The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun, Roger Beck, OUP Oxford, 2006, 0198140894, 9780198140894, 285 pages. A study of the religious system of Mithraism, one of the ‘mystery cults’ popular in the Roman Empire contemporary with early Christianity. Roger Beck describes Mithraism from the point of view of the initiate engaging with the religion and its rich symbolic system in thought, word, ritual action, and cult life. He employs the methods of anthropology of religion and the new cognitive science of religion to explore in detail the semiotics of the Mysteries' astral symbolism, which has been the principal subject of his many previous publications on the cult.

Captive Star, Nora Roberts, Dec 19, 2011, Fiction, 293 pages. LADY ON THE LAM It should have been a piece of cake. All he had to do was pick up some pretty little bail jumper who wasn’t even bothering to hide. But cynical bounty hunter ....

The Roman Cult of Mithras The God and His Mysteries, Manfred Clauss, 2001, History, 256 pages. The Mithras cult first became evident in Rome towards the end of the first century AD. During the next two centuries, it spread to the frontiers of the Western empire ....


Secret Star, Nora Roberts, Dec 19, 2011, Fiction, 290 pages. MURDERED MILLIONAIRESS He was standing face-to-face with a dead woman. . . and she was holding a gun. Lieutenant Seth Buchanan’s homicide investigation—and his heart—were ....

Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology An Argument for Continuity, Carol Harrison, Jan 19, 2006, Religion, 302 pages. Carol Harrison challenges the almost universally accepted interpretation of the development of Augustine’s theology. In this book she proposes a new thesis, arguing for a ....

Roman Ideas of Deity in the Last Century Before the Christian Era Lectures Delivered in Oxford for the Common University Fund, W. Warde Fowler, 2007, Social Science, 180 pages. PREFACE. THE Author of this very practical treatise on Scotch Loch - Fishing desires clearly that it may be of use to all who had it. He does not pretend to have written ....

A study of the religious system of Mithraism, one of the 'mystery cults' popular in the Roman Empire contemporary with early Christianity. Roger Beck describes Mithraism from the point of view of the initiate engaging with the religion and its rich symbolic system in thought, word, ritual action, and cult life. He employs the methods of anthropology of religion and the new cognitive science of religion to explore in detail the semiotics of the Mysteries' astral symbolism, which has been the principal subject of his many previous publications on the cult.

Given Beck's credentials and his reputation as an erudite scholar of the enigmatic mysteries of Mithras, one might rightly expect that this book would break new ground. Beck does not disappoint. The book is engagingly written and is an exemplar of how scholarship can be pursued in a fair, engaging manner. (Richard S. Ascough, Studies in Religion)

This makes for an interesting eclectic journey through one of the most mysterious cults in the Roman Empire... Throughout the book this interpretative scheme is filled out with impressively meticulous analysis of the textual evidence, the symbolic structutre of the mithraeum, and the tauroctony. (Anders Lisdorf, Journal of Roman Studies)

not only compulsory reading for any scholar or student working on Mithraism, but ought to be taken full account of also by anyone with an interest in the study of ancient religion in general ... the persistent reader will be rewarded with the rich experience of having his or her thoughts continuously provoked by a great historian of ancient religion in the course of his attempts to make sense of the fascinating phenomena that were the Mithraic mysteries. (Ted Kaiser, Ancient West & East)

In dealing with the mysteries, Beck makes us aware that this is a religion which expresses itself through the medium of the visual arts. In this it is unlike Christianity, which expressed itself through the spoken and then the written word. In the absence of such "doctrines" how then do we learn more of the mysteries and what the initiate apprehended in the symbols of his religion?

2. The "harmony of tension in opposition." For this Beck returns to the seminal text of Porphyry's De Antro, which describes the fundamental opposites eg night and day, descent and ascent. (This was originally from a saying of Heraclitus.) As the book progresses it becomes clear how integral these polarities are to the mysteries.

He leads the reader by careful analysis through classical and Christian authorities who described the mysteries; and through a detailed description of "star talk" which combines the Graeco-Roman interpretation of astronomy, astrology, both linked to theology, whilst never losing sight of the context in which the mysteries developed.

In a short review it is not possible to do justice to the range of subjects covered by Beck in this impressive work. I was left with a sense of wonder at the many-layered levels of meaning that make up the symbols in the mysteries. Beck portrays a belief system that, to me showed a complexity beyond any I would have considered possible for nearly two thousand years ago. I was also left with the sense of an elegant religion that promised its believers a future beyond the stars and must have held great appeal to those living in times of such uncertainty.

As the previous reviewer stated, the book is academic. However, I feel that even so it is of little
value. The author spends more than three quarters of the book justifying his methods and applying them to other cultures and systems to show that they "work." He spends very little time actually talking about Mithraism. An entire section of the book is devoted to analyzing the Chamula tribe in Mexico.

This book provides a new description of Mithraism, one of the mystery cults of the Roman Empire, from the perspective of its initiates. Mithraism, which was centred on the sun god Mithras, is described as a complex of symbolic representations created, apprehended, and transmitted not only in the medium of an extraordinarily rich and detailed iconography, but also in ritual action and language, in cult life and hierarchy, and in the design of its sacred space, the mithraeum.

The study of the ancient mystery cult of Mithraism has been heavily influenced over the last century by the pioneering work of Franz Cumont followed by that of M. J. Vermaseren. Ever since Cumont's volumes first appeared in the 1890s, his ideas on Mithraism have been influential, particularly with regard to the quest for Mithraic doctrine. His emphasis on the Iranian features of the cult is now less influential with the Iranising influences generally played down in scholarship over the last thirty years. While the long shadow cast by Cumont is sometimes susceptible to exaggeration, recent research such as that of Robert Turcan demonstrates that Cumont's influence is still strong.1

In the considerable body of work on Mithraism undertaken by Roger Beck over the last thirty years, some significant challenges have been directed at Cumont's aims and, as a consequence, at the scholarship on Mithraism in general. In this, his latest book, Beck presents the culmination of important aspects of his work on Mithraism. This is an attempt to cement a different perspective on the mysteries, which he has been establishing for some time. There will be questions asked of this book and some sections of it will be met with skepticism. Beck, however, presents an extensive amount of material in support of his theories in a convincing style that is at times a little dense. The book is most convincing in its consideration of the importance of the Mithraeum and its iconography in toto, rather than what Beck sees as the prejudicing of iconographic interpretations for the purpose of establishing doctrine.

Beck essentially rejects the concept of an overarching doctrine of Mithraism, instead emphasising the Mithraic initiate's apprehension and experience of astrological/astronomical symbols. Beck seeks to establish a language of star-talk as a means of understanding how the Mithraeum and its iconography enabled this to take place. This approach is acknowledged by Beck as owing much to the anthropological work of Clifford Geertz and to Richard Gordon with specific regard to Mithraism.2 Beck makes an admirable attempt at using observations from anthropology and other disciplines as a means of understanding ancient Mithraism and its practice in more complex ways than before. Perhaps less convincing are parallels drawn with modern religious practice together with claims about the evolution of the human brain and how this might help us understand the initiate's experience of ancient Mithraism. Some sections of the book contain in-depth and, at times, close to impenetrable detail on astronomical and astrological phenomena. Each chapter contains a large number of sections and subsections, and it is not an easy book to read in places, but it is worth the investment.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which comprises four chapters designed to lay the groundwork for the second and longer section, Transition: From Old Ways to New Ways, which comprises six chapters. The first section critiques attempts made in older scholarship, and in some cases more recent scholarship, to reconstruct a doctrine of ancient Mithraism based on interpretations of Mithraic iconography. On many occasions in this section, and indeed throughout the book, Beck notes a general neglect in scholarship of ancient textual references to Mithraism. In particular, he emphasises the importance of Porphyry's De Antro as a potential "gateway text" whereby the activities and experience of ancient Mithraists might be better understood when
combined with an experiential approach to the Mithraeum and its iconography. On numerous occasions in the book, Beck emphasises a failure in the scholarship to ask not merely what the iconography means but how it means, and, in the chapters comprising the second section of the book, he attempts to redress this imbalance.

In Chapter 1, Beck discusses concerns over older attempts to discover Mithraic doctrine while concluding that more recent approaches to the study of Mithraism have resulted in one group of scholars working on reconstructing Mithraic doctrine and experience and another researching the cult more as a social phenomenon.

Chapter 2 emphasises the importance of Porphyry's De Antro as a potential starting point for scholarship to investigate Mithraism but points out that this has generally not been the case in modern studies. Beck's analysis of Cumont's aim to establish "the full theology of Mithraism embodied in the totality of scenes and symbols" is most detailed in this chapter. He is particularly concerned about the presumption that a Mithraic doctrine has remained for some the ultimate heuristic endeavour and that there is a positivist assumption that the iconography conveys little of significance above and beyond the mythical stories told. The consequences of this approach are that some have concluded that the mysteries cannot have been a serious and sophisticated cognitive enterprise. Beck points out that one of the results of this approach is that the monumental iconography, particularly the Tauroctony, has been privileged over other aspects of the Mithraeum including architecture and small finds and that this remains a significant issue in scholarship on Mithraism.

As a means of redressing the main faults of twentieth-century approaches to Mithraism, Beck suggests that, because it emphasises the significance of the Mithraeum itself, more consideration of Porphyry's De Antro would address the problem of undervaluing texts and the Mithraeum compared with the importance afforded to the figured monuments. Here, Beck is laying the groundwork for his elevation of the Mithraeum to importance alongside the iconography rather than in subservience to it.

In Chapter 3 Beck introduces the concept of the Mithraeum as a symbol in itself. In the process, he emphasises that the symbolism of both the Mithraeum and its iconography needs to be considered in terms of referents in the surrounding Graeco-Roman culture. This is because, in De Antro, Porphyry interprets the Mithraeum with reference to the cosmos. While Beck makes the approving observation that more recent scholarship has largely shed the idea of an ongoing Iranising influence on Mithraism, he sounds a cautionary note by claiming that the referents should also include those in Iranian culture. The most important referents in the surrounding culture are those of an astrological and astronomical nature, as Mithraism was "awash" with such symbols. Of key importance in this chapter and, indeed, throughout the book is the general scholarly neglect of the Mithraeum as a symbol and the preference given to interpretations of the iconography in isolation from the culture within which Mithraism operated.

The key theme of Chapter 4 is the rejection of the pursuit of a Mithraic doctrine in favour of the significance of Mithraic ritual. Traditionally, the Mithraeum has been seen as the classroom with its initiates as pupils. In much the same way that Christianity operates, there are those who are in charge and there are those who are the faithful. The faithful get from the iconography what those in charge put into it. In this chapter and in other parts of the book, Christianity is used as a point of comparison with Mithraism both from an ancient and modern perspective.

Beck engages in issues of modern translations of Porphyry's De Antro to further demonstrate that emphasis has been placed in scholarship on the Mithraeum and its iconography acting as a vehicle of instruction regarding what happened to initiates before birth and what would happen to them after death. Beck essentially sees the Mithraeum as an inductive vehicle whereby initiates experienced what happened before and what would happen after death. The claims made in De Antro are key to this interpretation, and it does seem that modern translations of the text have been affected by the development of Mithraic doctrine in modern scholarship. This is taken up in much more detail in chapter 7. The heavy reliance placed on Porphyry's text is bound to draw some criticism, and Beck
appears to be aware that this is the case. Ultimately, however, he believes that the neo-Platonists did not misrepresent the Mithraists.

An important part of criticising the modern emphasis on Mithraic doctrine is expressed in the concern that the mysteries have been co-opted by modern scholars into a constructed ancient intellectual tradition. The result is that ownership of the mysteries has passed from "ordinary" initiates to an imagined elite that controlled Mithraic doctrine. Beck points out that one of the results of this approach is reflected in modern scholarship, where inquiries into doctrine are pursued separately from those into the social profile and cult activities of the "humble" membership. This observation is the basis for identifying a range of scholarly positions on the ancient cult. These range from the suggestions of Ulansey, who sees Mithraism as a reflection of exceptionally precise astronomical knowledge among a small, intellectual elite in the ancient world, to Swerdlow, who sees Mithraic doctrine as so poor that the cult was little more than a crude activity of the common Roman soldiery. In between are the positions of Merkelbach, who emphasises the ongoing importance of the Platonic tradition, and Turcan, who essentially follows a modified version of Cumont.

Paraphrasing Beck's own words, the first four chapters are preparation for the hermeneutic road ahead in chapters 5-10. The six chapters which comprise the second section of the book, Transition: From Old Ways to New Ways, are a detailed explanation of Beck's position on the Mysteries of Mithras. Many of the ideas and concepts in this section were introduced in section one, and here we have a more detailed consideration of them. There is considerable detail in this section, and it is not easy to follow in places.

In Chapter 5 the anthropological approach of Clifford Geertz is applied to the Mithraic mysteries. The aim is to focus on the intent of the whole Mithraic symbol system by placing the performance of ritual and the construction, apprehension and utilisation of symbolic forms above the individual significance of the icon(s) or the sacred space itself. The greatest difficulty here is that Mithraic ritual cannot be observed, and Beck is well aware of this problem. He proposes that it is possible to undertake a Geertzian description of Mithraic ritual as the Mithraeum itself and the seven grades that initiates attained can still be entered into. It is possible to do this, he claims, by accessing appropriate referents observable within the broader culture of Graeco-Roman paganism. Essentially, the Mithraic model of the universe as conceived in the Mithraeum is the Graeco-Roman model established by Plato in the Timaeus.

An interesting, and clearly controversial, attempt is made to understand Mithraic ritual practice by considering the ritual practices of a modern religious group in Mexico, the Chamulas. Beck claims to be able to identify similarities between Chamula belief and practice and Mithraism as a further means of "observing" Mithraic ritual practice. Some will have doubts as to the validity of such an exercise.

Chapter 6 is methodologically related to chapter 5 in that it attempts to further reduce the divide between antiquity and the present in order to increase our understanding of Mithraic ritual practice. This is done using a theoretical approach recently developed in the cognitive sciences and anthropology known as the "cognitive science of religion". This approach is aimed at demystifying religious beings and operates on the assumption that the ability to form mental representations of supernatural beings is a function of the "evolved mental endowment of Homo Sapiens", p. 89. Beck claims that there has not been enough time for the brains of humans to evolve in just two millennia, so we should assume that we presently form representations of supernatural beings just as people did in antiquity. Ultimately, the claim is that we form representations of supernatural beings not by virtue of membership in societies but by virtue of being Homo Sapiens. Of concern here is that much of this is controversial and appears quite speculative, yet no references are made to any relevant studies in the area or to scientific work done on the evolution of the human brain. Ultimately, this approach is driven by the necessity to access the initiate's apprehension of the symbols of Mithraism if Geertzian anthropological theory is to be successfully applied.

Chapter 7 considers in detail the Mithraeum itself as a symbol within the symbol system so central to
Mithraism. Here the Mithraeum is presented as a model of the Graeco-Roman universe as it was conceived in Platonic philosophy. There is considerable description of the Mithraeum and how specific furnishings and architectural features are representative of particular universal and planetary features along with the iconography itself. These descriptions and analyses tend to assume uniformity of design of Mithraea across the empire which Beck earlier notes is not necessarily borne out by the archaeological evidence.

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