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MITHRAS IN ETRURIA

CHARACTERISTICS OF A MYSTERY CULT IN THE ROMAN *REGIO VII*

Summary: The aim of this article is to cast a light on the nature of the mysteries of Mithras in central Italy, focusing on the administrative division of Roman Etruria. The *Regio VII* in fact, despite not being the richest Italian area in terms of Mithraic findings, has nevertheless emerged as a privileged territory to observe different aspects of the cult, due to the great variety of its artefacts.

Hence, starting from the material evidence and from its distribution across the region, the social classes that took part in the worship of Mithras are identified. Consequently, the active role played by public officials in promoting the spread of the mysteries is discussed, as well as the cult diffusion among the lower classes, and the interest demonstrated by the aristocratic elites from the Middle/Late Empire.

The conclusion will examine the last phases of the cult in Etruria, showing how the Mithraic mysteries ended following diverse modalities during the first decades of the 5th century AD, sometimes because of violent acts of destruction, and sometimes in a peaceful manner.

Key words: Mithraic mysteries, Etruria, marble, social classes, state religious policy

In 1937, while choosing the topic for his paper in honour of the archaeologist Bartolomeo Nogara, Franz Cumont, father of Mithraic studies, decided to offer an overview of what was known at that time about the presence of the cult of Mithras within the borders of the Roman *Regio* of Etruria. The choice made by the great scholar in his *Mithra en Etrurie* revealed itself to be particularly inspiring, opening a season of discoveries which would greatly enrich the panorama of the *Regio VII*.¹ Once again today, the opportunity to direct our attention to the *Regio VII* has been offered by the recent discovery of a remarkable statue of Mithras tauroctonos, coming from the

¹ CUMONT, F.: *Mithra en Étrurie*. In PARIBENI, R. (ed.): *Scritti in onore di Bartolomeo Nogara. Raccolti in occasione del suo 70 anno*. Città del Vaticano 1937. For a more recent perspective on the “Eastern” cults in central Italy (Mithraic mysteries included): RUBIO RIVERA, R.: *Difusion, asimilacion e interaccion de los cultos misticos orientales in Etruria y Umbria*. PhD thesis. Universidad Complutense, Madrid 1991.

territory of Tarquinia, by the “nucleo tutela del patrimonio culturale” of the carabinieri.

Thus, the object of this discussion is to offer a brief overview of the archaeological evidence found in the region. We will try to make these precious findings “speak out”, framing them within their chronological grid, in order to clarify some aspects of the Mithraic presence in Etruria and to reconstruct, at least in part, its diffusion, *acme* and decline.²

PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE FINDINGS

Starting from Rome and going north, the first site of discovery is the city of Veii, where two marble reliefs depicting the killing of the bull were found, one of which is a piece of particularly fine workmanship.³ Another finding, from the neighbouring town of Capena, seems to suggest the vitality of the Mithras cult in this area: a marble base bearing an inscription and originally surmounted by a now lost statue of one of the *dadophori*.⁴ From Fiano Romano instead, comes a wonderful two-faced relief, depicting the tauroctony on the first side, and the banquet of Mithras and the Sun-God on the other side⁵ (fig. 1).

Also worth mentioning is the famous hypogeum of Clepsina in Caere, an underground space where traces of both the cults of *Magna Mater* and of Isis were

² This article derives from my thesis “Mitra in Etruria”, written by the author under the supervision of Prof. Eugenio La Rocca, University La Sapienza in Rome.

³ PORCAROLI, F. L.: *Il rilievo mitraico da Veio. Un'opera recuperata dalla guardia di Finanza*. Roma 2009; DI GIUSEPPE, H. – PATTERSON, H. L.: Area 37. Età romana. In CASCINO, R. – DI GIUSEPPE, H. – PATTERSON, H. L. (edd.): *Veii. The Historical Topography of the Ancient City. A Restudy of John Ward-Perkins's Survey* [Archaeological Monograph of the British School at Rome 19]. London 2012. Currently under study by Dr. Ugo Fusco, whom I take the opportunity to thank for sharing the results of his research. FUSCO, U.: A New Mithraic Relief from Veii. *ArchClass* 66 (2015) 519–546.

⁴ VERMASEREN, M. J.: *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae*. 2 vols. The Hague, 1956–1960 [CIMRM], 645–646: *Hymnu/s inibic/to*.

⁵ CIMRM 641; R. VOLKOMMER in LIMC 6 (1992) 136, s.v. *Mithras*. A detailed discussion of the mithraic theology and iconography is beyond the aim of this thesis. For more complete information, the reader should refer to: WILL, E.: *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain: contribution a l'histoire de l'art de l'empire Romain* [BEFAR 183] Paris 1955; CAMPBELL, L.A.: *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* [EPRO 11]. Leiden 1968; HINNELS, J. R.: Reflections on the Bull-slaying Scene. In *Mithraic Studies 2*. Manchester 1975, 290–312; GORDON, R. L.: *The Sacred Geography of a Mithraeum: the Example of Sette Sfere*. *EJMS* 1 (1976); MASTROCINQUE, A.: *Studi sul Mitraismo: il mitraismo e la magia*. Roma 1998; VOLKOMMER, R.: Mithras Tauroctonus – Studien zu einer Typologie der Stieropferszene auf Mithrasbildwerken. *MEFRA* 103 (1991) 265–281; BECK, R.: In the Place of the Lion: Mithras in the Tauroctony. In HINNELS, J. R. (ed.): *Studies in Mithraism*. Roma 1994, 29–50; MARTIN, L. H.: Reflections on the Mithraic Tauroctony as Cult Scene: Mithras in the Tauroctony. In HINNELS, J. R. (ed.): *Studies in Mithraism*. Roma 1994, 217–224; BECK, R.: *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire. Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*. Oxford – New York 2006; PRESCENDI, F.: Riflessioni e ipotesi sulla tauroctonia mitraica e il sacrificio. In *Religions orientale – culti misterici: neue Perspektiven – Nouvelles perspectives – Prospettive nuove*. Stuttgart 2006, 113–122; ALVAR, J.: *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*. Leiden 2008.

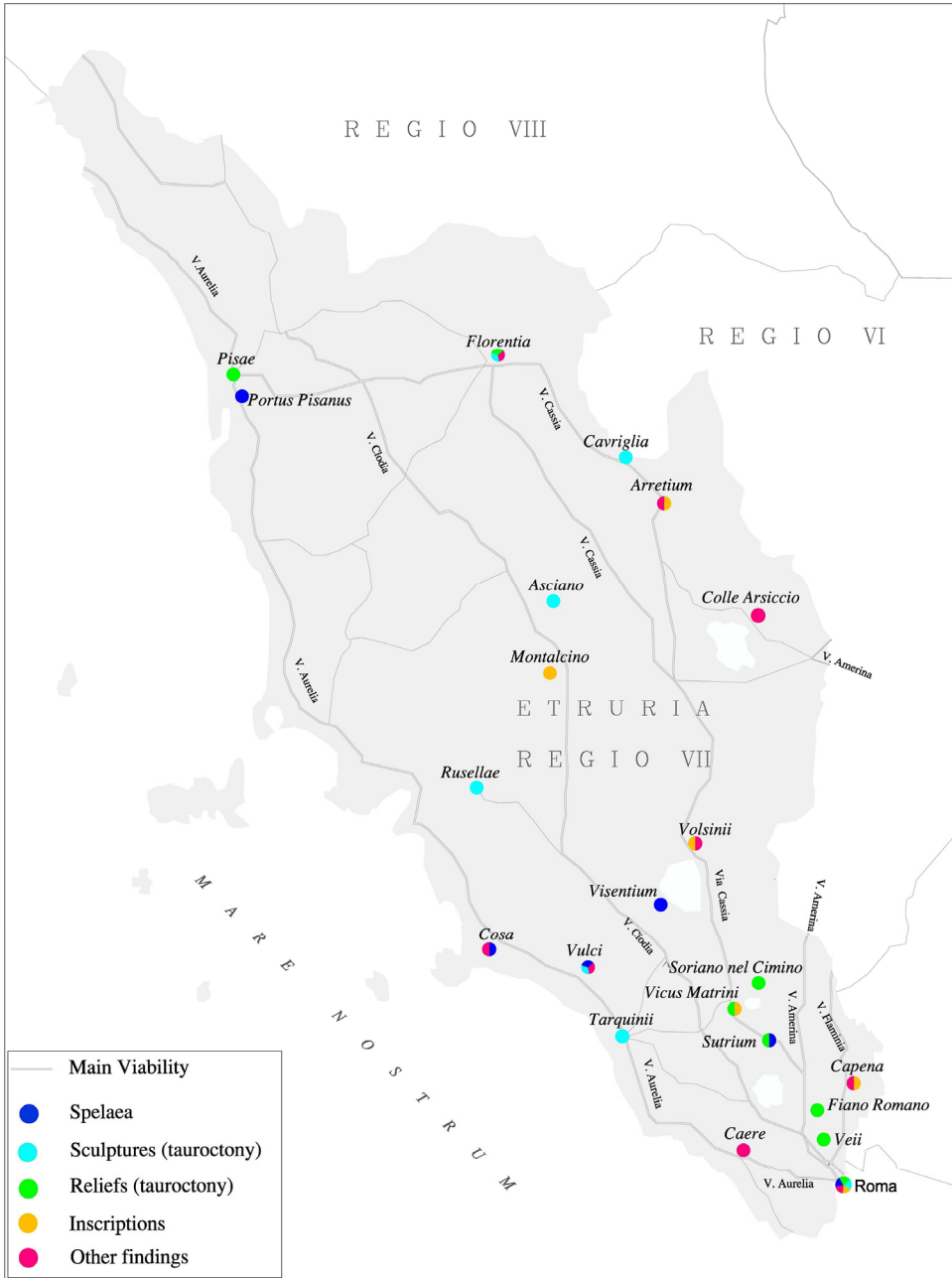


Fig. 1. Map of the distribution of the Mithraic evidence within the *Regio VII Etruria* (realized by the author)

found. Of particular interest is a graffito showing a character with a radial crown in the act of slaying a bull. The identification with Mithras was immediately considered, although the figure does not fit the traditional iconography of the Persian god, and the shrine cannot be considered a proper mithraeum.⁶

At any rate, the first *spelaeum* in the region is not far away, just a bit further north in the town of Sutri on the Via Cassia. Here, the Mithraic *antrum*, in strict connection with the local amphitheatre, was turned into a church during the Late Antiquity or the Early Middle Ages. The sanctuary, however, retains its Pagan plan, on which Christian decoration has been added.⁷ A marble relief with the tauroctony (preserved in Rome, at the Museum of the Baths of Diocletian), was also found in Sutri, perhaps originally placed in the apse of the *antrum*.

In addition, two other reliefs depicting the sacrifice of the bull have been found in neighbouring areas, the first in Soriano nel Cimino, and the latter (realized in tuff) lodged within a wall of a modern farmhouse in Vicus Matrini, not far from Sutri.⁸

A marble altar bearing a Mithraic inscription can be seen today in a Romanesque church in the Umbrian town of Ficulle. It has been attributed to the territory of Volsinii and it testifies to the existence of a Mithraic shrine in this territory dedicated by the freedman Tiberius Claudius Thermodon.⁹ A second finding, a bust of the god Sabazios, on whose chest stands out, among other decorations, the image of Mithras *tauroctonos*,¹⁰ enhances the Mithraic panorama of the area. During the Roman era, the importance of the fertile territories around the lake of Bolsena is also reflected by a Mithraic *antrum* in Visentium, today in the territory of Capodimonte, none of whose iconographical decorations, unfortunately, have survived to this day.¹¹ Furthermore,

⁶ CRISTOFANI, M. – GREGORI, G. L.: Di un complesso sotterraneo scoperto nell'area urbana di Caere. *Prospettiva* 49 (1987) 2–14; M. A. RIZZO in *EAA suppl.* II (1994) 105–107 s.v. *Cerveteri*. COLIVICCHI, F. ET AL.: New Excavations in the Urban Area of Caere. *Museion* 13 (2016) 359–450, here 388–389 (Prof. Fabio Colivicchi has also presented and discussed this graffito during the conference “Symposium Peregrinum 2016, the Mysteries of Mithras and other Mystic Cults in the Roman World, June 16-19 2016, Tarquinia-Vulci”). This hypothesis has some validity, which could explain the deviation from the iconographical tradition and the unusual discovery site of the graffito, along with the fact that it could belong to a chronological phase which is prior to the complete standardization of the Mithraic iconography. If this is so, we find ourselves with an interesting clue for both the primary coding of the mysteries of Mithras in the Roman area, and their connection with other “oriental” deities.

⁷ *CIMRM* 653; MORSELLI, C.: *Sutrium*. Firenze 1980, 42.

⁸ For the Vicus Matrini relief: *CIMRM* 655–656: *L. Avillius Rufinus posuit*; ANDREUSSI, M.: Vicus Matrini [Forma Italiae. Regio VII 4]. Roma 1977. For the Soriano relief: *CIMRM* 657; SCARDOZZI, G.: *Ager Ciminius (I.G.M. F. 137 2. NO Soriano nel Cimino, II SO Vignanello)*. Carta archeologica d'Italia. Viterbo 2004, 101–102.

⁹ *CIMRM* 660: Soli Invicto/Mithrae/Tiberius Claudius/Tiberi filius/Thermodo(n)/spelaeum c(um)/signis et ar(a)/ceterisque/voti compos/dedt; MUNZI, M.: La vita religiosa. In TAMBURINI, P. (ed.): *Un Museo e il suo territorio. Il Museo Territoriale del Lago di Bolsena. Vol. 2: Dal periodo romano all'era moderna*. Bolsena 2001, 23; BUONOCORE, M.: Tiberius Claudius Tiberi filius Thermodon: da Volsinii a Praeneste. In *Zbornik u čast Emilija Marina za 60. rodendan – Miscellanea Emilio Marin sexagenario dicata*. Split 2011, 145.

¹⁰ LANE, E. N.: *Corpus Cultus Iovis Sabazii (CCIS), III: Conclusions*. Leiden 1983, 40.

¹¹ BIAMONTE, G.: Uno spelaeum mitraico nel territorio dell'antica Visentium presso Capodimonte sul lago di Bolsena. *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 63 (1998) 23–36, here 23.

a group of terracottas linked with the Mithraic cult has been discovered in the territory surrounding the nearby lake Trasimenus, on “Colle Arsiccio”. Here, a votive deposit was found, containing terracottas spanning from the early Republic to the beginning of the 4th century AD. Some of them, dating to the 2nd century AD, appear to be Mithraic images, in particular a fragmentary *pinax* with scene of Mithras slaying the bull.¹²

A beautiful depiction of the tauroctony, as already mentioned, comes from the city of Tarquinia.¹³ This new acquisition serves as a *pendant* to the situation in the adjacent archaeological area of Vulci, the place of discovery of one of the most significant contexts of the entire *Regio*: the local shrine is in fact characterised by extraordinary sculptural furnishings, including two tauroctony sculptures (the “Major” and the “Minor Group”) and the statue of a *dadophorus*.¹⁴

North of Vulci is the Roman city of Cosa, whose mithraeum is housed within the local *curia*, while a bust depicting Mithras preserved from the waist up, originally part of a tauroctony group, comes from the nearby colony of Rusellae.¹⁵

Heading north, the next Mithraic temple along the Tyrrhenian coast is situated in Portus Pisanus, the harbour of Pisa. Pisa was a flourishing city during the Empire, and the cult of Mithras was likely practiced within its walls, as testified by a tauroctony relief of unknown origin, walled in the “Campo Santo Monumentale”.¹⁶

Moving on to central Etruria, we find a statue of Mithras which comes from Asciano, near Siena. This statue was bought by Cumont himself and is now kept at the Academia Belgica in Rome.¹⁷ The northern inland sector of this region is not so rich in evidence as the coastal area, but there are some notable findings in the major Roman settlements. Thus, a marble votive stone from Arezzo bears the inscription

¹² MORANDINI, F.: Una testimonianza del culto mitraico a Colle Arsiccio di Magione. *Rivista di archeologia* 30 (2006) 77–91.

¹³ FESTA, L.: Il Mitra Tauroctono di Tarquinia: intervento di restauro e riassetto con l'uso di tecnologie 3D. In *Atti del Convegno Lo Stato dell'arte, XIII Congresso Nazionale IGHC*. Torino 2015.

¹⁴ SGUBINI MORETTI, A. M.: Nota preliminare su un mitreo scoperto a Vulci. In BIANCHI, U. (ed.): *Mysteria Mithrae. Atti del Seminario Internazionale, Roma 1978*. Leiden 1979, 259–296, here 260.

¹⁵ For the *spelaeum* of Cosa: RICHARDSON JR., L.: Cosa and Rome: Comitium and Curia. *Archaeology* 10 (1957) 49–55; BROWN, F. E.: *Cosa III: the Buildings of the Forum: Colony, Municipium, and Village*. Philadelphia 1993; FENTRESS, E.: Cosa in the Empire: the Unmaking of a Roman Town. *JRA* 7 (1994) 208–222; *CIMRM* 661; FENTRESS, E.: *Cosa 5: An Intermittent Town. Excavations 1991–1997*. Ann Arbor 2003; Furthermore, Dr. James Connell Henriques presented the mithraeum at the conference *Symposium Peregrinum 2016, the Mysteries of Mithras and other Mystic Cults in the Roman World, June 16–19 2016, Tarquinia-Vulci*.

For the statue of Rusellae: *CIMRM* 661; CELUZZA, M. G.: Statua frammentaria di Mitra. In PARI-BENI ROVAI, E. (ed.): *Un decennio di ricerche a Roselle: statue e ritratti* [Contributi rosellani I]. Studia Firenze 1990, 105.

¹⁶ GENOVESI, S.: *Nuove evidenze per il culto di Mitra dall'area di Portus Pisanus/S. Stefano ai Lupi (LI)*. in FACCHIN, G. – MILLETTI, M. (eds): *Materiali per Populonia 10 (Quaderni del Dipartimento di archeologia e storia delle arti, Sezione archeologica, Università di Siena)*. Pisa 2011, 277–288, here 277; ARIAS, P. E. – CRISTIANI, E. – GABBA E.: *Il Camposanto Monumentale di Pisa: le Antichità I*. Pisa 1977, 80; VOLLKOMMER (n. 5) 128.

¹⁷ *CIMRM* 662

of a slave, and a fragment of the head of a bull (maybe pertinent to a Mithraic group) and a bull-killing sculpture were found in the small, nearby town of Cavriglia.¹⁸ Furthermore, close to the town of Montalcino, a *tabula ansata* bearing a mithraic inscription has been found, dedicated by the praetorian veteran Lucius Granius Pudens.¹⁹

Lastly, to conclude this short list, we must consider a number of marble findings preserved in Florence, whose exact origin is unknown: a relief and a fragmentary statue, both depicting the tauroctony; a fragment showing the petrogenic birth of Mithras; a sculpture of the lion-headed deity linked to the Mithraic mysteries; and a marble head, possibly representing the god.²⁰

MITHRAIC FINDINGS OF THE REGIO VII ETRURIA

No.	Typology	Location	Material	Chronology	Reference
1	Mithraic <i>Spe-laeum</i>	Sutri	n/a	2nd/3rd century AD	CIMRM 653; MORSELLI 1980 (n. 7)
2	Mithraic <i>Spe-laeum</i>	Visentium	n/a	2nd/3rd century AD	BIAMONTE 1997 (n. 11)
3	Mithraic <i>Spe-laeum</i>	Vulci	n/a	3rd century AD	SGUBINI MORETTI 1979 (n. 14); SGUBINI MORETTI 1998 (n. 60)
4	Mithraic <i>Spe-laeum</i>	Cosa	n/a	Second half of the 2nd century AD	RICHARDSON 1957 (n. 15), BROWN 1993 (n. 15), FENTRESS 2003 (n. 15)

¹⁸ CIMRM 658: *(in)victo/deo/salvo/Prunic/ian(o) n(ostro)/Myron ser(vus)*; BOCCI PACINI, P. – NOCENTINI, S.: *Catalogo delle sculture romane. Museo nazionale archeologico di Arezzo*. Roma 1983, 28; TRACCHI, A.: *Ricognizioni archeologiche in Etruria: dal Chianti al Valdarno*. Roma 1978, 73.

¹⁹ TRAVERSO, M.: *Esercito e società italica in età imperiale*. Roma 2006, 186; CIL XI 2596: *L(ucius) Granius Pudens, veter(amus) / ex coh(orte) VII pr(aetoria), d(at) ((denarios)) VIII(milia) d(e) p(roprio), / ut gens eos ((denarios)) in usu/ris dent et die n(atali) festo / sollemne oleum in / lucerna, quem dedi / d(e) p(roprio) ex usuris praes/tetur d(eo) I(nvicto) M(ithrae)*.

²⁰ MINTO, A.: Di alcuni bassorilievi tardo-romani del Museo Archeologico di Firenze. In *Hommages à Joseph Bidez et à Franz Cumont* [Collection Latomus II]. Bruxelles 1949, 205–210; CIMRM 663, 664, 665, 666 667, 668. The mithraic attribution of this last item is actually quite weak. It seems better suited to other interpretations, such as *Helios* or *Alexandre the Great*.

No.	Typology	Location	Material	Chronology	Reference
5	Mithraic <i>Spe-laeum</i>	Portus Pisanus	n/a	Second half of the 2nd century AD	GENOVESI 2011 (n. 16)
6	Relief (Tauroctony)	Veii	Marble	Middle of the 2nd century AD	PORCAROLI 2009 (n. 3); FUSCO 2015 (n. 3)
7	Relief (Tauroctony)	Veii	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD?	DI GIUSEPPE – PATTERSON 2012 (n. 3)
8	Relief (Tauroctony)	Fiano Romano	Marble	Second half of the 2nd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 641; VOLLKOMMER 1992 (n. 5)
9	Relief (Tauroctony)	Sutri	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 654; MORSELLI 1980 (n. 7)
10	Relief (Tauroctony)	Vicus Matrini	Tuff	2nd/3rd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 655–656; ANDREUSSI 1977 (n. 8)
11	Relief (Tauroctony)	Soriano nel Cimino	Marble	Late 3rd/4th century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 657; SCARDOZZI 2004 (n. 8)
12	Relief (Tauroctony)	Pisa	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 663; ARIAS–CRISTIANI–GABBA 1977 (n. 16); VOLLKOMMER 1992 (n. 5)
13	Relief (Tauroctony)	Florence?	Marble	3rd/4th century AD	MINTO 1949 (n. 20); <i>CIMRM</i> 668
14	Group Sculpture (Tauroctony)	Tarquini	Marble	2nd century AD	FESTA 2015 (n. 13)
15	Group Sculpture (Tauroctony, “Major Group”)	Vulci	Marble	3rd century AD	SGUBINI MORETTI 1979 (n. 14); SGUBINI MORETTI 1998 (n. 60)

No.	Typology	Location	Material	Chronology	Reference
16	Group Sculpture (Tauroctony, “Minor Group”)	Vulci	Marble	3rd century AD	SGUBINI MORETTI 1979 (n. 14); SGUBINI MORETTI 1998 (n. 60)
17	Group Sculpture (Tauroctony)	Rusellae	Marble	Second half of the 2nd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 661; CELUZZA 1990 (n. 15)
18	Group Sculpture (Tauroctony)	Asciano	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	CUMONT 1937 (n. 1); <i>CIMRM</i> 662
19	Group Sculpture (Tauroctony)	Cavriglia	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	TRACCHI 1978 (n. 18); BOCCI PACINI – NOCENTINI 1983 (n. 18)
20	Group Sculpture (Tauroctony)	Florence?	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 664
21	<i>Pinax</i> (Tauroctony)	Colle Arsiccio	Terracotta	Second half of the 2nd century AD	MORANDINI 2006 (n. 12)
22	Depiction of a solar figure slaying a bull	Caere	Graffito	2nd/3rd century AD?	CRISTOFANI 1987 (n. 6); RIZZO 1994 (n. 6); COLIVICCHI ET ALII 2016 (n. 6)
23	Sculpture (<i>dado-phorus</i>)	Capena	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD?	<i>CIMRM</i> 646
24	Sculpture (bust of Sabazios)	Volsinii	Bronze	2nd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 659; LANE 1983 (n. 10)
25	Sculpture (leg of uncertain attribution)	Cosa	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD?	BROWN 1993 (n. 15)
26	Sculpture (head of a bull)	Arretium	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	BOCCI PACINI – NOCENTINI 1983 (n. 18)
27	Sculpture (<i>dado-phorus</i>)	Vulci	Marble	3rd century AD	SGUBINI MORETTI 1979 (n. 14); SGUBINI MORETTI 1998 (n. 60)

No.	Typology	Location	Material	Chronology	Reference
28	Sculpture (<i>trapezophoros</i>)	Vulci	Marble	3rd century AD	SGUBINI MORETTI 1979 (n. 14); SGUBINI MORETTI 1998 (n. 60)
29	Sculpture (herm with young Bacchus' head)	Vulci	Marble	3rd century AD	SGUBINI MORETTI 1979 (n. 14); SGUBINI MORETTI 1998 (n. 60)
30	Sculpture (lion-headed god)	Florence?	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 665
31	Sculpture (birth of Mithras from a rock)	Florence?	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 666
32	Sculpture (marble head, possibly identified as Mithras)	Florence?	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 667
33	Votive Altar	Volsinii	Marble	Second half of the 2nd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 660; BUONOCORE 2011 (n. 9)
34	Votive Stone	Arretium	Marble	2nd/3rd century AD	<i>CIMRM</i> 658
35	<i>Tabula Ansata</i>	Montalcino	Bronze	2nd century AD.	TRAVERSO 2006 (n. 19)
36	Liturgical Crater	Vulci	Pottery	3rd/4th century AD	SGUBINI MORETTI 1979 (n. 14); SGUBINI MORETTI 1998 (n. 60)
37	Liturgical Vessel	Vulci	Pottery	3rd/4th century AD	SGUBINI MORETTI 1979 (n. 14); SGUBINI MORETTI 1998 (n. 60)



Fig. 2. Mithraeum of Cosa, housed within the city *curia* (picture taken by the author)



Fig. 3. Mithraic *spelaeum* of Vulci (picture taken by the author)



Fig. 4. Apse of the former *spelaeum* of Sutri, now re-adapted into the Christian church of “Madonna del Parto”; note the image of the Madonna and Child lodged where the Mithraic tauroctony was probably originally located (picture taken by the author)



Fig. 5. Marble group of Mithras *tauroctonos* from the town of Asciano, near Siena; now preserved at the Academia Belgica in Rome (picture taken by the author)



Fig. 6. Marble “Major Group” of Mithras *tauroctonos* from the mithraeum of Vulci (picture taken by the author)



Fig. 7. Fragmentary representation of Mithras from the Roman colony of Rusellae. Originally part of a marble group depicting the god slaying the bull (picture taken by the author)



Fig. 8. Marble relief depicting the Mithraic tauroctony, now preserved at the *Camposanto Monumentale* in Pisa (picture taken by the author)



Fig. 9. Tuff relief depicting Mithras slaying the bull lodged within a wall in Vicus Matrini, near Sutri (picture taken by the author)

- The high density of the Mithraic cultic places in southern Etruria is proven by the presence of documents in up to twelve centres.
- On the other hand, the much larger northern half allowed to bring to light Mithraic findings from nine contexts; a picture with a much lower concentration considering the large disparity in the actual size of the two areas.

This can be a reflection of the cultural hegemony of Rome, whose influence must have been felt more strongly in its surrounding areas. Hence, Lower Etruria, more densely urbanized due to the influence radiating from the *Urbs*, must have been more permeable to a wider diffusion of the cult, even within its smaller settlements.²² It should also be noted that some of the most significant findings from the south (as at least one of the reliefs from Veii²³), are among the oldest in the *Regio*, dating to slightly beyond the first half of the 2nd century AD: a condition perhaps deriving from the early arrival of the cult, following an initial expansion from Rome.

A similar march seems to be suggested by the distribution of evidence, which is heavily concentrated along the main roads heading north:²⁴

- Along the *Via Aurelia*, evidence of a Mithraic cult has been found in seven cities.
- The path of the *Via Clodia* has provided limited discoveries. The cult is attested in three centres in the proximity of its route, Visentium, Asciano and Montalcino.
- Conversely, the importance of the *Via Cassia* is revealed by the abundance of findings, present in nine municipalities.
- Along the short stretch of the *Flaminia* within Etrurian borders, the only evidence pertains to the territory of Capena.
- Finally, of some significance is the *Via Amerina*, being the deposit of “Colle Arsiccio” along a secondary road departing from it.

Ultimately, this brief list shows how the *Via Aurelia* and the *Via Cassia*, very busy consular roads, constituted the principle vehicle for the diffusion of the cult, while inland Etruria, which was mostly crossed by local traffic, at first glance, appears to have been less receptive to the Mithraic spirituality. Therefore, with Rome as prime driving force, the consular roads must have served as the main routes to expand cultural and religious trends, including of course, the cult of Mithras, not only in Etruria but throughout the entire peninsula, reaching as far as Gaul and beyond.²⁵

²² CUMONT (n. 1).

²³ FUSCO (n. 3).

²⁴ For the viability of the region: POTTER, T. W.: *Storia del Paesaggio dell'Etruria meridionale. Archeologia e trasformazioni del territorio*. Roma 1985; QUILICI, L.: Le antiche vie dell'Etruria. In *Secondo Congresso internazionale etrusco*. Roma 1989, 451–506; CALZOLARI, M.: L'Italia nella Tabula Peutingeriana. In PRONTERA, F. (ed.): *Vie e luoghi dell'Etruria nella Tabula Peutingeriana*. Firenze 2003, 53–66.

²⁵ For the genesis and the subsequent expansion of the cult of Mithras in Italy since the 1st century AD: CLAUSS, M.: *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*. New York 2000; SFAMENI GASPARRO, G.: I misteri di Mithra. In BOTTINI, A. (ed.): *Il rito segreto. Misteri in Grecia e a Roma*. Milano 2005, 99–101; GORDON, R. L.: Institutionalized Religious Options: Mithraism. In RÜPKE, J. (ed.): *A Companion to Roman Religion* [Blackwell Companions of the Ancient World]. Oxford 2007, 392–405.

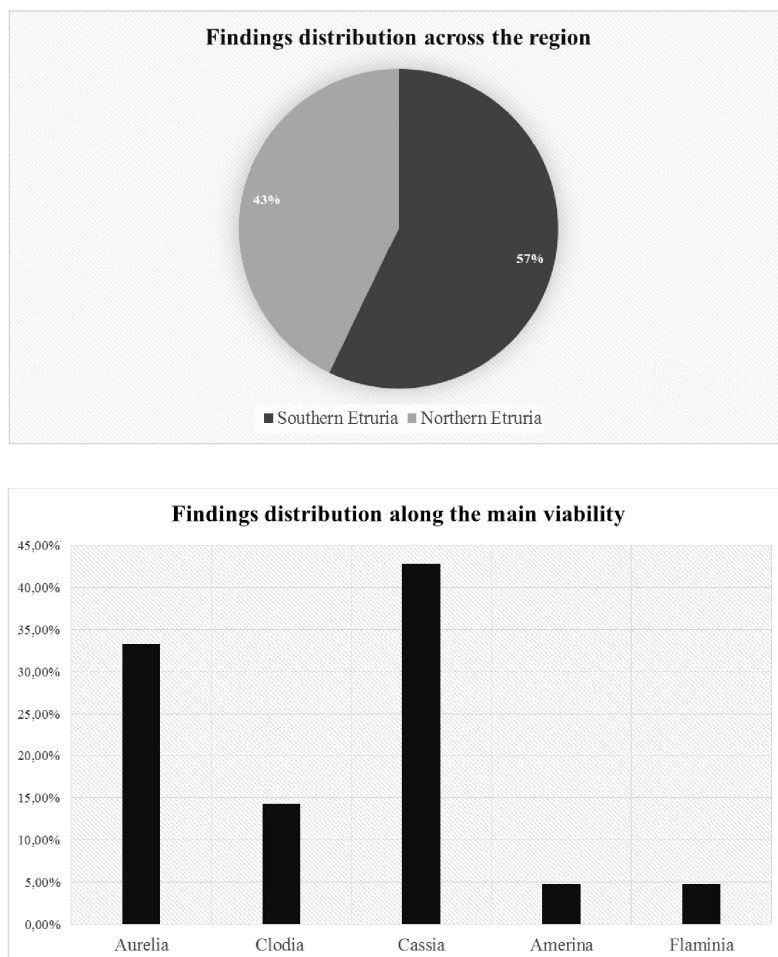


Fig. 11. Distribution patterns of the Mithraic presence throughout the *Regio VII Etruria* (realized by the author)

SOURCES OF RAW MATERIAL AND CRAFTSMEN

The necessary starting point, in attempting both to prove the spread of the Mithraic cult from Rome throughout the region and to identify its carriers, are the dynamics of production and circulation of the archaeological findings. The main raw material used is the white marble of Luna, extracted from the quarries of Tuscia, and chiselled into the image of the mystery god and his assistants:

- Fourteen tauroctony representations (seven statues and seven reliefs) are in fact made of white marble, in most cases extracted from the quarries of the *Regio*. Furthermore, eleven other Mithraic furnishings depicting various subjects were

carved using the same material, bringing to twenty-five the total number of findings.²⁶

- Tuff, a common local stone, has been used to realize only one piece, the relief of Vicus Matrini.
- Terracotta has been utilized in a single context, for the furnishings of “Colle Arsiccio”.
- Lastly, bronze was the material used for two finds, the bust of Sabazios from Volsinii and the *tabula ansata* from Montalcino.

Thus, we may observe that marble, mainly found locally, seems to have played a major role in the way the cult was revealed to its followers.²⁷ The supervision of this resource was a State prerogative, which was managed directly by the government and in part through a system of contracts granted to private workshops, generally located in Rome, core of the marble industry.²⁸ Certainly, the proximity of lower Etruria and Rome was such that the Imperial capital must have served as the main market for all those rich patrons eager to grab high quality pieces, such as the furnishings of Veii or Vulci.

Nevertheless, the Vicus Matrini relief is inferior in quality compared to its marble counterparts. This piece is in fact made of “poor” and locally extracted tuff, likely suggesting that local workers, native to the southern part of the region, might have been responsible for its realization, and demonstrating that skilled stonemasons, working on a limited scale, were still in existence in 2nd-century Etruria. However, the severe crisis which these indigenous “industries” went through under the late Antonine and Severan dynasties (estimated time of origin of most of the findings of the region), considerably weakened them and virtually led to their extinction.²⁹ The economic crisis was so general in fact, that its traces are evident in all production areas of *Regio VII*, including, of course, the marble sector.³⁰

²⁶ The marble base with the lost *dadophorus* from Capena; the altar from Volsinii; the *dadophorus*, an herm with Bacchus’ head and a *trapezophoros* from Vulci; the votive stone and a bull’s head from Arezzo; a marble leg from the *spelaeum* of Cosa; the “rock-born” Mithras, the lion-headed god and the possibly-Mithraic head preserved in Florence.

²⁷ PENSABENE, P.: *I marmi nella Roma antica*. Roma 2013, 420: the most commonly used quarries in the Roman times are located in Etruria, where nine different kinds of coloured marble come from.

²⁸ PANELLA, C.: Mercè e scambi nel Mediterraneo tardoantico. In CARANDINI, A. – CRACCO RUGGINI, L. – GIARDINA, A. (eds): *Storia di Roma III: L’età tardoantica II*. Torino 1993, 613–697, here 618.

²⁹ WALKER, S.: From West to East: Evidence for a Shift in the Balance of Trade in White Marble. In HERZ, N. – WAELENS, M. (eds): *Classical Marble: Geochemistry, Technology, Trade*. Dordrecht–Boston–London 1988, 187–196: In the *Luna* district, the crisis is particularly evident in the gradual depletion of the industry of semi-finished products.

³⁰ Agriculture, for example, suffered a considerable drop, as documented in the villa of Settefinestre, near Cosa, whose productivity reduced so extensively, that even the domestic demand had to rely on imports (CARANDINI, A.: Il mondo della Tarda Antichità visto attraverso le merci. In GIARDINA, A. [ed.]: *Società romana e impero tardoantico III. Le merci e gli insediamenti*. Roma 1986, 3–19, here 6; RICCI, A.: Cosa e il suo territorio (Etruria). Il contesto di Settefinestre. In GIARDINA, A. [ed.]: *Società romana e impero tardoantico III. Le merci e gli insediamenti*. Roma 1986, 83–88, here 83). Even the production of ceramics, including the iconic Italic sigillata, suffered a meltdown. Production gradually declined during the 2nd century AD, and around the middle of the century only a few limited late-Italic forms, intended

In view of this situation, a Roman influence on the majority of the marble pieces seems to be more plausible. Within the Roman world in fact, itinerant craftsmen were at disposal of clients, and, while operating all over the Mediterranean Sea basin, maintained their headquarters in Rome. Therefore, the wealthy elites of the *Regio VII* could have employed these artisans to work local marbles of Etruria, in this way resolving the economic paradox of sending the locally available raw material to Rome, to consequently receive it back as a finished product.

This kind of semi-local production might be proposed for the Vulci “Minor Group” and the Rusellae statue, both sharing some formal features, such as the drapery and the presence, in both cases, of a pin on the right arm of the god, evidence of an original composition which was divided into several pieces. Thus, due to the proximity of the two towns, a single workshop operating in the area could, possibly, have been responsible for both artefacts: a workshop, whose main headquarters could have been nowhere but in Rome, given the formal care of the Rusellae sculpture, and the Minor Group belonging to a shrine which was realized, as we shall see, for very elite clients.³¹

Nonetheless, the scenario that suggests these travelling artisans operating within the perimeter of the *Regio* does not seem convincing enough to explain the productive origin of the entirety of the finds in question, especially in light of some clues derived from shipwrecks of merchant vessels. If, in fact, evidence is found referring to the Julio-Claudian and the early Antonine period shows a large-scale commercialization of unprocessed raw materials, intended for artisans to work in their place of destination, the trend seems to reverse in the second half of the 2nd century AD. The wrecks from this period forward were mostly loaded with manufactured products, which found their main redistribution point in Rome, even when the production centres were located in different geographical areas.³² Some of the Vulci furnishings, probably made out of Asian marble, are a striking example of this tendency, having almost certainly arrived in Etruria from the Imperial capital, where they may have been originally imported from the provinces.

As we shall see, the Vulci context is not the only one cited in this paper which highlights the custom of the elite to buy valuable pieces on the international market operated by Rome: during the Middle Empire in fact, clients, even the richest, could not have all of their requests fulfilled, but, instead, had to follow the rules of a market which utilized a sort of “mass-production”.³³ It is a matter of particular interest, considering how, due to the government’s supervision of the industry, the most popular

for local distribution in sporadic areas such as Cosa, survived (ANDREAU, J.: *Mercati e mercato*. In SCHIAVONE, A. [ed.]: *Storia di Roma II. L'impero mediterraneo 2: I principi e il mondo*. Torino 1991, 367–386, here 367).

³¹ CELUZZA (n. 15) 105.

³² PENSABENE (n. 27) 191; WARD-PERKINS, J. B.: *The Imported Sarcophagi of Roman Tyre*. *BMB* 22 (1969) 109–145, here 129; *The sarcophagi from Asia Minor are emblematic in this regard, being imported to Rome and sold there to the rest of Italy.*

³³ CLARKE, W.: *Archived Finds of Decorative Stone and Marble*. In CASCINO – DI GIUSEPPE – PATTERSON: *Veii* (n. 3) 316–317.

models, the Mithraic ones included, had to be in some way “inspired” or at least welcomed by the State.³⁴

Therein lies the reason for pointing out the dependence of the marble market on the *Urbs*: the furnishings were either marketed as finished products from Rome or crafted by itinerant Rome-based workers, but the Capitoline administration always acted as a motivating power both in spreading the Mithraic artefacts across the *Regio VII* and in favouring their assimilation into the social fabric. These furnishings, thus, can be considered as State-approved iconographies, and their circulation within Etrurian borders was a consequence of that process of *imitatio Romae*, resulting in the peripheries, spontaneous (though government-inspired) homologation with the capital, regarded as a source of civic and political legitimacy. In conclusion, although the direct Roman origin for all the artefacts in question is not ascertained, the State, through its control over both laboratories and artistic models, surely played a strong, though often indirect, role in stimulating their fabrication and distribution.

MITHRAS AND THE STATE OFFICIALS IN ETRURIA

As mentioned, within the borders of the region various factors seem to hint at the ways the local Etrurian elites responded to these indirect “religious directions” from above: among these factors, one of the most emblematic is the marble altar from the territory of Volsinii, which, in the late 2nd century, was dedicated by the distinguished citizen Thermodon, commissioner of a Mithraic *antrum* in the territory of his city, as testified by the surviving inscription.³⁵ To understand the deep meaning of Thermodon’s Mithraic devotion, it is necessary to spend some words on his social background and on the class to which he belonged to. Tiberius Claudius Thermodon, indeed, belonged to the ranks of Imperial freedmen, as evidenced by his *praenomen*, which identifies him as a descendant of slaves freed under the reign of Claudius.³⁶ The freedmen, in fact, found their more profitable occupations in the public administration, where they held key positions. Thus, the State boasted a very large number of them, an entire caste, directly subordinate to the central government. Consequently, due to the indissoluble forge of their relationship with the Emperor, they played a crucial role in creating consensus among the population, and prime importance was

³⁴ The State’s desire to establish a monopoly is evident from the gradual takeover of the private workshops starting from the second half of the 2nd century AD. For instance, this process is particularly evident for the Anatolian quarries of Docimeion, where the names of the workshops were more and more frequently derived from that of the reigning Emperor (*Antonina*, *Commodiana*, *Severiana*), sign of the assumption of direct control by the central government. PENSABENE (n. 27).

³⁵ Such a clear interest of officials in the Mithraic mysteries, has also been proven by some evidence found in surrounding areas immediately outside the borders of the region, such as the dedications by the *arkarius* Apronianus, magistrate in the city of Nersae, and that of the *equites* Lucillianus and Furianus from Aveia Vestina. *CIMRM* 647–648, 652; BUONOCORE (n. 9).

³⁶ BUONOCORE (n. 9).

given to crucial responsibilities such as spreading government-promoted iconographies or managing the state marble industry.³⁷

The clearest indicator, however, of the privileged bond between the freedmen and the government is the monopoly of the Imperial cult, reserved from Augustus onward, to the *Caesari servi*; having in the Prince their direct patron, the Imperial freedmen were indeed the most suitable candidates to perform the sacred rites for the *Domus Divina*. The pervasive diffusion of this State-cult in Etruria has been well described by the abundance of contexts where evidence of its priesthood have come to light, as in Veii (*CIL* XI 3781), Falerii (*CIL* XI 3083), Lucus Feroniae (*CIL* XI 3938), Nepes (*CIL* XI 1801), and Luna (*CIL* XI 1344b). These priests, the *sevires Augustales*, could only slavishly accommodate the choices of the government they served, and one of the most logical and common ways of doing so was by mimicking its religious inclinations.³⁸ Hence, for example, when in 2nd century Falerii, the *sevir* Caius Metilius Saturninus accomplished his vow to the goddesses Isis and Cybele, he was certainly responding to the implicit directive coming from a higher office indicating that these deities were worthy of honour.

Thermodon, though not being a *sevir* himself, was an illustrious personage within his community, and likely a preeminent public figure. His religious actions, carried out for the benefit of all his citizens, followed the instructions of the ruling power, whose approval from above had to have been a prerequisite in selecting the deities to honour. Therefore, his ostentatious Mithraic devotion could only be explained in light of the government's growing involvement with solar cults:³⁹ the

³⁷ On this phenomenon: GORDON, R. L.: The Date and Significance of CIMRM 593. *JMS* 2 (1978) 148–174 = GORDON, R. L.: *Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World: Studies on Mithraism and Religious Art*. Norfolk 1996, ch. VII, 151–153. This condition is summarized in the *Regio VIII* by the votive epigraph of Vicirius A. Felix, Imperial freedman of Rusellae, who occupied a senior post in the local marble industry, and simultaneously held the position of *sevir Augustalis: a. vicirius (feli)x (pro)culi (ibertus), marmorarius* (PARIBENI ROVAI [n. 15] 74).

³⁸ R. L. GORDON: Religion in the Roman Empire: The Civic Compromise and Its Limits. In BEARD, M. – NORTH, J. (eds): *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World*. London 1990, 179–255.

³⁹ For the relation between the Imperial cult and the figure of Apollo: ZANKER, P.: *Augusto e il potere delle immagini*. Torino 2006; MILLER, J. F.: *Apollo, Augustus and the Poets*. Cambridge 2011; MASTROCINQUE, A.: I sacerdoti di Apollo e il culto imperiale. In *Sacerdos. Figure del sacro nella società romana: Atti del convegno internazionale, Cividale del Friuli*. Pisa 2014, 223–238.

For the relationship between the Imperial power and the worship of *Sol Invictus*: HALSBERGHE, G. H.: *The cult of Sol Invictus*. Leiden 1972; HIJMAN, S. E.: The Sun that did Not Rise in the East: The Cult of Sol Invictus in the Light of Non-Literary Evidence. *BABesch* 75 (1996) 115–150; WALLRAFF, M.: *Christus versus Sol. Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike*. Münster 2001; MATERN, P.: *Helios und Sol: Kulte und Ikonographie des Griechischen und Römischen Sonnengottes*. Istanbul 2002; BERRENS, S.: *Sonnenkult und Kaisertum von den Severern bis zu Constantin I. (193–337 n. Chr.)* [Historia Einzelschriften 185]. Stuttgart 2004; HIJMAN, S. E.: *Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome*. Groningen 2009.

Within the confines of *Regio VII*, the two-faced relief from Fiano Romano represents the role of *Sol Invictus* in the Mithraic theology particularly well: while the first side shows the standardized tauroctony, the latter represents the myth's next scene, where Mithras and *Sol* feast side-by-side, sitting together in a celestial sphere.

freedman thus appeals to the dome of power from which he draws his own freedom, and his act of dedication is nothing more than an implicit self-legitimation of his own authority and a search for consensus.⁴⁰

Furthermore, perhaps an even more striking proof of the affiliation of local administrative classes to the mysteries comes from Cosa, where the mithraeum is lodged within the local *curia*. Worship here is in fact officiated inside the most important public building, the devotional core for the body of magistrates of the colony and the entire community. It is impossible not to draw a parallel with the contemporary presence of a *spelaeum* in Rome's Capitoline Hill, a source of inspiration for civic religious spaces across the entire *Res Publica*; spaces where the main buildings, in Rome as in Etruria, served as favoured theatres for the *decuriones* to perform the ceremonies of the Imperial cult.⁴¹

Hence, while the *curiae* of Caere, Saturnia, Pisa, and many other cities of the *Regio* witnessed the veneration of the Emperor's genius, the equivalent building in Cosa housed a mithraeum, probably entrusted with a similar social role.⁴² In this regard, it is also worth mentioning the temple of *Liber Pater* in Cosa which, like the *curia*, overlooked the city forum. The well-established association of *Liber* with the *Princeps* and the Imperial cult is, in fact, another crucial signal hinting at how the religious landscape of the area was a cleverly designed stage for loyalty to the Empire.⁴³

In fact, only after having accomplished, on the Sun's command, his role of pantocrator, through the killing of the bull, Mithras is allowed to ascend to the level of *Sol*, and to be identified with him (as meant by the epithet *Invictus*, shared by both deities). ALVAR (n. 5).

⁴⁰ For the involvement of the freedmen in politics: WEAVER, P. R. C.: *Familia Caesaris: A Social Study of the Emperors Freedmen and Slaves*. Cambridge 1972; GARNSEY, P.: Descendants of Freedmen in Local Politics. Some Criteria. In LEVICK, B. (ed.): *The Ancient Historian and His Materials: Essays in Honour of C.E. Stevens on His Seventieth Birthday*. Farnborough 1975, 167–180; GARNSEY, P.: Independent Freedmen and the Economy of Roman Italy under the Principate. *Klio* 63 (1981) 359–372; KIRSCHENBAUM, A.: *Sons, Slaves and Freedmen in Roman Commerce*. Jerusalem 1987; HAGELIN, L.: *Imperial Freedmen and Roman Society: A Study on the Social Standing of Imperial Freedmen as Expressed in Literary and Epigraphic Sources in the Early Roman Empire*. Uppsala 2010; MOURITSEN, H.: *The Freedmen in the Roman World*. Cambridge 2011.

⁴¹ For the cult of Mithras on the Capitoline Hill: CECHELLI, C.: *Studi e documenti sulla Roma sacra*. Spoleto 1938 129–176; MASTROCINQUE, A.: Mithra e gli imperatori. In *Potere e religione nel mondo indo-mediterraneo tra ellenismo e tarda antichità*. Roma 2009, 171–185.

⁴² A dedication on behalf of the magistrates comes from Saturnia, while in Caere the devotion toward the Emperor is attested inside the *curia Arsenia* (probably the ceremonial area within the Senate of the colony), and the *templum divorum*. Furthermore, two marble slabs from Pisa report the *decuriones* decree to hold sacred rites and erect a triumphal arch to the memory of Gaius and Lucius Caesar, the two heirs of Augustus who died at an early age. TAYLOR, L. R.: *Local Cults in Etruria*. Rome 1923.

⁴³ For the temple of *Liber* in Cosa: COLLINS-CLINTON, J.: *A Late Antique Shrine of Liber Pater at Cosa*. Leiden 1997.

There is proof of the devotion of the administrative classes toward *Liber Pater* and other deities related to the Empire within the *Regio VII*: in an inscription found in Luna, citizens and *decuriones* jointly dedicated a vow to the Italic god, *pro salutem* of the Emperor Septimius Severus and his family (*CIL XI* 1335). Furthermore, a marble altar, coming from the same city depicts both *Liber* and Hercules, a demigod traditionally associated with Imperial authority. TAYLOR (n. 42) 229.

It is not so arduous at this point to imagine members of the class of freedmen in Cosa wearing magistrate vestments while taking part in initiations in the *curia*'s mithraeum. Furthermore, based on this comparison, a strategic location could also be assumed, with the due caution, for Thermodon's sanctuary. Both choices made in Cosa and Volsinii, in fact, coherently echoed the officials, common practice of promoting, as a demonstration of allegiance, the government-endorsed worships, including the cult of Mithras, which developed within the Roman administrative *milieu*.⁴⁴ These Etrurian settings, thus, are not isolated cases, but instead they mirror a large number of analogous situations, starting from the intent of eminent Imperial freedmen to encourage the Mithraic mysteries in Rome ever since the reign of Trajan.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the mysteries of Mithras, which shared with the piety for the Prince the same function of crystallizing social order, embodied one of the many facades the Imperial cult manifested to his subjects, in Etruria as well as in the rest of the Empire.⁴⁶

THE CULT'S DIFFUSION AMONG THE LOWER SOCIAL CLASSES

As we have seen, Thermodon was eager to pledge loyalty to the central government, and the way he did so was through a public gesture on behalf of his fellow citizens. Equally, the *forum* of Cosa, and likewise all other civic sites in the region, were structured to recall specific religious directions to the mind of those who came in contact with them. Accordingly, if the administration played a leading role in spreading the cult, it is, however, clear that those magistrates must have needed an "audience" to sponsor their views and spread their messages. The State, in fact, solely triggered the devotion toward the religious beliefs it preferred, causing the different social groups of the Empire to spontaneously respond by embracing those cults and contributing to their establishment within the territory.

⁴⁴ See MERKELBACH, R.: *Mithras*. Königstein 1984; GORDON, R. L.: Who worshipped Mithras? *JRS* 7 (1994) 459–474; CLAUSS (n. 25); MASTROCINQUE: *Mithra* (n. 41).

⁴⁵ 2nd century senior officials are responsible for the oldest surviving dedications to Mithras: thus, the Mithraic vow expressed by the Imperial freedman Ephebianus dates to the reign of Hadrian, while under Trajan, his colleague Alcimus is responsible for another inscription to the god *Invictus* (GORDON: *The Date* [n. 37] 151–153; TURCAN, R.: *Mithra et le mithriacisme*. Paris 1981, 26).

⁴⁶ The connection between the devotion to the Emperor and the mystery cults is well known and documented. Cf. PLEKET, H. W.: An Aspect of the Emperor Cult. *Imperial Mysteries*. *HTR* 58 (1965) 331–347. Regarding the Mithraic cult, some examples, outside Etrurian borders, highlight this link explicitly, and in a few cases Mithras is even directly invoked *pro salute* to the Imperial family. Under Commodus, the *procurator castrensis* Stertinius dedicated a Mithraic inscription in Rome to the Emperor, while the *Augustalis* Priscianus seems to be behind the realization of the *castra peregrinorum* mithraeum. MASTROCINQUE: *Mithra* (n. 41) 175. At the beginning of the 3rd century, a group of Imperial freedmen are the authors of a votive epigraph to Mithras, here invoked to propitiate the war campaigns of Severus; in addition, a Mithraic *spelaeum* is the discovery site of an inscription by two freedmen, *pro reditu et pro victoris* of Severus and his sons from the *bellum Parthicum*. Lastly, under the same principate, a freedman, counting among the ranks of the *sevires Augustales*, dedicated an epigraph in the *antrum* in Rome. CLAUSS, M.: *Cultores Mithrae. Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes*. Stuttgart 1992, 22.

The merchants are often cited as the fifth column of this expansion, and in Etruria, there are several 2nd century Mithraic findings more or less securely ascribed to tradesmen. This may be the case of the Rusellae statue and the relief in Pisa, both coming from prosperous trading centres. Furthermore, the structures of the mithraeum located in Portus Pisanus re-adapted some quarters of a larger storage building in the settlement.⁴⁷

The context in Sutri could also be of some significance because of the shrine's strict connection with a building for *ludi*; indeed, the *spelaeum* was linked with the amphitheatre, the oldest in the *Regio*, both being excavated in the same tuff rock.⁴⁸ Moreover, the two constructions found their location in the town suburbia, in close proximity to the Via Cassia, suggesting a likely simultaneous attendance by passing travellers.⁴⁹

However, this trend of attendance apparently clashed with the nature of the cult we are talking about: the mysteries relied on an initiatory journey, taking place within a community, where members were expected to meet frequently. Each community rotated in fact around a geographically-fixed pivot, a shrine of reference for the congregation, where the faithful were required to gather. It appears clear how such practices were not easily compatible with the lifestyle of a merchant, characterized by large-scale displacements. Hence, if commerce could have served as a mainspring in diffusing the cult, its maintenance *in situ* was undoubtedly up to settlers.

The positioning of the shrines within the cities could provide a good starting point in trying to identify the social classes to which these individuals belonged. The *spelaea* of Sutri and Portus, in fact, lay in outlying areas, frequented by the urban plebs, where usually the buildings for games found their place: the famous saying *panem et circenses* well synthesizes the Roman mentality, which believed that public spectacles were the main vent for humble classes. Other than in Sutri, where this strict correlation is demonstrated, the Mithras cult was in fact present in several other cities having amphitheatres for gladiatorial games; in Etruria, there are buildings for

⁴⁷ GENOVESI (n. 16) 278. The potential knowledge offered by this *spelaeum* appears particularly evident when comparing it with the contemporary Mithraic presence in Ostia, where two mithraea reused previously constructed *horrea*. SCHREIBER, J.: The Environment of Ostian Mithraism. In LAEUHLI, S. (ed.): *Mithraism in Ostia: Mystery Religion and Christianity in the Ancient Port of Rome*. Evanston, Ill. (1967) 22–45.

⁴⁸ CUMONT (n. 1) 100.

⁴⁹ In both Florence and Fiesole, the position of the local temples of Isis (like Mithras, an “eastern” deity, characterized in the Imperial period by a Greco-Roman mystery cult) could represent another echo of the travellers’ religious priorities along the consular roads. In both cases, the buildings are located in the city’s suburbs, abutting the city gate, and right at the entrance of the road that connected the two cities: both suitable sites for incoming travellers to approach.

It is also interesting to note the strict proximity of the Florentine *iseum* to the city theatre, highlighting, as in Sutri, some sort of connection between the two buildings. GUIDOTTI, M. C.: *L’iseo di Firenze*. In ARSLAN, E. A. (ed.): *Iside: il mito, il mistero, la magia. Catalogo della mostra*. Milano 1997, 369.

ludi in 9 settlements, 7 of which (Arretium, Florentiae, Pisae, Sutrium, Rusellae, Veii, Volsinii) have also provided evidence of Mithraic discoveries.⁵⁰

The organization of the games was indeed an essential component in the search for consensus of the elite ruling class, and it was a duty fulfilled by the body of magistrates of each town.⁵¹ That is the reason why inscriptions testifying the organization of circus games by the local *Augustales*, for the citizens' enjoyment and to honour the Emperor, have been found both in Veii⁵² and in Falerii.⁵³ Thus, the erection of a mithraeum in the vicinity of a building used for games (as in Sutri) could perhaps indicate the intention, on the part of ruling class, to flaunt the cult in front of the lower classes orbiting around circuses and amphitheatres.

Another proof in support of this theory emerges analysing the architectural features of the shrines: both Sutri and Portus mithraea were in fact obtained by adapting earlier buildings, yet another signal of limited economic resources.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the scarce quality of some of the findings, such as the tuff relief from Vicus Matrini, highlight the low social status of their customers, despite the fact that the worshipper, L. Avillius Rufinus, was at least a free man (probably a freedman), as inferred by the *tria nomina* which he bore.

By contrast, the man who dedicated the marble stone found in Arezzo expressly declares himself a slave. His own name, Myron, like that of the much more illustrious Thermodon, has a clear Greek origin, identifying him as descendant of slaves imported from the Roman East.⁵⁵ Myron's epigraph provides remarkable evidence of why Imperial bureaucracy chose to promote the cult of Mithras among slaves and humble groups. Myron, in fact, dedicated *pro salutem* of his master Prunicianus, as a demonstration of loyalty to the established order, which had Mithras as its guarantor: hence, the mystery cult, structured according to a rigid system of ranks, perfectly harmonized within Roman society, helping to create a framework for slaves and commoners. Through the Mithraic hierarchy, in fact, they had to transpose, even into their most intimate sphere, those religious values of submission and obedience to the constituted authority, personified, outside the *spelaea*, by their superiors and the State.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ TOSI, G.: *Gli edifici per spettacoli nell'Italia romana*. Roma 2003; GREGORI, G. L.: *Ludi e Munera. 25 anni di ricerche sugli spettacoli d'età romana*. Milano 2011, 83.

⁵¹ VOS, M. DE: Eracle e Priamo: trasmissione di potere. Mitologia e ideologia imperiale. In MASTROCINQUE, A. (ed.): *Ercole in Occidente*. Trento 1993, 87.

⁵² *CIL* XI 3781.

⁵³ *CIL* XI 3083.

⁵⁴ The comparison with Ostia proves crucial also in this occasion; sixteen of the Ostian *spelaea* show a very similar situation, yet immensely amplified, to that of Portus and Sutri. As for the shrines in Etruria, also the Ostian ones were mostly housed in humble buildings. These Mithraic *antra* are located in highly populated suburbs, and their inhabitants were the poorer classes, employed in the docks or in the many *horrea* concentrated in this part of the city. SCHREIBER (n. 47) 56.

⁵⁵ For the connection between the birth of the Mithraic mysteries and people of Greek-Anatolian descent: GORDON: *The Date* (n. 37); BECK, R.: *The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis*. *JRS* 88 (1998) 115–128.

⁵⁶ CLAUSS (n. 25) 143.

MITHRAS AMONG THE ARISTOCRACY OF SOUTHERN ETRURIA

The situation described so far does not seem, however, to apply to some of the findings taken into consideration, in particular the shrine in Vulci and possibly the marble relief from Soriano nel Cimino, both dating after the first half of the 3rd century AD.

The mithraeum of Vulci reused some service areas of a late Republican *domus* (not in use at the time the *spelaeum* was built), and was likely linked with an abutting *domus* built during the Middle Empire, some spaces of which have been discovered northeast of the sanctuary.⁵⁷ Similarly, the relief from Soriano comes from what appears to be the house of a wealthy individual: the place of discovery was in fact the basement of a modern private building, implanted on a Roman site. Segments of two walls of this building, in blocks of peperino blocks, and several structures in *opus quadratum* have survived up to now. There, along with the relief, the marble statue of a man wearing a toga has been found, suggesting, also in this case, the possibility that those spaces were patronized by the upper classes.⁵⁸

Of course, the existence of *spelaea* was not so rare in 2nd to 3rd century noble *villas*, since they were frequented by the slaves and by the service staff; furthermore, contrary to what was thought traditionally, the cult of Mithras must have retained its appeal among the lower and administrative classes still into the 3rd and 4th centuries AD.⁵⁹ However, their devotional impetus seems to have been extinguished by the second half of the 3rd century and, though the majority of shrines built during the previous centuries were still in use by the common people, these social groups appear to have lost interest in or the ability to produce *ex novo* Mithraic sanctuaries and art.

The relief from Soriano, instead, can be attributed to the period between the 3rd and the 4th century. In Vulci, on the other hand, the mithraeum was in existence from the late 3rd century (the period during which its marble sculptures were realized) up to the beginning of the 5th century (as confirmed by the presence of 4th-century African oil lamps, and especially by the treasures of the shrine, whose coinage spread from the 3rd century to the reign of Arcadius and Honorius).⁶⁰ In addition, its rich furnishings and the use of imported marble could indicate that the wealthy classes attended the *spelaeum*.

The hypothesis that the abovementioned sanctuaries belonged to prominent men, perhaps even senators from Rome, is based on these data: a situation reversed in comparison to the first two centuries of the Empire, when senators, sure of their inviolable aristocratic privileges, could treat with indifference a cult which, on the other hand, the social groups directly dependent on the Emperor had to conform with.⁶¹

⁵⁷ SGUBINI MORETTI, A. M.: *Vulci: scoperte e riscoperte: nuovi dati dal territorio e dai depositi del museo. Catalogo della mostra*. Montalto di Castro 2002, 13.

⁵⁸ SCARDOZZI (n. 8) 101–102.

⁵⁹ BJØRNEBYE, J.: Re-interpreting the Cult of Mithras in the 4th Century. In SALZMAN, M. R. – SÁGHY, M. – TESTA, R. L.: *Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Rome*. Cambridge 2015, 197–212.

⁶⁰ SGUBINI MORETTI, A. M.: *Il Mitreo di Vulci. Catalogo della mostra, Montalto di Castro 1997*. Viterbo 1998, 34.

⁶¹ The Roman aristocracy was often closed in its religious conservatism, sometimes as a defensive mechanism in response to the favour shown by the ruling power to other classes and other gods. Thus,

Nonetheless, at least since the last decades of the 3rd century AD and for all the next century, Mithras had increasingly become part of the *pantheon* of the gods favoured by the *patres conscripti*⁶² and by the noble class in general. The driving force of this “conversion” was probably the gradual ascending trajectory with which the solar motives lived during the first three centuries of the Empire; especially from the Aurelian religious reform on, aimed at revitalizing the cult of *Sol Invictus*, whose pontifical college was reserved for the senatorial order. The Aurelian Sun-God was in fact a true national Roman deity, rightfully occupying its place among the gods of the *Quirites*, and thus fully able, thanks to the continuous references to the *mos maiorum*, to satisfy the conservative noble caste.⁶³

That means that the same Mithraic faith demonstrated by the worshipers of the Vulci and Soriano shrines must have germinated from this fertile terrain, deeply steeped in solar spirituality.⁶⁴ Under this circumstance, the fact that the owner of the Vulci Mithraic *antrum* was a member of the Roman Senate now appears rather possible. He was, in fact, a rich Pagan interested in a cult whose god bore the epithet of *Sol Invictus*: a picture fitting those Roman aristocrats who enthusiastically followed the trend of their Era.

The presence of senatorial families in the territory of Vulci is indeed well attested, and the city was a privileged seat for the *virī clarissimi* to build their residences outside Rome.⁶⁵ The *gentes* of the *Minucii*, *Postumii* and *Sempronii*, had in fact their *villas* in Vulci, as confirmed by epigraphic inscriptions dated at least up to the 1st century AD.⁶⁶ These families, however, continued to enjoy great prestige in the following centuries, and they likely maintained their property in the area during the Late Empire.⁶⁷

the senatorial historiography left a huge amount of evidence of how the practice of mystery and “eastern” worship had been utilized to prove the malpractice of all those leaders and princes accused of an “anti-senatorial” policy (Suet. *Ner.* 56, *Dom.* 1; *Hist. Aug. Comm.* 9. 4).

⁶² GRIFFITH, A.: Mithraism in the Private and Public Lives of 4th-c. Senators in Rome. *Electronic Journal Mithraic Studies* 1 (2000) <http://www.uhu.es/ejms/Papers/Volume1Papers/ABGMS.DOC>

⁶³ This is confirmed by epigraphic material showing the uninterrupted succession of senators whose names were associated with the cult of the Sun far beyond the death of Aurelian, well into the 4th century (*CIL* V 803, *CIL* VI 501, *CIL* VI 1778, *CIL* VIII 1329, *CIL* VIII 14688). HALSBERGHE (n. 39) 142; WATSON, A.: *Aurelian and the Third Century*. London 1999, 191.

For the references to Roman tradition in the solar cult of Aurelian: HIJMANS: *Sol* (n. 39); for the mutual influence and co-dependency between the cults of *Sol Invictus* and Mithras: WALLRAFF (n. 39).

⁶⁴ There are several examples of how the senators must have perceived the two gods *Invicti* as sides of the same coin; for instance, the epigraphic material hands down several cases of patricians invested at the same time with the priesthood of both Mithras and *Sol* (*CIL* VI 1675, *CIL* VI 1779, *CIL* VI 2151).

⁶⁵ MARZANO, A.: *Roman Villas in Central Italy: A Social and Economic History*. Leiden 2007, 770.

⁶⁶ GAZZETTI, G.: La bassa e media valle del Fiora. Vulci. La città e il territorio dopo la conquista. In CARANDINI, A. (ed.): *La romanizzazione dell'Etruria: il territorio di Vulci*. Milano 1985, 61–64, here 63.

⁶⁷ A member of the *gens Sempronia*, P. Aelius Metrophanes, held the position of *procurator* to Ancyra under the Severan dynasty.

The Postumii went even further into the 3rd century, having news of T. Flavius Postumius, *praefectus Urbis* in 271, and Postumius Quietus, known from an inscription possibly dating at the beginning of the 4th century.

Some evidence also demonstrates the interest these senatorial families showed in solar cults; a member of the *gens Postumia*, T. Flavius Postumius, was appointed prefect of Rome in 271, the year Aurelian ascended to the throne, and it is highly unlikely that someone so close to the Emperor would not have followed his political and religious interests. In fact, several decades later, he himself, or a relative named after him, having become *corrector Italiae* and priest of *Sol Invictus*, was responsible for dedicating a *templum Dei Solis* to Diocletian and Maximian in Comum:⁶⁸ a temple that could probably be identified with a Mithraic *antrum*, since the two *Augusti* are the first known Roman Emperors to have realized a mithraeum themselves.⁶⁹ Lastly, there are some (more feeble) clues pointing to the family of the Minucii: from the mithraeum of *Dura Europos*, comes in fact an inscription to Mithras by Minicius Martialis, provincial prosecutor in Syria between 207 and 211 AD.⁷⁰ How exactly the *gens Minucia* and *Minicia* were related is unknown, but the extraordinary similarity of the names might suggest some correlation.⁷¹

Obviously, lacking a systematic excavation of the area of the *villa*, there is not any conclusive proof that one of these dynasties erected the *domus* and the mithraeum. However, whether the *spelaeum* belonged to a Roman *gens* or was attended by distinguished local citizens, in Vulci (and perhaps also in Soriano) the worshipers had to be higher class individuals, whose interest in Mithras no doubt can be traced back to the way the gradual growing interest toward solar motives influenced the perception of the double figure of Mithras/*Sol*.

CESSATION OF WORSHIP AND DISMISSAL OF THE SPELAEA

Despite the new lifeblood injected by the aristocrats into the mysteries of Mithras, by the first half of the 5th century the centuries-old shrines in Etruria had ceased to exist. Hence, when the sanctuary in Vulci was burned and destroyed (at some time during

Likewise, the *gens Minucia* was to enjoy some authority even in the late 3rd century, as affirmed in an inscription dating the year 274 and mentioning a senator and *procurator* named Minucius, and his son Minucius Honoratus Marcellus, whose political career presumably took place during the second half of the century. BARBIERI, G.: *L'albo senatorio da Settimio Severo a Carino (193–285)* [Studi pubblicati dall'Istituto italiano per la Storia antica, fasc. 6]. Roma 1952.

⁶⁸ *AE* 1914, n. 249: *templum dei solis/iassu d(ominorum) n(ostrorum) diocletiani/et maximiani aug(ustorum)/t(itus) fl(avius) post(umius) titianus v(ir) c(larissimus) corr(ector)/ital(iae) perfecit ac dedicavit/curante auxilio iuniorē/v(iro) c(larissimo) curatore c(iv(itatis) comensium*

For the identification of the temple as a mithraeum: SAUER, E.: *The End of Paganism in the North-Western Provinces of the Roman Empire: The Example of the Mithras Cult*. Oxford 1996.

⁶⁹ *CIL* III 4413. The same Mithraic devotion expressed by the two *Augusti* is probably a direct consequence of the Aurelian reform: only thirty years before, it would have been unthinkable for the Persian god to fulfil such a solemn and public role.

⁷⁰ *CIMRM* 53.

⁷¹ Minicius Martialis held the office of *procurator Syriae*, normally reserved to individuals of consular rank, proving the high rank of his family. Furthermore, the membership of the *gens* to the Senate under the Severans is confirmed by Minicius Timinianus Oppianus appointed proconsul of Africa around the year 200. BARBIERI (n. 67) 90.

the first half of the 5th century AD), the liturgical furnishings were randomly thrown on the ground and buried under the rubble. The statues were consequently found highly damaged and overturned along the centre aisle, while the deposits of coins and the remains of pottery appear to have suffered a similar fate in the vestibule. In addition, a layer of ashes covered the destruction layers, tangible sign of a fire set by the looters.⁷²

The end of the cult in Cosa can be traced to the same period: as in Vulci, also in Cosa, ceramic remains and coins were found scattered (three of the five coins, two of which dated back to the middle of the 3rd century AD, lay above the layers of obliteration).⁷³ Furthermore, in Portus Pisanus, where traces of violent destruction were not found, the shrine ceased to exist as a mithraeum during the first half of the 5th century. Based on such comparisons, the end of the cult in both Visentium and Sutri could perhaps fall into this chronological range.

Those responsible for the dismissal of the temples are often identified in those groups of Christians who, more and more often over the 4th and 5th centuries, as the political power and the word of Christ became increasingly intertwined, felt the need to fight the Pagan religions. Thus, during the 4th century AD, the cult of Mithras began to loosen its ties with the veneration of the *Princeps*, and, from the beginning of the following century, the mysteries became object of systematic persecution carried out by Catholic zealots.⁷⁴

In Vulci, such religious motivations seem to be suggested by the different treatment reserved for the different furnishings. The two tauroctony sculptures are in fact by far the most severely damaged: the “Major Group” appeared broken into two parts at the time of their discovery and the head of the god was missing in both groups. The removal and the failure to find the heads of both of these statues (in a context undoubtedly unviolated until their discovery), could point to a particular intentional fury against the *simulacra* of Mithras, especially since at least other six bull-killing groups from Etruria seem to have suffered the same fate: the group statues from Tarquinia, Cavriglia, and Florence were missing the god’s head, and on the reliefs from

⁷² SGUBINI MORETTI, A. M.: La bassa e media valle del Fiume. Vulci. Il Mitreo. In CARANDINI, A. (ed.): *La romanizzazione dell’Etruria: il territorio di Vulci*. Milano 1985, 73.

⁷³ BUTTREY, T. V.: Cosa: The Coins. *MAAR* 34 (1980) CG 405.

⁷⁴ SCARPI, P.: *Le religioni dei misteri II: Samotraccia, Andania, Iside, Cibele e Attis, Mitraismo*. Milano 2003, 353.

The inability to eradicate such an extraordinary tool in the maintenance of social hierarchy as the Imperial cult, is highlighted in Tuscany and Umbria by the famous rescript of Constantine (*CIL* XI 5265), where the Emperor reaffirmed the practice in both Hispellum and Volsinii, but at the same time bitterly opposed every Pagan ritual connected to it. Ultimately, if the semi-divine worship of the Prince was not abolished, it was, however, stripped of its Pagan nature. For a religious system such as the Mithraic cult, so tied to the political sphere, this change could have led only to a sharp decline in devotion on part of those social classes that, in the previous centuries, had embraced it to follow the authority which was in power at the time.

For the relation between the Imperial cult and the Christian morality: BRENT, A.: *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order: Concepts and Images of Authority in Paganism and Early Christianity before the Age of Cyprian*. Leiden 1999.

Sutri, Vicus Matrini and Soriano, the face of Mithras appeared severely damaged at the time of discovery.⁷⁵

St. Augustine provided the theological justification for this practice. In his *De Civitate Dei*, in fact, he stated that the gods are nothing more than demons, evil entities, whose corrupted souls hide inside their *simulacra*, which, consequently, must be destroyed to drive them out.⁷⁶ In light of this practice, it seems likely that the representations of Mithras in the region could have been voluntarily targeted.

The *spelaeum* in Vulci, however, is not a valid specimen for all the contexts in question: one of the better-studied cases is that of Portus Pisanus, where surprisingly there is no trace of any sign indicating a traumatic event comparable to the one recorded in Vulci, but rather the final stages of use hinted at a pacific desertion of the temple.⁷⁷ The same applies to the shrine of Cosa, where, once again, there is no certain evidence of vicious destruction.⁷⁸ Thus, these findings could introduce several situations where the mysteries were extinguished independently, without requiring external violence.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the growing faith of Christ could not have been completely extraneous to these events: in fact, even a non-violent extinction of the Mithraic cult had probably to be dependent on the widespread proselytism exercised by the Christians. Hence, also without any use of violence, the haemorrhagic movement of the worshippers of Mithras toward the religion of Christ, out of personal conviction, fear or simple social convenience, in the long run, must have caused the end of the Mithraic mysteries.

⁷⁵ The comparison with Ostia proves to be crucial in this case too. In the mithraeum of the Baths of Mithras, subjected to violent destruction, the tauroctony group was decapitated, and both the heads of the god and the bull were found in a sewer. Instead, in the *spelaeum* of Fructosus, a damaged statue of a *dadophorus* was found, but not that of Mithras, likely a sign of how the latter had been the prime target for the looters (DAVID, M.: La fine dei mitrei ostiensi. In PANAINO, A. – PIRAS, A. [eds]: *Proceedings of the 5th Conference of the Societas Iranologica Europaea*. Milano 2006, 395–396).

Furthermore, from Tor Cervara, near Rome, a tauroctony relief has been found fragmented into over fifty pieces. The head of the god, initially not found, has been recently restored, after its identification with a fragment kept in the archaeological museum in Karlsruhe: the different context of the discovery can thus be a consequence of an intentional removal of the head (HORST, K.: Die Geschichte um das Mithras-Kultbild von Tor Cervara (Rom): Eine Kriminalgeschichte. *AW* 45 [2014] 57).

Finally, even the hagiographic tradition insists on how this practice was widespread: worth mentioning is, for instance, the hagiography of St. Eugene of Trebizond, where the saint, together with a handful of faithful, conceived and implemented a scheme to assault a Mithraic *antrum* situated on a hill in the vicinity of the city (ROSENQUIST, J. O.: The Hagiographical Evidence of Mithraism in Trebizond: Local Tradition or Learned Designed? *Eranos* 89 [1991] 107–120).

⁷⁶ August. *De civ. Dei* VIII 26. 3.

⁷⁷ GENOVESI (n. 16) 284.

⁷⁸ The same goes for the nearby sanctuary of *Liber*, where there was a peaceful cessation of worship (FENTRESS: Cosa 5 [n. 15] 65–66).

⁷⁹ A comparison can be underlined with the mithraeum of the *Crypta Balbi*: indeed, its continuity is likely to have lasted until the beginning of the 5th century AD, with the first substantial efforts to make changes dating to the mid-century. Here, it is also possible that the dismissal of the cult took place in a peaceful manner, and that only years after the cessation of worship, did the environment undergo rearrangements, after an earthquake in 443, which damaged the entire complex (SAGUI, L.: Il mitreo della Crypta Balbi a Roma e i suoi reperti. In MARTENS, M. – BOE, G. DE [eds]: *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds* [Archeologie de Vlaanderen 4]. Bruxelles 2004, 168–169).

THE ARCHANGEL IN THE ANTRUM OF SUTRI:
EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSIONS

During the Early Middle Ages, the almost complete obliteration of the memory of Mithras in what used to be Roman *Regio VII* is magnificently testified by the re-adaptation of the *spelaeum* of Sutri into a Christian church under the aegis of the Archangel Michael, at least from the 7th/8th century AD. Consequently, any trace of the Pagan past of the shrine was erased and replaced by the systematic deployment of Christian iconographies.

Such conversion is traditionally explained as a consequence of the role of Sutri as a *submansio* along the *Via Francigena*, the path of the pilgrimage toward the famous Apulian sanctuary of St. Michael on mount Gargano.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the cult of the warrior angel started to spread across the Italian peninsula in the 4th century, long before the establishment of the route to Gargano. Saint Michael indeed, according to his Biblical role of commander of the armies of Heaven against Evil, played a pivotal role in deleting the memory of the Pagan cults, and several temples in central Italy were rededicated to this figure.⁸¹ Hence, herein may lie the reason why the church of Sutri was originally dedicated to the Archangel, consequently depicted on the ceiling of the Sutri *ipogeum* dressed as a late-antique military commander, the celestial counterpart of the new Christian temporal power.

At any rate, the establishment of a church in a Mithraic place of worship must be seen as the very last stage of the long and mutable life cycle of the cult of Mithras in Etruria, whose narration served as the main purpose of this article. Firstly, starting from examining the disposition of the findings (concentrated along the main viability and in the southern half of the region), a spread of the cult from Rome has been hypothesized. The State officials of Etruria have been called into question as vectors of this expansion, since their deep interest in promoting the mysteries is suggested by the altar from the territory of Volsinii (attesting the dedication of a mithraeum by the eminent freedman Tiberius Thermodon) and by the location of the *antrum* of Cosa within the local *curia* (probably meaning that its rites were performed by public officials). Moreover, both the administration of the Etrurian marble quarries and the circulation of raw material and finished products were prerogatives of the Imperial freedmen, which accordingly played a crucial role in favoring the religious iconographies welcomed by the government, such as the highly standardized Mithraic representations.

⁸⁰ SENSI, M.: Santuari e culto di S. Michele nell'Italia centrale. In BOUET, P. – OTRANTO, G. – VAUCHEZ, A. (eds): *Culto e santuari di san Michele nell'Europa medievale*. Bari 2007, 241–280, here 244–245.

⁸¹ The area has plenty of similar cases, such as the churches of “Sant’Angelo in Vastogirardi”, and of “San Michele in Vittorito” in Abruzzo, both realized re-adapting the structures of temples of Hercules. (FALLA CASTELFRANCHI, M.: Il culto di San Michele in Abruzzo e Molise dalle origini all’altomedioevo (sec. V–XI). In CARLETTI, C. – OTRANTO, G. (eds): *Culto e insediamenti micaelici nell'Italia meridionale fra antichità e medioevo*. Bari 1994, 507–551, here 510.

The State support to the figure of Mithras seems to have been successful in Etruria, and some findings prove the rapid diffusion of the cult among the lower classes of society during the 2nd century AD. The *spelaea* of Sutri and Portus Pisanus indeed are located in suburban neighborhoods, the first one in the proximity of the local amphitheater, and the latter within a storehouse. Besides, an inscription from Arretium bears a mithraic dedication by a slave *pro salutem* of his master, demonstrating the cult's role in maintaining the social hierarchy.

Furthermore, some clues possibly indicate that, from the 3rd century, the cult expanded the body of its worshippers to include even the highest patrician classes: a situation hinted at by the marble relief from Soriano (found within a *domus*) and by the mithraeum of Vulci (built in connection with a rich *villa*). The latter case is of particular interest being the city, the place of residence of several senatorial families, for some of which (the Sempronii and the Minucii) the involvement in both the cults of Mithras and *Sol Invictus* is attested.

Finally, the *spelaeum* of Vulci also represents one of the more striking contexts where to examine the dismissal of the mysteries in *Regio VII*. Here, in fact, several traces of arson and violent destruction, probably perpetrated by Christian fanatics, have been discovered. Conversely, in both Portus Pisanus and Cosa, layers of destruction were not found, and this seems to prove a peaceful abandonment during the 5th century AD. This discrepancy shows how the circumstances of the disappearance of the cult varied from place to place and, rather than suggesting a coherent violent eradication of the cult throughout the entire region, it seems to illustrate a condition where, following the religious, political and social shifts of the Era, the name of Mithras must have been gradually and often peacefully forgotten.

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