

Chapter 7

The *mithraea*

§ 1 Introduction

As has been explained in chapter 1, § 6, the cult of Mithras is dealt with separately in view of the place of residence of the participants in the cult. In the same chapter, in § 4, I have argued that all *mithraea* should be dealt with, those in the selected material environment and the others, because the initiators took the presence of other *mithraea* into account, as can be deduced from the regular distribution of the shrines through the city. The place of residence of the participants and the distribution will be discussed in detail here and in chapter 12, § 3. The Ostian *mithraea* are not found as catalogue-items, because of the excellent publication by Becatti.¹ However a detailed analysis of the masonry is still unavailable.

§ 2 Presentation of the evidence

2A The evidence

The evidence is presented in topographical order.² A plan with the distribution of the *mithraea* can be found in Becatti's study.³ The items dealt with are the name and location (Regio, Insula) of the *mithraeum*, its date of construction, and the function of the building in which it was installed.

01 Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana (I,III,3); end of second century; in a building, function uncertain.⁴

02 Mitreo di Menandro (I,III,5); early third century; in a building, function of ground floor uncertain.⁵

03 Mitreo di Fructosus (I,X,4); c. 250 AD; in guild-seat of *stuppatores*.⁶

04 Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra (I,XVII,4); end of second or early third century; in underground

¹ Becatti 1954. Publication of new material: Lazzarini 1979. A catalogue of the Ostian material: Vermaseren 1956, 114-147 nrs. 216-321. General studies: Laeuchli 1967(1) with Bianchi 1979; Meiggs 1973, 370-375. Cf. Beck 1984, 2022-2026.

² Data from Becatti 1954, unless indicated otherwise.

³ Becatti 1954, fig. 25.

⁴ See chapter 6, § 2A, catalogue A, nrs. 6, 7.

⁵ See chapter 3, § 2, n. 9.

⁶ Hermansen 1982(1), 61-62; Hermansen 1982(2).

service area of baths.⁷

05 Mitreo Aldobrandini (II,I,2); end of second century; set against wall and tower of Sullan city-wall.

06 Mitreo presso Porta Romana (II,II,5); first half of third century; in a Hadrianic structure.⁸

07 Mitreo delle Sette Sfere (II,VIII,6) (possibly = nr. 17); Antoninus Pius - Commodus, possibly c. 172 AD or a little later;⁹ in a room to the west of the Domus di Apuleius (II,VIII,5).

08 Mitreo delle Pareti Dipinte (III,I,6); end of second century; in a *domus*, altered c. 50 AD and function from then on unknown.

09 Mitreo della Planta Pedis (III,XVII,2); c. 176-180, restored c. 253-259 AD; in some sort of "loggia", which was related to the Serapeum (III,XVII,4).¹⁰

10 Mitreo del Palazzo Imperiale I (*regio* III, northwest part); c. 162 AD; in the Imperial palace.

11 Mitreo del Palazzo Imperiale II (Mitreo Fagan) (*regio* III, northwest part); c. 190 AD; somewhere in northwest part of Ostia, in a *crypta Palati*, which is probably lying in an unexcavated part of the Palazzo.

12 Mitreo degli Animali (IV,II,11); c. 160 AD; in a Trajanic structure.¹¹

13 Mitreo delle Sette Porte (IV,V,13); c. 160-170 AD, possibly c. 173 AD or a little later;¹² in *horrea*.

14 Mitreo dei Serpenti (V,VI,6); c. 250 AD; in a building, function uncertain.

15 Mitreo di Felicissimus (V,IX,1); second half of third century; in a building, function uncertain.

16 Sabazeo (V,XII,3);¹³ first half of third century; in *horrea*.

17 Mitreo Petrini (possibly = nr. 7); Antoninus Pius - Commodus.

2B Dates, position, distribution, appearance, deities

The earliest evidence is from c. 160 AD (Mitreo degli Animali) and from c. 162 AD (Mitreo del Palazzo Imperiale I), i.e. from the end of the reign of Antoninus Pius and the beginning of that of Marcus Aurelius. Most shrines were built in the period c. 160-250 AD: six in the period Pius - Commodus, five at the end of the second and the beginning of the third century, four in the first half of the third century. In the fifties of the third century the Mitreo della Planta Pedis was restored, while the Mitreo di Felicissimus was built at some point in the second half of the century.¹⁴

Chronologically the introduction and decline of the cult in Ostia coincide

⁷ For the exact position: Nielsen-Schiøler 1980, figs. 2, 4.

⁸ Hadrianic structure: SO I, 235.

⁹ C. 172 AD: Beck 1979. Cf. Gordon 1989, 53-58.

¹⁰ Becatti 1954, 77-85; Floriani Squarciapino 1962, 19-21.

¹¹ Trajanic structure: SO I, 235.

¹² C. 173 AD: Beck 1979.

¹³ A shrine of Mithras and Jupiter-Sabazius.

¹⁴ On the sequence of building: Schreiber 1967, 36-38.

roughly with the introduction and decline in Rome. There the cult started to flourish in the course of the second century from Trajan onwards, and came to an abrupt end during the reign of Constantine, calling to mind this Emperor's conversion to Christianity. A short revival is documented at the end of the fourth century in Rome.¹⁵ It may be noted that one of the earliest documents in Ostia, from 162 AD, was found in the Imperial Palace (Mitreo I).¹⁶ The Mitreo delle Terme del Mitra was destroyed on purpose (the statue of Mithras slaying the bull was damaged; the heads of Mithras and of the bull were hacked off), perhaps when a Christian structure was erected in the north end of the baths (in the first quarter of the fourth century?).¹⁷ The short distance between the Basilica Cristiana (III,I,4) and the Mitreo delle Pareti Dipinte may not be accidental. As in the Terme del Mitra we may witness here an attempt to suppress the cult of Mithras by replacing a *mithraeum* by a Christian building. The marble altar of the *mithraeum* was found smashed having been deliberately destroyed.¹⁸ The Basilica Cristiana has been dated to the first quarter of the fifth century.¹⁹ The Mitreo di Fructosus was destroyed and set on fire at an unknown point in time.²⁰

In 12 buildings 13 *mithraea* were installed. The function of five of these buildings is known: the guild-seat of the *stuppatores* (rope makers) (Tempio Collegiale I,X,4), the Terme del Mitra (I,XVII,2), the Palazzo Imperiale, Horrea IV,V,12 and Horrea V,XII,2. The location therefore varies greatly.²¹ The cult of Mithras never became a State cult,²² so that the shrines were not built on *loca publica*. What all shrines have in common as well is, that they are in secluded, hidden, dark places.²³ The Mitreo presso Porta Romana is the only one near a main street (the Decumanus Maximus), but it does not open directly onto it. The Mitreo della Planta Pedis and the Mitreo degli Animali are both at the end of a cul

¹⁵ Vermaseren 1956, 362; Merkelbach 1984, 245-246.

¹⁶ CIL XIV, 58.59, dated January 18th 162. The day may have been chosen because of the rising of Aquarius on this day (Herz 1975, 131).

¹⁷ Calza 1951, 129-131; Becatti 1954, 139; R. Calza 1965(2), 239-242; Heres 1982, 427-433.

¹⁸ Becatti 1954, 139.

¹⁹ Heres 1982, 464-471.

²⁰ Becatti 1954, 139; Hermansen 1982(2), 125.

²¹ See also Becatti 1954, 133-134 and Coarelli 1979, 70-75, 78-79 (offering a conspectus of the location of *mithraea* in Rome).

²² Simon 1979, especially 428.

²³ On secrecy in the cult of Mithras, with a comparison with other mystery cults: Burkert 1987, 41-43.

de sac. Usually the interior of the shrine is shielded from the eyes of outsiders by the position of the entrance.²⁴ One shrine is related to adjacent buildings through its position: Coarelli has noted that the Mitreo delle Sette Sfere, located directly behind the four Republican Quattro Tempietti (II,VIII,2), is exactly in the middle of the temples.²⁵ Only after further study of the Domus di Apuleio, next to which the shrine was built, can it be established whether this is accidental or not.

When all *mithraea* had been built they were distributed evenly over Ostia. There are two exceptions: the Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana and the Mitreo di Menandro are virtually back to back, and it is probable that there were two shrines in the Palazzo Imperiale.²⁶ The total number of Ostian *mithraea* may, according to Coarelli, have been approximately 40.²⁷ This number is rather high. According to Coarelli 18 shrines have been found. As has been explained above, the number is 16.²⁸ According to Coarelli approximately half of Ostia has been excavated (33 of c. 70 hectares). In reality c. 34 of c. 50 developed hectares have been excavated.²⁹ This brings the total to approximately 24. The hypothetical nature of this estimate does not need any comment.

In the inscriptions the Ostian *mithraea* are called *spelaeum* (the cave where Mithras had killed the bull), *templum* and *aedes cum suo pronao*. These denominations are found outside Ostia as well.³⁰ They are usually elongated rooms, with reclining couches for the initiates along the lateral walls, and an altar and depiction of Mithras at the back. As to the size of the shrines, according to Meiggs "the largest are far smaller than many at Rome, holding at most some forty worshippers; some have room for less than twenty".³¹ Figure 16 is a conspectus of the lengths of the *podia* in the shrines.³² The maximum capacity is calculated by allowing a half metre per person. The capacity does not vary a great deal, the smallest

²⁴ Becatti 1954, 133-135.

²⁵ Coarelli 1989(2), 35-38. The temples were possibly dedicated to Ceres, Fortuna, Venus, and Spes (Meiggs 1973, 350-351).

²⁶ On the distribution: Becatti 1954, 133.

²⁷ Coarelli 1979.

²⁸ Nr. 17 may be identical to nr. 7. The Sacello delle Tre Navate (III,II,12), included by Coarelli, is dealt with in Becatti 1954, but it was not a *mithraeum*, as is explained by Becatti himself (Becatti 1954, 69-75).

²⁹ Pavolini 1983, 36.

³⁰ Sfameni Gasparro 1979, 356-358.

³¹ Meiggs 1973, 372.

³² Measurements from Becatti 1954 or from plans.

<i>MITHRAEUM</i>	LENGTH OF PODIA	CAPACITY
01 DEL CASEGGIATO DI DIANA :	C. 14	C. 28
02 DI MENANDRO :	C. 16	C. 32
03 DI FRUCTOSUS :	C. 9	C. 18
05 ALDOBRANDINI :	C. 7 MIN. C. 14 MIN.	
06 PRESSO PORTA ROMANA :	C. 19.5	C. 39
07 DELLE SETTE SFERE :	C. 16 (18.5, BUT 2.5 NOT USABLE)	C. 32
08 DELLE PARETI DIPINTE :	C. 21	C. 42
09 DELLA PLANTA PEDIS :	UNKNOWN	UNKNOWN
10 DEL PALAZZO IMPERIALE I :	C. 20	C. 40
11 DEL PALAZZO IMPERIALE II :	UNKNOWN	UNKNOWN
12 DEGLI ANIMALI :	C. 9, WITH SPACE FOR PORTABLE BENCHES	C. 18 MIN.
13 DELLE SETTE PORTE :	C. 14	C. 28
14 DEI SERPENTI :	C. 19.5	C. 39
15 DI FELICISSIMUS :	C. 18.5	C. 37
16 SABAZEO :	C. 22.5	C. 45
17 PETRINI :	UNKNOWN	UNKNOWN

Figure 16. The Ostian *mithraea*: the maximum capacity.

shrine may have accommodated some 18 people, the largest 45. The average number of adherents over the 11 shrines for which the maximum capacity can be accurately calculated is 35. The total number for 16 shrines may then have been some 576. However, each *mithraeum* may have been used by a larger number of people than its maximum capacity allowed, on separate occasions.

The initiates in the cult of Mithras did not reject the other gods, and a number of these can actually be found inside *mithraea*, including traditional gods like Jupiter. Often these gods were given a specific, Mithraic meaning, but the use of other gods in itself shows, that the pantheon was accepted. To it the cult of Mithras was added.³³ In Ostia Mithras is found together with gods like Silvanus and Dionysus.³⁴ One dedication, found near the Sabazeo, he shares with Fortuna, the Lares and Tutela.³⁵ *Sacerdos* M. Caerellius Hieronimus was also involved with the cult of the Magna Mater.³⁶

2C Participants, organization

There is no direct evidence concerning the financiers of the Ostian shrines. If a shrine was installed inside a building, the person or organiza-

³³ Gordon 1972, 93, 102; Simon 1979, 412; Burkert 1987, 48-49.

³⁴ Cumont 1892; Becatti 1954, 56-57, 137.

³⁵ CIL XIV S, 4309; Becatti 1954, 116.

³⁶ CIL XIV, 70; Becatti 1954, 92.

tion owning the building was obviously favourably disposed towards the cult. This does not imply of course that this person or all members of that organization were initiated. It has recently been argued by Coarelli - as a "working hypothesis" - that around 150 AD the famous author Apuleius of Madaura lived in the Domus di Apuleio (II,VIII,5), and that he had the adjacent Mitreo delle Sette Sfere built. Coarelli points out that the explanation of the order of planetary gods in the mosaics of the shrine poses a problem, but that a virtually identical sequence is found in two of the works of Apuleius.³⁷

Not one inscription informs us as to the names of the organizations of adherents in Ostia. Elsewhere *sacrati*, *consacranei*, *cultores*, *collegia* and *fratres* are documented.³⁸ From Portus comes part of an *album sacra-to[rum]*.³⁹ The most important men in the cult in Ostia were called *pater*, *sacerdos* or *antistes*, titles which sometimes overlap each other (for example: *pater et sacerdos*). Sex. Pompeius Maximus was *pater patrum*. This title is documented outside Ostia as well and could mean that he was highest in the highest grade. However, at least here in Ostia the title is apparently that of the head of the cult: Maximus was both *pater* in the Mitreo Aldobrandini and honoured as *sacerdos Solis Invicti Mithrae*, *pater patrum* by all *sacerdotes Solis Invicti Mithrae ob amorem et merita eius*.⁴⁰

Women were not allowed to participate in the cult. As to the social status of the male adherents, Meiggs has concluded that in Ostia the majority of the worshippers consisted of "men of humble means and modest social standing".⁴¹ Members of at least some distinction are M. Caerellius Hieronimus from the Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana, who was *pater* and an ordinary member of the *corpus fabrum tignuariorum*,⁴² [---]rius Fructosus, who had the Mitreo di Fructosus built and was *patronus* of the small *corpus stuppatorum*,⁴³ Sex. Pompeius Maximus, *pater* in the Mitreo Aldobrandini, *pater patrum*, and *quinquennalis* of the *corpus traiectus*

³⁷ Coarelli 1989(2), 32-33, 35-38. A priest called Mithras, featuring in book 11 of the Metamorphoseon (11, 22, 3 and 11, 25, 7) is probably a reference to Mithras as the guide of souls (Gwyn Griffiths 1975, 281-282). On Apuleius as possible owner of the Domus see chapter 2, § 4.

³⁸ Sfameni Gasparro 1979, 380-381.

³⁹ CIL XIV, 286.

⁴⁰ Maximus as *pater*: CIL XIV S, 4314. As *pater patrum*: CIL XIV, 403. Becatti 1954, 39-43; Meiggs 1973, 373.

⁴¹ Meiggs 1973, 374.

⁴² CIL XIV S, 4313; Becatti 1954, 13; Meiggs 1973, 374.

⁴³ See § 2A n. 6.

togatensium (a small ferry service),⁴⁴ and finally P. Clodius Flavius Venerandus from the Sabazeo, who was *sevir Augustalis*, a rich freedman.⁴⁵ Men of some wealth are therefore found, but the entire upper class, those who went through the local *cursus honorum*, is absent. The importance of freedmen and their descendants in the cult in Ostia has been pointed out by Meiggs and Gordon.⁴⁶ Among them one Imperial freedman is found, Aurelius Cresce(n)s, *Aug. lib.*⁴⁷ Of the 32 names known from the inscriptions 16 are Greek.⁴⁸ A few slaves can also be identified.⁴⁹

The situation that emerges from the Ostian inscriptions is not anomalous. For the cult in general in the period from c. 150 to c. 300 AD Gordon has drawn attention to the almost total absence of senators and equestrians (except for a few in military posts), and of decurions and Augustales (the latter two groups, i.e. the local city elites, are - with a few exceptions - found to be involved in the cult of Mithras only in the least urbanized and romanized areas).⁵⁰ Slaves and freedmen in the Imperial administrative service are represented very well, both in the northern provinces and in Italy.⁵¹ In Ostia only one Imperial freedman has been found, but Imperial slaves and freedmen may also have been involved with the Mitreo del Palazzo Imperiale I. As to the slaves in the cult, they are found both in Italy and in the Danube area, but in Ostia and elsewhere not enough slaves are documented to regard the cult of Mithras as a slave cult.⁵² The army was of great importance in the cult. Out of the 210 dedicators whose status in the outside world is known 81 (38%) were soldiers with the rank of centurion or lower.⁵³ The military element is represented in Rome by *mithraea* related to barracks (the Castra Peregrina, Equitum Singularium, Praetoria, Urbana and the Stationes Vigilum).⁵⁴

⁴⁴ See n. 40.

⁴⁵ CIL XIV S, 4318; Becatti 1954, 116; Meiggs 1973, 376.

⁴⁶ Meiggs 1973, 374; Gordon 1972, 109.

⁴⁷ CIL XIV S, 4315; Becatti 1954, 130.

⁴⁸ Gordon 1972, 109. Cf. Bömer-Herz 1981, 160: "Merkwürdig ist ..., dass später die Griechen, in deren Heimat bekanntlich der Kult des Mithras so gut wie überhaupt nicht Fuss fassen konnte, eine relativ grosse Zahl an Mithrasanhängern unter den Sklaven stellten".

⁴⁹ Bömer-Herz 1981, 161, 168 (but Venerandus in CIL XIV S, 4309 is rather P. Clodius Flavius Venerandus, *sevir Augustalis*, not a slave: Becatti 1954, 116); Rainer 1984, 110.

⁵⁰ Gordon 1972, 103, 110.

⁵¹ Gordon 1972, 103.

⁵² Bömer-Herz 1981, 160-172.

⁵³ Gordon 1972, 103.

⁵⁴ Coarelli 1979, 78-79. In Ostia no *mithraeum* has been found related to the Caserma dei Vigili (Statio Vigilum) (II,V,1).