In the Cave of Mysteries:
Analyzing Ritual Space within the Roman Cult of Mithras through the examples of Santa Prisca, Walbrook, and Carrawburgh

Adam Norberg
In the Cave of Mysteries:

Analyzing Ritual Space within the Roman Cult of Mithras through the examples of Santa Prisca, Walbrook, and Carrawburgh

Adam Norberg

Abstract

The Mysteries of Mithras, dedicated to the eponymous Persian divinity, was one of several mystery cults of the ancient world. It flourished during the second and third centuries CE throughout the Roman Empire, but with special frequency in Italy and the frontier provinces along the Rhine and Danube. Those initiated into the Mysteries met in special cult rooms or complexes known to them as "caves", but which in modern research are most commonly referred to as *mithraea* (*s. mithraeum*). Their defining features are a central aisle flanked by *podia* with a cult niche at the far end, typically displaying the bull-slaying Mithras. Since the late 19th century, the research of the cult has traditionally concerned itself with issues regarding the cult's origins as well as its doctrines and beliefs. However, it has been noted that this traditional approach includes an undervaluing of both the role of ritual within the Mysteries and the design of the *mithraeum* with regards to the enacted rituals. By instead focusing on these shortcomings the present study will suggest a practice-oriented way of viewing the role of ritual within the cult and how this might have related to the physical space of the *mithraeum*.

**Keywords:** Mithras, ritual, *mithraeum*, space, practice, movement, presentation, Santa Prisca, Walbrook, Carrawburgh

**Front page:** Illustration of the main sanctuary of the *mithraeum* beneath the Church of Santa Prisca. Based on a photograph by Vermaseren & Van Essen, Plate XII.2. Drawing by author.
Table of contents

Abbreviations.................................................................................................................. iii
List of Figures ................................................................................................................... iv
1. Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1
   1.1. Purpose and Research Questions ........................................................................... 2
   1.2. Theory and Method ............................................................................................... 6
       1.2.1. Defining Ritual .......................................................................................... 7
       1.2.2. Archaeology, Ritual, and Practice .............................................................. 10
       1.2.3. Approaching Ritual Space within the Mysteries of Mithras ......................... 14
   1.3. Presentation of Material ....................................................................................... 16
       1.3.1. Archaeological Finds ............................................................................... 16
       1.3.2. Literary Sources .................................................................................... 18
   1.4. Research History ................................................................................................. 19
       1.4.1. Publishing History of the Chosen Mithraea ................................................. 23
2. Beneath the Rocks of the Persian Cave – The Mithraeum of Santa Prisca in Rome .... 25
   2.1. Movement and Access ......................................................................................... 29
       2.1.1. Room V .................................................................................................. 30
       2.1.2. Room W .................................................................................................. 31
       2.1.3. Room Y .................................................................................................. 34
       2.1.4. Room Z .................................................................................................. 36
       2.1.5. Room X .................................................................................................. 37
   2.2. Presentation and Visibility .................................................................................... 38
       2.2.1. Room V .................................................................................................. 39
       2.2.2. Room W .................................................................................................. 39
       2.2.3. Room Y .................................................................................................. 42
       2.2.4. Room Z .................................................................................................. 43
       2.2.5. Room X .................................................................................................. 43
   2.3. Ritual Space and Social Relationships .................................................................... 44
       2.3.1. Women and the Mysteries of Mithras ......................................................... 47
   3.1. Movement and Access ........................................................................................... 52
   3.2. Presentation and Visibility .................................................................................... 53
   3.3. Ritual Space and Social Relationships .................................................................... 54
4. At World's End – The Mithraeum at Carrawburgh upon Hadrian's Wall ............... 55
   4.1. Movement and Access .............................................................................. 58
   4.2. Presentation and Visibility ...................................................................... 60
   4.3. Ritual Space and Social Relationships ................................................... 61
5. The World of the Cave – Ritual Space within the Mysteries of Mithras .......... 63
6. Conclusions ................................................................................................... 67
Bibliography ................................................................................................. 70
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antiquity</td>
<td>Antiquity: A Quarterly Review of Archaeology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJA</td>
<td>American Journal of Archaeology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britannia</td>
<td>Britannia: A Journal of Romano-British and Kindred Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIMRM</td>
<td>Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GaR</td>
<td>Greece and Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helios</td>
<td>Helios: Journal of the Classical Association of the Southwestern United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historia</td>
<td>Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JMithSt</td>
<td>Journal of Mithraic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JRS</td>
<td>Journal of Roman Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numen</td>
<td>Numen: International Review for the History of Religions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RES</td>
<td>RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>StudRelig</td>
<td>Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Fig. 1. Map of Western Europe showing the location of the three mithraea chosen for the case studies: 1. Santa Prisca, 2. Walbrook, 3. Carrawburgh. Drawing by author after Clauss 2001, 26. Blank map from Wikimedia Commons: (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/Blank_map_Western_Europe_without_borders_atelier_graphique_colors.svg, 2016-04-13).

Fig. 2. Ground plan of the mithraeum beneath the Church of Santa Prisca. At the time of its foundation, the mithraeum was confined to room W. Shortly afterwards, it would expand to include rooms V, X, Y, and Z. For the scale, see Fig. 7. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, foldout between pages 24-25, Fig. 5.

Fig. 3. View into room W from door m. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XII.2.

Fig. 4. View of the south podium and the walled up door e. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XXIV.1.

Fig. 5. View of the thronus inside door e. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XXIV.2.

Fig. 6. Illustrations of the frescoes. Clockwise from top left: The procession of the grades, the procession of leones with sacrificial animals, the procession of leones with paraphernalia, and the feasting of Sol and Mithras. From Ferrua 1940, Figs 8 and 9: (http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/images/ferrua_fig9.jpg, 2016-08-03).

Fig. 7. Adapted ground plan of the mithraeum beneath the Church of Santa Prisca. It serves to illustrate the path (arrows) followed by the dynamic part of the analysis along with the basis of the static part (podia, marked in red). Based on Fig. 2. For the names of the architectural features, see Fig. 2. Drawing by author.

Fig. 8. Section of room Y looking north. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Fig. 15.

Fig. 9. The cult niche in room Y. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XXXII.1.

Fig. 10. View into room Z from door a. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XXXIII.4.

Fig. 11. View from room W through door m and into room V. The protruding podium is clearly visible. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XI.1.

Fig. 12. Section of room W looking north, thus showing much of the backdrop for the south podium. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 32, Fig. 7.
Fig. 13. Section of rooms W and Y looking east, thus demonstrating the connection between the cult niche and central aisle in Y and the *thronus* in room W (not visible in section). From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 33, Fig. 8.

Fig. 14. View into rooms Y and X from door *n*. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XXXIII.1.

Fig. 15. View through room Y and into room Z from door *p*. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XXXIII.3.

Fig. 16. Ground plan of the *mithraeum* at Walbrook. The original building with its entrance to the east. From Grimes 1968, 97, Fig. 24.

Fig. 17. Ground plans of the *mithraeum* at Walbrook. The subsequent developments, including the acquiring of a one-level floor (bottom). The entrance is to the east. From Grimes 1968, 101 (partly fold-out), Fig. 25.

Fig. 18. Ground plan of the first *mithraeum*. From Richmond & Gillam 1951, 5, Fig. 2.

Fig. 19. Ground plan of the second *mithraeum*. From Richmond & Gillam 1951, 11, Fig. 3. For the refurbishings, see *ibid*, Figs. 4, 5.

Fig. 20. Ground plan of the third *mithraeum*. From Richmond & Gillam 1951, 31, Fig. 7.
1. Introduction

In the ancient world, the term "mysteries" was used to refer to religious cults characterized by secrecy and the promise of salvation. Their special mark was the necessity of initiation, typically through a special form of ritual, before any participation in cult activities could be allowed. The initiation was thought of as a transforming process which entailed access to the promised salvation, comprehending anything the initiates yearned for but above all the salvation of the soul after death.\(^1\) The Mysteries of Mithras, dedicated to the eponymous Persian divinity of light, justice and the contract, was one such mystery cult.\(^2\) It flourished during the second and third centuries CE throughout the Roman world, but with special frequency in Italy and the frontier provinces along the Rhine and Danube rivers.\(^3\)

The earliest securely dated archaeological evidence for the cult of Mithras, in the form of dedicatory inscriptions, appears during the late first century CE, when traces of it are suddenly found at several widely separated sites throughout the Empire. The associated contexts are mainly those connected to the military, the imperial administration, and commercial centres.\(^4\) The first clear literary reference dates from the same period, when Statius refers to Mithras as being equated with Apollo in his guise as god of the Sun.\(^5\)

Those initiated into the Mysteries, calling themselves *syndexioi* (συνδεξιοι) – those bound by the handshake – met in special cult rooms or complexes known as caves (*spelaea, s. spelaeum*) or, in a more neutral sense, as temples (*templa, s. templum*).\(^6\) In modern research, however, the most commonly occurring name for the Mithraic cult room is "*mithraeum*".\(^7\) Externally these constructions exhibit a plethora of different forms and shapes, ranging from refurbished locales within larger buildings to natural caves. Instead, the defining features exist internally: a central aisle flanked by *podia* with a cult niche at the far end, characteristically displaying the bull-slaying Mithras.\(^8\)

---

\(^1\) Clauss 2001, 14-15.

\(^2\) Although it has frequently been referred to as the "Roman cult of Mithras" in modern research, the "Mysteries of Mithras" is what appears to have been its contemporary name, at least in later antiquity. In the mid-third century CE, Porphyry explicitly refers to the cult as τα του Μιθρα μυστήρια; Porphyry *De abst.* 2.56, 4.16; Gordon 1972, 95; Gordon 2007, 394.

\(^3\) Gordon 1972, 103; Turcan 1996, 207-211; Clauss 2001, 3; Gordon 2007, 396.


\(^5\) Statius *Theb.* 1.719-720.


\(^7\) "*Mithraeum*" as a term denoting the Mithraic cult room is first used in its Greek form μιθραείον by the church historian Socrates during the fifth century. The Latinized version is neologistic and calqued on the Greek word; Socrates *Hist. Eccl.* 3.2; Gordon 2007, 395.

\(^8\) Turcan 1996, 216; Clauss 2001, 42-46. The iconic composition of Mithras and the bull has in modern research often been referred to using the originally Greek noun "tauroctony" with Mithras frequently being described as "tauroctonous", or in the process of killing the bull. The former word appears nowhere in either inscriptions or
Since the late 19th century, the research of the cult of Mithras has traditionally concerned itself with issues regarding its origins as well as its doctrines and beliefs. The former has been discussed primarily with reference to the Indo-Iranian Mithra while the latter has primarily either been deduced from a reconstructed cult myth based on iconography, or discussed with reference to ancient astrology and astronomy. However, it has been noted that the traditional approach includes an undervaluing of both the role of ritual within the Mysteries and the design of the mithraeum with regards to the enacted rituals. Further, the literary evidence, albeit limited and exclusively from outside sources, has been almost completely neglected in favour of an almost exclusive concentration on the iconographical evidence.\(^9\)

1.1. Purpose and Research Questions

In a study concerning the role and use of astrology within the Mysteries of Mithras, Roger Beck identifies five problems with the traditional research of the cult. According to Beck, the most serious of these problems is the total disregard of semantics and semiotics, an observation which forms the foundation for his own study. The remaining four problems are – in Beck's ascending order of seriousness – the undervaluing of the literary sources in favour of iconography, the undervaluing of the design of the mithraeum and of the rituals enacted therein, the overwhelming focus on doctrine, and the assumption that without doctrine the cult could not have been a serious enterprise. These five problems are discussed by Beck within the framework of his idea of "star-talk", a hypothetical language of symbols based in the realms of astrology and astronomy, which is posited as having been the central idiom of the Mysteries. Beck's study is mainly one of cognition, in that it seeks to understand how the symbolism was transmitted and subsequently apprehended by the initiates. Beck's stance on ritual further signifies a cognitive focus, as suggested by his working definition that it is the mental representations of rituals – rather than the rituals themselves – which can have empirically verifiable or falsifiable propositions made about them.\(^10\) By working from the two problems, as identified by Beck, concerning the literary sources and the design of the mithraeum, the present study will suggest a more practice-oriented way of viewing the role of ritual within the Mysteries of Mithras.

In contrast to the traditional approach to the cult of Mithras, the present study will not interest itself with the task of discerning doctrine or belief. Instead, the aim of this study is to analyze and discuss the interior space of the *mithraeum* in relation to ritual action – the ritual space – and the role this might have served within the context of the Mysteries. The explicit focus on the ritual space of the *mithraeum* as the object of research finds motivation in the very nature of the Mysteries themselves. Unlike other mystery cults, which are known to have enacted public processions, the Mysteries of Mithras seem to have been exclusively esoteric in nature.\(^{11}\) Previous research has further shown how the interior design of the *mithraeum* combines several elements kept separate in civic cult, such as the housing of a cult image, a site for sacrifice, and a meeting place for a dining group.\(^{12}\) Therefore, every aspect of cult affairs carried out by those initiated into the Mysteries seems to have been confined to the space of the *mithraeum*, which in turn would have needed to be internally ordered to cater to those affairs.

The study of rituals as practice has noted how the central quality of ritual action is the primacy of the body moving within a specially constructed space, while simultaneously both imposing and receiving the same values which order that space. The body acts within a space that appears to command it to act in a certain way, but this space is actually created and organized based on the movements of the body. The initiates moving within the *mithraeum* would not have seen how they had created the space that is impressing itself on them, but would have assumed that forces from beyond the immediate situation were shaping the space and its activities in fundamental ways.\(^{13}\) This assumption regarding the relationship between ritual, space, body, and movement will be central within the theoretical framework of the present study.

The analysis will be carried out in a series of three consecutive case studies. While each case study will feature discussions regarding the *mithraeum* and its ritual space, the last two will be mainly comparative and consider the discussion with reference to geographic variations. The first and main case study will focus on the *mithraeum* located below the Church of Santa Prisca on Rome's Aventine Hill. Subsequently, the comparative case studies will focus on two *mithraea* located in Roman Britannia, a provincial context outside of the cult's main area of distribution. The reason behind this particular provincial focus is to enable a comparison of ritual space based on the geographic prevalence of the cult. As previously

---

13 Bell 1997, 82, 139.
noted, Italy has one of the highest densities of evidence for the cult of Mithras, with Britain exhibiting a far lesser amount. The *mithraea* chosen for the comparative case studies, located in London and at Carrawburgh upon Hadrian's Wall, will allow for an analysis of how the use of ritual space within the Mysteries of Mithras might have catered to local taste or adapted depending on the composition of the initiated group (Fig. 1). The comparative case studies

Fig. 1. Map of Western Europe showing the location of the three *mithraea* chosen for the case studies: 1. Santa Prisca, 2. Walbrook, 3. Carrawburgh. Drawing by author after Clauss 2001, 26.
will also allow for an analysis of how the design of the *mithraeum* might vary depending on its associated context, with Rome and London representing two different urban contexts – metropolitan and provincial – while Carrawburgh represents a military context located within a rural landscape.

Each case study will consider any group of recovered archaeological evidence – including epigraphy, pottery, and sculptures – along with architectural features and discuss them with reference to ritual actions, movement, and general visibility within the chosen *mithraeum*. However, it should be noted that while the study will contain analyses regarding the occurrence of specific rituals, the lack of reliable literary sources makes a reconstruction of such rituals almost impossible. While a relatively good number of literary testimonia regarding Mithraic rituals do exist, most are rather hostile accounts by Christian writers seeking to discredit the Mysteries and should be considered *a priori* as distortions at best.\(^\text{14}\)

This situation does not nullify the use of literary sources in studying the cult of Mithras, but rather indicates the importance of approaching them cautiously and of contextualizing them with reference to purpose and intended audience. As previously noted, the literary evidence has often been undervalued within previous research concerning the cult and while the present study will seek to make better use of them, they will only feature as a complement to the main analysis rather than as an aspect in and of themselves.

Based on the approach described above, there are a number of questions central to the main analysis:

- How might the physical space of the *mithraeum* relate to ritual action and how can this manifest itself in the archaeological record?
- What role might the enacted rituals have served within the context of the Mysteries and how could this be reflected in the design of the *mithraeum*?
- Is it possible to discern variations in the analysis of the two previous questions with regards to geography and associated contexts?

In continuing with this introductory chapter, the theoretical framework of the present study will be presented along with the parameters for the case studies. Issues and possible pitfalls regarding both the definition and the study of ritual in an archaeological discourse will also be discussed. The introduction will then close with a presentation of the relevant material and an

\(^{14}\) Clauss 2001, 16; Alvar 2008, 344.
overview of previous research. Chapter 2 will feature the main analysis of the ritual space of the *mithraeum* of Santa Prisca, followed by the two comparative case studies in chapters 3 and 4. After the closure of the analysis, the case studies will be compared and discussed in chapter 5 and, lastly, the results will be concluded in chapter 6.

1.2. Theory and Method

In contrast to previous perspectives occupied with doctrines, beliefs, and the meaning and transmission of symbols, the present study will present a practice-oriented way of viewing the role of ritual within the Mysteries of Mithras. To achieve this the parameters of the case studies will primarily be ordered around an archaeological adaptation of the so-called practice theory. Developed within the confines of religious studies, sociology, and anthropology, practice theory replaced structuralism as the dominant tool for ritual analysis within anthropology during the 1970s. Its implementation brought about a shift from viewing ritual activity as an expression of cultural patterns to viewing it as the process which instead creates such patterns.\(^{15}\) Practice theory has been noted to be an especially fruitful approach for the archaeological study of ritual, given its emphasis on human action.\(^ {16}\) Its application on a Mithraic material will allow the present study to substantially break with the traditional approach, while forming a theoretical framework from which to build a multifaceted analysis, consisting of such aspects as movement and visibility, of the ritual space of the *mithraeum*.

Within the field of archaeology there exists a widespread understanding of ritual as a form of action that results in material traces, whereas religion is a more abstract symbolic system consisting of beliefs, myths, and doctrines. With these definitions archaeologists tend to create a simple dichotomy between religion and ritual, manifested as belief and action. However, most archaeologists recognize the existence of a dialectic between the two phenomena, with aspects of one being necessarily related to aspects of the other; ritual elements can be used to construe systems of belief, just as knowledge of religious belief can be used to investigate ritual. Although few would argue that ritual or religion is completely determinative of the other, scholars tend to emphasize one over the other.\(^{17}\)

Previous research of the cult of Mithras has often employed the same terminological use of religion as the archaeological approach described above. This has created a seemingly clear distinction between religion and ritual within the field of research, with the religion of the cult

---

\(^{15}\) Bell 1997, 76, 82.
\(^{16}\) Fogelin 2008, 3-4.
\(^{17}\) Fogelin 2007a, 56-57.
mainly being viewed as consisting of its doctrines, narratives, and beliefs while its rituals form the active representation of worship.\textsuperscript{18} Given the present study's focus on ritual space – along with the previously stated aim of treating neither doctrine nor belief – the definition of ritual is presently more relevant than that of religion. However, it will still be necessary to offer a basic explanation of what the present study considers as constituting "religion", thereby explaining more precisely what is not being studied. In line with Timothy Insoll's advice that the simpler the definition of religion within archaeological studies the better, given the inherent complexity of the phenomenon, religion will be considered in the same manner as outlined in previous research of the cult; the mythological narratives, the beliefs of the initiates, the meaning of symbols, and the knowledge of these aspects.\textsuperscript{19}

However, it should be noted that the application of such a simple dichotomy between religion and ritual conceives the possibility of obscuring important aspects of these complex phenomena. Thus, to maintain the distinction between religion and ritual as one of belief and action is only satisfactory as a general point of departure. The present study will make no attempt to argue for the actual existence of such a simple distinction. As outlined, these general definitions – belief and action – will only serve to ascribe a relatively simple initial explanation to religion and ritual. Therefore, in order to arrange a functional analysis of ritual space, the complexities associated with the concept of ritual will need to be covered more thoroughly. Thus, before ordering the parameters for the case studies, some definitional aspects of ritual will have to be considered.

\textit{1.2.1. Defining Ritual}

During the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century a prolonged debate regarding the origins of religion brought about the study of ritual. The central question, which gave rise to several schools of thought, was whether religion and culture were originally rooted in myth or ritual.\textsuperscript{20} These early theories, alternately advocating the primacy or subordination of ritual, have in retrospect tended to highlight the important point that ritual is in itself an academic construction. As a term, ritual became an analytical tool originally used to explain the roots of religion in human behaviour in ways that were meaningful to modern scholars. In a wider sense, the focus on ritual within

\textsuperscript{18} Beck states this perhaps most explicitly in his initial criticism of the traditional approach to the cult. He points out how previous research has considered religion as equal to faith or a belief system. In a later section, Beck considers a number of proposed Mithraic axioms as intricately linked with the religion of the Mysteries, while stressing how they are not to be viewed as the doctrines of previous research; Beck 2010, 2, 5-7.

\textsuperscript{19} Insoll further notes how important it is to recognize that, despite all the complexities of attempted definitions, religion also includes that which is intangible and is therefore in many respects indefinable; Insoll 2004, 7; Insoll 2005, 45.

\textsuperscript{20} Bell 1997, 3; Fogelin 2007a, 56.
religious studies helped formulate theoretical models that could examine the dynamics of religion apart from a focus on the veracity of doctrinal beliefs. Above all, ritual activity is tangible evidence that there is more to religion than a simple acknowledgment of belief.\textsuperscript{21}

Ritual might indeed be as difficult to define as religion. This difficulty is mainly caused by the variety of activities which can be considered as rituals, along with the multiplicity of perspectives which can be used to interpret them. There is the possibility of rituals being both sacred and secular in intent, thereby making it difficult to differentiate religious rituals from their non-religious equivalents.\textsuperscript{22} The main guidance for defining ritual has been attributed to Catherine Bell and her six characteristics which typically define both rituals and so-called ritual-like activities. The latter signifies common actions which have gained a likeness to ritual while neither being nor becoming explicitly religious, such as sports and theatre. Bell’s characteristics and their referents are:

- \textit{Formalism}: the employment of more formal, or restricted, codes of speech and action than those used outside the ritual context.
- \textit{Traditionalism}: the archaic or anachronistic elements often employed within rituals.
- \textit{Invariance}: the strict and repetitive patterns of rituals.
- \textit{Rule-Governance}: the strict code of rules which determine appropriate ritual behaviour.
- \textit{Sacral symbolism}: the employment of symbols within the ritual act.
- \textit{Performance}: the display of ritual actions, both in public and within an exclusive group of practitioners.\textsuperscript{23}

As these characteristics suggest, rituals are multifaceted in composition and not only concerned with physical action, but consist rather of this active aspect in combination with both passive and active modes of communication. Rituals can contain both esoteric and exoteric knowledge, which is often manifested in association with heightened emotional states. They can be considered as a means for shaping beliefs, ideologies, and identities, or as a source of authority for those who either participate in, control, or create them. Thus, ritual

\textsuperscript{21} Bell 1997, 21-22.
\textsuperscript{22} Bell 1997, ix; Insoll 2004, 10; Insoll 2005, 46; Wesler 2012, 11.
\textsuperscript{23} Bell 1997, 138-164; Fogelin 2007a, 58; Kyriakidis 2007b, 10; Fogelin 2008, 4.
can be explained as a combination of emotion, experience, knowledge, movement, and communication.\textsuperscript{24} Although there exists a general consensus regarding ritual as a complex socio-cultural medium chosen to invoke ordered relationships between people and aspects of authority, power, and value, there exists no clear and widely shared explanation of what constitutes ritual or how to understand it.\textsuperscript{25} The multifaceted nature of ritual further implies that all ritual practices cannot be reduced to a universal set of acts, functions, or structures. The definition and significance of ritual are matters of particular social contexts and organizations of cultural knowledge. Thus, isolated from context, ritual cannot be fully studied.\textsuperscript{26} It has been noted that within an archaeological material ritual is usually implied and recognized through elements of repetition. Relying heavily on context, the identification is often hinged upon the use of special places where rituals conventionally occur or of ritual paraphernalia.\textsuperscript{27}

Evangelos Kyriakidis has identified several non-exhaustive challenges and issues regarding the study of ritual within an archaeological material. In identifying the presence of ritual within a specific assemblage, it might seem an instinctive response to assume that similar material in nearby locations points to the same type of ritual. However, considering the tendency of rituals belonging to the same context to use similar paraphernalia, similarity in material does not necessarily equal similarity in ritual action.\textsuperscript{28} Indeed, one element which might be shared between rituals is the use of a specific location, thus challenging the assumption that a single location hosts a single recurring ritual. It is therefore important to remember that evidence of ritual will in all likelihood reflect many rituals rather than one.\textsuperscript{29}

Another issue to consider while identifying ritual in an archaeological material is the common inseparability of ritual and mundane affairs. The central issue is whether a storage jar found in connection to a ritual context is to be interpreted as being ritual or mundane in nature. Many locations set aside for rituals are also used as storage for food, tools, and items for ritual use, even though no ritual actually occurs in the storage area. Likewise, many ritual items are often stored in mundane contexts, such as private houses. Thus, the attribution of ritual value to an item based on its context alone can be difficult from an archaeological standpoint.\textsuperscript{30} Further, traces of ritual are not necessarily traceable \textit{in situ}. Established ritual

\textsuperscript{24} Insoll 2004, 10; Kyriakidis 2007a, 2; Wesler 2012, 12.
\textsuperscript{25} Bell 1997, x; Kyriakidis 2007a, 1.
\textsuperscript{26} Bell 1997, xi, 81; Insoll 2004, 11-12; Kyriakidis 2007a, 1; Wesler 2012, 12.
\textsuperscript{27} Renfrew 1985, 14-15; Fogelin 2007b, 32; Kyriakidis 2007b, 9.
\textsuperscript{28} Kyriakidis 2007b, 10-14.
\textsuperscript{29} Kyriakidis 2007b, 14-15.
\textsuperscript{30} Kyriakidis 2007b, 16-18.
locations that host one or more rituals are usually cleared before and after a ritual has been performed. Material residues are thus recycled, pushed aside, littered in wells or pits, purposefully destroyed, or cleared away. Therefore, the identification of ritual in an archaeological record is complicated by the fact that the material found is most commonly not in a primary deposit.\textsuperscript{31}

Comparably to Insoll's statement regarding the use of religion within archaeology, Catherine Bell has argued that ritual should be defined as simply as possible in archaeological studies, given the relatively little clear data available. She even considers the possibility of completely eschewing the need for a definition, while instead focusing on what ritual does and how it can be used.\textsuperscript{32} In response, Kyriakidis has pointed out the importance of including a definition of each individual use of the term, his main point being that the abolishment of definitions would encourage vagueness.\textsuperscript{33}

While observing all the previously mentioned complexities, the present study will make use of the relatively clear definition of ritual offered by Kyriakidis: "Ritual is an etic category that refers to set activities with a special (not-normal) intention-in-action, and which are specific to a group of people."\textsuperscript{34} This definition will be slightly altered in order to be contextually specific to the cult of Mithras, thus reading:

Ritual is an etic category that refers to set activities with a special (not-normal) intention-in-action, and which are specific to those gathered within the space of the \textit{mithraeum}.

1.2.2. Archaeology, Ritual, and Practice

The archaeological study of religion and ritual, with regards to both its theoretical and methodological aspects, has until recently been almost completely neglected. It has been suggested that this neglect finds parts of its cause in the definitional uncertainties of the two phenomena. Archaeologists have been especially reluctant to use the term religion, except where historically known or living religions are concerned. Ritual, on the other hand, has been used more frequently to describe archaeological material, but has often been treated

\textsuperscript{31} Kyriakidis 2007b, 18-20.  
\textsuperscript{32} Bell 2007, 277-279.  
\textsuperscript{33} Kyriakidis 2007c, 289-290.  
\textsuperscript{34} Kyriakidis 2007c, 290.
simplistically or on a commonsensical basis.\textsuperscript{35} Many approaches to ritual have followed an implicit theoretical approach which does not lend itself to the testing and reproduction of results. Further, such implicit studies are often forced to rely on historical evidence to substantiate their claims.\textsuperscript{36} It should be noted that the archaeology of religion and ritual is still in its growth curve, although there has been an escalating focus among archaeologists to research religious topics.\textsuperscript{37}

This recent surge of archaeological interest can be traced back to Colin Renfrew's seminal work at the Phylakopi Sanctuary on the Island of Melos in Greece. Here Renfrew attempted to establish certain criteria in order to evaluate whether a specific architectural complex could have been a cult centre. He developed a list of material correlates that typically characterize the practice of worship and compared it with his archaeological material, deducing that Phylakopi indeed had been a cult sanctuary.\textsuperscript{38} Renfrew became the first to develop a more generalizing approach to the study of ritual in archaeology, with a clear emphasis on human action. The argument for such a stance was based on the supposed inability of archaeology to recover religious beliefs. According to Renfrew, archaeologists rather recover the material record which results from the human behaviour of worship, a system of patterned actions in response to religious doctrine. Renfrew argues that an archaeology of religion and ritual must first and foremost search for such a material record.\textsuperscript{39}

Renfrew presented four main components of recognizing ritual in an archaeological record. The first of these components, termed "focusing of attention", denotes the spatial aspects of ritual; it may take place in special locations or buildings and employ features which serve to concentrate awareness on a specific point. The second component, a "boundary zone between this world and the next", focuses on liminal aspects of ritual; it may involve hidden exclusive mysteries reflected in the architecture, as well as concepts of cleanliness and pollution. The third component, the "presence of the deity", reflects the use of a cult image and associated iconography. Lastly, the fourth component, "participation and offering", includes the performative aspects of ritual; it may employ specific paraphernalia, the sacrifice of animals,

\textsuperscript{35} Insoll 2004, 10-11; Insoll 2005, 45-46; Kyriakidis 2007a, 2. It has been noted by several scholars how the interpretation of ritual in an archaeological record is a long-standing joke within the field, with the label "ritual" ascribed to things considered weird or not fully understood; Renfrew 1985, 15; Insoll 2004, 2; Fogelin 2007a, 59, Wesler 2012, 9.
\textsuperscript{36} Kyriakidis 2007a, 3.
\textsuperscript{37} Fogelin 2008, 1; Insoll 2004, 4; Wesler 2012, 9.
\textsuperscript{38} Renfrew 1985; Fogelin 2007a, 59.
\textsuperscript{39} Renfrew 1985, 12-15; Fogelin 2007, 59; Wesler 2012, 11.
and the offering of votives. The performative aspects might also be indicated by art, symbols, spatial patterning, and architectural or landscape design.40

Renfrew stresses that his list of commonly occurring features should not be seen as a mechanical checklist, but rather as a way of discerning patterns in human practice which in turn may be interpreted as ritual actions. According to Renfrew, the necessary requirements to establish ritual practice in an archaeological material is not only a specific quota of correlates, but rather the evidence of expressive actions – such as sacrifice or offerings – and indications that a transcendent being – such as a god – is involved. However, Renfrew admits to the risk of attributing an entirely secular action directed towards a non-transcendental entity as ritual practice. Because of this, Renfrew states the essential criterion that the assemblage should not be explicable in secular terms in light of what is known about the society in question, implicitly stressing the importance of context.41 It has been noted that Renfrew's approach primarily favours studies of institutionalized ritual practices within sedentary communities, because of his reliance on a developed iconography to identify the presence of deities. This reliance on iconography has also led to his view of religion being described as essentially structural, but with an explicit focus on ritual action.42

Within the contemporary archaeology of ritual, a rudimentary dividing line can be drawn depending on whether religion or ritual is considered as holding primacy in the dialectic. Those archaeologists who consider religion to be primary often employ a structuralist perspective, emphasizing the meaning of symbols, while considering ritual as a means of enacting underlying religious beliefs.43 On the other hand, those archaeologists who consider ritual to be primary tend to focus on how religious belief conform to ritual action. In contrast to the static view of the structuralist perspective, the creative aspects of ritual are emphasized, with rituals being viewed as continually forming and reshaping both religious beliefs and their socio-cultural environment. Emphasis is also placed on how the experience of ritual creates, reaffirms or challenges existing social relations, either among the participants or between the participants and aspects of authority and power. Further, the meaning and importance of symbolism is downplayed in favour of analyses concerning the way in which symbols are used.44

41 Renfrew 1985, 17, 20.
42 Fogelin 2007a, 59; Wesler 2012, 14.
43 Fogelin 2007a, 56-58.
44 Bell 1997, 76; Fogelin 2007a, 58-59.
Practice theory is one such perspective which considers the primacy of ritual within the aforementioned dialectic. In addition to the more general aspects outlined above, practice theory is less interested in specific types of acts and more interested in how cultural activity in general works. It is particularly attentive to the political dimensions of social relationships, especially with regards to the constitution and manipulation of positions of domination and subordination. Practice theory enables a more direct focus on what people do and how they do it. Thus, it involves less preliminary commitment to some underlying notion of ritual in general. The primary concern is not what rituals mean but rather what rituals do. Also, rather than viewing ritual as a tool for the expression of authority, it tends to consider ritual as a tool for the construction of relationships of authority and submission.

Practice theory posits that the one clearly distinguishable feature of ritual is that it involves a degree of "ritualization", or a way of acting that differentiates it from other ways of acting by simply doing what it does. Further, it makes this distinction for specific purposes. In considering some aspects about ritualization, Catherine Bell has focused on a series of patterns which are generated by gestures and sounds as the body moves through a physical space, which it in turn seeks to qualitatively structure. Bell notes how the structured space provides those in it with an experience of the objective reality of the patterns, which the body in turn projects by moving within the same space. Thus, Bell argues that the goal of ritualization is completely circular, in that it seeks to create a ritual agent which both embodies and deploys these projected patterns. This aspect of ritual, in which the body is influenced by its movement through a specially structured space, is further discussed with regards to Bell's characteristic of performance. In referring to the "dynamics of framing" of the ritual, Bell suggests that a building's design shapes the motion of the people who use it. The building can further evoke distinctions between the special and the mundane by simply being separate from other structures.

In recent years, the study of religious architecture in relation to ritual has become an increasing focus within archaeology. Scholars have also begun to address the experiential aspects of ritual architecture, with studies emphasizing such issues as patterns of visibility, sensory experiences, movement, and access in particular architectural forms. Ritual spaces tend to share the characteristic of generating and expressing social cohesiveness, which is

45 Bell 1997, 76.
46 Bell 1997, 82-83.
47 Bell 1997, 81.
48 Bell 1997, 81.
50 Fogelin 2003, 134.
further promoted through occasions of group ritual. In his study of ritual space within early Buddhist architecture, Lars Fogelin distinguishes between communal and corporate group rituals. Communal rituals involve all participants more or less equally and requires no ritual specialist or other individuals leading the act of worship. In contrast, corporate rituals are directed or mediated by a ritual specialist elevated into a position of leadership.

In his analysis, Fogelin makes use of the so-called principle of presentation, largely derived from theatrical set design. Presentation refers to the manner in which an object or action is shown to a viewer and emphasizes its underlying intention. Different intentions in presentation often result in different architectural forms. As noted by Fogelin, the final form of presentation is always a negotiation between the intentions of presentation, the cultural context, the audience, and the physical limitations of architecture. Thus, presentation in ritual spaces can assume a plethora of different forms.

Fogelin uses two presentational forms, gained from set design, to relate his analysis of group rituals to the principle of presentation. The first form, the arena, indicates a space in which the audience surrounds the presented object or action. The lines of sight in an arena highlight both that which is presented and the other audience members, thus promoting communal rituals. The second form, the hall, indicates a space in which the audience is placed on only one side of the presented object or action. The hall thus downplays interaction between audience members and focuses attention to a specific point, promoting corporate rituals. However, Fogelin notes that although ritual spaces are typically built to support the most common form of expected ritual, this does not mean that the architecture determines the rituals. He further notes how the ritual space might be temporarily altered through the use of specific paraphernalia in relation to rituals, which in turn affects the presentational form.

Although Fogelin has situated his study within the specific context of early historic South Asia, he explicitly states that applications situated in other social and historical contexts are possible. This notion is further emphasized by Wesler, who claims that the principles employed by Fogelin are applicable to any religious architecture or landscape. The main reason behind this wide applicability of the principles can be found in their adherence to a more general theoretical framework regarding the shaping of architecture based on its

51 Fogelin 2003, 133; Wesler 2012, 12, 99.
52 Fogelin 2003, 133-134; Wesler 2012, 100.
53 Fogelin 2003, 135.
intended use. Thus, the approach employed by Fogelin in studying early Buddhist architecture can likewise be employed in a study concerning the ritual space of the mithraeum.

1.2.3. Approaching Ritual Space within the Mysteries of Mithras

The previous sections have outlined the definitional complexities and multifaceted nature of ritual, as well as presented the central ideas and principles underlying the theoretical framework of the present study. In its approach to the use of ritual space within the Mysteries of Mithras, this study will employ the archaeological adaptation of practice theory as its overarching framework, especially as it has been outlined by Catherine Bell. The most important aspects of practice theory to consider within the parameters of the case studies are the movements of the body within the physical space of the mithraeum and the social relationships the ritual might have created or affirmed among the initiates. Further, the principles of presentation, visibility, and different forms of group ritual, as discussed and used by Lars Fogelin, will be employed in each case study.

The three case studies will each be divided into three analytical sections. In considering the dynamic aspects of the analysis, the first sections will be attentive to the ways in which the constructed space both enabled and restricted specific movement and how the design of the building shaped the motion of the people who used it. The second sections will then consider the static aspects of the analysis and be attentive to the manner in which an object or action is shown to a viewer; what could be seen and from where. These sections will correspond to the first question stated previously in the introduction. Finally, the third sections will consider the preceding discussions with regards to the ordering of social relationships through ritual action, corresponding to the second question. The third question, concerning geographic variations, will be covered by the discussion comparing the case studies in chapter 5.

Each section will consider the archaeological material recovered from within the mithraeum, appropriately with regards to the nature of the analysis. Thus, for example, the dynamic part of the analysis will consider the movement to and from static objects – such as altars – or the moving of portable objects – such as pottery vessels. As previously outlined, approaches to ritual within the field of archaeology can be almost as multifaceted as the definition of the concept itself. As mentioned, however, one recurring principle regarding the identification of ritual within an archaeological material is the element of repetition or pattern. Thus, the identification of pattern will be central in analyzing the archaeological evidence recovered from within the mithraea chosen for the case studies. In line with Colin Renfrew, the analysis will be especially attentive to evidence of expressive actions – such as sacrifice or
offerings – as well as specifically designed paraphernalia which might have been used during rituals.

The analysis will be complemented by literary sources which mention the inner workings of the Mysteries of Mithras in its discussion regarding specific rituals enacted within the mithraea. When the literary sources mention the occurrence of ritual within the cult it happens almost exclusively with reference to either initiation or feasting, the latter of which is further implied by the likeness of the mithraeum to a triclinium.\textsuperscript{56} The nature of the sources, both with regards to their frequent hostility and their generally scant information, makes it next to impossible to reconstruct the rituals with any greater certainty as well as to identify specific rituals in the archaeological material. Therefore, the analysis will rather be attentive to the general character of the rituals, as opposed to reconstructing them in detail. Further, the information which has survived regarding Mithraic ritual will predominantly be discussed with regards to movement, presentation, and social relationships, rather than being explicitly sought after in the archaeological material.

1.3. Presentation of Material

The material central to the present study is the three chosen mithraea and their associated archaeological records. The mithraea will be studied through their associated archaeological publications, with ground plans, sections, and photographs constituting vital assets. As previously mentioned, the study will make use of both archaeological and historical material. The relevant archaeological material consists of any piece of evidence for the occurrence of cult recovered from within the three mithraea. Similarly, the relevant literary sources are any source which mentions either rituals or other relevant aspects of the Mysteries. In the following two sections, the material will be presented in more detail, along with important issues to consider when applying them to the analysis.

1.3.1. Archaeological Finds

Within the archaeological records of the three chosen mithraea there are a couple of prominent find categories which could be considered as constituting find patterns. The overwhelming majority of artifacts recovered from within the three mithraea are pottery vessels, especially tableware – such as cups and platters – and storage jars. Lamps and sculptures are also common, with the specifically Mithraic cult sculptures forming a distinct

\textsuperscript{56} Beck 1992, 3-4; Turcan 1996, 218. For examples of mentions of ritual, see Justin Martyr \textit{Apol.} 1.66; \textit{Dial.} 70; Tertullian \textit{De bapt.} 5; \textit{De cor.} 15; Porphyry \textit{De antr. nymph}. 5-15.
find pattern.\textsuperscript{57} Besides the representation of the bull-slaying Mithras, the most characteristic sculptures to be found in \textit{mithraea} are the two torch-bearers Cautes and Cautopates, Mithras' companions, which might allude to such opposites as day/night, light/dark, and life/death.\textsuperscript{58}

As previously outlined, identifying ritual in an archaeological material is far from straightforward, hence the stated aim of considering the general character of the enacted rituals as opposed to reconstructing them in detail. However, there are several factors to consider when interpreting the material associated with the chosen \textit{mithraea}. First, there is the issue of chronology and provenance. At the end of its useful life, the \textit{mithraeum} of Santa Prisca was filled with rubble, earth, and rubbish through holes cut in the covering vault.\textsuperscript{59} This presents the problem regarding what material originally belonged to the \textit{mithraeum} and what was only ever part of the fill. It can be considered to at least partly hinge on who the filling was carried out by. As will be mentioned in later sections, it is uncertain whether the perpetrators where the initiates themselves or an outside group, which might have affected which material was included in the filling.\textsuperscript{60}

A similar issue was caused during the excavations of the \textit{mithraeum}, when a heavy rainfall caused the collapse of a cofferdam running across the middle of the so-called room X. A great amount of earth, belonging to the top layer in the room, was washed into the neighbouring room Y. This made it impossible to distinguish between the original contents of room Y and what had been added from room X, as well as to distinguish between what belonged to the different layers of earth inside that room.\textsuperscript{61} However, because of the overall similarity in find patterns throughout the \textit{mithraeum}, this is not expected to be of major significance for the analysis. Further, because of the study's comparative aspect, it would have been much more devastating if the same sequence of events had occurred in the main sanctuary of room W.\textsuperscript{62}

The issue of "background noise" is significant to the study of the \textit{mithraea} at both Walbrook and Carrawburgh. Both of these \textit{mithraea} were constructed on wet and unstable

\textsuperscript{57}For more information on each individual artifact, see the associated catalogues at Richmond & Gillam 1951, 62-92; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 338-528; and Shepherd 1998, 155-215.

\textsuperscript{58}For more information on Cautès and Cautopates, see Beck 1977; and Clauss 2001, 95-98. To regard the occurrence of these sculptures as solid evidence towards the cult of Mithras, however, can tend to conceal part of the cult. As pointed out by Price, not all buildings identified as \textit{mithraea} sport these "characteristic" items, which creates the possibility of completely neglecting these locales. We might therefore end up only seeking after our own preconceptions rather than the cult itself; Price 2012, 3.

\textsuperscript{59}Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 114-115.

\textsuperscript{60}Nicholson 1995, 360-361; It can be argued that if the initiates themselves would have undertaken the operation of filling up the \textit{mithraeum}, it would have been much easier to use the material already located inside. If it was perpetrated by an outside group, it is likely that they would have brought along their own material. However, no interpretation completely excludes the other.

\textsuperscript{61}Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 57, 387.

\textsuperscript{62}This room within the \textit{mithraeum} of Santa Prisca corresponds in layout to the main sanctuaries of the two other, and much smaller, \textit{mithraea}, and contains the cult niche. For more information, see Chapter 2.
ground and so the floor level needed to be raised at different intervals. This creates the possibility of recovering artifacts from within the mithraeum which only ever was part of the makeup of the floor.\textsuperscript{63} This is particularly noticeable within the mithraeum at Walbrook. Some of the animal bones recovered from within the temple are in such isolated samples that they might have been introduced as part of the floor makeup.\textsuperscript{64} Another constant issue is the possible degree of selection, both during antiquity and the excavation, which will have favoured the recovery of larger bone fragments at the expense of smaller pieces. This is further exemplified by the first excavations in the mithraeum of Santa Prisca, during the 1930s, where only a very superficial inventory over recovered artifacts was made.\textsuperscript{65}

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textbf{1.3.2. Literary Sources} \hfill  \\
    Previous research has gathered much of the existing literary references to the cult of Mithras. One of the most prominent of these collections is the one made by A. S. Geden and published in 1925.\textsuperscript{66} This collection will serve as an important overview for the available ancient testimonia on the Mysteries, and will assist with translations. Epigraphy, which will be discussed where available, will be gathered from the relevant publication and presented in footnotes. Otherwise, the historical material will be the most applied literary source within the parameters of the case studies.

    As previously mentioned, there exists a general lack of reliable literary sources on the Mysteries of Mithras, making the reconstruction of rituals, myths, or historical chronology difficult in some respects and next to impossible in others. With regards to Mithraic ritual there exists a relatively good number of accounts, although exclusively from outside sources. Several of these, which indeed feature in the main analysis, are rather hostile accounts – either explicitly or implicitly – made by Christian authors seeking to discredit the Mysteries. The reason for this enmity has been traced to the many elements shared between the cult and Christianity, thus inspiring the view of the Mysteries as a perversion of Christianity. As stated in the introduction, these accounts should be considered \textit{a priori} as distortions at best.\textsuperscript{67}

    Besides the Christian authors, the most important group for information on the Mysteries is the Neoplatonists. These authors likely used the Mysteries as a way to legitimize their own philosophical and theological speculations, which has lead to the disagreement within modern
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{63} Richmond & Gillam 1951, 25; Shepherd 1998, 71, 80, 208. The term “background noise” is Shepherd's.
\textsuperscript{64} Shepherd 1998, 208.
\textsuperscript{65} Shepherd 1998, 208.
\textsuperscript{66} See Geden 1925.
\textsuperscript{67} Clauss 2001, 16; Alvar 2008, 344.
research about whether these accounts are truthful or not. There are two primary opinions on the matter: either, the Neoplatonists did not misrepresent the information because they did not need to, as it already said what they needed it to say, or there is a core of accurate information but the Mysteries as they are presented are essentially a philosophical construct. These interpretational issues, along with the Christian accounts, only serve to further highlight the importance of approaching each source cautiously and of contextualizing them with reference to purpose and intended audience.

1.4. Research History
Franz Cumont was the first scholar to publish all the available evidence for the cult of Mithras. The literary sources, inscriptions, and archaeological artifacts were all gathered in his two-volume work "Textes et monuments figures relatives aux mystères de Mithra". These volumes, along with the coherence of his account of the cult, made him the dominant authority on the subject for more than half a century after their publication. Cumont’s heuristic methodology sought first to reconstruct the cult myth, with the iconography of the artifacts as a point of departure, and then from that myth deduce the cult's doctrines and beliefs. A few years later Cumont published the concluding chapter of "Textes et monuments" separately to provide a brief introduction to the cult in French, English, and German, which for decades remained the only available work of its kind.

Cumont argued that the Roman cult of Mithras developed from a branch of Persian Zoroastrianism through a transformative process where theology and practice were passed down through time and space. Central to this scenario was the Anatolian peninsula, where the cult would have received its final form during the Hellenistic Age at the hands of a Zoroastrian diaspora. Through this supposedly unbroken Persian tradition Cumont argued for the existence of an inherent dualism between good and evil in the Mysteries, from which he ended up formulating a Mithraic eschatology. Cumont's fundamental assumption was that the religion of the cult existed primarily in its theology, an assumption which led to the downplay of the role of ritual in shaping the Mysteries.

Towards the middle of the 20th century it became obvious that a new collection of Mithraic evidence was necessary, owing to the increase in material over the preceding years. In answer

68 Beck 2010, 44-45.
69 See Cumont 1886-1899.
71 Cumont 1903, 6; Clauss 2001, xix.
to this need, Maarten J. Vermaseren published his "Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae" (CIMRM), a two-volume work which still constitutes the standard work on the subject and provides access to the main bulk of evidence for the cult. Vermaseren's work allowed the silent deficit in Cumont's title, the mithraea, the epigraphy, and the small finds, to be addressed as adequately as the iconography.\(^{73}\) The publication of the CIMRM stimulated a renaissance in Mithraic studies which brought about the organization of three international conferences – at Manchester (1971), in Teheran (1975), and at Rome (1978) – along with the publishing of the *Journal of Mithraic Studies* in three volumes between 1976 and 1980.\(^{74}\)

These developments brought along substantial criticism of Cumont's reconstructed narrative. One of the reasons behind this rather late response is that the study of the cult of Mithras had finally developed sufficiently to risk alternatives to the rather outdated Cumontian tradition. It has also been noted that Cumont's authority on the subject tended to dismiss alternative interpretations.\(^{75}\) However, the merits to Cumont's approach has continued to be stressed. The most obvious and compelling reason for his almost exclusive focus on iconography was the sheer quantity of iconographic evidence, promoting a point of departure here where the data was the thickest. A second reason is the prominent place of the bull-slaying within the mithraeum, manifestly being the focus of attention for the cult.\(^{76}\) On the other hand, there exist significant problems with Cumont's assumption of an unbroken Persian tradition for the Roman cult. The most obvious issue is that the Roman cult seems to have defined itself by a number of characteristics which were completely absent from the Persian worship of Mithra, such as the cave-like mithraeum, a series of initiations into ever higher grades, the secrecy surrounding the cult's doctrines, and – perhaps most significantly – Mithras as a bull-slayer.\(^{77}\)

The first comprehensive critique of Cumont's views on the Mysteries were presented by John Hinnells and Richard Gordon during the international Mithraic conference held at Manchester in 1971.\(^{78}\) Hinnells specifically criticized Cumont's interpretation of an inherent dualism between good and evil within the Mysteries, an interpretation which in part focused on the dog and the snake in the bull-slaying scene. Cumont had interpreted these as forces of good and evil, based on Persian accounts where the dog serves the good Ahura Mazda and the

\(^{73}\) For CIMRM, see Vermaseren 1956; Clauss 2001, xix; Beck 2010, 18.
\(^{74}\) Clauss 2001, xx.
\(^{75}\) Ulansey 1989, 10; Clauss 2001, xix; Alvar 2008, 78, 92.
\(^{77}\) Ulansey 1989, 8.
\(^{78}\) The conference proceedings were edited and published in two volumes by John Hinnells. See Hinnells 1975a.
snake serves the evil Ahriman. Hinnells pointed out that without these preconceptions there is nothing in the iconography to suggest that the relationship between the two is one of antagonism.\textsuperscript{79} Richard Gordon then went on to show how Cumont's arguments were essentially circular. Gordon noted how Cumont from the outset assumed the validity to use comparisons with Persian religion as the basis of his interpretation, but then used the results of his interpretation to justify the original assumption that the Persian material was relevant to the Roman cult. Gordon concluded that Cumont's Persian hypothesis was completely invalid and that it was necessary to reject any theory which looks to Persian religion in order to explain the Roman cult of Mithras.\textsuperscript{80}

The first and perhaps most significant gain of this criticism was the decoupling of the Roman cult of Mithras from Cumont's Zoroastrian diaspora, which lead to a greater focus on the Mysteries within their Graeco-Roman context. The contextual approach enabled examinations of Mithraic iconography without the distortions introduced by Cumont's assumingly unbroken Persian tradition.\textsuperscript{81} This led some scholars to propose the somewhat radical view that the cult of Mithras was essentially created in, and subsequently spread from, the city of Rome. Reinhold Merkelbach even went so far as to postulate the creation of the Mysteries by a single individual of genius. It has been noted that there exists no archaeological evidence in support of either of these views.\textsuperscript{82}

Another result of the criticism was the partial abandonment of a narrative approach to the Mysteries in favour of an astrological interpretation of the bull-slaying. It came to be widely believed that the iconography of the Mithraic cult relief had a solely allegorical value and could be read as a star map of a certain sector of the heavens, thus providing insight into Mithraic doctrine and beliefs.\textsuperscript{83} In 1974, Roger Beck presented a paper in which he identified all the elements contained within the bull-slaying with specific constellations near a particular stretch of the ecliptic. He suggested that Mithras was closely linked to the constellation Leo, the diurnal and nocturnal House of the Sun. Beck's main interest was to determine the period

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{79} Hinnells 1975b, 293, 298.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Gordon 1975, 221, 225.
\item \textsuperscript{81} Gordon 1972, 94-95; Alvar 2008, 92.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Clauss 2001, xx; Gordon 2007, 394; Alvar 2008, 93.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
of the year represented in the bull-slaying and ended up suggesting a date in mid-August, at the time of the harvest.\textsuperscript{84}

In 1975, Stanley Insler presented a paper at the International Mithraic Conference in Teheran which linked an astral interpretation with an iteration of Cumont's claim that the Roman cult of Mithras had originated in Persia. Insler interpreted the death of the bull as marking the end of winter and the coming of summer, while arguing that the configuration of the constellations represented in the cult relief suggested a date in April. He concluded therefore that the bull-slaying celebrated the day of the great Persian festival of Mithra, a date which was also the traditional date of the beginning of spring in Roman peasant calendars.\textsuperscript{85} The paper produced quite a stir at the conference, since it seemed to offer a way of reconnecting with Cumont's traditional narrative.\textsuperscript{86}

In the following years a number of other hypotheses regarding astrological readings of the Mithraic cult relief appeared, with interpretations often reduced to discussions on fine astronomical details. Virtually all scholars involved in the discussion agreed that the bull must be the constellation Taurus and that the various other figures represent other Zodiacal constellations. With these premises, however, no one could agree on the identity of Mithras.\textsuperscript{87}

In 1989, David Ulansey published a study in which Mithras was equated with the constellation Perseus. After associating Cautes and Cautopates with the constellations Taurus and Scorpius he concluded that the equatorial constellation midway between these points – which is Perseus – must be Mithras, thereby making Taurus and Scorpius the "equinoctial seat" mentioned by Porphyry. However, during the cult's heyday the equinoctial constellations were Aries and Libra, not Taurus and Scorpius. This slippage – known as the "precession of the equinoxes" – became Ulansey's explanation for the origins of the Mysteries of Mithras, as first interpreted by a group of Stoic intellectuals in Cilicia. This interpretation has since been met with sharp criticism from other scholars.\textsuperscript{88}

The astral hypothesis has, despite its early popularity, not succeeded in convincing the greater body of Mithraic scholars. It has proven extremely difficult to date the time of year signified by a particular rising or setting astral phenomenon. It has also been noted that the

\textsuperscript{84} Ulansey 1989, 19-20; Alvar 2008, 95-97. Beck's paper was only ever read at a meeting of the American Philological Association and was never published. However, Beck continued to develop his arguments in later articles. See Beck 1976; and 1977.
\textsuperscript{86} Alvar 2008, 95.
\textsuperscript{87} Alvar 2008, 97.
\textsuperscript{88} See Ulansey 1989; Alvar 2008, 97-98.
sheer number of incompatible readings tend to undermine the whole approach. In more contemporary research, most previous lines of thought are present. The previously mentioned study by Roger Beck, which explored his hypothetical language of symbols, termed "star-talk", as being the central idiom of the Mysteries is one example of a more cognitive perspective on the cult of Mithras. The application of cognitive studies within the research of the cult is further exemplified by the recently published collection of essays by Luther Martin, some of which explore the themes of cognition and mindscapes.

1.4.1. Excavation and Publishing History of the Chosen Mithraea

The mithraeum beneath and partly behind the Church of Santa Prisca on the Aventine was accidentally discovered in 1934. The Augustinian Fathers, who have charge of the church and adjacent monastery, carried out an excavation with the hope of finding further data in connection with the earliest history of the church, but instead stumbled upon the mithraeum. This first excavation lasted until 1938 after which a preliminary description of the temple was published by professor A. Ferrua. In 1952, Maarten J. Vermaseren and Carel C. Van Essen began the preliminary work of assessing the state of the mithraeum, before they started their own excavations the following year. They worked within the mithraeum and the surrounding residential building until 1959 and published their work in 1965.

The mithraeum at London's Walbrook Valley was discovered in 1952 and subsequently excavated as part of the substantial rebuilding and redevelopment of the city following the Second World War. It was first upon the discovery of a head of Mithras in September 1954 that the building was identified as a mithraeum. At this time, arrangements had already been made for the demolition of the temple to make way for a block of offices, an arrangement which caused a public outrage as it came to light following the identification of the mithraeum. After the end of the excavations a few days later, the attention had already forced the issue to be discussed in the House of Commons and created queues of thousands of people at the excavation site. It was ultimately decided to move and reconstruct the temple a couple of blocks away, an operation which was finalized in 1964.

---

90 See Beck 2010; and Martin 2015.
91 Ferrua 1940, non vidi; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, ix, 24.
92 Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, ix-xi. For the publication, see Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965.
93 The attention the mithraeum received include extensive coverage in national newspapers, debates among academics about whether such monuments should be preserved in situ or not, and a request for the matter of its preservation to be discussed in the Cabinet by Prime Minister Winston Churchill. At one occasion, visitors to the site reportedly tried to storm a police barricade to gain access; Shepherd 1998, 7, 13-15, 26.
Although the publicity which the *mithraeum* attracted might have resulted in its preservation, it has been noted that the publicity often was misinformed, which has lead to the perseverence of several factoids in studies of the temple.\textsuperscript{94} This situation was certainly made worse by the delayed publication of the excavated *mithraeum*, which for long had to contend itself with a brief account by William F. Grimes – director of the London Museum and one of the project leaders – in a title presenting the archaeological work in post-war London. Forty years later, the archaeological report on the *mithraeum* was completed and published by John D. Shepherd.\textsuperscript{95}

The *mithraeum* at Carrawburgh was discovered in 1949 after an unusually dry summer had caused the border of the valley floor to shrink, revealing a long and narrow building above the shrunken surface. Three inscribed Roman altars were discovered standing at one end of the building – apparently *in situ* – and the marshy ground yielded traces of woodwork. This freestanding building was subsequently excavated over eleven weeks in late spring 1950 by the excavation committees of Durham University and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle Upon Tyne. It was published the following year by I. A. Richmond and J. P. Gillam.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{94} Shepherd 1998, xiii-xiv.
\textsuperscript{95} For the publication, see Shepherd 1998. For the brief account, see Grimes 1968. The *mithraeum* is covered on pages 92-117.
\textsuperscript{96} Richmond & Gillam 1951, 1-3. For the publication, see Richmond & Gillam 1951.
The Church of Santa Prisca, devoted to the eponymous martyr, is a titular church of Rome and stands upon the Aventine Hill. Beneath the grounds of the Church two ancient residential building stages have been discerned. Judging from brick stamps, the first building was constructed no earlier than 95 CE and stood where the northern half of the Church and the southern half of its cortile now stands. A couple of years later, but before 117 CE, as judged from brick stamps, an internal refurbishing and external enlargement of the first building resulted in the second building. Around 195 CE, a mithraeum would come to be constructed in its basement (Figs. 2 & 7).97

The mithraeum was built in two stages. The first stage was confined to room W – 11.25 x 4.20 m. – which consisted of the characteristic central aisle with brick pavement flanked by podia provided with mensae. From the entrance at door m the aisle led towards the cult niche – 2.36 m. wide x 1.22 m. deep – which exhibited a stucco group of the bull-slaying Mithras. The group was heavily damaged at the time of discovery, but many fragments were found scattered throughout the room during the first excavations. These included Mithras' head along with remains of his arms, legs, and torso, fragments of the bull's head and tail, the dog's head and neck, and fragments of the snake. A small piece of the raven's wings were still attached to the inside of the north wall of the niche. The niche itself was built in brick, stuccoed and painted blue, with an arch of tiles forming the top, the inside of which was stuccoed and painted blue with yellow stars. The front ends of the side walls were decorated in yellow-coloured stucco and simulated two pilasters with Corinthian capitals.98

The whole bottom width of the cult niche was occupied by a large statue of a reclining bearded god. The lower part of its body was covered by a cloth painted blue, while the rest of its body was painted red. Its arms are missing but the left hand was found during the first excavations, clasping an object which is possibly the handle of either an oar or a staff, or a cornucopia. The hand along with fragments of the head, which was covered by a velum, show traces of gilding.99

Immediately within door m stood niches for statues of Cautes and Cautopates. Both niches were stuccoed white on the sides and the fronts were painted red. The inside of the north niche – as seen from door m – was painted a dark purple and the right niche was painted

97 CIMRM 476. The suggested construction date for the mithraeum is based on the style of the sculptures and earliest paintings; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 107-114, 177.
98 CIMRM 479. The existence of two different stages is deduced partly from the later addition of the same red-coloured stucco throughout the different rooms, and partly from an analysis of the changes in architecture associated with this later event; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 126, 128-129.
99 CIMRM 478; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 131.
Fig. 2. Ground plan over the *mithraeum* beneath the Church of Santa Prisca. At the time of its foundation, the *mithraeum* was confined to room W. Shortly afterwards, it would expand to include rooms V, X, Y, and Z. For the scale, see Fig. 7. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, foldout between pages 24-25, Fig. 5.

Fig. 3. View into room W from door *m*. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XII.2.
orange. These colours seem to suggest that the north niche was intended for Cautopates and the south one for Cautes.\textsuperscript{100} Indeed, a statue of Cautes was found directly in front of the south niche during the first excavations. He is dressed in a short tunic, leans cross-legged against a tree trunk and holds the remains of his torch in his right hand. The statue's back was roughened and made flat and small holes for the fitting of it inside the niche were made in the thighs. No statue of Cautopates was recovered, but several nail holes and traces of the border of the mantle could be discerned inside the north niche.\textsuperscript{101}

Large parts of the mithraeum were stuccoed and painted; the entrance was painted red, the ceiling was painted blue and decorated with painted stars, and the fronts of the podia were painted red. On walls I\textsubscript{2} and K\textsubscript{2} there were frescoes depicting three processions of initiates, with lines of verse added at the top. On wall K\textsubscript{2} there was a procession of six leones, as evident from the lines of verse, moving towards the cult niche carrying paraphernalia. On wall I\textsubscript{2} there were two individual processions. Furthest from the cult niche, four leones were carrying paraphernalia. Further up the wall, closer to the cult niche, a procession of the seven priestly grades were received by the pater, seated upon a throne.\textsuperscript{102}

Based on an architectural analysis, the mithraeum was enlarged around 220 CE to include rooms V, Y, Z and possibly X in the layout of the temple. Room V received its own set of podia along with a small enclosed area, housing a brick base and a stucco figure. The podia inside room W were raised by means of two layers of brick and partly covered with marble. In the middle of the south podium a large terracotta vase was embedded in a semicircular opening, which was stuccoed and painted blue. Above this opening, door e was filled up and a brick seat – a thronus – was constructed in the doorway, which was enlarged at the top (Figs. 4, 5). The subsequently formed niche was stuccoed and painted; the remaining traces seem to indicate a basket with flowers or fruit painted in the centre against a blue background.\textsuperscript{103}

The cult niche was partly redecorated and another original Mithras group in stucco was added to the north side wall. A large part of the body and part of the neck of a white bull, tied around the neck with a yellow cord, are preserved. Mithras, whose head and the greater part of whose body are lost, was sitting astride the bull and grasped its neck with his right arm. Further, pieces of pumice, painted yellow and spotted with red, brown, and blue, were

\textsuperscript{100} This interpretation is based on the association of the torch-bearers with day (Cautes) and night (Cautopates). The brighter orange colour thus represents the light of day, while the darker purple represents the darkness of night. The interpretation is strengthened by the recovery of a statue of Cautes in front of the right niche during the first excavations; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 133.

\textsuperscript{101} CIMRM 477. The statue of Cautes (Ht. 1.02 m.) is catalogued at W/V 19; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 133, 341.

\textsuperscript{102} CIMRM 480-482, 484; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 126, 165-169.

\textsuperscript{103} Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 126-127.
attached to the back wall and Mithras' cloak was given a new layer of stucco and painted dark red.\footnote{Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 127, 129-130.} In front of the cult niche was a basin – which might have already existed in the first stage – made of brick and with a marble lid. The basin received its water through a lead pipe from another basin just behind and above it, and emptied through a drain located under the central aisle.\footnote{Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 35, 126-127.}

Large parts of the mithraeum were covered in fresh layers of paint and new frescoes were made on the walls. Despite being repainted, the motifs of the frescoes were largely left unchanged and consisted mainly of the changing of dress colours for several processionists. On the south wall, the procession of leones, now increased to six, received a sequence of sacrificial animals – which might have already existed in the earlier layer – consisting of a white bull, a cock, a ram, and a boar. On the north wall, the procession of leones was represented as moving towards a scene with Sol and Mithras dining in a grotto, while being waited by attendants dressed as ravens (Fig. 6).\footnote{CIMRM 483; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 148-162, 169-170.}

The mithraeum remained in use until c. 400 CE, when it was destroyed and filled with rubble, earth, and rubbish through holes cut in the vault of room W. The whole residential building was then razed and the church was built over the remains. The destruction has been described as violent, with Vermaseren postulating a congregation of Christians from a nearby
Fig. 6. Illustrations of the frescoes. Clockwise from top left: The procession of the grades, the procession of leones with sacrificial animals, the procession of leones with paraphernalia, and the feasting of Sol and Mithras. From Ferrua 1940, Figs 8 and 9.

titulus – possibly located in the basement of the first residential building – as the perpetrators. However, it has been suggested that this rather exhausting method of desecration was employed not by hostile Christians but by the Mithraic initiates themselves. The main argument is that the method suggests a respect for the mithraeum in a way that simpler methods, such as fire and casual vandalism, do not.

2.1. Access and Movement

From the entrance at door L it is possible to trace a seemingly continuous path through the second stage mithraeum (Fig. 7). Immediately within the entrance a flight of five steps leads down into the anteroom, accentuating a journey into an underground cave. The space of the original mithraeum in room W, containing the cult niche with the bull-slaying Mithras, could then be entered through door m. The three rooms X, Y, and Z could be accessed, either directly or indirectly, from room W. Door q was walled up in antiquity and room U will therefore not feature in the analysis. Constituting the dynamic part of the analysis, the following section will trace this path through the mithraeum, treating access and movement within each room successively with an emphasis on ritual activity.

2.1.1. Room V

As part of the second building stage, room V – 4.60 m. x 4.10 m. – received its own set of podia along walls C and D. Their fronts were painted the same red as those in room W but lacked mensae. In the corner beside the flight of steps leading into the room, two roughly built walls formed an angle and enclosed a small area accessible through a narrow entrance.110 A path was thus formed at a right angle in the space between the podia and the enclosed area, ushering the body towards the entrance to room W. Turning right, the initiate would have been aligned with the cult niche located at the end of the aisle.

The entrance to the enclosed area in room V could be closed by a large stone block, thus either preventing or enabling access to the small area. A marble threshold – decorated on both sides in relief with foliate patterns – was found to have been placed in the entrance. East of the entrance, against wall G, stood a brick base. The base was stuccoed and painted red and its

\[110\] Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 137.
top seems to have been hollowed out, suggesting a use as either a pedestal or an altar. At the bottom of wall L within the enclosed area there is a shallow projection. It is not wide enough for a podium and was therefore probably intended as a shelf. Shortly after the discovery of the mithraeum, a nude human torso with legs ending in dolphins, all in red-coloured stucco, was found fastened to the wall above the projection. The fragments of the feet were subsequently lost. The stucco behind the figure was coloured brownish-yellow.\textsuperscript{111}

The features of the enclosed area suggest a ritual focus, possibly relating to the generally liminal character of the anteroom. Several chicken bones were found on the floor inside the enclosed area, although this find pattern is replicated throughout the mithraeum. The same holds for the recovered pieces of pottery and lamps.\textsuperscript{112} Depending on the use of the brick base, the movement within the enclosed area could relate to the offering of sacrifice or votives. As noted by Vermaseren, the fact that the base was completely stuccoed and painted makes its use as an altar for bloody sacrifice seem less likely.\textsuperscript{113} Ritual focus and subsequent movement could also have been directed at the stucco figure, with the projection below possibly being used for the holding of lamps or votives. Further, several statuettes – such as that of Hecate or the Giant – found inside rooms V/W might have belonged to this area, either upon the brick base or the projection, possibly in order to accentuate the liminality of the room.\textsuperscript{114}

\textit{2.1.2. Room W}

After following the path in room V through door \textit{m} the initiate would have entered room W. Like virtually every other mithraeum, the room is characterized by its central aisle and two podia. The aisle directs the body along the fronts of the podia and towards the cult niche at its

\textsuperscript{111} CIMRM 491. This figure is considered by Vermaseren to be either a Triton or a Giant, with the concluding remarks that the latter is more probable. This is based primarily on the prevalence of the Gigantomachy in Mithraic iconography as well as the – now outdated – Cumontian view that the Giants would have represented the principle of evil and darkness; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 137-138.

\textsuperscript{112} Vermaseren lists the finds from V and W under a combined header in the catalogue, which makes it impossible to differentiate between the two rooms with regards to the recovered material. The reason behind this combined header is that the rooms were excavated by the Augustinian Fathers who unfortunately did not keep a detailed record regarding provenance. Only a very superficial inventory was made by one of the Fathers, which was used in the ordering of the catalogue. Further, the catalogue is not exhaustive, since it is clearly stated by Vermaseren that only the "more interesting pieces" from the inventory are mentioned in the catalogue; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 338.

\textsuperscript{113} Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 137.

\textsuperscript{114} The upper part of a three-bodied Hecate of marble (Ht. 0.08 m.) was found during the first excavations, but was subsequently lost. Its exact findspot is unknown, but it would have been in either room V or W. Vermaseren notes that statues depicting Hecate was a common feature of \textit{mithraea}. The Giant was represented by a lower part in Greek marble (Ht. 0.19 m.) which stood upon a base (W. 0.17 m.) with traces of purple colouring. It leans against a tree trunk, or a rock, and sports the characteristic snake feet. Its findspot is also unknown. The sculptures are catalogued at W/V 20 and 23 respectively; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 342-343.
far end. This sense of forward movement is further transmitted through the processions depicted in the frescoes on walls K² and I².

The relationship between the frescoes and the enacted rituals within the mithraeum is difficult to ascertain. It has been noted how the names above each depicted processionist suggest an intention to memorialize the donors and affirm their position within the hierarchy of the cult. It might therefore be appropriate to assume a synoptic rather than a naturalistic view of the frescoes; they depict not what was to be seen within the mithraeum, but rather what was needed to be told. However, the depictions might still have been inspired by actual events, since any message needs to contain certain familiar features in order for it to be fully understood by its intended audience. While certainly not being naturalistic, the frescoes might have alluded to certain sequences which were familiar to the initiates, such as the bringing of food and drink for the ritual meals.

The procession of the grades before the pater upon his thronus poses a similar issue. A thronus was indeed added to the mithraeum as part of the second building stage, but it is unclear whether or not it was actually used and in what way. If it indeed acted as the seat of the pater during certain ritual activities it raises the question as to why it was not included in the first iteration of the mithraeum. As the seat of the pater, the thronus would certainly have conveyed a sense of authority and hierarchy. This could also be said about the fresco, where the pater receives the lower grades like a patronus would have received his clientes. As previously noted, the procession of the grades was probably never enacted within the mithraeum, but was rather meant as an affirmation of the hierarchy of the cult. However, if such an event ever would have taken place, it would certainly have taken place along the central aisle.

Because of the layout of the mithraeum, any ritual movement carried out inside room W would have been confined to the central aisle, both because of the lack of other spaces and because of its manifestly focal character. It would have served as the conduit for the serving of food and drink before and during the ritual meals, as well as during the transportation of associated pottery vessels, such as dishes, flagons, and jars. Further, any ritual activity

---

115 It is, for example, highly unlikely that the initiates would have led adult bulls, rams, or boars down the cramped central aisle, as depicted in one of the processions. Instead, the sequence of sacrificial animals might have served as a metonymy for the offering of sacrifice and/or the ritual feasting; Alvar 2008, 346-347.

116 These types of pottery were indeed found in large numbers throughout the mithraeum. The pottery discovered in rooms W/V are catalogued at W/V 50-52, 54-56, 58-61, and 96-186. Their findspot within these rooms does not signify that the vessels were constantly kept there, as they easily could have been moved from elsewhere in the temple; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 348-352.
focused on the cult niche, such as the offering of sacrifice or votives, would also have been controlled by the central aisle.

It is probable that the initiation into the Mysteries took place in room W, since this room was both the original space of the *mithraeum* as well as the location of the bull-slaying Mithras. Both Porphyry and Tertullian allude to the act of washing with water as part of the initiatory rituals. These passages should, however, be cautiously interpreted. Porphyry's allusion is implicit as he mentions how honey was used for washing during the initiations of *leones* instead of water.\(^{117}\) Tertullian's account of the cult is generally hostile and he frequently refers to it as a Satanic mimicry of Christianity.\(^{118}\) Therefore, it is highly uncertain whether his observation on the initiation reflect actual events, or whether they are distortions or outright fabrications made in order to further accentuate his view of the Mysteries as a perversion of Christianity.

Regardless of the accuracy of the information within these passages, it is clear that any initiatory rituals enacted within room W would most likely have been confined to the central aisle and the space directly in front of the cult niche. If the washing with water indeed was part of the initiation into the Mysteries it might have been carried out by using water from the basin, thus initiating the person in front of both the other initiates and – perhaps most significantly – Mithras himself. There are other instances within the room where the use of water might be alluded to, possibly for lustration, such as the terracotta vase embedded in a semicircular opening in the middle of the south *podium* and in front of the *thronus*.

To the north of the cult niche there is a small area, named room W', in the corner between walls H and I. The area is reached through a narrow entrance formed between the top of the north *podium* and a short wall protruding from the north side of the cult niche. Among the features of this area is a rectangular piece of stucco on wall I, five large amphorae inserted into the ground along wall H, and two brick ledges constructed one above the other on the outside of the cult niche. Many sculptural pieces were recovered here, including a large head and a statuette of Serapis, the heads of two unidentified goddesses, and the head of an unidentified god. The backs of the heads were not worked and they were therefore probably placed against or attached to a wall or niche. The sculptures were not necessarily found *in situ*.

---

\(^{117}\) It is unclear whether or not this actually alludes to other instances of initiation within the Mysteries of Mithras or to other forms of initiation entirely. However, given the literary context of the passage, the former seems most likely; Porphyry *De antr. nymph.* 15.

\(^{118}\) Tertullian *De bapt.* 5; For examples of explicit mention regarding the Satanic or otherwise perverted character of the Mysteries of Mithras, see Ter. *De cor.* 15 and *De praesc. haer.* 40.3-4.
but, as noted by Vermaseren, the substantial weight of the head of Serapis means that it was probably not placed far away.\textsuperscript{119}

The features of room W suggest a similar character as the enclosed area in room V, but without being a focal point within the larger room. The brick ledges might have served a similar purpose as the projection in the enclosed area, such as the holding of lamps or statuettes. Further, the five amphorae suggest a particularly interesting aspect of this space. Their necks and bottoms had been intentionally removed, thus making it easier to retrieve items stored in them, such as ritual paraphernalia. If the amphorae were used as containers, part of the movement within this space might have been related to the preparation of ritual.\textsuperscript{120} Otherwise, the find patterns in room W tend to mimic those of the \textit{mithraeum} at large, consisting mainly of lamps and different types of pottery.\textsuperscript{121}

\subsection*{2.1.3. Room Y}

Room Y – 4.40 m. x 6.85 m. – could be accessed from room W by passing through door \textit{b}. The two rooms contain similar features, such as the \textit{podia}, the breaking of the left-side \textit{podium} by a doorway, and the central aisle leading towards a cult niche (Figs. 8, 9).\textsuperscript{122} The cult niche in room Y – 1.40 m. wide x 0.27 m. deep – is constructed upon wall A around a narrow elevation and covered in stucco. The front ends of the side walls, consisting of two pilasters in brickwork, were painted red and the inside of the niche was painted greenish-blue. Centrally within the niche there was a small representation in stucco of which hardly anything has survived. Vermaseren notes how careful study of the remains suggests that the representation depicted Sol, with faint traces of a radiate crown being distinguishable. The head of the god was surrounded by two still clearly outlined circles, which might have depicted the signs of the Zodiac. The signs themselves can no longer be identified, although a part on the left might be interpreted as part of the Scorpio.\textsuperscript{123}

Like in room W, the central aisle formed between the \textit{podia} conveys a sense of forward movement and ushers the body towards the cult niche. Indeed, any activity associated with the

\textsuperscript{119} Vermaseren suggests that at least one of the female heads represents Luna and the male head Sol. His interpretation is mainly based on the prevalence of these deities in Mithraic cult reliefs, although he notes that the characteristic radiate crown and crescent moon are missing. Based on this interpretation, Vermaseren places the heads either inside the cult niche or on its arch; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 134-136.

\textsuperscript{120} A piece of textile, interpreted as a fragment of a cloak, was found inside one of the amphorae. It is, however, uncertain whether this cloak had any relation to Mithraic ritual. The piece of textile is not catalogued individually, but together with the amphorae at W’ 21; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 137, 435-436.

\textsuperscript{121} The catalogued finds are covered in a separate section under W’ 1-69; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 433-438.

\textsuperscript{122} Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 140.

\textsuperscript{123} Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 37, 140.
niche, such as the placing of lamps on the surrounding elevation or the offering of sacrifice or votives, would have required the use of the central aisle. The *podia* in room Y are much lower than those in room W and measure approximately 0.25 m. from the ground.\textsuperscript{124} It is thus unclear if they shared a function with their counterparts in room W. The left turn inside room Y is more prominent than the one in room W, seemingly being at an equal width with the central aisle. This would probably have made the forward movement in room Y less forced than it would have been in room W, instead offering a clear alternative with the passage through door *n*.

Set into the elevation in front of the cult niche is a shallow basin of coarse red pottery. Only part of the basin was found *in situ*, although a large fragment of it was found in the same room on the west *podia* behind door *b*. The basin was seemingly not connected to any form of drain nor did it receive water directly from a pipe. The purpose of this basin is unclear.\textsuperscript{125} If it was meant to hold any form of liquid, it would have had to be brought to, and subsequently poured into, the basin by means of the central aisle. If the basin was meant for sacrifice – bloody or not – it would likewise have needed to be brought to the basin.

\textsuperscript{124} Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 56, 140.
\textsuperscript{125} Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 141.
2.1.4. Room Z

Room Z – 2.63 m x 6.85 m – could be entered both from room W through door a and from room Y through door n (Fig. 10). The entrance from room Y seems to have been the most convenient, since the entrance from room W is preceded by a narrow passage formed between wall I₁ and the niche of Cautopates. On the west side of the room and along wall I₁ stands a podium which bends in front of door n and continues towards wall K₁. The podium could be accessed by three steps after entering the room through door n. Here, traces of red coloured stucco suggest that the podium was painted the same colour as those in rooms V and W. It is not known if the podium continued down to wall H, but Vermaseren notes that it is probable.¹²⁶

The rather crude wall which partitions off the rest of the room from door o is not easy to interpret. Vermaseren notes that the wall – which consists of loosely piled lumps of tufa – needed temporary support to prevent it from falling down during the excavations. Vermaseren connects the wall to the final century of the mithraeum, when the temple might have risked being raided by a nearby Christian congregation by way of room T. The wall would thus have been constructed as a way of maintaining secrecy and hiding the initiates from view.¹²⁷ This is also held as definite evidence that room T was not part of the mithraeum and that door o could simply have been used as an alternative entrance, much like door e before the construction of the thronus.¹²⁸

In front of door n there is a short wall, covered with red stucco, which ran towards wall H and ended at a distance of 0.67 m. from it. Thus, a narrow passage was formed between this short wall and wall K₁. Along the west side of the short wall there was a rectangular elevation, which occupied the greater part of the front of the podium. Upon this elevation and embedded in its floor stands the lower half of a dolium. At the time of excavation the dolium contained a terracotta vase with an inscription on its border. The rim of the vase slopes inwards and in the base there is an opening which is less than half the width of the opening in the top. Over this opening there was originally a small glass dish which subsequently was lost.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 142.
¹²⁷ Based on an architectural analysis, Vermaseren offers 306 CE as the construction date for the wall; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 64, 114.
¹²⁸ Although the use of room T by the cult seems improbable because of the circumstances surrounding the construction of the wall, the wall’s suggested use as protection begs the question as to why door o was not covered up instead. As the architectural analysis seems to show that room T connected the mithraeum to the basement of the first residential building, the passage through door o might have been too important regarding the possible bringing of supplies for temple activities. The wall could thus have been a compromise between still being able to use door o and maintaining some privacy; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 147.
¹²⁹ Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 146.
Movement within room Z was thus restricted to either the narrow passage leading to door n or the space atop the elevation which was not occupied by the *dolium*. Like the amphorae of room W, the *dolium* enabled items to be retrieved from it, thus suggesting a possible intention for movement within the room. Its shape is also reminiscent to that of a basin, with the terracotta vase – if connected to the *dolium* – acting as a receptacle for fluids. The prominent place of it inside the room suggests that any ritual activity carried out within the room might have had the *dolium* as its focus.

The movement inside the room would have been further hampered because of a shallow pit, which covered the entire space between the elevation, the short wall, and door a. Indeed, the only way out of this pit would have been through the narrow passage leading towards door n. The nature of this pit is highly uncertain and this is not the place to further consider Vermaseren’s claim that the pit might have been used as a mock grave during initiatory ceremonies, a form of initiation for which the evidence is dubious.\(^{130}\) In any case, entering the room through door a would have meant to descend into this pit, further suggesting the passage through door n as the more convenient.

2.1.5. Room X

Room X – 6.80 m. x 2.70 m. – was only accessible through door p from room Y. Along walls I3 and I4 there are high but narrow *podia*, which could not have served for reclining. Instead,

\(^ {130}\) Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 143-145. As noted by Clauss, the occurrence of certain tests of endurance during the initiatory rituals is only mentioned following the decline of the cult in the fourth century CE. Further, the fancifulness of these accounts seems to escalate along with their date of composition; Clauss 2001, 102.
they were probably used either for sitting or for the placing of cult objects. The excavations did not yield any other structural features besides these podia and their layout probably determined any movement inside the room. Thus, the most significant movement inside room X would have been that towards or away from the podia, either with the intention to sit down upon them or with the intention of placing or retrieving cult objects.

Vermaseren notes that except for a vase with a dipinto there are no finds indicating the use of room X in the cult. However, noting the similarity of the finds recovered in the room to those recovered from other rooms in the mithraeum, the use of the room in the cult does not seem improbable. Indeed, the absence of a clearly distinguishable active role of the room in cult, such as statue bases or places for offerings, does not necessarily signify that the room served no role in the cult.

The finds recovered from room X consist almost exclusively of pieces of pottery – primarily amphorae and jars – and lamps, thus replicating the find patterns of the other rooms. As part of the mithraeum, room X could have been used as storage room for paraphernalia used in ritual activities, such as pottery used during the feasting, or for food and wine. In this scenario, although not specifically connected to ritual movement, room X might have served a role in the preparation of ritual.

2.2. Presentation and Visibility

In the previous section, the analysis concerned the dynamic aspects of the ritual space of the mithraeum, and focused on the temple floor. Conversely, the static part of the analysis will depart from the podia; the places within the mithraeum where the initiates were most probably static (see Fig. 7). It is uncertain in what position the initiates dwelled on the podia, with both sitting and reclining having been suggested by previous research. During the

131 Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 139.
132 Vermaseren notes the improbability of the slaughter of large animals in the room, as well as the lack of evidence for vases or pits in the floor to indicate this. The one interpretation he indeed does offer of the room as part of the cult is based on the suggested role of rooms Y and Z for initiatory rites. He suggests that while rooms Y and Z could have been used for the purification through the elements of water and fire, room X could have been used for the purification through the element of earth, citing precedents from other mystery cults. The vase with the dipinto is catalogued at X 846. The dipinto is given as the Latin fusio; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 139.
133 Only finds made in the bottom layer of room X have been included in the analysis, since this layer represents the undisturbed subsoil to the level of the podia. These finds cover the catalogue nos. X 1094-1182 and X 1060-1093, with the nos. X 1157-1182 having been found under door p; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 417-420, 431-433.
134 The use of the podia for sitting is mentioned several times by both Cumont and Vermaseren, with the former specifically connecting sitting to the initiatory ceremony. Turcan and Claus, on the other hand, claim that the podia were used for reclining. Turcan specifically describes the position as "half-reclining" and "slantwise"; Cumont 1903, 111; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 137-139; Turcan 1996, 218-219; Claus 2001, 46.
ritual feasting it is perhaps most likely that the initiates followed the contemporary convention of reclining, which is further suggested by the location of the mensae along the fronts of the podia, and either lying on their stomachs or sides while supporting themselves with their elbows. That being said, it is difficult to ascertain whether the podia were constantly used for reclining, or whether the manner of their use was circumstantial, with the initiates sitting during initiatory rituals – as proposed by Cumont – and then reclining during meals.\textsuperscript{135}

2.2.1. Room V

The podia in room V are aligned against walls C and D and run from the west side of the staircase to wall G on the north side of door \textit{m}. The podia are protruding about 1.50 m. from the wall and stand about 1 m. high as measured from the floor. The layout of the podia is more reminiscent of a hall design than that of an arena, since they appear to be oriented towards a specific point. Thus, depending on their reclining position, the initiates might not have been directly facing each other. Instead, the design of the room suggests that the initiates' focus would have been drawn towards the enclosed area in the southeast corner of the room. The focal point would thus have been the stucco figure mounted upon the wall, possibly lit up by lamps placed on the projection below it.

While reclining on the podia, the initiates would have been in the line of sight of both room W and door L, thus being suspended in between the sacred cave and the mundane world outside. This sense of liminality would likely have been more profound the closer to the intersection of walls C and D the initiate was reclining. The farther down along wall C the initiate was the harder it would have been to see out beyond the stairs, but the easier to see into room W and \textit{vice versa}. In fact, those reclining roughly in the middle of the podium along wall C would have been the only ones in the entire mithraeum to recline directly in front of the cult niche inside room W. The importance of being able to see into room W is reflected in the widening of door \textit{m}, which coincided with the addition of the podia in the anteroom. This meant that the podium along wall D projected 0.40 m. away from the door jamb, thus significantly widening the field of vision (Fig. 11).

2.2.2. Room W

The podia in room W – which stand to a similar height to and slightly larger width than those in room V – are aligned against walls K\textsubscript{2} and I\textsubscript{2} and separated by the central aisle. The north

\textsuperscript{135} Cumont 1903, 111.
Fig. 11. View from room W through door m and into room V. The protruding podium is clearly visible. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, Plate XI.1.

podium – along wall K₂ – is broken in the middle by door b, as well as being separated from walls I₁ and I₃ by two passages leading to rooms Z and W' respectively. The south podium – along wall I₂ – runs uninterruptedly between walls I₁ and I₃. The layout of the podia is reminiscent of an arena design, with each podium providing a significant backdrop for the other. Thus, depending on their reclining position, the initiates would likely have been facing each other.

Besides the other initiates, the backdrop for each podium would have consisted of the niches of Cautes and Cautopates and the frescoes. A visibility pattern of opposites seems to be valid in the understanding of each backdrop, i.e. the features aligned against each wall would have been most visible for those reclining on the opposite podium. Thus, the frescoes with the procession of the grades and that of the leones with sacrificial animals would have been most clearly visible from the north podium and vice versa for the procession of the leones with paraphernalia and the feasting of Sol and Mithras. This also applies to the niches of Cautes and Cautopates, with the inside of each only being visible from the opposite podium (Fig. 12).

A significant part of the backdrop for the south podium, and thus most clearly visible for those reclining upon the north podium, was the niche with the thronus. Although it is unclear how and if it was used, the thronus occupied a central place within the mithraeum. If used, the person sitting upon the thronus would have been able to see not only the majority of room W but also down the length of the central aisle in room Y, thus being visually linked to both cult niches inside the mithraeum (Fig. 13). From the thronus it would therefore have been possible to follow any ritual action directed by the central aisles in each of the two rooms.
Fig. 12. Section of room W looking north, thus showing much of the backdrop for the south podium. From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 32, Fig. 7.

Fig. 13. Section of rooms W and Y looking east, thus demonstrating the connection between the cult niche and central aisle in Y and the thronus in room W (not visible in section). From Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 33, Fig. 8.

The cult niche would have been visible from every point upon the podia, given its size and prominent place along the middle of wall I3. It is, however, uncertain if every individual feature of the niche would have been visible regardless of one's position within the room. The group with the bull-slaying Mithras and the bearded god were probably the easiest to see, but the raven and the smaller Mithras group – located on the inside of the north side wall – might only have been clearly visible from the south podium. It is interesting to note that the reclining pose of the bearded god would seemingly have included him among the reclining initiates.

During the first excavations, a lead plaque with the cut-out head of Sol was found near the cult niche. The plaque had small nail holes in each of the upper corners and would therefore probably have been fastened inside the niche. The seven-rayed crown of Sol was pierced,
enabling light from behind to shine through.\textsuperscript{136} If it indeed was fastened inside the cult niche, the plaque would probably have been visible to the majority within the room, given the extra care taken with the piercing of the rays. While being illuminated from behind, the plaque would certainly have created a significant spectacle, making it seem as if the god himself was present in the room.

Because of its position beyond the cult niche and behind the north podium, room W' would have been largely secluded. It would likely have been visible from almost every position upon the south podium, but its placement in the corner and behind the projection from the side wall of the cult niche might very well have dislodged it from the rest of the room. Any comparison with the enclosed area in room V does therefore not apply here, since the enclosed area clearly was the focal point of its room. In an attempt to make sense of room W', Vermaseren suggests that it was used during the initiatory rituals. This argument is based both on the graffito upon the side wall of the cult niche, mentioning how its author was "born at first light", and Vermaseren's supposition that the area of stucco upon wall I\textsubscript{3} displayed a representation of Mithras' birth from a rock.\textsuperscript{137} However, it seems rather unlikely that such an important ceremony would have been confined to the secluded area of room W', considering its reclusiveness from the larger room W and the prominent central aisle.

2.2.3. Room Y

It is uncertain whether the podia in room Y were used for reclining, given their much lower height than their equivalents in rooms V and W, or whether they served as storage ledges. However, their width – which is on par with that of the other podia – suggests that they saw the same use as the podia in the previously mentioned rooms, but because of their modest height it is likely that furniture and/or cushions were used for reclining upon. The use of furniture might further have offered the possibility of altering the use of the room depending on circumstance; if more space was needed the furniture could be removed. The use of furniture is purely conjectural, since no traces of such objects have been recovered.

\textsuperscript{136} CIMRM 494. The plaque (Ht. 0.55 m., W. 0.43 m., D. 0.03 m.) is catalogued at W/V 46; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 346.

\textsuperscript{137} CIMRM 498. Vermaseren reads the graffito as: Natus prima luce / duobus augg. co(n)s(ulibus) / Severo et Anton[in]o / XII kalendae Decem[br]is / dies Saturni / luna XVIII. It translates as: "Born at first light when the Emperors Severus and Antoninus were consuls, the 12\textsuperscript{th} day before the first of December, the day of Saturn, the 18\textsuperscript{th} of the Moon." This equals the 20\textsuperscript{th} November 202 CE. No indication of a representation of Mithras' rock-birth was ever recovered; Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 118, 136. For more information on Mithras' birth from a rock, see Schofield 1995; and Clauss 2001, 62-71.
Like room W, the design of room Y simulates that of an arena. Thus, the initiates on the podia inside room Y would have formed a significant part of the backdrop for each other. Focus would also have been drawn towards the central aisle. From inside room Y the initiates would not have been able to see much of the activities in room W. Instead, their main focal point seems to have been the cult niche with the representation of Sol. Much like its equivalent in room W, the cult niche in room Y – along with any ritual activity directed at it – would have been visible from every point upon the podia, given its prominent place upon wall A. There are no other indications of specific features or wall decorations within this room.

2.2.4. Room Z

With regards to the podia, the layout of this room is highly reminiscent of room V. Like room V, the hall design of the room would have focused the attention of those positioned upon the podia towards the elevation, with its dolium, and possibly the pit beyond. If the podia ran all the way up to wall H, the currently missing stretch would have been in a better position to see into the pit. Beyond these manifestly focal features, the initiates might have been able to see into room W and Y through doors a and n respectively (Fig. 14). From the position upon the bench directly opposite door n, it would have been possible to see further into room X. However, any attempt to see into room W would have been severely restricted by the niche of Cautopates. As previously stated, the wall in the north part of the room would have completely concealed door o – and room T beyond – from view.

2.2.5. Room X

As noted in the previous section, the narrow width of the podia in this room probably signify that they were not used for reclining, but could instead have been used for sitting upon. Regardless of whether or not they were actually used in this way, the field of vision within the room would not have covered more than door p and any fellow initiates. The design is reminiscent of a hall, with the podia aligned around a central point, in this case door p. Through door p it would have been possible to see straight through room Y and into room Z on the other side of the mithraeum, with the possibility to observe actions carried out around the dolium (Fig. 15). However, this would only have been possible from the middle of the podium directly opposite the door.
2.3. Ritual Space and Social Relationships

During the early fifth century CE, the Christian theologian Jerome makes explicit mention of the hierarchy within the Mysteries of Mithras. In a letter addressed to a woman named Laeta he names the ascending ranks of initiation, beginning with corax and proceeding with nymphus, miles, leo, perses, heliodromus, and pater.\(^{138}\) Tertullian, writing some two centuries earlier, mentions the grades miles and leo, while Porphyry mentions leo and perses.\(^{139}\) As previously mentioned, the hierarchy of the Mysteries is presented in the so-called procession of the grades upon wall I\(_2\) in room W. In this fresco, the pater arguably holds authority over the other grades, which is reflected through him receiving them upon his thronus.

In the general epigraphic record, the grade pater is mentioned most frequently of all grades, with about half of all mentioned grades being patres. After pater, the second most common grade in the epigraphic record is leo.\(^{140}\) This relationship finds a curious parallel in the frescoes of room W, where the pater – despite only appearing once – holds what may be considered as the most authoritative position of all in the processions, which in turn are numerically dominated by initiates of the grade leo.\(^{141}\)

As stated in the previous section, the layout of room W – the main part of the mithraeum – is reminiscent of an arena design, with the initiates forming a significant part of each other's

\(^{138}\) Jerome *Ep.* 107.2. Jerome actually gives two terms as the name of the second grade: nymphus and gryphus, the latter seemingly corresponding to the word cryfius (“one who is shrouded”). Cryfius occurs in a couple of fourth-century inscriptions, while nymphus occurs in epigraphic evidence from the third century. It is uncertain whether this reflects a change in term over time or whether the two were used simultaneously with reference to particular functions or responsibilities within the cult; Clauss 2001, 134.

\(^{139}\) Porphyry *De antr. nymph.* 15; Tertullian *Adv. Marcion.* 1.13.4; *De cor.* 15.3.

\(^{140}\) Clauss 2001, 136-137.

\(^{141}\) Gordon 1972, 100-101.
backdrop. An arena design, which usually promotes communal ritual, seems rather paradoxical when considering what is known about the hierarchy of the Mysteries. The initiation into different grades suggests a hierarchical pyramid which, not unlike within a military or senatorial context, increases the initiate’s authority by each grade.\textsuperscript{142} This is further implied by Tertullian who states that those who wishes to undergo an initiation first must approach the \textit{pater} to learn of what preparations are to be made, further solidifying the view of the \textit{pater} as the most authoritative person within the \textit{mithraeum}.\textsuperscript{143} The symbols associated with the \textit{pater}, as shown in the \textit{mithraeum} of Felicissimus at Ostia, expresses this authority quite clearly: a staff, ring, Phrygian cap, and sickle – all found in other contexts to express the idea of rule. The \textit{pater} is also mentioned in a number of votive dedications as having supervised the dedicatory ritual.\textsuperscript{144}

It is uncertain if the \textit{mithraeum} was partitioned in order to reflect or reaffirm the hierarchy of the cult, but considering the relatively high number of grades in relation to the limited space this might very well have been the case.\textsuperscript{145} If the frescoes are any indication of how authority might have been reflected in the room, it is noteworthy that both the procession of the grades and the feasting of Sol and Mithras are located closest to the cult niche, and thus closest to the god. The two highest grades \textit{pater} and \textit{heliodromus} have often been connected to Mithras and Sol respectively, with regards to their attributes.\textsuperscript{146} As an initiate progressed through the grades, this might have been affirmed through a transition closer to the god within the space of the \textit{mithraeum}; the farther into the cave an initiate reclined, the higher his grade.\textsuperscript{147} It might even be feasible to suggest that the \textit{pater} and the \textit{heliodromus} would have reclined on the section of the left bench which ran directly beneath the fresco of Sol and Mithras, thus replicating the motif and reaffirming their connection to these deities.

If the \textit{mithraeum} reflected the initiate's status within the hierarchy of the cult through such a partitioning, it is interesting to note how the second stage \textit{mithraeum} seemingly included room V as a direct extension of the original temple. The importance of being able to see into

\textsuperscript{142} Gordon 1972, 103. \\
\textsuperscript{143} It is not made clear by Tertullian whether this applies for each grade or only for those who have not yet been initiated, although the former does not seem unlikely; Tertullian \textit{Apol.} 7. \\
\textsuperscript{144} Gordon 1972, 100-101. \\
\textsuperscript{145} Judging by the size of known \textit{mithraea} they likely never contained more than around forty or, exceptionally, fifty people. The average would have fluctuated around twenty; Beck 1992, 7-8; Turcan 1996, 219. If we consider the mean height of Italian adult males of 168 cm., as estimated by Kron, a number of about twenty reclining initiates in room W seems probable; Kron 2005, 72. \\
\textsuperscript{146} Beck 1992, 4; Beck 2000, 145-146. \\
\textsuperscript{147} This is further suggested by the mosaic covering the central aisle of the \textit{mithraeum} of Felicissimus at Ostia, where a series of panels display symbols associated with each grade. The closer one gets to the cult niche, the higher the grade displayed on the floor; Clauss 2001, 133-138.
room W from room V is suggested by the widening of door m. This raises the question regarding the use of the three rooms X, Y, and Z, since none of these had an unhindered view into room W. It is possible that these rooms were not in constant use for ritual purposes and that the only room were the initiates engaged in meals were room W, judging by the mensae. If room V indeed functioned as a direct extension of room W, the initiates reclining here would have been the furthest away from the cult niche and thus of the lower grades. The partaking in the feasting itself might therefore have been hinged on the initiate's position within the cult.

Citing the historian Eubulus, Porphyry explains how the initiates were divided into three groups based on their ritual function. The passage is highly unclear and it is difficult to ascertain if he constantly refers to the Roman cult or if he alternates between it and a Persian antecedent. Porphyry states that, besides the patres (πατέρες), the initiates who take part in the actual rituals were known as lions (λέοντες) and the servants were known as ravens (κόρακες).\(^{148}\) If this observation is correct it might explain the two processions of leones in the frescoes of the mithraeum of Santa Prisca. In the processions the leones are either carrying paraphernalia or driving animals – presumably for sacrifice – which, if Porphyry's statement is applicable, might signify ritual acts. Further, the attending servant in the fresco with Sol and Mithras is wearing what appears to be a raven mask, suggesting in accordance with Porphyry the function of the lowest grade as one of ritual assistant.

The previously mentioned dipinti above each fresco which probably names the donors for the mithraeum, also mention the name of each grade within the procession of the grades, as well as the grade leo for each of the possible donors.\(^{149}\) This would likely have served to further reaffirm the hierarchy of the cult and the place of certain persons within it, constantly being visible during the enactment of rituals. This would have connected their names to the rituals which they helped to enable, either through their donations or their participation, and would thus have strengthened their position within the initiated group.

Most modern accounts of the Mysteries assume that all Mithraists were members of a grade and that only those initiated spent time inside the mithraeum. However, it has further been noted, in relation to mystery religions in general, that initiation was not synonymous with belief, but a further and rather exclusive step.\(^{150}\) This begs the question as to how the

---

\(^{148}\) The ambiguity mainly stems from Porphyry consistently referring to the Mithraic initiates as "Persians", thus often causing confusion about whether he refers to the initiates or the ethnicity. It is not made any clearer by his apparent – and rather frequent – switching between the two mid-passage; Porphyry De abst. 4.16.

\(^{149}\) Vermaseren & Van Essen 1965, 184-186.

advancement in the hierarchy actually commenced. Again, given the generally small groups in relation to the number of grades, it would not seem improbable to immediately assign a grade to those initiated. It is, however, uncertain if the initiation was preceded by a period of trial before admission into the community could be allowed. If this would have been the case, those admitted on trial might have reclined in the anteroom, symbolizing their suspension in between the community and the outside world.

Through its hierarchy, it can be argued that the cult constituted a certain means of social control, thus fulfilling a traditional and highly conscious function of Roman religion.\textsuperscript{151} In our sense of the word "priest" as one who officiates religious ceremonies, it might be feasible to suggest that the only grade to fulfil this definition was the \textit{pater}. Therefore, for the \textit{pater} the Mysteries might have been closely synonymous with the issue of power. It was unusual to find professional priests in the Roman Empire. Ordinarily, a priesthood was a temporary part-time office whose function was as much to confirm or claim social status as to serve the god in question.\textsuperscript{152} Because of this, it is not surprising that the initiates often were soldiers or either Imperial or private slaves, since in each of these situations submission to authority and acceptance of a particular role were of utmost importance. At the same time, promotion was possible, which might have been reflected in the advancement through the grades of the Mysteries. Thus, the Mysteries of Mithras might have replicated the basic symbolic and social structures of the mundane life, while at the same time offering the same possibility of advancement, but towards the god and his gifts instead. Further, these relationships would likely have been constantly reaffirmed by the enactment of rituals within the space of the \textit{mithraeum}.\textsuperscript{153}

\subsection*{2.3.1. Women and the Mysteries of Mithras}

The exclusion of women is often stated as one of the defining features of the Mysteries of Mithras, an exclusion which would have set it apart from several of its contemporary equivalents within the realm of mystery religions.\textsuperscript{154} Although it has been mentioned frequently and with conviction, there actually exists no explicit mention in any ancient source that such was the matter. One often referenced passage, the aforementioned lines of Porphyry, is highly dubious and might at best be implicit regarding the exclusion of women. Where the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{151} Gordon 1972, 95. It is noted by Pettipiece how the cult of Mithras tended to melt into the Graeco-Roman religious milieu; Pettipiece 2008, 56.
\item \textsuperscript{152} The exception to the unusual professional priesthoods in the Roman Empire tended to exist in those provinces where a hieratic form of society had existed before the arrival of the Romans; Gordon 1972, 101-102.
\item \textsuperscript{153} Gordon 1972, 103-104; Revell 2007, 212-214.
\item \textsuperscript{154} Gordon 1972, 98; Beck 1992, 10-11; David 2000, 121-123.
\end{itemize}
functions of the three grades *pater*, *leo*, and *corax* are mentioned, Porphyry also curiously states how women were called "lionesses" (λέαιναι), a word which because of a corruption in the preserved text also has been read as "hyenas" (υαιναι).\(^{155}\)

One of the proponents for the word to be read as "hyenas" is Richard Gordon, who argues, based on the ancient view of hyenas as repeatedly changing their sex, that the animal's connection with the concept of reversal of norms would have been undesirable and frowned upon by the authoritarian and primarily masculine cult.\(^{156}\) Gordon's view has been challenged by Jonathan David who questions the reading of "hyenas" while proposing the reading of "lionesses", stating how lionesses – along with all the other animals mentioned in Porphyry's passage – appear in Mithraic iconography while hyenas do not.\(^{157}\)

The theory of female grades within the Mysteries of Mithras has been suggested, but rarely pursued. In his own study, David considers the implications of a set of two late third-century sepulchres from North Africa, which name the occupants as *leo* and *lea*. This, coupled with the Mithraic iconography of the tomb, leads David to suggest the initiation of one of the occupants into the grade *lea* ("lioness") thus lending support for this particular reading of Porphyry.\(^{158}\) David's stance was subsequently criticized by Alison Griffith, who argued that very little of David's cited evidence is unimpeachable. She notes how women are conspicuously absent from the few surviving membership lists, graffiti, and representations of members or other Mithraic art, and they do not appear as dedicators even in domestic mithraea in Rome and Ostia. Griffith further states how the question whether women chose not to participate or whether they were actively excluded remains an unresolved issue.\(^{159}\)

It is therefore difficult to discern whether or not women participated in the cult within the mithraeum of Santa Prisca. Because of its distribution, it would seem rather unlikely that the cult of Mithras did not evolve to include regional variations, thus including more women in different parts of the Empire. If the grade *lea* existed in these contexts, it might have shared the same authority and responsibilities of its male counterpart. If this was the case in the mithraeum of Santa Prisca is, however, impossible to discern with the available information.

\(\text{David 2000, 121-124, 129.}\)
\(\text{See Gordon 1980.}\)
\(\text{David 2000, 135. David also criticizes Gordon's use of what he calls the "Graeco-Roman encyclopaedia", a collection of all the miscellaneous folk knowledge garnered from ancient authors. His main point of criticism is its reliance on the building of one object of free association upon another which provides no standard of judgment, aside from the idea that all of the Classical world conceptualized nature, gender, and symbolism in the same manner; David 2000, 131.}\)
\(\text{David 2000, 124-125.}\)
\(\text{Griffith 2006, 48-50.}\)
3. Temple on the River – The *Mithraeum* of London’s Walbrook Valley

The Walbrook River, a small tributary to the Thames, ran through a shallow valley in the centre of ancient Londinium. The character of the area was markedly different from what would have been expected so near to the city centre. There was no concentration here of stone buildings, but rather a scatter of timber huts and sporadic industrial activity. Indeed, one of only two stone buildings in this area was a *mithraeum* built on the eastern fringes of the valley (Fig. 16).

The *mithraeum* was accessed through an anteroom at the east end of the building. The rectangular main body of the *mithraeum* measured 17.83 m. x 7.84 m., with a semi-circular apse at its west end. The ends of the anteroom projected beyond the side walls of the main building, thus giving the temple a T-shape and an overall width of 11.12 m. However, because parts of the anteroom continue under the unexcavated modern street, the full length of the temple remains unknown. It is thus unknown if the *mithraeum* was a free-standing building or whether it was linked to a larger complex of rooms through the unexcavated anteroom.

The main temple plan altered very little during the useful life of the building. Internally, on the other hand, many alterations took place which over time entirely transformed the character of the building, possibly signifying a change in cult practices. The best recorded of these internal alterations are the nine superimposed floor surfaces, the first four of which most definitely were connected to the use of the temple as a *mithraeum*. The initial floor, along with the construction of the temple, has been dated to c. 240-250 CE through the study of pottery.

The entrance to the temple was through a double doorway. Immediately within the door, double downward steps gave on to the floor of the central aisle, flanked by *podia* on each side. In contrast to traditional *mithraea*, the layout of the temple would have resembled a basilica, as the central aisle and the area in front of the *podia* were defined by sleeper walls which carried stone-columned arcades. The sleeper walls would thus have left a passage between the *podia* and the colonnade.

At the far end of the central aisle, two steps upwards provided access to the apse. A stone plinth in the centre of the apse probably served as the base of a sculptural group of the bull-slaying Mithras. It is further suggested that the plinth carried a pair of slender columns.

---

160 CIMRM 814; Grimes 1968, 93-98; Shepherd 1998, 56. The other stone building was represented by a small scrap of mosaic on the east side of the river towards the north; Grimes 1968, 96.
161 Grimes 1968, 98; Shepherd 1998, 63-65, 221.
162 Shepherd 1998, 12, 71-72, 221.
163 The positions of the columns were marked only by their settings, designed like round platters with straight sides. The settings were roughly 0.45 m. in diameter; Shepherd 1998, 65-67.
supporting an epistyle or architrave from which would hang curtains intended to control visual access to the cult group. The upper of the steps leading to the apse from the central aisle was wider than the lower and might have accommodated altars ranged below the plinth. Against the inner wall of the apse there were four small holes, uniform in size and shape and evenly spaced out, which may have held posts supporting additional furnishings or paraphernalia. In the southwest corner was a shallow timber-lined well which provided water to the mithraeum through the early years of its history. The well had been carefully constructed and set in a hole big enough to allow for it to be packed with impervious clay. However, the mithraeum did not retain its original basilican features. Long before the end of its useful life it had undergone many changes which at least in part were a reflection of the local ground conditions. The wet nature of the site was a constant issue and the three subsequent floors (2, 3 and 4) represent a sequence wherein the floor level was gradually lifted. With the laying of Floor 4 the central aisle acquired a one-level floor, with the original steps at both the entrance and the apse being fully concealed (Fig. 17.).

During the first quarter of the fourth century CE, three definable events took place in the mithraeum. First, part of the building suffered a collapse; second, the colonnades were removed, resulting in an open hall plan with one floor (5) covering the entire temple other than the raised ground of the apse; and third, a number of cult sculptures – including the head of the bull-slaying Mithras – were buried in pits in the floor. It is clear that the columns had

---

164 Shepherd 1998, 68-70.
165 Shepherd 1998, 70.
166 Shepherd 1998, 71, 80.
already been dismantled when the pieces were buried, as one of the pits overlay a column pad.\(^\text{167}\) It is likely that these events represent a redesign of the interior to accommodate a new deity, with the sculptures associated with the original cult likely having been buried by either

\(^{167}\) The suggested date of the internal reconstruction to an open hall plan is strengthened by the analysis of pottery; Shepherd 1998, 82, 86, 155, 227.
Because of these profound alterations, the following analysis will only concern itself with floors 1-4, which precede these events.

3.1. Access and Movement

Upon entering the *mithraeum* from the anteroom, the double steps leading down to the central aisle accentuates a journey into an underground cave. At the far end of the central aisle, in the apse, the two steps leading up towards the cult sculpture work in an opposite fashion, instead accentuating a journey upwards in order to reach Mithras. The steps therefore seem to order the *mithraeum* into three distinct parts in which an initiate could move. First there was the liminal anteroom which provided access to the main body of the *mithraeum*, consisting of the central aisle and the podia. From the main body it would subsequently have been possible to reach the apse with its cult sculpture, the abode of Mithras. This partition would have been most profound in the earlier iterations of the building, since the ever rising floor level eventually concealed the steps.

The central aisle would have acted as the main conduit for movement within the temple and any ritual activity aimed at the cult sculpture would have been directed by the aisle. This would most likely also have been the case for the distribution of dining vessels before the ritual feasting. It is uncertain as to what extent the rather thin passages between the *podia* and the arcades would have been used, but it seems safe to assume that they presented the principal space of accessing the *podia*. They might further have been utilized as a means to reach the reclining initiates by way of the central aisle, such as during the serving of food and drink. As expected, a substantial number of pottery vessels were found throughout the floors associated with the use of the building as a *mithraeum*. The types found correspond well with the occurrence of ritual meals, with bowls, dishes, and flagons being some of the most common.\(^{169}\)

The well in the southwest corner of the *mithraeum* was probably reached from the passage between the *podium* and the arcade, since it lay beside the steps leading to the apse. This means that any ritual activity which required the drawing of water from the well, such as

---

\(^{168}\) The reason behind the burial of the sculptures has been blamed on a Christian community, or at least an anti-pagan policy of the local government. This argument is based on both the date of the burials during the first quarter of the fourth century and the presence of what appears to be an axe-cut on the side of the head of Mithras. As noted by Shepherd, however, if the sequence of events preceding the burials are taken into account, there is also the much simpler explanation that the sculptures may have been buried with reverence by pagan cultists. The apparent continued use of the building for a pagan cult following these events further solidifies this interpretation; Shepherd 1998, 228; Kousser 2010, 128.

\(^{169}\) A total of 245 vessels were found in the central aisle of Floors 1-4 and are catalogued under Group VIII, the group associated with the use of the building as a *mithraeum*. See Shepherd 1998, 155-158.
Tertullian’s version of the initiation, would have made use of the passage. The water from the well could also have been used for the washing and cleaning of the temple, especially if any form of bloody sacrifice had been carried out. During the compiling of the excavation data, a number of bones were isolated as probably having originated from cult practices, such as feasting or possibly sacrifice. These indicate that chickens were the most common faunal species included in the rituals, followed by sheep/goats and pigs.\(^\text{170}\)

3.2. Presentation and Visibility

The layout of the podia within the mithraeum is reminiscent of an arena design. Thus, depending on their reclining position, the initiates would likely have been facing each other. They would also have been facing the central aisle and would thus have been in direct line of sight of any ritual activity it directed, such as that aimed at the cult sculpture. However, the columns of the arcades might have presented significant obstacles to an unhindered view of the sanctuary. Thus, depending on their location upon the podia, the initiates might have had trouble keeping every instance of the ritual within their direct line of sight.

As suggested by the features of the plinth, it might have been desirable to control what was visible to the initiates at different times during the ritual. If indeed curtains were hung from an architrave above the cult sculpture it could be used for the effect of spectacle during certain climactic stages of ritual activity, revealing the presence of Mithras among his faithful. The importance of spectacle is further suggested by the finding of a pinecone of the Mediterranean stone pine ("Pinus pinea"). The pinecone was partly burnt or scorched on one side, which corresponds to other British finds of pinecones in Mithraic contexts. Instead of being ignited, the pinecone had been intentionally carbonized by roasting for use as fuel. When burnt it would have given off a pungent aroma of pine and glowed dark red, which would certainly have enhanced the ritual experience in the rather gloomy interior of the mithraeum.\(^\text{171}\)

In 1889, a group of sculptures were found on what would later become the excavation site for the mithraeum, and it has been suggested that this group was part of the sculptures buried in Floor 5 and would therefore have belonged in the mithraeum. The full ensemble of sculptures placed inside the temple would thus have included representations of the bull-slaying Mithras, Minerva, Serapis, Mercury, an unidentified water deity, and possibly the

\(^\text{170}\) As noted by Shepherd, however, the recovered bones may not be an accurate reflection of the activities which produced them. There is for example a significant probability that large bones would have been cleared out after feasts or other celebratory events. The number of chicken bones may be a factor of their size, as smaller material would have been more easily incorporated into the make up of the floor; Shepherd 1998, 208-214.

\(^\text{171}\) It is not noted by Shepherd in which floor the pinecone was discovered, although it is catalogued under Group VIII and would thus have belonged in the mithraeum; Shepherd 1998, 161.
Genius of Londinium. The different finishes of the sculptures suggest different ways in which they were meant to be seen. For example, the largest representation of the bull-slaying Mithras, which probably stood in the apse, was clearly not intended to be viewed from the rear. The same holds for the Genius and the Serapis, which were probably meant to fit into a niche or background. Besides the cult sculpture, it is not known where the sculptures would have been placed. It is possible that the supportive posts which might have existed in the curvature of the apse supported at least some of these sculptures.

3.3. Ritual Space and Social Relationships

One of the sculptures recovered in 1889 was the so-called Mithras of Ulpius Silvanus, a rectangular relief in white marble which displays the bull-slaying scene, with Cautes and Cautopates in attendance. Around this scene, there is a roundel on the border of which is worked the twelve signs of the Zodiac. Present in the corners are Sol and Luna and representations of wind gods, probably Boreas and Zephyrus. This relief has received its name after its dedicator, who presents himself in a votive inscription.

Much like the names above the processionists in the mithraeum of Santa Prisca, this inscription would have had implications for the social relationships within the community, displaying Silvanus' devotion to Mithras. Further, the final line "votum solvit" indicates that the dedication had come following a service from the god. Therefore, Silvanus was not only devout of Mithras, he had also received the god's favour.

While Floor 4, the last floor of the mithraeum proper, was in use a recess was created in the face of the plinth in the apse. It has been suggested that this hole originated as a result of the removal of Silvanus' relief which, although not as deep, is approximately the same size as the hole. The placing of small dedicatory reliefs in such positions in front of the main cult scene is known elsewhere. If this is correct, the relief would have occupied perhaps the most central place in the entire mithraeum, being located directly below the cult sculpture. Ulpius Silvanus' devotion would thus have been clearly visible to anyone upon the podia and even if they could not read the inscription from afar the association between dedicator and dedication would have been strong.

---

172 CIMRM 815-821; Shepherd 1998, 165-171.
173 CIMRM 810-811. The inscription reads: Ulpius Silvanus / factus Arausione / emeritus leg(ionis) II aug(ustae) / votum solvit. For more information on the relief (Ht. 0.43 m., W. 0.51 m., D. 0.11 m.), see Shepherd 1998, 172.
174 Shepherd 1998, 82.
4. At World's End – The Mithraeum at Carrawburgh upon Hadrian's Wall

The mithraeum at Carrawburgh, the seventh border fort upon Hadrian's Wall from the east, lies just over 27 m. south of the southwest angle of the fort, on the east bank of a small marshy valley. Three main stages of development were discerned within this free-standing building, with the second of these exhibiting two internal reconstructions. The first mithraeum was the smallest of the three main stages, measuring approximately 5.50 m. x 7.90 m. and exhibiting the typical configuration with a central aisle and podia (Fig. 18). An anteroom, measuring 1.20 m. from back to front, was separated from the rest of the building by a wooden screen. Beyond the anteroom, the main part of the mithraeum measured 4.50 m. x 5.10 m. and at its back a two-foot strip was marked off by timber posts, of which the middle contained remains of a low altar platform. No remains of the podia have survived, although the spaces occupied by them were clearly visible. The absence of roof-supporting posts suggests that the building might have been covered by a simple gabled roof.\textsuperscript{175}

The second mithraeum was made by adding a northward extension to the first temple, increasing its overall length by c. 6.00 m. and adding an apse at the far end of the aisle (Fig. 19). Internally, the whole building now measured 4.50 m. x 10.90 m. and the anteroom was extended to 2.10 m. from back to front, while retaining its wooden screen. Just beyond the screen, steps ordained access to the podia and two plastered pedestals were probably meant to carry statues of Cautes and Cautopates – which were present in later phases of the temple. The previous roofing system was most likely extended farther north, with a separate gabled roof built over the anteroom.\textsuperscript{176} The building received two internal refurbishings wherein almost every internal fixture appears to have been reconstructed, although without any change to the overall plan.\textsuperscript{177} The pottery discovered within the first and second temples suggests that both of these stages were constructed c. 200-225 CE.\textsuperscript{178}

The second temple suffered damage – possibly from pillaging – towards the end of its useful life, as evident from traces of fire within the building. The wooden screen in the anteroom was burnt down, pieces of pottery were broken and the flooring had been considerably disturbed. However, no sign of general burning appeared and the mithraeum was thus not completely destroyed. Instead, its undamaged stone furnishings were reused in a third iteration of the temple.\textsuperscript{179}

\textsuperscript{175} CIMRM 844; Richmond & Gillam 1951, 4-9.
\textsuperscript{176} Richmond & Gillam 1951, 9-14.
\textsuperscript{177} For a detailed description of these internal refurbishings, see Richmond & Gillam 1951, 15-27.
\textsuperscript{178} Richmond & Gillam 1951, 67.
\textsuperscript{179} Richmond & Gillam 1951, 27.
This third *mithraeum* was a complete reconstruction of the previous temple (Fig. 20). While the full internal dimensions of the building were the same as before, the old apse were curtailed to such an extent as to become a niche 0.40 m. deep. The anteroom was made larger than ever before, measuring c. 2.40 m. from back to front, and was yet again divided from the main part by a wooden screen. In the corner formed by the screen and the east wall of the *mithraeum* stood a stone pedestal, at the foot of which was found the fallen statue of a seated mother goddess of ungainly proportions. Beyond the screen, at each end of the *podia*, were
placed statues of Cautes and Cautopates. The backs of the statues were not worked and they were thus probably intended to stand against a wall, presumably elsewhere in the *mithraeum*, before being relocated. Incorporated into the fronts of the *podia* was a line of oak roof-posts, set at 1.50 m. intervals, which ran the full length of the building, as well as two small altars on each side. Further, three larger altars stood in a line in front of the niche.\(^{180}\)

This final restoration of the *mithraeum* has been suggested to belong to the period of occupation on Hadrian's Wall which begins in 297-305 CE, thus placing the destruction of the

---

\(^{180}\) CIMRM 849-850; Richmond & Gillam 1951, 29-39.
second temple before this date. The total absence of Constantinian coins seems to indicate that the building did not continue to be in use for very long into the fourth century. Some sculptural pieces had most likely been deliberately removed, such as the representation of the bull-slaying Mithras – which was damaged in the process and left behind a fragment of the bull's muzzle – while others were left to their fate. At an undisclosed later time, the building gave in to the unstable ground conditions and collapsed.  

4.1. Access and Movement  
The sense of forward movement is prevalent throughout every building stage of the mithraeum, despite it rarely being axially consistent. Indeed, all three temples had their main doorway aligned slightly east of the main axis formed by the central aisle. Upon entering the main sanctuary, the movement along the central aisle was the only pronounced way of moving which remained consistent throughout the lifespan of the mithraeum. Conversely, the anteroom would consistently have offered more alternatives with regards to movement.  

Throughout its useful life, the mithraeum could only be entered through a single doorway located upon the south wall of the building. This doorway provided access to the anteroom, which was uniformly separated from the main sanctuary by the wooden screen. Immediately to the right of the entrance there was a drain carrying a small feeder spring down to the main valley. In the first temple it was covered with portable stone slabs, thus making it possible to draw running water from it. Despite the possibility of receiving water for use in cult activities, there are no indications that this was actually done. In later stages this drain was completely concealed beneath the ever rising floor level, indicating that it probably was not used as a source of water.  

There are no indications of any structural features occupying this space in the second mithraeum, but in the third mithraeum the pedestal of the seated mother goddess stood in the northeast corner formed between the screen and the wall. Beyond the pedestal stood also the base of a sizeable jar, presumably for offerings.  

Because of the doorway not being aligned with the main axis of the mithraeum, there was consistently more space to the west in the anteroom than there was to the east. From the second temple onwards, a frequently used hearth was aligned against the heavily calcined south wall just west of the doorway. Besides the hearth, there were three features in the

---

181 Richmond & Gillam 1951, 39-44.
182 Richmond & Gillam 1951, 5-6.
183 Richmond & Gillam 1951, 30. The jar by the mother goddess is catalogued at no. 42, see Richmond & Gillam 1951, 75.
184 Richmond & Gillam 1951, 14, 18-19, 21, 29.
west part of the anteroom of the second *mithraeum*, each connected to a different phase. First, there was a stone bench running the length of the west wall. This bench was later removed as part of the first refurbishing and was replaced by an oblong stone-lined pit, resembling a coffin. In the second refurbishing this pit was concealed under the floor and a stone bench was once again installed, this time along the length of the wooden screen. No features occupying this space were discerned in the third building.\(^{185}\)

Through a doorway in the wooden screen, the initiate would have entered the main sanctuary of the *mithraeum*. On the far side of the central aisle stood the cult sculpture, almost certainly a version of the bull-slaying Mithras. In the first temple, this area was the place of a low stone platform for an altar and/or sculptures. With the addition of the apse a large horizontal slab, which carried the upper part of the wall, likely acted as a shelf or bracket for the bull-slaying Mithras, probably in the form of a carved stone relief.\(^ {186}\)

Any ritual activity directed at this cult sculpture, or any of the altars that were subsequently placed in front of it, would have been constricted to the central aisle. This would also have been true for the distribution of dining vessels as a prelude to the ritual feasting. Throughout the different iterations of the *mithraeum*, the most commonly occurring pottery vessels are cups, cooking pots, and *mortaria*, closely followed by platters, bowls, and jars. One of the cooking pots was caked in soot which, along with the other cooking pots and *mortaria*, suggests the preparation of food, an act which probably occurred in connection to the constant hearth in the anteroom. The serving during the ritual meals would thus have ran a course from the anteroom and up the central aisle to the initiates reclining along the *podia*.\(^ {187}\) If the collection of animal bones recovered from within the *mithraeum* serves as any indication of what was eaten, young pigs were in clear majority, followed by sheep/goats.\(^ {188}\)

A feature common to several stages of the *mithraeum* were the steps on each side immediately within the entrance to the main sanctuary. These provided access to the *podia* and it seems valid to suppose that the *podia* were accessed from this end even when no steps could be discerned, given the available space between them and the wooden screen. The length of the *podia* varied substantially over the life of the building, which also affected the available space at their ends. For example, the first iteration of the second *mithraeum* left

---

\(^{185}\) Richmond & Gillam 1951, 12, 19, 21.

\(^{186}\) Richmond & Gillam 1951, 6, 9-10.

\(^{187}\) For the catalogue of the pottery vessels, see Richmond & Gillam 1951, 63-80. The cooking pot caked in soot is catalogued at no. 4; Richmond & Gillam 1951, 64.

\(^{188}\) Richmond & Gillam 1951, 89-92.
almost no space at all between the podia and the wooden screen, while the third mithraeum sported much greater space at this location in the temple. This would have had a significant influence on the movement within the main sanctuary, affecting the ease with which the initiates could access the podia.

On the west podia belonging to the second refurbishment of the second temple there was found a shovel – vatillum – of wrought iron. The lower part of the shaft and parts of the bowl were decorated with simple twists. The residue found in the bowl contained some carbonaceous material with the properties of pinecone charcoal.\(^{189}\) This suggests that the shovel was in use as an altar shovel, thereby constructing another different form of movement for the initiate in question within the mithraeum. Indeed, a shovel is one of the symbols of the grade leo, as depicted on the panel in the mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia.\(^{190}\) Therefore, the presence of the shovel might also suggest the presence of at least one leo at Carrawburgh.

4.2. Presentation and Visibility

The layout of the podia within the mithraeum is reminiscent of an arena design. Thus, depending on their reclining position, the initiates would likely have been facing each other. They would also have been facing the central aisle and would thus have been in direct line of sight of any ritual activity it directed, such as that aimed at the cult sculpture or the line of altars. From the podia the initiates would have had an almost unobstructed view of the entire mithraeum, with the only constantly obstructing objects being the roof posts of the third building and the wooden screen. In the first mithraeum, the timber posts in front of the altar platform might have held curtains, which would have controlled the visibility of the cult sculpture. Thus, the god could both be hidden from view and revealed as demanded by ritual circumstance.\(^{191}\)

The wooden screen would have almost completely hidden the anteroom from view, except that which could be seen through the doorway. However, it is possible that the doorway could have been covered by hanging textiles, thus completely obscuring visibility. This would also have been the case from inside the anteroom, where the wooden screen would have concealed the activity within the main sanctuary. This ensured that any activity carried out in the anteroom, which probably were of a preparatory nature, such as the cooking of food, did not interfere with any ritual enacted within the main sanctuary.

\(^{189}\) Richmond & Gillam 1951, 84, 87. See chapter 4.2 for more information on the pinecone charcoal.

\(^{190}\) Clauss 2001, 135.

\(^{191}\) Richmond & Gillam 1951, 6.
There is evidence for the occurrence of spectacle at different times within the *mithraeum*. Pinecones of the Mediterranean stone pine were found both in the first temple and the first refurbishing of the second temple. In the central aisle of the first temple, one of the found pinecones was heavily charred. The pinecone had been deliberately carbonized by being roasted, in order to serve as fuel. Tests demonstrated that such fuel burns steadily and slowly with a dark red glow and gives off a pungent aroma of pine.\(^\text{192}\) Further, one of the altars of the third temple displayed Mithras with the radiate crown of Sol, of which the individual rays were pierced. A receptacle carved in the back of the altar allowed for the placement of a lamp, in order to illuminate the rays.\(^\text{193}\) Combined with the dark red glow and smell of the pinecones, this would undoubtedly have created a powerful atmosphere within the gloomy interior of the *mithraeum*.

4.3. Ritual Space and Social Relationships

Of the three altars in front of the cult niche in the third *mithraeum*, only the previously mentioned with the pierced radiate crown contained a carved image. The other two had rather rudimentary decorations of ivy leaves and bolsters. All three altars, however, sported dedicatory inscriptions which named their dedicators as a series of military prefects, almost certainly from the nearby fort.\(^\text{194}\) Much like the dedicatory inscription upon the relief of Ulpius Silvanus in the *mithraeum* at Walbrook, these inscriptions would have had implications for the social relationships within the community, displaying the prefects' devotion to Mithras. Further, the final line of each inscription, "*votum solvit*" indicates that the dedication had come following a service from the god. Therefore, the prefects were not only devout of Mithras, they had also received the god's favour.

The placement of the altars in front of the cult niche means that they would have occupied perhaps the most prominent place in the entire *mithraeum*, as they were located directly below the cult sculpture. The devotion of the prefects would thus have been clearly visible to anyone upon the *podia* and even if they could not read the inscription from afar the association

---

\(^\text{192}\) Richmond & Gillam 1951, 6-7.

\(^\text{193}\) The altar in question was donated by one Marcus Simplicius Simplex. The identification of the figure on the altar as Mithras instead of Sol is based on the votive inscription, which reads: *Deo invicto / Mitrae M(arcus) Sim/plicius Simplex / pr(a)eff(ectus) v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*; Richmond & Gillam 1951, 37, 49.

\(^\text{194}\) CIMRM 845-848. The series of prefects suggest that the earlier altars would have also stood in earlier iterations of the *mithraeum*. The inscriptions, in possible order of date, read: 1. *D(eo) in(victo) M(itrae) / s(acrum) / Aul(us) Cluentius / Habitus pra(e)fectus / coh(ortis) I / Batavorum / domu Ulti/n(i)a Colon(ia) / Sept(imia) Aur(elia) Lar(ina) / v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*; 2. *Deo inv(icto) M(itrae) / L(uicius) Antonius / Proculus / Prae(fectus) coh(ortis) I Batavorum / Antoninianae / v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*; 3. See note 188; Richmond & Gillam 1951, 45-51.
between dedicator and dedication would have been profound. The latest altar, that of Marcus Simplicius Simplex and the one showing Mithras with a pierced radiate crown, would likely have left a strong impact on his fellow initiates as it was illuminated in the dimly lit interior of the *mithraeum*. 
5. The World of the Cave – Ritual Space within the Mysteries of Mithras

The three mithraea discussed and analyzed over the course of the case studies all share the characteristic central aisles and flanking podia, with cult niches and/or sculptures at the far end of the temples. Only the mithraeum beneath Santa Prisca contained multiple rooms besides an anteroom, which both Carrawburgh and Walbrook also sported. However, next to nothing is known about the anteroom at Walbrook, on account of it being unexcavated. Therefore, this comparative discussion will initially focus on the particular space which shared similarities throughout the mithraea – the rooms with the characteristic elements – before focusing on those two anterooms about which there is substantial information.195

As previously mentioned, all three mithraea consisted of the characteristic central aisle and podia. Further, the possible ways of moving within each main sanctuary would not have been markedly different. Besides each central aisle, few alternatives for movement were offered, one exception being the space of room W at Santa Prisca. Of course, this similarity in movement has its cause in the overall similar layouts of each mithraeum; in essence, the designs of Santa Prisca, Walbrook, and Carrawburgh were the same. However, minor differences did manifestly exist and these would have had implications for the movement within the room, but not enough to be overtly tangible. At the most, they would have ordained access to the podia in different places or facilitated the serving of food.

As would have been expected, the focus of each mithraeum would have been the cult sculpture or relief at the far end of the central aisle. Consequently, this feature tended to be surrounded by alternatives for ritual action, such as altars or basins. This is indeed the case in all three mithraea, were the different iterations of cult sculptures or reliefs would have been the single most important structure within the room, and thus the most prominently visible. Because of this it was suggested in the analysis that some of the most important rituals might have been enacted in front of it, especially the initiation into the Mysteries. If Tertullian's account is valid, water would have been a staple within the activities of the mithraeum, which is further suggested by the frequently occurring receptacles for water. All three mithraea would have had the possibility of drawing water within the temple, which might be one of the reasons for constructing the British mithraea on such wet ground.

195 For the sake of convenience, the mithraea will only be referred to by the name of their location, i.e. Santa Prisca, Walbrook, and Carrawburgh. This means that unless anything else is stated these names will refer to the mithraea.
Water would also have been important for the washing of the many pottery vessels used during the ritual meals. The composition of these meals seems to have been more or less similar, with the same types of meat offered throughout the three mithraea. Interestingly enough, however, there have not been found many clear inferences of bloody sacrifice, or common slaughter, within any of the mithraea. Instead, the altars seems to have been more inclined to take burning offerings, such as that containing pinecone fuel at Carrawburgh. It is therefore likely that the initiates feasted on the meat of already slaughtered animals, such as that which could be bought in the market. It is not completely improbable that bloody sacrifice did occur during the enactment of certain rituals, which might explain why so many recovered animal bones indicate young individuals; it would have been too much a hassle to bring fully adult animals down the rather cramped central aisle.

The importance of spectacle within rituals is exemplified throughout the three mithraea. In Santa Prisca and at Carrawburgh there has been found similar representations of gods with pierced radiate crowns – Sol at Santa Prisca and Mithras at Carrawburgh – which could have been illuminated from behind to great effect. Pinecones of the Mediterranean stone pine were found at both Walbrook and Carrawburgh which likely served as altar fuel, giving off a dark red glow and a pungent aroma of pine. Further, the cult sculptures at the British mithraea might have been coverable by hanging textiles, thus enabling them to be dramatically revealed at a critical point during the ritual. What role the spectacle served in the context of the rituals is difficult to say, although it might have been important simply for being what it is. Within the Mithraic community, the use of such atmospherically enhancing items might have strengthened the social ties between the initiates, since such a special experience would likely have been a powerful collective memory.

Because of the other rooms, the podia in the mithraeum of Santa Prisca were interrupted by doorways, one of which – door e – was subsequently walled up. This interruption created a partition of the north podium, dislodging part of it from the greater structure. The dislodged part was located directly underneath the fresco of Sol and Mithras and was suggested in the analysis to have been the podium of the pater and heliodromus. Based on what is known, such a clear partition of the space within the room was present neither at Walbrook nor Carrawburgh, where the podia seemingly ran uninterrupted. Further, the thronus – which was constructed in the walled up door e – has no counterpart at either of the British mithraea.

Turcan 1996, 234.
It is thus interesting to consider the implications of the social hierarchy with reference to the absence of these features. At Santa Prisca, the hierarchy would constantly have been reaffirmed through both the aforementioned architectural features and the frescoes, both considering their motifs and the *dipinti* above them. Because only their foundations have survived, it is impossible to know if the walls at Walbrook and Carrawburgh sported frescoes, although it is not improbable. Based on what is known, however, the hierarchy of the Mysteries would have been far more tangible at Santa Prisca than it would have been at Walbrook or Carrawburgh.

This does not necessarily signify that the hierarchy was less observed the farther away from a concentration of the cult a *mithraea* was located, but rather that it might have been hinged on the composition of the group itself. The community at Santa Prisca would likely have been larger than either of the British communities, thus making it more important to convey the relationships of authority. Since Rome seems to have been a stronghold of the cult, it is possible that there might have been a greater number of aspiring initiates constantly in line than would have been the case at, for example, Carrawburgh. Thus, the greater the influx of new initiates, the greater the need to contain them within the established order. Because of this, it would have been desirable to expose them as much as possible to the already existing hierarchy, constantly reminding them of their place.

The communities at Walbrook and Carrawburgh would likely have been smaller and not experienced as much of a pressure from new initiates as at Santa Prisca. Therefore, the reaffirming of authority would not have needed to be overtly explicit, since the group might have tended to be rather stable. This would especially have been the case at Carrawburgh at the extreme end of the Roman world, were most initiates would have belonged to the nearby military fort. Expressions of authority could thus afford to be rather implicit, as exemplified by the relief of Ulpius Silvanus at Walbrook and the three altars at Carrawburgh. This is likely the cause for the omission of grades from the epigraphy; it did not need to be told because the name alone would have been enough.

The implications this might have had on the enacted rituals are difficult to consider, mainly because of the rather scant evidence of Mithraic ritual in general. What can be suggested, however, is that the initiatory rituals might very well have been affected by these different attitudes to hierarchical affirmation. The seven grades of the Mysteries are perhaps the most tangible evidence for the existence of a hierarchy within the Mithraic communities. It is therefore possible that the initiatory rituals would have differed depending on whether they were enacted at Santa Prisca or, for example, at Carrawburgh. At Santa Prisca, the aspiring
initiate would have been surrounded by reminders of his place within the Mysteries, such as the hierarchy displayed in the procession of the grades to the fresco of Sol and Mithras, where a raven-masked servant did the waiting. Conversely, this would not have been the case at Carrawburgh or Walbrook, where no equivalents to such reminders would have existed.

The two anterooms of which there is substantial information are those of Santa Prisca and Carrawburgh. Despite both acting as the liminal space through which the initiates would have to walk in order to reach the main sanctuary, they do not share many similarities with regards to their features. First, and perhaps most significant, the anteroom at Carrawburgh had an overt character of being a space associated with preparatory actions. There was a hearth used for the preparing of food and there would have existed several possible receptacles for the storage of pottery and paraphernalia. The anteroom at Carrawburgh was not a space in which an initiate would spend longer times being inactive, since the room suggests an atmosphere of activity.

The situation at Santa Prisca is almost the complete opposite. Nothing inside room V suggested any activities connected to the preparation of ritual and the existence of the podia indicates that this room would have contained reclining initiates. These profound differences thus form almost complete opposites: preparation for ritual versus the enactment of ritual, and activity versus inactivity. More likely than not, these differences had much to do with the larger community at Santa Prisca, which forced the second stage of the mithraeum to include podia in the anteroom. Thus, the anteroom almost became an extension of the main sanctuary, the implications for which with regards to social relationships have been explored above.

Despite these differences, there is one feature that both anterooms share: the presence of a divinity. In the anteroom at Santa Prisca there was the enclosed space with its stucco representation of what might have been a Giant, while at Carrawburgh there was the ungainly mother goddess. Both of these had receptacles for the offering of votives – the projection at Santa Prisca and the jar at Carrawburgh – and both were, curiously enough, located on the right-hand side of the entrance to the main sanctuary.

The existence of the divinities in the anterooms, thus being located within the mithraea but not inside the main sanctuaries, might suggest the existence of specific relationships between different sculptural representations within the ritual world of the cult. There might have existed a dividing line between who or what was allowed to be worshipped within the main sanctuary of the mithraeum, and thus share the cave with Mithras. The placement of deities outside of this metaphorical cave, in the liminal space of the anteroom, can be indicative of a
similar perception with regards to worship. Thus, the reason why these divinities did not stand inside the main sanctuary is because they did not belong in the world of Mithras, but rather in a world directly in connection to it. They were allowed to receive offerings, but not to share the cave.

With regards to geographic variations, the differences between the *mithraea* and their relation to both ritual and initiates seems to have been most tangible in connection to the expression of hierarchy. Within each of the main sanctuaries, the central aisle would have offered the most consistent way of moving around, with only small variations with regards to alternative movement displayed within the different temples. The archaeological assemblages yield surprisingly similar artifacts, even excluding the pottery vessels associated with the ritual feasting. Instead, the differences between the communities would likely have existed mostly within the communities themselves, as well as the rituals they took part in and which would have only served to further define these differences. Thus, when speaking of the "Mysteries", it might be appropriate to emphasize the plural of the word.
6. Conclusions

In the introductory chapter, three questions were postulated as being central to the main analysis. These questions were:

- How might the physical space of the *mithraeum* relate to ritual action and how can this manifest itself in the archaeological record?
- What role might the enacted rituals have served within the context of the Mysteries and how could this be reflected in the design of the *mithraeum*?
- Is it possible to discern variations in the analysis of the two previous questions with regards to geography and associated contexts?

The analyses carried out over the course of the three case studies reflected these questions in their structure. Hence, the first question corresponded to the dynamic and static parts of each analysis, the second question to the discussions concerning the relationship between the *mithraea* and the social hierarchy of the initiates, and the third question to the comparative role of the last two case studies, which were compared to the analysis of the main case study in chapter 5. In this concluding chapter, summarizing answers to these questions will be presented.

The physical space of the *mithraeum* would constantly have offered one clearly defined way of moving around within the temple: the central aisle. This space, formed by the *podia*, would have directed any ritual action aimed at the cult niche or sculpture, the most prominent and important feature within each *mithraeum*. In this case, the space worked mainly as a conduit, forcing the ritual participant to move in a certain way. Given its prominent placement, it is highly probable that the most important rituals took place along the central aisle and directly in front of the cult niche or sculpture. There were likely both a dynamic and static aspect to ritual action, which might have yielded different experiences for the involved initiates. For instance, the use of spectacle as an atmospheric enhancer during certain rituals would likely have been most palpable when static.

Within the archaeological record there exists certain categories of artifacts which can be indicative of ritual action. The most obvious of these are perhaps artifacts which do not need to be discovered in a specific cult context to be interpreted as ritual objects, such as altars. The main difficulty lies with interpreting objects which also could be mundane, such as pottery. Instead, the interpretation of these hinge on the context. In this case, the existence of pottery
within a *mithraeum* is most certainly indicative of the ritual feasting. It is important to note that the objects on their own might not be considered overtly "ritual", but rather that it is their connection to the action which creates the association. Hence, a cup might in itself not be a ritual artifact, but when filled with wine during the meals before Mithras it would have taken on a ritual significance. Here, the references to ritual in literary sources become important although, as previously mentioned, the literary sources bring issues of their own.

Within the context of the Mysteries, the most important role of the enacted rituals might have been the construction and reaffirmation of the hierarchy. Through the two rather securely known instances of ritual – the feasting and the initiation – this relationship between the initiates would have been strengthened. During the feasting, each initiate might have had a specific place upon the *podia* which related to his standing within the hierarchy. As suggested by both the frescoes at Santa Prisca and the mosaics in the *mithraeum* of Felicissimus at Ostia, the closer to the cult niche an initiate reclined, the higher his grade. Literary accounts further suggest the division of the grades by different functions, which might have been visualized within the frescoes at Santa Prisca. This suggests that the participation in feasting, or in any ritual, might have been dependent on an initiate's grade.

As shown in the comparative discussion, there exist variations in the execution of ritual spaces throughout different *mithraea*. The most tangible of these concern the way in which the hierarchy of the Mysteries were presented and reaffirmed within each main sanctuary. In the *mithraeum* of Santa Prisca, located in metropolitan Rome, there might have been a steadily larger influx of aspiring initiates, thus forcing the Mithraic community to keep the hierarchy as clear and visible as possible. In provincial Londinium and rural Carrawburgh the influx of new initiates would not have been as profound as in Rome, thus not necessitating overtly explicit reminders of the community's hierarchical structure. This does not signify that the hierarchy was less important outside of a metropolitan context, but rather that the community within a provincial or rural context might have been more stable over the long term.
Bibliography

Ancient Sources


Modern Sources

Beck, R. 1976. 'A Note on the Scorpion in the Tauroctony', *JMithSt* 1:2, 208-209.


David, J. 2000. 'The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?', *Numen* 47:2, 121-141.


Pettipiece, T. 2008. 'From Cybele to Christ: Christianity and the transformation of late Roman religious culture', *StudRelig* 37:1, 41-61.


Sick, D. H. 2004. 'Mit(h)ra(s) and the Myths of the Sun', *Numen* 51:4, 432-467.


