

# The Mithras-Scape: a Case Study from Ostia Antica

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## Abstract

Within the plethora of Roman cultic practice, the Mithras cult took an exceptional role. In contrast to almost all other cults, cultic activities, and their associated material expressions, were focused internally. All cultic space was private and only accessible to initiates. This was a conscious strategy that appears to have helped popularize the cult.

This does however not mean that the Mithraic cult places (*mithraea*) should be seen as isolated nuclei that functioned independently from their larger urban and social contexts.

In this paper the relationship between Mithraic cult and its urban (socio-economic) context is explored through a number of case studies from Ostia. The nature of this site offers us interesting lines of enquiry to examine this concurrence of social, economic and cultic demands on Roman society. By looking at the way Mithraic cult sites interacted with their built environments, combined with the material contents of the cult places themselves, a better understanding of the cult's larger socio-economic impact can be achieved.

Contrary to the cult's inward focus and its display of privacy, its socio-economic implications carried much further within the groups adhering to Mithras. It can be suggested that *mithraea* formed spaces of interaction and stages for self-promotion in various ways that extended beyond the confined cultic space.

## Introduction

Since the days of Cumont, a significant amount of scholarly attention has focused on the Roman cult of Mithras.<sup>1</sup> The focus on just the mithraeum, considering them as isolated spaces, has long prevailed. Instead, I will argue for *mithraea* as nodes in larger networks. These are several types of networks: religious, social and structural.

New lines of enquiry, as extensively pioneered by the late Hanna Stöger,<sup>2</sup> have offered the possibility to better understand the dynamics of Roman urban life through the archaeological record. The site of Ostia offers a fascinating opportunity to look at *mithraea* from these lines of approach. Ostia, for the preservation of many architectural elements, combined with the highest density of excavated *mithraea* known, offers a most suitable dataset to look at the cult from a new perspective. In this article we will look at this through a number of case studies from the Ostian *mithraea*. It should however be stressed that this in term only gives us proper insight into the Mithraic cult in Ostia since, as will be explained later on, the cultic expression and the role the Mithraic cult fulfilled is highly contextual and localized through time and space. Nevertheless,

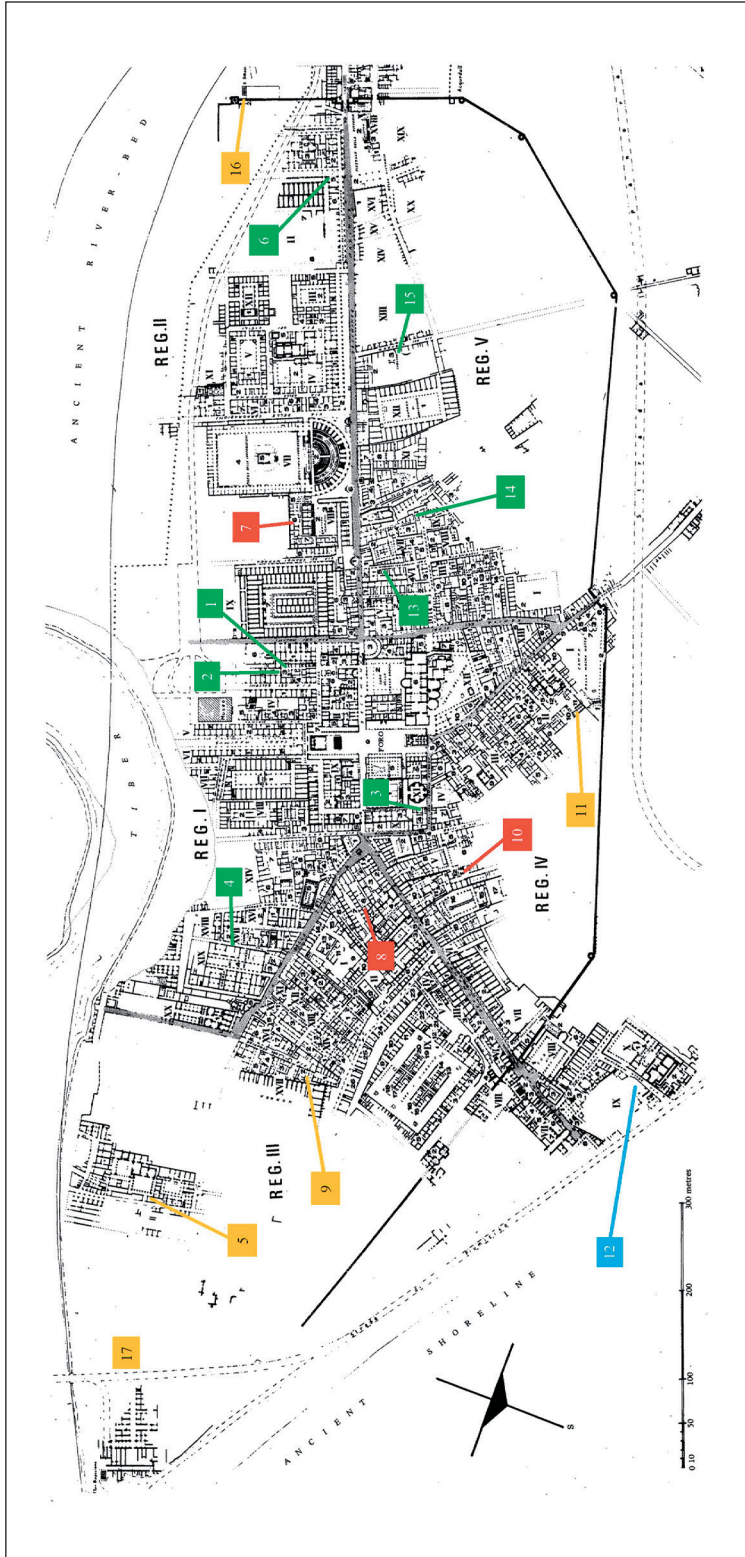


Fig. 1: The mithraea within the site of Ostia. The colours indicate the era of construction. Red: 160–180 C.E. Yellow: 180–210 C.E. Green: 210–275 Blue: After 300 C.E. 1. Casa di Diana mithraeum; 2. Mithraeum of Lucretius Menander; 3. Mithraeum of Fructosus; 4. Baths of Mitra mithraeum; 5. 'Imperial Palace' mithraeum; 6. Mithraeum near Porta Romana; 7. Seven spheres mithraeum; 8. Painted walls mithraeum; 9. Planted foot mithraeum; 10. Seven gates mithraeum; 11. Mithraeum of the animals; 12. Coloured marbles mithraeum; 13. Mithraeum of the serpents; 14. Mithraeum of Felicissimus; 15. So-called Sabazeum; 16. Aldobrandini mithraeum; 17. Fagan mithraeum. Note that no. 15 is uncertain whether it is a mithraeum and the location of no. 17 is approximate.

some of the broader elements of the Mithras cult in general can be argued for and seem to have had a universal function.

### The Spatial Interaction of Mithraea

Through the aforementioned new lines of enquiry, we can ask the long excavated contexts of the mithraea new questions. By analyzing how the different spaces that make up the context are connected, one can quantify how these spaces would have interacted and whether they facilitated access or not. These are the some of the basic principles of space syntax<sup>3</sup>. In the mithraea with the best preserved structural contexts this analysis was applied through Access Analysis, which yielded several interesting results.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that even in the contexts where due to a lack of preservation or excavation this type of analysis would have been too speculative, in most cases the results probably would have been similar to the table shown.

A distinction can be made in the structural contexts of the mithraea: buildings used solely as mithraea,<sup>5</sup> or buildings wherein the mithraeum was integrated into a larger, multi-purpose context. In both types of contexts, even in semi-public spaces, which were of mixed use, such as guild houses, the cella of the mithraeum is virtually always the most private space within them.<sup>6</sup> In the table this is observed through the depth

Mithraeum	Mixed use of context	Context depth	Depth of cella	Mean real relative asymmetry	Cella real relative asymmetry
Casa di Diana	Yes	7	6 & 7	1,062	1,451/1,811
Lucretius Menander	No	4	4	1,061	1,375
Fructosus	Yes	4	4	0,860	1,469
Painted Walls	No?	6	6	1,236	1,825
Coloured Marbles	No	3	3	0,977	1,240
Serpents	Yes?	5	5	0,697	1,194
Felicissimus	No	2	2	1,050	1,719

Table 1: Overview of the placement of several of the mithraea's cellae within their respective contexts. Note that the cella of the Casa di Diana mithraeum is divided into two distinct rooms. In case of the Serpents mithraeum, it was decided to analyse the entire building block, in which it is situated.

of the cellae compared to the overall depth of the contexts, as well as the real relative asymmetry. The asymmetry is even more indicative of the (lack of) level of integration of the cella within the context as any space with a significantly higher score than the mean of the context can be considered to have a low interaction potential, thus being less accessible.

This shows that the (cella of the) mithraeum seems to have been intended only for the inner circle of people who would frequent the buildings and not for outsiders occasionally entering for the building's other uses. This makes it apparent that the choice for the cella space seems to have been very deliberate. Furthermore, to otherwise reach or enhance this effect, often a number of architectural modifications were applied to the pre-existing spaces.<sup>7</sup> In several of these mithraea one or several small, sequential antechambers were constructed to create an artificial feeling of distance.<sup>8</sup> Amongst the spatial interaction there is furthermore the use of height differences observed in several mithraea. The use of stairs (sometimes combined with one or several antechambers) and lower-lying rooms as cult rooms proper is observed in several of the mithraea. This could have been done to invoke a sentiment recalling the central Mithraic myth of the Tauroctony, which was set in a cave.

### Exchange of Ideas

Apart from the previously argued conscious and shared ideas in the spatial layout and design of the mithraea, the exchange is also expressed in the design and contents of the cella of the mithraeum proper. These can be observed in several material categories.

Firstly, six out of the 16 known pavements in the mithraea of Ostia have a Mithraic theme to them.<sup>9</sup> The designs vary quite a bit, and cover most of the cult's lifetime.<sup>10</sup> This seems unremarkable at first, however there is no other known mithraeum in the entire Roman Empire, which had mosaics with a Mithraic theme.

Secondly, out of the eight surviving Mithraic altars found in Ostia, four are so-called illuminated altars. Contrary to the mosaics, this is something that is observed in mithraea outside of Ostia, albeit in incredibly small numbers.<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, in most mithraea from Ostia the altar is combined with a stairs-like construction (see fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> This is either presented as an altar integrated within the stairs or the altar being placed in front of the stairs. Interestingly, several of the earlier mithraea are retrofitted with these stairs, as well as the illuminated altars, after they became 'popular' somewhere in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.

The argument of just copying of typical architectural elements when founding a new mithraeum is countered by the retroactive fitting of new elements in already existing mithraea. This is observed in all three categories mentioned.<sup>13</sup> Finally, a Mithraic inscription, most likely from the Aldobrandini mithraeum, hints at a hierarchy amongst the *paters* of the different cultic groups, naming a certain Sextus Pompeus Maximus as





Fig. 2: The altar and altar-stairs of the Imperial Palace mithraeum. Originally it was covered with marble and topped with a statue of Mithras, most likely a Tauroctony. Scale = 50 cm.

the *pater patrum*.<sup>14</sup> This all hints at a continuous exchange of ideas and contact between the different smaller groups.

### The Social and Economic Dimensions

The exchanges of ideas do have their limitations. All of the better-preserved Ostian mithraea have a certain distinction to them. It seems to have been a mix-and-match of figurative and decorative Mithraic elements for each Mithraic group (or their *pater*) to express what they deemed to constitute a mithraeum. Economics must have played a significant part in this decision making process, since the execution of the different mithraea hints at significantly different level of wealth between the groups.

Reuse of older Mithraic and non-Mithraic elements within the later mithraea could be seen as either economical or giving oneself legitimacy through the connectedness with the past.<sup>15</sup>

The distinct visual culture, as well as the aforementioned ritualized entry, shows that this was very much an experience driven cult. This is further enforced by the social nature of it; there is no evidence of domestic, individual worshipping of the cult in Ostia, and examples of individual worship are quite rare in the Roman world in general.<sup>16</sup>

An even stronger indication that this cult was indeed based around the social experience is put forward through the scattered information we have on the practised rituals. Here two rituals in particular come into place. The first one is the *rite de passage* initiates had to undergo to become a member of the cult. This was apparently a long and strenuous effort on the part of the initiate.<sup>17</sup> From anthropological studies we know that this enforces the sense of belonging to a group and marks its exclusivity.<sup>18</sup> The second one is the ritual feasts that took place within these mithraea on a regular basis. These feasts were preceded by gifts of the cult's members to the *pater* in the form of either money or goods, to be used in the feasting or be used as a contribution to the mithraeum.<sup>19</sup> In turn the *pater* would have been most likely responsible for the feast. Both this feasting and the reciprocity through the exchange of food and other goods would have enforced the social ties between members.<sup>20</sup>

This in turn also would have had social and economic consequences outside the mithraea. The coin hoards found in several of the mithraea, including Ostia,<sup>21</sup> might have functioned as a financial security for members in times of distress, as well as for the functioning of the mithraeum itself. Furthermore it might have offered new possibilities for its members in the fields of employment through the connections found in the mithraea. Mithras never became a public cult in Ostia, thus all mithraea were private enterprises.<sup>22</sup> Due to the (intentionally) small-scale nature of the cult places they seemed to fulfill a need that was not filled by public cults. The aforementioned social and economic functioning of the Mithras cult might have been a leading factor in its popularity.

### Conclusion

In this paper it was attempted to approach Mithraism in Ostia from some lesser-studied perspectives. The many mithraea in Ostia show strong similarities in layout, design and contents. One should see the relative popularity of Mithraism<sup>23</sup> within the context of Ostia. Ostia saw a huge wave of immigration during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE. This rapid urbanization would have changed the social landscape drastically. It should be considered that there was a demand to return to smaller social nuclei.

Mithraic groups might have been one of several answers for this demand for smaller, tight-knit groups.<sup>24</sup> The arguments presented in this paper all hint towards forming an exclusive, private and small-scale social group. This group feeling was further enforced by a very distinct religious identity and perhaps economic security as well. One could imagine similar demands were present in other major urban centers such as Rome,

where similar large numbers of mithraea have been found. Furthermore, these mithraea formed part of larger networks, not only between the different Mithraic groups, but also amongst fields of profession through guilds, and perhaps certain neighborhoods or insulae. The mithraea were stages for self-promotion and strengthening of relationships both inside and outside the mithraeum.

### Acknowledgements

I want to thank our beloved Hanna Stöger for making this publication possible; as the author's supervisor she was of invaluable worth in the research and writing process. She will be dearly missed as an excellent scholar, and most of all as a kind and compassionate person.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cumont 1903

<sup>2</sup> Stöger 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Hillier and Hanson 1984, 11–14.

<sup>4</sup> The software used in this analysis was JASS, developed by the School of Architecture of the Swedish KTH; see <<https://www.arch.kth.se/en/forskning/urban-design/software-1.675214>> for more information and a link to the software. The plans used in this analysis were by Calza (1953) and David (2016), whilst taking into consideration subsequent structural analyses by in the case of Calza by Falzone (1998), White (2012), Oome (2007), Hermansen (1982), Bianchi (1998) and Heres (1982).

<sup>5</sup> In part due to the nature of the site, the function of many ('empty') rooms is virtually impossible to reconstruct. It is perhaps possible that some of these buildings with the sole function of mithraeum also served as the residence for an individual, most likely the *pater*.

<sup>6</sup> Although there is only one mithraeum in Ostia that can certainly be associated to a guild house, the Fructosus mithraeum belonging to the Stuppatores guild, several other mithraea have possible links to guilds and guild houses (see note 24).

<sup>7</sup> Except for possibly the Imperial Palace mithraeum, all mithraea were reused spaces (Spurza 1999, 248).

<sup>8</sup> Hillier – Vaughan 2007

<sup>9</sup> See Becatti 1954 for images and the most extensive descriptions for each of the pavements.

<sup>10</sup> The ones that seem to be very similar in mosaic design as well as dating are the Seven Gates and Seven Spheres mithraea. Both most likely dating to the 170s (Beck 1979), while the Felicissimus mithraeum has the last Mithraic mosaic dating to around 275, Heres 1982, 94.

<sup>11</sup> The most notable example is the similarity between the altar found in the Painted Walls mithraeum and one of the altars found in the mithraeum of Carrawburgh on the Hadrian's wall (Becatti 1954, 61).

<sup>12</sup> In some literature this is referred to as a *bema*, for example Spurza 1999, 248.

<sup>13</sup> The Painted Walls mithraeum is the clearest example in this case. Probably being the oldest mithraeum known from Ostia, in later phases it is both retrofitted with an illuminated altar and a stairs-like construct (Becatti 1954, 61). Furthermore, the Planted Foot and Imperial Palace mithraea received an altar-stairs and mosaic pavement and a mosaic pavement in a secondary phase respectively. Becatti 1954, 82–84; GdS 33, 99.

<sup>14</sup> C.I.L. XIV, 403; Becatti 1954, 42.

<sup>15</sup> See White 2012 for an extensive analysis of the reuse of Mithraic elements in different Ostian mithraea.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon (2004, 264–267) argues that it was most likely mostly individually practiced when one lost connection to their Mithraic group.

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed account of these initiations see Beck 2000.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Van Gennep 2004, 26–39.

<sup>19</sup> Vermaseren – Van Essen 1965, 158 f.

<sup>20</sup> Mauss 1954, 72.

<sup>21</sup> A large coin hoard was found in the Imperial Palace mithraeum. Spurza 1999, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Latteur 2011.

<sup>23</sup> As far as we can tell from the archaeological record, the amount of individuals participating in the cult was only a small minority of Ostia's population. For a more detailed examination see Sonnemans 2017, 129; Rives (2010, 251) observed similar overestimations in the popularity of the mystery cults by earlier scholars in general.

<sup>24</sup> Another 'answer' can be seen in the form of the many guilds that formed in Ostia during the same time. Guilds also provided a financial security to their members (Bakker 1994, 177). Several Mithraic groups also seem to have overlapped with guilds. The Fructosus mithraeum is located inside the contemporary guild house of the Stuppatores; the Porta Romana mithraeum is located close to the guild the coach drivers (Hermansen 1981, 81); the Imperial Palace mithraeum is located very close to the seat of the grain merchants (Spurza 1999, 314) The Casa di Diana mithraeum seems to be located in an insula refurbished as guild house for an unknown guild, perhaps the millers guild (Bakker 1994, 205).

## Image Credits

Fig. 1: after Meiggs 1973, fig 1, modified by author. – Fig. 2: Photo by the author. – Tab. 1: Made by the author using Microsoft Word.

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