ISSN: 2632-4091 History *of* Classical Scholarship 6 November 2026
Issue 8 (2026): 141–176

Mithras, Magic and Appropriations in Roman Religion. An Interview with Richard L. Gordon

— Csaba Szabó and Richard L. Gordon —

Abstract

Richard L. Gordon (b. 1943) is a distinguished scholar of ancient religion and magic, with a particular focus on the Roman world. Over the course of a scholarly career spanning more than half a century, his work has left a lasting mark on the study of the Roman cult of Mithras, the sociology of Roman religion, and, especially, the historiography and study of magic in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. Gordon's intellectual trajectory is distinctive, indeed exceptional, in the extent to which it successfully bridged the British academic tradition and the German world of Altertumswissenschaft*, while French traditions of the history of religions and epigraphy also played an important role in shaping his scholarly career. The detailed life-interview presented below explores Gordon's personal and professional career, and reflects on the major historiographic and methodological transformations that have shaped the study of Roman religion, Mithraic studies, and research on ancient magic over the past half-century.*

Keywords

Richard L. Gordon, Roman religious studies, Mithraic studies, ancient magic, sociology of religion, biography

Szabó: You studied at the University of Cambridge in the early 1960s. What was it like to be a university student during that period, and which prominent mentors and scholars played a decisive role in shaping your academic and professional career?

Gordon: When I was young, it was customary in England for academically able boys to be expected to study Classics. I attended both a preparatory school, starting Latin at 8 and Greek at 10, and a public (i.e. private boarding) school, where this pressure was particularly strong. There were, of course, some very famous non-boarding public schools, such as Dulwich College and St Paul's School in London, where Classics was taught to an even higher standard; scholars such as Martin L. West (1937–2015) emerged from that milieu. My best teacher was J.A. Graham (b. 1933), who had recently come down from Magdalen College, Oxford,

where his Greats tutors were 'Tom Brown' Stevens (1905–1976) and Geoffrey de Ste Croix (1910–2000; New College), in their day famously stimulating Oxford ancient historians. Not only did Graham give us a thorough grounding in Ancient History but introduced us to Greek art, especially sculpture, and comparative grammar.[1] With a colleague, he even organised a trip to Greece in the Spring of 1959, when I was 15 — long before the days of mass-tourism. At Delphi, I remember, the owner of a local restaurant — this was only ten years after the end of the brutal civil war between the Greek Communists and the government — proudly showed us his guest book, with the signatures of Himmler and Goebbels.

In any case, when I went up to Cambridge in 1962, the number of people attending university in England was very small — it was shortly before the introduction of general grants provided by local authorities. Since I held an award from a Cambridge college, I was also granted a state scholarship: the Ministry of Education paid me £300 per year to attend university. There were also very few postgraduate students; postgraduate study was still in its infancy at that time. Even when I began my postgraduate studies, there were only about twenty postgraduates in my college, Jesus College, including those in the sciences. Today, there are around four hundred. In any case, all this was a very long time ago.

As for my college, Jesus: the Master was a famous Hellenist, Denys Page (1908–1978), and the University Professor of Ancient History was Hugo Jones (1904–1970), the great historian of Late Antiquity. The college fellow in Classics was D.R. Shackleton Bailey (1917–2005), then officially university lecturer in Tibetan, but later a distinguished editor of Latin texts after moving to Michigan and then Harvard. However, the member of the college who influenced me most at that time was Moses Finley (1912–1986).[2]

When I first arrived in Cambridge, Finley was in the United States for my first year, and I was therefore taught by others, including Roger Dawe (1934–2020), then of Caius College. When Finley returned, I wrote an essay for him on Herodotus — a topic on which I had already written at school. The essay was unusually long, about twenty handwritten pages or so, and he was fairly impressed by it, forming from that point a favourable opinion of me.

In those days, Part I of the Classical Tripos consisted of Latin and Greek, as well as three papers on literature, history, and philosophy.

[1] Lullies and Hirmer 1956; Buck 1952.

[2] Jew, Osborne and Scott 2016. Despite being often given as 'Israel', the 'I' in MIF had no true referent, meaning simply 'myself': Finley had no second name, and only allowed I. to be added out of pressure from US convention.

Between these, I spent the long vacation of 1965 travelling round Turkey on £25 — at that time, the Bank of England strictly controlled the amount of money one could take out of the country. In those days of the unstable third Inönü government, the entire Kurdish area was out of bounds, so I hardly got much further east than Antakya; but got to know the Seljuk architecture of Central Anatolia, the 'impregnable' fort of Amasya, stormed by Pompey, and the succulent yellow figs of Adana. Travelling alone for such a long time was in more than one way a maturing experience: one was practically forced to change money on the black market, which was strictly forbidden, and I had to bribe my way out of the country via the port of Marmaris, to reach Rhodes.

For Part II, there were various options. One had to choose a main subject and a subsidiary subject. I chose Ancient History as my main subject, largely because of Finley, and Literature as my subsidiary subject. Because I had obtained a First in Part I, it was possible at that time — provided one held a state scholarship — to take two years over Part II, part of which I devoted to reading up on later medieval philosophy, which later, when I taught early modern witchcraft, stood me in good stead. This is why I completed my degree in 1966 rather than 1965, in effect studying what was essentially a one-year course over two years. Unsurprisingly, one did well under those conditions. However, this also required taking an additional subsidiary subject, for which I chose Philosophy. The set book for this was Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* — though I would have much preferred the *Politics* — for which I was farmed out to Geoffrey Lloyd (b. 1933), then of King's College, who had delivered a series of brilliant lectures on early Greek science,[3] and whose work on the contexts of ancient Greek science, from *Polarity and Analogy* (1966) to *Adversaries and Authorities* (1996) has continued to influence me.

I should say something more about Moses Finley.[4] In those days, supervisions took place in his room — University lectures were something entirely different. During supervisions, one would sit in his room and read out the first two or three sentences of one's essay. He would then begin talking about whatever he happened to be working on at the time, and we never progressed very far with the essay itself. Eventually, he

[3] Lloyd 1970.

[4] As an American Jew and having himself worked in New York during the '30s for members of the Frankfurt School at the Institute of Social Research, including Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), Finley knew of the distress caused by political persecution, which he was later to experience himself. At Cambridge, mild antisemitism, mixed with anti-Americanism, expressed itself in occasional sneers about his supposedly deficient knowledge of the Classical languages.

would take the essay, scribble 'OK' at the bottom, and that was that. This was how he interacted with clever students whom he liked.

In the first year after I began my postgraduate studies, I originally wanted to work on Plutarch. Moses Finley dismissed this idea entirely, saying that it was nonsense and that I needed a different subject. Since I was interested in religion,[5] he suggested a topic such as *Religion as a Form of Pre-political Protest in the Roman Empire*. 'Pre-political protest' was the subject of a recently published book by Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012), the Marxist historian.[6] Moses Finley himself, although not a party member, was certainly a Marxist, and he was very taken with this approach.[7]

Finley was very well connected. Immediately after my finals, he arranged for me to go to Freiburg im Breisgau, where each week I attended the remainder of Hermann Strasburger's seminar on Thucydides, a text I already knew well, having read the whole in Greek either at school or as an undergraduate,[8] and devoted the rest of my time to improving my German by reading through the more interesting parts of vols. 5 and 6 of the then recently-published early volumes of the Fischer Weltgeschichte.[9] In my first year of research, Finley sent me to the London School of Economics, where I attended a conversion course in Sociology once a week — sociology was very much the intellectual fashion of the

[5] My parents, who were medical doctors but had both suffered the torture of being required to attend the Kirk thrice on Sundays (wonderfully parodied by Robert Louis Stevenson in *Kidnapped*, when Alan Breck Stewart and David Balfour come across a kirk in the Highlands, and overhear a fragment of the minister's sermon, 'thirteenthly, my brethren, and in parenthesis ….'), repudiated religion, and indeed I believe I had never heard the word 'God' until I began at boarding school at the age of ten, when there was a religious service on Sunday morning, and I remember wondering whom they were thus addressing. At Cambridge, however, in a flush of Scots fervour, I was briefly a member of the Church of Scotland.

[6] Hobsbawm 1959.

[7] Harris 2013.

[8] Finley admired Strasburger not merely for his work but also because he had refused under pressure to divorce his wife, who was half Jewish, and had been punished by being called up and sent to the Russian front, where he was badly wounded in the foot and had to wear a clumsy surgical boot. Finley also befriended several East German and Czech scholars under pressure to conform to the official state-Marxist line.

[9] Bengtson 1965; Grimal 1965. Incidentally, Finley was strongly critical of Bengtson, who despite having been a fanatical Nazi (he joined the party already in 1933, and the SA in 1937) was leniently classified by the Americans as a mere 'Mitläufer' and, typically for the Adenauer Republic, soon after the war returned to academic life in Munich and was thus enabled to reaffirm his highly conservative views (see Rebenich 2010).

time, promising an alternative to the discourse of mainstream political history. There I was taught by David Martin (1929–2019), the leading representative of the sociology of religion, and I learned a great deal about contemporary trends in that field.[10] This, as well as reading Max Weber's work on religious sociology, had a profound influence on me.

The following year Finley arranged with Henri Van Effenterre and Pierre Vidal-Naquet for me to go to Paris, where I attended seminars at the École Pratique des Hautes Études from November 1967 to May 1968, leaving just before the events of May 1968. There I attended the classes (in different sections) of Jean-Pierre Vernant (1914–2007)[11] and Vidal-Naquet (1930–2006) — the latter gave me the Italian translation of his denunciation of the French army's practices during the Algerian war and the connivance of the Fourth Republic, the book that led to his requiring police protection after threats by the *pieds noirs*.[12] Marcel Detienne (1935–2019) had not yet been appointed a *Directeur d'études*, but had just published his magnificent *Les Maîtres de verité dans la Grèce archaïque*[13] and often intervened in Vernant's classes — I remember a particularly brilliant intervention on the South Italian *tarantella* and 'tarantism'. Their primary interests lay in Greek history and thought, and although I was strongly influenced by them — I even published a volume of translations of their work a few years later[14] — my principal interest then was epigraphy. Louis Robert (1904–1985),[15] who taught in another section of the École, was an enthralling teacher. He would enter the room and announce, *'Aujourd'hui, nous avons une vocation à la géographie',* and then speak for two virtually uninterrupted hours, without notes, in an extraordinarily learned and entertaining manner. For Latin epigraphy, I attended the classes of Hans-Georg Pflaum (1902–1979), a jolly, good-

[10] Martin 1967, 1969.

[11] Vernant 1965; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1972.

[12] Vidal-Naquet 1963. The *pieds noirs* were the European settlers in Algeria most of whom returned to France after Algerian independence in 1962. Vidal-Naquet was grateful to Finley, who had given him access to his responses to hostile questioning before the McCarran Committee of the Senate investigating alleged Soviet infiltration into the USA, which became especially officious after the Republicans took control of the Senate in 1952. As a result, amid the current rage of virulent anti-communism, Rutgers University dismissed him for un-American activities. As far as I remember, V-N had been called as a witness in the trial of some *pieds noirs* in Paris. For a biography of V-N, whose parents, with the connivance of the Vichy police, had been murdered in Auschwitz in 1942 and who for many years refused to set foot in Germany, see Dosse 2020.

[13] Detienne 1967.

[14] Gordon 1980.

[15] E.g. Robert 1969–1990.

natured man, who went through procuratorial careers with us. I remember him confiding that whenever he bought a new book, he would immediately cut the pages — in those days, French books, such as Budé editions, came uncut — in case he should drop dead, and people would say 'Ah — le cochon, il ne les a pas lus'.[16] Occasionally too I went to hear Gabriel Le Bras (1891–1970), the sociologist of religion in France, and, accustomed to Vidal-Naquet's seminars, once committed the *faux pas* of asking a question, to which he sweetly replied, 'De quelle province êtes-vous, Monsieur?', and returned to his discourse. And once or twice I listened to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) on *bricolage* and the structure of South American myths.[17]

Influential though these intellectual experiences were, I could find absolutely nothing workable on the subject of pre-political protest: it seemed to me a completely hopeless enterprise.[18] In desperation, I then turned to the so-called Oriental religions.[19] I worked for a time on Isis, but that was clearly a dead end, since her worship was initially heavily promoted by the Ptolemies, and during the so-called 'second wave' under the Empire, though stronger in some provinces than in others, received local decurial, and then imperial, patronage — the attempts to control it in the late Republic were mostly due to political differences between the senatorial factions.[20] The same was true of Magna Mater, since the cult was introduced on the recommendation of to Xviri, and received a temple on the Palatine in 191 BCE, where numerous cheap terracotta votives of Osiris attest to its attraction for families desiring protection for infants, and its 'non-Roman' aspects, such as the *Galli*, subjected to control; as with Isis, the cult received widespread patronage in Italy and the western provinces under the Empire.[21] Eventually, I turned to Mithras and began reading the 'Conclusions' to *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* by Franz Cumont (1868–1947).[22] I took an instant

[16] Much later I wrote the bulk of three quinquennial surveys of Roman epigraphy for *the Journal of Roman Studies* with Joyce Reynolds, Mary Beard and Charlotte Roueché (Gordon 1993, 1997, 2003).

[17] Lévi-Strauss 1962; 1964.

[18] Since I worked on this topic mainly in Paris, I only came across R. MacMullen's *Enemies of the Roman Order* (1966) later, after I had begun to work on Mithras. Besides, MacMullen, impressionistic as ever, focused mainly on obvious topics such as conspiracies, philosophers, rebellion and magic, which were not my concern.

[19] On the notion see: Gordon 2014.

[20] E.g. Bricault 2013; Versluys 2004.

[21] E.g. Van Haeperen 2019.

[22] Cumont 1894–99; 1900; cf. Cumont 1906. On the life and impact of Cumont see: Bonnet 2005; Lannoy and Praet 2023.

dislike to both his style of writing and his fantastical theories. It was this reaction that led me to write my PhD on the subject.[23]

Sz. Franz Cumont died in 1947, yet his interpretations of the cult of Mithras were already being criticised in the 1940s, and several of his works received critical reviews. Were there scholars in the 1960s as well who consciously distanced themselves from Cumont's theories, and if so, in what ways did their approaches differ?

G. Yes, of course there were predecessors. There was a Swedish Iranist, Stig Wikander (1908–1983),[24] who argued that there was, in fact, no real similarity between the Mithras of the Roman cult and the evidence from Iranian religion. I think he was the most important predecessor in this respect. However, the reception of Wikander's work was quite sceptical. Scholars such Schlumberger, for example, strongly criticised him, especially his suggestion that the cult might have originated in the Balkans.[25]

Cumont, by contrast, was mainly influenced by nineteenth-century scholarship, particularly by the essay on Mithra by Friedrich Windischmann (1811–1861) and his posthumous work on Zoroastrian religion,[26] as well as by the new translations of the Pahlavi texts produced by James Darmesteter (1849–1894), which had recently appeared in Max Müller's series *The Sacred Books of the East*.[27] Cumont returned to a number of these Pahlavi texts and identified what appeared to him to be suggestive parallels. In its extreme form, he translated virtually all the deities of the Roman cult directly into Iranian gods, without any real methodological reservations. In order to make this plausible, he had to posit some mechanism by which these ideas were transmitted into the Roman world, since he was well aware that there was almost no evidence for a Greek Mithras, apart from a few literary references. Consequently, the Roman army was made to serve as the principal agent of transmission from east to west. In this respect, Cumont was strongly influenced by the German archaeologist Georg Wolff (1845–1929), who excavated the Mithraeum at Heddernheim III and was among the earliest — and certainly most influential — advocates of a military explanation for the spread of the cult.[28]

[23] Gordon 1973, summarised in Gordon 1975.

[24] Wikander 1950.

[25] On the impact of Wikander see also: Schlumberger 1953; Lincoln 1977; Beskow 1978. See also: Timuş 2000 and de Jong 2021.

[26] Windischmann 1857; 1863.

[27] Darmesteter 1880 and 1883.

[28] Wolff and Cumont 1894.

My own work on Mithras, which I began on my return from Paris and then at the British School at Rome in 1969, approached the cult from a completely different angle. Rather than focusing on the Rhine–Danube frontier, I approached it from an Italian perspective. In Italy, one can search high and low for evidence of a specifically military Mithras, but it simply does not exist. This gave me a very different attitude towards the subject, and fundamentally shaped the way I thought about it. It was also a particularly favourable period for such work. These were the final years of the Iranian monarchy under the Shah, a time when Iran showed a strong interest in promoting the study of 'Mithraism', not least through the organisation of international congresses. These initiatives were closely connected with scholars from the United Kingdom, especially John R. Hinnells (1941–2018), among others.[29]

Sz. This raises the broader question of how, in the 1970s, a renaissance of Mithraic studies emerged. What was its starting point? How did those highly influential congresses — organised by John Hinnells and others, by Ugo Bianchi, and later by other scholars, often in collaboration with Iran — come into being?

G. I cannot speak for Bianchi, who approached the subject from a different angle and had himself been trained partly as an Iranist.[30] In my own case, however, this development was entirely due to Hinnells, who at that time was a lecturer — later professor — of Religious Studies at Manchester. He had been a student of Mary Boyce (1920–2006) at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Mary Boyce attempted — ultimately without much success — to teach him Pahlavi and Old Iranian; he was very poor at languages and did not get very far. Nevertheless, he inherited from her a strong interest in the Iranian aspects of the cult of Mithras.[31] Mary Boyce herself, in the third volume of *A History of Zoroastrianism*, did indeed write — together with Frantz Grenet, now himself a professor at the Collège de France — a chapter or subchapter on the Iranian connections of Roman Mithras.[32] Even in the late 1970s, therefore, this remained a live issue for her, as it did for many other Iranists who continued to pursue this line of interpretation.[33]

[29] Hintze 2017.

[30] Bianchi 1979.

[31] Boyce 1969; 1975.

[32] Boyce 1979; Boyce and Grenet 1991.

[33] E.g. Gnoli 2017.

At the first Mithraic congress in Manchester in July 1971, there were several well-known Iranists present, including Helmut Humbach (1921–2017), Ilya Gershevitch (1914–2001) of my own college, the historian Richard Frye (1920–2014), the Indologist Paul Thieme (1905–2001), and the London archaeologist David Bivar (1926–2015), among others. They tended to dominate the discussion, and it was simply taken for granted that there existed a close and intimate relationship between Eastern and Western Mithras-worship. In his edition of the Avestan hymn to Mithra (1959), Gershevitch, although fully aware of the difficulties involved, devoted a substantial part of his introduction to this problem (pp. 38–44).

When I stood up and challenged this entire conception of Mithras, the reaction was one of incredulity — an indignant response to the very idea that this question might be raised in a critical manner. At that time, I was still a PhD student (although I had started working as a lecturer at the University of East Anglia at Norwich), and the Manchester congress in 1971 was the first occasion on which I met John Hinnells.[34]

In 1973, I went on an expedition across Europe with John Hinnells and others in order to take photographs of Mithraic monuments, working in Rome, Vienna, Germany, and elsewhere — Poetovio and so on. When the second conference in Tehran was held in September 1975 some of the same scholars were present, with the addition of Jean Kellens (b. 1944), Roman Ghirshman (1895–1979), Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (1910–2012), Hanns-Peter Schmidt (1930–2017), Rüdiger Schmitt (b. 1939) and others still.[35] But before that — even already at the Manchester conference — the name of the Shahbanou, as she was called, the Empress (Farah Pahlavi, b. 1938), was mentioned with a certain reverence. This suggests that funding may already have been coming from Iranian sources, although I know nothing concrete about that. By the time of the second conference, however, Hinnells had clearly established a close relationship with the so-called Pahlavi Library, a cultural institution organised under the auspices of the royal court. I do not believe that the Shah himself knew anything about this, but Hinnells had close contacts with the Director of the Library, Shojaeddin Shafa (1918–2010).

Apparently — although I was not present — the Shahbanou, Farah Pahlavi, came to open the Tehran conference. I never met her, and I very

[34] In his presentation at the grand Cyrus celebration in Shiraz in 1971 (Hinnells 1974), Hinnells was still persuaded of the close relationship between Iran and the Roman cult, a persuasion that lay behind his planning of the 1971 conference back in Manchester, but afterwards, during the period when he was editing the two volumes, he came round to a more critical position, reflected in Hinnells 1975.

[35] Duchesne-Guillemin 1978.

deliberately avoided appearing in the photograph that was published at the beginning of the conference volume. Why? Because I found the whole affair deeply embarrassing. We were staying at the Hilton Hotel, and I was often with John's secretary Mione, who was a very pleasant woman. We used to walk out of the Hilton and turn into the poorer quarters of Tehran, where one could see the everyday lives of ordinary people, their poverty, and the general conditions in which they lived. It was all profoundly disturbing. At the same time, we were treated to magnificent banquets. Scholars of Mithraism from behind the Iron Curtain[36] — people who had never seen such food — ate and ate during these extraordinary meals. It recalled the celebrations of the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire, when enormous sums had been spent while the population, particularly in the provinces and rural areas, remained in poverty. Millions were spent on spectacle while ordinary people lived in deprivation.

These two conferences, and especially their published proceedings, were real game changers for the field. Above all, it was the paper by Insler that created the greatest impact at Tehran.[37] I myself gave a paper on the *pater sacrorum* problem, which was never published.[38] Insler's paper, by contrast, made an immediate impression. What he argued — if I recall correctly — was that the bull in the tauroctony scene represents the constellation Taurus at its heliacal setting and therefore alludes to the Iranian spring festival of Nō Rūz (now Nowruz, 21 March). The reaction was enthusiastic: this, people said, was the proof we have always been looking for — the demonstration that Mithraism was a genuinely Iranian cult. It was however never quite clear why it had to be the heliacal setting rather than, say, the heliacal rising (summer solstice) or the cosmical setting … (i.e. the time of the Mithrakana/Mihragan), as Roger Beck suggested.

From my perspective, this marked the beginning of what I would call a serious misdirection. Scholars jumped onto the bandwagon, proposing identifications of Mithras with this or that constellation, and so on, endlessly. In fact, Roger Beck had already published something very similar earlier, but it had appeared only as a brief report of a paper delivered at a meeting of the American Philological Association in 1973 and therefore went largely unnoticed. Moreover, versions of this theory

[36] Băluță 1978.

[37] Insler 1978.

[38] I had taken it from a section of my thesis, but became aware of its deficiencies and failed to send it to the editor, Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin. Somehow a draft version circulated that was later rightly criticised by a pupil of Geza Alföldy, Fritz Mitthof (Mitthof 1992).

had already been proposed in the nineteenth century, so it was not, strictly speaking, a new idea of Insler's — rather, it was one that had been forgotten and then rediscovered. Of course, that was a different issue from the interpretation of the bull and lion motif, which rested on a quite separate line of argument. But in any case, Beck later became central to these debates.[39]

This brings me to Hinnells' other, in my view unhappy, idea: that the Pahlavi Library should support the publication of a dedicated journal. If the conferences themselves were intellectually questionable — at best backward-looking — this was an even worse proposal, because there were simply not enough scholars who wanted to write for such a journal (*Journal of Mithraic Studies*). There simply was no such thing as a comparative 'Mithraic Studies' ranging from Vedic India via Iran and the Roman Empire to the modern Parsis! Routledge, with whom Hinnells had contacts, agreed in principle to publish it, but insisted that the editor had to be based in England. Hinnells declared himself far too busy and effectively forced me into the role, as I was the only other available candidate. In truth, Charles Daniels (1930–1996) — or one of his colleagues — would have been a much better choice. In any case, I found it extraordinarily difficult to persuade people to contribute. Roger Beck, however, was very welcome indeed, because he wrote prolifically in defence of his theory of stellar connections. He filled an impressive number of pages, much to my relief.[40]

Sz. How, in retrospect, do you evaluate the renaissance of Mithraic studies in the 1970s? To what extent did this development shape the subsequent direction of research, and were the more problematic aspects of Cumont's scholarly legacy successfully resolved?

G. I am afraid that I regard the overall impact of this development as rather negative. What my own study, particularly my critique of Cumont, effectively did was to open a door. As Jesus pointed out, once you have driven the devil out of a possessed man, if you are not careful, seven other devils will enter in his place. That, I think, is precisely what happened when Roger Beck began to pursue the stellar interpretation of the cult.

Of course, the astral dimension is there — there is no question about that. But the idea that one could entirely ignore the Iranian context was, in my view, a major mistake. It opened the way to the pursuit of a kind of

[39] Beck 2004; 2006.

[40] Beck 1976.

phantasm: the obsessive identification of Mithras with specific stellar formations. This was a serious distortion.[41]

At roughly the same time — or very shortly thereafter — Reinhold Merkelbach (1918–2006) published his book.[42] Whether he knew anything about what was happening in England, I have no idea; he never cited the *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, for instance. Yet he had already published, much earlier, a rather similar pamphlet or article in the *Abhandlungen der Nordrhein-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* dealing with Mithraic cosmology.[43] In that work, he essentially took over Porphyry wholesale and transformed the cult into a form of Neoplatonism. At the same time, he revived the idea of a religious 'genius', derived from Martin P. Nilsson (1874–1967), who had already proposed such an interpretation in the late 1940s, in his *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*.[44] That work itself was, of course, an excellent synthesis of the problem as it stood at the time.[45]

This pattern of interpretation — seeing Mithras primarily through a Platonic or cosmological lens — was not confined to Merkelbach alone. Robert Turcan (1929–2018), for example, had already pointed in this direction in 1975 in his book *Mithras Platonicus* and later in his *Mithra et le mithriacisme* .[46]

Sz. It seems to me that at that time there were at least three largely separate scholarly traditions: the English, the French, and the German. Communication between them was minimal. Was there very little genuine dialogue across these traditions during that period?

G. Turcan, strongly influenced by Cumont (though he became increasingly critical), continued to assume an 'oriental' background for the cult. However, he understood Mithraic salvation as *bio-cosmique* [47] — a term borrowed from Jean Bayet (1892–1969) — offering a form of this-worldly salvation, in contrast to Cumont's more extreme conception of a mystery religion oriented entirely toward the afterlife, which in turn required

[41] See Beck 2004, 235–50.

[42] Merkelbach 1984.

[43] Merkelbach 1982; cf. Bonnet and Van Haeperen 2006 on Cumont 1929.

[44] Nilsson 1961 2: 675.

[45] For good résumés of Mithraic studies esp. since 1975, see Beck 2004, 3–23; Mastrocinque in Belayche and Mastrocinque 2013, lxix–lxxxviii; cf. Mastrocinque 2017, 1–40

[46] Turcan 1975; Turcan 1981. See also: Turcan 2016.

[47] Gordon 2017a.

extensive astral symbolism.[48] Although Roger Beck retained certain elements of the 'oriental' narrative, in particular by espousing the idea of an origin in the astrological speculations in the penumbra of the Commagenian court, he rejected Cumont's model of otherworldly salvation. Merkelbach, however, adopted a Neoplatonic version of Cumont's salvationism while simultaneously denying any genuine 'oriental' background — except insofar as the supposed 'genius' within the imperial household who invented the cult must somehow have known something about Mithras in Persia. How or why this would have been the case, however, was never explained. Instead, Merkelbach relied on vague notions of homogeneity and coherence without offering any concrete mechanism of transmission. This was precisely what Roger Beck attempted to address in his article in the *Journal of Roman Studies* 88, where he examined figures such as Tiberius' court astrologer Balbillus and proposed a chain of transmission linking astrology, imperial ideology, and Mithraic symbolism.[49] Merkelbach's view was also decisively rejected by Manfred Clauss, who rightly insisted that the subject of Roman Mithras is a primarily archaeological problem and study must begin not with ancient literary sources but with the archaeology and epigraphy, though in my view he occasionally remained oddly attached to some of Merkelbach's ideas.[50]

Sz. If we step back and consider the range of theories now on offer — the Cumontian model of direct Iranian transmission into the Roman Empire; the Merkelbachian idea of a Mithraic 'genius' operating in Rome, Ostia, or elsewhere; the hypothesis of a single founder or founding group proposed by scholars such as István Tóth, Viktor Beshkov, and Geo Widengren; and finally the astronomical or stellar interpretation advanced by Roger Beck — it is hardly surprising that this proliferation of arguments has proved confusing. The sheer abundance of the literature makes even younger scholars uncertain as to how these theories relate to one another. So how, today, should Mithras be situated within the broader framework of Roman religion — or within what you once called the 'encyclopaedia of the Greco-Roman world'?

G. Frankly, I find the continuing fascination with Mithras quite extraordinary. Yet I was struck by a remark made to me by Andreas Hensen,

[48] On the background to Cumont's ideas, see esp. Belayche 2011; also Bonnet and Van Haeperen 2006.

[49] Beck 1998, repr. 2004, 31–44; see also 2004, 323–29.

[50] Clauss 1990; 1992; 2012.

who teaches a course on the archaeology of religion at Heidelberg.[51] He told me that, among his students, Mithras is an exceptionally attractive topic, largely because it is an almost entirely archaeological phenomenon. As a result, Mithraism has become the natural terrain of provincial archaeologists. When they wish to speak about religion in the Roman Empire, Mithras offers an ideal case study. Mithraea are relatively easy to identify archaeologically; they have a distinctive and recognisable form. Over the past fifteen or twenty years, the discovery of a mithraeum has itself become newsworthy. This interest has also been fuelled, I think, by the internet. Believe it or not, Islamicist writers — and later Iranian commentators — have seized upon the suggestion, first made by Cumont and later echoed by Clauss, that Christianity absorbed certain elements of Mithraism.[52] For them, this serves as evidence that Christianity borrowed from an earlier 'oriental', specifically Iranian, religion. This perspective was reinforced recently when Iranian authorities announced the discovery of a Mithraeum in a cave in Iran. From that point of view, 'Mithraism' might once again be claimed as an authentically 'oriental' religion. And although Roman historians are unanimous that the Roman cult was an invented tradition, there are currently moves in Western scholarship to reclaim Roman Mithras as significantly Iranian; these include a project directed by Frantz Grenet at the Collège de France drawing attention to new research that might reinforce such claims.[53]

Sz. Based on your long-term engagement with the topic and the various interpretive frameworks that have emerged over recent decades, how would you characterize the Roman cult (or movement) of Mithras today? What is your current overall assessment of its nature, origins, and significance in light of ongoing scholarly debates?

G. Well, in fact, I no longer work on Mithras as such, though I have recently written an article on Mithraeum V at Aquincum, a site which you know well.[54] But apart from that, I have largely abandoned my earlier ideas.[55] Indeed, I am rather ashamed of my article on sacred geography, which I wrote in something like a state of intellectual possession or heightened illumination, when I suddenly thought I had seen everything clearly.

[51] Hensen 2013; Hensen 2021. See also: McCarty and Egri 2020.

[52] Clauss 2000 and 2012.

[53] 'Mithra/s en dialogue entre Asie Centrale, Iran et Rome'. Note also Lahe 2019.

[54] Kocsis 1989; Fitz 1989; Szabó et al. 2025; Gordon 2026.

[55] See also the Mithraic items from the Journal of Mithraic Studies collected in Gordon 1996.

Quite rightly, Vermaseren criticised me for going completely over the top, and I think that criticism was entirely justified.[56] As so often, later reflection prompts one to become aware of the unconscious but questionable assumptions that underlie one's early work — in this case, that the aim was to follow Cumont in assuming the rôle of Mithraic theologian, as if one were a latter-day Euboulos or Pallas.[57]

Today, I would approach the matter very differently. I would see Mithraism in terms of individual mystagogues or religious entrepreneurs taking hold of a fertile idea — an idea that was not a blank slate onto which anything could be written, but rather a kind of page full of gaps, intriguing gaps. These gaps could be filled, elaborated, amplified, and explored in many different ways, according to the needs and imaginations of individuals. They worked with a shared repertoire of ideas and images, which allowed them to construct a position for themselves within society — or perhaps more accurately, a position from which they had been excluded by the dominant sacrificial structures of Roman religion.[58]

In Roman religion, the paterfamilias occupied a central sacrificial role, provided he was in a position to exercise it — above all, if he was wealthy enough to own his own house. For large segments of the population, however, especially those living in cramped rented accommodation, this was simply not possible, or only marginally so. How, then, could such people perform the religious functions associated with the *paterfamilias*? Associations of this kind, including Mithraic groups, seem to me to have been perfectly adapted to a particular social niche — primarily for men occupying a specific intermediate position within society. These individuals could band together and attract followers by creatively filling in those conceptual and ritual gaps. Initially, they may have met in very small groups, perhaps in private apartments or similar spaces — where exactly, we cannot say. As soon as circumstances allowed, however, they moved into rented premises or pooled their resources to erect freestanding structures, as at Güglingen, where we see wooden buildings.[59] Later, when greater financial means became available, these structures were often rebuilt in stone. It is especially in military contexts that we encounter stone-built mithraea. Here, soldiers — and very often centurions and *immunes*, who enjoyed privileged status — were able to

[56] Vermaseren 1982, 55; the criticism was confirmed by Turcan 1982, 326.

[57] On these two voluminous Greek commentators on Mithras, whose work, cited only by Porphyry, has sadly not survived, see Turcan 1975, 23–43.

[58] See e.g. Gordon 2015; 2016; 2017 a, b, c; 2019.

[59] Siemers-Klenner 2020.

contribute collectively to such construction projects. They had the resources and the organisational capacity to do so.[60]

Sz. Does this mean that Mithraism functioned as an alternative society, a kind of competing social pyramid, or a refuge for the marginalised?

G. No, I do not think that is quite right. The truly poor had little or no access to this world. Rather, these were people who already had something to lose. This is why it seems clear to me that, in the cities especially, the primary participants were freedmen or the families of freedmen — individuals who had achieved a measure of success, who had gained the trust of their former masters, accumulated a *peculium*, and secured a foothold within society. For members of the elite, by contrast, the only realistic context in which they would encounter such cults was the army. This is why the evidence from Aquincum is so important. In Mithraeum V, we appear to have a case in Acmazo(n) — probably a slave or freedman of Cassius Pius Marcellinus — who seems to have introduced his patron to the cult and explained to him the god he himself knew. Where Acmazo(n) learned about Mithras remains uncertain. It may have been through contact with soldiers, or perhaps through his own putative origins in Asia Minor. We simply do not know. But it is precisely this kind of micro-historical constellation that seems to me the most promising way forward.

Sz. Numerous studies have sought to suggest that a cult of Mithras (or rather the distinctive Roman Mysteries of Mithras) emerged in the first half of the first century CE, and more recent theories — such as Attilio Mastrocinque's unusual proposal connecting the cult's formation to the Augustan era and imperial ideology, among others — continue to proliferate. In your view, what can be said about the earliest groups or communities? Do you still maintain that the proposed links between the Roman cult of Mithras and the religious or cultural traditions of the Hellenistic kingdoms reflect historical reality to any significant degree? How do you currently approach the highly debated and contentious issue of the cult's origins?

G. For me, this remains a major question mark, and I would actually prefer not to think about it. But if I am forced to do so, it seems to me that there is at least one indisputable element that is genuinely original to this cult:

[60] Gordon 2009, though the paper is in fact a critique of the idea that the Roman cult was 'typically' one of soldiers.

namely, the idea of cosmic renewal brought about through the death of a bull. This is an important Iranian concept, though it does not occur in the Avesta and in the Middle Persian sources it is Ahriman who kills it. We never encounter it in the Graeco-Roman tradition, and it appears to be distinctive to the Roman cult of Mithras. Whatever position one takes, one must accept that this is an Iranian idea, however it may have entered the cult.[61] The fact that Statius, in the earliest literary reference, already alludes to this idea seems to me to suggest the possibility of a written transmission to the West — some kind of narrative or doctrinal account — already originating in Anatolia, perhaps transmitted through one or another of the surviving groups in Asia Minor. Cumont, of course, referred to these figures as *Magousaioi*, following the terminology of the early Christian authors, particularly the fourth-century post-Nicene Fathers. Whether this identification is correct, we simply do not know.

However, there exists an intriguing inscription from Sarıhüyük on the border between Phrygia and Galatia, probably concerning misuse of temple funds, that mentions the *Magoi* in connection with Mithrês.[62] Although it is desperately fragmentary, it nevertheless shows that a tradition linking *Magoi* and *Mithrês* was present in Phrygia/Galatia in the first century BCE. It is by no means impossible that one or another of these groups developed ideas connected with the *Mithrakāna*. In that sense, a channel of transmission — textual or para-textual — cannot be excluded.

Sz. At the same time, we also encounter elements that appear distinctly Neoplatonic or Orphic in character. The motif of the cosmic egg is a good example. There is a well-known relief from Britannia in which Mithras is shown as being born from an egg. How is one to interpret such imagery? How did this element enter the cult?

G. To me, the answer seems rather obvious. It represents the exploration, by individual actors, of the spaces between existing ideas — the dots between the lines, so to speak. Why should it not? Mithraism was an expansive cult, one that actively invited precisely this kind of innovation. It encouraged experimentation, elaboration, and creative recombination. In that sense, it is entirely appropriate to describe the Roman cult of

[61] Gordon 2015, 452.

[62] Mitchell 1982, 306f. no. 404, line 4: κ]ατὰ μάγους Μίθρην [. Note the use of the Ionian form of the name, rather than with α-pure, regularly used by e.g. Euboulus and Pallas.

Mithras as a form of religious *bricolage*. One can see, then, that fragments of ideas I developed many years ago are still there, scattered through my thinking, lingering in the background of my mind.

Sz. In the English-speaking world, particularly in Anglo-American contexts, there has been a noticeable proliferation of neo-pagan and self-identified neo-Mithraic groups in recent years. Some of these communities even organize regular gatherings, such as the annual event known as MithraCon. What underlying factors do you believe account for the emergence and growth of these contemporary neo-pagan movements centred on Mithras? Furthermore, given the extreme scarcity of direct evidence for the liturgical practices and ritual texts of the ancient Roman cult of Mithras, on what sources, methods, or interpretive strategies do these modern groups rely on when attempting to reconstruct or revive Mithraic liturgy and ritual? How viable or historically grounded do you consider such reconstructions to be?

G. Well, in the Romantic period — or at least following the discovery of the Temple of Isis in Pompeii — it was Isis who effectively assumed this role. During the height of Egyptomania, as you know, there emerged a great number of imitation cults of Isis and related movements. These were often highly imaginative reconstructions rather than direct continuations of ancient practice. Most of these movements seem to have died out, although I must admit that I do not know their later history in any detail. What is clear, however, is that Isis did not simply disappear from the cultural landscape. Instead, she entered the world of occultism and nineteenth-century European esotericism, where she was reconfigured as a figure of the Great Mother — an archetypal goddess embodying nature, mystery, and primordial wisdom. Beyond that point, however, my knowledge becomes rather limited. I am not entirely sure how these currents developed in the twentieth century, nor what their present forms might be. The trajectory of this transformation — from antiquarian rediscovery, through Romantic projection, to esoteric abstraction — is evident, but its later history still remains, for me at least, something of an open question.[63]

Sz. Turning to the question of gender, why do you believe the Roman cult of Mithras appears to have been — at least predominantly or effectively — an exclusively male movement? The archaeological and epigraphic

[63] Nabarz 2005.

evidence yields virtually no unambiguous indications of female participation or initiation, with inscriptions, dedications, and representations of initiates overwhelmingly pointing to male adherents.

G. In my view, there were no female members at all.[64] After all, the overwhelming majority of Roman *collegia* were exclusively male. Some did have female patronesses, of course, but participation was generally restricted to men.[65] From that perspective, the existence of a cult structured along strictly male lines is hardly surprising. What is genuinely fascinating, however, is the account connected with the River Araxes in Armenia preserved in the pseudo-Plutarchan *De fluviorum et montium nominibus* 23.4 (ed. Müller 1882, 2: 663): Mithras, who hated the 'race of women' but wanted a child, masturbates onto a rock, from which a son, Diorphos, is born, whom Ares subsequently turns into a mountain.[66] As Walter Burkert suggested, this Armenian myth is itself a transposition of the Hittite myth of Ullikummi; but it evidently picks up a known feature of the conceptualisation of Iranian Mi*θ*ra.[67] The birth from a rock is repeated in the familiar iconography of Mithras' birth from the rock.[68] But what, precisely, does 'birth from a rock' signify? To my mind, its meaning is quite clear: it implies the negation of Woman. This is its latent, but crucial, significance. Unlike Greek Olympians and heroes, Persian Mithras does not require a female being to be born; his origin is entirely male — one might even read this motif as a deliberate counterpoint to the birth of Aphrodite. In that myth, sperm falling into the sea — into a formless, boundless element — produces a female deity. Here, by contrast, semen encounters stone: solid, fixed, masculine, and the result is a male god. Seen in this light, the rock-birth of Mithras appears as a myth consciously shaped in dialogue with such well-known narratives. Its meaning emerges precisely from that contrast: sea versus stone, female versus male, generative chaos versus rigid exclusivity. The story of the rock is not accidental — it is a statement. An interesting further 'midrashic' extension of this theme of negation of the female can be found in the (unique) motif of Baby Mithras picking grapes instead of drinking

[64] On this issue see: Chalupa 2005; Griffith 2006.

[65] Hemelrijk 2008.

[66] *Μίθρας υἱον ἔχειν βουλόμενος καὶ τὸ γένος τῶν γυναικῶν μισῶν, πέτρᾳ τινὶ προσεξέθορεν· ἔγκυος δὲ ὁ λίθος γενόμενος μετὰ τοὺς ὡρισμένους χρόνους ἀνέδωκε νέον τοὔνομα Δίορφον*. See further, e.g. Gordon 1980, 54–56.

[67] Burkert 1979.

[68] See the fine early article by Vermaseren 1951.

mother's milk in a bye-scene on the Syrian relief now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.[69]

Sz. Over the past fifteen years or so, your research has shifted significantly toward the study of Roman magic and Greco-Roman magical practices, which is considered now as an integral part of Roman religion. Could you elaborate on what led you to this particular area of research?

G. I started my academic career at university as a Lecturer in interdisciplinary topics (Ancient Civilisation) at the School of Modern Languages and European History, University of East Anglia. This School, by contrast with the traditional model of separate Departments, was composed of historians and literature specialists from France, Germany, Spain, Russia, and Scandinavia, supported by language teachers. Although it was an extremely vital and lively group, they wanted people who could help integrate these different perspectives — Classics in the broad sense seemed one plausible option.

A colleague appointed at the same time as me, Robert Rowland (1945–2023), was a sociologist raised in Brazil. He had studied in Cambridge, switched from Classics to Sociology, and worked for his PhD on clientism ('*sottogoverno*') and its imbrication with the Italian state, so long dominated by the Democrazia Cristiana. However, acutely conscious of the ethical problems of using personal contacts for such a politically sensitive project, he never published it. When the Carnation Revolution broke out in April 1975, since he was married to a Portuguese woman and spoke Portuguese, he decided to move back to Portugal, where he became professor of Anthropology in Lisbon, later enjoying a stellar career at the European University Institute in Florence.

While at Norwich, he had started a project on a new subject, witchcraft in the early modern period, and suggested that I take over this topic, to which he often returned in later life.[70] He had taught it for two terms as a special subject and had prepared a dossier of texts, which he handed over to me. For several years I taught this course on early modern witchcraft likewise as a two-term special subject, though it was reported that the topic had been cited in the University Senate by a scientist as evidence of the deplorable decline of proper university education. At that time, Keith Thomas's important book *Religion and the Decline of Magic* had recently been published, which included an entire section on English witchcraft, and also a volume of English witchcraft pamphlets, which

[69] Inv. no. 97.95.19; de Jong 1997; Gordon 2001 [2004], 100–102.

[70] Rowland 1990; 1996.

provided suitable texts for teaching, quite apart from the appearance of a reprint of an English translation of the *Malleus maleficarum*.[71] Initially, I thought there was by contrast little on this topic in the ancient world. However, the early work of David Jordan and Roy Kotansky fairly soon alerted me to publications of new texts, while the availability of reprints of Wünsch's and Audollent's collections of curse tablets meant one could conveniently work on them in one's study rather than traipse to a research library each time one wanted to consult them.[72] When invited to give a talk at Cambridge on this topic in 1980s, I therefore decided to focus on cursing in Classical Athens. This was the first talk I gave; it was never published, but it sparked my interest. I was deeply influenced not just by E.E. Evans Pritchard (1902–1973) on Azande witchcraft but also by Dan Sperber's critique of Lévi-Straussian structuralism and the rationalism of Martin Hollis (1938–1999), a colleague at Norwich, whose specialism was the epistemology of the social sciences.[73]

After moving to Germany, I began to work on this subject more intensively. One of my first articles there was on Lucan's Erichtho, prepared for John Bramble's Festschrift.[74] This marked the beginning of a deeper interest in the topic.

Sz. Can you say something about your move to Germany?

G. In 1979, I took a routine sabbatical, and was able to spend a profitable period of six months from June till December in Cambridge, where the Classics Faculty provided me with an office on Mill Road next to Myles Burnyeat (1939–2019), the specialist in ancient scepticism, who had just moved from London. This was also the period of the demise of the *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, which since the cessation of the subsidy from the Pahlavi Library and the employment of ugly and complicated 'Camera-Ready copy' had been increasingly burdensome to edit.[75]

On my return to Norwich, I felt I had little more to say on the cult of Mithras, yet uncertain where to turn next. Having written an article for my Norwich friend John Onians (b. 1942) on the ambiguities of anthropomorphic representation,[76] I began to work on the imagery of Roman

[71] Thomas 1971, 209–332; Rosen 1969; Summers 1969.

[72] Wünsch 1976; Audollent 1967.

[73] Evans-Pritchard 1937; Sperber 1975, 1982; Hollis 1977; Hollis and Lukes 1982.

[74] Gordon 1987.

[75] My own contributions to the last issue (no. 3), after which Routledge had already decided to cease publishing, were Gordon 1979–80a and b.

[76] Gordon 1979.

sacrifice and did present a paper in Washington in 1986,[77] but it was an invitation by John North and Mary Beard in 1983 to speak at their seminar at the Institute of Classical Studies in London on religious control at Rome that prompted me to resume work on priesthood, work that was finally published in 1999, though it stemmed from a talk at Lancaster in 1977.[78] At the same time, my present wife, who held a temporary post at Norwich in modern Scandinavian literature, became pregnant. In 1987 her position was, despite repeated promises, finally not renewed, the Thatcher cuts to universities began to bite, our son was born, and she decided to return to her alma mater in Kiel, where she had been offered a position as Assistentin (lecturer). Faced with this choice, I decided to take leave for a year; and then, since it was clear that she could not fulfil her job, write her Habilitation and be responsible for the baby, gave up my tenured position in Norwich.[79]

This decision I have never regretted: in one's forties, no doubt, one learns to weigh other imperatives against one's earlier prejudices. Many masters at my preparatory school in the mid '50s had fought in the war, even been injured, and hated all Germans; the padre had witnessed at first hand the New Zealand troops' hopeless resistance to the German paratroops on Crete; my housemaster at public school had been captured at Dunkirk and spent the remainder of the war as a PoW; his Belgian wife was crippled after being tortured by the Gestapo, among other things by having all her finger- and toenails ripped out.

Sz. Returning to Mithras, how in your view should we understand one of the most debated texts that relates both to magic and to Mithras, seemingly bridging these two areas — specifically, the Mithraic liturgy? You previously wrote a very influential review of Hans D. Betz's work on this subject. How do you interpret this text today, and what does it reveal about the connection between magic and Mithras as it appears in this magical papyrus?

[77] Gordon 1989.

[78] Gordon 1990. Mary Beard adroitly split the original piece into three, gave them new titles and provided good images with captions.

[79] In the years before moving from Kiel to Munich, I worked on several papers, which have gradually been published in various forms. My first longer publication on this topic, due to a chance meeting in Zurich with Stuart Clark in 1987, who happened to be starting on the project 'History of Magic and Witchcraft in Europe' with Bengt Ankarloo for the Athlone (London University) Press, was Gordon 1999, which emerged from my research on early modern witchcraft.

G. Going back in time, as we know from Macrobius' *Saturnalia* I, in the fourth century CE there was a significant attempt to synthesize the divinities in terms of solar aspects. It appears that the Mithraic liturgy is not merely influenced by this, but was part of the same search for unification — a characteristic Neoplatonic effort, possibly aimed at positioning itself in relation to Christianity. The author of this ritual was influenced by these ideas; however, this doesn't take us very far. The structure of the ritual, as far as I know, is entirely unique: it incorporated sequences of imagery, trumpet sounds, and other noises, and was highly original in its composition.[80]

Sz. You spent the last 10–15 years of your academic career associated with the University of Erfurt, which has become a leading centre for Roman religious studies, especially thanks to the projects of Jörg Rüpke, one of the most influential scholars in the field over the past decades. How did you start your career in Erfurt, what brought you there, and what were your main research focuses?

G. I was invited to Erfurt by Jörg Rüpke in 2002 to give a lecture. As it happened, my visit coincided with the first school massacre in Germany, which took place at a Gymnasium in Erfurt. I vividly remember the candles and flowers all the way up the steps leading to the cathedral in the Domplatz. A few years later, I received a request from Edinburgh University Press to translate Rüpke's short book on Roman religion.[81] Initially, I declined, but I eventually agreed, as allegedly no one else could be found to undertake the translation.

During this intermediate period, Rüpke (b. 1962) was serving as Dean and offered me an honorary professorship. I was grateful for the gesture and accepted. At first, however, my involvement was limited to teaching. Since there was no funding attached to the position — as is customary with honorary professorships — I was not able to be in Erfurt very often. Subsequently, Rüpke initiated a research project with Hans Joas (b. 1948) on individualism in religion, challenging the dominant assumption that individualism began only in the Renaissance or even as late as the nineteenth century. I was a member of the ancient section, and from that point on I began to visit more regularly.

My full engagement, however, came with the launch of the *Lived Ancient Religion* (LAR) project, an ERC-funded initiative in Erfurt that

[80] Betz 2005 with Gordon 2005. See now also Alvar Ezquerra 2010; Edmonds 2014; Dosoo 2026.

[81] Rüpke 2007.

brought together eight or nine young scholars to explore this topic from different perspectives under Rüpke's leadership. I found this project extremely rewarding. As you know, it has since become highly influential, not only within Roman religious studies but more broadly, as it moved beyond traditional collective models of religion and encouraged scholars to focus on individuality, innovation, and lived practice — concerns already central to the earlier individualism project.

Sz. In recent Roman religious studies, I have noticed that many scholars have adopted and developed this approach, even if they were not directly involved in the original project. At the same time, it has also attracted some criticism. For example, John Scheid devoted an entire chapter of his 2016 book on Roman religion to criticize this perspective.[82]

How do you assess the current state of the study of Roman religion in light of these newer trends? Do you see them as operating in parallel intellectual frameworks, as entering into productive dialogue, or as forming increasingly separate scholarly worlds?

G. I think the difficulty arises from the fact that 'Roman religion' has been used in two quite different senses. On the one hand, there is the traditional understanding: the religion of the city of Rome, above all the religion of its elite, as reconstructed from sources such as Livy, Sextus Pompeius Festus, and the wider antiquarian tradition. This approach concentrates on public cult, priestly colleges, legal regulation, and the ritual order of the Roman state. John Scheid clearly belongs to this lineage. He was trained within that framework, and it is therefore entirely unsurprising that he continues to define Roman religion primarily in terms of civic orthopraxy and adherence to formal rules. We might also think of figures such as Jerzy Linderski, and more recently Craige Champion, who in different ways sustain or revive this tradition.[83] On the other hand, from the 1970s onward, a rather different set of ideas emerged. First came the so-called symbolic turn, followed by the cultural turn. These developments shifted attention away from purely institutional and legal structures toward questions of meaning, representation, and cultural construction. In France, these intellectual movements were slower to gain influence; in Britain — closer in many respects to developments in the United States — their impact was felt earlier and more directly. The transformative effect of these theoretical currents is particularly evident in *Religions of Rome* by Mary Beard (b. 1955), John

[82] Scheid 2013; 2016.

[83] Linderski 1995, 608–25; Champion 2017; Mackey 2022.

North (1938–2025), and Simon Price (1954–2011).[84] Although North had been formed within a more traditional Oxford milieu, the collaboration with Beard and Price marked a methodological broadening. Price, especially through his work on the imperial cult in Asia Minor, was attentive to newer approaches shaped by symbolic and cultural theory.[85] The very choice of the plural — *Religions of Rome* — provoked considerable resistance among traditionalists, who insisted that there was only one Roman religion. More recently, James B. Rives, in *Religion in the Roman Empire*, has attempted a kind of synthesis.[86] His work retains attention to the civic religion of Rome while embedding it within a broader imperial and cultural framework — an orientation already visible in his earlier research on Carthage.

Sz. Over the past fifteen years, nearly four hundred monographs have been published on the religious life of the Roman Empire, including studies on Roman magic and the interactions between early Christianity and polytheistic traditions. What accounts for the remarkable popularity of research on Greek and Roman religion?

G. In my view, this phenomenon is largely the result and consequence of the cultural turn. For contemporary scholars, religion is increasingly understood as a component of culture ('religion is culture').[87] This represents a radical departure from earlier tendencies and methodological approaches, particularly from the traditional history-of-religions perspective. In my own work, I have been primarily interested in the sociology of religion; however, today religion as a topic within cultural studies can be analysed from the perspective of numerous disciplines. Popular research trends such as urban religion, lived religion, and local and glocal approaches currently define the most innovative directions in the study of Roman religion.[88] Religion should therefore be interpreted as a means of exploring what it means to be religious within the specific context of a given society, and as a tool through which processes of self-understanding and the construction of personal identity are articulated.

[84] Beard, North and Price 1998.

[85] Price 1984.

[86] Rives 2006.

[87] Scheer 2022.

[88] Taves 2009; Dirven and McCarty 2014; Szabó 2024; Graham 2025; Rüpke 2026.

Csaba Szabó
University of Szeged
MTA-SZTE Momentum
Mithras Research Group
szabo.csaba@szte.hu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000–0001–7527–6325

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alvar Ezquerra 2010: Alvar Ezquerra, Jaime, Mithraism and Magic. In: Richard L. Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón (eds.), Magical Practice in the Latin West (Brill: Leiden, 2010) 519–549.

Audollent 1967: Audollent, Auguste, Defixionum tabellae … (Frankfurt a.M.: Minerva GmbH, 1967).

Băluţă 1978: Băluţă, Closca L., Le mithriacisme dans l'épigraphie de la Dacie. In: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), Acta Iranica. 1.4. 17 Études Mithriaques (Tehran and Leiden: Bibliothèque Pahlavi and Brill, 1978) 1–7.

Beard, North and Price 1998: Beard, Mary, North, John A. and Price, Simon R.F., Religions of Rome, 1: A History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Beck 1976: Beck, Roger L., Interpreting the Ponza Zodiac, Journal of Mithraic Studies 1 (1976) 1–20.

Beck 1998: Beck, Roger L., The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis, Journal of Roman Studies 88 (1998) 115–128.

Beck 2004: Beck, Roger L., Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works and New Essays (London: Routledge, 2004).

Beck 2006: Beck, Roger L., The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Belayche 2011: Belayche, Nicole, Introduction historiographique, 1. L'homme de Mithra. In: Nicole Belayche and Attilio Mastrocinque, with Daniela Bonanno (eds.), Franz Cumont, Les Mystères de Mithra3 (réédition critique). Bibliotheca Cumontiana: Scripta maiora 3 (Savigliano: Nino Aragno/Turnhout: Brepols, 2011) xiii–lxviii.

Belayche and Mastrocinque 2013: Belayche, Nicole and Mastrocinque, Attilio (eds.), Reédition critique a Franz Cumont, Les Mystéres á Mithra. Bibliotheca Cumontiana. Scripta Maiora 3 (Rome: Brepols, 2013).

Bengtson 1965: Bengtson, Hermann (ed.), Fischer Weltgeschichte, 5: Griechen und Perser (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1965).

Beskow 1978: Beskow, Per, The Routes of Early Mithraism. In: Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (ed.), Études Mithriaques (Tehran and Leiden: Bibliothèque Pahlavi and Brill, 1978) 7–18.

Betz 2005: Betz, Hans, The 'Mithras Liturgy'. Text, Translation, and Commentary (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

Bianchi 1979: Bianchi, Ugo (ed.), Mysteria Mithrae: Atti del Seminario Internazionale su 'La specificità storico-religiosa dei Misteri di Mitra, con particolare riferimento alle fonti documentarie di Roma e Ostia', Roma e Ostia 28–31 marzo 1978. EPRO 80 (Leiden: Brill, 1979).

Bonnet 2005: Bonnet, Corinne, Le «grand atelier de la science». Franz Cumont et l'«Altertumswissenschaft». Héritages et émancipations, 1: Des études universitaires à la fin de la Ie Guerre mondiale, 1888–1923 (Brussels and Rome: Institut historique belge de Rome, 2005).

Bonnet and Van Haeperen 2006: Bonnet, Corinne and Van Haeperen, Françoise, with Toune, Bastien (eds.), F. Cumont, Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain. Bibliotheca Cumontiana: Scripta maiora 1 (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2006) i–lxxiv.
Boyce 1969: Boyce, Mary, On Mithra's Part in Zoroastrianism, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 32 (1969) 10–34.
Boyce 1975: Boyce, Mary, Mihragân among the Irani Zoroastrians. In: John R. Hinnells (ed.), Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975) 106–118.
Boyce 1979: Boyce, Mary, Zoroastrians. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices (London: Routledge, 1979).
Boyce and Grenet 1991: Boyce, Mary, and Grenet, Frantz, A History of Zoroastrianism, 3: Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule. Handbuch der Orientalistik, 1.8.1 (Leiden: Brill, 1991).
Bricault 2013: Bricault, Laurent, Les cultes isiaques dans le monde gréco-romain (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013).
Buck 1952: Buck, Carl D., Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin (University of Chicago Press, 1952). First ed. 1933.
Burkert 1979: Burkert, Walter, Von Ullikummi zum Kaukasus: Die Felsgeburt des Unholds, Würzburger Jahrbücher N.F. 5 (1979) 253–261.
Chalupa 2005: Chalupa, Aleš, Hyenas or Lionesses? Mithraism and Women in the Religious World of Late Antiquity, Religio: Revue pro religionistiku 13.2 (2005) 198–230.
Champion 2017: Champion, Craige, The Peace of the Gods: Elite Religious Practices in the Middle Roman Republic (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
Clauss 1990: Clauss, Manfred, Mithras. Kult und Mysterien (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1990) (see also Clauss 2012).
Clauss 1992: Clauss, Manfred, Cultores Mithrae. Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kultes (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992).
Clauss 2000: Clauss, Manfred, The Roman Cult of Mithras: the God and His Mysteries (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).
Clauss 2012: Clauss, Manfred, Mithras. Kult und Mysterium (Darmstadt: Philipp von Zabern, 2012).
Cumont 1894–99: Cumont, Franz, Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra. 2 vols. (Brussels: H. Lamertin, 1894–1899).
Cumont 1900: Cumont, Franz, Les mystères de Mithra (Brussels: H. Lamertin, 1900).
Cumont 1906: Cumont, Franz, Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain (Paris: E. Leroux, 1906).
Cumont 1929: Cumont, Franz, Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain4 (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1929).
Darmesteter 1880: Darmesteter, James, The Zend-Avesta 1: The Vendidad. Sacred Books of the East 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1880).

Darmesteter 1883: Darmesteter, James, The Zend-Avesta 2: The Sīrōzahs, Yasts, and Nyāyis (trans. E.H. Mills). Sacred Books of the East 23 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883).
de Jong 1997: de Jong, Albert, A New Mithraic Relief, Bulletin of the Asia Institute NS 11 (1997) 53–63.
de Jong 2021: de Jong, Albert, The Eclipse of Geo Widengren in the Study of Iranian Religions. In: Göran Larsson (ed.), The Legacy, Life and Work of Geo Widengren and the Study of the History of Religions after World War II (Leiden: Brill, 2021) 89–124.
Detienne 1967: Detienne, Marcel, Les Maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque (Paris: Maspero, 1967).
Dirven and McCarty 2014: Dirven, Lucinda, and McCarty, Matthew M., Local Idioms and Global Meanings: Mithraism and Roman Provincial Art. In: Lisa R. Brody and Gail L. Hoffman (eds.), Roman in the Provinces: Art of the Periphery of the Empire (Boston: MacMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2014) 125–142.
Dosoo 2026: Dosoo, Korshi, Medea, the Magi and the Memorandum of Aeëtes. In: Christopher A. Faraone and Sofía Torallas Tovar (eds.), New Approaches to the Paris Magical Codex (Berlin: de Gruyter) 233–273.
Dosse 2020: Dosse, François, Vidal-Naquet, une vie (Paris: La Découverte, 2020).
Duchesne-Guillemin 1978: Duchesne-Guillemin, Jacques (ed.), Études Mithriaques: Actes du 2e Congrès International, Téhéran, 1er – 8 Septembre 1975 (Tehran and Leiden: Bibliothèque Pahlavi and Brill, 1978).
Edmonds 2014: Edmonds III, Radcliffe G., There and Back Again: Temporary Immortality in the Mithras Liturgy. In: Brigitte S. Bøgh (ed.), Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity: Shifting Identities — Creating Change (Frankfurt a. M: Peter Lang, 2014) 185–201.
Evans-Pritchard 1937: Evans-Pritchard, Edward E., Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).
Fitz 1989: Fitz, Jenö, Prosopographische Bemerkungen zu den Inschriften aus dem Mithras-Heiligtum im Legionslager von Aquincum, Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 41 (1989) 93–98.
Gershevitch 1959: Gershevitch, Ilya, The Avestan Hymn to Mithra, with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).
Gnoli 2017: Gnoli, Tommaso, Mitrei del Vicino Oriente: una facies orientale del culto misterico de Mitra, Electrum 24 (2017) 191–121. https://doi.org/10.4467/20800909EL.17.027.7509
Gordon 1973: Gordon, Richard L., Mithraism in the Roman Empire, unpublished PhD Cambridge (1973) (supervisor: Moses Finley).
Gordon 1975: Gordon, Richard L., Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism. In: John R. Hinnells (ed.), Mithraic Studies. 2 vols. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975) 1: 215–248.
Gordon 1979: Gordon, Richard, The Roman Imperial Cult and the Question of Power. In: Raising the Eyebrow: John Onians and World Art Studies, L.

Golden (ed.) BAR International Series 996 (Oxford 2001) 107–122. Reprinted in J.A. North and S.R.F. Price (eds.), The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians Oxford 2011) [= Oxford Readings in Classical Studies] 37–70.
Gordon 1979–80a: Gordon, Richard L., Reality, Evocation and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras, Journal of Mithraic Studies 3 (1979–80) 19–99.
Gordon 1979–80b: Gordon, Richard L., Panelled Complications, Journal of Mithraic Studies 3 (1979–80) 200–227.
Gordon 1980: Gordon, Richard L. (ed.), Myth, Religion and Society: Structuralist Essays by M. Detienne, L. Gernet, J-P. Vernant, P. Vidal-Naquet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, repr. 1986 and 2009).
Gordon 1987: Gordon, Richard L., Lucan's Erictho. In: Michael Whitby, Philip Hardie, and Mary Whitby (eds.), Homo Viator. Classical Essays for John Bramble (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1987) 231–241.
Gordon 1989: Gordon, Richard L., The Moment of Death: Art and the Ritual of Greek Sacrifice. In: Irving Lavin et al., Acts of the XXVIth Congress for the History of Art, Washington 11–16 August 1986 (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 1989) 431–437.
Gordon 1990: Gordon, Richard L., From Republic to Principate: Priesthood, Religion and Ideology; The Veil of Power: Emperors, Sacrifice and Benefaction; Religion in the Roman Empire: The Civic Compromise and Its Limits. In: Mary Beard and John North (eds.), Pagan Priests (London: Duckworth, 1990) 179–255.
Gordon 1993: Gordon, Richard L., Roman Inscriptions, 1986–90, Journal of Roman Studies 83 (1993) 131–158.
Gordon 1996: Gordon, Richard L., Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World: Studies in Mithraism and Religious Art (Aldershot: Variorum Collected Studies series, 1996).
Gordon 1997: Gordon, Richard L., Roman Inscriptions 1991–95, Journal of Roman Studies 87 (1997) 203–240.
Gordon 1999: Gordon, Richard L., Imagining Greek and Roman Magic. In: Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (eds.), The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, 2: Ancient Greece and Rome (London: Athlone Press, 1999) 159–275.
Gordon 2001 [2004]: Gordon, Richard L., Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine, Topoi (Lyon: Maison de l'Orient) 11.1 (2001 [2004]) 77–136.
Gordon 2003: Gordon, Richard L., Roman Inscriptions 1996–2000, Journal of Roman Studies 93 (2003) 212–292.
Gordon 2005: Gordon, Richard L., Probably Not Mithras (review of H.D. Betz, The 'Mithras Liturgy'), The Classical Review 55.1 (2005) 99–100.
Gordon 2009: Gordon, Richard L., The Roman Army and the Cult of Mithras: A Critical View. In: Yann Le Bohec, and Catherine Wolf (eds.), L'armée romaine et la religion (Paris: de Boccard, 2009) 379–450.
Gordon 2014: Gordon, Richard L., Coming to Terms with the 'Oriental Religions of the Roman Empire' (review of Corinne Bonnet et al. (eds.), Les

religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain: Cent ans après Cumont [1906–2006], 2009), Numen 61 (2014) 657–672.
Gordon 2015: Gordon, Richard L., From Mi*θ*ra to Roman Mithras: Appendix to Martin L. West, 'Ancient Greece', in M. Stausberg and Y. Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina (eds.), The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism (Malden and Oxford, 2015) 451–456.
Gordon 2016: Gordon, Richard L., Den Jungstier auf den goldenen Schulter zu tragen. Mythos, Ritual und Jenseitsvorstellungen im Mithraskult. In: Katharina Waldner, Wolfgang Spickermann, and Richard Gordon (eds.), Burial Rituals, Ideas of Afterlife, and the Individual in the Hellenistic World and the Roman Empire. Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 57 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2016) 219–253.
Gordon 2017a: Gordon, Richard L., Mithraic Ideas and Reflections (review of Robert Turcan, Recherches mithriaques, 2016), Journal of Roman Archaeology 30 (2017) 666–669.
Gordon 2017b: Gordon, Richard L., Persae in spelaeis solem colunt: Mithra(s) between Persia and Rome. In: Rolf Strootman and Miguel John Versluys (eds.), Persianism in Antiquity (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2017) 289–327.
Gordon 2017c: Gordon, Richard L., Nature, Order and Well-Being in the Roman Cult of Mithras. In: Almut Hintze and Alan Williams (eds.), Holy Wealth: Accounting for This World and the Next in Religious Belief and Practice: Festschrift for John R. Hinnells, Iranica 24 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017) 93–130.
Gordon 2019: Gordon, Richard L., The Cult of Mithras in Late Antiquity, ARYS: Antigüedad, Religiones y Sociedades 17 (2019) 461–475.
Gordon 2026: Gordon, Richard L., The Mithraeum in the Legionary Castra of Aquincum, ARYS: Antigüedad, Religiones y Sociedades 24 (2026).
Graham 2025: Graham, Emma, Material and Experiential Religion, Classical Review 75.2 (2025) 303–313.
Griffith 2006: Griffith, Alison B., Completing the Picture: Women and the Female Principle in the Mithraic Cult, Numen 53.1 (2006) 48–77.
Grimal 1965: Grimal, Pierre (ed.), Fischer Weltgeschichte, 6: Der Hellenismus und der Aufstieg Roms (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1965).
Harris 2013: Harris, William V. (ed.), Moses Finley and Politics. Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 40 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
Hemelrijk 2008: Hemelrijk, Emily, Patronesses and 'Mothers' of Roman Collegia, Classical Antiquity 27 (2008) 115–162.
Hensen 2013: Hensen, Andreas, Mithras: der Mysterienkult an Limes, Rhein und Donau (Darmstadt: Theiss, 2013).
Hensen 2017: Hensen, Andreas, Templa et spelaea Mithrae: Unity and Diversity in the Topography, Architecture and Design of Sanctuaries in the Cult of Mithras. In: S. Nagel, J.-F. Quack and C. Witschel (eds.), Entangled Worlds: Religious Confluences between East and West in the Roman Empire. The Cults of Isis, Mithras and Jupiter Dolichenus. Proceedings of

the Colloquium held at Heidelberg 26–29 Nov. 2009. Orientalische Religionen in der Antike 22 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 384–412.
Hensen 2021: Hensen, Andreas, The Archaeology of the Sanctuaries of Mithras. In: Laurent Bricault, Richard Veymiers and Nicolas Amoroso (eds.), The Mystery of Mithras: Exploring the Heart of a Roman Cult (Morlanwelz: Musée royal de Mariemont, 2021) 215–226.
Hinnells 1974: Hinnells, John R., The Iranian Background of Mithraic Iconography. In: Congrès mondial d'iranlogie (ed.), Acta Iranica 3: Hommage universel 3: Commémoration Cyrus. Actes du Congrès de Shiraz 1971 et autres études rédigées à l'occasion du 2500e anniversaire de la fondation de l'empire perse (Tehran, Liège and Leiden: Brill, 1974) 242–250.
Hinnells 1975: Hinnells, John R., 'Reflections on the Bull-Slaying Scene'. In: Hinnells, John R. (ed.), Mithraic Studies (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975) 1: 290–312.
Hintze 2017: Hintze, Almut, John Russell Hinnells: A Profile. In: Almut Hintze and Alan Williams (eds.), Holy Wealth: Accounting for This World and the Next in Religious Belief and Practice: Festschrift for John R. Hinnells. Iranica 24 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017) xv–xxi.
Hobsbawm 1959: Hobsbawm, Eric J., Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959).
Hollis 1977: Hollis, Martin, Models of Man: Philosophical Thoughts on Social Action (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
Hollis and Lukes 1982: Hollis, Martin and Lukes, Steven (eds.), Rationality and Relativism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982).
Insler 1978: Insler, Stanley, A New Interpretation of the Bull-Slaying Motif. In: Margreet De Boer, and T. Andrew Edridge (eds.), Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren à l'occasion de son 60e anniversaire le 7 avril 1978. EPRO 68.1–2 (Leiden: Brill, 1978) 2: 519–538.
Jew, Osborne and Scott 2016: Jew, Daniel, Osborne, Robin and Scott, Michael (eds.), M.I. Finley: An Ancient Historian and His Impact (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
Kocsis 1989: Kocsis, László, Inschriften aus dem Mithras-Heiligtum des Hauses des tribunus laticlavius im Legionslager von Aquincum aus dem 2–3. Jahrhundert, Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 41 (1989) 81–92.
Lahe 2019: Lahe, Jaan, Mithras–Mi*θ*ra–Mitra. Der römische Gott Mithras aus der Perspektive der vergleichenden Religionsgeschichte (Tübingen: Zaphon, 2019).
Lannoy and Praet 2023: Lannoy, Annelies and Praet, Danny, Franz Cumont and the Historical-Religious Study of Early Christianity in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Europe. In: Annelies Lannoy and Danny Praet (eds.), The Christian Mystery. Early Christianity and the Ancient Mystery Cults in the Work of Franz Cumont and in the History of Scholarship (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2023) 9–59.

Lévi-Strauss 1962: Lévi-Strauss, Claude, La Pensée sauvage (Paris: Plon, 1962).
Lévi-Strauss 1964: Lévi-Strauss, Claude, Mythologiques 1: le cru et le cuit (Paris: Plon, 1964).
Lincoln 1977: Lincoln, Bruce, Mitra, Mithra, Mithras: Problems of a Multiform Deity (review of J.R. Hinnells [ed.], Mithraic Studies), History of Religions 17.2 (1977) 200–204.
Linderski 1995: Linderski, Jerzy, Roman Religion in Livy. In: Linderski, Jerzy, Roman Questions (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1995) 1: 608–625.
Lloyd 1970: Lloyd, Geoffrey E.R., Early Greek Science from Thales to Aristotle (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970).
Lullies and Hirmer 1956: Lullies, Reinhard with Hirmer, Max, Griechische Plastik von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn der römischen Kaiserzeit (Munich: Max Hirmer, 1956).
Mackey 2022: Mackey, Jacob L., Belief and Cult: Rethinking Roman Religion (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022).
Martin 1967: Martin, David, A Sociology of English Religion (London: Heinemann, 1967).
Martin 1969: Martin, David, The Religious and the Secular (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).
Mastrocinque 2017: Mastrocinque, Attilio, The Mysteries of Mithras: A Different Account. Orientalische Religionen in der Antike 24 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).
McCarty and Egri 2020: McCarty, M. Matthew and Egri, Mariana (eds.), The Archaeology of Mithraism: New Finds and Approaches to Mithras-Worship. BABESCH Supplement 39 (Leuven: Peeters, 2020).
Merkelbach 1982: Merkelbach, Reinhold, Weihegrade und Seelenlehre der Mithrasmysterien. Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vorträge — Geisteswissenschaften: G 257 (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1982).
Merkelbach 1984: Merkelbach, Reinhold, Mithras (Königstein/Ts: Hain, 1984).
Mitchell 1982: Mitchell, Stephen, Regional Epigraphic Catalogues of Asia Minor 2: The Ankara District; the Inscriptions of North Galatia. British Archaeological Reports, International Series 135 (Oxford: B.A.R., 1982).
Mitthof 1992: Mitthof, Fritz, Der Vorstand der Kultgemeinden des Mithras. Eine Sammlung und Untersuchung der inschriftlichen Zeugnisse, Klio 74 (1992) 275–90.
Müller 1852–82: Müller, Karl, Geographi Graeci minores. 2 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1852–1882).
Nabarz 2005: Nabarz, Payam, The Mysteries of Mithras: The Pagan Belief that Shaped the Christian World (London: Inner Traditions, 2005).
Nilsson 1961: Nilsson, P. Martin, Geschichte der griechischen Religion 2. Die hellenistische und römische Zeit2. Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft 5.2.2 (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1961). First ed. 1950.

Price 1984: Price, Simon, Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
Rebenich 2010: Rebenich, Stefan, Hermann Bengtson (1909–1989). In: Katharina Weigen (ed.), Münchner Historiker zwischen Politik und Wissenschaft (Munich: Utz Verlag, 2010) 281–308.
Rives 2006: Rives, James, Religion in the Roman Empire (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).
Robert 1969–1990: Robert, Louis, Opera minora selecta I–VII (Paris, 1969–1990).
Rosen 1969: Rosen, Barbara (ed.), Witchcraft in England, 1558–1618 (London: Arnold, 1969).
Rowland 1990: Rowland, Robert L., Fantasticall and Devilishe Persons: European Witch-Beliefs in Comparative Perspective. In: Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (eds.), Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centre and Peripheries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 161–190.
Rowland 1996: Rowland, Robert L., Maleficio e rappresentazioni collettive: ovvero, perché in Inghilterra le streghe non volavano. In: Giovanna Bosco and Patrizia Castelli (eds.), Stregoneria e streghe nell'Europa moderna (Pisa: Pacini, 1996) 169–179.
Rüpke 2007: Rüpke, Jörg, Religion of the Romans (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).
Rüpke 2026: Rüpke, Jörg, Cities of Gods: A Global History of Religion and the City from the Ancient World to the Modern (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2026).
Scheer 2022: Scheer, Monique, Culture and Religion: Remarks on an Indeterminate Relationship, Religion and Society: Advances in Research 13.1 (2022) 111–125. https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2022.130107
Scheid 2013: Scheid, John, Les dieux, l'État et l'individu. Réflexions sur la religion civique à Rome (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013).
Scheid 2016: Scheid, John, The Gods, the State, and the Individual: Reflections on Civic Religion in Rome (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2016).
Schlumberger 1953: Schlumberger, Daniel, review of: Wikander, Études sur les mystères de Mithras, Syria 30.4 (1953) 325–330.
Siemers-Klenner 2020: Siemers-Klenner, Ines, Archäologie des Mithraskultes. Architektur und Kultpraxis am Beispiel der Tempel von Güglingen, Kreis Heilbronn (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2020).
Sperber 1975: Sperber, Dan, Rethinking Symbolism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
Sperber 1982: Sperber, Dan, Apparently Irrational Beliefs. In: Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds.), Rationality and Relativism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982) 149–180.
Summers 1969: Summers, Montague (tr.), Malleus maleficarum (London: Hogarth Press, 1969).

Szabó 2024: Szabó, Csaba, Rewriting Roman Religion: Historiography of a Decade (2013–2023), Memoria Antiquitatis: Acta Musei Petrodavensis 29 (2024) 381–391.
Szabó et al. 2025: Szabó, Csaba et al., Archaeology of Mithras in Aquincum. Sanctuaries and Materiality of a Roman Cult, Cercetări Arheologice 32.2 (2025) 501–532.
Taves 2009: Taves, Ann, Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
Timuş 2000: Timuş, Mihaela, La bibliographie annotée de Stig Wikander (1908–1983), Studia Asiatica: International Journal for Asian Studies 1 (2000) 209–234.
Thomas 1971: Thomas, Keith, Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971).
Turcan 1975: Turcan, Robert A., Mithras Platonicus: Recherches sur l'hellénisation philosophique de Mithra. EPRO 47 (Leiden: Brill, 1975).
Turcan 1981: Turcan, Robert A., Mithra et le mithriacisme (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1981).
Turcan 1982: Turcan, Robert A., review of Vermaseren, Mithriaca 3: The Mithraeum at Marino (1982), Revue des Études Anciennes 84.1–4 (1982) 325–327.
Turcan 2016: Turcan, Robert A., Recherches mithriaques. Quarante ans de questions et d'investigations (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2016).
Van Haeperen 2019: Van Haeperen, Françoise, Étrangère et ancestrale. La Mère des dieux dans le monde romain (Paris: Publications de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2019).
Vermaseren 1951: Vermaseren, Maarten Jozef, The Miraculous Birth of Mithras. In: L. Gerevich (ed.), Studia archaeologica Gerardo van Hoorn oblata (Leiden: Brill, 1951) 93–109.
Vermaseren 1982: Vermaseren, Maarten Jozef, Mithriaca 3: The Mithraeum at Marino, EPRO 16.3 (Leiden: Brill, 1982).
Vernant 1965: Vernant, Jean-Pierre, Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs: Études de psychologie historique (Paris: Maspero, 1965).
Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1972: Vernant, Jean-Pierre and Vidal-Naquet, Pierre, Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne 1 (Paris: Maspero, 1972).
Vidal-Naquet 1963: Vidal-Naquet, Pierre, Lo Stato di tortura (Bari: Laterza, 1963).
Versluys 2004: Versluys, Miguel John, 'Isis Capitolina' and the Egyptian Cults in Republican Rome. In: Laurent Bricault et al. (eds.), Isis en Occident (Leiden: Brill, 2004) 421–448.
Wikander 1950: Wikander, Stig, Études sur les mystères de Mithras. Årsbok 1950, Vetenskaps-Societeten i Lund (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1951).
Windischmann 1857: Windischmann, Friedrich H.H., Mithra: Ein Beitrag zur Mythengeschichte des Orients (Leipzig: Brockhaus in Komm, 1857) = Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, 1.1.

Windischmann 1863: Windischmann, Friedrich H.H., Zoroastrische Studien: Abhandlungen zur Mythologie und Sagengeschichte des alten Iran, ed. Fr. Spiegel (Berlin: Ferd. Dümmler's Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1863).
Wolff and Cumont 1894: Wolff, G. Georg and Cumont, Franz, Das dritte Mithräum in Heddernheim und seine Skulpturen, Westdeutsche Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kunst 13 (1894) 37–104.
Wünsch 1976: Wünsch, Richard, Inscriptiones Atticae, Supplementum Inscriptionum Atticarum 1, ed. A.N. Oikonomides (Chicago: Ares Publishing, 1976).