

RLB284 – Hellenistic Religions: Cosmology, Community, Cognition

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final research paper

## Mithraism

### Cosmology, Community and Cognition in a Hellenistic cult

#### **Cosmology**

Cosmology seems to have played an important role in the cult of Mithras, since it was used as a model for the setting and decoration of Mithraea and influenced the organizational structure of the cult's adherents. As no Mithraic texts describing or commenting cosmology were found so far and other, more or less contemporary sources are often subjectively criticizing, therefore unreliable, the main attention has to be focused on archaeological and epigraphical sources.<sup>1</sup>

Many Mithraea were built as artificial caves or were placed in adjusted natural ones, or in basements or other underground spaces of buildings. They usually had vaulted ceilings, that represented the firmament and could be decorated in such manner, i.e. with stars, planets, constellations etc. The floor and walls were then decorated with mosaics, frescoes or reliefs depicting planetary spheres as corresponding to stages of initiation, or signs of the zodiac or other

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<sup>1</sup> See Luther H. Martin, *Helénistická náboženství*, Brno: Masarykova univerzita 1997, 101; Robert Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus*, Praha: Vyšehrad, 2004, 59.

astrological features incorporated into figural scenes and motives from Mithraistic mythology. The central and ever-present of these cult-images is that of Mithra Tauroktonos, the bull-slayer.<sup>2</sup>

All figures and animals appearing on the tauroctony images seem to be representing actual constellations: the bull (Taurus), Mithras (Orion or Perseus, maybe neither?), the dog (Canis Minor or Maior), the snake (Hydra), the raven (Corax), the scorpion (Scorpio), the lion (Leo), the crab (Cancer), the eagle (Aquila) and the cup (Crater). Cautes and Cautopates, the torch-bearing attendants of Mithras may be representing the rising or setting sun or the warm and cold season of the year, while the ears of wheat sprouting from the bull's tail may represent the star Spica ( $\alpha$  Virginis). Even though these astronomical connections are generally acknowledged, without any explanatory texts, their meaning remains unclear. And the fact, that not all of these figures appear on all tauroctony images and that their setting does not exactly fit with the actual positions of the constellations in the sky does not really help the case. Still it seems that the claim of Porfyrios, that these caves were representing the cosmos itself was correct.<sup>3</sup>

Attempts at reconstructing Mithraistic cosmology, as well as mythology and teachings from iconography and epigraphy have not so far led to any consensus. Robert Turcan tried to reconstruct a general Mithraistic "narrative cycle", with the inherent mythology and cosmology (basically a Mithraistic world-view), as it is depicted on the tauroctony stele of Osterburken. For this purpose he refers to both Greco-Roman and Persian (Indo-Iranian) mythology and retells the cosmological myth, from the creation of the universe to the passing of rule from Kronos (Saturn) to Zeus (Jupiter) and to the birth of Mithras, who finally defeats the Evil endangering the world by sacrificing the bull.<sup>4</sup>

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2 L. H. Martin, *Helénistická náboženství ...*, 101-104; R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 36-62; Robert Turcan, *The cults of the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, 215-219.

3 L. H. Martin, *Helénistická náboženství ...*, 101-104; Marvin W. Meyer, *The ancient mysteries: a sourcebook of sacred texts*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, 199-201, 210-211; R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 36-42; R. Turcan, *The cults of ...*, 221-228; for comparison of various tauroctony images, from the most notable mithraea such as those of Osterburken, Heidelberg-Neuenheim, Nida-Heddernheim, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Ostia or Dura Europos see also: Mithraeum. Our Common Sun <<http://www.mithraeum.eu>>, section Mithraea.

4 See R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 75-91; R. Turcan, *The cults of ...*, 221-233.

Although there might have existed something as a general mythological framework, similar to Turcan's interpretation and shared by most of the Mithraists, there is no evidence for any centralized, official version of Mithras myth, just as there is no evidence of a central authority that would promote such idea. The area covered by Mithraism, both spatially and temporally, was too wide and it is more likely that many various versions of myths were locally bound to specific mithraea. Variations occur even in the iconography itself, where only certain mythical episodes, motives or features are selected or depicted in different setting or order in different times and places. Therefore we cannot easily accept a single version of a Mithraistic cosmological myth as a universal template for interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

What we can say with certainty is that the Mithraic cosmology stems entirely from the so-called Ptolemaic model of universe, with little to no influences taken from the pre-hellenistic model (since the first mithraea appear as late as the end of the 1st century CE, this shouldn't be too surprising). Mithraists shared the same universal model as many other hellenistic mysteries, with the Earth in the center and seven planetary spheres and one astral sphere around it. Unlike the chthonic mystery cults (like those of the Great Mother type), Mithraists sought for their "Saviour" beyond Earth and the planetary spheres, but they didn't perceive them as oppressive or incarcerating, like the Gnostic and Christian traditions did, but simply as stages of „salvation“ or levels of increasing power over one's own world and fate.<sup>6</sup>

In this way, each of the seven degrees of initiation (Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, Pater) was assigned to one of these spheres and gods associated with them, each designated by specific symbols and rites. This connection is attested by literary accounts of St. Jerome (around 403 CE) and Firmicus Maternus (around 350 CE), as well as by archaeological (iconographical) and epigraphical remains found in the Mithraea in Dura Europos (mostly around

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5 See Richard L. Gordon, Panelled complications, *Journal of Mithraic studies* III/1980, 200-227, [online] available at (7. 1. 2011): <[http://www.hums.canterbury.ac.nz/clas/ejms/out\\_of\\_print/JMSv3n1-2/JMSv3Chronique.pdf](http://www.hums.canterbury.ac.nz/clas/ejms/out_of_print/JMSv3n1-2/JMSv3Chronique.pdf)>, 211; L. H. Martin, *Helénistická náboženství ...*, 101-102; R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 75.

6 See L. H. Martin, *Helénistická náboženství ...*, 103-104.

210 CE) and Santa Prisca (2nd century CE) and in the Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia (2nd half of 3rd century CE). These seven stages can therefore be viewed as universal for all Mithraists, though their exact meaning and possible variations of this meaning remain mostly unknown to us.<sup>7</sup>

All in all, we may assume that cosmology retained a prominent position in Mithras cult, even though it might be possible, that its importance is slightly exaggerated due to the lack of Mithraic literature. The abundant astronomico-astrological motives in iconography were surely not mere decorations, Mithraic cosmology contained the essential "guidelines" for salvation. From the evidence mentioned above and from other sources, like the so-called Mithras liturgy from the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (which however is not considered "mainstream" Mithraic text, if there ever was anything like "mainstream" in Mithraism) we have a rough idea, how these guidelines looked like. But how were these turned into practice and whether these were unchanging instructions, shared by all Mithraists universally, that are questions not so easily answered. Due to other factors, discussed below, Mithraism probably never became a centrally unified tradition with unified teachings of a doctrinal type. To have a complete understanding of Mithraic cosmology and its changes, one would need a complete database of all the relevant Mithraic finds and their variations with respect to different dating and location, all packed up in a neat, synoptic chart. I am not aware of this being accomplished, but there might be other ways, how to get deeper into the Mithraic world-view.<sup>8</sup>

## Community

When considering the character of Mithraic community, again we have to rely mostly on archaeological and epigraphical (namely the *alba* of Virunum and dedicatory inscriptions) remains.

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7 Aleš Chalupa, Seven Mithraic Grades: An Initiatory or Priestly Hierarchy?, *Religio* 16/2, 2008, 177-201; St. Jerome, *Letter CVII. To Laeta*, [online] available at (7. 1. 2011): <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.CVII.html>>; L. H. Martin, *Helénistická náboženství ...*, 104-105; M. W. Meyer, *The ancient mysteries...*, 206-210; R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 65-67; R. Turcan, *The cults of ...*, 234-235.

8 See L. H. Martin, *Helénistická náboženství ...*, 101-105; M. W. Meyer, *The ancient mysteries...*, 211-221; for more detailed account on Mithraic cosmology see: R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 75-91; R. Turcan, *The cults of ...*, 221-240.

Firstly it is the size of the Mithraea that gives us indications regarding the size of individual Mithraic groups. The number of people that could fit in a Mithraeum varies between 8 to 60, the average and most common amount being around 30. When the number of adherents of Mithras in one location increased substantially, a new Mithraeum was built and the group split, so there never was a need for a larger meeting place. It is therefore certain that Mithraist "cells" were small groups of people, who knew each other quite well and kept their relationships close.<sup>9</sup>

If we compare the average size of Mithraist group with the so-called Dunbar's number social group scale, it fits right into the small group (or "band") size of 30-50 members, which is expected to be very stable and cohesive. In groups of this size, one could count on the others when it came to serious matters, and letting the group down would have consequences, since all the members know each other well. It also probably is easier to manage, without the need for a charismatic leader or mass-media.<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned above, Mithraists distinguished seven, hierarchically organized, initiatory grades: Raven (Corax), Bridegroom (Nymphus), Soldier (Miles), Lion (Leo), Persian (Perses), Sun-runner or Courier of the Sun (Heliodromus) and Father (Pater). These grades are quite well attested, so we have no doubt about their actual existence. There are however some disputes concerning whether these were in fact priestly ranks, i.e. that only some of the Mithras adherents were expected to be initiated more than once (to attain a higher rank). But so far this does not seem to be the case and it is more likely that these grades were tightly connected with Mithraic salvation and that it was

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9 See Roger Beck, "On Becoming a Mithraist: New Evidence for the Propagation of the Mysteries", in: Leif E. Vaage (ed.), *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity*, Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006, 175-194: 185-187; Aleš Chalupa, "Mithraistické album z Viruna a jeho význam", *Religio* 14/2, 2006, 243-258: 254-258; R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 62-63; see also Roger Beck, "Mithraism", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, [online] available at (7. 1. 2011): <<http://www.iranica.com/articles/mithraism>>; R. Turcan, *The cults of ...*, 240-241.

10 As one commenter wrote: "...at around 40 people, the 'PHYSICAL SPACE' requirements become so large, that you can't easily shout across them. This may sound silly, but what that physical separation creates is a dynamic where decisions are made on 'one side' without the 'other side' being involved. Up to this point most everyone feels included in the whole because news travels so fast, and is often within earshot. Once we passed 40, the only news that travels fast is bad news and 'secrets'.", see *The Dunbar number as a Limit to Group Sizes - Life with Alacrity*, available at (7. 1. 2011): <[http://www.lifewithalacrity.com/2004/03/the\\_dunbar\\_num.html](http://www.lifewithalacrity.com/2004/03/the_dunbar_num.html)>; for Dunbar's number see Robin I. M. Dunbar, "Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates", *Journal of Human Evolution* 22/6, 1992, 469-493.

the ultimate goal of each Mithraist to achieve the Father rank. There is also some evidence that these achievements were universally accepted by all Mithraists and one could retain his rank while moving to a different Mithraeum.<sup>11</sup>

Another characteristic feature of the mysteries of Mithras was the exclusion of women. Again, there are still some doubts as to whether there really were no women among the Mithraists, as is suggested mostly by non-Mithraic literary sources, however there is also an apparent lack of evidence that would indicate the opposite, so this seems to be a fact, or rather a rule, that might have had a few exceptions.<sup>12</sup>

According to Plutarch the cult of Mithras originated among the Cilician pirates, who were likely backed up by military and political elites of Commagene and Pontus, where a cult of Mithras (or Mithra-Helios) was connected with the royal power and its protection. These pirate bands were likely organized into "männerbund" type fraternities, artificial kinship groups of males, in a fashion similar to that of the later Mithraic groups of the Roman empire, however their other characteristics were obviously quite different. When the Cilician pirates were crushed by Pompey in 67 BCE, the survivors were settled in southern Italy. However, we hear nothing about Mithras mysteries for the next 150 years. If there truly was a continuity between the settled pirates and the rise of mithraism at the end of the 1st century CE, there is a lack of solid evidence for it.<sup>13</sup>

It is more likely that the mysteries of Mithras, as we know them from the imperial period, were introduced during the second half of the 1st century CE by soldiers and officials, who were previously engaged in campaigns in the east, or were of eastern origin themselves. How much of the "soon-to-be Mithraism" was brought by these men from the east, and how much of it was actually "created" in the west is still a matter of debate. The earliest Mithraic monuments from Rome and its

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11 See R. Beck, "On Becoming a Mithraist...", 189-190; A. Chalupa, "Mithraistické album z Viruna..."; A. Chalupa, "Seven Mithraic Grades..."; see also Marquita Volken, "The development of the cult of Mithras in the western Roman Empire: a socio-archaeological perspective", *Electronic Journal of Mithraic Studies* IV, 2004, [online] available at (7. 1. 2011): <<http://www.uhu.es/ejms/papers.htm>>.

12 See R. Beck, "On Becoming a Mithraist...", 181; Aleš Chalupa, "Hyenas or Lionesses? Mithraism and Women in the Religious World of the Late Antiquity", *Religio* 13/2, 2005, 198-230; L. H. Martin, *Helénistická náboženství ...*, 105.

13 See M. W. Meyer, *The ancient mysteries...*, 199, 204-205; R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 19-25; R. Turcan, *The cults of ...*, 201-204; see also M. Volken, "The development of...", section 5.

vicinity and from military camps and outposts along the Limes on Rhine and Danube indicate two social components - the military (and military officials) and freedmen from the imperial court. Later on, the cult probably spread through family-, household- and colleague-based relationships and personal recommendations. During the 2nd century the cult started spreading through the western provinces and now included also civilian officials, merchants and craftsmen, Mithraea now appear in cities far away from the limes and close to public buildings. At the end of the 2nd century Mithraism infiltrated the highest echelons of military hierarchy and, reportedly, caught the interest of emperor Commodus himself. It gained however no official support from the emperors until the beginning of the 4th century CE. By this time the mysteries of Mithras were already on the decline and apart from a short-lived polytheistic "revival", promoted by some local elites during the second half of the 4th century, they never recovered.<sup>14</sup>

Followers of Mithras thus range from slaves and freedmen to high ranking elites of the Roman society. The majority were however of the middle strata of lower military and bureaucratic ranks and moderately successful freedmen, males only. Scholars still debate about what made these loyal servants of the empire to join a "Persian" cult without much of a conclusion, as it is hard to determine which factors played the major role for various kinds of people in those times.<sup>15</sup>

I myself am convinced that all these social groups could well form fraternity types of groups without being necessarily Mithraic, Mithraism however brought more advantages into the group. At this point I would like to use a cross-cultural reference, namely that of Guan Yu (being the only suitable example I am familiar with). Guan Yu is a deified Chinese general from the 3rd century CE, who is known in the "West" as "god of war and wealth", which is a bit of a misinterpretation. Guan

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14 See Manfred Clauss, *The Roman cult of Mithras: The god and his mysteries*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, 21-32; Richard L. Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society: Social Factors in the Explanation of Religious Change in the Roman Empire", *Religion* 2, 1972, 92-121; Wolf Liebeschuetz, "The expansion of Mithraism among the religious cults of the second century", in: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism: papers associated with the Mithraic Panel organized on the occasion of the XVIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Rome 1990*, Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1994, 195-216: 198-203; R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 26-35; R. Turcan, *The cults of ...*, 204-207, 240-247; M. Volken, "The development of...".

15 See R. Beck, "Mithraism",...; R. Beck, "On becoming a Mithraist..."; R. L. Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman..."; W. Liebeschuetz, "The expansion of..."; R. Turcan, *The cults of ...*, 240-243; M. Volken, "The development of...".

Yu does not directly provide protection in combat, victory or commercial success, he is more of a "god of loyalty and brotherhood", whose main purpose is to make sure that all oaths are fulfilled and all deals are fair and honest. As such he is revered not only by the military, law enforcement organizations, merchants and businessmen, but also by organized crime groups, like the Triads, where cohesion and loyalty is a matter of life and death. My guess is, that Mithra played a similar role (as did many other figures in other traditions) in the masculine Mithraic fraternities and if we add a complex "salvation ideology" to this..., well, surely joining these guys won't do any harm, right?<sup>16</sup>

## Cognition

Actually... it might. You could die out there! Only symbolically, most of the time, but still... accidents do happen. And when the guy with the weapon in hand is someone like Commodus, the odds are that he won't stick just with symbolism, although this might be just a slander. Initiation rites were important part (essential in fact) of all ancient mysteries and as far as we can tell from the limited evidence, Mithraic initiation rites fell into the category of "rites of terror". These do not necessarily have to "scare the hell out" of the initiate, as long as they have a sufficient "shock effect" or induce "anxious anticipation" in him. When the initiation is complete, these feelings are usually replaced by those of joy and relief, when the menacing behaviour of those already initiated shifts to friendly treatment. The high sensory excitement of such rituals makes them more memorable while the knowledge that others have undergone the same ordeal makes the subsequent social bonds easier to make and more durable.<sup>17</sup>

16 For the role of Guan Yu in fraternities see John K. Fairbank, *Dějiny Číny*, Praha: Lidové noviny 1998, 238; Ching Kun Yang, *Religion in Chinese society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1967, 159, 286.

17 See L. H. Martin, *Helénistická náboženství ...*, 104-105; Luther H. Martin, "Performativity, Narrativity and Cognition: Demythologizing the Roman Cult of Mithras", in: Willi Braun (ed.), *Rhetoric and Reality in Early Christianities*, Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2005, 187-217: sections 2-3; Luther H. Martin, "The Promise of Cognitive Science for the Study of Early Christianity", in: Petri Luomanen - Ilkka Pyysiäinen - Risto Uro (eds.), *Explaining Christian origins and early Judaism: Contributions from cognitive and social science*, Leiden: Brill, 2007, 37-56: 48; Luther H. Martin, "The Roman Cult of Mithras: A Cognitive Perspective", *Religio* 14/2, 2006, 131-146: 134-139; M. W. Meyer, *The ancient mysteries...*, 199; for doing initiation "Commodus style" see also R. Turcan, *Mithra a mithraismus ...*, 65-74; R. Turcan, *The cults of ...*, 243-244; for iconographical evidence see A.



From a cognitive perspective, these experiences are, due to high sensory arousal, stored into the "flashbulb" type of episodic memory. As such they remain remembered for a long time, without the need of being repeated, however lack any semantic meaning, which is added reflectively when the memory is recalled. This kind of utilization of episodic and "flashbulb" memory is typical for what Harvey Whitehouse calls "imagistic mode of religion". Even other characteristics of Mithraism conform to the imagistic mode, as it was defined in his "modes of religiosity theory", like organization into small groups without a central authority, prevalence of iconography over literary works, exclusivity etc. All these features are indications, that the "teachings" shared and spread (communicated) by Mithraists were dependent more on the episodic, rather than on the semantic memory, as would be the case of the doctrinal mode.<sup>18</sup>

One of the major problems when studying religion is that we can't really know what people think and imagine in their minds and that is even less possible when we're dealing with people already dead for several hundreds of years. Even cognitive science can't tell what's inside people's heads, but it can at least guess, what are these people doing with these things. So when it comes to Mithraists, we don't know "what" they were experiencing during their rituals, but we know these experiences were communicated by example (action, image) rather than by word and to small groups of people at a time. They were "sharing" excitement, altered states of consciousness (in the broader sense) by inducing the same experiences to new members, who memorised them in their episodic memory and then reflected on them. The specific architecture and decoration of the Mithraea probably incited audio-visual illusions which further encouraged the sensory arousal.<sup>19</sup>

In my opinion the "imagistic mode" should be viewed only as an ideal type, or, as

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Chalupa, "Seven Mithraic Grades...", 188, 196.

18 See Justin L. Barrett, "Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion", *Trends in Cognitive Science* 4, 2000, 29-34: 32; L. H. Martin, "Performativity, Narrativity and...", sections 1, 3; L. H. Martin, "The Promise of Cognitive...", 43-48; L. H. Martin, "The Roman Cult...", 132-134, 137-139; Luther H. Martin, "Religion and Cognition", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, London: Routledge, 2nd edition, 2009, 526-542; for Whitehouse's "modes of religiosity theory" see Harvey Whitehouse, „Teorie dvou modů náboženskosti“, *Religio* 17/2, 2009, 209-230.

19 See J. L. Barrett, "Exploring the Natural..."; L. H. Martin, "Performativity, Narrativity and...", sections 1, 3; L. H. Martin, "The Roman Cult...", 132-134, 137-139; H. Whitehouse, „Teorie dvou modů...“, 218-224.

Whitehouse put it, a "tendency" of religious traditions towards one of the two opposite positions. There is no "purely imagistic" religion out there and Mithraism is no exception. Some formalised, semantic meaning and conceptualised mental representations were necessary to make it all work. Which of these and how were then encoded into cosmology, iconography, and/or narrated through mythology or formalised ideology I cannot tell, but sharing a world-view based on reflective exegesis only seems unlikely to me. To be "saved" through ascension, by (literary) "getting high" is a feat accomplishable by any "junkie"; it takes a bit more to establish a 7-stage system of weird names, astrological symbolism and hierarchy and share it with thousands of people throughout the empire for about 300 years.

## **Conclusion**

We can see that Mithraism, as a religious tradition, adopted a particular strategy of expansion and continuity. By retaining small, individual, secluded and closed but cohesive groups of adherents, Mithraism ensured stability at the expense of limiting its expansive potential. Together with exciting initiatory rituals and complex symbolism and salvation-oriented ideology, which further strengthened internal stability and cooperation, Mithraism was probably more "mysterious" than most mysteries. But by limiting its own potential of becoming a "religion for everyone", by not spreading its "memes", it failed to outlast its contemporaries. On the cognitive and ideological level, Mithraism did not differ too much from other mysteries of the imagistic mode, their cosmological perspective might have been a bit different, but it originated in the same cosmological model as was used long after the disappearance of Mithraism. Where the Mithraists failed, was at the social level (or rather the socio-cognitive level, see above). Given by the social background of its adherents and character of their fraternities, who then inevitably yielded precedence to people of similar background when looking for new members, Mithraism produced fictional kinship groups, which were nevertheless too "specialised" and bound to the state structures

of the Roman empire. When these structures became permeated by the "less specialised" and "more expansive" Christians, and when the empire itself began to crumble from the 3rd century onward, Mithraism likely lacked both the manpower and the popularity to sustain itself.

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