



THE MYSTERY OF MITHRAS

EXPLORING THE HEART OF A ROMAN CULT

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THE MYSTERY OF MITHRAS

EXPLORING THE HEART OF A ROMAN CULT

Edited by Laurent Bricault, Richard Veymiers and Nicolas Amoroso
with the collaboration of Laure Barthet, Margaux Bekas, Pascal Capus,
Alexandra Dardenay, Wolfgang David and Carsten Wenzel

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Musée royal de Mariemont

Richard Veymiers, Director
Nicolas Amoroso, Curator of the Department of Greek
and Roman Antiquities
Laurent Bricault, Professor of Roman History at the Université
Toulouse – Jean Jaurès

Musée Saint-Raymond de Toulouse

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and Numismatic Collections
Margaux Bekas, Heritage Curator

Archäologisches Museum Frankfurt

Wolfgang David, Director
Carsten Wenzel, Curator of the Roman Provincial Collections

Publication Manager

Jean-Sébastien Balzat

Graphic Designer

Justine Periaux

Photographer

Andy Simon

Translator

Gil H. Renberg

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MITHRAS TODAY: A ROMAN GOD IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

Mathieu Scapin, L. Bricault & R. Veymiers

Even though Mithras seems little known outside of the scholarly sphere, he has been employed regularly in a number of cultural works of the 20th and 21st centuries. The purpose of this article is not to explore the iconography and mythology of this god who is thought to have come from the East,¹ but rather to gain an understanding from several examples of how they were reused in contemporary culture. In general, one retains from the Roman imagery of Mithras the scene showing the god killing a bull (fig. 1). He is regularly accompanied by two figures, the dadophori Cautes (the rising sun) and Cautopates (the setting sun), identifiable according to the orientation of the torch that they hold in their hands. Normally some animals complete the tauroctony scene: a perched raven, a dog licking the bull's blood, a serpent crawling towards the wound, and a scorpion pinching the bovine's testicles.² It is above all from this image, which was central to the god's Roman cult, that the contemporary creations are born.

¹ GRENET 2001; GORDON 2017a. See the contributions of J. Alvar & L. Bricault and that of D. Boschung in this volume, 121-131 and 133-141.

²TURCAN 1993.

Fig. 1 Statue of Mithras Tauroctonos in front of the Carp Pond in the park at the Palace of Fontainebleau.



³ See LEFRANÇOIS 2009.

⁴ AL-MATARY 2017, 19.

THE RESEMANTIZATION OF MITHRAS IN THE FIGURAL ARTS

On 2 July 1931 a monument erected in Paris was unveiled, before an outside wall of the Palais de Chaillot (fig. 2). Realised by Paul Landowski, an academic sculptor in the Third Republic, the sculptural group commemorated the nationalist writer Paul Adam, who passed away in 1920.³ Adam was the author, as part of a rich literary production, of a work entitled *Le Progrès des races. Le Taureau de Mithra*, published in Paris in 1907. In it, he explores the virtues of resistance to barbarism, justifying colonisation as necessary for a “beneficial fertility obtained from killing”, in the image of Mithras sacrificing the bull to make life spring forth from it.⁴

This idea of a fecund force is found in a monumental design by a visual artist from Nice, Ernest Pignon-Ernest (Cat. I.10), with the evocative title “Picasso/Mithras Fertilising the Earth with the Blood of the Bull”. Displayed at Arles in 1992 in a large Möbius strip, it then measured 10 m x 2 m. In this composition, the Spanish artist is drawn nude, in the manner of Mithras using a blade held in his right hand to slit the throat of a giant bovine, which he rides while

Fig. 2 Commemorative monument of Paul Adam by Paul Landowski, Paris – Palais de Chaillot, 1931.



pulling back its head, like a fiery god who, at the end of his life, manages to dominate one of the recurrent and major figures in his work: a bull.

MITHRAS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Literature is not to be outdone when it comes to transmitting the ancient gods and their myths – while reinterpreting, adapting and sometimes transforming them. In France, the tauromachy/tauroctony association could be seen in this way during the Roaring Twenties in the works of Henry de Montherlant, notably in his novel *Les Bestiaires*, first published in serial form between February and March 1925 in *Le Journal* and then in a volume published by Grasset the following year.⁵ The novel focusses on Alban de Bricoule, a teenager who during a vacation in Spain discovers a passion for bulls and their being put to death. The young Alban is offered a copy of the novel *Quo Vadis?*,⁶ which will introduce him to Antiquity, following the experience of Montherlant himself and making him represent none other than the author.⁷ The discourse that he developed on the tauromachy, in both his novels and the lectures he delivered on the subject, plunged him into an exploration of the roots of the “cult of the bull across the ages”,⁸ with an obligatory passage on Mithras, the god sacrificing the bull. He then reads abundantly from the works of the historians who had discussed the subject, such as Charles Daremberg, Émile Espérandieu, and of course Franz Cumont: entire passages of the novel are adapted from the articles “Tauria” or “Taurobolium” from the *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines* of Daremberg and Saglio or Cumont’s *Mystères de Mithra* (see Cat. I.6).⁹ As Pierre Duroisin wrote: “But what worked the most in the cults of Mithras and Cybele, and in their *taurobolium*, these were the two mystical generations: generation of love through combat, and then generation of the rich life through an exterminating act.”¹⁰ Montherlant, fascinated by both Antiquity and Mithras, like other authors of his time even put together a collection of artefacts, among which were included a 1st- or 2nd-century Roman bronze mask discovered at Jarny (Meurthe-et-Moselle) and a bull-headed bust from the 1st century.¹¹

Some time before this, Rudyard Kipling had also included Mithras in his poetic and novelistic works, with the ancient god making a notable appearance in 1906 in a text that became famous, entitled *A Song to Mithras*, and subtitled “Hymn of the XXX Legion: circa

⁵ DOMENGET 2003, 96.

⁶ Written by the Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz and published in 1896.

⁷ DOMENGET 2003, 94; DUROISIN 2011, 188; see also, <https://www.canalacademie.com/ida9531-Montherlant-et-la-tauromachie-d-apres-son-roman-Les-Bestiaires.html>, consulted on 7/05/2020.

⁸ DOMENGET 2003, 96.

⁹ DUROISIN 2011.

¹⁰ DUROISIN 2011, 206; making the *taurobolium* a ritual equally Mithraic was still common at the time.

¹¹ See the auction house catalogue ARTCURIAL 2017, nos. 7 (bust) and 11 (mask).

A.D. 350" (Cat. I.8). The poem can be found in the children's book *Puck of Pook's Hill*, which consists of short stories and poems. Far from his Indian birthplace, Kipling exalted British history¹² to two children through an intermediary, the elf Puck, a Celtic folkloric figure most notably used by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In this poem, through the evocation of a major ancient monument from the English landscape – Hadrian's Wall – Kipling highlights the importance of Mithras to the Roman soldiers stationed in Britain. The god, considered to be the beginning, middle and end of all things, and to be the one who brightens every passing day, appears there, like the legionaries, as "also a soldier":

"Mithras, God of the Morning (...)
Mithras, also a soldier (...)
Mithras, God of the Noontide (...)
Mithras, God of the Sunset (...)
Mithras, God of the Midnight"

Mithras is evoked elsewhere in the tale, particularly in "On the Great Wall", notably when Parnesius, centurion of the 7th cohort of the 30th legion, tells Puck about the sacrifice of the bull at night in a temple¹³ or explains how he was promoted to the grade of "Gryphon".¹⁴ Other texts by Kipling make direct reference to Mithras, such as the poem "Alnaschar and the Oxen", found in the collection *Debts and Credits* from 1926,¹⁵ or the new short story "The Church that was at Antioch", first published in 1929 before being included in the collection *Limits and Renewals* in 1932.¹⁶

In a manner undoubtedly less striking than Hercules, Caesar or the Trojan War, Mithras also inspired certain literary works belonging to popular culture. In *Le Cycle de Mithra*,¹⁷ Rachel Tanner created a dystopia in a universe of *fantasy*: in the 8th century, the Roman Empire still exists, but it is not Christian; in fact, the official state religion is that of Mithras. The two volumes of the cycle, *L'Empreinte des dieux* and *Le glaive de Mithra*, involve different figures operating in a world populated by magic, religious fanatics, divine apparitions and human sacrifices. Drawing inspiration from the works of Robert Turcan,¹⁸ she negatively describes a Mithraic religion strongly coloured by Christianity, in which one would partake of "bread made from wheat without salt and yeast".¹⁹ This caricatured approach is also found in the short story *Histoire d'Hiram le malchanceux*, in which she recounts, in the manner of a Christmas

¹² LEHN 2012, 98.

¹³ TINGEY 1962, 12.

¹⁴ For the Mithraic grades, see the contribution of N. Belayche in this volume, 309-318.

¹⁵ AGEISHI 2017, 34.

¹⁶ SIMMERS 2015, 53; COATES 2011; LINGLEY 2013, 51.

¹⁷ Mnémos edition, 2019, including novels and short stories. The two novels were originally published in 2002 in *Imaginaires sans frontières* editions.

¹⁸ TURCAN 1993.

¹⁹ *L'Empreinte des dieux*, 61.

story, the birth of Mithras in Iran on December 25. Another contemporary novel, *Les lions de Mithra*,²⁰ written by Jean-Christophe Piot, involves a Roman Empire weakened by the turpitude of Commodus and the increasingly difficult defence of the frontiers, notably in the face of Dacian incursions. Networks of followers of new religions and cults are developing in the empire, from one end to another, thanks to roads and river and maritime routes promoting mobility. Worshippers of Mithras and devotees of Christ mix together there, sometimes engaged in a competition that is ultimately in vain, with dangers elsewhere. The author, who had read Robert Turcan extensively, describes ceremonies and rituals practiced by men – especially in the military – holding the grade of Lion, all members of Mithraic brotherhoods that owe much to a stereotypical vision of Freemasonry.

In a similar vein, the series of historical mystery novels *John, the Lord Chamberlain*, created by the writing team of Mary Reed and Eric Mayer,²¹ are set in 6th-century Constantinople and involve John, the eunuch chamberlain of the emperor Justinian and a secret member of the cult of Mithras. In the first novel, *One of Sorrow* (1999), he assists in a *taurobolium* ceremony, enabling a worshipper to climb a grade by bathing in the blood of the sacrificial animal; another ceremony in honour of Mithras is described in the novel *Four for a Boy* (2003). Finally, in *Empire for Ravens* (2018), Mithras, his iconography and his cult are significantly involved. Mary Reed (under the name of Mayer, that of her husband) in 2013 also wrote a short novel about this same figure, *The Body in the Mithraeum* (fig. 3), in which John leads an investigation into a murder in a secret *Mithraeum* at Byzantium in 533 C.E.

Lastly, we should note the presence of the god Mithras in the universe of *Conan the Cimmerian*, published in the form of short stories by Robert E. Howard in 1932.²² In these Mithras is a universal god, but has been forgotten by the Hyborians. He is notably the god of the eastern kingdom of Khoraja, where there lives a chancellor named Taurus.²³

MITHRAS PLACED IN PANELS: THE CULT OF THE GOD IN COMICS

Hailing from an Antiquity that continues to inspire the authors of comics, whatever the period (Greek, Roman or preferably Egyptian) and whatever the land where they were created (for example, manga in Japan or comics in the United States),²⁴ Mithras has also been a source of *scenarii* set in squares.

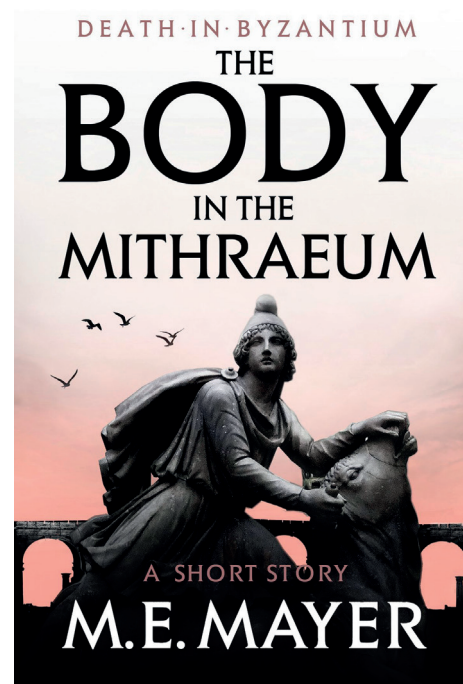


Fig. 3 Cover of M.E. Mayer's novel, *The Body in the Mithraeum*, London 2013.

²⁰ Published in 2006 by Sophie Gramond Editions.

²¹ Published in 1999 and 2018 by Poisoned Pen Press.

²² The mention of the god Mithras appears for the first time in "The Phoenix on the Sword" in a December 1932 issue of *Weird Tales*.

²³ On Eastern imagery, see the adaptation in the comic book by Vincent Brugeas and Ronan Toulhoat, *Le colosse noir*, Glénat, 2018, as well as the commentary of Patrice Louinet in that volume. Taurus may be a direct reference to Mithras's bull.

²⁴ For a general overview, see GALLEGO 2015.

The *Labiénus* of François Thierry Lamy and Christian Léger,²⁵ initially conceived as “an illustrated short story presented in the form of sequential dialogue”,²⁶ “is intended to be a counterpoint to the historical reconstruction of the *Alix* type and to show a muddy, filthy side of Rome and the human soul [in comics]”.²⁷ In two volumes, *Labiénus* tells the story of a Roman tribune of that name who, living in the 3rd century, is increasingly overcome by a fervour for Mithras and desire to become immortal, even if it means killing his dog and sacrificing his own son. This choice of plot leads us into the military world and there are numerous allusions (direct or indirect) to the grades through which initiates must pass – such as, for example, the third grade, the *Leo* (“Lion”) (fig. 4) – before attaining that of *Pater* (“Father”), the seventh and last, synonymous with religious and administrative responsibilities in the Mithraic community.²⁸ In volume 2, Clélie, the wife of Labiénus, has a prophetic dream in which she sees her husband eating their child. The panel showing this moment is a reproduction of the painting by Goya, *Saturn Devouring his Son*, preserved at the Prado Museum in Madrid. In this work, Mithras and his cult are linked to gratuitous violence and to human sacrifices and magic from the East, forbidden practices punished with a capital sentence during the Roman era.

Another comic book includes Mithras and his cult in a uchronic story: *Jour J, Vive l'Empereur*.²⁹ The French Empire of the 19th century has spread in Europe and beyond, all the way to China's doorstep, and has electrical technology invented by Nikola Tesla. In this story, French imperial soldiers belong to “the fraternity of the Bull” of Mithras, France's official god. Twice in this volume there is a scene with a taurobolic ceremony in honour of Mithras: during the first a soldier is initiated by “taking a shower” in the blood of a bull sacrificed for the occasion; the second is at the coronation of Emperor Napoleon V, during which another bull is sacrificed at Notre Dame (fig. 5), its blood falling from gargoyles onto the imperial crown, which is then placed upon the head of the new emperor. This passage, in which Mithras is substituted for the Christian God in the coronation ritual, is an adaptation of the historical crowning of Napoleon I as painted by Jacques-Louis David in 1808. Once again, the taurobolic rite is here associated with Mithras, according to a historiographic tradition that is decidedly difficult to change.³⁰

MITHRAS ON SCREEN

Contrary to the traditional Graeco-Roman gods, and even the principal biblical figures, Mithras is hardly to be found in audio-visual

²⁵ Éditions Theloma, 2004-2006. Vol. 1: *Le prix de l'immortalité*. Vol. 2: *Sol Invictus*. Permit us here to express all our gratitude to the authors for the precious time that they spent responding to Mathieu Scapin's questions.

²⁶ <http://tlamy.free.fr/histoire.html>, consulted on 09/03/2020.

²⁷ According to an exchange with the author.

²⁸ CHALUPA 2008, 188.

²⁹ Duval, Pécau, Gess and Thorn, *Jour J. Vive L'Empereur. 2 décembre 1925: Paris, rumeurs d'Attentat autour du sacre de Napoléon V*. Delcourt, Series B, 2011.

³⁰ See *supra*, n. 10.

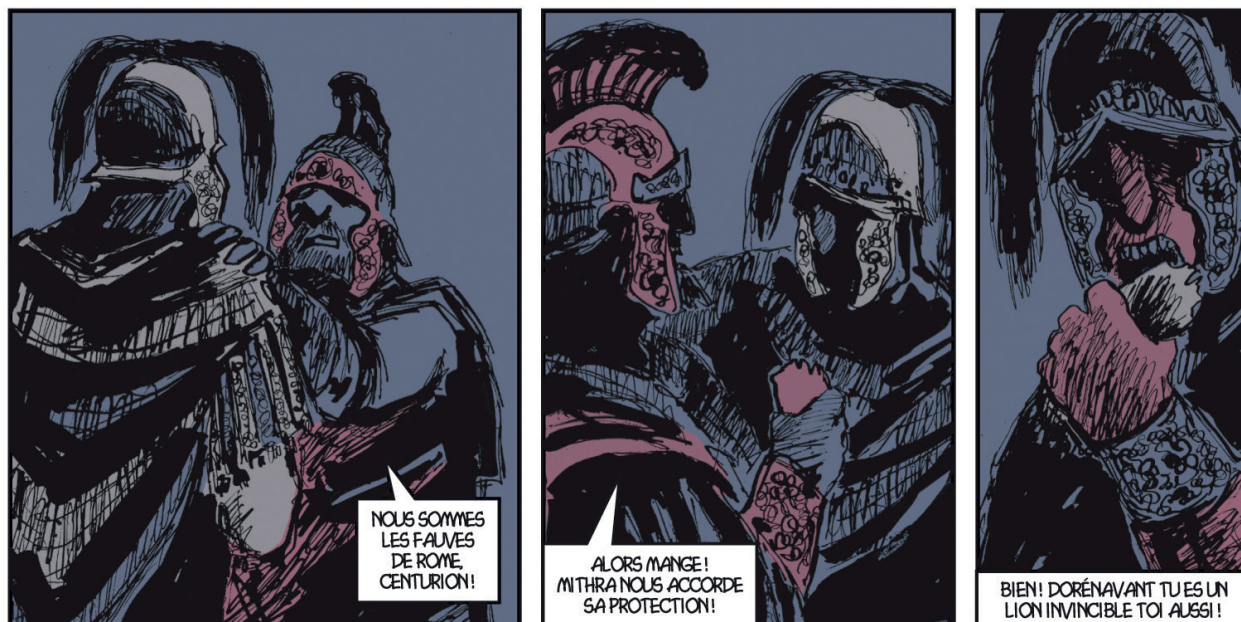


Fig. 4 Thierry Lamy and Christian Léger, *Labiénus*, 2004, vol. 1, pl. 10.



Fig. 5 Duval, Pécau, Gess and Thorn, *Jour J. Vive L'Empereur. 2 décembre 1925*, 2011, pl. 45.

works, from the beginning of cinema to our own time.³¹ When he appears in films and television series that are set in Antiquity it is in a military context, during prayers associated with battle. Such is the case in a six-episode British series broadcast in 1977 on BBC Scotland, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, and its Anglo-American remake *The Eagle*, which appeared in theatres in 2011. The two productions are adaptations of an English-language historical novel by Rosemary Sutcliff for young adults. Published in 1954, the story is inspired by the disappearance of Rome's Ninth Legion (*Legio IX Hispana*) and its eagle (*aquila*) standard in Britain during the 2nd century. It is to a young centurion, Marcus Flavius Aquila³² (played in 1977 by Anthony Higgins and in 2011 by Channing Tatum), that

³¹ It is all the more notable that the production of historical films with an ancient theme is nevertheless considerable. See DUMONT 2009.

³² Note here the reference to the eagle in the *cognomen* of the main figure.

the heavy task falls of recovering the Eagle lost by his father and now beyond Hadrian's Wall, in barbarian lands. Bearing a ritual scar on his forehead, he is presented at the beginning of the novel as a Mithraic worshipper who has attained the grade of Raven. Mithras subsequently intervenes three times: in Chapter 5 ("Saturnalia Games") when Marcus discusses the atmosphere of *Mithraea* and rites that take place in them, particularly on December 24, the day before the god's birthday; in Chapter 6, when the god's name is invoked as a swear word; and lastly in Chapter 13, when Marcus and his Breton slave Esca encounter a survivor of the lost legion, and mention is made of the mark on the forehead borne by the initiates of this cult.³³ The BBC series, mainly scripted by Bill Craig, scrupulously follows the novel in making references to Mithras several times. In the 2011 movie *The Eagle*, directed by Kevin Macdonald, Mithras is only mentioned during the first twenty minutes (fig. 6): during his arrival at the Roman camp, Marcus prays to Mithras and, in contrast with the English series, he does so before a small relief representing the god in a tauroctony scene; later, he prays to Mithras over the body of a soldier killed during the assault on the camp by the natives, and again before the battle against the Picts, at the end of which he will be wounded. If the movie begins as a story based on real historic facts, it concludes as a victory *cum laude* for Marcus, with the rehabilitation of his father's lost honour, in the manner of American soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Mithras also plays a part in other genres of fiction that instead unfold in a contemporary or even futuristic setting. This is the case with the 2012 horror thriller *The Conspiracy* (fig. 7), the first full-length film of the Canadian director Christopher MacBride. Employing "found footage" as in a documentary,³⁴ the movie

³³ The works of fiction that we are exploring in this contribution almost all incorporate this theme of the mark on the forehead. This is in effect a misinterpretation of Tertullian by the scholar Franz Joseph Dölger in 1911 and reprised by Cumont in 1930; see RENAULT 2007.

³⁴ A style popularised in 1999 by the independent American horror film *The Blair Witch Project*.

Fig. 6 Prayer to Mithras before battle in the movie *The Eagle*, directed by Kevin Macdonald, 2011.



involves two American cineastes, Aaron and Jim, who inquire into the disappearance of a conspiracy theorist. Their investigation puts them on the trail of a dangerous secret organisation, the Tarsus Club, which venerates the god Mithras and sacrifices a bull at each of its meetings. Participating incognito at one of these gatherings, they swear allegiance to Mithras during an initiatory ceremony, at the end of which they are to receive a raven mask. But when their presence is discovered, Aaron receives a bull mask, which incites the other members to chase him into the woods.

In September 2020, Mithras found himself at the heart of a new American post-apocalyptic science-fiction television series, *Raised by Wolves* (Cat. I.12), which was released through the on-demand video service HBO Max. Created by Aaron Guzikowski with Ridley Scott as executive producer, the series plunges the viewer into a dystopic future set in the 22nd century. The Earth has been

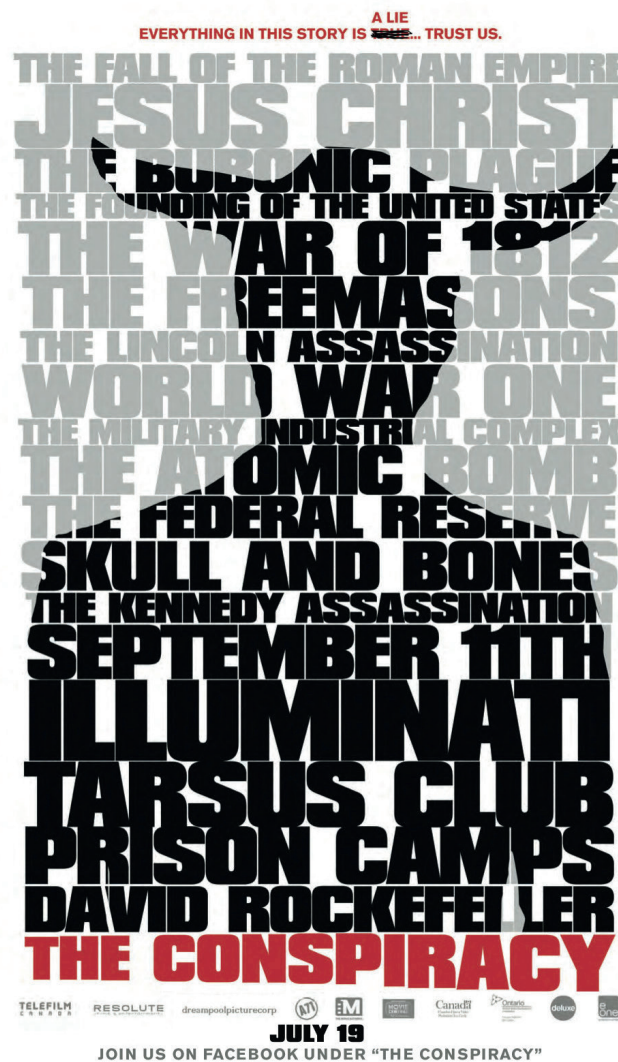


Fig. 7 Poster for the movie *The Conspiracy*, directed by Christopher MacBride, 2012.



Fig. 8 The android Mother surrounded by Mithraic symbols in episode 5 of the series *Raised by Wolves* created by Aaron Guzikowski, 2020.

ravaged by an unprecedented religious war pitting atheists against members of the church of Mithraists (“the Mithraic”), who venerate the Sun god. The atheists send two androids, Mother and Father, to an exoplanet, Kepler-22b, with twelve embryos in order to reconstruct a civilisation devoid of religion. Having taken refuge in a space ark, the survivors of the Mithraic also make for the same planet so as to found a colony and perpetuate their beliefs. To give life to their “Mithraic”, the developers of the series have mixed in religious references, combining Mithraic (fig. 8) and Christian symbolism.³⁵ Thus the Mithraic members have a “Book of Scripture”, practice communion, and their devout soldiers – like Marcus, played by Travis Fimmel – wear a white garment bearing the red sun of Mithras.

THIS IS THE MUSIC OF MITHRAS

It is perhaps in the area of contemporary music that Mithras is most evident. Thus the fifth album of *Ager Sonus*, the musical project of the German Thomas Langewehr which appeared in 2019, bears the name *Mithra*. An artist who plays multiple instruments, Langewehr belongs to the atmospheric/“Dark ambient” genre, the influences of which are to be sought in the music of movies and video games, creating a cold, rather dark, atmosphere, without utilisation of a tempo. *Mithra* belongs to a discography marked considerably by Antiquity, as was the case with *Back of the Black Earth*

³⁵ This has been claimed by Guzikowski in several of his interviews.

in 2017, which creates a musical voyage to ancient Egypt, as well as 2018's *Necropolis*, composed of eight titles such as "Deciphering Hieroglyphs", "Of Ashes and Dust", and "Abu Simbel". The album *Mithra* features eight tracks with titles evoking the cult of this god: "Initiation", "Dawn", "Reborn", and "Ritual". On the album's official site³⁶ the listener is "invited to join the cult of Mithras". To complete the mysterious atmosphere of this initiatory rite, a "synaesthetic" description drives it a little farther into the cult:

"The cinnamon scented scroll lies perfectly aligned on your silken bed sheet, the black seal of a lion's head catches your gasp as it stares you down. The test has begun!

You stumble through the dark, your path a reflection of moonlight periodically piercing the clouds. Bare feet scrape rain soaked ground, the smell of wet earth and blood fills your exhausted breath. A faint glow signals you in the distance. Is this the beckoning you have been waiting for?"

The mysterious ambience surrounding the cult of Mithras, nocturnal, dark and secret, is expressed in a title like "Carpe Noctem", which echoes the Horatian phrase "Carpe Diem". This music track is a mixture of synthesizers and string and percussion instruments, which create an inner atmosphere that is warm and borrowed from esotericism, like that always presented in peplums. The piece "Initiation" plays with the same elements and attempts to recreate, in music, the atmosphere surrounding initiations at *Mithraea*.

In 2016, an English progressive rock band, Mithra, was revealed to the general public at the Glastonbury Festival in England. Their musical style emphasises dynamic and sometimes guttural voices, far removed from the more evanescent style of Ager Sonus. In 2018 the group released "Altar of the Sun", with lyrics that, in a double sense, directly evoke Mithras, assimilated to the Iranian solar god Mazdā:

"Surrender unto Mithra with your life, Live life through Mazda and worship the one sun we must"

³⁶ <https://cryochamber.bandcamp.com/album/mithra>, consulted on 05/03/2020.

³⁷ <https://rockloadmag.com/news/mithra-new-single-altar-of-the-sun-out-now/>, consulted on 06/03/2020.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ <http://tuonelamagazine.com/interview-with-anoushbard-about-mithra/>, consulted on 06/03/2020.

⁴⁰ <https://www.anoushbard.com/band/>, consulted on 06/03/2020.

⁴¹ On the reception of Antiquity in metal music, see UMURHAN 2012; LINDNER & WIELAND 2018 and FLETCHER & UMURHAN 2019.

Mithras is invoked as *deus invictus*, the protector of soldiers on campaign:

“Pray, for the solemn sun,
Pray, for the wars we won”

But, aside from a simple historical reference to Mithras, it is in fact a genuine critique of religious extremism that this song develops.³⁷

Other music groups have chosen a name linked to Mithras, such as the American neofolk group Blood Axis, which has set Kipling’s poem “A Song to Mithras” to music, or Mithras, an English Brutal death metal group. In France, the group Caldera released in 2011 an instrumental album entitled *Mithra*, featuring only two tracks of 16 and 18 minutes: the first is named *lithogenitvs*, which can be translated “born from the rock”, and the second Sacrificivm (Corvus, Ave Despectvs, Scorpio), which translates as “Sacrifice (raven, despicable hello, scorpion)”. I shall conclude this brief general survey with a mention of Anoushbard, an Iranian progressive death metal group, originally from Tehran and the creator, in 2020, of an album likewise entitled *Mithra*, recorded outside of Iran because of censorship.³⁸ The group’s name, concerned with the Persian roots of Zoroastrian culture,³⁹ is borrowed from a prison that once belonged to the Sasanian Empire, a place where identity is lost and existence is dedicated to eternal oblivion.⁴⁰

In general, metal bands have never hesitated to turn to Antiquity, unlike other musical styles, for their name, song titles, or lyrics.⁴¹