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HARMONIOUS OPPOSITION (PART I):  
PYTHAGOREAN THEMES OF COSMOGONIC MEDIATION  
IN THE ROMAN MYSTERIES OF MITHRAS

INTRODUCTION

The Mithraic thought-world presents the historian with a hermeneutic challenge that is virtually unique among ancient religions. In the absence of a substantial corpus of textual evidence, any interpretation of the cult's complex and polysemous iconographic system requires a speculative "reading" that depends *a priori* upon the relation one accords the material remains of the mysteries with one or another better-attested domain of ancient knowledge. The resultant vicissitudes in the history of Mithraic studies are well known to scholars currently working in the field. Fortunately, we now have a substantial and relatively stable foundation of brilliant scholarship upon which to build, scholarship whose most fruitful investigations involve astrological interpretations of the tauroctony.<sup>1</sup> Here, however, I would like to offer a new reading of another stratum of iconographic discourse, one that is superimposed over both the literal denotation of the bull-slaying and the second-order astrological symbolism: specifically, the structural and geometrical relationships among the elements of the typical Mithraic tauroctony. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that (1) these structural relationships comprise a semantic stratum that derives from contemporaneous Neopythagorean thought and consequently can be "read" according to what might be considered a contemporaneous Neopythagorean symbological "lexicon";<sup>2</sup> that (2) these features may have been deliberately encrypted in order to symbolize the Pythagorean notion of the harmo-nization and reconciliation of metaphysical opposites; and finally that (3) Mithras' central position amidst these symbols indicates his role involved cosmogonic mediation. This thesis has implications for our understanding of the milieu in which the cult developed, and also suggests a

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<sup>1</sup> It is now virtually incontrovertible that the central cult-icon of the bull-slaying scene with its attendant animals represents (at least at one interpretative stratum) the so-called *paranatellonta* close to the zodiacal constellations between Taurus and Scorpius, themselves respectively represented by the bull and the scorpion; it has further been proposed that this serves as a celestial map for the salvific ascent and eventual *diexodos* of the soul. See, *inter alia*, Beck 1984; 1994; 1998; 2006; Gordon 1976; 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Such a reading of Mithraic iconography does not compete with the astrological interpretation, since the superimposition of semantic strata— already evident from the multiplicity of meanings at the astrological level alone— suggests that multiple readings may coexist in harmony. Three very interesting articles by Gordon (1980b; 1988; 1994) illustrate the remarkably polyvalent nature of Mithraic symbolism.

closer relationship than is generally appreciated between philosophical speculation and cultic praxis in the Roman world.

## 1. POLARITY AND OPPOSITION IN THE MITHRAIC TAUROCTONY AND THE ENIGMA OF MITHRAS' POSTURE

1.1. The emphasis on polarity and binary opposition that has been observed in many diverse systems of ancient thought is particularly evident, even central, in the Roman mysteries of Mithras.<sup>3</sup> In the composition of the principal cult-icon, the theme of opposition is immediately, *viscerally*, evoked by the dualities of Mithras and the bull, Sol and Luna, and the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates: dualities which respectively represent the differing relationships between dominator and dominated, agent and patient, and complementary but equal principles.<sup>4</sup> Yet there is an additional opposition, so obvious as to be almost imperceptible, which has hitherto apparently escaped scholarly scrutiny: that between Mithras' right and left leg. The god's right leg, appearing on the left as one faces the tauroctony, is nearly always straight as it pins the bull's hoof to the ground, while his left leg, which is usually resting on the back or flank of the bull, is bent at the knee with his foot often partially obscured beneath the folds of his tunic.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> R. Beck has suggested that a passage of Porphyry, *De antr. nymph.* 29.12-21— which concludes with the statement that (according to his translation) “there is a tension of harmony in opposition, and it shoots from the bowstring through opposites” (itself ultimately derived from Heracleitus, fr. 51 D–K) — refers to Mithraic doctrine and reveals a principal theme of the mysteries: that of the “harmony of tension in opposition.” This is a major thesis of Beck's most recent work (2006); but see also Beck 1988; 2000. On the left-right opposition in the tauroctony and in Mithraic iconography in general, see also, *inter alia*, Gordon 1976; Hinnells 1976; Beck 1980 (esp. 104 and n. 65); 1998; Vermaseren 1982, 49-50. On polarity as a fundamental classificatory system in ancient thought, see Lloyd 1966.

<sup>4</sup> One can also discern an opposition in a number of implicit astrological dualities at a secondary interpretative stratum beneath the most literal meaning of the bull-slaying scene: for example, that between the torchbearers representing the spring and autumn equinoxes (or simply day and night); the diametrically opposing symbols of the zodiacal constellations Taurus (the bull) and Scorpius (the scorpion invariably depicted pinching the hapless bull's testicles); or even that between the tauroctonus Mithras as the Sun and the bull in its capacity as lunar symbol.

<sup>5</sup> Of the 192 tauroctony photographs in Vermaseren 1956-1960 [=CIMRM] in which Mithras' legs are visible, 188 cases, or 98%, unequivocally portray the pattern in which the right leg is straight and the left leg is bent, leaving four possible counterexamples to Mithras' usual tauroctonus posture (Vermaseren does not note their irregularity), as follows. (1) A stele from Pregrade, Croatia, (CIMRM item number 1468), which Vermaseren calls “primitive,” shows a rough Mithras with both legs apparently bent. (2) A crude tauroctony from Arsha-wa-Qibar in Syria (no. 71) shows a “monstrously small” Mithras (*op. cit.* vol. 1 p. 72), standing atop the bull, also with both of his legs bent. (3) A broken tauroctony (607), ostensibly from Rome, anonymously donated to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (inv. no. 92.2692: apparently the only anonymous gift in the Graeco-Roman collection!) shows Mithras uncharacteristically astride the bull and facing its head; consequently his left leg, still visible on the far side of the bull, is straight, while his right leg, in the foreground, is bent. Because Mithras' pelvis is in a nonstandard orientation, the position of the straight and bent leg with respect to the observer has been preserved while the left-right polarity of the legs with respect to the god's body has been reversed (left straight, right bent). If it is inauthentic or a late copy one might assume that a sculptor unfamiliar with the underlying schema rationalized the unnatural but conventional position of the god into one more

Anyone familiar with the cult's iconography will immediately recognize this awkward and possibly unnatural posture as a typical or even essential aspect of the tauroctony. The remarkable consistency of this particular feature is underscored by comparison with the subtle variability of others. For example, the exact configurations of the animals surrounding the bull vary between tauroctonies and between regions, while even the respective position of the torchbearers, *Cautes* (torch upwards) and *Cautopates* (torch downwards), is occasionally reversed.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in contrast with the invariability of his stance, other aspects of Mithras' posture are not entirely consistent between examples. Thus, for instance, among all tauroctonies represented by photographs in M. J. Vermaseren's *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (*CIMRM*) in which the god's head and legs are clearly visible, Mithras is portrayed frontally in roughly half of all cases, while in more than one third of the examples he is facing some degrees towards the tail of the bull, in the direction of Sol (i.e. away from, rather than towards, the sacrificial act). The relative invariability of the positions of the god's legs suggests that this feature of the tauroctony was accorded some kind of special importance.<sup>7</sup>

**1.2.** Given the prevalence of this feature of Mithras' posture, it is surprising that (at least to my knowledge) no real attempt has yet been made to analyze it, although scholars have occasionally offered various art-historical hypotheses for the origin of the bull-slaying scene as a whole. Thus, for instance, it has been suggested that it is based upon typical Hellenistic hunting motifs and the familiar images of centauricidal Lapiths.<sup>8</sup> Yet even if

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anatomically feasible while leaving the basic compositional relationship of the piece intact. On this stele see also Saxl 1931, 12 and pl. 35. (4) Finally, the highly realistic marble group tauroctony of the Baths of Mithras in Ostia (230) shows another uncharacteristic Mithras, Phrygian-capless and in Roman attire, crouching over the bull with his dagger raised. The right leg is very slightly bent, but as if to emphasize the difference, the left leg is bent back radically so that only the kneecap touches the bull. The straight-bent opposition therefore appears to be retained deliberately to the best of the ability of the actual human who undoubtedly modeled (in Roman dress) for this uncharacteristically lifelike sculpture. Here the exception proves the rule, demonstrating not only the unnaturalness of the posture itself but also the lengths to which the cultists went in order to preserve it at the expense of artistic grace. In all but four anomalous examples, therefore— one of which is possibly inauthentic— Mithras' right leg is straight while his left is bent.

<sup>6</sup> See Campbell 1954; Beck 1982; Schofield 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Of the 145 *CIMRM* tauroctony photographs in which Mithras' head is visible, he faces at least a few degrees to the right of center, thus towards the tail of the bull, in 57 cases, 39% of the time; his gaze is perpendicular to the axis of the spine of the bull in 77 cases, 53% of the time; and forward in only 11 cases, 8% of the time. Forty-seven examples in *CIMRM* are either too badly damaged or not sufficiently clear to determine. Mithras' averted gaze might reflect the solar orientation of the cult, since in the vast majority of cases in which the two luminaries are visible, Sol appears in the upper right-hand register of the scene, above the tail of the bull, while Luna occupies the opposite corner above the bull's head; the god seems to be trying to gaze backward at the Sun. Of 76 plates in *CIMRM* in which either luminary is visible, Sol occurs on the right and Luna on the left (from Mithras' perspective) 72 times, or 95% of the time; this pattern is reversed in only 4 cases, or 5% of the time; of these anomalous cases in which Sol is to Mithras' left, the latter faces perpendicular to the bull in 3 cases and once towards the tail, in the direction of Luna.

<sup>8</sup> At the turn of the last century, Cumont (1896-1898: 181, 214-219) suggested that the tauroctony had been inspired by Pergamene reliefs of the goddess Nike slaying a bull; this hypothesis was followed,

the posture derives from these artistic prototypes, one still might wonder why the cult's founders should have selected this particular model in the first place, and if they did adopt such a model, why they exaggerated certain aspects while reversing others; and further, why this specific structural relationship was crystallized and repeated more or less unaltered throughout the three centuries (or so) of the Roman cult's florescence.<sup>9</sup> For we may be confident that the tauroctony is at least in part based upon a complex and polyvalent astral symbolism, and it therefore cannot have been solely dependent upon the mere repetition of traditional forms or upon strictly aesthetic criteria. Furthermore, the widespread and nearly simultaneous emergence of an extremely consistent iconographic system suggests that Mithraism had been conceived more or less at once, in its entirety, according to a carefully elaborated system of thought (it is thus dissimilar to most other Graeco-Roman mystery-cults to which it is often compared). Indeed, the complex interrelationship between the various multivalent elements of the tauroctony seem to have been guided by an underlying rationale, a *logos*, whose origin was probably less a result of diachronic evolution than of careful, deliberate design at one point in time by an individual or perhaps a small group of collaborators.<sup>10</sup> So if in fact the relative configuration of Mithras' legs— right leg straight, left leg bent sharply at the knee— remains one of the most constant iconographic features of the tauroctony, what, then, accounts for its invariance? And wherefore this particular opposition?

## 2. THE TAUROCTONY AND THE PYTHAGOREAN TABLE OF OPPOSITES

**2.1.** Here I would like to suggest that this apparently insignificant feature of Mithras' posture, remarkable for its peculiar awkwardness as much as its relentless consistency, might hold a key not only to the composition of the tauroctony but also to an essential

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with qualifications, by other scholars; thus F. Saxl (1931: 4-13 & pl. 32) concurred that the Pergamene Nike had figured in the creation of the tauroctony but also thought the motif to have derived in part from earlier Greek representations of Herakles as well as from other non-Greek sources. Yet there are significant differences between the tauroctony and the Hellenistic reliefs proffered as prototypes: for example, Nike invariably looks towards the bull while Mithras usually faces away from the deed; also, the Nike reliefs and the Mithraic tauroctony frequently mirror each other, with the bull and the goddess facing to the left as one observes the scene. Finally, Nike's extended leg is often not completely straight. See also Will 1955, 169 ff. (with the objections of Turcan 1993, 48ff.).

<sup>9</sup> Seeking to describe the historical evolution of Mithraic ideology through time and space, scholars operating within a developmental paradigm (e.g. Campbell 1954; Hinnells 1976) examined the regional typological variations in the subsidiary mythical scenes portrayed in panels surrounding the tauroctony or upon the subtly changing positions of the torchbearers and animals, (i.e. precisely those aspects which *do* vary considerably), while less attention was accorded Mithras himself. Yet the god's posture appears not to have changed conspicuously over time and thus seems to have been standardized at the origin of the Roman mysteries, perhaps in accord with some specific aspect of doctrine. More recent scholars have tended to minimize the correlation between iconography and doctrine; thus Schwertheim 1974; Berciu and Petolescu 1976; Schofield 1995; but cf. Gordon 1980a, who asserts conversely that the form of Mithraic art, far from concealing or encoding meaning, *is* the meaning itself.

<sup>10</sup> This point is made by Hinnells 1978, Boyce and Grenet 1991, 470; see also the methodological discussion in Beck 1984, esp. 2074 ff. and n. 108.

and overarching aspect of Mithraic doctrine as a whole. The contrast between “straight” and “bent” occurs most notably in Aristotle’s description of the Pythagorean table of opposite principles (*archai*) comprising the primordial origin of all things (*Metaphysics* 986a23-26). In this passage, the opposition of “straight” (*euthu*) with “bent” (*kampulon*)—in that order— may be found among a list of ten opposing pairs, along with limit-unlimited, odd-even, one-many, right-left, male-female, rest-motion, light-darkness, good-evil, and square-oblong.<sup>11</sup> The correspondence between, on the one hand, the Pythagorean doctrine associating right with straight and left with bent, and, on the other hand, the iconographic configuration of Mithras’ legs— also, clearly, right-straight and left-bent— might at first seem to be merely coincidental or trivial, yet upon closer examination it becomes evident that certain complementary elements in the respective zones of the tauroctony correspond to additional oppositions of the Pythagorean table. As is evident from a perusal of *CIMRM*, the typical tauroctony shows a pronounced visual division created by the implicit diagonal line ascending from the lower left to the upper right, formed roughly by the line of contact between Mithras’ straight right leg and the hind leg of the bull, proceeding upwards between his legs (where it is sometimes made visible by a crease in his tunic) and then finally following either his chest or the angle of his right arm upwards to the top of the bull’s head, where his hand usually grasps the animal by its nostrils. This implicit line divides the scene into upper right-hand and lower left-hand zones (right and left, that is, from Mithras’ perspective), with terrestrial animals (dog, serpent, scorpion) in the lower-left zone and the aerial animal (raven) in the upper-right zone. With this lateral division in mind, besides (a) the initial straight-bent polarity with which we began, one may observe (b) the light-dark opposition implied by the daylight accompanying Sol and nocturnal darkness concomitant with Luna,<sup>12</sup> and (c) the male-female duality clearly represented by the two luminaries, with Sol to Mithras’ right and Luna to his left.<sup>13</sup> That this correspondence is

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<sup>11</sup> The sources for early Pythagoreanism are problematic, and Aristotle’s accounts of the Pythagoreans must be treated with particular caution. Nevertheless, scholars have generally held the table of opposites to reflect genuine Pythagorean doctrine. As early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE the Pythagoreans were reputed to have taught that the phenomenal world arises from a series of pairs of metaphysical oppositions, the most fundamental usually being that between Limit (*peras*) and Unlimited (*apeiron*); this presumably refers to the mutually exclusive sets of those things which admit degrees of difference and those that do not. Plato alludes to Pythagoras as having introduced this doctrine at *Phlb.* 16c-d; also 18b-c, 23c-28b. That this passage is in fact an intended allusion to Pythagoras is defended by Burkert (1972: 85-92) but see *ibid.* 51 ff., where he considers the opposites to be genuine Pythagorean doctrine although not necessarily ancient; cf. however Guthrie (1995: 232, 245-251), who considers this to be early; thus also Kahn 1974. I shall defer the question of the precise relation between Pythagorean and Platonic thought; for the purposes of the present study, let us assume no absolute historical demarcation can be made between these intellectual movements in late antiquity.

<sup>12</sup> This feature is also made explicit by color shading on the painted frescoes at Marino, the Palazzo Barberini (*CIMRM* 389) and Santa Maria Capua Vetere (181).

<sup>13</sup> One also might expect to find an odd (right)—even (left) opposition, but if this occurs it is limited to a few atypical tauroctonies: *CIMRM* 1137, 1920, 1958, 1972, 2036, 2085, 2154, 2214 and 2338, for example, portray Cautes, to Mithras’ left, with two raised torches, and Cautopates, to Mithras’ right,

noncoincidental and that the structural opposition of the tauroctony might indeed have been deliberately designed according to the Pythagorean table of *archai* is further supported by a curious tradition, more or less contemporaneous with Roman Mithraism, that Pythagoras himself had learned the doctrine of opposing *archai* from “Zaratas” (i.e. Zoroaster), who was also reputed (falsely, one presumes) to have established the Mithraic mysteries (e.g. by Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 6).<sup>14</sup>

### 3. PYTHAGOREAN GEOMETRICAL SYMBOLISM IN THE TAUROCTONY

**3.1.** It therefore appears that beneath both the literal, first-order imagery of the bull-slaying and also the second-order representation of an astrological map, the tauroctony is governed by a more abstract stratum, a third-order symbolism involving a series of structural oppositions related to Pythagorean thought. This initial hypothesis appears to be further supported by the fact that additional Pythagorean elements may be discovered lurking beneath the surface of Mithraic iconography. In several important studies, Prof. István Tóth— in whose memory this paper is offered— has noted that both an equilateral triangle and a pentagram— two geometric figures which, as he suggests, had marked symbolic value for the Pythagoreans— are encrypted in the relief from Intercisa (Dunaújváros) in Pannonia. As an explanation for these figures, Tóth proposed that the sectaries who commissioned this particular relief were well-versed in contemporaneous Neopythagorean thought.<sup>15</sup> Yet these two geometric figures occur more widely in Mithraic art than Tóth apparently realized, and aspects of his suggestions concerning Intercisa may be extrapolated to the tauroctony in general.<sup>16</sup>

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with only one lowered torch. There are no cases where this anomaly is reversed. The infrequency of this pattern allows no firm conclusion to be drawn.

<sup>14</sup> Hippol. *Haer.* 1.2.12 with Spoerri 1955; Kingsley 1990; also Plut., *De an. proc. in Tim* 1012e. Although Hippolytus makes no mention of the straight-bent dichotomy so crucial for the composition of the tauroctony, this passage nevertheless provides evidence for two common notions: first, that the Pythagorean doctrine of opposing *archai* was associated with (and indeed even purported to have *derived* from) Persian dualism, and second, that this entire scheme was in some way associated with the cycle of the sun (this latter notion so tantalizingly reminiscent of Mithras’ solar role). Whatever its actual provenance or antiquity, in the first few centuries CE there circulated a number of different accounts of the Pythagorean table of opposites, all of which preserved the general notion of a primordial, cosmogonic opposition: e.g. Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 48; Porph. *V. Pyth.* 38; Varro *Ling.* 5.11. These accounts describe more or less the same scheme, although sometimes with emphasis on other elements or the omission or addition of details. Thus, for instance, Porphyry includes “stable” and “unstable” under right and left respectively, which is suggestive of the opposition between the stability of Mithras’ fixed right foot, planted firmly on the bull’s hind hoof, and the precariousness of his bent left knee as he attempts to force down the unfortunate animal.

<sup>15</sup> Tóth 1999; 2003. I also had the opportunity to see an earlier unpublished manuscript version of “Az Intercisai Mithraeum nagy kultuszképe.” Prof. Tóth was, incidentally, one of very few authors (along with Carcopino and Turcan, on whom, see n. 23 *infra*) to suggest more than a circumstantial link between Mithraism and Pythagoreanism.

<sup>16</sup> Tóth does not extend this hypothesis to the cult as a whole, presumably because not all tauroctonies display the precise pentagram of the sort he sees at Intercisa. In the Intercisa relief the bull’s nostrils and tail are exceptionally on the same approximate horizontal line with respect to the base of the scene;

**3.2.** First, one should note that virtually *every* tauroctony— not only that of Intercisa— contains an implicit triangle, a figure to which the Pythagoreans accorded enormous mathematical, cosmological, and even theological significance.<sup>17</sup> To be precise, in most of the tauroctonies represented in *CIMRM*, Mithras' straight right leg extends to the base of the relief at an angle more or less mirrored by a corresponding angle on the opposite side of the scene, formed by either the dog or the bent foreleg of the bull. This line is often continued by the subtle ridge of the bull's shoulder, thereby tacitly delineating an isosceles or occasionally equilateral triangle whose apex converges at Mithras' chest or on his head.<sup>18</sup> That this figure was intended to be “read” as a geometric symbol rather than as a purely naturalistic feature is implied by the fact that on typical tauroctony-

Tóth takes these two points as the left- and right-most points of the pentagram. Yet in most other examples of the tauroctony— those examples which, in my opinion, clearly display an encrypted pentagram— these two points, are apparently situated on *other* laterally-symmetrical features of the scene, such as the torchbearers' heads, and not, as at Intercisa, on the head and tail of the bull. Understood in this way, the pentagram is a common feature of many other tauroctonies as well.

<sup>17</sup> Philolaus and other early Pythagoreans are said to have considered the angles of triangles sacred to specific gods; Procl. *In Eucl.* 130, 166-9, 173-4; idem, *Theol. Plat.* 1.4, ; Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 30; Dam. *De princ.* 2.127.7. Huffman (1993, 381-391) considers these fragments spurious and attributes them to the early Academy instead; he sees these as pertaining to the Graeco-Roman astrological concept of trigonon and tetragonon (e.g. in Manilius, *Astron.* 2.270 ff.: the triangles and squares inscribed in the circle of the zodiac linking three and four signs respectively) but considers the 12-sign zodiac to have developed too late for these to be genuine fragments of Philolaus. See however Kingsley's (1994) argument for the authenticity of these fragments and an early date for the 12-sign zodiac and consequently the genuinely Pythagorean nature of angular theology. Remarkably, Gordon (1976: 134-137) completes the cycle of associations by relating the trigonon and tetragonon to Mithraism. Later thinkers influenced by Pythagoreanism associated triangles with various entities: according to Plutarch (*De def. or.* 416d) the Pythagoreanizing Platonic scholar Xenocrates equated equilateral triangles with gods, isosceles triangles with daemones and scalene triangles with men. Pythagoras himself, of course, was reputed to have discovered the so-called Pythagorean theorem— that the sums of the squares of the two catheti of a right triangle are equal to the square of the hypotenuse— at which point, according to an anecdote preserved by Plutarch (*Non pos. suav.* 1094b) and Proclus (*In Eucl.* 426), he sacrificed an ox, an image itself curiously reminiscent of the Mithraic tauroctony. See also Diog. Laert. 8.12 and 8.22, in which the one ox has been expanded to one hundred; this lest one imagine that the vegetarianism later associated with Pythagoras precludes the possibility of a Pythagorean origin of the tauroctony. Porphyry (*V. Pyth.* 36) solves this apparent problem by claiming the ox was made of flour, which, interestingly enough, is reminiscent of the ears of wheat occasionally sprouting from the tail or wound of the bull which Mithras slaughters.

<sup>18</sup> An informal perusal of *CIMRM* photographs revealed 93 tauroctonies which appeared to contain an implicit isosceles or equilateral triangle with both angles at the base approximately equal (among these examples the angle of Mithras' leg varies significantly, and in each case the angle opposite changes correspondingly, suggesting a highly deliberate scheme); 30 displayed angles at the bases which were clearly unequal, while 61 were insufficiently clear to determine one way or the other. Another triangle may also be implied by Mithras' legs, whose awkward position very often involves a right angle. This is not immediately evident, since in most cases neither the top of his thigh nor the angle of his shin is precisely 90 degrees from his straight right leg. Rather, in these instances the right angle tends to be formed by a short line representing the meeting point of the bottom of his left calf and his thigh. In almost half of the visible examples in *CIMRM*, this angle was roughly 90 degrees; in a large majority of the rest of the examples, either his left thigh itself or the line of his calf formed a right angle.

reliefs, the animals and Mithras' legs— the figurative elements comprising the triangle— are almost invariably depicted on the same two-dimensional plane in an otherwise three-dimensional scene, which in real life would imply a clumsy and unstable, if not physically impossible, position astride the bull. Moreover, emphasizing the importance of the symbol to Mithraism, undisguised representations of triangles occur in several Mithraea, usually on centrally-located altars separate from the main cult-icon.<sup>19</sup>

**3.3.** The second figure that Tóth perceives in the Intercisa relief— the pentagram— is similarly associated with Pythagoreanism and even thought to have been a *symbolon* by which Pythagoreans could secretly recognize one another.<sup>20</sup> Yet I would suggest that the pentagram is also embedded in many other reliefs, not just that of Intercisa, although the exact composition of the figure varies between examples. Like the triangle with which it is often contiguous, the pentagram is not depicted explicitly but rather is suggested by a number of subtle features. In the typical tauroctony, a plainly visible segment originates in Mithras' right foot (point A), appears to follow Mithras' right leg and back, and culminates at his head (B); this point B often also coincides with the ceiling of the grotto. A corresponding segment then redescends from point B, follows the dog's back, and ends at (C) the dog's hind legs, or occasionally, when the dog is in a nonstandard position, at the bull's forelegs or Cautopates' feet. The segment BC is often also suggested to some extent by a number of coincident details, such as the bull's eye, the top of the handle of the dagger, the line of bull's shoulder, the head of Cautopates' downward-pointing torch, the dog's back or the bull's bent foreleg, and other more variable features as well such as inconspicuous and seemingly inconsequential creases in the neck of the bull. From the termination of this segment at point C, an ascending diagonal (the mirror image of AB) follows a path usually delineated by the dog's forelegs

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<sup>19</sup> These include a yellow sandstone isosceles triangle adorned with a crescent symbol, found at Hedderheim, *CIMRM* 1120, and an equilateral triangle with a hemispherical protuberance (487) unearthed at Santa Prisca in Rome, on which see Vermaseren and van Essen 1965, 342 and pl. LXXIX.3; also the vaguely leonine face emerging from an “upside-down” equilateral triangle, p. 343 and pl. LXXVIII.6.. Monuments with ostensibly architectural triangular elements or other subtle decoration include *CIMRM* 987bis, 112 7, 1206, 1247 front and back, 1347, 1400, 1902, 1919, 1944, 2037, 2244, 2305. Other types of triangle symbols include *CIMRM* 11, 229, 234, 369, 390, 411, 434, 457, 487, 508, 676, 829 (an isosceles triangle hewn out of the wall near the altar), 1004, 1120, 1152, 1200, 1206, 1306, 1394, 1660, 1944, 2028, 2164, and 2351. Unusual triangular altar-bases also occur in the Mithraeum at Spoleto (676); at Rome in the Mithraea of the Baths of Caraccalla (457) and the Palazzo dei Musei (434), (on which see Pietrangeli 1940, 143-173), and at Ostia in those of the Pareti Dipinti (264) and the Baths of Mithras (229). Each example occurs in a very central position on or near the axis of the cella and also quite near the principal tauroctony, suggesting that this feature possessed a special importance in the cult; spatial arrangements within Mithraea were symbolically significant; see Gordon 1976. In the summer of 1998 I was able to photograph triangular altars at the Mithraea of the Palazzo dei Musei in Rome and the Baths of Mithras and the Pareti Dipinti at Ostia. Like the triangles encrypted in the tauroctony, the angles of the triangles depicted on these altars vary: those of the Baths of Mithras and the Palazzo are distinctly isosceles triangles, while that of the Pareti Dipinti seems equilateral; other than the complete absence of scalene triangles there is no evident consistency in the precise symbolism. On triangles in Mithraism in general see Wortmann 1969, 410-423 and Lentz 1975.

<sup>20</sup> Lucian, *Laps.* 5, with scholium (*Schol. Luc.* 234.21 Rabe), Burkert 1961, 230 n. 4; 1972, 176 n. 81; de Vogel 1966, 247-291.



and / or those of the bull, the angle of Mithras' bent left shin or the crease between his thigh and shin, and occasionally the furrows of his garment; this segment culminates in (D) the cap or forehead of the torchbearer to Mithras' right (our left). In addition, the implicit ascending diagonal line described by Mithras' right foot (A) and the point of his bent left knee almost invariably alligns with the torchbearer to his left (usually Cautopates, with downward-pointing torch), generally meeting (E) the crest of his Phrygian cap, his eyes, his forehead, or, less frequently, other marked points on his body, in each case at or near the wall of the grotto. This relationship is typically maintained whatever the angle of this imaginary diagonal line with respect to the base of the scene.<sup>21</sup> In each case this line AE also intersects other significant points of the scene, such as the entrance wound of the knife (e.g. *CIMRM* nos. 181, 368, and 588) or the snout of the dog (e.g. 390, 588, 650, and Marino). The pentagram is completed by the horizontal segment DE, extending between Cautes and Cautopates and often intersecting the top or the hilt of the dagger or some other more conspicuous point on Mithras' right hand, often following the line of either of the god's forearms, and occasionally also intersecting the flame of Cautes' torch or the tuft (or ear of wheat) at the end of the bull's upturned tail to Mithras' right. To reiterate, the five angles of the tacit pentagram thus usually occur at the following points, now describing a pentagon in clockwise order: (D) the head of the torchbearer (either Cautes or Cautopates) to Mithras' right; (B) Mithras' head or the top of his cap; (E) the head of the other torchbearer to Mithras' left; (C) the dog's hind legs, the bent knee of the bull, or, occasionally, the left-hand torchbearer's feet; and finally (A) Mithras' right foot planted on the bull's hoof. Although the pentagram is rarely precisely equilateral, there is at least a general lateral symmetry, which means that the angle at Mithras' right foot with respect to the base of the scene (BAC) is rarely more than 5 degrees (and never more than 10 degrees) different from that at the dog's hind feet (BCA).<sup>22</sup> The variability of the composition suggests that the pentagram's presence is due not to the mere replication of a fixed model but rather to a conscious and deliberate encryption of this particular figure, perhaps through the use of a geometrical template by the sculptor.

#### 4. A PYTHAGOREAN "READING" OF THE GEOMETRIC SYMBOLISM OF THE TAUROCTONY

**4.1.** If this reading is correct, Mithraic iconography may involve (at least in part) a deliberate encryption of certain Pythagorean *symbola*. At present I shall leave aside the historical question of how exactly Neopythagorean ideas might have permeated Mithraism at what must have been a germinal stage of the Roman cult's development,

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<sup>21</sup> Thus, for instance, at Capua, the angle is 25 degrees to the crest of Cautopates' cap, at Marino, 26 degrees similarly attaining his cap, at Barberini (*CIMRM* 390) 22 degrees to the bend of his left elbow; in the Villa Borghese stele (588), 23 degrees to his forehead; in the stele found on the Esquiline in Rome (368) 32 degrees to the point of his cap.

<sup>22</sup> For example, the relative angles BAC and BCA at Marino are 35 and 40 degrees, respectively, at *CIMRM* 588, 36 and 40; at 390, 40 and 35; at 368, 34 and 29; at 650, 41 and 37; and at 181, 30 and 40.

although I do believe there is a strong case to be made that they did.<sup>23</sup> What is important for our immediate purposes is simply to note that the embedding of geometrical symbolism itself seems to be consistent with a long tradition of Pythagorean praxis. The anecdotal evidence for early Pythagoreanism already suggests a concern with both the graphic expression of abstract ideas and the symbolic encryption of doctrine.<sup>24</sup> Yet there is also explicit evidence from late antiquity that symbols in the form of geometrical shapes and bodily postures were deliberately encrypted in figurative cult-icons and theurgical statuettes.<sup>25</sup> It is therefore plausible that the third-order, symbolic subtext of

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<sup>23</sup> So numerous are the circumstantial correspondences between Mithraism and Pythagoreanism that one might reasonably suppose the cult's founders to have been Neopythagoreans or at least well-versed in Pythagorean lore; this deserves a separate study in the future. For a tiny glimpse of some such correspondences, one might simply consider two biographical mythologoumena about Pythagoras: first, that of his visits to and persistent links with Persian Magi (e.g. Diog. Laert. 8.2; Porph. *V. Pyth.* 12; Iambl. *VP* 4), and second, his construction of an artificial subterranean chamber, reminiscent of a Mithraic *spelaeum*, to serve as a retreat (Diog. Laert. 8.41; Porph. *V. Pyth.* 9; Iambl. *VP* 5; Burkert 1972, 156-161). Carcopino (1927: 211-216) suggests that this legend inspired a Neopythagorean conventicle in Rome to construct and decorate a subterranean basilica and notes an apparent similarity with Mithraism; intriguingly, the mid-1<sup>st</sup> cent. CE date proposed for this monument would situate it just prior to the emergence of the first Mithraic *spelaeum*. The connection between Mithraism and Pythagoreanism has been largely neglected but for a few scholars; thus Tóth, as above, but also Carcopino (*op. cit.* 213, n. 7): “La ressemblance entre les rites pythagoriciens et mithriaques peut être fortuite. Celle entre les explications théologiques de ces rites peut l’être aussi. Mais si ces analogies procèdent d’une influence, il est bien malaisé de deviner en quel sens elle s’exerça. Est-ce le mazdéisme qui, à l’origine, pénétra le pythagorisme? Est-ce le pythagorisme qui, plus tard, a déteint sur le mithriacisme romanisé? Les deux réponses ne s’excluent pas, et c’est un fait qu’aux environs de notre ère, on ne distingue pas entre les mages et les pythagoriciens.” Turcan (1975) makes a similar connection between Pythagoreanism and the western sources (e.g. *ibid.* 59: “...les seuls auteurs grecs connus pour s’être intéressés spécialement techniquement, si j’ose dire, au mithriacisme pythagorisaient de façon presque systématique”) but rejects the western evidence as corrupted with Neopythagorean and Platonic ideas that he denies the mysteries themselves. The suggestion of a Neopythagorean origin for Mithraism is not in conflict with Beck’s recent (1998; 2001) suggestion that the cult was developed in the milieu of the Commagenean royal dynasty, perhaps by the astrologer T. Claudius Balbillus, son of the famous Platonist (and reputed Neopythagorean) T. Claudius Thrasyllus; on the latter’s Neopythagoreanism, see Tarrant 1993.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. the claim of Aristotle (*Metaph.* 1092b8) that the Pythagorean Eurytus of Tarentum associated entities such as “man” and “horse” with the lowest number of pebbles which could be arranged to represent it. Struck 2004 has proposed a Pythagorean origin for the concept of the “symbol” (*symbolon*) used to denote a token conveying hidden meaning. There are also various legends that the Pythagoreans kept certain esoteric aspects of geometry rigorously secret and severely punished those who revealed them; thus, *inter alia*, Plut. *Num.* 22; Burkert 1972, 457 ff.. The Pythagorean concern with esoteric symbolism had a practical side as well: under the threat of total annihilation from ongoing persecutions, the early Pythagoreans were said to have preserved their doctrine in symbols which were then passed down clandestinely within families; thus Iambl. *VP* 23; Diog. Laert. 7.42.

<sup>25</sup> Thus Procl. *In Eucl.* 138; Iambl. *Myst.* 184.2-14. Lest one imagine a feature so apparently inconsequential as the position of the god’s legs to be too peripheral a feature for genuine Pythagorean concern, an offhand remark of Plutarch is to the effect that the Pythagoreans never crossed their left leg over their right one (*De vit. pud.* 532c). What precisely this means in the case of Mithraism is uncertain, since Cautes or Cautopates is often doing just that; but it makes clear that as a symbolic element the legs in particular were not thought to be beneath Pythagorean scrutiny.

the tauroctony was similarly designed, and that it represented an especially esoteric aspect of Mithraic discourse, a discourse encrypted at an iconographic level well beneath the first symbolic stratum (the literal denotation of the mythical bull-slaying) or the second stratum (the astrological schema). It is, of course, impossible to know whether the Mithraic rank-and-file were themselves aware of this third-order symbolic stratum, but one might reasonably conjecture that the geometrical relationships underlying the tauroctony and their symbolic connotations were known to the cult's founders as well as the spiritual leaders (i.e., the Fathers) of each congregation, and thus presumably also to the artists and craftsmen under the Fathers' patronage. One may also speculate that the superimposition of several symbolic strata would have lent itself conveniently to the hierarchical grade structure of the cult in which increasingly esoteric or abstract interpretations could have been revealed progressively to the initiates.

4.2. At this point, if I am correct thus far, one may ask why the founders of the mysteries chose to embed these particular Pythagorean symbols so centrally in the principal cult-icon. An answer might be suggested by the convergence of "meanings"—I use the term advisedly<sup>26</sup>—that the Pythagoreans were thought to have accorded the two figures. Although the triangle was closely associated with cosmogony in Pythagorean thought<sup>27</sup>—a significance which would correspond well with Mithras' ostensibly demiurgic role as *despotês geneseôs*, if we are to trust Porphyry (*De antro* 6)—the figure also seems to have represented the harmonization of opposites. The Pythagoreans assimilated the triangle to the notion of the "triad," which apparently represented the abstract notion of mediation between extremes and the harmonization and unification of opposite principles.<sup>28</sup> According to a passage of Nicomachus of Gerasa preserved in the *Theologoumena Arithmeticae* (an anonymous Neopythagorean compendium transmitted in the corpus of Iamblichus), the triad represents the symmetry of the "mean" term between extremes, as well as a number of abstract qualities—such as "friendship" (*philia*),

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<sup>26</sup> Beck (2006)—following an early anti-structuralist current in anthropology (especially the work of D. Sperber)—has argued for extreme caution in the interpretation of Mithraic symbols, which are polyvalent and often self-referential. While I agree in principle, I take exception in this case, since the Pythagorean symbolism I have proposed (1) has an extremely well-defined context for interpretation in the Neopythagorean arithmological and symbological "lexicon" and (2) has been, in that same context, self-consciously theorized (e.g. nn. 24 and 25 *supra*) as a symbolic language with a specific meaning. Therefore, if my thesis is correct, then the hermeneutic error—if it is an "error"—is *already* present in the Neopythagorean source for the symbolism which was later adopted by the founders of the mysteries.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. Procl. *In Eucl.* 166. The Pythagoreans were reputed to have considered the *tetraktys*—an equilateral triangle formed from the graphic arrangement of the first four integers whose sum is ten (i.e.,  $1+2+3+4=10$ )—to be the source of the natural world; Theon of Smyrna, *Expos.* 38; Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.94-95; Aët. 1.3 in Diels, *Dox. Graec.* 280; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.1.1; Burkert 1972, 72-73, 187-188; Delatte 1915, 249-268. In the *Timaeus*, a doctrine ostensibly based on a Pythagorean source, Plato attributes the origin of all bodies to isosceles and scalene right triangles (53c-55c), and the notion of the creation of the physical world from various types of triangles was frequently repeated in the Hellenistic pseudopythagorica.

<sup>28</sup> On the Pythagoreans association of triangle with triad, see Nicomachus, *Introduction to Arithmetic* 2.8.1; Anon. [Iambl.] *Theol. Arith.* 17 f. de Falco; on the sources for this kind of thought more generally, see O'Meara 1989, 14-25.

“peace” (*eirênê*), “harmony” (*harmonia*), “unanimity” (*homonoia*) and “marriage” (*gamos*)—all associated with the unification of opposites.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, a similar significance seems to have been accorded the pentagram. A passage of Lucian attests that the Pythagoreans associated this figure with “health” (*bugeia*).<sup>30</sup> According to Pythagorean medical doctrine, health entails the harmonious balance between opposing qualities, such as hot and cold, moisture and dryness, and so on, while disease results from the preponderance of one such quality over another.<sup>31</sup> The pentagram would therefore have had the distinct connotation of the harmony of opposites. Yet perhaps more importantly, by the same logic that the triangle was related to the triad, the pentagram could be assimilated to the “pentad,” or the set of five (often arranged graphically as a pentagon), which, as Plutarch attests, the Pythagoreans called “marriage” (*gamos*) in that it is the sum of the first male “male” number (i.e. 3) and the first “female” one (i.e. 2).<sup>32</sup> The *Theologoumena* accords the Pentad the role of mediation *par excellence* (*mesotêtos tês aristês kai phusikôtatês*: 31.16 de Falco); the figure is further repeatedly related to a familiar constellation of mediatory concepts, such as “marriage” (*gamos*), “justice” (*dikaiosunê*) the “midpoint” (*kentron*), the “absence of strife” (*aneikia*), and, more generally, to the harmonious reconciliation of opposites. The treatise also attributes to a Pythagorean named Megillus the association of the Pentad’s mediatory function and its ability to unite opposites with the characteristics of luminosity and planetary motion.<sup>33</sup>

**4.3.** It therefore appears that the two embedded geometric figures, the triangle and the pentagram, may have been intended to represent the reconciliation and harmonization of cosmological and metaphysical opposites of the sort we have already seen to be encrypted by the reciprocal zones of the tauroctony. According to this “reading,” then, the tauroctony represents both (1) symbols of primordial *opposition* (i.e. the dualities right—left, male—female, light—dark, straight—bent, etc.), and (2) symbols of the *harmonization* of opposites (i.e. triangle, pentagram). That this third-order symbolic stratum concerns the function of the tauroctonus Mithras himself is suggested by the fact that the god’s body is both central and structurally essential to both geometrical figures as well as to the lateral division between the two opposing zones, zones that he simultaneously separates and unites while also governing the subtly unequal<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Anon. [Iambl.] *Theol. Arith.* 26 de Falco; cf. Porph. *V. Pyth.* 51. In later Platonism, the two Pythagorean connotations of the triangle—both demiurgic and harmonizing—seem to have converged; thus Proclus (*In Eucl.* 130) attributes to Theodorus of Asine (a student of Iamblichus) the peculiar notion that various gods are associated with the different angles of a triangle, some presiding over the creative or cosmogonic process of emanation, others over the reunification of disparate elements.

<sup>30</sup> Lucian, *Laps.* 5. The association seems to be confirmed by archaeological evidence; Stapleton 1958, 35 n. 43.

<sup>31</sup> Ps.-Timaeus of Locrii, *On the Cosmos* 10-11; Burkert 1972, 272.

<sup>32</sup> Plut. *De E ap. Delph.* 337f ff.; Anon. [Iambl.] *Theol. Arith.* 30 de Falco.

<sup>33</sup> Anon. [Iambl.] *Theol. Arith.* 35.1-6 de Falco. These characteristics are, of course, reminiscent of both Mithras’ solar role and the astrological context of the tauroctony.

<sup>34</sup> The god’s gaze is often strangely averted from the sacrificial act, either staring out frontally from the scene or turning back over his right shoulder towards Sol. This suggests that while uniting opposites with his legs, he nevertheless usually favors the bright, solar, right side over the tenebrous and lunar left

relationship between them.<sup>35</sup> We may further juxtapose this graphic schema with a certain amount of independent textual evidence to the effect that Mithras served as mediator: evidence whose relevance to the mysteries themselves has often been questioned.<sup>36</sup> There is, for instance, Plutarch's oft-cited excursus on ostensibly "Persian" religion at *De Iside et Osiride* 39, in which he refers to Mithras as "mediator" (*mesitês*), midway between the opposing principles of light (Oromazes) and darkness (Areimanius). More important, perhaps, is the extensive testimony of the Emperor Julian, who was himself, arguably, a Mithraic initiate. In his *Hymn to King Helios*, Julian repeatedly emphasizes the sun-god's cosmically-central position, and attributes to him the role of "some kind of mediation" (*tinôn mesotêtôn*) between opposing metaphysical principles, as well as the power to unite them.<sup>37</sup> Finally, one might also consider the aforementioned (n. 3, *supra*) passage of Porphyry's *De antro nympharum* 29, which enumerates a series of cosmic oppositions and concludes with the statement, at lines 20-21, "from this tension of opposition there is harmony, and it shoots through the opposites" (*dia touto palintonos hê harmonia kai toxuei dia tôn enantiôn*). Beck has shown this passage to be of Mithraic provenance, but it may *also*— and indeed may *simultaneously*— refer to the Pythagorean *archai*.<sup>38</sup> The cumulative weight of this evidence suggests that at least one significant

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side. This is also congruent with Pythagorean dualism, for, although the opposites are attuned in some way, they are not ethically equivalent, Aristotle indicates at *Metaph.* 986a and *Eth. Nic.* 1106b29.

<sup>35</sup> This, too, is consistent with Pythagorean concerns, for we may recall that the concept of *harmonia*— both that of the elements and regions of the cosmos as well as that arising between protological opposites— was very important to the Pythagoreans, who considered the opposing principles not mutually hostile but rather conjoined in a harmonious tension. On the early Pythagorean notion of harmony, Philolaus fr. 6 D–K [=Stob. *Ecl.* 1.21.7d] and Diog. Laert. 8.85 with Huffman 1993, 37-53; on the likely authenticity of fr. 6, see *ibid.* 93-101; Thesleff 1961, 41-45; Burkert 1972, 350-357; de Vogel 1966, 103 ff.. The notion was common in Neopythagorean accounts; thus, for example, Iambl. *VP* 9.

<sup>36</sup> I am not the first to propose a mediatory role for Mithras; this idea has already a long and troubled history. In 1899 F. Cumont had made this suggestion on the basis of an assumed analogy with Iranian dualism and of course also the well-known tidbits of textual evidence. Cumont's thesis has not been unanimously accepted; thus, for example, in an influential 1975 article, R. Gordon— who was both skeptical of Cumont's explanation of Roman Mithraism solely with reference to Zoroastrian doctrine and dubious about the relevance of the textual evidence to the cult— attacked Cumont's claim as entirely unjustified, asserting that "although there is Western evidence that Mithras held an astronomically certified middle position on the cosmic sphere, there is no evidence to permit the belief that he was supposed to be a *mesitês* between two opposing dominions." Simultaneously, but for quite different reasons, Turcan (1975: 15-22) rejected the attribution of mediation to Mithras as a philosophical gloss. However, some subsequent scholarship has tended give the textual evidence greater weight and therefore to re-attribute the god something of a mediatory role. In 1977, P. Athanassiadi rejected Gordon's criticism of Cumont on the issue of mediation and suggested instead a close connection between Julian's text— specifically the Emperor's attribution of the role of metaphysical mediation to the sun— and the ideology of the actual mysteries. More recently Beck (1988; 2000; 2006) has adduced astrological evidence for Mithras' cosmically-central position.

<sup>37</sup> Julian, *Or.* 4, 132d, 135c, 138c-d, 139b-d, 140b-c, 142a, 143c-d, 146c, 148b-c, 156c. One should note that the value of Julian's testimony for Mithraism is compromised somewhat by the fact that the Emperor refers to Mithras by name only once, at 155b, but see Athanassiadi 1977; Beck 1984, 2053.

<sup>38</sup> See Beck 2000; 2006, 81-85. Although Beck is undoubtedly correct about the Mithraic associations of *De antr. nymph.* 29.12-21, it is curious that Porphyry does not attribute this passage either to his usual

aspect of Mithras' function— ingeniously represented beneath the more obvious iconographic layers of mythical and astrological symbolism— was that of an overarching principle capable of mediating and harmonizing otherwise incommensurable opposites, the primordial Pythagorean oppositions upon whose harmonious coexistence the cosmos depends.

## 5. CONCLUSION: WHEREFORE MITHRAS IN ROMAN NEOPYTHAGOREANISM?

**5.1.** Finally, if it is in fact the case that clandestine Pythagorean ideas lie at the heart of the mysteries, one might wonder why the cult's founders might have chosen this particular Iranian deity, reconceptualized as a personification of an abstract metaphysical principle, to compete with the profusion of other options for personal salvation in the early Empire.<sup>39</sup> It is important to recognize that however humble many of the cult's eventual adherents were, the original founders were almost certainly members of the Hellenized Roman intellectual elite, perhaps even— as has often been suggested in one way or another— specialists at the forefront of contemporaneous religious and cosmological thought. It therefore seems reasonable to suppose that the hypothetical founders of the mysteries were well-schooled not only in the science of astrology but also in contemporaneous Neopythagorean thought (itself by no means exclusive of astrological concerns), and that they adopted the deity at least partially in response to the philosophical need for a supreme, ungenerated principle which could mediate harmoniously between primordial opposites.<sup>40</sup> Here we may have yet another example of the intricate and often underappreciated interrelation of philosophical and religious concerns in Graeco-Roman antiquity.

**5.2.** To be absolutely clear, I do not mean to suggest that this particular philosophical exigency was the *only* factor involved in the creation of the cult (for the astrological component was certainly as important); but that it was at least one significant motivation is rendered plausible by the following consideration. The Pythagorean doctrine of *archai* had long been a source of sectarian controversy. While some early Pythagoreans seem to have believed that the first principle was a duality of opposites, others posited a prior,

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source for Mithraic lore, Eubulus (the suspiciously Pythagorean-seeming author of a lost multi-volumed work, *Peri tou Mithra*, on whom see Turcan 1975, 23-43), or to the Mithraizing Neopythagoreans Numenius and Cronius; rather, right before this passage, the last source Porphyry cites by name, at 28.16, is actually Pythagoras himself (but from what source?); thus the enumeration of opposites here may simply be a summary of the Pythagorean doctrine of *archai*. This does not, however, preclude that it is *also* Mithraic; indeed, this very ambiguity is fundamental to my thesis.

<sup>39</sup> That is, if the cult's founders were not *already* Mithra-worshippers, as Beck has recently suggested (1998; 2001). Of course, Neopythagoreanism and Mithrolatry are not mutually exclusive: if Beck is in fact right— i.e. that the mysteries were founded by Commagenean Mithra-worshipping nobility in connection with T. Claudius Balbillus, son of the Neopythagorean Thrasyllus— then the two hypothetical origins coincide.

<sup>40</sup> Deities were occasionally invoked by philosophers to fulfill an abstract mediatory role; one is reminded of the Chaldaean theurgists' somewhat anomalous adoption of the goddess Hecate to serve as a mediator between the sensible and intelligible worlds; see Johnston 1990.

all-embracing unity— a transcendental Monad— which would generate the first monad— dyad pair at the subjacent ontological level and ensure the harmonious cooperation of complementary principles.<sup>41</sup> The ancient controversy about the nature of the first principle— i.e. whether it was a unitary principle or a dyadic pair— continued well into late antiquity; thus, for example, we know that disagreement on this issue gave rise to one of many sectarian schisms among the Neopythagoreanizing Valentinians of the 2nd century CE.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, it was specifically during the period contemporaneous with the emergence of Mithraism that the notion of a transcendent unitary principle became common within Neopythagorean circles.<sup>43</sup>

**5.3.** My suggestion, then, is that the founders of the Roman mysteries— perhaps a schismatic offshoot of some Neopythagorean school of the sort that began to emerge in Rome of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE<sup>44</sup>— sought an ostensibly traditional deity to fulfill what was in effect a new role, namely, that of a high god who could also serve as a superincumbent mediatory principle capable of transcending and thus reconciling the primordial opposites, and yet one who would be better suited to the additional task of personal salvation than the rather aloof-seeming, impersonal Monad. To find such a deity, a group of Pythagoreanizing intellectuals might have turned to Persia, a country with which Pythagoras was reputed to have close connections, and which, despite a long history of political antagonism with the West, traditionally had been admired by Greek philosophers for its exotic wisdom;<sup>45</sup> there they would have encountered the authentically Persian Mithra, a god of justice, contracts, and friendship, who, it would seem, had long been ready to fulfill this role. Indeed, while much of the recent scholarship has sought to distance the Roman cult from its putative Iranian origin, scholars of comparative mythology have also noted the surprising continuity of Mithras' Indo-Iranian and Roman incarnations. The adoption of this Persian deity would not have been mere "Orientalizing"; rather, it would have been an eminently reasonable decision for these sectaries to venerate a solar deity who ensured the harmony of "good unions":

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<sup>41</sup> The postulate of a primordial Monad superceding the first duality of monad and dyad seems to have been common to one strand of Academic thought among Pythagoreanizing Platonists such as Eudorus and Moderatus, perhaps following a doctrine of Speusippus or even Plato's own so-called "unwritten doctrines"; see Whittaker 1973. A passage of Syrianus (*In Metaph.* 165.33) attests that the early Pythagoreans Philolaus and Archytus posited a supreme principle overarching both limit and unlimited. Huffman (1993) considers the Philolaus fragment spurious, but certain passages in Plato describing a third principle overarching both the Limited and the Unlimited and capable of causing their mixture would seem indicate this idea had occurred during his time if not before; thus *Pl. Phlb.* 25c-d and esp. 27b-c.

<sup>42</sup> Hippol. *Haer.* 7.29.

<sup>43</sup> Krämer 1964, 238-254.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., the Neopythagorean revival attempted in the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE by Nigidius Figulus (*Cic. Fam.* 4.13; *Tim.* 1); on Eudorus' role in this revival, and esp. his notion of a singular Monad transcending the first duality of opposites, Dillon 1977, 117-121; on similar doctrines *chez* Thrasyllus, see Tarrant 1993, 210-211.

<sup>45</sup> On the persistent infatuation of Platonists and Pythagoreans with Zoroaster, see Kingsley 1990; 1995b.

unions between friends and nations, but also perhaps between opposites on whose harmonious reconciliation the cosmos itself, and our salvation therefrom, depends.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> On the continuity of Indo-Iranian and Roman Mithras, see Lincoln 1991. On Mithras as guardian of contracts, see Dumézil 1976; Boyce 1969; Thieme 1975. In a future article ("Harmonious Opposition, Part II") I hope to demonstrate that Mithras' power of mediation was also a crucial element of the mysteries' soteriology, as it enabled the initiates to breach the otherwise impenetrable boundary between sensible (cosmic) and intelligible (hypercosmic) realms.



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