



# Roman Religion in the Classroom: Spotlight on the Mysteries of Mithras<sup>1</sup>

by Ersin Hussein

There appears to be no ‘tail end’ in sight for academic enquiry into the worship of Mithras in the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Interest in this ancient religion, and its popularity and longevity as a topic of study, has no doubt been secured by its status as an elective cult and by its rich, and at times controversial, surviving evidence, which is predominantly archaeological in nature and packed with astrological symbolism. No written documentation representing a theological canon, which might outline its origins, traditions and customs, has ever been discovered.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the few surviving literary accounts present snapshots of the cult and are written by ‘outsiders’.<sup>4</sup> Though strongly associated with Zoroastrianism, an ancient religion widely worshipped across Asia Minor and Persia, the exact origins of Mithras, his identity as a god, and the development of his worship remain unclear. With the reopening of the London Mithraeum last year the spotlight has once again been cast on the spread and impact of the cult in Roman Britain.<sup>5</sup> This article accompanies pieces in this volume of *JCT* and the next which focus on this sacred and once exclusive space. Organised in two sections, part one will begin with a brief introduction to the history of scholarship, focusing mostly on some methodological and theoretical developments in recent studies. Following this, attention will be paid to the nature of the evidence for the

mysteries of Mithras and popular interpretations drawn from it. Part two will discuss methods for bringing this rich material to life in the classroom and reflect on pedagogical issues relating to teaching Mithraism as part of the Latin GCSE syllabus. The tried and tested exercises presented in this part of the article and are applicable to a variety of classroom settings, sizes and age groups.

Ideas concerning the preparation and delivery of teaching material expressed in this article are by no means definitive or exhaustive. I hope that sharing some of the strategies and methods that I have observed colleagues utilising, or that I have researched and developed myself, will be of interest and use to readers.

## PART ONE

### *Traditional and innovative approaches*

In the 1980s, Belgian archaeologist and historian Franz Cumont established Mithraism as a field of study and the framework for future enquiries by identifying and cataloguing its archaeological evidence.<sup>6</sup> More significantly, he used its iconography as the point of departure for exploring the cult. For Cumont, the appearance of mystery cults such as Mithraism across the Roman Empire, particularly in the western provinces, was evidence of a linear diffusion of ideas from east to

west. He placed great significance on identifying the Iranian ‘origins’ of the cult and sought out these elements in the evidence. Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, Cumont’s student, maintained this iconographic focus and made an equally lasting impact by publishing updated catalogues of Mithraic monuments.<sup>7</sup> In conjunction with the emphasis on the cult’s iconography, early scholarship also drew misleading parallels and comparisons between Mithraism and Christianity, interpreting them as rival cults.<sup>8</sup> This is unsurprising because of the voluntary and personal nature of both religions. While the rituals of Roman state religion predominantly centred on the ideology of the Imperial household Empire politics and were dictated by orthopraxy as opposed to orthodoxy, elective cults tended to offer some sort of spiritual salvation for the individual. The 1970s saw a sea-change. Following an international conference which celebrated and took stock of the field, a proliferation of publications appeared challenging traditional approaches and ideas, particularly Cumont’s.<sup>9</sup> While more nuanced approaches characterise the field, clarity over certain aspects of the cult is still lacking and fierce debate about how best to interpret the evidence continues. For some, however, Cumont and his immediate successors’ influence remains ever-present and problematic. Fast-forward several decades and Roger Beck, one of many leading scholars who

have redefined the study of Mithraism, continues to call for a drastic paradigm shift.<sup>10</sup> Like many others, his studies reject an overarching ‘one size fits all’ pre-existing package deal which adherents ‘bought into’. In his most recent monograph greater emphasis is placed on a more nuanced exploration of *how* adherents engaged with the environment in which they met and worshipped together.<sup>11</sup> Beck’s most significant point is this: modern scholarship has unfairly prejudiced iconographic evidence over surviving literary evidence to draw conclusions about a belief system of Mithraists and their rituals.<sup>12</sup> For Beck, attention to the environment of the mithraeum, in conjunction with the surviving iconography, must be paid to obtain a deeper and culturally rich understanding of *how* these symbols conveyed key messages to its adherents.<sup>13</sup> Starting and framing any exploration of Mithraism with study of the mithraeum is logical because the Mithraic mysteries and their associated monuments were conducted and displayed in these private settings. The following overview of the cult will begin with a summary of its sacred spaces followed by discussion of its key iconography, appeal and adherents.

#### *Scene-setting*

Mithraic monuments discovered across the Roman Empire indicate the cult’s popularity and spread from the first to the fourth centuries AD.<sup>14</sup> While there was not a cult centre, the highest concentration of evidence has been discovered across Rome, Ostia, and the Frontier provinces along the Rhine and Danube, with spaces of worship firmly established in the Empire’s capital by the early second century AD.<sup>15</sup> Evidence for the cult diminishes in the fourth to fifth centuries AD, naturally coinciding with watershed moments in the history of Roman religion which had a major impact on pagan worship across the Empire, e.g. Emperor Theodosius’ anti-pagan decrees.<sup>16</sup>

Mithraea (singular: mithraeum), the cave-like ‘temples’ of the cult, were often obscured from public view, located in secluded or private places, though some were established in bustling urban spaces.<sup>17</sup> For context and comparison, Roman state religion, and

even other elective cults, were more outwardly visible and marked daily life in permanent and temporary ways through festivals, rituals and sacrifices which were performed out in the open. Similarly, worshippers of Isis could be easily identified by their garb, shaved heads and be heard processing through the streets on certain occasions. Furthermore, although closed to non-worshippers, the Temple of Isis and Serapis in Rome was clearly located in the Campus Martius.<sup>18</sup> Initiates of the Mithraic mysteries belonged to a congregation, estimated between ten and 40 members, as part of a specific mithraeum, and were united through membership, gathering for communal activities such as ceremonies, initiations and feasting.<sup>19</sup> Entry into these exclusive spaces sometimes required descent into a network of underground anterooms before reaching a main room or a long, narrow crypt. This main space was often flanked either side by benches for feasting and at one end had an altar and even a water source nearby for use in any ritual activities.<sup>20</sup> Beck’s close reading of Porphyry, a Neoplatonic philosopher active in the third and early fourth centuries AD, offers an illuminating starting point regarding the nature and organisation of mithraea.<sup>21</sup>

*Similarly, the Persians call the place a cave where they introduce an initiate to the mysteries, revealing to him the path by which souls descend and go back again. For Eubulus tells us that Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honour of Mithras, the creator and father of all. This cave bore for him the image of the cosmos which Mithras had created, and the things which the cave contained, by their proportionate arrangement, provided him with symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos. Porphyry de antro nympharum 6 (trans. Arethusa edition taken from Beck (2006), 16):*

Two significant points emerge from Porphyry’s interpretation of the Mithraic mysteries. First is that mithraea were organised to represent a map of the universe to facilitate understanding of the mystery of descent and return of souls. The eastern end of the mithraeum, understood to represent the day, stood in direct symbolic opposition to the western end, associated with dark

and night. North and south of mithraea may also have been marked, possibly with planetary spheres and signs of the zodiac. Beck’s interpretation that this means that mithraea were teaching spaces in which initiates received wisdom establishes a highly charged framework for the iconography that it contained. The second significant point is that Mithraism claimed Persia as its source of wisdom and that the cult was founded by Zoroaster in the distant past. While a popular narrative and easy to interpret from the iconography, stories of ‘origins’ must not be taken for granted in antiquity and this particular story should be understood as a western construction of the cult’s links with Persia in the Roman Empire.<sup>22</sup> Despite the need to tread with caution over these details, Mithraic monuments discovered across the Roman Empire present a range of common, recurring symbols which relate to the organisation of the space as a representation of the cosmos.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Mithraic iconography*

Amongst the complex and peculiar symbols which allude to the reception of wisdom in the mithraeum, the tauroctony, the representation of Mithras poised to slay a bull, is without doubt the most familiar, iconic and loaded with meaning. Traditionally, it is also the image from which the cult’s liturgy has been reconstructed. Elaborate frescoes, plaques, and free-standing sculptures depicting the tauroctony were often positioned in a central niche, usually the eastern part of the mithraeum. Mithras’ association with the sun, sometimes highlighted by surrounding scenes showing Mithras feasting with Sol and later being invested by him with the power of the Sun, adds significance to this positioning.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the medium, Mithras is portrayed wearing a Phrygian cap and cape, forcing the bull down with a knee on its back, with a knife poised in one hand and pulling the nostrils of the bull upwards with the other to expose the throat. The carved relief discovered in the London Mithraeum is a useful point of reference as it contained several associated images which were commonly found represented as part of the tauroctony



across the Empire.<sup>25</sup> For example, surrounding this tauroctony is a band depicting the twelve signs of the zodiac as well as other astrological symbols alluding to specific constellations. A dog, snake, and a scorpion can be observed. All these figures can be interpreted as corresponding to constellations: Mithras with Leo, the bull with Taurus, the dog, snake and scorpion with Canis Major and Canis Minor, Hydra, and Scorpio respectively. The twins Cautes and Caupates are also represented either as torch-bearers or with shepherds' crooks. Finally, Sol is depicted in the top left of the scene, in his *quadriga* (a four-horse chariot), and Luna in a *biga* (a two-horse chariot) in the top left.

Overall, the tauroctony is an uncomfortable image to take in as it pre-empts an act of violence and is full of heightened tension. In comparison, much calmer scenes of sacrifice inform our understanding of the rituals of Roman state religion.<sup>26</sup> Further elaborate scenes could frame the tauroctony and from this the 'mythology' of Mithras can be drawn. For example, scenes of Mithras being born from a rock, him dragging the bull into the cave, scenes of sacrifice and feasting - an integral activity of the cult, and scenes of Mithras interacting with Sol, were popular.

The combination of the basic division and organisation of mithraea into spaces associated with night and day and the iconography of the cult, with its associated astrological symbols, are testimony to the Mithraic axiom 'harmony and tension in opposition'.<sup>27</sup> The highly evocative organisation of these spaces could be further augmented by the positioning of other symbols, inscriptions, or images and these varied across the empire.

The eight mithraea at Ostia present an interesting cluster of sacred spaces. They reveal how these familiar symbols were further embedded within these environments and hint at the organisation of the cult. For example, the Mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia, dated to the middle of the third century AD, has a black and white mosaic in the floor depicting in sequence the grades of initiation in the cult and the deities or symbols

associated with each one.<sup>28</sup> The grades through which an initiate passed (from top to bottom of the mosaic) were Raven, Male Bride, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Sun-runner, Father. Initiates progressed through the grades, presumably moving up with members of their own congregation, no doubt completing new rituals at each stage.<sup>29</sup> Of these, the Lion is perhaps the first crucial grade as the prior three were preparatory and did not necessarily imply full membership. The prominence of the grade of Father in graffiti and inscriptions point to it being the most senior.

The combination of astrological and planetary symbols with the organisation and progression of initiates into grades points to an experience which can be likened to a celestial journey of the human soul through the fixed stars. More than this, an interpretation is that the soul of the initiate was conceived as rising during his lifetime further and further away from the earth, eventually to achieve *apogenesis* (birth away from the material world).<sup>30</sup>

#### *Appeal and adherents*

The Mithraic mysteries had an identity as a strong military cult and while popular with soldiers, the evidence also points to high numbers of imperial slaves and ex-slaves as initiates across the Roman Empire.<sup>31</sup> The invisibility, or partial participation, of individuals who do not belong to these groups in dedications or inscriptions prompt valuable questions about what counted as adherence in antiquity. For example, names of generals in dedications made in the province under their command is suggestive of a more symbolic involvement, likely because the cult was popular amongst their soldiers. Furthermore, evidence for women being initiated into the cult is entirely lacking, but dedications made by women have been discovered, indicating that while not initiated total exclusion from the cult was not necessarily the case.<sup>32</sup> It is also notable that the cult did not draw membership from the elite classes, no doubt as it was incompatible with traditional, state religion, until the mid-third century AD.<sup>33</sup>

At least for adherents identified clearly as soldiers, imperial slaves and ex-slaves, it does not take too much of a leap to understand the appeal of the cult. These social groups shared a common experience that could easily be transposed to the worship of Mithras because it was an experience shaped by self-discipline, subjection to a strict hierarchy, and progression through the ranks.<sup>34</sup> In a very real sense, the organisation of the cult could be interpreted as mirroring some of their everyday life experiences.

## PART TWO

### *Breaking down the evidence*

The above overview of Mithraism in the Roman Empire, albeit brief, highly selective, and rather sweeping, provides a snapshot of the varied and dynamic evidence available to explore this exciting topic. The challenge lies in breaking it all down into digestible chunks whilst delivering key information that enables students to explore the possible interpretations and develop their personal, critical responses. Furthermore, maintaining class attention and energy whilst delivering information that is accessible to, and inclusive for, students of all attainments, and providing the tools to aid retention of the subject knowledge, remain high on the agenda when planning any teaching session.<sup>35</sup> One solution lies in creating a learning environment which includes active learning. A person's average attention span is thought to be roughly 15 to 20 minutes and, where possible, this is a useful yardstick by which to measure when changes in tempo should come in teaching sessions.<sup>36</sup> Delivering information or devising exercises in blocks of five, ten and 15 minutes has proven a flexible way to organise teaching sessions and should, theoretically, avoid a restless audience or flat atmosphere.

For example, I planned a two-hour lecture on Roman religion, which was part of a compulsory, first year introductory module to Roman culture and society, using this technique:

Time	Focus	Resources
0.00-0.05 mins	Introduction: - Structure and aims of the session.	PowerPoint and handout with images and passages to discuss in class.
0.05-0.20	Religion in the private sphere: - Role of family members - Daily rituals and festivals.	
0.20-0.35	State religion: - Foundation myths and sacred topography of the city (the <i>pomerium</i> ). - The Roman gods and their temples.	
0.35-0.55	- Overview of vows, prayers, and sacrifice. - Overview of priesthoods.	
0.55-0.05	Break	
0.05-0.20	Religion and the Emperor: - Augustus and the 'restoration' of Roman religion. - Focus on: <i>Lares Augusti</i> , <i>Genius Augusti</i> , Saecular games, Augustus' religion titles.	
0.20-0.30	The imperial cult and apotheosis: - Romulus; Julius Caesar; Augustus-Claudius; Vespasian; Antoninus Pius and Faustina.	
0.30-0.35	- Introducing 'foreign' cult to Rome - <i>Magna Mater</i> . - Elective forms of worship: Isis, Mithras, Christianity and Judaism.	
0.35-0.50	Focus on Mithraism: - Membership, appeal, iconography, and visibility.	
0.50-0.55	Conclusion and key take-away points.	

This was later adapted for the delivery of a much shorter one-hour lecture on Roman religion on a similar module:

Time	Focus	Resources
0.00-0.05 mins	Introduction: structure and aims of the session.	PowerPoint and handout with images and passages to discuss in class.
0.05-0.15	Overview of key terms and concepts.	
0.15-0.30	The framework of Roman state religion. The inclusion of foreign gods.	
0.30-0.45	Elective forms of worship: Mithras, Isis, Christianity. Focus on Mithraism.	
0.45-0.50	Conclusion and key take-away points.	

Whatever the focus and aims of the session, this model is flexible. The time apportioned at the start and end of the session should ensure successful delivery of a teaching session as student expectations can be managed through the setting of clear instructions and the consolidation of key information. Regardless of the learning environment or the task at hand, the delivery of clear instructions and guidance prior to and during learning events creates an inclusive environment in which students should feel confident to contribute, particularly if it involves some student participation.<sup>37</sup>

Nothing creates energy and lifts the mood in a classroom of any size, configuration or setting like individual or group work in which students are required to directly explore and discuss primary evidence and there are many ways to facilitate this. This can work particularly well if a class or group has a good dynamic with confident speakers to share their ideas and if instructions about the session is clear, whether

delivered in advance or at the start of the class. Active engagement with core material or case studies, rather than listening passively, not only aids the consolidation of key information but also develops academic and interpersonal skills. For instance, individual or group activities foster collegiality, encourage problem-solving, team-work, and communication skills. These moments are ideal for discretely moving around the class and speaking with students, particularly those with SpLDs. Without fail students are more at ease asking questions and sharing ideas in this smaller setting as opposed to in front of all their peers. Furthermore, this technique avoids the session being dominated by a few eager or more self-assured students, and allows those who are more introverted or not as confident with the material to speak or receive focused attention. All of this is well known. However, no matter how dynamic and innovative a lesson is in theory, its success depends on the flexibility and inclusivity of the

activity and on the class dynamic. For these reasons, the activities outlined below are designed to build student confidence with the material whether they have prepared in advance of the session or not.

#### *Making introductions*

Introduction of the key information can be delivered using a number of dynamic media that are free and easily accessible. Some of my best and worst memories of school are of a lesson beginning with the classroom door being forced open by a gargantuan trolley with a television on it that would now be museum-worthy. Out would come a VHS tape (remember those?!) and shortly after the classroom would be plunged into darkness. These teaching sessions would be greeted with glee because it required little active participation in class, but the reality was that the information delivered would be forgotten. The potential to transport students to other landscapes, settings or environments

through visual media remains exciting and can be more successful than this by creating discussion points in lessons while bringing leading academics, archaeologists and curators into the classroom. One such resource is the Romans in Focus project (<https://www.romansinfoocus.com/>) which produced eight, five to six-minute short videos on several topics relating to Roman culture and society. The eight videos (which are entitled: Rethinking women and work; *insulae*: how the masses lived; Freedmen: new citizens; Auxiliary soldiers: Romans-to-be; Roman law: the art of the fair and good?; Growing up in the Roman Empire; Constructing power in Augustus' Rome; Religion: public display and private worship) are free to access and are accompanied by a range of supporting material including: a transcript of the videos, questions to pose to students, supplementary evidence to the objects included in the shorts with a bibliography, and links to other useful web resources to engage with.

*Some activities and exercises*

1. Question everything...

Having introduced the necessary contextual information about Roman religion and the evidence for Mithraism, a range of general, overarching questions can be posed to break up teaching sessions and encourage student involvement. The questions below, taken from Beard, North, and Price's text and sourcebooks, encompass a wide range of

issues relating to the study of Roman Religion. The fact that there are no clear-cut, fixed answers to these questions renders them perfect for debates or as points of discussion:

- What did Roman religion look like?
- What was the role of the ordinary populace?
- Were foreign cults alternative or complementary to traditional, state religion?
- Whom did foreign cults appeal to and why?
  - Which groups in society?
  - Poor or rich? Or were these religions of the disadvantaged?
  - What would make someone want to participate?
- How far were the elite involved in these cults?
  - What counts as adherence?
- What was the boundary between official and unofficial religion?
  - Was there any sense of integration?
  - What made a cult an official Roman cult?
  - Did they incorporate the Roman Emperor in their activities in any way?

- How were they integrated into the Roman calendar?
- Did they make any sort of impact?

These questions can be revised to ask more focused questions about Mithraism and be presented in conjunction with specific evidence to prompt quick-fire responses or lengthier debate and discussion depending on the aims, and constraints, of the teaching session.

When more concentrated exploration of a case study is possible, opportunities for even more creative and involved engagement are greater. For example, students can be presented with a selection of primary evidence to engage with in advance of or during the lesson to prepare for a debate or to answer questions more generally in class. Ideally, students would come prepared to class where they might spend the first few minutes in set groups, having already worked independently or with others, consolidating their ideas and how they plan to present their conclusions to their peers. It might also be the case that while one or two people will be more willing to speak or present ideas to the wider class, there are also roles for students who are less willing to speak in front of their peers. These include that of scribe, or if the group are presenting using a handout or a PowerPoint students could take the lead designing or organising visuals. In lecture or seminar sessions, which typically run for 50 minutes, the format has often taken the following:

Time	Focus	Resources
0.00-0.05 mins	Introduction: structure and aims of the session.	
0.05-0.20	Group work. Class leader to circulate room.	If this session is designated for student presentations, this time could be allocated for these. In my experience, the more freedom students have over the format their presentations take, the more likely they are to volunteer.
0.20-0.25	Reminder that five minutes of group work remains, students to organise how they will present ideas to the class.	
0.25-0.45	Class debate or discussion working through set questions/material.	
0.45-0.50	Conclusion and key take away points.	

## 2. Student-led teaching sessions

Student-led lessons are also excellent for developing subject knowledge, critical thinking, communication and team-working skills. Academic institutions and research groups are continually developing dynamic, free and accessible resources, such as digitised maps, museum catalogues, podcasts, and educational videos, which are successfully making it easier for data and research to be shared amongst specialist and wider audiences. This opens up a world of opportunities when it comes to preparing teaching

sessions and engaging students with the ancient world. These resources are excellent for developing subject knowledge. Regardless of the module or topic that I am teaching, I always devise a seminar in which students spend time in advance of the lesson (or during it), using a selection of hand-picked websites, to conduct research on an object or an ancient site. It can be a minefield for some to navigate their way through the amateur, general and academic websites and databases. Therefore, I consider it essential that students are equipped with the skills to decipher for themselves which online

resources are appropriate to consult, how best to utilise these for their own research, and to be mindful of traditional modes of research which should not be forgotten or overlooked. Part of their work would include an assessment of the web-resource that they used. Students can either present their findings in class or by submitting a short, written report which could be assessed or less formal. In preparation of this exercise, specific instructions and questions are set to guide students. Variations of the instructions can be presented in advance of the session or in class. For example:

---

### Session aims:

- To consolidate our overview of the worship of Mithras across the Roman Empire.
- To explore a range of online resources.
- To compare and contrast online resources with traditional methods of conducting research.

### Key questions:

- How can websites add to our understanding of the Mithraic Mysteries?
- What sort of information do they provide?
- Are some landscapes or types of evidence given preference?
- What can we learn about Roman religion and the wider culture and society of the Roman Empire?
- How does this compare to other resources that you would use to conduct research?

### Part One – Choosing a case study:

- Case Study One: A dedication to/representation of Mithras from the Roman Inscriptions of Britain Online website: <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org>
- Case Study Two: A Mithraeum at Ostia from the Ostia-antica website: <http://www.ostia-antica.org/>
- Case Study Three: An object housed in the British Museum: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/search.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx)
- Case Study Four: An object housed in the London Museum: <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections>
- Case Study Five: An overview of the London Mithraeum: <https://www.londonmithraeum.com/>

### Part Two – assessing the evidence:

General questions:

- What sort of information do websites provide about the archaeological and historical context?
- How does the website present the objects or sites?
- Does the website facilitate a broader understanding of the objects or sites, such as:

If assessing a site:

1. What is the function of this site?
2. When, where, how, and why was it developed?
3. What is the history of archaeology and conservation at the site?
4. What objects or buildings remain in situ? Where have others been moved to and why?
5. What does this site reveal about the worship of Mithras/Roman religion in this context?

If assessing an object:

6. What is the function of this type of object?
7. Where and how was it produced?
8. How might it have been used or re-used?
9. How did the context of the object relate to its function? (e.g. Why was an inscription inscribed in a particular material?)
10. What does this object reveal about the worship of Mithras/Roman religion in this context?

### Part three: Comparison with traditional published materials:

Now compare what you have learned online with the published materials that we have encountered so far or that you have discovered whilst developing your own research on Roman religion. Questions to consider:

- Do you think that a website like this has any advantages over 'traditional' publications in book form? Is it easy to access, to navigate, and to answer the questions set out above? What would you change, if anything, about the website?
-



The organisation of student-led sessions, depending on the size of the class and how many groups are formed, normally runs as per the draft schedule above on page nine.

### 3. Evoking the mithraeum

Beck's emphasis on the importance of recognising the role and the environment of the mithraeum has been emphasised throughout this article. So, how can the environment and atmosphere of a mithraeum be brought to life in a classroom setting to provide the all-important framework for considering the rich and complex iconographic evidence? While ideal, visiting a mithraeum is not always possible. The web resources discussed in this article, with their educational videos and access to archaeological material via museum catalogues or websites maintained by academic institutions, emphasise the environment and atmosphere of the mithraeum through images, maps, and videos. There are other creative and instructive ways in which the atmosphere or organisation of the space can be evoked in the classroom.

The hierarchical nature of Roman society was mirrored in many aspects of daily life, in particular in its religions. Without asking students to partake in cringeworthy re-enactments, for which students are often unwilling to volunteer (unless they have a burning desire to indulge in some acting!), it is possible to emulate and emphasise the privileges that the minority some experienced, through their access to wealth and knowledge, and the marginalisation of other groups through very light role play. It is an interesting way to encourage students to think about the experience of individuals or collective groups in antiquity. For instance, in a lecture focused on the gladiatorial games at Rome (delivered with a colleague several years ago), upon entering the lecture hall, students were assigned a specific 'roles' or 'character types' and had to sit in a divided room according to their status, as they would have done in a Roman amphitheatre. The actions that took place within the mock arena were decided by a minority of the class and as the lesson unfurled discussion took place about the inclusivity of the experience. This approach could easily be applied to the Mithraic mysteries. The shape of the mithraeum

could be evoked simply with a basic reconfiguration of the classroom and pupils could be assigned roles and be asked to position themselves where they think they would be in this setting. This could then trigger discussion about the roles of different groups, particularly women in the case of the cult of Mithras.

Setting a creative writing assignment is another approach that would engage critically with the primary evidence. As no surviving documentation that could be considered doctrine has been discovered, students could be asked to critically think about the environment of mithraea and their iconography, and to then write their own guide or rule book on how to enact the Mithraic mysteries. This could be done from the perspective of a Mithraist of a particular rank or congregation (to impress the varied nature of the evidence according to context), an outsider, or of a modern traveller going back in time.<sup>38</sup>

**Ersin Hussein, Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Swansea**  
[ersin.hussein@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:ersin.hussein@swansea.ac.uk)

## References

- Beck, R. (1984). 'Mithraism since Franz Cumont', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.7.4: 2002–2115.
- Beck, R. (2006). *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beard, M., North, J., and Price, S. (1998a). *Religions of Rome. Volume 1. A History*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Beard, M., North, J., and Price, S. (1998b). *Religions of Rome. Volume 2. A Sourcebook*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C., and Tight, M. (1998). *The Academic Career Handbook*, Open University Press: Buckingham and Philadelphia.
- Bligh, D. A. (1972). *What's The Use of Lectures?*, 3rd Edition. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Bowden, H. (2010). *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cannon, R. and Newble, D. (2000). *A Handbook for Teachers in Universities and Colleges, A guide to improving teaching*, 3rd Edition. London: Kogan Page.

Clauss, M. (2000). *The Roman Cult of Mithras: the God and his Mysteries*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Coarelli, F. (1979). "Topografia Mitriaca di Roma", in U. Bianchi ed. *Mysteria Mithrae*, Leiden: E. J. Brill: 69–79.

Cumont, F. (1894–1896). *Textes et Monuments Figurés Relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra: pub. avec une introduction critique*, Two Volumes, Bruxelles: H. Lamertin.

Cumont, F. (1911). *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism, with an introductory essay by Grant Showerman*, Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company.

David, J. (2000). "The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?" *Numen*, 47 (2): 121–141.

Exley, K. and Dennick, R. (2004). *Small Group Teaching: Tutorials, Seminars and Beyond*, London: Routledge.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books.

Gibbs, G., Habeshaw, S., and Habeshaw, T. (1992). *53 Interesting Things to do in Your Lectures*, 4th Edition, Bristol: Technical and Educational Services.

Griffiths, S. (2003). 'Chapter 7: Teaching and learning in small groups' in H. Fry, S. Ketteridge, and S. Marshall, (eds.) (2003) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. London: Kogan Page: 91–104.

Gordon, R. (1972). 'Mithraism and Roman society', *Religion* 2: 92–121.

Gordon, R. (1976). 'The sacred geography of a mithraeum: the example of Sette Sfere', *Mithraic Stud.* 1: 119–65.

Gordon, R. (1980). 'Reality, evocation and boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 3: 19–99.

Gordon, R. (1996). *Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World: Studies in Mithraism and Religious Art*. Aldershot.

Griffith, A. (2006). 'Completing the Picture: Women and the Female Principle in the Mithraic Cult', *Numen*, 53 (1): 48–77.

Grimes, W. et al. (1998). *The Temple of Mithras, London: Excavations*, Museum of London; London: English Heritage.

Hinnells, J. ed. (1975). *Mithraic Studies; Proceedings*. International Congress of Mithraic Studies (1st: 1971: Manchester University),

Two Volumes, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Hopkins, K. (1999). *A World Full of Gods: Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman World*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Martin, L. (2015). *The Mind of Mithraists: Historical and Cognitive Studies in the Roman Cult of Mithras*, London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Merkelbach, R. (1984). *Mithras*, Königstein/Ts: Hain.

Renan, E. (1882). *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du Monde Antique*, Paris: Calmann Lévy.

Rüpke, J. ed. (2007). *A companion to Roman Religion*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Speidel, M. (1980). *Mithras-Orion: Greek Hero and Roman Army God*, Leiden: Brill.

Sperber, D. (1975). *Rethinking Symbolism*, translated by A. L. Morton, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Turcan, R. (1975). *Mithras Platonius*, Leiden: Brill.

Ulansey, D. (1989). *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vermaseren, M. (1956–1960). *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, Two volumes, Hagae Comitatus: M. Nijhoff.

<sup>1</sup>This article is a much-revised version of a paper that I delivered at the Hands up Education conference held at the Museum of London (8<sup>th</sup> July 2017). I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to participate in this event and for their initial feedback on the paper. I would also like to thank the team at the Cambridge Schools Classics Project for enabling me to work with them on the development of Romans in Focus: <https://www.romansinfocus.com/>.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. the select bibliography of key works provided at the end of the article. Beard, North, and Price's, hereafter *BNP*, text and sourcebook on Roman religion remains useful to consult and is the most accessible text cited, providing invaluable summaries of many Roman cults and situates these within the wider historical and social context of the Empire. Where possible, primary sources cited in this article have been drawn from museum catalogues, academic databases and from *BNP* for ease of access. All websites and databases cited were last accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2018.

<sup>3</sup>A magical handbook recorded on papyri in the fourth century AD contains text which has been controversially considered by some as

Mithraic liturgy: *Papyri Graecae Magicae* iv.475–86, 618–65, 674–7, 692–732 = *BNP* (1998b), 269–270, no. 11.6.

<sup>4</sup>*BNP* (1998b), 305.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Grimes *et al.* (1998) and the London Mithraeum website: <https://www.londonmithraeum.com/>

<sup>6</sup>Cumont (1894), (1896) and (1911); Beck (2006), 1: The term 'Mithraism' is a modern invention, whereas the cult was referred to as 'the Mysteries of Mithras' in antiquity.

<sup>7</sup>Vermaseren (1956–1960), hereafter *CIMRM*.

<sup>8</sup>E.g. Renan (1882).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Hinnells ed. (1975) and Beck (1984).

<sup>10</sup>E.g. in particular Beck (2006), 3–4 and 20.

<sup>11</sup>Beck (2006), 1–4: His engagement with cognitive neuroscience and anthropology, notably with Geertz (1973) and Sperber (1975), is successful in part. The influence of this approach on more recent scholarship is all too clear in Martin (2015).

<sup>12</sup>Beck (2006), 23.

<sup>13</sup>Beck (2006), 3.

<sup>14</sup>*BNP* (1998b), 88–89: the term mithraeum is another modern invention, ancient terms for these sacred spaces included *templum*, *aedes*, and *speleum*.

<sup>15</sup>*BNP* (1998a), 266: The exact number of mithraea in the city of Rome has been debated. Cf. Coarelli (1979) who estimated that 700 mithraea existed in Rome.

<sup>16</sup>For Theodosius' ban on pagan sacrifice in AD 392 cf. *Theodosian Codex XVI 10.12* = *BNP* (1998b), 286–287, no. 11.4.

<sup>17</sup>For example, at Ostia a number are in locations away from busy roads: Cf. <http://www.ostia-antica.org/dict/topics/mithraea/mithraea.htm>. At Rome, however, mithraea have been discovered at the Circus Maximus and the Baths of Caracalla. Cf. *BNP* (1998a), xx–xxi map three which highlights the known mithraea of Rome and *BNP* (1998b), 88–91, no. 4.6.

<sup>18</sup>Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.9–10 = *BNP* (1998b), 134–135, no. 5.6c which describes the procession of Isis. Cf. also *BNP* (1998a), map two on pages xviii–xix and 264–6.

<sup>19</sup>*BNP* (1998a), 288; Clauss (2000), 42: Initiates were united symbolically through the gesture of a handshake in the Roman cult of Mithras (referred to as *syndexioi*).

<sup>20</sup>The ground plans of the Mithraea at Ostia are great examples to illustrate this layout: <http://www.ostia-antica.org/dict/topics/mithraea/mithraea.htm>

<sup>21</sup>Beck (2006), 16–7 and 41–66.

<sup>22</sup>*BNP* (1998a), 279–80. Cf. also *BNP* (1998b), 311–313, no. 12.5d.

<sup>23</sup>E.g. *BNP* (1998a), 277–8 and 285–6. For key reading on the range of constellations that these key figures are identified with see: Gordon (1976) on astrological symbolism; Ulansey (1989); *BNP* (1998b), 305, 313–316, no. 12.5g; Beck (2006) in general.

<sup>24</sup>Vivid depictions include:

1. *CIMRM* 650 = *BNP* (1998b), 307–8, no. 12.5b: an annotated image of the tauroctony.
2. *RIB* 3 = London Museum ID A16933: a carved relief discovered in the London Mithraeum is on display in the London Museum. Details of this can also be found on the Roman Inscriptions of Britain (*RIB*) database: <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/3>
3. At Ostia a replica of the free-standing tauroctony is now positioned in a mithraeum located in Regio I Insula XVII (referred to as Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra) with the original statue on display in the museum at Ostia: <http://www.ostia-antica.org/regio1/17/17-2a.htm>
4. *CIMRM* 181: a fresco in the mithraeum located in the church of San. Maria Capua Vetere in Italy.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/3>

<sup>26</sup>E.g. *BNP* (1998b), 148–149, no. 6.1b: a panel from Marcus Aurelius' triumphal arch (Rome, AD 176) depicts the emperor preparing to sacrifice in front of the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitolium. Note the sacrificial bull standing serenely as part of the crowd!

<sup>27</sup>Beck (2006), 5–6.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. *BNP* (1998b), 305–6, no. 12.5a = *CIMRM* 299 and <http://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm>.

<sup>29</sup>*BNP* (1998a), 285, 288–90.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey* 24–5 = *BNP* (1998b), 313–316, no. 12.5g.

<sup>31</sup>For a range of inscriptions which shed light on worshippers cf. *BNP* (1998b), 308–11, no.



12.5c and 316–319, no. 12.5h. Other illuminative examples include:

1. *CIMRM* 214; *Insc. Italiae* IV.67: Marble plaque found near Hadrian's villa outside Tivoli To Sun unconquerable Mithras, just as he himself ordered in a dream his image (?) to be repaired, Victorianus a slave steward of our emperor undertook its repair for the ever-present deity at his own expense and dedicated it. Hail <Noma> to all. The attendant was [...]lius Magnus.
2. *CIMRM* 1243: On a small altar from a Roman military base at Bingium (modern Bingen, near Mainz in Germany)

In honour of the imperial house, to the unconquerable god Mithras the altar was established as a result of a vow to the god at their expense by Aulus Gratus Iuvenis Father of the rites and Aulus Gratus Potens, soldier of the XXII legion, Fire Officer. The brothers dedicated it when Africanus was consul <AD. 236>.

<sup>32</sup>*BNP* (1998a), 298. For further reading on membership of the cult see *BNP* (1998a), 291–5. For more recent discussion of the supposed exclusion of women from the cult cf. David (2000) and Griffith (2006).

<sup>33</sup>E.g. *CIL* VI 1778 = *BNP* (1998b), 213, no. 8.9. Cf. also *BNP* (1998b), 291–2.

<sup>34</sup>Aside from the hierarchy of the cult which mirrored that of Roman society, Mithraists were expected to adhere to strict codes of conduct and abstain from certain behaviour. E.g. *BNP* (1998b), 311, no. 12.5d = Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, 16.

<sup>35</sup>Cannon and Newble (2000), 43; Exley and Dennick (2004), 13–20.

<sup>36</sup>Bligh (1972), 52–61 and 66–73; Gibbs, Habeshaw, S., and Habeshaw, T. (1992), 95.

<sup>37</sup>Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight (1998), 84–6.

<sup>38</sup>Hopkins, K. (1999) which presents the accounts of two travellers who go back in time to experience ancient Rome!