ELECTRUM ∗ Vol. 30 (2023): 273–292
https://doi.org/10.4467/20800909EL.23.009.17326
www.ejournals.eu/electrum

In the Invisible Space – The Phenomemon of Crypts in Ostia

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Abstract

The article addresses the issue of Mithraism in Ostia. It discusses the latest discoveries, the nature of the Mithra cult in Ostia, with particular emphasis on the place of Mithra's shrines in the city space.

Keywords: Mithra, mithrea, Ostia, Roman mithraism, city space.

Quid quod et Inuictum spelaea sub atra recondunt
quemque tegunt tenebris audent hunc dicere Solem?
Quis colat occulte lucem sidusque supernum
celet in infernis nisi rerum causa malarum?[1]

Scientific excitement has not yet subsided after the discovery of the Mithraeum of the Colored Marble (IV, IX, 5)[2] by archaeologists, when the Italian press and television were electrified by another sensational news from Ostia in February 2022. House of the Stuccoed Capitals (V, VII, 4–5), a fragment of painted stucco relief showing fragments of tauroctonium was unexpectedly discovered.[3] The number of Mithraic temples found so far

[1] *Ps*. Paulinus, *Carmen* 32: *What of the fact that they hide the Unconquered One in a rocky cave and dare to call the one they keep in darkness the Sun? Who adores light in secret or hides the star of the sky in the shadows beneath the earth except for some evil purpose?* [Transl. Croke – Harries 1981].

[2] In 2014, during the archaeological research conducted by archaeologists from the University of Bologna, as part of the Ostia Marina project, a new building with a room identified as a mithraeum was found. This building has been conventionally named „Mithraeum of colored marble" because of its special type of marble flooring (*spelaeum*). On the basis of currently available data, a very late date (even the end of the 4th century CE) is assumed: David 2017, 171–182; 2018, 117–131.

[3] https://www.ostiaantica.beniculturali.it/it/info/attivita-del-parco-il-dio-mitra-in-stucco-emerge-dagli-scavi-di-ostia-antica/; https://www.ansa.it/canale_viaggiart/it/regione/lazio/2022/02/13/a-ostia-antica-scoperto-rilievo-mitra-in-stucco_8cdeb4eb-65b5-46c8-8e39-d695de3ec709.html (10.05.2022).

meant that Ostia was "always" considered a kind of "microcosm" in research on the phenomenon of the cult of Mithras. Recent discoveries will certainly confirm and strengthen this opinion.

When Robert Fagan, during excavations in 1794–1802, discovered the first mithraeum (unfortunately we do not know its location at present), certainly no one expected that more than 220 years later Ostia would still be able to surprise archaeologists, historians and researchers of the religious life of Roman cities.

I. The City

One of the hallmarks of society in the Roman Empire was its urban character. It was the cities that constituted the highest and most important level of the social organization of the Empire. However, their religious life was never confined within strict limits. However, there was, of course, a strictly regulated system of ordering it imposed by the state and in the public sphere. One of its elements was the use of a universal cult calendar, which, however, to some extent also took into account the religious traditions of various groups of inhabitants and elements of the religious system of Rome, assimilated by individuals or organized communities. There were in fact many regional and local religious systems that differed so much from each other that it can be said that the Roman religion was a local phenomenon.[4] The same was also the case of Ostia.[5] In this city—from the researcher's point of view—there are a number of favorable circumstances that make it possible to look at the organization of religious life. Conducting research is mainly facilitated by the state of its preservation. In general, we do not know the detailed topography of Roman cities, but rather it appears to us in a discontinuous manner, because most often excavation works, for various non-scientific reasons, must be limited to the exploration of only single, isolated monuments and often do not allow us to learn the details of the fabric of the whole structure which made the urban area cohesive during the Roman era. This fact most often limits the possibility of analyzing the process of spatial and functional integration also in relation to many elements of religious life, e.g. sanctuaries and places of worship. Therefore, Ostia plays a special role. The city (at least theoretically) provides us with a fairly complete picture of the gradual development, starting from the creation of the republican *castrum* until the slow loss of importance and amandonment of the city at the end of the ancient era.[6]

The cohabitation of gods and people in Ostia lasted, according to tradition, from the very beginning of the city, and the relationship between them—as in other cities—was called *cultus deorum*. This expression was used by the Romans to describe various ways of worshiping their divine "fellow citizens" by virtue of their supremacy and

[4] Woolf 2003, 39–56.

[5] Meiggs 1973, 337: 'Every aspect of Ostian religion can be paralleled elsewhere in the Roman world, but the total pattern is distinctively Ostian.'

[6] Only theoretically, however, as unfortunately we do not have full (or even comparably rich) source material for all periods of the city's functioning. The history of the excavations carried out in the city also had a huge impact on the state of preservation of the sources in the city.

in return for the favors received from them. Therefore, such an understanding of these relations means that efforts were made to maintain regular contact-dialogue with them. J. Scheid emphasized that it is the city that is "a place of meeting with the gods and maintaining relationships with them, and religion is a set of means serving to implement and maintain these relations"[7] and it has always been a "combination" of elements of the public stage and private living space, creating a "skeleton," within which the life of the city and its inhabitants was taking place.[8] There is no doubt that sacred buildings constituted an important part of the city landscape and a significant part of the city status and identification system of its citizens.[9] Statues, objects of worship, foundation plaques "supported memory" and assured (all residents, and in particular the various cult communities created by them) of their own unique tradition.[10] Objects and specific places, used constantly in ritual activities, not only were organizing or even "creating" space, but through many years of use they were creating their own history.[11] Such "permanent" points of reference were, above all, state buildings, temples and the broadly understood sacred space, and the factor integrating the society were rituals, sacrifices, processions and holidays, i.e. elements of religious life.[12] The image of Ostia's religious life understood in this way, however, consisted—and it must be remembered—of two elements. The first was the "outer layer," visible to residents in the city space. These included temples, chapels, statues of gods, inscriptions displayed to the public, as well as holidays and religious ceremonies in which residents, visitors and guests participated. However, there was also a second element which, although it co-created Ostia's religious topography, was "invisible" to its average, uninitiated inhabitant or visitor. "Invisible," but not absent or less important. It was also part of the city's religious life. This "invisible" part of the sacred space was associated with cults unavailable to everyone, among others precisely with Mithraism, and we could define it as the "crypt phenomenon."

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[7] Scheid 1997, 86–87.

[8] Perring 1991, 273–293; Rieger 2004; Tatarkiewicz 2009; Arnhold 2016.

[9] Public buildings, squares, streets together with apartments are symbols thanks to which residents can express who they are. Therefore, in order to meet the expectations of the society, man tries to change the environment. This, in turn, causes that buildings are consequently created and decorated in a way that responds to specific, defined social needs. Hence, studies of urban space try to answer the question of how the evolution of a city is determined by the perception of the world by its inhabitants (especially those who had power), and how the form of the city shaped the social behavior of its inhabitants. See also: Perring 1991, 273–293; Yi-Fu 1987,133; Tilley 1994,17; Zanker 2000, 205–226.

[10] It is mainly related to everyday life in a specific reality, and often also to getting used to specific, unchanging and permanent spatial situations. From the moment of birth, man is taught to "evaluate and shows certain specific patterns of behavior towards specific places". This issue is presented in more detail by Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2002, 123–172.

[11] However, it should be borne in mind that the pace of changes introduced in this space had to be slow enough to allow for the emergence of history. When "history is not tied to a stable system of places, it is meaningless." Norberg-Schulz 2000, 114; Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2002, 138.

[12] In the literature on ancient cults, the term "religious life" is often used. This concept, however, is a product of modern science and belongs to its terminology, as it has no equivalent in ancient sources. Although commonly used, the term has not been clearly described, and scientists do not even agree on the definition of the term. In view of such difficulties, I assume that the religious life of the city focused both on sacrifice (which allowed contact with God and which was made to bring the deity closer to man, make his existence present), and sacred rites (washing, anointing, feasting) for the celebration of which temples were built.

II. Mithraism[13]

The cult of Mithra has been the subject of intense scientific study for many years.[14] It was even considered as a sub-discipline of religious history. All important works in the last two decades have asked the same fundamental questions: how, where and by whom Roman Mithraism was shaped, what is its essence, what narrative (or narratives) lies behind the relatively standard iconographic (visual) language, and finally what was mitraeum and what was happening in it? The abundance of the developed literature may testify to the almost (nomen-omen) "cult" interest of contemporary scholars in this subject.[15] Nevertheless, the mysteries of Mithra are still one of the greatest mysteries of antiquity for historians dealing with the history of Roman religions, to this day, despite over a century of research, not fully solved.[16] In the first centuries of our era, this extraordinary cult of hard-to-identify origins spread throughout the entire Roman Empire, until its fate was

[13] The term "Mithraism" comes from the nineteenth century: Robertson 1890, 225–248.

[14] Research into the origins of the Roman cult of Mithra is "an endless story." According to F. Cumont's theory, the cult of Mithra came to Rome as a kind of "carbon" of Persian Mithraism (Cumont 1899). Cumont interpreted all elements of Roman Mithraism through the prism of the "eastern" cult of this god. The views of the Belgian researcher have not been discussed for several decades. The approach to worship changed radically in the 1960s and 1970s. This was started with the appearance of a new body of Mithraic relics by Marteen J. Vermaseren (CIMRM) and a series of conferences organized by John Hinnells (Hinnells 1975b), at which the so-called "Cumont dogma" was questioned. There were postulates stating the need to reinterpret the symbolism and doctrine of Roman Mithraism, as well as its main representation—tauroctonium (Bianchi 1979). At the end of the eighties of the twentieth century, a new theory, considered very controversial, appeared, the creator of which is D. Ulansey. He claims that Roman Mithraism is a cult created by philosophers that has only taken over the name of 'Mithra' and some traditional elements of liturgy and mysteries (Ulansey 1989). According to Ulansey, the depiction of Mithra killing a bull is associated with the discovery by Hipparchus around 125 BCE of the phenomenon of precession, consisting in the slow movement of the points where the sun is located on the equinoxes along the ecliptic. According to the author's theory, the system of constellations, the symbols of which are images depicted on tauroctonium (in his opinion, the Taurus is supposed to correspond to the constellation of Taurus, the dog—the Little Dog (*Canis Minor*), the serpent—*Hydra*, the scorpion—*Scorpio*, etc.) corresponds to the astronomical situation of 2000 years before the "birth" of the mysteries of Mithra, when the equinox was in the constellation Taurus. The "killing" of the bull by Mithra, to which the constellation Perseus is supposed to correspond, would therefore symbolize the movement of the celestial sphere and the precession to the constellation Aries, which was the equinox point of Hipparchus. Ulansey's theory has been accused of making it unlikely that a phenomenon as complicated and impractical as that discovered by Hipparchus would quickly become popular and understandable to a mass of simple people. However, this controversial publication initiated another stage in the study of Mithraism. The "startalk" theory developed by David Ulansey (Ulansey 1989) was refined and deepened by Roger Beck (Beck 2004; 2006). Other important works began to appear, which oscillated between the cultural-historical, cognitive, sociological and archaeological approach to worship (Clauss 2004; Gordon 2007; Chalupa 2011, 107–123; Dirven 2015; Walsh 2015, 141–152). In 2017, the controversial work by A. Mastrocinque was published, in which the author tries to link the origins of Mithraism in Rome with the emergence of the imperial cult, and sees Mithra as the new Apollo (Mastrocinque 2017). See Tatarkiewicz 2015, 113–123.

[15] Some of the studies are more innovative, in others—not necessarily based on new archaeological discoveries—the authors re-interpret theories and ideas even from over a hundred years ago: Adrych *et al.* 2017; Lo Russo *et al*. 2022.

[16] Gordon 1994, 103–125.

sealed by the decisions and actions of Theodosius, who categorically condemned all non-Christian religious practices.

The period of the early empire was extremely active in the field of religion—on the one hand, one can speak of the increased influence of Eastern syncretic cults on the Roman world, and on the other hand, their clash with each other. These religions gave their followers the hope of salvation and immortality, they attracted them with an attractive, colorful ritual that strongly influenced the senses and imagination. Hence probably the great popularity of the cults of Isis, Serapis, Baal and Cybele in this era. However, the cult of Mithra gained the greatest influence in the Roman world. This popularity was probably due to the fact that the ideological message related to it declared that it was fighting the forces of evil and acted in the service of justice, good and truth. By actively helping Mithra by adhering to strict morals, faithfulness to oaths and keeping secrets, the initiate could himself contribute to hastening the final victory of good over evil. Mithraism combined a solemn ritual with the pursuit of moral purity and hope for immortality, it also gave a sense of community and brotherhood. Its popularity was probably due to its mystery, inaccessibility to the uninitiated and interesting symbolism.[17] The standardized composition (as the depiction of Mithra[18] is often called) was, according to some theories, nothing more than a symbolic map of the sky.

The presence of the worshipers of Mithra and the fact that they celebrated mysteries were well known to the Romans, but the rituals and the essence of worship remained available only to the initiated.[19] Therefore, the biggest problem for researchers of Mithraism is—and probably will always remain—the lack of sources depicting the cult, ceremony, or the doctrine itself from the point of view of the 'Mithraists,' active participants of the cult.[20] For us, the most tangible remains are material sources—inscriptions, cult objects, sculptures, bas-reliefs, etc., but most of all temples. Mithraic believers met in the mithraea to participate in the daily liturgy and eat ritual meals. It was to be a symbol of the covenant between Mithras and the Sun. It is the grotto—*mithraeum-spelunca,* crypta—that remains, next to the main cult scene, the tauroctonium, the most tangible evidence of the cult's existence.

[17] Bianchi 1979, 12–13.

[18] This phrase was used by B. Sefton in his speech at the Manchester Congress in 1971 (the text was not published). Source: Beck 1984, 2075.

[19] The mysteries of Mithra were not available as a public cult, access to them was reserved to a small group of initiates. Some researchers assume (sometimes questioned by others) that participation in the mysteries of Mithra was limited to adult men only (discussion on this topic: Chalupa 2005, 198–230; Griffith 2006, 48–77; David 2000, 121–141). Individual groups of followers could count about 10–15 people, taking into account the size of the mithraea; However, it should be remembered that the number of temples does not necessarily reflect the overall number of people participating in the form of initiation mysteries. See, for example, Chalupa 2008, 177–201; 2013, 9–32.

[20] Beck 2000, 145–180.

III. Mithraea

Looking at the map of the Roman Empire with the mithraea marked on it, we find that the cult of Mithra spread mainly in ports and at "strategic" points (along trade routes, borders where military units were stationed, near administrative centers).[21] Undoubtedly, the dynamic spread of the cult was influenced by the intensification of the construction of roads connecting together previously unconnected regions. The need to defend the empire and the efficient operation of the administration entailed the need to move large groups of people, mainly the army. The soldiers not only moved, but often stayed for several years in foreign territories, hundreds of kilometers away from their homeland, and this made it easier to learn about new beliefs and customs, as well as to adopt them. Then, after returning to their homeland, the soldiers could also become "missionaries" of the new faith. New mthraea were also created there.[22] At the same time, it is worth remembering that they are "visible" for us—contemporary, because during the period of functioning they were "hidden" in the spatial tissue.

Mithraea definitely differed in appearance from typical, "visible" tamples, which are an important visual element of cities and temples of the Greco-Roman world. Mithra's followers gathered in partially or completely hidden temples, usually underground, in places that were always installed between existing buildings, most often among residential *insulae* or among other utility buildings. The entrance to them was also hidden, usually it did not open to the main street, but to outlying areas, dead-ends, side streets, to exclude the possibility of visits or even accidental peeking inside by profans.

According to Porphyry's account,

> the Persians called 'caves' the places where they initiated the candidates . . . For, as Eubulus says, Zoroaster was the first who consecrated in the neighboring mountains of Persia, a spontaneously produced cave, florid, and having fountains, in honor of Mithra, the maker and father of all things; a cave, according to Zoroaster, bearing a resemblance of the world, which was fabricated by Mithra. But the things contained in the cavern being arranged according to commensurate intervals, were symbols of the mundane elements and climates . . .[23]

Mithreum was probably perceived as a projection of the cosmos, a kind of (micro) cosmos. According to the mythology of Mithraism, in the grotto, hidden like the

[21] The last full body collecting information about archaeological materials related to the cult of Mithra was the work of M. J. Vermaseren (CIMRM). Since its publication, however, other sites of Mithra's cult have been discovered. Hence the need to create a new body of Mithraic monuments, postulated by many researchers. This time in a modern, digitized form. Such an idea was initiated almost twenty years ago by R. Gordon, but unfortunately it has not yet found a satisfactory form of implementation (https://web.archive.org/web/20150502073246/http://www.uhu.es/ejms/cimrm.htm, 5.08.2021) Information about discoveries is also collected and posted on the portal tertullian.org, but this site is not financed by any institution and remains an individual initiative of the creator Robert Pearse, as is the blog by Szabó Csaba (https://religioacademici.wordpress.com/2013/06/29/actualities-new-mithraic-sanctuaries/, 8.05.2021).

[22] That is why such an important postulate is the necessity to focus on the general problem of the spread of cults in the Empire, proposed by S. Price (2012, 1–19).

[23] Porph., *De antro nymph*. 2.

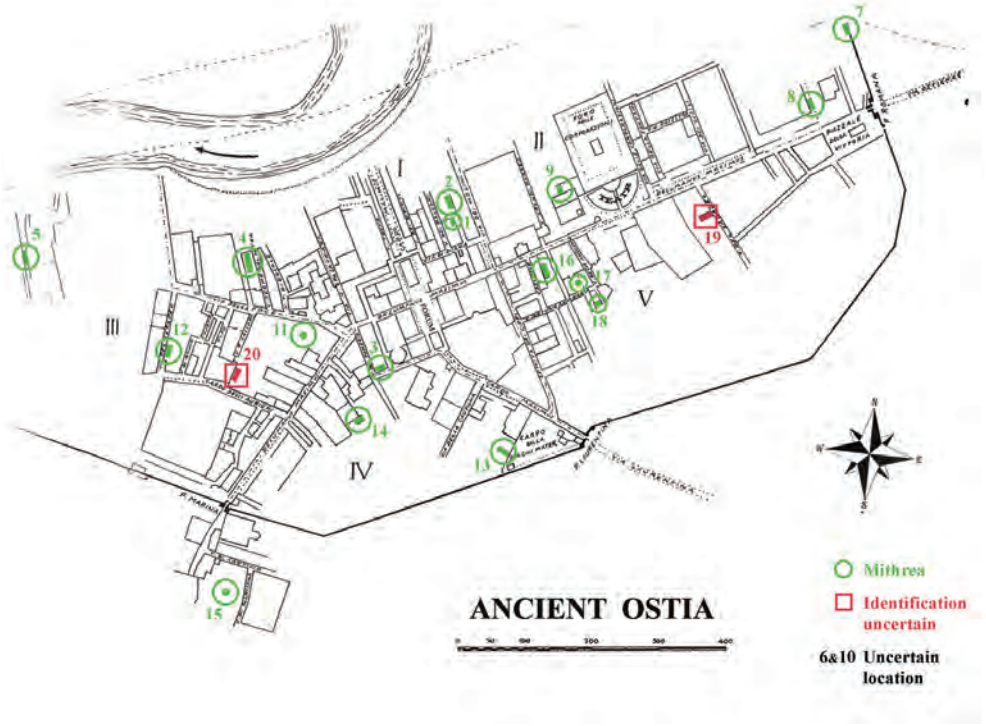

Fig. 1. Mithraea in ancient Ostia (marked on the plan of Calza – Becatti 1977)

temples mentioned above, the earthly journey of Mithra began and ended. It was believed that the god was born in a grotto, coming directly from a rock. Cult rituals culminated in the grotto, and in it Mithra killed the "Heavenly Bull." The underground rituals must have amazed and frightened, and the glow of the torchlight played an important role in creating an atmosphere of mystery.[24] The overwhelming and almost touchable darkness around and the connection with death and the world of the dead meant that the mithraea could actually make a very gloomy and depressing impression, and yet it was there that the resurrection, the rebirth of life and his final victory over death were celebrated.

The cult room of the mithraeum was built on a rectangular plan and divided along the longer axis into three parts: the central nave and two side podiums. The podiums were often covered with marble, and sometimes they were made of compacted clay and faced with wood. The benches were inclined slightly towards the wall. The walls of the temples were painted. Similarly, the ceiling: usually it was covered with paintings of

[24] '. . . In fact, they transmit his sacred rites in hidden caves so that they avoid the grace of the splendid and clear light, having been submerged in the shady filth of darkness . . .;' Iulius Firmicus Maternus, *De Errore Profanarum Religionum* 5. Introduction, Translation and Commentary Richard E. Oster, Huston 1971.

planets and stars and was supposed to resemble a map of the sky full of symbols. But the most important element of the cult was what was going on in the mithraeum, namely that "imaginary act of controlled violence." *Tauroctonium*, or ritualistic killing of a bull, was not performed as an act of sacrifice to the gods, but only to humans and other creatures. It was believed that this sacrifice was not the act of men but of gods, and was regarded as an act of creation and salvation that strengthens the power of life, a symbol of the solidarity of living beings against death. Mithra was also referred to as the Invincible Sun (*Sol Invictus*), because his act symbolized victory over the forces of darkness, symbolized by the bull. The blood shed by Mithra had a cleansing power, restoring life. This is evidenced by the inscription on the walls of the mithraeum under the church of Santa Prisca in Rome, where you can read: *Et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso*. *Tauroctonium* and all its accompanying representations are often referred to as a "standardized composition" which, according to some theories, is nothing more than a symbolic map of the sky. Same as the cave-*mithraeum* itself.[25]

What is most astonishing about the Roman mithraea is the fact that among the more than half a thousand mithraea discovered in the Empire, so easily identifiable due to their characteristic, homogeneous and repetitive structure, no two worlds are identical. Although the division into the central corridor and two side podiums, the altar and the *tauroctonium* stage is a constant and common model, each mithraeum was different, had its own "personality" and contained specific details that made it a unique object. This, of course, also applies to the Ostian mithraea, which, although built on the same "plan," are characterized by an individual finish indicating the different financial possibilities of the followers (donors), as well as taking into account the architectural circumstances of the place where they were created.

IV. Mithraea in Ostia[26]

The temples of Mithra, which were discovered in Ostia, were given names during research conducted in the first thirty years of the 20th century related to the characteristic motifs appearing on the paintings found in them (e.g. Mithraeum of the Snakes[27]), mosaics (e.g. Mithraeum of the Animals,[28] Mithraeum of the Seven Gates[29]), names of the founders that can be read in the inscriptions found in them (e.g. Mithraeum of Felicissimus[30]), or simply from the type of room in which they were located (e.g. Mithraeum of the Baths of Mithras,[31] Mithraeum of the House of Diana[32]). Most temples date from AD 160–250,

[25] For an analysis of the symbolism of the mithraeum see: Clauss 1990a (chapter 4); White 1990, 47–59; 2012.
[26] Research on religion in the city space: Rüpke 2020.
[27] CIMRM 294.
[28] CIMRM 278.
[29] CIMRM 287.
[30] CIMRM 299.
[31] CIMRM 229.
[32] CIMRM 216.

six to the second century, four to the late second and third centuries, five to the third century, and the Mithraeum of the Colored Marble late fourth century.[33]

The most important elements that, apart from the layout of the room, allow the room to be identified as a mithereum are epigraphic monuments and a tauroctonium scene.

Inscriptions devoted to Mithra, written on marble slabs, are an extremely valuable source for us not only because of the information they contain about worshipers, but also about the equipment, construction and funding of temples, as well as their contents. Petronius Felix is a donor of the image of Ahriman and some other monument. M. Lollianus Callinicus consecrated the altar[34] from the same inscription, Fructosus financed the erection of the temple.[35] L. Tullius Agatho[36] founded the altar, and Decimius Decimianus, with his own money, renovated the Mitraeum of the Seven Spheres.[37] A dedication by L. Agrius Calendo,[38] who financed the mosaic, was found on the mosaics between the podiums in the temple of the Imperial Palace. L. Sempronius of the Mithreum of the Painted Walls sacrificed the base for the large relief of Mithra. Fructosus[39] financed the mosaic between the side podiums of the Sabazeum, and in Fagan's Mithreum a relief was found depicting the god himself, displayed by three Valerius—as M. Clauss[40] believes—brothers.[41] In addition, the inscriptions are an excellent resource for learning the Mithraic "language". It is thanks to, among others, the inscriptions found in Ostia, that we can identify the side podiums in temples as *praesepia*,[42] *thronum*,[43] as a cult furniture or, as R. Gordon[44] wants, a more widely understood niche equipment.

IV.1. The sizes and interior of the mithraea

The rooms in Mithra's tabernacles were built on a rectangular plan and divided along the longer axis into three parts: the central nave (1.5 to 3 m wide) and two side podiums (1.17–2.3 m wide). The podiums were often covered with marble, and sometimes they were made of compacted clay, faced with wood[45] and usually slightly inclined towards the wall. It was on them that the faithful sat or rather rested in a reclining position when they ate a meal together. A cult performance was placed in the depths of the mithraeum. From the height of the platform, the high priest of the community could address the

[33] Dating of the temples of Mithra in Ostia: CIMRM; Becatti 1954; Schreiber 1967, 42–45.

[34] CIL XIV 4310,4311 = CIMRM 222, 220.

[35] CIL XIV 257 = CIMRM 228.

[36] CIL XIV 62 = CIMRM 248.

[37] CIL XIV 60, 61 = CIMRM 246, 247.

[38] CIL XIV 66 = CIMRM 251.

[39] CIL XIV 4297 = CIMRM 301.

[40] According to W. Liebenschuetz 1994, 204 Vitalis and Nicomes were slaves of Heracles (CIMRM 313); the author compares it to the situation in another inscription, where M. Umblius Krito performed with his slave Pylades (CIMRM 275).

[41] CIL XIV 65 = CIMRM 313.

[42] CIMRM 233; CIL XIV 4314.

[43] CIMRM 223, 233, 266.

[44] Gordon 1994, 105.

[45] Turcan 1993, 74.

initiated.[46] The altar was either in front of the image of the killing bull, Mithras, or at the foot of the steps.

Ostian temples varied in sizes: from relatively large (Mithraeum of the Imperial Palace 17 × 5.5 m and Mithraeum of the Baths of Mithras 16.5 × 3.9 m) to superficially modest (Mithraeum of Lucretius Menander 7.8 × 4.2 and Mithraeum of Fructosus 4.5 × 5.7 m). These sizes may suggest that the followers preferred to meet in a small group. The creation of a new place of worship was probably related to the appearance of some new believers in the community, and this may indicate a gradual but continuous increase in the popularity of the cult and the number of initiates.

Many of the individual features of temples were caused by architectural difficulties and the variety of buildings. Despite the constant, general division into a central corridor and two side podiums, each mithraeum was different, had its own "personality" and specific details that made them unique. There is an interesting mention in the inscription in Fructosus' mithraeum: templum et spelaeum. M. F. Squarciapino believes that the templum was named after the temple in which the Mithraic chapel was adapted.[47]

Before entering the main room there was always a kind of foyer (Mithraeum of the Animals, Mithraeum of Lucretius Menander, Mithraeum of Fructosus, Mithraeum of the Snakes, Mithraeum of the Imperial Palace, Shrine of Sabazius), or some other room (Mithraeum of Felicissimus). There were also small pools for water near the entrance. At the Mithraeum of the House of Diana, at the Mithraeum of the Imperial Palace, and at the Felicissimus' sanctuary, they were on the right side of the corridor. In the case of Mithraeum of the Painted Walls and Mithraeum of the Seven Gates—in the middle of the passage, and in the Shrine of Sabazius, there were two pools.[48]

The central aisle in seven mithraea was covered with mosaics with a wide variety of motifs, but also of different quality of workmanship. Some of them were particularly interesting, such as the one in the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres, where the main corridor is depicted with seven arches that follow one another like rungs of a ladder. Along the passage, on the sides of the podiums, there are representations of the signs of the zodiac and images of deities associated with the planets. Also in the Mithraeum of the Seven Gates, the floor and podiums are covered with mosaics. In front of the entrance to this sanctuary there is a central arch, and on its sides there are three smaller arcs—which in total gives the symbol of seven gates, seven cosmic spheres through which the follower's soul passes.[49] The deities, symbols of the planets, are presented in a mosaic—four of them on the vertical wall of the podium (Mars, Luna, Venus, Mercury) and two on the floor next to the altar (Jupiter and Saturn). The cosmic symbolism in this mithraeum was complemented by: a vase (symbol of water), a serpent (symbol of earth) and an eagle (symbol of air) holding a lightning bolt in its claws (symbol of fire). An equally interesting mosaic has been preserved in Mithreum of the Animals. It shows a naked man with

[46] Turcan 1993, 75.

[47] Squarciapino 1962, 40.

[48] D. Groh points out that the purpose of the pools is not entirely certain. He supposes that they may have served as a kind of "baptismal font" or, more likely, as a place where the faithful washed their hands, they performed a symbolic ablution before proceeding to the "banquet" (Groh 1967, 20).

[49] There is no evidence, however, that this is directly related to the seven steps of the Mithraic ladder mentioned by Celsius (Orig., *Contra Cels*. VI, 23); Turcan 1993, 71.

a spade with holes in one hand and a sickle in the other. During rituals, fire was carried on such a blade, and the sickle symbolized nature blossoming from bull's blood. In addition to it, the following are depicted: a rooster, a raven, a scorpion, a snake and a bull's head. However, the most important mosaic, extremely important for understanding the probable hierarchy and degrees of initiation in the cult in question, was found in the temple of Felicissimus. It presents, as it is supposed, symbols of successive levels of initiation, namely the Raven, Newlywed, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Messenger of the Sun and Father, as well as a ritual "base" surrounded by ears of grain and blooming twigs, symbols of a new blooming life.[50]

The walls of the sanctuaries were also sometimes covered with paintings. There must have been a large painting in the niche of the Temple of the Painted Walls, probably the scene where Mithra slays the bull. Many traces of blue and brown paint and light traces of red have been preserved. The niche of the Temple of the Seven Spheres was painted blue. The traces of red and yellow were supposed to symbolize fire and sunlight. The side walls of this temple represented a luxurious, exotic garden, perhaps the one described by Porphyry, resembling the flowering grotto dedicated to Mithra by Zarathustra in the mountains of Persia. This garden was to symbolize the rebirth of nature—the main task of this deity. From the decorative frescoes that adorned the walls of the mithraeum in the Baths, only traces of green bushes have survived.[51] In the Mithreum of the Snakes, a painting of a genius has been preserved between two great snakes, considered to be House Lars. This chapel has many traces of rebuilding, but the image of the snake was not damaged during various construction operations. This reptile can also be found in the performances at the Mithreum of the Animals or at the Mithreum of the Footprint.

Altars and small altars were also an important element of the Ostian mithraea. In the center of the Mithraeum of the Footprint, a tall, narrow altar was found, which, however, due to the lack of any decorations, was classified by R. Turcan as a pedestal or a kind of table.[52] Also, the triangular altar in Mithra's Baths probably did not function as an altar in the strict sense, but rather as a table top on which lamps or a ritual meal were placed.[53] Yet another type of altar is found in the temple of Lucretius Menander. In this case, it is a brick structure with a marble plaque on the front. The plate has holes. A lamp was probably placed in the hole.[54] Also in the Mithraeum of Lucretius Menander, the remains of an altar were found, in which there was a place for the lamp to be placed in it.[55] Finally, the classic altar can be found in the Mithraeum of the House of Diana.[56] This is a typical example of Mithraic 'recycling'—the altar was originally dedicated to Hercules and Aqua Salvia. It was bruised and rebuilt for new purposes: among others it was turned upside down, and the followers of Mithra pierced a hole in it. The recess that formed served probably, as in other cases, to accommodate the lamp.

[50] Chalupa 2008.
[51] CIMRM 229.
[52] Turcan 1993, 217.
[53] Turcan 1993, 218.
[54] Turcan 1993, 221.
[55] Turcan 1993, 221.
[56] Turcan 1993, 220.

IV.2. *Tauroctonium*[57]

The *tauroctonium* scene has been preserved in six churches in Ostia. It was usually placed not directly on the floor, but on a small platform. In the Mithreum of the Seven Spheres, a relief depicting Mithra killing a bull has survived. The raven has not survived, but it is likely that the god who performs the sacrifice is looking at it. There were five stars and a crescent moon on the flowing cloak.[58] The deity depicted in the scene is accompanied by a dog and a scorpion. In Mithreum "Fagan," which has not survived to our times in good condition, a depiction of Mithra in an oriental costume was found. His flowing mantle is surrounded by seven stars, and the tail of the slain bull is finished with a bunch of ears of grain. The scene also features a dog with a collar, a snake with its head near the victim's wound, a scorpion clutching the bull's genitals, and a raven perched on its tail.[59] The remains of the Imperial Palace are more modest, with only a fragment of a head in a Phrygian cap and a right hand with a knife preserved. In Mithreum of the Footprint, a fragment of a raven's tail, busts of the Moon (*Luna*) and the Sun (*Sol*)[60] has been found. In Ostia, however, we do not find a *tauroctonium* scene with a legend about the life and deeds of god, zodiac, Cautes and Cautopates (they appear on separate statues, paintings, but never on a relief together with Mithra[61]). In on the literature devoted to Mithraic iconography one can find only one unusual image in which the god does not appear in the so-called eastern costume. It is a statue from Ostia (Mithraum of the Baths of Mithras). The artist portrayed the young man at the moment preceding the sacrifice. Mitra is wearing a short tunic that covers only part of the torso. There is no Phrygian cap. With his left hand he holds the animal, with his right hand with a dagger he rises triumphantly. She turns her curly head expressively, even pathetically. His gaze is focused somewhere in space. A snake crawls on the base. This performance is so unique that it is widely regarded as an example of the aforementioned ancient 'recycling'. The sculpture was originally used for completely different purposes, but it has been reconstructed and used again, this time in a mithraeum. The official results of the research and the full description of the newly discovered, previously mentioned Ostian *tauroctonium* in House of the Stuccoed Capitals should be eagerly awaited.

IV.3. Location of the mithraea[62]

The Ostian mithraea were located in pre-existing buildings that are not in one specific district, but throughout the city, in specially adapted rooms.[63] Based on the excavations to date, it seems that the traces of the beginnings of the cult were connected with the

[57] Martin 1994, 217–225; Panagiotidou 2012.

[58] CIMRM 245.

[59] CIMRM 310.

[60] CIMRM 274.

[61] Which is typical of the representations of the tauroctonium from Italy. For more on the types of representation: Beck 1984.

[62] See: Fig.1 & Annex [Mithraea have been marked on the plan of Calza, Becatti 1977].

[63] I assume that 17(+3 uncertains) Mithra temples have been identified in Ostia (with the latest discoveries. The Shrine of the Three Naves, Sabazeum are uncertain. Squarciapino also mentions the so-called Mithraeum

southern and central parts of the city. The inscription in the Mithraeum of the Animals was dated by M. J. Vermarseren for 142–143, and the Mitraeum of the Seven Gates for around 160. Temples dating back to the era of the cult's greatest bloom are located in the densely populated, but mainly inhabited by port and warehouse workers, western and northwestern parts of Ostia. Later chapels were also built in the south-eastern and eastern parts of the city. Mithraea located in uninhabited areas (thermal baths, warehouses) on the outskirts of the city were built at the end of the 3rd century. J. Schreiber does not exclude that the employees of those *horreas*, termas and warehouses attended the mithraea there, but he does not think that it was a generally accepted custom, but rather sporadic cases.[64] J. T. Bakker assumed that the Mithraeum of the House of Diana was located on the college premises and that the adjoining area was for worshipers living in the immediate vicinity. He seeks a similar relationship in the nearby Mithraeum "Fagan" (which would be a place of worship for the inhabitants of the area) and the sanctuary in the "Imperial Palace" (its inhabitants and employees of the Palace were to use it[65]). However, the fact that temples were located in thermal baths, *horrea*, shops and college rooms cannot, according to M. Clauss, be read unequivocally in such a way that only people using these buildings, or visiting them, constituted a group of believers.

In a few cases, the temples of Mithra were adjacent to the shrines of other deities. The Mithraeum of the Animals was near the Sanctuary of Attis and Bellona, right next to the Field of the Great Mother of the Gods, and the Mithraeum of the Footprint near the Serapeum. The Temple of Hercules adjoined the Mithraeum of the Painted Walls and the Mithraeum of the Baths of Mithras. The Mithraeum of Felicissimus was found nearby a sanctuary dedicated to the Good Goddess (*Bona Dea*), and Mithraeum near the Roman Gate and Mithraeum of Fructosus were adjacent to some other, previously unidentified temples. An important regularity was also noticed: the earlier chapels (those from the end of the 2nd century) were located in private buildings, while the later ones were usually located in public rooms, which, according to some interpretations, could suggest an increase in the awareness of the inhabitants and—perhaps—social acceptance of the cult.[66]

For many years, people have also been looking for an answer to the question whether the orientation of the mithraea in urban space was accidental or not.[67] In the case of something like Ostia, in which we can not only recreate the urban tissue, but also know the location of a dozen mithraea, such searches are also carried out.[68] The same is also happening at other archaeological sites. Interesting effects of their work were presented, for example, by Polish archaeologists conducting research on the mithraeum in Hawarte. While examining its remains, archaeologists noticed a horizontal fissure carved in the stone that widened towards the inside of the grotto. Similar traces have already been found in other miter shells. It has long been speculated that they were created so that at a certain

"Petrini" (Squarciapino 1966, 56), monuments of which, however, are usually included in the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres.

[64] Schreiber 1967, 41.

[65] Bakker 1994, 205.

[66] Schreiber 1967, 38.

[67] Gordon 1976, 119–165; Sclavi *et al.* 2016, 257–266.

[68] Beck 1979, 515–553; Gervers 1979, 579–596 and most recently Stöger 2011.

point in time the light would fall precisely on the face of Mithra, the killing bull. However, the prevailing opinion was often that they were simply skylights used to illuminate the room. Polish archaeologists decided to research this fissure, although, unfortunately, only its lower part has survived. Measurements and calculations they carried out showed that light could enter the mithraeum throughout the winter half-year.[69] Similar studies were also carried out last year during the arche in an ancient cemetery in the Spanish city of Carmona. Researchers from the Universidad Pablo de Olavide in Seville put forward the thesis that the so-called The "Elephant Tomb" is the former temple of the god Mithras. However, there was no hard evidence for this. The main argument of the scientists was a window in the ceiling of the main chamber. There were earlier suggestions that it could have some symbolic and religious significance, and not only serve to illuminate the interior of the tomb. The shape of the building and the conducted archaeoastronomic analyzes indicate that it is possible that it was designed for the needs of the cult of Mithras. Studies have also shown that it was positioned so that the sun's rays would reach the center of the chamber exactly during the spring and autumn equinoxes, three hours after sunrise. Archaeologists speculate that the light fell directly on the statue of Mithra killing a bull that has not survived to our times. The Spaniards also established that on the days of the winter and summer solstices, the Sun illuminated the north and south walls of the chamber, respectively.[70]

Places of worship are considered in the context of the city space—other buildings in the vicinity, the time and circumstances of their formation. In the case of an "elusive" or "invisible" space, however, we must also ask ourselves whether we can even determine to what extent the cult was "visible" in the city. Did the people who put on a new mithraeum have any/full freedom in choosing the place? What was the motivation behind this choice? Such research raises another natural question, namely who 'designed' the mithraea? Were these people who knew the basics of astronomy perfectly and on this basis chose the location of new assembly places?

Recent years have been a search for the dependence of mithraea on the directions of the world, researching whether there was a chance that on certain days of the year sunlight would fall inside the *speleum*. In 1984, Roger Beck stated that there was no discernible rule governing the position of miter throughout the Empire. However, there is some evidence that specific places of worship may have been constructed to let sunlight shine in at certain times or seasons of the year.[71] Maybe in other cases people choosing places for temples did not have such a choice. Besides, did the believers have the knowledge to make such a choice? After all, we do not even know who could start a new community, or what the procedures for dedicating a new temple were. It seems that a great danger in the study of Mithraism is the creation of certain images and the formation of theories without knowing fairly basic knowledge about the organization of

[69] Gawlikowski *et al.* 2011, 169–176.

[70] Jiménez Hernández – Carrasco Gómez 2012, 119–139.

[71] Beck 1984, 356–371, especially the fragment: "In general, there is no discernible principle which governs the orientation of Mithraea throughout the Empire. Mithraea are found oriented towards virtually every point of the compass in virtually every region. But there is some slight evidence that particular Mithraea might have been aligned orotherwise constructed so as to allow, at particular times or seasons, beams of sunlight to enter insome significant way; and in a solar cult such a possibility is at least not unlikely *a priori*."

the cult and what happened in the mithraea. We have little knowledge in these matters. We are not sure how often they met, at what times, or how information about the meetings and the location of the mithraeum were communicated to each other. Very intensive research on Mithraism, resulting from both the increase in new source material and the increasingly diverse interpretation methods, indicates a constant interest in worship.[72] Recent years have been a time of global scrutiny of religions in a spatial context. Also of Mithraism. When we ask ourselves why Ostia is a special place in the research on this cult, the simplest answer comes to mind—because an unprecedented elsewhere number of mithraea has been found there. That is true. But it begs another question: Why was that so? And here we may not find the right answer, but we may be tempted to make at least two assumptions. It happened, first of all, due to the port character of the city, and therefore the great mobility and diversity of its inhabitants. Secondly, perhaps we should reverse the question posed. Maybe Ostia was not such a special place after all? Maybe it is special today, because we have virtually unlimited research possibilities and we see the local mithrea "superimposed" on the city map, we see them in the city tissue, in the vicinity of other buildings. Perhaps in other cities of the Empire the number of mithraea was comparable, but due to the fact that the ancient urban fabric was not or is not possible to be studied on a scale like in Ostia, the places of worship will not be known to us and we will never get such a clear picture of their—and especially of those "invisible"—location in the city?

As shown by previous research, there is a high probability that possible archaeological discoveries will provoke further questions. The complex subject of the mysteries, by its very nature, still raises many doubts, and often new questions arise instead of the expected answers.

Ernest Renan wrote that if Christianity were conquered by some deadly disease, the world would be overwhelmed by Mithraism.[73] For years, we have considered this statement ahistorical and naive, but in the end I will allow myself to join the choir of "seekers" of new solutions and theories. Today, Christian churches remain one of the most vital symbols of religion. Simple lumps of Romanesque churches, soaring gothic, rich baroque, modern lumps of contemporary places of worship dominate the landscape of many cities, delighting pilgrims, tourists and believers. Being aware of this, however, we should not forget where the first Christians met—after all, they arranged chapels in private apartments, abandoned rooms, places hidden from the sight of random passers-by, in places adapted for the liturgy, not created from scratch for this purpose. This was probably similar to the followers of Mithra. We are not and we will never know in which direction the cult would evolve and what the religious space not only of Ostia but also of any other Roman city could look like, and whether the places of Mithra's cult in them would still remain only a "phenomenon of crypts."

[72] In recent years, many studies have appeared, the authors of which create and set new trends in research on this issue. It is undoubtedly influenced by the increase in new sources, especially archaeological ones. At the same time, more and more new studies, opinions and interpretations concerning various specific aspects of the cult are created, analyzing mainly the symbolism of the *tauroctonium* and *mithraeum*. See Woolf 2017.

[73] Renan 1923, 579: 'Si le christianisme eût été arrêté dans sa croissance par quelque maladie mortelle, le monde eût été mithriaste.'

Annex: List of Mithrea in ancient Ostia

1) **Mithraeum of the House of Diana** (Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana) (I,III,3–4) – CIMRM 216, Becatti 1954, 9–15; Squarciapino 1962, 38–39; White 2012, 452–459; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6534).
2) **Mithraeum of Lucretius Menander** (Mitreo di Lucrezio Menandro) (I,III,5) – Becatti 1954, 17–20; CIMRM 224; Squarciapino 1962, 39–40; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6559).
3) **Mithraeum of Fructosus** (Mitreo di Fructosus) (I,X,4) – Becatti 1954, 21–28; CIMRM 226; Squarciapino 1962, 40; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6604).
4) **Mithraeum of the Baths of Mithras** (Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra) (I,XVII,2) – Becatti 1954, 29–38; CIMRM 229; Squarciapino 1962, 40–41; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6610).
5) **Mithraeum of the Imperial Palace** (Mitreo del Palazzo Imperiale) – Becatti 1954, 53–57; Squarciapino 1962, 44–46; White 2012, 459–465; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6565).
6) **Mithraeum "Fagan"** (Mitreo Fagan) – Becatti 1954, 119–121; CIMRM 309; Squarciapino 1962, 55–56; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6538).
7) **Mithraeum "Aldobrandini"** (Mitreo Aldobrandini) (II,I,2) – Becatti 1954, 39–44; CIMRM 232; Squarciapino 1962, 41–43; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6522).
8) **Mithraeum near the Roman Gate** (Mitreo presso Porta Romana) (II,II,5): Becatti 1954, 45–46; CIMRM 238; Squarciapino 1962, 43; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6351).
9) **Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres** (Mitreo delle Sette Sfere) (II,VIII,6) – Becatti 1954, 47–51; CIMRM 239, 244; Squarciapino 1962, 43–44; Gordon 1976; Beck 1979; Beck 2000; White 2012, 466–469; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6592).
10) **Mithraeum "Petrini" –** Becatti 1954, 123–124, CIMRM 245; Squarciapino 1962, 43–44; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6576) – uncertain.
11) **House and Mithraeum of the Painted Walls** (Mitreo delle Pareti Dipinte) (III,I,6) – Becatti 1954, 59–68; CIMRM 264; Squarciapino 1962, 46–47; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6571).
12) **Mithraeum of the Footprint** (Mitreo della Planta Pedis) (III,XVII,2) Becatti 1954, 77–85, CIMRM 272, Floriani Squarciapino 1962, 47–48), Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6582).
13) **Mithraeum of the Animals** (Mitreo degli Animali) (IV,II,11) – Becatti 1954, 87–92; CIMRM 278; Squarciapino 1962, 48–49; White 2012, 445–451; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6528).

14) **Mithraeum of the Seven Gates** (Mitreo delle Sette Porte) (IV,V,13) – Becatti 1954, 93–99; CIMRM 287; Squarciapino 1962, 50–51; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6588).
15) **Mithraeum of the Coloured Marble** (Mitreo dei Marmi Colorati) (IV,IX,5) – David 2017; David 2018; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6555).
16) **Mithraeum of the Snakes** (Mitreo dei Serpenti) (V,VI,6) – Becatti 1954, 101–104; CIMRM 294; Squarciapino 1962, 51–52; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6598).
17) **Mithraeum (?) – House of the Stuccoed Capitals** (Domus dei Capitelli di Stucco) (V,VII,4–5).
18) **Mithraeum of Felicissimus** (Mitreo di Felicissimus) (V,IX,1) – Becatti 1954, 105–112, CIMRM 299; Squarciapino 1962, 52–54; Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6544).
19) **Shrine of Sabazius (Sabazeo)** (V,XII,3) – Van Haeperen 2019 (https://books.openedition.org/cdf/6549) – uncertain.
20) **Shrine of the Three Naves** (Sacello delle Tre Navate) (III,II,12) – uncertain.

Abbreviations

CIMRM – M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, 2 vols., The Hague 1956–1960.
TMMM – *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, F. Cumont (ed.), Paris 1889.

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