

# THE RISE AND FALL OF THE MITHRAIC MYSTERIES

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**W**ho was Mithras and what are the Mithraic Mysteries? Because of the Roman penchant for incorporating “foreign” ideas, Mithras was surely not a purely Roman creation. The name of Mithras most likely derives from the Indo-Iranian noun, *mitra*, that which binds, as in a covenant.<sup>1</sup> The term, “mysteries,” does not necessarily imply that a new religion is mysterious: It implies that its members are formally initiated. The term “mystery” derives from the Greek *mysterion*, or secret rites. There was little written about the Mithraic Mysteries. It is only through the inferences drawn from the

cave or cave-like *Mithraeum* and the generally present *Tauroctony* and other images, the initiations, and the primary participants that we can make any conclusions. In addition, while, “the modern term ‘religion’ seems to be incorrect in a Roman setting,”<sup>2</sup> to participate in a mystery religion implies a binding obligation, a duty, and honor. Duty and honor were paramount in Roman civilization although adherence to any one religion was not necessary. Mithraism itself, “...was neither static nor homogeneous... just as Christianity varied from one region of the Roman Empire to the other, so too did Mithraism.”<sup>3</sup>



## The Mithraeum and Tauroctony

The celebrations of the Mithraic Mysteries were held in Mithraea (Mithraic temples) found throughout the Roman Empire at military outposts in Germany, France, Spain, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. All Mithraea share certain common characteristics. They are all in or built and decorated to represent caves, they are all longer than they are wide with stone benches on either side, and they all depict the Tauroctony, or scene of Mithras slaying the bull, at a prominent altar. Included are the figure of Mithras wearing a Phrygian hat and a cloak, the bull (often with its tail in, or depicting, ears of wheat), the dog and snake appearing to ingest the blood of the slain bull, the scorpion biting at the bull's genitals, and the Sun, Moon, and stars above or under Mithras's cloak. Often there is a raven perched on the bull's back, two torchbearers on either side representing light and dark, one with the torch up (Cautes) and one with torch down (Cautopates), and a goblet.

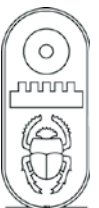
The actual origins, rites, and rituals of the Mithraic Mysteries are relatively unknown. Plutarch, in his *Life of Pompey*, tells a story that implies Mithras was an import from the Cilician pirates, who were plundering cities on the coast, around 67 BCE.<sup>4</sup> The wealthy joined the pirates as professional thieves to obtain places of honor for the satisfaction of their ambitions.<sup>5</sup> Porphyry, in his *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, talks of the cave (grotto) as a symbol of the cosmos with souls coming into being and then ascending into the immortal realm.<sup>6</sup> The cave also served as a symbol of all unseen powers since they are dark to our eyes and the essence of the powers is, including those of the Primary Mover, invisible.

David Ulansey, in *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*,<sup>7</sup> hypothesizes that these



Frontispiece of the Rudolphine Tables by Johannes Kepler (1571–1630). Left to right are Hipparchus, Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, and Ptolemy. Photo by Steve Nicklas, NOAA Central Library.

objects represent a set of constellations, e.g., Taurus (bull), Scorpio (scorpion), Corvus (raven), Crater (goblet), Hydra (snake), Canis Major or Minor (dog), and that Mithras himself is represented by the constellation Perseus. The interpretations of what these symbols represent and why these constellations are used, and not the zodiacal constellations, have been a subject of debate. The answer lies in the different view between the ecliptic (the zodiac) and the celestial equator. Plato described these two celestial circles as forming a cross. He also believed that the Creator endowed these two circles with uniform, permanent, and unchangeable motion,<sup>8</sup> a philosophical and scientific concept believed throughout the ancient world until the second century BCE, when Hipparchus of Nicaea witnessed a nova in the constellation Scorpio.



## Discovery of the Axial Precession

Hipparchus had already begun to notice the longitudinal shift in the star Spica in the Virgo constellation by comparing his observations with those of Timocharis of Alexandria (third century BCE) and ancient Babylonian astronomical observations.<sup>9</sup> He concluded that the heavens were moving westward along the ecliptic at the rate of approximately one degree (or less) each century. He decided to prepare a new star chart measuring the position of each star according to latitude, i.e. the distance north or south of the celestial equator, and longitude, the angular distance east or west of a particular point. This action created the first star chart with gridlines still in use today. As Hipparchus prepared his star chart, he began to notice, utilizing the older observations with his own, a pivoting east/west change in the position of the north celestial pole star, an observation that takes decades to ascertain. This precession of the vernal equinox is now known as the axial precession. He calculated that a complete cycle occurred approximately every 26,700 years. Today this complete cycle is referred to as the Great Year of approximately 25,800 years,

taking approximately 2,150 years for the precession through each of the twelve thirty-degree signs of the tropical (seasonal) zodiac.<sup>10</sup> Plato's idea of the uniform, permanent, and unchangeable universal cross of the Creator had changed.

Today we refer to this axial precession in reference to the Ages of Humanity, from the Golden Age of Leo and the birth of the Orphic Phanes, through the silver age of Cancer and the Great Mother goddess, to the present Age of Pisces (see Table 1: The Ages of Humanity from 10,500 BCE<sup>11</sup>). The speed of axial precession changes over time, however, depending on Earth's rotation, and it is currently speeding up (the precessional speed is increasing which decreases the cycle period).<sup>12</sup> The Vernal Equinox during the four-century advent of Mithraism was in the constellation of Aries, the Ram, moving to the Age of Pisces, the Fish. During the period of the Mithraic Mysteries, the constellation Perseus stood just above Pisces, Aries, and Taurus. In astrological thought, Perseus represents the third decanate of Aries (ruled by Mars) indicating a sub-ruler Jupiter, the primary ritual god of the Romans. Perseus, or for our purposes, Mithras, is seen to be at



The Pleiades (M45, The Seven Sisters) open cluster - infrared image from NASA's Spitzer Space Telescope. Approximately 5,200 years ago, the Spring Equinox was near the bright star Aldebaran, while the Fall Equinox was near the star Antares. At that time, the Pleiades were almost on the equator. Also, the most visible stars in every constellation in the tauroctony were near the Equator. Recalling such an arrangement would have had great interest for Mithraists. Photo by John Stauffer. NASA / JPL-Caltech.

**TABLE 1: THE AGES OF HUMANITY FROM 10,500 BCE<sup>13</sup>**

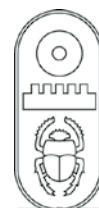
<i>Constellation of Equinox</i>	<i>Approximate Year Began</i>	<i>Approximate Year End(s)</i>	<i>Name of Age</i>	<i>Events</i>
Leo, the Lion (Sun)	10,500 BCE (Beginning of Holocene period)	8350 BCE	The Golden Age, Ruled by Cronus or the Orphic Phanes	Stabilization of planetary climate. Global warming, sea levels rise
Cancer, the Crab (Moon)	8350 BCE	6200 BCE	The Age of the Great Mother, the Silver Age, Zeus	The Mother Goddess, Neolithic revolution, domestication of animals and agriculture
Gemini, the Twins (Mercury)	6200 BCE	4050 BCE	The Age of Communication and Trade, Heroic Age	Writing developed, trade began, wheeled transportation, the pantheon of deities
Taurus, the Bull (Venus)	4050 BCE	1900 BCE	The Age of Structure and Eternity, The Bronze Age	The Pyramids, copper and tin smelted (bronze), papyrus scrolls, the Ankh, bull deity in Egypt and Crete
Aries, the Ram (Mars)	1900 BCE	250 CE	The Age of War, Iron Age	Akhnaton's monotheism, Persian Mithraism, Courage, initiative, war, and adventure. Romans as "Sons of Mars," iron swords
Pisces, the Fish (Jupiter)	250 CE	2400 CE	The Middle Ages, The Modern World	New religions, the rise of Christianity, and Islam
Aquarius, the Water-Bearer (Saturn)	2400 CE	4550 CE	The New Age	Unknown

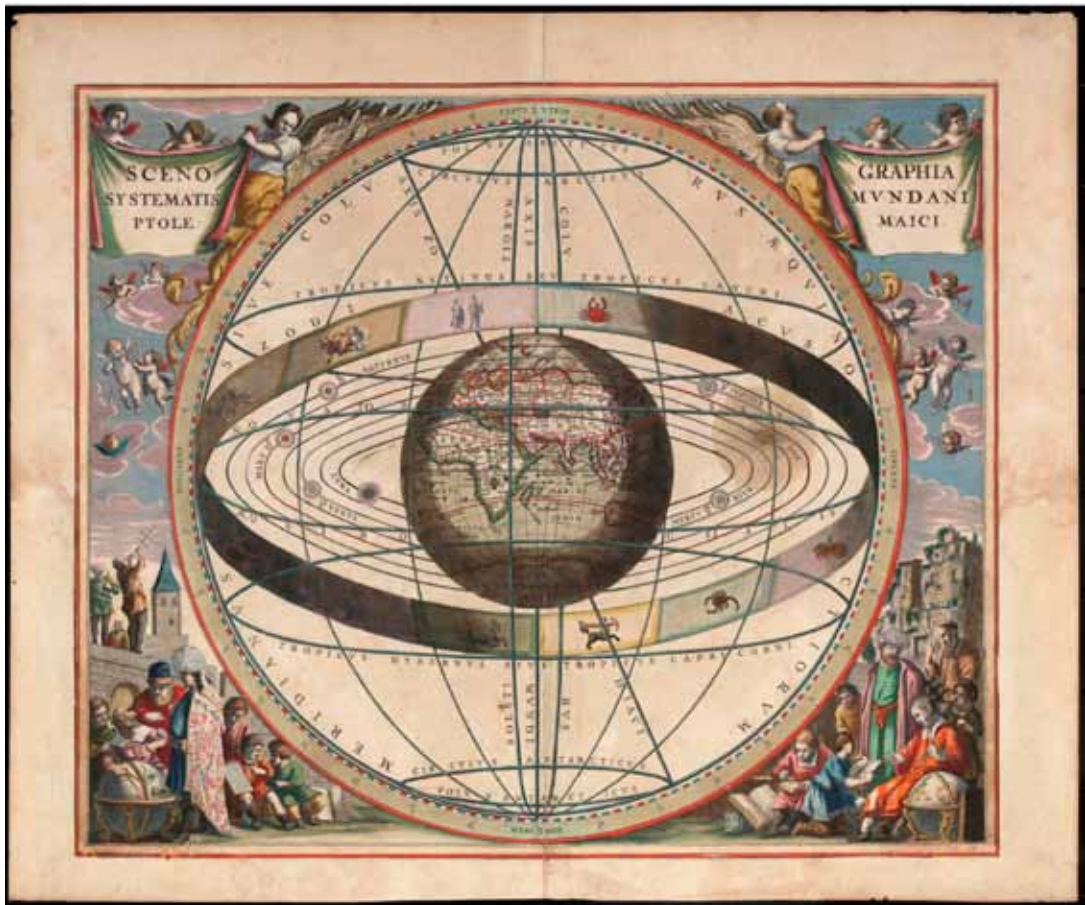
the center of the precession and, hence, became the Primary Celestial Mover.

When the Mithraic Mysteries were born, astronomy and astrological beliefs permeated Mediterranean religious thought, and astrology was becoming an art of synthesis, just as the mystery religions of Rome were becoming syncretistic. Probably because of the discovery by Hipparchus, Julius Caesar reformed the Roman calendar in 46 BCE, with consultation from Sosignes of Alexandria,

to approximate to the tropical year. Before this adjustment, an official date that was recorded as happening in January was actually falling in mid-autumn.<sup>14</sup>

Sometime near the end of the first century Claudius Ptolemy was born. Ptolemy was born a Roman citizen of Egypt and was a member of Alexandria's Greek society. He became a leading scientist publishing a variety of treatises. The most well-known down to the present day are the extensive amalgamation of





Andreas Cellarius and Johannes van Loon, *Harmonia macrocosmica*, 1660–61. Chart showing signs of the zodiac and the solar system with world at the center, following the Ptolemaic System.

astronomical knowledge, the *Almagest*, the *Geography*, and the astrological synthesis of the *Quadripartitum*, or *Tetrabiblos*.

Astrology and astronomy had wide influence in the Greco-Roman period. The stars and planets were the immortal deities, as they had been for millennia. With the discovery of the axial precession, a new god had appeared possessing a world-shaking power to move the heavens themselves. This all-powerful god, Mithras, the Sol Invictus, had control over the cosmos and therefore would automatically have power over the astrological forces determining life on Earth. Mithras's control of the Universe meant that, with the appropriate homage, he possessed the ability to guarantee the soul a safe journey through the celestial spheres after death, something on the

minds of all Roman soldiers. Discovering the precession of the equinoxes meant knowing how to ascend through the newly identified layout of the cosmos.

### The Roman Military

The Marian Reform (named for Gaius Marius) in 107 BCE eventually transformed the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire.<sup>15</sup> Marius proposed a restructuring of the organization of the soldiers in the Roman armies. The armies had consisted of landowners only, who had to bring their own horses and armaments. The theory was that landowners would be more apt to defend their own homes. Marius wanted to change the army to include state-paid, state-armed, and state-trained legions of professional soldiers from the landless, i.e.

the *capite censi*. The Marian Reform was a strategy to strengthen Rome in response to the threat from the Germanic Cimbri and Teutonic tribes.

Eventually, as the Empire settled into the *Pax Romana*, a period coinciding with the Mithraic Mysteries, the consolidation of the military took place and moderation in the expansion of the Empire became the goal. Mercenaries from other lands were hired to guard the far-flung borders. However, martial concerns had to be addressed because war with one power or another was a way of life for the Romans. This “Roman peace” was not intended to end war; it was intended to create an atmosphere of non-resistance.

Stoicism was a predominant philosophy during this period. In stoicism, self-control and the strength to endure misfortune were important human attributes, especially for the military. It has been suggested that the Mithraic initiations involved three ordeals to be endured: heat, cold, and hunger. Roman stoics sought to live in harmony with that which was out of their control, i.e. a non-resistance to the will of the universal mover. For the Roman soldier this was personified by Mithras/Perseus. Soldiers sought a respite from the worries of constant warfare. Because most Mithraea could only hold thirty to forty people, the seven-step Mithraic initiation process may have been very selective. The Mithraic mysteries sought to provide the means for the highly trained, duty-bound officers to envision the opportunities for salvation. The cave-like Mithraea were built to represent the cosmos where their salvation could be found through the theurgy of the Mithraic Mysteries.

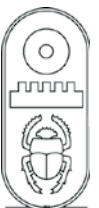
### Initiation into the Mithraic Mysteries

During the fourth century CE, St. Jerome, the Roman Catholic patron saint

of translators, librarians, and encyclopedists, listed the seven grades of initiation into the Roman Mithraic Mysteries (see Table 2, Mithraic Initiation). Initiation is a form of sympathetic magic and has long been an aspect of religion with ritual objects designed to affect the environment of people through correspondences. At the end of their initiation, the initiates of Mithras would shake hands with the *Pater*, the highest-ranking member, and meals were held as a sacramental feast in honor of Mithras, the Sol Invictus, the unconquered sun.

Almost from the beginning, initiation into the mysteries seems to have been limited to males<sup>16</sup> and was popular among the military (as suggested by the Mithraea at military sites). Mithraism promised knowledge that was hidden from outsiders. It is known that the Roman society typically was not particularly spiritual, but Romans were ritualists and formalists to the core. As in all hierarchies (from the Greek for the leaders of sacred rites), the members were above, below, or on the same level as other members. A hierarchy is a system of order, something very important in the Roman world.

The Romans celebrated the seven-day Saturnalia during the time many believe to be the birth of Mithras, near December 23. Saturnalia was introduced around 217 BCE, in the hopes of building morale after the Roman military defeat by the Carthaginians at Lake Trasimene.<sup>17</sup> It was a time to “eat, drink, and be merry,” a breaking of their system of order, a reversal of roles between masters and slaves, and a holiday for the Roman soldiers. The ropes that bound the statue of Saturn in Rome for the rest of the year, were removed; and everyone wore the *pileus*, a conical, brimless, felt hat, also known as the liberty cap or Phrygian cap,<sup>18</sup> the symbol of the highest level of Mithraic initiation.



It is possible that the feasts and initiations into the Mithraic mysteries occurred at different times during the year, however, perhaps they began in the mid-spring after the heliacal setting of Taurus (the slaying of the bull) when the Sun was moving to its hottest. The Tauroctony symbolized the "...final death of winter, symbolized by the bull, and the approach of summer."<sup>19</sup> All members progressed through the first four ranks representing spiritual progress. Not everyone proceeded to the three higher ranks.

Some possible meanings of the symbols in the initiations can be gleaned from a reading of the currently available literature on the Mysteries. Those who had completed the first initiation, the Raven, were the servers at the ritual meals. The Raven symbolizes the rational rising of the spirit in service. The Nymphus of the second initiation symbolizes subservience in the ritual marriage of the initiate to Mithras. During the third initiation, the Soldier was presented with a crown balanced on a sword, which he must refuse stating that Mithras is his crown. This symbolizes that although he wishes to attain glory for himself he will

sacrifice his physical power to Mithras. The final initiation into the lesser mysteries of Mithras was that of Adept. The symbol of the Lion represented the stoic concept of the Demiurge, where the Soldier will become the "Good Leader," or Ariomanus, through trial by fire. This will allow him to help those below him in reaching salvation.

Those who advanced into the greater mysteries became Perses with the harpe dagger as its symbol. Perseus removed Medusa's head with the mythological harpe dagger, an adamantine sword, borrowed from Hermes. Every year in August, we can view the Perseid meteor showers that appear to be coming from Perseus's sword as he stands on the white road of the Milky Way. This symbolizes the rescuer reborn from the ashes. The sixth initiation brought the soldier to Heliodromus, or Sun-courier, where he stood with Mithras, the Sol Invictus as the Sun and Mithras moved in their course. The final initiation was symbolized by the curved knife and Phrygian cap and was that of the Pater, the matured, disciplined father, who could show the way to freedom and liberty from fear of the cycle of life and death.

**TABLE 2: MITHRAIC INITIATION**

<i>Grade of Initiation</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Associated Planet</i>	<i>Associated Constellation</i>
<i>Lesser Mysteries</i>				
1	Corax	The Crow	Mercury	Corax, the Raven
2	Nymphus	Male Bride	Venus	Taurus, the Bull
3	Miles	Soldier	Mars	Aries, the Sword
4	Adept	Lion	Jupiter	Leo, the Lion
<i>Greater Mysteries</i>				
5	Perses	The Harpe Dagger	Moon	
6	Heliodromus	Sun-courier	Sun	
7	Pater	Curved knife, Phrygian Cap	Saturn	

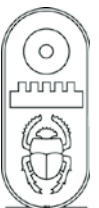


Mithraic relief with the Tauroctony scene. Monumental Cemetery, Pisa. Photo © 2010 by LoneWolf 1976 / Wikimedia Commons.

### The Apparent Demise of the Mithraic Mysteries

Roman religion in general was not based on any central belief, but on a mixture of varied rituals and traditions that had been assembled over the years from a number of sources: “To the Romans, religion was less a spiritual experience than a contractual relationship between mankind and the forces which were believed to control people’s existence and well-being.”<sup>20</sup> One of the most important aspects of Roman religion was the synthesis of whatever mystery religion, god or goddess, or idea that arrived in Rome. It remains difficult to know what the Mithraic Mysteries included but the evidence suggests that they had incorporated many of the mystery religions of antiquity and personages from throughout their Empire. The Romans created a religion around the secret knowledge of a god that granted salvation from their fate as embodied in the stars and planets.

During the first four centuries CE, many changes were taking place in the Roman Empire that would mark the apparent demise of the Mithraic Mysteries. The first century experienced the ministry of Jesus and rise of the Christian religion. The second century saw the end of the Pax Romana, the building of Hadrian’s Wall in Britain and Ptolemy’s astronomical and astrological *Almagest* and *Tetrabiblos*. With the advent of the “Crisis in the third century,”<sup>21</sup> the Roman Empire was beset by civil war, foreign invasion, the plague, and economic depression. Clement of Alexandria was developing a Christian Platonism and the Romanized Egyptian stoic, Plotinus, established Neo-Platonism proclaiming that Aristotle and Plato were of the same mind, the same *nous*. In the fourth century, Constantine became the first Christian Roman Emperor. The first Council of Nicaea was held in 325 CE, establishing a consensus of concepts for state establishment of the Christian Church. Theodosius I banned all pagan religions from the Empire by 395 CE,





including the Mithraic Mysteries, and Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire.

In *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, David Ulansey states, “The Mithraic mysteries ended as a religion of soldiers, based on an ideology of power and hierarchy.”<sup>22</sup> What then was the spiritual truth that created Mithras, the last god of the mystery religions? What made him worthy of homage? During Medieval times, Anselm of Canterbury believed that truth was rightness perceptible only to the mind, the ontological argument for the Supreme Being. According to Ralph M. Lewis, “The first principle of truth [is] personal assurance and confidence...”<sup>23</sup> The primordial tradition that brought the concept of space and time, the mysteries of the cycle of life and death, including the traditions brought forward in the now darkened Mithraic Mysteries, remains alive in our religions, philosophies, mysticism, and in our sciences.



Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea burning Arian books. Drawing on vellum, ca. 825 in the Capitolare Library, Vercelli, a compendium of canon law produced in northern Italy.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hans-Peter Schmidt, “Mithra i: Mithra in Old Indian and Mithra in Old Iranian,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (New York: Columbia University, 2006). Available at <http://www.iranica.com/articles/mithra-i>.

<sup>2</sup> Clive Hewett, “Roman Religion: An Introduction,” (The Roman Military Research Society, 2010). Available at <http://www.romanarmy.net/relintro.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Pvdens. “Mithras Sol Invictus—An Initiate’s Guide,” (The Roman Military Research Society, 2008). Available at <http://www.romanarmy.net/mithras.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, “Pompey,” *Lives* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), vol 2, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. “So that now there embarked with these pirates men of wealth and noble birth and superior abilities, as if it had been a natural occupation to gain distinction in.”

<sup>6</sup> Porphyry, “On the Cave of the Nymphs” (*De antro nympharum*) in *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*, ed. Marvin W. Meyer

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 210–11.

<sup>7</sup> David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Timaeus and Critias* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 49. “He then took the fabric and cut it down the middle into two strips, which he placed crosswise at their middle points to form a shape like the letter X; he then bent the ends round in a circle and fastened them to each other opposite the point at which the strips crossed, to make two circles, one inner and one outer. And he endowed them with uniform motion in the same place, and named the movement of the outer circle after the nature of the Same, of the inner after the nature of the Different.”

<sup>9</sup> “Hipparchus.” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: William Benton, 1957).

<sup>10</sup> “Precession” in *Astronomy Encyclopedia*, ed. Sir Patrick Moore (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 218–19.

<sup>11</sup> The Holocene Period from around 10,500 BCE is the geological epic that includes the present. It is the period of civilization when the climate changes began to stabilize and became more regional.

<sup>12</sup> A.L. Berger, “Obliquity and precession for the last 5 million years.” *Astronomy and Astrophysics*, 51 (1976): 127.

<sup>13</sup> There are approximately 2,150 years between the ages. Although the Aquarian Age is believed to have already begun, or will be beginning soon, by using the 10,500 BCE generally agreed upon

start date of the Holocene period the Aquarian Age does not begin until 2400 CE. The beginning and ending of the “Ages of Humanity” is highly controversial.

<sup>14</sup> “Julian calendar” in *Astronomy Encyclopedia*, ed. Sir Patrick Moore (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 210.

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, “Caius Marius,” *Lives* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), vol 1, 549–584.

<sup>16</sup> David Jonathan, “The Exclusion of Women in the Mithraic Mysteries: Ancient or Modern?” *Numen* 47(2), (2000): 121–141. There is some evidence that women were not altogether or dogmatically excluded from the Mithraic Mysteries.

<sup>17</sup> Shawn Landis, “The Roman Saturnalia,” (Suite 101.com, November 20, 2007). Available at [http://roman-history.suite101.com/article.cfm/the\\_roman\\_saturnalia](http://roman-history.suite101.com/article.cfm/the_roman_saturnalia).

<sup>18</sup> James Yates, “Pileus,” *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. William Smith (London: John Murray, 1875).

<sup>19</sup> Ulansey, 20.

<sup>20</sup> “Roman Religion,” *Illustrated History of the Roman Empire*, <http://www.roman-empire.net/religion/religion.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Kelley L. Ross, “Crisis of the Third Century,” *Rome And Romania, 27 BC–1453 AD*, <http://www.friesian.com/romania.htm#crisis-1>.

<sup>22</sup> Ulansey, 125.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, Ralph M., “Truth, What is it?”

