

Politics of Mithras: The Mystery Cult and Matters of State

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Abstract

The mystery cult of Mithras had a significant influence on the government of the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries CE. With a prominent affiliation with the military, as well as imperial elites and even emperors serving as initiates in the cult, Mithraism wielded vast political control across the empire. Mithraism's impact on the Roman Empire is often understated or overlooked in modern scholarship. Studies of Mithraism tend to analyze its beliefs, migration, and theology. However, examination of inscriptions, textual evidence, and secondary scholarly sources suggests highly plausible evidence of the link between Mithraism and the Roman government. For instance, an inscription on a Mithraic altar in Rome names "Sextilius Agesilaus Aedesius" as both a pater (a high-ranking member of the cult of Mithras) and a magistrate in Spain. This inscription is explored in greater detail in this paper. Understanding these links in the context of Late Antiquity sheds new light on our knowledge of the Roman Empire. Most scholarly studies on the Roman Empire focus on one of two extremes: the sacred Christian Rome or the solely secular empire. This paper analyzes an alternative religion often overlooked among studies of Roman theology: Mithraism. Rome was not just the origin of Christianity's popularity, but a melting pot of many different religions that all impacted the politics and populace in their ways. The analysis provided in this paper recognizes Mithraism, amongst many beliefs, as an important influence on Roman statecraft.

Introduction

Although few are familiar with Mithraism, it had a significant impact on the political state of Rome. When looking at inscriptions in Roman *Mithraea* and secondary scholarly analyses of the Mithraic cult's members, it is evident that the cult was very popular among the Roman military, and had deeply infiltrated the government and social hierarchy of the Roman Empire.¹ The cult of Mithras was present in Roman society's religion, politics, and military, the cornerstones on which the colossal empire was built. Mithraism's influence reached its height in the third century CE. By observing the connections between the army and politics of the Roman Empire of Late Antiquity and Mithraism, one can gain a new perspective from which to view the religion and politics of Rome.

Besides merely expanding scholarly understanding of religion and Rome, this paper illuminates a new facet of the cult of Mithras overlooked by most scholars. Although there is limited information on Mithraism, consistent with its moniker as a "mystery" cult, most studies done on the pagan religion revolve around its theology. Roger Beck goes so far as to claim that scholarship has found three schools of reference for modern studies of the cult of Mithras: the lore and history of Mithraism, the Iranian religion and its beliefs, and astrology and astronomy.² All three of these schools study the inner workings of the Mithraic Mysteries. Noticeably absent is the study of the influence of Mithraism on the greater and secular Roman world. While most scholars seek to learn about the structure, beliefs, and iconography of the cult, this paper specifically examines the overlap of Mithraism and other aspects of the Roman empire. This overlap allows us to observe how the cult of Mithras influenced the greater, outer world of Roman statecraft during the second, third, and fourth centuries CE.

To detail the influence of Mithraism on the Roman Empire, it is necessary to first explain what the cult of Mithras was, how it spread throughout the empire, and why it was so appealing to Roman citizens. Having laid this context, research into and analysis of two Roman elites, as well as two emperors, serve as specific examples of Mithraists in the empire. By using their inscriptions found in *Mithraea*, as well as other contemporary textual and material evidence, this paper shows the

¹ Roger Shaw, "Bellum Romanum" in *The Military Engineer* 35, no. 216 (1943): 523-526.

² Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*. Oxford University Press Oxford, 2007. 72.

integration and influence of the Mithraic Mysteries on the Roman government.

Mithraism and Religious Rome

In the chapter “The New Mood” in his 1971 book *The World of Late Antiquity*, Peter Brown expounds on the religions of Rome during this late antique era. The gods were an integral part of Roman life. Statues, symbols, and artwork of various Roman deities could be found everywhere one went, and the motto of *providentia deorum* (which meant “the gods are looking after us”) summed up the public’s feelings for the beings they worshiped.³ For the countless non-Christians of the empire before Constantine, that of the second and third centuries, these gods were the recipients of adoration, sacrifice, and general worship. The term “pagan” could be applied to the majority of Rome, for the polytheistic practices of the ancient world continued deep into the centuries of late antiquity.

The cult of Mithras (also known as Mithraism or the Mithraic Mysteries) was a mystery pagan cult that primarily operated in the Roman Empire during the first to fourth centuries CE. Mystery cults were religions that required followers to be initiated before participating in rituals and prayers.⁴ Their belief systems were kept secret from figures outside of the religion. Mithraism primarily followed the Persian god Mithras, and Mithraic temples (or *Mithraeums*), known for being underground and cavernous in appearance, were found throughout the empire, stretching from Britain to Northern Africa. Within the cult itself, members were structured in a hierarchy of different ranks: *Corax* (raven), *Nymphus* (male bride), *Miles* (soldier), *Leo* (lion), *Perses* (Persian), *Heliodromus* (sun-courier), and the highest, the *Pater* (father).⁵ It is known that the position of *pater* held the most power in the cult and was the most exclusive. This is likely due to the patriarchal *paterfamilias* system of Roman society, in which the father held absolute autocratic authority over his family and household.⁶

³ Peter Brown, “The New Mood” in *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (New York City, W. W. Norton, 1971), 50.

⁴ Reinhold Merkelbach, “Mystery Religion.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 9, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mystery-religion>.

⁵ Jonathan David, “The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?” in *Numen* (Leiden, Brill Academic Publishers; 2000). See also Roger Beck, “Mithras” in *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 7 Mar. 2016; Accessed 20 Feb. 2023 for more information on the structure of the cult of Mithras.

⁶ “The Roman Empire: In the First Century. The Roman Empire. Life in Roman Times. Family Life,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed March 9, 2023,

Because of the secrecy of the cult of Mithras, there is little knowledge about the specifics of the cult. Most scholarly knowledge comes from iconography and sculptures of Mithras, as textual evidence is difficult to find. To the benefit of modern researchers, much Mithraic art has been preserved over time due to the underground nature of *Mithraea*. While this is not a paper on the religion of the cult of Mithras, these images will prove to be important in connecting the Mithraic Mysteries to the Roman elite. The two most common symbols of Mithraism were the *Mithraeum* itself, the underground cave temple, and the *tauroctony*, a common iconography that depicted the god Mithras killing a bull in the cave that inspired the design of the *Mithraeum*. Commonly repeated Mithraic symbols are visible throughout the image: a scorpion pinches the bull's testicles, a snake and dog drink the bull's blood, Sol (the sun) and Luna (the moon) watch, and the Mithraic "torch-bearers" *cautes* and *cautopates* flank Mithras's side.⁷ The iconography of *Mithraea* is likely why so many scholars choose to examine the theology of the cult of Mithras – there is more archaeological work detailing the religion of the Mithraic Mysteries than its influence.

Mithras, Magistrates, and the Military

Scholars have, however, learned that the military played a major role in the cult of Mithras. Although the official Roman deity of war was Mars, he became a figurehead that Mithras could stand behind and use to infiltrate the legions.⁸ The Roman military was the foundation of the Roman imperial system, and its policies of religious tolerance helped strengthen the empire. The original Roman religion, adapted from the Greeks, was very polytheistic: the king of the gods, Jupiter, ruled over a whole host of minor gods and major deities. As Rome expanded, many of the people it conquered also worshiped multiple deities. Mithras himself was originally an Indo-Iranian deity before he was adapted by the Romans for the Mithraic Mysteries.

As the Roman military traversed the lands of the empire, they would have been the first to encounter and adopt new beliefs. Unlike farmers back in the mainland or senators in Rome, the military would have played a significant role in the spread and growth of religion. This is how the cult of Mithras is believed to have spread across the Roman

<https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/family.html#:~:text=At%20the%20head%20of%20Roman,over%20his%20household%20and%20children>.

⁷ "The Tauroctony," accessed March 9, 2023,

<https://www.tertullian.org/rppearse/mithras/display.php?page=tauroctony>.

⁸ Shaw, "Bellum Romanum," 525–526.

empire in a relatively short amount of time.⁹ The location of numerous *Mithraea* aligning with military outposts is a sign of the connection between the military and Mithras.¹⁰ In certain cases, entire legions (a group of soldiers consisting of five to six thousand Roman citizens) were members of the cult of Mithras, and dedicated altars as a group. This can be seen in the cases of *Legio V Macedonica* and *Legio XIII Gemina*, two legions that dedicated at least four monuments to Mithras.¹¹

Manfred Clauss discussed the involvement of government officials and the Roman military as members of the cult of Mithras in chapter six, “Recruitment,” of his acclaimed 1990 book *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*.¹² According to Clauss, the earliest known Mithraic cult members were Roman soldiers who took the religion to the various lands they traveled to and fought in. Clauss found that altar dedications were relatively common among officers and under-officers of Rome, but less so among standard soldiers. This is to be expected, as dedications such as altars (which took time to craft) were more costly than the average soldier could afford. It is possible that being a part of the cult of Mithras may have aided lower-level soldiers in climbing the ranks of the military hierarchy. While lower-ranking soldiers have left less of an imprint on the historical record of Mithraism, the appeal of the cult to this group is not far-fetched.

The bull has often been a simple symbol of masculinity and strength, something that likely attracted the attention of male soldiers in the Roman military. In addition, the *tauroctony* was a piece of iconography to which soldiers could likely relate. It features Mithras fighting a bull, a creature familiar to ancient Romans. In contrast, the stories of many other religions center on defeating supernatural monsters. Mithras does not fight a hydra or chimera; he fights a common animal. The god’s task is a difficult one, but it is achievable. Additionally, the action of the *tauroctony* was one of aggression, something the military would highly value in a soldier. Due to the relatability of the *tauroctony*, it is plausible that members of the military of all ranks would be drawn to the cult of Mithras. This idea of achievement or ascension through the killing of a strong, but common creature is likely why many members of the cult of Mithras ascended to such high places within the Roman Empire: like

⁹ Jocelyn Godwin, “Mithras and Aion” in *Mystery Religions of the Ancient World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 98.

¹⁰ Manfred Clauss, “Recruitment” in *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Clauss, “Recruitment,” 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 35.

Mithras, they rose to the top through struggle and violence, conquering their dominions.

In addition to high-ranking officers in the Roman military, initiates of the cult of Mithras included numerous Roman magistrates. One notable member of the cult of Mithras from both military and politics was a senator from the 2nd century, Marcus Valerius Maximianus. Valerius is reputed as one of the most successful of Marcus Aurelius' generals. The role of the senator in Roman society was a position of great imperial importance. A Roman senator could pass new laws, would own vast areas of land, and was a primary advisor to the emperor himself.¹³ Valerius was a very successful general, credited as a hero of the Marcomannic wars, in which the Roman Empire waged war against various Germanic tribes for thirteen years.¹⁴ Lauded and praised for personally killing the Germanic chieftain Valao, Valerius became a senator after the war in recognition of his valiant deeds. Valerius is credited with the spread of Mithraism during his time as a *legate* or commander of a legion.¹⁵ Altars dedicated to Mithras by Valerius have been found in the former fortress of Apulum (in modern-day Romania), as well as in Lambaesis (modern-day Tazoult in Algeria).¹⁶ The fact that one of the emperor's most successful generals and senators, a highly regarded soldier in his own right, was one of the primary diffusers of the cult of Mithras demonstrates the degree of integration Mithraism held in the upper echelons of ancient Roman society.

Although the majority of the elites in the cult of Mithras entered the cult through the military, there are also known cases in which Roman officials became Mithraists. An inscription on an altar within a *Mithraeum* in the city of Rome, dated to 376 CE, was allegedly dedicated by a high-ranking imperial official, Sextilius Agesilaus Aedesius, who was also a *pater* in the cult of Mithras:

To the Great Gods, to the Mother of the Gods, and to Attis, the honorable Sextilius Agesilaus Aedesius, the worthy Solicitor in the African court, Imperial Councilor, President of the Supreme Commission on Petitions and Investigations, Head of the Chancellery, Captain of the

¹³ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Senate." Encyclopaedia Britannica, November 5, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history>.

¹⁴ Jakub Jasiński, "Marcomannic Wars (167-180 CE)" *Imperium Romanum*, 15 Oct. 2021. Accessed 24 Feb. 2023. <https://imperiumromanum.pl/en/wars/marcomannic-wars/>.

¹⁵ "The Roman Legion," n.d., Accessed March 2, 2023 https://penelope.uchicago.edu/%7Egrout/encyclopaedia_romana/britannia/wales/legio.html.

¹⁶ Clauss, "Recruitment," 35.

Prefects in Spain in all the most important matters, Father of Fathers of the Invincible Sun God Mithras, Hierophant of Hecate, Chief Shepherd of Dionysus, reborn unto eternity through the sacrifice of a bull and a ram – has dedicated the altar, on the Ides of August, while our Lords Valens, for the fifth time, and Valentinian the younger, the Augusti, were consuls.¹⁷

This inscription begins by addressing the “great gods” of Rome, including the “mother of gods,” a title related to beings including Cybele, Gaea, Demeter, Rhea, and occasionally even the Virgin Mary who was the principal figure of worship for another Greco-Roman mystery cult. It also addresses Attis, a formerly Phrygian deity who was regarded as a solar deity in Rome, similar to Mithras, and then names the dedicator of the altar, Sextilius Agesilaus Aedesius.¹⁸ This acknowledges an important aspect of Roman religion: polytheism. Although this inscription is part of an altar to Mithras, it acknowledges other deities as well, which are further explored below. After naming Agesilaus, the inscription goes on to list many of his important political titles. These duties, in conjunction with the title “father of fathers,” are sufficient to identify this significant political figure as a high-ranking member of the Mithraic Mysteries. Agesilaus’s title “father of fathers shows his status as a *pater* in the world of Mithraism, while his other title, the “captain of the prefects in Spain,” shows his power in the greater Roman world. The term prefect applied to many different magistrates and high officials in Rome, and a *praetorian prefect* was responsible for maintaining law and order in the Roman Empire. As a “Solicitor in the African court,” Agesilaus would have wielded significant legal power in parts of the Roman empire. Although “imperial councilor” might not have been an official job, the title plausibly suggests that Agesilaus was one of the primary advisors to the emperor of Rome.

The quote continues by moving from describing Agesilaus’ political titles to describing his religious titles. In addition to being a *pater* of the cult of Mithras, Agesilaus was a “hierophant of Hecate” and a “chief shepherd of Dionysus.” Hecate and Dionysus were both Greek deities, the gods of witchcraft and wine respectively. This hints that Agesilaus was likely an initiate of other pagan cults as well as the cult of Mithras, further evidencing that polytheism was active throughout Rome. The mystery cult of Dionysus was well known for its immense

¹⁷ Frederick C. Grant, *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1953), 147.

¹⁸ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. “Attis.” Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998. Accessed March 13, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Attis>.

popularity in ancient Greece and Rome, and Hecate was worshiped alongside the Greek deities of Demeter and Persephone in the Eleusinian Mysteries.¹⁹ The inscription concludes by stating that Agesilaus had been “reborn unto eternity with the sacrifice of a bull and a ram” and then giving an idea of the period the altar was dedicated (based on who was in charge of Rome at the time). Although the exact meaning of this inscription is unknown, the cult of Mithras was associated with its primary myth of the eponymous deity killing a bull and tied to a cycle of rebirth.²⁰ In particular, this inscription reflects the Mithraic concept of salvation by divine rebirth. Of course, even though the religious meanings of this inscription can be debated, the titles attached to Agesilaus offer a visible link between great political power and the cult of Mithras in ancient Rome.

Agesilaus is a prime example of how deeply integrated the cult of Mithras was into Roman statecraft. Although military men would have had the most interaction with border religions as Rome expanded its empire, statesmen who made frequent but brief trips across the empire would also have encountered these cults. A statesman, such as Agesilaus, who would not travel as extensively as a soldier or general, was not likely to be interested in every new border religion he encountered. From Agesilaus’ other titles, he can be identified as a participant in both the Dionysian and Eleusinian Mysteries, which were both very popular and widespread cults in the ancient Mediterranean. Agesilaus’ involvement in the Mithraic Mysteries would have put the cult of Mithras on the same tier as these other mysteries and would define it as something far more important than a small fringe cult. The fact that an imperial official, an elite who was not a part of the Roman military, would have entered the cult of Mithras and climbed the ranks to become a *pater*, suggests the significant influence Mithraism had on Roman statecraft.

Mithras and Emperor Diocletian

The integration of the Mithraic Mysteries into the Roman military defined the majority of its influence on the political state of the Roman Empire. The military was the foundation of the Roman imperial system and led the expansion, conquest, and colonization of the ever-growing Roman empire. However, there were multiple cases in which the cult of Mithras had a much more direct impact on the imperial government. In Frothingham’s article in the *American Journal of Archaeology*, he details a

¹⁹ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). Refer back to Burkert for more information on mystery cults in the Mediterranean at this time.

²⁰ Brown, “The New Mood” 56.

relief built into a sculpture in Rome that claims the emperor Diocletian revered Mithras as the protector god of the empire.²¹ The sculpture has been mutilated since its original conception, and the original art depicting Mithras is largely destroyed. However, what remains of the scene arguably illustrates the mystery cult's deity. The sculpture is one of victory: a sign of the triumph of Diocletian. It shows Diocletian performing a sacrifice, a traditional Roman ritual. As Diocletian preceded Constantine, the emperor who established Christianity as a major religion of the empire, it is important to note the non-Christian nature of a sacrifice, as seen in this sculpture. This sacrifice is dedicated to Roma, a representation of Rome, Mars, the god of war, and a figure whose face is destroyed, but still visibly has radiant rays beaming from their head. Roma is holding this deity up to Diocletian, likely signifying that this unknown entity is the one to whom Diocletian is offering a sacrifice. Frothingham argues that this figure is Mithras, who has been shown in many pieces of iconography as a sun god.²² While other scholars, such as Henry Thédénat, have said that this sun god is Apollo, its appearance is starkly different from the formerly Greek deity.²³ Frothingham himself linked Mithras's depiction to being similar to the Roman god of Sol. Although the appearance is similar, Mithras has repeatedly been both compared to Sol and described as synonymous with Sol.

Also key to Diocletian's connection to the cult of Mithras is an inscription found at Carnuntum on the Danube (in modern-day Austria), the site where Mithras was originally named as the protector of Rome:

“D(eo) S(oli) i(nvicto) M(ithrae) | fautori imperii sui |
Iovii et Herculi | religiosissimi | Augusti et Caesares |
sacrarium | restituerunt.”²⁴

Without translating the entire inscription, keywords and phrases naming Mithras make this inscription important. The beginning, “D(eo) S(oli) I(nvicto) M(ithrae)” translates to “Mithras the Unconquered Sun God.” This description of Mithras is not unique to this inscription – Mithras has been called the *deus sol invictus* across Rome, and the mystery cult's deity has been compared to Sol Invictus (or simply Sol), another imperial sun deity with a cult, many times before. However, this inscription is particularly notable for the section directly afterward, which names

²¹ A. L. Frothingham, “Diocletian and Mithra in the Roman Forum” in *American Journal of Archaeology* 18, no. 2 (1914): 146–155. Refer for more information on the sculpture.

²² Frothingham, “Diocletian and Mithra in the Roman Forum,” 151-153.

²³ Henry Thédénat. *Le Forum Romain et Les Forums Impériaux* (Librairie Hachette, 1898), 262-263.

²⁴ Manfred Clauss, Anne Kolb, Wolfgang A. Slaby, and Barbara Woitas, *Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss / Slaby*, Accessed 22 Feb. 2023.

https://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi.php?s_sprache=en.

Mithras as the “fautori imperii sui,” or “protector of their [the Romans] empire.” This implies that Diocletian was acknowledging Mithras’s important standing in the Roman government. Not only was he a deity followed by many soldiers of the imperial army, but Mithras’s significance to Rome was such that the emperor praised him in a sculpture of his triumph. Although this inscription is far from a state edict, its status as a symbol of victory in war still shows the influence Mithras had on the government. In an age in which many emperors won their position through war, triumph in battle was a deeply political move.

Examining the connection between Diocletian and Mithraism is doubly important due to the period during which the emperor ruled. 10 years after this inscription is estimated to have been written, Diocletian’s successor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, legalizing Christianity in the Roman Empire. An additional 10 years later, Christianity became the official religion of Rome. But until that point, Mithraism and Christianity had long competed for worshippers in Rome.²⁵ Diocletian provides an example of the influence held by Roman pagan religions even in the years preceding Christianity’s rise in popularity across Rome. The empire of old was not a secular state. Everyone, from the soldiers to the emperor, was engaged in the traditions and rituals of various polytheistic religions.

Mithras and Emperor Julian

Diocletian was not the only Mithraist emperor or the last. Emperor Julian (who ruled from 361 to 363) is thought to have been a member of the Mithraic Mysteries, though the validity of this assumption is heavily disputed. This paper follows the assumption that Julian, nicknamed “the Apostate” (meaning he completely renounced Christianity) by his Christian enemies, was indeed a member of the cult of Mithras. First introduced by Franz Cumont, considered by many to be the father of modern studies on the cult,²⁶ the affiliation was further analyzed by Polymnia Athanassiadi in her 1977 article in *The Journal of Theological Studies*.²⁷ Julian was widely known for being anti-Christian, which is noteworthy as his uncle, Constantine, was the emperor who established Christianity as the primary religion of Rome. Julian openly accepted many pagan and historically Hellenistic religions and spent

²⁵ Clyde Pharr, “Constantine and the Christians” in *The Classical Outlook* 16, no. 6 (1939), 57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44005884>.

²⁶ Franz Cumont, “Mithra and the Imperial Power” in *The Mysteries of Mithra* (Dover Publications, 1956), 89.

²⁷ Polymnia Athanassiadi, “A Contribution to Mithraic Theology: The Emperor Julian’s ‘Hymn to King Helios.’” in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 28, no. 2 (1977), 361.

significant time during his rule attempting to suppress Christian influence in the empire. Athanassiadi uses many of Julian's writings to support her argument that the apostate emperor was a Mithraist.²⁸ In *Caesars*, Julian not-so-subtly writes that the god Hermes granted him knowledge of Mithra, after which Julian began to worship "Father Mithra." Earlier, in *Contra Heraclium*, Julian wrote that he wished to "become [a] god" like Athene (Athena), Hermes, and Helios. Because of Helios' status as a sun deity and Mithras often being called "Helios-Mithras," Athanassiadi claims that Julian is talking about Mithras in this passage.²⁹

The claim that Julian's referral to "Helios" is referencing Mithras is further supported in other works by the emperor. In *Hymn to King Helios*, Julian specifically references the *cautes* and *cautopates*, two figures shown in almost every *Mithraeum's tauroctony*.³⁰ The two torch-bearers each held their torches in opposite directions: *cautes* with the flame pointing up and *cautopates* with the flame pointing down. The torch-bearers represent the movement of the sun, signifying Mithras' importance as a solar deity. Given this symbolism, it is plausible that the sun god Julian is referring to is not Helios, but instead Mithras. This sheds an important light on a relatively unexplored area of the Mithraic Mysteries. Having not one, but two Roman emperors that actively worshiped Mithras shows that Rome was neither secular nor solely Christian and that the cult of Mithras was significantly influential in the Roman government. The cult was not only integrated into the Roman military but also managed to gain a foothold in the highest echelons of the Roman government, even during the rise of Christianity's power in the empire.

In analyzing how emperors came to power at this time, it is logical that many would be a part of the cult of Mithras. The "Crisis of the Third Century," which lasted from 235 to 284 CE, dominated the Roman Empire during the peak of Mithraism's popularity. This crisis led to the quick succession of fourteen emperors in 50 years. These so-called "barracks emperors" gained their power through military support, and almost always by assassinating their predecessors.³¹ The Rome of this era was thus controlled by a series of strong military leaders who ascended to imperial leadership. With the cult's popularity in the military, it seems

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 362.

³⁰ For more information on *cautes* and *cautopates*, see Roger Beck, "Cautes and Cautopates: Some Astronomical Considerations" in *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays* (Routledge, 2020).

³¹ Joshua J. Mark, "The Barracks Emperors." *World History Encyclopedia* 13 Nov. 2017; Accessed 23 Feb. 2023. https://www.worldhistory.org/Barracks_Empereors/.

probable that a series of emperors rising from the ranks of the military would be part of the Mithraic Mysteries. This demonstrates how the cult of Mithras was able to integrate itself into the Roman government and eventually influence the emperor himself. The last emperor of the Crisis of the Third Century and these “barracks emperors” was none other than Diocletian, who was referenced earlier as the dedicator of the sculpture at Carnuntum to Mithras.

Even if these specific emperors were not Mithraists themselves, one can hypothesize that the cult of Mithras had a heavy hand in their actions. As in the case of Valerius and countless other Mithraic soldiers,³² Mithraism had a foothold within the Roman military. When looking at a situation like the Crisis of the Third Century where the Roman military took an active stand against the government, one could make a well-educated assumption that the cult of Mithras was part of the conflict. And, when considering that Roman law might have also been influenced by Mithraists, such as Agesilaus the *prefect*,³³ it appears the cult of Mithras infiltrated every aspect of the Roman government once the “barracks emperors” gained official power.

Mithras: Church and State

It is widely accepted that the ancient Roman Empire was a state of varied religions. Christianity was not the dominant religion of Rome in Late Antiquity. It was always greatly contested by other religions. Rome had a diverse array of faiths from various sources. However, while Christianity was not the primary Roman religion, neither was Mithraism. There is very little information to suggest that Mithraism was particularly popular among the peasant or merchant classes, and it seems that most of its worshippers were members of the military or the government. In addition to the cult of Mithras, other mystery cults such as those of Isis, Cybele, Dionysus, and Hecate were common throughout Rome, and Judaism and Christianity have had at least a small foothold in Rome since their very founding.

However, of these many systems of faith, the cult of Mithras seems to be unique in its reach and membership. Mithraism exemplified the concept of social conformism. Its popularity was likely because it was a reflection of many qualities that were highly valued in Roman society. Masculinity, strength, ascension, and accomplishment were all traits every Roman man was supposed to demonstrate in his everyday life. Other cults were not integrated into the military to the extent of

³² Clauss, “Recruitment,” 34.

³³ Grant, *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism*, 147.

Mithras, and other mystery cults of the time did not have such elite initiates as the imperials that made up the Mithraic Mysteries. This was the result of the widespread belief in Mithraism and the sway it held over the upper echelons of Roman society. As a male deity, Mithras was more likely to have high-status followers: in the patriarchal society of Rome, men would have had the most power.³⁴ It would be rare to find followers of Isis, whose mystery cult was predominantly made up of female initiates, among the influential elite of the Roman empire.

Arguably, Mithraism heavily influenced those directly responsible for carrying out critical matters of the government. The influence of the male initiates of the cult of Mithras analyzed in this paper is well documented. Marcus Valerius Maximianus, Sextilius Agesilaus Aedesius, and the emperors Diocletian and Julian were four significant examples of Roman Mithraic elites, but they were certainly not the only high-ranking members of the Mithraic Mysteries. *Mithraea* and their altars required funding from Roman patricians who could afford to spend money on the cult's decorations and shrines. The countless *Mithraea* across the empire would mean that many different wealthy Romans were supporters or members of the cult. Sculptures and inscriptions such as the ones created by Agesilaus and Diocletian are only examples of many, many dedications to the great god Mithras.

Conclusion

It is a common mistake to interpret the past through the lens of the present. Yet, as Peter Brown warns in the updated foreword to his book *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, nothing is immune to changes over time.³⁵ General assumptions about topics as important as religion and politics should never be made. However, the knowledge gained about the religious makeup of the Roman Empire of Late Antiquity, in the right context, can help change the modern perspective of the world's civilizations. Due to Christianity becoming the "normative" religion of the Western world, there is a tendency to think in terms of monotheism, making it difficult to comprehend just how polytheistic the ancient world was. The Roman Empire had a much different kind of religiosity than the world today. Rome should not be viewed as a Christian state, because for most of its life, it was a polytheistic empire. Additionally, the separation of church

³⁴ For further information on the Roman patriarchal society, see Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³⁵ Peter Brown, "Introduction" in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York City, Columbia University Press, 2008), 23-24.

and state that is customary today is a modern invention and does not apply to ancient Rome, where religion and politics were deeply intertwined.

Even with the intrinsic nature of mystery cults making it difficult to truly know the extent of the cult of Mithras's influence on Roman statecraft, it is evident that the Mithraic Mysteries held significant sway over the Roman Empire of Late Antiquity. Its integration into the Roman military and government, imperial initiates, and Mithras' ability to mesh well with other gods worshiped in Rome, was such that its sphere of influence reached across the empire. Analyzing inscriptions suggests that it was the cult of Mithras that counted many important governmental figures among its initiates. The same cannot be said for other mystery cults of this time. Religion and politics went hand in hand in Rome, as priests and other holy people also served as government officials. Although more is known about other religions of the Roman Empire, scholars should never overlook Mithraism. No other cult had as many elite members or imperial followers as that of Mithras, and the land the cult occupied due to the marauding military initiates that made up its numbers put the Mithraic Mysteries in a league of its own, worthy of further study and exploration.

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