

## RITUAL AND HIERARCHY IN THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRAS

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### RESUMEN

Dentro del contexto de las relaciones entre religión y poder, el presente artículo se orienta a la consideración del papel jugado por las prácticas religiosas en el mantenimiento de las estructuras sociopolíticas. De esta forma, a través del estudio de las evidencias conocidas del culto a Mitra se analizan sus capacidades en dos aspectos: el reconocimiento de las jerarquías, a través de la adaptación al ritual del sistema romano del patronazgo y la justificación del papel sumiso del individuo en el ordenamiento político del poder imperial.

### ABSTRACT

This article analyses, within the relationship between religion and power in the ancient world, the way in which religious practice contributes to the maintenance of Roman socio-political structures. Therefore, in this article would be suggested two aspects of this relation on the basis of evidences of the cult of Mithras: the legitimation of hierarchy by adapting the ritual system to the Roman patronage and the submission of the individual in the political structure of the imperial power.

The general subject of the relation between religion and the maintenance of political and social power in the ancient world has not until recently received the attention it deserves. It has in fact traditionally been taken for granted, particularly in relation to the most obviously relevant case, the cult of Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors: it was only in the 1980s that the issues of the subjects' attitudes to such cult, and the relationship between ruler cult and other religious cult was seriously raised.<sup>1</sup> At about the same time, attempts were made to

<sup>1</sup> In this article, V. = the catalogue number in M.J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (The Hague, 1956-60), 2 vols. Corrections to Vermaseren's information are in course of presentation on the internet site of the Electronic Journal of Mithraic Studies, <http://www2.uhu.es/ejms> and (often preferable) <http://gama.inseec.pt/Lusitania/ejrm>.

Schwertheim = E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler orientalischer Gottheiten im römischen Deutschland* EPRO 40 (Leyden, 1974).

problematise the nature of religious authority in the classical city state and at Rome, and contrast them with the patterns found in the complex states and empires of the ancient Near East.<sup>2</sup> There have also been attempts, initially inspired by the Besançon group of ancient historians,<sup>3</sup> but more recently by the realisation that religion needs to be 'written back into the heart of all our narratives' of the emergence of imperial culture,<sup>4</sup> to examine the relation between religious institutions and colonial power in the Latin West. One account of this has indeed argued that the religious choices of the élite were always decisive in the construction of 'civic religion' itself, a notion which never represented more than a highly selective version of the true cult activity of the city population, let alone that of its dependent territory.<sup>5</sup>

There has been less interest in the question of how exactly religious practice contributes to the maintenance and legitimation of socio-political hierarchy. This is partly a matter of our sheer ignorance, for it would be reasonable to suppose that an important, perhaps a crucial, aspect of this problem might be provided by a semiotic or other account of ritual; but it is precisely ritual action in the ancient world about which we know least. Moreover, the ritual aspects of civic sacrifice, insofar as they are known to us, do not suggest that, even if we knew many more details, they would contribute to a greater understanding of how religious practice legitimates social hierarchy. The way in which other aspects of

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S.R.F. Price, 'Between man and god: sacrifice in the Roman imperial cult,' *JRS* 70 (1980), 28-43; id., *Rituals and Power: the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1984); D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: studies in the ruler cult in the western provinces of the Roman empire* EPRO 108 (Leyden, 1987-92); R. Turcan, 'La promotion du sujet par le culte du souverain,' in: A. Small (ed.), *Subject and Ruler: the cult of the ruling power in Classical Antiquity* JRA Supplement 17 (Ann Arbor, 1996), 51-62; M. Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott: Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> R.L. Garland, 'Religious authority in Archaic and Classical Greece,' *ABSA* 77 (1982), 125-76; M. Beard, 'Accia Larentia gains a son: myths and priesthood at Rome,' in: M.M. MacKenzie and C. Roueché (eds.), *Images of Authority: Papers for Joyce Reynolds* Cambridge Philological Society Supplement 16 (Cambridge, 1989), 41-61; M. Beard and J. North (eds.), *Pagan Priests* (London, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> M. Clevel-Lévêque, 'Le syncrétisme gallo-romain, structures et finalités,' in: F. Sartori (ed.), *Praelectiones Patavinae* Università Padova, Pubbl. Ist. di Storia antica, 9 (Rome, 1972), 51-134; P-A. Février, 'Religion et domination dans l'Afrique romaine,' *DHA* 2 (1976), 305-63.

<sup>4</sup> G. Woolf, 'The religious history of the northwestern provinces,' *JRA* 13 (2000), 615-30, at 616 (rev. of T. Derks, *Gods, Temples and Religious Practices: the transformation of religious ideas and values in Roman Gaul* Amsterdam Archaeological Studies 2 (Amsterdam, 1998)).

<sup>5</sup> A. Bendlin, 'Peripheral centres – central peripheries: religious communication in the Roman Empire,' in: H. Cancik and J. Rüpke (eds.), *Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion* (Tübingen, 1998), 35-68; id., 'Looking beyond the civic compromise: religious pluralism in late-republican Rome,' in: E. Bispham and C. Smith (eds.), *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome and Italy* (Edinburgh, 2000), 115-35.

ritual, for example, festivals and processions, concretise and legitimate social hierarchy, has however been studied with profit,<sup>6</sup> as have imperial funerary rituals.<sup>7</sup> All this, though, remains rather impressionistic. But in an important new book, Jaime Alvar has suggested that examination of the 'oriental cults' of the Roman Empire, precisely because they were not so embedded in the other socio-political institutions of the ancient world, may be valuable here, partly because their rituals, because 'strange', are more reported, and partly because myth plays a more direct role in legitimating these rituals than is commonly the case in civic ritual.<sup>8</sup> He has profitably examined the myths of the cults of Isis, Cybele-Attis and Mithras from this point of view.

In this article I would like to suggest some further ways in which the cult of Mithras simultaneously drew upon wider conceptions of hierarchy and gave individual initiates a concrete, personal, experience of the necessity of social asymmetry.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. H. Quet, 'Remarques sur la place de la fête dans les discours de moralistes grecs et dans l'éloge des cités et des évergètes aux premiers siècles de l'Empire,' in: *La fête, pratique et discours* (Paris, 1981), 41-84; E.E. Rice, *The Grand Procession of Ptolemy Philadelphus* (Oxford, 1983), on Kallixenos of Rhodes, *FGrH* 627 F2; Price, *Rituals and Power* (n.1 above), 101-14, 128f. (on Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 35. 10); Fishwick, *Imperial Cult* (n. 1 above), 2.1: 475-590; P. Schmitt Pantel, *La cité au banquet: histoire des repas publics dans les cités grecques* CEFR 157 (Rome 1992); A. Lozano, 'Vida política y fiestas religiosas en Estratonicea de Caria,' in: J. Alvar, C. Blánquez, C.G. Wagner (eds.), *Ritual y conciencia cívica en el Mundo antiguo: Homenaje a F. Gascó ARYS 7* (Madrid, 1995), 139-53; F. Gascó, 'Évergètes, fiestas y conciencia cívica en las ciudades griegas de época Imperial,' *ibid.* 165-70. (Concern with the social functions of ritual was a significant feature of early modern historiography in the late 1970s, e.g. E. Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, 1981); cf. *id.*, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997)). It must be confessed, however, that evocations of festivals, crowds and processions often serve a merely descriptive, non-analytic end, e.g. R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1981), 18-42; R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London, 1986), 66-8; and there are currently signs of a desire to escape from the simple reading 'ritual → social order', e.g. N. Bourque, 'An anthropologist's view of ritual,' in Bispham and Smith (eds.), *Religion* (see preceding n.), 19-33.

<sup>7</sup> H. Gesche, 'Die Divinisierung der römischen Kaiser in ihrer Funktion als Herrschaftslegitimation,' *Chiron* 8 (1978), 374-90; W. Kierdorf, '“Funus” und “consecratio”. Zur Terminologie und Ablauf der kaiserlichen Apotheose,' *Chiron* 16 (1986), 43-69; S.R.F. Price, 'From noble funerals to divine consecration,' in: D. Cannadine and S.R.F. Price (eds.) *Rituals of Royalty: power and ceremonial in traditional societies* (Cambridge, 1987), 56-105; J. Arce, *Funus imperatorum: los funerales de los emperadores romanos* (Madrid, 1988). On late-antique imperial funerals: S.G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1981), 93-158; S. Rebenich, 'Vom dreizehnten Gott zum dreizehnten Apostel?: Der tote Kaiser in der Spätantike,' *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 4 (2000), 300-24; with the remarks of P.R.L. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: towards a Christian empire* (Madison, 1992), 13-15.

<sup>8</sup> J. Alvar, *Los Misterios: religiones 'orientales' en el imperio romano* (Barcelona, 2001).

### 1. PATRONAGE AND DEFERENCE.

Although so much about the mystery cult of Mithras remains obscure, it seems certain that the internal organisation was ranked into a hierarchy of holders of different initiatory grades. The traditional view that there were seven of these, which was based upon the explicit listing of the names by St. Jerome in relation to an incident at Rome involving the Urban Prefect Furius Maecius Gracchus in 376/7,<sup>9</sup> seemed to be satisfactorily confirmed by the discovery at Ostia in the course of the Fascist excavations (1938-42) of a mosaic floor representing seven grade-symbols in a line stretching from the entrance to the cult-niche (Fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> This in turn seemed to be confirmed by the paintings on the right-hand wall of the S. Prisca mithraeum on the Aventine, discovered in 1935 and first published in 1940, which include a series of acclamations to all seven of the grades listed by Jerome.<sup>11</sup>

The inference has however recently been denied on two different grounds. Manfred Clauss has argued that the grades were in fact ranks within the priesthood, and that most members of the cult were not members of grades, they were initiated once and that was all. The main argument in favour of this hypothesis, which is based on the analogy of other mystery cults, is the highly uneven epigraphic evidence for the grades, which are far more common in Rome and more generally in Italy, than they are on the Rhine-Danube area, where most of the archaeological evidence for the cult derives from.<sup>12</sup> Only about 14% of the c. 1050 epigraphically-attested Mithraists mention their grade.

There are four good arguments against this view. First, a recently-discovered *album*, or membership-list, from Virunum, clearly implies that there was a specific notion of membership in the Mithraic community: over an 18-year period, following the initial list relating to the year 183/4 A.D., several new names were added annually by the *scrutator* or *scriba*, never less than one (in 186, 190, 194, 196 and 201 A.D.), never more than eight (184, after the losses probably caused by

<sup>9</sup> '(Gracchus) specum Mithrae et omnia portentosa simulacra quibus Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, Pater imitantur subvertit ...': Jerome, *Ep.* 107, 2. *Imitantur*, the reading of all the main mss., has been rejected in favour of *initiantur* by Vallarsi and many later editors. This would make better sense, but *imitantur* seems to allude to a tradition similar to that known by Ambrosiaster (see below).

<sup>10</sup> G. Becatti, *Scavi di Ostia, 2: I Mitrei* (Rome, 1954), 105-12 = V.299.

<sup>11</sup> A. Ferrua, 'Il mitreo sotto la chiesa di S. Prisca,' *BCR* 68 (1940), 59-70; M.J. Vermaseren and C.C. van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca, Rome* (Leyden, 1965), 155-60 (upper layer); 167-9 (lower layer).

<sup>12</sup> M. Clauss, 'Die sieben Grade des Mithras-Kultes,' *ZPE* 82 (1990), 183-94; id., *The Roman Cult of Mithras: the god and his mysteries* (Edinburgh, 2000), 131-3 (= *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien* [Munich, 1990], 138-40).

the plague).<sup>13</sup> The document seems to exclude the idea that there were many initiates who never became full members of the cult (or 'priests' in Clauss' terminology). Secondly, the small size of most Mithraic temples, and their resemblance to *triclinia*, dining-halls, tends to confirm the idea that the notion of membership was well-developed in this cult. This suggests that Clauss' distinction between simple initiates and a special élite of 'priests' is inappropriate, especially since the epigraphical evidence tends to support the view that *sacerdos* normally implied the grade *Pater* – a *Pater* need not have been a priest, but a *sacerdos* usually required to have achieved the grade *Pater*.<sup>14</sup> If all the grade-members had been priests, it would have been nonsensical to create a special title of this kind for certain *Patres*.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, the casual manner in which Tertullian refers to the initiation-rite for Miles, to the allegorical significance of Mithraic Lions, and to Fathers, strongly suggests that he thought of these grades as membership grades and not as a qualification open only to a small minority of members.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the dozens of graffiti on the columns of the North side of the mithraeum at Dura-Europos, which Clauss does not allude to at all, strongly support the assumption that to be an ordinary member of a Mithraic congregation involved membership of one of the seven grades.<sup>17</sup> Here too there are acclamations to individuals, for example Mareos and Maximinus, both wall-painters, and another individual who was a professional scribe, who are given no grade.<sup>18</sup> In each of these cases, however, it seems reasonable to suppose that these acclamations are to be taken as an expression of gratitude for services provided, and have no significance for the issue of grades. However until these graffiti are fully published – an event we have now been awaiting for half a century – any statement about the case at Dura must remain provisional.

Clauss however does not dispute that the system of seven grades did apply widely through the Empire, albeit only to 'priests'. It is precisely

<sup>13</sup> AE 1994: 1334, with G. Piccottini, *Mithrastempel in Virunum* (Klagenfurt, 1994), 24–28. I see little reason to share W. Hameter's ill-expressed doubts concerning Piccottini's association of the phrase *mortalitatis causa* with a visitation of the Antonine plague: 'The afterlife of some inscriptions from Noricum: modifications and falsifications,' in: *The Afterlife of Roman Inscriptions*, A. Cooley (ed.) BICS Suppl. 73 (London, 2000), 37–46 at 44.

<sup>14</sup> F. Mitthof, 'Der Vorstand der Kultgemeinden des Mithras: eine Sammlung und Untersuchung der inschriftlichen Zeugnisse,' *Klio* 74 (1992), 275–90. Although his material so clearly suggests that Clauss is wrong, Mitthof concludes his article by agreeing with his view.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. R.L. Gordon, *JRA* 7 (1994), 458–74, at 466; J. Alvar, *Los Misterios* (n.8 above), 274f.

<sup>16</sup> *De corona* 15 (Miles); *adv. Marc.* 1,13,4 (Leo); *ad nat.* 1,7,23; *apol.* 8,7 (*Pater sacrorum*).

<sup>17</sup> M. Rostovtzeff et al., *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Preliminary report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons, 1933–34, 1934–5* (New Haven, 1939), nos. 848, 855, 857–8, with p.123f. (= V. 54, 57, 59–60). Others are mentioned by D. Francis, 'Mithraic graffiti from Dura-Europos,' in: J.R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* (Manchester, 1975), 2: 406–45.

<sup>18</sup> Rostovtzeff et al., *Report*, nos. 853, 860, 854 = V. 46, 62, 56.

this that Robert Turcan has now questioned, on the grounds that the complete system of seven is only attested for Rome and Ostia, and then only from the Severan period - the Mitreo di Felicissimo in Ostia is even later (mid-3<sup>rd</sup> cent. A.D.).<sup>19</sup> He stresses that several grades, for example *Perses* and *Nymphus*, are never attested epigraphically outside Rome and Dura, and *Heliodromus* does not occur even at Dura, being apparently substituted by *Stereôtes*.<sup>20</sup> Porphyry mentions only *Patres*, *Persai*, *Leones* and *Korakes*; and there are only two grades, not seven, represented in the well-known Feast-scene from Konjic, Dalmatia (V.1896.3). He argues that only the grades *Leo* and *Korax/Corvus* are original to the cult of Mithras, and that the full system of seven is a late, and purely local, expansion whose intention was to correlate the grade system with that of the planets, a typical strategy of occultism.

Salutary as this criticism of the conventional position is, it should not be allowed too much weight. For one thing, there is no good reason to expect votive inscriptions to mention grade-membership. Grade-membership was, on the conventional understanding, merely a phase in a religious progression; an inscribed votive on the other hand is an intentionally permanent, or near-permanent, record of a quasi-contractual relation with the god. One ought in fact to consider the mention of a grade on a votive the exception rather than the rule, a function of the loosening of the generic rules for different types of epigraphic composition, and of the tendency, very marked in the cult of Mithras, for later documents to be more revealing, more 'garrulous', than earlier ones. Secondly, although it appears from the indices of Vermaseren's *Corpus* that *Patres* are attested far more often than other grades, almost half of these attestations occur as a form of context-specific dating, 'during the Fatherhood of X', and have a distorting effect upon the figures. And there is anyway a well-known general tendency in epigraphy for senior functions to be over-represented.<sup>21</sup> Thirdly, the only grade listed in the Virunum bronze album mentioned above, which is the most important document we possess for the history of recruitment to a Mithraic community, is that of Father. The inference is not that no other grades existed, but that grades

<sup>19</sup> R. Turcan, 'Hiérarchie sacerdotale et astrologie dans les mystères de Mithra,' in: *La science des cieux: sages, mages astrologues*, Res orientales 12 (Bures-sur-Yvette, 1999), 249-61. But R. MacMullen had much earlier stressed the discrepancies in the epigraphic evidence for the grades, as well as the existence at Dura-Europos of other titles (such as *magos* and *sophistês*) which could not be fitted into the conventional scheme: *Paganism* (n.6 above), 124, though in his subsequent remarks he negligently confuses cult-positions with initiatory grades.

<sup>20</sup> On *stereôtes*, see Francis, 'Mithraic graffiti,' (n. 17 above), 441; R.L. Gordon, 'Mystery, metaphor and doctrine in the Mysteries of Mithras,' in: J.R. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism* *Storia delle Religioni* 9 (Rome, 1994), 103-24, at 112f.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. E.P. Forbis, *Municipal Virtues in the Roman Empire: the evidence of Roman honorary inscriptions* *Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 79 (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1996), 96-102.

below Father were not listed because they were merely temporary achievements. There must have existed other documents in the community which recorded the progress of individuals through the grade ladder but which were not considered worth recording in bronze.<sup>22</sup>

It is not at all surprising therefore to find that the two sites where evidence for grades is most plentiful are Santa Prisca and Dura. In neither temple is there a single votive inscription which mentions a grade. All the evidence occurs in the form of *dipinti*, a non-monumental and relatively informal type of commemoration. Moreover, the existence at Dura of technical terms for those desirous of rising to the next grade, *melloleôn*, for example, and *petitor*, terms that are unrecorded elsewhere, suggests that at any rate there the notion of ascending a graduated scale of grades was well-established.<sup>23</sup> Equally, there is no reason to think that this was a peculiarity of Dura. The cult of Mithras was re-introduced into the city at the time of its re-occupation shortly before the death of Septimius Severus in 211, by vexillations from the IV Scythica and XVI Flavia. Both of these units were stationed in Syria at the time, where vexillations are found in widely different commissions; yet it has always been accepted that the general form of phase II at Dura implies that its inspiration was both from the Danube frontier area and from Italy.<sup>24</sup>

Then again, although it may be true that Porphyry does not mention all seven grades, there is no reason, given the nature of his arguments, why he should: he mentions grades invariably in relation to a particular point, for example, to explain the names taken from the animal kingdom (Lion, Raven),<sup>25</sup> not as part of a concern with the Mysteries for their own sake. And the notion of a regular seven-fold Mithraic hierarchy based upon the scheme of planets is taken for granted by Celsus, writing in the 160s, although his sources, which have been thought to be Alexandrian, elaborate upon the scheme for their own, again occultist, ends, correlating the scheme with metals.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Francis, 'Mithraic graffiti,' (n. 17 above), 440f. notes one or two cases of rare names that recur at Dura in association with different grades, which permit the inference that these are the same individuals rising through the system. But most names recur too often to allow this sort of conclusion.

<sup>23</sup> *Melloleôn*, 'aspirant Lion': Rostovtzeff et al., *Report* (n. 17 above), 124 (no inscription cited); *petitor* is a simple transcription of the military Latin word for an aspirant to a higher post, and may in this case mean 'aspirant to the grade of *Pater*': *ibid.* no. 848 = V.54. The case of *antipatros* is unclear. It seems to be inspired by bureaucratic/military coinages such as *antigraphon*, a copy of a document, and *antistratêgos*, *antitamias* in Roman usage, and should therefore mean 'substitute Father': *ibid.* no. 855 = V. 57.

<sup>24</sup> Rostovtzeff et al., *Report* (n.17 above), 82; cf. I. Roll's telling comparison between Dura and Italian Mithraic iconography, 'The Mysteries of Mithras in the Roman Orient,' *JMS* 2,1 (1977), 53-68, at 59-62.

<sup>25</sup> Porphyry, *de abstin.* 4,16,3 Patillon-Segonds.

<sup>26</sup> Celsus, *ap. Origen, Contra Celsum* 6, 22; cf. R. Turcan, *Mithras platonicus: recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra* EPRO 47 (Leyden, 1975), 44-61; I.P. Couliano

Finally, Turcan developed his point in ignorance of some important new evidence which suggests that the grade system, though not necessarily in its sevenfold form, was known in Germany in the first half of the second century A.D., and probably earlier than c.130. This is the evidence of the Wetterau-ware cult-vessel (*Schlangengefäß*) discovered in Mainz in 1976, but first published in 1994, and which has recently been the subject of an important article by Roger Beck.<sup>27</sup> One face of the vessel undoubtedly represents a *Pater* sitting down and taking aim with an armed bow at an initiand (fig. 14). The other face represents a sort of Mithraic procession of four individuals walking to the left. The third figure in the procession (Fig. 2) holds the whip that is Sol's usual attribute in the iconography, and possibly a radiate crown seen from the side, at any rate with a curious elongation extending from the front.<sup>28</sup> Beck identifies this scene as a procession of *Heliodromus*, the Sun-Runner, the second highest grade, a procession intended to evoke the Sun's annual journey along the ecliptic. That solar journey is punctuated by two opposed pairs of astronomical events, the solstices and the equinoxes, and he takes these opposed astronomical pairs to be connoted by the rods held by the figures immediately in front of and behind *Heliodromus*, the first with rod held downwards, the hindmost figure with his rod held erect (p.156-8). The procession would thus connote one of the central themes of the Mysteries. Whether this be the case or not,<sup>29</sup> it is undeniable that we have here indubitable, and early, evidence for a grade, *Heliodromus*, Runner of the Sun, not mentioned in a single epigraphic text on stone anywhere in the Empire, which again suggests something of the bias of that epigraphic evidence. The figure leading the procession wears a cuirass (Fig. 3), and it is natural to identify him as an emblematic *Miles*, Soldier. But the Mainz cult-vessel apparently makes no allusion either to *Leo*, Lion, nor to *Corvus*, Raven, though representations of both are found in evidence in widely scattered over the Empire.<sup>30</sup> Its silences too therefore cannot be pressed to provide

[sic], 'The Mithraic ladder revisited,' in: J.R. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism* (Roma, 1994), 75-91.

<sup>27</sup> G. Horn, 'Der Mainzer Kultgefäß,' *MAZ* 1 (1994), 21-66; R.L. Beck, 'Ritual, myth, doctrine and initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: new evidence from a cult-vessel,' *JRS* 90 (2000), 145-80; Alvar, *Los Misterios* (n. 8 above), 261.

<sup>28</sup> On the iconography of Helios and Sol, see C. Letto, s.v. Helios/Sol, in: *LIMC* 4 (1988), 592-625; N. Yalouris, *ibid.* 5 (1990), 1005-34. Helios' 'radiate crown' emerges in the early Va, apparently in imitation of the head-gear worn by participants in the *lampadedromiai*, the boys' torch-races at Athens: E. Parisinou, *The Light of the Gods: the role of light in Archaic and Classical Greek cult* (London, 2000), 36-44.

<sup>29</sup> It seems to me that the second, grandly dressed, figure must represent a Father (see Fig. 9 below), but for Beck's argument it is necessary that his staff complement that of the small hindmost figure, and he does not identify him.

<sup>30</sup> *Leo*, representations on pottery: two late Antonine terra-sigillata sherds from the potteries at Ittenwiller or Rheinzabern, showing figures dressed in a tunic and apparently

evidence in favour of Turcan's claim, but its positive evidence shows that at least three of the grades known from Rome c. 200 AD already were known in Germany seventy or eighty years earlier. To deny the general existence within the Mysteries of Mithras of a graduated hierarchy of initiatory grades, even if not of all seven in the standard list, is beginning to look perverse.

These considerations suggest that we are justified in continuing to claim that the cult of Mithras was from its early expansion in the Roman Empire at the end of the first century A.D. a mystery cult deliberately constructed around the idea of repeated, and indeed progressive, initiation. Whatever other celebrations took place in Mithraic temples, initiations were evidently of primary importance, even if not necessarily the most common or everyday events: successive initiation provided a structure to each Mithraist's membership of the group. At Dura-Europos it was regular practice to acclaim each initiate on reaching a new grade, for example *Νάμα Κα[μ]ερίω στρατιώτη ἀκερίω*, 'Hail to Kameronios, an unsullied *Miles*', or *Νάμα ἐλπίσι Ἀντωνείνω [σ]τερεώτη ἀγαθῶ συνδεξίω τῶ εὐσεβεῖ*, 'Hail, with good hopes (for the future), to Antoninus the *Stereôtês*, a good Mithraist, and reverent'.<sup>31</sup> Together with words like *melloleôn* and *petitor*, noted above (n.21), acclamations such as these, invariably prefaced by a self-conscious allusion to the Persian character of the cult (*Nama* is an authentic Old Persian word), underline the importance of going through the sequence of grades: each successive rise is collectively acknowledged by the whole congregation, and fixed in writing on the walls of the temple. It is worth stressing that these graffiti are often beautifully written, and in several colours of ink:<sup>32</sup> they were private honorific texts, quite different from the majority of the graffiti at Pompeii or the *ludus magnus* in Rome.

It is evident from the language of the Dura acclamations that promotion in the Mysteries was at least partly justified in religio-moral

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wearing lion-masks: (1) R. Forrer, *Das Mithra-Heiligtum von Königshoffen bei Straßburg* (Stuttgart, 1915), 116 fig.84 = M. Clauss, *Cult of Mithras* (n. 12 above), 117 fig. 74; (2) F. Petry and E. Kern, 'Un mithraeum à Biesheim (Haut-Rhein)', *Cahiers Alsaciens d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 21 (1978), 4-32, at p. 27, fig. 6D. A third such figure has now been found in the unpublished mithraeum at Bornheim/Sechtem near Bonn. The only other straightforwardly recognisable representation of a *Leo* occurs on the reverse of the Konjic relief: V. 1896.3d (4th cent. A.D.). *Corvus*: V. 42.13 (Dura, final phase); 397 rev. (Castra Praetoria, Rome); 1896.3a (Konjic).

<sup>31</sup> Rostovtzeff et al, *Report* (n. 17 above), 120 nos. 857, 859 = V.59; 60. The *Report* apparently considers the 'hopes' to relate to military promotion; in my view, it is a military metaphor now applied to initiation (cf. Francis, 'Mithraic graffiti' [n.17 above], 439 with n.75). *Nama*-acclamations of a similar type are known from S. Prisca in Rome, and from one or two inscriptions. all from mid-Italy: 214 (Tibur); 308 (Ostia); 416 (perhaps a forgery); 591 (Rome).

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* 118.

terms: the achievement of a higher grade was legitimated by a candidate's fulfilment of certain moral expectations. What these were we can vaguely infer from the rather stereotyped adjectives that describe many of the grades at Dura, such as *agathos*, *akeraios*, *dikaios*, *eusebês*, *hieros* (good, unsullied, just, pious, holy); less clearly from the commonest adjective there for the Lions, ABΠOΣ, (*h*)*abros*, which in Greek means 'delicate, luxurious, graceful' – even 'soft' –<sup>33</sup> but which has been understood as a neologism based on the word ἄβρα, common in later Greek, meaning 'personal maid'.<sup>34</sup> If we are prepared to consider Semitic loan-words at Dura, however, there are two other possibilities which offer least as good a sense as 'companion (*syndexios*)': אַבִּיר (in Hebrew *abir*, 'strong, noble', and אַבִּיר in Hebrew *bar*, 'pure, clean'.<sup>35</sup> However that may be, what needs to be stressed in the present context is that a hierarchical system which applies rational criteria in the selection of those to be promoted concentrates authority in the hands of those qualified to apply the criteria, in the Mithraic case, the Fathers of the community, just as it makes willing subordinates of those who strive to be promoted, who must internalise the values of the system. That is, the type of initiation practised by the cult of Mithras led directly to a social pattern in which authority was complemented by deference.<sup>36</sup> Deference is the tool with which the weak prise advantages from their superiors; social capital is the reward of those superiors for playing the game more or less according to the rules.

We should, at any rate, be aware of the issues of power and patronage within the microcosm of the Mithraic congregation even if we are scarcely in a position to point to evidence that concretely illuminates them. If individual Fathers felt impelled to provide cult furniture at their own expense, *de sua pecunia*, and did so gladly,<sup>37</sup> their reward did not simply lie, as they piously claimed, in heaven. The Fathers must have been in many ways the driving forces within Mithraic congregations: their knowledge and enthusiasm was crucial to the continued existence

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* 124. The interest of this word was first noted by Cumont, 'The Dura Mithraeum' in: J.R. Hinnells, *Mithraic Studies* (Manchester, 1975), 1: 151-214 at 199f., suggesting that it was a poetic word derived from a ritual hymn.

<sup>34</sup> Francis, 'Mithraic graffiti' (n.17 above), 444, with LSJ Supplement s.v. This word is identical to Aramaic אַבִּירָא, *hab.ra*, 'female companion'. Such a coinage might parallel the Mithraic neologism *nymphos* from the f. *nymphê*, 'bride'.

<sup>35</sup> In the latter case, since in Semitic languages the definite article is attached both to the noun and to the adjective, the word would normally occur, when used of a man, as אַבִּיר, in Hebrew *hâb .r*. The hypothesis is only plausible if in Palmyrene or Nabatean, the local languages at Dura, the *.r* were pronounced quiescently, as a vocal *hewa*. If ABΠOΣ is related to אַבִּיר, its force would be the same as ἀκέραλος, 'pure'.

<sup>36</sup> We shall see later that the rituals themselves emphasized the same point.

<sup>37</sup> *Sua pecunia* vel sim.: V. 233; ILS 4212 = V. 312f. (Ostia); V.626 (relief plus temple decoration); ILS 4224 = V 706 (restoration after fire, Mediolanum); V. 1243 = Schwertheim, #108c (altar, Bingham).

of such small religious groups not guaranteed by the casual weight of the divine system inscribed in the civic calendar. Gifts of cult-furniture, above all of the cult-relief, which was the essential minimum requirement for carrying on the collective worship, signalled a claim to the knowledge that underlay the cult's claims.<sup>38</sup> But more than anything else, such gifts established the Father as a benefactor, whose gifts create a permanently asymmetrical relation between giver and receiver, a relation in which the receivers have no hope of reciprocating, and so cancelling out, the value of the gift.<sup>39</sup> In return for that outlay of time, knowledge, expense and effort, the Fathers as a group expected deference, loyalty, submission. This theme of asymmetrical social relations is deployed far more insistently in the Mysteries of Mithras than in other analogous cults of the Empire.

At Ostia, for example, one Diocles dedicated his brick altar faced in marble to Mithras *ob honorem C. Lucreti Menandri patris*, as a mark of respect to the Father (Fig. 4).<sup>40</sup> An unknown dedicator at the mithraeum *degli Animali* in the same town made a gift of some kind to the temple; he expresses his undertaking as a gift to M. C(a)erellius Hieronymus, *patri et sacerdoti suo*, and it was Hieronymus, in his capacity as *antistes templi*, the supervisor of the mithraeum, who actually dedicated it to the god.<sup>41</sup> Another man, on recording his restoration of two statues of the torchbearers, prefaced his inscription with the characteristic Mithraic greeting to his Father: *na]ma Victori patri*.<sup>42</sup> At Rome, the lateral face of a pair of small altars from the mithraeum of the Castra Peregrina beneath S. Stefano Rotondo on the Celimontana, is inscribed simply *Leo vivas cum Caedicio patre*, 'Long may you live, Lion, together with the Father Caedicius Priscianus'.<sup>43</sup> At Dura, Marinus an aspirant (*petitor*) to an unnamed grade, hailed first Mithras, then the two presiding Fathers of

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Clauss, *Cult of Mithras* (n. 12 above), 43.

<sup>39</sup> F.G. Bailey, *Gifts and Poison: the politics of reputation* (London, 1971), 238-41; M. Sahlins, *Stone-Age Economics* (London, 1974), 249f.; cf. Schmitt Pantel, *Cité au banquet* (n. 6 above), 408-20.

<sup>40</sup> Becatti, *Mitrei* (n. 10 above), = V.225, probably from c.210-220.

<sup>41</sup> V. 282 = CIL XIV 70 (late Antonine or Severan). The text reads: ...]d(onum)-d(edit)-| M-Cerellio | Hieronymo patri | et-sacerdoti-suo | eosque ·antistes-s(upra)-s(criptus)· | deo libens dicavit. *Eos* must refer to the gift, i.e. no doubt *fratres*, statues of Cautes and Cautopates, as in the inscription mentioned in the next note; and *antistes* back to Hieronymus. Although a fictional gift to the Father is unique in Mithraic epigraphy, it is consistent with the other evidence adduced here, and is preferable to assuming a writer's error, in an otherwise literate text, for e.g. *eiusque antistiti*.

<sup>42</sup> V.308 (see n. 31 above); the inscription is poorly recut over an earlier one. Probably mid- to late IIIp.

<sup>43</sup> AE 1980: 49b, 50b (late Antonine). 'Lion' refers to Baebius Quintianus, one of the dedicators of the statues of the torchbearers mentioned in the main texts.

the Fathers, and himself only third.<sup>44</sup> An instructive *symbolon*, a secret utterance belonging to the sacred 'property' of an initiation cult, addresses the Mithraic initiate as *συνδέξιλος πατρός ἀγαυοῦ*, 'hand-shaker (i.e. initiate) of an illustrious Father'.<sup>45</sup> Whatever the actual routes by which new members were introduced to a Mithraic congregation, symbolically the initiate owed his new existence to the Father, who is given the Homeric epithet 'illustrious'.

We may profitably think of this relationship as a specialised instance of a much wider form of social relation in the Roman Empire, that of patronage. It is familiar that Roman society was articulated not merely by legal, economic, cultural and geographic differentia but also by placement within patronage networks.<sup>46</sup> If the key central patron was the Emperor, who found his own moral and political justification in the exercise of differential patronage, his very capacity to act as patron within the Empire as a whole, and at the level of hundreds of individual cases, was brokered by individual senators and equestrians. The standing of any individual in these orders was at least partly a function of his ability to obtain constructive favours for communities and individuals who looked to him, whether formally or informally, as patron, just as the standing of the emperor was a function of his ability to exercise patronage according to the tacit rules of fairness, appropriateness, measure, disinterestedness, consistency. 'Grand' patronage was thus the indispensable grease that oiled the machinery of a society of legally-differentiated orders. As a mode of social interaction, it simultaneously confirmed the necessity and propriety of the unequal distribution of power and wealth in such a society, and, because it was a temporary, and within an order often reversible, relation, gave the impression that the distribution of those social goods was subject to the intervention of rational good-will. It has thus an important masking effect.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, it offered a

<sup>44</sup> Rostovtzeff, *Report* (n. 17 above), 87 no.848 = V.54 (c.211-12 AD) (cited n.23 above). A similar honorific allusion to Fathers before the dedicant's own name in V.57 = *Report* 119 no. 855, listing two *patres paterôn* before the lower initiates (though in this case it is possible that all have just been promoted). Analogous alterations to the normal ordering of names occurs, albeit rarely, in the context of other mysteries, e.g. CIL XII 4323 = ILS 4120 (taurobolium, Narbo).

<sup>45</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De errore* 5.2 (p.46.11 Ziegler). The initiate owes his new status to the initiator, in a sense he belongs to him.

<sup>46</sup> G. Alföldy, *Römische Sozialgeschichte* (Wiesbaden, 1975), 89f.; F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London, 1977); R.P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge, 1982), 41-78; L. Roniger, 'Modern patron-client relations and historical clientelism: some clues from ancient Republican Rome,' *Archives européennes de Sociologie* 24 (1983), 63-95; P.D.A. Garnsey and R.P. Saller, *The Roman Empire: economy, society and culture* (London, 1987), 148-59; A. Wallace-Hadrill (ed.), *Patronage in Ancient Society* (London, 1989).

<sup>47</sup> J.G. Merquior, *The Veil and the Mask: essays on culture and ideology* (London, 1979), 1-38.

powerful model for social interaction throughout the society, down to the slave-*familia* itself.

We can trace the descent of patronage networks down through the structures of local city government to the micro-level of the *patroni* of professional corporations. But the operation of patronage as a system is quite independent of the existence of formal titles. Anyone in a position to accord or withhold favours, distribute rewards or sanctions, can act in the manner of a patron at the micro-level. In so doing, he asserts his (temporary) social power, fulfils the possibilities of his social position, and acquires that 'profit par excellence' which consists in the feeling both that one's existence is justified and that one is *comme il faut*.<sup>48</sup> An initiator in a mystery cult such as Mithraism possessed a body of esoteric lore, relating both to the elementary symbols of the temple, and to their deeper meanings and exegetical possibilities. He possessed, quite simply, the power that his knowledge grants him (Fig. 5). The ambition to acquire that knowledge must have been one of the most powerful inducements for individuals to continue through the successive stages of initiation – not perhaps that all, or even most, actually did so. If the ideal description of the senior Mithraic initiate is *sophistês*, the one who knows, the condition of the beginner is suggested by the Hermupolis catechism: ἀπορεῖ, 'he is/you are at a loss, do not know the answer'.<sup>49</sup>

The analogy between patronage in the outer world of political and social relations and the relation of the Mithraic Father to the rest of the congregation was exploited unselfconsciously within the Mysteries. For example, in the procession of the grades on the right wall of both layers of paintings at S. Prisca in Rome (Fig. 6), the Father is represented as sitting alone on a throne or chair, his hand raised in a gesture of acknowledgement of the offerings brought him by the Lions,<sup>50</sup> in a manner reminiscent of the Emperor receiving honour from military commanders (Fig. 7), or gifts from foreign clients (Fig. 8).<sup>51</sup> The main figure of the procession of the Mainz cult-vessel, who in my view is the Father, is represented as walking majestically forward, in a flowing robe and holding a staff (Fig. 9). All this, deportment, bearing and staff, suggest

<sup>48</sup> P. Bourdieu, *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris, 1979), 252f.

<sup>49</sup> *Sophistês*: Rostovtzeff, *Report* (n.17 above), 123; Cumont, 'Dura,' (n.33 above), 202f. (but the unpublished text *IMDur.* 39 in n.284 perhaps suggests that not all *sophistai* held a high rank); Hermupolis catechism: W. Brashear, *A Mithraic Catechism from Egypt* Tyche Supplementband 1 (Vienna, 1992), 18; 20f. This text is generally considered not to be Mithraic in the narrow sense, however, but to emanate from an unknown esoteric group in IVP.

<sup>50</sup> M.J. Vermaseren and C.C. van Essen, *Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of S. Prisca in Rome* (Leyden, 1966), 155f. with pl. LIX (upper layer); 168 no.1 (lower layer). Vermaseren

<sup>51</sup> Rightly noted by Vermaseren, *ibid.* 158f., though the iconographic model has a much longer history in imperial art than he suggests. It is also worth noting that the Father, at least in the upper layer, is dressed in a red robe, red, because of its expense, connoting high status.

the dignity and authority of the person of high standing. The same claim is made in a summary or symbolic manner by the staff in the Father-frame in the floor-mosaic of the Mitreo di Felicissimo in Ostia (Fig. 1), and indeed by the Phrygian cap with ear-flaps next to it, which links the Father directly with the god.<sup>52</sup>

We may suggest that Mithraic social organisation borrowed from the outside world the model of the patron-client relationship; but transmuted it into an ideal form. What remained was the desirable essence, generous altruism, philanthropy, service of the other world: what is given to the initiate is solely for his own true good; the return for the initiator is the satisfaction derived from the performance of a holy duty. The religious act decently masks its contribution to, and naturalisation of, the reproduction of social relations of inequality. It is moreover in the context of such private religious structures that we can locate the emergence of a characteristically Graeco-Roman kind of religious specialist, not full-time or supported by the state apparatus, as in the complex pre-industrial states of the Fertile Crescent, nor an itinerant purifier, seer and wonder-worker as in the Archaic world, nor an ecstatic mortifier of the flesh, but a kind of petty bureaucrat of the holy, a mediator of routinised religious experience.<sup>53</sup>

## 2. PATTERNS OF RITUAL

In the second part of the paper, I wish to go further and suggest how such patterns of deference were conveyed in and through ritual performance, and thus experienced physically and directly, not merely as abstract thoughts or ideals. We of course know extremely little about Mithraic ritual, as we do about ritual in all ancient religion. Moreover, it may very well be that different Mithraic communities constructed their own particular rituals in keeping with their understanding of the requirements. There would then be not one Mithraic ritual system but

<sup>52</sup> On the different (Graeco-)Persian types of tiara, M. Nollé, *Denkmäler vom Satrapensitz Daskyleion* (Berlin, 1992), 45-47.

<sup>53</sup> There was of course a wide range of sacral statuses in the complex states of the Fertile Crescent, but the main contrast holds, cf. K. Watanabe (ed.), *Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near-East: Papers of the Second Colloquium on the Ancient Near East, Mitaka, Tokyo, March 1996* (Heidelberg, 1999); S. Sauneron, *Les prêtres de l'ancienne Égypte* (Paris, 1988); H. Kees, *Das Priestertum der ägypt. Staat vom neuen Reich bis zur Spätzeit* (Cologne and Leyden, 1953-58); itinerant religious professionals: W. Burkert, *Die orientalisierende Epoche in der gr. und röm. Religion und Literatur* SB Heidelberger Akad. Wiss. phil.-hist. Kl. 1984, 1 (Heidelberg, 1984), 43-8; id. 'Bacchic *teletai* in the Hellenistic age,' in T. Carpenter & C. Faraone (eds.), *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca, 1993), 259-75; mortifiers of the flesh: M. Beard, 'The Roman and the Foreign: the cult of the Great Mother in Imperial Rome,' in: N. Thomas & C. Humphrey, *Shamanism, History and the State* (Ann Arbor, 1993) 164-90; Alvar, *Los Misterios* (n.8 above), 188-96.

many, each presenting slightly different value commitments. Nor is it always clear what kind of events we are dealing with: Mithraic rituals seem consistently to ignore the boundaries usually suggested for the study of ritual. With these important reservations in mind, I propose to look at three rituals, or groups of rituals, of which we know something (which of course really means 'hardly anything') and read them as means of inscribing the value of hierarchy and subordination into the unmediated experience of the initiate. I do not thereby mean to suggest that there are no other equally legitimate ways of reading them.

### 1) 'LIBERATION'

The late fourth-century commentator Ambrosiaster denounces Mithraic initiation in his *Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti*. The initiates, he claims, are blind-folded and some have to flap their wings as though they were birds, and others roar as if they were lions, but others

ligatis manibus intestinis pullinis proiciuntur super foveas aqua plenas, accedente quodam cum gladio et inrumpente intestina supra dicta qui se liberatorem appellet.<sup>54</sup>

This text's gross misrepresentation of the terms Leo and Corax suggest that its value is not to be over-estimated.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, as usual, we cannot tell what significance such a ritual incident might have taken on when set, as it surely must have been, into the context of a longer ceremony. But the account is interesting because it bears a very general similarity to some of the panels from the mithraeum beneath S. Maria Capua Vetere discussed below. Here I want to note just three points.

a) The initiate is subjected to restriction upon his free movement and humiliation – also pain – by being pushed about with his hands bound behind his back. Such treatment recalls that of prisoners-of-war and condemned persons, for example on Antonine battle-sarcophagi, or the column of M. Aurelius (180-92 A.D.).<sup>56</sup> And, as ritual action, it is characteristic of 'transition' or 'liminal' rites (Van Gennep), which effect the initiate's symbolic transition from one status to another.

<sup>54</sup> '(Others) have their hands tied with chicken's guts and are then pushed across a pit full of water; and then someone comes up with a sword and cuts through the guts, saying that he is their liberator,' *Quaest. vet. nov. test.* 114 (CSEL 50). See also Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God* (London, 1963), 133f.

<sup>55</sup> Both Euboulus and Pallas however attest considerable interest in the fact that these grades are named after animals (ap. Porphyry, *de abstin.* 4,6,3 Patillon-Segonds), so that Ambrosiaster's scorn surely picks up a well-known theme. Pits that could represent 'foveas' are not quite unknown: A. Schatzmann, 'Archäologie und mithräische Alltag: Zur Problematik funktioneller Bereiche im Inneren von Mithrasheiligtümern,' *Seminararbeit Uni Zürich* (1997), 36-39.

<sup>56</sup> E.g. Neoptolemus sarcophagus from Via Collatina, Museo naz. delle Terme, c. 162-65 A.D.; Column: R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Rom, das Zentrum der Macht* (Munich, 1970), fig.

b) The bonds used, chicken guts, are evidently 'symbolic': they are slimy and disgusting, but not really painful. The 'make-believe' aspect of ritual performance is clearly evident here, as is the challenge to common-sense ('Why chicken-guts?'), which impels subjective interpretation of meaning. This aspect of the ritual points away from actual experience towards the construction of primary meaning by the initiate. The significance of the ritual is hinted at in the liberator's announcement of his function or identity: *Ego sum liberator tuus*. Retrospectively, the pit becomes the Styx; the chicken-guts represent the toils of the Underworld or mortality (the cock being associated with Persephone and the Underworld);<sup>57</sup> the 'liberation' is freedom from the power of death; humiliation is a necessary precondition to salvation, just as this world is to another.

c) Although the violence is merely enacted, the implicit message of the ritual is that the asymmetry between 'liberator' and initiand has an exemplary, privileged status. The 'liberator' is in a position to bring the initiand into contact with the transcendent world, from which he (the initiand) can 'borrow' life. The 'liberator' can bestow this gift in the measure that he empowered to subject the initiand to the violence of bondage and humiliation.<sup>58</sup> All this the initiand can perceive and accept. But the most important wider achievement of ritual is not perceptible to the participants or actors, 'the way in which the hegemonic social order is appropriated as a redemptive process and reproduced'.<sup>59</sup> The other rituals/ritual clusters I wish to discuss here may contribute to this issue.

## 2) RITUALS OF ABASEMENT

The mithraeum beneath the church of S. Maria Capua Vetere (not far from Naples) is unique in having relatively well-preserved frescoes depicting initiation on the fascias of the lateral podia, dating from the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. A.D.<sup>60</sup> These frescoes, which consist of six

365 (barbarian prisoners being beheaded). Vermaseren aptly cites panels on the Trajanic Adamklissi monument: *Mithriaca 1: the Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere* EPRO 16.1 (Leyden, 1971), 31.

<sup>57</sup> Porphyry, *de abstin.* 4,16,6 Patillon-Segonds.

<sup>58</sup> M. Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: history and ideology in the circumcision ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge, 1986), 188f.

<sup>59</sup> C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York and Oxford, 1992), 110.

<sup>60</sup> The original publication is A. Minto, 'S. Maria Capua Vetere, scoperta di una cripta mitriaca,' NS Ser. 5, 21 (1924), 353-74. The most detailed, but not always satisfactory, account is Vermaseren, *Capua* (n.56 above), 26-48. Because the frescoes are too poorly preserved to reproduce in black and white, the relevant scenes are here shown in rough tracings based on Vermaseren's colour plates.

panels on the right-hand podium (of which four are reasonably well-preserved), and seven on the left (only three of which are preserved), do not carry explanatory graffiti, and their rôle or intention is quite unclear. It is possible that they were intended as a sort of visual *liber sacerdotalis*, that is, as a prescriptive account of rituals to be carried out, although without the corresponding verbal *symbola* they can have been of little use. Or they may be a commemoration for some reason of a particular initiation-series, perhaps of the donor.<sup>61</sup> But it is undecidable even whether the panels represent a sequence of rituals relating to a single grade, or an ideal series of moments from initiations for different grades. They certainly bear no close relation to any ritual transmitted to us by a literary source.<sup>62</sup> Vermaseren believed that they provide a sort of narrative sequence, moving from the right podium to the left, and from entrance to cult-niche, but this is extremely doubtful, as are many of his readings of what can be made out on each panel. It is anyway not my intention here to discuss the possible content of the panels (which now seems a hopeless undertaking), but to explore the general structure of some of the moments of ritual. In each of the panels, the initiate is represented naked, again a characteristic feature of 'transition' or 'liminal' rituals.

Two of the four readable scenes on the right podium have structural analogies with Ambrosiaster's account, although there is no point in comparing them closely. In one, the initiand is stumbling forward, blind-folded, with his arms stretched out before him; a much taller figure, a mystagogue, stands behind him to guide him forward (Fig. 10).<sup>63</sup> In the next, the initiand is represented as kneeling, again blind-folded, with his hands bound behind his back (Fig. 11). An assistant, in a white tunic and short red cape, stands behind him with his right hand on his neck holding him firm while a larger, bearded, figure, splendidly dressed in cloak, mantle and Phrygian cap, presumably the Father, approaches threateningly with a lighted torch.<sup>64</sup>

All three readable panels on the left podium are similar in intent. In one, the initiand lies prostrate on the ground, surrounded by several indeterminate objects, of which only a scorpion can be made out for

<sup>61</sup> There seems no doubt that these panels are somewhat later than the rest of the paintings in the mithraeum, which are mainly late Antonine. The podia themselves were enlarged in the Severan period.

<sup>62</sup> Horn, 'Kultgefäß,' (n.27 above), 27f.; Clauss, *Cult of Mithras* (n. 12 above), 102f. The late literary tradition, stemming from Gregory of Nazianzen in the fourth century (*orat.* 4, 70), speaks of 'tests' involving cold, heat, fasting etc., but is in detail completely worthless.

<sup>63</sup> Vermaseren, *Capua* (n. 56 above), 26f., panel I (Right), pl. XXI = V.187.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 28-34, Panel II (Right), pl. XXII = V.188. Vermaseren (p.28) expressly denies that the initiator is wearing a Phrygian cap, and claims to be able to see a helmet. He identifies the scene as a fire-test.

certain (Fig. 12). At least two figures surround the initiate, both doing something to him (the one on the right perhaps pointing a staff towards him).<sup>65</sup> In the second, the initiate kneels on the ground with his hands outstretched, again with an assistant supporting or holding him, and the initiator, in a red cloak and a Phrygian cap, extends two torches towards him.<sup>66</sup> In the last, the initiate kneels with his hands (tied) behind his head, apparently held there by the assistant (Fig. 13). To the right, the Father seems to be indicating with his staff a loaf of bread lying on the ground.<sup>67</sup> The remaining two panels in which scenes can be made out seem to have a different, 'celebratory' character.<sup>68</sup>

The third ritual I wish to adduce here is similar in principle to those depicted on the podia of the Capua mithraeum. I have already invoked one face of the new cult-vessel from Mainz (p. 000). On the other, a Father, sitting on a chair, aims an armed bow (Fig. 14) at a naked young man, evidently an initiate, whose wrists seem to be bound, and who is evidently turning away in fear (Fig. 15). Behind the initiate is an assistant, who raises his right hand in a gesture which suggests that he is uttering a *symbolon* that links this enactment to the established body of Mithraic meanings. The similarity between this enactment and the well-known narrative scene in which Mithras fires an arrow at a rock-face to release water, strongly suggests that the *symbolon* implied by the Mainz cult-vessel referred to that mythical event.<sup>69</sup> But in the present connection, the point to be emphasized is the sharp contrast between the Father and assistant on the one hand, and the anxious, naked initiate on the other.

\* \* \*

The panels at Capua and the Mainz vessel do not depict rituals in any direct or unmediated sense. They depict arrested, perhaps idealised, moments within rituals, moments which could be claimed to have some special significance either for the donor or for the Mithraic community

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 43f., Panel II (Left), pl. XXVI = V.193.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, 44f., Panel III (Left), pl. XXVII = V.195.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* 45-47, Panel IV (Left), pl. XXVIII = V.194. Vermaseren's account of this scene is quite different and, I believe, largely fanciful. He claims that with one hand the initiate is offering a *rhyton* to the assistant behind him, while holding the other across his chest; and that the assistant is meanwhile pouring liquid from a little cup into the *rhyton*.

<sup>68</sup> Panel IV (Right), pl. XXIII = V.190, 'ritual embrace'; Panel V (Right), pl. XXV = V.191, bestowal of victor's crown.

<sup>69</sup> Horn, 'Kultgefäß' (n.27 above), 23; 27f.; better: Beck, 'Ritual,' (*ibid.*), 149-54; on the bow itself as a symbol of harmony through opposites, 167-71. Although Mithras is almost invariably on German monuments shown standing to shoot his bow, in the depictions of the scene on the Danube he generally sits on a rock. This fact, which I take to be a naturalistic representation of the Father's seated position in the ritual, suggests that the latter was not practised solely in Mainz, but widely in the Danube area, and that the connection between myth and ritual was explicit, cf. R.L. Gordon, 'Viewing Mithraic art: the altar from Burginatum (Kalkar), Germania Inferior,' ARYS 1 (1998), 227-58 at 250.

at large. As such, we may argue that they have done for us the work of sifting the oppositions which construct the actual rituals. Oppositions at any rate there certainly are. There is first the contrast between the sizes of the participants: the initiand is consistently presented as smaller than the assistants, who are in turn smaller and less magnificent than the officiants. Although the initiand is at the centre of each scene, the other, in this context more powerful, figures are visually dominant. The nakedness of the initiand is stressed by the tone of brick-red or brown used, contrasting with the 'purple' and white of the mystagogues. Then again, the officiants are bearded (not on the Mainz vessel), the initiand beardless, signalling a contrast between the ideal dignity of maturity and the prescriptive inferiority of the initiand's status (youth = socially less significant). We may also note the contrasts between kneeling, prostration, or (in the case of the Mainz vessel) shrinking away, and standing upright, which is often underlined by the bonds which confine the initiand's free movement. These contrasts are reinforced by the fact that the initiand is, at least in some panels, blindfolded and cannot see where he is going, a contrast that alludes to that between knowledge and ignorance. The Mainz vessel makes explicit another contrast which is not so evident at Capua, between self-command and anguish, fear or anxiety. These contrasts can be summarized as that between purposive agency and passive submission, between the free action of an agent and the enforced re-action of a subject.

These contrasts serve the same purpose as the rhetorical tropes of emphasis, such as anaphora, epizeuxis or ploche, and can be listed like Aristotle's list of Pythagorean contrasts (*Met.* 1, 986a24-6):

full-sized	small
clothed	naked
bearded	beardless
standing	kneeling/ prostrate/ shrinking back
freely moving	bound
sighted	blind
self-controlled	anxious
knowledge	ignorance
purposive agency	passive reaction

The sheer number of these correlated oppositions gives the initiand a loose sense of totality, as though these were the significant terms of which the world is constructed, above all, in terms of domination and subordination.

The anthropologist Catherine Bell has recently attempted in her *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* to escape from what she sees as the unhelpful opposition between thought and action characteristic of traditional views of ritual, which see the latter as conveying by symbolic means a specific idea.<sup>70</sup> She prefers to concentrate on the notion of ritualisation, a social strategy for privileging valued distinctions: 'Acting ritually is first and foremost a matter of nuanced contrasts and the evocation of strategic, value-laden distinctions' (p.90). These evocations are primarily conveyed by the role of the body in ritual: the implicit end of ritualisation is production of a 'ritualised body'. Ritual practices construct an environment in space and time that is organised according to schemes of privileged oppositions. Although in the course of a ritual performance many such oppositions may be evoked, a few come tacitly to dominate. These oppositions are internalised through performance of ritual into the ritualised body. 'Through the orchestration in time of loosely and effectively homologized oppositions in which some gradually come to dominate others, the social body reproduces itself in the image of the symbolically schematized environment that has been simultaneously established' (p.110).

The Mithraic representations show very clearly the way in which a number of correlated oppositions can be made to provide the skeleton of an entire ritual complex which impresses itself upon the social body of the subject. Bell rightly insists that the body is central. 'Kneeling does not merely *communicate* subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinate kneeler in and through the act itself.'<sup>71</sup> This point should motivate us to look at the Mithraic images with special attention, noting their insistence on the overwhelming authority and power accorded the mystagogues, and the implied dependence and humiliation of the initiand.<sup>72</sup> These rituals impressed onto the initiand's body the experience of insignificance, confinement, helplessness, fear, in such a way that they became for the subject not a mere charade, which is generally how such ritual events in antiquity are regarded, nor a purely private memory, but part of his

<sup>70</sup> Bell, *Ritual Theory* (n. 59 above), 88-117. Her work is extremely dense, and I can here only render it in a very superficial manner.

<sup>71</sup> Bell, *ibid.*, 100; cf. R. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge, 1999), 276: 'When an actor performs a liturgical order he participates in it, which is to say that he becomes part of it ...'.

<sup>72</sup> Particularly if Vermaseren is correct to see a scorpion beside the prostrate initiand in panel 2 Left (Fig. 12).

social body. The subject enacts subordination in its most abject form, just as the initiators enact domination in a free and untrammelled form.

But Bell is equally concerned to suggest how ideological commitments implicit in the religious sphere might be effective also in the world outside, how the realm of the sacred leaks into the profane. Drawing on Bourdieu and Foucault, therefore, she argues further that, because the ritualised body is also the individual's social body, the oppositions once imposed can be transposed into other socio-cultural situations beyond that of the ritual itself. The schemes implicit in the movement of bodies in ritual are reabsorbed, taken on, by the participants as real, and defining.<sup>73</sup> It is the individual's social body which on the one hand projects the organising oppositions onto the space-time environment, but also re-absorbs them as the 'nature of reality', as natural givens. Once absorbed, the structured oppositions condition both the day-to-day behaviour of those who have passed through the rituals, and feed back into their conception of how ritual ought to look if it is to be effective. A pattern of value and behaviour thus comes into being, which redeploys the patterns once acquired in ritual experience in other contexts. This is a theoretical, and necessarily very general, non-specific, account of how the make-believe, or enacted, world of ritual comes to have an effect in the world of daily behaviour and existential value.

This emphasis on the role of the body as mediating between the world of ritual and the world of everyday life makes Bell's account attractive to anyone who is compelled to discuss ritual behaviour exclusively on the basis of iconography or brief accounts by hostile or tendentious sources, as we are in the case of the Mysteries of Mithras. For these sources provide us with distortions of the reality they report. Whatever the precise history of their origin, which is likely to remain indefinitely a matter of dispute,<sup>74</sup> the Mysteries emerged in a world already steeply stratified and hierarchised. They developed a more complex and explicit account of the cosmos than the other 'oriental' cults, and to this complexity there corresponded a system of initiation, which, as far as the majority of initiates were concerned, deferred the revelation of a central 'secret' indefinitely. No other mystery cult, so far as we know, deferred revelation in this way.<sup>75</sup> Correlated with deferred revelation was the grade-system, which was the organisational expression

<sup>73</sup> Bell, *ibid.*, 99; J. Blacking, 'Towards an anthropology of the body,' in: *id.* (ed.), *The Anthropology of the Body* (London, 1987), 1-28.

<sup>74</sup> For some recent theories, see R.L. Beck, 'The Mysteries of Mithras: a new account of their genesis,' *JRS* 88 (1998), 115-28; R.L. Gordon, 'Persei sub rupibus antri: Überlegungen zur Entstehung der Mithrasmysterien,' in: *Ptuj im römischen Reich* (Ptuj/Ljubljana, 2001).

<sup>75</sup> The case at Eleusis cannot be understood as a genuine deferral in this sense: K. Dowden, 'Grades in the Eleusinian mysteries,' *RHR* 197 (1980), 409-27.

of this restrictive attitude towards knowledge (and doubtless salvation). By means of this organisational structure, the Mysteries were able to turn what in other mystery cults was a single idea or claim into a diffuse, ramified system of ideas centred on a number of key cosmological oppositions. This oppositional structure was repeated in the cult's ethical teaching, which, at least in the case of the Lions, sharply contrasted negative and positive moral values,<sup>76</sup> and in its social teaching, above all in its exclusion of women.<sup>77</sup>

The stress of Mithraic initiations upon a set of oppositions exemplifying domination and subordination is thus perfectly consonant with a whole pattern of contrasts within the cult. Within the cult, these initiations were linked to the promise of well-being, salvation, knowledge, transcendence. The bodily experience of humiliation and subjugation was inextricably bound up with the promise of redemption, just as the power of the initiators was perceived as redemptive. The connection between humiliation, deference and redemption is neatly expressed in one of the panels at Capua which I have not discussed here, in which the kneeling, naked initiate, whose hands are no longer bound, receives a crown from a mystagogue standing behind him and whom he cannot see.<sup>78</sup>

But this elective association in the Mysteries in fact reproduces in its own idiom the much wider and more abstract claim made by the Roman state to be responsible, in the person of the sacrificial Emperor, for the well-being, the redemption, of the entire population of the Empire. The Mithraic ritual, we might say, reproduces in miniature the grand alchemy whereby the repressive apparatus of the Roman state, with its infliction of large-scale violence, both military and in relation to criminal justice, both in the amphitheatre and in the slave *familia*, is justified by the emperor's key rôle in the maintenance of the *pax deorum*.<sup>79</sup>

What the initiate subjectively feels is that this social order based upon deference and subjugation of the inferior is right and proper, indeed redemptive; and he responds by dedicating his votive in honour of Mithras thankfully *in honorem domus divinae, pro salute d.n.imp. ... , pro sal. Augg. nn., or num. aug.*<sup>80</sup> Religious crisis occurs when this type of deference and self-humiliation begin to lose their redemptive value. Redemption must then be sought elsewhere, in the repression of desire, or in the radical rejection of this world.

<sup>76</sup> The clearest text is Porphyry, *de antro nympharum* 15; cf. the general discussion, including the new frescoes at Huarte/Hawarti nr. Apamea in Syria, of Alvar, *Los Misterios* (n. 8 above), 154-62.

<sup>77</sup> R.L. Gordon, 'Reality, evocation and boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras,' *JMS* 3 (1980), 19-99, at 42-64; Alvar, *ibid.* 131f.

<sup>78</sup> Panel V (Right), pl. XXV, cited n. 68 above.

<sup>79</sup> R.L. Gordon, 'The veil of power: emperors, sacrificers and benefactors,' in: Beard and North, *Pagan Priests* (n.2 above), 201-31.

<sup>80</sup> See the list in M. Clauss, 'Sol invictus Mithras,' *Athenaeum* 78 (1990), 423-50, at 441-50.

Fig. 1.

The mosaic ladder of the grades in the Mitreo di Felicissimo, Ostia (c.250 A.D.). Each grade is associated with the symbols of a planet, from the lowest (Mercury) to the highest (Saturn).



Fig. 2.

Heliodromus, from the procession on the Mainz cult-vessel.





Fig. 3.  
Miles, leading the procession on the Mainz  
cult-vessel.

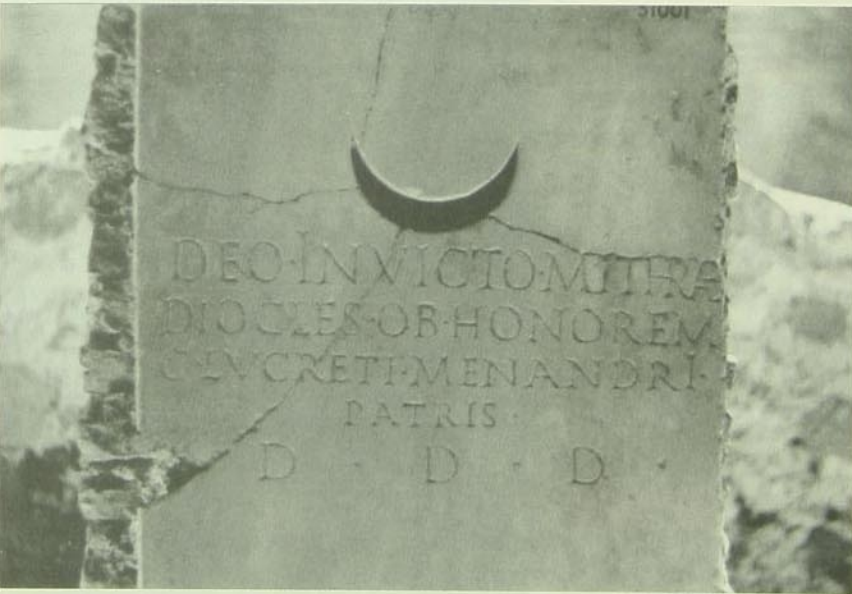


Fig. 4.  
Altar of Diocles, Ostia, Mitreo di Lucrezio Menandro (V. 225), 1<sup>st</sup>  
half of 3<sup>rd</sup> cent.

Fig. 5.

One of the 'Magi' from the front of the arcosolium, Dura phase 3 (V. 22b). The scroll and staff denote the Fathers' claim to status and authority based on literate knowledge.



Fig. 6.

A seated Father, dressed to recall Mithras, receiving the offerings of the Mithraic Lions. S. Prisca, r. wall, upper layer, c. 220 A.D.



Fig. 7.

Drusus and Tiberius presenting Augustus with their military laurels after the conquest of Raetia. Aureus of Augustus, 15-12 B.C., rev. BMC 1, 77 no.447, pl.10.17.



Fig. 8.

Augustus receiving a child from a German client, referring to the resettlement of German peoples within the Empire, 8 B.C. Denarius, 8 B.C. BMC 1, 85 no.494 pl.12,14.



Fig. 9.

The Father in the Heliodromus procession on the cult-vessel from Mainz, c. 120-40 A.D.



Fig. 10.

Blindfolded, naked initiand being pushed forward by a mystagogue (right-hand podium, panel 1, S. Maria Capua Vetere).

Fig. 11.

A Father approaching a blindfolded initiand with a lighted torch (r.h. podium, panel 2, Capua mithraeum).



Fig. 12.

An initiand lying prostrate on the ground, with mystagogues at his head and foot (l.h. podium, panel 2, Capua mithraeum).

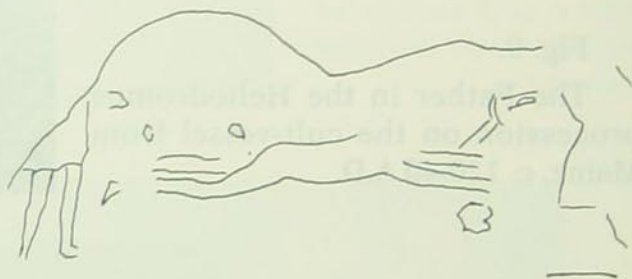


Fig. 13.

A Father pointing with his staff at a ?loaf of bread lying beside a kneeling initiand (l.h. podium, panel 4, Capua mithraeum).

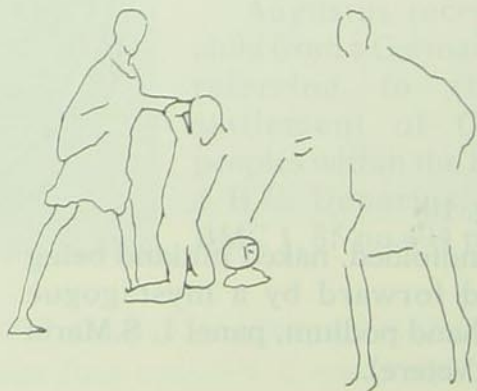


Fig. 14: A Father seated and aiming his bow at an initiand on the Mainz cult-vessel.

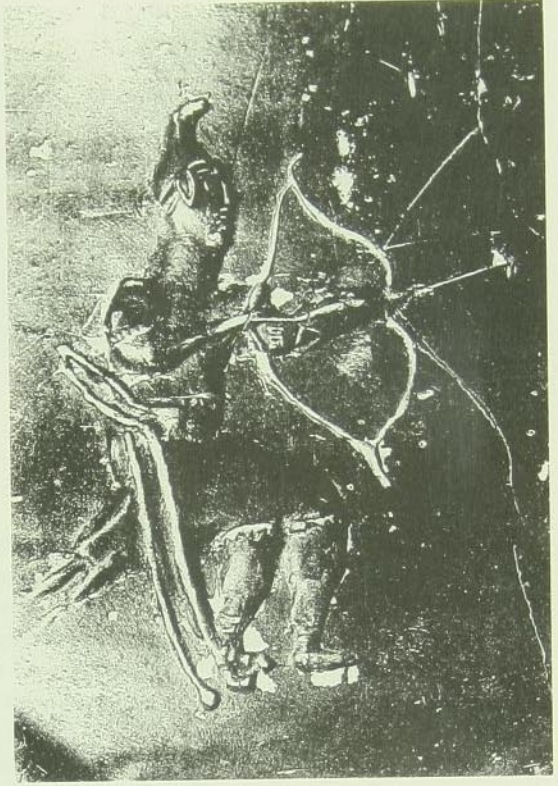


Fig. 15: A detail of the initiand, holding up his arms to protect himself.

