The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis

Roger Beck

The Journal of Roman Studies, Vol. 88. (1998), pp. 115-128.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0075-4358%281998%2988%3C115%3ATMOMAN%3E2.0.CO%3B2-7

The Journal of Roman Studies is currently published by Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.

THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRAS: A NEW ACCOUNT OF THEIR GENESIS*

By ROGER BECK

I

In 1896 Franz Cumont published, as the second volume of his *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, the dossier of documents on the basis of which he was to render, three years later, the first truly historical account of the transformation of Mithra-worship from a branch of Iranian Mazdaism to a Roman mystery cult.

This transformative process, as he envisaged it, was long and evolutionary. He used a geological metaphor to describe its stages, as theology and practice were passed down the ages and across the lands from Iran to Rome:[1]

> Le fond de cette religion, sa couche inférieure et primordiale, est la foi de l'ancien Iran, d'où elle tire son origine. Au-dessus de ce substratum mazdéen, s'est déposé en Babylonie un sédiment épais de doctrines sémitiques, puis en Asie Mineure les croyances locales y ont ajouté quelques alluvions. Enfin, une végétation touffue d'idées helléniques a grandi sur ce sol fertile, et dérobe en partie à nos recherches sa véritable nature.

Central to Cumont's scenario was Anatolia and the Mazdean diaspora that survived (and flourished) there after the fall of the Achaemenian empire. It was there during the Hellenistic Age that 'Mithraism received approximately its definitive form',[2] although Cumont hesitated to pinpoint the precise time and area.

Reactions to Cumont—and there have been many, although his remains the 'default' account to which we tend to return—have mostly pulled the transformative moment down in time and westwards in space.[3] Anatolia has continued to have its adherents (e.g., Will, Colpe, Schwertheim, Gordon, Boyce),[4] though these usually look to the extreme end of the period and the turbulence of the Mithridatic Wars in the mid-first century B.C. The Cilician pirates, whose *teletai* of Mithras were said by Plutarch to have survived to his own time (*Pomp.* 24), remain a favourite staging-post (e.g., Will, Turcan).[5] A more radical departure is represented by those accounts which see the cult as essentially created in, and diffused from, the city of Rome not much prior to the

* This paper was first delivered to a joint seminar of the Department of Classics and the Centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto (November, 1996). I am grateful for the helpful comments made there and afterwards, especially those of Timothy Barnes, Alexander Jones, Peter Richardson, and John Rist. I am also grateful to the scholars and friends who have patiently read and thoughtfully commented on the drafts, in particular G. W. Bowersock, Mary Boyce, Fred Brenk, Giovanni Casadio, Richard Gordon, John Hinnells, Peter Kingsley, Henri Lavagne, Reinhold Merkelbach, Robert Turcan, and finally to the Editorial Committee of the Journal.

The following abbreviations are used:

EM = J. Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), *Études Mithriaques* (1978)

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

JMS = *Journal of Mithraic Studies*.

Kommagene = F. K. Dörner (ed.), *Kommagene*, Antike Welt Sondernummer (1975)

MS = J. R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* (2 vols, 1975)

SM = J. R. Hinnells (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism* (1994)

V + number = Vermaseren, op. cit. (n. 22)

[1] *Les mystères de Mithra* (3rd edn, 1913), 27.

[2] ibid., 17.

[3] For a survey, see R. Beck, 'Mithraism since Franz Cumont', *ANRW* II.17.4 (1984), 2002–114, at 2071–5.

[4] E. Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain* (1955), 144–69; idem, 'Origine et nature du Mithriacisme', *EM*, 527–36, at 527–8; C. Colpe, 'Mithra-Verehrung, Mithras-Kult und die Existenz iranischer Mysterien', *MS* Vol. 2, 378–405, at 390–9; E. Schwertheim, 'Monumente des Mithraskultes in Kommagene', *Kommagene*, 63–8; idem, *Mithras: seine Denkmäler und sein Kult*, Antike Welt Sondernummer (1979), 13–24; R. L. Gordon, 'The date and significance of CIMRM 593', *JMS* 2 (1978, reprinted in Gordon 1996), 148–74; idem, 'Who worshipped Mithras?' *JRA* 7 (1994), 459–74, at 469–71 (more cautiously); M. Boyce and F. Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism* Vol. 3 (1991), 468–90. On the limitations of the Anatolian evidence, see Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2018–19; Gordon, op. cit. (above, 1994), 461–2.

[5] Will, op. cit. (n. 4, 1955), 164 f.; R. Turcan, *Mithra et le mithriacisme* (2nd edn, 1993), 25–6.

earliest extant monuments and dedications (Vermaseren in his later work, Merkelbach, Clauss).[6] Most interesting is Merkelbach's theory, drawing on Nilsson,[7] which postulates the creation of the Mysteries by a forgotten individual of genius, working in the environs of the palace at Rome but himself of east Anatolian origin and deeply versed not only in Iranian religious traditions but also in Hellenistic philosophical culture. Cumont's geological strata become in effect one man's multifarious expertise.

II

In the context of the centenary of *Textes et monuments*, and as a tribute to Cumont as the founder of the study of Mithraism, I am proposing a new scenario for the genesis of the Mysteries which will synthesize and reconcile the insights of previous accounts. It may properly be called a 'Cumontian scenario' for two reasons: first, because it looks again to Anatolia and Anatolians; secondly, and more importantly, because it hews to the methodological line first set by Cumont.

Cumont, as I read him, sought to give an account of an historical process, untrammelled by doctrinaire historiography, on the basis of the broadest possible array of relevant historical evidence.[8] It was the interconnection of multifarious data, painstakingly assembled in the volume of testimony and monuments (1896), that led, in the volume of interpretations (1899), to the first full and credible portrait of Mithraism. To do justice not merely to the sociological externals of a religion but to its inner dynamics qua religion, one must be inclusive. At the present juncture, the study of Mithraism shows signs of taking a rather positivistic turn, in which the hard data of epigraphy and archaeological *Realien* are privileged and the supposedly softer data of iconography discounted. Valid inferences, it is thought, may be drawn from the former, while the fruits of the latter are largely speculative.[9] As a result, the inner life of the Mysteries, including their doctrine, is downplayed by some as largely irrecoverable—hence as inconsequential.[10] It is not an approach with which, I think, Cumont or his principal successors in the European continental traditions (Vermaseren, Bianchi,

[6] M. J. Vermaseren, 'Mithras in der Römerzeit', in M. J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Die orientalischen Religionen im Römerreich* (1981), 96–120, at 96–103; R. Merkelbach, *Mithras* (1984), 77, 160–1, 146–9; M. Clauss, *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien* (1990), 31–2; idem, *Cultores Mithrae: Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes* (1992), 253–5; more tentatively, W. Liebeschuetz, 'The expansion of Mithraism among the religious cults of the second century', *SM*, 195–216, at 199–200. There is a telling critique in Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1994), 467–8. From the publication dates, it will be apparent that this is the later of the two trends; indeed, when I made my survey of post-Cumontian scholarship (op. cit. (n. 3), 2074) it was still something to be desired. There is a third trend, that typified by G. Widengren ('The Mithraic mysteries in the Greco-Roman world, with special regard to their Iranian background', in *La Persia e il mondo greco-romano*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Anno 363, Quaderno 76 (1966), 433–55; idem, 'Reflections on the origins of the Mithraic Mysteries', in *Perennitas: Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich* (1980), 645–68; cf. Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2065–6, and 2013–4 with n. 14), which sees in the Mysteries essentially a continuity from Iran. I pass it by, not because it is negligible, but because by definition it postulates no new genesis of the Mysteries as part of the process of east–west transmission of Mithra-worship.

[7] *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (3rd edn, 1974), Vol. 2, 675 f.

[8] An approach to history much the same as that later described by P. Veyne in *Comment on écrit l'histoire* (1971): 'Rien qu'un récit véridique' (ch. I, title).

[9] I have in mind particularly the work of Manfred Clauss. This is not to belittle the great contribution made by Clauss in *Cultores Mithrae* (above, n. 6) on the basis of the cult's epigraphy (see my review, *Phoenix* 48 (1994), 173–6, and Gordon's review article, op. cit. (n. 4,, 1994)), but to sound a note of caution against carrying a reasonable scepticism concerning iconographic interpretations too far. See the retrospective and programmatic statements in the introduction to *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien* (above, n. 6), 7–9: of Cumont, 'in der Annahme, die Religion bestehe essentiell in ihrer Theologie, vernachlässigte er den Kult' (7). In a sense, Clauss renews the counter trend to Cumont's approach which, in Cumont's own day, was typified by J. Toutain, *Les cultes paiens dans l'empire romain, I: Les provinces latines* (3 vols, 1907–20); R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (1981), 116, with n. 11, has an interesting perspective on this earlier debate, favouring Toutain.

[10] This final, illogical step is taken by N. M. Swerdlow, 'On the cosmical mysteries of Mithras', *CP* 86 (1991), 48–63, a review article of D. Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries* (1989). Swerdlow's dismissal of the rich body of astrological evidence, in both the texts and the monuments, because of the excesses of its recent interpreters, leads him to the further dismissal, as contemptuous as it is ill-considered, of the Mysteries and their initiates alike: '... those who ask "What was Mithraism, anyway?" just may conclude that it was nothing much, and perhaps not a serious religion after all' (62).

Turcan, Merkelbach)[11] would be entirely happy. To understand *how* a religion was transmitted one must seek to reconstruct *what* it was, the evolving nature of the thing transmitted. The *where* and *when* of its physical traces and the *who* of its adherents are key components of the story—they are those indeed on which I shall mainly dwell in the present study—but they should never be mistaken for the story itself.

III

After those remarks, it might seem not a little contrary to look first not to the 'what' but to the 'who'—and not to the divine 'who', the evolving but always essentially Iranian Mithra at the core of the Cumontian story, but to the human 'who' of his adherents. In putting forward my account of the genesis of the Mysteries, I shall start by asking questions about a *founding group*. What would such an initial group, with the essential characteristics of a Mithraic cell and capable of transmitting the mysteries to its known successors, look like? What would be its setting in time, space, and society? My account, then, will be based neither on a long transformative process (*à la* Cumont) nor on a single creative individual (Nilsson-Merkelbach) but on the profile of that founding group.

A founding group is a necessary hypothesis; for what new religion does not have an initial band of adherents? Nevertheless, because the identity of Mithraism's founding group is not patently a matter of record but must be reconstructed indirectly from an array of historical evidence, it must remain in this sense (i.e., qua founders) hypothetical, although the postulated group (qua group), as we shall see, is real enough historically. Consequently, what I offer here does not pretend to be a definitive historical account of the genesis of the Mysteries, only an historically plausible account. To paraphrase Veyne on the writing of history: *Rien qu'un récit vraisemblable*.[12]

IV

The following parameters constrain the account. They are set by the known data of the cult after it has crossed the threshold of visibility into the historical record; essentially, they are patterns in the subsequent evidence which must be accommodated if the account of the foundation of the Mysteries is to be more plausible than its predecessors.

1. The postulated foundation group should be reasonably close in time to the cult's earliest attested dedications and monuments. The problem with theories of formation in the first century B.C. (or earlier) is the absence of near-contemporary monumental evidence. Why does widespread evidence for the cult appear at the end of the first century A.D. or the beginning of the second, but not earlier? If formation took place in the first century B.C., either the Mysteries went to ground for a century and more, or else what was formed was not the Mysteries as they came to be, with their formidable monumental apparatus, but rather some earlier, minimally iconic phase. The latter,

[11] To cite a work of each, M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithra, ce dieu mystérieux* (trans. M. Léman and L. Gilbert, 1960); U. Bianchi, 'The religio-historical question of the mysteries of Mithra', in U. Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae* (1979), 3–60; Turcan, op. cit. (n. 5); Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6).

[12] loc. cit. (n. 7). It is worth pointing out that, although unusual in classical scholarship, this sort of hypothetical reconstruction is both commonplace and fundamental to the study of primitive Christianity (or Christianities). New Testament Form Criticism, for instance, works by reconstructing from the texts (viz. the Gospels) the early Christian or proto-Christian communities whose needs those texts were intended to serve. This method even involves second-order hypotheses: e.g., a certain type of community is hypothesized for the common source text of Matthew and Luke, called 'Q'; but 'Q' itself is hypothetical in that, although generally accepted as an actual text by New Testament scholarship, it is neither extant nor directly attested. The title of a recent work by one of my Toronto colleagues is illustrative of this method: L. E. Vaage, *Galilean Upstarts: Jesus' First Followers According to Q* (1994).

however, merely returns us to the question of the true formative stage immediately prior to the earliest monumental evidence. Let us locate the hypothetical founding group a generation or so earlier than the earliest evidence, approximately in the third quarter of the first century A.D.

2. The foundation scenario must be compatible with the transmission of the Mysteries within a comparatively short time span to widely separated parts of the Empire. The major problem that bedevils theories of the cult's diffusion is this simultaneity in the archaeological record. Progression in space cannot be neatly deduced from progression in time. That is why so many different scenarios of diffusion are prima facie possible (e.g., from the lower Danube—Wikander, Beskow).[13] The enigma is greatly heightened by the addition of the Caesarea Maritima mithraeum to the roster of locations where the cult is attested for the late first to early second centuries A.D.[14] Until recently, Mithraism in the East (e.g., as at Dura) was generally thought to be a later back-formation from the cult in the West.[15]

The attested locations of the cult in the earliest phase (*c.* 80–120) are as follows:[16]

Mithraea datable from pottery[17]

Nida/Heddernheim III (Germania Sup.)[18]
Mogontiacum (Germania Sup.)[19]
Pons Aeni (Noricum)[20]
Caesarea (Judaea)[21]

Datable dedications[22]

Nida/Heddernheim I (Germania Sup.) (V1091/2, 1098)[23]
Carnuntum III (Pannonia Sup.) (V1718)[24]

[13] S. Wikander, 'Études sur les mystéres de Mithras', *Vetenskapssocieteten i Lund, Årsbok* (1951), 5–46; P. Beskow, 'The routes of early Mithraism', *EM*, 7–18.

[14] J. A. Blakely *et al.*, *Caesarea Maritima: The Pottery and Dating of Vault 1*, Joint Excavation Report 4 (1987), 62, 103; cf. R. J. Painter, *Mithraism and the Religious Context at Caesarea Maritima*, dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1994), 99–163.

[15] I. Roll, 'The mysteries of Mithras in the Roman orient: the problem of origin', *JMS* 2 (1977), 18–52; S. B. Downey, 'Syrian images of Mithras Tauroctonos', *EM*, 135–49; Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2013–17.

[16] From the perspective of dating, the dossier should be regarded as a composite of the certain and the highly probable. Most of its elements are conveniently set out in Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6), 147–9; see also Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6, 1990), 31–2; idem, op. cit. (n. 6, 1992), 251–2; Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1994), 460–2, 467–8, 470. I have also consulted material prepared by Richard Gordon for a book on Mithraism which we are writing together. I am greatly dependent on, and grateful for, his expertise in this early phase of the Mysteries, especially in Germany where the picture is extremely complicated.

[17] Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1994), 461, with references in n. 8.

[18] J. Huld-Zetsche, *Mithras in Nida-Heddernheim* (1986), 33–6. See also Vermaseren (below, n. 22), no. 1117; E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler orientalischer Gottheiten im römischen Deutschland* (1974), no. 61; Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6, 1992), 115–17.

[19] H. G. Horn, 'Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß', *Mainzer Archäologische Zeitschrift* 1 (1994), 21–66, at 31–2 (see also R. Merkelbach, 'Das Mainzer Mithrasgefäß', *ZPE* 108 (1995), 1–6). Strictly, we have to do with the dating of a ritual cup of a certain pottery type (Wetterau ware); unfortunately, the mithraeum where it was discovered could not be systematically excavated. This remarkable object is decorated with seven figures, representing cult members engaged in two scenes of ritual performance. Though some of the figures are grade holders (the Pater and the Heliodromus are readily identifiable), finding a corresponding grade for every figure (let alone one-for-one correspondences with each of the seven grades in the hierarchy) is problematic. I am currently working on an explication of the cup's two scenes. What is undeniable is that the cup documents a developed, indeed sophisticated, ritual and ideology at a very early date in the cult's life.

[20] J. Garbsch, 'Pons Aeni', *Bayerische Vorgeschichtsblätter* 50 (1985), 355–462, at 428–35. See also Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6, 1992), 135.

[21] Above, n. 14.

[22] Where applicable, monuments are cited by their number in M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (2 vols, 1956–60), prefixed with 'V'. On the dossier of the earliest epigraphy, see Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1994), 467. Gordon rightly draws attention to a certain fluidity of language in Mithras' cult-titles both in these early inscriptions and in the relatively few inscriptions from Anatolia: op. cit. (n. 4, 1978), 159 f.

[23] Respectively, by the cavalryman Tacitus and the centurion C. Lollius Crispus: Schwertheim, op. cit. (n. 18, 1974), nos 59i and o; Huld-Zetsche, op. cit. (n. 18), 55–6, nos 8 and 9; Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6), 149, nos 6 and 7; Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6, 1992), 116; Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1994), 460.

[24] By the centurion C. Sacidius Barbarus: Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6), 148–9, no. 5; D. Schön, *Orientalische Kulte im römischen Österreich* (1988), no. 50; Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6, 1992), 157. See also C. M. Daniels, 'The role of the Roman army in the spread and practice of Mithraism', *MS* Vol. 2, 249–74, at 250–1.

Novae (Moesia Inf.) (V2268/9)[25]
Oescus (Moesia Inf.) (V2250)[26]
Rome (V362, 593/4)[27]
Aezanitis (NW Phrygia) (V23)[28]
Datable literary reference
Rome (Statius, *Theb.* 1.719–20)[29]

The postulated group need not be geographically fixed. Indeed, freeing it from a particular formative location (which by definition excludes all other locations) eases the problem of the simultaneity of the earliest evidence. Rome *or* Anatolia may be a false dichotomy. Were the Mysteries launched, as it were, from a mobile platform? The concept of a group in transit might seem strange; but as we shall see, in the fluid world of the Roman Empire of the first century A.D. it is not a null category.

3. The founding group has to have been one of social 'insiders', although not of the élite. It cannot have comprised the marginal or alienated. Otherwise Mithraism's speedy adoption by moderately successful and trusted persons with no apparent suspicion on the part of their patrons or superiors is inexplicable.[30] Moreover, the group must have been such as to commend itself simultaneously to persons of this sort both in the military and in the households of the great, since Mithraism of the earliest phase is firmly located in both circles.[31]

4. The founding group has to be a plausible matrix for (a) a rich Iranian religious tradition centred on Mithra-worship and (b) a learned Western tradition in which astrology furnished the master metaphors of cosmology and soteriology. Both streams are fundamental to the Mysteries as we know them from the monuments and literary testimonies. Between them, they furnish the 'what' of Mithraism. The first stream is recognized by all scholars; indeed, its acknowledgement is Cumont's essential and

[25] By Melichrisus, slave of P. Caragonius Philopalaestrus, *conductor* of the *publicum portorium Ripae Thraciae*: Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6), 148, no. 4; Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6, 1992), 224; Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1978), 153–4; idem, op. cit. (n. 4, 1994), 267–8. Melichrisus' name may be esoteric, alluding to the purification of Mithraic Lions with honey (Porphyry, *De antro* 15). A peculiar detail of this monument is that the deity Cautopates carries an upside-down cockerel, balancing the cockerel carried upright by Cautopates' twin, Cautes, on the opposite side.

[26] By the veteran and *pater sacrorum* T. Tettius Plotus: Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6, 1992), 225.

[27] Respectively, by the imperial freedman T. Flavius Hyginus Ephebianus and the slave Alcimus, the *vilicus* of T. Claudius Livianus (in all likelihood, the *praefectus praetorio* under Trajan): Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1978), 151–3, 155–6; Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6), 147–8, nos 3 and 2; Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6, 1992), 19–20 (see nn. 32, 35, 54). Hyginus makes his dedication 'through his father (*dia . . . patros idiou*), Lollius Rufus', and most scholars take 'father' not in the natural but in the esoteric hierarchic sense. The tauroctony dedicated by Alcimus has some significant idiosyncratic features: the torchbearers are grouped together on the same side of the composition, i.e., behind the bull's tail to the viewer's left, rather than one on each side; the ears of wheat appear not as growths on the bull's tail but as patterns of blood flowing from the wound struck by the god.

[28] I have included the one Anatolian monument which (a) belongs to this early period and (b) cannot be dismissed, because of iconographic or other dissimilarities, as definitely not a monument of the Mysteries. To exclude it, on the grounds that it must none the less belong to some collateral branch of Mithra-worship (since nothing about it absolutely compels us to attribute it to the Mysteries), would have begged the question. It is a dedication of one Midon, son of Solon, to Helios Mithras, and shows the bust of the god in a Phrygian cap. See, most recently Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1994), 470. We shall return below to the dossier of Anatolian monuments.

[29] The well-known allusion by Statius to Mithras subduing the bull in the 'Persian cave': 'seu Persei sub rupibus antri/ indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram'. See Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1978), 161–4; Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6), 147, no. 1. If Statius is drawing, directly or indirectly, on the cult icon, he has either taken liberties with the standard iconography or else is replicating a non-standard (pre-standard?) exemplar: Mithras, on the monuments, typically holds the bull by the muzzle, not the horns.

[30] The social appeal of Mithraism to conformists is agreed by all; see esp. R. L. Gordon, 'Mithraism and Roman society', *Religion* 2 (1972), 92–121 (reprinted in Gordon 1996); Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6), 153–88; Clauss, op. cit. (n. 6, 1990), 42–50; idem, op. cit. (n. 6, 1992), 262–75; Turcan, op. cit. (n. 5), 37–41; Liebeschuetz, op. cit. (n. 6). All stress the importance of *familiae* and of bureaucratic and military structures in the propagation of the Mysteries. The permission, indeed the encouragement, of superiors is likewise assumed. Liebeschuetz (203–6) rightly observes that the civilian groups frequently belong to a second tier of dependency, as the freedmen/slaves of freedmen/slaves.

[31] As can readily be appreciated from the status of the dedicators: above, nn. 23–7.

indisputable legacy.[32] The second stream, though amply demonstrable, still remains controversial; I shall say rather more about it later.[33] The story should also tell how these two streams entered the founding group (as a Cumontian account, it will emphasize continuities over discontinuities), and how they were shaped within the founding group to become the definitive Mysteries. An individual 'of genius' may have been responsible for much of this shaping, or even for some degree of 'reinvention' as the Mysteries were transmitted outwards from the founding group.[34] Such a figure, however, although he can be readily accommodated in the story and might indeed enhance it, is not one of its essential elements.

V

Is there an actual group with a profile conforming to the these four parameters? If what emerges is a mere chimaera, it should be set aside and we should return to one or other of the current bi-polar alternatives, lengthy evolution (in the East) or reinvention (in the West). Obviously, though, I would not be advancing my scenario if there were not a plausible candidate in the Roman world of the later first century A.D.

Before I unveil my candidate, I want to emphasize again that what I am advancing remains a scenario of the founding of the Mysteries, not a claim to have discovered with certainty the founding group. My argument is not:

(1) here is the profile of a founding group;
(2) group x fits the profile; therefore
(3) group x founded the Mysteries.

Rather, to reverse the order, it aims at the conclusion:

(3) my scenario of the founding of the Mysteries is historically plausible, because
(2) there is an historical group (x) which fits
(1) a profile of the founding group desiderated by patterns in the historical evidence.

That group x , realistically, *could* have founded the Mysteries does not imply that group x *did* found the Mysteries. I propose a suspect, perhaps even a prime suspect, and a scenario; but I have no smoking gun to offer, either in evidence or in logic.

The identified group will serve as a control on the verisimilitude of the account, ensuring that the profile is not that of some chimaera, a composite of features that could never have cohered in an historical actuality. It will keep the account in the real world. It is worth observing that the identification of a founding group which is neither known

[32] Although, of course, considerable disagreement persists about the precise nature and extent of the Iranian component and the manner of its metamorphosis into the stuff of the Mysteries. The most thoroughgoing and effective critique of Cumont's interpretation of Mithraism as transmuted Mazdaism is Gordon's ('Franz Cumont and the doctrines of Mithraism', *MS* Vol. 1, 215–48), the most successful redefinition of the Mysteries' continuing Iranian ethos—at least in my opinion—Turcan's: 'Le sacrifice mithriaque: Innovations de sens et de modalités', in *Le sacrifice dans l'antiquité classique*, Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique, Fondation Hardt (1981), 341–80; 'Salut mithriaque et sotériologie néoplatonicienne', in U. Bianchi and M. J. Vermaseren (eds), *La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell' impero romano* (1982), 173–91; 'Le dieu et le divin dans les mystères de Mithra', in R. van de Broek (ed.), *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World* (1988), 243–61. On the maximalist view of Widengren and others, see above, n. 6.

[33] Scepticism is undoubtedly warranted by the implausibility of much of the astronomical/astrological interpretation of the cult-icon: Swerdlow, op. cit. (n. 10); Turcan, op. cit. (n. 5), 105–8; R. Beck, 'In the place of the Lion: Mithras in the tauroctony', *SM*, 29–50, at 32–40; cf. idem, op. cit. (n. 3), 2081–3. But the body of astrological data, occurring in both the monuments and the texts and concerning not only the icon but also the mithraeum and the grade hierarchy (see below), is not to be denied merely because of the perceived inadequacies of its interpreters or because of its difficult, somewhat rebarbative nature: R. Beck, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* (1988), ix–xii. Patient, more sophisticated, and methodologically sounder evaluation of the evidence is certainly to be desiderated, but so is a recognition of its pervasiveness and complexity. Practitioners of this line of inquiry and their critics alike have a long but, one hopes, rewarding road to travel. There is an interesting story to be told—though not here—as to why Cumont, himself no mean scholar of ancient astrology, so persistently undervalued and marginalized the astrology of the Mysteries.

[34] One might, for example, envisage a figure such as Paul of Tarsus, who defined a certain type of Christianity even as he transmitted it.

to have existed nor whose existence is even plausible is the basic error of the most sensational recent account of Mithraism's origins, that of Ulansey.[35]

VI

I propose to locate Mithraism's founding group among the dependants, military and civilian, of the dynasty of Commagene as it made the transition from client rulers to Roman aristocrats.[36] The kingdom of Commagene on the Empire's eastern marches with Parthia and Armenia figures, more or less prominently, in all accounts of the transmission of Mithras worship, because the monuments and texts of Antiochus I, its mid-first-century B.C. ruler and the founder of a remarkable syncretistic Greco-Iranian royal cult, accord to Mithras a prominent place in the newly defined pantheon.[37] It is, however, on the ending of the kingdom more than a century later that I wish to focus.[38] The actual demise occurred in A.D. 72 with the deposition of the long-reigning Antiochus IV,[39] following a period of unusual turmoil and mobility of personnel across the Empire. Commagenian military elements (under royal command) were engaged in

[35] op. cit. (n. 10). Ulansey proposes a group of Tarsian Stoics who, at some time after the middle of the second century B.C., transmuted the astronomer Hipparchus' highly technical hypothesis about the precession of the equinoxes into the foundation doctrine of the new cult. As I have demonstrated (Beck, op. cit. (n. 33), 37–9), other than a few professional astronomers, almost no one took cognizance of Hipparchus' discovery (Origen and Proclus are the two exceptions, with a single reference apiece), and no one at all was interested in the historical reconstruction of the equinoxes of past epochs that Ulansey's account postulates. To imagine that people in Antiquity might have turned such matters into a religion is an egregious anachronism.

[36] The story of the dynasty and its fortunes is well and fully told by R. D. Sullivan, 'The dynasty of Commagene', *ANRW* II.8 (1977), 732–98. We are concerned with its later phases (Sullivan, 785–98), particularly with the times of the last reigning king, C. Iulius Antiochus IV Epiphanes (A.D. 38–72; *PIR*^{2} 4.138–40, no. J 149), and his son of the same name (*PIR*^{2} 4.140–1, no. J 150; *RE* 10.1.159–63, Iulius no. 66). The acme of Romanization was reached in the next generation by C. Iulius Antiochus Epiphanes Philopappus (he of the monument in Athens), suffect consul in 109 and Arval Brother (*PIR*^{2} 4.141, no. J 151). The kingly title was retained in the latter two generations, as was a proud dynastic memory (see below on Julia Balbilla). The dynasty had, of course, long been Hellenized, tracing its pedigree to Alexander and the Seleucids and interweaving Greek with Iranian in the pantheon of its cult (see next note). Highly germane, from our perspective, is the family's connection with the astrologer and high Roman functionary, Ti. Claudius Balbillus. The specifics of the link and the prosopography of Balbillus are complicated and controversial (less so now than formerly); they will be discussed briefly below. However interpreted, the relationship adds an unusual cultural dimension to the dynasty's Romanization. Was there a 'trickle down' of astrological doctrine to those in the dynasty's household to whom our scenario traces the origins of the Mysteries?

[37] See esp. Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6), 50–72. The scholarly literature on the Commagenian royal cult is considerable; I cite the two most recent comprehensive studies, both excellent: M. Boyce, op. cit. (n. 4), 309–51; H. Waldmann, *Der kommagenische Mazdaismus* (1991). This is also the point at which to recognize the contribution to the study of Commagenian religion of another distinguished Belgian scholar, Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin: 'Iran and Greece in Commagene', *EM*, 187–204. On Mithras in particular in the context of the royal cult, see F. K. Dörner, 'Mithras in Kommagene', *EM*, 123–33; Schwertheim, op. cit. (n. 4, 1979), 13–18; Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2017–18. Important here because he has more to say than most about the dynasty and the cult subsequent to Antiochus I is J. Wagner, 'Dynastie und Herrscherkult in Kommagene', *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 33 (1983), 177–224 (see esp. 208–24). The articles and illustrations in the Antike Welt Sondernummer 1975 devoted to the kingdom (= F. K. Dörner (ed.), *Kommagene*) furnish an excellent overview.

[38] In its final phase, under Antiochus IV, the kingdom included portions of maritime Cilicia (Dio 59.8.2, Jos., *AJ* 19.276). In A.D. 52, Antiochus campaigned against some wild tribes there (*agrestium Cilicum nationes*) which had been harrowing the coastal cities (Tac., *Ann.* 12.55). Pacification was achieved by isolating and killing the chieftains and 'settling the rest leniently' (*ceteros clementia composuit*). It is worth considering whether the germination of the Mysteries might not have taken place when Commagenian and Cilician Mithra-worship coalesced at the exposure of Commagenian administrators and military to the rites of the Cilician tribes. On this scenario, the Mysteries would indeed have been transmitted from the *teletai* of Cilician outlaws, as Plutarch's testimony declares (above, n. 5), but at a different time and by a different route than scholars have supposed. These rites, one may rather postulate, were not carried abroad and perpetuated by Pompey's resettled pirates—Plutarch does not in fact say that they were—but instead lingered in their homeland of Cilicia until taken up by the Commagenians more than a century later.

[39] Josephus, *BJ* 7.219–43, gives a full account of this episode and its aftermath.

both the Judaean and Civil Wars,[40] and there would have been extensive contact with Roman legionary and other troops (including the units already identified as among the earlier carriers of the new mystery cult: XV Apollinaris, V Macedonica, II Adiutrix).[41] On the civilian side, the dynasty, after its deposition, was resident for a period in Rome:[42] contact between its *familia* and the *familiae* of the Roman aristocracy, including the imperial *familia*, is more than likely. What I propose, then, is that the Mysteries of Mithras were developed within a subset of these Commagenian soldiers and family-retainers and were transmitted by them at various points of contact to their counterparts in the Roman world. Development and transmission should be seen as overlapping, not rigidly sequential, phases: certain of the essentials of the Mysteries will have been in place prior to their transmission, but they were developed into their familiar form in and through the process of transmission itself.

VII

Earlier, I set out certain parameters for our account, based on the constraints of the historical evidence. The scenario of the founding of the Mysteries by a circle of Commagenians in the mid- to late first century A.D. fits those parameters in the following ways:

1. By moving the foundation period forward from the first century B.C. to the first century A.D., the account obviates the problem of the missing evidence. Nothing from the Mysteries is extant from that earlier period because, quite simply, the Mysteries did not then exist. What we have are, principally, monuments documenting Mithras-worship as an element in the religion out of which the Mysteries were eventually to be generated, the Commagenian royal cult. The scenario allows for a futher interval, between an initial dissemination of the Mysteries (60s to 70s A.D.?) and their earliest dedicatory and monumental records (*c.* 80–120), during which the archaeological record remains silent while the cult grows towards the threshold of visibility.

2. Equally, the account obviates the problem of the simultaneity of the earliest evidence and the difficulty of determining a locale for the foundation of the Mysteries. The Mysteries were 'founded' wherever subsets of this highly mobile Commagenian founding group interacted with their military or civilian peers in the Roman world. The very early date of the Caesarea mithraeum is accommodated (the Mithraic community being founded there during, or in the aftermath of, the Judean War).[43] The Rome versus Anatolia problem disappears. The scarce, enigmatic, but not negligible Anatolian material outside Commagene can be accommodated piece by piece, instead of either (a)

[40] In the Civil Wars, on the side of Otho against the Vitellians in the battle twelve miles from Cremona (Tac., *Hist.* 2,25.2); in the Judean War, at the siege of Jerusalem (Tac., *Hist.* 5.1.2, Jos., *BJ* 5.460–5). On both occasions the Commagenians were led by Antiochus, the king's son (above, n. 36); on the latter occasion, he volunteered his crack detachment of 'Macedonians' in a gallant—or foolhardy—assault on the walls. There had been earlier co-operation, and hence presumably contacts, between Commagenian and Roman forces in Corbulo's Armenian campaigns (Tac., *Ann.* 13.7.1, 37.2).

[41] Daniels, op. cit. (n. 24), 250–2; Turcan, op. cit. (n. 5), 32. On Caesarea as a likely military contact point, see Painter, op. cit. (n. 14), 45–9, 115–19. D. Braund, 'New "Latin" inscriptions in central Asia: Legio XV Apollinaris and Mithras?' *ZPE* 89 (1991), 188–90, is properly sceptical of the interpretation of a Latin-alphabet inscription found in Northern Bactria which has a detachment of XV Apollinaris worshipping Mithras in a cave there some time during this period(!).

[42] Jos., *BJ* 7.243 ('. . . and there they remained (*katemenon*), treated with every respect'). Antiochus IV was no stranger to the city; it was presumably there that, together with Herod Agrippa of Judaea, he 'associated with' (*syneinai*) Caligula, a relationship which the Romans observed with dismay, considering the pair of client princes 'mentors in tyranny' (*tyrannodidaskalous*): Dio 59.24.1. The acquaintance of his eventual kinsman by marriage, Balbillus (above, n. 36), was most likely made in Rome.

[43] Painter, loc. cit. (n. 14).

having to bear the weight of being the key transformative link in an evolutionary chain or (b) being relegated entirely to the status of back-formation from the Western mysteries.[44] Some of the material may be collateral to the Mysteries, i.e., manifestations of local Mithra-worship not stemming from the Commagenian founding group.[45]

3. The social status of the postulated founding group is consonant with the status of the earliest cult cells, as attested by the earliest dedicators. Essentially, this is a model of peer-to-peer commendation both in the military and in the *familiae* of the great.[46] Hence Mithraism's uniform respectability, most untypical of translocated mystery cults.

4. A Commagenian group, dependent on the dynasty, would be carriers of the two essential defining traits of the Mysteries identified above, (a) an Iranian tradition centred on Mithra-worship and (b) a learned Western tradition, principally astrological. Both would have been derived from the royal cult itself, amply documented in its monuments. It is important to note that the account does not make the Mysteries the evolutionary successor of the royal cult or the royal cult a prototype of the Mysteries.[47] The Mysteries were a genuinely new creation, a creation which however drew on antecedent traditions. The account locates the antecedent traditions in the cult of the royal patrons of the founding group. The great innovation, the primary 'invention' of the Mysteries, was the bull-killing of Mithras construed as a mighty act of 'salvation'.[48] The great continuities, inherited from the royal cult, were (a) the identification of Mithras with

[44] On the dossier of Anatolian material, F. Cumont, 'Mithra en Asie Mineure', *Anatolian Studies in Honour of W. H. Buckler* (1939), 67–76; Will, op. cit. (n. 4, 1955), 154–6; Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2018–19; Gordon, op. cit. (n. 4, 1978), 159–60; idem, op. cit. (n. 4, 1994), 461–2, 469–70. See above, n. 28, on V23; also n. 22, on the variety in forms of dedication, to which Gordon rightly draws attention as evidence of a certain fluidity in the types of Mithra-worship and the early Mysteries there.

[45] It is in this category that I would place the Kerch terracottas, on which see Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2019.

[46] See above, n. 30 and the studies cited there; see also R. Beck, 'The Mysteries of Mithras', in J. S. Kloppenborg and S. G. Wilson (eds), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (1996), 176–85, at 179. For a recent sociological perspective on the growth of new religious movements through social networks (with applications to the ancient world), see R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (1996), 13–21.

[47] Attempts have indeed been made to project Mithraism back into the royal cult, notably on the basis of the artificial cavern at Arsameia on the Nymphaeus as a precursor of the mithraeum: Schwertheim, op. cit. (n. 4, 1975); idem, op. cit. (n. 4, 1979), 13–18; Dörner, op. cit. (n. 37, 1978), 132–3; contra, H. Dörrie, *Der Königskult des Antiochus von Kommagene im Lichte neuer Inschriften-Funde* (1964), 192–4. Waldmann, op. cit. (n. 37), 182–4, gives an appropriately sceptical overview of the question 'Mithrasmysterien in Kommagene?' Actually, Waldmann's question can now be answered in the affirmative, though in a different sense than he intended. Very recently (late summer 1997), a mithraeum was discovered in a natural cave at Doliche, with a representation of the bull-killing Mithras cut into the rock. So far, however, there is nothing to suggest a particularly early date or that this is other than a standard Roman mithraeum. Nevertheless, the discovery is of great importance, and I return to it in a postscript.

[48] By 'invention' I mean, rather in the rhetorical sense, the *discovery* of the bull-killing as a divine fact of supreme relevance and its subsequent elaboration in myth and doctrine. By 'salvation' I mean only the effect of the act for good, however defined, on the world and, as mediated through the cult, on the initiates. The specifics of that good I here leave undefined. If Mithras as bull-killer was indeed the 'invention' of the founding cultists in the middle of the first century A.D., then it is not surprising that the search for his Iranian original has proven so unsatisfactory (see Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2068–9). (The exploration of the underlying Iranian concepts of sacrifical killing, whether by god or mortal, is of course another matter.) The reason that we hear no hint of a bull-killing Mithras prior to the late first century A.D. is, quite simply, that he did not exist until shortly before that time. If I were to suggest an antecedent for the motif of the bull-killing, I would locate it close to Commagene—in Tarsus and the image of the bull-vanquishing lion, prominent in the earlier coinage of that city. In fact, this antecedent has already been proposed, *inter alia*, by A. D. Bivar, 'Towards an integrated picture of ancient Mithraism', *SM*, 61–73, at 64–5. I would construe it, however, not as a forerunner of the bull-killing Mithras but rather as a trigger to his invention, a pre-existent motif, quite unrelated to him, which might have given both impetus and local legitimacy (the latter through the appearance of traditional depth) to a new religious creation. Again, I would pull the moment forward in time to the age of Antiochus IV and the expansion of Commagene into Cilicia (above, n. 38—though Tarsus, of course, remained outside his realm).

the Sun (demonstrably, a Commagenian equation of the century before),[49] and (b) the employment of astrology in the composition of 'cosmic images',[50] artificial constructs, that is, which mirror or replicate certain celestial realities.

The foremost of these constructs was (i) the icon of the tauroctony, in which the celestial dimensions of the newly 'invented' bull-killing, as the action of a solar deity, were expressed in the patterns of a narrative allegory whose underlying terms are Sun, Moon, and constellations;[51] in a similar way, though more explicitly and more straightforwardly, the celestial charter of the Commagenian royal cult had been embodied among the sculptured monuments of Nemrud Dağ in the star-studded figure of the lion who is Leo.[52] Two other innovative creations of the Mysteries likewise mirror the heavens. They are (ii) the physical structure of the mithraeum which, we are explicitly told, was designed as an 'image of the cosmos (*eikona kosmou*), whose furnishings, by their proportionate arrangement, symbolize the cosmic elements and

[49] The monuments of the royal cult make this equation both in text and in iconography. Mithras is called Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes in the foundation text of the primary *hierothesion* on Nemrud Dağ (V32 = *OGIS* 383 = H. Waldmann, *Die kommagenischen Kultreformen* (1973), 62–9, line 55), and elsewhere likewise, though with variation in the order of names. On the reliefs which show him in *dexiosis* with the king, one extant on the west terrace of Nemrud Dağ (V30) and two at Arsameia on the Nymphaeus, his Persian tiara is surrounded with the rayed solar halo: Waldmann (above), pls 22.3, 30.2–3; Dörner, *Kommagene*, 41 Abb. 42, 56 Abb. 82; idem, op. cit. (n. 37), pls 3–6; Schwertheim, op. cit. (n. 4, 1979), 17 Abb. 16, 20 Abb. 19; Merkelbach, op. cit. (n. 6), 266–7, Abb. 4–5. That the equation of Mithras with the Sun was formulated in the context of the royal cult and not inherited ready-made is proved by a different *dexiosis* relief, discovered in 1974 at Sofraz Köy, which belongs to an earlier phase of the cult and predates the identification of the two divinities. Here the god with solar rays and halo is named simply Apollo Epēkoos, his iconography is entirely Hellenic, and he is neither called nor does he carry any of the attributes of Persian Mithra: J. Wagner, 'Neue Funde zum Götter- und Königskult unter Antiochos I. von Kommagene', *Kommagene*, 51–9, at 54–9 with Abb. 77; J. Wagner and G. Petzl, 'Eine neue Temenos-Stele des Königs Antiochos I. von Kommagene', *ZPE* 20 (1976), 201–23; Schwertheim, op. cit. (n. 4, 1979), 20, Abb. 20; Wagner, op. cit. (n. 37), 192–4, 198–208, pl. 49.4; Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2018. (Very similar is the Samosata relief of Helios: Waldmann, op. cit. (above), pl. 5.) Solar Mithras thus represents a continuity from the royal cult of Commagene to the Mysteries of Mithras, but it is not a long-standing one, being an 'invention' of the royal cult itself in the same sense that Mithras as bull-killer was the 'invention' of the Commagenian founders of the Mysteries a century or so later (see preceding note). In our account, then, the 'invention' of Helios-Mithras in the Commagenian royal cult is sufficient causal explanation of the solarity of Mithras in the Mysteries: Mithras is the Sun in the Mysteries because the Commagenian founders of the Mysteries received him in that identity. Further theories about the remoter Iranian origins of Mithras' solarity (a much vexed question: see Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2068; Boyce, op. cit. (n. 4), 479–82) thus concern not so much the Mysteries themselves as the antecedent royal cult: on what precedent, if any, did Antiochus I build his identification of Mithras with the Sun? The chronology of the monuments of the royal cult and the development of the various divine equations recorded there are complicated—and still very open—questions. Necessarily, I have simplified, but only to what commands general agreement. For discussions of these issues see, in addition to the works of Wagner cited above, Dörner, op. cit. (n. 37); Duchesne-Guillemin, op. cit. (n. 37); Boyce, op. cit. (n. 4), 317–49; Waldmann, op. cit. (n. 37), esp. 55–9 (note that, for relative chronology, this work replaces Waldmann's 1973 work cited above).

[50] On the phrase, see below, n. 53.

[51] Beck, op. cit. (n. 33, 1994); see also above, n. 33.

[52] V31. The stars are arranged in the pattern of Leo the constellation, three larger stars above the lion's back are identified by inscription as the planets Mars, Mercury, and Jupiter, and there is a crescent moon on the lion's chest. There is general agreement, following O. Neugebauer and H. B. Van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes* (1959), 14–16, no. 61, that the monument functions as a horoscope whose designated date is 7 July 62 B.C.; also, following Dörrie, op. cit. (n. 47), 201–7, that the accompanying *dexiosis* reliefs are to be interpreted in the light of this horoscope as alluding to the successive conjunctions (within a few days of each other) of the three planets and the moon with the principal star of Leo, Regulus, symbolized on the lion monument by the large star cradled in the lunar crescent on the lion's chest. The *dexiosis* reliefs thus also carry an astrological message, that the planetary gods on a particular occasion came to greet and be greeted by the king's celestial surrogate, 'the royal star at the heart of the lion' (Pliny's phrase, *NH* 18.235, 271). In their ensemble, they both establish and validate the theological equations of the royal cult by reference to what had actually occurred in the heavens. (While essentially correct, the current astrological interpretation of the monuments requires modification, in part because Dörrie's conjunction data were erroneous and present a misleading and oversimplified picture of the underlying celestial events and configurations, and in part because Neugebauer and Van Hoesen, while, of course, accurate in their data, were severely limited in their treatment of the horoscope within its unusual religious context. I am presently at work on a revised interpretation, as also on the astrology of the cult's later monuments, notably the Karakuş site, a hitherto neglected line of inquiry, though obviously worth exploring if one is arguing for a continuity in astrological thinking from the royal cult to the Mysteries of Mithras.)

climes';[53] and (iii) the organizational structure of the seven-fold grade hierarchy whose principle of arrangement is a sequence of the planets through which the initiate passes as up a 'seven-runged ladder'.[54]

The new messages of the Mysteries were thus largely conveyed in the inherited, though brilliantly adapted, medium of astrology. What was transmitted was not the celestial constructs themselves (the tauroctony, the mithraeum, the grade hierarchy—these were the definitive inventions of the Mysteries) but the mind set and habit of constructing things to celestial templates.[55]

VIII

I have characterized this account of the origins of the Mysteries as 'Cumontian' because it looks again to Anatolia and to an Anatolian group steeped in an Iranian religious tradition. These, however, are not the Hellenized Mazdean magi, the *Magousaioi*, to whom Cumont remained so attached as Mithraism's putative ancestors.[56] They are a less diffuse group and one whose devotion to Mithras may be inferred directly from the much heralded devotion of their dynastic patrons to that god. In an economy that is surely a desirable feature of any such account, this group also becomes the origin of another component of the Mysteries, the astrologically based cosmology, which Cumont located more distantly in space and time, in Babylon as the Semitic 'stratum' and contribution to Mithraism.[57]

Temporally, Cumont saw the transformative process of Mazdaism to Mithraism occurring in the centuries immediately prior to the Christian era. Nevertheless, in a passage of *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*[58] he puts the decisive moment of lift-off into the Roman world in the second half of the first century A.D. and in

[53] Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 6. On the way in which this ideal is exemplified in actual mithraea, principally the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres in Ostia, see R. Beck, 'Cosmic models: Some uses of Hellenistic science in Roman religion', in T. D. Barnes (ed.), *The Sciences in Greco-Roman Society* (1995) = *Apeiron* 27 (1994), no. 4, 99–117. In principle and in nomenclature, though not in practice, every mithraeum is a 'cave' because the cave is a symbol of the universe (Porph., ibid.). The Mysteries, in a sense, went underground, in sharp contrast with their royal antecedent, which was a cult of high, open places. It is conceivable that the artificial cavern tunnelled out at the Arsameia site might have prompted the Mysteries to take that direction, but it is certainly not the prototype of a mithraeum (see above, n. 47). On the mithraeum recently discovered in a natural cave at Doliche, see above (n. 47), and below (Postscript).

[54] Beck, op. cit. (n. 33, 1988), esp. 1–11. The phrase (*klimax heptapylos*) is taken from the Mithraic *symbolon* given in Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.22 (Beck, ibid., 73–85); the images of the grades and their tutelary planets are arranged in this ladder form in mosaic up the aisle of the Felicissimus Mithraeum at Ostia (V299).

[55] For example, arrangements of the planets were used in both systems to define tutelary gods. But the products were very different. Whereas in the Commagenian royal cult the conjunctions of certain planets with the star Regulus in a certain year had been used to define the identities of the king's divine peers (above, n. 52), in the Mysteries a unique spatio-temporal sequence of the full seven was constructed to organize and validate the hierarchy of grades and to characterize progress through it: Beck, op. cit. (n. 33, 1988), 1–11. The example is instructive in another respect, for it points up a key difference between the two religions: the royal cult focused the universal on the particular—on a particular moment in time, on particular local circumstances, and on one particular individual and his dynasty; in the Mysteries the 'images of the universe' were made universally applicable, functioning, at least potentially (and with the notorious restriction to the male sex), for the salvation of all. Because of its particularity, the royal cult was, finally, a non-exportable dead end; Mithraism injected a measure of egalitarianism into the cosmos, and so succeeded.

[56] See the important, though ultimately misdirected, 1931 article in which Cumont linked the newly discovered and idiosyncratic Dieburg relief (V1247) to the magian hymns of Dio, *Or.* 36 (39–61) to postulate a common eschatology transmitted from the 'mages occidentaux' to the Mysteries: 'La fin du monde selon les mages occidentaux', *RHR* 103 (1931), 29–96; contra, Gordon, op. cit. (n. 32), 237–41; Beck, op. cit. (n. 3), 2036–7; idem, 'Thus spake not Zarathuštra: Zoroastrian pseudepigrapha of the Greco-Roman world', in Boyce and Grenet, op. cit. (n. 4), 491–565, at 539–48.

[57] *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*, Vol. 1 (1899), 109, 120, 301 ('c'est là la doctrine capitale [viz. astrological fatalism] que Babylone a introduite dans le mazdéisme'); likewise much of Mithras' solarity: ibid., 200, 300 ('il y a en réalité dans les mystères deux divinités solaires, l'une iranienne qui est l'héritière du Hvarè perse, l'autre sémitique qui est le substitut du Shamash babylonien, identifié à Mithra'), 303.

[58] (1929), 129–30.

circumstances identical to those postulated here. In this sense, I have done no more than update Cumont. The passage is worth quoting at some length:

> Des contacts passagers avec des populations mazdéennes se produisirent à partir des guerres contre Mithridate, mais ils ne devinrent fréquents et durables qu'au I^er^ siècle de notre ère. C'est alors que l'Empire étendit graduellement ses annexions jusqu'à l'Euphrate supérieur, s'adjoignant ainsi tout le plateau d'Anatolie, et au sud du Taurus, la Commagène. Les dynasties indigènes . . . disparurent l'une après l'autre. Les Flaviens construisirent un immense réseau routier à travers ces régions. En même temps . . . les légions vinrent camper sur les bords du haut Euphrate et dans les montagnes de l'Arménie . . .. Ainsi . . . tous les îlots mazdéens disséminés en Cappadoce et dans le Pont entrèrent forcément en rapports constants avec le monde latin . . ..
>
> De ces conquêtes et de ces annexions en Asie Mineure et Syrie date la propagation soudaine en Occident des mystères persiques de Mithra. Car, si une communauté de leurs adeptes paraît avoir existé à Rome dès le temps de Pompée . . ., leur diffusion réelle ne commença qu'à partir des Flaviens vers la fin du I^er^ siècle de notre ère.

In broad-brush terms this is right. But the scenario can be put in sharper focus and certain peculiarities of Mithraism better understood if we look to a very specific set of Commagenians and to the special circumstances of war and migration which brought them into close contact with precisely those groups in Roman society among whom Mithraism appears in the succeeding generation.

IX

If my account follows the trajectory of Cumont, it builds no less on the insights of Merkelbach following Nilsson. The foundation of the Mysteries, it is here argued, did indeed occur in a synthesis of Iranian religion and Greek learning, and that synthesis was no less the product of invention than of evolution. Foundation in Rome, moreover, in the environs of the palace is accommodated by the supposition that it was there that the entourage of the deposed yet honoured Antiochus IV, invited to live in the capital by the emperor, first transmitted the Mysteries into the households of the great.

My principal departure from Merkelbach is to stress creation within a relatively limited group rather than by a single individual of genius. Yet, intriguingly, if one were to seek an individual in this setting, there is an obvious candidate, not so much as the synthesizer of Iranian religion and Greek learning but as the re-designer of that astrology which was the dominant mode of Greek learning in the Mysteries as previously in the Commagenian royal cult. That person, already mentioned,[59] is Ti. Claudius Balbillus, who was both the leading astrologer of the period in Rome and related by marriage, possibly too by blood, to the Commagenian dynasty. (That Balbillus was the father-in-law of C. Iulius Antiochus Epiphanes, the son of the last ruling king of Commagene, is generally agreed; most scholars also accept that Balbillus was the son of the pre-eminent astrologer of the previous generation, Ti. Claudius Thrasyllus, who may—here is where real uncertainty obtrudes—himself have married a Commagenian

[59] Above, n. 36.

princess.)[60] This coincidence of a well-known astrologer in close proximity to the Commagenian dynasty at the crucial time is too promising to pass over in silence. Balbillus, as the kinsman of the dynasty and a person of rank and influence within the Roman élite, was, of course, the social superior of the original Mithraists here postulated. If one were to fit him into the scenario, it need not be as an early Mithraist himself or as the putative founder. Rather, one might imagine a sort of intellectual *patronus* of the early Mysteries, a mentor and close source of inspiration. Still, I emphasize that it is less important to nominate a specific individual as our missing genius than to demonstrate through an actual example the historical plausibility of the account even when we add in this feature.[61]

[60] It is unnecessary to adopt here more than the minimalist position that Balbillus the astrologer was the grandfather of the Julia Balbilla who caused a poem to be inscribed on the colossus of Memnon in which she claims as her other grandfather Antiochus IV of Commagene (the grandfathers are styled respectively 'Balbillus the wise' and 'Antiochus the king'): A. and E. Bernand, *Les inscriptions grecques et latines du Colosse de Memnon* (1960), 86–92, no. 29, lines 13–16, with commentary. The Bernands' correct reading of line 15 of this poem excludes, in my view, an earlier and widely current interpretation which gave Balbillus himself 'a royal mother, (?)Aka' (see also J. Gagé, *Basileia* (1968), 75–85). Balbillus' Commagenian mother was promoted by C. Cichorius, *Römische Studien* (1922), 390–8, in the same prosopographical package which also made him the (unnamed) son of Thrasyllus mentioned by Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.22) as predicting Nero's principate. One may, of course, retain the filiation while rejecting the earlier Commagenian marriage connection. That Balbillus himself married royalty (whether Commagenian or other) was argued by J. Schwartz, 'Ti. Claudius Balbillus (préfet d' Égypte et conseiller de Neron)', *Bull. Inst. Franç. d'Archéol. Orient.* 49 (1950), 45–55, at 48, and Gagé, op. cit. (above), 84. On Balbillus' daughter (Julia Balbilla's mother), see *PIR*^{2} I.262, no. C 1086 (Claudia Capitolina). As a practising astrologer, Balbillus has the invidious distinction of advising Nero to divert the evil omen of a comet on to members of the nobility as surrogate victims (Suetonius, *Nero* 36). Balbillus was also among the 'best' astrologers whom Vespasian consulted, favouring him to the extent of allowing the Ephesians to institute games in his honour (Dio 66.9.2; on the records of these 'Balbilleia', see L Moretti, *Iscrizioni agonistiche greche* (1953), 184 and index s.v.). On the theoretical side, a fragment from Balbillus' astrological works is preserved (*CCAG* 8.3.103–4; 8.4.233–8, 240–4); it is concerned principally with the rather dangerous topic of length of life. Cumont, as historian of astrology, devoted a short study to him: 'Astrologues romains et byzantins: I. Balbillus', *Mél. d'Archéol. et d'histoire . . . de l'École Franç. de Rome* 37 (1918–19), 33–8; see also W. and H. G. Gundel, *Astrologumena* (1966), 151–3. Balbillus, it is generally agreed, also had a varied and distinguished career as an equestrian functionary, a point of some significance if one is to cast him as a sort of godfather to the Mithraic Mysteries. Here again, I follow a minimalist consensus which identifies him with, *inter alios*, (a) the Balbillus who was the subject of a procuratorial career recorded in an Ephesian inscription (J. Keil, *Forschungen in Ephesus* 3 (1928), 127–8, nos 41–2 = *AE* 1924, 78) and (b) the Balbillus who was prefect of Egypt from 55 to 59 (Tac., *Ann.* 13.22). For brief biographies which reflect at least this consensus (in addition to those by Cumont, Moretti, the Bernands and the Gundels cited above) see D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor*, Vol. 2 (1950), 1398–400; R. Syme, *Tacitus* (1958), 508–9; H.-G. Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres sous le haut-empire romain*, Vol. 1. (1960), 34–41, no. 15. A 'separatist' position, breaking apart the various identities, was taken by A. Stein, 'Balbillus', *Aegyptus* 13 (1933), 123–36; and less insistently in *PIR*^{2} I.184–5, no. C 813; cf. ibid., 349, no. B 38; cf. Schwartz, op. cit. (above) (less radical). A maximalist (or 'unitarian') biography, following Cichorius (above) and exploiting all possible identities and both Commagenian marriage connections, is woven into his history of Roman astrology by F. H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (1954), index s. 'Balbillus'. Finally, one should mention, though with reservations, Gagé's picture of Balbillus and the Commagenian dynasty as deeply involved in the formulation of a 'royalist' ideology focused on the person of the emperor: op. cit. (above), 75–85, 108–17, 143–9, 155–63; more tentatively, Wagner, op. cit. (n. 37), 216–17.

[61] In Balbillus' favour, one might point to certain Egyptian (or Egyptianizing) elements which appear to have entered Mithraic ideology, most notably in the person of their lion-headed god: R. Pettazzoni, 'The monstrous figure of Time in Mithraism', in *Essays in the History of Religions* (trans. H. J. Rose, 1954), 180–92. It is difficult to account for these motifs in most current scenarios of transmission. Balbillus, the curious polymath who prior to his governorship of Egypt had served as head of the 'Museum and Library at Alexandria' (see preceding note on his procuratorial career), would be a fine example of the type of conduit which must be postulated. Indeed, his whole persona resonates remarkably with that 'bricolage' of encyclopaedic learning which, as Gordon has so perceptively demonstrated (op. cit. (n. 4, 1978); 'Reality, evocation and boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras', *JMS* 3 (1980, reprinted in Gordon 1996), 19–99), characterizes the Mysteries. For example, Seneca (*Nat. Quaest.* 4a.2.13–15) reports an eye-witness account by Balbillus, whom he decribes as 'the best of men and uniquely accomplished in every genre of literature', of a battle between dolphins and crocodiles at the Heracleot mouth of the Nile; paradoxically, the more pacific creatures were the victors. Such animal lore is the stuff of the Mysteries: see Gordon, op. cit. (above, 1980).

X. POSTSCRIPT

Late in the summer of 1997, a mithraeum was discovered by an archaeological team from the University of Münster at the Commagenian city of Doliche.[62] The mithraeum was located in a natural cave, with its bull-killing relief cut into the rock.[63] The relief is badly damaged, but it appears to be essentially of the standard design familiar in scores of exemplars across the Roman Empire from the early to mid-second century A.D. onward. So far the mithraeum has yielded nothing which can date it more narrowly, except for a short inscription in a niche which may 'possibly' refer to the legion IV Scythica,[64] stationed at Zeugma from the mid-first to the end of the third century.

The new mithraeum does not, of course, in any way confirm my account. If, as seems likely, it belongs with the mass of standard Roman mithraea of the second and third centuries, then it shows only that Mithraism returned to the land of its founders. Only if it can be shown to antedate all its peers would it assume a special significance as evidence for the Commagenian origin of the Mysteries. A date in the early first century A.D. or earlier would, of course, disconfirm my account: in that case the Mysteries might indeed be Commagenian, but the founding group would not be as I have postulated it. Finally, it must be emphasized that the mithraeum is no evidence for autochthonous Commagenian religion. The Münster expedition does not report it as such, although, ironically, that was precisely the objective of the survey in the area when it was led to the cave.

Erindale College, University of Toronto

[62] E. Winter and A. Schütte-Maischatz, 'Neue Forschungen in Kommagene', *Historisch-Archäologischer Freundeskreis: Rundbrief* (1997), 31–7. I am most grateful to Simon Price for alerting me to this discovery and sending me the initial report (above).

[63] On caves and rock-cut reliefs in Mithraism, see H. Lavagne, 'Importance de la grotte dans le mithriacisme en occident', *EM*, 271–8; R. Beck, 'The rock-cut mithraea of Arupium (Dalmatia)', *Phoenix* 38 (1984), 356–71. On artificial caves in the Commagenian royal cult, see above n. 47.

[64] Mithraists from IV Scythica are attested at Dura (V53, 62).