When Mithras Came to Rome:
The Cultural Transmission of Mithras from Persia to the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

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ABSTRACT

When Mithras Came to Rome: The Cultural Transmission of Mithras from Persia to the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

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Scholars of Mithraic studies disagree on the origins of the Roman mystery cult of Mithras. Iranologists have largely insisted on a Persian origin of the cult. Alternatively, Roman historians emphasize the separation between the Persian Yazāt Miϑra and the Roman cult of Mithras; they interpret the cult as a Roman production informed by ancient astrology and Neoplatonic philosophy. Recent scholarship has addressed how Greco-Roman appropriation of the god Miϑra, included a process of selection and instrumentalisation of Persian tradition which informed how the Roman Mithraists developed a novel religious expression. Building on this recent approach that attends to the complex dynamics of cultural transmission, this dissertation argues that the Hellenistic reception of the god Miϑra coupled with Roman ideals of Persia can be traced in Mithraic art and its ritual language. This thesis suggests a new model for the development of Roman Mithraic imagery and visual language, and its complex relationship to Persian antecedents.

This study has four main objectives: The first objective is to establish a visual and textual inventory of the Persian Miϑra that provides an ample account for comparing the oriental manifestation of the god with his Roman counterpart Mithras. The second account is to explore the Greek depictions of the Zoroastrian Miϑra that transmitted the Persian figure of the god to Rome as the result of Rome's interest in the Orient. The third objective is to demonstrate how the Mithraic Mystagogues embraced the Greek imagination of "handsome Oriental" as well as Greek depictions of Zoroastrian Miϑra to invent an esoteric iconography and visual language for their novel religiosity in the Roman cultural milieu, which was a novel visual language that affected the descriptions of those intellectuals who had no personal engagement with the Roman cult. The last objective is to examine the appearance of Mithras cult in the broader context of Rome's imperial ideology and the attendant idea that Rome is defined by its openness to others and outsiders, particularly in terms of cultic life. It concludes that this cultural transmission and borrowing on the part of Romans should be understood in relation to Rome's imperial ideology and cultural identity.

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Introduction

Persia in the Roman Imagination: The Mystery Cult of Mithras

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This thesis offers a new approach to the study of Roman Mithraism. It explores how the cultic imagery of Mithras reflected Rome's cultural incorporation of foreign cults and cultures, and the attendant idea that the Empire was defined by its openness to others and outsiders, particularly Persians. It is an endeavor to trace the cultural transmission of the god Mitra/Miϑra/Mithras from Persia to the Roman Empire in a geographical-chronological order, and to examine the Roman appearance of the god as a deliberate cultural borrowing on the part of Roman Mithrasts.[1] In order to achieve an accurate chronology of the god's different appearances, this research takes a closer look at the figures of Mitra/Miϑra in the Vedic and Zoroastrian pantheons. Then, it turns to Greek historiography and Hellenistic Asia Minor where the god was identified as the Persian counterpart of the Greek Apollo, Helios and Hermes. This chronology will finally end with the Roman portrait of the god Mithras (Miϑra) as a bull killer deity.

Relying on recent scholarship in Mithraic studies, this work examines the sources that transmitted the Persian god Miϑra to the Roman Empire and demonstrates that the Romans embraced the figure of Persian Miϑra identified by Greeks, a figure who differed from the Zoroastrian figure of the god. This thesis also argues how the Roman Mithraic Mystagogues incorporated the Hellenistic imagery of the "handsome Oriental" into their cultic iconography and visual language to stress the Persian provenance of their god and to historicize their novel cult.[2] It also explores the Mithraic Mystagogues' claim to the Persian provenance of their god – a claim which later affected descriptions of the cult written by Roman period authors, Middle and Neoplatonists who had no personal engagement in the cult itself. Finally, this dissertation suggests

[1] I will use the various Mitra/Miϑra/Mithras to refer to the god in relation to the cultural contexts in which the god has appeared. Thus, the name *Mitra* refers to the god's appearance in the Vedic pantheon, *Miϑra* identifies the god's appearance in the Zoroastrian pantheon, and finally, Mithras (Μίϑρας) is the Greek transliteration of the Persian name, which occurred during the god's emergence in Asia Minor (Commagene) and in the Roman Empire. Moreover, the god's name was inscribed as Miiro, Miro, Mioro, Miiro, Miuro on the Kušan coins, and he is also named Mihr by Middle Persian and Armenian sources.

[2] Schneider, 2007, 62.

that the appearance of Mithras in the Roman Empire was a deliberate cultural borrowing that the Romans made in relation to Rome's cultural-political ideology and her enthusiasm for other cultures – and of Persia in particular. It also proposes that the iconography and visual language of the cult reflect the Roman notion of Persia and Persianness as their equal cultural-political counterpart, as their desirable foe who ran the Eastern part of the Mediterranean world.

1.2. What is the Roman Cult of Mithras?

The Roman cult of Mithras refers to the worship of the foreign god Mithras (Miϑra) in the Roman Empire. The cult has been examined by scholars as one of the Roman mystery cults, since its adherents were compelled to conceal the cultic practices and beliefs from non-initiates and to maintain the secrecy of their initiation rites. This definition, while prevalent, may not accurately helps us define the cult.

Walter Burkert defined "Mystery cults" as a group of cults sharing some criteria: they were late-antique phenomena, Oriental in origin, and promised salvation to their initiates.[3] In fact, however, these cults were not all late antique in prominence. The Eleusinian cult (the mystery cult of Demeter and Persephone), for instance, dates back to the sixth century BCE, and the mystery cult of Mithras was established by the end of the first century CE. They were not all Oriental in origin either. The Eleusinian cult and the Bacchus cult (the mystery cult of Dionysus) were both Greek mysteries that were later transmitted to Rome. Thus, scholars have recently argued that mystery cults refers to those cults that demanded secrecy and promised their initiates to improve their lives both in this life and in the life after death through communication with the god in initiation rituals.[4] In the context of the Roman Empire, scholars use the term "Mystery Cults" to refer to the cult of Isis, the cult of Dionysus, the cult of Magna Mater (Cybele and Attis), the cult of Demeter and Persephone, and the cult of Mithras.[5] Such a classification encounters another difficulty: however, these cults do not follow the same pattern in their initiation rituals. While ecstatic performance was a shared ritual between the Bacchus cult, the Eleusinian cult and the cult

[3] Burkert, 1987, 2-3.
[4] Johnston, 2007, 98-99.
[5] Cf. Bowden, 2010, 15.

of Cybele and Attis, there is no evidence that the cult of Mithras contained ecstatic rituals.[6] Additionally, while the gold tablets (the thirty-eight inscribed gold tablets found in graves dated to 5th century BCE to 2nd century CE) provide rich information about the idea of the afterlife and the journey to the underworld in Bacchus cult, we know little about the notion of the afterlife in the Roman cult of Mithras. Another difference can be found in these cults' views of gender. While the Roman Mithras cult was a brotherhood, the other mystery cults were open to both women and men. For these reasons, scholars have challenged this heuristic category noting that the only shared feature among them is their demand for secrecy.[7]

Despite the problems with the category of "Mystery cults", labeling the Roman Mithraism as a mystery cult originating from Persia (the Orient) has been the major tendency in Mithraic studies for over a century. The first scholar who categorized the Roman cult of Mithras as "mystery cult" was Frantz Cumont (*Les Mysteries de Mithra*, 1902). Cumont borrowed Georges Lafaye's model of the cult of Isis which traced back the mystery worship of Isis to Egypt. He held that the mystery cult of Mithras originated in Persia and was transmitted to the Roman Empire via Asia Minor.[8] Following Cumont, the German Orientalist Geo Widengren contended that the Roman Mithras cult was an Oriental mystery cult rooted in Persian and other Near Eastern religions.[9] Later in the 1970s, Ugo Bianchi returned to Cumont's model and argued that the Mithras cult was a Roman mystery religion which originated in the Orient.[10]

The question of the Mithras cult's origin has been the subject of Mithraic studies from the 19th century until today. The first mention of the god, as I will examine in Chapter one, appears among Vedic deities and later as a member of the Zoroastrian pantheon, where the deity personified the notion of "contract" and functioned as the overseer of contracts, savior of the soul and the arbiter over judgement, penalizing liars and transgressors. The symmetries and asymmetries between the Roman Mithras and his Vedic counterpart, Mitra, and his Zoroastrian equivalent, Miϑra, have been a central issue in Mithraic studies. However, the issue of origins is not the only difficulty in Mithraic studies. The lack of extant primary sources also complicates our

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[6] Bowden, 2010, 18.
[7] Following this critical view, scholars have avoided using this terminology in the case of the Roman cult of Mithras. E.g. Beck, 2006; Martine, 2015; Gordon, 2017B.
[8] Gordon, 2017b, 3.
[9] Widengren, 1966, 433-56.
[10] Bianchi, 1979, 3-29.

understanding of how Mithras came to Rome. The evidence for Iranian worship of the god is based on literary sources (texts and royal inscriptions) and royal imagery of the god, while the primary sources of the mystery cult of Mithras in the Roman Empire are mostly limited to the extant material artefacts (such as Mithraea and the cultic scenes of the tauroctony and Mithras' birth from stone), and some texts and commentaries written by intellectuals in the Greco-Roman world who were not cult participants themselves.

Roger Beck has argued that the military men and the royal household of last the Commagenian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes transmitted the god Mithras (Miϑra) to Rome when they went into exile in Rome in the mid first century CE.[11] The Commagenian pantheon exhibited a hybrid image of Mithras (Miϑra) together with his Greek counterparts Apollo, Helios and Hermes and depicted the god in a Persian garment. The Roman military warmly welcomed the god Mithras, and his cult was established sometime in the late first century CE within the boundaries of the Roman Empire.[12]

The Roman cult of Mithras became a brotherhood that excluded women. In fact the Mithraic exclusion of women was not a random choice, and scholars have suggested that this exclusion related to the demographics of Mithraic membership (mainly comprised of military men), and Mithraic ritual culture itself.[13] Richard Gordon, followed by Aleš Chaplupa, suggests that the Mithraic brotherhood borrowed the structure of Roman religious collegia such as *Collegium Pontificum*,[14] which often prevented prevented the participation of women.[15] Moreover, Gordon argues the Mithraic notion that Mithras, a man, created the world by sacrificing the bull,

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[11] Beck, 2001; cf. 2006B, 182. I will return to Beck's hypothesi s about the genesis of the Mithras cult in chapter three.

[12] Scholars assert that the Roman cult of Mithras was born in Rome and Ostia. However, recent excavations suggest that there was no Mithraeum in Rome dating back to before Severan period, and none in Ostia earlier than the joint reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (161 CE). See: Gordon, 2017, 286, n. 41.

[13] Gordon, 1980, 19-99; David, 2000, 121-41; Chalupa, 2005, 199-230; Griffith, 2006, 48-77. However, the first answer to the Mithraic exclusion of women was offered by Geo Widengren who examine their exclusion in the background of the cult in ancient Persia. For Widengren, Mithraic brotherhood was indeed a *Männerbünde* in which there was no place for women, and it was the main reason that Mithraism was warmly welcomed by the military in the Roman Empire. Yet, in order to consent Widengren's interpretation, we need to agree with the Cumontian hypothesis that traces the cult back to Persia. I will discuss Cumont's hypothesis in below. On Widengren's idea, see: Widengren, 1966, 433-55; on answer to Widengren, see: Beck, 1984, 2063.

[14] The only female members of this collegium were the Vestal virgins who were in charge of the temple of Vesta.

[15] Gordon, 1980, 19-99; Chalupa, 2005, 199-230; cf. Clauss, 1990, 42. Gordon suggests that Mithras' birth from a rock demonstrates also his contempt towards women. Though, Gordon later modified his interpretation, and considered the rock birth scene as stemming from the Greek anodic stereotype. I will return to Mithras' birth from a rock in chapter three. See: Gordon, 1980, 56; cf. Gordon, 2017, 292.

undermined the symbolic power of women, which was then reflected in the cult's male only homosociality .[16] More recently, scholars have proposed that the Mithraic notion of body rituals and their ethic of asceticism was another feature that focused on the structure of male body, as I will consider below.[17]

Some evidence shows that the Roman Emperors favoured the cult of Mithras in some specific periods.[18] According to *Historia Augusta*, the emperor Commodus (r.180-192 CE) was interested in the cult of Mithras, and inscriptions and monuments illustrate the Emperors' devotion to the cult of Mithras.[19] Under the Severan dynasty (193-235 CE), the Roman cult of Mithras was spread over the Empire widely, as the result of the emperor Septimius Severus and his wife Julia Domna's interests in foreign gods.[20] The emperor Julian (361-363 CE) was another Roman emperor who showed some intellectual interest in the figure of Mithras, particularly the god's similarities with Helios.[21] Yet we should not exaggerate the emperors' support for and participation in the Roman cult of Mithras, as our evidence is spotty. Some of the Roman emperors might have participated in the cult by means of dedications to Mithras or receiving dedications on the behalf of the god, yet there is little evidence for any emperors' active membership in the cult or their identification with Mithras.[22]

Archeological evidence proves that Mithras' cult flourished in the second century CE and spread over the Western part of the Roman Empire from northern Britain down to the Rhine and

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[16] Gordon, 1980, 63.
[17] Alvar, 2008, 202; cf. Gordon, 2011, 359.
[18] Masterocinque 2017, 41-5; ibid, 192-203.
[19] Aelius Spartianus, Iulius Capitolinus, Vulcacius Gallicanus, *Historia Augusta, Commodus*: 9; Masterocinque, 2017, 42-43. See also: the dedicatory inscriptions e.g. CIMRM 313; CIMRM 315; CIMRM 510. However, according to *Historia Augusta*, the emperor Commodus was not only interested in the cult of Mithras, but also the mystery cult of Isis. Commodus is also said to have shaved his head and carried the statue of Anubis. *Historia Augusta, Commodus*: 9. Moreover, Commodus' fascination with the mystic rites of Mithras can be reflected in his obsession for bizarre phenomena, such as his desire for representing himself with divine attributes –those of Heracles, in particular. In this sense, practicing the Mithraic rites—and the possibility that Commodus joined the brotherhood—demonstrate the emperor's love of the exotic.
[20] Attilio Mastrocinque argues that Mithraism reached its zenith under the Severan dynasty, and the absence of Mithras on the Roman coins or monuments at that time and prior point to the cult's demands for secrecy. Mastrocinque, 2017, 43-44.
[21] Julian, *Hymn to King Helios, Dedicated to Sallust*, see especially: 135, 138-140. f. Mastrocinque, 2017, 44.
[22] Imperial interest in the mystery cult of Mithras does not point to the Mithraic brotherhood as a community of elites controlling the power behind the throne. The direct role of the Mithraic Mystagogues in the political structure of the Roman Empire is a very controversial claim, which is unsupported by cultic evidence, or any other sources for that matter. For the opposite view, see: Scaliger, 2010. Indeed, the emperors' interest in the cult can be understood as Rome's openness towards foreign cultures after the Augustan cultural evolution and in relation to Rome's imperial policy.

the Danube area. Around 500 cultic images (the tauroctony, the bull slaying scene), 38 temples (Mithraea) and more than 100 inscriptions have been excavated, mainly located in Rome, Ostia and the Rhine-Danube frontier area (the Latin speaking provinces).[23] According to Porphyry, the third century CE Neoplatonist, all Mithraea began as natural caves (e.g. Mithraeum S. Giovanni di Duino)[24] or constructed ones (e.g. Mithraeum St. Clement),[25] and imitated the first mythical cave that was consecrated by Zoroaster to worship Mithras.[26] As Mithras was the creator of the world and all that is within it, the Mithraeum represented the cosmos in its entirety, writes Porphyry.

The Mithraic temples followed a similar structure in architectural plan but not in interior design. They usually included a hallway at the center which ended at the cultic relief, fresco or freestanding statue showing the bull slaying scene. Two long benches furnished the hallway on both right and left sides. A sacrificial altar, some niches, and a few rooms around the hallway often decorated the interior spaces of Mithraea. Some Mithraea were decorated with frescos representing the Mystagogues and initiates performing the initiation rituals, the portraits of Mithras and his attendants (Cautes and Cautopates, Sol and Luna), and the images and statues of Kronos and Sarapis.[27] In opposition, to the rich interior design, Mithraea usually had a simple architectural appearance from the outside.[28] The interior design indicated perhaps the mystical character of the cult, whereby both the initiates and the cultic monuments concealed the mysteries from non-initiates.

The ambiance of the Mithraeum and its interior decorations alongside the tauroctony revealed cultic notions and beliefs to the initiates. The tauroctony, as the main cultic icon, depicts Mithras dressed in a Persian garment slaying the bull, an act which resulted in the creation of the world (see fig.1). The typical iconography of the tauroctony shows Mithras dressed in a Persian garment subduing the bull while keeping a dagger with his right hand on the bull's neck. This scene is usually decorated by other cultic symbols such as the Zodiac signs, cultic animals such as

[23] Gordon, 2015, 451. The amount of Mithraic tauroctonies, Mithraea and cultic inscriptions are estimations, and different sources report different numbers. Eric Orlin proposes a number around 110 to 120 for the Roman Mithraea, with 25-30 as natural caves. Orlin, 2016, 604-5.
[24] CIMRM Supplement, discovered in 1965 in Venice, Italy.
[25] CIMRM 338.
[26] Porphyry, *De antro*, 2.
[27] E.g. Mithraeum S. Maria Capua Vetere (CIMRM 180); cf. Mithraeum Santa Prisca (CIMRM 476); cf. the London Mithraeum.
[28] Beck, 2016.

the dog, serpent and scorpion, and Mithras' attendants (Cautes, Cautopates, Sol and Luna). Additionally, in some cases, the scene of the tauroctony is framed by miniature scenes that represents other narratives about the god's life (see fig.2). The Mithraic tauroctony often show some variation in form and details,[29] and may include: Mithras' birth and miracle, including his the "water miracle", Mithras carrying the bull, and Mithras and Sol in a ritual banquet (see fig.3).[30] While the Roman Mithraeum resembles the cosmos, the tauroctony represents the moment of the creation of the world by Mithras that happened through slaying the bull.[31] The main function of the Mithraeum is to evoke the moment of creation of the world by Mithras, and because of that Mithraea were constructed in natural caves or in hidden temples to demonstrate and remind initiates about the world and its creation.

Scholars have argued that the interior design of Mithraea reflect Mithraic cosmology, and the cult's astrological dimension is particularly evident in some cases. [32] For example, the mosaic ladders of the *Seven Spheres Mithraeum (Mitreo delle Sette Sfere)* show seven arches on the floor of the main hall, starting at the entrance and ending near the cult-niche where the god Mithras slays the bull. The planetary symbols (Mars, Venus and Saturn on the left and the Moon, Mercury and Jupiter on the right) decorate the arches on both sides (see fig.4). As typical architecture for Mithraea, benches line both side of the main hall, and the Zodiac signs embellish the benches. Pisces, Aquarius, Capricorn, Sagittarius, Scorpio and Libra are on the right and Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo and Virgo appear on the left. The second century Middle Platonist Celsus states that according to the Mithraic mysteries, there is a ladder with seven gates for the souls' genesis and apogenesis in the world and each gate is ascribed to a specific planet. The first is attributed to Saturn, the second to Venus, the third to Jupiter, the fourth to Mercury, the fifth to Mars, the sixth to the Moon, and the seventh to the sun. The souls descend and ascend into and out of the world through these gates protected by those gods ascribed to each planet.[33] Relying on Celsus, Mithraic scholars argue the seven arches on the floor in the *Seven Spheres Mithraeum*

[29] I will discuss the tauroctony, its form and iconography in chapter three.
[30] Some Mithraic scenes and frescoes depict the god drawing a bow and firing his arrow at a rock to draw water from it. However, this is simply a scholarly interpretation of this iconography, and Mitharic evidence is lacking.
[31] Porphyry, *De antro*, 2.
[32] Certain scholars have held to an astrological reading of the Seven Spheres Mithraeum and considered this Mithraeum as an appropriate example for the Mithraic astrological-cosmological doctrine particularly due to its simultaneous representation of the seven arches, the planetary symbols and the Zodiac signs. See: Gordon, 1976; Beck, 1979; Beck, 2006, 103-33; Beck, 2014.
[33] Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VI: 22.

(Mitreo delle Sette Sfere) act as the gates of the ladder through which the souls descend and ascend, and the planetary symbols depicted at their corners are the signs of planetary gods who protect these gates.[34]

According to Roger Beck, the Mithraea represented the cosmos and everything within it, and the initiates imitated the souls' genesis and apogenesis by performing rituals in this micro-cosmos and passing through the arches on the floor. It was through this imitation and ritual performance that initiates internalized cultic notions and beliefs.[35] Thus, Beck argues that the Mithraea is a part of process that prepares initiates for cultic experience.[36] For the purpose of this dissertation, however, I will not focus on the scholarly interpretations of the Mithraea. However, it is necessary to mention that this scholarly interpretation of Mithraic temples has been open to doubt due to its strong reliance on Middle and Neoplatonic sources, as I will explain later in this chapter.

It does seem clear from our sources that he Mithraic brotherhood had a hierarchical social structure, including seven grades through which initiates had to pass. The mosaic ladders on the floor of the *Seven Gates Mithraeum (Mitreo delle Sette Porte)* in Ostia show a series of seven gates at the entrance that may refer to the seven initiation grades and the hierarchical structure of Mithraic brotherhood (see fig.5). In an order from lowest to highest, the seven grades of Mithraic initiation were Raven (*Corax*), Bridegroom (*Nymphus*), Soldier (*Miles*), Lion (*Leo*), Persian (*Perses*), Runner of the sun (*Heliodromus*), and Father (*Pater*). The floor mosaics of the *Felicissimus Mithraeum* in Ostia depict seven squares, each signifying one of the Mithraic initiation grades via its associated symbols: in the first square, *Caduceus* (the staff carried by Hermes and Mercury), a small vessel and the raven signify the grade *Corax*; in the second square, a veil and an oil lamp (the third symbol is damaged) refer to the grade *Nymphus*; in the next square, a spear, helmet and *sarcina* (the marching bag carried by Roman soldiers) symbolize the third grade *Miles;*[37] in the fourth square, a thunderbolt, *sistrum* and shovel indicate the fourth grade *Leo*; in the fifth square, *akinakes, aratrum*, a star and the crescent moon signify the grade *Perses*; a

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[34] However, scholars have also discussed these arches in relation to the seven grades of Mithraic initiation. See: e.g. Beck, 1988, 1-14.
[35] Beck, 2006, 103-33; cf. Beck, 2016.
[36] Beck, 2016.
[37] Chalupa and Glomb have deciphered the third motif as a bull's pelvic limb, instead of *sarcina*, in relation to the Mitharic sacrifice ceremony. See: Chalupa & Glomb, 2013, 16-28.

whip, seven-rayed crown and torch in the sixth square depict the grade *Heliodromus*; and a Phrygian cap, staff, *patera* and dagger symbolize the highest grade *Pater*.[38] It is worth noting that the dagger and Phrygian cap are shared symbols between the highest grade *Pater* and the god Mithras himself (see fig.6).

Manfred Clauss has suggested that the seven grades of initiations were in fact the seven ranks within the Mithraic priesthood, and other members initiated into the cult joined the cultic community as ordinary initiates.[39] Yet, there would be no need to create seven grades with particular terminology and symbols if all graded Mithraists were priests.[40] While Clauss has limited the seven initiation grades to the Mithraic priesthood, Robert Turcan contends that only the grades Leo and Corax were original to the cult and the rest of grades were a later addition (from third century CE) to the cult in Rome, Ostia and Dura,[41] since there is no evidence attesting the complete list of seven initiation grades, from the lowest to the highest, outside Rome and Ostia.[42] Gordon argues that the votive inscriptions[43] were permanent but the initiation grades were part of cultic progression; thus, there was no reason to mention a temporary position in an inscription.[44] In other words, Mithraists passed the initiation grades respectively and their grades were temporary while their devotion were permanent. A dedicator in the grade of *Corax* was prepared to pass to the level *Nymphus* over time as a part of cultic progression, and therefore, there was no need to mention his temporary grade, which changed continually on dedicatory inscriptions. Gordon

[38] On the symbols attributed to the seven grades of initiation, see: Chalupa & Glomb, 2013, 12, Table 1.
[39] His main argument is that only 14% of the Mithraic inscriptions mention the grades of Mithraists. See: Clauss, 2000, 131-40.
[40] Gordon, 2011, 327-9. Elsewhere, Gordon explains that is no reason to consider a restricted structure for the Mithraic priesthood, as they needed to be a *Sacerdo* and not a full-time priest. They would have to be experts in religious affairs and practices and have religious authority but not necessarily be "full time or supported by the state apparatus". Gordon, 2011, 344; cf. ibid, 329. I agree with Gordon, but I would to add that even being *Sacerdo* provided authority for the Mithraic Fathers that came with the cultic hegemony, which produced and reproduced itself via ritual performances. In other words, as full-time priests or *Sacerdos*, the Mithraic Fathers were supported by cultic authority and hegemony, but there was no reason to explain the seven grades of initiation, if it was only among the Mithraic Fathers. On ritual performance and the idea of Mithraic redemptive hegemony, see: Mazhjoo, 2017, 60-2.
[41] The graffiti of the Dura Europos Mithraeum indicates some alternative names for the seven grades of Mithraic initiation. See: Rostovtzeff et al, 1939, 119-24; CIMRM 56; CIMRM 63.
[42] The grades *Heliodromus* never appeared outside Rome and Ostia. The grades *Nymphus* and *Perses* were inscribed only at Rome and Dura, and Porphyry, the third century Neoplatonist, mentioned only four grades (*Corax, Leo, Persis* and *Pater*) in his commentary and interpretation on the Mithras cult. Turcan, 1999, 249-60; cf. Gordon, 2011, 330. Moreover, the Mithareum of Dura-Europos was established in the Severan period, and it was inspired by the Mithraic tradition common in Rome, Ostia and the Danube frontier area, particularly in its second phase. See: Gordon, 2011, 332. On the architecture and history of the three phases of the Dura Europos Mithraeum, see: Rostovtzeff, 1939, 62-82.
[43] The dedicatory inscriptions which indicate that an object is dedicated to the god Mithras.
[44] Gordon, 2011, 330.

interprets the seven initiation grades by way of the socio-political structure of the Roman Empire. According to him, the relations between ordinary people and the military, with their patrons and the Emperor in the socio-political structure of the real Roman world, accounted for the relation between the Mithraic Fathers with the rest of Mithraic community. For Gordon, the manner whereby the Mithraists honored the Fathers resembled the military's practice of venerating the Emperor.[45]

Indeed, Gordon's reading of the seven initiation grades is the most appropriate interpretation for the argument of this dissertation, which considers the emergence of the Roman cult of Mithras in relation to Rome's political and cultural context. The Roman evidence indicates that the main members of Mithraic brotherhood were military commanders, soldiers and freed-slaves who were acquainted with the Roman military disciplines and socio-political networks of Roman society. Rome was open to others, particularly in terms of cultic life, and Mithraists embraced a foreign god, integrated him into a model of a social structure that they borrowed from their military context.

The fact that there is no firm primary literary sources about Mithraic rituals means that the understandings of the cultic ceremonies are scholarly assumptions and interpretations of the cultic artefacts, such as cultic epigraphy, reliefs, frescos and ladder mosaics. There are also some fragments written by Christian apologists who mention Mithraic rituals in their works. For instance, in *De Baptismo*, Tertullian notes that washing and sprinkling water around for purification was a part of the Mithraic and Isis initiation rituals.[46] Likewise, Porphyry writes about the notion of purification and using water in initiation rituals among Mithraists.[47]

The only ritual that Mithraists performed without a doubt was a common meal, which plausibly imitated the First-Cult meal.[48] The Scene of the First-Cult meal has been depicted in many Mithraea. It represents Mithras and Sol in a ritual banquet celebrating the bull sacrifice by Mithras. The animal bones unearthed in the excavations of some Mithraea plainly attest this claim.[49] There is no certain information about the dates of Mithraic ceremonies and feasts. Relying

[45] Gordon, 2011, 342-3.
[46] Tertullian, *De Baptismo:* 5.
[47] Porphyry, *De Antro,* 15-16.
[48] Jaim Alvar suggests that the ceremony was held at least once a month. See: Alvar, 2008, 361. However, there is no reliable source to support his suggestion.
[49] E.g. the Mithraeum at St Urban; the Mithraea at Konjic and Jajce. See: Walsh, 2019, 31-2.

on the astral motifs, such as the Zodiac signs depicted in some Mithraea, some scholars have asserted that Mithraists celebrated the summer and winter solstices due to their roles in Mithraic cosmology. It may be the case that in the Mithraic cosmology the souls descend in to the world in the summer solstice and they ascend out of the world in the winter solstice.[50]

Mithraic artefacts also demonstrate that the body was essential to Mithraic initiation rituals. It was through imitation that the cult reproduced its doctrine and sustained its social structure in initiates' bodies. Those rituals performed in the space of Mithraea were imitations of the god's acts, and evoked the cultic myth and the moment of eternal creation. For example, the Mithraic cultic vessel of Mainz illustrates two scenes. The first scene depicts a man on the left who wears a Persian cap (the cap of Mithras) and kneels and holds a drawn bow (see fig.7). The third figure on the right wears a short garment and gazes at the smaller figure with his mouth open. In front of him and in the middle of the scene stands a naked figure, smaller than the other two, who might be the initiate. The second scene depicts four standing male persons: the first figure wears a breastplate; the second man, wearing a Persian cap, holds a rod positioned downwards; the third person brandishes a whip; while the last figure represents a standing man who holds a rod positioned upwards (see fig.8).[51] Scholars have interpreted these scenes as the replication of Mithras' archery and the water miracle, which would be renacted in the real world of the Mithraea.[52] Imitating the cultic myth positioned initiates in a specific relation to the god and imposed a sense of belonging to the cultic community of Mithraists.[53]

Thus, one can claim the Mithraic body was a social object. As depicted by colorful frescos of the *St. Maria Capua Vetere* Mithraeum, the Mithraic body was transformed into a social object through performing the initiation rituals of abasement (see fig.9).[54] One scene from *St. Maria*

[50] Beck, 2016, 12. Roger Beck, followed by Alvar, claimed that the Mithraists celebrated the summer solstice ascribed to souls' genesis and the winter solstice assigned to the souls' apogenesis. However, to confirm Beck's suggestion, we need to first accept his astrological-cosmological interpretation of the world of the Mithraeum and the tauroctony. We need to accept Roman Mithraism as an astral cult believing in the souls' descending and ascending in the world. On Beck's interpretation of Mithraic belief about the souls' genesis and apogenesis in the world of the Mithraea, see: Beck, 2014. Alvar even goes further and assumes that the Mithraists celebrated the spring and autumn equinoxes as "Mithras' proper seat". Alvar relies on Porphyry here, but in fact, there is no reliable source other than Porphyry to assert his assumption. Alvar, 2008, 362.
[51] Huld-Zetsche.I, 2008, plate 64.
[52] Beck, 2000, 145-80; cf. Merkelbach, 1994. Merkelbach also believes that this scene represents the "Water miracle", but he does not further elaborate his thoughts or provide an interpretation.
[53] Cf. Gordon, 2011, 334.
[54] On the Mithraic rituals of abasement, see: Gordon, 2009, 290-313; Gordon, 2011, 346-55.

Capua Vetere represents a blindfolded initiate kneeling on the floor and a Mystagogue standing behind him holding an object over the initiate's head.[55] In another scene, a naked initiate lies on the floor and two Mystagogues stand around him: one near his feet and the other near his head.[56] Another fresco from the Capua Vetere shows a naked and a blindfolded initiate who kneels on the floor, while a Mystagogue controls and pushes him forward his behind. Another Mystagogue stands in front of the initiate holding the staff assigned to the highest Mithraic grade of *Pater*.[57] These scenes represent specific bodily rituals whereby initiates experienced the authority and dominance of Mystagogues over them. It was through performing rituals like these that the Mithraic Mystagogues reproduced their authority and the Mithraic brotherhood imposed its hegemony on initiates.[58]

The cult of Mithras expanded for three centuries but declined during the mid fourth century CE. Traditionally, scholars viewed Roman government oppression and anti-pagan laws as the most important factors contributing to the demise of the Roman Mithras cults.[59] Very recently David Walsh has asserted that the reduction of Roman hegemony over the imperial frontiers and the transformation in Mithraic initiation rituals, reduced the uniqueness of Mithras cult and put the cult of Mithras at risk of extinction.[60] From the second half of the fourth century, the settlement patterns changed in the western part of the Empire as Rome lost its domination over the western frontiers, and large numbers of military and related administrative staff departed from that area. These changes transformed not only the situation of the Mithras cult, but also the whole of the Roman Empire – particularly in terms of its religious life. The change in the populations altered the view of the western frontiers that included large numbers of Mithraea, and the Mithraic

[55] Vermaseren, 1971, Plate XXV.
[56] Vermaseren, 1971, Plate XXVI.
[57] Vermaseren, 1971, Plate XXVIII.
[58] On the notion of body as a social entity in Mithraism, see: Gordon, 2001, 245-74; Gordon, 2011, 355-59; cf. Beck, 2000, 145-80; cf. Mazhjoo, 2017, 57-63.
[59] Cf. Walsh, 2019, 64.
[60] Walsh asserts that the transformation of rituals which emerged from the late third century CE onwards affected the uniqueness of the Mithraic rituals, and the cult lost its fascination and appeal among ordinary people. Yet, the change and variety in Mithraic rituals (such as different forms of votive offerings, as argued by Walsh) was not simply an evolution which occurred in the third and fourth century CE, as Mithraic artefacts show local distinctions and varieties in cultic iconography and ritual language. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that these diversities lessened the appeal of the cult and resulted in less commitment among Mithrasits. On the changes in ritual practices discussed by Walsh, see: Walsh, 2019, 30-9. On the explanation about the decline of the cult suggested by Walsh, see: Walsh, 2019, 56-64.

brotherhood notably lost its members who mainly belonged to the Roman military.[61] The remaining population who inhabited the region had distinct social relations which differed from the Roman commanders and soldiers whose social networks were "largely male-orientated and highly structured bodies",[62] appropriate to the social structure of the Mithras cult as a brotherhood. This change in the population affected the requirements for Mithraic membership, and in turn lessened peoples' desire to participate in the cult.

There is no doubt that the Roman cult of Mithras owed its emergence, rise and demise largely to the cultural and political relations of the Roman Empire. This dissertation, in turn, argues that the emergence of the god Mithras and the flourishing of his cult should be understood in terms of Rome's enthusiasm towards other cultures, an interest which was in turn supported by its imperial ideology.

1.3. History of Scholarship on the Origins of Roman Mithraism

For a century, scholars have interpreted extant Mithraic artifacts in light of Persian texts and royal inscriptions. As the father of Mithraic studies, Frantz Cumont sought the roots of Roman Mithraism in the Orient – and Persia, in particular.[63] He understood the Roman Mithraic cult as having descended from a "Primitive Mazdaism"[64] that was transmitted to Babylon by the Magi. The cult absorbed some Semitic influences, before moving to Asia Minor where it borrowed local beliefs, and then, lastly, was affected by Hellenism sometime around the first century BCE.[65] Cumont wrote *Les Mysteries de Mithra* during an intellectual era greatly dominated by Orientalist approaches (1902), and Cumont's categorization of the Roman cult of Mithras as a Mystery cult originating in Persia should be understood as a part of his larger view of "Oriental religions".[66] Thus for Cumont, Roman Mithraism was unquestionably Asiatic in origin,[67] and he saw the

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[61] Cf. Bowden, 2010, 195.
[62] Walsh, 2019, 59.
[63] Cumont, 1903, 1-32.
[64] Cumont, 1894-99, 3-4; additionally, Cumont used the same logic for answering critiques that challenged his usage of the late date Zoroastrian and Pahlavi texts to interpret Mithraic symbols and imagery. I will discuss this later in this paper.
[65] Cumont, 1903, 30-1.
[66] Cumont, 1910.
[67] Cumont, 1903, 30.

Persian mysteries transmitted from Persia to Rome through Asia Minor.[68] After Rome's victory in the Mithridatic Wars[69] and the death of Mithridate VI Eupator in 63 BCE,[70] Cilician pirates learned about the cult from the remnants of the Pontic army. The Iranian mysteries were in turn passed on to the Romans when Pompey the Great constituted Syria and Pontus and expanded Cilicia in 63 BCE.[71] Supporting this view, Cumont believed that the portrait of Mithras on coins minted in Tarsus show that devotion to the god existed there until the collapse of the Roman Empire.[72] Here it is necessary to mention that Geo Widengren is the main scholar who has attempted to revive Cumont's hypothesis, and sought for a Persian-Near Eastern model of the Mithras cult.[73] His works indicate that Cumont's theories continue to inform scholars.

Cumont's hypothesis that the cult was transmitted from Persia to the Roman Empire via Asia Minor deserves more attention if Cumont had focused on the processes of transmission of the god rather than imagining that the whole cultic artiface was retained from its original Persian context. I will return below to the question of how the cult was transmitted from Asia Minor. Here I want to highlight two issues with Cumont's hypothesis of cult's transmission: firstly, Cumont searched for a Persian mystery cult as the origin of Roman Mithraism that was rooted in a primitive Mazdaism, and secondly, he assumed the cult was transmitted firstly to Babylon and then to Asia Minor via a group of Magi. Yet there is no evidence attesting the existence of a Persian cult of Miϑra similar to the Roman model of Mithraism, and more importantly, there is no evidence for a group of Magi who worshipped the god Miϑra in Babylon. Cumont's idea of the cult's transmission from Persia to the Roman Empire, in short, does not have support from archeological and literary sources.

Considering his efforts to position Roman Mitharism in relation to primitive Mazdaism, we should note that Cumont's interpretation of Mithraic iconography and ritual language relied largely on the myth of primal creation found in the Avestan and Pahlavi sources. Despite the

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[68] Yet, there is no evidence to assert that the worship of the Persian Miθra was a mystery cult in Persia. The mystery form of the cult seems to be a Roman invention rooted in the cultural milieu of the Roman Empire; cf. Gordon, 2017b, 6.
[69] Olshausen, 2006; McGing, 2009.
[70] McGing, 2009.
[71] Cumont, 1903, 31-2; ibid, 37. On Pompey the Great and the expansion of Clicia, see: Will, 2006.
[72] Cumont, 1903, 31-2; ibid, 37. On Tarsus coins, see: e.g. ANS Collection: 1973.191.144
[73] However, Widengren later expanded his interpretation and tried to find some parallels between the rituals of some Persian religious movments such as Bābakīyah and Mithraic initiation rituals relying on the German concept of männerbund. Widengren, 1979, 675-697; cf. Beck, 1984, 2065-66; ibid, 2071; cf. Gordon, 2017, 285.

problems with his thesis, the Cumontian approach has dominated Mithraic studies for decades, and it has had both beneficial and detrimental influences on Mithraic studies as a whole. Richard Gordon describes Cumont as a scholar "who has the ability and the good fortune to succeed both in establishing a subject and in dominating it for the next half century."[74] However, as Roger Beck has remarked, Cumont owes his domination over the field of Mithraic studies to his understanding and archiving of the extant artefacts and iconography, which became the first complete collection of Mithraic materials.[75]

The currency of Cumont's hypothesis that the cult of Mithras had an Oriental origin reached its zenith in the 1950-1960s. In these years, the *"corpus inscriptum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae"* gathered by Martine Vermaseren became the main source of all research on the cult of Mithras. Vermaseren's work was an updated and completed version of Cumont's collection of Mithraic epigraphic and iconographic evidence of the cult, published in 1896-99 and titled *Textes et monuments figures relatifs aux mysteres de Mithra*.[76]

Cumont's dominance ended, however, at the first International Congress of Mithraic Studies in 1971 when scholars, notably Richard Gordon, challenged his approach as overly general in its interpretation and results. Gordon concluded: "Surely at best Cumont could only have argued that some Magian ideas were present in the West. He had no right to make assertions about their relationship in the West, or about how they come to be there."[77] Apart from his revolutionary response to the Cumontian approach, Gordon has analyzed this cult in terms of the social structure of the Roman Empire, and in relation to the Imperial cult in particular. His contribution to the field has been to interpret the Roman cult of Mithras based upon concepts of hegemony, sovereignty and the military structure of the Empire.[78] Gordon highlighted the similarities between the Roman Emperor's relationship to the Roman citizens and the hierarchical structure of Roman Mithraism, notably the relationship between the initiates and Fathers. In doing so, Gordon argued that Mithraism was a Roman production and believed that the establishment of the cult might be connected with "the Flavian organization of the Euphrates frontier."[79] However, more recently and

[74] Gordon, 1975, 215.
[75] Beck, 1984, 2003.
[76] Beck, 1984, 2005.
[77] Gordon, 1975, 243.
[78] Gordon, 2007, 392-405.
[79] Gordon, 2007, 395.

following Roger Beck, Gordon has considered the possibility of the Commagenian royal cult as the genesis of the Roman cult of Mithras, what he calls "proto-Mithraism".[80]

In the 1970s as well, a new scholarly paradigm examined the possible Greek influence on the Mithras cult. These approaches defined the Roman mystery cults as relying on the fusion of Oriental religions with Greek thought in a Hellenistic context. Indeed, the main approach here was to emphasize Hellenization and the spread of the Greek culture over conquered territories. Although this new paradigm was not widely accepted by the scholars in the field of Mithraic studies, the works of German Orientalists promoting it shed some light on the possible Oriental origin of the Mithras cult.[81]

A decade later, Reinhold Merkelbach offered a remmarkable hypothesis that dominated the field of Mithraic studies for a while. Merkelbach was the leading figure of the secondary Orientalist approach in Mithraic studies that highlighted the creation and formation of Mithraism in Asia Minor. His book *Mithras: ein persisch-römischer Mysterienkult*, published in 1984, argued that Roman Mithraism was a religion invented based on Iranian mythology in combination with Greek philosophy and ancient Babylonian astrology. In an extensive chapter entitled "*Mithras Kulte Hellenistischer Zeit"*, Merkelbach concentrates on the Pontic, Cappadocian, Armenian and Commagenian kingdoms, and claims that the mystery cult of Mithras was "Einpersisch-romischer Mysterien kult" founded in the eastern borders of the Roman Empire by a person who knew Persian mythology as well as Greek philosophy and Neoplatonism.[82] Merkelbach was not the first scholar to speak about the founding of Mithraism during the Hellenistic era, but he was the first scholar in the 1980s who suggested the genesis of the cult lay in the frontiers of Asia Minor.

Despite all the difficulty such as the misinterpretations of extant Mithraic artefacts that Merkelbach's interpretation entails, his efforts in tracing the cult back to Asia Minor deserve attention.[83] In fact, the idea that Asia Minor was part of the transmission of the cult, filling the gap between Persia and the Roman Empire, has been warmly and variously welcomed by different

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[80] Gordon, 2017, note 47.
[81] E.g. Burkert, 1989; Merkelbach, 1998, .3-4; Reitzenstein 1987, 6-7.
[82] Merkelbach, 1984, 42-74.
[83] Beck, 2006, 51. However, Beck rejected Merkelbach's interpretation of the cult iconography and rituals due to his treatment of archaeological evidence of the Roman cult, and his "unconscious repetition of what has already been said better or more fully elsewhere." See: Beck, 1987, 300.

scholars in Mithraic scholarship. Cumont described the transmission of the Persian cult of Mithras from Persia to the Roman Empire via Babylon and Asia Minor, the hypothesis that dominated the field of Mithraic studies for many years and is still held by many Iranists. Merkelbach returned to this hypothesis and cast Asia Minor not only as the bridge between the Persian Miϑra and the Roman Mithraism, but also as the birth place of the mystery cult of Mithras. A few years later in 1998, Roger Beck affirmed the role of Asia Minor in founding Roman Mithraism, but he also suggested an alternative scenario whereby the civilians and military men of the Commagenian royal family were the first generation of Mithraists who established the proto-Mithraism at the time of their participation in the Judean and Civil Wars and their exile in Rome.[84] More recent studies likewise focus on the extant artefacts dating back to the kingdom of Commagene (the first century BCE) and attest the role of Asia Minor in transmitting the Persian figure of Miϑra to the Roman Empire.[85] In Chapter two, I return to Beck's hypothesis of the Commagenian royal cult as the genesis of the Roman Mithras cult. While, I agree with some of Beck's points, I will argue in this chapter that the emergence of Roman Mithraism must also take into account the role of Greek historiography and literature in transmitting the god to the Roman Empire.

Additionally, in the 1970s, a new tendency showed up in Mithraic scholarship that looked for cultic notions and meanings in the astrological signs and celestial bodies appearing in the Mithraic tauroctony and Mithraea. Addressing this issue, scholars have sought to trace the cult's celestial beliefs back to Persia.[86] Stanley Insler should be considered the first scholar who focused on some basic elements of the Persian dualistic view in the tauroctony most fully and interpreted the scene in accordance with the Persian bull-lion motif symbolizing the time cycles. For him, the Mithraic bull slaying scene represents the juxtaposition of the summer (Leo) and winter (Tarsus) constellations, the expression of the death of winter and the threatening role of summer in this death, symbolizing the cycle of birth and death.[87] The correspondence between the astral date and calendar date meant that the tauroctony was originally attributed to the date of the *Mihragān*, the

[84] This hypothesis was originally proposed by Beck in 1998. See: Beck, 1998, 115-28; and it republished later in 2001. See: Beck, 2001, 59-76; cf. Beck, 2006, 51.

[85] I will deal with this issue in chapters two and three when discussing the hybrid deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes and his role in the transmission of the god from Persia to the Roman Empire.

[86] For other astrological interpretations of Mitharic iconography, see: Stark, 1869; Cumont, 1898; Hartner, 1965; Merkelbach 1965; Bausani, 1979; Speidel, 1980. Cumont and Merkelbach briefly touched the issue, rather than focus on the astrological context of the Mithraic cult.

[87] Insler, 1978, 519-38.

Zoroastrian festival attributed to Miϑra.[88] Insler's astrological reading of the tauroctony relying on Persian motifs and Zoroastrian elements, was an effort to support Cumont's hypothesis of cult's transmission from Persia to the Roman Empire.

In the last years of the 1970, researches in the cult of Mithras changed directions and strongly challenged Cumont's hypothesis and started to view the Roman cult of Mithras as a celestial cult with a complex cosmology independent from the Persian origin of the god Mithras (Miϑra). In 1989, David Ulansey wrote *The Origin of Mithraic Mysterious: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* and interpreted the *tauroctony* as the image of the sky in relation to the celestial bodies. Ulansey's identification of Mithras with the constellation of Perseus distinguishes his view from other astral interpretations that interpret Mithras as the sun, the constellation of Leo and the signs of the summer quarter.[89] The main criticism of his view was Ulansey's disavowal of the relationship between the Roman tradition and Indo-Iranian origin of the god.[90] Severing the god entirely from any Oriental origin is too drastic, since Persian elements can be witnessed in the name of the god, the name of his attendants and in the name of the fifth initiation grade *Perses*.[91]

In 2006, Roger Beck published one of the most widely influential scholarship on Mithraic studies, *The Religion of the Mithras cult in the Roman Empire*, which catalyzed a new phase in the study of Roman Mithraism. Beck offered an astrological-cosmological reading of Mithraic iconography at the annual meeting of the American philological association in 1973 for the first time, but it was only in the 2000s when his hypothesis (known as the "star-talk" theory) appeared in its completed version.[92] Relying on ancient astrology, and the Middle and Neoplatonists' interpretations of the Mithraic cult, Beck attempted to decipher Mithraic iconography as a visual language, a systematic usage of signs and symbols for Mithraic adherents. Thus, he associated

[88] On Insler's interpretation of the tauroctony's reference to *Mihragān,* see in particular: Insler, 1978, 531-38; cf. Gordon, 2017, 285. Gordon reads Insler's assumption as it referred to the Iranian spring festival of *Now rūz,* while Insler himself writes, "in my view, the seasonal festival indicated by the tauroctony originally was the *Mihragān* indeed." Insler, 1978, 534. Accordingly, the bull slaying scene shows the date of dedication to Miϑra (Mithras).
[89] On the identification of Mithras with Perseus, see: Ulansey, 1989, 15-39.
[90] E.g. Beck, 2006, 50-1.
[91] I return the terminology of Mithras and his attendants' names in chapter one and three.
[92] Beck, 2006, 153-189.

these Mithraic signs and symbols with the astral objects, stars and constellations, which each point to deeper cosmological ideas.

The symbolic anthropology of Beck's "star-talk" theory is indebted to a Geertzian approach.[93] According to Geertz, religions are systems of symbols. Consequently, Beck focused on "three distinctive symbolic constructs" of the Mithras cult which could be read together as language that communicated to the Mithraic adherents: the tauroctony, the Mithraeum and the seven grades of initiation. For Beck, these signs acted as part of cultic experience and initiation rituals and were not simply the instruments to train initiates.[94] The ambiance of the Mithraeum, staged as a micro-cosmos, and the iconography of the tauroctony, as a map of the sky, were part of the progression of Mithraic initiation. They both related to Mithraic cosmology and the idea of souls' ascending into and descending out of the world, as I mentioned earlier.[95] The Geertzian approach is strongly tied to an anthropological and ethnographical method of fieldwork that requires gathering data through participant observation of the society of the case study. Thus, to decipher Mithraic iconography and visual language, one needs to enter into a Mithraeum and experience Mithraic initiation rituals and their seven grades, a requirement that is no longer possible in the case of Mithraic brotherhood. While Beck noted that the Mithraic brotherhood was an antique cultic society inaccessible to fieldwork, he nevertheless pointed out that this cult and its society were documented in extant literature.[96] Thus, instead of the Avestan and Pahlavi sources (the Zoroastrian hymns and Pahlavi texts compiled in 9th and 10th centuries CE), Beck refers to Porphyry's *on the Cave of the Nymphs in the Thirteenth Book of the Odyssey* (a commentary written by the Neoplatonist in the third century CE) to provide the information to decipher the cultic iconography and reconstructing the Mithraic beliefs and practices.[97] Because he relies on Porphyry, Beck's "star-talk" theory also strongly depends on Middle and Neoplatonists' descriptions of the cult. It was through rereading their descriptions (Porphyry and Celsus in

[93] On Beck and Geertz, see: Beck, 2006, 67-71.
[94]According to Beck, Mithraic initiates experienced the Mithraeum and the seven grades of initiation from the inside and the tauroctony from the outside (that is, just through imagination). No one could enter the tauroctony, but they could experience the seven initiation grades via performing the initiation rituals in the Mithraeum that acted as a microcosm. See: Beck, 2006, 71.
[95] I have explained these view and interpretation of the tauroctony and Mithraeum previously in this chapter.
[96] Beck, 2006, 69-70.
[97] I explain the dates of composition and the content of the Zoroastrian and Pahlavi sources of Persian Miϑra in chapter one.

particular) that he saw the tauroctony as an account of the stars' movements and the Mithraeum as a micro-cosmos, in relation to the souls' genesis and apogenesis.

Responding to Beck's theory, Robert Turcan rejected the authenticity and reliability of the Middle and Neoplatonists' descriptions to decipher Mithraic iconography and ritual language. He argues that those philosophers might have misrepresented Mitharic notions and beliefs in order to adapt those ideas to their own philosophical agenda.[98] His critical argument was rooted in Turcan's enthusiasm for Cumont's hypothesis about the cult's transmission from Persia to the Roman Empire. Turcan himself interpreted the Roman cult of Mithras as a Persian religion influenced by Greek thought in the Hellenistic era.[99] His book Mithras *Platonicus, Recherches sur l'Hellénisation Philosophique de Mithra* was published in 1975, when the Cumontian approach still dominated Mithraic scholarship. The significant impact of Turcan in Mithraic scholarship was his critical argument against interpreting the Mithraic iconography in accordance to the Middle and Neoplatonic sources rather than his own understanding of the cult as a Persian religion. Turcan still holds the most prominent critical view of the astrological interpretation of Mithraic iconography, while the Beckian approach among classicists continues to be the leading theory on the origin of the Roman Mithraism and its iconography.

Almost three decades later, Beck answered Turcan, and argued that the Middle and Neoplatonist interpretations of the Mithras cult should be understood as the philosophers' elucidations of Mithraic doctrine and not their projection of philosophical ideas onto Mithraic data. For Beck, these interpretations of cultic notions and beliefs were the fabrication of philosophers rather than the lived experiences of adherents.[100] More recently, Gordon has suggested that instead of a selection between reliability and unreliability of the sources, scholars might agree that the Mithraists applied some of those philosophical assertions found in the Middle and Neoplatonic descriptions to their cultic constructions.[101] Thus, despite Turcan's critical argument, Mithraic

[98] Turcan, 1975, 62-89.
[99] Turcan, 1996, 200.
[100] Beck, 2006, 86-7.
[101] Gordon, 2017, 301. In fact, here, Gordon refers to those sources that might be used by both Mithraists and Middle and Neoplatonists. Though the issue is still controversial and open to discussion, some of these sources may attest this claim. For instance, in speaking about the Persian mysteries of Mithras, Porphyry mentions an unknown philosopher namely Euboulus who had written about the foundation of the Mithras cult by Zoroaster. See: Porphyry, *De antro*, 2.

scholars still rely on Middle and Neoplatonists' sources to support an astrological reading of Mithraic iconography and ritual language.

To summarize the scholarship I have been tracing thus far, the whole history of Mithraic scholarship can be categorized into two main metanarratives that explore the origin of the Mithraic cult and its reconstruction. Cumont's hypothesis falls under what I call the metanarrative of "continuity". It proposes a Persian origin for the Roman cult and argues that the cult was a wholesale idea transmitted from Persia to the Roman Empire via Asia Minor. In this sense, both the god and the cult are Persian in origin and essence. This hypothesis dominated Mithraic scholarship for more than 90 years. While, the second metanarrative, which I call the metanarrative of "discontinuity", focuses on the cult as a Roman production, and proposes an astrological interpretation of the Mithraic iconography and ritual language. This metanarrative, called "the Roman bricolage" theory by some scholars, allows for only a slight connection between the Roman cult and the Persian god Miϑra.[102] Some scholars stand between these two metanarratives and apply the astral interpretation to support Cumont's hypothesis of the cult's transmission from Persia to the Roman Empire.[103] Thus, the main difference between these two metanarratives of Mithraic scholarship is in their view of the cult's origin – be it Roman or Persian.

In recent years, owing to the dominance of the metanarrative of discontinuity in Mithraic studies, the Persian aspect of the cult has been largely ignored, and the appearance of Mithras (Miϑra) in the Roman Empire has never been discussed as a conscious cultural borrowing done by the Romans. In view of this issue, Gordon has recently articulated a notion of Persianism to explain the Greco-Roman appropriation of the Persian god Miϑra, whereby the Roman Mithraists attempted to validate and to present their god as a Persian deity. He understands appropriation as a process of selection from others' traditions, the fabrication and filtering those materials by one agent (who may be groups or individuals), which always involves creative transformation. Accordingly, Persianism in the context of Roman Mithraism is the process whereby Roman Mithraic Mystagogues appropriated knowledge about the Persian Miϑra from external sources and transformed this data into the Mithraic iconography and ritual language to validate the Persian origin of their god both in name and visually. Gordon also claimed the Mithraists' assertion about

[102] Gordon, 2017b, 4.
[103] Stark 1869, Hartner 1965, Insler 1978, Bausani 1979, Speidel 1980.

the Persian provenance of their god influenced those who had no personal involvement in the Mithras cult, such as later intellectual and Neoplatonic commentators.[104] For Gordon, Persianism complements the process of Romanization, rather than offering an entirely new frame to examine Roman Mithraism.[105]

Analyzing Mithraic art and ritual language under the lens of Persianism allows for a closer look at the Mithraic cultic imagery and etymology.[106] Notably, Gordon explored different elements and different descriptions of the cult reflecting Persianism in the Greco-Roman appropriation of the Persian god.[107] The first element relates to Statius' narrative (the Late-Flavian poet whose poems date to the first century CE) that describes the gesture of Mithras in the tauroctony. Statius writes "Mithras twisting the horns wroth to follow in the rocks of Perses' carven."[108] Accordingly, the god Mithras subdues the horns of the bull and carried him into a cave that was in Persian mountain to slay him and create new life. Gordon argues that in the true model of tauroctony, Mithras wrenched the bull's head but he did not twist the bull's horns. Thus, he claims that Statius copied or acquired his information from a text written by a Magian author (the priest of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian religion) or a Zoroastrian pseudepigrapha.[109] Gordon then sees Persianism in the Roman imagery of the god in the archaeological artefacts and epigraphy of the cult. Mithras' dress and accoutrements, the Mithraic hunting and archery motifs, alongside some linguistic features, such as the terminology of god's name, reveal that Mithraic mystagogues desired to furnish Mithraea with the motifs representing the Persain provenance of the god.[110]

Gordon also takes his model of Persianism to the later Neoplatonists' interpretations that classified the Roman Mithras cult as a sub-category of "Magian wisdom". Middle and Neoplatonists were enthusiastic about the religions of ancient wise people, including the Persians, since their wisdom and religions were assumed to be the precursor to Plato's own religious doctrine. Thus, Gordon asserts that the Mithraic Mystagogues' efforts to validate the Persian provenance of

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[104] Gordon, 2017, 314.
[105] Gordon 2015, 455.
[106] I will discuss these issues in more detail in chapter one.
[107] Gordon 2017, 287-88.
[108] "Seu Persei sub rupibus antri indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram." Statius, *Thebaid,* I: 719-720. For the English translation, see Shackleton Bailey, 2003, 93. Gordon, however, doubts that Statius had seen a standard relief since in the Mithraic standard relief wrenches the bull's head without touching his horns; cf. CIMRM 548; cf. Gordon, 2017, 280-81; cf. Gordon 1977-78, 161-64.
[109] Gordon, 2017, 287; ibid, p.289; cf. Gordon, 2015, 452.
[110] Gordon, 2017, 290.

their god, traceable through cultic iconography and ritual language, enabled Neoplatonists to categorize the Roman cult of Mithras as a sub-category of "Magian wisdom".[111] Likewise, late-antique encyclopedias, such as the Lexicons of *Hesychius*, the *Suda* and *Photius* identified Mithras with Miϑra (the Persian Sun god), and which traced the Roman cult back to Persia, may contain less than reliable knowledge of the cult.[112] Despite of few fragments of late antique sources, the late-Flavian poem of Statius is the only classical narrative linking Mithras (Miϑra), the Sun, to Roman Mithraism.[113]

As mentioned earlier, this thesis follows Gordon's model. Gordon asserts that his notion of Persianism provides an appropriate means to understand and interpret the efforts of Mithraic Mystagogues to validate the Persian provenance of their god, and to explore that how these efforts affected the descriptions of external viewers who were not personally engaged with the cult. Relying on Gordon, this thesis will examine the sources by which the Persian god Miϑra was transmitted to the Roman Empire, and by which the Roman Mithraists became acquainted with the Persian god. In particular, I examine Greek sources and historiography of the Persian Miϑra which identifies the god as the Persian counterpart of Apollo and Helios, the hybrid imagery of the Persian god in the royal cult of Commagene dated to the first century BCE, the Greek topoi of Persians characterizing them expert in archery and horse riding, and lastly the Middle and Neoplatonic views of the tradition of Magi and Persian religion. These sources reveal how Persian elements and ideas about the god Mithras (Miϑra) were mediated to the Romans. Going further, I will demonstrate that the Mithraic Mystagogues' appropriation of the god Miϑra was a deliberate cultural borrowing from Hellenistic sources that must be understood in the context of Rome's imperial ideology and conceptions of Persians as the "other". In sum, this project argues that the emergence of Mithras, as a foreign god in the Roman Empire, can be understood in the context of Roman imagery painting Persia as the esoteric other who ran the eastern part of the Mediterranean world.

[111] Gordon, 2017, 300-303.
[112] Gordon, 2017, 307.
[113] Gordon, 2017, 304.

1.4. Chapter Outline

In the chapters that follow, I will reconstruct the Persian figure of the god relying on the Avestan and Pahlavi sources, and then turn to the Greek and Hellenistic identification and imagery of the Persian Miϑra as the sources by which the god was transmitted to the Roman World. Finally, relying on the Persian figure of the god and the figure of him as reconstructed by Greeks, I return to the main concern of this dissertation and analyze the appearance of Mithras in the Roman Empire as a deliberate cultural borrowing that Romans made in relation to their enthusiasm for the Orient and Persia in particular.

I. Miϑra, the Lord of Contracts: The God in Vedic, Avestan, and Pahlavi Sources

The objective of this chapter is to review Vedic, Avestan and Pahlavi sources such as *MihrYašt*, *Great Bundahišn*, *Vendīdād* and the Persian royal inscriptions and imagery to explore the iconography and characteristics attributed to the god Mitra/Miϑra in both the Zoroastrian and Vedic pantheons. This chapter seeks to answer the question: how much did the Romans borrow from the iconography and character of the Indo-Iranian god Mitra/Miϑra? In other words, by laying out evidence for Vedic and Persian personification and imagery of the god Mitra/Miϑra, I will have a control set of data from which I can compare Greek identification and Hellenistic imagery of the Persian Miϑra as those sources that transmitted the figure of the god to the Roman Empire (that is the primary interest of this thesis research).

II. The Cultural Transmission of the Zoroastrian God into the Hellenistic World

This chapter examines Hellenistic descriptions and imagery of the Persian god Miϑra. I start this section by discussing the cultural process of *interpretatio graeca* that rendered the Persian Miϑra legible to the Greek worldview and mentality. I will analyze sources written by Greek authors and historians to explore the Greek description of the Persian Miϑra, particularly in the Hellenistic era. I will also examine texts written by Roman intellectuals and fragments of late antique encyclopedias, such as the *Suda* and *Photius' Lexicon* which describe the Persian Miϑra. By so doing, I will be able to examine the Hellenistic identification of the god. My main concern in this discussion is to investigate the role of the Antiochan cult in transmitting the Hellenistic figure of Mithras (Miϑra) to the Roman Empire. Finally, I will turn to Commagene dynasty of the first century BCE and discuss the representation of the Persian Miϑra (called by his Greek name

Μίϑρας) in the hybrid deity Apollo-Mithars-Helios-Hermes in the royal cult of Antiochus I. In sum, the main purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the Hellenistic materials provided the sources of the Roman iconography and conception of the god Mithras that defined his Roman cult.

III. Picturing the "Handsome Oriental": Roman Imagery of Mithras

This chapter is the most consequential part of the dissertation. It examines the cultic imagery and iconography of the god Mithras in the Roman world. I will look at different examples of the tauroctony (the bull slaying scene) to analyze the Roman iconography of the god Mithras and his divine attendants. The essential goal here is to seek the origin of these motifs and elements, which were appropriated by the Mithraic Mystagogues to create a new visual language and imagery depicting their god and his attendants. Moreover, by analyzing the cultic iconography and visual language of the Roman cult, this chapter will consider how the the figure of the god was transmitted to the Roman Empire and how Roman Mithraists became familiar with the Persian Miϑra. The second section of this chapter examines the influences of Mithraic iconography and imagery on Roman authors, Middle and Neoplatonists' descriptions of the Mithras cult. The chapter, thus, considers the origin of Mithraic visual language as well as the effects that specific iconography had on the external sources who had no personal engagement in the cult. Other scholars have performed similar exercises, but their treatment of the Persian and Hellenistic materials has been less systematic than what I offer in this thesis. Such efforts lead to the final phase of this dissertation that considers the reasons behind Roman interest in the Persian god Miϑra, and attempts to answer the question as why were the Romans keen to integrate a Persian god into their cultural-religious life?

IV. Epilogue: Rome Imitates Her Perilous Foe to Unify her Territory

The concluding epilogue considers the cultural-political context of Roman's deliberate cultural borrowing. In conversation with Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, it maintains that Rome's enthusiasm for Persia was indeed part of Roman Orientalism that identified Persia as the only cultural-political competitor of Rome who ran the Eastern world of the Mediterranean world. Such a view enabled Rome to identify herself positively and to justify her invasion of the East. I will propose that the appearance of Mithras (Miϑra) in the Roman Empire should be understood in such a cultural context and was made possible by Augustus' notion of *Pax Romana* (peace under the Romans), namely the Augustan idea of being open to others and integrating foreign cultural

phenomena into Roman culture and identity. Augustan Rome made possible the appeal of a Persian god and enabled the construction of a cultic identity that ultimately served Rome's imperial ideology and confirmed the dominance of their cultural identity.

Chapter One

Miϑra, the Lord of Contracts: The God in Vedic, Avestan, and Pahlavi Sources

When discussing the origin of the deity Mithras in the Roman Empire, Franz Cumont advanced a theory of an Oriental origin of the cult. In doing so, he effectively created a new figure of Miϑra in his interpretation of the Roman bull slaying scene, the tauroctony, and imagined the transmission of Mithras cult from Persia to the Roman Empire in ways not reflected in the Avestan and Pahlavi (Persian) sources. Under the influence of Cumont, Mithraic studies scholars have thus operated within a limited understanding of the god Miϑra and his associated cult. From the 1970s onwards, Mithraic scholars such as Richard Gordon, David Ulansey and Roger Beck have challenged Cumont's hypothesis about the Persian provenance of the Roman god, and carefully pointed out the differences between the Roman god (who appears as the bull slayer) and his Persian antecedents.[114] Yet, these scholars did not consider that certain attributes of the god from his Zoroastrian context could have been transmitted into the Greek world. As I will show, the Roman cult of Mithras reveals a familiarity with Greek and Hellenistic treatments of the god. However, the Romans did not simply appropriate a fully-developed Persian cult and mythology, as Cumont would have it – but rather, they absorbed only certain features of the god that can be traced back to these earlier sources. As such, the pattern of cultural transmission that I will discuss in this thesis requires a deeper consideration of the attributes and iconography of Mitra/Miϑra in his Vedic and Zoroastrian contexts.

This chapter examines the evidence of the god Mitra/Miϑra found in both the Indian and Persian scriptural sources for the purpose of comparing these earlier iterations with the later Roman depiction of the god Mithras. I will begin this chapter by examining certain hymns and stanzas from the Ṛgveda (particularly mandala 59, which is dedicated to Mitra) in order to highlighting the resemblances between the Zoroastrian Miϑra and his Vedic counterparts. Then I will explore specific fragments of the Avestan and Pahlavi texts and outline a comprehensive image of the god Miϑra, his personification and function in the Zoroastrian pantheon. The Avestan hymn Mihr Yašt, and the Pahlavi texts *Vendīdād, the Great Bundahišn Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag*, the

[114] For arguments which disagree with Cumont, see: Literature Review.

Dādestān ī Dēnīg, and the *Dādestān ī Menog ī Xrad* will be the main sources that I examine in this chapter. In addition, I will investigate the visual imagery of the god in Persian royal reliefs, coins and seals in relation to his socio-political function in those societies. As the protector of contracts, the Zoroastrian Miϑra played a significant role in the socio-political context of the Sasanian kingdom. In light of this, I will also explore the image of Miϑra on the Tāq-e-Bostān royal relief, and will consider the figures attributed to Miϑra and his Kušān counterpart Miiro in the Persian numismatic tradition. This chapter will depict the figures of the god as he appeared in the Vedic and Zoroastrian pantheon in order to provide a set of data for demonstrating the Greek descriptions and Roman iconography of the god, those descriptions that I will discuss in next chapter.

1.1 The Genealogy of the Avestan Miϑra in the Vedic Pantheon

The earliest evidence for Mitra dates to 1400 BCE, when the god's name appears alongside the names of the Vedic deities Varuṇa, Indra,[115] and Nāsatya in a treaty between Hittites and the kingdom of Mitanni.[116] Scholars argue that the mention of Mitra's name in this agreement demonstrates the god's role as the protector of contracts between the two groups.[117] Various connotations of the god's name are attested by the Vedic, Avestan and Pahlavi texts, and their etymology evokes the possibility that Mitra (AV. Miϑra) was a proto-Aryan deity.[118] Thus, some scholars suggest that in the Proto-Aryan era, Mitra personified the notion of "contract" and that

[115] Indra was the lord of the Vedic pantheon, and the king of the current generation of the gods. He played a major role in the emergence of the world and can be identified with several equivalent Indo-European deities such Dyaus Pitā, the father of Heaven. The ancient texts provide no information about his birth except that he "stood up" immediately after his birth. Indra was similar in character to the Greek Heracles (Ἡρακλῆς) and his capacity for heroic action was a significant dimension of his personality. He killed his father Tvaṣṭṛ (according to some texts). He opened the Vala cave and freed the Sunlight. He also killed the demonic giant Vṛtra and freed the primordial sweet waters. Indra stood between the heaven and the earth, and held up the sky with his arms. In the later tradition and with the immigration of Indo-Aryans down to Panjab, Indra appeared as the god of rain, and retains this role to this day. Owing to his character, Indra became the prototype of the Ārya warrior and as the Indo-Aryan god of war. For more information, see: Witzel, 2009, 772-74.

[116] Nāsatya are the Vedic Aśvins, the young sons of heaven. They correspond to the morning and evening star, and they are the saviors of the sun at the time of its setting and the divine twins of healing and miraculous treatment. They are also horse riders but not charioteers. Some scholars argue that they have a lesser position in the Vedic pantheon due to the notion of pollution and disease associated with their healing roles. See: Witzel 2009, 776. On the issue of Hatti-Mitanni treaty, see: Thieme, 1960; cf. Witzel, 2009, 765.

[117] Thieme, 1960, 307; Thieme, 1957, 18-20.

[118] Schmidt, 2006.

the cult of Mitra was established among the Indo-Iranian tribes by no later than the beginning of the second millennium BCE.[119]

The god Mitra also comes into view as one of the deities in the Ṛgvedic pantheon. In the later Hindu philosophical tradition, the Ṛgveda is understood to be eternal, with no specific author, and was transmitted orally from generation to generation. Yet, the "general index" to the Ṛgveda, the *Sarvānukramanī,* composed around the mid-four century, attributes each maṇḍala to a particular author.[120] The date of composition of the Ṛgvedic scripture is not certain and estimated to be the second millennium BCE due to its use of the Vedic language – the language of Indic tribes who immigrated to the South Asian continent prior to the mid-second millennium BCE.[121]

Mitra is a masculine Sanskrit name *(Nom. -ḥ)* derived from the neuter *mitrá (Nom. –m)* meaning contract, agreement and treaty. Thus, the Vedic Mitra is characterized both as the personification of contracts and as the overseer of them.[122] More precisely, the word *mitra* alludes to the abstract concept of deified contract as well as the embodiment of a divine being. Alternatively, if Mitra's name is derived from the neutered word *mitrá* preserved in Classical Sanskrit meaning 'friend', then the name of the god can be deciphered as "being a friend of the contract", or more precisely "a firm friendship by a contract" that holds a connotation of the god's social role in contracts.[123] However, Hans P. Schmidt, following Paul Thieme, suggests since the meaning of contract for the word *mitra* does not appear in any Sanskrit lexicography, this notion is a secondary development borrowed from the Avestan Miϑra. He asserts that Spiegel was the first scholar who read the meaning Miϑra as contract in a Zoroastrian *Rivāyat* (*Vendīdād IV*), where those breaking contracts, bargains and promises are Miϑra's antagonists.[124]

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[119] Thieme, 1960, 306-7; Gershevitch, 1967, 4; cf. Schmidt, 2006. On the Proto-Aryan tribes, the Aryans (Indo-Iranians) and their immigration to India and Iran, see: R. Schmit, 2011. However, it is extremely difficult to assert this theory relying on linguistic data alone, and as such it remains a hypothesis subject to debate.
[120] Kessler-Persaud, 2010, 5.
[121] Kessler-Persaud, 2010, 3-6; cf. Skjærvø, 1994, 201.
[122] Thieme, 1957, 22; Witzel, 2009, 766; Schmidt, 1987, 345.
[123] Schmidt, 1978, 350; Thieme, 1957, 22 and n.2.
[124] Schmidt, 1978, 350-1. On the meaning of Miϑra in Vendīdād IV, see: note 44.

The Vedic Mitra often appears in association with other deities – the god Varuṇa in particular. In Maṇḍala 1, hymn 35 dedicated to Savitṛ,[125] for instance, Mitra is called along with Varuṇa, the personification of cosmic order, and Agni, the god of fire:

> I invoke Agni first, for well-being; I invoke Mitra and Varuṇa here, for help. (RV 1:35.1)[126]

Schmidt suggests that the appearance of Mitra alongside Agni mainly relates to the role and function of Agni as the mediator between gods and humans.[127] In another stanza, Mitra is one of the charioteers of the law together with Aryaman, the god of hospitality,[128] and Varuṇa:

> Today for you, at the rising of the Sun, with our hymns we will conceive what Varuṇa, Mitra, and Aryaman solemnly declare. You are charioteer of truth. (RV 7:66.12) [129]

As indicated above, the Vedic Mitra frequently appears with Varuṇa, and there are at minimum twenty-five Vedic hymns dedicated to Mitra-Varuṇa.[130] The god Varuṇa is one of the prominent *āditya* gods in the Vedic pantheon whose social function is evident. He is the personification of cosmic order, universal and intertribal dominance. He also functions as the protector of *Ṛta*, and as the overseer of humans' truthfulness:

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[125] He is one of the Vedic deities who was said to move the sun in the mornings and evenings. He also roused humans from their slumber in the early morning. See: Witzel, 2009, 776.

[126] "hvayāmy aghnim prathamaṃ svastaye hvayāmi mitrāvaruṇāv ihāvase|" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv01035.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 141; cf. Griffith 1896, 21.

[127] Schmidt, 1978, 372; ibid, 379. Agni is the male personification of the neutral element of fire. Agni was born from water. He is Apām Napāt, the grandson of the waters (the female deity Āpas). According to a myth which plausibly predates the Indo-European period, fire was brought to the gods from his hiding place by the deity Mātariśvan. However, in the ritual, Agni was reborn every morning through the *agnihotra* ritual. He served as sacred fire, and stood at the center of Vedic rituals. Agni was (and to some extent, continues to be) the messenger between humans and gods, the one who carries the votive offering to the gods in its burnt form. Similarly, the gods were understood to come down to the ground and sit around the sacred fire. As guests, they were honored, fed and praised by humans. In a simplified scenario, both Hinduism and Zoroastrianism have been sometimes classified as fire worshiping religions due to the central role of fire in their rituals. See: Witzel, 2009, 770-71.

[128] Aryaman, meaning hospitality, is derived from the word *'arya'* with the suffix '-man'. Thus, Aryaman is the deity of bridal exchange between clans (as hospitality) and shows the magnitude of this tradition among the Indo-Iranians. See: Witzel, 2009, 766.

[129] "tad vo adya manāmahe sūktaiḥ sūra udite| yadohate varuṇo mitro aryamā yūyaṃ ṛtasya rathyaḥ||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv07066.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); "The Rig Veda."; for the translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 964; cf. Griffith, 1896, 279.

[130] i.e. RV 1:136; 1:137; 1:152; 1:153; 5:62; 5:63: 5:64; 5:65; 5:66; 5:67; 5:68 5:69; 5:70; 5:71; 5:72; 6:67; 7:60; 7:61; 7:62; 7:63; 7:64; 7:65; 7:66; 8:25; 10:132.

> Whatever this deceit that we humans practice against the divine race, o Varuṇa. If by inattention we have erased your ordinance, do not harm us of that guilt, o god. (RV 7: 89.5)[131]

A Vedic hymn dedicated to Mitra-Varuṇa introduce Varuṇa as Mitra's counterpart:

> Blameless, helped by you, we would be completely within the most extensive help of Mitra, whose complement is Varuṇa. (RV 5:65.5) [132]

Then, in the same hymn, we read that the two gods are worshipped at sunrise and again at noon to bring safety, wealth and progeny:

> In the early morning, at midday, and at the rising of the sun, again and again I call upon the goddess Aditi for wealth in its entirely, O Mitra and Varuṇa. I invoke (her) for kith and kin, for luck and life. (RV 5:69.3) [133]

In Vedic rituals, the two are honored by offering butter to the sacrificial fire who brings the sacrifice to Mitra-Varuṇa:

> Of one accord we shall sacrifice greatly to you two, O Mitra-Varuṇa, with oblations, with reverence, and with ghee, you gee-backed ones, as when the

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[131] "yat kiṃ cedaṃ varuṇa daivye jane.abhidrohaṃ manuṣyāścarāmasi| acittī yat tava dharmā yuyopima mā nastasmādenaso deva rīriṣaḥ||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv07089.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 996; cf. Griffith, 1896, 287. *Ṛta* (Avest. *aša*) is the power of truth and loyalty sustaining the cosmic order that acts in opposite to *druh* (Avest. *druj*), the power of untruth indicating the conceptions of disloyalty and betraying. Thieme and Schlerath delineate the Avestan *aša* (Vedic *Ṛta*) as truth. Witzel translates it as the "active force of truth". However, it seems that the term signifies a dynamic power and not only the notion of truth. Witzel, 2009, 768; cf. Schlerath & Skjærvø 2011; cf. Thieme, 1975, 34-9.

[132] "vayam mitrasyāvasi syāma saprathastame| anehasas tvotayaḥ satrā varuṇaśeṣasaḥ||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv05065.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 748; cf. Griffith, 1896, 211.

[133] "prātar devīm aditiṃ johavīmi madhyaṃdina uditā sūryasya| rāye mitrāvaruṇā sarvatāteḷe tokāya tanayāya śaṃ yoḥ||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv05069.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 751; cf. Griffith 1896, 212.

Adhvaryus [134] among us bring (Soma) to you along with their insight. (RV 1:153.1)[135]

The sacred plant Soma and its pressed juice were used as offerings in religious rituals since Indo-Iranian times. The so-called agniṣṭoma corresponds to the Zoroastrian ritual equivalent of the Soma sacrifice. Soma is one of the four kings in the Vedic pantheon.[136] And Soma is pressed to praise Mitra-Varuṇa:

> Come here toward the pressing of the pious man, o Varuṇa and Mitra, to drink of this Soma. (RV 5:71.3) [137]

In another stanza, we find the pressed Soma is served as ritual drink:

> Mitra and Varuṇa take pleasure in our sacrifice to their liking. Let them sit down upon the ritual grass to drink the Soma. (RV 5:72.3) [138]

In another hymn dedicated to Mitra-Varuṇa, cow milk is an offering used to honor them:

> Aditi, the milk –cow, swells for truth and for the person who gives offerings, O Mitra and Varuṇa, when serving you at the ceremony, he spurs you two on. The one upon whom the oblation is bestowed [=Agni] is like the human Hotar. (RV 1:153.3) [139]

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[134] A group of priests who performed the Vedic *Yajna*, the sacrificial rituals and devotions; on this issue, see: Steiner, 2010.

[135] "yajāmahe vāṃ mahaḥ sajoṣā havyebhirmitrāvaruṇā namobhiḥ| ghṛtairghṛtasnū adha yad vāmasme adhvaryavo na dhītibhirbharanti||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv01153.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 330; cf. Griffith 1896, 83.

[136] The word Soma is derived from the verb "Su" meaning to press out. Soma is one of the four kings in the Vedic pantheon. The plant might have been a kind of Ephedra as its juice has an exhilarating psychological effect. Both the Ṛgveda and the Avesta say that the best Soma is found on the high mountains in Himalayas, Pamirs, and Hindukush. He has a heroic and warlike character. Indra, the king of the gods, could free the primordial sweet waters from the embrace of the demonic giant Vṛtra just by drinking the juice of Soma. The Soma juice heals illnesses and brings immortality to drinkers as does the Greek ambrosia (ἀμβροσία meaning immortality). See: Witzel, 2009, 771-72.

[137] "upa naḥ sutam ā ghataṃ varuṇa mitra dāśuṣaḥ| asya somasya pītaye||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv05071.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 753; cf. Griffith, 1896, 212.

[138] "mitraś ca no varuṇaś ca juṣetāṃ yajñam iṣṭaye|ni barhiṣi sadatāṃ somapītaye||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv05072.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 753; cf. Griffith 1896, 213.

[139] "pīpāya dhenuraditirṛtāya janāya mitrāvaruṇā havirde| hinoti yad vāṃ vidathe saparyan sa rātahavyo mānuṣo na hotā||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv01153.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 330; cf. Griffith, 1896, 83. In Hinduism, the

Moreover, according to the Ṛgveda, the mixture of cow milk and pressed Soma is used as a sacred drink for serving Mitra together with Varuṇa:

> We have pressed -you two, drive hither-with the stones; these exhilarating ones here are mixed with cows [=milk]-these exhilarating Soma drinks. You two kings, touching heaven, come here right to us, into our midst. These with their milk mixture are for you two, Mitra and Varuṇa- the clear Soma drinks and those with their milk mixture. (RV. 1:137.1) [140]

The question arises here as to whether Varuṇa is the guardian of *Ṛta* and the overseer of human truthfulness and Mitra is the personification of the deified concept of contract. If so, can one claim that protecting contracts of oaths and loyalty characterizes Mitra-Varuṇa? Moreover, are these two gods the only Vedic deities protecting contracts and punishing contract breakers, or are there others? In order to answer the first question, Jan Gonda asserts that Mitra is not the guardian of *Rta*, but he is rather the maintainer and preserver who keeps the order of *Rta* in its right circumstance. However, according to the Ṛgveda, Mitra is the personification of the deified conception of "contract" rather than the protector of it – or more precisely, rather than being the *only* protector of it.[141] The mission of overseeing truth, oaths and contracts is shared by Mitra-Varuṇa:

> Those who through truth increase by truth, the lords of truth, of light, these two, Mitra and Varuṇa, do I call. (RV. 1: 23.5) [142]

sacred cow represents pure goodness and motherly love, and its sacredness symbolizes a mother's sacredness. Its milk also evokes breast milk and breast-feeding. In the Vedic period, the cow was the symbol of maternity and fertility. It was the symbol of the mother of the gods, the cosmic waters, and the rain cloud. In Vedic literature, both the cow and bull are mentioned more than any other sacred animal, since they were the main sacrificial animals and their milk was dedicated to the gods in rituals and religious feasts. See: Jacobsen, 2009, 713-16.

[140] "suṣumā yātamadribhirghośrītā matsarā ime somāso matsarā ime| ā rājānā divispṛśāsmatrā ghantamupa naḥ| ime vāṃ mitrāvaruṇā ghavāśiraḥ somāḥ śukrā ghavāśiraḥ||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv01137.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 309; cf. Griffith, 1896, 76.

[141] On the notion of Mitra as contract, see particularly: Thieme, 1975, 21-40.

[142] "ṛtena yāv ṛtāvṛdhāv ṛtasya jyotiṣas patī| tā mitrāvaruṇā huve||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv01023.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 117; cf. Griffith, 1896, 13.

In other Stanzas, Mitra and Varuṇa accompany Aryaman and are the deities protecting the truth. The pairing between these deities and their connection to truth is clearly manifested in the following stanza:

> Today for you, at the rising of the sun, with our hymns we will conceive what Varuṇa, Mitra and Aryaman solemnly declare. You are charioteers of truth! (You) possessing the truth, born of the truth, and strengthening through the truth, (you) terrifying haters of untruth- might we be in the most protective favor of you, o men, and might also our patrons. (RV. 7: 66.12-13)[143]

In this triad, Mitra personifies alliance, Aryaman represents hospitality and Varuṇa indicates true-speech in relation to the notion of truth.[144] In the Ṛgvedic hymns, Indra is the deity who penalizes liars, contract breakers and those who do not respect the sacredness of contract, and not the *āditya* protecting and overseeing contracts:[145]

> Those of evil ways who transgress against Mitra [an alliance] and against Aryaman, against agreements and against Varuṇa- grind your bulging bullish ruddy weapon of death down on those without alliance (to us), o bullish Indra. (RV. 10: 89.9) [146]

Thus, the deadly weapon is in the hands of Indra. He alone is responsible for punishing those who transgress Mitra, Aryaman and Varuṇa, along the oaths and contracts they oversee. In another hymn dedicated to Ādityas, we read:

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[143] "tad vo adya manāmahe sūktaiḥ sūra udite| yadohate varuṇo mitro aryamā yūyaṃ ṛtasya rathyaḥ|| ṛtāvāna ṛtajātā ṛtāvṛdho ghorāso anṛtadviṣaḥ| teṣāṃvaḥ sumne suchardiṣṭame naraḥ syāma ye ca sūrayaḥ||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv07066.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 964; cf. Griffith, 1896, 279.

[144] Schmidt, 1978, 370.

[145] Cf. Schmidt, 1978, 369-70.

[146] "pra ye mitraṃ prāryamaṇaṃ durevāḥ pra saṃghiraḥ pravaruṇaṃ minanti| nyamitreṣu vadhamindra tumraṃ vṛṣanvṛṣāṇamaruṣaṃ śiśīhi||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv10089.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 1536; cf. Thieme, 1975, 468.

> O Aditi, Mitra, and Varuṇa, have mercy if we have committed any offense against you. Might I reach the broad light that is free of fear, Indra. Let the long darkness (of death) not reach us. (RV. 2:27.14) [147]

Consequently, characterizing Mitra's role as the sole protector of contracts mainly arises from his identification with the Avestan Miϑra rather than his representation in the Ṛgveda. In the Zoroastrian tradition, Miϑra appears as the overseer of oaths and contracts, and he absorbs different characteristics of the Vedic gods Indra and Varuṇa. Thus, the Zoroastrian Miϑra resembles Varuṇa in terms of overseeing oaths and human truthfulness, and he resembles Indra in term of penalizing those who are not faithful. In other words, the capacity of overseeing and punishing are two characteristics that distinguish the Vedic Mitra from the Zoroastrian Miϑra. I will return to this issue later in my discussion of the Avestan Miϑra, but for now, I would like to emphasize that in contrast to his Avestan counterpart, the Vedic Mitra is primarily the personification of the concept of the "contract", who shares the characteristics of protecting oaths, truth, contracts and cosmic order with other Vedic deities.

Hymn 59 of the third Maṇḍala is the only hymn dedicated to Mitra alone. Here, Mitra is the contract maker between people who sustains earth and heaven (RV. 3:59.1). [148] He is free from disease and he is kind with those who honor him through their fire dedications:

> The great Ādityas is to be approached with reverence – he who arranges the peoples, who is very kind to the one singing praise. For him the most wonderful, for Mitra, offer this pleasing offering into the fire. (RV. 3:59.5)[149]

However, the Vedic Mitra also shares some resemblances with his Avestan counterpart in this hymn. Just as the Avestan Miϑra, the Vedic Mitra represents wakefulness and sleeplessness:

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[147] "adite mitra varuṇota mṛḷa yad vo vayaṃ cakṛmā kaccidāghaḥ| urvaśyāmabhayaṃ jyotirindra mā no dīrghā abhi naśan tamisrāḥ||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv02027.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 441; cf. Griffith, 1896, 117.

[148] "mitro janān yātayati bruvāṇo mitro dādhāra pṛthivīmuta dyām|" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv03059.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); "Mitra arranges the peoples when (Aliance) is declared. Mitra upholdas earth and heaven..." for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 550; cf. Griffith, 1896, 152.

[149] "mahānādityo namasopasadyo yātayajjano ghṛṇate suśevaḥ| tasmā etat panyatamāya juṣṭamaghnau mitrāya havirā juhota||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv03059.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 550; cf. Griffith, 1896, 152.

> Mitra watches over the nations with unblinking eye. To Mitra offer an offering ghee. (RV. 3:59.1)[150]

Likewise, we read about Miϑra in the Avesta the following:

> We worship Mithra [*sic*] of wide pastures…has a wide outlook, is strong, sleepless, (ever) waking. (*Mihr Yt.*7)[151]

As revealed by these stanzas, being sleepless is a certain quality attributed to both gods who personify contracts. Thus, one can claim the quality of overseeing contracts comes with the condition of being sleepless, or being wakeful. Both Mitra and Miϑra personify all forms of the contract and have the quality of guarding and overseeing them.

Both deities, Mitra and Miϑra, traverse the cosmos, but the former does so through his greatness and fame:

> Wide-ranging Mitra, who surmounts heaven through his greatness and earth through his renown. (RV. 3:59.7)[152]

The later drives his chariot from a continent to another:

> We worship Mithra [*sic*]…who drives forth in (his) high-wheeled chariot, built by (Spsnta) Mainyu, from the continent of Arazahi to the shining continent Xwaniratha…(*Mihr Yt.*67)[153]

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[150] "mitraḥ kṛṣṭīranimiṣābhi caṣṭe mitrāya havyaṃghṛtavajjuhota||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv03059.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 550; cf. Griffith, 1896, 152.

[151] "miϑrəm. vouru.gaoiiaoitīm. yazamaide…pərəϑu.vaēδaiianəm. sūrəm. axᵛafnəm. jaγauruuā̊ŋhəm" For the transcription,see: http://titus.unifrankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm?avest161.htm&fbclid=IwAR2AfF8fayNAiycNskXBrWXveIIGAqEvX9f10S707XEDtX1pNGBmH1-59gA; for the English translation, see: Malandra 1983, 59; cf. Gershevitch, 1959, 77.

[152] "abhi yo mahinā divaṃ mitro babhūva saprathāḥ| abhi śravobhiḥ pṛthivīm||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rvsan/rv03059.htm (accessed April 17, 2019); for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 550; cf. Griffith, 1896, 152.

[153] "miϑrəm. vouru.gaoiiaoitīm… yō. vāṣ̌a. mainiiu.hąm.tāšta.bərəzi.caxra. frauuazaite. haca. karṣ̌uuarə. yat̰. arəzahi. upa. karṣ̌uuarə. yat̰. xᵛaniraϑəm. bāmīm." For the transcription, see: http://titus.unifrankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm?avest161.htm&fbclid=IwAR2AfF8fayNAiycNskXBrWXveIIGAqEvX9f10S707XEDtX1pNGBmH1-59gA; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 66; cf. Gershevitch, 1959, 105.

Thus, both gods traverse the earth to oversee all contracts, while the Zoroastrian Miϑra is a chariot driver, the Vedic Mitra is not.

Apart from these resemblances of being wakeful and traversing the earth, the Zoroastrian Miϑra diverges from his Vedic counterpart. The Zoroastrian Miϑra combines features that we find in the Vedic representations of Mitra, Varuṇa and Indra, and ultimately ranks higher in that pantheon than Mitra does in the Vedic one. In fact, the Zoroastrian corpus attributes a more prominent role to Miϑra in comparison to the Vedic Mitra who has a minor role in the Ṛgvedic pantheon, and who obtains his status only in association with Varuṇa.

1.2. Miϑra in the Zoroastrian Pantheon

At first glance, the Persian Miϑra (MP. Mihr) embodies the concepts of the vow, commitment, covenant, contract, treaty, and promise.[154] The etymology of the god's Persian name implies that it was derived from the same root as the Vedic name, namely the neuter noun *mitrá* meaning "contract".[155] The Mackenzie dictionary defines *mtr* (Mihr) as Miϑra the lord of wide pastures, the sun, the 7th month and 16th day of the Zoroastrian calendar, contract, bond, love and friendship.[156] Some scholars characterize Miϑra, in accordance with his social function, as being indicative of moral obligation and faithfulness to oath and contract. In this sense, Miϑra represents a social moral obligation serving as the bedrock of society.[157] Moreover, he can be also the personification of religious piety.[158]

The Yašts are the hymns dedicated to the Zoroastrian deities that depict Miϑra Yazāta[159] as the lord of contracts and provide a comprehensive image of the god's characteristics, capacities,

[154] Schmidt, 2006; Thieme, 1957, p.18; ibid, p.23; cf. Schmidt, 1978, 350; ibid, 351. The both texts of Mihr Yašt 116-17 and Vendīdād, IV: IIa-IIe personify Miϑra as the representation of various contracts existing in the material world.
[155] Schmidt, 1978, 345; cf. Gershevitch, 1950, 28-9.
[156] Mackenzi, 1986, 56; cf. Moazami, 2014. In her commentary on the *Pahlavi Vendīdād,* Moazami interprets the Pahlavi *mtr* (Mihr) as Miϑra, the lord of wide pastures (e.g.3:1.E & 19:15.C) and *mtrwk-dlwc* (*Mihrōdruǰ*) as contract breaking (e.g.4:5.B, 4:6.B & 4:7.B) On Miϑra as the lord of pastures, see: 370.
[157] Hertzfeld interprets Miϑra as the personification of the moral obligation which is the base of society. See: Hertzfeld, 1947, 467; Schmidt, 1978, 351. Lentz goes further, and claims Miϑra personifies piety, the holiness of oaths and religious obligation at least in some stanzas of Mihr Yašt (123 & 116). See: Schmidt, 1978, 352-3.
[158] Lentz, 1970, 248-9.
[159] Yazāta are the Zoroastrian gods and goddesses who were created by the supreme god Ahura Mazdā.

roles and functions in the Zoroastrian pantheon. The Avestan Yašts are important parts of the Zoroastrian sacred texts, as they relate to rituals and ritual performances. The precise date of their composition is undetermined and perhaps dates back to sometime before, during or after the Achaemenid era, towards the middle of the first millennium BCE; though, the earliest extant manuscript is the codex F1 composed in 1591 CE.[160]

Mihr Yašt is the tenth Yašt of the Avesta that is the longest hymn with 35 *Karde* (sections) and 146 stanzas dedicated Miϑra. According to Mihr Yašt, Ahura Mazdā creates Miϑra and demands that he be venerated:

> Ahura Mazdā said to Zarathushtra the Spitamid: When I created Mithra [*sic*] of wide pastures, I made him, O Spitamid, as worthy of worship and praise as myself, Ahura Mazdā. (*Mihr Yt*.1)[161]

In the only Yašt dedicated to him, Miϑra is evoked side-by-side with Ahura Mazdā twice for assisting and protecting those who are faithful to him:

> Then may he come to help us. O exalted Mithra [*sic*] and Ahura, when the whip cracks and the horses neigh… (*Mihr Yt*.113) [162]

In another stanza, we read:

> We worship the exalted Righteous who (ensure) freedom from danger, Ahura and Mithra [*sic*], as well as the Stars, the Moon, and the Sun. (*Mihr Yt*.145)[163]

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[160] Skjærvø, 1994, 199-201; cf. Hintze, 2014.

[161] "mraot̰. ahurō. mazdā̊. spitamāi. zaraϑuštrāi: āat̰. yat̰. miϑrəm. yim. vouru.gaoiiaoitīm. frādaδąm. azəm. spitama. āat̰. dim.daδąm.auuā̊ṇtəm.yesniiata.auuā̊ṇtəm.vahmiiata.yaϑa.mąmcit̰. yim. ahurəm. mazdąm." For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 59; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 75.

[162] "taδa.nō.jamiiāt̰.auuaiŋ́he.miϑra.ahura.bərəzaṇta.yat̰.bərəzəm.barāt̰. aštra. vācim. aspanąmca. srifa." For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 72; cf. Greshevitch, 1959, 131; cf. ibid,147. Boyce believes this phrase refers to Apām Napāt who is the only god sharing the title of Ahurā with Miϑra and Ahura Mazdā. Boyce, 1975a, 42; Schmidt, 2006.

[163] "miϑra.ahura.bərəzaṇta.aiϑiiejaŋha.aṣ̌auuana.yazamaide:strə̄ušca.mā̊ŋhəmca.huuarəca.uruuarā̊.paiti.barəsmaniiā̊.m iϑrəm.vīspanąm. dax́iiunąm. daiŋ́hupaitīm. yazamaide." For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 75; cf. Greshevitch, 1959, 147.

Traditionally, Miϑra was considered to be the sun. Alfred Hillebrandt even goes further and assumes Mitra/Miϑra was the Indo-Iranian sun god.[164] Yet, there is no evidence attesting to Mitra/Miϑra as the sun or even the light, and Schmidt suggests that this identification must be a secondary development.[165] According to Mihr Yašt, Miϑra is not the sun, he is associated with the sun. He traverses the earth with the sun:

> Who is the first supernatural god to rise across the Harā (mountain range), in front of the immortal swift-horsed sun… (*Mihr Yt.*13) [166]

In another stanza of this hymn, we find Miϑra moving across the earth according to the sun's path in the sky:

> We worship Mithra [*sic*]…who, broad as the earth, goes along after sunset, (who) sweeps both edges of this broad, round earth whose limits are far apart; (who) surveys all that which is between earth and heaven. (*Mihr Yt.*95)[167]

Mary Boyce asserts that the sun is the celestial fire (the greatest manifestation of fire known to men), and that fire is Miϑra's instrument for the ordeal by fire.[168] Hence, Miϑra's association with the Sun relates to his role as the lord of true-speech and fire. It was through the ordeal by fire that true-speech is recognized.[169]Accordingly, Miϑra resembles another Vedic deity different from Mitra in this capacity. As the lord of true speech and oaths, the Avestan Miϑra corresponds to Varuṇa, the deity of oaths and *Ṛta.* Yet, the identification of Miϑra with the sun is also emphasized by ancient Greek historiography, which characterizes Miϑra as the Persian Helios. I will address

[164] Schmidt, 1978, 346.
[165] Ibid, 384.
[166] "yō.paoiriiō.mainiiauuō.yazatō.tarō.harąm.āsnaoiti.pauruua.naēmāṯ. aməṣ̌ahe. hū. yaṯ. auruuaṯ.aspahe:,…" For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 60; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 79.
[167]Thesun'secliptic."miϑrəm.vouru.gaoiiaoitīm.yazamaide.arš.vacaŋhəm.viiāxanəm.hazaŋra.gaoṣ̌əm.hutāštəm.baēuu arə.caṣ̌manəm.bərəzaṇtəm.pərəϑu.vaēδaiianəm.sūrəm.axᵛafnəm.jaγauruuā̊ŋhəm.yō.zəm.fraϑā̊.aiβiiāiti.pasca.hū.frāṣ̌ mō.dāitīm.marəzaiti.uua.karana.aiŋ́hā̊.zəmō.yaṯ.paϑanaiiā̊.skarənaiiā̊.dūraēpāraiiā̊:vīspəm.imaṯ.ādiδāiti.yaṯ.aṇtarə.zą m.asmanəmca," For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.unifrankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm ; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 70; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 121.

[168] Boyce, 1975, 74. Ordeal by fire was a ceremony whereby the judiciary asked people to prove their loyalty and commitments to their oaths and contracts.
[169] Boyce, 1975b, 73-5; cf. Boyce, 1975a, 35-6.

this point in the next chapter, and here I want to stress that while the Avestan Miϑra is not equated with the sun, he is still associated with the sun.

The Avestan hymn also depicts Miϑra as a luminous figure. He has a face shining like the stars. In Mihr Yašt, we read:

> …whose [Miϑra's] face blazes like (that) of the star Tishtrya… (*Mihr Yt.*143)[170]

As mentioned earlier, one of the shared qualities between the Vedic and Zoroastrian gods is to be ever wakeful. Thus, in Mihr Yašt, we find Miϑra being omniscient and ever-present with a thousand ears and ten thousand eyes:

> We worship Mithra of wide pastures, whose speech is correct, who is eloquent (in verbal contests), who has a thousand ears, is well built, has ten thousand eyes, is tall, has a wide outlook, is strong, sleepless, (ever) waking. (*Mihr Yt.*7) [171]

With his ten thousand eyes, Miϑra is similar to his Vedic counterpart. His thousand ears and ten thousand eyes ensure that Miϑra oversees all contracts, as we read:

> Who [Miϑra] has one thousand perceptions. Ahura Mazdā gave (him) ten thousand eyes so that he might look out. Thus, with these eyes and these perceptions, he espies the covenant-breaker and the one false to the covenant. Thus, with these eyes and these perceptions, Mithra is undeceivable, (he) who, strong, having ten thousand spies, undeceivable, knows all. (*Mihr Yt.*82)[172]

Miϑra also has long hands and can grab everyone speaking falsehood and lies:

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[170] "yeŋ́hā̊ ainikō brāzaiti yaϑa tištriiō stārahe…" For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 75; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 145.

[171] "miϑrəm. vouru. gaoiiaoitīm. yazamaide. arš. vacaŋhəm. viiāxanəm. hazaŋra. gaoṣ̌əm. hutāštəm. baēuuarə. caṣ̌manəm. bərəzaṇtəm. pərəϑu. vaēδaiianəm. sūrəm. axᵛafnəm. jaγauruuā̊ŋhəm." For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 59; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 77.

[172] "yeŋ́he. hazaŋrəm. yaoxštinąm.fradaϑaṯ. ahurō. mazdā̊.baēuuarə. dōiϑranąm. vīdōiϑre:āaṯ. ābiiō. dōiϑrābiiō.aiβiias ca. yaoxštibiiō. spasiieiti.miϑrō.ziiąm. miϑrō.drujəmca:āaṯ. ābiiō. dōiϑrābiiō.aiβiiasca.yaoxštibiiō. aδaoiiō. asti.miϑrō .yō.baēuuarə.spasanō.sūrō. vīspō.vīδuuā̊. aδaoiiamnō." For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 68; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 113.

> We worship Mithra [*sic*]…whose very long arms reach out to catch those who speak falsely. Even if (he who speaks falsely) is at the eastern river, he is caught. Even if he is at the western (river), he is struck down. Whether at the source of the Rangha or in the middle of this earth. (*Mihr Yt.*104)[173]

Similarly, in the Pahlavi literature, the figure of Miϑra appears to be the overseer of oaths, true-speech, contracts and covenants with his thousand ears and ten thousand eyes. For instance, according to the cosmogonic and cosmological text of the *Great Bundahišn*—likely written at the end of the Sassanian epoch (the earliest available manuscripts are K_{20} and H_6, which are both dated back to the late 14th or early 15th century)—Miϑra is both the judge and the guardian of contracts, who sees everywhere and listens to everything to find truth and true-speech:[174]

> His being possessed of a thousand ears is this: five hundred spirits do for him the work of the ear. His being possessed of ten thousand eyes is this: five thousand spirits do for him the work of the eye, (saying); Listen to this and listen to that, look at this and look at that. Every day he is with the sun in this work till noon. Therefore, the judge in this world decides in judgement until noon. (*The Great Bundahišn*, 171f.)[175]

For this reason, Miϑra takes on the role of judge, discerning truth from falsity. In his capacity as an arbiter, Miϑra accompanies the sun every day from sunrise until noon, judging everything he sees and hears. Thus, parallel to *Mihr* Yašt, Miϑra is not the sun but he accompanies the sun while doing his own task, supervising oaths and contracts.[176] In *Mihr* Yašt, we read:

> We worship Mithra [*sic*]…who drives forth in (his) high-wheeled chariot, built by (Spənta) Mainyu, from the continent of Arazahi to the shining continent

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[173] "miϑrəm. vouru.gaoiiaoitīm. yazamaide.arš.vacaŋhəm. viiāxanəm.hazaŋra.gaoṣ̌əm. hutāštəm.baēuuarə.caṣ̌manəm. bərəzaṇtəm.pərəϑu.vaēδaiianəm. sūrəm.axᵛafnəm. jaγauruuā̊ŋhəm.yeŋ́he. darəγācit̰. bāzauua.fragrəβəṇti.miϑō.aojaŋhō.+yat̰cit̰. uṣ̌astaire.hiṇduuō.āgəuruuaiieite.yat̰cit̰. daoṣ̌ataire. niγne.yat̰cit̰. sanake.raŋhaiiā̊.yat̰cit̰. vīmaiδīm.aiŋ́hā̊. z əmō." For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 71; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 125.
[174] On the *Great Bundahišn*, its composition and manuscripts, see: Mackenzie, 1989.
[175] "u-š 1000- gōšīh ēd ku-š 500 mēnōg kār ī gōšīh hamē kunēd u-š bēwar-cašmīh ēn ku-š 5000 mēnōg kār ī cašmīh kunēnd ku mihr ēn niyoš ud hān-ez niyōš, ēn wēn ud hā-ez wēn. Harw rōz tā nēm-rōz abāg xwaršēd pad ēn kar. Ēd rāy dādwar pad gētīg tā nēm-rōz wizīr kunēd." For the transcription and English translation, see: Shaked, 1995, IV: 12-3.
[176] Cf. *Mihr Yašt, 95.*

> Xwaniratha, accompanied by timely Energy (?), and by the Mazda-created Xwaranah, and by the Ahura-created Victoriousness whose chariot good, tall Ashi guides; for whose (chariot) the Mazdean Religion prepared the paths for easy travel, which (chariot) is pulled by supernatural, white, radiant, shining (?), wise, shadowless steeds which issue forth from the supernatural realm whenever Damoish Upamana [or Av. Vərəθrayna; MP. Warahrān or Wahrān] gets it off to a good start, (and) which all the supernatural daewas as well as the concupiscent drugwants fear, (crying out). (*Mihr Yt.*67-68)[177]

Accordingly, to aid in his daily travels, the Avestan Miϑra has a chariot built by Ahura Mazdā, which is pulled by spiritual white radiant steeds which take him across the seven regions (NP. *Haft Kešvar)*[178] so that the god might oversee oaths, true speech and covenants.

Moreover, as revealed in this stanza, Miϑra is not alone in his travels. He is accompanied by Aši (MP. Aši)[179], Daēnā (MP. Dēn)[180], Vərəθraγna (MP. Warahrān or Wahrān or Bahrām)[181] and

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[177] "miϑrəm. vouru.gaoiiaoitīm. yazamaide.arš.vacaŋhəm. viiāxanəm.hazaŋra.gaoṣ̌əm. hutāštəm.baēuuarə.caṣ̌manəm.
bərəzaṇtəm.pərəϑu.vaēδaiianəm. sūrəm.ax^{v}afnəm. jaγauruuā̊ŋhəm.yō. vāṣ̌a. mainiiu.hąm.tāšta.bərəzi.caxra.frauuaza
ite.haca. karṣ̌uuarə. yat̰. arəzahi.upa. karṣ̌uuarə. yat̰. x^{v}aniraϑəm. bāmīm.raϑβiia. ciϑra.hacimnō.x^{v}arənaŋhaca. mazda
δāta.vərəϑraγnaca.ahuraδāta.yeŋ́he. vāṣ̌əm. hangrəβnāiti.aṣ̌iš. vaŋuhi. yā. bərəzaiti.yeŋ́he. daēna. māzdaiiasniš.x^{v}īte.p
aϑō. rāδaiti:yim. auruuaṇtō. mainiiauuā̊ŋhō.auruṣ̌a.raoxṣ̌na.frādərəsra.spəṇta. vīδuuā̊ŋhō. asaiia.maniuuasaŋhō.vazəṇ
ti.yat̰. dim. dāmōiš. upamanō.hu.irixtəm.bāδa. irinaxti:yahmat̰.haca. fratərəsəṇti.vīspe. mainiiauua. daēuua.yaēca. var
əniia. druuaṇtō." For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm ; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 66-7; cf. Gershevitch, 1959, 105-7.

[178] On the idea of 'Haft Kešvar', see: Shahbazi, 2012.

[179] Aši is the Avestan goddess of rewards and good fortune. According to the *Gātāϑ*, obedience is the result of a proper mindset and it is rewarded by good fortune. Thus, Aši is in a close relationship with Sraoša who personifies "obedience", and with Vohu Manah who personifies a "proper mindset". Ard Yašt [Yt. 17] is dedicated to Aši, where the goddess appears as the god of fertility and marriage. The Younger Avesta describes the Zoroastrian goddess as tall, strong, beautiful with healing power and high intelligence. Ahura Mazdā, Zaraθuštra and Iranian Heroes such as Yima worship and honor her by sacrifice. See: Skjærvø, 2011; Skjærvø, 2011a.

[180] Daēnā/ Dēn is the deification and personification of the Mazdean religion, whose essence is the wisdom of Ahura Mazdā (the supreme lord), and its manifestation is the practice of the holy words (similar to the Greek concept of λόγος). The Yazatā Daēnā appears as the daughter, sister or sometimes as the wife of Ahura Mazdā. Together with the deities of time and space, Dēn is the divine instrument who assists Ahura Mazdā in creation. She also represents humanity's wisdom and deeds. The personification of Daēnā as representing the inner self and deeds is confirmed in Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts and the inscription of Kerdīr. On the Day of Judgment, the soul of a dead man goes along the Činwad Bridge and meets Daēnā as a beautiful woman or a witch in accordance to what they did in his life. See: Shaki, 2011.

[181] Vərəθraγna/Warahrān/Wahrān/Bahrām is one of the prominent figures in the Zoroastrian pantheon personifying victory. In the Avesta and in Mihr Yašt, he is called by another name *Damoish Upamana* (e.g. Miht Yt.68). Created by Ahura Mazdā, Vərəθraγna is strong, upholds Farr and sustains peace and prosperity. He is also the warrior god of Zoroastrianism. According to *Bahrām Yašt*, the hymn dedicated to him, the Avestan Vərəθraγna has ten different incarnations resembling the avatars of Viṣṇu or the incarnations of Indra. Some of his manifestations are a gale, a bull with golden horns, and a youth at the age of fifteen, a falcon, a wild goat and an armed warrior. To those who worship

X^{v}arənah.[182] Aši guides his chariot and Daēnā prepares the way for easy travel. With a frightening visage, Vərəθraγna flies in front of Miϑra's chariot and slays those who are contract breakers and not faithful to Miϑra:

> We worship Mithra [*sic*]…in front of whom Ahura-created Warathraghna drives in the form of a ferocious wild boar with sharp teeth, with sharp tusks… who cuts everything up; all at once he mixes together on the ground the bones, hair, brains, and blood of the men who are false to a covenant. (*Mihr Yt.*70-72)[183]

Finally, in *Mihr Yašt,* we read:

> …in front of him drives blazing Fire who is the strong Kawyan Xwaronah. (*Mihr Yt.*127)[184]

This blazing fire is the divine Royal Fortune, which might represent the sacred fire known as Ādur-farnbag or Ādur- xvarrah in the Sasanian epoch[185] – or more plausibly, it personifies the flames of fire protecting X^{v}arənah (Kavyan Fortune; Farr; divine Royal Fortune).[186]

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him, Vərəθraγna offers them victory in words, in practice, in speech and in verbal contest. The Avestan Vərəθraγna is the personification of victory in not only war and military tactics but also triumph over the dēws (evils) in intellectual and moral senses. In the Seleucid and Parthian eras under the Hellenistic influences and in earlier Sassanians, Vərəθraγna was identified with Ares or Herakles and was embodied as a naked man holding a cudgel. Then, in later Sassanian art and coinage, he was depicted as one of his animal incarnations or as the victorious fire. See: Gnoli & Jamzadeh, 2011.

[182] In contrast to the complex etymology, the Avestan Farr(ah)/X^{v}arənah personifies the power of a fiery nature. Thus, it is in connection with luminaries, stars, Ahura Mazdā, holy immortals, and some Yazatas such as Miϑra. X^{v}arənah is also associated also with the waters of sea and river and material seeds. Thus, this is a part of human and divine nature, a spiritual reason motivating the creation of body and person. It personifies fortune in a general sense, good fortune and the Royal Fortune as well. According to the nineteenth Yašt, dedicated to the Yazata of earth, Ahura Mazdā says every mortal must seek x^{v}arənah to achieve success and good fortune. In Greek historiography, X^{v}arənah is a golden eagle accompanying both divine and solar chariots. In Persian imagery, Farr(ah)/X^{v}arənah is associated with light and fire, with the ring seen in investiture scenes, with the sun disk, a falcon or an eagle, and the human body with flames in and around. See: Gnoli, 1999.

[183] "miϑrəm vouru . gaoyaoitīm…ĵaγaurvåŊhəm…yeŊhe paurva . naēmāṭ vazaite vərəϑraγnō ahuraδātō hū kəhrpa varāzahe paiti . ərənō tiži . dąstrahe aršnō tiži…hakaṭ vīspå aipi . kərəntaiti yō hakaṭ astəsča varəsəsča mastarəγnasča vohunišča zəmāδa hąm . raēϑwayeiti miϑrō . druĵąm mašyānąm. ahe raya…tåsčā yazamaide." For the transcription, see: Gershevitch, 1959, 106-8; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 67; cf. Gershevitch, 1959, 107-9. Zaehner believes this angry and aggressive picture of Miθra must have been influenced by the images of Indian daēvas (e.g. Indrā and Varunā). See Zaehner, 1961, 109-10; cf. Gershevitch, 1959, 193-4: 41. Yet, the point is that this frightening imagery represents Vərəθraγna and not Miϑra.

[184] "…nixṣ̌ata.ahmāṱ. vazata. ātarš. yō. upa.suxtō.uγrəm. yō.kauuaēm. x^{v}arənō." For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm ; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 74; cf. Gershevitch, 1959, 137.

[185] Gershevitch, 1959, 278; cf. Duchesne-Guillemin, 1973, 204.

[186] Boyce, 1975b, 74; cf. Schmidt, 2006.

We also learn that Miϑra inhabits Harā.[187] From there, he surpasses heaven and earth, and oversees the whole of Iran, the seven regions (NP. *Haft Kešvar*) and the seven climes of the earth:

> We worship Mithra [*sic*]…Who is the first supernatural god to rise across the Harā (mountain range), in front of the immortal swift-horsed sun, who is the first to seize the beautiful mountain peaks adorned with gold; from there he, the most mighty, surveys the whole land inhabited by Iranians, where gallant rulers preside over many (offerings of) refreshments (to the gods), where high mountains rich in pasture lands and water provide fodder for cattle, where there exist deep lakes with wide expanses of water, where wide irrigation waters rush with eddies toward Parutian Ishkata, Haraiwan Margu, Sogdian Gawa, and Chorasmia. Strong Mithra [*sic*] surveys (the continents) Arazahi, Sawahl, Fradadhafshu, Widadhafshu, Wouru.bargshtl, Wouru.jaroshtl, and that splendid continent Xwaniratha, (the land of) village settlement and (of) healthy village habitation. (Mihr Yt.12-15)[188]

Miϑra is the lord of pastures and he protects plants, allowing them to grow and enabling rainfall:

> We worship Mithra [*sic*]… (who, as) a spy, stands erect, watchful, brave, eloquent, who fills the waters, who listens to the call (of men), who lets the water fall, who allows the plants to grow, who has jurisdiction over boundaries, is eloquent, clever, undeceivable, who has manifold perception, who was created by the Creator. (*Mihr Yt.*61)[189]

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[187] The mythical mountain Hāra is located at the center of the world, from where every morning the sun in travels the world accompanied by Miϑra.

[188] “miϑrəm.vouru.gaoiiaoitīm.yazamaide.arš.vacaŋhəm.viiāxanəm.hazaŋra.gaoṣ̌əm.hutāštəm.baēuuarə.caṣ̌manəm.bərəzaṇtəm.pərəϑu.vaēδaiianəm.sūrəm.ax^{v}afnəm.jaγauruuā̊ŋhəm.yō.paoiriiō.mainiiauuō.yazatō.tarō.harąm.āsnaoiti.pauruua.naēmāt̰.aməṣ̌ahe.hū.yat̰.auruuat̰.aspahe:yō.paoiriiō.zaraniiō.pīsō.srīrā̊.barəṣ̌nauua.gərəβnāiti.adāt̰.vīspəm.ādiδāiti.airiiō.ṣ̌aiianəm.səuuištō:yahmiia.sāstārō.auruua.paoiriš.īrā̊.rāzaiieṇte.yahmiia.garaiiō.bərəzaṇtō.pouru.vāstrā̊ŋhō.āfəṇtō.ϑātairō.gauue.frāδaiieṇte.yahmiia.jafra.varaiiō.uruuāpā̊ŋhō.hištəṇte.yahmiia.āpō.nāuuaiiā̊.pərəϑβiš.xṣ̌aoδaŋha.ϑβaxṣ̌əṇte.āiśatəm.pourutəmca.mourum.hārōiium.gaomca.suxδəm.x^{v}āirizəmca.auui.arəzahi.sauuahi.auui.fradaδafṣ̌u.vīdaδafṣ̌u.auui.vouru.barəšti.vouru.jarəši.auui.imat̰.karṣ̌uuarə.yat̰.x^{v}aniraϑəm.bāmīm.gauuaṣ̌aiianəm.gauuaṣ̌itīmca.baēṣ̌aziiąm.miϑrō.sūrō.ādiδāiti.” For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 60; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 78-81.

[189] “miϑrəm.vouru.gaoiiaoitīm.yazamaide.arš.vacaŋhəm.viiāxanəm.hazaŋra.gaoṣ̌əm.hutāštəm.baēuuarə.caṣ̌manəm.pərəϑu.vaēδaiianəm.sūrəm.ax^{v}afnəm.jaγauruuā̊ŋhəm.ərəδβō.zəṇgəm.zaēnaŋhuṇtəm.spasəm.taxməm.viiāxanəm.frat̰.āpəm.zauuanō.srūtəm.tat̰.āpəm.uxṣ̌iiat̰.uruuarəm.karṣ̌ō.rāzaŋhəm.viiāxanəm.yaoxštiuuaṇtəm.aδaoiiamnəm.pouru.yaoxštīm. dāmiδātəm;” For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 66; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 103.

The rulers of nations pray to him before they go into the battle against "blood-thirsty enemies":

> Whom the rulers descending upon the battlefield worship (as they advance) against the bloodthirsty enemy armies, against those drawn up in battle lines between the two warring countries. (*Mihr Yt*.8)[190]

Miϑra saves the houses, clans, tribes, countries, and empires who worship him, and destroys those who are not faithful to him:

> Then Mithra [*sic*] of wide pastures comes to help him by whom he has been propitiated; but Mithra of wide pastures destroys the house, village, clan, country and empire of him by whom he has been treated with enmity. (*Mihr Yt*.87)[191]

He liberates those who worship him from anxieties, and punishes those who are unfaithful to him – that is, those who are not faithful to their contract:

> May you, O Mithra [*sic*], undeceived (by us), remove us from anxiety, from anxieties. You induce fear for their own person(s) in men who are false to a covenant in this manner: (when) angered you are able to remove the power in their arms, the strength in their legs, the light of their eyes, the hearing of their ears. (*Mihr Yt*.23)[192]

As previously mentioned, the Zoroastrian Miϑra penalizes contract breakers; while, in the Ṛgveda, Indra is the deity who punishes those who are not faithful to Mitra and to their oaths. We read in the *Ṛgveda*:

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[190] "yim. yazəṇte. daiŋ́hupataiiō. arəzahe. auua.jasəṇtō.auui.haēnaiiā̊. xruuiṣ̌iieitīš.auui. hąm.yaṇta. rasmaoiiō.aṇtarə. daiŋ́hu. pāpərətāne." For the transcription, see: http://titus.unifrankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm?avest161.htm&fbclid=IwAR2AfF8fayNAiycNskXBrWXveIIGAqEvX9f10S707XEDtX1pNGBmH1-59gA; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 59; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 77-9.

[191] "āat̰.yahmāi. xṣ̌nūtō.bauuaiti.miϑrō. yō. vouru.gaoiiaoitiš.ahmāi. jasaiti.auuaiŋ́he:āat̰. yahmāi.t̰bištō.bauuaiti.miϑrō . yō.vouru.gaoiiaoitiš.ahmāi. frasciṇdaiieiti.nmānəmca. vīsəmca.zaṇtūmca. daxiiūmca.daiŋ́husastīmca." For the transcription, see: http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 69; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 115.

[192] "apa.nō. haca. ązaŋhat̰. apa. haca. *ązaŋhibiiō.miϑra. barōiš. anādruxtō: tūm. ana. miϑrō.drująm. maš́iiānąm. auui. xᵛaēpaiϑiiā̊sə. tanuuō.ϑβiiąm.auua.barahi:apa. aēṣ̌ąm. bāzuuā̊. aojō. tūm. graṇtō.xṣ̌aiiamnō. barahi.apa. pāδaiiā̊. zāuu arə. apa. caṣ̌manā̊. sūkəm apa. gaoṣ̌aiiā̊. sraoma. For the transcription, see: http://titus.unifrankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm?avest161.htm&fbclid=IwAR2AfF8fayNAiycNskXBrWXveIIGAqEvX9f10S707XEDtX1pNGBmH1-59gA; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 61; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 85.

> Those of evil ways who transgress against Mitra [an alliance] and against Aryaman, against agreements and Varuṇa – grind your bulging bullish ruddy weapon of death down on those without alliance (to us), o bullish Indra. (RV. 10:89.9)[193]

Thus, the Zoroastrian Miϑra shows some resemblances not only with his Ṛgvedic counterpart Mitra, but also with Indra in terms of castigating liars and transgressors.

The Zoroastrian Miϑra, however, is not alone in penalizing liars and contract breakers, and the gods Sraoša, the protector of material world, and Rašnu, the divine judge,[194] assist also him in this battle. Sraoša (MP. Srōš) is considered to be brave, strong, swift and powerful. In his anthropomorphic incarnation, Sraoša is a youthful man, handsome, with powerful arms. He is a protector and guardian, keeping the material world safe from demonic power. He is the companion of Miϑra and Rašnu, and the eleventh Yašt is dedicated to him. According to the eleventh Yašt, he is the teacher of religion. Sraoša also has some connections with holy words and speech, rituals and religion.[195] Rašnu (MP. Rašn) is the divine judge of the Zoroastrian pantheon holding a golden scale in his hands to weight the souls' deeds. According to the twelfth Yašt, the Yašt dedicated to him, Rašnu has a relation to the rule of speech. It is in this Yašt that Zarathustra asks Ahura Mazdā about the correct law, the law of judicial procedure and decisions. Rašnu is also the divine judge of oaths and ordeals. Thus, in Mihr Yašt, we read:

> Mithra [*sic*] frightens (them) hither, Rashnu frightens (them) back, Sraosha the companion of Ashi chases (them) together from all directions toward their protective gods. (But) these desert the battle lines, since Mithra [*sic*] of wide pastures, angered (at) having been treated with enmity, is hostile (at) not having been acknowledged. (*Mihr Yt.*41)[196]

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[193] "pra ye mitraṃ prāryamaṇaṃ durevāḥ pra saṃghirаḥ pravaruṇaṃ minanti| nyamitreṣu vadhamindra tumraṃ vṛṣanvṛṣāṇamaruṣaṃ śiśīhi||" For the transcription, see: Sacred texts, "The Rig Veda."; for the English translation, see: Jamison & Brereton, 2014, 1536; cf. Griffith, 1896, 468.

[194] Rašnu is the Zoroastrian counterpart of the Vedic judge Varuṇa. See: Malandra, 2013.

[195] The basic meaning of Sraoša's name is "to hear and to obey". Sraoša has no counterpart in the Ṛigvedic tradition, and thus he might be an Iranian deity originally. In the Pahlavi literature, Sraoša is the ruler of the material world and the protector of living beings just as Ahura Mazdā is the lord of both the spiritual and material worlds. See: Malandra, 2014.

[196] "miϑrō. auui.ϑrā̊ŋhaiiete.rašnuš. paiti.ϑrā̊ŋhaiiete.sraoṣ̌ō. aṣ̌iiō. vīspaēibiiō. naēmaēibiiō. hąm.vāiti.paiti. ϑrātāra. y a ata: tē. rasmanō. raēcaiieiti.yaϑa. graṇtō. upa.t̰bištō. apaiti.zaṇtō. miϑnāiti.miϑrō. yō. vouru.gaoiiaoitiš." For the transcription,see:

This troika of Mihr, Sraoša and Rašnu appears again in later Pahlavi literature as the trio of both judgment and punishment.[197] In *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, the Pahlavi text written by the high priest of Zoroastrian community Manūščihr in the 9th century, the arbiter Miϑra is accompanied by Vohu Manah (MP. Wahman)[198], Rašnu and Sraoša and together they appear in count to judge the deeds, words and thought of the souls of the dead:[199]

> And that accounting is at the time of accounting. Those who perform the accounting (are) Ohrmazd, Wahman, Mihr, Srōš, and Rašn, each at his own time. They will all perform the accounting with justice, according to the reply written in its own chapter. (*Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, Question. 30:10)[200]

Indeed, Rašnu and Sraoša, sometimes accompanied by other gods, are the attendants of Miϑra in his battle against whom are *Mihr-druj* and in his judgment of the souls of the dead. Some scholars propose that the later Roman trio of Mithras, Cautes and Cautopates, the two miniature figures attending Mithras in the bull slaying scene, represent the Zoroastrian troika of Miϑra, Rašnu and Sraoša.[201] Yet, extant Roman artefacts, Greek and Latin literature do not support this conclusion. Shaul Shaked observed that each god in this trio performs a precise role: Miϑra is the arbiter, Rašnu is the judge, and Sraoša is the opponent of evil and the benefactor of the good.[202] If we accept Shaked's theory, then, Miϑra can be also the psychopomp, the soul savior assisting the souls of the dead in their passage over Činwad Puhl (Bridge).[203]

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http://titus.unifrankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/airan/avesta/avest.htm?avest161.htm&fbclid=IwAR2AfF8fayNAiycNskXBrWXveIIGAqEvX9f10S707XEDtX1pNGBmH1-59gA; for the English translation, see: Malandra, 1983, 64; cf. Gershevitch, 1967, 95.

[197] On the appearance of Miϑra in Pahlavi literature, see also: Schmidt, 1978, 377.

[198] Vohu Manah is the divine personification of good thought and alludes to the good moral state of a person's mind. In the Avesta, Vohu Manah is associated with Ahura Mazdā, and the souls of truthful men. He is one of Ahura Mazdā's assistants in creation. He is also an adviser, and men are commanded to follow "the ways of good thought". Vohu Manah appears in opposition to *aka manah*, which is bad thought. In his eschatological role, Vohu Manah welcomes the souls of truthful men. In the later Pahlavi texts, Wahman personifies both goodness and good thought, and plays a significant role in the destiny of men as he does in the Avesta. Wahman counts good deeds, words, and thoughts trice per day. He is a leader and guides souls in their travels. See: Gignoux, 2011.

[199] On *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, see: Shaki, 2011.

[200] "ud ān ī āmār bawēd pad hangām ī āmār (bawēd) āmārgar ohrmazd wahman mihr srōš rašn har(w) ēk pad xwēš hangām hamāg pad rāstīh āmār kunēnd čiyōn pad dar ī xwēš pāssox nibišt." For the transcription and English translation, see: Jaafari-Dehaghi, 1998, 94-5; cf. Kreyenbroek, 1985, 134-5.

[201] Gershevitch, 1967, 68-70.

[202] Shaked, 1995, IV: 13.

[203] See: Lincoln, 1991, 76-86; cf. Mazhjoo, 2017. For the opposite view, see: Benveniste, 1929, 87-9.

In the *Pahlavi Vendīdād*—probably written contemporary with the Sassanian Avesta or even later at the end of the Sassanian era[204]—the Zoroastrian god appears as the psychopomp sharing some capacities with the other Zoroastrian gods Sraoša and Rašnu.[205] Three nights after a person passes away, the psychopomp Miϑra appears to separate the soul from the body and to assist the souls of the dead in ascending:

> Then Ohrmazd answered: After men are departed, after men have passed away [when the material world is ended, passed for them], after that [body and soul] is the tearing of the departed (body) by the demons of evil knowledge [no person will die until they tear apart (his body)]. At the third night is the separation, when the brilliant dawn lights up, the mountain of righteousness and bliss, where Mithra [*sic*] with good weapons makes separation/ascends, the Sun, too, rises [by coming up] there. (*Pahlavi Vendīdād*. 19:28)[206]

Likewise, in the *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag*, the Pahlavi report of the soul's journey to the heaven and hell composed during the 9th to 10th centuries CE, Ardā Wīrāz describes his passage over the Činwad Puhl (Bridge) as having been easily, triumphantly, and happily accomplished through the assistance of Ātar and Sraoša, and under the protection of Miϑra, Rašnu, Vāyu (MP. Wād)[207] and Vohu Manah.[208] We read:

> Ensuite le pont Činvad s'èlargit de neuf lances. Moi, en compagnie de Srōš le saint et du dieu Ādur, je passai par le pont Činwad facilement, largement, courageusement et triomphalement. La protection multiple de dieu Mihr, de Rašn le véridique, de vay le bon, du puissant dieu Vahrām, d'Aštād la déesse qui donne

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[204] The earliest manuscripts are L4 (1323) and K1 (1324) and the most complete codex is Ml3 (1594).

[205] On *Vendīdād*, its composition and manuscripts, see: Malandra, 2006.

[206] "(A)u-š guft Ohrmazd kū pas az be widerišnīh, ī mardōmān pas az ān frāz sazišnīh ī mardōmān [ka-šān sazišn gētī be bawēd] pas az [pēš tan ud gyān] be darrišnīh ī dēwān druzagān duš-dānāgān [ay har kas-ē tā-š ān be darrēnd ā be nē mīrēd] (B) pad ān ī sidīgar šab be wizīhišnīh ka ōš rōšnēnēd ī bāmīg (C) pad gar ī ahlāyīh xwārīh kū wizīhīnēd mihr ī hu-zēn (D) xwaršēd-iz [pad ul uzišnīh] ānōh ul uzēd." For the transcription and English translation, see: Moazami, 2014, 440-3.

[207] Vāyu is the Zoroastrian god of wind, atmosphere and space. The genealogy of the god in the Avesta shows that Vāyu is a multifaceted deity. The good Vāyu protects the creations of Ahura Mazdā (*Spənta Mainyu*), while, the bad Vāyu is the god of death and protects the creations of Aŋra Mainyu. The demonic face of Vāyu was stressed in Pahlavi literature, placing him beside Astwihād, the demon of death. In later Pahlavi sources, Vāyu is also identified with the primordial condition of indefinite space in contrast to the primordial condition of indefinite time that is Zurvan. See Malandra 2015.

[208] On *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag*, see: Gignoux, 2011.

> le plus à la création, le Xvarrah de la bonne religion des mazdéens, et les fravashis des justes et les autres Mēnōgs me rendirent d'abord hommage à moi, Ardā virāz, et je vis, moi Ardā virāz, Rašn le véridique qui tenait à la main une balance jaune en or, et jugeait les justes et les méchants. (*Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag*. 5:1-3)[209]

Additionally, the psychopomp Miϑra also appears as the eschatological judge. In *Dādestān ī Menog ī Xrad*, the Pahlavi book consisting the questions asked by the mythical character Dānāg of the personification of wisdom *Menog ī Xrad*- the oldest Pahlavi manuscript date to 16th century, Miϑra the arbiter is accompanied by Sraoša and Rašnu to judge:[210]

> With the evil desire of Xešm, who carries a bloody weapon, and astvihad,[211] who swallows all the creation and does not know satisfaction, and the judgment of Mihr, Srōš and Rašn, and the weighing in the scales of the just Rašn by the scale of the spirits, which does not make any side its favourite, neither the righteous nor the wicked, neither lords nor rulers. (*Dādestān ī Menog ī Xrad.* 2:117-120)[212]

Finally, yet importantly, Pahlavi literature rarely alludes to Miϑra in the role of mediator. Hence, as the worldly overseer of contracts and the eschatological judge, the Zoroastrian Miϑra functions as mediator and overseer of the contract between Ahura Mazdā and Ahriman. In the apocalyptic text *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, Miϑra is the arbiter and overseer of the contract between Ahura Mazdā and Ahriman and is the head of a group of good spirit deities (MP. Mēnōg; Ahra Mazdā, Sraoša, Rašnu, Wahrām) who help Pišyōtān[213] in his battle against Ahriman:

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[209] "pas ān Činwad puhl nō nēzag pahnāy abāz būman pad abāgīh ī Srōš ahlav ud Ādur yazd pad Činwad puhl xvārīhā ud frāxīhā ud nēv-dilērīhā ud pērōzgarīhā be vidard hēm vas pānāgīh ī Mihr yazd ud Rašn ī rēstag ud Vay ī Veh ud Vahrām yazd [ī] amāvand ud Aštād yazd [ī] freh-dādār ī gēhān ud Xvarrah ī dēn ī veh ī māzdēsnān ud fravahar ī ahlavān ud abārīg mānōgān ō man ardā vīrāz naxust namāz burd hēnd u-m dīd man ardā vīrāz Rašn ī rāst kē tarāzūg ī zard ī zarrēn pad dast dāšt ud ahlavān ud druvandān handāzīd." For the transcription and French translation, see: Gignoux, 1984, 51 & 158. Malandra proposes Sraoša as the Zoroastrian psychopomp. Malandra, 2013; yet, it seems that Sraoša is not the only god in the Zoroastrian pantheon capable of guiding and accompanying the souls of the dead in their ascension.

[210] On *Dādestān ī Menog ī Xrad*, see: Tafazzoli, 2011.

[211] Astwihād, is the Avestan demon of death who breaks bones and divides the body, and from whom no one can escape. See: Kanga, 2011.

[212] "Pad anāg-kāmagīh ī xešm ī xrvi-druš ud astvihād ke hamōyēn dām ōbārēd ud sērīh ne dānēd ud miyāncīgīh ī mihr ud srōš ud rašn ud tarāzēnīdārīh ī rašn ī rāst pad tarāzūg ī mēnōgān ke hēc kustag hu-grāy ne kunēd, ne ahlawān rāy ud ne-z druwandān, ne xwadāyān rāy ud ne-z dehbadān." For the transcription and English translation, see: Shaked, 1995, IV: 11.

[213] The Zoroastrian apocalyptic figure and the attendant of Ūšēdārmāh who repels Ahriman's attack at the end of the present millennium.

> And I, the creator Ohrmazd, together with the Amahraspands, will come to mount Hukairya and will order to the Amahraspands to tell all the yazads and the spirits, “Go and help the glorious Pišyōtān.” And Mihr of the wide pastures, the swift Srōš, the true Rašn, the forceful Wahrām, the victorious Aštād, and the Xwarrah of the Mazdean religion, organizing power which is the arranger of the world, at my, the creator’s, command will arrive in support to help the glorious Pišyōtān. They will smite the dews and those of obscure stock. The evil Gannāg Mēnōg will cry to Mihr of the wide pastures, “Stand up for truth, you, Mihr of the wide pastures.” And then Mihr of the wide pastures will cry out, “<As regards>, this nine thousand year agreement that he has made <it is clear that> up to now Dahāg of the evil religion, the Tūr Frāsyāb, Alexander the Hrōmāyīg and those parted hair dēws with the leather girdle have held sovereignty for a period of one thousand years more than <those established in> the treaty. (*Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, 7:27-32) [214]

There is only one Greek text that indicates Miϑra is the mediator between the twins of Ahriman and Ahura Mazdā. In Plutarch’s *De Isis et Osiris,* the Persian Miϑra appears as a judge, mediating the battle between Ahura Mazdā and Ahriman, a role that might be influenced strongly by the Greek view of the Zoroastrian dualism. I will return to this issue in next chapter, where I will address the Hellenistic reception of the Persian Miϑra.

The name of Miϑra is coupled with Ahura Mazdā in both the Zoroastrian scriptures and the Achaemenid royal inscriptions. Richard Hallock proposes that the Elamite name of the god as *Mišebaka* appears for the first time in the Persepolis fortification texts. The Persepolis fortification texts deal with the administrative records of food during the years 509-494 BCE, under the reign of Darius I the Great (r. 522-486 BCE). There we read:

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[214] “Ud man, dādār ohrmazd, abāg amahraspandān, ō gar ī hukairyāt āyēm ud framāyēm ō amahraspandān kū gōwēnd ō hamāg yazadān ud mēnōgān kū, rawēd ud rasēd ō ayārīh ī pišōtan ī bāmīg. Ud mihr ī frāx-gōyōd, ud Srōš <ī> tagīg, ud Rašn ī rāst, ud wahrām ī amāwand, ud aštād ī pērōzgar <ud> xwarrah ī dēn ī māzdēsnān, nērōg ī rāyēnīdārīh ī gēhān ārāstār pad framān ī man, dādār, ō pušt rasēnd ō ayārīh ī pišōtan ī bāmīg. be zanēnd dēwān [ī] ud tom-tōhmagān. Wāng kunēd gannāg mēnōg ī druwand ō mihr ī frāx-gōyōd kū, pad rāstīh ul ēst, tō, mihr ī frāx-gōyōd. Ud pas mihr ī frāx-gōyōd wāng kunēd kū, ēn nō hazār sāl pašt- ēwī –š kard tā nūn dahāg ī duĵdēn, ud frāsyāb ī tūr, ud aleksandar ī hrōmāyīg, ud awēšān dawāl-kustīgān dēwān ī wizard-wars ēk hazār sāl āwām wēš az paymān xwadāyīh kard.” For the transcription and English translation, see: Cereti, 1995, 144 & 164-5; cf. Shaked, 1995, IV: 15.

> 16 marriš (of) wine, supplied by Šarukba, Appirka the priest received, utilized (it) for (the god) Ahuramazda and the god Mithra [*sic*] and (the god) šimut. 21st year. (PF.338)[215]

Hallock's assertion was strongly challenged due to its shaky linguistic ground and supporting evidence.[216] Recent scholarships assumes that Artaxerxes II, the eldest son of Darius II (r. 405-04 to 359-58 BCE), was the first Persian king to mention the name of Miϑra in his royal inscriptions at Šūš (Susa) and Hamadān (Hagmatāna) beside the names of Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā (MP. Anāhitā)[217] and Ahura Mazdā. In an example from these inscriptions, we read:

> This palace Darius my great-great-grand-father built; later under Artaxerxes my grand-father it was burned; by the favor of Ahuramazda, Anaitis, and Mithras [*sic*], this palace I built. (A2Sa) [218]

In another example from Artaxerxes II's inscriptions, Miϑra appears as the guardian of the king and his kingship:

> This palace, of stone in its column(s), Artaxerxes the Great king built, the son of Darius the king, an Achaemenian. May Mithras [*sic*] protect me…(A2Hb) [219]

Indeed, the appearance of Miϑra on the Achaemenid royal inscriptions can be perceived in the paradigm of "Persian religion" under the Achaemenids' religious policy, the religious landscape

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[215] "16 mar-ri-iš W.GEŠTIN.lg kur-min m.Ša-ru-uk-ba[-n]a m.Ap-pir-ka ša-tin du-ša d.U-r[i-]um-mas-da a-ak d.Mi-iš-še-ba-ka a-ak d.Ši-mu(!)-ut-na ha- [h]u-ut-taš h.be-ul [20(+)l-um-me-man-na" For the transcription and English translation, see: Hallock, 1969, 151: PF 338.

[216] For an opposing conclusion, see: Henkelman, 2008, n. 491, n. 548 & n. 551; cf. Gershevitch, 1959, 3-4.

[217] Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā is the Zoroastrian Yazatā praised in the fifth Yašt, known as the *Ābān Yašt*, and in the Pahlavi literature. Sūrā and Anāhitā are epithets meaning strong and undefiled. She is the river goddess, strong and beautiful, and drives a chariot pulled by the four horses of wind, rain, cloud and sleet. Anāhitā is also the goddess of fertility, as the water-divinity who purifies the seeds of all men and womb of all women and makes milk for breastfeeding. She is the Zoroastrian counterpart of the Indian Sarasvatī, and in association with the Zoroastrian Apąm Napāt, the other water-divinity. From the Achaemenid time to the Parthian era, she was known as a woman, but this terminology was changed into "Ardwīsūr, the lady of water" in the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods under the influence of royal usage and the Pahlavi literature. See: Boyce & Bier, 2011.

[218] "imam apadānam Dārayava.uš apaniyākammai̯ akunau̯š; abiyaparam upā Ṛtaxšaçā niyākammai̯ aϑau̯ca?; vašnā A.uramazdā, Anāhitā utā Miϑra adam niyastāyam apadānam imam akunai̯." For the transcription, see: Schmitt, 2009, 191-2; for the English translation, see: Kent, 1950, 154. On the appearance of Miϑra in Artaxerxes II's inscriptions, see: Shahbazi, 1985, 505; Shenkar, 2014, 102.

[219] "apadānam stūnāya aϑangai̯nam Ṛtaxšaçā xšāyaϑiya vazṛka akunau̯š, haya Dārayava. uš xšāyaϑiya puça, Haxāmanišiya; Mitra mām pātu." For the transcription, see: Schmitt, 2009, 188; for the English translation, see: Kent, 1950, 155.

of their territory and the cultural milieu of the first millennium BCE. Wouter F.M. Henkelman defines the Persian religion under the reign of Achaemenids as "a heterogeneous unity of religious beliefs and cultic practices that emerged from a long Elamite-Iranian coexistence" that was understood as a native religion by the inhabitants of Achaemenid territory.[220] Thus, he suggests the appearance of Miϑra as the guardian of the king referred to an older Elamite tradition that was adopted by the Achaemenids as a part of their religious policy.

The use of the theonym Miϑra (MP. Mihr) as a component of theophoric names was prevalent in the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian epochs. The anthroponym *Mihr-Ohrmazd* and *Mihr-Hormizd* in Middle Persian and Syriac,[221] and the names of the sacred fires such as *Mihr-Ādur-Ohrmazd* or *Mihr-Ādūr-Māh* in the Sasanian era show the popular use of theonym Miϑra (Mihr) in Persia.[222] Thus, some scholars conclude that the widespread use of the theonym Mihr (Miϑra) indicates an independent cult of Miϑra in Persia.[223] Conversely, Carlo G. Cereti rejects this theory, and says that using the theonym Mihr (Miϑra) was popular not only in the Achaemenid era but also in the Sasanian era when the god belonged to the Zoroastrian pantheon. Thus, there is no evidence to demonstrate the establishment of an independent cult of Mithra.[224] Moreover, in agreement with him, I would add that there is no testimony for an independent devotion to Miϑra beyond the Zoroastrian pantheon in extant archaeological artefacts or written evidence. The reconstruction of a Persian cult relying on a series of theophoric names alone is insufficient.

In conclusion, the Avestan and Pahlavi scriptures represent Miϑra as the protector and overseer of contracts, the eschatological judge, the psychopomp and apocalyptic mediator. This portrait was partly visualized on the Sasanian royal reliefs, coinage and personal seals. Below, I will consider the various royal or personal imagery of Miϑra which were influenced by his Zoroastrian representation and depicted the god in his chariot or on the mount Harā overseeing and protecting oaths and contracts.

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[220] On the issue of "Persian religion", see: Henkelman, 2008, 58-9.
[221] Shenkar, 2014, 106.
[222] Cereti, 2018, 89; cf. Frye, 1975, 65.
[223] E.g. Frye, 1975, 65; Foltz, 2013, 21-2; Pourshariati, 2009, 258-60 & 398-404. For an opposing view, see: Daryaee 2010, 249-252; Cereti, 2018.
[224] Cereti, 2018, 89.

1.3. The Visual Imagery of Miϑra

There is no definite visual image representing Miϑra from the Achaemenian (700-330 BCE) and Parthian (250 BCE-226 CE) periods.[225] Yet, some scholars assert that the depiction of the Persian Miϑra predates the mention of his name in the royal inscriptions of Artaxerxes II. Alireza Shapour Shahbazi says that the first representation of the Persian Miϑra dates back to the 4th century BCE when the Irano-Lycian king Miϑrapāta depicted Miϑra with the radiate nimbus on his coins.[226] Adrian David H. Bivar suggests that the rayed figure and the solar chariot on the Greco-Bactrian coins dated to the last half of the second century represents the Persian Miϑra.[227] Similarly, Frantz Grenet sees the earliest images of Miϑra on the coins minted by the Greek rulers of Bactria and Kapisain the second century BCE, which portray Miϑra in a manner similar to the iconography of Zeus.[228] He asserts this iconography acquired Iranian features on later Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins, and represented the deity with radiant tiara attributed to Persian Miϑra (see fig.10).[229] Albeit, as Michael Shenkar proposes, there is no reason to accept that the inhabitants of Hellenistic Bactria and Kapisa understood this image of the god as anyone other than Helios – or, as I would like to add, Apollo, who was also associated with a chariot and crown.[230] In other words, the local population probably understood this syncretistic iconography to represent Helios, Apollo or the supreme lord Zeus, and not Miϑra.[231]Additionally, as far as iconography is concerned, the first definite imagery of Iranian Miϑra appears under the Sasanian

[225] Shenkar, 2014, 102.
[226] Shabazi, 1985, 504-5. On the Irano-Lycian dynasty, see: Weiskopf, 2011; Boyce, 1982, 172. Herpagus, Cyrus' general, conquered Lycia and established the Irano-Lycian kingdom and the satrap at Sardis. The nature of this kingdom is still open to debate.
[227] Bivar, 1979, 742; Bivar, 1975, 90-105. Bivar proposes Mithraism as the state religion of the Median kingdom. He characterizes Miϑra as the chief deity of Median religion associated with the concept of death and the afterlife. Duchesne-Guillemin maintains that Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, was a follower of Miϑra, the great god of the Medes. However, his argument gains no support from archeological artefacts or royal inscriptions. See: Duchesne-Guillemin, 1974, 17-21.
[228] Grenet, 2001, 37; Grenet, 2006; Stančo, 2012, 202. On the Greek rulers of Bactria and Kapisa who depicted Miϑra(?) on their coins, see: e.g. Heliocles I, ca. 145-130 BCE.
[229] Grenet, 2001, 37; Grenet, 2006; Shenkar, 2014, 06; Grenet, 2001, Fig.5; Stančo, 2012, Figs.342-4; Shenkar, 2014, Fig.73. On the later Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coinage, see: e.g. bronze coins of Amyntas and Hermaeus, ca. 95-70 BCE.
[230] Shenkar, 2014, 106; ibid, fig.74; Stančo, 2012, figs.195-6. On the iconography of Apollo on Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins, see: Lerner, 2017, 13; Stančo, 2012, 33. Stančo argues that despite the popularity of Apollo's iconography on Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins, there is no evidence attesting that the local population embraced the god himself. Stančo, 2012, 35-6, fig.13. Apart from his argument, the imagery of a deified figure with a radiant nimbus primarily represents Helios, Zeus and Apollo in the Hellenistic context, deities whose close relationship with light and the Sun was evident to Greeks.
[231] However, one can justify this syncretistic iconography created by Greco-Bactrian kings in relation to their ideology of colonialization and in the context of a Greek ruler cult.

dynasty, which postdates this Greek iconography by about three hundred years and demonstrates a syncretistic model influenced by the imagery of the Greek and Roman Sol-Helios on one hand and the Mesopotamian Šamaš on the other hand.[232]

Thus, the Sasanians did not simply adopt an earlier iconography. Instead, they created a unique picture of Miϑra mainly in relation to their religio-political propaganda. The first definite image of Persian Miϑra appears on the coins of Hormizd I, or Ōhrmazd I (r. 272-73 CE) whose life and short reign are not well known. It shows a scene of two male figures with a fire altar in the center (see fig. 11).[233] The left character represents the Sasanian king, bearing the royal emblems and insignia, as he raises his right hand in a pledging gesture, while the character on the right side of the altar, dressed in a tunic with a radiant tiara on his head represents Miϑra, who is offering the royal diadem to the king. The Sasanians might have borrowed such an iconography from contemporaneous Roman coins issued in Samosata that represent Sol.[234] The Roman coinage, particularly in the Greek East, used Sol to portray the Roman Emperors – and thus, the Sasanian king of kings might have borrowed this design to legitimize their political power and domination over the East.[235]

The second image of Miϑra created by the Sasanians appears in the monumental rock-relief of Tāq-e-Bostān (see fig. 12). The royal rock-relief shows a scene with three characters: on the left, Miϑra has a radiant nimbus around his head and stands on a lotus flower holding a *barsom* (AV. barəsman);[236] Ahura Mazdā stands on the right offering the royal diadem to "the king of kings" – the figure possibly refers to Šāpur II (r. 309-79 CE) or Ardašīr II (r. 379-83 CE), who stands at the center reaching for the diadem.[237] Both Ahura Mazdā and the king stand on the corpse of a defeated

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[232] Callieri, 1990, 84; Shenkar, 2014, 106. Yet, De Jong takes another direction and argues that though the synthesis of Miθra and the Babylonian Šamaš usually accounts for the solar character of Miϑra, some connections between Miϑra and fire, Miϑra and the sun were already established in the Achaemenid era. See: De Jong, 1997, 286.
[233] Gyselen, 2010, 78, Fig.16; Shenkar, 2014, 103, Fig.65.
[234] Shenkar, 2014, 103.
[235] Yet in agreement with Gyselen, I would like to add that the fire altar is a Persian theme that gives a local flavour as well as a hybrid color to Ōhrmazd I's coinage. It distinguishes his design from a simple borrowing and creates a novel tradition propagating his political agenda. To compare the designs, see: Gyselen, 2010, figs. 13 &14.
[236] The sacred twigs made from the Haoma plant or pomegranates used for certain rituals and ceremonies. The Barsom represents the sacred creation of vegetables by Ahra Mazdā, and thus the Barsom ceremony is a ritual to praise the god and his creation that also abolishes the power of Ahriman and other evils. See: Kanga, 1988.
[237] Callieri, 1990, 83; cf. Shenkar, 2014, n.511. On Ardašīr II, see: Shahbazi, 2011.

enemy identified with the Roman Emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus (also known as Julian the Apostate) who was killed in the battle by Šāpur II in June 363.[238]

Dominique Hollard attributes the appearance of Miϑra and the Roman Emperor in the rock-relief to the imperialist ideology of the Roman Emperor, who claimed the protection of the Roman Sol-Mithras in his campaign against Šāpur II.[239] Conversely, I argue that the appearance of these two characters in Tāq-e-Bostān rock relief relates to a Sasanian political agenda, not the imperial ideology of the Roman Emperor. Indeed, if the purpose of the Sassanians was to depict the Roman Sol-Mithras, who was venerated by their defeated enemy prior to the battle, they could simply portray the Roman god in his original iconography as a Roman deity, an image that was similar to the Roman Emperor. Rather, what we have here is an image featuring iconography associated with the Sasanian king and the Zoroastrian supreme deity. Moreover, why does the god stand on a lotus, if the relief represents the Roman Sol-Mithras? What relation does the Roman god have with the symbol of the lotus flower?

The Sasanians embellished their political power and imperial ideology with religious symbolism. This enabled them to create a novel cultural identity tied to their sacred land, Ērānšahr.[240] In this sense, the appearance of Miϑra in Tāq-e-Bostān relates to his role as the lord of contracts in the Sasanian political landscape.[241] The Emperor Julianus is the breaker of convention between Rome and Persia, the transgressor who campaigned against Šāpur II and the sacred frontiers of Ērānšahr, and Miϑra appears here as the Zoroastrian overseer of covenants who penalizes contract breakers. As the lord of contracts, Miϑra stands to the right side and oversees the divine investiture of the king, when the Supreme Deity, here, Ahura Mazdā, dedicates Farr (X^varənah, the divine fortune) to the Sasanian king of kings and depicts divine protection by saving Ērānšahr from the attack of non-Iranians. In other words, the divine investiture scene depicts the moment of making an earthly-divine covenant. As such, Miϑra stands here as both mediator and guardian of contracts.[242]

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[238] Daryaee, 2017; Daryaee, 2012, 193.
[239] Hollard, 2010; cf. Adrych et al., 2017, 88-92.
[240] Daryaee, 2017, 394-99.
[241] Cf. Shenkar, 2014, 113.
[242] This interpretation is also supported by the fact that the Zoroastrian clergy had achieved more power during the reigns of Šāpur II and his son, and that Zoroastrianism served as a political instrument for the Sasanian political agenda then more than any other time. See: Daryaee, 2012, 194. On the issue of "the divine investiture of the king", see: Rose, 2012.

The appearance of the lotus flower in the Tāq-e-Bostān rock relief, on which Miϑra is standing, also validates this interpretation.[243] Some scholars interpret the appearance of this motif in association with the divinity of water and its role in protecting Farr.[244] Yet the lotus flower might have a propagandistic function that complemented the Sasanians' political agenda. Frantz Grenet writes : "le lotus sur lequel se tient Miϑra est une symbole régalien de la dynastie vassale des Koushano-sassanides, que Shāpūr II avait libérée du danger barbare quelques années avant sa victoire sur l'Apostate."[245] In the Hunnic war (around 350 CE), Šāpur II defeated the nomadic tribes in central Asia and established Sasanian dominance over the Kušāns by placing his son on the throne (he later took the title of "king of Kušān").[246] Hence, both the king and his son held political ties with the territory of Kušān and the establishment of Kušāno-Sasanian dynasty. Accordingly, I agree with Grenet that the motif of the lotus reflects the royal symbols of the Kušāno-Sasanian dynasty, recalling the Sasanians' imperial dominance and commitment to the Kušān territory, a sort of political commitment similar to all oaths and convention that were supervised by Miϑra, the lord of contract.[247] Such a unique iconographic depiction of the god Miϑra points to the Sasanians' imperial ideology, and it served to bond the inhabitants of the vast territory that they controlled. More precisely, the Sasanians embraced different signs and symbols from the local cultures of their vast territory and incorporated them into the Zoroastrian context in order to create an official visual language legitimizing their political power and justifying their imperial ideology. In this sense, the Tāq-e-Bostān rock relief depicts Šāpur II's conquest of the Kušān territory on the one hand and his victory over the Roman military movements on the other

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[243] Cf. Shenkar, 2014, 104.

[244] Hollard, 2010, 158. Soudavar argues that the lotus symbolizes Farr. According to Zamyād Yašt, Jamšid loses his Farr when he strays from righteous path. Then, his Farr was taken with a falcon to Apam Napāt who preserves the Farr in the waters of Vouroukaša Lake. The lotus also grows and rises from the water. Soudavar, 2003, 56-9; Soudavar, 2010; cf. Zamyād Yašt. 35; Boyce 1975b, 74-5. In Eastern art and sacred traditions, the lotus flower usually appears in association with the cosmic waters and the womb of the universe. It is also the symbol of purity. In the Hindu tradition, the waters are understood to be female and the cosmic lotus is their generative organ. Campbell, 1992, 90-1. However, it seems that the appearance of the lotus in Tāq-e-Bostān is connected to the concept of purity from the Eastern tradition and borrowed by the Sasanian Kušānšāh rather than symbolizing Farr as divine fortune. Otherwise, if the lotus was the symbol of divine fortune here in this relief, it would be more logical to see the lotus under Ahura Mazdā's feet instead of Miθra's. On the issue of Farr, see: note 68.

[245] Grenet, 2001, 36; Shenkar, 2014, 104.

[246] Daryaee, 2012, 193; cf. Daryaee, 2017.

[247] On the relation between the Kušān dynasty and the Lotus flower, see: Carter, 1981.

hand. It is a scene that represents the great achievements and triumphs of the Sasanian Empire while promoting its political authority and agenda.[248]

Miϑra has frequent appearance not only on the Sasanian coins or reliefs, but also on their seals.[249] A Sasanian seal from the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin (today the Bode Museum) shows Miϑra beardless with a radiant nimbus, riding a chariot pulled by two winged horses (see fig. 13).[250] Another seal represents a figure standing in a four-wheeled chariot decorated with a lion's head. The god is again beardless with a radiant halo around his head and his hair is decorated in a similar manner as elsewhere.[251] There is only one known seal in Western Iran labeled by the legend *mtry yzdty* (the god Miϑra) in which the god's headdress resembles that worn by Miϑra on the Tāq-e-Bostān relief.[252]

Another Sasanian seal uncovered in Eastern Iran dated to the late 4th or 5th centuries and preserved now in the British Museum represents Miϑra beardless with a sun like halo round his head and his body rising from a rock mountain. The god holds a sword in his hand and looks at a worshipper standing in front him in a gesture of adoration (see fig.14).[253] Some scholars argue that this iconography might be derived from the iconography of the Mesopotamian Šamaš, and it is best represented in the Avestan *Mihr Yašt*, which mentions that Miϑra inhabits Mount Harā, from whence he oversees all covenants.[254] Alternatively, Grenet proposes that this iconography evokes the Roman imagery of Mithras' generation from a rock. He writes, "le dieu émergeant à mi-corps de la montagne traitée comme un empilement de rochers globulaires rappelle le Mithra [*sic*] pétrogène des Mystères occidentaux."[255] Indeed, this iconography of the Persian Miϑra rising from a mountain postdates the Roman iconography of Mithras petragenes, and may reveal the influence of Roman Mithraic imagery on the Persian iconography of the god. Yet, Miϑra, as the

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[248] Cf. Canepa, 2018, 126 & 360.
[249] Shenkar argues, "Designs on seals were not subject to administrative control and were not an instrument of royal propaganda"; thus, they simply reflect the preferences of individuals as unofficial mediums. See: Shenkar, 2014, 103. However, I would like to add that seals indeed demonstrate royal propaganda through the preferences of individuals. Since, in fact, the royal propaganda and political agenda chiefly nourished and shaped individual preferences. There was no such thing as personal preference that was not influenced by the ruling political agenda.
[250] Callieri, 1990, Fig.6; Grenet, 1993, Fig.2; Shenkar, 2014, Fig.66; Gyselen, 2000, Fig.14.
[251] Shenkar, 2014, Fig.68; Gignoux and Gyselen, 1982, Figs.10.9. Shenkar, 2014, 113.
[252] Gyselen, 1993, Fig.20.G.4; Shenkar, 2014, Fig.67. Indeed, the repetition of icons may reflect the Sasanians' achievement of a new hybrid iconography propagating their political agenda.
[253] Callieri, 1990, p.80, Figs. 2 & 3; Grenet, 1993, Fig.4; Grenet 2001, p.37; Grenet 2006, Fig.9; Shenkar 2014, p.108.
[254] MY.50-1; Callieri, 1990, 84; Shenkar, 2014, 108. According to Mihr Yašt, Miϑra rises from Mount Harā and protects contracts and vows from there. Thus, the Avestan Miϑra is not petragenes or saxigenus (born from rock).
[255] Grenet, 2001, 37.

Zoroastrian god of contracts, served as the overseer of covenants, oaths and commitment to the Sasanian political agenda. Thus, the seal most likely represents the Zoroastrian *Yazāta* who lives in Mount Harā and oversees all oath, contracts and commitments even between two countries and authorities. My point here is not to reject the influence of the Roman imagery of petrogenes Mithras, but rather to stress that the appearance of this motif on a seal represents the function of this god as the guardian of contracts in relation to the Sasanian political ideology and society.

In Eastern Iran, the earliest images possibly attributable to Miϑra are associated with Kušān coinage. The coins of the nameless Kušān king known as Soter Mega (the Savior, the Great, ca. 80-100 CE)[256] features an equestrian figure on one side and a beardless visage wearing a diadem and holding an arrow in his right hand on the obverse (see fig.15).[257] It is hard to discern whether this bust is the first image of Miϑra in Eastern Iran, since this bust resembles the iconography of Apollo in the Greek numismatic tradition and not imagery normally attributed to Miϑra. The bust with the radiant rays over his head evokes Helios or Apollo on Greek coins, which could have plausibly derived from Greco-Bacterian coinage, and not the Zoroastrian Miϑra that appeared later in the Kušān numismatic pantheon as Miiro.[258]

The first definite imagery of Miϑra in Eastern Iran is on the reverse of Kušan coins minted under the reigns of Kaniška (ca. 127-153 CE) and his successor Huviška (ca. 153-191 CE) with the legend of the god's name inscribed first in Greek as Helios and then in Bactrian as Mihr (written

[256] Relying on the Bactrian inscriptions at Rabatak and Dasht-i-Nawar as well as the Chinese chronicle of the later Han dynasty Hou Han Shu, recent scholarships identify him as Wima Takto, the son of the first Kušān king Qiujiuque. See: Jongeward, Cribb & Donovan, 2015, 39-40.

[257] Rosenfield, 1967, figs. 14-15; Grenet, 2006, Fig.1; Shenkar, 2014, Fig.75; Jongeward, Cribb & Donovan, 2015, Figs. 147-257.

[258] Grenet asserts this type of iconography "is obviously copied from a Hellenistic statue of Apollo holding an arrow." See: Grenet, 2006; cf. Jongeward, Cribb & Donovan, 2015, 42. I agree with the suggestion that this iconography originated with the Greek imagery of Apollo the archer, but I would like to add that this bust also resembles the radiant head of Helios found on Greek coins. Moreover, Shenkar elaborates that "there is no certainty that he [the bust] was understood as Mithras [sic], although this would obviously be a natural interpretation for Apollo in the Iranian cultural sphere." See: Shenkar, 2014, 106. In agreement with Shenkar, there is no specific reason for attributing this imagery to the Iranian Miϑra. More precisely, almost fifteen years later, we still find the Kušān sun god labeled with the Greek legend Helios in Kaniška's first year coinage. Thus, one can conclude that the bust on the coins of *Soter megas* in the former periods were plausibly known as Helios or Apollo holding his arrow and not the figure representing the Persian Miϑra. See: Jongeward, Cribb & Donovan, 2015, 67. On the bust of Apollo in the Greek numismatic tradition, see: e.g. ANS collection 1977.158.300; ANS collection 1948.19.2335; ANS collection 1944.100.71838. On the radiant head of Helios in Greek numismatic tradition, see: e.g. ANS collection 1944.100.40057; ANS collection 1944.100.48810; ANS collection 2008.29.31. On the relations between Helios and ruler cults, see: Gordon, 2006.

Miro, Mioro, Miiro, Mirro, Miuro etc.).[259] Following the general iconography of the Kušān numismatic pantheon, Miiro was depicted without a chariot.[260] He appears standing with a rayed nimbus, dressed in Persian custom (tunic, cloak, and boots) and holding either a sword or spear or both in his hands (see figs.16&17).[261] Callieri sees some resemblances between the Kušān iconography of Miiro and the figure who appears on the reverse of some coins of Antoninus Pius (r. 138-161 CE).[262] Shenkar goes further and claims that the iconography of gods in the Kušān numismatic pantheon were minted at the same time during the reign of Kaniška or that of his successor and primarily followed the Roman prototypes for inspiration.[263] Unlike him, I do not think that the Kušān numismatic tradition followed the Roman prototype. The Kušāns and later the Kušāno-Sassanians created a syncretistic coinage with Iranian and Buddhist themes they inherited along with several motifs from the Greco-Bactrian pantheon and coinage.[264] Thus, the Roman numismatic tradition depicted Sol nude with a flying cloak on his shoulder or dressed in a fluttering garment, standing or driving his chariot, which is different from the image of Kušān Miiro dressed in Iranian attire (cloak, tunic, trouser, and boots).[265] Moreover, the Kušān Miiro bears little semblance with Apollo standing nude or with toga holding lyre, patera or laurel branch in his hands.[266]

Göbl recognizes eleven types of Miiro's iconography, and suggests that the last type of this iconography was created under the Kušāno-Sasanian king Ardašīr I (r.?-242 CE) that represents the god seated on a throne and offering a diadem, labeled with the Bactrian legend *Bago Miuro* (the god Miϑra).[267] Later issues of the coins represent the god sometimes enthroned and sometimes rising from a fire altar, inscribed by the Middle Persian or Bactrian legend *burzʾawand yazad* (the

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[259] Rosenfield, 1967, 82-3; Callierie, 1990, 90; Grenet, 2006; Shenkar, 2014, 107. However, the legend *'Mirro'* was sometime replaced by '*ΗΛΙΟC*' on the coins minted by Kaniška. See: e.g. Rosenfield, 1967, fig.31.

[260] Rosenfield demonstrates that the solar chariot was a common theme in the imagery of Miϑra in pre-Kušān coinage and later in the Buddhist sculptures, but was absent from the Kušān numismatic tradition. Rosenfield, 1967, 82.

[261] Rosenfield, 1967, 82 & figs. 50, 51, 56, 58, 115-131; Grenet, 2006; Callieri, 1990, 90; Jongeward, Cribb & Donovan, 2015, figs. 378, 713, 733 & 742.

[262] Callieri, 1990, 90.

[263] Shenkar, 2014, 107.

[264] My focus here is on the iconography of Miiro and not the entire iconography of Kušān numismatic pantheon as Shenkar argues.

[265] E.g. ANS Collection: 1944.100.52303; ANS Collection: 1944.100.52359. I will discuss the Roman iconography of Sol in the third chapter.

[266] E.g. ANS collection 1937.158.427; ANS collection 1909.78.21.

[267] Göbl, 1984: Miiro. Ardašīr I was the founder of the Sasanian Empire who ended the Kušān dynasty in Bactria with his second attack to their territory sometime between the years 229 to 240 CE. Yet, the beginning of the Sasanian rule in Kušān territory is still disputed and open to debate. See : De La Vaissière, 2016.

god who possesses the highest). A golden coin of Ardašīr I minted in Balkh shows the god seated on a throne, dressed in Persian garments with hair and beard styled in a Sasanian manner along with a radiant halo round his head, offering a diadem.[268] Grenet points out that the earliest issues of this coinage, showing the enthroned god with naked chest and cloak on reverse, recall the style of Greek statues (and the embodiment of Zeus in particular) rather than the typical Sasanian iconography of Miϑra represented by the later coins.[269] While the earliest issues of this coin were plausibly influenced by the local iconography associated with Greco-Bactrian coinage, the later issues mainly reflect a syncretistic iconography created by the Sasanians.[270]

The influence of such Sasanian imagery spread as far as Central Asia. Buddhist art along with the iconography of Indian and Hindu deities and local cults reveal a familiarity with the Sasanian royal imagery of Miϑra and his Kušān counterpart Miiro. For instance, the wall painting of Panjikent, the sealing of Kafir-Kala and the painting on the large niche above the 35-meter Buddhas at Bāmiyān are all well-preserved examples attesting to the influence of the Sasanian visual imagery of Miϑra, which encompassed the entirly of the Persian and Persianate world (see fig. 18).[271]

1.4. Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has argued that the Vedic Mitra personified the notion of "contract", which explains his first appearance on the Hittites-Mitanni's contract to protect the political commitment and covenant between two kingdoms. The asura Mitra also had a close association with the notion of truth, and often appeared in company with other Vedic gods Indra, Aryaman, and Varuṇa who is the personification and protector of the truth, oaths and commitment. In the Zoroastrian pantheon, we find an image of Miϑra who has absorbed some characteristics of Vedic deities such as Varuṇa and Indra. The Avestan and Pahlavi sources provide a rich portrait of the god with a thousand ears and ten thousand eyes, who steers a chariot pulled by four white steeds. Miϑra penalizes those who speak untruth, accompanies the souls of the dead, and traverses

[268] Shenkar, 2014, 107, pl.12.
[269] Grenet, 2006, fig. 4.
[270] Cf. Callieri, 1990, 90.
[271] Callieri, 1990; cf. Grent, 2006; cf. Shenkar, 2014, 110-13.

the earth with the Sun to oversee oaths and contracts, and judges people every day before the sun reaches its noontime zenith. Thus, the Zoroastrian Miϑra reflects the Vedic Mitra in terms of personifying contracts, and he also shares some qualities with Varuṇa in terms of protecting truth and oaths, and Indra in terms of penalizing liars and transgressors. The Zoroastrian Miϑra is the mediator and overseer of the commitment between Ahura Mazdā and Ahriman as well as the political contracts formed between two countries. He is the deity praised by the rulers of countries before going to war. Miϑra also appears as the protector in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, and plays a noticeable role in the Sasanians' political propaganda to legitimize their authority through their religious tradition. On the Sassanian royal reliefs, Miϑra oversees the moment of divine investiture. The Zoroastrian lord of contracts also appears on personal seals to protect individual contracts and commitments.

Altogether, we find in these Persian sources that Miϑra is the personification of contracts, and the one who oversee oaths and bonds with his thousand ears and ten thousand eyes. He is not a bull slaying god related to a mystery cult. However, the radiant nimbus and chariot that appear in the Sasanian iconography of Miϑra bear some similarities to the iconography of Sol on Roman provincial coinage. Such imagery also evokes the Avestan imagery of Miϑra as the one who drives his chariot pulled by four wide steeds. If the Sasanians borrowed some elements of the Roman numismatic imagery of Sol to depict Miϑra, they did so because Roman imagery already matched the Avestan description of their *Yazāta*. In next chapter, I will examine some examples of Greek descriptions and Hellenistic imagery of the Persian god as those sources transmitted a figure of Miϑra to the Roman Empire that was distinctive from Persian character of the god.

Chapter Two

The Cultural Transmission of the Zoroastrian God into the Hellenistic World

Chapter one discussed the Vedic and Zoroastrian imagery and characteristics of the god Mitra/Miϑra in his respective contexts. There I explained that the Vedic Mitra is the personification of contracts and has strong ties to the concept of truth. I also demonstrated that the Zoroastrian Miϑra was not the sun itself but that he traverses the world alongside the sun judging people every day before noon. I mentioned that the Zoroastrian Miϑra is psychopomp and who accompanies the souls of the dead. He also supervises all contracts and commitments with his thousand ears and ten thousands eyes, using his long arms to pluck away all those who speak falsehoods. Building on this information, I now examine the Greek narratives and Hellenistic imagery of the god Miϑra along with the sources that transmitted a particular figure of the Persian god to the Roman Empire. As such, this chapter endeavours to demonstrate that the Greek and Hellenistic descriptions and imagery transmitted certain characteristics of the god Miϑra which detached the figure from earlier representations in the Vedic and Zoroastrian contexts. Thus, this chapter will bridge the gap between the Persian Miϑra and his Roman counterpart (called by his Greek name, Μίϑρας) and examine the probable sources that informed Roman cultic iconography of the god. Here, I will try to answer how the Roman Mithraists learned about the Persian Miϑra.

I will begin this chapter by exploring the image of the Persian Miϑra depicted in Greek historiography and the cultural phenomenon of the so-called *interpretatio graeca.* I will show how *interpretatio graeca* acted as a cultural process which transmitted a selective image of the Persian Miϑra to the Roman cultural milieu. Rather than discussing the sources in a time order, I will argue the Greek and Roman narratives by their contents and identifications of the Persian Miϑra as the sun and the equivalent of the Greek gods Apollo and Helios. Following this, I will move to Commagene, where Mithras appears as a hybrid deity along with the Greek gods Apollo, Helios and Hermes. In this section, I will argue that the royal cult constructed by the Commagene king, Antiochus I, was a form of cultural integration, and I will demonstrate that the hybrid deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes he created largely accounts for Mithras'(Miϑra's) transmission to the Roman Empire sometime around the first century CE. Additionally, I will show that as with Greek historiography, the Antiochan hybrid deity introduced a Hellenistic configuration of the Persian

Mithras (Miϑra) to Rome that became a novel portrait of the god that can be distinguished from the god's earlier appearance in the Vedic and Persian traditions. In next chapter, I will trace the origin of the Roman iconography of Mithras in these Greek depictions of the Persian god Miϑra and the Greek topoi of Persians, and I will examine the god's appearance in the Roman Empire as a deliberate cultural borrowing from Persians on the part of the Romans.

2.1. The Persian Miϑra in the Eyes of Greeks and Romans

Greek historiography often identified Miϑra as the equivalent of the Greek gods Apollo and Helios. Indeed, this identification reflects an *interpretatio graeca* – that is, a process of rendering foreign religions and cultures legible to the Greek worldview and to the structures familiar to the Greeks, both literally and conceptually.[272] Accordingly, Greek authors (followed by their Roman predecessors) compared the Persian Miϑra to Greek deities who, they felt, shared certain qualities of the Avestan and Pahlavi deity. In other words, the Greek image of the Persian Miϑra represents a cultural adaptation of a foreign god for Greek audiences, rather than a faithful rendering of a foreign god. In this sense, the Persian god Miϑra is understood to be the sun and the Persian equivalent to the Greek sun god Helios.

The earliest source identifying the Persian Miϑra with the sun (*ἥλιον, ὅνκαλοῦσι Μίϑρην)* was Strabo's Geography (ca. 62 BCE to 23-4 CE), which reads:

> Now the Persians do not erect statues or altars, but offer sacrifice on a high place, regrading the heavens as Zeus; and they also worship Helios, whom they call Mithras, and Selene and Aphrodite, and fire and earth and winds and water… (*Geography, 15, 3:13*)[273]

Thus, the Persian Miϑra (*Μίϑρης*) is the Persian counterpart of Greek Helios, as Greeks also identified the Persian supreme deity Ahura Mazdā with Zeus. This identification of the Persian god was later embraced by Roman historians and authors. According to Quintus Curtius Rufus (ca.

[272] Cf. De Jong, 1997, 29-38.

[273] "Πέρσαι τοίνυν ἀγάλματα μὲν καὶ βωμοὺς οὐχ ἱδρύονται, θύουσι δ᾽ ἐν ὑψηλῷ τόπῳ τὸνοὐρανὸν ἡγούμενοι Δία: τ ιμῶσι δὲ καὶ ἥλιον, ὃν καλοῦσι Μίθρην, καὶ σελήνην καὶ Ἀφροδίτην καὶ πῦρ καὶ γῆνκαὶ ἀνέμους καὶ ὕδωρ"; for the English translation, see: Jones, 1966, Vol. VII: 175.

1st century CE) in his *Historiarum Alexandri Magni Macedonis*, Darius I, the third Achaemenid king of kings (r. 522-486 BCE), prayed to the sun and Miϑras, and the sacred eternal fire:

> He himself [Darius] with his generals and relatives rode about among the divisions as they stood under arms, calling upon the sun and Miϑras, and the sacred and eternal fire, to inspire them with a courage worthy of their ancient glory and the records of their forefathers. (*Historiarum Alexandri Magni Macedonis, 4: 13.12*)[274]

Similar to his identification with the Greek Helios, several texts refer to Miϑra as the equivalent of Apollo, as the Greek god of wisdom, truth, light and divination. Plyaenus of Lampsacus (ca. 340-285 BCE) indicated that (in his battle with the Saka) Darius I appealed to the god Apollo to save his soldiers by giving them water:

> Then he [Darius] climbed up a hill, and implored Apollo in this moment of distress to save his army by giving them water. The god heard his prayers, and there followed a plentiful shower of rain, which the army collected on hides, and in vases. (*Stratagemata, 7: 12*)[275]

Likewise, in Pseudo-Clementine's *Homiliae* (ca. 4th Century CE)[276]**,** Miϑras is another name of Apollo who is both the sun and the son of Zeus:

> And I [Apion] must ask you to think of all such stories as embodying some such allegory. Look on Apollo as the wandering Sun (peri-polôn), a son of Zeus, who was also called Mithras, as completing the period of a year. (*Homiliae, 6:10*)[277]

Similarly, in the *Sminthian Oration to Apollo*, Miϑra is the Persian name of Apollo:

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[274] "Ipse cum ducibuspropinquisqueagmina in armisstantiumcircumibat, Solem et Mithremsacrumque et aeternuminuocansignem, utillisdignamuetereglogiamaiorumquemonumentisfortitudineminspirarent." For the English translation, see: Rolfe, 1956, 281

[275] "καὶ -ἦνγὰρ ἐπιτολὴτοῦἡλίου- ηὔξατο τῷ Ἀπόλλωνι͵εἰχρεὼνσωθῆναι Πέρσας͵ ὕδωρἐξοὐρανοῦ παρασχεῖν· ὁ θεὸς ἐπήκουσε· καὶ ὄμβρος κατερράλη πολύς·" For the English translation, see: Shepherd, 1796, 273.

[276] Though attributed to Clementine (1st Century CE), *Homilíai* was probably written in Syria in the 4th century CE. On Pseudo-Clementine Literature, see: Fusillo, 2006.

[277] For the English translation, see: Schaff, 1885, 461.

> As Miϑras the Persians addressed you, as Horus the Egyptians (for you lead the seasons [horai] in their cycle), as Dionysus the Thebans. The people of Delphi honor you with a double name: "Apollo" and "Dionysus".[278]

There are few fragments and images that depict a hybrid figure of the Persian god Miϑra together with his Greek counterparts Apollo and Helios. As mentioned above, Greek intellectuals were interested in identifying the Persian god relying on those qualities which they felt Miϑra shared with the Greek deities. The Roman astronomer Ptolemy (ca.85-100 to 160-70 CE) also stated that Persians, alongside other inhabitants of the southern part of greater Asia, revered the star of Saturn *(Κρόνου)* under the name of Miϑra Helios (*Μίθραν ἥλιον)*:

> Of the second quarter, which embraces the southern part of greater Asia, the other parts, including India, Ariana, Gedrosia, Parthia, Media, Persia, Babylonia, Mesopotamia, and Assyria, which are situated in the south-east of the whole inhabited world, are, as we might presume, familiar to the south-eastern triangle, Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn, and are governed by Venus and Saturn in oriental aspects. Therefore one would find that the natures of their inhabitants conform with the temperaments governed by such rulers; for they revere the star of Venus under the name of Isis, and that of Saturn as Mithras Helios. (*Tetrabiblos, 2: 3.64*)[279]

Ptolemy's description of the Persian Miϑra was not the only example of the hybridity between Miϑra and the Greek Helios. Another example of such a hybridity is the deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes in the pantheon of the Commagenian royal cult dated to the first century BCE. I will return to this hybrid deity below, but here, I would emphasize that similar to Miϑra's identification with the Greek gods, the hybridization between Miϑra, Apollo and Helios (known as the Greek counterparts of the Persian Miϑra) was also a common theme in the Late Hellenistic period (197-31 BCE) – a theme that was later absorbed by Roman intellectuals such as Ptolemy.

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[278] For the complete English translation, see: Krentz, 1997, 187.

[279] "Τοῦ δὲ δευτέρου τεταρτημορίου τοῦ κατὰ τὸ νότιον μέρος τῆςμεγάλης Ἀσίας τὰ μὲν ἄλλα μέρη τὰ περιέχοντα Ἰν δικήν, Ἀριανήν, Γεδρωσίαν, Παρθίαν, Μηδίαν, Περσίδα, Βαβυλωνίαν, Μεσοποταμίαν, Ἀσσυρίαν, καὶ τὴν θέσιν ἔχο ντα πρὸς νοταπηλιώτην τῆς ὅλης οἰκουμένης, εἰκότωςκαὶ αὐτὰ συνοικειοῦται μὲν τῷ νοταπηλιωτικῷ τριγώνῳ τοῦ Τ αύρου καὶ Παρθένου καὶ Αἰγόκερω, οἰκοδεσποτοῦνται δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης καὶ τοῦ Κρόνου ἐπὶ ἑῴων σχηματι σμῶν: διόπερ καὶ τὰς φύσεις τῶνἐν αὐτοῖς ἀκολούθως ἄν τις εὕροι τοῖς ὑπὸ τῶν οὕτως οἰκοδεσποτησάντων ἀποτελο υμένας: σέβουσί τε γὰρ τὸνμὲν τῆς Ἀφροδίτης Ἶσιν ὀνομάζοντες, τὸν δὲ τοῦ Κρόνου Μίθραν ἥλιον." For the English translation, see: Robbins, 1994, 139.

However, the epithet referring to the Persian Miϑra as Phaëthon is an example of authors describing the Zoroastrian god according to parallels found within the Greek pantheon – and a continuation of the Greek literary tradition of *interpretatio graeca*. In the archaic poems, *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, we find Phaëthon with the epithet of Helios *(ἠέλιος φαέθων),* the shining sun.[280] In Greek mythology, Phaëthon was the son of Helios who compelled his father to let him drive the chariot of the sun, but he was inexperienced and lost control of the immortal steeds and the sun chariot. His recklessness caused trouble and set the earth on fire; thus, Zeus threatened him with lightening and sent him into the river Eridanus.[281] In *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus (ca. 5th century CE) writes:

> Pass into Bactrian soil, where Mithras is a god, the Assyrian Phaëthon of Persia; for Deriades has learnt no dances of eternal blessed, he honours Helios and Zeus or the company of shining stars. (*Nonnos, Dionysiaca, 21:250*) [282]

This is the Greek record that reports the worship of Miϑra as the Assyrian Phaëthon of Persia, and one who was venerated in Bactria. Yet, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the Avestan Miϑra is not the sun—nor even the Sun god—but he traverses the earth in company of the sun as a judge who renders his decisions from dawn until noon. Thus, such Greek (and Roman) descriptions of the Persian god Miϑra were little more than an intellectual construction, and one that differs from his earlier character in the Zoroastrian pantheon. More precisely, my point here is neither to show the connection between the Persian Miϑra, the Greek Helios and the Assyrian Phaëthon, nor to speak about borrowing a Persian god, but rather to emphasize how Greeks (and later Romans) identified a foreign god as the equivalent of a god familiar and legible to a Greek world-view. Miϑra in his original context is not the Sun god, but he was identified by Greeks as a Sun god similar to the Assyrian Phaëthon or the Greek Helios.

Nevertheless, while Greek and Roman historians misunderstood Miϑra as the Persian Sun god (a Persian Helios), they were aware of the deity's role as the protector of contracts and oaths, and as the one whom the Persians worshipped before going to war and to whom their kings swore their oaths. This faithful characterization of the god Miϑra might be acquired through military

[280] See: Homer, *Iliad,* XI: 735; cf. *Odyssey,* XI: 15.
[281] Heinze, 2006.
[282] "δύεο Βάκτριονοὖδας¸ ὅπῃ θεὸς ἔπλετοΜίθρης¸ Ἀσσύριος ΦαέθωνἐνìΠερσίδι·" For the English translation, see: Rouse, 1962, 165.

encounters between the Greeks and the Persians (notably during the Persian wars between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE). In the *Oeconomicus* (ca. 430-354 BCE), Cyrus swore by the Sun god *(Míϑρην)*, vowing that as king he would always work hard and exert himself:

> I swear by the Sun-god that I never yet sat down to dinner when in sound health, without first working hard at some task of war or agriculture, or exerting myself somehow. (*Oeconomicus, 4:25)*[283]

According to the *Cyropaedia* (ca. 430-354 BCE), after conquering Sardis and Babylon, Artabazus[284] similarly made a vow to Miϑra (*Míϑρην)*, one that recalled his friendship with Cyrus:

> And now we have won the great battle and have Sardis and Croesus in subjection; we have taken Babylon and subjugated everything; and yet yesterday, by Mithras, if I had not fought my way through the crowd with my fists, I vow I could not have got near you. *(Cyropaedia, 7:53)*[285]

Artabazus swears to the god Miϑra to show his honor, honesty and friendship to Cyrus. In another example, in *Plutarch's Lives* (ca. 47-120 CE), Artaxerxes II (r. 405 to 359-58 BCE) swears to Miϑra *(Μίθραν)* for being merciful to a gift giver:

> Indeed, when a certain Omisus brought him a single pomegranate of surpassing size, he [Artaxerxes] said: By Mithra, this man would speedily make a city great instead of small were he entrusted with it. *(Parallel Lives, 4:4)* [286]

As discussed, these fragments show that Greek historians were familiar with the character of the Persian Miϑra as the personification of friendship and as the god who supports and supervises all forms of contracts whether they be between two kingdoms, between king and nation, between king and supreme deity, or between friends. In contrast to the identification of Miϑra as the Persian counterpart of the Greek Sun god Helios (that was the result of the cultural process of *interpretatio*

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[283] "ὄμνυμίσοιτὸνΜίθρην¸ ὅτανπερ ὑγιαίνω¸ μηπώποτε δειπνῆσαι πρὶνίδρῶσαι ἢ τῶν πολεμικῶντι ἢ τῶνγεωργικῶνἔργωνμελετῶν ἢ ἀεὶἔνγέτιΦιλοτιμούμενος." For the English translation, see: Marchant, 1959, 401.

[284]In Xenophon's Cyropaedia, Artabazus was one of Cyrus' generals and friends who remained faithful to him and encouraged Medes to support Cyrus; cf. Smith, 1884, 107.

[285] "Καὶ νῦνδὴνενικήκμέντετὴνμεγάληνμάχην καὶ Σάρδεις καὶ Κροῖσον ὑποχείριονἔχομεν καὶ Βαβυλῶνα ᾗρήκαμεν καὶ πάντας κατεστράμμεθα¸ καὶ μὰτὸνΜίθρηνἐγώτοιἐχθές¸ εἰμὴ πολλοῖςδιεπύκτευσα¸ οὐκἂνἐδυνάμηνσοι προσελθεῖν." For the English translation, see: Marchant, 1959, 401.

[286] "ἀλλὰ καὶ ῥόαν μίαν ὑπερφυῆμεγέθει προσενέγκαντος Ὠμίσου τινὸς αὐτῷ,νὴ τὸν Μίθραν,' εἶπεν,'οὗτος ὁ ἀνὴρ κ αὶ πόλιν ἂν ἐκ μικρᾶς ταχὺποιήσειε μεγάλην πιστευθείς." For the English translation, see: Perrin, 1954, 135.

graeca), the Greek description of the Persian deity as the god supporting all forms of contracts mirrored the character of the god in the Zoroastrian pantheon.

In addition to these Greek (and Roman) historiographies, there are rare sources whereby Miϑra, as the Zoroastrian overseer of oaths and contracts, is shown to have political prestige. In *the Romance of Alexander the Great* (ca. 3rd century CE), the name Miϑra appears at the opening of letter sent by Darius III (ca. 380-330 BCE) to his Greek counterpart Alexander, in which the Persian king shares the throne of the god who is both the Sun god and who rises with the sun:

> I, king of kings, Kinsman of the gods, who shares the throne of the sun god, Mihr [Miϑra], and rise with the sun, Darius, myself a god, give my servant Alexander these orders. *(The Romance of Alexander the Great, 103)*[287]

Then, in Alexander's response to the Persian king, we read:

> King Alexander, son of Ammon, and of his father Philip, and his mother Olympias, greets the king of kings, him who shares the throne of the sun god, Mihr [Miϑra], the son of the gods who rises with the sun, the great king of the Persians, Darius. *(The Romance of Alexander the Great, 107)* [288]

Albert De Jong asserts that the idea that kings shared a throne with Miϑra was an anachronism in line with the orientalizing features of the *Romance of Alexander the Great*.[289] The presence of Miϑra in this novel may also allude to the well-known political gesture of Persians who swore to Miϑra, or who called upon the name of the god (as the guardian of oaths and contracts) in their political relations and in correspondences with their friends and enemies.[290] As we have seen in the first chapter, the god's name appears for the first time (along with the names of other Vedic deities) in a treaty between the Hittites and the kingdom of Mitanni, due to his association with contracts and truth. This relationship plausibly endured as a political strategy among Persians in the Achaemenid, Parthian and later in the Sassanian periods. In other words, such narratives

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[287] "Βασιλεὺς βασιλέων καὶ θεῶν συγγενὴς σύνθρονός τε θεῷ Μίθρᾳ καὶ συνανατέλλων ἡλίῳ, ἐγὼ αὐτὸς θεὸς Δαρεῖος Ἀλεξάνδρῳ ἐμῷ θεράποντι τάδε…" For the English translation, see: Wolohojian, 1969, 58.

[288] "'Βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξανδρος πατρὸς Φιλίππου καὶ μητρὸς Ὀλυμπιάδος βασιλεῖ βασιλέων καὶ συνθρόνῳ ἡλίου θεοῦ μεγίστου καὶ ἐκγόνῳ θεῶν καὶ συνανατέλλοντι ἡλίῳ, μεγάλῳ βασιλεῖ Περσῶν Δαρείῳ χαίρειν." For the English translation, see: ibid, 60.

[289] De Jong, 1997, 290.

[290] Cf. Daryaee, 2011 (1390), 96-103.

indicate that Greeks and their Roman counterparts were familiar with this Persian practice, perhaps having gained awareness of it through their military, commercial and political encounters. Moreover, the distinction between the sun and Miϑra that appeared in late antique sources demonstrate that authors were familiar with the political gesture of swearing oaths to Miϑra.[291]

The Greek identification of the Persian Miϑra was embraced by Romans not only in classical antiquity, but also in the late antique encyclopedic tradition that primarily reconfigured Mithras (Miϑra) into the figure described by Greeks. The late-antique encyclopedia *Hesychii Alexandrini Lexicon* (ca. 5th century CE), for instance, informs us about *Μίϑρης* as the Persian Helios, and *Μίϑρης* as the most prominent god among the Persians.[292] In *Photius' Lexicon* (ca. 9th century CE), followed by the Byzantine Greek encyclopedia *Suda* (ca. 10th century CE), *Μίϑρον* is identified with Helios and as the sun to whom the Persians dedicated numerous sacrifices.[293] Richard Gordon suggests that "the late-antique encyclopedia/commentary is completely ignorant of the association between Magian wisdom and 'Mithraism' forged in the Platonist tradition, from Plutarch to Porphyry (and indeed to Proclus)." In agreement with him, I propose that the late-antique encyclopedic tradition continued the pattern of *interpretatio graeca,* in which Miϑra appeared as the equivalent of Apollo or Helios, rather than following a Platonic reading that interpreted the Roman Mithras cult as sharing mysteries with, or derived from, the Magi tradition. In other words, late-antique authors—as well as the early-Christian apologists—preferred not to take the Platonic and Neo-Platonic commentaries into account in their discussion of the god. I will return to these Platonic and Neo-Platonic portraits of Persian religion and the Magi tradition below and again later chapters. However, for now, it is adequate to note that this late-antique encyclopedic tradition continued the ancient Greek historiographic tradition of depicting foreign religions and cultures according to a decidedly Greek mindset.

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[291] Cf. Gordon, 2017, 304. Gordon argues that the earlier identifications of Miϑra as the sun (such as in Strabo) relate to an observation about the developments of this identification in western Parthia, while late-antique authors (he provides the example of Quintus Curtius) distinguished between Miϑra and the sun. I agree with Gordon, but this distinction seems to be a conscious and not accidental choice. More precisely, it was a conscious choice that came out of their familiarity and encounters with Persians, Parthians and Sasanians in commerce, politics and military movements which might familiarize them with the authentic figure of Miϑra in the Zoroastrian pantheon.

[292] "Μίϑρας·ὁἥλιος͵παραΠέρσαις"; "Μίϑρης·ὁπρῶτοςένΠέρσαιςθεός." See: *HesychiiAlexandrini Lexicon,*s.v. Μίϑρας and Μίϑρης.

[293] "Μίθραν νομίζουσινεἶναι οἱ Πέρσαι τὸνἥλιον͵ καὶ τούτῳθύουσι πολλὰςθυσίας." See: *Photios' Lexicon*, s.v. Μίϑρον; cf.*Suidae Lexicon*, s.v.Μίϑρον.

The Greek and Roman accounts of the Persian Miϑra are not limited to these two well-known categories: the god being associated with Apollo and Helios and the god's relation to oaths and truthful speaking. A third category describes the god Miϑra with no referent to his Persian character. Some Greek and Roman authors mention Miϑra in order to highlight his esoteric Oriental character in order to craft their own philosophy and religious ideas. Plutarch's *De Isis et Osiride* (ca. 45-120 CE) is an example of the trend that portrays Miϑra as moderator between Ohrmazd and Areimanius in the Magian dualistic view of primal creation.[294] Plutarch mentions that Zoroaster, whom he calls the "Magian" living sometime around five thousand years before the Trojan War, believed in two gods.[295] One was born from pure light, and became the creator of all that is good and good deities; the other, born from darkness, becoming the creator of all that is bad and the daemons. The Magian priest, Zoroaster, called the latter one Areimanius and the first one Ohrmazd, and between these two, explains Plutarch, was the mediator whom the Persians call Μίθρην:[296]

> He [Zoroaster] used to call the one Horomazes and the other Areimanius, and showed also that the former was especially akin, among objects of perception, to light, and the latter, on the contrary, to darkness and ignorance, while in between the two was Μίθρην (Mithras); and this is why the Persians call Μίθρην the mediator.(*De Iside et Osiride, 46*) [297]

Thus, Plutarch's Persian Miϑra is neither the sun nor even the Sun god; instead, the deity functions as mediator in the primordial battle between Ohrmazd and Areimanius. Shaked argues that the Greek term employed here *(μεσίτην)* is a direct rendering of the Pahlavi term *miyāngīc,* meaning mediator and thus evokes Miϑra's intermediary role in the Pahlavi sources.[298] While, Shaked's argument might be justified by the idea of the oral transmission of the Zoroastrian corpus and tradition, all extant Pahlavi scriptures describing Miϑra as mediator postdate Plutarch's *De Iside*

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[294] Areimanius was the Latin form of the Zoroastrian Ahriman, while Ohrmazd was the Latin form of the Zoroastrian supreme deity Ahura Mazdā.
[295] Plutarch, *De Isis*, 46.
[296] Ibid, 46-47.
[297]"οὗτος οὖν ἐκάλειτὸν μὲν ΄ωρομάζην, τὸν δ΄ ΄Αρειμάνιον· καὶ προσαπεφαίνετο τὸνμὲνέοκέναι φωτὶμάλιστα τῶν αἰσθητῶν, τὸν δ΄ ἒμπαλιν σκότῳ καὶ ἀγνοίᾳ, μέσον δ΄ ἀμφοῖντὸνΜίθρηνεἶναι. διὸ καὶ Μίθρην Πέρσαι τὸνμεσίτηνὀνομάζουσιν." For the English translation, see: Griffiths, 1970, 191; cf. ibid, 474 (note on 190, 26-7).
[298] Shaked, 1995, IV: 15.

et Osiride.[299] As such, it is not possible to treat the Pahlavi narratives of Miϑra as Plutarch's main source. How then did Plutarch gain knowledge about the Persian mediator, Miϑra?

An alternative view proposes that Plutarch refers here to Zurvanism and the Zurvanite cosmogony, where Ohrmazd and Areimanius were the twin offspring of their father, Zurvan.[300] It is assumed that in ancient Zoroastrianism, Zurvan was the god of time, and the Pahlavi and Armenian sources identify him as fate, fortune and infinite time.[301] According to the myth, Ohrmazd and his twin Areimanius were the offspring of the pre-existent spirit and the god of eternal time, Zurvan, who made sacrifices for a thousand years to beget a son. Yet, Zurvan felt doubt when his sacrifice yielded no result, and consequently Areimanius was born as the penalty of his doubt and Ohrmazd as the reward of his sacrifice.[302] In this sense, the Zurvanite cosmogony had three prominent characters who were the father (Zurvan) and his two sons (Ohrmazd and Areimanius), with no account of Mithras (Miϑra).

Then the question arises as to how did Plutarch familiarize himself with Zurvanism and the mediator Miϑra if he refers to Zurvanism in this passage? Did he have access to accurate information, or did he retrieve his knowledge from pseudepigraphal writings about Zurvanism or even Zoroastrianism? Plutarch's familiarity with Zurvansim likely reflects his knowledge of the Greek, Syriac and Armenian sources about the religion of the Persians, and not the Avestan sources and scriptures depicting the god's role in the Zoroastrian pantheon.[303] In addition, relying on the text (*De Isis, 46-7*), Plutarch saw no difference between the Zurvanite narratives of primal creation

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[299] I have previously discussed the mediating role of Miϑra as he appears in certain Pahlavi texts. See: chapter one.
[300] Benveniste, 1929, 26; Zaehner, 1955, 13. Some scholars assume that Zurvanism was a pre-Zoroastrian religion and the religion of the Medes or the Parthians, and the latter group were contemporaneous of Plutarch; while some scholars count Zurvanism as a heresy of true Zoroastrianism. See: Boyce, 1994, 15-6. Others explore Zurvanism as one option of Zoroastrian cosmogony among others that was not necessarily seen as the betrayal of Zoroastrianism. Shaked, 1992, 232; Shaked, 1995, 19. However, a more recent view asserts that time and space were prominent and certain features in every cosmogonic myth as well as the Zoroastrian cosmogony in which Zurvan played the role of eternal time with no special account of his own. De Jong, 1997, 331 and De Jong, 2014 & 2014a.
[301] Zaehner, 1955, 58-9; cf. De Jong, 2014.
[302] Zaehner, 1955, 419-29; cf. De Jong, 1997, 331-2; cf. De Jong, 2014a.
[303] On the myth of Zurvan in non-Zoroastrian sources, see: De Jong, 1997, 331; cf. De Jong, 2014a. Shaked argues that the Zurvānite cosmogony depicts a triangular form of primal creation that was not in correspondence with the Mazdaean dualistic worldview, and consequently, the Mazdaean orthodoxy denied this intermediary, removed the moderator Miϑra and constructed a novel narrative within its dualistic view. See: Shaked, 1995, 19. However, following De Jong and Kellens, it is hard to use the terms polytheism, dualism and monotheism in the absence of the self-identification of Zoroastrianism; and as a result, it is also hard to say that the Mazdaean Orthodoxy removed the persona of Miϑra in opposition to its monotheistic or even dualistic view. Thus, I find it preferable to read the existence of the mediator Miϑra in Plutarch's narrative in relation to his Middle Platonic philosophy. I will discuss this issue in following chapters. See: Kellens, 1980, 23-4.

and the Zoroastrian cosmogony – as is made clear when he alludes to this narrative as the dualistic view of "Zoroaster the Magian" (*Ζωροάστρης ὁ μάγος*).[304] In fact, in *De Isis*, Plutarch refers to Theopompus and Eudoxus rather than any other source. These two authors were especially interested in Persian religions and wisdom, and their writings could complement Plutarch's knowledge of Zoroaster's view of the two gods.[305]

It remains to be answered, how did Plutarch receive the idea of Miϑra as a mediator if he refers to the Zoroastrian cosmogony or even the Zurvanite version of Zoroastrian cosmogony?[306] Did he have access to any specific scripture or source describing the role of Miϑra as the mediator between the two gods (*θεύς*)? Indeed, the only reliable response to these questions is that Plutarch gained some knowledge about "barbarian wisdom" and Persian religion from his teacher Ammonius of Athens who was in charge of a Platonic academy. Plutarch informs us about Ammonius' philosophical ideas in *The E at Delphi (De E apud Delphos)* and John Dillon traces the Persian influences on Plutarch's demonology back to his teacher's distinctive identification of "Hades" or "Pluto" as a daemon affixing his realm in the air between the Moon and the Earth.[307] Additionally, years of travel and being a member of the Delphic priesthood made Plutarch familiar with a wide range of sources from which he chose to establish his own dualistic philosophy and demonology. De Jong elaborates on three aspects of Plutarch's objectivity of Zoroaster's teachings which serve as the link between myth and ritual when conceptualizing divinity as well as Plutarch's views on demonology and dualism. However, I prefer to emphasize the two last dimensions, which are Plutarch's demonology and dualism.[308] Indeed, not only Plutarch but also numerous other Greek and Roman philosophers, such as Celsus and Porphyry, as well as early Christian authors and apologists, such as Tertullian, Origen and Firmicus Maternus, had a keen interest in the so-called "barbarian wisdom" and religions. They evoked these traditions to establish their own theological and sociological agendas rather than to provide a factual account of foreign people and

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[304] De Jong discusses Plutarch's *De Isis et Osiride*, as one of the Greek sources on the Zoroastrian theology and doctrine in details, but my point here is to examine the specific account of Miϑra represented by this text rather than exploring Plutarch's view of the Zoroastrian dualism. On the Zoroastrian doctrine in *De Isis,* see: De Jong, 1997, 157-63; ibid, 334-5.

[305] In his *Lives of eminent Philosophers,* Diogenes Laertius mentions that both Eudoxus in his *Voyage round the World (Περιόδῳ)*, and Theopompus in the eighth book of his *Philippica (Φιλιππικῶν)* have written about the tradition of the Magi. See: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent Philosophers* I: 8; cf. De Jong, 1997, 162.

[306] On the Zurvanite version of Zoroastrian cosmogony and theology, see: note 32.

[307] See: Dillon, 1977, 190-2; cf. Jones, 1967.

[308] De Jong, 1997, 159; of note; Dillon, 1977, 202-4; and on Plutarch's demonology, see: ibid, 216-9.

their religions, as I will elaborate in the following chapter. There, I will also show how the Roman iconography of Mithras and his attendant inspired Middle and Neoplatonic philosophers, use of the god's character and origin.

2.2. The Hybrid Rebirth of Miϑra in the Antiochan Pantheon

The final representation of the Persian Miϑra that I examine in this chapter is the hybrid god, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, found in the royal cult established by Antiochus I (r.69-31 BCE) from Commagene. In the nomos inscriptions at the *Nemrud Daği hierothesion*, Miϑra is the Persian Yazāta whose name (called by his Greek name Μίϑρας) appears alongside the names of three Greek gods Apollo, Helios and Hermes. Here, I will demonstrate that the importance of the Antiochan god, for our discussion about the Hellenistic imagery of Mithras (Miϑra), is in his hybrid representation that shows the god together with his well-known Greek counterparts Apollo and Helios. Recently, Miguel John Versluys has challenged the application of terms such as "hybridity" and "syncretism" when used for Commagenene archeology and the Antiochan aesthetic style. He explains that such terms usually denote to a sort of "impurity" vs. "purity", and this terminology of archeology refers to "a random and unsystematic merging of elements from different pure" in the case of Commagene. Instead, Versluys applies the terms "bricolage" and the juxtaposition of discrete elements in order to describe the Antiochan aesthetics. However, while I agree with his terminology and interpretation of the Antiochan style and Commagene archeology, I believe the application of the terms "syncretism" and "hybridity" in interpreting the Antiochan ruler cult and pantheon is less problematic, and such a terminology does not reject the apparent purity and innovation of Antiochus I's ruler cult and religion. For instance, we can claim a sort of purity in the case of the deities Apollo, Helios, Hermes and Mithras (Miϑra) in the Greek and Zoroastrian pantheons that gained a new configuration under Antiochus I's innovation of the god Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes.[309]

Moreover, in this section, I will explore the role that the Commagenian royal cult plausibly played in the transmission of the god Miϑra to Rome in the first century CE. In introduction, I have explained that in contrast to Cumont and his followers who seek Miϑra's transmission from Persia

[309] Versluys, 2017, 201-5.

to the Roman Empire via Magi whose winter residence was in Babylon and later moved to Asia Minor, Roger Beck proposed that the Antiochan royal cult and the deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes was the genesis of a Proto-Mithraism. He has asserted that the god Mithras (Miϑra) was transmitted to Rome by the civilians and military men of the last Commagenian king, during the Judean and Civil Wars and during their exile in Rome.[310] In line with Beck's hypothesis, I will argue that Antiochus I constructed a hybrid image of Mithras as the god Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes that introduced and brought a Hellenistic representation of Mithras to Rome, which was distinguished from the Vedic and Zoroastrian character of the god.

Before analyzing the Antiochan imagery of Mithras, I should provide a little background on the Commagene dynasty. According to Diodurus' *Library of History (31:19a),* Commagene gained its independence by the effort of the Seleucid ruler Ptolemaeus. The kingdom was established in 163 BCE.[311] The two kings who followed Ptolemaeus were Samos II and Mithradates I Callinicus, both of whom we know through Commagenean coinage.[312] The fourth king was Antiochus I, the second son of Mithradates I Callinicus and Laodice,[313] the daughter of the Seleucid king Antiochus VIII Grypus.[314] When Antiochus I ascended the throne in 69 BCE,[315] Tigranes, the Armenian king of kings, had gained power in certain regions around Euphrates due to the weakness of the Seleucid Empire. Later, when Tigranes was conquered by the Romans, Antiochus I immediately demonstrated his loyalty to Rome, and called himself a friend of the Romans (*philoromaios*).[316] A few years later (and in order to balance his foreign policy) Antiochus I also developed a political relation with Persia by way of the marriage of his daughter Laodice to the Parthian king, Orodes II (r. 57-37 BCE).[317]

Antiochus I was, in fact, the most influential figure in the Commagenean line. Under his rule, the entire territory of Commagene experienced a period of prosperity both in its economy and political life. If Ptolemaeus was the founder of the Commagenean kingdom, Antiochus I was the

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[310] See: introduction, note 82.
[311] On the history of Commagene, see: Versluys, 2017, 46-7; Brijder, 2014, 56; Weiskopf, 2011.
[312] E.g. Dillen, 2014, 538-9: figs. 2.1- 2.2 on Samos II & figs 3.1-3.2 on Mithradates I Callinicus. The Commagenean coinage represent the bust of the king on the obverse side and Dionysus, winged Nike or Athena on the reverse; cf. Brijder, 2014, 53-6.
[313] Their eldest son was Philadelphe who did not appear in the line of Commagenean kings. Brijder, 2014, 52.
[314] Brijder, 2014, 57; Weiskopf, 2011.
[315] Brijder, 2014, 59-60; cf. Versluys, 2017, 48.
[316] Brijder, 2014, 64.
[317] Brijder, 2014, 60-62; Weiskopf, 2011.

one who established and developed a Commagenean ethnic and cultural identity.[318] After Antiochus I's death, his son and successor Mithradates II imperiled the kingdom of Commagene. He lost the important cities of Zeugma (Seleukeia at the Euphrates) and Doliche, when in a tragic scenario, Octavian penalized the Commagenean king Mithradates II for his support of Mark Antony in the battle of Actium and added the city Zeugma to the Roman province of Syria in response.[319] The incorporation of Zeugma to the province of Syria was the beginning of the fall of Commagene. After the death of Antiochus III in 17 CE, the entire territory of Commagene was incorporated into the Roman province of Syria and the royal family moved to Rome. Yet the throne of Commagene was returned to the last king and member of the Commagenean royal family, Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 38 CE, perhaps due to his close friendship with the Emperor Caligula. Finally, Emperor Vespasian returned the territory of Commagene back to the Roman province of Syria and ended the Commagenean kingship officially. Hence, the members of royal family moved to Rome and the Roman legions of Roman were sent to Samosata and Zeugma.[320]

In the socio-cultural context of the Hellenistic world, Antiochus I established a royal cult relying on a triad of religion, politics and ethnic identity to legitimize and secure his own political power under the influence and authority of both Rome and Persia.[321] Over the thirty or so years between 69 and 36 BCE, Antiochus I erected three *hierothesia* (*ἱεροθέσιον;* sacred tomb) in Arsameia on the Euphrates, Arsameia on Nymphaion and in *Nemrud Dağ* (today at Adiyaman, in southeastern Turkey). Among them, the last two were the best excavated, and between these two *hierothesia*, the *Nemrud Daği hierothesion* is our main focus to examine the Antiochan imagery of Mithras.[322] Since the monument on *Nemrud Daği* is the largest *hierothesion* constructed by Antiochus I, and the nomos inscriptions (*nomos inscriptions, 36-53*) informs us that it is the tomb of the king himself.[323] Yet, not only was it his tomb, but the *hierothesion* was also constructed to

[318]Miguel John Versluys has dedicated a book to the visual style and cultural identity constructed by Antiochus I. He argues that the Commagenean king used material culture to establish a Commagenean ethnic identity in the Hellenistic world. See: Versluys, 2017.
[319] Versluys, 2017, 49; cf. Brijder, 2014, 68; cf. Cohen, 2006, 32-3.
[320] Versluys, 2017, 49-50; cf. Brijder, 2014, 70-2; Weiskopf, 2011.
[321] For the gods' names mentioned in the nomos inscription, see below.
[322]Today, it is located at Adiyaman, Turkey. The sanctuary was discovered by the German road-building engineer Karl Sester in 1881 and was excavated by the American archaeologist Theresa Goell during the 1940-70s. On the preliminary excavation report, see: Sanders, 1994; cf. Brijder, 2014.
[323] For Greek transcription Sanders, 1996, 208-9; for the English translation, see: ibid, 214; cf. Versluys, 2017, 53.

revere the hybrid deities and to honor Antiochus I's deified royal ancestors (*nomos inscriptions, 36-67*).[324]

In the courtyard of *Nemrud Daği hierothesion*, we see long rows of reliefs representing the King's paternal and maternal forbearers, with the colossal statues of the hybrid deities and a series of the *dexiosis* reliefs (i.e. the handshaking scene). Among these is an image of Mithras that deserves our attention. In what follows, I will briefly describe the *hierothesion* at *Nemrud Daği* in order to provide a comprehensive image of the hybrid world in which the god Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes was depicted and positioned. In addition, such a description introduces for our consideration the hybrid Antiochan personification of Mithras, the sole hybrid image of the god that reached Rome sometime in the first century CE.

<u>*Site Description:*</u>

The *Nemrud Daği hierothesion* covers an area of 2.6 hectares (26.000 sq) and soars 50 m to its rounded apex. The canonical monument is bordered with three terraces on the East, North and West sides, and two different routes for pilgrim access. Of these three, the East terrace is the best preserved and is roughly 11 m higher than the West Terrace.[325]

a) *The East terrace:* In the upper podium on the west side of the terrace, five colossal statues of the Antiochan deities (Zeus-Ormades, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, and Artagnes-Heracles-Ares) appear together with Antiochus I (see fig.19). The deities are identified by the inscriptions on their bases and their immense size is intended to be seen from a distance.[326]

Zeus-Oromasdes, who sits on the highest throne, is physically larger than the other deities. Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes and Artagnes-Heracles-Ares are on his left, and the Tyche of Commagene and the king Antiochus I are on his right (see figs. 20&21). While the male deities are dressed in Persian garments (long-sleeved tunic, trousers, cloak and boots), the sole female deity is depicted with the Greek *chiton* and *himation*.[327] The row of deities ends on

[324] For the English translation, see: Sanders, 1996, 214.
[325] Sanders, 1996, 91-3.
[326] Sanders, 1996, 101 & 214.
[327] Brijder has recently proposed that the deities were once brightly painted. See: Brijder, 2014, 103-13; Versluys, 2017, 56.

both sides with a low pedestal holding two colossal statues of guardian animals (the lion and the eagle, see fig. 22).[328]

In front of the colossal statues, there is a platform with a row of five dark-gray sandstone reliefs flanked by sculptures of lions and eagles on both the south and north sides. These huge sandstone figures are indeed the well-known *dexiosis* reliefs showing Antiochus I clasping hands with the deities (see fig. 23). The East Terrace's *dexiosis* reliefs are destroyed, and their description depends on the better-preserved reliefs of the West Terrace. On these reliefs, we find the same deities as the colossal statues on the upper podium but not in the same order and style. Only Zeus-Oromasdes is placed at the center of the row. Other stelae show the king clasping the right hand of Artagnes-Heracles-Ares, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, and the goddess of Commagene. The lion horoscope relief is the last stele in this group that depicts a lion with nineteen stars carved on and around its body and tail, a crescent moon on its chest, and a three planets over its back inscribed as Mars, Mercury and Jupiter (see fig. 24).[329] While previous scholarship held that this horoscope relief indicates the date of Antiochus I's birth, recent work suggests a dual function for the Antiochan lion horoscope relief. The lion relief is a celestial clock that reveals the time of planting, harvesting, and other agricultural activities in relation to the fertile lands of Commagene. It also indicates the monthly celebrations of the king's birthday and his accession.[330]

The north and south sides of the East terrace are flanked by the rows of Antiochus I's Greek and Persian ancestors. The north row depicts his genealogy through his father, and the south line goes through his maternal lineage. The back side of each pedestal is inscribed by the names of the king and the ancestor whose figure has been depicted on the relief.[331]

Lastly, the final part of the East terrace is a stepped pyramidal platform positioned in front of the row of colossal statues that may have functioned as an altar.[332]

[328] Sanders, 1996, 106-7; cf. Versluys, 2017, 54-5.
[329] Sanders, 1996, 107-9.
[330]On the traditional interpretation of the lion horoscope relief, see: Sanders, 1996, 108-9; on more recent approaches, see: Crijns, 2014; Versluys, 2017, 64-5.
[331] Sanders, 1996, 111-13.
[332] Sanders, 1996, 115-16.

b) The North terrace: The north terrace contains simple architecture, which was unfinished, and meant to connect the two other terraces that acted as the main spaces for ritual performances (see fig. 25).[333]

c) The West terrace: This terrace is smaller than the East terrace and has different embellishments (see fig.26). To provide enough space for the colossal statues, which correspond to the examples seen on the East terrace, the court was enlarged toward the west, and decorated by an L-shape row of the stelae exhibiting the paternal and the maternal forebears of the king. Additionally, in the West terrace, the lion horoscope and the dexiosis reliefs were erected in the northeast of the courtyard and not below the colossal statues. Another salient difference is the absence of the pyramidal platform—the constructed altar—in front of the colossal statues. This missing feature can be interpreted in two ways: first, it may suggest the subordination of the West court; second, that it may indicate a different ritual function for the West terrace.[334]

The deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes appears four times in the *Nemrud Daği hierothesion*—twice among the colossal statues and twice on the *dexiosis* reliefs—and always dressed in Persian garments (long sleeved tunic, trousers, boots and a cloak). The Antiochan deity evidences a strong Persian—even Oriental—lineage, as the deity appears with a Phrygian cap and sunburst around his head on the dexiosis relief on the West terrace.[335] I will examine the motif of Phrygian cap used by Greeks to depict the people attributed to the East in the next chapter. Here, I note that crowned by the Phrygian cap, the god Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes appears partly Eastern in look, and more precisely as a reference the Parthian Empire ruling at this time.[336] The sunburst around the head of this deity evokes the radiant halo or diadem attributed to Apollo and Helios. Consequently, the Antiochan deity integrates Persian and Greek motifs and elements to represent the hybrid character of the god.

The deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes was formed from three Greek gods and one Persian Yazāta, identified on in the *nomos inscriptions* with his Greek name Μίθρας. He was a

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[333] Sanders, 1996, 127-8; cf. Versluys, 2017, 60.
[334] On the issue of the different ritual functions of the terraces, see: Crijns, 2014, 569-71.
[335] Cf. Versluys, 2017, 55. I will return to the motifs of Persian attire and Phrygian cap in the next chapter and will examine them as those elements used in Greek imagery of “handosme Orienatl”.
[336] Similar to Greeks, Romans used the Phrygian cap for portraying those deities and people attributed to the East, such as the Parthians who were Romans’ eastern neighbor.

multifaceted deity who personified qualities are associated with each of these gods. Helios shares some of his functions with Apollo with regards to sun light, wisdom and truth.[337] He is also the Greek Sun god, and Miϑra, too, has a relationship with the sun in his Persian form. As mentioned previously, Greek historiography frequently identified the Persian Miϑra with the Greek sun god Helios, in the sense that both gods are charioteers and overseers of the human world. Helios drives his chariot down from the heavens to the ocean and shines upon mortal men and immortal gods alike. Likewise, Miϑra also drives his chariot from east to west ensuring that all contracts and oaths are kept in good faith.[338] With a ten thousand eyes, the Avestan Miϑra sees everything. He speaks only truth and plucks up those who speak falsehood. There are also some resemblances between Miϑra and Hermes: Miϑra is the god of pastures, and Hermes was honored by herdsmen; Hermes is the god of the *herm* and marks all private borders as well as city borders; Miϑra protects all contracts and oaths, including treaties between sovereign territories. More importantly, Miϑra and Hermes are both psychopomps, accompanying the souls of the dead in their descent to the underworld.[339] In this sense one can assert the gods share some qualities and complement each other and are brought together in a single unified deity.

Considering the Antiochan hybrid representation, Bruno Jacob asserts that Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes is mainly Greek, and the Iranian god Mithras (Miϑra) is only an addition to this combined deity.[340] However, hybridity entails adding and combining separate features and different essences into a new product that changes their original meaning. Consequently, this manifestation of Mithras is not simply an addition to the three Greek gods found here, but one which shaped and affected the meaning inherent in this combined deity. In other words, Mithras, along with the three Greek gods Apollo, Helios and Hermes, were combined into a new configuration that retain some of their previous traits, infuses them with novel qualities. Indeed, such transformation and syncretistic borrowing defined the Antiochan aesthetics and construction of its royal cult. More recently, Matthew Canepa has argued about this deity that "each god was identified with only one Iranian divinity, but often associated with multiple Greek gods, indicating

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[337]Graf & Ley, 2006.

[338] On the functions and characters of the Persian Miϑra, see: chapter one. On Helios, see: Gordon, 2006; cf. *Homeric hymn to Helios*. I will address the relation between Miϑra and Helios in the next chapter.

[339] On Hermes, see: Baudy & Ley 2006; cf. *Homeric hymn to Hermes*. On Miϑra, the soul savior, see: chapter one.

[340] Jacob, 2012, 103; cf. Jacob, 2017, 235-48.

without a doubt that the Iranian deities formed the core of the god's identity."[341] Then, the question emerges as why are three "Greek gods" but only one "Iranian divinity" if the Iranian Yazāta is the core of the hybrid deity? In fact, Mithras' (Miϑra's) combination with Apollo or Helios—widely known as the Greek counterparts of the Persian Yazāta—could be ample, if the core of this hybridity was Mithras (Miϑra). In other words, Mithras (Miϑra) is neither a mere addition as Jacob suggests, nor the core of the deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes as Canepa asserts. Rather, the Antiochan god was a hybrid creation representing a single deity whose nature and character, as highlighted previously, entails the shared qualities among the Persian Miϑra (here, called as Μίϑρας) and his Greek counterparts Apollo, Helios and Hermes. More precisely, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes blends elements from Persian and Greek deities, similar to the two other Antiochan deities (Artagnes-Heracles-Ares and Zeus-Oromasdes).

In order to understand the hybrid nature of the Antiochan god, we need to ask how well Antiochus I was acquainted with these gods in their indigenous cultural milieus? How much did he know about similarities between the Persian Miϑra and Hermes, or about the resemblances between the Persian Miϑra and Greek Helios and Apollo? It is hard to answer these questions, and perhaps the only reliable response here is to consider Antiochus I's familiarity with the Greek interpretation of the Zoroastrian Miϑra which I have explained above. The Commagenean king had the opportunity to retrieve knowledge from ancient and contemporaneous Persian and Greek religious traditions.[342] In fact, his familiarity with the Greek understanding of the Persian Miϑra is evident in his hybrid representation of the god. Antiochus I's personification and imagery of the god Apollo-Mithars-Helios-Hermes brought four gods together in a single unified divinity as these gods share some qualities and complement each other.

Moreover, the hybrid nature of the deity also suggests that Antiochus did not aim to portray images that were authentic according to the original contexts of these gods, or to create a god Persian or Greek in origin. He tried to create a hybrid divine figure suitable to his political objective – namely, to legitimize his dynasty. Miguel John Versluys has recently interpreted Commagene archeology and the Persian elements employed in the Antiochan aesthetic style as "typically post-

[341] Canepa, 2018, 203.
[342] Cf. Canepa, 2018, 247.

Seleucid, late Hellenistic form of Persianism,"[343] as a form of reception and historicization by reference to the Achaemenid Empire. What pushed Antiochus I towards a Persianist aesthetic in the late Hellenistic world? Versluys explains, "It seems appropriate to describe this [dynastic cult locations built by Antiochus I] as a royal dynastic project, a form of *kultur-politik* whereby Antiochus I apparently used a unified set of symbols to communicate certain message through material culture."[344] Antiochus I supported the formation of an ethnic identity in order to legitimize his authority and legitimacy with regards to his powerful neighbours, Rome and Persia. The Antiochan monuments (more precisely, the *Nemrud Daği hierothesion* in our case) embodied the king's political ideology and imagined ethnic identity, which enabled his kingdom to be more fully integrated into the Hellenistic world. The Commagenean king used negotiation instead of provocation, and cultural peace, instead of military conflict to assert his kingdom's position. Taking Versluys' proposition into account, the hybrid deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes was a symbol whereby Antiochus I could convey a political message to his powerful neighbours, which in turn legitimized his authority over the Commagenean territory. Embracing three Greek deities and one Persian god, the deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, Antiochus I created a multi-ethnic deity representing his "friendly" cultural-political strategy. Antiochus I used hybrid pantheon, as a strategy to spread his political agenda and to construct an ethnic identity legitimizing his sovereignty over Commagene. In this sense, not only were the stelae of his royal Persian-Macedonian forebears, but also the colossal statues of Greco-Persian ancestral gods, part of his cultural-political project that attempted to position the Commagenean kingship between the frontiers of Rome and Persia.[345]

I will return to this discussion in the next chapter but here, I focus on the Antiochan representation of the hybrid deity, and demonstrate that such a personification and imagery reflects the Greek descriptions identifying the Persian Miϑra as the counterpart of the Greek gods Apollo and Helios on the one hand, and representing to Antiochus I's efforts for legitimizing his political authority on the other.

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[343]Versluys, 2017, 218; cf. Canepa, 2018, 202. Recently, Matthew Canepa suggested that the Greco-Macedonian artistic tradition was the dominant model of art and architecture in Commagene.

[344] Versluys, 2018, 108.

[345] On the ancestral gods, see: *nomos inscriptions 232*. For the argument on "ethnic maneuvering in the Hellenistic world", see: Versluys, 2017, 141-2 & on the "Antiochan structuring identity", see: ibid, 155-65; cf. Canepa, 2018, 247-8.

It has been speculated that it was the Antiochan hybrid representation of Mithras (Miϑra), dressed in the Persian garment, which arrived in Rome in the first century CE and inspired the Roman imagery of the deity cultivated by the Mithraic Mystagogues. As mentioned earlier, Roger Beck has recently proposed that the god Mithras was transmitted to Rome by a founding group of Commagenian military men and royal households. This group first brought the image of the god as patrons in the Civil and Judaean War and again when they went into exile in Rome.[346] In agreement with Beck, I concur that it was the figure of god that was transmitted to Rome but not that the whole idea of the cult entailed its doctrine and rituals, came to be known as the "Roman Mithraism". The relation between the Antiochan imagery of the god and the Roman iconography of Mithras (which I explore in the next chapter) confirms that the god was transmitted to Rome via the military and households of the last Commagenean king Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This is the case because the Antiochan Mithras is the only known representation which predates the iconography of the Roman Mithras and which portrays the god in a Persian garment. More precisely, Beck's hypothesis about the transmission of the god can be supported by the fact that the Antiochan imagery that depicted the deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes dressed in Persian garment accounts as one of the sources for the later Roman iconography of the god Mithras (Miϑra). At least, one can claim that the Antiochan imagery of the god was a key source for the transmission of the god to the Roman Empire.

2.3. Conclusion

To conclude, one can see that the Persian Miϑra was altered when he appeared in a non-Zoroastrian context. Greek historiographers (and later Roman authors) identified the god as the Persian Helios or Apollo, representing some features of the Persian Yazāta, while also adopting some characteristics of deities from the Greek pantheon. In Hellenistic and later Greek sources, Miϑra appears as the Persian sun god to whom Persians swore their oaths and who intervened between Ahura Mazdā and Ahriman. Greek historiography, then, appropriated the Zoroastrian god as the equivalent of Helios and Apollo and created an image that was palatable for Greek audiences.

[346] Beck, 2006B, 182; cf.Beck, 2001, 62-73.

The image of Miϑra (Μίϑρας) that we find in Greek historiography is the same figure of the god found at *Nemrud Daği*. There, the deity appears in a hybrid form with his Greek equivalents in order to propagate the religious-political agenda of the Commagenean king. As an ancestral deity, the deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes represented a character of Miϑra who differs from his Zoroastrian origin, but is much closer to the Greek descriptions of the Persian Miϑra. In fact, the appearance of the god in a combination with the Greek Apollo and Helios indicates the Commagenean king's familiarity with the Greek imagery of the Persian Miϑra. Additionally, the Antiochan Mithras most probably was the first embodiment of the Persian Miϑra that depicted the god in the Persian garment and was transmitted to the Roman Empire sometime in the first century CE. The Antiochan pantheon transmitted an image of the Persian god portrayed in Persian costume that is crucial to explain on the history of the Roman cult of Mithras.

In sum, studying the Greek and Hellenistic descriptions and imagery of the Persian Miϑra proves that apart from all qualities attributed to the god, these depictions clearly reported the god's Persian provenance in their narratives, which later provided a set of sources and inspirations for the Roman Mithraists. In next chapter, I will demonstrate how the Mithraic Mystagogues embraced theis Greek imagery and descriptions to create a certain visual language that stressed the Persian provenance of their god.

Chapter Three

Visualizing the "Handsome Oriental": The Roman Imagery of Mithras

Where it may seem that the only available option for understanding Roman Mithraism is to choose between either a Roman or Persian origin of the cult, Richard Gordon has recently proposed something different. He argues that Persianism explains the Greco-Roman appropriation of the Persian god Miϑra and their Mithraic iconography and ritual language.[347] In my introduction, I explained that for Gordon, Persianism in the context of Roman Mithraism is the process whereby the Roman Mithraic Mystagogues appropriated knowledge about the Persian Miϑra from external sources, and that data then informed Mithraic iconography and ritual language indicating a Persian origin for their god, both in name and appearance. According to Gordon, the Mitharic Mystagogues' claims about the Persian origin of their god at least partly informed Roman intellectuals, Middle and Neoplatonists' interpretations of the cult as well as late-antique encyclopedic writers who described Mithras in their works.[348]

Gordon has likewise demonstrated that the cultic imagery of Mithras emphasizes the Persian provenance of the deity.[349] In Roman iconography, Mithras is usually dressed in the Hellenistic stereotype of Persians – namely a sleeved tunic (*candys*), trousers (*anaxyrídes*), and Phyrigian cap (*τιάρα*).[350] Gordon finds some Greek topoi of Persians in the cultic scenes that depict Mithras engaged horse-riding or shooting arrows. Gordon ultimately argues that Mithras' dress and accoutrements, the Mithraic hunting and archery motifs, along with some linguistic allusions (such as the terminology of the god's name) reveal that the Mithraic mystagogues desired to present the Mithraea with the epigraphs of Mithras (Miϑra) as a Persian deity, rather than a novel invention.[351]

This chapter relies on Gordon's concept of Persianism concerning the Greco-Roman appropriation of the Persian god Miϑra. Here, I am interested in how Mithraic imagery created an

[347] I have explained the term "Persianism" under "Contribution to Scholarship" in the introduction to this dissertation.
[348] Gordon, 2017, 287-89. It should be noted that none of these intellectuals or authors had any direct experience or involvement with the cult itself.
[349] I have discussed these five facets in the "Literature Review" section of my introduction.
[350] Gordon, 2017, 290.
[351] Gordon, 2017, 289.

exotic "feeling" for its Roman adherents, and I will demonstrate that the Mithraic Mystagogues adopted a Greek image of the "handsome Oriental"—and of Persians in particular—and incorporated it into their cultic iconography and visual language in order to create a distinctly foreign image of their deity and cult. In chapter one, I explored the characteristics and visual representation of the god in the Vedic and Zoroastrian traditions, where the god was understood as the personification of contracts and appears as the overseer of all contracts, as well as judge and soul savior. In chapter two, I examined several examples of Greek and Latin passages describing the Persian Miϑra via the lens of *interpretatio graeca*. I demonstrated how the Greek historiography created a novel image of the Persian Miϑra that was later embraced by the Roman intellectuals and historians. Moreover, in the same chapter, I explored Mithras' appearance in Commagene as a hybrid deity, where the imagery of the Zoroastrian Yazāta was Hellenized and the god appears in a hybrid form along with the Greek gods Apollo, Helios and Hermes.[352] In this chapter, relying on the Greek imagery and identification of Persian Miϑra that I discussed in chapter two, I will consider the origin of cultic visual language and the Oriental imagery of the Roman Mithras. Here I will examine archaeological materials from the first four centuries CE, such as the wall paintings of the Dura Mithraeum and the tauroctony of *Pio Clementino*, in order to trace how the Mithraic mystagogues emphasized the Persian provenance of their god visually through cultic imagery and iconography.

In the second section of this chapter, I turn to those descriptions and narratives written by Greek and Roman intellectuals (mostly Middle and Neoplatonists) to explore the perceptions of cultic iconography in the eyes of those people who had no personal engagement in the cult. I will consider some fragments of the antique and late antique sources such as *Thebais*, *the Scholia to Thebais*, *the Error of the Pagans*, and some interpretations written by Middle and Neoplatonists, such as Celsus and Porphyry, to illustrate how the cultic iconography successfully highlighted the Persian provenance of the god and influenced these latter descriptions and interpretations. My aim is to demonstrate that the cultic imagery of the god Mithras enabled the Roman intellectuals to trace the god and his cult back to Persia. It also aided the agendas of Middle and Neoplatonist philosophers who understood the cult as being those mysteries shared by the Persian Magi whose teachings became the blueprint for Plato's religious discourse and philosophy. In this section, I

[352] I have discussed the term "*Interpretatio graeca*" in "The Persian Miϑra in the Eyes of Greeks and Romans". See: Chapter two; De Jong 1997, 29-38.

will also show how the Middle and Neoplatonists' use of the term mystery (*μυστήρια*) distinguishes their written interpretation (Middle and Neoplatonists) from those of the Roman authors and intellectuals.

3.1. Reading the Tauroctony

The Mithraic bull slaying scene—the tauroctony (Ταυροκτόνυς)—is the main source which informs us about the cultic iconography of the god Mithras and his attendants. In this section, I will begin by describing the Mithraic bull slaying scene in detail and move on to the scholarly interpretations of the tauroctony. Most scholars approach the cultic iconography in relation to the cult's genesis, either using it to validate the theory of a cult transmitted from Persia to Rome or as a celestial cult invented wholesale by the Roman Mithraists. Building on these interpretations, I will examine the Mithraic iconography as a Roman creation that entailed Hellenistic imagery of Persians and their god Miϑra. I will consider how the Mithraic Mystagogues incorporated the Greek imagery of the "handsome Oriental" into their cultic iconography to stress the Persian provenance of their god.

At first glance the tauroctony offers a simple portrait of Mithras slaying the bull – yet, a deeper investigation suggests more complex connotations. As a visual representation that establishes a specific relationship between the deity and his initiates, it also acts as a liturgical text, signifying Mithraic beliefs and practices. Scholars advancing the metanarratives of continuity and discontinuity both agree that the tauroctony is the pictorial medium of the cultic beliefs. They have aimed to elucidate those beliefs by deciphering the symbols and characters of the tauroctony.[353]

As a relief or statue, colorful or colorless, the usual characters in the tauroctony are Mithras, a bull, a snake and a scorpion. Often, a dog, a raven, Sol and Luna, Cautes and Cautopates—the Mithraic *dadophoroi*—a lion and a crater, as well as the Zodiac symbols, embellish the Mithraic bull-slaying scene. The scene of the Mithraic tauroctony—that is the deity Mithras, the bull, Cautes and Cautopates, Sol and Luna along with the dog, snake and scorpion—entail some variety and differences in both features and structure. Some tauroctonies contain additional characters, and

[353] Hannah, 1996, 180.

they vary in terms of style and arrangement.[354] Some examples depict the bull-slaying scene at the center of the image, framed by miniature scenes such as Mithras' miracles, Mithras with his attendants Cautes and Cautopates, the pair of Sol and Mithras in the sacred banquet, Sol riding his chariot *quadriga*, the zodiac symbols, and the reclining figure personifying Kronos/Saturnus.[355] The colorful tauroctony of the Mithraeum Berberini at Rome is one of the examples that portrays Mithras slaying the bull at the center, the snake and the dog under his feet, Cautes and Cautopates on his both sides, with the zodiac symbols displayed over his head in an arch (see fig. 27).[356] The stars fill the space between Mithras and the Zodiac arch. At the top corners, Sol and Luna appear as the overseers of the god's deed. Ten smaller scenes embellish both the right and left sides of the scene depicting Mithras carrying and slaying the bull, Mithras' rock-birth, a reclining figure, Mithras accompanied by Sol, the image of Sol driving his *quadriga,* and finally two scenes probably of the Mithraic initiation rituals.

As with the Berberini tauroctony, the miniature scenes surround the main scene of the tauroctony and often depict not only the god, but also his deeds, attendants, and initiates. Hence, such a complex image can provide a comprehensive representation of the cult's narrative and doctrine. This structure highlights the god's deeds by placing the bull-slaying scene at the center and provides details about the god's life (such as the rock birth of Mithras) and deeds (such as Mithras carrying the bull to the cave). A sandstone relief from Heddernheim in Germany also reveals a rich picture of the Mithraic tauroctony within its three-sided frame (see fig. 28).[357] The frame has been decorated by images of the wind gods on the four corners, the portraits of four

[354] E.g. CIMRM 592; cf. CIMRM 1768; cf. CIMRM 245; The tauroctony of Absalmos (the Mithraic tauroctony in the Israel Museum, Inv. 97.95.19) is an excellent example of the Mithraic bull-slaying scene with unique iconographic details such as: a reclining figure wearing a Phrygian cap; two figures dressed in the Persian garment holding a cauldron; and the figures of Cautes and Cautopates with spears in their left hands. On the tauroctony of Absalmon, see: De Jong, 1997 (published in 2000); cf, Cumont, 2001. However, I believe that the most probable scenario explaining these varieties in both features and structures is the influences of local cultures that added unique details, and which vary from location to location in their cultic iconography.

[355] Thomson Hill identified the reclining figure as the god Oceanus; e.g. CIMRM 813. Thomson Hill, 1955, 122. Oceanus is the divine presence of the World River, World Sea and flowing waters. He lives with his wife Tethys on the boundaries of the earth and does not participate in the meeting on Olympus. Oceanus did not enjoy any cult, though Alexander the Great is one exception who worshiped him. The concept of Oceanus also relates to the notion of *Oikoumene,* an ideal life space for all people. See: Ambühl & Schmitt, 2006. However, Gordon has recently attributed this Mithraic figure to the philosophical myth of Kronos/Saturnus created by the Stoic Posidonius in which Kronos dreamed the coming world-order in communication with Zeus, and this had become a "most beatific vision" by the age of Greco-Egyptian *Corpus Hermeticum.* See: Gordon 2017c, 115. On Kronos the dreamer, see: A.P.Bos, 1989, 88-111 and see specially: 102-3.

[356] I.e. CIMRM 390.

[357] I.e. CIMRM 1083.

young men who are probably the initiates, along with a reclining figure, the Petragenes Mithras, and Mithras drawing the bow on the left and right sides. The images of Luna driving her biga and Sol accompanied by Mithras riding his chariot is seen on the upper edge of the frame. The central scene of the relief represents Mithras slaying the bull with Cautes and Cautopates standing at his side and the zodiac arch over his head. Scenes evoking Mithras' miracles embellish the space between the zodiac and the upper edge of the frame.

How might the Mithraic initiates have understood these symbols and motifs? What was the central message that this visual medium conveyed to the initiates at first glance? The metanarratives of Mithraic studies consider the tauroctony as the visualization of the cultic conceptions and beliefs of this cult, but they go in two opposite directions in their interpretations. Seeking the origin of the Mithras cult in Persia, scholars holding the metanarrative of continuity interpret the bull-slaying scene as depicting the primal creation found in the Avestan and Pahlavi literature, and more precisely in the *Greater Bundahišn*. In contrast, those holding the metanarrative of discontinuity, rely on its astrological themes and decipher the cultic scene as a star-chart representing souls' genesis and apogenesis in the cosmos.[358]

For Cumont and his followers, the Mithraic bull-slaying scene is a visualization of Mithras' combat with the bull—that is, the unqie bull (AV. Gāw ī ēwdād) created by Ahura Mazdā—which resulted in the creation of all beneficent plants and animals.[359] Accordingly, when Mithras seized the bull by his horns, the sun sent his messenger (the raven) to command Mithras to slay the bull.[360] Finally, Mithras carried the bull into the cave, seized his horns, controlled the animal's body with his feet, plunged knife into the bull's flank and slew him. At that time different useful herbs and plants sprang from the corpse of the bull. Wheat, which could be used for bread grew from his spine, and vines, which gave the fruit for the sacred drink of mysteries came out of his blood.[361] Then the evil sprits, the scorpion and the serpent, strove to consume his genitals parts and to drink his blood. However, they were not strong enough to destroy the bull's body. By Ahura Mazdā's will, the seed of the bull was gathered and purified in the Moon. The purified seeds then produced all useful animals. Afterwards, the soul of the bull ascended to the celestial sphere under the

358 On the difference between these two metanarratives, see the "Literature Review" section in my introduction.
359 Cumont, 1903, 132; ibid, 137. Cumont notes that Mithras performed this mission against his will.
360 Cumont, 1903, 135.
361 Cumont proposes a kind of Christian reading of the cultic narrative, in which the body and the blood of the primordial bull mirror the role of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the Christian context.

protection of the dog, where his soul was honored as divinity with the name of Silvanus. For Cumont, then, the tauroctony envisions the scene of the primal creation, and its hero is the creator of all beneficent beings on the earth.[362] Yet this interpretation had no parallel in literary sources, it based solely on the iconography of the tauroctony.

Cumont's interpretation was dogged by at least one unanswered issue. The most pressing of which was how to explain the Roman Mithras' role as the bull-slayer when the Persian Miϑra was not.[363] In the absence of any Zoroastrian imagery of the god,[364] Cumont appealed to the Avestan and Pahlavi sources (notably, the *Greater Bundahišn)* in order to decipher the symbols of the tauroctony in accordance with his idea that the Roman cult was transmitted from Persia to Rome. Yet, his narrative of Mithras' bull sacrifice, and the primal creation that followed, has no parallel in the Avestan and Pahlavi texts. According to the Zoroastrian cosmology, the primeval ox was poisoned and killed by the evil spirit and not by Miϑra.[365] At that point the vegetables emerged from his limbs, and fifty-five grains and twelve medical plants sprang from the earth because of Ahura Mazdā's will and power.[366] Thus, the Zoroastrian Miϑra plays no role in this life-giving event, and he is neither a bull-slayer nor a life-giver.[367] To solve this dilemma, Cumont justifies his interpretation by arguing that these were the beliefs and the tradition of a group of Iranian clergy called Magi, whose winter residence was Babylon, while the narrative of primal creation in the *Great Bundahišn* was strongly affected by the orthodoxy of Sasanian and even post-Sasanian Zoroastrianism. At this time the former Magian narrative of the primal creation, in which Miϑra was the bull-killer and life giver, was denied and Ahura Mazdā was attributed to be the author of creation.[368]

Herman Lommel, followed by Mary Boyce and Philip G. Kreyenbroek, responded to this puzzle in a different manner and interpreted the Mithraic bull sacrifice in terms of the Zoroastrian

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[362] Cumont. 1903, 135-7.
[363] Beck, 1984, 2068.
[364] Previously, I have discussed that there is no portrait of Miϑra in the Zoroastrian context parallel to the Roman imagery of Mithras. The first royal image of the god appeared under Sassanian rule. On the Persian imagery of Miϑra, see: chapter one, 21-8.
[365] The *Great Bundahišn,* IV: 10 & 20-2i; ibid, IVa.
[366] The *Great Bundahišn*, XIII: 1-2 & 4-5; ibid, XVI: 3.
[367] See: chapter one, n.31; cf. Beck 1984, 2068.
[368] Cumont, 1903, 9-11; cf. Gordon, 2017, 282.

sacrifice of *haoma*.[369] Ilya Gershevitch and Richard Frye follow Cumont's justification and highlight a relation between Ahriman and Miϑra to explain Mithras' representation as a bull-killer. Accordingly, Miϑra was worshipped not only by the Zoroastrians, but also by the inhabitants of Western Iran who revered Miϑra alongside other beneficent Indo-Iranian gods (*Asuras*) and malevolent ones (*daēvas*) and honored him with sacrifices. This tradition later moved to Babylon and Asia Minor under the influence of the Magi, and finally arrived in Rome where bull-slaying deity appeared on the wall of the Mithraea.[370] This more recent line of scholarship traces the image of the bull-slayer Mithras back to Miϑra in Western Iran (a connection that is erroneous), instead of the Zoroastrian tradition widespread in Babylonia.

Following this route, we are forced to open up a new line of inquiry: who is the Ahrimanic Miϑra? Moreover, is there any reliable source about Miϑra being worshipped as a *daēva* in Western Iran prior to Zoroastrianism? Was this western tradition the same as the tradition of the Magi inhabiting Babylon? Who were the Magi exactly? Do we have any precise picture of their tradition beyond the information provided by Greek historiography and Syriac sources?[371] Was their religious tradition different from Zoroastrianism?[372] Thus, instead of stressing on the role of the Magi, Bruce Lincoln suggests another hypothesis tracing the primordial sacrifice of a bull back to Proto-Indo-European time, which was reinterpreted once by the Iranians in several different versions and one of them was later adopted and reinterpreted by the Roman Mithraic Mystagogues.[373] Indeed, I agree with Lincoln as he finally elaborates the cultural role of Asia Minor in this transmission as well as the role of Mitharic Mystagogues in interpreting the Iranain version of primordial sacrifice of the bull. However, I like to pursue his hypothesis even further

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[369] Haoma is the Avestan name for a plant (skt. Soma) that was pressed under open sky by a Zoroastrian priest sitting or standing on the floor. For more on Haoma, see: chapter one, n.29; on the Haoma ritual, see: Boyce, 2012. This idea of the Mithraic bull sacrifice as parallel to the Haoma ritual was defended by Herman Lommel, and later by Mary Boyce and Philip G Kreyenbroek. On Lommel's interpretation, see: Gershevitch 1967, 64-65; on Boyce and Kreyenbroek, see: Kreyenbroek 1994, 173-82.

[370] Gershevitch, 1967, 63-4; cf. Frey, 1966, 145. However, Gershevitch and Frye use different sources to defend the pre-Zoroastrian worship of Miϑra as *daēva* worshipping. Gershevitch finds the reference to the *daēva* worship of Miϑra in the Avestan scriptures (Yt 5.94, Yt 10.81) that attest to some of Zoroastrian gods (such as Miϑra and Anāhitā) being honored by non-Zoroastrian and *daēva* worshippers who offered sacrifices to these deities. In contrast, Frye relies on Darius' inscription in Bīstūn and mentions, "The religion of the Aryans, as we have seen, is Mazda worship; therefore, non-Mazda worship could be equated with *daiva* or foreign worship." Gershevitch, 1967, 63; cf. Frye, 1996, 145; cf. Kreyenbroek, 1994. On Kreyenbroek, see also: Beck 2006, 238-9.

[371] On Magi traditions in Greek historiography, see: De Jong, 1997. On Magi traditions in Syriac sources, see: e.g. Landau, 2016, 19-38.

[372] Below, I will return to this issue and will argue the tradition of Magi in details.

[373] Lincoln, 1991, 76-7.

and emphasize on the role of Greek historiography and ethnography both in the transmission the figure of the god and in the interpretation of the Iranian bull sacrifice. Yet, it is necessary to mention that Lincoln's hypothesis leads us to another problem as what do we know about that specific narrative of the primordial sacrifice of the bull among the Proto-Indo-Europeans that was embraced and reinterpreted by Mithraic Mystagogues? In other words, we need to reconstruct that specific narrative of primordial bull sacrifice in order to understand the scene of Mithraic tauroctony.

In agreement with Cumont, Leroy A. Campbell interpreted Mithraic iconography in reference to the Persian dualism (Zoroastrianism) and asserted that Mithraic iconography represented the Persian mystery cult of Mithras in a language comprehensible to Romans.[374] Campbell's interpretation had some impact on the field of Mithraic studies among the Iranologists, and it supported Cumont's hypothesis of the transmission of the mystery cult from Persia to the Roman Empire, however it gained little traction among the classicists in the field of Mithraic studies. Of scholars who argue that the genesis of the Roman tauroctony can be traced to Persia, John R. Hinnells did consider Campbell's thesis in an article presented in the international first congress of Mitharic studies.[375] Hinnells takes a more nuanced approach and sees the Mithraic tauroctony as "a cultic or ritual scene" depicting the act of sacrifice that should be interpreted in reference to at least four accounts of Zoroastrian ritual practices, including the yasna ceremony as the central ritual in Zoroastrianism, the practice of animal sacrifice, *Mihragān* and the role of Miϑra in Zoroastrian rituals.[376] Hinnells, however, echoes Cumont when he writes, "I am not seeking to prove that Roman Mithraism was derived from any one Indo-Iranian ritual but rather…to show that Mithraic iconography accords with Iranian practice in such a way that the development of the one from the other is plausible."[377] In fact, Hinnells shifts from pre-Zoroastrian beliefs and the tradition of Magi to the Zoroastrian ritual texts as a source for the representation of the bull-slayer Mithras. The difficulty with his argument is that it presumes the Roman Mithraic Mystagogues' familiarity with Zoroastrian ritual sacrifice. In other words, the Mithraic Mystagogues needed to know the yasna ceremony and Zoroastrian ritual in order to produce the

[374] Beck, 1984, 2060.
[375] Hinnells, 1975, 290-312.
[376] Hinnells, 1975, 305. Yasna is the name of the central ritual of Zoroastrianism, as well as a long liturgical text that is a part of the Zoroastrian canon. See: Malandra, 2006.
[377] Hinnells, 1975, 305.

iconography of the tauroctony. Therefore, the question is whether they knew about Zoroastrian ritual and the yasna ceremony, considering that the transmission of the Avesta was oral until the reign of the Sasanians (r. 224-650 CE). Did they perhaps learn these rituals from the Magi who resided in Babylon and soon moved to Asia Minor? If yes, we have to ask ourselves once more, who were the Magi and what do we know about their tradition?

Alternatively, the metanarrative of discontinuity proposes an independent reading of the symbols of the Mithraic tauroctony as related to ancient astrology. The work of Roger Beck significantly advanced the discontinuity approach. He radically rejects the relation between the Persian Yazāt Miϑra and the Roman mystery cult of Mithras. He argues instead for an astronomical reading of the Mithraic tauroctony relying on the third century Neoplatonist Porphyry's description of the Roman Mithraism.[378] Beck writes, "In point of fact, certain components of the iconography are indeed unilingual; or rather, they speak about referents in one culture only. These are the explicit astronomical symbols, and what they refer to are things in the heavens as constructed in Greco-Roman culture..."[379] In this sense, Beck reads the Mithraic visual language as a system of symbols indicating a set of concepts established in the Greco-Roman cultural milieu and not the Persian one. For him, Mithraic cosmology, theology, soteriology and eschatology are reflected in the astronomical objects and their motions.[380]

Consequently, Beck's "star-talk" theory has two different levels: that of exegesis and that of interpretation. At the exegesis stage, Beck deciphers the symbols of the Mithraic tauroctony as celestial bodies; then, when he turns to interpretation, he examines the ideas signified by those celestial bodies in the cultic context of Roman Mithraism.[381] According to his theory, the tauroctony is the map of the heavens in which each sign embodies a particular constellation. The bull is Taurus; Cautes and Cautopates are Gemini; though coincidently, they also represent the constellation Scorpius on the left and the constellation Taurus on the right. The dog indicates Canis, both major and minor. The snake is Hydra, while the Crater simply represents the constellation

[378] On Porphyry, see: Emilsson, 2015.
[379] Beck, 2006, 29.
[380] To clarify the two different stages of his methodology, Beck proposes an example and writes, "Notice that we have passed by a first level of reference. In the scene of the tauroctony the sculpted or painted raven, for example, refers to the raven, which was present when Mithras slew the bull. This is quite possibly true, but also irrelevant to our inquiry. Here, we are concerned with the raven as a star-talk sign for Corvus, not as the bird who witnessed or participated in the event of the bull-killing." Beck, 2006, 192.
[381] Beck, 2006, 190.

Crater, and at the end of bull's tail sits Virgo. Finally, the lion, raven and scorpion refer to Leo, Corvus and the constellation Scorpius respectively.[382] Five of these nine constellations (Taurus, Gemini, Leo, Virgo, and Scorpius) sit on the Zodiac line. The remaining four (Hydra, Canes, Crater, and Corvus) are *paranatellonta* sitting in the south of those five zodiacal constellations.[383] For Beck, these *paranatellonta* are synonymous with the Zodiac constellations of the tauroctony.[384] The tauroctony faces south, and those four constellations are southern *paranatellonta* to the summer quadrant of the Zodiac: Canes rises with Cancer and Leo; Hydra appears midway of cancer, Leo and Virgo. The constellation Crater rises midway between Leo and Virgo, and the constellation Corvus appears midway of Leo and Virgo.[385] Now, what about Sol, Luna, the bull and Mithras? Sol and Luna simply refer to the sun and the moon. Moreover, according to the god's dedicatory epithet *Deo Soli Invicto Mithrae,* meaning "Mithras, the unconquered sun", Mithras is the sun.[386] And relying on Porphyry's *De antro 24-5,* Beck decodes the bull as the moon.*[387]* Porphyry writes:

> The priestesses of Ceres, also, as being initiated into the mysteries of the terrene Goddess, were called by the ancient bees; and Proserpine herself was denominated by them honied [Honey-sweet]. The moon, likewise, who presides over generation, was called by them a bee, and also a bull. And Taurus is the exaltation of the moon. But bees are ox-begotten [ox-born]. And this application is also given to souls proceeding into generation. The God, likewise, who is occultly connected with

[382] Beck, 2006, 195.
[383] Παρανατέλλοντα; *paranatellonta* are the stars rising simultaneously (alongside) other stars or constellations and become visible/invisible at certain degrees of the ecliptic. Paranatellonta were defined first by Aratus, the Hellenistic writer from the 3rd century BCE, but it was Teucer from Babylon, the first century astrologer, who linked these stars to the Zodiac signs. See: Hübner, 2006.
[384] Beck, 2006, 197.
[385] Beck, 2006, 197.
[386] Cf. Ulansey, 1989; 25-39. Ulansey deciphers Mithras as the personification of the constellation Perseus and not the Sun. The constellation that lies over Taurus is Perseus who has similar iconography to Mithras, wearing a Phrygian cap in many ancient representations. However, his idea is unsupported by both astronomical interpretations and iconography. As the young Greek hero, the son of Deana and Zeus, Perseus was depicted with sword, magic bag (*kíbisis)*, winged sandals and headgear (with wings, from 470-60 BCE) that differentiate him from the bull-killing deity. On Perseus' iconography, see: Bäbler & Käppel, 2006. For Mithras' epithet in dedicatory inscriptions, see: e.g. 546.
[387] In Beck's translation, it is Porphyry's *De antro 18*; cf. Beck, 2006, 198.

generation, is a stealer of oxen [the Cattle–Stealing god, βουκλόπος θεός]. (*De Antro,* 24-5)[388]

The ancients who were initiated into the mysteries of Mithras and the terrene Goddess considered the bee and bull as the embodiments of the moon. Mithras is thus both the bull thief and the moon thief.

Relying on Porphyry again, Beck concludes that if Mithras in the tauroctony is the sun and the bull means the moon, the juxtaposition of the bull with Mithras is the so-called "new moon", the sun's conquest over the moon.[389] Beck explains, "The principal players in the tauroctony are Mithras and the bull. As agents-signs in the discourse, they mean 'Sun' and 'Moon', and those too are the meanings of Sol and Luna in the upper corners of the composition. The tauroctony is thus star-talking about the interaction of Sun and Moon."[390]

Beck interprets the bull-slaying Mithras as the "sun in Leo". Since Mithras is the sun and since the Zodiac constellation Leo lies between Scorpius (on the left/on the east) and Taurus (on the right/ on the west), Mithras is represented as the sun in Leo at the center of the tauroctony.[391] Beck believes that the construction of the tauroctony suggests that Mithraists might have the planetary *oikoi* (house) in their mind. *Oikoi* is the Greco-Roman astrological system in which each planet is assigned to one (in the cases of sun and moon) or two (in the cases of Mercury, Mars, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn) Zodiac constellations. Mercury in Virgo and Gemini, Venus in Libra and Taurus, Mars in Scorpius and Aries, Jupiter in Sagittarius and Pisces, and finally Saturn sits in Capricorn and Aquarius. In this sense, the tauroctony shows both the sun and the moon in their

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[388] For the English translation, see: Taylor, 1923: 8; cf. Beck, 2006, 198. Mithras is the cattle-stealing god since he stole the bull, carried him on his shoulder to the cave and slew him in the cave. M.J.Edwards reads the βουκλόπος θεός as Hermes, and interprets the text in relation to mystery cult of Dionysus. For Edward, the key lies in the next sentence, "To which may be added, that honey is considered as a symbol of death, and on this account it is usual to offer libations of honey to the terrestrial Gods". Honey here appears as the symbol of death and is attributed to Kore/ Persephone and relates to the Eleusinian mysteries. Thus, Edwards interprets βουκλόπος θεός as Hermes who has strong ties with the Eleusinian cult and known as the cattle thief by everyone who is conversant with Greek myths; Edward, 1993, 124. Beck rejects Edwards' interpretation of the βουκλόπος θεός and proposes that Edward overlooks the larger Mithraic context of Porphyry's *De antro;* Beck, 2006, 198, n.7. Gordon finds a parallel image of Mithras as βουκλόπος, like Hermes and Heracles, in Statius' *Thebaid,* 1:719-720; Gordon, 2017, 281.

[389] Beck, 2006, 199.

[390] Beck, 2006, 206.

[391] Beck, 2006, 203 & 214. According to calendrical time, the "Sun in Leo" refers the Sun during the last third of July to the first two thirds of August.

respective houses: the moon in Cancer and the sun in Leo.[392] The Mithraic bull-slaying scene is about the planetary motion and the annual motion of the sun and the monthly motion of the moon in particular.[393] It also reveals the motion of all celestial bodies around the heavens in a twenty-four hour period – the daily motion of all celestial bodies from east (left/Scorpius) to west (right/Taurus).[394] Additionally, as the map of sky, the tauroctony also illustrates the heavens from Taurus in the west (right) to the Scorpius in the east (left).[395] Indeed, the direction of the tauroctony from east to west is decipherable through Mithras slaying the bull to the right (west), the direction of Sol's *quadriga* to the right (west) mounting the heavens (that is, the Sun rising to the heavens), and the direction of Luna's *biga* descending to the right (west).[396]

The main critique of Beck's "star-talk" theory is its complexity and strong reliance on ancient astrology. Beck's reading of the Mithraic tauroctony suggests a deep knowledge of astronomy and astrology among the individuals who participated in the mystery cult of Mithras. Can we expect such a deep understanding of astronomy and astrology among the initiates who mostly belonged to the Roman military or who were administrators? Were they all, from the new initiates to those Mithraists in the higher grades, aware of these astronomical-astrological details? Did they know about the Greco-Roman system of *oikoi*? Why might the Mithraists be interested in showing the annual, monthly and daily motions of celestial bodies on their cultic relief? Why might they be interested in showing the equinoxes and seasonal movements? Why those specific zodiac constellations and not others? Why that particular scene from Taurus to Scorpius? Why those specific *paranatellonta*?[397] Indeed, an astronomical-astrological reading of tauroctony is insufficient to understand the Mithraic iconography and ritual language.[398] The religious market of the Roman Empire presented more options for the Mithraic brotherhood than simply to create a celestial cult. Thus, Beck's argument for the character of the cult does not address sufficiently the cultural-political milieu of the Roman Empire.

[392] Beck, 2006, 218.
[393] Beck, 2006, 205.
[394] Beck, 2006, 203.
[395] Beck, 2006, 203.
[396] Beck, 2006, 203-4.
[397] Cf. Hannah, 1996, 182.
[398] Cf. Gordon, 2009, n.50. Gordon challenges Beck over his astronomical-astrological reading of the Roman mystery cult of Mithras.

By relying on the astronomical-astrological interpretation, Beck neglects the aesthetic of the cultic iconography. In fact, Mithras appears with his Phrygian gap, Cautes and Cautopates with their Persian garments, and Sol with his quadriga, as repeated in the vast majority of the Mithraic tauroctony. I doubt that the Roman Mithraists derived the entire Mithraic iconography from the traditional imagery of Greco-Roman pagan religion, particularly as there is almost no visual trace of Mithras in the Roman world prior to the first century CE.[399] More precisely, they might have borrowed some parts of their cultic iconography from the portraits of Sol and Luna, or even Jupiter/Kronos in Greco-Roman pagan tradition, but not in the case of Mithras and his attendants.

In the next section, I will show that the Roman Mithraists established a hybridized visual language and imagery that is ex novo in the Roman period and should be deciphered in relation to the cultural and socio-political context of the Empire. Such an approach helps to explain the appearance of a deity with Indo-Iranian provenance in a Roman mystery cult. In the following section, I examine some well-preserved examples of the Mithraic bull-slaying scene, to consider the hybrid character of Mithraic imagery and iconography.

3.2. The Hellenistic imagery of the "Handsome Oriental": A New Approach to the Mithraic Tauroctony

In the courtyard of the *Museo Pio Clementino* at the Vatican,[400] there is a marble relief that depicts Mithras sitting on the bull, controlling the animal with his right food and left hand, and slaying him with the sword in his right hand (see fig. 29).[401] The central figure of the tauroctony is the deity himself. Mithras is depicted in midway through the act of slaying the bull, dressed in *Candys*[402] and *anaxyrídes,*[403] with a fluttering mantle on his shoulders and a Phrygian cap atop his curly hair. A sheath and belt embellish Mithras' tunic. A dog, a snake, and a small scorpion attack the bull's genitals. The scene is decorated with an arch that might signify the cave in which Mithras slew the bull. A raven sits on the right corner of the arch, gazing at Mithras slaying the bull. There

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[399] Cf. Hannah, 1996, 179.
[400] *Museo Pio Clementino* is the pontifical collections of classical statues dated back to the original collection of Pope Julius II (1503-1513) which is located in the *Octagonal* court at the Vatican.
[401] I.e. CIMRM 546.
[402] Gk. κάνδυς; the name of a Persian garment given by Greek historians. See: Herodotus, *Histories VII*, 61:1.
[403] Gk. ἀναξυρίδες; the name of Persian trousers used by historians. See: Herodotus, *Histories VII*, 61:1.

are two figures, one on each corner over the arch watching the bull-slaying scene from above. The figure on the right, with the radiant nimbus around his head, represents Sol and the left figure, with a crescent moon around her neck and two stars over her head, recalls Luna – the two deities, which often appear as the overseers of Mithraic tauroctony. The relief is inscribed with the Latin abbreviation indicating the name of the god and the dedicator: 'SOLI INVICTO DEO, ATTIMETVS, AVGG.NN.SER.ACT. PERAEDIORVM ROMANIANORVM.' (To the unconquered sun god, Attimetus, the slave of our Emperor [sacred one, majestic one], the clerk of Roman farms).[404]

Such depictions of Mithras evoke the tradition of Hellenistic imagery which Rolf M.Schneider has referred to as the "handsome Oriental".[405] In Schneider's words, the handsome oriental "is distinguished by youthful beauty, rich dress and intensive colour."[406] The Roman imagery shows that as Eastern costumes acquired more prestige in the middle and late Republican period, the Romans used the Oriental dress to represent the Parthians and Trojans.[407] For instance, the statue of Augustus in the Villa of Livia Augusta at Prima Porta represents an image of a Parthian with a long beard and curly hair dressed in a long sleeved tunic and trousers with flat shoes on the Emperor's *sagum* (see fig. 30). The Parthian man, shown armed, has a narrow headgear and a belt around his waist.[408] This imagery reflects the typical Greek image of "handsome Oriental" with Persian headgear, tunic, trousers and footgear. The Romans used a precise iconography to depict Parthian ethnicity, which differentiated the Parthian figures with bearded faces from the "handsome Oriental" with shaved visages.[409]

The origins of "handsome Oriental" can be traced to the Greeks in classical Athens who portrayed the people from the East. This image was later appropriated by the Romans to depict people from the Orient and the Parthians in particular.[410] This earlier "handsome Oriental" was usually dressed in a long sleeved double belted tunic, a flowing mantle, with a long trousers and flat shoes. He had a shaved face, curly hair and a Phrygian cap.[411] For instance, Strabo (ca. 62 BCE

[404] I.e. CIMRM 547.
[405] Schneider, 2007, 60.
[406] Schneider, 2007, 61.
[407] Brian Rose, 2005, 34.
[408] Cf. Schneider, 2005, 54.
[409] Schneider, 2007, 54 & 61.
[410] Schneider, 2007, 60.
[411] Schneider, 2007, 61.

to 23-4 CE), when describing the Persians as the successors of the Medes,[412] highlights their dress and love of horseback riding and archery:

> The Medes, however, are said to have been the originators of costumes for the Armenians, and also, still earlier, for the Persians, who were their masters and their successors in the supreme authority over Asia. For example, their "Persian" stole, as it is now called, and their zeal for archery and horsemanship, and the court they pay to their kings, and their ornaments, and the divine reverence paid by subjects to the kings, came to the Persians from the Medes. And that this is true is particularly clear from their dress; for tiara,[413] citaris,[414]pilus, tunics with sleeves reaching to the hands, and trousers are indeed suitable things to wear in cold and northerly regions, such as the Medes wear, but by no means in southerly region; and most of the settlements possessed by the Persians were on the Red sea, farther south than the country of the Babylonians and the Susians. (*Geography XI*, 13:9)[415]

Similarly, Herodotus (ca. 485-424 BCE) mentions that the Persian army were one million and seven hundred thousand soldiers in total, and describes their costume as including tiaras, sleeved tunics and trousers.[416] He also gives some information about their equipment:

> The men who served in the army were the following: Firstly, the Persians; for their equipment they wore on their heads loose caps called tiaras, and on their bodies sleeved tunics of diverse colours, with scales of iron like in appearance to the scale of fish, and breeches on their legs; for shields they had wicker bucklers, with

[412] Median tribes settled down in Western Iran at the end of the second millennium BCE. Their power increased during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. The western part of Iran and its neighbouring territories were under their rule from 700 to 550 BCE. See: Dandamayev and Medvedskaya, 2006.
[413]According to Herodotus and Strabo, Persians named their cap a 'tiara'. See: Herodotus, *Histories VII*, 61:1; cf. Strabo, *Geography* XI, 13:9; *kídaris* or *kítaris, tiara,* and *kurbasía* are the Greek words referring to Persian headgear. See: Calmeyer, 1993.
[414] See: note 10.
[415] "ἔθη δὲ τὰ πολλὰ μὲν τὰ αὐτὰ τούτοις τε καὶ τοῖς Ἀρμενίοις διὰ τὸ καὶ τὴν χώραν παραπλησίαν εἶναι. τοὺςμέντοι Μήδους ἀρχηγέτας εἶναί φασι καὶ τούτοις καὶ ἔτι πρότερον Πέρσαις τοῖς ἔχουσιν αὐτοὺς καὶδιαδεξαμένοις τὴν τῆς Ἀσίας ἐξουσίαν. ἡ γὰρ νῦν λεγομένη Περσικὴ στολὴ καὶ ὁ τῆς τοξικῆς καὶ ἱππικῆς ζῆλοςκαὶ ἡ περὶ τοὺς βασιλέας θε ραπεία καὶ κόσμος καὶ σεβασμὸς θεοπρεπὴς παρὰ τῶν ἀρχομένων εἰς τοὺςΠέρσας παρὰ Μήδων ἀφῖκται. καὶ ὅτι τοῦ τ᾽ ἀληθὲς ἐκ τῆς ἐσθῆτος μάλιστα δῆλον: τιάρα γάρ τις καὶ κίταρις καὶπῖλος καὶ χειριδωτοὶ χιτῶνες καὶ ἀναξυρίδες ἐ ν μὲν τοῖς ψυχροῖς τόποις καὶ προσβόρροις ἐπιτήδειά ἐστιφορήματα, οἷοί εἰσιν οἱ Μηδικοί, ἐν δὲ τοῖς νοτίοις ἥκιστα : οἱ δὲ Πέρσαι τὴν πλείστην οἴκησιν ἐπὶ τῇ Ἐρυθρᾷθαλάττῃ κέκτηνται, μεσημβρινώτεροι καὶ Βαβυλωνίων ὄντες καὶ Σουσίων." For the English translation, see: Jones, 1961, 313-5.
[416] Herodotus*, the Histories VII*, 60:1; ibid, 61:1.

> quivers hanging beneath these; they carried short spears, long bows, and arrows of reed, and daggers withal that hung from the girdle by the right thigh. (*The Histories VII*, 61:1)[417]

Hence, as Greek and Roman descriptions illuminate, long-sleeved tunic, pleated skirts and wrapped overgarment were perceived to be the favored dress of the ancient Near Eastern peoples that the Persians adopted and supplemented with headbands and tall hats.[418]

It is necessary to mention that while the male clothing of the Achaemenid Empire was various, they all shared similar headgear, overgarments, tunics, trousers and flat footgear.[419] In the *Anabasis* (ca. 430-354 BCE), the Persian nobles who accompanied Cyrus wear purple cloaks, colored trousers and pricy tunics.[420] According to the *Cyropaedia* (ca. 430-354 BCE), Cyrus gifted Median dress that was colored either red, sable, purple or scarlet to the most noble of his military men.[421] The Achaemenid kings also wore a garment colored red, blue and white in the official ceremonies signifying their sovereignty.[422] According to Diodorus Siculus (ca. 1st century BCE), Alexander desired to imitate the Persian luxury and the ornamental presence of the Achaemenid kings. He wore a Persian diadem with a white robe and Persian sash along with everything else except trousers and the long-sleeved upper dress. In the mimesis of Cyrus, Alexander had given a mantle with purple borders to his noble men.[423] Plutarch (ca. 45-120 CE) notes that Alexander wore the Persian dress out of a desire to adopt native costume.[424] Similarly, in *Historiae Alexanderi Magni* (ca. 1st century CE), Alexander appears with a Persian white-purple variegated garment for venerating the costumes of conquered people:

[417] "οἱ δὲ στρατευόμενοι οἵδε ἦσαν, Πέρσαι μὲν ὧδε ἐσκευασμένοι: περὶ μὲν τῇσι κεφαλῇσι εἶχον τιάρασκαλεομένου ς πίλους ἀπαγέας, περὶ δὲ τὸ σῶμα κιθῶνας χειριδωτοὺς ποικίλους, λεπίδος σιδηρέης ὄψινἰχθυοειδέος, περὶ δὲ τὰ σκ έλεα ἀναξυρίδας, ἀντὶ δὲ ἀσπίδων γέρρα: ὑπὸ δὲ φαρετρεῶνες ἐκρέμαντο: αἰχμὰς δὲβραχέας εἶχον, τόξα δὲ μεγάλα, ὀιστοὺς δὲ καλαμίνους, πρὸς δὲ ἐγχειρίδια παρὰ τὸν δεξιὸν μηρὸνπαραιωρεύμενα ἐκ τῆς ζώνης." For the English translation, see: Godley, 1920, 376-7.

[418] Shahbazi, 1992; cf. Rollinger, 2003.

[419] Shahabzi considers five type of dressing as Persian and Elamite court attire, cavalry costumes of Iranian and related groups, short Greek-style tunic with a loose mantle in front, the Indian style of a kilt, and lastly the costume of plain dwellers. See: Shahbazi, 1992.

[420] Xenophon, *Anabasis I*, 5:8.

[421] Xenophon, *Cyropaedia VIII,* 3:3; Shahbazi, 1992.

[422] Shahbazi, 1992.

[423] Diodorus Siculus, *Library XVII*, 77:4-5; Shahbazi, 1992.

[424] Plutarch, *Alexander*, 45: 1.

> Accordingly, he encircled his brow with a purple diadem, variegated with white such as Darius had worn, and assumed the Persian garb, not even fearing the omen of changing from the insignia of a victor to the dress of the conquered. In fact, he used to say that he was wearing the spoils of the Persians; but with them he has assumed also their costumes, and insolence of spirit accompanied the magnificence of his attire. *(Historiae Alexanderi Magni VI,* 6:4)[425]

Alexander did not necessarily value the culture of conquered people, but rather, the Persian garment appealed to his imperial policy – that of dominating natives along imitating their cultures. Hence, Alexander's conquest of Persia did not change the Persian style of dress, and this Achaemenid dress lasted unchanged into the rule of the Seleucids (r. 311/12-64 BCE) and Parthians (r. 250 BCE-226 CE). Known as the Persian look, this style went beyond the frontiers of Persia under the Parthian rule, and was widespread in the Near East, from Syria to India.[426]Thus, together the Achaemenids, Alexander the Great and the Seleucids provided a template for how the Greeks portrayed the Persians. Alexander and his successors opened the East and positioned the West vis-à-vis Persia. This stereotypical look was later embraced and perpetuated by the Romans to portray all people associated with the East.

Returning to Mithraic iconography, we find Mithras dressed in a long-sleeved tunic (the Median *candys*), with trousers (*anaxyrídes*), and a Phrygian cap (*τιάρα*), along with a belt and flat shoes, each indicating the "handsome Oriental" type. This visual stereotype, as I have explained, was established by Greeks to identify all people associated with the East.[427] The cultic iconography of the god with the Oriental garment calls attention to the scene of the ritual banquet after the bull sacrifice that depicts Mithras in the Persian garment and Helios (Sol) nude or only with a shoulder-cape.[428] Additionally, in Mithraic visual language and iconography, the Phrygian cap characterized

[425] "Itaque purpureum diadema distinctum albo, quale Dareus habuerat, capiti circumdedit vestemque Persicamsumpsit, ne omen quidem veritus, quod a victoris insignibus in devicti transiret habitum. Et ille se quidem spolia Persarum gestare dicebat, sed cum illis quoque mores induerat, superbiamque habitusanimi ins olentia sequebatur." For the English translation, see: Rolfe, 1956, 51.

[426] Kawami, 1987, 140. On prevalence of the Persian garment in the Near East, see: Sarkhosh Curtis, 2000, 23-34; Sarkhosh Curtis reviews several examples of different sites from Mesopotamia and Babylon and states how the Parthians introduced Persian culture and costume to the post-Hellenistic world; cf. Kawami, 1987, 140-45.

[427] Cf. Gordon, 2017, 290; Schneider, 2007, 76; Sanchez, 2012, 124. However, there is at least one example of the Mithraic tauroctony in the Mithraic bath at Ostia, depicting the god without shoes and trousers with a sleeveless tunic decorated by a narrow belt; i.e. CIMRM 230.

[428] Gordon, 2017, 291.

not only the god and his attendants, but also the grade of the Mitharic Father – which is the final grade of Mitharic initiation.[429] Gordon suggests that the tiara might be used to signify the Persian character of the cult as a whole.[430] In Greek and Roman iconography, the Phrygian cap is attributed to different mythical figures and religious characters such as Mithras, Attis,[431]Ganymede[432] and Midas.[433] The significant feature of this imagery is indeed the shared elements that tie all these personages with the East.

The deity Mithras has a Persian counterpart in the Zoroastrian pantheon. Attis was the Phrygian deity worshiped in association with Cybele in the cult of Magna Mater (see fig. 31).[434] More than two hundred terracotta statues dated to the second century BCE show Attis who is dressed in the Parthian garment and Phrygian cap.[435] The next figure in the list is the historical king of Phrygia, Midas who appeared in Greco-Roman mythology as the founder of Cybele's temple in Pessinus, the witness of the musical competition between Apollo and Pan, and the disciple of Orpheus (see fig. 32).[436] According to myth, king Midas wore the Phrygian cap to hide the ass' ears which had sprung from his head in punishment from Apollo for judging Pan as a better musician than the god himself.[437] Ganymede is the last figure in this line. Originally, a Phrygian or Thracian mythical figure, Ganymede was a beautiful boy, or perhaps the son of Dardanian king Tros, loved by Zeus (see fig. 33). The boy was abducted by Iris and her windstorm, or by Hermes and Zeus' eagle, to serve as a cupbearer for Zeus at Olympus.[438]All these figures were originally from the Orient – or were tied to the world that the Greeks and later the Romans identified with the Orient. Consequently, the cultic iconography portraying Mithras dressed in a Persian garment Phrygian cap, with shaven visage and curly hair, strongly relied on the Greek imagination of the "handsome Oriental", which the Romans appropriated.

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[429] Gordon, 2017, 291-2.
[430] Gordon, 2017, 292. However, the Scholion to *Thebaid 1.717-20* is the only text that mentions Mithras' Phrygian cap.
[431] Fig.9.
[432] Fig.10.
[433] Hurschmann, 2006.
[434] Gerhard, 2006; Vermaseren, 1966.
[435] Brian Rose, 2005, 34, no.69; Vermaseren, 1966, pl.V, pl.XII: I, pl.XVII.
[436] Högemann & Scherf, 2006.
[437] Levick, 2013, 43.
[438] Dynes, 454; cf. Visser & Ameling, 2006.

Like the Phrygian cap, Mithras' accoutrements and the scenes representing the god hunting the bull or drawing the bow recall Greek topoi about the Persians.[439] Two versions of hunting scenes are known from Dura Mithraeum that represent Mithras hunting from horseback.[440]The well-preserved scene on the south wall depicts Mithras sitting on horseback and preparing to shoot an arrow (see fig. 34). A serpent is under the feet of the horse, and two deer, two gazelles, a lion and a dog move in front of Mithras. In the second scene on the north wall (which is less well preserved) two lions and three gazelles accompany Mithras hunting from horseback (see fig. 35).[441] The forms of the wall paintings suggest a Persian painting style in particular.[442] Cumont argues that this image takes the Avestan imagery of Miϑra into account, as the Zoroastrian corpus also characterized the god as an archer.[443] Yet, according to the existing Zoroastrian corpus, the Avestan Miϑra is neither an archer nor a horseback rider, but instead a charioteer. Thus, Cumont again explains that the Zoroastrian imagery of Miϑra changed under the orthodoxy of Sassanian Zoroastrianism when the god became a charioteer. There, the deity appeared as a solar deity and exchanged his chariot for the horse of Hvarəxšaēta (MP.Khorshīd/ Khwarshēd) in the Roman cultic iconography.[444] However, this interpretation leads us to another problem: why did the Zoroastrian priests transform an archer and horseback riding deity into a charioteer? Moreover, where did Cumont find the archer and horseback rider images of Miϑra? In fact, Cumont here returns to his hypothesis of the cult's transmission from Persia to the Roman Empire and finds the origin of this imagery in the Magi tradition widespread in Babylonia and Asia Minor.[445] Thus, once more, we are brought back to a possible religious tradition of Zoroastrian clergy who wintered in Babylon and later moved to Asia Minor, and transmitted the Zoroastrian imagery of the god dated back to pre-Sasanian era alongside the Persian mystery cult to the Roman Empire.

Vermaseren interpreted the Mithraic hunting motif as a symbolic scene, one demonstrating "Mithras' struggle against the powers of darkness."[446] Indeed, his interpretation was mainly rooted in a scholarly view of Roman Mithraism as a dualistic religion of similar nature to

[439] Gordon, 2017, 290-96; cf. Cumont, 1975, 189.
[440] I.e. CIMRM 52; Rostovtzeff et al., 1939, XIV-XV.
[441] Rostovtzeff et al., 1939, 112-16.
[442] Rostovtzeff et al., 1939, 113; cf. Gordon, 2017, 296 n.87.
[443] Cumont, 1975, 188-9. On the Avestan Imagery of Miϑra, see: chapter one, 10-22.
[444] Cumont, 1975, 189; cf. Gordon, 2017, 296 n.87. Hvarəxšaēta is the Avestan name of the Sun.
[445] See above.
[446] Vermaseren, 1963, 93-4; cf. Gordon, 2017, 296 n.87.

Zoroastrianism.[447] From this point of view, the hunter equestrian Mithras alludes to the final harmony of elements in the Zoroastrian eschatology, when the horseman Miϑra as *Deus invictus* (world conqueror) destroys the lunar natures and maintains the solar substances in his final act.[448] Yet, I disagree that we should interpret this motif in the context of dualism. There is no need to identify Mithras with a Zoroastrian apocalyptic figure precisely due to the difficulties with dating and cultural transmission that I have already discussed.

Gordon maintains that the hunting scene of the Dura Mithraeum is comparable to the hunting motifs from Germania, which reflect the Greek topoi of Persians that were transmitted to Germania through movements of the military between Syria and Rhine.[449] Indeed, according to Greek historiography, Persians were experts in hunting, archery and even riding. Herodotus mentions that the Persians educated their children from ages five to twenty by teaching them riding, archery and honesty.[450] Likewise, Strabo notes that the Persian style of hunting was to fire arrows and throw javelins from horseback.[451] Thus, the Roman iconography of Mithras follows not only a "handsome Oriental" type with its rich attire, but specifically a Persian "handsome Oriental" who is an expert in archery and horse riding.

The Armenian Mihr and the Petragenes Mithras

The Roman cultic iconography of Mithras reveals a familiarity with sources other than the Greek imagination of "handsome Oriental" and the Greek topoi of Persians in particular. Indeed, the Roman imagery also visualizes the petragenes Mithras—that is the youthful Mithras' birth from a stone nude with a Phrygian cap and curly hair and holding dagger and torch in his hands (see fig. 36)

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[447] E.g. Campbell, 1968; cf. Gordon, 2017c, 97.

[448] Campbell, 1968, 263-4. However, it is necessary to mention that Mithra(s) is not an apocalyptic figure. According to the *Zamyād Yašt* (*Yašt* 19), the appearance of Saošyant (the Savior), the resurrection of the dead, and the victory over evil are essential constituents of Zoroastrian eschatology. On Zoroastrian eschatology, see: Shaked, 1998.

[449] Gordon suggests another scenario and says the hunting motif might be related to the epithet *invictus* and similar to those scenes showing the Roman Emperors hunting from horseback. He later strikes down this possibility and explains that the simultaneous depictions of the hunting motif and the first cult-meal in some Mithraea suggest a Persianist element; namely, local depictions of Persians as expert equestrians and hunters. Gordon, 2017, 310 & 295-96; for the hunting motifs from Germania e.g. Osterburken, (i.e. CIMRM 1083), Heddernheim/Frankfurt Mithraeum I (i.e. CIMRM 1083B), Rückingen (i.e. CIMRM 1137), Dieburg (i.e. CIMRM 1247), and Neuenheim/Heidelberg (i.e. CIMRM 1289).

[450] Herodotus, *The Histoire I*, 136:2.

[451] Strabo, *Geography XV*, 3:18.

Some scholars have suggested the Armenian Mihr as the source for the iconography of youthful Mithras rising from a rock.[452] The double-faced Armenian deity appears once as the Armenian equivalent of the Zoroastrian Miϑra, and later as a heroic figure in the national epic and historiography of Armenia. According to Herodotus, the Armenians were settlers of Phrygia and armed like the Phrygians.[453] The Armenians were appointed as the rulers of their settled land when the Medes conquered it. In the same period, around the 6th century BCE, the Armenians absorbed some Hittite, Hurrian and Urartian elements into their religious beliefs. From the Achaemenid period (r. 700 to 330 BCE), the Armenian religious beliefs and language were influenced by the Zoroastrian pantheon and religion when they embraced Zoroastrianism and incorporated it into the local religious traditions.[454] The name of *Armina* (Armenia) as a *satrapy* (province) of the Achaemenid Empire was first attested in the Bīsotūn inscription dated to 520 BCE,[455] and its inhabitants, were known as Mazda-worshippers (AV. *Mazdayasna*), similar to the Persians.[456] Yet, the Armenians adopted Greek images to embody their gods, in contrast to the Persians who, according to Herodotus, built no statue or temple to worship their gods.[457]

In Armenian sources, Mihr is the counterpart of the Zoroastrian Miϑra and the Vedic Mitra. He is the son of Aramazd who is the Armenian counterpart to the Zoroastrian Ahura Mazdā,[458] and the "father of all".[459] However, in contrast to the Zoroastrian Miϑra, the later historiography of Armenia identifies the Armenian Mihr with the Greek god of fire, Hephaestus, not the Greek god Helios or Apollo.[460] There is at least one known temple dedicated to the Armenian Mihr (Arm. *mrhakanmehean*)[461] at Bagayarič (the town of the god)[462] that was destroyed by Tiridates III and Gregory the Illuminator sometime in the third century CE.[463] Moreover, similar to theophoric

[452] E.g. Vermaseren, 1951; Widengren, 1966; Gershevitch, 1975; Russell, 2004.
[453] Herodotus, *Histories*, 7:73.
[454] Russell, 2011.
[455] Schmitt, 2011.
[456] A native form of *mazdēac'ik'* (Mazdeans) is mentioned in an Armenian magical text dated to 1611 CE. See: Russell, 2011; Russel, 1987, 169.
[457] Russell, 2011. On the Persian religious beliefs see Herodotus, *Histories*, 1:131.1.
[458] On the Armenian Aramazd, see: Russell, 1987, 156-75.
[459] Agathangelos, *History of the Armenian,* 790; cf. Russell, 2011; Russell, 1987, 159.
[460] Russell, 2011 in Movsēs Xorenacʻi 3:17; Shenkar, 2014, 20 & 105.
[461] Russell, 1987, 263.
[462] Russell, 2004, 553 & 555. No one has excavated the temple, and Russell's description relied on a nonprofessional visit and report.
[463] Agathangelos, *History of the Armenian,* 790; cf. Widengren, 1966, 435. It is necessary to mention that there is no record of the carved stone or wall painting representing the Roman tauroctony in this temple. Consequently, it is

names such as *Mihr-Ohrmazd* and *Mihr-Hormozid*, the theonym Mihr appears as Armenian personal names such as *Mher*, *Mihran* and *Mihrtad*.[464] In addition, *Mehean* is the Armenian word for the pagan temple, which was plausibly derived from *Mehr*, the name of Zoroastrian Miϑra in the Middle Persian.[465] Yet, the manifestation of the theonym Miϑra as a component of theophoric names merely shows the influence of the Zoroastrian pantheon and religion on Armenian society, and cannot be argued as an evidence attesting an independent cult of Mihr in Armenia.[466]

Touraj Daryaee points out the link between the Armenian Mihr, the Zoroastrian Miϑra and the Roman Mithraism and writes, "What makes the Iranian notions of Mehr [AV. Miϑra] relevant for the cult of Mithras [in the Roman Empire] are the Armenian and the Pontus regions, where a good amount of syncretism took place. It is there that we can see Mithra [Miϑra] makes its important appearance, leading to the question of whether the "cult" is in-bound or out of bounds with the Zoroastrian tradition."[467] In agreement with Daryaee's attention to the syncretism arising from Armenia and Pontus, I would like to go even further and suggest that not only did the Armenian and Pontus regions act as a bridge transmitting Greek and Hellenistic imagery and descriptions of the Persian Miϑra to the Roman Empire, but also the entire area of Asia Minor contributed in a similar manner.

A mentioned earlier, the Armenian Mihr appears as a hero and his name has been preserved as *p'ok'rMher* (little Mher) in the Armenian epic *"David of Sassoun"*.[468] According to the fourth cycle of the epic, *p'ok'rMher* is the son of David and the fourth great hero in the line of the heroes from Sassoun.[469] In avenging David's death, the hero and his uncle strode into the city of Sassoun.

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difficult and controversial to connect the Armenian temple of Mihr as the origin of the Roman Mithraeum. For an opposing view, see Russell, 2014; Russell, 1987; Gershevitch in the *Second plenary discussion* in Hinnells, 1975, 357.

[464]Russell, 1987, 262-3.

[465] Russell, 2011; Russell, 2004, 553.

[466] C.f. For an opposing view, see Russell, 1987.

[467] Daryaee, 2010, p.250.

[468]*David* is the main hero of the Armenian national epic "*Sasounts 'I Davit'"* plausibly dated to the 10th century. See: Kouymjian & Der Mugrdechian, 2013, 5-9. The epic conveys some general themes of mythical narratives and epic poems such as the miraculous birth and the rite of passages that heroes need to undertake prior to their victory a dragon, giant or wild beast. On the theme and structure of "*Sasounts 'I Davit'",* see: Anderson, 1978-9.

[469] The second cycle of this national epic relates to "Lion Mher" or "Great Mher" who is the second hero in the line of Sassoun. He is called "Lion Mher" since, according to the epic, Mihr seized a lion and divided it into two parts when he was child. Yet, his heroic character reveals no link to our discussion about the Roman Mithraism. Moreover, there was no trace of the "Lion Mher" in the first official version of the epic published in 1936 under the title *"Sasnatsrer"*, and there were only three heroes in the line: Sanasar, David the son of Sanasar, and Mher the son of David. See: Kouymjian & Der Mugrdechian, 2013, 13.

Then, *p'ok'rMher* went to the King *Pachik*'s realm to marry his daughter Gohar, but Gohar challenged him to kill the king of the west. Thus, after slaughtering the king, *p'ok'r Mher* returned to King Pachik's realm but found out Gohar had died. Then, he went at the grave of his mother *Khandout* and heard his mother call him to go the Rock cave. The hero was guided by a raven in his way to a rock cave at Van and ordered to stay until the last judgement. The local people and residents still believe *p'ok'rMher* is in the cave, and the water flows from the rock is the urine of his horse. The hero cannot leave the cave as long as the world is feeble and chaotic, but the cave opens twice a year and *p'ok'rMher* comes out to see if the earth can bear him or not.[470] In another narrative, the *Čarxi Fēlēk* (the wheel of fate) is turning inside of this cave and Mihr is always watching it. Once a year the cave miraculously opens and Mihr traverses the world, but once the wheel stops, the door of the cave will fully open and Mihr will be free to leave the cave for good.[471]

Iranologists who interpret the Roman Mithraism as the continuation of Miϑra worshipped in Persia argue that the Armenian *p'ok'rMher* is the key that explains the change from Miϑra in Persia to Mithras in the Roman milieu – and, in particular, the latter's birth from a rock.[472] Yet, the heroic figure of *p'ok'rMher* is better understood as an apocalyptic savior in the Armenian context, and not as earlier instance of the petragenes Mithras.[473] The imagery of petragenes Mithras depicts the youthful Mithras nude and dressed only with a Phrygian gap rising from stone that is markedly different than the account of the Armenian hero who would be confined in a cave until the world was ready for his presence.

Apart from the Armenian epic, the historiography of Armenia also portrays a contradictory image of Mihr. One of the most controversial narratives about Mihr is found in the *De Fluviorumet Montium Nominibus (Περὶ ποταμῶν καὶ ὄρων ἐπωνυμίας,* ca. 3rd to 4th century),[474] where Mihr *(μίϑρας)* bears a *Steingeburtssagen* (born from a rock) boy. The text is originally in Greek, and the name of Mihr is mentioned in Greek as *Μίϑρας,* the same as the name of Zoroastrian Miϑra in Greek historiography. According to this version of story, Mithras desired to have a son, but he

[470]Kouymjian & Der Mugrdechian, 2013, 32-3; cf. Boyle, 1976, 107-116; cf. Russell, 1987, Russell links this story to the Roman iconography of Mithras that shows the god shooting an arrow to release water from a rock. See: Russell, 2004, 192-3.
[471]On this narrative, see especially: Boyle, 1976, 111-12; on "*Mihr and the Čarxi Fēlēk",* see: ibid, 115-16; cf. Russell 1987, 273.
[472]Gershevitch, 1975, 84-98; Gershevitch in *Second plenary discussion* in Hinnells, 1975, 356; Russell, 2004.
[473]Cf. Russell, 1987, 273; cf. Hinnells in *Second plenary discussion* in Hinnells, 1975, 357.
[474] The book *About the Names of Rivers and Mountains* written by Pseudo-Plutarch.

despised women. He laid with a stone, the stone became pregnant and delivered a baby boy called Diorphus *(Δίορφος)*. Competing with Mars for courage, Diorphus was slain and the gods transformed him into the mountain lying near the river Araxes.[475] Scholars devoted much attention to this passage to account for the Roman imagery of Mithras rising from a rock. James Russell writes, "What is more impressive is that the Mithraic petrogeny is definitely associated with the river of Armenia, the Araxes, in the story of the rock-birth of Diorphos in the *De Fluviis*."[476] Others speak about Mithras' hatred towards women as an account for the masculine structure of the Roman Mithraic society, which focused on brotherhood and was exclusive to men.[477] Following Cumont, Maarten Vermaseren explored the origin of Mithras' cult in the Orient, and asserted that the whole story of Mithras' birth was plausibly affected by the mythical narratives and the gods of Asia Minor and *Agdistis* in particular.[478] Robert Eister noted that the *Steingeburtssagen* (the emergence from a stone rock) is a common theme among the myths of Asia Minor and the Caucasus, plausibly rooted in Iranian myths.[479]

In contrast, Alberto De Jong argued that "petrogeny" is the main theme here and it appears in some parallel mythical narratives from Caucasus and Asia Minor, such as Armillus, Sozryko (Soslan and Syrdon), Amirani, Agdistis, which were all affected by the Hurrian epic *"Song of Ullikummi"*.[480] He rightly concludes that Mithras in *De Fluviss* is not in the same category, and "the appearance of Mithra's name in this myth seems to be due to the identification of the Zoroastrian divinity with a Caucasians god or hero, due to the impact Zoroastrianism had on the pre-Christian religions of the Caucasus."[481] I agree with De Jong that *Steingeburtssagen* is a widespread theme in Asia Minor and the Caucasus that plausibly influenced Pseudo-Plutarch's narrative about the name of Araxes. Yet, it is critical to note as well that Mithras in *De Fluviis* is neither a *petragenes* (born from a rock) nor a *petragenetrix* (the rock giving birth, the mother), he

[475]Pseudo-Plutarch, *De Fluviis,* 23:4.
[476]Russell, 2004, 557.
[477] Russell, 1987, 271-2.
[478] Vermaseren, 1951, 290.
[479] Eisler, 1912, 310-12.
[480] The song of *Ullikummi* belongs to a group of mythological compositions found at *Boˇazköy* that narrate the Hittite version of Hurrian epics. In this epic, the Hurrian god *Kumarbi*, the father of all gods, creates a stone-monster against *Tešub*, the Hurrian storm god. The narrative commences with these words: "*Kumarbi* left his hometown and went to a new place where he met a huge rock. The god lied with the rock and subsequently the rock became pregnant and bore a son whom *Kumarbi* gave him the name *Ullikummi* which determined his duty to battle against the storm god." See Güterbock, 1951, 138-9.
[481] De Jong, 1997, 294. For his complete discussion on Mithras in *De Fluviss*, see: De Jong, 1997, 291-3; cf. Russell, 1987, 271-2.

is *impregnatus* (the one who impregnates the stone and the rock-birth comes from his seeds). Consequently, Pseudo-Plutarch's Mithras is not the same figure as the petragenes Mithras portrayed by Roman iconography. In that iconography, the youthful god rises mostly nude from a stone, wearing a Phrygian cap atop his curly hair and holding dagger and torch in his hands. The Armenian god or hero who desires to have a son differs from the Roman god who is petragenes himself.

Gordon has recently suggested that the Roman imagery of the petragenes Mithras stems from the Greek anodic stereotype that usually refers to the passage from the underworld to this world.[482] In agreement with Gordon, I think that the Roman innovation of the petragenes Mithras—similar to the Mithraic tauroctony—should be interpreted in reference to the Roman cultural context and in relation to other symbols of the Mithraic visual language.

The Mithraic Dadophoroi

As mentioned previously, Mithras is not the only figure of the tauroctony depicted as a "handsome Oriental" – so are Cautes and Cautopates (see fig. 37). Known as the miniatures of Mithras, the Mithraic *dadophoroi* (torchbearers) dressed in *candys*, *anaxyrídes,* and the Phrygian cap, often accompany Mithras in the tauroctony or his birth scenes.[483] These Mithraic torchbearers might embody Mithras' epithets or might complement his functions as a creator god.[484] In the imagery of *dadophoroi*, the idea of opposition or balance has been essential to their iconography.[485] Sitting always opposite one another, Cautes and Cautopates, with their torches facing upward and downward respectively, might represent Sunrise and Sunset, up and down, north and south, and left and right.[486] In fact, this opposite visualization has been essential in the iconography of the torchbearers due to the cultic conceptions attributed to them such as heat and cold, entrance and departure, genesis and apogenesis.[487]

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[482] Gordon, 2017, 292. "*anodos*" means journey upwards, usually as a passage from the underworld to this world. On *"Anodoi"* and Chthonic passage, See Bérard, 1974, specially see: figs. 1; 34 a; 34b; 35a; 35b.
[483] E.g. CIMRM 123; CIMRM 124; CIMRM 254A; CIMRM 254B; CIMRM 368.
[484] Hannah, 1996, 183.
[485] Hinnells, 1976, 52.
[486] Cf. Gordon, 1988, 55-6; Dirven, 2016, 22.
[487] Cf. Gordon, 2006; Malandra, 1990; Beck, 2006, 207; cf. Porphyry, *De Antro,* 29-30; For the English translation see: Taylor, 1923: 11-12; cf. Bread et al., 1998, 314-315.

Traditionally, scholars believed that the trinity of Mithras, Cautes and Cautopates represented the judicial and apocalyptic trinity of Miϑra, Srōš and Rašn, or Miϑra accompanied by gayamarətan (MP. Gayōmart)[488] and Yima (MP. Jamšēd).[489] Relying on this identification, some scholars suggest that the etymology of the Mithraic pair's names can explain the cultic imagery of Mithras and his attendants.[490] The name Cautes is the Persian *Kavauta* or *Kavuta* and is composed of the Avestan *kavi* and two suffixes. The term *kavi* was used for the ancient Persian kings, and the suffix *auta* or *uta* refer to the Pahlavi *ōtak* or *utak* rooted in Old Persian *auta-ka* or *uta-ka,* which was the epithet of the Persian king Yima (MP. Jamšēd). Hence, both the torchbearers represent the youthful Yima. Cautopates is the Persian *kauautapati* derived from the suffix *pati* (master, lord) attached to *kauauta* – meaning either "royal kinsman" or "protected by the royal kinsman"[491]. Consequently, scholars have argued that Mithras in the company of Cautes and Cautopates represents the troika of Miϑra, gayamarətan and Yima both visually and etymologically. Thus, this etymology strongly relies on the Cumontian approach that interprets Roman Mithraism in reference to the Zoroastrian tradition. Yet, the fact that these figures cannot refer to the trinity of Miϑra, gayamarətan and Yima since the twin relation between Miϑra and Yima is already disputed,[492] and consequently there is no reason to explain the representation of the Persian mythical king Yima in the Roman Mithraea.

In fact, understanding this terminology in terms of the Roman cult's iconography is more satisfying. Regardless of their functions, Cautes and Cautopates are miniatures of Mithras in form and in almost every iconographic detail. Hence, this visual resemblance emphasizes the notion that

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[488] Meaning mortal life. According to the Bundahišn, Gayōmart is created in Ērān-wēz to assist Ahura Mazdā in his fight against the Evil Spirits. See: Shaki, 2000.

[489] Zaehner, 1955, 102; cf. Gershevitch, 1959, 69; in the seventeenth Yašt dedicated to Aši, Ahura Mazdā and Armaiti Spenta are the father and mother and Miϑra, Aši, Srōš and Rašn are the sons with Daena as their sister. On the triad of Miϑra, Srōš and Rašn, see: chapter one, 17-9. Additionally, according to a later Pahlavi text, Ahra Mazdā and Spandarm are the parents of Gayōmart; thus, Miϑra who is the son of Ahra Mazdā is identified as the brother of Gayōmart. The relationship between Miϑra and Yima originates in their representations of equinoxes in the Zoroastrian calendar. Persians celebrate the fall equinox dedicated to Miϑra (Mehragān) and the spring equinox dedicated to Yima (Nowruz, MP. nōg rōz). In other words, Miϑra is the brother of Gayōmart and the celestial counterpart of Yima. See: Zaehner, 1961, 141-2; cf. Gershevitch, 1959, 69. Yima is the mythical king of Persia who ruled the world in the Golden age. See: Skjærvø, 2012.

[490] Zaehner, 1961, 141-2; for an opposing view, see Schwartz, 1975, 409-10; Schwartz, 1975, 407 n.1. Cautes' name is abbreviated as *C.* and Cautopates as *CAVTOPT*, *CAVTOP* and *CP*.

[491] Zaehner, 1961, 141-2. Gershevitch proposes the name of Cautopates derived from *varu-gauyauti* that is the epithet of Miϑra in MihrYašt meaning "having wide pastures." Gershevitch, 1959, 151-2; cf. Malandra also translates this epithet as "Miϑra of wide pastures". See: Malandra, 1990, 59.

[492] Cf. Schwartz, 1975, 409-10.

Kauta- (cautes, meaning small), refers to the *dadophoroi*'s visual replication of Mithras. What about the suffix *pates* in Cautopates? *Pati* is an Avestan suffix (or sometimes prefix) meaning opposing, against, toward. Thus, Cautopates could mean *kauta* followed by *pati* meaning "counter to Cautes".[493] Consequently, it seems that the Mithraic *dadophoroi* are connected to Mithras not only in their Oriental garment but also in their names.[494] In short, the Roman Mithraists placed three "handsome Orientals" with Persian names at the center of the Roman cult.[495]

<u>*Sol and Luna*</u>

As stated earlier, the Oriental dress of Mithras and his attendants leads us to consider their encounter with Sol and Luna depicted in the Greek style – such as at the scene of first banquet after the death of the bull, where Mithras appears in Persian attire and Helios/Sol is nude or appears only with a shoulder-cape.[496] The association between Mithras and Helios recalls the hybrid deity of Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes at *Nemrut Dagi.*[497] The Mithraic imagery of the god Helios (Sol) depicts him alone or accompanied by Mithras. Helios (Sol) is the overseer of the bull-slaying scene, the witness of Mithras' miracles, and a participant in the Mithraic feast after the bull-slaying. A careful look at the Mithraic iconography of Helios (Sol) reveals that it is informed by Greek iconography.[498]

The predominant iconography of Helios with a radiant halo around his head and driving his chariot dates back to the end of the 6th Century BCE.[499] In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Helios is *ἠέλιος φαέθων* – "the shining sun".[500] As the personification of the Sun, the Greek Helios was the son of Gaia and Zeus and identified with Sol in the Roman world. According to the *Odyssey*, Helios sees and hears all things.[501] Thus, he is the overseer of the human world and the guardian of the cosmic order. In the *Iliad*, Helios along with Gaia and Zeus are the gods to whom people

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[493] Schwartz, 1975, 420-21.
[494] Cf. Gordon, 2006.
[495] Yet, the discussion of etymology is still open to debate, and the metanarrative of discontinuity has recently proposed an astronomical-astrological reading of these figures. See above.
[496] Gordon, 2017, 291.
[497] See: Chapter two.
[498] Gordon, 2017, 291; e.g. CIMRM 1958 on Helios as the charioteer; CIMRM 368 on Helios as the overseer of the bull-slaying scene; CIMRM 1958 on Helios as the witness of Mithras' miracle; LIMC Vol.VI$_2$: Mithras 437 on Helios as the participant in the Mithraic feast after slaying the bull, solo or accompanied by Mithras.
[499] On the iconography of Helios/Sol see: LIMC IV.1, 592-625 & IV.2, 366-385; Gordon, 2006.
[500] See: Homer, *Iliade,* XI: 735; cf. Homer, *Odyssey,* XI: 15.
[501] *Odyssey,* XI: 105; Gordon, 2006.

offer sacrifice when swearing oaths.[502] He is one of the witnesses in the myth of Demeter and Persephone.[503] In the Homeric hymn dedicated to Helios, he is a deathless god living at the highest point of heaven. Dressed in a rich, radiant garment that flickers and flies in the wind, Helios rides a golden-yoked chariot from heaven to the Ocean.[504] Indeed, the Greek iconography of Helios reflects narratives of him in Greek mythology and literature.

The Roman imagery of Sol (the Roman counterpart of Helios) depicts the deity with the same iconography as the Greek Helios. Roman Republic coinage in the last centuries BCE confirms this. A coin dated to 217-215 BCE depicts the deity with a radiant halo around his head on the obverse and a crescent moon with two stars on the reverse (see fig. 38).[505] Another example is a coin that dates to 76 BCE and depicts almost the same design: the image of Sol with a radiant nimbus on the obverse and a crescent moon with seven stars around on the reverse (see fig.39).[506] A coin minted on 132 BCE shows the head of Roma wearing helmet on the obverse and Sol with a radiant halo around his head riding his chariot on the reverse (see fig.40).[507]According to *De Lingua Latina* (ca.116-27 BCE), Tatius the legendary king of Sabini, dedicated an altar to the sun in Rome and introduced the cult of the Sun to Rome.[508] Similarly, Dionysius of Halicarnassus mentions that Tatius built temples and consecrated altars for the deities Sun and Moon, Saturn, Rhea, Vesta, Vulcan, Diana, Enyalius and other gods, to whom the king made pledges during battle.[509]

The Romans held annual festivals to honor the Sun god. The first festival dedicated to *Sol Indiges* was held every year on August 9 in the shrine of the Sun, close to the temple of Quirinus.[510] According to *De Mensibus* (ca. 6th century), there was a second festival called *Agonalia* celebrated on December 11th honoring Helios.[511] Tacitus (ca. 55-120 CE) mentions that an ancient temple at

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[502] Homer, *Iliad,* III: 100&105; Gordon, 2006; cf. According to Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom, the kings Tatius and Romulus dedicated temples to the Sun and Moon, and other gods with whom they made vows prior to battle. Apparently, overseeing oaths was a function of Helios that has been embraced by the Roman Sun god Sol.
[503] Homer, *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*: 20.
[504] Homer, *Homeric Hymns dedicated to Helios.*
[505] ANS 1944.100.57.
[506] RRC 390/1.
[507] ANS; 1941.131.72.
[508] Varro, *De Lingua Latina* V: 74; Stenger, 2006; Gordon, 2006; cf. Halsberghe, 1972, 28.
[509] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Roman Antiquities* II, 50:3; Gordon, 2006.
[510] The name and place of the temple has been mentioned in *Institutio Oratoria I*, 7:12; cf. Gordon 2006; cf. Halsberghe, 1972, 28. *Indiges*, meaning local divinized heroes who stand in opposition to foreign deities, was the epithet for the gods characterized differently in antiquity; see: Prescendi, 2006.
[511] Ludys, *De Manibus* IV, 155; cf. Gordon, 2006.

Circus Maximus was dedicated to the Sun god whose festival was on August 28.[512] There was no precise connection between the festivals and the astronomical courses.[513]

The cult of Sol Invictus is generally considered as the substitute for the Syrian cult of *Sol Indiges* that emerged in the third century CE.[514] From 179 CE until the end of the rule of Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180 CE), Septimius Severus (r. 193-211 CE) was in command of the Syrian legion, where he was in contact with the priesthood of the cult of Sol Elagabal whose main temple was in Emesa. He married Julia Domna who was a member of the high priestly family of Sol Elagabal.[515] The queen propagated the cult in Severus' time. Until the reign of Emperor Commodus (r. 180-192 CE), the deity rarely appeared on the Imperial coins, and his identification with the Roman Emperor as *INVICTUS* (unconquered), *AUGUSTUS* (sacred, venerable), *PROPUGNATUR* (stand up for, defender), *ORIENS* (rising, beginning) and *COMES* (soldier, devotee) was recognized after the time of Emperor Caracalla. Caracalla (r. 211-217 CE) was also interested in the Syrian cult of Sol Elagabal and pursued it as a state cult for the Romans. A coin dating to 211-217 CE, issued in Emesa, represents a bust of the Emperor Caracalla on the obverse and the temple of Sol Elagabal containing the holy stone on the reverse (see fig.41).[516] The image of Sol Elagabal's temple at Emesa usually contains a huge stone inside of the temple personifying the Syrian god. Emperor Elagabalus (r. 218-223 CE) legitimized the cult of Sol Invictus Elagabalus as the principal deity of Rome.[517] The notion that Sol Invictus (the unconquered Sun) and his cult had an Oriental or eastern provenance is unlikely since the Syrian cults were not solar religions. Indeed, the Roman promotion of the cult of Sol Invictus was part of an effort to establish a state cult combining the hypostasis of the Emperor and the personification of victory.[518] Finally, probably on 25 December 274, Emperor Aurelianus (r. 270-275 CE) dedicated a new temple of Sol invictus to Rome and founded the state cult of Sol invictus officially.[519]

The Roman Imperial coinage featuring Sol was influenced by Greek iconography of Helios (Sol) representing the god dressed in a fluttering garment with a radiant nimbus over his head. A

[512] Tacitus, *the Annals I,* 15:74; cf. Gordon, 2006.
[513] Gordon, 2006.
[514] Halsberghe, 1972, 45.
[515] Her father was the priest of Sol Elagabalus. See: Levick, 2007, 14.
[516] ANS Collection: 1961.154.68
[517] Halsberghe, 1972, 41-2.
[518] Gordon, 2006.
[519] Birley & Leppin, 2006.

coin issued on 220 CE at Rome depicts a bust of Emperor Elagabalus with the legend '*IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG'* on the obverse. The deity Sol Elagabalus stands on the reverse nude with a cloak flying on his shoulder and a radiant nimbus over his head, raising his right hand and holding a whip in his left hand with the legend *'P M TR P III COS III P P'* (See fig.42).[520] The scene is decorated with a star seen under his right hand. Another coin dated to 218-222 CE shows a picture of the Emperor with the legend *'ANTONINVS PIVS FEL AVG'* on the obverse and a four-horse chariot on the reverse with the legend *'SANC[T DEO S]OLI ELAGABAL'* meaning *'to the sacred deity Sol Elagabalus'* (see fig.43).[521]

The Mithraic imagery of Helios/Sol nude with a flying cloak on his shoulder or dressed in a fluttering garment, standing or driving his chariot echoes the Greek visualization of the Sun god Helios. Mithraists embraced the Greek iconography of Helios/Sol, which they incorporated into the Roman iconography, depicting the deity nude or with a fluttering garment in the tauroctony and on the walls of Mithraea. In contrast to Sol, Luna rarely appears in Mithraic imagery, and his appearance is mostly limited to the tauroctony, where the moon deity deity is depicted as a young figure (feminine or masculine) often decorated with a crescent moon and sometimes with few stars around her or his neck, or over her or his head looking at Mithras slaying the bull.[522] Luna often appears opposite Sol. Varro (ca. 116-27 BCE) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (ca. 60-7 BCE) both report that similar to the imperial cult of Sol, the legendary king Tatius introduced the cult of Luna to Rome.[523] The cult of the Moon might have been influenced by the Greek cult of Selene and Artemis.[524] In the Republican period, the Moon deity held only a minor public cult, but she had a significant presence in popular beliefs.[525]

Similar to Sol, Luna appeared on Roman Republic coins after the third century BCE. A coin dating to the second century BCE depicts the image of Roma with her helmet on the obverse and the image of Luna riding her *biga* (chariot) with two horses on the reverse (see fig. 44).[526] The

[520] ANS Collection: 1944.100.52303.
[521] ANS Collection: 1944.100.52359.
[522] For the image of Luna decorated with stars see CIMRM 2355; for the image of Luna decorated with a crescent moon see e.g. CIMRM 759; CIMRM 1400; CIMRM 1314.
[523] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Roman Antiquities* II, 50:3; cf. Varro, *De Lingua Latina* V:74; Gordon, 2006.
[524] Gordon, 2006. Selena was the Greek female counterpart of Helios in archaic and classical time often depicted as a winged deity driving a chariot with horses and later with Oxen or riding horse or mule; on the iconography of Selene/Luna see: LIMC VII.1, 706-15 & VII.2, 524-29.
[525] Gordon, 2006; e.g. Livius, *AbUrbe Condita XLIV*, 37: 5-9.
[526] RRC 133/3.

Republic coinage also reflects the association between Sol and Luna. A coin issued in 109-108 BCE portrays the head of Sol with his radiant nimbus on the obverse and the figure of Luna riding her *biga* with two horses on the reverse (see fig. 45). In addition, a crescent moon, four stars and the legend *'Roma'* decorated the reverse.[527] The appearance of Sol and Luna together lasted into Roman Imperial coinage. A coin dating from 19 to 4 BCE depicts the head of Sol with a radiant nimbus on the obverse and four horses carrying a basket with a flower inside on the reverse with a legend *'CAESAR AVGVSTVS SC'* (see fig. 46).[528] From the Augustan era, Imperial theology associated Sol and Luna with the cosmological roles of the Emperor and his queen, and established the political order in relation to divine order. A silver coin minted on 217 CE shows the head of Emperor with the legend *'ANTONINUS PIUS AUG GERM*' on the obverse and the image of Luna driving her *biga* drawn by two oxen with the legend *'PM TR P XX COS IIII PP'* on the reverse (see fig.47).[529] The fact that the images of Sol and Luna appeared on Imperial coins confirms that the iconography of these solar deities was strongly influenced by the Greek tradition. The deity with a radiant nimbus or halo around his head driving his chariot drawn by four horses as well as the female figure riding her *biga* carried by two horses or oxen are exact replicas of the iconography of the Greek Helios and Selene. This tradition was then embraced by the Roman Mithraists to complement their cultic imagery.

Accordingly, the Mithraic tauroctony portrays three Oriental figures (Mithras attended by Cautes and Cautopates) as well as three Greek figures (Helios, Luna and sometimes Kronos/Saturn).[530] The cultic imagery of Helios (Sol), Luna and Kronos/Saturn represents the Greek visualization of those deities later incorporated by the Romans while the portraits of Mithras, Cautes and Cautopates reflect the Greek imagination of the people attributed to the Orient (which was also embraced and complemented by the Romans). My point here is not to ignore the local varieties of Mithraic imagery, but rather to concentrate on the constant features of Mithraic iconography and visual language. Images of Mithras and his attendants dressed in long sleeved tunic, and Persian trousers evoke Herodotus and Strabo's imagery of Persians wearing *candys* and *anaxyrídes* – imagery which became more orientalised later through the addition of curly hair and a Phrygian cap to the Persian costume. Indeed, one simple conclusion that comes out of this

[527] RRC 303/1.
[528] ANS Collection: 1944.100.38318.
[529] ANS Collection: 1944.100.51569.
[530] Or Oceanus; see: note 10.

discussion is that not only were the Roman Mithraists aware of the Persian origin of their god, but they also desired to emphasize such an origin. In this sense, the Roman tauroctony is a scene of Greek and Roman imagination. Mithras and his attendants Cautes and Cautopates are "handsome Orientals" whose stereotype was presented to the West by the Achaemenids, Alexander the Great and his successors. They are the visual representations of the Greek and Roman imagination of Persians as a category of people inhabiting the Eastern part of the world and attributed to the Orient. I will return to this issue in more depth in next chapter.

A marble relief dating to the Second century CE visualizes a significant picture of this encounter (see fig.48).[531] As the bull-killer god, Mithras sits in the center of the tauroctony dressed in his usual garments. Cautes and Cautopates stand at his sides wearing their usual attire similar to Mithras (the Persian trousers, a long-sleeved belt doubled tunic with cloak and Phrygian cap). Then on the top, Sol naked with a flying mantle drives his ascending chariot drawn by four horses. Exactly opposite to him on the left corner is Luna riding her *biga* carried by two horses. Two naked boys with upward and downwards torches guide Sol and Luna's chariots. Indeed, the Piazza Capitolini relief represents each character in his/her stereotypical depiction: Mithras, Cautes and Cautopates as the "handsome Oriental", naked Sol driving his four-horse chariot, and Luna with her two horses (oxen) *biga*.

In summary, I am arguing that the iconography of the Mithraic bull slaying scene and the Roman Mystagogues integrated the traditional iconography of the Greek and Roman deities with the Greek ideal of the "handsome Oriental" in order to create a novel visual language for their cult, which was Hellenistic in appearance but Roman in theme and doctrine. I demonstrated the Mithraic visual language revealed not only the acquaintance of the Mithraic Mystagogues with the Persian Miϑra as imagined in the Hellenistic world, but also that their invented iconography emphasized the Persian provenance of their god. In the above discussion, I explained that the cultic iconography reflects that how the Roman Mithraists understood and depicted their god.

[531] CIMRM 415.

In the following section, I consider how the Mithraic iconography was understood by outsiders who had no personal engagement in the Roman cult of Mithras and who were not initiates in the cult.

3.3. The Roman Cult of Mithras in the Eyes of Non-Initiates

External sources describing Roman Mithraism are few in number. In the introduction, I have explained that the primary sources inform about the cult of Mithras in the Roman Empire are limited to the extant artefacts dating back to the first four centuries CE, alongside some texts and commentaries written by Roman authors, such as Statius and Firmicus Maternus, along with several interpretations written by Middle and Neoplatonists, such as Celsus and Porphyry, who have described the Roman cult of Mithras via its iconography and visual language. The Roman cult of Mithras was a cult that adhered to secrecy and its initiates were compelled to conceal the cultic beliefs and practices from non-initiates. Hence, the only available way for outsiders has plausibly been to describe the cult via its iconography, furnishings and architecture.[532] Consequently, the question arises as to how did those outsiders understand the cultic iconography, furnishings and architecture? How did they interpret this visual language, when they had no engagement in the cult?

In his argument about the different notions of Persianism in the Roman cult of Mithras, Gordon writes: "Yet, it may well be that for many groups, especially those remote from larger urban areas, Mithras' specifically Persian identity was not of much significance: he just looked like that."[533] From his point of view, the cultic iconography of Mithras was not significant and meaningful to ordinary Romans or Greeks who resided far from urban centers, and this iconography was an internal assertion meaningful for the Mithraic initiates rather than those with no participation in the cult. Conversely, I argue that the cultic iconography created by the Mithraic Mystagogues, which depicted the god as the "handsome Oriental", strongly influenced the

[532] I use "mystery cult" for the Roman cult of Mithras as it demanded secrecy from its initiates, and not as an example for the category of "the Roman mystery cults" suggested by Walter Burkert or Sarah Johnston, as I discussed in the introduction. My point here is to stress that the Roman Mithraic brotherhood was a close cultic community that was revealed to non-initiates only through its visual language.
[533] Gordon, 2017, 291.

perceptions of ordinary Romans who were not adherents of the cult of Mithras. In the previous section, I explained the cultic iconography of the god and his attendants and demonstrated that Mithras was not the only figure in the Roman Empire depicted with a Persian garment, Phrygian cap, shaven face and curly hair. Romans used the same iconography for all figures attributed to the East, and the figure of the "handsome Oriental" was a common way to depict foreigners in the Roman Imperial art and literature, particularly from the Augustan era onwards.[534] Thus, I believe the figure of Mithras signified a foreignness that was familiar for all Romans, including ordinary people and intellectuals who might live everywhere in the Roman Empire. Mithras looked like the foreigners attributed to the East. Moreover, we should not forget that the Mithraic Mystagogues used this imagery to validate the foreign provenance of their god and developed an iconographic tradition that stressed the foreign (Persian) provenance of their god. Their message was 'our god (Mithras) was a foreign (Persian) god' that they desired to depict in a visual style familiar to everybody inhabiting the Roman Empire. My argument here is that their strategy was successful.

The perceptions of the cultic iconography of Mithras as a foreign god was confirmed by Roman intellectuals and philosophers' descriptions and interpretations of the Roman Mithras cult. These narratives show that the cultic iconography and visual language influenced not only ordinary Romans but also the group of authors and philosophers who had no first-hand engagement with the cult but interpreted and described it as outsiders. Richard Gordon indicates that the Mithraic Mystagogues' assertion about the Persian provenance of the cult, that he calls "internal claims",[535] affected intellectuals and particularly Neoplatonists who had no personal engagement in the cult. In agreement with him, I add that the Mystagogues' assertion about the Persian provenance of their god provided an appropriate context for Roman authors to link the whole concept of the cult to Persia, and also enabled Middle and Neoplatonists to use these images for their own agenda. In the next chapter, I will discuss the significance of Persia for the Romans and will elaborate this issue in relation to the Roman cultural milieu and imperial policy. Here, I focus only on the Roman intellectuals' descriptions of the Mithras cult and demonstrate that these authors went beyond the cultic iconography representing Mithras as a foreign (Persian) god and linked the entire cult to Persia.

[534] I will discuss this further in the following chapter.
[535] Gordon, 2017, 314.

The Cult of Mithras Described by Roman and Early Christian Apologists

Statius' *Thebais* is perhaps the most appropriate example that shows how the cultic iconography depicting Mithras as the "handsome Oriental", as a god with Persian origin, influenced the descriptions of Roman intellectuals whose access to the cult was only through their encounter with cultic iconography and architecture. Statius was a Late-Flavian dynastic poet (ca. the first century CE) whose poem *(Thebais I:720)* is the only source in the entire history of the Roman cult that describes the gesture of Mithras as depicted in the tauroctony and links this iconography to the Persian origin of the cult.[536] According to the *Thebais*, Adrastus, the legendary king of Argos, prays to Apollo and identifies him with three foreign gods that one of them is Mithras:

> Whether 'tis best to call you rosy Titan in the fashion of the Achaemenian race [Ahura Mazdā], or Osiris the grain-bringer, or Mithras twisting the horns wroth to follow in the rocks of Perses'cavern. (*Thebais*, *I: 720*)[537]

Thus, this short passage locates the cult in Persia by tracing the cultic myth back to Persia. The god Mithras twisted the horns of the bull and carried it into a cave in the Persian mountains. Roger Beck has proposed that Statius was aware of the Greek topoi of Persians as expert in archery and horse riding. He interprets "twisting the horns" as a metaphor related to archery (twisting the horns of the bow) in which Persians were expert.[538] Alternatively, Gordon argues that Statius copied or acquired his information from a text written by a Magian author (the priest of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian religion) and ascribed this description to the Zoroastrian pseudepigrapha.[539] In the standard Mithraic iconography, Mithras subdues the bull by wrenching its head back and not by twisting his horns. Gordon explains that Statius has not actually seen the Mithraic tauroctony and has only referred to a pseudepigraphical source.[540] I agree with Gordon's that Statius might have had access to some Zoroastrain pseudepigrapha, but in contrast to him, I see no reason to preclude the possibility that Statitus encountered the Mithraic tauroctony. This passage clearly refers not only

[536] On *Thebaid (I: 720)* as the earliest passage on the Mithraic cult in the Western Mediterranean world, see: Gordon 2017, note 2; on *Thebaid (I: 720)* as the only reference to the Mithraic tauroctony, see Beck 2001, 61.
[537] "seu Persei sub rupibus antri indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram." For the English translation, see Bailey, 2003, 93; cf. Gordon, 2017, 279.
[538] Beck, 2001, 61-2.
[539] Gordon, 2017, 281.
[540] Gordon, 2017, 280-1; and for *Thebais (I: 720)* as an account for Persianism, see: ibid, 287; cf. ibid, 304.

to Mithars' gesture in controlling the bull but also to the cave consecrated for worshipping the god (Mithraeum). More precisely Statius' use of "twisting" instead of "wrenching" can be understood simply as a crude description of the scene, or perhaps he was exposed to a poor example of the tauroctony.[541] Moreover, Statius' expression of "in the rocks of Perses' cavern" shows that he had a passing acquaintance with the connection between the cult of Mithras and Persia, and the cultic iconography of the god representing him as the "handsome Oriental" complemented his knowledge of the Persian origin of the god. I suggest that apart from his literary sources, Statius' description of Mithras was influenced by the cultic iconography and furnishings of the Mithraea, which the Mithraic Mystagogues created to stress and validate the Persian origin of their god.

Another example of an external description informed by the Persian appearance of the god is found in the *Scholia to Thebais.* The text is ascribed to a fourth century scholiast Lactantius Placidus who, in his explanation of Mithras appearing in *Thebais* for addressing Apollo, asserts the cult's Persian origin and transmission from Persia to Rome mingled with Phrygian elements. He writes:[542]

> They consider the sacred one originally from Persia; a Phrygian Persian; a Roman Phrygian. *(Scholia to Thebais, I: 720)*[543]

Gordon argues that this phrase attests Cumont's hypothesis of the cult's transmission from Persia to the Roman Empire through Asia Minor, as well as his view that the late-antique descriptions of the Mithraic cult were influenced by the Mystagogues' claim about the Persian provenance of their god.[544] In fact, it is the cultic imagery of the god that supports the impression that the deity is a foreign Persian-Phrygian, Romanized by arriving and settling in Rome. It is Mithras' Persian garment (*candys, anaxyrídes, τιάρα*), his curly hair and Phrygian cap that visually identify Mithras as the "handsome Oriental" and enables the viewer to trace the cult back to Persia.

Firmicus Maternus, the fourth century astrologer, is another Roman author who mentions Mithras in his works. After his conversion to Christianity, the Roman astrologer wrote a book

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[541] Cf. Gordon, 2017, 279-80. There is no evident Zoroastrian pseudepigrapha that mentions Mithras' bull-slaying. As such, if Gordon traces this phrase back to pseudepigrapha written by the Magi then he needs to clarify his sources in the Zoroastrian tradition. As it stands, we are left with numerous unanswered questions: what was the source? When was it written? Who was the author?

[542] On the author of the *scholia to Thebais*, see: Hill, 2000, 57-59.

[543] "quae sacra primum Persae habuerunt, a Persis Phryges, a Phrygibus Romani".

[544] Gordon, 2017, 305.

entitled *De errore profanarum religionum* (*the Error of the Pagans)* against the pagans' gods and the deities of those mystery cults widespread in Roman Empire.[545] In the fifth chapter of the book, Firmicus Maternus writes that the Persians and Magi venerate fire and divide it into male and female principles. Mithras is the male aspect of the fire who was bull-thief and worshipped in the cave. He writes:

> The Persians and all the Magi who dwell in the confines of the Persian land give their preference to fire and think it ought to be ranked above all the other elements. So they divide fire into two potencies, relating its nature to the potency of the two sexes…the male they worship as a cattle rustler, and his cult to the potency of fire, as his prophet handed down the lore to us, saying: *Μύστα βοοκλοπίης, συνδέξιε πατρὸς ἀγαυοῦ* ("initiate of cattle-rustling, companion by handclasp of an illustrious father.") Him they call Mithra [sic], and his cult they carry on in hidden caves…So you who declare it proper for the cult of the Magi to be carried on by the Persian rite in these cave temples, why do praise only this among the Persian customs? If you think it worthy of the Roman name to serve the cults of the Persians, the laws of the Persians… *(The Error of the pagans, 5:1-2)*[546]

This description has no parallel in the Zoroastrian tradition, which was the main religion among the Persians contemporaneous with Firmicus Maternus in the mid-fourth century. Moreover, the Persian Miϑra is neither a cattle thief nor a male principle of fire; nor are there any indications that devotees revered him in hidden caves.[547] However, Mithras can be read as a bull-slaying deity in Roman imagery depicts the god carrying a bull on his shoulders, and he is also the one revered in hidden caves.[548] Thus, one can conclude that the Roman author incorporated his pseudo-knowledge of the Persian religious practice, which he might have acquired from Greek

[545] On the life of Firmicus Maternus, see: Hoheisel, 2006.
[546] "Persae et Magi omnes qui Persicae regionis incolunt fines, ignem praeferunt, et omnibus elementis ignem putant debere praeponi. Hi itaque ignem in duas dividunt potestates, naturam eius ad utriusque sexus transferentes…Virum vero abactorem bovum colentes sacra eius ad ignis transferunt potestatem, sicut propheta eius tradidit nobis dicens : Μύστα βοοκλοπίης, συνδέξιε πατρὸς ἀγαυοῦ. Hunc Mithram dicunt, sacra vero eius in speluncis abditis tradunt... cur haec Persarum sola laudatis? Si hoc Romano nomine dignum putatis, ut Persarum sacris, ut Persarum legibus serviatis" For the English translation, see: Forbes, 1970, 51-2.
[547] On Miϑra in the Avestan and Pahlavi sources, see: chapter one.
[548] I have already discussed the βουκλόπος θεός Mithras in Porphyry's *De antro (24-5)*. See: above, note 40.

historiography, into his external perception of then-contemporary Mithraic iconography.[549] Indeed, Firmicus Maternus' refrence to the Magi as fire worshippers shows that he might have gained his knowledge of the Magi tradition from Greek historiography that defined the Persian religion as a fire worshipping religion.[550] Gordon notes that Firmicus Maternus explicitly claims that the Mithraists followed the rites of the Magi when he writes "*magorum ritu Persico"* (the Persian rite of Magi). He also states that Firmicus Maternus' expression of *propheta eius* (his prophet) refers to Zoroaster who was known as the prophet of the Persian religion followed by that of the Magi. Thus, Gordon reads this passage as the late antique encyclopedic description of the Mithras cult that was influenced by the Mithraic Mystagogues' assertion about the Persian origin of their god.[551] I go even further, and suggest that Firmicus Maternus attempts to link the whole idea of the cult—not only the god—to Persia when he defines Mithras as "*si hoc Romano nomine dignum putatis, ut Persarum sacris, ut Persarum legibus serviatis"* (the Roman name to serve the cults of the Persians, the laws of the Persians).[552] Firmicus Maternus' description reveals his basic knowledge of both the Persian religion and the Roman cult of Mithras. This information might have been obtained by means of his visual experience and encounter with Mithraic art and iconography rather than by reading accurate sources of the Persian religion. More precisely, his description of the god Mithras is the result of the cultic iconography that represents the god as the "handsome Oriental" who steals cattle (the bull). In Firmicus Maternus' fictional scenario, Mithras with his Oriental figure (portrayed by the cultic iconography) originates in Persia where the Magi honored fire, and thus Mithras was transformed into the male principle of fire and the cattle stealing god worshipped in hidden caves. Moreover, we cannot detach such a description from Firmicus Maternus' own theological agenda, as he converted to Christianity and challenged the Pagan gods to compete with the Christian one. It is in this context that the Roman author mingled his visual knowledge of the Roman Mithras cult alongside his pseudo-knowledge of Zoroastrianism, plausibly obtained from Greek historiography, to demonstrate the errors of Persian religions.[553]

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[549] For the Greek historiography of Persian religions, see: e.g. Herodotus, *The Histories I*, 131:1-3; cf. Strabo, *Geography XV*, 3:13. I have discussed these passages in chapter two.

[550] The Magi venerated fire but did not worship it. The fire rituals carried out by them can be traced back to the Indo-Iranian religions where their sacred fire was the embodiment of Agni who was replaced by Ātaš (MP. Ādur) in the Zoroastrian pantheon. See: chapter one, note 18.

[551] Gordon, 2017, 305.

[552] Firmicus Maternus, *De Errore Profanis Religionis, V:2.*

[553] For Firmicus Maternus on the cult of Mithras vs. Christianity, see: Firmicus Maternus, *De Errore Profanis Religionis, XIX; XX.*

Similar to the description of Firmicus Maternus is that of John the Lydian, the sixth century Roman author who traces the worship of the rock-born Mithras east and highlights the god's relation to fire. In his book *De Menibus* about the calendar of pagans' festivals, John the Lydian assigned the four cardinal directions to the four elements, each protected by a chief deity. He writes:

> The Romans, it is clear, honored Hestia [Vesta] before all [others], just as the Persians [honor] the rock-born Mithras on account of the cardinal point of fire; and those under the Bear [people of North honor] the moist nature on account of the cardinal point of water; and the Egyptians [honor] Isis, the equivalent of Selene [the goddess of the moon], the overseer of all the air. (*De Mensibus*, *Febru 30)*[554]

Accordingly, the Rock-born Mithras is the deity revered by the Persians who lived in the east, and east is also highlighted as the cardinal direction related to the natural element of fire.

Earlier in this chapter, I have argued that the cultic iconography depicts Mithras' birth from a stone, yet the Persian Miϑra is not a petragenes god, nor did the Persians worship him in connection with fire. As I explained in chapter one, the Persian Miϑra accompanies the sun that was identified as the celestial fire among the Persians, and there is no specific relationship between the Persian Miϑra and the element of fire other than this. Indeed, this narrative reflects a passing acquaintance of its author with the Persian religion (handed down to him via Greek historiography) and his encounter with the Mithraic iconography and visual language depicting Mithras as the petragenes god and the "handsome Oriental". Thus, I do agree with Gordon when he classifies *De Menibus*' description of Mithras as a late antique encyclopedic passage that was affected by the Mithraic Mystagogues' assertion about the Persian origin of their god.[555]

Relying on these examples (with he exception of Statius' *Thebais* which is the only classical literary source linking the Roman cult of Mithras to Persia), one can conclude that the late antique descriptions of the Mithraic cult were composed of the Greek historiography of the Persian Miϑra as equivalent of the Greek Helios or Apollo and the Roman cultic iconography of the god that portrayed him as the "handsome Oriental" who was born from a stone. The passage of *De Menibus* recalls Firmicus Maternus' description of Mithras as the male principle of fire and the cattle-stealing god that the Magi and Persians worshipped in hidden caves. Both narratives

[554] For the English translation, see: Hooker, 2013, 90.
[555] Gordon, 2017, 307.

describe Mithras as depicted by the Roman cultic iconography—as the "handsome Oriental" who is rock-born and cattle-stealing god—and which does not match with the Persian figure of Mithras (Miϑra) – that is, a god portrayed with a thousand ears and ten thousand eyes overseeing all oaths and contracts. Nevertheless, both passages link the god to the East, as his cultic iconography evoke the people attributed to the East who worshipped fire according to Greek historiography[556] and both narratives share at least two issues with the scholium on *Thebais* which refers to the transmission of the Persian-Phrygian god, originally from Persia, to the Roman Empire. Similar to John the Lydian and Firmicus Maternus, the scholiast links Mithras, portrayed as the "handsome Oriental" in the cultic iconography, to the East where people, according to Greek historiography, wore the typical Persian garment (*candys, anaxyrídes, τιάρα*) and worshipped fire.[557] Hence, it is no exageration to state that the late antique descriptions of Mithras and his cult was strongly influenced not only by the cultic iconography and the Mithraic Mystagogues' assertion about the Persian provenance of their god, but also by Greek historiography that characterized Persians as "handsome Orientals" and described their religion as a fire worshipping one.

Thus, I agree with Gordon when he suggests that the Mithraic Mystagogues' efforts to validate the Persian origin of their god influenced the late antique descriptions of Mithras.[558] I go even further and suggest that the cultic iconography and the visual language created by the Mithraic Mystagogues provided proper context for those Roman and Christian authors to describe the Roman Mithraism either as a foreign cult (such as *De errore, 5:1-2*) or as a cult with a foreign god (such as *The Scholia on Thebais I:720*). But I do not agree with Gordon when he classifies these descriptions as one category together with the passages of late antique encyclopaedias (such as the ninth century *Photius' Lexicon*, the fifth century *Hesychii Alexanderini Lexicon*, the Byzantine Greek encyclopedia *Suda*). I have discussed these encyclopedic passages in chapter two, and explained that these definitions follow Greek historiography, and more precisely the *interpretatio graeca* of Persian religions that define Mithras as the Persian sun god, equivalent to the Greek Helios and Apollo. These passages are mainly the repetitions of the Hellenistic description and imagery of the Persian Miϑra and show no connection with the Roman cults of Mithras. Here, I mention that argument just to note that, in contrast to Gordon, I classify the late

[556] See n.199.
[557] For Greek historiography on Persian garments and styles of dress see above.
[558] Gordon, 2017, 303-307.

antique descriptions of the Roman Mithras and his cult into two different groups: the first are those descriptions that followed an *interpretatio graeca* of Mithras (Miϑra) which I discussed in chapter two, while the other considered here are those narratives that trace the Roman cult of Mithras back to Persia. There is also a third category of sources reporting a philosophical interpretation of the cult, and even the reconstruction of Roman Mithraism, which differ from the late antique descriptions and define the cult as a "sub-category of Magian wisdom".[559]

<u>*The Cult of Mithras as Identified by Middle and Neoplatonists*</u>

Celsus was a second century Middle Platonist whose works were handed down to us via the works of the third century Christian apologist Origen. Celsus describes the Roman cult of Mithras in this way:[560]

> These truths [the notions and beliefs] are obscurely represented by the teaching of the Persians and by the mystery of Mithras which is of Persian origin. (*Contra Celsum, 6:22*)[561]

The fragment of Celsus continues by describing those mysteries and the seven gates, each assigned to a planetary god that the souls pass through in their descent to the world and ascent the divine realm. I mentioned this description in the introduction and explained that some scholars employ Celsus' description of the seven gates in accordance to the interior design of the Seven Sphere Mithraeum and locate his narrative in relation to the Mithraic cosmology and the Mithraic notion of the souls' genesis and apogenesis.[562] However, my point here is to explore Celsus' expression of '*mysteries*' (*Μυστήρια*) in describing the Mithras cult rather than to examine his description in relation to the Mithraic cosmology and worldview.

Gordon demonstrates that Celsus' statement was affected by the Mithraic Mystagogues' claim about the Persian origin of their god. After all, Celsus describes the Roman cult of Mithras

[559] Gordon, 2017, 300.
[560] On Celsus' life and works, see: Baltes, 2006.
[561] "Ἑξῆς δὲ τούτοις βουλόμενος ὁ Κέλσος πολυμάθειαν ἑαυτοῦ ἐπιδείξασθαι ἐν τῷ καθ' ἡμῶν λόγῳ ἐκτίθεταί τινα καὶ περσικὰ μυστήρια ἐν οἷς φησιν· Αἰνίττεται ταῦτα καὶ ὁ Περσῶν λόγος, καὶ ἡ τοῦ Μίθρου τελετή, <ἣ> παρ' αὐτοῖς ἐστιν." For the English translation, see: Chadwick, 1965, 334. Here, Origen quotes a section of Celsus' work called *The True Doctrine (ὁ ἀληθὴς λόγος).*
[562] E.g. Beck, 2015; Beck, 1988; Beck, 1979; Gordon, 1976.

as "the mystery of Mithras which is of Persian origin".[563] In other words, similar to classical and late antique descriptions, Celsus' narrative of the Mithraic cosmology reflects the author's slight knowledge of the Mithraic cult, knowledge which could have been obtained second-hand and which depicted the god as the "handsome Oriental."[564] Yet, in contrast to those descriptions, the cult of Mithras in Celsus' narrative is not just a cult with a Persian origin or a cult with a god originated from Persia, it is also a series of truths, teachings and mysteries of the Persians. It is in fact Celsus' deployment of the term *Μυστήρια* (Mystery) that distinguishes his narrative from those classical and late antique descriptions. Thus, the question arises as to why did Celsus use such an expression in describing and interpreting the cosmology of Mithras cult? Indeed, Gordon is right when he responds that *Μυστήρια* suggests a certain level of seriousness and secrecy associated with the Magi, but simultaneously, stimulated a pseudo-history of the foundation of the cult of Mithras by Zoroaster.[565] The fact that I agree with Gordon that the Middle and Neoplatonists' descriptions of the Mithras cult resulted in producing a pseudo-history of the foundation of Roman Mithraism, but I like to stress that these descriptions were in fact intellectual constructions made deliberately and consciously to support the Middle and Neoplatonic agendas that suggest the ancient wisdom as the bedrock for Plato's philosophy. I will return to this issue in below.

Similar to Celsus is the third century Neoplatonist Porphyry, whose description of the Mithras cult can affirm Gordon's argument of its pseudo-history and foundation by Zoroaster. By referring to an unknown philosopher, Eubulus, Porphyry writes:

> Thus also the Persians, mystically signifying the descent of the soul into the sublunary regions, and its regression from it, initiate the mystic (or him who is admitted to the arcane sacred rites) in a place which they denominate a cavern. For, as Eubulus says, Zoroaster was the first who consecrated in the neighbouring

[563] Gordon, 2017, 302-3.
[564] However, in condemning Celsus (as the work is entitled *Κατὰ Κέλσου, Contra Celsum*), Origen uses the same terminology as "mysteries of Mithras of the Persians" (*Περσῶν τοῦ Μίθρου μυστήρια, Contra Celsum, 6:22*). Yet, the fact that Origen's use of the term '*mysteries*' seems to be a repeat of Celsus' expression rather than a deliberate and conscious use of the word, since the main objective of Origen in this section was to criticize Celsus' philosophy of *The True Doctrine (ὁ ἀληθὴς λόγος*) and his argument of the souls' ascending into the divine realm (Origen, Contra Celsum VI, 22-24) and not to argue about the cosmology of the Mithraic cult. Thus, I doubt that we can use Origen's commentary on Celsus' description of the mystery of Mithras as an example of external descriptions that were influenced by the Mystagogues' assertion about the Persian origin of their god.
[565] Gordon, 2017, 301.

> mountains of Persia, a spontaneously produced cave, florid, and having fountains, in honour of Mithra, the maker and father of all things; a cave, according to Zoroaster, bearing a resemblance of the world, which was fabricated by Mithra. (*De Antro,* 2)

Another passage written by Porphyry completes his illustration of the mysteries of Mithras and defines those mysteries as shared by the Magi tradition:

> They [the Magi] are likewise divided into three genera, as we are informed by Eubulus, who wrote the history of Mithra, in a treatise consisting of many books. In this work he says, that the first and most learned class of the Magi neither eat nor slay any thing animated, but adhere to the ancient abstinence from animals. The second class use some animals indeed [for food], but do not slay any that are tame. Nor do those of the third class, similarly with other men, lay their hands on all animals. For the dogma with all of them which ranks as the first is this, that there is a transmigration of souls; and this they also appear to indicate in the mysteries of Mithra [sic]. (*De abstinentia ab esu animalium IV, 16*)

In this sense Porphyry points out at least two issues: first, the foundation of the cult by Zoroaster who consecrated a cave in the Persian mountains for worshipping Mithras (in *De Antro, 2*), and second, linking the mysteries of Mithras to the Magi tradition or at least to rituals shared by the Magi (in *De abstinentia, IV: 16*). This latter issue is shared between Porphyry's narrative and Celsus' description of the cult, which was handed down to us via the third century apologist Origen. Hence, as mentioned above, Porphyry's narrative of the Mithraic mysteries is an appropriate example for Gordon's claim that deploying the term *Μυστήρια* (mystery) suggests both a level of secrecy associated with the tradition of Magi and that the Middle and Neoplatonists produced a pseudo-history of the cult's origin and establishment by Zoroaster. We know it is pseudo-history since the Roman cult of Mithras or— the mystery cult of Mithras, according to their terminology— was established neither by Zoroaster nor by the Magi. Moreover, the pseudo-history of the Mithras cult and their use of the expression *Μυστήρια* (mystery) should be read alongside the Middle and Neoplatonists' own agenda, which was to connect the cult and its mysteries with the Magi whose teachings and philosophy served as the bedrock for Plato's own religious doctrine and philosophy.

Returning to Gordon, he argued that the Middle and Neoplatonic readings of the Mithraic mysteries could affect the Mithraic Mystagogues' efforts both in interpretation and in ritual performances even at the level of small group of initiations. The reason for this, he argues, is that such an effect might result in the appearance of a kind of Mithraic rituals (such as the revelation rituals of the so-called *Mithraic liturgy*) that were different from the version already practiced in the western Empire.[566] However, even if we accept this assumption, it is hard to trace the effects of the Middle and Neoplatonic narratives in contemporaneous Mithraic communities and rituals in the second and third centuries CE. Indeed, those versions of the Mithraic rituals and Mystagogues' own interpretations that Gordon points out here (such as *Mithraic liturgy* dated to fourth century CE) date back to a period later than the second and third centuries CE. Thus, in contrast to Gordon, I wonder about those philosophical discourses that shaped the attitudes of Mithraic Mystagogues, their cultic iconography and their ritual language, prior to Middle and Neoplatonic eras, when Greek historiography constructed the notion of "ancient wisdom" and the figure of "handsome Oriental" in order to shape and to validate their identification of "Greeks" versus "Barbarians." Indeed, this assumption alongside those above questions about the Middle and Neoplatonists' agenda cause us to take one step back and ask how were the Magi imagined and described in previous Greek and Roman history and philosophy, and why did these figures appear significant to Middle and Neoplatonic philosophers, and their interpretations of the Mithraic cult in particular?

Tradition of Magi and the Notion of "ancient wisdom"

The term Magi (sin. Magus, Μάγος, Μάγοι) refers to Persian priests, particularly in Western Iran, from the time of Medes to the Sasanian era.[567] However, there is no certain information about the Western group of Magi prior to the Zoroastrian period and scholars characterize them differently. Some scholars hold that they are a specific tribe among the Medes and disciples of Zoroaster. Others consider them neither as a tribe nor as disciples of Zoroaster and suggest that they followed the Pre-Zoroastrian Indo-Iranian religion in opposition to Zoroaster.[568]

[566] Gordon, 2017, 301; ibid, 303.
[567] Dandamayev, 2012.
[568] Cf. Dandamayev, 1992, 167. This identification of Magi can also be read in Cumont's interpretation of the Roman imagery of Mithars as a bull-killing deity. Above, in examining Cumont's interpretation of the tauroctony, I explained that Gershevitch and Frye developed Cumont's argument about the Roman iconography of Mithras as a bull-killing deity in reference to a group of Magi who lived in Western Iran and worshipped the bull-killing Mithras (Miϑra) as

However, an accurate reconstruction of this priesthood and their religion is difficult owing to the few available textual sources.[569]

In his inscription at Naqš-e Rostam, Šāpur I (the second Sasanian king, r. 239-70) mentions the Magi as the priests with whom they founded many fires and honoured the cult of the gods.[570] However, the Magi also had significant roles in economic and political structures from earlier periods. According to the Persepolis fortification tablet 1955 (PF.1955), a Magus named Ukpiš received three *irtiba* (measures) for holding the *lan* ceremony, three for venerating Miϑra, three for the mountain *Ariaramnes*, three for the river *Ahinharišda*.[571] Some records from Babylonia demonstrate the presence of Magi (or in fact, a group of Magi) in this city, most likely in order to hold the religious ceremony for the Persians and Medes who resided in Babylonia as a part of the Achaemenid royal court.[572] Moreover, there is some evidence validating the appearance of Magi in Egypt and in Dascylium where the Achaemenid satrapy in Northwestern Anatolia was located until 330s BCE.[573] A relief from Dascylium shows two Magi dressed in tunics and trousers with covered mouths performing the Persian religious ceremony (see fig. 49).[574] Strabo writes about the community of Magi and the many altars dedicated to their gods in Cappadocia.[575] The abbreviation *mgw* for the term Magi appears on the Parthian jewelry and amulets, and offers a clue to their social and religious position among the Persians.[576] From the late third century CE, the prestige of the Magi as the Zoroastrian priests *(mow)* and chief priests (*mowbed)*, grew considerably and they acquired a powerful role in the Sasanian royal court. The Sasanian seals

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their creator god. The bull-killing Mithras (Miϑra) was indeed one of the daēvas in the Indo-Iranian pantheon that was the pre-Zoroastrian religion of Persia. This group of priests as daēva worshippers were the enemy of Zoroaster who worshipped and proclaimed Ahura Mazdā as the creator deity. Cf: De Jong, 1997, 390. On the Indo-Iranian religion, see: chapter one.

[569] De Jong, 1997, 391.

[570] Cf. Dandamayev, 2012. For the English translation of Šāpur I's inscription at Naqš-e Rostam, see: Soward, 2013, on E-Sasanika, Late-Antique Iran Project.

[571] For the transcription and English translation, see: Hallock, 1969, 559 (PF.1955).

[572] Dandamayev, 1992, 166. In contrast, I would like to emphasize that though the presence of the Magi in Babylonia seems reasonable and was validated by historical evidence, it cannot account for Cumont's hypothesis of a Persian cult of Miϑra (Mithras) that was transmitted from Persia to Babylon by a group of Magi. There is no record revealing the veneration of a Persian Miϑra solely and independently by this group of priests who moved and settled down in Babylonia. Indeed, their presence in Babylonia parallels their appearance in Egypt during the Achaemenid period and in that historical moment, the image of the Persian Miϑra that far from the one transmitted to the Roman Empire.

[573] On the Magi's appearance in Egypt, see: e.g. Late Babylonian Texts in the Ashmolean Museum.

[574] However, while such an imagery can be accounted for performing the Zoroastrian ceremony, it cannot be interpreted as an account for the veneration of Miϑra independent of Persian practice.

[575] Strabo, *Geography,* XV, 3:15.

[576] Dandamayev, 2012. For the abbreviation on amulets, see: Gignoux, 1978, 65, no.8:2.

document the chief priests' participations in political and administrative affairs, their role in ritual performances and in the judiciary system.[577]

Greek historiography characterizes the Magi as the disciples of Zoroaster and the priesthood of his cult, who held a dualistic religious doctrine and who were expert astrologers and prophets. In the *Histories*, the Magi are named as one of the six Median tribes united by Deioces.[578] Herodotus mentions that religious sacrifice was not lawful among Persians without the presence of a Magus. The Magus engaged in the sacrificial ceremony by reading the song of the birth of the gods.[579] They also offered libations in the form of sacrificial white horses to heroes and rivers.[580] As reported by Herodotus, the Magi were unlike Egyptian priests (and in fact unlike all other people) and they were responsible for performing death rituals.[581] They could also predict the future, and interpret visions and zodiac charts, as they interpreted the third vision of the Achaemenid king Xerxes (ca. 519-466 BCE) regarding his domination over the world.[582] De Jong asserts that the Zoroastrian corpus evidences the Persian Magi's awareness of astrology from earlier times.[583]

From the late fifth century and beginning of fourth century, Greek intellectuals enriched the Greek topoi of Magi made by Herodotus, and the term Magi began to connote secrecy and magic, and came to mean magician in Greek, Latin and early Christian sources.[584] In the *Cyropaedia* (ca. 430-354 BCE), the Magi appear as both the teachers and the priests who perform sacrifices and religious rituals.[585] In his *Natural History*, the first century CE philosopher Pliny the Elder mentions that according to Eudoxus, the magical art (science), originated in Persia under

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577 On the titles of Zoroastrian priests, their roles and power under the Sasanian reign, see: Daryaee, 2009, 127-29.
578 Herodotus, *the Histories I*, 101.
579 Herodotus, *the Histories I*, 132.
580 Herodotus, *the Histories VII*, 43; ibid, 113.
581 Herodotus, *the Histories I*, 140.
582 Herodotus, *the Histories I*, 120; I, 107; VII, 19. On both the divinatory practices and the reading of the Zodiac charts, see: ibid VII, 37. De Jong suggests that the Magi's skills in divinatory practices and the interpretation of visions, as remarked by Greek historiography, may relate to the significant Zoroastrian placed on dreams "because it is in dreams that the divinities may appear to human beings." De Jong, 1997, 396. In agreement with De Jong, the notion of dreams in the sense of epiphany and the idea facing the god in dreams was also widespread in the Greek and Roman worlds. From this point of view, a dream was a device to encounter divinity. For the Greek and Roman ideas of epiphany, see: e.g. Edelstein, E and Edelstein, L, 1998, e.g. T 444, T 445, T 446, T 449.
583 On the astrology fragments in the Zoroastrian corpus, see: e.g. the *Great Bundahišn, IV & V.*
584 On the difficulty of the different connotations of the term Magi (*Μάγοι*), see: De Jong, 1997, 393-4. On magic and magicians in Greece and Rome, see: Graf and Johnston, 2006.
585 Xenophon, *Cyropaedia VIII*, 3:11-12.

Zoroaster, and was the most important of all philosophical schools.[586] The late second century Christian author, Clement of Alexandria, mentions Magi engaging in nightly ecstatic rituals similar to Bacchic devotees.[587] In Acts of the Apostles, Simon is given the name of Magus after it is said he was practicing magic in Samaria,[588] and the Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Peter describe him as the messenger of Satan, a sorcerer, a magus, a thief and the enemy of Christ who acquires his power from Satan.[589] Yet, it is necessary to mention that my focus is on the stereotype of the Magi as the disciple of Zoroaster and the priesthood of his religion, and not the connotation of the Magi as Magicians.

Parallel to their historiography, Greek philosophy also developed the topoi of the Magi as "wise men" and characterized them as the disciples of Zoroaster whose teachings and philosophy comprised "ancient wisdom". For Plato and his counterpart Aristotle, and later for the Stoics, Zoroaster and his disciples were always positioned as "wise men" teaching "ancient wisdom". "Ancient wisdom", according to the Greeks, meant the wisdom from the very first person that was preserved in mythology and came down to the present via the work of wise people. For instance, the first century CE stoic philosopher Seneca ascribes the notion of "ancient wisdom" to the very first man in the golden age who followed his instincts and nature to behave.[590] According to Seneca, this first human being was free from the distortion and immorality that we suffer from today. While the very first man did right by his nature in a pre-technical and pre-philosophical age, the invention of the arts (in Seneca's words, the invention of mechanical tools) based on self-consciousness changed the understanding of the world and transformed this understanding into a technical and non-mechanical level. This new understanding and the technical world led people away from their previous virtue rather than supported it.[591]

It was through Pythagoras, the sixth century BCE philosopher that the notion of "ancient wisdom" came to the attention of Plato.[592] Pythagoras inspired Plato and acquainted him with the

[586] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History XXX*, 2.
[587] Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 2.22.2; cf. De Jong, 1997, 387-8.
[588] *Acts of the Apostles*, 8:5-13. On "Simon Magus", see: Fitzmyer, 1998, 403, note.9.
[589] Misset-Van De Weg, 1998, 97.
[590] Seneca, *Epistle XC*.
[591] Boys-Stone, 2001, 42-3; ibid, 111-12.
[592] Platonism intersects with Pythagoreanism in at least in three dimensions: they are both interested in an immaterial soul; they enjoy similar anthropology and cosmology; and they both denigrate material objects, such as the body. See: Adamson, 2014, 29.

"wise men" who were the Brahmins, the Magi, the Egyptians, and the Jews.[593] The biographies of Pythagoras regularly highlight his enthusiasm for "ancient wisdom" handed down via the philosophy of "wise men". According to the third century CE Neoplatonist Porphyry, Pythagoras also met Chaldeans, Phoenicians and Egyptians.[594]

Pythagoras was not the sole pre-Socratic philosopher to be invested in "ancient wisdom" and the philosophy of "wise men". According to Diogenes Laertius, Heraclitus, the six century pre-Socrates philosopher, had some sort of relationship with the Achaemenid king Darius I, and was acquainted with the teachings of Zoroaster who was one of the "wise men".[595] Empedocles is another pre-Socrates philosopher whose philosophy alludes to the Zoroastrian dualistic worldview, or more precisely, to the Zoroastrian dualism highlighted by Greeks.[596]

Aristotle placed the Persian Magi prior to the Egyptians, with the pre-Socratic thinkers and Orpheus in the line of "wise men".[597] His references to the Oriental philosophy and teachings, particularly in his earlier writings, aimed at demonstrating Greek philosophy's reliance on Oriental philosophy and the philosophy of the Magi in particular.[598] Some scholars contend that either a Chaldean or a follower of Zoroaster joined the Academy in its last years.[599] This information might be pseudo-historiography about the Platonic Academy, as Aristotle became familiar with the philosophy of Magi and the notion of "ancient wisdom" from Plato and his academy. Indeed, the notion of "ancient wisdom" served as the bedrock for Plato's philosophy and anthropology, and the thrust of his philosophy was in the reconstruction of "ancient wisdom" from which it obtained its validity.[600]

Until the late republic and by the time of Augustus, the image of Magi as the "wise men" and the disciples of Zoroaster, along with being experts in prophecy and astrology, was established

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[593] Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 6; cf. Goldman, 2009, 444.
[594] Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 12.
[595] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers IX*, 1; cf. Charoust, 1965, 578, n.19.
[596] Cf. Charoust, 1965, 578. On Empedocles' dualistic philosophy, see: Adamson, 2014, 64-69. It is necessary to mention that the process of *interpretatio graeca* emphasized dualism as the main component of Zoroastrianism. In other words, it was indeed what the Greeks knew about it. On the identification of Zoroastrianism as a dualism, see: chapter two, note.32.
[597] Jaeger, 1948, 128-31; Chroust, 1965, 572.
[598] Chroust, 1965, 573; cf. ibid, 580. Indeed, *On Philosophy* is Aristotle's main source when he discusses the philosophy of the East and beyond.
[599] Charoust, 1965, 576.
[600] Boys-Stone, 2001, 115.

and spread across the Greco-Roman world. The Romans then embraced and adopted the Greek ideal of Persian Magi in their historiography and philosophy. The first century BCE Roman orator and lawyer, Cicero, presents the Persian Magi as the wise men among the Persians, experts in prophecy and interpreting visions and dreams. In *De Natura Deorum,* Cicero narrates a story where Cyrus II the Great (ca. 600-530 BCE) dreamed three time that the sun appeared at his feet. Each time, he attempted to seize it, but the sun escaped and finally disappeared. Thus, Cyrus demanded the Magi interpret his dream, and they answered the Achaemenid king, saying:

> He [Cyrus] was told by the Magi, who are classed as wise and learned men among the Persians that his grasping for the sun three times portended that he would reign for thirty years. (*De Natura Deorum I, 23:46*)[601]

Cicero (*De Natura Deorum I*, 41: 91) also claims that Magi tutored the Persian king.[602] In Strabo's *Geography* (*VX*, 3), Magi conduct the sacrificial ceremonies and offer libation to the rivers.[603] The second century CE Syrian satirist Lucian, claims that the Magi could travel to the underworld. In his *Menippus,* a wise man from the Chaldeans, named *Mithrobarzanes,* claims that he has the capacity to travel to the underworld.[604] Some scholars suggest that Lucian's description of *Mithrobarzanes* refers to a genuine tradition coming from Persian Magi who asserted that they could travel to hell and heaven and receive a special vision and inner knowledge.[605]

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[601]"ei magos dixisse, quod genus sapientium et doctorum habebatur in Persis, ex triplici appetitione solistriginta annos Cyrum regnaturum esse portendi." For the English translation, see: Falconer, 1923, 275.

[602] Cicero, *De Devination I,* 41: 91.

[603] Strabo, *Geography VX*, 3.

[604] Lucian, *Mennipus*, 6. De Jong claims that *Mithrobarzanes* is Magus among Chaldeans, since the identification of the Persian Magi as a group of the Chaldeans was a common miss-identification of them in Greek sources. De Jong, 1997, 393.

[605] De Jong refers to the Sasanian Zoroastrian priest Kirdir who claimed to have gained inner knowledge from visions and their travels to the underworld. De Jong writes, "The suggestion that Lucian's description of the activities of *Mithrobarzanes* was not entirely his own [Lucian's] fantasy remains an attractive possibility." De Jong, 1997, 399; cf. Kingsley, 2009, 226-27. Kingsley interprets *Mithrobarzanes*' (Lucian's Magus) ability to descend to the underworld as a shamanic act and links the tradition of Persian Magi to north-Asiatic shamanism. However, I like to emphasize that though *Mithrobarzanes* (*Μιθροβαρζάνης*) is a Persian name denoting a Persian genealogy, the text directly notes that he was a wise man (*σοφῷ ἀνδρὶ*) from the Chaldeans (*Χαλδαίων*) and not from the Magi nor even Persian. Thus, to assert De Jong's hypothesis, we need to confirm either the misidentification of Chaldeans with the Magi, or simply accept the hypothesis of Magi as a group of priests in Western Iran whose winter residence was Babylon. More notably, some ancient scholars referred to the Chaldeans as Babylonians, or as synonymous with Magicians and astrologers. See: Dandamayev, 2012; cf. n.237. In this sense, *Mithrobarzanes* could be a Chaldean or an astrologer who lived in Babylon. Perhaps, we can simply understand this fragment as Lucian's efforts to provide an esoteric genre for his story, though this priestly proficiency might have some genuine parallels among both Magi and Chaldeans.

In addition to the Greek and Roman authors, Christian writers also describe the Magi as expert astrologers who came from the Orient. In his gospel, Matthew mentions a group of three Magi who came from the East in search of Jesus, the king of Jews, whom they know by his star:

> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. (*The Gospel of Matthew*, *2:1*)

Likewise, the Syriac text of *The Revelation of the Magi*, a pseudoepigraphical Christian text dated to the early third or late second century CE, describes the Magi as the astrologers who live in a land called "Shir" located in the extreme eastern edge of the world, and who pray to God in silence, in a cave on the highest of their land.[606] Early Christian writings develop the image of the Persian Magi as expert astrologers in order to validate their own agenda that Jesus, the king of Jews and the son of the God, was known from the extreme eastern edge of the world. Thus, Jesus' star arose in the sky and seen by the Magi, who were the most expert astrologers in their time. The figure of the Magi thus gives the birth narrative of Jesus an exotic, Oriental flair.

Roman philosophy also adapted the Greek stereotype of the Magi and the notion of "ancient wisdom" as part of the Magian teachings. Following Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, the entire schools of Middle and Neoplatonism were inspired by the notion of "wise men" and many next generation philosophers repeated the trope that "ancient wisdom" originated from the East. Among them, Plutarch, Celsus and Porphyry are notable examples, particularly for our argument on the Roman cult of Mithras. I have already discussed Plutarch's works in chapter two, where I demonstrated Plutarch's interpretation of the mediator Miϑra in the Zurvanite cosmogony, and his use of the Zoroastrian dualism in his own dualistic philosophy and demonology in particular. Here, it is enough just to say that Plutarch's writings, philosophy, metaphysic and ethics simply reveal his interest in Persian culture and religion. [607] The reliance of certain aspects of Plutarch's

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[606] Some scholars render the term Magi as "wise men". On the original date and language of the text, see: Landua, 2016, 21-3. On the content, see: ibid, 30-38; cf. Landau, 2010, 35-88.

[607] On Plutarch's philosophy, see: Dillon, 1977, 184-228. For Plutarch's view on Zoroastrianism and Persian Miϑra in "The Persian Miϑra in the Eyes of Greeks and Romans", see: chapter two. Almagor shows how Plutarch follows the Socratic tradition in characterizing the Persian kings as ethical models. On Plutarch's historiography, see: Almagor, 2017, 133-42. On Plutarch on Persian dualism, see: ibid, 151-61.

philosophy on the "ancient wisdom" mainly appears in his book *De Iside et Osiride* where he deals with both Egyptian mythology and the teachings of Zoroaster whom he calls *μάγος*.[608]

Celsus who I discussed at the start of this section, also provides a list of "wise men" in his *The True Doctrine (ὁ ἀληθὴς λόγος*) whose philosophies and teachings inspired their contemporaneous people. As quoted by Origen, Celsus writes:

> For he [Celsus] says that Linus, Musaeus, Orpheus, Pherecydes, Zoroaster the Persian, and Pythagoras understood these doctrines [the true doctrine], and their opinions were put down in books and are preserved to this day. (*Contra Celsum, 1:16*)[609]

Likewise, Porphyry also wrote about the Magi as the Persian priests and the disciples of Zoroaster. In the *Life of Plotinus*, the biography of his teacher, Porphyry mentions Plotinus was keen to learn about Persian concepts and methods adopted by Brahmins.[610] Perhaps this shows that Porphyry acquired his knowledge about the Persian religion from his teacher, the inheritor of a rich philosophical tradition that had a great interest in Persia and Persian religion. For Porphyry, the Magi are those who were wise among the Persians and worshipped the divinity. As mentioned above, in his *De abstinentia ab esu animalium*, Porphyry provides some information about the three priesthood classes among the Magi who had different diets but shared ideas regarding the souls' genesis and apogenesis.[611] This imagery appears also in his commentary on the thirteenth book of the Odyssey, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, where Porphyry proposes an allegorical description of the Mithraic cult. Zoroaster, he says, consecrated a cave in the mountains of Persia and there, for the first-time, worshipped Mithras as the creator.[612] Among the Persians and the Magi were those ancient ones for whom the cave was a miniature image of cosmos symbolizing the souls' genesis and apogenesis in the world. Aaron Johnson has recently suggested that

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[608] Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride, 46 E.*

[609] "Καὶ Μωϋσέα, Λίνον δὲ καὶ Μουσαῖον καὶ Ὀρφέα καὶ τὸν Φερεκύδην καὶ τὸν Πέρσην Ζωροάστρην καὶ Πυθαγόραν φήσας περὶ τῶνδε διειληφέναι, καὶ ἐς βίβλους κατατεθεῖσθαι τὰ ἑαυτῶν δόγματα καὶ πεφυλάχθαι αὐτὰ μέχρι δεῦρο." For the English translation, see: Chadwick, 1965, 18.

[610] Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Works*, 3. Cf, Boys-Stone, 2001, 113.

[611] Porphyry, *De abstinentia ab esu animalium,* 4:16. De Jong argues that Porphyry ascribed Pythagoraean characteristics to the Magi. Since Porphyry refers to Neo-Pythagoraean sources throughout the text and more notably, it seems unlikely for the followers of Zoroaster were vegetarian. See: De Jong, 1997, 395. This picture fits with the scenario that I suggested here, that the Greek notion of "ancient wisdom" was originated in the Pre-socratic tradition. Middle and Neoplatonists later incorporated this constructed notion in their philosophy.

[612] Porphyry, *on the cave of the Nymphs,* 2-3.

Porphyry uses the Persians for his "ethnic argumentation" that is "the use of ethnic representation as one of the principle mechanisms driving an argument,"[613] and pursued his philosophical argumentation.[614] I agree with Johnson when he says Porphyry used the Persian ethnicity in order to validate his own argument about "ancient wisdom" and about Zoroaster as one of the wise men, along with the Magi as his disciples. As Johnson himself elaborates, Porphyry's reference to the Greeks, Egyptians, Persians, Syrians, Indians and Jews was rooted in the esoteric imagination of these ethnics as Eastern people, and the idea that not only Plato but also Pre-socrates philosophers such as Pythagoras acquired their wisdom from their philosophy and religions.[615] Thus, the conception of "ethnic argumentation" can be linked not only to Porphyry's use of these ethnics and the Persians in particular but also to the larger context of Middle and Neoplatonists' use of the Persian ethnicity to fulfill their agenda of "ancient wisdom" and its focal role for Plato's philosophy and religious doctrine. In this sense, the Persian ethnicity alludes to the Middle and Neoplatonists' conception of "ancient wisdom" and placed the Persians and the Magi in the line of wise men alongside the Brahmins, the Chaldeans, the Egyptians and the Phoenicians whose philosophy and religions comprised the "ancient wisdom".

Not only Porphyry, Plutarch and Celsus, but also other Middle and Neoplatonists as well as Christian apologists took advantage of the Persian identity, culture and religion to support their own agendas. Indeed, the Mithraic Mystagogues' assertions about the Persian provenance of their god and the cultic iconography that portrayed the god as the "handsome Oriental" assisted Middle and Neoplatonists' philosophical agenda. It identified the Roman Mithras cult as a part of the Magi tradition, or mysteries shared by the Magi, whose teaching of "ancient wisdom" was the bedrock of Plato's religious doctrine and philosophy.

Consequently, I agree with Gordon in saying that using the term "μυστήρια" provides the Middle and Neoplatonists' descriptions of the Mithraic cult with a high level of secrecy and sacred knowledge attributed to the Magi tradition. I also argue that the significance of the Magi tradition to the Middle and Neoplatonists was through its believed connection to "ancient wisdom" and which served to legitimate the historical foundation of their philosophy. However, I would go even

[613] Johnson, 2013, 204.
[614] Johnson, 2013, 201.
[615] Johnson, 2013, 197-201.

further and suggest that the Mithraic Mystagogues' assertion of the Persian provenance of their god, the antique and late antique descriptions ascribing the god and his cult to Persia, and the Middle and Neoplatonists' narratives classifying the cult as shared mysteries with the Magi, need to be interpreted in relation to the cultural milieu of the Roman Empire and Rome's encounter with Persia. This view leads us to the final phase of this dissertation, namely to explore the appearance of the Persian Miϑra (Mithras) in the shadow of political and cultural relations between Rome and Persia as the two powers that run the two sides of the ancient Mediterranean world.

3.4. Conclusion: Deifying Ethnic Imagery

I agree with Gordon in saying that "[t]he abandonment of Mithraic grand récite, once welcomed by Beck, allows us new, deliberately exploratory, ways of looking that take their cue from themes and issues current in other discourses."[616] Indeed, acknowledging the hybrid themes of Mithraic imagery sheds light on the idea that the Roman Mystagogues had a clear vision of the Persian origin of their god and even stressed his Oriental provenance through the cultic iconography. Moreover, this view expands our options to go beyond a simple choice between the metanarratives of continuity or discontinuity. Accordingly, Roman Mithraism is neither the continuation of Persian veneration of Miϑra nor a pure celestial cult invented in the Roman Empire, it is rather a Roman invention from Hellenistic sources that should be understood in the cultural context of the Roman Empire.

The Mithraic iconography depicted a Mithras entirely different from the Avestan charioteer Miϑra and the Antiochan imagery that represented Mithras as a hybrid deity alongside Apollo, Helios and Hermes. In fact, the Roman imagery of the god and his attendants reveal the familiarity of the Roman Mystagogues with the Persian provenance of Mithras and the Greek description of the Persian god, but not with his Zoroastrian counterpart. The Roman Mystagogues portrayed their god as a "handsome Oriental" who originated from Persia, but he was not the same as the Zoroastrian charioteer deity with a thousand ears and ten thousand eyes who oversees all contracts. Rather than the Zoroastrian god or the Antiochan hybrid deity, the Roman imagery of Mithras evoked the Greek and Roman descriptions of the Persian Miϑra who was partly identified with the

[616] Gordon, 2017a, 20.

sun and the counterpart of Helios. Additionally, the antique and late antique descriptions of the Roman cult together with the Middle and Neoplatonists' interpretations developed the cultic visual language and complemented the "handsome Oriental" image of the god Mithras by adding a high level of secrecy ascribed to the Magi tradition as well as to the god's character and his cult. The Roman Mithras was a "handsome Oriental" whose cult shared its mysteries with the tradition of Magi that comprised the "ancient wisdom", which was the blueprint for Plato's religious ideas and philosophy. In fact, it was Rome's military encounters with her neighbours that helped to create a cultural-religious markert in the Empire and provided different options for the inhabitants of the Empire to articulate their identity and ethnicity in relation to other ethnicities.

Ultimately, the Mithraic Mystagogues' claim about the Persian provenance of their god, and their use of a widespread iconography associated with the East raises the question: Why did the Roman Mithraists deliberately stress the Persian origin of their god and depict him as a "handsome Oriental"? Why did the Roman Mystagogues desire to construct a foreign image of their god? I will deal with these issues in following chapter.

Epilogue

The Persian Miϑra in the Context of Cultural and Military Encounters Between Rome and Persia

This project has traced the cultural transmission of Mithras from the Persian to the Hellenistic and, finally, Roman worlds. Tracing how the god was variously constructed and presented in the different worlds, I conclude by arguing that Roman images of the god Mithras was constructed from romantic visions of Persia which were inherited from the Greeks. As such, this Roman mystery cult offers an underappreciated set of sources to examine Romans' perception of the Orient, and of Persia in particular. As I will suggest in this Epilogue, this representation of Persia was significant to Rome due to her cultural contacts and political conflicts with her eastern neighbors. To borrow Micheal Schneider's terminology, the Roman Mithras turned out to be a "handsome Oriental," and the cult imagery of the god offers an example of the Roman practice of accentuating the Persians' exotic culture and luxurious lifestyle for their own social and religious ends.

This thesis began by reconstructing the figure of Mitra/Miϑra in his earliest appearances in both the Vedic and Zoroastrian pantheons. I used this reconstruction as a control set of data to compare with the cultic imagery of Mithras found in the Hellenistic and Roman sources. I showed that the Vedic Mitra and the Persian Miϑra both personified the notion of "contract" and acted as contract-keeping deity. However, in contrast to the minor role that the Vedic Mitra played (he was often accompanied by Varuṇa, Indra and Aryaman), the Zoroastrian Miϑra was the overseer of all contracts and penalized those who spoke untruth. With his thousand ears and ten thousand eyes, Miϑra was the judge and traversed the world alongside the sun to pass judgment on people. He was also the Zoroastrian psychopomp who accompanied the souls of the dead in crossing the Činwad Puhl (Bridge).

In chapter two, I examined some passages of Greek historiography that discussed Persian religion, and I demonstrated that these Greek authors identified the Persian Miϑra as the counterpart of Helios and Apollo. In turn they depicted a figure of the god to their audiences who was legible to their Greek worldview. I further claimed that this identification of the god was taken

up by the late antique encyclopedic tradition, which also solidified the notion of Miϑra as the Persian sun god and the counterpart of Apollo and Helios. In the last section of this chapter, I focused on the hybrid deity Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes and explored the Antiochian imagery of the god as the first known representation that depicted Mithras (Miϑra) dressed in the Persian garment. I concluded that the Greek understanding of the Persian god Miϑra not only differed from the god as he appears in the Zoroastrian pantheons, but also that these Greek sources were essential in transmitting a figure of the god into the Roman Empire.

Chapter three argued that the Roman imagery of Mithras shows no familiarity with the figure of Miϑra found in the Avestan and Pahlavi sources, and confirms that Roman imagery reflects the image of the god constructed by the Greeks in the Hellenistic era. In that chapter, I examined different examples of the Mithraic tauroctony in order to show that the cultic iconography of Mithras and his attendants was rooted in the Greek understanding of the Persians. I proposed that the Mithraic Mystagogues obtained their knowledge about Mithras (Miϑra) from Hellenistic narratives and imagery of the god, and also embraced the Greek stereotype of the "handsome Oriental" to create a cultic iconography that stressed the Persian provenance of their cultic deity. Lastly, I explored how the cultic imagery and iconography of Mithras that stressed the Persian provenance of the god affected the narratives of the cult by Roman-period authors, namely Middle and Neoplatonists. As I demonstrated, these authors had no personal engagement with the cult; yet, as the external observers of the cultic language created by Mithraic Mystagogues that portrayed the god dressed in the Persian garment, these authors traced the god back to Persia and described his cult as Persian mysteries shared by the Magi. These Roman authors were acquinted with the Greek imagination of Persians and their religion via Greek ethnography and Greek philosophical writings. Such knowledge enbled Statius to characterize Mithras as the god who carried the bull into a cave in the Persain mountains, and enabled Firmicus Maternus to describe Mithras as the male principle of the fire which was worshipped by the Persians and Magi. Accordingly, I concluded that the Roman authors' understanding and descriptions of the god implies that they were influenced to some degree by the Persianized look of the Mithras cult. The look and manifestation that was deliberately created and emphasized by the Mithraic Mystagogues.

In this final section, I ask why the Roman Mithraists were motivated to create a novel visual language and to show their god as the "handsome Oriental". What, in other words, prompted them

to present their god as Persian? Why, moreover, might Persianness have appealed to the military men who became cult initiates? Here I briefly contextualize the cultic iconography in the socio-cultic context of Roman Mithraism and also in the broader cultural-political context of the Roman Empire in which the cult took root. I argue that Roman Mithraists crafted cultic iconography and a visual language, a sort of constructed "Persian-look," to create a historical consciousness and cultic identity for themselves.

Jörg Rüpke's notion of historicization is useful to understand what cultic iconography can reveal about Mithraic identity and community. Rüpke defines the historicization of religions as a process whereby a current religious phenomenon is constructed, or imagined, to have roots in the past.[617] Framing their cult as Persian was a mode of rhetoric that the Mystagogues used to provide their cult and community with such a history, with a god who originated from the East. In doing so, the Mithraists used the qualities of secrecy and esoteric knowledge that were associated with Persia and Persian religion. As elaborated in chapter three, there seems to have been a mutually-informing relationship between the Mithraic visual language created by the Mithraic Mystagogues and the descriptions written by Middle and Neoplatonists that linked the Roman cult of Mithras to Persian religion and the tradition of Magi. Indeed, such an internal view of the cult that considered the Mitharic brotherhood as a "mystery society" is also evidented by the social structure of Mithraic brotherhood that prohibited Mithraists from revealing the cultic concepts and rituals to non-initiates. Moreover, historicizing their cult in this way, the Mithraists participated in the larger discourse of Rome's imagination of her eastern neighbour. The depictions of the god Mithras, the visual language and the rituals that grew up around the god and his cult reflect Rome's perception of the Orient and the Persians in particular. In other words, it was not the case that Romans simply depicted and borrowed the god Mithras from his Persian milieu, as has been considered traditionally. Rather, I am arguing that the Roman Mithraists embraced a certain Greek stereotype of the barbarian other and people from the Orient—the so called "handsome Oriental"—in order to assert the Oriental provenance of their god. Here I suggest that Mithraic visual language and the Mithraic Mystagogues' use of the "handsome Oriental" motif to portray their god can be understood in relation to Rome's policy and strategy towards others, especially Persia.

[617] On the notion of Historicization and historiography of religions, see: Rüpke, 2011, 285-309.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s post-colonial theories came to the attention of the field of Roman studies. These theoretical perspectives changed the way that scholars understood and interpreted the political thought and strategies of Rome towards her conquered lands and foreign neighbors during the Republican and Imperial eras. The meaning of the term "Romanization," which defined Rome's superior relation to her conquered peoples, was criticized and fell out of favor.[618] Postcolonial studies have since argued that Romanization should be understood to reflect the multiplicity of the Roman identity and been read as a process whereby conquered people adapt and adopt the culture of their conquerors, thus, variously incorporating Roman culture and identity as their own. These studies challenged Romanization both as a top-down process and as a term that suggested at the superiority of Roman culture and identity over that of non-Roman cultures and identities. As a result scholars are now more attentive to Roman attitudes toward foreign cultures and peoples as ethnocentric attitudes that also entailed idealization and even admiration for the perceived exoticism of certain foreign peoples. For my part, what is key in this scholarship is to note how the Romans perceived or even idealized Persians as an "exotic other" productively in the construction of the Mithras cult.

Romans traditionally saw themselves as the inheritors of Greek historiography, philosophy and all other dimensions of Greek intellectuality. Both Greeks and Romans had different attitudes towards those foreigners who lived among them, so-called immigrants, and those aliens living at a distance.[619] The Greeks used the term barbarians for all foreigners. In his narrative of the Greco-Persian war, for instance, Herodotus (ca. 485-424 BCE) implied the term to describe the Persians not positively but respectfully. For him, the Persians were non-Greek enemies but the dominant authority in the east. By emphasizing the asymmetries and differences between Greek and Persian practices, Herodotus conceptualized Greek identity in opposition to Persian identity, and first established the stereotype of Persians as an esteemed foe. According to Herodotus' *Historia*, the Persians worshiped the sun, the moon, and other natural powers in addition to a supreme deity without erecting any temple or any dedication to their gods. He also said that they taught their sons three things: to ride a horse, to use the bow, and to speak the truth.[620] Even after his time, Greeks continued to portray the people attributed to the East and the Persians, in particular, as the

[618] Lulic, 2015, 21.
[619] Isaac, 2013.
[620] Herodotus, *Historia*, 1.131-140.

"handsome Oriental". Benjamin Isaac argues that this respectful imagination of the barbarians and the Persians in particular, gradually changed over time and toward the end of the fifth century BCE, the idea of natural slavery justified the superiority of Greeks over barbarians. Isocrates (436-338 BCE) speaks about the hatred of Persia and the unification between Greeks against barbarians.

The idea of natural slavery was developed by Aristotle. In his book *Politics*, he suggests that some people are masters naturally over others who are barbarians and slaves.[621] However, Greeks had a controversial encounter with barbarians and the Persians in particular. For instance, the main theme in the *Anabasis* and the *Cyropaedia* is Persia, where Xenophon (431-354 BCE) admires the Persians and described them respectfully. Isaac notes that there are also some Greek passages that reflect egalitarian views of Greekness and barbarian.[622] However, as I discussed in chapter three, Alexander's conquest over Persia changed Greek attitudes towards Persians into a positive and reverential tone. Alexander immitated the Persian kings' style of dressing and ruling, and he married a Persian princess. In sum, Alexander and his successors' imitations of and reactions towards Persians evoke the Herodotian image of Persia as an esteemed enemy which should be defeated, but also venerated at some points.

Under the Augustan cultural evolution, the Greek tradition was evoked to construct a Roman past to revitalize Roman society and culture in the aftermath of civil wars.[623] Rome's enthusiasm for foreign cultures was extended particularly under the Principate. When Augustus took the throne, Rome was in transition and experienced social, economic and political problems. Augustus sought new ways to revive Rome through establishing peace, security and a law-based rule.[624] By emphasizing the past and opening the gates of the Roman world, Augustus attempted to provide solutions to those social and political problems that the senatorial aristocracy of Rome were not able to solve or were unwilling to recognize.[625] When Rome opened doors to the Orient and the local cultures of conquered territories at the end of the first century BCE, it was in Galinsky's words "a time of transition, of continuing experimentation" in social and foreign policy, art, literature and religion.[626] Undoubtedly, Augustus's view of *parta victoriis pax* (*Pax Augusta*,

[621] Isaac, 2013.
[622] Isaac, 2013. For seeing an example of this egalitarian view see: Antiphon, *De Veritate: 420.*
[623] On the "Augustan evolution" see: Galinsky, 1996, 3-9.
[624] Galinsky, 1996, 8.
[625] Galinsky, 1996, 8-9.
[626] Galinsly, 1996, 9.

peace achieved through victory)[627] and the Augustan conception of openness to others enabled the social and cultural context in which Romans could embrace foreign cultural phenomena.

Yet even before Augustus' rule, the expansion of Roman territory in the Republican period already compeled the Romans to engage with different groups of immigrants and the inhabitants of the conquered lands both in eastern and western boundaries. Thus, the Romans made a new group of Romans, Greeks and barbarians.[628] Later Rome would even grant citizenship to these foreign people and the inhabitants of the provinces and conquered lands.[629] What is of interest to this project, however, is that in the late Republican and early Imperial period, the Romans were selectively appropriating aspects of the cultures of these foreigners and integraing into their culture. It is in this context that we can better understand the cultural borrowing that is on evidence in the Roman cult of Mithras, as I will explain below.

Rome's enthusiasm towards foreign cultural phenomena from both her eastern neighbors and the local cultures of conquered territories could shore up Roman identity and superiority over others and her powerful neighbours. The reception, appropriation and integration of other cultures and the cultures of conquered lands were processes that enabled Rome to enrich her identity, while also maintaining her exceptionality. Greg Woolf's study of Roman Gaul provides us a good example of this cultural dynamic. Woolf nicely demonstrates the cultural impact of the Roman Empire upon the inhabitants of Gaul province during the reign of Augustus, which threatened their cultural options and compeled to take on aspects of Roman culture. Yet, according to Woolf, this was a cultural exchange whereby the Romans also appropriated and integrated the local Galic culture, resulting in an aristocracy that appeared both Gallic and Roman.

Romans engaged in similar kinds of cultural exchange not only with the habitants of conquered lands, but also with those foreigners, such as the Persians (Parthians), Egyptians or Syrians who lived at a distance. Rome threated the local and foreign cultures, on one hand and integrated those cultures, on the other. This seemly ambivalent view of foreigners, particularly of those who lived far from the capital of the Empir is best understood as the continuance of Greek views of barbarians and foreigners. Rome's encounters with and appropiations of foreigner

[627]Augustus, *Res Gestae*, 13.
[628] Isaac 2013.
[629] At least until the third century, when the emperor Caracalla provided the Roman citizenship for all free citizens under the *Constitutio Antoniniana*.

cultures can be related to Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and stereotype. Bhabha suggests that the relation between colonizer and colonized was not a one-way process in which the colonized were mere passive victims. Rather, hybridity entails dynamic cultural entanglement between colonizer and the colonized, or in this case, between putative "foreign" others, the "Persians," who represent both a threat and an inticement of difference to Roman subjects.[630] Thus, it is not simply that Romans absorbed elements of Persian culture, but rather they were engaged and amplified in a cultural process already evident in Hellenistic sources that stereotyped "Persians," that simultaneously cast them as alluring and dangerous. So too Rome's engagement with other peoples of conquered lands and foreigners found Romans integrating others cultures into their own, in a way, as Bhaba suggests, is negotiated.

This ambivalence between peace and conflict, negotiation and provocation, conquering and embracing was also part of Rome's policy to those she conquered and enemies from the Late Republic onwards. Thus, we can see these ideas reflected in Cicero's comments on warfare:

> Then, too, in the case of a state in its external relations, the rights of war must be strictly observed. For since there are two ways of settling a dispute: first, by discussion; second, by physical force; and since the former is characteristic of man, the latter of the brute, we must resort to force only in case we may not avail ourselves of discussion. (*Cicero, De Officiis, I: 34*)[631]

According to Cicero, cultural peace and military conflict were both political strategies to dominate others. The Roman Republican orator persuaded the Roman state to use negotiation over military might, but argued that both lead to the same end. In the Late Republic and in Augustan Rome such strategies were deployed simultaneously, so that Rome maintained its own authority as an imperial power by means of war and peace. In foreign policy, Rome fought with her neighbors and conquered territories, yet in her cultural strategy, Rome selectively appropriated and integrated foreign cultural phenomena. The themes of openness, Romanness, triumph and conquest were developed in this period and enabled Rome to extend her authority over the Mediterranean world. As Eric Orlin has argued, being open to foreign cultures and the cultures of conquered lands was

[630] Wallace-Hadrill, 2008, 11. Bhaba, *The Location of Cultures*, on stereotype, 94-102, and on hybridity, 145-174.
[631] "Atque in re publica maxime conservanda sunt iura belli. Nam cum sint duo genera decertandi, unum per disceptationem, alterum per vim, cumque illud proprium sit hominis, hoc beluarum, confugiendum est ad posterius, si uti non licet superiore." For English translation, see: Miller, 1913, 37-9.

one of the main strategies that unified the Augustan empire for four centuries.[632] In other words, this openness to foreign cultures was the result of Rome's imperial policy and tendency for extending sovereignty over the conquered lands. Similar to the case of Gaul, Rome compeled the people of conquered lands to accept the Roman cultural values and ideals, and they adopted some phenomena of foreign cultures and even culture of enemies to create a multi-cultural Roman. The cultural appropriation and integration happening in the Roman Empire was not simply the Romans versus others, "but an enormous multi-sided exchange across a vast territory, in which 'influences came from everywhere and flowed to everywhere."[633] In other words, this cultural exchange under the Roman Empire was a dynamic process relation between the Roman culture as the host culture adopting and embracing non-Roman cultural phenomena (from the cultures of conquered peoples and other neighbours).

Yet this absorption of non-Roman phenomena into Roman cultural and social life was not an automatic process. The Romans made conscious choices about how to act in each case.[634] Thus, as the result of these conscious choices and the Roman policy of openness, numerous foreign cults and practices found their new homes along the Roman frontiers. We can say that Roman appropriation of other cultures was a conscious choice and a deliberate cultural borrowing from those whom Rome desired to defeat and to assimilate. This cultural borrowing was a means for Romans enhanced a cultural identity that at once affirmed Rome's dominance over her territories, it also entailed the incorporation of difference, an attraction to it. The Augustan revolution amplified these possibilities across the Roman empire, in that, foreign others were now more available to be the subjects of Roman fascination and imagination, in a diverse set of ways.

It was in this context of an Empire that at once feared and desired encounters with foreign outsiders, that we find Romans incorporating the Greeks' characterization and imagery of Persians as the "handsome Orientals" expert in archery and horse riding. It was in this context that Mithraic Mystagogues embraced the Greek imagery and topoi of Persians to portray their god as the "handsome Oriental" and to identify themselves as Romans who had the esoteric knowledge about the god of an Oriental desirable foe. The complexity of Rome's encounter with the Persians surfaces in this imagery of the "handsome Oriental"—a figure of a young, handsome man with

[632] Orlin, 2010, 7.
[633] Wallace-Hadrill, 2008, 13.
[634] Orlin 2010, 4.

curly hair usually dressed in the Persian tunic, with trousers, mantle and headgear (often a Phrygian cap) who was understood to embody every character from the Orient, including their mythical figures and gods.[635] The Roman idea of the Parthians (their contemporaneous "Persians") as the Oriental others was well established from this period.[636] The Augustan ideology divided the Roman Orient into the two Easts that entailed Egypt, on one side, and the Trojans, Phrygians, Medes, Achaemenids, Parthians and later the Sasanians, on the other.[637] In the late Republic and Imperial periods, the Romans routinely saw the Persians (and their Roman-period contemporary, the Parthians) as esoteric others who were the venerable and detestable descendants of the Achaemenids (ca. 700-330 BCE), running the Eastern part of the Mediterranean world. For Roman thinkers and poets of the Augustan age, Parthians were Persae, Medi or Achaemenii, following Rome's embrace of Greek image and characterization of Persians. In chapter three, I demonstrated how Greek intellectuals and their Roman counterparts continued to reproduce this image and how Herodotus' identification and Greek topoi of the Persians set the cultural groundwork for the Roman conceptions of Persians and Persianness. Moreover, I elucidated how the Greek and Roman philosophers—and the Middle and Neoplatonists in particular—complemented this imagery by pairing it with secrecy and so-called esoteric knowledge about Persian religion and culture.

When Romans defined Persianness, they transformed the Persians from a distant Eastern other into a familiar image that helped to fill-out a Roman hybridized identity that entailed the incorporation of other cultures. Such incorporation, as I have been arguing, worked on a conflictual representation of the Persians as loathable and desirable. They depicted the Parthians (Persians) as their perilous foes, and also as fascinating and exotic others, who were their only true cultural competitor. In the late first century BCE, Ovid, the Roman poet, while extolling the exoticism of the Persian people, boasted of Rome's potential power over the Parthians: "Behold! Caesar is preparing to add to our possession the part of the world still unconquered. Inhabitants of the eastern end of the world, you will soon belong to us. You will pay the penalty, Parthia."[638] In spite of Ovid's minatory tone, Roman Imperial art nonetheless continued the Greek tradition of

[635] Schneider, 2007, 76. However, there are images of certain foreign gods (such as Attis or Dionysus) that depict a naked young man clothed in a cape with headgear without pants and tunic, though such imagery emphasizes their Greek nature rather than Oriental.
[636] Schneider, 2007, 60.
[637] Schneider, 2007, 78.
[638] Kennedy& Goldman, 2013, 233-4.

representing Persians as exotic and alluring people. Charles B. Rose notes that though the Augustan poets chastise Persia at various points, the imagery of Parthians (the Persians) on contemporary coinage and monuments ultimately worked to promote the (unrealized) ideal of Augustan pacification of the Persian East.[639]

There is no doubt that Augustus used art and architecture as an effective visual media to support his cultural strategy and foreign policy.[640] In chapter three, I discussed the imagery of a "handsome Oriental" on the Emperor Augustus' *sagum* of his statue in the villa of Livia at Prima Porta as an example of Roman imagery of the Parthians (Persians, see fig. 30). I observed that this imagery carried on the Greek stereotype of the "handsome Oriental" dressed in a long-sleeved tunic and trousers with flat shoes and curly hair. There, I explained that the Romans differentiated the image of Parthians with bearded faces from the clean-shaved "handsome Orientals". Another example of imperial art that depicts the Parthians in a similar manner is the marble statue of an imperial monument from the Palatine Hill in Rome that served as pillar table (see fig. 50). The statue depicts a kneeling Parthian dressed in Persian garments (a double-belted sleeved tunic, with trousers and flat shoes) with a mustache, curly hair and a Phrygian cap. The main purpose of such an imagery was to reinforce Rome's imperial power and superiority over barbarian others. The statue of a kneeling barbarian stressed the weakness and inferiority of barbarians in contrast to Rome's dominance over the Orient.[641] If the martial prowess of the Roman army was the means that supported its imperial ideology, the imagery and iconography of the Parthians (Persians) as kneeling "handsome Orientals" was the visual propaganda that supported Rome's aspiration to dominate the East.[642]

Rome's multifaceted enthusiasm for Persia also appears in scenes of combat. Similar depictions of the Parthians appear on other monuments amid scenes of war, representing Rome's complex view of Persia and and institutionalizing her military encounters with the powerful eastern neighbour. A military scene from the monument of Lucius Verus at Ephesos (known as the Parthian monument) depicts the battle between the Romans and Parthians and portrays the Parthians with the Phrygian caps and bearded faces dressed in double-belted tunics (see fig. 51).

[639] Cf. Rose, 2005.
[640] Galinsky, 2011, 73.
[641] Cf. Zanker, 2008, 84-7.
[642] Concerning the physical elements of Roman imperial strategy, see: Luttwak, 2004, 281-2.

The scene depicts the Parthians being defeated and crushed under the hooves of the Roman horse. Similarly, the scene of the Trajanic battle on the Arch of Constantine is another combat scene illustrating the superiority of the Romans over their Oriental enemy (see fig.52). Depicted in the stereotype of "handsome Oriental", the Trojans are depicted as being injured and defeated as they are trampled by Roman horses. The imagery of the Persians in these scenes was part of what Rose calls "enemy iconography", a new conception that was rooted in Augustus' peaceful strategy with regards to Persia and Armenia. [643] Indeed, the Roman perception of the Parthians (as their contemporaneous Persians) was changed by the Augustan Parthian policy. Though the political relation between Romans and Parthians started in 96 BCE, when Mithradates II sent a treaty for friendship to Sulla the ruler of the Ropman province Cilicia, [644] but it was under Augutus' treaty with the Parthians in 20 BCE that the importance of Parthian realm increased for Rome's foreign policy.

Returning to the Mithras cult and the appearance of a Persian god in the Roman Empire, one can claim the Roman ideology of seeing itself as the open city, and Rome's cultural incorporation of foreign cults and cultures resulted in the appearance of novel identities on the frontiers of Roman Empire.[645] Rolf Michael Schneider writes, "How deeply the concept of the Oriental as friend was imprinted on the cultural identity of imperial Rome is particularly manifest in the widespread popularity of Oriental gods such as Attis and Mithras. Two images highlight the significance of visual narratives in the process of shaping and re-shaping Rome's Oriental identity throughout the Principate."[646] The emergence of Mithras and other foreign gods such as Isis, Cybele and Attis plainly reflect Rome's receptivity to non-Roman cultures, as part of her imperial effort to incorporate foreign peoples and so, too, in political and military contexts, to embolden Rome's colonial aspirations. Orlin writes, "But a glance at the Augustan religious program will highlight the continued contribution of religious activity to constructing a new sense of Romanness and to setting the stage for the longue durée of the Empire."[647]

We know from extant Mithraic dedicatory inscriptions that the cult's representation of Persia held special attraction for members of Roman military. As discussed above, Rome's military

[643] Rose, 2005, 21-2.
[644] Dabrowa, 2012, 171.
[645] Cf. Roselaar, 2015.
[646] Schneider, 2007, 78.
[647] Orlin, 2010, 210.

campaigns and cultural interactions, particularly from the Augustan era, discouraged a completely negative view of the Persians and supported a rather romantic vision of them – a vision that resulted in the appearance of the Roman Mithras cult.[648] It was no coincidence that the cult of Mithras came into existence in the first century CE precisely during the Augustan era and the first period of expansion for the Roman Empire. The cult rapidly then spread over the western provinces of the Empire (the Latin West) in the second and third centuries CE where it reached its zenith. Roman soldiers, legionnaires and commanders were acquainted with "Persians" via their military movements. It seems likely that they especially welcomed the figure of the god that the military and household of the last Commagenain king had transmitted to the Roman Empire. In Galinsky's words, "Romans were military imperialists, but they were not cultural imperialists".[649]

It was during Augustus' reign that Romans began to embrace the Persian god as depicted by Greeks and established as cult whose novel religiosity maintained Rome's superiority over and enthusiasm for the exotic Persia, as I have already shown. It was after the Augustan policy of 20 BCE that Persia was highlited for Roman foreign policy and Rome's military and political encounters with Parthian realm were dramatically increased on the eastern boundaries (particularly on Armenia, Plmyra, Cilicia and Mesotopamia). This enthusiasm for Rome's foreign policy and military continued into the second century CE precisely when the cult of Mithras flourished along the western frontiers. To be a member of this novel brotherhood differentiated initiates from their peers in the Roman military and the wider society, providing them with a sense of belong to an elite community with a fluid identity that could coexist alongside their Roman ethnicity. They were Roman, military, administrative men, and Mithraists at the same time. This thesis offers some tantalizing possibilities to better understand why a cult that strongly stressed the Persian provenance of its god was more widespread over the Roman western provinces, in places where there was almost no trace of Rome's eastern neighbor, than the eastern ones. Why, we might ask, did this image of a foreign Persian god have more romantic appeal for the military fighted far from the borders of "Persia" itself, where contemporary successors of their perilous foe would be encountered? Did the proximity to Parthians undermine the authenticity of a cult posing as Persian? Did the proximity make less appealing a stereotyped image of "Persia" on display in cultic iconography? As mentioned above, the military encounters between Rome and Persia mainly

[648] Cf. Grun, 2011, 11.
[649] Galinsky, 2015, 5.

happened on the eastern boundaries, and particularly as Rome attempted to dominate the lands of Syria and Armenia. Further, the bulk of extant Mithraic artefacts unearthed from Dacia, Gaul and the Danubian frontiers points to the popularity of the cult away from such military encounters.

To conclude, it was in the context of Rome's enthusiasm for the foreign cultures, and the Persian culture in particular, that the Roman bull killer Mithras, the Greek imagery of "handsome Oriental", Middle and Neoplatonists' notion of Persian mysteries met each other, and as a result, a fascinating Roman cult came into being. Mithras, the god of a perilous foe, was depicted on the walls of Roman Mithraea indicating Romans' knowledge and acquaintance with the esoteric culture and religion of "Persia". Devotion to Mithras by men in the Roman military reveals Rome's enthusiasm for the religion and culture of this eastern other, an enthusiasm that can be understood in relation to the Roman imperialism that was always already marked by its hybridity.

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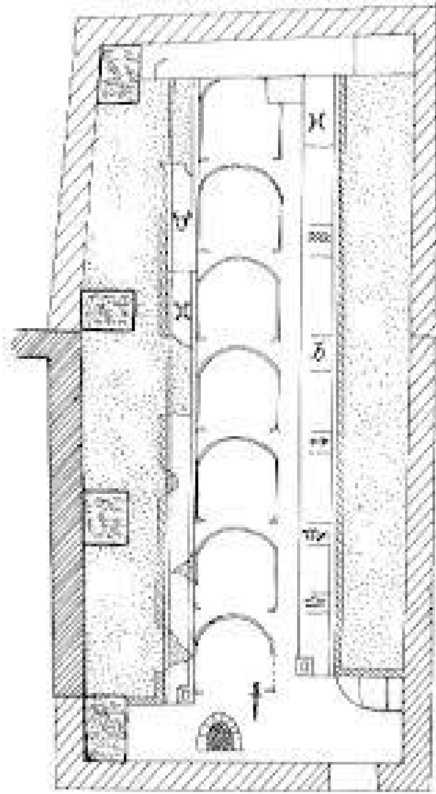
Appendix

1. The Mithraic bull slaying scene (2nd Century CE, Royal Ontario Museum, author)

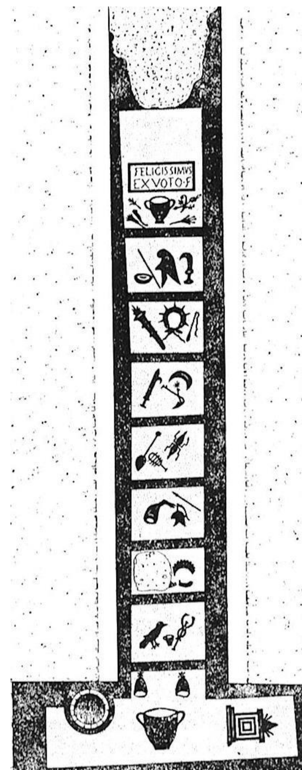
2. Tauroctony of Absalmos, Inv. 97.95.19
http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=israel_museum_97_95_19

3. Mithras carrying the bull to the cave



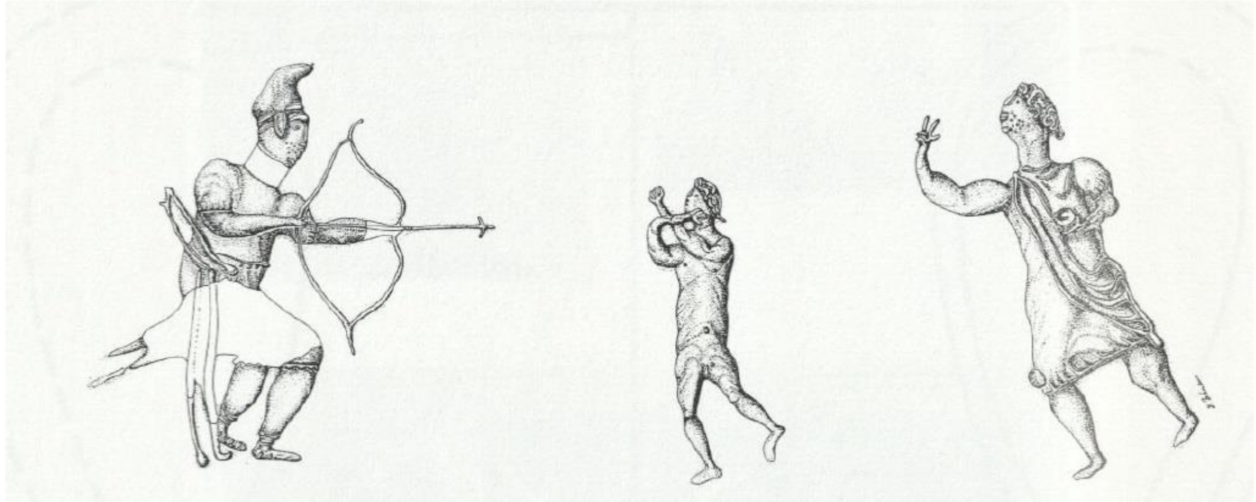
4. Seven Spheres Mithraeum (Mitreo delle Sette Sfere)
https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio2/8/8-6.htm

5. The mosaic ladders of the Seven Gates Mithraeum
https://brewminate.com/the-ostia-mithraea-an-introduction-to-the-cult-of-mithras-and-tour-of-the-ostian-shrines/



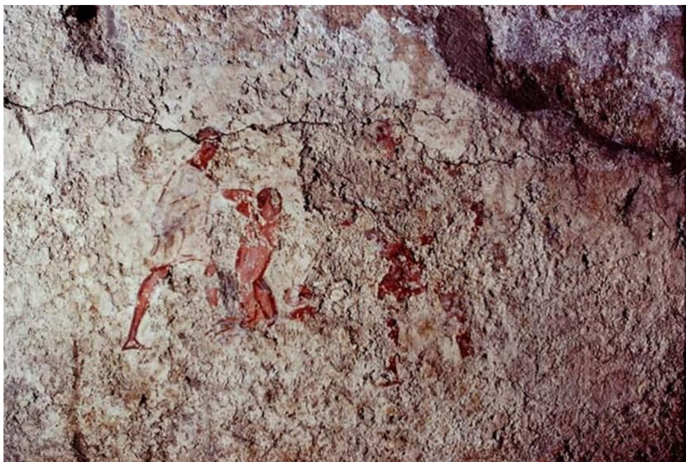
6. The Mosaic ladder of the Felicissimus Mithraeum
https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm

7.



7. Scene A, The Mithraic Cultic Vessel of Mainz (Huld-Zetsche, Plate. 64)

8. Scene B, The Mithraic Cultic vessel of Mainz, (Huld-Zetsche, Plate. 64)



9. Colorful frescoes of the St. Capua Vetere Mithraeum
https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/Temples/Santa%20Maria%20Capua%20Vetere%20Mithraeum.htm

10. Head of Miϑra on a Greco-Bactrian coin of Hermaeus (Grenet, 2003, fig. 5)

11. Miϑra on the coin of Hormizd I (Shenkar 2014, fig.65)

12. The monumental rock-relief of Tāq-e-Bostān (with Permission of H. Nikravesh)

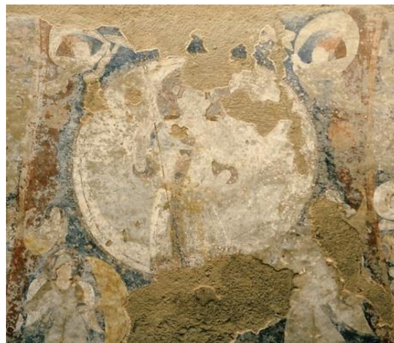
13. Miϑra riding a chariot pulled by two winged horse (Grenet 2006, fig.6)

14. Miϑra rising from a rock mountain (Callieri 1990, fig.2)

15. The coin of the Kušān king known as Soter Mega (author)

16. Miϑra on the reverse of Kušan coins minted under the reigns of Kaniška (author)

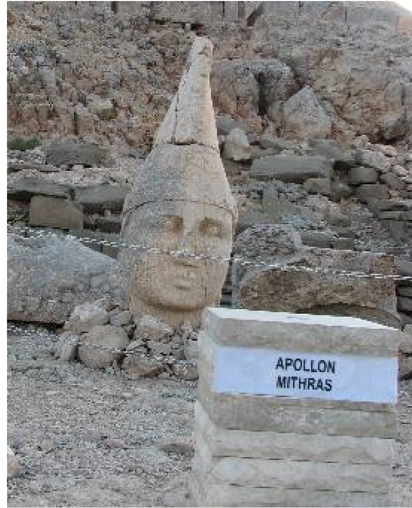
17. Miϑra on the reverse of Kušan coins minted under the reigns of Huviška (author)



18. The image of Sun-god on the large niche above the 35- meter Buddhas at Bāmiyān (Callieri 1990, fig.9)

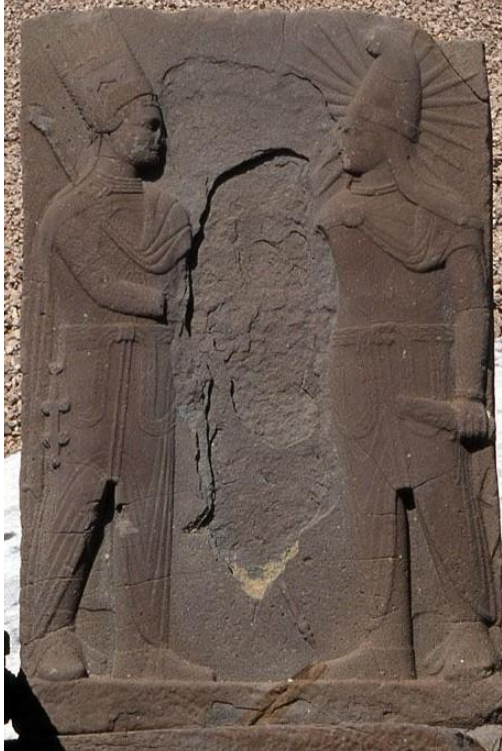
19. 3D image of the East terrace, Nemrud Daği
http://www.learningsites.com/NemrudDagi/NemrudDagi_models.php

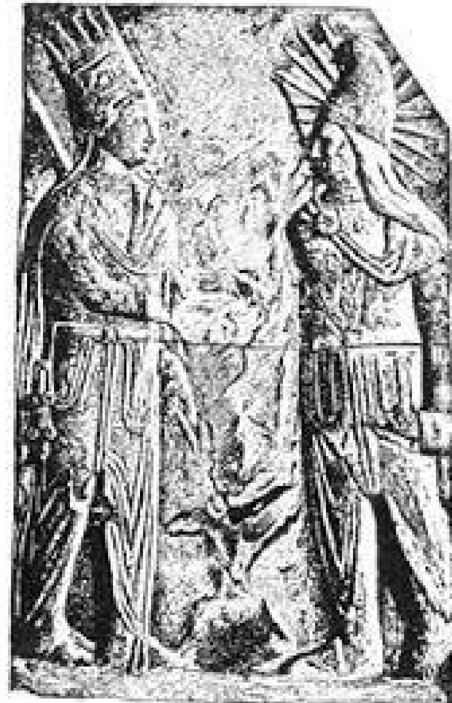
20. Five colossal statues of the Antiochan deities (Zeus-Ormades, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, and Artagnes-Heracles-Ares) together with Antiochus I, East terrace, Nemrud Daği (author)



21. The head of Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, East terrace, Nemrud Daği (author)

22. The guardian animals, East terrace, Nemrud Daği (author)





23. D*exiosis* reliefs showing Antiochus I clasping hands with Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, Nemrud Daği
https://empiresoffaith.com/2017/05/03/mithra-in-commagene-some-sort-of-mix-up/

24. The lion horoscope relief, Easst terrace, Nemrud Daği (CIMRM 31)

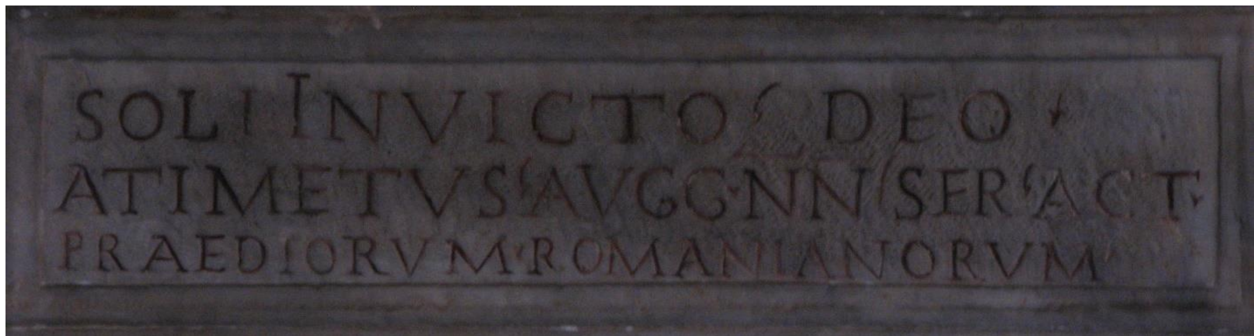
25. The North terrace, Nemrud Daği (author)

26. 3D image of the West terrace, Nemrud Daği
http://www.learningsites.com/NemrudDagi/NemrudDagi_models.php

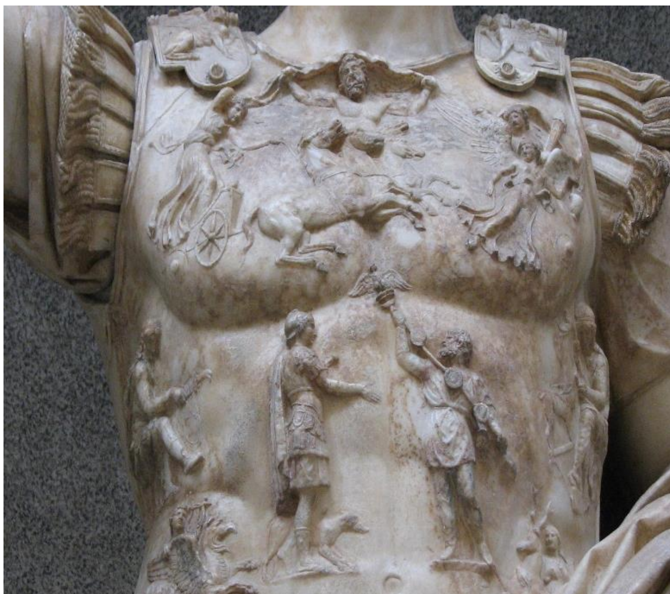
27. The colorful tauroctony of the Mithraeum Berberini at Rome (CIMRM 390)

28. The sandstone relief from Heddernheim (CIMRM 1083)

29. The Mithraic tauroctony in the courtyard of the *Museo Pio Clementino,* Vatican Museum (author)



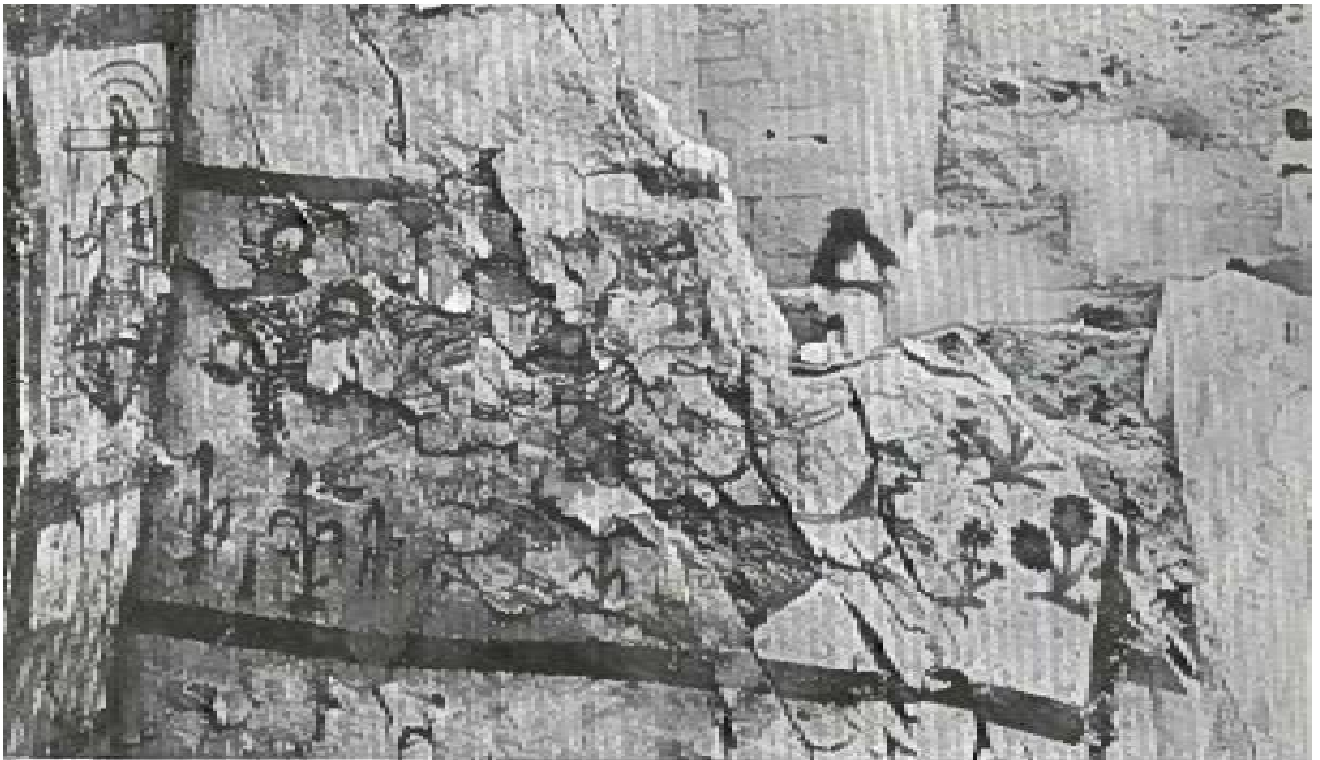
30. The statue of Augustus in the Villa of Livia Augusta at Prima Porta, Vatican Museum (author)



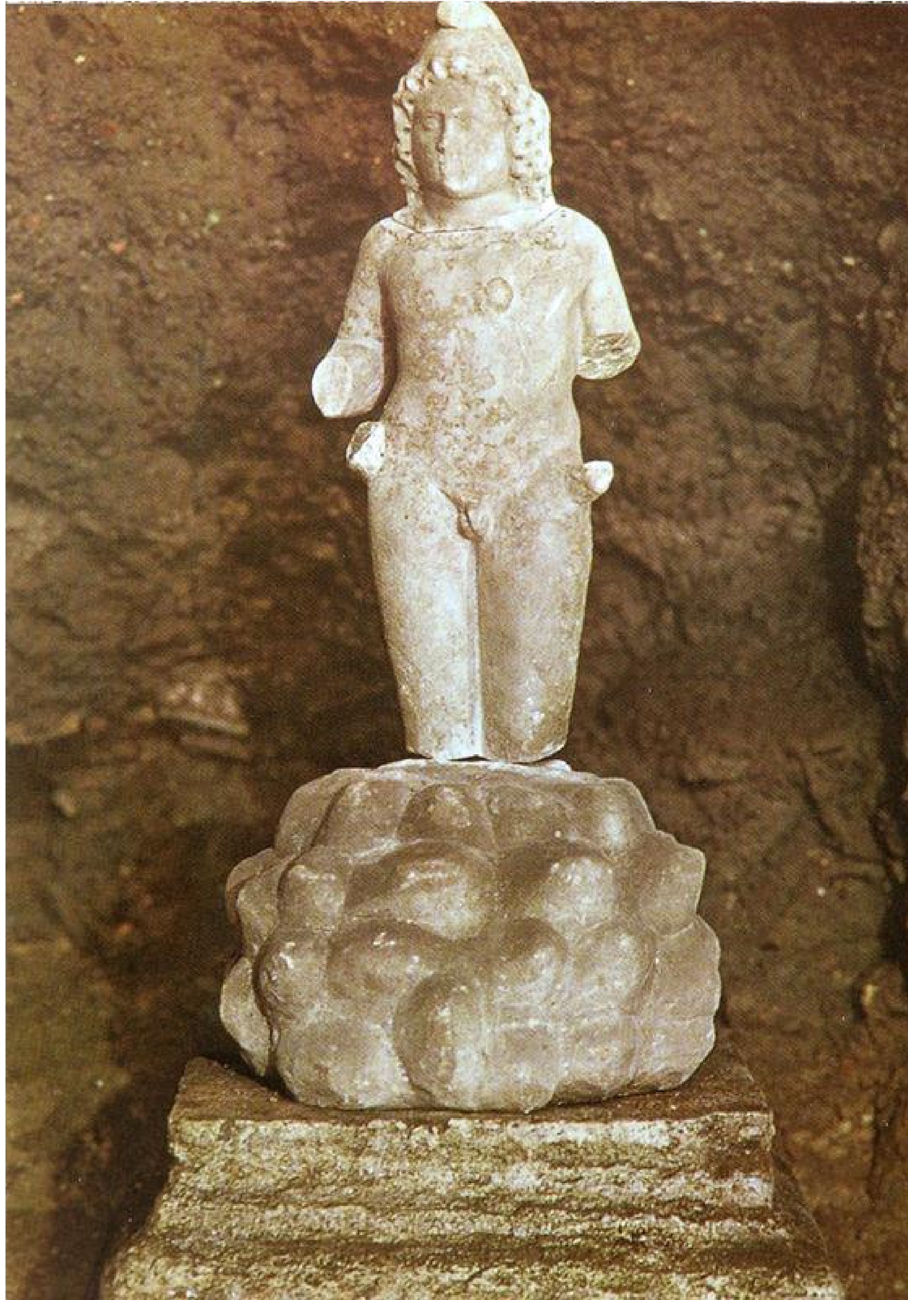
31. The statue of Attis, Ostia, Italy (author)   33. The statue of Ganymede, Vatican Museum (author)

32. King Midas in the musical competition between Apollo and Pan, Jean Lepautre (1618-1682)
https://www.agefotostock.com/age/en/Stock-Images/Rights-Managed/AQT-LCPB_160730_12788/1

34. South wall, Late Mithraeum, Fresco of Mithras the hunter, Dura-Europo
(Rostovtzeff, 1939, Plat XIV)



35. North wall, Late Mithraeum, Fresco of Mithras the hunter, Dura-Europo (ibid)



36. The petragenes Mithras, St. Clemente, Rome (CIMRM 344)

37. The Mithraic dadophoroi (Cautes and Cautopates) (author)

38. The Roman coin with image of Sol on the obverse and a crescent moon with two stars on the reverse (ANS. 1944.100.57)

39. The Roman coin with the image of Sol on the obverse and a crescent moon with seven stars around on the reverse (RRC. 390/1)

40. The Roman coin with the head of Roma wearing helmet on the obverse and Sol riding his chariot on the reverse (ANS. 1941.131.72

41. The Roman coin with the bust of the Emperor Caracalla on obverse and the temple of Sol Elagabal containing the holy stone on the reverse (ANS. 1961.154.68)

42. The Roman coin with the bust of Emperor Elagabalus on the obverse and the deity Sol Elagabalus stands on the reverse nude with a flying cloak on his shoulder (ANS. 1944.100.52303)

43. The Roman coin with the bust of Emperor Antonius Pius on the obverse and the deity Sol riding a four-horse chariot on the reverse (ANS. 1944.100.52.359)

44. The Roman coin with the image of Roma with her helmet on the obverse and the image of Luna riding her biga with two horses on the reverse (RRC. 133/3)

45. The head of Sol with his radiant nimbus on the obverse and the figure of Luna riding her biga with two horses on the reverse (RRC. 303/1)

46. The head of Sol with a radiant nimbus on the obverse and four horses carrying a basket with a flower inside on the reverse (ANS. 1944.100.38318)

47. The coin with the head of Emperor Antonius Pius on the obverse and the image of Luna driving her biga drawn by two oxen (ANS. 1944.100.51569)

48. The Tauroctony (CIMRM 415)

49. The relife from Dascylium shows Magi
http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Religions/iranian/Zarathushtrian/achaemenian_zarathushtrian.htm

50. The marbel statue of the Palatine Hill in Rome
https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/484770347360572484/

51. The military scene from the monument of Lucius Verus at Ephesos, Vienna Ephesos museum https://tarihvearkeoloji.blogspot.com/2015/03/the-battle-between-romans-and-parthians.html?m=1

52. The scene of the Trajanic battle on the Arch of Constantine (author)