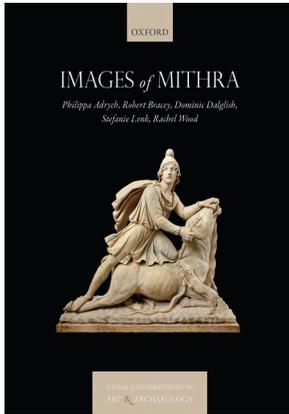
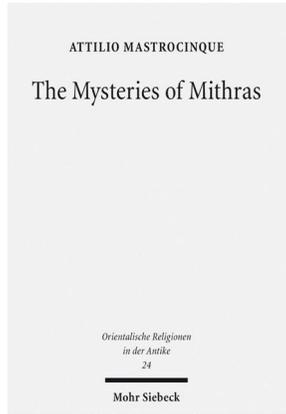


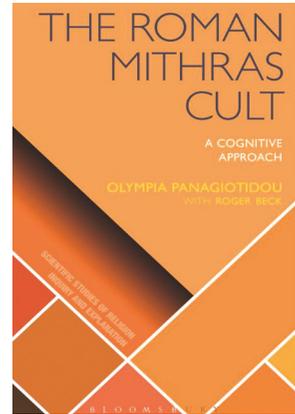
## UNDERSTANDING ROMAN MITHRAS. NOTES ON THREE NEW BOOKS



ADRYCH, PHILIPPA, BRACEY, ROBERT, DALGLISH, DOMINIC, LENK, STEFANIE & WOOD, RACHEL (2017). *Images of Mithra. Visual Conversations in Art and Archaeology I*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press. xx, 211 pp., 50.00 \$ [ISBN 978-0-19-879253-6].



MASTROCINQUE, ATTILIO (2017). *The Mysteries of Mithras. A Different Account. Orientalische Religionen in der Antike XXIV*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. xxi, 363 pp., 99,00 € [ISBN 978-3-16-155112-3].



PANAGIOTIDOU, OLYMPIA & BECK, ROGER (2017). *The Roman Mithras cult. A Cognitive Approach. Scientific Studies of Religion. Inquiry and Explanation*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic. xii, 226 pp., 85,00 € [ISBN 978-1-4725-6741-3]

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SINCE THE SEMINAL WORK OF FRANZ V. CUMONT,<sup>2</sup> the once called Mithraic studies – a sub-discipline within the Roman religious studies focusing on the cult

1. I'm thankful to Birgitta Hoffmann (University of Manchester) for the correction of the text.

2. Cumont, 1903. On his work and scholarly heritage see also: Bonnet, 2005; Belayche & Mastrocinque, 2013.

of Roman Mithras – changed radically, especially in the 1970's, when the monumental corpus of Marteen J. Vermaseren<sup>3</sup> and the conference-series organized by John Hinnells questioned the so-called Cumontian dogma.<sup>4</sup> The influential start-talk theory developed by S. Insler and D. Ulansey<sup>5</sup> was pushed further in the most recent paradigmatic book on the cult by Roger Beck.<sup>6</sup> Other important works were oscillating between cultural-historical, sociological and archaeological approaches.<sup>7</sup> All of these major works in the last two decades were asking the same crucial questions: how, where and by whom was the Roman cult of Mithras formed, what is the narrative(s) behind the comparatively standardized iconographic (visual) language and what was happening in a mithraeum?

Three recently published books on the same topic try to answer these crucial questions – each of them focusing on a different topic. The book of Attilio Mastrocicque, Olympia Panagiotidou with Roger Beck and a volume edited by Philippa Adrych, Robert Bracey, Dominic Dalglish, Stefanie Lenk and Rachel Wood are three of the latest books focusing on the Roman cult of Mithras, however, the number of books published on this topic in the last few years are much higher.<sup>8</sup> The abundance of literature on a single religion shows an almost “cultic” attraction of contemporary scholars for this topic. The three books, discussed here, reflect well the above mentioned three central questions and “mysteries” of this sub-discipline. Instead of presenting each book separately, I will analyze their different approaches, methodologies and major results through the lenses of these three crucial questions: the problem of origins, visual language and religious experience.

### THE ORIGINS OF ROMAN MITHRAS: A NEVER-ENDING STORY

One of the crucial questions of the scholarship focusing on the Roman cult (or religion)<sup>9</sup> of Mithras is the geographic and theological origins of it. The quest to find out when, where and who founded this new religious movement and its standardized visual language is one of the most frequently asked questions of the discipline. Interpreted by Franz Cumont as a Persian-Iranian cult, it was introduced in his seminal work among the so called Oriental cults, a notion which was contested and questio-

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3. Vermaseren, 1956-1960. See also: Vermaseren, 1965.

4. Hinnells, 1975.

5. Insler, 1978; Ulansey, 1989.

6. Beck, 2006. On his book see: Chalupa, 2012; Szabó, 2013.

7. Merkelbach, 1984; Clauss, 2004; Gordon, 2007; Dirven, 2015.

8. See also: Clauss, 2013; Martin, 2015; Walsh, 2018; Lahe, 2018.

9. On the terminological differences see: Rüpke, 2018.

ned in the last two decades.<sup>10</sup> The convulsive quest for a well-established geographic, chronologic and human agency in the problem of origins is not a specificity of the Mithraic studies: the same problem can be observed in other ethno-archaeological studies too.<sup>11</sup> Since the seminal work of Cumont, numerous theories were formed which tried to understand the origins of this new Roman cult. Based on the literary sources (the first mentions of Mithras as a Roman divinity are from the period of Nero and later, from the late Flavian period)<sup>12</sup> and the first epigraphic evidences (dated from the early Trajanic period),<sup>13</sup> the cult of Mithras appeared suddenly in Rome and its provinces at the end of the first century AD. Some thought that Cilician pirates had transported the Hellenistic Mithra cult to Rome. Others were suggesting that the cult was moved to Rome from Commagene by the Commagenian royal family or by Tiridates I of Armenia.<sup>14</sup> There were theories suggesting that the cult arrived in Ostia first<sup>15</sup> or was developed in Poetovio by a certain “prophet” named as Mithras.<sup>16</sup> Due to the “doctrine” of Cumont who labeled this religious invention as an “Oriental” one, most of the theories stressed its Eastern (Persian, Anatolian, Syrian) origin. Later, this current was changed and new theories stressed the central role of Rome and its Hellenistic and Anatolian diasporas in the formation of the cult.<sup>17</sup>

In the last decade, numerous important studies highlighted the Roman-ness of this cult and interpreted its Oriental elements (the Persian vestment of the central figure, the few Persian words in the cult, the literary association of the cult with Zoroaster) as “persianisms”, an attractive facet of religious communication which was a well-known strategy of small group religions in the Roman Empire.<sup>18</sup> In this new context, the cult of Roman Mithras appears as a religious bricolage, which uses Persianism, Hellenic mystery and classical Greco-Roman philosophy and iconography as strategies of religious communication in a crowded Roman religious market.<sup>19</sup> Despite of these new results, none of the three new books are presenting the Origins of Mithras as a result of such Roman religious bricolage. While the book of Panagiotidou resolves the problem

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10. On this problem see: Gordon, 2014; Versluys, 2014; Alvar, 2017. See also Mastrocinque’s summary: Mastrocinque, 2017.

11. Curta, 2014.

12. Dio, LXIII 5, 2 and Statius, *Thebais* I 717-720.

13. Gordon, 1976.

14. Beck, 2001.

15. Rohde, 2012.

16. Beskow, 1980; Tóth, 2015.

17. For the latest theories on the origin of the cult see: Chalupa, 2016.

18. Gordon, 2017.

19. Faraone, 2013. See also: Bremmer, 2014; Rüpke, 2018, pp. 313-319.

of origins in two short footnotes<sup>20</sup> and the book of the Oxford research group discussed the topic in a well-argued chapter on Nemrut Dağı,<sup>21</sup> the book of Mastrocinque is dedicated almost entirely on this topic. He presents a brand new theory, presenting the visual language of the Mithraic paneled reliefs as the imperial propaganda of Augustus, arguing that the cult was formed in the Palatine, during the reign of Augustus, representing an allegory of the new world order of Augustus, the new Apollo.<sup>22</sup> While Mastrocinque invented a radically new approach on the origins of the cult and its iconography, but could not argue many of his own statements with solid proofs, the Oxford group was much more careful and tried to highlight the differences between the transfer of the name of a divinity, forms of communication related to a divine agent and its visual narrative (iconography). They argued that “what presents itself to us, both to the east and west, and before and after this moment in Commagene, is the procession of one idea and means of representation amongst many. What this came to be associated with, what lingered from past associations, how it was framed and who came to ponder it are more intrinsic to whatever “god” may have been constructed from such ideas than any original conception may have been. Whilst scholars say, therefore, a great deal about the combination of cultural elements visible in the figure of Apollo-Mithras, the one that stands to the fore is that of Commagene”.<sup>23</sup> A great advantage of the book of the Oxford group is their clear division between the name of the divinity, its geographic and cultural locality and its iconographic (visual) narrative. They also questioned the chronological and ideological linearity of these cults (Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Mitra-Mithra-Mithras), emphasizing the inter-connectivity of cultures in the grand history of Rome, Persia and Middle Asia, but also the importance of the local religious appropriations.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, the most innovative part of their book fits perfectly into the Lived Ancient Religion approach, which interprets the names of the gods, their iconographic program (visual language) as facets of Roman religious communication and strategies in maintaining a sacralised space,<sup>25</sup> only one of these three new books cited this new approach on Roman religion – unfortunately, not in a positive way.<sup>26</sup>

Of these three new books, the best account for those who want to understand the complex relationship of the Vedic Mitra, the Hellenistic Mithra and the Roman

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20. Panagiotidou, 2017, p. 3, nn. 11 and 12.

21. Adrych *et al.*, 2017, pp. 150-160.

22. For a short summary of his iconographic analysis see: Mastrocinque, 2017, p. 177. For a detailed review of his book: Szabó, 2018b.

23. Adrych *et al.*, 2017, p. 157.

24. A detailed review of their book: Woolf, 2017.

25. Rüpke, 2018, pp. 11-21.

26. Panagiotidou, 2017, pp. 9-10.

Mithras, is summarized by the Oxford group, illustrated with wonderful, high quality photographs. While all were written for specialists the other two are much more confusing and presents an approach or a theory which need a much more profound knowledge in the literature on Augustan art and ideology or cognitive studies.. Although Mastrocinque's book is dedicated almost entirely to this crucial topic, his radically new hypothesis could not answer the problem of the "origins" of this cult, but made it perhaps, more obscure and complicated, especially for "uninitiated" readers into the modern Mithraist literature.

### THE VISUAL LANGUAGE: THE POWER OF IMAGES

Another crucial aspect in the study of Roman Mithraism is the central relief and its visual language. Known since the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD mostly from Italy and from the Rhine and the Danubian provinces, the standardized iconography of the reliefs of a mithraeum produced hundreds of important articles and books in the last two to three centuries.<sup>27</sup> For a long time, the so-called Mithraic studies were focusing on the art historians' descriptions of the reliefs, creating endless typologies. Unfortunately, this tendency remains still one of the most popular ones in Roman provincial studies, however, it can answer only some limited aspects on local appropriations or insights in production and mobility of objects.<sup>28</sup>

Since the classical scholarship (*Altertumwissenschaft*) became more and more involved in interdisciplinary studies, visibility, visual narratives and the power of images became a highly debated topic, which helped us to view the figurative language and the narrative reliefs of the ancients in a much more complex way. From the three books presented here, Mastrocinque's work has the most traditional approach on visibility and the role of images in religious communication. While in his first chapter (pp. 1-40) he presents shortly but very convincingly the literary sources on Mithras and the major views on the cult from antiquity, the next seven chapters (pp. 41-297) are focused on the analysis and radical reinterpretation of the iconography and the cultural-historical narrative behind the paneled reliefs and the surrounding elements (torchbearers, Aiones, planetary gods, magical gems). Although he presents a radically new approach, arguing that the Mithraic iconography was developed at the Palatine during the age of Augustus as part of the imperial propaganda, his methodology

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27. The earliest literature of the cult of Mithras from the 17th-18th centuries were focusing especially on the iconography of the tauroctony. See also: Gordon, 2004; Szabó, 2013. The most influential iconographic interpretations were published in: Will, 1955; Campbell, 1968; Gordon, 1980; Speidel, 1980; Beck, 2006.

28. A good example for this current: Sicoe, 2014.

dealing with iconography, reliefs and his combination of the archaeological material with the textual sources are, actually, very traditional, based on the work of the Italian and German art historical schools. Following the old presumption that the uniformity of the Mithraic reliefs suggests a central narrative, a “lost story” of Mithras with a powerful soteriological, philosophical and theological message, Mastrocinque with his “radically new approach” actually does the same as his predecessors in the last two centuries: trying to re-create the “lost story” behind the iconography. In contrast, the reviewer believes that ancient figurative monuments (funerary reliefs, sarcophagi, paneled reliefs from sanctuaries) had an intended message by creators and another one, interpreted by the viewers, which required a religious knowledge which moderns don’t have or re-create pseudo-knowledges. Unfortunately, the available literary sources – best presented (from these three books) in Mastrocinque’s work – are simply not enough to recreate the intended, original narrative from the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Discussing the visuality of the mithraeum, Mastrocinque didn’t go beyond this neurotic point of the scholarship trying to understand the “lost story” of Mithras or the founder(s). From a methodological point of view, the books of Panagiotidou and the Oxford group offer at least a new and probably, more interesting view on the effect and role of visuality and images. These two books confront two opposite, but complementary approaches: the cultural-historical and the cognitive approach.

The book of the Oxford group is part of the Empire of Faith project and it is the first volume of a series focusing on visual conversation in art and archaeology. The project and the series are led by Ias Elsner, therefore it is not surprising that this book also follows Elsner’s paradigmatic views on visuality and visual languages.<sup>29</sup> In six case studies (Mithras in Rome, Dura-Europos, Bourg-Saint Andéol, Sasanian Iran, Kushan Bactria and Commagene), the Oxford group tries to understand how ancient and modern people viewed the images of Mithra(s) in different geographic and temporal environments, how the image and the name of the divinity (divinities) became an agent in religious communication(s) but also, in communication between ancient and modern times.<sup>30</sup> With fascinating photographic material, they analyze

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29. Four of his important articles or books are cited in this book. See especially: Elsner, 2007.

30. One of the most important summaries on the Roman image of Mithras was summed up by the Oxford group: “One way of responding to the questions, ‘why this image?’ and ‘how does the tauroctony convey information?’ is to refer to its development from precedents featuring specific elements of the scene and indeed from the wider Greco-Roman artistic tradition. It was assembled, in part, for this reason. The image was part of a religious and artistic dialogue that drew upon and developed pre-existing images. One way in which it functioned, therefore, and thus part of its meaning, was bound up with these other images” (Adrych *et al.*, 2017, p. 30). They took up the idea of this cultural-religious bricolage, following the idea of Faraone who published similar ideas in his seminal work from 2013: Faraone, 2013. His article is often cited by the group too.

the cultural-historical effect of images, questioning, however, the linearity and direct connectivity of Persian, Bactrian, Commagenian and Roman Mithra(s) cults. They admit, that there was possibly a central myth of Mithras, but with numerous local variations and appropriations.<sup>31</sup> A good case study of local appropriation and how visibility and images are formed and transformed by local taste, variations of religious knowledge and the cultural-historical background is the mithraeum from Dura Europos, presented in detail by the authors. In another case study focusing on the natural cavities and grottos, Mithraic caves or carved reliefs of Mithras in the Roman Empire, the Oxford group discusses the visual effect and dialogue of a image and nature. Again, their argumentation is following the cultural-historical approach and is the best documented case study of these types of sanctuaries – although the maps and modern settlement denominations used in the book are far below the standard usually associated with such a prestigious publishing house.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast with the Oxford group, Panagiotidou presents the Mithraic image(s) and their narrative in a totally different way. She represents a new current in research, namely historical cognitive studies,<sup>33</sup> which is has gained a lot of followers in Classical Studies recently. Its basic presumption is that the human body (eyes and, especially, the brain and our neurotic system) perceived the physical world in the same manner since homo sapiens came into existence. Panagiotidou herself affirms this numerous times in her book. Based on this presumption, the cognitive approach uses the results of contemporary medical, psychological, sociological and anthropological researches to understand the physical, mental and psychological reactions and experiences of humans in moods of religious communication. According to the basic dogma of historical cognitive studies, the brain and the human perception throughout time react in the same way to fear, humiliation, darkness, prayer, modifications and stimulations of human body or other sensual effects. After their opinion, cultural-historical factors did not play a significant role in human perception and religious experiences.<sup>34</sup> Panagiotidou herself criticizes the cultural-historical approaches<sup>35</sup> and

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31. Adrych *et al.*, 2017, p. 35, n. 49.

32. The maps used by the Oxford group presents the ancient settlements in wrong geographical positions (Apulum, Carnuntum, Scrabantia are in totally odd places), others are named by their modern denomination and some of them (such as Fertőrákos) are not even presented on the map. Unfortunately, for the Oxford group, the sources from Central-East Europe seems to be as exotic as they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is not acceptable anymore in the digital age of classics, where most of the epigraphic and iconographic sources, maps and publications are available.

33. On this current and its categories see: Geertz, 2017.

34. Panagiotidou, 2017, p. 57 however claims that there is a difference between modern and ancient view on the Evening Star. Just one case study, where the cognitive approach fails.

35. Panagiotidou, 2017, pp. 10-11.

argues, that the cognitive approach offers the best way to understand the visual effects of the Mithraic reliefs comes. Starting from Clifford Geertz paradigmatic definition of religion as a system of sacred symbols, Panagiotidou continues her argument with Kearney's model of world view, where images and assumptions describe mental representations of humans. Panagiotidou's methodology for those who are not initiated in cognitive studies are extremely hard to follow: she builds her arguments almost exclusively on contemporary medical, psychological and cognitive studies. Her fourth chapter (pp. 115-140) is entirely dedicated to the interpretation of the Mithraic relief. Her analysis – as the other chapters – is based on a well-chosen modern social theory imposed on the case study of ancient sources. She uses the theory of Ch. S. Peirce on interpretative processes, arguing that the Mithraic relief was an iconic representation with innumerable symbolic level of references. The most interesting argument of her book is that there were no necessity for a central myth or myths to exist in order to conceive the story represented by the scene of tauroctony.<sup>36</sup>

The power of images and the tauroctony plays a central role in all three books. While Mastrocinque's and Panagiotidou's book represents two extremities of the scholarship – one which use all the possible literary and archaeological sources and a positivist methodology to prove his unusual approach, while the other one views the primary material through a labyrinth of modern concepts and abstractions. From the three books, the Oxford group's work represents the *aurea mediocritas* between the dry positivism and abundance of sources and the abstractions of contemporary social theories.

### RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: LIVED RELIGION AND BEYOND

The third and most interesting question of Mithraic studies is related to the religious actions, experiences and their short and long term effect on the human agents. What was happening in a mithraeum? What kind of rituals, chants, prayers, senses and movements can we identify? How often did they meet? How visible or invisible were these meetings, rituals or possible public events? What did they eat and where did they prepare those foods? These intriguing questions coming mostly from religious studies were traditionally rarely asked by Mithraic scholars. The available literary sources on the Roman mysteries of Mithras are coming mostly from secondary sources and Christian apologetic literature and rarely describe religious experiences or the effect of these on human participants. Similarly, contemporary archaeology of the mithraea can offer only partial answers on the above enrolled questions. However, the large number of well excavated sanctuaries in the post-CIMRM period might

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36. Panagiotidou, 2017, p. 137.

give us a much more complex picture on the repetitive or non-repetitive patterns and local variations of rites and rituals or their effects on the actors.<sup>37</sup> Religious experiences are presented in all three books, but they each highlight different aspects of it.

Mastrocinque's book has around ten pages focusing on this topic (pp. 289-297). He uses the modern notions of "Mithraists", "initiations" and "community" as given and universal, based on the literary and archaeological sources. Although he presents a good summary of the current state of research on possible initiation rites, his text uses these notions without taking the local appropriations into consideration or possible variations of religious knowledge, the lack of initiation rites in provincial contexts and the contemporary studies on religious communities.<sup>38</sup> It is hard to believe, that the Romans who were attending these events in a mithraeum a few times per year or perhaps, even less frequently, formed a strong ideological or brotherly community. A much more detailed analysis on the notion of community, personal self and social identity can be found in the book of Panagiotidou (pp. 141-164). In the reviewer's opinion, this chapter represents the best part of her book and the best account on religious grouping and the transformation of the self in the context of the ancient mysteries of Mithras to date. Her study is based on the minimal group paradigm of Tajfel and Turner and analyses not only the dynamics of the formation of small group religions, but also the techniques of maintaining them and how rituals contributed to social cohesion of the worshippers. She also claims, that in the end those who participated on these regular (or irregular?) religious experiences in a mithraeum, gained a social cohesion and common identity. This theory, however, was highly criticized by the cultural-historical school recently, which argued that such strong, dogmatic identities appear only in modern religious communities – or not even there.<sup>39</sup> Religious experience appears only indirectly in the book of the Oxford group, especially in the chapter focusing on the Mithraic caves and its relationship with the natural environment (pp. 61-81). The three books discuss the agency of the sanctuary and the tauroctony, their effect on human agents and also the social cohesion of Mithraic religious knowledge, but omit the problem of religious experience itself<sup>40</sup> and the archaeology of religious communication in the sanctuaries.<sup>41</sup> A much more detailed and comparative analysis of the archaeological and literary sources would be useful to understand the cognitive aspects of ancient religious experiences.

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37. On this topic see: Dirven, 2015.

38. For a good introduction see: Rebillard & Rüpke, 2017.

39. Lichtermann *et al.*, 2017; Woolf, 2017.

40. On the notion see: Taves, 2009.

41. For a case study on archaeology of Roman religious communication see: Szabó, 2018a.

## CONCLUSIONS

The three important books discussed above offer a different – sometimes radically different – methodology, presenting the same topic and trying to answer similar questions, without even trying to create a comprehensive view on a religious phenomena. This liminality represent the common point between these books. All of them represent a particular school: a positivist, a cultural-historical and the cognitivist one, which are basically representing the main approaches of scholarship on the study of ancient religions nowadays. It shows not only three different methodologies, but gives a comparative glimpse also in the history of religious studies in the UK, Italy and the American anthropological school. The popularity of the so-called Mithraic studies reflects the great variety of new methodologies and innovative approaches to answer those secular questions asked already by Cumont and his contemporaries. Although the three presented books could not give a certain answer on these “big” questions, their new approaches show, how the study of ancient religions evolved in the last century, what can be saved from the doctrine of Cumont, what the limits of contemporary social theories are and in the very end, show the striking limits of our human perception and knowledge to understand, reinterpret and embody past events and phenomena.

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