Coping with Images of Initiations in the Mithras Cult

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Coping with Images of Initiations in the Mithras Cult

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Nothing does more to reveal what was in the mind of the ancients (τὴν τῶν παλαιῶν ἐμφαίνει δianoian) than the rites of initiation (οἱ περὶ τὰς τελετὰς ὀργασμοὶ) and the ritual acts (τὰ δρώμενα) that are performed in religious services with symbolic intent (συμβολικῶς ἐν ταῖς ἱερουργίαις).
Plutarch¹

- 1 “Religious Images in the Roman World”: the topic that the editors set in this collection² is indeed a key issue, for images and visibility were a daily lived experience in both the Greek³ and the Roman world.⁴ Yet it is a highly demanding one in terms of method, the more so for those who seek to examine the images of the mystery cults, which are by definition placed under a ban of silence. In that respect, it might be worthwhile to start with the rather pessimistic position of R. Beck on the question of images in the Mithras cult: “as soon as we start to interpret the iconography, to say what it ‘means’, we enter the domain of error, or at least of potential error”.⁵
- 2 This paper (which is not a study of the “mysteries of Mithras” as a whole) sets out to reconsider the ways in which one might narrow down “the domain of error” in investigating Mithraic images.⁶ All “mystery cults” share similar documentary problems;⁷ yet the “mysteries” of Mithras are probably those that prove most complex when one turns the attention to the images and the message they convey. The expectations raised by a large body of visual evidence are great,⁸ if only because of the lack of other evidence for “mysteries” in the epigraphic testimonies of the worshippers themselves,⁹ and in the ancient literature alluded to by Porphyry and already stamped with a Platonic reading.¹⁰ The scholarly tradition goes back to Franz Cumont, who considered images as “notre source d’information principale dans l’étude du

mithriacisme”.¹¹ Cumont viewed these images as “hiéroglyphes”,¹² able to reveal what he called the Mithraic “doctrine” and “liturgy” (a “Roman form of Mazdeism”, to his eyes) through the symbolist approach that F. Creuzer had initiated.¹³ “Nous ne connaissons guère ces traditions épiques [those of the Mithras mysteries’ doctrine] que par les monuments qui leur servaient d’illustration”;¹⁴ in other words, visual testimonies reveal the missing theology through a symbolic language.¹⁵ Cumont had in mind the tauroctony (i.e. the reliefs of Mithras slaying the bull);¹⁶ but the frescoes that could credibly be interpreted as images of initiation were discovered or published after the 1960s. However, Cumont’s “literary” method of reading texts as pathways to the meaning of images¹⁷ is still applied in current readings of these frescoes, as we shall note below. Textual evidence on these “mysteries” come from philosophical and Christian works, which Cumont and later scholars took for granted, whatever their chronology may be¹⁸ and with little attention to the biases set by their intentionality upon the texts, whether didactic or polemical.¹⁹ Finally, the (seven) grades (sometimes) attested in both texts and images²⁰ are taken for granted as evidence of initiation.²¹ Yet their meaning as either a hierarchical progression within the Mithraic communities or as actual successive new religious statuses after (metaphorical) journeys in the cosmos, is less certain than we should expect.²²

- 3 By invoking various interpretative models, scholars shed light on different facets of what mystery cults could be. Two theoretical models are worth recalling for the purposes of this reflection on images of initiation in the Mithras cult. Starting from psychological expressions – like that of Aelius Aristides evoking the Eleusinian experience as φορικωδέστατόν τε καὶ φαιδρότατον (“the most frightening and the most joyful”)²³ – cognitivist approaches focus on the sensorial and psychological data that trigger mental processes at work at individuals during the rituals,²⁴ mainly during the “initiation”, and they examine the epistemic phenomena that arise from them (acquisition, memorization, transformation).²⁵ Do images mirror these feelings, and through which visual signs? Shifting from individuals to groups, sociological tools envision these cults in terms of collective identity (initiated-insiders / uninitiated-outsiders) and hierarchical organization within the groups: what is reserved on the level of words (the λεγόμενα), or things shown (the δεικνύμενα) to few “initiands / initiates” (with eventual progression to higher grades as in the Mithras cult) or to specific ritual agents²⁶ – as in the various sequences of the many days festival of the Eleusinian Mysteries?²⁷ Do images represent these groupings or functions, and how?
- 4 From the 1970s onwards, in the wake of Richard Gordon and Roger Beck, a joint social and astronomical reading of Mithraic iconographic “programs” has been developed, mainly based on the representations of the tauroctony – just like in Cumont’s approach, albeit with a very different outlook.²⁸ The semiotic reading of images provides scholars with a useful tool for investigating what images of mysteries, or rather *images that scholars identify as* representing mystery scenes,²⁹ can tell us on the ritual practices within these secret cults. Even thirty-four years after the publication of *Ancient Mystery Cults* of Walter Burkert,³⁰ these cults still prompt scientific debate, insofar as the term might already encompass a large range of conceptions in ancient Rome – from the possibility of an intimate relation with the divine (whatever the process may be) to any kind of spiritual knowledge that is not available through dialectic reasoning and the common ways of ritual interactions with the divine.³¹

- 5 After a number of studies on the images depicting rituals and the dialogue between textual and visual evidence,³² over the last five years I have been co-leading with Francesco Massa a research project on “mystery cults and their agents”.³³ We tackled many issues pertaining to mystery cults, among which that of images of mysteries. The following reflections on images of initiations in the Mithras cult owe much to this collective work with F. Massa and the colleagues who took part in the project.³⁴ In light of their results, the aim of my contribution is more modest (much as the challenge remains difficult)³⁵: to focus on frescoes (and incidentally a vase) that were discovered in three *mithraea* (in Italy and Palestine) and were interpreted as images of initiatory rituals. I shall leave aside the tauroctony and its side panels,³⁶ which are hardly related to narrative accounts of the god’s “story” during ritual meetings³⁷ and the exegetic commentaries that took shape on.³⁸

Outlining the Puzzling Question of Images of Mystery Cults

- 6 I do not need to draw an overall picture of mystery cults, because the bibliography is already rich,³⁹ although a number of pending questions justify ongoing work.⁴⁰ Moreover the Mithras cult in the Roman empire holds a peculiar place in the list of mystery cults insofar as it was a Roman creation, probably devised in Rome itself in the last quarter of the first century CE.⁴¹ It thus has few common features with the Greek Eleusinian-type mysteries – as Cumont had already noted over a century ago: “Ce n’est pas à l’imitation des cultes helléniques que ses adeptes [*scil.* those of Mithras] constituèrent leurs sociétés secrètes”.⁴² However, it is unavoidable to start with some remarks on the question of the images of mystery cults in general, for the cult of Mithras has been listed in this broad category since the birth of Mithraic studies at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴³ Cumont envisioned “oriental”/mystery cults as a coherent religious category displaying common features:⁴⁴ on the deities’ side, their cosmic power made them saviour gods,⁴⁵ while on the worshippers’ side the initiates had privileged relations with the gods and access to reserved (*mystikoi*) revelations, and enjoyed a new life both *hic et nunc* and *post mortem* and, once initiated, enjoyed a new life.⁴⁶ Such a “mystic” image of mystery cults was effectively deconstructed from the 1970s onwards.⁴⁷ Yet scholars have invoked testimonies of Greek-type mystery cults (i.e. the model of traumatic experience) in support of their reading of what they regard as images of initiation in the Mithras cult, whatever its Roman ‘invention’.⁴⁸
- 7 Research on mystery cults in the Greek and Roman periods could be one of the dossiers in the field of the history of religions that benefitted most substantially from the iconic and visual turn,⁴⁹ framed within the wider question of the representation of rituals.⁵⁰ However, among all kinds of rituals, the mystery ones display two specific features,⁵¹ which set them as a special category and also carry consequences on the images of mysteries – for the purposes of this paper, those of Mithras. Firstly, mystery cults are defined by a secrecy ban, the ἐπίταγμα of mysteries.⁵² They are ἡ κρύψις and ἡ μυστικὴ τῶν ἱερῶν, as Strabo puts it,⁵³ being kept secret by those who experienced them. Actually there is no trace of “mysteries” in the inscriptions the Mithras’ worshippers (the vexed question of the grades will be addressed later), neither in the lexicon nor in the clues of rituals.⁵⁴ Secondly, according to the Eleusinian pattern, the experience the participants (*mystai* / initiands) lived during the ritual is regularly expressed as being

impossible to voice (ἄρρητα / ἀπόρρητα) in discourses of various kinds, mainly in philosophical texts, but also in literary and epigraphical documents.⁵⁵ Consequently, the ritual experience could be evoked, but it is never “described”. The Greek authors who point out the epistemological nature of “mystery-related” experiences (with the Eleusinian model in mind) explained it as a specific kind of knowledge that Aristotle would have defined according to a fragment transmitted by a Byzantine (tenth century CE) author. This knowledge does not follow a didactic or dialectic process (τὸ διδακτικόν), but it is the result of a sudden and immediate achievement (τὸ τελεστικόν), in the form of an “illumination” that impresses (τυπούμενος) the mind: “For in these mysteries who is initiated is struck by the visions, but does not receive any teaching”.⁵⁶

- 8 The evidence of the Greek and Roman periods consistently shows that mysteries were occasional rituals weighted with a heavy emotional dimension that operated on memory.⁵⁷ The rhetor Sopater (fourth century CE) reports his experience at Eleusis in a unique personal testimony: “I came out of the mystery hall feeling like a stranger to myself” (ἐξήειν ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνακτόρων ἐπ’ ἐμαυτῷ ξενιζόμενος).⁵⁸ The emotions felt during the initiatory ritual were mostly related to the viewing of specific objects or a divine epiphany as in Eleusis.⁵⁹ The philosophical tradition evokes them as paradoxical experiences that combined terror and light/enlightenment, albeit in a metaphorical way.⁶⁰ Thus images of initiation are analyzed through the lenses of traumatic events, as is the case with the Mithraic frescoes. These specific experiences fostered another consensus among ancient authors: the call for allegorical images in discourses on the initiatory experience. A rhetorical text of the second century CE (falsely attributed to Demetrios of Phaleron) states: “This is why mysteries are revealed in allegories (Διὸ καὶ τὰ μυστήρια ἐν ἀλληγορίαις λέγεται), to inspire the shuddering and awe associated with darkness and night (πρὸς ἔκπληξιν καὶ φόβον, ὥσπερ ἐν σκότῳ καὶ νυκτὶ). In fact allegory is not unlike darkness and night (ἔοικεν δὲ καὶ ἡ ἀλληγορία τῷ σκότῳ καὶ τῇ νυκτὶ)”.⁶¹ A century later, Plotinus said that “mysteries and myths concerning the gods speak in riddles (τὰ μυστήρια καὶ οἱ μῦθοι οἱ περὶ θεῶν αἰνίττονται)”.⁶² Christian authors shared this approach, albeit with a different agenda. Clement of Alexandria, in his long polemical development on “pagan” mysteries, stressed this emotional dimension as well, and related it to the tragic stories of the gods.⁶³ The question of the relationships between myth, ritual, and images is an important one, and it meaningfully interacts with the topic of this collection – all the more acutely in the case of Mithras whose “myth” is reconstructed on the basis of an iconographical analysis. However, one cannot consider that any depiction of the myth conveys a mysteric meaning or attests to mysteric rites, as is for instance surmised by the editors of the mosaic of the House of Dionysos in Sepphoris in Galilee.⁶⁴
- 9 The evidence for mystery cults, whether textual or visual, entails a system of signs, just as any language. And yet it matches a specific difficulty, because of the two features I underlined (the interdiction on divulgation and the incommunicability of experience), which deprive the modern observer of data and comparable parallels. Moreover, the investigation becomes more complex when one considers a phenomenon that F. Massa and I have proposed to designate as “mystericization”, that is the extensive use of both a lexicon and an *imaginaire* of “mysteries” that spread in literature and in various fields of knowledge of the Roman period from the end of the first century CE onwards.⁶⁵ Plutarch offers a perfect example of this trend when he presents *philosophia* as a μυστηριώδης θεολογία since it proceeds towards the One through successive steps, each

one marked by its own distinctive quality.⁶⁶ As a consequence of a hidden reality – which could in fact be more metaphorical than ritual – the “mystical silence”⁶⁷ prompts divergent interpretations on the nature of this ritual reality, on its content(s), purposes, and even actual existence for some “mystery cults” (such as the “mysteries” of Egyptian cults).⁶⁸

‘Seeing’ and ‘Viewing’: an Eleusinian Model

- 10 The question of seeing and viewing deserves special mention in a discussion of images of initiations in the Mithras cult for it is explicitly painted on frescoes. It is possible to represent what is seen or not – whatever it is – and seeing combines two levels of meaning: it reveals ritual moments when things are shown and viewed or not, and it expresses a passage from a previous state to another one, whatever the latter may be. In the lexicon related to mystery cults, and mirroring the model of the Eleusinian mysteries (“prototypical”, in Bremmer’s words), terms pertaining to the seeing and the viewing are in the majority – as both the Eleusinian title *hierophantes* and the stage of *ἐποπτεία* (“look upon, see”, and *ἐπόπται*/viewers distinct from *μύσται*) suggest.⁶⁹ They are part of a wide range alluding to things or images shown and seen during the secret experience, like the *ἱερά* (which are both the ceremony and sacred objects) that the hierophant shown (*φαίνειν*) to the initiates in Eleusis: “he displayed the mysteries for the two goddesses by the sanctuary of Deo” (*ἡ τελετὰς ἀνέφαινε θεοῖν παρ’ ἀνάκτορα Διοῦς*).⁷⁰ The climax of the initiation ritual was the revelation of the *hiera* that were carefully kept in the *anaktoron* during the year.⁷¹ Among the *hiera* shown in the *Telesterion* during the “brilliant nights”, there was probably also a revelation of the grains (with the performance of the *Hymn*?) that everybody knew as Demeter’s gift. Varro confirms the pattern for what he calls the Ceres *mysteria*, probably in the wake of Eleusis: “many things are transmitted in her mysteries (*multa in mysteriis eius tradi*) which only refer to the discovery of fruits (*quae nisi ad frugum inuentionem non pertineant*)”.⁷² The heresiologist pseudo-Hippolytus is even more explicit when he evokes the *epopteia*: “The Athenians [...] when they initiated according to the Eleusinian rites (*μνοῦντες Ἐλευσίνια*), they exhibited to the higher initiates (*ἐπιδεικνύντες τοῖς ἐποπτεύουσι*) the great, wondrous, and most perfect mystery beheld in silence (*τὸ μέγα καὶ θαυμαστὸν καὶ τελεώτατον ἐποπτικὸν ἐκεῖ μυστήριον ἐν σιωπῇ*): a harvested ear of grain (*τεθερισμένον στάχυον*)”.⁷³
- 11 Besides the objects that are shown, the most frequent way of expressing the process of initiation in textual evidence is a visual statement: the “light-bringing rites” (*ὄργια φαεσίμβροτα*)⁷⁴ achieve the passage from darkness to lightness (blindness to vision) and provoke a sudden (*ἐξαίφνης*) enlightenment (*ἐλλαμπις* in philosophical texts),⁷⁵ thus vision(s) that images of mysteries might have tried to express. These revelations through viewing go as far as to be shown eventually in the ritual attire of the Isiac priests or initiates, which would display visually their sacred knowledge according to Plutarch: “as though within a casket (*ὥσπερ ἐν κίστῃ*) [...] they cloak them with secrecy, thus giving intimations, some dark and shadowy, some clear and bright, of their concepts about the gods, intimations of the same sort as are clearly evidenced in the wearing of the sacred garb.”⁷⁶ These initiated Isiac agents became themselves a kind of *cista* that was the visual marker of mysteries,⁷⁷ except in the Mithras cult. After reporting the myth of Isis and Osiris, and producing an interpretation of his own,

Plutarch states that “into the most sacred rites (ταῖς ἁγιωτάταις τελεταῖς) she [Isis] infused images (εἰκόνας), suggestions (ὑπονοίας) and representations (μιμήματα) of her experiences at that time (τῶν τότε παθημάτων)” [when she was searching for Osiris’ body].⁷⁸ The list of the three forms of visibility is noticeable because it mixes material and mental (imaginative) representations. Similarly the construction of the images induces an intellectual, speculative or imaginative discourse on the lived reality, which is also shaped by the cultural environment of both producers and viewers.

- 12 Yet one may wonder why somebody would have visually represented what is forbidden to disclose to “profanes”, even the mere topography of the inner sanctuary at Eleusis according to Pausanias: “the uninitiated are of course not permitted to learn that which they are prevented from seeing (τοῖς οὐ τελεσθεῖσιν, ὁπόσων θεάς εἴργονται, δῆλα δήπου μηδὲ πυθέσθαι μετεῖναι σφισιν)”.⁷⁹ This indicates that the expected viewers of images of mysteries were insiders (i.e. initiates): the frescoes that will be examined in what follows are indeed inside the spaces of the *mithraea* opened only to the members of the groups, and consequently their visual language had to talk to this audience. Moreover, the silence ban might have been deemed to have been respected because visual representations (whatever they are, and for any ritual) are not replications or “literal” illustration of *realia*. Images (just like texts) are visual constructs, which select elements and combine them for conveying messages on various fields: ritual experience, ritual space, group identity, possibly doctrinal assertion. Being signs, chosen for their capacity for analogy, similitude or resemblance, and carrying a whole range of possible values, the elements whose assemblage constitutes the image suggest (σημαίνειν) and allude to (ἀνίσσομαι) reality, rather than they depict it, as the rituals themselves.⁸⁰ For instance, figures wearing animal masks in Mithraic reliefs (like the *corax* and *leo* in that of Konjic) do not imply that the worshippers wore actually masks during the ceremonies,⁸¹ as regularly envisioned from Cumont onwards on the basis of a passage in a late fourth-century polemical Christian text.⁸² Images carry their own meanings according to their own logic and they can be far removed from the reality of the acts. Displaying a polyvalent semantic system similar to that of texts,⁸³ they show what their producers considered both worthy to be shown and available to be viewed. The viewers for their part saw images with their own cultural and imaginative background – as modern viewers also do through their own – and their viewing contributed to building the meaning of the image. It is thus important to bear in mind who could see those images.

Mithraic Frescoes as Images of Grouping and Contrasted Agencies

- 13 Since we ignore what we are looking for, both because of the specific features of mystery cults and the nature of visual language with its own semiotic rules and metaphorical settings,⁸⁴ it is not easy to identify the images that carry representations of initiation scenes, even when testimonies are as numerous as is the case with the Mithras cult. However, insofar as the Mithras cult is a Roman invention, we cannot rely on the visual markers of the Greek “mystery cult” tradition to decipher the Mithraic images, especially the *cista* of the Eleusinian mysteries,⁸⁵ which later spread over other cults like the mysteries of Isis⁸⁶ and Mater Magna.⁸⁷ Torches as “markers” of *Cautes* and *Cautopates* (the “torch-bearers”) are a significant exception,⁸⁸ though their

representation bypasses the iconography of mystery cults. Even without these objects, the *imaginaire* of the mystery cults remains.

- 14 Against the backdrop of all these contextualizing settings, I can now focus on the frescoes to which scholars have given a documentary value for reconstructing initiation scenes. These few images might open up access to the climax of the religious experience that is otherwise evoked in texts written by outsiders, whether philosophers or Christian writers. In the 1960s paintings of initiation scenes in two Italian *mithraea* were found (Santa Prisca on the Aventine in Rome) or properly published (Sta Maria Capua Vetere, discovered in 1924). To be more precise, those of Santa Prisca on the Aventine in Rome represent only processions, with acclamations of the different grades and five *leones* carrying sacrificial offerings.⁸⁹ Processions are not part of the initiation process itself (they might follow it in form of acclamation of the new initiates), yet they were understood as a subsequent sequence to the initiation of the *leones* (the first of the high grades, according to R. Gordon) – therefore with the tacit assumption that the initiation was a collective ritual. The point has to be kept in mind as far as the frescoes picture only an individual. The frescoes at Santa Maria Capua Vetere, discovered on the faces of the side-benches in the 1922 excavations by A. Minto and dating to the late Severian period, are more *suggestive* of an initiatory practice, although they are *not* depictions.⁹⁰ Two other major discoveries started to build some sort of series: the frescoes of the *mithraeum* of Caesarea Maritima in Roman Palestine, discovered in the 1970s but published only recently,⁹¹ and I also add to the discussion an adorned krater (*Schlangengefäß*) from Mainz (Germany), first published in 1994 by H.G. Horn, who identified on one face (B) a procession alike and on the other (A) three figures read as within an initiation process.⁹²
- 15 All these images were found inside *mithraea*, in the central meeting room with benches. They were thus intended for the members of the groups and did not break the rule of silence. Yet the intention of the paintings remains unclear: a memorial function, a didactic purpose, or a warning for candidates to initiation?⁹³ Answering these questions is challenging as we are still ignorant on the context of initiation: were the members all initiated or on the path to initiation? Was initiation the condition of entering within a group?⁹⁴ Did all the members have a grade? Did all the *mithraea* over the Empire have the same number of grades (probably not)? Did all the promotions to a new grade have to experience another initiation?⁹⁵ Was the initiation ritual the same for all the grades (thus the eventual trauma would have not been repeated)? Was it a reiteration (thus a lived experience already known) or a progression? Attempts to relate the frescoes to one specific grade have proven inconclusive (see below).
- 16 I shall not delve at length on the details of the Italian and German images because they already received due attention.⁹⁶ My main concern is to underline the extent to which the reading of these images has contributed to building an interpretative model that lent itself to uncritical acceptance.

Fig. 1. The Mainz Mithraic Vessel: Side A, an "initiand" (middle) between a *Pater* (left) and a "mystagogue" (right).

Photo Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Rheinland-Pfalz, Mainz

Fig. 2a. *CIMRM* 187 fig 57 and 191 fig. 59

<http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=cimrm>

Fig. 2b. The Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere.

M.J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca* I. Leiden, 1971, panel II (W), pl. XXII.

- 17 Vermaseren's reading of the Capua frescoes (the images which remain the basic reference point in many scholarly discussions) is not straightforward when he uses textual evidence to reconstruct the meaning of images. His conclusion ultimately denies an eventual help from textual narratives,⁹⁷ although he calls on them extensively to interpret some panels. His *imaginaire* of the experience of initiation – a symbolic death and revival – is modelled by ancient texts related to the Eleusinian “Great Mysteries” and evoking this experience as a progressive path towards happiness through extreme suffering. Vermaseren interpreted the frescoes as actual representations of the successive stages experienced by the neophytes. He called into play Christian texts in the effort to decrypt the scenes, for instance panel V (fig. 2a, right), which he related to Tertullian's *On the Crown*:

“The well-known passage from Tertullian's *de corona* concerning the initiation of the *miles* may be quoted in illustration of the scene at Capua [...] he now relates the ceremony of the crown in greater detail [...] Tertullian does not tell us who offers the crown to the *miles* [...] This act is compared to martyrdom in which again it is the sword that confers the crown”.⁹⁸

- 18 Thus, Vermaseren was fully aware of the Church Father's biased reading through the lenses of a polemical, competitive discourse – *quasi mimum martyrii*,⁹⁹ while he still considered the text as a “comment” on the image, as Cumont did.¹⁰⁰ He tries therefore to solve the inconsistencies between the text and the images, with no critical eye on the method itself. He thus interprets the round object above the head of the kneeling figure as a crown (the “only one obvious similarity”, M. J. Vermaseren);¹⁰¹ that is very doubtful,¹⁰² and it would be helpful to reexamine the reading with colour filters techniques (much as the frescoes are now badly damaged). Another passage of Tertullian is called for again in order to interpret an object that could be a sword (*sub gladio redimit coronam*; panel II, fig. 2b)¹⁰³, but “the object might equally be a staff” (Vermaseren). Vermaseren also had to confront the wider differences between the

images and the narrative of the text, and he bypassed them in retaining the initiatory pattern, albeit for a neophyte and not for a *miles*, according to Tertullian's text.¹⁰⁴

- 19 When one starts from the painted images, without a positivistic illusion of "photographs" of lived ceremonies, the major feature is the emphasis put on figures who express different agencies through contrasting modes of behaviour, like in groups with a strong hierarchy: a figure (the initiand) is *acted*¹⁰⁵ (nude, lying,¹⁰⁶ kneeling, beardless as a youth, hands bound,¹⁰⁷ blindfolded, pushed) – what texts about the Eleusinian Mysteries describe as "fear and anguish", ἄγωνία.¹⁰⁸ Yet images do not represent the second/final step expressed in the texts, the "joy and happiness", ἡδονή, that is the achievement of the initiation: "But after this, a marvelous light appears".¹⁰⁹ The most noticeable visual features are attitudes and gestures construing opposite couples¹¹⁰ that can express two statuses within the group – possibly the "change of mind" of W. Burkert, that is the *μετάνοια* resulting from a peculiar experience: the naked candidate to initiation *versus* already initiated ritual agents who are vested; the candidate kneeling and lying *versus* ritual agents standing; the candidate powerless facing armed figures (in the Mainz vessel alike); the candidate pushed or led by someone standing behind him; the candidate with eyes covered or discovered in order to evoke blindness before vision as the standing figures – possibly "illumination" as texts say. The unique attribute of a grade that is painted (moulded on the krater) is the Phrygian cap of the Pater and his Persian dress – a "stylistic gesture" for J. Elsner¹¹¹ – on the vase (fig. 1 on the left; fig. 2b): definitely the only grade that is attested in all the *mithraea*.¹¹² The krater of Mainz was read as a promotion or initiatory scene along the same lines.¹¹³ It does indeed display some formal similarities, although the visual choices are different for representing the relationship between the three figures (one seated and two standing; one nude and two with garments). R. Beck proposed to combine two levels of reading, a human/ritual one related to an initiation experience, and a mythical one "mimicking the mythic archery of Mithras".¹¹⁴ Yet the gesture would not be totally over-realistic in the strategic position of the *castrum* of Mainz/Mogontiacum in the *Agri Decumates*, where two (then one) legion(s) were stationed, and where the picture of an archer could easily be related to the military context of the local community.
- 20 The submission of the central figure (the "initiand") is evoked through the nudity and the "archery of the Father" (R. Beck, side A, fig. 1), a frightening episode lived by the initiand, yet far from "the shuddering and awe associated with darkness and night" in pseudo-Demetrios' terms.¹¹⁵ The initiand threatened to death by an enthroned Father has behind him another figure (fig. 1 on the right) whose gestures – his head looking upwards, his mouth opened, and his right arm raised – evoke someone speaking.¹¹⁶ One might envision some kind of ritual trial in front of the god/*Pater*. Scholars call him "mystagogue", fitting with a ritual function, but who does not match an identified grade. The visual "programme" of face A is not especially terrifying, because the archery that can credibly be seen in a mythical and metaphorical way (i.e. with Mithras as an archer), unless it is paralleled with the interpretative model developed from the reading of the Capua frescoes. However, considering that Mithraic groups were atomized communities,¹¹⁷ modern studies miss solid ground to establish common initiatory patterns across the empire as a whole. Doing so with such few attestations relies on a *petitio principii* that puts a model, the Eleusinian one, as relevant for any cult labelled as "mystery cult" by the historiography. Yet recent studies demonstrate that

the category of “mystery cults” *per se* is not at all obvious: the evidence is both too scarce and too diverse.¹¹⁸ The problem is enhanced by the so-called mysteries of Mithras: they were invented in Roman milieus with no hints to Eleusinian themes or rituals, as far as we know.

- 21 In 2017 the poorly preserved frescoes of the *mithraeum* of Caesarea Maritima in Syria-Palaestina, painted on the wall of the meeting room, were published.¹¹⁹ The archaeologists made tremendous efforts to read them, with the help of new technologies (fig. 3). This set of material offers a good case study to push further the methodological reflections linked to the reading of evidence through the lenses of a model.

Fig. 3. R. J. Bull et al., The Mithraeum at Caesarea Maritima, Boston.

FIG. 42 Color reconstruction of surviving fresco panels, with described individuals numbered (Sapir Head).

FIG. 43 Color saturated and tone balanced image of fresco on south wall (Bobeck).

ASOR, Archeological Reports 25, 2017, fig. 42-43.

- 22 A few years before the publication of the final report, in 2011, E. M. Moorman, after R. Gordon, had already proposed a reading of the scenes as the narrative of the god as a guiding principle – possibly in the wake of the Hawarte *mithraeum*: “The three scenes having Mithras’ life on the side walls have Mithras kneeling in front of Sol, Mithras shaking hands with Sol and Mithras riding on a bull to Oceanus or Saturnus. The images are framed by trees which look like cypresses.”¹²⁰ In their 2017 final report, the archaeologists modeled their reconstruction of the *spelaeum* upon an astronomical reading,¹²¹ and the deciphering of the frescoes upon the Capuan interpretations and a strong set of textual evidence. Yet we already noticed how far interpretations based on a literary corpus can be biased upon the texts that are invoked for. Moreover, this method postulates that it existed a “standardized iconographic visual program” spread in all *mithraea* – an assertion that presupposes a prescriptive authority like in a centralized “Church”. The fact that the tauroctony reliefs display an amazing uniformity besides details¹²² is still a question, because we know that Mithraic

communities were atomized groups, within which the religio-cultural envisioning of the Father was surely important.¹²³ The two contemporary Syrian *mithraea* at Sidon and Hawarte near Apamea (second half of the fourth century), with their two different visual inspiration (Greek in Sidon and Persian in Hawarte), are convincing on this count.¹²⁴ Concerning Caesarea further south, the authors identify the paintings as displaying a chronological narrative of the initiation of the *leones*, the grade pictured in Sta Prisca.¹²⁵ They read the three sequences (fig. 3) through the initiatory model of an extreme, near-death experience, provoking the transformation of the initiate, although the drawing they provide to the modern reader (fig. 3) does not convey such a terrifying atmosphere.

- 23 The first scene on the left (panel A) depicts a procession, with two figures, one standing and one kneeling, bringing offerings (a bread loaf and a cock) for the ritual meal.¹²⁶ It can remind other procession scenes, e.g. at Santa Prisca in Rome when the Lions are acclaimed. Yet it is not strictly speaking part of the initiation ritual. Ritual meals were a regular meeting occasion for Mithraic groups¹²⁷ (in happiness, as a Roman *Pater* reminds us),¹²⁸ and we noted that on the Aventine there is no argument for deciding between the end of an “initiatory ritual” and just an ‘administrative’ promotion to a higher grade. Moreover, the parallel of the mystery festival at Andania in Messenia, which is known in detail because its ritual regulations were engraved, invites to distinguish the different stages.¹²⁹ The second panel (B)¹³⁰ encapsulates the main interpretative issues. It pictures a man standing, vested with oriental pants and a short cloak, who delivers something to a man in front of him with a kind of stick, possibly a torch. This second figure is nude, except a short cloak on his shoulders; he is kneeling and receives what is given in his hands. One can imagine that nudity, the kneeling position and the stick prompted the editors to model their reading and method on that of Vermaseren for the Capua *mithraeum*, although the context of the scene looks very different. The editors search for texts giving an “illustration” to the images. But, although the two texts which could enlighten the images refer to the grade of Lion (the grade acclaimed at Sta Prisca), the authors cannot decide between Tertullian in an antignostic treatise which points to a frightening “fire-test”,¹³¹ and the Neoplatonic Porphyry in *On the Cave of the Nymphs* (thus after the frescoes were painted) who evokes a peaceful purificatory rite with honey: “When they pour honey instead of water on the initiates on the Lion-grade Mysteries (Ὅταν μὲν οὖν τοῖς τὰ λεοντικά μουμένοις), they call upon them to keep their hands pure (εἰς τὰς χεῖρας ἀνθ’ ὕδατος μέλι νίψασθαι ἐγγέωσι)”,¹³² The crater painted in the field (up on right) might give precedence to Porphyry¹³³ – if one expects images to be visual expressions of discourses – but it is well known that this text displays the perfect achievement of an allegorical reading, ἐν συμβόλῳ;¹³⁴ the experience displayed visually has no traumatic features. Finally, the last panel (C, fig. 3 on the right) shows the *dexiosis* between Sol in divine nudity and Mithras, a motive that is frequently depicted on reliefs as well; we come here to a mythic level. The editors dramatize it as a “blood-pact”, and call for another text then, belonging to another cultural context (praised by Cumont), an Avestic feature of Miθra as god of oath: “The inclusion of this scene among the other images indicates that the blood pact was part of this specific ceremony, a conclusion to the rites sealing the transition of the *mystes* with a sacred oath to the god/cult father”.¹³⁵ Whatever could be this enigmatic “transition of the *mystes*” (Burkert’s “change of

mind”?), again, the atmosphere does not smell the near-death experience model that the editors follow.

- 24 When looking for images first, rather than displaying a chronological sequence of initiation (as archaeologists advocate), this whole set seems to be drawing through visual codes the three different ways through which a religious group might give an image both of itself and to itself: a collective ritual one with the procession (A), the initiation with a transmission (*tradere* in Latin) without necessarily having a special terrifying ambiance (B), and a mythological narrative on the gods sponsoring the group, through the riddle of the *dexiosis* (C). The three features here identified fit with the main outlines I started from. Moreover, the only point of consensus in all testimonies (either literary or archaeological, pagan or Christian, insiders or outsiders) is the collective meeting, generally accompanied by a meal – thus within a reserved circle, the reason why Christian polemicists focused on these rituals.¹³⁶ It is worth noting here that this was the explicit meaning of *μυστήριον* in the letters sent by the priests of Zeus in Carian Stratonicea in order to invite the neighbouring cities to the *δεῖπνον* in the presence of the god.¹³⁷
- 25 This attempt to cope with the question of images of initiation in the Mithras cult demonstrates, in my view, that these images are difficult to identify because they cannot be read through one-dimensional models or uncontextualized texts. For instance, on the basis of both the starred ceiling of two *mithraea* (Santa Maria Capua Vetere and Dura Europos) and an astronomical reading, the scholarly consensus reconstructs the vaults of *mithraea* as depicting a dark blue sky studded with stars; and yet many other sanctuaries disprove the supposed ‘rule’, like the paintings of the Güglingen *mithraeum* II, which display a “profane Gestaltung” with “ein geometrisches Muster” (coffered ceiling type).¹³⁸
- 26 Moreover, as a general observation, it proves hazardous to interpret images on the basis of discourses that mobilize their own significant elements according to their own argumentative perspectives. Even after the “visual turn”, the prevailing method for deciphering (supposed) images of Mithraic initiation consists of calling for texts. Notwithstanding the fact that each *mithraeum* had probably its own cultural and identity references (for instance, between a military context on the *limes* and an urban one in Rome), these texts are of two kinds: either they are philosophical texts, which speak in riddles (as authors say) and are of late date for some, compared to that of the creation of the iconographic programs; or they are Christian texts, with apologetic and polemical strategies, for the Fathers considered that mystery cults were the major competitor of Christianity that had its own *mysterion* – or at least they chose to present them in that way.¹³⁹ Thus mysteries were imposture for them. We ignore how Christian authors were informed about pagan mysteries, as far as there was a silence ban. Even if they got first-hand information, it is clear that they biased the picture because of their ideological goals, as we noticed with the chapter of Tertullian’s *De Corona*.¹⁴⁰ It is thus more prudent to avoid starting with a literary model and to read images according to their own codes. The picture that the painted images of three *mithraea* convey some similarities. Yet they do not all fit (except for the Capua ensemble) with the model of fright, which is also based on a literary blueprint, notably the philosophico-Eleusinian tradition, and they do not display any hint of the enjoyable moment that is also part of the model. Moreover, their very low numbers, combined with their differences, makes

it impossible to establish a general pattern. The initiation rituals in *mithraea* remain a mystery.

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NOTES

1. Plutarch, fr. 157 Sandbach, 15-25 (*On the Festival of the Images at Plataeae*), transl. F. Sandbach.
2. I warmly thank Cláudia Beltrão and Federico Santangelo for their invitation, their incomparable hospitality, and many thoughtful discussions ... not to mention the careful correction of the English form.
3. See BÉRARD *et al.* 1984 (Engl. transl. BÉRARD *et al.* 1989).
4. See ZANKER 1988; HÖLSCHER 2004 and 2018; ELSNER 2007.
5. BECK 2006, 24.
6. Consequently it addresses neither the many pending issues pertaining to the Roman cult of Mithras nor its contradictory interpretations, except when images are concerned.
7. See BELAYCHE, MASSA 2021a.
8. See e.g. TURCAN 1993, 45: "Le mithriacisme nous est accessible surtout et *directement* par l'iconographie" (italics mine), and *infra* n. 14.
9. See F. Cumont's letter to A. Loisy on August 7, 1909: "Vous trouverez quelques indications réunies dans les *Monum. Myst. de Mithra*, I, p. 324-5 avec les renvois nécessaires. Vous verrez que *c'est maigre*" (italics mine). See CLAUSS 2001 (first German ed. 1990), 102: "Rather oddly, initiation

is one of the aspects of the mysteries of Mithras the literary sources do not mention". On the epigraphical evidence, see BELAYCHE forthcoming.

10. Euboulos' and Pallas' works (τὰ περὶ τῶν τοῦ Μίθρα συναγαγόντων μυστηρίων, Porphyry, *De abstinentia* 2, 56, 11) possibly through Numenius: see TURCAN 1975, 23-43.

11. CUMONT 1899, 53. Cumont had a "Winckelmannian" approach to iconography: see the appendix on "l'art mithriaque" in CUMONT 1913, ed. 2013, 221-238. There is no need to recall the foundational place of F. Cumont as the initiator of Mithraic studies; see a letter of A. Loisy (July 31, 1909): "C'est vous qui êtes Mithra".

12. CUMONT 1899, XII.

13. BONNET 1997.

14. CUMONT 1913, *Les Mystères de Mithra*, p. 101 (italics mine) and 172: "représenter sur la pierre non seulement les divinités, mais la cosmogonie des mystères et les épisodes de la légende de Mithra jusqu'à l'immolation suprême du taureau". For TURCAN 1993, Mithraic images are "de véritables 'histoires saintes' en images", with a Christian flavour in the expression. See also BREMMER 2014, 131, who designates the birth of Mithras (from the rock) as "a kind of 'immaculate conception'".

15. For a recent critique of this method see BECK 2006, 17-25; see also ADRYCH *et al.*, 2017, 9-10, with a valuable emphasis on the point that many Mithraic reliefs had been restored along a modern (Cumontian) model of the Mithras mysteries, and these restorations corroborate a debatable reconstruction (19-24).

16. The first known dated relief (CIMRM 594), that of Alcimius, a slave *vilicus* of the Praetorian Prefect Ti. Claudius Livianus, was dedicated c. 102 *Sol(i) M(ithrae)*. CAMPBELL 1968, 291-293, also focusing on the tauroctony reliefs and frescoes, reads "some form of an initiation rite", *telete* (laying on of hands; pouring on of water; purification) in scenes from predellas; for the Capuan frescoes see *infra*.

17. CUMONT 1927⁴ [2006], 5, read the *Zend Avesta* as a literal account, a "*commentaire pour interpréter la masse considérable de monuments figurés*" (italics mine).

18. See e.g. CLAUSS 2001, 102: "the fancifulness of [the Christian] accounts of the supposed tests of courage growths with their date of composition".

19. On philosophical texts, see the caveat of VAN NUFFELEN 2011, 47: "the fact that we are dealing with philosophical reinterpretations of mystery cults should warn us against naïvely using descriptions of mystery cults by philosophers as unequivocal evidence for their real functioning". This point was demonstrated by TURCAN 1975.

20. Cf. e.g. the *mithraea* of Felicissimus and of the Sette Sfere in Ostia. GORDON 1996, 20, initiated the reading of the grades as "modelled upon the structure of the cosmos".

21. For a definition of the term, BIANCHI 1965, esp. 155: "nous entendons par 'initiation' l'accession rituelle d'un individu ou d'un groupe homogène dans un état, ou plus spécifiquement, dans un corps sacralement qualifié et religieusement 'autre'". On the intersection between *rites de passage* and initiations, see GRAF 2003.

22. Cf. CHALUPA 2008 and ADRYCH 2021. I concur with ALVAR 2008, who, after devoting eight pages to the grades, states: "I think it more realistic to discuss Mithraic initiation not primarily in terms of the grades" (371).

23. Aelius Aristides, Ἐλευσίνιος (*Or.* 22), 2.

24. See e.g. MARTIN 2006, based on the theoretical model of WHITEHOUSE 2004.

25. For the mysteries of Mithras, BOWDEN 2010, 181-197; MARTIN 2015; PANAGIOTIDOU-BECK 2017. On *mithraea* as space, GORDON 2017.

26. Cf. SIMMEL 1950.

27. See also the case of Ephesos, where the *μυστήρια* of Artemis are delineated only by a specific group of ritual agents who seem to be involved in regular ritual gestures, opposite to their *mystike* performance at Mount Solmissos: see BELAYCHE 2016.
28. GORDON 1996 and BECK 2006.
29. See the debate on the interpretation of the frescoes of the so-called Villa of the Mysteries (Villa Iam) at Pompei (70-60 BCE): some scholars interpret them as displaying a Dionysiac initiation (e.g. SAURON 1998), while others argue for the sequence of a wedding ceremony displayed in the Roman matron's apartments (VEYNE ET AL. 1998, 13-153 and VEYNE 2016).
30. BURKERT 1987.
31. For the “mystericization” in the second century CE, see BELAYCHE, MASSA and HOFFMANN 2021.
32. See BELAYCHE 2006, 2008, 2017 and 2021a.
33. AnHiMA (UMR 8210, Paris), “Les ‘cultes à mystères’ (mystèria, teletai, orgia, etc.) et leurs acteurs spécialisés” (2014-2018), <https://www.anhima.fr/spip.php?article1164>, last accessed 15.04.21.
34. Cf. BELAYCHE-MASSA 2021b.
35. Cf. F. Cumont's letter to A. Loisy (August 7, 1909) on the mysteries of Mithras: “Rien de plus mystérieux que le rituel de ces mystères”.
36. For instance that of Neuenheim (today in the Museum of Karlsruhe): CIMRM II, 1289. The precursor of a post-Cumontian and astronomic reading is GORDON 1996. The approach was further developed in BECK 2006. On the use of these images, see recently MASTROCINQUE 2017, who builds his “different account” (an Augustan propaganda discourse) upon them. On the tauroctony and the methodological problems that its reading presents, see ADRYCH ET AL. 2017.
37. ALVAR 2008, 351-358, studies the common meals with sacrifices as “a communicative institution” (355).
38. Yet R. Beck proposed to combine the two readings on the Mainz krater. See *infra* n. 92.
39. Too long to be quoted *in extenso*: see firstly the foundational reexamination in BURKERT 1987; COSMOPOULOS 2003; BOWDEN 2010 (with a cognitivist approach); BREMMER 2014, with light focus on images, 135-137.
40. See e.g. BLAKELY 2009; MARTIN-VELASCO-GARCIA 2016; BELAYCHE-MASSA 2016; PHILONENKO-LEHMANN-PERNOT 2017.
41. BECK 1998 convincingly proposed that they might have been invented within Roman astrological circles, like that of the *Balbilli*, connected both to Commagene and Egypt, and possibly familiar with Chaldaean *magi* that came to Rome with the king Tiridates of Armenia during the reign of Nero, see Pliny, *Natural History* 30, 6, 1. Under Domitian, see Statius, *Thebaid*, 1, 719-720: *Persei sub rupibus antri/indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram* (“Mithras, that beneath the rocky Persean cave strains at the reluctant-following horns”, transl. LCL).
42. CUMONT 1913 [2013], 29. Nevertheless scholars still read them through the Greek model, e.g. BREMMER 2014, 133 : “the inventor of the Mithras Mysteries may well have been influenced by the fact that the Eleusinian and Samothracian Mysteries had only two grades”.
43. Considering the loss of Euboulos' work (see *supra* n. 10), this categorization goes back to the Christian authors of the second half of the second century (Justin, Tertullian, etc.): MASSA 2016. Some reflections on its significance in ALVAR 2008, 6-14.
44. He equated them with “Oriental religions”: “Toutes les dévotions venues du Levant ont pris la forme de mystères” (2006, XXXIX-XLIV). SFAMENI GASPARRO 2003, 130, goes as far as arguing that the mysteries of Mithras were the model of “mystery” because of their complete secrecy: “Solo per il mitraismo sarebbe legittimo usare la definizione di ‘religione di mistero’”.
45. On Mithras see now ALVAR 2008, 74-106, “who essentially resumes Cumont” (78), but with a focus on new astronomic insights.

46. CUMONT 1927⁴ [2006], 44-67. This theme was at the core of the conference held in Rome in 1979, whose proceedings were published as BIANCHI-VERMASEREN 1982, with many contributions that argued for a conception of this-wordly salvation.
47. See BONNET-RÜPKE-SCARPI 2006 and BONNET-PIRENNE-DELFORGE-PRAET 2009. On the mysteries of Mithras, see BELAYCHE-MASTROGINQUE, “Introduction historiographique”, in CUMONT 1913 [2013], XIII-LXXXVIII.
48. See *infra* n. 90-92.
49. Cf. e.g. MAAR-BURDA 2004; STIEGLER 2008; BRÄUNLEIN 2009; BÉRARD 2018, esp. 15-35 (“Iconographie – Iconologie – Iconologique”).
50. For instance on images of gods: see MYLONOPOULOS 2010, 201 and ESTIENNE *et al.* 2014.
51. See BELAYCHE-MASSA 2016, 7-19.
52. Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.11. Cf. Sudas s.v. μυστήρια (μυστήριον/α comes from μυέω, “closing the lips or eyes”) See MOTTE 1986 and MONTIGLIO 2000, 23-31 (“Closing One’s Lips, Closing One’s Eyes: Silence in the Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries”).
53. Strabo 10.3.9 [C 467]: “the secrecy (ἡ τε κρύψις) with which the sacred rites (ἡ μυστική τῶν ἱερῶν) are concealed induces reverence for the divine (σεμνοποιεῖ τὸ θεῖον) since it imitates the nature of the divine, which is to avoid being perceived by our human senses (μιμουμένη τὴν φύσιν αὐτοῦ φεύγουσαν ἡμῶν τὴν αἴσθησιν)”, transl. LCL.
54. We have only one epigraphical “report” of these meetings (in fact a poetic text by the Father Proficentius), which does not allude to religious considerations, but to the joyful conviviality of the *syndexi*: CIMRM 423; cf. BELAYCHE forthcoming. The point is confirmed by the types of ceramics found within excavated *mithraea*: see e.g. KLENNER 2019, 307 and 381.
55. IG II² 1110, 16-17 (= *IEleusis* 513): τὰ ἀπόρρητα τῆς κατὰ τὰ μυστήρια τελετῆς (“the secret rites of the initiation during the Mysteries”).
56. Psellus, *Commentary on Iohannes Climachus* = Aristotle, *Peri philosophias* fr. 15b, Ross: ἐν ἐκείναις γὰρ τυπούμενος ὁ τελούμενος τὰς θεωρίας ἦν, ἀλλ’ οὐ διδασκόμενος. See also Synesius of Cyrene, *Dion* 8, 5-8 = Aristotle, *Peri philosophias* fr. 15, Ross: οὐ μαθεῖν [...] ἀλλὰ παθεῖν.
57. This does not disregard the fact that books may have also been used during the ceremonies: for the Dionysiac mysteries see MASSA 2013.
58. Sopater, *Rhetores Graeci*, 8, p. 115 (ed. Walz), transl. BURKERT 1987, 90.
59. See BELAYCHE 2021b.
60. These features are displayed from Plato onwards, *infra* n. 75. See USTINOVA 2017, 113-168 (“Telestic *mania* and near-death experience”) who takes for granted ancient textual evidence.
61. Ps.-Demetrius of Phaleron, *On Style*, 101.
62. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5, 1, 7, 33 (on the generation from Cronos); for Eleusis, Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 2, 12, 2 (the abduction of Persephone and the wandering of Demeter). See NILSSON 1953, 180: “Mystery rites were, when represented, generally concealed in a mythical guise”. Mysteries were so strongly connected with a pathway to truth that hidden discourses were presented as full of truth: “a suggestion of truth”: VAN NUFFELEN 2007.
63. Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 2.13.1, quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea, *Preparation for the Gospel* 2.3. 9-10 (transl. LCL), in a section entitled “On the unspeakable rites and the secret mysteries of the polytheistic imposture” (Περὶ τῶν ἀπορρήτων τελετῶν καὶ τῶν κρυφίων μυστηρίων τῆς πολυθέου πλάνης); see also Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, 15.1.2; see MASSA 2016 and 2018.
64. TALGAM-WEISS 2004.
65. BELAYCHE-MASSA 2021b, 7-22.
66. Plutarch, fr. 157 Sandbach, 15-25 (*On the Festival of the Images at Plataeae*), ap. Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*, 3, *Proem*. For mystery-like discourses on the philosophical progression, ROSKAM 2001 and MARTIN-VELASCO-GARCÍA BLANCO 2016.

67. Plutarch, *On Talkativeness* 7.505F.
68. See MASSA 2018 and VEYMIERS 2021.
69. Cf. KERÉNYI 1967, for an interpretation of the μύησις as an experience of “seeing the unseen”. See also SABBATUCCI 1965, 147 on Eleusis (“luce, visione dell’alterità [...], illuminazione [...], salvezza futura”); CLINTON 2003; and PETRIDOU 2013.
70. IG II² 3764 (in 217/218); see also 3662, 5 (end of the second-beginning of the third century).
71. Cf. IG II² 3639 and 3411 (the hierophant who initiated the emperor Commodus).
72. Varro, quoted by Augustine, *Civ. D.* 7.20. In Mithraic rituals *tradere* is the regular verb for expressing initiation or the grant of a new grade: CIMRM 400-405, from 357 to 376 CE in Rome.
73. Ps.-Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, 5.8.39. See ZAMAGNI 2018, 298-299 on this passage.
74. IG II² 3661, 3-4 (end of the second-beginning of the third century). In literature, see Euripides, *Hippolytus* 25: “to see and celebrate the holy mysteries (σεμνῶν ἐς ὅψιν καὶ τέλη μυστηρίων)”, transl. LCL; Andocides, *On the Mysteries*, 31: “you are here as initiates who have seen the rites of the Two Goddesses” (μεμύησθε καὶ ἐοράκατε τοῖν θεοῖν τὰ ἱερά), transl. LCL slightly modified; and so on.
75. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250bc and 265b, and Aristotle, *Peri philosophias*, fr. 15b, Ross (quoted by Psellus, *Commentary on Iohannes Climachus*): “the mind experiences enlightenment (αὐτοῦ παθόντος τοῦ νοῦ τὴν ἔλλαμψιν)”. See CROISSANT 1932, 145-146, and BERNABÉ 2016, 27-42.
76. Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 3.352B: ὥσπερ ἐν κίστῃ καὶ περιστέλλοντες, τὰ μὲν μέλανα καὶ σκιώδη τὰ δὲ φανερά καὶ λαμπρά τῆς περὶ θεῶν ὑποδηλοῦντες οἰήσεως, οἷα καὶ περὶ τὴν ἐσθῆτα τὴν ἱερὰν ἀποφαίνεται, transl. LCL.
77. The Eleusinian formula (τὸ σύνθημα Ἐλευσινίων μυστηρίων): Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2.21.2, points to it: “I fasted, I drank the *kykeon*, I have taken from the chest, I worked and deposited in the *kalathos*, and from the basket to the chest” (ἐνήστευσα, ἔπιον τὸν κυκεῶνα, ἔλαβον ἐκ κίστης, ἐργασάμενος ἀπεθέμην εἰς κάλαθον καὶ ἐκ καλάθου εἰς κίστην); the *kiste* supported some kind of manipulation by the *mystai*, before becoming a visual marker, see *infra* n. 85. On the κίσται μυστικάί, see Plutarch, *Life of Phocion*, 28.5 and Clement of Alexandria, *Protrept.* 2.22.4.
78. Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 27, 361E, transl. LCL.
79. Pausanias 1.38.7; see CLINTON 2003.
80. Cf. Lucian, *The Parliament of the Gods* 11.1-6: αἰνίγματα revealed to initiates during *mysteria*; and *supra* n. 77.
81. It may be noted that Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 4.16, states that those who receive the Lion grade (ὅ τε τὰ λεοντικά παραλαμβάνων) are bestowed with all sorts of animal forms (περιτίθεται παντοδαπὰς ζώων μορφάς). See TURCAN 1968, 37-38.
82. Respectively: CIMRM 1896 fig. 491 rev.; Ambrosiaster, *Quaestiones veteris et novi Testamenti* 114.11: “Certains battent des ailes comme des oiseaux et imitent le cri du corbeau, d’autres au contraire rugissent à la manière des lions” (transl. *Sources chrétiennes* 512); CUMONT 1899, 8. See BURKERT 1987, 93: “More graphic and hence less likely to reproduce mere fantasy”. But GORDON 2019, 469 rightly doubts that it was an actual banquet of worshippers.
83. See e.g. BÉRARD-BRON-POMARI 1987.
84. Cf. GORDON 1996, 46: “the opacity of iconography”.
85. See *supra* n. 76. Images of *kistai*, torches, wheat, and other objects related to the cult of Demeter were publicly displayed on the main buildings of the sanctuary: MYLONAS 1961, fig. 55-57. For images of *kistai*/baskets on Attic votive reliefs, see HAMILTON 2009.
86. Considering that it is not a traditional Egyptian object, one may wonder if the Graeco-Roman Isiac worshippers borrowed it as an actual ritual object or in order to visually endow their cult with a mystery-like image, and thus vest their foreign and new cult with respectability.
87. See respectively the papers by JACCOTTET 2021, VAN HAEPEREN 2021, and VEYMIERS 2021.

88. Mithras himself can yield a torch: see the relief on an altar from Apulum (Brukenthal National Museum, Sibiu, inv. no. 7274). Moreover, there was a practical necessity in the dark *mithraea*.
89. See VERMASEREN-VAN ESSEN 1965, 160-162 (the East wall); recently see MOORMANN 2011, 163-183. In the *mithraeum* of Dura too the grades are acclaimed (CUMONT 1975): however, this says nothing about the initiation ritual *stricto sensu*. The remarkable archaeological study of the Mithraeum II at Güglingen – a valuable *comparandum* because of its rigorous methods – attests to sacrifices only and rejects the spatial possibility of processions, KLENNER 2019.
90. MINTO 1924. For the frescoes see CAMPBELL 1968, 294-300 and VERMASEREN 1971, 24-51, with a synoptic chart of the successive panels at 25 fig. 5. More recently a detailed study by GORDON 2009, with 296 fig. 16.3: “a schematic representation of the arrangement of the scenes on the podium frescoes”.
91. BULL *et al.* 2017. This final report presents significant differences with the preliminary reports, which are now outdated.
92. Dated to 120-140 CE (Mainz, Archäologische Denkmalpflege Inv. FM 83-101); BECK 2000 and HULD-ZETSCHKE 2008.
93. GORDON 2009, on the basis of the Capuan frescoes, argues that Mithraic identity and teaching were transmitted through the suffering body in a “théâtre de la terreur” (M. Foucault); his parallel with Christian martyrs is less convincing.
94. This is the case with the Eleusinian model, but the Mithras cult has its own genesis.
95. The Isiac model built after Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI, is not relevant, because the three initiations of Lucius concern two different places and two different deities.
96. See e.g. CLAUSS 2001, 102-105, and ALVAR 2008, 346-349 and esp. 371-376. On the procession, see BECK 2006, 123-133 and 2008, 154-157, who puts forward the hypothesis of a symbolical representation of the astronomical solar journey.
97. VERMASEREN 1971, 48: “any of the descriptions in the ancient authors concerning initiations in the Mithraic mysteries are really useful for the interpretation of these unique Capuan frescoes”.
98. VERMASEREN 1971, 38-39 (italics mine). Tertullian, *De corona* 15.3-4: “some soldier of Mithras, who, at his initiation in the gloomy cavern, in the camp, it may well be said, of darkness, when at the sword's point a crown is presented to him, as though in mimicry of martyrdom, and thereupon put upon his head, is admonished to resist and cast it off, and, if you like, transfer it to his shoulder, saying that Mithras is his crown. etc.” (italics mine). In the recently published Mithraeum II from Güglingen (Germany), KLENNER 2019, two swords (“die Deponierung des Kultschwertes aus dem ersten Tempel unter dem Fundament des neuen Altares”, 143 and 251-257, “Theaterschwert”?), a bow and arrows (“Reflexbogen”, 257-258) and a rayed iron crown (“Strahlenkrone”, 259-261) are interpreted as artefacts for the initiatory ritual; for Tertullian, 368-369 (“ergibt sich, daß die Archäologie hier die Schriftquellen bestätigen kann”). See also HENSEN 2013, 65, for the theatrical sword of the Riegen *mithraeum*. I do not need to delve here on the discussion of *signare frontibus*, see Renaut 2007.
99. VERMASEREN 1971, 41: “it is with this statement as a starting point that one must try to explain Tertullian's difficult text”. The *imitatio diabolica* is a current Christian pattern: see MASSA 2016.
100. VERMASEREN 1971, 40 (“the second part of the text gives a further comment”).
101. See also CAMPBELL 1968, 292-293, who interprets a motif of the tauroctony reliefs as a “coronation” in the *Telete* related to the Heliodromus.
102. See GORDON 2009, 300. The figure is already wearing a Phrygian cap: CAMPBELL 1968, 300.
103. Tertullian, *De praescr. haer.* 40.4.
104. VERMASEREN 1971, 42.

105. For CAMPBELL 1968, 297, “a ceremonial slaying of the initiate” on the model of Mithras’ slaying of the bull; he calls into play *SHA Commodus* 9.5 – yet the anecdote might be in keeping with the portrait of a “bad emperor”.
106. VERMASEREN 1971, pl. XXVI.
107. See e.g. Ambrosiaster, *Quaestiones veteris et novi Testamenti* 114.11: “On leur voile les yeux [...] d’autres encore, les mains liées par des boyaux d’animaux, sont poussés au-dessus de fosses remplies d’eau, lorsque arrive quelqu’un armé d’un glaive, rompant les susdits boyaux, qui se proclame libérateur” (transl. *Sources chrétiennes* 512).
108. See the following note. Cf. ALVAR 2008, 371 (“to underline the role of fear, submission and endurance in Mithraic rituals of this type”) and 373 (“these scenes imply fear and suffering as an essential part of Mithraic initiation”).
109. Aelius Aristides, *Orations* 50 (*Sacred Tales* 4), 7. See the well-known fragment of Plutarch, *De anima* (fr. 178 Sandbach), ap. Stobaeus, 4.52.49: “The soul suffers as do those who have been initiated into the great Mysteries (οἱ τελεταῖς μεγάλαις κατοργιαζόμενοι), that is why the words and the actions of dying (τελευτᾶν) and performing the rituals (τελεῖσθαι) resemble each other. At first there was wanderings and exhausting walks, and unfulfilled and unclear journeys (τινὲς ὕποπτοι πορεῖται καὶ ἀτέλεστοι). Before the end (πρὸ τοῦ τέλους αὐτοῦ) come all terrible things, terror and trembling and sweat and awe (φρίκη καὶ τρόμος καὶ ἰδρῶς καὶ θάμβος). But after this, a marvelous light (φῶς τι θαυμάσιον) appears ...”
110. GORDON 2009, 303: “a structure of oppositions”.
111. ELSNER 2003, 126.
112. Other proposals of identification of the grades can be only hypothetical in absence of their visual markers, like those known from the *mithraeum* of Felicissimus in Ostia, whatever view one might take in the debates on their meaning: see GORDON 2013.
113. Already by the first editor H.G. Horn (HORN 1994, esp. 25-28); then, e.g., BECK 2008, 149-150 and ALVAR 2008, 348-349: face A depicts “a *Pater* and a *Heliodromus*, namely representatives of the two highest grades, endorsing the promotion of a worshipper to the inferior grade *Miles*, followed by a mystagogue, i.e. the man responsible for accompanying and protecting the initiate.”
114. BECK 2008, 148.
115. See *supra* n. 61.
116. BECK 2008, 149-154.
117. See GORDON 2009, 297 (“tests were not standardized between temples, and each Mithraic community devised its own forms of initiation”) and GORDON 2019, 466-467.
118. See BELAYCHE, MASSA 2016b and BELAYCHE-MASSA 2021a.
119. BULL ET AL. 2017.
120. MOORMANN 2011, 182; GORDON 2001, 80. Both scholars made comparisons with the Capuan frescoes and the Mainz vessel.
121. The illumination of the room on the Summer solstice (BULL ET AL. 2017, 61-62) is fascinating. Yet it is probably a fantasy, because the *mithraeum* was settled in a vaulted room beneath a portico, thus with no opening towards the sky: BURRELL 1993.
122. CAMPBELL 1968 proposed a typology.
123. See ELSNER 2003, 127: “a single and recognizable empire-wide form of Mithraism or to the desire of various ad hoc sects and groups to aspire to a vision of unity while in fact practising and believing whatever they liked.”
124. See BARATTE 2001 and GAWLIKOWSKI 2007. We can also recall the iconographic diversity in the Ostian *mithraea*.
125. BULL ET AL. 2017, 47: “Taken together, the three panels represent an initiation”.

126. BULL ET AL. 2017, 44: “The elements of this scene depict a procession. The composition has parallels to known images of initiation practices (Sta Maria Capua Vetere, Konjic) and should therefore be interpreted as a scene from an initiation ritual”.
127. The editors acknowledge the point at 44: “processions as part of the preparation for the cult meal and ritual”. See on Güglingen KLENNER 2019, 377-386.
128. See *supra* n. 54. ELSNER 2003 stresses the use of art as a means “to help establish a more coherent sense of community and identity among existing members” (125).
129. The distinction between the various stages is made through the change of garments: see GAWLINSKI 2012.
130. BULL ET AL. 2017, 45-46.
131. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.13.5: *sicut aridae et ardentis naturae sacramenta leones Mithrae philosophantur*. The verb itself prevents a literal use of the passage. *Contra* KLENNER 2019, 376 (“diese Feuerprobe”).
132. Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs* 15 (transl. R. Lamberton, New York, 1983, with slight changes); see also 17 (*passim*): “Étant donné donc que le miel est utilisé pour purifier, pour protéger de la corruption et pour donner le plaisir qui attire vers la génération (λαμβάνομένου τοίνυν καὶ ἐπὶ καθαρμοῦ τοῦ μέλιτος καὶ ἐπὶ φυλακῆς σπευδόνος καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς δι’ ἡδονῆς εἰς γένεσιν καταγωγῆς) [...] Pour cette raison aussi, c’est dans les cratères et les amphores que les abeilles déposent leur miel, car les cratères portent le symbole des sources [...] tandis que les amphores (τῶν δ’ ἀμφιφορέων) sont le symbole des récipients dans lesquels nous puisons l’eau qui vient des sources.” (transl. T. Dorandi, Paris, 2019).
133. Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, 17: “just as a krater is set beside Mithras to stand for a spring (καθὼς παρὰ τῷ Μίθρᾳ ὁ κρατὴρ ἀντὶ τῆς πηγῆς τέτακται).” (transl. R. Lamberton). There is a strong scholarly consensus on considering Porphyry’s information as second hand. See AKÇAY 2019, 64: “we cannot disregard the view that Porphyry (and Eubulus) offer their own Platonising interpretation of scraps of information picked up at second or third hand about the mysteries”.
134. The point has been closely studied, from LAMBERTON 1986 to AKÇAY 2019.
135. BULL ET AL. 2017, 46.
136. See BELAYCHE 2009.
137. Cf. *I. Stratonikeia* 22, 23, 25, 27, 30. LAUMONIER 1958, 255, stresses the “fête-beuverie”.
138. KLENNER 2019, 153 (“Für die Mithräumsdecke wählte man also nicht spezifisch sakrale Themen, sondern durchaus beliebte, profane Muster”) and 161 (“Entgegen der allgemeinen Vorstellung, Mithräen wären im Inneren mit Sternenhimmeln bemalt gewesen, orientierte man sich mit der Wahl der Dekoration eher an den für die Wohnkultur der Zeit üblichen Motiven”).
139. See MASSA 2017.
140. Some answers will be put forward in a forthcoming monograph: F. MASSA, *Les cultes à mystères dans l’empire romain : païens et chrétiens en compétition*.

ABSTRACTS

This paper starts with a preliminary reflection on the broader field of “mystery cults”, which are characterized by a ban on divulgation and the incommunicability of experience. The “mysteries” of Mithras present a further difficulty: their images, built within Roman contexts, lack the visual

markers of the Greek “mystery cult” tradition. Moreover, the epigraphical evidence for the worshippers of Mithras does not mention “mysteries”. The second and longer section of the paper addresses the few frescoes that were interpreted as depictions of initiation rituals inside three *mithraea* and on an adorned krater. It first recalls the main approaches to the interpretation of these images (historiography, anthropological approach, semiotic reading), and then argues that these images intended to display to the viewers (insiders/initiates) a sense of grouping and of contrasted agencies within the groups, to different extents in each *mithraeum*. By focusing on a case-study from Caesarea Maritima, it proposes to identify the three different ways through which a religious group might give an image both of itself and to itself: a collective ritual (i.e. a procession), the initiation as a transmission (without a special terrifying ambiance), and a mythological narrative on the deity who protects the group.

Questo articolo prende le mosse da una riflessione preliminare sui "culti misterici", significativamente marcati dal divieto di divulgazione e dall'incomunicabilità dell'esperienza. I "misteri" di Mitra presentano poi un'ulteriore difficoltà: le loro immagini, costruite in contesti romani, mancano di quei marcatori visivi che pertengono alla tradizione dei "culti misterici" greci. Inoltre, l'evidenza epigrafica non menziona "misteri" in relazione ai devoti di Mitra. La seconda e più ampia parte dell'articolo esamina le poche testimonianze che sono state interpretate come raffigurazioni di riti di iniziazione all'interno di tre mitrei e su un cratere decorato. Riprende poi, in primo luogo, i principali approcci interpretativi proposti per la lettura di queste immagini (dal punto di vista storiografico, antropologico e sociologico), per passare a individuare in esse l'intento di alimentare negli spettatori (*insiders/iniziati*) il senso di comunità, dando la misura delle diverse forme di agentività attive all'interno del gruppo e in maniera differente tra un mitreo e l'altro. Attraverso l'analisi del caso studio di *Caesarea Maritima*, il contributo identifica tre differenti modalità attraverso cui un gruppo religioso può restituire, nello stesso tempo, un'immagine a se stesso e di se stesso: il ricorso a un rituale collettivo (cioè una processione); l'iniziazione intesa come trasmissione (senza ricorso ad atmosfere particolarmente spaventose); e, infine, una narrazione mitologica sulla divinità che protegge il gruppo.

INDEX

Keywords: initiation, images, mystery cults, Mithraism, Caesarea Maritima, Cumont Franz

Parole chiave: iniziazione, immagini, culti misterici, Mitraismo, Caesarea Maritima, Cumont Franz

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