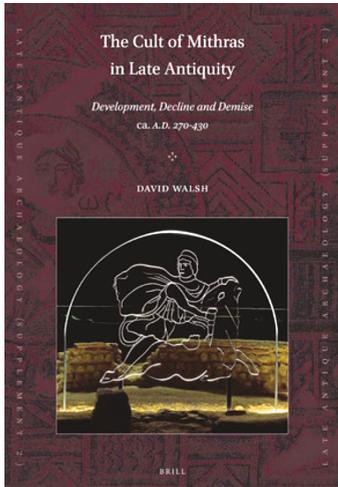


THE CULT OF MITHRAS IN LATE ANTIQUITY



WALSH, DAVID (2018). *The Cult of Mithras in Late Antiquity: Development, Decline and Demise ca. A. D. 270-430*. Late Antique Archaeology, Supplementary Series II. Leiden & Boston: Brill. xii, 145 pp., 121,00€ [ISBN 978-9-0043-8080-6].

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THE PUBLICATION OF THIS DOCTORAL THESIS from the University of Canterbury (UK) is timely. It forms part of the on-going project of Luke Lavan, director of the Centre for Late Antique Archaeology at Canterbury, to encourage a dialogue between those who work primarily on late-antique texts and archaeologists concerned with late-antique material culture. So far the Centre has published eight volumes in the series Late Antique Archaeology (Brill), of which the most relevant to this dissertation was *The Archaeology of late-antique "Paganism"*, the proceedings of a conference held in Leuven, where Lavan was a post-doctoral fellow, in 2005.¹ Apart from a handful of studies of the City of Rome itself,² and a very one-sided

1. Lavan and Mulryan, 2011. The coverage of the book is rather uneven, however, as is the quality of the contributions.

2. Griffith, 1993; Bjørneby, 2007; cf. 2012; 2014; 2016; Schuddeboom, 2016.

chapter in a book by E. Sauer,³ the archaeological evidence for the decline of the cult of Mithras in late antiquity has hardly ever been the topic of sustained enquiry, being usually consigned to a brief chapter at the end of books whose focus is quite different. Moreover, in keeping with the wider aims of Late Antique Archaeology, Walsh has made a point of trying to contextualise his Mithraic material within the wider framework of previous archaeological studies of building-intensities and their geographical variability in the late-antique period.

The first thing to establish is that such a project could only be undertaken with reasonable confidence in the last few years: when I performed a similar exercise nearly 50 years ago, it was almost impossible to establish the dates at which mithraea were either founded or abandoned – apart from coin-evidence, which provided only *very* rough guides to *post-quem* dates, the only usable information was derived from dated or datable inscriptions, since stratigraphic information was hardly ever available and virtually no coarse-ware sequences had then been established. Moreover, in the older literature the shibboleth that destructions or abandonments must have been due to Christian violence was often taken for granted, so that, for example, Robert Forrer, in his otherwise excellent account of the Strasbourg-Königshofen temple, insisted, against all the evidence, that it must have been abandoned only at the end of the reign of Theodosius I.⁴ The situation has now changed, at any rate somewhat, in the case of mithraea excavated within the past 50 years, though even now no full report of excavations has ever been published. And even where that was the case, subsequent information may prove earlier inferences about dates wrong. A case in point is the now well-known example of the mithraeum at Tienen/Tirlement in Belgium, where the grand-scale feast was credibly dated on the basis of the coarse-ware (Spruchbecherkeramik from Trier) to c. 275 CE. Since then, however, the coarse-ware has been down-dated by half a century or so, and new C¹⁴ estimates for the fish-bones have established their dates as lying between 130 and 224 CE. In other words, the feast celebrated by the Mithraists of Tienen and their friends and relatives was not held in the middle of the “third-century crisis” but, in all likelihood, at some time in the reign of Caracalla, which makes far better sense.⁵

Dismissing the traditional “Christians done it” scenario in the light of well-founded recent scepticism,⁶ Walsh begins by establishing that the decline of the cult of

3. Sauer, 2002, pp. 79-88, cf. pp. 143-156; also his dissertation, 1996 (on the NW provinces).

4. Forrer, 1915, p. 79.

5. Martens *et al.*, 2019.

6. Ward-Perkins, 2003; Bayliss, 2004; Hahn, 2004; 2015; Bremmer, 2013; Dijkstra, 2015 (with the bibliographies in nn. 8-9 on p. 28); Frankfurter, 2018, p. xiii. There is now even a specialist journal on the topic, *Journal*

Mithras (and he explicitly confines himself to the organised form of the cult, p. 56) was a long drawn-out process with both “internal” and “external” aspects. On the one hand, he finds that there was an increasing local diversification in how the cult was understood, i.e. a loosening of “cultic norms”, and, from the early fourth century, a marked decline in the readiness of groups either to construct or even to repair their buildings. Analytically separate from that, however, is the issue of the “fate of mithraea”, i.e. the reasons for the abandonment of temples. In those cases where the furnishings were simply left as they were, or carefully cleared away or buried, we can say that this was due to deliberate choice, whatever the motives; but where violence was involved, it is virtually impossible in any given case to show that Christians must have been involved, so that a range of alternatives must be taken into account.

The book contains four main chapters, followed by a commented list of 38 Mithraic sites known or surmised to have been still active in the Latin-speaking Empire during (part of) the fourth century (the relatively new case of Angers – *dép. Maine et Loire* –, the most westerly Gallic temple yet found, which was destroyed in the early fifth-century, is not included).⁷ Chap. 1 (pp. 17-41) argues that from the last quarter of the third century there are signs that the cult became more heavily influenced by local factors, for example in connection with water sources in Gaul, or the open-air mithraea in Dalmatia. The “typical” Mithraic architectural form, the *biclinium* with cult niche, is followed less frequently; there are changes in iconography; fewer votive inscriptions and those often by members of the military, followed by the practice (in NW provinces) of depositing low-value coins as votive-offerings; apparent changes in the grade hierarchy; and finally the appearance of senators at Rome in the fourth century claiming to hold high positions in the cult. Chap. 2 (pp. 42-55) uses a series of maps to chart the decline in the number of new foundations and repairs between 275 and 400 CE, emphasizing that these changes took place at different rates in different areas. These results are then related to the conclusions of other archaeologists who have worked on rates of public construction, notably Hélène Jouffroy (Italy, N. Africa) and Penelope Goodman (Galliae).⁸ The overall conclusion is that in the Gal-

of Religion and Violence (started 2013, formerly Academic Publishing, now Philosophy Documentation Center)

7. Molin, Brodeur and Mortreau, 2015, cf. *AE* 2015, 926-930. The temple at Camporosso in Italy (in ancient Noricum, on the main road from Aquileia to Virunum), which has also been claimed to have continued in use well into the fourth century (cf. *AE* 2015, 1047), but is ignored by Walsh, probably did not (pers. comm. from Stefano Magnani).

8. Jouffroy, 1986; he might perhaps have taken account of e.g. Boatwright, 1989; Barton, 1995; Hors-ter, 2001 and 2014 too. Walsh himself collected the necessary comparative evidence for Pannonia and Noricum from a range of different publications: Walsh, 2016.

liae, on the left bank of the Rhine, and Italy investment in mithraea was in decline already at the end of the third century, while holding up elsewhere, especially in the Pannonias, with a few mithraea still being founded in Dalmatia early in the fourth century, and in Rome until the mid-fourth.

Chap. 3 (pp. 56-66) offers a number of suggestions towards explaining these findings. One obvious possibility is the decline of population in various areas, combined with the tendency to move into fortified settlements, for example at Lentia/Linz, with a corresponding fracture of social networks upon which recruitment into the cult previously relied. Another possibility is that there were changes in rituals (specifically: less intense initiatory rites), which led in turn to lower commitment on the part of members of such groups, and so less willingness to invest in infrastructure and “plant”, with the result that it was easy to shift religious capital elsewhere, into other religious options. Walsh also considers the possible effects of imperial coercion during the fourth century, concluding that this is likely to have been fairly negligible. The final chapter (Chap. 4, pp. 67-93) discusses the archaeological evidence for the “fate” of mithraea, again illustrated by a series of maps, and the possible reasons for their abandonment and/or destruction. Once again the emphasis is upon regional diversity. Walsh finds evidence that 26 mithraea were violently destroyed or found with broken images between the late third century and the early fifth, while only 16 were empty (some others, however, such as Orbe/Alpes and Königsbrunn/Raetia were excluded from the outset) or abandoned without being wrecked, while material from five others had been used for other building needs. Confident claims to be able to distinguish Christian from other types of violence are rightly rejected: if all we know is that the heads of (some) statues are found knocked off in mithraeum X, who can tell when, why or by whom this was done? Generally speaking, the rate of violent destruction increases as the fourth century wears on, while “still” abandonment remained fairly common in “inner” provinces. Some attempt is made to calibrate these findings with the local presence of Christian groups, with the conclusion that most mithraea were located where they were few Christian groups, the only certain case in the western Empire of defacement by Christians being the mithraeum on the island of Ponza in the Gulf of Naples. “Barbarian” invasion was generally a far more common cause of destruction (although it seems likely that this often occurred at some considerable time after abandonment), whereas in Italy and Dalmatia ‘still’ abandonment was usual, under a variety of pressures, among them no doubt the slowly increasing danger of delation attending the practice of non-Christian religion, especially in towns.

While Walsh’s overall presentation of the archaeological evidence is much to be welcomed, such surveys are always beset by uncertainties, and his will inevitably

be subjected to further investigation and criticism by experts on local situations. A number of queries certainly raise themselves. It is not clear to me, for example, why he chose to include Doliche in Commagene and Hawarti/Apamea in Syria, let alone the extremely doubtful case of Sa'ara, since these are completely marginal to the European picture, which is otherwise his exclusive concern; yet he excludes Sidon, where we have inscriptions dated to 389 CE. At Rome, he counts the surviving inscription of Aurelius Tamesius Augentius (ILS 4269) found in 1867 beneath the Palazzo Marignoli on Piazza S. Silvestro in Capite as a mithraeum, even though the associated inscriptions by Augentius' grandfather (ILS 4267a-e, 4268), found in the fifteenth century, are all lost and no description of any kind is known; yet he refuses to include e.g. Serdica, Orbe, Königsbrunn, and the new find at Ostia on the grounds that no building is known or the information lacks precision. A mid-fourth century mithraeum is also credited to the Vaticanum, although the relevant inscriptions imply no such thing, since they record taurobolia by members of the senatorial class, Mithras being mentioned merely in a list of other high-ranking religious offices held by these men. The mithraeum of via Giovanni Lanza 128 is cited repeatedly, though it is a mere hole of a couple of square metres beneath a senatorial house, yet neither S. Clemente nor S. Prisca is included even though they almost certainly continued in use until the late fourth century, or even, as Oliver Nicholson suggested, into the fifth.⁹ More generally, given that the absolute numbers are so tiny, and that, thanks to their characteristic architectonic form, mithraea are more visible than other types of shrine, one wonders how telling the apparent buoyancy of Mithraic building in the Middle Danube area and Dalmatia into the fourth century really is (given its importance in this period, the absence of Mithraic evidence from Sirmium/ Sremska Mitrovića is very strange).

I have three more substantial comments. First, I wonder whether it was wise to begin only from 275 CE. Of course, if one sets out to discuss "Late Antiquity", this date might seem an obvious choice. In the Mithraic case, however, it prevented Walsh from drawing a larger picture of the decline of the cult. For, given the well-known peculiarities of the cult's geographical distribution, the really significant losses of Roman territory in this regard were the abandonment of the right bank of the Rhine in the mid-third century and of Dacia in the 270s. When one considers the amount of space in Vermaseren's catalogue occupied by these two provinces, the cult's "decline" began already well before 275. We should also bear in mind that the usual maps of Mithraic expansion, for example that recently drawn up by Darius Frackowiak, are

9. Nicholson, 1995, pp. 61-62.

“maximalist”, even “triumphalist”, and typically ignore that fact that some mithraea were short-lived or were given up long before the 250s.¹⁰

Secondly, I have some doubts about the force of Walsh’s points regarding “weakening of commitment”, which relies upon an excessively schematic “before and after” scenario. Although for the purposes of general description we are repeatedly told what “typical” mithraea looked like, in fact there were always very considerable differences between individual temples:¹¹ for example, even in the single township of Ostia not one of the cult-niches closely resembles any other – thus showing the range of choices open to founders with regard to a part of their mithraeum one might have thought of great ritual importance. Still at Ostia, whereas Sette Sfere incorporates detailed references to the organised cosmos, and Sette Porte at any rate images of six planets, none of the others shows any such concern. Moreover, we really have no idea how widespread the organisation of members of such groups into different grades was: from the epigraphic evidence, we know only that along the entire Rhine-Danube frontier provinces there are almost no references to them, whereas Fathers at any rate occur fairly often at Rome and Ostia, albeit mainly as a means of “dating by respect”. If we only had epigraphy on stone to rely on, we would judge that grades were quite unimportant – as is well known, the sole epigraphic reference to a grade *heliodromus* is a dipinto at S. Prisca. It is only the special cases of the graffiti at Dura-Europos – still mostly unpublished – and the dipinti at S. Prisca on the Aventine that suggest their organisational significance, and we have little idea how far these cases are generalisable. The only safe conclusion is that reference to grades was not considered appropriate when dedicating votives. Nor do we have much idea of the nature of initiation rituals: is the divided sword-blade from Riegel “typical” – i.e. were there imitation death-scenes everywhere? Why are the initiation-scenes from Capua (250-275 CE) quite different from that/those on the Mainz Schlangengefäß (120-140 CE), which are different again from Tertullian’s account of the ritual for the grade Miles (*de corona* 15.3-4)? As for iconography, it cuts no ice to cite a few provincial images in order to suggest “decline”: just in the Germania, we only have to think of the Mannheim relief, the Phaethon-scene on the reverse of the Dieburg relief, the promotion of Mithras *venator* above the feast-scene on the reverse of the double-sided reliefs from Heddernheim I and Rüdningen, the assimilation between Mithras and

10. Frackowiack, 2013.

11. Cf. Hensen, 2017.

Mercury, and many, many others,¹² to say nothing of the variety of unique scenes on the *predelle* of the complex panelled reliefs: there were always and everywhere experiments and individual variation in the iconography. Nor should we single out the find of a dish of fruits found at Linz and claim that it signals a decline in sacrificial enthusiasm.¹³ On the other hand, the finds of animal bones in greater or smaller quantities tell us nothing about the degree to which slaughter was ritualised (at Dura, for example, meat was simply bought on the market, which must also have been the case where there was no space for a kitchen), any more than the big celebration at Tienen in the first quarter of the third century signals a shift in the general character of the cult in Belgica – the find remains unique, even if the ritual smashing of utensils is a well-known phenomenon in northern Gaul.

Thirdly, Walsh's suggestions about the possible reasons for decline focus too much on the Balkan area and the military, and not enough on the fact that investment in Italy, the Galliae, and the left bank of the Rhine was already waning in the third century. This point is related to an assumption he shares with most work on this topic, namely that the task is to explain why “worshippers” wanted to join Mithraic groups, i.e. what “the attraction” was. In my view this assumption elides the crucial factor of the organisers of such small groups, whose commitment, energy and relative wealth were crucial in forming and maintaining them in the first generation, and then in ensuring a successful transition to new leadership.¹⁴ Most such groups never succeeded in moving out of informal groupings and into rented accommodation, let alone, at any rate in settlements where there was sufficient space available, managing to build their own meeting-place.

In the eastern Mediterranean, and in the Greek-speaking area of Moesia Inferior, the most important such groups were Dionysiac, whereas in parts of the west, though of course there were cults of Liber Pater, and major regional ones such as

12. Resp. V. 1275, 1247, 1083b, 1137b; Hensen, 1995; some others: baby Mithras as *kosmokrator* at Trier (V. 985); incense-burning Sol at Cologne (Bird, 2004, p. 193); the Mainzer Schlangengefäß (Huld-Zetsche 2008, pp. 76-81); inscribing Victoria at Stockstadt I (V.1181); the peculiar 2m² “interruption” in the middle of the right-hand (SW) podium at Martigny (Wiblé, 1995, p. 7); the burials in front of the mithraeum at Wiesloch (Hensen, 1994; 1999).

13. Cf. Rives, 2011; 2012; Bremmer, 2018, though a good survey, overdoes the influence of a few intellectuals who claimed to know what gods liked to eat.

14. Cf. Horster, 2011; Gordon, 2013, 2017; Denzey Lewis, 2017. Wendt, 2016 is mainly concerned with individuals who made no attempt to found long-lasting groups; she does discuss Paul at length, but, at any rate on the evidence of the letters, his activities in the eastern Mediterranean were of a completely different order from that of the persons I am interested in, whose existence he simply took for granted.

those of the Thracian Rider, the Danubian Riders and Epona, that of Mithras came to provide a similar kind of focus for religious entrepreneurs looking to manage their own small groups. In my view, the combined effects of the Antonine (160-195 CE) and “Cypriatic” (249-270) epidemics on industrial and agricultural production,¹⁵ the climatic down-turn from 150/200 until c. 300 CE,¹⁶ and the political, military and economic problems of the second half of the third century, adversely affected the ability, and slowly also the readiness, of such small-time religious entrepreneurs to finance their groups, and to persuade others to maintain their payments towards the upkeep of the group. The crucial turning-point was surely the death of an existing leader and the problem of finding a successor(s).

For all the tirelessly-repeated claim that “Mithraism was a religion of soldiers”, which can anyway never have applied in Italy or in large areas of the Empire that lie well behind the frontier, the sheer size of Mithraic temples implies that only tiny numbers of the military were ever involved at any given time. It may be true that during the third-century crisis there is evidence that high imperial officials made moves to restore collapsed or derelict mithraea – but this merely shows that they were taking over what had been the responsibility of the erstwhile organisers, who were evidently no longer in a position to mobilise such funds.¹⁷ Moreover, we should not over-emphasise either their concern or its effects: it is worth remembering that the inscription recording the most famous of these gestures, by the former Tetrarchs at Carnuntum in 307, was actually cut not on a fine new altar commensurate with the financial means of the Iovii and Herculii but over a previous text on a much older altar no doubt taken from an abandoned mithraeum (*ILS* 659). In my view, the “second” decline of the cult of Mithras – that is, after the loss of the right bank of the Rhine and of Dacia – is best understood as resulting from the economic decline of a primarily urban class of *relatively* prosperous craftsmen and small business-men, of the type represented by the men listed in the two *alba* from Virunum (*AE* 1994: 1334, 1335) of the period 180-200 CE, or implied by the evidence from Ostia,¹⁸ above all those of them with the initiative, knowledge, resources

15. McConnell *et al.*, 2018.

16. McCormick *et al.*, 2012.

17. Oddly enough, Walsh does not devote a special section to these texts.

18. Rainer, 1984. Walsh gives “median” dates (an odd way of representing the matter) of 250 for two Ostian temples (“Lucrezio Menandro” and Terme di Mitra) for which White (2012, p. 442) gives simply “3rd cent.” Apart from di Felicissimo (c. 275), all the mithraea founded in the second half of the third century at Ostia (Fructosus, Porta Romana, Serpente) are notably poor, and most seem to have been given up in the early fourth.

and commitment to found and manage their own group.¹⁹ In other words, we need to incorporate individual agency and creativity into a model of how the cult of Mithras was realised from place to place, from temple to temple. And so, of course, a model too of the failure of such agency and enterprise.

I conclude with a few minor points taken from Chap. 1.

On p. 21, Walsh repeats the speculation in the early reports of the mithraeum at Caesarea Maritima that a ray of sunlight would have shone down upon the altar at midsummer. But this claim, like the old idea of the “wooden sun-burst”, has long since been exploded: the row of storage vaults in which the mithraeum was installed was in fact the substructures of the office of the financial procurator, so no direct “beams of sunlight” could have penetrated the mithraeum at midsummer or indeed at any other time.²⁰

On p. 29, we read that the figures of Mithras and Sol on the reverse of the Konjic relief (V. 1896) “are likely [to be] a *pater* and a *heliodromus*” – an idea taken over directly from Vermaseren’s interpretation of a scene at S. Prisca on the Aventine. The mere presence of a *leo* as well as a *corax* at either extreme of the iconic scene of the feast, at which, as usual, the two torchbearers serve the gods, by no means legitimates Walsh’s ‘likely’. On the contrary, neither the *corax* nor the *leo* appears to be taking part in serving the gods: they are shown simply as spectators at the mythical event. In other words, the scene on this relief is *not* a step further on from the well-known cases in which a *corax* takes over the role of servitor from the torchbearers, but chooses an alternative means of representing the significance of regular feasting in mithraea as a commemoration or reproduction of the First Sacrifice and its direct aftermath, the feast shared by Mithras and Sol that justified the god’s title *Deus Sol invictus Mithras* etc.

On p.30 Walsh understands the *hieroceryx* of ILS 4148, 4153 and AE 1953, 238 (all dated between 374 and 377) as the same as *corax*, which he naturally finds mystifying since the senators involved were all *patres*; but he should have known that *hieroceryx* was the title of innumerable important ritual dignitaries in the Greek world, among other places at Delphi, (Amphictionic League), Olympia, Ephesus, Miletus, the Black Sea area, but especially Eleusis, where the *hieroceryx* is regularly

19. On this social group, see recently Wilson and Flohr, 2016, esp. the essays by K. Ruffing (pp. 115-131), W. Broekaert (pp. 222-253), P. Goodman (pp. 301-333) and O. Lång (pp. 352-376).

20. See now Bull *et al.*, 2017. A later claim, that the pottery found in the mithraeum could be dated to the Flavian period, which would have been important, has also been shown to be completely wrong; and the new publication seems destined to continue this unhappy sequence of erroneous speculations in its interpretation of the faded wall-paintings.

listed as third in the hierarchy after the Hierophant and the Dadouchos.²¹ A fragment of Pophry's *On statues* even suggests a possible motive for wealthy senators thus transferring the title from the Eleusinian mysteries to the Roman cult of Mithras, in which he mentions how, at the mysteries of Eleusis, the hierophant makes the preparations (ἐνσκευάζεται) at the statue of the “demiurge”, the Dadouchos at that of the Sun, the “altar-man” at that of the Moon, and the *hieroceryx* at that of Hermes.²² Walsh was distracted by the appearance of *hierocoracica* in *ILS* 4268, the term used for initiations into the grade *corax* (of a senatorial child, *puer*) at S. Silvestro in Capite in 376, itself based at some remove on the term ἱερός κόραξ (again probably for a child or youth) in two important third-century votives from the putative mithraeum near the Tiber harbour (the enlarged Emporium) on the left bank, near Monte Testaccio (*IGUR* 106, 107). We may perhaps assume that this locution originated in the eastern Mediterranean – another hint at the existence of Mithraic worship in major centres there for which archaeological evidence is so far lacking.

Again on p. 30, we are told that the “Mithras liturgy” is found on a “papyrus fragment” from Egypt, whereas in fact, as Walsh could easily have established by consulting Hans Dieter Betz's standard commentary,²³ it constitutes lines 475-820 of the Great Paris Magical Codex (= *PGM* IV), which contains in all 3274 lines of text.

On p.31, the passage of “Ambrosiaster”, *Quaest.* 114, 11, that claims that Mithraic initiates had their hands tied with chicken guts and were then made to jump over ditches, crow like cocks and roar like lions, is described as “reliable to an extent” – though exactly what features of this absurd account Walsh is prepared to believe we are – wisely enough – not told.

It would however be wrong to end on a carping note. Walsh has performed a considerable service in charting the archaeological information, such as it is, relating to the decline after 275 CE of what we may call the institutionalised Roman cult of Mithras, in trying to align the discussion of Mithraic “decline” and “fate” with developments relating to such topics in related fields, in emphasising alternative narratives, and in pointing out the role of pre-conception and *parti-pris* in the traditional scenarios. All this makes perfect sense in the context of the wider project directed by Luke Lavan at Canterbury. He is also to be praised for what he deliberately avoids – terms such as “Mithraism” or “pagan/ism”, both of them implying a coherence that dissolves on closer inspection, or describ-

21. PHI list 279 epigraphic texts mentioning ἱεροκήρυκες from all over the “old” or central Greek world in the Hellenistic and Roman period (except Sicily and Anatolia).

22. Porph., *Peri agalm.* 10, 75 Bidez = Euseb., *PE* III 12, 5.

23. Betz, 2003.

ing the cult of Mithras as “a mystery cult”, as though this were an historically meaningful category rather than a relic, re-booted by emergent History of Religions, of Christian apologetics and the interest of the Second Sophistic in thematising subjectively-valuable religious experiences appropriate to these writers’ own sense of social and psychological distinction.²⁴ Although I do not find his leit-motif of “biographies of gods” particularly convincing, he is also absolutely right to emphasise, like Olympia Panagiotidou in her very different book on Mithras, the need to place religious activity in antiquity in its local settings, as practice and performance by individuals in concrete situations and with a variety of aims, values, resources and competences, rather than as the result of reference to a pre-existing template imposed by “tradition”.²⁵

24. Massa, 2016.

25. Recently emphasised by Frankfurter, 2018; Schowalter *et al.*, 2019; cf. the work of the Lived Ancient Religion group at Erfurt (2012-2017), e.g. Rüpke, 2016; Patzelt, 2018. On O. Panagiotidou, see e.g. the review in this Journal by Szabó, 2018.

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