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Religio. 2018, vol. 26, iss. 2, pp. [167]-182

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138913>

Access Date: 20. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Was There a Network of Roman Mithraists?

LUTHER H. MARTIN

Folklorist and anthropologist Andrew Lang has identified a tendency for the homonymy of gods to be characteristic of “the mythological period of all nations”.¹ In contrast to the *phenomenology* of religion, which posits an essentialized “sacrality” underlying the various theographies, a perennial *history* of religions’ question is that of the specific relationship(s) between deities sharing a common name. While this problem of the relationship of homonymous deities is, perhaps, most generally familiar from Greek polytheism,² that between the various incarnations of the Indo-European Mithra has recently been reintroduced to modern scholarship.³

Already from the second millennium BC (c. 1500-1200 BC), a solar deity with the name of *Mitra* is prominent in the Hindu pantheon of the Indian *Rig Veda* as guarantor of friendship and contract, and, contemporaneously (c. 1400 BC), as witness to an inscribed peace treaty between the Hittites and their neighbors. A *Mithra* is later attested in the Persian *Avestas* from c. sixth century BC as a divine solar protector of truths, covenants and oaths. Subsequently, an initiatory cult of a *Mithras Sol Invictus* is documented by archaeological remains from the end of the first century AD throughout the expanse of the Roman Empire.⁴ Might these homonymous Indo-European deities be related? If so, what might be their historical connection(s)?

1 Andrew Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religions* II, London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1887, 100.

2 Henk S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*, Leiden: Brill 2011, 60-77.

3 Philippa Adrych – Robert Bracey – Dominic Dalgligh – Stefanie Lenk – Rachel Wood, *Images of Mithra*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017; see Bruce Lincoln, “Mithra(s) as Sun and Savior”, in: Ugo Bianchi – Maarten Vermaseren (eds.), *La Soteriologia dei Culti Orientali nell’Impero Romano*, Leiden: Brill 1982, 505-526: 505.

4 Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, trans. Richard Gordon, London: Routledge 2001, 3-4. Apart from the initial period for the appearance of the Roman cults of Mithras, dates for Mithras in the *Rig Veda* and the *Avestas* are disputed and are given here as only an approximation of their relative historical sequence.

Introduction

Franz Cumont, the father of modern Mithraic studies, argued that a cult of Mithra spread from Iran to Rome through a linear process of historical diffusion,⁵ a late nineteenth-century theory of religious transmission modeled on the spread of languages westward from an Indo-Aryan original. As this Iranian Mithraism also spread westward, it was, according to Cumont, modified by each culture through which it was broadcast until it culminated in a distinctively Roman Mithraism.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, a number of scholars began to argue that cults of a Roman Mithras, whatever might be their association with previous names of Mithra, represented fundamentally a new religion that had been created within the cultural ecology of the Roman Empire.⁶ For example, while the Persian Mithra was extolled as the “lord of wide pastures” and as guardian of all creatures, including cattle,⁷ the Roman Mithras was represented specifically by the tauroctony, a modern term for the ubiquitous cult representation of Mithras slaying a bull.⁸ Since the Roman Mithraists seem to have produced no texts – at least no texts have survived or have even been referred to in contemporaneous sources, at least until the third century⁹ – scholars have attempted to reconstruct from the tauroctony and from associated Mithraic imagery, a comprehensive Roman Mithraism having a shared mythology or consistent set of practices.¹⁰

Most recently, a number of scholars have emphasized that all groups that somehow legitimated themselves with authorizing claims to the name of the Roman Mithras were characterized by local variations, a conclusion that calls into question models of linear coherence. The authors of a recent study of the various *Images of Mithra*, for example, conclude that there simply was, “no broad Mithraism, covering the geographic and temporal

5 Franz Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* I-II, Bruxelles: H. Lamertin 1896-1899; id., *The Mysteries of Mithra*, trans. Thomas J. McCormack (from the 2nd French ed.), New York: Dover Publications 1956.

6 Roger Beck, “Mithraism since Franz Cumont”, in: Hildegard Temporini – Wolfgang Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.17.4, Berlin: de Gruyter 1984, 2002-2115.

7 *Mihra Yašt* 10.28.

8 Worshipers of the Persian Mithra also might have sacrificed “small cattle” to Mithra (*Mihra Yašt* 10.30).

9 Porphyry (234-c. 305 AD) refers to two histories of Mithras, one by a certain Pallas (Porph., *De abstinentia* 2.56, 4.16) and one by Euboulus of Palestine (*Abstin.* 4.16; *De antr. nymph.* 6), as sources for his discussion of the Roman cults of Mithras. Jerome also refers to a “history of Mithra in many volumes” (*Adversus Jovinianum* 2.14).

10 E.g., M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 62-101.

range” from India to Rome,¹¹ effectively de-essentializing any notion of a standard, comprehensive Mithraism – even within the bounds of the Roman Empire.¹²

Several scholars have employed the new approach of the cognitive science of religion in their investigations of commonalities among cults of the Roman Mithras.¹³ This cognitive approach seeks to identify universal neurocognitive dynamics that underlie the diversity of human expressions, behaviors, and thought. And while pan-human cognitive attractors have been identified for the Roman Mithraists along with their autochthonous exploitations of these attractors, this approach has not contributed to questions about any particular historical and social relationships between these cults.

Might contemporary network theory contribute to explanations for the relationship among the numerous widely-distributed cults of the Roman Mithras as it has for other religious cults in the Roman Empire?¹⁴ Was there, in other words, a network of Roman Mithraists?¹⁵

11 P. Adrych – R. Bracey et al., *Images of Mithra...*, 5.

12 *Ibid.*, 170; M. Clauss notes that over 420 Mithraic sites have been identified (M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, xxi). Archaeologist Filippo Coarelli has estimated there may have been some 700 Mithraic sites within the Aurelian Wall of Rome alone (Filippo Coarelli, “Topographia Mithraica di Roma”, in: Ugo Bianchi [ed.], *Mysteria Mithrae: Atti del Seminario Internazionale su “La specificità storico-religiosa dei Misteri di Mithra, con particolare riferimento alle fonti documentarie di Roma e Ostia”*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1979, 69-79: 77).

13 Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006; Luther H. Martin, *The Mind of Mithraists: Historical and Cognitive Studies in the Roman Cult of Mithras*, London: Bloomsbury 2015; Olympia Panagiotidou with Roger Beck, *The Roman Mithras Cult: A Cognitive Approach*, London: Bloomsbury 2017.

14 Anna Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire: The Spread of New Ideas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013.

15 The genesis of this article is twofold. First, was my decision some years ago to focus on the Roman cults of Mithras as my primary example for historical and comparative studies of religion generally, especially as explicitly framed by theoretical concerns (Luther H. Martin, “Reflections on my Studies of the Roman Cults of Mithras for the Historical and Comparative Study of Religions” [online], *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, <<https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341452>>, 29 August 2018 [30 November 2018]). Second, was a workshop held in Brno, Czech Republic, 23-25 October 2014, on “Network Theory, Cognitive Science, and Historiography”, sponsored by the Department for the Study of Religions, Masaryk University and by the Institute for the Advanced Studies of Religion (Toronto) in cooperation with the Czech Association for the Study of Religions (Luther H. Martin – Donald Wiebe, “Network Theory, Cognitive Science, and Historiography”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistikou* 23/1, 2015, 109-112). Subsequently, workshops on the same theme were held in Kavala, Greece, 1-4 September 2015, with the additional sponsorship of the Greek Association for the Study of Religion and Culture, in Budapest, Hungary, 29 August-5 September 2016, with the support of Eötvös Loránd University and Central European

Network theory and historiography

Modern historians are not unfamiliar with social network analyses. A structural mapping of networks, popular among social scientists since the 1950s, can be traced back to the publication of Georg Simmel's *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* in 1908.¹⁶ The translator of the sixth chapter of this volume, "Die Kreuzung sozialer Kreise", interpreted its title into English as "The Interaction of Group-Affiliations" in order to emphasize Simmel's focus on network relations.¹⁷ The Italian sociologist Mario Diani has concluded that it was Simmel's emphasis on the structural *form* of social relationships rather than on their *specific content* that facilitated "the application of his concepts to historical periods other than the ones which provided most of his empirical examples".¹⁸ Nevertheless, historians have generally neglected the concept of networks;¹⁹ those who do employ network analyses in their work, however, still explicitly embrace mid-twentieth century representational-descriptive models of networks.²⁰

University, Budapest, and in Orthes, Crete, 1-6 October 2017, with the support of the Cultural Center of ANADRASIS. I should like to thank all of the participants in these workshops for their keen insights into network theory and for their suggestions about its relevance for historical research.

- 16 Georg Simmel, *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot 1908 (English transl.: *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, trans. Anthony J. Blasi, Leiden: Brill 2009). See Mary Chayko, "The First Web Theorist? Georg Simmel and the Legacy of 'The Web of Group Affiliations'", *Information, Communication and Society* 18/12, 2015, 1419-1422.
- 17 This chapter was later reprinted as "The *Web* of Group-Affiliations" (emphasis added), in Georg Simmel, *Conflict and The Web of Group-Affiliations*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff – Reinhard Bendix, New York: Free Press 1955.
- 18 Mario Diani, "Simmel to Rokkan and Beyond: Towards a Network Theory of (New) Social Movements", *European Journal of Social Theory* 3/4, 2000, 387-406: 394.
- 19 Irad Malkin – Christy Constantakopoulou – Katerina Panagopoulou, "Introduction", in: iid. (eds.), *Greek and Roman Networks in the Mediterranean*, London: Routledge 2009, 1-11: 3.
- 20 E.g., Ian Rutherford, "Network Theory and Theoretic Networks", in: Irad Malkin – Christy Constantakopoulou – Katerina Panagopoulou (eds.), *Greek and Roman Networks in the Mediterranean*, London: Routledge 2009, 24-38: 27 and note 22 referencing other historians similarly inclined. Rutherford was a resourceful contributor to our second workshop on "Network Theory, Cognitive Science, and Historiography" in Kavala.

I was first introduced to social network analysis while an undergraduate sociology major in the late 1950s when I encountered sociograms, a technique of graphically visualizing intergroup relationships that was introduced in 1930 by Jacob L. Moreno, *Who Shall Survive: A New Approach to the Problem of Human Interrelations*, Washington, DC: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co. 1934. For an interesting history of sociological network analyses (up to 2004), see Linton C. Freeman, *The*

Contemporary interest in network theory by historians, especially by historians of Western antiquity, derives largely from Irad Malkin's explanation of the emergence of Greek civilization by employing a scientific theory of networks rather than the earlier sociological modeling.²¹ For Malkin, modern social network theory is "part of complexity theory", as developed primarily in the natural sciences.²² To distinguish this scientific theory of networks from earlier sociological models, it can be referred to as "complexity-network theory".

Most simply,²³ complexity theory "seeks to understand emergent phenomena through the self-organization of large systems".²⁴ This self-organization emerges "through the formation and rapid dynamics of decentralized, accessible, nonhierarchical, multidirectional, expansive, and interactive networks" that result in non-essentialized "small worlds".²⁵ The links among the interconnected nodes that characterize these "small worlds" are not necessarily geographical or contingent but are measured by their "degree of separation", that is, by the number of nodes which must be traversed to reach a target node.²⁶ Content that moves along network lines of connection, whether it is information, behaviors, artifacts, or power, is referred to as its "flow".²⁷ And even though network flows may move from one node to another in one direction only,²⁸ Malkin emphasizes that cultural flows in successful networks are typically multidirectional.²⁹

Social complexity-network theory identifies two types of connections or ties, "strong" and "weak". Strong ties bind individuals into groups, and groups into tight webs of clearly defined relations that can be characterized

Development of Social Network Analysis: A Study in the Sociology of Science, North Charleston, SC: BookSurge 2004.

21 Irad Malkin, *A Small Greek World: Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

22 *Ibid.*, 31.

23 Complexity theory is, well, complex. It involves modeling, from the sociological to the natural sciences (especially physics) to the mathematical, as these models are applied to various fields of study. Malkin's summary of complexity-network theory is the primary resource for this article, especially, because of his singular discussion of the application of complexity-network theory to historical data (*ibid.*, 3-64).

24 *Ibid.*, 31.

25 *Ibid.*, 25, 205-206, citing Darin Barney, *The Network Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2004, 2.

26 I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 9, 13, 206.

27 *Ibid.*, 17-18, 25; D. Barney, *The Network Society...*, 27.

28 D. Barney, *The Network Society...*, 27.

29 I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 18, 115. The significance of reciprocal interactions for the robustness of networks was already emphasized by Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1971 (1st ed. 1908).

by a “combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie”.³⁰ The dense relations of these ties, however, engender an insular cohesion at the expense of information and influence from the larger world.³¹ Weak, or relatively loose ties, on the other hand, are a relative measure whereby the strength of relationship commitments are less than for strong ties – the difference between, for example, “friend” and “acquaintance”.³² In contrast to the resilient commitments of strong ties, weak-tie relationships foster open contact with various different groups with a consequent access to a wider range of information.³³ In his seminal article on “The Strength of Weak Ties”, Mark Granovetter concludes that the “removal of the average weak tie [from a network] would do more ‘damage’ to transmission possibilities [‘of whatever is to be diffused’] than would that of the average strong one”.³⁴ It is the decentralized, accessible, nonhierarchical, multidirectional, expansive dynamics of weak ties that result in the emergence of “small worlds”. This “small world” model is characteristic of constructed networks, from power grids to the internet, as well as being familiar from a number of the natural sciences – physics and biology.³⁵ In other words, both natural and artifactual worlds exhibit small-world properties.

To give but one recent example of a network discovery, evolutionary biologist Toby Spribille and colleagues recently published research on lichens that calls into question the conventional view that conceives of the basic units of life as individual, whether at the level of molecules, cells, or species.³⁶ Initially regarded as plants, and then as fungi, lichens have been understood, for the past century and a half, as a symbiosis between a single fungus and a single photosynthesizing partner that resembles neither of the symbionts in isolation. However, research by Spribille’s team showed that many common lichens are composed of the known fungus, its photosynthesizing partner and, unexpectedly, certain yeasts, the abundance of

30 Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties”, *American Journal of Sociology* 78/6, 1973, 1360-1380: 1361.

31 Nicholas A. Christakis – James H. Fowler, *Connected: How Your Friends’ Friends’ Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do*, New York: Little, Brown and Company 2011, 157.

32 M. S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties...”, 1368.

33 *Ibid.*, 1366, 1371.

34 *Ibid.*, 1366.

35 I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 205-206; Steven Strogatz, *Sync: How Order Emerges from Chaos in the Universe, Nature, and Daily Life*, New York: Hyperion 2003, 232.

36 Toby Spribille – Veera Tuovinen – Philipp Resl et al., “Basidiomycete Yeasts in the Cortex of Ascomycete Macrolichen”, *Science* 353/6298, 2016, 488-492.

which correlates with previously unexplained variations in lichen phenotypes.³⁷ This research, as one commentator concluded, reflects a larger paradigm shift in biology generally; it suggests that all units of life, rather than being considered as individual – even as individuals in symbiotic relations – may better be conceived of as networks, which, after all, are more fundamental and persist longer within biological systems than do individuals.³⁸ The presumption, in other words, is that network principles are universal,³⁹ including the view that networks are the fundamental units of social organization as well.

Further theoretical reflections on network systems and social organization subsequent to Malkin's work include those of Ralph Kenna et al.⁴⁰ Specific historical studies on aspects of social networks in ancient Greece have been advanced by Malkin et al.⁴¹ and by Esther Eidinow,⁴² as on religious networks in the Roman Empire, by Anna Collar.⁴³ A traditional social network analysis of the early Christianities was suggested by Rodney Stark,⁴⁴ and elaborated by Dennis C. Duling in his study of "itinerate charismatics and community sympathizers" in the "Jesus Movement".⁴⁵ Subsequently Albert-László Barabási⁴⁶ suggested a social network analysis of the early Christianities that presumes complexity-network theory.⁴⁷ In his exploration of the relationship between (early Christian) religious ideas and social structures, István Czachesz fully incorporated

37 *Ibid.*, 488.

38 Erica Gies, "The Meaning of Lichen", *Scientific American* 316/6, 2017, 52-59: 56, 59.

39 I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 6, 27.

40 Ralph Kenna – Máirín MacCarron – Pádraig MacCarron (eds.), *Maths Meets Myths: Quantitative Approaches to Ancient Narratives*, Cham: Springer International 2017.

41 Irad Malkin – Christy Constantakopoulou – Katerina Panagopoulou (eds.), *Greek and Roman Networks in the Mediterranean*, London: Routledge 2009.

42 Esther Eidinow, "Networks and Narratives: A Model for Ancient Greek Religion", *Kernos* 24, 2011, 9-38.

43 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*

44 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, 20.

45 Dennis C. Duling, "The Jesus Movement and Social Network Analysis (Part I: The Spatial Network)", *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 29/4, 1999, 156-175: 157.

46 Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: How Everything is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life*, New York: Plume Books 2003, 3-5, 129.

47 On the difference between earlier sociometrics and the contemporary theorizing that might be termed "complexity-network theory", see I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 26-31; Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties...", 1360-1361. Unfortunately, representatives of these two approaches to networks, the sociological and the scientific, rarely communicate with one another (I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 16, note 29, with reference to L. C. Freeman, *The Development of Social Network Analysis...*, 165-166).

complexity-network analysis.⁴⁸ Such an incorporation of complexity-network theory by historians of ancient religions, Malkin concludes, takes “networks beyond the representational and descriptive and ... [gives] them a creative and explanatory role”.⁴⁹

Cults of Jupiter Dolichenus and those of the Roman Mithras

A widespread religious network of the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus has been mapped for the Roman Empire by archaeologist Anna Collar.⁵⁰ Rather than speculating about any intrinsic appeal the Dolichean cults may have had, Collar, although influenced by Malkin’s work, constructed the networked distribution of the Dolichean cults by employing Proximal Point Analysis (PPA).⁵¹ PPA seeks to link each individual node to its three closest neighbors by indicating, as in the “small world” model, “*relative degrees* of connection, rather than [their] absolute presence or absence”.⁵² Might the Dolichean network, as described by Collar, provide a parallel historical comparator for a description of (and, perhaps, as in complex networks of the “small world” model, an explanation for) a network of Roman Mithraists?

Cults of the Roman Mithras and those of Jupiter Dolichenus were both disseminated throughout the Roman Empire from the end of the first century AD.⁵³ Collar argues that cults of Jupiter Dolichenus were transmitted swiftly and widely because they were adopted by middle-ranking officers of the Roman legions who had access to an “already existing” military network.⁵⁴ Because of the geographical distances within the Roman Empire, this network was key to the smooth operations and logistical support of the Roman military system.⁵⁵ The availability of this military network to the Dolicheans, Collar argues, provides “a clear explanation for

48 István Czachesz, “Women, Charity, and Mobility: Weak Links and the Historical Transformation of Religions”, in: István Czachesz – Tamás Biró (eds.), *Changing Minds: Religion and Cognition through the Ages*, Leuven: Peeters 2011, 129-154.

49 I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 209; see also Duncan J. Watts, *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company 2003, 29.

50 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 79-145.

51 *Ibid.*, 27-29. Proximal Point Analysis was developed by anthropologist John E. Terrell, “Geographic Systems and Human Diversity in the North Solomons”, *World Archaeology* 9/1, 1977, 62-81, and, especially, by Cyprian Broodbank, *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000.

52 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 27, citing C. Broodbank, *An Island Archaeology...*, 180-181 (italics in original).

53 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 99; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 21-22.

54 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 96, 113-114.

55 *Ibid.*, 47-48.

the spread of the cult” ... “at such speed and across the Roman Empire to such depth”.⁵⁶ Collar argues that this relationship of cults of Jupiter Dolichenus with the Roman army “illuminates the role that military social networks can play in cultic success”.⁵⁷

Similar to the Dolichean network, the Roman cults of Mithras were also spread (primarily) by their embeddedness in the infrastructure of the Roman military network.⁵⁸ For example, four members of the Praetorian Guard were, in the late-first/early-second century, reassigned from the *castra praetoria*, their home base, to the island of Andros.⁵⁹ Presumably initiates into the community of the *castra praetoria* mithraeum, the nearby distinctive structure where Mithraists met,⁶⁰ they founded on this remote Cycladic island their own Mithraic group and constructed there a mithraeum.⁶¹ Further, there is the example of the mithraea that were established

56 *Ibid.*, 94, 79.

57 *Ibid.*, 80.

58 Aleš Chalupa – Eva Výtvarová – Adam Mertel – Jan Fousek – Tomáš Hampejs, “Roman Military Infrastructure Was Crucial in the Spread of Mithraism in the Roman Empire”, under review at the journal *PLOS ONE*. Charles M. Daniels, “The Role of the Roman Army in the Spread and Practice of Mithraism”, in: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 249-274.

There are exceptions to the relationship of cults of the Roman Mithras to the military – the Mithraic groups documented in Ostia, for example, in which membership was from the *negotiatores* and *mercatores* associated with the various guilds that dominated in this commercial port city (John Schreiber, “The Environment of Ostian Mithraism”, in: Samuel Laeuchli [ed.], *Mithraism in Ostia: Mystery Religion and Christianity in the Ancient Port of Rome*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1967, 22-45: 41; Russell Meiggs, *Roman Ostia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1973, 311-336, 372-375; A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 53). See also the influence of traders for the spread of the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus (A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 111-112). Other categories of Mithraic groups included retired veterans (Panayotis Pachis, “The Cult of Mithras in Thessaloniki”, in: John R. Hinnells [ed.], *Studies in Mithraism*, Rome: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider 1994, 229-255: 249), reassigned civil servants such as customs personnel, and clients and slaves loyal to their increasingly mobile patrons (Per Beskow, “The Portorium and the Mysteries of Mithras”, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 3/1-2, 1980, 1-18). While a network analysis might be applied to these various groups, especially to the “guild” Mithraists, and to the possible relationship between these various Mithraic groups and those associated with the military, for purposes of this article, we will focus on the cults of the Roman Mithras within the military since this relationship was the principal factor in their spread.

59 Nickolas Reed, “The Mithraeum on Andros”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 18, 1975, 207-211.

60 *CIMRM* 397-398; *CIMRM* = Maarten J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae* I-II, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1956-1960.

61 The Andros mithraeum is documented by its dedicatory inscription, dated between 198-209 AD (*CIMRM* 2350). The mithraeum itself has not been discovered, although Reginald E. Witt claims that he has located it (Reginald E. Witt, “Some Thoughts on

as a consequence of redeployments of the *Legio quinta Macedonica* (the Fifth Macedonian Legion), or of its subunits. At each of the sites where these legionnaires were stationed, from 167 until the second half of the third century, Mithraic dedications are attested,⁶² e.g., in Dacia at Potaissa,⁶³ and in Pannonia at Poetovio.⁶⁴ While these military units must have remained in some reciprocal military communication with their command centers, for example, between the unit of Praetorian guards on Andros and their headquarters at the *castra praetoria* in Rome, there is no evidence for any specifically Mithraic communications between or of any interactions among newly established Mithraic groups and the group from which they had split.

As did the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus, those of the Roman Mithras largely followed military deployments especially along the Rhine and the Danube, and in northern Britannia.⁶⁵ As the army increasingly relied on the local conscription of “barbarians” during the Imperial period, its embedded cults served as a medium for Romanization, that is, for a proclivity to adopt Roman architectural styles, food preferences, and clothing, e.g., the wearing of togas.⁶⁶ This indigenizing function of Roman initiatory cults is an important insight that remains largely unexplored.

To fully appreciate the spread of religious cults in the Roman Empire, Collar contends that it is necessary to understand their origins within their “intellectual, social, geographical and religious context”.⁶⁷ It is indeed interesting that cults of the Roman Mithras and those of Jupiter Dolichenus may have shared common cultural origins. The origin of the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus was, of course, Doliche, a city in the kingdom of Commagene, where Jupiter Dolichenus was “the Roman manifestation of a Near Eastern storm god”.⁶⁸ And although two mithraea have been dis-

Isis in Relation to Mithras”, in: John R. Hinnells [ed.], *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1975, 479-493: 483, note 39).

62 C. M. Daniels, “The Role of the Roman Army...”, 251; P. Pachis, “The Cult of Mithras...”, 243-244, 249-250.

63 *CIMRM* 1921, 1929.

64 *CIMRM* 1590, 1592, 1594, 1596.

65 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 124; M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 21.

66 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 49, 80; Luther H. Martin, “Reflections on the Mithraic Tauroctony as Cult Scene”, in: John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Rome: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider 1994, 217-224: 224; rpt. in Luther H. Martin, *The Mind of Mithraists: Historical and Cognitive Studies in the Roman Cult of Mithras*, London: Bloomsbury 2015, 21-28: 28.

67 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 80.

68 *Ibid.*

covered in Doliche,⁶⁹ and Commagene is the locus for one of the more persuasive proposals for the origin of cults of Roman Mithras,⁷⁰ the specific origins of the cults of the Roman Mithras remain uncertain.⁷¹ In any case, the question of origins, Malkin concludes, “signifies little for the simultaneous aspects of the emergence of” a network.⁷²

It is clear that a centralized religious network of Jupiter Dolichenus emerged in the Roman Empire, as Collar has described. If, however, a center-periphery model for cults of the Roman Mithras, as proposed by Cumont, is not supported by the historical data, as is accepted by most contemporary scholars,⁷³ what model remains for how autonomous Mithraic cells became distributed throughout the expanse of the Roman Imperial landscape apart from any centralized management? Were they related? If so, how?

So, was there a Mithraic network?

It is clear that the cults of Roman Mithraists spread (largely) through the military in ways that are analogous to those of Jupiter Dolichenus, as suggested by Collar.⁷⁴ There are, however, significant differences between the ecologies of the two cultic amalgamations that question the existence of any Mithraic network.

Rather than the increasingly centralized and hierarchicalized ties that came to characterize relationships among the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus, any ties between the autonomous, decentralized, nonhierarchical Mithraic

69 *Ibid.*, 84; “CIMRM Supplement – Twin Mithraea from Doliche, Commagene, Turkey” [online], <http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=supp_Turkey_Doliche_Mithraeums>, [17 July 2018].

70 Roger Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 88, 1998, 115-128; rpt. in id., *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2004, 31-44.

71 Aleš Chalupa, “The Origins of the Roman Cult of Mithras in the Light of New Evidence and Interpretations: The Current State of Affairs”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 24/1, 2016, 65-96. Interestingly, an inscription to “*Io(vi) S(oli) invi(cto) / deo genitori / r(upe) n(ato)*” at the base of a Mithraic tauroctonus relief from Dacia (Apulum?) (*CIMRM* 2006-2007), tentatively dated from the late second to the early third century, is not dedicated to Mithras but to Jupiter, and to Jupiter as *deus genitor*, an epithet characteristic of a Palmyrene solar-fertility god that is rarely used elsewhere of Mithras (István Tóth, “The Cult of Iuppiter Sol Invictus Deus Genitor in Dacia”, *Acta classica Universitatis scientiarum Debreceniensis* 6, 1970, 71-74: 74).

72 I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 222.

73 R. Beck, “Mithraism since Franz Cumont...”.

74 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 94, note 24, citing James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Blackwell 2007, 141, 145.

nodes would, on the other hand, seem to be weak, or absent altogether.⁷⁵ Whereas the dynamics of high-arousal rites of initiation into the small-scale Mithraic associations would create strong ties *within* individual Mithraic groups,⁷⁶ these strong *intragroup* ties would also establish *intergroup* exclusivity. Consequently, it would be unlikely to find evidence for any strong webs of clearly defined relations among the distributed Mithraic nodes. Weak (or absent) ties among the Mithraic nodes, on the other hand, would account for their local innovations and variations,⁷⁷ even for different positionings and interpretations of the ubiquitous tauriconous image itself.⁷⁸

Malkin emphasizes that it is a dynamics of exchange between and among weak ties that allows for the emergence of “small world” networks.⁷⁹ The small Greek world he describes was a network of (city-state) nodes that were active in “reciprocal exchanges of trade, religion, language, art, literature and philosophy” as well as in socio-political organization.⁸⁰ As Malkin concluded about the category “Greece”, any successful Mithraic network would require reciprocal network ties with both “outward *and* backward currents along network lines”.⁸¹ Mithraic groups, however, seem not to have accessed the military means of trans-group communication exploited by the Dolicheans.

In addition to mid-level officers of the Roman military who followed Jupiter Dolichenus and the lower ranks of the military to which cult information “filtered down”,⁸² non-military members of the cult are also documented by dedicatory inscriptions. While these often involved military

75 “Absent ties”, or “ties without substantial significance” or those that are “negligible”, are, with strong and weak ties, a third possibility, identified by Mark Granovetter for analyses of social networks (M. S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties...”, 1361, note 4).

76 Luther H. Martin, “Performativity, Discourse and Cognition: ‘Demythologizing’ the Roman Cult of Mithras”, in: Willi Braun (ed.), *Rhetoric and Reality in Early Christianity*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2005, 187-217; rpt. in Luther H. Martin (ed.), *Deep History, Secular Theory: Historical and Scientific Studies of Religion*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2014, 272-297: 276-280.

77 I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 26-27. For an example of ostensibly comparable Mithraic representations that, upon closer examination, turn out to be more “complicated”, see Richard Gordon, “Panelled Complications”, *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 3/1-2, 1980, 200-227; rpt. in id., *Image and Values in the Graeco-Roman World: Studies in Mithraism and Religious Art*, Aldershot: Variorum 1996, IX (200-227).

78 P. Adrych – R. Bracey et al., *Images of Mithra...*, 167-168.

79 I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 18, 27, 33, 115, 119.

80 *Ibid.*, 24.

81 *Ibid.*, 164 (italics in original); see also A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 52.

82 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 94.

connections, such as family members of legionnaires,⁸³ dedications also document civilian members of the cult who apparently had no connections to the military.⁸⁴ There is, however, no evidence that cults of the Roman Mithras were as inclusive as were those of the Dolichean cults – they generally excluded women, for example⁸⁵ – nor that Mithraic practices were performed in private settings apart from the institutional context in which they were embedded – military, bureaucratic, or guild.⁸⁶

Finally, cults of Jupiter Dolichenus eventually developed a priesthood, separate from the military structure, for managing conceptual and performative control. This class of priests, connected with cult centers in Doliche, presumably formed a regularly communicating network of Dolichean religious “brethren”.⁸⁷ Most of these priests were Syrians, who, Collar concludes, “were regularly transported or transporting themselves to the west from Syria and the eastern provinces for the purpose of administering the cult”.⁸⁸ In addition, non-Syrians, even non-Orientals, were also accepted into the priesthood, and trained *in situ* by established priests.⁸⁹ There are, however, no trans-local religious officials or specialists documented for cults of the Roman Mithras; even the role of a locally autonomous *patres*, who presumably presided over (most) Mithraic cells, is not fully understood.

83 *Ibid.*, 94-95.

84 *Ibid.*, 95.

85 Given the local autonomy of Mithraic groups, it is possible that some may have initiated females (Jonathan David, “The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?”, *Numen* 47, 2000, 121-141; Alison Griffith, “Completing the Picture: Women and the Female Principle in the Mithraic Cult”, *Numen* 53, 2006, 48-77). Nevertheless, membership in Mithraic groups remained overwhelming male (Richard Gordon, “Mithraism”, in: Lindsay Jones [ed.], *Encyclopedia of Religion* IX, Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA ²2005, 6088-6093: 6090).

86 A mithraeum connected with the Domus of the Criptoportico from the excavations of Vulci is sometimes described as an example of a “private [Mithraic] cult site” (Alfonsina Russo Tagliente, *Vulci e i misteri di Mitra: Culti orientali in Etruria*, Rome: Soprintendenza Archeologia del Lazio e dell’ Etruria Meridionale/Commune di Montalto di Castro/Comune di Canino; Vulci: Parco Naturalistico Archeologico di Vulci 2016, n.p.). However, “a bronze *fistula* found in the spa area ... retains the name of M. Vinicius which suggests connections with three distinct characters of Vulci: the first a console of 33 BC, the second a suffix of 19 BC and finally with the son-in-law of [the prominent Roman general Germanicus], in turn, honorary consul and husband of Iulia Livilla” (“La Casa del Criptoportico di Vulci” [online], <<https://verbavolantmonumentament.com/2016/03/03/la-casa-del-criptoportico-di-vulci/>>, 3 March 2016 [18 July 2018]). If this Criptoportico was indeed the residence of the consul and son-in-law of Germanicus, a military connection is suggested for this mithraeum as well, founded, perhaps, by/for veterans.

87 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 139-140.

88 *Ibid.*, 140.

89 *Ibid.*

While a centralized cult of Jupiter Dolichenus established its independence from the military with its admission of civilians and by its administration by a non-military, hierarchical priesthood, the Roman cults of Mithras remained, on the other hand, subordinate to the Roman military organization (or to the administrative bureaucracy or guild) in which they were embedded.⁹⁰ Of course, any subgroups within the highly regulated Roman legions whose members might espouse loyalty to some external, non-military administration would have been antithetical to the strict command and control structures of the Roman military⁹¹ – a potential constraint that the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus seem to have resolved.

The cults of Jupiter Dolichenus endured until the end of the third century AD, when they succumbed to a decline in the “established military communications of central Imperial governance” that resulted from “military and political turbulence”, especially on Rome’s frontiers.⁹² This decline of the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus along with that of their military communications supports Collar’s conclusion about the role military social networks can play in cultic failures as well as in cultic success.⁹³ Nevertheless, cults of the Roman Mithras, arguably more interlinked with the Roman military than were those of Jupiter Dolichenus, persisted until the end of the following century, when they became subject to the anti-pagan decrees of the Christian Emperor Theodosius.

Conclusion

Malkin raises the question of “when a ‘network’ is simply a network and when it is the ‘network’ of network theory?”. While it might be demurred that any systematic representation of networks presumes some theory or other, Malkin’s question distinguishes between the earlier models for graphically representing networks and those that include insights from complexity theory. He answers his question about this distinction by opining “that it is both ... since the one often implies the other”.⁹⁴ Similarly, the widespread but decentralized distribution of cults of the Roman Mithras throughout the Empire has, in fact, been characterized by both, as a pre-complexity linear network of singular origination (e.g., Cumont), and suggested as an example of the “small world” model of complexity-network theory (Collar). But while there may have been *potential* for a Mithraic network to have developed in the Roman Empire, as

90 M. Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras...*, 40.

91 Polybius 6:38; Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* 85-88, 102-107.

92 A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire...*, 144.

93 *Ibid.*, 80.

94 I. Malkin, *A Small Greek World...*, 16.

it did for the Dolicheans, the argument for the singular origin for a Roman Mithraism has been discredited, while the historical evidence for a “small Mithraic world” remains undocumented.

Unlike the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus, it would seem that the cults of the Roman Mithras never (or seldom) differentiated themselves from the embrace of their mediating institutions (military, administrative, or guild) to emerge as an interactive network that was, in some way, self-reliantly Mithraic. Rather, the diffusion of Mithraic groups seems always to have remained dependent upon the linear deployments and redeployments of military units (or upon the market driven mobility of merchants or the administrative responsibilities of Roman civil servants). Apart from scholarly presumptions about some essentialized Mithraism transmitted from a common origin, this externally controlled spread of Mithraic groups,⁹⁵ could have resulted, at best, in incidental connections between random Mithraic communities.⁹⁶

A “small world” model advanced by complexity-network theorists still promises to explain a Mithraic network that might challenge hypotheses of common origins as well as the more recent hypotheses of Mithraic groups as simply local and autonomous. A successful modeling of a weak-tie network for Mithraic groups could justify previous, and still persistent, efforts to discover a “small world” network underlying the heterogeneous cultures of the Roman Mithraists that would integrate beliefs and practices that might be more or less comparable throughout the Empire. However, no evidence for such a historical possibility has yet been adduced, for example, for any multidirectional flow among Mithraic groups, a dynamics of reciprocity that is requisite for the emergence of “small world” networks. Rather, the cognitive science of religion, which identifies the pan-human neurocognitive dynamics and attractors that underlie culturally contingent representations, still remains the most viable approach for understanding the diverse expressions and practices of the disparate Mithraic groups.

95 D. Barney, *The Network Society*..., 27.

96 Leonardo Ambasciano arrives at similar conclusions for the Roman cult of Bona Dea; see Leonardo Ambasciano, “The Goddess Who Failed? Competitive Networks (or the Lack Thereof), Gender Politics, and the Diffusion of the Roman Cult of Bona Dea”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistku* 24/2, 2016, 111-165.

SUMMARY

Was There a Network of Roman Mithraists?

A deity with the name of Mithra (Mitra, Mithras) is attested from second millennium BC Indian Vedas to the first four centuries of the Roman Empire. Despite scholarly attempts to trace a line of influence from earlier manifestations of this deity, especially from the Persian Mithra to the Roman Mithras, recent research suggests that the character of Mithraic cults, even those of the Roman Mithras, remains primarily local. Might, however, the recent renewal of interest by historians in network theory – especially, network theory as it has been recast from sociological to chaos theory, to a “complexity-network theory” – show a relationship among the Mithraic cults, especially, among those of the Roman Empire? This possibility is supported by a recent network mapping of the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus in the Roman world. Despite the cults of Jupiter Dolichenus and those of the Roman Mithras both being transmitted (largely) by their embeddedness in the Roman military, there remain significant differences between the two religions that question the emergence of a network of Roman Mithraists. Rather, the approach of the cognitive science of religion, which seeks to identify the pan-human neurocognitive dynamics and attractors that underlie culturally contingent representations, and which has now also been employed by a few scholars of the Roman cults of Mithras, remains the most viable approach for understanding the relationship of diverse practices and cultural expressions of the disparate Mithraic groups.

Keywords: network theory; “complexity-network theory”; Jupiter Dolichenus; cults of the Roman Mithras; cognitive science of religion.

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