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**Fig. 1. Aion from Modena (CIMRM 695)**

Taken over from Reinhold Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Königstein/Ts: Hein 1984, fig. 74.

# *Hyenas or Lionesses? Mithraism and Women in the Religious World of the Late Antiquity*

Aleš Chalupa\*

Only men were initiated into the Mysteries of Mithras. This conclusion was for the first time drawn by Franz Cumont as early as 1899. After having put together the corpus of all literary, archaeological and epigraphic evidence relevant to this religion, the Belgian scholar immediately became aware of one remarkable fact: all the monuments and dedicatory inscriptions were made only by men.<sup>1</sup> Cumont believed that this situation was caused by the practice of a rigorous ascetic discipline, which prevented women from striving for the initiation into the Mysteries of Mithras and from moving up their initiatory ladder.<sup>2</sup> As a result, women occupied only inferior position among the Mithraists. Cumont considered this rule to be valid for all Mithraic communities in the west.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, he was aware of the existence of several finds which disturbed his scheme. Neoplatonist Porphyry might have mentioned initiatory grade “lioness” in

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\* Abbreviations used in the following text are: *AE* = *L'Année Épigraphique*; *ANRW* = Hildegart Temporini – Wolfgang Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter 1974-; *BNP I* = Mary Beard – John North – Simon Price, *Religions of Rome I: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998; *BNP II* = iid., *Religions of Rome II: A Sourcebook*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998; *CIL* = *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin 1863-; *CIMRM* = Maarten J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae I-II*, Haag: Martinus Nijhoff 1956-1960; *EJMS* = *Electronic Journal of Mithraic Studies* <<http://www.uhu.es/ejms>>; *EPRO* = *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain*; *IRT* = Joyce M. Reynolds – John B. Ward-Perkins, *The Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania*, Roma: British School at Rome 1952; *JMS* = *Journal of Mithraic Studies*; *JRA* = *Journal of Roman Archaeology*; *JRS* = *Journal of Roman Studies*; *ZPE* = *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*; [ ] = corrupted or reconstructed reading; ( ) = text or letters omitted.

1 Franz Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystère de Mithra I*, Brussels: H. Lamertin 1899, 330; cf. also id., *Die Mystèrien des Mithras*, Leipzig – Berlin: Teubner 1923, 163. – The above-mentioned corpus is F. Cumont, *Textes et monuments...II*, Brussels: H. Lamertin 1896.

2 F. Cumont, *Die Mystèrien...*, 163.

3 *Ibid.*, 163, n. 1.

one of his works<sup>4</sup> narrowly corresponding with the funerary inscription from North African Tripolis (ancient Oea), which also uses the title “lioness” when speaking about a woman.<sup>5</sup> However, Cumont considered these cases to be isolated and anomalous, possibly reflecting the extraordinary ways in some local communities influenced by the Orient.<sup>6</sup>

Cumont’s conclusion still appears to be valid at the present time. In fact, there were only few attempts to broaden our perspectives of this subject. In the 1950’s John Ferguson came with the idea that the female initiatory grade “lioness” (*lea*), the possible alternative to the ordinary masculine grade “lion” (*leo*), could be seen as an attempt of Mithraists to expand the religious potential of their cult.<sup>7</sup> Mithraism as a predominantly male religion – even Ferguson could not ignore this obvious fact – must have been aware of this limitation and aspired to overcome it. Ferguson thought that these efforts were closely connected with the ambitions of Mithraism to become a full-fledged world religion.<sup>8</sup> On this occasion Ferguson mentioned another thesis of Cumont, the assumption of close connections between Mithraism and the cult of Cybele (in Cumont’s interpretations she was the transformed Persian goddess Anāhita),<sup>9</sup> compensating to a large extent for the absence of feminine element.<sup>10</sup> Mithraism therefore involved women in its religious activities with the help of a related minor deity.

Ferguson’s opinions became almost immediately the target of critical comments of Jocelyn Toynbee. In particular she pointed out that the existence of these hypothetical female initiates, known as “lionesses”, is founded on an evidence too weak and doubtful to justify the postulation of so far-fetched and fundamental theories.<sup>11</sup> She also highlighted the fact that all the other known Mithraic grades are in substance completely masculine and that the existence of one or two anomalies should not in any case obscure the obvious fact that in hundreds of others Mithraic inscriptions women are completely absent.<sup>12</sup> Toynbee also dismissed Cumont’s claim endorsed by Ferguson, that Persian Anāhita in the guise of Cybele played the role of a systematically constructed counterpart of the male god

4 Porphyry, *De abstinence* IV.16. However, the exact wording of this passage remains problematic, see p. 209 below.

5 *CIMRM* 115; The connection of this inscription with Mithraism is uncertain, see pp. 203-204 below.

6 F. Cumont, *Die Mysterien...*, 163, n. 1.

7 John Ferguson, “More about Mithras”, *Hibbert Journal* 53, 1954-1955, 319-326: 320.

8 *Ibid.*, 320.

9 F. Cumont, *Die Mysterien...*, 168.

10 J. Ferguson, “More about Mithras...”, 320.

11 Jocelyn M. C. Toynbee, “Still More about Mithras”, *Hibbert Journal* 54, 1955-1956, 107-114: 108.

12 *Ibid.*, 108-109.

Mithras. Even though the temples of both deities were occasionally adjacent to each other, Toynbee stressed the non-existence of permanent relations both in dedicatory inscriptions and in visual symbolism.<sup>13</sup>

The state of affairs has not changed much from that time. The conclusion that women were not initiated into the Mysteries of Mithras is still part of the widespread consensus.<sup>14</sup> Richard Gordon's contribution caused its further amplification. In his paper, primarily focused on the interpretation of the Mithraic initiatory grades, he expressed the view that the exclusion of women was conscious and ideologically motivated act of the members of the cult, where women played the role of representatives of the world of change, vicissitude and death.<sup>15</sup> Although a great many of his ideas expressed there were embraced with considerable hesitation, for a long time no one objected to his conclusions about the absence of women in Mithraism.

Nevertheless, since the Cumont's times, new discoveries have come to light, which could refer to the possible presence of women in Mithraism. Some of them became a starting point for the article of Jonathan David, who has recently made an attempt to criticize the prevailing consensus.<sup>16</sup>

13 *Ibid.*, 109. – Even before her Stig Wikander warned about the non-existence of these relations, see *id.*, “Études sur le mystères de Mithras”, *Vetenskapssocieten i Lund, Årsbok 1950*, Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup 1951, 5-46: 6-13.

14 E.g. Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Mithras: Geschichte eines Kultes*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1965, 133-136; *id.*, “Mithras in der Römerzeit”, in: M. J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Die orientalischen Religionen in Römerreich*, (EPRO 93), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1981, 96-120: 105; Leroy A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, (EPRO 11), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1968, 316; Richard L. Gordon, “Mithraism and Roman Society: Social Factors in the Explanation of Religious Change in the Roman Empire”, *Religion* 2, 1972, 92-121: 98; *id.*, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras”, *JMS* 3, 1980, 19-99: 57-64; *id.*, “Who Worshipped Mithras?”, *JRA* 7, 1994, 459-74: 465; Roger L. Beck, “Mithraism since Franz Cumont”, *ANRW* II.17.4, 1984, 2002-2115: 2094; *id.*, “The mysteries of Mithras”, in: John S. Kloppenborg – Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, London – New York: Routledge 1996, 176-185: 177; Reinhold Merkelbach, *Mithras*, Königstein/Ts.: Hein 1984, 253, n. 4; Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1987, 42-43 and n. 73; Manfred Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien*, München: C. H. Beck 1990, 42; *id.*, *Cultores Mithrae: Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner 1992, 264 and 277; Robert Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacisme*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres 1993, 90-91; *id.*, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Blackwell 1996, 247; John H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, “The Expansion of Mithraism among the Religious Cults of the Second Century”, in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Roma: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider 1994, 195-216: 202; Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, “I misteri di Mitra: Religione o culto?”, in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Roma: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider 1994, 93-102: 101; BNP I, 298.

15 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 57-64.

16 Jonathan David, “The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?”, *Numen* 47, 2000, 121-141.

In his opinion, there is currently “a substantial amount of evidence” which should prevent us from “repeating a time-honored scholarly misinterpretation”.<sup>17</sup> It was possible for women to participate in the Mysteries of Mithras, even though such involvement occurred rather sporadically.<sup>18</sup> This situation was by no means the result of an intentional ideological exclusion, but the product of the influence of several factors unfavorable for women.<sup>19</sup> However, is there really enough evidence to support and justify his contention for the reappraisal of current opinions? The answer should be given in the next three chapters, which will focus on the re-examination of all Mithraic findings pertinent to women.

### I. The epigraphic evidence

The surviving epigraphic evidence provides the best opportunity to prove the presence of women in Mithraism. Although the material of this kind has only limited value and is exposed to some problems of interpretation, it is an indisputable reminder of the real Mithraic cult practice.<sup>20</sup>

The inscriptions, which could possibly have been left by women, are evaluated here on the bases of these three criteria: (1) the dedicatory inscription was demonstrably made by a woman; (2) the inscription was demonstrably dedicated to Mithras; (3) if the dedication to Mithras is dubious, the object was at least found in the Mithraic surroundings. The inscription meeting the first and second criterion will be regarded as a promising evidence of women’s presence in the Mysteries of Mithras. In the view of the fact that only one of the evaluated inscriptions fulfilled these requirements, also the inscriptions meeting at least the first and the

17 *Ibid.*, 141.

18 *Ibid.*, 139.

19 *Ibid.*, 139-140.

20 Some difficulties connected with the nature of the epigraphic sources are discussed by Géza Alföldy, “Die Krise des Imperium Romanum und die Religion Roms”, in: Werner Eck (ed.), *Religion und Gesellschaft in der Römischen Kaiserzeit: Kolloquium zu Ehren von Friedrich Vittinghoff*, Köln – Wien: Böhlau Verlag 1989, 53-102: 72-74; M. Clauss, *Mithras...*, 42-43; id., *Cultores Mithrae...*, 9-15; R. L. Gordon, “Who Worshipped Mithras...?”, 468-471. The crucial problem, at least with respect to our subject of interest, remains the question what exactly could be considered as an epigraphic dedication made by a Mithraist, respectively who could be regarded as a Mithraist. The people, whose relations with the cult were far less close than is usually supposed, could have made considerable portion of inscriptions and dedications. It could be observed with the great degree of certainty that the dedication made by a Mithraist is the one, where Mithras is mentioned and its author indicates the attained Mithraic grade. However, there is only about 15% of such inscriptions in the total sum of all Mithraic dedications, which can only mean that the great part of Mithraists usually did not betray their grades.

third criterion will be regarded as a possible evidence.<sup>21</sup> The results are following:

No.	Details	1	2	3	Evaluation
1	<i>CIMRM</i> 115 (ancient Oea, modern Tripolis, Libya, Roman province Africa)	yes	no	no	<b>no</b>
2	<i>CIMRM</i> 284 (ancient Ostia, Italy)	yes	no	yes	<b>no</b>
3	<i>CIMRM</i> 413a (Rome, Italy)	?	yes	no	<b>no</b>
4	<i>CIMRM</i> 696 (exact finding spot unknown, probably ancient Mutina, modern Modena, or Rome, Italy)	?	no	yes	<b>no</b>
5	<i>CIMRM</i> 705 (ancient Mediolanum, modern Milano, Italy)	yes	?	no	?
6	<i>CIMRM</i> 883 (modern Soulan, France, Roman province Gallia)	yes	no	no	<b>no</b>
7	<i>CIMRM</i> 1034 (modern Rheder, Germany, Roman province Germania Inferior)	yes	yes	no	?
8	<i>CIMRM</i> 1363 (modern Königshoffen, France, Roman province Germania Superior)	?	no	yes	<b>no</b>
9	<i>CIMRM</i> 1463 (ancient Emona, modern Ljubljana, Slovenia, Roman province Pannonia Superior)	?	yes	no	?
10	<i>AE</i> 1980, no. 51 (Rome, Italy)	yes	?	yes	?

1. This inscription,<sup>22</sup> which was found on the top of a sarcophagus belonging to the woman named Aelia Arisuth, ends with the words *qae lea iacet*. It was discovered shortly after the publication of Cumont's corpus of Mithraic evidence. Cumont himself was later concerned with its interpretation. In his opinion the tomb, where two sarcophagi were found, was the burial site of the holder of Mithraic grade leo and his wife, who could even be the bearer of the otherwise unattested title *lea*, "lioness".<sup>23</sup> His conclu-

21 I excluded from the further evaluation *CIMRM* 2007 and *AE* 1966, no. 344 = Ljubica Zotović, *Les cultes orientaux sur le territoire de la Mésie supérieure*, (EPRO 7), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1966, no. 1. Both these inscriptions were made by husbands in favour of their wives, but there is no indication that they were female Mithraic initiates.

22 *CIMRM* 115 = *AE* 1904, no. 19 = *IRT*, no. 239a; corrected reading *AE* 1924, no. 99 = J. M. Reynolds, "Inscription of Roman Tripolitania: A Supplement", *Papers of the British School at Rome* 23, 1955, 124-147, no. 1.

23 F. Cumont, *Die Mysterien...*, 163, n. 2. Above mentioned man is Aelius Magnus, see *CIMRM* 114 = *AE* 1904, no. 18 = *IRT*, no. 239b.

sion was subsequently endorsed by Maarten J. Vermaseren.<sup>24</sup> Vermaseren also made a reference to the iconographic resemblance between the person with the candlestick found in one of the tomb's frescos<sup>25</sup> and the figure painted on the wall of the Santa Prisca mithraeum in Rome.<sup>26</sup> Even though he was willing to concede that the title *lea* was authentic and Oea tomb was really the burial ground of Mithraic husband and wife, he considered this case to be an isolated one and probably concerning only this African community.<sup>27</sup> Jonathan David has recently used the same kind of argument.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, other authors remained rather sceptical and in their opinions this tomb has apparently no connection with Mithraism.<sup>29</sup> Under these circumstances it is presumably prudent to regard this inscription as non-Mithraic: the iconographic resemblance is in itself insufficient proof and the tomb, which is dedicated to Dis Manibus, is not a mithraeum – its Mithraic origins could not thus be securely demonstrated.

2. The marble column, where the inscription is situated, was procured by a certain Iunia Zosima and dedicated to the collegium of *dendrophori*.<sup>30</sup> The column was found in the mithraeum<sup>31</sup> and Iunia Zosima is in the inscription branded as *mater*. Jonathan David believes her to be Mithraist and her title *mater* regards as the possible parallel to the highest Mithraic grade *pater*.<sup>32</sup> In view of the fact that Mithras name is nowhere mentioned in the inscription and the collegium of *dendrophori* is completely unknown from the Mithraic cult practice,<sup>33</sup> it is advisable to consider it non-Mithraic.
3. This inscription is undoubtedly Mithraic.<sup>34</sup> The dedication was made by a man, whose name is reconstructed as Ulpus Paulus. The last name stated in the inscription, *Melito*, could cause some problems. Manfred Clauss gives it as a nominative,<sup>35</sup> but Richard Gordon rightly comments that in Latin nomenclature *Mel(l)ito* is a wom-

24 M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras...*, 133-134.

25 *CIMRM* 113.

26 M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras...*, 134. For the detailed description of this painting see Maarten J. Vermaseren – Carel C. Van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1965, 150 and pl. LV = *CIMRM* 482.6. The present condition of the painting is very poor.

27 M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras...*, 134.

28 J. David, "The Exclusion...", 125-126.

29 E.g. Charles M. Daniels, "The Role of the Roman Army in the Spread and Practice of Mithraism", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies I*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 249-274; 274; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 253, n. 4; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 294; R. Turcan, *Mithra...*, 90.

30 *CIMRM* 284 = *CIL* XIV.69.

31 *CIMRM* 278 (the mithraeum "degli Animali" in Ostia).

32 J. David, "The Exclusion...", 128 and n. 28, 129-130. – The supporting evidence in the form of the altar inscription from the Cologne mithraeum (*CIMRM* 1207) is very tenuous. The altar was dedicated to a female deity and its connection with Mithraism, if there is any, is marginal at best, see M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 99, n. 15; Elmar Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler orientalischen Gottheiten im Römischen Deutschland*, (EPRO 40), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1974, 256-257.

33 But this collegium is known from the cult of Cybele, see Garth Thomas, "Mater Magna and Attis", *ANRW* II.17.4, 1984, 1500-1535: 1529-1530.

34 *CIMRM* 413 = *AE* 1903, no. 6 = *CIL* VI.36831; [*De*]o invicto Mithrae / [...U]lpus Paulus / ex / voto / d(onum) d(edit) / antistante L. Iustinio / Augurio p(atr)i et Melito.

35 M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 21.



an's name.<sup>36</sup> In his opinion, *Melito* is either Iustinus Augurius's nickname or the name of the second *antistans*, both in ablative form.<sup>37</sup> This conclusion is almost certainly correct and the inscription does not mention any woman.

4. In Vermaseren's opinion the inscription on the one of the most remarkable Mithraic monuments<sup>38</sup> bears two names: Felix, Mithraic *pater*, together with a certain Euphrosyne.<sup>39</sup> Reinhold Merkelbach questioned this reading and proposed as the dedicants Felix and Euphrosynus.<sup>40</sup> The whole situation is complicated by the fact that the great part of the original inscription was deliberately erased.<sup>41</sup> In view of the fact that the motif of the monument is Orphic (see fig. 1) it is very probable that it had been taken over from this religious milieu and redesigned to its final Mithraic form by the person of Felix.<sup>42</sup> Howard M. Jackson thinks that the original dedication, made by Felix together with Euphrosyne, was erased after he was initiated into the Mysteries of Mithras (where he later became *pater*), because of the impropriety of woman's name in the exclusively male cult.<sup>43</sup> Although the conclusion of this kind remains completely speculative – due to the unclear reading and our ignorance of the monument's preceding fates we are not able to ascertain the time periods of its use – it is better to consider the hypothetical Eufrosyne (whose existence is far from certain anyway) as neither woman nor Mithraist.
5. The altar with the inscription was undoubtedly dedicated by a woman, *Varia Severa*.<sup>44</sup> But the name of the deity in the inscription is mentioned only by letters *D. M.* The reading proposed by Vermaseren, *D(eo) [invicto] M(ithrae)*, is therefore completely arbitrary. Vermaseren gives as alternative reading *D(is) M(anibus)*,<sup>45</sup> Manfred Clauss *D(is) M(agnis)*.<sup>46</sup> Although Jonathan David regards this altar, and also the inscription, as Mithraic,<sup>47</sup> his conclusion is, in view of the fact that it was discovered outside of Mithraic context, very questionable. In spite of the fact that this matter could not be decisively solved, I am inclined to believe that this monument is not Mithraic.

36 R. Gordon, "Who Worshipped...", 471.

37 *Ibid.*, 471-472; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, "The Expansion of Mithraism...", 203, is of the same opinion.

38 *CIMRM* 695, fig. 197; cf. also R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 324-325 and fig. 74.

39 *CIMRM* 696 = *CIL* VI.36829; *Euphrosyn[e] et Felix / p(ecunia) p(osuit) / Felix pater*.

40 R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 324; his corrected reading is: *Euphrosyn[us] et Felix / p(ecunia sua) p(osuit) / Felix pater*.

41 R. L. Gordon, "Who Worshipped...", 472.

42 *Ibid.*, 472; cf. also M. J. Vermaseren's commentary to *CIMRM* 696 (vol. I, 254) and Howard M. Jackson, "Love Makes the World Go Round: The Classical Greek Ancestry of the Youth with the Zodiacal Circle in Late Roman Art", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider 1994, 131-164: 134.

43 H. M. Jackson, "Love Makes the World...", 134.

44 *CIMRM* 705 = *CIL* V.5696.

45 M. J. Vermaseren in commentary to *CIMRM* 705 (vol. I, 256). But Gerard Mussies, "Cascelia's Prayer", in: Ugo Bianchi – Maarten J. Vermaseren (eds.), *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell'Impero Romano*, (EPRO 92), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1982, 156-167: 164, n. 12, holds this reading improbable, because *D(is) M(anibus)* was in the Imperial times usually followed by the genitive or dative of a personal name and not by the nominative.

46 M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 286.

47 J. David, "The Exclusion...", 128, n. 29.

6. The altar with the inscription was dedicated by Faustus and Modesta.<sup>48</sup> But the improved reading ruled out any possible connection with Mithraism.<sup>49</sup>
7. This inscription<sup>50</sup> was made by Paterna,<sup>51</sup> wife of Iustinus, (*pro salute*) *Firmino*.<sup>52</sup> The deity, to whom the dedication was made, is undoubtedly Mithras. Although it is not absolutely certain that Paterna was really initiated into the Mysteries, since the inscription was made in favour of a different person, it is the only direct evidence of woman's dedication to Mithras we possess at the moment.<sup>53</sup>
8. The stone altar bearing an inscription<sup>54</sup> was used as building material and found in the wall of the Königshoffen Mithraeum.<sup>55</sup> Even if the name mentioned in the inscription, Ianussa, could be female, in all probability it is a male name.<sup>56</sup> Since the altar could serve purely as building material and bears no name of deity to whom it was dedicated, its relation to Mithraism remains unclear.
9. The altar with the inscription was dedicated to Mithras, who is in this case identified with the Roman god Silvanus.<sup>57</sup> The dedicator is a person named Blastia. Jonathan David, together with some other authors (M. J. Vermaseren, Anna Šašel, Jaroslav Šašel), regards this person as a woman,<sup>58</sup> Manfred Clauss maintains the very opposite.<sup>59</sup> Both variants are allowable on the basis of linguistic and onomastic criteria. The inscription itself does not make it possible to solve this problem definitely. In view of the fact that also the number of attested dedications to Silvanus made by women is quite small,<sup>60</sup> the bearer of this name was most likely a man.

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48 *CIMRM* 883 = *CIL* XIII.379.

49 Vivienne J. Walters, *The Cult of Mithras in the Roman Provinces of Gaul*, (EPRO 41), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1974, 142-143; the original *Deo Mithrae* is here given as *Deo A.C.T.C.*

50 *CIMRM* 1034 = *CIL* XIII.7958/9 = E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, 39, no. 41.

51 This woman is probably identical to the person known from the funeral inscription (*CIL* XIII, 7960) from the same region, see E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, 39; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 99-100.

52 For this reading see E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, 39.

53 Even Manfred Clauss, otherwise firm proponent of male exclusiveness of Mithraism, accepts this possibility, although reluctantly (*Cultores Mithrae...*, 99).

54 *CIMRM* 1363 = *CIL* XIII.11616c.

55 *CIMRM* 1335.

56 M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 112.

57 *CIMRM* 1463 = Anna Šašel – Jaroslav Šašel, *Inscriptiones Latinae quae in Iugoslavia inter annos MCMXL et MCMLX repertae et editae sunt*, Ljubljana 1963, no. 32 = Ljubica Zotović, *Mitrazam na tlu Jugoslavije*, Beograd: Arheološki institut 1973, no. 44 = Petar Selem, *Les religions orientales dans la Pannonie romaine, partie en Yougoslavie*, (EPRO 85), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1980, no. 1; *D(eo) i(nvicto) M(ithrae) / Silvano Augusto / sac(rum) Blastia / C. E. B...*

58 J. David, "The Exclusion...", 128-129; M. J. Vermaseren and A. Šašel – J. Šašel, see n. 57 above.

59 M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 160.

60 On the basis of data in the *Corpus inscriptionum dei Silvani*, in: Peter F. Dorsey, *The Cult of Silvanus: A Study in Roman Folk Religion*, (Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 20), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1992, 154-78, it is possible to assess that the number of women's dedications is about 4.1%. According to the information of some ancient

10. The text of this prayer, chiseled out on the four sides of a small stone altar discovered in the vicinity of the main altar of the San Stefano Rotondo Mithraeum in Rome, was made by freedwoman Cascelia Elegans.<sup>61</sup> Even though Mithras is nowhere mentioned explicitly in the prayer, the context of its discovery is evidently Mithraic.<sup>62</sup> Also some of the used epithets (e.g. *dominus aeternus*) could be related to Mithras.<sup>63</sup> After the thorough examination of the text Gerard Mussies came to the conclusion that the addressee of the prayer was probably the syncretic deity Sol-Mithras-Aion and not Mithras himself.<sup>64</sup> Although Jonathan David again considers this prayer the most compelling evidence of women's presence in Mithraism,<sup>65</sup> the others do not share his optimism.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, the connection of this text with Mithraism is almost indubitable. Although it cannot be regarded an irrefutable evidence of women's initiation into the Mysteries of Mithras, it suggests at least the possibility that under certain circumstances (e.g. if someone of their relatives or patrons was a Mithraist) the women could dedicate votive gifts to Mithras and so partially participate in his worship.

Only four inscriptions (no. 5, 7, 9 and 10) indicate at least a small possibility of women's presence in Mithraism. However, the inscriptions no. 5 and 9 are very doubtful and I am personally inclined to believe that they are either unrelated to Mithras (no. 5) or they were made by a man (no. 9). Two remaining inscriptions (no. 7 and 10) could be considered exceptional cases, in which women dedicated votive gifts to Mithras, but their preceding initiation remains uncertain.<sup>67</sup>

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authors, Silvanus also belonged to the deities, which reportedly prevented women from participating in their cult, cf. P. F. Dorsey, "The Role of Women in the Cult of Silvanus", *Numen* 36, 1989, 143-155 and id., *The Cult of Silvanus...*, 124-134. About the contradiction between epigraphic reality and information of classical literary sources concerning the exclusion of men or women from the worship of some deities see p. 208 below.

- 61 *AE* 1980, no. 51 = Silvio Panciera, "Il materiale epigrafico dallo scavo del mitreo di S. Stefano Rotondo (con un *addendum* sul verso terminante ... *sanguine fuso*)", in: Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae*, (EPRO 80), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 87-112: 97-98; pictures (no. 6-9) of all four sides of this altar are in the appendix to this study.
- 62 In addition to the circumstances of the discovery (not far away from the mithraeum's main altar), it is the name of Cascelia's patron Primus, which captured our attention. The person of this name, even though it is impossible to prove that they are identical, the bearer of the title *pater*, is known from other Roman Mithraic inscriptions (*CIMRM* 351 and 355).
- 63 The study devoted to the thorough examination of the text of this prayer, its interpretation and possible Mithraic connections is G. Mussies, "Cascelia's Prayer...", 158-163.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 163.
- 65 J. David, "The Exclusion...", 127-129.
- 66 E.g. R. Beck, "Mithraism since Franz Cumont...", 2030, n. 42; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 25, n. 94.
- 67 See n. 20 above.

## II. The literary sources

Classical literary sources form another domain, where Jonathan David tries to find some support for his demand for the change of the current consensus. In his opinion there is no ancient text, which would explicitly state that women were excluded from the Mysteries of Mithras.<sup>68</sup> That is certainly true, but the significance of this silence should not be overestimated. From the antiquity we know several deities, who were supposed, at least in the view of classical authors, to exclude one of the sexes from the participation in their cults. Unfortunately, the epigraphic material persuasively disproves these claims. It seems that literary and epigraphic sources often reflect the different kind of religious reality and that, instead of supporting each other, they are mutually exclusive.<sup>69</sup> Any assertion of classical authors about the section of the society, from which the members of the ancient cults were recruited, is only of limited value, unless confronted with an information source of different nature. In case of Mithraism, epigraphy demonstrates almost complete absence of women and literary sources are reticent about this particular point. But under no circumstances could this fact be used as an argument against the current consensus. The opposite is true.

At the same time it is also necessary to point out that no ancient text explicitly claims that women were initiated into the Mysteries of Mithras, regardless of Jonathan David's introduction of two extracts from the works of classical authors, which should reportedly prove their presence in this cult: Tertullian's *De praescriptione haereticorum* XL.1-5 and Porphyry's *De abstinetia* IV.16.

The interpretation of both these passages remains problematic. Tertullian's text, especially its possible contribution to the reconstruction of Mithraic ritual and eschatology, was the topic of many discussions in the scholarly circles. Nevertheless, this particular passage has two subjects, Mithras and Devil, and the apple of discord is the exact determina-

68 J. David, "The Exclusion...", 129.

69 To this subject in general, see Dennis Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, 17-18. – The contradiction between literary and epigraphic sources could be found e.g. in the cult of the goddess Bona Dea, who could be reportedly worshipped only by women (cf. Hendrik H. J. Brower, *Bona Dea: The Sources and a Description of the Cult*, [EPRO 110], Leiden: E. J. Brill 1989, 257-258), or in the allegedly exclusively male cults of the gods Hercules (cf. Celia E. Schultz, "Modern Prejudice and Ancient Praxis: Female Worship of Hercules at Rome", *ZPE* 113, 2000, 291-297: 293) and Silvanus (cf. Peter F. Dorsey, "The Role of Women...", 143-155; id., *The Cult of Silvanus...*, 124-134).

tion of their predicates, owing to the existence of various readings in the surviving manuscripts. But the subject in the final sentence “*habet et virgines, habet et continentes*” is definitely Devil and not Mithras.<sup>70</sup> Those “virgins” are not female Mithraic initiates but *Virgines Vestales*, the priestesses of Roman goddess Vesta. Tertullian’s testimony is therefore, in spite of Jonathan David’s claims,<sup>71</sup> no proof of women’s presence in Mithraism.

The situation concerning Porfiry’s text is even more complicated. In Richard Gordon’s view, the text suggests the very opposite: women were deliberately excluded from Mithraism.<sup>72</sup> The controversial passage states:

There, in order to demonstrate our kinship with animals allegorically, they are (i.e. Mithraists) accustomed to image us by means of animals. Thus they call those who are initiated into their rites (*metechontas*) “Lions”, women “Lionesses” (*leinas*) and the attendants (*hyperetountas*) “Ravens”. And with respect to Fathers [the same is true]; for they are called “Eagles” and “Hawks”.<sup>73</sup>

“Lionesses” (*leinas*) occur in the renaissance codex *Felicianus* and they also found their way to the modern Nauck’s edition of Porfiry’s texts, even though all other surviving manuscripts state “hyenas” (*hyainas*) in the quoted passage. “Lionesses” thus seem to be Felicianus’s emendation. Some other corrupted sentences appear in this passage, but the length of these lacunae probably does not seriously impede our ability to grasp the meaning of the whole text.<sup>74</sup>

Richard Gordon strongly insists on the correctness of manuscriptal *hyainas*,<sup>75</sup> which are in his opinion more appropriate to the sense of the passage. He believes that a hyena as the animal symbol of negative traits in women’s nature does not function as a special variety of the initiatory grade, otherwise unattested, destined only for women. On the contrary, he considers this expression to be the most cogent argument for the confirmation of their intentional exclusion from the Mysteries of Mithras.<sup>76</sup> But the seeming parallel between *CIMRM* 115 and possible *leinas* in Porfiry-

70 Richard L. Gordon, “Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism”, in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* I, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 215-248: 234; Per Beskow, “Tertullian on Mithras”, in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Roma: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider 1994, 51-60: 55, n. 17.

71 J. David, “The Exclusion...”, 127; his understanding of this passage defies reason.

72 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, especially 57-69.

73 English translation BNP II, 311.

74 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 65; but J. David (“The Exclusion...”, 123-124, n. 7-9) is rather sceptical and less optimistic.

75 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 57, n. 93: “Let us consign Felicianus’s *leinas* once and for all to the wastehap from which it came.” *Hyainas* are also accepted in BNP II, 311-312 and n. 3.

76 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 57-58; see pp. 219-220 below.

ry's text is for Jonathan David too exciting an opportunity to be easily abandoned.<sup>77</sup> The dispute remains insoluble as the accuracy of neither of these readings can be established with absolute certainty. Nevertheless, it appears to me that in the time when there was almost no detailed information about the real nature of Mithraism the emendation from *hyainas* to *leainas* is much more likely than the other way round. Thus in this case the principle "*lectio difficilior potentior*" is probably sensibly meaningful. If we consider *hyainas* as more appropriate to the original reading of the text, then the existence of initiatory grade of the same name seems to be extremely improbable considering the bad reputation of hyenas in antiquity.

In conclusion, it is necessary to point out that we know a text from the antiquity which remarks that Mithras "hated the race of women".<sup>78</sup> The importance of this statement should not be overrated. The text is evidently not Mithraic.<sup>79</sup> However, it could have preserved some very old mythological motives, especially of Anatolian or Armenian origin, which were later taken over by Mithraists, reinterpreted by them and newly integrated into the ideology of their mysteries.<sup>80</sup>

### III. The iconography of the cult

Already a relatively limited room for proving the women's participation in the life of the cult is provided by the Mithraic iconography. Although Mithraism is usually seen as religious movement quite rigidly separated from the civic pantheon of the Roman Empire, even in its surroundings it was possible to make dedications to a wide range of other deities.<sup>81</sup> A statue of triple headed Hecate from the Sidon Mithraeum in Syria<sup>82</sup> and a head of the same goddess from the Santa Prisca Mithraeum in Rome belong among the noteworthy examples of this practice.<sup>83</sup> Others

77 J. David, "The Exclusion...", 123-125 a 135-137; but cf. p. 203-204 above.

78 Pseudo-Plutarch, *De fluviiis* XXIII.4.

79 Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin literature*, (Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 133), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1997, 290-291.

80 R. L. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary...", 56-57; Mary Boyce – Paul Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism III: Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1991, 468-490.

81 M. Clauss, *Mithras...*, 153-174; BNP I, 282.

82 *CIMRM* 84-5 = R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 281, fig. 21; Lewis M. Hopfe, "Mithraism in Syria", *ANRW* II.18.4, 1990, 2214-2235: 2222.

83 *CIMRM* 486 = M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 342, no. 20 and pl. no. LXXVII 1 = R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 311, fig. 59.

include a head of Venus from the same mithraeum in Rome;<sup>84</sup> plaques with the figures of Amor and Psyche from the Mithraeum Santa Capua Vetere<sup>85</sup> and Santa Prisca;<sup>86</sup> a head of Minerva from the London Mithraeum<sup>87</sup> and a relief with the same goddess holding a lance and a shield from the mithraeum in Heddernheim;<sup>88</sup> a sculpture of naked Venus standing beside a small statuette of Cupid on a dolphin from Spanish Merida (see fig. 2);<sup>89</sup> a marble carving of naked Venus leaving her bath with a small dolphin beside her from the mithraeum in the Caracalla-therms in Rome.<sup>90</sup> Female deities appear also in the scenes portraying the gathering of twelve Olympian gods or other mythological themes.<sup>91</sup> But these finds must not be considered as an evidence of women's presence in Mithraism. Such a display of religious "syncretism" is an example of the prevailing contemporary practice and Mithraism is no exception in this regard. Intentions of Mithraists could be on this count purely esthetic, since several of the above-mentioned statues are real masterpieces of art.



**Fig. 2. Venus from Merida  
(CIMRM 783)**

Taken over from R. Merkelbach,  
*Mithras...*, fig. 79.

84 M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, pl. CIX = R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 312, fig. 60.

85 *CIMRM* 186 = M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca I: The Mithraeum at S. Maria Capua Vetere*, (EPRO 16.1), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1971, pl. XX = R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 286, fig. 27.

86 M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 478, pl. CXXVIII 1 = R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 314, fig. 64.

87 *CIMRM* 820 = R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 331, fig. 84.

88 *CIMRM* 1086 = E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, 70, no. 59d = R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 345, fig. 105.

89 *CIMRM* 784 = R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 328, fig. 79.

90 *CIMRM* 460.

91 E.g. *CIMRM* 1292, 4c from Osterburken (Parcae).

Female statuettes were also discovered in two mithraeums: in English Carrawburgh<sup>92</sup> and in German Dieburgh.<sup>93</sup> Their precise identity is unclear, but the aspirations of Jonathan David to interpret these figures as votive offerings dedicated by female Mithraists or even as their portraits are unfounded.<sup>94</sup> In all likelihood they too represent some unidentifiable deities of polytheistic pantheon.

Could at least some of these female deities have played the more important role in the Mithraic religious ideology? Reinhold Merkelbach attaches great importance to the discoveries of the statues of triple headed Hecate. In his opinion this goddess represents the Mithraic transformation of Persian goddess Aredvi-Sāra-Anāhita, whose threefold aspect refers symbolically to triadic character of the world soul, which the Mithraists viewed in accordance with the doctrine of Platonism.<sup>95</sup> He also pays attention to the interpretation of the figures of Amor and Psyche. He maintains that the representation of this divine pair expresses the Mithraic belief in the escape of the soul from the sublunar world into the sphere of the fixed stars practiced in this cult.<sup>96</sup> But this soteriological principle, reportedly held by Mithraists (this subject is still hotly debated), in itself again does not automatically require the women's presence among the initiates and their participation in the rites of the mysteries. A tension between the binary opposites (and in the Graeco-Roman world the opposition male/female certainly counts among them), which probably played an important role in the Mithraic doctrine, could have easily functioned even on the entirely ideal level, without any reference to the existing social or internal reality.

Not long ago Alison Griffith has drawn our attention to the important role of the Moon, the representative of feminine principle, inside the

92 Ian A. Richmond – John P. Gillam, *The Temple of Mithras at Carrawburgh*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Society of Antiquaries 1951, 30, pl. 10A; interpreted as “mother-goddess”.

93 *CIMRM* 1262 and fig. 331; Friedrich Behn, *Das Mithrasheiligtum zu Dieburg*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1928, 35, no. 14, fig. 39; also E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler...*, 166, no. 123o; Schwertheim interprets as “mother-goddess” (*Muttergottheit*), M. J. Vermaseren as “goddess sitting on a throne and nursing a child”.

94 J. David, “The Exclusion...”, 126.

95 R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 234-235.

96 *Ibid.*, 237-240; cf. also R. L. Gordon, “Authority, Salvation and Mystery in the Mysteries of Mithras”, in: Paul Zanker – Susan Walker – Richard L. Gordon, *Image and Mystery in the Roman World: Three Papers Given in Memory of Jocelyn Toynbee*, Gloucester: Sutton 1988, 45-80: 50-60; R. Beck, “In the Place of the Lion: Mithras in the Tauroctony”, in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Roma: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider 1994, 29-50; id., “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel”, *JRS* 90, 2000, 145-180: 167-171.



Mysteries of Mithras.<sup>97</sup> The bust of the goddess Luna is a conventional motif of the standard Mithraic tauroctony. In the majority of cases it is situated in the right corner of this cultic scene, usually in the form of a woman's head adorned with the moon sickle. But according to some interpretations, Luna appears in the polysemous Mithraic symbolism once more, even in a more important role: as a white bull slain by Mithras.<sup>98</sup> This identification could be explained either by the transformation of the old Indo-European myth about the killing of a lunar bull in the Mithraic circles<sup>99</sup> or by the application of astrological rules according to which the Moon gathers the most of his strength when passing through the constellation of Taurus, where the Moon's "exaltation" occurs.<sup>100</sup> This fact gains further importance, when we realize that Mithras was often identified with the Sun.<sup>101</sup> The sacrifice of the bull then could be seen, at least on one level, as a victory of the Sun over the Moon. On the other hand, it could be considered as an important act of creation and salvation. The whole scene would thus be loaded with an internal tension of great proportions: the power of Mithras to create earthly life and bring salvation depends on his ability to catch, overcome and slay his counterpart – the lunar bull, earthly representative of the feminine moon deity.<sup>102</sup>

This observation could indicate that even in such a masculine mythological milieu, as the Mithraic Mysteries are sometimes regarded, the feminine principles could have played much more important and subtle role than is usually expected.<sup>103</sup> But in view of the possible participation of women the same is true, what had been said above about the Mithraic

97 Alison B. Griffith, "Mithras, Death, and Redemption in Statius, *Thebaid* I, 719-20", *Latomus* 60, 2001, 108-123.

98 John F. Hansman, "Some Possible Classical Connections in Mithraic Speculation", in: Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae*, (EPRO 80), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 601-613; 602; Roger Beck, "Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac: II", *JMS* 2, 1978, 87-147: 101-102; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 201-205. – We know that the bull was white from the discoveries of some painted tauroctonies, e.g. from the Mithraeum S. Capua Maria Vetere or Marino; see Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca...* I, pl. III; id., *Mithriaca III: The mithraeum at Marino*, (EPRO 16.3), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1982, pl. III and IV.

99 R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 9-22.

100 R. Beck, "In the Place of the Lion...", 34.

101 *Ibid.*, 34.

102 A. B. Griffith, "Mithras, Death, and Redemption...", 116.

103 Radcliffe G. Edmonds ("At the Seizure of the Moon: The absence of the Moon in the Mithras Liturgy", in: Scott Noegel – Joel Walker – Brannon Wheeler [eds.], *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2003, 223-239: 238-239) expresses very prudently his opinion that the evaluation of the Moon in the Mithraic doctrine is rather negative. The interpretation of Alison Griffith is thus only one of many possible in this connection.

doctrine of salvation: the importance of feminine principles in the Mithraic ideology does not automatically require the presence of women in the life of the mysteries.

#### IV. The conclusion

The conclusion seems to be extremely obvious. None of the above-mentioned epigraphic, literary or iconographic evidence proves with absolute certainty the participation of women in the Mysteries. Two inscriptions perhaps admit the existence of certain relationships in the form of dedication of votive gifts to Mithras, but this act by itself did not necessarily require a prior initiation or a further active participation in the cult's activities. In spite of the occasional disagreement and the existence of some debatable findings there is at the present time no compelling reason for the change of the current academic consensus: women were really excluded from the Mysteries of Mithras. Cumont's original conclusion was in this respect completely correct, regardless of the fact that a body of learning and the amount of processed Mithraic evidence from the time of his activity has substantially increased and many of his opinions have been deservedly criticized and re-evaluated.

#### V. The possible cause of the exclusion of women from Mithraism

But what was the cause of the women's exclusion from Mithraism? And should we see it as an intentional act or was it just an accidental outcome of several unfavorable coincidences? Three typologically different solutions have been proposed.

The first solution works with the concept of inherited structure. The cause of the exclusion is to be found already in the Iranian or possibly in Armenian or Anatolian background. The most powerful proponent of this interpretation was Geo Widengren.<sup>104</sup> In his opinion the Mithraic communities resembled in their structure the warrior societies of Ancient Iran, where Mithras took place and position that was in these societies held by the war chiefs or the lords of the following.<sup>105</sup> In these bands of men

104 Geo Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans*, (Die Religionen der Menschheit 14), Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1965, 222-232; id., "The Mithraic Mysteries in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Regard to their Iranian Background", in: *La Persia e il mondo greco-romano*, Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, Anno 363, Quaderno 76, Roma 1966, 433-56; id., "Reflections on the Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries", in: Angelo Brelich (ed.), *Perennitas: Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich*, Roma: Ed. dell'Ateneo 1980, 645-668.

105 G. Widengren, "The Mithraic Mysteries...", 450; id., "Reflections...", 663-665.

(*Männerbünde*) there was logically no place for women and Mithraism, which took over their system of organization, was unable to change this situation. In addition to that, Mithraism achieved its greatest success in military circles of the Roman Empire, where women were not admitted and where their presence could be seen as a possible threat for the troop's discipline.

Geo Widengren tried to prove the existence of this inherited structure especially by the analysis of Mithraic nomenclature and its comparison with the titles known from ancient Iranian war societies: the Mithraic names as *consacraneus*,<sup>106</sup> *frater*,<sup>107</sup> *comes*,<sup>108</sup> *adiutor*,<sup>109</sup> *socius*<sup>110</sup> or *syn-dexios*<sup>111</sup> have its Iranian parallels and are identical with the nomenclature of societies united by virtue of shared values and aims.<sup>112</sup> Also a substantial part of Mithraic rituals corresponds to those of Roman legions,<sup>113</sup> as we can infer from some Mithraic frescoes.<sup>114</sup> These rituals then again closely resemble the trials young men had to endure before their admission to the war bands of archaic societies.<sup>115</sup>

However, this explanation is exposed to two serious objections which make its validity problematic. First, its application stands or falls to a large extent with the theory of the Iranian origins of the Mithraic Mysteries and their subsequent diffusion into the Graeco-Roman world. This for many years universally accepted scheme, inherently connected with Franz Cumont and his groundbreaking work, was seriously questioned and in its maximalist version it is now completely abandoned.<sup>116</sup> The aim of critical remarks is not so much the existence of Iranian motives (or rather "Iranian") in Mithraism, but the transfer of the closed and integral religious tradition from one cultural milieu to another, imaginable in reality only with a considerable difficulty.<sup>117</sup> The second obstacle is connected

106 *CIMRM* 876; (*consacratus*) *CIMRM* 1315.

107 *CIMRM* 1476, 1773, 1793.

108 *CIMRM* 672, 1467.

109 *CIMRM* 717.

110 *CIMRM* 730, 876, 1207, 1793, 1833.

111 *CIMRM* 423.

112 G. Widengren, "Reflections...", 664-665.

113 *Ibid.*, 665.

114 Very instructive are in this sense the frescoes in the Mithraeum S. Maria Capua Vetere; see M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca...* I, 24-51, pl. XXI-III and XX-XXVIII.

115 G. Widengren, "Reflections...", 665.

116 R. L. Gordon took an entirely fundamental and uncompromising stand on this subject; see *id.*, "Franz Cumont...", esp. 242-247; cf. also the summary of this problematic in R. Beck, "Mithraism since Franz Cumont...", 2056-2070.

117 Cf. e.g. J. M. Vermaseren, "Mithras in der Römerzeit...", 96; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 75-77; M. Boyce – P. Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism...* III, 468-469 and 490; R. Turcan, *Mithra...*, 95; BNP I, 279.

with structural elements themselves. If Geo Widengren sees the possible cause of the exclusion of women from Mithraism in the continuation of the traditions of Iranian war societies,<sup>118</sup> his theory is in the end unverifiable. The existence of purely male structure of the Mithraic Mysteries is not necessarily the outcome of a transfer of already existing structural system but it could be the product of an independent development in the institutions, which in both cultural contexts are of similar or even identical characteristics.<sup>119</sup>

The second solution considers the exclusion of women as the consequence of fortuitous influence of some concomitant circumstances. Mithraism in the time of its formation simply adopted the prevailing and well-established structures of typologically similar religious collegiums (the so called “voluntary associations”), which too in most instances prevented women from participating.<sup>120</sup> Also Richard Gordon admits that this solution could be correct. In his opinion the exclusion motivated by need of conformity could have played very important role in the search for Mithraic identity. If the other mysteries or new cults as marginal religious systems often admitted both sexes, and this convention was again one of the earmarks retrospectively confirming their marginality, then the exclusion of women by the Mithraists could be seen as an important attempt at accommodation to traditional religious institutions, even though Mithraism did not succeed in relinquishing some other marginal characteristics.<sup>121</sup> Another factor could also play an important role: in view of the fact that Mithraism recruited greatest part of its following from the military

118 The existence of these *Männerbünde* in Ancient Iran rests on the evidence, which is now regarded as extremely tenuous and largely irrelevant; see Albert de Jong, “Jeh the Primal Whore? Observations on Zoroastrian Misogyny”, in: Ria Kloppenborg – Wouter J. Hanegraaf (eds.), *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, (Studies in History of Religions 65), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1995, 15-41: 17, n. 9.

119 R. Beck, “Mithraism since Franz Cumont...”, 2063.

120 M. Clauss, *Mithras...*, 42; id., *Cultores Mithrae...*, 264. – For the information about the significance and structure of these collegiums in the late antique society see Frank M. Ausbüttel, *Untersuchungen zu den Vereinen im Westen des Römischen Reiches*, Kallmünz: M. Lassleben 1982 (possible exceptions to the above-mentioned rule on the p. 42); John S. Kloppenborg, “Collegia and thiasoi: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership”, in: John S. Kloppenborg – Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, London – New York: Routledge 1996, 16-30 (possible exceptions to the above-mentioned rule on the p. 25); Andreas Bendlin, “Gemeinschaft, Öffentlichkeit und Identität: Forschungsgeschichtliche Anmerkungen zu den Mustern sozialer Ordnung in Rom”, in: Ulrike Egelhaaf-Geiser – Alfred Schäfer (eds.), *Religiöse Vereine in der römischen Antike*, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 2002, 9-40.

121 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 42-43. But in Gordon’s view the real cause of women’s exclusion is much deeper, see pp. 217-221 below.

structures and the imperial administration, the members of this cult had to avoid any suspicion of possible social subversions. Although a typologically different and chronologically distant example, the senate's suppression of the Bacchic cult in 186 BCE<sup>122</sup> gives prominence to the possible dangers which could threaten religious movements not respecting the traditional norms advocated by the dominant religious tradition,<sup>123</sup> among which certainly belonged the strict separation of both sexes during the cultic activities.<sup>124</sup>

In his short survey of the possible origins of the Mysteries of Mithras, Per Beskow successfully combined the first and the second solution. The Swedish scholar influenced by the relatively early and anomalous finds from the Bosporan region<sup>125</sup> tries to locate the genesis of Mithraism precisely in this geographic territory.<sup>126</sup> In his view, the formation of Mithraism could have taken place in the milieu of Bosporan *thiasoi* and *synodoi*, which had some remarkable characteristics: these guilds were exclusively male (if we can trust the surviving lists of their membership) and their members were recruited from the military ranks of the local Bosporan aristocracy; they were associated with the cult of particular divinity; they had a closed, esoteric character; the number of the persons involved in one guild was limited to 15-20; they called each other *adelphoi* and stood under the leadership of a man called *pater*; some other officials

122 For the more detailed analysis of this controversy, its possible cause and the consequences for the future evolution of the Roman religion, see e.g. John North, "Religious Toleration in Republican Rome", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 25, 1979, 85-103, or (differently) Erich Gruen, *Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1990, 34-79.

123 About some complications connected with collegiums' activities and their restrictions, see Wendy Cotter, "The Collegia and Roman Law: State Restrictions on Voluntary Associations, 64 BCE – 200 CE", in: John S. Kloppenborg – Stephen G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, London – New York: Routledge 1996, 74-89.

124 On this subject see John Scheid, "The Religious Roles of Roman Women", in: Pauline Schmitt-Pantel (ed.), *A History of Women in the West I: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, Cambridge – London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1992, 377-408.

125 *CIMRM* 11-12 = Vladimir B. Blawatsky – Genadii A. Kochelenko, *Le culte de Mithra sur la côte septentrionale de la Mer Noir*, (EPRO 8), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1966, fig. 8 and 10. – It is debatable whether these monuments are really Mithraic or not. Bull-killing Mithras appears on them with the usual Frygian cap but he is exceptionally naked and his raised hand with a dagger is only about to strike. These abnormalities led some scholars to the conclusion that these statuettes are depicting Attis instead of Mithras; cf. R. Beck, "Mithraism since Franz Cumont...", 2019; M. Clauss, *Mithras...*, 163-164.

126 Per Beskow, "The Routes of Early Mithraism", in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques*, (Acta Iranica 17.1.4), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1978, 7-18.

appear in the hierarchy of these guilds but their functions are largely unknown.<sup>127</sup>

This theory quite persuasively demonstrates, at least in the form of a feasible and historically defensible scenario, that the existence of an entirely male structure could have arisen in a different social context than in the Iranian one and could have been the outcome of the application of existing religious norms to the new religious formations.

Richard Gordon came with the opinion that the Mithraic exclusion of women was not a random effect but an intentional act, which has close connections with certain Mithraic doctrinal values. His study, primarily focused on the analysis of the symbolic meaning of seven Mithraic initiatory grades, is certainly a singular and in many ways also the most radical example of an attempt to explain this extraordinary fact. Even though Gordon admits the plausibility of the explanation mentioned above, he considers it very improbable.<sup>128</sup> The exclusion seems to be too consistent and rigorous to be a mere attempt for the accommodation to the contemporary religious background. Its cause must have been deeply rooted in the Mithraic concept of “salvation”, since this exclusion was also one of the major constituents in the establishment of cult’s identity.<sup>129</sup>

Gordon’s argumentation in his comprehensive study is very detailed and complex. However, in my paper there is room only for a short summary of his most impressive and important thoughts. In the first phase of the search for the evidence supporting his theory, Gordon proceeds exactly in the same way as Jocelyn Toynbee before him.<sup>130</sup> After a thorough analysis of possible meanings of the seven Mithraic grades of initiation, he, too, arrived at a conclusion that their names and symbolic values systematically suppress the existence of any feminine elements.<sup>131</sup>

Nevertheless, the focus of the systematic exclusion of women did not lie in the Mithraic initiatory system, but first and foremost in the Mithraic myth.<sup>132</sup> In the classical sources Mithras is sometimes called as “god out of rock” – *theos ek petras*.<sup>133</sup> A figural representation of his “rock-birth” often appears in the Mithraic iconography, either as a separate monument or as an image in the “side-scenes” surrounding the tauroctony.<sup>134</sup> The

127 *Ibid.*, 15-16.

128 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 42-43.

129 *Ibid.*, 42-43.

130 See p. 200-201 above.

131 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 43-54.

132 *Ibid.*, 54.

133 Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* XX.1.

134 E.g. *CIMRM* 344, 860, 985, 1027, 1127, 1593, 1687, 1949, 1991, 1994, 2134, 2151. – The interpretations of this iconographic motif are sometimes profoundly different from

rock, which gives birth to Mithras, was in the Mysteries even called *petra genetrix* – “a generative rock”.<sup>135</sup> In Gordon’s opinion the way of this birth of Mithras from the inanimate rock “guarantees his divinity, his non-subjection to human rules, and affirms his independence of the race of women”.<sup>136</sup>

But this supportive evidence does not make up for the explicit assertion, which Mithraists had to formulate about their exclusion of women. In this respect Gordon ascribes a lot of importance to the testimony of Porfiry.<sup>137</sup> He considers this controversial text, whose possible explanatory complications were shortly outlined above,<sup>138</sup> as a definition of opposition between “fully initiated” (*metechontas*) and women (*gynaikas*), respectively “fully initiated” and attendants (*hyperetountas*). Credibility of this interpretation is further backed up by a contrastive use of the representatives of two different animal categories: lion/hyena and eagle (or hawk)/raven. Gordon’s explanation of this passage (similarly as before his interpretation of the symbolic meaning of Mithraic grades) is based on the collections of “factual” knowledge of the Graeco-Roman antiquity about the “real” world, which he calls the “encyclopaedia”. He considers Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis historia* and Aelian’s *De natura animalium* the main representatives of these compilations collecting universal pieces of information about the world and the nature which subsequently serve as the starting point of his interpretations.<sup>139</sup>

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the one given by Gordon; cf. e.g. Maarten J. Vermaseren, “The Miraculous Birth of Mithras”, *Mnemosyne* 4, 1951, 285-301; Edwin M. Yamauchi, “*The Apocalypse of Adam*, Mithraism, and Pre-Christian Gnosticism”, in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemain (ed.), *Études Mithriaques*, (Acta Iranica 17.I.4), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1978, 537-563: 547-562; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 96-98; M. Clauss, *Mithras...*, 71-79.

135 *CIMRM* 1127, 1489-1490 and probably *CIMRM* 1652; see also the inscription from S. Stefano Rotondo Mithraeum in Rome, in: R. Beck, “Mithraism since Franz Cumont...”, 2029.

136 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 56.

137 Porfiry, *De abstinetia* IV.16.

138 See pp. 209-210 above.

139 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 72, n. 8. – Richard Gordon limits himself only to the works of the first two centuries CE and his main sources are both above-mentioned authors. Gordon assumes that “at least in the cases of the animals ... there is good reason to believe that some ideas about them were widely held, and that Pliny and Aelian do indeed reproduce not esoteric ideas but current ones”. In his opinion, it is also legitimate to suppose that the Mysteries of Mithras “in their use of the ‘real’ world ... drew not upon esoteric or geographically specific notions, but upon banal ones”. It should also be generally accepted that “the normal relation to ‘wild’ animals in the Graeco-Roman world came to be a matter not of acute empirical investigation ... but of construction useful social meanings on the basis of assumed knowledge”.

The list of characteristics attributed to hyenas by these authors is very unflattering. Hyenas are able to repeatedly change their sex and thus produce offspring without the male.<sup>140</sup> These two qualities are already sufficiently ominous to create an unimaginable threat for the male oriented culture. Gordon also observes that “if the Mysteries believed a myth which made Mithras the ideal pattern of generation (without the female), the hyena represents the opposite, an order in which the female reproduces without the male”.<sup>141</sup> Additionally, hyenas are able to reproduce a human voice, a characteristic, which contributes to their already ambiguous and confused sexuality and which makes their classification even more problematic.<sup>142</sup> They so possess an ability that is essentially human and are able to use it against men. Moreover, they are endowed with several other magical powers.<sup>143</sup> An animal of this nature was thus perfectly suited to play a role of the antithesis of the Mithraic means of salvation.<sup>144</sup>

In Gordon’s view this characteristics persuasively demonstrate that hyena “was an entirely appropriate name for women in a cult committed to the supremacy of the male or the masculine”, the personification of the world where “nothing makes any sense and all categories are jumbled together”.<sup>145</sup>

Finally, Richard Gordon minutely analyzes the variances between the Mithraic concept of sacrifice known from the tauroctony and the original Promethean sacrifice at Mekone.<sup>146</sup> The Mithraic conception of sacrifice reflects a completely different attitude to the role of humans in the way of the world, and therefore also to the role of women in the society.<sup>147</sup> In Gordon’s view, the reorganization of this traditional myth was “an ex-

140 Change of sex: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* VIII.105, XXVIII.92; Aelian, *Natura animalium* I.25. Offspring without males: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* VIII.105.

141 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 59

142 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* VIII.106-107.

143 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* VIII.106; Aelian, *Natura animalium* VI.14.

144 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 60.

145 *Ibid.*, 61.

146 *Ibid.*, 62-63; for the possible differences in the visual image of Mithraic sacrifice and its “standard” Graeco-Roman practice see also R. Turcan, “La sacrifice mithriaque: Innovation de sens et de modalités”, in: Jean Rudhardt – Oliver Reverdin (eds.), *Le sacrifice dans l’antiquité*, (Entretiens Fondation Hardt XXVII), Vandœuvres – Genève 1980, 341-380; R. L. Gordon, “Authority, salvation and mystery...”, 64-71.

147 Detailed interpretation of Hesiodic sacrifice as an archetype of its “standard” form and its possible implications, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, “At Man’s Table: Hesiod’s Foundation Myth of Sacrifice”, in: Marcel Detienne – Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*, Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press 1989, 21-86.



treme attempt to found, mythically and ritually, the age-old dream of patri-lineal societies, to do away with women and leave the world pure and un-sullied ... but they [i.e. Mithraists] chose to effect the dream in the context not of this world (where it was evidently impossible)<sup>148</sup> but of the next, and to write off this world insofar as it was polluted by hyena, woman”<sup>149</sup>.

This exclusion of women caused considerable limitation with respect to possible massive dissemination of Mithraism.<sup>150</sup> But the purely male and internally coherent structure which emerged as a result of this mythical re-organization and transformation, compensated for this handicap. In Gordon’s words “what such a sect lost in terms of mass appeal they made up for in coherence at the level of their fantasy version of what the world is ‘really’ like”.<sup>151</sup>

In conclusion it is necessary to state that the real cause of the exclusion of women remains unclear. Gordon’s interpretations, although they unquestionably enriched the discussion, did not convince everyone and they have staunch opponents.<sup>152</sup> It is quite evident that Gordon’s attitude to this question is very radical: the contention that women were systematically excluded from Mithraism, moreover as hyenas, representatives of the world hostile to men, goes certainly beyond the scope of the available evidence. In the present state of our knowledge this question cannot be decisively answered. Because of the relative closeness of the cult and the absence of festivals opened to the public, the Mithraic proselytization must have proceeded at a level of personal relations.<sup>153</sup> In this view the ab-

148 There is no compelling reason to assume that Mithraists lived in celibacy. The epigraphic evidence is in this sense very eloquent: *CIMRM* 473-474, 510, 526, 715, 730, 863, 911, 1009, 1165, 1434, 1524, 1728, 1766 (and probably also *CIMRM* 313, 518, 687, 1717) contain the usual wording *pro se et suis*, attesting their marital status; *CIMRM* 2007 begs for protection of a wife and son.

149 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 63.

150 *Ibid.*, 64; If the impact of this exclusion was really so radical and put Mithraism to a serious disadvantage, see the discussion on the pp. 222-228 below.

151 R. L. Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary...”, 64.

152 Cf. e.g. Noel M. Swerdlow, “Review article: On the Cosmical Mysteries of Mithras”, *Classical Philology* 86, 1991, 48-63: 50-51; M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 264, n. 3; J. David, “The Exclusion...”, 131-137.

153 See David E. Aune, “Expansion and Recruitment among Hellenistic Religions: The Case of Mithraism”, in: Peder Borgen – Vernon K. Robbins – David B. Gowler (eds.), *Recruitment, Conquest, and Conflict: Strategies in Judaism, Early Christianity, and the Greco-Roman World*, Atlanta: Ga. Scholars Press 1998, 39-56: 52-53; and (in a more detailed manner) Marquita Volken, “The Development of the Cult of Mithras in the Western Roman Empire: A Socioarcheological perspective”, *EJMS*, 4, 2004 (31.10. 2004; Word document, 20 pp.).

sence of women could really be regarded as an accidental consequence of the fact that they were not invited to join in and had almost no opportunity to do so, since Mithraism was most successful exactly in the army and imperial administration, where women were also absent. Nevertheless, a certain degree of intentionality seems to be undeniable: Mithraists probably prided themselves on their male exclusiveness and rejected women more than willingly.<sup>154</sup> In all probability both these factors, namely the lack of opportunities and the ostentatious ostracism, worked together.

## VI. The consequences of Mithraic exclusion of women

The last question to be pondered in connection with the object of our attention is the impact of Mithraic exclusion of women on the possibility of its further proliferation and survival in the religious world of the late antiquity. Although this judgment is only rarely pronounced explicitly,<sup>155</sup> a general academic consensus is probably very close to the opinion that by its restriction to the mere half of the population Mithraism lost a great part of a potential room for its more prominent diffusion and that this handicap led in the end to its ultimate failure in the competition with another new religious “cult”, which unlike Mithraism accepted women: Christianity.<sup>156</sup>

This question is narrowly connected with a problem, which has not yet been closely scrutinized in the literature devoted to the study of Mithraism: the manner of Mithraic conversion and the religious propagation of this cult. Even though the exact number of Mithraists in any period of its existence is completely unknown, it would be misguided to conclude on the basis of relatively small proportions of their underground “caves” that

154 At least by virtue of epigraphic sources this exclusion seems to be almost absolute, which is remarkable and demonstrates the high level of consistency in attitude of Mithraists to this issue. By way of illustration we can take the Mithraic *album* – the list of initiates – from the ancient Virunum (not far away from Klagenfurt in modern Austria), containing the information about the cult members in the time span of 19 years (probably 183-201 CE) and registering only masculine names (98 in all). See Gernot Piccottini, *Mithrastempel in Virunum*, Klagenfurt: Verlag des Geschichtsvereines für Kärnten 1994, 27, fig. 15.

155 But it could be found, more or less explicitly stated, in F. Cumont, *Die Mysterien...*, 163; M. J. Vermaseren, “Mithras in der Römerzeit...”, 105-106; R. Turcan, *Mithra...*, 115; id., *The Cults...*, 247.

156 Rodney Stark (*The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, 95-128) expresses the opinion that openness toward women was one of important factors, which decisively contributed to the unexpected success of Christianity.

the total number of the cult's initiates was small and negligible.<sup>157</sup> This conclusion would be inconsistent with the quantity of surviving archaeological material, which is in Marquita Volken's opinion "too large to have been created by an organization made up of a small population, especially taking into consideration that the inscriptions associated with the cult indicate that the members were not rich social elites".<sup>158</sup>

Nevertheless, the majority of our evidence refers to the existence of relatively small groups of men assembled around one cult center as the focal point of their activities. Iconographic and epigraphic sources definitely confirmed literary references about the existence of seven-grade initiatory ladder,<sup>159</sup> which was scaled by all Mithraists in respective phases of their progress.<sup>160</sup> Because Mithraism seems to have in all places of its appearance consistent and relatively uniform characteristics,<sup>161</sup> it could be assumed that in its structure there was a well-established organizing

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157 Mithraic network must have been quite dense especially in Ostia or Rome. From Ostia we know 16 mithraeums, at least from the part of the city, which underwent systematic archaeological survey (about one third of the whole area). Since they are arranged very equally, Filippo Corelli made on the basis of this fact and the comparison of the size of both cities an estimation that there were some 700 mithraeums in Rome alone (F. Corelli, "Topografia mitriaca di Roma (con una carta)", in: Ugo Bianchi [ed.], *Mysteria Mithrae*, [EPRO 80], Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 69-79: 77). M. Clauss (*Cultores Mithrae...*, 17-18) dismissed this number as too high. He himself accepts some 19 mithraeums found in Rome, Eva M. Steinby (*Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* III, Roma: Edizioni Quasar 1993, 257-270) then 27. Cf. also R. Merkelbach, *Mithras...*, 184-186. The total number of them was probably much higher, but we can only guess.

158 M. Volken, "The Development...", 2; cf. also M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 266.

159 This sequence, previously known only from one of Jerome's letters (*Epistula CVII ad Laetam*) and sporadic epigraphic material, was corroborated by the discoveries of the floor mosaic in the Ostian Mithraeum Felicissimus (*CIMRM* 299) and graffiti in the Santa Prisca Mithraeum in Rome (*CIMRM* 480; for their corrected reading see M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 168-169).

160 Objections to this conclusion expressed by Manfred Clauss ("Die Sieben Grades des Mithraskultes", *ZPE* 82, 1990, 183-194; id., *Mithras...*, 138; id., *Cultores Mithrae...*, 275-277) are not entirely persuasive; cf. R. L. Gordon, "Who Worshipped...", 465-467; M. Volken, "The Development...", 11, n. 26.

161 E.g. tauroctony as a motif is everywhere basically uniform. The existing variations are rather artistic than ideological in nature; cf. Alan Schofield, "The Search for Iconographic Variation in Roman Mithraism", *Religion* 25, 1995, 51-66: 60-62. – But this fact by no means precludes the existence of regional variations or peculiarities. For some of them see R. L. Gordon, "Mystery Metaphor and Doctrine in the Mysteries of Mithras", in: John Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider 1994, 103-124.

principle capable of promoting and maintaining this uniformity.<sup>162</sup> According to Marquita Volken, “a cult that uses small groups of men organized into cells could use a vertical structure of grades for the cells and a horizontal structure for an all encompassing hierarchy, thus eliminating a central figure of authority and central administration and so creating a flexible and adaptable network ... the cult authority would reside in the enforcement of grade system and the strength of the interpersonal relations and commitment between members.”<sup>163</sup> The movement up the initiatory ladder was controlled by the meticulous fulfillment of prescribed initiatory rites, which were probably predated by a trial period and dependent on some prerequisites. The initiatory rites themselves were, seen from the perspective of an initiand, emotionally and physically very distressing (as we can infer from some iconographic finds and one not a very reliable literary source)<sup>164</sup> and their successful completion led to further strengthening of the mutual relations among the members of the cult. For these reasons the numbers of initiates active in one center were probably intentionally restricted.

The horizontal movement of members of the Mithraic communities then represents an information that was obtained relatively recently and could be regarded surprising in the context of Hellenistic mystery cults, though absolutely essential for our understanding of the mode of Mithraic proliferation. Everything indicates that the vertical movement within the cells was so uniform and standardized that the initiation in one place enabled the member of the cult who had to for some reasons leave his current community to join a different one in a different place as the holder of the

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162 How exactly was this uniformity established and maintained is unknown. To this few remarks: the discovery of an inkpot in the mithraeum in Mainz (Ingeborg Huld-Zetsche, “Ein Mithräum in Mainz”, in: *Archäologie in Rheinland-Pfalz 2002*, Mainz: von Zabern 2003, 75-78: 76 and fig. 3) hints at the possible administrative activity archiving economic and religious life of the cult. Also the *album* from Virunum supports this conclusion (see p. 222, n. 154 above). – The papyrus published in 1992 (William M. Brashear, *A Mithraic Catechism from Egypt*, Wien: Verlag Adolf Holzhausens Nfg. 1992) could be regarded as a literary “textbook” preserving the correct formulation of questions and answers spoken during the Mithraic initiation (providing that this papyrus is really Mithraic, which is far from certain; cf. R. Turcan, *Mithra...*, 152-156). The graffiti from the Santa Prisca Mithraeum are, too, consistent with this theory; see M. J. Vermaseren – C. C. Van Essen, *The Excavations...*, 179-184.

163 M. Volken, “The Development...”, 7.

164 The relevant frescoes are from the mithraeum S. Maria Capua Vetere; see M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca...* I, 24-51, pl. XXI-III and XX-XXVIII. The above-mentioned literary source is Pseudo-Ambroziaster, *Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* CXIII.11.

same grade he already attained in the original community.<sup>165</sup> This information seems to be verified by the discovery of *album* from the Virunum mithraeum, which also indicates that when the number of initiates in one center exceeded acceptable limits a split-up occurred and a new community was created.<sup>166</sup>

But how did Mithraism recruit new members? And why were people willing to become Mithraists? One way to answer these questions (admittedly a problematic one) is to utilize the findings of contemporary sociology which deals with the problems of religious conversion and try to adapt them on the conditions of the late antique world, as has been recently done by American sociologist Rodney Stark with a very stimulating outcome.<sup>167</sup> If we apply some of his findings on the study of the Mysteries, we come to the conclusion that the requirements, which Mithraism as a new religious movement had to meet to win the recognition on the highly competitive late antique “religious market”, were very severe. However, they were attainable as long as Mithraism concentrated its potential on the narrowly defined social stratum to which it offered a specific and attractive “product”.<sup>168</sup> And this is the situation that most probably happened. Mithraism directed its attention to the social classes, which were highly mobile and distinguished themselves by the internal hierarchy enabling a professional advancement. This structure was religiously imitated in the Mithraic ideology<sup>169</sup> and the cult in its final form became a strange mixture of symposiac society and secret organisation, where the relations among the members were strengthened by the successive initiations and esoteric doctrine. This doctrine provided the access to the contemporary “high-tec” knowledge of Hellenistic astrology, pretended to be the source of the ancient “Oriental” wisdom, warned about the “real” dismal nature of the world, life and death and probably also proposed a pos-

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165 G. Piccottini, *Mithrastempel in Virunum...*, 34-35.

166 *Ibid.*, 44-51; 20 names from the album appear also in the remnants of a marble plaque registering the members of another newly founded cult center (*CIL* III.4816 = *AE* 1994, no. 1334).

167 Owing to the unreliability of our demographic data, or even to their complete absence, the application of some modern sociological theories and approaches could be quite risky, not to say dangerous.

168 R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity...*, 193-195; cf. also M. Volken, “The Development...”, 5.

169 R. L. Gordon, “Mithraism and Roman Society...”, 95.

sible way out of that situation.<sup>170</sup> Nevertheless, the number of links with the current religious tradition remained considerable and Mithraism could be regarded a novelty due to the structuring of the elements rather than by the nature of the elements themselves.<sup>171</sup>

The nature of Mithraic conversion was not primarily the matter of ideology. It was motivated rather by the aspirations to keep the current interpersonal relations or to establish new ones since those were one of the guarantees of the Mithraists' survival and prosperity in the unstable and unpredictable world.<sup>172</sup> This mode of conversion based on the personal relations seems to be verified by the discovery of the earthen vessel in German Mainz (ancient Mogontiacum).<sup>173</sup> To enter the Mysteries the intercession of an already existing member of the cult was probably required. This member backed the new candidate, guaranteed his admission and supervised his progress, always after the fulfillment of certain preconditions. The relations among the Mithraists were thus in accordance with the relations between a patron and a client, which represented a very important factor in the working of Roman society, and so played the role of another character in compliance with the contemporary rules of social behavior.

But what were the consequences of Mithraic exclusion of women for the further diffusion of the Mysteries and for their chances in the competition with the Christianity? In his book, devoted to the problems of mission and conversion in the religious world of the Roman Empire, Martin

170 The inscription from Santa Prisca mithraeum, whose wording is probably *Et nos servasti ... sanguine fuso* (see S. Panciera, "Il materiale epigrafico...", 103-105), confirms that Mithraists saw themselves "saved" in some way. This fact is not to be denied, whether the form of this "salvation" was completely mundane (according to Robert Turcan, "Salut mithriaque et sotériologie néoplatonicienne", in: Ugo Bianchi – Maarten J. Vermaseren [eds.], *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell'impero romano: Atti del Colloquio Internazionale su La Soteriologia dei Culti Orientali nell'Impero Romano, Roma, 24-28 settembre 1979*, [EPRO 92], Leiden: E. J. Brill 1982, 173-191), or cosmic in the form of the escape of a soul from the sublunar world to the sphere of fixed stars (according to Roger Beck, "*Qui mortalitatis causa convenerunt*: The meeting of the Virunum Mithraists on June 26, A. D. 184", *Phoenix* 52, 1998, 335-344; id., "In the Place of the Lion...", 29-50).

171 After Rodney Stark (*The Rise of Christianity...*, 55), these links with the current religious world substantially facilitated a possible conversion.

172 Cf. *ibid.*, 16-17.

173 See Heinz G. Horn, "Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß", *Mainzer Archäologische Zeitschrift* 1, 1994, 21-66; R. Merkelbach, "Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß", *ZPE* 108, 1995, 1-6; Roger Beck, "Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel", *JRS* 90, 2000, 145-180. The importance of this vessel lies especially in the fact that it shows "real" Mithraists in two ritual activities, and not their mythological precedents which we know e.g. from side scenes around the tauroctony.

Goodman asks a question whether the members of the Hellenistic religious cults ever wanted the people outside their communities to join them and if they did, whether they wanted everyone to do so without an exception.<sup>174</sup> In the case of Mithraism the answer is, in all probability, negative. Its strength and virtue did not lie in universalism and great numbers, but in the very close and intimate relations within the narrowly defined communities with restricted membership and strong ties of mutual loyalty.<sup>175</sup> This state of affairs could have been created only on condition that the number of Mithraists in one cell remained limited, even if this condition required a split-up and the establishment of a new community.<sup>176</sup>

The potential scope of Mithraic proliferation was thus reduced by the very nature of this religion, since it furnished the “ideal” product to the specifically determined social classes whose numbers were never too great. The exclusion of women would have played its crucial role only if Mithraism ever declared its own universalistic claims, but this apparently never happened and most probably could not ever happen. Within the bounds of the working of Mithraic structure the exclusion of women caused no serious disadvantage or restrictions, on the contrary, it only invigorated the communal sense of cohesion and helped to create more permanent relations among the cult members.<sup>177</sup> The ultimate historical failure of Mithraism had therefore a different cause than the exclusion of women.

About the degree of competition between Mithraism and Christianity, there is no need to stretch the evidence we have.<sup>178</sup> Social structures of Mithraism and early Christianities were rather different and early controversy is more a hypothetical assumption than a matter of historically grounded facts.<sup>179</sup> Although the mutual tensions could have grown gradually, especially in the places with a high density of their followers

174 Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994, 23.

175 This fact could successfully eliminate so-called “free-rider problem”, the existence of individuals in the cult, whose loyalty and contribution were inadequate to their gains and profits. Cf. R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity...*, 174-179.

176 See p. 224, n. 166 above.

177 M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 264.

178 Marcel Simon, “Mithra, rival du Christ?”, in: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques*, (Acta Iranica 17.1.4), Leiden: E. J. Brill 1978, 457-478: 477-478; R. Beck, “Mithraism since Franz Cumont...”, 2095; Luther H. Martin, “Roman Mithraism and Christianity”, *Numen* 36, 1989, 2-15: 4-6.

179 Carsten Colpe (“Die Mithrasmytherien und die Kirchenväter”, in: Willem Den Boer [ed.], *Romanitas et Christianitas: Studia I. H. Waszink a.d. VI kal. Nov. a 1973, 13 lustura complenti oblata*, Amsterdam: North Holland 1973, 29-43) shows Mithraism as an unimportant target of anti-pagan polemic.

(Rome and military structures), Mithraism was never a major opponent of Christianity. In the time when Christianity began to gain ground in the religious world of the Late Antiquity, Mithraism, which *floruit* can be put in the reign of the Severi,<sup>180</sup> already stagnated and was slowly declining. After the publication of Theodosian edicts Mithraism was finally doomed and quickly disappeared.<sup>181</sup> The famous words of Ernest Renan about the Mithraic world<sup>182</sup> form thus a perfect example how the interests of one religion could completely distort the goals of another: the world could have never been Mithraic, because the Mithraists in all probability never had these intentions.

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180 M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae...*, 12-13. – This assessment is grounded on the numbers of datable epigraphic evidence, but these must not necessarily reflect the real vitality of Mithraism in the different periods of its existence. The Roman epigraphy reached its zenith exactly in the years 150-250 CE, but later this field rapidly declines (see e.g. Ramsay MacMullen, “The epigraphic habit in the Roman empire”, *American Journal of Philology* 103, 1982, 233-246; Géza Alföldy, “Augustus und die Inschriften: Tradition und Inovation. Die Geburt der imperialen Epigraphik”, *Gymnasium* 98, 1991, 289-324). The decrease of Mithraic dedications at the end of the 3rd century CE could thus reflect rather the general decline of epigraphic culture than the dip in the current popularity of Mithraism.

181 For the more detailed information about the disappearance of Mithraism in the West, see Eberhard Sauer, *The End of Paganism in the North-West Provinces of the Roman Empire: The Example of Mithras Cult*, Oxford: Tempus Reparatum 1996. – The latest newly founded Mithraic community is attested in the year 325 CE (the mithraeum in Gimmeldingen, *CIMRM* 1313). Except for Rome and so called “pagan restoration”, we have no evidence for the existence of Mithraism already in the 5th century CE (cf. M. Clauss, *Mithras...*, 37-41).

182 Ernest Renan, *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du monde antique*, Paris: Calmann Lévy 1882, 579: “Si le christianisme eût été arêté dans sa croissance par quelque maladie mortelle, le monde eût été mithriaste.”



## SUMMARY

**Hyenas or Lionesses? Mithraism and Women in the Religious World of the Late Antiquity**

This study responds to the recent questioning of the long-standing and widely held academic consensus that only men were initiated into the Mysteries of Mithras (Jonathan David, "The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?", *Numen* 47, 2000, 121-141). After the re-examination of all relevant epigraphical finds, literary sources and Mithraic iconography the author of the present study comes to the conclusion that there is no serious reason for the change of current opinions about the exclusion of women from Mithraism.

The study also tries to establish the possible cause leading to the development of the purely male structure of the Mithraic Mysteries. In this respect the most probable solution is the combination of two factors: firstly, Mithraism operated on the same principles as the contemporary religious collegiums which also excluded women (with certain exceptions); secondly, this tendency was probably supported by the negative assessment of feminine principle in the Mithraic religious ideology.

Although some scholars regarded the male exclusiveness of Mithraism as a substantial handicap, which in the end led to its final historical failure in the competition with the Christianity that was more friendly toward women, in the author's opinion this reason has no justification. Mithraism catered for the small and closely-knit communities and had no universalistic aspirations; moreover, it directed its attention to the members of the social classes, which were never too numerous (soldiers, imperial administration, etc.). In the context of its functioning the exclusion of women thus caused no serious disadvantage and the reasons for its ultimate failure must be sought elsewhere.



## RESUMÉ

**Hyeny, nebo lvice? Mithraismus a ženy v kontextu náboženského světa pozdní antiky**

Tato studie reaguje na nedávné zpochybnění letitého a široce sdíleného konsensu, že mezi mithraistické vyznavače patřili pouze muži (Jonathan David, "The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?", *Numen* 47, 2000, 121-141). Po přezkoumání epigrafických nálezů, literárních pramenů a mithraistické ikonografie dochází autor této studie k závěru, že žádné skutečně závažné důvody ke změně dosavadního konsensu o vyloučení žen z mithraismu neexistují.

Studie se rovněž zamýšlí nad možnými příčinami vzniku čistě mužské struktury Mithrových mystérií. Za nejpravděpodobnější je v tomto ohledu pokládáno spolupůsobení dvou faktorů. Mithraistické komunity především fungovaly na obdobných principech jako soudobá náboženská kolegia, která rovněž (až na výjimky) ženy do svých řad nepřijímala. Tuto tendenci navíc patrně podpořilo negativní hodnocení femininního principu v mithraistické náboženské ideologii.

Přestože někteří badatelé pokládali omezení mithraismu pouze na příslušníky jednoho pohlaví za závažný handicap, který v konečných důsledcích vedl k jeho historickému neúspěchu v soupeření s křesťanstvím, vůči ženám vstřícnějším, podle autora této studie jejich přesvědčení neodpovídá realitě. Mithraismus, jehož funkční struktura byla založena právě na existenci malých a uzavřených komunit, postrádal univerzalistické ambice a orientoval se převážně na příslušníky společenských vrstev, jejichž počet zůstával omezen (vojáci, příslušníci imperiální správy atd.). V rámci jeho fungování tak vyloučení žen nepředstavovalo žádnou významnější slabinu; konečné příčiny zániku mithraismu je třeba hledat jinde.

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