

## The Seven Grades of Mithraism: Structure, Symbolism, and Origins Mithraizm'in Yedi Derecesi: Yapı, Sembolizm ve Kökenler

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**Abstract:** This study examines the hierarchical structure of the seven initiatory grades in Mithraism, a mystery religion that flourished during the Roman Empire. While direct textual sources on Mithraism are scarce, a rich body of archaeological, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence allows for the reconstruction of its internal organization. Each grade—from Corax to Pater—reflects both a ritual role within the cult and a symbolic stage in the spiritual ascent of the initiate. The aim of this study is not only to interpret the internal function and symbolic meaning of these grades, but also to investigate their possible origins in Eastern religious traditions. Comparative analysis with structures in Mesopotamian cosmology, ziggurat symbolism, and graded initiation systems found in Ismailism, Bektashism, Akhism, and Yezidism suggests that the Mithraic hierarchy may be part of a broader and older cultural continuum. This work employs methods from historical contextual analysis, comparative iconography, and symbolic interpretation to evaluate the theological and ritual significance of the Mithraic grades. Ultimately, the study argues that the initiatory system of Mithraism embodies not only a cultic order but also a cosmological vision of spiritual ascent and transformation.

**Özet:** Bu çalışma, Roma İmparatorluğu döneminde yaygınlık kazanmış bir gizem dini olan Mithraizm'deki yedi dereceli inisiyasyon yapısını incelemektedir. Mithraizm'e dair doğrudan metinsel kaynaklar sınırlı olsa da, arkeolojik, epigrafik ve ikonografik açıdan zengin bir malzeme, kültün içsel örgütlenmesinin yeniden inşasına imkân tanımaktadır. Corax'tan Pater'e kadar her bir derece, kült içinde hem ritüel bir işlevi hem de inisiyenin ruhsal yükselişinde simgesel bir aşamayı temsil etmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, söz konusu derecelerin kült içindeki işlev ve sembolik anlamlarını yorumlamakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda bunların Doğu kökenli dini geleneklerle olan olası ilişkilerini de araştırmaktır. Mezopotamya kozmolojisi, ziggurat sembolizmi ve İsmaililik, Bektaşilik, Ahilik ve Yezidilik gibi geleneklerdeki dereceli inisiyasyon sistemleriyle yapılan karşılaştırmalı analizler, Mithraik hiyerarşinin daha geniş ve daha eski bir kültürel sürekliliğin parçası olabileceğini göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, Mithraik derecelerin teolojik ve ritüel önemini değerlendirmek amacıyla tarihsel bağlamsal analiz, karşılaştırmalı ikonografi ve sembolik yorumlama yöntemlerinden yararlanmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, Mithraizm'in inisiyasyon sistemi yalnızca kült içi bir düzeni değil, aynı zamanda ruhsal yükseliş ve dönüşümle ilgili kozmolojik bir vizyonu da bünyesinde barındırmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Initiatory Grades, Mystery Religions, Roman Empire, Symbolism, Akhism

**Keywords:** İnisiyasyon dereceleri, Gizem Dinleri, Roma İmparatorluğu, Sembolizm, Ahilik

### Introduction

Mithraism, which gained considerable prominence during the Roman Empire, stands out among the mystery religions for its distinctive symbolic system, esoteric ritual practices, and particularly its unique seven-grade initiatory hierarchy. This hierarchical structure not only functioned as a means of religious affiliation but also symbolically mapped the initiate's spiritual progression. In this regard, Mithraism should be understood as a religious system that reflects both organizational coherence and a cosmological vision.

Due to the near-total absence of direct textual sources on Mithraism, scholarly reconstruction of its internal structure has relied heavily on archaeological, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence. Despite this limitation, visual and material remains—especially from the Mithraea in Ostia and Rome, such as those of Felicissimus and Santa Prisca—offer substantial insights into the internal organization of the cult. Mosaics, inscriptions, and frescoes from these sites, combined with the accounts of ancient authors such as Jerome, Porphyry, and Augustine, provide key information on the meaning and function of the initiatory grades.

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The Mithraic hierarchy comprises seven grades—Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, and Pater—each associated with a ritual function and symbolic transformation. These degrees are widely interpreted as representing not only cultic responsibilities but also the initiate's symbolic ascent through the cosmic order. While this system has been discussed extensively in the context of Roman religious practices, its deeper historical origins remain the subject of scholarly debate. Most existing studies tend to treat the structure as a Roman religious innovation or refer only briefly to Eastern influences without a sustained comparative framework.

This study offers both a symbolic-structural analysis of the Mithraic grades and an alternative historical perspective regarding their origins. It centers on the following key research question: Was the seven-grade initiatory system of Mithraism a religious structure developed exclusively within the Roman milieu, or does it reflect a continuation of older initiatory and cosmological models from Mesopotamian, Iranian, and Anatolian traditions? In answering this question, the study argues that the hierarchical structure of Mithraism represents not only a mystery cult framework but also an expression of long-standing symbolic continuity between East and West.

The research adopts a comparative historical methodology to explore structural and symbolic parallels between the Mithraic grade system and initiation models found in Mesopotamian ziggurat symbolism, as well as in religious traditions such as Ismailism, Bektashism, Akhism, and Yezidism. It seeks to evaluate ritual elements and symbolic codes not only within their immediate religious contexts but also across time and geography, thereby suggesting a broader pattern of cultural transmission. The widespread adoption of Mithraism among Roman soldiers, and the apparent structural alignment between its grades and military rank, may also account for its popularity compared to other contemporary mystery cults.

Ultimately, this study aims to reinterpret the Mithraic grade system as a symbolic and ritual framework that not only served the cult's internal organization but also mirrored older cosmological models of spiritual ascent. By situating Mithraism within this broader historical and symbolic continuum, the study challenges the prevailing view of it as a purely Roman phenomenon and instead positions it as a western articulation of an ancient and transregional sacred tradition.

### **The Grades in Mithraism**

One of the most striking features that defines the uniqueness of Mithraism is its hierarchical initiatory system within the cult. While it is true that other belief systems also assign specific titles to individuals performing certain functions, the key distinction lies in the nature of these titles. In most traditions, such titles typically refer to members of a priestly class. In contrast, Mithraism does not possess a formally established priesthood. Furthermore, initiates in Mithraic communities undergo a ritual progression through various grades. Taken together, these elements offer a compelling explanation for why Mithraism may have appeared more attractive than other contemporary mystery religions.

Our knowledge of Mithraism remains limited, largely due to the near absence of literary sources. Nevertheless, a passage in Jerome's *Epistulae* CVII. ad Laetam confirms the existence of seven initiatory grades within the cult. These grades are identified in sequence as Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, and Pater. Although these names may seem peculiar at first glance, they are far from arbitrary and carry ritual and symbolic significance. Moreover, some epigraphic evidence suggests that variations beyond the canonical seven grades also existed. In certain local communities, systems with eight grades, or conversely, only two or three, have been attested<sup>1</sup>.

The exact nature of initiation within the cult remains highly debated, primarily due to the lack of definitive sources. However, when the limited literary and iconographic evidence is considered alongside epigraphic material, a general framework of the grade system can be reconstructed. Three literary texts are of primary importance in this regard. The first set of information is attributed to the ancient author Euboulos. As cited in Porphyry's *De Abstinencia*, Euboulos notes that initiates participating in Mithraic rites were referred to as "Lions," "female hyenas," and "attendant ravens," while those belonging to the "Fathers"

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsay Macmullan, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale, 1981), 234.

grade were called “Eagles” and “Hawks”<sup>2</sup>. This account attributed to Euboulos provides significant clues concerning the structure of the Mithraic grade system.

Another significant reference to the Mithraic grades comes from Augustine, a knowledgeable Roman clergyman and Christian thinker writing in the early 380s. Regarding the initiation process, Augustine states: “Their eyes are completely shut; some flap their arms like birds, caw like ravens, and some roar like lions”<sup>3</sup>. Although there is a gap of more than a century between this passage and the account attributed to Euboulos, it is noteworthy that Augustine refers only to the “Corax” and “Leo” grades. Epigraphic evidence confirms the prominence of these two ranks: “Leo” is mentioned 41 times, and “Corax” 5 times<sup>4</sup>. These figures suggest that the Leo and Corax grades held particular prominence within Mithraic communities. It is therefore plausible that the architects of the Mithraic Mysteries were influenced by traditions such as the Eleusinian and Samothracian Mysteries, which consisted of only two degrees<sup>5</sup>.

There is no definitive information regarding how the grades were practically implemented within the cult. However, archaeological and epigraphic data related to these grades are more clearly traceable in and around the city of Rome. For instance, the floor mosaic of the mid-third-century Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia (Fig. 1) visibly displays symbols corresponding to the seven grades. Likewise, the contemporaneous Santa Prisca Mithraeum in Rome contains references to these grades. In contrast, the farther one moves from Rome—for example, in regions such as Dacia and Moesia—the fewer the traces of individual grades become<sup>6</sup>. This observation has led recent studies to suggest that the grade system was not rigidly fixed but rather evolved in accordance with local conditions<sup>7</sup>. In fact, it has been argued that there was a direct correlation between the size of a community and the number of grades implemented: the smaller the community, the fewer the grades<sup>8</sup>.

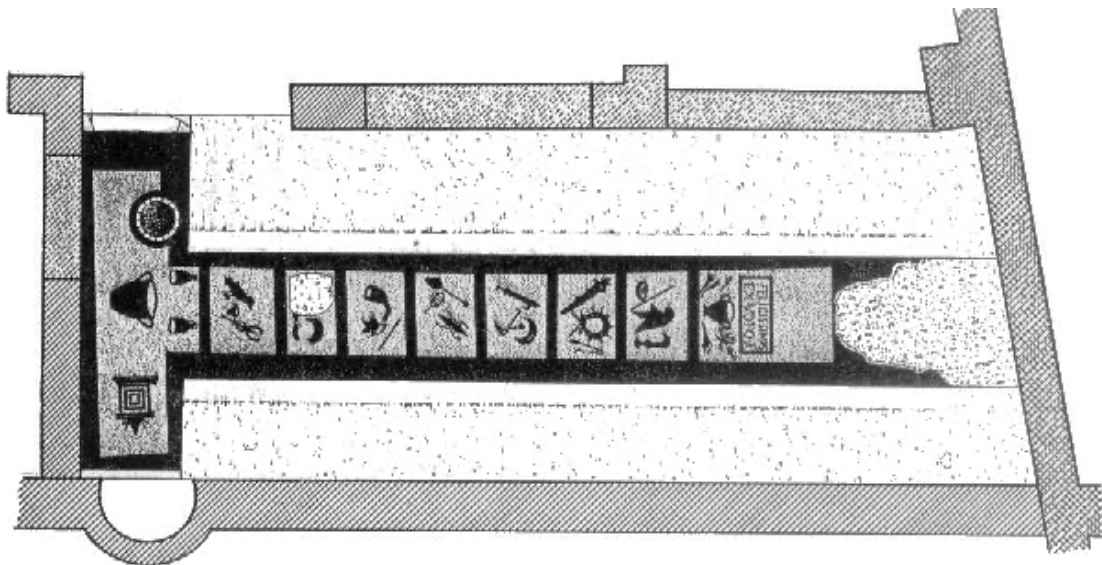


Figure 1. <https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm> (accessed 19 March 2025).

The Mithraic grade system is generally believed to fall into three distinct groups. The first group consists of Corax, Nymphus, and Miles; the second includes Leo, Perses, and Heliodromus. Pater occupies

<sup>2</sup> Porphyry, *De Abstinencia*, 4.16.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Shenington Geden, *Select Passages Illustrating Mithraism* (London: 1925), 65.

<sup>4</sup> Manfred Clauss, “Die sieben Grades des Mithras-Kultes”, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 82, (1990): 185.

<sup>5</sup> Jan N. Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries of Ancient World* (Berlin/Boston: 2014), 132–133.

<sup>6</sup> Sorin Nemeti, “Planets, grades and soteriology in Dacian Mithraism”, *Acta Musei Napocensis* 41–42, (2004-2005): 107–124.

<sup>7</sup> Jaime Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2008), 364–371; Aleš Chalupa, “Seven Mithraic Grades: An Initiatory or Priestly Hierarchy”, *Religio XVI/ 2* (2008): 190–191.

<sup>8</sup> Bremmer, *Mysteries of Ancient World*, 134.

a unique and elevated position of its own<sup>9</sup>. The lowest rank, Corax, was responsible for service duties during rituals, similar to the roles of young men in Greek symposia, who were expected to pour wine and wash dishes. A fresco from Dura Europos depicts a raven-headed figure offering a skewer of meat to the reclining Mithras and Sol. Likewise, the lamp symbol in the mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum is associated with the Nymphus grade, suggesting that this level was also responsible for maintaining illumination. Given the inherent darkness of Mithraea, this task must have been both essential and likely assigned to one of the lower ranks. Although the exact duties of Miles are unknown, scholarly consensus holds that this third degree marked a deeper identification with Mithras himself and thus served as a transitional stage between the first and second groups<sup>10</sup>.

With the grades of Leo, Perses, and Heliodromus, initiates entered a new stage within the Mithraic system. This division appears consistent with the structure of the cult, particularly considering the prominence of the Leo grade. After Pater, Leo is the most frequently mentioned grade in epigraphic material and seems to have acquired a normative status<sup>11</sup>. Pallas refers to those of the Leo grade as "initiators in the rites," implying that the preceding grades primarily served to shape character, while formal ritual duties began with Leo. Expressions such as Pater leonum and the designation of a Mithraic sanctuary as leonteum also reflect the centrality of this grade within the cult. The Leo grade was especially associated with the element of fire; as noted in the wall inscriptions of the Santa Prisca Mithraeum in Rome, it appears that members of this grade were responsible for burning incense<sup>12</sup>.

One of the wall inscriptions from the Santa Prisca Mithraeum in Rome contains the following hymn associated with the Leo grade and its role in incense offerings:

*"Receive the incense bearers, Father, receive the Lions, O Sacred One,  
Through whom we offer incense, through whom we consume and burn ourselves!"*

These lines reveal that the Leo grade was not only responsible for the act of offering incense but also symbolized a deeper ritual of purification and spiritual transformation<sup>13</sup>.

### **Corax – The Raven**

The first level within the Mithraic grade system was known as Corax (Raven). This grade was traditionally believed to be under the protection of the god Mercury. Archaeological evidence from the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia indicates that the primary symbols associated with the Corax rank were the raven, the caduceus (Mercury's staff), and a cup (Fig. 2). The Corax grade symbolized the initiate's ritual death upon entering the community, as spiritual progression required a symbolic death before rebirth could occur along the mystical path.

Two inscriptions found in the Santa Prisca Mithraeum clearly indicate that the Corax grade was associated with the god Mercury. A similar situation is observed in the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia, where symbolic elements linked to this grade are present. Within the Corax area, a small beaker and a caduceus—the emblem of Mercury—are prominently featured. These findings not only reflect the ceremonial function of the grade but also illuminate its mythological associations.

<sup>9</sup> E. D. Francis, "Mithraic Graffiti from Dura Europos", *Mithraic Studies*, Ed. J. R. Hinnells, (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1975, 440–445.

<sup>10</sup> Bremmer, *Mysteries of Ancient World*, 134–135.

<sup>11</sup> For detailed discussions on the significance of the Leo grade, see Concetta A. Spada, "Il leo nella gerarchia dei gradi mitriaci", *Mysteria Mithrae*, ed. U. Bianchi, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 639–648; H. Jackson, "The Meaning and Function of the Leontocephaline in Roman Mithraism," *Numen* 32, no. 1 (1985): 17–45; Richard Gordon, "Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine", *Topoi* 11, (2001): 109–111; R. Bortolin, *Il leontocefalo dei misteri mitraici: l'identità enigmatica di un dio* (Padua: 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Bremmer, *Mysteries of Ancient World*, 136.

<sup>13</sup> Bremmer, *Mysteries of Ancient World*, 136.



Figure 2. <https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm> (accessed 19 March 2025).

In addition to the well-known sevenfold hierarchy associated with the gods, certain functional distinctions were also made within the Mithraic system. A passage in Porphyry suggests that attaining the first three grades did not grant full participation in the mysteries. Initiates at this level may be likened to the catechumens in early Christianity—that is, individuals in a preparatory stage, serving the cult rather than fully engaging in its rites. Admission to this category was contingent upon acceptance into the Corax grade<sup>14</sup>.

Augustine notes that initiates of the Corax grade made sounds resembling ravens and flapped their arms like birds during ritual performance<sup>15</sup>. A visual representation of this practice appears in a scene from the Mithraeum at Konjic in Dalmatia, where initiates are depicted wearing raven masks. This scene offers insight into the origins of early rituals, rooted in the belief that the divine could be identified with an animal form, and that one could attain spiritual union by assuming its image and name. These masked priests were understood to behave as ritual servants during special ceremonies, acting in an overt and symbolic manner. The small beaker found in the Felicissimus Mithraeum may be related to this practice<sup>16</sup>.

Merkelbach interprets the tauroctony scene in light of the symbols associated with the seven-grade Mithraic initiation system, viewing it within a ritual context. His interpretation draws not only on a literary passage from *Contra Celsum* but also on the floor mosaic in the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia, which depicts a seven-stepped ladder representing the grades. According to Merkelbach, the first grade, Corax, signifies the phase of calling, and corresponds to the raven in the tauroctony—who brings Mithras the message from Sol that the time has come to slay the bull<sup>17</sup>.

### **Nymphus – The Bridegroom**

In the Mithraic initiatory system, the second grade following *Corax* is *Nymphus* (“Bridegroom”), a stage traditionally associated with the protective influence of the goddess Venus. Archaeological evidence from the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia—though heavily damaged in the corresponding section—offers limited yet suggestive clues regarding the symbolism of this grade. Among the discernible elements are a lamp and an object resembling a crescent-shaped diadem, both of which may be linked to the ritual and symbolic attributes of the *Nymphus* stage (Fig. 3). Despite these findings, *Nymphus* remains one of the most

<sup>14</sup> Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (London: Kegan Paul Trench Trübner & Co. 1903), 155.

<sup>15</sup> Geden, *Select Passages*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 133.

<sup>17</sup> Reinhold Merkelbach, *Mithras: Ein persisch-römischer Mysterienkult* (Königstein: 1984), 78, 81–85.



enigmatic degrees within the Mithraic hierarchy, with its precise ritual functions and theological connotations still largely subject to scholarly conjecture.



Figure 3. <https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm> (accessed 19 March 2025).

The second stage in the Mithraic initiation system, Nymphus, is known not only by its primary title—meaning “bridegroom”—but also by a secondary designation: Chrysalis<sup>18</sup>. This title signifies the latent spiritual potential of the novice initiate, who has not yet undergone full transformation. In the subsequent grades of Leo and Perses, initiates participate in sacred honey rituals, completing their metamorphosis into bees<sup>19</sup>.

In his manuscript letter to Laeta<sup>20</sup>, Jerome mentions two terms for this grade: Nymphus and Gryphon. Interestingly, while Gryphon appears in one or two inscriptions from the fourth century, only Nymphus is attested in third-century epigraphy, suggesting that the second designation may have been deliberately concealed<sup>21</sup>.

At this stage, the initiate would swear an oath to remain celibate as the symbolic “bride of Mithras.” During ritual practice, Nymphus-grade initiates offered a cup of water to a statue of Mithras. The vessel symbolized the initiate’s heart, while the water represented their love for the god<sup>22</sup>. Though the diadem is a symbol traditionally linked to Venus, the depiction of an oil lamp in this context likely reflects the ritual functions associated with this grade<sup>23</sup>. Initiates of the Nymphus grade wore a veil and carried a lamp during ceremonies. These objects symbolized the idea that one could not behold the light of truth until the veil of illusion had been lifted<sup>24</sup>.

The second initiation stage, Nymphus, which Merkelbach interprets as chrysalis—the embryonic or cocoon phase of initiation—is represented in Mithraic iconography by the image of the serpent beneath the bull. This serpent is typically depicted in conjunction with a dog, both positioned beneath the bull’s body<sup>25</sup>. The symbol embodies the initiate’s incomplete transformation, a movement toward hidden knowledge, and the redirection of internal energies during the early stages of spiritual development.

<sup>18</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 88–93.

<sup>19</sup> Payam Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras The Pagan Belief That Shaped the Christian World* (Rochester: 2005), 49.

<sup>20</sup> Jerome, *Epistulae* CVII. ad Laetam.

<sup>21</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 134.

<sup>22</sup> Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 134.

<sup>24</sup> Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 81–85.

### Miles – The Soldier

The third grade in the Mithraic initiatory system is designated as *Miles* (“Soldier”), a stage traditionally placed under the protection of Mars, the Roman god of war. Archaeological evidence from the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia associates this grade with a distinct set of symbols: a helmet, a spear, and a bull’s leg (Fig. 4)<sup>26</sup>. Collectively, these elements signify the initiate’s transition into a new spiritual phase characterized by martial discipline, unwavering loyalty, and the sacrificial ethos central to Mithraic theology.



Figure 4. <https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm> (accessed 19 March 2025).

The Christian theologian Tertullian, writing in the second century CE, offers a rare and valuable account regarding the Miles grade. According to his description, the initiate—naked, blindfolded, and with hands bound—would kneel within a darkened cave, where a crown was presented to him upon the tip of a sword. Upon receiving the crown, the initiate would symbolically reject worldly authority by removing it from his head, placing it upon his shoulder, and proclaiming that his only sovereign was Mithras<sup>27</sup>. This ritual dramatized the initiate’s renunciation of material attachments and signified a transition toward spiritual emancipation. From that point onward, as a “soldier” of Mithras, the initiate was understood to have embarked upon an inner struggle—a metaphysical battle against the self<sup>28</sup>.

At the conclusion of this initiatory stage, a mark was inscribed on the initiate’s forehead, symbolizing their new spiritual identity and responsibilities. However, the precise form and meaning of this marking remain subjects of scholarly debate. Cumont interprets the mark as a visible reminder of the profound obligations assumed by the initiate upon entering the Miles grade<sup>29</sup>. Turcan, citing historical precedent, notes that Hostilianus—presumed to be the son of Emperor Decius Traianus—reportedly bore an X-shaped mark on his forehead<sup>30</sup>. In contrast, Nabarz suggests that the symbol may have taken the form of a cross with equal arms, a solar emblem intended to reflect the initiate’s alignment with cosmic order and illumination<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 134.

<sup>27</sup> Tertullian, *De Corona*, ch. XV; Manfred Clauss, “Miles Mithrae”, *Klio* 74, (1992): 269–274.

<sup>28</sup> Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 157; Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 157.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Turcan, *Mithra et la Mithriacisme*, (Paris: 1993), 244.

<sup>31</sup> Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 51. Christian ceremonies, which were heavily influenced by Mithraism, can give an idea about what this marking might be. It suggests that Ash Wednesday in the Christian faith was taken from Mithraism or that both were fed from a common source. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent in the Western Church. It falls approximately six and a half weeks before Easter, typically between February 4 and March 11. In early Christianity, the duration of Lent varied among different churches. Over time, it was standardized to six weeks (42 days). However, since Sundays were not counted as fasting days, this left only 36 days of actual fasting. In reference to the forty days that Jesus spent fasting in the desert, four additional days were added to Lent during the 7th century, bringing the total number of fasting days to forty. In the Roman Empire, penitents would begin their period of penance on the first day of Lent. They wore sackcloth and had ashes

According to Merkelbach, the third initiation stage, Miles, is associated with the planet Mars and carries a militaristic significance. Its astrological equivalent is the zodiac sign Scorpio. In Mithraic iconography, the Miles grade is represented by the scorpion in the tauroctony scene, specifically the one attacking the bull's genitals<sup>32</sup>. This symbol is interpreted as a metaphor for the initiate's entry into inner struggle and the need to master personal desires and impulses.

### Leo – The Lion

The fourth and most significant grade in Mithraism was Leo (the Lion). This grade was traditionally associated with the patron deity Jupiter. According to evidence from the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia, the symbolic attributes linked to this grade include a fire shovel, a bundle of lightning bolts, and a sistrum (see Fig. 5). These elements reflect the ritual and cosmological functions attributed to the Leo grade within the Mithraic hierarchy.



Figure 5. <https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm> (accessed 19 March 2025).

Within the Mithraic hierarchy, the Leo grade—positioned fourth in the sequence—marks the stage at which initiates became fully integrated into the core mysteries of the cult. Consequently, the designation Leo appears more frequently than any other grade in the archaeological record, particularly in epigraphic inscriptions<sup>33</sup>. Given the elevated status ascribed to this grade, it is perhaps unsurprising that significantly less evidence survives for the higher degrees, such as Perses and Heliodromus<sup>34</sup>.

At this stage of initiation, the Leo grade was understood to represent a symbolic union with the element of fire. Initiates who reached this level were no longer considered passive participants but were believed to embody the sacred qualities of fire itself. As part of this transformation, strict ritual prohibitions were observed: contact with water was expressly forbidden. In its place, honey was employed for the ritual purification of the hands and the anointing of the mouth. This substitution was intended to maintain the elemental purity of fire and to prevent contamination through the symbolic antithesis of water. Elements of these ritual practices are attested in the writings of the Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry.

In Mithraic ritual practice, initiates used honey in place of water to cleanse their hands—a gesture that transcended mere hygiene and carried deep symbolic meaning. This substitution reflected the purifying

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sprinkled over their heads. They would remain apart from the Christian community until Maundy Thursday—the Thursday before Easter. Although these practices were abandoned between the 8th and 10th centuries, the imposition of ashes was preserved and eventually transformed into a ritual act applied to the entire congregation. In the contemporary Roman Catholic Church, crosses made of ash are traced on the foreheads of the faithful during Ash Wednesday services. These ashes are obtained from the burned palm branches from the previous year's Palm Sunday. Ash Wednesday is also observed in Anglican, Lutheran, and some Protestant churches. However, it is not practiced in Eastern Orthodox churches, as Lent in those traditions begins on a Monday. See: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ash-Wednesday-Christian-holy-day> (accessed 13 March 2025).

<sup>32</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 81–85.

<sup>33</sup> Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 155.

<sup>34</sup> Bremmer, *Mysteries of Ancient World*, 136–137.



nature of fire, which the Leo grade was closely associated with, and deliberately avoided the elemental opposition between fire and water. As noted by Porphyry, this custom embodied the initiate's symbolic transformation and purification through fire, reinforcing the metaphysical alignment between ritual action and cosmic principle<sup>35</sup>.

In the large fresco of the Santa Prisca Mithraeum in Rome, initiates of the Leo grade are portrayed wearing flame-red cloaks, visually reinforcing their association with the element of fire. Correspondingly, the panel dedicated to this grade in the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia features a fire shovel, further underscoring the symbolic connection between Leo and fire. Additional objects depicted on the same panel—including a rattle, a sistrum, and a thunderbolt—are emblematic of Jupiter, the tutelary deity of this grade. Within the context of the Leo initiation rites, particular emphasis was placed on evoking and embodying the transformative and purifying qualities of fire<sup>36</sup>.

The incense offerings performed by initiates of the Leo grade were believed to facilitate the ascent of souls into the celestial realm. In the Santa Prisca Mithraeum in Rome, this belief is visually expressed through a fresco depicting a ritual procession of Leos presenting offerings to the Pater, arranged in two parallel rows along the wall paintings. Several of these figures are accompanied by inscriptions composed in metrical verse. Notably, one such verse appears on the left wall, situated above the reclining figure of the god Sol within the banquet scene, further reinforcing the ritual and cosmological significance of the Leo grade.

*“Receive the incense bearers, Father; receive the Lions, O Sacred One,*

*For we offer incense, for we consume and burn ourselves<sup>37</sup>.”*

These verses reveal that the Leo grade was not merely a ceremonial rank, but one representing sacrifice, purification, and spiritual self-offering.

During initiation into the Leo grade, a distinct form of baptismal ritual was performed. However, in alignment with the symbolic association of this grade with the element of fire, water—traditionally understood as antithetical to fire—was deliberately excluded from the ceremony. In its place, a ritual practice reminiscent of rites performed for newborn infants was observed: honey was poured over the initiate's hands and applied to the tongue<sup>38</sup>. This act was intended to purify and protect the initiate from spiritual defilement, reinforcing the elemental symbolism of fire while marking a transition into a higher state of ritual and moral purity.

At the conclusion of the purification rite, the Pater formally acknowledged the initiate's advancement by solemnly extending a handshake—an act that ritually echoed the mythological joining of hands between Sol and Mithras. The symbolic weight of this gesture was deeply embedded in Mithraic practice, to the extent that initiates were sometimes referred to as *syndexioi*, meaning “those united by the handshake.” This designation underscored not only the communal bond among members but also their shared participation in a sacred lineage modeled on divine precedent<sup>39</sup>.

In Mithraic initiation rituals, the symbolic trials involving fire and water represented the dual processes of spiritual “burning” and “extinguishing,” serving as metaphors for the initiate's inner transformation. These elemental ordeals highlight the shamanistic dimensions embedded within the

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<sup>35</sup> Porphyry, *De Antra Nympharum*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 135.

<sup>37</sup> Maarten Josef Vermaseren, and C. C. V. Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 224–232.

<sup>38</sup> Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 157.

<sup>39</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 151–152.

Mithraic mysteries, wherein symbolic death and rebirth formed central components of the initiatory experience. A key feature of such rites was the presence of a pit of trials, typically covered with stone slabs, which signified the ritual devouring or symbolic descent of the initiate into the earth. The discovery of such a pit in the Mithraeum at Carrawburgh, located on the northern frontier of Roman Britain, attests to the widespread geographical diffusion of these practices throughout the Roman Empire<sup>40</sup>.

Initiates of the Leo grade, like those of the Corax stage, were believed to don lion masks and emit leonine roars during ritual ceremonies<sup>41</sup>—acts intended to embody the symbolic identity of the grade and reinforce its connection to the element of fire. Leos also held practical responsibilities within the cult, notably the task of carrying food prepared by lower-ranking members to the ritual banquet. This banquet reenacted the mythic last supper of Mithras and his companions, during which bread and wine were shared prior to Mithras's ascension to the heavens in the chariot of Sol. Additionally, a principal duty assigned to Leo initiates was the maintenance of the sacred altar fire, a role consistent with their association with purification and spiritual transformation<sup>42</sup>.

One of the key symbolic attributes associated with the Leo grade is the thunderbolt, an emblem closely tied to the divine authority of Jupiter. In several visual representations, the thunderbolt is prominently depicted on the chest of Leontocephalus, the lion-headed figure often interpreted as a syncretic deity within Mithraic iconography. In Roman religious language, the incense offerings performed by Leo initiates were believed to facilitate the ascent of souls to the celestial realm. These rites were conducted while the Leo members wore lion masks, further reinforcing their ritual identity and symbolic connection to both fire and celestial mediation.

This symbolic performance may reflect deeper Mesopotamian ritual archetypes, as suggested by an eighth-century BCE Assyrian relief depicting lion-masked figures engaged in ceremonial functions<sup>43</sup>. A comparable motif appears on a Hittite cylinder seal, where two lions, standing upright beside the goddess Ashara, are shown carrying a boat containing human figures. In his analysis of this scene, Ward argues that such lion-headed figures—also attested on bronze burial plaques—may have symbolized the soul's transition from the earthly to the spiritual realm<sup>44</sup>. These iconographic parallels offer meaningful resonance with the ritual role of Leo-grade initiates in Roman Mithraism, suggesting the persistence of archetypal imagery across distinct but symbolically related traditions<sup>45</sup>.

According to Merkelbach, the fourth initiation grade, Leo, is symbolically represented in the tauroctony scene by the figure of the dog. He establishes a symbolic equivalence between the lion and the dog through Mithraic hunting iconography, wherein Mithras is frequently depicted in the act of pursuing game, accompanied by both animals. Within this visual and symbolic framework, the dog serves as an iconographic counterpart to the lion, thereby functioning as a metaphorical representation of the Leo grade. This association further underscores the layered and coded nature of Mithraic imagery in articulating hierarchical and theological concepts<sup>46</sup>.

### **Perses – The Persian**

The fifth grade within the Mithraic initiation system is known as Perses (the Persian). This stage was associated with the celestial influence of the moon goddess Luna. According to archaeological evidence

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<sup>40</sup> Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 53.

<sup>41</sup> Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 158.

<sup>42</sup> Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 52.

<sup>43</sup> C. Provanzano, "The Mysteries of Mithra: Tracing Syncretistic Connections to the Ancient Near East" (Master's thesis, California State University, 2009), 98.

<sup>44</sup> W. H. Ward, "The Hittite Gods in Hittite Art." *American Journal of Archaeology* 3, (1899): 37–38.

<sup>45</sup> Provanzano, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 98.

<sup>46</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 81–85.

from the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia, the symbols linked to the Perses grade include a harpy, a crescent with a star, and a whip (Fig. 6). These icons collectively evoke lunar and nocturnal themes, as well as notions of discipline and purification specific to this stage.



Figure 6. <https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm> (accessed 19 March 2025).

As Porphyry notes<sup>47</sup>, just as in the Leo grade, honey was also offered to initiates of the Perses grade for its protective qualities<sup>48</sup>. He further describes the Perses initiates as endowed with symbolic healing powers and protective capacities. Intriguingly, in ancient Iranian belief, honey was thought to originate from the moon. In this context, honey was not understood in the modern sense of a "honeymoon," but rather as a symbol of enduring love and fertility within marriage<sup>49</sup>.

The sickle depicted in the Perses panel of the Felicissimus Mithraeum may be interpreted as a representation of this fertility symbolism. Moreover, its form resembles the Akinakes, a short sword widely used by the Persians and Scythians during the first millennium BCE, adding a layer of martial symbolism. The same scene also includes a crescent and star motif, visually reinforcing the connection to the moon goddess Luna<sup>50</sup>.

In the Mithraic initiation system, the fifth and sixth grades—Perses and Heliodromus—are symbolically associated with the torch-bearing figures Cautopates and Cautes, who flank the tauroctony scene. According to Merkelbach, the Perses grade corresponds to Cautopates, whose torch points downward, while the Heliodromus grade is linked to Cautes, who holds his torch aloft. These two figures represent not only the cosmic duality of light and darkness, but also the spiritual progression of the initiate from obscurity to illumination<sup>51</sup>.

### **Heliodromus – The Solar Path**

The sixth grade in the Mithraic initiatory hierarchy is *Heliodromus* ("Sun-Runner" or "Courier of the Sun"), a title imbued with solar and cosmological symbolism. This grade was associated with the tutelary deity Helios (the Sun), and its iconography reflects a strong emphasis on solar motifs, divine authority, and astral ascent. According to archaeological data from the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia, the principal symbols linked to this grade include a torch, a whip, and a radiant crown—each invoking notions of solar power, illumination, and spiritual propulsion (Fig. 7)<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> Porphyry, *De Antra Nympharum*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 157.

<sup>49</sup> M. Homayouri, *Origins of Persian Gnosis* (London: 1992), 8.

<sup>50</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 136.

<sup>51</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 81–85.

<sup>52</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithra*, 87.

The Heliodromus functioned not only as a high-ranking initiate but also as a symbolic embodiment of the Sun in ritual contexts. During sacred banquets, Heliodromi were seated beside Mithras, mirroring the mythological partnership between the deity and Sol as depicted in tauroctony scenes<sup>53</sup>. This seating arrangement underscored the initiate's progression toward solar assimilation and divine proximity, reinforcing the cosmological dimension of the grade.



Figure 7. <https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm> (accessed 19 March 2025).

Initiates of the Heliodromus grade wore garments dyed red—the color of blood, flame, and the midday sun—further underscoring their identification with solar energy and divine illumination<sup>54</sup>. The torch they carried, held aloft in contrast to the downward-pointing torch of the *Perses* grade, visually paralleled the Mithraic figure *Cautes*, who stands as the personification of rising light and cosmic ascent<sup>55</sup>. This dual symbolism, shared with *Cautopates* (associated with the *Perses* grade), formed part of the Mithraic representation of balance between darkness and light, descent and ascent.

Astrologically, the grade of Heliodromus aligns with the Sun as both planetary deity and metaphysical destination. Merkelbach<sup>56</sup> argues that the ascension through the seven grades culminates in solar integration, represented by this grade, which stands just below the *Pater*—the earthly embodiment of Mithras himself.

### **Pater – The Father**

At the pinnacle of the Mithraic initiation system stands the seventh and highest grade: Pater (Father). This stage was associated with the cosmic guardianship of Saturn, the god of time and order. According to archaeological findings from the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia, the symbols of the Pater grade include a dagger, the cap of Mithras, a staff, and a patera (libation bowl) (Fig. 8). These elements emphasize the Pater's role as both cosmic authority and ritual leader within the Mithraic hierarchy.

At the summit of the Mithraic hierarchy stood the Patres, who presided over sacred ceremonies (pater sacrorum) and commanded the lower ranks of the faithful. Initiates of this seventh and final grade of Mithraism were at times referred to as “eagles” and “hawks”<sup>57</sup>. As spiritual teachers of the community, the Patres were entrusted with the direction of liturgical rites<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 53-55.

<sup>54</sup> Turcan, *Mithra et la Mithriacisme*, 89.

<sup>55</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithra*, 87-89.

<sup>56</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithra*, 89, 122.

<sup>57</sup> Porphyry, *De Abstinencia*, IV.16; Richard Gordon, “Reality, Evocation and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras”, *The Journal of Mithraic Studies* III/1-2 (1980): 65–67.

<sup>58</sup> Nabarz, *The Mysteries of Mithras*, 54.



Among them, the supreme figure—“the Father of Fathers”—occupied the highest spiritual position and remained in office until his death<sup>59</sup>. This hierarchical and symbolic structure reveals that Mithraism was not merely a personal path of initiation, but also a system embedded with ritual authority and religious governance.



Figure 8. <https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio5/9/9-1.htm> (accessed 19 March 2025).

Initiates of the Pater grade wore long-sleeved red tunics with yellow stripes, yellow belts, loose-fitting Persian trousers, and were adorned with a red cap and cloak<sup>60</sup>. These ceremonial garments symbolized both cosmic order and spiritual authority.

In the Pater panel of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia, a Phrygian cap attributed to Mithras is among the depicted symbols. This iconography reinforces the role of the Pater as the earthly representative of the god. Additional symbols such as the libation bowl (patera) highlight his function in conducting rituals, while the sickle and staff signify the protective influence of the god Saturn over this highest grade<sup>61</sup>.

In Mithraic communities, the supreme spiritual authority was designated as Pater Patrum (Father of Fathers), a title that occasionally evolved into Pater Patratus. These grand masters preserved the overall governance of the cult until their deaths, serving as the custodians of ritual and organizational order<sup>62</sup>.

Respect and devotion toward these exalted leaders were expressed through the honorific "Father," and within the Mithraic system, those who had attained mystical knowledge referred to one another as “brothers.” This terminology reflected the expectation that initiates (consacranei) cultivate mutual love and solidarity. The Pater was also likely responsible for determining whether lower-ranked initiates were ready to ascend to higher degrees, thus guiding their spiritual progression.

Among the Mithraic grades, the Pater class is the most frequently attested in epigraphic sources. The highest-ranking figure within this class was often designated as p(ater) patrum—“Father of Fathers”—a title that likely indicated his authority over other Patres. This designation is clearly documented in multiple inscriptions<sup>63</sup>.

The frequent appearance of the Pater grade in epigraphic records may suggest that any initiate could potentially attain this highest rank. However, such an interpretation is incompatible with the rigid hierarchy of the Roman Empire. Just as it would be inconceivable for a common soldier to command an officer, or for an ordinary citizen to surpass a member of the imperial household, it is unlikely that Leo-grade initiates

<sup>59</sup> Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 155.

<sup>60</sup> C. Daniels, *Mithras and His Temples on the Wall* (Tyne:1989), 8.

<sup>61</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 120.

<sup>62</sup> Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, 155.

<sup>63</sup> CIMRM, 403, 799.

from lower social strata ever advanced to the Pater rank. This limitation was likely well understood within Mithraic communities.

Therefore, the prominent role attributed to the Pater in Jerome's writings, as well as the symbolic representation of this grade in the Felicissimus Mithraeum, should be viewed not as literal realities but as idealized portrayals of spiritual hierarchy<sup>64</sup>. In this sense, the initiatory class system may have functioned less as a genuinely accessible structure and more as a symbolic expression of cosmic and communal order.

According to Merkelbach, the seventh and final grade of Mithraic initiation—Pater—corresponds to Mithras himself, who is regarded as “the creator and father of all.” This association is rooted in the myth of the cosmogonic sacrifice of the primordial bull. Since the universe was believed to have originated from the slaying of the bull depicted in the tauroctony, the Pater was not merely the spiritual leader of the community, but also symbolized the earthly embodiment of Mithras' creative and sovereign power<sup>65</sup>.

### **Other Titles: Local Traditions**

In Italy, a substantial amount of epigraphic and literary evidence exists regarding the priestly ranks of Mithraism. The use of various titles associated with the Pater grade appears to reflect local traditions and regional religious practices. One such title, Pater Patratus, borrowed from traditional Roman priesthood terminology, was adopted by some Mithraic Patres, forming a symbolic link between Mithraic initiation and Roman sacerdotal heritage.

Another less frequently encountered designation is Pater Sacrorum, which translates as “father of the mysteries,” while Pater Nominus refers more generally to the paternal role traditionally attributed to leaders within the Mithraic community<sup>66</sup>. This variety of titles highlights the theological and organizational flexibility embedded in Mithraic ritual leadership.

Following the Pater grade, Leo is the most frequently attested Mithraic grade in archaeological and epigraphic sources. Individuals associated with this grade are sometimes referred to as Sacerdos, a general Latin term for priest. When the expression Pater et Sacerdos appears, it often indicates a person's hierarchical position within the Mithraic system. Rather than representing two distinct roles, this formula likely reflects the combination of a generic sacerdotal title with the Mithraic-specific rank of Pater.

Interestingly, several inscriptions mention Sacerdos in direct association with Pater, and some examples suggest these titles might be interchangeable within certain contexts. However, scholarly debate continues regarding whether these terms functioned as synonyms or denoted separate ritual statuses<sup>67</sup>.

Another commonly used title for temple functions in Mithraism is Antistes. In Mithraic contexts, this term frequently appears alongside Pater and Sacerdos. At Mitreo Fagan, the first Mithraeum discovered in Ostia, C. Valerius Heracles is recorded as participating in three separate dedications, in which he refers to himself using both the titles Pater and Antistes. As a Pater, he joined two Sacerdotes in dedicating a statue of the god of Time, while in another cultic context, he identified himself solely as Sacerdos.

This overlapping of roles becomes more complex when, in another Ostian Mithraeum, M. Caerellius Hieronymus is described in one inscription as one of two Sacerdotes et Antistites, and in another as Pater et Sacerdos. These examples illustrate that the boundaries between these titles were not strictly fixed and

<sup>64</sup> Bremmer, *Mysteries of Ancient World*, 137–138.

<sup>65</sup> Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 81–85.

<sup>66</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 138.

<sup>67</sup> F. Mitthof, “Der Vorstand der Kultgemeinden des Mithras. Eine Sammlung und Untersuchung der inschriftlichen Zeugnisse”, *Klio* 74, (1992): 275 – 90.

may have varied depending on individual roles or local community practices. Furthermore, it was not unusual for initiates to transfer from one Mithraic congregation to another<sup>68</sup>.

### Assessment

Scholarly research on the Mithraic grade system has primarily focused on the symbolic, functional, and ritual significance of the degrees within the cult. However, little attention has been given to their origins, and existing studies tend to approach this aspect only superficially. It is plausible that a system of graded initiation already existed in the regions where Mithraism first developed.

Two hypotheses are often proposed to explain the prevalence of the grade structure among Roman soldiers. The first, and more plausible, is that the hierarchical nature of Mithraism facilitated its rapid acceptance among military personnel due to structural similarities. The second hypothesis suggests that the cult's military popularity may have generated the hierarchical system itself; however, this is unlikely, as comparable military-associated cults such as those of Sabazios or Dolichenus did not employ such ranked systems. This implies that Mithraism's hierarchical framework likely originated in a pre-Roman context.

Tartu, a recent scholar contributing significantly to the study of Mithraism, suggests that the origins of the Mithraic grade system—like the tauroctony motif—may be traced back to Mesopotamian traditions. He proposes that the concept of a tiered initiatory structure finds a precedent in the architectural and symbolic design of the Mesopotamian ziggurat, which served as a medium of communication between humans and the divine through its seven ascending levels.

A textual source supporting this view dates to 2115 BCE and refers to the ruler of the city-state of Lagaš, Gudea, who constructed a temple for his god Ningirsu known as Eninnu, “the House of Fifty.” Descriptions of this structure, recorded on clay cylinders, reference its seven-level form. This layered architectural model may have later provided the cosmological and symbolic foundation for the seven grades of Mithraic initiation<sup>69</sup>.

In the late 3rd millennium BCE, Gudea, ruler of the city-state of Lagaš, constructed the Eninnu Temple for his god Ningirsu. This edifice was not only an architectural project but also a ritual structure modeled after a cosmological schema composed of seven symbolic squares. The following passage, recorded on clay cylinders, narrates the sacred process of its foundation:

*“Gudea, responsible for building the house, placed the building’s carrying basket on his head as if it were a sacred crown. He laid the foundation, set the walls upon the ground. He aligned the bricks with a cord to mark the boundary of the first square.*

*‘This is the line of a sealed jar with a capacity of 1 yasad,’ he said, marking the second square.*

*‘This is the Anzud bird sheltering its young beneath its wings,’ he said, defining the third square.*

*‘This is a panther encircling a raging lion,’ he said, outlining the fourth square.*

*‘This is the blue sky in all its glory,’ he said, forming the fifth square.*

*‘This is the fruitful day of offering,’ he said, drawing the sixth square.*

*‘This is Eninnu, who bathes the earth with the light of the Moon,’ he said, designating the seventh square<sup>70</sup>.”*

<sup>68</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, 138.

<sup>69</sup> Annus Amar Tartu, “The Soul’s Journeys and Tauroctony: On Babylonian Sediment in the Syncretic Religious Doctrines of Late Antiquity”, *Body and Soul in the Conceptions of the Religions*, ed. M. Dietrich and T. Kulmar, (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2008), 7.

<sup>70</sup> Tartu, *The Soul’s Journeys and Tauroctony*, 8, fn. 10.

This passage not only illustrates sacred architectural methodology but also reveals a cosmological hierarchy that may have inspired later ritual systems—such as the seven initiatory grades of Mithraism.

The seventh level of the structure can be associated with the Sumerian Moon god Su'en. The sixth word includes the term “day,” which, in Sumerian, is written with the same sign used for both Utu (the Sun god) and ud (day), possibly indicating a solar reference. The “blue sky” mentioned in the fifth level may refer to the sky god An or the storm god Iškur. The panther and lion in the fourth level can be associated with Inanna. The Anzu bird in the third level might be linked to Ningirsu, the patron deity of the temple<sup>71</sup>. The top two levels—clearly linked to the Moon and then the Sun—demonstrate a deliberately constructed cosmic order<sup>72</sup>.

According to Babylonian texts and the account of Herodotus, the famous ziggurat of Marduk's E-temen-anki temple in Babylon consisted of seven levels, and possibly an eighth rooftop chamber, where only women chosen by the god were permitted to spend the night. There is some evidence that the Christian heretic Bardaisan of Edessa envisioned Paradise as being located at the top of the ziggurat. The Syrian theologian Ephrem criticizes Bardaisan's view, stating in *Hymns against Heresies* (55.7) that he placed Paradise “at the top of the building, with doors opened by the command of the Mother,” accusing him of assigning Paradise to a shameful location. The expression “top of the building” clearly refers to the mythological equivalent of the divine bedroom at the summit of the ziggurat. For Ephrem, the reason Bardaisan's Paradise is considered shameful is that it implies a sexual union between the Father and the Mother<sup>73</sup>.

As can be seen, the number seven and its associated religious symbolism occupy a significant place in Mesopotamian thought. However, although such similarities suggest a potential connection, the chronological gap between these Mesopotamian systems and Mithraism raises doubts regarding a direct relationship. Yet, we possess a crucial historical detail that may help to resolve this uncertainty. Similar to the ziggurat example discussed above, a passage from Herodotus provides information about the walls built around Ecbatana, noting that these structures consisted of seven concentric layers. This account serves as compelling evidence for the continuity of Mesopotamian symbolism in subsequent cultural and architectural forms.

According to Herodotus, the city of Ecbatana was surrounded by seven concentric walls, each enclosed within the other. The innermost wall contained the royal palace and the treasury. Herodotus notes that the outermost wall was approximately the size of the perimeter of Athens. Each wall was distinguished by its color: the battlements of the first were white, the second black, the third bright red, the fourth dull blue, and the fifth was the color of resin. In this way, the fortifications presented a gradation of hues. As for the final two walls, their fortifications were not defined by pigment but by precious metals—the sixth being coated in silver, and the seventh in gold. This seven-layered architectural symbolism provides compelling evidence that the sacred numerology and cosmological design associated with the number seven persisted well into the first millennium BCE<sup>74</sup>.

Parpola argues that the traces of pigment found on the ziggurat of Dur-Šarrukin, the capital of the Assyrian king Sargon II, indicate that each level of the structure was painted a different color. The sequence of these colors—white, black, purple, blue, orange, gold, and silver—corresponds directly to the seven concentric walls of Ecbatana described by Herodotus. According to Parpola, these colors symbolize the

<sup>71</sup> J. Black, and A. Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: 1992).

<sup>72</sup> Tartu, *The Soul's Journeys and Tauroctony*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Tartu, *The Soul's Journeys and Tauroctony*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, II.98.



seven planetary spheres, in the order of Venus, Saturn, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, the Sun, and the Moon<sup>75</sup>. Through this seven-stage chromatic design, the ziggurat becomes associated with the descent and ascent of the goddess Inanna (or Ishtar) as described in Sumerian–Akkadian mythology. In a hymn attributed to Ashurbanipal, the ziggurat is described as the very essence of Ishtar in Nineveh, and the colored levels of the structure correspond to the seven garments or powers the goddess removes during her descent into the underworld and reclaims during her return<sup>76</sup>. The donning of these colored garments symbolizes ascent, while their removal reflects descent. Thus, the downward movement from the ziggurat’s silver-colored summit represents symbolic disrobing, marking a cosmic or spiritual regression. The myth of the goddess can be interpreted as a metaphor for the transformation of the human soul or the cyclical descent and ascent of cosmic essence<sup>77</sup>.

Our ability to establish a connection between Herodotus’s account of the seven concentric walls of Ecbatana and the Mithraic mysteries does not rest solely on modern scholarly interpretations, but rather on a testimony contemporary with the mysteries themselves. This testimony comes from one of the early Church Fathers, Origen. In his work *Contra Celsum*, Origen provides insights that allow us to understand the Mithraic initiation system from a contemporary perspective and offer significant clues as to how the sevenfold architectural scheme described by Herodotus found symbolic resonance within the mystery religions.

In *Contra Celsum*, Book VI, section 22, Origen quotes Celsus describing certain Persian mysteries. These mysteries, he says, are directly tied to Persian teachings and the rites associated with Mithras, a deity of Persian origin. Within the Mithraic mysteries, a symbolic system is established that corresponds to the two celestial orbits—the fixed stars—and the planets through which the soul is believed to pass. This system is represented by a ladder with seven gates and an eighth gate at its summit. Each of the seven gates is associated with a specific metal and a corresponding planetary deity: the first gate, made of lead, corresponds to Kronos (Saturn) and symbolizes slowness; the second, of tin, to Aphrodite (Venus) due to its brightness and softness; the third, of bronze, to Zeus (Jupiter), as it is firm and established; the fourth, of iron, to Hermes (Mercury), since both the metal and the god are useful and industrious; the fifth gate, made of a mixed alloy, is linked to Ares (Mars), reflecting volatility and inconsistency; the sixth, of silver, to the Moon; and the seventh, of gold, to the Sun. These metals were chosen not only for their physical properties and colors, which resemble the associated celestial bodies, but also for their symbolic alignment with the deities’ attributes. This passage from Origen provides one of the earliest attestations of the Mithraic initiation system as a cosmologically and astrologically structured path<sup>78</sup>.

Origen’s description of Mithraic grades in *Contra Celsum* bears a striking resemblance to symbolic structures found in texts composed centuries before his time, providing compelling evidence for historical continuity. Particularly noteworthy is Origen’s reference to a ladder with seven gates and an eighth gate at the summit—a motif that finds a close architectural and symbolic parallel in Mesopotamian tradition. The famous ziggurat of E-temen-anki, dedicated to Marduk in Babylon, is described in both Babylonian metrological texts and Herodotus<sup>79</sup> as consisting of seven levels and possibly an eighth rooftop chamber, where only women chosen by the god were permitted to spend the night. There is evidence suggesting that the Christian heretic Bardaisan of Edessa envisioned Paradise situated at the top of such a structure. The Syrian theologian Ephrem, in his *Hymns against Heresies* (55.7), criticizes Bardaisan’s idea of “a place at

<sup>75</sup> S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997).

<sup>76</sup> P. Lapinkivi, “The Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence.” *State Archives of Assyria Studies*, XV (Helsinki: 2004, 146–148).

<sup>77</sup> Tartu, *The Soul’s Journeys and Tauroctony*, 10–11.

<sup>78</sup> Origenes, *Contra Celsum*, VI.22.

<sup>79</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, I.181.

the top of the building, whose gates are opened by the command of the Mother,” arguing that he had placed Paradise in a shameful location. This “top of the building” clearly corresponds to the mythological equivalent of the divine bedchamber of the ziggurat. For Ephrem, the shame lay in the implied sexual union between the Father and the Mother<sup>80</sup>. In Bardaisan’s cosmology, the Father corresponds to the Sun and the Mother to the Moon<sup>81</sup>. While it was common in Greco-Roman thought to assign masculine qualities to the Sun and feminine ones to the Moon, regions like Edessa and especially Harran—where lunar cults persisted well into late antiquity—frequently treated the Moon as a masculine figure. Bardaisan’s deviation from this tradition likely reflects the influence of Western Hellenistic thought. Similarly, in Mithraism, the Sun is masculine, and the Moon is feminine. The idea of a union between the Sun and Moon emerges most clearly during the conceptual fluidity of the Hellenistic period. In Mesopotamia, the Moon god was typically male and paired with Venus (Inanna/Ishtar) as his consort. The later diffusion of Greek ideas throughout the region appears to have facilitated the formation of alternate theological systems.

Tartu’s effort to trace the hierarchical structure within the Mithraic cult back to Mesopotamian traditions represents a methodologically sound and compelling approach. In the cultural matrix of Mesopotamia, one indeed finds narrative structures and iconographic motifs that closely mirror those of Mithraism. Substantial evidence for the eastern origins of Mithraism’s grade system can also be found in religious formations such as Yazidism, Ahl-e Haqq, Akhism, Bektashism, and particularly Ismailism. Within Ismaili doctrine, a sevenfold hierarchical structure is also present, consisting of the following ranks: Imam, Hujjat, Zu’l-Mass, Abwab, Dā’ī al-Ma’ dhūn, Mukallaf, and Mu’min. Among these, the Abwab serve as appointed missionaries responsible for the spiritual advancement of believers<sup>82</sup>. In terms of function, they resemble the Leo grade within the Mithraic hierarchy. A comparable system can be found within the Akhi tradition, which includes three main levels: Yiğit, Ahi, and Şeyh, each of which is subdivided into three stages. The Yiğit stage includes the ranks of Ahbap, Nīm-Tarık, and Müfredi, and it is at the Müfredi level that the most significant ritual of Akhism—the girding of the belt (şed kuşanma)—is performed<sup>83</sup>. This ceremony bears a noteworthy resemblance to the third Mithraic grade, Miles, which also marks formal initiation into the cult. The geographical proximity of Ismailism, Akhism, Yazidism, and Ahl-e Haqq to the Iranian regions where Mithraism originated suggests that these similarities are not coincidental but instead reflect a deep-rooted and continuous religious heritage.

As previously noted, Bremmer<sup>84</sup> proposes a division of the Mithraic grade system into two main groups, treating the Pater grade as a separate and singular category. This classification is substantiated by epigraphic evidence, where Pater, Leo, and Corax are the most frequently mentioned grades. While Bremmer’s model is insightful, it may be refined through comparative analysis with hierarchical structures found in Eastern religious traditions such as Ismailism and Akhism. In both cases, a tripartite division is evident. Within Mithraism, the first group consists of the grades Corax, Nymphus, and Miles. The initiation ritual associated with Miles resembles the “şed kuşanma” ceremony performed at the Müfredi level in Akhism, marking formal admission into the order. Although the candidate is designated as Miles, this phase symbolically corresponds to Corax—the novice or apprentice. The Leo grade occupies a central position in the hierarchy, metaphorically aligned with the sun’s position in the sky. The reverence shown toward the lion and the symbolic significance attributed to Leo underscore its privileged status within the cult. This grade corresponds to the Ahi, or journeyman, level in Akhism. An intriguing parallel emerges here: while Akhism derives its name from the Ahi grade, Mithraism does not explicitly derive its name from the Leo

<sup>80</sup> Tartu, *The Soul’s Journeys and Tauroctony*, 8.

<sup>81</sup> J. W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen: 1966), 147–148.

<sup>82</sup> İsmail Cerrahoğlu, *Tefsir Tarihi* (Ankara: 2017), 300.

<sup>83</sup> Fatih Köksal, *Ahi Evran ve Ahilik* (Kırşehir: 2008), 110–111.

<sup>84</sup> Bremmer, *Mysteries of Ancient World*.

grade, yet terms such as *leontokephalus* and *leonteum* suggest an analogous centrality<sup>85</sup>. The final group in Mithraism comprises *Perses*, *Heliodromus*, and *Pater*, which collectively parallel the master or *shaykh* rank within Akhism. This tripartite structure suggests that the seven Mithraic initiation grades may have been organized into two principal divisions: a preliminary set of three grades representing novices, followed by four more advanced grades reflecting theological and cosmological dimensions<sup>86</sup>. Furthermore, the latter four may themselves be internally divided. *Leo*, which is the second most frequently mentioned grade after *Pater*, stands as a distinct transitional stage. The final triad—*Perses*, *Heliodromus*, and *Pater*—forms a cohesive group, potentially echoing the Christian triad of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Although there are no direct textual sources attesting to the Mithraic grade system, it is plausible that this hierarchical structure originated in the Iranian cultural sphere and was later transmitted to the Roman world. This hypothesis is supported by the presence of similar hierarchical systems in religious traditions that subsequently emerged within the same geographical region. The relative absence of such clearly defined hierarchies in other contemporary mystery cults may also help explain the particular appeal of Mithraism among Roman soldiers. The graded structure of the cult offered a religious framework that resonated with the principles of military discipline and rank, making it especially attractive to members of the armed forces.

### Conclusion

This study has examined the seven-grade initiatory system of Mithraism, exploring its symbolic and ritual dimensions while situating it within a broader cultural continuum that extends beyond the Roman Empire. The Mithraic grades, while functioning as distinct ritual roles, also embody a cosmological structure representing the spiritual ascent of the initiate. This dual function underscores Mithraism's unique position as both a mystery cult and a system of cosmic alignment.

A comparative analysis with Eastern traditions such as Mesopotamian ziggurats, Ismailism, Bektashism, and Akhism reveals striking similarities in symbolic structure and hierarchical organization. The main contribution of this study lies in contextualizing Mithraic grades not merely as a product of the Roman milieu but as a continuation of earlier Eastern initiation systems. The archaeological evidence from sites like the *Felicissimus Mithraeum* and the *Santa Prisca Mithraeum* provides crucial visual data that supports the existence of a tiered initiatory framework with distinct symbolic codes.

Nevertheless, the study also highlights certain limitations. The scarcity of direct textual sources on Mithraic initiation rituals has necessitated a reliance on archaeological and epigraphic material. This reliance, while valuable, restricts the interpretive scope, leaving some aspects of the symbolic and ritual significance of the grades open to conjecture. Furthermore, the analysis of potential connections between Mithraic grades and Eastern traditions could be further expanded by delving into specific initiation practices in Ismailism and Akhism. This would provide a more comprehensive comparative framework, particularly in terms of ritual symbolism and spiritual ascent.

Future research could address these gaps by focusing on a more in-depth comparative analysis of Mithraism's grade system with corresponding structures in Eastern traditions. Such an approach would not only elucidate Mithraism's roots in pre-Roman initiation systems but also enhance our understanding of how this mystery religion synthesized various cultural and theological elements into a coherent cosmological order.

In conclusion, the Mithraic grade system is not merely a ritual hierarchy but a profound theological construct that encapsulates the initiate's spiritual progression and cosmic integration. By extending the

<sup>85</sup> For a possible connection between Mithraism and Akhism, see: <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/futuvvet> accessed 15/11/2024.

<sup>86</sup> Atilio Mastrocinque, *The Mysteries of Mithras: A Different Account* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 205.

analysis to include potential Eastern influences, this study contributes to the broader discourse on religious syncretism and the transmission of sacred knowledge across cultural boundaries.



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