The Roman Cult of Mithras

Religious Phenomenon and Brotherhood

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he male [god] they worship is a cattle rustler, and his cult they relate
to the potency of fire...united by the handshake of the illustrious Father."1 So wrote
the Christian writer Firmicus Maternus about the followers of Mithras showing
much contempt and little understanding on one of the most widespread ancient
mystery religions—Mithraism. The worship of Mithras—a god of Persian origin—was
part of the so-called "mystery cults" that developed in the East and rapidly spread
all over the provinces under Roman rule, reaching its greatest extent during the
second and third centuries A.D. The present analysis will limit its attention to three
areas only. It will first consider, Italy—mainly Rome and Ostia where this cult was
very popular—and Gallia-Germania-Noricum (modern France, Germany, and
Austria) and third, ancient Syria (modern eastern Turkey and Syria) as
representatives, respectively, of western provincial territories and an eastern
province. In particular, two aspects will be the objects of investigation: Mithras' iconicography and inscriptions in order to identify his visual patterns, various
epithets, and associations with other deities, and the very nature of the Mithraic
religion as a mystery cult. The purpose of conducting an analysis of both the
Mithraic image, and of what it may have meant for Mithras' worshippers to be part
of this mystery religion, will help explain the reasons for the cult's widespread
popularity. This cult became very popular, specifically among the Roman soldiers
all over the empire, despite the fact that Mithras was the god of Rome's enemies—
the Parthians. I will argue that the key to understand Mithras' popularity is to be found, first of all, in his iconography and not his theology, namely in his simple and
yet powerful image. Secondly, as a mystery religion, Mithras' cult not only had a
votive character, but also offered an opportunity for a secret brotherhood—an
organizational structure similar to a secret society of a Masonic type that must have
been particularly appealing for soldiers. Finally, the syncretic and universal aspects
of the Mithraic cult represent additional elements that can help explain the Parthian
god's popularity among the Roman troops.

Before proceeding with the analysis of why Mithraism was so wide-spread
particularly among the soldiers, it is necessary to address the problem of the
sources. In contrast with Mithraism's popularity and the fact that Mithraic
sanctuaries can be found all over the Roman provinces, historians are faced with a
dearth of literary source material on Mithras. This is not surprising and can be
explained in part by the fact that, as a mystery cult, Mithraism had an element of
secrecy. Because the written evidence on the cult of Roman Mithras is very scarce
as few documents have survived, scholars have looked at evidence from material
culture and, in particular, they have relied on the comprehensive catalogue of
inscriptions and monuments which offers a valuable source about the Mithraic cult

1 Firmicus Maternus, De Errorre Profanarum Religionum, 5.2, translated by Marvin W. Meyer, The
Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook. Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean
and its worshippers. While this monumental list of epigraphical evidence provides information on both the patterns of nomenclature for the god Mithras and the people that were involved in this mystery cult, the archaeological remains—mainly of architectural and pictorial nature—help identify visual patterns associated with the Mithraic religion. The few written documents available, the epigraphical material, and the visual elements from material culture will constitute the main base for the evidence presented in this article. Among the many problems in dealing with evidence of archaeological nature there is the fact that images, monuments, and artifacts speak their own language, therefore attempting to “translate” the visual into text is a process that requires the help of various tools, such as an understanding of the social context and values of that particular past society. Thus, one should keep in mind that ancient Romans were polytheistic and that their concept of religion and relationship with the divine differed from the belief system of our modern, predominantly monotheistic, society. In the case of Mithraism in particular, it is necessary to consider anthropological aspects and sociological significance of ancient mystery cults in order to understand the appeal of the cult to many ancient Romans.

The cult of Mithras fascinated people in antiquity, and it has also raised much interest among modern scholars. Historians have produced a plethora of articles and books since 1896-1899. Mithraism has attracted an enormous amount of scholarly attention, mainly because of the supposed link with Christianity. In the last few

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2 Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithraeae* (Hagae Comitis: M. Nijhoff, i-i, 1956-1960), hereafter cited as CIMRM followed by the document number. The dating of the inscriptions is provided when available.

3 Knowing the social context—and specifically the Weltanschauung and role within society of those for whom the image or artifact was intended—constitutes relevant information when using material culture as historical evidence. Peter Burke exemplifies this concept by mentioning how the painting by Tiziano entitled *Sacred and Profane Love* can be understood correctly only if viewers are aware of the changes through time in assumption about nudity. The clothed Venus represents the profane love, while the naked woman symbolizes the sacred love—contrarily to what our modern sensibility would suggest. See Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 38-9.

4 I am referring in particular to concepts such as soul, salvation, and afterlife that, even when present in antiquity, had a different significance for the ancient people than the meanings attributed to those notions in modern times. For the pitfall of anachronism when dealing with ancient religions, see John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indian University Press, 2003), 18-21.


6 Many scholars have interpreted Mithras as a “savior” and perceived Mithraism as a religion of salvation and redemption. For an interpretation of Mithraic salvation, see Leroy A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 371-93. For the soteriological nature of mystery cults in general (with particular emphasis on Mithraism), see also Ugo Bianchi and Maarten J.
decades, the focus on the cult of Mithras has been on theology, namely on deciphering the “mystery” behind the mystery cult. Thus, many historians have looked at the Mithraic iconography and from it they have extrapolated an abstract meaning—often rather complex—that links Mithras to a deeper astronomical and astrological paradigm. Other analyses have pointed out a convergence of Neoplatonic ideas with the theology of Mithraism. In particular, a recent interpretation of the so-called “Mithras Liturgy” has connected the latter to the theurgy, or ritual practice of the Chaldaean Oracles. Additionally, attempts have also been made to interpret Mithras as something else or rather someone else, thus speculating on the symbolism of the god and proposing an understanding of Mithras and its cult in allegoric terms. Instead of analyzing the Mithraic theology in order


8 The so-called “Mithras Liturgy” is a section of a fourth century A.D. Graeco-Egyptian papyrus, namely lines 475-834 of the “Great Magical Papyrus” of the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris. See Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, 211-21. It is one of the most perplexing texts concerning the worship of Mithras. Because it mentions the “ascent of the soul,” many scholars have found connections between this text and Neoplatonic ideas. For an interpretation of how the ritual technique of ascent in the *Mithras Liturgy* may find its closest parallel in the theurgic practices of the *Chaldaean Oracles* (a collection of enigmatic verses from the second century quoted by Neoplatonists), see Radcliffe Edmonds, “Did the Mithraists Inhale? A Technique for Theurgic Ascent in the Mithras Liturgy, the Chaldaean Oracles, and some Mithraic Frescoes” in *The Ancient World* 32 (2001): 10-22.

9 See Michael P. Speidel, *Mithras-Orion: Greek Hero and Roman Army God* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980). Speidel’s study provides a clear attempt to interpret Mithras as someone else and Mithraism as permeated with symbolism. He has formulated a complex analysis on the Mithraic cult—an analysis in which he connects Mithras to the constellation Orion and his myth. Speidel has suggested that Mithras was in reality the Greek deity Orion. This would explain his popularity in the Roman army, since Orion was a Greek hero, strong, swift, armed—in fact he was called “the swordbearer”—and very skilled in hunting. More importantly, as the son of Mars and a victorious military leader himself, “he was the epitome of manhood ... and the embodiment of a fierce warrior” (Speidel, *Mithras-Orion*, 38).

According to Speidler, astral features and astrological significance would also permeate the Mithraic cult. A cosmic meaning would be attached to Mithras’ icon, which represents a series of equatorial constellations—such as the bull being the Taurus constellation, the scorpion being the zodiac sign of Scorpio and so forth. In essence, Speidel sees Mithraism as a Greek cosmic religion, not a Persian cult. Thus, when faced with the question “why did a truly Greek religion present itself in an Iranian garment?” he simply dismisses it with an anachronistic statement, namely that the founders of the cult shared the old Greek and Roman belief that “the wisdom of the Orient was superior to their own” (Speidel, *Mithras-Orion* 46). In my opinion, it is not clear why the Romans could not have worshipped Orion directly, and instead they chose a “disguised” Mithras—dressed in Persian garments, but actually a Greek god!—because in reality they wanted to pay their devotion to Orion.

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to understand the significance of Mithras and its cult, it is necessary to focus, respectively, on his image and on the aspect of this mystery religion as a social function and a bonding experience among its worshippers.

First of all, in order to explain the god's appeal a look at how Mithras was represented in mural paintings, reliefs, and statues, is instrumental. A reason for the popularity of Mithras' cult was in the power of its simple and at the same time evocative iconography. That Mithras may have had a deeper, secondary meaning is not to be excluded. The various interpretations of Mithraism within an astrological context fail to explain why the cult became so popular, particularly among soldiers. Most likely, the more abstract meaning was known to very few worshippers of the cult—the patres, or those at the top of the cult hierarchy. However, it was in the direct perception of Mithras' image—an direct reading of his iconography that was accessible to the any common viewer—that one can find the "mystery" of the cult's appeal. Overall, Mithras' iconography presented an image that combined new and old, simple and familiar features with more exotic ones.

With very few exceptions, Mithras' iconography is very consistent throughout the Roman territories. Typically, he wears Persian clothing, such as a Phrygian cap, flying cloak, tunic, and trousers. He is represented in the act of slaughtering a bull, which he holds down with one hand while with the other hand he holds a dagger (Mithras Tauroctonos). The Latin poet Statius described the scene of Mithras slaying the bull precisely as it is consistently found in archaeological evidence, namely with the god grabbing the bull by the horns and trying to pull the animal toward the opposite direction. As part of the bull-killing scene, one may often find a dog, a snake, a scorpion, a crow (raven), and two torchbearers—identified as the deities Cautes (with torch up) and Cautopates (with torch down). Around this "standard" scene (tauroctony, or the bull slaying), the twelve signs of the zodiac also appear in some cases. In addition, there are some images of a banquet between Mithras and the sun-god and representations of his birth from a rock. His

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11 The image of Mithras does not differ much from East to West. One of the few variants is a statue found in Ostia that represents the god dressed like a Greek hero with the chiton (cf. CIMRM 239). Because he is not wearing the Persian trousers that are a key component of his eastern attire, Mithras resembles more a Greek god according to Speidler (cf. Speidler, Mithras-Orion, 24-5). This is one of the proofs used by Speidler to justify the connection Mithras-Orion and, in the end, according to the Dutch scholar, despite Mithras' Persian garments, "Mithraism was ostensibly a Persian cult... [since] the myth of Mithras is largely the myth of the Greek hero Orion" (Speidler, Mithras-Orion, 3). See also previous footnote. However, it is worth noting that Mithras is depicted rather consistently in his eastern/Persian attire with trousers and the Phrygian cap.


13 In ancient mythology, the torchbearer Cautes was linked to the south wind, whereas Cautopates was associated with the north wind; Porphyr, De AntrO Nymphenarum, 24 in Scarpi, Le religioni dei misteri, 360. However, some scholars hold that the two deities corresponded respectively to the rising and setting sun—ascending and descending in relation to the equator; see Robert Turcan, The Gods of Ancient Rome: Religion in Everyday Life from Archaic to Imperial Times (New York: Routledge, 2001), 132.

14 Among the various examples, see CIMRM 42, Syria, Dura-Europos, approx. 168 A.D. and CIMRM 695, Rome, Italy.

15 See CIMRM 42, Syria, Dura-Europos for an example of the banquet of Mithras and Helios. See also CIMRM 894, Gallia, St. Aubin: exceptional representation of Mithras' rock-birth depicting the naked child stepping out of the piled up boulders, on which he leans with both hands; CIMRM 966, Gallia, Pons Saravi: Mithras' rock-birth; CIMRM 985, Gallia, Augusta Treverorum: Mithras' rock-birth.

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peculiar birth not only appears in inscriptions and is represented in statues, but it is also mentioned in Firmicus Maternus, who called Mithras ὁ ἄρχων, or "the god (born) from the rock," and in Commodianus, who referred to the Persian god as "invictus de petra natus [...] deus" (the invincible god born from a rock). Finally, other elements in the Mithraic imagery are the presence of stars on his flying cloak or around his head, and sun rays and a nimbus also around his head.

Despite his Persian attire, Mithras' image must have appeared very familiar and rather appealing to the soldiers, since the god represents a hunter—or rather a hero—and conveys the idea of strength, courage, and invincibility. Mithras appears as "an energetic god, active, unconquerable, unsurpassable." The god's image is very powerful in its straightforwardness. The power of Mithras' image lies in his direct appeal: the act that the god is performing is not mysterious or unusual, but rather evokes a familiar context to soldiers, namely a fight, a struggle in order to subdue the dangerous "other" or the enemy. Mithras was thought to be the creator and father of all, the Demiurges, whose creative energy generated and still permeates the entire cosmos. The god Mithras struggled with the white cosmic bull, which he finally overcame and killed. The bull represented a force that had to be subdued, like the enemies of Rome. In essence, Mithras' image is simple and primordial as it incorporates recognizable elements (sun as the good force and bull as the antagonist—a strong power to fight against) and, at the same time, it is peculiar and unfamiliar (the god's eastern attire). The Mithraic scene also portrays a scorpion, a snake, and a dog that appear to be wanting to extract the life out of the slaughtered bull by attacking its genitals. This image expresses a concept of cosmic opposites—the duality of good versus evil (Mithras versus his antagonists). Thus, Mithraic iconography is ultimately universal in his syncretism of old and new, familiar and unfamiliar, good and bad.

Furthermore, the contrast between unfamiliar versus familiar features in Mithras' representation is mirrored in his nomenclature and connection with other gods. On the one hand, like his attire, the god's name is "foreign" since it is a Latinized form, through the Greek, of the Avestan "Mithra" that means "pact, contract, covenant." On the other hand, Mithras is familiar as his portrayal appears in association with other deities, such as Apollo, Helios, Iuppiter Dolichenus, and Hercules, hence showing that the Persian god was of the same "status" as long-established, well-known deities. For instance, one of the oldest Mithraic monuments

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17 CIMRM 90, Syria, Latakieh-Tartous, first half of the second century A.D.: head of Mithras with Phrygian cap and surrounded by a nimbus and rays.
18 R.L. Gordon underlies the concept of invincibility as a key component of the Mithraic image and states that Mithras is god, hero, and athlete at the same time. According to Gordon, "the language of 'invincibility', of 'physical' strength, of struggle and victory was taken over from pre-existing narrative and iconographical patterns, which served to familiarize the unfamiliar 'Persian' god, to assimilate him to a pattern of classical heroes" (Gordon, "Authority, Salvation and Mystery," 49), and, I would add, of Roman gods. For an example of Mithras as hunter, see CIMRM 55, Syria, Dura-Europos and CIMRM 77, Syria, Sidon, 188 A.D.
21 Mithra (Mīθra-), nominative) is the Avestan form whereas Mithras or Mithres the Latin and Greek forms.

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from Roman times shows the association Apollo-Mithras-Helios.22 In general, various deities are present in Mithraic sanctuaries–deities that were supposed to protect each grade of initiate (such as Venus for the second grade).23 A strange-looking figure is often found connected to the cult of Mithras—a lion-headed god, who is encircled by the coils of a snake and may likely represent Aion, also identified as Chronos (time or cosmic eternity).24

More importantly, Mithras is connected with the cult of the sol invictus, or unconquered sun.25 This is not surprising, since Mithras was not only linked to the idea of contract, but he was also the Persian god of light and justice. Although Mithras and the sun-god are separate in the Persian myth, yet their figures often tend to merge and blend.26 Altars to sol invictus have been found in Mithraic sanctuaries along with inscriptions attributing that title (either sol invictus or deus sol invictus) to Mithras himself.27 Undoubtedly, the appellative of “invincible” given to Mithras along with the persistent emphasis upon light and brightness made this god very attractive in the eyes of the soldiers.28 In addition, the Mithras-sun association conferred a universal character to the deity, since the sun is a primordial and powerful element that was an object of worship in many ancient societies, both east and west.

22 See the archeological complex at Commagene (Eastern Turkey): CIMRM 28, Syria, Nemrud-Dagh, approx. 69-34 B.C. In the sepulchral monument of King Antiochus I of Commagene among the five eight-meter high statues there is one representing Apollo-Mithras in a sitting posture on a throne. For an English translation of the inscription on the throne, see John Ferguson, The Religions of the Roman Empire (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 83. In the same monument one can also admire a relief of Apollo-Mithras-Helios. See also CIMRM 33, Syria, Samosata, same as above: Apollo-Mithras-Helios (same time / Antiochus of Commagene).

23 For the Mithraic seven grades of initiation, see pages 13-14.

24 CIMRM 78, Syria, Sidon, 188 A.D.: an entirely naked figure with a lion’s head (Aion). Beneath his wide-open mouth there is the head of a snake, entwining him with three large coils. CIMRM 879, Gallia, Arelata: dressed torso of a standing Aion, whose head and legs got lost. A serpent, winding itself in three coils round the god’s body, rests its head on the god’s breast. Between the coils of the snake, there are the twelve signs of the zodiac. Thus, the serpent must symbolize “the annual circumvolutions of the sun in the ecliptic and its passage through the different constellations.” Robert Turcan, The Cults of the Roman Empire (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 226.

25 The sol invictus (or El Gabal) was originally a Syrian sun deity whose worship was actively promoted in Rome by the emperor Elagabalus (r. 218-222). See Leslie Adkins and Roy Adkins, Dictionary of Roman Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Gaston H. Halsberghe, The Cult of Sol Invictus (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972).

26 Ferguson, The Religions of the Roman Empire, 47.

27 CIMRM 34, Syria, Dura-Europos, 168 A.D.: mithraeum with many scenes from the myth from the time of the emperor Septimius Severus. The inscription states “Mithras-sol invictus.” Also, CIMRM 88, Syria, Secia: deo soli invicto; CIMRM 897, Gallia, Bourg-Saint-Andeol: deum invictum; CIMRM 890, Gallia, Vasio: deo soli invicto Mithrae; CIMRM 898, Gallia, Mons Seleucus: deo soli invicto; CIMRM 907, Gallia, Lugdunum: deo invicto; CIMRM 986-987, Gallia, Augusta Treverorum: deo invicto Soli et deo invicto Mithrae, respectively. These are only some of the numerous examples that can be found in Syria, Gallia, and Italy.

28 For instance, in a mithraeum in Britain (near the fort of Carrawburgh on Hadrian’s Wall) one can see that on one of the altars was carved a relief of Mithras with a radiate crown, the rays of which were cut through one of the stones so that a lamp could be placed behind it with the effect of giving light to the crown like a halo. Graham Webster, The Roman Imperial Army of the First and Second Centuries A.D. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 278-279. In addition, Lane Fox states that many special effects—especially lights reflected on water and fireworks—were particularly vivid in the worship of Mithras, conducted in the chambers of his small, subterranean shrines. Robin Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1995), 136.
In addition to the iconography, a look at the Mithraic membership, the places of worship, the organizational structure, and at Mithraism within the context of mystery religions can provide useful insights into the significance of the cult, ultimately explaining its popularity. Mithraism was not exclusively the cult of the Roman soldiers, since members of the imperial administrative service, merchants, and freedmen also worshipped the Persian god—as it is well attested in the many Mithraic sanctuaries in the ancient port of Ostia. Since Roman religion was a "social" religion—meaning that it was closely linked to the community, not to the individual—a cult may fulfill different roles among different social groups. Roman gods usually varied according to the community concerned: "they were, so to speak, members of the same community as their worshippers." Thus, the meaning of Mithraism among the soldiers may not have been the same as the one among civilians. For the purpose of this analysis, the emphasis is placed on Mithraism as the religion of Roman troops, because the cult of Mithras was predominantly popular in the army and, in fact, it was the latter that had been responsible for bringing this religious practice all over the Roman territories—from south-east toward north-west. Additionally, Mithraism was confined almost exclusively to men. Therefore, one should look at what made this god so appealing to men and soldiers in particular.

Since the Roman cult of Mithras was mainly linked to soldiers, a look at religions and cults among military men is instrumental. Mithraism can be defined overall as the religion of the Roman soldiers par excellence during the empire. The definition "religion of the Roman soldiers" instead of "religion of the Roman army" is used on purpose and has its reason. In fact, the Roman army had official religious practices, such as the cult of the standards—which included the gold eagle, the images of the emperor, the vexillum (flag), and the sacrementum (sacred oath). The army also celebrated various religious ceremonies and festivals throughout the year, as attested in the Feriale Duranum, a calendar found at Dura-Europos that marked the numerous religious observations during the entire military religious year. These official religious observances intended to identify the life of the individual soldier and of the individual legion with the destiny of Rome, maintained the esprit

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30 Scheid stresses the "social" character of Roman religion, which involved individuals insofar as they were members of a particular community. There was not one Roman religion, but rather a series of Roman religions, "as many Roman religions as there were Roman social groups: the city, the legion, [...] colleges of artisans, sub-districts of the city" and so forth. Scheid, Roman Religion, 19.
31 Scheid, Roman Religion, 20.
32 According to traditional scholarship, Mithraism was a cult exclusively for men and the presence of women was forbidden. In a recent article, Jonathan David has shown some compelling evidence that women were not absolutely excluded from the Mithraic cult, although their participation was very limited; Jonathan David, "The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?" in Numen 47 (2000): 121-41. In the end, we cannot say that Mithraism was confined to men only, but it certainly remains a predominately male religion.
33 Another well-attested cult of the Roman soldiers was the worship of Jupiter Dolichenus, which reached its peak of popularity during the first past of the third century. Overall, it was not so widespread as Mithraism. For the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus (and also Jupiter Heliopolitanus) among Roman legionary centurions, see Eric Birley, "The Religion of the Roman Army," in Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt, II.16.2 (1978): 1506-41.
du corps, and created a social structure based on values such as discipline, loyalty, and tradition.\footnote{Helgeland, “Roman Army Religion,” 1473.} Additionally, since most religious celebrations coincided with public festivals of the civilian population, these religious practices connected the Roman army—at least symbolically—to the society of Roman civilians.

However, Mithraism fell under the so-called unofficial army cults and served a different purpose. The cult of Mithras was the soldier's personal religion as opposed to the army religion that was imposed from above.\footnote{“The impersonalities of state-religion could not satisfy the religious needs of the individual. For these he turned to the mysteries” (cf. Ferguson, The Religions of the Roman Empire, 99).} Roman soldiers needed something—or rather someone—they could identify with, and the “unconquerable” Mithras with his features of physical strength, courage, and victory over a dangerous antagonist fit well such need. Thus, soldiers must have felt drawn to this decidedly forceful god. The dualism of Mithraism also appealed to the soldiers, namely the struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, order and chaos in which Mithras was fighting on behalf of Rome as a good, civilized power against the disorderly barbarians.

In addition to membership, the physical setting of the cult of Mithras helps to define its character and meaning, and hence its appeal. Like Mithras’ portrayals appear very uniform, his sanctuaries, or mithraea, also share similar features throughout the empire.\footnote{In reality, mithraeum (pl. mithraea)—the standard modern term for the Mithraic cult buildings—is a recent scholarly invention. The ancients had no such term, but used simply templum or speleum. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), vol. 2, 89.} The consistency in the architectural and pictorial features of the mithraea can be explained in view of the fact that “the religious use of space enabled the soldier to orient himself... Roman soldiers often moved from place to place, and the religious use of space helped keep them from becoming disoriented.”\footnote{Helgeland, “Roman Army Religion,” 1503.} The mithraeum—or temple for the worship of Mithras—was built to resemble the cave (speleum) in which Mithras was supposed to have captured and killed the divine bull. The mithraea were small and tunnel-like.\footnote{For instance, the largest mithraeum discovered in Rome—the Mithraeum Thermarum Antoninianarum, near the Baths of Caracalla—measures 25.15 by 10.60 yards, or 23 by 9.70 meters (cf. Adkins & Adkins, Dictionary of Roman Religion).} Because it was supposed to resemble a cave, the space was rather dark and often underground and was often decorated with the signs of the Zodiac in order to represent an image of the cosmos itself.\footnote{The idea of the cave as an allegory of the cosmos is found in ancient philosophical writing, such as in Porphyry’s treatise where he analyzes the Homeric cave of the nymphs and elaborates his interpretation on the basis of a mystical reading of the Mithraic cave. Porphyry, De Antro Nympharum, 6-7 in Meyer, The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook, 210-11. Additionally, for the significance of the Mithraic cave and a platonizing perspective in the symbolism of Mithraism, see the study by Reinhold Merkelbach, Mithras (Könstein: Hain, 1984), 228-244.} The focus of the temple interior was a marble relief or a painting on the opposite end of the entrance, portraying Mithras killing the bull.

Two interesting elements emerge from the mithraeum spatial configuration. One characteristic is the small size of these temples—a peculiarity that suggests that the number of worshippers in any one place must have been also small. Thus, “the small group of men in the caves must have experienced an intimate feeling of togetherness.”\footnote{Walter Burkert, Ancient Mystery Cults (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 47.} Instead of building bigger sanctuaries as the cult membership grew, Mithras’ worshippers kept utilizing a religious space that could accommodate few
devotees at once, hence maintaining a sense of familiarity and intimacy within each
group. As a result, as they gathered in small groups, they were able to form a close-
kin brotherhood with well-defined grades of membership. \[42\] Secondly, the
mithraeum itself was an intimate space that resembled a dining room with Mithras,
as the host of the banquet, sitting at the head of the table. In fact, along the sides of the
mithraeum, there were benches on which the worshippers reclined at ritual
meals. \[43\] There is no reason to doubt that the allegoric scene representing Mithras
and Helios feasting together, which is frequently present in Mithraic iconography,
had a realistic counterpart in enjoyable banquets with plenty of food consumed by
the devotees. The archaeological evidence confirms this. In excavated mithraeae the
remnants of animal bones of various species clearly indicate that the benches on the
sides were not used just for praying, but also as couches on which substantial meals
were consumed. \[44\] One can clearly see how the ritual became a social experience.
Thus, "the religion was always world-affirming rather than world-denying."

However, along with Mithras' image as a hunter or victorious fighter, and
along with the small size of Mithraic community where devotees could closely
interact with one another, an element that played a significant role in the popularity
of Mithraism was its rank structure. The cult of Mithras contributed to the creation
and consolidation of ties among the soldiers mainly because the Mithraic
community was a highly structured organization. In fact, the worshippers were
grouped according to seven levels or grades by which they progressed through
successive stages of initiation as more of the mysteries of the cult were revealed to
them. The seven grades were Corax (Raven), Nymphus (Gryphon / Griffin or
Bridegroom or Embryo-scholars disagree on the translation of this term), Miles
(Soldier), Leo (Lion), Perses (Persian), Heliodromus (Courier of the Sun), and Pater
(Father). \[45\] The Mithraic hierarchy must have reminded the soldier of the army
hierarchy; hence the idea of a well-structured order was something familiar to the
Mithraic worshipper. It was in the highly hierarchical structure of its community
that the cult of Mithraism differed from most other mystery cults.

Mithras' cult presented an organizational system similar to a "church order." \[46\]
Every Mithraic unit was a small face-to-face group, in which relations of authority
were clearly defined by the seven grades and ultimately sanctioned by religious
beliefs. The head of each group was the pater, or Father—an individual who had
reached the seventh grade of the Mithraic hierarchy. He embodied the highest:
authority—all the members were subordinated to him—and, as emblems of his power,

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42 As Gordon aptly summarized it, "to highlight the narrowly 'religious' elements in Mithraism does
not get us far. 'Mithraism' is of course not only a system of teaching about a god and the experience
of the individual soul, but an organization, a social teaching, a cultural system that not only explains
experience but patterns it" (Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society," 112).
43 See the images in the mithraeum at Santa Prisca on the Aventino and at San Clemente (CIMRM 476
and CIMRM 338-348), two of the thirteen mithraeae that have survived in Rome.
44 See CIMRM 480/483 and Turcan, The Cults of the Roman Empire, 234.
46 The Christian scholar Jerome mentions the seven grades of the Mithraic hierarchy; Jerome,
Epistulae, 107 in A.S. Geden, trans., Select Passages Illustrating Mithraism (London: Society for
Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1925), 61. The best depiction of the Mithraic grades can be found in
the floor mosaic of the mithraeum of Felicissimo at Ostia contained in Samuel Laeuchli, ed.,
Mithraism in Ostia: Mystery Religion and Christianity in the Ancient Port of Rome (Evanston, IL:
Northwestern University Press, 1967), plates 22-8. For a detailed description of these seven grades
and their significance within the Mithraic ritual, see Manfred Claus, The Roman Cult of Mithras: The

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**The Roman Cult of Mithras**
he carried the Phrygian cap (like Mithras) and Saturn's sickle, and wore a special ring.  Therefore, he decided whom to admit to the cult, supervised the rituals, and was responsible for initiations and grade promotions. Thus, Mithraism can be seen as a "divine" replication of social, "ordinary" (in this case, military) experience, since it reinforced hierarchy and authority.

Because Mithraism had a "rank" structure in the seven grades of the cult, it appealed both to the soldiers working their way up through the ranks and to the officers, who saw the Mithraic hierarchy as a religious duplication and reaffirmation of the military hierarchy. This made the cult of Mithras a familiar practice in the eyes of the soldiers and a "safe" cult for the authorities. Mithraism included both common soldiers and military officers, therefore it was not perceived as a suspicious club that may trigger revolts against the superiors. As a matter of fact, there was no "revolutionary" message in the Mithraic cult. The typical worshipper of Mithras as depicted in paintings is young and strong, the image of social conformity, not of marginality. His promotion through the grades was achieved only by acceptance of and submission to authority. There was no hint of any desire to break social boundaries in Mithraism. On the contrary, in its strict hierarchy, the entire secret ritual reinforced social boundaries. Ultimately, the cult of Mithras combined "the hierarchic and disciplined structures and values of its male members [...] with a new integrated view of the cosmos now completely structured in terms of masculine attributes"—a masculinity that was epitomized in the bull-slaying icon. Since Mithraism intended to mirror the social organization in its religious hierarchy, this could explain the "almost" absence of women in the cult due to a replication of the army structure—in which women were not present—and not necessarily a misogynist feature of the cult. It is also noteworthy that until about 195 A.D., there was a peculiar refusal of the Roman army to approve of the legal marriage of soldiers.

48 For the Father's iconography, see the mithraeum of Felicissimo at Ostia and the one in Santa Prisca. The latter is shown sitting on a throne and receiving homage from members of the lower grades. See, respectively, Samuel Laeuchli, ed., Mithraism in Ostia: Mystery Religion and Christianity in the Ancient Port of Rome (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967) and Maarten Jozef Vermaseren and C.C. van Essen, The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965).

49 For the authority of the Mithraic Father, see R.L. Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society," 101.

50 Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society," 104.

51 For an analysis of groups or associations characterized by a hierarchical structure, see Victor W. Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 191-2: "One can instance the Freemasons, the Rosicrucians, the Elks, the Sicilian Mafia, and other kinds of secret societies and brotherhoods, with elaborate ritual and ceremonial, and with generally a strong religious tinge. The membership of such groups is often drawn from socio-political communities of similarly ranked persons, with shared egalitarian values and a similar level of economic consumption."

52 As far as the evidence of the inscriptions regarding military membership, around 22 percent were centurions, 44 percent occupied one of the many ranks between that of junior centurion and private, and 35 percent were private (some of whom may have been retired). Gordon, "Mithraism and Roman Society," 108-9.


55 Some scholars have attributed a misogynist aspect of Mithraism based on the one piece of evidence from the so-called Pseudo-Plutarch, who accounts how Mithras—hater of women—joined himself in sexual union with a rock. Cf. Pseudo-Plutarch, De Fluviiis, 23.4 in Scarpi, Le religioni dei misteri, 355.
Therefore, “the religious life of Mithraism was more closely modeled on the values of the camp than of the domestic hearth.”

More importantly, a major factor contributing to the popularity of Mithraism is its very nature as a mystery cult. The diffusion of mystery religions, such as the cult of Isis, the Great Mother, and Mithras, was an important religious phenomenon that characterized the Roman Empire. In ancient times, religion was the product of various concerns—political, social, and psychological. For the Roman soldier in particular, religion provided a structure that helped him distinguish between Roman and alien (“the other”, the enemy), between order and chaos. However, while this function was mainly covered by the army official cults, it was rather in a mystery cult—such as was the case of Mithraism—that the Roman soldiers could have found a personal, more intimate shelter from the hazards of military life. The army proved effective in its ability to control the natural fear in the soldiers’ lives by promoting religious festivals, oaths, and the signa. In addition, the strict military disciplina was certainly a powerful antidote against the unconscious impulse of fear. However, it was in ritual behavior (and mysteries had well-defined rituals) that soldiers found comfort for their own anxieties. Thus, Mithraism as a mystery religion was very powerful in helping the soldiers dealing with their fears to a greater extent than the official army cults, because of its votive character and the fact that it provided protection by reinforcing ties among its adepts.

The concept of votive religion constituted the basis of a mystery cult. Most historians have looked at mystery cults and defined them as a form of personal religion aimed at some sort of salvation. Thus, many scholars have interpreted Mithraism as a cosmic religion of salvation. If salvation of one’s soul had been indeed at the core of this cult, one may have a difficult time explaining why Mithraism had no funerary symbolism and there were no statues of the dead or Mithraic sarcophagi. On the contrary, the cult of Mithras and mysteries in general are to be understood as personal religions at a more elementary level, namely as the practice of making vows. Mithraism shares in the general instrumental nature of Roman religion that was characterized by a highly developed contractual relation to the gods. It may not be a coincidence that the name of Mithras itself indicates the

56 Gordon, “Mithraism and Roman Society,” 98.
57 It is worth remembering that Roman religion was polytheistic, therefore there were gods of particular places and particular functions and the worshipping of different gods at once posed no spiritual conflict. In addition to allowing for a multiplicity of deities, Roman religion was always changing. Some rituals fell into disuse and others developed as Rome expanded its territorial conquests and came into contact with other cultures.
59 Burkert, Ancient Mystery Cults, 12-29.
60 Various scholars stress the promise of soul immortality as a strong element of appeal for mystery cults. See, among the many ones, the study by David Ulansey, The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). In opposition to numerous interpretations of Mithraism as a religion of salvation and the emphasis on making it a parallel / antagonistic cult to Christianity, Burkert has stated that there is no clear evidence that Mithraism “guaranteed[d] his followers some kind of transcendent salvation or immortality and the ascent to heaven from the ‘cave’ which is the cosmos.” Instead, Mithraism may in fact have been “heroically facing and maintaining this cosmos built on violence and sacrifice” (cf. Burkert, Ancient Mystery Cults, 27). I concur with such an interpretation.
62 Gordon, “Mithraism and Roman Society,” 98-9. For the “contractual” nature of mystery religions, see also Burkert, Ancient Mystery Cults, 13. Burkert pointed out that “ancient mysteries were a
idea of contract. Worshippers—in this case, soldiers—made promises to Mithras through offerings and rituals expected protection in return, either because they were in danger or ill. The concept of do ut des was a means to appease one’s agonizing experience of distress during military campaigns. Many Mithraic inscriptions clearly show this votive nature and express the devotee’s gratefulness towards the god, who had provided protection.

Overall, Mithraism provided “vertical” as well as “horizontal” protection. One the one hand, protection came from above—from Mithras and the other deities associated with him, such as the protective gods of the seven grades. On the other hand, protection also came from the other worshippers within one’s Mithraic community—both from those of higher ranks and from one’s peers. Knowing that one could count on divine assistance as well as on companions in both combat and prayer, helped to reduce the anxieties of fighting in war. It is also worth noting that in his myth Mithras appears as the one bringing world-order, strong, invincible, and, most importantly, unlike other gods, he does not die. The absence of death in the Mithraic myth must have provided the soldiers with a powerful sense of reassurance and self-confidence vis-a-vis dangers.

Mithraism was not only about coping with fear, seeking protection (divine or human), and reinforcing the notion of authority through a rigid—but at the same time familiar—hierarchical structure. Mithraism was also about creating ties, bonding together and the unconscious need to belong. Vertical ties were accompanied by equally strong horizontal ones. Mithraic groups emphasized their communal feeling by stressing the importance of the collectivity over the individual. It is worth noting that the term “Mithraist” is a modern scholarly creation. Instead, one name that Mithras’ worshippers used for themselves was syndexioi, or “those linked by the handshake.” Final admission into the Mithraic community was sealed by a handshake (δεξιωσα) with the pater. Last but not least, we know that as a group, they were jointly united by the oath. A famous inscription, discovered in Rome on the Campus Martius and written by the pater Profectius, commemorates in verses the founding of a mithraeum and refers to the handshake as a marker of Mithras’ worshippers:

personal, but not necessarily a spiritual, form of religion” (op. cit., 87), a statement which underlies the personal and practical nature of votive / contractual religions, such as Mithraism.

As previously mentioned, “Mithras” is comes from the Avestan “Mithra” that means “pact, contract, covenant.”

In essence, thanks to the themes of “placation and contract” that were at the core of a votive act, the soldiers fought better knowing that the gods were on their side. Graham Webster, The Roman Imperial Army of the First and Second Centuries A.D. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 275.

As one of many examples see CIMRM 413 from Rome: “[De]o invicto Mithrae / [...U]pius Paulus / ex / voto / d(ono) d(edit) / antistante L. Justino / Augurio p(atr) et Melito.” The numerous votive offerings are an indication that Mithras was perceived to be a successful and helpful god.


“The joining of the right hands promoted the initiate to syndexioi with the Father; the oath (sacramentum) made them sacrati et consacrani.” Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, Mithras, the Secret God (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1963), 136. See also R.L. Gordon, “Mithraism and Roman Society,” 107 on the Mithraic oath.

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This spot is blessed, holy, observant and bounteous: Mithras marked it, and made known to Proficentius, Father of the Mysteries, That he should build a dedicate a Cave to him; And he has accomplished swiftly, tirelessly, this dear task That under such protection he began, desirous That the Hand-shaken (Lat. syndexi) might make their vows joyfully for ever. These poor lines Proficentius composed, Most worthy Father of Mithras.68

It is noteworthy that the “cave” is consecrated to the god Mithras so that “vows” could be made to him on behalf of the worshippers that are called “the Hand-shaken.” These verses reiterate three elements that characterize the Mithraic cult, namely that Mithraism was a religion of small groups (a fact that appears clear from the fact that most “caves” were incapable of hosting more than ten or twelve individuals), that the cult had a votive character, and that its members were tied together through a pact sealed by a handshake.

This act of handshaking was performed not only among the cult members but also between Mithras and the sun-god, hence turning such action into a symbolic marker of this cult. A recurrent scene in Mithraist iconography is the so-called “pact of friendship”—an image in which Mithras and the sun-god stand in front of each other as equal partners and shake their right hands (sometimes in front of an altar).69

Among the Greeks and Romans handshaking (iunctio dextrarum, or joining of the right hands) was not an everyday gesture as it is now in western societies. Rather, it was a sign of very close friendship.70 Often friends who returned from a long journey were received with a handshake, or the same gesture was used to sanction an agreement.71 Therefore, with the handshake, Mithras and the sun-god are settling a pact.72 The pact between the deities was the model for the ritual handshake between the pater and the initiate.

Bound by both an oath and a handshake, Mithras’ worshippers must have known one another very well and provided reciprocal help like the brothers of a Masonic lodge. Thus, the cult also had a sociological aspect, not just a religious one. As a cult of men and specifically soldiers, it had the features of a brotherhood—an organization based on principles such as secrecy, loyalty, and unity in the fight for mutual interests. By creating a boundary between “those who belonged” and the outsiders, it reinforced the idea of being Roman soldiers as opposed to the “others”

68 Translation from Manfred Claus, The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries (New York: Routledge, 2001), 42. For the original text of the Latin inscription, see CIMRM 423.
69 See as an example CIMRM 1430, Virunum, Noricum, third century A.D. On a relief from Virunum, near modern Klagenfurt, Mithras’ right hand clasps the sun-god’s right hand in a friendly handshake. Mithras also puts his left hand upon Helios’ left shoulder.
70 For the meaning of handshake in the classical world, see Claus, The Roman Cult of Mithras, 152.
71 In fact, the “joining of the right hands” was a means of solemnizing marriages. Claus, The Roman Cult of Mithras.
72 Among the various scenes that give the impression that the two gods are making an agreement, there is an interesting, but uncommon relief from Nersae, Italy (CIMRM 647-650). The sun-god, naked, is kneeling on one knee before Mithras in the vicinity of an altar. Helios is grasping Mithras’ right wrist with one hand, while with the other he is holding a dagger. Mithras is holding a knife in one hand. Vermaseren had suggested that “the two gods are presumably making a blood pact.” Vermaseren, Mithras, the Secret God, 97.

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(the enemies), hence reinforcing the group’s inward-looking solidarity. Additionally, the element of secrecy created strong cohesiveness. One should not ignore the fact that the Mithraic religious experience had “effects upon the earthy community, particularly in relation to the sense of mutual belonging.”73

Moreover, like any secret society of any given time, the cult of Mithras had a rite of initiation based on the notion of re-birth, a highly hierarchical structure, and a strong congregational aspect.74 One can certainly speak of the Mithraic community as being based on sodalitas (companionship), a society formed by socii and amici.75 Numerous inscriptions utilize the words socius and sodalicio.76 Indeed, the devoted members must have spent together considerable amount of time, energy, and money for the god and for their fellow-initiates. Obligations similar to those of private amicitia might have included helping in burial and funeral, as was the case in other mystery cults—although the evidence for it in regard to the Mithraic cult is scarce.77 In essence, the Mithraic communities were not only spiritual brotherhoods tied together by spiritual bonds, but they were also associations that enjoyed the right of holding property, that provided legal assistance to his members, and that elected officers.78

Thus, the aspect of the cult of Mithras as a social experience of bonding together makes sense especially when one considers the fact that soldiers were away from home and most of the time in unfamiliar environments. “The development of the associative phenomenon of religious matters is also characteristic of a fairly mobile population, where the individual was no longer part of a fixed family or a city in the traditional sense of the word. These cultist clubs housed in the Mithraic

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73 See Claus, The Roman Cult of Mithras, 105. Claus also points out that “modern sociological studies have made plain how widespread is the need to belong, and in antiquity the case was no different.”

74 For the concept of spiritual regeneration in Mithraism within the broader context of rites of initiation in various cultures, see Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1994), 93-4 and 112 and Turner, The Ritual Process.

75 Interestingly, Scarpi has suggested a similarity between the Mithraic community and the comitatus of the German tribes as described by Tacitus (Germania, 13, 1-4; 14.2-3), since both structures were based on a hierarchical and martialistic organization and fit within the Indo-European context. “L’ampia diffusione del mithraismo tra soldati delle legioni romane può lasciare sospettare un’origine legata a possibili comunità iniziatriche e cultuali di uomini, fondate su un’etica di tipo aristocratico e guerriero, analogamente al comitatus delle tribù germaniche [...] che si inseriscono nel medesimo orizzonte culturale indo-europeo a cui appartiene anche la civiltà iraniana.” Scarpi, Le relazioni dei misteri, 352.

76 CIMRM 361, Rome: “[S[i]lvi] i[nvicto M(ithrae) et sodalicio eius ....” See also CIMRM 730, Italy: “D(enc) i[nvicto] M(ithrae) et Soli soci/o sac(rum)...” as an inscription that reiterates the “pact” between Mithras and the sun-god.

77 Members of various mystery religions helped one another in funerary arrangements (Burkert, Ancient Mystery Cults, 44). In the case of those worshipping Mithras the evidence is inconclusive. See, as supporting evidence, CIMRM 1021, Colonia Agrippina, Germany (near modern Cologne) where a sepulchral inscription in limestone has been found in the immediate vicinity of a mithraeum. The inscription is most likely about a Mithras’ worshipper that was buried there: “Have / Cimber ex(sedarius) et / Piestas Esnoho / esse(a)rio sodali / [b]ene merenti / [p]osuit. Vale.” Note the word sodali, “to the companion, or member of a club.”

78 Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithras, 168.

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caverns ... gave the rootless immigrants to Rome [and—I would add—the soldiers as well], of every race and class, the feeling that they had found the comfort of a piety closer to gods and men.” In essence, Mithraism sought to secure an “at-home” feeling by strengthening social ties. Additionally, the cult of Mithras also served as reinforcement of its members’ identity. Mithraism perfectly fit within the larger context of the mystery religions, because “the mystery discourse established sociopolitical identity for the alienated individual, whether rural (Eleusinian) or urban (Isiac), male (Mithraic) or female (Dionysian).”

A last element that can help explain the popularity of the cult of Mithras was its universal and syncretic character, which stemmed from both its parthianitas and romanitas. The Persian origin of Mithraism is not much disputed, although there may be no clear relationship with the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism. Mithras’ origin can be traced among the Indo-Aryan people. According to Plutarch, the cult was popular among Cilician pirates, who introduced the celebration of the Mithraic mysteries into the Roman world around the first century B.C. After defeating the sea raiders, Pompey seems to have settled a good number of them in Calabria—a fact that helps explain how Mithraism arrived in Italy. However, it was not until the end of the second century A.D. that the worship of Mithras became widespread first among the Roman soldiers in the east and then, moving westward and northward, all over the provinces. Whether its point of origin was actually Parthia or Anatolia-

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80 “Ancient mysteries were a personal, but not necessarily a spiritual, form of religion” (Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 87).
81 Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 161. See also, “One possible function of mystery religions was to solve individual problems of identity” (cf. Gordon, “Mithraism and Roman Society,” 94).
82 CIMRM 28, Syria, Nemrud-Dagh: an inscription states that the Mithraic priests must dress in the Persian attire on the annual and monthly feasts of the cult. However, Merkelbach has advanced a unique theory about the origin of Mithraism. According to the German scholar, the cult may have been the creation of an individual of genius, who was of east Anatolian origin, well-versed in both the Persian religion tradition and the Hellenistic culture, and resided in the Roman imperial court. The purpose of creating this new religion was to reinforce loyalty among the soldiers. Thus, Mithraism was born in Rome and from there it was spread all over the empire. “Ich vermute, daß die Mithrasreligion ausgebildet worden ist von einem Mann aus der kaiserlichen Hofstaat, der ursprünglich aus dem Osten stammte, z.B. aus Armenien oder aus der Provinz Pontos; und daß er diese Religion geschaffen hat für die Bedürfnisse der ihm lebenden Caesariani, als eine Religion der Gruppe, welche eine religiös sanktionierte Loyalität nach oben hin unbot.” Cf. Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 161.
83 Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 24: “[the Cilician pirates] offered strange sacrifices of their own at Olympus, where they celebrated secret rites or mysteries, among which were those of Mithras. These Mithraic rites, first celebrated by the pirates, are still celebrated today.” Cf. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, 204.
85 As mentioned above, not all scholars agree on the point of origin and beginning date of the cult of Roman Mithras. For instance, Beck has proposed that the mysteries of Mithras were developed in a subset of Commagene soldiers and family-retainers of the dynasty of Antiochus IV. On the one hand, while they were engaging in the Judean wars, Commagenean military elements had extensive contact with Roman troops and were responsible for transmitting the mysteries to the Roman army. On the civilian side, with the deposition of Antiochus IV in 72 A.D., the eastern dynasty established its residence in Rome and contributed in spreading the cult throughout Italy. Thus, according to Beck, the foundation period of Mithraism should be moved from the first century B.C. to the first century A.D.

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Syria, Mithraism has a clear connotation of *parthianitas*, which is attested by both the god’s attire and the use of the Persian word “*nama*” (= hail! or long live...) as a form of greeting among Mithras’ worshippers. Both Firmicus Maternus and Porphyry stressed the Persian origin of the god.

Although Roman Mithras maintained Parthian attributes, his cult underwent some changes when it became popular among Roman troops. Before his introduction into the Roman world, Mithras in association with the sun-god was simply a symbol of fertility. From the bull, the plant/life was born (see the ears of grain coming out of the bull’s tail). His cult arrived in the western part of the Roman Empire from the Hellenized East. Even Alexander the Great is said to have been initiated into Persian Mithraism. According to Q. Curtius Rufus, “the king himself with his generals and staff passed around the ranks of the armed men, praying to the sun and Mithra and the sacred eternal fire to inspire them with courage worthy of their ancient fame and the monuments of their ancestors.” When the god arrived in the West, his myth focused in particular on the killing of the bull, the concept of rebirth, the ideals of strength and invincibility, and the dualism of order-chaos. More importantly, the god’s exoticism may have made him attractive, in a manner similar to other “foreign” deities such as the Egyptian Isis. In essence, his *parthianitas* made him popular. His foreignness gave him a reassuring connotation of impartiality—a virtue that may have been very appealing to a diverse group such as the Roman imperial army.

Despite the fact that the worship of Mithras had a Persian origin and maintained traces of its native cult, Mithraism became “utterly Roman.” It was “Roman” in the sense that the cult had a “pragmatic” feature. The strong element of pragmatism in Roman society and culture influenced the Weltanschauung of its citizens in many aspects, including that of religion. Not only did Roman religion with its polytheistic character allow for the worship of many deities at the same time, but also it was specifically the fundamental pragmatism of ancient Romans that caused them to try other practices when the old rituals appeared ineffectual.

This opened the way to foreign cults, like the mystery cults. In Roman religion there was no jealousy or exclusivity when it came to worshipping deities, but instead a sense of inclusiveness. The pragmatic aspect of Mithraism can also be seen in both

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its previously discussed nature as a votive religion, as well as in its willingness to include other gods within the cult. Just as romanitas extended all over the provinces throughout the extension of Roman citizenship, the cult of Mithras integrated other deities, hence assuming a trait of universality.

An attractive feature of Mithraism was that each grade of the hierarchy had a specific protective deity and associated emblems. The deities were respectively—in order from the first to the seventh grade—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Moon, Sun, and Saturn. Therefore, the mithraeum presented itself as a sort of pantheon, a sanctuary including the main and best-known deities. This can help explain the appeal of the Mithras’ religion in the eyes of soldiers coming from a variety of different places, namely its universal and comprehensive character. Although centered on the figure the Mithras, Mithraism was more than just that god’s cult. It was a cult that included other deities and that also incorporated the signs of the zodiac into an all-inclusive system.

Thus, Mithras combined elements that may have appeared exotic (his origin and attire) with aspects that were very familiar to the Roman world. The god remained in part Persian and became in part Roman—resulting in a syncretic character that made him universal. On the one hand, Mithras’ universality stems from his own parthianitas or the fact that Mithras was a Parthian, hence a foreign god that did not come from any of the Roman provinces. This conferred him a neutral and impartial character—and ultimately a universal one—making him easily accepted in an army formed by soldiers that came from all different parts of the empire. The idea that Mithraism stands as evidence for the “barbarization” of the army is to be rejected. On the other hand, the cult of Mithras was universal in the sense that it was very Roman and all-inclusive of Roman religion. In essence, because of its syncretic character, Mithraism was the religion of no one place and of all places, of no one single god and of many gods, hence it was universal. Although some historians have seen Mithraism and the worship of the sun god (the latter promoted especially during the reigns of the emperors Elagabalus and Aurelian) as a “growing drift into monotheism,” the presence of many other gods in the Mithraic shrines makes Mithraism appear as the apogee of paganism (more precisely, henotheism) and of romanitas.

In conclusion, the cult of Mithras was popular among the Roman soldiers for a number of reasons, including the god’s powerful image, the highly hierarchical Mithraic structure, the very nature of Mithraism as a mystery cult and its emphasis on votive character, the aspect of brotherhood that each community fostered, and the inclusiveness of other deities that made the religion universal. In his simplicity and direct iconographical representation, Mithras was very compelling for Roman soldiers, since the god embodied notions such as strength, invincibility, and courage, and he marked a clear boundary between “us” and the “other” in the dualism of good versus evil and light versus darkness. The rank structure provided a system that was familiar to the soldiers in reinforcing hierarchy, authority, and ultimately order; whereas the votive character of the cult helped them cope with their fears and anxieties. Most importantly, Mithras’ widespread popularity throughout the Roman Empire resulted from his syncretic and universal character, and from the nature of the Mithraic community as not only a religious group, but

94 Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians, 575.

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also as a brotherhood. Moreover, small *mithraea* meant that the group of worshippers that met there was also small. The space itself was utilized for communal ceremonial meals. Even if coated with religious ritual, the act of eating together was undoubtedly a social function. Vertical and horizontal ties constituted unifying forces that were at least as compelling—if not more—as any promise for salvation. Without completely discarding the significance of Mithraic theology (including its complex symbolism and liturgy), Mithraism was not simply a religious community, but rather a religion *and* a community. In essence, the cult of Mithras was a social and psychological phenomenon and not merely a religious practice, because it was about bonding as much as it was about spirituality.