular meaning these objects had for individual worshippers of Mithras is usually not self-evident but must be reconstructed by scholars with reference to a certain framework of interpretation which is external to these objects. At the same time, there is usually a plurality of possible frameworks of interpretation – cultural and social contexts – and the choosing of each of them will lead to a specific interpretation and attribution of a distinctive meaning.
- 3 Roger Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 88, 1998, 115-128.
- 4 This pertains especially to the first of the two mithraea discovered in the vicinity of the small town of Dülük in modern Turkey. The German excavators of this archaeological site originally proposed a surprisingly early date for this mithraeum, see p. 80 below.

A brief history of scholarship on the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras

The quest for the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras is constantly obstructed by one crucial difficulty: the mutual inconsistency of literary and archaeological sources which are telling very different and seemingly irreconcilable “stories”.⁵ Graeco-Roman literary sources, which take notice of the existence of the Roman cult of Mithras, are in many regards scanty and vague, none of them, however, openly contests the Persian provenance of the cult. The only extant text which deals explicitly with the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras as “Mithraic mysteries” ascribes its foundation to Zarathustra, the Persian prophet *par excellence*. The Greek neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre describes the act as follows:⁶

Zoroaster, as Euboulos tells us, was the first to dedicate a natural cave in the nearby mountains of Persia, a cave surrounded by flowers and furnished with springs, in honour of Mithras, the maker and father of all. The cave was for him an image of the cosmos which Mithras created ... After Zoroaster it became the custom among others to perform ceremonies of initiation in caverns and caves, either natural or artificial.

The historicity of this claim is doubtful in the least, but this passage, if nothing else, at least attests the possibility that a similar aetiological narrative might have circulated among the worshippers of Mithras in the Roman Empire. A foundation story of this kind could provide the cult with much needed legitimacy by claiming the inheritance of ancient wisdom from a religious tradition which commanded, at least in some circles of the Roman society, respect and admiration.⁷ The Persian extraction of the

5 Cf. Christian Witschel, “Die Ursprünge des Mithras-Kults: Orientalischer Gott oder westliche Neu-schöpfung?”, in: Claus Hattler (ed.), *Imperium der Götter: Isis, Mithras, Christus: Kulte und Religionen im Römischen Reich*, Stuttgart: Theiss 2013, 201-210: 205-209.

6 Porphyry of Tyre, *De antro nympharum* 6. Quoted according to English translation in Mary Beard – John North – Simon Price, *Religions of Rome II: A Sourcebook*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, 90-91.

7 See Richard L. Gordon, “Authority, Salvation and Mystery in the Mysteries of Mithra”, in: Janet Huskinson – Mary Beard – Joyce Reynolds (eds.), *Image and Mystery in the Roman World: Three Papers Given in Memory of Jocelyn Toynbee*, Cambridge: Alan Sutton 1988, 45-80: 47. For more detailed information about the attitudes of the Greeks and Romans toward the great and ancient cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean, see Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenisation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975; Roger Beck, “Thus Spake not Zarathustra: Zoroastrian Pseudepigrapha of the Greco-Roman World”, in: Mary Boyce – Frantz Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism III: Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1991, 491-565; Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*, (RGRW 133), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1997.

“Mysteries of Mithras” is also explicitly attested in other Graeco-Roman literary sources.⁸

This perception of the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras, which was prevalent amongst Greco-Roman intellectuals, has influenced discussion on this topic from the beginnings of modern Mithraic studies, which is intrinsically connected to the figure of Franz Cumont. At the very end of the 19th century, this Belgian expert on ancient religions first collected all known surviving evidence pertaining to the worship of Mithras, including archaeological and epigraphic evidence and testimonies from ancient literature, and then arranged them in the form of a concise and accessible referential corpus.⁹ Subsequently, he wrote, based on this meticulously collected evidence, a complete history of the Mithras cult, in which its Persian origins played a decisive role.¹⁰ Cumont found the existence of strong ties between the Roman cult of Mithras and Persian religious traditions extremely persuasive and well-supported by the surviving historical evidence. In his eyes, the Roman cult of Mithras was a continuation of an originally Persian cult which, under the influence of particular historical circumstances, had left its homeland and migrated to other regions of the Roman Empire, where it successfully spread and thrived for three centuries.¹¹ Although the Roman cult of Mithras received certain “accretions” on its westward journey, according to Cumont its essential core in the form of the ideology of Persian Mazdaism remained practically unchanged.¹² Nothing probably expresses Cumont’s opinion on the nature of the Roman cult of Mithras better than the famous and often quoted passage in which Cumont uses for his description of the cult’s “layers” the metaphor of geological stratification:

An analysis of the constituent elements of Mithraism, like a cross-section of a geological formation, shows the stratification of this composite mass in their regular order of deposition. The basal layer of this religion, its lower and primordial stratum, is the

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- 8 E.g. Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* V,1-2; John the Lydian, *De mensibus* IV,30; Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 46 (369d-e); Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI,22, etc.
- 9 Franz Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs au mystères de Mithra* II, Bruxelles: H. Lamertin 1896. This *opus magnum* still remains a “must-read” source, although its function of a standard referential corpus of Mithraic evidence was superseded by Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae* I-II, Den Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1956-1960. Vermaseren’s corpus, however, in contrast to Cumont’s *TMMM* II, does not include literary sources.
- 10 Franz Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs au mystères de Mithra* I, Bruxelles: H. Lamertin 1899; an abridged version of this volume is Franz Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra*, Bruxelles: H. Lamertin³ 1913.
- 11 F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra*..., 31-84. Cumont saw the Roman army as the main propagator of the Mithras cult in the Roman Empire (*ibid.*, 39).
- 12 *Ibid.*, 24-27.

faith of ancient Iran, from which it took its origin. Above this Mazdean substratum was deposited in Babylon a thick sediment of Semitic doctrines, and afterwards the local beliefs of Asia Minor added to it their alluvial deposits. Finally, a luxuriant vegetation of Hellenic ideas burst out from this fertile soil and partly concealed from view its true original nature.¹³

Although the Cumontian scenario of the westward diffusion of the Mithraic cult eventually remained largely unfounded on historical grounds,¹⁴ it became a canonical and generally accepted version of the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras for a very long time. This vision of the Roman cult of Mithras found its strongest expression in the works of some followers of Cumont, which see it – in complete accordance with the original Cumontian view – as a cult built essentially on authentically Persian philosophical and ideological elements. Into this scholarly tradition we can classify Geo Widengren, a Swedish expert on Iranian religions,¹⁵ Leroy Campbell, an American classicist,¹⁶ and, to a certain degree, Adrian D. H. Bivar, a British orientalist.¹⁷

Over time, however, dissenting voices gradually made their appearance. Already in the 1950s, the first serious criticism of Cumontian views on the

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- 13 *Ibid.*, 27. Quoted according to English translation by Thomas J. McCormack: Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, Chicago: Open Court Publishing 1903, 30-31.
- 14 Cumont himself admitted that, due to the fragmentary character of our evidence, the precise contours of Mithraic diffusion cannot be reconstructed, cf. F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra...*, 17.
- 15 Geo Widengren, *Die Religion Irans*, (Die Religionen der Menschheit 14), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1966, 222-232; id., “The Mithraic Mysteries in the Greco-Roman World with Special Regard to Their Iranian Background”, in: *Atti del Convegno sul tema: La Persia e il mondo greco-romano, Roma 11-14 aprile 1965*, (Problemi attuali di scienza e di cultura 76), Roma: Accademia dei Lincei 1966, 433-456; id., “Bābakīya and the Mithraic Mysteries”, in: Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae*, (ÉPRO 80), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 675-696; id., “Reflections on the Origin of the Mithraic Mysteries”, in: *Perennitas: Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich: Promossi dalla Cattedra di religioni del mondo classico dell’Università degli studi di Roma*, Roma: Edizioni dell’Ateneo 1980, 645-668.
- 16 Leroy A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, (ÉPRO 11), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1968. In this monograph focusing on the classification and interpretation of Mithraic iconography, Campbell constantly refers – freely and usually also without any substantiation – to the “Oriental” and Persian motifs which, in his opinion, constitute the Roman cult of Mithras. This view can be indicatively demonstrated by the following quotation (*ibid.*, 179): “The contemporary authors generally referred to the Mithraic mysteries as being ‘Persian’, whereas modern scholars have tended to minimize the Iranian elements and treat the mysteries as being essentially Greek. I have been forced to retreat from a similar approach and to recognize that in the more or less Graeco-Roman art forms there are ideologies that are essentially oriental if not purely Persian.”
- 17 See especially Adrian D. H. Bivar, *The Personalities of Mithra in Archaeology and Literature*, (Biennial Yarshater Lecture Series 1), New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press 1998, which is a synthesis of his ideas previously published in many separate articles.

origin of the Roman cult of Mithras was expressed by the Swedish orientalist Stig Wikander.¹⁸ Wikander demonstrated that many conclusions regarding the beginnings of the cult and endorsed by Cumont and his followers were plainly arbitrary and rejected the view seeing the direct and uncomplicated descent of the Roman cult of Mithras from a Persian predecessor as completely unfounded.¹⁹ At the time, however, his isolated voice was not strong enough to disrupt the strength of the Cumontian synthesis, mainly because the alternative scenario of the cult's origins, which situated the cult's formation on the Balkan Peninsula,²⁰ was also historically implausible. Nevertheless, small inconsistencies in Cumont's seemingly monolithic interpretation of the Roman cult of Mithras began slowly to accumulate and this trend culminated in the year 1971 at the first international congress of Mithraic studies in Manchester. None of a series of papers, critical of the great Belgian scholar, was more decisive than the one presented by Richard L. Gordon, who, from the retrospective point of view, definitively demolished the magnificent edifice of Cumontian views on the Roman cult of Mithras.²¹ In his paper, Gordon systematically refuted many of the conclusions made by Cumont, including the assumption of an unbroken chain connecting the Roman cult of Mithras with a Persian religious tradition, which he considered unfounded and based almost solely on circular reasoning.²² In Gordon's opinion, it was methodologi-

18 Stig Wikander, "Études sur les mystères de Mithra I: Introduction", in: *Vetenskaps-societen i Lund: Årsbok 1950*, Lund: H. Ohlssons 1951, 5-46.

19 *Ibid.*, 16-17, 21-22.

20 *Ibid.*, 41-46.

21 Richard L. Gordon, "Franz Cumont and the Doctrine of Mithraism", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies I*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 215-248. In addition to Gordon's paper, others with far-reaching consequences include e.g. Carsten Colpe, "Mithra-Verehrung, Mithras-Kult und die Existenz iranischer Mysterien", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies II*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 378-405; John Hinnells, "Reflections on the Bull-Slaying Scene", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies II*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 290-312.

22 R. L. Gordon, "Franz Cumont...", 221. A striking example of Cumont's circular reasoning is his treatment of a lion-headed being which the Belgian scholar saw as a Mithraic representation of Zurvan, the Persian god of eternal time, see F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra...*, 106-110. Gordon ("Franz Cumont...", 221-224) persuasively proved that nothing in the iconography of this being and its attributes make this identification absolutely certain. Cumont's persuasion is thus based, to a great extent, on his previous, but never specifically confirmed, assumption that in the case of the Roman cult of Mithras we really deal with a continuation of an authentic Persian religious cult. This assumption is subsequently used as a proof for Cumont's identification of a lion-headed being with the Persian deity of Zurvan. In reality, we know neither the name given to this being by worshippers of Mithras (evidence speaks rather for the name of Arimanius) nor the role it played within the cult. The existence of strong ties between the Roman cult of Mithras and an authentic Persian predecessor is, at least in

cally untenable to interpret various features attested in the Roman cult of Mithras by references to the Persian religious tradition and its sacred texts, because the idea of Persian roots of the cult was, given the available evidence, a research question which had not been sufficiently explored or persuasively answered. Gordon's criticism aimed not so much at the idea of Persian roots of the Roman cult of Mithras *per se*, since Gordon himself saw this possibility as open for further inquiry and even likely, but rather at the observation that the uncritical adoption of Cumont's ideas made it, for a long time, very difficult to pursue alternative scenarios which might shed new light on the origins of the cult of Mithras. In addition, Wikander, Gordon and other scholars have noted that only a negligible part of Mithraic evidence comes from the regions where Cumont and his followers searched for the formation of the Roman version of the Mithras cult.²³ The center of the cult was, at least judged by the density of the preserved material evidence, situated in Italy and the Rhinean and Danubian provinces.²⁴ There is also a clearly recognizable discontinuity between the older testimonies of the Mithras cult coming from Iran, Syria or Asia Minor, which predate the Roman period, and the later evidence from the Roman Empire. It seems that certain features which characterize the Mithras cult in the West, e.g. the mithraeum, tauroctony, or the system of seven initiatory grades,²⁵ have no clear parallels in the earlier Eastern evidence and probably represent a new form of Mithras worship, which is not identifiable in archaeological material until the last quarter of the 1st century CE.²⁶ All efforts to identify these features or their rudimentary forms *in statu nascendi* in material of the Persian or Asia Minor provenance remain, after intensive scholarly discussion, futile.²⁷

As a result of this "paradigmatic shift", scholars started to entertain alternative scenarios which may prove relevant in the quest for the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras. Some scholars accepted a great deal of the criticism of Cumont's account and opted to abandon his notion of the

this case, a mere working hypothesis which demands further verification, not a firmly established fact.

- 23 See e.g. Roger Beck, "Mithraism Since Franz Cumont", *ANRW* II.17.4, 1984, 2002-2115; 2013-2020. Discoveries made in the last thirty years did not significantly change this situation.
- 24 For a general overview see tables of evidence from individual provinces in Manfred Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae: Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes*, (Heidelberger Althistorische Beiträge und Epigraphische Studien 10), Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 1992.
- 25 The discussion whether these Mithraic grades were universal and initiatory in nature still continues. For further details see Aleš Chalupa, "Seven Mithraic Grades: An Initiatory or Priestly Hierarchy?", *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 16/2, 2008, 177-201.
- 26 See the section "Evidence from the early period of the Roman cult of Mithras" below.
- 27 See the section "Evidence from the early period of the Roman cult of Mithras" below.

Roman cult of Mithras with an undiluted Persian “essence” hidden under the veil of later Hellenistic or Roman accretions. The formative process leading up to the appearance of the Roman cult of Mithras became viewed as a discontinuous transformation by which a local Persian (or generally Eastern) form of the Mithras cult gradually changed into a new religious tradition which incorporated many cultural and religious elements from different cultural backgrounds.²⁸ From this point of view, the role of the Greek Hellenistic tradition was inherent to the formative process of the cult of Mithras. The innovation was the attention being paid to the contacts of this original Mithras cult with Roman culture. This reappraisal of Roman influences pushed the emergence of the Roman cult of Mithras forward to much later times, usually well into the 1st century BCE or, in some cases, even further, to the 1st century CE.²⁹ The preferred place of origin remained Asia Minor, where we can easily postulate the existence of a vital Persian religious tradition which might have come into contact with Hellenistic and (later) Roman culture. The proponents of this scenario are, amongst others, Robert Turcan,³⁰ Ernest Will,³¹ Carsten Colpe,³² Elmar Schwertheim,³³ Mary Boyce³⁴ and Richard L. Gordon.³⁵ The proposed alternatives situated the formation of the Roman cult of Mithras on the Balkan Peninsula, in line with Stig Wikander,³⁶ or on the

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- 28 The process of the gradual formation of a new religious tradition building on elements from various previously existing traditions may potentially be described by the concept of “cultural hybridity”, which is slowly replacing the more prevalent, but also more problematic, concept of “syncretism”. Cf. Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity*, Cambridge – Malden, MA: Polity Press 2009.
- 29 For a more detailed discussion see the section “The origins of the Roman cult of Mithras: A critical discussion” below.
- 30 Robert Turcan, *Mithra et le mithraïsme*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres 21993, 19-29.
- 31 Ernest Will, “Origine et nature du mithraïsme”, in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques: Actes du 2^e Congrès international, Téhéran, du 1^{er} au 8 septembre 1975*, Téhéran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi 1978, 527-536.
- 32 C. Colpe, “Mithra-Verehrung...”, 390-394.
- 33 Elmar Schwertheim, “Mithras: Seine Denkmäler und sein Kult”, *Antike Welt* 10, 1979, 1-76: 13-29.
- 34 Mary Boyce – Frantz Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism III: Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1991, 468-490.
- 35 Richard L. Gordon, “The Date and Significance of CIMRM 593 (British Museum, Townley Collection)”, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2, 1978, 148-174; id., “*Persei sub rupibus antri*: Überlegungen zur Entstehung der Mithrasmythen”, in: Mojca Vomer-Gojkovič (ed.), *Ptuj v rimskem cesarstvu: Mitraizem in njegova doba: Mednarodno znanstveno srečanje, Ptuj, 11.-15. oktober 1999 / Ptuj in römischen Reich: Mithraskult und seine Zeit: Akten des internationalen Symposium Ptuj, 11.-15. Okt. 1999*, (Archeologia Poetoviensis 2), Ptuj: Pokrajinski Muzej Ptuj 2001, 289-301.
- 36 S. Wikander, “Études sur les mystères de Mithra I...”, 41-46.

Crimean Peninsula, which was regarded as the cradle of the cult by the Swedish scholar Per Beskow.³⁷

From the 1980s, a new type of scenario began to appear. This scenario can be seen as a more radical departure from the traditional versions of the Cumontian transformation model. In these scenarios, the Roman Cult of Mithras is not conceptualized as a product of long-lasting and spontaneous transformation, but as the consequence of a short and carefully planned invention by an unknown individual or a narrow group of founders. The proponents of this scenario very often proceed from an older hypothesis, which was first presented by Martin P. Nilsson, a Swedish expert on Greek religions. Nilsson saw the Roman cult of Mithras as the creation of an unknown religious “genius”.³⁸ The first scholar who meticulously explored this hypothesis was the German classicist Reinhold Merkelbach,³⁹ who was later followed by Manfred Clauss, a German professor of ancient history.⁴⁰ Clauss is probably the most eloquent propagator of this scenario in contemporary Mithraic studies. According to these authors, the Roman cult of Mithras originated either in Rome or Ostia and diffused at a later stage from Italy into other, more distant, Roman provinces. This scenario was or is also endorsed, to a certain extent, by the late Maarten J. Vermaseren,⁴¹ Wolfgang Liebeschuetz,⁴² and Bruno Jacobs.⁴³ The hypothetical number of suggested borrowings taken over from authentic Persian

37 Per Beskow, “The Routes of Early Mithraism”, in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques: Actes du 2^e Congrès international, Téhéran, du 1^{er} au 8 septembre 1975*, Téhéran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi 1978, 7-18.

38 Martin P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion II*, München: C. H. Beck 1961, 675-676.

39 Reinhold Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Königstein im Taunus: Anton Hain 1984, 75-77, 160-161.

40 Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2000, 7-8; cf. also id., *Cultores Mithrae...*, 253-255; id., *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, Darmstadt – Mainz: Philipp von Zabern 2012, 14-18.

41 Maarten J. Vermaseren, “Mithras in der Römerzeit”, in: id. (ed.), *Die orientalische Religionen im Römerreich*, (ÉPRO 93), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1981, 96-120: 96-97.

42 Wolfgang Liebeschuetz, “The Expansion of Mithraism among the Religious Cults of the Second Century”, in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism: Papers Associated with the Mithraic Panel Organized on the Occasion of the XVIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider 1994, 195-216: 199-200.

43 Bruno Jacobs, *Die Herkunft und Entstehung der römischen Mithrasmysterien: Überlegungen zur Rolle des Stifters und zu den astronomischen Hintergründen der Kultlegende*, (Xenia: Konstanzer Althistorische Vorträge und Forschungen 43), Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz 1999, 33-36.

traditions varies, from many according to Merkelbach⁴⁴ down to almost none, as argued by Clauss.⁴⁵

A very particular theory of Mithraic origins was presented by the American scholar David Ulansey in 1989.⁴⁶ His scenario follows a very fashionable surge in the 1980s, which put forth astrological interpretations of the Roman cult of Mithras and focused especially on deciphering the secret meaning hidden in the cult's most prolific iconographic image: the tauroctony.⁴⁷ According to Ulansey, the later Roman cult of Mithras originated in the course of the 1st century BCE with a group of stoic philosophers, residents of Tarsus in Asia Minor, as a reaction to the discovery of the precession of equinoxes, made by the famous astronomer Hipparchus of Rhodes. The precession of equinoxes, observable from the Earth as a slow westward movement of equinoctial points along the ecliptic, is the cause, among other things, of the gradual change of the zodiacal sign in which the sun resides at the time of vernal equinox. In the 1st century BCE, the sign of the vernal equinox was situated in Aries, but approximately 2000 years before, in the sign of Taurus. In Ulansey's view, the tauroctony portraying the slaying of a bull by Mithras is, in reality, a symbolical allusion to this change of equinoctial sign from Taurus to Aries, and behind the apparent personality of Mithras actually hides a powerful extra-cosmic deity bringing about this change of cosmic epochs.⁴⁸ Ulansey's theory became very well-known but was, at the same time, also heavily criticized, especially for the author's uncritical reading of historical sources and his tendency towards unbounded speculation.⁴⁹

The most recent review study and an innovative contribution to the question of Mithraic origins is the article by Roger Beck, published in 1998 in the *Journal of Roman Studies*.⁵⁰ Beck sees the Kingdom of Commagene, which existed on the border of modern Turkey and Syria from 163 BCE until 72 CE as a potential candidate for Mithraic origins. The social group which was decisive in the formation of the cult is identified as members of the local military aristocracy who, according to Beck,

44 R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 77.

45 M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 7-8.

46 David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989.

47 For a detailed survey of these astrological interpretations, see Roger Beck, "The Rise and Fall of the Astral Identifications of the Tauroctonous Mithras", in: id., *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2004, 235-249.

48 D. Ulansey, *The Origins...*, 65-90.

49 See especially Noel M. Swerdlow, "Review Article: On the Cosmical Mysteries of Mithras", *Classical Philology* 86, 1991, 48-63; Manfred Clauss, "Mithras und die Präzession", *Klio: Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte* 83, 2001, 219-225.

50 R. Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras...".

amalgamated the Hellenised worship of Mithras with elements of contemporary astrology.⁵¹ The final transformation of the cult into the form we know from the Roman Empire took place in the time of the civil war of 68-70 CE, when the Kingdom of Commagene ceased to exist and the members of the Commagenian military aristocracy were incorporated into Roman military structures; the cult could hence spread quickly to all provinces, especially those along the Roman borders.

Evidence from the early period of the Roman cult of Mithras

Before we can proceed with a detailed analysis of the oldest Mithraic evidence, it will be necessary to clarify some important theoretical assumptions underlying this inquiry into the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras. Firstly, it must be established which structures will be accepted as the minimum conditions for us to speak of the presence of the Roman cult of Mithras in a particular geographical locality. In this regard, there are two structures which are usually considered as essential for the cult's existence: the mithraeum and the tauroctony.⁵² This assumption, although not completely unproblematic,⁵³ will be adopted for this study, since some persuasive arguments in favour of its acceptance have been presented: in the western material, these structures seem to be so integral and ubiquitous that their absence would create an almost insurmountable obstacle for the cult's operation.

The second important theoretical issue concerns the material which predates the establishment of the Roman Empire. After evaluation of the previous scholarly discussion, all evidence from Persia, Asia Minor, or

51 *Ibid.*, 121-125. An important role in this formative process is ascribed by Beck to the famous astrologist Tiberius Claudius Balbilus (ca 3-79 CE), who was bound to the Commagenean dynasty by kinship relations (*ibid.*, 126-127). More detailed information about Balbilus' "astrological style" and its possible similarity with some elements within the Roman cult of Mithras can be found in Roger Beck, "Whose Astrology? The Imprint of Ti. Claudius Balbillus on the Mithraic Mysteries", in: *id.*, *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2004, 323-329.

52 Cf. Roger 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: 171.

53 Richard L. Gordon, "Small and Miniature Reproductions of the Mithraic Icon: Reliefs, Pottery, Ornaments and Gems", in: Marleen Martens – Guy De Boe (eds.), *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds*, Brussel: Museum Het Toreke 2004, 259-283, comes with a hypothesis that some miniature exemplars of the tauroctony could serve as objects of reverence in the domestic cult (*ibid.*, 259-260) or, alternatively, as "travel monuments" for Mithras worshippers on the road. In any case, even Richard Gordon does not dispute the view that these monuments were more likely an alternative solution for places without a sufficient number of Mithras worshippers, which precluded the foundation of a standard community centered around a mithraeum (*ibid.*, 263), than a full-fledged version of the cult.

Syria and dated before the 1st century CE is excluded from further consideration, notwithstanding the fact that some scholars saw it as proof of the existence of the Mithraic Mysteries in the Achaemenid Empire or in the Hellenistic period. In this regard, a hypothetical proto-tauroctony from Uruk-Warka,⁵⁴ a relief from Hatra,⁵⁵ an inscription from Faraša,⁵⁶ or purported mithraea from Takht-e-Solaiman,⁵⁷ Arsameia,⁵⁸ or Pergamon⁵⁹ can be mentioned as examples of this type of evidence. These monuments represent an obvious discontinuity from the later form of Mithras worship known from the Roman Empire, and their value in the quest for the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras was thus, correctly in my opinion, assessed as largely irrelevant.⁶⁰ What these monuments attest, at best, is the existence of some disparate elements, which may also be found later in the Roman cult of Mithras, but lacking the structural form typical for Mithras worship in the Roman Empire.

If we adopt both abovementioned theoretical assumptions, the earliest phase of the Roman cult of Mithras, when this cult slowly becomes recog-

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- 54 Heinrich J. Lenzen, "Ausgrabungen in Warka", *Archiv für Orientforschung* 18, 1957-1958, 170-173; G. Widengren, "The Mithraic Mysteries in the Greco-Roman World...", 452-453; id., "Reflections on the Origin of the Mithraic Mysteries...", 667.
- 55 G. Widengren, *Die Religion Irans...*, 230.
- 56 *CIMRM* 19; G. Widengren, "The Mithraic Mysteries in the Greco-Roman World...", 453-456; id., "Reflections on the Origin of the Mithraic Mysteries...", 647-648.
- 57 Jalaladdin Imam-Jomeh, "In Search of a Mithraeum at Takht-e-Solaiman", in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques: Actes du 2^e Congrès international, Téhéran, du 1^{er} au 8 septembre 1975*, Téhéran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi 1978, 255-259.
- 58 Friedrich K. Dörner – Theresa Goell, *Arsameia am Nyphaios: Die Ausgrabungen im Hierothesion des Mithradates Kallinikos von 1953-56*, (Istanbul Forschungen 53), Berlin: Gebr. Mann 1963.
- 59 Wolfgang Radt, "Archeological Reports – Turkey: Kapikaya bei Pergamon – ein Heiligtum der Kybele und des Mithras? Der 'Podiensaal' in der Stadtgrabung von Pergamon", *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2, 1978, 192-197; id., "Kapikaya bei Pergamon – ein Heiligtum der Kybele und des Mithras", in: Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae*, (ÉPRO 80), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 789-792; Stefan C. Dahlinger, "Der sogenannte Podiensaal in Pergamon: Ein Mithräum?", in: Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae*, (ÉPRO 80), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 793-801.
- 60 See e.g. Israel Roll, "The Mysteries of Mithras in the Roman Orient: The Problem of Origin", *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2, 1977, 53-68; Richard N. Frye, "Mithra in Iranian History", in: John R. Hinnels, *Mithraic Studies* I, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 62-67; id., "Mithra in Iranian Archaeology", in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques: Actes du 2^e Congrès international, Téhéran, du 1^{er} au 8 septembre 1975*, Téhéran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi 1978, 205-211; Susan B. Downey, "Syrian Images of Mithras Tauroctonus", in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques: Actes du 2^e Congrès international, Téhéran, du 1^{er} au 8 septembre 1975*, Téhéran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi 1978, 135-149; Hendrik J. W. Drijvers, "Mithra at Hatra?", in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques: Actes du 2^e Congrès international, Téhéran, du 1^{er} au 8 septembre 1975*, Téhéran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi 1978, 151-186; etc.

nizable in archaeological material, can presently be dated to the period 75-125 CE.⁶¹ We can also suppose that its final transformation – or possibly foundation – briefly predates its visibility in the archaeological record and happened, most probably, in the years 25-75 CE. This evidence includes datable mithraea, Mithraic inscriptions, and literary accounts.

A) Datable Mithraea

1) Nida/Heddernheim III (Germania Superior/Germany)

In 1887, the third mithraeum⁶² in Nida/Heddernheim was discovered. Later, in 1890 and 1893, this mithraeum underwent a series of systematic archaeological excavations. The foundation of this Mithraic temple was initially dated to the end of the 2nd century CE, on the basis especially of the artistic style of “large monuments”. Revision analysis of the pottery found in this mithraeum, however, showed that it could in fact have been founded much earlier, around 100 CE.⁶³ Although this dating is not completely unproblematic,⁶⁴ there is good evidence to accept it.

2) Güglingen II (Germania Superior/Germany)

During rescue excavations in land designated for the construction of an industrial zone in the vicinity of the German town Güglingen, two mithraea were unearthed. The first one was discovered in 1999,⁶⁵ the second in 2002, and both were carefully explored in archaeological excavations from 2003 to 2004. The foundation of the latter mithraeum, which is remarkably

61 The only possible exception could be the first mithraeum from Dülük in Turkey and its proposed dating, which is discussed in greater detail below at p. 80.

62 *TMMM* II, no. 253 [pp. 372-373] = *CIMRM* 1117 = Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Heddernheim: Gesamtkatalog*, (Archäologische Reihe 6), Frankfurt am Main: Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte Frankfurt am Main 1986, 26-39 = Elmar Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler orientalischer Gottheiten im römischen Deutschland (mit Ausnahme der ägyptischen Gottheiten)*, (ÉPRO 40), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1974, no. 61 [pp. 79-87].

63 I. Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Heddernheim...*, 36-39.

64 Only a few shards of pottery actually come from this period; the largest portion is dated somewhat later, between the years 130-150 and 180-220 CE, see I. Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Heddernheim...*, 33-36. The possibility that these shards are in reality contamination from a different archaeological context cannot be entirely excluded, see Richard L. Gordon, “The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras: A Critical View”, in: Catherine Wolff – Yann Le Bohac (eds.), *L’armée romaine et la religion sous le Haut-Empire romain: Actes du quatrième Congrès de Lyon (26-28 octobre 2006)*, Lyon: De Boccard 2009, 379-450: 398, n. 98.

65 Walter Joachim, “Ein römisches Mithräum mit römischen und alamannischen Siedlungsresten in Güglingen, Kreis Heilbronn”, *Archäologische Ausgrabungen in Baden-Württemberg, 1999*, Stuttgart: Theiss 2000, 139-143.

well preserved and yielded a large number of Mithraic artefacts, is estimated in the first quarter of the 2nd century CE.⁶⁶ This mithraeum is thus one of the earliest mithraea known from the former Roman province of Germania Superior.

3) Mogontiacum/Mainz (Germania Superior/Germany)

The mithraeum at Mainz was discovered during construction works in 1976, only provisionally examined, and then irretrievably destroyed.⁶⁷ In the mithraeum itself a larger amount of ceramic vessels and shards were found, including a broken wine crater (mixing bowl) which received considerable attention for its depiction of two scenes of Mithraic initiations.⁶⁸ A revisionary survey of the pottery, made many years after the original discovery, traces the existence of the mithraeum to at least the first quarter of the 2nd century CE.⁶⁹

4) Ad Enum/Pfaffenhoffen am Inn (Noricum/Germany)

At Ad Enum,⁷⁰ a Roman settlement situated in the valley of the River Inn near a strategic river crossing, a mithraeum and a Mithraic community existed until the early 5th century CE, when the mithraeum met its violent destruction, probably due to Christian intervention. This dismal end is at-

66 Klaus Körntum – Andrea Neth, “Markt und Mithras: Neues vom römischen vicus in Güglingen, Kreis Heilbronn”, *Archäologische Ausgrabungen in Baden-Württemberg 2003*, Stuttgart: Theiss 2004, 113-117.

67 A publication giving detailed information about this mithraeum, all its finds, and the circumstances of its discovery is Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche, *Der Mithraskult in Mainz und das Mithräum am Ballplatz*, (Mainzer archäologische Schriften 7), Mainz: Eigenverlag der Generaldirektion Kulturelles Erbe, Direktion Archäologie 2008.

68 Heinz G. Horn, “Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß”, *Mainzer Archäologische Zeitschrift* 1, 1994, 21-66; Reinhold Merkelbach, “Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 108, 1995, 1-6; R. Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation...”, 145-180; 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*, Brüssel: Museum Het Toreke 2004, 213-227; ead., *Der Mithraskult in Mainz...*, 99-108.

69 I. Huld-Zetsche, *Der Mithraskult in Mainz...*, 12-14. The above-mentioned wine crater, belonging among so-called “Schlangengefäße” (vessels decorated with a snake motif), is then dated into the period 120-140 CE.

70 In older literature, the existence of this mithraeum is related to the Roman settlement of Pons Aeni. Recent topographical and toponymical research of this region has proven, however, that this particular mithraeum was rather situated at the site of a Roman settlement (*vicus*) named in ancient sources as Ad Enum. For more detailed information, see Bernd Steidl, “Stationen an der Brücke: *Pons Aeni* und *Ad Enum* am Inn-Übergang der Staatsstraße Augusta *Vindellicum-Iuvavum*”, in: Gerald Grabherr (ed.), *Conquiescamus! Longum iter fecimus: Römische Raststationen und Straßeninfrastruktur in Ostalpenraum: Akten des Kolloquiums zur Forschungslage zu Römischen Straßenstationen*, Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press 2010, 71-110: 93.

tested by many finds discovered in the Mithraic temple, unearthed there for the first time in 1977 and systematically excavated in the following years by an archaeological team led by Jochen Garbsch. Garbsch, in the final publication on this mithraeum from 1985, determined its foundation date, based on coin and pottery finds, around the end of the 1st century CE.⁷¹ If this dating is correct, the mithraeum from Ad Enum would be one of the oldest archaeologically attested Mithraic meeting sites. New revisionary research, however, questioned the dating proposed by Garbsch and his team, mainly because of the limited amount of material from this time period (80-100 CE) and the possibility that its assignment to the mithraeum was made without proper consideration of the circumstances under which it was found.⁷² The oldest evidence probably relates to the time of the settlement's foundation with the mithraeum itself being built later, most likely shortly after 150 CE.⁷³

5) Caesarea Maritima (Judea/Israel)

During archaeological excavations taking place at the site of ancient Caesarea Maritima, an important port town in Roman times, a mithraeum was discovered in 1973.⁷⁴ Essential for the dating of the mithraeum's origin was an analysis of ceramic finds, which determined that this Mithraic temple already existed in the 80s of the 1st century CE.⁷⁵ This mithraeum is thus the oldest securely dated and archaeologically attested Mithraic gathering site.

71 Jochen Garbsch, "Das Mithräum von Pons Aeni", *Bayerische Vorgeschichtsblätter* 50, 1985, 355-462: 428-435.

72 Bernd Steidl, "Neues zu den Inschriften aus dem Mithraeum von Mühltal am Inn: Pons Aeni, Ad Enum und die statio Ennensis des publicum portorium Illyrici", *Bayerische Vorgeschichtsblätter* 73, 2008, 53-85: 82.

73 B. Steidl, "Neues zu den Inschriften...", 77; id., "Stationen an der Brücke...", 94.

74 Lewis M. Hopfe – Gary Lease, "The Caesarea Mithraeum: A Preliminary Report", *Biblical Archaeologist* 38, 1975, 1-10; Robert J. Bull, "The Mithraeum at Caesarea Maritima", in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques: Actes du 2^e Congrès International, Téhéran, du 1^{er} au 8 septembre 1975*, Téhéran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi 1978, 75-90; Lewis M. Hopfe, "Mithraism in Syria", *ANRW* II.18.4, 1990, 2214-2235: 2228-2230.

75 For more detailed information see Jeffrey A. Blakely et al., *Caesarea Maritima: The Pottery and Dating of Vault 1: Horreum, Mithraeum, and Later Uses*, (Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima, IV, 1987), Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press 1987, 62, 103; Jeffrey A. Blakely, "Ceramics and Commerce: Amphorae from Caesarea Maritima", *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 271, 1988, 31-50: 35; R. Jackson Painter, "The Origins and Social Context of Mithraism at Caesarea Maritima", in: Terence L. Donaldson (ed.), *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima*, Waterloo: Wilfried Laurier University Press 2000, 205-225: 206-207.

6) Dolichos I/Dülük (Commagene/Turkey)

In 1997 and 1998, a team of German archaeologists from the University of Münster discovered two mithraea in the vicinity of Dülük, a small town in Eastern Turkey.⁷⁶ Dülük, situated approximately 10 km northwest of the sprawling city of Gaziantep with a population exceeding one million, lies in the place of the ancient town of Dolichos, especially famous as the birthplace of Jupiter Dolichenos. This discovery attracted great attention for two reasons – firstly, because it was the first explicit evidence of the presence of the Roman cult of Mithras in ancient Commagene; secondly, for the very early date of the foundations preliminarily proposed for the first of two Dolichenian mithraea. German archaeologists determined, as the *terminus ante quem*, the year 25 CE at the latest, on the basis of the discovery of a coin issued by a Seleucid king, Antiochus IX Eusebes (who ruled ca. from 115 to 96 BCE), in the floor filling of the Mithraic Temple I.⁷⁷ If this dating proves justified, the Dolichos mithraeum would be the earliest piece of Mithraic evidence. This would radically call into question our current views of the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras. There are, however, many reasons to be cautious. Firstly, the dating proposed by the German archaeologists is inconclusive and very contentious, mainly due to the confused stratigraphical situation inside the Mithraic Temple I. Secondly, the discovery of one single coin in the floor filling does not prove, at least not to a sufficient degree of certainty, that this place served as a mithraeum as early as the beginning of the 1st century CE. No other evidence corroborates this early dating.⁷⁸

76 Anke Schütte-Maischatz – Engelbert Winter, “Kultstätten der Mithrasmytherien in Doliche”, in: Jörg Wagner (ed.), *Gottkönige am Euphrat: Neue Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in Kommagene*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern 2000, 93-99; Anke Schütte-Maischatz – Engelbert Winter, “Die Mithräen von Doliche: Überlegungen zu den ersten Kultstätten der Mithras-Mysterien in Kommagene”, *Topoi* 11/1, 2001, 149-173; Anke Schütte-Maischatz, “Die Mithräen von Doliche”, in: Anke Schütte-Maischatz – Engelbert Winter (eds.), *Doliche – eine kommagenische Stadt und ihre Götter: Mithras und Jupiter Dolichenos*, (Asia Minor Studien 52), Bonn: Habelt 2004, 79-156.

77 A. Schütte-Maischatz – E. Winter, “Kultstätten der Mithrasmytherien...”, 99; iid., “Die Mithräen von Doliche...”, 157; Margherita Facella, “The Coins from the Mithraea in Dülük”, in: Anke Schütte-Maischatz – Engelbert Winter (eds.), *Doliche – eine kommagenische Stadt und ihre Götter – Mithras und Jupiter Dolichenos*, (Asia Minor Studien 52), Bonn: Habelt 2004, 179-187.

78 See the arguments persuasively refuting, in my opinion, this early dating in Richard L. Gordon, “Mithras in Doliche: Issues of Date and Origin”, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 20, 2007, 602-610; cf. also Roger Beck, *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2004, 28-29.

7) Emerita Augusta II/Mérida (Lusitania/Spain)

In 2000, a mithraeum was discovered during rescue archaeological excavations in the Spanish town of Mérida, which used to be the ancient Roman colony of Emerita Augusta. The newly discovered temple is, in all probability, different from the one which was already discovered nearby at the beginning of the 20th century.⁷⁹ Inside, excavators found several altars, large amounts of pottery shards, and some remains of frescos, which decorated its walls. In a preliminary report, the archaeologist responsible for the excavations proposed tentatively that this temple was founded at some time during the early Flavian period, for the mithraeum existed only very briefly and was supposedly destroyed shortly after 100 CE.⁸⁰ The views of other scholars remain sceptical⁸¹ and no final excavation report has so far been published. The relevance of this discovery is therefore uncertain and the absence of further information makes any definitive conclusion impossible.

B) Datable Mithraic inscriptions

8) Nida/Heddernheim (Germania Superior/Germany)

Two inscriptions that may be dated to the earliest stage of the existence of the Roman cult of Mithras originate from the mithraeum I in Nida-Heddernheim.⁸² The first is situated on the front face of a small sandstone altar (height 0.27 m, width 0.21 m, depth 0.17 m).⁸³ The inscription⁸⁴ is six lines long and reads:

79 This mithraeum is only indirectly attested and its existence is deduced from the discovery of a large number of Mithraic monuments, see Antonio García y Bellido, *Les religions orientales dans l'Espagne romaine*, (ÉPRO 5), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1967, 26-33, no. 1-13; cf. also *CIMRM* 772-797.

80 Teresa Barrientos Vera, "Nuevos datos para el estudio de las religiones orientales en Occidente: Un espacio de culto mitraico en la zona Sur de Mérida", *Memoria 5: Excavaciones arqueológicas en Mérida*, 1999, 357-381: 367-377.

81 Jaime Alvar – Richard L. Gordon – Celso Rodríguez, "The Mithraeum at Lugo (Lucus Augusti) and Its Connection with Legio II Gemina", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 19, 2006, 266-277: 267 and n. 4.

82 About the mithraeum I in Nida-Heddernheim see *CIMRM* 1082 = I. Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Heddernheim...*, 17-21 = E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, no. 59 [pp. 66-77].

83 *CIMRM* 1091-1092 = I. Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Heddernheim...*, 55, no. 8 = *CIL* XIII, 7365 [vol. 4, p. 125] = EDCS-11001461 = HD041974 = E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, no. 59i [pp. 71-72].

84 Vermaseren's reading in *CIMRM* II (p. 68) and Schwertheim's reading (*Die Denkmäler...*, no. 59i [pp. 71-72]) are given in a slightly different form to the one published in Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche. Vermaseren and Schwertheim place after *alae* I *Fla(viae)* an additional word *milli(ariae)*. Vermaseren wrongly reads the first line as

Fortun(ae) / sacrum / Tacitus eq(ues) / alae I Fla(viae) / t(urma) Cl(audii) Attici / v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) l(aetus) m(erito)

Dedicated to Fortuna. Tacitus, a cavalryman of the first ala Flavia of the squadron of Claudius Atticus, has fulfilled his vow, willingly and gladly, as he should.

Although Mithras himself is not mentioned in the inscription, its Mithraic status is confirmed by a badly damaged (and in the 19th century, improperly restored) image on the rear side of the altar, which portrays a man with a Phrygian cap and a billowing mantel dragging a bull on his shoulders. This Mithraic iconographic motif is also known from other localities and was known, at least among Mithras worshippers in Poetovio/Ptuj (Pannonia Superior/Slovenia), under the name *transitus*.⁸⁵ The *terminus ante quem* for the dedication of the inscription is the year 110 CE, since the first ala was located in Nida from 83/85 until 110 CE.⁸⁶ The relation between the inscription and the *transitus* motif, however, remains unclear. It is possible that the altar with the inscription was reused by Mithraists later.⁸⁷ This possibility makes the relevance of this inscription for our understanding of the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras problematic and it should probably be excluded from further consideration.

9) Nida/Heddernheim (Germania Superior/Germany)

The second relevant inscription from the mithraeum I is also on the front side of a small sandstone altar (height 0.23 m, width 0.18-0.20 m, depth 0.155-0.16 m).⁸⁸ The five-line-long inscription (letter height 0.02-0.025 m) reads:

Fortun(ae) sacrum (according to photos of this monument, each of these words occur in a separate line). *CIL* and *HD* then complete the name of the dedicator as *Tacilus*. On the basis of existing photo documentation, I endorse the reading proposed by Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche.

- 85 For more information on this iconographic motif generally, see M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 77-78. For other exemplars of this motif, see e.g. *CIMRM* 1495 (Poetovio/Ptuj), *CIMRM* 1497 (Poetovio/Ptuj), *CIMRM* 1811 (Sárkezi), *CIMRM* 1900 (Skelani) etc.
- 86 I. Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Heddernheim...*, 21. E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, no. 59i (p. 72), then determines as the *terminus ante quem* the year 122 CE. In both cases, however, the dating belongs to the earliest period of the existence of the Roman cult of Mithras.
- 87 See E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, 271; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 116, n. 118.
- 88 *CIMRM* 1098 = E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, no. 59i (p. 73) = I. Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Heddernheim...*, no. 9 (p. 56) = *CIL* XIII, 7362 [vol. 4, p. 125] = EDCS-11001458 = HD059854.

D(eo) In(victo) C(aius) / Lollius / Crispus / c(enturio) coh(ortis) XXXII / vol(untariorum)

(Dedicated) to the Unconquered God (Mithras). Gaius Lollius Crispus, a centurion of the 32nd cohort of volunteer corps (of Roman citizens).

The *terminus ante quem* for the dedication of this inscription is again the year 110 CE, since the 32nd cohort of Roman citizens was stationed at Nida from 90 until 110 CE.⁸⁹ However, the relevance of this inscription has recently been questioned by Richard L. Gordon. Gordon claims that there are some arguments speaking against this early dating: (1) the formulation *deo* plus the name of a deity is otherwise unattested in Germania until the year 196 CE;⁹⁰ (2) the presence of the soldiers from the 32nd cohort in Nida is, in a few cases, demonstrated well after 110 CE;⁹¹ (3) all other finds from the mithraeum I are late.⁹² Nevertheless, Gordon allows for the possibility that the mithraeum I and all the monuments it contained, with the exception of this altar, were destroyed during the invasion of Germanic Chatti in the third quarter of the 2nd century CE, which devastated many regions in Germania Superior. The rescued altar could subsequently have been piously placed inside a newly reconstructed Mithraic temple.⁹³ Thus, in many regards, the dating of the inscription remains contentious.

10) Carnuntum/Bad Deutsch Altenburg (Pannonia Superior/Austria)

This inscription is preserved on a marble altar (height 0.95 m, width 0.47-0.57 m, depth 0.49 m) found on the bank of the Danube in the vicin-

89 I. Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Hedderheim...*, 21. Huld-Zetsche here refers to the research of Paul Wagner ("Zum Kastellvicus des Kastells Oberflorstadt", in: Christoph Unz [ed.], *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen roms III: 13. Internationaler Limeskongress Aalen 1983, Vorträge*, [Forschungen und Berichte zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte in Baden-Württemberg 20], Stuttgart: Theiss 1986, 281-283: 281), who argues that in 110 CE the 32nd cohort left Nida for the Ober-Florstadt region. This dating is also accepted by M. Clauss (*The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 21).

90 R. L. Gordon, "The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras...", 392 and n. 74.

91 *Ibid.*, 392; cf. also Richard L. Gordon, "Who Worshipped Mithras?", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 7, 1994, 459-474: 460.

92 R. L. Gordon, "The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras...", 392.

93 *Ibid.*, 392-393.

ity of Bad Deutsch Altenburg.⁹⁴ The inscription⁹⁵ is five lines long (letter height 0.03-0.045 m) and reads:

*Invicto Mīt(h)r[h](a)e (sic!) / C. Sacidius Balrbarus [(centurio)] leg(ionis) / XV
Apol[linar(is)] / ex voto [[...]] / [[.....]] / [[.....]]*

To the Unconquered Mithras. Gaius Sacidius Barbarus, a centurion of the legio XV Apollinaris, from the vow (made) ...

This inscription is dated on the basis of our knowledge of the movements of the legio XV, which, after its return from the Eastern campaign, was stationed in Carnuntum in the years 71-114 CE.⁹⁶ After 114 CE, this legion participated in the Trajan expedition into Mesopotamia and was later permanently stationed, by decree of the emperor Hadrian, in Satala (modern Sadak in Turkey),⁹⁷ and never returned to European parts of the Roman Empire. A lot therefore speaks for the conclusion that the *terminus ante quem* for the dedication of this inscription is the year 113 CE.⁹⁸ Thus, in all probability, this inscription is one of the oldest Mithraic monuments found in the Danubian provinces.

11) Novae/Svištov (Moesia Inferior/Bulgary)

This inscription is preserved in the middle of a rectangular stone block (height 0.19 m, width 0.34 m, depth 0.255 m) which has its upper and

94 *CIMRM* 1718 = Dorit Schön, *Orientalische Kulte im römischen Österreich*, Wien: Böhlau 1988, no. 50 (p. 51) = *CIL* III, 4418 = Martin Mosser, *Die Steindenkmäler der legio XV Apollinaris*, (Wiener Archäologische Studien 5), Wien: Forschungsgesellschaft Wiener Stadtarchäologie 2003, no. 204 [pp. 267-268 and pl. 27] = Eduard Vorbeck, *Militärschriften aus Carnuntum*, (Römische Forschungen in Niederösterreich 2), Wien: Kulturreferat der Niederösterreichischen Landesregierung ²1980, no. 143 = Gabrielle Kremer, *Götterdarstellungen, Kult- und Weihedenkmäler aus Carnuntum*, (Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani, Carnuntum Supplement 1), Wien: Verlag des Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 2012, no. 352 = *AEA* 2001-2002, no. 19 = *AEA* 2010, no. 2 = *AEA* 2010, no. 6 = *AEA* 2010, no. 8 = *AEA* 2011-2012, no. 43 = HD071954 = EDCS-26600137.

95 Two further lines at the foot of this altar were intentionally erased. A reading proposed by D. Schön, *Orientalische Kulte...*, no. 50 (p. 51), is erroneous: Schön reads *Mihre* instead of the correct *Mitrhe*. Vermaseren in *CIMRM* then wrongly reads [*c(enturio)*] instead of the correct [(*centurio*)], see D. Schön, *Orientalische Kulte...*, no. 50 (p. 51) and HD071954. For a photograph of the altar and inscription which substantiates the reading stated above, see <<http://www.ubi-erat-lupa.org/imagelink/index.php?Nr=6150>> [23 November 2015].

96 D. Schön, *Orientalische Kulte...*, 51.

97 R. L. Gordon, "The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras...", 393 and n. 80.

98 Gordon, however, mentions the possibility that some auxiliary units from the Eastern legions could have been, for example at the time of the Marcomannic wars, recalled back to fight in the Pannonian regions, see R. L. Gordon, "The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras...", 393 and n. 81.

lower parts broken off.⁹⁹ Next to the inscription, on the right side, is an image of Cautes, one of the Mithraic torchbearers, holding in his right hand a raised torch and in his left hand a cock, with its head held downwards. On the left side next to the inscription, we find an image of Cautopates, the second of the two Mithraic torchbearers, holding again a cock in his left hand, but this time with its head held upwards. In his right hand he holds a lowered torch. A reading of the originally eight-line-long inscription (letter height 0.025-0.035 m), from which only four lines are preserved, can be reconstructed as:¹⁰⁰

[Invicto] / deo / Melichrysus / P(ubli) Caragoni / Philopalaestri [cond(uctoris) pu-
bl(ici) por(torii)] / [ripae Thraciae] / [ser(vus) vil(icus) posuit]

To the Unconquerable god, Melichrysus, a slave and housekeeper of Publius Caragonius Philopalaestrus, a tenant of the public customs office¹⁰¹ on the Thracian bank (of the Danube), dedicated...

On the basis of other inscriptions, we are able to ascertain that Publius Caragonius Philopalaestrus, who is mentioned on this monument, is almost certainly identical with the customs official whose name occurs on an official Latin and Greek decree dealing with a border survey of a town of Histria (modern Istria in Romania) and issued on the 25th October 100 CE.¹⁰² If this identification is correct, we can conclude that the monument from Novae was made at some time around 100 CE (probably at the beginning of the 2nd century CE) and is thus particularly relevant for the question under review in this article.

12) Oescus/Guljanci (Moesia Inferior/Bulgaria)

This six-line-long inscription¹⁰³ (letter height 0.07 m) was found on a limestone altar (height 0.82, width 0.43 m) and reads:

99 *CIMRM* 2268.

100 *CIMRM* 2269 = *IGLNovae*, no. 35 = *ILBulg*, no. 289 = *PLINovae*, p. 122 = *AE* 1940, no. 100 = HD020910 = EDCS-13301380. The reading of the second line in *CIMRM* (*leo*) is in all probability erroneous. In transcription I endorse the reconstructed reading according to *AE* 1940, no. 100 and databases EDCS and HD.

101 According to R. Merkelbach (*Mithras...*, 148), this titulature thus does not reflect contemporary practice since at the time when the inscription was made the collection of custom fees was the responsibility of state officials and not private tenants.

102 *Inscriptionae Scythiae Minoris* 1.67.68 = *AE* 1919, no. 10, line 67 = HD044434.

103 *CIL* III, 6128 (p. 2316,45) = *CIL* III, 7425 = *ILBulg*, no. 32 = *CIMRM* 2250 = *AE* 1900, no. 15 = *TMMM* II, no. 225 = HD028111 = EDCS-27800906. – Vermaseren proposed the reading *f(idelis)*, which according to him refers to the person of the Mithraic Father (“faithful Father of the sacred ceremonies”). Epigraphical databases EDCS and DH propose the reading *F(elix)*, referring to the name of the legio IV. In this article, I follow the latter reading.

*T(itus) Tettiu[s] / Plotu{u}s / vet(eranus) leg(ionis) II[II] / F(laviae) F(elicis) p(ater)
s(acrorum) d[ei] / Invicti [s(olvit)] / l(ibens) m(erito)*

Titus Tettius Plotus, a veteran of the legio IV Flavia Felix, Father of the sacred ceremonies of the Unconquered God, has fulfilled his vow, willingly, as he should.

The person who dedicated this altar, Titus Tettius Plotus, was a veteran of the legio IV which was, according to some sources,¹⁰⁴ relocated to the region near Oescus by the emperor Trajan (ruled 98-117 CE). If this assumption is correct,¹⁰⁵ the inscription itself was, in all probability, made briefly after 110 CE. Richard Gordon, however, has expressed doubts about this early date because the inscription contains the title *pater sacrorum*, which is otherwise known only from the 3rd century CE.¹⁰⁶ He also raises the possibility that Titus Tettius Plotus returned to Oescus much later after 110 CE from a different place, for example Singidunum (modern Beograd in Serbia), which served, from the first quarter of the 2nd century CE, as the winter station of the legio IV.¹⁰⁷ The early dating is thus not absolutely certain and remains open to possible reassessment.

13) Rome

An altar,¹⁰⁸ found in Rome near the Esquiline Hill, bears a nine-line-long bilingual inscription in Latin and Greek.¹⁰⁹ It reads:

Soli / Invicto Mithrae / T(itus) Flavius Aug(usti) lib(ertus) Hyginus / Ephebianus / d(onum) d(edit) // Ηēλιōι Μιθραι / Τ(ίτους) Φλαυίος Ηυγιός / δια Λολλιού Ρουφού / πατρος ιδίου.

Titus Flavius Hyginus Ephebianus, freedman of the emperor, dedicated to the Sun Unconquered Mithras. Titus Flavius Hyginus, through Lollius Rufus, Father¹¹⁰ of his (mithraeum, dedicated) to Sun Mithras.

104 See Emil Ritterling, “Legio”, *RE* 12, 1925, 1211-1829: 1287 and 1543.

105 *Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg* (HD028111) dates the inscription in 151-200 CE, but without any specific explanation.

106 See R. L. Gordon, “The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras...”, 393 and n. 77.

107 *Ibid.*, 393.

108 Information about the circumstances of the altar’s discovery is very scanty, see *TMMM* II, no. 66 (“Ara reperta in Esquilis ad aedem DD. Petri et Marcellini”), and is repeated without any addition by Vermaseren in *CIMRM* 362.

109 *CIL* VI, 732 (p. 3006) = *CIG* 6011 = *IGRRP* I, no. 77 = *IGUR* I, no. 179 = *CIMRM* 362.

110 The majority of interpreters think that the phrase *patros idiou* does not refer to Ephebianus’ biological father, but to a leader of the community to which this imperial freedman belonged, see R. L. Gordon, “The Date and Significance...”, 153.

The exact dating of this dedication is impossible but it is usually placed into the period 68-117 CE.¹¹¹ In all probability, the inscription thus belongs to a small group of monuments coming from the earliest period of the existence of the Roman cult of Mithras.

14) Rome

This inscription is carved out in a statue portraying Mithras slaying a bull – more specifically, on the front side of a pedestal and on the rear side of the bull statue.¹¹² Although the sculpture group and inscription originate from Rome, they are presently kept at the British Museum in London. The inscription¹¹³ reads:

*Alcimus Ti(beri) Cl(audi) Liviani ser(vus) vi[l]ic(us) S(oli) M(ithrae) v(otum) s(olvit)
d(onum) d(edit).*

Alcimus, a slave and housekeeper of Tiberius Claudius Livianus, has fulfilled his vow and given as a present to Sol Mithras.

Tiberius Claudius Livianus, who is mentioned by the dedicator Alcimus, is probably identical with the prefect of the Pretorian Guard in office under the emperor Trajan.¹¹⁴ On the basis of this prosographic information, we can, with a high degree of certainty, argue that this inscription was made in the period 101-120 CE.¹¹⁵

111 For a detailed explanation of this dating, see R. L. Gordon, “The Date and Significance...”, 151-153.

112 *CIMRM* 593. This tauroctony is remarkable for some details which may indicate that this particular exemplar was produced in the early phase of the cult’s existence when the iconographic rules were still fluid and left room for individual “experimentation”. These details include wheat ears sprouting directly from the wound caused by Mithras’ dagger instead of the tip of the bull’s tail, or the positioning of both torchbearers on the left side of a sculpture group, with one possibly supporting (the monument is unfortunately damaged in this place) the tail of the dying animal.

113 *CIL* VI, 718 (p. 3006, p. 3757) = *CIL* VI, 30818 = *ILS*, no. 4199 = *CIMRM* 594 = *CIMRM* II, p. 31.

114 See Ronald Syme, “Guard Prefects of Trajan and Hadrian”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 80, 1980, 64-80: 66-67.

115 About the dating of this inscription, see R. L. Gordon, “The Date and Significance...”, 154-157. Cf. also R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 147-148 and n. 3-2; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 20 and n. 54, 253-254; id., *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium...*, 28.

15) Aezanitis/Savçılar (Phrygia/Turkey)

This Greek inscription¹¹⁶ is situated on a base depicting an unidentifiable figure.¹¹⁷ In 1926, it was on display in the garden of a house in the Turkish town of Savçılar, but it is impossible to determine with any certainty where it was originally discovered. The inscription is dedicated to Sol Mithras by Midon, son of Solon, and it reads:

*Hēliō(i) Mithra(i) Midōn / Sōlonos / anethēken / euchēn / etous rxb mē(nos)
P[a(nēmou)].*

Dedicated to Sol Mithras by Midon, son of Solon, in the year 162 of our era.

If we accept that the year 162 mentioned in the inscription refers to the Sullan era, we can establish the year 77-78 CE as the year of its dedication.¹¹⁸ Although we cannot securely exclude the possibility that this monument reflects some “traditional” form of Mithras worship, it would be methodologically faulty to dismiss it *a priori* from further consideration. Its dedication to Sol Mithras provides an interesting parallel with the Ephebianus’ inscription from Rome (no. 13 above) and therefore raises the possibility that this monument and inscription already belong to the Roman version of the Mithras cult.

C) Datable literary accounts

16) Publius Papinius Statius, *Thebais* I.717-720

In *Thebais*, a mythological epos depicting the struggle of Eteokles and Polyneikes, the sons of Oedipus, for the Theban throne, and written by the Roman poet Publius Papinius Statius (ca. 45-96 CE), some verses are, in all likelihood, a learned allusion to the Roman cult of Mithras. The first book of this epos ends with a prayer by Adrastus to Apollo, who is addressed here by epithets given to him by people of different nations:

116 *CIMRM* 23 = Franz Cumont, “Mithra en Asie Mineure”, in: W. M. Calder – J. Keil (eds.), *Anatolian Studies presented to W. H. Buckley*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1939, 67-76: 69 = Barbara Levick et al. (eds.), *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua* X, (Journal of Roman Studies Monographs 7), London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies 1993, 449.

117 Vermaseren in *CIMRM* 23, p. 51, speaks about Mithras with a Phrygian cap; this identification is, however, disputed as erroneous by B. Levick et al. (eds.), *Monumenta...*, 449.

118 See F. Cumont, “Mithra en Asie Mineure...”, 69; R. L. Gordon, “Who Worshipped Mithras?...”, 470 and n. 56.

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

... whether 'tis right to call thee rosy Titan, in the fashion of the Achaemenian race, or Osiris bringer of the harvest, or Mithras, that beneath the rocky Persian cave strains at the reluctant-following horns.¹¹⁹

The whole epos was completed in 92 CE at the latest; the first book must thus have been compiled much earlier, probably as early as the start of the 80s of the 1st century CE.¹²⁰ It is possible that this passage alludes either to the tauroctony,¹²¹ or to an iconographic motif portraying Mithras dragging a bull by his horns to a cave where the beast is subsequently slain.¹²² If this hypothesis is correct, the poem testifies that the Roman cult of Mithras was already known to members of the Roman aristocracy in the reign of the Flavian dynasty.¹²³

The origins of the Roman cult of Mithras: A critical discussion

What can we conclude from the abovementioned list of Mithraic evidence supposedly dated to the earliest period of the cult's existence (for a concise summary see Tab. 1)? Firstly, the hypothesis which places the proposed formative period of the Roman cult of Mithras in the years 75-125 CE can be considered confirmed, although the number of conclusively dated pieces of evidence remains rather negligible. It is also clear, on the basis of the archaeological evidence, that the cult gained its momentum from the second half of the 2nd century CE onward, when the amount of datable Mithraic material increases significantly.¹²⁴ Regardless of some claims to the contrary, it is still valid to conclude that no monument relating to the Roman cult of Mithras can be persuasively dated to before 75 CE.

119 Quoted according to English translation by John H. Mozley in *Status I: Silvae – Thebaid* I-IV, London: William Heinemann 1928, 393.

120 About the dating of the first book of *Thebais*, see R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithraïsme...*, 127.

121 This interpretation, however, remains problematic because it openly contradicts the fact that, on the absolute majority of preserved tauroctonies, Mithras grabs the bull's muzzle and not his horns.

122 See e.g. *CIMRM* 1301.4 or *CIMRM* 1400.6.

123 See e.g. R. L. Gordon, "The Date and Significance...", 161-164; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 147; R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithraïsme...*, 131-134; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 22; R. Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras...", 119.

124 See M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 255.

No.	Place (modern)	Place (ancient)	Roman province	Type of evidence	Proposed dating	Evaluation of the dating	Relevance for the Roman cult of Mithras
1	Heddernheim	Nida	Germania Superior	mithraeum	before 100 CE	probable	confirmed
2	Gügingen	unknown	Germania Superior	mithraeum	100-125 CE	confirmed	confirmed
3	Mainz	Mogontiacum	Germania Superior	mithraeum	100-125 CE	confirmed	confirmed
4	Pfaffenhofen am Inn	Ad Ennum	Noricum	mithraeum	before 100 CE	dubious	confirmed
5	Sdot Yam	Caesarea Maritima	Judaea	mithraeum	about 80 CE	confirmed	confirmed
6	Dülük	Dolichos	Syria	mithraeum	before 25 CE	dubious	confirmed
7	Mérida	Emerita Augusta	Lusitania	mithraeum	before 100 CE	dubious	confirmed
8	Heddernheim	Nida	Germania Superior	inscription on an altar	before 110 CE	confirmed	uncertain
9	Heddernheim	Nida	Germania Superior	inscription on an altar	before 110 CE	probable	confirmed
10	Bad Deutsch Altenburg	Carnuntum	Pannonia Superior	inscription on an altar	before 114 CE	confirmed	confirmed
11	Svišřov	Novae	Moesia Inferior	inscription on a monument	about 100 CE	confirmed	confirmed
12	Guljanci	Oescus	Moesia Inferior	inscription on an altar	about 100 CE	probable	confirmed
13	Roma	Roma	Roma	inscription on an altar	68-117 CE	confirmed	confirmed
14	Roma	Roma	Roma	inscription on a tauroctony	101-120 CE	confirmed	confirmed
15	Savřilar	Aezanitis	Phrygia	inscription on a base	77/78 CE	probable	uncertain
16	Roma	Roma	Roma	passage in Statius, <i>Thebais</i> I.17-720	before 92 CE	confirmed	uncertain

Table 1. A list of potential early (75-125 CE) Mithraic evidence.

Secondly, the evidence which can, with a high degree of certainty, be dated to the earliest period of the cult's existence comes from regions separated from each other by large geographical distances (Germania Superior, Pannonia Superior, Moesia Inferior, Rome, and Judea). Such a pattern of distribution of the earliest evidence, as exemplified on Map 1, makes it impossible to identify a hypothetical "centre" from which the cult started to spread. The earliest evidence does not support the old Cumontian scenario of the diffusion of the Roman cult of Mithras, and the innovated scenarios, still relying on the premise of the cult's origins in Asia Minor, hardly improve the situation. This complication becomes even more evident when we look at the global distribution of Mithraic evidence: the more eastward we go, the sparser Mithraic evidence becomes.



Map 1. The geographical distribution of Mithraic evidence which possibly derives from the early period of the cult's existence (□ = mithraeum; △ = inscription; ☆ = literary text).

Map by Adam Mertel.

Thirdly, this spatially impressive diffusion of the Roman cult of Mithras, even in the earliest period of its existence, suggests that Mithraic communities were capable of effectively using the communication struc-

tures of the Roman Empire, namely its military roads and trade routes. This does not, in itself, substantiate the claim that the Roman cult of Mithras originated in Roman military circles or is to be seen, as it is often done, as a sort of a military cult.¹²⁵ The decisive impact of Roman military infrastructure on the early diffusion of the Roman cult of Mithras cannot, however, be neglected.¹²⁶ Even here, the picture remains much more complex than Cumont and his followers – who never stopped adhering to the scenario of the cult diffusing westward from the Eastern provinces – thought.¹²⁷ Some of the oldest Mithraic artefacts instead support the idea that Roman soldiers first encountered the cult in the Danubian and Rhinean provinces and not in the East.¹²⁸

These complications compelled some scholars to abandon the search for a specific geographical location where the Roman cult of Mithras was supposed to have originated and to focus their attention on the identification of a particular founding group whose adventures, mobility, and/or social status might have facilitated the cult's rapid and geographically impressive spread.¹²⁹ In addition, the maintenance of a sharp distinction between transformation and invention may be detrimental in this regard, since, in the case of the genesis of such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon as the Roman cult of Mithras, both scenarios most likely coexisted; the time of origination could thus partially overlap with the time of dispersion.¹³⁰

Scenarios of this kind (i.e. those focusing on the identification of a prospective founding group), however, remain quite rare. The one potential founding group, which has been discussed in Mithraic scholarship for a long time, is the Cilician pirates mentioned by the Greek philosopher and historian Plutarch.¹³¹ These pirates, captured during Pompey's campaign against them in 67 BCE, were, according to some ancient sources, relocated to – in addition to other places – Southern Italy, and, specifically,

125 For a thorough-going critique of the attitude seeing in the Roman cult of Mithras a typical "military cult", see R. L. Gordon, "The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras...".

126 C. Witschel, "Die Ursprünge des Mithras-Kults...", 209-210.

127 Srov. F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra...*, 39-63.

128 For the first outspoken critique of Cumont's theory of the transmission of the Roman cult of Mithras westward through Roman soldiers of "Oriental" extraction, see Charles M. Daniels, "The Role of the Roman Army in the Spread and Practice of Mithraism", in: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies II*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 249-274.

129 E.g. R. Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras...", 119.

130 R. Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras...", 122: "Development and transmission should be seen as overlapping, not rigidly sequential, phases: certain of the essentials of the Mysteries will have been in place prior to their transmission, but they were developed into their familiar forms in and through the process of transmission itself."

131 Plutarch, *Vita Pompeii* 24-25.

Campania.¹³² Plutarch informs us, too, that these pirates celebrated some mysteries dedicated to Mithras which purportedly continued to be performed until his times. Some scholars accept the credibility of Plutarch's account and see the Cilician pirates as a social group which could be responsible for the transmission of the Mithras cult into Italy, from where it subsequently permeated to other parts of the Roman Empire. Their contribution is seen as essential, for example, by Ernest Will,¹³³ Elmar Schwertheim,¹³⁴ and David Ulansey.¹³⁵ This scenario, however, incurs some difficulties which render its historical relevance problematic. Even if we leave aside the question of whether Plutarch's identification of the "Mysteries of Mithras" known in his times with the mysteries of the Cilician pirates is correct,¹³⁶ it remains a fact that their hypothetical cult, which supposedly later transformed into the Roman cult of Mithras, left no archaeologically visible traces for approximately 150 years.

Alternative hypotheses focusing on the identification of a prospective group of founders were introduced by David Ulansey, Per Beskow, and Roger Beck. Ulansey's scenario can be seen as highly speculative and historically implausible, because the existence of the group whose contribution to the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras he considers as fundamental (stoic philosophers from Tarsus who recognized the religious value and potential of Hipparchus' discovery of the precession of equinoxes) remains purely hypothetical and unattested in historical sources.¹³⁷ According to Per Beskow, the Roman cult of Mithras originated in the 1st century CE in the Bosporan kingdom (in the region around the Crimean Peninsula) in the milieu of local voluntary associations. These Bosporan *synodoi* and *thyasoï* had some interesting characteristics which are consistent with the known features of the Roman cult of Mithras; their membership was exclusively male¹³⁸ and recruited from the military stratum of

132 Servius, *Commentarium ad Georgicam* IV.127 (Georgius Thilo [ed.], *Servii Grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii Bucolica et Georgica commentarii*, Leipzig: Teubner 1887, 329-330).

133 E. Will, "Origine et nature du mithriacisme...", 527.

134 E. Schwertheim, "Mithras: Seine Denkmäler und sein Kult...", 19.

135 D. Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries...*, 40-41.

136 This question is discussed in greater detail e.g. by Eric D. Francis, "Plutarch's Mithraic Pirates", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* I, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 207-210; Robert Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus: Recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*, (ÉPRO 47), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1975, 1-13; Claudio Rubino, "Pompeyo Magno, los piratas cilicios y la introducción del Mithraísmo en el Impero romano según Plutarco", *Latomus* 65, 2006, 915-927.

137 For a very detailed and scorching criticism of Ulansey's historical method and manipulation of sources, see M. Clauss, "Mithras und die Präzession...".

138 The Roman cult of Mithras also excluded women and initiated only males, see Aleš Chalupa, "Hyenas or Lionesses? Mithraism and Women in the Religious World of the

local aristocracy; they had a closed, esoteric character; the maximum number of participating members in one cell was approximately 15-20; they addressed themselves as “brothers” (*adelphoi*) and operated under the leadership of an official named “father”.¹³⁹ Taking into account the Roman military presence in the Crimean region, it is not impossible that some Roman soldiers might have been “inoculated” by the Mithras cult and spread it later, after the Romans evacuated these places and moved to the Danubian provinces, from where it subsequently dispersed into more distant provinces of the Roman Empire.¹⁴⁰ In this regard, Beskow also accentuates the supportive contribution of another highly mobile social group: custom officials of the Roman imperial government stationed in the Danubian provinces.¹⁴¹ The critical problem for Beskow’s scenario is the fact that Mithras is not directly attested as a deity worshipped by Bosporan *synodoi* and *thyasoi*. Tauroctonus statuettes from Kerch,¹⁴² which are prominent in Beskow’s argumentation, probably portray, taking into account the god’s attire and nakedness, Attis and not Mithras.¹⁴³

The best scenario dealing with the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras is, in my opinion, that of Roger Beck. Beck firstly defines the necessary characteristics of a hypothetical founding group in which the cult germinated: a) its existence must predate the appearance of the first Mithraic monuments for at least one generation, i.e. be in existence already in the period 50-75 CE; b) it must not be tied exclusively to one particular geographical locality; on the contrary, it must be highly mobile; c) it must be socially well positioned, although not belong to the highest (senatorial) orders of Roman society; d) it must have access to the Roman military and, at the same time, to the Roman imperial administration; and e) it must be acquainted with the Persian religious tradition and amalgamate it with the knowledge provided by Hellenistic science, represented for example by astrology.¹⁴⁴ This founding group is subsequently identified as civil and military dependants of the Commagenian royal family, who became, after

Late Antiquity”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 13/2, 2005, 198-230.

139 P. Beskow, “The Routes of Early Mithraism...”, 15-16.

140 *Ibid.*, 17-18.

141 Per Beskow, “The *Portorium* and the Mysteries of Mithras”, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 3, 1980, 1-18.

142 *CIMRM* 11 and *CIMRM* 12 = Vladimir D. Blawatsky – Gennadij A. Kochelenko, *Le culte de Mithra sur la côte septentrional de la Mer Noir*, (ÉPRO 8), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1966, fig. 8 and 10.

143 R. Beck, “Mithraism Since Franz Cumont...”, 2019.

144 R. Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras...”, 117-120. This amalgamation of Persian religion with astrological lore was supposedly made through the person of the famous astrologist Titus Claudius Balbillus, see p. 75 and n. 51 above.

the civil wars of 68-70 CE, members of the Roman aristocracy.¹⁴⁵ The genesis of the Roman cult of Mithras thus intersects with the history of one particular social group which had strong ties to the Persian religious tradition, is attested in our historical sources, and about whose fate and actions in the 1st century CE we have sufficiently detailed information. However, this said, it remains true that even this sophisticated scenario cannot be directly corroborated by our historical sources, and must remain in the form of a hypothesis: historically credible, but a hypothesis nonetheless.

Conclusion

From a careful review of the oldest Mithraic evidence, it follows that the Roman cult of Mithras, in all probability, originated shortly before 75-125 CE. The geographical distribution of the oldest monuments does not refer to a particular geographical locality and does not conclusively support any of the scenarios of Mithraic origin proposed so far, which further complicates the search for a solution to this time-old question. The suggested alternative to the “Asia Minor scenarios”, introduced and propagated foremost by Manfred Clauss, which places the genesis of the Roman cult of Mithras in Rome or Ostia, encounters the same problems as the theories it reacts to: there seems to be no easily identifiable connection between Rome and the localities where the oldest Mithraic monuments are reported. Therefore, attention has shifted to the search for a founding community in which the cult germinated and subsequently spread to the majority of Roman provinces. The most promising scenarios of this type are those introduced by Per Beskow (who saw the members of Bosporan *synodoi* and *thyasoi* as a potential founding group) and Roger Beck (according to whom the Roman cult of Mithras originated among the members of the Commagenian military aristocracy). Although the latter scenarios may be seen as a “step in the right direction”, they are lacking, just as other scholarly narratives about the Mithraic origins, any decisive empirical evidence from our historical sources and must remain suitable hypotheses open to further verification. At the moment, we are not able to conclusively identify either a place or a specific founding group in which the Roman cult of Mithras might have originated, or to describe the specific historical circumstances under which this process took place.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 121-122. For more extensive information on the history of the Commagenian Kingdom, see Richard D. Sullivan, “The Dynasty of Commagene”, *ANRW* II.8, 1977, 732-798.



SUMMARY

The Origins of the Roman Cult of Mithras in the Light of New Evidence and Interpretations: The Current State of Affairs

This article deals with the still unresolved question of the origins of the Roman cult of Mithras. After a brief history of the scholarship dealing with this topic, individual mithraea, inscriptions, and passages in literary texts which have been dated to the earliest period of the cult's existence are evaluated. On the basis of this re-evaluation, some provisional conclusions concerning the question of Mithraic origins are made, namely that (1) the earliest evidence comes from the period 75-125 CE but remains, until the second half of the 2nd century CE, relatively negligible; (2) the geographical distribution of early evidence does not allow for a clear identification of the geographical location from which the cult started to spread, which suggests that (3) the cult made effective use of Roman military infrastructure and trade routes and (4) was transmitted, at least initially, due to the high mobility of the first propagators. However, it must be acknowledged that, at present, we can neither conclusively identify its place of origin nor the people who initiated the cult. In addition it is impossible to describe the specific historical circumstances in which these formative processes should be placed.

Keywords: Roman cult of Mithras; origins of the Roman cult of Mithras; cultural hybridity; invention of new religious cults; cultural transmission; Franz Cumont; Roger Beck; Per Beskow; Kingdom of Commagene.

Department for the Study of Religions
Faculty of Arts
Masaryk University
Arna Nováka 1
602 00 Brno
Czech Republic

ALEŠ CHALUPA
chalupa@phil.muni.cz