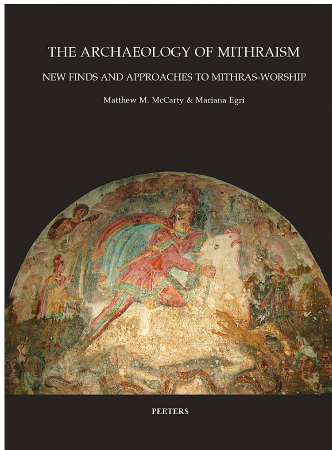
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF MITHRAISM



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MANY YEARS AGO, I MENTIONED TO AN EMINENT PROFESSOR of Roman archaeology that I was keen to research the cult of Mithras. To my dismay his reply was that there were already plenty of studies on the cult and that there was little else to add. Fortunately, I ignored their advice and soon discovered that there was still much about the cult of Mithras to be explored. This belief is evidently shared by many others given

the array of publications concerning the cult that have appeared in recent years.[1] This rapid expansion of Mithraic studies owes itself in large part to recent developments in archaeological methods and techniques, especially the greater attention now paid to small finds. In particular, the publication in 2004 of *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds* acted as somewhat of a watershed moment as it demonstrated the ample information to be gained from the titular items, including plant and animal remains. The stimulus for this volume was the discovery of a small wooden mithraeum at Tienen in modern Belgium, which produced evidence for a feast that could have provided for over 100 people. This was a startling revelation, as traditionally all Mithraic rituals were presumed to have taken place behind closed doors and involved relatively small numbers of people, and it demonstrated how archaeological materials that had hitherto been largely ignored could considerably transform our understanding of the cult. Over fifteen years later, and with several new mithraea having since been excavated with the importance of small finds in mind, the time is ripe for a sequel to the 2004 volume.

The present volume, *The Archaeology of Mithraism: New Finds and Approaches to Mithras Worship*, is in some respects this sequel. The impetus for this is again the discovery of a mithraeum that has yielded an array deposits and small finds, which appear to provide evidence for another Mithraic feast with over 100 participants. Subsequently, there are several chapters pertaining to this mithraeum, while many of the contributions focus on similar evidence from other contexts. Furthermore, there are chapters which revist and reassess older excavations, discuss approaches to Mithraic art, and why the cult disappeared. There are nineteen chapters in total, three of which are in French and the rest in English. Most of the contributions are only around ten to twelve pages in length, largely owing to the fact that they relate to ongoing projects that will be published in their own right at a later date. This means a variety of topics are covered in an easily digestible fashion, although many of the observations and conclusions are only tentative at this stage. Most chapters are well-illustrated, with the photographs of the wall-paintings from the Hawarte Mithraeum of particular note given their uniqueness and that the current state of the mithraeum remains unknown. The chapters addressing the mithraea at Kempraten and Caesarea Maritima would benefit from further illustrations to supplement the discussion (showing the finds recovered in the case of the former and the sequence of frescoes from the latter), although one expects in the case of Kempraten that these will be included in the full publication of the mithraeum.

1. E.g., Adrych *et al.*, 2017; Mastrocinque, 2017; Panagiotidou & Beck, 2017.

The discussions included here certainly provide much optimism for the future of Mithraic studies, as they highlight the dividends that new approaches are beginning to reap. As noted, small finds are rightly afforded much attention in the volume, but there is also a concerted effort to analyse the depositional processes that led to these objects entering the archaeological record. Such an approach is to be applauded, as Roman archaeologists have arguably had a tendency to focus primarily on the finds while marginalising the information that can be gained from the structure of deposits that contained them.[2] Of particular note here is the micromorphological analysis currently being undertaken on samples from Kempraten, which will allow for depositional processes that occurred in and around the temple to be reconstructed with a level of detail not previously seen in the study of a mithraeum. Moreover, there is a nuanced analysis of the foundation deposit in Apulum Mithraeum III which provides interesting new insights into what processes were involved in its creation, a welcome contrast to previous studies that have paid little attention to such deposits. It will also be fascinating to see how the stratigraphy of the well within the Mithraeum of the Coloured Marbles at Ostia, which is briefly described here, compares to that of similar features found elsewhere; for example, the recently discovered well that was located outside the London Mithraeum evidently served a ritual purpose and was found to contain a range of objects.[3] Not only will establishing trends and variations among such evidence help to better understand these sites and their relationships with other mithraea, but this will also aid in the identification of possible mithraea that do not produce any extant inscriptions or iconography (as has been the case at Colchester and Marquise).[4]

The benefits of contextualising Mithraic communities within their social networks, as well as their geographical relationships, is also rightly acknowledged here. In the case of Apulum Mithraeum III, we are shown how the *portorium* provided pathways for Mithras-worship to spread and how figures such as Publius Aelius Marius, who is named in an inscription from the mithraeum, perhaps served as nodes connecting Mithraic communities that were located at a significant distance from each other (in this case Pannonia and Dacia). Subsequently, such relationships facilitated by social networks might explain why certain features, including the aforementioned foundation deposits, appear in mithraea separated over long distances rather than those concentrated in one particular area. Indeed, one wonders what relation-

2. Haynes, 2013.
3. Bryan *et al.*, 2017, p. 105.
4. Maniez, 2014; Walsh, 2018.

ships between Mithraic communities might be revealed if one undertook a holistic, multi-layered network analysis of names, titles, depositional practices, iconography and architecture from Mithraic contexts.

Across the other chapters, a wide range of new approaches and frameworks that are being employed to gain a greater understanding of the Mithras cult are discussed: the potential contribution of experimental archaeology to Mithraic studies is demonstrated via the recreation of ceramic vessels that have been found in several mithraea, which emit steam from the mouth of a snake decorating them; the benefits of laser-scanning in the recording process are made evident by the highly detailed sections and plans of the Mithraeum of the Coloured Marbles; the contribution of developer-funded archaeology is attested to via the discovery of the mithraea at Inveresk and Kempraten; and we see how tighter restrictions on the trade of black-market antiquities has resulted in the recovery of a bull-stabbing statue from Tarquinia. We are also given an example of the dividends that can be gained from the critical reassessment of older reports; in this case, it is argued that the Dura-Europos Mithraeum underwent two building phases rather than three and that the community originally consisted of Roman soldiers rather than Palmyrene archers. Fittingly, we also have an update on the analysis of the finds from the Tienen Mithraeum, with an earlier date range of 230-240 CE now established for the large feast, which has been obtained from a revaluation of the black-slipped-ware in combination with radiocarbon analysis of freshwater fish and mammal bones from the site.

Additionally, many of the sites discussed, such as the mithraea at Angers, Kempraten, Mariana, Martigny, Ostia, and Hawarte, provide further additions to the growing corpus of Mithraic materials dating to the fourth century and beyond. As to be expected, there is some discussion concerning the relationship between these Mithraic communities and their Christian neighbours, and whether the latter were responsible for the abandonment of some of these mithraea (particularly those at Mariana and Hawarte). However, as Melega rightly observes in the Chapter 11, there were likely a number of factors that played a role in the demise of Mithraic communities, and it is important to take a step back and contextualise the fate of each temple within a broader framework. Yet to my mind the more exciting aspect of these discoveries and the subsequent analyses is what they will tell us about how Mithraic worship evolved and varied in the fourth century. There were clearly some major changes to the rituals conducted by Mithraic communities at this time which are still not well-understood (the deposition of coins as votives for example), and it is time to look more closely at how non-Christian groups, Mithraic and otherwise, reacted to this highly transformative period via the archaeological evidence for their ritual practices, which until now has largely been neglected.

If there is one issue to raise about this volume, it is the continued use of the modern term “Mithraism” (and by extension Mithraist). The difficulties surrounding this term are discussed in the Introduction, but the editors have decided that it still provides a “useful shorthand”. Admittedly it is a word with a lot of mileage and recognition, but ideally the time has come to dispense with it given that it infers a religious movement that required its followers to adhere to certain tenets, as is the case with other “-isms” such as Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism, even though this is no extant evidence for this. In the grand scheme of things this is not a major issue for those with a reasonable understanding of the cult, but among broader audiences it risks perpetuating out-dated ideas that the Mithras cult was an also-ran to Christianity, and a glance at social media around Christmas time will show such misinformation is still very much in circulation. In contrast, the term *tauroctony*, which is applied to the cult’s central image of Mithras and the bull, is used by only some of the contributors here, with others preferring ‘bull-stabbing scene’ which is a safer term given that Mithras is probably only wounding the animal rather than sacrificing it.[5] If the word *tauroctony* can be phased out, I see no reason to not to do the same for “Mithraism” and use an alternative instead (e.g., the cult of Mithras, the Mithras cult, the Mysteries of Mithras etc).

This point aside, there is much in this volume that illustrates the tremendous amount to still be learned about the cult of Mithras via new avenues of research and the application of updated archaeological techniques, as well as the potential for collaboration across institutions and continents. The publication of these various projects in their entirety will eventually superseded much of the information provided here, but for now it serves as an easily accessible update on the state of Mithraic studies. The professor who told me there was little more to be written on the cult of Mithras was wrong then and they would still be wrong now.

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5. Palmer, 2009.

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