Ancient Mystery Cults and Funerary Practices in the Roman Empire
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This paper will not and cannot offer a comprehensive overview over the entire field of research introduced in the title. What I would like to do is to offer a sketch of the project to be tackled in the years to come within the Research Unit “Religious Individualization in a Historical Perspective”. At the moment, we are busy compiling the material, and I would be grateful for any contributions of ideas in the discussion of my paper.

Objective

One of the best known individual options of ancient religion is without a doubt the initiation into mystery cults. The oldest accounts of the message put forth by these cults is to be found in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and may be summarized as follows: “There is ritual access to a privileged relationship with the gods that every man is free to chose, granting a better lot in the afterlife to you than to other mortals. […]”¹. This form of religious practice was widespread throughout the entire Greek world as early as the 6th and 5th century BCE. A further development can be made out during Hellenistic and Imperial Ages, while Christian polemic shows that mystery cults were still popular even in Late Antiquity.² Gold plates found in graves dating from the 5th to 3rd century BCE³ show the dead to be marked as initiates of Dionysus and describe the way for them to take in the beyond. They also show that the connection between the notions of the afterlife and mystery cults was not restricted to discourse, but found practical application in the way individuals were buried. According to an inscription found in Cumae dating from the mid-5th century BCE⁴ those initiated into Bacchic mysteries had their own burial sites. Grave inscriptions show the “cursus honorum” within mystery cults, e.g. a priest in Eleusis,⁵ or a disciple of Mater Magna, Isis, or Mithras,⁶ as well as telling us about the participation of sodales at burials.⁷ Grave epigrams mention the connection between mysteries and expectations concerning the afterlife.⁸ Especially in Germania we may assume burials of initiates in the vicinity of excavated Mithraea.⁹ This is

¹ Schlesier 2001, 160.
² Overview: Burkert 1990.
³ Zuntz 1971; Graf/Johnston 2007; Bernabé/Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008
⁴ LSGC 120.
⁵ IG II/III² 366,1.
⁶ E.g. CCCA III 261 (Magna Mater), SIRIS 396 = Rüpke 2005, 3178 (Isis Pelagia); CIMRM 511; Rüpke 2005, 3028 (Mithras) all Rome.
⁷ E.g. CIL VI 10098 = CCCA III 355 (Rome).
⁸ E.g. PEEK 1960 no. 208; 210; 250; 304; 306; cf. BETZ 1998.
even more conspicuous since so-called “oriental” mystery cults of the Imperial Age – such as those of Mater Magna, Isis, or Mithras – are generally assumed to put less focus on the afterlife than do the mysteries in Eleusis or of Dionysus.\textsuperscript{10}

Our project attempts to trace all possible connections between mystery initiations and burial practices to be found in archaeological, epigraphic, and literary sources, and to offer a new interpretation. Based on the large amount and wide variety of material, we will be able to reconstruct individual religious practices between the options of initiation and burial on a historical basis from the early Empire to Late Antiquity. At the same time, the question regarding a possible origin of this connection must be faced, which is likely to be found in Greece. Centered on the question of which media (inscriptions, rituals, images etc.) were used to communicate that initiation into mystery cults had taken place, the question of how the experience of being a member of a mystery cult and notions of death were commuted to other initiates and outsiders comes into focus.

In this paper, I will focus on the following areas:

1. The so-called Orphic Gold Tablets, and their distribution during the Roman Imperial Age;
2. The consecration of the individual;
3. Burial practices and mystery cults, focusing mainly on the graves of mystai in the vicinity of Mithras sanctuaries and grave sites or inscriptions with a definite connection to mystery cults;
4. The so-called “funeral banquet” images to be found in both the areas of grave sculpture and Mithras cult;
5. Grave inscriptions of cult members and functionaries.

\textit{Research History}

Even though the discovery of the gold tablet in graves of Dionysus initiates has been widely published during the past three decades\textsuperscript{11} – adding archaeological proof to Herodotus’ (2.81.2) connection between burial practices and mystery initiation –, a thorough analysis of the connection between mystery cults and burial practices is still outstanding. This may well be because the influential survey of Walter Burkert (1990) has shown that the hope of preferential treatment by the gods was just as important in this life (if not more so) as it was in

\textsuperscript{10} Burkert 1990, 30-34.
the beyond. Burkert rightly opposes this understanding of polytheistic mysteries to a classification as redemptive cults similar to Christianity. In addition, research on the gold tablets often focuses on supposed “orphan-Pythagorean”, and therefore “philosophical” content, even though it is easy to see that the texts themselves give no hints that actually point to Orpheus (Schlesier). For the Roman Imperial Age we have an abundance of material, but any objective research is hampered by two assumptions long-standing in research history.

One, the isolation of burial practices as “funerary cult”, supported by the argument that in ancient polytheism, burial and cult sites were always systematically separated. The other, the assumption that grave inscriptions were “conventional” and “literary”, therefore not “religious”. One of the major goals of our research will be to prove that the Christian burial practice ad martyres is nothing at all new, but had predecessors in polytheistic religious practices.

Sources

The discourse on death and the afterlife which was part of mystery cults may be reconstructed by using the compilations of Burkert and Scarpi. Concerning the Gold Tablets, Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston as well as the more recent collections of Albero Bernabé and Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal offer a comprehensive overview.

For the cults of Mater Magna and Mithras, Marten Jan Vermaseren’s compilations of inscriptions (CCCA and CIMRM) are indispensable. For the mysteries of Dionysus, Jaccottet’s study offers sufficient material. Compilations of material on the Dolichenus and Sabazios cults are to be found in the CCID and the CCIS. Indispensable is also the collection of SIRIS for the cult of Isis by Ladislaus Vidman. Grave inscriptions for the city of Rome, with references to cultic functions in mystery cults, are compiled in Rüpke 2005 for the years 300 BCE to 499 CE.

1. The So-Called Orphic Gold Tablets and Their Distribution in the Imperial Age

The So-Called Orphic Gold Tablets are mostly gold tablets in the form of leaves, bearing an inscription. A large number of these tablets, most of which date to the 4th to 2nd c.

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12 REITZENSTEIN 1927.
14 HABERMEHL 1996, 309.
15 BURKERT 2004, 92-114.
16 SCARPI 2004.
18 JACCOTTET 2003.
BCE, were found in graves near Hipponion, Thessaly, Crete and especially Thurii. The short inscriptions identify the dead as members of Orphic cults, and contain detailed descriptions as to their conduct after death, such as the warning not to drink from the Fount if Lethe, but to remember to drink from the Well of Mnemosyne. A good six centuries younger than the gold tablets from Thurii is a similar tablet found in Rome, dated 260 CE. It bears the text: *She comes from the pure, pure, queen of the subterranean beings, | Eucles und Eubouleus, son of Zeus, Accept therefore. | this gift of Mnemosyne. Celebrated by men. | “Come, Caecilia Secundina, legitimately transformed into a goddess”*. In difference to the tablets of Thurii, the soul does not speak about the deceased in the first, but third person singular, addressing her by name. Maybe the tablet itself is the actual addressee in this context. Another exception is the worldly name given to the deceased, who is to be transformed into a divinity. This is not the place to speak at length about the Orphic Gold Tablets; however, I would like to stress the fact that these tablets were apparently still widespread even during the Imperial Age, being eloquent witnesses of the connection between mystery cults and afterlife expectations. It must also be noted that a large part of these tablets were found in women’s graves.

2. The Consecration of Individuals

The Orphic tablet found in Rome vividly introduces the notion of divinization, a process which, according to the tablet, must be seen in the context of mystery cults. Caecilia Secundina was transformed into a goddess after her death. H. Wrede understands these kinds of “private deifications” to be common throughout the Roman Empire. We will here look at two examples from Germanic contexts. One can today be found at the museum of Avenches, being an inscription set in stone of unknown origin. The stone is a cube of yellow Jurassic chalk (42.5 x 9 x 16.5 cm), which probably once served as the base of a statue. It was dedicated to Livilla dea by Genialis, the freedman of Flavius Erotis. This form of private deification found particular attention among slaves and freedmen in the Latin West. We know of more than 300 private deifications in which the deceased are continually identified with distinct deities. In the present case, the deceased is quite broadly termed goddess. According to Wrede, this kind of dedication is only known for the years between 42 to 68 CE, was only found in Rome, and did not spread west until c. 120 CE, before disappearing again under the

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19 **BERNABÉ/IMÉNEZ SAN CRISTÓBAL** 2008, No. L11, 133 sq.
21 **EDMONDS** 2004, 65 sq.
22 **WREDE** 1981.
23 **FREI-STOLBA** 1990, passim.
24 **WREDE** 1981, esp.. 158 sqq.
Severans. The highest density was always to be found in Rome. Two elements contribute to raise doubt about placing the dedication to Livilla dea with any certainty in the context of urban Rome: one, the recent discovery of a woman’s grave at the centre of the newly excavated cult district in En Chaplix, situated right next to the necropolis; two, the discovery of a small temple in the city district of Avenches from the first half of the first century CE, under which were discovered graves from the late Latène era with mummified bodies. It may also be possible to establish a connection to a local gens as administrators of this cult district, their freedmen or a related family still worshipping the mythical forebear Livilla in the 2nd c. CE. Regarding the size and decoration of the tombs, belonging to the largest north of the Alps, this may have been a rather important gens with considerable influence and family tradition.

In every respect remarkable among dedications to women in the Lower Germanic Province is the altar of Dea Domina Rufia Materna in Millingen. In this case, the deceased is quite broadly termed ‘goddess’. The sponsor of the altar, Mucronia Marcia, also dedicated a sacred grove (lucus), in which she sacrificed every year on July 17th, on the birthday of Materna in October, and on February 21st, the day of the parentalia, to a pater Rufius Similis, his son Similis, and his daughter Materna. This is most likely to be interpreted as a funerary banquets at the birthday of the dead. Rufius Similis and Mucronia Marcia were the parents of Rufia Materna and Rufius Similis. F. Drexel supposes that there is a connection to a congregation of mystai. The dedication is in any case an important connector between provincial religion and the cult of the dead.

3. Burial Practices and Mystery Cults

Phenomena like mystai graves in the vicinity of Mithraea, burials under cult buildings (Avenches, Kontich), in cult chambers (Frankfurt-Schwanheim, Pforzheim), or sanctuaries close or adjacent to necropoleis (Avenches, Nierzier-Eschegewähr, Tavigny St. Martin) make a systematic distinction between “everyday religion” and cult of the dead seem much too schematic. We will attempt to highlight connecting points between the two areas in a larger study. The following remarks will focus on the graves of mystai, introducing some of them.
Angera (Gallia Transpadana)  | Mithras  | Cultic cave with the graves of two human skeletons at the entrance\(^{32}\)
Großkrotzenburg  | Mithras  | Mithraeum with graves of mystai\(^{33}\)
Stockstadt  | Mithras, Sol, Cautes, Cautopates, [A]rthio, IOM, Mercurius, (Victoria), (Mars), (Iuno), (Diana), (Vulcanus), (Hercules), (Hekate), (Epona)  | Mithraeum I with graves of mystai\(^{34}\)
Wiesloch  | (Mithras), Mercurius  | Mithraeum with favissa (sacrificial pit) and graves of mystai\(^{35}\)
Krefeld Gellep  | (Mithras)  | Mithraeum within a necropolis\(^{36}\)
Cologne, Richmondstr./corner Breitestr. (northwestern residential area)  | Mithras, (Dadophor)  | Mithraeum I with grave of mystai?\(^{37}\)

Looking at the given examples, graves in the vicinity of Mithraea seem to be the exception. It must also be said, however, that this may just be a result of what we know today and not show the actual situation as it used to be. In view of the situation of a number of Mithraea within necropoleis, it is in any case to be assumed that no immediate classification can be made between grave cults on the one side, and mystery cults on the other.

There is a cave in Angera near the Lago Maggiore, about halfway up the hill which could be identified as a Mithraeum by archaeological finds, among them crockery and animal bones (cattle, goat, poultry, and swine) found near the entrance. Unusual are the two human skeletons also found buried near the entrance. Numerous numismatic finds date the

\(^{32}\) CIMRM 716


Mithraeum to the 4th century CE, although Vermaseren is uncertain about attributing the coins to the Mithraeum. Parallel cases in Germania seem to call for such an attribution, however.  

The Mithraeum in Großkrotzenburg was situated to the North-West of the fort, away from the vicus in an area that was well off the beaten track within a cemetery. On both sides of the supposed entrance to the pronaos of the Mithraeum we find an evenly spaced number of cremation burials. To mark the graves, brick tiles were used which were stamped with the seal of the cohors IV Vindelicorum, a brickyard which was run by the unit in the 2nd century CE. A. Hensen thus rightly assumes that graves and Mithras temple stood in relation to another, since the arrangement of the graves on both sides of the entrances would also support this notion.

In the neighborhood of the Mithraeum I in Stockstadt a Dolichenum was found only 17 meters distant. We can date this to the 3rd c. CE. Thanks to a dated inscription and tile seals we know that the stone building of the Mithraeum was there at the beginning of the 3rd century and was not abandoned until around 250 CE. Mithraeum I in Stockstadt contained inscriptions and images of Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Hercules, Vulcan, Victoria, Diana, Hecate, Juno, Epona, and maybe Dea Artio. A seated statue of Mercury bearing an inscription to Mithras and Mercury belongs to the second Mithraeum. South of Mithraeum I we have another necropolis, with three graves only 6 to 8 meters distant. Again, we can safely assume the proximity to the temple to be intended.

In 1989, a small Mithraeum was discovered during excavations of a Roman vicus in Wiesloch which originally consisted of wood and lattice, being rebuild in stone after a fire. The dating of the separate phases is somewhat uncertain; apparently the building was abandoned around 260 CE and fell into disrepair. At 6 meters distance, a sacrificial pit was unearthed, which not only contained a larger number of cattle, pig, sheep, and horse bones, but also the skeleton of a raven in the last deposition layer. This last was protectively covered by the fragments of an amphora, on which a horses head had been placed. The sacrificial pit was most likely situated within the temenos of the temple. Right next to the entrance, which is yet to be excavated, two burning pits were found, both containing a number of burial gifts, one dating from the middle of the 2nd century CE, the other to the reign of M. Aurelius. In one

38 CIMRM 716, p. 258.
39 HENSEN 2000, 90.
41 CIL XIII 11788a = SCHWERTHEIM 1974, 147 sq. no. 117 a = HUPE 1997, 186 no. 152: sitting Mercury with cock, ram, turtle and Bacchus child on his lap.
42 HENSEN 2000, 91.
case, the body can be identified as that of a male, approximately 40 years of age. 18 meters
distant to the building two other burning pits were found containing the remains of two 15 and
17 year-old women, both dating to the end of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} or beginning of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century. These
graves were within a walled burial ground, most certainly containing more graves which
unfortunately were not preserved. The graves at the entrance are certainly unique. Hensen
assumes a concurrence of Mithraeum and burials, which would place these outside of the
settlement.\textsuperscript{44} That both graves were destroyed in the course of the erection of the temple
would make little sense in view of the short occupation span of the \textit{vicus} and the limited
number of inhabitants.

Within the space of the burial grounds, to the northwest of the Roman auxiliary fort of
\textit{Gelduba}/Krefeld-Gellep, traces of a wooden structure were discovered in 1981, which were
interpreted as the remains of a Mithraeum. The building stood within a depression of 13 x 6.5
meters. Cult image and dedicatory \textit{stelai} could not be discovered, fixtures only revealed a tufa
box set into the floor and traces of a fire place.\textsuperscript{45} Even during the time of its erection, the
building was placed within the enclosure of the burial grounds. Shards of oil lamps and clay
vessels date the building to the first half of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century CE. Remains of mortars and white
clay jars found in the filling of the middle passage of the building date to the second half of
the second century, the time in which the Mithraeum was abandoned. A large part of the
wooden fixtures were pulled out in that time, and broken clay crockery used to fill in the
recesses. The space was later used for a mass burial, most likely of the victims of the first
attacks of the Franks.\textsuperscript{46} The pit contains the skeletons of at least 19 individuals, most of them
having died between 257 and 260.\textsuperscript{47} Consequently, we have here the oldest known Mithraeum
in Lower Germania. Its initial erection seems to go back to the auxiliary unit stationed here. If
people were buried at the site while the sanctuary was in use stands to question; we also do
not know if older grave sites were moved or destroyed when the temple was built.\textsuperscript{48} It is
possible that the older Mithraeum was abandoned when a new stone building was put up,
though we have as of yet found no traces of such an edifice. D. Engster mentions the
possibility that the members of the cult were exclusively made up of members of the \textit{ala
Sulpicia} which was transferred from the \textit{vicus} during the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century CE. Following units may

\textsuperscript{44} HENSEN 2000, 87 sqq.
\textsuperscript{45} REICHMANN 1997, 21 sqq.; cf. FOLLMANN-SCHULZ 1986, 749; CHR. REICHMANN. In: HORN 1987, 534 and
WIEGELS 2000, 295 with Lit.
\textsuperscript{47} REICHMANN 1997 23 sq.; cf. Id. 1996; J. KUNOW, Die Militärgeschichte Niedergermaniens. In: HORN 1987,
27-109, hier S. 82.
\textsuperscript{48} REICHMANN 1997, 21 sq.
not have been adherents to the cult of Mithras. After the discovery of a complex in Künzig, containing two phases of wooden structures, we must also face the question that a part of the known Mithras sanctuaries may actually be dated much earlier, having been built in wood.

For Cologne, we are presented with a peculiarity when excavations brought to light a grave inscription of 57.5 x 32 cm. It seems to have been put up by two comrades for an essedarius, a charioteer in the arena. The first word of the inscription was later headed by the word cor{a}x. Since we cannot determine when the later addition of the initiation degree was inscribed onto the stone, we do not know if a direct relation to the persons mentioned in the inscription was intended. It is debatable whether this inscription can actually count as evidence for the Mithras cult. All names included in the inscription are vouched for as cognomina, the deceased having a Greek name found also in Rome. L. Lazzaro believes him to be a slave. In connection with the evidence from Upper Germania, the tomb stone is best interpreted as the grave of an initiate in the vicinity of a Mithraeum. The deceased, Exsochus, was most likely a member of the Mithraic congregation and subsequently buried within the sanctuary. His fellow gladiators paid for his tomb stone, on which the degree of his initiation was later added to mark out the connection to the cult of Mithras.

There also seem to be memorial stones for deceased members of the congregation within the Mithraeum itself, as an inscription from Poetovio in memoriam Hyacinthi seems to indicate. An altar for D(eus) i(nvictus) M(ithras) et Soli socio in the Eisack valley in Southern Tyrol was donated ob memor(iam) patris suis ex colleg(a). A similar formula is also to be found on the small altar in Tergeste dedicated to Magna Mater. The Album of Virunum, discovered in 1992, a very well-preserved bronze tablet, lists the names of 98 living and deceased members of the album sacratorum, the names of the deceased being marked by thanon (deceased). The inscription is to be dated between January 1, 183 and June 26, 184 and was donated in the course of the restoration of the Mithraeum, in which members came

49 ENGSTER 2002, 440.
53 SOLIN/SALOMIES 1988, 314 (Cimber) and 378 (Pietas); SOLIN 1982, 723 (Exsochus).
54 LAZZARO 1993, 246.
55 CIMRM 1501and 1503. Vermaseren believes that Hyacinthus was the founder of the mithraeum.
56 CIMRM 730.
57 CCCA 244: M(atri) d(um) m(agnae) | in memori(a) | Usiae L(ucii) fil(iae) | Tertullinae || sacerd(otis) divarum | matris suae | Sex(tus) Appuleius Marcell(us) | d(ono) d(edit).
together on June 26, 184 mortality causor convener(unt), probably in connection with the plague. 58

It must also be mentioned that within the sanctuary of Mithras in Königshoffen in Alsace, a pit was found which contained the skull and thighbones of a human being. Cumont interpreted this as a building sacrifice. 59 The so-called Rock of Mithras, a cult grotto at St. Urban in Carinthia, contained children’s teeth in addition to animal bones and pottery shards. 60

While for the Cybele/Attis and Isis/Serapis cults we have a large number of devotional objects in the graves, this is much rarer for the cult of Mithras, though not unheard of. 61 Attis appears depicted on numerous grave monuments and inscriptions, 62 not to mention the abundance of pine cone images on the graves. Terracotta figurines of Cybele and Attis can often be found as grave goods, 63 while symbols of the cult of Isis and the depiction of Egyptian deities can also be found on many grave inscriptions. 64 There is also a special grave inscription addressed to Egyptian deities (the “water of Osiris”, “indebted to Isis, to Serapis” etc.). 65 We also know of a number of statues of the dead dressed in Egyptian style, like the Athenian women dressed up as Isis. 66

4. The So-Called Funeral Banquet

Richard Gordon recently noted that the cultic feasts depicted in Germanic Mithras monuments are directly related to the reliefs of the funeral banquet. According to Gordon, excavations of necropoleis along the coasts of Asia Minor revealed a large quantity of such reliefs, their iconography taken from the Greek hero cult. 67 These reliefs seem to want to convey the idea of a good death. 68 Presumably it was once again the Roman military which adapted these ideas and introduced them in the west. We find a large number especially in

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59 CIMRM 1375.
60 CIMRM 1442.
61 CIMRM 11, 12 (Pantikapaion, Chersones); 113 (Oea, Tripolitania).
62 Cf. CCCA I 103 (Armonia, Phrygia) door of a tomb with a picture of Attis; 116 (Buglija, Phrygia) tombstone of a family which mentions Attis; CCCA IV 249 (Tergeste); CCCA V 328 and 329 (Nemausus) part of grave monuments with symbols of Attis; VI 97 (Carnuntum).
63 Cf. CCCA I 336 (Cebres Mysia); 528 (Cyme, Ionia); CCCA IV, 3 (Cumae); CCCA V 143 (Icosium, Africa). 164 (Carmo, Hispania), 430 (Argentomarus, Gallia).
64 Cf. SIRIS 18 (Athens, Kerameikos); 97 (Larisa, Thessaly); 454, 455 (Rome); 629 (Patavium); 678 (Narona, Dalmatia); 737 (Carpentorate);
65 Cf. SIRIS 52 (Tanagra); 346 (Corydalla); 347 (Rhodopolis); 459-465 (Rome); 586 (Ravenna); 593 (Bononia)
67 RICHARD GORDON, “Das Ladenburger Kultmahlrelief: Mythos, Ritual und Jenseitsvorstellungen im Mithraskult”, Paper given at a conference in Güglingen on 4. 4.09. I am very grateful to Prof. Gordon for sending me a copy of his text.
68 Cf. FABRICIUS 1999.
major colonial centers and military stations (especially Cologne, Mainz, and Bonn), in which elaborate tomb stones were put up depicting the deceased in full armor and riding down his enemies. The inscriptions give name (with *tribus*), rank, age, and years of service. The typical grave *stelai* are modeled on Italic archetypes, adapted by the sculptors along the Rhine. The transition to the civilian sphere is achieved by depicting the late friend or family member as the heroicized deceased reveling in the joys of an everlasting feast. Like the rider grave reliefs, these images are not to be found along the Rhine before the days of the Flavians, when they were chosen by active soldiers and veterans who often belonged to auxiliary units. During the second century, the imagery was re-interpreted as realistic family feasts, thus secularized and introduced into the civilian sphere. The local Celtic population of Mainz took over the habit if putting up distinct grave markers during the 1st century CE. The strong concentration of military units lured a large number of stone mason to Mainz, where they worked for the legionaries from Upper Italy and Gallia Narbonensis, as well as the auxiliary units from all parts of the empire. This concentration of shops and military examples probably contributed to wealthy civilians erecting grave monuments for themselves and their families. Gordon interprets the depiction of the cultic meals on Germanic Mithras monuments as an allusion to the idea of the hero’s meal and the eternal feast after death. This would mean that scenes of cultic meals in Mithraism do not look back to mythical times, do not only depict a repeated ritual within the Mithraeum, but rather express the Mithraic hope for a good life after death. This would explain the absence of Mithraic grave iconography as it is known from the cults of Isis or Cybele: the cultic meal was in itself the funeral banquet.

The Mithraic depiction of the cultic meal is not only known in Germania, but can be found on monuments connected to the cult of Mithras throughout the Roman Empire. For Germany, the images found in Frankfurt-Heddernheim, Rückingen, Dieburg, Ladenburg, and Osterburken must be mentioned. Other images of Mithras and Sol at the feast can be found in Dura Europos, Santa Prisca in Rome, Augusta Emerita, Pons Saravi, Apulum, Biljanovac, Tvalicavo, Tomis, Serdica, and Philoppopolis. Another grave marker depicting a funeral banquet from Byzantium gained quite some attention since it was put up for a woman called

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71 BOPPERT 1992, 81.
72 SCHWERTHEIM 1974, 59a = CIMRM 1083 (Heddernheim); SCHWERTHEIM 1974, 85a = CIMRM 1137 (Rückingen); SCHWERTHEIM 1974, 123a = CIMRM 1247 (Dieburg); SCHWERTHEIM 1974, 144a = WIEGELS 2000, G 21 (Ladenburg); SCHWERTHEIM 1974, 148a = CIMRM 1292/93 (Osterburken).
73 CIMRM 42, 49 (Dura Europos); 484, 485 (S. Prisca, Rome); 782 (Augusta Emerita); 966 (Pons Saravi); 1935, 1958, 1974 (Apulum); 2202 (Biljanovac, Poesia sup.); 2225 (Ratiaria); 2244 (Tvalicavo); 2297 (Tomis); 2320, 2325 (Serdica); 2332 (Philippopolis).
Epikrate, who also had a theophoric Isis sobriquet.74 This would indicate that the imagery of the hero’s feast was not confined to the cult of Mithras.

We can conclude, then, that the motif of the hero’s meal of Mithras and Sol was known throughout the Roman Empire with a somewhat stronger focus in Germania and the upper Danube provinces. Since for these areas, scenes of funeral banquets in funerary art was also well known, it can be assumed that behind this was not only the idea of the eternal feast, but also that the connection hero’s meal-Mithras and Sol-funeral banquet was recognized by the adherents of the cult of Mithras throughout. For Germany it must be stated, however, that recent studies have set an earlier date for the Mithraeum of Mainz, dating it to the Flavian period,75 thus setting the beginnings of the Mithraeum in Mainz at a time in which the first depictions of funeral banquets also appear in funerary art. The idea of the hero’s feast and the good death is most likely to have influenced both sepulchral sculpture and Mithraic imagery.

5. Grave inscriptions of Cult Members and Cult Functionaries

Grave inscriptions of devotees to Isis, Cybele, and Mithras can be found in large numbers and different contexts. It is notable that grave inscriptions mentioning the cult of Mithras are far less common than those of other cults. Mention should be made of two leones in Africa Proconsularis, though the adherence to the cult of Mithras in this case is debatable, because one of them is a woman.76 But scattered evidence shows that there are some regions in which women can be seen to stand in some kind of connection to the cult of Mithras, especially since recent studies have shown that these congregations were by no means privileged circles. We also have grave inscriptions for patres,77 sacerdotes of the cult of Mithras,78 and in one case a hiereus79 who is likely to stand in some connection to the cult.

For the cult of Isis, we have a number of grave inscriptions mentioning not only adherents and initiates,80 but also cult functionaries.81 The same can be said of devotees to the cults of Cybele and Attis.82 They are also known for the cult of Sabazius.83
In general, it can be observed that there is a marked interest of both priests and functionaries, as much as initiates and devotees to document their relationship to Isis/Serapis, Cybele/Attis, or also, in some cases, Mithras on their grave markers. This illustrates the wide acceptance of the cults and their congregations among the populace, while these formulae also seem to appeal to the gods to lend their aid after death. If a priestly office is worth mentioning for any other cult, the mere membership in a mystery cult congregation may also by noted for posterity.

6. Conclusions

Departing from the assumption that during the Roman Imperial Age, membership of a “group religion” like the cults of Mithras, Cybele, or Isis must have some influence on individual burial practices, and the notions of death and the afterlife that come with it, five areas of study have been put forth which will be examined in the course of our project. Concerning the Orphic Gold Tablets I was able to show that this kind of burial gift was still placed in the graves during the Roman Imperial Age. To come to any extensive conclusions, it will not only be necessary to carefully examine the relevant source compilations on the Bacchic cult, but also to examine possible connections to private deifications. It will therefore be necessary to go beyond the material compiled by Wrede.

Another important complex will be the issue of grave and temple. The occasional graves of initiates found in the vicinity of Mithraea such as Wiesloch or Stockstadt which have been introduced in this paper, have their analogies in other cult sites. A. Hensen, following M. Clauss, assumes that cult congregations also took care of funerary matters. They would thus fulfill the same kind of function as funerary collegia. While the grave inscriptions of cult functionaries and memorial markers mentioned above may point to this interpretation, the question remains why the graves of mystai were placed at the entrance to Mithraea. In order to make some progress in this direction, it is necessary to systematically

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RÜPKE 2005, 563 (Rome); aedituus: SIRIS 396 = RÜPKE 2005, 3178 (Rome); scoparius: 517 (Syracusa); pausarius: 727 (Arelate); Anubophorus: 742 (Vienna).

82 Religiosus: CCCA III 292 (Rome); archigallus: III 261 (Rome); VI 141 (Iader, Dalm.); sacerdos: CCCA III 276 = RÜPKE 2005, 1801; III 291 = RÜPKE 2005, 1154; III 296 = RÜPKE 2005, 2719; III 360 = RÜPKE 2005, 450; RÜPKE 2005, 1037 (Rome); CCCA III 420, 422, 423, (Ostia); 442 (Portus); V 85 (El Kef); V 125 (Sigus); dendrophor: CCCA IV 14 (Puteoli); V 373 (Vienna); V 390, 391 (Lugdunum); VI 160 (Salona); caernophor: IV 15 (Puteoli); tympanistria: CCCA III 444; sodales ballatores: III 361 (Rome). See also: CIL XIII 5384 (Vesontio, mater sacrorum) and CIL XII 708 (Arles, antistitis?).

83 Cf. CCIS II 28 (Teos, Sabaziastrapolo); II 65 (Rome, Sabazia antistes).

84 I would like to remind you of the link between temple and necropolis in Avenches ‘En Chaplix’, Niederzier ‘Eschergewähr’ and probably Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt. I think that there is a need for a special and systematic investigation of the link of temple and necropolis in the Roman Empire.

85 HENSEN 2000, 92.
analyze the Mithraea which have so far been excavated throughout the Roman Empire, also comparing them to the known sanctuaries of Isis and Cybele. It already seems to become obvious that a connection between grave and sanctuary is not specific to certain cults, but has to be treated in accordance with possible regional differences.

More difficult to answer will be the question of possible notions of the afterlife for the members of these “group religions”. Even though it seems likely that the imagery of the hero’s feast is initially to be viewed as a separate element standing in no relation to grave cult and was later still used in other than funerary contexts, the implications of the imagery shifted. It may well be assumed that within the border provinces where this kind of imagery was widely spread thanks to the military units that had introduced it, the connection to the afterlife seems to have been quite obvious to the observer. In this we must follow R. Gordon who stresses that this kind of imagery found entrance into the Mithraea by way of funerary art, interpreting the banquet of Sol and Mithras as the eternal feast. We are currently working on compiling all source material of this divine feast, looking for analogies in other cultures.

Finally, we will attempt to comprehensively collect all source material of grave monuments of initiates and cult functionaries of the Imperial Age in order to analyze if there are any regional and chronological differences and to be able to analyze how important is was for the deceased and their possible descendants and heirs to be marked out as an adherent to a specific deity. Special attention will be paid to the question of there being any possible “initiate grave sites”, even though this question too will be hard to answer.

Bibliography


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