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THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRAS AND OTHER MYSTIC CULTS IN THE ROMAN WORLD

INTRODUCTION

AN OCCASION TO DEAL WITH MITHRAISM ANEW

The conference “The Mysteries of Mithras and Other Mystic Cults in the Roman World,” which was held in Tarquinia in June 2016, focused on a phenomenon of the ancient world which proves increasingly important: the interaction between Roman religion and foreign cults, and especially cults from the East. Southern Etruria and northern Latium provide us with a favorable context for focusing on the topic of our meeting.

The role of Greeks and Carthaginians along the mid-Tyrrhenian shore were demonstrated by both solid previous studies and new discoveries in the development and transformation of local pantheons of Etruscan and Latin cities, thanks to these foreign influences. One has only to remember the excavation in the emporium of Gravisca, with its local cult to Adonis, or the asylum of Pyrgi wherein new archaeological data allowed us to rewrite the story of cultural contacts between Greeks and Etruscans.

Major surprises, however, are provided by the Imperial Age, thanks to recent research. On the Etruscan soil, up to five cultic places (Vulci, Tarquinia, Sutri, Cosa, Livorno) should be added to the well-known and rich repertory of Mithraic monuments and temples in this area, and especially in Rome and Ostia. A beautiful marble relief has been found in Veii; a great excitement has been caused by the recovery of a marble statue from Tarquinia, thanks to a successful operation to fight clandestine diggings, by the Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale, in 2014. Investigations by the judicial police, directed by the Procura della Repubblica del Tribunale di Roma, led to localizing the clandestine finding on the Poggio della Civita di Tarquinia, near the famous temple known as Ara della Regina. Archaeological diggings by the Soprintendenza followed those operations and allowed the precise spot where the marble statue came from to be singled out, thanks to the discovery of the dog leaning into the bull’s knee and dove-tailing the Mithraic statue. This monument has been dated to the second quarter of the 2nd century AD and proves, without any possible doubt, the provenance of the Mithraic marble group from the Civita of Tarquinia.

The University of Verona is going forth with archaeological research in order to better know the urban context of this discovery.

The Mithras cult in southern Etruria was already known, thanks to the Mithraeum of Vulci, dug in the Seventies of the past century. This temple is unique for its amount of information in this area. We want to add the Mithraeum of Marino, with its exceptional paintings, which has been recently presented to the visitors in a better and more modern way.

The time is evidently ripe for presenting to the scientific community such news and also new interpretations of previously-known data. The Soprintendenza, the Università di Verona, Péter Pázmány Catholic University of Budapest, Brandeis University, Waltham (MA), have promoted the conference, “The Mysteries of Mithras and Other Mystic Cults in the Roman World” During four days of activities, many European and American Universities and Institutions have been involved, with their representatives and a large audience attending the different sessions. Along with the numerous papers on Mithras, contributions concerning Cybele, Isis, Serapis, and other foreign gods have enriched the panorama of data, studies and research, by giving also opportunities for further research. Also unprecedented has been the form of organization of this conference, located in different seats, in the tradition of the Symposia Peregrina, a series of meetings created following the initiation by Patricia Johnston (Brandeis University of Waltham/Boston) at the Villa Vergiliana in Cuma, seat of the American Vergilian Society, and subsequently relocated in Grumento Nova (Basilicata), Verona, and Budapest.

This conference offered an occasion to involve in this complex cultural project institutions, local communities of the territories from which important Mithraic monuments came, especially Tarquinia and Vulci (in the province of Viterbo), and Marino (province of Rome). This project also gave birth to the exhibition “Vulci e i misteri di Mitra. Culti orientali in Etruria” at the castle of Abbazia, at Vulci, to an exhibition of the Mithras sculptural group from Tarquinia at the National Archaeological Museum of Tarquinia, and to guided visits to the magnificent Mithraeum of Marino, in its new presentation to visitors.

Other institutions should be thanked for their support and participation in the enterprise, and namely the University of Dallas at Marino, the Fondazione Etruria Mater, the Fondazione Carivit of Viterbo, the Municipalities of Tarquinia, Montalto di Castro, and Canino (where the ancient Vulci is located), the civic museum of Marino, the Università Agraria of Tarquinia, and the Fondazione Vulci. Thanks to the different forms of contribution by all the participants, scholars, and local administrations a scientific event such as this conference represented a new and important element for the cohesion of the territory, based on culture, according to the programmatic lines that the Soprintendenza has been following for many years.

ORIENTAL CULTS

In the 19th century several cults of Anatolia, Judaea, Syria, and Egypt ignited the curiosity of many scholars – Creuzer is the most representative among them – who

wanted to recognize oriental influences in European culture. It was, partially, a reaction to Classicism, which characterized the Napoleonic period and the subsequent decades. Jerusalem and Memphis went to the fore, instead of Athens and Rome. Archaeological discoveries sharpened the focus on the so-called “Orient” and also the deciphering and translation of Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts gave a supplementary impetus to such an approach. At the end of the 19th century Franz Cumont provided the academic world with a handbook of oriental religions in the Roman Empire.¹ This had become a reference book for roughly one century by establishing a basic list of gods and cults who had been the most influential among the Romans and changed deeply their religious mentality. These gods are Cybele and Attis, Mithras, Isis, Serapis, and Harpocrates, with minor and somehow uncertain additions of other gods such as Iuppiter Dolichenus, Iuppiter Heliopolitanus, Bacchus, Sabazius, and eventually others. Apart from their oriental origin, these gods were fascinating because many of them had mysteric features, secret doctrines, hidden rituals, and allowed a direct contact with the divine world. Not only scientific knowledge, but also the personal religious search for living gods was pushing scholars and learned people to study these cults. A different form of art featured cultic images of the oriental gods, who were conceived of differently from Greco-Roman traditional gods. This difference was thought of as a mark of divinity.

Two important defects undermined such an approach, namely that of excluding from the oriental gods in the Roman Empire the Jewish god and also Jesus Christ, who had been the most important ones to have succeeded in transforming the Roman religious mentality. But religious reasons prevented Cumont and other subsequent scholars from studying together Hebraism, Christianity and “oriental religions”, and even so he failed to obtain a position as full professor of Roman History at the University of Ghent because of his dangerous and inopportune research. The uneasy relationship between studies in Judeo-Christian tradition and oriental studies (especially Assyrian and Sumerian studies) produced a split between them, as well, and in the 20th century several scholars acutely avoided comparisons and interferences in order not to hurt the contemporary religious sensibility.

Nowadays, such a problem is to some degree out of date, and researchers are relatively free from the danger of being persecuted. Probably no one among the believers in a monotheistic religion abandoned his faith because of the research in Syrian, Persian or Mesopotamian gods. Only the enormous difficulties of being acquainted with both Christianity, Judaism and “oriental cults” prevent many researchers from undertaking a comparative approach. One among the major mistakes in the 19th century research was that of looking only for (supposed) similarities and putting aside the differences, the chronological disjunctions, and other obstacles.

The second defect was the artificial compound created by putting together different cults and gathering them in one category. Sometimes the mysteric features of

¹ CUMONT, F.: *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*. Paris 1929⁴. New ed. by C. Bonnet, F. Van Haepelen, and B. Toune. Turin 2006. For a relatively recent updating: TURCAN, R.: *Les cultes orientaux dans le monde romain*. Paris 1989.

these cults were recognized as the unifying element among them, even though several mysteric rituals had been created or added after the model of the Greek mysteries. For example, the mysteries of Cybele are documented only in the Imperial Age, and then very rarely. Moreover, the supposed soteriological nature of all the oriental cults, or many of them, was conceived starting from the Christian model which has been too hastily adopted for many foreign cults.²

Recent works and conferences underlined the scarce coherence of a compound such as that of the “oriental cults”.³ Obviously, such a criticism does not prevent us from studying each one of these cults, but simply warns against naively grouping them together.

Another approach to our topic has been proposed recently, from the point of view of the Romanization of cults in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire instead of the influence from East to West. How did Roman law, Roman religion, and tradition transform many cults in the East? The results of such an approach have been definitely interesting and important.⁴ Cultural contacts have been influential on both sides within the Roman Empire.

Our conference had not the ambition of transforming methodologies or proposing new thoughts for re-thinking oriental gods, but, more simply, that of gathering many researchers who present an updated panorama of several oriental cults. Archaeological discoveries had been many in recent decades, and especially the known Mithraic documents are more now than when Maarten Jozef Vermaseren was writing his

² See the criticism by J. ALVAR: *Romanising Oriental Gods. Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras* [RGRW 165]. Leiden–Boston 2008.

³ BONNET, C. – RÜPKE, J. – SCARPI, P. (eds): *Religions orientales – culti misterici. Neue Perspektiven – nouvelles perspectives – prospettive nuove* [PawB 16]. Stuttgart 2006 (and especially BELAYCHE, N.: Note sur l’imagerie des divinités ‘orientales’ dans le Proche-Orient romain, 123–133); KAIZER, T.: In Search of Oriental Cults. Methodological Problems Concerning ‘the Particular’ and ‘the General’ in Near Eastern Religion in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods. *Historia* 55 (2006) 26–47; BONNET, C. – PIRENNE-DELFORGE, V. – PRAET, D. (eds): *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain cent ans après Cumont (1906–2006). Bilan historique et historiographique. Colloque Rome, 16–18 November 2006*. Brussels–Rome 2009; GORDON, R. L.: Coming to Terms with the “Oriental Religions of the Roman Empire”. *Numen* 61 (2014) 657–672. A partial and critical “rehabilitation” of this category has been proposed by J. ALVAR: *Romanising Oriental Gods. Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*. Leiden 2008. On the origin of this category: LAHE, J.: Die „Orientalischen Religionen“ im Römerreich als ein Problem der Religionsgeschichte. *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 20 (2012) 151–195.

⁴ See DE BLOIS, L. – FUNKE, P. – HAHN, J. (eds): *The Impact of Imperial Rome on Religions, Ritual and Religious Life in the Roman Empire. Proceedings of the Fifth Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire (Roman Empire, 200 BC – AD 476). Münster, June 30 – July 4, 2004*. Leiden–Boston 2006; CADOTTE, A.: *La Romanisation des Dieux. L’interpretatio romana en Afrique du Nord sous le Haut-Empire* [RGRW 158]. Leiden 2007; ALVAR (n. 2); BELAYCHE, N.: *DEAE SVRIAE SACRUM*. La romanité des cultes ‘orientaux’. *Revue Historique* 615 (2000) 565–592; BELAYCHE, N.: Les formes de religion dans quelques colonies du Proche-Orient. *ARG* 5 (2003) 157–179; BELAYCHE, N.: ‘Languages’ and Religion in second- to fourth-century Palestine: in Search of the Impact of Rome. In COTTON, H. M. – HOYLAND, R.G. – PRICE, J. J. – WASSERSTEIN, D. J. (eds): *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*. Cambridge – New York 2009, 177–202; WITSCHERL, CHR.: ‘Orientalische Kulte’ im römischen Reich – neue Perspektiven der altertumswissenschaftlichen Forschung. In BLÖMER, M. – WINTER, E. (eds): *Iuppiter Dolichenus. Vom Lokalkult zur Reichsreligion* [ORA 8]. Tübingen 2012, 13–38.

Mithraic corpus. Almost all of the Roman provinces have new finds to add – and not only in the field of Mithraism. The call for papers has been particularly appealing to researchers from the Danubian countries, Switzerland, America, Spain, and Italy. Interpretations of known documents or texts and also new finds have been presented and discussed. The lack of a new, updated corpus of Mithraic monuments is still felt, and several projects for realizing this have been surprisingly dismissed, but now, fortunately, the project for a new corpus of Mithraic monuments in Italy has begun at the Universities of Verona and Ghent. The proceedings of our conference are intended to be a contribution to the knowledge of texts and monuments of several cults of oriental origin.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONFERENCE

The topics of the papers in this collection begin with the numerous Mithraic sites that have been identified, beginning in Etruria. In the first paper, Maria Gabriella Scapaticci discusses the discovery of the Mithraic statue from Tarquinia. Then Nicola Luciani examines the characteristics of the Mithraic cult in Etruria; Rebeca Rubio Rivera studies the spread of the Mithraic cult in both Etruria and Umbria, and Giovanna Bastianelli focusses on the fragmentary documentation of Mithraism in Umbria. Ugo Fusco deals with the Mithraic reliefs from Latium and the one newly found in Veii. We then move on to other Mithraic sites, beginning with Ostia, where Massimiliano David reports on “A Newly Discovered Mithraeum at Ostia”, and, in an article also signed by Alessandro Melega, examines a newly identified Mithraic monogram recurring in Ostia, which could be put in comparison with the Christogram and some symbols of other gods in the Imperial Age.

Stefano De Togni clarifies the non-Mithraic nature of a temple in Angera, which had been sometimes discussed for its location in a cave, and James C. Henriques presents the scarcely known Mithraeum of Cosa, whose location, abutting the local Curia, is extremely interesting. Beatrice Palma Venetucci, Beatrice Cacciotti, and Maria Mangiafesta discuss the provenance of some Isiac and Mithraic sculptures from Antium, and Valentino Gasparini and Richard L. Gordon examine the growing use of the “less specific” terms “Isiac gods” and “Isiac cults”.

We then move to Spain, where Claudina Romero Mayorga deals with “Mithraic Iconography in Hispania. Reinterpretation of the Catalogue and New Findings”. We then go to Switzerland, where Sarah Lo Russo, Regula Ackermann and Hannes Flück (with a contribution by Markus Peter) report on a recently discovered cultic site of Mithras at Kempraten (CH) and scientific analyses on the related finds.

The Panel on Mithras in Danubian Provinces is aimed at presenting and discussing the numerous recent discoveries in this area. After our conference in Tarquinia, Matthew McCarty and Mariana Egri organized another important meeting on “Archaeology of Mithraism” in Alba Iulia (Romania) on 26–28 October 2017, and here other new discoveries have been presented. In our panel, Mithraism in Moesia Inferior has been dealt with by Valentin Bottez; Mojca Vomer Gojkovič presents in

detail the known Mithraea in Poetovio by adding interesting news about some Mithraic finds discovered in 2011; Andrej Preložnik and Aleksandra Nestorović discuss the numerous Mithraic testimonies from Poetovio and its territory; Nirvana Silnović deals with a miniature Mithraic Relief from the Archaeological Museum in Split; Ádám Szabó presents a paper on “The Two Parts of the ‘Mithraic Universe’ by Right of the External and Internal Orientation of the Cult Image”; Csaba Szabó provides us with an updated overview of the Mithraic finds from Dacia, i.e. a *CIMRM* Supplement of this province; and finally, Tünde Vágási discusses the inscriptions from Pannonia with dedications to both Mithras and Sol.

A section of these proceedings is devoted to Mithraic ideology. Tommaso Gnoli examines “The ‘City of Darkness’ and ‘the Riders’ in the Mithraeum of Hawarte,” a late antique cultic place, testifying to ideological connections with some Iranian beliefs. Robert Turcan, the famous French scholar, sent his paper, which has been translated by P. A. Johnston and A. Mastrocinque, but he passed away on January 16, 2018, before seeing the proofs. In his paper he explains the epithet *saecularis* as referring to the god’s role as the ruler of the whole cosmos and of time. Then a noteworthy monument from the Via Appia, the Tomb of Vibia, is studied by Francisco Marco Simón (“A Place with Shared Meanings: Mithras, Sabazius and Christianity in the ‘Tomb of Vibia’”). Gérard Freyburger deals with the Mithraic and Isiac symbols and their presentation during the mystery ceremonies. Attilio Mastrocinque underlines that the Mithraic benches were called *praesepia*, a name which implies that the initiates were supposed to be similar to animals and especially to lions. Sandra Blakely deals with the similarities between the Dioscuri and the Mithraic torchbearers. Christopher A. Faraone deals with some relationships between mystery cults and *defixiones*. Olympia Panagiotidou writes on secrecy in the Mithraic mystery cult as a means to reinforce the social cohesion among the members of the communities. Jaan Lahe, “*Mitra-Mithra-Mithras*: the Roman Mithras and His Indo-Iranian background” underlines the Persian origin of Mithraism. Diego Romagnoli compares Neo-Platonism and Mithraism and supposes that Neo-Platonists identified Mithras with the Demiourgos and Hecate with the *anima mundi*. Luciano Albanese then compares the cave of the Nymphs described by Homer in the Thirteenth Canto of the *Odyssey*, as deciphered by Porphyry, and the cave in the mysteries of Mithras, whereas Ewa Osek compares the Modena relief to the *Orphic Rhapsodies*.

Three works by Tünde Vágási, Dan-Tudor Ionescu, and Lorenzo Pérez Yarza examine the complex relationships between Mithras, Sol Invictus, and Apollo.

We then move to the Egyptian cults, beginning with Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, who focusses on the cohesion of the ‘Isiac Family’ in the Hellenistic and Roman world. Beatrice Poletti argues against the supposed traditionalism of Augustus, who, instead, did not repress any foreign cult, but favored a re-shaping of some of them according to the imperial ideology.

The next group of papers are concerned with the cult of Cybele and Attis. Pirmin Koch presents the archaeological research in Kempraten (Switzerland), where the Roman temple to the Magna Mater shows many similarities with the Metroon in Mainz (Germany). Giulia Pedrucci discusses the *mundus Attinis* at Consilinum

(Campania) as related to the Attis cult and the god's death. Paola Gagliardi, in her paper, notices that the character of Adonis was apparently more important in the Augustan literature than in rituals and public festivals. This leads to Vincenzo Elio Junior Macchione and Davide Mastroianni's examination of the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* of Tiriolo, where recent archaeological discoveries suggest that the bronze text was published close to a local temple to Bacchus.

The final paper is concerned with the image of Orpheus: Francesca Ceci and Aleksandra Krauze-Kołodziej, "Perception of a Mystery: the Images of the Myth of Orpheus on Ancient Coins" consider the images of the myth of the legendary poet and prophet on ancient coins.

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Today, we think of the worship of Mithras as "Mithraism," but that's a fairly recent title. Older references to the religion call it either the Mysteries of Mithras or even the Mysteries of the Persians, making the connection between the god and his Persian origins clear. The cult had a major stronghold in the Roman empire, and those Roman subjects who practiced it considered themselves Persian in a cultural respect. Those ancient Romans traced their cult's lineage back to Zoroaster, but where the cult started is much less clear. For about the 200 years leading up to 2800 BC, Mithras (who's at 4. Initiation into the mysteries of Mithras. 5. Priests. 6. Mithras and other gods. The Roman deity Mithras appears in the historical record in the late 1st century A.D., and disappears from it in the late 4th century A.D. Unlike the major mythological figures of Graeco-Roman religion, such as Jupiter and Hercules, no ancient source preserves the mythology of the god. All of our information is therefore derived from depictions on monuments, and the limited mentions of the cult in literary sources. The temples of Mithras were always an underground cave, featuring a relief of Mithras killing the bull. This "tauroctony", as it is known today, appears in the same format everywhere Mithraism was an underground Roman religious group that worshipped a pagan deity called Mithras. All Mithraea featured a tauroctony, an image of the god Mithras slaying a sacred bull, as its centerpiece. Though the covert religion was once so widespread some historians considered it an early rival and "sister religion" to Christianity, little is actually known for certain about it. As Roger Beck describes in his book *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, "The stars spill out over Mithras' tunic, giving the god a peculiar transparency, as if he belongs both in the universe of the painted cave and in the universe of stars and planets framed by the cloak" which of course he does because the universe at all levels is his. A new book on the mysteries of Mithras, a solar-based religion that flourished in the Roman empire sometime between the first and fifth centuries of the common era. As is well known, Mithraism has left no extant sacred texts other than some inscriptions. In contemporary literature, there are only a few fragmented commentaries, mostly from the third century CE. The extant evidence for the religion that does exist is overwhelmingly archaeological and iconographic. These remains reveal a practice. Mithras was not a jealous god, and other gods can be found honored alongside Mithras. Members of the Mithraic cult sometimes doubled as members of other Mystery cults, as well as practicing the more mainstream religions of the Greco-Roman world. The central motive of every Mithraeum is a representation of Mithras dragging a bull and slitting its throat. Mithras is also surrounded by other animals representing the zodiac, and celestial elements like the sun, moon and stars are constantly present. Scholars disagree as to the exact nature of the meaning of this, but two explanations are likely. T