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How the Mithraeum of the Mithraic Cult Functioned as Sacred Space in Rome

Nadeau, Justin Taylor

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How the Mithraeum of the Mithraic Cult Functioned as Sacred Space in Rome

by

Justin Taylor Nadeau

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Abstract

Sacred space is a complicated subject, and it should be treated as such. Scholarship on the cult of Mithras often simply denotes a space as sacred without any further recognition given to how the space functions as sacred. By applying the theory associated with sacred space I determine that the Mithraeum of the ancient cult of Mithras functioned as sacred space through the boundaries, active and passive role in the human bodily experience, establishing a communal identity and the perceived presence of a deity. That said, each sacred space utilizes these elements in unique ways and as such, there is not one single cohesive application of sacred space.

PREFACE

This thesis is an original, unpublished and independent work by the author Justin Taylor Nadeau.

Acknowledgements

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	10
RELIGION IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE:	12
MYSTERY CULTS:	13
MITHRA(S):.....	14
MITHRAEUM (MITHRAEA):	15
MITHRAIC SCHOLARSHIP:.....	20
METHODOLOGY:	24
CHAPTER 1: DEFINING SACRED SPACE.....	28
CHAPTER 2: BOUNDED LOCATION.....	36
<i>NON-PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES</i>	40
<i>PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES</i>	47
<i>CASE STUDIES:</i>	49
Circus Maximus Mithraeum.....	49
San Clemente Mithraeum.....	52
Santa Prisca Mithraeum	55
<i>Conclusions</i>	57
CHAPTER 3: ACTIVE ROLE IN HUMAN, BODILY EXPERIENCE TO CREATE A COMMUNAL IDENTITY.....	58
<i>TAUROCTONY</i>	63
‘ <i>STAR-TALK</i> ’	64
<i>CASE STUDIES:</i>	67
Circus Maximus Mithraeum.....	67
San Clemente Mithraeum.....	70
Santa Prisca Mithraeum	73
<i>Conclusions</i>	75
CHAPTER 4: PASSIVE ROLE IN HUMAN, BODILY EXPERIENCE	76
<i>SACRIFICE AND ALTARS</i>	77
<i>THE RITUAL USE OF ALTARS IN ROMAN STATE SACRIFICE</i>	80
<i>CASE STUDIES:</i>	86
Circus Maximus Mithraeum.....	86
San Clemente Mithraeum.....	88
Santa Prisca Mithraeum	90
<i>Conclusions</i>	91
CHAPTER 5: PERCEIVED PRESENCE OF A DEITY (OR SUPERNATURAL BEING).....	92
<i>EIDOS OF MITHRAS</i>	94
<i>CASE STUDIES:</i>	99
Circus Maximus Mithraeum.....	99
San Clemente Mithraeum.....	100
Santa Prisca Mithraeum	102
<i>Conclusions</i>	103
CONCLUSION	104
BIBLIOGRAPHY:.....	106

List of Figures

(Due to copyright restrictions, select images will not appear in the thesis)

Figure 1	<i>‘Ideal’ Mithraeum. Beck, 2006: 102.</i>
Figure 2	<i>The Mithraeum of Felicissimus, Ostia, with symbols substituted for the planets and the Zodiacs. Beck, 2006: 103.</i>
Figure 3	<i>Map of Mithraea in Mediterranean, Hinnells, 1985: 77.</i>
Figure 4	<i>Layout of Jerusalem Temple. Lloyd Thomas, 2012-2016. All Rights Reserved Worldwide.</i>
Figure 5	<i>Seven Mithraic Grades Table.</i>
Figure 6	<i>Layout of Circus Maximus Mithraeum by Comune di Roma, Author’s Photograph.</i>
Figure 7	<i>Layout of Circus Maximus Mithraeum, Peitrangelli, 1940: 148.</i>
Figure 7.1	<i>Obstructed view of Mithraeum from Red dot on Figure 7, Author’s Photograph.</i>
Figure 8	<i>Layout of San Clemente Mithraeum by Comune di Roma, Author’s Photograph.</i>
Figure 9	<i>Layout of Santa Prisca Mithraeum. Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 25.</i>
Figure 10	<i>Mithraic Initiation Ritual Table.</i>
Figure 11	<i>Layout, Circus Maximus Mithraeum. Author’s Photograph.</i>
Figure 12	<i>View from Room A/B, Circus Maximus Mithraeum. Author’s Photograph.</i>
Figure 13	<i>Relief, Circus Maximus Mithraeum. Author’s Photograph.</i>

Figure 14	<i>Layout, San Clemente Mithraeum. Author's Photograph.</i>
Figure 15	<i>Sketch of Room AM, San Clemente Mithraeum. Nolan, 1934: 171.</i>
Figure 16	<i>Altar, San Clemente Mithraeum. Author's Photograph.</i>
Figure 17	<i>Layout, Santa Prisca Mithraeum. Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 25.</i>
Figure 18	<i>View of Room W, San Clemente Mithraeum, Author's Photograph.</i>
Figure 19	<i>Communal Meal Relief, Konjic Mithraeum. National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina.</i>
Figure 20	<i>Layout Circus Maximus Mithraeum. Author's Photograph.</i>
Figure 20.1	<i>Circus Maximus Triangular podium (L), Rectangular Podium (R). Author's Photograph.</i>
Figure 21	<i>Main Room, Circus Maximus Mithraeum. Author's Photograph.</i>
Figure 22	<i>Main Room with Altar, San Clemente Mithraeum. Author's Photograph.</i>
Figure 23	<i>Altar in Room V, Santa Prisca Mithraeum. Author's Photograph.</i>
Figure 24	<i>Standish Tauroctony, London, British Museum. (BM 1825,0613.1).</i>
Figure 25	<i>Townley Tauroctony, London, British Museum. (BM 1805,0703.270).</i>
Figure 26	<i>Relief, Circus Maximus Mithraeum. Author's Photograph.</i>
Figure 27	<i>Main Cult-Niche, San Clemente. Author's Photograph.</i>

Figure 28..... *Main Cult-Relief, Santa Prisca. Author's Photograph.*

List of Abbreviations

OCD..... *Oxford Classical Dictionary*

OED..... *Oxford English Dictionary*

CIMRM I..... *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae, Volume I*

CIMRM II..... *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae, Volume II*

TMMM..... *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*

JMS..... *Journal of Mithraic Studies*

Introduction

From the bustling metropolis of Manhattan to the expansive arches of southern Utah, spaces impact individuals. Dr. Gabriel A. Radvansky and Dr. David E. Copeland questioned this in terms of how movement through space affects an individual's cognitive ability. Their results found that after a spatial shift, an individual was less accurately able to identify disassociated objects than associated objects in a fictional situation¹. Each new space disrupted an individual's cognitive processing². We are constantly monitoring changes to comprehend new spaces. As we move, our information about the previous space is secondary or forgotten. This study demonstrates that spaces affect individuals on a deeper, cognitive level.

Sacred space remains an important aspect today, so much so that they are causes of conflict. This conflict is evident in two cases: first, is the situation surrounding the site now called 'Uluru' in Australia and second is the conflict regarding Mauna Kea in Hawaii.

Uluru, in Australia, and its surrounding areas were inhabited by Australian Aboriginals until 1873 when British explorer W.C. Gosse arrived and claimed Uluru as Ayers rock³. Years of conflict followed between Australian Aboriginals and European colonizers, and Ayers rock was eventually included in a reserve to the Aboriginals. In the 1950s the Australian government decided to open Ayers rock to tourists⁴. This act sparked the conflict which culminated in the legal dispute over land claims between the Aboriginals and the Australian government in the

¹ Copeland, Radvansky, 2006: 1153-1154. Subjects were given a fictional story wherein the protagonist had an object that was associated or dissociated, then that protagonist would move to a new space and the subject was questioned on the object. Ex. the protagonist would put on a sweater (associated) or take it off (dissociated) then go for a run, 1150-1151.

² *Ibid.* 1155.

³ Layton, 2001: 54.

⁴ *Ibid.* 74-75.

-Introduction-

1970s⁵. It was not until the drafting of a Land Rights Act that the original title of Uluru was finally acknowledged on 11 November 1983⁶. It was concluded and stated by the Governor-General, that Uluru was restored to the Aboriginal Australians because it had “deep spiritual significance” and deserves to be recognized by the Australian government⁷. This conflict regarding Uluru displays the cultural and political significance that sacred space maintains in the modern world.

More recently, Mauna Kea in Hawaii has suffered a similar fate. Mauna Kea is a dormant volcano on the largest of the Hawaiian Islands, Hawaii. It has served as a sacred peak for the local Hawaiians for hundreds of years and represents the mountain altar of Wākea, the celestial father and progenitor of the Hawaiian race⁸. Mauna Kea became the premier site for astronomical observations in the 1960s⁹. There were 5 total telescopes built by 1979 on the summit of Mauna Kea¹⁰. In the early 2000s dissent began to rise, and local Hawaiian voices were finally articulated in the *Los Angeles Times*¹¹. Local Hawaiians are understandably frustrated with the government’s response to their outrage and have begun to set up protests blocking access to the mountain¹². This example demonstrates how there is a disconnect between cultures surrounding sacred space. The only method of understanding the situations surrounding Uluru and Mauna Kea is to further explore sacred spaces.

⁵ *Ibid.* 93-118.

⁶ *Ibid.* 118.

⁷ *Ibid.* 118.

⁸ Ciotti, 2011: 148.

⁹ *Ibid.* 149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 150.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 151.

¹² See Kamana Beamer in *Honolulu Civil Beat* published 6 September 2019 (<https://bit.ly/2kDKK08>) and Ben Gutierrez in *Hawaii News Now* published 7 September 2019 (<https://bit.ly/2lBYadl>).

These examples, along with the effect of sacred space on individuals, are readily applicable to antiquity through the analysis of the Mithraeum of the mysteries of Mithras in Rome. The focus of this thesis will be on to what extent the Mithraea of the ancient mystery cult dedicated to the deity Mithras functioned as sacred space. The mystery cult of Mithras provides an excellent study to objectively understand the function of sacred space within an isolated time and culture.

Religion in the Roman Empire:

The vast expanse and diversity associated with the Roman Empire requires refining before proceeding. Defining a ‘Roman’ is difficult because the ancient Roman Empire is described as a cultural ‘melting pot’¹³. Romanization is often used as a blanket term for the spread of Roman culture, and scholars either see its broadness as a drawback or strength¹⁴. W.V. Harris has defined Romanization as “the process by which the inhabitants [of the places conquered by the Roman political/cultural/military systems] come to be, and think of themselves, as Romans”¹⁵. Jenn Cianca argues that the cultural association of a ‘Roman’ varies depending on the context, and as such is difficult to define¹⁶. I defer to her definition of a typical Roman and relative Roman religion as “a member of the Empire’s population whose civic and private practice reflects the values of Rome”¹⁷. This definition allows for the comparison of Roman religious practices and Mithraic practices, as the cult was a heavily Romanized institution.

¹³ Woolf, 1998: 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁵ Harris, 1971: 147.

¹⁶ Cianca, 2018: 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid*. 36.

The terms ‘pagan’ and ‘paganism’ have undergone scrutiny in recent years as they may not be representative of the varying degree of religious and cultic practices present throughout the Roman world. The term ‘pagan’ was originally used by Christians in late antiquity to refer to their rivals or anyone who was not part of the Judeo-Christian sphere (i.e. Judaism and Christianity)¹⁸. A modern trend in scholarship has attempted to introduce the term ‘polytheist’ instead to replace the Christian polemical overtones that are inherent with the use of ‘pagan’¹⁹. Despite this shift, the term ‘polytheist’ is still used interchangeably with ‘pagan’ in much classical scholarship²⁰ - as such I will use the term ‘pagan’.

‘Roman religion(s)’ or ‘paganism’ are modern terms applied to the diversity of religious elements present in the ancient Mediterranean²¹. As the ancient world slowly moves further away, scholars must work harder to maintain the validity of this comparative approach²². The basis of commonalities becomes broader and grouping together “Romans” and “pagans” becomes a necessity in the study of the ancient world.

Mystery Cults:

One of the many elements, and arguably one of the most defining, of the Roman religions were mystery cults. The term mystery stems from the Greek noun μυστήριον (*mysterion*) meaning “secret rite” or simply, “mystery”²³. Accordingly, this word stems from the verb μύεω (*mueo*), meaning “being initiated into the mysteries” or “to close”²⁴. The verb can be viewed in

¹⁸ Lee, 2016: 8.

¹⁹ Cameron, 2010: 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 28.

²¹ Bowden, 2010: 5-6.

²² *Ibid.* 32.

²³ LSJ Lexicon, s.v. “μυστήριον, n.” Accessed 20 June 2019.

²⁴ LSJ Lexicon, s.v. “μύεω, v.” Accessed 20 June 2019.

two ways: first, it is “to close” one’s mouth²⁵; and the second, is “to close” (and subsequently open) one’s eyes referring to the initiation ceremonies often associated with mystery cults²⁶. A clear example of this comes from Apuleius’ *Metamorphosis* (or *The Golden Ass*) 11.22-24, when the protagonist, Lucius explains the initiation into the cult of Isis, and the secrecy involved with it²⁷.

Therefore, a mystery cult is a group of initiated individuals who participate in secret ritual actions in a defined space²⁸. The mystery cult dedicated to Mithras was present in the Roman Empire between the 1st and 5th c. CE. Some scholars argue that the Mithraic mysteries should not be considered a uniform mystery cult as the term may not be representative of the group’s true nature or intentions²⁹. I, however, disagree with this conclusion and argue similar to Abolala Soudavar, that the Mithraic mysteries functioned as a mystery cult because it practised secrecy, had a non-dogmatic brotherhood, and would have inspired fierce loyalty³⁰.

Mithra(s):

A multitude of names appears referring to a specific male deity in antiquity associated with Mithras. The term *Mithra* appears in one of the oldest Indo-European texts, the Rig-Veda, in the Vendidad 4 and the Yasht 10³¹. Here, *Mithra* means ‘oath’, ‘contract’, or, as Hanns-Peter

²⁵ Meyer, 1987: 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 4.

²⁷ Bowden, 2010: 14.

²⁸ Burkert, 1987: 8-9; Beard et al, Vol. 1, 1999: 245-249; Bowden, 2010: 2-16.

²⁹ Walsh, 2018: 15. Furthermore, the cohesiveness of the Mithraic cult has also come into question in recent years, see McCarty et al, 2016 and Gordon, 2017.

³⁰ Soudavar, 2014: 18.

³¹ Hinnells, 1985: 8; Schmidt, 2006: 1; Adrych et al, 2017: 2-3.

Schmidt argues, can be more accurately translated as ‘moral obligation’³². This reference from the 2nd millennium BCE carried through into the Roman Empire as the name Mithras³³.

The Mithraic mysteries may have adopted imagery from Persian worship, but the Roman Mithras differed from previous Persian Mithra worship and developed on its own in the Roman Empire³⁴. David Ulansey states that none of the essential characteristics of the Roman mysteries can be found in the Persian religions³⁵. The Mithraic mysteries are a phenomenon primarily of the ‘west’ and the Roman empire³⁶. Early Mithraic scholarship tended to emphasize this relationship until the separation from the Cumontian framework when the Persian/Iranian origins were refuted in the mid-1970s³⁷. The various appearances of Mithra(s) are evidence of its vast use throughout the ancient world – however there is a clear separation between the Persian and Roman version of Mithras³⁸. For this study I focus on the Romanized version of the deity Mithras between the 1st c. CE and the 5th c. CE.

Mithraeum (Mithraea):

The Mithraeum (pl. Mithraea) is the term used by modern scholarship to refer to the place where the initiates of the Mithraic mysteries met and performed rituals. One of the reasons that the Mithraic mysteries have become so popular in modern academia is due to the breadth of these Mithraea throughout the Mediterranean accompanied by a staggering lack of literary evidence. As evident from Figure 3, Mithraea and Mithraic related evidence stretch across the

³² Schmidt, 2006: 1.

³³ *Ibid.* 2-3.

³⁴ Bowden, 2010: 181.

³⁵ Ulansey, 1989: 8.

³⁶ Beck, 1984: 2003.

³⁷ Gordon, 1976: 215-248. Although Beck has argued differently, see Beck, 1998 and 2001.

³⁸ For further discussion on the history of *Mithra* see Grenet, 2001; Rose, 2011; Clauss, 2012; Gordon, 2015 and Adrych et al. 2017.

Mediterranean. A Mithraeum was found in London called the London Mithraeum (or the Temple of Mithras, Wallbrook) by W.F. Grimes in 1954³⁹, and on the complete opposite side of the Roman Empire, a Mithraeum in the ancient city of Dura-Europos in modern-day Syria⁴⁰. The term “Mithraeum” was coined, according to Franz Cumont, by an archaeologist named Habel who discovered the first Mithraea in 1826 in Heddernheim (near Frankfurt) in Germany⁴¹.

The Mithraic mysteries were unique in that they integrated their worldview directly into space, which is why the Mithraeum is essential to study. The space was a necessity for the cult⁴². The Mithraeum performed three functions usually kept separate in Roman civic religious practices: 1 – housed the cult image; 2 – acted as the sacrificial site; 3 – was the meeting place for a dining group⁴³. There is a generic blueprint for the construction that every Mithraeum adheres to (of course there are exceptions). The general shape is a long narrow corridor, with an open center aisle, two paralleled benches on either side all leading to a cult niche at the end of the room. Applying this generic blueprint, and the “cosmic model” emphasized by Roger Beck, we end up with the “ideal Mithraeum”, see Figure 1 and 2, which most Mithraea resemble⁴⁴.

³⁹ Vermaseren, Vol. 2, 1956: 139.

⁴⁰ Vermaseren, Vol. 1, 1956: 57-58.

⁴¹ Cumont, 1899: 54.

⁴² Beck, 2006: 105.

⁴³ Gordon, 2007: 416.

⁴⁴ Beck, 2006: 102-103; Hensen, 2017: 385.

-Introduction-

The Mithraeum, according to Porphyry (*De Antro* 6: 8-9), was designed as an authentic “image of the universe” (*eikona kosmou*), imitating the supposed precedent of Zoroaster who was the first to dedicate a cave to the god Mithras⁴⁵. Porphyry of Tyre was a Greek author from the late 3rd c. CE who often wrote in defense of paganism in the increasingly Christian world at the time⁴⁶. His work, *De Antro*, presents his Neoplatonic and philological focus dealing with the

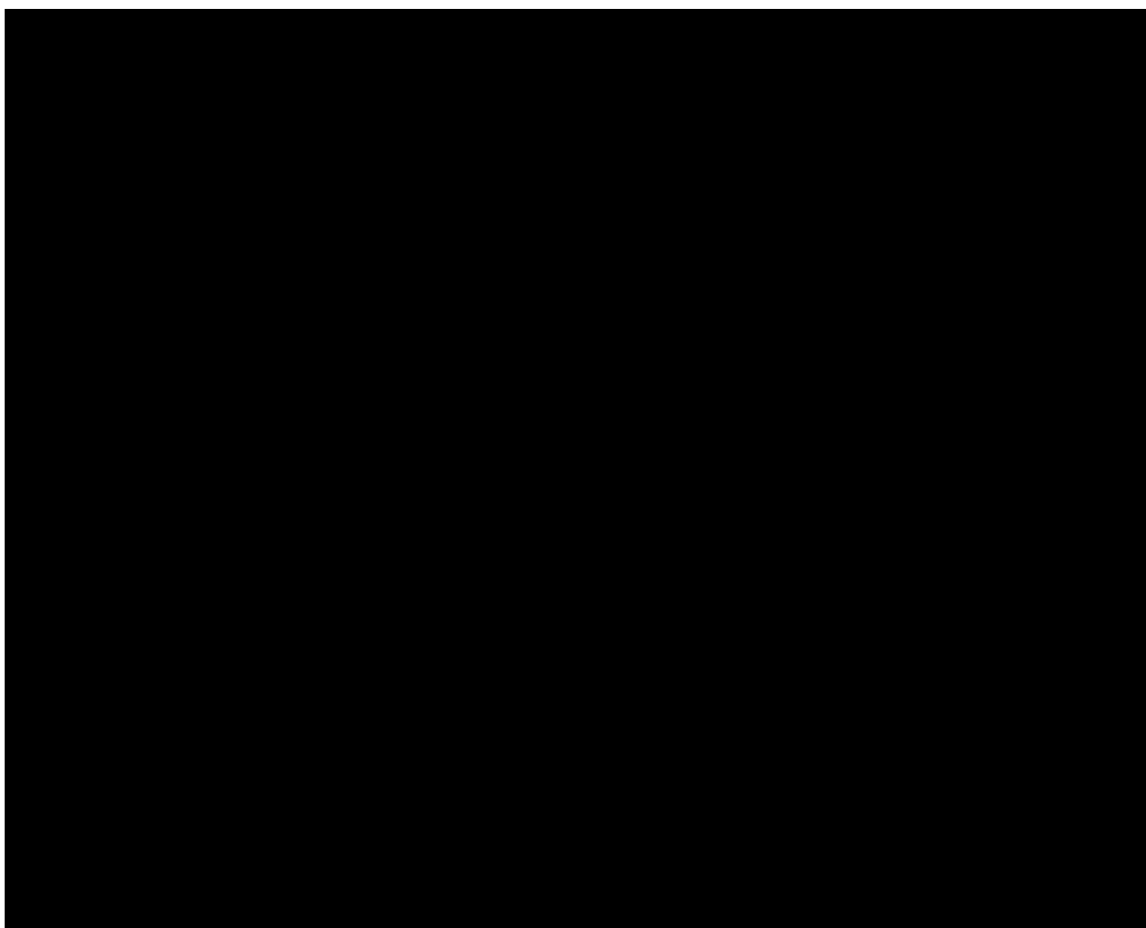


Figure 1. The 'Ideal' Mithraeum. Beck, 2006: 102

⁴⁵ Panagiotidou, 2012: 35-36; Gordon 2017: 422-423.

⁴⁶ Johnson, 2013: 3-4.

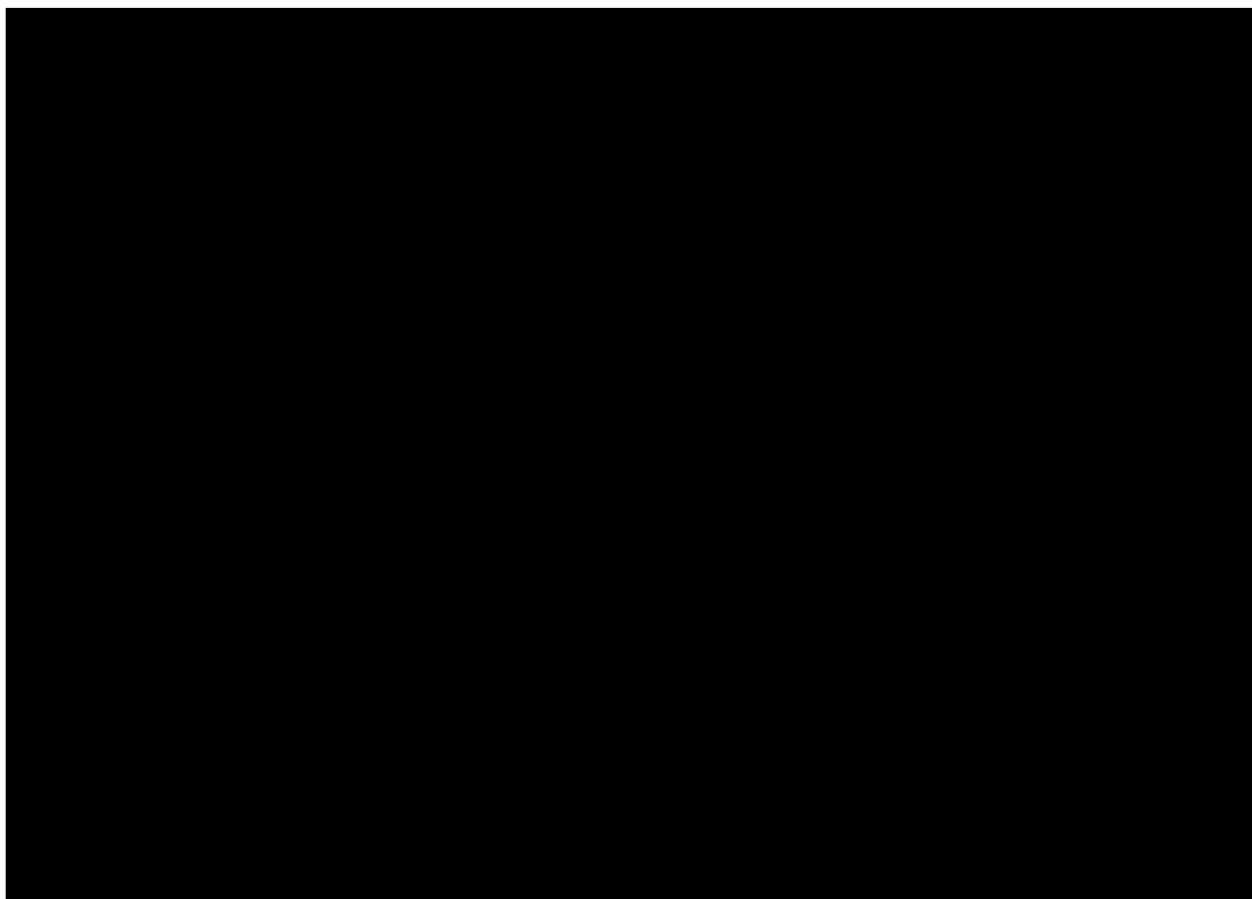


Figure 2. The Mithraeum of Felicissimus, Ostia, with symbols substituted for planets and Zodiacs. Beck, 2006: 103.

complex allegories found in Homer's *Odyssey*⁴⁷. In the passage of interest, Porphyry discusses a description of a shadowy cave of the nymphs near Phorcys in Ithaca where Odysseus is left by the Phaeacians (Homer, *Odyssey*: 13.102-112). Beck uses this passage as his "gateway into the Mithraic mysteries"⁴⁸. The passage reads as follows:

[6] ...οὕτω καὶ Πέρσαι τὴν εἰς κάτω κάθοδον τῶν ψυχῶν καὶ πάλιν ἔξοδον μυσταγωγοῦντες τελοῦσι τὸν μύστην, ἐπονομάσαντες σπήλαιον <τὸν> τόπον· πρώτου μὲν, ὡς ἔφη Εὐβουλος, Ζωροάστρου (10) αὐτοφυὲς σπήλαιον ἐν τοῖς πλησίον ὄρεσι τῆς Περσίδος ἀνθηρὸν καὶ πηγὰς ἔχον ἀνιερώσαντος εἰς τιμὴν τοῦ πάντων ποιητοῦ καὶ πατρὸς Μίθρου, εἰκόνα φέροντος αὐτῷ τοῦ σπηλαίου τοῦ κόσμου, ὃν ὁ Μίθρας ἐδημιούργησε, τῶν δ' ἐντὸς κατὰ συμμέτρους ἀποστάσεις

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 7.

⁴⁸ Beck, 2006: 16. It must be noted that there is slight scholarly debate as to the reliability of Porphyry's *De Antro*. Beck treats Porphyry as a reliable source, while Turcan argues that it is distorted. See Turcan, 1975; Beck, 2006 for more.

Μίθρας ἐδημιούργησε, τῶν δ' ἐντὸς κατὰ συμμέτρους ἀποστάσεις σύμβολα φερόντων τῶν κοσμικῶν στοιχείων καὶ κλιμάτων. (Porphyry, *De Antro* 6)

“Thus, also the Persians, mystically **signifying the descent of the soul** into the sublunary regions, and **its regression from it**, initiate the mystic (or him who is admitted to the arcane sacred rites) in a place which they denominate a cavern. For, as Eubulus says, Zoroaster (10) was the first who consecrated in the neighbouring mountains of Persia, a spontaneously produced cave, florid, and having fountains, in honour of Mithra, the maker and father of all things; **a cave**, (15) according to Zoroaster, bearing a **resemblance of the world (cosmos)**, which was fabricated by Mithra. But the things contained in the cavern being arranged according to commensurate intervals were symbols of the mundane elements and climates.” (Porphyry, *De Antro* 6. Trans. Thomas Taylor)

Most Mithraea are small and imitate natural caves in that they are closed spaces with no connection to the outside world, built either on the ground floor or underground⁴⁹. They were constructed to remind the initiates of the mythological stories of Mithras first slaughtering the bull in a cave⁵⁰. The imitated ‘cave’ was important in maintaining the rituals in the mystery of darkness, as the space could only be illuminated by lighting implements⁵¹. The metaphysical representation of the space has been discussed in great depth by other scholars and needs no more attention here⁵². The metaphysical representation of space proves the significant role of the space within the Mithraic cult and the necessity to study it as sacred space.

⁴⁹ Beck, 2006: 36; Alipour, 2019: 39.

⁵⁰ Alipour, 2019: 38-39.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 38-39.

⁵² See Gordon, 1976: 119-165; Beck, 2006: 102-112; Panagiotidou, 2012: 36.; Alipour, 2019: 38-39.

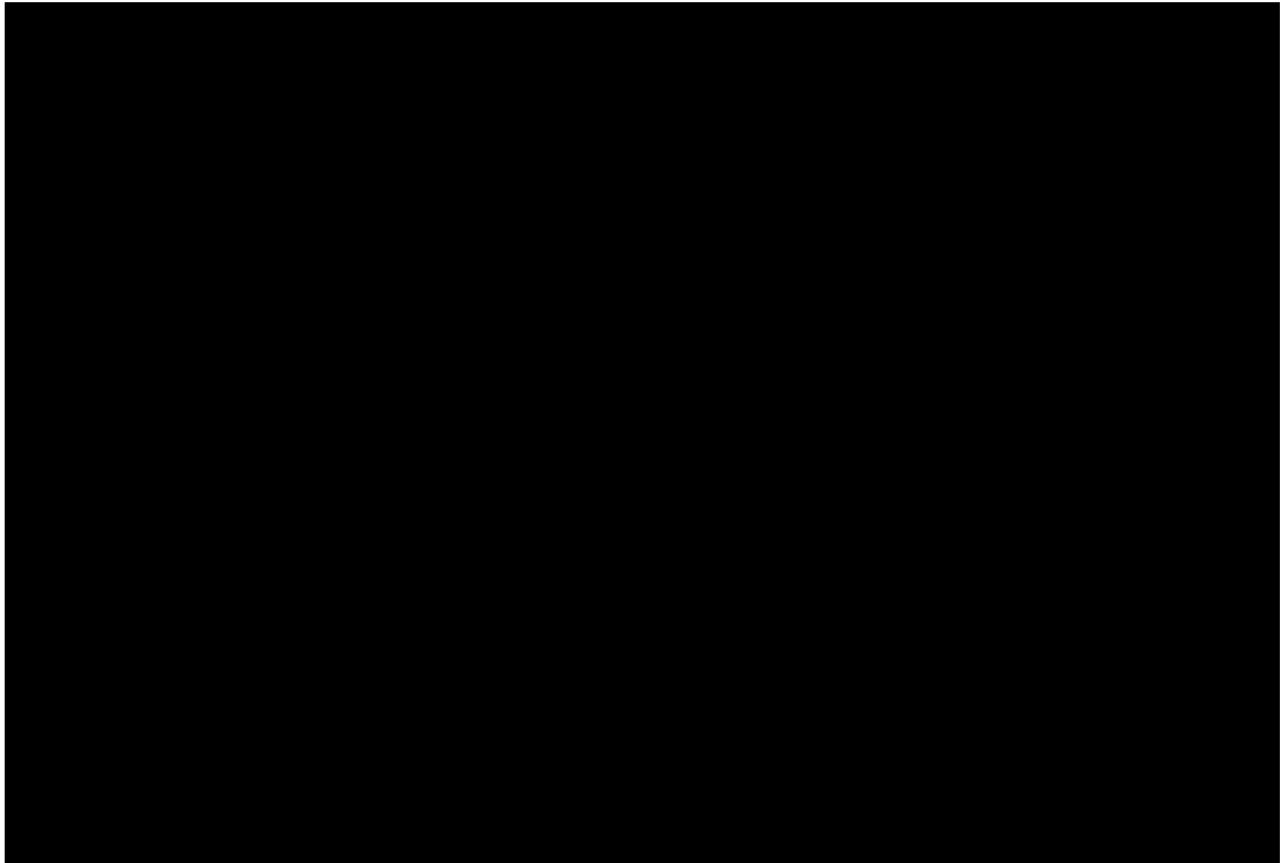


Figure 3. Map of Mithraea in the Mediterranean.
Hinnells, 1985: 77

Mithraic Scholarship:

Certain scholars have dominated and influenced the entire field of Mithraic scholarship. The Belgian scholar, Franz Cumont [1868-1947] pioneered and monopolized the study of Mithras for many years⁵³. Cumont was following a general trend in the scholarship of his time attempting a systematic reconstruction and a search for the origins of Mithraic mysteries⁵⁴. Cumont published *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra* (TMMM), Volume 1 & 2, between 1896-1899, which laid the foundation for Mithraic scholarship for nearly

⁵³ See Gordon, 1975; Beck, 1984.

⁵⁴ Beck, 1984; Bremmer, 2014; Adrych et al., 2017; Gordon, 2017: 415.

half a century, as many scholars believed Cumont's meticulous collection beyond reproach⁵⁵.

These two tomes were followed by *Les mystères de Mithra* published in 1903, which summarized his objective, methodology and much of the *TMMM*. Cumont's approach can be best expressed by the following passage:

“L'analyse des parties constitutives du mithriacisme montre... Le fond de cette religion, sa couche inférieure et primordiale, est la foi de l'ancien Iran, d'où elle tire son origine.” (Cumont, 1903: 27)

“The analysis of the constituent elements of Mithraism show... The base of this religion, its lower and primordial layer, is the faith of ancient Iran, from where it gets its origin.” (Cumont, 1903: 27. Trans. Thomas J. McCormack)

This passage demonstrates Cumont's attempts to place the origins of Mithraic 'doctrine' within ancient Iran. This claim is so fervent that Cumont analogizes his methodology as a geological formation. This resulted in the assumption of the movement of a single religion moving from Iran into the Roman empire with a distinct representative 'doctrine' in the form of 'Mithraism'. Cumont uses a contemporary Christian model that is evident and through terms such as “doctrine” and “Mithraism”⁵⁶. Roger Beck and Richard Gordon argue that the use of 'isms' denotes generalizations⁵⁷. Therefore, Cumont's use of “Mithraism” is an essentialization of the religion of the Cult of Mithras, assuming it has an overarching theology like contemporary Christianity⁵⁸. Cumont's approach adopts generalized assumptions and his methods must be approached with caution. I remove this assumption by focusing on the cult's presence in Rome, rather than assuming its cohesiveness throughout the empire. In the 21st c., Mithraic scholarship

⁵⁵ Beck, 1984: 2003.

⁵⁶ Cumont, 1956: 29, 105, 191, 194.

⁵⁷ Beck, 2006: 1-15; Gordon, 2007: 416.

⁵⁸ Adrych et al., 2017: 4-5.

tends to avoid Cumont's model and the term 'Mithraism' as it over essentializes the Mithraic mysteries⁵⁹.

Some Mithraic scholarship, heavily influenced by the Cumontian framework, has focused on how the Mysteries of Mithras and early Christianity were intertwined, which leads to the question of conflict between the two groups. Cumont sees a mutual conflict between the two groups, and this has leaked into some archaeological reports⁶⁰. On one side, early Church fathers chastise Mithraic mysteries for imitating early Christian practices⁶¹, yet any return insults are silent due to the lack of surviving evidence from the Mithraists; thus, the conflict between the two groups cannot be substantiated. For this thesis, literary Christian sources will be treated with caution, and any destruction of Mithraeum will be assumed not by religious conflict unless otherwise evident.

Cumont remained dominant in the field of Mithraic studies postmortem. The first substantial refutation of the Cumontian model came in 1951 from Stig Wikander [1908-1983] in *Études sur les mystères de Mithras*⁶². During this transitional period of Mithraic scholarship, there was a complete re-categorization of all Mithraic findings that replaced the *TMMM* and Leroy A. Campbell by the Dutch scholar, M.J. Vermaseren [1918-1985] in his *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (CIMRM) published 1956-1960, as well as an insurgence of Iranian scholars focusing on the Mithraic cult in 1964⁶³. Yet this transition was still plagued by a search for origins and a focus on iconography. This is the first major shift

⁵⁹ Beck, 1984: 2003; Adrych et al, 2017: 5.

⁶⁰ Cumont, 1956: 193-194; Vermaseren and van Essen, 1965: 114-116.

⁶¹ See Justin Martyr *Apologia* 1.66; Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 40.3-4.

⁶² Beck, 1984: 2005; Adrych et al, 2017: 5.

⁶³ Alipour, 2019: 36.

in Mithraic contributions as Vermaseren overtook Cumont's position at the head of Mithraic scholarship⁶⁴.

In the 1970s, Beck singles out three important scholars that produced significant works: Robert Turcan's *Mithras Platonicus*⁶⁵ in 1975 which provides a philosophical treatment of the cult's sources; Ugo Bianchi's "The Religio-Historical Questions of Mithraic mysteries"⁶⁶ from 1979 which attempts to categorize the Mithraic mysteries within the larger more general context of mystery religions; and Gordon's criticism of Cumont's model from 1975⁶⁷. These works are important defining elements of Mithraic scholarship, yet still ignore the idea of sacred space.

At the end of the 1970s, Mithraic scholarship had an oligarchy of prominent scholars and there began a growing interest in the complex symbols associated with the Mithraic mysteries, not of which focused on sacred space. Beck outlined in 1984 what he considered the major questions, topics, and areas of research that require more attention in the field of Mithraic studies. These questions revolve around understanding the nature and origins of the mysteries, not sacred space⁶⁸. This is exemplified by David Ulansey's *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries* published in 1989⁶⁹ and more recently Beck's *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire* in 2006⁷⁰. Since 1984, there have been many significant contributions to the field of mystery cults and Mithras that tackle some of Beck's questions. Most notable is Beck's work from 2006 that has taken its place as one of the most comprehensive treatments of the Mithraic mysteries to date. Alongside Beck, Gordon has published a plethora of works

⁶⁴ Beck, 1984: 2005.

⁶⁵ Turcan, 1975.

⁶⁶ Bianchi, 1979.

⁶⁷ Gordon, 1975.

⁶⁸ Beck, 1984: 2056-2057.

⁶⁹ Ulansey, 1989.

⁷⁰ Beck, 2006.

discussing Mithras in the past 20 years⁷¹. In 2017, Adrych et al. published *Images of Mithras*, which rivals Campbell's treatment of Mithraic iconography and Attilio Mastrocinque's *The Mysteries of Mithras: A Different Account* have been highly influential⁷².

In terms of the Mithraeum specifically, scholarship has varied as the scholarship previously mentioned only briefly mention the space. Much of the focus surrounding Mithraea have stemmed from Ulansey's approach, i.e. the astrological/astronomical symbolism. Beck's definition of a Mithraeum is that it is used as a system to convey symbolic elements – through positioning, paintings, reliefs, and various other symbols⁷³. Other scholars tend to mention the place in passing simply as a place of worship⁷⁴. Hugh Bowden, more recently, argues that the Mithraeum provides a starting point for the study of Mithras, as it remains the only concrete, literally, evidence regarding the Mithraic mysteries⁷⁵. The Mithraic scholarship is missing a concise analysis of space in a religious context.

Methodology:

There have been a few specialized studies regarding Mithraic space which deserve focus to determine where my research fits. These specialized studies focus on space, but not in its religious context. Beck discusses the idea of a “cognized environment” which stems from the metaphorical representation of the Mithraeum as the cosmos/universe⁷⁶. Throughout his work, Beck focuses and explains in detail how the various furnishing of the space represents the

⁷¹ See Gordon, 1981; 2001; 2001; 2005; 2007; 2009; 2013; 2017.

⁷² Adrych et al, 2017; Mastrocinque, 2017.

⁷³ Beck, 2006: 7.

⁷⁴ see Meyer, 1987: 199; Turcan, 1997: 207; Bowden, 2010: 182; Adrych, 2017: 9.

⁷⁵ Bowden, 2010: 182-185, 188-189.

⁷⁶ Beck, 2006: 77-81, 102-112.

metaphorical interpretation presented by Porphyry's *De Antro*, as discussed in the Mithraeum section earlier.

Similarly, Olympia Panagiotidou has discussed the Mithraea in terms of the body and perception. She argues that the Mithraists perceived the space as a microcosm and the Mithraeum existed in a cosmological orientation rather than a geographical one⁷⁷. The perceived cosmological orientation thus influenced every ritual position and movement of individuals throughout the space as representative of the Zodiacs and celestial bodies moving⁷⁸. Panagiotidou, using an embodied perception framework, argues that Mithraists also perceived their space in six spatial dimensions: above/below (or up/down), front/behind and left/right⁷⁹. Beck adds that spatial dimensions are further present in the metaphysical models of the Mithraic cult, which draw much of their inspiration from the Neo-Platonic philosophical school⁸⁰. These dimensions put further emphasis on opposition, as well as the up/down having the metaphysical representation of the journey of the soul⁸¹. Hayk Hakobyan in 2019 follows this trend but focuses on the Iranian influences for the construction of Mithraeum – with little focus on the Roman cult⁸². For Beck and Panagiotidou, their focus is on the cognitive and metaphorical interpretations of the Mithraists regarding how they perceived the space. Luther H. Martin further emphasizes the cognitive interpretation of the space⁸³. These approaches, while speculative, are important in determining the cognitive interpretations of the Mithraists, however

⁷⁷ Panagiotidou, 2012: 38.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 42-43.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 34.

⁸⁰ Beck, 2006: 82-83.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 84-87.

⁸² See Hakobyan, 2019.

⁸³ Martin, 2004: 246.

my focus is to utilize practical considerations (such as positions of the altar or reliefs) to produce a firmer conclusion about how the space affected the Mithraists.

Without the space, the cult of Mithras would lose communal identity and have no way to experience the sacred. To determine the efficacy of the communal element of space, the experiential aspects of the space need to be determined. Other specialized studies on the Mithraeum include Lucinda Dirven's work from 2015 which focuses on how the Mithraeum functioned as *tableau vivant* ('living picture'). Dirven analyzes the archaeological evidence and ties it into the mythological narrative of the deity Mithras. She argues that through ritual and initiation of the cult's members, they become contemporaries with this sacred narrative and foster the religious experience of worshipping Mithras⁸⁴. My thesis limits the amount of guesswork by taking a more holistic approach to the practical elements of the space to determine how it affected the Mithraists. A holistic approach is valuable in determining the overall function of the space as it includes all specific elements of the sacred and how the initiates were affected.

This study combines disciplines to determine how three Mithraea, specifically in Rome, functioned as sacred space in the real, practical world. After defining the elements of sacred space, I turn to three sites in Rome to apply this theory to determine the efficacy of defining the Mithraeum as sacred space: the Circus Maximus Mithraeum (CIMRM 434), the San Clemente Mithraeum (CIMRM 338) and the Santa Prisca Mithraeum (CIMRM 476). In the summer of 2019, I had the privilege of visiting and documenting each of these sites. These visits allowed me, not only to document the sites' features, but also personally experience the space as an

⁸⁴ Dirven, 2015: 29-47.

-Introduction-

embodied individual. I was able to see sight lines, barriers, changes in light, and move through the space which was helpful in the application of the theory of sacred space.

I have chosen these three sites within Rome to limit the scope of my research, keeping my conclusions applicable to a smaller community in Rome, alongside Roman religious practices. The larger the sample size, the broader the conclusions tend to become⁸⁵. By keeping my sample size small it allows me to focus the theory of sacred space in-depth for each site.

⁸⁵ Brown, 2012: 109.

Chapter 1: Defining Sacred Space

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce an appropriate definition of sacred space. There are two major streams of scholarship relevant to the study of sacred space in the Roman world: Classics and Religious Studies. It is necessary to analyze both streams as they contribute substantially while utilizing different methodologies.

Before diving into sacred space, some contemporary issues surrounding the study of religion require clarification. The issue of ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ perspective arises when studying religion or culture⁸⁶. R.T. McCutcheon summarizes that ‘etic’ viewpoints see behavior from outside the system, and ‘emic’ viewpoints see behavior from inside the system⁸⁷. Scholarly approaches to the study of cultures, such as anthropology, sociology, and history tend to utilize an etic approach. Emic explanations of religious institutions are entangled with internal religious definitions, a way to overcome this is to make use of comparative reference⁸⁸. H.S. Versnel argues that scholarship attempting an emic approach is a contradiction, as scholarship often attempts to generalize and find comparative elements of cultures – religious or not⁸⁹. As such, an ‘etic’ approach to the study of religions is not a negative one, but rather encourages an approach which allows for comparative reference. Scholars studying religious cultures or groups use both perspectives depending on the context.

In terms of Mithras, a comparative reference to the broader ancient Roman and modern culture is vital as there is no surviving literature⁹⁰. The distinction is important because the way a

⁸⁶ McCutcheon, 1999: 15.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 17.

⁸⁸ Smart, 1973: 22.

⁸⁹ Versnel, 1991: 185.

⁹⁰ See Introduction, 20-22.

modern audience views religion and, by extension, what is sacred may be different from how an ancient audience would. Every modern account of Mithras both over-simplifies and over-generalizes the cult due to the unsolvable argument between the particular/local versus general/supra-regional⁹¹. However, for the sake of analysis, one must include modern religious studies scholarship and research to better understand the sacred space of the ancient world.

The term ‘sacred’ has transformed its original Latin definition into our modern English one. The term appears throughout sources from antiquity and refers to something dedicated to a deity (or deities)⁹². The *Institutiones* by Gaius gives a brief exposition on the Roman legal system of the 2nd c. CE, with specific attention paid to defining terms, to provide one example of how the Romans used *sacer*⁹³. Gaius presents *res divini iuris* not as a homogenous category, but one divided into subcategories inherited from earlier Roman law – but even these categories are not consistent throughout antiquity⁹⁴. James B. Rives argues that Gaius’ categorization of “things subject to divine right” is closest to what modern scholars define as sacred⁹⁵. Susan Alcock explains that in the ancient world, sacred spaces were largely denoted by the human ritual actions therein⁹⁶. The actions of individuals dedicate spaces to specific deities which in turn are considered as sacred⁹⁷. While this interpretation seems to point to a clear relationship between the modern and ancient usage, the reality is that the term is more complex.

Religious studies scholars turn to more theoretical approaches when attempting to define sacred space. There are three major approaches: hermeneutical (phenomenological), socio-

⁹¹ Gordon, 2017: 294.

⁹² *A Latin Dictionary*, Charlton T. Lewis & Charles Short (Oxford, 1879), s.v. “sacer”.

⁹³ Honoré, 2005.

⁹⁴ Rives, 2011: 168-170. For further see Moser et al., 2014; Cianca, 2016.

⁹⁵ Rives, 2011: 167.

⁹⁶ Alcock, 1993: 172-175.

⁹⁷ Elsner, Rutherford, 2006: 5-6.

historical, and critical-spatial. Each of these approaches corresponds to the three major fields of space outlined by Henri Lefebvre: the mental, social and physical respectively⁹⁸.

The hermeneutical approach is defined by the attempt to understand religious space through the interpretation of structure/systems of interrelated elements. Mircea Eliade argues that the phenomenon of hierophany (or theophany) is the arbiter of sacred space, i.e. a space becomes 'sacred' when a deity manifests itself there⁹⁹. Building on Eliade, Baruch M. Bokser also argues that theophany is a determinant for sacred space¹⁰⁰. Victor Turner emphasizes that rituals performed creates an opportunity for liminality¹⁰¹. The liminality reduces the separation between the human and the divine¹⁰². Once the space has been 'consecrated' through ritual activity, arrangements are made to give the space a physical and visible structure to define it¹⁰³. Furthering this idea of liminality, Belden C. Lane argues that space is an active participant in shaping the human experience and that this idea supports a "supernatural" presence¹⁰⁴. For Turner, it is the human activity that creates the 'sacred' of a space, and for Lane, it is the space that influences the idea of 'sacred'. Alcock would agree with both ideas as she argues that sacred spaces are largely determined through a variety of human actions¹⁰⁵. Alcock states that in the ancient Graeco-Roman world, sanctuaries were often denoted by the human ritual actions therein¹⁰⁶. Timothy Ingold further argues that the body is not only an object of the space but is also the subject acting in the space¹⁰⁷. These theories outline some defining elements of sacred

⁹⁸ Lefebvre, 1991: 11-12.

⁹⁹ Eliade, 1965: 20-67; Kilde, 2013: 185.

¹⁰⁰ Bokser, 1985: 279.

¹⁰¹ Turner, 1977: 20-23; Kilde, 2013: 185.

¹⁰² Turner, 1977: 90-96.

¹⁰³ Turner, 1977: 26-30.

¹⁰⁴ Lane, 2001: 57; Kilde, 2013: 186.

¹⁰⁵ Alcock, 1993: 172.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 172-175.

¹⁰⁷ Ingold, 2000: 170.

space: the perceived presence of a deity, human ritual actions and space's influence the sacredness.

The socio-historical approach focuses on the social functions of spaces that play a significant role in 'the sacred'. J.Z. Smith argues that sacred space is created through many human activities – such as, how they design and ornament the space, prepare to enter, dress within and what is done with the space¹⁰⁸. J.Z. Smith supplies the simple metaphor that sacred space acts as a “focusing lens” that focuses various objects into a religious form for the participants of that space¹⁰⁹. Thomas A. Markus argues that an important element of sacred space is the power in spatial arrangements and the role these arrangements play in maintaining specific power relationships¹¹⁰. To determine whether something maintained these elements one must look for how the space functions within a system of authority¹¹¹. The most important element that the socio-historical approach brings to sacred space is the idea of ‘living spaces’¹¹². Jeanne H. Kilde argues that the social function of religious space is an expression of a community (collective memory) that functions to retain cultural memory and establishing identity¹¹³. Therefore, the socio-historical approach emphasizes human participation and power relationships in defining sacred space. These ‘living sacred spaces’ actively function to establish a collective identity through human participation and power relationships.

Finally, the critical-spatial approach to the nature of space. Lefebvre argues in a similar vein to the socio-historical approach of Markus, that sacred space is the outcome of three

¹⁰⁸ Smith, 1987: 1-10; Kilde, 2013: 189.

¹⁰⁹ Smith, 1980: 114; Grimes, 1999: 261.

¹¹⁰ Markus, 1993: 8-9; Grimes, 1999: 191.

¹¹¹ Markus, 1993: 12-18.

¹¹² Grimes, 1999: 189.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 192.

relationships of embedded power¹¹⁴. The first relationship is *spatial practice* – which aims to establish levels of continuity, competence and performance¹¹⁵. Second, the *representation of space* – the conscious understanding of the space¹¹⁶. And third, *spaces of representation* – the spatial embodiment of complex symbolism¹¹⁷. The *spatial practices* remain consistent to help foster a communal identity. The *representation of space* and the *spaces of representation* are inversely related. Each encompasses how individuals perceive the space and what the space is meant to be perceived as. These relationships portray space as an active participant in the experience of the ‘sacred’¹¹⁸. The idea of active sacred space echoes Turner and Lane, by simply breaking down the idea of active space into three relationships associated with power. Michel de Certeau argues that space is a system of layers from various social, political elements and symbolism¹¹⁹. It is through these layers that space accumulates its ‘sacred’ designation¹²⁰. Lefebvre and de Certeau both emphasize the active role space plays in defining itself as ‘sacred’ but also the larger context that sacred space resides in. The most important element amongst these scholars is the active role the space itself plays in determining sacred space.

The active role of space is inversely related to the passive role of the human participant in sacred space. Kim Knott raises the idea that the body is the point of connection between the local, social practices and the larger organization of power¹²¹. The body plays an active role in sacred space because it is the vessel through which that space is experienced. Knott argues that

¹¹⁴ Lefebvre, 1991: 33; Kilde, 2013: 194.

¹¹⁵ Lefebvre, 1991: 33, 38.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 38.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 39.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ De Certeau, 1988: 200-202; Kilde, 2013: 196.

¹²⁰ De Certeau, 1988: 200-202.

¹²¹ Knott, 2005: 36.

the body's experiences and representations of the space directly associate it with the sacred¹²². Rather than the body creating sacred space, it is the experience of the body which defines its sacredness. Knott also emphasizes the context in which space is located in, echoing Lefebvre and De Certeau. She argues that "the physical, social and mental dimensions of space... involve examining [the space's] material and physical emplacement, the space of its social relationships, and its ideological, imaginary and cosmological locations"¹²³. An essential element that Knott adds to the theories of sacred space is the idea of bodily experience. It is not enough to look at the physical context of a space, we must also consider the cognitive context of the participants.

Personal experience plays a role in how space is defined by an individual. Space achieves a concrete identity when an individual's experience of it is total, through all senses, and the active and reflective mind is stimulated¹²⁴. A space for an individual will be meaningful if that individual experiences it as sacred. Yi-Fu Tuan's example describes how a child sees the world versus an adult. The child has limited memory of places, yet an adult can recognize a place through controlled memory recollection¹²⁵. Related to sacred space, think of an average American, from a predominantly Christian world, walking through a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in the Himalayas. They might not fully comprehend the sacred space in the same manner as a devout Buddhist Monk of that monastery would. Tuan and Knott have emphasized that individualized knowledge is necessary to fully understand and experience sacred space. In terms of the Mithraeum, this might require participation and initiation in the rites of the cult to fully appreciate the objects within the space as sacred.

¹²² *Ibid.* 36.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 36.

¹²⁴ Tuan, 1977: 18.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 19.

The final distinction that religious studies and classical scholars emphasize is that sacred space is separated from the ‘profane’ world. Viekko Anttonen argues that individuals have the inherent capacity to create boundaries that are activated when setting apart sacred space¹²⁶. This separation is displayed in binary categories such as male and female, life and death, pure and impure, left and right, inside and outside¹²⁷. Bokser also adds that the separation from the ‘profane’ is another determining factor of sacred space¹²⁸. These dichotomies are emphasized in the separation of sacred space. Sacred spaces thus must maintain some degree of separation to be defined.

Each of these strands of scholarship has unique strengths, therefore it is necessary to include Classical and Religious Studies scholarship when studying sacred space. Classical scholarship may sometimes limit themselves to ancient perspectives, ignoring modern studies. While Religious Studies scholars may tend to generalize in their theoretical approaches¹²⁹. To ensure a scholarly balanced approach to sacred space in the ancient world, this thesis will adopt an interdisciplinary approach towards the cult of Mithras. This interdisciplinary approach enables this thesis to make an important contribution to our knowledge of Mithraea, by demonstrating why and how they functioned as sacred space.

In conclusion, our final definition of sacred space is a long one. Sacred space is a bounded location that plays an active and passive role in the human, bodily experience to create a communal identity through the perceived presence of a deity (or supernatural being). In this thesis I will demonstrate that the Mithraeum qualifies as sacred space under this definition of the

¹²⁶ Anttonen, 2002: 31.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 191.

¹²⁸ Bokser, 1985: 279.

¹²⁹ Kilde, 2013: 200.

-Chapter 1: Defining Sacred Space-

term. In Chapter 1, I will show that the Mithraeum was a bounded location and will consider how its boundaries functioned. Chapter 2 will examine the active role in the human bodily experience to create a communal identity, specifically looking at the communal aspects of the Mithraic cult and how they are present in the space. In Chapter 3, I will focus on the passive role in the human bodily experience by analyzing the ritual actions and location of the altar in each space in order to determine the functionality of the space. In Chapter 4, I will demonstrate the perceived presence of the deity Mithras through epiphany in reliefs and statues. To conclude, each of these chapters will show how the Mithraeum functioned as sacred space.

Chapter 2: Bounded Location

Sacred space is a bounded location that is separated from the world. Previous scholarship tended to emphasize this separation through a reliance on the sacred/profane dichotomy. The outside world was considered ‘profane’ and the inside was ‘sacred’. This is present in the influential scholarship of Emile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade. Durkheim, writing in the late 19th century, relies heavily on the idea that all religious beliefs stem from the sacred/profane dichotomy¹³⁰. Durkheim states that “all known religious beliefs” revolve around the classification of things as sacred and profane¹³¹. He sees the sacred and profane as interacting through the mechanism of rites but is still limited in his discussion as not all religious beliefs adhere to this sacred/profane classification¹³². Eliade’s work, from the early 20th century, suffers the same issues as Durkheim as it presents all-encompassing statements about religious experience¹³³. Scholars, such as Durkheim and Eliade, have tended to separate the religious world into these two binary categories.

In recent years this dichotomy has been refuted as the reality of sacred space is not binary. J.Z. Smith begins to question the unconscious dualism that is present in scholars like Durkheim and Eliade. Smith argues that they are drawn to the innate dual classification which inherently makes it difficult to classify complex and compound systems¹³⁴. Smith states that there is a cognitive gap present between the “socially ideal” and the “socially real”¹³⁵. The “socially ideal” is the theoretical dichotomy, while the “socially real” refers to practical

¹³⁰ Durkheim, 1990: 42-45.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 34.

¹³² *Ibid.* 34-35.

¹³³ Eliade, 1965: 8, 15-16.

¹³⁴ Smith, 1987: 39-40.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 41.

examples that are not as distinct as the theory. Smith argues that Durkheim, when confronted with a complexity, fails to perceive the issue of ideology, in that if Durkheim's theory did not fit, his arguments become disjointed¹³⁶. There is increasing complexity when studying sacred space, and as such one needs to remain cautious about attempting to force theory where it will not fit.

Cianca confirms J.Z. Smith's ideas by arguing that the sacred/profane dichotomy cannot be consistently applied to sacred space and therefore the separation of sacred space requires a different classification¹³⁷. Her solution defines space by its function or role in society¹³⁸. She states that sacred space requires demarcation, and this is best demonstrated with boundaries¹³⁹. D. Chidester and E. Linenthal echo Cianca's solution. One of the major elements they noticed was that sacred space can be identified as ritual space and is set apart from the "ordinary environment" to act as the center for the performance of "controlled, extraordinary patterns of action"¹⁴⁰. There is a delineation of sacred space, between the sacred "here" versus the non-sacred "there"¹⁴¹. This demarcation is necessary inside the space to the extent each room is separated. For too long the static, binary definition of sacred space has dominated the scholarly approach¹⁴². The approach of bounded space fills the gaps of the sacred/profane dichotomy.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 40.

¹³⁷ Cianca, 2018: 143.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 143.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* 146.

¹⁴⁰ Chidester, Linenthal, 1995: 10.

¹⁴¹ Moser, 2019: 16.

¹⁴² Wing, 2016: 11.

Sacred space is not separated in an absolute sense, as in the sacred/profane dichotomy, but rather it may contain “hierarchical power relations of domination and subordination, inclusion and exclusion, appropriation and dispossession”¹⁴³. These hierarchical power relationships manifest themselves as “graded sanctity”, as Cianca illustrates using the examples of boundaries in the Jerusalem Temple, which functioned similarly to many temples in ancient Greece and Rome¹⁴⁴.

I have chosen the Jerusalem Temple as an example because the construction and ritual activity is described in detail and the layout resembles that of a Mithraeum¹⁴⁵.

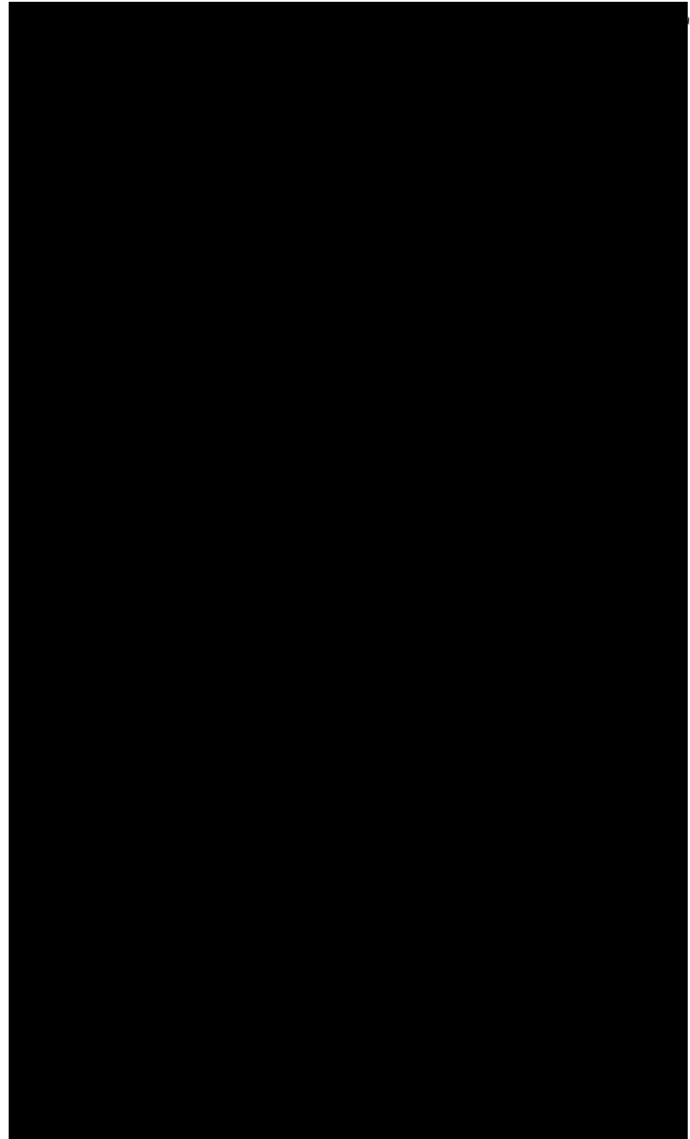


Figure 4. Layout of Jerusalem Temple. Copyright © Lloyd Thomas 2012-2016. All rights reserved worldwide.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* 17.

¹⁴⁴ Cianca, 2018: 146.

¹⁴⁵ Goldhill, 2005: 9.

The temple was divided into courts separated by non-physical and physical boundaries. The first is the Court of the Gentiles¹⁴⁶, which sits outside the temple walls and anyone could enter¹⁴⁷. Between the Court of the Gentiles and the next four courts was the *soreg*, which was a fence that acted as a physical boundary, limiting gentiles' access to the inner temple complex¹⁴⁸.

From the Court of the Gentiles, one moves through the central gate into the Women's Court (creating a gendered boundary)¹⁴⁹. Next is the Court of the Israelites¹⁵⁰ (reserved for ritually pure Jewish men) which transitions into the Court of the Priests¹⁵¹ where the altar is located, and finally, the Temple Court¹⁵² – in which the innermost chamber is the Holy of Holies, wherein only the High Priest was allowed¹⁵³. The example of the Jerusalem Temple immediately problematizes the sacred space dichotomy due to its subsequent courts and their associated boundaries. Graded sanctity, through bounded space, can accurately categorize it rather than the binary sacred/profane dichotomy. The space is not only sacred within the temple's precinct but beyond each gate, the space becomes progressively restricted and more sacred. Viewing Mithraic space as bounded allows for the inclusion of graded sanctity which allows the complexities to be better understood.

Most buildings are surrounded by a boundary to separate them from other spaces¹⁵⁴. These boundaries are defined by physical (architectural/natural) terminating lines but also bleed into a non-physical sense to limit the access to the space¹⁵⁵. Furthermore, progressive levels are

¹⁴⁶ See Red #1 in Figure 4.

¹⁴⁷ Goldhill, 2005: 65-67. See also Acts 3:11, 5:12, 15.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 68.

¹⁴⁹ See Red #2 in Figure 4.

¹⁵⁰ See Red #3 in Figure 4.

¹⁵¹ See Red #4 in Figure 4.

¹⁵² See Red #5 in Figure 4.

¹⁵³ Goldhill, 2005: 69-71.

¹⁵⁴ Cianca, 2018: 146; Wing, 2016: 16.

¹⁵⁵ Gabbard, Lester, 1995: 1-20; Moser, 2019: 16.

presented by access barriers within the sacred space¹⁵⁶. These barriers acted to control the admittance of individuals into the Jerusalem Temple¹⁵⁷. Therefore, defining sacred space as separated by non-physical and physical boundaries is an accurate representation of the complex structure of sacred space.

The physical and non-physical boundaries often worked together to define the physical structures and allow people to navigate the non-physical, ‘invisible’, boundaries. Robert McCauley notes that boundaries are not always obvious by physical demarcation but can be implied through simple changes of light, color, height or diverting pathways¹⁵⁸. Claudia Moser defines non-physical boundaries as internal boundaries, encompassing the experiential and implied divisions within a certain context¹⁵⁹. Panagiotidou explains that Mithraic rituals, with their implicit non-physical boundaries, took place within space and time (i.e. reality)¹⁶⁰. In addition to natural spatial and temporal dimensions (the physical boundaries), the Mithraic rituals were intertwined with complex metaphors (non-physical boundaries) which would have altered the initiate’s perception of the bounded sacred space¹⁶¹.

NON-PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES

Non-physical boundaries only function within the context of a community’s ideological structures. The boundaries encompass and are enforced by the ‘unwritten rules’ of a community’s culture/religion or even family structure. For example, the colloquial expression ‘Dad’s chair’ is a simple example of this phenomenon. This expression is representative of

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 146.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 146. Purity regulations, such as the exclusion of recent mothers, menstruants, or ejaculants were enforced by the physical barriers and gender restrictions, such as women not being permitted entry beyond the “court of the women” and non-priestly males were not permitted into the “sanctuary”.

¹⁵⁸ McCauley, 2014: 160.

¹⁵⁹ Moser, 2019: 18.

¹⁶⁰ Panagiotidou, 2017: 69.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* 69.

traditional, American, blue-collared society where the ‘dad’ of the nuclear family would have a designated space (e.g. a comfortable chair) where only he was allowed to sit. There are no walls or locked doors preventing others from intruding on the space, rather it was the non-physical boundaries that had been established and enforced by the community (i.e. family) that designated the space. The Mithraeum as representative of the universe required separation because the entire universe needed to be represented within (i.e. there is no ‘outside’ of the universe). This is in drastic comparison to the grand temples of the Roman world, i.e. the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill¹⁶². The community must then agree on its canon of non-physical boundaries to enforce, such as gendered boundaries and a hierarchy of initiatory grades.

In terms of non-physical boundaries that were enforced within the mysteries of Mithras, there is a conventional modern assumption of the cult’s gender exclusivity. Beck, in his entry in the *OCD*, states that the Mithraic cult involved “small autonomous groups of initiates, exclusively male”¹⁶³. Manfred Clauss adamantly claims that the Mithraic mysteries admitted or allowed no women in any principal role in the rituals¹⁶⁴. There is a consensus in Mithraic scholarship that women were not permitted in the cult¹⁶⁵.

Gordon tackles this consensus and argues that while the exclusion of women has often been assumed as fact and quickly dismissed, it is an important element in determining the defined boundaries of the Mithraic cult in the Roman world¹⁶⁶. Gordon argues that during the

¹⁶² Beard et al., 1998: 59-60.

¹⁶³ Beck, 2005: s.v. “Mithras”.

¹⁶⁴ Clauss, 2000: 33.

¹⁶⁵ See Martin, 1987: 114; Burkert, 1984: 43, 52; Turcan, 1996: 240; Beard et al, Vol. 1, 1998: 248; Clauss, 2000: 33.

¹⁶⁶ Gordon, 1981: 42.

genesis of the Mithraic cult, initiates had to define themselves within the Roman world and as such drew from contemporary institutions, where the exclusion of women was commonplace¹⁶⁷. The most pervasive institution among the social classes of wealthy Mithraic patrons was the *collegium tenuiorum* which regularly excluded women and as such provided the Mithraic mysteries with a self-definition within the bounds of ‘traditional’ gender exclusion of Roman institutions¹⁶⁸. Gordon systematically analyzes the seven hierarchical grades and the alliance to the Roman military as further evidence for gender exclusion¹⁶⁹. Gordon concludes that the mysteries of Mithras adheres to an extreme view of women in that they are the origin of evil in the world in an attempt to establish an ideal patrilineal society and leave women in the polluted world outside the cult¹⁷⁰.

Other scholarship discusses this issue in the hopes of determining a more nuanced answer. Mastrocinque states that it is unclear whether women were permitted to attend or participate in Mithraic ceremonies¹⁷¹. Jonathan David argues that women were not excluded and participated in the mysteries to some degree¹⁷². Meanwhile, Alison Griffith argues that much of the evidence used by David for his claim is inconclusive or simply incorrect¹⁷³. She states that a more accurate conclusion, including all current data, is that women did not participate in the mysteries of Mithras, however that said, it does not mean they were actively excluded¹⁷⁴. My view, following Griffith, is that David’s evidence is not convincing. David argues that in

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 42.

¹⁶⁸ Gordon, 2001: 258-265; 1981: 42. The *collegium tenuiorum* represented the ‘ideal’ model for “a specialized non-familial institution” such as “private associations for social, religious and business purposes” as stated by Gordon, 1981: 42.

¹⁶⁹ Gordon, 1981: 43-44, 53.

¹⁷⁰ Gordon, 1981: 63; 2013: 296.

¹⁷¹ Mastrocinque, 2017: 17.

¹⁷² David, 2000: 141.

¹⁷³ Griffith, 2006: 51, 54, 55, 57, 64.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 77.

Porphyry's *De Abstinencia* 4.16 there is a reference either *λεαίνας* (lionesses) or *ῥαῖναι* (hyenas)¹⁷⁵. However, according Nuack, the manuscript is deeply corrupted at this position and the actual word is inconclusive¹⁷⁶. David also attempts to argue that the 'lioness' grade is evident by inscriptions from a set of sepulchres from Oea (Tripoli) in northern Africa, of which is not conclusively related to the cult, but maintains some Mithraic iconography¹⁷⁷. Vermaseren states that if this is Mithraic, then it represents a race localized version of the cult – and not representative of a larger cultic practice¹⁷⁸.

I argue that there were no women involved which aligns with the traditional institutions of gender restriction in the Roman world¹⁷⁹. The gender restriction acted as a non-physical boundary within the Mithraic cult.

The Mithraic mysteries involved a complex system of hierarchical grades that were an integral part of the Mithraic experience¹⁸⁰. Beck maintains that this complex hierarchy was limited to certain Mithraic communities where the hierarchy is demonstrated¹⁸¹ – such as Felicissimus in Ostia. I argue that the hierarchy is a key component of the Mithraic identity and was present in most Mithraic communities across the Empire. These grades are evident through literary and archaeological evidence – most notably from the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia, but the Mithraic iconography is filled with references to them.

¹⁷⁵ David, 2000: 123.

¹⁷⁶ Nuack, 1886: XIV-XVI.

¹⁷⁷ David, 2000: 125-126.

¹⁷⁸ CIMRM 115

¹⁷⁹ Gordon, 1981; Chalupa, 2005; Griffith, 2006; Bremmer, 2014: 131.

¹⁸⁰ Gordon, 2001: 247-248.

¹⁸¹ Beck, 2006: 72-73.

The following table, Figure 5, summarizes the current scholarly consensus regarding the grades¹⁸². There are four ancient sources (two literary, two archaeological) which provide especially important evidence for grades in the Mithraic cult. The first literary source is Origen, a Christian writer of the third century CE. The second literary source is Jerome, a Christian writer of the late fourth-fifth century CE. Both authors are respectively valuable, however their accuracy is questionable due to the polemical nature of their works. The first archaeological source is inscriptions found at Santa Prisca¹⁸³. Secondly, are the symbols present in the seven panels from the Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia.

Grade¹⁸⁴	Origen, <i>Contra Celsum</i> 6.21	Jerome, <i>Letter 107.2</i>	Santa Prisca Mithraeum	Felicissimus Mithraeum, Ostia
<i>CORAX</i> (raven)	lead, Saturn	Raven	Raven, Mercury	1 st Panel: Raven, small vessel, <i>caduceus</i> (Mercury) ¹⁸⁵
<i>NYMPHUS</i> (bridegroom)	tin, Venus	Bridegroom	Nymphs, Venus	2 nd Panel: Diadem (Venus), lamp, unknown ¹⁸⁶
<i>MILES</i> (soldier)	copper, Jupiter	Soldier	Soldier, Mars	3 rd Panel: Military bag/bull hindquarter, helmet (Mars), lance ¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² These grades have been sufficiently discussed by Beck, 2006; and Mastrocinque, 2017.

¹⁸³ Vermaseren, 1965: 148-150.

¹⁸⁴ See Chalupa, 2008; Beart et al, 1999 for further discussion.

¹⁸⁵ Chalupa, 2008: 183.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 184.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 184-185.

LEO (lion)	iron, Mercury	Lion	Lion, Jupiter	4 th Panel: Spade/ladle, <i>sistrum</i> (Magna Mater), lightning bolt (Jupiter) ¹⁸⁸
PERSES (Persian)	mixture, Mars	Perseus	Persian, Moon	5 th Panel: Sword (Perseus), scythe, <i>hesperos</i> , crescent Moon ¹⁸⁹
HELIODROMUS (sun runner)	silver, Moon	Sun	Sunrunner/Sun	6 th Panel: torch, crowd with ribbons, <i>phosphoros</i> , whip (Sun) ¹⁹⁰
PATER (father)	gold, Sun	Father	Father, Saturn	7 th Panel: <i>patera</i> , <i>rhabdos</i> , Phrygian cap, knife (Saturn) ¹⁹¹

Figure 5. Seven Mithraic
Grades

In application, these grades served as restrictive boundaries within the Mithraeum. The first grade that initiates would have entered into would be *Corax*, and then moving down the table up through the hierarchy to the final grade, the *Pater*, of which there is only one per Mithraic community¹⁹². The general movement of the space encourages forward motion, moving up the hierarchical ladder and revealing more knowledge¹⁹³. The evidence from Santa Prisca, and other Mithraea, suggests that the higher grades sat closer to the cult relief supporting

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 185-186.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 187.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 187-188.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.* 188.

¹⁹² For more on the initiatory grade, see Mastocinque, 2017: 5-16

¹⁹³ Soudavar, 2014: 19-20; Alipour, 2019: 42.

the idea of graded sanctity within the space¹⁹⁴. Through initiation, the separation of the Mithraic world (inside the Mithraeum) is gradually revealed, if not all at once, to initiates which emphasizes the clearest external boundary that separates the Mithraeum from the ‘outside’ world¹⁹⁵. The grades represent a foundational element of the Mithraic identity and acted as a communal non-physical boundary.

The rituals involved in initiation to these grades also emphasize the non-physical separation of the cult from the outside world. The assimilation to these grades emphasizes the separation between those who are and who are not *syndexioi* (i.e. initiated)¹⁹⁶. Gordon argues strongly that the purification rituals involved with initiation into the cult, especially those surrounding the *Leo* grade, emphasize the cult’s separation¹⁹⁷. The Mithraeum is a physical structure that can be ‘entered’, and Beck argues that Mithraea are designed to be entered at a specific moment, specifically after initiation¹⁹⁸. The external boundary combines the physical (walls) and non-physical (initiation), limiting access to the space.

Non-physical, experiential boundaries were defined in the ancient world differently than today. Ancient Romans, just like most humans today, experienced their surroundings through their five senses – sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch¹⁹⁹. Richard Jenkyns argues that Romans used their eyes more than their ears, and their ears more than their noses²⁰⁰ – and that taste

¹⁹⁴ Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 169-170

¹⁹⁵ Gordon, 1981: 41.

¹⁹⁶ Gordon, 2013: 296; 2017: 429.

¹⁹⁷ Gordon, 1981: 40-41.

¹⁹⁸ Beck, 2006: 71.

¹⁹⁹ Jenkyns argues that there is a sixth sense that accounts for humans situational and positional awareness. He argues that a blind man within a space can understand, to a degree, the dimensions and dispositions of objects. See Jenkyns, 2013: 275.

²⁰⁰ Jenkyns, 2013: 39.

appears extraneous in most ancient accounts of the Roman world²⁰¹. Therefore, the most relevant experienced senses for the Romans were sight and touch.

To determine if Mithraea functioned as sacred space, their boundaries need to be defined, and any degree of ‘graded sanctity’ further defined by interior barriers to restrict admittance into other rooms. While non-physical barriers can function within the specific community, anyone new or foreign could require physical barriers to emphasize the non-physical. Furthermore, the physical boundaries function in a direct relationship with the non-physical. Together they function to create and define the boundaries of sacred space.

PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES

The physical boundaries which separate the sacred and non-sacred space are more distinct than the non-physical boundaries. Physical boundaries are often considered concerning their limits or their “edges”²⁰². Within the scholarship on sanctuaries and sacred space in the ancient world, τέμενος (*temenos*) is often used to refer to the sacred boundaries of space. It came to be understood as an area set apart for the gods, with the clearest example being the famous sanctuary dedicated to Demeter at Eleusis in Greece²⁰³. This site exemplifies the boundaries of sacred space. So much so that in the famous anecdote of the Roman Emperor Nero, who after murdering his mother, denied himself entry into the bounded *temenos* of Eleusis.

[4] Peregrinatione quidem Graeciae et Eleusinis sacris, quorum initiatione impii et scelerati uoce praeconis summouentur, interesse non ausus est. (Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, 34.4. LCL 38)

²⁰¹ *Ibid.* 1.

²⁰² Moser, 2014: 16.

²⁰³ Eleusis is one of the most famous sanctuaries from ancient Greece, housing the Eleusinian mysteries dedicated to Demeter and Persephone. This sanctuary became a popular tourist attraction for the devotees of Demeter and Persephone, and simply people wishing to see the famed sanctuary at Eleusis. For more description on the Eleusinian mysteries see Powell, 2015: 246-249, and for more on the sanctuary at Eleusis as sacred space see Burkert, 1985: 84-87.

[4] Moreover, in his journey through Greece he did not venture to take part in the Eleusinian mysteries since at the beginning the godless and wicked are warned by the herald's proclamation to go hence. (Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, 34.4. trans. J.C. Rolfe, LCL 38)

This anecdote demonstrates the cohesive role physical and non-physical boundaries play in defining sacred space. It is not only the physical boundary of the *temenos* that restricts Nero from entering but also the non-physical boundary regarding the *impii* (godless) and *scelerati* (wicked). While the term *temenos* is not used in this example, the notion that the physical boundaries of the sanctuary were so strong as to keep an emperor such as Nero out suggests that the *temenos* of Eleusis was well established. Within the context of the Mithraic mysteries, we will see there is a clear separation from the outside world, just as in the Eleusinian mysteries. Often, the entrances to these Mithraea were in low-traffic areas, to not draw too much attention to the space. This emphasizes the exclusivity present throughout mystery cults²⁰⁴. To determine the bounded space of the mysteries of Mithras, the physical boundaries first need to be clearly defined. Each Mithraea operated uniquely, and as such their relative boundaries are site-specific.

Each boundary defines who is allowed into the cult. The size of the space helps to ensure the creation of a community; too big and there is no communication between members, and too small the community is cramped and uncomfortable²⁰⁵. Furthermore, the size of these spaces was small to encourage an intimate encounter with the deity Mithras²⁰⁶. The small size of the Mithraeum imitates the practical and metaphysical elements of a cave²⁰⁷.

²⁰⁴ Brown, 2011: 109-110.

²⁰⁵ Bremmer, 2014: 131.

²⁰⁶ Beck, 1992: 8; Cuatrecasas, 2019: 26.

²⁰⁷ Brown, 2012: 109. See Introduction: Mithraeum, 14-18.

CASE STUDIES:

Circus Maximus Mithraeum

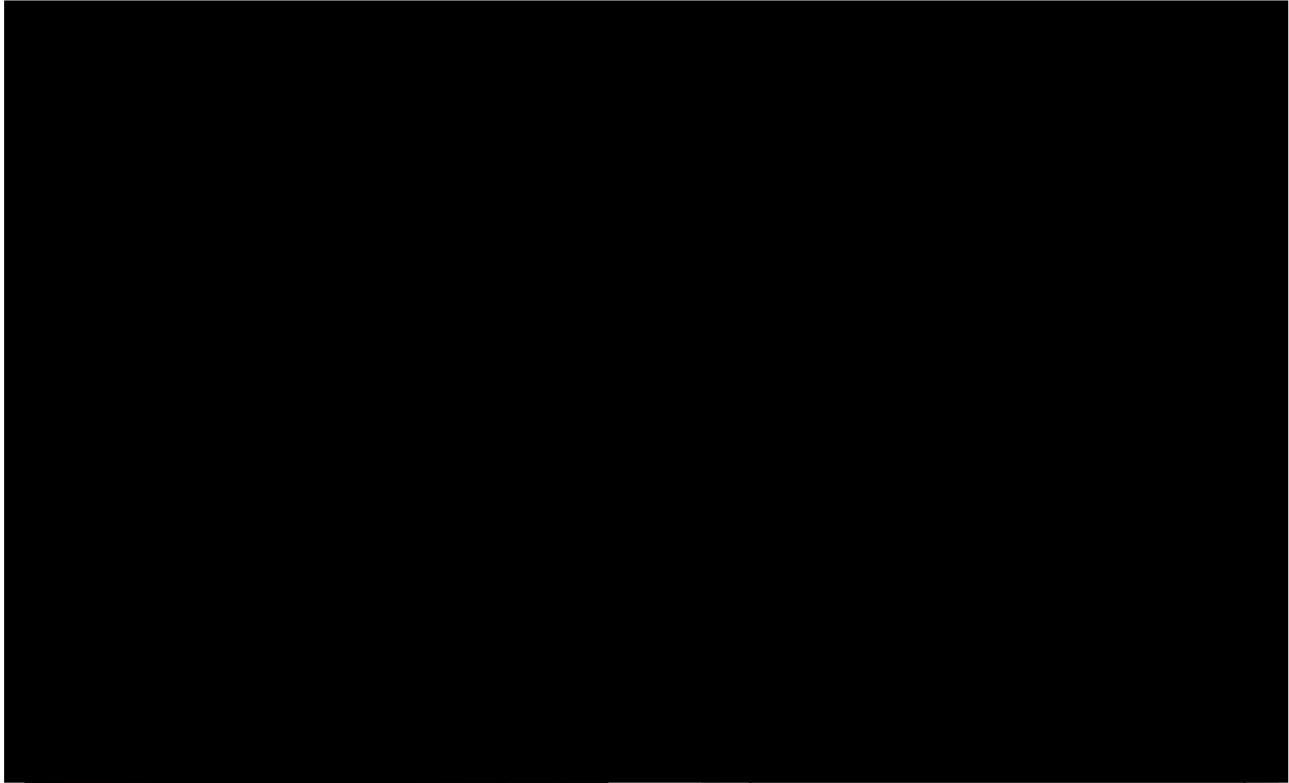


Figure 6. Blueprint by Comune di Roma of Circus Maximus, Author's Photographs taken with the kind permission of the Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali.

Figure 7. Blueprint of Circus Maximus, from Pietrangelli, 1940.

The Circus Maximus Mithraeum, named due to its proximity to the ancient stadium, lies due west of the Palatine hill, off the bank of the Tiber River. The Mithraeum was originally discovered in 1931 and, today sits underneath the Polizia Municipale headquarters in downtown Rome. The Mithraeum, in antiquity, was in the Forum Boarium which was a commercial and cultural hub throughout Rome's history²⁰⁸. The initial excavations, completed by Antonio M. Colini in 1931, were limited to a few findings. The primary excavation report was done by Pietrangelli in 1940. The archaeological data dates the initial phase of the building to the 3rd c. BCE²⁰⁹. The Mithraeum was not established until the late 3rd c. CE, in the third phase of this

²⁰⁸ Richardson, 1992: 163-164.

²⁰⁹ Pietrangelli, 1940: 143-153.

building, when some changes standard to the structure of a Mithraeum were made²¹⁰. The entire space measures 89 m², including all rooms²¹¹. The occupiable space of the Mithraeum was extremely intimate, measuring approximately 3m x 11m (33m²), making it one of the smaller urban Mithraea²¹².

The outermost physical boundary is created by the walls of the pre-existing building. These walls are marked in Figure 6 in orange. These walls have degraded, however, thanks to the restorations completed by the archaeological teams we can begin to picture how these walls functioned. One was able to enter the external boundary through two possible doorways. One is at the North-East wall (the bottom of Fig. 6 and 7). The second doorway utilized further constructed walls by the Mithraists to enter Room D from Room S²¹³. This doorway is now bricked up but would have allowed the Mithraists to enter the space from the external world. Both doors create an external boundary as the inside of the Mithraeum cannot be seen or accessed from either door, establishing a boundary.

Furthermore, the initial sightlines once inside this space are blocked by the constructed walls between Room C and the rest of the Mithraeum, see Figure 7.1.

This site follows the general shape of a Mithraeum, with

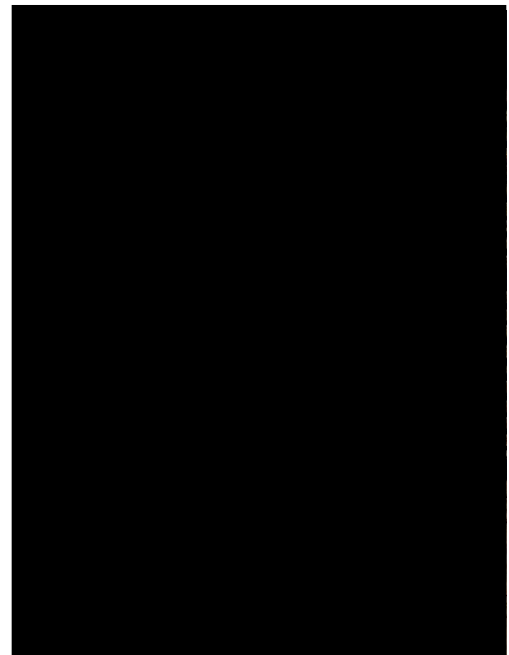


Figure 7.1. Obstructed view of Mithraeum from Red dot on Figure 7, Author's Photograph.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.* 153-161. Griffith, 1993: 125. See further discussion of standard Mithraeum construction in the Introduction – Mithraeum (Mithraea) section.

²¹¹ *Ibid.* 148.

²¹² *Ibid.* 148. Walsh, 2016: 144. There are areas of this Mithraeum that are raised pedestals which would not have been utilized by the initiates as occupiable spaces where they would sit/stand.

²¹³ Pietrangelli, 1940: 152.

slight variations. The site is long and narrow, which pushes focus to the end of the corridor that would have been occupied by a large cult-relief, similar to the highly decorated altar that remains today. The second boundary is established by this visual obstruction of the main sanctuary. It can be assumed that these boundaries were restricted in terms of hierarchy as well. The separation between Rooms AB, DF from Room C and the rest of the space appears a purposeful construction by the Mithraists to slowly reveal the space to mimic the initiation into the cult and the consumption of knowledge moving up the hierarchy. Therefore, the higher grades may have been allowed further access past the boundaries.

San Clemente Mithraeum



Figure 8. Layout of San Clemente by Comune di Roma, lowest level. Author's Photographs taken with the kind permission of i Padri Domenicani della Basilica di San Clemente.

The San Clemente Mithraeum is located at the north foot of the Caelian Hill underneath the Basilica of Saint Clement. The Mithraeum was installed in the late 2nd c. CE in Phase II of the existing *domus*²¹⁴. The space is constructed to control the movement through the space – involving built doors and walls. At first glance, both buildings have multiple rooms located within an exterior boundary dedicated to the religion/cult²¹⁵. As many Mithraic sites often predate Mithraic occupancy their overall structure resembles earlier constructed Roman buildings, however, some elements were constructed or changed by the Mithraic occupants

²¹⁴ Boyle, 1989: 63-65 and Guidobaldi, 1992: 41 date the installation of the Mithraeum; Heikonen, 2017: 31-33, 217 for the Phasing of the buildings.

²¹⁵ This point will be discussed in more detail later.

creating further bounded space²¹⁶. This Mithraeum is significantly larger than the Circus Maximus Mithraeum, and Rooms PM, AM and M measure 107.56 m², which is one of the larger Mithraea to date²¹⁷. In Figure 8 we can see portions of walls (evident by the blue color) that were filled in to close off certain hallways and passages by the Mithraists, creating physical boundaries controlling movement through the space.

The black (dark purple) walls were constructed during the original phase of the *domus* before the 1st c. CE. The walls built in the later period are located in Room AM, represented by the textured blue color. As such, the plain blue walls built between the 2nd – 3rd c. CE can be considered in terms of bounded location of the Mithraeum as they were built during the initial phase of the Mithraic occupancy. The only entrance to the space is the doorway into Room PM, from the alley which separates the ancient buildings. The initial boundary forces movement into Room AM from Room PM and creates another boundary limiting access to the space.

Moving out of Room AM, there is a hallway that separates Room PM and AM from the rest of the space. Room SM, to the north of the space, has often been dubbed the ‘Mithraic School’²¹⁸. The purpose of Room SM is difficult to determine and has been debated at great length²¹⁹. For this study, I will refrain from discussing Room SM and will focus my discussion on the main sanctuary including Room PM, AM and M.

Room M is the main sanctuary of this Mithraeum. This room contains all the typical features associated with a Mithraeum – the long rectangular shape, paralleled benches, and cult niche. The boundaries of this room are made clear by the walls constructed by the Mithraists.

²¹⁶ Nolan, 1934: 171-180. Boyle, 1989: 63-80.

²¹⁷ Heikonen, 2017: 31-32.

²¹⁸ Nolan, 1934: 181-184.

²¹⁹ See the following for discussion regarding the purpose and dating of Room SM. Nolan, 1934: 182; Vermaseren, 1956: 156-157; Heikonen, 2017: 30-34.

The cryptoporticus surrounding Room M is isolated through the construction of walls and creating a singular doorway for one to enter and exit the room.

Overall, there are three major stages of boundaries within this Mithraeum (excluding the Mithraic school). The first involved the restricted movement between Rooms PM and AM, with the clear boundaries separating the two. This initial stage moves directly into the secondary bounded space, which is Room M, the main sanctuary. Following the example of the Jerusalem Temple, Room PM may have been a room open to everyone, and the restricted movement from Room PM into Room AM allowed only initiates to enter. Furthermore, the innermost boundaries into Room M may have been further restrictions based on hierarchical grade (only the higher were allowed into the sanctuary), or more likely Room M and AM worked simultaneously as the complete bounded sanctuary of Mithras at San Clemente. The direct connection between these two rooms provides evidence, akin to the standard layout of a Mithraeum, that the main sanctuary functioned as one long room.

Santa Prisca Mithraeum

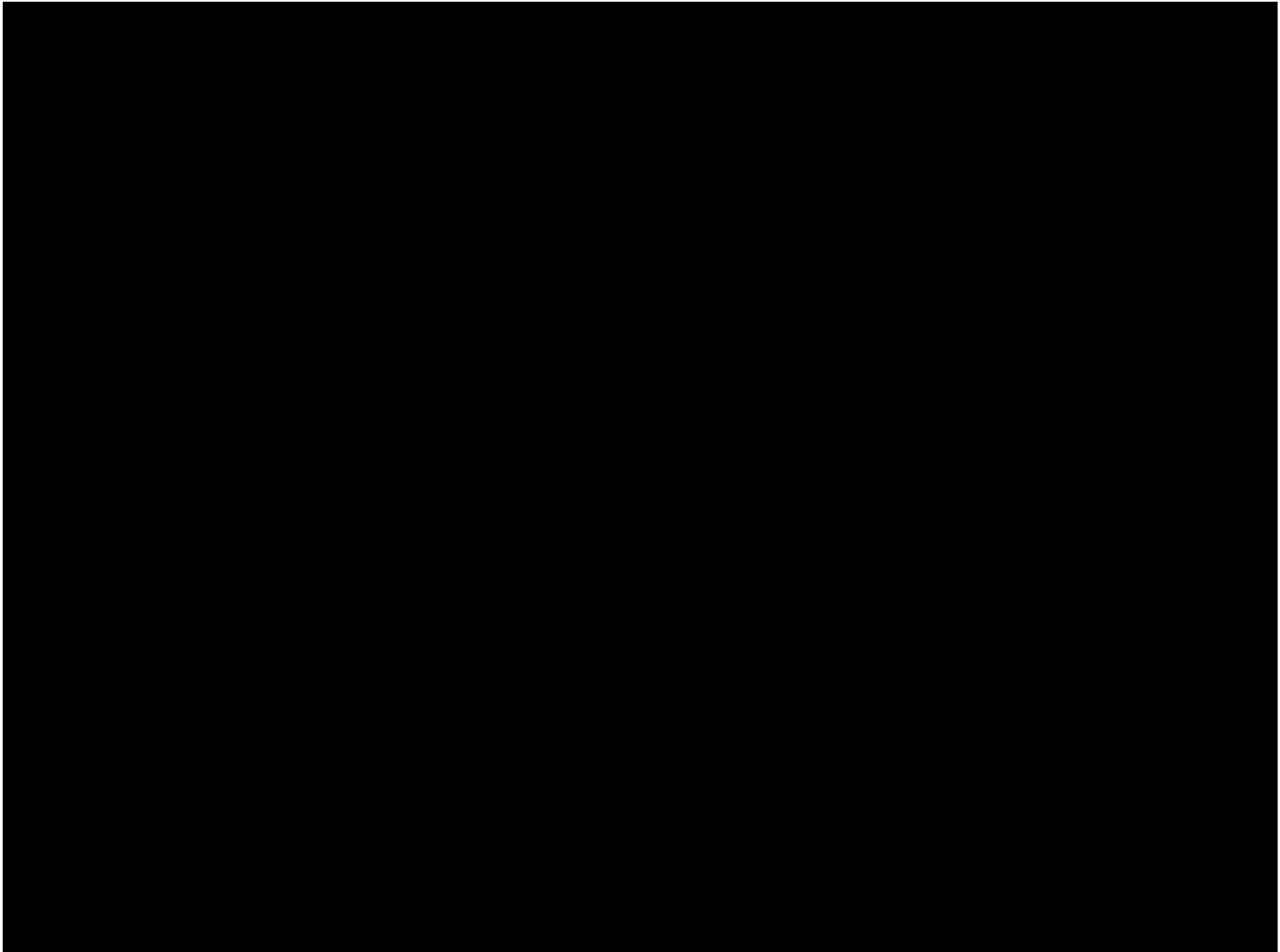


Figure 9. Layout of Santa Prisca Mithraeum, Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 25

The Mithraeum under Santa Prisca is one of the best-preserved and documented sites. The Church of Santa Prisca sits on the Aventine hill, peripheral to the rest of Rome²²⁰. Not only does the modern church sit here, but under that is an early Christian basilica dated to the 4th c. CE²²¹. The lowest layer, two stories underground, is the original *domus* which dates to c. 90-110 CE²²². The Mithraists moved into the space after 195 CE²²³, and they adapted the space as they saw fit – there is a gap of archaeological evidence after Trajan’s reign where nobody occupied

²²⁰ Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 1.

²²¹ *Ibid.* 107.

²²² *Ibid.* 107.

²²³ *Ibid.* 114.

the building²²⁴. The Mithraists appear to have occupied the entire basement (Rooms U, V, W, X, Y and Z), save Room T which acted as liminal space between the Mithraic and Christian communities occupying the larger structure²²⁵. The entire space measures 120.95m² and is one of the largest Mithraea to date²²⁶. The Mithraists' architectural impact on the space was minimal, limited to the standard construction necessary for a Mithraeum²²⁷. The Mithraeum Stage I was originally constructed in Phase III of the Roman building dated c. 195 CE, and then was expanded into Stage II c. 220 CE²²⁸. The walls surrounding the Mithraeum proper (Room V and W) were part of the Phase III *domus*²²⁹. The modern entrance into the Mithraeum²³⁰ was built after the Mithraic occupancy²³¹. The original doorway to the Mithraeum is now filled in located on the east side of Room V, in Wall C²³². There is another possible door leading directly into Room W; Door *e* is mentioned by Vermaseren in passing as there is evidence that it was walled up at some point, but its purpose is unclear²³³. Nevertheless, there is certainly one door to access the Mithraeum establishing the initial boundary separating the inside from the outside.

Once inside Room V, there is a natural progression into Room W which contains the cult-niche and paintings. Door *m/m'* is another boundary that separates Room V and W. Vermaseren and van Essen argue that the logical progression of an initiate in the space would take them from

²²⁴ *Ibid.* 114.

²²⁵ *Ibid.* 114.

²²⁶ Walsh, 2016: 144.

²²⁷ Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 114. General constructions of Mithraea included painting, installing long parallel benches, installing reliefs and installing other ritual elements, see Mastrocinque, 2017: 22-25 for more discussion on basic elements of Mithraism.

²²⁸ *Ibid.* 107-114.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* 25-27.

²³⁰ See Door L/L' on Fig. 9.

²³¹ *Ibid.* 25-26.

²³² *Ibid.* 25. This door would have given access to the mithraeum until it was walled up in 1958 for structural reasons.

²³³ *Ibid.* 33-34.

Room W, through Door *b/b* ' into Rooms Y and Z which would act as initiation rooms²³⁴. This assumption is supported by the wall paintings above Door *b/b* ' which depict the initiation ritual²³⁵. Therefore, Rooms Y and Z served a different purpose than Rooms V and W and are thus bounded separately by the walls and doors of the space. Room X appears to have had no specific Mithraic purpose and may have functioned as a storage area for ritual implements²³⁶. This demonstrates the possibility of graded sanctity present in this space. Un-initiated members would be guided, possibly blindfolded, to this space by a higher-level member to take place in the rituals necessary to allow them to access the full space. If un-initiated members were kept separate (such as in Room SM of the San Clemente Mithraeum), having them be guided by a higher-level member would help facilitate their training and control exposure to more 'mysterious' elements of the cult.

Conclusions

Therefore, the physical boundaries of external walls and entrances restricted entry into the space, while the subsequent rooms and doorways may have restricted the member's access depending on hierarchical grade. Each of these spaces demonstrate a degree of bounded space which fulfills a component of sacred space. Each Mithraeum can thus be defined as sacred space because it is a bounded location.

²³⁴ *Ibid.* 144-147.

²³⁵ *Ibid.* 148-160.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* 139.

Chapter 3: Active Role in Human, Bodily Experience to Create a Communal Identity

Sacred space is defined by the active role that it plays in the human experience to create a communal identity. There is often an inherent power to space that not only distinguishes it but plays an active role in defining and grounding individuals within a community. The space actively allows individuals to use it in rituals, experience the sacred and anchor their embodied beliefs and identity through iconography. The experiential relationship between the human body and the space actively gives the space meaning²³⁷.

The phenomenon of a sacred space actively creating an identity is best explained by Lane. His example is far removed from that of the Mithraeum in the Roman Empire, but his analysis applies to the human experience of sacred space. Lane explains during his visit to the ‘Great Medicine Wheel’ in Wyoming, USA, that one of the initial impressions that he experienced was being drawn to the mystery of the place – the space was energized and stimulated the imagination by connecting to his daily life²³⁸. While Lane states that there was nothing numinous about his visit, he experienced a powerful sense of connectedness; not only to those who were visiting the site as well but also of his own life²³⁹. In the scholarly discourse on the subject however, these notions of the space’s active role have been absent and an explanation of one’s sense of ‘connectedness’ appears “magical and naïve”²⁴⁰. Lane argues that individual experiences are complex and sacred space “is ‘known’ only to the extent that we participate in the various affordances it offers” and that an individual interprets a space as much as they can

²³⁷ Smith, 1987: 28; Lefebvre, 1991: 194-196.

²³⁸ Lane, 2001: 53-54.

²³⁹ *Ibid.* 55.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 55.

and is drawn to striking aspects of it²⁴¹. Thus, the space is actively involved in creating identity through individual experiences.

The individual experience of sacred space centers around the human body. Cianca states that human beings are embodied, and we inherently generate a relationship between our bodies and the world around them²⁴². There are no purely intellectual, emotional, or ideological experiences of space rather it is interpreted by the body by combining the lived experience of that individual²⁴³. The basic human experience is guided by the senses; what is seen, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted²⁴⁴. These senses are then processed by the body creating perception²⁴⁵. Hölscher explains how in the ancient world, daily life is stamped with visual manifestations²⁴⁶. There are often material objects that possess an active power that respond to an individual's vision²⁴⁷. Therefore, the sense of vision was crucial to the active experience of objects and sacred spaces. For my study of Mithraea, then, the aspects I see as evidence for the active role of sacred space are the striking surfaces, shapes, artifacts, paintings, sculptures and location – anything that can be interpreted by an individual to stimulate their perceptions and ground their communal identity.

Furthermore, this active relationship is a vital element in the construction of identity of a group within a space²⁴⁸. J.Z. Smith regards sacred space as being created through the actions of the users²⁴⁹. Sacred space is created by a specific religious group to maintain that social

²⁴¹ *Ibid.* 68-69.

²⁴² Cianca, 2018: 147.

²⁴³ *Ibid.* 147.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 148.

²⁴⁵ Tuan, 1977: 11-12.

²⁴⁶ Hölscher, 2018: 1.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 4.

²⁴⁸ Kilde, 2014: 190.

²⁴⁹ Smith, 1987: 28.

group²⁵⁰. This idea links directly with Durkheim's emphasis on communal unity and the social function of religion and space.

For Durkheim, social integration and cohesion are achieved in two ways: first, by establishing a moral community that shares common norms, values and morals; and second, through the effectiveness of ritual²⁵¹. The communal activity provides members with conscious ideas and beliefs and, on a more unconscious level, these beliefs are anchored by a psychological power called "effervescence"²⁵². At its base, effervescence means enthusiasm. Durkheim takes this term and incorporates it into his 'collective effervescence'. Shilling and Mellor explain that 'collective effervescence' is stimulated by the assembling of social groups²⁵³. The collective group's senses are combined into their social order and bound through fundamental concepts²⁵⁴. For Durkheim, the action of assembling in small social groups binds humans together through shared ideals by that group; and this is the essence of 'collective effervescence'. Tuan adds that perception of space can be mediated by the collective culture which creates conception²⁵⁵. From this theory, the active role space plays in the human experience is directly associated with the construction of communal identity. Therefore, sacred space actively facilitates bodily perception and communal identity.

Mithraists were ritually initiated into their mysteries and thus defined their communal identity²⁵⁶. The archaeological evidence from the Santa Maria Mithraeum (CIMRM 180) shows the initiation process. This spatial representation of structure is underpinned by the pre-existing

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 43-46.

²⁵¹ Durkheim, 2012: 45, 211, 358; Eller, 2007: 21.

²⁵² Durkheim, 2012: 226; Eller, 2007: 21.


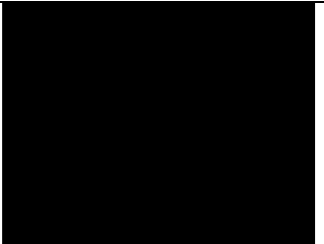
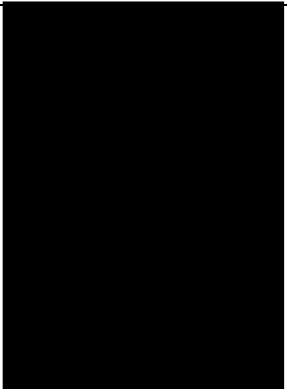
²⁵³ Shilling, Mellor, 1998: 196.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 196.

²⁵⁵ Eller, 2007: 11-12.

²⁵⁶ Mithraic initiation is one of the best documented Mithraic rituals, Martin, 2004: 250-251.

fundamental concepts of the Mithraic cult²⁵⁷. Clauss and Gordon discuss these frescoes depicting the initiation into the Mithraic cult²⁵⁸.

 CIMRM 187 – 1 st Panel	First Panel: Larger figure (assistant mystagogue/teacher according to Clauss) dressing in a white tunic guiding a nude initiate in red ochre, whose eyes are covered with a white blindfold ²⁵⁹ .
 CIMRM 188 – 2 nd Panel	Second Panel: Three figures. The ‘teacher’ on the left wearing a red billowing cape and Phrygian cap, holding a stick-like object (possibly a sword). The figure opposite him is kneeling and blindfolded, with his arms appearing to be bound behind his back ²⁶⁰ .
 CIMRM 191 – 3 rd Panel	Third Panel: Two figures, the initiate is still kneeling with his hands tied behind his back. The sword/stick that the ‘teacher’ was holding in the previous panel now lies on the ground next to the initiate, and he is no longer blindfolded. The figure behind is holding a crown-like object over the initiate’s head ²⁶¹ .

²⁵⁷ Lefebvre, 1991: 401-402.

²⁵⁸ Clauss, 2000: 103-131; Gordon, 2001: 271-272.

²⁵⁹ Clauss, 2000: 103.

²⁶⁰ Clauss, 2000: 103.

²⁶¹ Clauss, 2000: 103.

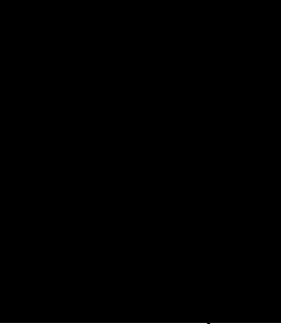
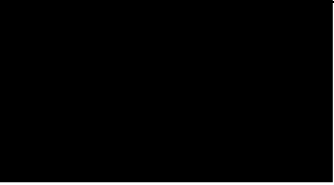
 CIMRM 194 – 4 th Panel	<p>Fourth Panel:</p> <p>Two figures, the ‘teacher’ in his red cloak is standing behind the initiate holding his shoulders and standing on his calves, preventing him from rising. The ‘teacher’ also appears to be indicating an object on the ground with a staff he is holding²⁶².</p>
 CIMRM 193 – 5 th Panel	<p>Fifth Panel:</p> <p>The initiate lies stretched on the ground, as if dead. At his head and feet are the two figures from the previous panels. Modern scholarship sees this as a test of courage²⁶³.</p>

Figure 10. Initiation Panels
with Descriptions

These panels display the experience of initiation into the Mithraic mysteries. The size of the individuals depicted is suggestive of the power dynamic which may have been organically present in the space wherein power relationships were represented in the space itself²⁶⁴. The initiation ritual demonstrates the intimate community of the Mithraic cult, and as such aligns with a core set of fundamental concepts.

The fundamental concepts which link the Mithraic community are the essential theology surrounding the worship of Mithras. These concepts are fundamental; however, initiates may not have known all the intricacies of complicated cult symbols²⁶⁵. The most common fundamental concept is the Tauroctony. I will also spend limited time on the astrological/astronomical

²⁶² Clauss, 2000: 103.

²⁶³ *Ibid.* 103.

²⁶⁴ Lefebvre, 1991: 229-231; Gordon, 2013: 297.

²⁶⁵ Beck, 2006: 130.

elements, which Beck calls ‘star-talk’, of Mithraic theology as they are present in the evidence of sacred space. Beck and Beard et al. are critical of an iconographically centered approach²⁶⁶, while Adrych et al. emphasize it as a valuable way to complete any missing ideas from literary sources²⁶⁷. I intend to use an iconographically centered approach while supplementing literary evidence to avoid misrepresentation. The Tauroctony and the astrological symbols are present throughout Mithraic iconography and are actively responsible for allowing individuals to experience the sacred and embody their communal identity.

TAUROCTONY

The Tauroctony is the most ubiquitous symbol found throughout Mithraic worship in the Mediterranean world and represents the foundation of the Mithraic social and cosmological order²⁶⁸. As there are numerous Tauroctonies, I will limit my discussion to those present in the Circus Maximus, Santa Prisca and San Clemente Mithraea. The main identifying features of the figure Mithras in the Tauroctony will be discussed in Chapter 4: The Perceived Presence of a Deity²⁶⁹.

The Tauroctony itself is a depiction of the youthful Mithras slaying the bull, surrounded by icons and symbols of the Mithras liturgy which has been adequately discussed by previous scholarship²⁷⁰. The area that has not been focused on is the placement of the scene and how initiates of the cult experienced it. The common iconography and central location of the Tauroctony prove that there are fundamental elements amongst Mithraic communities. It is important to note that the iconography would have been in full color in antiquity²⁷¹. The

²⁶⁶ Beck, 2006: 16-17; Beard et al., Vol. 2, 1998: 307.

²⁶⁷ Adrych et al, 2017: 9-10.

²⁶⁸ Beck, 2006: 130.

²⁶⁹ This point is discussed later.

²⁷⁰ See Campbell, 1968; Beck, 2006; Adrych et al, 2017; Mastrocinque, 2017.

²⁷¹ Magrini et al., 2019.

experience of these fundamental elements can be determined by the basic structure of the Tauroctony and functions to stimulate the initiate's perceptions, ground their identity and experience the sacred. The Tauroctony, and its related images, contribute to the active role of sacred space because they are found everywhere and often holds the central position in the main Mithraic sanctuary.

'STAR-TALK'

Mithraic iconography is awash with astrological and astronomical referents and symbols. Beck states that the Mithraic "symbolic idiom" is the language of astrology²⁷². There are astrological references to the Zodiac signs, the Sun and Moon, and Mithras as the (Unconquered) Sun²⁷³. The central Tauroctony utilizes this language to actively inspire a communal identity while demonstrating the fundamental astrological theories present in Mithras' mythological stories. The Zodiac signs refer to a band of the celestial sphere in which the sun, moon and principal planets move, and is divided into twelve equal parts called signs²⁷⁴. The twelve signs are also divided into the four seasons and the layout of the Mithraeum directly correlates to these Zodiac signs as seen in the Introduction: Mithraeum section discussed earlier²⁷⁵. Each sign is further associated with an animal, and the animal associations are important during the discussion of Mithraic astrology.

To apply these to the Mithraic liturgy, we need not look farther than the Tauroctony which is the main and most common piece of Mithraic evidence. Each Zodiac sign, and even constellations not traditionally associated with the zodiacs, are represented in this cult-image.

²⁷² Beck, 2006: 11.

²⁷³ *Ibid.* 30-31.

²⁷⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "zodiac"

²⁷⁵ Beck, 2006: 51-54

Mithras²⁷⁶ is slaying the bull (Taurus), surrounded by a dog (Canis Major/Minor), snake (Hydra), scorpion (Scorpio), raven (Corvus), twins (Gemini), and often a cup (Crater), lion (Leo) and the ear of wheat (Scipa, Alpha Virginis) as the Bull's tail²⁷⁷. The astrological symbols are present among Mithraic iconography as evident by the Zodiac and constellations present in the Tauroctony which serves to ground the initiate's perceptions in their identity and associated the Tauroctony with the foundational knowledge associated with astrological symbols²⁷⁸. The Zodiac symbols are fundamental concepts of the Mithraic iconography that actively participate in defining sacred space.

Another astrological element that is present in Mithraic iconography is from a literary reference that regards the Mithraeum as representative of the universe. This reference comes from Porphyry's *De Antro*, as discussed earlier in the Introduction. Porphyry brings to light the syncretic nature of the mysteries of Mithras. The cult, by including elements drawn from Neoplatonism, Zoroastrianism, Persian theology and so on, exhibits a character that adapts elements from its surroundings and incorporates them²⁷⁹. The two elements that Porphyry tells us about the Mithraeum are: 1) "The Mithraeum is meant to represent the universe."; and 2) "it is an 'image of the universe' to realize a mystery of the descent and return of souls"²⁸⁰. Both elements are references to the astrological symbolism of the Mithraic mysteries. The Mithraeum has a direct correlation to the 'cosmos', as has been discussed in detail by Beck and Mastrocinque²⁸¹.

²⁷⁶ According the Ulansey, the figure of Mithras himself also refers to the constellation of Perseus, see Ulansey, 1989: 25-39.

²⁷⁷ Beck, 2006: 31.

²⁷⁸ Recent studies have demonstrated these astrological symbols' connection to Mithraic iconography, see Campbell, 1968; Hinnells, 1975; Beck, 1988, 2006; Mastrocinque, 2017, Amendola, 2018.

²⁷⁹ Mastrocinque, 2017: 28-30.

²⁸⁰ Beck, 2006: 16-17.

²⁸¹ See Beck, 2006 and Mastrocinque, 2017.

Various astrological iconography is applied to create the perception by individual initiates of the space imitating the ‘cosmos’, including vaulted (often painted) ceilings. The vaulted ceiling is often present in the Tauroctony scene and actively grounds the initiate’s identity in the sacred Mithraic context.

In application, the active role creates a community through fundamental concepts present which ground initiates’ identity. The astrological iconography, present in the Tauroctony, demonstrates a continuity for the Mithraic community. It should be noted that some Mithraic scholarship argues the idea of ‘iconic discursivity’, which states that there is diversity among iconography in different Mithraea²⁸². McCarty et al. argue that there are local varieties of the cult that can be explored in more detail²⁸³. However, despite differences in iconography, the fundamental concepts present in many Mithraea allow us to establish continuity between them all using network theory²⁸⁴. Anne Collar extensively discusses network theory and recognizes that ideas (especially religious) are transferred through social connections²⁸⁵. Collar focuses on the interactions between different individualized groups and how information, especially religion, transfers from one to another²⁸⁶. Therefore, it is valid to claim continuity through fundamental concepts which are present across Mithraic communities despite iconic discursivity. The fundamental iconographic concepts are what allow Mithraic scholars to identify sites as Mithraic – which in and of itself demonstrates the idea of iconographic continuity. The homogenous Mithraic identity is still present despite these local variances through the common fundamental elements. The striking visual elements of the Tauroctony and the Zodiac in each

²⁸² See Gordon, 2009: 295.

²⁸³ McCarty et al., 2017: 370-371, 387-388.

²⁸⁴ Collar, 2013: 1-2.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 22-26.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 4-5, 8-9.

space are experienced by individuals to ground their identity and contribute to the active role of the inherent power of the space. Having established that the Mithraeum might function actively to create a communal identity, I will now demonstrate this in my three case study sites.

CASE STUDIES:

Circus Maximus Mithraeum

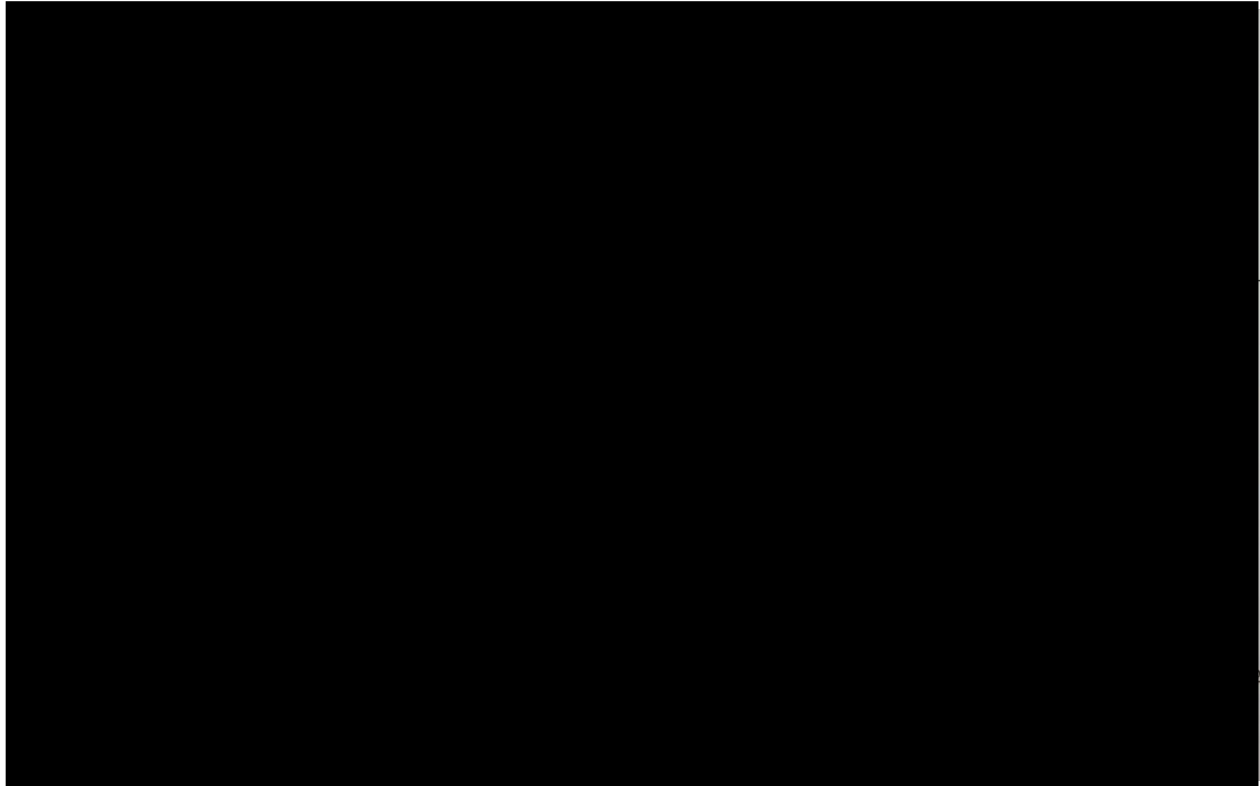


Figure 11. Blueprint of Circus Maximus. Author's Photo (L), Pietrangelli, 1940: 148 (R).

Initiates enter the bounded Circus Maximus Mithraeum through door *a* in the northeast wall. Immediately entering, one's view is interrupted by the constructed wall located between Rooms AB and Room C. Standing in the middle of the entranceway, one cannot see any further into the sanctuary. However, if you move slightly to the right, you can begin to peek through these walls and see further into the sanctuary. Moving past these walls, the first striking elements you come across would have resided in the niches *c'* and *c''*, the statues of Cautes and

Cautopates would have stood ‘guarding’ as it were, the main sanctuary²⁸⁷. The two figures are present throughout Mithraic iconography and are often depicted in the Tauroctony scene, flanking Mithras and are representative of the astrological sign Gemini.

Moving past the torchbearers, one’s view is immediately drawn to the end of the main hallway where a dilapidated, headless bust now sits²⁸⁸. In the excavation reports, the bust is described as an “acephalous male bust with anatomical *lorica* and bodice”²⁸⁹. It stands in such disrepair that it is impossible to identify the figure. The bust is depicted in the relief of the Circus Maximus.



Figure 13. Circus Maximus Relief,
Author’s Photograph

²⁸⁷ Pietrangeli, 1940: 153.

²⁸⁸ Pietrangeli, 1940: 154.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 168.

representation of the Tauroctony scene, or perhaps a large bust of Mithras himself; unfortunately, we will never know.

The focus then turns to the surviving cult relief along the east wall of Room M, see Figure 13. This relief is a well preserved Mithraic tauroctony which immediately pulls focus once one enters the final room. The initial excavations report at this site focused primarily on this relief. The relief (0.87m x 1.64m) was moved by archaeologists to its current location, based on structural holes and braces found²⁹⁰. The relief was found almost entirely intact, with only minimal destruction to the upper left corner and Mithras' nose. Furthermore, the relief bears the inscription dedicating the image to Mithras²⁹¹. Colini dates the relief to the end of the 3rd c. CE, due to the lettering and the precision of the engravings²⁹². This corresponds with Carlo Pietrangeli's conclusion that the Mithraists occupied Phase III of the pre-existing building, in the late 3rd c. CE²⁹³.

On the relief is the familiar bull-slaying scene with Mithras sporting his Phrygian cap, Persian cloak and billowing cape with Sol in the top left, Luna in the top right and Cautes/Cautopates flanking either side of him. Mithras' body and clothes were found with flecks of red paint that likely decorated the relief in its original construction²⁹⁴. The Zodiac symbols are represented by a bull, dog, snake, scorpion, raven, the twins, and the ear of wheat as the bull's tail. Furthermore, a figure in the lower left corner (likely Mithras) is carrying a bull by its hind legs, likely to be sacrificed in the 'cave'²⁹⁵. The cave, as representative of the cosmos, is

²⁹⁰ Colini, 1931: 124.

²⁹¹ Pietrangeli, 1940: 166.

²⁹² Colini, 1931: 125-126.

²⁹³ Pietrangeli, 1940: 147, 153.

²⁹⁴ Colini, 1931: 124-125.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 126-128.

present in the mid-left, under Sol. Colini explains that this aspect represents the “mouth of the grotto”, having been sculpted with holes to symbolize a rock face²⁹⁶. Mithras’ bull-slaying scene takes place within the cave and emphasizes the mythological context for the initiates. This relief is the main striking image of the space and actively functions to present the fundamental concepts to the initiates and ground their identity as adherents to the Mithraic liturgy.

San Clemente Mithraeum

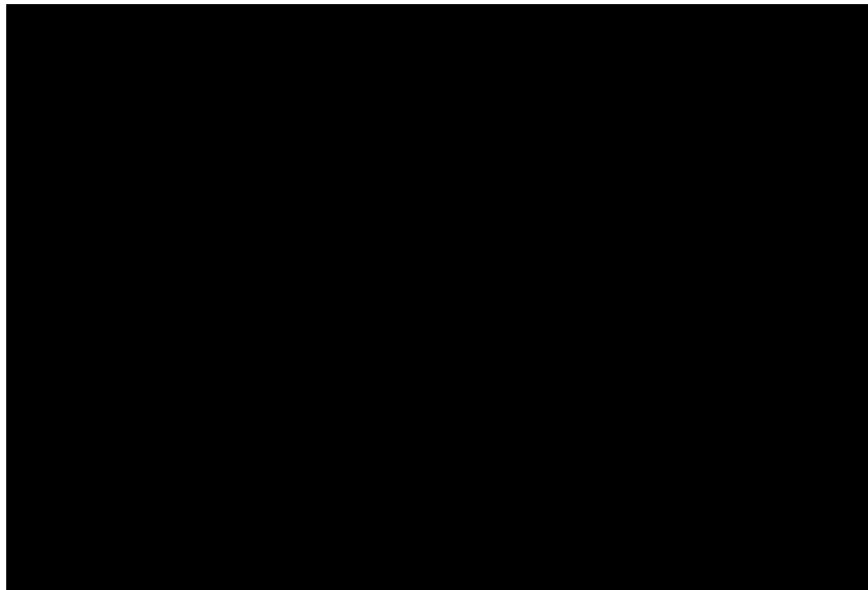


Figure 14. Layout of San Clemente.

As one enters the Mithraeum under San Clemente, their experience is controlled by the three closed doorways in Room PM. Their senses are funnelled through the only remaining open door. There are striking elements that connect to the Mithraic common symbols entering Room AM. The first thing initiates would see is the highly decorated altar, placed in the center of Room AM²⁹⁷. Figure 15 is a re-creation sketch done by Louis Nolan²⁹⁸. The reliefs on the altar

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 127.

²⁹⁷ The original placement of this altar is debated. Nolan and Boyle argue for placement in Room AM, while one of the archaeological teams (it is unclear who), moved it into Room M, where it now resides.

²⁹⁸ It must be noted that Nolan takes artistic liberties by adding the statue on top of the altar, as well as the decoration on the roof. Furthermore, the altar was likely further back in the middle of Room AM, allowing initiates to circumambulate and view each decorated relief.

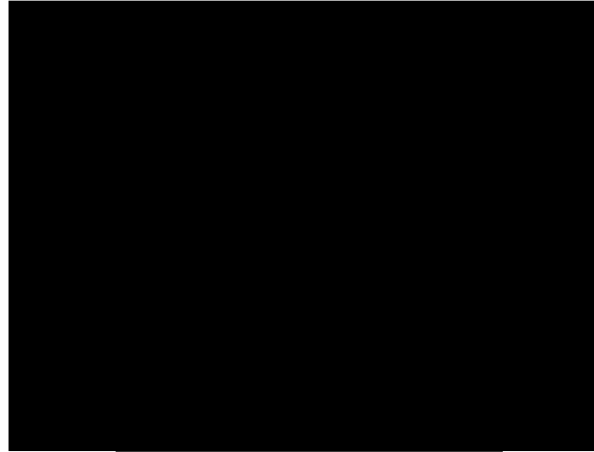


Figure 15. Room AM Sketch

display the Tauroctony scene, and the fundamental Mithraic iconography, see Figure 16.

Mithras is depicted on the front of the altar slaying the bull wearing his Phrygian cap, Persian cloak and a billowing cape. The figures Sol and Luna are also depicted in the top left and right of the relief respectively. The busts protruding from the top corners of the altar are personifications of the four seasons, relating to the mythology of Mithras' association with the cosmos²⁹⁹. The Zodiac symbols are also present in the bull, dog, snake and scorpion all in the standard positions surrounding Mithras. Furthermore, Cautes and Cautopates are flanking either side of Mithras on the left and right of the altar respectively. On the back of the relief is a depiction of another snake which is common in Mithraic iconography.

The cave representing the 'cosmos' is also present in two-fold in San Clemente. First, the altar's front relief is bordered by two rough pillars on either side of Mithras and covered by a roof meant to represent the grotto in which Mithras slew the bull. Secondly, moving through the space into the main sanctuary, Room M, the ceiling is vaulted and perforated³⁰⁰, painted with stars and holes. These striking elements and the Tauroctony scene immediately ground the

²⁹⁹ Boyle, 1988: 66.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 66. Possibly to see the stars.

individual's identity and allow them to embody the sacred through the mythological narrative of Mithras.



Figure 16. Altar at San Clemente.
Author's Photograph.

The main sanctuary, Room M, is similar to most Mithraea, with parallel benches and an area for the cult niche at the end of the aisle. Currently, the statue there depicts Mithras' rock birth³⁰¹. However, it is almost impossible to determine what was displayed here in antiquity, as there are no other extant remains of another relief or statue in this niche – similar to the main niche in the Circus Maximus Mithraeum. Whatever did stand in this niche was the main focal point of the entire sanctuary. As one enters Room M, their gaze is drawn to the end niche where the Mithraic relief/statue would have stood. The cult niche would have most likely related fundamental Mithraic iconographic symbols, such as another Tauroctony scene.

The Mithraeum under S. Clemente is constructed to guide the individual's experience. Their movement and view are shifted depending on which room they are in. Each room contains

³⁰¹ Clauss, 2000: 62; Mastrocinque, 2017: 107-112.

striking images that suggest that room's purpose while also connecting it to the larger Mithraic liturgical context. The Tauroctony grounds the initiate's experience and identity within the larger context of Mithras' mythology and allows them to embody the sacred through it.

Santa Prisca Mithraeum

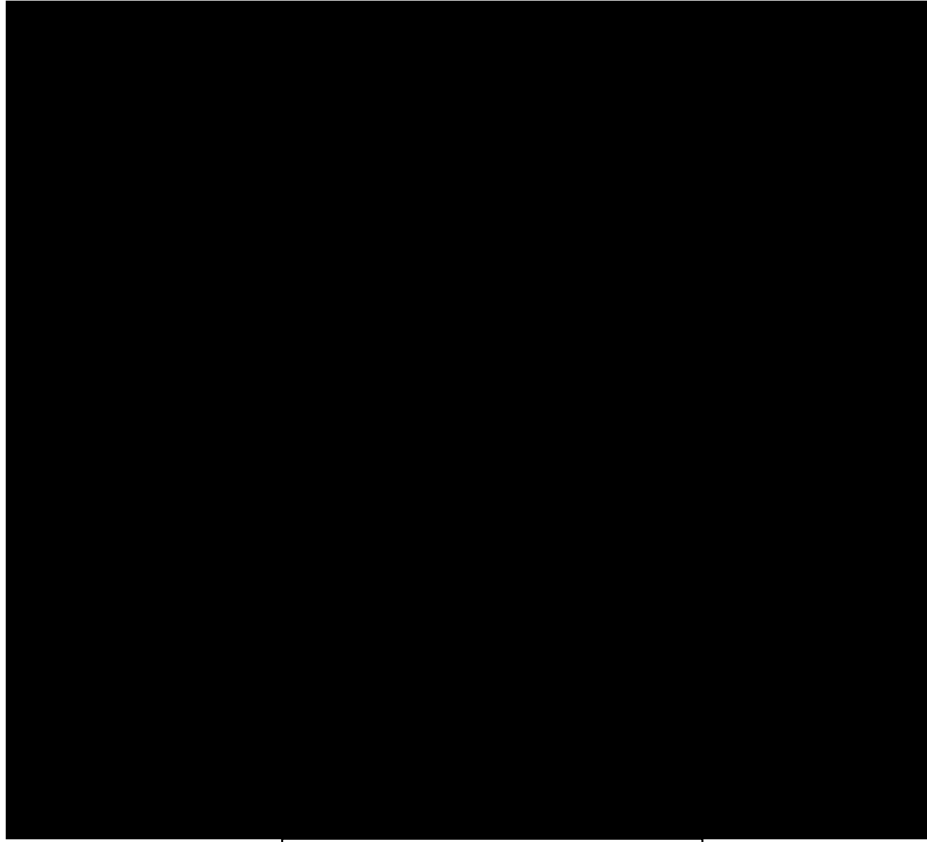


Figure 17. Santa Prisca Layout.

As one enters the Mithraeum under Santa Prisca, through Room V, they can immediately see into the main sanctuary where the cult-relief stands at the end of the hallway, see Figure 18. This relief is another representation of the Tauroctony scene placing one's perceptions into the Mithraic context. Passing through the doorway *m'/m''*, two niches containing Cautes and Cautopates stand vigil. From the doorway, the torchbearers appear to flank Mithras in typical Tauroctony fashion.

The aisles of the Mithraeum lead and draw attention to the Tauroctony located at the end of Room W. The relief was badly damaged at the time of excavation; however, many fragments were discovered throughout the site and the relief was reconstructed in 1956-1957 by Giovanni Sansone³⁰². It must be noted that this Tauroctony scene is unique – which will be explored in Chapter 4. Despite the differences in Mithras' portrayal, the

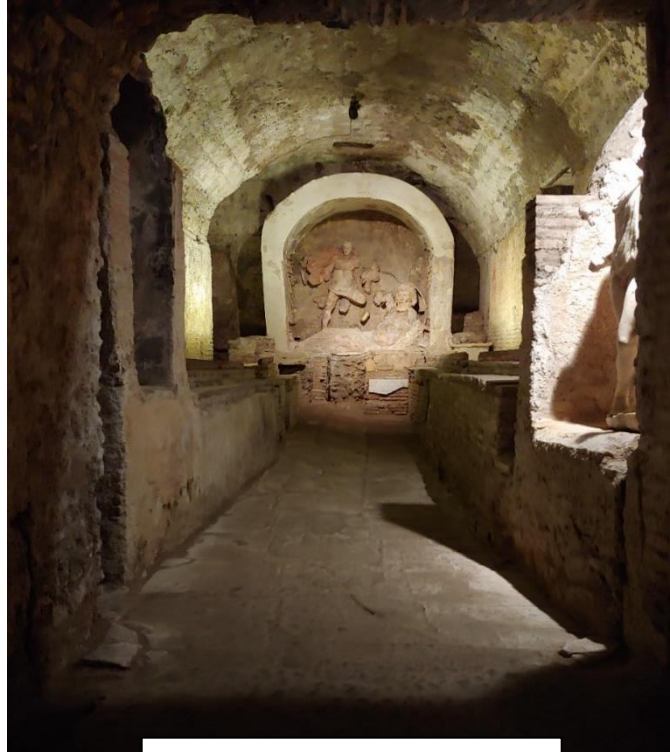


Figure 18. Author's Photograph

fundamental elements are still present in the Tauroctony. Mithras is slaying the bull and is surrounded by fragments of the snake, raven, and dog which relate to the Zodiac symbols associated with the cult. The scene itself is bordered, akin to the San Clemente relief, to represent the 'grotto' or cave wherein Mithras mythologically slew the bull³⁰³. The upper arch is painted blue with three yellow stars representing the sky and again relating to the astrological symbols³⁰⁴. Santa Prisca, like San Clemente, also supports a painted vaulted ceiling giving the illusion of a cave. The Tauroctony as a scene allows the individual initiates to experience the sacred by grounding them in their embodied beliefs and identity as members of the Mithraic mysteries. The sight lines appear clearer in the Santa Prisca Mithraeum as compared to my other case studies. This could be simply a unique decision by this group, but more likely is that they

³⁰² Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 129-130.

³⁰³ *Ibid.* 129.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 129.

adapted the pre-existing space to fit the basic structure of the sanctuary most efficiently. The relief and the vaulted ceiling demonstrate the fundamental elements associated with Mithras' mythology and shift the initiate's perceptions into the Mithraic context.

Conclusions

These three case studies demonstrate that each space was actively involved in grounding the initiate's identity in the fundamental concepts of the cult – including 'star-talk' and the Tauroctony. The 'star-talk' is ever present in the general construction of the space, as explored by Beck, with the vaulted ceiling and painted reliefs. Furthermore, the astrological symbols are also present within the Tauroctony. All these elements show us that each of these Mithraea can be defined as sacred space as they are actively involved in the human experience by creating and grounding individual's identity within the context of the cult.

Chapter 4: Passive Role in Human, Bodily Experience

Sacred space can also be defined by the passive role of the space. The passive role is how the space is acted upon, and thus how the initiates of the Mithraic mysteries used the space needs to be determined. To determine how the space functioned as sacred, the ritual actions of the Mithraic mysteries need to be defined. How the space functioned as sacred, and the sacred functions of the space are two fundamental goals of this chapter. They are not identically related, but rather are intertwined in their relationship to sacred space. Sacred functions within space often manifest themselves in rituals.

Ritual theory is a broad topic within religious studies scholarship and has thus garnered a lot of attention throughout the years. Eliade begins our discussion by stating that rituals can be as simple as crossing a threshold³⁰⁵. For Eliade, *le seuil* (the threshold) acts as *la borne* (the boundary) to distinguish the function of the space³⁰⁶. Eliade represents the phenomenological approach to the study of religion which emphasizes the primacy of myths and symbols; this approach also views myths as steadfast and rituals as more fluid³⁰⁷. Therefore, for scholars like Eliade, rituals were reliant on their associated myths. This is expanded on by J.Z. Smith who argues that the boundaries of sacred space directly correlate with human activities³⁰⁸. Rituals portray an idealized way the world should be organized ensuring that the participants are acutely aware of the fragility of reality³⁰⁹. The ritualization of creating boundaries is exemplified by Turner in a study of the Ndembu tribe of northwest Zambia. In this tribe, a Ndembu hunter will

³⁰⁵ Eliade, 1965: 28.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 28.

³⁰⁷ Bell, 1997: 10.

³⁰⁸ Smith, 1987: 47-53.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 47-53.

‘sweep’ or ‘clear’³¹⁰ a specific area to invoke the presence of the deity, Mukaala³¹¹. This example displays the ritual action involved in creating sacred space. J.Z. Smith supplies the simple metaphor that sacred space acts as a ‘focusing lens’ through which the participants can see, or argue for, what is significant in their life³¹². However, J.Z. Smith’s theories are analyzed by Ronald L. Grimes, a prominent ritual theory scholar. Grimes’ largest objection to Smith, which with I agree, is his understanding of ritual disembodies it, making ritual one-dimensional and metaphorical³¹³. In light of these disagreements, ritual action needs to be thoroughly understood to be used to define sacred space.

SACRIFICE AND ALTARS

There are a few rituals associated with the Mithraic mysteries. The ritual that will be my main focus for this work will be the communal meal and its associated sacrifice³¹⁴. The meal and sacrifice provide the best evidence for how the Mithraists acted upon the space, as well as being well attested to by archaeological and literary evidence. There are a few points of contention within the Mithraic scholarship that need further clarification before continuing. The first is the question about whether the Mithraists sacrificed animals or not. Jas Elsner argues that there is no concrete evidence and leans towards ‘no’³¹⁵. Elsner disagrees with Turcan³¹⁶, Gordon³¹⁷, Britt-Marie Näsström³¹⁸ and Lentacker et al.³¹⁹ who all argue for the practice of sacrifice within the Mithraic mysteries. Elsner and Turcan question whether, assuming sacrifices

³¹⁰ This ritualized clearing is known as *mukombela*, which translated and defined means ‘a cleared spot (as for invoking spirits and setting traps)’. See Turner, 1979: 69-75.

³¹¹ Turner, 1979: 69-70.

³¹² Smith, 1980: 114; Bell, 1997: 11.

³¹³ Grimes, 1999: 264-270.

³¹⁴ For more on the Mithraic rituals, see Gordon, 2001; Martin, 2004; Beck 2006; Mastrocinque, 2017.

³¹⁵ Elsner, 1995: 212.

³¹⁶ Turcan, 1981: 34; 1991: 220-224.

³¹⁷ Gordon, 1988: 69; 2013: 35-37.

³¹⁸ Näsström, 2004: 110.

³¹⁹ Lentacker et al., 2002: 78-80.

did occur, the altars were used or were simply decorative³²⁰? To argue this point, I turn back to my comparative approach discussing the role altars played in Roman state sacrifices³²¹. Overall, I argue that the altars were used practically in sacrificial animals within the cult of Mithras due to the overwhelming evidence, however, the frequency and content of the sacrificed may have varied.

The ritual cult meal wherein initiates share a meal, replicating the feast of Mithras and Sol, is evident from the archeological evidence from the Konjic Mithraeum (CIMRM 1895), the Mithraeum at Fiano Romano (CIMRM 641) and the Santa Prisca Mithraeum (CIMRM 476)³²², as well as literary evidence, such as Justin Martyr's *Apologia* 1.66³²³.

For example, the relief from the Konjic Mithraeum depicts the communal meal scene, with the 'super-natural' beings, Mithras and Sol, personified eating with the initiates behind the table. The meal is separated from initiation rituals and involved Mithras directly taking the architectural place of honor, according to Graeco-Roman table protocol³²⁴. Graeco-Roman table protocol dictated places according to social position,



³²⁰ Turcan, 1991: 223; Elsner, 1995:

³²¹ Martin, 2004: 253.

³²² Beck, 2000: 145. Each of these e

³²³ Beck, 2000: 143; Martin, 2004: 2

³²⁴ Clauss, 2000: 113; Martin, 2004:

wherein the center of the three-table configuration was of highest honor³²⁵. The communal meal scene is often accompanied by the Tauroctony. Vermaseren states that the figures are sitting with raised hands surrounded by costumed initiates, which would remain consistent with the ritual present in this relief³²⁶. The initiates surrounding the table are adorned in costumes representative of their hierarchical grade. From left to right we can see a person supporting a Raven's mask, signifying the Corvax grade³²⁷. The next figure is wearing a Phrygian cap, mimicking Mithras, and could represent the Persian/Perseus grade³²⁸. The last figure on the far right of the relief that survives is wearing a Lion mask which represents the grade of Leo³²⁹. Mithraists dined in typical Roman fashion, reclined on two parallel benches on either side of the Mithraeum³³⁰. The cult meal functioned beyond the practical and represented the question of salvation within the cult³³¹. The meal highlighted the mythological 'first sacrifice' represented in the Tauroctony³³². It has also been established as a central ritual of the mysteries³³³. A ritualized meal is a fundamental element of Greek and Roman religious practices³³⁴, and as such may have influenced the practice of sacrifice within the Mithraic mysteries. The presence of sacrifice is confirmed by animal bones found at many sites³³⁵. I turn to a comparative approach to the broader Roman pagan practice of ritual meals and the ritual sacrifice. The comparison of related

³²⁵ Martin, 2004: 253

³²⁶ Vermaseren, 1956: 264-265.

³²⁷ *Ibid.* 264-265.

³²⁸ See the Felicissimus Mithraeum from Ostia for the Phrygian cap symbol associated with the 5th Mithraic grade.

³²⁹ Vermaseren, 1956: 264-265.

³³⁰ Bremmer, 2014: 131.

³³¹ Gordon, 2017: 426.

³³² Gordon, 2007: 421.

³³³ Beck, 1992: 4; Hensen, 2017: 389.

³³⁴ Beard et al., Vol. 1, 1998: 36 Heut, 2004: 189; Schultz, 2016.

³³⁵ Bremmer, 2014: 130.

evidence is essential to the understanding of the ancient world. As Moser states, this comparison of “close evidence from the past” is a “fundamental aspect of the historical process”³³⁶.

Viewing the sacrifices of the mysteries of Mithras in congruency with more broad Roman pagan sacrifices is applicable because of the Romanization of the cult of Mithras. While the origins of the Mithraic mysteries have a long and complicated past, there is a consensus that Roman Mithras and the subsequent rites involved with the mystery cult of Mithras differ from the Indo-Iranian and Persian Mithra and the rites dedicated to him³³⁷. Therefore, an analysis of how altars were used in the broader Roman state sacrifices will give us a comparative idea of how they were used in the Mithraic mysteries.

THE RITUAL USE OF ALTARS IN ROMAN STATE SACRIFICE

Central to Roman pagan religious practices was the sacrifice. As Beard et al. argue sacrifice was the central and main ritual of almost all religious occasions in the Roman world³³⁸. One of the most famous is the *suovetaurilia* which marked various official occasions – and more notably is depicted in the Mithraeum at Santa Prisca³³⁹. These sacrifices followed general rules and involved a procession which led eventually to an altar³⁴⁰. Elsner argues that there are two differences between Roman state and Mithraic sacrifices. Elsner argues that firstly, Mithraic sacrifices were kept inside, as compared to the Roman state sacrifices which were often held outside in front of temples³⁴¹. Secondly, there is no deferral or separation between the place of sacrifice and the deity being propitiated³⁴². I disagree with Elsner on these differences regarding

³³⁶ Moser, 2019: 2.

³³⁷ Grenet, 2001: 35.

³³⁸ Beard et al, 1998: 36. Also see Faraone & Naiden, 2012: 1-10 for an explanation of the development of scholarship surrounding ‘animal sacrifice’ in the ancient Roman world.

³³⁹ Stephenson, 2015: 32-35.

³⁴⁰ Beard et al, 1999: 36.

³⁴¹ Elsner, 1995: 210. This point however, will be refuted in the following discussion.

³⁴² *Ibid.* 210.

the separation between the place of sacrifice and propitiation, as the following discussion will show the place of sacrifice was also the place where the deity was propitiated.

The altar was the focal point for sacrifices, and in the Mithraic context provided a direct connection to the deity. Moser argues that the altar played a leading role as the primary and authoritative mediator in the crafting of sacrifice³⁴³. The central act of Roman religious self-identification was the burning of offerings made to the gods on altars³⁴⁴. In the case of the ritual action of sacrifice, the most important physical structure is the altar which is where sacrificial rites were performed³⁴⁵. As such, it is reasonable to analyze the archeological evidence to determine the functionality of altars in the definition of sacred space³⁴⁶. Porphyry gives us evidence on the ubiquitous use of altars in his work *De Abstinentia*, which is a detailed treatise on pagan religious customs³⁴⁷. In Book II Porphyry, in response to the illegality and denouncement of vegetal offerings at sacrifices, argues against the usage of animal sacrifice and states:

πόρρω δὲ τῶν περὶ τὰς θυσίας ἀπαρχῶν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις προΐουσῶν παρανομίας, ἡ τῶν δεινотάτων θυμάτων παράληψις ἐπεισέχθη, ὡμότητος πλήρης, ὥς δοκεῖν τὰς πρόσθεν λεχθείσας καθ' ἡμῶν ἀρὰς νῦν τέλος εἶλη φέναι, σφαζάντων τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τοὺς βωμοὺς φέναι, σφαζάντων τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ τοὺς βωμοὺς αἱμαζάντων, ἀφ' οὗ λιμῶν τε καὶ πολέμων πειραθέντες αἱμάτων ἤψαντο. (A. Nauck, *Porphyrii philosophi Platonici opuscula selecta*, 2nd ed., Leipzig: Teubner, 1886 (repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1963): 85-269).

“This mode, however, of offering first-fruits in sacrifices, having, at length, proceeded to great illegality, the assumption of immolations, most dire and full of cruelty, was introduced; so that it would seem that the execrations, which were formerly uttered against us, have now received their consummation, in consequence of men slaughtering animals, and **defiling altars with blood**; and this commenced

³⁴³ Moser, 2019: 1.

³⁴⁴ Faraone, Naiden, 2012: 4; Huet, 2004: 185.

³⁴⁵ Moser, 2019: 52. Faraone, Naiden, 2012: 1, 19.

³⁴⁶ Moser, 2019: 16.

³⁴⁷ Johnson, 2013: 16.

from that period in which mankind tasted of blood, through having experienced the evils of famine and war.” (Porphyry, *DA* 2.7, Trans. Roger Pearse).

Behind Porphyry’s agenda of convincing more people to become vegetarians is the evidence for the ubiquitous presence of altars in animal and vegetal sacrifices in the Roman world. Porphyry is important because he is situated in the same comparative culture that may have influenced the rituals of the Mithraic mysteries and emphasizes the use of altars³⁴⁸.

Recent archeological find of animal bones provides clarification on the presence of animal sacrifices within Mithraea. Previously, animal bones were oft written off without any consequential meaning. Vermaseren states from his findings at S. Prisca, “at the base of the *thronus* (elevated chair reserved for the *pater* grade in the middle of the southern bench in Room W) were found some animal bones”³⁴⁹ and “the fragments of animal bones lay scattered in the sand (throughout Room V and W) and although the animals are just those which are painted on the wall of this side (the southern wall of Room W) I believe they are part of the rubbish and not the remains of a votive offering”³⁵⁰. Pietrangelli from the excavations of Circus Maximus states, “*sono state trovate alcune ossa e due denti di suino* (some bones and two pig teeth were found)”³⁵¹ and mentions nothing more on the presence of animal remains.

Recent scholarship argues that these ‘incidental’ finds that are simply mentioned and then passed over by early archaeological excavations may answer some questions regarding the ritual actions of the Mithraic mysteries in the Roman Empire³⁵². More recently, McCarty et al. during their excavations of a Mithraeum in Apulum, Romania, discovered a small vessel that contained

³⁴⁸ See my earlier discussion on Porphyry’s reliability in the Introduction

³⁴⁹ Vermaseren, 1965: 127.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 128.

³⁵¹ Pietrangelli, 1940: 155.

³⁵² Martens, 2004: 333.

a mixture of ash, burned vegetal remains and animal bones³⁵³. This find is relevant to my case studies because it introduces an interpretive method of analyzing the presence of animal bones and not brushing them off as rubbish like earlier scholarship. The deposits in this box represent the intentional burning of vegetal and animal materials, most likely as sacrificial offerings consistent with Roman sacrificial practices³⁵⁴. The bones from the box were identified as small pigs, 2 larger pigs and 3 chickens. Some of the chicken remains were exposed to a direct flame of low temperature which is consistent with offerings at a small altar, as compared to cremation on a high-temperature pyre³⁵⁵. This rite seems to mark the remains of a single, large-scale, important event, rather than a continual collection of remains³⁵⁶. Therefore, the communal meal was important to the practice and conceptions of the cult, and as such may have been practiced in the three Mithraea I focus on³⁵⁷.

To determine the presence of an altar, an “altar” first needs to be defined. The *OED* defines an altar as “a block, table, stand or other raised structure with a flat top used as the focus for a religious ritual, especially for making sacrifices or offerings to a god or gods”³⁵⁸. This is a simple enough starting point, but the ancient world viewed altars in a slightly different manner.

The size of altars varies across time and cultures and is one factor that can be used to determine whether something is an altar or not. Classical scholarship becomes divided on whether altars are defined more by construction or function, yet both are vital components in

³⁵³ McCarty et al, 2019: 287.

³⁵⁴ McCarty et al, 2019: 288-289; Gordon, 2013: 37.

³⁵⁵ McCarty et al, 2019: 290.

³⁵⁶ Martens, 2004: 341.

³⁵⁷ McCarty et al, 2019: 294. It must be noted that while it is impossible to directly connect the bones with Mithraic ritual action, they should taken into consideration while discussing sacred space through ritual action.

³⁵⁸ *OED*. s.v. ‘altar’.

their determination³⁵⁹. The most detailed typology of altars comes from Rupp, who classifies altars into 14 different categories³⁶⁰. Rupp's classifications are valuable because he not only describes a wide variety of types of altars but gives examples. The relevant classifications are X – “monolithic block and built altars with corner acroteria”³⁶¹, and XI – “elevated, built altars”³⁶². Both of these classifications fit with Haase's observations that the most common type of altars from the republic was much plainer compared to the lavish productions of the later imperial period³⁶³. Roman altars had a square or rectangular base (sometimes with a circular centerpiece), with a wide molded top (sometimes with *acroteria*, ornaments placed on a flat pedestal)³⁶⁴.

Relevant to the study of Mithraeum is Turcan's treatment of altars is valuable because of his focus on Mithraic decoration. He explains that the altars found denote the sacrificial space, directly relating them to the passive role involved in defining sacred space³⁶⁵. Furthermore, Turcan classifies three types of altars found in Mithraea³⁶⁶. The three types of altars are: 1 – “*les autels dans lesquels on a taillé une ou plusieurs niches à l'avant ou à l'arrière* (altars in which one or more niches have been cut into the front or the back)”; 2 – “*les autels simplement perforés de part en part* (altars in which a sculpted façade is pierced in relation to cavity built in the posterior face)”; 3 – “*les autels dont un motif sculpté en façade est ajouré en relation avec une cavité taillée dans la face postérieure* (altars in which a carved pattern is pierced concerning a

³⁵⁹ Etienne (Etienne, 1991: 9) and Petropoulou (Petropoulou, 1991: 27) focus on the function of an altar, while Moser (Moser, 2019: 23-32) and Rupp (Rupp, 1991: 57-59) focus more on the construction.

³⁶⁰ Rupp, 1991: 57-59. While Rupp's classifications are based on Greek altar depictions, the comparison between Greek and Roman altars is still relevant.

³⁶¹ Rupp, 1991: 59.

³⁶² *Ibid.* 59.

³⁶³ Haase, 2013: 2.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 2-3.

³⁶⁵ Turcan, 1991: 217.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 219.

cavity in the posterior face)''³⁶⁷. Armed with Turcan and Rupp's classification systems will allow me to identify and define the altars present in the Mithraea in Rome.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 219.

CASE STUDIES:

Circus Maximus Mithraeum

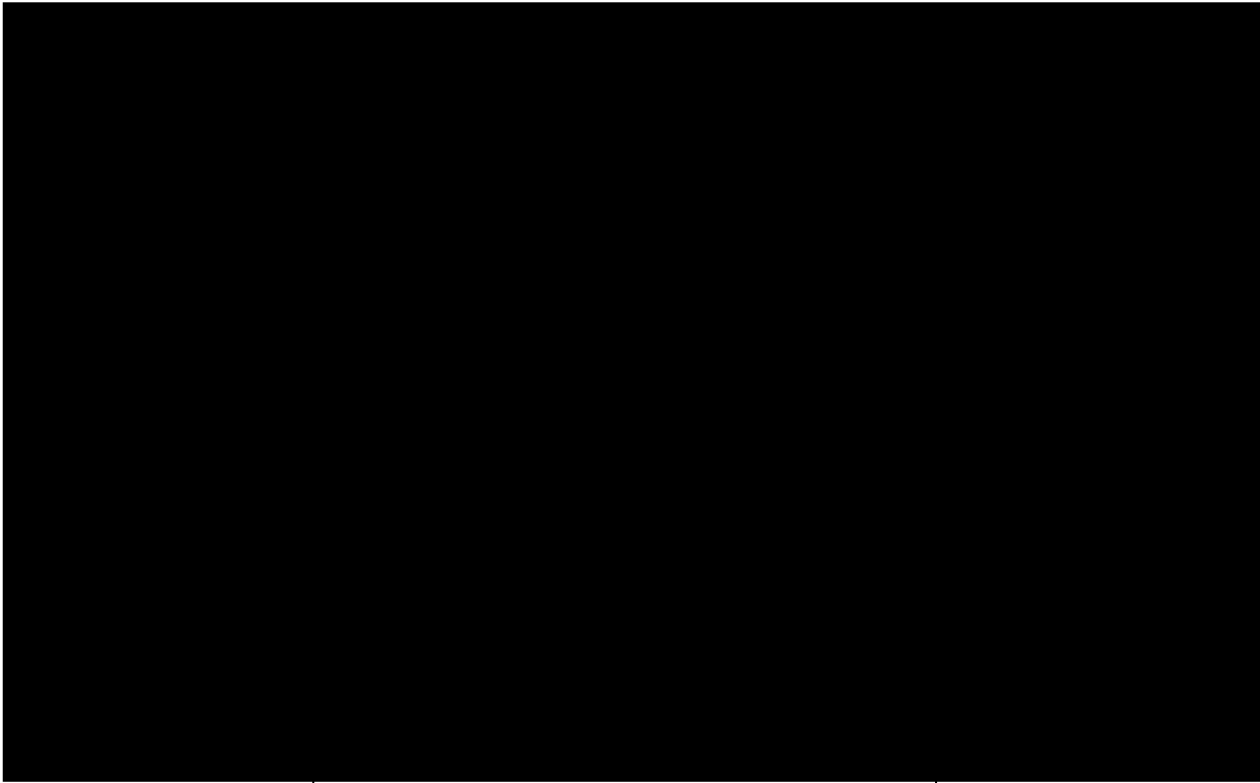


Figure 20. Blueprint of Circus Maximus, Author's Photograph. (L), Pietrangeli, 1940: 148 (R).

The presence of an altar is difficult to determine at the Circus Maximus Mithraeum.

Colini in his initial excavation report states nothing about the presence of an altar, but Pietrangeli and Vermaseren argue that there might be evidence of an altar in front of the cult-niche.

Positioned directly in front of the cult-niche at the end of the main sanctuary (in Room M/L) there are two podiums. The one on the left has a triangular base³⁶⁸ and the right has a rectangular base, which Pietrangeli and Vermaseren suggest may have served as an altar, see Figure 20.1³⁶⁹.

³⁶⁸ For a detailed description of the symbolism and purpose of the triangle base, see Mastrocinque, 2017: 257-259.

³⁶⁹ Pietrangeli, 1940: 157; Vermaseren, 1956: 183.

This assumption is a limited one as this structure does not fit with Turcan or Rupp's classifications and there appears to be no other evidence to strongly suggest the presence of an altar in this Mithraeum which may be problematic for the definition of sacred space. However, a structure of Room M/L nearing the end of the main sanctuary has an interesting function that may solve our missing altar conundrum.

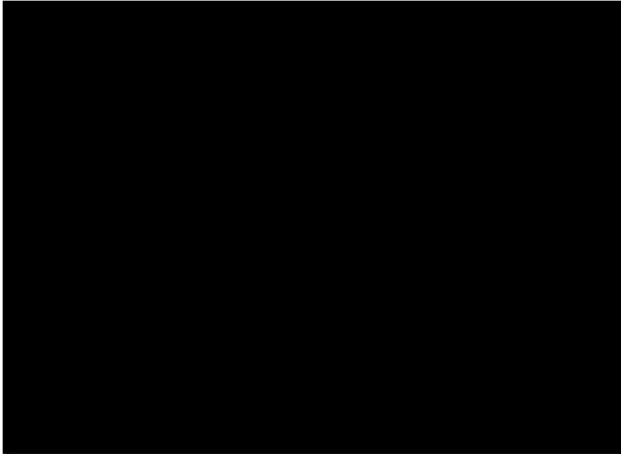


Figure 20.1. Triangular podium (L), Rectangular Podium (R). Author's Photograph.

In the main sanctuary, Vermaseren and Pietrangeli state that an amphora was found under the arched doorway *d* leading into Room M/L³⁷⁰. Under this amphora were found animal remains which may suggest, via proximity, that sacrifices were performed close to door *d*³⁷¹. In front of the relief in the left niche, there are two horizontal platforms that, I suggest, could have

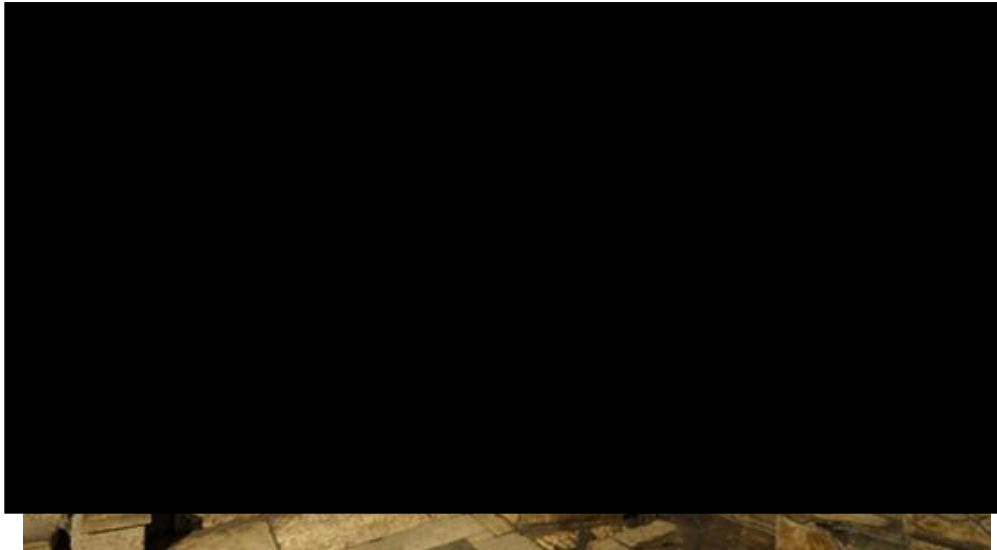


Figure 21. Main cult-niche, Circus Maximus. Author's Photograph.

³⁷⁰ Pietrangeli, 1940: 172-173; Vermaseren, 1956: 183.

³⁷¹ Pietrangeli, 1940: 155; Vermaseren, 1956: 183, 185. Vermaseren goes on to list that other small animal bones were found within this Mithraeum. See the Red Dot in Fig. 20.

been used as altars in the sacrificial rituals of the Mithraic mysteries. Vermaseren mentions in passing an alabaster marble circle which lies on the floor of this main room³⁷². The peculiar placement of this circle and the fact that it is directly connected to a flow of water³⁷³ may suggest that it was used in a sacrificial context³⁷⁴. Since these suggestions have little, if any, archeological evidence, they must remain suggestions. Instead, to define this Mithraeum as sacred space, we must incorporate the other elements of sacred space.

San Clemente Mithraeum

The altar at San Clemente now sits in Room M, the main sanctuary, see Figure 22. However, Nolan states that this was not always the case. Originally the altar was found in a passage outside of the Mithraic temple³⁷⁵. Nolan simply states that it was found “in the passage outside the temple; but we doubt if it is in its proper position, as we rather think that it should be near



Figure 22. Altar in Room M, San Clemente. Author's Photo.

the place of sacrifice which was probably at the entrance to the cave³⁷⁶. Vermaseren states that the altar was “discovered partly in the sanctuary itself, partly in the irregular room opposite the Mithraeum” and is now “kept in the *spelaeum*”³⁷⁷. From these descriptions, the altar appears to have been moved into Room M. This raises the possibility that the altar was not originally located in Room M. If so, then the Mithraists may have performed sacrifices in a different part of this Mithraeum. As Vermaseren and Nolan suggest, the sacrifices may have been held in the

³⁷² *Ibid.* 183.

³⁷³ Alipour, 2019: 41.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 183.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 238.

³⁷⁶ Nolan, 1914: 238.

³⁷⁷ Vermaseren, 1956: 157.

‘ante-room’ opposite Room M, Room AM. Leonard E. Boyle agrees that the altar would have originally been placed in the anteroom before the main Mithraic temple³⁷⁸.

I argue that this altar would have been situated in the ‘ante-room’ or Room AM, and this is where the sacrifices would have taken place. The altar would thus define Room AM as sacred space central to the ritual action of the sacrifice and would be separated from the Mithraeum proper, Room M. The sacrifice, and the following meal were the focal rituals of worship. Everyone would meet at the space and congregate in Room M, those involved in the sacrifice would leave and perform the sacrifice then carry food into Room M where the communal meal would take place. The space is inherently built with forwarding motion, moving towards the final cult-niche in Room M. This altar falls under Turcan’s first classification, having multiple niches cut out, and Rupp’s X, being a monolithic built altar with corner akroteria³⁷⁹. Therefore, the altar was used to define Room AM as sacred space.

The space is playing an acted upon (passive) role because the humans are differentiating what they are doing in distinct parts of the space. The Mithraists used the space to create an experience for the communal group. We can thus conclude that they acted upon the space through the spectacle of ritual sacrifice and a communal meal. Many previous scholars have ignored rooms like Room AM and focused on rooms like Room M. However, my work views rooms like Room AM as vital components of the sacred space that should not be ignored.

³⁷⁸ Boyle, 1989: 65.

³⁷⁹ Turcan, 1991: 217; Rupp, 1991: 59.

Santa Prisca Mithraeum

The ritual action performed in the S. Prisca Mithraeum is evident from the altar present in the anteroom, Room V (see Figure 23). The altar in the anteroom provides what Vermaseren dubs a ‘slaughter room’³⁸⁰, or an area separated somewhat from the main sanctuary where the ritual action could be performed, echoing the possible altar placement at San Clemente. Vermaseren further argues that this altar may have been used for the sacrifice of small cattle³⁸¹, and this may be supported by the archaeological evidence of small chicken, boar, sheep



Figure 23. Altar in Room V, Santa Prisca. Author's Photograph.

and ox bones found by Vermaseren and his team³⁸². Oddly enough, the altar does not fit with Turcan's classifications, but does fit with Rupp's type XI or a simple elevated built altar³⁸³. Rupp's classification is important because it recognizes the simple and less decorative nature of this altar, compared to the more decorative San Clemente altar. A large drain was found next to the altar that leads outside and may have been utilized to drain the excess blood of sacrificed animals³⁸⁴.

The placement of this altar is confirmed by the fact that it is cemented in place, therefore it has not been moved by any archeological team. The bones discovered and the presence of an

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 65.

³⁸¹ Vermaseren, 1956: 193.

³⁸² Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 127-127. These bones found by Vermaseren and his team are regarded as simply rubbish from the Christians filling in the Mithraeum. However, more recent studies have found these animal bones may provide extant evidence of animal sacrifices within the Mithraic mysteries – see Marteen, 2004.

³⁸³ Turcan, 1991: 217; Rupp, 1991: 59.

³⁸⁴ Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 65-66.

altar provides evidence of the distinction of Room V in the Mithraeum of S. Prisca as being used for the ritual action of sacrifice. Much like San Clemente, the placement of the altar in the ante-room suggests that this space was acted upon by the initiates, while the main focus of the ritual was the communal meal that occurred post-sacrifice. Therefore, the ante-room in Santa Prisca functioned as sacred space by being ritually acted upon. The ritual actions would be done to venerate the perceived presence of the deity Mithras embodied by cult images.

Conclusions

The three case studies show us that the initiates of the cult of Mithras utilized the space ritually. The ritual actions were localized through the altar in the sacrificial rituals involved within the cult. The position of the altar thus defines the room in which it sits as ritually involved with the sacredness of the space. Therefore, each space, and the rooms within the space, can be defined differently by the passive role that they place in the ritual human experience.

Chapter 5: Perceived Presence of a Deity (or Supernatural Being)

The perceived presence of a deity is a key element in the definition of sacred space. Bokser argues that theophany is a determinant of sacred space³⁸⁵. Turner adds rituals performed in designated spaces create an opportunity for liminality³⁸⁶. The liminality Turner emphasizes is to reduce the separation between the human and divine³⁸⁷. Furthering this idea of liminality, Lane argues that space is an active participant in shaping the human experience and that this idea supports a “supernatural substantive presence”³⁸⁸. The perceived presence of a deity in the Greek and Roman world can be best understood through the ideas of epiphany and embodiment.

Epiphany originates from the Greek verb *ἐπιφαίνομαι*, *ἐπιφαίνω* meaning to appear or show oneself, and simultaneously related to the noun *ἐπιφάνεια* meaning an appearance or manifestation. Using this term in its pagan context can allow us to determine sacred space through the perceived presence of a deity. Platt discusses the context of epiphany in antiquity. It must be first noted that Platt’s arguments and examples stem from Greek religious practices, but as Roman religious practices were so closely related to their Greek counterparts, the idea of epiphany can still be applied in a Roman context³⁸⁹. Epiphany becomes a necessity in pagan practices where it is emphasized that the gods should not be seen directly, but their presence can be experienced through a physical image, such as a cult statue³⁹⁰. Greek and Roman mythology often emphasize the idea that the gods should not be looked directly upon. One thinks of Zeus

³⁸⁵ Bokser, 1985: 279.

³⁸⁶ Kilde, 2013: 185.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 185.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 186.

³⁸⁹ Beard et al, 1999: 317-318.

³⁹⁰ Platt, 2011: 77.

and Semele³⁹¹, or Artemis and Acteon³⁹², who are punished or destroyed for looking directly upon the gods³⁹³. Therefore, the mortals require a medium in which to view the gods as they cannot behold them in true, direct form.

In this sense, the epiphanic climax (as Platt calls it³⁹⁴) was a direct and powerful means of perceiving the divine by viewing a physical image that served as the object of a cult. This physical image was usually a statue and was displayed in a “prominent position within the temple”³⁹⁵. This statue was much more than a “symbolic actualisation” of a deity, but rather was an experience of the living presence, and the deity was thought to inhabit the same space as the viewer/worshipper³⁹⁶. Platt summarizes this idea nicely in that “to view a cult image was to encounter a being who looked back”³⁹⁷.

Furthermore, the idea of epiphany is also studied through the notion of embodiment. Rüpke analyzes the appropriation of images through the embodiment of deities. Rüpke stresses the idea that a statue may embody a deity, but is not bound to that specific image³⁹⁸. It can be expected that the initiates of the Mithraic mysteries similarly experience the presence of Mithras.

Another element of embodying imagery that is evident in Propertius is that the statues a deity can embody may look different. Rüpke argues that the continuity is emphasized by the associations made with the deity³⁹⁹. There are defining qualities to maintain continuity in images

³⁹¹ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. 3.255. Semele looks upon Zeus’ true form and is destroyed by the power of his presence.

³⁹² See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.138. Acteon stumbles upon Artemis in her true naked form and is punished for looking directly at the goddess.

³⁹³ Platt, 2011: 12.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 77.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 77.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 77.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 78.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 52.

³⁹⁹ Rüpke, 2016: 53.

of the deity. Therefore, the theory of epiphany and embodiment can be applied to statues in the pagan Greco-Roman world where they were viewed as mediums for the perceived presence of a deity.

EIDOS OF MITHRAS

Since epiphany is primarily concerned with presentation, the deity's *eidos* requires development which usually occurs in literary hymns or mythological narratives⁴⁰⁰. The term *eidos* stems from the Greek *εἶδος* meaning 'that which is seen' and in this sense the general form or appearance of a statue⁴⁰¹. As Mithras lacks any surviving literary documents produced by adherents of the cult, the cult-image is arguably the most important determinant for sacred space functioning through theophany⁴⁰².

Much of Mithraic scholarship has been focused on understanding the complicated 'liturgy' behind the cult, and there has been a lack of focus on depictions of Mithras himself⁴⁰³. Previously this topic of Mithraic iconography was covered by Campbell who focused on the Tauroctony as divided into eight major types and the slaying action of Mithras divided into five major types⁴⁰⁴. In total, Campbell posits that there are 40 different types of Tauroctonies depicting Mithras. Despite this, there is again a general lack of focus on the body of Mithras in Campbell's work. He devotes much to the figures surrounding Mithras⁴⁰⁵, the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates⁴⁰⁶, a massive portion to the astrological association⁴⁰⁷, and attempting to determine the true meaning of the cult-image. Gordon meanwhile outlines four classes of

⁴⁰⁰ Platt, 2011: 60-61.

⁴⁰¹ Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, s.v. 'εἶδος'.

⁴⁰² Gordon, 2007: 420-421.

⁴⁰³ Gordon, 2009: 290; Brown, 2011: 106.

⁴⁰⁴ Campbell, 1968: 1-5.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 12-28.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 29-43.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 44-166.

Mithraic images: 1 – images of servants at the sacred banquet of Mithras and Sol; 2 – one of two groups of banqueters within the context of the cult image; 3 – the images of grade members (sometimes with portraits and personal names); 4 – images of initiation⁴⁰⁸. Despite his claim that there has been a lack of focus on the body of Mithras, he too appears to fall into the same trap, as he focuses more generally on the bodies of the initiates within the frescoes of the Capuan images⁴⁰⁹.

To determine a defining *eidos* for Mithras, I turn to more general treatments of the Mithraic mysteries. Clauss touches on the body of Mithras briefly by describing some common characteristics of depictions of Mithras. Clauss states that Mithras is often depicted as a beardless youth⁴¹⁰, with his cloak (*chlamys*) that is often worn streaming behind him in triumph, wearing a knee-length, long-sleeved tunic (*tunica manicata*) and a Phrygian cap⁴¹¹. Bowden confirms these attributes and claims that Mithras is the central figure of the tauroctony often depicted as the bull-killer wearing a cloak and ‘Persian’ hat⁴¹². These qualifications are what can be used to determine Mithras’ *eidos*, and how his presence can be determined to embody the images in an act of epiphany.

⁴⁰⁸ Gordon, 2009: 291.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 304-308.

⁴¹⁰ Clauss, 2000: 79.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.* 89.

⁴¹² Bowden, 2010: 185.

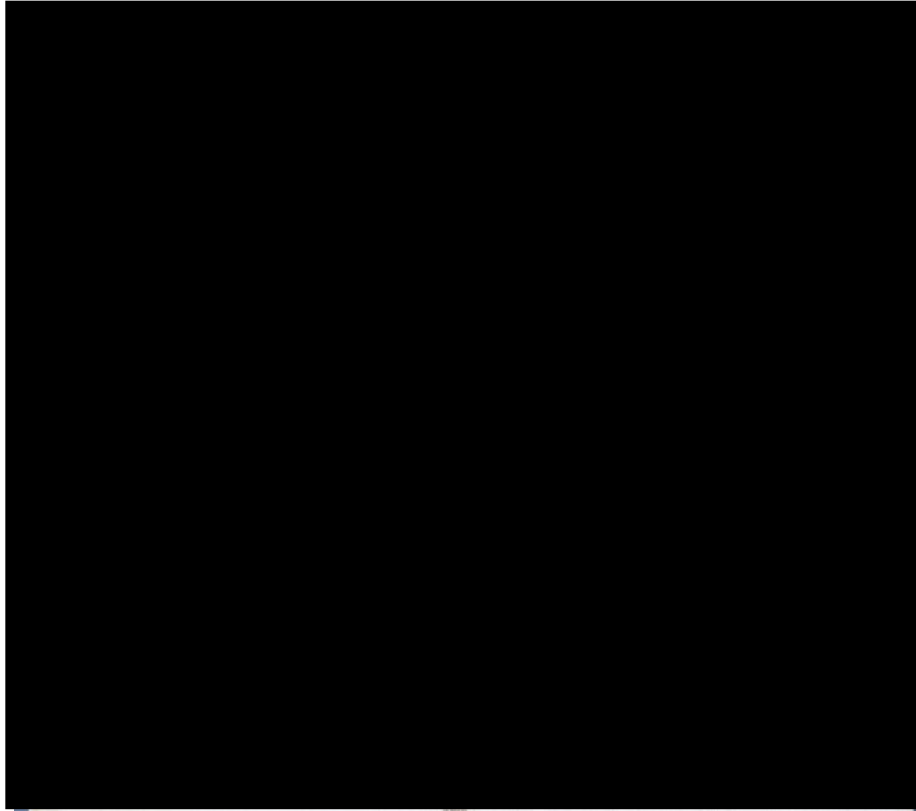


Figure 24. Standish Tauroctony. London, British Museum. (BM 1825,0613.1)

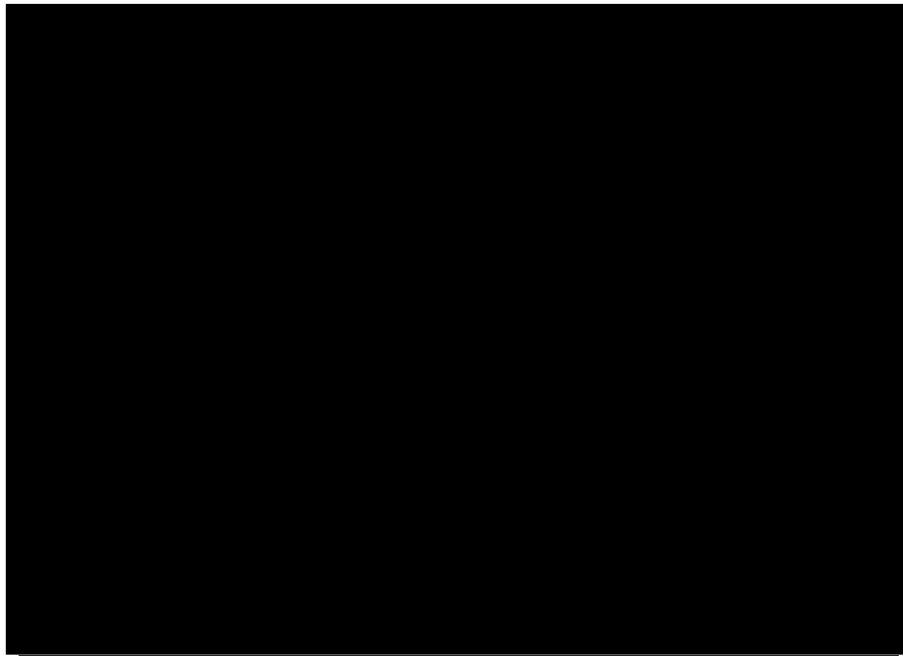


Figure 25. Townley Tauroctony. London, British Museum. (BM 1805,0703.270)

To confirm the *eidos* of Mithras, I turn to two relevant examples. Many of the images of Mithras were not labelled in antiquity, luckily some were. It is from the labelled images that we can confirm an *eidos* of Mithras.

The Standish Tauroctony (Fig. 24; CIMRM 592) and the Townley Tauroctony (Fig. 25; CIMRM 593) are discussed by Adrych et al. as two statues that exemplify the standard for depictions of Mithras are two of the earliest and most complete representations that survive⁴¹³.

The inscriptions from the Townley Tauroctony on the front and rear of the statue denote the statue was dedicated to “*Sol Mithras*”⁴¹⁴. The young figure (as evident by his beardless face), is wearing a long-sleeved tunic with thin trousers, supporting a short cape and a Phrygian cap on top of a head of medium length curly hair⁴¹⁵. The Standish Tauroctony has no inscription, yet, the characteristics are almost identical to the Townley Tauroctony and are consistent with the *eidos* of Mithras⁴¹⁶. Thus, from statues such as these which are dedicated to Mithras, the *eidos* of Mithras can be confirmed.

The terms relief and statue are relevant when discussing epiphany and embodiment and require a clear distinction. To determine how the perceived presence of a deity functioned within the Mithraic mysteries, these terms and how Romans experienced them need to be defined. In reliefs or relief sculptures, the subjects project from the background but remain a part of it⁴¹⁷. Gardner et al. explain that there are different types of reliefs; in *high-relief*, the subjects project boldly from the background, in *low-relief*, or *bas-relief*, the subjects project slightly⁴¹⁸. Reliefs

⁴¹³ Adrych et al, 2017: 15.

⁴¹⁴ Adrych et al., 2017: 17; CIMRM 594.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.* 15-16.

⁴¹⁶ Sinziana, 2019.

⁴¹⁷ Gardner et al., 2006: 11-12.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.* 12.

are opposed to statues in which the viewer can freely walk around them and still see the subjects. Statues, or *freestanding sculptures*, are pieces of art where the subjects depicted exist independently from any architectural frame or background⁴¹⁹. Platt would argue that both reliefs and sculptures function similarly in terms of embodiment, as it is the *eidos* of the deity that matters⁴²⁰. Dirven also emphasizes that the *eidos* or sacred narrative presented by the image is the most important in embodiment⁴²¹. Every representation of Mithras allowed the initiates to directly experience the mythological events⁴²². Therefore, both reliefs and sculptures can function in the same capacity in epiphany, both being able to receive the embodiment of a deity. The presence of either a relief or a sculpture containing the *eidos* of Mithras can be understood as the perceived presence of a deity.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.* 11.

⁴²⁰ Platt, 2011: 39, 373.

⁴²¹ Dirven, 2015: 27-31.

⁴²² Gordon, 2017: 433.

CASE STUDIES:

Circus Maximus Mithraeum



Figure 26. Relief, Circus Maximus.
Author's Photograph.

The perceived presence is evidenced by the surviving cult relief held in a prominent position in Room M/L. The relief displays elements consistent with Mithras' *eidōs*. Colini explains that this is one of the best-preserved reliefs of Mithras and is almost entirely intact – save the upper left corner and the tip of Mithras' nose, see Figure 26⁴²³. On the relief, Mithras is present in his typical manner as the bull slayer wearing his *chlamys* tunic and Phrygian cap⁴²⁴. Accompanying Mithras are Cautes and Cautopates who appear in a similar appearance to the deity, just without the *chlamys*⁴²⁵. This relief provides evidence for the perceived presence of Mithras within Room M/L. From these elements, Room M/L can be considered as a sacred space through the perceived presence of a deity.

⁴²³ Colini, 1931: 123-4.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.* 126.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.* 127.

San Clemente Mithraeum

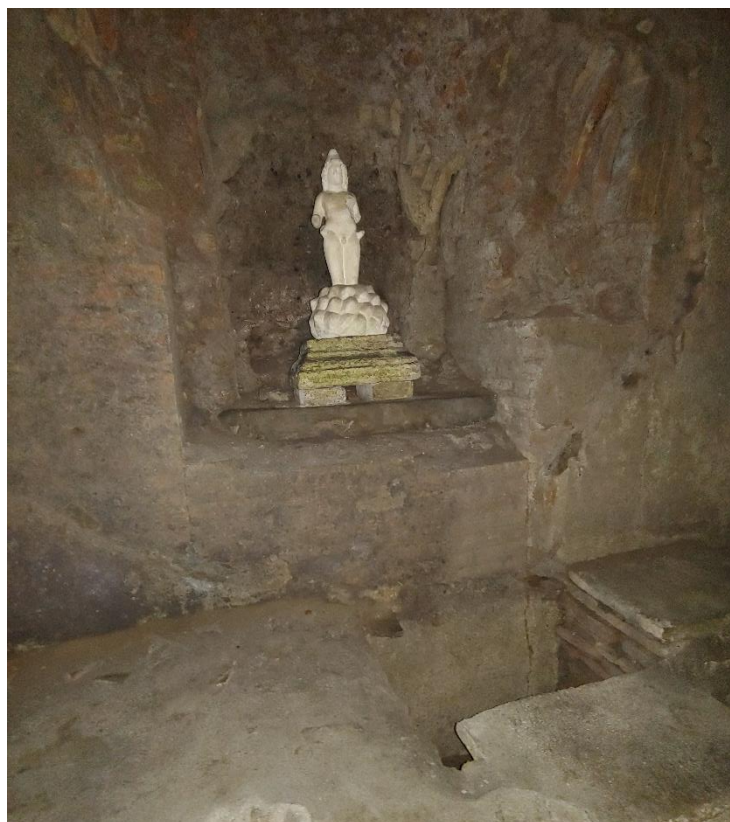


Figure 27. Main Cult-niche, San Clemente. Author's Photograph.

There are two pieces of archaeological evidence of the perceived presence of a deity at San Clemente. The first is the niche in the north-west well of Room M, where a small votive statue of Mithras has been placed, see Figure 27. This statue represents Mithras as *deus ex petra*, rising from the rock, as part of his mythological birth⁴²⁶. A key identifying characteristic of Mithras is his Phrygian cap which he is wearing⁴²⁷. This 63.5 cm tall statue is the first piece of visual evidence that suggests the perceived presence of the deity Mithras in Room M. Originally, this statue was found in one of the initial staircases leading down into the 4th c. CE underground basilica and was placed in Room M by Nolan's excavation team⁴²⁸. It is unclear

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.* 112-113.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.* 112.

⁴²⁸ Nolan, 1914: 112.

how the statue ended up in the staircase where Nolan and his team found it, and it does not seem likely that it would have originally fit in the niche where it now resides, despite Nolan's persistence⁴²⁹. There is no evidence in the archaeological reports of any other fragments, but according to the standard Mithraic layout discussed in the Introduction and the importance and prominence the Tauroctony scene in other Mithraea, it can be assumed that a large cult-relief sat there.

The second piece of evidence is the relief on the altar. The relief is described in detail by Nolan and Vermaseren as containing all the usual imagery associated with Mithras and his mythology⁴³⁰. On the front-facing side of the altar, as can be seen in Figure 3, there is a detailed relief of the famous *tauroctony* associated with Mithras. The relief shows Mithras clad in a short tunic and *chlamys* cloak flying over his left shoulder and wearing his Phrygian cap, grasping the bull with his left hand and plunging a dagger into its neck with the other hand⁴³¹. This depiction of Mithras is another piece of evidence suggesting the perceived presence of a deity. The location of the smaller statue of Mithras could be evidence that Room M was considered sacred space through the perceived presence of Mithras as the statue holds a prominent position; while Room AM also held the altar with the Tauroctony relief in a prominent position inviting the perceived presence of Mithras into that room as well.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.* 113. Nolan also claims that there is no doubt the niche is where the statue of Mithras stood 'in pride of place', holding a prominent position in the room Nolan, 1934: 238.

⁴³⁰ See Nolan, 1914: 238-243; Vermaseren, 1956: 157.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.* 238-243.

Santa Prisca Mithraeum



Figure 28. Main relief, Santa Prisca.
Author's Photograph.

The perceived presence of a deity is evidenced by the cult-image that holds a prominent position in the Mithraeum proper, Room W, in Figure 28. The relief is the major focal point of this room, and Vermaseren states that when standing in front of the relief facing away from it, one can see into almost every other room of the Mithraeum⁴³². The relief was originally found in pieces scattered across the Mithraeum but Vermaseren and van Essen, with the help of Giovanni Sansone, were able to reconstruct it as it stands now⁴³³. Mithras is wearing his Phrygian hat and *chlamys*, accompanied by the figures of a bull and dog, which are consistent Mithras' iconography⁴³⁴. There are two anomalies in this relief that do appear to break the continuity of Mithraic iconography. The first is that Mithras is not wearing his usual 'oriental' or Persian

⁴³² Vermaseren, 1965:128.

⁴³³ *Ibid.* 129.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.* 130.

cloak, rather he is nearly all in the nude save his characteristic *chlamys*⁴³⁵. Vermaseren and van Essen argue that this appears to be because the relief used here is an adaptation of an earlier statue of Apollo⁴³⁶. The second inconsistency of this relief is the attitude and positioning of Mithras. The position and dress of Mithras himself are rare, only found in a few other sites⁴³⁷. Mithras' body is front facing, as compared to the reliefs found at Circus Maximus and San Clemente, wherein Mithras' body and head are turned away from the slaughter of the bull⁴³⁸. It appears that Mithras is not slaying the bull as he is in other depictions, but rather Mithras is simply catching it⁴³⁹. Vermaseren and van Essen argue that this is representative of the trials that initiates must undergo and is a conscious artistic change made by the Mithraic sculptor⁴⁴⁰. Despite these inconsistencies, we can still conclude that the relief depicts Mithras and allowed the worshippers to perceive his presence.

Conclusions

Therefore, each of these case studies can be defined as sacred space as the deity, Mithras, was present wherever his *eidos* was present. In each of the spaces, the main cult relief of Mithras held a prominent position to allow the deity to embody it and participate in the cult actions.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.* 130.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.* 131.

⁴³⁷ CIMRM I: 201, CIMRM II: 2196 and 2327.

⁴³⁸ Vermaseren, van Essen, 1965: 130-131.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.* 131.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 131.

Conclusion

Each Mithraeum can be considered sacred space to a varying extent. Due to the unique nature of each local community, the sites need to be defined as sacred space individually. The Mithraic initiates used their space for a variety of sacred functions, and further delineated the purpose of each room. This separation allows boundaries to be established based on the different functions of each room. Furthermore, the space grounded the initiate's identity through communal, fundamental concepts – again varying from room to room. The rituals involved in the cult utilized sacrifices, congruent with broader Roman religious practices, and involved an important cult meal that used the space to honor Mithras. Lastly, Mithras himself was perceived as present in different forms throughout the space – whether it be communication through sacrifice or epiphany in cult-images. Movement through the space represented the initiate physically coming closer to the god through his image and revealing cosmic truths. These elements provide striking images that create a communal identity through the fundamental Mithraic iconography. The Tauroctony actively engages with the initiate's sight to ground them in their identity as an initiate of the Mithraic mysteries.

The Mithraeum functioned as sacred space and individually fulfills the elements that define sacred space to specific degrees. Therefore, the Mithraeum of the Mithraic mysteries should not be considered uniformly as sacred space. Rather the Mithraeum is an amalgamation of sacred spaces that all functioned individually yet cohesively to define the space as sacred. This thesis has shown that every Mithraeum is unique, not only in its construction, but in how it functioned as sacred space. As opposed to previous work which focused on the metaphysical representation of space, I argue that the physical and practical elements are equally important in

- *Conclusion* -

defining the space. To expand our understanding of sacred space, both the physical and metaphysical elements need to be included and explored.

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