

**LIFE AND DEATH IN A MULTICULTURAL
HARBOUR CITY:
OSTIA ANTICA FROM THE REPUBLIC
THROUGH LATE ANTIQUITY**

editor

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Marble relief depicting the Portus harbour. Ostia Nuovi depositi, inv. 49132.
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The Cult of Mithras in Ostia

MARJA-LEENA HÄNNINEN

The cult of Mithras is a special instance among the cults of foreign origin in Ostia. It was the latest of the so-called mystery cults, and the most exclusive and mysterious. Traditionally, it has been assumed that women were not admitted into Mithraic cult associations, though more recent studies have argued that women were actually involved, at least in some parts of the Roman empire.¹ As many as 17 sanctuaries in Ostia have been identified as Mithraea, making the city unique in the study of the cult of Mithras. But what kind of deity was Mithras and what did the cult involve? In principle, Mithras was a Persian deity of light, but there has been a long scholarly dispute over his eastern origin.² The god's name is Persian, and his outfit in cult images is of Persian style, but the majority of finds related to the cult come from the western parts of the Roman empire and the surviving inscriptions are mainly in Latin. That of Mithras' Persian roots may have been an origin myth of the kind typical of antiquity, intended to promote the cult as an exotic eastern newcomer to the Romans.

Very few literary sources on Mithraic cult are extant and its actual theology is thus not known. The central myths have been reconstructed on the basis of the imagery found at cult sites, and Ostia has had a huge influence on such interpretations.³ The dualism of darkness and light, chaos and order is seen as essential to the cult of Mithras. Every sanctuary of Mithras had some kind of cult image (statue, relief, painting) depicting Mithras slaying a bull, a sacrifice that symbolised the recreation of the world. The bull has also been interpreted as representing the moon and darkness.⁴ Mithras is depicted wearing a Persian outfit, with a Phrygian cap on his head. A raven, a dog, a snake, and a scorpion biting the bull's testicles are often also depicted in the iconography. The standard images also include two male figures wearing tunics, one carrying an upraised torch, the other a torch pointing downwards. The figure with a raised torch is called *Cautes* and represents the sun, light and the south, while *Cautopates* with his torch pointing down represents darkness and the north.⁵ The snake, scorpion and dog, also typical of Mithraic imagery, may be cosmological symbols connected with the constellations.⁶ There was no single authorized version of the cult's central myth, but rather several variants.

Even the chronology of the expansion of the Mithraic cult is to some extent uncertain. According to the Greek historian Plutarch, the cult of Mithras had already arrived in Rome by the time of Pompey, but there is no archaeological evidence for the worship of Mithras in Rome before the imperial period. It

¹ For a recent discussion of women in the cult of Mithras, see DAVID 2000.

² For the scholarly discussion and various theories, see MERKELBACH 1984, 75-77; BEARD – NORTH – PRICE 1998, 279-80; CLAUSS 2000, 3-8; BECK 2006, 17-25.

³ BEARD – NORTH – PRICE 1998, 285-86; VAN HAEPEREN 2020, 123-32.

⁴ MERKELBACH 1984, 193-206.

⁵ MEIGGS 1973, 371.

⁶ BEARD – NORTH – PRICE 1998, 285-86.

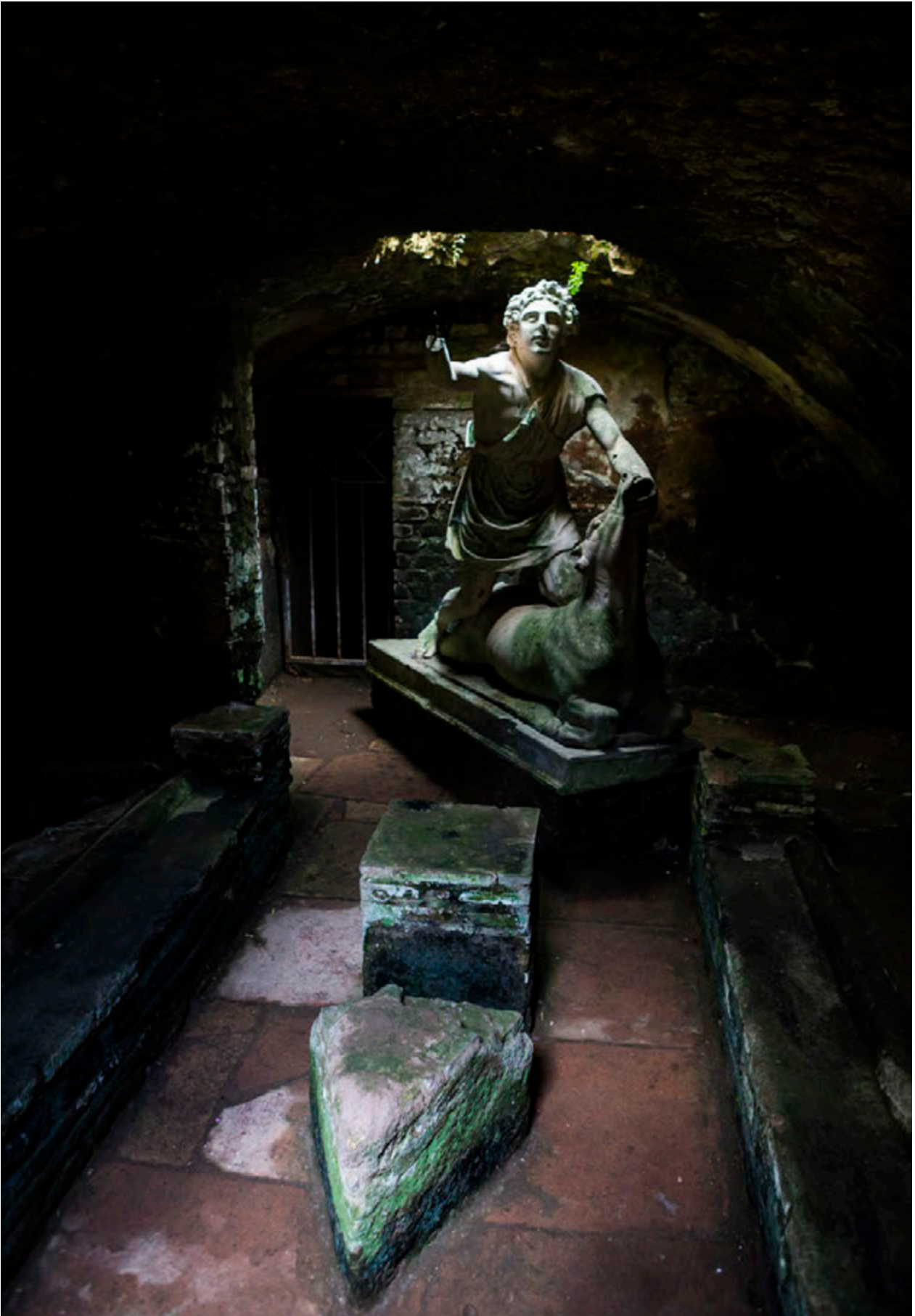


Figure 1. The statue of Mithras slaying the bull in the Terme del Mitra in Ostia. Photo: Saana Säilynoja, Vapriikki Photo Archive.



Figure 2. The mosaic of Felicissimus in the Mitreo del Felicissimus. Photo: Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica, Archivio Fotografico.

the central aisle of the so-called Mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia¹³ there is a black and white mosaic – donated by a man called Felicissimus – whose imagery has had an enormous impact on the definition of the grades of initiation. The lowest grade of was called the raven (*corax*) and was symbolized by a *caduceus*, the staff of Mercury. The second grade was the bridegroom (*nymphus*), symbolized by a torch, a diadem and an oil lamp. The third grade of initiation was the soldier (*miles*), symbolized by a soldier’s bag, a lance and a helmet. The fourth grade, the lion (*leo*), was symbolized by a spade, a *sistrum* and a lightning bolt. The fifth

has been assumed that the cult of Mithras only gained more followers in the west under the Flavian dynasty and the peak of its popularity seems to date to the third century.⁷ The earliest Ostian Mithraea have been dated to the Antonine period, but the majority are of the third century; here, too, the worship of Mithras seems to have been most popular during the third century CE.⁸

It is generally assumed that the cult of Mithras was a men’s cult that accepted no female members. However, women’s dedications to Mithras have also been found in some areas.⁹ In Ostia, there is no evidence of even marginal participation by women in the cult of Mithras. The observation that Mithraea were built mainly in places with Roman military camps or veteran colonies has supported the assumption that this was a cult practiced by men.¹⁰ The worship of Mithras appears to have been especially popular in the central provinces of the Roman empire, such as Pannonia and Dacia, where the Roman army had large military camps.¹¹ In Ostia, by contrast, the cult of Mithras does not seem to have had any connection with the army, due mainly to the fact that it was not a military town in the imperial era, but primarily a port and commercial centre.

It is assumed that there was a strict internal hierarchy governed by the seven grades of initiation in Mithraic cult groups.¹² (**Fig. 2**) In

⁷ MEIGGS 1973, 370; CLAUSS 2000, 21-25.

⁸ WHITE 2012, 444-45; VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 150-91.

⁹ BEARD – NORTH – PRICE 1998, 298.

¹⁰ CLAUSS 2000, 33-34.

¹¹ MERKELBACH 1984, 149-53; BEARD – NORTH – PRICE 1998, 294-95, 301; CLAUSS 2000, 23-27.

¹² For the symbols of the various grades of initiation, see MERKELBACH 1984, 86-129.

¹³ FLORIANI SQUARCIAPINO 1962, 52-54; VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 162-63.

grade was called the Persian (*Perses*) and was symbolized by a sword, a moon crescent and a scythe. The sixth grade was the sun-runner (*heliodromus*), and was symbolized by a whip, a torch and solar rays. The seventh and highest grade was called the father (*pater*), whose emblems were a *patera* (a shallow bowl), a Phrygian cap and Saturn's sickle. The grade of *pater* presumably meant a leading position in a Mithraic cult group.¹⁴

Mithraea were distributed quite evenly around different parts of Ostia, but are not found in the most central public areas or along the main streets.¹⁵ Some of the oldest Mithraea in Ostia were installed in residential buildings, *insula* or *domus*, in which one or two rooms were set aside for use by cult members. At least three Ostian Mithraea are located near baths and four in warehouses.¹⁶ One Mithraeum was built into the foundations of an unfinished sanctuary of an Ostian *collegium*, probably that of the ropemakers (*Stuppatores*).¹⁷ The construction of the Mithraeum was sponsored by a man named Fructosus, who was also *patronus* of an association in Ostia of whose name only the first letter *s* survives. However, the name Fructosus also appears in a membership list of the *collegium* of the *Stuppatores*, dating to the same period as the Mithraeum, and rooms used for the production of ropes (*stuppa*) have been identified in the vicinity.¹⁸ We do not know why the original sanctuary of the association was left unfinished. It would have been most unusual to choose Mithras as a tutelary deity of a *collegium*. It is possible that some members of the Mithraic cult group also belonged to the association of the ropemakers or that the worshippers of Mithras had some kind of contract to use the sanctuary on the premises of the *collegium*.¹⁹ One additional Mithraeum was identified in the excavations carried out in 2014, called the *Mitreo dei marmi colorati*, located near a guest



Figure 3. Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana. Photo: Arja Karivieri.

¹⁴ MEIGGS 1973, 373; VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 163.

¹⁵ VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 338, fig. 7.

¹⁶ MEIGGS 1973, 374; WHITE 2012, 440-44, 480.

¹⁷ BECATTI 1954, 21-25; MEIGGS 1973, 375; VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 188-90.

¹⁸ BECATTI 1954, 25-26; CLAUSS 1992, 35.

¹⁹ WHITE 2012, 476-77.



Figure 4. Reconstruction of the Mitreo del Caseggiato di Diana. Reconstruction: Jesper Blid.

house and tavern. This sanctuary has been dated to the second half of the fourth century and is thus the latest known Mithraeum in Ostia.²⁰

The Ostian Mithraea do not suggest great wealth. Even the largest Mithraea in Ostia are much smaller than many of those in Rome. They could hold a maximum of 40 people, and some less than 20. Mithraea were usually installed in existing buildings. One of the largest Ostian Mithraea utilizes structures of the service area in a public bath, another the Sullan city wall and tower by the riverbank. In the so-called House of Diana, two rooms in the north-eastern corner of the ground floor were adapted for cult purposes by covering the windows and building benches (*podia*) and an altar (Figs. 3-4). This mithraeum dates to the final building phase of the House of Diana, at the end of the third century.²¹ A private *lararium* (domestic shrine) was used to install another Mithraeum – the two snakes painted on the wall were also suited to Mithraic imagery.²²

All of Ostia's Mithraea were installed in existing buildings by modifying and adapting the original space. Recycled materials were also often used in the decorations, and the original paintings and mosaics in the space were not necessarily changed.²³ The most famous cult image of Mithras from the city, a large statue in the Ostia Museum (Cat. no. 156; a copy is on display in the exhibition), was most probably acquired second-hand and partly damaged for the sanctuary in the substructures of a bath building (*Terme del*

²⁰ See the article by PELLEGRINO in this volume. A short report presenting the main results of the "Ostia Marina Project", directed by Massimiliano David, in VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 168-69, 382, figs. 165-68.

²¹ VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 156-59.

²² MEIGGS 1973, 372; VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 187-88.

²³ MEIGGS 1973, 372-73; WHITE 2012, 444, 483-84.

Mitra).²⁴ Most Mithraea in Ostia were not underground sanctuaries, but there may have been attempts to create the illusion of a cave through the decorations and lighting.

Some Ostian Mithraea have original features, but most follow the same pattern.²⁵ The actual sanctuary is a narrow rectangular room that receives no direct light, representing the cave in which the god was believed to have been born. In two Ostian inscriptions the Mithraeum is actually described as a cave, *spe-laeum*. The central aisle of the sanctuary was flanked by long *podia*, benches that sloped slightly towards the walls. Based on the structure of the sanctuaries, it has been assumed that the priest walked down the aisle between the benches towards the altar.²⁶

Some altars in the Ostian Mithraea had a hole, probably for a lamp. The front of the altar may have been pierced, so that light could shine through it and create a crescent or illuminate a relief on the front part of the altar. The statue of the sun god was dramatically lit in this way in the so-called Mithraeum of the painted walls (*Mitreo delle pareti dipinte*). The cult's central myth was represented behind the altar, usually in a wall relief. The iconography in different sanctuaries varies only slightly, but the materials used in cult images and the quality of the execution differs. Mithras, wearing a Persian outfit, is depicted slaying the bull with a knife. A dog leaps towards the blood spurting from the wound, while a snake reaches for it from the other side and a scorpion attacks the genitals of the bull. A raven above watches the scene. Two torch-bearing youths, Cautes and Cautopates, are depicted as statuettes or in mosaics at the entrance of the sanctuary or on either side of the altar.²⁷



Figure 5. Mitreo delle Sette Porte. Photo: Arja Karivieri.

²⁴ MEIGGS 1973, 372-73; VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 190-91.

²⁵ See the article by PELLEGRINO in this volume.

²⁶ MEIGGS 1973, 370.

²⁷ MEIGGS 1973, 371.

An unusually rich and well preserved astrological symbolism can be seen in the decoration of a Mithraeum located on the west side of the so-called House of Apuleius in Ostia (*Mitreo delle Sette Sfere*). There are seven black semicircles in the white mosaic of the central aisle representing the seven planets, symbolized by figures depicted in the black and white mosaics on the vertical sides of the benches. The twelve signs of the zodiac are represented in the black and white mosaics covering the horizontal top of the benches.²⁸ In the Mithraeum of Felicissimus, too, the planets are clearly connected with the seven grades of initiation, and symbols of each initiation grade are depicted in the mosaic panels between the *podia*.²⁹

The Ostian Mithraea were mainly located in ordinary city districts, not in remote places that were difficult to access. However, access to the sanctuary and its visibility, in particular, may have been restricted. The Mithraeum was often entered from the side.³⁰ The Mithraea of Ostia were not monumental or spectacular, but they may have been situated in very close proximity to the city centre. The installation of the earliest Mithraea in private houses suggests that the cult groups were private in nature. Several examples of small sanctuaries in *insula* complexes are known in Ostia, such as the *Sacello delle Tre Navate* next to the *Caseggiato degli Aurighi*. The layout of this sanctuary resembles that of a Mithraeum, but the space is much larger and nothing in the decoration explicitly refers to the cult of Mithras. There is a kitchen next to the sanctuary, as was often the case since ritual feasting was an essential part of the social life of associations and cult groups.³¹

What kind of men belonged to Mithraic groups? According to the surviving inscriptions they did not come from the leading social groups of Ostia. However, no membership lists of Mithraic groups are known from the city. The extant inscriptions from Ostia mainly document the names of priests of Mithras, *patres*, and donors of the cult groups.³² Consequently, we know largely about the most important and wealthiest members of Mithraic groups in Ostia. Obviously, the associations needed sponsors and donors, since they were always reliant on private funds. Indeed, the majority of the surviving inscriptions document donations needed for the basic furnishings of the Mithraea, such as images of Mithras killing the bull, marble and mosaic decorations for the *podia* and central aisle, and images of *Cautes* and *Cautopates*. Small statuettes of Mithras seem to have been the most typical donations.

The highest grade of initiation in the cult of Mithras, that of *pater*, is the only one mentioned in Ostian inscriptions referring to the cult. The *patres* were presumably leaders of individual sanctuaries and cult groups. The grade of *pater* also appears to have been linked with priestly functions. The “fathers” of the Ostian Mithraea do not seem to have been prominent public figures, such as individuals who might have held municipal offices, for example. On the contrary, their social status was relatively low, and the names of slaves even appear among the worshippers of Mithras in Ostia.³³ Some members of the Mithraic groups did, however, have connections with the trade *collegia*, or professional guilds, of Ostia. Similarly, many worshippers of Magna Mater and the Egyptian deities were also active in the Ostian *collegia*. For example, the *pater* and sponsor of the Mitreo Aldobrandini, Sextus Pompeius Maximus, was president of a *collegium* in charge of one of Ostia’s ferry services. The name Sextus Pompeius Maximus is mentioned in two in-

²⁸ FLORIANI SQUARCIAPINO 1962, 43-44; MEIGGS 1973, 371.

²⁹ FLORIANI SQUARCIAPINO 1962, 52-54; CLAUSS 2000, 133-38.

³⁰ WHITE 2012, 478-79.

³¹ WHITE 2012, 477-80.

³² MEIGGS 1973, 373-74; CLAUSS 1992, 40-42.

³³ MEIGGS 1973, 373.

scriptions, one of which was erected by other priests of Mithras to honour him.³⁴ Sextus Pompeius Maximus is respectfully described as *pater patrum*, father of the fathers, perhaps suggesting cooperation between various Mithraea in Ostia or that there were several *patres* in this particular sanctuary.

The Mithraic groups of Ostia honoured their *patres* in particular with inscriptions. In the *Mitreo delle Sette Sfere*, for example, there was an inscription stating that L. Tullius Agatho had donated an altar to the Mithraeum in honour of the *pater* of the community, M. Aemilius Epaphroditus.³⁵ In Ostia, the *patres* of Mithraic groups were usually also donors. It is possible that the highest grade of initiation required donations to the community. Status within the cult group seems to some extent to have reflected a man's status in society, or at least his economic standing. Members of the local elite or the holders of public offices never appear as worshippers of Mithras in the surviving epigraphic evidence from Ostia. Instead, we find men who had been members of business and trade *collegia* or who had held priesthoods in other cults, serving in the *Seviri Augustales*, for example. Significantly, many worshippers of Mithras in Ostia had a Greek *cognomen*, suggesting that they or their ancestors had formerly been slaves.³⁶

As for the social background of worshippers, the cult of Mithras follows the same pattern as other "Oriental mystery cults", with many followers being wealthy and successful freedmen. In the second century, these cults seem to have constituted a fairly well-established aspect of religious life in Ostia. Cult communities showed loyalty to the empire, praying to their deities, sacrificing and making dedications to them for the wellbeing of the emperor and his family. The cult of Mithras in Ostia is an exception in this respect, since there are no references to the local authorities in the extant inscriptions and only one dedication of the Mithraists on behalf of the emperor is known.³⁷ Equally, however, there are no references to the authorities being suspicious of Mithraic cult groups in Ostia, or anywhere else. Deference to the authorities and acceptance of hierarchies seem to have been essential to the cult of Mithras.³⁸

The cult of Mithras was the latest in the line of the great mystery religions and, consequently, the peak in its popularity is also later than that of the cults of Magna Mater, Isis and Serapis. Mithras was still worshipped as Rome was Christianized during the fourth century, and one new Mithraeum was even founded in Ostia during this century. Common features have been identified in the cult of Mithras and Christianity, such as the dualism of good and evil, and were already noted by ancient writers. Like Christ, Mithras may have been interpreted as a mediator and saviour figure. It is still difficult to say if Christianity and the cult



Figure 6 (Cat. no. 157). Handle of a knife, interpreted as an item used in Mithraic rituals. Ostia Nuovi depositi, inv. 4317. Photo: Saana Säilynoja, Vapriikki Photo Archive.

³⁴ *CIL* XIV 403; *CIL* XIV 4314; MEIGGS 1973, 373-74; VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 150-52.

³⁵ *CIL* XIV 62. See discussion in VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 177-79 (*Mithraeum* Petrini) and 185-87.

³⁶ MEIGGS 1973, 373-74; CLAUSS 1992, 40-42.

³⁷ VERMASEREN 1956, no. 273.

³⁸ See CLAUSS 2000, 21-23, 39-41.

of Mithras were true rivals in Late Antiquity. In any case, the Christians attacked sanctuaries of Mithras in various parts of the Roman empire, especially from the end of the fourth century onwards, and even Christian authors report violent acts against worshippers of Mithras. The Christians thus seem to have regarded Mithraism as some sort of threat.³⁹ The archaeological remains preserve traces of the intentional destruction of cult sites and images, including in Ostia. After the fourth century CE, there is no further evidence for the worship of Mithras in Ostia.⁴⁰

³⁹ CLAUSS 2000, 168-72; WINTER 2000.

⁴⁰ MEIGGS 1973, 401; WHITE 2012, 471; VAN HAEPEREN 2019, 168-69.