If So, How?
Representing "Coming Back to Life" in the Mysteries of Mithras

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In his essay *On the Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey (De antr. nymph.* 6 [= §2 in older translations]), Porphyry, the late third-century "scholar, philosopher, and student of religion,"[1] tells us that the Mithraists, whom he terms "the Persians,"[2] "perfect their initiate by inducting him into a mystery of the descent of souls and their exit back out again, calling the place a 'cave'" (οὕτω καὶ Πέρσαι τὴν εἰς κάτω κάθοδον τῶν ψυχῶν καὶ πάλιν ἔξοδον μυσταγωγοῦντες τελοῦσι τὸν μύστην, ἐπονομάσαντες σπήλαιον <τὸν> τόπον).[3] "This cave," Porphyry continues, "bore for him the image of the cosmos (εἰκόνα . . . κόσμου) which Mithras had created, and the things which the cave contained, by their proportionate arrangement, provided him with symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos" (τῶν δ᾽ ἐντὸς κατὰ συμμέτρους ἀποστάσεις σύμβολα φερόντων τῶν κοσμικῶν στοιχείων καὶ κλιμάτων).[4]

In sum, we are told here that the mithraeum[5] (1) was known esoterically as a "cave"; (2) that it was designed and constructed as an "image of the cosmos"; (3) that it was so designed and constructed for the purpose of "inducting the initiate into a mystery

[1] As the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* well describes him (s.v.).

[2] If the term "Persians" is outdated, "Mithraists" is purely a scholar's neologism.

[3] Throughout this essay I reference and cite the Arethusa edition of Porphyry's essay (Seminar Classics 1969). Though the significantly older and inferior translation of Thomas Taylor (1823) is hyperlinked for quick reference, Taylor's translation should not detract from the better Arethusa edition.

[4] "Him" is Zoroaster, Mithraism's putative founder. In form, this is a myth of origins; but since Porphyry nowhere says or implies that what Mithraists do "now" differs from what Zoroaster did "then," we can accept that Porphyry is speaking (or supposes he is speaking) of the standard mithraeum of his own day.

[5] "Mithraeum" too is a scholarly neologism.

of the descent of souls and their exit back out again"; and (4) that it realized its intended form as a literal microcosm by incorporating "symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos" in "proportionate arrangement."

Strangely, however, what appears at first sight to be germane information from a contemporaneous source about the design and function of the mithraeum is generally either ignored or dismissed offhandedly by modern scholars. For example, Jan Bremmer (2014, 130 n. 109), in an otherwise exhaustive book titled *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*, even though at one point he cites this very passage from *On the Cave*, fails to mention its assertion that "induction into a mystery" was precisely the intent behind the mithraeum's design! The only modern scholar of Mithraism to engage with this issue in a substantial way—the present author excepted—has been Robert Turcan. This he did in his 1975 monograph *Mithras Platonicus: Recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra*. The title, as the saying goes, "says it all." What the Neoplatonic authors, Porphyry foremost among them, give us is not really Mithraism at all, but a *Neoplatonic construction* of Mithraism. I have challenged this view in my monograph on the cult (Beck 2006), specifically in an appendix with the title "On Porphyry's *De antro nympharum* as a reliable source of data on the Mithraic mysteries." I shall expand these arguments here, focusing particularly on what Porphyry had to say about the mithraeum as a mechanism for "inducting the initiate into a mystery of the descent of souls and their exit back out again" (*On the Cave* 6 [= §2 in older translations]).

Let us ask, then, if Porphyry's information is accurate, at least for *some* mithraea and thus for the Mithraic communities which constructed, maintained, and used them. That *all* mithraea were constructed to this template for the purpose of enabling "a mystery of the descent of souls and their exit back out again" I shall not argue, since it would presuppose the sort of detailed, universally binding teaching alien to the mystery cults, as to all forms of ancient paganism. I shall claim only that the template was current in the city of Rome, its port of Ostia, and in areas to the northwest (Etruria) and southeast (as far as Campania) during the late second and the third centuries CE. Even that should not be taken to mean that it was the norm in those areas at that time. Nor shall I argue that it was

some sort of package deal in which commitment to a part entailed commitment to the whole. Mithraea might be called "caves" and as such considered "images of the universe" in a general way without the sort of detailed microcosm-to-macrocosm correspondences and initiations that Porphyry intimates. One size, emphatically, does *not* fit all.

On the first of the four propositions there is no dispute. That the mithraeum was a "cave" is confirmed both epigraphically—it is called a "cave" in inscriptions[6]—and occasionally by instantiation in natural caves, where available,[7] and elsewhere often in barrel-vaulted inner rooms which *ipso facto* look like caves and which are sometimes decorated naturalistically with lumps of pumice, sea shells, etc.[8] That mithraea were "caves" is probably as close to a truth about the cult acknowledged *semper et ubique* as one gets.

The second proposition is nowhere confirmed epigraphically. No inscription calls a mithraeum an "image of the universe." Verification depends therefore on examining the fourth proposition: put as a question, do extant mithraea incorporate in "proportionate arrangement symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos"?

In one respect, however, the mithraeum qua cave certainly does resemble the apparent universe. A natural cave is an inside without a clearly defined outside;[9] so is the apparent universe. And so, usually, are mithraea. Frequently they are rooms or suites of rooms within larger buildings. And when they are self-contained buildings, in dramatic contrast to the standard temples of classical antiquity, they seem to have had no exterior decoration at all. A mithraeum, literally, is all interior.

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[6] See the epigraphical indices to both volumes of *CIMRM*, s. *antrum* and *spelaeum*.

[7] A spectacular example is the cave recently discovered in Doliche in ancient Commagene, containing two separate mithraea (see Schütte-Maischatz and Winter 2000). Sometimes the relief of the bull-killing Mithras was carved into a cliff or rock face, thus forming one of the mithraeum's four sides (e.g. *CIMRM* 1901–02 [Jajce, Dalmatia]; Beck 1984 [Arupium, Dalmatia]). For images of Mithraic monuments (both mithraea and icons), see Google Images, s. "Mithras." One should, however, exercise caution: some of the images are make-believe modern fantasies.

[8] Pumice and seashells (e.g., *CIMRM* 389 [Barberini Mithraeum, Rome]).

[9] See Porphyry, *On the Cave* 5 (= §2 in older translations).

Porphyry's third point, that the mithraeum is designed to "induct the initiate into a mystery of the descent of souls and their exit back out again," is of course the claim that concerns us most. Again, however, we cannot test it until we have looked more closely at the fourth proposition that the mithraeum achieves its status as microcosm by incorporating "symbols of the elements and climates of the [macro]cosmos" in "proportionate arrangement," since it is precisely the mithraeum's authenticity as microcosm that enables the mystery of the cosmic "descent of souls and their exit back out again."

In excavated mithraea, then, do we actually find "symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos" in "proportionate arrangement"? Short answer: Yes we do. Immediate qualification: yes, but not in many. However, bracketing off those that have "cosmic symbols proportionately arranged" from those that do not and treating the former as a special and very limited class is far too simplistic. For it is entirely possible that what is *explicit* in the few Porphyrean mithraea (if we may term them such) is *implicit* in many, many others. How so?

All, or almost all, mithraea contain a representation of the bull-killing Mithras in relief or freestanding sculpture or in fresco at the end of the room opposite the entrance. A reproduction *in situ* of what was probably the original tauroctony of the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres at Ostia, the mithraeum which will concern us most in the present study, may be seen in a website devoted to this mithraeum (see further n. 12 below).

Mithras is the Sun, and the Sun, qua one of the seven planets, is technically an "element" of the cosmos. It follows that at least one symbol of an important "cosmic element" is positioned in a particular place in the vast majority of mithraea. It is a *norm* of their design, not merely an option.

The image of the god in the sanctuary, or its equivalent, is a feature of many religious structures, not just Mithraism's. A more unusual feature of the mithraeum is the pair of side-benches, intended principally for feasting and fellowship, on either side of the central aisle leading from the entrance to the cult-niche.

Opposition, as I have demonstrated at length in my book on the cult (Beck 2006), is a fundamental concept in Mithraism.[10] If, then, we can establish from explicit symbols that in *some* mithraea the side-benches represent opposite sides of the universe, then it is probable that in others lacking such symbols the side-benches still carry the same representational freight, with Mithras in the cult-niche, both separating and linking the two sides of the physical mithraeum carrying some corresponding significance in the macrocosm represented. It is indeed a matter of probabilities. For how can we determine whether in a *particular* mithraeum the potential implicit in *all* mithraea was realized cognitively and ritually by the initiates of the community in question?

We should now look at the disposition of explicit "symbols of the elements and climates of the universe" in order to determine whether they are "proportionately arranged" so as to realize an accurate microcosm and thus enable "a mystery of the descent of souls and their exit back out again." By "elements of the universe" one is to understand the seven planets and the stars, in particular the background of stars against which the planets move and which constitute the band of the zodiac with its twelve familiar signs (Aries, Taurus, Gemini, etc.). "Climates" in this cosmic context are bands circling the celestial sphere north and south of the celestial equator.[11]

So let us take a tour of the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres ('Sette Sfere') in Ostia.[12] This, I must admit, is a thoroughly loaded choice: of all mithraea, it is the one that most explicitly instantiates Porphyry's archetype. Its floor plan is shown in figure 1. The

[10] See the numerous subentries under "opposition(s)" in Beck 2006, General Index.

[11] A celestial "climate" is the projection of a terrestrial climate, which is a band of terrestrial latitude parallel to the terrestrial equator, outwards on to the sphere of the fixed stars. The number of terrestrial climates was never definitively fixed. In one popular system, for example (see Neugebauer 1975, 1:44), there were seven climates extending north from equator to pole.

[12] Fortunately, such a tour can now be done online at Ostia: Sette Sfere, a webpage devoted to this mithraeum! The images of the black-on-white mosaic figures on the side-benches are excellent (many not available elsewhere). For the time being, however, ignore the various interpretations of the symbols offered in the text. In particular, ignore the drawing of the four cardinal points in the second diagram ("Schematic representation . . . Gordon 1976, fig. 2"). By the time you have finished the present article you will understand why this representation is entirely mistaken!

"cosmos" of which it is an "image" is shown in figure 2. In taking a tour of the mithraeum we, like the initiates before us, are taking a tour of the cosmos.

Both figures are diagrams of three-dimensional structures. Figure 1 is essentially an interior view of the mithraeum from above, as if through a glass ceiling. Figure 2 is an exterior view of the universe (were it possible!), if all its spheres—the seven planetary spheres (not shown) as well as the ultimate sphere of the fixed stars—were transparent. In figure 2, the off-vertical dotted line represents the axis on which the universe appears to revolve once a day in a westerly direction (indicated by the arrow above the word "Equator"). At the ends of this axis are the north and south celestial poles. Joining the poles as great circles on the circumference of the celestial sphere are the colures.[13] If you travel down one of the colures—it doesn't matter which—from the north celestial pole to the south celestial pole, or up from the south pole to the north pole, at the midpoint you will cross the celestial equator. Your celestial journey would be precisely analogous to a terrestrial journey in which, travelling down or up any line of longitude from earth's north or south pole, you reach our terrestrial equator midway. Too important to relegate to a footnote is my calculated lapse into the boreocentric equation: north = up / south = down.

Consider next the celestial equator and the two circles parallel to it, the summer tropic to the north and the winter tropic to the south. The equator is the path traveled by the Sun on the days of the spring and autumn equinoxes (when day and night are of equal length); the summer tropic is the Sun's path on the day of the summer solstice (the longest day); and the winter tropic is the Sun's path on the day of the winter solstice (the shortest day). This apparent daily journey of the Sun is caused, in ancient thinking, by the westward rotation of the universe, carrying with it both stars and planets. (We now know of course that it is merely an epiphenomenon of the earth's own daily rotation.)

Lastly, consider the ecliptic (represented as a red dotted line). The ecliptic is the path around which the Sun appears to travel

[13] The equinoctial colure also passes through the points of the equinoxes in Aries and Libra and the solstitial colure through the points of the solstices in Cancer and Capricorn.

eastward (the direction indicated by the arrow above its representation in the diagram) in the course of a year. The ecliptic is the central line of the zodiac, the band around which the other six "planets" (i.e., the Moon and the five planets proper) also appear to travel westward in their proper periods (from the Moon's approximately twenty-seven-and-a-third days to Saturn's approximately twenty-nine-and-a-half years). The speed of the seven planets in orbit varies. At regular intervals, the five planets proper even appear to slow to a stop, then move westward ("retrograde" motion) for a while, then slow down and stop again, and finally resume eastward motion. The band of the zodiac is composed of the twelve well-known "signs," in a sequence of four quadrants:[14] (1) the *spring* quadrant, beginning at the spring equinox (in the centre of the diagram, near side) and comprising the signs of Aries, Taurus, and Gemini; (2) the *summer* quadrant, beginning at the summer solstice (upper right) and comprising Cancer, Leo, and Virgo; (3) the *autumn* quadrant, beginning at the autumn equinox (centre, far side) and comprising Libra, Scorpio, and Sagittarius; and (4) the *winter* quadrant, beginning at the winter solstice (lower left) and comprising Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces. We shall also speak of the "northern" half of the ecliptic, which is the semicircle lying "above" the equator in the northern celestial hemisphere, and of the "southern" half, which is the semicircle lying "below" the equator in the southern hemisphere.

Let us next see how the mithraeum, specifically the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres in Ostia, instantiates this macrocosm. The diagram in figure 1 is a "plan" of this mithraeum. One cannot call it precisely a "floor plan," since what one sees is partly the central aisle and partly the tops of the benches on either side. As in all plans, the view is from *above*. It follows, then, that macrocosmically it is a view from the *north*. But a view of what? From the presence of emblems of the zodiacal signs on the front edges of the side-benches, one might well answer: the plane of the

[14] (1) We follow here the system by which the four tropic points are set at the beginning of their signs. (2) Fortunately for us, in antiquity the *signs* of the zodiac, qua equal lengths of 30° measured from the point of the spring equinox, corresponded quite well with the *constellations* after which they were named. Since then, signs and constellations have parted company, but this need not concern us.

ecliptic. That answer is true—but it is incomplete. The view is also, or alternatively, a view down onto the equator, a view *straight* down from the north celestial pole.

But how can it be both? The answer lies in the comprehension of the initiates reclining on their benches, not in *a priori* deductions from the architecture of the macrocosm. As academics, we must work with the latter, but it would be a mistake to suppose that this was how the designers and cult leaders saw it, still less the rank-and-file members. Conversely, it would be just as mistaken to discount the initiates' sense, acquired from teaching and experience, of where they were in the universe by virtue of being in a particular place in the microcosm of their mithraeum. Remember, too, that while this celestial architecture is for us an abstraction of relevance only to positional astronomy on the one side and astrology on the other, for the ancients it was apprehended as reality.

From a modern cognitive perspective, one might say, following Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002, 89–137), that in the constructed "mental space" blending macrocosm and microcosm, the initiates "compressed" the planes of the ecliptic and the equator.[15] This would enable them (well below the level of conscious thought, of course) to reconcile their sense of location on the level among the signs of the zodiac with their sense of the cosmos turning on a straight floor-to-ceiling axis at right angles to their benches.

In the macrocosm the planes of the equator and the ecliptic are joined—hinged, as it were—at the celestial diameter running between the equinoxes. It follows that if both planes are represented in the mithraeum by the side-benches, *the central aisle*—strictly, the central line of the central aisle—*of the mithraeum represents the equinoctial diameter of the universe*. We may confirm this by noting that in the mithraeum, at least in the Sette Sfere Mithraeum, the two signs of the zodiac on the bench ends closest to the cult-niche are Pisces on the right side in the diagram and Aries on the left, and on the bench ends closest to the entrance they are Virgo (left) and Libra

[15] In effect, the initiates collapse the famous chi-cross fashioned by the demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus* (36).

(right).[16] The spring equinox lies at the end of Pisces and the beginning of Aries, the autumn equinox at the end of Virgo and the beginning of Libra. It follows that in the mithraeum the cult-niche end of the aisle is indeed the spring equinox and the entrance end the autumn equinox.

In a very dense and difficult passage of *On the Cave* (24 [= §11 in older translations]) Porphyry tells us:

> To Mithras, as his proper seat (οἰκείαν καθέδραν), they [i.e., the Mithraists] assigned the equinoxes. Thus he carries the knife of Aries, the sign of Mars, and is borne on the bull of Venus; Libra is also the sign of Venus, Like Taurus.[17] As creator and master of genesis, Mithras is set on the equator with the northern signs on his right and the southern signs to his left.

For all its complexity, however, it is clear that Porphyry is talking here about the logic by which the Mithraists matched the microcosm of their mithraeum to the macrocosm as they apprehended it—in other words, how they incorporated "symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos" in "proportionate arrangement."

Once we have established the basic equations, that the aisle of the mithraeum represents—and so *is*—the equinoctial diameter of the universe and that the spring equinox lies at the cult-niche end and the autumn equinox at the entrance end, much else falls into place. Furthermore, the intent of the passage of Porphyry quoted above becomes much less opaque.

Just as described by Porphyry, Mithras is indeed "set on the equator" and the equinoxes are his "proper seat." Specifically, his cult image occupies the spring equinox, commanding the diameter of the universe from there to the autumn equinox at the foot of the aisle. Set where he is, Mithras does indeed have "the northern signs on his right and the southern signs to his left," the northern signs, as we have already noted, being those to the north of the equator (Aries

[16] Of these four signs, only the image of Libra is reproduced at the Ostia: Sette Sfere website. Unfortunately, the images on this site, although labelled, are not numbered.

[17] The function of this middle part of the passage is to furnish proof from a combination of Mithraic iconography and astrological lore. I have suggested the supplement "Libra is Aphrodite's" in order to restore logic to the argument (Beck 1976).

to Virgo) and the southern signs those to the south of the equator (Libra to Pisces).[18]

The diameter at right angles to the equinoctial diameter in the macrocosm is the solstitial diameter, joining the summer solstice in Cancer (upper right in the diagram in fig. 2) to the winter solstice in Capricorn (lower left). How is this diameter instantiated in the microcosm of the mithraeum? There is no obvious feature that *crosses* the mithraeum at its midpoint that would correspond to the aisle that runs its length. Perhaps a notional line running from the beginning of Cancer to the beginning of Capricorn, if we can determine those points on the benches from the positions of the mosaic images of the signs of the zodiac? Fortunately, however, we are not reduced to this unsatisfactory expedient. Not coincidentally, surely, we find at the midpoint in the side of each bench a small niche.[19] These niches are non-functional. We may postulate, then, that by replication in the proper position—"proportionate arrangement" again!—they are the solstices, the summer solstice on the bench to the left in the diagram and the winter solstice on the bench to the right.

The solstices, from a Mithraist's perspective, are the most important points in the universe. For in Mithraic thinking they are the points at which the soul-journey, intimated by Porphyry in *On the Cave* 6 (the "mystery of the descent of souls and their exit back out again" [= §2 in older translations]), starts and finishes. The Mithraists were not alone in this belief. We find it also in Neoplatonic speculation, where Proclus (*In R.* 2.128.26–129.13) attributes it to Numenius explicating Plato's "Myth of Er":

> By 'heaven' he means the sphere of the fixed stars, and he says there are two chasms in this, Capricorn and Cancer, the latter a path down into genesis, the former a path of ascent . . . and introduces a further enormous fantasy (τερατολογίαν) with leapings (πηδήσεις) of souls from the tropics to the equinoxes and returns from these back to the tropics, leapings that are all his own and that he transfers to these matters, stitching the Platonic utterances together with astrological concerns and

[18] Of the northern signs, the images of Taurus and Gemini are reproduced in the Ostia: Sette Sfere website; and of the southern signs, the images of Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, and Aquarius.

[19] See detailed illustrations of the niches at the Ostia: Sette Sfere website. The location of these niches can also be seen in figure 1 (in this essay, above).

> these with the mysteries (συρράπτων τὰ Πλατωνικὰ ῥήματα τοῖς γενεθλιαλογικοῖς καὶ ταῦτα τοῖς τελεστικοῖς).[20]

Numenius, in Proclus's rather censorious view, makes a patchwork of Plato, astrology (τοῖς γενεθλιαλογικοῖς), and the mysteries (τοῖς τελεστικοῖς). It should now be obvious whose mysteries—more strictly, "initiations"—Numenius intended: the Mysteries of Mithras. The astrology simply rode in with these "initiations."

Porphyry too alludes to this belief that the soul enters through a gate at the summer solstice in Cancer and departs through another gate at the winter solstice in Capricorn (*On the Cave* 21–22 [= §10 in older translations]):

> Taking the cave as an image and symbol of the cosmos, Numenius and his pupil Cronius assert that there are two extremities in the heavens: the winter tropic than which nothing is more southern and the summer tropic than which nothing is more northern. The summer tropic is in Cancer, the winter tropic is in Capricorn. . . . (22) Two of these [i.e., signs of the zodiac], Cancer and Capricorn, the theologians treated as gates. . . . Numenius and Cronius say that the gate through which souls descend is Cancer and the gate through which they ascend is Capricorn. Cancer is northerly and suited for descent, Capricorn southerly and suitable for ascent.

It is noteworthy that neither Proclus nor Porphyry in *On the Cave* 6 (= §2 in older translations) speaks of *teaching* the initiates anything about "the descent of souls and their exit back out again" through these solstitial gates. The mithraeum was indeed an instrument, but it was not a teaching aid. It was an instrument for getting the initiates down from heaven and back out again *in a mystery*. How precisely the mystery was effected must wait until further pieces of the picture are in place.

After the passage from *On the Cave* 24 (= §11 in older translations) quoted earlier, Porphyry continues: "They [i.e., the Mithraists] set Cautes to the south because of its heat and Cautopates to the north because of the coldness of its wind."[21]

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[20] Greek text from Kroll 1899–1901; trans. Lamberton (1986, 66–67), with minor changes and a correction (ἰσημερινά = "equinoxes," not "solstices").

[21] "Cautopates" was recovered in a brilliant emendation in the Arethusa edition of *On the Cave*.

Cautes and Cautopates are deities of the Mithras cult—and of no other.[22] In appearance they are small clones of Mithras and they are present in representations of his adventures, notably the bull-killing scene. They are twins, differentiated solely by the fact that one of them, Cautes, carries a raised torch, the other, Cautopates, a lowered torch. Cautes thus represents, among other things, ascent and Cautopates descent. In our present context, then, the descent of the soul into mortal genesis through the gate of the summer solstice (Cancer) would be represented by Cautopates, and the soul's ascent back out again into immortality through the gate of the winter solstice (Capricorn) by Cautes (Beck 2006, 107–12). And this is precisely what we find both in Sette Sfere and in the texts of Porphyry quoted above. Mosaic images of the torchbearers are found on the bench ends closest to the entrance.[23] Cautopates is set on the end of the bench carrying the northern signs (Aries to Virgo) and is thus to the right of Mithras in the cult-niche; Cautes is set on the end of the bench carrying the southern signs (Libra to Pisces) and is thus to the left of Mithras in the cult-niche. This is not only so at Sette Sfere, but also at every other mithraeum—admittedly rather few—where the torchbearers are represented as an opposed pair elsewhere than in the composition of the principal cult icon (Gordon 1976, 127 with n. 47). Once again cosmic symbols are found appropriately positioned.

Before turning from zodiacal signs to planets, we should look briefly at the "climates," whose symbols are also said to be "proportionately arranged" in the mithraeum. The climates of the universe are bands circling the celestial sphere to the north and south of its equator.[24] The arrangement of the celestial climates in both macrocosm and microcosm is shown in figure 3. In the upper diagram (fig. 3a) we view the macrocosm side-on,[25] essentially as in figure 2, though with the celestial equator and the ecliptic shown

[22] On Cautes and Cautopates see Hinnells 1976; Beck 1977; Beck 2006, index under "Cautes and Cautopates." See also the website of Roger Pearse, which has a good illustration of *CIMRM* 254, a pair of statues of the deities from the Mitreo di Palazzo Imperiale, where they were positioned opposite each other in the mid-bench niches.

[23] The images are reproduced in the Ostia: Sette Sfere website.

[24] See above, n. 11.

[25] The point of view is from *outside* universe, supposing such a thing possible!

simply as straight lines. In the lower diagram (fig. 3b) we see the plan of the mithraeum from above, as in figure 1. However, the benches with their signs have been opened out so as to pair the signs into their proper climates, three north and three south of the ecliptic. The climates will play no further part in our story, but it was important to introduce them in order to show that Porphyry and/or his sources knew what they were talking about *technically* when they spoke of "symbols of the elements and *climates* of the cosmos" in "proportionate arrangement" in the archetypal mithraeum.

And so to the planets. Symbols of the planets are shown in two forms at Sette Sfere. One form is as anthropomorphic representations in mosaic on the fronts of the benches,[26] as shown by name and placement in figure 1. Since the benches represent the ecliptic/zodiac, the placement of the planets in particular signs would seem to replicate an actual or ideal celestial configuration (Beck 1979). Only six of the seven planets are represented on the side-benches. The missing seventh is the Sun. The obvious inference to be drawn is that he is not missing at all, but is present as Mithras in the icon of the bull-killing, set in the cult-niche at the spring equinox, which is the point of transition from Pisces into Aries![27]

More important from our perspective is the other representation of the planets as a sequence of seven undifferentiated mosaic arcs extending up the aisle. These seven arcs are understood by all to represent the seven planetary spheres—hence of course the mithraeum's name.

This feature is unique to Sette Sfere, and it is not possible to argue that it is implicit in other mithraea in the way one can argue that the replication of the northern and southern semicircles of the ecliptic/zodiac in the side-benches is implicit in an indeterminate number of mithraea lacking explicit symbols of the zodiacal signs on the benches. Nevertheless, one can plausibly claim that at Sette Sfere—and only at Sette Sfere—there is a representation of that

[26] These images are all reproduced in the Ostia: Sette Sfere website.

[27] As I have already mentioned, the tauroctony on display *in situ* at Sette Sfere is a reproduction of what was *probably* the mithraeum's original icon (see the illustration at the Ostia: Sette Sfere website). If so, it is interesting that here at Sette Sfere the lining of Mithras's billowing cloak displays five stars and a crescent—i.e., the Sun's six planetary colleagues who appear in mosaic on the side-benches!

other part of the soul-journey, the descent down through and the ascent back up through the seven planetary spheres.

Origen (*Contra Celsum* 6.22) alludes to both parts of the journey, and says, moreover, that the Mithraists have a symbol for them—not indeed one constructed into the mithraeum itself, but a "seven-gated ladder and an eighth [sc. gate] on top":

> These things [i.e., the celestial ascent of souls] the λόγος of the Persians [i.e., the Mithraists, as in Porphyry] and the τελετή of Mithras intimate. . . . for there is therein a certain σύμβολον of the two celestial revolutions (περιόδων), that of the fixed stars and that assigned to the planets, and of the route of the soul through and out (διεξόδου) of them. Such is the σύμβολον: a seven-gated ladder and an eighth gate on top (κλῖμαξ ἑπτάπυλος, ἐπὶ δ᾽αὐτῇ πύλη ὀγδόη).

In sum, then, the soul descends into mortal genesis through the summer solstice in Cancer, located in the mithraeum at the midpoint of the bench on the left, marked at Sette Sfere (and in some other mithraea in the area of Ostia, Rome, and vicinity) by a small niche; it departs back out again in apogenesis through the winter solstice in Capricorn, likewise marked by a niche in the bench opposite. From the gate of entry in the sphere of the fixed stars at the summer solstice the soul descends sequentially through the spheres of the planets, represented at Sette Sfere—and at Sette Sfere only—by the seven mosaic arcs in the floor of the aisle; and through the same seven spheres, in reverse order of course, it ascends again to the gate of exit at the winter solstice.[28]

Porphyry, in section 6 of *On the Cave* (= §2 in older translations), claimed in effect (1) that the mithraeum was known esoterically as a "cave"; (2) that it was designed and constructed as an "image of the cosmos"; (3) that it was so designed and constructed for the purpose of "inducting the initiate into a mystery of the descent of souls and their exit back out again"; and (4) that it realized its intended form as a literal microcosm by incorporating "symbols of the elements and climates of the cosmos" in "proportionate arrangement." The evidence of actual mithraea as well as of two other literary sources (Proclus and Origen) confirms

[28] On the planetary spheres in Mithraic thought about the soul-journey, see Beck 1988, 73–85.

Porphyry's assertions, at least for a limited number of Mithraic communities in central Italy.

The mystery instantiated in the mithraeum affords an answer *in experience* to the twofold question: "whence, by what route, and under whose aegis did I come here?" and "whither, by what route, and under whose aegis do I depart?"

The experience will have been of two sorts: (1) *cognitive*, the experience of *apprehending* the mithraeum in whole and in its parts as an authentic and functional image of the universe; and (2) *ritual*, the experience of *enacting* within this microcosm "the descent of souls and their exit back out again."

The specifics of the ritual are lost. Presumably it involved movement or, more likely, signaling by gesture descent from the summer solstice (middle of the left bench in the diagram in fig. 1) to earth in the centre of the mithraeum at the intersection of the universe's solstitial and equinoctial diameters; then ascent and "exit back out again" from the central earth to the winter solstice in the middle of the opposite bench (on the right in the diagram). Proclus (see above) mentions "leapings of souls from the tropics to the equinoxes and returns from these back to the tropics," and ties them with "initiations," which are surely Mithraic. Could this allude to some dimly comprehended ritual of processing around the mithraeum with stations at both ends, i.e., the equinoxes, as well as at the midpoints of the benches, i.e., the solstices (tropics)? If so, we already know the significance of processing clockwise or counterclockwise. To move clockwise (black arrow at bottom of diagram in fig. 1) is to move westward and so replicate the westward rotation of the universe; to move counterclockwise (orange arrow at top of diagram) is to move eastward and so replicate the eastward revolutions of the planets around the zodiac. Finally, at Sette Sfere, to process up the aisle across the seven mosaic arcs is self-evidently to pass through the seven planetary spheres. But does this movement replicate descent or ascent—or both? If one has to choose between the two, I would favor the latter, i.e., ascent, if only because the anthropomorphic representation of the Moon, whose sphere is the lowest and closest to earth, is at the entrance end of the left bench, while the representation of Saturn, whose sphere is the highest and closest to heaven, is at the cult-niche end of the right bench. Further, it is appropriate that progress "up" the aisle from entrance to cult-

niche should replicate ascent from earth to heaven rather than descent from heaven to earth.

The routes of genesis and apogenesis we have determined. To the question "under whose aegis?" the answer, if it was ever in doubt, is surely now evident: Mithras. The soul descends and returns under the aegis of Mithras, as "demiurge and lord of genesis," set on his "proper throne" . . . "at the equinoxes." In the mithraeum, he is represented as the bull-killer,[29] set in the cult-niche at the spring equinox facing the autumn equinox at the opposite end of the aisle, which is the diameter of the universe, a setting intimated, as Porphyry (*On the Cave* 24 [= §11 in older translations]) attests in tortuous astrological logic, by symbols of both equinoxes.[30] There enthroned, he has on his right the northern signs of the zodiac, the gate of entry in Cancer, and Cautopates, the Mithraic divinity carrying a lowered torch who presides over descent into genesis; and on his left the southern signs, the gate of exit in Capricorn, and Cautes, the divinity with a raised torch who presides over ascent back out into apogenesis.

Two questions remain. First, was the cycle of genesis and apogenesis and the soul's "descent and exit back out again" thought to be repeated? Unfortunately, there is not a scrap of evidence pointing one way or another. Secondly, was genesis considered a misfortune and apogenesis desirable? Did Mithraism harbor the "life is death and death is life" paradox? Generally, the ethos of the monuments suggests that in Mithraism material life and corporality were considered good, a legacy, I would still say, from its Iranian antecedents. There is no intimation of gnostic horror at the material, and no intimation of the soul's ascent as an escape through essentially malevolent powers at the gates through the planetary spheres. In Mithraism the seven planets were benevolent, and especially so as the guardians of the seven grades of initiation (Beck

[29] There is no evidence that the bull-killing *enables* the descent and ascent of souls—of all souls or just Mithraic souls. Of course, there may have been some speculative talk among Mithraists about it, but it cannot be a lost item of Mithraic "theology" or "doctrine" for the simple reason that Mithraism was not that sort of theologically doctrinal religion.

[30] In Sette Sfere (fig. 1), observe that "the knife (μάχαιραν) of Aries, the sign of Mars" appears not only in the icon of the bull-killing in the cult-niche, i.e., at the spring equinox, but also by itself as a mosaic in the floor at the entrance—where it is close to the image of Mars on the bench on the right!

1988, 1–11). One concludes, then, that both the way down and the way up were good. For a Mithraist the universe was well disposed.

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Figure 1:
Plan of the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres (Sette Sfere), Ostia

Drawing based on Vermaseren 1956–1960, 1.122, fig. 71
Redrawn and adapted by R. Beck and F. S. Tappenden

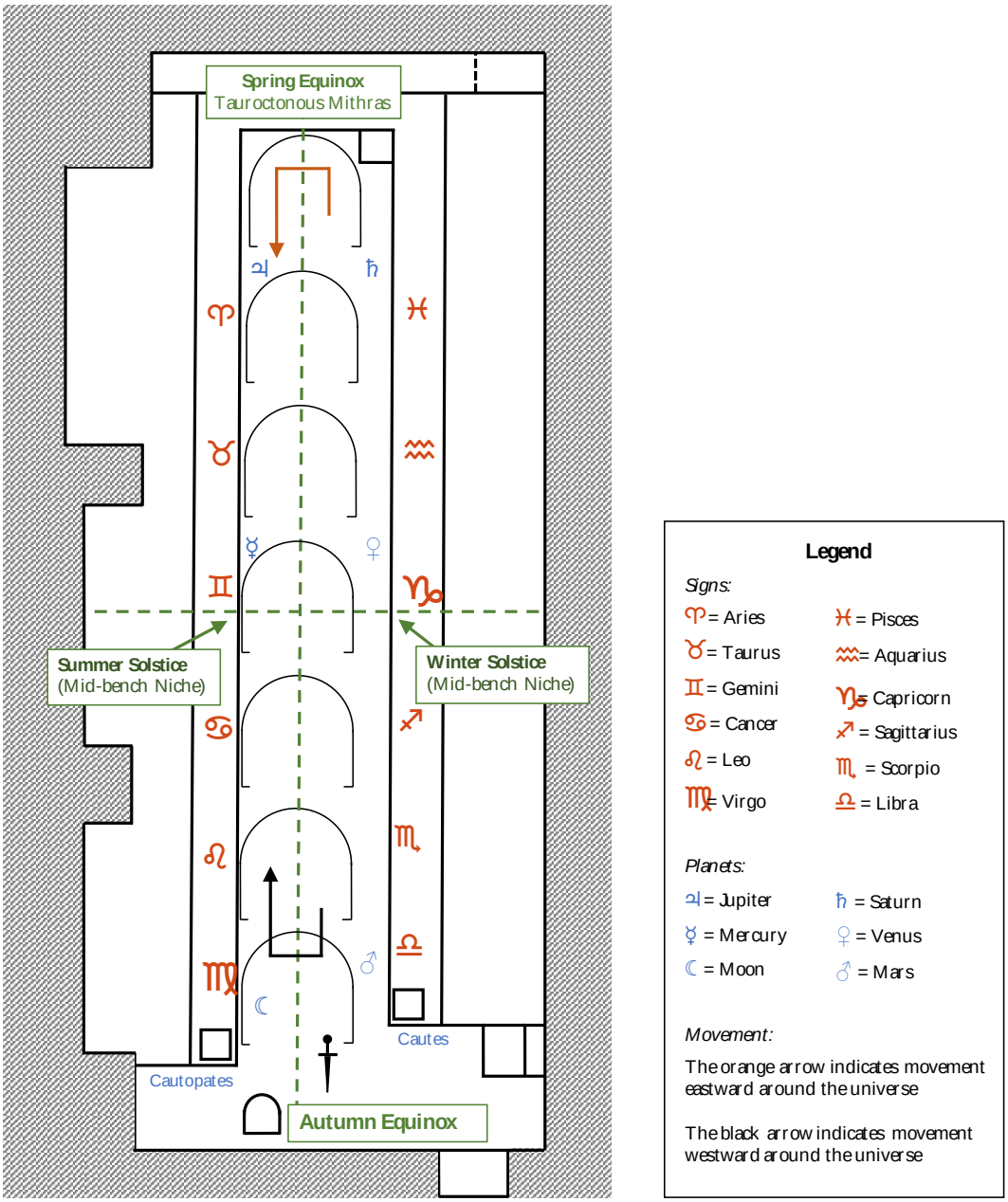
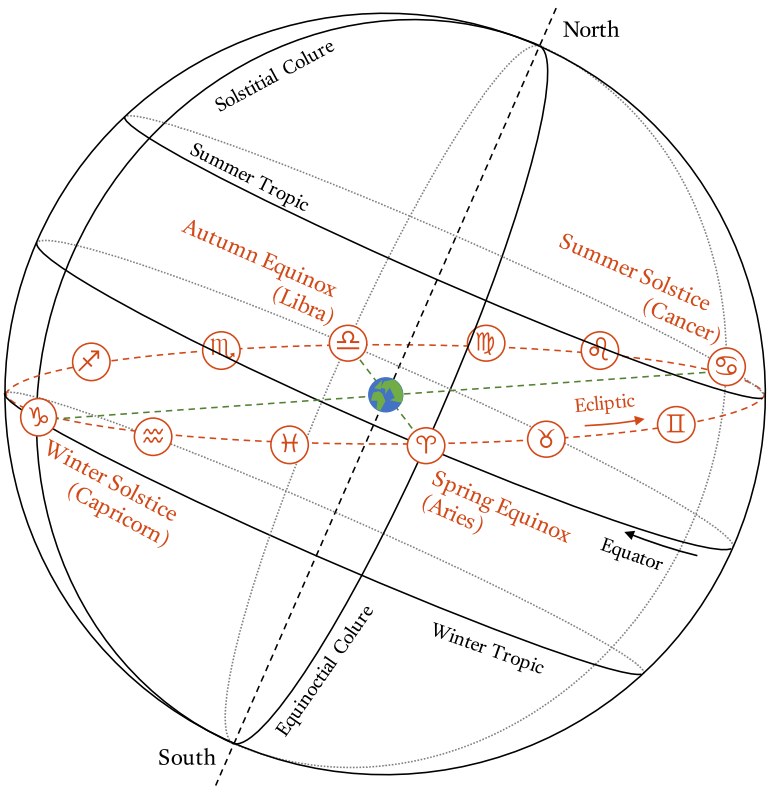


Figure 2:
Diagram of the Cosmos as apprehended at the Time of the Mysteries of Mithras
Drawing by R. Beck and F. S. Tappenden



Legend:

♈ = Aries
♉ = Taurus
♊ = Gemini
♋ = Cancer
♌ = Leo
♍ = Virgo
♎ = Libra
♏ = Scorpio
♐ = Sagittarius
♑ = Capricorn
♒ = Aquarius
♓ = Pisces

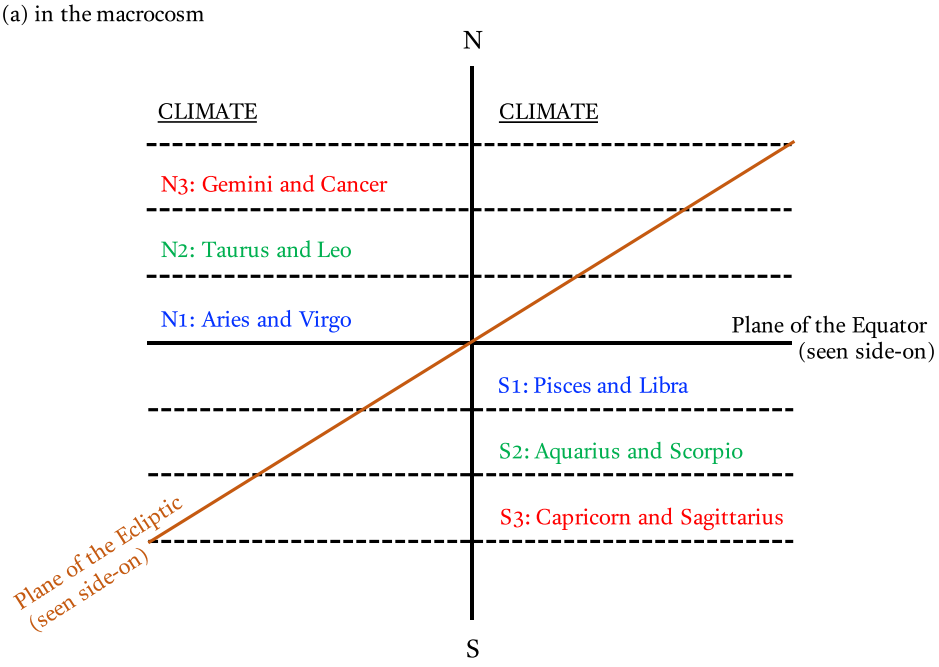
The orange arrow above the ecliptic indicates the direction of the Sun's apparent annual motion eastward through the signs of the zodiac.

The black arrow below the equator indicates the direction of the apparent daily westward rotation of the entire celestial sphere.

Figure 3:
The disposition of the "climates of the universe" (a) in the macrocosm and (b) in the microcosm of the mithraeum (the example of Sette Sfere)

Drawings by R. Beck
Fig. 3a reproduced (with permission) from Beck forthcoming (Fig. 3)
Fig. 3b reproduced (with permission) from Beck 2015, 1672 (Fig. 150.2) and Beck forthcoming (Fig. 4)

(a) in the macrocosm



(b) in the microcosm

