

## Introduction

In the 16th and 17th centuries learned authors, such as Pirro Ligorio (1513–1583) and Filippo Della Torre (1657–1717),<sup>1</sup> faced the puzzling archaeological evidence of magical amulets and some mystery cults, especially Mithraic monuments and, therefore, had to interpret such evidence in light of information on Mithras gleaned from ancient literary sources (e.g., Herodotus, Strabo, Stadius, Plutarch, St. Jerome, Tertullian, Porphyry, Firmicus Maternus, St. Augustine, Hesychius, and the *Historia Augusta*). They underscored the solar nature of this god. Ligorio focused on the magical and healing value of his cult. In the engravings of Antonio Lafreri (1512–1577) the famous Mithraic relief of Ottaviano Zeno was reproduced and the religious climate of the Counter-Reformation suggested to this author and his advisers a moral interpretation of the scene as an allegory of agricultural labour. Many contemporary scholars shared his view, which did not find the approval of the humanist Stephanus Pighius (Steven Winand Pigge, 1520–1604).<sup>2</sup> The study of Mithraic iconography was affected by the interpretation of the so-called *emblemata*, i.e. symbolic images (including ancient iconographies), sometimes associated with inscriptions or hieroglyphs. This kind of research was inaugurated in 1531 by the *Emblematum liber* by Andrea Alciato.<sup>3</sup>

Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) dealt with Mithras by resorting to pagan authors such as Plutarch and the *Oracula Chaldaica*<sup>4</sup> but he eventually identified the god with a pharaoh who built the obelisks and with Osiris himself, the first king of Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Della Torre repeated ancient arguments against Mithraism,<sup>6</sup> such as its putative imitation of Christian rites. This author was also looking for archaeological data concerning Mithras from Italy and Roman provinces. On the other hand, Thomas Hyde (1636–1703)<sup>7</sup> tried to understand Mithras through the lens of Persian religion by underlining his connection and, at times, identification with fire. The Christian authors handed over to these modern scholars the debate on possible relationships between the cult of Mithras and Christianity and also some clues to explain Mithraism. Such heritage inevitably made its mark on scholarly debates about Mithras,<sup>8</sup> starting from the Renaissance, but the archaeological discoveries, on one hand, and the access to Persian sources, on the other, allowed major developments in this field of the history of religions.

At the end of the 17th century CE, Bernard de Montfaucon<sup>9</sup> associated the sculptures of the lion-headed god with Mithraism. Then Johann G. Eichhorn<sup>10</sup> interpreted the Mithraic sacrifice of the bull as a symbol of creation and salvation. Félix Lajard<sup>11</sup> expanded the corpus of Mithraic monuments; unfortunately, although he had at his disposal the *Avesta* (what Hyde did not), he resorted, instead, to comparisons with the Assyrian culture.

Our knowledge of Mithraism took a decisive step at the end of the 19th century thanks to the two volumes by the Belgian scholar Franz Cumont: *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, I–II, Brussels 1896 and 1898. Here literary sources attesting to Mithras were considerably more numerous than in the prior decades, including

<sup>1</sup> Pirro Ligorio, in an unpublished manuscript kept in the Archivio di Stato di Torino, Book XLIX “Nel quale se tratta dell’antichi intagli e della natura del Sole medico”; Filippo Della Torre, *Monumenta Veteris Antii, hoc est inscriptio M. Aquili et tabula Solis Mithrae variis figuris et symbolis exculpta*, Rome 1700. Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637), in an unpublished manuscript kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Dép. des manuscrits, Dupuy 667: “Recueil de dissertations et de notes relatives à la numismatique, à la glyptique et à l’épigraphie antiques”, also dealt with ancient magic and mystic cults. On the early interpretations of Mithraic monuments in the Renaissance: R.L. Gordon, “Interpreting Mithras in the Late Renaissance, 1: the ‘monument of Ottaviano Zeno’ (V. 335) in Antonio Lafreri’s *Speculum Romanae magnificentiae* (1564)”, *EJMS* 4, 2004, 1–42; I. Campos Méndez, “Panorámica historiográfica de los estudios sobre el Mitra védico, avéstico y romano”, *Revista de historiografía* 29, 2018, 297–311.

<sup>2</sup> See the important essay of Gordon, “Interpreting Mithras”. The Italian scholar Girolamo Aleandro (1574–1629), in a manuscript in the Barberini library, hypothesized that Mithras was the spark produced by a flint: B. de Montfaucon, *L’antiquité expliquée*, I.2, Paris 1719, 368.

<sup>3</sup> On Renaissance studies on *emblemata* see a recent work by L. Volkmann, *Hieroglyph, Emblem, and Renaissance Pictography*, transl. and ed. by R. Raybould, Leiden and Boston 2018 (on Mithras see page 170).

<sup>4</sup> *Obeliscus Pamphilius*, Rome 1650, 63–64 (Kircher dates the reign of Mithras-Osiris to 1837 BC); Oedipus *Aegyptiacus*, I, Rome 1652, 145; Id., *Sphinx mystagoga*, Rome 1673, pars I, caput 1, 3.

<sup>5</sup> He reads the name Mitres (instead of the correct reading Mespheres; Mitres appears in one codex and in one instance) in Plin., *N.h.* 36.64; cf. 69: *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, I, 91–92.

<sup>6</sup> I use the modern name “Mithraism” because it is traditional and I declare that I do not do that in order to instil the idea that the Roman cult of Mithras was a religion.

<sup>7</sup> Th. Hyde, *Veterum Persarum et Parthorum et Medorum religionis historia*, Oxford 1700, second ed. 1760, chap. 4, 110–114. An early translation of and commentary on the Persian *Hymn to Mithras* was that of F. Windischmann, *Mithra. Ein Beitrag zur Mythengeschichte des Orients*, Leipzig 1857 (*Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 1.1, 1859).

<sup>8</sup> See recently Ph. Adrych, “The Seven Grades of Mithraism’, or how to build a Religion”, in *Mystery Cults in visual Representation in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, eds. N. Belayche and F. Massa, RGRW 194, Leiden and Boston 2021, 103–122, part. 111–112.

<sup>9</sup> B. de Montfaucon, *Diarium Italicum sive monumentorum veterum, bibliothecatum... notitiae*, Paris 1702, 170, 196–202; *L’antiquité expliquée*, I.2, 368–372.

<sup>10</sup> J.G. Eichhorn, *De deo Sole invicto Mithra commentatio*, Göttingen 1814.

<sup>11</sup> F. Lajard, *Introduction à l’étude du culte public et des mystères de Mithra en Orient et en Occident*, Paris 1847.

oriental works different from the Greek and Roman texts known to the previous scholarship. Moreover, Cumont published his large corpus of monuments and inscriptions, which allowed him and subsequent researchers to ground their work on a solid documentary foundation. His new and original reconstruction of the cult of Mithras was included in this work and was also published in the first scientific book on Mithraism, *Les mystères de Mithra*.<sup>12</sup> Cumont carried out studies in the Persian and Anatolian cultic traditions and the Roman cult of Mithras, underscoring the main features of this old oriental god in the Roman mystery cult which scholars typically call “Mithraism”.<sup>13</sup> He thought that Roman Mithraism was a transformation of elements of Zoroastrianism into a cult for the Roman Empire. In a subsequent study, Cumont<sup>14</sup> compared select oriental apocalyptic texts (especially the *Apocalypse of Hystaspes*) with beliefs of Magi living in Asia Minor and the Roman cult of Mithras. Cumont noticed the similarities between Christianity and Mithraism and developed further this problem in his private correspondences, especially with Alfred Loisy.<sup>15</sup>

Cumont wrote a still famous sentence:

Notre situation est à peu près celle où nous serions s’il nous fallait *écrire* l’histoire de l’Église au Moyen Âge en ne disposant pour toute ressource que de la Bible hébraïque et des débris sculptés de portails romans et gothiques.<sup>16</sup>

These words still hold their value and the reason of the mysterious nature of Mithraism resides in its being a secret cult. This aspect was always known thanks to passages of Jerome, Firmicus Maternus, and other Christian authors. The difficult task of knowing what was intrinsically “mysterious” and secret encouraged the search for other documents, mostly depending on archaeological discoveries. The useful corpus published by Cumont was later expanded and enriched by Maarten Joseph Vermaseren in his two volumes of the *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithraicae* (CIMRM; The Hague 1956 and 1960). In 1961 the same scholar edited a series of 113 volumes called “Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain” (EPRO), where many contributions to the Mithraic studies have been published.

The mysteries of Mithras included many puzzling features: for example, they previewed seven successive grades of initiation, which corresponded to the seven planets: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Luna, Sol, Saturn; the Mithraic temples were dining rooms that looked like caves (at least partially), although there was only one extant case in which a Mithraic temple was a dining room in a natural cave (the Mithraeum of Duino, near Aquileia). Scholars were also captivated by the ostensible visual culture of Mithraism; this fascinating and mysterious cult depicted the puzzling image of the god sacrificing a bull on reliefs, statues, and frescoes. What is their meaning? Why were there seven initiations corresponding to the planets? Adding a further layer of complexity, a series of minor characters, such as the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates, and minor scenes were displayed in Mithraea. Following in the tradition of Cumont, scholars have looked within the Persian tradition for comparisons and possible clues.

Mithraic studies have followed two different paths that are inextricably linked to the different specializations of scholars. Specialists of Iranian studies often recognized true Persian elements in Roman Mithraism,<sup>17</sup> whereas other scholars, mostly educated in Graeco-Roman studies, have been skeptical of this Persian interpretation and have, instead, underlined the Roman features of Mithraism.

The sharpest criticism to the Mazdaean roots of Mithraism was put forwards by Richard Gordon starting from 1974.<sup>18</sup> Many comparisons, such as that between Zurvan (the Iranian god of time) and the lion-headed Mithraic god, or between Ahura Mazda and the Mithraic god Jupiter, have been proved false. The Cumontian model of transmission from Iran to Rome, via Anatolia, has also been criticized insofar as it depended on a parallelism with the spread of Christianity. Incomers from the East were not responsible for the spread of Mithraism<sup>19</sup> because in the East the cult of Mithras had no mysterious feature, and the initiates in the mysteries of Mithras were, with few exceptions, Roman citizens.<sup>20</sup> Moreover,

<sup>12</sup> F. Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra* (3rd ed., Brussels 1913), new ed. by N. Belayche, A. Mastrocinque, and D. Bonanno, Bibliotheca Cumontiana. Scripta maiora III, Turin 2013.

<sup>13</sup> This term has been used since the 19th century: see M. McCarthy, M. Egri, and R. Rustoiu, “Connected Communities in Roman Mithraism: Regional Webs from the Apulum Mithraeum III Project (Dacia)”, *Phoenix* 71, 2017, 370-392, part. 370.

<sup>14</sup> F. Cumont, “La fin du monde selon les mages occidentaux”, *RHR* 103, 1931, 29-96.

<sup>15</sup> “*Mon cher Mithra...*”: *La correspondance entre Franz Cumont et Alfred Loisy*, I-II, eds. A. Lannoy, C. Bonnet, D. Praet, Leuven 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Cumont, *Les mystères de Mithra*, 6. “Our predicament is somewhat similar to that in which we should find ourselves if we were called upon to write the history of the Church of the Middle Ages with no other sources at our command than the Hebrew Bible and the sculpted *débris* of Roman and Gothic portals” (transl. McCormack).

<sup>17</sup> See, for ex., G. Gnoli, “Sol persice Mithra”, in *Mysteria Mithrae*. Atti del Seminario Internazionale Roma and Ostia 28-31 Marzo 1978, ed. U. Bianchi, EPRO 80, Leiden 1979, 725-740; A.D.H. Bivar, “Mithraic Images of Bactria: are they related to Roman Mithraism?”, *ibidem*, 741-750; Id., *The Personalities of Mithra in Archaeology and Literature*, New York 1998; M. Boyce and F. Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism, III. Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule*, Handbuch der Orientalistik, I. Abt. 8.2, Leiden, New York, Copenhagen, and Cologne 1991, part. 468-490; J. Lahe, *Mithras – Miθra – Mitra. Der römische Gott Mithras aus der Perspektive der vergleichenden Religionsgeschichte*, Münster 2019.

<sup>18</sup> R.L. Gordon, “Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism”, in *Mithraic Studies*, ed. J.R. Hinnells, I, Manchester 1975, 215-248.

<sup>19</sup> R. Gordon, “Who worshipped Mithras?”, *JRA* 7, 1994, 459-474.

<sup>20</sup> M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae. Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes*, Stuttgart 1992.

the category of “Oriental cults (or religions) in the Roman Empire” has been recently dismantled<sup>21</sup> and, consequently, the social status of Mithraists and their net have been freed from a supposed network of “oriental cults”. Devotees of Mithras were mostly integrated into the army and the imperial administration of the Roman Empire.<sup>22</sup> Differences between Mithraism and Persian religion, on one hand, and between Mithraism and other foreign cults, such as those of Isis and the Jewish god, on the other hand, became more relevant than similarities.

To solve the riddles of Mithraism, several scholars focused on philosophical ideas associated with the mysteries of Mithras. Instead of relying mostly on Christian authors, who dealt with Mithras, some scholars<sup>23</sup> exploited Porphyry’s *de antro Nympharum* and few other philosophical works which interpreted the mysteries of Mithras from a Platonic perspective. However, Robert Turcan<sup>24</sup> underlined that these philosophers were not initiates in these mysteries and, in some cases, incorrectly described features of the Mithras cult.

Given the proliferation of zodiacal signs, stars, and planets on Mithraic monuments, it should not come as a surprise that astrological studies provided another tool for understanding Mithraism. Scholars, such as David Ulansey and Roger Beck,<sup>25</sup> recognized stars and constellations in the Mithraic characters and symbols recurring in the Tauroctony. As Beck observed, these constellations are apparently those of the northern heavenly hemisphere. From this point of view, however, it is difficult to explain how stars interacted with initiations. A Christian model might suggest a Mithraic paradise among the stars, but such an explanation is not without problems. Stars had different meanings in the beliefs of different ancient peoples, and we should investigate them before accepting a comparison with Christianity. Only some Christian Gnostics seemed to have borrowed from Mithraic beliefs, conceiving of a ladder with seven rungs that led to paradise, as is witnessed by both pagans (Celsus’ *alethès logos*) and Christians (Origen, in his *contra Celsum*, fifth book).<sup>26</sup>

Many interpretations of Mithraism are unsatisfactory because they do not attend sufficiently to differences and uncertainties. Comparisons between Mithraism and Christianity, or Mithraism and Persian religion, or Mithraism and Platonism cannot be overestimated. At the same time, comparisons cannot be taken as completely reliable clues for understanding Mithraism, especially if they gloss over the many and important differences. It is also not advisable to limit research merely to deconstructive criticisms and demolitions of other scholarly theories. For example, one cannot automatically dismiss the numerous studies that have noted the clear parallels between Christianity and Mithraism. Nor can one set aside the search for Persian elements in Mithraism until we know how – and how many – Persian elements were incorporated into Roman religious thought and transformed into this mystery cult. Greek philosophy reshaped almost all the cults in the Roman Empire. Platonism gave an impetus to the creation of a metaphysical world that located the lords of the whole cosmos, such as the deified emperors, the Jewish god, Serapis, Isis, Tyche, Nemesis and other gods. In some cases, the interpretation of Mithraism by Porphyry corresponds to real features of Mithraea.<sup>27</sup> Although we need to think critically about our comparative starting points, all clues must be followed because they convey data whose significance and value should be investigated and ascertained.

Scholars have recently looked to cognitive studies to understand Mithraism. Some scholars<sup>28</sup> have thus stressed the value of vision of Mithraic images as a source of knowledge for initiates. In short, their brains were activated by the images

<sup>21</sup> *Religions orientales – culti misterici. Neuen Perspektiven – nouvelles perspectives – prospettive nuove*, eds. C. Bonnet, J. Rüpke, and P. Scarpi, Stuttgart 2006; *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain: Cent ans après Cumont (1906-2016). Bilan historique et historiographique*. Colloque Rome 2006, eds. C. Bonnet, V. Pirenne-Delforge, and D. Praet, Brussels and Rome 2009; R. Gordon, “Coming to Terms with the ‘Oriental Religions’ of the Roman Empire”, *Numen* 61, 2014, 657-672. A recent debate on the “Oriental cults” can be found in *Entangled Worlds: Religious Confluences between East and West in the Roman Empire. The Cults of Isis, Mithras and Jupiter Dolichenus*, eds. S. Nagel, J.F. Quack, and C. Witschel, ORA 22, Tübingen 2017.

<sup>22</sup> For the army, see the discussion by R. Gordon, “The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras: a critical View,” in *L’armée romaine et la religion*, eds. C. Wolff and Y. Le Bohec, Paris 2009, 379-450.

<sup>23</sup> See, in particular, R. Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Hain 1984 (2nd ed., Königstein im Taunus 1994).

<sup>24</sup> R. Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus: recherches sur l’hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*, EPRO 47, Leiden 1975.

<sup>25</sup> See, in particular, K.B. Stark, “Die Mithrassteine von Dormagen”, *Jahrbücher des Vereins von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande* 46, 1869, 1-25; M.P. Speidel, *Mithras-Orion*, EPRO 81, Leiden 1980; D. Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries. Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, New York and Oxford 1989; R. Gordon, “The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum: the Example of Sette Sfere”, *JMS* 1.2, 1976, 119-165; J. Insler, “A New Interpretation of the Bull-Slaying Motif”, in *Hommage à Maarten J. Vermaseren*, I, EPRO 68, Leiden 1978, 519-538; R. Beck, *Planetary Gods and planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithra*, EPRO 109, Leiden 1988; R. Beck, *Beck on Mithraism, Collected Works with New Essays*, Aldershot 2004, 251-265; R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, Oxford 2012; see also T. Gnoli, “Mithras and the Stars: a Note”, in *Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies*. Proceedings of the 6th European Conference of Iranian Studies, Vienna, 18-22 September 2007, Wiesbaden 2010, 77-86.

<sup>26</sup> A. Mastrocinque, *Des mystères de Mithra aux mystères de Jésus*, PAWB 26, Stuttgart 2009. A relatively recent discussion on the supposed relationships between pagan mystery cults and early Christianity: J. Alvar et alii, *Cristianismo primitivo y religiones mistericas*, Madrid 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon, “The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum”; A. Blomart, “Mithra et Porphyre: quand sculpture et philosophie se rejoignent”, *RHR* 211, 1994, 419-441.

<sup>28</sup> L. Martin, “Performativity, Discourse and Cognition: ‘Demythologizing’ the Roman Cult of Mithras”, in *Rhetoric and Reality in Early Christianity*, ed. W. Braun, Waterloo, ON, 2005, 187-217; Id., *The Mind of Mithraists*, London, New Delhi, New York, and Sydney 2015; R. Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, Oxford 2012; Id., R. Beck, “Ecstatic Religion in the Roman Cult of Mithras”, in *Practicing Gnosis. Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson*, eds. A.D. DeConick, G. Shaw, and J.D. Turner, NHMS 85, Leiden and Boston 2013, 75-89; O. Panagiotidou and R. Beck, *The Roman Mithras Cult. A Cognitive Approach*, London-New York 2017; A. Chalupa, “What Might Cognitive Science Contribute to our Understanding of the Roman Cult of Mithras?”, in *Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography*, eds. L.H. Martin and J. Sorensen, London and Oakville 2010, 107-124; A.B. Griffith, “Dead Religion, Live Minds: Memory and Recall of Mithraic Bull”, *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 1.1, 2014, 72-89.

themselves. The parallel research stream of “lived religion”, promoted by Jörg Rüpke and his research group in Erfurt, has also focused on the personal response to rituals and religious enactments. This line of research can be fruitful since it seeks to understand what ancient initiates recognized by contemplating Mithraic iconographies. Our modern perspectives and sensibilities, including, inter alia, Christian attitudes toward “salvation” (a word connected by some scholars with the blood of the Mithraic bull), beliefs about paradise and afterlife, assumptions about miracles, materialistic views of the cosmos, and ethics about animals, can impede our understanding of this ancient Roman cult. Our scholarly perspective must attempt to take seriously, instead, the ideological, religious, philosophical, literary education and training of the Romans. While objectivity is impossible, we should make every possible effort to understand Roman habits on their own terms. In short, we should use all available tools at our disposal (e.g., iconographical and art historical studies, hermeneutics, and philology) to approach the mind of Roman pagans such as the Mithraists and reduce the gap between European and Roman mentalities.

The imagery of Mithraism was rather evocative because it recalled images familiar to onlookers: a person sacrificing a bull in the Roman Empire fatally recalled the image of Victory; a person holding a torch upwards, in a religious iconography, recalled a god of the increasing light; a beautiful landscape with shepherds and pasturing animals recalled peace, abundance, and possibly the Golden Age. We are not ancient Romans, but we have a large repertory of iconographies, mythological and religious texts, and we can single out the ones which best fit the images and texts of Mithraism. For a Roman, “salvation” did not necessarily mean salvation of the soul in the afterlife, but could denote salvation from the civil wars, from a terrible enemy, or from pestilence. The Greek words *soter* and *soteria* were also used for rulers or heroes who provided freedom from tyranny, threatening enemies, and similar evils.

We assume that Mithraic adherents recognized what they were ready and trained to recognize. In that vein, the majority of literate Romans knew the works of the most important poets and famous monuments. Virgil and Horace, the Ara Pacis, the Capitol, and temples to the imperial cult, for example, were largely known – and their vestiges are likewise known to us, at least in part. Some Christian monuments can be used for comparison with Mithraic iconography because even Christians drew heavily on pagan, Graeco-Roman iconography. For example, the Good Shepherd with his sheep was another image of peace, piety, and happiness. There was not a genealogical link between Mithraic and Christian iconographies; they borrowed independently from Graeco-Roman iconographic canons.

The method of analysis adopted here consists of identifying comparisons with the most famous poetic traditions as well as monuments and images, especially those with recurring iconographic schemes, in order to account for some otherwise mysterious Mithraic images. I will continually make use of the most famous poet of Latin literature, Virgil, as a point of reference for interpreting these images.<sup>29</sup>

I will also adopt a comparative approach to Mithraism that takes seriously the imperial cult, yet avoids automatically assuming a Christian idea of salvation of the soul in the afterlife. We cannot take for granted that Mithraic believers only wanted salvation in a Mithraic paradise – even though this is possible – because the concept of *servare* was extremely important in the Roman imperial ideology; it was the foundation of the imperial power and was different from the *servare* in the Christian sense. Augustus saved the Roman people from tyranny, and not from the Devil.

A few years ago, I proposed a new interpretation of the Mithraic stories depicted on the panels of cultic reliefs<sup>30</sup>. This interpretation relies on reading the scenes on the left side of the Tauroctony because the sequence is the same as that in Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue*. In this new book, we will see that the prophecy reported in Virgil is similar to other prophecies, including that of Hystaspes, the *Bahman Yasht*, and the *Jamasp Nama* (i.e., they have a similar structure and share many details). But we will confirm that the closest parallels with Mithraism come from Virgil. Toward that end, we will see that Virgil provides us with sufficient evidence to explain in a precise sequence some scenes in the upper part of Mithraic reliefs.

When I was studying the relationships between Mithraic iconography and imperial ideology, I came across two major topics that had never been noticed before:

1. the mysteries of Mithras had a prophet, known to Firmicus Maternus, and a prophecy written in a sacred text;
2. the first scenes in the Mithraic predellas correspond to the Sibylline prophecy reported by Virgil in his fourth *Eclogue*.

The first point has scarcely been noticed before, while the second has only convinced some scholars. Although I was not at that time completely convinced by the influence of Virgil on early Mithraism, the evidence I had gathered was

<sup>29</sup> A comparison between the Mithraic pastoral scenes and the fourth *Eclogue* of Virgil was proposed, more than one century ago, by J. Geffcken, “Die Hirten auf dem Felde”, *Hermes* 49, 1914, 321-351. This author also compared this Mithraic iconography with the Christian Nativity scene.

<sup>30</sup> A. Mastrocinque, *The Mysteries of Mithras: A Different Account*, ORA 24, Tübingen 2017.

so strong that I was compelled at least to present it, with full awareness of the risks inherent in such a proposal. My insufficient confidence prevented me from realizing that the same prophecy continues in the scenes often represented over the Tauroctony, which are in fact the most puzzling scenes. I had mistakenly thought that the scenes carved in the upper part of the Mithraic relief from Dieburg were the same as those on most Mithraic reliefs. I thus supposed that the bull sheltered in a temple from Mithras' attack, carved in Dieburg, was the same as the bovine in a small house in many reliefs from Danubian provinces. But the central part of the relief from Dieburg depicts Mithras as a hunter and not the Tauroctony. It is also the only case in which Mithras is throwing either a stone or something else against a bull resting in a temple. This is not the case with all the scenes in the upper parts of other reliefs.

Before dealing with Virgil and the Iranian prophecies, and with the above-mentioned scenes, we should repeat the main reasons why the scenes on the left have something to do with the Sibylline prophecy in Virgil. The scenes, in their recurring order, are the following:

1. Zeus striking the Giants with his thunderbolts
2. Saturn sleeping on a rock
3. Mithras arising out of a rock
4. the birth of a man or some men from a tree.

In addition to these themes, we also take into account the harvesting Mithras,<sup>31</sup> who appears above, on the horizontal panelled series over the Tauroctony. We will recall here why the Gigantomachy could be an image of civil wars and the heads sprouting from some trees are an image of the coming of a new generation on earth. Then we will also see why the scenes in the upper predellas could be interpreted as a depiction of the Golden Age, according to Virgil and other authors of the Imperial Age.

A comparison between the Mithraic scenes on the panels and some ancient prophecies is necessary, especially if the prophecies are apparently or allegedly of Persian origin. The question we must ask ourselves is: does the Virgilian prophecy in the fourth Eclogue have a Persian background? Nigidius Figulus knew of a prophecy of the Magi about the ages of the world. This testimony demonstrates the dissemination of such Persian (or "Persian") prophecies. The investigation in ancient prophecies shows that the Virgilian text is the most appropriate for a comparison with the Mithraic prophecy.

Another important series of questions we must ask is: why was Mithras so important for the Roman people? Why do many of the dedications to Mithras include prayers on behalf of emperors? Why does the Grand *camée de France* depict Mithras holding the cosmic globe beneath the *divus Augustus*?

In my opinion, an underestimated testimony on Mithras is Herodotus's identification of Aphrodite with the Iranian "goddess Mitra". We will see that this testimony referred to the morning star (i.e., the star of Venus), and this identification coheres with many statements in ancient Persian and Indian traditions. Moreover, it allows us to explain the relationship between Augustus, the Roman emperors, and Mithras. Indeed, Venus was the mother of Aeneas and the protectress of Rome, and Mithras was the mediator between light and darkness.

In conclusion, this book provides another tool for understanding Mithraism: the comparison of the Mithraic prophecy with other prophecies, especially the famous prophecy of the Virgilian Eclogue. This tool can help us view Mithraism in conjunction with Roman imperial ideology and, therefore, situate this cult within the wider context of the majority of cults in the Roman Empire. Mithraism was not necessarily an outlier in comparison with the imperial cults and with the cults of gods that the emperors cherished (for ex. Augustus and Apollo, Domitian and Minerva). We will link Mithraism with the morning light (the light of Venus) – the light between darkness and daylight. Venus was very important for the Roman ideology. It is not surprising, therefore, that the light of Venus in the morning was also meaningful in the Roman cult for Mithras.

### 1.1. The Prophecy

Many scholars did not notice that the polemic of Christian authors against Mithraism mostly targeted the Mithraic prophecies more than the sacraments. In an early phase of the polemic, Justin Martyr (2nd cent. AD) complained about the Mithraic sacred rock and condemned the pagan beliefs by quoting biblical prophets who had allegedly been read, used, and falsified:

<sup>31</sup> *CIMRM* 1083, 1137, 1301, 2338(?).

Ὅταν δὲ οἱ τὰ τοῦ Μίθρου μυστήρια παραδιδόντες λέγωσιν ἐκ πέτρας γεγενῆσθαι αὐτόν, καὶ σπήλαιον καλῶσι τὸν τόπον ἔνθα μνεῖν τοὺς πειθομένους αὐτῶ παραδιδούσιν, ἐνταῦθα οὐχὶ τὸ εἰρημένον ὑπὸ Δανιήλ, ὅτι λίθος ἄνευ χειρῶν ἐτμήθη ἐξ ὄρους μεγάλου, μεμιμησθαι αὐτοὺς ἐπίσταμαι, καὶ τὰ ὑπὸ Ἡσαίου ὁμοίως, οὗ καὶ τοὺς λόγους πάντας μιμήσασθαι ἐπεχείρησαν;

And when those who transmit the mysteries of Mithras say that he was begotten of a rock, and call the place where those who believe in him are initiated “a cave”, do I not perceive here that the utterance of Daniel, that a stone without hands was cut out of a great mountain, has been imitated by them, and that they have attempted likewise to imitate the whole of Isaiah’s words?<sup>32</sup>

Justin quotes Jewish prophets who allegedly alluded to Jesus and makes it evident that a Mithraic prophetic text was disturbing because it proposed an interpretation of Jewish prophecies that were – according to Justin – the proof of the redeeming deeds of Jesus and of his being the Messiah. Evidently, some Jewish prophecies presented similarities with the Mithraic prophecy, and these similarities explain why the Christian authors triggered a controversy concerning the person alluded to in the prophecies.

We do not know how Justin was informed about Mithraism, but it is improbable that he was informed carefully and first-hand about the sacred book of Mithraism even though he quotes a passage from it.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, Firmicus Maternus, in the 4th century, had the opportunity of reading, at least partially, a holy book of Mithraism, written by a prophet: *sicut propheta eius* (i.e. Mithrae) *tradidit nobis*. Firmicus argues at length against the Mithraic cult. In the 5th chapter of his *De errore profanarum religionum*, this author quotes some sentences in Greek from this book:

Firm. Mat., *de errore* 20: θεὸς ἐκ πέτρας

Firm. Mat., *de errore* 19: <ι>δὲ νύμφε, χαῖρε νύμφε, νύμφε νέον φῶς.

Firm. Mat., *de errore* 5 / *sicut propheta eius tradidit nobis dicens*: Μύστα βοοκλοπίης, συνδέξει πατρὸς ἀγαοῦ

Another clause is reported by Justin:

Firm. Mat., *de errore* 5: *sicut propheta eius tradidit nobis dicens*: Μύστα βοοκλοπίης, συνδέξει πατρὸς ἀγαοῦ

Iustin., *Dial. cum Tryphone* 70: ἐκ πέτρας γεγενῆσθαι

Most arguments targeted the identification of the protagonist of the prophecy with Mithras and not Jesus, and this fact suggests that the Mithraic prophecy forecasted the coming of a saviour who was to come out of a rock. On the contrary, blame was simply laid on the theft of cattle (βοοκλοπίη) by Mithras, probably because no comparison with Jesus was possible.

Firmicus Maternus does not tell us who this prophet was, but there is a certain degree of probability that he was Zoroaster himself, who was a famous prophet. Franz Cumont<sup>34</sup> supposed that the two Magi, depicted in a fresco from the Mithraeum of Dura Europos, were Zoroaster and Osthanes – one was the Father of the Mazdean religion and the other was the well-known Magus of king Xerxes – i.e., the two most famous Magi of all time. But this is of less importance, and one can put forward another hypothesis or give up formulating any hypotheses at all.

## 1.2. Virgil and Mithraism

When I realized that the series of scenes on the left of the Tauroctony corresponded to the prophecy of the Sibyl in Virgil, in his fourth Eclogue, I did not want to admit it. Not a single similarity, but a specific series of events and characters were at stake. I had studied the cult of Mithras for many years and I was convinced that it was an intriguing and puzzling cult, whose secrets were impossible to crack. Like almost all the researchers, I knew that these mysteries depended on Persian traditions, Anatolian influences, and forms of adaptation to the Roman religious tradition. I also knew that these mysteries were performed by Romans and not by Persians nor by other peoples. Virgil, as a clue to understanding Mithraism, was an unacceptable heresy. Consequently, I tried to camouflage and reduce the impact of such a discovery.

<sup>32</sup> Iustin., *Dial. cum Tryphone* 70. In the same century, Celsus knew of a “Persian” theology and the related interpretation: Celsus, *apud* Orig., *contra Celsum* 6.22: Περσῶν θεολογία ... δευτέραν διήγησιν.

<sup>33</sup> On sacred books and poetic texts of Mithraism: J. Alvar Ezquerro, “Mithraism and Magic”, in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*. Papers from the International Conference held at the University of Zaragoza 30 Sept.-1 Oct. 2005, eds. R.L. Gordon, F. Marco Simón, RGRW 168, Leiden 2010, 510-549, part. 533.

<sup>34</sup> J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d’après la tradition grecque*, I, Paris 1938, 39 and pl. I; *CIMRM* 44; F. Cumont, “The Dura-Mithraeum”, in *Mithraic Studies*, ed. J.R. Hinnells, I, Manchester 1975, 182-184.

But let us see what these similarities are.

Virgil, in his famous poem, the fourth *Eclogue*, wrote the following verses:

<p><i>Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas; magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo. iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna, iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto. tu modo nascenti puero, quo ferrea primum desinet ac toto surget gens aurea mundo, casta fave Lucina: tuus iam regnat Apollo. ... molli paulatim flavescet campus arista.</i></p>	<p>Now the last age of the Cumaean prophecy begins: the great roll-call of the centuries is born anew. Now the Virgin returns, and Saturn's reign: now a new race descends from the heavens above. Only favour the child who is born, pure Lucina, under whom the first race of iron shall end, and a golden race rises up throughout the world: now your Apollo reigns. ... The plain will slowly turn golden with tender wheat. (Transl. Kline)</p>
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On the predellas we see Jupiter destroying the giants, Saturn sleeping, a boy coming out of a rock, some human heads coming out of a tree, and Mithras harvesting. The sequence, until now, is the following one:

Virgil	Left panels of Mithraism
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) end of the iron generation</li> <li>2) Saturn on earth</li> <li>3) Birth of a divine child</li> <li>4) Birth of a new generation</li> <li>5) the final era</li> <li>6) reign of Apollo</li> <li>7) fertility on earth.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Gigantomachy</li> <li>2) Saturn</li> <li>3) Birth of the young Mithras</li> <li>4) Birth of men from trees</li>   <li>7) fertility on earth.</li> </ol>

### 1.3. Virgil, the Gigantomachy, and the Iron Generation

In my book *The Mysteries of Mithras. A different Account* I have already presented the series of scenes usually depicted on the left of the Tauroctony, but it is necessary to repeat or summarize some parts or even expand others to let the readers understand why the Gigantomachy alluded to the Civil Wars of Rome, and the human heads sprouting out of a tree represented the birth of a new generation. The other parallels are easier to understand:

Virgil	Mithraic reliefs
<p><i>redeunt Saturnia regna nascenti puero molli paulatim flavescet campus arista</i></p>	<p>sleeping Saturn Mithras' birth from a rock Mithras harvesting</p>

We begin with the Gigantomachy. Gigantomachy and Titanomachy were not only a myth for the ancients but were often a model of historic fights and victories over dreadful enemies.<sup>35</sup> In the 5th century the Athenians represented two Gigantomachies in the decoration of the Parthenon to symbolize the victory over the Persians. Pindar's first Pythian ode celebrated Hieron's victory over the Etruscans at Cumae by speaking of Zeus conquering the Giant Typhon. After the long war against Antiochus III, Eumenes II had the famous altar built to Zeus at Pergamum, where the magnificent Gigantomachy was depicted.<sup>36</sup> After having liberated Athens from Cassander, Antigonos Monophthalmos and Demetrios Poliorcetes wanted to be represented in the *peplos* of Athena among the gods fighting the giants.<sup>37</sup> Callimachus<sup>38</sup> spoke of Titans when he mentioned the victory over Celts – who wanted to plunder Delphi – at the hands of the Aetolians, in 279 BC.

The poetry of Augustan Age used the Gigantomachy as a metaphor for the victories of Augustus and the triumph over wicked mankind. This metaphor was so popular that in the following periods it became a recurring cliché.

<sup>35</sup> See F. Vian, "La guerre des géants devant les penseurs de l'antiquité", *REG* 65, 1952, 1-39.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. for instance: F. Howard, "Another Prototype for the Gigantomachy of Pergamon", *AJA* 68, 2, 1964, 129-136. Many scholars suppose that the altar celebrated Attalus I's victories over the Galatae in Asia Minor, but one could wonder if Eumenes II, shortly after 188 AD, did not celebrate the end of the most dramatic war for Pergamon, that against Antiochus III.

<sup>37</sup> Diod. 20.46; Plut., *Dem.* 10.

<sup>38</sup> Callim., *Hymn. 4 in Delum* 172-175; cf. *Callimachus*, ed. R. Pfeiffer, Oxford 1953, on fr. 592.

*The Mithraic Prophecy*

Ovid, in his *Fasti*,<sup>39</sup> describes the temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus, vowed before the war against Brutus and Cassius, and adds the following verse:

*digna Giganteis haec sunt delubra tropaeis.*

The shrine is worthy of trophies won from Giants.

Virgil describes the battle of Actium as a fight between gods and monstrous superhuman beings:

*regina in mediis patrio uocat agmina sistro,  
necdum etiam geminos a tergo respicit anguis.  
omnigenumque deum monstra et latrator Anubis  
contra Neptunum et Venerem contraque Mineruam  
tela tenent.*

The queen in their midst  
Summons her trups with her native *sistrum*, nor does she glance  
Back t the twin serpents behind her. Monstruous gods of  
Every form and barking Anubis hurls weapons at Neptune and  
Venus and at the goddess Minerva.<sup>40</sup>

The commentary by Servius explains the verses by quoting the parallel case of the giants, even if he did so by recalling the episode of their initial success:

*bello autem Gigantum plures deos ferarum formas accepisse traditur.*

Gods are said to have assumed forms of beasts during the Gigantomachy.<sup>41</sup>

And Horace describes the Muses as giving their advice to Augustus, who won his wars as the gods defeated the Titans.

<i>Vos lene consilium et datis et dato gaudetis, almae. scimus, ut inpios Titanas immanemque turbam fulmine sustulerit caduco, qui terram inertem, qui mare temperat ventosum et urbis regnaque tristia, divosque mortalisque turmas imperio regit unus aequo. magnum illa terrorem intulerat Iovi fidens iuventus horrida brachiis fratresque tendentes opaco Pelion inposuisse Olympo. sed quid Typhoeus et validus Mimas aut quid minaci Porphyriion statu, quid Rhoetus evolsisque truncis Enceladus iaculator audax contra sonantem Palladis aegida possent ruentes? hinc avidus stetit Volcanus, hinc matrona Iuno et numquam umeris positurus arcum, qui rore puro Castaliae lavit crinis solutos, qui Lyciae tenet dumeta natalemque silvam, Delius et Patareus Apollo.</i>	<p>You give calm advice, and you delight in that giving, kindly ones. We know how the evil Titans, how their savage supporters were struck down by the lightning from above, by him who rules the silent earth, the stormy sea, the cities, and the kingdoms of darkness, alone, in Imperial justice, commanding the gods and the mortal crowd. Great terror was visited on Jupiter by all those bold warriors bristling with hands, and by the brothers who tried to set Pelion on shadowy Olympus. But what power could Giant Typhoeus have, or mighty Mimas, or that Porphyriion with his menacing stance, Rhoetus, or Enceladus, audacious hurler of uprooted trees, against the bronze breastplate, Minerva's aegis? On one side stood eager Vulcan, on the other maternal Juno, and Apollo of Patara and Delos, who is never without the bow on his shoulder ...<sup>42</sup></p>
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<sup>39</sup> Ovid., *Fasti* V.555.

<sup>40</sup> Verg., *Aen.* 8.696-700 (transl. Johnston); see P.R. Hardie, "Some Themes from Gigantomachy in the 'Aeneid'", *Hermes* 111, 1983, 311-326, part. 320-324.

<sup>41</sup> Serv., in *Aen.* 8.696. On this tradition cf. Hygin., *Astron.* 2.28. There were genuine Egyptian sources for a flight of the gods in form of animals, connected with the war against the giants. See J.F. Quack, "Isis, Thot und Arian", in *The Carlsberg Papyri 11. Demotic Literary Texts from Tebtunis and Beyond*, ed. K. Ryholt, Copenhagen 2019, 77-138.

<sup>42</sup> \* Hor., *Carm.* 3.4. 41-62, transl. Kline.



In another poetry Horace mentions Lapiths, Centaurs, and Giants when Augustus' enemies were to be recalled:

<p><i>Nolis longa ferae bella Numantiae nec durum Hannibalem nec Siculum mare Poeno purpureum sanguine mollibus aptari citharae modis nec saevos Lapithas et nimium mero Hylaeum domitosque Herculea manu Telluris iuvenes, unde periculum fulgens contremuit domus Saturni veteris, tuque pedestribus dices historiis proelia Caesaris, Maecenas...</i></p>	<p>You'd not wish the theme of Numantia's fierce wars matched to the lyre's soft tones, nor cruel Hannibal, nor the Sicilian Sea turned to dark crimson by the Carthaginians' blood, nor the savage Lapiths, and drunken Hylaeus filled with excess wine, nor Hercules with his hand taming the sons of earth, at the danger of which ancient Saturn's glittering house was shaken: you'd be better yourself, Maecenas, at writing prose histories of Caesar's battles.<sup>43</sup></p>
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The theme of the Gigantomachy was the standard reference for the Roman Civil Wars and was thus proposed by several poets following the Civil War of 69 AD between the four emperors and Vespasian's subsequent victory.<sup>44</sup> The same topic recurs in Claudius Mamertinus, following the civil war won by Diocletian,<sup>45</sup> and Eunapius spoke of the destruction of temples in Egypt under Theodosius as if the Christians responsible for this were Giants fighting the gods.<sup>46</sup>

During the siege of Perusia, Quintus Salvius Salvidienus Rufus, one of Octavian's generals, threw lead bullets (*glandae missiles*) bearing the symbol of a thunderbolt.<sup>47</sup> On a denarius of Octavian, issued in 29 BC, shortly after the battle at Actium, a thunderbolt was depicted behind the *princeps*' laureate head.<sup>48</sup>

In the event, the analogy with the Gigantomachy was even more obvious, for in the final phase of the battle at Actium Octavian's fleet smote the enemies with darts, arrows, ignited balls, and anything else that could recall Jupiter's thunderbolts, as we can read in Cassius Dio:

κάνταῦθα ἄλλο αὖ εἶδος μάχης συνηέχθη. οἱ μὲν γὰρ πολλαχῆ ἅμα προσπλέοντες τισι βέλη τε πυρφόρα ἐπ' αὐτοὺς ἐξετόξευον καὶ λαμπάδας ἐκ χειρὸς ἐπηκόντιζον καὶ τινὰς καὶ χυτρίδας ἀνθράκων καὶ πίττης πλήρεις πόρρωθεν μηχαναῖς ἐπερρίπτουν.

And now another kind of battle was entered upon. The assailants would approach their victims from many directions at once, shoot blazing missiles at them, hurl with their hands torches fastened to javelins and with the aid of engines would throw from a distance pots full of charcoal and pitch.<sup>49</sup>

During the Classical and Hellenistic Ages, the Gigantomachy was a metaphorical myth for speaking of savage enemies, often barbarians, defeated in a difficult battle. In Rome, the same mythical account became the symbol of Civil Wars, which were supposed to be the greatest of evils, the cause of doom. Lucanus<sup>50</sup> opened his *Pharsalia* by comparing the reign of Jupiter after the war against the giants with the reign of Nero after the Civil Wars.

Virgil, in his fourth *Eclogue*, speaks of the end of the wicked generation, the generation of iron, and of the *scelus* which marked this generation:

*ferrea primum desinet (scil. progenies)  
...si qua manent sceleris vestigia nostri  
...solvent*

the first race of iron shall end  
... any traces of our evils that remain  
will be cancelled.

<sup>43</sup> Hor., *Carm.* 2.12.1-12, transl. Kline. Cf. R.G.M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Orazio, Odes*, II, Oxford 1987, 180. Horace's *Carm.* 1.3 alludes to the Gigantomachy by saying: "Nothing's too high for mortal men:/ like fools, we aim at the heavens themselves./ sinful, we won't let Jupiter/set aside his lightning bolts of anger". See D. Traill, "Horace C. 1.3: A Political Ode?", *The Classical Journal*, 78, 1982-1983, 131-137.

<sup>44</sup> Lucan., *Phars.* 7.144-50; Stat., *Silv.* 5.3.195-7; Historia Augusta, *Galba* 1.4; see. B. Gibson, Statius: *Silvae* 5, Oxford 2006, 343; T. Stover, *Epic and Empire in Vespasianic Rome: a New Reading of Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica*, Oxford 2012, chap. 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Panegyrici Latini* 2, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Eunapius, *Vitae soph.* 472.

<sup>47</sup> E. Zangemeister, "Glandes plumbeae", *Ephemeris Epigraphica* VI, 1885, 52-78, part. 53-55. On thunderbolts on *missiles* of Agrippa: F. Verdin and M. Chataigneau, "Marcus Agrippa et l'Aquitaine", *Aquitania* 29, 2013, 69-104.

<sup>48</sup> *RIC* I, 270; cf. also 269a.

<sup>49</sup> Cass. Dio 50.34.3; transl. Cary. Two omens forecast the defeat of Cleopatra and Antony: "a two-headed serpent, so huge that its length came to eighty-five feet, had suddenly appeared in Etruria, and after doing much damage had been killed by lightning", and "the statues of herself and Antony in the guise of gods that the Athenians had placed on their Acropolis, had been hurled down by thunderbolts into the theatre": Cass. Dio 50.8 and 15; transl. Cary.

<sup>50</sup> Lucan., *Phars.* 1.33-52.

The word *scelus* was specifically used by authors who were speaking of the Civil Wars.<sup>51</sup>

When the Mithraic iconography appears in the archaeological record, in the second half of the 1st century AD, the Gigantomachy was a common mythological account to speak of the Civil Wars. In addition, the sistrum was used in the Mithraic iconography along with the thunderbolt: two symbols that were recurring in Roman poetry describing the war between Octavian and Cleopatra.

#### 1.4. The Sistrum and the Thunderbolt

The major protagonist of the Gigantomachy was Jupiter, who is depicted on Mithraic predellas. The symbols of the grade that he patronized, that of Leo, included the sistrum, which caused some embarrassment among scholars.<sup>52</sup> The poetry of the Augustan and Julio-Claudian Ages celebrated the war between Cleopatra and Jupiter with their own symbols, the sistrum and the thunderbolt, respectively.

We can quote the verses of Virgil that referred to the battle of Actium:

*regina in mediis patrio uocat agmina sistro,  
necdum etiam geminos a tergo respicit anguis.  
omnigenumque deum monstra et latrator Anubis  
contra Neptunum et Venerem contraque  
Mineruam.*

The queen in the centre signals to her columns with the native sistrum, not yet turning to look at the twin snakes at her back. Barking Anubis, and monstrous gods of every kind brandish weapons against Neptune, Venus, and Minerva.<sup>53</sup>

Propertius recalls that the Egyptian queen was wielding a sistrum during the battle:

*scilicet incesti meretrix regina Canopi,  
una Philippeo sanguine adusta nota,  
ausa Iovi nostro latrantem opponere Anubim,  
et Tiberim Nili cogere ferre minas,  
Romanamque tubam crepitanti pellere sistro*

Truly that whore, queen of incestuous Canopus, a brand burned by the blood of Philip, dared to oppose our Jupiter with yapping Anubis, and forced Tiber to suffer the threats of Nile, and banished the Roman trumpet with the rattle of the sistrum.<sup>54</sup>

Then we read the verses of Manilius:

*restabant Actia bella  
dotali commissa acie, repetitaque rerum  
alea et in ponto quaesitus rector Olympi,  
femineum sortita iugum cum Roma pependit  
atque ipsa Isiaco certarunt fulmina sistro.*

War at Actium was still to come, waged by an army pledged in dowry, when the destiny of the world was again at stake and the ruler of the heaven was determined on the sea; the fate of Rome, threatened with a female yoke, hung in the balance, and the very thunderbolt clashed with the sistrum of Isis.<sup>55</sup>

And Lucanus says:

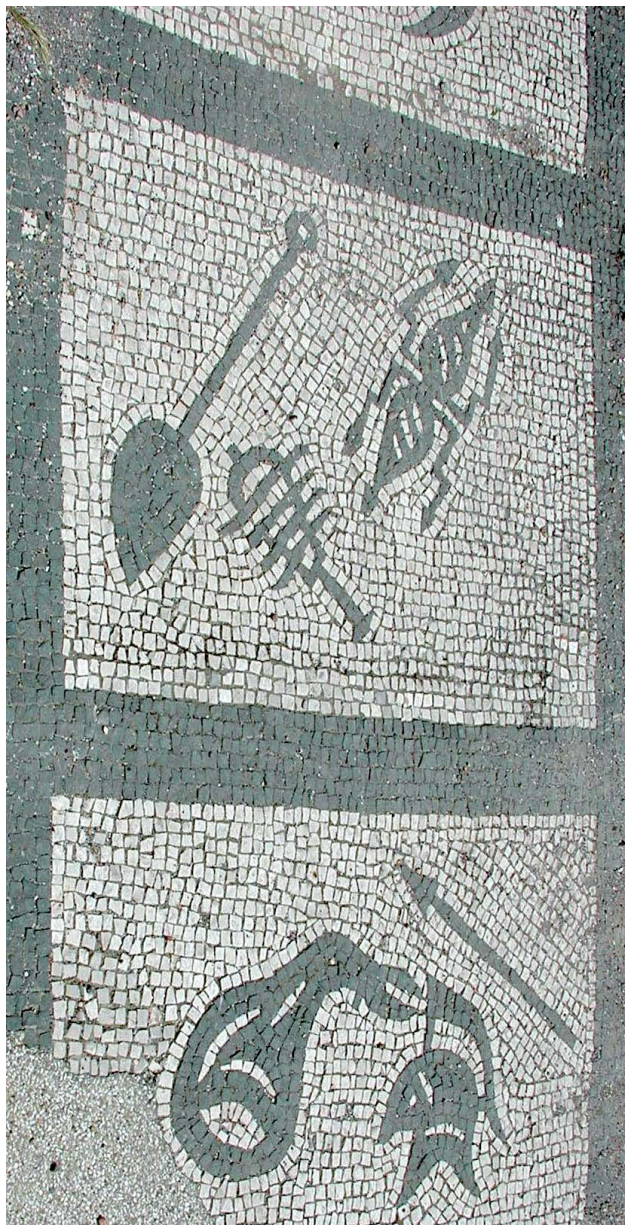
<sup>51</sup> Traill, "Horace C. 1.3: A Political Ode?", 134.

<sup>52</sup> Several proposals are quoted in my *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 119.

<sup>53</sup> Verg., *Aen.* 8.696-9.

<sup>54</sup> Prop. 3.11.39-43; transl. Kline.

<sup>55</sup> Manil. 1.914-918; transl. Goold.



**Fig. 1.1. Detail of the mosaic on the floor of the Mithraeum of Felicissimus, in Ostia.**

*terrui illa suo, si fas, Capitolia sistro*

Cleopatra threatened (if it were possible) the Capitol with her sistrum.<sup>56</sup>

The symbol of the sistrum is coupled with the thunderbolt on the mosaic of Felicissimus, at Ostia, where they are symbols of the fourth grade, that of Leo and the god Jupiter. Part of a sistrum was recently found in the so-called “Mitreo dei marmi colorati” at Ostia.<sup>57</sup>

According to Cassius Dio,<sup>58</sup> Cleopatra used to swear that her purpose was that of dispensing justice on the Capitol.

The pair of symbols of Leo, sistrum and thunderbolt, has a meaning that was more evident in the 1st century AD than now. For decades, after the battle of Actium, the ancients recognized the sistrum-thunderbolt pair as the symbols of Cleopatra and Jupiter who fought: the first was the loser and the second the winner. The thunderbolt was the successful weapon, the sistrum was a trophy of the victor.

<sup>56</sup> Lucan., *Phars.* 10.63.

<sup>57</sup> M. David, “First Remarks about the Newly Discovered Mithraeum of Colored Marbles at Ancient Ostia”, *Mediterraneo Antico*, 20, 1-2, 2017, 171-182.

<sup>58</sup> Cass. Dio 50.5.

### 1.5. Saturn, the Birth of Mithras, the Coming of a New Generation, and the Harvest

The scenes on the Mithraic predellas depict episodes on earth and not in the world of the gods, as the harvest of Mithras shows. The rock which Mithras was born from was on earth and, before that, the Gigantomachy was fought in Phlegra, in Pallene, on the Kekaumene plain or elsewhere on earth. Saturn was on earth, as well, where he is depicted asleep.

I do not repeat the data I have collected and discussed in my previous book on Mithraism<sup>59</sup> concerning the birth of Mithras and its connection with a dream of Saturn. Here we only underline that Saturn seems to be free, after his exile or imprisonment at the hands of Jupiter/Zeus. Moreover, a Mithraic relief shows Saturn handing over a thunderbolt to Jupiter for the fight against giants.<sup>60</sup> The Virgilian verses *redeunt Saturnia regna ... tu modo nascenti puero* correspond to the series of Mithraic predellas depicting the birth of Mithras. Virgil also writes: *tuus iam regnat Apollo*, and this fits the Mithraic scenes, being Mithras identified to Apollo.

After the birth of Mithras, another scene follows, that of the birth of one man or several men from one tree or some trees. We know of a dovetailing myth thanks to Hesiod, who probably inspired the hypothetical founder of Mithraism. This ancient poet described the four ages of men: the first, that of gold, the second, that of silver, the third, that of bronze, and finally that of iron, and wrote the following verses:

Ζεὺς δὲ πατὴρ τρίτον ἄλλο γένος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων  
χάλκειον ποίησ', οὐκ ἀργυρέω οὐδὲν ὁμοῖον,  
ἐκ μελιᾶν ...

Zeus the Father made a third generation of mortal men, a brazen race, sprung from ash-trees; and it was in no way equal to the silver age.<sup>61</sup>

The birth of the primeval inhabitants of Latium from trees was well-known in the Augustan age, as these verses of Virgil prove:

<i>haec nemora indigenae Fauni Nymphaeque tenebant gensque uirum truncis et duro robore nata.</i>	These woods were first the seat of native Nymphs and Fauns, who took their birth from trunks of trees and stubborn oak. <sup>62</sup>
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A similar tradition of birth of men from trees was also known in Persia, even if it is documented in medieval works. In § 3.6 we will discuss some Persian prophetic texts, among which the *Jamasp Nama* where, in chapter 3, we read:

“from the seed of Gayômdard, men came forth from the earth in the body of the plant *rovâs*”.

In the following chapter of the *Jamasp Nama* the creation of the first men is so described:

“from him (Gayômdard) the seed passed to the tree. The tree accepted it, and it passed off to the earth. The earth accepted it. It remained in the earth for thirty years. Then in the form of the plant *rovâs*, it grew up from the earth. From them were first born a noble woman and a man.”

We will also see that another Persian work, the *Bundahishn*, reports a similar tradition concerning the birth of humans from some plants.

In order to summarize, we read the verses taken into account:

*redeunt Saturnia regna,  
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.  
tu modo nascenti puero, quo ferrea primum desinet  
ac toto surget gens aurea mundo*

All this does not imply that Virgil was the author of the Mithraic prophecy; his fourth *Eclogue* was simply similar to the Mithraic prophecy. Hitherto we have presented parts of the results already achieved with *The Mysteries of Mithras*, and now we go forth.

<sup>59</sup> *The Mysteries of Mithras*, § 28.

<sup>60</sup> *CIMRM* 1283 (Heidelberg, Neuenheim) and probably 1359 (Königshofen).

<sup>61</sup> Hes., *Op. et dies* 143-145; transl. Evelyn-White. The ash-trees were called *meliai*, and an ancient name of Samothrace was Melites: Strabo 10.3.19 = 472.

<sup>62</sup> Verg., *Aen.* 8.314-315. On this mythology: C.P. Charalampidis, *The Dendrites in Pre-Christian and Christian Historical-literary Tradition and Iconography*, Rome 1995.