V The Mysteries of Isis and Mithras

In the previous chapters we have seen that lack of data is one of the great problems of studying ancient Mysteries. We have also concentrated on the Mysteries of divinities who were already part of the Greek pantheon in the classical period, if not before. In the Roman period there were also Mysteries of gods or goddesses who clearly did not originate within the area of Greek culture. For my penultimate chapter, before we look at the impact of the Mysteries on emerging Christianity (Ch. VI), I have selected those Oriental Mysteries about which we have a reasonable amount of information, namely those of Isis and Mithras. Of these Mysteries, those of Isis (§ 1) have long fascinated the Western world thanks to their description in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*,[1] whereas Mithras (§ 2) was popularised by Cumont (above, Preface) as the great competitor of nascent Christianity. Together they will allow us to form a better idea of how these Oriental Mysteries constructed their initiatory rituals in the first centuries of the Roman Empire.

1 Isis

The first mention of Egyptian Mysteries is in Herodotus. In the second book of his *Histories*, which is devoted to Egypt, he notes that in the sanctuary of Athena, i.e. the Egyptian goddess Neith, in Saïs there is a tomb of a god whose name he cannot reveal for religious reasons. This is not unusual for Herodotus, who is very reticent about cults that require secrecy, especially those connected with or analogous to the Mysteries.[2] These words, then, prepare the reader for a possible connection with Mysteries. Herodotus proceeds to relate that there is also a sacred pond in the sanctuary and, 'it is on this pond that they put on, by night (as in Eleusis: Ch. I.2), performances of his sufferings, which the Egyptians call Mysteries' (2.171.1). Here too Herodotus does not report the name of the relevant god, who is evidently Osiris, as the performance on the pond belongs to the so-called 'Navigation of Osiris', which took place during the Khoiak Festival in the autumn/early winter.[3] Yet we can be certain that the Egyptians did not call these perfor-

1 See the testimonies assembled in J. Assmann and F. Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien. Reisen in die Unterwelt in Aufklärung und Romantik* (Munich, 2011).

2 See, most recently, S. Gödde, 'οὗ μοι ὅσιόν ἐστι λέγειν. Zur Poetik der Leerstelle in Herodots Ägypten-Logos', in A. Bierl *et al.* (eds), *Literatur und Religion 2* (Berlin and New York, 2007) 41–90; T. Harrison, *Divinity and History: the Religion of Herodotus* (Oxford, 2002^2) 184–186.

3 For the festival, see E. Chassinat, *Le mystère d'Osiris au mois de Choiak*, 2 vols (Paris, 1966–1968); L.B. Mikhail, 'The Festival of Sokar: An Episode of the Osirian Khoiak Festival', *Göttinger*

mances Mysteries, which is clearly Herodotus' interpretation, as they did not have a general term or exact equivalent for what the Greeks called Mysteries.[4]

But which Mysteries did he have in mind? Elsewhere in Book II Herodotus interprets Osiris as Dionysos and Isis as Demeter.[5] The identification of Osiris with Dionysos is not strange, as Osiris, too, was torn to pieces like Dionysos (Ch. III.3). He was therefore the prime suspect, so to speak, to become Dionysos' equivalent. This suggests that Herodotus associated the Khoiak Festival not with the Eleusinian Mysteries but with the Orphic-Bacchic Mysteries, the only ones in which the tragic fate of Dionysos played a role.[6] In the – admittedly much later – treatise *On Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch notes that the dismemberment of Dionysos was one of the reasons to identify him with Osiris.[7] Herodotus' passage, therefore, is a valuable testimony for the early occurrence of the murder of Dionysos in those Mysteries (Ch. III.3).

Herodotus is the only early author to connect Egypt with Mysteries, but he does not mention Isis in this connection. It is not until the Hellenistic period that we hear of her association with Mysteries.[8] The oldest testimony occurs in a so-called aretalogy, a kind of self-revelation by the goddess, in which Isis enumerates her cultural and cosmological inventions. A total of six of these texts have been found inscribed on stone, dating from about 100 BC to the third century AD; they are all related to one another and probably go back to a specific archetype in the earliest Ptolemaic period.[9] The most elaborate one, found in Kyme on the west coast of Turkey and dating to the first or second century AD,[10] even thought it

Miszellen 82 (1994) 25–44; F. Gaudard, 'Pap. Berlin P. 8278 and Its Fragments: Testimony of the Osirian Khoiak Festival Celebration during the Ptolemaic Period', in V.M. Lepper (ed.), *Forschung in der Papyrussammlung* (Berlin, 2012) 271–286.

4 Burkert, *AMC*, 40; M. Bommas, *Heiligtum und Mysterium. Griechenland und seine ägyptischen Gottheiten* (Mainz, 2005) 6–7; L. Bricault, *Les cultes isiaques dans le monde gréco-romain* (Paris, 2013) 430: 'Ces mystères égyptiens sont bien differents des mystères initiatiques du monde grec'.

5 Hdt. 2.59.2 (Isis), 144.2 (Osiris), 156.5 (Isis), cf. G. Casadio, 'Osiride in Grecia e Dioniso in Egitto', in I. Gallo (ed.), *Plutarco e la religione* (Naples, 1996) 201–228; L. Coulon, 'Osiris chez Hérodote', in idem *et al.* (eds), *Hérodote et l'Égypte* (Lyon, 2013) 167–190.

6 See also W. Burkert, *Kleine Schriften III* (Göttingen, 2006) 153–159.

7 Plut. *Mor.* 364f–365a; note also 356b and 364de.

8 A very well-informed study of the Egyptian Mysteries, although not wholly up-to-date regarding the epigraphical material, is F. Dunand, 'Les mystères égyptiens aux époques hellénistique et romaine', in F. Dunand *et al.*, *Mystères et syncrètismes* (Paris, 1975) 12–62; see also ead., *Isis, Mère des Dieux* (Paris, 2000) 125–140.

9 A. Henrichs, 'The Sophists and Hellenistic Religion: Prodicus as the Spiritual Father of the Isis Aretalogies', *HSCP* 38 (1984) 139–158 at 156f.

10 *RICIS* 302/0204 (with previous bibliography), of which now a close, second-century AD copy has been found in Macedonian Cassandreia (*RICIS* Suppl. I, 113/1201), in addition to the already

wise to confirm the Egyptian credentials of its praises by telling us at the start, 'The following was copied from the stele which is in Memphis, where it stands before the temple of Hephaestus' (= Egyptian Ptah). Such an 'authentication' is a well-known literary topos and goes back a long way in history: the prologue of the Gilgamesh epic already invites us '[*Find*] the tablet box of cedar, [*release*] its clasps of bronze! [Open] the lid of its secret, [lift] up the tablet of lapis lazuli and read out all the misfortunes, all that Gilgamesh went through'.[11] Such fictitious stelae were a common form of religious propaganda in the Hellenistic and Roman period. Usually they occur in contexts that show Alexandrian or Egyptian influence,[12] as is hardly surprising: the topos was already current in ancient Egypt.[13]

That does not mean that these praises can be reduced to a strictly Egyptian background. The stress on Isis' status as a cultural heroine and former queen of Egypt would hardly be thinkable without the influence of the Sophist Prodicus.[14] Yet Egyptian influence is not in doubt, as the beginning of the aretalogy already states: 'I am Isis, the mistress of every land, and I was taught by Hermes (= Egyptian Thoth), and with Hermes I devised writing, both the hieroglyphic and the demotic, that all might not be written with the same letters'.[15] Early students of this aretalogy stressed the Greek content, but increasing interest in contemporary demotic literature has brought to light a number of hymns that put beyond doubt the great Egyptian influence on these praises.[16] At the same time, they also

known copies of Thessalonica (*IG* X 2.254 = *RICIS* 113/0545), Maroneia (*RICIS* 114/0202), Ios (*IG* XII 5.14 = *RICIS* 202/1101) and Telmessus (*RICIS* 306/0201: unpublished). For Isis' temple in Kyme, see S. Lagona, 'Cibele e Iside a Kyme Eolica', in H. Krinzinger (ed.), *Die Ägais und das westliche Mittelmeer* (Vienna, 2000) 143–148 (with previous bibliography).

11 *Gilgamesh*, Tablet 1.24–28, tr. A. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 2 vols (Oxford, 2003) 1.539; A.-J. Festugière, *Études de religion grecque et hellénistique* (Paris, 1972) 272–274; W. Speyer, *Bücherfunde in der Glaubenswerbung der Antike* (Göttingen, 1970); W. Burkert, *Kleine Schriften III* (Göttingen, 2006) 272; P. Piovanelli, 'The Miraculous Discovery of the Hidden Manuscript, or the Paratextual Function of the Prologue to the *Apocalypse of Paul*', in J.N. Bremmer and I. Czachesz (eds), *The* Visio Pauli *and the Gnostic* Apocalypse of Paul (Leuven, 2007) 23–49; R.L. Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography II* (Oxford, 2013) 624–625; this volume, Ch. IV.1.2. For later periods: J. Herman and F. Hallyn (eds), *Le topos du manuscrit trouvé* (Leuven, 1999).

12 A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* (Paris, 1950[3]) 1.319–324; Henrichs, 'The Sophists and Hellenistic Religion', 152 n. 57.

13 For examples, see M.A. Stadler, *Weiser und Wesir. Studien zu Vorkommen, Rolle und Wesen des Gottes Thot im ägyptischen Totenbuch* (Tübingen, 2009) 70–89.

14 Henrichs, 'The Sophists and Hellenistic Religion', 152–158.

15 See also the balanced survey of H.S. Versnel, *Ter Unus* (Leiden, 1990) 41–44.

16 T.M. Dousa, 'Imagining Isis: on Some Continuities and Discontinuities in the Image of Isis in Greek Hymns and Demotic Texts', in K. Ryholt (ed.), *Acts of the Seventh International Conference of Demotic Studies* (Copenhagen, 2002) 149–184; J.F. Quack, '"Ich bin Isis, die Herrin der beiden

demonstrate that the author of this aretalogy was not a slavish copier but an independent author who made his own choices from the available Greek and Egyptian literature.

It is striking that the earliest, still Hellenistic, aretalogies, those of Maroneia and Andros, do not contain the claim, 'I revealed Mysteries unto men', which we do find in the first or second-century AD ones of Kyme (24–25) and Ios (23); an early second-century AD aretalogy on papyrus also calls Isis '*mystis* at the Hellespont' (*P.Oxy*. 11.1380.110–11). Admittedly, the aretalogy of Maroneia (*ca*. 100 BC) states, 'She (Isis) has invented writings with Hermes, and from these the holy ones for the initiates, but the public ones for everyone' (22–24); a long digression credits Isis with first revealing the fruits of the earth in Athens and closely associates her with Triptolemos, so the author (and surely also the readers) wants to go hastily to Athens, where Eleusis is the jewel of the city (36–41). Although these lines connect Isis with Mysteries, they claim no more for her than the invention of books in the Mysteries and a close association with the most famous Mysteries of the day, those of Eleusis – not with her own Mysteries.[17]

All this seems an important indication that Mysteries were a relatively late arrival among the achievements of Isis as perceived by her propagandists. There are surprisingly few data for her Mysteries, despite the attention that initiation receives in Apuleius.[18] This is not the *communis opinio* of the scholarly world, however. The famous Egyptologist Erik Hornung states: 'Mit der Ausbreitung der Isiskulte über das gesamte römische Reich fanden auch die Isismysterien immer weitere Verbreitung. Von ihrer Bedeutung berichten viele antike Schriftsteller, dazu auch bildliche Darstellungen'.[19] Miguel John Versluys even argues: 'This aspect (i.e. Isis as a Mystery goddess) is, probably, the

Länder." Versuch zum demotischen Hintergrund der memphitischen Isisaretalogie', in S. Meyer (ed.), *Egypt – Temple of the Whole World* (Leiden, 2003) 319–365 (to be read with M.A. Stadler, 'Zur ägyptischen Vorlage der memphitischen Isisaretalogie', *Göttinger Miszellen* 204 (2005) 7–9); H. Kockelmann, *Praising the Goddess: A Comparative and Annotated Re-edition of Six Demotic Hymns and Praises Addressed to Isis* (Berlin and New York, 2008); M. Stadler, 'Spätägyptische Hymnen als Quellen für den interkulturellen Austausch und den Umgang mit dem eigenen Erbe – drei Fallstudien', in M. Witte and J. Diehl (eds), *Orakel und Gebete. Interdisziplinäre Studien zur Sprache der Religion in Ägypten, Vorderasien und Griechenland in hellenistischer Zeit* (Tübingen, 2009) 141–163 at 160–162 and 'New Light on the Universality of Isis', in J.F. Quack and C. Witschel (eds), *Religious Flows in the Roman Empire*, forthcoming.

17 *Contra* Bricault, *Les cultes isiaques*, 430, cf. *RICIS* 114/0202, cf. U. Bianchi, 'Iside dea misterica. Quando?', in G. Piccaluga (ed.), *Perennitas. Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich* (Rome, 1980) 9–36.

18 See also Burkert, *AMC*, 40.

19 E. Hornung, 'Altägyptische Wurzeln der Isismysterien', in C. Berger *et al.* (eds), *Hommages à Jean Leclant*, 3 vols (Cairo, 1994) 3.287–293 at 287; similarly, Bommas, *Heiligtum*, 74f.

defining characteristic of the Hellenistic and Roman Isis in religious terms'.[20] Nothing could be further from the truth. There was indeed a Mystery cult of Isis in Rome, as several inscriptions show, and perhaps in some other Italian towns, such as Brindisi;[21] we also have an altar dedicated to Isis Orgia in Thessalonica in the second century AD, an epithet that suggests Mysteries,[22] and which may well explain a broken column in Cenchreae with 'Orgia' inscribed on it;[23] we also have references to Mysteries of Isis in Anatolian Prusa and Tralles, probably Samos and perhaps Bithynia and Sagalassos;[24] but that is all. Outside Italy, the epicentre is clearly the eastern Mediterranean. None of these Mysteries can be securely dated earlier than the second century AD and none of them provides us with any detail whatsoever of the actual initiation. In consequence, Apuleius' novel *Metamorphoses*, which is plausibly dated to the last decades of the second century,[25] is of exceptional value for its account of the initiation of its protagonist. It is a literary account and not an anthropological 'thick' description, but there is general agreement that Apuleius was very well informed about the cult of Isis.[26] We will therefore proceed to his account, even if with some trepidation, as there are no other reports to act as a check on Apuleius' imagination.

We have arrived at the eleventh and last book of the novel.[27] In the previous book, the man-turned-donkey Lucius had heard that he had to copulate in public

20 M.J. Versluys, 'Orientalising Roman Gods', in L. Bricault and C. Bonnet (eds), *Panthée: Religious Transformations in the Graeco-Roman Empire* (Leiden, 2013) 235–259 at 253f.

21 Rome: *RICIS* *501/0127, 501/0165–66, 501/0168, 501/0185, *501/0188, *501/0190. Brindisi: 505/0101. Forlimpopoli: 512/0201. Modena: 512/0602.

22 *IG* X.2.1, 103 = *RICIS* 205/0104, cf. C. Steimle, *Religion im römischen Thessaloniki* (Tübingen, 2008) 103–106.

23 *RICIS* *102/0201, cf. J.L. Rife, 'Religion and Society at Roman Kenchreai', in S.J. Friesen *et al.* (eds), *Corinth in Context* (Leiden, 2010) 391–432 at 402–411.

24 Prusa: *I. Prusa* 48 =*RICIS* 308/0401. Tralles: *I. Tralles* 86 = *RICIS* 303/1301. Samos: *IG* XII 6.2, 600 = *RICIS* 205/0104. Bithynia: *RICIS* 308/1201. Sagalassos: *RICIS* *312/0501.

25 S.J. Harrison, *Apuleius: a Latin Sophist* (Oxford, 2000) 9.

26 Harrison, *Apuleius*, 238; J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods* (Leiden, 2008) 337.

27 I am of course heavily indebted to the standard commentary by J.G. Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros, The Isis-Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)* (Leiden, 1975); note also J.-C. Fredouille, *Apulei* Metamorphoseon *Liber XI* (Paris, 1975); Bricault, *Les cultes isiaques*, 428–445; U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser, '"Ich war ihr steter Diener": Kultalltag im Isis-Buch des Apuleius', in C. Hattler (ed.), *Imperium der Götter* (Karlsruhe and Darmstadt, 2013) 150–155. From the older literature, see especially R. Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* (Leipzig, 1927[3]) 220–234 (too Egyptianising); A.D. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford, 1933) 138–155; W. Wittmann, *Das Isisbuch des Apuleius* (Stuttgart, 1938) 100–121 (a clever book, but very much influenced by national-socialist ideology); M.P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion II* (Munich, 1961[2]) 632–638.

with a woman condemned to death for several murders. We might think that the simple fact of copulation with a human might have been somewhat off-putting, but not for this donkey. On the contrary, a wealthy Corinthian lady had already paid his trainer to have a night of love with him, and Lucius only too happily obliged in what must be the most outrageous love scene in ancient literature.[28] But even randy donkeys have their standards, and when he sees an opportunity Lucius flees the theatre and runs the six miles to the seaside of the neighbouring city of Cenchreae.[29]

At the beach Isis appears to him in a dream and promises to change him back into a human being. The next day there will be a great religious festival and if he plucks the roses out of the hand of her priest he will become normal again. Lucius approaches the priest, devours the roses and, as he tells us, 'at once my ugly animal form slipped from me' (13).[30] The problem of his nakedness is immediately solved by the priest, who nods to a participant in the procession, who gives him his outer, white garment (14, 15).[31] Subsequently, Lucius rents a house in Isis' sanctuary, where the goddess continuously appears in his dreams, urging him to become initiated.[32] Yet Lucius delays that final step, considering the many requirements of her cult, not least that of chastity (19).

Apuleius of course raises the suspense with Lucius' deliberations, but there is perhaps also a more general reason behind this delay: important transitions in life cannot be made light-heartedly.[33] Such transitions have to be dramatised, and that is what Apuleius is doing here. At the same time, Lucius promotes his own importance, as not a night passes without the goddess appearing to him and trying to persuade him to let himself be initiated (19: *censebat initiari*).

After he has had another dream in which the chief priest offers him gifts that clearly have a symbolic meaning (20), Lucius is ready for his initiation, but now

28 A. Henrichs, 'Missing Pages: Papyrology, Genre, and the Greek Novel', in D. Obbink and R. Rutherford (eds), *Culture in Pieces. Essays on Ancient Texts in Honour of Peter Parsons* (Oxford, 2011) 302–322 at 317.

29 P. Veyne, 'Apulée à Cenchrées', *Rev. Philol.* 39 (1965) 241–251; for the sanctuary of Isis, see Bommas, *Heiligtum*, 109–112, whose reconstruction of the ritual is speculative; K. Kleibl, *Iseion. Raumgestaltung und Kultpraxis in den Heiligtümern gräco-ägyptischer Götter im Mittelmeerraum* (Worms, 2009) 192–195.

30 All references to chapter numbers are to Book 11 of the *Metamorphoses*.

31 For the clothes, which are described by Apuleius in less detail and as more simple than they were in reality, see U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser, 'Des Mysten neue Kleider: Gewande(l)te Identität im Isisbuch des Apuleius', in S. Schrenk and K. Vössing (eds), *Kleidung und Identität in religiösen Kontexten der Kaiserzeit* (Regensburg, 2012) 149–162.

32 For inns in Isis' sanctuaries, see Kleibl, *Iseion*, 122–124.

33 J. Bremmer and N. Horsfall, *Roman Myth and Mythography* (London, 1987) 108–111.

the chief priest holds off (21).[34] He tells him that the day of the initiation is determined by a nod from the goddess, as is the selection of the administering priest and even the amount of money that has to be paid to be initiated. This is a recurring theme in Lucius' initiations and the frequency with which he mentions that theme suggests a certain ambivalence, if not outright criticism.[35] But, as the priest adds, Lucius is already starting to abstain from certain foods in order that he 'might more properly penetrate to the hidden mysteries of the purest ritual practice' (21). As this fasting is the beginning of the process of initiation, now is the right moment to touch briefly on a methodological question, to which previous analyses have not given enough thought. If the Isis Mysteries are indeed relatively recent – as they must be, as they are hardly attested before the second century AD – we must ask: where did the priests get their ideas as they constructed this new ritual of the Isis Mysteries?

The most plausible answer seems to be: from their own rituals and other Mysteries. The obvious candidates in the latter respect are of course the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Mysteries of Samothrace, the most prestigious Mysteries of the period, but the priests may also have considered Dionysiac Mysteries. At the same time, they had their own Isiac rituals in their own Isiac temples – rituals and architecture that must have contributed to the *bricolage* of the initiation. The existing rituals derived from the priests' own Egyptian tradition, but they had also been adapted to the Greek and Roman world. We must always be prepared to look both to Egypt and to the contemporary world of the Roman empire when we analyse our material.

So let us return to Lucius. Dreams are clearly an important part of the cult of Isis. The somewhat younger traveller Pausanias (10.32.9) tells us that in Tithorea in Phocis only those who had been summoned by Isis in a dream were admitted to her temple.[36] Incubation was practised in some sanctuaries of Egyptian gods, for example in Athens and Delos, and we even hear of dream exegetes there.[37] Moreover, many inscriptions to Isis mention that they were erected 'on the order

34 It is striking how Apuleius varies the terminology for the chief priest: 16, 20 (*summus sacerdos*), 17 (*sacerdos maximus*), 21 (*primarium sacerdotem*), 22 (*sacerdotem praecipuum*).

35 Apul. *Met*. 11.18.3, 21.4, 22.3, 23.1, 25.5, 28.4–6 and 30.1–2, cf. Fredouille, *Apulei* Metamorphoseon *Liber XI*, 12–13; Harrison, *Apuleius*, 245.

36 Cf. Nock, *Conversion*, 152–155; Bommas, *Heiligtum*, 105–108. For Tithorea, see also U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser, 'Exklusives Mysterium oder inszeniertes Wissen? Die ägyptischen Kulte in der Darstellung des Pausanias', dans A. Hoffmann (ed.), *Ägyptische Kulte und ihre Heiligtümer im Osten des Römischen Reiches* (Istanbul, 2005) 259–280.

37 Athens: *RICIS* 101/0206. Delos: 101/0221, 202/0209. For the Egyptian background, see M.A. Stadler, *Einführung in die ägyptische Religion ptolemäisch-römischer Zeit nach den demotischen religiösen Texten* (Berlin, 2012) 74–81.

of the goddess'.[38] Apuleius is thus referring to a well-known characteristic of the Isis cult when he mentions these dreams.

The same must be true of the reference to fasting and abstention from certain types of food. The Egyptian priest and Stoic philosopher Chaeremon, who was also a tutor of Nero, wrote a book, whose title is unknown but from which the third-century pagan philosopher Porphyry quotes in his own book *On Abstinence*. From this we know that the Egyptian priests did not eat bread, fish, carnivorous birds or, sometimes, even eggs. When preparing for an important function in some kind of ritual they had to abstain for a number of days from all animal food, vegetables and sex. From this tradition of ascetic abstention, the Isis priests had clearly made a selection for the initiates in Roman times, perhaps depending on the local ecology.[39]

Lucius' patience is rewarded. One night the goddess appears and tells him that the day, so desired by him, has come. Of course she does not forget to tell him the cost of the ritual but, perhaps as a comfort, she also informs him that it is the high priest himself, Mithras, who will initiate him, being joined to him by a 'divine conjunction of stars'. This astrological detail points to the great interest in astrology at the time as well as to the attested astronomical activities of the Egyptian priests.[40] The name Mithras has often set off a discussion of syncretism in the first centuries of the Christian era.[41] At the time of Cumont and long afterwards, the term 'syncretism' carried a pejorative sense and suggested a mixing of 'pure' Christianity or Roman religion with Oriental religious elements. Most scholars today are rather hesitant about using the term, as they have become increasingly aware that all religions constantly borrow elements from other religions or ideologies: there are no 'pure' religions.[42] Nonetheless a reference to

38 See L. Bricault, *Receuil des inscriptions concernant les cultes isiaques*, 3 vols (Paris, 2005) 2.790: index s.v. 'Impératives'.

39 Porph. *Abst*. 4.6–8 = Chaeremon fr. 10, to be read with the commentaries of Van der Horst and of Patillon and Segonds in their Budé edition of Porphyry *ad loc*.; note also Plut. *Mor*. 352f, 353d–f.

40 R.A. Parker and O. Neugebauer, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts*, 3 vols (Providence, 1960–1969); G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton, 1993^2) 67–68; J. Dieleman, 'Claiming the Stars. Egyptian Priests Facing the Sky', in S. Bickel and A. Loprieno (eds), *Basel Egyptology Prize 1* (Basel, 2003) 277–289 and 'Stars and the Egyptian Priesthood in the Greco-Roman Period', in S. Noegel *et al.* (eds), *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World* (University Park, 2003) 137–153. For the interest in astrology, see F. Cumont, *Astrologie et Religion chez les Grecs et les Romains*, ed. I. Tassignon (Brussels and Rome, 2000).

41 See already Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* (1910^1) 29–30 = 1927^3, 42f.

42 R. Gordon, 'Synkretismus I', in *Der Neue Pauly* 11 (2001) 1151–1155; C. Markschies, 'Synkretismus. V. Kirchengeschichtlich', in *TRE* 32 (2001) 538–552; C. Auffarth, 'Synkretismus. IV. Antike', in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*^{4}, vol. 7 (Tübingen, 2004) 1962–1964; M. Tardieu, 'Les facettes

the competing god Mithras would be rather surprising here. Joachim Quack proposes to interpret 'Mithras' as a form of the Egyptian name Month-Re, traces of which can still be found in the magical papyri.[43] The proposed identification is hardly plausible from a phonetic point of view, but Apuleius also mentions the Egyptian Zatchlas, a first prophet, whose name has caused equal headaches for Egyptologists, who have not been able to give it a plausible explanation.[44] In fact, Mithras as a personal name was not unknown in antiquity, although usually written as Mithres,[45] and the name may well point the reader to the cosmological speculations of the Mithras cult, the more so as the description of Mithras as *meum iam parentem* is redolent of *Pater*, the highest position in the Mithraic grade system (§ 2).[46]

After the usual ritual of the opening of the temple,[47] Mithras brings out some books 'from the secret part of the sanctuary', to which only the priests had access.[48] The books, as Lucius notes, were 'inscribed with unknown characters. Some used the shapes of all sorts of animals to represent abridged expressions of liturgical language; in others ends of the letters were knotted and curved like wheels or interwoven like vine-tendrils to protect their meaning from the curiosity of the uninitiated' (22.8). The last words look like a contemporary interpretation, but the description is fairly accurate and suggests that part of the books were

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du syncrétisme: méthodologie de la recherche et histoire des concepts', in G. Veinstein (ed.), *Syncrétismes et hérésies dans l'Orient seldjoukide et ottoman (XIVe–XVIIe s.)* (Paris, 2005) 3–16; P. Xella, '"Syncrétisme" comme catégorie conceptuelle', in C. Bonnet *et al.* (eds), *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain: cent ans après Cumont (1906–2006)* (Brussels and Rome, 2009) 134–150 (with detailed bibliography).

43 J.F. Quack, 'Königsweihe, Priesterweihe, Isisweihe', in J. Assmann (ed.), *Ägyptische Mysterien?* (Munich, 2002) 95–108 at 95 n. 2.

44 For Zatchlas and comparable Egyptian priests in Roman times, see J. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites* (Leiden, 2005) 240–254.

45 Mithres: for example, H. Solin, *Die stadtrömischen Sklavennamen. Ein Namenbuch*, 3 vols (Stuttgart, 1996) 2.301 and *Die Griechischen Personennamen in Rom*, 3 vols (Berlin and New York, 2003^2) 1.405; *SEG* 32.1236–1237, 38.1218, 46.1519, 54.1227, 57.1164–1165, 58.1664. Mithras: Plut. *Mor.* 1126e; *REG* 65 (1952) 1183; *Anatol. Stud.* 18 (1968) 94 no. 1, 01, 5f.; *IG* XIV 1815; *I. Tralles*: 180 (with thanks to Richard Gordon).

46 As is suggested by K. Dowden, 'Geography and Direction in *Metamorphoses* 11', in W. Keulen and U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser (eds), *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass III: The Isis Book* (Leiden, 2012) 156–167 at 166.

47 R. Merkelbach, *Isis Regina – Zeus Sarapis* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1995) 150–151; S. Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, tr. D. Lorton (Ithaca and London, 2000) 76–88; Kleibl, *Iseion*, 131–133.

48 Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 5.4.19.3 = Chaeremon fr. 20D, cf. J. Vergote, 'Clement d'Alexandrie et l'écriture égyptienne. Essai d'interprétation de Stromates V, IV, 20–21', *Le Muséon* 52 (1939) 199–221.

written in hieroglyphs or, perhaps, the hieratic script.[49] It cannot be stressed strongly enough that such a use of books was very uncommon in Greek and Roman religion, although we have seen that books also occurred in the Orphic-Bacchic Mysteries (Ch. III.2). The books of the Egyptian scholarly priests, whom the Greeks called *hierogrammateis*, 'temple scribes',[50] were called 'books of the gods' or 'divine books' in Egyptian, which the Greeks in turn translated as *hierai bibloi*, 'holy books'.[51] These books were composed, copied and preserved 'in the temple libraries and the House-of-Life, the cultic library that housed those texts that were seen as the emanations of the sun god Re'[52] and which was the place where these writings were discussed.[53] In our case we do not know where exactly the priests preserved their books, but the Egyptian script must certainly have helped to raise the solemnity of the occasion, even if Lucius did not understand Egyptian, which the priest perhaps translated or paraphrased.

From the books the priest reads out what Lucius had to buy for his initiation. Unfortunately, he gives no details, but one thing is certain: there was no such thing as a free lunch in this ritual! Naturally, he has to take a bath, as such purificatory baths were very common in all kinds of rituals, including several Mysteries, as we have seen (Ch. I.1 and *passim*);[54] the fact that he even receives an

49 Wittman, *Das Isisbuch*, 108–109; Griffiths, *The Isis-Book*, 285; Quack, 'Königsweihe', 95–96; Bommas, *Heiligtum*, 7–9. For late hieroglyphics, see P. Derchain, 'Les hiéroglyphes à l'époque ptolémaïque', in C. Baurain *et al.* (eds), *Phoinikeia grammata: lire et écrire en Méditerranée* (Namur, 1989) 243–256.

50 For this position, see most recently K.-T. Zauzich, 'Hierogrammat', in *LÄ* 2 (1977) 1199–1201; Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*, 207.

51 Bremmer, 'From Holy Books to Holy Bible: an Itinerary from Ancient Greece to Modern Islam via Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity', in M. Popović (ed.), *Authoritative Scriptures in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden, 2010) 327–360.

52 Dieleman, *Priests*, 207; emanations of Re, Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 57–60; R. Jasnow and K.-T. Zauzich, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Thoth* (Wiesbaden, 2005) 27–29. House-of-Life: see most recently K. Ryholt, 'On the Contents and Nature of the Tebtunis Temple Library', in S. Lippert and M. Schentuleit (eds), *Tebtynis und Soknopaiu Nesos: Leben im römerzeitlichen Fajum* (Wiesbaden, 2005) 141–170, with important new material on the contents of Egyptian temple libraries; K. Zinn, 'Tempelbibliotheken im Alten Ägypten', in H. Froschauer and C. Römer (eds), *Bibliotheken: Leben und Lesen in den frühen Klöstern Ägyptens* (Vienna, 2008) 81–91; Kleibl, *Iseion*, 118–120. The libraries are mentioned already by Hecataeus of Abdera *FGrH* 264 F 25 (as quoted by Diod. Sic. 1.49.3); Ael. Arist. *Or.* 8.29; G. Burkard, 'Bibliotheken im alten Ägypten. Überlegungen zum (*sic*) Methodik ihres Nachweises und Übersicht zum Stand der Forschung', *Bibliothek. Forschung und Praxis* 4 (1980) 79–115.

53 J. Osing, *Hieratische Papyri aus Tebtunis I* (Copenhagen, 1998) 22f.

54 R. Parker, *Miasma* (Oxford, 1983) 20.

additional sprinkling stresses its importance.[55] Water was very important in the sanctuaries of Isis and various dedications of fountains to the goddess have survived.[56] The priest then asked for forgiveness, another traditional theme in Egyptian priests' initiations.[57] Together with the bathing, it meant that the future initiate was now sufficiently pure of body and soul to approach the goddess. The priest next uttered some holy words and ordered Lucius to abstain from meat and wine for a period of ten days. That particular period occurs already in the Bacchanalian Mysteries of the early second century BC, but it is also the normal period of abstention in the cult of Isis in the Late Republic and Early Empire, as we know from the complaints of Roman love poets who missed their girlfriends for that period.[58] There were even associations of worshippers of Egyptian gods that met every ten days.[59] Evidently, in the construction of the Mysteries the priests once again made use of the traditional rituals of the cult of Isis.

All these preliminary rituals happened during the day, but the actual initiation had to take place at night, the normal time of initiation in ancient Mysteries (Ch. I.2 and *passim*). Suddenly a crowd of worshippers turned up and honoured Lucius with presents, a custom which seems to have developed in Hellenistic times.[60] After all the uninitiated have been dismissed – Apuleius here alludes to the Vergilian *procul, o procul este, profani* (*Aen*. 6.258: Appendix 2.1),[61] but this banishing of the uninitiated was traditional in the early Orphic-Bacchic Mysteries (Ch. III.2) – Lucius receives a linen robe, as was normal in the cult of

55 Wittmann, *Das Isisbuch*, 109–110.

56 Water: R. Wild, *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis* (Leiden, 1981); Bommas, *Heiligtum*, 41–42, 45; Kleibl, *Iseion*, 102–114, 154f. Fountains: *RICIS* 202/0279 (Delos), 509/0201 (Helvia Ricina), 602/0301 (Alameda).

57 J.A. Hanson (Loeb) wrongly translates *praefatus deum veniam* with 'asking the gods' favour', but the priest asks for forgiveness, a traditional theme in the Isis cult, as Lucius does in 25.7, cf. Griffiths, *The Isis-Book*, 287; L. Koenen, 'Egyptian Influence in Tibullus', *Illinois Class. Stud*. 1 (1976) 127–159 at 129; R. Merkelbach, *Die Unschuldserklärungen und Beichten im ägyptischen Totenbuch, in der römischen Elegie und im antiken Roman* (Giessen, 1987); M.A. Stadler, 'Judgment after Death (Negative Confession)', in W. Wendrich *et al*. (eds), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* =http://escholarship.org/uc/nelc_uee (Los Angeles, 2008), accessed 17-12-2013.

58 Bacchanalia: Livy 39.9. Love poets: Tib. 1.3.26; Prop. 2.33A.1–2, 2.28.62 (mention of the ten-day period); Ov. *Am*. 1.8.74, 2.19.42, 3.9.33f.

59 *RICIS* 202/0139 (Delos), 308/0401 = *I. Prusa* 48; RICIS 204/1002 (Cos), cf. Bricault, *Les cultes isiaques*, 292–294.

60 As is suggested by Ter. *Phormio* 48–50.

61 Apul. *Met*. 11.23.4: *semotis procul profanis omnibus*; note also Apul. *Met*. 3.15.1, which equally refers to the closing of the doors to the profane, cf. P. Van Nuffelen, *Rethinking the Gods* (Cambridge, 2011) 94.

Isis.[62] The priest takes his hand and leads him into the innermost part of the temple; unfortunately, it is not completely clear how we should imagine this temple, as there was no standardised form.[63] At this *moment suprême*, however, Apuleius fails us. 'Dear reader', he tells us, 'you may awfully wish to know what was said and done afterwards. I'd tell if it were allowed … But I shall not keep you in suspense with perhaps religious desire nor shall I torture you with prolonged anguish' (23.5–6). He proceeds: 'I approached the frontier of death, I set foot on the threshold of Persephone, I journeyed through all the elements and came back, I saw at midnight the sun, sparkling in white light, I came close to the gods of the upper and nether world and adored them from near at hand' (23.7, tr. Burkert).

As has often been observed,[64] Apuleius has put the description in the form of the *symbolon* (Ch. VI.3), 'password', of the Eleusinian initiates: 'I fasted, I drank the *kykeon* (like Demeter in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*), I took from the hamper, after working I deposited in the basket and from the basket in the hamper' (Ch. I.1). Like these phrases, Apuleius' solemn words are tantalising but ultimately not informative. Yet we should note that they in part refer back to the qualities of Isis we have already mentioned. First, we have the association with the universe, including the underworld, though there are no archaeological indications that this visit to the underworld was symbolised by visits to subterranean corridors or halls, as has sometimes been suggested.[65] This theme had been announced by the goddess in the dream to Lucius on the beach of Cenchreae, in which she pronounced a kind of aretalogy of herself. In her *Selbstoffenbarung* she mentions that she is the *regina manium*, 'queen of the dead' (5.1) – in fact, Lucius himself had already identified the goddess with Proserpina and Hecate, amongst many other goddesses (2) – and at the end of her revelation she mentions that after death Lucius will find her holding court in the underworld and the Elysian fields (6.6). The chief priest had mentioned that the gates of death were in Isis' hands and that the initiation itself was 'performed in the manner of voluntary death' (21.7). In other words, when Lucius mentions that he approached the underworld but also returned, he is alluding to the power of Isis over life but also over death. We know this also from an inscription from Bithynia, in which an

62 Ov. *Met*. 1.747; Juv. 6.533: Plut. *Mor*. 352cd (reason for linen); Apul. *Met*. 11.3.5, 10.1–2, 14.3, 24.2, 27.4; *RICIS* 202/0428, 503/0301 (Nemi).

63 See the full survey by Kleibl, *Iseion*, 70–90.

64 See, for example, Wittmann, *Das Isisbuch*, 112; Griffiths, *The Isis-Book*, 294–296; Burkert, *AMC*, 98.

65 See the discussion by Kleibl, *Iseion*, 66f.

initiate tells us that because of his initiation into the Mysteries of Isis he did not 'walk the dark road of the Acheron' but 'ran to the havens of the blessed'.[66]

Before Lucius returned to the upper world, he also, as he tells us, journeyed through all the elements. Burkert suggests that the elements had to do with purifications, but that is unpersuasive, as Lucius had already been extensively purified.[67] His passing through the elements seems rather to be a stage in his journey before returning to this world. These elements are also under the rule of Isis, for in the dream of Lucius we have just mentioned she refers to herself as the *elementorum omnium domina*, 'mistress of all the elements' (5.1), and Lucius later states that 'the elements are the slaves' of Isis (25). In Apuleius, elements always refer to the elements of nature, that is, earth, water, air and fire, which make up the sublunary world.[68] Lucius seems to have travelled to the boundaries of both the upper and the nether world, which enabled him to actually see the gods of both these worlds.

In his *Sacred Tales*, Apuleius' contemporary Aelius Aristides refers to an initiation into the cult of Sarapis,[69] the Egyptian god often closely associated with Isis: 'But that which appeared later contained something much more frightening than these things, in which there were ladders, which delimited the region above and below the earth, and the power of the gods on each side, and there were other things, which caused a wonderful feeling of terror, and cannot perhaps be told to all, with the result that I gladly beheld the tokens. The summary point was about the power of the god, that both without conveyance and without bodies Sarapis is able to carry men wherever he wishes. Such was the initiation, and not easily recognised, I rose'.[70] It seems hardly a coincidence that in this Egyptian context

66 *RICIS* 308/1201, cf. C. Bonner, 'Desired Haven', *Harvard Theol. Rev*. 34 (1941) 49–67.

67 Burkert, *AMC*, 98. Was Burkert, perhaps unconsciously, influenced by Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, in which initiation into the Mysteries of Isis and Osiris is connected with a trial by water and fire, cf. J. Assmann, *Die Zauberflöte. Oper und Mysterium* (Munich and Vienna, 2005)?

68 Apul. *De deo Socratis* 8, *Met*. 11.2.28, 3.15, 4.30, 6.22; in general, A. Lumpe, 'Elementum', in *RAC* 4 (1959) 1073–1100.

69 For Sarapis, see most recently S. Schmidt, 'Serapis – ein neuer Gott für die Griechen in Ägypten', in H. Becker *et al*. (eds), *Ägypten – Griechenland – Rom. Abwehr und Berührung* (Frankfurt, 2005) 291–304; M. Bergmann, 'Sarapis im 3. Jahrhundert v. Chr.', in G. Weber (ed.), *Alexandreia und das ptolemäische Ägypten* (Berlin, 2010) 109–135; N. Belayche, 'Le possible "corps" des dieux: retour sur Sarapis', in F. Prescendi and Y. Volokhine (eds), *Dans le laboratoire de l'historien des religions* (Geneva, 2011) 227–250; M. Bommas, 'Isis, Osiris, and Serapis', in C. Riggs (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* (Oxford, 2012) 419–435; D. Devauchelle, 'Pas d'Apis pour Sarapis!', in A. Gasse *et al*. (eds), *Et in Aegypto et ad Aegyptum. Recueil d'études dédiées à Jean-Claude Grenier* (Montpellier, 2012) 213–225 ; J.F. Quack, 'Serapis als neuer Gefährte der Isis. Von der Geburt eines Gottes aus dem Geist eines Stiers', in Hattler, *Imperium der Götter*, 164–170.

70 Ael. Arist. *Or*. 49.48, tr. Behr 1986.

we also find an experience of the gods on either side of the earth, even though we are left very much in the dark about how exactly we should imagine this experience.[71]

In the middle of Lucius' description, and thus clearly the highlight of the ritual, we find the mention of the sun at midnight. Egyptologists relate this to passages from the *Book of the Dead*.[72] Although the *Book* itself had ceased to be copied when the Isis priests started to construct their Mysteries,[73] its ideas were still current and would remain so into the third century AD. We may therefore presume that at midnight a torch was lit, as torches were heavily imbued with solar symbolism.[74] The priests of Isis may well have looked to the prestigious contemporary Mysteries with which they would have to compete, and they could confidently compare their own fire with that of the great fire at the *moment suprême* of Eleusis (Ch. I.3). A recently published inscription has shown that the famous Mysteries of Samothrace had taken over not only the Eleusinian light but also the Eleusinian promises of a better position in the afterlife (Ch. II.1). The Mysteries of Isis would hardly have been less spectacular or promised less than the best known Mysteries of Greece.

At the end of his description, and perhaps its climax, Lucius mentions that he had adored the gods from close at hand. It is important to realise how different this is from classical Greek religion. Mythology tells us how Semele was burned to ashes when she saw Zeus in his full glory.[75] Here Lucius' proximity to the gods is stressed, just as he will be displayed on a platform opposite the statue of Isis after his initiation (below). It does not seem impossible that Lucius was confronted with images of the gods or perhaps with frescoes depicting them, though the latter is less likely, given the nocturnal setting of his initiation. The proximity fits the trend towards a closer connection between worshipper and the gods, as can be witnessed in the first centuries of the

71 Martin Stadler points out to me that in the Demotic first Setne-story a Book of Thoth is the object of desire because through its knowledge one can understand the birds of the sky, the fish in the water, and one can see the sun god. In the second Setne-story, Setne is brought to the underworld and sees Osiris himself. For translations of the two Setne-stories, see F. Hoffmann and J. F. Quack, *Anthologie der demotischen Literatur* (Berlin, 2007) 118–137; D. Agut-Labordère and M. Chauveau, *Héros, magiciens et sages oubliés de l'Égypte ancienne* (Paris, 2011) 71–94.

72 Griffiths, *The Isis-Book*, 303–308.

73 M. Coenen, 'On the Demise of the *Book of the Dead* in Ptolemaic Thebes', *Rev. d'Égyptologie* 52 (2001) 69–84.

74 M. Smith, *Traversing Eternity* (Oxford, 2009) 389–391.

75 Diod. Sic. 3.63.3–4, 4.2.2–3; Ov. *Met*. 3.256–315; Hyg. *Fab*. 167, 179; Apollod. 3.4.3; A. Kossatz-Deissmann, 'Semele', in *LIMC* VII.1 (1994) 718–726 at nos 6–17 and 'Semele', in *LIMC*, Suppl. 1 (2009) 448–450 at add. 3.

Christian era.[76] That is all we can say about what happened to Lucius in that fateful night: there is no mention of a sacred drama, no mention of Osiris' suffering. I stress this, as several scholars try to import into Apuleius all kinds of details that we are simply not told.[77]

The next morning Lucius appeared, 'wearing a robe with twelve layers (?) as a sign of initiation', perhaps symbolising his passing through the zodiac.[78] He ascended a wooden platform in front of the goddess's statue in the very centre of the sanctuary. Once again he wore a linen garment. The text does not make clear if he had changed clothes in the meantime, but this time it is described as wonderfully embroidered and what 'the initiates call the Olympian stole' (24.3), which suggests that the initiation was seen as a kind of triumph in an Olympic contest.[79] He received a torch in his hand and a crown of palm leaves in order to make him look like a statue of the Sun. Here, too, one is inclined to see a certain resemblance to the Eleusinian Mysteries, as one of its most important officials, the *daidouchos*, 'the torch-bearer', had been made to resemble Helios, in line with the growing importance of Sol/Helios in Late Antiquity.[80] This all must have happened early in the morning, as now the curtains of the temple were opened and the people present were amazed by the view. The new status of the initiate was thus publicly dramatised and advertised. Afterwards, there were meals to celebrate his new 'birth in regard to the Mysteries'. And that was 'the perfection of the initiation', as Lucius remarks (24). He remains in the sanctuary for a few days to enjoy 'the ineffable pleasure of the holy image' – another

76 H.W. Pleket, 'Religious History as the History of Mentality: The "Believer" as Servant of the Deity in the Greek World', in H.S. Versnel (ed.), *Faith, Hope and Worship* (Leiden, 1981) 152–192; Versnel, *Ter unus*, 88–92.

77 For example, M. Malaise, 'Les caractéristiques et la question des antécédents de l'initiation isiaque', in J. Ries (ed.), *Les rites d'initiation* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1986) 355–362, which is a summarising update of his 'Contenu et effets de l'initiation isiaque', *Ant. Class.* 50 (1981) 483–498; Merkelbach, *Isis Regina*, 290–294 and, even, A. Chaniotis, 'Emotional Community Through Ritual: Initiates, Citizens and Pilgrims as Emotional Communities in the Greek World', in idem (ed.), *Ritual Dynamics in the Ancient Mediterranean: Agency, Emotion, Gender, Representation* (Stuttgart, 2011) 264–290 at 267.

78 See the discussion by Griffiths, *The Isis-Book*, 308–310. As the subsequent description only mentions a linen tunic, either Lucius must have changed clothes or the expression refers to a robe with twelve parts.

79 Griffiths, *The Isis-Book*, 313–314 wrongly connects the term with Mount Olympus and the Olympian gods, cf. M. Zimmerman, 'Text and Interpretation ~ Interpretation and Text', in Keulen and Egelhaaf-Gaiser, *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass III*, 1–27 at 22–24.

80 Eus. *PE* 3.12; in general, M. Wallraff, *Christus Verus Sol. Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike* (Münster, 2001); S. Hijmans, *Sol: the Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome*, 2 vols (Diss. Groningen, 2009).

indication of the desire for a close relationship between goddess and worshipper, as for the Egyptians, like the Greeks, image and divinity were closely associated.[81] The novel continues with initiations into the Mysteries of Osiris, but we shall leave it here and move on to a completely different type of Mysteries, those of Mithras.

2 Mithras

While the Egyptian origin of Isis is perfectly clear and the development of the goddess can be followed over many centuries, the case of Mithras is more complicated.[82] It is difficult to get a grip on the god's advance from the ancient Near East to the Roman Empire and, whereas with Isis we at least have Apuleius, we lack any such narrative about the Mysteries of Mithras.[83] Our main sources for these Mysteries are archaeological,[84] whereas in the case of Isis they are

81 Egyptians: Porph. *Abst.* 4.6 = Chaeremon, fr. 10, cf. C. Aldred, 'Bild', in *LÄ* I (1975) 793–795 and W. Helck, 'Statuenkult', in *LÄ* V (1984) 1265–1267. Greeks: Bremmer, 'The Agency of Greek and Roman Statues: from Homer to Constantine', *Opuscula* 6 (2013) 7–21 (with full bibliography).

82 The point of departure must now be the excellent survey of R. Gordon, 'Mithras', in *RAC* 24 (2012) 964–1009, which supersedes all previous general studies; see also his 'Institutionalized Religious Options', in J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion* (Oxford, 2007) 392–405. The best monograph is M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, tr. and ed. by R. Gordon (Edinburgh, 2000), updated as *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium* (Darmstadt and Mainz, 2012); interesting but rather speculative, A. Mastrocinque, *Des Mystères de Mithra aux Mystères de Jésus* (Stuttgart, 2009). For the *Forschungsgeschichte*, see R. Beck, 'Mithraism since Franz Cumont', in *ANRW* II.17.4 (1984) 2002–2115 and *Beck on Mithraism* (Aldershot, 2004) 3–23, covering up to 2003; A. Chalupa, 'Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Found? Larger Theoretical Assumptions Behind Roger Beck's *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire*', *Pantheon* 7 (2012) 5–17; R. Gordon, 'Von Cumont bis Clauss. Ein Jahrhundert Mithras-Forschung', in Hattler, *Imperium der Götter*, 237–242.

83 Gordon, 'Mithras', 979 states that the only sources that clearly call the Mithras cult Mysteries are either Neo-Platonic (rather: Middle-Platonic) or Christian. This is true, but the convergence of pagan and Christian authors leaves little doubt about the existence of the Mysteries, cf. the list of relevant sources by Burkert, *ACM*, 138 n. 50; see now also Gordon, 'On Typologies and History: "Orphic Themes" in Mithraism', in G. Sfameni Gasparro *et al.* (eds), *Religion in the History of European Culture*, 2 vols (Palermo, 2013) 2.1023–1048 at 1031.

84 For the most recent bibliography, see M. Martens and G. De Boe, 'Bibliography of Mithraic Studies', in eid. (eds), *Roman Mithraism. The Evidence of the Small Finds* (Tienen, 2004) 363–385. For the most recent archaeological discoveries, see I. Klenner, 'Breaking News! Meldungen aus der Welt des Mithras', in P. Jung (ed.), *Utere felix vivas. Festschrift für Jürgen Oldenstein* (Bonn, 2012) 113–127; Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, 183–184; add A. de Jong, 'A New Syrian Mithraic Tauroctony', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, NS 11 (1997) 53–63. For the most recent pictures of Mithraic frescoes, see E.M. Moormann, *Divine Interiors. Mural Paintings in Greek and Roman*

textual.[85] Even when we have textual sources for Mithras, they are in the main no more than the mention of his name: in fact, it is probably correct to say that the onomastic evidence, that is, names containing the element 'Mithras', is the most important access we have to the early worship of Mithras.

The god must have originated in the first half of the second millennium BC after the Indo-Iranians had left the Indo-European *Urheimat*. This early date is guaranteed by his occurrence in the *Rig Veda* (3.59) and in a treaty between the Hittite king Suppiluliuma I and Shattiwaza, king of the Mitanni, ca. 1380 BC.[86] The etymology of the god's name is uncertain, but there is some consensus that it must originally have meant something like 'contract',[87] though this does not necessarily explain his function either in the ancient Iranian period or during the Roman Empire.

In the Persian tradition the god turns up much later. Theophoric names with the element Mithras start to appear only in the eighth century BC, the oldest in an Assyrian inscription of King Tiglath-Pileser III (745–726) of 737 BC.[88] These names – more than 45 different ones for over 300 persons in not only Persian but also Akkadian, Aramaic, Babylonian, Demotic Egyptian, Elamite, Greek and Hebrew[89] – show the great popularity of the god at the time of the Persian Empire. However, in classical times we find the god himself mentioned only in Persian inscriptions of Artaxerxes II (404–359) and Artaxerxes III (358–38),[90] while later Greek and Roman historians refer to the god also in connection with Darius III (336–330).[91] The spelling of the name as Mithres in Strabo suggests that the god

Sanctuaries (Amsterdam, 2011) 163–183, with the corresponding colour plates; Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, plates 1–16.

85 Cf. Burkert, *AMC*, 42: 'The scarcity of literary references to mysteries of Mithras is strange when compared to the richness of the archaeological evidence'.

86 K. Kitchen and P. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East*, 3 vols (Wiesbaden, 2012) 1.365–380 (= 55A) at § 16.55–56 and 387–402 (= 56A) at § 13.41, cf. P. Thieme, 'The "Aryan" Gods of the Mitanni Treaties', *J. Am. Or. Soc.* 80 (1960) 301–317; J. Gonda, *The Vedic God Mitra* (Leiden, 1972); N. Oettinger and G. Wilhelm, 'Mitra, Mithra', in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 8 (Berlin and New York, 1993–1997) 284–286.

87 M. Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen II* (Heidelberg, 1996) 354f.

88 R. Schmitt, *Iranische Personennamen in der neuassyrischen Nebenüberlieferung* (Vienna, 2009) 113f.

89 R. Schmitt, 'Die theophoren Eigennamen mit altiranisch *Miθra-', in J. Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études mithriaques* (Leiden, 1978) 395–455; R. Zadok, *Iranische Personennamen in der neu- und spätbabylonischen Nebenüberlieferung* (Vienna, 2009) 267–270; R. Schmitt, *Iranische Personennamen in der griechischen Literatur vor Alexander d. Gr.* (Vienna, 2011) 261–266.

90 R. Schmitt, *Die altpersischen Inschriften der Achämeniden* (Vienna, 2009) 187–188, 194–195 (A. II), 195–197 (A. III).

91 Curt. Ruf. 4.13.12; Plut. *Alex.* 30.4; Gordon, 'Mithras', 969.

was mentioned already by an Ionian source, as perhaps could be expected.[92] From these brief notices we see that the god was closely associated with the kings, whose protector he was, and that he was identified with the Sun.[93] It is thus not surprising that many kings were called Mithradates, the most famous being Mithradates VI, the great enemy of Rome. As satraps and other Persian grandees owned large estates in Asia Minor,[94] names with Mithras even occur in Lycian and Lydian.[95]

The widespread worship of the god apparently survived the collapse of the Persian Empire at the hands of Alexander the Great, perhaps helped by surviving pockets of Magi,[96] the Median priests of the Persians, for in his *Life of Pompey* Plutarch mentions that in Lycian Olympos local pirates 'performed certain secret rites (i.e., mystery cults), of which that of Mithras continues to the present day, having been first instituted by them' (24.5). There is a very large chronological gap between these Cilician pirates and Plutarch and, given that the rites were secret, that the pirates were wiped out by Pompey and that Mithraic Mysteries are not attested before the late first century AD, we must conclude that it was Plutarch himself who made the connection between the late Republican pirate rites and contemporary Mithraic cult, and not that he had reliable information about the contemporary cult's origin.

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92 See Radt on Strabo 15.3.13, cf. R. Schmitt, 'Greek Reinterpretation of Iranian Names by Folk Etymology', in E. Matthews (ed.), *Old and New Worlds in Greek Onomastics* (Oxford, 2007) 135–150 at 145: 'It is well known that eastern names passed to the Greeks above all via Ionic and in Ionic dialect form' and 'Greek – ης ... reflects the nominative ending O.Iran*-ā(h)'.

93 For the identification with the sun, see also Strabo 15.3.13 with Radt *ad loc.*; Stat. *Theb.* 1.719–720; *P.Oxy* 15.1802.64 (second/third century AD); Hsch. μ 1355; Clauss, *Mithras*, 146–155 = Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, 139–147 (well illustrated).

94 See the studies by N.V. Sekunda: 'Persian settlement in Hellespontine Phrygia', in A. Kuhrt and H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg (eds), *Achaemenid History* 3 (Leiden, 1988) 175–196, 'Achaemenid settlement in Caria, Lycia and Greater Phrygia', in eaed. (eds), *Achaemenid History* 6 (Leiden, 1991) 83–143 and 'Itabelis and the Satrapy of Mysia', *Am. J. of Anc. Hist.* 14 (1989 [1998]) 73–102; P. Briant, *Histoire de l'empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre*, 2 vols (Paris, 1996 = Leiden, 1997) 1.718–720, 725–727; S. Mitchell, 'Iranian Names and the Presence of Persians in the Religious Sanctuaries of Asia Minor', in Matthews, *Old and New Worlds in Greek Onomastics*, 151–171; more generally about the survival of Persian settlers in Asia Minor, L. Ballesteros Pastor, '*Nullis umquam nisi domesticis regibus*. Cappadocia, Pontus and the resistance to the Diadochi in Asia Minor', in V. Alonso Troncoso and E.M. Anson (eds), *After Alexander: The Time of the Diadochi (323–281 BC)* (Oxford, 2013) 183–198.

95 R. Schmitt, *Iranische Namen in den indogermanischen Sprachen Kleinasiens (Lykisch, Lydisch, Phrygisch)* (Vienna, 1982) 23–24 (Lycian), 31–32 (Lydian).

96 Strabo 15.3.15; Tac. *Ann.* 3.60–64; Paus. 5.27.5–6, cf. P. Herrmann, 'Magier in Hypaipa', *Hyperboreus* 8 (2002) 364–369; Gordon, 'Mithras', 969–971.

Like early Christianity, the cult of Mithras burst suddenly onto the Roman scene, albeit somewhat later, in the last decades of the first century AD. In the year 92 the Roman poet Statius 'published' his epic *Thebaid*, in which he compared Apollo to 'Mithras twisting the horns wroth to follow in the rocks of Perses' cavern' (1.719–20, tr. Shackleton Bailey). He had begun his poem around AD 80 (*Theb*. 12.811), which gives us the timespan within which he will have made the acquaintance of Mithras' cult.[97] Yet the oldest dedications to Mithras, which are from around the same time, were not found in Rome but in Germanic Nida, modern Heddernheim near Frankfurt, from about AD 90 (V 1098), in Steklen in Bulgaria from about AD 100 (V 2269)[98] and, perhaps a decade later, in Carnuntum in Austria (V 1718).[99]

These data have given rise to a fierce debate about the geographical origin of the Mysteries. Against most current experts, Richard Gordon has argued for an origin in Anatolia rather than Italy,[100] but this seems unlikely. Anatolia was not far from the two most famous Mysteries, those of Eleusis (Ch. I) and Samothrace (Ch. II.1), and it would have been hard to compete with them, as is indeed illustrated by the rarity of Mithraea in mainland Greece and the eastern Mediterranean.[101] It is more plausible to assume that the cult was invented in Rome, where Statius had already seen a statue of the bull-killing god before AD 92 (above).[102]

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97 For the passage, see R. Turcan, *Mithra et le Mithraicisme* (Paris, 2000^2) 127–135; A.B. Griffith, 'Mithras, Death and Redemption in Statius, *Thebaid* I.719–720', *Latomus* 60 (2001) 108–123.

98 Note that the Mithraeum in Bavarian Pons Aeni, modern Pfaffenhofen am Inn, which was dated to about AD 100 by J. Grabsch, 'Das Mithraeum von Pons Aeni', *Bayerische Vorgeschichtsblätter* 50 (1985) 355–462, has been relocated to Ad Enum/Mühltal and redated to about AD 150 by B. Steidl, 'Neues zu den Inschriften aus dem Mithraeum von Mühlthal am Inn: *Pons Aeni, Ad Enum* und die *statio Enensis* des *publicum portorium Illyrici*', ibid. 73 (2008) 53–85 and 'Stationen an der Brücke – Pons Aeni und Ad Enum am Inn-Übergang der Staatsstraße Augusta Vindelicum–Iuvavum', in G. Grabherr and B. Kainrath (eds), *Conquiescamus! longum iter fecimus* (Innsbruck, 2010) 71–110.

99 I quote the Mithraic inscriptions from M.J. Vermaseren, *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae*, 2 vols (The Hague, 1956–1960).

100 Gordon, 'Mithras', 973.

101 See the detailed and up-to-date maps in Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, 13, 185–189; note also the map in C. Witschel, 'Die Ursprünge des Mithras-Kults: Orientalischer Gott oder westliche Neuschöpfung?', in Hattler, *Imperium der Götter*, 200–218 at 206f.

102 For the statue, see most recently P. Roy, 'Un nouveau relief de Mithra tauroctone', *Pallas* 90 (2012) 63–74; C. Faraone, 'The Amuletic Design of the Mithraic Bull-Wounding Scene', *JRS* 103 (2013) 1–21, whose new interpretation of Mithras' killing of the bull is refuted by D. Boschung, 'Mithras: Konzeption und Verbreitung eines neuen Götterbildes', in idem and A. Schäfer (eds), *Römische Götterbilder der mittleren und späten Kaiserzeit* (Munich, 2014), who also offers a new genealogy of the origin of Mithras' iconography.

An origin in Rome is also supported by the architecture typical of Mithraea, in which the image of the god occupies the central position in the seating arrangements for the banquet, the best parallel for which is the seating installations for funeral banquets in Ostia and Pompeii, in which the grave occupies the central position amid the triclinia. A Roman origin is the more likely in that the cult rooms were clearly designed to contrast with normal Roman sanctuaries – something which is harder to imagine happening in Anatolia.[103]

Nonetheless there are several Persian details in the cult, such as (1) the association of Mithras with the Persian Mithrakana festival which takes place on the fall equinox, (2) the presence of two attendants for Mithras in the *Miθra-Yašt*, just as the Roman Mithras has the accompanying twins Cautes and Cautopates, (3) the presence of the raven at a sacrificial scene on a Mithraic altar in Poetovio/Ptuj, which recalls the vulture in the *Bundahišn* who likewise flies off with a piece of the sacrificial meat,[104] and (4) the Iranian garments of the god and his companions.[105] Consequently, we should be looking for someone of Persian origin or with Persian connections, perhaps from Commagene,[106] but who also spoke Greek, because the initiatory grades seem to have been invented by a native Greek speaker.[107] The most likely explanation of all these data is that the founder came from Anatolia where, as we saw (above), the worship of the god had survived the collapse of the Persian Empire, but who designed the cult in Rome itself. The god must have been exported almost immediately to Germania, given the early dates of the finds there.

The worshippers met in dark artificial caves or, at least, grotto-like buildings, in the West called *spelaea*, 'caves', which were carefully constructed as a reflection of the Mithraic world but also shaped that world in turn.[108] These caves were

103 A. Klöckner, 'Mithras und das Mahl der Männer. Götterbild, Ritual und sakraler Raum in einem römischen "Mysterienkult"', in U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser *et al*. (eds), *Kultur der Antike* (Berlin, 2011) 200–225 at 210.

104 For these examples, see the more detailed discussion of R. Gordon, '"Persaei sub rupibus antri": Überlegungen zur Entstehung der Mithrasmysterien', in *Ptuj im römischen Reich/Mithraskult und seine Zeit = Archaeologia Poetovionensis* 2 (Ptuj, 2001 [2002]) 289–301. For the Mithrakana festival, see also Strabo 11.14.9 with Radt *ad loc*.

105 M. García Sánchez, 'The dress and colour of Mithraism: Roman or Iranian garments?', in Schrenk and Vössing, *Kleidung und Identität*, 123–134.

106 As is persuasively suggested by R. Beck, 'The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of their Genesis', *JRS* 88 (1998) 115–128 = *Beck on Mithraism*, 31–44.

107 R. Merkelbach, *Mithras* (Königstein, 1984) 109.

108 In the following paragraphs I closely follow Klöckner, 'Mithras und das Mahl der Männer'. See also R. Gordon, '"Glücklich ist dieser Ort… " Mithras-Heiligtümer und Kultgeschehen', in Hattler, *Imperium der Götter*, 211–218.

lieux de mémoire, places where the worshippers remembered and were reminded of the cave in which Mithras had killed the bull that had made him the 'maker and father of all'.[109] In the centre of the rear wall they would see a relief of the god, representing him at the moment he kills the bull, the killing of which was the foundation of the present social and cosmological order. This representation of a god in action in relief form was highly unusual for ancient religion, as they now had to approach the relief to look at Mithras' action rather than worshipping his statue.[110] By adorning the caves with stars, the Sun and symbols of the planets, the worshippers expressed their belief in Mithras as the creator of an ordered cosmos who would guarantee the worshipper an ordered life.[111] Modern scholars have paid much attention to the astrological and cosmological speculations of ancient Mithraists[112] but, just as most modern Protestants have not ploughed through the 13 volumes of Karl Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* and most Catholics were not terribly interested in the latest dogmatic insights of Pope Benedict XVI, we need not suppose that most Mithras worshippers followed or were interested in these highly complicated speculations.

As the killing of the bull would normally have been followed by a sacrificial banquet, it is not surprising that on several reliefs we have a representation of such a banquet enjoyed by Mithras and Sol.[113] It is clear from the many bones found in and near Mithraea that Mithras' worshippers followed this example by dining and, especially, drinking together,[114] but their sacrifices consisted mainly of suckling pigs and chickens, not bulls.[115] In other words, the bull banquet represents the ideal sacrifice, not the real practice: representation of ritual and its actual practice should not be confused.[116] In Greek and Roman sanctuaries, it was customary for

109 Porph. *De antro* 6.

110 Klöckner, 'Mithras und das Mahl der Männer', 214–116. For the normal practice regarding Roman statues, see B. Gladigow, 'Zur Ikonographie und Pragmatik römischer Kultbilder', in H. Keller and N. Staubach (eds), *Iconologia Sacra* (Berlin, 1994) 9–24.

111 The most recent insights regarding this aspect of Mithraism are surveyed by Gordon, 'Mithras', 975–979.

112 Especially, R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2006) but also his *Beck on Mithraism*; Gordon, 'Mithras', 984–988.

113 Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 132–33 with Abb. 15, 53, 148; Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 354–355; Clauss, *Mithras*, 110–113 = Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, 104–109.

114 The importance of drinking is stressed by Ines Klenner, in a forthcoming Hamburg dissertation, on the basis of the many drinking vessels found in Mithraea.

115 See the various contributions to Martens and De Boe, *Roman Mithraism, the Evidence of the Small Finds*.

116 For some important observations in this respect, see A. Klöckner, 'Votive als Gegenstände des Rituals – Votive als Bilder von Ritualen: Das Beispiel der griechischen Weihreliefs', in J. Mylonopoulos and H. Roeder (eds), *Archäologie und Ritual* (Vienna, 2006) 139–152.

worshippers to dine in rooms adjacent to the temple after sacrificing on the altar in front of the temple. Mithras' worshippers, in contrast, dined inside the Mithraeum in the company of their god,[117] reclining on two raised podia at either side of and close to the altar,[118] although in many Ostian Mithraea there were also ancillary rooms, and outside Italy, where Mithraea were often situated at the edge of town, the food was prepared in dining rooms outside the cave. As the caves were relatively small, the 'congregation' had to be small too, about 20 to 50 people.[119] This must have made the regular meetings into places of friendship and intimacy where close connections between the worshippers could be formed.

A final aspect deserves attention before we come to the initiation proper. The cult of Mithras was a real man's world, as women could not be initiated; we might even speak in this respect of a kind of 'immaculate conception', as the god was represented as being born from a rock, not from a woman.[120] This must have been a conscious choice in the design of the cult, which was later rationalised. 'Mithras hated the race of women', we are told by a Pseudo-Plutarchan text (*De Fluviis* 223.4),[121] and a little known but relatively early author on Mithraism, the post-Hadrianic but pre-Porphyrian Pallas,[122] says that the Mithraists called women 'hyenas', clearly not a compliment.[123] We simply

117 J.P. Kane, 'The Mithraic Cult-meal', in J. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies*, 2 vols (Manchester, 1975) 1.313–351; Å. Hultgård, 'Remarques sur les repas cultuels dans le Mithriacisme', in C. Grappe (ed.), *Le repas de dieu* (Tübingen, 2004) 299–324; A.B. Griffith, 'Amicitia in a Religious Context: the Setting and Social Functions of the Mithraic Cult Meal', in M. Tamminen *et al.* (eds), *Passages from Antiquity to the Middle Ages III: De Amicitia* (Rome, 2010) 64–77; Gordon, 'Mithras', 979f.

118 R. Turcan, 'Les autels du culte mithriaque', in R. Etienne and M.T. Le Dihanet (eds), *L'espace sacrificial dans les civilisations méditerranéennes de l'Antiquité* (Lyons, 1991) 217–225; Clauss, *Mithras*, 57–60 = Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, 60–62.

119 For some exceptions, see Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 358f. Ostia: L.M. White, 'The Changing Face of Mithraism at Ostia: Archaeology, Art and the Urban Landscape', in D. Balch and A. Weissenrieder (eds), *Contested Spaces: Houses and Temples in Roman Antiquity and the New Testament* (Tübingen, 2012) 435–492.

120 Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 70; Commodianus, *Instruct.* 1.13; Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 20.1; Hieronymus, *Adv. Iov.* 1.7 (= *PL* 23.228–231); Lydus, *Mens.* 3.26; M.J. Vermaseren, 'The Miraculous Birth of Mithras', *Mnemosyne* III 4 (1951) 285–301; Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 96–98; I. Neri, 'Mithra petrogenito. Origine iconografica e aspetti cultuali della nascita dalla pietra', *Ostraka* 9 (2000) 227–245; W. Burkert, *Kleine Schriften II* (Göttingen, 2003) 94–95; Gordon, 'Mithras', 983; Clauss, *Mithras*, 62–71 = *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, 65–72.

121 For the date of composition of this text, see F. Jacoby, *Abhandlungen zur griechischen Geschichtsschreibung* (Leiden, 1956) 359–422.

122 For his date, see Porph. *Abst.* 2.58 (mention of Hadrian).

123 For the many negative connotations of the hyena, see R. Gordon, *Image and Value in the Greco-Roman World* (Aldershot, 1996) IV. 70, V.57–61, 63 and 'Magian Lessons in Natural History:

don't know why.[124] It may be that this exclusion of women is part of Mithras' Persian legacy, as the latter's Ossetic counterpart Wastyrǯi is also specifically a god of men.[125] Prosopographical and epigraphical studies have also increasingly elucidated the social composition of these males. It is now clear that they did not consist mainly of soldiers, as Cumont thought. Everything seems to indicate that, on the whole, they were neither very high nor very low on the social scale. There were few senators or very lowly slaves amongst them,[126] but rather the middle ranks of the army, imperial staff, and slaves and freedmen of the imperial household, as well as some ordinary citizens.[127]

How did one get initiated into the Mysteries of this group of males? The precise nature of the initiation is highly debated because we have no narrative about it,[128] but we should try to combine the sparse literary and iconographical evidence with the epigraphical material, though the latter is in this respect hardly more informative. Three literary texts are of prime importance. The early (?) Pallas

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Unique Animals in Graeco-Roman Natural Magic', in J. Dijkstra *et al.* (eds), *Myths, Martyrs and Modernity. Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer* (Leiden, 2010) 249–269 at 263–265. In general, see also J. North, 'Gender and Cult in the Roman West: Mithras, Isis, Attis', in E. Hemelrijk and G. Woolf (eds), *Women and the Roman City in the Latin West* (Leiden, 2013) 109–127.

124 For various explanations, none very persuasive, see Gordon, *Image and Value*, V.42–64; A.B. Griffith, 'Completing the Picture: Women and the Female Principle in the Mithraic Cult', *Numen* 53 (2006) 48–77; A. Chalupa, 'Hyenas or Lionesses? Mithraism and Women in the Religious World of the Late Antiquity', *Religio* 18 (2005) 198–229; Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 202.

125 A. Lubotsky, 'The Old Persian Month Name *viyax(a)na-*, Avestan *viiāx(a)na-* 'eloquent, bragging' and Ossetic Festivals', in V. Sadovski and D. Stifter (eds), *Iranistische und Indogermanistische Beiträge in memoriam Jochem Schindler (1944–1994)* (Vienna, 2012) 95–106 at 102.

126 For the senators, see now Z. Várhelyi, *The Religion of the Senators in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2010) 145–147.

127 M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae* (Stuttgart, 1992), summarised in Clauss, *Mithras*, 33–41 = *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, 36–47; R. Gordon, 'Who Worshipped Mithras?', *JRA* 7 (1994) 459–474 and 'The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras', in Y. Le Bohec and C. Wolff (eds), *L'armée romaine et la religion sous le Haut-Empire romain* (Paris, 2009) 379–450; O. Latteur, 'La diffusion du culte de Mithra dans les provinces danubiennes: l'example de la Pannonie Inférieure', *LEC* 78 (2010) 187–214.

128 The best discussions are: Gordon, *Image and Value*, V (first published in 1980 and sometimes too strongly influenced by the structuralist fashion of the day); Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 75–133 (the best collection of material, but idiosyncratic interpretations); M. Clauss, 'Die sieben Grade des Mithras-Kultes', *ZPE* 82 (1990) 183–194 (important for the attention to the epigraphical evidence); Turcan, *Mithra*, 81–92; Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 336–381; A. Chalupa, 'Seven Mithraic Grades: An Initiatory or Priestly Hierarchy?', *Religio* 16 (2008) 177–201 (the most level-headed discussion); Gordon, 'Mithras', 981–984.

tells us: 'Thus they call the initiates (*mystas*) that participate in their rites (*metechontas*) "Lions", women "hyenas" and the attendants (*hypêretountas*) "Ravens". And with respect to the Fathers … (some words are missing here), they are in effect called "Eagles" and "Hawks".'[129] The Christian author Ambrosiaster, a well-informed Roman clergyman working in Rome in the early 380s,[130] writes about the initiation: 'their eyes are blindfolded that they may not refuse to be foully abused; some moreover beat their wings together like a bird, and croak like ravens, and others roar like lions; and yet others are pushed across ditches filled with water: their hands have previously been tied with the intestines of a chicken, and then someone comes up and cuts these intestines (he calls himself their "liberator")'.[131] It is striking that both passages, although more than a century apart, mention only the grades of 'Raven' and 'Lion', precisely the ones that, after the rank of Father, are mentioned most in the epigraphical evidence (Lion 41 times, Raven 5 times).[132] As these two grades are the most important ones, the inventor of the Mithras Mysteries may well have been influenced by the fact that the Eleusinian and Samothracian Mysteries had only two grades.

Yet around the time of Ambrosiaster, Jerome mentions seven grades in a letter to the Christian Laeta: 'To pass over incidents in remote antiquity, which to the sceptical may appear too fabulous for belief, did not your kinsman Gracchus, whose name recalls his patrician rank, destroy the cave of Mithras a few years ago when he was Prefect of Rome? Did he not destroy, break and burn all the monstrous images there by which worshippers were initiated as Raven, Bridegroom, Soldier, Lion, Perses, Sun-runner and Father? Did he not send them before him as hostages, and gain for himself baptism in Christ?'[133] It may well be

129 Porph. *Abst*. 4.16, tr. Gordon, slightly adapted.

130 D.G. Hunter, 'The significance of Ambrosiaster', *J. Early Christ. Stud*. 17 (2009) 1–26.

131 Ambrosiaster, *Quaestiones Veteri et Novi Testamenti* 114.11, ed. M.-P. de Bussières (*SC* 512, 2007), tr. Gordon, slightly adapted: *Ne enim horreant turpiter dehonestari se, oculi illis velantur. Alii autem sicut ales alas percutiunt vocem coracis imitantes; alii vero leonum more fremunt; alteri autem ligatis manibus intestinis pullinis proiciuntur super foveas aqua plenas, accedente quodam cum gladio et inrumpente intestina supra dicta, qui se liberatorem appellet*, cf. Gordon, 'Ritual and Hierarchy', 346–348. For Ambrosiaster's knowledge of pagan rituals, see J. Stüben, *Das Heidentum im Spiegel von Heilsgeschichte und Gesetz: ein Versuch über das Bild der Paganitas im Werk des Ambrosiaster* (Darmstadt, 1990).

132 Clauss, 'Die sieben Grade', 185.

133 Hieronymus, *Ep*. 107.2: *Et ut omittam vetera, ne apud incredulos nimis fabulosa videantur, ante paucos annos propinquus vester Gracchus, nobilitatem patriciam nomine sonans, cum praefecturam regeret urbanam, nonne specu Mithrae, et omnia portentuosa simulacra, quibus Corax, Nymphius, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, Pater initiantur, subvertit, fregit, exussit et his quasi obsidibus ante praemissis, inpetravit baptismum Christi?* For the date of Gracchus' destruction of the shrine (AD 376–377), see A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford, 2011) 144.

significant that Jerome was living in Rome, as was Ambrosiaster and, perhaps, Pallas, because this grade system had clearly taken root most firmly in Rome and the surrounding areas. This is attested also by the seven grades in the floor-mosaic of the mid-third-century Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia and the reference to the grades in the more-or-less contemporaneous Mithraeum of Santa Prisca in Rome.[134] The further away we move from Rome, for example in Dacia and Moesia, the less we hear of the individual grades.[135] Recent discussions therefore rightly assume that the grade system was fairly flexible and depended on local circumstances.[136] The smaller the 'congregation', the fewer the number of grades there must have been, one would think.

The seven grades were correlated with the seven planets, as we can see in the Mithraea of Felicissimus and Santa Prisca.[137] This has traditionally caused scholars of the Mithraic initiation to take the seven-grade system at face value and so to analyse one grade after the other. Yet this is an insider's, emic presentation[138] and it is more helpful for us to look at the initiation from the outside, to take a so-called etic view. We then see that the grades fall clearly into two groups. The first group consists of Raven, Bridegroom and Soldier, and the second comprises Lion, Persian and Sun-runner, with the Father occupying a place all of his own.[139] It is important that Pallas (mentioned above) tells us that the Ravens had to serve. In other words, the lowest grade had to perform menial tasks, just as in Greek symposia the youths had to do the wine-pouring and the washing up.[140] And indeed, a raven-headed person offers a spit with pieces of meat to the reclining Mithras and Sol on the fresco of the Mithraeum of Dura Europus.[141] Serving will

134 Felicissimus: V 299. Santa Prisca: M.J. Vermaseren and C.C. van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome* (Leiden, 1965) 155–158.

135 Clauss, *Mithras*, 132 = *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, 127; I. and S. Nemeti, 'Planets, grades and soteriology in Dacian Mithraism', *Acta Musei Napocensis* 41–42 (2004–2005) 107–124; V. Bottez, 'Quelques aspects du culte mithriaque en Mésie Inférieure', *Dacia* 50 (2006) 285–296.

136 Turcan, *Mithra*, 81–83; Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 364–371; Chalupa, 'Seven Mithraic Grades', 190–191; Gordon, 'Mithras', 981.

137 For the correlation, see, most recently, Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods*, 366–368.

138 This is not sufficiently taken into account by R. Gordon, 'Ritual and Hierarchy in the Mysteries of Mithras', in J.A. North and S. Price (eds), *The Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2011) 325–365 (first published in 2001 [2005]) at 327–336.

139 Basically, this was already seen by E.D. Francis, 'Mithraic Graffiti from Dura Europos', in Hinnells, *Mithraic Studies*, 2.424–445 at 440–445.

140 Bremmer, 'Adolescents, Symposium and Pederasty', in O. Murray (ed.), *Sympotica* (Oxford, 1990) 135–148.

141 V 42.13; note also the raven-masked men on the relief from Konjic (V 1896.3 = Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Abb. 148) and Castra Praetoria (Rome: V 397); two ravens on a votive from Inveresk in Scotland, cf. F. Hunter, 'Kastell Inveresk: Leibwächter, geköpfte Tote und Mysterienkulte in

also have been the duty of the Bridegroom, who is associated with an oil lamp on the mosaic in the Mithraeum of Felicissimus.[142] Given the darkness of the caves, care of the lighting must have been an indispensable task and was presumably assigned to one of the lower grades. We do not know the duties of the Soldier,[143] but Tertullian tells us that when he was presented with a crown on his head, he had to remove it and say 'Mithras is my crown!'[144] The acclamation suggests that the third grade was more closely identified with Mithras himself than the previous two and so constituted the transitional grade between the two groups.

Ascent up the Mithraic ladder did not come without a price. Two frescoes from the Mithraeum in Capua, dating from AD 220–240, and several late literary texts, such as the already quoted Ambrosiaster, depict and recount trials of humiliation and harassment for the initiates.[145] The precise details, such as 'fifty days of fasting, two days of flogging, twenty days in the snow', may be either Christian exaggeration or attempts to impress Mithraic outsiders, but the fact itself is hardly in doubt and is now supported by the discovery of a so-called *Schlangengefäss* in a Mithraeum of Mainz, dating to AD 120–140. This earthenware krater depicts what is generally agreed to be an initiatory test in which a seated, bearded man, obviously the Father, aims an arrow at a much smaller man whose hands are tied and genitals are showing, surely as a sign of humiliation.[146] It seems reasonable to suppose that the roughest treatment of an initiate would

Britannien', *Der Limes* 7.1 (2013) 14–21 at 18. For raven bones found in Mithraea, see Chalupa, 'Seven Mithraic Grades', 183 n. 24–25.

142 Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 91.

143 For the grade and its iconography, see A. Chalupa and T. Glomb, 'The Third Symbol of the *Miles* Grade on the Floor Mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia: A New Interpretation', *Religio* 21 (2013) 9–32.

144 Tert. *Cor*. 15.3, cf. I. Toth, '*Mithram esse coronam suam*: Bemerkungen über den dogmatischen Hintergrund der Initiationsriten der Mithrasmysterien', *Acta Classica Debrecen.* 2 (1966) 73–79; M. Clauss, 'Miles Mithrae', *Klio* 74 (1992) 269–274; P. Beskow, 'Tertullian on Mithras', in J. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism* (Rome, 1994) 51–60 at 52–54; L. Nagy, '*Mithram esse coronam suam*. Tertullian und die Einweihung des Miles in den Mithras-Mysterien', in Á. Szabó *et al*. (eds), *Cultus deorum*, 3 vols (Pécs, 2008) 2.183–202; Gordon, 'Mithras', 1001.

145 M.J. Vermaseren, *The Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere* (Leiden, 1971) Plates 22 and 26 (= Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Abb. 30–31); Greg. Naz. *Or*. 4.70, 89 (ed. Bernardi, *SC* 309, 1983), 39.5 (ed. Moreschini, *SC* 358, 1999); S. Brock, *The Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Nonnos Mythological Scholia* (Cambridge, 1971) 169–170; Burkert, *AMC*, 102f.

146 R. Beck, 'Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel', *JRS* 90 (2000) 145–180 = *Beck on Mithraism*, 55–92; I. Huld-Zetsche, *Der Mithraskult in Mainz und das Mithräum am Ballplatz* (Mainz, 2008); Gordon, 'Ritual and Hierarchy', 351f. For another representation of humiliation, see R. Gordon, 'The Mithraic Body: The Example of the Capua Mithraeum', in P. Johnston and G. Casadio (eds), *The Cults of Magna Graecia* (Austin,

take place at the beginning when he was still fairly unknown to the others. I would therefore assign these tests to the first grades, who at the banquet also, surely, had to recline, if at all, furthest from the relief with Mithras.[147]

We move into a new group with the Lion, Persian and Sun-runner. The division is warranted because of the importance of the Lion, which is, after the Father, the grade that is mentioned most in epigraphy and seems to have held a normative status.[148] As we saw above, Pallas called the Lions 'those who have been initiated in the rites'. In other words, the previous grades were preparatory in character. Expressions such as *pater leonum*, and *leonteum* as a designation for a Mithraic sanctuary, point in the same direction.[149] The Lions were especially associated with fire and they seem to have concerned themselves with the burning of incense, as we read on the walls of the Santa Prisca Mithraeum in Rome:

> Receive the incense-burners, Father, receive the Lions, Holy One,
> through whom we offer incense, through whom we are ourselves consumed![150]

Porphyry tells us that the Lions were initiates of fire, and that honey rather than water, which is an enemy of fire, was therefore poured on their hands to purify them and their tongues were purified of guilt by honey too.[151] These purifications also show that this grade was the real start of becoming an initiate of Mithras. We should not forget that Isis initiates had to confess their sins too (§ 1) and that in later antiquity the Eleusinian initiates not only had to be free of bloodshed but also had to be 'pure of soul' (Ch. I.1). At the end of the purification, in order to confirm the initiation, the Father solemnly shook the hand of the new initiate, the mythical reflection of which can be seen on those Mithraic reliefs where Mithras

2009) 290–313; note also SHA *Commodus* 9.6 (although probably slander, it seems to suggest a fake execution in the ritual).

147 As is well observed by Turcan, *Mithra*, 80.

148 For the Lion, see especially C. Aloe Spada, 'Il *leo* nella gerarchia dei gradi mitriaci', in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae* (Leiden, 1979) 639–648; Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 100–109; H.-M. Jackson, 'The Meaning and Function of the Leontocephaline in Roman Mithraism', *Numen* 32 (1985) 17–45; Gordon, *Image and Value*, V.32–39 and 'Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine', *Topoi* 11 (2001) 77–136 at 109–111; R. Bortolin, *Il leontocefalo dei misteri mitraici: l'identità enigmatica di un dio* (Padua, 2012).

149 V 688 (*pater leonum*). U. Ciotti, 'Due iscrizioni mitriache inedite', in M. de Boer and T. Edridge (eds), *Hommages à M.J. Vermaseren*, 3 vols (Leiden, 1978) 1.233–239 (*leonteum*).

150 Vermaseren and Van Essen, *Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca*, 224–232 at lines 16–17: *accipe thuricremos, Pater, accipe, sancte, Leones/per quos thura damus, per quos consumimur*.

151 Porph. *De antro* 15.

shakes hands with Sol.[152] The symbolic character of the handshake was so important that the initiates could also be called *syndexi*, 'the united handshakers'.[153] Given the importance of the Lion grade, it is not surprising that we hear very little about the next grades, Persian (*Perses*) and Sun-runner (*Heliodromus*).

The top grade was the Father (*Pater*), which is also the grade mentioned most often epigraphically; we even hear of a Father of the Fathers (*p(ater) patrum*: V 403, 799; *AE* 1978: 641), presumably to mark his authority over other Fathers. We are reasonably well informed about his role.[154] He was clearly the head of the Mithraic 'congregation' and supervised both the meal and the setting up of votive altars, as his permission to do so is sometimes mentioned.[155] The fact that he is occasionally called Father and Priest (*pater et sacerdos*: V 511) confirms what we would have supposed anyway, viz. that he supervised the sacrifices.[156] Given that he solemnly shook the hand of the new initiates, he will also have supervised the initiations in his sanctuary.[157] Finally, as one Father mentions that he was a *stu[d(iosus) astrologia[e]* (V 708), we may safely assume that most other initiates were not. It is the Father who will have been the intellectual 'archive' and inspiration of the Mithraic worshippers.

The frequent occurrence of the Father in the epigraphic record might give the impression that anyone could become a Father. Yet this cannot have been true, and the reason should be obvious. In the hierarchical structure of the Roman Empire it would be impossible to imagine that an ordinary private soldier could give commands to an officer, or that an ordinary citizen could be superior to someone high up in the imperial household.[158] This must have been clear to those Lions who belonged to the lower social strata of the Mithraic 'congregation', and they probably did not bother to become initiated into the higher grades. The mention of the Father's role by Jerome and his representation at the top of the

152 See V 1083, 1137, 1292, 1400, 1430(c4), 1579(1), 1584, and 1359 (restored).

153 Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 5.2; V 423.7, note also V 54, 60, 63, 63a, 65, 423, cf. M. LeGlay, 'La *dexiôsis* dans les Mystères de Mithra', in Duchesne-Guillemin, *Études mithriaques*, 279–303; Clauss, *Mithras*, 151–152 = *Mithras: Kult und Mysterium*, 101.

154 F. Mitthof, 'Der Vorstand der Kultgemeinden des Mithras: Eine Sammlung und Untersuchung der inschriftlichen Zeugnisse', *Klio* 74 (1992) 275–290, to be read with Gordon, 'Ritual and Hierarchy', 329.

155 *Année Epigraphique* 1979: 425; 1980: 48; V 333, 774, 793.

156 Note also V 475, 511, 622, 626; *SEG* 52.1590; *I. Anazarbos* 9.7–9; the Fathers who call themselves *pater patratus* (V 706, 803), the title of the ancient Roman fetial priesthood, and *pater sacrorum* (V 1243).

157 Cf. Tert. *Apol.* 8.7.

158 This is well noted by Gordon, *Image and Value*, III.109 and 'Ritual and Hierarchy', 337–344.

grades of the Mithraeum of Felicissimus, then, must have been an ideal representation, rather than a realistic one, of the initiatory grade system.[159]

3 Conclusions

What have we learned from this survey? There are five points I would like to stress:

First, when we now look back at Burkert's definition of Mysteries as discussed in the Preface ('initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred'), we can see that the examples of Isis and Mithras conform much better to Burkert's definition than the prototypical Eleusinian Mysteries.

Second, over time, a striking shift took place from collective to individual initiation and from territorially fixed Mystery cults to mobile ones. In classical Athens there was still a large group of people who went annually in official procession to Eleusis (Ch. I.2); similarly, in Samothrace there was a large hall where the initiations took place (Ch. II.1). Later we hear nothing of the initiatory experience or of special groups of Eleusinian initiates in Attica. The earliest Orphic-Bacchic worshippers may still have met communally, but the Gold Leaves are already the product of individual initiations without a detectable geographical centre. In the cases of Isis and Mithras, the initiations seem to have been individual from the very beginning, and their Mysteries were characterised by an ever-expanding mobility. We can see how ancient religion had developed in the late Hellenistic and earlier Roman period into a religious market that no longer identified itself with the civic community of the city. It had made space for smaller groups that were no longer under the immediate control of the civic elites but were instead the products of religious entrepreneurs.[160]

Third, initiation required investments of money and time. This was already the case with the Eleusinian Mysteries but seems to have become a fixed element of all subsequent Mysteries. Consequently, these were not something for the poor and needy. More interesting, though, are the 'symbolic' costs. It is well known from modern research into processes of conversion that, in order to minimise the costs of conversion, people prefer to convert to religions or denominations that are fairly close to their current faith.[161] The situation is of course different in a

159 *Contra* Gordon, 'Ritual and Hierarchy', 330–334.

160 Cf. R. Gordon, 'Individuality, Selfhood and Power in the Second Century: The Mystagogue as a Mediator of Religious Options', in J. Rüpke and G. Woolf (eds), *Religious Dimensions of the Self in the Second Century CE* (Tübingen, 2013) 146–172.

161 R. Stark and R. Fink, *Acts of Faith* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2000) 123f.

polytheistic system, for which we can hardly speak of conversion in our sense of the word. Yet allegiance to a cult can have its 'symbolic' costs too, as we learn from Apuleius, who tells us that the initiates of Isis had to wear a linen garment (above) and have a fully shaven head (10).[162] This must have meant that many upper-class males will have refrained from this initiation, and it is noteworthy that Apuleius does not mention the shaving of Lucius' own head in his initiation into the Mysteries of Isis.

Was this different in the cult of Mithras? According to the Church Father Tertullian, the initiates of Mithras were marked (*signat*) on their foreheads. This information has been contested, but not persuasively.[163] The fact that Gregory of Nazianzus mentions burnings in the Mithraic initiations suggests that the worshippers of Mithras were only symbolically tattooed or that a term was used that could be interpreted in that way, because the term for tattooing was re-interpreted as 'branding' in Late Antiquity. The respectable worshippers of Mithras would certainly not have accepted real tattoos, as that would have characterised them as slaves.[164]

Fourth, the worshippers of Mithras must have formed a relatively tight-knit group, even though their social identity will not have depended on the cult, which was not exclusive, for some Mithraists worshipped other gods as well. We usually do not know which ones,[165] but in the dominant polytheistic system total exclusivity was highly unusual. On the other hand, the worship of Mithras must have been very important for the worshippers, given the investments they had made. Mithras certainly fits the tendency towards the dominance of one god in the

162 For the fully shaven head, see K. Fittschen, 'Lesefrüchte III', *Boreas* 34 (2011) 165–184 at 172–177.

163 L. Renaut, 'Les initiés aux mystères de Mithra étaient-ils marqués au front? Pour une relecture de Tertullien, De praescr. 40, 4', in C. Bonnet *et al.* (eds), *Religioni in contatto nel Mediterraneo antico = Mediterranea* 4 (Pisa, 2008), 171–190, who wants to change *frontibus* into *fontibus*, but note the objections of J.-C. Fredouille, *Rev. Ét. Aug.* 55 (2009) 300.

164 For tattooing and branding in Late Antiquity, see C.P. Jones, '*Stigma*: Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity', *JRS* 77 (1987) 139–155; M. Gustafson, '*Inscripta in fronte*: Penal Tattooing in Late Antiquity', *Class. Ant.***16 (1997) 79–105; L.** Renaut, 'Le tatouage des hommes libres aux IV^{e} et V^{e} siècles de notre ère', *Diasporas. Histoire et sociétés* 16 (2011) 11–27; Bremmer, '*Stigmata*: From Tattoos to Saints' Marks', in H.A. Shapiro and F. Waschek (eds), *Fluide Körper – Bodies in Transition* (Munich, 2014).

165 A. Hensen, 'Mercurio Mithrae – Zeugnisse der Merkurverehrung im Mithraskult', in C. Czysz *et al.* (eds), *Provinzialrömische Forschungen: Festschrift für Günter Ulbert zum 65. Geburtstag* (Espelkamp, 1995) 211–216 (Mithras and Mercurius); H. Schwarzer, 'Die Heiligtümer des Iuppiter Dolichenus', in M. Blömer and E. Winter (eds), *Iuppiter Dolichenus. Vom Lokalkult zur Reichsreligion* (Tübingen, 2012) 143–210 at 172–174 (worshippers of Mithras dedicated also in sanctuaries of Iuppiter Dolichenus and vice versa).

earlier Roman Empire[166] and his main epithet *Invictus*, 'Unconquered', may well have been a comfort to his worshippers.[167] Isis too was a powerful divinity of this kind[168] who was worshipped by various associations called Isiastai or Isiakoi, and even some of her initiates had formed a special association,[169] but numerically these remain well behind the ever increasing number of newly discovered Mithraea. Clearly, not every Mystery exerted the same fascination on the inhabitants of the Roman Empire.

Fifth, how traditional were these cults? Readers will have noticed that they have heard surprisingly little about authentically Egyptian and Persian motifs. That is indeed true. Yet there is a great difference between the two Mysteries. In the sanctuaries of Egyptian gods in the Roman Empire there were many artifacts to remind the visitor of Egypt, such as obelisks, hieroglyphs, statues, sphinxes and sistra, to mention only the most striking objects.[170] In the Mithraea, on the other hand, there were far fewer visible or audible Persian elements. There was the Persian appearance of the god himself, the occasional use of a Persian word such as *nama*, 'Hail!', or the image of the Persian dagger, *akinakes*, which was correlated with the grade of the Persian, and that is more or less it.

So how are we to understand this difference? The reason may become clearer if we compare these cults with modern Buddhism. It has been observed that the forms of Asian Buddhism that have proved most congenial to Westerners are those that come closest to their own Enlightenment values, such as reason, tolerance, freedom and rejection of religious orthodoxy.[171] In other words, if an Asian religion wants to be successful in the West, then it has to shed most of its Oriental features. Or, if we apply this to antiquity, the cults with an Oriental background that wanted to be successful had to be as un-Oriental as possible. An

166 See, most recently, P. Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique. La montée de l'intolérance dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris, 2010); S. Mitchell and P. Van Nuffelen (eds), *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leuven, 2010) and *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2010); G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Dio unico, pluralità e monarchia divina* (Brescia, 2011).

167 Gordon, 'Mithras', 988.

168 For Isis, see H.S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods* (Leiden, 2011) 283–289, with previous bibliography.

169 Keibl, *Iseion*, 162–165; L. Bricault, 'Associations isiaques d'Occident', in A. Mastrocinque and C. Scibona (eds), *Demeter, Isis, Vesta, and Cybele. Studies ... Giulia Sfameni Gasparro* (Stuttgart, 2012) 91–104 and *Les cultes isiaques*, 294–297. Initiates: *RICIS* 113/0537 (Thessalonica), 303/1301 (Tralles), 308/0401 (Prusa), *501/0127 (Rome).

170 See the survey in Keibl, *Iseion*, 167–170; Bricault, *Les cultes isiaques*, 233–253.

171 D. Lopez (ed.), *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston, 2002).

exotic tinge interested outsiders, but the cult had to remain acceptable in general – so not *too* exotic.[172] This difference between the Mysteries of Isis and Mithras partly explains their varying degrees of success.

Finally, Franz Cumont (see Preface) imagined these Oriental cults as important rivals of early Christianity. We will see in our next and final chapter whether that was really true.[173]

172 See also Versluys, 'Orientalising Roman Gods'.

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