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## THE MYSTERIES OF MITHRAS AND OTHER MYSTIC CULTS IN THE ROMAN WORLD

### INTRODUCTION

#### AN OCCASION TO DEAL WITH MITHRAISM ANEW

The conference “The Mysteries of Mithras and Other Mystic Cults in the Roman World,” which was held in Tarquinia in June 2016, focused on a phenomenon of the ancient world which proves increasingly important: the interaction between Roman religion and foreign cults, and especially cults from the East. Southern Etruria and northern Latium provide us with a favorable context for focusing on the topic of our meeting.

The role of Greeks and Carthaginians along the mid-Tyrrhenian shore were demonstrated by both solid previous studies and new discoveries in the development and transformation of local pantheons of Etruscan and Latin cities, thanks to these foreign influences. One has only to remember the excavation in the emporium of Gravisca, with its local cult to Adonis, or the asylum of Pyrgi wherein new archaeological data allowed us to rewrite the story of cultural contacts between Greeks and Etruscans.

Major surprises, however, are provided by the Imperial Age, thanks to recent research. On the Etruscan soil, up to five cultic places (Vulci, Tarquinia, Sutri, Cosa, Livorno) should be added to the well-known and rich repertory of Mithraic monuments and temples in this area, and especially in Rome and Ostia. A beautiful marble relief has been found in Veii; a great excitement has been caused by the recovery of a marble statue from Tarquinia, thanks to a successful operation to fight clandestine diggings, by the Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale, in 2014. Investigations by the judicial police, directed by the Procura della Repubblica del Tribunale di Roma, led to localizing the clandestine finding on the Poggio della Civita di Tarquinia, near the famous temple known as Ara della Regina. Archaeological diggings by the Soprintendenza followed those operations and allowed the precise spot where the marble statue came from to be singled out, thanks to the discovery of the dog leaning into the bull’s knee and dove-tailing the Mithraic statue. This monument has been dated to the second quarter of the 2nd century AD and proves, without any possible doubt, the provenance of the Mithraic marble group from the Civita of Tarquinia.

The University of Verona is going forth with archaeological research in order to better know the urban context of this discovery.

The Mithras cult in southern Etruria was already known, thanks to the Mithraeum of Vulci, dug in the Seventies of the past century. This temple is unique for its amount of information in this area. We want to add the Mithraeum of Marino, with its exceptional paintings, which has been recently presented to the visitors in a better and more modern way.

The time is evidently ripe for presenting to the scientific community such news and also new interpretations of previously-known data. The Soprintendenza, the Università di Verona, Péter Pázmány Catholic University of Budapest, Brandeis University, Waltham (MA), have promoted the conference, “The Mysteries of Mithras and Other Mystic Cults in the Roman World” During four days of activities, many European and American Universities and Institutions have been involved, with their representatives and a large audience attending the different sessions. Along with the numerous papers on Mithras, contributions concerning Cybele, Isis, Serapis, and other foreign gods have enriched the panorama of data, studies and research, by giving also opportunities for further research. Also unprecedented has been the form of organization of this conference, located in different seats, in the tradition of the Symposia Peregrina, a series of meetings created following the initiation by Patricia Johnston (Brandeis University of Waltham/Boston) at the Villa Vergiliana in Cuma, seat of the American Vergilian Society, and subsequently relocated in Grumento Nova (Basilicata), Verona, and Budapest.

This conference offered an occasion to involve in this complex cultural project institutions, local communities of the territories from which important Mithraic monuments came, especially Tarquinia and Vulci (in the province of Viterbo), and Marino (province of Rome). This project also gave birth to the exhibition “Vulci e i misteri di Mitra. Culti orientali in Etruria” at the castle of Abbazia, at Vulci, to an exhibition of the Mithras sculptural group from Tarquinia at the National Archaeological Museum of Tarquinia, and to guided visits to the magnificent Mithraeum of Marino, in its new presentation to visitors.

Other institutions should be thanked for their support and participation in the enterprise, and namely the University of Dallas at Marino, the Fondazione Etruria Mater, the Fondazione Carivit of Viterbo, the Municipalities of Tarquinia, Montalto di Castro, and Canino (where the ancient Vulci is located), the civic museum of Marino, the Università Agraria of Tarquinia, and the Fondazione Vulci. Thanks to the different forms of contribution by all the participants, scholars, and local administrations a scientific event such as this conference represented a new and important element for the cohesion of the territory, based on culture, according to the programmatic lines that the Soprintendenza has been following for many years.

## ORIENTAL CULTS

In the 19th century several cults of Anatolia, Judaea, Syria, and Egypt ignited the curiosity of many scholars – Creuzer is the most representative among them – who