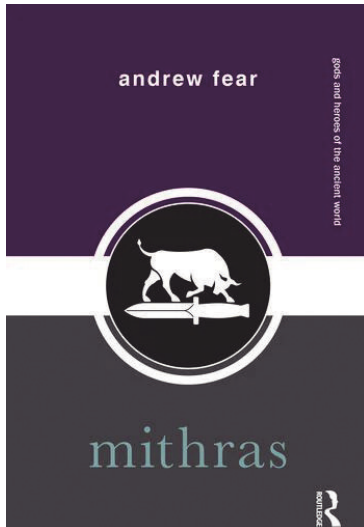


## MITHRAS




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MONOGRAPHS ON MITHRAS ARE FEW AND FAR BETWEEN, so any new publication is eagerly awaited by scholars working in the field. Synthesising studies on Mithras are scarce because recent research seems to have reached a dead end, with much emphasis on local manifestations of the cult and an increasing number of scholars arguing that there was no such thing as a Mithraic religion.<sup>1</sup> Andrew Fear's monograph on Mithras, recently published in Routledge's *Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World* series, which aims to provide the latest critical research on ancient gods and heroes

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1. Recent synthesising studies are Clauss, 2000 and Gordon, 2012. Cf. also the introduction by Nicole Belayche to the new edition of Franz Cumont's *Les mystères de Mithra*, cited in the following note. Also of note is the catalogue of the recent Mithras exhibition by Bricault, Vermiers & Amoroso, 2021.

by leading scholars in the field, is therefore a formidable challenge that many specialists in the field would have refused to take on. Fear is a Lecturer in Classics at the University of Manchester and a specialist in Roman Spain and Britain, early Christianity and the Roman army. According to his biography in the book, the author has a long-standing interest in ancient religion and Western esotericism, particularly (as this publication suggests) Freemasonry. The point of view of a relative outsider to the field of Mithraic studies is potentially very interesting, especially given the impasse in which the study currently finds itself. However, the approach is so far removed from my own that I gave serious consideration to not reviewing the book at all. Not only do I find it unsatisfying to be over-critical, but our points of view are so far apart that a fruitful discussion becomes virtually impossible. Let me first say that, like Fear, I cannot conclusively prove my interpretation. This is the great problem with the study of Mithras: our sources are so poor that very little can be established with certainty. But that does not mean that all hypotheses are equally likely, and that research has not progressed over time. I decided to write this review anyway because Fear's book is likely to be used by students as an introduction to the subject (which is indeed the series' target audience). Since much of what is found in this book can also be found on popular sites on the web, it is worth explaining that this book no longer represents current academic opinion, and why this is so. But before discussing the book's main argument, I will first provide an overview of its contents.

The book begins with a short introductory chapter of just eight pages in which Fear explains the appeal of Mithras over the past 150 years, provides a summary of the academic debate on the subject and clarifies his own position. He argues that the cult has attracted so much attention because of its enigmatic and mysterious character and its supposed similarity to, and rivalry with, Christianity in the early centuries of the Common Era. A key role in this respect was played by Franz Cumont, the founding father of Mithraic studies at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Cumont's positivist reconstruction of the available sources dominated the field until the seventies of the last century. Since then, there has been a proliferation of interpretations, which has meant that "Mithras has become much more, not less, mysterious in the last 50 years". Against this, Fear's own approach is largely a return to Cumont, whom "was perhaps closer to the truths than many of his more recent detractors believe" (p. 9).

In the nine chapters that follow, we are offered an impressionistic vision of the cult, in which the sources are discussed along traditional lines. The first three

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2. Cumont's oeuvre is currently being republished with extensive critical introductions. On Cumont and Mithras see especially Belayche, 2013.

chapters are socio-historical in nature, beginning with a historical overview of the remains of the cult from the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> to the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, followed by a chapter devoted to reconstructing the sociology of Mithras' worshippers. Chapter 4 is a detailed discussion of the sources for the presumed eastern, Iranian origin of the god and their implications for the Roman cult. Chapters 5 and 6 reconstruct the sacred narrative on the basis of visual material supplemented by literary passages. Much space (pp. 89-98) is devoted to a discussion of the tauroctony, the killing of the bull by Mithras, which is undoubtedly the most important event in this narrative. Chapter 7 deals with the meaning of the mysterious lion-headed god, whom Fear explains as a guardian between different celestial spheres, in line with the presumed Persian origin of the god (pp. 127-130). Chapter 8 describes the sanctuary where the god's rituals are celebrated, and the following chapter focuses on the rituals themselves. Starting from the assumption that this was a mystery cult, much attention is paid to the so-called "grade system" (of which Fear, p. 146, rightly notes that the three literary references to this system are frustratingly inconsistent) and the associated initiation rituals. In addition to initiation rituals, this extensive chapter also deals with the so-called "rituals of association" in the cult, of which the sacred banquet is by far the most important. The available sources on Mithraic rituals are discussed in detail, both iconographic evidence, such as the paintings from the *mithraea* below the Santa Prisca in Rome and Santa Maria in Capua Vetere, and possible (and highly controversial) literary sources, such as a presumed Mithras liturgy and catechism from Egypt (a country where the cult is virtually unattested). A separate section is devoted to the representations on the so-called "Mainz crater", which Roger Beck has interpreted as a performative ritual based on the story of the god, an interpretation that is now widely accepted but which Fear rejects. Finally, chapter 10 reconstructs the credo of the cult, which is defined as a mystery cult, a religion of redemption that, like Christianity, promises its followers immortality.

In keeping with the format of the series, the final chapter deals with the afterlife of Mithras. Although it is relatively short, in the opinion of this reviewer, this is by far the most interesting and original chapter. Although Mithras enjoyed some popularity among Freemasons, the god's role in neo-paganism and the Western esoteric tradition is negligible. Fear points out that the cult of Mithras received surprisingly little attention until Franz Cumont revived the god at the end of the nineteenth century. Although Cumont never said so explicitly, it is clear that he interpreted the cult as a kind of para-Christianity, an originally Eastern religion that preached moral purity and the hope of immortality. This idea was enthusiastically embraced by followers of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and scholars of comparative religion at the begin-

ning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Their publications eventually led to the still widespread idea that Christianity was a religion derived from Mithraism.

Without going into detail, it is clear that Fear, like Franz Cumont and his followers such as the Dutch scholar Maarten J. Vermaseren, sets out to create a normative Mithraism. For Fear, as for Cumont before him, Mithraism is a consciously designed and fixed religious system, with a clear beginning, a fixed sacred narrative, religious practice and a well-defined credo that testifies to its character as a mystery religion and is strongly reminiscent of Christianity. Starting from the idea that Mithraism was a religion of salvation with a fixed creed like Christianity, Fear believes that we can reconstruct at least the outlines of this religion on the basis of some literary testimonies and a large amount of archaeological material. In this reconstruction, the literary sources are considered the main source of information, since the material remains do not speak for themselves, and archaeology can never be more than the handmaiden of history (p. 6).

With this approach, Fear is diametrically opposed to the current trend in most research on Mithras.<sup>4</sup> In the entire book, only one sentence is devoted to this trend. In discussing alternative interpretations of the cult since Cumont, Fear mentions the strong strand that has stressed the primacy of astrology in Mithraism, as well as “others [who] have doubted whether Mithraism existed as a coherent belief system at all [*sic!*], rather that it was a group of loosely related beliefs held in different ways” (pp. 6-7). The accompanying footnote refers only to studies that support the astrological interpretation, an interpretation that is discussed and rejected in more detail later in the book (p. 180), while ignoring the current trend altogether. In reality, however, the astrological interpretation is currently on the wane, while the idea that there was no such thing as Mithraism is strongly on the rise, both among young scholars and former adherents of the astronomical or neo-Platonic interpretation.

The more recent approach is to doubt that Mithraism existed as a coherent belief system at all, let alone that this system was similar to the religious systems prevalent among early Christian groups.<sup>5</sup> Instead of looking for a single cult that was the same throughout the empire (as Cumont did and Fear still does), scholars now tend to emphasise the local characteristics of its manifestations. As a result, Cumont’s so-called “orthodoxy” is now largely abandoned, as are the ongoing attempts in mod-

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3. On this, see Lannoy, 2023.

4. The literature on Mithras is extensive. For references to recent publications and an overview of the *status quo* of different aspects of the cult by a great many specialists, see Bricault, Veymiers & Amoroso, 2021.

5. Of course, the pluralities of early Christianities should be taken into account as well.

ern scholarship to fill in the gaps and create a normative Mithraism.<sup>6</sup> To varying degrees, but increasingly, historians stress that there was no central priesthood, no fixed theology, and no set ritual among the worshippers of Mithras. Even the existence of a common, unchanging narrative about the god is now often denied.<sup>7</sup> In a cultic movement that apparently had no written sources, let alone divinely inspired books, such a fixed, unchanging narrative is highly unlikely. As a result, some historians of religion now question whether the Mithras cult can be called a religion at all.<sup>8</sup>

This new approach has huge implications for the way in which individual monuments can be interpreted. It implies that all research is, by definition, local and must be based on the material found at a particular site. In the case of Mithras, this means that the material culture is the starting point for further research, not the texts. The textual sources are considered unreliable since, apart from a few (barely legible) *dipinti* from the *Mithraeum* below Santa Prisca in Rome, they were all written by outsiders to the cult (a few pagan philosophers and Christian theologians) or by a philosophically inclined former Christian (the 4<sup>th</sup> century Emperor Julian). I agree with Fear that this modern approach (though methodologically correct in my view) eventually runs into insurmountable problems, but to ignore the latest critical research in a series that aims to provide an overview of such developments is, in my view, a lost opportunity. Moreover, falling back on a theory that was convincingly refuted 50 years ago is certainly not the way forward.<sup>9</sup> There is no point in repeating all the arguments that have been put forward against Cumont's ideas, but it is worth pointing out a few basic points.

First and foremost, we should assess Fear's idea that Mithraism was a redemptive religion, similar to Christianity. Fear uses three main arguments to support this claim. The first is the open and frequent hostility to Mithras in Christian sources. This vehement hostility, Fear argues, stems from the observation by Christian theologians that the content and practice of the Mithras cult bore strong similarities to Christianity. On reflection, however, the total number of passages in which Mithras is mentioned is very

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6. By far the most inspiring new study of late is Adrych *et al.*, 2017.

7. On these scenes and the vexed question whether they represent a sacred narrative, see Gordon, 1979-1980. See now also Dirven, 2015.

8. This approach is heavily influenced by Nongbri, 2013, a work now particularly popular in the USA. While I agree that the cult of Mithras was very different from religion as we know it today (a notion based on Christianity as it developed after the Enlightenment), I do not agree with abolishing the concept altogether. Instead, I suggest that we look for a different, more neutral working definition of religion, and then adapt that definition to the object of study as presented in the ancient sources.

9. Fundamental is Gordon, 1975.

limited. From the second to the sixth century, we have no more than 35 references, many of which are found in the same authors (notably Tertullian and Origen).<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, Fear relies on a famous *dipinto* found in the *Mithraeum* under the Santa Prisca in Rome, which, according to its excavator Vermaseren, reads *et nos servasti eternali sanguine fuso* – “you saved us by shedding the eternal blood” –, which was interpreted to mean that the shedding of the bull’s blood by Mithras was in some way a redeeming act. Vermaseren’s reading and interpretation of this *dipinto* (largely inspired by Cumont’s interpretation of the tauroctony) is far from certain, as Fear finally notes on p. 93 when he states that “as things stand, the case is perhaps more suggestive than certain”. This pertinent remark seems to be more of an interpolation from a critical reviewer than Fear’s own opinion, as the entire chapter bears the title of this *dipinto*.

Thirdly, Fear argues that the centrality of the tauroctony in Mithraic sanctuaries proves that it must have been a redemptive act, comparable to the crucifixion. More than once Fear argues that the crucifixion symbolises Jesus’ victory over death in a similar way to the tauroctony. However, although Fear frequently refers to the prominence of the crucifixion in Christian churches, the event appears late in the history of Christian art and always as part of a story with another climax.<sup>11</sup> In the early church, the crucifixion does not illustrate Jesus’ victory over death, as his resurrection does. While one can argue for the empty cross as an unvanquished symbol (cf. the cross in Constantine’s dream, as well as the symbol of the cross in 4<sup>th</sup>-century mosaics and sarcophagi in Rome), this is not true of the event of the crucifixion itself. The equation of Jesus’ crucifixion with the tauroctony is therefore unfounded and it certainly does not follow from this that the tauroctony symbolises victory (although this could be the case in view of the frequent title *Sol Invictus*), let alone victory over death. Interaction between various elective cults and Christianity is of course possible, but in the case of Mithras there is no evidence of interaction with Christianity, let alone that supposed outward similarities between the two testify to a similar creed.<sup>12</sup> The supposed similarities between Mithras and Christ result from the hidden influence of the Cumontian paradigm, that in line with the evolutionistic ideas of his time, presented the mithraic cult as a para-Christianity.

Another important assumption in Fear’s study is that Mithraism was a religion with a fixed sacred narrative, set of rituals and well-defined credo. Part of this argu-

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10. Roselaar, 2014.

11. Mc-Gowan, 2018. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, theologians refer to Christ’s death as a victory, but hardly any representations of the event have come down to us.

12. On this, see Smith, 1990. Also Alvar Ezquerro, 2008, esp. pp. 393-401.

ment is based upon its presumed similarity with Christianity, which should be dismissed. If we abandon the idea of a fixed narrative, there is no reason to assume that the representations of the god's story found throughout the Roman Empire illustrate the same myth. Contrary to early Christianity, there was no written narrative, let alone that such a narrative was divinely inspired and unchangeable. In contrast, the sources bear out that the narrative of the god was fairly flexible and could be adjusted at will. As such, the functioning of the narrative tallies with the character of myths in classical society. Fear's argument that the unique scenes found in the recently discovered *mithraeum* in Huarte show how much of the *mythos* of the religion we have lost (p. 9), should therefore be rejected. In contrast, the material from Huarte is more plausibly interpreted as evidence of the local adaptability of the cult.

The sacred banquet apart, the rituals performed inside these temples also testify to local variation. As Fear himself notes, the three literary testimonies that inform us about the planets in the so-called "grade system" are all different. The graffiti from Dura-Europos, in which unique grades such as *mello leones* (a half-lions), *neo leon* (young lion) and an *antipater* (pre-father) are mentioned, also testify to the local variability of the so-called "system".<sup>13</sup> All of this, of course, has far-reaching consequences for the reconstruction of the cult's creed, which many scholars today consider an impossible task. The status of Mithras as a mystery cult was already challenged by Walter Burkert in his iconic *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge 1987), and since then the very concept of mystery cults has been called into question.<sup>14</sup> This debate is in turn related to how we define a mystery cult, which is by no means self-evident since it has become increasingly clear that the cults that are traditionally reckoned among such cults greatly differ among themselves, and that the former definition of cults that centre on personal salvation and personal rebirth cannot be upheld, at least not for all of them. How Mithras fits into this is still debated.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, I would like to comment on the presumed oriental origin of the cult (chapter 4). As we know, Cumont was convinced that the cult of Mithras originated in Persia and travelled from there to Anatolia and then to Rome. Although it was adapted to its new environment, Cumont believed that the cult remained essentially

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13. On the different grades attested in graffiti from the *mithraeum* in Dura-Europos, see Dirven & McCarty, 2021. Opinions about the empire wide status of the grades differ greatly among scholars. On the grades as canonical, see Clauss, 2000, pp. 131-140; Gordon, 2007, p. 399. Against this: Turcan, 1999. See now also the critical stance of Adrych, 2021.

14. Burkert, 1987, pp. 42, 76, 110, where he notes that compared to other so-called mystery cults, Mithras is the odd one out.

15. See Alvar Ezquerro, 2008, pp. 34-35, n. 12.

Iranian and that he could use Iranian/Zoroastrian sources to interpret the material remains from the Roman Empire. When Cumont was dethroned in the '70, the idea of an Iranian origin was largely abandoned. Although theories of possible Iranian influence continue to surface,<sup>16</sup> most scholars now regard the cult of Mithras as a Roman invention, with a god who was at most inspired by, but very different from, the Iranian god Mithra. They claim that the cult merely plays with exotic Iranian lore (a phenomenon called *perserie* or, more recently, Persianism), but has nothing to do with Iran proper.<sup>17</sup> Fear argues that in antiquity both Mithras' worshippers and his opponents took the god's Iranian origin for granted. If the god's Iranian character had been a recent invention, he argues the latter would certainly have used it to discredit the cult (p. 44). Furthermore, Fear argues that "the weight of evidence for an Asian origin (of Roman Mithras) cannot be dismissed out of hand, and that it would be foolish not to turn to Asia in the search for him" (pp. 46-47). In addition to the generally accepted Iranian character of the god, these testimonies consist first and foremost of the account of Tiridates visiting Nero in Rome (Dio, LXIII 1, 2 – 2, 3), as well as Plutarch's Cilician pirates who worshipped Mithras (*Life of Pompey* 24).

Fear therefore returns to the idea of the god's Iranian origin, albeit in a slightly different way from Cumont. In his detailed discussion of Mitra in Zoroastrian sources (pp. 48-55), he shows that this material differs in important respects from the Western sources and that Cumont was mistaken in this respect. Fear hypothesises the existence of an alternative, non-orthodox Zoroastrianism in Commagene or, more likely, Armenia, where the origins of the Western cult may be found. Although such variations on the later orthodox version of Sasanian Zoroastrianism are indeed a possibility (indeed, recent scholarship argues against Mary Boyce that orthodox Zoroastrianism was in fact a Sasanian creation, and only one of many forms existing in antiquity),<sup>18</sup> there is currently no substantial evidence to support Fear's hypothesis. The early dates of the *mithraea* of Commagene and *Caesarea Maritima* (p. 46) are highly controversial, whereas all testimonies of Mitra in the region differ significantly from Mithras' cult in the West. Although the bull-slaying rituals attested among the

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16. Several recent spectacular discoveries of *mithraea* in Syria, notably the *mithraeum* at Huarte and the Syrian cult relief found in Jerusalem a few years ago, have led some scholars to return to the supposed oriental features of Mithraism in Roman Syria. The *mithraeum* at Dura also continues to inspire such ideas. Recently, for example, Gnoli, 2017. Cf. Gordon, 2017, pp. 318-320, who opts for a re-Iranisation of the cult at Dura (and Huarte). For a rejection of such Iranian influences at Dura, see Dirven, forthcoming.

17. On these concepts, see Strootman & Versluys, 2017 in their introduction to their edited volume.

18. See in particular De Jong, 2008; 2015a; and 2015b.



Yazidis in northern Iraq (pp. 60-63) are reminiscent of Mithras' sacrifice in several respects, they are so different overall that they cannot be used as evidence for the origin of the Roman Mithras in these regions. Although I agree with Fear that Mitra may have entered the Roman world via Armenia or Commagene, I doubt that this tells us anything new about the character and cult of the Roman god. People may well have been convinced of the god's Iranian character, but the establishment of his cult in the West probably changed his Asian character considerably. Such a process is not unusual, as the history of modern yoga shows. What we now call yoga is just over 100 years old and is a mixture of Indian yoga and Scandinavian gymnastics. Not many of its practitioners today are aware of this history, nor are they willing to accept it.

It may be clear from the above that this new book on Mithras is at odds with most of what is currently going on in mithraic studies. In itself, this is not a problem, except that there are hardly any footnotes to enable the reader to check the opinions expressed here. This is particularly unfortunate given that the book is aimed at students and a general audience. Equally surprising is the choice of graphics. For a book in which the description of figurative monuments plays such an important role it contains very few pictures and the few pictures there are, are of decidedly uninformative monuments. Virtually all are of monuments in Britain, suggesting that copyright rather than appropriateness of the images was the criterion for selection. I recommend that readers consult the Tertullian Project online, which contains most of the monuments from Vermaseren's *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (CIMRM), supplemented by more recent finds. Finally, it should be noted that the editing of the book by the publisher was not very careful, as it is full of typos and spelling mistakes. Maarten Vermaseren's name, for example, is consequently misspelled as Vermasaren. Surely this would have been a different book if the editors had invested more time before publication.

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