

# RITUAL, MYTH, DOCTRINE, AND INITIATION IN THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRAS: NEW EVIDENCE FROM A CULT VESSEL\*

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(PLATES XIII–XIV)

## I. INTRODUCTION: MITHRAIC RITUAL

Despite the wealth of the cult's material remains, we still know relatively little about the ritual of the Mithraic mysteries. What was it, in the sense of liturgy performed, that Mithraists actually did in mithraea? How did it relate to myth, to the story of the god, which, by contrast, is singularly well documented on the monuments? Was it, in some way, a mimesis or re-enactment of that story? How, if at all, was it an expression of the initiate's progress, an actualization of his 'salvation',<sup>1</sup> and thus of cult doctrine on these matters.

There are three major pieces of this puzzle already in place.<sup>2</sup> First, and most important, we know that the cult meal, shared by the initiates on the banquet benches of their mithraeum, replicated the feast of Mithras and the Sun god at a table draped with the hide of the newly slain bull.<sup>3</sup> We know this primarily from representations on the Konjic relief and the Sa. Prisca frescoes, where we see the initiates participating in roles defined by their positions within the hierarchy of grades: the Father (*Pater*) and the

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References to Mithraic monuments in M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae* (2 vols, 1956–60) will be by number prefixed with 'V' (e.g., V485). Other abbreviations:

BNP *History, Sourcebook* = Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1 — A History, Volume 2 — A Sourcebook*, (1998)

JMS = *Journal of Mithraic Studies*

<sup>1</sup> That the Mithraists were in some sense 'saved' is agreed by all, the agency of that salvation being, as the dipinto in the Sa. Prisca mithraeum attests, the 'blood shed' by Mithras, presumably in the bull-killing (*et nos servasti . . . sanguine fuso*: the text quoted here is that deemed secure by S. Panciera in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae* (1979), 103–5). The specifics of that salvation are widely debated, but need not concern us at this point.

<sup>2</sup> What remains quite unknown is the liturgical year — and indeed whether the Mithraists had one, although it is difficult to imagine a solar cult without. Mithras' birth is generally supposed to have occurred, and been celebrated, on 25 December, but that rests solely on the assumption that it coincided with the *Natalis Invicti*, the birthday of the official Sun god. The assumption is reasonable but not self-evidently correct. A valiant attempt was made by I. Tóth ('Das lokale System der mithraischen Personifikationen im Gebiet von Poetovio,' *Arheološki vestnik* 28 (1977), 385–92) to correlate other events in the story of Mithras with the seasonal cycle and hence with a liturgical year, but it was not, in my opinion, persuasive (R. Beck, 'Mithraism since Franz Cumont',

*ANRW* II.17.4 (1984), 2002–115, at 2040–1). More cautiously and convincingly, R. Merkelbach (*Mithras* (1984), 141–5) suggested several dates throughout the solar year as potentially significant, arguing principally from the zodiacs with which Mithraic icons are so liberally endowed. I have argued that the icon of the bull-killing Mithras (the so-called 'tauroctony') speaks in a very complex fashion of a particular season, *opôra* or high summer, but not that the bull-killing is liturgically datable ('In the place of the Lion: Mithras in the tauroctony', in J. R. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism* (1994), 29–50, at 44–6). In sum, I do not believe that the Mithraists' ritual year is recoverable — yet at least. Even R. Turcan's tentative summary overstates, although it is surely in principle along the right lines (*Mithra et le mithriacisme* (2nd edn, 1993), 80–1): 'Suivant les moments de l'année, on devait mettre l'accent sur tel ou tel épisode de la geste divine: naissance de Mithra pétrogène (peut-être au solstice d'hiver . . .); sacrifice du taureau à l'équinoxe de printemps; miracle de l'eau . . . [final ellipsis marks *sic*]'. On the possible observance of the summer solstice, see my '*Qui mortalitatis causa convenerunt*: The meeting of the Virunum Mithraists on June 26, A.D. 184', *Phoenix* 52 (1998), 335–44.

<sup>3</sup> On this there is no disagreement. For treatments of the cult meal and its divine archetype in the more recent general studies of Mithraism: Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 2), 132–3; M. Clauss, *Mithras* (1990), 117–22; Turcan, op. cit. (n. 2), 78–80. Of particular studies of the cult meal, the most perceptive, in my view, are J. Stewardson and E. Saunders, 'Reflections on the Mithraic liturgy', in S. Laeuchli (ed.), *Mithraism in Ostia* (1967), 67–84, and J. P. Kane, 'The Mithraic cult meal in its Greek and Roman environment', in J. R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* (1975), vol. 2, 313–51. Kane concludes, rightly in my opinion, that the giving of bread and a cup of water mentioned by Justin (*Apology* 66) as a Mithraic ritual is not an element of the cult meal but a rite of initiation (as Justin in fact calls it).

Sun-Runner (*Heliodromus*) represented Mithras and Sol reclining at their feast, the remaining grades their ministers.<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that there is no known counterpart in ritual to the central mythic act which precedes the feast, the bull-killing itself.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, since the bull-killing in some sense effected 'salvation', we may suppose that the feast of the initiates, replicating the feast of the gods, celebrated this salutary effect for mortals. That the divine feast follows, and follows *from*, the bull-killing is assured by (1) the fact that it was served on the hide of the slaughtered bull,<sup>6</sup> and (2) its depiction on the reverse of tauroctony reliefs, at least some of which could be rotated at the appropriate ritual moment.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the ubiquity of the mithraeum's distinctive banqueting benches implies the ubiquity of the cult meal as the 'liturgie ordinaire'.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, the frescoes on the side-benches of the Capua mithraeum reveal actual scenes of cult initiation in some detail.<sup>9</sup> However, there is nothing in these scenes which resonates in any way with cult myth. Unlike the banqueters, these Mithraic initiators and initiands are not replicating any known episode in the cult story. Nor, moreover, can the scenes be correlated with initiations into particular grades, about which there is a certain amount of scattered information.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Konjic = V1896; recognizable as ministers are the Raven, the Lion, and (?) the Persian. Sa. Prisca = V483 (best illustration in Bianchi, op. cit. (n. 1), Appx I, Tav. X); the Raven is recognizable; the banquet scene is balanced on the other side of the aisle by a fresco of grade initiates bearing offerings toward a throned Father. A Raven ministrant is also recognizable in V42.13 (Dura) and 397 (Castra Praetoria, Rome).

<sup>5</sup> Though, paradoxically, there seems to be an allusion to initiation into Mithras' theft of the bull in the *symbolon* reported by Firmicus Maternus, *De err.* 5.2: *mysta boöklopiês, syndexie patros agauou*.

<sup>6</sup> Particularly well represented on the Ladenburg, Rüdigen, and Hedernheim (I) reliefs (all illustrated in Clauss, op. cit. (n. 3), 121-2).

<sup>7</sup> e.g., V1083 Hedernheim I.

<sup>8</sup> Turcan, op. cit. (n. 2), 78.

<sup>9</sup> M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithraica I: The Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere* (1971), with excellent colour plates. We shall return to the composition of these initiation scenes below. Until the publication of the cult vessel which will be the principal subject of this article the Capua frescoes were virtually unique as depictions of Mithraic initiation. Descriptions of the lost Velletri reliefs (V609) are too elusive to furnish helpful parallels (see Vermaseren, *Mithraica I* (above), index, s. 'Velletri').

<sup>10</sup> Initiation into specific grades are recorded in the fourth-century Roman inscriptions V400-5, typically in the form NN *tradiderunt leontica (persica, patrica, heliaca* (for the *Heliodromus*?), *hierocoracica* (for the Raven). Ritual is best attested for the Lions: being 'fiery' their ablutions are performed with a suitably fiery liquid, honey, not water (Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 15); they are the cult's incense offerers (*per quos thuradamus*, Sa. Prisca dipinto: M. J. Vermaseren and C. C. van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome* (1965), 224) and in some sense 'consume' their fellow initiates (*per quos consumimur ipsi*, *ibid.*), presumably something ritually enacted; processions of lions can be seen on both side walls of the Sa. Prisca mithraeum (V481-2); finally, what may be the text of an initiation ceremony into the grade has recently been published by W. M. Brashear, *A Mithraic Catechism from Egypt (P. Berol. 21196)* (1992). For the Mithraic Soldier (*Miles*), a formal renunciation of a crown, with the formula 'Mithras is my crown', is reported by Tertullian (*De corona* 15). For the *Nymphus* (the term cannot be translated, for it is a non-word for a non-thing, a 'male bride' — see Gordon, op. cit. (below), 48), ritual transvestism was practised, to judge from the frescoes

of the Pareti Dipinte mithraeum in Ostia (V268); they were hailed at some point as the community's 'new light' (formula in Firmicus Maternus, *De err.* 19.1). On the grades and the extent of our knowledge concerning them, see M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithra, ce dieu mystérieux* (trans. M. Lémán and L. Gilbert, 1960), 115-26; Beck, op. cit. (n. 2, 1984), 2090-3; Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 2), 77-133 (a very full but somewhat idiosyncratic treatment); Clauss, op. cit. (n. 3), 138-45; Turcan, op. cit. (n. 2), 81-91. By far the best treatment of the ideology of the grades remains, in my view, R. L. Gordon, 'Reality, evocation and boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras', *JMS* 3 (1980), 19-99 (reprinted in *idem, Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World* (1996), ch. 5). In general, Mithraic ritual seems to be characterized by strangeness, violence, and the extreme. Apart from the ethos of the Capua frescoes, our best evidence is Ambrosiaster (Ps.-Augustine), *Quaest. vet. nov. test.* 114.11 (CSEL 50, p. 308): 'Their eyes are blindfolded so they don't recoil from being foully degraded; some flap their wings like birds, imitating the call of the raven; others roar like lions; others again, their hands bound with chicken guts, are propelled over trenches filled with water; then comes someone with a sword and severs the guts — he's called the "liberator"'. Other Christian writers attest the severity of Mithraic rituals of initiation, although in the later sources one must allow for exaggeration based on the increasing remoteness of authentic information: see Clauss, op. cit. (n. 3), 111. The emperor Commodus is reported to have actually killed a man during a Mithraic rite in which 'something is customarily said or counterfeited to elicit a display of fear' ('cum illic aliquid ad speciem timoris vel dici vel fingi soleat', SHA *Comm.* 9). A possible stage prop for such a ritual has been discovered at the Riegel mithraeum: a blade whose two halves are joined by a hoop which would fit around the body (references, with other interpretations of the object, Beck, op. cit. (n. 2, 1984), 2039); the effect of someone apparently run through by a sword is illustrated, with an appropriately tunicked model, in E. Schwertheim, *Mithras: Seine Denkmäler und sein Kult*, *Antike Welt Sondernummer* (1979), 29 Abb. 38. A pit in the Carrawburgh mithraeum has been interpreted as the place for a mimesis of interment or subjection to other ordeals (V844; I. A. Richmond and J. P. Gillam, *The Temple of Mithras at Carrawburgh* (1951), 19). Finally, we should not overlook the alarming ritual implications of the 'fiery breath which is an ablution (*niptron*) for holy magi' (graffito in the Dura mithraeum, V68).

Thirdly, Porphyry (*De antro nympharum* 6) tells us that the mithraeum functioned as the place of initiation into a mystery of the 'descent and exit of souls' and that it was designed and equipped for this purpose as a 'likeness (*eikona*) of the universe':

Similarly, the Persians call the place a cave where they introduce an initiate to the mysteries, revealing to him the path by which souls descend and go back again. For Eubulus tells us that Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honour of Mithras, the creator and father of all . . . This cave bore for him the image of the cosmos which Mithras had created, and the things which the cave contained, by their proportionate arrangement, provided him with symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos. [trans. Arethusa edition]

There is plenty of evidence from actual excavated exemplars showing that Porphyry and his sources were quite correct about the design of the mithraeum as a 'cosmic model'.<sup>11</sup> That being so, we ought to have some confidence in their information about the intent of the design. As yet, however, no direct evidence has come to light to reveal the *drômena* of this rite of initiation, the ritual mode or ceremony, that is, by which 'descent and exit' were expressed within the mithraeum qua cosmic model.

## II. THE MAINZ CUP: ITS PRIMARY IMPORT

This small but by no means negligible dossier on Mithraic ritual is dramatically augmented by a single, recently published cult vessel, a large two-handled crater discovered in a mithraeum in Mainz, the ancient Mogontiacum and capital of the Roman province of Germania Superior.<sup>12</sup> Moulded on the shoulders of the vessel between the handles are seven figures, three on one side and four on the other (Pls

<sup>11</sup> Most explicit is the Seven Spheres mithraeum at Ostia: R. L. Gordon, 'The sacred geography of a mithraeum; the example of Sette Sfere', *JMS* 1 (1976), 119–65 (reprinted in idem, op. cit. (n. 10, 1996), ch. 6); idem, 'Authority, salvation and mystery in the Mysteries of Mithras', in J. Huskinson, M. Beard and J. Reynolds (eds), *Image and Mystery in the Roman World* (1988, repr. in Gordon, op. cit. (n. 10, 1996), ch. 4), 45–80, at 50–60; R. Beck, 'Cosmic models: some uses of Hellenistic science in Roman religion', in T. D. Barnes (ed.), *The Sciences in Greco-Roman Society*, Apeiron 27.4 (1994), 99–117.

<sup>12</sup> Published by H. G. Horn, 'Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß', *Mainzer Archäologische Zeitschrift* 1 (1994), 21–66. The vessel stands some 40 cm high. A dipinto on the rim records the dedication to Mithras (*[i]nv[ic]to*); for the dedicatory name, Horn (ibid., 30) reads *Quintus Cas[s]ius* (though Abb. 13 seems to show no more than *Quintus Ca[ ]*). The pottery type, Wetterau ware, is of great significance because of its relatively early date; it will be discussed below. The vessel belongs to the class of *Schlangengefäßen*, so called from the snakes which are moulded on to them, in this instance a single one with its head resting on the top of one handle and its tail writhing horizontally around a quarter of the cup's body. There are a number of other Mithraic *Schlangengefäße*, with notable examples from Köln (E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler orientalischer Gottheiten im römischen Deutschland* (1974), no. 15a) and Friedberg (V1061); see also E. Swoboda, 'Die Schlange im Mithraskult', *JOAI* 30 (1937), 1–27; J. Bird, 'Frogs from the Walbrook', in eadem, M. Hassall, and H. Sheldon (eds), *Interpreting Roman London: Papers in Memory of Hugh Chapman* (1996), 119–27, at 119–21 (a valuable discussion of the cult contexts and motifs of

these vessels: they are associated with other gods besides Mithras). Joanna Bird makes the intriguing suggestion that on the analogy with the Köln vessel cited above, the snake's head on the extant handle may well have been balanced by a lion on the lost handle (personal communication).

The story of the discovery of the vessel and its mithraeum in the context of the commercial redevelopment of the site in Mainz in 1976 makes dismal reading. 'Leider konnten sie [i.e., the site] von der Archäologischen Denkmalpflege Mainz nicht eingehender untersucht werden. Möglich war lediglich, im Rahmen einer notmaßnahme und mit Hilfe ehrenamtlicher Mitarbeiter die von Baggern zufällig freigelegten Befunde einzumessen und fotografisch mehr schlecht also recht zu dokumentieren sowie vereinzelte Funde zu bergen. Der Grabungsbericht ist demzufolge äußerst lückenhaft' (Horn, op. cit. (above), 21). Indeed, the mithraeum has to be inferred primarily from the finds; even its precise location and plan are irrecoverable. One can only conclude, with Horn, '... daß beim Ausschachten der Baugrube für den Nordstern-Neubau . . . in Mainz wohl ein komplettes Mithrasheiligtum so gut wie unbeobachtet und undokumentiert zerstört bzw. abgebagert wurde' (ibid., 22). Most tragically, to judge from their few remaining fragments, it seems that about eight other vessels similar to ours were smashed during excavation and hauled off with the spoil (ibid., 22, n. 7). If these vessels were anything like as informative as ours, the loss to our knowledge of Mithraism is incalculable. This sorry story is much redeemed by the careful restoration and publication of the surviving vessel, for which we are greatly in the debt of the museum and archaeological services (see next note) and H. G. Horn.

XIII–XIV).<sup>13</sup> There can be no doubt that these figures represent cult members engaged in cult activities. The vessel thus belongs among the very few Mithraic monuments on which we can be certain that what is depicted, at least at the literal level, is the human world of cult initiates rather than the divine world of cult myth. On the Mainz vessel, as I shall argue, the humans are mimicking the divine, so in fact both levels are present. But the divine, the mythic, is intimated in the rituals of the human participants; it is these latter whom the artist has actualized on the artifact.

The fact that the figures number seven, that they are differentiated in appearance and attributes, and that some of them are manifestly grade holders of identifiable rank, led the publisher, H. G. Horn, to postulate a one-for-one set of correspondences between the seven figures on the vessel and the seven grades of the Mithraic hierarchy.<sup>14</sup> This is understandable, but I shall argue later that it is misconceived and leads to implausible results. Similarly, I shall argue against R. Merkelbach's alternative analysis, which also postulates a grade identity for each of the figures but finds certain of the grades represented twice and others not at all.<sup>15</sup> My point here is that the emphasis on grade identity distracts from, and conflicts with, the more important task — which of course Horn and Merkelbach also pursued — of determining what the figures are doing in the context of the two scenes in which they participate. Function, not rank, is the issue here. The Mainz vessel does indeed furnish significant new data on the incidence of the Mithraic grade hierarchy, but it tells us much more of substance about Mithraic ritual and the ritual's underlying doctrinal intent.

Each of the scenes, I shall argue, represents the performance of a ritual which takes place within the mithraeum. On one side (A) is represented what I shall term 'the archery of the Father', on the other (B) 'the procession of the Sun-Runner'. That the former is a ritual of initiation was recognized by Horn from its striking similarity of composition with the Capua scenes.<sup>16</sup> Merkelbach argued that it represents Mithras shooting at a rock, a common scene in the myth cycle, usually called the 'water miracle' from the supposed effect of the archery.<sup>17</sup> Here, I shall simply combine the insights of the two scholars — recognizing that they are not mutually exclusive — and propose that the ritual archery of the Father initiates by miming the mythic archery of Mithras. If this is so, then we have a second myth-and-ritual pair to complement the banquet of the gods and the cult meal of the initiates discussed above:

*ritual (enacted)*

feast of the Father and the Sun-Runner  
archery of the Father

*myth (imitated)*

feast of Mithras and Sol  
archery of Mithras

The second scene (B), I shall argue, likewise has its counterpart in the divine world, though the allusion is less straightforward. What is mimed in the procession of the Sun-Runner are certain esoteric cosmological truths, about which we are quite well informed from Porphyry's *De antro*, having to do with the Sun's journey (the *dromos* of *Helios* performed, logically enough, by the *Heliodromus*) and its role in the 'descent and exit of souls'. If I am right, we now have an actual example of a ritual of initiation into those mysteries for which the mithraeum, we are told, was designed as 'cosmic model'. These are the *drômena* which, I mentioned above, have so far eluded us.

The importance of the recovery of these two ritual scenes is greatly enhanced by the early date of the artifact relative to the history of Mithraism. The vessel is of 'Wetterau ware', a regional pottery type whose manufacture was limited to the first quarter of the second century A.D.<sup>18</sup> The vessel therefore belongs among our earliest

<sup>13</sup> Photographs: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Rheinland-Pfalz, Abt. Archäologische Denkmalpflege, Amt Mainz. I am most grateful to this Office for the photographs and permission to reproduce them. To capture the detail, I have used individual photographs of the figures arranged as on the vessel.

<sup>14</sup> op. cit. (n. 12), 28–30.

<sup>15</sup> 'Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß', *ZPE* 108 (1995), 1–6, at 6.

<sup>16</sup> op. cit. (n. 12), 25–8.

<sup>17</sup> op. cit. (n. 15), 2–5.

<sup>18</sup> V. Rupp, *Wetterauer Ware: Eine römische Keramik im Rhein-Main-Gebiet* (1987), 54–9.

data for the Mithras cult on the Rhine frontier, or for that matter anywhere in the Empire. The implications are considerable: it suggests that the cult's peculiar grade structure — or at least major components of it — was in place more or less *ab origine*; likewise the well-developed interplay of ritual, myth, and doctrine of a sort which characterizes a mature religion; and all this not in the capital city but at the margins of Empire. It adds a large measure of support to those accounts of the Mysteries which construe them as something more constructed than evolved,<sup>19</sup> and it certainly casts doubt on those others which see them, for the most part, as a product of incoherent, unthinking good fellowship.<sup>20</sup> We shall return to these implications in the Conclusion.

Before describing and analysing the scenes on the two sides, the problem of the vessel's uniqueness should be addressed. To what extent may we generalize from this single artifact? Can we be reasonably sure that the rituals depicted there, even if correctly interpreted, were not merely local or peculiar to the Mithraists of Mogontiacum? These would indeed be insoluble questions if the scenes were unrelated to anything else in the cult's visual or textual remains. That, however, is demonstrably not the case. The archery of Mithras is well documented iconographically over a wide area. It is reasonable to suppose that its mimesis by a mithraeum's Father was widespread too — which is not to say that it was universal, as we assume the banquet to have been. The reason why the archery ritual is attested so far only at Mogontiacum is not that it was merely a local initiative; it arises from something already noted, the fact that with very few exceptions (such as the Capua frescos) Mithraists depicted myth rather than ritual, things done by their gods, not things done by themselves as initiates. The Mainz Cup is one of the handful of exceptions. Similarly, the scene of the procession of the Sun-Runner is no aberration; it coheres with Mithraic cosmology preserved in Porphyry's *De antro* and expressed in the design of actual mithraea. I would hazard the conjecture that the ritual was in widespread — again, not universal — use to animate, through performance, the mithraeum's design. These, then, are pieces of the puzzle which by shape and colour fit with what we have already.

### III. SCENE A: THE ARCHERY OF THE FATHER

Of the three figures on Side A (Pl. XIII), that on the left is seated (he is the only one of the seven on the cup so posed). He wears a Persian cap with ear-flaps. He is in the act of drawing a bow. He aims his arrow straight at the figure in front of him, the middle of the three in the scene. This second figure is smaller than the other two and naked. He is shown advancing towards the seated bowman, whom he faces. His arms are crossed in front of him in a gesture of subordination,<sup>21</sup> though they are raised to the level of his head as if to ward off the threat of the drawn bow. Behind him (thus on the right of the scene), the third figure likewise advances leftwards. He gazes upwards, with open mouth as if speaking; his right arm is extended and raised, the hand gesturing with thumb and two fingers (index and middle) extended and the other two fingers folded over the palm; his left arm is bent across his chest, the hand holding a small indecipherable object.<sup>22</sup>

Undoubtedly, as Horn argued,<sup>23</sup> this is a scene of initiation. The seated bowman is a Father of the Mithraic community, identifiable as such in that he wears the garb of Mithras and performs one of the god's actions. He is the initiator. The naked figure is

<sup>19</sup> The view articulated most fully by Merkelbach, *op. cit.* (n. 2), 75–7 (note the section title: 'Die Mithrasmysterien — eine neue Religion'); see also my 'The Mysteries of Mithras: a new account of their genesis', *JRS* 88 (1998), 115–28.

<sup>20</sup> N. M. Swerdlow, 'On the cosmical mysteries of Mithras', *CP* 86 (1991), 48–63, is the extreme case of this view. There is something of it in R. MacMullen's description of Mithraic cult activities: *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (1981), 124. Full-scale treatments of Mithraism tend to move away from it because the

mass of evidence, principally iconographic, renders it unsustainable: Merkelbach, *op. cit.* (n. 2); Turcan, *op. cit.* (n. 2); even Clauss, *op. cit.* (n. 3), despite his emphasis on cult community over doctrine.

<sup>21</sup> Thus, e.g., Tiridates of Armenia on his first encounter with Nero at Naples (Dio 63.2.4, *tas cheiras epallaxas*).

<sup>22</sup> Horn (*op. cit.* (n. 12), 23) suggests a cup. We shall return to the figure's gesture later.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 25–8.

the initiand, small and vulnerable, menaced with a death he goes to meet, yet instinctively tries to ward off. That the bow and arrow were real enough and the archery potentially deadly, we need scarcely doubt. The terror of the scene fits well with what we know of ancient initiation in general and of Mithraic initiation in particular.<sup>24</sup> The third figure, balancing the scene on the right, is the mystagogue. As in the Capua scenes, he is probably the initiand's sponsor and guide into the ritual and its experience; he is also, as we shall see when we come to examine his gesture, its explicator. The Capua scenes, as Horn well appreciated,<sup>25</sup> are crucial to the interpretation of this scene on the Mainz vessel. If there were any doubt about the primary meaning of the latter, parallels of composition with the former would obviate them. In both we find the same triads of initiator, initiand, and mystagogue, similarly placed. Especially striking is the similarity between initiands: small, naked, and vulnerable, even their gestures (in one instance of the Capua scenes)<sup>26</sup> are the same.

Why, though, does a ritual of Mithraic initiation take this form of mimed archery? Here we may follow Merkelbach's insight that the scene represents — we should qualify, *also* represents — an episode from the cult myth, found as a side-scene on many of the monuments of the bull-killing, especially the complex northern reliefs.<sup>27</sup> This is the so-called 'water miracle', a scene in which Mithras shoots an arrow at a rock to draw water from it.<sup>28</sup> As on the Mainz vessel, the scene is often witnessed by two subordinate figures, who are its suppliants and beneficiaries. It appears, then, that the participants in the initiation drama are playing out an episode in the story of the god: the Father aims an arrow because Mithras aimed an arrow.

Far from being mutually exclusive, the interpretations of Horn and Merkelbach turn out to be complementary. The scene on the cup is *both* cult initiation *and* water miracle. The Father initiates by imitating the deed of Mithras, whose counterpart in the economy of the cult he is. Ritual is here a mimesis of myth. The scene is enacted simultaneously at two levels or in two worlds, the earthly world of cult life and the 'other' world of heroic myth. What is done in the here and now by the Pater imitates and thus derives its authority from what was done (or is done timelessly) by Mithras in that other world. I have tried to display these relationships between different levels of reality, or 'worlds', schematically in the diagram (Fig. 1): the scene on the artifact (first box) represents a ritual performance (an initiation by the Father) taking place in the actual world of the mithraeum (second box), which in turn imitates, and is therefore validated by, a mythic event (the archery of Mithras) in the divine world (third box). As I have already suggested, representations of the familiar banquet scene refer in much the same way to the world of men (*viz.*, cult initiates) and the world of gods, although allusion to the former, except in the Konjic relief,<sup>29</sup> is not so direct. Scene A of the Mainz vessel is a key addition to our dossier of Mithraic art precisely because it furnishes a parallel to the banquet scene in the linking of myth to ritual: the mythic event of the water miracle is replicated in ritual, as a rite of initiation, by the feigned archery of the Father, just as the banquet of Mithras and Sol is replicated by the banquet of the initiates presided over by the Father and the Sun-Runner.

This raises the further question, why should the water miracle be chosen as the archetype for an initiation ritual? With the banquet the question scarcely arises; that the celebration of men should replicate the celebration of gods is self-evidently appropriate. The relevance of Mithras' archery to initiation, however, is not so obvious. Part of the answer, as we shall see later, lies with the symbolism of the bow. For the present, though, we need to look at the water miracle itself and its supposed significance in the myth cycle. With the possible exception of one of the Sa. Prisca texts,<sup>30</sup> we have no

<sup>24</sup> See above, n. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Above, n. 23; on the Capua scenes, Vermaseren, *op. cit.* (n. 9), esp. pls 21–3, 25–8.

<sup>26</sup> Vermaseren, *ibid.*, pl. 28.

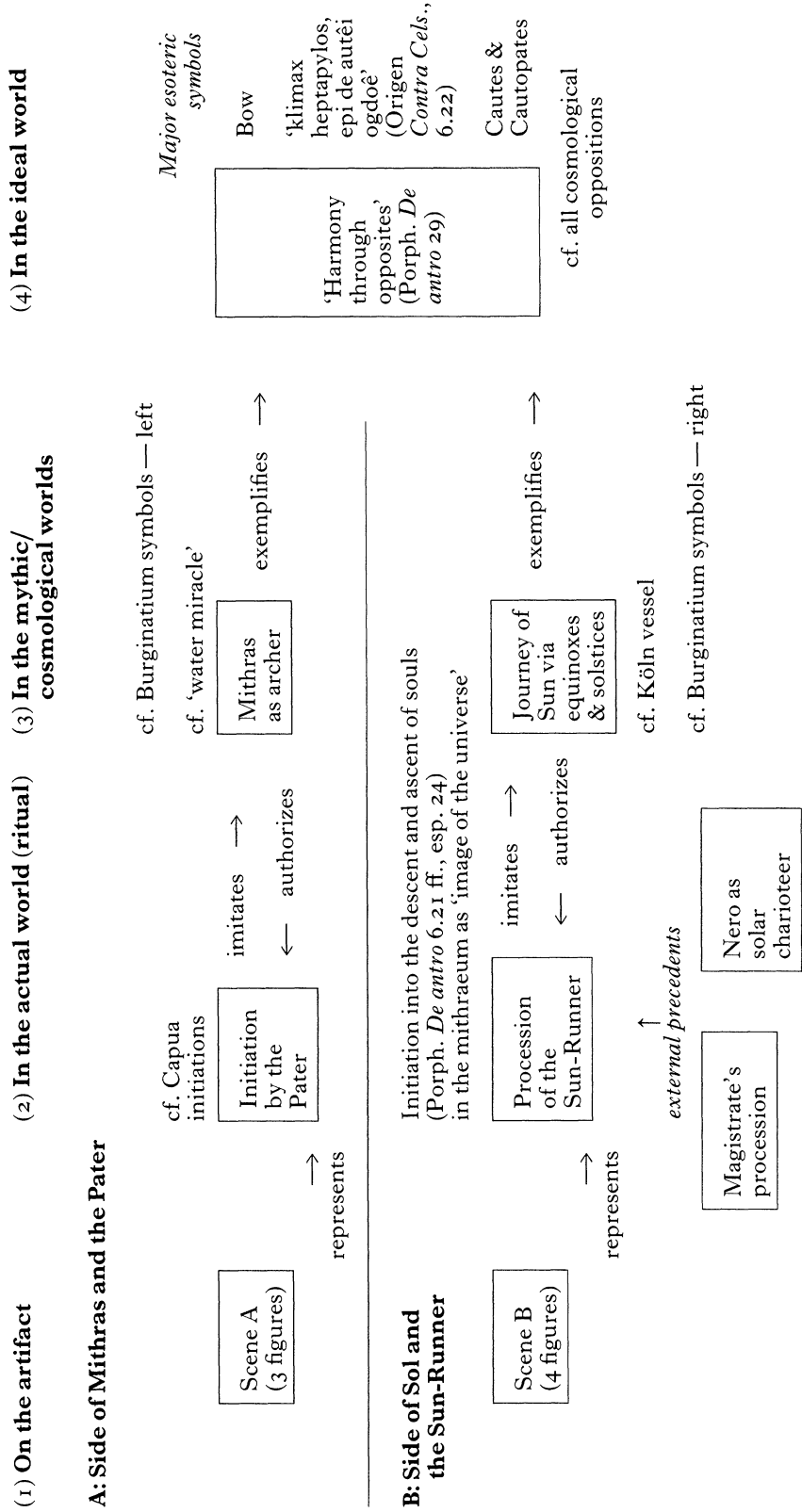
<sup>27</sup> *op. cit.* (n. 15), 2–5. For the scene's location on various monuments (excluding the Danubian), see R. L. Gordon, 'Panelled complications', *JMS* 3 (1980), 200–27 (repr. as ch. 9 in Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 10, 1996)); the scene is (letter) 'O' in his scheme.

<sup>28</sup> There is an example from Mogontiacum, V1225; similar in composition to the scene on our cup is V1301 (Besigheim).

<sup>29</sup> Above, n. 4.

<sup>30</sup> 'Fons concluse petris, geminos qui aluisti nectare fratres' (Vermaseren and van Essen, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 193) is generally thought to refer to the water miracle.

FIG. 1. ACCESSING THE MYSTERIES THROUGH THE MAINZ VESSEL.



written evidence at all on this episode. What is happening in the scene and what it means have to be reconstructed from iconography and other archaeological data, always a risky undertaking. Scholars, however, are unanimous in the following reading: Mithras shoots at a rock and elicits water from it; the other figures in the scene (sometimes one, sometimes two) serve either to petition Mithras or to receive gratefully (sometimes in cupped hands) the gushing water.<sup>31</sup> The archery is thus interpreted as a victory over drought, an action once performed by the god in mythic time to relieve world-wide aridity and thus performable again in actual time at the behest of his devotees.

Water both gives and sustains life, so the water miracle is seen as an achievement of Mithras as the creator and/or enabler of physical life and growth. Is he also the author of the 'waters of life' in a more profound sense? Even as cautious a scholar as Manfred Clauss affirms that he is, explicitly drawing the parallel with contemporary Christianity:<sup>32</sup>

Das Wasserwunder weist neben dem Kultmahl [N.B.!] die deutlichsten Parallelen zum Christentum auf, das in derselben Zeit wie der Mithras-Kult expandierte. Natürlich rühren die Vorstellungen beide Kulte, die dem zugrunde liegen, aus den gleichen Traditionen her. Das Wasserwunder gehört zu jenen Wundermythen, die aus Gegenden stammen, in denen Dürre herrscht und das Gedeihen von Mensch und Natur vom Regen abhängt. *Mithras und Christus verkörpern beide auf ihre Art dieses zunächst ganz konkret lebensnotwendige, dann bald symbolhafte Wasser* [my italics]. Christus wird im Neue Testament als das Wasser des Lebens apostrophiert. Als Symbol der Unsterblichkeit ist auf zahlreichen christlichen Sarkophagen jenes Wunder dargestellt, bei dem Mose Wasser mittels eines Stabes aus dem Felsen schlägt (Exodus 17).

Appropriately, Clauss then goes on to discuss the rich archaeological and monumental data for the importance of water in the Mithras cult.<sup>33</sup> Following this line of argument, one might conclude that a ritual of initiation that replicates the water miracle is admission into that more abundant life symbolized by the waters elicited by Mithras the bowman:

#### ARCHERY ⇒ WATER ⇒ LIFE

By one of those strange extensions of meaning so typical of Mithraism, archery thus becomes a mode of baptism. All that prevents me from wholeheartedly pressing this solution is, first, its entire dependence on a particular interpretation of the archery of Mithras in the side-scenes and, secondly, the fact that in the scene on the Mainz vessel the Father is shooting not *for* the initiand but *at* the initiand.

That the seated bowman is the — or a — Father of the local Mithraic community is not in doubt. His dress, and more particularly his actions, mark him as Mithras' surrogate, and such a person can only be a Father.<sup>34</sup> He is enthroned, while all others stand and face him. This last is true not only of those in Scene A, but also of the four in Scene B, whose procession may be linked across the intervening handle. They too are moving leftwards around the body of the vessel towards the Father. The composition is here reminiscent of the Sa. Prisca procession scene (V480), in which representatives of the grades, clearly identified as such, proceed towards an enthroned Father. Finally, we may note the privileging of the Father's position by the treatment of the moulded snake. His throne is embowered by the snake, which laps around him, from its head on the vessel's lip above, through its body on the handle behind, to the coil immediately below.

<sup>31</sup> F. Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, Vol. 1 (1899), 164–6; Vermaseren, op. cit. (n. 10), 71–4; Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 2), 112–15; Clauss, op. cit. (n. 3), 80–2. The two subsidiary figures are apparently the same pair as sometimes attend the birth of Mithras from the rock and are probably identifiable with the torchbearers (Cautes and Cautopates) who attend the bull-killing. The rock at which Mithras shoots is also the vault of heaven (Merkelbach, loc. cit.).

<sup>32</sup> loc. cit. (n. 31). The parallel with Christian uses of Moses' water miracle at Horeb (Exodus 17:1–7) was already drawn by Cumont, loc. cit. (n. 31).

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* Note esp. the *fons perennis* of V1533.

<sup>34</sup> The Persian cap is the symbol of the Father in the relevant panel of the Felicissimus grade mosaic (V299). The bow and arrow is, of course, Mithras' weapon.



Are the second and third figures in Scene A, the initiand and the mystagogue, also identifiable as grade holders? Horn<sup>35</sup> assigned them, respectively, the grades of Raven (*Corax*) and Lion (*Leo*), but the only iconographic warrant is the small, indistinct object held by the mystagogue, which he interpreted as a cup. It will be presented to the new initiate qua Raven; for a cup, as the Raven panel in the aisle mosaic of the Felicissimus mithraeum attests,<sup>36</sup> is the proper symbol of that grade. This is all rather tenuous, and in fact these two identities were determined more by a process of elimination. Horn, assuming one-for-one correspondence between figures on the vessel and grades in the hierarchy, first assigned grade identities to the four figures in Scene B, and of course to the bowman in A; the two grades remaining for the other two figures in A were the Raven and the Lion. For Merkelbach,<sup>37</sup> these two figures are the Persian (*Perses* — centre) and the Sun-Runner (right). This follows a priori from their identities as the pastoral figures who attend the water miracle.<sup>38</sup> This pair, on Merkelbach's theory, is identical with the Mithraic subdeities Cautopates and Cautes, to whom in turn correspond the Persian and the Sun-Runner. The identifications are thus only as good as the general theory.<sup>39</sup> Thus, neither Horn's nor Merkelbach's identifications stem from the actual iconography; nor do they contribute to an understanding of the scene's primary intent in ritual and myth.

There is, however, something more to be said about the mystagogue. As already mentioned, the artist has modelled the gesture of his right hand in careful detail: thumb, index, and middle fingers extended, ring and little fingers folded into the palm. The gesture is anything but casual. That it is an orator's gesture seems likely, more so in that the figure appears to be speaking. But what does it signify? The answer lies not so much where one might expect it, in the orators' handbooks,<sup>40</sup> but in the iconography of comparable artifacts. This is precisely the gesture which H. P. L'Orange documented in numerous examples in various media and which he argued signified 'speech' — not a particular type of speech, or a particular content, or a particular style or level or emotional coloration, but speech itself, the presentation of reason through language, in

<sup>35</sup> op. cit. (n. 9), 30.

<sup>36</sup> V299. If one were to pursue Horn's identification further, it should be through the associations of raven and cup in the catasterism myth for Corvus, Crater, and Hydra. The story (Apollo instructs the raven to fetch water; the raven dallies in its task, offering the specious excuse that it was prevented by a water-snake; Apollo condemns the raven to thirst over the season of its delay, catasterizing it along with the water-jar and water-snake) has been fully explored by Richard Gordon for its resonances in the ideology of the Mithraic grade system (op. cit. (n. 10), 25–9). Gordon has demonstrated how the story's underlying tension between thirst/drought/aridity and water/fertility/generation is exemplified in the Mithraic grade structure in general and the Raven grade in particular. The same tension, as we have seen, underlies the Mithraic 'water miracle', which is the story replicated in the ritual of our Scene A. If the initiand is indeed the Raven, as Horn suggests, then perhaps the scene also functions as an esoteric counterpart of the catasterism myth. A different Raven is commissioned by a different Apollo, himself shooting to end drought; in a nice paradox, the cup in which water is to be brought is held (again, if Horn's identification is correct) by a fiery, water-shunning Lion (above, n. 10 — dryness in Mithraism is not a simple

negative); and behind 'Apollo' writhes a much more formidable manifestation of the raven's feeble excuse, the snake. The vessel itself, on which the scene is depicted, bespeaks, as Merkelbach points out (op. cit. (n. 15), 6), 'water'. Thus, Horn's identifications may be shown to generate a secondary intent for the scene, but without iconographic warrant it remains inconclusive.

<sup>37</sup> op. cit. (n. 15), 2–6.

<sup>38</sup> See above, n. 31.

<sup>39</sup> That there is an extensive correlation between the grades and the figures in the various scenes of the Mithraic myth cycle was central to Merkelbach's interpretation of the latter in his monograph on the cult: op. cit. (n. 2), 86–133; see also his *Weihegrade und Seelenlehre der Mithrasmysterien*, Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vorträge G 257 (1982). The goal of relating cult life to myth and doctrine is wholly admirable, but Merkelbach's correlations, at least as an extended system, have not proved credible; see my review article of his *Mithras*: 'Merkelbach's Mithras', *Phoenix* 41 (1987), 296–316, at 306–15.

<sup>40</sup> There are no precise parallels in the section of Quintillian's *Institutio oratoria* (11.3.92–104) which discusses hand gestures.

a word, *logos*.<sup>41</sup> Apart from the wealth of artifacts,<sup>42</sup> there is one especially cogent literary description. In the *Golden Ass*, when the mutilated Thelyphron is coaxed by Byrrhaena, with compliments to his oratory, into re-telling his bizarre story, he commands the attention of his fellow dinner guests (whose discourtesy he has just protested) with exactly the gesture of our mystagogue: ‘. . . porrigit dexteram, et ad instar oratorum conformat articulum, duobusque infimis conclusis digitis ceteros eminus porrigens et infesto pollice clementer surrigens infit Thelyphron: “pupillus ego Mileto profectus . . .”’.<sup>43</sup> The gesture, then, whether Thelyphron’s or our mystagogue’s, is not meant to tell its audience (or us the viewers of the vessel) anything about the content of what is being said, except that it is serious and extraordinary. It says, in effect, ‘*intende* — listen’.<sup>44</sup> In the context of the Mainz cup, it indicates that the figure is indeed the mystagogue, the one who reveals, presumably in the narrative of Mithras’ archery, the intent and efficacy of the ritual. It makes clear something that we might perhaps assume but could not otherwise know for certain, that the ritual has *legomena* as well as *drômena*, things said which match the things done.<sup>45</sup>

#### IV. SCENE B: THE PROCESSION OF THE SUN-RUNNER

The other side of the vessel shows a processional scene with four figures moving in file to the left (Pl. XIV). The first figure wears a breastplate and is the only one on the vessel so clad. The second and the fourth carry rods, held in front of them in the right hand, but in strikingly different and contrasted positions: No. 2 downwards as one might hold a walking stick, No. 4 upwards almost vertically. They are further differentiated in that No. 2 wears a Persian cap (like the Father in Scene A), while No. 4. is bareheaded. The figure between them, No. 3 in the procession, brandishes a whip. The whip, in Mithraism, is the proper symbol of the second most senior grade, the ‘Sun-Runner’ (*Heliodromus*), who carries it in his capacity as solar charioteer.<sup>46</sup> For just as the Father is Mithras’ surrogate in the economy of the cult, so the Sun-Runner is the Sun’s; and as the text in the Sa. Prisca mithraeum attests, the Sun is the grade’s tutelary planet.<sup>47</sup> From the single projecting spike on the top of the figure’s peculiar head-dress, Horn and Merkelbach infer that it is the rayed solar bonnet, which is another of the

<sup>41</sup> *Studies on the Iconography of Kingship in the Ancient World* (1953), 171–97. His examples are drawn from sarcophagus reliefs, diptychs, coins, catacomb frescos, mosaics, etc. Admittedly, much of the material comes from early Christian art and is thus quite late relative to the Mainz vessel. Particularly germane, however, are (i) the illustrations of ancient comic actors, especially the Prologus, in the Terence Codex Vaticanus, and (ii) the Sabazius hands. On the latter, the gesture is interpreted as giving voice to the symbols with which the hands are embellished; they become ‘speaking hands’. The gesture eventually becomes one of blessing (the so-called *benedictio latina*), but L’Orange argues, convincingly in my view, that that was not its original intent. While such a construction could be placed on the Sabazius hands, it could scarcely be so in the Apuleius passage below, or in the Terence miniatures (cf. the scene of the council of the gods at the start of *Aeneid* 10 from the Codex Romanus (vat. lat. 3867, fol. 234v): that Venus is about to speak is to be inferred from the gesture in question which she alone makes; also *ibid.*, fol. 11, Meliboeus makes the same gesture as he leads off the amoebaean song of the *Eclogues*).

<sup>42</sup> One might add as a particularly vivid example the scene of the *traditio legis* on a silver casket from Thessalonica (illustrated in T. F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*

(1993), 80, fig. 57): Christ makes the speaker’s gesture with his right hand as he hands the scroll to Peter on his left (viewer’s right), while Paul on his right answers with the identical gesture in imitation. The composition is an elegant statement of the authority of the Word, spoken and written. In gesture and uplifted gaze, both Christ and Paul are strongly reminiscent of our Mainz mystagogue.

<sup>43</sup> Apuleius, *Met.* 2.21 (ed. Hanson).

<sup>44</sup> I echo the word of another talking artifact, the scroll which carries the ‘author’s’ address to the reader in the introduction of the *Golden Ass* (1.1).

<sup>45</sup> L’Orange contrasts the ‘gesture of thought’ with the ‘gesture of power’. In the latter (*op. cit.* (n. 41), 139–70), the right hand is extended but the palm is open (outwards) and the fingers all extended. In the archery scene on the Mainz cup the mystagogue’s gesture of speech is balanced by a different ‘gesture of power’: the Father’s hands draw the bow and hold it in tension with arrow poised. This is the essence of the *drômenon*. In contrast to the hands of the two active figures, the hands of the initiand between express passivity and subordination (above, n. 21).

<sup>46</sup> The symbol is found in the Sun-Runner’s panel in the mosaic of the Felicissimus mithraeum (V299).

<sup>47</sup> *Nama Heliodromis tutela Solis* (V480.2; Vermas-eren and van Essen, *op. cit.* (n. 10), 156).

Sun-Runner's identifiers.<sup>48</sup> We should accept, then, as certain their identification of the figure as a cult functionary of that grade.

We need scarcely go further in pursuit of grade identities. The first figure *may* be, indeed probably is, a 'Soldier' (*Miles*); for it would be difficult to interpret his breastplate in other terms. But the identification will add nothing to our understanding of the scene. The second figure, likewise, *may* be a 'Persian' (*Perses*), although the Persian cap which he wears is the Father's symbol, not the symbol of the Persian.<sup>49</sup> But, again, the identification adds nothing. Rather, it distracts from the cap's significance in context, which, I shall suggest, is to differentiate further its wearer from his colleague, the rodbearer with the raised wand at the end of the procession.

Nevertheless, before explicating this processional scene, we should complete the grade identifications proposed by Horn and Merkelbach. For ease of reference, the identifications for all seven figures on the cup are set out below; the position of each grade in the hierarchy is given by number in parenthesis, from lowest — Raven (1) — to highest — Father (7):

<i>Figure</i> (as here interpreted)	<i>Horn</i>	<i>Merkelbach</i>
A1      initiating Father = Mithras as archer	initiating Father (7)	Mithras as archer = Father (7)
A2      initiand	initiand = Raven (1)	'entreating shepherd' = Cautopates = Persian (5)
A3      mystagogue	mystagogue = Lion (4)	'shepherd with cup' = Cautes = Sun-Runner (6)
B1      attendant (Soldier)	Soldier (3)	Soldier (3)
B2      rodbearer (rod down) = Cautopates	Persian (5)	Persian (5) = Cautopates
B3      Sun-Runner = Sol	Sun-Runner (6)	Sun-Runner (6) = Cautes
B4      rodbearer (rod up) = Cautes	Nymphus (2)	Raven (1)

The final figure in the procession scene (B4) is especially problematic. Horn assigns him to the Nymphus grade and justifies the identification by reading the figure's elevated stick as a torch — which, at the literal level, it most certainly is not — and construing it as a substitute for the Nymphus' proper symbol of a lamp.<sup>50</sup> But the fact of the matter is that neither this figure nor the initiand and mystagogue on the other side carry unambiguous grade identifiers, so identification is a matter of shuffling them into the most appropriate — or least inappropriate — grades not already assigned to the other four figures.

<sup>48</sup> Horn, *op. cit.* (n. 12), 24, 29; Merkelbach, *op. cit.* (n. 15), 6. This symbol, complete with ribbons to tie the bonnet beneath the chin, is found, together with the symbol of the whip, in the Sun-Runner's panel in the Felicissimus mosaics (V299).

<sup>49</sup> See, once again, the relevant panels of the Felicissimus mosaics (V299).

<sup>50</sup> *op. cit.* (n. 12), 24, 29. On the Nymphus, the only grade name which I have left untranslated, see above, n. 10.

Merkelbach identifies B<sub>4</sub> as a Raven.<sup>51</sup> He has three alternatives for this final figure, since, in his analysis, the Sun-Runner and Persian appear twice, once as the shepherds participating in the water miracle performed by the Father playing Mithras the archer, and again as the figures with the whip and the Persian cap (B<sub>3</sub> and B<sub>2</sub>) in the procession scene. The question, then, is which two of the trio Lion-Nymphus-Raven to eliminate and why. Merkelbach opts for the Lion and the Nymphus on the grounds that the latter is represented by the figure of the snake, an equation stemming from his general theory of grade identification,<sup>52</sup> while the Lion is truly and appropriately absent because this is a water vessel with a scene of the water miracle and water is inimical to the fiery Lion grade (Porphyry, *De antro* 15).<sup>53</sup> Hence figure B<sub>4</sub> can only be the Raven.

The most serious weakness in Merkelbach's analysis lies not so much in the eliminations, tortuous though they are, or in the selection of the lowliest grade of Raven for B<sub>4</sub>, for which there is some slight warrant in the figure's youthfulness; rather, it stems from the prior identification of the figures with the lowered stick (B<sub>2</sub>) and the whip (B<sub>3</sub>) as Persian and Sun-Runner respectively. Now, the second of these identifications, as we have seen, is certain, while the first is not implausible. But the consequence, in Merkelbach's system, is that these two figures, qua Persian and Sun-Runner, must also represent the subdeities Cautopates and Cautes. Those were the equations used to establish the grade identities of the shepherds at the water miracle in the other scene (shepherds = Cautopates and Cautes = Persian and Sun-Runner). However, to identify B<sub>2</sub> and B<sub>3</sub> in the procession *as the twins* Cautopates and Cautes is to deny the obvious. If any two figures are to represent those deities, it must surely be, as I shall argue below, the pair with the identical yet opposed symbols of the lowered and raised sticks, i.e., B<sub>2</sub> and B<sub>4</sub>. Yet B<sub>4</sub>, for Merkelbach, cannot be Cautes (even though Merkelbach follows Horn in seeing his elevated stick as a torch), since Cautes correlates with the Sun-Runner and the Sun-Runner is manifestly B<sub>3</sub> with the solar whip. Merkelbach's grade identifications on the Mainz vessel are thus in unresolvable conflict with his more general system of grade equations in Mithraic iconography.

Putting aside these other grade identifications allows us to focus on the essence of the scene and to begin to correlate it with the scene on the other side of the vessel. Let us start with the rodbearers. Their function, I suggest, is to escort the person whom they bracket, much as lictors escort a magistrate — an analogy to which we shall return in due course. From this it follows that the commanding figure in Scene B is this person in between. Scene B represents the procession of the Sun-Runner just as Scene A represents the archery of the Father. In the composition of the Mainz vessel, the two senior grades, the Father and the Sun-Runner, predominate.

What, then, is the meaning of the procession of the Sun-Runner? What purpose did it serve as a ritual performed? To what does it allude at some higher level, in a world beyond literal action in the mithraeum? For the archery of the Father we have the close compositional analogy, on the one hand, with the Capua frescoes to tell us that this is a scene of initiation, and, on the other, with the water miracle to tell us that Mithras' own archery validates the ritual. What is it that authorizes, or energizes, the procession of the Sun-Runner? Ritual can never be entirely self-referential, something performed solely for its own sake. It must, if it is not to be inane or trivial, refer to some larger reality beyond.

To answer these questions, one must return to the rodbearers. Now, it seems to me inescapable that in a Mithraic context such a pair, carrying the same symbol but in contrasted positions, one elevated, the other lowered, denotes primarily, not two of the seven grades, but the cult's peculiar pair of subdeities, Cautes and Cautopates. On numerous cult monuments, in particular in scenes of the bull-killing, the cult's principal

<sup>51</sup> op. cit. (n. 15), 6.

<sup>52</sup> op. cit. (n. 2), 91.

<sup>53</sup> See above, n. 10; see also n. 12 — Joanna Bird's

suggestion that the vessel may have carried a lion on the top of the missing handle to balance the snake's head on the extant handle.

icon, the pair is regularly featured, distinguished by the attributes of a raised torch (Cautes) and a lowered torch (Cautopates).<sup>54</sup>

On the Mainz vessel, then, it appears that two of the cult members are playing the roles of Cautes and Cautopates, just as the Heliodromus with his whip is miming Sol the charioteer and the Pater with his bow is miming Mithras the archer. It matters not at all that the contrasted objects are rods rather than torches. On another early monument from the lower Danube they are birds, one held upright, the other upside down.<sup>55</sup> Nor does it matter that B2 wears a Persian cap, while B4 is bare-headed. This too merely serves to heighten the contrast within an essential unity of function. The two are identical, yet opposed.

Our scene, then, represents two cult members playing Cautes and Cautopates escorting a third who is a Sun-Runner playing the Sun (the trio preceded by a fourth who, to judge from his breastplate, is probably of the grade of Soldier). Like the scene on Side A, we must suppose that this processional scene also refers to a world beyond the world of which it is a literal representation, beyond the world, that is, of ritual performance within the mithraeum. In Scene A that other world is the world of myth, of the heroic deeds of Mithras. In Scene B what is imitated and so actualized in the ritual is drawn, I suggest, from the world of cult cosmology. It is a doctrinal truth rather than an episode of myth.

What, then, does the Sun-Runner with his two rodbearers mime in this procession? The grade title furnishes an obvious clue. The Sun-Runner (*Heliodromus*) imitates the course, the *dromos*, of the Sun. Now, the Sun's particular course is its annual journey around the ecliptic, the journey which both defines and generates the earth's seasons.<sup>56</sup> That course has four great markers or turning points, the tropics of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, defined in opposed pairs as the equinoxes (spring/autumn) and solstices (summer/winter). It is these opposed celestial pairs, I suggest, that are intimated by the rodbearers attending the Sun-Runner in the guise of Cautes and Cautopates attending the Sun.<sup>57</sup> There is good warrant for effecting this identification, for we know from Porphyry's essay *On the Cave of the Nymphs* that the four solar tropics were significant doctrinally to the Mithraists. It was there that they located their deities, Mithras at the equinoxes, Cautes and Cautopates at the solstices.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> On the iconography of the torchbearers (with frequencies and geographic distribution), see J. R. Hinnells, 'The iconography of Cautes and Cautopates, I: the data', *JMS* 1 (1976), 36–67; on their astronomical significance, R. Beck, 'Cautes and Cautopates: some astronomical considerations', *JMS* 2 (1977), 1–17; on their opposition (and the rare exceptions to it), idem, 'The Mithraic torchbearers and "absence of opposition"', *Classical Views* 26, N.S. 1 (1982), 126–40; most recently, R. Hannah, 'The image of Cautes and Cautopates in the Mithraic tauroctony', in M. Dillon (ed.), *Religion in the Ancient World* (1996), 177–92.

<sup>55</sup> V2268/9.

<sup>56</sup> Astronomically, *dromos* means the distance (in longitude) covered by a celestial body in a given period of time. A particularly relevant example, in view of what follows, is Geminus 1.34–5: as a result of the eccentricity of its orbit, 'the sun's [sc. annual] *dromos* is divided into four unequal sectors'; hence the inequality of the seasons. The Mithraists' verbal coinage is thus precisely and literally appropriate. On analogous *-dromos* coinages see R. L. Gordon, 'Mystery, metaphor and doctrine in the Mysteries of Mithras', in Hinnells, op. cit. (n. 2), 103–24, at 110–13.

<sup>57</sup> Raised and lowered objects, whether they be torches as normally or rods as here, are appropriate

signifiers for the solstices and equinoxes as contrasted pairs. At the spring equinox the Sun is ascending in daily altitude as it crosses into the northern half of the ecliptic; at the autumn equinox it is declining in daily altitude as it crosses back into the southern half. The solstices are more ambiguous: at the summer solstice the Sun reaches its zenith at the ecliptic's northern extreme, but at the selfsame moment it starts its descent southward; conversely, at the winter solstice the Sun reaches its nadir but at the same time starts its climb back northward and upward — the paradox of midwinter renewal.

<sup>58</sup> *De antro* 24: 'To Mithras as his proper seat, they assigned the equinoxes . . . As creator and master of genesis, Mithras is set at the equator with the northern signs to his right and the southern signs to his left. They set Cautes to the south because of its heat and Cautopates to the north because of the coldness of its wind'. From context it is clear that the northern and southern tropics, i.e., the summer and winter solstices, are intended. Cautes and Cautopates were restored to the text by the brilliant — and universally accepted — emendation of the Arethusa edition (1969). On the passage, see R. Beck, 'The seat of Mithras at the equinoxes: Porphyry, *De antro nymphaeum* 24', *JMS* 1 (1976), 95–8; idem, op. cit. (n. 11, 1994), 106–7, 114–15.

The scene on the Mainz vessel, interpreted in this way, is not without precedent. Indeed, there is a close analogy on a similar artifact from a site not that far distant. A Mithraic *Schlangengefäß* from Köln shows the Sun between Cautopates and Cautes (left and right respectively, as on the Mainz vessel, but facing inwards towards him rather than processing with him).<sup>59</sup> On the Köln vessel, by contrast, the scene is obviously set in the cosmological world, not the actual world. The gods are presented as themselves, rather than through personae intimated by human actors in a ritual — which, most unusually, is the primary subject of the artist's representation on the Mainz vessel. The cosmic setting is further emphasized by the large stars, originally seven in all, around the circumference of the Köln vessel. Thus, the Köln vessel represents directly what it is that the figures in Scene B of the Mainz vessel are enacting, and Porphyry's *De antro* explicates the underlying doctrine of both.<sup>60</sup> We may conclude that the procession of the Sun-Runner is as certainly a mimed actualization of Mithraic doctrine as the Father's archery is of Mithraic myth. It is worth reflecting, too, that without Porphyry's *De antro* and its embedded Mithraic lore, the significance of the Sun-Runner's procession would be as opaque to us as would the Father's archery without the corresponding side-scene from the monuments. Conversely, the scenes on the Mainz and Köln cups help to confirm as genuinely Mithraic the cosmological doctrines attributed to the Mysteries in the *De antro*.<sup>61</sup>

The *De antro* warrants reading yet further meaning into the Sun-Runner's procession, answering the question: to what end, other than imitating the cosmological placement of their gods, would Mithraists play a game of solar travel between the tropics? Now, the setting of Mithras at the equinoxes and the torchbearers at the solstices had an anthropological as well as a theological purpose. It was at the solstices, according to Porphyry, that the gates through which the human soul enters and leaves the world were located, entry being at the northern tropic (Cancer) and exit at the

<sup>59</sup> Schwertheim, op. cit. (n. 12), no. 15a; good colour illustration in idem, op. cit. (n. 10), Abb. 42 (see also Abb. 83, 86).

<sup>60</sup> Sol between Cautes and Cautopates is apparently the subject of one of the fresco panels in the mithraeum in the Tribune's house at Aquincum: O. Madarassy, 'Die bemalte Kultwand im Mithräum des Legionslagers von Aquincum', *Kölner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte* 24 (1991), 207–11, at 209–10; the scene is numbered 11 in the sequence. It is badly damaged and difficult to decipher, but whatever its interpretation, this is a new side-scene in the cycle, in the sense that it has not been encountered before. Sol is kneeling, and Madarassy reads it as an initiation scene: 'Vermutlich handelt es sich um eine mit dem Kult zusammenhängende Einweihungszereemonie, um die darstellung einer Wiedergeburt'. There are similarities, noted by Madarassy, with the Dura-Europus scene of Cautes and Cautopates bearing between them the carcass of the slain bull (V42.12).

<sup>61</sup> The Mithraic core of the cosmology of *De antro* 24 is not really in doubt, but the point is worth making explicitly because certain of its important features, to be introduced below, are dismissed as spurious (i.e., non-Mithraic) in R. Turcan's influential *Mithras*

*Platonicus: Recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra* (1975). Turcan, as we shall see, tends to construe such things as philosophers' constructs calqued on the Mysteries by outsiders. The issue of genuineness needs to be addressed definitively. Since the issues are technical and complicated, I shall deal with them for the most part in the Appendix. For a brief critique of Turcan's overall approach, see my 'Mithraism since Franz Cumont' (above, n. 2), 2055–6. It is encouraging that the compilers of the most recent sourcebook on Roman religion include, as a probable Mithraic source and with a serviceable commentary from that perspective, generous excerpts from the *De antro*: BNP *Sourcebook*, 90–1 extract 4.6a, 313–16 extract 12.5g. In BNP *History* (277–8) the authors discuss this question of the reliability of Porphyry's Mithraic data, but conclude that 'this is only a pressing problem if you imagine that there was a single "real" Mithraic message which could, in principle and if you had enough evidence, be disentangled'. I return to this answer in my Conclusion. Since I maintain that Mithraism did indeed have doctrinal norms (as I would prefer to call them) and that the Mainz vessel affords us significant new access to them, the problem, in my view, is indeed 'pressing' and its solution achievable.

southern (Capricorn).<sup>62</sup> Although Porphyry does not explicitly complete the equations, one may conclude that Cautopates, set at the northern tropic, presides over entry and descent into mortality; that Cautes, set at the southern tropic, presides over exit and ascent into immortality; and that Mithras, from his 'proper seat' at the equinoxes midway between, ultimately controls and balances both processes. Finally, as Porphyry tells us and as we have already observed,<sup>63</sup> it was into a 'mystery' of this double process of the soul's entry and exit that the Mithraists inducted their initiates, designing and furnishing their mithraeum or 'cave' as a 'model of the cosmos' for this very purpose. We may therefore infer that miming the solar journey within the context of a mithraeum necessarily intimates the genesis and apogenesis of souls and as such would be an integral part of the mithraeum's rites of initiation. The procession of the Sun-Runner in Scene B thus proves to be as initiatory as the archery of the Father in Scene A. But of greater importance, in Scene B of the Mainz vessel we appear to have hit upon a form of the missing *drômena* of the mystery of the soul's 'descent and exit' which the Mithraist practised in the mithraeum qua cosmic model. As I commented at the end of the Introduction, this crucial element of Mithraic ritual has so far eluded us.

It is here that one must confront Robert Turcan's contention that the doctrine of solstitial soul gates is not Mithraic. Clearly, if Turcan is right, it cannot be a mystery of the soul's entry and exit through the gates of the solstices that the Mithraists of the Mainz vessel are enacting. Turcan's contention about the soul gates is part of a larger thesis, which is the principal subject of his important *Mithras Platonicus*, as the subtitle, *Recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*, makes explicit. This thesis discounts the data on Mithras and Mithraism found in the philosophical sources on the grounds that they are for the most part (and with allowance made for an irreducible genuine core) distortions or elaborations designed to bolster and authenticate the philosophers' own theories. In the case of the *De antro*, Porphyry uses this data, probably already contaminated by his own philosophical sources, to substantiate various elements in the allegory which he weaves round Homer's description of the cave in *Odyssey* 13.102–12. Scepticism is certainly in order. It is not Porphyry's intent to give an objective account of Mithraism; Mithraic data are simply grist to his allegorical mill. Could he not be distorting or elaborating them with the justification that they carry profounder meanings which are 'really' there though unsuspected by the cultists? Indeed he could. However, the fact that an ancient allegorist might well pursue this method as fair game does not imply that in any given instance or set of instances he actually did so. To establish this as more than a possibility, we must show that what Porphyry, or any other philosopher, attributes to Mithraism is inconsistent with what we know about the cult from its monuments. In other studies I have demonstrated that

<sup>62</sup> *De antro* 21–9. In chs 21 and 22 Porphyry acknowledges the second-century Neopythagorean Numenius of Apamea 'and his associate Cronius' as his immediate sources for these solstitial soul gates. Later in the passage, as we have seen, Porphyry explicitly cites the doctrines of the Mithraic mysteries. Whether Mithraic doctrine was mediated through Numenius (and/or Cronius), or whether through another source (Porphyry elsewhere cites Pallas and Eubulus, on whom see Turcan, *op. cit.* (n. 61), 23–43, as sources on Mithraism), or whether Porphyry here drew directly on the Mithraists, it is difficult to tell. As is apparent from the parallel account in Proclus, the Numenian material will have been drawn from that author's commentary on the 'Myth of Er' with which Plato concludes his *Republic* (Numenius fr. 35 Des Places = Proclus, *In Rempubl.* 2, p. 128 Kroll). Although his is the earliest attested account of it, there is no reason to suppose that the theory of solstitial gates is original to Numenius. The Mithraists could well have had priority; indeed, it appears likely from the Mainz vessel that they did. Below and in the Appendix, I address Turcan's contention that the Mithraists cannot have held a theory of solstitial gates

because it is incompatible with other elements of their doctrine. A third literary version of the theory, which is also thought to derive ultimately from Numenius, is found in Macrobius, *In Somn.* 1.12.1–4. See R. Lambertson, *Homer the Theologian* (1986), 66–75, 120–33, 318–24; H. de Ley, *Macrobius and Numenius* (1972). L. Simonini gives a full commentary on this section in her edition of the *De antro* (1986). Although she furnishes much detailed and germane background information, she does not succeed, in my opinion, in disentangling the literary and Mithraic sources or in displaying their relationship; the architecture of the section remains opaque. Modern scholarship on the larger topic of the soul's celestial journey is considerable. I cite the major treatments in my *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* (1988), nn. 12, 180 (add A. F. Segal, 'Heavenly ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, early Christianity and their environment', *ANRW* II.23.2, 1333–94). *Planetary Gods* is itself largely concerned with manifestations of the theory of the soul's celestial journey in the literary testimonia and on the monuments of Mithraism (esp. 41–2, 73–85, 92–100).

<sup>63</sup> *De antro* 6, quoted above in my Introduction.

Porphyry's Mithraic information in the *De antro*, far from being inconsistent with the monuments of Mithraism, is amply borne out by them.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, evidence continues to mount from new discoveries to support the credibility of the *De antro*'s Mithraic data.<sup>65</sup> Here it remains only to disprove Turcan's particular claim that the theory of soul gates at the solstices is incompatible with Mithraic doctrine. Unfortunately, that road is long and tortuous, but it has to be followed if we are to restore full credibility to the Mithraic data reported by Porphyry and his philosophical sources. In the following two paragraphs I summarize Turcan's argument and its refutation, leaving my full counter-argument to the Appendix.

As we have seen, in *De antro* 21 and 22 Porphyry (following Numenius and Cronius) locates the soul gates at the solstices; in ch. 24, by introducing the cosmic location of Mithras in this context, he appears to attribute the doctrine of the entry and exit of souls through solstitial gates to Mithraism. This, argues Turcan,<sup>66</sup> cannot be, for the doctrine of solstitial gates presupposes a particular *thema mundi*, i.e., an alignment of the heavens at the time of the world's creation, while Mithraic doctrine presupposes a different *thema mundi* altogether. Mithraic cosmological doctrine and the doctrine of the entry and exit of souls through solstitial gates are thus mutually exclusive. Mithraism, then, could not have taught the doctrine of entry and exit through solstitial gates because it was incompatible with the cult's cosmology.

The counter-argument is not that the doctrine of solstitial soul gates and the cosmological doctrines of Mithraism imply the same *thema mundi*, but rather that neither set of doctrines implies any particular *thema mundi*. There is in fact only one attested *thema mundi* and it has nothing to do either with the theory of solstitial soul gates as reported in the philosophical sources or with Mithraic cosmology as reported in *De antro* 24 and exemplified on the cult monuments relating to that passage. It is simply an irrelevance. Demonstrating that fact and explaining why Turcan should have pursued such a will-o'-the-wisp will be the matter of the Appendix. The conclusion is that there is no incompatibility between Mithraic cosmological doctrines and the theory of solstitial soul gates. Quite the contrary; solstitial soul gates are part and parcel of Mithraic cosmology and anthropology — which is the obvious way to construe *De antro* 6 and 21–9.

Nothing, then, precludes reading Scene B of the Mainz vessel as a representation of initiates miming within their mithraeum the cosmology and the destiny of souls ascribed to them in the *De antro*. Accordingly, we should now briefly rehearse the mithraeum's relevant features both as 'cosmic model' and as stage set for the initiates' performance, using the data of the *De antro*, especially ch. 24, as elements of its blueprint. The classic case is the Sette Sfere mithraeum in Ostia, because the cosmography there is much more explicit than in any other mithraeum. The mithraeum in my diagram (Fig. 2) is thus a composite of the ideal mithraeum as intimated in the *De antro* and actual mithraea as represented principally by Sette Sfere.<sup>67</sup>

The 'proper seat of Mithras' which is 'at the equinoxes' or 'on the equator' is represented in the mithraeum by the image of the bull-killing Mithras, with equinoctial symbols,<sup>68</sup> commanding the central axis of the structure, the aisle between the two distinctive side benches. So placed, Mithras has 'on his right the northern signs', which

<sup>64</sup> op. cit. (n. 62), 92–100; op. cit. (n. 11), 106–9, 112–14; see also the studies by R. L. Gordon cited above, n. 11.

<sup>65</sup> (1) Celebration of the solstices as feasts of mortality and immortality is suggested by a formula in the recently discovered Virunum *album*: see my 'Qui mortalitatis causa convenerunt: the meeting of the Virunum Mithraists on June 26, A.D. 184', *Phoenix* 52 (1998), 335–44; G. Piccottini, *Mithrastempel in Virunum* (1994), 24. (2) In the papyrus 'Mithraic catechism' (W. Brashear, *A Mithraic Catechism from Egypt* (1992), 23, on line 5 recto), the supplement 'tropic' is proposed by Merkelbach and Burkert (no mean authorities!) to the initiand's response, 'through the summer . . .'

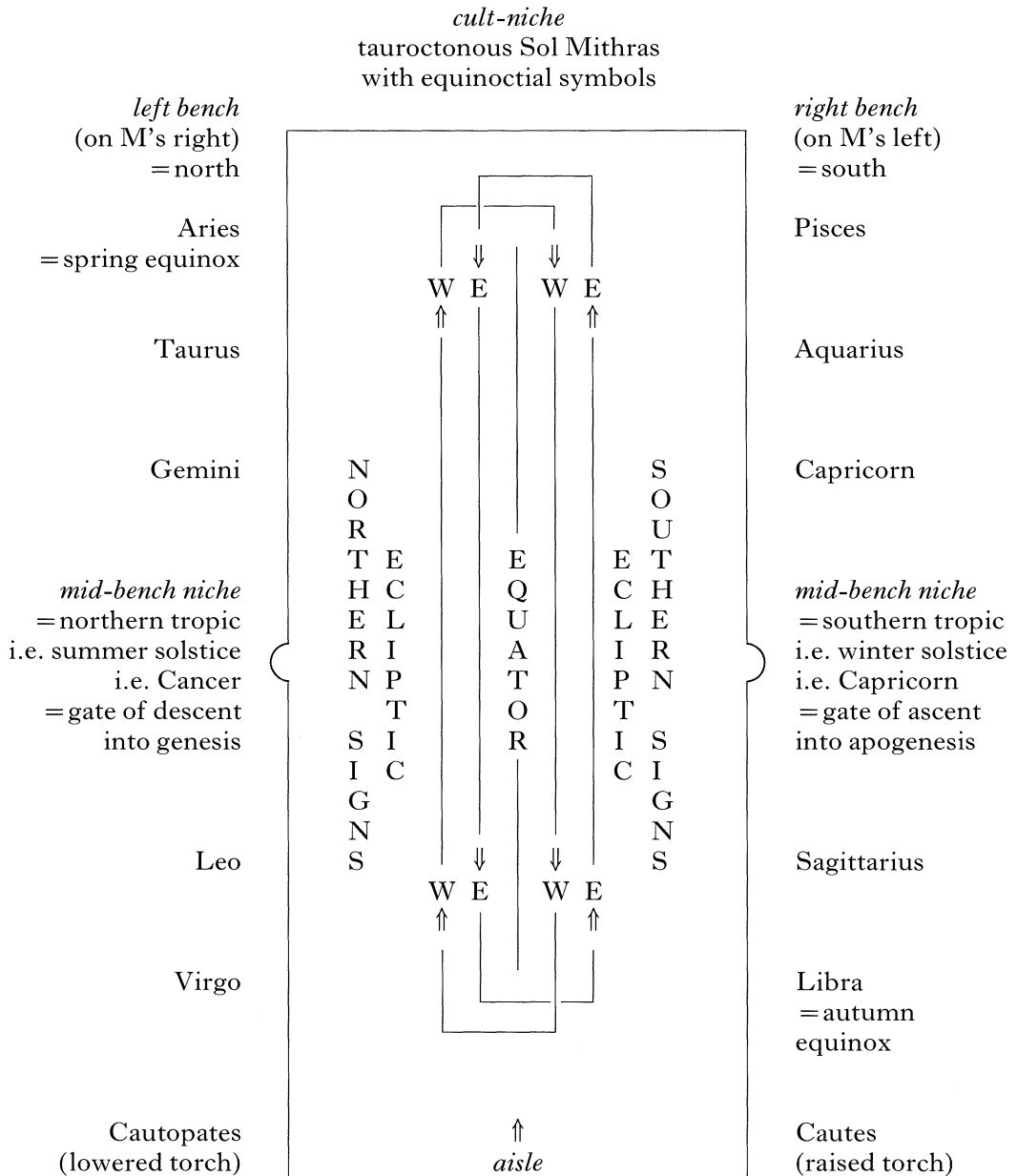
<sup>66</sup> op. cit. (n. 61), 88–9.

<sup>67</sup> For fuller descriptions of the mithraeum's design, see the works cited above, n. 11. For simplicity's sake I have included only what is relevant to our present concerns.

<sup>68</sup> Aries, the spring equinox, is intimated by the knife which Mithras wields, Libra, the autumn equinox, by the fact that he straddles the bull. The logic is tortuous and can only be recovered by emendation of the *De antro*'s text (Beck, op. cit. (n. 58)): the knife belongs to Mars, and Mars has Aries as his astrological 'house'; the bull, qua Taurus, belongs to Venus, again as her astrological house, and Venus has Libra as her other house.



FIG. 2.  
THE MITHRAEUM AS 'IMAGE OF THE UNIVERSE'. COMPOSITE RECONSTRUCTION FROM PORPHYRY, *DE ANTRO NYMPHARUM* 6.21-4, AND EXCAVATED SITES, PRINCIPALLY THE MITHRAEUM OF THE SEVEN SPHERES (OSTIA).



are represented in the mithraeum by the bench to his right (embellished at Sette Sfere with symbols of the six northern signs of the zodiac); and 'on his left the southern signs', represented by the bench to his left (embellished at Sette Sfere with symbols of the six southern signs). The setting of Cautes 'to the south' and of Cautopates 'to the north' is represented by the placement of the torchbearers; when their images are set on or against the bench ends, Cautes is invariably found on the 'southern' side to Mithras' left (i.e., to the right for someone entering the mithraeum) and Cautopates on the 'northern' side to Mithras' right. It follows that the solstices, at the midpoints of the northern and southern signs, are represented by the niches which are regularly found at the midpoint of each bench. The summer solstice (the tropic of Cancer) is midway along the 'northern' bench, the winter solstice (the tropic of Capricorn) midway along the 'southern' bench. These, then, represent the gates of genesis and apogenesis, of entry and exit into and out of the world.<sup>69</sup>

The mithraeum's orientation is symbolic, not actual: i.e., its 'north' side does not necessarily lie towards the geographic north, nor does its aisle run east-west in that literal sense.<sup>70</sup> But even at the symbolic level, one must guard against automatically applying the logic of geographic orientation and inferring that because the mithraeum has 'north' and 'south' benches it therefore has an 'east' end at the cult-niche and the image of the tauroctonus Mithras and a 'west' end at the customary entrance.<sup>71</sup> The ideal mithraeum is not a place on the earth's surface; rather, it is the cosmos itself and thus in the strict sense amenable only to a cosmographic orientation. In a geocentric cosmography, the universe, like the globe of earth, although it has north and south *hemispheres* and north and south *poles*, has neither east nor west *ends*. Rather, east and west are *directions of motion* around the north-south axis. Consequently, while 'north' and 'south' are replicated in the mithraeum by its north and south *sides*, i.e., the benches to Mithras' right and left respectively, 'east' and 'west' are replicated not by its two ends but by *motion along the aisle*. But motion in which direction? In a seeming paradox which in fact merely reflects the cosmographic principles involved, motion in either direction up or down the aisle can replicate either eastward or westward motion. More precisely, as I have tried to show in the diagram, if one follows the order of the signs of the zodiac (explicit in the Sette Sfere mithraeum as mosaics on the side benches) and proceeds down the north bench from cult-niche to entrance and back up the south bench from entrance to cult-niche, one is replicating *eastward* motion, i.e., the motion of sun, moon, and planets (the seven whose spheres are represented at Sette Sfere as arcs in mosaic on the floor of the aisle);<sup>72</sup> conversely, proceeding in the opposite direction replicates *westward* motion, i.e. the daily motion of the universe itself and all celestial bodies.<sup>73</sup>

The mithraeum's aisle, the space where ritual movement must take place if it is to be enacted at all, thus represents a sideways projection or edge-on view of the two great

<sup>69</sup> At the Dura mithraeum one of the columns along the front of the 'north' (geographic south) bench is obligingly labelled '*eisodos / exodos*' (V66, graffito 'in minute letters'; for location see V34). One would be ill-advised to attempt literal entry or egress since there is no physical doorway there — and never was. Clearly this is a soul gate, and its function is ritual or psychagogic. On the wall on the same side in the Capua mithraeum there is a graffito INYODUM, which it is tempting to construe as 'a barbarous Latin-Greek contamination for *eisodos*' (Vermaseren, op. cit. (n. 9), 23-4, though he concludes that this 'involves too liberal an interpretation of the laws of epigraphy'). The Capua mithraeum also contains conspicuous mid-bench niches with a transverse line in the form of a narrow stone slab across the aisle between — not to mention the relief of Cupid and Psyche in the central panel of the wall on the same side as the graffito, approximately above the mid-bench niche representing the gate of entry of souls. The appropriate conclusions were drawn by Gordon, op. cit. (n. 11, 1988), 57-8.

<sup>70</sup> Actual mithraea are aligned in many different directions: see Beck, op. cit. (n. 11), 112 n. 24.

<sup>71</sup> A mistake made by Gordon, op. cit. (n. 11, 1976), 127 fig. 2, 133-4, and Turcan, op. cit. (n. 61), 84. Unfortunately, BNP *Sourcebook* (315) compounds the error by introducing it into the text of *De antro* 24 as an explanatory gloss: 'Mithras is placed . . . on the line of the equinoxes <facing west>, with the north on his right and the south on his left'.

<sup>72</sup> The planets, though not the sun and moon, can also move westward in so-called 'retrograde motion'.

<sup>73</sup> It is important to note here a major limitation in the mithraeum's design. Moving 'westward' up or down the aisle would indeed intimate universal daily motion. However, in the actual universe that motion does not take place against a fixed background, as does eastward (or westward) planetary motion. The entire background, including the signs and the four tropics, revolve together with the sun, moon, and planets in the course of twenty-four hours. Clearly this motion cannot be imparted to the model, though it can be imaged.

circles that carry celestial motion: the equator, parallel to which all celestial bodies revolve daily, and the ecliptic, oblique to the former and along which the sun, moon, and planets revolve in their particular periods.<sup>74</sup> More precisely, while the equator is seen edge-on, the ecliptic and its circle of signs (the zodiac), because it is oblique, is viewed somewhat on the bias, its northern half with the northern signs obtruding on one side and its southern half with the southern signs obtruding on the other.<sup>75</sup>

The ecliptic and the equator intersect at the equinoxes, and it is these that are replicated by the ends of the mithraeum, the spring equinox (Aries) by the cult-niche and the autumn equinox (Libra) by the entrance. The tauroctonous Mithras is thus at the spring equinox. Since Mithras is the Sun, and the Sun reaches the spring equinox in late March, a time of year is specified, although one should not forget that *De antro* 24 sets Mithras impartially at both equinoxes.<sup>76</sup>

The point about orientation has been worth making at some length, because determining the proper meaning of 'east' and 'west' in the context of the mithraeum has enabled us to get at the true significance of proceeding up and down the mithraeum's aisle. This is of obvious relevance to the processional scene on the Mainz vessel, in which initiates replicate within the mithraeum cosmic motions which are necessarily east-west and/or west-east.

The procession of the Heliodromus, by miming the specifics of the solar journey and, esoterically, the cosmic setting of Mithras and the torchbearers at the equinoxes and solstices respectively, brings the 'image of the universe' to life, energizing that which as a material structure is inert until acted upon ritually.<sup>77</sup> Just as Mithras animates the cosmos whose 'demiurge and despot of genesis' he is,<sup>78</sup> so, in their mimesis, the initiates activate the 'image of the cosmos' and thereby enable their 'mystery of the descent and return of souls' through the gates of the solstices. The enactment of this mystery — we now have ample reason to trust what Porphyry tells us — is precisely the business of Mithraists meeting in their mithraeum.

Parading in imitation of the Sun and of one's esoteric deities at the tropic points will probably seem a bizarre and unlikely activity (perhaps all the more so in a provincial garrison town). But the enactment of solar dramas of one sort or another was by no means peculiar to the Mithraists. They are reported on a much grander and more public scale in the Serapeum at Alexandria, where a sunbeam illuminating the mouth of the statue of Serapis on the day on which the Sun's statue was brought to visit that of Serapis was interpreted as the Sun greeting Serapis with a kiss.<sup>79</sup> Another striking

<sup>74</sup> In the imagination of antiquity these are frequented routes. In the great myth of the *Phaedrus* gods and human souls travel them (although the description is imprecise: D. R. Dicks, *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle* (1970), 114–15). It is the ultimate *périphérique* (in Plato's account, at 248B, quite as crowded and risky as its latter-day urban exemplars), and the Mithraists are doing nothing unusual, conceptually, in joining the traffic. It is their mode of joining that is truly original.

<sup>75</sup> If a mind experiment would help, imagine a fly walking around the edge of a transparent disk which is viewed side-on. The fly is proceeding in the same direction, but for the viewer it appears to be going to and fro along a single linear path. Now imagine a second disk concentric with the first, but somewhat oblique to it, with the intersecting diameters at right angles to the viewer's line of sight. The circumambulating fly still appears to be going to and fro, but its path deviates from one side to the other in a shallow ellipse. In the mithraeum (and in my floor-plan of its design), the paradox of motion in the same direction appearing as motion in opposite directions is the inevitable consequence of trying to express in two dimensions a three-dimensional reality. There is a certain appropriateness here. As everyone in antiquity knew, the cosmic original is spherical and endowed with a circular motion which is divine; but the mortal denizens of the physical mithraeum, constructed to a

rectangular plan in the sublunary world, must intimate that celestial motion by the rectilinear motion proper to the elements of mutability. Such are the constraints of one half of our human nature.

<sup>76</sup> On the explicit privileging of the spring equinox at the Sette Sfere mithraeum, see R. Beck, 'Sette Sfere, Sette Porte, and the spring equinoxes of A.D. 172 and 173', in Bianchi, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 519–29. If we wish to go further and specify sunrise as the time of day — though nothing in the mithraeum's design or the *De antro* data necessitates it — then Mithras as the rising Sun would indeed, terrestrially speaking, be in the east. Only so can the mithraeum's cult-niche be equated with an 'east' and its entrance with a 'west'.

<sup>77</sup> There is an interesting analogy in the vestments of the Jewish high priest. Like the tabernacle and its furnishings, they too were interpreted by contemporaries as an image of the universe (Josephus, *AJ* 3.180, 184–7), although that is not their meaning in the charter text (Exodus 28, 39). They were worn, i.e., the image was activated, each year only on the three most solemn festivals and the one fast (*AJ* 18.94). Their custody at other times was a contentious issue, being held at various times not only by the Temple establishment but also by client kings and Roman prefects.

<sup>78</sup> *De antro* 24.

<sup>79</sup> Rufinus, *HE* 11.23.

'happening' in the same temple was the suspension of the Sun's image, in the form of a statuette or small chariot made of iron, apparently by magnetism, likewise in salutation of Serapis; the explicatory liturgical formula is preserved: *surrexit Sol, ut valedicens Serapi discedat ad propria*.<sup>80</sup> Our most detailed description of an ancient initiation, albeit fictional, ends with the public display of the newly made initiate, Lucius in the *Golden Ass*, in the guise of the Sun.<sup>81</sup> In these events, as in the Mithraists' procession of the Sun-Runner, mixed-media performance art (as we might call it these days) is conscripted into the service of solar cult. Below, we shall discuss the emperor Nero's contributions to this art form, for they are particularly germane. The physical sun lends itself to such displays through the use of sunbeams or shadows, as the first of the two examples from Alexandria shows. There may well be two such instances in the design of mithraea. It is likely that the off-set scuttle in the roof of the Caesarea mithraeum served to focus a sunbeam on the central altar around the time of the summer solstice and thus to demonstrate and define that solar tropic,<sup>82</sup> possible, too, that the Carrawburgh mithraeum on Hadrian's Wall (V844) was structured to mark the winter solstice by focusing a sunbeam at that time of year through the exterior and interior doorways across the front of — appropriately — Cautes' statue and on to the image of Sol on his altar.<sup>83</sup> Finally, we should not forget the religious and cosmological aspects of the ordinary sundial. It, too, is a 'model of the universe' on which by shadow projection the Sun measures out both daily and annual (viz., seasonal) time.<sup>84</sup> It is thus a microcosmic arena for the god's journeyings. It was therefore entirely appropriate that Augustus dedicated its largest exemplar, the great Horologium in the Campus Martius,<sup>85</sup> to the Sun. In this particular form (i.e., projection on to a level horizontal surface), the dial's principal east-west axis is the equinoctial line while the solstices lie at the northern and southern extremes of its meridian.<sup>86</sup> The esoteric cosmic model of the mithraeum is actually not that dissimilar from the exoteric — and quotidian — model of the sundial.

What is remarkable about the Mithraists' action is not the strangeness of the ritual or its intent but the integration of the ritual and its sacred space, of performance and stage set. The key is the structure of the mithraeum as 'cosmic model' with its 'symbols of the elements and climes in proportionate arrangement'. To actualize in the present world a mystery of cosmic soul travel the Mithraists daringly shrank the universe to a scale model. In viewing the activities of the initiates in Scene B of the Mainz vessel, we should bear in mind that we see just the actors in a performance that makes sense only on its proper stage — that stage being the very location where the artifact was kept. The initiate viewer would supply the missing background, for it was all around him. Fortunately, from the *De antro* and the lay-out of extant mithraea we too can reintegrate the actors with their set.

Precedence resides neither with the ritual nor with the structure. Each 'consecrates' — in the most literal sense, makes mutually sacred — the other. To echo the title of J. Z. Smith's important book on the subject,<sup>87</sup> what 'takes place' makes place: the ritual realizes the mithraeum as sacred space. But the opposite causality is just as true: the model universe as context makes sacred and endows with meaning an otherwise quite senseless file of four men with two sticks and a whip.

<sup>80</sup> Rufinus, *ibid.*; Quodvultdeus, *Liber promissionum et praedictorum dei* 3.42; formula in Rufinus. On both events, see R. Merkelbach, *Isis regina — Zeus Sarapis* (1995), 149–50.

<sup>81</sup> Apuleius, *Met.* 11.24: 'After I had thus been decorated in the likeness of the Sun (*ad instar Solis*) and set up in the guise of a statue, the curtains were suddenly opened and the people wandered round to view me' (trans. Hanson). Specifically, the solar accoutrements are (1) the twelve stoles, (2) the lighted torch, (3) the 'crown made of leaves of shining palm, jutting out like rays of light'. The last is, of course, virtually the same as the headgear of the Sun-Runner. A celebration follows to mark Lucius' 'birth into the mysteries' (*natalem sacrorum*): 'a delicious banquet and a cheerful party'. Solar pageantry and good cheer:

is it surprising that Apuleius chose to call Lucius' mystagogue — Mithras?

<sup>82</sup> R. J. Bull, 'The mithraeum at Caesarea Maritima', in J. Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques* (1978), 75–89, at 79.

<sup>83</sup> Beck, *op. cit.* (n. 2, 1984), 2034.

<sup>84</sup> On ancient sundials see S. L. Gibbs, *Greek and Roman Sundials* (1976).

<sup>85</sup> E. Buchner, *Die Sonnenuhr des Augustus* (1982); see also Beck, *op. cit.* (n. 11, 1994), 100, 102, 104–5.

<sup>86</sup> For other examples of this form of dial, see Gibbs, *op. cit.* (n. 84), nos 4001–15; note esp. no. 4007 with lettering for the signs of the zodiac and for the equinoctial and two solstitial lines.

<sup>87</sup> *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (1987).

To return finally to the *dramatis personae*, we may conclude (a) that the second figure in the procession, with the lowered stick, represents Cautopates at the gate of the descent of souls at the summer solstice (i.e., the northern tropic); (b) that the fourth figure, with the raised stick, represents Cautes at the gate of ascent at the winter solstice (i.e., the southern tropic); and (c) that the third figure, the Sun-Runner, represents the Sun at the mid-point between, i.e., 'at the equinoxes' or 'on the equator', and thus Mithras himself at his 'proper seat' where he controls the processes of both genesis and apogenesis.<sup>88</sup> That the Sun-Runner represents both the Sun and Mithras is but a manifestation of the larger paradox under which Mithras both is and is not the Sun — is, because countless inscriptions hail him as such; is not, because in iconic representations the two are separate characters. A more startling paradox is the representation of the *summer* solstice by the rodbearer with the *lowered* stick and of the *winter* solstice by the rodbearer with the *raised* stick. This seems to invert the physical and perceptible facts that at the summer solstice the midday sun is high in the heavens, while at the winter solstice it is low down at the nadir of its annual journey. This is indeed the case. But what inverts that exoteric, i.e., public and scientific, truth is the esoteric truth that from the summer solstice souls descend and to the winter solstice they rise again.<sup>89</sup>

So far, our analysis of Scene B has paralleled that of Scene A, as can be appreciated in the diagram (Fig. 1):

The scene on the artifact (first box)  
*represents*  
 a ritual performance (second box —  
     A: initiation by the Father  
     B: the procession of the Sun-Runner)  
*which imitates and is authorized by*, respectively,  
 a mythic event and a cosmological doctrine (third box —  
     A: the archery of the Mithras  
     B: the journey of the Sun).

Scene B, however, also makes reference beyond the esoteric world of Mithraic myth and doctrine to authority in the secular world, as I indicate in the two boxes ('external precedents') in the bottom row of the diagram.

First, the procession of the Sun-Runner imitates something very public and very Roman, the procession of a magistrate attended by his lictors. For composition, one may compare the well-known reverse scene on the denarius of M. Junius Brutus showing his ancestor Lucius, the consul of 509 B.C., thus attended.<sup>90</sup> The order (left to right) is identical to that on our vessel: on the coin — *accensus*, lictor, consul, lictor; on the

<sup>88</sup> The phrases in quotation marks are of course the familiar ones from *De antro* 24. They steer one clear of the inappropriate question 'which equinox?' Just as the microcosm of a planar horizontal sundial has separate solstitial lines but only a single equinoctial line (see above, n. 86), and the analogous microcosm of the mithraeum has separate 'northern' and 'southern benches' but only a single 'east-west' aisle, so the performance of this drama of the tropics requires separate actors for the solstices and their deities but only one for the equinoxes and the god Sol Mithras located there.

<sup>89</sup> Even at the physical level the symbolism is appropriate, for from the summer solstice the sun starts to descend and from the winter solstice it starts to rise again. Porphyry's *De antro* (21–5) preserves a different logic, which is probably the Mithraists' own since it is used to locate their torchbearing deities. The solstices are first identified as 'northern' and 'southern' (indeed, the terms 'summer' and 'winter' are never used of the solstices in this section); the northern (i.e., summer) solstice is assigned to Cauto-

pates and descent into genesis because the north wind is bracing and vivifying, the southern (i.e., winter) solstice to Cautes and ascent into apogenesis because the south wind is warm and relaxing and so dissolves mortality back into immortality. That said, however, it would be unwise to exclude altogether the obvious exoteric connotations of the raised and lowered sticks with summer (high sun) and winter (low sun) respectively. By conflating the terrestrial with the celestial, the paradox can be made to seem implicit in nature: (terrestrial) north is cold, but the (celestial) northern tropic is the site of the summer sun; (terrestrial) south is warm, but the (celestial) southern tropic is the site of the winter sun. The Mithraists probably appreciated the ambiguity. I would not altogether exclude the possibility, adumbrated there, that the rodbearers *also* intimate the equinoxes where Sol-Mithras has his 'proper seat', the raised stick the waxing sun at the spring equinox, the lowered stick the waning sun at the autumn equinox. See above, n. 57.

<sup>90</sup> M. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage* (1974), no. 433/1.

vessel — Soldier, rodbearer, Sun-Runner, rodbearer. In the transformation of public into cultic functionaries, the only structural change is the opposition of the symbols of authority: the fasces are carried identically, the rods one upright and the other reversed. The opposition is of course fundamental to the esoteric significance of the Mithraists' procession, as has been amply demonstrated. It also serves to differentiate crisply esoteric authority from exoteric.

Authority is the key concept here. The procession of the Sun-Runner draws on the recognizable symbolism of political authority in order to enhance its claims to spiritual authority. This symbolism, adopted and adapted into the world of the mithraeum, poses no challenge to its political original precisely because its claims are confined to the world of the mithraeum. Like the archery of the Pater, we must suppose the procession of the Heliodromus to be staged inside the mithraeum. As we have seen, it is only there, within the 'model of the universe', that the procession can convey its cosmological meaning, animating the model thereby. Outside, it would be both pointless and presumptuous, a mere travesty of secular *imperium*. In any case, with the possible exception of the sacrificial procession depicted at the Sa. Prisca mithraeum,<sup>91</sup> public display was not a feature of the Mithras cult. At least, if it was, it was not one which the Mithraists chose to commemorate in and on their monuments. More tellingly, it is one on which external sources are entirely silent.

Secondly, it may be that a more specific historical archetype lies behind the processing Sun-Runner. In a recent article,<sup>92</sup> I have proposed a new account of the Mithras cult that places its creation, simultaneously with its irruption into the Roman world, around the time of the Judean and Civil Wars. On this scenario, one might now suggest that among the elements that went into the invention of this solar cult was the heliolatry — perhaps heliomania would be the better term — provoked by Nero's exhibitionist promotion of, and self-identification with, the Sun god. In the aftermath of the great fire during the punishment of the Christian arsonists, Nero paraded among the people dressed as a charioteer.<sup>93</sup> There can be no doubt that this was in mimesis of the Sun, representing the triumph of divine over criminal fire. Again, during the visit of Tiridates in 66, on the so-called 'golden day' the purple theatre awning protecting spectators from the sun 'was embroidered with a figure of Nero driving a chariot, with golden stars gleaming all around'<sup>94</sup> — surely, an imaginative and daring substitution of the emperor's image for the Sun's in the Sun's own space, the vault of heaven. I am not suggesting that the procession of the Mithraic Sun-Runner consciously imitated these

<sup>91</sup> V481. Rightly, in my view, Merkelbach (op. cit. (n. 2), 180–2) maintains that what is represented is an actual, not an ideal, procession (the participants being named individual Mithraic Lions). If so, it could only take place outside, there being insufficient space to parade an ox through a mithraeum. Following Vermaseren (op. cit. (n. 10), 43 f.; cf. Vermaseren and Van Essen, op. cit. (n. 10), 160–4), Merkelbach describes the procession as the preliminary to the suovetaurilia (the sacrifice of a pig, a sheep, and a bull, customary on certain great public occasions). Turcan denies this, on the grounds that the cock, which is also carried by one of the Mithraists, is not one of the prescribed animals (op. cit. (n. 2), 79). This is too simple: we might rather say that the Mithraists' procession *alludes* to the suovetaurilia, and hence signals the

importance of their ritual, but deprecates identification precisely by the inclusion of an improper victim. The cock is the 'Persian bird' (*Persikos ornis*); no prize, then, for guessing whose ritual this quasi-suovetaurilia has become. In the same way, our procession of the Sun-Runner deprecates identification with the magistrate's procession by inverting one of the quasi-fasces. On processions in pagan, imperial, and Christian art see, Mathews, op. cit. (n. 42), 150–71.

<sup>92</sup> 'The Mysteries of Mithras: a new account of their genesis', *JRS* 88 (1998), 115–28.

<sup>93</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.6–7.

<sup>94</sup> Dio 63.6.2 (Loeb translation). The same conceit underlies Lucan, *Phars.* 1. 48–50: 'seu te flammigeros Phoebi conscendere currus / telluremque nihil mutato sole timentem / igne vago lustrare iuuet . . .'

or any other specific piece of Neronian solar fantasy.<sup>95</sup> Rather, we may detect in the procession of the Heliodromus, as enacted on the Mainz cup, an echo of Neronian showmanship some fifty years on. Nero set the fashion for imitating the Sun god; the Mithraists then exploited that fashion within the confines of their own peculiar world. In the spirit of the times, it marks an egalitarian extension of access to heaven, not that dissimilar in principle from Christianity's, though the medium is utterly different.<sup>96</sup>

#### V. INTEGRATING THE SCENES: 'HARMONY THROUGH OPPOSITES'

So far, we have explored the scenes on the Mainz vessel at three levels of reality or 'worlds', represented by the first three columns in the diagram (Fig. 1): at the most literal level, as images presented on the artifact; next, as representations of things done in the world of the mithraeum; and thirdly, as representations of what those performances intimate at the mythic or cosmological level. The two scenes conduct one through this hierarchy of worlds along separate but parallel routes. There is, however, a fourth level at which the routes converge and the two scenes are integrated as aspects of a single reality (just as their physical starting points are, literally, the two sides of the same vessel). I have termed this level, represented in the fourth column of the diagram,

<sup>95</sup> Nor do I mean to imply that Nero systematically used solar imagery to promote a certain form of divine monarchy. Thus, the strictures of (e.g.) M. T. Griffin (*Nero: the End of a Dynasty* (1984), 215–20) against such interpretations do not apply. We have to do not with propaganda in the service of calculated policy, but with exuberant and opportunistic fictions shaped as much by audience response as by artistic initiative. I have deliberately left out of account here the colossal statue of Nero in his own Domus Aurea (Suet., *Nero* 31), since it is a moot point whether or not it incorporated solar iconography. Also, I have avoided making much of Tiridates prostrating himself before Nero 'as Mithras' (Dio 63.5.2). No doubt, Tiridates' words (supposing them correctly reported) carried a wealth of meaning for both parties, but I follow Boyce and Grenet (*History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol. 3 (1991), 39) in hearing Iranian royal ritual as their primary referent: '... to prostrate myself before you as I do before Mithras too' (*hōs kai ton Mithran*). If this episode and Tiridates' initiation of Nero into 'Magian/magic feasts' ('magicis etiam cenis initiaverat', Pliny, *NH* 30.6) have anything to do with Roman Mithraism, it is only as an incident that brought the Persian god to Rome's attention *prior to the founding of the Mysteries*. We need to get the cart back behind the horse: Nero and Tiridates were in no sense playing to a local audience of Mithraists, because Mithraism as we know it did not then exist. It is one of the merits of a late foundation scenario that we do not have to postulate Roman Mithraic input into some hybrid 'Zoroastrian-Mithraic' (Griffin's term, *ibid.*, 216) investiture or, worse, into the monarchs' 'Magian feasts'. (Although this is not the place to do so, Cumont's reconstruction ('L'iniziazione di Nerone da parte di Tiridate d'Armenia', *Rivista di Filologia* N.S. 11 (1933), 145–54) can be vindicated by explaining the Mithraic investiture scene and the banquet scene in terms of *outcome* rather than *input*: Mithraic myth and ritual, together with their artistic representations, developed as they did in imaginative response to the flamboyant actions of the rulers of the two world

powers, Rome and Parthia/Armenia; they were not, as Cumont imagined, pre-existent forms brought to Rome by Tiridates' magi and played out there in a context that already knew them in the Roman mysteries. This path merits further exploration — eventually. One wonders, for example, about the role of the following fantasies in Mithraism's genesis: (1) a world said to be ruled, in its master's absence, by a freedman called 'Sun' (Dio 63.12.2); (2) an exceptionally Romanophile Parthian prince and the exchange of high courtesies with great pageantry of arms in the East (Tac., *Ann.* 15.28–30); (3) the same prince, Tiridates of Armenia, transfixing a pair of bulls with a single arrow fired from his seat in games given in Puteoli by another of Nero's freedmen, Patrobius (Dio 63.3.1–2) — all grist, I suspect, to that mill of the imagination, which on rare occasions and at certain cultural junctures grinds out a new religion.)

<sup>96</sup> One last Neronian fantasy is worth citing here: the rotating dining-room in the Domus Aurea. Whatever its ideological intent, it not only 'could have represented the heavens' (Griffin, *op. cit.* (n. 95), 138; cf. H.-P. L'Orange, 'Domus Aurea — der Sonnenpalast,' *Symbolae Osloenses* Suppl. 11 (1942), 68–100, at 72) — it did represent them, or at least was thought to do so and was so described by Suetonius, whose text (31.2) is unambiguous: 'praecipua cenationum rotunda, quae perpetuo diebus ac noctibus *vice mundi* circumageretur'. It is difficult to imagine what this rotunda could be other than a dome representing at least the northern celestial hemisphere (with the pole at the zenith) revolving, with or without the chamber below, every twenty-four hours so as to bring the stars and constellation figures on to the actual meridian at the correct time. In any event, it was interpreted by contemporaries as a cosmic model which replicated the universe by daily revolution. With fewer resources but more imagination, the Mithraists too managed to hold their meals in cosmic models. Was it the palace that here furnished a precedent for lesser folk to achieve the heavens?

the 'ideal' world, for it is a world essentially of abstract principles, although these principles are exemplified in Mithraic art by a wealth of material symbols.<sup>97</sup>

At this fourth level both scenes on the cup exemplify a principle of 'harmony through opposition'. That this was an important principle of Mithraic doctrine is amply borne out in the cult's prolific monumental art and even in its meagre literary documentation. It is also, of course, a principle in much ancient philosophy;<sup>98</sup> indeed, thanks to the Mainz vessel, it can now be shown that the Mithraists drew directly or indirectly on a particular philosopher for one of its instances. It is not, then, a mere echo of philosophical thought in Mithraic doctrine; nor is it something tendentiously elicited from Mithraism by contemporary or modern intellectuals; nor is it some epiphenomenon generated by structuralist analysis.

The arch-symbols of opposition and polarity on the cult's monuments are of course the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates, who regularly flank the icon of the bull-killing Mithras and who are sometimes also found, as we have seen, as independent images on opposite sides of the mithraeum. There is no need to rehearse here the various ways in which the twins, with their raised and lowered torches, represent 'identity in opposition', i.e., that which is both the same and yet polarized into opposites.<sup>99</sup> The relevant examples were given in the preceding section in which we saw how the rodbearers in Scene B, in the roles of Cautes and Cautopates, acted out the opposition of the solstices and the mystery of the descent and ascent of souls through the solstitial gates.

Opposition, then, is both explicit in, and fundamental to the intent of, the ritual played out in the Sun-Runner's procession. What of the archery of the Father in the other scene? For this we must turn again to the *De antro*. In ch. 29 Porphyry summarizes various opposed cosmological pairs, in addition to those which were used in the preceding explication of the solstitial soul gates (i.e., the equinoxes and solstices). He concludes with the image of the drawn bow, stemming ultimately from Heraclitus:<sup>100</sup>

Since nature arose out of diversity, the ancients everywhere made that which has a twofold entrance her symbol. For the progression is either through the intelligible or through the sensible; and when it is through the sensible, it is either through the sphere of the fixed stars or through the sphere of the planets; and again it is made either by an immortal or a mortal road. There is a cardinal point above the earth, and another below it, one to the east, and one to the west. There are regions to the left and right, there is night and day. *And so there is a harmony of tension in opposition and it shoots from the bowstring through opposites (kai dia touto palintonos hê harmonia kai toxoeui dia tôn enantiôn)*<sup>101</sup>

Here, then, is our answer. The symbol of opposition in Scene A is the bow itself, the bow of the Father and thus of Mithras. The archery of the Father, which is a mimesis of the archery of Mithras, represents at the highest and most abstract level the polarity of opposites held in harmonious tension.

<sup>97</sup> The hierarchy of 'worlds' and the routes through them are offered as heuristic and hermeneutic devices for comprehending the complex of realities — myth, ritual, initiates, and initiation, 'place' in the Smithian sense (above, n. 87), art and artifacts, theology, cosmology and soteriology — which made up the Mysteries of Mithras. No precedence is intended in the hierarchy, except of course that the art and artifacts (first level) are generally posterior, temporally and conceptually, to the rituals, myths, and ideas (second through fourth levels) to which they give visual expression. Even that is an overstatement: few would deny, for example, that much Mithraic myth and theology was defined, not prior to, but *in* the creation of the icon of the bull-killing. In particular, I do not intend to imply priority in creation or formulation, or a hierarchy of religious or metaphysical value, or even a highly conscious differentiation, as between the worlds of ritual performance (second level), myth and cosmology (third level), and abstract ideology (fourth). Especially, I would wish to avoid any

impression that Mithraic myth (or cosmology), because it 'authorizes' ritual as its 'imitation', therefore *generates* ritual, in the sense that the Mithraists deliberately designed ritual to express existing myth (or cosmology). The 'invention' of Mithraic myth and ritual, which I regard as essentially equipollent realities, is a topic to which we shall return.

<sup>98</sup> See, most obviously, G. E. R. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy: Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought* (1966), 15–171. In cosmology, the best example, because it is also fundamental to that aspect of Mithraism, is the opposition of the two celestial motions, the motion of the universe (westward) and the motion of the planets (eastward), which exemplified for Plato in the *Timaeus* (36) the even more fundamental polarity of Same and Different.

<sup>99</sup> See the works cited in n. 54, above.

<sup>100</sup> Fr. 51 DK.

<sup>101</sup> Trans. Arethusa ed. (1969), modified to restore 'mortal or immortal road' to their correct order.



It is surely no coincidence that the selfsame essay of Porphyry, an essay containing a number of explicit references to Mithraism, should enable us first to unlock the cosmological and soteriological intent of the opposition in Scene B, then to discover the implicit symbol of opposition in Scene A, and so, finally and in consequence, to reintegrate the two scenes as expressions of a doctrinal principle of 'opposition' itself at the most abstract level. One may surmise that it was ultimately the Mithraists, rather than Porphyry's philosophical sources, who contributed the polarities of *De antro* 29,<sup>102</sup> in particular the closing image of the drawn bow, which they adapted from Heraclitus and used to explicate the archery of their god. Several years ago, without benefit of the Mainz vessel, I argued precisely this case for the Mithraic provenance of *De antro* 29 and the image of the bow:<sup>103</sup> 'The metaphor signals . . . a *symbolon*, and it is not difficult to detect its visual counterpart within the Mysteries of Mithras: the scene of Mithras as archer'. That case is now, I submit, much more secure. From the Mainz vessel we may even assign the verbal symbol a precise context, the ritual in which the archery of Mithras was mimed by the Father. 'He shoots through opposites', said of the Father who is Mithras,<sup>104</sup> may be heard among the *legomena* of the speaking mystagogue.

The polarities of *De antro* 29 begin with the distinction between a 'route' (*poreia*) 'through the intelligible' and a route 'through the perceptible'. Within the perceptible there is a further opposition between a route via the sphere of the fixed stars ('through the non-wandering') and a route via the spheres of the planets ('through that of the wanderers'); likewise, between a route of immortality ('through the immortal') and a route of mortality ('through the mortal route'). What makes the attribution of the *De antro*'s polarities to Mithraism virtually certain is the independent testimony of the anti-Christian polemicist Celsus, as quoted by Origen, that the Mithraists encoded the opposition of the spheres of the planets and of the fixed stars and the soul's 'route through and out' (*diexodos*) in yet another visual symbol, a 'seven-gated ladder'.<sup>105</sup>

These things [i.e., celestial ascent] are intimated in the doctrines of the Persians and their mysteries of Mithras. They have a symbol of the two celestial revolutions, that of the fixed stars and that assigned to the planets, and of the road of the soul through and out of them. The symbol is this: a seven-gated ladder (*klimax heptapylos*) with an eighth on top.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the intent of the Mithraists' symbol is as Celsus reports it: its primary meaning, conveyed in the formula 'seven plus one', is the two celestial revolutions, its secondary meaning the soul's *diexodos* thereby.<sup>106</sup> That the celestial revolutions are opposed to each other in direction, the sphere of the fixed stars revolving westwards and the spheres of the planets eastwards, is a cosmological commonplace.<sup>107</sup> Hence, their appearance at the head of Porphyry's list of polarities in

<sup>102</sup> Some other considerations leading to that conclusion: (1) The 'cardinal points' are not our familiar points of the compass, but the astrological *kenra*, respectively the 'midheaven', the 'lower midheaven', the 'ascendant', and the 'descendant'. The use of technical astrological concepts is typical of Mithraism as presented to us both in the *De antro* and on the monuments. (2) A fairly recent discovery in a mithraeum in Mundelsheim probably exemplifies another of these polarities, 'left and right': the left half of an ox skull sunk into the bench on the left (as one enters) and the right half of the same or another ox skull in the opposite bench (D. Planck, 'Ein römisches Mithräum bei Mundelsheim', *Archäologische Ausgrabungen in Baden-Württemberg* (1989), 184–90). More than the tautology 'this is on your left/right' is surely intended! Interestingly, 'right' and 'left' are here relative to the mortal entering the mithraeum rather than the god in the cult-niche (see diagram, Fig. 2).

<sup>103</sup> op. cit. (n. 56), 84–5.

<sup>104</sup> This would explain a puzzling feature of Porphyry's language: it is 'harmony' itself that 'shoots'. We may suppose two stages in the transmission of the Heraclitan saying, which originally took the form of a

baldly stated simile appended to a vivid metaphor: *palintonos harmoniê hokôsper toxou kai lyrês* ('there is a back-stretched connection, as of a bow and of a lyre', trans. Barnes). First, the Mithraists split the saying, converting part of the bland simile into a dramatic statement about their god's bowmanship. Since action accompanied words, there was no need to specify the subject. Secondly, Porphyry (or his philosophical predecessor) reintegrated the saying. Robbed of its performance context, the second element, somewhat awkwardly, acquired 'harmony' as its grammatical subject.

<sup>105</sup> *Contra Celsum* 6.22. Plato uses *diexodos* as one of his terms for the celestial paths of gods and souls in the *Phaedrus* (247A, there are 'many' such *diexodoi*).

<sup>106</sup> Beck, op. cit. (n. 62), 73–85. Turcan (op. cit. (n. 61), 44–61), following Cumont ('La fin du monde selon les mages occidentaux', *RHR* 103 (1931), 29–96), argued that the symbol signified something altogether different, a sequence of world ages. There is nothing in the evidence to compel such a reading; equally, no reason why Celsus' testimony cannot be read literally and at face value.

<sup>107</sup> See above, n. 98.

the sensible world is not surprising. However, from the independent testimony of Celsus we may infer that Porphyry adopted them as part of a Mithraic list of oppositions closing with the symbol of the archer god who 'shoots through opposites'.

The secondary meaning of the symbol of the ladder, the *diexodos* of souls, alludes to a scenario of the soul's celestial journey different from, but complementary to, that intimated in *De antro* 21–8 and enacted, as I have suggested, in the ritual depicted in Scene B of the Mainz vessel.<sup>108</sup> The full Mithraic account, it appears, related not only how the soul enters and leaves the cosmos through the gates of the solstices, but also how it travels through the spheres of the planets and the sphere of the fixed stars.<sup>109</sup> Since the solstices are located in the sphere of the fixed stars, entry and exit through them can be regarded as a subset of the journey through that sphere. Correlating the two soul journeys is not, however, the issue here.<sup>110</sup> The point is rather that both journeys are accomplished through cosmic opposites and so exemplify, finally, the same abstract principle of 'harmony through opposition'.

By induction, we can work our way up through various opposed pairs expressed in symbols — some obvious (Cautes and Cautopates), others more veiled (the bow, the ladder) — to a doctrinal principle of 'opposition' itself. That principle is not merely one of cosmology; it is also one of soteriology and anthropology, in that it is actualized in the descent and ascent of the human soul as taught in the Mysteries and enacted in their rituals. This doctrine of opposition is spelled out, at least in part, in *De antro* 29. We need not doubt that it was pursued, both inductively and deductively, through its various symbolic and ritual expressions in the instruction and admission of initiates.

By a curious coincidence, another Mithraic monument from Germany, likewise discovered fairly recently and not yet part of the familiar dossier of Mithraic scholarship, furnishes a close parallel to the Mainz vessel in the relationship between the scenes on the two sides. An altar base from Burginatum,<sup>111</sup> down-Rhine in Germania Inferior, shows on its lateral faces assemblages of symbols: on the left side, an untensed bow crossed with an arrow above a crater entwined by a snake; on the right, a wreath with fillets and the seven solar rays at its apex, a lighted lamp at its centre, a slanting staff, and at the bottom the globe of the cosmos with crossed bands representing the celestial equator and the zodiac/ecliptic. The 'lists' of symbols and the function of such lists in Mithraic art are the subject of an article by Richard Gordon,<sup>112</sup> so there is no need to pursue them exhaustively here. Suffice it to say that *inter alia* the list on the left face seems to me to intimate the domain of the Father and of Mithras, while that on the right intimates the domain of the Sun-Runner and of Sol, thus paralleling precisely the scenes on either side of the Mainz vessel. That the bow alludes not only to Mithras but also to

<sup>108</sup> It is worth noting that the prime example of the ladder symbol in Mithraic art is found on another German snake-vessel, V1061: see H. Ogawa, 'Mithraic ladder symbols and the Friedberg crater', in M. B. de Boer and T. A. Edridge (eds), *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren* (1978), 854–73.

<sup>109</sup> A further important element in the account was the involvement of the Sun and Moon in these journeyings — hardly a surprise in Mithraism: in *De antro* 29, following the list of opposites, we learn that the Moon was a gate of descent and the Sun a gate of ascent (Beck, op. cit. (n. 2, 1994), 48). We should appreciate that all this 'soul travel' was not necessarily, or even primarily, viewed as posthumous (Beck, op. cit. (n. 62), 77–8). In ritual, in imagination, and in progress through the grades and their tutelary planets, the journeys were undertaken in the here and now; they were not mere planning for the disembodied future — or recollections of a pre-embodied past.

<sup>110</sup> My study of the bull-killing relief (op. cit. (n. 2, 1994)) was largely an exploration of how the cult icon functions, *inter alia*, as a sort of map and calendar for

soul travel in the sphere of the fixed stars. My *Planetary Gods* (above, n. 62) was more, though not exclusively, concerned with the Mithraists' journeys in the spheres of the planets.

<sup>111</sup> H. G. Horn, 'Eine Mithras-Weiung vom Niederrhein', *Ausgrabungen im Rheinland 1983/84*, Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn: Kunst und Altertum am Rhein 122 (1985), 151–5. In his subsequent publication of the Mainz vessel (idem, op. cit. (n. 12)) Horn of course makes appropriate reference to the Burginatum altar.

<sup>112</sup> 'Viewing Mithraic art: the altar from Burginatum (Kalkar), Germania Inferior', *ARYS* 1 (1998), 227–58. Among monuments which 'list' in this way by the mere juxtaposing of symbols, the closest analogies are V1496 (Poetovio) and V1706 (Carnuntum). The donor of the altar describes himself as *p(ater) s(acrorum)* (following Horn, Gordon, and Clauss (*Cultores Mithrae* (1992), 98) for the expansion, rather than *p(ecunia) s(ua)*); he had, presumably, the expertise to marshal his symbols in a meaningful way.

his mortal surrogate, the Father, is now securely established;<sup>113</sup> equally, the rayed crown alludes to the Sun-Runner as his proper symbol.<sup>114</sup> Finally, on each side we find the great symbols of opposition: the bow of Mithras by which he 'shoots through opposites'; the two zones on the globe along which the Sun and his celestial colleagues measure out the universe's definitive contrary motions. Enacted in cult ritual, the counterparts of these symbols of opposition are, as we find them on the two sides of Mainz vessel, the archery of the Father and the procession of the Sun-Runner.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The Mainz vessel is a document of fundamental importance not only for the internal history of Mithraism (as its publisher fully appreciated)<sup>115</sup> but also — and let me here hazard an extreme claim — for the religious history of the Roman Empire. The significance for Mithraism lies principally in the new data which the vessel brings to bear on Mithraic ritual and its place within the ideology of the Mysteries. The import of this evidence is greatly enhanced by the vessel's early date in the cult's history. Taken together with the other early monuments of the cult,<sup>116</sup> it would suggest that, ideologically, the Mysteries were formed in a burst of creative 'invention' no later than the end of the first century A.D. or the very beginning of the second. Negatively, it weighs against the view that the Mysteries were evolved unsystematically over a long period of time.

With respect to the cults of the Roman world (Christianity and Judaism included), the authors of the recent *Religions of Rome* urge us to 'avoid thinking in terms of "uniformity", or in terms of a central core "orthodox" tradition with its peripheral "variants"'. We should 'think rather in terms of different religions as clusters of ideas, people and rituals, sharing some common identity across time and place, but at the same time inevitably invested with different meanings in their different contexts'.<sup>117</sup> On the whole the prescription is sensible, and I agree that orthodoxy and heterodoxy are unhelpful categories especially in dealing with the pagan cults — which is why I prefer to speak rather of 'norms'. Norms are in fact demonstrable for Mithraism, the most obvious being the composition of the tauroctony, the icon of the bull-killing Mithras. Here the norm is not simply the presence of the icon in the mithraeum but its peculiarly stereotyped composition, maintained empire-wide for over two centuries. Another norm, observed *semper et ubique*, was the mithraeum's distinctive side-benches, designed for the celebration of the cult meal. Other features of the cult, while not universally observed, are nevertheless legitimately viewed as 'norms'. The full sevenfold grade hierarchy, which was probably not realized in each and every Mithraic community, is

<sup>113</sup> Gordon (*ibid.*, 248–58) links the other symbol on the same face of the altar, the crater with snake, to the 'water miracle'; hence to the bow, to Mithras as archer, and to rituals of initiation — i.e., to everything that we find in Scene A of the Mainz vessel. Note that the Mainz vessel *is* what the Burginatum altar depicts, a 'snake-vessel'. On the former, the seated Father/Mithras is privileged by location with respect to the snake: writhing beneath him and up the handle it defines his place of enthronement.

<sup>114</sup> The Sun-Runner's other symbol may also be present: Gordon (*ibid.*, 232) describes the staff on the same side as having 'a slightly thickened top perhaps suggesting a whip'. The lamp would refer to the light of the Sun: the cult's solar (and lunar) altars are sometimes illuminated by lamplight shining through apertures (e.g., V847, where the apertures are the

solar rays). That the lamp also indicates the grade of Nymphus, whose proper symbol it is, should be considered too (Gordon, *ibid.*, 243–4; Horn, *op. cit.* (n. 12), 30, n. 52).

<sup>115</sup> Horn, *op. cit.* (n. 12), 30.

<sup>116</sup> See Beck, *op. cit.* (n. 92), 118–19.

<sup>117</sup> BNP *History*, 249; cf. 278, where the postulate of 'a single "real" Mithraic message' is questioned (see above, n. 61), and 302–6 where the authors pose the problem of the 'homogeneity' of the cults, allowing that it is only 'because there *is* a degree of uniformity in their material remains' (302, emphasis *sic*) that we can plot their distribution across the Empire. For Mithraism, they rightly see that homogeneity (or otherwise) is largely a question of the centripetal in iconography versus the centrifugal (302 with n. 174, 303–4 with n. 177).

an example.<sup>118</sup> That there were also regional variants and local singularities in Mithraism is not in doubt.<sup>119</sup> For all these reasons I was at pains to explore the extent to which one may legitimately generalize from the scenes on the Mainz vessel.<sup>120</sup> I concluded that these are not one-off ideological 'sports' but rather expressions of wide-spread, even normative, Mithraic ritual and doctrine.<sup>121</sup> What is untypical about the Mainz vessel is not the ritual actions which it depicts but the artifact's 'garrulosity' in showing such scenes at all.<sup>122</sup>

The fact of the matter is that while none of the mysteries had core orthodoxies, at least one — Mithraism — did have extensive norms reinforcing its religious identity over time and space.<sup>123</sup> At the other extreme, the mysteries of Dionysus were so discontinuous and their manifestations so discrete that not only does it make no sense to speak of 'a central core "orthodox" tradition', but it is also questionable whether those mysteries can even be described as 'sharing common identity across time and place'.<sup>124</sup> In this regard as in others, the dissimilarities of the mystery cults are as striking and as important as their similarities.

Now to my more far-reaching claims concerning the vessel's significance for the religious history of the Roman Empire. First, as a necessary proviso, I am not proposing that there is a 'religious history' of the Roman Empire in the sense of some single grand process in the development of which, and in the historian's reconstruction of which, the Mainz vessel is a significant new landmark. But there *was* a 'Roman Empire'; publicly and privately, its people, who interacted with one another, were possessed of a remarkable array of religions; so there is a story to be told whose chapters cannot remain self-contained. That the story can indeed be told and its chapters integrated has been well demonstrated in the recent work quoted above, *Religions of Rome*.<sup>125</sup>

A more substantial point follows on from this proviso about religious pluralism. The Mainz vessel is important for the Empire's religious history because it raises anew and in a dramatic way a comparison with another of the Empire's religions, one which

<sup>118</sup> There is room for disagreement here. Claus (‘Die sieben Grade des Mithras-Kultes’, *ZPE* 82 (1990), 183–94) argues that the grade hierarchy was an optional priesthood entered by some 15 per cent of cult members, i.e. the proportion for whom grade status is recorded. Most scholars, however, continue to believe otherwise: that the attested grade membership is the tip of an iceberg, albeit one of indeterminate size, and that silence about grades in a particular mithraeum does not imply absence. Again, it is a matter of what the Mithraists chose to be talkative about, and of what it was considered appropriate to say in what medium. Gordon (‘Who worshipped Mithras?’ *JRA* 7 (1994), 459–74, at 465–7) rightly points to the extensive grade information conveyed at Dura in the fragile medium of scratched and painted texts; the same is of course true of the Sa. Prisca mithraeum. The Mainz vessel is itself an important vehicle of new information about the grades (especially the seldom attested Sun-Runner) and their early appearance in the cult's history, although, as I have argued, its seven figures do not *ipso facto* confirm the sevenfold hierarchy.

<sup>119</sup> These range from truly idiosyncratic exemplars of the tauroctony (e.g., V334, 1275) to such obviously localized ideological initiatives as the personification of mythic events at Poetovio (Tóth, op. cit. (n. 2)). There are also broad regional variations in the composition of the side scenes relative to the main bull-killing in complex reliefs and frescos, a perennial topic in Mithraic scholarship: see Beck, op. cit. (n. 2, 1984), 2074–8.

<sup>120</sup> Sect. II, ad fin.

<sup>121</sup> Similarly, the 'mithraeum' described in Sect. IV is

not a single Ostian example, Sette Sfere, but a composite of Porphyry's data and of actual features, some of which are exemplified in all mithraea, others in many mithraea, but none contradicted by contrary features elsewhere. Sette Sfere is simply the most 'garrulous' case (see next note).

<sup>122</sup> On 'garrulosity' see R. L. Gordon, 'A new Mithraic relief from Rome', *JMS* 1 (1976), 166–86 (reprinted in op. cit. (n. 10), ch. 8), at 175–7.

<sup>123</sup> The really interesting question is how those norms in Mithraism were developed and maintained. Obviously, it was not as in Christianity where orthodoxy was progressively defined by appeal to scripture backed by the authority of the episcopacy, especially the apostolic tradition of the greater sees. Just as obviously, the transmission of doctrinal norms in Mithraism was dependent on the transmission of iconographic norms (see above, nn. 117, 119), an irrelevance to Christianity. The contrast is implicit in the treatment of 'homogeneity' in *BNP History*, 302–6.

<sup>124</sup> In terms of group identity, what links, for example, the Bacchic manifestations of the 186 B.C. scandal, the Villa of the Mysteries, and Agrippinilla's thiasos (*BNP History*, 91–6, 161–4, 271, respectively)? Yet all three arguably exemplify mysteries of Dionysus. The absence of these mysteries from the discussion of 'homogeneity' in *BNP* (see preceding note) in effect makes the case for the zero grade: there could be mysteries of the same god with no common group identity at all.

<sup>125</sup> Note the plurality of the title and the fact that nevertheless the 'religions' are not presented in self-contained sections.

came into being at approximately the same time as Mithraism<sup>126</sup> — Christianity. The Mainz vessel, if my explications are approximately right, adds weighty support to the view (now quite out of vogue, as we shall see) that the Mithraists were operating — symbolically, ritually, and ideologically — much as were some of their Christian contemporaries. In the relationship between cult act and mythic act, between sacrament and sacred story, it seems to me, there is a striking similarity between, on the one hand, the archeries of the Father and of Mithras and, on the other, the eucharist and the Last Supper. More precisely, the Mainz vessel, by introducing a further pair of terms on the Mithraic side, enhances the familiar analogy: Mithraic cult meal : banquet of Mithras and Sol :: eucharist : Last Supper.<sup>127</sup> To the Mithraic side we may also add the pair, Sun-Runner's procession and Sun's journey, although the charter for the ritual is in this instance cosmological (i.e., the actual solar journey and its esoteric implications for the fate of souls) rather than mythical. For Christianity, I have added what few would quarrel with — initiation by baptism.<sup>128</sup>

<i>Ritual</i>	<i>Validating myth/ cosmological 'fact'</i>
<i>Mithraic</i>	
Feast of initiates	Feast of Mithras and Sol
Archery of the Father	Archery of Mithras ('water miracle')
Sun-Runner's Procession	Solar journey
<i>Christian</i>	
Eucharist	Last Supper
Baptism	Baptism of Jesus by John in Jordan

No comparison of ancient religions, and especially not one between a mystery cult and Christianity, can now be undertaken without reference to Jonathan Z. Smith's dense and brilliant work on the topic of comparison itself in this historical context, *Drudgery Divine*.<sup>129</sup> First, then, in Smith's terms, my comparison is analogical, not genealogical.<sup>130</sup> I make no claim that things in early Christianity were as they were because of the influence of Mithraism — or vice versa. Nor do I postulate deterministic convergence: that each religion was led ineluctably, if independently, towards similar sacraments. In fact, the scenes on the Mainz vessel show that the Mithraists developed a portfolio of sacraments that was in ways quite different from the Christian. I claim

<sup>126</sup> Most would agree that the explosive growth of Mithraism began towards the end of the first century A.D. Some hold (on the testimony of Plutarch, *Pomp.* 24) that the cult came to Rome much earlier; but if so, it remained latent for more than a century, and we have no idea of its early form, for it has left no trace in literature or archaeology. The very substantial monumental and epigraphic record, which defines for us the Mysteries of Mithras as one of the religions of the Roman Empire, begins at the very end of the first century A.D. One need suppose an incubation period of no more than a generation or so before the commencement of that record. For a scenario of Mithraism's genesis, see Beck, *op. cit.* (n. 92) (survey of scholarly opinion, 115–16; on Plut., *Pomp.* 24, 121 n. 38). Cf. Franz Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (1929), 130: 'Car, si une communauté de leurs adeptes [i.e., Mithraists] paraît avoir existé à Rome dès le temps de Pompée . . . , leur diffusion réelle ne commença qu'à partir des Flaviens vers la fin du I<sup>er</sup> siècle de notre ère'.

<sup>127</sup> On the Mithraic cult meal, see above, Section 1, esp. n. 3. For the acceptance of such analogies, see the extended quotation from Claus concerning the 'water miracle', above (Sect. III). That the Christian eucharist (whatever one chooses to call it) was validated by a charter myth, at least for Paul of Tarsus and

his Corinthian correspondents, is readily apparent in 1 Cor 11:23–5 (cf. Mk 14:22–5, Mt 26:26–9, Lk 22:17–19).

<sup>128</sup> For the story (admittedly, not presented explicitly as a charter for cult practice), see Mk 1:4–11, Mt 3, Lk 2:1–22. A further comparison may be drawn between the Mithraic and the Christian rites of initiation: archery of Father : archery of Mithras = water miracle :: rite of baptism : baptisms by John. What gives the analogy particular interest is the appearance of water on both sides of the comparison. From there one might pursue (though not here) baptisms, on both sides, in another element — fire (on the Mithraic side, see above, n. 10, on the initiation of Lions and 'the fiery breath which is an ablution for holy magi'; on the Christian, the 'baptism with the holy spirit and with fire' (Lk 3:16, Mt 3:11, cf. Mk 1:8), in opposition to the baptism of water). I emphasize, however, that we are here concerned more with the comparison of relationships (*a:b::x:y*) than with the comparison of things (ritual *a* with ritual *x*, myth *b* with myth *y*).

<sup>129</sup> *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (1990).

<sup>130</sup> On the distinction, Smith, *ibid.*, 47–51.

only that, in the light of the Mainz vessel and other data which it informs, Mithraism may now be described in more sacramental terms than previously; consequently, that there is a striking comparison to be made between it and early Christianity, if it is granted that in one or more of its forms early Christianity evolved sacramentally.<sup>131</sup>

That last proviso is more controversial than it might seem. Sacramentalism, especially in conjunction with a robust other-worldly soteriology, is a characteristic which contemporary scholarship tends to downplay — both in Christianity and in the mysteries.<sup>132</sup> On the pagan side, this will be familiar enough, certainly to classicists. For more than a decade now, we have been accustomed to discounting both systematic ideology and other-worldliness in the mystery cults.<sup>133</sup> Above all, we like our cults tentative, even banal, in their soteriologies. To use another of Smith's illuminating distinctions, we favour the 'locative' over the 'utopian',<sup>134</sup> that is, we emphasize that which in the cults is focused on confirmation in the here and now rather than on salvation in and to another world.

Less familiar to classicists will be the extent to which early Christianity too, in some of its forms — one speaks now of 'Christianities', plural — is being uncoupled from the other-worldly soteriology traditionally associated with Paul of Tarsus. Indeed, in Smith's *Drudgery Divine* the comparison finally effected is between non-Pauline Christianities of a 'locative' sort, on the one hand, and 'locative' pagan mysteries, among which those of Attis are selected as a paradigm, on the other.<sup>135</sup> There is good reason for this shift. As Smith amply demonstrates, the practice of comparing Christianity to the mystery cults (and vice versa) was vitiated from the outset by partisan confessional agendas, predominantly those of Protestant theologians seeking to discredit the Roman Church by portraying it as corrupted from Christianity's pristine origins by the mystery cults.<sup>136</sup> Above all, Smith argues, we have to escape the thoroughly compromised comparison of a supposedly fundamental Christian soteriology of 'dying and rising with Christ' with an imagined mystery soteriology of salvation through the death and resurrection of the cult deity.<sup>137</sup>

One of the advantages of bringing new *Mithraic* evidence into play is that it necessarily moves the issue away from that distracting soteriological pattern. One may

<sup>131</sup> In characterizing both religions as 'sacramental', I intend first what I here argue: that Mithraism and Christianity alike developed rituals related to events in their myths (or to some other esoteric 'fact'); and secondly that the development of the ritual-myth relationships in each system was a conscious and pervasive process.

<sup>132</sup> To an earlier generation of scholars (e.g., S. Angus, *The Mystery-Religions* (2nd edn, 1928; repr. 1975)) the sort of analogies I have set out and the conclusions I have drawn from the Mainz vessel would have seemed methodologically unproblematic, though possibly quite disturbing in their implications for the stature of Mithraism relative to early Christianity.

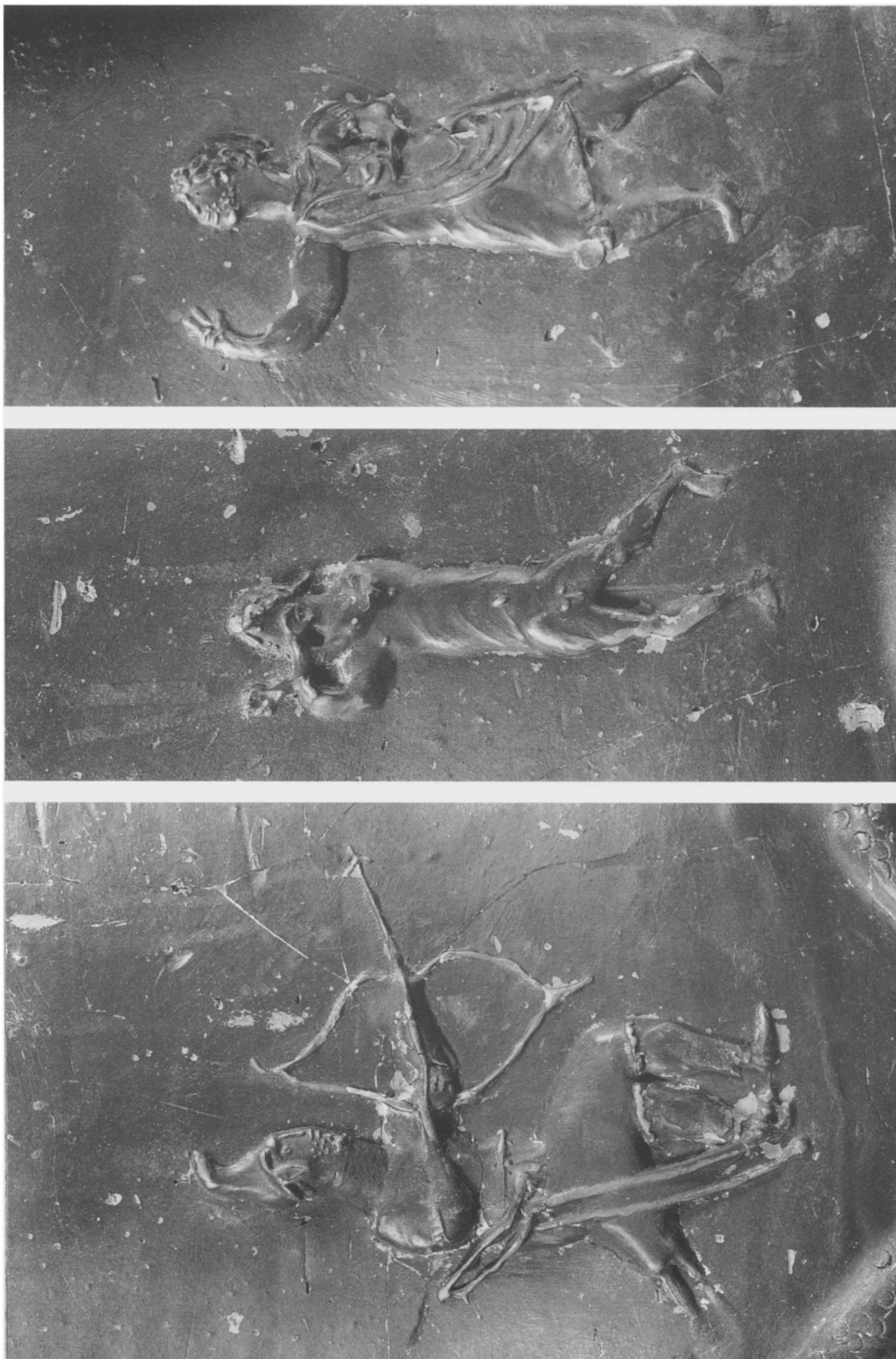
<sup>133</sup> Undoubtedly, this started as a healthy reaction against an excessive and faulty emphasis on theology and soteriology. Walter Burkert's *Ancient Mystery Cults* (1987), it seems to me, admirably set the limits of what we can legitimately say about these aspects of the mystery cults. For Mithraism specifically, Clauss's study (op. cit. (n. 3)) was an equally salutary corrective.

<sup>134</sup> op. cit. (n. 129), 121–43.  
<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*, 99–114, 120–43. For his characterization of early Christianities, Smith builds on (1) the manifestly locative symbolism of their artistic remains convincingly set out in G. F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (1985), and (2) certain 'movements in Palestine and southern Syria that cultivated the memory of Jesus as a founder-teacher', as reconstructed, with equal persuasiveness, in B. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (1988, from

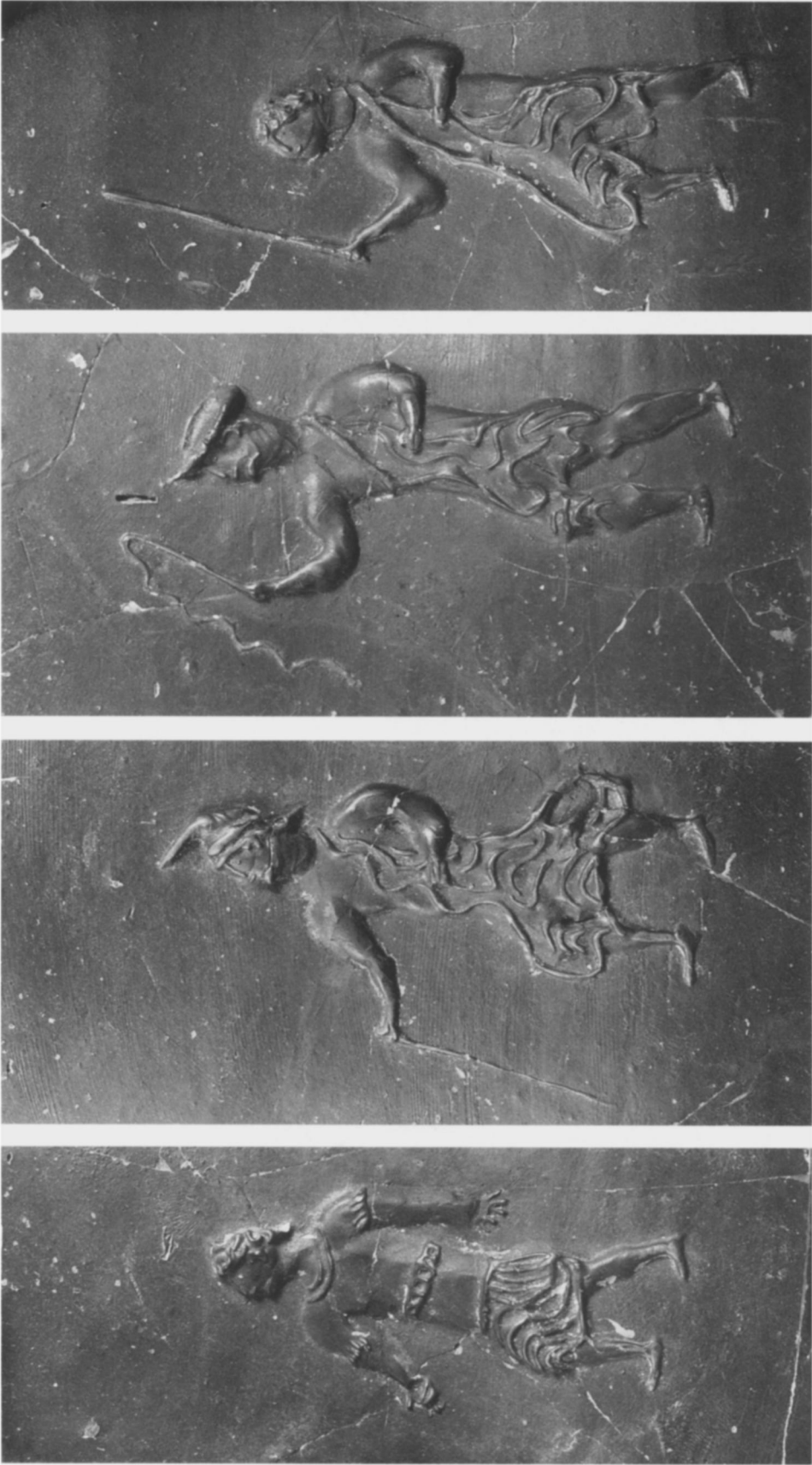
which the quotation is taken (Mack 11, Smith 135)). It is important to note that even locative Christianities observed the practices of baptism and cult meal which I have listed as Christian rites in the comparison above. Indeed, Smith (*ibid.*, 129–30) describes Mack's set of Christianities in just such terms: 'a heterogeneous collection of relatively small groups, marked off from their neighbours by a rite of initiation (chiefly, adult baptism), with their most conspicuous cultic act a common meal . . .' For the Attis cult, Smith relies on its characterization in G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Soteriology and Mystic Aspects in the Cult of Attis and Cybele* (1985), a characterization with which I am entirely in agreement. My quarrel, it should be clear, is not with Smith's new comparison between locative Christianities and locative mysteries, which I find extraordinarily fruitful, still less with the interpretations on which Smith relies, which I accept as valid and thus leading to a valid comparison. What disturbs me, rather, is the privileging of the Attis cult and its demonstrable lack of a robust soteriology as a template for the mysteries as a whole. That the mystery cults might furnish other soteriologies, other 'utopian' systems differing *toto caelo* from the type sought but *not* discovered in the Attis cult, seems for some reason to be inconceivable. We shall return to this problem later.

<sup>136</sup> op. cit. (n. 129), *passim*. This is a vast and complicated story, told with immense learning; I have alluded here only to the most obvious strand scrutinized by Smith, the polemics of 'pagano-papism' (*ibid.*, 120–5).

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, 89–111; see also above, n. 135.



THE MAINZ MITHRAIC VESSEL. INITIATES ON SIDE A ('THE ARCHERY OF THE FATHER'). Photo: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Rheinland-Pfalz.



THE MAINZ MITHRAIC VESSEL. INITIATES ON SIDE B ('THE PROCESSION OF THE SUN-RUNNER').  
*Photo. Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Rheinland-Pfalz.*



accept (or not) Smith's demonstration that utopian soteriologies of a dying and rising god, and thus their expression in ritual, were minor and marginal among early Christianities and late or non-existent in, e.g., the Attis cult. The 'unconquered' Mithras, however, does not die and therefore does not rise again; so Mithraic 'salvation', whether locative or utopian, cannot rest on a story of this sort, nor can its rituals express that type of myth or realize that type of salvation.<sup>138</sup>

Furthermore, the very novelty of the scenes on the Mainz vessel leads us on from the hackneyed comparison of *types* of ritual activity (cult meals, baptisms) to fresh analogies which display something more fundamental, the *relationship* of ritual to cult myth (or other esoteric 'fact') as exemplified in two distinct religions which yet came into being contemporaneously and continued to coexist within the same multicultural empire.<sup>139</sup> What the analogies suggest, then, is a *shared sacramental mentality*, a propensity for expressing myth in ritual. If the string of analogies holds, necessarily this sacramental mentality cannot be considered a unique aspect of early Christianity any more than it can of Mithraism.<sup>140</sup> The scenes on the Mainz vessel reveal in a (literally) dramatic way that it was an aspect of the religious imagination of the times.

Manifest charter myths for important rituals are actually something of a rarity, at least in the religions of classical antiquity. That indeed is the principal embarrassment of myth-and-ritual theory, especially when it is offered as an omnibus explanation with the myths and rituals forced into a single or a few overarching patterns. Not all rites act out a myth; not all myths tell the story behind a rite. Obvious mutual validation (such as the story of Prometheus' primal sacrifice at Mekone and the apportionment of the parts of a sacrificial animal as between gods and humans) is the exception rather than the rule.<sup>141</sup> Yet the Mainz vessel, a single artifact, yields two novel and precise pairs of ritual and myth: (A) the archery of the Mithraic Father, as a ritual of initiation, imitating the archery of Mithras, and (B) the procession of the Sun-Runner, as a ritual both of cosmic ordering and of esoteric soul-travel, delineating the journey of the Sun and the route of souls. What is perhaps most exciting about the discovery of these two pairs is their definition in historical time. Relative to the artifact on which they are given expression, these are not age-old rites and stories. The main building blocks of myth, ritual, 'place', and doctrine which we have here analysed were 'invented' little more than fifty years before.<sup>142</sup> But then, at that point in time the same is true of much in Christianity, necessarily so of its Jesus stories and whatever rites depended on them.

Here we reach the crux in the re-evaluation of the religious history of the Roman Empire which, I contend, the scenes on the Mainz vessel urge on us. The story which emerges from J. Z. Smith's comparison is one in which conservative, locative Christianities keep pace with conservative, locative mystery cults. I do not suggest that this is an inaccurate picture, but I do suggest that it is by no means the full picture. On the pagan side, Smith effectively ensured its incompleteness by privileging the Attis cult as a paradigm of the mysteries.<sup>143</sup> His over-reliance on that cult allowed him to establish,

<sup>138</sup> Mithras can be brought on to this comparative grid only by redefining it in terms of 'struggle' rather than death. Hence Ugo Bianchi's Mithras as a god of 'vicissitude' ('dio in vicenda'), to which human vicissitude can be related: 'The religio-historical question of the mysteries of Mithra', in *idem*, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 3-60, esp. 10-16 (see also Smith, *op. cit.* (n. 129), 107-8 nn. 40-1).

<sup>139</sup> On the approximate date of Mithraism's emergence in the Roman Empire, see above, n. 126.

<sup>140</sup> This is all to the good, since claims of 'uniqueness', as Smith vehemently argues (*op. cit.* (n. 129), 37-46), ruin the comparative enterprise: that which is truly unique (*sui generis*) is, strictly speaking, incomparable. Yet Christianity to mystery comparisons were regularly made for that very reason: to advance the former's uniqueness.

<sup>141</sup> For a sensible, brief but nuanced statement on the inter-relation of myth and ritual, see (e.g.) W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology*

and *Ritual* (1979), 56-8; for the problems of even a revised myth-and-ritual theory, F. Graf, *Greek Mythology: An Introduction* (trans. T. Marier, 1993), 50-3. The Mekone story: Hesiod, *Theog.* 535-61.

<sup>142</sup> By 'invention' I do not mean fabrication *de novo* (i.e., altogether without precedent or antecedents). I mean rather, in the present context, the 'discovery' and consecration of a set of stories as especially relevant to the inventing group and the organization of an apparatus of ritual, initiation, place, art, and structured cult life in order to harness that relevance on the group's behalf. Place and art were particularly important for the Mithraists; for the Christians one would probably substitute 'text'. In this sense of the word, I have attempted to recapture the 'invention' of the Mithraic mysteries and the inventing group in art. *cit.* (n. 92). In my scenario, the cult's initial explosive growth follows quickly on — to some extent, perhaps, is concurrent with — its invention (see above, n. 126).

<sup>143</sup> See above, n. 135.

or to appear to establish, two things: first and most obviously, that the dying gods of the mysteries do not rise again and that the mysteries accordingly lacked a robust utopian soteriology based on stories of divine death and resurrection; secondly, and of almost as much importance, that the locative traditions of the mysteries were very ancient and trailed long histories of self-reinterpretation behind them. The weakness in the first of these positions is that while it allows for locative soteriologies based on dying but un-resurrected gods or heroes, it precludes the possibility of utopian soteriologies based on altogether different types of myth and doctrine. Yet, demonstrably, just such a soteriology may be found in the Mysteries of Mithras. We may never be able — and probably should not try — to define a Mithraist's 'salvation' fully and with complete precision; but at least we know — and know all the better for the Mainz vessel — that it had much to do with that mystery of the soul's descent into mortality and ascent into immortality into which the initiate was inducted in the mithraeum.<sup>144</sup>

Let us look more closely at the second position, conceding that for the Attis cult Smith is certainly right:

In almost no case, when treating this period, do we study a new religion. Rather, almost every religious tradition that forms the object of our research has had a centuries-old history. We study archaic Mediterranean religions in their Late Antique phases.<sup>145</sup>

Not so: the exception — and Mithraism is no minor one — was substantially invented a mere half century or so before the dedicator of the Mainz vessel displayed a well-articulated range of its ritual, myth, and doctrine on his offering. Forcing the mystery cults into a single generic mould seldom works. For Mithraism, the days are long gone when one could credibly claim that the continuities from its Persian antecedents are more significant than its re-creation as the 'Persian' mysteries of the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>146</sup>

The reverse to the conservative and locative side of the coin is the radical, the inventive, the utopian. Fortunately, classicists now have an admirable model for this other side in a study, not of the religions of the period (although religion, specifically Christianity, figures largely therein), but of another aspect of its imaginative and creative life, its literature. In *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian*,<sup>147</sup> G. W. Bowersock describes a burst of inventiveness, starting precisely in Nero's reign, which engendered new forms of fiction, principally the prose romance. These works are chock full of marvels, and they are distinctly utopian. One of Bowersock's most startling proposals concerns the *Scheintod*, the 'apparent death' which a character (usually the heroine) undergoes:

<sup>144</sup> That Mithraism had a utopian soteriology which cannot be accommodated to the pattern postulated (rightly or wrongly) for the other cults and that this soteriology had to do with the cosmic soul journey were conclusions reached in the 'final statement' of the International Seminar on the 'Religio-Historical Character of Roman Mithraism' (Rome, 1978: Bianchi, op. cit. (n. 1), xiv-xviii). To appreciate this conclusion one has to read behind the convoluted language needed to secure consensus in the drafting committee, so I shall not quote the statement here. Wisely, the statement also warns against another comparative pitfall: assimilating Mithraic doctrines of genesis and apogenesis unthinkingly to an antimaterial Gnostic or dualistic pattern.

<sup>145</sup> op. cit. (n. 129), 107, cf. 120-1.

<sup>146</sup> I have attempted to trace Mithraism's continuities as well as its 'inventions' (see above, n. 142) in my recent study of the cult's origins (op. cit. (n. 126), esp. 123-5). The continuities are significant, but they are not definitive. They do not even include, for example, Mithras as bull-killer. The failure of more than a century of scholarship to find the Iranian original of this central cult 'fact' suggests strongly that it too was an 'invention' antedating by little, if at all, its icono-

graphic expression. The new in Mithraism was not a 'rectification' (to draw on another of Smith's illuminating concepts: *Imagining Religion* (1982), 66-101), in which new myth or ritual is generated within a religion to accommodate an external cultural shock. The fact is that Mithra-worship itself migrated across a huge cultural divide. Although one can identify bits of the linguistic, conceptual, and mythic baggage carried across, they were reconstituted in what is more usefully characterized as a 'new religion' (Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 2), 75-7) than as Romanized Mazdaism, as Cumont persisted in describing it. On post-Cumontian scholarship which saw Mithraism essentially as a continuation or collateral branch of Iranian religion, see my survey in op. cit. (n. 2, 1984), 2063-71, in particular on L. A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* (1968), the most thorough-going attempt to trace a systematic pattern of Iranian religious thought, much of it highly abstract, in the Roman cult. A. D. H. Bivar's quest for an 'esoteric Mithraism' pervasive throughout the ancient world from Rome to India has recently culminated in his *The Personalities of Mithra in Archaeology and Literature* (1999).

<sup>147</sup> (1994).

The question we must now ask is whether from a historical point of view we would be justified in explaining the extraordinary growth in fictional writing, and its characteristic and concomitant fascination with resurrection, as some kind of reflection of the remarkable stories that were coming out of Palestine precisely in the middle of the first century A.D.<sup>148</sup>

Another radical suggestion is that we see not only the novelist Achilles Tatius' story of the origin of wine but also the last preserved episode of Petronius' *Satyrica*, the story of Eumolpus' cannibalistic will, as plays upon the new rite of the eucharist.<sup>149</sup> With the *Satyrica* we are back in the Neronian age itself. Necessarily, then, given the relative dates, what is parodied there is the story behind the Gospels, including the sacramental construction placed upon the story, rather than the Gospel narratives as we now have them.

While Smith depicts a society of carefully locative cults, Bowersock depicts the same society, the credulous and the incredulous alike, abuzz with utopian fantasies. Neither picture is false to the original, yet it is within the world of fantastical invention, invention not merely of literary forms but of story and of ritual too, that I would choose to locate the invention of the Mithraic mysteries. Which is not to deny the obvious: that the Mithraists were also the most this-worldly and locative of folk.<sup>150</sup> In cult life, undoubtedly, Mithraism made its initiates comfortable in the present order; but it also inducted them into mysteries of an ampler destiny of souls.<sup>151</sup> The Mainz vessel documents these inductions.

The authors of *Religions of Rome* rightly indicate why their subject is of special importance and relevance.<sup>152</sup>

The history of Roman religion . . . is nothing less than the story of the origin and development of those attitudes and assumptions that still underlie most forms of contemporary religious life in the West and most contemporary religions.

As they go on to say, 'this is not just a question of the growth of Christianity'.<sup>153</sup> What changes is the mentality of the whole — pagans, Jews, and Christians alike. While ancient modes persist, something emerges which is familiar, until 'in the religious debates and conflicts of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. we are in a world that is broadly recognizable to us'.<sup>154</sup> Already at the cusp of the first and second centuries, had we entered the mithraeum at Mogontiacum we would have witnessed some of the first strange glimmerings of a sacramental mentality which, for good or ill, is still with us today.<sup>155</sup>

There is a final lesson to be learnt from the Mainz vessel. In the interplay of ritual, myth, and cosmology, a high degree of ideological sophistication lurks beneath these crude images of an inelegant regional pottery. That something so subtle should appear so early in the cult's history — and on the margins of empire at that — should cause us to re-examine our stereotypes of the simple religion of soldiers and freedmen. '[T]hose who ask "What was Mithraism anyway?" just may conclude that it was nothing much,

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*, 99–119, quotation at 119.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*, 125–38: Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Cleitophon* 2.2; Petronius, *Satyrica* 141.2–11. In the latter, Bowersock argues that the word play *testamentum/diathêkê* is an intentional part of the parody.

<sup>150</sup> On Mithraism as a conformist's religion: R. L. Gordon, 'Mithraism and Roman society', *Religion* 2 (1972), 92–121 (reprinted in Gordon, *op. cit.* (n. 11, 1996)); W. Liebeschuetz, 'The expansion of Mithraism among the religious cults of the second century', in Hinnells, *op. cit.* (n. 2), 195–216.

<sup>151</sup> The ritual depicted in Scene B of the Mainz vessel is both locative and utopian: locative in that it affirms the actual physical order of the heavens as the science of the times describes it, utopian in that it admits the individual human initiate into a soul journey within that vast spatio-temporal order. In a recent article (see

above, n. 65) I have argued that it was to celebrate this soul journey as well as to commemorate their deceased colleagues (a locative response) that the Mithraists of Virunum met, as their *album* records, *mortalitatis causa* on 26 June 184. I also remark there on some striking modern comparisons: the terrible consequences, in the cults of the Solar Temple and Heaven's Gate, of propelling oneself or others physically rather than symbolically on a celestial journey analogous to the Mithraists'.

<sup>152</sup> BNP *History*, x.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> For a forceful restatement, within the Christian theological tradition, of the primacy of ritual, see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (1998).

and perhaps not a serious religion after all,' asserted N. M. Swerdlow.<sup>156</sup> He could not have been more wrong.

The issue is not, however, a single scholar's over-reaction. The real stumbling block for classicists here is classicism itself, an ingrained bias against allowing that anything of intellectual worth might grow independently of the traditions of the élite as we have sanctified them in the literary canon (a wholly illogical exception being made for the early Christians).<sup>157</sup> If something does appear to emerge among the lower orders, antiquity's non-chattering classes,<sup>158</sup> it must be derivative — or illusory.<sup>159</sup> It will not be easy to reverse this way of thinking on the Mithraists' behalf, for they are scarcely sympathetic subjects for modern times. But male to a man though they were,<sup>160</sup> and by universal scholarly consent conformists to their social order,<sup>161</sup> the evidence of the Mainz vessel leads one to conclude that they may just have created an advanced religion of remarkable originality after all.

VII. APPENDIX: ON THE ALLEGED INCOMPATIBILITY OF THE THEORY OF SOLSTITIAL SOUL GATES WITH MITHRAIC DOCTRINE

In his influential *Mithras Platonicus* Robert Turcan claims that the theory of soul gates at the solstices is incompatible with the doctrines of Mithraism by the following argument.<sup>162</sup> (1) The theory of solstitial gates presupposes a *thema mundi* (horoscope of the world) with Cancer (the summer solstice) rising and Capricorn (the winter solstice) setting; (2) Mithraism, as evidenced in the 'close association of the tauroctony with Aries' (the sign of the spring equinox), presupposes a *thema* which 'dates the origin of the world and of life from the spring equinox'; (3) *themata* (1) and (2) are mutually exclusive, implying different cosmogonies; (4) therefore Mithraism could not have taught the theory of the soul's entry and exit through solstitial gates.

Clearly, the first question to ask is, does Mithraic cosmology in fact imply one version of the *thema mundi* and the theory of solstitial gates another? It is important to realize, however, that a negative answer could be given on either of two grounds. It could be the case either that Mithraic cosmology and the theory of solstitial gates imply the same *thema*, or that one or the other or both of them are quite independent of any particular version of the *thema*. In the second case, Turcan's argument would fail not because Mithraic cosmology and the theory of solstitial gates share the same version of the *thema* but because at least one of them implies nothing about the *thema* at all. It is the latter tack that I shall take here.

<sup>156</sup> op. cit. (n. 20), 62. Swerdlow is reacting, with reason, to excesses in the astronomical/astrological interpretation of Mithraism.

<sup>157</sup> Though the current trend is rather to elevate the Christians up the social scale: e.g., R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (1996), 29–47, following esp. W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (1983). Contra, Keith Hopkins, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), 185–226, at 207–13. Hopkins's tripartite stratification (élite, sub-élite, masses) is here more useful than the bipartite (élite versus the rest). He construes early Christianity as a movement led by thoroughly literate members of the sub-élite recruiting from that class and the masses.

<sup>158</sup> I exclude epigraphic chatter, which in Mithraism, as in other cults, emanates from anyone who could afford a dedication with an inscription. Typically, though, such communication is confined to the titles of the god and the career of the dedicator. It says next to nothing about cult or individual ideology.

<sup>159</sup> Cultural 'trickle down' is conceivable, seepage upwards not. Hence, finally, that reluctance, noted in Section IV, to allow testimonies about Mithraic doctrine to mean what they say. True originality is drained out of Mithraism by interpreting its doctrines as the construction of philosophers. That the philosophers might actually have learnt from the Mithraists about solstitial soul gates and other such things seems not to be an option. One should not, of course, go to

the other extreme of romanticizing Mithraism as a people's religion, exclusively the product of proletarian thought. Learned input, especially astrological, played a part, and I have suggested a conduit, *exempli gratia*, in the person of Ti. Claudius Balbillus (Beck, op. cit. (n. 92), 126–7).

<sup>160</sup> The bad press that an all-male cult can now expect may be illustrated from an important work by a leading literary scholar. In *The True Story of the Novel* (1996), 68, Margaret Ann Doody casually condemns Mithraism for expropriating the taurobolium from the female devotees of the Great Goddess and then excluding them. The inadvertent insertion of 'Mithraic' into S. Angus' sentence 'The most impressive sacrament of the Mysterics was the taurobolium' (Doody, 494, n. 7; Angus, op. cit. (n. 132), 94) is revealing — as is the pseudo-history so generated.

<sup>161</sup> See above, n. 150. Again, Hopkins's tripartite stratification is useful (above, n. 157). We should think of Mithraism as a religion of the sub-élite (including freedmen and even slaves, where they wielded a measure of actual power and enjoyed a measure of material resources) — and of those striving to get a foot on the lowest rung of the sub-élite ladder. Is it perhaps just intellectual snobbery that makes it hard to envisage such folk embarked autonomously on a high cognitive enterprise?

<sup>162</sup> op. cit. (n. 61), 88–9.

At first sight, at least, it does seem germane to question the *thema*'s relevance. Even if the Mithraists did have their own version of the *thema*, i.e., a particular doctrine concerning the disposition of the heavens at creation, is that a reason why they could not also have shared with others a common theory about the entry and exit of souls through solstitial gates? In fact, the theory would be compatible with any configuration of the *thema*, and one wonders why Turcan should have thought otherwise.

Actually, there is only one attested version of the *thema mundi*. It is that recorded by Firmicus Maternus and Macrobius.<sup>163</sup> It sets the planets each in the sign of its 'house',<sup>164</sup> and, as Turcan correctly observes, Cancer in the ascendant, i.e., rising in the east. Turcan states that the doctrine of solstitial gates postulates this *thema*. But this is not so. The doctrine and the *thema* are logically independent, in that either one could be maintained without the other. There is a fortuitous link in that the *thema* places the solstitial signs at the rising and setting points, i.e., on the horizon to east and west, while in a more general way points of communication between the upper and the nether worlds were also thought to lie to the east and (especially) the west. Cumont thought that the link was significant, even causal, but did not demonstrate that it was anything more than a coincidence.<sup>165</sup> There is no evidence that the *thema* developed out of any theory of the location of spirit gates or vice versa, and the positioning of the solstitial signs in the *thema* is better explained as the consequence of the *thema*'s own internal logic: i.e., Cancer is in the ascendant to allow the planets, located each in its own house, to rise in succession at about equal intervals of time during the first day of creation. Alternatively, we may accept the ancients' own explanation: the signs are where they are so as to place Aries, their leader, in the position of honour in midheaven.<sup>166</sup>

In addition to Cumont, Turcan relied on H. de Ley for the postulated link between the *thema mundi* and the doctrine of solstitial gates.<sup>167</sup> While Cumont was speculative, de Ley was simply mistaken. He states that Porphyry in the context of the passage on the solstitial gates (*De antro* 21–9) also discusses the *thema*. What Porphyry discusses is not the *thema*, but the system underlying the *thema*, the arrangement of planetary houses.<sup>168</sup> The *De antro* is altogether silent on the *thema*, and there is not the slightest intimation of it in the background.<sup>169</sup> The proof is that Porphyry lists both the 'diurnal' and the 'nocturnal' houses of the planets. The latter are irrelevant to the *thema mundi* — but highly germane to the subsequent argument concerning the equinoctial 'seat' of Mithras.<sup>170</sup>

The doctrine of solstitial gates, then, neither implies nor is implied by the *thema mundi*. What of Mithraic cosmology, and in particular that part of it explicit in *De antro*, namely the 'seat' of Mithras at the equinoxes? Again, in a formal sense, there is no reason why a particular cosmic location for the god should imply or be implied by any particular *thema mundi*. Nevertheless, let us follow Turcan's argument and see why it is that he postulates for the Mithraists a *thema* different from the attested one.

<sup>163</sup> Firmicus, *Mathesis* 3.1; Macrobius, *In Somnium* 1.21.23–7. For a description of the *thema mundi* and further references, see A. Bouché-Leclercq, *L'Astrologie grecque* (1899), 185–7. The earliest mention of the *thema*, though without specifics, is by the first-century A.D. astrologer Thrasyllus (*CCAG* 8.3.100.27–30).

<sup>164</sup> Thus, Moon in Cancer, Sun in Leo, Mercury in Virgo, Venus in Libra, Mars in Scorpius, Jupiter in Sagittarius, Saturn in Capricorn. For the planets proper, these are their 'diurnal', as opposed to 'nocturnal', houses. See Bouché-Leclercq, *op. cit.* (n. 163), 182–92.

<sup>165</sup> F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains* (1942), 38–41.

<sup>166</sup> Firmicus, *Math.* 3.1.18; Macrobius, *In Somn.* 1.21.23.

<sup>167</sup> *op. cit.* (n. 62), 20.

<sup>168</sup> One may well ask why Porphyry (or his sources) introduced and described the system of houses (ch. 22), which at first sight has no obvious connection with the solstitial soul gates. The answer is twofold. (1) It provides the reason why the Saturnalia, a festival of liberation and hence a prototype for the exit

of souls from mortality, is celebrated at the winter solstice when the sun enters Capricorn (23): Capricorn is the house of Saturn. (2) It underpins the highly complicated and compacted (and textually corrupt) argument linking the symbols of the tauroctonus Mithras to the equinoxes which are his 'proper seat' (24); see above, n. 68. Since the Mithraists used the astrological houses in their cosmology, it is possible, indeed probable, that they are Porphyry's ultimate source for the system in the present context.

<sup>169</sup> De Ley's error is perpetuated in Simonini's commentary (*op. cit.* (n. 62), 191): 'Porfirio introduce il *thema mundi* . . .' Simonini cites J. Flamant, *Macrobo et le néo-platonisme latin* (1977), 452 (n. 253), but Flamant says only that Porphyry 'donne cette domiciliation . . . et fait allusion à la "géniture" du monde selon les Egyptiens, mais il ne lie pas les deux choses'. Even this is mistaken, for what Porphyry alludes to is 'genesis into (*eis*) the cosmos' not the *genesis* of the cosmos. Scholarship has rendered the *De antro*, never an easy text, virtually unnavigable in places.

<sup>170</sup> See above, n. 68.

According to Turcan, the Mithraists believed that the world was created or, more precisely, vivified by Mithras in the springtime. It was a belief inherited from the cult's Iranian antecedents, and it was to this vernal creation that their tauroctony was made to allude. Furthermore, it was as 'demiurge and master of genesis' that the tauroctonous Mithras is set at the equinoxes (one of which, of course, is the spring equinox) in the cosmology of *De antro* 24. Cogent evidence is adduced by Turcan both for the springtime creation in the Iranian tradition and for a widespread Greco-Roman view that the year, if not the world, begins in the spring.<sup>171</sup> Hence Aries, the sign of the spring equinox, becomes the first and leader of the signs. Metaphorically, too, creation is the springtime of the world. We may suppose, then, that for the Mithraists, as almost universally, spring was the season of new beginnings, and its symbols the tokens of new beginnings. Whether they also believed that the world was actually and literally created in the spring is another matter, but let us grant it for the sake of the argument. What follows?

It would follow that the standard *thema mundi* becomes, from a Mithraist's point of view, inaccurate — but not for the reasons Turcan supposes. The standard *thema*, Turcan argues, is incompatible with Mithraic cosmology and vernal creation because it has Cancer rising in the east and Capricorn setting in the west. But rising and setting signs have to do with the time of day, not with the season of the year. What determines season is rather the location of the sun. The sun in the attested *thema mundi* was situated, like all the planets, in its house. The sun's house is Leo, and when the sun is in Leo it is high summer (late July to late August). So the Mithraists, if they believed in a vernal creation, would have had to construct or adopt — though there is no evidence that they did either — a *thema* with the Sun in Aries, not, as Turcan supposes, a *thema* with Aries rather than Cancer in the ascendant. Mithraic cosmology, as interpreted by Turcan, does not therefore imply a *thema* incompatible with the standard *thema mundi* in respect of the signs occupying the rising and setting points at creation.

At every stage, then, Turcan's argument fails in logic, because the implications are not as stated. Nothing in their cosmology prevented the Mithraists from subscribing to — or themselves inventing — the theory of the gates of souls at the solstices, and there is no inconsistency within the material deployed by Porphyry concerning the solstitial gates and the 'seat' of Mithras at the equinoxes. The Mithraic data in the *De antro* may once more be construed at face value, for here at least it is not the Mithraists' ancient interpreters, still less the Mithraists themselves, who contributed the 'esprit confus et confusionniste' of which Turcan complains.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> *op. cit.* (n. 62), 54–6.

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*, 89.