“Hic locus est felix, sanctus, piusque benignus”

The cult of Mithras in fourth century Rome

by

Jonas Bjørnebye

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Abbreviations

ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*. Edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase. Berlin, 1972-
BAC	*Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana*
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
BCR	*Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Communale di Roma*
CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*
CIMRM	*Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*
EJMS	*Electronic Journal of Mithraic Studies*
EPRO	*Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain*
JMS	*Journal of Mithraic Studies*
JRA	*Journal of Roman Archaeology*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
TMMM	*Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*

Introduction: Re-imagining the cult of Mithras in fourth century Rome

Ce sont surtout les découvertes faites dans la capitale du monde romain qui ont été intéressantes pour la connaissance du culte de Mithra, et on peut en déduire que c'est à Rome même que le cœur de la religion mithriaque a battu le plus fort.

Maarten J. Vermaseren[1]

"This is the place: auspicious, sacred, holy, and favorable", is the first line of the poem celebrating the construction of a mithraeum in Rome by the third century Mithraic *pater* Proficientus.[2] The poem highlights several important aspects of what we know of the cult of Mithras in Rome, but the focus of the first line is firmly on the importance of the sacred space of the mithraeum, and this nicely complements the three chapters of this study dealing with the mithraeum itself, as well as the icon and the Mithraic communities – both of which belonged inside of the sacred space of the mithraeum. Consequently, this study deals only with some aspects of the cult of Mithras in the Roman Empire, but the focus is even more restrained, as it is also confined to a certain time and a certain place. Specifically, its focus is on how Roman Mithraism appeared in the turbulent fourth century, in the period roughly from the establishment of the Tetrarchy in the last two decades of the third century, through the sweeping reforms of Constantine, and up to the religious legislation of Theodosius at the very end of the fourth century. In this period, the ascendance of Christianity as an officially sanctioned religious system with the gradual codification of its institutions and dogma, and the canonization of the Christian scripture, led to drastic changes in the socio-religious climate of the Empire.

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[1] Vermaseren. *Mithriaca IV*, preface.

[2] *Hic locus est felix, sanctus, piusque benignus*. The inscription has catalogue number 423 in Vermaseren's *CIMRM*. This is the first line in an inscribed poem celebrating the construction of a Mithraic *spelaeum* by the *pater* Proficientus. This *spelaeum* is almost certainly to be identified with the mithraeum of *San Lorenzo in Damaso*, which was most likely still in use through much of the fourth century. The inscription is especially important because it features the central terms of *spelaeum*, *pater*, and *syndexi*, all of which are central to any discussion of Mithraic communities.

The end point of this study is, unlike much of the evidence for Mithrasim, not set in stone, but the crisis resulting from the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410, a crisis which brought fundamental change to the city, marks a natural end to many of the social and religious institutions of the Rome, and amongst them it seems, the cult of Mithras. The religious dynamics in the various provinces, and in the various layers of society, were affected to varying degrees and in different ways by the sometimes radical changes of the fourth century, but while charting all these changes is far outside the scope of this study, some insights of a more general nature into the religious climate in this period may be gleaned from the discourses of not only the most prolific religions, like Christianity, but also from some of the more obscure ones, like in this case Roman Mithraism.

One of the basic assumptions of Mithraic studies has, since the inception of the discipline, been that Mithraism in the fourth century represented at the very least an aberration and a break with the traditional cult, and in the most radical interpretation a contaminated and devolved version of the original ideology and practice struggling to maintain its identity in a religious landscape where Christianity was in ascendancy. However, fourth century Mithraism has not, with a few notable exceptions,[3] received much attention from scholars of ancient religion, apart from a general dismissal of a sentence or two, and no large scale comprehensive study of Mithraism in the fourth century has, to the best of my knowledge, ever been written.[4] Mostly, when Mithraism in the fourth century, especially in Rome, is mentioned, it is the differences, that are highlighted, i.e. the deviations from the norm of what we know of the cult in the second and third centuries. This deviation is usually explained either by reference to religious syncretism, a term that in this case seems to be wholly unsatisfactory for analytical purposes, or by appealing to "common knowledge", established truisms of earlier scholarship that have, as this study will show, little or no grounding in the actual evidence.

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[3] See for instance: Griffith, "Mithraism", Gordon, "The end of Mithraism", Sauer, *The End of Paganism* and *Religious Hatred*, and. Nicholson, "The end of Mithraism".

[4] It may be argued that Sauer's doctoral dissertation, *The End of Paganism*, deals with fourth century Mithraism, but in this case, it is a matter of perspective. Saur's project is, as his title suggests, a discussion of the end of Paganism and of the end of the Mithraic cult, and as such is not concerned with charting the development of the cult throughout the century. Furthermore, his discussion is confined to the north-west provinces, and he does not touch upon the cult in Rome in this period.

Luckily, the dearth of materials for studying the fourth century that has previously been a major stumbling block for this area of research has improved somewhat in the last ten years, and during this time, several new studies have helped shed light on previously understudied categories of Mithraic remains, greatly assisting chronological and contextual studies of the cult of Mithras in the Roman world. The demographics of the members of Mithraic groups and geographical distribution of mithraea are integral to many studies of Mithraism, and thanks to recent archaeological finds, new fourth century mithraea have come to light, even in the city of Rome, and in this context this new material serves a threefold purpose. Firstly, the increase in fourth century mithraea available for study allows us to make preliminary observations about the cult's geographical distribution and demographical makeup in this period in comparison to that of the preceding two centuries. Secondly, some of these mithraea have yielded finds of iconography peculiar to the fourth century which have not as yet received much treatment, and finally, modern archaeology, archaeozoology, and related disciplines have allowed us access to materials that would have remained completely mute not so long ago.

My contention is that Mithraism grew rather than declined, or at least that the membership of the cult remained stable, and that it survived as much the same coherent system throughout the civil wars and the associated loss of empire-wide communications in the mid-to-late third century. The cult survived relatively unchanged in Rome up until the very end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, before finally disappearing amidst the re-organization and re-building of the city following the Gothic sack of 410. This re-birth which lead the French scholar Bertrand Lançon to describe Rome as "une cité-phénix: meurtrie mais vivante"[5], was largely administrated by the bishops of Rome, and in this re-organization of power, temporal as well as religious, as well as of Rome's monumental topography, there was no room left for Mithras. The inherent flexibility and adaptability of the Mithraic language of symbols and of the Mithraic communities, as well as their essentially conformist nature and organizational structure which mimicked the central Roman social institutions of the *familia* and of the system of

[5] Lançon, *Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive*, 53.

patronage, would eventually, and it seems to me quite painlessly[6], allow Mithraism to adapt to the changing face of imperial attitudes towards religious expressions in this period, before finally becoming redundant in the early fifth century.

This gradual assimilation with the re-constructed social fabric of the city where Christianity was setting the pace effectively ended Mithraism as a separate and identifiable religion as far as we can tell. In Rome at least, there is little or no evidence to suggest that Mithraism met a violent end. It is in this context that the study of Mithraism in the fourth century might be especially important, not only for Mithraic scholarship, but also for the study of the greater context of religion in the emerging Christian Empire. There is, I think, much potential gain in trying to understand the way Mithraism appears in this period, and I tend to agree with Oliver Nicholson that in this line of inquiry, "the evidence for the final days of Mithraism could shed light on larger questions concerning the ending of non-Christian cult in the Roman Empire."[7]

For the city of Rome, the fourth century was a period of transition. From imperial capital to Christian capital, the century of mostly absent emperors allowed the city to reclaim its own identity, and indeed throughout this century, introspection and continuity as well as transformation seem to be the watchwords. In much the same fashion as Octavian completely reshaped the Roman world while maintaining the fiction of political continuity, the political and religious leadership of Rome was transformed in the period from the tetrarchs to Theodosius. It is important to bear in mind, however, that "although no longer the administrative head of the empire, Rome in late antiquity retained its symbolic value and remained important as a cultural, social, and economic center in the west. In the 4th and 5th c., too, certain popes, Damasus and Leo especially, acted to make it the center of western Christendom."[8]

While appearances are often deceiving in the history of late antique Rome, they are even more so when the cult of Mithras in Rome in the fourth century is afforded more than a mere glance. Mithraism in

[6] This view of a relatively "painless" end to Mithraism is by no means shared by all. For the opposite view, see for instance Eberhard Sauer's statement in *The End of Paganism*: "Mithraism did not die a natural death; there was active Christian euthanasia when the cult was not yet mortally ill.", (*The End of Paganism*, 80).
[7] Nicholson, "The end of Mithraism," 358.
[8] Salzman, "Sacred time and sacred space," 123.

Rome in this period is often described, as noted above, as being essentially dead and the subject of a failed, politically motivated resurrection in the last decades of the fourth century, before every last vestige of the cult was annihilated by the Christian mobs. As will become apparent through this study, this turn of events has little, if anything, to do with the actual source material, and when this evidence is analyzed in its proper context, a very different view of the late antique cult in Rome emerges.

The main points of difference between the study of Mithraism and the study of many of the other religions of late antiquity, and especially from the study of early Christianity, is the state of the source material, that is, the nature of the evidence available for any analysis of the different aspects of the cult. Religious phenomena of late antiquity are often compared to Christianity, and in the case of Mithraism, it has at times, at least prior to the latter half of the twentieth century, been viewed as one of Christianity's main opponents.[9]

There is a discrepancy, however, between Mithraism and Christianity in the material available for study. Texts, be they the canonical texts of the New Testament, the writings of the church fathers, or the comparatively great volume of Christian correspondence from the first three centuries CE, dominate the study of early Christianity, while Christian art, iconography, and epigraphy are often downplayed and understudied categories of evidence.[10] The exact opposite seems to hold true for Mithraism throughout the known history of the cult. Though Mithraism was roughly contemporary with early Christianity, the records left behind by the Mithraists themselves are, for many reasons having to do both with presumed cult praxis and with the history of transmission, completely different in nature. The greatest difference lies perhaps in the total absence of epistolary references to Mithraism by the initiates themselves, as well as in

[9] This attitude is epitomized by Ernest Renan's notorious and wildly exaggerated dictum: "Si le christianisme eût été arrêté dans sa croissance par quelque maladie mortelle, le monde eût été mithriaste." Ernest Renan, *Marc-Aurele*, 579.

[10] Though there has been increased interest in, and focus on, Christian art of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries over the last three decades, the study of ancient Christianity is still dominated by a focus on text-based studies. Some recent works on late antique Christian art are: Jensen, *Face to Face* and *The Substance of Things Seen*, Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, and "Inventing Christian Rome", Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, Hellemo, *Adventus Domini*. For early Christian architecture, see especially White, *Social Origins. Vol. I* and *II.* , but more recently several good articles on late antique architecture and topography have also been published in several collections, with one of the more useful and accessible being Lavan and Bowden (eds.), *Theory and Practice in Late Antique Archaeology*.

the loss of the only two known histories of the cult, the works of Euboulos and Pallas quoted by Porphyry.[11] Our perception of Mithraism is understandably skewed, to a great extent, by the nature of the extant material evidence, or in the words of Jas Elsner: "We necessarily write our history looking not at antiquity as it was, but at the visual, archaeological, and literary fragments which survive"[12], and as far as Mithraism in concerned, the evidence is very fragmentary indeed.

To be sure, there are texts that can shed light on Mithraism,[13] but there are few that do more than mention Mithras briefly in passing, and those that do offer more pronounced insights are notoriously problematic, each in their own way. Fortunately, we have an abundance of other types of material for the study of Mithraism. The problem with these other categories of material – art, architecture, and epigraphy – is that the answers that the material is able to provide are often not helpful in regard to the questions we are asking. Instead of texts that claim to speak of the internal aspects of a religion; of dogma, of hierarchies, and of self-image, we have mostly pieces of stone that speak a very different language. Perhaps we should be asking different questions? In the following three chapters, a selection of different sources relevant to the main theme of this dissertation, the cult of Mithras in fourth century Rome, is presented, including some of these pieces of stone, together with material in other media, and relevant literary references.

The main portion of the first chapter presents a discussion of the most concrete category of evidence, the structural remains of the actual Mithraic sanctuaries that were in use in Rome during the fourth century. In this chapter, other types of archeological material, like coins, ceramics, and animal bones, will also be briefly discussed as categories of evidence, but this type of material is unfortunately often scarce in Rome, for reasons discussed below. The main focus will necessarily be on the mithraea of Rome, and on what the structure and layout of these Mithraic cult rooms might tell us about the cult practices of late antique Mithraism in general, and of fourth century Roman Mithraism in particular.

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[11] Porphyry, *De abstinentia ab esu animalium*, 4.16.
[12] Elsner, *Imperial Rome*, 14.
[13] While these texts are generally considered where appropriate to the specific subject at hand, several of the most important literary references to late antique Mithraism are discussed in detail in chapter 3 of this study.

Next, and closely linked with the architectural material, is the category of Mithraic art and iconography. This material is the subject of chapter 2. Much Mithraic art is in fact physically part of mithraea, though it is often productive, and even necessary, for reasons I will come back to in this chapter, to treat this material as a separate category. Mithraic art is usually found in the form of carved reliefs, most often of the tauroctony, and as small-scale statuary, but sometimes, and especially so in Rome and central Italy, magnificent murals have been at least partially preserved.[14]

Mithraic epigraphy allows us to construct various statistical models of membership, and to compare these to similar models of the distribution of Latin epigraphy in general.[15] Furthermore, they are often the basis for what little we have of Mithraic prosopography. Epigraphic evidence comes with plenty of problems of its own, however, and these are often added to the problems of interpretation and representativity raised by Mithraic inscriptions. In chapter 3, the last chapter of this study, I will be focusing on some of these problems, before discussing in detail some of the central topics related to the Mithraic communities of Rome that I feel are crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of the actual people involved in the cult of Mithras in Rome at this time, and of the social structure of the religious communities they formed.

[14] The most famous of these murals is the one from the mithraeum at *Marino* in central Italy, but there are also large-scale murals of the tauroctony from the mithraeum at *S. Maria Capua Vetere*, from the *Barberini* mithraeum in Rome, and possibly from the mithraeum of the *Pareti dipinte* at Ostia, though almost all of the tauroctony scene itself is no longer extant. We must also mention the magnificent murals of the processions of the grades at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum in Rome.

[15] MacMullen, *Paganism*, Mrozek, "Répartition chronologique", Clauss, *Cultores*, and especially Witschel, "Re-evaluating the Roman West".

Chapter 1

Structural evidence: Mithraea and other archaeological sources for Mithraism in fourth century Rome

…the locus of meaning resides neither in the building itself (a physical object) nor in the mind of the beholder (a human subject), but rather in the negotiation or the interactive relation that subsumes both building and beholder – in the ritual-architectural event in which buildings and human participants alike are involved. Meaning is not a condition or quality of the building, of the thing itself; meaning arises from situations. The meaning of the building, then, must always be a meaning for some specific one at some specific time in some specific place.

Lindsay Jones[16]

The following chapter deals with what may be called structural evidence, and what Jones calls "buildings at some specific time in some specific place", and as such, it is the Mithraic cult room, the *mithraeum*, in the city of Rome and its immediate environs during the fourth century CE that is the main focus of this chapter. The aim of the chapter is first and foremost to chart what is known about the mithraea of the late antique city and to discern structural, topographical, and even demographic patterns based on the capacity of the sanctuaries and their relative placing within the city of Rome. Further, the question of the somewhat ambiguous place of the mithraea between the publicly funded monumental temples of Rome and the private household-based practices of some cults in Rome, including Christianity and Mithraism, is considered. The discussion of the appearances and functions of the Mithraic sacred places will serve to establish the external parameters of the cult of Mithras in late antique Rome, and to prepare the way for the discussion of Mithraic art in chapter 2 and a closer study of some of the Mithraic communities of Rome in chapter 3.

The first part of the present chapter deals with the archaeological remains of the mithraea in a general sense, that is, the overall impression of the structures of the mithraea in fourth century Rome and of the objects found within or in connection to them. The beginning of the chapter also briefly presents

[16] Jones, *Sacred Architecture* I, 41.

and discusses categories and types of archaeological material that have not been given much attention in Mithraic scholarship until recently, including faunal and numismatic evidence, in so far as it is relevant to the situation in late antique Rome. The second section of this chapter presents the known mithraea that were most likely still in use in the city in the fourth century and examines the evidence for the dating of the mithraea and for their abandonment or destruction, while the third section deals briefly with the Mithraic topography of Rome, and discusses the types of Mithraic structures found in the city in the fourth century.

Section four deals with Mithraic demographic patterns in late antique Rome from a statistical viewpoint, suggesting possible numbers of operational mithraea and of active Mithraists. The following two sections deal with the implications of the type of mithraeum known as *domus mithraea*, and with the place of the mithraeum in the public and private spheres of Roman society in so far as these terms apply in the context of Rome in the fourth century. Section seven then briefly sums up the main points and concludes the chapter.

1.1. Caves and Stones: the mithraea and their contents

There are several reasons why the Mithraic cult rooms, the mithraea, have been so important in modern mithraic scholarship. Firstly, the structural evidence of the mithraea with their programmatic and recognizable ground plan is easily identifiable in archaeological excavations, leading to a collection of concrete data, hard evidence, or *Realien*, much appreciated by archaeologists and historians alike. Mithraea are usually easily identifiable because of the typical groundplan of a rectangular room with flanking podia, and the objects found within such a mithraeum can in most cases, on the basis of association, be treated uncritically as Mithraic artifacts. Moreover, generally speaking, Mithraea in the sense of Mithraic archaeological sites are often easier to date than other Mithraic remains such as for example artwork, which has, up until recently, been one of three available categories of study, along with the mithraea and what remains of Mithraic epigraphy. Recently, however, new archaeological methods, not to mention the discovery of several new sites containing a wealth of Mithraic materials, have allowed

for corroborative dating of the newly excavated mithraea, but in many cases, the results have been perplexing. What primarily concerns me here, however, is how these new methods and finds give a somewhat different impression of the last phase of the cult, the turbulent fourth century, making it necessary to revise the general opinion of the character of the cult in this period, and in this case, in the city of Rome.

The mithraea are typically the most obvious remains of Mithraism in Rome, and moreover, they are enterable physical spaces in which the modern viewer, like the ancient initiates, can experience the atmosphere of the sacred space in a very different way than what the viewing of Mithraic remains in museums or photographs allow for. This additional dimension, which was of course also available for the Mithraic initiates themselves, must not be understated. The archetypical mithraeum in Rome, or at least the most accessible, is the well-known mithraeum of *San Clemente*,[17] which is open to the public most of the time. Indeed, it is the building of the mithraeum, the mithraeum as a sacred architectural space, which is today the most easily identified remnant of Roman Mithraism, next to the cult icon of the tauroctony.

Newly excavated mithraea are also the main sites today of most of the important finds of mithraic artifacts, art, and epigraphy, and in an archaeological sense the context provided by these places and spaces are doubly important because of the problems and dangers of basing theories upon material with an ambiguous provenience in contemporary archaeology. Having said that, Rome is perhaps the place in the Roman Empire with the largest amount of mithraic material found outside of the context of extant mithraea, and several of the mithraea that were extant a hundred years ago are now gone, lost to accidents or urban development, and consequently making the establishment of lines of provenience, chronology, and genealogy difficult.

In addition to providing an archaeological context for Mithraic finds, the mithraea remain important in several additional respects as well. They form the basis for Mithraic topography and demographics in Rome, which gives the primary evidence for establishing models, both quantitative and qualitative, for the membership of the Mithraic communities. Together with the epigraphic material, this

[17] V 338-348.

lets us establish certain parameters for the composition of the Mithraic communities, and also, to a certain extent, lets us postulate just who these Roman Mithraists were and what they did. Additionally, the mithraea house many of the most important Mithraic works of art, and virtually all the ones that can be dated and placed with any degree of certainty have been found in the context of a mithraeum.

Under the heading of Mithraic art as part of the mithraeum comes also the ubiquitous icons and the extensive murals. At least that is the case in Rome and the immediate environs, portraying not only the main icon of the cult and mythological scenes, but also scenes of cult-life and rituals, crucial to our understanding of what went on in the Mithraic communities. Many, indeed most, of these scenes are found in mithraea either in or close to Rome – I am thinking here primarily of the murals and dipinti from the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum[18] and of the wall paintings depicting initiatory rites on the podia of the *Capua* mithraeum[19] not far from the city. Finally, much Mithraic epigraphic material has been recovered from known mithraea, though the provenience of some of the most important inscriptions in the study of fourth century Mithraism in Rome, such as the *Phrygianum* inscriptions,[20] is often uncertain as they are found in other archaeological contexts. In other cases, such as the inscriptions from the *Piazza San Silvestro*,[21] the presumed mithraeum itself is no longer extant. How the artwork and especially the icon functioned within the sacred space of the mithraeum and what Mithraic epigraphy and art can tell us about the structure and experiences of the Mithraic communities in Rome, are treated in more detail throughout this study. But in this chapter, the main focus is on the mithraeum as a physical structure, and these Mithraic temples must therefore first be considered as buildings, albeit buildings defined by their users as well as their contemporaries as sacred spaces.

More than four hundred mithraea have come to light so far and new ones are constantly being added to the list, even recently in the city of Rome itself, leaving the very real possibility of new, and potentially groundbreaking discoveries, like for instance the newly excavated mithraeum of the *Crypta*

[18] V 476-500. See also Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*.
[19] Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I*.
[20] V 513-514. See also Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 157-158.
[21] V 400-406.

Balbi. However, these mithraea are usually discovered in rural areas far from Rome, like for instance the recent discovery of a new fourth century mithraeum near the village of Hawarti, or Huarte, in Syria.[22] The mithraea are helpful in several respects for gaining a deeper understanding of Roman Mithraism. Firstly, their distinct architectural style, their uniformity in the general layout spanning three centuries and most of the Roman world, testify to the "stability" and continuity, or even "canonicity", of some of the core elements of Mithraic cult life. Secondly, the mithraea themselves are useful for establishing a Mithraic presence in a given location and present us with the opportunity for statistical extrapolation of membership data, such as geographical preferences and the demographic image of the membership groups. Further, they serve to establish parameters for suggesting the size of the communities, as well as giving pointers concerning the social location or social catchments of the different Mithraic communities, mainly through the level of quality and the extent of the decorations, and the scale and quality of the votives and the main cult icon of the mithraeum.

As well as the data provided by the size, structure, and decoration of the buildings themselves (what I refer to as structural evidence or architectural source material), the mithraea usually provide the contexts for two of the three other categories of evidence: Mithraic epigraphy, either inscriptions on tauroctony reliefs, altars, and other votives, or in dipinti and graffiti usually on the side walls of the mithraeum, and Mithraic art, covering a wide array of different motifs and executed in many different media. As for the last category of evidence, textual references to Mithraism, no separate texts, that is textual evidence apart from epigraphy, have been found in any mithraeum, and it would seem that no first hand accounts of Mithraic practice, again apart from evidence from Mithraic epigraphy, is still extant

[22] This mithraeum is magnificently decorated by wall-paintings, and features several unique motifs which will certainly be important for the study of Mithraic iconography. The mithraeum has not yet been fully published, but several preliminary reports by Michal Gawlikowski, the archaeologist in charge of the excavations, have appeared. These reports are: Gawlikowski, "Hawarti Preliminary Report", "Hawarte 1999", "Un nouveau mithraeum récemment découvert à Huarté près d'Apamée," and "Le mithraeum de Haouarte (Apamène)." The discovery of a large quantity of tableware as well as animal remains in a pit outside the newly excavated mithraeum at Tienen, Belgium, has also attracted new attention to the topic of Mithraic processions and large-scale feasts, begging a re-examination of the secrecy of the cult and its visibility in local society. For more on the finds from this mithraeum, see below and of course Martens, "The *Mithraeum* in Tienen (Belgium)."

today, if they indeed ever existed.[23] The very few literary references we have though, are often concerned with, or at least refer to, the mithraea, what they contained and what went on inside them, and as such, these references are doubly important to the study of the initiatory grade hierarchy and cult life. What the mithraea contained is discussed in chapter 2, while what went on inside Roman mithraea is discussed both in chapter 2 and chapter 3 of the present study.

1.1.1. The mithraea as buildings

The extant mithraea present us with actual physical remains of the architectural structures of the sacred spaces of the Mithraic cult. While the Mithraists themselves never used the word mithraeum as far as we know, but preferred words like *speleum* or *antrum* (cave), *crypta* (underground hallway or corridor), *fanum* (sacred or holy place), or even *templum* (a temple or a sacred space), the word mithraeum is the common appellation in Mithraic scholarship and is used throughout this study. The Mithraic cult rooms are, as noted above, easily identifiable because of their programmatic layout. Almost all mithraea seem more or less to follow the same general architectural plan, though practical considerations, such as for example structural changes in the buildings housing mithraea, can change the proportions of the cult rooms somewhat. The mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*,[24] to take an example from Rome, assumed a much more square shape rather than the traditional rectangular shape after the enlargement of the mithraeum in the late third century nearly doubled the size of the room.

The main cult room was usually quite small, with most of the extant ones being under 10 meters in any direction, and the largest documented so far in Rome, that of the *Crypta Balbi*,[25] is unusually, though not exceptionally, large in being 31.5 meters long, and approximately 12 meters wide.[26] Several ante- and side chambers were often attached to the main structure, but these were all equally small or even

[23] Very few Mithraic scholars still regard the so-called *Mithras Liturgy* (originally published by Dieterich, and recently re-published by Betz) as actually describing any kind of Mithraic liturgy or ritual.
[24] See Lissi-Caronna, *Il Mitreo Dei Castra Peregrinorum*, and "Materiale mitriaco da S. Stefano Rotondo".
[25] See Ricci, "Crypta Balbi", and Saguì, "Crypta Balbi."
[26] The largest cult room in Rome up until the recent discovery of the *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum was the mithraeum of the *Baths of Caracalla*, which is 23 meters long and a little under 10 meters wide. The largest in central Italy, outside of the city of Rome, is that of the *Marino* mithraeum, which is a little over 29 meters long, but the length of these three mithraea is exceptional indeed, and not representative of a typical Roman mithraeum.

smaller, and seem to have had peripheral functions, probably being used as kitchens, changing rooms, or for storage. The size of the sanctuaries gives some indications to the manner of their use and for the communities that used them. Intimacy must clearly have played an important part in cult life, as even the largest sanctuary must have had trouble accommodating more than forty or so people, and the average must have been around twenty. The room was constructed according to a traditional scheme of a central aisle, most often ending in an apse, much like the Christian basilica, but flanked on each side by raised *podia*, and this structural scheme seems to have remained virtually constant throughout the cult's three hundred year history.

The building materials, the architectural details, and certainly the decoration and the placing of cult-images could vary greatly from place to place, except for the mithraeum's main tauroctony scene, whose position was almost canonically fixed. There does seem to be some principles or rules concerning the placement of different visual elements, at least in Rome, and this is especially true in connection with the placing of elements that principally belong within the main composition of the icon, such as, most commonly, the two torchbearers.[27] The ceiling, floor, walls, and podia could be made of almost any kind of material available, from hard-packed earth to marble or more exotic stone, and could be left almost undecorated or carry anything from simple decorative designs to complex murals like the exquisite tauroctony mural at the *Marino* mithraeum. In short, the mithraea display on the one hand a great degree of conformity in scheme and structure, but on the other hand there is clearly also a great freedom of execution that seems to follow few other guidelines than the wealth and artistic inclinations of the small community, or of the patron that commissioned the decorations. It is form and function rather than the decoration of the cult room that seems to be the principal aspect. There are a few general hints to these functions, and some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from the layout and decoration of the specific mithraea in Rome.

[27] It was not unusual for a mithraeum to contain several tauroctony scenes, often in different media as well as a host of accompanying wall-paintings and small-scale statuary. The relative placing of these images is discussed in Chapter 2.

Though the initiates of the Mithras cult in Rome and central Italy sometimes referred to their sanctuary as a *templum*, the modern term "temple" can often be misleading as we simply do not know enough about Mithraic practices and beliefs to label them as such. Even if we did, the modern notion of temple carrying as it does connotations of faith and worship, is more than likely anachronistic in relation to the sacred spaces of Roman religions in late antiquity, and especially Mithraism. Additionally, the word temple calls to mind the structure of the classical Greek temples with colonnades and a cella only accessible to the priesthood, and even then only on certain days, while the rituals themselves were conducted outside the temple building, all in all an almost a complete reversal of the structure of the mithraea. It is easily argued that the mithraea seem to have been mainly important as assembly rooms serving as locations for communal rituals, much like the contemporary Christian house churches. Robin Jensen draws attention to the link between the Christian house churches and the Roman dining rooms, on a cultural level, but also on a structural level. She writes that "in these places of hospitality, [house churches], early Christians gathered to share a meal together, not unlike a gathering for a dinner party in a private home. Clearly, domestic space is essential to the idea of Christian architecture, part of its deep memory."[28] The same holds true for Mithraism – one needs only to take the triclinium-like appearance created by the podia into consideration, and indeed Robert Turcan uses the concept of the Mithraic cult rooms as communal dining rooms to argue that mithraea are not, even in this context, strictly speaking temples.[29]

Taking into consideration the ground-plans of known mithraea, Turcan argues that the impression created is that of a great variety of details, but within an overall strict structural form. In his view the mithraea have in common only this – that they are assembly rooms for the community, sharing the layout described above. As Turcan puts it:

> Autrement dit, le *Mithraeum* est d'abord une salle à manger pour des repas pris en commun. Les convives étaient étendus obliquement, tous la tête tournée vers l'image de Mithra tauroctone qui, peint

[28] Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen*, 104-105.
[29] Turcan, *Mithra et le Mithriacisme*, 74.

> ou sculpté, décorait uniformément le fond des sanctuaires, comme le Christ en croix dans les églises catholiques préconciliaires.[30]

But even though the cultic meal seems to have been very important in Mithraism, as evidenced by Mithraic imagery and by literary referances as well as by the architecture of the mithraea, being a dining room was hardly the only function of these sacred spaces, as Turcan's reference to the crucifixion suggests. The mithraeum was, physically as well as metaphorically, a reproduction of the archetypical Persian cave where Mithras killed the original bull according to Statius and Porphyry,[31] and in many mithraea, the ceiling of the room, or most often only the ceiling of the cult niche, has been worked to be made to look like rough stone – like a natural cave. However, in addition to representing the mythical cave, the cult room could also take on other aspects and be conceived of, as we have seen, a communal dining room, or it could be conceived as a stage for the re-enactment of mythical and ritual drama. But the mithraeum was also, crucially, an image of the cosmos.

Judging from the extensive decoration of the Mithraic sanctuaries, including floor mosaics and wall-paintings, many of the mithraea, at least of central Italy, also seem to have been the scene of a complex system of astrological symbolism which, in addition to the clearly astrological character of the symbol complex of the icon itself, turned the "cave" into a map of the universe. Notable examples are the mosaics of the *Sette Sfere*[32] and *Sette Porte*[33] mithraea in Ostia, but some of the lines from the dipinti on the right wall of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, where each of the initiatory grades are said to be under the guidance of one of the seven planets,[34] seem also to corroborate this astrological inclination amongst the

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[30] Turcan, *Mithra et le Mithriacisme*, 74.
[31] Statius, *Persei sub rupibus antri Indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram* (Theb. 1.719-20) is actually the very first true reference to a recognizable form of Roman Mithraism, and is usually dated to the year 91/92 CE. The cave is also central in Porphyry's example of Mithraism in his allegorical study of the cave of the nymphs in Homer's *Odyssey*, *De antro nympharum.* The church fathers are also preoccupied with the Mithraic caves, with Tertullian dubbing them *vere castra tenebrarum* (*De cor.* 15), and Justin Martyr aptly draws attention to the parallels between the symbolism of the cave in Mithraism and the symbolism of the cave in Daniel and Isaiah (*dial. Tryph*. 70). The conception of the mithraeum *qua* cave is indeed central in Mithraism, and is discussed in light of different contexts at several points in the present study.
[32] V 239 – V 249.
[33] V 287 – V 293.
[34] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 167-169.

Mithraic communities of Rome and central Italy. This map of the universe could even be conceived of as a representation of the cosmos itself, and as the sphere of the fixed stars through which, according to Neo-Platonic philosophy, the soul entered and exited the world. According to Porphyry:

> Similarly, the Persians call the place a cave where they introduce an initiate to the mysteries, revealing to him the path by which souls descend and go back again. For Eubulus tells us that Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honour of Mithras, the creator and father of all; it was located in the mountains near Persia and had flowers and springs. This cave bore for him the image of the cosmos which Mithras had created, and the things which the cave contained, by their proportionate arrangement, provided him with symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos. After Zoroaster others adopted the custom of performing their rites of initiation in caves and grottoes which were either natural or artificial.[35]

"[Porphyry] clearly tells us", writes Roger Beck, "not only that induction into a mystery of the soul's descent and return was an activity of the cult but also that mithraea were designed and equipped for this very purpose. They function as 'cosmic models' for the accomplishment, no doubt both by ritual and instruction, of a celestial journey."[36]

The mithraea in a sense present two "modes" of reality at once, an earthly and a heavenly, and Richard Gordon, using the example of the *Sette Sfere* mithraeum at Ostia, argues that even the actual ground-plan of the mithraeum reflects this ambiguity:

> Could there be any more appropriate symbolic scheme on the floor of a mithraeum? For the mithraeum is characterized by its ambiguity as both a symbol of the cosmos, a map or likeness of heaven and its changes, and as a human construction, part of earth: it is both heaven and earth at one and the same time, the unique point of their meeting… the construction of the earth corresponds to the construction of (part of) the cosmos.[37]

Thus, in addition to being an "earthly" practical, as well as mythological, construction, the mithraeum *qua* cave could be not only a representation of the universe, but it could become the actual cosmos itself, while in a sense still remaining a cave. Porphyry describes this dual referentiality of the cave in allegorical

[35] Porphyry, *De antro* 6 (translation from the Arethusa edition).
[36] Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras," 183.
[37] Gordon, "sacred geography," 143.

terms, but also describes the "heavenly" geography of this Mithraic cosmos and Mithras' rightful place in it:

> This is why Homer has put the cave's entrances neither at east and west nor at the equinoxes, that is at Aries and Libra, but facing the south and north, indeed at the southernmost and northernmost gates, because the cave is consecrated to souls and to water nymphs, and these points are appropriate for creation <genesis> and departure <apogenesis> in relation to souls. They <i.e. Numenius and Kronius> assigned the equinoxes to Mithras as his proper seat. For this reason he carries the dagger which belongs to Ares, whose "house" is in Aries; and rides on a bull – Taurus is the "house" of Venus, [and Libra], like Taurus, <is her "house">. Mithras, as maker and lord of creation, is placed on the line of the equinoxes <facing west>, with the north on his right and the south on his left.[38]

Consequently, according to Manfred Clauss, "the mithraeum thus became an image of the world through which men pass in order to reach God, visible in the background."[39] The idea of the cave as an image of the cosmos is, as we have seen, also supported by archaeological evidence, and Robert Turcan eloquently sums up this connection between Porphyry's allegory and the physical remains of the mithraea:

> L'antre apparaît donc comme typique de Mithra qui, à la différence des dieux grecs et romains, n'a pas d'autres sanctuaires que les *spelaea*. Si le monde est un temple, réciproquement tout « temple » de Mithra est une image du monde, non pas seulement comme séjour ténébreux, mais en tant que symbole de l'ordre divin, *diakosmèsis*, à la fois obscur et charmant à l'égale de l'antre homérique. Le décor peint ou sculpté des Mithraea, la cape étoilée de dieu, les zodiaques ornant l'orbe des *arcosolia* au-dessus du Tauroctone faisaient de ces antres les chapelles d'un culte cosmique.[40]

Richard Gordon comments as follows on the relationship between the *Sette Sfere* mithraeum and the above quote from Porphyry[41]: "The symbolism of the *mithraeum*-cosmos is utterly literal: the entrance and exit are inside the *mithraeum* itself, one on the north bench, the other on the south bench. This is the starting point of Porphyry's parallel between the Nymph's cave and the *mithraeum*."[42] But in addition to Porphyry's testimony and the obvious cosmic implications of the structure of the mithraeum and Mithraic art, Roger Beck argues that, in itself: "a cave is an appropriate image of the universe because, like the

[38] *De antro* 24. Translation by Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome* 2, 314-315.
[39] Clauss, *The Roman cult of Mithras*, 51.
[40] Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus*, 67.
[41] Porphyry, *De antro* 24.
[42] Gordon, "sacred geography," 133.

universe, it is an inside without an outside. That is why, ideologically at least, the exteriors of standard Greek and Roman [Mithraic] temples, does not matter."[43] In other words, it is not only that Mithras didn't have other sancturies of the traditional Greco-Roman type, but that, for ideological reasons, a Mithraic "temple" should not have an "outside", since it was in fact the universe and external decoration was therefore neither needed nor appropriate. This is of course by now a rather belabored point, but since the implications of the mithraeum *qua* cave are so important throughout all the aspects of the cult, it cannot be stressed often enough.

The cosmological orientation aside, no rules of geographical orientation seem to have existed, apart from what sometimes seems to be a preference for having the entrance to the cult room in the west and the main cult icon in its apse in the east.[44] Indeed the efforts that have been made to find any sort of system in the geographical orientation of mithraea, other than the abovementioned east-west orientation, have yielded negative results.[45] Though it seems probable that some mithraea at least were oriented as to catch natural light in certain parts of the cult room at specific times of the year, there is little evidence for an overarching general esoteric scheme based on spatial orientation. The spatial orientation of the mithraeum, especially as it pertains to the facing of the cult icon and the placing of Mithraic iconographical elements, is discussed in chapter 2 of the present study.

Having explained what is encompassed by my category of Mithraic structural evidence, I must briefly deal with what is covered, in the present context, by the sub-category of Mithraic archaeological material. Though obviously the mithraeum and Mithraic art are also "archaeological material" in the strictest sense, the function of this category in the context of the present discussion is as a tool for sorting certain types of material evidence, and as such, the mithraea and the icons are not included in this category for analytical purposes. This category of archaeological material encompasses instead all the material

[43] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 106.
[44] Though some mithraea, like for instance the one at *Ponza*, are oriented in the opposite direction. This spatial orientation is not unusual for temples in the Greco-Roman world in general, and the corresponding orientation of the mithraea may be interpreted as simply a cultural preference.
[45] Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, is one of the few full-scale studies to attempt this, but Richard Gordon, among others, has little good to say about Campbell's work: "Founded upon a tangle of indefensible assumptions and executed in a cloud of errors, it deserves simply to be ignored". Gordon, "Panelled complications," 201.

evidence pertaining to Mithraism that is not covered by the categories of structural remains, art, or epigraphy, but discussing this category in conjunction with the mithraea is justified by similarity of approach in the sense of the theoretical analytical tools used in their identification and typology. The category of archaeological sources contains such things as numismatic evidence, zooarchaeological material, paleobotanical evidence, pottery analysis, the study of other utensils, and finally the so-called "small finds", including jewelry, personal emblems and icons, gems, and assorted Mithraic bric-à-brac.

1.1.2. Mithraic taphonomics

Recently, the emergence of relatively new sub-disciplines in classical archaeology has contributed to something of a renaissance in some areas of Mithraic studies. Several new and potentially informative mithraea have come to light in the past decade, and the application of techniques such as taphonomy[46], archaeozoology[47], palaeobotany[48], and numismatics has yielded interesting results. Unfortunately, this holds true for the Mithraic remains from the city of Rome only in a very limited sense, since the vast majority of Rome's mithraea were excavated long before archaeological provenience and the stringent stratigraphy of excavations and sites was an issue, while the reports on the mithraea excavated in Rome during the past 30 years are in general very brief, and the only recently excavated mithraeum, that of the *Crypta Balbi*, has yet to be fully published. Consequently the data regarding the chronology and stratigraphy of finds, not to mention the "small finds", coarse-ware, and the like, is most often very scarce or indeed non- existent. If the excavations of the *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum promise to be indispensable to the future studies of Mithrasim in Rome, it is not primarily because of its faunal remains, which are in themselves not spectacular, but rather because of its great size, its peculiarly "public" location in what seems to be the middle of an *insula* near the center of the city, and not least because of the very late date of its destruction.

[46] The study of the processes by which animal and plant remains become preserved as fossils.
[47] The study of animals in an archaeological context.
[48] The study of fossil (and exctinct) plants.

Detailed examination of the remains of animal bones, for instance from the recently excavated mithraeum at Tienen in Belgium, provide new information on previously unknown Mithraic ritual practices.[49] At Tienen there seems to be evidence, for example, for a large scale communal feast, possibly held in connection with the celebration of summer solstice, both from the faunal remains and from the amount of recovered ceramic vessels. The data from the recovered ceramics, which would seem to indicate about a hundred sets of eating utensils,[50] and the taphonomic investigation of the faunal remains, suggest a feast, probably lasting several days, involving about a hundred participants. A much larger number of participants eating from shared tableware is also a possibility that must be considered, though it remains less likely, mostly for reasons having to do with the demographic patterns of this relatively sparsely populated area.

In Rome, on the other hand, evidence of large scale public feasts has not been found in relation to any mithraeum, but some recovered taphonomic evidence from the *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum seems to suggest a slight preference for some types of animals, notably domestic fowl, though to a lesser degree than do the animal remains of the *Tienen* mithraeum.[51] At the very least, though, the bones found at the *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum, and the consequent analysis of the animal remains, reveal something of the ritual menu of the Mithraic community in question, though it is often hard to determine what, if any, ritual and symbolical significance the remains hold. For instance, according to a recent article,

> When the faunal material from the Crypta Balbi *mithraeum* at Rome is compared with that of a secular context from the same location, the only meaningful difference can be found in the significantly higher frequency of chicken bones at the temple (20% versus 7%, comparisons based upon NISP)(De Grossi Mazzorin, *in press*).[52]

[49] Martens, "The Mithraeum in Tienen", and Lentacker, Ervynck and Van Neer, "Gastronomy or religion" and "The Symbolic Meaning of the Cock".
[50] Martens, "The Mithraeum in Tienen," 25-56, but see especially 30-38.
[51] De Grossi Mazzorin, "I resti animali".
[52] Lentacker, Ervynck and Van Neer, "Gastronomy or religion," 86. De Grossi Mazzorin "I resti animali".

There seems indeed to be a slight preference for the meat of chickens in this Roman mithraeum, which is corroborated by material from other mithraea in the Roman world,[53] and though this in itself is not surprising, the sex (male), and the sexual status (castrated) of the birds is. There seems to be an overwhelming preference for capons, castrated male domestic fowl, though why this should be so is unclear. Though the commonsensical interpretation would suggest that capons are plumper and simply better to eat, it is still tempting to speculate on the relation of the castrated birds to the sexually ambiguous Mithraic initiatory grade of *nymphus*. Without corroborating evidence, however, such a link remains tenuous, and in my mind, is not worth following at this point in time. Still, the symbolic meaning of the cock (or the capon) is intriguing, and, finding no practical reasons for this preference, Lentacker, Erwynk and Van Neer suggest the alternative of a symbolic relationship, though without really going into just what the nature of this relationship might be:

> In conclusion, a dominance of male fowl is the typical pattern (although not exclusive) for *mithraea*. Clearly, gastronomy cannot account for the relationship between Mithras and the cock. Otherwise female domestic fowl would be found at *mithraea* and chickens would have been abundant in all Roman temples. The link between the cock and the cult of Mithras must therefore be a symbolic one.[54]

Few positive conclusions can be drawn from this preference of fowl even if one of the *dadophori*, usually *Cautes*,[55] is sometimes depicted brandishing a cock, or at least a chicken, and one of the *Leones* is depicted as carrying a cock in a mural of a procession at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum. Lentacker, Ervynck and Van Neer have considered the role of the cock and the other animals at the Tienen mithraeum in greater detail, and some of their conclusions may be applicable to the Roman material.

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[53] Notably at *Tienen*, but taphonomic finds from many of the northern mithraea show the same trends, see for instance the mithraea of *Künzing*, *Martigny*, *Orbe-Boscéaz*, *London*, *Septeuil*, *Zillis*, all of which are briefly discussed and referenced in Lentacker, Ervynck and Van Neer, "The Symbolic Meaning of the Cock," 69-73. Presentations of the faunal material from some of these mithraea are presented in Martens and De Boe, *Roman Mithraism*.

[54] Lentacker, Ervynck and Van Neer, "Gastronomy or religion", 90.

[55] See Hinnells, "The Iconography of Cautes and Cautopates I," 36-37. The mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum* features Cautes with a cock at his feet, see Lissi-Caronna, "Castra Peregrinorum," 32-33.

The authors suggest that, "the selection of the animals killed for the festivities most probably also reflects the symbolic meaning of certain species within the Mithras cult", a statement which is hardly enlightening. The archaeologists' reluctance to venture into symbolic interpretation does not diminish the importance and potential utility of these taphonomic studies however. The promise of taphonomics for Mithraic scholarship is summed up thus by Lentacker, Ervynck and Van Neer:

> While such finds [of animal remains] were formerly often not recovered or studied, and only figured as anecdotal mentionings in publications, it is now realised that they are not only of interest to archaeozoologists but can also help to reveal what was happening within the Mithras cult. However, an indepth analysis of the place of animals within the religion can only be made when historians start to take into account fully the data from the archaeozoological analyses, which could eventually lead to a review of the ritual role of certain animals within the Mithras cult and myth.[56]

1.1.3. Mithraic numismatics

Coins have been another understudied category in Mithraic scholarship until recently, possibly because the only questions numismatics seem able to answer relate to the last phases of the cult, to the dating of the abandonment and destruction of Mithraic sites which, as a rule, have not been given much attention in Mithraic scholarship so far. This is, I believe, mainly because numismatics have not proven especially helpful in regard to the questions of dogma and origin, which have traditionally been the main areas of scholarly interest. Christopher Howgego emphasizes the marginal nature of numismatic evidence for religious studies in a recent article, and goes so far as to state that: "There is no room [in coinage] for 'private religion' or for the theology of immigrant minorities. There is thus almost no evidence for the spread of Mithraism, Judaism, or Christianity."[57]

Numismatics, and especially statistical analyses of coin deposits found in mithraea, has, on the other hand proven to be important in dating various mithraea, and coins seem to be especially useful in tracing the last phase of the cult in the north-western empire.[58] The utility of the coin finds is completely dependent on stringent stratigraphy, however, a factor which unfortunately often complicates matters,

[56] Lentacker, Ervynck and Van Neer, "The Symbolic Meaning of the Cock," 75.
[57] Howgego, "Coinage and Identity," 2.
[58] See especially Sauer, *The End of Paganism*, and *Religious Hatred*, but also "Coins in Mithraea".

since the stratigraphy of many Mithraic sites is often poorly recorded. Consequently, it is often difficult to ascertain which strata the coins belong too, and their usefulness in corroborating stylistic dating is minimalized. But numismatic material often allows us to establish, or at least corroborate, the chronological development of the use of some mithraea and their communities in a general sense, since findings of datable coins in the excavated materials in many cases allow for the establishment of a *terminus post quem* for the abandonment of the mithraeum. However, whether the locale remained in use as a Mithraic cult room or whether the site was used for other purposes is often more difficult to determine.

Additionally, in the context of late antique Mithraism, we should entertain the possibility, suggested by Eberhard Sauer, that numismatic evidence may indicate a relationship between coin deposits and an increasing "openness" in Mithraic cult practice in late antiquity:

> It appears now that coins were deposited on the temple floor by the votaries themselves. The scale of offerings compares favourably with sanctuaries open to the public, possibly suggesting that Mithraism opened up in Late Antiquity. While some temples were abandoned earlier, all those with numerous coin offerings continue until the late fourth, some presumably even into the fifth century.[59]

Unfortunately, coins are less useful when dealing with Mithraism in Rome in this period, mostly because of the scarcity of stringently recorded finds, of recorded stratigraphy, and of the almost total absence of numismatic evidence in the excavation reports of almost every known mithraeum in Rome. Indeed, using an example from nearby Ostia, Eberhard Sauer reports that, "a single excavating season at Ostia (between November 1885 and May 1886) yielded 372 bronze coins."[60] "Nevertheless," he continues, "it is symptomatic that the findspots or dates of mintage of the coins were not considered to be worth mentioning."[61] The implications for the study of Mithraism in Rome and its environs is sadly that we are left without corroborating evidence for the dating of almost all of the mithraea. Consequently we must do without the *Realien*, and other dating criteria must be considered instead. I will be returning to the difficult

[59] Sauer, "Coins in Mithraea," 343.
[60] Sauer, "Coins in Mithraea," 327.
[61] Sauer, "Coins in Mithraea," 327.

question of the dating of the Roman mithraea, which is often a case of combining stylistic dating with any corroborating archaeological material, in relation to the extent of Mithraism in fourth century Rome throughout this study. First, however, it is necessary to briefly present and discuss the Roman mithraea that seem to have been in use in the fourth century.

1.2. The Roman mithraea

The sixteen mithraea that I consider, based on the available evidence, to potentially have been in use in Rome in the fourth century are here listed in alphabetical order, instead of following Griffith's topographical system. I have, however, listed the *Regio* location of each mithraeum to facilitate correlating the data with Coarelli's listing of Roman mithraea.[62]

1. Casa di Nummii Albini / Via XX Settembre (Regio VI)
2. Castra Peregrinorum / Santo Stefano Rotondo (Regio II)
3. Castra Praetoria (Regio VI)
4. Crypta Balbi (Regio IX)
5. Foro Boario / Mitreo del Circo Massimo (Regio XI)
6. Foro di Nerva (Regio VIII)
7. Ospedale di San Giovanni (Regio V)
8. Palazzo Barberini (Regio VI)
9. Phrygianum / San Pietro (Regio XIV)
10. Piazza San Silvestro (Regio VII)
11. San Clemente (Regio III)
12. San Lorenzo in Damaso (Regio IX)
13. Santa Prisca (Regio XIII)
14. Terme di Caracalla (Regio XII)

[62] Coarelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," 70-75.

15. Terme di Tito (Regio III)
16. Via Giovanni Lanza 128 (Regio III)

Unfortunately, some of these mithraea are too badly damaged, or the original excavation report too scantily documented, to provide much useful information. Even so, the existence of each mithraeum provides valuable input for understanding the Mithraic topography of Rome, as well as for constructing statistically based models of demographics and membership. A minority of the selected mithraea contain positive evidence for founding or for re-decorating during the fourth century, but it can be argued, though *ex silentio*, that the others as well were in fact still in use, since there is no evidence of their destruction before the early part of the fifth century. Some of the sixteen mithraea are still extant today, but some, unfortunately, have disappeared, leaving only descriptions in the secondary sources.

Most of these mithraea are inadequately published, and there is often some confusion concerning much of the material associated with them, mainly due to the practices of archaeological excavations before the 1860's. However, a valiant effort at cataloguing the mithraea in Rome more systematically and in greater detail than had previously been attempted[63] was made by Alison Griffith in her 1993 doctoral dissertation: "The archaeological evidence for Mithraism in imperial Rome."[64] I have chosen to refer primarily to her enumeration, because many of the mithraea in question are neither discussed in Vermaseren's dissertation[65] nor subsequently in his corpus[66], and consequently do not have associated CIMRM numbers.[67] Problems associated with other publications listing the Roman mithraea also make adherence to Griffith's system desirable.

[63] Vermaseren deals with the Roman mithraea both in his doctoral dissertation, *De Mithrasdienst in Rome*, and in the *CIMRM*, and Coarelli briefly lists the Roman mithraea in topographical order in "Topografia mitriaca di Roma", but neither of them do so in the systematic fashion in which Griffith discusses in detail the available evidence for all the known mithraea of Rome at the time of writing her dissertation. When dealing with the remains of mithraea in Rome, Griffith's work is quite simply invaluable.
[64] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence". The dissertation has so far unfortunately not been published.
[65] Vermaseren, *De Mithrasdienst in Rome*.
[66] Vermaseren, *CIMRM*.
[67] The prefix V is used to denote CIMRM numbers throughout this study.

The Roman mithraea are only listed in four other publications. These are Cumont's *TMMM*,[68] Vermaseren's dissertation *De Mithrasdienst in Rome*, Vermaseren's later *CIMRM*,[69] and a short article by Filippo Coarelli "Topografia mitriaca di Roma". In all of these publications, an in-depth assessment of the quality and quantity of the actual evidence for the mithraea is missing, and indeed, many of the mithraea are not really described at all but rather simply listed. This has lead to the inclusion of several mithraea for which there is no evidence, material or otherwise, and the issue is further complicated by the use of different names for the mithraea, different catalogue numbers, and different organizational principles in the sorting and presentation of the Roman mithraea.[70] More serious, however, is Griffith's objection that "the way in which these catalogues have presented the architectural remains of mithraea and other Mithraic monuments has influenced the interpretation of Mithraism in Rome. Most obviously, by obscuring the dates of the mithraea the catalogues treat them as if they were all contemporary."[71]

This last point is of course especially valid from the point of view of contextual studies like Griffith's and my own. The lack of any chronological considerations and differentiation in most primary studies and catalogues of Mithraic remains also, unfortunately, often extends to many secondary studies of the material. Recent advances in archaeological methodology seem to be alleviating the problem and remedying this trend simply by being able to provide a much more stringent basis for dating newly excavated material, and also, one would hope, by making this material more readily available to the scholarly community.

The only mithraeum in the present study not referred to by either the enumeration in Griffith's list or by a V (*CIMRM*) number, is the mithraeum of the *Crypta Balbi*, which was excavated only very recently. With regard to the inscriptions associated with the mithraea, however, I have opted to keep the *CIMRM* designations, mainly for ease of reference. The corresponding designations in *CIL*, *CIMRM*, *TMMM*, etc. will be given in the notes where relevant.

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[68] Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*.
[69] *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*.
[70] See Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 14-18.
[71] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 15.

Alison Griffith operates with the following three categories of mithraea: definite, possible, and rejected, and her criteria of selection are clearly explained as follows:

> The investigation in this chapter defines what constitutes evidence for a definite mithraeum, and it makes distinctions in the quality of evidence by designating a mithraeum as definite, possible or rejected. A definite mithraeum is a sanctuary for which there are physical remains or an inscription which clearly mentions a sanctuary by using a word for cave such as *antrum* or *spelaeum*.[72]

Before moving on to a brief discussion, or listing, of each of the sixteen fourth century mithraea, it is important to bear in mind that, contrary to Griffith, I shall count as definite even mithraea for which there is no extant physical evidence. This is because, as we shall see, in some cases there are grounds for counting a non-extant mithraeum as "definite", in the sense that it certainly existed physically at some point in time and was in use by a Mithraic community, a conclusion that can be reached based on other types of evidence than the criteria Griffith establishes in the quote above. Such distinctions between classes of mithraea, in this case the distinction between mithraea classed as *definite*, *possible*, and *rejected*, are important, but perhaps less so when the aim is not first and foremost to sort out the archaeological provinience of each Mithraic site. In my case, the primary consideration is to establish the parameters for the demographic patterns of Mithraism in fourth century Rome, and not the archaeological provenience of each mithraeum in question. Having established that, I will now briefly discuss each of the sixteen mithraea.

1.2.1. The mithraeum of the *Casa di Nummii Albini / Via XX Settembre*

The first of these mithraea, the mithraeum of the *Domus of the Nummii Albini,* is one that in all likelihood was founded sometime during the fourth century, and it is rated as a definite mithraeum by Alison Griffith.[73] Though the mithraeum itself is no longer extant, it is especially important for the present study because of its firm connection with one of the most important senatorial families of the period, the Nummii Albini. Not only is the relatively firm association between a mithraeum and one of the leading

[72] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 19.
[73] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 13D, V 386-388, Coarelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," 18.

senatorial families of Rome a rather rare phenomenon, but it is also significant because the discovery of a mithraeum in the *domus* of the Nummii Albini corroborates the epigraphic evidence of the *Phrygianum* and the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro* which suggests active involvement in the Mithraic cult by the elite of Roman society in the mid-to-late fourth century. [74]

The families of the Roman senatorial aristocracy were, it seems, more deeply involved with Mithraism during the late fourth century than they seem, as a class, to have been before. However, we must also consider the probability that this seeming preference is due to the vagaries of the survival of archaeological evidence. It is also worth bearing in mind the explosive growth of the senatorial aristocracy itself in the wake of the Constantinian reforms which more than tripled the membership of the Roman *clarissimi* from approximately six hundred to two thousand persons.[75] In addition to this connection with the senatorial aristocracy, another important detail related to this mithraeum is the identification made by Cappanari of a structure with a drain in a corner outside the mithraeum which he postulated was used to drain off the blood from a tauro- or criobolium.[76] Additionally, this mithraeum also had a plaster tauroctony and a wall painting of the bull slaying scene, stylistic elements which seem to fit well with other third century and fourth century mithraea, as for example the stucco icon and extensive murals of the *Santa Prisca* and *Barberini mithraea* in Rome, respectively, and the tauroctony and initiation frescoes of the *Marino* and *Capua* mithraea in central Italy.[77]

1.2.2. The mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum / S. Stefano Rotondo*

The mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum* is again rated as a definitive mithraeum by Alison Griffith.[78] Based on the archaeological evidence, the mithraeum seems to have been founded, and to have been in use from, about 180, but the mithraeum went through a second building phase, dated by Elisa Lissi Caronna to

[74] See Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 84.
[75] Lançon, *Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive*, 70.
[76] Capannari, "scoperte archeologiche," 3-12.
[77] See chapter 2 of this study.
[78] See Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 26-31. The mithraeum is number 1D in Griffith's system and number 2 in Coarelli's. It does not have a number in Vermaseren's *Corpus*.

the late third century when it was substantially refurbished and remodeled.[79] The remodeling entailed an enlargement leading to a doubling in size but which also resulted in an untypical square ground plan rather than the more typical rectangular plan. This mithraeum is interesting for us for several reasons, but the most important are the presence of two main icons and the possibility that they could both have been in use during the fourth century, as well as the changes that can be observed with regard to the placing of imagery due to the enlargement of the mithraeum.

This mithraeum is also of interest to this study because the enlargement of the mithraeum seems to have been carried out in the late third century, when it was almost doubled in size, suggesting that the membership of this mithraeum increased rather than decreased in the last decades of the third century and in the early fourth century. This fact is of considerable interest for the question of the Mithraic demographics of late antique Rome.[80] Thus, at least one Mithraic community, and most likely several others too, as we shall see, was in growth at this point in time, a fact which seems to belie the common assumption that the cult was in decline from the late third century onwards.

There is also the question of the destruction of the mithraeum to consider. There is no doubt that this mithraeum was violently destroyed, as pieces of the original stucco relief were scattered on the floor and the marble relief had a piece of the upper left corner knocked off. The movable objects found on the site were also scattered throughout the mithraeum, suggesting to Lissi-Caronna that, "questo mitreo subì una violenta devastazione."[81] But the crucial question in the context of this study is *when* this destruction of the decoration of the mithraeum took place. Like many other Roman mithraea, the mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum* was filled up with debris to be used as a foundation for another building, in this case a fifth century church, and the nature of this kind of fill often makes a precise dating difficult. According to Lissi-Caronna the construction of the church of *S. Stefano Rotondo*, using the mithraeum as foundation, has wrecked havoc with the stratigraphy of the site, making any firm archaeological dating hazardous,

[79] Lissi Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 15-24.
[80] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 15.
[81] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 46.

though a very late fourth century or early fifth century date is not unreasonable.[82] In conclusion, this mithraeum was doubled in size towards the end of the third century, and seems to have been continually in use at least throughout the fourth century, suggesting that the Mithraic community which frequented the *spelaeum* was alive and well, perhaps even expanding, in this period.

1.2.3. The mithraeum of the *Castra Praetoria*

The mithraeum of the *Castra Praetoria*[83] is deemed definite by Griffith, though this is based on epigraphic evidence since no architectural remains of the mithraeum have ever been found. Still, there was most definitely a mithraic site on the premises, most likely a mithraeum, since according to Vermaseren: "in the castra praetoria itself two finds were made, showing that the god was also worshipped in the camp and in all probability had a sanctuary of his own."[84] Interestingly, Vermaseren later seems to have changed his mind, as the *Castra Praetoria* is no longer listed as a mithraeum in his *Corpus*. Following Coarelli and Griffith, I have treated the site as a definite mithraeum in this study.

As seems often to be the case with the Roman sites, there is no known precise find-spot for the relief and the statuette, making any further effort at identifying a mithraeum all the harder, and Filipo Coarelli states simply: "rilievo e statua di dadoforo scoperti in prossimità o all'interno dei *Castra Praetoria*, in un punto non precisato."[85] There are also two inscriptions related to the mithraeum, both dedicated to the health and well being of Septimius Severus, Caracalla, and Geta,[86] suggesting a late second or early third century dating of the mithraeum, or perhaps even later, but in any case the mithraeum must have been comparatively short lived since it was presumably destroyed when Constantine converted the barracks of the Praetorian Guard into the church of *San Giovanni in Laterano*.[87]

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[82] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 46.
[83] Griffith 14D, V 397-398, Coarelli 21.
[84] Vermaseren, *De Mithrasdienst in Rome*, 145.
[85] Coarelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," 73.
[86] *CIL* 6.780, and *AE* (1911) 220.
[87] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 85-88.

Of the two Mithraic pieces recovered from the site of the *Castra Praetoria*, the statuette of the torchbearer seems now to be lost.[88] The tauroctony relief,[89] on the other hand, is still extant, and it holds a special interest to studies of Mithraic iconography as it is one of a very few reversible tauroctony reliefs from the city of Rome. The obverse of the relief shows the tauroctony scene, while the reverse predictably depicts the sacred banquet of Sol and Mithras. Unfortunately, only part of the relief has been preserved, but enough remains for us to be able to discern Mithras reclining at the table with the usual drinking vessel, in this case a horn, and a plate of loaves on a tripod. There seems also to be a figure representing a raven-masked initiate, a *corax* presumably, "walking towards one of the fellow-guests in order to hand him a cup."[90] For this reason the icon is important in relation to the study of the grade hierarchy in Rome as well, and even though the mithraeum was presumably destroyed with the barracks after Constantine's victory, it remains an important piece of evidence for the structure of the grade hierarchy in late antique Mithraism in Rome.

1.2.4. The mithraeum of the *Crypta Balbi*

This mithraeum is thought to have been founded in the very beginning of the third century and to have been in use at least up until the late fourth century and possibly well into the fifth.[91] The mithraeum was recently discovered in the middle of what appears to have been a four-story, densely populated *insula* at the southern end of the Campus Martius. With its overall dimensions of approximately 31.5 by 12 meters, this mithraeum is so far the largest found in Rome, and one of the largest known mithraea in the Roman world. This mithraeum too seems to have been extensively re-modeled in the late third- and early fourth century according to Marco Ricci:

> Con la fine del III inizi del IV secolo, in età constantiniana, sia l'aula di culto che gli ambienti nord vennero ristrutturati nuovamente. Nel mitreo venne ampliato verso sud il banco settentrionale e vennero realizzati quattro pilastrini in opera mista addossati ai banchi intorno al blocco con anello nel

[88] V 398. The statuette was reported by Cumont to have been in the Tabulario at Rome, but while compiling the *CIMRM*, Vermaseren could not find it. *CIMRM*, 171.
[89] V 397.
[90] Vermaseren, *CIMRM*, 171.
[91] See Ricci, "Crypta Balbi", and Saguì, "Crypta Balbi".

> corridoio centrale; di questi I due ad oriente presentano alla base due nicchie quella sud probabilmente per una lampada e quella nord con un'olla impiantata nel pavimento.[92]

There is no archaeological evidence for the abandonment or closing of the mithraeum before the mid-fifth century, when apparently parts of the mithraeum and the room to the north of it were transformed into a stable following an earthquake. The primary importance of all this is that this mithraeum was most definitely not destroyed by Christians, at least not during the fourth century. This is all the more remarkable since the mithraeum was located roughly in the middle of an apartment building in, or at least near, the city center. Essentially, again according to Marco Ricci, there were no major structural changes before the middle of the fifth century:

> Non possediamo notizie certe riguardo alla chiusura del mitreao in relazione all'editto di Teodosio. …Una reale trasformazione avviene soltanto intorno alla metà del V secolo, forse anche in relazione al terremoto del 443, quando possiamo collocare lo smantellamento degli arredi del mitreo e dell'ambiente contiguo a nord.[93]

Lucia Saguì even notes that the "…*mithraeum* was in use till at least way in the 4th century, as testified by the material found on the earthen floors, but perhaps also later on since the destruction layer can be dated around the middle of the 5th century."[94] A series of objects, craters, and lamps showing "characteristics, dimensions and iconography which may be related to ritual use"[95] were also found in this late layer, suggesting that late fourth and early fifth century Mithraism employed, at the very least, continuous ritual iconography, though the interpretation and ritual application of these implements may of course have changed by this time.

The mithraeum of the *Crypta Balbi* has not yet been published in its entirety, but a preliminary note about the excavation and the architecture of the mithraeum, along with another article describing some of the objects found in the mithraeum have been recently published, and a short zooarchaeological

[92] Ricci, "Crypta Balbi," 162.
[93] Ricci, "Crypta Balbi," 164.
[94] Saguì, "Crypta Balbi," 175.
[95] Saguì, "Crypta Balbi," 175.

note concerning the finds of various animal bones was published in the same volume.[96] The animal finds are found in a variety of depositions within the mithraeum, and are dated mainly from the fourth to the fifth century, and seem to show broadly the same tendencies as the material from Belgium discussed above.[97]

1.2.5. The mithraeum of the *Foro Boario*

Another mithraeum that must be included is the one found on the *Forum Boarium* "built in the third century A.D., certainly by plebeians, who were trading there,"[98] according to Vermaseren, though there is little corroborating evidence for the social standing of this Mithraic community. The mithraeum is usually dated to the late third, or possibly early fourth century, and was extensively remodeled, at least on two occasions, evidenced by the structural changes and the brickwork, which includes a fourth century wall of yellow and red brick. [99] The mithraeum is considered to be a definite mithraeum by Alison Griffith[100], and, interestingly, it bears some striking and important parallels to the newly discovered mithraeum of the *Crypta Balbi* with regards to the building phases of the mithraeum, and especially with regards to its placement in the middle of an *insula*.

The *Foro Boario* mithraeum was discovered by Pietrangeli and Colini[101] in a public building close to the Circus Maximus which went through several different building phases including extensive re-modelling of the area used for the mithraeum. The mithraeum itself was constructed through the conversion of a series of small rooms, and according to Griffith, it was the extensive re-modelling of these rooms, partially blocking them off so that "the long axis of the mithraeum cut across the short axes of

[96] The mithraeum was only discovered in 2000, and has yet to be comprehensively published. Some preliminary reports have recently been published however, and chief among these are: Ricci, "Crypta Balbi" on the excavation itself, Saguì, "Crypta Balbi" on some of the objects recovered, and De Grossi Mazzorin, "I resti animali" on the zooarchaeological finds. All three papers are published in Maartens and DeBoe, *Roman Mithraism*.
[97] Namely a slight preference for the consumption of domestic fowl, usually castrated males.
[98] Vermaseren, *De Mithrasdienst in Rome*, 143.
[99] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 126.
[100] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 124-130. The mithraeum is Griffith 31D, V 434 (mithraeum) and 435-455, and Coarelli 31.
[101] Pietrangeli, "Il mitreo" is the excavation report, while Colini, "Relievo mitriaco" is concerned mainly with the tauroctony relief found in connection with the mithraeum.

these rectangular rooms" [102], that provided the mithraeum with a slightly more rectangular floor-plan than that of most other mithraea in Rome. The mithraeum, then, was found in the middle of a building that we must assume, because of its location, was still in public use in the fourth century, paralleling what we know of the placement of the *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum which was also located in the middle of a densely populated *insula*. This semi-public location of both of these mithraea raises some interesting questions about the often postulated "secluded" nature of Mithraism, and it seems that while the activities inside the mithraeum were only accessible to the initiated, the actual existence of the mithraeum must have been common knowledge in the neighborhood, not unlike the contemporary Christian churches.

Circumstantial evidence of this type – the enlargement of the sanctuaries, the location of new mithraea in the middle of publicly accessible structures near the center of the city, and a tendency for refurbishing older mithraea – imply that contrary to stagnation and decline, the cult of Mithras was actually in growth in the city of Rome in the fourth century. It is usually argued that any growth of the cult in this period is due to the syncretistic inclusiveness of the senators associated with the pagan revival in the late fourth century, but both the excavated mithraea and Mithraic art seem to show an obvious tendency towards continuity.

In fact, for most, if not all, of these mithraea that were enlarged and refurbished in the fourth century, there is no evidence linking them to anyone of senatorial rank. Instead, the evidence of mithraea like the *Foro Boario*, the *Castra Peregrinorum*, and the *Crypta Balbi* seem to belie such a model, suggesting rather a steady growth among the ordinary membership of the cult – the lower ranking bureaucrats, merchants, soldiers, and *liberti* – which are usually found making up the ranks of the Mithraic communities. The increased "visibility" of Mithraism in the public eye, which seems likely from the growing use of semi-public locations for the mithraea founded in the late third century and in the fourth century, needs corroborating evidence for any firm conclusion to be drawn, but it is worth noting that the

[102] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 125.

recently discovered mithraeum at Tienen[103] provides evidence for large-scale, semi-public feasts outside of the mithraeum itself, suggesting that each mithraeum might have had a far larger following than its relative size would imply. This organizational model of an inner core of initiated Mithraists combined with a peripheral following of laymen is a possibility that should at the very least be seriously taken into consideration when dealing with statistical models of Mithraic demographics.

Alison Griffith also notes that the architectural compartmentalization evident in this mithraeum, caused in this case by the conversion of several small rooms into a mithraeum, is much more common in the mithraea of Ostia than in those of Rome itself, with several mithraea in Ostia being constructed in this fashion. For example, the mithraeum of the *Planta Pedis*, the mithraeum *Degli Animali*, the *Casa di Diana* mithraeum, the house of *Lucrezio Menandro*, the *Terme del Mitra*, the *Pareti Dipinte* mithraeum, and the *Sabazeo* mithraeum all have compartmentalized spaces.[104] Interestingly also, in relation to the question of the role of associated goddesses in the cult of Mithras and of the allegations of syncretism in the late cult, the mithraeum on the *Forum Boarium* also contained the lower part of a statuette of Minerva, as well as the base of a Venus-statuette.[105]

1.2.6. The mithraeum of the *Foro di Nerva*

"Only towards the end of the fourth century A.D. was Mithras admitted to a small, insignificant sanctuary on the Forum of Nerva," writes Vermaseren,[106] but the mithraeum is rejected by Griffith on account of the absence of any firm evidence.[107] The mithraeum of the *Forum of Nerva* is indeed no longer extant, and it may never have existed at all, but a recovered inscribed relief of Sol found in the location usually most certainly is from a mithraeum on the spot or close by.[108] Coarelli admits the possibility that: "Anche in questo caso è dubbia la localizzazione dello *spelaeum*, anche se è possibile che in epoca tarda il Tempio di

[103] The mithraeum has not yet been fully published, but see the preliminary reports in Maartens and DeBoe, *Roman Mithraism*.
[104] For more information and technical details on the mithraea in Ostia, see Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, Becatti, *I mitrei*, Laeuchli, *Mithraism in Ostia*, but especially Backer, *Living and Working*. Pavia, *Mitrei di Roma*, contains several high quality photographs of the most important mithraea at Ostia.
[105] V 441 and 442 respectively.
[106] Vermaseren, *De Mithrasdienst in Rome*, 143.
[107] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 120-122. The mithraeum is Griffith 29R.
[108] V 411-412.

Minerva abbia potuto ospitare un mitreo."[109] In any case, Griffith asserts that the damaged inscription on the relief, most likely is Mithraic, but that it cannot be securely associated with any known mithraeum. According to Griffith, Roberto Paribeni dates the inscription tentatively to the fourth century,[110] as does Coarelli,[111] which, for my purpose, makes it useful for inferring the extent of Mithraic activity in Rome in the fourth century. The mithraeum, or in this case at least a Mithraic site datable to this late period, is important in relation to the quantitative demographic data, strengthening the case for growth, rather than decline.

1.2.7. The mithraeum of the *Ospedale San Giovanni*

The mithraeum of the *Ospedale S. Giovanni* has been only briefly published by Valnea Santa Maria Scrinari,[112] but though damaged, the site most definitely is a mithraeum, though not very large,[113] and it is also rated as definitive in Griffith's study.[114] Griffith gives the mithraeum a tentative date based on the brief excavation report, stating: "She [Scrinari] did not date the mithraeum, but the conversion from granary to cistern in the late 3rd century offers a reasonable *terminus post quem* for the sanctuary."[115] So the structural changes indicate a foundation date somewhere in or after the second half of the third century, while the remains of an oil lamp bearing the monogram of Constantine testify that the mithraeum was most probably still in use at the beginning of the fourth century at least, according to Valnea Santa Maria Scrinari:

> Tutti gli elementi ricuperati concordano ad assegnare alla seconda metà del III secolo lo svipullo della vita nell'ambiente mentre un solo elemento, che però per la casualità stessa del ritrovamento nello sterro del vano è poco probante per la sua cronologia, una lucerna a beccuccio allungato (tipo Dressel 31) decorata sul piattello con il monogramma costantiniano, ne porterebbe l'arresto agli inizi del IV se. d.C.[116]

[109] Coarelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," 73.
[110] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 120-121, refers to a short notice by Paribeni in *NS* 1933, 478-480.
[111] Coarelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," 73.
[112] Santa Maria Scrinari, "Il mitreo."
[113] The mithraeum had a length of about 7 meters and a width of about 3.7 meters; see Santa Maria Scrinari, "Il mitreo," 222.
[114] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 39-41. The mithraeum is Griffith 3D and Coarelli 11.
[115] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 40-41.
[116] Santa Maria Scrinari, "Il mitreo," 224.

1.2.8. The mithraeum of the *Palazzo Barberini*

The mithraeum of the *Palazzo Barberini*[117] sports one of the most famous of the Italian tauroctonies in fresco and Alison Griffith calls the painting "the single greatest contribution of this mithraeum to our general knowledge of Mithraism." The mithraeum is thought to have been founded in the middle of the second century, but the mithraeum, like many of the other mithraea of Rome, was heavily re-decorated at the beginning, or perhaps during the second quarter, of the third century, and there is no evidence indicating how long it remained in use. The spectacular tauroctony mural, which is discussed in detail in chapter 2 of this study, is dated to the second phase of the mithraeum, and it is thought to be roughly contemporary with the wall-paintings of the *Marino* and *Capua* mithraea with which the *Barberini* tauroctony shares many similarities. According to Griffith, "the combined evidence from the architecture and the painting shows that the mithraeum was used slightly before and throughout the Severan period."[118]

The mithraeum was of medium size for Rome, with a length of 11.83 meters and a width of 6.25 meters. It should be noted, however, that the entire length of the mithraeum has not been excavated. The *Barberini* mithraeum could have been part of the structure where an inscription naming the fourth century senator Alfenius Ceionius Iulianus Kamenius as *pater* in the Mithraic mysteries was found.[119] Thus, Kamenius may have been the owner or *pater* of this mithraeum, something which would mean that the mithraeum was in use in the late fourth century. However, Alison Griffith is critical of this connection:

> The Barberini mithraeum cannot be associated securely with the domus of Alfenius Ceionius Iulianus Kamenius for several reasons: because of its Severan date, because we cannot establish how long it remained in use, and because the original excavation reports do not contain enough information about the stratigraphical context of the peristyle remains to allow us to draw a conclusion about their relationship with the mithraeum. The sanctuary is, in fact, so close to the remains of the peristyle that both could easily have been part of the same property. Any further conclusion would be pure speculation.[120]

[117] Griffith 12D, V 389 (mithraeum) and 390-395, Coarelli 17.
[118] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 80.
[119] V 516.
[120] Griffith, "Mithraism," 6.

Griffith, following Capannari,[121] but only up to a certain point, thinks it much more likely that Kamenius was involved instead in some fashion with the mithraeum of the *Nummii Albini*, basing this assumption on the fact that the remains of this mithraeum are also found close to the inscription in question, and that the Ceionii Kamenii and the Nummii Albini had a long-standing connection by marriage.[122]

1.2.9. The mithraeum of the *Phrygianum* on the Vatican hill

Griffith calls the mithraeum of the *Vatican Phrygianum*[123] on the Vatican hill a possible mithraeum, or at least a Mithraic shrine within a non-mithraic sanctuary, and dates it to the fourth century on the basis of epigraphic evidence. The *Phrygianum* itself is no longer extant, and inscriptions from a large group of altars dedicated to the oriental deities are the only remains of this temple to Magna Mater and Attis. The date of the inscriptions on the altars range from 305-390, and according to Griffith: "This group of inscriptions is the only significant body of evidence for a sanctuary called the *Phrygianum*."[124] Moreover, the "Mithraic" inscriptions in question were in fact not dedicated to Mithras, but the dedicants list among their titles that each of them is a *pater* and *hieroceryx* of Mithras, leading Alison Griffith to classifiy the site only as a "possible" mithraeum: "These dedications do not suggest the existence of a mithraeum, but they might indicate that there was a shrine to Mithras in the *Phrygianum*."[125] The *Phrygianum* is not therefore really to be reckoned as a mithraeum as such, but it most definitely is a Mithraic site, and thus still has a place in this category, along with the inscriptions which, even though not Mithraic inscriptions, still provide a wealth of information about fourth century Mithraism, and are indispensable to any analysis of the cult in this period.

[121] Capannari, "casa del Nummi," 17-26.
[122] Griffith, "Mithraism," 7-8.
[123] Griffith 38P, V 513-514 (inscribed altars), TMMM 19-20 (inscribed altars).
[124] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 157.
[125] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 158.

1.2.10. The mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro*

"In the 15th century a Mithraeum was discovered on the Piazza S. Silvestro in Capite. About its construction all data fail," is Vermaseren's brief but poignant description of the mithraeum of the *Piazza S. Silvestro.*[126] Rodolfo Lanciani, however, furnishes a little more information, though he too notes the scarcity of any accounts concerning the details of its discovery:

> The sacred grotto of Mithras, in the Campus Martius, was within the limits of the seventh region, on the east side of the Via Lata, between the modern Corso and the general post-office in the Piazza of S. Silvestro in Capite, and, more precisely, in the plot of ground which is now occupied by the Marignoli palace. It was discovered at the end of the fifteenth century, but no satisfactory account of the discovery has come down to us. Fra Giovanni Giocondo and Pietro Sabino, who seem to have witnessed the event, only copied the inscriptions of the sanctuary, without describing any of the details of its architecture and disposition.[127]

The mithraeum itself is now lost, as are all the inscriptions copied by Giocondo and Sabino but one,[128] but owing to the epigraphic record which chronicles initiations performed by three generations of the same Roman *familia* in this mithraeum, as well as one inscription detailing the refurbishing of the mithraeum in the late fourth century, this mithraeum remains one of those most central to the discussion of fourth century Mithraism in general, and, along with the *Santa Prisca* murals and the floor mosaics of the *Felicissimus* mithraeum in Ostia, to the discussion of the grade hierarchy in Mithraism in particular. It seems to have been the private mithraeum of the family of Nonius Victor Olympius, a *vir clarissimus*, and the inscriptions associated with it give fascinating insights into several important aspects of the inner workings of the cult of Mithras in this period,[129] as well as into the structure of the grade hierarchy as mentioned above.

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[126] Griffith 22D, V 399 (mithraeum) and 400 – 406 (inscriptions), Coarelli 22, TMMM 9 (mithraeum) and 7 – 13 (inscriptions), CIL 6.749 – 6.754 (inscriptions).
[127] Lanciani, *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries*, 166.
[128] V 406.
[129] Especially the relationship between filial bonds and house mithraea. This relationship is discussed in chapter 3 of this study.

In addition to the inscriptions commemorating various initiations, there is another inscription which also belongs to this group, and is actually still extant, namely that on an altar set up by the grandson of Nonius Victor Olympius. This inscription celebrates the refurbishing of his grandfather's mithraeum, or perhaps the foundation of a new one, since the relevant text actually reads: *Antra facit*. In any case, the reconstruction of an older mithraeum, or the construction of a new one, in the late fourth century is another indication of the growth of the cult in this period. The location of this mithraeum should also be briefly considered, since, according to Daniela Gallo, the mithraeum was located inside the precinct of Aurelian's temple of Sol.[130] The identification and location of the mithraeum is well argued and has interesting implications because of the connection between Mithras and Sol apparent in Mithraic epigraphy and iconography. Ultimately, however, the conclusion must be the same as Griffith's, that: "There was certainly a mithraeum, but the present evidence does not indicate whether it was inside the temple of Sol or merely near that sanctuary."[131] It has also been suggested, most recently by Gallo,[132] that the mithraeum destroyed by the prefect Gracchus in 376/377 and famously reported by Jerome,[133] was in fact the mithraeum of *San Silvestro*, but there is no firm evidence for this and any such conclusion remains pure speculation.

1.2.11. The mithraeum of *San Clemente*

The mithraeum discovered in a Roman *domus* underneath the Basilica of *S. Clemente*[134] is one of the best known of the Roman mithraea, especially since it is the only mithraeum in Rome which is open to the general public on a regular basis, and was actually the first mithraeum to be excavated in a fashion approaching the modern archaeological standards with regard to stringent stratigraphy.[135] The mithraeum itself seems to have been abandoned some time in the late fourth century, but there is no clear evidence, or

[130] Gallo, "Il mitreo di S. Silvestro in Capite," 231-234.
[131] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 105.
[132] Gallo, "Il mitreo di S. Silvestro in Capite," 236-238.
[133] Jerome, *Ep.* 107.2.
[134] Griffith 5D, V 338-348, Coarelli 3, TMMM 19a-19f.
[135] See Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 47-62, for a summation and discussion of the excavations of this mithraeum.

any firm date, for its dismantling or destruction. Only the construction of the church of San Clemente on the foundations of the mithraeum gives a reasonable *terminus ante quem* for the abandonment of the mithraeum in the very late fourth century, or the early fifth century. According to Graydon Snyder, "no earlier than about 390, this third-century house [next to the one which housed the mithraeum] was transformed into what we know as the lower basilica [of San Clemente], with the neighboring house of the second century and its Mithraeum utilized in the construction of, or buried under, the apse and choir."[136]

The mithraeum is evocatively described by Vermaseren in the *CIMRM*, but as is often the case, he gives no information on dating.[137] Alison Griffith presents a useful summation of what is known about the mithraeum:

> In summary, then, the mithraeum under S. Clemente is a Severan period sanctuary with at least two associated rooms installed into the basement of a *domus* of the Flavian period. The mithraeum probably remained in use during the 3rd and 4th centuries until Christians, who gained control of the *domus* and the neighboring tufa-block structure, used both buildings for the foundations of the 5th-century basilica of S. Clemente.[138]

The mithraeum itself was not especially large, measuring 9.6 meters by 6 meters, but it belongs with a group of rooms thought to have been part of a Roman *domus*, leaving the possibility that some of these adjoining rooms were used in conjunction with the mithraeum. However, the actual function of these rooms and their possible connection with the mithraeum remain unknown.[139]

1.2.12. The mithraeum of *San Lorenzo in Damaso*

Of the mithraeum of *San Lorenzo in Damaso*[140] not much is left of the mithraeum itself, but Vermaseren tells us that:

> Of the sanctuary, situated near the entrance of the Palazzo,[141] to the right along the façade, only some remnants have been preserved: a fragment of a wall; traces of a white mosaic floor probably of the

[136] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 76.
[137] Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, 156-157.
[138] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 62.
[139] See Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, 156-157, Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 58-59, and Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 257.
[140] Griffith 23D, V 421 (mithraeum) and 422-428, Coarelli 27.

central aisle (Br. 1.50), laying between the two side-benches. On a fragment of a wall, traces of red painting decorated with small crescents and stars have been found.[142]

The foundation of the basilica by Pope Damasus (367-384) provides a *terminus ante quem* for the date of the mithraeum, but a more specific dating has proven difficult, though Lawrence Richardson states that: "The remains date from the middle of the third century, and the shrine is believed to have had a relatively short life."[143] We must still assume that it may have been in use at least during the first half of the fourth century, however, and the finds from the mithraeum include (in addition to a round altar,[144] a statue of the rock-birth,[145] a statue of cautopates,[146] and a fragment of a tauroctony relief[147]) one inscription put up by the *pater* Proficentius. This inscription is also important because it provides corroborating evidence for the use of the appellation *syndexi* by the initiates, as well as commemorating the construction of the mithraeum, called *spelaeum* in the inscription.[148]

The mithraeum seems to have been a modest one, not frequented by the senatorial aristocracy in the fourth century, and if one accepts the model of a demographic shift in the fourth century where the "Mithraism of the masses" died out and was superseded by "senatorial Mithraism", one might therefore assume that the mithraeum had a short life and was not in use in the late fourth century. However, there is no evidence to support either this model, or the assumption of a short lifespan for the mithraeum, and even Vermaseren concedes that: "It is a shabby spelaeum, to which no new dedications have been added afterwards. This does not prove, however, that the Mithraeum itself would have been used for a short time only."[149]

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[141] In the 15th century the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Damaso was incorporated into the Palazzo della Cancelleria.
[142] Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, 179.
[143] Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 258.
[144] V 422.
[145] V 428.
[146] V 427.
[147] V 426.
[148] V 423.
[149] Vermaseren, *De Mithrasdienst in Rome*, 146.

1.2.13. The mithraeum of *Santa Prisca*

Like the *San Clemente* mithraeum, the mithraeum beneath the church of *Santa Prisca*[150] on the Aventine Hill is one of the best known of the Roman mithraea, and it is arguably one of the most important Mithraic finds overall. It is known especially for its two layers of wall paintings, which, though badly preserved, have proved extremely intriguing, providing information particularly on the grade hierarchy, processions, and possibly ritual practices in Roman Mithraism.[151] The mithraeum, which is still largely extant, was likely founded in the late second century, but it was probably in use until the early fifth century, when it was filled up with rubble. It is "exceptional", writes Alison Griffith, "because it is part of a group of rooms which may have contained more than one sanctuary, and because it contains not one but two layers of paintings which are useful for dating the phase of the mithraeum and which also document part of the Mithraic liturgy."[152] On the north wall, Mithras and Sol (or the Mithraic *pater* and the *heliodromus*) are depicted sharing the sacred meal, and approaching them is a procession of initiates bearing the grade of *leo* and identified by name in accompanying inscriptions. The mural on the south wall shows another procession of initiates in which all the seven different grades are present, and the grades are accompanied by painted inscriptions above each figure. The initiates in this painting are shown leading a pig, a bull, and a ram (as well as a cock in the upper layer of painting), in a scene stylistically reminiscent of the sacrificial processions in Roman civil religion.

An additional couple of points are also of interest in relation to this mithraeum: First, the fact that it was carefully filled up with ruble and debris instead of being violently destroyed, much like several other mithraea in the area, suggests that the willful destruction of elements of the decoration of the mithraeum, if indeed it took place, was not due to religious conflict with Christians. In fact, according to Oliver Nicholson, who discusses the destruction of mithraea in Italy:

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[150] Griffith 32D, V 476 (mithraeum) and 477-500, Coarelli 37.
[151] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 148-178 (wall-paintings) and 179-240 (inscriptions).
[152] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 132.

> The Mithraeum at Santa Maria Capua Vetere 'was not destroyed but filled up with rubbish in order to make it inaccessible' (Vermaseren 1971: 1); the paintings on the walls were found unmarked and remarkably fresh. The Mithraic temple at Santa Prisca on the Aventine Hill in Rome was found in a similar condition. Here, too, the paintings were remarkably well preserved, though in some cases the faces had been scratched out. The temple had been deliberately filled with sand, brickbats, potsherds and other debris; it took the excavators and three men, working eight hours a day, four weeks to shift the rubble from one room alone.[153]

Though there is indeed a difference of opinion today concerning the extent of willful destruction, Vermaseren, in the original excavation report, was convinced that comprehensive destruction took place, and that the Christians were to blame:

> The Aventine Mithraeum was destroyed in a very thorough manner, and it has already been pointed out that the Christians first attacked the representation which had the most striking similarity to their own cult practices i.e. the picture of the sacred repast of Sol and Mithras. … After the destruction of the cult-niche and some of the monuments (though not others, the real meaning of which was not understood), the whole building was filled with rubbish – a not inconsiderable undertaking.[154]

Most scholars, following Vermaseren, tend to exaggerate the willful damage, highlighting the callous brutality of the destruction of the Mithraic murals at the Santa Prisca mithraeum, when in reality most of the damage can just as easily be attributed to the filling up of the room with debris. If one studies the excavation report in detail, it becomes clear that there is little actual evidence for the scenario of the mithraeum being destroyed by a mob of angry Christians.

Certainly, the stucco icon may easily have been destroyed as a result of the fill. The willful damage therefore seems limited to the following: Some of the eyes on some of the wall paintings were scratched out, the faces of Mithras and Sol in the painting of the sacred meal seem to have been damaged on purpose, and there is evidence for at least one axe hit.[155] This evidence is hardly compatible with any sort of total and systematic destruction of the mithraeum. Eberhard Sauer however, believes that the mithraeum was violently destroyed by Christians who felt a burning hatred towards the cult:

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[153] Nicholson, "The end of Mithraism," 360.
[154] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 241-242.
[155] See Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 149.

> At some stage before the building was filled in, the sharp blade of an axe, about 14cm wide to judge by the photographs, mutilated the scene. The axe attack left deep marks on the bodies of several figures. … The later filling up of the temple and its replacement by a church are an entirely different matter. Images, made both of stone and stucco, including the central cult image with the bull-slaying scene, were equally attacked in a violent matter and smashed to pieces. As far as the wall paintings are concerned the heads of the sun god and of Mithras himself were undoubtedly amongst the main foci of hatred and bore direct hits.[156]

But Sauer does not list any references to his sources in this case, and if the photographs he is referring to are the ones from Vermaseren and Van Essen's original report, these photographs are of such bad quality that little detail can be gleaned from them. It should be added at this point, however, that Sauer is primarily concerned with the end of Mithraism in the north-west provinces, where evidence for destruction is much more convincing and prevalent than it is in Rome.

Was religious hatred the main motivating factor behind the destruction of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum? In all likelihood, the destruction of the mithraeum did not take place until the beginning of the fifth century. At that time the supposed "struggle" between Mithraism and Christianity was long over, and since there is no evidence for *systematic* destruction, I think it is more natural to suppose that the motivation behind the filling of the mithraeum was much more prosaic – the creation of a firm fundament for the construction of the fifth century church of *Santa Prisca*. In this context, it is more likely that the strange images in the room may have been destroyed by superstitious workmen who at this point in time probably had no real idea of what they were seeing. Such a scenario fits well with the fact that the only willful damage seems to have been to the faces, and notably the eyes, of the figures in the paintings, while, as I noted above, the rather fragile icon of this mithraeum could easily have been destroyed in the process of filling the mithraeum with debris. There is in fact no positive evidence at *Santa Prisca* for a continuation of the cult into the fifth century, but the mithraeum may well have been in use until the early fifth century, when the church of *Santa Prisca* was built over it, as there is no evidence for destruction or abandonment of the mithraeum in the fourth century at all.

[156] Sauer, *Religious Hatred*, 135-136.

One last important point to consider is the fact that the luxuriously appointed and extensively decorated *Santa Prisca* mithraeum was situated quite close to the *domus* of the matron Marcella, Jerome's famous patroness, where he lived and taught during the later half of the fourth century. According to the French historian Bertrand Lançon, Fabia Aconia Paulina, the wife of the senator Praetextatus, who was a *pater patrum* in the cult of Mithras, was a frequent guest in Marcella's household:

> Les textes littéraires et épigraphiques montrent que les grandes domus sénatoriales se situaient principalement sur les collines entourant le Capitole et le Palatin. Sur l'Aventin se trouvait celle de Marcella, la matrone chez qui Jérôme réunissait des femmes pieuses pour les instruire, ainsi que celle de Praetextatus.[157]

This raises the interesting point that the actual conflict between Mithraism and Christianity in this period was minimal, contrary to what the rhetoric of Jerome and Prudentius would have us believe. Further more, the close social interaction between Christians and non-Christians implies that there were other modes of interaction at play between the two than fierce competition. At the very least this seems to be true towards the end of the fourth century in Rome, and this point is discussed more fully in chapter 3 of this study.

1.2.14. The mithraeum of the *Terme di Caracalla*

The impressive, still extant mithraeum situated underneath the *Baths of Caracalla*,[158] is with its 23 by 9.7 meters one of the largest found in Rome, next to the *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum. Dating the mithraeum has, as is too often the case with the Roman mithraea, proven problematic, but the sanctuary must at least have been installed after the completion of the baths in 216, and, according to Griffith, "No evidence for a certain date exists, although it is probable that the mithraeum dates to the 3rd century, either early, when the baths were built, or late, as Lugli[159] has suggested".[160] Certainly it seems to have been still in use

[157] Lançon, *Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive*, 91.
[158] Griffith 34D, V 457 (mithraeum) and 458-463, Coarelli 32.
[159] She is referring to Lugli, *monumenti antichi*, 159-161.
[160] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 145.

throughout the fourth century, and the bath itself probably remained in operation up until the cutting of the aqueduct which supplied it with water in 537.[161]

The main points of interest pertaining to this mithraeum are the location of the mithraeum in a relatively public building frequented by many people, and its large size implying a rather large Mithraic community.[162] Additionally, this mithraeum contains two so-called "basins", though one of them is really nothing more than a shallow circle with a diameter of 93 cm and a depth of ca. 11 cm lying directly in front of the entrance. The other, however, is more of a pit, rectangular in shape and 1.9 m deep, which can be entered through a tunnel from an adjoining room. The pit is situated roughly in the middle of the main cultic room of the mithraeum, and it has been suggested that these two pits, or at least the largest one, were used to perform taurobolia[163] and criobolia, the alleged ritual bloodbaths usually associated with the cult of Magna Mater. The evidence for such use of the pits is sketchy at best, however,[164] and on the basis of the current evidence the conclusion must be that, even though the largest pit in this mithraeum is technically large enough for one person to undergo the taurobolium, a bloodbath such as evocatively described by Prudentius[165] is highly unlikely to have taken place there, if indeed it ever took place at all.[166] The reasons for this are several. First, there is the problem of bringing the bull passively up to the pit, and this process is evocatively, even humorously, described by Cosi:

> Ancora Prudenzio ci dice che l'animale era addobbato con corone di fiori, con lamine dorate, e aveva le corna legate tra loro. Se si considera la nota violenza dei tori, non doveva esser facile costringere l'animale a giungere, così addobbato, fin nel locale sotterraneo, facendolo scendere per le scale e conducendolo in luoghi che abbiamo già supposto fumosi e maleodoranti. A ciò si aggiunga, tra parentesi, che il colore dominante delle raffigurazioni e degli apparati del culto mitriaco sembra essere stato il rosso, che come è ben noto è stato scelto fra tutti per eccitare ancor più l'animale.[167]

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[161] For data on the Bath of Caracalla, see Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 387-389.
[162] V 463.
[163] For the relationship between "taurobolium" and "tauroctony" in linguistic terms, see Cosi, "Terme di Caracalla," 934.
[164] Cosi helpfully provides a summary of the publications supporting the hypothesis that the pit was used for a taurobolium, see Cosi, "Terme di Caracalla," 933, n. 1.
[165] *Hunc inquinatum talibus contagiis, tabo recentis sordidum piaculi, omnes salutant atque adorant eminus, vilis quod illum sanguis et bos mortuus foedis latentem sub cavernis laverint*. - Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, 10.1000-1050.
[166] Neil McLynn has recently questioned the existence of such a ritual as described by Prudentius, see McLynn, "The fourth-century taurobolium," 312-330.
[167] Cosi, "Terme di Caracalla," 940.

In addition to the logistical problems involved in getting a bull into the mithraeum, not to mention in relative secrecy, there is another overriding practical consideration: where does the blood go? Dario Cosi brings attention to the very real problems of keeping and killing bulls in mithraea even after they have been successfully brought in and pacified: "In primo luogo la presenza e l'uccisione cruenta di un animale come il toro provoca odore, sporcizia, sangue, forse non facilmente sopportabili in un locale angusto, oscuro e non areato."[168]

Griffith concludes: "Cosi offered a practical argument against the performance of the bloody 4th-century version of the rite by pointing out that the pit has no drain for the fifty liters of blood in a bull.[169] Taken together, Duthoy's[170] and Cosi's analyses indicate that the taurobolium as a bloodbath did not occur in the pit in the Baths of Caracalla."[171] A person standing or crouching in the pit would have been drowned in the blood for which there was no outlet, and the mess would have been almost impossible to clean up. Hence, it is quite impossible, for practical reasons, to imagine a taurobolium ritual of the sort described by Prudentius to have taken place even in a mithraeum as large as that of the *Terme di Caracalla*.

1.2.15. The mithraeum of the *Terme di Tito*

The mithraeum which was located in the Baths of Titus[172] is another which is no longer extant, though it is described by Lanciani,[173] and several paintings and drawings reproducing the slightly unusual wall-painting of the tauroctony have been preserved. The site is classified as a definite mithraeum by Alison Griffith, mainly on the basis of Lanciani's description of it and the Mithraic elements associated with the site – namely the different variations of the reproductions of the unusual tauroctony scene. Griffith concludes, rightly in my opinion, that, "the Mithraic elements in the painting, though few, are too distinct

[168] Cosi, "Terme di Caracalla," 938.
[169] Cosi, "Terme di Caracalla," 939.
[170] Duthoy, *The Taurobolium*.
[171] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 147.
[172] Griffith 6D, V 337 (wall painting) and 364-365 (inscribed relief), Coarelli 2.
[173] Lanciani, "Le picturae antiquae cryptarum romanarum," 174-175.

to be coincidental. Moreover, the architectural context, a cryptoporticus, was suitable for a Mithraic sanctuary because it provided a dark, private, vaulted, underground space for the cult."[174]

The mithraeum itself has not to my knowledge been dated,[175] though it is worth bearing in mind that it survived relatively unscathed up until recently, and was not violently destroyed, nor filled up, in late antiquity, suggesting that in the end, it was simply abandoned. When this abandonment may have taken place is an open question, though one may suppose that it happened in the early fifth century rather than sooner, since real estate in Rome would have been at a premium before the sack of the city by the Goths in 410, making it highly unlikely that the premises would have remained unused. In addition to the possible late dating of the cult room, as well as the fact that the mithraeum was not destroyed, the mithraeum of the *Terme di Tito* is noteworthy because of the tauroctony mural, preserved in eighteenth century aquarelles and later drawings, which very uncharacteristically shows Mithras wearing the radiant Solar crown instead of his usual Phrygian cap.[176] The painting itself is discussed in detail in chapter 2 below.

1.2.16. The mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*

The very small *domus* mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*[177] is rated as definite by Griffith and is reckoned as one of the most central of the fourth century mithraea.[178] Richardson describes the untypical appearance and layout of the mithraeum thus:

> A lararium with statues of Isis-Fortuna and Serapis, as well as the Olympians, stood in a room above a mithraeum, accessible by a stair from the lararium. This was a small vaulted room with a marble Mithraic relief supported on brackets, in front of which was a rude altar. Several niches appear in the walls, and niches on the stair landing were probably for statues of Cautes and Cautopates.[179]

[174] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 65.
[175] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 63-66.
[176] V 337.
[177] Griffith 7D, V 356 and 357-360, Coarelli 5, TMMM 15. The mithraeum itself is only 2.70 by 2.20 meters according to Gallo (Gallo, "Il mitreo di Via Giovanni Lanza," 249), though Alison Griffith reports it as being 3.70 by 2.43 meters (Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 68).
[178] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 67-71.
[179] Richardson, *New Topographical Dictionary*, 258.

This matter-of-fact description evades the problems involved in the interpretation of this mithraeum summed up in the following words: "its layout does not conform to typical mithraea in every respect, its owner cannot be identified, and it is difficult to date precisely."[180] However, some indications point to a fourth century date,[181] and according to Alison Griffith: "What is most useful for supporting a 'Constantinian' date is the presence of a mithraeum in a particularly well-appointed *domus* containing certain architectural features which might indicate a 4th-c. date, as here, and the remarkable variety of deities in the *lararium*."[182]

An inscription traditionally associated with the mithraeum[183] describing the dedication of a (Mithraic) cave to Mithras by a priest of *Brontos* and *Hecate* is important for the discussion about the alleged "syncretistic" nature of fourth century Mithraism, and even though Griffith argues persuasively that the inscription cannot be securely associated with the mithraeum, since it was not found in situ, it still deserves consideration.[184] The possibility that the inscription was associated with the mithraeum is made a little more likely by the close association between the underground mithraeum and the small garden *lararium* upstairs, which housed representations of a variety of deities. Griffith also briefly discusses the interesting possibility that a cult meal may have taken place outside the mithraeum in the small garden above: "The mithraeum at Via Giovanni Lanza is undeniably too small for most worship activities, and it is thus distinctly possible that some of them, particularly the cult meal, took place outside the mithraeum in the garden above."[185] Such a scenario would be a parallel to the recent evidence for banquets held outside the mithraeum in Tienen,[186] where many more people were entertained than the mithraeum itself would have been able to hold. The example of the *Via Giovanni Lanza* mithraeum may point to the same type of event in relation to *domus* mithraea in fourth century Rome.

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[180] Griffith, "Mithraism," 3.
[181] See Gallo, "Il mitreo di Via Giovanni Lanza," 249.
[182] Griffith, "Mithraism," 4. It appears that the whereabouts of the sculptures from the lararium is unknown at present, making the dating of the mithraeum even more of a challenge. See Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 69.
[183] V 360, CIL VI 733, TMMM 61.
[184] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 69.
[185] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 71.
[186] See Martens, "The Mithraeum in Tienen", and Lentacker, Ervynck and Van Neer, "Gastronomy or religion" and "The Symbolic Meaning of the Cock".

1.2.17. Main trends in the material

This brief look at the sixteen mithraea, or Mithraic sites, which seem to have been in use in the fourth century, allows us to make some preliminary conclusions concerning the main trends of the material. First, there is a great degree of variation in the size of the mithraea, from the tiny mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128* to the very large mithraea of the *Terme di Caracalla* and the *Crypta Balbi*. The fact that the latter large mithraea were still in use throughout the fourth century suggests that at least some Mithraic communities had a considerable membership at this late point in time, and the relatively public locations of these two sanctuaries may also indicate that secrecy was less important, at least in late antiquity, than is usually argued. Certainly, the large scale of these mithraea and of their communities must have been noticeable in the context of a busy bath complex like the *Terme di Caracalla*, and in the middle of a large and densely populated *insula* in the middle of the city.

Several of the mithraea in question seem to have been refurbished and expanded towards the end of the third century, or even in the fourth. This suggests an increase in membership rather than a decrease, which is often postulated on the basis of the dearth of epigraphic evidence from the mid-third century onwards. Rather, the expansion of four of the sixteen mithraea in the late third or in the fourth century (*Castra Peregrinorum, Crypta Balbi, Foro Boario*, and *Piazza San Silvestro*[187]), and the foundation of at least three other mithraea during the fourth century (*Casa di Nummii Albini*, *Foro di Nerva*, and *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*), speak against any stagnation and decline in cult life.

Of these sixteen mithraea, only three can be positively connected with Mithraists of senatorial rank: *Casa di Nummii Albini*, *Piazza San Silvestro*, and the Mithraic shrine in the *Phrygianum*. While there is a possibility that the *Palazzo Barberini*, *Santa Prisca*, and *Via Giovanni Lanza* mithraea may also have had some connection to the senatorial aristocracy, there is no real evidence to support this assumption. Consequently, any firm connection must remain speculation rather than fact, suggesting that the "common people" were still by far the majority of the Mithraic membership in Rome in the fourth

[187] It remains somewhat uncertain whether the inscription set up by Tamesisus Augentius Olympius (V 406) commemorates the reconstruction of his grandfather's mithraeum, or the foundation of a new one. Most scholars tend to accept that Tamesius rebuilt the older mithraeum.

century. Indeed, had it not been for the inscriptions found in the *Phrygianum*, the idea of a break in continuity between the older cult and the revival of Mithraism in the late fourth century by members of the pagan aristocracy would most probably never have arisen.

Two of the mithraea discussed above, the *Casa di Nummii Albini* and the *Terme di Caracalla*, have been tentatively connected to the ritual bloodbath of the *taurobolium*, a rite usually thought to have been a feature of the Metroac cult rather than the Mithraic cult, and this has been thought to provide another link to the pagan senators of the *Phrygianum* inscriptions, several of whom are reportedly *tauroboliati*. There is, however, absolutely no evidence of any kind to suggest that such a ritual, especially in the gruesome fashion described by Prudentius, ever took place in these mithraea. On the contrary, every practical consideration suggests that the enactment of such a ritual was quite impossible within the confines of the mithraea, even one as large as that of the *Terme di Caracalla*.

Concerning the question of the date of the end of Mithraism in Rome, only three of the sixteen mithraea discussed above show evidence for destruction during the fourth century. These are the mithraea of the *Castra Praetoria*, *San Lorenzo in Damaso*, and possibly *Castra Peregrinorum*, though some of the evidence allows for the possibility that this mithraeum may also have survived into the early fifth century. Additionally, four more mithraea arguably escaped destruction until the fifth century: *Crypta Balbi*, *San Clemente*, *Santa Prisca*, and *Terme di Caracalla*. Hardly any mithraea show evidence of having been destroyed as a result of religious hatred; rather, they seem rather to have been incorporated into the foundations of new buildings, a process which was very common in antiquity, and was made easier by the underground location of most mithraea.

All in all, the evidence of the mithraea suggests a growth rather than a decline in the cult of Mithras in the fourth century, and this growth seems only marginally to have been dependent on the acceptance of the cult by the upper echelons of the Roman aristocracy. There seems to be a tendency for late antique mithraea to be less concerned with secrecy, with mithraea being located in relatively public venues, but the evidence is by no means secure enough for this to be considered unambiguously. It can be

securely stated, however, that, on the whole, the mithraea of Rome were not subject to violent, religiously motivated destruction, and many, if not most, seem to have survived into the fifth century.

1.3. The mithraea of Ostia and central Italy

While this study is primarily concerned with late antique Mithraism in the city of Rome, important comparative material from central Italy may also be considered in this context. In the main, this material will be discussed in detail only when appropriate in relation to the Roman material, especially in conjunction with statistical models of Mithraic demographics and as part of the discussion on Italian stylistic preferences in Mithraic art, but a brief summary of the source material in question will be useful at this point for comparative purposes. Most important here are the mithraea of Rome's port city of Ostia. Though Ostia was gradually abandoned during the fourth and the fifth century, and none of its mithraea can be conclusively proven to have been in use in this period, Ostia's mithraea have always been used as the primary comparative standard by which Roman Mithraism has been measured, and as such must be considered in detail. This comparison has generally been especially important in relation to demographic studies since the statistical models and data extrapolated onto the city of Rome are most often based on information from the port of Ostia where much of the layout and appearance of the late antique town has been preserved. Consequently, demographic data for Rome has often been arrived at through an upscaling of the Mithraic demographic model in Ostia, while allowing for certain basic differences between Ostia and Rome. In addition, the decoration of some mithraea in central Italy, namely those of Capua and Marino, has been used to argue for a uniquely Italian style of Mithraic art, and as these mithraea are quite likely roughly contemporary with the period of my main inquiry, they might offer valuable insights on several aspects of Roman Mithraism. The mithraeum at Ponza likewise offers interesting insights into late antique Mithraic architecture, art, and even the ritual practices of contemporary Mithraic congregations in Rome.

1.3.1. The mithraea of Ostia

The Ostian mithraea have been especially important in Mithraic studies for several reasons. As briefly mentioned above, one of the most important functions of the Ostian material has been the extrapolation of demographical distribution, membership numbers, and topographical location onto a more general model of Roman Mithraism, but also specifically for the city of Rome. 16 mithraea have been excavated and positively identified in Ostia so far, while one more possible mithraeum is regarded as "uncertain".[188] According to Jan Theo Backer, "the sixteen Ostian *mithraea* were steadily built and modified from the middle of the second century AD up to the second half of the third. Unexcavated shrines may of course prove to be earlier or later, but given what is known at present it may be assumed that chronologically the development in Ostia did not differ much from that in Rome."[189]

These Ostian mithraea seem to mirror trends in chronological development in the Roman material to a large extent, but there are two main differences. There is no firm evidence in Ostia of any mithraea being founded or refurbished later than the late third century. This may have something to do with the general depopulation of the port city. The other difference is that the mithraea themselves are generally smaller than those in Rome. The latter fact might be due to several factors, among them the relative population density of Ostia in relation to Rome, the status and function of Ostia as an active port, and the relative social catchments and ethnic makeup of the Ostian neighborhoods vis-à-vis Rome, especially in late antiquity when the fortunes of Ostia were waning.

1.3.2. The mithraea of *Sta. Maria Capua Vetere, Marino,* and *Ponza*

Three other well-known and well-preserved mithraea are found in locations not far from Rome. These are the mithraeum of *Marino* in the Alban Hills, the mithraeum on the island of *Ponza*, and the mithraeum of *Capua Vetere* on the coast close to Naples. The latter was discovered in 1922, and was described by

[188] Backer, *Living and Working*, 111-117 and 204-208, but especially 115 and fig. 16. For the mithraea of ostia, see also Becatti, *I mitrei*, Vermaseren, *CIMRM*, 114-147, Laeuchli, *Mithraism in Ostia*, Bianchi, ed., *Mysteria Mithrae*, and Beck, "Mithraism since Franz Cumont," 2022-2026.
[189] Backer, *Living and Working*, 204.

Vermaseren as "one of the most beautiful and important sanctuaries dedicated to Mithras."[190] The entire mithraeum was stuccoed and painted, and seems to have been refurbished several times. The wall paintings and the painted and star-spangled vault were never destroyed, though the mithraeum was abandoned at some point after the middle of the fourth century.

The latest secure dating of the mithraeum is offered by numismatic evidence, and according to Eberhard Sauer, "some time after AD 330/35, the date of the latest of three identified coins from the occupation levels of the temple, earth mixed with debris of tiles, mortar and stone were dumped through the air holes into the interior of the subterranean place of worship."[191] This fill essentially sealed off the mithraeum for posterity, and it is a point of note that though this mithraeum was clearly not violently destroyed, the actual technique used for the fill was not very different from the way in which several of the Roman mithraea were filled up, including the mithraeum of *Santa Prisca*, which is usually supposed to have been the target of Christian destructive rage. A comparative look at the filling up of these two mithraea might corroborate my point that the reasons for the filling of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum had much more to do with practical structural considerations than with religious hatred: the mithraeum at Capua, like some of those in Rome, was clearly filled up with some care, suggesting either that the structure was to be used as part of the foundation for another structure, or the less likely possibility that the room was to be filled up and blocked up by the Mithraists themselves to preserve the sanctuary. In any case, such a fill would be a rather strange outlet for a frenzy of religiously motivated hatred. As such, the *Capua* mithraeum can be used to argue against the prevalent argument that the mithraea were in general abandoned because of attacks by Christians.[192]

The *Capua* mithraeum is important to this study in two other respects as well. First, it can be securely proven to have been in use at least up until the middle of the fourth century corroborating finds from Rome. This indicates that Mithraism was still alive and well in central Italy in late antiquity and that

[190] Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I*, 1.
[191] Sauer, *Religious Hatred*, 53. See also Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I*, 49.
[192] See for instance Sauer, *The end of paganism*, and, *Religious Hatred*, 143-159, and especially 165-169, though Sauer does admit that "in most parts of the Empire the evidence is insufficient to tell one way or the other." (Sauer, *Religious Hatred*, 169.

fourth century Mithraism was not simply a result of the syncretistic tendencies of the senatorial aristocracy in Rome. Secondly, the mithraeum was sumptuously decorated, perhaps even on par with the *Santa Prisca* and *Barberini* mithraea in Rome, and its murals provide important comparative material in relation to those of the Roman mithraea. This is true not only of the cult icon in fresco, but also of the paintings on the sides of the *podia* illustrating what seems to be scenes of initiatory rituals. The focus on initiation evidenced by these paintings seems to support the notion that the grade hierarchy with its associated initiatory rituals was one of the central elements of Mithraism in Rome. This evidence from a site close to, but not in the immediate surroundings of Rome, show that Mithraism as it appears in Rome in the fourth century was not a brand of Mithraism peculiar only to that city, but shared many similarities with other Mithraic sites in central Italy in late antiquity.

The tauroctony mural of the *Marino* mithraeum is arguably the best known image of Mithras today, and it remains one of the most artistically accomplished of the painted icons – even featuring scenes from the "life of Mithras" elsewhere only found with the great complex reliefs of the Rhine frontier. The mithraeum was found as late as in 1963 at Marino in the Alban Hills not far from Rome, and measuring 29.20 meters, it is the longest in Italy outside of Rome. The size is not the only thing of importance with regard to this mithraeum, however, and it is important to note, in relation to the discussion concerning destruction of mithraea, that the *Marino* mithraeum shows no signs of intentional damage whatsoever, but seems rather to have been simply closed up, and subsequently forgotten. Dating the mithraeum has proven difficult, but it seems likely that it remained in use at least until the end of the fourth century. It is the quality of the wall paintings of the tauroctony, however, that really sets the *Marino* mithraeum apart from most of the other mithraea, though there are certain indications that the icon executed in fresco was more widespread than the extant evidence leads us to believe.[193] According to Meyboom who discusses the painting in relation to the two other more or less extant painted icons in central Italy:

[193] See chapter 2 of this study.

> The only other extant example of a painted tauroctony in Italy [in addition to the ones at Marino and Barberini] is that in the Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere. A few other similar painted representations existed but these are either badly damaged or not enough is known about them to give sufficient information. These three painted tauroctonies seem to belong roughly to the same period.[194]

These painted tauroctonies, and other relevant murals executed in roughly the same style, such as those of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum in Rome, are discussed in detail in chapter 2 of this study. For now, I will simply draw attention to the fact that the icons of the mithraea of *Marino* and *Capua* are the most important examples of the so-called Italian style of painted tauroctonies outside of Rome and therefore essential to a discussion of Mithraic art from the third century onwards. We must also briefly consider yet another mithraeum, namely that of *Ponza*, which is interesting because of its untypical layout, and because of its tauroctony, now lost but, according to Vermaseren, probably executed in stucco, paralleling the icon of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum and others from Rome.[195] This corroborates the evidence in Rome for the relative popularity of stucco icons in Italy, though these icons are of such a fragile nature that most are no longer extant. According to Vermaseren, the decorated vault of the mithraeum is also especially important because of its prominent zodiac:

> Here is represented also in stucco, but of a high artistic standard, a zodiac that is not only of interest to the specialist in Mithraic art but also to every student of the important science of astronomy and its so often disapproved but influential sister astrology. One can even say that the heavens which are in Mithraism commonly symbolized by the vault itself – sometimes richly decorated with stars – found their expression in this *speleum* in an exceptional zodiac, which must have been inspired by a *sacerdos dei Solis invicti Mithrae studiosus astrologiae*[196] who was at the same time *caelo devotus et astris*.[197]

This zodiac is important because it, along with decorations from the *Sette Sfere* and the *Sette Porte* mithraea in Ostia, shows a preference for astrological motifs in central Italy. These motifs are generally more subdued in the Roman material – the zodiacs usually being smaller in scale – unless of course the

[194] Meyboom in Vermaseren, *Mithriaca III*, 35.
[195] Vermaseren, *Mithriaca II*, 7.
[196] V 708.
[197] V 406. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca II*, 9.

tauroctony itself is interpreted in light of astrological symbolism, or "star talk" as Roger Beck calls it.[198] Finally, it should be noted that the mithraeum at Ponza, in contrast to the mithraea at Marino and Capua, *does* show sign of destruction, or rather vandalism, by Christians, since, according to Vermaseren, "opposite the entrance and at the beginning of the left side-wall of the *speleum* the Christians have hewn a cross in the wall above a holy water font."[199] But the evidence is ambiguous: "In the cult-niche there is no evidence of destruction by the Christians at the end of the fourth century, though it is likely that just as on the mainland the speleum was not used after that period. It is therefore not certain that the cross in the left wall is really antique and not of a much more recent date."[200] The mithraeum may well have been in use in the early fifth century, and it seems that the evidence for any destruction by Christians is in reality quite uncertain.

1.4. Mithraic topography – Excavated Rome and its mithraea

The topographical pattern created by the excavated mithraea can tell us important things about Mithraism in Rome, but it is important to bear in mind the vagaries of archaeological discoveries, of modern city-planning and other factors. For instance, some parts of Rome are more extensively excavated than others, while other areas have seen comparatively few excavations, at least in modern times, and in some instances, especially with the frantic excavations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much archaeological material has been overlooked or destroyed. At this point, a legitimate question is again why so many of the mithraea in Rome are located below Christian churches. There can of course be many possible answers to this question, one of them is that most churches built in the fourth and fifth centuries were built upon the foundations of older buildings or were simply converted from them, and as mithraea

[198] Astrological interpretations of Mithraic motifs have been very popular during the last three decades. The main proponents of different models of astrological interpretations have been: Beck, *Planetary Gods*, *Beck on Mithraism* (which collects his articles on the subject), and most recently *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, Gordon, "Sacred geography", Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, and "Mithras and the hypercosmic sun", as well as Speidel, *Mithras-Orion*. See also comments by Barton, *Ancient Astrology*, and Swerdlow, "Cosmical Mysteries".
[199] Vermaseren, *Mithriaca II*, 10-11.
[200] Vermaseren, *Mithriaca II*, 13.

were most often located in basement or ground floor rooms, they naturally became part of the foundation for any new structure built on the foundations of the old.

Much of the archaeological material would, as we have seen, seem to support such an interpretation, but there is also the very real possibility that this high frequency of churches constructed atop mithraea might have something to do with the fact that the excavations of the foundations of many of Rome's churches have been conducted with the aim of discovering the origins of the church itself. Methodical excavations have of course not been carried out underneath all the cellars of modern Rome, and who knows how many mithraea would come to light if this were done. Another small point to bear in mind is the very high density of small churches in Rome, leaving good odds that at least some of them may have been built on foundations which contained filled up, abandoned mithraea. In spite of all these reservations, we are still able to discern the outline of the topographical spread, or grid, of Mithraism in Rome.[201] In short, there seems to be an overridingly even distribution of mithraea throughout the city within the Aurelian walls, though with notable absences in some of the poorer neighborhoods and along the Tiber waterfront, as may be expected since the more affluent areas generally yield more archaeological remains, at least of the sort that was considered relevant to excavators prior to the twentieth century.

The religious topography of Rome in late antiquity is a difficult subject and wrought with uncertainties both practical and methodological, but the potential gains of successful models of the distribution of religious sites and the demographic implications of this distribution, make at least a brief excursion worthwhile. One important key seems to be the application of interpretative models, and according to Gisella Cantino Wataghin: "Even if all the practical and cultural problems hindering large-scale excavations in urban contexts and buildings-in-use could be overcome, the evidence would still remain fragmentary. Interpretation, therefore, still has to concentrate on discussing models."[202]

[201] For a more in-depth treatment of the actual topography of each mithraeum in Rome in the context of its immediate surroundings, see Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 163-240. See also Vermaseren, *Mithrasdienst*, 33-110, though Vermaseren's dissertation is naturally rather dated today.
[202] Wataghin, "Christian Topography," 252.

When devising this type of model it is important to bear in mind its hypothetical nature, however, since the topographical models are a product of, and depend on the same arbitraryness in the preservation of the archaeological evidence, in much the same way as other scholarly disciplines which focus mainly on the structural material. Luke Lavan argues that topography remains essential for establishing what he calls a "human spatial narrative", but that a wider array of sources than has commonly been accepted must be used for establishing these topographical models:

> In terms of methodology, it is clear that much of our knowledge of late antique urban topography has depended simply on crude patterns in the survival of archaeological evidence; to improve on this we must concentrate on writing actively about topography, not just through the collection of evidence, but through argument, critically evaluating different kinds of sources to create a human spatial narrative for Late Antiquity.[203]

This human spatial narrative would then potentially enable a better understanding of the interaction between people and their "structural context", which, applied to the history of the cult of Mithras in Rome, would carry great benefits for analyzing groups of Mithraists in relation to their mithraea, and these mithraea in relation to their immediate architectural and social context.

The social, political, and religious topography of Rome in the fourth century was similar to that of the preceding two or three centuries, with a few exceptions. The city of Rome had apparently neither grown nor shrunk noticeably, but the population of the city in the fourth century, estimated by the French historian Bertrand Lançon to have been somewhere in the environs of 800.000, suffered a dramatic decrease in the beginning of the fifth century:

> Un premier affaissement démographique eut lieu dans les années 408-419 : la réforme de l'Annone qui eut lieu au cours de cette dernière année laisse à penser que la population avait chuté de quelque 300 000 personnes. Entre 419 et 452, Rome ne comptait plus que 300 000 habitants environ. La Ville connut ensuite une nouvelle baisse : on estime sa population à 80 000 personnes en 530.[204]

[203] Lavan, "Political Topography," 331.
[204] Lançon, *Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive*, 27.

The *Campus Martius* was now not only included within the city walls, but also quite heavily populated. Moreover, the socio-economic catchments of some of the neighborhoods, notably the Aventine hill, had changed substantially. This factor is rarely taken into account in studies of Mithraism, but Alison Griffith makes a point of this topographical, and consequently demographical, change, noting that "the archaeological evidence from these areas suggests that the imperial [Aventine] Hill was an aristocratic neighborhood, unlike its Republican counterpart. The difference is significant and well worth reviewing, since previous interpretations of the Mithraic evidence from the imperial period have relied on Republican topography."[205] The Aventine, which had from the time of the republic been a low rent area, was in the fourth century home to some of the most prominent and wealthy families of Rome, including Jerome's benefactress Marcella, and it is probably no coincidence that the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, one of the most lavishly decorated in Rome, was situated on the Aventine and remained in use throughout the fourth century.

Most of the other mithraea in Rome in the fourth century that we know about are quite evenly distributed throughout the city, with notable absences in the poorer neighborhoods. According to Alison Griffith, "the most noteworthy absences are in the poorer sections of Rome, especially the Subura and the ports along both sides of the Tiber, the areas near the many gates, particularly the Porta Capena, and the many *insulae* which have been excavated all over the city."[206] Though there is little evidence either way, we must consider whether a given mithraeum was used only by its co-local congregation, or whether attendance was in fact open to any Mithraist in passing, an idea that finds some support in the fact that many mithraea were located in, or near, public baths.[207] The model of an even distribution and of local use fits surprisingly well with the distribution of mithraea in Rome's port of Ostia, and in the words of Jan Theo Backer:

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[205] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 225.
[206] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 166. The *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum was situated in an *insula* but Griffith's thesis was written prior to its discovery.
[207] For a thorough discussion on the Mithraic topography of Rome, see Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 163-240. Griffith analyses the immediate neighborhoods of the mithraea, but reaches few general conclusions other than the preponderance of mithraea were confined to four main locations: "in certain barracks, in *domus*, in imperial baths, and in the sanctuaries of other Oriental deities." Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 237.

> The even distribution of the *mithraea* over Ostia has always led archaeologists to the conclusion that they were meant for people in the neighbourhood: if the number of adherents grew too large a new *mithraeum* was built. The similar size of the shrines leads to the same conclusion: if the shrines would have been related to people from one building, such as the workers in a store building, large fluctuations in their capacity would be inevitable.[208]

These "fluctuations in capacity" make it necessary to consider what the capacity might have been in the first place, especially since several of the mithraea in use in the fourth century were larger than average, in some cases like the Crypta Balbi and the Terme di Caracalla very large, implying large active Mithraic communities, but also suggesting that at least some mithraea could have been open to any Mithraic initiate and not only to those belonging to that specific community.

There have been several attempts at assessing the extent of membership in the Mithraic cult in Rome, most of them based on extrapolation from the data from Rome's port city of Ostia, where, as mentioned above, some sixteen mithraea have been excavated. Jan Theo Backer has recently suggested a statistical model for assessing the maximum number of people involved in Mithraic services, by allocating one Mithraist for each 50 cm of each side podium in each mithraeum, giving an approximate number of Mithraists attending a "service" or "meeting":

> The maximum capacity is calculated by allowing a half metre per person. The capacity does not vary a great deal, the smallest shrine may have accommodated some 18 people, the largest 45.The average number of adherents over the 11 shrines for which the maximum capacity can be accurately calculated is 35. The total number for 16 shrines may then have been some 576. However, each *mithraeum* may have been used by a larger number of people than its maximum capacity allowed, on separate occasions.[209]

The average number of attendees reached by Backer only includes those who would fit inside the mithraeum at one time, and does not, as Backer acknowledges, take into account situations like for instance the possibility of the participation of different grades on different days of the week, different groups sharing the same mithraeum by turns, the possibility of an auxiliary membership mass which

[208] Backer, *Living and Working*, 204.
[209] Backer, *Living and Working*, 114-115.

gathered only for larger communal events like celebrations, processions, and feasts, evidence of which has recently come to light at Tienen in Belgium.[210]

The Mithraic demographics of Ostia have often been used to construct models for membership in Rome, by extrapolating from the number of Mithraists calculated as a percentage of the population of Ostia to the situation in Rome.[211] Using Backer's model, but allowing for an overall larger size of the mithraea in Rome, gives us a mean number of Mithraists per mithraeum somewhere in the 40 to 50 persons per mithraeum range, though this number is of course highly speculative and must be used with extreme caution. Based on comparison with Meiggs' figures for the population of Ostia being 1/50 that of Rome,[212] a postulated number of 1,000,000 inhabitants for Rome,[213] and a postulated number of 40 mithraea in Ostia,[214] Filippo Coarelli estimated a total of about 2000 mithraea in Rome.[215] Coarelli, however, recognized that this high number was improbable, and, choosing instead a model based on the topographical distribution of mithraea per hectar in Ostia (approximately 2 mithraea per hectar) compared to Rome, modified the estimate of mithraea in Rome to a little less than 700.[216] By assuming instead, like Backer, about 24 mithraea for Ostia, which would seem to fit better with the latest archaeological estimates,[217] a maximum estimate based on population numbers would be in the vicinity of 500 mithraea for Rome, which would correspond better with Coarelli's topographical model. Recalling our tentative number of 40 to 50 persons per mithraeum, this would give an approximate number of 20,000 to 25,000

[210] The mithraeum has not as yet been completely published, but there are several preliminary reports available, notably in Martens and De Boe (eds.), *Roman Mithraism*.
[211] Notably by Coarelli in "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," 76-77.
[212] Coarelli's numbers for Ostia were based on Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*, 532-534.
[213] Lançon, on the other hand, believes that the number of inhabitants should not be higher than 800,000. See Lançon, *Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive*, 27.
[214] The parameters for postulating 40 mithraea seem to be faulty however. Coarelli, in "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," believed that only about 33 hectares out of a total of 77 hectares had been uncovered, thus bringing the number of mithraea statistically from 18 to 40. Recent archaeology has shown however that a much larger percentage of Ostia has been excavated; see Backer, *Living and Working*, 114. Backer estimates the number of mithraea at twenty four.
[215] Coarelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," 77. It should be noted, however, that Vermaseren in his original study of the cult of Mithras in Rome estimated only about 100 mithraea in total for the city, see Vermaseren, *Mithrasdienst*, 149.
[216] Coarelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," 77.
[217] See Backer, *Living and Working*, 114 and note 29 with reference to Pavolini, *Ostia*, 36.

Mithraists in the city of Rome, indicating that this constituted around five percent of the population, a relatively small but not negligible religious community.

There are of course serious methodological problems connected with this type of statistical approach, such as the representativity of the comparison between Ostia and Rome, the problematic estimates of the population of Rome itself throughout this period, the assumption that one person per 50 cm of bench-space is indicative of the number of followers, and so forth. Essentially, such statistically based numbers can be no more than guesswork. But the figures do highlight an important aspect of Mithraic topography of Rome and Ostia, namely the correlation between the number of mithraea established by Coarelli's more modest topographical model and the lower number of mithraea reflected by the population-based model after Backer's revision of the statistical material on which it was based. Backer's model, which sets the number of Mithraists in Rome as 50 times that of Ostia, yields a little under 29,000 Roman Mithraists, but if we use Lançon's estimate of a population of 800,000 for Rome instead of Coarelli's of 1,000,000, the statistical results add up remarkably well. Our tentative number for the Mithraic community of Rome seem at least a little more certain, and offer the opportunity to construct a statistical model specifically for Mithraism in late antiquity. The number of Mithraists in Rome at the peak of the cult in the Severan period would then be, according to both Coarelli's and Backer's models, approximately 30,000.

In my view, approximately half of the known mithraea were still in use throughout the fourth century. Specifically this means that 16 mithraea out of somewhere between 24 and 40 known mithraea in Rome depending on who's estimate one chooses to follow[218] were in use, which would translate to a possible 250 or so operational mithraea in fourth century Rome. These numbers suggest that Mithraism in Rome was still very much an active religion outside of the senatorial elite. If at least half of the mithraea in Rome were still in active use in the fourth century, there were potentially 15,000 Mithraists in the area within the Aurelian walls, quite a considerable number, and we must consider that an increase during this

[218] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," counts 24 *certain* and *possible* mithraea, whereas Coarelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma", counts 40 mithraea in the city.

period in the use of *domus* mithraea would allow for an even greater number of both mithraea and Mithraists.

Most data suggest a decline in the general population of Rome towards the end of the fourth century and especially in the beginning of the fifth. Estimated population numbers range from "538,000 to 1,250,000 in the mid-second century when its population was greatest, and from 250,000 to 800,000 at the time of Constantine," according to Luther Martin.[219] Though both Bertrand Lançon[220] and Richard Krautheimer[221] estimate the fourth century population of Rome at about 800,000, a lower number is certainly possible, and the population of Rome at the end of the fourth century was probably from a little over half to almost three-quarters of what it was two hundred years earlier. However, relatively speaking, the percentage of Mithraists among the population seems to remain proportionally roughly the same or even to grow in the late third and in the fourth century, based on the structural evidence of the extensive remodeling and expanding of many of the Roman mithraea in this period. This means that instead of a decline of cult practice in the third century followed by a senatorial revival in the fourth, we seem to be dealing with a remarkably stable religious group in steady growth. This stability and growth would seem to corroborate the fact that a larger percentage of mithraea were in continuous use throughout the period, with refurbishings and even construction of new mithraea occurring intermittently up until the late fourth century.

The point of this "statistical excursion" is to show that statistical models based on topographical material show that Mithraism in Rome in the fourth century was not the sole province of the aristocracy, but that it remained a living religion among the general population of the city. Indeed, as we have seen, only three of the Mithraic sites that were in use during the fourth century – the mithraea of *Piazza San Silvestro* and *Casa di Nummii Albini*, and the possible Mithraic shrine in the *Phrygianum* – can positively be connected with membership of the senatorial ranks. According to the most conservative of the estimates of Roman mithraea made above, there should statistically have been at least 400-500 mithraea in

[219] Martin, "Roman Mithraism and Christianity," 3.
[220] Lançon, Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive, 27.
[221] Krautheimer, *Rome*, 4.

the city, meaning that we have so far in all likelihood discovered less than 10 percent of them. Additionally, we must consider the possible extent of so-called "house mithraea", and their role in the Mithraic landscape of fourth century Rome, a factor which changes the composite image of the mithraea in Rome somewhat. Let us consider briefly the "house mithraea".

1.5. *Domus mithraea*

A striking feature of Mithraic architecture in Rome is the great variation in the sizes of the mithraea. A comparison of the large structures of the *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum and the mithraeum in the *Terme di Caracalla* with the tiny house mithraeum of *Via Giovanni Lanza 128* makes it abundantly clear that though there seems to have been many fixed structural guidelines, size was not one of them. This observation raises several questions, most important of which is what the factors were that determined the size of the mithraeum. The size of the mithraea might be dependent on several factors, but in addition to the obvious ones such as the available space and the size of the community, as well as funding, the small-scale mithraea constructed within private dwellings still need special consideration.

Domus, or house, mithraea, are Mithraic sanctuaries that are usually small in size, situated within a private household, and most likely under the control of the head of the household, though membership need not necessarily be confined to the extended *familia*. In a *domus* mithraeum in the strict sense, the cult room is accessible only from within the house itself, though exceptions can occur, and is more likely to be a temporary structure rather than a permanent one, with the cult furniture being small-scale and easily movable. Such a temporary structure would usually not contain fixed side-benches, a situation which makes archaeological identification of a *domus* mithraeum exceedingly hard unless specific Mithraic artifacts or epigraphy are found on the site. A good example of this kind of mithraeum is the *Giovanni Lanza* mithraeum in Rome,[222] though this mithraeum is untypical of house mithraea in the sense that it

[222] V 356 and 357-360.

was accessed through a garden *lararium* rather than directly from the *domus* itself, leading Alison Griffith to affirm that "this example of a [*domus*] mithraeum located outside its *domus* is unique."[223]

We must bear in mind, however, that the decorations of these small sanctuaries were most likely small and movable, and could quite probably be executed in material other than stone, like wood or even painted cloth, and as such would not have been preserved as the larger stone reliefs have. Indeed, there is little evidence for permanent fixtures of any kind in Roman housing in general, and it would seem that most furniture was essentially of a mobile nature, and that rooms could be re-arranged and re-configured quite easily. The same could be the case with the trappings of house mithraea and indeed with Christian house churches, and as such any room could become a shrine on a semi-permanent basis by the addition of certain fixtures, and presumably by being consecrated by means of rituals, which in the case of Mithraism we know next to nothing about.

If these house mithraea were indeed more common than has often been presupposed, that would have a serious impact on the existing demographic models of the extent of Mithraism in Rome. Allison Griffith has tentatively suggested that house mithraea associated specifically with members of the senatorial aristocracy might be a phenomenon typical of the fourth century,[224] but we might also imagine that restrictions on pagan worship would have forced the cult to go "underground" in all layers of society, leading to an increased number of smaller *domus* mithraea. There is little corroborating evidence for either of these models, though circumstantial evidence does at least support the notion that several of Rome's senatorial families had mithraea in their own homes.[225] Indeed, most of the problems posed by the difficult category of house mithraea are similar to those relating to the identification of Christian house churches. The archaeological material is simply too scarce to allow any firm conclusion concerning the extent of movable and semi-permanent religious gathering places within the private *domus*, and Graydon Snyder, discussing the archaeological evidence for pre-Constantinian house churches, concludes that "evidence of any kind remains surprisingly sparse. Christians must have met in homes or other small

[223] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 70.
[224] Griffith, "Mithraism," 1-2, and "Archaeological Evidence," 252-255.
[225] Griffith, "Mithraism," 3-8.

edifices without sufficiently altering the structures for us to determine their presence."[226] These problems of identification are further complicated by the evidence for second and third century mithraea in non-senatorial *domus* and *insulae* in Ostia and Rome, and "while the archaeological record does show that mithraea in *domus* in Rome appeared at least as early as the late 2nd – and early 3rd – c., ignorance of the owner's identity for each of these earlier examples prevents any conclusion about who installed and used the sanctuary."[227] In essence, much like the situation with Christian pre-Constantinian house churches, there is little evidence to confirm any details apart from the possible existence of mithraea in private homes and other small edifices in Rome.

The case is not much improved in relation to the fourth century house mithraea in Rome, as there are only two unequivocal examples: the abovementioned *Giovanni Lanza* mithraeum and the mithraeum in the house of the Nummii Albini.[228] Moreover, the state of these mithraea is such that the material does not allow for much in the way of general conclusions, other than that small-scale private mithraea located in the houses of families with enough wealth to spare a room for the purpose did in fact exist. In the fourth century, some evidence points to the possible use of *domus* mithraea by senators, but in the main, a *domus* mithraeum could belong to anyone able to afford his own *domus*. In any case, we must leave open the possibility that there may have existed quite a few "private" mithraea in Rome in the fourth century, and if Griffith's suggestion is correct, that would strengthen the case against the view that Mithraism was in decline either among the senatorial aristocracy in Rome in the fourth century, or among the lower socio-economic layers of the population, the traditional Mithraist recruiting ground of the previous two centuries.

We must also consider the question of a Mithraic presence in other religious cult buildings in late antique Rome. Just as there have been found many sculptures of other deities in Roman mithraea, there is a possibility that Mithraic shrines could have existed within the perimeters of other religious buildings. The two best known examples of such possible Mithraic shrines or sites are the *Phrygianum* on the

[226] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 166.
[227] Griffith, "Mithraism," 7.
[228] V 356 and 357-360.

Vatican Hill[229] and the temple of *Jupiter Dolichenus* on the Aventine hill.[230] Nominally a temple dedicated to *Magna Mater*, the Great Idaean Mother of the gods, the *Phrygianum* is no longer extant and its exact location is not known, but a series of inscriptions from the sanctuary have been preserved. These are dedicated to the oriental gods and feature senators carrying multiple religious titles, including Mithraic ones and specifically titles reflecting the highest grades and offices in the cult, such as *pater* and *hierocery*x of Mithras,[231] and these inscriptions are in turn considered evidence for the temple.[232] It is possible that the *Phrygianum* contained a small Mithraic shrine, but though this possibility is not only attractive but also quite likely given the nature of the inscriptions found and the range of divinities seemingly worshipped in the precinct, the evidence remains inconclusive.[233]

In addition to the shrine in the *Phrygianum* there is evidence for Mithraic activity, most likely a permanent shrine, in the *Dolichenum* on the Aventine Hill. According to Alison Griffith, "the temple of Jupiter Dolichenus does not indicate the presence of a mithraeum, but it does represent a site of Mithraic worship."[234] Remains of Mithraic tauroctony reliefs and Mithraic inscriptions were in fact found among the plentiful religious objects found on the site of the temple. This site, rated as a definite Mithraic site by both Griffith[235] and Coarelli[236], is not to be regarded as a mithraeum as such, but there seems to be evidence that the site was shared between the principal deity, Jupiter Dolichenus, and Mithras. Unfortunately, there is no evidence for Mithraic or any other type of activity at this site in the fourth century, apart from "possible restorations to the altar made under Julian"[237], and I have not included the site among the group of mithraea in use in the fourth century. It is still interesting for comparative purposes, however, as it is a good example of Mithras being worshipped inside a temple dedicated to

[229] V 513-514 (inscribed altars).
[230] V 467 (mithraeum) and V 468-471 (relief fragments, relief, inscription and inscribed altar).
[231] From an inscribed altar to the Great Gods (V 514), dedicated by the senator Ulpius Egnatius Faventinus, featuring what amounts to a veritable *cursus honorum* of religious titles.
[232] *CIL* VI.497, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 503, and 504. See also Griffith, "Mithraism," 10, note 31.
[233] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 158-159.
[234] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 139.
[235] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 139-143. The Mithraic site is number 33D.
[236] Coarelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma," 75. The mithraeum is number 35.
[237] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 141. Griffith is referring to data from Colini, "Santuario delle divinitá dolichene," 157-159.

another Greco-Roman deity. This highlights the possibility that the worship of Mithras in Rome in the fourth century could have taken place at several other locations than the ones we can securely identify as Mithraic temples, which is an important consideration for tracing changes in cult practice in late antiquity, and this is a point that I return to in chapter 3. Far from all mithraea in Rome have been found, as noted above, and it is worth bearing in mind that, as we have seen, more than half of the known mithraea in Rome were most likely still in use throughout the fourth century, and some presumably even into the beginning of the fifth.

1.6. Religious architecture and the role of mithraea in public and private space in the fourth century Christian city

Religious architecture in late antique Rome can be categorized both as monumental and public, exemplified on the one hand by the large state-funded temples of the third and early fourth century and the new large-scale construction of basilical type churches in the fourth and fifth centuries, and on the other hand by small scale, private sanctuaries like the mithraea and shrines and temples to other "oriental" deities, private *lararia*, and the Christian house churches of the second, third, and fourth centuries. The categories of "public" and "private", as well as those of "religious" and "secular", are somewhat problematic when applied to the context of the architecture of ancient and late antique Rome, since the lines of demarcation were vague and unclear, and we should also be aware that the buildings that are defined as private in the architectural sense are by no means necessarily to be understood as such in the modern sense of the word "private". The distinction simply means that the monumental buildings were accessible to more people and functioned in a wider array of social, political, and ritual contexts than the more private buildings, which were usually frequented by a *familia*, including freedmen, clients, and household friends.

Public, monumental architecture remained an important political tool in late antiquity, and it is important to bear in mind that monumental buildings of these kinds were not only still being built, but that large-scale construction and public works were quite prolific throughout the fourth century. As Jas Elsner

argues, there was in the fourth century a clear continuation of the imperial building programs of the three preceding centuries:

> Great basilical churches were built, whose forms and techniques looked back to masterpieces of Roman architectural brickwork like the Pantheon, the Macellum of Trajan and the Baths of Caracalla in Rome. Many of these fourth-century monuments or objects do not survive today and are known only from late drawings and engravings. But their existence indicates the continuance of the traditions of imperial patronage and self-advertisement through art which had been so signally established by Augustus' transformation of Rome.[238]

Indeed, the visual spectacle of fourth century Rome must have seemed even grander than in earlier times. As Richard Krautheimer says: "Romans, provincials, and foreigners gawked at temples, palaces, administrative buildings, basilicas, theatres, porticos: heaps of marble, or marble imitation, gilded capitals, triumphal arches, honorific statues. To a fourth-century visitor, all this was the grand show that reflected the glory of Rome and her empire."[239]

The question of funding is important to consider at this point. State funded temples also served a state function; they had state funded priesthoods and were part of the public face of the Roman state and of imperial power. Consequently, religious buildings funded or donated by the emperor not only enhanced his prestige, but allowed him to retain some measure of control over the site and the cult. In essence, the traditional model of patronage extended to the building programs of the late antique emperors, and the construction of large-scale basilical churches funded or donated by Constantine and his successors, fit neatly into this pattern. One of the largest and most impressive basilicas in Rome was built by the pagan emperor Maxentius at the very beginning of the fourth century, and, at the same time, Maxentius constructed a new temple to Venus and Roma which "was the largest and most impressive temple in Rome and the largest sanctuary associated with Roma in the Mediterranean world."[240] Furthermore, according to John Curran:

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[238] Elsner, "Art and Architecture," 737.
[239] Krautheimer, *Rome, 9*.
[240] Curran, *Pagan city and Christian capital*, 57.

> A key religious site in Rome had been magnificently restored and amplified. Maxentius had taken the opportunity to demonstrate and celebrate the connection between the personified city and the ancient patroness of the imperial house. The building was no mere gesture of support to the traditions of the city, it was a self-consciously Roman contribution made by a resident Roman emperor.[241]

Constantine, after his victory over Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, embarked on an ambitious building program of his own in the city of Rome, rivaling that of Maxentius. The projects of Constantine saw the first large-scale church building in Rome, famously the great Lateran basilica whose great size heralded a break with the modest scale of the Christian buildings up until this point: "Construite sur un plan basilical à cinq nefs, elle mesurait 100 mètres sur 55 ; elle égalait donc en taille la basilique de Maxence."[242] The Christian basilica was ostentatiously decorated with walls covered with yellow marble, and was soon called the *basilica aurea*. Both the Lateran basilica and the new basilica dedicated to Saint Peter were in fact built on locations which had until then been home to Mithraic sites – the mithraeum in the *Castra Praetoria* and the Mithraic shrine in the *Phrygianum*, respectively.

As long as the emperor was *pontifex maximus*, he was also the highest religious authority for all the state-sponsored temples, and indeed the line between state-funding and funding by the emperor himself is not always very clear. Constantine's building program blurred the lines between public and private financial control even more than had been the case with the lavish building programs of the earlier emperors, and "the employment of imperial property at the Lateran and to the south and west of the city emphasized Constantine's personal patronage of the Christian cult."[243] However, after Constantine, "in Rome, the Christian emperors of the fourth century never took to themselves the responsibility for providing churches in the heart of the city; that duty was left to the bishops."[244] While the state could still erect and support monumental buildings – even refurbishing religious buildings (which in mid-to-late fourth century Rome increasingly meant Christian churches) – the construction and day-to-day maintainance of religious structures became a private matter.

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[241] Curran, *Pagan city and Christian capital*, 57.
[242] Lançon, *Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive*, 43.
[243] Curran, *Pagan city and Christian capital*, 115.
[244] Curran, *Pagan city and Christian capital*, 117.

Whether sponsored by the emperor, the state, or private citizens holding high office, the high cost of funding religious buildings would tend to mean that the sponsors, patrons, and priesthoods connected to these monumental temples were mainly associated with the highest levels of Roman society. The monumental temples were a very visible aspect of life in Rome, and several of the so-called oriental cults also had great public, or semi-public structures devoted to them. Aurelian's promotion of the cult of *Sol Invictus* to an officially funded state cult by constructing a large public temple and instituting a new priesthood is a good example. At the end of our period, in the early fifth century, Rome was just as impressive as before, if not more so, and most of the old monuments and the majestic temples of the city were still in good repair, sparkling in marble and gold. Even at the end of the fourth century, the great public pagan temples of Rome were still frequented: "Les temples de Rome furent fréquentés durant tout le IV^{e} siècle. Fermés par Théodose au début des années 390, ils continuèrent cependant d'être un ornement respecté de la Ville. En tant qu'édifices publics, ils furent protégés des déprédations par la préfecture urbaine, selon la volonté impériale."[245]

In the third and the fourth centuries, Christianity gradually moved from the so-called house churches and into the public eye in the architectural sense as well as in the socio-political sense:

> The toleration of Christianity proclaimed in 313 led to a remarkable transformation in Christian liturgy and its artistic and architectural settings. From house-churches like the third-century baptistery of Dura Europos, Christian ritual moved into huge basilicas in the major cities. From using adapted domestic buildings, Christians found themselves worshiping in new purpose-built churches.[246]

After Constantine, and beginning with the Lateran church, the Christian centers of worship increasingly became highly decorated buildings in the basilical style, and consequently they became much more publicly visible. This is really where the architectural split between the two "Eastern Mystery Cults" of Mithraism and Christianity first occurs. Ironically, this is the point when a comparison between Mithraic and Christian art really becomes possible because a Christian iconographical canon, and an overall scheme

[245] Lançon, *Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive*, 35.
[246] Elsner, "Art and Architecture," 755.

of church decoration, is only possible to identify from this point onwards. The similarities between the scheme of Christian church art and the decoration of mithraea is discussed in more detail in chapter 2 of this study.

Whereas the Christian churches became public buildings in a sense during the fourth century, the mithraea remained private sanctuaries throughout the entire period. At least this was the case in Rome, as far as we can tell. There is no evidence for any monumental public Mithraic buildings, but, as we have noted, some of the sanctuaries seem to have been public in the sense that they could be used by people who were not intimately connected with the owner of the premises. At least we can surmise that the late antique mithraea were accessible to more people than have often been presumed. Essentially, at least some of these sanctuaries, particularly the *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum, the *Forum Boarium* mithraeum, and the mithraeum at the *Terme di Caracalla*, were not secret *per se* in as much as people would almost certainly know that there was a mithraeum on the premises, though whether these mithraea were accessible to Mithraists other than those belonging to the local community is an open question. It seems probable though that only those initiated into the cult were allowed access to the mithraeum itself, while more inclusive community activities, and even recruitment, could have taken place in adjoining rooms or in relation to more public Mithraic shrines found in the temples of other deities such as in the *Phrygianum* or *Dolichenum*.

Some, if not most, Roman deities, and especially those of "foreign" or "oriental" origin, had both public *and* private sanctuaries. For instance, Magna Mater had a monumental public sanctuary on the Palatine Hill, but probably several more sanctuaries of a more private nature throughout the city, with the most interesting for the study of fourth century Mithraism being the aforementioned *Phrygianum* on the Vatican Hill.[247] But again, the modern sense of the word "private" might prove misleading, for, according to Neil McLynn, "the Vatican inscriptions, carved upon often sumptuous altars which presumably stood in the precincts of the *Phrygianum*, were not in any important sense 'private'; nor do their formulae convey

[247] L. Michael White presents some of the household sanctuaries of Magna Mater in Rome, see White, *Social Origins* I, 45-47.

to the innocent reader any atmosphere of 'personal and emotional intensity'."[248] It is worth noting that, though the Mithraic cult in Rome was not "private" in the sense McLynn uses the term, the cult was neither officially sanctioned, nor state-funded, and though Antonia Tripolitis in her recent book on Hellenistic religions claims that the dedication of an altar to Mithras by the Tetrarchs in 308, "established Mithras as the official god of the Roman state,"[249] this was most certainly not the case. The Mithraea of Rome should be placed firmly in the "private" sphere in the sense that they were un-sanctioned and neither monumental, nor state-funded, though the *Phrygianum* inscriptions at least belonged in the public domain and some mithraea must have been highly visible in the day-to-day urban life of Rome. So even this use of the term private is something of a simplification, and it seems preferable instead to imagine Mithraism existing, somewhat ambiguously, between the two poles of public and private, though there seems to be a trend for mithraea in the fourth century of becoming slightly more visible in the eye of the public, a trend which is noticeable both in the more public location of mithraea and from the mention of the cult in many textual sources of the fourth century and later.

As for the smaller mithraea, those that were truly private and located in a *domus* or other secluded places generally inaccessible to the public, there remains the usual problems associated with archaeological material concerning both Christian *domus ecclesiae* and *domus* mithraea, since only permanent structures with a clearly recognizable architectural structure can be readily identified as mithraea, or churches; at least this is the case when any distinct decoration is missing. Thus, according to L. Michael White, "A key point arises from the fact that there can be no archaeological evidence for the earliest household meetings (the house church proper). By definition, then, there was no architectural adaptation and, consequently, nothing distinctively Christian about the physical setting."[250] If much of the decoration of these sacred spaces was portable, as is a natural assumption if services or gatherings took place in private houses, then they usually do not leave any traces in the buildings themselves, and given not only the climate of Rome but also the sustained use of these rooms up through the centuries, most

[248] McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, 313.
[249] Tripolitis, *Religions*, 57. She does not give any indication of what this startling observation is based on, however.
[250] White, *Social Origins* I, 21.

permanent wall-paintings would not have survived. We may for instance imagine that these small sanctuaries had altars made of wood or earthenware, backdrops of decorated cloth, murals painted on removable panels, small scale and easily movable statuary, and so forth – all of which would leave little archaeological evidence unless preserved, for instance in sealed underground locations. And even then, as is the case with most mithraea, the survival of this type of material is accidental rather than certain.

One of the greatest challenges of Christian archaeology is the identification of pre-Constantinian house churches, and this is mainly because "household sanctuaries are rarely discernible from the archaeology precisely because they required minimal adaptation and articulation of the cultic space. For the most part they remained domestic in form and function. Nonetheless, there seems to have been a widespread practice of establishing such household cults."[251] And even though the identification of architectural and archaeological remains for these structures is problematic, the house churches must be considered because they were clearly an important element of early Christianity for many reasons, including, but not exclusively, because of the privacy such a locale offered. As a parallel to the co-existence of "regular" mithraea and *domus* mithraea, it seems that Christian house churches were not only forerunners of the basilical churches, but that they continued to exist, as a type, alongside the monumental churches. According to L. Michael White:

> The archaeological evidence indicates that domus ecclesiae and aula ecclesiae forms continued well after that point when basilicas had supposedly become the norm. Thus we find that while monumental basilicas were springing up under the aegis of Constantine, other churches were still being founded following prebasilical patterns.[252]

Now, as mithraea are almost always defined on the basis of the architectural structure of the cult room, this means that the room should idealy include the oblong rectangular shape, the side podia, and the space for a tauroctony on the far wall, at the very least, to be instantly identifiable as a mithraeum. However, as we have seen, several fourth century mithraea in Rome did not conform exactly to this scheme.

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[251] White, *Social Origins* I, 44.
[252] White, *Social Origins* I, 23.

Arguments can be made however, that mithraea could also be more ad hoc rooms, and that all the elements mentioned need not necessarily have been present for a given space to function as a mithraeum. An example of such a non-typical mithraeum that does not conform to a recognizable architectural scheme could be the postulated mithraeum inside the *Phrygianum* and *Dolichenum* in Rome, as well as the examples of *domus* mithraea discussed above.

The question of the ambiguous state of the mithraeum *between* public and private spaces must now be considered both in the modern sense and in the ancient sense of the terms. Firstly, in the modern sense, it cannot be said that the mithraea themselves were publicly accessible since they were, strictly speaking, only directly accessible to the initiated, but it is interesting to note that they quite often lay in, or were attached to, public buildings, some of which may have had quite a lot of people passing through on a regular basis, such as would be the case with the public baths that housed mithraea, namely the *Terme di Caracalla* and *Terme di Tito,* and presumably also in the great *insula* of the *Crypta Balbi*. This seemingly puts the mithraeum in question in a rather awkward situation, being presumably the location of secret cultic activities, while running the very real risk of "outsiders" seeing, or at the very least overhearing, the cultic events taking place within the mithraeum, much like the celebration of the Eucharistic mass in the Christian churches of the time. Obscuring the entrance by different means such as doors and ante-rooms would of course help to alleviate the threat posed by random passers-by, but might not be all that effective in concealing that activities did take place in the mithraeum, and depending on the time of day the ceremonies were performed, we must assume that any sounds made by the congregation at least ran the risk of being overheard. In any case it is unthinkable that no one would be aware of the fact that there was an active temple of some sort on the premises.

What does this imply in relation to the place of the Mithraic cult room in the public/private dichotomy in the modern sense? Take for example the function of the atrium in a Roman elite household. This room would often be located in the center of what would be a private dwelling by modern definition, though this room would in practice be the most "public" in the house, as this is where the *pater familias* would conduct most of his business and meet regularly with his clients and colleagues.

If the atrium – as a structural and social space – falls somewhere in between public and private, then what does that entail for the house mithraea? That depends of course on who had access to it but also on the makeup of the community. If the cult room was a private *domus* mithraeum accessible only to the *pater familias*, his immediate family members, and a few selected servants and clients, then we might term the mithraeum private, but if it was accessible to other Mithraists, not explicitly connected to the household on a more permanent basis, then we must consider that the mithraeum could have a more public nature. The *domus* mithraeum, where the *pater* was also the *pater familias*, raises another interesting point, namely the issue of confluence of social, economical, and religious control. In the case of the senatorial aristocrat or the rich owner of the property controlling the parameters of the community while participating in the role of religious leader, "the *domus* mithraeum could thus function as the consummate expression of its aristocratic owner's power as *pater familias*; in it he led his congregation not only with the power of a Mithraic *pater*, but also with the legal power of *patria potestas* or *dominus*, or with the social influence of a *patronus*."[253] And this mode of control seems to parallel power structures applicable to pre-Constantinian *domus ecclesiae*, since here too, "the nature of the extended family, with slaves, freedmen, and other clients attached to the household, also meant that the loyalties of the house church might be determined in large measure from the top down by the patron."[254]

Griffith has suggested that members of the senatorial aristocracy could frequently attend each other's mithraea,[255] and if she is right, it would seem that even these mithraea occupied ambiguous spaces between the categories of public and private, since even though the mithraea might be private and the community strictly controlled by its owner, attendance by members of other neighboring communities would belie the insular status of the *domus* mithraeum. Let us consider again the *Piazza San Silvestro* mithraeum – this time from the point of view of a house mithraeum. Unfortunately, we do not know any architectural details about this mithraeum, but there are, as we have seen, reasons for considering it a

[253] Griffith, "Mithraism," 20.
[254] White, *Social Origins* I, 145.
[255] Griffith, "Mithraism", especially 20-25.

house mithraeum.[256] It is possible that the *San Silvestro* mithraeum might be the mithraeum that Jerome mentions,[257] which was destroyed by the urban prefect Gracchus in 377, but it seems plausible that if this was indeed the case, then Jerome would certainly have mentioned that the mithraeum was located within the household of members of the senatorial elite. When describing this incident, had it involved pagan members of the *clarissimi,* Jerome would most likely have mentioned the family by name so as to embellish the "victory" of Christianity, and it is just as likely that Prudentius would have done the same.[258] Jerome was writing almost thirty years after the fact, so he would hardly be concerned with any reactions by this aristocratic family; this makes it even more likely that the mithraeum in question was not directly associated with members of the elite, and that it was not the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro* which was so graphically dismantled by Gracchus.

In this case it is more likely that the destroyed mithraeum, described gleefully by Jerome and Prudentius, would not have been a small mithraeum inside the private dwelling of a senatorial family, but rather would have been located in a much more public setting and used by a community of much lower social standing. The public visibility of the mithraeum in question is of course also a central factor in Gracchus' motivation for destroying it. He hoped, according to Jerome,[259] to secure a Christian baptism for himself by tearing down the mithraeum, and so we must assume that the site he chose for his demonstration of piety was one that would be noticed by the Christian population, yet not one that would alienate pagan, but potentially powerful, members of the senate, for even though Gracchus may have been a Christian, he was also prefect of the city, which shows that he was first and foremost a politician. At the end of the day, there is, however, no evidence of any kind to suggest that the *San Silvestro* mithraeum is the mithraeum that Gracchus is reported to have destroyed, other than the fact that there is an inscription

[256] See this study, 1.2.10.
[257] Jerome, *Ep*. 107.2.
[258] Prudentius, *Contra orationem Symmachi*, I, 561-565.
[259] Jerome, *Ep*. 107.2.

that describes the refurbishing of the mithraeum, or even the construction of an entirely new mithraeum, some years following the event Jerome describes.[260]

If we suppose that the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro* was situated within a private *domus*, this might help to explain why the only persons who are named in the inscriptions celebrating initiations are members of the immediate family of the *pater patrum*; it is also telling that one of these inscriptions mentions the only known case of a child being initiated into the mysteries, though the term "child" might be a little misleading, as the boy in question was thirteen years old at the time and just a couple of years shy of manhood in legal terms with the donning of the *toga virilis* at the age of fifteen or sixteen.[261] The initiation of children by their fathers is something that may well have been a feature of more household-centered mithraea. The fact that there is no other corroborating evidence for the initiation of children into the Mithraic cult could possibly be due to the dearth of archaeological evidence for *domus* mithraea.

If the immediate family of the *pater* and *pater familias* had the monopoly on the priestly grades, then who filled out the other grades of these small household Mithraic communities? Presumably, the persons initiated into the lower grades would be members of the extended *familia* like younger brothers and cousins, the clients of the household, and freedmen beholden to the family in some fashion. The slaves belonging to the household, however, would most likely not have been initiated into these communities, because while it could be acceptable in some circumstances that other citizens would hold ranks above that of one of the sons of the house (in this specific case the thirteen year old Aemilianus Corfo who started his career as a Mithraist in this mithraeum holding the lowest grade, that of Corax, on April 8, 376[262]), it would be unthinkable that slaves of the household could be senior to a member of their master's immediate family. It remains a possibility, though, that slaves could be initiated into the lowest grade and not be allowed to advance within this particular community. All this implies that house mithraea

[260] The refurbishing was carried out by Tamesius Augentius Olympius, presumably the grandson of the *pater patrum* Nonius Victor Olympius, sometime in the late fourth century, after the death of his grandfather. The dedication is inscribed on a marble altar, V 406 = CIL VI 754. For details on the family, see Jones, Martindale and Morris, *Prosopography*, 124-125, 646-647, and the proposed *stemmata* on 1142.
[261] The inscription in question is V 403.
[262] V 403 = CIL VI 751b.

might have had social guidelines quite different from the larger and more public ones. The Mithraic communities and the social and religious guidelines which structured them in the city of Rome in the fourth century is the topic of chapter 3 of this study.

1.7. Main themes of Mithraic structural evidence from fourth century Rome

All in all, then, the mithraea of late antique Rome present an ambiguous picture of the cult, but there are some trends which seem to coalesce into patterns. In the first part of the chapter, we saw that many mithraea remained in use throughout most of the fourth century, and some even longer. Some of these mithraea were very large, and must have been noticeable in the local community, while many others were enlarged in the late third century and in the fourth. Some new mithraea were even constructed *de novo* in the fourth century, seemingly belying the postulated decline of Mihtraism from the late third century onwards. Additionally, we have seen that only a very small percentage of the archaeological material shows any connection with the senatorial aristocracy which embraced Mithraism in the late fourth century. This suggests that "senatorial Mithraism" must be seen as an addition to the existing Mithraic communities, and not as a replacement for them. Few, if any, mithraea show signs of having been willfully and violently destroyed as a result of religious hatred, and it seems that Mithraism in Rome remained alive and well throughout the fourth century, presumably succumbing to "natural causes" and gradually dying out in the early part of the fifth century as Christianity became the only viable religion in the empire.

In the second part of the chapter, it became apparent that Mithraism was clearly not in decline in Rome in the fourth century, but that it even became much more visible during the third and fourth centuries than it had been before. This may have had some connection with the increased popularity of the cult among the senatorial elite of the city, but this group remains only a very small part of the membership of the cult in late antiquity. Indeed, we have seen that the demographic range and social catchments of the initiates varied to a great extent, from the lowest layers of society to the very pinnacle of power, and it also varied in the public eye, from the most publicly noticeable mithraea or Mithraic shrines in

conjunction with temples and sanctuaries of other deities, to the large and opulent mithraea located in the middle of *insulae* and *termae*, to the small and very private *domus* mithraea of both the senatorial aristocracy, and potentially lower ranks.

We have also seen that the architectural and structural face of Mithrasim had much in common with the architectural expression of the Christian communities of Rome at the time. "The house church organization also points to models from the Roman environment in which the early Christian movement spread. In this wider social context Christians would have appeared similar to a number of other kinds of groups familiar to the urban environment. These include collegial associations, philosophical schools, the synagogue, and the household itself."[263] Essentially, with regard to the situation, social location, and even the status of the individual Roman communities, the two religions seem to have had much in common, at least up until the end of the fourth century. This appearance of similarity also extends, in some fashion, to the mithraea and churches, both with regards to the respective *domus ecclesiae*, but also with regard to the larger expressions of sacred architecture, the churches and mithraea in semi-public locations, highly visible in the local community.

The mithraea as cult rooms and as sanctuaries are clearly important, and Lindsay Jones wants us to consider the role of sacred architecture "not as inert, static objects of reflection but as dynamic partners in conversation, or, in the case of the game analogy, as active, lissome players who both respond to and evoke responses from those who experience them."[264] And Jones continues, describing the partners in this conversation – or the players of the game:

> Constituting the interpretation of sacred architecture in terms of ritual circumstances rather than buildings per se requires, in other words, serious consideration of all the constituent elements of the circumstances, most poignantly: first, the stone, wood, and iron of the buildings themselves, which together are imagined as one "player" in the hermeneutical game; second, human beings, heavily burdened with expectations, traditions, and religious opinions, imagined somewhat more easily as additional players; and third, the ceremonial occasion as the activity or game (or conversation), which actually brings buildings and people into a to-and-fro involvement with one another.[265]

[263] White, *Social Origins*, 143.
[264] Jones, *Sacred Architecture* I, 46.
[265] Jones, *Sacred Architecture* I, 48.

This concept of a dialogue is essential, I think, for understanding the interplay of the mithraea, the Mithraic icon, and the Mithraic communities who experienced them in the context of collective religious usage. To understand the dynamics of this "conversation", all the elements must be seriously considered, and understanding the structure of the mithraeum in late antique Rome has been the purpose of this chapter.

Chapter 2:

The Mithraic icon in fourth century Rome

One cannot write history without dealing with the history of images, and of no epoch is this more true than the fourth and fifth centuries of the current era.

Thomas Mathews[266]

In chapter 1, we have seen that the mithraea in use in the fourth century in Rome could vary quite dramatically in size and execution, and in social location, and that as the basic layout remained the same, there was little evidence of any fourth century stylistic preferences in Mithraic architecture, except perhaps for a possible increase in the numbers of *domus* mithraea, and the relatively "public" location of some of the mithraea in use at this time.[267] All in all the architectural, or structural, evidence seems to indicate a high degree of continuity rather than any distinct "late Mithraic" preferences, and this evidence in turn seems to be corroborated by the demographic models of fourth century Mithraism in Rome and central Italy discussed in the previous chapter.[268] In this chapter, it will become clear that the case is similar with regard to the iconographical material from Rome, where continuity seems again to be the key, and where there is little or no evidence to suggest the existence of a type of distinct "senatorial Mithraism" more closely aligned with the supposed ideals of the so-called "pagan" revival than with the "real mysteries."[269]

The problems and challenges of fourth century Mithraic art, as with the structural evidence, are mainly twofold: firstly the problem of establishing any distinct fourth century style because of the serious problems involved in the categorization, typologization, and especially dating, of the materials

[266] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 11.
[267] Primarily the mithraea of the *Crypta Balbi* and the *Terme di Caracalla*, and the possible mithraeum in the *Phrygianum*.
[268] See discussion in chapter 1.
[269] See chapter 3.

involved.[270] Uncorroborated stylistic dating is notoriously unreliable, and is indeed often little more than educated guess work, but in many cases, especially in Rome where few sites have been stratigraphically documented, this is the only available option. It is still vital, however, that we keep the problems associated with stylistic dating in mind when discussing any possible fourth century style of Mithraic art. The second challenge is the geographical considerations, and consequently the distinctions between various categories of Mithraic art based on provincial typologies.[271] This discussion is especially important with regard to the typologies of the so-called "complex icons" and how these apply to the Roman material, and is dealt with in greater detail below. The main question at this point is whether there was a distinct Italian style of Mithraic art at any point in history, and whether we can speak of at least certain identifiable Roman and Italian stylistic and artistic preferences. Additionally, we must evaluate how these preferences are related to the development of the cult in the third and the fourth centuries.

To answer this question, this chapter begins with a brief overview of Mithraic art in use in Rome during the fourth century and discusses both the issue of change and continuity in the cult icons, and the function of these icons within the spatial context and architectural scheme of the Mithraic cult room. This is then followed by a discussion of the main cult icons, the tauroctonies, found in Rome, and discusses the merits and shortcomings of the typologies and categories that have been proposed for these icons. In this study, the distinction between the "basic" and the "complex" icons is still retained for analytical purposes, and the implications of the two categories of Mithraic cult icons is discussed in relation to the Roman material of the late period. A brief look at the visual elements of the basic and complex types of icon found in Rome in this period follows, which in turn leads to an analysis of the correlation of icon type and mithraeum in the material from Rome in the fourth century. The discussion of the Mithraic tauroctony icons from Rome ends with a look at the applicability of the commonly accepted typologies of Mithraic

[270] See below, but also chapter 1.
[271] See the discussion below on geographical typologies and Italian stylistic preferences. Typologies in Mithraic art derive mainly from the works of Ernest Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain*, and Fritz Saxl, *Mithras, typengeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, but found their most extreme proponent in Leroy Campbell's *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, though Campbell's typologies and even his analysis remain, on the whole, untenable. Most recently, the pitfalls of applying geographical archetypes to the typological sub-categories of the corpus of Mithraic art have been examined by Gordon, "Panelled complications," and Schofield, "Iconographic Variation."

icons in general to the Roman material. In the following section, viewing and experiencing the icon in its primary context is briefly discussed where pertinent to the Roman fourth century material, and finally, after a few comments on change and continuity in Roman Mithraic art, the summary answers the question of the existence and relevance of a fourth century Roman style of Mithraic art, and suggests some possible interpretations of the function and relevance of the tauroctony icon in the context of Mithraism in fourth century Rome.

2.1. Mithraic art in use in the fourth century

When dealing with Mithraic art, and even with Mithraic art history, we are first and foremost dealing with the image of the bull-slaying Mithras; the tauroctony. The main reason for this is that the tauroctony motif was the main cult image of the cult of Mithras, and as such, it was present in every mithraeum throughout the Empire. There are innumerable representations of the tauroctony in Mithraic art in all media, and new images of the bull-slaying are constantly being added to the list as new finds are unearthed. Furthermore, the bull-killing motif is discussed in nearly every treatment of any aspect of the cult, and it seems that all Mithraic scholars have their own, sometimes wildly differing, interpretations of the meaning of the icon. This chapter is not concerned with interpreting the motif of the bull-slaying Mithras as such, but will focus on the corpus of Mithraic icons from Rome, with the main emphasis on tauroctonies which could have been in use in last phase of the cult in Rome. A good beginning is a look at the statistics of the Roman tauroctonies.

Though Clauss' statistical survey of Mithraic material from 1992 is no longer entirely up to date,[272] his statistics for Rome are still valuable for illustrating trends in the distribution of the material. Clauss' survey is mostly focused on epigraphic evidence and on demographics, but also includes a list of Mithraic tauroctony reliefs in Rome. Clauss lists 97 tauroctony reliefs, or Mithras reliefs, from the city of

[272] Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*. See also the slightly revised and updated version of his *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien*, translated by Richard Gordon and published in English as *The Roman Cult of Mithras*. Gordon's addition of an up-to-date section of suggested further reading is especially helpful.

Rome, and even allowing for the discovery of new tauroctonies since Clauss's survey, the total number of known reliefs should not at present be very much over a hundred.[273]

Of the 97 reliefs that Clauss lists, 85 are *unbestimmt*, meaning that their specific placement in late antiquity is unknown, and many of these are found completely without context. To further complicate attempts at contextualizing many of these icons, several of the listed tauroctonies in Vermaseren's corpus had in fact never been verified by Vermaseren himself, but were listed based on information from Cumont and others.[274] Some of these tauroctonies were supposedly to be found in private collections, accessible neither to the general public nor to Vermaseren himself in some cases, whereas many others have been lost, and are only preserved in drawings or paintings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[275] This complete lack of archaeological context for well over half of the known reliefs from Rome, makes the project of categorizing and dating the corpus of the surviving tauroctonies from Rome, and even to evaluate them statistically, close to an impossible task, especially since only a very few of the tauroctonies in question bear datable inscriptions. Still we must attempt to discern some general trends and guidelines in the material before we can approach the question of an Italian style of tauroctony scene, and especially the question of a change in this style over time. Campbell suggested that more and more subsidiary images were added to the tauroctony scene over time,[276] but this does not, as we shall see, find support in the Roman material.

Based both on the dating of epigraphical and archaeological materials and on stylistic dating criteria, we must in general assume that most Mithraic artwork was commissioned in the period from the

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[273] Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 16-17, and especially note 3 which lists all the included reliefs. At this point it is important to note, however, that it is unclear if Clauss is only including actual reliefs, and not tauroctonies in other media such as stucco and fresco. For instance, he lists the Santa Prisca mithraeum as not having a Mithras relief, while the Barberini is listed with a relief, though I take it he is referring to the tauroctony mural. This mural however is not listed in his note number 2 on page 17 in which he presents the Mithras reliefs with their corresponding numbers in Vermaseren's corpus.

[274] For example from the city of Rome itself: V 396, V 398, V408, V542, V 598, V 601, were never verified by Vermaseren, and a whole section lists "monuments probably found in Rome, but of which the present owners are unknown," *CIMRM I*, 230-234.

[275] Such is the case with the tauroctony fresco from the mithraeum of the *Terme di Tito* (V 337), for instance, which only survives in two versions in eighteenth century aquarelles.

[276] Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, 12.

mid-second century to the mid-third century.[277] Most mithraea in Rome were also founded in this period,[278] and as we must assume that all mithraea had some kind of cult icon from its very beginning, this would account for a large amount of tauroctonies datable to the late second and early third century. Additionally, certain stylistic elements, like for instance the presence or absence of bearded figures, the use of, and depth of, drill work, and the shape of locks of hair and the plasticity of garments, offer some indication of the age of a given piece of art.[279] But we must be wary of assuming a too high a degree of change in Roman art from the third to the fourth centuries, an assumption which is often based on purely stylistic criteria. Jas Elsner highlights instead the essential continuity of Roman art in the period:

> In the arena of the arts, it is striking that once one has eschewed a conventional stylistic account in favour of a thematic analysis of images according to their social and cultural functions, the evidence points towards very deep continuities. From the end of the third century, the patterns of patrician patronage, the culture of wealthy villas and their decoration, the lavish accoutrements of the dinner table, the continuing adornment of cities with impressive new buildings (especially churches) – all this seems to have been virtually unaffected by military or economic crisis.[280]

There are two other important factors which must also be dealt with at this point. The first is the possibility of an ideological preference for "classicizing" elements in the stylistic execution of the artwork. This preference for classicizing elements could be influenced by the practical consideration that the artist commissioned for a certain piece of art would almost certainly, at this point in time, either be copying an older original, or following another set of more or less rigid visual guidelines. But it could also be tied to the importance placed on the "ancientness" of the icon which would fit in well with what we

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[277] Mithraic icons are rarely inscribed with datable inscriptions, and the dating of Mithraic tauroctonies is most often based on stylistic criteria, or, where there is a clear archaeological provenience, on other material from the icon's archaeological context. Neither of the last two methods provides an absolute or secure dating of the tauroctony itself, and they both come with their own sets of problems discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, both contextual and stylistic dating provide a flexible framework, or matrix, in which Mithraic art can be discussed and comparatively analyzed, and as such, the established dates of the tauroctonies in question will still be my starting point. Most Roman icons are dated to the century or so between the Antonines and up until the period of the post Severan civil wars, or roughly from the 130's to the 240's.

[278] See chapter 1.

[279] For an example of a well argued but often speculative application of stylistic dating criteria, see Van Essen's dating of the two layers of murals at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum in Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 173-178.

[280] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 11.

know of the conservative or conformist values of the Mithraic cult,[281] and indeed even with the ancient "Persian" nature of Mithras himself, recalling the ancient wisdom of the magi.[282] Secondly, we must consider that, in most cases, the original icon, which had been installed at the time of foundation of the mithraeum or shortly thereafter, remained in use and fulfilled its religious functions presumably up until the end of the cult, or at least until the mithraeum in question was abandoned or destroyed, unless a new icon was specifically needed for some reason.[283]

A fruitful comparison at this point might be between the fourth century mithraea and modern churches, where decorations such as crucifixes and apsidal art are usually preserved – and even venerated because of their age, until a new one is needed because of some calamity, an old one needs to be restored, or indeed a new church building is erected. Turcan goes even further, directly comparing the image of the tauroctony in the mithraeum to the scene of the crucifixion in Christian churches, with the members of the congregation all having their heads turned towards "l'image de Mithra tauroctone qui, peint ou sculpté, décorait uniformément le fond des sanctuaires, comme le Christ en croix dans les églises catholiques préconciliaires".[284] Even if differences between the two "main icons", the crucified Christ and the tauroctonous Mithras, are greater than the similarities, important similarities remain. Aside from the fact that they assume much of the same architectural or spatial function in their respective cult rooms, both cult objects derived religious authority from their age. Thus, when we imagine Mithraic art in the fourth century, we must take into account that the art work, or at least the main cult icon, may well be over a hundred years old. The fact that it is extremely hard to identify a late-third and fourth century style in

[281] For the essentially conformist nature of the Mithraic cult, see especially Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, and Merkelbach, *Mithras*, but also Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman society", "Authority, Salvation and Mystery", and "Who worshipped Mithras?"
[282] Whether or not one accepts any real Persian antecedents for Roman Mithraism, there are quite a few references to either the Magi or other ancient Persian elements in all categories of Mithraic material. This is not the place for a discussion concerning the "Persian-ness" of Mithraism, however. For a recent re-evaluation of the topic, see Gordon, "Persei sub rupibus antri."
[283] Like for instance at the mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*, though why a new icon should be needed after the enlargement of the mithraeum in the late third century is unclear. The old icon could possibly still have remained in use however. The icon(s) of this mithraeum is discussed below.
[284] Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacism*, 74.

Mithraic art at all,[285] further strengthens the assumption that new artwork complied as much as possible with older prototypes.

We should also consider that in some, or even most, mithraea, several tauroctony icons have been found, which suggests that new icons could be donated and dedicated to the shrine without necessarily replacing the old main icon. Alternatively, even if the new icon did indeed replace the old, the old one was still kept and given a place of honor in the mithraeum, signifying veneration and continuity. In some instances, the old icon was even kept, unchanged, underneath a new one. A good example of this is again the stucco icon from the first phase of the mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*, where both the icon and the niche were kept unchanged despite the instalment of a new marble relief over the old niche in the late third century.

Extensive murals, painted icons, and the "hybrid" stucco icons,[286] seem, at least at first glance, to represent a Roman and central Italian preference, and these types of cult icon bring with them their own set of problems of stylistic dating and placing. For instance, at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, the lower layer of wall paintings on both side-walls, originally thought by Van Essen to be from the beginning of the third century,[287] were according to his purely stylistically based dating re-painted with mostly the same motifs twenty to thirty years later.[288]

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[285] The case is different for the recently discovered fourth century paintings at Huarte/Hawarti which display a range of motifs previously unknown in Mithraic art, but this could also be a case of geographical, as well as temporal, variation. Roger Beck, for instance, argues the point eloquently: "It is tempting to relate the extreme iconographic divergence to the late date of the frescoes, as a manifestation of the breaking apart of a religion in its dying days. Perhaps – but I would stake no money on the impossibility of equally divergent monuments turning up from Mithraism's second or third century heydays. More relevant is locale: it seems to me a priori unlikely that such radically innovative representation would occur in an area of the cult's concentration such as Rome or Ostia." (Beck, *Beck on Mithraism*, 8-9).

[286] Such as famously the one at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum described in Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 128-134. The icon must have been erected prior to the year 202, based on the evidence of an inscription found *in situ*, see Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 125. There is evidence that points to the presence of a "hybrid" stucco tauroctony also in the fourth century mithraeum of the Nummii Albini, but though this icon is given its own catalogue number in the *CIMRM* (V 387), it is not extant today. For a discussion of the stucco icons in Rome on a case by case basis, see below.

[287] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 173. Specifically, the lower level should, according to Van Essen, be dated to 195-200, ibid, 177.

[288] The dating of the upper layer of murals is based on comparative stylistic studies. Van Essen argues that the plasticity of the locks of head hair and the style of the facial hair of some of the figures, makes it possible to date this layer to approximately the year 220, Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 173-176. The associative nature of

The latter case raises several important questions. Why were the original scenes painted over after such a short period?[289] Why were the motifs of the paintings left basically the same on the upper layer? And perhaps even more importantly: Why was the cult icon in stucco left basically as it was, with only minor modifications,[290] while the rest of the mithraeum was redecorated? One possible explanation for the continued use of the icon in the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum is the very high artistic quality of the piece, but the most persuasive explanation to my mind remains that there was not necessarily a need for a new icon, since its subject matter was so static. This is doubly true, as the *Santa Prisca* icon was essentially of the "basic" or "simple" type of tauroctony, even if some other elements also intrude into the composition.[291] In this example, describing the *Santa Prisca* icon as "basic" is no reflection on the artistic merits of the piece, but rather refers to the lack of side-scenes from the "life of Mithras" in separate bands flanking the main scene of the icon itself. Especially in Rome, the distinction between "basic" and "complex" icons is not so simple, however, and in the *Santa Prisca*, to stay with the present example, a figure representing Mithras carrying or dragging the bull, the *transitus* motif, is included within the borders of the main motif itself, making a typological classification much less clear cut.[292]

In most cases the icon was not replaced when the mithraeum was refurbished, so long as no radical structural changes were required. In the case of *Santa Prisca* at least, the rest of the mithraeum was

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his arguments, and the highly uncertain dating of his very few comparative examples, however, makes his dating only probable at best. The dating remains unchallenged however.

[289] Vermaseren's suggestion, mentioned only in passing, is that the verses on the lower layer of murals revealed too much of the cult liturgy, see Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 177.

[290] The modifications included pieces of pumice painted yellow added inside the cult niche, and the re-painting of Mithras's cloak in a dark red, see Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 129.

[291] "Basic" in the sense that the main scene of the icon, Mithras killing the bull, is not flanked by side-scenes depicting episodes from the life of Mithras in horizontal or vertical bands which characterizes the "complex" icons. In Rome, and also in the icon discussed above, the *transitus* or *petrogenesis* motifs can occur within the borders of the main composition, and this is indeed the case in the tauroctony from the *Santa Prisca* where the *transitus* motif intrudes. The *Santa Prisca* icon is anything but basic in an artistic sense however, and must have been a true wonder to behold prior to its destruction. Additionally the classification of this icon as "basic" is not completely clear cut, as the tauroctony scene also prominently features the figure of a reclining bearded male who should probably be identified as Caelus/Oceanus or even Saturnus (Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 131-133). The addition of this figure serves to blur the typological lines between different categories of tauroctony icons, highlighting one of the central problems of the classification of Mithraic art.

[292] To my knowledge, there is also a marble relief from the *Foro Boario* mithraeum (V 435) where the *transitus* motif occurs within the main composition itself, but where the other scenes and any evidence for narrative bands are absent. There is also a limestone relief from the *Piazza Dante* (V 350) where the scenes depicting the *pact of friendship* and the *obeisance of Sol* occur below the tauroctony itself, but are not separated from the main scene by any sort of band.

remodeled, but the icon itself was kept, and presumably continued to serve as the main cult icon of the mithraeum until the mithraeum was eventually abandoned and filled up, sometime in the early fifth century.[293] Though the latter explanation seems the more likely, there is also the possibility that the complexity of the artistic achievement of the stucco tauroctony of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum was the reason that it was not replaced by a new one when the mithraeum was refurbished. At this point it becomes necessary to discuss the murals and stucco icons, as well as the other main types of icons in Rome and its environs at this time, in the context that they were experienced by their viewers – the mithraeum.

2.2. Mithraic art in the spatial context and architectural scheme of the mithraeum

The most important aspect of the tauroctony is undoubtedly its role as the main cult icon of a Mithraic community. The scene depicting Mithras slaying the bull in the primordial cave was clearly the most important element of Mithraic art, and as far as we know, a prime requisite of every mithraeum. Looking at the Mithraic cult room, the mithraeum itself, one of the most striking things one notices is the rather "programmatic" layout. Though the distribution of specific iconography *within* the mithraeum seems at first glance to vary considerably, as it does in style, sophistication, size and execution, we are generally able to discern the same overall visual scheme, consisting of a rectangular room with side-podia and an apsidal cult niche containing the icon, and quite often also of the placing of secondary statuary, reliefs, and paintings. There seems indeed to be an overarching architecturally contingent visual scheme that ties together all the varying iconography in the mithraeum into a coherent visual whole, similar to both the architectural form and the standardized overall pattern of decoration in the Christian basilical type churches of the fourth and fifth centuries.[294]

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[293] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 241-242.

[294] The relationship between mithraea and churches, both in architecture and art, is discussed below, while the relationship between the Mithraic and Christian communities in Rome is discussed in Chapter 3. For a thorough discussion of the architecture of early Christian churches, see White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, vols. 1 and 2. For apsidal art in Italian churches in late antiquity, see especially Hellemo, *Adventus Domini*.

The visual scheme of the mithraeum includes the use of special effects such as light effects and stage props, and a limited, but striking palette of colors. The typical mithraeum was a smallish room, though in Rome there are several examples of relatively large mithraea, such as the *Crypta Balbi* and *Terme di Caracalla* mithraea. The mithraea were sometimes constructed to create the impression of an underground cave or cavern with a vaulted ceiling, mirroring the primordial cave referred to by Statius, Porphyry, Tertullian, and Justin Martyr,[295] with the ceiling made to look like natural stone through the use of pumice or stucco. The ceiling was often painted blue, and sometimes "stars" of precious stones or metals were inserted with the express purpose of turning the ceiling into the vault of heaven.[296] Even where the ceiling of the cult room was not made to look like the inside of a cave, the apsis of the cult niche usually was, at least in Rome, and it seems that it was essential to locate Mithras' most important action, symbolically, metaphorically, and concretely, firmly within the space of the cave.

2.2.1. Literary references to the Mithraic cave

Though there is a dearth of literary evidence for the cult of Mithras, several passages in secondary literary references still mention Mithraism, though often these references, as well as references to other non-Christian religious practices, seem to be used as rhetorical devices to highlight points of intra-Christian polemic.[297] While these references to Mithraism are often preoccupied with describing cult practices, they do sometimes also offer details of the scheme of the mithraeum – either in the sense of the "real-world" scheme, or the idealized prototypical scheme. In some cases these passages allow us a glimpse into the symbolic "alternate universe" of the Mithraic cult room. For instance, when Jerome in one of his letters to Laeta describes the apparent destruction of a mithraeum in Rome in the mid-fourth century by one of her kinsmen, he indirectly tells us several details about the visual scheme of a mithraeum:

[295] Statius, *Theb*. 1.719-20, Porphyry, *De antr. nymph.* 6, Tertullian, *De cor.* 15.3., Justin Martyr, *Dial. Tryph.*, 70.
[296] The ceiling of the mithraeum at *Santa Maria Capua Vetere* was even said to be adorned with real jewels. See Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I*, 3.
[297] For instance, Jerome's letters are often highly political and use layer upon layer of rhetoric, but this is of course also true of most of the writers of this period engaged in religious and political polemics.

> ... ante paucos annos propinquus **[Col.0869]** vester Graccus, nobilitatem patritiam nomine sonans, cum Praefecturam gereret [Mss. *regeret*] urbanam , nonne specum Mithrae, et omnia portentosa simulacra, quibus Corax, **679** Nymphus [al. *Nyphus,* et *Gryphus*], Miles, Leo, Perses, Helios, Dromo, Pater initiantur [al. *innitebantur*], subvertit, fregit, excussit: et his quasi obsidibus ante praemissis, impetravit baptismum Christi.
>
> ... did not your own kinsman Gracchus whose name betokens his patrician origin, when a few years back he held the prefecture of the City, overthrow, break in pieces, and shake to pieces the grotto of Mithras and all the dreadful images therein? Those I mean by which the worshippers were initiated as Raven, Bridegroom, Soldier, Lion, Perseus, Sun, Crab, and Father? Did he not, I repeat, destroy these and then, sending them before him as hostages, obtain for himself Christian baptism?[298]

Important here is the description of the "grotto of Mithras", the *specus Mithrae*, which not only highlights the centrality of the cave metaphor, but also the importance of the images contained inside it, and this interplay, which I return to below, seems to be one of the defining aspects of Mithraism in Rome. Because of the information it gives about these images and their function, this passage is one of the most interesting and important pieces of literary evidence regarding Mithraism, and especially so for this study, as it describes events taking place in Rome in 376/77, while Gracchus was urban prefect.[299] Prudentius, another contemporary Christian writer, mentions only that a certain Gracchus "commanded the images of gods to be pulled down,"[300] but his testimony lends credence to Jerome's account.

In addition to the interplay between the images and the physical cave, it is especially the reference to the grades and the initiation, which is important in the passage from Jerome cited above, since this testimony, which is corroborated by mosaics from the *Felicissimus* mithraeum at Ostia,[301] illustrates the intimate connection between initatory practices and Mithraic iconography. Gracchus destroys the Mithraic cave and the markers by which the Mithraists were initated, *simulacra...initiantur*,[302] which presumably should be interpreted as either a complex icon in stucco or in marble relief, or perhaps a set of individual small-scale sculpture depicting the grades, though that would have little precedence in Mithraic art.

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[298] Jerome, *Ep. 107. 2.* The translation is from *Early Church Fathers: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.* Series II, Volume VI.
[299] For what little details are known concenring the prefect Gracchus, see Jones, Martindale and Morris, *Prosopography*, 399.
[300] Prudentius, *Contra orationem Symmachi*, I, 561-565.
[301] V 299.
[302] Jerome, *Ep. 107.2.*

Alternatively, it remains at least possible that these *simulacra* were painted scenes of initiation like those found at Capua, floor mosaics like the ones at the *Felicissimus* mithraeum at Ostia, or perhaps even some other known pieces of statuary, like for instance *leontocephalines*, are indeed what Jerome is reffering to. Still, given the amount of small-scale sculpture and altars found in Roman mithraea, he is most likely reffering to various elements of the icon, like for instance the torchbearers, placed throughout the mithraeum, and to a central scene in stucco, which would not only be relatively easy to break, but which seems also to correspond most closely to how Jerome describes the event. The choice of words like *subvertit, fregit, excussit*, does not seem to fit with a painted scene, but as Jerome could have chosen these terms simply for dramatic effect, this conclusion must be treatet with some caution.

The scheme of the seven grades which Jerome describes seems to fit well with the archaeological evidence of the *Felicissimus* floor mosaics and with the *Santa Prisca* murals, and since "basic" icons are thought to generally be the norm in Rome, there is something to be said for Merkelbach's suggestion that symbols of all the seven grades are present in the central image of the tauroctony itself, though most other scholars believe that the key to this particular reading of the cryptogram is lost to us today.[303] I return to the discussion of the initiatory system in Chapter 3 of the present study, and briefly to the relation of the grade symbols to both the basic and the complex icon below, but at this point we must note the connection suggested by Jerome between the mithraeum itself and the imagery of the initiatory grades and visual "markers" in general.

Statius is a main witness for the understanding of the ontological status of the mithraeum as essentially a "Persian" cave, recalling the original cave where, according to myth,[304] literary references,

[303] Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 80-81. In this scheme, the raven of course stands for *Corax*, the snake comes to stand for *Nymphus*, the scorpion for *Miles*, the dog for *Leo*, *Cautopates* for *Perses*, *Cautes* for *Heliodromus*, and Mithras himself for the *Pater*.

[304] Mithraic mythology is essentially a misnomer, as most of what we recognize as Mithraic myths and myth events are basically constructions of modern Mithraic scholarship, and as such must be treated with some caution. This is not the place, however, for an extensive discussion of the problems of the "Mithras myth" (extensive being the only type of discussion possible) but see for instance Lerjeryd, *Mithraismens miljöer* (with a summary in English) and Bjørnebye, "The Multivalent Symbol," 60-66. The question of whether it is possible, or even desirable, to establish a narrative Mithraic mythology is also discussed below.

and art, Mithras slew the bull,[305] and the underground *frisson* is echoed by Tertullian who describes the mithraea as *castra tenebrarum*, citadels of darkness.[306] To Porphyry too, the symbolism of the cave is important, but, as one would expect in Porphyry's allegorical and Neo-Platonic interpretation, the ontological status of the Mithraic cave becomes very different.[307] Justin Martyr, on the other hand, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, also highlights the importance of the symbolism of the cave, but, presumably to discredit the Mithraic claim to "ancient wisdom", instead blames the Mithraists for imitating Daniel and Isaiah.

> And when those who record the mysteries of Mithras say that he was begotten of a rock, and call the place where those who believe in him are initiated a cave, do I not perceive here that the utterance of Daniel, that a stone without hands was cut out of a great mountain, has been imitated by them, and that they have attempted likewise to imitate the whole of Isaiah's words? For they contrived that the words of righteousness be quoted also by them. But I must repeat to you the words of Isaiah referred to, in order that from them you may know that these things are so. They are these: `Hear, ye that are far off, what I have done; those that are near shall know my might. The sinners in Zion are removed; trembling shall seize the impious. Who shall announce to you the everlasting place? The man who walks in righteousness, speaks in the right way, hates sin and unrighteousness, and keeps his hands pure from bribes, stops the ears from hearing the unjust judgment of blood closes the eyes from seeing unrighteousness: he shall dwell in the lofty cave of the strong rock.[308]

The text goes on to deal with the Mithraic sacred meal as a devilish antithesis to the Eucharist, and it is this antithesis to the true and holy ritual practices of the Christians which is the point of the passage from Tertullian as well – not an objective description of the rites of the Mithraists. Describing the Mithraic rituals is only of secondary importance in this context, however, as Tertullian's focus on the symbolism of the cave confirms the symbolic significance accorded to it by the other sources presented above.

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[305] Statius, *Theb*. 1.719-20.
[306] Tertullian, *de Cor.* 15.3.
[307] Porphyry, *de Antr. Nymph.* 6. See also Turcan, *Mithras platonicus*, 62-90, and recently, Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 16-17, 30-35, 41-50, and ff.
[308] Justin Martyr, *dial. Tryph.* 70. The translation is from *Early Church Fathers: Ante-Nicene Fathers.* Volume I.

2.2.2. Spatial Orientation and structural guidelines

Almost remarkably, there seem to be no particular rules regarding spatial orientation of the mithraeum, in the sense of alignment to points of the compass, except for an occasional preference in some mithraea for an East-West orientation. In cities, such as Rome, it would seem that the orientation of the mithraeum was at most a secondary consideration. Leroy Campbell attempted to classify the orientation of mithraea, and came to the conclusion that:

> In cities the actual orientation was influenced by street alignment, which was sometimes governed by other religious formulas, or by preexisting conditions which made a complete modification of orientation impossible. For example, the Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia is oriented WSW. with respect to its main axis, but a secondary aisle and cult niche is oriented NNW. Such arrangements probably represent the best that could be done with a given location and financial outlay.[309]

In Rome, this practice of orienting the mithraeum "wherever physically convenient"[310] is particularly striking, as the mithraea seem to be oriented to all points of the compass with a slight majority favoring a northerly facing of the main cult icon. Indeed, according to Lentz: "As in practice the main cult picture may face in any direction, the term 'orientation' loses any connection with specific points of the compass or technical significance, becoming merely synonymous with 'direction'."[311] Contrary to the spatial orientation, or direction, of the mithraeum, which seems to have followed few other guidelines than the purely practical, the arrangement of the main interior follows, as we have seen, a rather strict basic pattern with few exceptions.

With the exception of the painted icons of *Marino* and *Capua* and the very small mithraea, like the one on the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*, the main cult icon is most often situated within a niche forming the apsis of the cult room. In addition, what often looks like an arbitrary and eclectic choice seems in fact to conform to a set of structural guidelines, for example the relative proportions of the mithraeum and the

[309] Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, 50-51. Campbell lists the orientations of quite a few mithraea in a table on pages 51 to 53.
[310] Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, 50.
[311] Lentz, "peculiarities," 360.

placing of small scale statuary,[312] though the guidelines here seem much less rigid than for the general "triclinium-like" layout of the cult room. In the apsis, or cult niche, the main cult scene that formed the visual focus of the cult room was always the tauroctony, executed in various media. In Rome and central Italy there seems to be a preference for the main cult icon of the mithraeum to be executed in fresco,[313] in stucco,[314] or as free-standing sculptured statue-groups,[315] while the standard small-scale marble reliefs which statistically are the most common type found in Rome, seem most often to be secondary, presumably votive, icons.

Though there is certainly a degree of variation concerning the placing of the individual elements within the borders of the main scene of the icon, and in the use of certain visual details in the composition of the scene, there is again a striking reliance on a set of motifs made up of certain *key*, or *core*, elements. In the main scene of the cult icon, the central motif is of course Mithras himself in the act of slaying the bull, but the key visual elements of this scene also include representations of the ears of corn or wheat sprouting from the tail, or from the wound, of the dying bull, the dog and the snake lapping up its blood, the scorpion attacking the bull's testicles, the raven hovering above the scene, busts of Sol and Luna in the top corners, and not least the occurrence of the two *dadophori*, the torchbearers, *Cautes* and *Cautopates* flanking Mithras himself.

The "canonical" images form, according to Robert Turcan, almost a Mithraic cathecism:

> L'art mithriaque avait en effet pour but d'informer les mystes, de les confirmer dans la connaissance d'une geste divine et des croyances attachées aux épisodes du mythe. Il s'agit d'un système d'images canoniques, toujours les mêmes et en quelque sorte « catéchétiques ». Le paganisme hellénique était une religion esthétique de l'idole ou statue isolée ; le mithriacisme est une religion dogmatique du

[312] Such as for instance the placing of small statues of the torchbearers flanking the entrance to the mithraeum, either on the inside, or, in some special cases such as from the mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128* in Rome, on the outside of the cult room itself. The case can also be argued for protomes and busts of Sol and Luna, and indeed the physical proximity of any representation of the sacred banquet to the main icon, as for instance at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum.
[313] Such as the famous frescoes of the *Barberini* mithraeum in Rome itself and the *Marino* and *Capua* mithraea not far from the city.
[314] This is the case at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum and the mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*.
[315] The tauroctony statues seem to be a distinct Roman/Italian preference, and the vast majority of all such groups are found in Rome, though a few are also found in the provinces.

> tableau composite et symbolique. Il fallait donc pouvoir exposer aux fidèles une imagerie complexe, condensée, mais claire et cohérente, facile à commenter comme à fixer visuellement.[316]

Indeed, the relationship between the icon and the mithraeum might be one of the keys to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the cult, and the importance and complexity of this relationship has been noted and explored by many, most notably but in different ways by Richard Gordon and Roger Beck. Gordon wrote as early as 1976:

> The relationship between the mithraeum and the relief is one of obvious complexity. Not only does each constitute a map of at least two ontologically distinct kinds of unseen reality, the historical and the cosmic; not only is each a metonymic sign for the other (note the simultaneous presence in temple and relief of Cautes and Cautopates, Mithras petragenes, taurophoros, of Sol, of sevenfold patterns, of zodiacal signs, of craters, snakes and lions…); but ritual actions within the mithraeum are displayed paradigmatically in the relief, notably in the scenes in which grade-holders serve at the feast of Mithras and Sol, and in the handshake of Sol and Mithras.[317]

The relationship between Mithraic iconography and ritual in Rome is explored in greater detail below, but at this point it is important to establish the "syntax" of the basic tauroctony structure, which is after all the most common type there is, at least in Rome.

Before exploring this syntax in greater detail, however, it must be noted that Mithraic iconography was not restricted to the cult room, even though the image of the bull-killing is usually considered as the cult's main icon. The tauroctony is also found on several types of 'small finds'; on plates, on medallions, on gems, and on small scale portable votive-type reliefs. But is the tauroctony the same thing when it occurs on tableware and on small personal medallions instead? Was there a difference between the private and the communal icon? Richard Gordon treats the often neglected subject of the "small finds" in a literal sense in a recent article, and urges consideration of the implications of this use of the image of the tauroctony outside of the context of the mithraeum's communal cult icon:

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[316] Turcan, *Mithra et le Mithriacisme*, 51.
[317] Gordon, "A new Mithraic relief from Rome," 174-175. "The contexts in which it was used" are discussed below, and the relationship between the private and the communal icon is also examined in Chapter 3.

> In moving from being the focal point of the *mithraeum* to the decoration of utilitarian objects, the key Mithraic image acquired the status of an emblem or logo, of which one can say in general that their semantic value is minimal and anyway declines in proportion to the familiarity of the image. … The image of the bull-killing acquired in fact many values depending on the contexts in which it was used.[318]

Some of these small-scale representations of the bull-killing seem to follow the stylistic guidelines of the major types of complex/compound relief quite closely, and this is especially the case with those of the simpler Danubian type, but "[m]any offer unusual details, which implies the loosening of the tacit pressures which in Mithraic communities favoured a consensus concerning the design and imagery of these Danubian-style reliefs."[319] The loosening of the strict "Danubian elements" of the compositional guidelines, or "visual canon" in these small reliefs, may indeed be an example of other factors that contributed to the opening of said canon towards the end of our period, but I dare not attempt to generalize any conclusions concerning any sort of canon in fourth century Rome, in particular from such a small group of images. For now, I must relegate these items to the role of circumstantial evidence.

We might draw the conclusion then that the abovementioned central elements of the bull-killing scene, the animals, the torchbearers, and Sol and Luna along with Mithras and the bull, are the *core visual criteria* of the iconographically static main cult icon, forming the visual focal point not only of the mithraeum, but also for more "private" modes of worship. However, most of the known tauroctony reliefs were indeed intended as main cult icons, at least as reflected in the extant archaeological material from Rome, and the role of the relief as the main focal point of the cult room must still be our main consideration. Let us leave the architectural scheme of the Mithraic cave for now, returning to it in the context of "viewing the icon", and look more closely at the core elements of Mithraic art as they are expressed in the iconography of the cult icon in general and in Rome in particular.

[318] Gordon, "Small and miniature reproductions," 272.
[319] Gordon, "Small and miniature reproductions," 266.

2.3. The composition of the Mithraic cult icon

Stylistically, the representations of the tauroctony scene vary from very simple ones, consisting of little more than an outline of Mithras and the bull, to the magnificent murals of central Italy[320] and the great complex reliefs of the Rhine provinces.[321] Execution and style varied greatly, as did some elements of the scene, but certain "core" elements were almost always present,[322] and these bear repetition, since they are in essence the primary elements also of the visual syntax of the basic sentences of the Mithraic language of symbols. The central elements of the basic icon were Mithras and the bull, with Mithras usually shown kneeling astride the bull and plunging his dagger into its neck while looking away over his shoulder, but in addition to the two main characters in this drama, a fixed set of secondary characters, or "visual sub units",[323] is also usually present except in a few cases. These secondary elements are a group of animals: the dog and the snake who are shown, as a rule, lapping up the blood spilling from the wound of the dying bull, the scorpion clasping the bull's testicles, and the raven perched on high. Additionally, the two Mithraic torchbearers, *Cautes* with his torch raised and *Cautopates* with his torch pointing downwards, are usually present within the central composition, one on each flank, though the torchbearers are sometimes found instead removed from within the frame of the main icon and placed as small scale statues flanking

[320] These are the wall-paintings from the *Barberini* mithraeum in Rome (V 390), and the *Marino* (Vermaseren, *Mithriaca III*, plates III-X) and *Capua* (V 181) mithraea close to the city. The three paintings of the tauroctony scene are compositionally and stylistically similar, though the one at *Capua* does not feature side-scenes from the life of Mithras.

[321] The great complex reliefs of the Rhine provinces have received much attention in Mithraic studies as they are of a large scale, are often of a high artistic quality, and show a plethora of scenes from the life of Mithras. Though these reliefs are not the topic of the present discussion, comparisons between elements of the Rhine reliefs and the paintings of the mithraea of central Italy are inevitable not only because of similar compositions but also because of their relationship in much of past scholarship on Mithraic art. Some representative examples of Rhine monuments are: *Neuenheim* (V 1283), *Osterburken* (V 1292), and to a certain extent the relief from *Nida (Heddernheim)* (V 1083). Though this relief differs in several important respects from V 1283 and 1292, it is the most similar to the *Marino* fresco and to the complex relief from *Nersae* (V 650).

[322] Though exceptions do of course occur, and there are several examples of reliefs missing some of these elements, mainly in the case of very simplistic icons or in very small (miniature) ones. There are also some examples of the icon sculptured in the round where the animals accompanying the scene are missing, and the sculpture of the tauroctony from the *Terme* mithraeum in Ostia (V 230), for example, shows only Mithras (in unusual attire) and the bull. This sculpture is highly unusual in several respects: the way in which Mithras holds his left hand under the muzzle of the bull, the unusually high position of Mithras' knife, and the lack of the traditional oriental attire including the trademark Phrygian cap, have led scholars to conclude that the statue must be very early. This is however uncorroborated by any datable material. This sculpture does not feature any of the normal elements of the tauroctony scene apart from Mithras and the bull.

[323] Small, "The Raven," 533 ff.

either the main icon or the entrance to the mithraeum. Busts of Sol and Luna are usually seen in the upper corners of the scene, though these too are sometimes moved out of the main composition, as was the case, for instance, in the first phase of the mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*, where small paintings of the busts of Sol and Luna flanked the main tauroctony icon.[324]

The figure of Mithras himself is usually attired in an oriental costume of Phrygian cap, *tunica manicata* (a long-sleeved tunic), *anaxyrides* (eastern style trousers), and a cape, though in some cases, he is depicted heroically nude[325] or even, in a unique example from Ostia, in what seems to be a Greek *chiton*.[326] Like the general trend in Graeco-Roman art, most if not all tauroctony scenes, regardless of the medium they were executed in, were painted, and the different items of Mithras' clothing was usually colored in either blue or red, often, as in the painting at Marino, with most of the costume in red with only the inside of the cape being blue and star-speckled. The bull was often white, sometimes wearing the *dorsuale*, the Roman sacrificial band in reds or browns, while the torchbearers could be depicted in a variety of colors with reds and greens being the most common.

2.3.1. The "syntax" of the basic icon

These, then, are the elements of the "basic" tauroctony scene, which is the most common variant of the main cult icon, at least statistically, though, as shown below, the case is radically different with regard to the main icons of each mithraeum. Douglas R. Small terms these elements of the scene the icon's *subsidiary visual units*. "I suggest," he writes, "that independent, subsidiary visual units exist *within* the main cult scene. These component units …are separate units co-existing with one another."[327] Small goes on to describe the language of the Mithraic cult icon in syntactical terms:

> The central Mithraic icon [like languages and grammars] also facilitates meaning, however obscure that may be. Moreover, detailed repetition of the basic motif suggests that the icon is not a random or

[324] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 11.
[325] This is the case with Mithras as he appears in the stucco icon of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, where he is shown nude except for a flying cape. He is also bare-headed, missing the trademark Phrygian cap.
[326] V 230.
[327] Small, "The Raven," 533.

> haphazard configuration of images. The Mithraic image is highly structured and metaphorically speaking has a grammar of its own. If a kind of grammar were not present we might see the Scorpion, Snake and Dog arching above Mithras and Bull. This, however, never occurs. The visual units in the central image, like words in sentences may be omitted. Additional visual units or words can magnify one's understanding of a picture or a sentence. The images on the Mithraic icon are most often ordered in a regular and predictable fashion. The task here is to identify the rules by which these images were ordered as a means toward determining what these visual units represented.[328]

A glance at the tauroctony motif allows certain primary assumptions to be made about the composition and the figures within. Mithras is to be found astride the bull, one knee pressing it down in its death-throes. He lifts up the muzzle of the beast with his left hand, while his right plunges the dagger into the neck or upper chest of the bull. Strangely serene and noncommittal in the act of killing, Mithras glances away over his shoulder, most often at the raven hovering nearby, but sometimes towards the onlookers. To these central figures, Small adds the animals, not including the raven. Which animals, or indeed which other visual elements, should be included in the basic composition, is not always clear, and to Small, this is down to regional variation to a great extent. He writes that:

> We can, with a high degree of certainty, anticipate the sequence of animals in the main bull-slaying scene. These are the Scorpion, Snake, and Dog. In considering the whole corpus of Mithraic monuments, this sequence is not a closed set. That is, this sequence of animals may take on other components, namely the Lion and Krater, e.g. # [V] 1083. This expanded sequence is, however, very uncommon in Italia and Roma and is far more prominent in Germania."[329]

As we are not concerned with Germania at the moment, but rather with Italy and Rome, where the presence of lions and kraters in the main composition of the icon is "very uncommon", Small's basic sequence suffices. His system really posits a tripartite divisional scheme of the main visual units of the Mithraic icon, where unit A covers two sub-sets, namely Mithras and the Bull (A1) and the trio of animals: Scorpion, Snake and Dog (A2).[330]

[328] Small, "The Raven," 533-534.
[329] Small, "The Raven," 536.
[330] Small, "The Raven," 535-536.

"Together," Small continues, "Sub-units A1 (Mithras and Bull) and A2 (Scorpion, Snake and Dog) form the primary elements, i.e. the most recurring, in the cult image."[331] In addition to the category A, there are two further categories; units B and C, where B is the Raven and C comprises the two pairs of Cautes and Cautopates (C1) and Sol and Luna (C2) which according to Small are "functional equivalents"[332] in the sense that they occur with a very similar frequency as well as a similar centrality. Quite obviously, the elements forming unit A are always in the central position. In a further affirmation of the central importance of just this group, "Unit A components are repeatedly attested, clearly omitting Units B and C. Moreover the components of unit A occur in a highly structured sequences."[333] This means, of course, that it should always be Mithras who kills the bull, and not the other way around, and that the animals should always occur in their respective places. In this sense, unit A is fundamentally different from the other two categories, and is always pre-eminent, since the act of bull-killing is always the central unit in the tauroctony icon. The other two units in Small's scheme are relegated to less central positions, and consequently are of secondary importance, since it is "centrality, which speaks most strongly for the primary character of Unit A."[334]

When dealing with the two other units, namely B and C, the key difference, in Small's scheme, is mobility. The Raven (unit B) is highly "mobile" in the sense that it can be found in varying places in the main scene within a given matrix of possibilities. In contrast to the mobility of B, the components of C are "iconographically stationary."[335] Unit B is therefore secondary to Unit A, but Unit C is tertiary. This is because unit B occurs on the monuments whether or not unit C is present, whereas the opposite is not true. The conclusion is that "the characters in A are primary to the bull-slaying, those in B are secondary, and those in C are tertiary. The most common pattern is that one in which all three Units are present."[336] These three units, then, seem to form the basic structure of the Italian tauroctonies, and any other motifs, like for

[331] Small, "The Raven," 536.
[332] Small, "The Raven," 536.
[333] Small, "The Raven," 537.
[334] Small, "The Raven," 537.
[335] Small, "The Raven," 538.
[336] Small, "The Raven," 539.

instance scenes from the mythical life of Mithras, such as the intrusion of the *transitus* motif into the main icon of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, are appended onto this basic "frame".[337]

2.3.2. Iconographical "syntax" and the icons of Rome

Speaking of frame, we must now consider how this model fits with the different types of icons in Rome. For instance, does Small's scheme fit as well with the three arguably Roman preferences in the choice of medium, i.e. wall paintings, stucco reliefs, and sculpture groups? It quickly becomes apparent, that the relative ranking of sub-units B and C on account of the mobility of the motif is not really applicable to the Roman material. In almost every case, the raven (B) remains stationary in the upper left hand corner of the central composition, perched on the cave wall just below the bust of Sol, while the torchbearers and the busts of Sol and Luna (C) can be moved out of the central composition to flank the icon, as is the case with the icons of the *Santa Prisca* (torchbearers) and *Castra Peregrinorum* (Sol and Luna), or the entrance to the mithraeum. Additionally, in some cases, the position of the torchbearers can be switched around, leaving *Cautes* on the right and *Cautopates* on the left, contrary to their normal placements.

Wall paintings depicting Mithraic scenes, or scenes showing processions or initiations, are common to the Roman and Italian mithraea, and in several instances even the main cult icon is executed in fresco. Such is the case at the famous mithraeum of *Marino* just outside of Rome, and at the *Barberini* mithraeum inside the city proper. These painted icons all include all the units and sub-units of Small's scheme, and in many of them, even more additional elements are added. Indeed, whereas the rule of including just the most central elements within the cult icon seems to hold true for the tauroctony reliefs in stone from the city, usually secondary icons, the case is different with regard to the icon when executed in fresco or stucco. The painted icons of the *Marino* and *Barberini* mithraea are in fact compositionally rather similar to the great complex icons of the Rhineland, as we have noted, and when it comes to the stucco icons there seem to be few, if any, rules regarding elements included in addition to the central units A, B, and C, as identified by Small. Except for the icon of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, the Roman stucco

[337] Small, "The Raven," 539.

icons have generally not survived in a state which permits the assessment of the placing of individual iconographic elements within the composition.

Just why there is such a high degree of freedom in the execution of the stucco icons is not quite clear, though it seems to have something to do with the relationship between the main icon and other Mithraic artwork within the three dimensional *tableau* of the mithraeum. The same holds true for sculptured groups of the bull-slaying, though in the case of these groups, the animals of group A are always included, usually the raven, group B is included, and quite often too, the torchbearers belonging to group C are included as well. Not surprisingly, the busts of Sol and Luna are very rarely included in the sculpture groups, one would assume for practical reasons, since such additions would present the sculptor with great technical difficulties. What we do notice though, in relation to these groups, is the almost complete absence of any other elements of Mithraic iconography, further confirming the centrality, at least in the main icon, of the elements of groups A and B in Small's scheme, though the relationship between the raven (B) and the torchbearers (C) is often different in the Roman icons. Perhaps the reason for this greater degree of variation on the detail level is simply that, as Richard Gordon suggests: "Italy presents us with the largest number of original schemes (of all types) as well as the largest range of 'common' types – inevitably, I think, because the iconographical 'toolbox' was more extensive there than elsewhere in the Roman world."[338] When looking at the compositional elements of the complex tauroctonies below, certain rules seem also to control the frequency and even placing of the scenes we must assume are at least in some way related to Mithraic mythology.

2.3.3. The "basic" and the "complex" icons in Rome

No discussion of Mithraic art in Rome can omit the specific iconographical details of the actual tauroctony icons of the city. Of the approximately seven hundred known tauroctonies,[339] about one hundred stem, as

[338] Gordon, "Panelled complications," n. 18, 226.
[339] A definite number is hard to come by. Manfred Clauss gives the number 673 in his *Cultores Mithrae* from 1992, but he does not list tauroctonies in miniature, only cult icons. In addition, new finds are coming to light all the time, and several tauroctonies have been discovered since the publication of *Cultores Mithrae*. I suspect the number of

we have seen, from the city of Rome itself, while Rome's harbor of Ostia, and Latium and Campania provide, according to Clauss, another 59.[340] Naturally, a detailed analysis of all of these icons, most of them undatable, is outside the scope of this dissertation, but the icons that can be, at least tentatively, associated with mithraea that were probably in use in the fourth century will be discussed in detail below.

It is necessary first to lay down certain parameters and classificatory categories, and even if they are not always helpful, the established categories of two, and sometimes three, types of complex icons will be followed here, at least to some degree. The first task is to establish what elements are included in the complex icons of Rome and Italy, and their compositional and stylistic relationship with the other types of complex icons. No less important, however, is the charting of the different contexts in which these complex scenes occur. Is there a correlation between the immediate context of the icon and the scenes included in it?

Icons with a complex composition containing additional elements and side-scenes are relatively uncommon in Rome and central Italy, with only a few examples known. In addition to the murals at *Barberini* and *Marino*, only five other reliefs from Rome and central Italy contain the scenes from the life of Mithras which characterize the category of the complex reliefs.[341] This means that the category of complex reliefs was not particularly popular in Italy, accounting for only about 0.5 percent of the total number of known tauroctonies, but as is often the case with statistics, this figure can only form the basis for a more nuanced and detailed investigation of the existing icons.

When approaching the complex icons of Rome and central Italy there are several additional factors to consider, not the least being that the spectacular, and presumably expensive, murals of *Barberini* and *Marino* are of this type, implying that such complex icons could be an ideal, but that the economy of the congregation in question was often the deciding factor. Further, it must be noted that the popularity of

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known tauroctonies to be a little less than seven hundred, excluding coarse-ware and miniature bull-slaying representations, though there is at present no comprehensive survey on the matter.

[340] Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 32 (Ostia) and 45-47 (Latium and Campania).

[341] These five are: a relief from the *Forum Boarium* mithraeum (V 435), a relief in limestone from Rome worked as an engraving (V 350), a relief presently in the Vatican museum (V 556), a relief from Ostia (V 321), and a relief from Nersae/Nesce in Etruria (V 650). A figure representing the *transitus* motif was also included in the stucco icon in the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, though this icon is so different from what is normally meant by a "complex" icon that it cannot be included. It does serve to highlight the blurring of the typological lines in Mithraic art, however.

freestanding sculpture and of wall paintings in general, in Rome and central Italy, could influence the choice of elements in the composition. In the case of the tauroctony scene realized in the round, some of the regular elements of the composition, like the torchbearers and the busts of Sol and Luna, are often missing, though in many examples the dog, the snake, and the scorpion, and sometimes even the raven, are present, suggesting that they were regarded as indispensable elements of the composition of the icon. The torchbearers could often be left out of the scene, and this is also true of the reliefs, but statuettes representing them were often placed flanking the main icon, or flanking the entrance to the mithraeum.[342] Thus, we must assume that even when the main icon was sculpted in the round, all the core elements of the composition of the cult icon were indeed present within the *tableau* of the mithraeum.

In contrast to the icons containing only the central elements, the complex compositions not only include additional scenes, but branch into other modes of interpretation as well. What are the scenes that are most often included in these compositions, and how do the complex icons of Rome and Italy relate, stylistically and compositionally, to the great complex reliefs of the Rhine provinces, and to the Danubian reliefs? Mainly found in the Rhine and Danube provinces, complex icons are not one of the most visible features of a Roman preference in iconography, but they do occur and must be briefly examined. These complex icons are defined as tauroctonies in which the main scene, the actual visual representation of the bull-killing, is flanked by bands of accompanying side-scenes, which have often been thought to illustrate Mithraic myth;[343] they either run vertically on each side of the of the icon, as is the case in icons of the so-called Rhine type, or form a triptych-like horizontal band placed below the tauroctony itself – the so-called Danubian type.

The only "real" complex icons in Rome, in the sense of the definition above, are the painted murals. No carved great paneled complex reliefs of the Rhine type have been found which hail from the

[342] Statuettes of torchbearers flanking the main cult icon(s) were found in situ at the *Castra Peregrinorum* mithraeum, while statuettes of torchbearers flanking the entrance to the mithraeum is attested at the mithraeum on the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*.

[343] The discussion concerning the details and the narrative structure of a postulated Mithraic myth-cycle has been one of the main points of disagreement among Mithraic scholars since the discipline was in its infancy. Since Cumont's model of Mithraism as a western form of Zoroastrianism with its accompanying Persian and Vedic myth-elements, a bewildering array of possible reconstructions and interpretations of Mithraic mythology have been put forth. For a short presentation of the basic elements of the "Mithras myth", see Bjørnebye, "The Multivalent Symbol," 60-66.

city itself,[344] nor are there many of the simple small-scale complex icons of the Danubian style to be found in Rome. Those that are found there, such as for instance a tauroctony relief with a band forming a sort of lower register displaying three scenes from the Mithras myth, which seems typologically reminiscent of the composition of the Danubian reliefs,[345] may easily be Danubian reliefs brought to Rome, rather than actually manufactured in Rome. Additionally, there are some Italian icons in which scenes from the life of Mithras "intrude" into the main composition, but these are best dealt with on an individual basis, and are discussed as such in detail below.

Returning to the two examples of complex icons mentioned above, the tauroctony mural at the mithraeum of *Marino* just outside of Rome, and within the city walls, the painting of the bull slaying scene at the *Barberini* mithraeum, we should first note that these two paintings are very similar in composition. Indeed Vermaseren writes that "according to the style of painting the fresco at Capua is closely related to that of Marino; but according to the typology the Marino fresco is most closely akin to that in the Barberini Mithraeum."[346] They are also typologically, at least on the compositional level, reminiscent of the great complex reliefs of the Rhine, showing many of the same side-scenes in vertical bands framing the main scene of Mithras killing the bull, but the typologies, and especially the relationship between the Rhine type and the "Raetian" or Italian type, are discussed below.

In addition to the two painted complex tauroctonies, there are five tauroctony reliefs from central Italy which can be classified as complex in a looser sense, since they include scenes from the "life of Mithras" flanking the main scene. Three of them are from the city of Rome itself,[347] while one is from Rome's harbor of Ostia,[348] and another comes from the small town of Nersae in Etruria, not far from Rome.[349] While the painted scenes and the *Nersae* relief typologically conform mainly to the Rhine reliefs, the inclusion of side-scenes in the Roman carved reliefs seems to have been made more *ad hoc*,

[344] Though there are a scant few in the environs of Rome, like for instance the relief from *Nersae* in Etruria (V 650).
[345] V 556.
[346] Vermaseren, *Mithriaca III*, 20.
[347] V 556, V 350, and V 435.
[348] V 321.
[349] V 650.

and in some cases, notably in the example from the Vatican Museum,[350] some of these scenes are even placed within the main scene. Strangely enough, though the statistical material is really too small for any firm conclusions, some scenes seem to be restricted to a lower register reminiscent of the style of the simple mass-produced reliefs of the Danube type, even if they are not divided from the taurocctony by a horizontal band. Vermaseren explains the extent of variation of the types of complex icons by assuming that all the types originated in Rome:

> The composite reliefs originated in Rome and its surroundings, as H. Lavagne[351] recently observed: in each case one is able to follow only here the preliminary stages and the various attempts of the artists to combine some scenes of less importance with the tauroctony. But here again its exact evolution is not clear for lack of dated monuments. The composite type never became popular in Italy, whereas it is highly developed in Germany.[352]

The typologies of Mithraic icons with regard to an Italian style of complex reliefs are discussed towards the end of this chapter, and the individual elements of the paintings and reliefs from Rome and environs are discussed in greater detail below, but it is important for now to note that the tauroctony scenes in Rome, in spite of some more or less obvious stylistic tendencies, seem to represent all possible styles, media, execution and complexity. This is perhaps not surprising in itself, but does present some difficulties when trying to establish the stylistic criteria of Roman Mithraic art.

2.4. The correlation of icons and mithraea in fourth century Rome

In the following sections, I will be discussing the main icons of Rome in the context of the mithraea they were found in, or are thought to relate to. It is interesting to note that even though the complex, or compound, tauroctonies do not even amount to one percent of the Mithraic icons of Rome and central Italy, the percentage rises remarkably when considering the mithraea that were in use in Rome in the fourth century, as was shown in Chapter 1. Of the sixteen mithraea that were probably in use in the city in this period, three certainly had main icons that featured side-scenes from the "life of Mithras": the

[350] V 556.
[351] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 481-504.
[352] Vermaseren, *Mithriaca III*, 25.

Barberini mithraeum,[353] the mithraeum on the *Forum Boarium*, and the stucco composition of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum. Moreover, there are indications that several of the others may also have included such scenes, and some icons contained other "alien" elements inside the limits of the composition of the basic tauroctony, though much of the evidence remains inconclusive. So far, that would seem to give us two out of sixteen, but in reality the situation is not so clear cut, as data on the main icons of several of the mithraea are missing or incomplete.

2.4.1. The icon of the mithraeum of the *Casa di Nummii Albini*

In the mithraeum of the *Casa di Nummii Albini*, there seem to have been two tauroctony scenes, one mural and one "relief in plaster, the traces of which point to a representation of Mithras slaying the bull."[354] But, like the mithraeum itself, neither tauroctony is extant, and to my knowledge only brief descriptions of the icons remain. Vermaseren describes the elements of the mural, namely Mithras himself, the bull, the torchbearers, the dog and the scorpion, but goes on to admit that "Further data are unknown."[355] This lack of evidence is also pointed out by Griffith in her description of the publication of the mithraeum: "Capannari's report, the only one on this mithraeum, lacks a drawing of the painting."[356] Consequently, there is no way of telling whether any of the icons from this mithraeum had additional scenes, or if they even included all the basic elements, as Vermaseren mentions neither the raven and the snake, nor the presence (or indeed absence) of Sol and Luna in the composition. Vermaseren's description is short, but the color scheme he describes for the mural is reminiscent of the one on the painting at Marino, leaving at least the possibility that the mural in the mithraeum of the *Nummii Albini* may have been similar to the Marino one on a compositional level as well, even including the side-scenes. The lack of evidence, however, makes the state of the icons from this mithraeum unknown, and with regard to the

[353] V 390, fig. 112. The tauroctony painting from the Barberini was re-examined by Vermaseren in *Mithriaca III: The Mithraeum at Marino*. This publication also contains much better photographs of the scene.
[354] Vermaseren, *CIMRM*, 167. The mural is V 386 and the plaster relief is V 387.
[355] Vermaseren, *CIMRM*, 167.
[356] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 83, note 135. Griffith is referring to Capannari, "Scoperte archeologiche."

iconographical details, they must at this point simply be left out of the discussion, although the inclusion of the mural in statistical study still remains feasible.

2.4.2. The icon of the *Castra Peregrinorum* mithraeum

The mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum* went through an intensive remodeling that nearly doubled its size in the late third century,[357] but it is interesting to note that the mihtraeum's icon in the first phase seems to have shared quite a few similarities with the one from the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum. Especially interesting for the present discussion is the fact that central elements of the basic composition were taken out of the stucco relief and placed on the icon's flanks – in this case protomes or decorative paintings of busts, of Sol and Luna – and were placed, according Lissi-Caronna, "ai lati della nicchia, sulla parete nord, erano dipinte le promoti di Sol (ad ovest) e di Luna (ad est)."[358] A statuette representing the *petrogenesis* of Mithras bearing a dedicatory inscription was found close to the stucco icon, and another near the podium of the mithraeum's second phase,[359] and there is also the possibility that that the torchbearers could have figured in the stucco relief itself, but the evidence is inconclusive.[360]

The *altorilievo* in stucco is almost completely destroyed, but the head of Mithras and a multitude of polychrome fragments of the scene have survived, prompting Lissi-Caronna to compare it to the main cult icon at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum:

> La testa … deve essere considerata un documento notevolissimo, anche se rientra nella tipologia consueta delle rappresentazioni di Mithra tauroctono. È particolarmente vicina, anche per la stessa material con cui è stata plasmata, alla testa del gruppo al Liebighaus di Frankfurt a.M., con resti abbondantissimi di policromia, ed alla testa di Mithra nella nicchia sull'altare del mitreo di S. Prisca in Roma.[361]

[357] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 15-24.
[358] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 11. The protome of Sol is unfortunately lost, with only a ray of his radiate crown remaining, but the protome of Luna is perfectly preserved, and, according to Lissi-Caronna: "La pittura è di buona qualità, ha una sua nobilità compositiva ed il pittore, ricorrendo a larghe pennelatte, è riuscito a raggiungere un effetto immediate." Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 12.
[359] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 29-30.
[360] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 14.
[361] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 12-14.

The marble tauroctony relief belonging to the second phase of the mithraeum, is rather of the basic type, featuring Mithras and the bull, the animals, the torchbearers, and Sol and Luna, but as noted above, a statuette of the rock-birth was found close to this relief, suggesting that additional scenes could well have been represented outside of the borders of the relief itself. The surprising choice of this normal type of basic relief for the second phase of the mithraeum highlights the great degree of continuity in Mithraic art in Rome. As we shall see, in all the cases where one would most expect to find examples of a distinctive fourth century style, at least in the compositional sense, the new reliefs in question seem instead to be remarkably similar to the earlier style. Two other small icons were found in the mithraeum as well, a basic composition from the phase of the first mithraeum, and a composite one divided into three registers conforming to the Danubian model. The latter is broken, but many of the pieces are preserved, leading Lissi-Caronna to classify it thus: "Il rilievo, pur essendo così framentario è della massima importanza perchè, tipologicamente …questo [rilievo] rinvenuto nel mitreo del *Castra Peregrinorum* rappresenta i vari episodi su tre registri e rientra perfettamente nella tipologia dei rilievi danubiani rinvenuti in prevalenza in Dacia."[362]

This mithraeum thus contained, in its second phase from the late third century to the end of the fourth or beginning of the fifth century, at least three different types of Mithraic icon: An icon of the Danubian type, an icon of the "basic" type so ubiquitous in Rome, and even an example of the type of stucco tauroctony which seems so highly suited to the creation of a sort of three-dimensional cult icon. This icon, discussed below, was still preserved under the cover of the new tauroctony relief. Complicating the issue of iconographical preference further is the question of which one of these three tauroctony scenes was regarded as the main cult icon in the case of this mithraeum. When the layout of the mithraeum changed in the second phase, the original stucco *altorilievo* in its niche was covered by the marble relief, but every indication suggests, however, that the stucco relief remained undamaged and unchanged beneath it and could possibly still be uncovered if there was a need. The Danubian style relief seems to have been a votive gift, and was probably displayed close to the marble icon, so that at least these three icons would

[362] Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum,* 37.

be instantly visible to the congregation. This suggests that the actual meaning-content of the complex versus the basic icons (possibly supplemented with additional statuary) was more or less the same, irrespective of the typologies of Mithraic scholarship, and that "form" (in the typological sense) and meaning content must be considered simultaneously. This point is well argued by Gordon:

> The criteria of association and difference should not be arbitrary but demonstrably relevant to the rôle of the relief as an element in a complex symbolic whole – the *mithraeum* conceived as articulated *espace religieux*; and to its conditions of material production. There can be no *alternative* between 'form' and 'meaning' in our discussion of these religious artefacts.[363]

The key to understanding the function of the icon here is, I think, the interplay between artistic freedom and ideological continuity – a central issue in the discussion of third and fourth century Mithraic art – as well as the symbiosis of the mithraeum and the icon(s) in the creation of "Mithraic space" where the axioms of Mithraism, DEUS SOL INVICTUS MITHRAS and "HARMONY OF TENSION IN OPPOSITION", to use Roger Beck's terms, are experienced.[364]

2.4.3. The icons of the *Castra Praetoria*, the *Crypta Balbi*, and the *Foro Boario* mithraea

The mithraeum of the *Castra Praetoria* was destroyed when Constantine leveled the barracks of the Praetorian Guard after his victory over Maxentius in 312, and little remains of its decoration today. A tauroctony relief from the mithraeum is however at least partially preserved, and is especially interesting because it is one of the very few reversible reliefs found in Italy.[365] The obverse of the relief seems to show the basic tauroctony, while the reverse shows, predictably, the scene of the sacred banquet. Importantly for our knowledge of the function of the initiatory grades in Mithraic ritual practices, one of the servants wears an animal mask.[366] "Remarkable," writes Vermaseren, "is the person, who is disguised

[363] Gordon, "Panelled complications," 202.
[364] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 5-6.
[365] The relief is V 397. As far as I am aware, there are only three reversible reliefs from Rome and its immediate surroundings which show the banquet scene on the reverse side: the relief from the *Castra Praetoria*, a fragment of a relief from the sanctuary of Zeus Brontoon on the Via Appia (V 634), and a relief from *Fiano Romano* (V 641), just 20 kilometers outside of the city of Rome.
[366] This is also the case in the wall painting of the banquet scene at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum.

with the mask of a raven and is dressed in a short cloak. He is walking towards one of the fellow-guests in order to hand him a cup."[367]

The newly excavated mithraeum of the *Crypta Balbi* has to my knowledge not yielded any icon(s) bearing scenes from the life of Mithras, but the finds from the mithraeum have, as was noted in chapter 1, not yet been fully published. The preliminary reports make no mention of any complex icon, and the fragment of a tauroctony relief found *in situ*, and now displayed in the *Crypta Balbi* museum, does not seem to have carried any side-scenes. Furthermore, it is clearly too small to have been the main icon of this rather large mithraeum, and the typology and the composition of the main cult icon of the mithraeum remain unknown.

In the mithraeum of the *Foro Boario*, which bears many similarities to the *Crypta Balbi* mithraeum,[368] one of the icons,[369] dated to the late third century and "found in the hindmost room of the mithraeum,"[370] has a figure of Mithras carrying the bull, the *transitus* motif, intruding into the basic composition. Though it is stylistically and compositionally far from what is normally regarded as a complex composition, the intrusion of one of the most common scenes from the life of Mithras into the bull-slaying scene shows some affinity to the type, and at the very least a knowledge of the iconography of the *transitus* motif. Though not really a complex relief as such, neither does it belong in the category of the basic type of icon, and thus further blurs the typological lines.

Additionally, the inclusion of the motif of Mithras carrying the bull inside the border of the main scene sets it apart from the compositions of the murals of *Barberini* and *Marino*, though this element also occurs in the *Santa Prisca* icon. It is fairly certain that this tauroctony relief was not the main cult icon of

[367] Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, 171. There are few in-depth treatments of the art of the sacred meal in Mithraic scholarship, but the best is still Kane, "The Mithraic cult meal". See also Bjørnebye, "The Multivalent Symbol," 92-123
[368] See Chapter 1.
[369] V 435.
[370] Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, 184 (V 435).

the *Foro Boario* mithraeum, however, and there are some indications that the main icon could have been a statue group, possibly with a painted backdrop.[371]

2.4.4. The icons of the mithraea of the *Foro di Nerva* and the *Ospedale San Giovanni*

No icon has been recovered from the mithraeum of the *Foro di Nerva*, and the mithraeum itself is no longer extant.[372] There is simply no way of determining what type of icon this mithraeum housed, and must for that reason be left out of this discussion. Some few elements of the icon seem to have been preserved, however, at the mithraeum of the *Ospedale San Giovanni*, where the cult icon seems to have been a painted tauroctony scene in fresco, though only fragments of it have been recovered. According to Valnea Santa Maria Scrinari:

> Quanto resta dell'immagine centrale è una testina giovanille attorniata da riccioli bruni e nimbata che sembra seguire il gesto del braccio destro levato in alto mentre la linea del corpo insiste sulla gamba sinistra piegata su una massa bruna non meglio definibile; poiché però la linea della massa procede verso l'alto lasciando stillare verso terra stille di colore vermiglio è possibile la ipotesi che la massa rappresenti il corpo del toro ferito dal piccolo dio solare.[373]

From the one photograph of this painting accompanying the article on the mithraeum, it is next to impossible to make out any details other than those described by Santa Maria Scrinari, and no evidence remains concerning whether or not the painted tauroctony included scenes from the life of Mithras, either inside the borders of the main composition or on side-panels.

2.4.5. The icons of the mithraeum of the *Palazzo Barberini*

The spectacular painted tauroctony from the *Barberini* mithraeum is one of the three famous Mithraic murals depicting the bull-killing coming from central Italy, and the only extant one from the city of Rome

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[371] The indications are mainly that there was, according to Vermaseren, "in the niche itself a semi-circular construction with a depression for a cult-statue" (*CIMRM,* 184). Additionally, a marble serpent's head found in the mithraeum seems to have belonged to "a group of Mithras as a bullkiller or to a rock-birth" (*CIMRM*, 185). A good impression can be gotten of the niche from the high quality photographs in Pavia, *Guida dei Mitrei di Roma Antica*, 209-215.

[372] Indeed Griffith questions whether the mithraeum ever existed at all. See Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 120-122.

[373] Santa Maria Scrinari, "Il mitreo," 223.

itself. Compositionally close to the *Marino* mural, it is stylistically more similar to the tauroctony painting from the *Capua* mithraeum,[374] which, according to Vermaseren, "forms a link between the two others".[375] This relationship between the three murals is important especially in relation to the establishment of an Italian style of painted tauroctonies, and the typological and compositional relationship is discussed below. At this point, however, there are two factors connected with the *Barberini* tauroctony we must consider. Firstly, it is the only example in Rome of a complete painted image of the bull-killing in which it is possible to make out the whole scene with all of its components, and secondly, it is one of the very few complex icons in the city of Rome, and possibly the only painted complex icon in the city.

The similarities between this scene and the complex mural of the *Marino* mithraeum, however, would seem to suggest that some sort of guideline, perhaps a prototype, informed at least these two complex paintings, and perhaps several other lost or damaged paintings in Rome as well. Taking into account the nature of the medium and the climate of Rome it is highly likely that far fewer painted tauroctonies have survived than is the case with reliefs and sculptures in marble or limestone. Even if speculation on the ratio of wall-painting to stone relief with regard to the main cult icon of the mithraea in Rome is somewhat futile, it may be suspected that the proportion of wall-paintings was far higher than the surviving evidence would suggest.

The painting of the *Barberini* mithraeum itself is composed with a large central panel illustrating the canonical motif of Mithras in the act of killing the bull in a grotto and accompanied by the regular attendants: the torchbearers, the four animals, and the busts of Sol and Luna. Flanking the central motif are vertical bands, one on each side, displaying smaller scenes from the range of motifs known as the life of Mithras, with a preponderance of motifs showing Mithras and Sol, as is also the case with the complex icons both of the Rhine and Danube types. The vertical bands show a total of eight scenes at Marino, while there are ten scenes in the *Barberini* mural. In both the *Barberini* and the *Marino* murals, Mithras himself sits in the normal position astride the bull, and has just plunged his dagger into the lower neck or

[374] See above.
[375] Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I*, 9.

upper chest area of the bull. Blood springs from the wound, and the dog and the snake are lapping it up, while the scorpion is at the bull's testicles and the raven is perched on the arch of the cave. Mithras himself is dressed in blue-green *tunica manicata*, *anaxyrides*, and a Phrygian cap,[376] while his cape is red and speckled with seven stars. The composition and style of the pose of Mithras and the bull, as well as of the animals and the busts of Sol and Luna, are almost identical to the scene at the *Marino* mithraeum. The colors are reversed in the *Barberini* mural, however, and there is also a slight variation in the elements of the central motif, with regard to the flanking torchbearers, who appear with their legs crossed at *Marino* and with their legs straight at *Barberini*.

Greater differences are apparent in the flanking bands of side-scenes, and with the addition of two painted arches above Mithras and the bull in the *Barberini* mural. The bottom arch bears the twelve signs of the zodiac, with a male figure, a *leontocephaline* or perhaps an Aion, in the middle. Above the zodiac there is another arch with a row of alternating trees and seven burning altars, the middle altar being hidden beneath the top half of the male figure of the arch below. Neither zodiacs nor the row of seven burning altars are frequent features of the central composition of the Roman tauroctonies,[377] though the zodiac is often present in the Rhine reliefs[378] and burning altars are not infrequent in reliefs from the Danube.[379] "On either side of the central painting there are five smaller scenes," Vermaseren writes, "divided from each other by brown borders. In general the figures are also painted brown."[380] On the left these are, from

[376] While the color photographs of the mural in Vermaseren's *Mithriaca III* seem to show the color as blue, Vermaseren described the color as green in the *CIMRM*, 168, and as turquoise in *Mithriaca III*, 12.
[377] There are some examples of Roman reliefs which include, or have at some point included, the seven burning altars. For example, Renaissance prints depicting the so-called Ottaviano Zeno monument (V 335) feature a frieze which includes seven burning altars above the main composition. For details on this monument, see Vermaseren, *Mithriaca IV*, but also Gordon, "Interpreting Mithras in the Late Renaissance, 1."
[378] For example, the complex relief from Nida (Heddernheim) (V 1083), from Osterburken (V 1292), and a relief in sandstone from Rückingen (V 1137), all feature an arched zodiac reminiscent of the one in the *Barberini* mural. This type of "zodiacal arch" also features in what appears to be the main icon (V 40), executed in gypsum, of the mithraeum at Dura-Europos (V 34), which also sports another painted arch above and along the sides of the tauroctony relief bearing a plethora of smaller scenes. Above this arch is yet another which features the seven burning altars.
[379] For example: Two reliefs from Apulum (V 1973 and 1974) which show seven and nine burning altars respectively, a marble relief found near Apulum (V 2000) with nine altars, two more small marble reliefs from Dacia (V 2068 and V 2085) showing seven altars. From Moesia, some examples that include seven burning altars are: V 2216, V 2237, V 2244, V 2245, V 2264.
[380] Vermaseren, *Mithriaca III*, 14.

top to bottom: the battle between Jupiter and the Giants, a reclining Oceanus-Saturn[381], the rockbirth of Mithras, the Water Miracle, and the scene of Mithras taurophorus. On the right, the top scene is the sacred meal, followed by the ascension or apotheosis of Mithras and Sol, the pact of friendship, Mithras-as-Atlas, and finally the obeisance of Sol before Mithras.

Certain stylistic elements in the three wall-paintings mentioned, such as the style used in the rendition of the bands and lines, and the degree of artistic impressionism, are the main criteria P.G.P. Meyboom has used in his attempt to date the *Barberini*, and in particular the *Marino* murals.[382] When it comes to the style of painting, Meyboom identifies a chronological relationship between the paintings:

> The three paintings of Mithras' bullslaying are therefore related to each other in both style and character of the ornamental painting: the Capua painting combines plasticity with the band style, the Marino painting combines surrealism with an early phase of the line style, and the Barberini painting adds impressionism to the fully developed line style.[383]

This chronology, and a comparison with other paintings and mosaics of this "impressionistic style",[384] including a mosaic head from the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, leads Meyboom to conclude that "it seems most plausible to date the Barberini painting in the same period, i.e. the second quarter of the third century A.D.".[385] Such criteria are of course not able to establish a precise dating, but because of the occurance of two distinct elements of style from this period, the line style and the baroque impressionism of Mithras' face and hair, the painting should not be dated before the second quarter of the third century at the earliest. A later date is certainly possible however.

[381] The figure of "Oceanus-Saturn" is also reminiscent of the reclining figure which dominates the lower portion of the stucco relief at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum.
[382] Meyboom, "Excursion."
[383] Meyboom, "Excursion," 44.
[384] Meyboom, "Excursion," 45.
[385] Meyboom, "Excursion," 46.

2.4.6. The missing icons of the *Phrygianum,* and the mithraea of the *Piazza San Silvestro* and *San Clemente*

There are no Mithraic remains from the possible mithraeum in the *Phrygianum* on the Vatican Hill, other than the epigraphic testimony of the dedicatory altars, and certainly no Mithraic icon has come to light which can be securely attributed to this mithraeum. The situation is much the same concerning the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro*, which has yielded some of the most important epigraphic evidence for fourth century Mithraism in Rome, but no Mithraic art.

In the mithraeum under the church of *San Clemente*, the cult niche is largely destroyed, and no trace of the original tauroctony icon has been found, though Vermaseren remarks that what remains of the niche shows that it "is arched and was formerly decorated with mosaic."[386] While the main icon is no longer extant, an altar of Parian marble remains, decorated with reliefs on all four sides, and displaying a tauroctony scene on the front. The depiction of the bull-killing is basic, with only the animals and the busts of Sol and Luna included, while the torchbearers are moved to the sides of the altar, giving yet another example of how some of the core elements of the basic scene can be present even if not physically included in the main composition. However, this altar is certainly not to be considered the central icon of this mithraeum, and in our immediate context, namely the correlation of the main icons of the Roman mithraea, this mithraeum must for all intents and purposes remain "icon-less". The same is true of the mithraeum of *San Lorenzo in Damaso*, where no tauroctony has been recovered at all. Traces of red paint decorated with stars and crescents have been found on a fragment of a wall, but not enough remains of the mithraeum to establish whether this fragment may have been part of a painted icon.[387]

2.4.7. The icon of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum

The art of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum has been documented much better, and especially the famous wall-paintings over the side podia have been very important in Mithraic scholarship since they were first properly published by Vermaseren and Van Essen in 1965. The main cult icon of the mithraeum, however,

[386] Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, 156.
[387] Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, 179.

a remarkable *altorillievo* composition in stucco/gypsum on a painted backdrop, has unfortunately received less attention in Mithraic scholarship, despite its beauty and artistic merits. The tauroctony is unusual in some important respects, like for instance the nudity of Mithras and the the presence of a very large reclining male figure which occupies much of the lower half of the scene, but other elements of the composition seem to be rather more common in the Roman material than elsewhere. The niche itself dates from the first phase of the mithraeum and was stuccoed and painted, though it seems that the pieces of pumice attached to create the appearance of a cave were added during the second phase.[388] Inside the niche, a stucco group of the tauroctony, a "hybrid" sculptured composition where the group is anchored to the painted wall, reminiscent of an *altorillievo*, was to form an integral icon. The icon was destroyed when the mithraeum was filled up in the early fifth century, but quite a few pieces have been recovered:

> There are remains of the arms, legs, and torso of the god, fragments of the bull (part of the head with one eye and the tail ending in corn-ears), and other fragments of the snake. A small piece of the wings of the raven flying towards Mithras is still attached to the inside of the left wall of the niche.[389]

Additionally, Mithras' head, parts of his cape, and pieces of the dog, were found, and much of the bull-killing scene has been reconstructed by Giovanni Sansone of the Soprintendenza Roma I, giving us a fairly accurate impression of the appearance of the piece. "For the restoration of the group of Mithras as the bull-slayer there is no comparable piece in stucco," writes Vermaseren,[390] though he goes on to list two other stucco groups from Rome and central Italy.[391] The latter are in fact different in so far as Mithras in the *Santa Prisca* group is represented as heroically nude,[392] and executed with an artistic freedom of the positioning and clothing of Mithras, showing "that a particular artist had freedom to adapt [their]

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[388] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 129.
[389] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 129.
[390] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 130.
[391] V 430 found under the *Palazzo Montecitorio* but now in Frankfurt and V 640 from *Aguzzano* just outside the city. The first one is smaller than the *Santa Prisca* group, and is supposedly dated to the second century, though I am unaware on what grounds this dating is based. The second is now lost, apparently it was lost while being transferred to the National Museum in Rome (Vermaseren, *CIMRM II*, 32) and there are no known photographs of it, but it is supposed to have been a little larger than the *Santa Prisca* group.
[392] The figure of Mithras from the *Santa Prisca* icon, heroically nude with a flying cape and depicted with a frontal attitude, has few parallels, with Vermaseren only listing three: V 201, V 2196, and V 2327.

presentation of the god to his own taste".[393] However, with regard to the medium, the composition, and possibly the technique, all three groups are rather similar. In addition, remains of a fourth, similar group was found in the mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*, thus this type of icon was rather less unusual in Rome and central Italy than has so far been assumed. This observation is important not only because this form of the tauroctony is potentially a uniquely Italian type of icon, virtually unknown in the provinces, but also because it illustrates the wide range of differences to be found among the Roman icons, belying the often assumed ubiquity of the "basic" icon in marble, executed in relief, which statistically seems to be the most popular in Rome. A closer look at the main icons in use in the mithraea of fourth century Rome seems to give a different picture, however, showing that quite a few of the basic reliefs must be relegated to secondary status, perhaps as votives, in the mithraea, with stucco icons and murals perhaps in fact being the most common types of main cult icon.

Next to Mithras himself and the bull, the most conspicuous figure in this particular tauroctony is that of a reclining, bearded male figure, his head covered by a veil, who fills out much of the lower part of the composition, and who is identified by Vermaseren as having the double character of "Sky-god and Water-god."[394] The inclusion of this figure is common to many of the icons in Rome and surroundings which include motifs in addition to the iconographical core elements, and it occurs significantly in two of the other painted main icons in Rome, namely the tauroctonies of the *Barberini* and *Terme di Tito* mithraea.[395] In the immediate surroundings of the city, the painting of the *Marino* mithraeum and the complex reliefs from Ostia and Nersae[396] also feature this figure.

A scene from the life of Mithras also forms part of the icon of the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, in this case a representation of a version of the *transitus* motif, where Mithras is overpowering the bull. "Monuments in [t]he Danube and Rhine provinces often illustrate this struggle of the god with the bull he

[393] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 130.
[394] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 131-132.
[395] V 390 and V 337 respectively.
[396] V 321 and V 650.

has to slay, but in Rome these scenes are generally neglected," Vermaseren writes.[397] However, among the icons of the Roman mithraea, there is at least one compositional parallel, where a scene normally expected to be accompanying the main composition intrudes into it instead, and that is the icon at the mithraeum of the *Foro Boario*. Although underrepresented in the general material, this compositional variant becomes statistically more prominent in the context of the main icons of the Roman mithraea. Indeed, in a mithraeum such as that of *Santa Prisca*, one gets the sense that the icon has somehow "exploded", leaving visual elements properly belonging to the main icon spread throughout the mithraeum. This phenomenon of an "exploded" icon has a parallel in Alan Schofield's analysis of the motif of the birth of Mithras in Mithraic art. Attempting to make sense of the striking lack of snakes on Mithraic birth scenes from the western part of the Empire, Schofield finds a possible explanation in just such a model:

> This apparent problem disappears if the possibility is considered that iconographic motifs were allowed to 'extend out' from one monument to another, effectively making the mithraeum itself an iconographic whole. So, Mithraists could take motifs from different monuments as and when they were needed to complete the theological image necessary at any particular time.[398]

The visual effect thus becomes in a sense comparable to the three-dimensional display of a pop-up book, in contrast to what has been described as the *bande-dessinée* effect of the flanking bands on the Rhine reliefs, where one often gets the impression that as many visual elements as possible have been crammed into the icon, almost as an iconographical "implosion", as it were, or at any rate an overabundance of iconographical elements.

2.4.8. The icons of the mithraea of the *Terme di Caracalla,* the *Terme di Tito,* and the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*

In the case of the mithraeum of the *Terme di Caracalla*, there are no indications concerning the type and appearance of the main icon located in the cult niche, though there are some remains of a marble

[397] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 131.
[398] Schofield, "Iconographic Variation," 55.

tauroctony relief, which "should have been in the back wall," according to Vermaseren.[399] The situation is reversed at the no longer extant mithraeum of the *Terme di Tito*. Though the mithraeum with all its accoutrements is lost, a copy of the mural bearing the icon of the bull-killing Mithras has been preserved in some eighteenth century aquarelles.[400] Details vary between the different artistic renditions of the icon,[401] but it is clear that this somewhat unusual fresco bears an at least superficial resemblance to the mythological scene of Europa and the bull, with a rather feminine Mithras and the bull reminiscent of a sea-creature. The snake, the dog, and the scorpion are missing from the composition, as is also one of the torchbearers, *Cautopates*, and Luna in her *biga*. The reclining, bearded figure of the type mentioned above in relation to the icon in the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, is included, however, though here he is clearly first and foremost *Oceanus*, carrying an oar over his shoulder and an amphora from which water flows, whereas his attributes as *Saturn* are downplayed, with no hint of the *velum*.

From the eighteenth century paintings themselves, it is impossible to discern whether the missing elements were included in the original fresco, whether they belonged to the immediate context of the icon, or whether they where simply not included in the composition of the original icon. How faithfully the aquarelles reproduce the details of the original mural is open to question, and something we in all likelihood will never know. The main icon of the small mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*[402] is small and includes only the basic elements of the scene, though the torchbearers have here too been moved out of the composition of the icon and placed instead in niches flanking the entrance to the mithraeum.

2.4.9. Lost icons and fragments

Unfortunately, in many, if not most, cases, it is hard to establish the main icon of the Roman mithraea. In the case of the mithraeum of the *Castra Praetoria*, only a fragment of an icon remains, and it is not even known whether this icon was the main bull-killing image in the mithraeum. The relief itself seems to have

[399] V 461. Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, 189.
[400] V 337.
[401] Vermaseren, *CIMRM I*, 155.
[402] V 357. The torchbearers are V 358 and V 359.

been reversible, with a representation of the sacred meal on the reverse side, but as most of the relief is lost, it is impossible now to establish the details of the tauroctony scene itself, hence it cannot be included in the survey of icon typology in relation to the mithraea of Rome except as a curiosity, being one of only three reversible icons known from Rome and its immediate surroundings. Neither can any icon from the mithraeum of the *Crypta Balbi* be included, since the only icon recovered from that mithraeum, as far as I am aware, is clearly too small to have been the main icon of this rather large mithraeum. However, while judgment must be suspended, since the finds from the mithraeum have not yet been fully published, this mithraeum cannot be included in the present survey. Likewise, the mithraeum of the *Foro Boario* is excluded here because the tauroctony relief recovered from the mithraeum was almost certainly not its main icon.

From the mithraeum of the *Castra Praetoria,* only a fragment of a relief has been recovered, and it is not at this point possible to ascertain whether this reversible relief was the main icon of the mithraeum. No relief at all has been recovered, either from the highly conjectural mithraeum of the *Foro di Nerva*, or from the possible mithraeum inside the *Phrygianum*, and while the main icons of the mithraea of *San Clemente*, the *Terme di Caracalla*, and *San Lorenzo in Damaso* are also lost, the structures of the first two are still extant.[403] That means that out of the sixteen mithraea presented in chapter 1, only for less than half of them can the main icon be established with any degree of certainty.

2.4.10. The icons of the fourth century Roman mithraea

Out of the seven mithraea listed above where we can be fairly certain of the type of icon which occupied the central place of honor in the mithraea, four had main icons in the form of wall paintings, though only the one at the *Barberini* mithraeum is still fully extant. Of the mural from the mithraeum of the *Ospedale San Giovanni* only fragments have been recovered, and little can be said of this piece other than that it is indeed a tauroctony scene. The painting of the mithraeum of the *Terme di Tito*, on the other hand, is

[403] The mithraeum of *San Clemente* is rather well preserved, and is in fact the only one in Rome which is open to the general public on a regular basis. Of the mithraeum underneath *San Lorenzo*, only remnants and fragments have been preserved. These are still enough, however, to establish with great certainty that the structure was indeed a mithraeum.

preserved in eighteenth century paintings, while the mithraeum itself is lost, and the painting from the mithraeum of the *Casa di Nummii Albini* is also lost, but the only preserved details are rather sketchily reported, the only published report including no drawing or painting of the icon.

In addition to the painted icons, "hybrid" icons with painted backdrops and an attached stucco group in *altorilievo* seem to have been very popular in Rome. The mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum* had an *altorilievo* in stucco which seems to have been the main icon in the first phase of the mithraeum, but which was still used alongside the new icon in the second phase. Most of the stucco icon is destroyed, but the preserved head of Mithras is, according to Lissi-Caronna, very similar to the head of the god from the stucco icon at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, which has been at least partially reconstructed. The mithraeum of the *Foro Boario* seems also to have had such a stucco group in addition to its painted icon. Only in the case of the small private mithraeum of *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*, in the second phase of the mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*, and possibly in the case of the reversible relief of the *Castra Praetoria* mithraeum, are the main icons beyond doubt reliefs in marble of the usual basic Italian type. This gives a rather different picture than when the Roman icons are considered statistically as a group rather than each icon in its own immediate context. The pattern of the main icon of the mithraeum being executed in fresco or stucco, while the mithraeum also contained several secondary icons in stone could also help explain the much higher find-ratio of the latter type.

When it comes to the chronology of types of Mithraic icons in Rome, it has been remarked that the basic types of the tauroctony scene were most likely the earliest, while more complex icons, which included side-scenes as an integral part of the composition, were a later invention. In Rome, at least, other factors seem to have been more important for the choice of the type of icon commissioned. This chronological model has, however, for example led to the relative dating of the murals of the *Marino*, *Capua*, and *Barberini* mithraea by Meyboom.[404]

It would seem though, that when mithraea were remodeled or newly founded in the fourth century in Rome, rather basic icons were as a rule chosen, sometimes in place of, or in addition to, more complex

[404] Meyboom, "Excursion."

ones. Thus, for instance, the remodeling of the *Castra Peregrinorum* mithraeum at the end of the third century saw a basic type of tauroctony relief, the statistically most prevalent type of icon in Rome, take over as the main focus of the cult room and probably its main icon in the latter phase, while the polychrome stucco group with painted backdrop, probably very much like the better preserved icon from the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, seems to have been relegated to a secondary place, and was indeed covered up by the new relief. Why should the older stucco icon be covered up in this fashion? The icon could of course have been damaged in some way, and covering it up would then perhaps have been preferable to dismantling it entirely. We must also consider that the stucco icon may have remained in use alongside the new relief, and that it was perhaps uncovered for special occasions. Perhaps the enlargement of the mithraeum, and quite possibly almost a doubling of its membership necessitated a simpler tauroctony icon for the instruction of new members of the community, while the much more ornate icon was revealed only for the higher ranks. Or perhaps the new icon was simply the result of changing fashions, while the old icon was kept out of sight. The mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*, like many other mithraea, possessed several tauroctony icons, but most unusually, the most sumptuous icon was in the latter phase of the building not the mithraeum's main icon, or at least it was not the icon which was viewed when one first entered the mithraeum.

Though most of the Roman icons datable to the fourth and the late third centuries seem to be of the more basic type, the evidence is too circumstantial to draw any firm conclusions, and, as I have noted, the choice of type, and presumably also of which iconographical elements to include, seems often to have been based on function rather than on a historical evolutionary model. For example, the secondary icon found in the mithraeum of the *Foro Boario*, which is dated to end of the third century, includes a *transitus* motif intruding into the main composition, an element which should in essence belong to an earlier period if it had been possible to establish a strict chronology of the compositional and stylistic elements of Mithraic art in Rome. Instead it seems that all the known types of Mithraic cult icons from Rome were in use during the latter days of the life of the cult, and it is very hard to establish any sort of chronology based on compositional criteria.

One factor in all this which needs to be taken into consideration, however, is the prevalence of icons which were either painted or a hybrid consisting of stucco *altorilievo* on a painted background, among the main cult icons of the mithraea. It seems that while the basic type of tauroctony relief in marble is clearly in the majority with regard to the total number of Roman tauroctonies, the situation radically changes when it comes to the mithraeum's choice of the type of icon to be used as the main icon, i.e. which commanded the place of honor in the apsidal cult niche. This preference for unique and complicated main icons suggests that the most important artistic rendition of the central motif of Mithraic art for each Mithraic community was usually more individualistic and artistically splendid than statistics would seem to imply. The smaller scale tauroctony reliefs of the basic type, sharing many similarities of style and execution and possibly even "mass-produced", seem rather to have occupied secondary positions in the cult room and were perhaps mostly gifts, votives or otherwise, from members of the community itself or perhaps from benefactors or other Mithraic communities. Why did the Roman communities prefer these stucco groups and tauroctonies sculptured in the round, which essentially became "exploded" icons, experienced in three dimensions against a painted backdrop, rather than the compact complex reliefs prevalent on the Rhine? Lack of artistic skill is certainly not the explanation, and we are perhaps better employed looking at how the Mithraic communities of Rome could have experienced their central icons. First, however, the possibility of an Italian style of icon must be considered.

2.5. The typologies of the icons from Rome

What conclusions can be drawn then concerning the types of icons used in the Roman mithraea in the fourth century? There seems to be a clear preference, as we have seen, in most of the mithraea where it is possible to establish the main icon, for icons to be executed in fresco or painted stucco *altorilievo* against a painted backdrop. Though I have not been able to establish with any certainty that any of these mithraea featured a main icon sculpted in the round, there are many indications that this type of icon was very popular as well. For instance, in some mithraea, like the mithraeum of the *Foro Boario*, the niche seems more suited for accomodating a sculpture group, and the artistic quality of the statues themselves is

generally very high, including some truly remarkable pieces,[405] which, together with the added complexity of working a complete sculpture group in the round as opposed to in relief, would presumably make these groups both quite costly and highly attractive as the central cult object of a mithraeum. Moreover, statue groups of the bull-killing in the round are statistically much more frequent in the Roman material than is the case in the rest of the empire, even if, as I have just shown above, the statistics of the corpus of tauroctonies from Rome do not accurately reflect, and indeed allow few conclusions as to the type of icon which featured as the main icon of a given mithraeum. Unfortunately, at this point in time, it would seem that the role of the sculptured groups must remain more or less conjecture.

Surprisingly few of the ubiquitous basic marble reliefs seem to have held the place of main icon in Rome's mithraea, though several small ones are often present in addition to the main cult image. In at least two cases, however, namely in the very small *domus* mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128* and in the second phase of the *Castra Peregrinorum* mithraeum,[406] such a relief seems to have served as the main icon. Discounting those mithraea where either no icon has been recovered, such as the *Foro di Nerva*, or where it is not possible to tell whether the icon included side-scenes from the life of Mithras, it would seem that icons of the complex type, understood in the very loosest sense of the term, are plentiful enough in the Roman material to be at least considered seriously. Indeed, when we start looking for the compositional elements of the complex icon using the mithraeum itself as the frame of the icon, the results, at least in the Roman material, are telling.

In every case we have examined, except perhaps for the *Barberini* mithraeum, the addition of supplemental elements to the main composition of the icon within the sphere of the mithraeum *qua* cave completes the icon. On a very fundamental level, this conception of the spatial function of the icon is completely different from the great complex reliefs of the Rhineland. In Rome, perhaps even more so than

[405] Though heavily restored, a group of Mithras tauroctonos in the Vatican Museum (V 548), is, along with a piece from Rome presently in the British Museum (V 592), a good example of the very high artistic quality of some of these groups. The famous sculpture from Ostia by Kriton (V 230) should also be mentioned at this point, though the piece itself differs from the "regular" tauroctonies in so many ways that it should really be considered as a separate type.

[406] Though in the case of this mithraeum, the previous stucco icon remained in use even while a new relief was installed in the new cult niche. The relationship between these two icons and their respective functions in this mithraeum is really anyone's guess.

in the provinces, there seem to be connections between the complexity of the main icon and the richness of the decoration of the mithraeum that have to do with spatial rather than monetary concerns. That is to say that in the provinces the complexity of a relief, in the iconographical sense, is usually very much related to the economic status of the mithraeum, with the largest and most complex reliefs usually found in large and richly decorated mithraea. In Rome on the other hand, many of the most beautiful and visually stunning icons, in paint, stucco, or in the round, are compositionally quite basic, or even stripped down, with additional elements needed to complete the iconographical effect of the icon in the mithraeum. Are we on the track, then, of the Italian style?

Provincial typologies of Mithraic icons, of the complex ones at any rate, were pioneered by Ernest Will,[407] and Henri Lavagne, who tried to establish the parameters of an Italian style, takes Will as his starting point. As is usually the case in any typological study of the Mithraic icons, Lavagne attempts to sort the Italian monuments by the criteria established by Will on the basis of the Rhenish, Raetian, and Danubian icons, namely the basic reading sequence of the accompanying side-scenes:

> Dans les stèles danubiennes, le sens de lecture n'est absolument assuré que pour les scènes placées en prédelles : elles se lisent de gauche à droite comme dans une frise classique, tandis que les épisodes qui occupent l'image centrale sont disposés sans ordre réel, comme s'il s'agissait d'un remplissage inorganisé. Les reliefs du groupe rétique attestent, pour leur part, une autre succession des différents tableaux : le début de la légende se place en haut du pilier de gauche, se poursuit en descendant le jambage, et se termine au sommet du pilastre de droite. Au contraire, la série rhénane inverse ces séquences : le cycle s'ouvre à l'extrémité *inférieure* du pilastre de gauche, se développe en le remontant, passe sur le cintre (ou le linteau) supérieur pour s'achever au bas du jambage droite.[408]

As noted above, Lavagne is primarily concerned with a detailed typology of the Italian tauroctony reliefs, and he proceeds to establish sub-groups of some of these reliefs, often using examples from Rome, based on which side-scenes appear within the frame of any given icon. The first of these sub-groups of Italian tauroctonies is, according to Lavagne, a type where one side-scene intrudes into the main relief, and his example from Rome is the tauroctony from the *Forum Boarium* or *Circus Maximus* mithraeum, in which

[407] Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain*.
[408] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 482.

the so-called *Transitus* or *Transitus dei* motif intrudes.[409] This scene shows Mithras carrying the bull by its hind legs, and in this relief, the scene appears in the lower left corner of the main scene.[410] Lavagne's second group, on the other hand, should possibly be discarded, based on the small scale votive type icons found in this group. The icons in Lavagne's second group conform, more or less, to the Danubian style reliefs with the lower triptych style band. He describes this group thus: "Un deuxième groupe comprend les monuments dont la partie inférieure est ornée de trois scènes disposées comme des prédelles, et dont le champ de l'image centrale est chargé de scènes supplémentaires."[411] From the Roman material, the example given by Lavagne is a very small relief from the so-called *Dolichenum* on the Aventine Hill,[412] a relief which does in fact consist of a main tauroctony scene, with a frieze below the main image carrying three scenes from the Mithras myth. But this little icon can in no way be considered the main icon of any mithraeum, and it is certainly rather a small votive relief, possibly brought to Rome from one of the Danubian provinces, and should not be considered Roman in any sense. Lavagne even acknowledges this himself:

> La pièce du *Dolichenum* de l'Aventin constitue un *unicum* remarquable dans la production mithriaque de l'Italie. Nous inclinons à penser que cet ex-voto a été apporté par un fidèle étranger, originaire des pays du bas Danube, et placé dans le sanctuaire d'un dieu dont les rapports avec Mithra sont bien établis.[413]

Another monument from the city of Rome is stylistically close to reliefs from Pannonia, Noricum, and Dalmatia, namely the Esquiline tauroctony,[414] where the side-scenes are not confined to friezes either horizontal or vertical, but are rather "thrown" into the main scene, and this type is Lavagne's fourth sub-group.[415]

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[409] V 435.
[410] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 484-485.
[411] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 486.
[412] V 469.
[413] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 487.
[414] V 350.
[415] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 489.

In Lavagnes fifth group, the side-scenes occur on the vertical edges of the monuments, as in the Rhine reliefs, and this group predictably also includes the tauroctony murals of the *Barberini* and *Marino* mithraea. In the flanking side-scenes of these, reminiscent as they are of some of the side-scenes of the great complex reliefs of the Rhine provinces, scenes from the life of Mithras, or the Mithras myth, mainly flank the main icon, usually clearly separated both from the main tauroctony and each other by bands.[416] This, then, is the Rhenish-Raetian type of monument, which both Lavagne and Turcan believe to be the type of complex icon which is most "Italian." Indeed, Turcan is convinced that if more Mithraic murals from Italy were preserved, they might more accurately reflect the popularity of the type:

> En fait, on retrouve ce même type en sculpture à Nesce, dans les Abruzzes, en peinture à Marino et à Rome même (Palais Barberini). La fragilité des enduits peints aujourd'hui disparus nous empêche de connaître quantité d'autres exemplaires qui attesteraient probablement le succès du type prétendument « réto-rhénan » dans la péninsule italique en passant peut-être par l'Italie du Nord.[417]

The Italian complex murals should then belong to this type, but again, whith so few examples, one must ask whether this categorization is really helpful, especially in the light of the acceptance, both by Lavagne and Turcan, of a sort of iconographical bible or canon, which meant that Mithraic iconography was always fixed and stable from a geographical viewpoint:

> De la frontière de l'Euphrate, en Syrie, jusqu'au nord de l'Angleterre, l'iconographie mithriaque était stable, fixe et cohérent. Elle ne variait guère quant au fond, même si dans la forme et l'élaboration on constate certaines particularités qui ne remettent jamais en cause les dénominateurs communs de base. Le mithriaste en déplacement d'affaires ou en mission était sûr de retrouver partout la même « bible » illustrée. Dans tous les *Mithraea* on se retrouvait environné, imprégné, visuellement endoctriné par les même représentations.[418]

In effect, this "bible" makes the provincial typologies, and even the type "réto-rhénan" superfluous, as, in essence, all the iconographical aspects of the icon are centrally regulated. In all fairness, this is a gross simplification of Turcan's position, but my point should serve to illustrate the need to tone down the

[416] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 491-96.
[417] Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacism*, 55
[418] Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacism*, 72.

importance of formal typological criteria when analyzing Mithraic art, especially since, according to Gordon: "[The typology], predicated upon an opposition between form and content, asserts the priority of formal similarities at the expense of exploring, for example, identities of 'meaning'."[419] Instead, the focus should rather be on other aspects, such as for example the interpretation of the artwork in its primary context as religious artifact and as the main cult object of the Mithraic communities.

The inconclusiveness of the statistical material, especially with regard to the Mithraic icons from the city of Rome, makes strict typological categories of the kind attempted by Will and Campbell, and even the modified typologies of Lavagne and Turcan, difficult to employ. This situation leads Gordon to ask the timely rhetorical question:

> A new Rhenish-Italian type then? … [W]hat is the sense in calling this a 'Raetian' order when it is evidenced by 3 or 4 monuments widely scattered in time and place, of which the earliest is probably the Barberini fresco? And if next week someone finds a complex panel relief in which both panels are to be read *upwards*, are we to invent yet another type?[420]

When these stylistic categories have only one or perhaps two examples in Rome, and only a few more in total, the categories themselves lose their meaning, and we are led to conclude, with Gordon, that, "the types themselves do not exist – they are merely inadequate hypotheses."[421] Simply put, then, there is little to be gained by applying the sub-categories of complex reliefs, as set out by Lavagne, to the Roman material, and that the simple division between complex and basic icons is the most that can be applied on the general level, while the study of an icon on its own stylistic and compositional merits is needed for more specific considerations. But even so, the statistics of Lavagne's classifications retain some value. Of all the Italian tauroctonies known at the time Lavagne wrote his article, 106 tauroctonies were without any side-scenes, and only 12 tauroctonies had side-scenes, so that the complex relief is statistically much rarer in Italy than in other parts of the Empire, and especially than in the Rhine and Danube regions. In Italy, the ratio is about one in nine, whereas in the rest of the Empire it is close to one in four,[422] though, as

[419] Gordon, "Panelled complications," 201.
[420] Gordon, "Panelled complications," 208-209.
[421] Gordon, "Panelled complications," 211.
[422] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 496.

Gordon argues; "'The rest of the Empire' is no sort of category – how many complex reliefs are there in Spain, Gaul, North Africa, Syria, even in Germany? The complex relief is *standard* only in the Danube area."[423] In the city of Rome, the ratio is, as we have seen above, even lower than Lavagne suggests, especially if only the mural of the *Barberini* mithraeum may count as a "proper" complex relief, since it is the only one that can unreservedly be considered Italian-made, and features scenes from the mythological life of Mithras in vertical flanking bands divided from the main tauroctony scene of the icon. Still, in some other Mithraic icons from Rome and environs, examples of this kind of motif intrudes into the main composition, and we must, at least briefly, consider why these scenes were chosen for inclusion in the composition of the main icon.

What considerations affected the choice of the inclusion of certain auxiliary scenes within the borders of the icon, or on the flanking bands? Entertaining the idea that there could have been a Mithraic "iconographical bible" which contained prototypes of all the scenes on the icon, Lavagne concluded that such an iconographical canon must have been loose enough to allow each community to choose the images that fitted them best, and ignore others. Generally, according to Lavagne, "dans la diffusion de l'imagerie mithriaque, on peut penser qu'il y a une vulgate faite de scènes canoniques exactement recopiées, mais que chaque 'église' est libre de mettre l'accent sur les représentations qui touchent davantage la sensibilité religieuse de ses fidèles." Rome, however, "reçoit une imagerie déjà traditionnelle, comme le souligne E. Will,[424] mais sa marque se traduit par une insistance sur certaines scènes où la légende tient moins de place que la cérémonie."[425] And this, then, is really the crux of the matter as far the inclusion or exclusion of side-scenes is concerned.

The implication is that there is a focus on scenes featuring "ritual action" in the Roman iconography, in distinction from the many scenes from the "life of Mithras" found on the true complex reliefs of the Rhine. This observation is in itself neither surprising nor enlightening, but if it is seen in relation to the poverty of the iconographical detail within the main frame in many of the central icons of

[423] Gordon, "Panelled complications," n. 18, 226.
[424] Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain*, 392.
[425] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 499.

the Roman mithraea, and also in relation to the clear focus on initiatory scenes in some of the mithraea in Rome and its immediate environs, like the *Santa Prisca* and *Capua* murals, we come closer to establishing a composite picture of what can be considered Roman iconographical preference and the Roman application of certain elements of Mithraic iconography. In other words, at this point it is necessary to look beyond the icon, and include its immediate context. Important in this regard is a particular focus on the cave itself in the Roman material, which is attested by many of our sources: literary, epigraphic, architectural, and iconographical. Lavagne does indeed give attention to the cave in the Roman material, concluding that: "la caractéristique essentielle de l'Italie dans la disposition des épisodes autour du tableau central est de préserver dans la mesure du possible, la figuration du *spelaeum*."[426]

Though Lavagne does not give a ratio for the occurrence of the cave in the Italian iconography, he does go on to state, in no uncertain terms, that, "un simple bilan quantitatif permet de constater que les tauroctones italiens comportent beaucoup plus souvent la figuration de *spelaeum* que ceux des provinces."[427] Richard Gordon is, however, highly critical of Lavagne's observations, especially when it comes to the alleged dichotomy between the "panel" option and the "cave" option:

> [Lavagne] concludes from his analysis that Italy 'rejected' the panel option because of a tension between it and the Italian emphasis upon the cave. But this is to fall into the trap of supposing that the Mithraists were concerned with the same formal issues as modern scholars; does not Marino offer a perfectly good example of integration between panel and cave; and Barberini?[428]

Lavagne is, I think, onto something when drawing attention to the cave, but he is mistaken in two important points. Firstly, as noted by Gordon, the alleged tension between complex icons and the cave is problematic, and secondly, Lavagne is only looking within the frame of the icon itself, which, at least in Rome, skews the image of the *tableau* of the mithraeum to a great extent. The icon must be considered in the context of the mithraeum. Few things about the icon can be established with absolute certainty, but one thing we do know for certain – and the importance of this point belies its banality – is that the icon was

[426] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 500.
[427] Lavagne, "Les reliefs Mithriaques en Italie," 501, n. 1.
[428] Gordon, "Panelled complications," 221-222.

made to be viewed and experienced first and foremost in the context of the Mithraic cave *par excellence*, the mithraeum. Gordon draws attention to what he feels is another important factor in the composition of the Italian icons:

> Should we not rather observe another interesting Italian exclusion, of small sculptures representing the scenes also found as side-scenes? Rome itself has yielded only eight (or ten) such statues, and all the rest of Italy another two (or six). …It can hardly be a coincidence that so few have been found in Italy where there are also few panelled reliefs; and it is surely that double exclusion we have to explain.[429]

But Gordon's point is not unproblematic, as he not only omits statuettes of the torchbearers from his material, but also representations of the elements of the icon in other media, such as fresco or stucco. In fact, with a few exceptions,[430] he lists only small-scale statuary representing the rock birth. In addition to the *dadophori*, small-scale statuary must also be added from the mithraea of the *Castra Peregrinorum* and *Crypta Balbi*, though of course these finds only came to light after Gordon's article was published. In addition to the statuary, I believe that the extensive use of wall painting in the Roman mithraea, and hence the many ritual scenes on these paintings, for example at *Santa Prisca* and *Capua*, must be considered in this context. As I have stated repeatedly, the mithraeum and the icon cannot really be separated from each other if the aim is an integrated picture of the Mithraic language(s) of imagery, because they would, at least in an overwhelming majority of cases, be experienced in tandem, as parts of a whole, by their viewers, the Mithraic communities.

2.6. Viewing, experiencing, and interpreting the Mithraic icon in late antique Rome

The "basic" icon, that is to say the Mithraic cult icons that feature depictions of the central act of Mithras killing the bull, and including the "canonical" animals, the torchbearers, and often busts of Sol and Luna, corresponding to the elements A, B, and C in Small's scheme,[431] make up the overwhelming majority of the extant Mithraic icons from Rome. But, as we have seen, these basic icons are rarely the main cult

[429] Gordon, "Panelled complications," 222.
[430] Gordon lists eight (or ten) small sculptures from Rome. These are listed in Gordon, "Panelled complications," n. 19, 226.
[431] Small, "The Raven."

icons of the Roman mithraea, or at least this is the case with the mithraea in use in the fourth century. The main cult icons of the sixteen mithraea examined in chapter 1 seem on the contrary to be executed in fresco, stucco, or even as sculptures in the round though this remains more conjectural, rather than as the marble reliefs most commonly attested in other regions.

Out of the sixteen mithraea in this study that were still in use in the fourth century, in only two cases can we be certain that the mithraeum's main icon was a basic icon in relief.[432] And even in these two instances, in only one case, that of the very small *domus* mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*, was the relief the only tauroctony scene in the cult room. In the other case where the main icon was a basic relief, namely during the second phase of the mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*, the relief was superimposed on the icon of the first phase, almost like a cover. The older icon seems to have been of the "exploded" type, with elements of the scene taken out of the borders of the icon and distributed around it as separate pieces of statuary, and, judging from the amount of sculptural "debris" and pieces of small-scale statuary preserved on the floor of the mithraeum, this also seems to have been the case in the second phase of the mithraeum. Certainly this is the case with the evocative protomes of Sol and Luna flanking the stucco icon in that mithraeum, and remains of statuary representing the torchbearers, and even two representations of the rock birth of Mithras, were found close to the icon.[433] The torchbearers were missing from the small tauroctony relief of the mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128*, too, and were instead placed flanking the entrance to the room in a familiar fashion.[434]

Still, though they seem rarely to have held the place of main icon in the mithraea, the basic reliefs are statistically the most common tauroctony representations in Rome. Indeed, with a very few exceptions, all Mithraic cult icons in relief, i.e. not in fresco or stucco or executed in the round, from Rome and the immediate surrounding countryside are basic icons, whereas true complex icons, analogous to the famous great complex reliefs of the Rhine provinces, are in our area really found only in murals, though, as we

[432] The mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128* and the second phase of the mithraeum of the *Castra Peregrinorum*.
[433] See Lissi-Caronna, *Castra Peregrinorum*, 29-32
[434] For the placing of the torchbearers in this mithraeum, see Gallo, "Il mitreo di Via Giovanni Lanza," 249-250. Cautes and Cautopates are depicted in figs. 3 and 4 respectively, while the little marble tauroctony relief is fig. 5.

have seen, there are examples of reliefs in which scenes from the life of Mithras intrude, even if they do not conform to the compositional parameters of what we usually recognize as complex reliefs.[435] Additionally, there are quite a few sculptures in the round depicting the tauroctonous Mithras in the Italian material, constituting a far larger percentage of the icons than seems to be the case in the provinces, though there is little evidence and few clues as to how these sculptures were displayed in the mithraea. The placing of the icon within the structural and architectural space of the mithraeum has been discussed above, but we must now consider how these different types of icons functioned visually inside the sacred space of the mithraeum – that is, how they were experienced and interpreted in their immediate religious context.

I have briefly noted the similarities, on a functional level, between the placing of Mithraic art within the mithraeum in late antiquity and the placing of Christian art within the churches from the fifth century and up to the present times. In the words of Ingvild Gilhus: "This fairly standardized image [the tauroctony] served as a cult icon in the different *mithraea* all over the empire for more than two centuries, comparable to the way in which the crucified Christ appeared on altar pieces in Christian churches at a later time."[436] Additionally, compounding the effect of the tauroctony itself, the placing of the elements of the icon throughout the mithraeum in essence created a sort of three-dimensional tableau reminiscent of nativity scenes in modern Christian Christmas celebrations. Thus, the initiate could experience himself as being essentially part of the act of Mithras, either as an onlooker, or as participating in the act itself on some symbolic level, perhaps through chanting or another form of ritualized action.

There is good reason to suppose that the mithraeum functioned in many instances as a sort of stage on which rituals, primarily the sacred meal, small-scale processions, and initiations took place. Not only do the many references in secondary sources from the period refer, often in lurid detail, to Mithraic initiatory rituals featuring "tests" which seem to have included violence, or at least the threat of

[435] These reliefs are: V 321, V 350, V 435, V 556, and V 650.
[436] Gilhus, *Animals, Gods, and Humans*, 128.

violence.[437] Ritual implements, like for example a prop sword, have also been found in mithraea, and in this specific case, the prop was clearly designed to create the illusion of someone being run through by a sword,[438] in essence a simulated murder.[439] The possible ritual archery of the Mithraic *pater*,[440] and all the evidence for the use of light-effects in the mithraeum, also support such an understanding of the Mithraic cult space as, among other things, a stage. The initiate could thus experience himself as being *in medias res*, perhaps re-enacting mythological scenes, assuming a role, presumably one appropriate to his initiatory grade, while his brother initiates took the other parts in the re-enacted drama.

There is no question that much of the Mithraic corpus of art functioned as a sort of *aide-mémoire* on several levels at the same time. The iconography in the mithraeum would furnish visual clues in relation to a Mithraic myth-cycle, perhaps featuring a narrative story of the acts of Mithras, while at the same time underscoring the ritual re-enactments and sacraments of the Mithraic community life. Here again the similarities with the use of art in the Christian communities are striking, and Robin Margaret Jensen's description of the functions of early Christian art seem to parallel the functions of the iconography of the Roman mithraea:

> From the beginning, Christian buildings as well as burial places were enhanced with images made in mosaic, paint, and stone that presented episodes from cycles of Bible stories as well as images of the saints and the prophets. Their selection, composition, and arrangement may have been based on the calendar of feasts, the structure of prayers, the contents of catechetical lessons, or the order of Scripture readings. They assisted the memory by giving an event, a rite, or a story a particular visual clue, which

[437] The gruesome nature of the Mithraic initiatory rituals grew in the telling and to some Christian writers from the fourth century and onwards these tests assumed epic and horrific proportions. There is quite a gap in proportion from the rituals described by Ambrosiaster (*Quaest. vet. nov. test.* 113.11), to the rather extreme tests lasting eighty days and involving several days of swimming and being hurled into a bonfire described by Pseudo-Nonnus in the sixth century (*Comm. in Greg. Nazian*. Or. 4.70 (Migne, PG 36: 989)), and being made to lie in the snow for twenty days according to Cosmas of Jerusalem in the eight century (*Scholia in Greg. Naz. Carm.* (Migne, PG 38: 506)).
[438] A prop sword, that is a sword where the point and the hilt are joined by an iron loop, giving the impression that the subject has been run through by the sword, was found in the *Riegel* mithraeum. See Schwertheim, *Mithras*, 29, figs. 38-39, for pictures of the prop blade. Fig. 38 shows a reconstruction of the possible use of the sword.
[439] The emperor Commodus is reported by Lampridius (*Historia Augusta, Vita Commodi*, 9.4) to have desecrated the Mithraic rites by committing an actual murder rather saying or doing something that would produce terror: *sacra Mithriaca homicidio vero polluit, cum illic aliquid ad speciem timoris vel dici vel fingi soleat*.
[440] This ritual, depicted on the Mainz *krater*, is discussed extensively by Beck in, "Ritual, myth, doctrine, and initiation," and in "Four Men, Two sticks, and a Whip."

> over time affected, shaped, and reinforced key aspects, climactic moments, or core meanings of those events, rituals, and readings.[441]

Indeed, it seems that the role and functions of religious art in the Roman Empire in general in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries shared many similarities, and there is clearly a close connection between Mithraic and Christian art, which is perhaps not so strange considering that the two religions developed their iconographical systems, or "canons", at the same time and in the same milieu. In all likelihood these communities experienced and viewed their art in much the same fashion, and their respective iconographical schemes were dependent on their cultural contexts, in this case the late antique *urbs*. What, then, where the tenets of religious art in third, fourth, and fifth century Rome?

2.6.1. Art in Rome in late antiquity

The Romans relied heavily, in fact almost exclusively, on images to convey symbolic meanings, and it is clear that the world of the Roman Empire was a distinctly visual culture, with a low literacy level.[442] But the Roman world of late antiquity was also a melting-pot of peoples with a wide range of cultural inputs, of impulses and ideas, and images, including of course religious art, played an exceedingly important part in these cultural discourses. According to Jas Elsner: "With the vast majority of the empire's inhabitants illiterate and often unable to speak the dominant languages of the elite, which were Greek in the east and Latin in the west, the most direct way of communicating was through images."[443] It might, in fact, be preferable to think of a corpus of images in terms of language, but not now formally and structurally in the terms of the "internal syntax" of the language of images that Small's scheme of the elements of the tauroctony suggests,[444] but rather as a system of communication. This is one of Tonio Hölscher's main

[441] Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen*, 87.
[442] The percentage of illiteracy in the population of the Roman Empire has been estimated to be as high as 90%, but this is a notoriously difficult field of enquiry, and actual numbers seem to be mostly speculation. The exact percentage of illiteracy is not of prime importance to the current study, and for my purposes, at least for now, defining illiteracy as "high" suffices. I am of course aware of the fact that the question of literacy in the Roman empire is an important one, but the issue is too complex to go into here, and space does not permit the kind of discussion the topic deserves.
[443] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 12.
[444] Small, "The Raven."

points when describing what he calls the language of images: "We can no longer approach works of art exclusively from the standpoint of production, as the expressions of artists or patrons," writes Hölscher, "but we must also examine them as forms of communication – that is, as a factor in the collective life of a society."[445]

Discussing art in Imperial Rome in general, and religious and Christian art in particular, Jas Elsner stresses just this role of the visual in Roman society throughout his work, maintaining that: "It was a civilization which theorized the visual more intensely than at any other time in antiquity."[446] Images served to spread, and to maintain, cultural and religious identity, as well as heralding and defining change: The Romans were constantly surrounded by images in all spheres of their daily lives, and according to Elsner, "the visual arts as a means of defining identity filled (in many ways created) the social environment in which Romans lived – from some (if not all) the rooms of their houses to the public spaces of urban life."[447] Images clearly occupied a central position in Roman religious and civic life, it served in a multitude of functions and capacities, and Elsner even goes as far as to state that in Graeco-Roman religion "art did not provide a commentary on religion, it *was* religion"[448]. And this point becomes especially relevant in late antiquity, as the decoration of the Christian churches became more lavish.

Though the new and imposing churches in Rome built by the emperors, like St. Peter's and the Lateran Basilica, were the most visible examples of both architecture and art, Jas Elsner argues that religious art on the whole experienced a revival during this period:

> Christians were not the only religious group to be decorating catacombs, shrines and sacred objects with a wealth of symbolic images which proclaimed their holiness. Jews, followers of the cult of Mithras and initiates in other cults both 'pagan' and 'syncretistic' (soon to be persecuted by the victorious Christians) were equally busy in an age which should be seen as a high point of religious imagery and sensibility.[449]

[445] Hölscher, *The Language of Images in Roman Art*, 7.
[446] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 12.
[447] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 27-28.
[448] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph,* 206.
[449] Elsner, "Art and architecture," 739.

It is important to bear in mind that even if much of the art, religious and secular, that was in use in the fourth century was produced in the second and third centuries, it was experienced – and consequently produced meaning – in the context in which it was viewed. Indeed, late antiquity also witnessed radical changes in art, not only in its execution but also in its placing, and, we must imagine, especially in the processes of interpretation. Thomas Mathews highlights these changes especially in relation to Christian art: "This period, from the mid-third century to the mid-sixth, was decisive" he writes; "something radically new came into existence that had not been there before."[450] Mathews is first and foremost preoccupied with challenging the idea of what he terms the "Emperor Mystique" of early Christian art,[451] but his comment on radical change is important for late antique religious art in general and the question of whether radical change is to be found in the execution, function, or interpretation of the artwork, or perhaps in all three, is one of the most central and challenging questions in the study of Roman religious art in late antiquity.

There is both a high degree of continuity and radical invention in much of the religious art of the period, but since Christian art is the commonly used yardstick for late antique art, the similarities, both on the formal and structural levels and as regards the placing, of Mithraic and Christian art in this period are often obscured. The history of basilical Christian art starts of course with Constantine, but even if many of the same patterns of placing art within the sphere of a sacred space were established in Mithraic art a hundred years earlier, it is clear that the decoration of mithraea and churches in the fourth century in Rome shared many similarities, and that these similarities must be taken into account in the interpretation of how these systems of images functioned in the contexts of their respective sacred spaces. Art that was in use in this period must therefore be interpreted in the context in which it was born, in the context of the experience of the art in fourth century Rome, and in the contexts that we, the modern interpreters, find it. This presents an interpretative challenge, but Jas Elsner helpfully suggests a possible solution:

[450] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 22.
[451] Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, 3-23.

> Images are visual symbols which may have a multiplicity of meanings and evocations for different viewers, both at the time they were made and thereafter. In treating of late antiquity, we must look to the whole span of images and monuments, both those surviving into and those created by that period. The meanings of such images may be not only multiple but even contradictory, with different viewers potentially believing different things about the same work of art. Furthermore, an investigation of art and architecture must be sensitive to the different social and cultural levels at which material culture may function.[452]

Mithraic art in fourth century Rome must be interpreted first and foremost as religious art, representing at the same time ideas from the time in which the art was created, from the time that the main motifs of Mithraic iconography was established, and from its fourth century context. Mithraic art was more or less confined to the mithraeum, so discussing it in the overall context of its function within a clearly defined sacred space is a good place to begin.

2.6.2. Art and meaning in the context of sacred space

If art was religion in Rome in late antiquity, then how did it express itself, and what rules governed and structured this interplay of religion, art, and sacred space? In short, what were the dynamics that produced meaning out of these corpora of iconographical motifs, and, in the case of both Mithraism and Christianity in this period, what was the importance and meaning of the fact that this language of images was, contrary to the public displays of not only Roman civic religion but also the other cults of the Empire, absolutely confined to the sacred spaces that were accessible only to the initiated? In the case of Mithraism, this seems to be one of the keys to understanding the life of the cult, and though we will likely never reach an unequivocal answer, we must still ask how the three-dimensional iconographical tableau of the mithraeum, containing not only the icon but also a multitude of auxiliary images, was understood by their viewers, the Mithraic communities. The consideration remains vital, not only when dealing with the interpretation of Mithraic art, or even when dealing with the interpretation of religious images, but really in relation to any approach to the challenge of analyzing the dynamics of interpretation in general.

[452] Elsner, "Art and architecture," 741.

Viewing, i.e. the complex process of moving from perception to interpretation,[453] is clearly a subjective experience, but it is also completely reliant on context, and in this case the context is of course the mithraeum. A few general remarks concerning viewing should be made, however, and a good start is Jas Elsner's tentative definition of the *process* of viewing:

> Viewing is always a dual process of interpretation in which what is seen becomes fitted into the already existent framework of the viewer's knowledge and thereby, very subtly, changes both the content of what the viewer knows (because something new has been added) and the meaning of what is seen (because it is now framed by the viewer's knowledge).[454]

To Elsner, the process of viewing is a discourse between the viewer and that which is seen. As such, an image carries no specific meaning prior to the "reflexive process of assimilation".[455] The image is rather "unassimilable without a context – and it generates that context from the beholder as a descriptive or narrative contextualisation within the beholders subjectivity."[456] Again the implication is that meaning lies not in *specific signification*, but in the relationships between image and viewer in any given *context*.

Elsner further outlines a set of different modes of viewing based on "presuppositions about 'reality'",[457] and categorises religious viewing as "symbolic", or "allegorical", in the sense that images occur in the "symbolic mode". This entailes a layered, polysemic reality, where every image, figure, or symbol carries at least two separate layers of meaning in addition to the purely subjective: its appearance and its allegorical transformation into something else.[458] In practical terms, where Mithraism is concerned, this means that the image of the tauroctony not only tells the story of Mithras chasing, catching, and killing the bull, but also gives meaning on several different levels at the same time. In addition, the polysemic value of the image, i.e. the interpretation in the "symbolic mode", implies an almost unlimited complexity of layers of symbolic elements within this process of interpretation. Elsner classifies, rightfully

[453] Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 2.
[454] Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 4.
[455] Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 21.
[456] Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 39.
[457] Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 22.
[458]Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 40.

in my opinion, Mithraic images as belonging in the symbolic mode, and the following passage is worth quoting at length:

> There are several aspects of symbolic accretion in such images which may be worth noting. In the first place, they signify their importance as cult icons through an excess of visual symbols. Such pleonasm offers not only an oversignification of symbolic elements in the visual form of the image but also the endless possibility for over reading – for excess in viewers' interpretations. When there is no limit to meaning, and that absence of limit is expressed through an excess of symbols, this enunciates not only the importance of the image as a sign for the reality to which such symbols refer but also the boundless depth of understanding to which their Truth offers access.[459]

This understanding of religious images, and by implication the symbolic understanding of the Mithraic icon, stresses the role of the interpreter in the creation of meaning, and downplays the concept of any inherent *meaning* in the symbol, highlighting rather *meanings* in the plural, created in the act of interpretation.[460] For though a symbol, and especially a religious symbol, may be conceived as being meaningful in itself, both universal and mediating a transcendent reality, by the individual interpreter, this dimension remains subjective, as all the layers of meaning carried by the symbol must. In modern terms this means, quite simply, that we will never have direct access to exactly what the Mithraic communities "believed", if such a term is applicable to ancient religion. Even so, it should still be possible to at least gain an overview of some of the *possible* meanings and functions of the Mithraic icon – that is apart from this aspect of Mithraic beliefs, which has perhaps received just a little too much attention in Mithraic scholarship from its inception.

We must begin, I think, by looking in detail at the specific Mithraic communities, and in the case of this study, the Mithraic communities of late antique Rome. I have discussed the Mithraic demographics of the third and fourth century *urbs* in general terms in the preceding chapter, and the differences in cult practice between the social catchments in the Roman cult, including the possibility of singling out a sort of senatorial Mithraism, is discussed in the following chapter, but I still need at this point to chart a few of

[459] Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, 220.
[460] For a discussion of the inherent meaning, or meaninglessness, of symbols, see Braarvig, "The function of religious rites".

the possible functions of the icon in the Mithraic communities of Rome and their respective mithraea. Though it is important not to downplay other aspects of identity, as Mithraism clearly served to maintain both ethnic identity and "Roman-ness", but above all, a religious identity, its language of images must have played an important role in propagating the essentially conservative and conformist social function of the Mithraic community within the larger structure of society in late antique Rome. This is apparent from the stability of Mithraic imagery which remained largely unchanged for well over three centuries.

The range of the social classes, backgrounds, ethnicity, and occupations found amongst the members of the Mithraic communities is wide, but in the usual interpretation of the social catchment of the cult, membership did not quite include the elite – it mainly attracted those aspiring to better their lot in life. "Mithraism indeed was a conformist's religion," writes Roger Beck, "petty bureaucrats, soldiers, successful freedmen, slaves with talent and a measure of autonomy in the households of the great. If not a religion of the elite or the sophisticated, it was certainly not a religion of the marginal, still less of the disaffected."[461] And as the Mithraic language of images was certainly established before the end of the fourth century, when we find a sharp increase in men of senatorial standing in the membership of the cult in Rome, we must look for the connection between social identity and imagery from this viewpoint. According to Jas Elsner, images provide an important contribution to the social dynamics of the group, both on the internal level and in relation to the world outside the mithraeum in which, after all, the members of the Mithraic communities spent the greater part of their lives:

> In the public and visual space between self and the world, images not only helped to establish the terms on which a collective social identity and subjectivity might be defined. They were also used to announce someone's status within that system, to negotiate issues of ethnicity, class, and gender, to promote a person or family or group (even a city) beyond local confines into the broader cultural ambience of the Roman empire.[462]

As Mithraism in Rome was essentially conformist, just as it seems to have been throughout the Empire, the "elitism of secrecy" of the small and insular upwardly mobile brotherhoods stands in contrast to the

[461] Beck, "Four Men, Two Sticks, and a Whip," 88.
[462] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 28.

conservativism and "royalist" sentiments of the multitude of Mithraic inscriptions dedicated to the health and well-being of the Emperors and the Empire itself.

Though the cult was "secret" and therefore potentially "subversive", at least theoretically, which basically entailed that the teachings and tenets of the cult should only be revealed to the initiated, Mithraism in Rome in this period seems to have been highly visible, with several mithraea placed in the middle of busy, publicly accessible areas. Not only the existence of the cult, but also details concerning the initiatory grade structure, seem to have been well known. I think that at least on the social level and in relation to the cult's role in the general community of the city, a comparison with the place of Masonic lodges in modern society is not out of place, especially if we use such a comparison mostly as a tool to think with and as an analytical category. In that sense, Mithraism, in its social aspect, is often understood as not only essentially conformist, but also as a "club of social-climbers",[463] emphasising integration and social mobility within the "system", where being part of the community would also assist the initiate in getting ahead in society. Additionally, according to Jas Elsner in the quote above, images were instrumental in structuring society and the individual's place within a social system.[464]

Although Mithraism was never publicly funded, or sanctioned by the ruling powers, the Mithraic cult was nevertheless tacitly endorsed, and Mithraic congregations were never, as far as we know, subject to censure or persecution until the very end of the life of the cult, which in Rome would be in the beginning of the fifth century. Even then, the persecution was officially sanctioned and endorsed only in a very few cases. Though it is well known, the only documented exception to this official reticence was the destruction of a mithraeum in Rome by the prefect Gracchus, as told, somewhat luridly, by Jerome,[465] but Gracchus' motives seem to have been selfish rather then for the benefit of the city, as he secured for

[463] See for example Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae* and *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, and Merkelbach, *Mithras*, where this "social climbing" often seems to be the only social function of the cult. The point of view that Mithraism was essentially a conformist religion was first established by Richard Gordon in "Mithraism and Roman Society", though Gordon is more moderate than the above mentioned German scholars, and indeed has often commented on the great extent of variation in the social structures and makeup of the Mithraic groups throughout the Empire. Though there are variations within the community of Mithraic scholarship as to the exclusivity of this aspect of the social function of the cult, there seems to be a general consensus these days, that the essentially conformist nature of the cult, and its deeply conservative social values was one of the defining elements of Mithraism in the Roman Empire.
[464] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 28.
[465] Jerome, *Ep.* 107.2.

himself, again according to Jerome, a Christian baptism as a consequence of his actions. Indeed, in Rome in this period we have many examples of the communities being encouraged, rather than persecuted, by members of the senatorial elite, and in the fourth century several members of the newly expanded senatorial class, including both praetorian and urban prefects, held the rank of *pater* or *pater patrum* in the Mithraic cult.

The mithraea of fourth century Rome were in effect true sanctuaries, generally inviolable, and presided over and protected by powerful patrons. This concept of inviolable sacred space is at the heart of Mithraism, just as the icon itself is, but how do these two core concepts interact on the symbolic level, i.e. how are they functionally alike, and how are they dissimilar? "Sacred space is an abstract idea," writes Robin Margaret Jensen. And further:

> It is like sacred image, and yet very much unlike it. Its symbolism lies not so much in its content as in its form. With space we move from the picture to the frame, finding the shape of the idea by noting its edges. Like Alice through the looking glass, we may enter this image and explore it, because it opens up into three dimensions.[466]

But, as we have seen, the icon too opens up into three dimensions and we must cast our net farther to grasp the central difference between space and icon. "Since architecture still projects an idea, it is a symbol, or image," continues Jensen, "but it is also more than these: it is a place, a destination, a 'site.'" And this is the crux of the matter: these sacred spaces are designed to be physically entered by every initiated member of the community. Roger Beck makes a point of just this *penetrability* of the mithraeum:

> Unlike the tauroctony, the mithraeum and the grade hierarchy are structures which can be entered, though of course in very different senses. One can 'get into' them – literally: 'into' the mithraeum because it is a room, a three-dimensional space designed to be entered physically; 'into' the grade hierarchy because it is a career, extended into the dimension of dime and designed to be entered by initiation at a particular moment. In contrast, the tauroctony is an impenetrable three- or two-dimensional object, a mass or a surface to be apprehended from the outside only.[467]

[466] Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen*, 102.
[467] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 71.

Entering into the grade hierarchy, as pertains to fourth century Rome, is dealt with in chapter 3, but at this point we should again note that the similarities between the Roman mithraea and the Christian cult rooms, this time on a spatial level, are very important. Jensen's summary of the relationship between architecture and cult life in the early Christian basilical churches, could just as well describe a mithraeum. The following passage is therefore worth quoting at length, all the while keeping the mithraeum in mind:

> [The basilica] was an ideal Christian worship space for several reasons. First, although such a building often accommodated a cult statue in its apse, it clearly differed from pagan worship spaces. It lacked the small inner room (cella) especially designed for the figure of a deity that could be seen only by consecrated priests on certain festivals. Nor was it rustic and primitive, like the sacred groves or crossroads with their outdoor altars and nature deities. Second, the basilica was designed as an interior space – as a hall for limited and private assembly – rather than as an exterior stage for sacrifice before a large public audience. Christians 'excused' the non-initiated from their sacred meals as a way of protecting the mystery and secrecy of their rites. The rite of baptism was likewise private: only the clergy and candidates (and perhaps sponsors) were allowed to participate or observed. During the Eucharist, doors were closed, curtains were drawn, and prayers were mostly inaudible; explanations given to outsiders were sketchy. The building was designed to accommodate the crowd and its activities but also to provide shelter and privacy. Third, the church building was the base of an organized and hierarchical community with several ranks of clergy and laity. People had a certain 'place' within the system, and their place inside the building was defined according to their role or status.[468]

Jensen's description of the basilica fits, word for word, with the essence of the mithraeum as sacred space; in fact, as noted above, Jensen could just as well have been describing a mithraeum in Rome at this time. The mithraeum as well was both architecturally and visually focused on the apse, which always held a representation of the tauroctony, and often an altar too. Like the basilical churches, the mithraea had, as a rule, no *cella*, though it could perhaps be argued that the mithraeum itself may be construed as a *cella* without a surrounding sacred precinct. In the latter case, however, the same argument may be made concerning the Christian basilica, and the comparison would still be valid. Again, like the basilica in Jensen's description, the mithraeum can in no way be thought of either as primitive or as rustic, since even if the cult room is shaped like a cave, and even though many mithraea are found in a rural context, the scheme, both architecturally and iconographically, of the mithraeum is just as complex as the basilical

[468] Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen*, 113-114.

scheme, and some mithraea, like for instance the *Santa Prisca* and *Marino* mithraea, were splendidly decorated. So far, the mithraeum, then, seems more akin to a Christian church than to any "pagan" place of worship.

Moving on to Jensen's second point, it is worth noting that the mithraeum was even more private, even more of an "interior space", than the basilical church. Because the mithraeum was generally smaller than the average basilical church building, the community, or at least the number of members of the community that could comfortably gather at any one time, was also smaller, and being smaller, the community was also even more exclusive and closer knit, and consequently, one would suppose, its secrets easier to keep, especially in conjunction with the initiatory grade structure. Additionally, in late antique Rome, family bonds seem to have been important within the Mithraic communities, and at least in one instance there is evidence for three generations of the nucleus of a Roman senatorial *familia* patronizing the same mithraeum.[469]

Such re-enforcement of existing social structures, with Mithraic Fathers and Brothers reflecting the biological bonds of the community, served to highlight and confirm the hierarchical structures of the cult, accurately reflecting the nature of the Roman *familia*. And this strictly hierarchical initiatory grade structure remained one of the pillars of the Mithraic communities, at least in Rome, and indeed, based on the literary references to the cult in late antiquity it seems that this aspect of the cult was generally well known even to outsiders, such as the Christian writers of the period like Jerome, who details the grade names when relating the story of the destruction of a mithraeum in Rome by the prefect Gracchus,[470] and Ambrosiaster, who reports in detail on what the initiates were up to in their sanctum:

> Ne enim horreant turpiter dehonestari se occuli illis velantur, alii autem sicut aves alas percutiunt vocem coracis imitantes; alii vero leonum fremunt; alii autem ligatis manibus intestinis pullinis

[469] Three generations of the family of Nonius Victor Olympius were initiated into the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro in Capite* in the last half of the fourth century. These initiations are commemorated in a series of inscriptions, V 400 – V 406. A short history of the site and of the inscriptions is found in Gallo, "Il mitreo di San Silvestro in Capite."
[470] Jerome, *Ep. 107.2.*

> proiciuntur super foveas aqua plenas, accedente quodam cum gladio et inrumpente intestina supra dicta qui se liberatorem appellet.[471]

> Their eyes are blindfolded that they may not refuse to be foully abused; some moreover beat their wings together as birds do, and croak like ravens, and others roar like lions; and yet others are pushed across ditches filled with water: their hands have previously been tied with the intestines of a chicken, and then somebody comes up and cuts these intestines (he calls himself their "liberator").[472]

Though we should perhaps not take Ambrosiaster too seriously, "we may plausibly argue," writes Richard Gordon, "that the mysteries' use of pretence in ritual was sufficiently familiar in the outside world to inspire this parody by Ambrosiaster."[473]

But the hierarchical grade structure not only defined the standing of the inititates within the community – it also defined their physical place in the sacred space of the mithraeum and their place in the Mithraic rituals. For example, we can be quite sure that in the ritual re-enactment of the sacred meal, the *pater* and the *heliodromus* shared the sacred meal in imitation of Mithras and Sol, while the *corax* served in a waiting capacity. This role of the *corax*, shown as an initiate wearing a raven mask, is even illustrated in the sumptuous wall painting of the sacred banquet at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum. The importance of the meal, and its apparent similarities with the Christian communal meal, was already acknowledged by Justin Martyr.[474]

If anything, one might argue that the connection between the mithraeum as a sacred space, the icon of Mithras killing the bull, and the ritual actions of the community, is even stronger, or tighter, than it is in the case of the Christian basilical church as described by Jensen. According to Roger Beck: "The distinctive space [the mithraeum] and the distinctive icon [the tauroctony], it appears, were functional necessities. One cannot conceive of the Mysteries of Mithras without them."[475] And further: "Truly to comprehend the 'meaning' of the Mysteries was to experience them by sight, hearing, and action *in the*

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[471] Ambrosiaster, *Quaest. vet. et nov. test.*, 114 (CSEL).
[472] The translation given is by Richard Gordon, see Gordon, "Reality, evocation and boundary," 24.
[473] Gordon, "Reality, evocation and boundary," 24.
[474] Justin Martyr, 1 *Apol*. 66.
[475] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 72.

context of the mithraeum and its ritual. Only thus would an extraordinary array of visual symbols 'make sense'."[476] This of course means that the meaning of the Mithraic mysteries is first and foremost produced by the individual Mithraist in the context of experiencing the icon, mentally and physically, within the mithraeum. But there are challenges. Indeed, the specific dynamics of this tripartite connection is so complex in Mithraism, active on so many levels and functioning in so many modes, that mapping the details of the relationship seems possible only in the most general terms. Still some modes in which the Mithraic icon functions in the context of the mithraeum as sacred space can be explored.

2.6.3. Art, myth and narrative in the icon and in the mithraeum

It may be assumed, I think, that there was some sort of Mithraic mythology, but we need not, indeed should not, accept uncritically the linear narrative of the version of the myth as reconstructed by Cumont.[477] Even so, though the narrative of Mithras' exploits is sometimes hard to follow on the flanking bands of the complex reliefs of the Rhine provinces and on the great murals of *Barberini* and *Marino*, there is still some sort of structure, not only in the choice of images but also in the sequence of some of the mythological scenes. For instance, the scenes featuring Mithras and Sol sharing a meal on the hide of the slain bull must be thought of as taking place after the bull is killed, while scenes depicting Mithras chasing after the still living bull obviously take place before he kills it. There are clearly many aspects of the interpretation of meaning content in Mithraic iconography and of the implications of different types of narrative to consider. It is essential, I think, not to dismiss any sort of narrative structure in Mithraic mythology completely, simply because modern scholarship has problems reconstructing such a myth. The Swedish scholar Per Lerjeryd has recently argued against the extrapolation of a Mithraic narrative mythology from the icon:

> According to my view the nature of the connection between icon and mythic text cannot be assessed with any certainty, but it should be obvious that no detailed correspondence between icon and mythic narrative can be assumed to exist, thus making it impossible to reconstruct a Mithraic mythology by

[476] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 62. My italics.
[477] See Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 130-140.

> "reading" its art. This notion runs contrary to one of the most cherished concepts in western art theory: the belief that art is readable and ultimately works according to the same principles as language. This is demonstrably false. The icon is able to send meaningful messages only if the receiver holds a degree of aprioristic knowledge.[478]

While I readily agree with Lerjeryd's observation that the "nature of the connection" between icon and myth cannot be identified with certainty, there are in fact quite a few narrative scenes depicted in Mithraic art, and these scenes should not simply be dismissed because the (re)construction of a narrative sequence is problematic. There are obvious problems with Lerjeryd's categorical dismissal of the possibility of "reading" Mithraic art, not the least being his assertion that aprioristic knowledge is a requirement for the interpretation of messages conveyed through images, which seems difficult to reconcile with his contention that such knowledge is not necessary for the receiver when the message is conveyed through "language". The implications of this stance, essentially a reductive take on some of the anthropologist Dan Sperber's arguments,[479] is nothing short of absurd, since the confluence of principle between art and language, both on a structural level and as a vehicle for conveying meaning, cannot be "demonstrably false", at least not without any sort of convincing demonstration.[480] The elements of Mithraic art can clearly be conceived of in terms of "language", and Richard Gordon, for example, found the comparison to language worth pursuing in his discussion of a Mithraic relief from Rome:

> [Although] the words available in a language at any one moment is limited, they can be combined according to the rules of the language in an almost unlimited number of ways. In the case of Mithraic art we have a limited number of 'words', a relatively large proportion of which are synonyms, in the sense that one can substitute for the other without radical shift of meaning. Yet the overall number of

[478] Lerjeryd, "Mithraismens miljöer," 264.
[479] Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*. On Sperber, symbols, and language signs, see also Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 155-162.
[480] The discussion of whether a system of symbols can be construed as language, in theoretical terms, goes back to Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, and the problem has figured in Mithraic scholarship during the last thirty years, though almost all Mithraic scholars, Lerjeryd excepted, pragmatically tend to treat the symbol system as language, though not necessarily explicitly naming it as such. The problem, and the positions for and against, have recently been summed up by Roger Beck; see Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 153-164. Beck, incidentally, concludes that Mithraic symbols can indeed be treated as language signs, and that they function as such even while retaining their powers of evocation (Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 162-63).

> possible 'sentences' (if we include frame, proportion and 'information' too as variables) is extremely large.[481]

In fact, in the case of Mithraism, the comparison between the iconography as a system of symbols and "language" is not only possible, but distinctly fruitful. For while the interpretation, or reading, of art does indeed require some sort of aprioristic knowledge, as Lerjeryd argues, so, obviously, does "language", and as systems of signs, at least, the two are comparable, the key to interpretation possibly being another mode of reading, I would suggest a contextual reading, or perhaps just another understanding of what is meant by the term "narrative structure" or indeed "language".

"Exegesis of what one might call the narrative signs in the tauroctony and other scenes is merely the retelling of the story of Mithras as it was presented to his initiates on the monuments of the mysteries,"[482] writes Beck. This is true, but these "narrative signs" need not necessarily be interpreted only as a story, or in other words, as a linear narrative. Tonio Hölscher has approached the function of narrative iconography on Roman military sarcophagi in a way which might be fruitful also for understanding the narrative in Mithraic iconography. In his fascinating analysis of the underlying semantic structures of Roman art, Hölscher presents an alternative to the understanding of the linear narrative sequence often assumed in iconographic "complexes". His example of the "non-narrative" semantic grouping of scenes on a type of Imperial Roman military sarcophagi is strikingly similar to the problems of the reading direction of the mythological scenes on the Mithraic complex reliefs, and illustrates that alternative readings must be seriously considered when dealing with iconographic complexes:

> There is a series of sarcophagi of Roman military commanders, displaying a sequence of episodes from the careers of the leading military class; the order in which they are arranged is striking from a chronological point of view: first a battle, then the ensuing subjugation and pardoning of the enemy, only then the (actually preceding) sacrifice on departure before the outbreak of war, and finally the marriage ceremony which had usually taken place at an earlier stage still. The arrangement of the scenes is not to be taken as a factual, biographical sequence, but as a systematic conception of ideal values, of the primary political virtues: *virtus, clementia, pietas* and *Concordia*.[483]

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[481] Gordon, "A new Mithraic relief from Rome," 170.
[482] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 192.
[483] Hölscher, *The Language of Images in Roman Art*, 88.

If the biographical narrative of Mithras' deeds, corresponding to the Mithras myth re-created by Cumont and Vermaseren, also follows a "non-narrative" grouping of elements, a view which I believe is the consensus in Mithraic scholarship today, we must consider other interpretative possibilities. One alternative approach is, as Gordon has suggested, to take a closer look at the dynamics of the iconography, which gives the impression "of a cult held together precisely by the power of its central icon and the dialectic between the narrative context which motivated the icon, and the ritual which turned narrative into personal experience".[484] This dialectic is, in the immediate context of this discussion, basically the dynamic between "the story" (not necessarily, as we have seen, the linear narrative of Mithras' deeds) and the re-enactment and experience of elements of "the story" by the community and its individual members.

But how do we approach this elusive dialectic? One posibility seems to be to direct an increased focus on the immediate context of the specific Mithraic community, and its experience of its icon (Mithras) in its correct place (the mithraeum). Roger Beck has recently re-formulated some of the fundamental questions of Mithraic scholarship with the experience of the individual, "the ordinary Mithraist", in mind:

> If we keep context in mind, however, our question 'what is doctrine?' might fruitfully be rephrased as follows: how, intellectually, did the ordinary Mithraist apprehend (1) the sacred environment of his 'cave' qua 'image of the universe', (2) its sacred furniture ('proportionately arranged') and especially the dominant icon of the bull-killing, (3) the ritual actions which he and his cult brothers performed therein, and (4) the esoteric relationship with cult brothers and with the deity into which he had entered as an initiate and which were played out in the ongoing life of the mithraeum? These are the familiar 'doctrinal' questions of cosmology, theology, soteriology, and hierarchy reformulated with reference to their principal stakeholder in his proper environment, the ordinary Mithraist in the Mithraic 'cave'.[485]

The interplay between the mithraeum as a sacred space and the schematically canonical placement of the bull-killing icon within it also establishes a sort of sacred perimeter, a stage, on which Mithraic sacraments are carried out and Mithraic rituals are acted out.

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[484] Gordon, "Small and miniature reproductions," 278.
[485] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 63.

There are also ambiguous echoes of Roman public rituals in the imagery of the cult, and even in the tauroctony scene itself.[486] Stephen Zwirn, dealing with narrative intention in Mithraic art, argues convincingly for a close parallel in function between the imagery of Mithraism and that of the imperial cult.[487] In his opinion, one of the most important aspects of the imagery of both cults was to re-inforce the concept of "victorious supremacy" as a core-concept in ideologies of a highly changeable nature. In comparing monuments from the two cults, he states: "Each successive monument was not merely a solution to the presentation of new or typical images of victory and familiar symbols of supremacy, but it was an innovative stage in the pursuit of the most effective way of expressing an evolving ideology."[488] Though at times rather strained, his comparison serves to underline both the "Roman-ness" of Mithraic imagery, and its heterogeneous nature.

A detailed analysis of possible ritual aspects of the Mithraic tauroctony scene as relating to official Roman religious practices is outside the scope of this study. It is, however, worth noting that the bull killed by Mithras is sometimes depicted in Roman art wearing the *dorsuale*, the dorsal band worn by Roman sacrificial animals, though most of the other details of the composition of the motif are quite unlike those of sacrifices in Roman "civic religion".[489] For instance, as Ingvild Gilhus tells us: "In the official iconography of the Roman Empire, we usually see living, healthy animals led to the altar, sometimes an animal is about to be killed but rarely a dead one in the process of being butchered. Living animals were part of the sacrificial procession that took place before the sacrifice."[490] The ideological "sacrifices" of the mystery cults like the tauroctony in Mithraism and the taurobolium of the Metroac cult in Rome, though they were probably never carried out in practice,[491] represented a new take on the traditional practices:

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[486] See especially Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer*, and Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*.
[487] Zwirn, "The intention of biographical narration."
[488] Zwirn, "The intention of biographical narration," 13.
[489] Examples of the bull with dorsal band are CIMRM 1128 and 1283. On the tauroctony as parallel to civic sacrifice, see Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 78-82, and on Mithras' killing of the bull in relation to Graeco-Roman hero-myths, see Gordon, "Authority, salvation and mystery," 60-72.
[490] Gilhus, *Animals, Gods, and Humans*, 117.
[491] See for example McLynn, "The fourth-century taurobolium", and Cosi, "Terme di Caracalla".

> These sacrifices were somehow connected with traditional practices, at the same time as they took a new direction in accordance with new religious needs and with the general religious developments in the empire. It is most important in this connection that the sacrificial animals were taken out of their traditional context and reinstalled in new cultic and hermeneutical settings. The most dramatic of these innovations was the taurobolium, and the most widespread was the mystery cult of Mithras, while the Neoplatonic creation of theurgy represented a new sacrificial practice as well as a new sacrificial theory.[492]

There is certainly a "new sacrificial theory" present in Roman Mithraism connected with the tauroctony scene, both with regard to the hermeneutical setting of the bull-killing and its representation in Mithraic art. John Hinnells, discussing the tauroctony, is quick to point out the clear connection between the image of Mithras as bull-slayer and the rituals of the Mithraic community:

> There is a clear link between the bull-slaying and ritual meal scenes, for the ritual meal is depicted taking place either over the body of the bull or at a table draped with the skin of the bull, and both are depicted occurring in the cosmic cave. As it is clear that the community enacted a ritual drama in imitation of the divine banquet, we have evidence of a direct association between the bull-slaying scene and the regular cultic life of the community. The bull-slaying scene is, in short, a cultic or ritual scene. We may in fact be able to say more about this ritual setting of the tauroctony. In Roman cultic practice sacrificial animals were decorated for the ritual procession with belts. On a number of Mithraic reliefs the bull is shown wearing just such a belt. The painted Mithraea also show the bull as a white sacrificial animal. Clearly, then, the tauroctony is a ritual scene depicting an act of sacrifice.[493]

But "when Mithras kills the bull," according to Jas Elsner, "he stabs him in the neck with a knife – quite unlike the traditional norms of bull sacrifice".[494] In actual fact, Elsner argues, none of the iconographical elements of the tauroctony reflect "the actualities of ancient sacrifice or the norms of its representation: it is an icon constructed for a symbolic and mystical system accessible only to those initiated into the Mithraic mysteries."[495] But there is more to the icon than the myth of Mithras' life and reflections of Roman sacrifice.

The icon in the apsis of the mithraeum, commanding the view of any who entered the room and functioning as the focal point of the assembled community clearly also had a didactic function. We have,

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[492] Gilhus, *Animals, Gods, and Humans*, 124-125.
[493] Hinnells, "Reflections on the bull-slaying scene," 304-305.
[494] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 206.
[495] Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 207.

of course, no idea whether Mithraic doctrine in fourth century Rome was simple, complex, or both, dependent on the degree of initiation of the members of the group. Indeed, we cannot even be sure that there was a Mithraic doctrine as such. Still, the transmission of the central ideas and concepts of the community, however simple, must have benefited greatly from the images of Mithraic art. As we have seen, these images, and especially the icon of the tauroctonous Mithras, were certainly more than decoration, and this holds true on a didactic level as well.

The imagery in the mithraeum had several functions, and the functions of the art in relation to ritual, myth, sacrifice, and even astrological models, have been widely recognized and discussed, but the image must surely also have served a didactic purpose, relating ethical teachings and doctrine to the initiated, perhaps varying according to the grade of the viewer. Geir Hellemo has argued that just this didactic function was of central importance in Christian apsidal art in Italy in late antiquity, and especially in the way the iconography related to the ritual meal in Christianity, the Eucharist:

> As the celebration of the Eucharist involves complicated chains of thought, the participants need all the help they can get in order to understand the depths of meaning contained in the act. To the overall synthesis of the various chains of thought which contribute to the meaning of the Eucharist, the visible pictorial programs are of the greatest value. Imagery's most important quality is to recapitulate in synthesis that which words and ritual acts take such time to present. Thus, all additional elements entering the liturgy as it progresses can be retained by the congregation. In our opinion, apsidal imagery unifies and summarizes the central content of the Eucharistic prayer. By doing this it furnishes a certain support for members of the congregation in their participation and understanding of the ritual celebration itself.[496]

According to Robin Jensen, these images worked in the didactic mode; they "assisted the memory by giving an event, a rite, or a story a particular visual clue, which over time affected, shaped, and reinforced key aspects, climactic moments, or core meanings of those events, rituals, and readings".[497] In my opinion, the same may well hold true for the extensively decorated mithraea, in relation to all three major structural elements of Mithraism – the mithraeum, the icon (and other Mithraic images), and the hierarchical initiatory structure of the Mithraic communities. These elements need to be integrated into the

[496] Hellemo, *Adventus Domini*, 281.
[497] Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen*, 87.

framework of the analysis of the context of any given Mithraic community, in this case the Mithraic communities of fourth century Rome. Returning to one of the main questions posed in the opening section of this chapter, we must deal with the subject of identifying the continuities and changes in Mithraic art in fourth century Rome, and by implication getting further insight into the peculiarities of Mithraic imagery, and primarily the main cult icon, in this context.

2.7. Change and continuity

"A regional preference for a particular variation or motif is important; it shows that mithraists had a sense of community identity, and that Mithraism was sufficiently flexible for regional iconographic variation to occur", writes Alan Schofield.[498] Flexibility and variation seem to be the catchwords here, and with regard to the subject of change and continuity, Mithraic iconography must consequently be considered as a varied whole, at least on the general level, in the sense that, though variation is the norm, the mithraeum itself with all its components, including the icon as well as other Mithraic artwork and items, must be understood as a symbolic universe, or perhaps rather as a universe (or language) of symbols. The implication of this understanding is that the individual symbol-elements need not be present in each and every image, but can be inferred from the other visual elements. In some instances, however, this tends to create a high degree of semantic openness, which in turn leads to a devaluation of more or less "official" interpretations. This could be likened to the process the Dutch scholar H.J. Adriaanse describes as "decanonization":

> This [decanonization] is a very new term whose meaning can be constructed in various ways. I will take decanonization here mostly to refer to gradual processes of invalidation of an extant canon. These processes do not necessarily lead to the complete disappearance of the canon in question; a partial undermining or obsolescence may be the result as well.[499]

[498] Schofield, "Iconographic Variation," 61-62.
[499] Adriaanse, "Canonicity and the Problem of the Golden Mean," 314.

In Mithraism, or at least from what we can surmise of the cult through our incomplete understanding of its iconography, we are probably dealing with a visual canon that has been orally transmitted. The structure of the iconographical canon is related to the interplay between the "canonical" iconographical motifs the mithraeum and the viewer. Any interpretation of this structure, essentially of the language of Mithraic art as a system of symbols, is, however, also dependent on the latent openness of the semantic field(s) of Mithraic iconography and the inherent multivalence, or polysemic nature, of the Mithraic symbols and symbol languages. It is important to stress at this point that these symbol languages, or systems of symbols, are not to be understood as fixed structures, in the sense of an established canon of sanctioned "texts" but rather as a grouping of signs commonly understood, or at least open to interpretation, by all the Mithraic communities.[500]

This system of symbols, the iconographical canon, became "loose" enough or inclusive enough in Mithraism during the era of the civil wars in the mid-third century to allow for a variety of interpretations of the Mithraic core concepts: the mithraeum, the icon, and the grade hierarchy. This in turn would seem to have led to a greater degree of geographical variation in the Mithraic material. Quite possibly, the increased variation in the choice of images was influenced by a decrease in empire-wide mobility and by the general growth in popularity of solar religions and solar symbolism, leading for example even to such shared sanctuaries between Mithras and the official cult of the Sun as the one described by archaeologist Varbinka Naydenova in modern Bulgaria.[501] The official adoption by the emperors of solar attributes and epithets was obviously also quite influential. Indeed, different iconographical representations of the "ideology" of Solarity served to give it increased popularity, and probably importance, in the last phases of Roman Mithraism.

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[500] The system of symbols is eloquently defined by Roger Beck: "By 'system' I mean, not some fixed and static encoding, the decoding of which will yield the 'meaning' of the mysteries, but a complex and fluid interrelation of the elements of the mysteries, both visual and performative, effected by the initiate himself, as he attunes his interior mental representations to the shared cultic representations of icon, word, and ritual. By 'symbols', it should be clear, I mean much more than just the visual symbolism to be traced in the iconography of the monuments." Beck, *Beck on Mithraism*, 45.

[501] "Ces phénomènes montrent que les deux cultes non seulement existaient parallèlement, mais qu'ils avaient une quantité de traits communs et des rites assez proches. A un certain moment on ne faisait plus différence entre les deux cultes et on leur rendait hommage dans un même sanctuaire." Naydenova, "Un sanctuaire syncrétiste," 228.

During the fourth century, at least in the more peripheral provinces like Syria, the openness of the semantic fields associated with Mithraic iconography seems to become great enough, inclusive enough, and flexible enough, to allow for new motifs that are strikingly different both in style, execution, and as far as we can tell, also in meaning content, from the earlier repertoire of more or less canonical motifs. A recently discovered mithraeum at Huarte in Syria, for example, has divulged several iconographical motifs previously unknown in Roman Mithraism.[502] These "new motifs" can, however, also be interpreted to fit with the "old". It is not necessarily "meanings" that change, but rather increased latitude, not only with regard to "possible meanings", but also in the freedom of iconographic execution. In Rome, however, Mithraic iconography seems to have remained remarkably stable throughout the last two centuries of the life of the cult, and it is hard to trace any general stylistic changes from the third to the fourth centuries in Mithraic art from Rome.

The statistical models of third and fourth century Mithraic communities in Rome discussed in chapter 1 support this point, and it seems there is even some numismatic evidence to support the argument for stability, suggesting not only possible growth in the membership of the cult, but also, connected with the growth, an "opening up" of the cult in the fourth century. According to Eberhard Sauer:

> It appears now that coins were deposited on the temple floor by the votaries themselves. The scale of offerings compares favourably with sanctuaries open to the public, possibly suggesting that Mithraism opened up in Late Antiquity. While some temples were abandoned earlier, all those with numerous coin offerings continue until the late fourth, some presumably even into the fifth century.[503]

The question of the relative size of, and possible growth of, the Mithraic communities in Rome in the fourth century is dealt with both in chapter 1, concerning Mithraic demographics from a statistical viewpoint, and in Chapter 3 in the context of the specific Mithraic communities, but at this point it is important to note that the demographic material does at least not contradict the notion of continuity in the Mithraic communities and their art.

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[502] See Gawlikowski, "Hawarti Preliminary Report", "Hawarte 1999", "Un nouveau mithraeum récemment découvert à Huarté près d'Apamée", and "Le mithraeum de Haouarte (Apamène)".
[503] Sauer, "Coins in Mithraea," 343.

Local styles of Mithraic art have their most visible proponents in the regionally based "typologies" of the complex icons, but for the greater majority of Mithraic icons, it is rather the find spot which determines their geographical provenience. Recent analyses of regional tauroctony scenes concentrating on the ratio of local manufacture versus imports suggest, however, that both means of acquiring icons, local production as well as imports, were equally acceptable. The parity of import/export with the manufacture of local types supports the argument that there was indeed quite extensive circulation of main icon types, such as for instance the tauroctonies of the Danubian type, throughout the Empire.[504] However, Gordon too seems to favor the conclusion that the unique iconography of the fourth century Huarte murals represents, first and foremost, local preferences:

> On sait toutefois que le culte de Mithra s'est adapté aux besoins locaux dans les provinces nord-ouest de l'Empire, en Dalmatie et dans les Mésies: les fresques d'Hūarte suggèrent qu'il en était de même en Syrie. La croyance au pouvoir des démons aurait suggéré une extension de la dimension morale du culte, mais aussi des possibilités nouvelles d'imaginer les activités salvatrices du dieu romain. De plus, il est bien possible qu'une des inspirations de ce renouvellement ait été des contacts avec des traditions iraniennes qui passaient par Nisibis ou par un autre point d'intersection culturelle.[505]

Although the main cult icon of the Huarte mithraeum is lost, the preserved flanking murals seem to have included all the most common of the side-scenes, as well as a number of scenes so far completely unknown.[506] Most of these images seem to refer to the battle between good and evil, but some may also be interpreted as highlighting the solar aspects, like for example the motif of the demonic heads pierced by what would seem to be spears or solar rays.[507] To be sure, Gawlikowski interprets all these images as reflecting the fight of good vs. evil in primarily Zoroastrian terms, but equally important in his presentation, and perhaps more relevant for a postulated fourth century style, is the light vs. dark dichotomy which highlights the solarity of Mithras:

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[504] See for instance the ratio of imports versus local reliefs in Dacia in this period, Sicoe, "Lokalproduktion und Importe."
[505] Gordon, "Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine," 115-116.
[506] See Gawlikowski, "Hawarti Preliminary Report", "Hawarte 1999", "Un nouveau mithraeum récemment découvert à Huarté près d'Apamée", and "Le mithraeum de Haouarte (Apamène)".
[507] Gawlikowski, "Le mithraeum de Haouarte (Apamène)," 187-188. There is no consensus on what these "rays" are, but in my view, they appear to be solar rays.

> Malgré l'absolue nouveauté de toute cette scène, il ne semble pas douteux que la place forte assaillie par le Soleil soit le siège des forces démoniaques. La porte des Enfers et les monstres qui la défendent font évidemment penser au combat éternel du Bien et du Mal, de la Lumière et des Ténèbres, qui fonde la religion iranienne au moins depuis Zoroastre.[508]

This increased focus on the light/solar attributes also seems consonant with what we know of fourth century mithraic inscriptions. Lions too seem to be especially important in the Huarte iconography, something which would again mirror the importance of the initiatory degree of Leo in the Mithraic fourth century inscriptions from Rome, especially those belonging to the family of Nonius Victor Olympius.[509]

The Lion is a creature of light and fire in Mithraic iconography and symbology,[510] but in addition to Gawlikowski's explanation of the cosmic fight between the good/light/fiery Lions and the evil/dark demons, it is also important to bear in mind that Lions were also supposed to cleanse their brothers by "consuming" them, as is reported by epigraphy from the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum in Rome:

Accipe thuricremos pater accipe sancte Leones,
Per quos thuradamus per quos consumimur ipsi [511]

Father, receive those who burn incense, Holy one, receive the Lions,
Through whom we offer (the) incense, through/by whom we are ourselves consumed.[512]

Concerning these lines, Gordon observes that, according to the "Graeco-Roman-Egyptian encyclopaedic knowledge about lions … the most important [connections between the words in the inscription] are the links between lions and fire, and lions as moral agents."[513] Thus, with the increased importance given to lions and *Leones* in the fourth century, it is possible also to suggest an increasing preoccupation with ethics, though the actual hard evidence for this is very scant. We should also note that the importance of

[508] Gawlikowski, "Le mithraeum de Haouarte (Apamène)," 187-188.
[509] V 399-406.
[510] See Gordon, "Reality, evocation and boundary," especially 32-37.
[511] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 224-232. The lines in question are numbers 16 and 17 on the lower layer of wall-paintings at the mithraeum.
[512] Translation by Richard Gordon, see Gordon, "Reality, evocation and boundary," 36.
[513] Gordon, "Reality, evocation and boundary," 37.

the Sun and of the Lion also fits extremely well with Beck's astrological interpretation of the tauroctony as representing Mithras as the sun in Leo: "…Mithras is indeed a celestial body, namely the Sun (hardly a controversial finding!), and that the tauroctony proclaims him *inter alia* the *Sun in Leo* and, since time and space in the heavens are fungible dimensions, the *Sun in the season of Leo*."[514]

Considering the icons and other Mithraic images from Rome, it at first seems that any temporal variation in this material is so small as to be almost negligible. In Rome, we are essentially left with the following: Most Roman tauroctonies are tentatively dated to the second and third centuries, though we must imagine that many, perhaps even a majority, remained in use throughout the fourth century. The tauroctonies not found in an archaeological context, i.e. in the excavation of a mithraeum, are next to impossible to date, and many of the tauroctonies that have been dated, have been so on the basis of very weak stylistic evidence. Thus we can establish that:

1) There was a degree of regional preference in the tauroctonies in Rome, where the main bull-killing scene was most often represented without any of the accompanying side-scenes. Very few of these so-called complex reliefs have been found in Rome and its environs – though an exception to this seems to be the distinct preference for extensive wall paintings and tauroctony murals as icons in Rome and central Italy, for example the magnificent tauroctony murals found in the *Barberini*, *Marino*, and *Capua* mithraea. The Roman mithraea of *Santa Prisca* and *Nummii Albini* also had extensive murals accompanying the main icon which was of the "exploded" type discussed above. The icons executed as wall paintings, at least the murals of *Barberini* and *Marino*, seem to have been mainly of the "complex" type in the sense that they had side-registers featuring scenes from the "life of Mithras" on vertical bands flanking the main tauroctony composition.
2) Although the paucity of evidence complicates the issue, it is clear that the painted plaster icons with painted backdrops and accompanying "cultic scenes", either in painting or small-scale

[514] Beck, *Beck on Mithraism*, 236.

sculpture, are found in several of the Roman mithraea in use in the fourth century. These tauroctonies that I have termed "exploded" icons seem to be the only type that could be interpreted as a uniquely Roman version of the icon. This regional preference for "exploded" icons apparent in Rome is quite different from the other two main geographical categories of cult icon most often discussed in Mithraic scholarship, the icons of the Rhine and Danube provinces, and consequently, the corpus of Roman icons seem to have distinctive regional flavor.

3) No systematic temporal variations or preference can be detected in the Roman icons, and the iconographical scheme of the main bull-killing scene appears to have remained stable throughout the life of the cult, at least in the city of Rome. Since there is no evidence for a radical change in Mithraic iconography in the fourth century, we must conclude that if there was indeed such a change, namely from "original" to "senatorial" Mithraism in fourth century Rome, corroboration from other sources is needed in order to show that a re-imagining and re-interpretation of existing imagery took place. It would seem that the composition of the elements of the main icon itself was "canonical' enough for the "second and third century style" to be the norm also in the fourth century, though this does not of course preclude a change in the range of possible interpretations or re-interpretations of the icon. The stability of the image does tend to suggest the absence of radical re-interpretation, however, especially since, as we have seen, even the expected changes in "stylistic fashion" are absent, or at the very least downplayed, in the iconographical material from Rome, and tend instead towards continuity and conservatism. This point seems to make any kind of "stylistic" dating highly uncertain, but a high degree of "doctrinal" as well as iconographic stability is not unreasonable given the almost remarkable conformity of the icons from Rome. Though stylistic details that can be traced to general temporal changes in Roman art do occur, these are almost always small variations of an almost negligible nature.

Mithraic art and iconography from Rome and central Italy that was still in use in the fourth century, especially the "exploded" icons and the complex murals, seems to highlight the importance of ritual

action, and of initiation, as well as of the dialectic between the individual Mithraic initiate and his immediate community of brothers, the icon, and the mithraeum as sacred space. There is also a tendency in the Roman icons and other Roman Mithraic art for the so-called "mythological" material to be less in evidence, mainly because of the overall lack of narrative panels on the icons, but in the final analysis, this point is not supported by enough concrete evidence to allow a definitive general conclusion.

Furthermore, with the corroborating evidence of epigraphy, the importance of the grades of *Pater patrum*, *pater*, and *leo* seems to be highlighted in the Roman material, especially after the mid-third century, though this is in large part due to the not unproblematic inscriptions of the *Phrygianum* and the inscriptions connected to the family of Nonius Victor Olympius.[515] This preference supports two important assumptions of recent Mithraic scholarship, namely the importance of the structure of familial hierarchy, as reflected in the grade of *pater*, first suggested by Gordon,[516] elaborated by Merkelbach[517] and Clauss[518], and recently applied to fourth century Mithraism by Griffith,[519] and the highlighting of the grade *leo* in Mithraic epigraphy. Together with the evidence for the increased importance of solar symbolism in late antique Rome, the latter finding gives credence to Roger Beck's recent suggestion of the concept of the "Sun-in-leo" as one of the fundamental ideological axioms of Mithraism.[520]

The above considerations seem to have been especially important in late antique Rome, but are also abundantly represented in the material from the late second and the third centuries, and this suggests to me a higher degree of continuity in the material than has so far been accepted. Further, a detailed study of the main Mithraic cult icons of the mithraea in use in the fourth century in Rome shows that temporal variation in the Mithraic art, at least in Rome and central Italy, is hard to demonstrate. On the other hand, there does seem to be clear geographical preferences for types of main icons. If any temporal trend or preference is to be registered, it might be a rather vague preference for a greater degree of "fluidity" or

[515] Both these sets of inscriptions will be discussed in chapter 3.
[516] Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society".
[517] Merkelbach, *Mithras*.
[518] Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien*, and *Cultores Mithrae*.
[519] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence", and "Mithraism".
[520] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, but see also many of the articles collected in *Beck on Mithraism*.

"ambiguity" in the iconography. Having dealt with the mithraea and the icons in use in fourth century Rome, this study will now examine the Mithraic communities of the city in greater detail. In the following chapter, it will become apparent that many of the same patterns and trends can be discerned in Mithraic demographics and within the social hierarchical structures of the Mithraic communities of late antique Rome.

Chapter 3:

The Mithraic communities of fourth century Rome

…there are more sensible and less sensible solutions to the problems and more plausible and less plausible pictures of the Mysteries. But necessarily our pictures are no more than possible models of reality; none of them will be its unique and true portrait. It is perhaps salutary to admit that we are in the business of building our own myths of Mithras.

Roger Beck[521]

This final chapter deals with the Mithraic communities of fourth century Rome, that elusive category of religious community which, owing to the fragmentary nature of the archaeological material and the total absence of epistolary evidence, often seems so hard to discern. In the following, the Mithraic communities of the late antique city are discussed in their varying contexts through a synthetic analysis drawing on the evidence for these groups examined in the previous two chapters, as well as the epigraphic evidence for late antique Mithraic communities in Rome which is discussed in the opening part of this chapter. In chapter 1, the mithraea – the sacred spaces of the Mithraic cult in Rome – were discussed in detail, as I tried to shed light on general questions of topography and demographics and considered some important details concerning each of the sixteen mithraea in use in Rome in the fourth century. In chapter 2, the visual expressions of the cult, primarily with regard to the main cult icon of each community, were analyzed with a view towards investigating the issue of change or continuity in the imagery and symbol-language of the Mithraic communities of Rome. In the present chapter, the main challenge will be to apply the data from the preceding two chapters, as well as from Mithraic epigraphy, to a synthetic analysis of Mithraism in Rome, with a focus on the actual communities of the late antique city.

[521] Beck, "Mithraism since Franz Cumont," 2058.

A great deal of information pertaining to the individual Mithraic communities in Rome can, as we have seen, be gleaned from the mithraea. For instance, the data obtained from the mithraea help us model the most likely size of each community based on the size of the cult room, and the relative social catchments of the different congregations based on the location of the mithraea and on the quantity and quality of its internal decoration. It is also possible to draw a rough demographic sketch of Mithraism in Rome in the fourth century based on statistical models. Interpretation of the artifacts and art of the cult can provide corroborating information, especially concerning the issue of change and continuity. Furthermore, the iconographical motifs which the communities of Rome found to be especially compelling also reflect communal values and issues of doctrine and hierarchy. Finally, Mithraic epigraphy divulges additional insights into the structure and life of the Mithraic communities, providing us with the names and social status of some of the initiates, as well as illustrating the importance of the initiatory grade hierarchy and highlighting bonds of family and of friendship.

The first section of this chapter deals with the controversial issue of late antique Roman epigraphy in general and fourth century Mithraic epigraphy in particular. Section 2 evaluates the social locations of the Mithraic communities in Rome in this period, while section 3 examines and contrasts Mithraism with contemporary religious groups in the city, in particular the Christian communities. Section 4 re-examines the issue of secrecy, while the Mithraic hierarchical grade structure is discussed in relation to the Roman social model of the *familia* and the system of patronage in section 5.

3.1. The epigraphical evidence for the Mithraic communities of fourth century Rome

The analyses of the mithraea of Rome and their icons have highlighted the themes of stability and growth in the Roman Mithraic communities of the fourth century, but are these themes reflected in the epigraphic and textual evidence? The epigraphic evidence is of great importance in Mithraic studies, both from a qualitative and from a quantitative viewpoint. Consequently, statistical studies of the typology and distribution of the Mithraic inscriptions, as well as detailed contextual analyses of the inscriptions themselves, provide vital corroboration for the information obtained from the distribution and decoration

of the Mithraic sanctuaries. The study of Mithraic epigraphy is not without problems, however, and a brief consideration of some of these is in order at this point.

Latin epigraphy, or more correctly in this context, Roman epigraphy, is a catch-all category for Latin texts, though sometimes including Greek words and phrases, inscribed on a variety of materials, with stone being the most common, or at least best represented in the extant archaeological material. The text itself is either incised, with letters cut into stone, metal, or wood, or it is made up of cut-out letters that are fastened onto a background. In some cases, like graffiti or dipinti, writings can be executed with paints or inks, usually on plastered walls. When dealing with epigraphic evidence, both in general and with regard to the individual inscriptions, we must remain aware of the limitations of this category of evidence. The most important consideration is how representative the material in question is, since economy, status, gender, purpose, and location, put quite strict limits on who was able to put up an inscription. Ramsey MacMullen also includes the force of habit among the limitations of epigraphy as evidence for ancient history. "It should never be forgotten", MacMullen argues, "that the habit and the price of an inscription, both, were needed to make a mark on the surviving record; and both were lacking among the great majority of the population. The record on which we depend almost entirely in forming general conclusions is itself sadly partial."[522] Consequently, before discussing the Mithraic inscriptions of fourth century Rome, we must consider some general parameters for, and some reservations concerning the application of, epigraphic evidence.

When evaluating the corpus of Roman epigraphy, economical factors must be considered, as the commission of an inscription incised in stone or bronze was exceedingly costly, and only those who were at least moderately wealthy could afford to do so. Inscriptions in the form of graffiti and dipinti were more affordable, but because these types of inscriptions seldom survive,[523] we are left with mostly a record of the well-to-do in Roman society. This state of affairs means that statistics based on epigraphical evidence

[522] MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 118.
[523] At least that is true of graffiti and dipinti from the north-western Mediterranean. This has mainly to do with climatic considerations, but in some very few cases, this type of perishable epigraphy have survived even in these areas.

does not accurately reflect the socio-economic makeup of the groups in question, in this case the Mithraic communities of Rome. Furthermore, certain types of less permanent inscriptions, mainly graffiti, which we know, based on the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum, were an important and highly visible feature of civic life in the Roman cities. Dipinti and graffiti denoting grade names have been recovered from the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum in Rome, but without this find, Mithraic scholars would in most cases have assumed that the practice of recording the achievement of a new grade in graffiti was confined to the east, in this case mainly Syria, because of the large amount of polychrome graffiti recovered from the mithraeum at *Dura-Europos*.[524] The imbalance of inscriptions along socio-economic and typological lines might even explain the overrepresentation of inscriptions related to the highest grade in the mysteries, the *pater*.

We must also consider that inscriptions were seldom put up by women,[525] and that few were set up by slaves and the lower ranks of the army.[526] Thus, in the statistics of Mithraic epigraphy, centurions are overrepresented in inscriptions in a military context, whereas the lower ranks seem to have usually erected inscriptions from a joint budget. These factors make the demographic patterns of the Mithraic cult in the Roman Empire more problematic than is usually accepted, and the statistical models based on epigraphical data must be treated with caution when discussing Mithraism from the point of view of the surviving Mithraic inscriptions.

It is often argued that Mithraism was a soldier's cult, though the statistics based on epigraphic data would seem to suggest otherwise.[527] But in fact only a small proportion of Mithraic inscriptions can with certainty be traced to active military personnel, and out of these, high-ranking soldiers, such as centurions, show up with a much higher proportional frequency in the corpus of epigraphy than the lower ranks. Taking the above points regarding epigraphically based statistics into consideration, this higher frequency of centurions is to be expected, and this overrepresentation does not necessarily mean that an

[524] See Francis, "Mithraic graffiti from Dura-Europos," 424-445.
[525] MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 116.
[526] Inscriptions by slaves and low-ranking military personnel are, however, present to a certain degree in the Mithraic epigraphic record, see Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 270-273.
[527] See Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 267-270.

overwhelming majority of Mithraists who were affilitated with the army were in fact officers. This argument is just as applicable to the obvious statistical underrepresentation of the rural poor, freed slaves, and other low-income or economically marginalized groups in the corpus of epigraphic evidence. Furthermore, the same reservation should be kept in mind with regard to the question of Mithraism being exclusively for men, and although the corpus of epigraphic evidence does not include many, if indeed any women among the Mithraists, the possibility of some sort of female presence in the life of the cult cannot be dismissed out of hand. This is not the place, however, for a discussion of the place of women in the Mithraic mysteries.[528]

After these cautions against the dangers inherent in models based on the epigraphic evidence, I still wish to draw attention to some general trends in Mithraic epigraphy of the late empire. First we must consider the general changes in recovered inscriptions from the second through the fourth centuries throughout the empire as a whole. Comparing Mithraic inscriptions with trends in other material categories, MacMullen notes that: "Representation of Mithraism in inscriptions is numerically similar to that of all inscriptions of every sort, throughout the west. About a third of the Mithraic dedicants are to be found in Italy; but so is nearly a third of the *Corpus*. A bare majority of the Italian come from Rome; but that is just the ratio within the *Corpus* overall."[529] Further, on Mithraism's geographical spread with regard to the evidence of the inscriptions, MacMullen notes that:

> The weight of a given cult is quite impossible to guess within close limits. Taking account, however, of a possible undervaluation in the east, where its members may have been too poor to put their prayers on stone, and of overvaluation in Italy and the northern frontier zones, where epigraphic habits certainly favored them very greatly, we should no doubt rank Mithraism among the two or three dozen better-known cults of the Empire.[530]

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[528] The exclusion of females, and indeed "femaleness" in general, in the Mithras cult is usually taken for granted in Mithraic scholarship, and has been since Franz Cumont stated that, "whilst the majority of the Oriental cults accorded to women a considerable role in their churches, and sometimes even a preponderating one, finding in them ardent supporters of the faith, Mithra forbade their participation in his Mysteries and so deprived himself of the incalculable assistance of these propagandists (Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 173)." Few scholars have discussed the issue at length, but three recent examples with quite conflicting opinions are; Gordon, "Reality evocation and boundary", David, "The Exclusion of Women", and Griffith, "Women in the Mithraic Cult."

[529] MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 119.

[530] MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 119.

With regard to temporal variation in the material, it must be noted that research into Latin epigraphy in general[531] points to a gradual rise in the amount of recorded inscriptions per year during the second century, reaching a peak under the Severans, before plummeting during the empire-wide unrest in the third century. The early fourth century again saw a rise in the number of recorded inscriptions. These general trends also seem, at first glance, to fit very well with our corpus of Mithraic inscriptions but, contrary to the commonly held opinion in Mithraic scholarship, this increase was actually quite dramatic in the case of Mithraic epigraphy from Rome. Mithraic inscriptions also seem to reach a peak in frequency during the late second and early third centuries, while the number of inscriptions dated to the rest of the third century is conspicuously lower. At first glance, the frequency of inscriptions is seemingly lower still in the fourth century, and Manfred Clauss states that: "Die meisten der erhaltenen inschriftlichen Zeugnisse stammen, wie eingangs erwähnt, aus der Zeit zwischen 150 und 250. Insgesamt ist für die zweite Hälfte des 3. Jahrhunderts das überlieferte Material spärlich; der Mithras-Kult bildet hierbei keine Ausnahme."[532] However, this conclusion must be seriously revised, since, in this case, there is more to the selection and representativeness of the material than meets the eye.

Manfred Clauss argued in his *Cultores Mithrae* that roughly 18% of the 1003 inscriptions he deems Mithraic can be dated, and that these inscriptions mirror the general epigraphic trend to a certain degree, though Clauss reached this conclusion only by downplaying some of the evidence crucial to the present study. Clauss' table of the datable Mithraic inscriptions lists 69 inscriptions for the second century, 98 for the third, and 18 for the fourth century. Moreover, breaking down the numbers even further, Clauss identifies a total of 83 inscriptions for the period 193-250, while there are only 18 for the rest of the third century, and, as noted above, only 18 for the entire fourth century.[533] This breakdown would seem to corroborate MacMullen's claim concerning the growth of Mithraism that "the number of [Mithraic] epigraphic testimonies begins its steep rise from the earliest, up to a point a little past A.D. 200. As we

[531] See MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 115: *table of Latin inscriptions of the empire*. MacMullen's source for these data is Mrozek, 115.
[532] Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 258. Clauss also presents a statistical breakdown of all known and datable Mithraic inscriptions in tabular form; see Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 12.
[533] Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 12.

have seen, however, the correspondence is illusory and the rise means nothing, because all inscriptions of every sort rise equally."[534] But this postulated close relationship between the "statistical appearance" of Latin epigraphy in general, and Mithraic epigraphy, is considerably more problematic when it comes to Mithraism in the fourth century.

Two important factors must be considered at this point: the question of a statistical decline in Mithraic epigraphy in the period from the mid-to-late third century and until the late fourth century, and the place of the late fourth century inscriptions of the Roman *clarissimi* in the corpus of late antique Mithraic epigraphy in general. At first glance, there seems to be evidence for a dramatic decline in Mithraic epigraphy from the late third century, with even fewer extant inscriptions datable to the whole of the fourth century, but this picture is skewed by several factors. Firstly, only 185 inscriptions out of the 1003 inscriptions that Clauss considered Mithraic can be securely dated,[535] and these 185 inscriptions are hardly a large enough number for reliable statistics. Even more to the point, the dearth of inscriptions in the late third and in the fourth century corresponds with a general decrease in the Roman epigraphic habit, from which point of view the percentage of Mithraic inscriptions vis-à-vis the corpus of Roman inscriptions in general remains stable, as both corpora seem to be following the same curve of statistical distribution.

Furthermore, this point also raises the question of the representativeness of the Mithraic inscriptions from fourth century Rome, of which there are, relatively speaking, quite a few. In appendix 3 to *Cultores Mithrae* Clauss in fact lists 17 persons by name that can be securely connected with Mithraism in the time of what he calls the *Heidnische Restauration* in Rome.[536] Some of these names appear on several inscriptions, allowing us to at the least double the number of fourth century Mithraic inscriptions. As should be evident, the increase in input numbers, if we choose to count these inscriptions as Mithraic, alters the statistics dramatically by showing a marked increase in the number of Mithraic inscriptions compared to the statistical distribution of Roman epigraphy in general in this period. But what can these

[534] MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 123.
[535] Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 12.
[536] Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 295-297.

statistics really tell us about Mithraism in fourth century Rome? According to a recent article by Christian Witschel:

> Quantitative considerations play a primary role with epigraphic sources; that is, we must always ask: Can a statistical evaluation that shows the distribution of extant inscriptions in the form of a curve actually offer conclusions about economic and demographic changes? …The absence of inscriptions seems not (necessarily) to have constituted any reflection of social, economic or demographic events. On the contrary, the decrease in inscriptions (which, by the way, assumed quite varied forms in the individual regions) should perhaps be explained with a change of mentality that now led to other, often more temporary forms of public representation, in lieu of *tituli* carved in stone.[537]

So we are left basically with two important considerations. The first is that the question of the criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of inscriptions in our statistics is crucial for any quantitative interpretation of Mithraic epigraphy from Rome during the fourth century. The second and most important consideration is that the quantitative interpretation of the fourth century inscriptions can only be used as corroboration for a qualitative analysis of the actual inscriptions in question. In relation to the larger issue of the confluence of epigraphic silence and religious decline, Eberhard Sauer presents a pointed and compelling comparison:

> If inscriptions in general first rise in number and then sharply decline [in the mid-third century] then this is certainly evidence for a major cultural change, but is it evidence that the oriental religions or paganism as a whole was in decline? The argument is as flawed as it would be [to] claim that the age of cathedrals in the high Middle Ages marks the apogee of European Christianity as opposed to periods of religious doubts and crisis before and after – or that today the religiosity of a country can be measured in the number or scale of religious monuments recently erected, totally irrespective of the economic resources and irrespective of whether there is peace or war.[538]

While epigraphy, as a source, has obvious limitations, most notably that fluctuations in the epigraphic "habit" are hard to predict with any degree of certainty. Furthermore, it is an important fact that epigraphy mainly records the activities of the upper economical segments of Roman society, while those of both lesser means and lower literacy levels leave fewer marks in this type of material. Still, the

[537] Witschel, "Re-evaluating the Roman West," 257.
[538] Sauer, *Religious Hatred*, 121-122.

epigraphic evidence for Mithraism in Rome does shed some light on the inner workings of the cult communities as well as providing raw data for statistically based demographic models. Mithraic inscriptions from Rome, both the inscribed altars of the *Phrygianum* and the initiatory inscriptions of the family of Nonius Victor Olympius,[539] attest the participation of the *clarissimi* in the active life of the cult in the mid-to-late fourth century, and the latter group of inscriptions also serves to corroborate the argument that the full range of known Mithraic grades were still in active use in this period.

In addition to the chronology provided by the dates recorded in these inscriptions, the content and wording amply illustrates how important the cult hierarchy and the parallel structure of the *familia* were for the Mithraic communities of Rome, as well as the prominent place ascribed to the traditional Roman virtues of *fides*, *pietas*, and *amicitia*. Granted, these are inscriptions describing mostly the actions and motivations of the *clarissimi*, but the information imparted by them fit very well with the traditional model of Mithraism as socially conform and sharing similarities with the fundamental social mechanism of Roman society – the system of *patronage*.

A final consideration is that the Mithraic inscriptions were generally not meant to be seen by outsiders – that is to say that the grade-graffiti found for example at *Santa Prisca* and at *Dura-Europos* were meant to be seen only by the initiates themselves. This carries some important implications as to the form and the function of the epigraphy. Since the grade-graffiti, the dipinti celebrating the initiations into the different grades of the hierarchy, almost always mention only one name for each initiate, the social catchments of the community membership might actually not be reflected in this material at all, though some evidence for ethnicity and socio-economic status may be derived from the names of the individuals.

Thus, while the expensive, quite formal, and somewhat more public inscriptions of the *Phrygianum* altars reveal the dedicants as *clarissimi*, social status did not neccesarily figure as prominently in the more informal record of the graffiti. Indeed, it is likely that senatorial rank, or lack of such, would not have been recorded in paint at all, since this type of graffiti was clearly intended to be seen only by the community themselves, all of which would have been aware of the social status of the

[539] V 400-406.

other members of the group. Unfortunately, very few examples of "grade graffiti" have been preserved, and most of the graffiti that have been recorded, have not been properly published,[540] leaving us in the dark on several important issues, such as for example the possibility that the names recovered from the inscriptions were cultic names, used and recorded only in the mithraeum, and that these names may have been chosen or awarded based on criteria other than socio-economic status and ethnicity. This seems, according to Vermaseren, to have been the case at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, and his conclusion is worth quoting at length:

> All the names on both layers of the S. Prisca Mithraeum could have been cult names and all have a significance coinciding with one of Hatt's divisions [of Metroac cult names].[541] Though there are certain Syrian influences in the Mithraeum, the names are either Latin or Greek, yet it is hardly likely that the members of the second Mithraeum were only of Greek or Oriental origin and those of the first Mithraeum only of Latin origin. Moreover in both periods the Mithraists of this sanctuary tried to adapt characteristic Roman rites to their cult, and the author(s) of the lines of verse on the first layer of paintings used Latin. All these facts together make it highly probable that the names were in fact cult names. The more exceptional names in particular, such as Salutius, (?) Tenetlius and Steturstadius were probably specifically chosen to be given to these Lions who were fratres in one large family.[542]

The next issue that must be dealt with is the semi-public nature of some of the inscriptions such as those recovered from the *Phrygianum*. The mention of Mithras, and the priestly grade of the dedicant, on the altars consecrated to other gods, could most probably have been seen by non-Mithraic "outsiders" unless these inscriptions were set up inside a closed Mithraic shrine inside the *Phrygianum*. In any case, the inscriptions give no evidence for cult practice other than informing the reader that the dedicant was a Mithraic priest of some standing. This is in clear contrast to the celebratory inscriptions of the *Piazza San Silvestro*, which describe the actual initiations performed as well as mentioning the grades involved in

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[540] This is the case with most of the epigraphic material from the mithraeum of *Dura-Europos*, and this corpus is perhaps one of the most important clues to the makeup of a Mithraic community that has so far been discovered. Indeed Richard Gordon considers it a "minor scandal" that Yale University still has not published the excavations in their entirety (Gordon, "The Walbrook Mithraeum," 742), especially since a manuscript describing the graffiti from the third phase of the Mithraeum at Dura was prepared by Professor Francis in the 1970's, but was never published for economic reasons. Since Francis' death the whereabouts of the manuscript is apparently unknown.

[541] Hatt, *La tombe gallo-romaine*, 35 ff. Jean-Jacques Hatt made a detailed study of cult names in the Cybele cult in Gallia.

[542] Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 185.

each initiation ceremony. The latter were clearly not meant for public viewing, while there is at least the possibility that this was one of the aspects of the former set of inscribed altars. All this serves to highlight one important factor in the use and analysis of these inscriptions, namely the context in which they were supposed to be viewed. Consequently, we must consider whether the notion of Mithraists as small exclusive groups is still valid in general terms, and especially if this is so in late antiquity. This issue was recently raised by Eberhard Sauer, and is especially pertinent after the discovery of archaeological material that suggests the occurrence at least once of a large-scale, semi-public Mithraic feast outside of the mithreum at Tienen. Sauer suggests that:

> Perhaps we should at least consider the possibility that the mystery cult increasingly opened up to attract the financial and moral support of wider circles of the community in an increasingly intolerant religious environment. It is certainly true that the number of members of the Roman aristocracy involved in Mithraism in the fourth century is unparalleled in the high imperial period. The decline in the epigraphic habit, unfortunately, does not allow us to establish whether or not this was an exclusive "upper class phenomenon" in the specific context of pagan resistance towards Christianisation at Rome or whether the number of people granted entry into *mithraea* may have increased also in many provincial *mithraea*.[543]

With regard to the statistical application of this group of inscriptions set up by members of the senatorial elite of Rome, they bear evidence for little else than the social catchments of the dedicants. In this sense, the exceptional thing about this group of Mithraic inscriptions that seem to account for approximately half of the statistical material is, as Richard Gordon pointed out, "the rank of their subjects or dedicators".[544] Consequently, these inscriptions do not in any sense prove the existence of any particular brand of "senatorial Mithraism", and they clearly must be counted as Mithraic and as a part of the corpus of evidence for fourth century Mithraic demographic patterns in Rome. However, as will become clear, the inscriptions of the *Phrygianum* and the *Piazza San Silvestro* also reveal important details concerning the practice of Mithraism in late antique Rome.

[543] Sauer, "Coins in *Mithraea*", 336.
[544] Gordon, "Who worshipped Mithras," 461.

3.2. The social location of fourth century Mithraism

Establishing the social location of Mithraism in fourth century Rome is essentially an endeavor grounded in educated guesswork, and in the main based on two groups of material evidence: the statistical models based on the numbers and distribution of the active mithraea in the city of Rome, and on the epigraphic record of the senatorial elite, mainly the inscriptions of the *Phrygianum* and others associated with them, and the inscriptions of the *Piazza San Silvestro*. Although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the cult of Mithras was, if anything, more active than ever in late antique Rome, there is a strong tendency in modern scholarship to imagine fourth century Mithraism as a phenomenon more in tune with the imagined syncretistic predilections of certain members of the senatorial aristocracy – the so-called pagan reaction or pagan revival – than with the "real" Mithras mysteries of the second century and first half of the third century. In actual fact, the evidence suggests a high degree of continuity in the Mithraic communities rather than a break, and the archaeological material, especially the very large and possibly semi-public mithraea of the *Crypta Balbi* and the *Terme di Caracalla*, suggests that most mithraea were associated with the socio-economic middle-to-high segment of the urban population rather than with the elite of the city.

It is clear from the continuity in the use and appearance of the mithraea and their decoration that the majority of Mithraists in fourth century Rome still belonged to the traditional social segment of the Mithraic cult – the large mass of the late Roman "middle class": petty bureaucrats and junior officials, shopkeepers, well-to-do freedmen, and so forth. In other words, the Mithraists were people with means and leisure to participate in the cult life and who belonged to segments of the population which were fundamentally upwardly mobile within the rather rigid social structures of late antique Rome.

The equestrian class had ceased to be as a separate entity at this point in time, and while the senatorial class still had many restrictions concerning the admittance of new members, advancement into it was certainly possible, and entrance into the ranks of the *clarissimi* became an accessible goal for a broader layer of the Roman population than had been the case before the reforms of Constantine. Essentially, such advancement was based on three factors: wealth, merit (at least theoretically), and the

social web of patronage and family ties.[545] This means that while the senatorial elite expanded to include parvenus, the old mechanisms of advancement, and consequently the essentially conservative nature of the Roman elite, remained in place. Roger Beck recently wrote that "Mithraism indeed was a conformist's religion: petty bureaucrats, soldiers, successful freedmen, slaves with talent and a measure of autonomy in the households of the great. If not a religion of the elite or the sophisticated, it was certainly not a religion of the marginal, still less of the disaffected."[546] While this observation is certainly true and still relevant for the late antique cult in Rome, there was clearly also room for the inclusion of other groups from both ends of the socio-economic spectrum in this period, namely the recently enlarged senatorial elite, but perhaps also the marginal, if not the disaffected.

There is no real reason to dismiss the possibility of urban poor participating in the mysteries in Rome, but it is clear that such communities would leave little impression in the archaeological material, since we must assume that such people had little money to pay for cult furniture of a more permanent sort, though we can easily imagine rooms in *insulae* turned into makeshift mithraea through the use of wood props and cloth hangings, perhaps with icons executed in ceramic or wood, or even painted cloth. There is no epigraphic evidence for the participation of the urban poor in the mysteries, and neither should we expect any. Firstly, the paucity of funds available to poorer members, and perhaps even more importantly, the lack of permanent locales, would restrict the commission of stone tauroctony reliefs and altars, and render undesirable the recording of grades and names in dipinti on the walls of the makeshift mithraea. Furthermore, while members of the senatorial class would present themselves as *clarissimi* in dedicatory inscriptions for obvious reasons, a freedman or petty bureaucrat would hardly announce himself as such, and consequently the social catchment at this level is next to impossible to ascertain, except perhaps in the case of ex-slaves, in which case there is the possibility that ethnic "markers" in their names or the

[545] See for example, Lançon, "Rome dans l'Antiquité tardive," 86-87, Hopkins, "Elite Mobility in the Roman Empire," 12-26. For a case-study of the social mobility of a family in fourth century Bordeaux, see Hopkins, "Social Mobility in the Later Roman Empire."
[546] Beck, "Four Men, Two Sticks, and a Whip", 88.

inclusion of an emperor's name marks them out. As we have seen, however, such ethnic markers may in fact be indications of cultic names rather than personal names.

No data can be reliably gathered on the participation of the lowest strata of Roman society in the cult of Mithras, but as far as the other end of the socio-economic spectrum is concerned, some parameters can tentatively be established. The group of senatorial Mithraists that is usually considered part of the pagan reaction must be considered in their social, political, and religious context, but first the ratio of members of the senatorial aristocracy in relation to the social status of the greater part of the Mithraic recruitment base must be briefly discussed. Closely tied to the question of how many Mithraists were active in Rome in the fourth century is that of how many of these belonged to the senatorial elite. Even the most conservative estimate of membership in the cult in the city in the fourth century gives a number of at least 500 Mithraists.

This number is based on an average community of 30 Mithraists per mithraeum, a number which is almost certainly too low in Rome, which had very large mithraea like that of the *Crypta Balbi* and the *Terme di Caracalla* in operation at this point in time. Multiplying this number by the sixteen mithraea, or Mithraic sites, that we can be reasonably sure were in use in the city in the fourth century, gives us an average membership of a little under 500 persons. This number, then, is the lowest number of Mithraists that our statistical model allows for, and even with this rather low membership number, the presence of 17 named individuals of senatorial rank, as well as one unnamed, only makes up a small minority of the *cultores mithrae*.[547] While not to be uncritically trusted, these numbers show that at least a quarter of the 2000 or so *clarissimi* in fourth century Rome would need to be a practicing Mithraist for the Mithraic community of Rome to have sufficient numbers to warrant the continuous use of even 16 mithraea, some of them very large. Furthermore, if we take into consideration that instead there was more likely around

[547] According to Manfred Clauss, these are: (A)emilianus Corfo Olympius, Agrestius, Alfenius Ceionius Iulianus Kamenius, Aur(elius) Victor Augentius, Caelius Hilarianus, Iunius Postumianus, C. Magius Donatus Severianus, Nonius Victor Olympius, Petronius Apol[lo]dorus, [Pontius At]ticus, R(ufius) Cae(i)oni(us) Sabin[u]s, C. Ruf(ius) Volusianus *pater*, Sextilius Agesilaus Aedesius, Tamesius Augentius Olympius, Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, Virius Nichomacus Flavianus, Ulpius Egnatius Faventinus. See Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 295-296.

250 mithraea in the city of Rome active at this time,[548] the senatorial participation becomes rather more marginal, but still this group looms large in the extant epigraphic record, and their role in late antique Mithraism in Rome must be considered in more detail.

The issue of the social and religious makeup of the fourth century Roman aristocracy is a difficult one and remains hotly debated, but Thomas Noble gives a brief and eloquent description of the Roman senatorial elite, their set of values, and their place in Roman society, which might serve as a starting point:

> To speak of the elite, of the aristocracy, is to talk about, at the very least, a class whose achievements and attitudes revolved around six elements: wealth, generally derived from land holding; dignity, a sense of self rooted in honor; reputation, the wider knowledge of a person's actions disseminated throughout the society; office, the holding of one or more of the republican magistracies, even under the empire, and of various imperial positions, especially in the fourth century; power, the capacity to cajole or coerce others; and life-style, a certain way of life typified by a felicitous blend of public and private preoccupations. Through Rome's ancient history the elite, the summit of the hierarchy, was formed by the senatorial aristocracy.[549]

But this lofty "summit" underwent a radical transformation in the early part of the fourth century, which had a profound impact on Roman society, and consequently also on the Mithraic communities of Rome. The drastic increase in membership in the senatorial ranks as a result of Constantine's reforms created about 1400 new senators in the city of Rome, which along with their immediate family must have been quite a noticeable influx, since the new senatorial class was now almost four times as large as it had been before the reform. The ancient aristocratic families of Rome also experienced a change in their collective fortunes, and for many, Constantine's reforms heralded an increase in power and authority. According to Michele Salzman:

> Although their military and political preeminence had been shaken by civil wars and invasions in the third century, many of the old senatorial aristocratic families had reemerged in the West in the fourth century to reassert leadership in civic and social life. Many of these men were among the wealthiest landowners in the empire. Their position was further enhanced by Constantine, who reincorporated senatorial aristocrats into political life and carried out reforms in state government.[550]

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[548] See chapter 1, section 4 of this study.
[549] Noble, "The Roman Elite", 13.
[550] Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 2.

The many new members of the senatorial aristocracy of Rome seem to have found their place swiftly and painlessly, composed as they were of immensely rich landholders and successful imperial bureaucrats, and "the senatorial aristocracy – the upper-class holders of the senatorial rank of *clarissimi* or 'most outstanding' – that emerged in the West in the fourth and early fifth centuries thus encompassed a number of elite groups who enjoyed wide-ranging social, economic, legal, and political influence".[551] These new senators were too many, and many of them too powerful or successful to be shunned by the old families, but there must still have been some social pressure for the "new men" to conform to the traditional values and ideals of the aristocracy, and to demonstrate that they were in possession of the virtues that characterized the *clarissimi*, and hence that they were socially on a par with their esteemed colleagues.

Now, this change of affairs would naturally lead to many social mechanisms being employed with the aim of integrating the old families and the "new men", and one would expect to see visible traces of these new families involving themselves in all the status concerns of the *clarissimi*, including of course traditional religious roles and priesthoods. When this class was dramatically enlarged by Constantine, the status concerns of over 1400 new members of this elite group ought to have had quite an impact on the religious institutions of the city. It is clear that "for centuries the same men who held high state office also held the most important priesthoods in the pagan state cults. These positions were traditionally much sought after as a means of manifesting and reinforcing a man's social status."[552] But there were clearly not enough of the traditional civic priesthoods to go around. Hence the attraction of new, or at least parallel religious expressions, whether Christian or pagan, amongst the *clarissimi* in fourth century Rome. Michele Salzman points out that "proper aristocratic behavior extended to religious rites and duties; these were traditionally in the service of the pagan cults. Only by meeting the expectations of his peers could an aristocrat expect to gain the acceptance that was the primary guarantee of aristocratic standing."[553] Thus it is not surprising that there should be an increase not only in senatorial membership in all the religious communities, Mithraism and Christianity included, but equally important would have been the need for

[551] Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 2.
[552] Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 2.
[553] Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 4.

the senatorial rank and the cursus of the dedicant in question to be sumptuously recorded. However, the post-Constantinian *clarissimi* differed from the senatorial aristocracy of the preceding two centuries in another important sense, namely its increased introspection and introversion. This tendency is highlighted by Mark Humphries:

> There is a noticeable change in the *cursus* of Roman senators in late antiquity as compared with earlier centuries. Such high administrative posts in provincial government as they held were tied particularly to Italy, Sicily, and Africa, regions with which the Senate was closely linked by patterns of landholding and networks of patronage. More generally, the *cursus* of senatorial offices was focused on the city of Rome itself. Thus the quaestorship and praetorship, at one time important stepping stones on the path to high administrative office, were, by the fourth century, primarily associated with the provision of spectacles at Rome. The summit of senatorial ambition likewise showed the Rome-centred horizons of the fourth century urban aristocracy. For most senators, it was the chief administrative post in their own city, the urban prefecture of Rome, that set the seal on a splendid career.[554]

In short, there was no pagan reaction against the imperial court by senatorial elite because of a perceived loss of power and privilege. Rather, the senatorial elite of fourth century Rome gained more power and prestige, as well as increased its membership base, and even the most prominent pagans of the late fourth century, Mithraic Fathers like Praetextatus and Albinus amongst them, owed their prestigious positions at least nominally to the imperial court. Essentially there was no *organized* opposition against the emperor or the imperial court in the form of a pagan reaction or revival movement – though there certainly was a degree of disagreement and perhaps resentment over certain imperial religious policies. On the contrary, an increased introversion and a preoccupation with the context of the city of Rome and environs, culturally, socially, and religiously, seems rather to have been the order of the day. In the final analysis, the senatorial elite of the fourth century remained more conformist than ever, and this goes a long way towards explaining the possible attraction of Mithraism to this social segment as a whole. "Publicly", argues Alison Griffith, "the cult offered senators a locale for important interaction and, as one

[554] Humphries, "Roman Senators and Absent Emperors," 32.

scholar has put it, a 'means for public self-expression'.[555] Privately, it reaffirmed hierarchy, and especially *fides*, within the *familia* and amongst peers."[556]

It is clearly problematic to treat the senatorial class as being composed of two opposing religious parties, Christian and pagan, and this model is no longer generally accepted in late antique scholarship. The flaws in this model of opposing parties and religious partisanship become especially apparent when the notion of a pagan reaction, or revival, is abandoned. In fact the important virtues and social bonds of *familia* and *amicitia* seem to have been much more important for all groups of the aristocracy than any religious affiliation, and there is ample evidence for Roman senatorial families which contained both Mithraic and Christian members. In Mithraic scholarship, however, the unsubstantiated idea of an alternative Mithraism connected to the pagan revival still persists.

Now, what does the notion of senatorial syncretistic Mithraism entail for the late fourth century cult, and how should we understand the role of Mithraism amongst the *clarissimi* in late antique Rome? Mithraism in late fourth century Rome has traditionally been portrayed as a re-invention of the cult in a syncretistic milieu rather than as a continuation of the cult practices of the second and third centuries. Almost counterintuitively, the waning and virtual disappearance of "real" Mithraism – the "eigentlichen Mithrasmysterien"[557] – in the early fourth century and its apparent replacement by a re-emergent syncretistic paganism which included a brand of "senatorial" Mithraism in Rome in the late fourth century, has become the default model for the social location and structure of late antique Mithraism. According to Manfred Clauss, Mithraism survived into the late fourth century only because it found a place amongst these pagan senators in their postulated protest against religious reforms:

> Diese demonstrative öffentliche Verehrung so vieler traditioneller Kulte war auch ein Protest der heidnischen Oberschicht der alten Haupstadt gegen die zunehmend rigider werdende Religionspolitik der Kaiser. In dieser Erneuerungsphase hatte auch Mithras seinen Platz. Während eines kurzen

[555] McLynn, "The fourth-century taurobolium," 328.
[556] Griffith, "Mithraism," 2.
[557] Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 147.

> Zeitraums erlebten seine Mysterien mit anderen vor allem in der Stadt Roma eine letze Blüte, in den höchsten Kreisen des Senatorenstandes faßbar.[558]

This interpretation of the events is based, however, mainly on the atypical set of inscriptions to the "oriental gods" recovered from the *Phrygianum* and elsewhere in Rome, and it is crucial that this model be re-evaluated in its proper social and religious context. According to John Matthews, "the inscriptions from the Vatican Phrygianum may even give an exaggerated impression of the prevalence of these religions among the aristocracy, rather as the public inscriptions of senators seem likely to over-represent the degree of political participation of senators at large in the fourth century."[559]

The combination of the almost exclusive reliance on the problematic evidence of the *Phrygianum* inscriptions and the other inscriptions of the fourth century *clarissimi* which mention Mithras,[560] on one hand, and the concept of a senatorial "pagan reaction"[561] on the other hand, has led to several unfortunate conclusions in the scholarship of Mithraism in fourth century Rome. Reinhold Merkelbach, for instance, claims that there is no evidence for any true Mithraism after the year 325, and categorically defines all later material as belonging to the "heidnischen Reaktion":

> Die drei letzten Zeugnisse der eigentlichen Mysterien fallen in die Jahre 313, 315, und 325.[562] ...Es gibt dann noch eine Gruppe von datierten Monumenten aus den Jahren 357-387 n. Chr. Sie stammen alle aus Rom und seiner Umgebung, von Personen der heidnischen Reaktion gegen das christliche Kaisertum in Konstantinopel und Mailand. Diese Monumente, die wir später kurz besprechen werden, gehören ebenfalls nicht mehr zu den eigentlichen Mithrasmysterien.[563]

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[558] Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 295.
[559] Matthews, "Symmachus and the Oriental Cults", 194.
[560] These inscriptions have in common that they feature the names of several well known pagan senators proclaiming themselves as holding the supreme grade of *pater patrum* in the Mithraic mysteries.
[561] The "pagan reaction" or "pagan revival" presupposes a coordinated senatorial protest in the face of a postulated increased marginalization of the senatorial class and a loss of privilege vis-à-vis Christianity.
[562] V 523, V 150, and V 1315.
[563] Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 147.

Even though "Mithraism in 4th-c. Rome is comparatively well documented"[564], Merkelbach does not accept any of this evidence as relating to "real" Mithraism, but rather to a syncretistic mishmash of a new religion of the old gods, where Mithras himself was forgotten:

> Man vereinigte den Kult des Mithras mit dem der Hekate, den des Bacchus mit demder Ceres von Eleusis, den des Sonnengottes mit dem des Osiris. Alle Götter des Heidentums sollten sich zusammenschließen. Die späten Inschriften aus Rom, welche Mithras nennen, gehen vom Jahr 357 bis zum Jahr 387; danach hören sie auf. Man kann diese Texte eigentlich nicht mehr als echte Zeugnisse der Mithrasmysterien werten; Mithras war für diese Männer vor allem ein Exponent des Heidentums, einer der vielen Götter, an denen sie festhalten wollten.[565]

It would appear at first glance that Merkelbach's view is extreme, but in this he is joined by other scholars, and even Roger Beck actually endorsed Merkelbach's view of the death of "real Mithraism" in the early fourth century, stating that: "Merkelbach rightly dismisses the eclectic and upper-class Mithraism of the late fourth century in Rome as essentially rootless. Quite early in the century the religion was as good as dead throughout the empire."[566] Recently, however, Beck seems to have changed his mind regarding this question, stating that: "As it happens, Mithraism towards the end of its historic lifespan furnishes an excellent example of a religion in which ownership, through an implicit claim to monopolize the agenda of representation, gravitated to the leadership."[567] This implies continuity in cult practices, if not in the socio-economic status, of the highest levels of leadership in the cult of Mithras in Rome, since far from a radical re-interpretation of the mysteries, the inscriptions of the *Piazza San Silvestro* instead give the impression of being very much in line with what we know of traditional Mithraic ritual practices. Indeed, if these inscriptions had not mentioned that the dedicants were *clarissimi*, they would never have been categorized as belonging to the senatorial Mithraism of the pagan revival.

[564] Griffith, "Mithraism," 2.
[565] Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 247.
[566] Beck, "Merkelbach's Mithras," 299.
[567] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 98.

Even Manfred Clauss, who does recognize the sharp increase in Mithraic inscriptions in the late fourth century, follows Merkelbach, and attributes most of them, including the *San Silvestro* inscriptions, to the ever-elusive "pagan revival":

> Erst aus der Zeit der Wende zum 4. Jahrhundert besitzen wir eine Reihe von Dokumenten, nach denen sich hohe Funktinäre des Staates für den Mithras-Kult einsetzen. Wir fassen an Hand der Weihegaben eine Renaissance des Kultes, wobei es nicht zu unterscheiden ist, ob ein neuer religiöser Impetus oder vor allem eine bauliche Erneuerung nach den Wirren des 3. Jahrhunderts den Anstoß bildete. Es war dies eine Zeit der Restauration des Mithras-Kultes, aber nicht nur dieses Kultes allein. Es handelte sich um eine Phase allgemeiner religiöser Erneuerung, und die Inschriften berichten vom Bau neuer, häufiger jedoch von der Wiederherstellung alter Tempel.[568]

But Clauss' differentiation at this point between the "real" cult of Mithras and the senators of the "pagan revival" has, as we have seen, led to the exclusion of a large segment of the available evidence from his statistical model of the quantitative appearance of Mithraism, since he has chosen not to include the inscriptions from fourth century Rome that he claims are to be connected first and foremost with members of the pagan revival.[569] These inscriptions are relegated to an appendix, and, crucially, are kept separate from the statistical models of the temporal and geographical distribution of the inscriptions.[570] Nowhere in his catalogue does Clauss really discuss his reasons for not including the inscriptions associated with the *Heidnische Restauration* together with his other material. It is in any case apparent that this exclusion further alters the overall impression of a corpus of material that is really already too limited to be statistically representative. Indeed, other archaeological evidence contradicts this "downward spiral" in Mithraic activity in late antiquity which results from the exclusion of these inscriptions in Clauss' temporal model.

Richard Gordon chooses instead to highlight the continuity in the material by arguing that "although the graph mapping datable Mithraic inscriptions does (roughly) coincide with the graph of all

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[568] Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 258.
[569] This is in tacit agreement with Reinhold Merkelbach who distinguishes between the pagan revival and "real Mithraism" which ends with Constantine, see Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 143, and 246-49
[570] On the inscriptions and demographics of the *Heidnische Restauration*, see Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*, 295-297. On the material datable to the fourth century that Clauss considers not connected to the revival but rather "real" Mithraic inscriptions, see 259-260.

datable inscriptions, the archaeological evidence independently confirms the epigraphic".[571] Gordon, moreover, maintains that the inscriptions excluded by Clauss should rather have been included in the main graph because it would fit better with the quantitative distribution of the archaeological evidence:

> Despite the comparative epigraphic silence from *c*.250, the impression given by the archaeology is of fairly substantial continuity into mid/late 4th c. with many local exceptions on the Rhine, Danubian and other frontiers. The inscriptions of the "pagan revival" are simply an especially legible instance of the continuity of the cult up to Theodosius's edicts of 380 and 392; what makes them exceptional is the rank of their subjects or dedicators.[572]

Indeed, the apparent problems of statistics and graph-mapping are fundamental to any kind of generalization based on the corpus of Roman epigraphy in general, or in this case based on Mithraic epigraphy in particular, and using statistics in any meaningful way becomes difficult simply because, as Christian Witschel rightly points out, "mathematically significant statistics, in the sense understood by modern social scientists, are almost never available for the ancient historian."[573] If the statistics are contingent on corroborating material, we should at this point be asking the question of whether the sharp decrease in inscriptions unrelated to the "revival" is independently confirmed by the archaeological evidence from fourth century Rome. As we have seen in the preceding section, this seems, according to the most recent evaluation of Mithraic remains from Rome, not to be the case.[574]

3.3. Mithraic communities amongst the religions of Rome

Very few religious groups exist in isolation, and the social and historical contexts of any given religious community are of fundamental importance to any understanding of that community. In fourth century Rome, much like most of the Western world today, religious pluralism was a principal feature of society. That is to say that Roman traditional public cult, the so-called "oriental" religions, ethnically centered cults, philosophical schools which most often included metaphysical teachings, and Christianity and

[571] Gordon, "Who worshipped Mithras?" 461.
[572] Gordon, "Who worshipped Mithras?" 461.
[573] Witschel, "Re-evaluating the Roman West," 257.
[574] See also Griffith, "Archaeological evidence", and "Mithraism".

Judaism, all co-existed within a cosmopolitan context, and this mélange bears many striking parallels to the religious landscape of the great cities of the Western world today. Far from the scenario of a form of "syncretistic paganism" in conflict with Christianity, this model of the religious climate of late antique Rome rather suggests a generally peaceful co-existence between the religious communities which, though there were many exceptions, valued bonds of family, friendship, and patronage higher than religious rivalry. In fact, the relationship between the religious communities of fourth century Rome seems to have been dominated by a high degree of mutual indifference rather than antagonistic confrontations.[575]

The place of Mithraism in the socio-religious fabric of fourth century Rome is difficult to establish unequivocally, not only because of the nature of the extant evidence and the often conflicting rapports on the cult from contemporary sources, but also because the place of the cult of Mithras in this context is closely linked to the problem of Christianity's growth and change in this period and to the thorny issue of the conversion of the aristocracy of the city. Given the lack of solid evidence, we will most likely never see the complete picture of the end of Mithraism in Rome, but the circumstantial evidence does suggest a high degree of peaceful coexistence through most of the fourth century, at least in the city of Rome. This state of affairs may have been influenced by several factors, chief among them the existence of powerful non-Christian patrons from the ruling families of the city, but also, I think, by the fact that the Christian communities at no point actually felt threatened by Mithraism in the city of Rome – there simply was no real competition, at least nowhere near the level and intensity of intra-Christian competition, and hence no real basis for an antagonistic relationship.

This indifference towards the Mithraic communities is clearly seen in the way the contemporary Christian literary references to Mithraism changes over time from the early second century to the late

[575] The issue of the nature of the relationship between religious communities in late antique Rome is a difficult one, and much recent scholarship has approached this question from different viewpoints. McLynn presents succinct arguments for indifference rather than conflict in "The Fouth-Century *Taurobolium*", while both Salzman (*The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*) and Curran (*Pagan City and Christian Capital*) reach much the same conclusions in their monographs. Indeed, the arguments for religious confrontation have been few and far between during the past decade, with a few notable exceptions. Eberhard Sauer, for example, has recently argued in *The End of Paganism* and in *Religious Hatred*, that late antique Christian groups were in active confrontation with pagan communities. Sauer's study does not deal with the situation in Rome, however. The relationship between Mithraic and Christian communities in fourth century Rome is discussed below.

fourth and early fifth centuries. Tertullian and Justin Martyr, for instance, were primarily preoccupied with the similarities between Mithraic and Christian rituals, and decried the rituals of the former as being devilish imitations of the true Christian rituals. "When Tertullian applies Christian terminology to the mysteries," argues Per Beskow, "he wants to show how similar they are to the Christian sacraments. He never conceals the similarities he discovers, but tends rather to overstate the parallel between Christian and pagan rites."[576] This insistence on outwards similarity but difference in essence, and on devilish, in this case Mithraic, imitation of Christian ritual practices, implies that it was a major concern for the Christian communities at the time to establish a self-identity similar to, but also distinct from, other religious practices of the time. Hence the insistence that what would superficially appear to be similarities were in fact differences; the rites might well be similar, but the difference lay in the fact that the Christian rituals and miracles actually were effective, while their Mithraic counterparts were not. From this point of view, the two religions were in fact the antithesis of each other. Later sources, however, like Jerome, Ambrosiaster, Firmicus Maternus, and Prudentius, present a different perspective on the relationship, if there was any, between the two. By these writers, Mithraic rituals, and especially initiatory rituals and the grade hierarchy, are rather presented in passing as something outlandish, and usually used more as rhetorical devices than anything else, and one gets the impression that these men did not feel themselves, or their religion, to be under threat by the Mithraic cult in any way.

Simply put, and contrary to common opinion, there was no real religious struggle in Rome in the fourth century between Mithraism and Christianity – that is my contention – and this is supported by the fact that there is next to no evidence for any such antagonistic relationship between the two religions. As far as the archaeological evidence is concerned, all the mithraea said to have been destroyed by Christians as an expression of religiously motivated hatred in the fourth century are explicable in other ways, and Antonia Tripolitis' recent claim that "the emperor Gratian (367-383) had Mithras's sanctuaries sacked of their wealth, ordered them closed, and withdrew all state support for the cult's maintenance",[577] is quite

[576] Beskow, "Tertullian on Mithras," 52.
[577] Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*, 58.

simply untrue, all the more so since Mithraism, as far as we know, never did receive any form of state support.

There is no literary evidence which describes attacks on Mithraism in this period, except for the story of Gracchus' destruction of an undefined mithraeum in Rome, and there is no reason to suspect that this mithraeum was still in actual use at the time. The written sources, when they do mention Mithras at all, never treat the cult as a dangerous rival, but rather as an exotic example of strange cultic practices, indicating a process of "normalization" in the relationship between the two communities, related to the ascendancy of Christianity in the fourth century. This process is ironic in a sense since every indication suggests that the similarities between the two cults, such as architectural and decorative preferences, in fact grew more pronounced through the centuries of coexistence, and that by the fourth century, both Mithraic and Christian communities were much more visible, both to each other and to the uninitiated than ever before.

Unsurprisingly, there are more literary references to Mithraism in the material from the fourth and fifth centuries than there are from the second and third,[578] and while most of these sources mention Mithraism only in passing, they seem almost exclusively to be concerned with superficial details pertaining to the hierarchical structure of the cult – indicating that this was general knowledge about Mithraism at the time. They report on the existence of a grade hierarchy and the use of initiatory rituals often involving fasting, sensory deprivation, and other tests – in short, the typical elements of an initiatory

[578] There are more texts that mention Mithras, directly or indirectly, in the literary corpus of the fourth century, than at any other point in history. If we were to include, as fourth century texts, Arnobius's *Adversus nationes*, possibly written around 298, as well as Claudianus' panegyric on the consulship of Stilicho from the year 400 (*De laudibus Stilichonis* 1.63) at the other end of our timeline, there are at least seventeen different texts from the fourth century with one or more, sometimes oblique, references to Mithras. These include, but are not limited to: Ambrosiaster (*Questiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti* 113.11), Arnobius (*Adversus nationes* 6.10), Claudian (*De laudibus Stilichonis* 1.63), Pseudo-Clement (*Homil.* 6.10), Commodian (*Instructiones* 1.13), Firmicus Maternus (*De errore profanarum religionum* 5.2, 19.1, 20.1), Gregory Nazianzen (*Oratio* 4.70, *Oratio* 39.5.), Jerome (*Ep.* 107.2, *Comm. in Am.* 1.3.9-10), Prudentius (*Contra orationem Symmachi* 1.562-4), Socrates Scholasticus (*Hist. eccles.* 3.2-3), Julian (*Caesares* 336), the anonymous *Mithras Liturgy*, Pseudo-Paulinus (*Carmen 32: Carmen ad Antonium* 114-115), the anonymous *Carmen contra paganos* 47, Porhyry (*De abstinentia* 4.16.3, *De antro nympharum* 5, 6, 15, 18, 24). Compared to the seven, or so, extant texts that mention Mithras from the first through third centuries (except of course the non-extant works on Mithras by Eubulus and Pallas), and the ten or so references to Mithras in texts from the fifth century and onwards, the textual evidence from the fourth century seems almost over-represented. This should at least be taken as an indication that the cult of Mithras was not generally unknown at the time.

cult, and not far removed from the contemporary practices of some Christian communities.[579] Although many of Franz Cumont's theories concerning the cult of Mithras and its relationship to Christianity are at odds both with the corpus of Mithraic remains and the current paradigm in Mithraic scholarship, chief of which is his scenario of a monumental struggle between Mithraism and Christianity which culminated in the pre-ordained victory of the latter, it is still worth pointing out that many of the similarities that Cumont recognized between the two religions are still convincing, and it is fruitful to re-examine some of these. Compellingly, Cumont draws attention to the similarities between the two struggling rivals:

> The struggle between the two rival religions was the more stubborn as their characters were the more alike. The adepts of both formed secret conventicles, closely united, the members of which gave themselves the name of "Brothers." The rites which they practiced offered numerous analogies. The sectaries of the Persian god, like the Christians, purified themselves by baptism; received, by a species of confirmation, the power necessary to combat the spirits of evil; and expected from a Lord's Supper salvation of body and soul. Like the latter, they also held Sunday sacred, and celebrated the birth of the Sun on the 25th of December, the same day on which Christmas has been celebrated, since the fourth century at least. They both preached a categorical system of ethics, regarded asceticism as meritorious, and counted among their principal virtues abstinence and continence, renunciation and self-control. Their conceptions of the world and of the destiny of man were similar. They both admitted the existence of a Heaven inhabited by beatified ones, situate in the upper regions, and of a Hell peopled by demons, situate in the bowels of the earth. They both placed a Flood at the beginning of history; they both assigned as the source of their traditions a primitive revelation; they both, finally, believed in the immortality of the soul, in a last judgement, and in a resurrection of the dead, consequent upon a final conflagration of the universe.[580]

Now for many of these Christian rites and the distinctive "Christocentric" terminology, there is little or no evidence for direct Mithraic analogues, at least not in the sense of a one-to-one correspondence. For instance, terms like "baptism", "salvation of body and soul", and concepts like heaven and hell, are unattested in the Mithraic corpus of evidence. Having said that, there is good reason to suppose that Mithraic initiatory rituals were in many ways quite similar to the Christian initiations and that there were similarities both in practice and ideology between the Christian agape and Eucharist and the Mithraic cultic meal. Additionally, some recently discovered Mithraic wall-paintings from Syria have been

[579] Baptism as initiation, and the importance of fasting and other ascetic practices, is well docunted in contemporary Christian sources, not least in the correspondence of Jerome.
[580] Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 191.

interpreted as depicting the gates of hell.[581] While there is no evidence to confirm the celebrations of the birthday of the Sun (*dies natalis*) in a strictly Mithraic context, the close connection between Mithras and Sol does make such an assumption quite plausible. As far as ethics, soteriology, and apocalyptics are concerned, there is at present no consensus in Mithraic scholarship as to what these were, other than the rather vague notion that the Mithraists too hoped for "salvation" in some sense.

"We may never be able – and probably should not try – to define a Mithraist's 'salvation' fully and with complete precision,"[582] writes Roger Beck, and it seems unlikely, barring new discoveries, that we shall ever have complete access to the inner workings of Mithraic teachings and any possible dogma. Nevertheless, Beck has recently, and quite plausibly to my mind, suggested that a shared "ritual mentality" is fundamental to any comparison between Mithraism and Christianity. Beck argues that rather than comparisons of *types* of ritual activity, a more constructive approach is to focus on "fresh analogies which display something more fundamental, the *relationship* of ritual to cult myth (or other esoteric 'fact') as exemplified in two distinct religions which yet came into being contemporaneously and continued to coexist within the same multicultural empire. What the analogies suggest, then," Beck continues, "is a *shared sacramental mentality*, a propensity for expressing myth in ritual. If the string of analogies holds, necessarily this sacramental mentality cannot be considered a unique aspect of early Christianity anymore than it can of Mithraism."[583]

Many of these similarities between Mithraism and Christianity, the *typological* similarities that Cumont identified as well as the shared *mentality* posited by Beck, were, judging by some of the literary references, recognized by the Mithraic and Christian communities themselves as well, and as such it is quite likely, given the outwards appearance of both religions in Rome in the fourth century, that a wide range of similarities between the two may have been assumed by the uninitiated contemporaries of the cults too. In fact, it seems that the existence of the initiatory grade hierarchy in Mithraism was

[581] These wall-paintings are from the mithraeum of Huarte/Hawarte in Syria. The mithraeum has not yet been fully published, but the wall-paintings are discussed in a set of preliminary reports by Michal Gawlikowski: "Hawarti Preliminary Report", "Hawarte 1999", "Un nouveau mithraeum", "Le mithraeum de Haouarte".
[582] Beck, "Ritual, myth, doctrine, and initiation," 176.
[583] Beck, "Ritual, myth, doctrine, and initiation," 175.

comparatively well known while the details of the actual rituals and teachings and dogma were not, and we must assume that on the level of detail, the reports of contemporary Christian sources were pure speculation. Indeed, in a close parallel to this discussion, Neil McLynn argues that Prudentius' account of the taurobolium in the cult of Magna Mater in fourth century Rome "derives ultimately not from any knowledge of the mechanics of the cult, but from the spectacle of the tauroboliate's bloodstained clothes and dark talk of a subterranean mission. It thus corresponds almost exactly with the Thyestean banquets and promiscuous orgies that pagans conjured from reports of what went on behind the closed doors of the Christian Eucharist."[584]

Consequently, what was generally known of the Christian initiations and the celebration of the Eucharist at the time and what was common knowledge of Metroac and Mithraic rites could have been much the same for the uninitiated passer-by, and it seems clear that this apparent dichotomy between a secret revelatory truth and a relatively public hierarchical structure lies at the heart of both Mithraism and Christianity in late antique Rome. This point is further discussed below, but first it is important to establish an impression of the ratio of Christians and non-Christians in fourth century Rome, particularly with regard to the elite, since the propagation and maintenance of religion in Rome at this time depended almost exclusively on the social mechanism of patronage, and as such, every religious community in Rome was financed either by the members of the community itself, if they were wealthy enough, or, more commonly, by wealthy members of the elite thus perpetuating one of the fundamental social mechanisms of Roman society.

While it seems likely that many, if not most, of those senators holding the highest public offices of the day were Christians, and that "the claim that a majority of the holders of high administrative office under the Christian emperors continued to be pagan until the reign of Gratian is quite simply false", as Timothy Barnes has recently shown, the fact that "accurate prosopography tends to confirm, not disprove, Eusebius' statement that Constantine gave preference to Christians in appointments"[585] does not mean that

[584] McLynn, "The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*," 319.
[585] Barnes, "Statistics and the Conversion of the Roman Aristocracy," 142.

the majority of the elite was in fact Christian. Barnes' statistics shed much light on the appointments made by the emperors, but sidesteps the issue of the preoccupations of the senatorial elite in Rome, which seem to have grown gradually more introverted as the century wore on. In fact, the urban and praetorian prefectures seem to have been the height of ambition in senatorial circles in the latter half of the fourth century, and, crucially, in these positions the non-Christian senators were over-represented.

The appointments at the very highest levels of the imperial court had little or no impact on the day-to-day business of the governing of Rome at this point, and to evaluate the survival of paganism amongst the elite, other data than the lists of the holders of the highest offices of the state must be used. Michele Salzman has analyzed the senatorial segment of the population of late antique Rome and Italy with a view to the survival of paganism in the fourth century, and she concludes that the majority of the family groups in question remained pagan throughout most of the fourth century:

> The quantitative evidence in my population study suggests that aristocrats from Rome and Italy were predominantly pagan well into the last decades of the fourth century. Throughout the period aristocratic families from Italy (including Rome) have a greater proportion of pagans (60%, 47 out of 79) as compared to Christians (35%, 24 out of 68). Paganism was particularly strong among aristocrats whose families were from Rome: 53% (42 out of 79) of the pagan aristocrats are from Rome whereas only 28% (19 out of 68) of the Christian aristocrats are from Rome. In addition, almost two-thirds (5 out of 9) of the pagan converts to Christianity come from Rome. The raw numbers are small, but the pattern supports the impression that the aristocrats from Rome and Italy were predominantly pagan over the time period of this study.[586]

These numbers show clearly that there is no reason to suggest a dramatic decline and death of paganism, or indeed Mithraism, amongst the senatorial elite in Rome in the fourth century, and that a dramatic decrease in the number of pagans is a phenomenon of the fifth century rather than of the fourth.

At this point it is also interesting to note that religious conversion in late antique Rome was not, contrary to the impression given of by the church fathers, a unilateral progression from pagan to Christian. There is at least one instance of the conversion of a Christian senator to the cult of Magna Mater, an anonymous senator reported in the *Carmen ad senatorem ex Christiana religione ad idolorum servitutem*

[586] Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 77.

conversum,[587] who turned from Christ to the service of idols, but while the senator is reproached for his actions, he is not wholly condemned, and the road to redemption still lay open if he would only repent. Indeed, while the poem is clearly an example of anti-pagan polemic, the vitriolic rhetoric belies the conclusion of the poem, and demonstrates that, rhetoric apart, the relationship between the different religious communities of Rome at this time was rather less strained and antagonistic than is usually supposed.

Rather than violent competition and struggle the impression gained is generally of peaceful coexistence and mutual indifference. A good example is the relationship between the religious centers of the *Phrygianum* (with its Mithraic shrine) and the basilica of Saint Peter. It is interesting to note that "although the two sites operated beside one another for a generation, spectacular advertisements for their rival faiths, there is not the slightest indication that Christians and pagans so much as acknowledged each other's presence on the Vatican."[588] But Neil McLynn draws attention to the fact that this was not an indifference resulting from ignorance:

> Instead, their mutual indifference indicates the aristocratic hauteur that – in fourth-century Rome – characterized both Cybele and Saint Peter. For both offered their clients not only spiritual fulfillment, but also a means of showing themselves off to advantage before their peers, through the applause of the appreciative paupers who haunted the Vatican, and who, we should not doubt, presented themselves at basilica and Phrygianum alike.[589]

These communities did clearly know *of* each other, and if they did not know the details of each other's teachings and rituals, they still shared a common *ritual mentality*, and an analogous sense of community. Indeed, as members of structured, closed, religious communities, Christians and Mithraists had much in common from the viewpoint of communal identity. The common community background and the shared religious context of the "idea of a *religious* community, founded on self-consciously distinctive

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[587] The *Poem to a Christian senator converted from Christianity to the service of Idols* is by an unknown author who usually goes by the name of "Pseudo-Cyprian". The poem is dated to the late fourth century based on similarities in style and content with the *Carmen contra paganos*. See Croke and Harries, *Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Rome*, 83-85.
[588] McLynn, "The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*," 329.
[589] McLynn, "The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*," 329.

beliefs about the divine world and what those beliefs implied for conduct of individual and communal life,"[590] leads Garth Fowden to highlight rather the important tool for self-definition which existed in the coexistence of these religious communities. According to Fowden, "the members of such a community accepted a more or less defined and internally coherent, and to some extent even written – that is, scriptural – system of belief and practice, and tended to exist in a reactive, mutually defining relationship with other such (theoretically) closed systems, that is, other religious communities."[591]

The nature of this coexistence between the different religious communities in fourth century Rome is the lynchpin in the understanding of the religious landscape of the late antique city, but owing to the partisan nature of most of our sources it is often difficult to get a clear picture of their interaction, and we must instead rely on rather vague impressions. Jerome's letter to Laeta is a case in point. The letter is the most frequently cited literary reference to Mithraism in the context of late antique Rome, and one of only two sources which mentions the destruction of a mithraeum by the prefect Gracchus. However, this letter is not really concerned with describing Mithraism, or with attacking pagan cults as such, but it is rather to be understood within the contemporary intra-Christian debate concerning the practice of rigid asceticism. Laeta, daughter-in-law of Jerome's benefactor Paula, had written to Jerome in Bethlehem to ask his advice for raising her daughter as a Christian virgin, and she seems to have been especially concerned that the paganism of her father, Albinus,[592] who was incidentally also a Mithraic *pater patrum* who had constructed a Mithraic cave "cum [sig]/nis et ornament[tis]" in Cirta in Numidia while he was *praeses consularis* there from 364-367,[593] would have a bad influence on her daughter's Christian upbringing. Jerome comforts her by stating categorically that "one unbeliever is sanctified by a holy and faithful household,"[594] and it is in this context that the prefect Gracchus is brought up since he was an example of one of Laeta's relations who had converted to Christianity and had won for himself a Christian

[590] Fowden, "Varieties of religious Community," 83.
[591] Fowden, "Varieties of religious Community," 83.
[592] Laeta was from a family which seems to have included both pagans and Christians. She was the daughter of Publilius Ceionius Caecina Albinus but her mother seems to have been a Christian and she was married to (St.) Paula's son Toxotius. See stemma 23 in Jones, Martindale and Morris, *Prosopography*, 1143.
[593] The mithraeum itself has never been found, but the inscription is V 129, *CIL* VIII 6975.
[594] *Sancta et fidelis domus unum sanctificat infidelem*. Jerome, *Ep*. 107.1.

baptism on favourable terms. He had demonstrated his Christian zeal, his *pietas*, in much the same fashion as Laeta would by consecrating her infant daughter as a Christian virgin and by raising her as an ascetic. "Christians are not born, but made,"[595] Jerome continues in the letter, and consoles Laeta with the hope that her father will one day become a Christian. In fact, Albinus remained a pagan, as did his son.[596] This illustrates not only that important and influential families in Rome still had pagan household heads in the early fifth century, but also that religious coexistence within the same household was seen as unproblematic even by hard-line Christians like Jerome.

Thus Mithras and Christ, like Mithraists and Christians, lived together in the same households, but this co-habitation was not instrumental in the conversion of pagans to Christians, at least not overwhelmingly so, and it seems, according to Michelle Salzman, that "for the post-Constantinian aristocracy, modern network theory is not the most helpful model." Indeed:

> Having Christians as friends or family members did not lead directly to conversion. The specific contexts within which aristocratic friendship and family networks functioned mediated the influence of both in spreading Christianity. While the importance of shared sentiments was a typical and oft-expressed ideal of ancient friendship, by the end of the fourth century it had become clear that the rules of friendship would ignore differences in religion in favor of class and personal ties. The mutual favors exchanged between the pagan Symmachus and the aggressively Christian bishop Ambrose on behalf of their respective clients attest to the continuities of class ties across the religious divide.[597]

If the issue of religious differences was of relatively little importance to the members of the Roman senatorial aristocracy, at least in comparison with class ties, one would imagine that it was even less so amongst their followers and clients. From the point of view of the masses, there were many similarities between Christianity and the other "oriental" cults, and as "joint dedications to Mithras and to other officially recognized and unofficial deities, as well as sanctuaries shared with Jupiter Dolichenus, show

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[595] *Fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani*. Jerome, *Ep*. 107.1.
[596] "Albinus's wife and daughter were also Christians. His son, however, remained staunchly pagan and served as urban and praetorian prefect of Rome (as had Albinus's father and brothers). One of his brothers was also intermarried with Christian families and would be the grandfather of the noted ascetic Melania the younger." White, *Social Origins*, 420, note 202.
[597] Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 15.

that Mithraism became less exclusive",[598] the visibility and mass appeal of these theoretically "secretive" initiatory communities clearly increased. In fact, Alison Griffith is clear that "examination of the 3rd- and 4th-century development of the Mithraic cult in Rome indicates that widespread appeal, variety of venue, and willingness to share sanctuaries and dedications with other deities became, and continued to be, the hallmark of Mithraism in its urban context".[599]

Even though Mithraism, unlike Christianity and many of the other religions in Rome, such as the cult of Magna Mater, did not feature public acclamations as far as we know, and had perhaps a lower public profile in the religious landscape of late antique Rome than its contemporaries, the similarities between Mithraism and Christianity might have seemed great to the uninitiated, and perhaps the choice of joining one religion rather than the other had more to do with presentation and with the religious leanings of the rich and powerful in Roman society rather than any "teachings", the majority of which would generally be unknown prior to initiation. After all, many of the rituals were similar, as was much of the imagery. For instance, Christian art of the period featured Christ as the sun, in much the same way as the sun featured in Mithraism as well as traditional Roman iconography, even as far as being mounted in chariot. Robin Jensen describes one such image:

> In the famous early fourth century mosaic said to be of Christi Helios in the dome of the mausoleum of the Julii in the excavations under Saint Peter's on the Vatican, we see a figure that may have been meant to represent Christ as Sol or perhaps as a rival to Sol riding in a chariot, surrounded by a golden sky, and adorned with a radiate halo. This rather glorious image corresponds with biblical language about Christ as the light (for example, John 1:1-5 and Eph 5:14) and with some textual references to Christ that employed solar imagery, including Clement of Alexandria's description of Christ as the "Sun of Righteousness" who rides in his chariot over all creation and "who has changed sunset into sunrise and crucified death into life."[600]

Not only does this mosaic most likely feature Christ as Sol, a clear iconographical correspondence with the Mithras and Sol motifs common in Mithraic art, but coming from the Vatican and datable to the early

[598] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 251-252.
[599] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 252-253.
[600] Jensen, *Face to Face*, 147-148. Jensen quotes Clement, *Prot*. 11.

fourth century, it is roughly contemporary with Mithraic art and located in close proximity to the Mithraic site in the *Phrygianum* on the Vatican Hill.

Similarities between Mithraism and Christianity were highlighted already by Cumont, as we have seen, but his point was to illustrate the confrontation between two similar religious systems, or faiths as he would have said, in a historically deterministic scenario related to the inevitable moral superiority and victory of Christianity. Indeed, to Cumont, Mithraism comes across as a sort of proto-Christianity that was too flawed in its moral teachings to triumph and which suffered from the fact that their "redeemer" did not, contrary to Christ, actually exist: "It was a strong source of inferiority for Mazdaism that it believed in only a mythical redeemer," wrote Cumont. "That unfailing wellspring of religious emotion supplied by the teachings and the passion of the God sacrificed on the cross, never flowed for the disciples of Mithra."[601] However, rather than Mithraism being too flawed to survive the battle for the Western soul and the Latin spirit, it seems, based on what little actual evidence there is, that the two religions lived side by side in relative harmony, peacefully for the most part, and that they instead of being rivals, were simply both products of a shared socio-historical context.

3.4. Secrecy and the public-private divide

Secrecy – at least the secrecy associated with the initiatory rites – was one of the defining factors of both Mithraism and Christianity in this period, but is was an attractive, communal secrecy which, by its very nature, in many ways must have served as a means to attract and recruit new members. The promise that the new members would learn the fundamental secrets of the cults, that they would be allowed to participate in secret rituals, like the Mithraic cult meal and the Christian Eucharist, and that they would become part of an exclusive elite community possessing esoteric knowledge and a special soteriology, must have been as great incentives to join a religious group in late antiquity, as they are in the religious landscape of the modern Western world.

[601] Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 195.

Passing by either a Christian basilica or large-scale, semi-public mithraea like those of the *Crypta Balbi*, *Terme di Caracalla*, or the *Santa Prisca*, must have been a rather similar experience: a passerby would perhaps see light coming from inside the cult room, he would smell the heavy incense, and perhaps hear singing and recitation of mystical hymns. Dale Kinney evocatively describes the impression the Lateran basilica might have made on an early fourth century passer-by:

> [The Lateran basilica] must have appeared like an audience hall or the Curia, a space to be entered by invitation only. Its exclusivity might have been especially evident at night. The large windows of late antique halls are often described in terms of daylight – that is, of admitting light – but they also would have led light out.[602]

The light shining out of these windows would be especially noticeable at night, drawing attention to the ritual gatherings of the Christian community. Essentially, the community was advertising their presence and exclusivity. Furthermore, these basilicas "positively advertised the fact that Christians had nighttime liturgies, in a brilliantly lighted space whose glowing windows established darkness as the realm of the non-initiates outside."[603]

All of this took place in relatively densely populated areas of the city, and the density of the churches and mithraea was such that, just as in present day Rome, there was a religious building on nearly every corner. Clearly this secrecy and the restricted access to mysteries enacted just barely out of plain sight must have been very attractive to many. Supporting the argument of a close connection between "public secrecy" and recruitment is the increased public visibility of both Christianity and Mithraism in Rome in the mid-to-late fourth century. It seems that throughout the fourth century, more information concerning these cults became generally known, but this information was still restricted to external appearances, the mechanisms of the recruiting drive, rather than any of the actual secrets of the cults in question.

The secrecy of the fundamental doctrinal "truths" of the community was especially important in this regard as a passage from the *Carmen ad senatorem ex Christiana religione ad idolorum servitutem*

[602] Kinney, "The Church Basilica," 128-129.
[603] Kinney, "The Church Basilica," 129.

conversum indicates: "If you do not wish to know the truth," writes the anonymous poet, "the offence will be light. It will not be light if you abandon the truth already known."[604] Initiatory knowledge was not to be revealed, but while the mysteries of the Christians are to stay hidden from those not initiated into the Christian mysteries, the pagans are criticized for hiding their mysteries from plain view. In another anonymous poem, the *Carmen ad Antonium*, the Mithraists are blamed for hidden sun-worship, and the poet phrases the rhetorical question: "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?"[605]

The initiatory truths remained hidden and accessible only to the initiated, a situation which served to maintain most of the cults, and certainly both Mithraism and Christianity at this time. Perhaps in this sense at least, it is meaningful to speak of some sort of competition between the cults, though there is no doubt that the cult of Mithras, even though the membership base seems to have been much more extensive in the fourth century than is usually assumed, remained quite small in comparison to the Christian population of the city in the late fourth century. It is in this light we must see Prudentius' description of the taurobolium. Prudentius' mental picture of the bloodbath does not attempt to accurately describe the actual rite such as it was practiced in the Metroac cult, but is rather a case of sending a *frisson* down the collective spine of his Christian audience back in Spain. Prudentius was in no sense privy to the actual performance of the taurobolium, but he could easily have witnessed the public acclamation of a *tauroboliatus* with a bloodstained tunic outside of one of the Metroac temples in the city of Rome, inciting his poetic imagination. Prudentius surely reflects the perspective of most Christians: "excluded from the mystery of the *taurobolium*, Christians could only shudder at what they could see of its results," argues

[604] *Carmen ad senatorem ex Christiana religione ad idolorum servitutem conversum* (Poem to a senator converted from Christianity to the service of idols), 72-73.
[605] Pseudo-Paulinus, *Carmen* XXXII: *Carmen ad Antonium*, 115-116. Translation by Croke and Harries, *Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Rome*, 88. Ambrosiaster too criticizes pagans for celebrating their rites in secrecy, *Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti*, 114.6.

Neil McLynn, and "Prudentius, moreover, suggests a likely source for their information: for he shows the ceremony culminating in that most characteristic fourth-century publicity device, an acclamation."[606]

This description of the rite of the taurobolium in a rather long-winded passage from the end of the *Peristephanon*[607] reveals the difficulty Prudentius had in trying to reconcile the presence of a crowd of spectators with the supposed secrecy of the rite of the taurobolium, and, as McLynn rightly remarks, "we might more plausibly envisage the blood-stained tauroboliate emerging from a sanctuary to display himself to an awed crowd; the hero of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, after his secret initiation to Isis, had likewise stood on a wooden platform to be 'unveiled' for public inspection."[608] And this is the crux of the matter in the sense of the "secret rites" and their place between public and private in Roman society. McLynn argues succinctly that "the key development of the fourth century might therefore be identified as the merger of the 'public' and the 'private' types of *taurobolium*, which (as far as we can tell) had involved essentially the same ritual but had differed in their intended beneficiaries and the degree of publicity; but now the pomp and spectacle of the public rites were at the disposal of private individuals."[609]

Much the same can be said of Mithraism in the fourth century, and moreover, this blurring of the public-private lines goes both ways. There was clearly an increase in the "privatization" of rites, as evidenced by the increased popularity of, and evidence for, *domus* mithraea in fourth century Rome, especially among the senatorial aristocracy, but at the same time it is important to note that this period also saw the use of several very large and semi-public mithraea, which seem to have remained in use throughout the entire fourth century and perhaps even into the early fifth century. Wolf Liebeschuetz makes a point of the distinction between secret rites and secret societies, and argues that "Mithraic groups were private societies, which met in private, and by lamp-light. But they were not secret societies.

[606] McLynn, "The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*," 318.
[607] Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, 10.1048.
[608] McLynn, "The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*," 318. McLynn cites Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11.24.
[609] McLynn, "The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*," 323.

Mithraea were often situated in frequented locations, and often even in public buildings."[610] As we have seen, this tendency was even more pronounced in the fourth century

It is in this context that the literary reports on Mithraic grades, initiations, hierarchies, and other small details should be understood. These were the "small secrets", the commonly known details which attracted new members to the cult, and not the "big secrets" of the cult, which remained the domain of the initiated. In many ways, it is this central importance of the act of initiation, as well as the private nature of the ritual, that make a comparison of Mithraic and Christian ritual mentality not only fruitful but necessary for understanding the relationship between these two cults in Rome. "In the Mysteries of Mithras the name suggests that, as in Christianity, full membership required initiation," writes Liebeschuetz, "and certainly all meetings took place in a space and under conditions appropriate to the experience of initiation. Then Mithraism, like Christianity once it was separate from Judaism, was not linked to the public religion of any political community. Moreover it was a purely private cult,"[611] although, we might add, it certainly – like Christianity – figured in the public eye.

We can reasonably conclude that some of the aspects of the Mithraic cult were commonly known in fourth century Rome, and that many of the mithraea of the city were known as such in the local environment, so that consequently the men seen entering and leaving the premises would have been known as Mithraists. The mithraea themselves and the identity of the community members were most likely not secret, but what these men actually *did* inside the mithraea during the Mithraic ceremonies remained hidden, at least to a large extent. The anonymous *Carmen contra paganos* describes an unnamed Roman prefect who initiates a priest, teaching him to "seek the Sun beneath the earth". The Latin reads: *Sacratus vester urbi quid praestitit, oro, qui hierium docuit sub terra quaerere solem*,[612] and the actual wording here is especially interesting in relation to Mithraic initiatory rituals in two respects. Since the

[610] Liebeschuetz, "The expansion of Mithraism," 196.
[611] Liebeschuetz, "The expansion of Mithraism," 195.
[612] *Carmen contra paganos*, 46-47.

prefect in question is most likely Vettius Agorius Praetextatus,[613] *pater patrum* in the cult of Mithras, while the "priest" in the poem is referred to as *hierius*, similar to the appellation of *hieroceryx* used to signify a Mithraic priesthood, it is quite possible that the passage refers to the initiation or confirmation of a new Mithraic *pater* by the *pater patrum* of the community, or communities, in question. The consequent allusion to another ritual performed which involved being "sent beneath the earth, stained with the blood of the bull",[614] is usually taken as a reference to the *taurobolium* as practiced in the cult of Magna Mater, but in this context, it seems rather to be a metaphorical reference to a Mithraic initiation, and the phrase is neatly echoed in a line in a mural at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum, reading: *et nos servasti … sanguine fuso* – "and you saved us, having shed the … blood"[615], presumably that of the bull. If the passage from the *Carmen contra paganos* is indeed a reference to a Mithraic ritual, we have one more instance of the main tenets, if not the actual detail and "meaning", of Mithraic ritual practice being known to the general public in Rome at the time.

In any case, it is clear that Christianity became much more visible to the uninitiated masses of Rome in the fourth century, and there seems to be reason to suspect that this was true also of the other religious communities of the city, although the evidence for this is more problematic owing to the general lack of evidence. In Rome, the richest religious communities are the most visible in both the archaeological and in the literary material, and consequently, there are many more sources for the religious practices of the senatorial elite than for communities with a lower socio-economic status. As we have seen, the mithraea and the associated statistical demographic models suggest that Mithraism was still popular, perhaps even in growth, among the non-elite population of Rome, but it is amongst the senators that the cult becomes most visible in the fourth century. Elite patronage was important not only for the

[613] There is no consensus at present as to the identity of the prefect, though the two most likely candidates are Praetextatus and Nichomachus Flavianus. Following McLynn, "The Fourth-Century *Taurobolium*", I believe that Praetextatus is the most likely candidate.
[614] *…sub terram missus, pollutus sanguine tauri*, *Carmen contra paganos*, 60.
[615] This famous line from the lower layer of paintings at the *Santa Prisca* mithraeum was originally reconstructed by Vermaseren (Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Santa Prisca*, 217-218) as: *et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso*, which he translated as "And you saved us after having shed the eternal blood." However, as Silvio Panciera pointed out (Panciera, "Materiale Epigrafico," 103-105), the word *eternali* is highly uncertain, and is best avoided. I have followed Panciera in my translation above.

religious community in question, but just as much for the status concerns and social networks of the aristocrats, and in this respect, Mithraism and Christianity were clearly much alike in the urban context of fourth century Rome. Indeed, just like the senatorial patronage of Christian communities found expression in financial and political support for churches and charities, one should consider the possibility that involvement in pagan cult, in this case Mithraism, was also an expression of aristocratic political considerations and fashion, as much as of sincere piety and religious self-expression. Alison Griffith argues that religious initiation had an important function in the social fabric of the elite networks of the Roman aristocracy, and that this had a pronounced effect on the increased visibility of Mithraism. According to Griffith:

> The possibility that [senatorial *domus*] mithraea were built for display and the existence of dedications to Magna Mater (also indicating the Mithraic grade of the initiate) from the temple of that officially recognized cult (the Vatican Phrygianum) suggests that revealing Mithraic initiation to one's social peers was important. Mithraic initiations were fashionable in the 4th century, but "mysteries" known by so many may well have ceased to be mysterious.[616]

Though much of the evidence indicates that the public face of the cult of Mithras was comparatively well known in the fourth century, and certainly seems to have left more of an impression in the contemporary sources than in the preceding two centuries, there is not enough solid evidence to suggest that the "mysteries" in the sense of the initiatory "truths" of Mithrais were known to many, nor that they ceased to be mysteries. The internal workings of the cult are, for a large part, still inaccessible to the modern scholar, but the structure of the cult at least becomes much more visible in the last century of its history. In Rome in this period, there seems to be a close connection between the initiatory hierarchy of the cult of Mithras, and the twin structures of the concept of *familia* and *domus* on the one hand, and the all important social network of patronage on the other. Much of this connection becomes visible through the use of the key terms of *pater* and *frater*, father and brother, and the highly symbolic gesture of the clasping of right hands by the initiated brothers.

[616] Griffith, "Archaeological Evidence," 259.

3.5. *Familia* structures and patronage

There were many similarities between Mithraic and Christian communities on the structural level, as is clear from the shared focus on initiatory hierarchy and from the adaptation of the social structural templates of the *familia* and the *domus* adopted by the communities. Both of these groups made extensive use of metaphorical kinship language to reinforce the hierarchical structures of the community, and in the case of both Mithraism and Christianity, this "family language" is primarily represented by the appellations of Father and Brother, and by the focus on the parallel vertical and horizontal structuring principles represented by these types of relationships. Marquita Volken points out the inherent growth potential of such a structure:

> A cult that uses small groups of men organized into cells could use a vertical structure of grades for the cells and a horizontal structure for an all encompassing hierarchy, thus eliminating a central figure of authority and central administration and so creating a flexible and adaptable network. This would mean that the relations between members and their position in the grade system were the most important parts of the overall organization. The cult authority would reside in the enforcement of the grade system and the strength of the interpersonal relations and commitment between members.[617]

This type of social structure, organized on both a vertical and on a horizontal axis, reinforces both natural authority and group cohesion at the same time, and although the Mithraic cult had more levels of initiation than Christianity, a structural comparison, based on the use of hierarchies structured along kinship lines, is still illuminating. In the case of the Christian use of kinship language, "the model of parent-child relations lends an air of naturalness to hierarchical relations among Christians even while it insists upon the essential similarity in substance among all Christians".[618] This finds a close parallel in Mithraism, where each community of *fratres* was headed by a *pater*, and sometimes it seems, one or more of the local communities were presided over by a *pater patrum*, the Father of the Fathers. The grade of *pater patrum* may, although we don't know this for certain, have functioned much like the Christian episcopate, with the Father of Fathers being in overall charge of several Mithraic communities.

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[617] Volken, "The development of the cult of Mithras," 7.
[618] Buell, *making Christians*, 117.

Just like in the Christian communities of the fourth century, there tended to be a close correspondence between the social and the religious status of the community leaders, and the evidence, although often circumstantial, indicates that members of the senatorial aristocracy dominated the top positions both in the Christian and the Mithraic communities in Rome and Italy at this time. In the case of the set of inscriptions from the Mithraic site of the *Piazza San Silvestro*, it seems that the *pater patrum* and the *pater* were also biologically father and son, and this state of affairs corresponds well with the overall power relations within the Roman *familia*. "Characteristic of the family structure of Antiquity was its asymmetry", argued Reidar Aasgaard recently. "It was a patriarchy: its organization was strongly hierarchical, with the oldest male in the central position."[619] And this is exactly how the organization of the Mithraic communities in general and the community of the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro* in particular appears to us from the evidence of the inscriptions.[620]

3.5.1. Brotherhood and hierarchy

Contrasting with the vertically structured organization represented by the *pater* in the position of highest authority and followed in turn by the representatives of the initiatory grades in decreasing order of importance, is the perceived equality of the brothers. According to Roger Beck, the result of this contrast was that, "as often in such enterprises, the Mithraic cell existed in a tension of hierarchy and egalitarianism. All Mithraists were 'brothers' (*fratres)*, 'handshakers' (*syndexioi)*, and 'initiates' (*mystai*). Yet there were of course leaders. In the generally accepted model of the cult, these were typically the 'Fathers' (*patres*), those who had achieved the highest rank in a cursus of seven grades."[621] As we have seen, the initiates described themselves as brothers, *fratres*, and used the appellation of *syndexi* – a transliteration from the Greek meaning "those who join right hands"[622] but which in Mithraism takes on the added meaning of "those *united* by the clasping of right hands", as the brothers were said to be "united

[619] Aasgaard, *Christian siblingship*, 49.
[620] V 400-406.
[621] Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras," 180.
[622] See White, *Social Origins II*, 406, note 183.

by the handshake of the illustrious Father."[623] The Latin form of the word is known from an inscription most likely connected to the *San Lorenzo* mithraeum,[624] and the inscription, in hexameter, concerns the celebrations of the dedication of the mithraeum and declares that the *pater* Proficientus constructed the Mithraic cave "so that the *syndexi* might in joy be able to perform their prayers together for ever".[625] Reinhold Merkelbach notes that "Hier ist *syndexi(i)* geradezu ein Name für alle Mithrasmysten; denn der Handschlag war die charakteristische Zeremonie dieses Kultes. Durch den Handschlag enstand eine feste persönlichen Beziehung; der Eingeweihte wurde zu einer Art Lehensmann des Paters."[626] Thus this ritual action in effect established both axes of the hierarchical structure at the same time.

An example of the use of brother-language similar to the usages in Mithraism and Christianity is found in a third century inscription to Jupiter Dolichenus where the listed initiates of the community are referred to as brothers, while the father of the candidates, mentioned in the first paragraph of the inscription, and seemingly occupying an intermediate position in the cult hierarchy, was responsible for their initiation.[627] Structurally, it seems that the hierarchy of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus had more than a little in common with the Mithraic grades, and though the evidence is scant, it is not unreasonable to assume that amongst the brothers of the cult, the role of "candidate", somewhere in between the priesthood and the ordinary worshippers, was akin to that of the *leo* in the Mithraic mysteries. I must point out that this connection remains conjectural however, and is only used here as an indication of a tendency towards similarities in organizational hierarchical structures in late antique religious communities. As we have seen, there seems to have been a Mithraic presence in the *Dolichenum* on the Aventine in Rome, a fact which serves to highlight both the structural similarities and the possibility of a close cultic relationship between the two varieties of religious community.

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[623] Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum*, 5.2.
[624] The inscription is V 423.
[625] In Latin the relevant passage reads: "Ut possint syndexi hilares celebrare vota per aevom".
[626] Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 107.
[627] Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome* II, 295.

According to Philip Harland, "we are witnessing primarily Roman phenomena".[628] Refuting the claim that this type of metaphorical brother-language was rare in "Greco-Roman ("pagan") associations or cults and relatively common in Christian groups", Harland shows that this misunderstanding primarily has to do with "a key difference in the genre of our sources for early Christian groups as opposed to associations. We have personal letters pertaining to early Christian groups (reflecting personal interaction), but rarely have any literary or epistolary evidence for the internal life of associations. Instead we have (public) monuments, including honorary inscriptions and epitaphs."[629] This is reflected in the nature of the evidence for Mithraism in late antique Rome, and it is worth noting that many of the direct references we have to the titles of *pater*, *frater*, and *syndexi*, are of a very private sort, found inside mithraea and only meant to be seen by the initiates themselves.

3.5.2. *Familia* and *domus*

The crucial link between the Mithraic initiatory hierarchy and the function of the brother-language is the central importance of the key terms and concepts of *familia*, *domus*,[630] and patronage. "These Greco-Roman family ideals of solidarity, goodwill, affection, friendship, protection, glory, and honor", argues Harland, "would be the sorts of values that would come to the minds of those who drew on the analogy of family relationships within group settings. When a member of a guild called a fellow 'brother,' that member was (at times) expressing in down-to-earth terms relations of solidarity, affection, or friendship, indicating that the association was a second home."[631] And home, *domus*, which was a concept which almost, but not quite, overlapped the meaning of the use of the word *familia*, could mean anything from the small nuclear family of a man, his wife, and their children – much like the modern concept of family – to a rather large community which included peripheral members of the extended family, slaves, freed

[628] Harland, "Familial Dimensions," 509.
[629] Harland, "Familial Dimensions," 495.
[630] For a clear and concise treatment of the relationship between the two concepts of *familia* and *domus* in the social structure of Roman society, see Aasgaard, *Christian siblingship*, 40-41.
[631] Harland, "Familial Dimensions," 513.

slaves beholden to the *pater familias*, and clients and hangers-on, which in the case of the largest and most influential noble families of Rome could number in the hundreds.

This extensive range in size – as well as the degree in which the *familia* fitted with the hierarchical pyramid structure – has much in common with the traces we find of the Mithraic communities of Rome. For example, we must imagine that the community which used the mithraeum of the *Via Giovanni Lanza 128* was a small and closeknit family unit, while the communities that frequented the very large and quite public mithraea of the *Terme di Caracalla* and the *Crypta Balbi* were not only larger but also, naturally, more heterogeneous groups. These groups closely resembled the familiar social structures of the plethora of different Roman voluntary associations which were generally within a similar size range to the Mithraic communities. According to Joseph Hellerman:

> Thirty to forty members constituted an average-sized group – and local in nature. The associations came together for a variety of purposes. Some groups consisted of persons who worked the same trades. Other groups gathered together to worship a specific god or goddess. Also to be included under the broad rubric of voluntary associations are the empire's synagogues and philosophical schools. Association activities typically included participation in communal meals and the election of members to magistracies or other positions of honor in the group.[632]

Both of these activities were central to Mithraic ritual practice; indeed one might argue, on the basis of the extant evidence, that the "participation in communal meals" and the "positions of honor in the group" were two of the most fundamental mechanisms of social interaction and structuring in the Mithraic communities in Rome.

In addition to the importance of patronage for the vertical chain of command of the community, the horizontal spread of the grade hierarchy would of course also have been dependent on the size and social makeup of the community, and recruitment and growth "relied, in part, on the close relations established between the sponsor and his initiands. This relationship may have mimicked the client patron system well known in Roman society."[633] One may imagine that some communities could be more

[632] Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family*, 4.
[633] Volken, "The development of the cult of Mithras," 12.

egalitarian than others, and this would more likely be the case in the more public larger communities which presumably had a more heterogeneous membership, than in the small *domus* communities dominated directly by the *pater familias*. On the other hand, duties and initiations might have been less rigorous in more private settings, but in any case, all the initiates were clearly, as emphasized by Richard Gordon, subordinate to the authority of the *pater* of the community. "This is one of the implications of the term 'brothers' occasionally employed to describe a group of Mithraists," argues Gordon. "The Father decided whom to admit to the cult, supervised many of the rituals including the dedication of votive-offerings, was responsible with some assistance for all initiations and grade promotions. In fact he was the outstanding figure in each cell."[634]

3.5.3. Fathers and sons

The outstanding figures in the fourth century Mithraic community in Rome which is best recorded in the epigraphic evidence, the community of the *Piazza San Silvestro*, are also the *patres*. Nonius Victor Olympius, the oldest male of the *familia* and bearing the title of *pater patrum*, and his son Aurelius Victor Augentius, holding the rank of *pater* of the community. According to Roger Beck, the most interesting thing about these inscriptions is actually what they do *not* say:

> There is no mention of Mithras, and there is no mention of those inducted into the various grades – with one exception: in 376 (V403) Aurelius Victor Augentius initiates his 13-year-old son Aemilianus Corfinius Olympius into the initial grade of Raven. Clearly, what the mysteries were largely "about" for this noble family was the noble family itself, not Mithras, not the cult brothers, but themselves. What it was "about" for the rank and file of this cult group, presumably composed largely of the family's clients and household, we can never know. But one may reasonably conjecture that appropriate representations of the patronal hierarchy were encouraged. This is not to say that the mysteries practiced under this noble family's aegis were less genuine, less alive, than those of earlier times and other places. Rather, it is to infer from the evidence of surface symptoms a change in how the initiates represented the mysteries to themselves and each other.[635]

This indirectly raises the central question of whether the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro* was the private mithraeum of the family of Nonius Victor Olympius, or whether Victor senior was in charge of

[634] Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman society," 101.
[635] Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, 98.

several mithraea in the city, as his title of *pater patrum* would suggest, while his son, Aurelius Victor Augentius was the presiding *pater* of this specific mithraeum. Further, we must ask who composed the rest of this community; was it the *familia* of the two men including younger siblings, clients, and slaves, or were the other initiates of roughly the same social group as the *patres*? A clue might be that the inscriptions which celebrate the initiations performed by the *patres* mention no other names apart from those of the Fathers themselves, except for one instance where a newly initiated *corax*, Nonius Victor Olympius' grandson Corfinius, is mentioned by name.

The span of a generation was in general much shorter in late antique Rome than it is today, and early initiation might have been a necessity if the candidate was to succeed his father in holding the highest rank of the community. The overlapping seen in the early initiation of Corfinius, still a few years away from assuming the *toga virilis*, might thus reflect the fact that "death rates entailed that many children lost their father very early, half of them before the age of twenty. Only about 20 per cent were born with a (paternal) grandfather still alive. Consequently, very many boys, already in their teens, would be the oldest living male in the family."[636]

It would seem from the initiation of Corfinius that there was indeed a rigid *cursus* of grades which had to be followed, or else Corfinius could easily have been inducted at for example the pivotal rank of *leo* rather than starting at the bottom of the ladder, so to speak, by being initiated into the servitor grade of *corax*. Corfinius seems to have been initiated shortly after the death of his grandfather, which made his father *pater patrum*. We do not know if there was another *pater* presiding over the mithraeum of the *Piazza San Silvestro* at this point, perhaps an uncle of the newly initiated Corfinius, or whether Aurelius Victor Augentius functioned in this capacity as well as that of *pater patrum*. Even if there had been another *pater* at the mithraeum who was not a member of the immediate family, the inscriptions need not have mentioned this. There is the possibility that initiations were the unique responsibility of the *pater patrum* in Rome at this time, or it may simply be that the inscriptions in question were put up by, and celebrated, the *familia* of the Augentii.

[636] Aasgaard, *Christian siblingship*, 37.

This focus on the members of the inner core of the *familia* indicates that the chief aim of these inscriptions was that they were set up to proclaim the ascendancy of this family dynasty rather than to record the initiations of members of the community. "Mithraic associations were small, intimate groups, made even closer by a solemn initiation ceremony," wrote Wolf Liebeschutz. He argued that: "it is unlikely that slaves were allowed to join without the permission, and indeed the encouragement of their master, and this would naturally have been forthcoming if the group had been set up by the master himself, with a view to, among other things, strengthening the solidarity of his household."[637] As we do not know with certainty anything about the community these fathers belonged to, we cannot tell who made up the membership of the congregation, though Alison Grifith recently made a convincing case for the community being made up of subordinate members of the extended *familia*.[638]

3.5.4. Leadership, patronage, and the senatorial elite

Closely connected to the role of the *pater* as *pater familias* is the function of the patron in the patronage system of reciprocal obligations. Consequently, the question of authority structures in Mithraism, and any structural similarities with the Roman *familia*, is tightly linked with the function of the system of patronage. This link is highly relevant when evaluating the importance of social standing within and outside of the cult hierarchy, especially in relation to the senatorial segment of the Mithraic population of Rome. The similarities between patronage and Mithraic hierarchy are also highly relevant in relation to the connection between different Mithraic groups, as well as providing clues to the function of the office or title of the *pater patrum*. When evaluating the extent of the structural similarities between the Mithraic communities and the patronage system and its exchanges of favours and obligations, the close connection between how the Mithraic grade hierarchy, the Roman extended *familia*, and the ubiquitous friendship networks of the leading families of Rome are structured quickly becomes apparent. This structural similarity is worth studying not only from the perspective of the social elite, the holders of authority, but also from the point of view of their dependents.

[637] Liebeschuetz, "The Expansion of Mithraism," 203.
[638] Griffith, "Mithraism," 8.

For instance, it is hard to imagine that the senators holding the rank of *pater patrum* were, in essence, simply glorified *patres* exerting influence only over their own immediate household, perhaps allowing sons and younger brothers the opportunity to be ordinary *patres* and thus setting them apart from the rest of the initiatory community. Rather, the semi-public locations and large dimensions of several of the late Roman mithraea suggests that while still a secret initiatory cult, Mithraism was also at this point in time visible in the religious landscape of the city, and the leadership as well as the sponsorship of these more visible communities would certainly be desirable for senators wanting to demonstrate to their peers their *pietas* as well as their social influence. Thus, the inscriptions of the *Phrygianum* should be seen more as fitting with an already established social hierarchy than as an aberration signaling a new type of Mithraism. Mithraic communities had always been patronized by the wealthy, at least this was the case in the city of Rome from the very earliest times, and the elevation of a considerable number of wealthy individuals to the ranks of the senatorial aristocracy in the mid-fourth century would simply make the desire for religious sponsorship even more attractive, and consequently such religious patronage became more noticeable in our sources in the course of the fourth century.

According to Michele Salzman, the Roman aristocrats were above all concerned with belonging to the right status group, and this extended to participation in, and patronage of, a variety of religious communities:

> Senatorial aristocrats traditionally sought pagan priesthoods because they offered another arena in which to demonstrate and augment honor; pagan ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and holidays had for centuries allowed the aristocrat to assert preeminence in public. At home pagan family rites reinforced the patriarchal social order, conferring prestige on male aristocrats. In private cultic settings the aristocrat gained honor before his peers.[639]

The private cultic settings were not only confined to traditional Roman cult and to Mithraism and the "oriental religions", but certainly also allowed Christianity to attract many new recruits from the ranks of the aristocrats in this period. For instance, Jerome reports that the *vir clarissimus* and Mithraic priest

[639] Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 20.

Albinus cradled his newborn granddaughter, a consecrated Christian virgin, as a doting grandfather would, while remaining a staunchly pagan *pater familias*. He does not berate Albinus for being a religious opponent, but merely consoles, as we have seen, Albinus's daughter Laeta by assuring her that the old senator would surely see the error of his ways and become a Christian in the end.

Returning to the inscriptions commissioned by Nonius Victor Olympius and his sons, it is important to note that they do not commemorate the donation of moneys, furniture, or icons to the mithraeum or to the community. Nor do they give thanks for a fulfilled promise or a successful venture. Instead, they celebrate the initiation of junior members into the lower grades by the Fathers of this Mithraic community. This focus on recording the act of the initiatory ritual reveals that the old grade hierarchy with its ritual initiations was still very much in operation in late antique Rome, and this shows that Mithraism in fourth century Rome was clearly no more a phenomenon of small intellectual elites with an axe to grind than it had been in the preceding centuries. Indeed, in pragmatic terms, most of the senatorial aristocracy of Rome in the mid-to-late fourth century owed their advancement to the house of Constantine, and, whether pagan or Christian, the Roman elite had a distinct place in the social, political, and religious fabric of the city.

The motivation of the elite for joining, or more likely for continuing their participation in, the cults is closely connected to the required demonstrations of *pietas* from their grandfathers. Their standing in their social peer group depended on the degree to which these men embodied the traditional Roman virtues, and any system that would allow them to show such virtues, in this case primarily *pietas*, would be well received by their peers. Additionally, the structure of the initiatory religious communities perpetuated the complex network of the parallel systems of patronage and friendship which was of fundamental importance in late antique Rome, both for the senators and for the rest of the population of the city. This network was closely mirrored by the Mithraic initiatory hierarchy with its vertical and horizontal community structures precipitated by the language of Fatherhood and Brotherhood and continually reinforced by the traditional friendship gesture of the clasping of right hands. It is clear that patronage was in no way defunct amongst the senatorial aristocracy and their dependents in Rome in the

fourth century. On the contrary, it may have become even more important as the wealthy elite of the city became more introvert and more concerned with city rather than empire. The fourth century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus reports that the aristocrats would not venture outside without a huge throng of clients and other followers which displayed their importance.[640] Clearly, religious leadership offered a very attractive mechanism for extending and maintaining such a network, both for the patron himself and for the increasingly under-employed citizens of Rome who were his clients.

3.6. The *cultores mithrae* in fourth century Rome

Who filled the mithraea of Rome in the fourth century? The answer should be that the Mithraic communities were made up by a representative selection of the population of the city, from the poorest unemployed day-workers in the Tiber-side slums to the exalted ranks of the *clarissimi* themselves. The members of the Mithraic groups in Rome in this period were still organized in a hierarchical community structure which shared many similarities with the dynamics of Roman society at large. Although the hierarchical grade structure of the cult of Mithras is often compared with that of the Roman army, civilian life also shared many of the same mechanisms, especially where authority and influence were concerned, and Manfred Clauss indeed concludes that "the relations between the social structure as a whole and that of the religious organization were extremely close. Against this background, we can understand the efforts of the individual to ascribe his success, both within the cult and in the wider society, to his readiness to obey and his ability to accomodate."[641]

As to whether the *pater* of a Mithraic community, the chief position of religious authority in the group, also may have held the highest social status in it, there is no clear answer. One might suppose, however, that any man who sponsored a Mithraic community would also want to maintain some authority over it. On the other hand, the history of religion is filled with examples of religious sponsors who are subordinate to the priests of their community in religious matters. In the end, it remains likely that in the

[640] Ammianus, *Res gestae*, 14.6.
[641] Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 41.

corpus of epigraphic evidence from Rome, individuals holding the grade of *pater patrum* presided over several mithraea by virtue of either seniority or as an honorary title, while each mithraeum was controlled on a day-to-day basis by its own *pater*. This structure could be an attempt to control the interaction between many closely situated communities in a relatively limited space, however, and the system need not necessarily have been true of other Mithraic communities outside Rome. Finally, we should note at this point that while the senatorial elite in Rome seems to have preferred *domus* mithraea, it is possible, indeed probable, that members of the aristocracy may have been financial sponsors of the larger "public" mithraea. Perhaps that was what earned them the title of *pater patrum* in our sources. Such a scenario would also seem to fit well with the model of patronage, and with the traditional Roman values of *fides*, *amicitia* and *pietas*. Whatever the reason for the title of *pater patrum*, it is quite possible that these few senators could have acted like "bishops" of Mithraism in Rome and abroad, much like their Christian counterparts did, with the bishops of Rome, Milan, and Ravenna being drawn almost uniquely from the ranks of the senatorial aristocracy. I must stress, however, that there is little firm evidence to support this argument.

Mithraism, then, was indeed not alien to fourth century Rome, nor was it a *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon living out its half-life in the collective imagination of a desperately outdated and disenfranchised aristocracy. It was simply another expression of the all-important inherent social structures of the time and place – its own religio-historical context. The concept of a new "senatorial" syncretistic Mithraism far removed from the "real Mysteries" rests, in the end, on two false assumptions. The first is that there was a break in the continuity of the Mithraic corpus of evidence – and this is based mainly on the epigraphic record – and the second is the perceived antagonistic relationship between "paganism" and Christianity in late antique Rome, a scenario which based on new scholarship on late antique Roman religions and society clearly merits reconsideration.

Continuity, change, and the end of the Mithraic communities of Rome

This study has shown, based on a re-appraisal of the archaeological, iconographical, and textual evidence, that the cult of Mithras in its traditional form was alive and well in the city of Rome throughout the fourth century CE. Contrary to the commonly held opinion that Mithraism in Rome had disappeared by the late fourth century, and that extant fourth century evidence for Roman Mithraism pertained to a syncretistic senatorial revival of certain aspects of a long-dead cult, the examination of the archaeological remains of mithraea in this study have shown that most of the mithraea seem to have been in use up until the late fourth or early fifth century. Far from abandonment and destruction, the analysis of the mithraea and their decoration highlights continuity and survival. There is even evidence to suggest that several mithraea were constructed *de novo* in the latter half of the fourth century, which would indicate that at least some Mithraic communities in Rome flourished at this time. Indeed, stability and growth are the two themes which clearly run through all the material examined and discussed in this study.

The mithraea are the most obvious material remains of Mithraic communities. While most Mithraic icons lack a strict archaeological context, in the sense that they are seldom documented *in situ* in stringently executed and properly recorded excavations of mithraea, the excavated mithraea themselves still allow us a glimpse of a Mithraic community simply by their presence. The mithraea as Mithraic sites still supply data on topography, distribution, and size, even if no decoration, coinage, or other material evidence is preserved. In Rome, the late antique mithraea provide us with a large quantity of data which seems to highlight several trends in the overall impression of the community life of the Mithraists in the city, notably a strong overall impression of continuity. The most pronounced trend, visible from the mid-third to the late fourth century is the refurbishing, redecoration, enlargement, and construction *de novo* of mithraea throughout the city. Enlargement of existing mithraea and construction of new ones in the late third and the fourth century suggest, as I have argued throughout this study, that the cult may actually, contrary to common opinion, have been in growth in this period, and that at least it was not in decline.

The themes of stability and growth, described above, are reflected in the Mithraic art of the late antique city and environs, with the main emphasis again being on a clear continuity in choice and execution of iconographic motifs. Contrary to what seems to be the situation with Mithraic art from for example Syria, notably in the mithraea at *Dura-Europos* and *Huarte*, Mithraic iconography and even artistic styles in Rome remained remarkably stable throughout this period, and there is little to distinguish fourth century Mithraic art in Rome from that of the previous centuries. This goes against all expectations, for if there was an entirely new syncretistic Mithraism in Rome in the late fourth century, one would expect that this would find expression in changes, or at least a somewhat higher frequency of variation, in the corpus of Mithraic art deriving from Rome and central Italy. As we have seen, however, the examination of the iconographical material in question shows that this was not the case.

Instead it seems that Mithraic art in Rome throughout the life of the cult depended on geographical factors rather than on temporal ones, and in many ways there are clear Roman, or central Italian, preferences traceable in Mithraic art, both in style and in execution. In Rome, the main icon of the cult, the image of the tauroctonous Mithras, generally did not include any side-scenes when executed in relief, but the very few tauroctony murals that have been recovered, suggest that in these paintings, the side-scenes were often included. The painted stucco icons, clearly a very Roman phenomenon, belong typologically somewhere in between the reliefs and the murals, and the tendency of these icons to include a few additional symbol elements within the main composition, places them between the reliefs and the murals in this respect too. One possible explanation for this grading of the inclusion of additional elements and side-scenes, with the murals including more side scenes than the reliefs, is to be found, I think, in the Roman preference for the three dimensional icon. In the case of this type of "exploded" icon, as I termed it in chapter 2, elements of the main composition, as well as possible side-scenes, are taken out of the main composition and placed throughout the sacred space of the mithraeum creating a three-dimensional tableau where the initiates could enter into the icon in a symbolic as well as in a spatial sense.

This relative freedom in the choice of elements to be included in Mithraic artwork, and especially in the choice of execution – mural, stucco, or relief – of the main icons in the mithraea that remained in

use during the fourth century, seems to be another important peculiarity of the Roman material. While smaller auxiliary or at least secondary tauroctony reliefs remained quite static in style and execution, in almost all the mithraea that we have studied where there is evidence for the main icon of the mithraeum, the main cult icon itself was uniquely individual in both style and execution. Consequently, even though basic reliefs are numerous in the Roman material, very few of these basic tauroctonies seem, as I argued in the preceding chapter, to have been used as main icons in the Roman mithraea.

In the end, the individuality highlighted by the choice of icon seems to be key to understanding the varied Mithraic communities of late antique Rome. Mithraism had at this point found purchase in all levels of society, and it is clear that the Mithraism of each Mithraic community would have been influenced by its immediate socio-economic context as well as by the social networks in which each community took part. Thus, the Mithraism practiced by the political and intellectual elite of the city surely differed in many more or less perceptible ways from the Mithraism practiced in ad hoc shrines by the population of the Tiber-side slums, or from the rituals enacted by the users of the cathedral-like mithraeum of the *Terme di Caracalla*. In each case, the practices and rituals clearly derived from a common basis, however, and Mithraic inscriptions and archaeological remains from the fourth century still remain identifiable as such. Indeed, the abundance of Mithraic evidence that can be associated more or less firmly with the fourth century indicates that reports of Mithraism's death were greatly exaggerated.

The Mithraic communities of the fourth century seem instead to have remained proportionally stable in relation to the estimated population of the city of Rome in this period, and there is hard evidence, discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation, to confirm that the cult survived in all the different sectors of the city where we can reasonably expect to find archaeological remains pertaining to the cult. Furthermore, all social layers of Roman society seem to be represented in the material, and growth, or at least numerical stability, seems to apply to the lower strata of society as well as to the senatorial aristocracy of the city, a group which is underrepresented in the epigraphic material until the mid-to-late fourth century.

As far as the elite is concerned, little of the evidence for fourth century Mithraism can be positively associated with members of the senatorial aristocracy in fourth century Rome. This suggests that any postulated senatorial brand of Mithraism must be viewed as an expansion of the traditional membership base and not as a replacement of the older demographics of the cult. Additionally, there is no evidence, material or otherwise, for any doctrinal variation in the most general sense of the word between traditional Mithraism and the late antique brand of Mithraism associated with the pagan reaction. The inclusion of a wide range of religious titles, connected to both the traditional civic priesthoods and to several "oriental" cults, on the altars of the *Phrygianum* do not prove that the cult practices and doctrines had become conflated with that of other "oriental" deities, nor that any hint of "syncretistic paganism" had replaced the beliefs and practices of the older cults. They only show that a handful of men of senatorial rank held priestly office in several cults at the same time, a practice which was not uncommon in Rome at any time in history. In essence, there are no grounds to suggest that the Mithraism practiced by these men was any less sincere than that of initiates on lower rungs of the social ladder, or of the communities of the preceding two centuries.

Mithraism in Rome was alive and well throughout the fourth century, and some evidence suggests that it might even have survived well into the fifth century.[642] The cult seems to have become more visible in the public eye from the mid-third century onwards, and several of the mithraea that were in use in the city in the fourth century were in what might be considered quite public locations where the existence of the mithraeum, if not the actual cult practices themselves, must have been known to the local community. Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest an increase in the use of house mithraea in the fourth century. It remains unclear, however, if this was a phenomenon restricted to the more affluent layers of society since the establishment of a mithraeum in the *domus* necessitated sacrificing part of a private building to the cult, or whether *domus* mithraea were relatively common also in less wealthy circles, paralleling the mode in which it has traditionally been assumed that Christian "house churches" operated

[642] The survival of the cult of Mithras into the early fifth century is discussed below. See also chapter 1 for a discussion of the archaeological evidence for the survival and continued use of some Roman mithreae in the fifth century.

prior to the beginning of the fourth century. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 1, there seem to be quite a few similarities between Christian and Mithraic communities in late antique Rome, both in relation to the use of house mithraea/churches, but also in relation to the similarities between the larger scale Christian structures and the larger semi-public mithraea in their function as communal sacred spaces. This closer association and peaceful coexistence between Mithraism and Christianity might shed light on the eventual disappearance of the cult in Rome. Manfred Clauss argued for the assimilation of the Mithraists into the Christian communities in the fourth century by stating that, "the cult of Mithras had always had a large element of dutifulness, a strong connection with constituted political authority. This may have induced many to accommodate themselves to the demand for a new kind of loyalty in the fourth century. Moreover," Clauss continues, "the similarities between the two religions … must have encouraged Mithraists in particular to become Christians. They had no need in their new faith to give up the ritual meal, their Sun-imagery, or even their candles, incense and bells."[643] I do agree with Clauss concerning the relatively painless integration of the Mithraists, but I don't believe this integration would have happened on a large scale in the fourth century.

This integration, and the consequent disappearance of the cult of Mithras in Rome, is, I believe, much more likely to be a phenomenon of the early fifth century. This point of view is supported by John Curran's arguments concerning systematic persecution of pagans in Rome: "Absent from Theodosius' measures[644] are the chilling threats of death, replaced instead by fines, proscription, and the loss of status. The apparent humaneness of the punishments should not obscure the fact that Theodosius' law made possible the systematic persecution of the old cults; a phenomenon that belongs to the fifth, not the fourth century."[645] When Mithraism did disappear, it was not as a result of active persecution, but rather, we must imagine, as a result of what Richard Gordon describes as Christian hostility in a "weak sense":

[643] Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 172.
[644] Curran is refering to Theodosius' law of February 391 which defined the central public acts of the state religion as illegal.
[645] Curran, *Pagan city and Christian capital*, 216.

> The end of Mithraism may be ascribed to the hostility of Christians in a weak or a strong sense. The weak sense would imply the gradual abandonment of worship as the Christianization of the State and of public life took ever more interventionist form, particularly in small cities and towns where individuals could scarcely escape notice. On that scenario, Mithraism would have ceased mainly as a result of indirect pressures, which caused its adherents to feel that the benefits of practicing their beliefs had come to be outweighed by the cost.[646]

If that is the "how" of the end of Mithraism in Rome, it is natural to assume that the precipitous decline in the population of the city after the sack by the Goths in 410, which had a negative effect on the religious life of the non-Christian communities of Rome, is the "when". After all, following on from the frenzied church building in the early fifth century, much of the re-construction of the city was organized and financed by the Christian leaders of the city. Rome had become the Christian capital of the empire.

[646] Gordon, "The end of Mithraism in the northwest provinces," 684-685.

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