

Initiatur in spelaeo: A Review of Ancient Terminology for Mithraic Cultic Spaces

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The most common word accepted in Mithraic historiography to refer to places of worship is “Mithraeum”. The historical sources, however, offer us a multitude of terms that diverge from this expression which could be evoking different realities and could be referring to other kind of cultic spaces. In this paper, we have collected all the mentions supported in the epigraphy and literary sources, to have a complete vision of all these terms. With these testimonies, we have revised the previous interpretations related to the use of these different names. The variety of them has little to do with location or period. Still, we propose that this terminological variation is related to the consideration that ancient Mithra’s followers had with the moment when they erected the cultic space. It is possible to connect the choice of the word “spelaeum” or “templum” with the first idea they had of what must be an “original Mithraic cave” if we consider the meaning of the verbs used by the dedicators in their inscriptions. The validity of this interpretation will allow for a better understanding of the symbolic universe in which the followers of Mithra moved, instead of the common acceptance of the modern word “mithraeum”.

Keywords: Mithraism, cave, Eastern Cults, epigraphy, Mithraeum.

Together with the tauroctony scene, the archaeological identification of the physical spaces where Mithraic worship took place have provided the most solid arguments for affirming the presence of Mithraism in a particular place. Indeed, the greatest advance in the knowledge of Mithraism within the borders of the Roman Empire has come from the proliferation of archaeological excavations, which have made it possible to revise and expand the map of its spread that was produced by the first systematic catalogue of Mithraic testimonies established by Franz Cumont¹ in the late nineteenth century; however, it has also been suggested that errors have sometimes been made with regard to an excessive identification of certain places as Mithraic.²

This proliferation of newly discovered spaces of worship has led a considerable number of researchers to focus their attention on analyzing the traditional interpretations of “Mithraea” in the development, dissemination, and establishment of Mithraic worship. Initial classifications were based on a broad distinction between Mithraea in private spac-

¹ With his work *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* (Vol I. Brussels, 1896 and Vol. II. Brussels, 1899), F. Cumont laid the foundations for what would become the scientific study of Mithraism, carrying out the first systematic survey of all the epigraphic, literary, artistic, and archaeological documents known at the time. His landmark work was updated fifty years later by his disciple M. J. Vermaseren in his *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis mithriacae* (CIMRM, vol. I and II, Leiden, 1956, 1960).

² Alvar 2018; Silnović 2022, 25.

es and Mithraea in public spaces,³ with a particular emphasis on the ultimate ownership of the buildings in which the place of worship had been identified. Accordingly, “private” Mithraea were located in private urban *insulae*, *villas* or *domus*, as opposed to those located in buildings whose ownership would be linked to one of the public authorities or which had to have the permission of the authorities for their erection. Other authors have attempted to refine this categorisation, which only addresses the location of the building, by also incorporating the context and the interaction with the environment. Nielsen⁴ and Børnebye⁵ have proposed other divisions based on accessibility and visibility, identifying “semi-public” or “neighbourhood” Mithraea based on their distribution and location. Although the historiography has tended to establish certain general characteristics that are often repeated in most Mithraic spaces of worship,⁶ it is nevertheless possible to identify a certain variety in the final form of the building model used by Mithraists. This has led to the emergence of other classifications that, rather than focusing on their location, sought to clarify the formal diversity of the buildings identified. One starting point was initially established by Zotović,⁷ who spoke about four types of places of worship: open-air sanctuaries, temples inside caves (*spelaea*), constructions adjoining caves (semi-*spelaea*) and artificial constructions (temples). Beck reduced the classification to two architectural categories (artificial constructions and structures in natural caves),⁸ but this distinction was too broad to be of any practical use. Schütte-Maischatz thus extended Beck’s initial criterion to free-standing buildings and those incorporated into public buildings, combining the formal elements with those of location.⁹ These distinctions continue to be useful and have served as a reference for comprehensive studies that have been carried out on Mithraic places of worship¹⁰ as well as others of a broader nature.¹¹

It is evident from the previous examples that the study of all the elements associated with the physical space where Mithraic worship took place within the frontiers of the Roman Empire has been a subject of enduring interest in the Mithraic historiography. There is, however, one aspect that has not received the same consideration in terms of research but that, despite the fact that there has been no significant change in the volume of testimonies available, could be examined in an attempt to make some progress in this area. The great typological diversity of Mithraic spaces of worship has traditionally been linked to a single term, “Mithraeum”, which historiography has adopted as an accepted way of referring to all these kinds of buildings, irrespective of their type and location. Nevertheless, literary and epigraphic sources have provided a number of different terms with which the Mithraists seem to have described their places of worship. The previous studies have merely noted this diversity. Rarely has an attempt been made to investigate what possible meaning or motivation could lie behind the choice of different terms to refer to a particular building. Our intention with this study is to propose an interpretation that will make it possible to better

³ Becatti 1953, 113; Coarelli 1979, 69–79; Rubio 2001, 246.

⁴ Nielsen 2014, 165.

⁵ Børnebye 2015, 228.

⁶ Turcan 1993, 74ss.; Nielsen 2014, 152–169; Campos 2017.

⁷ Zotović, 1973, 153ss.

⁸ Beck 1984, 363, n. 18.

⁹ Schütte-Maischatz 2004, 116.

¹⁰ Hensen, 2017.

¹¹ De Togni 2018; Silnović, 2022; Sonnemans 2022.

understand what cultic reality or intentionality might have justified the choice of one term or another when used in a commemorative inscription or a literary reference.

Our starting point is the origin of the word *Mithraeum*, insofar as its modern acceptance and widespread use has resulted from a lack of interest in investigating the connotations present in the original terms found in the ancient testimonies. We should clarify that despite what is often said, it is not a contemporary neologism. The first textual reference is in Greek, Μιθραῖον, recorded in two Ptolemaic papyri dated to the 3rd century BCE.¹² Gurob 22 (line 10) refers to a list of animals owned by different temples in Fayoum:¹³

Μιθραῖον Θυήρις Χαιάπιος πρόβα(τα) ιγ ἄρνες ε.

In BGU X 1936, line 2 contains what appear to be references to an invoice or account book:

ἀπὸ κατοχ[-ca.?-] [-ca.?-] Μιθραῖον [-ca.?-] [-ca.?-]εωτος δ[-ca.?-]

Based on the chronologies of both fragments, it is impossible to establish a connection between the use of this term and the identification of two buildings associated with the Roman cult of Mithras, as Harris¹⁴ has already indicated. This may very well be a continuation in Macedonian times of the Zoroastrian worship of Mithra that began in Achaemenid times, of which there are other textual testimonies in Egypt, through the reference to Mithraic theonyms in the Aramaic papyri from Saqqara.¹⁵ We can identify some connection in the use of this term in Greek by two Christian authors to refer to a temple occupied by Christians in Alexandria in the mid-fourth century CE. Socrates, in his *Ecclesiastical History* (III. 2), gives us the expression ἐν τῷ ἀδύτῳ τοῦ Μιθραίου. Describing the same event, Sozomenus writes the following in his homonymous work (V. 7): τὸ καλούμενον παρ' αὐτοῖς Μίθριον. Despite the variants, both terms are used by the authors to designate the place of worship occupied by Mithraists, which the Christians wanted to convert into a church. They do not seem to have been aware of the references in the Ptolemaic papyri but are rather making a Mithraic translation of the term *Serapeion*, which is what Amianus Marcellinus (*History* XXII. II. 7) uses to situate this event. This word was lost until the early nineteenth century, when it was rediscovered by Zoëga,¹⁶ who in 1817 transcribed “Mithraion von Ostia” to refer to the Mithraic temple in the Italian city. Its Latinisation came a few years later, when in 1838 G. F. Creuzer used it in the title of his work *Das Mithræum von Neuenheim bei Heidelberg*, and it was later popularised by Franz Cumont and his followers in their works.

As such, if we rule out the historicity of the neologism *Mithraeum* for the first centuries of the era, we need to establish which term was used by the followers of Mithra to refer to the places where they worshipped during the Roman period. There are two main ways of accessing the references that were used to designate these worship spaces. First, we have found a significant number of inscriptions from the second to the fourth century CE in which certain terms are recurrent (*templum* and *spelaeum*) and others are used less frequently (*antrum*, *fanum*, *sacraria*, *crypta* and *adytum*). In the following table, we have listed the references, locations and dates of the Mithraic inscriptions that contain some of the aforementioned terms.

¹² Rübsan 1974, 217; Lease 1986, 122-3; Bricault 2021, 205-6.

¹³ There is an ongoing debate as to whether the actual location should be in Fayoum or Memphis, cfr. Van Minnen 1998, 133; Sharafeldan, 2021, 84.

¹⁴ Harris 1996, 169.

¹⁵ Segal 1983, no. 50; Schmitt, 1991.

¹⁶ Zoëga 1817, 192.

Term	Repertoire	Provenance	Date in centuries
<i>Antra</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 406	Italy, Rome	II–III CE
<i>Antrum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 407	Italy, Rome	III CE
<i>Speleum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 129	Africa, Cirta	½ IV CE
<i>Spelaenum et Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 228	Italy, Ostia	III CE
<i>Spelaenum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 423	Italy, Rome	½ III CE
<i>Speleum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 360	Italy, Rome	III–IV CE
<i>Spelaenum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 648	Italy, Nersa	172 CE
<i>Speleum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 652	Italy, Aveia Vestina	II–III CE
<i>Speleo</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 308	Italy, Ostia	III CE
<i>Speleus (sacratis)</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 412	Italy, Rome	IV CE
<i>Spelaenum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 660	Italy, Volsini	II CE
<i>Speleum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 706	Italy, Mediolanum	II CE
<i>Spelaenum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 747	Italy, Aquileia	II CE
<i>Spelaenum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1846	Dalmatia, Senia	151–200 CE
<i>Speleum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 2350	Cyclades, Andros	202 CE
<i>Spelaenum</i>	AE 1996, 601	Italy, Umbria	II CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 53	Syria, Dura Europos	209–211 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1397	Raetia, Zwiefalten	III CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1243	Germania Sup., Bingen	236 CE
<i>Templo</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1297	Germania Sup., Murrhardt	151–250 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1431	Noricum, Virunum	311 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1438	Noricum, Virunum	239 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1485	Noricum, Atrans-Trojana	171–300 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1495	Pannonia Sup., Poetovio	151–230 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1546	Pannonia Sup., Poetovio	III CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1614	Pannonia Sup., Poetovio	301–310 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1661	Pannonia Sup., Stix-Neusiedl	III CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1673	Pannonia Sup., Carnuntum	171–300 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1792	Pannonia Inf., Aquincum	213–222 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1793	Pannonia Sup., Aquincum	III CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1814	Pannonia Inf., Gorsium	II CE
<i>Templum</i>	AE 2016, 1278	Pannonia Inf., Sirmium	151–300 CE
<i>Templo</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1808	Pannonia Inf., Campona	III CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1951	Dacia, Apulum	171–270 CE
<i>Templum</i>	AE 1998, 1079	Dacia, Apulum	197–230 CE
<i>Templi</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 2008	Dacia, Dostat	III CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 2208	Moesia Sup., Lopata	III CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 2222	Moesia Sup., Viminacium	151–250 CE
<i>Templum</i>	AE 1994, 1335	Noricum, Virunum	201–209 CE
<i>Templum</i>	AE 1996, 1189	Noricum, Virunum	182–184 CE
<i>Templum</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 2235	Moesia Sup., Guberevci	III CE
<i>Fanus (!)</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1315	Germania Sup., Gimmeldingen	325 CE
<i>Crypta</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 315	Italy, Ostia	180–200 CE
<i>Sacrarium</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> II, 1698	Pannonia Sup., Carnuntum	308 CE
<i>Sacrarium</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 449	Italy, Rome	III CE
<i>Aedem</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 247	Italy, Rome	151–200 CE
<i>Aedem</i>	<i>CIMRM</i> I, 876	Britannia, Bremenium	219–222 CE

The mere observation of this diversity and the degree of repetition has generally led the Mithraic historiography to focus on the different terms and to emphasise the greater prevalence of one or the other in the centre and on the periphery of the empire.¹⁷ The term *spelaeum* is primarily used in Italy and is associated with *antrum* and *crypta*, also found in this territory, due to their similarity in meaning; the generic *templum* is the term most used by Mithraists in the provinces, particularly in the Rhine and Danube area.

There have been different interpretations of this diversity among those who have considered the subject. In the nineteenth century, Visconti had indicated that *spelaeum* was the name given to cave sanctuaries where initiations took place and that *templum* was used for places where public liturgies were performed.¹⁸ On this point, Lavagne clarifies that he regards this not so much as a distinction in function but rather in location and type of decoration.¹⁹ Turcan does not consider the nuances that each term might have,²⁰ and Hensen seems inclined to emphasise the metaphorical nature of the use of *spelaeum* but without differentiating any other situation from the wider acceptance of the term *templum*.²¹ Scherrer explored the idea of finding an explanation for the disparity in terms, pointing out that the references to *antrum*, *crypt* and *spelaeum* would be linked to the apsidal-shaped niche where the tauroctony scene was located and that the more generic use of temple, *aedes* or *sacrarium* could refer to the building as a whole.²² We can surmise that the diversity of terms must be associated with elements that go beyond simple linguistic richness, because there does not seem to be an equivalence between what is implied using *spelaeum* and *templum*.

The other set of testimonies that provides us with some reference to the term known in Roman times to describe the Mithraic place of worship comes from several Christian authors who made specific mention of Mithraism in their works. In general, there is a certain insistence on underscoring their critique of the obscurantist practices they attributed to the Mithraists, which was compounded by the space where the initiates gathered.²³ By the second century CE, the earliest apologists echo the term “cave” when describing this place. Tertullian (*De cor.* 15) describes the rituals linked to the grade of Miles in the following way: *qui cum initiatur in spelaeo, in castris vere tenebrarum* (“Who, at his initiation in the gloomy cavern, in the camp, it may well be said, of darkness” (transl. Holmes 1869)). Justin (*Dial.* 70. 2–3), writing in Greek is much more explicit in using the term with which believers in Mithras refer to their place of worship:

Ὅταν δὲ οἱ τὰ τοῦ Μίθρου μυστήρια παραδιδόντες λέγωσιν ἐκ πέτρας γεγενῆσθαι αὐτόν, καὶ σπήλαιον καλῶσι τὸν τόπον ἔνθα μεῖν τοὺς πειθομένους αὐτῷ παραδιδούσιν, ἐνταῦθα οὐχὶ τὸ εἰρημένον ὑπὸ Δανιήλ.

Now when they who teach the mysteries of Mithra say that he was born from a rock and call the place where they teach the initiation of them that obey him a cave, do I not know that they have imitated the saying of Daniel. (Transl. Lukin Willians.)

¹⁷ Lavagne 1978, 272–3; Clauss 1992, 253; Scherrer 2008, 341–352; Csaba 2015, 123ss.; Hensen 2017, 393–394; Bricoult 2021, 207–208; Canciani 2022, 293–295.

¹⁸ Visconti 1864, 152ss.

¹⁹ Lavagne 1978, 273.

²⁰ Turcan 1993, 73.

²¹ Hensen 2017, 388.

²² Scherrer 2008, 345–352.

²³ Tolic 2020; Canciani 2022, 293.

The other authors are somewhat later (fourth to fifth century CE), they all reiterate the prominence of this term to describe the space where ceremonies take place. Jerome (*Epist.* 107. 2) uses it to refer to a “grotto of Mithras” destroyed by Gracchus, praetor of Rome in 378 CE:

cum praefecturam gereret urbanam, nonne **specum** Mithrae, et omnia portentosa simulacra, quibus Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Helios, Dromo, Pater initiantur, subvertit, fregit, excussit.

He held the prefecture of the city, overthrow, break in pieces, and shake to pieces the grotto of Mithra and all the dreadful images therein? Those I mean by which the worshippers were initiated as Raven, Bridegroom, Soldier, Lion, Perseus, Sun, Crab, and Father? (Transl. Wright.)

Paulinus of Nola makes the same reference in *Carmen* 32. 111 to indicate where the Mithraists have hidden the image of their god:

quid quod et Invictum **spelaea** sub atra recondunt quemque tegunt tenebris audent hunc dicere Solem.

For example, they keep the Unconquered One down in a dark cavern and dare to call him the sun though they hide him in darkness. (Transl. Walsh.)

Two other later authors maintain the same meaning. Firmicus Maternus (*Err. prof. relig.* V. 2) insists on the hidden nature of these places:

sacra vero eius in **speluncis** abditis tradunt, ut semper obscuro tenebrarum squalore demersi gratiam splendidi ac sereni luminis vitent.

His cult they carry on in hidden caves, so that they may be forever plunged in the gloomy squalor of darkness and thus shun the grace of light resplendent and serene. (Transl. Forbes.)

Apart from the apologetic tradition, there are other authors who have provided references on this subject. The first literary account of Mithraic worship is associated with the late first century CE poet Statius, who at the end of Book I of his *Thebaid* associates the god with a cave-like context: *Persaei sub rupibus antri indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram* (“Mithras, that beneath the rocky Persean cave strains at the reluctant-following horns” (transl. Mozley)). This idea is later reinforced by Lactantius Placidus (*Stat. Theb* 4. 720) who, in his commentary on this work by Statius, further reinforces the idea that the Persians worshipped Mithra in caves: *Persae in spelaeis Solem colunt* (“The Persians are said to have been the first to worship the Sun in caverns” (transl. Burnam 1902)). However, Placidus refers (717) to this idea again using the term *antro*: *apud Persas, ubi in antro colitur, Mithra vocatur*. (“the Persians Mitra and worship him in a cave” (transl. Burnam 1902)). One key author for the interpretation of the symbolic meaning that could be linked to the role of caves in Mithraic worship is Porphyry, in paragraph 6 on his work *On the Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey*²⁴ where he bases the tradition of choosing a cave on Zoroaster himself, from whom the followers of Mithras would have taken the custom, be they natural or artificial caves:

οὕτω καὶ Πέρσαι τὴν εἰς κάτω κάθοδον τῶν ψυχῶν καὶ πάλιν ἔξοδον μυσταγωγούντες τελοῦσι τὸν μύστην, ἐπονομάσαντες **σπήλαιον** <τὸν> τόπον· πρώτου μὲν, ὡς ἔφη Εὐβουλος,

²⁴ For further reading about the relationship between Porphyry and Mithraism, see Alt 1998, Mauerette 2005, and Akçay 2019.

Ζωροάστρου αὐτοφυῆς **σπήλαιον** ἐν τοῖς πλησίον ὄρεσι τῆς Περσίδος ἀνθηρὸν καὶ πηγὰς ἔχον ἀνιερώσαντος εἰς τιμὴν τοῦ πάντων ποιητοῦ καὶ πατρὸς Μίθρου, εἰκόνα φέροντος αὐτῷ τοῦ **σπηλαίου** τοῦ κόσμου, ὃν ὁ Μίθρας ἐδημιούργησε, τῶν δ' ἐντὸς κατὰ συμμετρους ἀποστάσεις σύμβολα φερόντων τῶν κοσμικῶν στοιχείων καὶ κλιμάτων· μετὰ δὲ τοῦτον τὸν Ζωροάστην κρατήσαντος καὶ παρὰ τοῖς ἄλλοις, δι' **ἄντρων** καὶ **σπηλαίων** εἶτ' οὖν αὐτοφυῶν εἶτε χειροποιήτων τὰς τελετὰς ἀποδιδόναι.

Thus, also the Persians, mystically signifying the descent of the soul into the sublunary regions, and its regression from it, initiate the mystic (or him who is admitted to the arcane sacred rites) in a place that they denominate a cavern. For, as Eubulus says, Zoroaster was the first who consecrated in the neighbouring mountains of Persia a spontaneously produced cave, florid and with fountains, in honour of Mithra, the maker and father of all things; a cave, according to Zoroaster, bearing a resemblance of the world, which was fabricated by Mithra. But the things contained in the cavern being arranged according to commensurate intervals were symbols of the mundane elements and climates. After Zoroaster, it was usual for others to perform the rites pertaining to the mysteries in caverns and dens, whether spontaneously produced or made by the hands. (Transl. Lamberton.)

Although we can clearly see the concurrence among these authors in their use of the terms *spelaeum* and *antro* in relation to the space where Mithraic ceremonies took place, only Justin (*Dial.* 70, 3) is categorical in his assertion that they “call the place where those who believe in him are initiated a cave”; for other authors, there is an atmosphere that underscores the dark and subterranean nature of Mithraic worship, and Justin associates the term *spelaeum* with the way in which the Mithraists themselves seem to have defined the space where they performed their rituals. Porphyry, as Tolic²⁵ indicates, speaks of natural and artificial caves but does not appear to specify what type of space he is referring to. Similarly, when Firmicus Maternus (V. 2) wishes to condemn the practices of the followers of Mithras as Persianism, he writes that in his *templis rite <sacra fieri> Magorum ritu Persico* (“in the temples, the Magian rites are duly performed after the Persian ceremonial” (transl. Forbes)); he thus again uses the generic temple as a way of describing a physical place that corresponds to the Roman idea of a space consecrated for the performance of rituals.

In contrast to the terminological diversity found in the epigraphic materials (up to seven different terms), there is greater homogeneity in the term used by the classical authors to refer to the space studied herein. The inscriptions have an added value as a source, as they are directly connected to individuals involved in Mithraic worship. However, the literary testimonies come from indirect references, with a clearly combative intentionality in many cases. Nevertheless, the consensus around underscoring the cave-like environment as a way of referring to the space where the god Mithra was worshipped by his followers must have been a familiar element that characterised this religious practice. Thus far, the emphasis has been more directly on underscoring the disparate origin of the inscriptions in relation to the term used. Accordingly, the use of *templum-fanum* — which represents 55 % of the total — is mostly located in territories on the north-eastern edge of the empire (Germania, Moesia, Dacia, Noricum, Pannonia and Raetia); while *spelaeum-antrum-crypta* — 40.4 % of those studied — are used in Italy, except for one in Dalmatia, another in the Cyclades and one in Britannia.

²⁵ Tolic 2020, 165.

What might have been the motivation for using one term or another when commissioning the inscription? There is a certain disparity in the physical location of the Mithraea, with all the categories mentioned, a diversity that is also found in the external form they might have in relation to the environment in which they are located. Nevertheless, historiography has reached a consensus that the general plan, the internal division and the decorative-symbolic elements of Mithraic spaces of worship had a certain similarity that makes them recognisable, even in their variations.²⁶ In this process of constructing the symbolic image that was to represent the place where the Mithraic liturgy took place, there is one component that seems to be recurrent: the intention to evoke inside the Mithraeum, regardless of the type of building chosen, an environment as close as possible to a cave, using construction materials that would facilitate this assimilation, for example, pumice stone²⁷ or creating the right atmosphere through the judicious use of lights and shadows²⁸ or pictorial decorations and the shape of the ceiling.²⁹ As such, to progress towards finding an answer to the question posed, we must move beyond the approach that has hitherto been established for this *spelaeum-templum* dichotomy. The literary sources appear to focus on evoking the image of a cave in relation to the Mithraic space of worship. It is the inscriptions that introduce the terminological variation, and until now, they have been used only to indicate the territorial concentration of one term or another. There is, however, an element we could examine in this material that has not been considered thus far. Of the 47 inscriptions analysed in this study, which include some of the terms that refer to the space used by Mithraists, 41 provide specific information explaining the reason why the dedicator(s) decided that the stone? should be erected. This cause is expressed in the verb that, when it appears, indicates that the inscription was commissioned to commemorate either the construction of the worship space or its restoration. The following table shows the verbs used in each case.

Term	Verb	Repertoire
<i>Templum</i>	<i>Feci</i>	AE 1998, 1079
	<i>Fecit</i>	CIMRM II, 2008
	<i>Refecit</i>	CIMRM II, 2222
	<i>Exstruxerunt</i>	AE 1994, 1335
	<i>Restitui fecit</i>	CIMRM II, 1431
	<i>Restituit</i>	CIMRM I, 782, 842; II, 1814, 2208, 1485, 1495, 1397, 1673, 1614; AE 2016, 1278-9
	<i>Refecerunt</i>	CIMRM II, 1438
	<i>Restituerunt</i>	AE 1994, 1334; CIMRM II, 1661
	<i>Constituerunt</i>	CIMRM II, 1792–1793
	<i>Re instructum</i>	CIMRM II, 2235
	<i>Restitutum</i>	CIMRM I, 53
	<i>Restituto</i>	CIMRM II, 1297
	<i>Spelaeum</i>	<i>Fecit</i>
<i>Faceret</i>		CIMRM I, 423

²⁶ Laechuli 1968, 74-5; Lavagne 1978, 273; Turcan 1993, 74; Hensen 2017, 384.

²⁷ Sgubini 1979, 263.

²⁸ Bjornebye 2012, 352; David 2020.

²⁹ Hensen, 2017, 393.

Term	Verb	Repertoire
	<i>Constituit</i>	CIMRM I, 360; II, 2350
	<i>Restituit</i>	CIMRM I, 648, 706
	<i>Refecit</i>	AE 1996, 601
	<i>Restauravit</i>	CIMRM I, 308
	<i>Consummaverunt</i>	CIMRM I, 652
	<i>Dedit</i>	CIMRM I, 660
<i>Antrum</i>	<i>Facit</i>	CIMRM I, 406
	<i>fecerunt</i>	CIMRM I, 407
<i>Aedem</i>	<i>Extruxit</i>	CIMRM I, 876

What is relevant to the question at hand is that the verbs used in the inscriptions tend to be concentrated differently depending on whether they are associated with the term *spelaeum* or *templum*. We thus observe that in the inscriptions in which *spelaeum-antrum* (15) are used, verbs whose meaning is related to the action of “building, erecting, raising, finishing” (*facere, constituere, dare, consummare*) are used more frequently; in the epigraphs in which *templum* (23) appears, verbs that evoke “rebuilding, remaking, restoring, re-erecting” (*reficere, restituere, re-instruere*) are repeated. We do not believe that this can be a coincidence when the figures are so disparate. Of the inscriptions with *templum*, 83 % are linked to the action of rebuilding. In contrast, 72 % of those with *spelaeum-antrum* are associated with the commemoration of their inauguration. We should bear in mind, as Sonnemans³⁰ notes, that these buildings are presented as ideal spaces for self-promotion and that any participation in the founding or re-founding act for the place of worship had to be documented with its corresponding epigraph. This also explains the interest of the dedicators in emphasising this key role by means of the expressions *de sua pecunia, ex suo omni inpena, a solo, etc.*

An analysis of the rationale behind the variations in the verbs used could explain the nuance that determines the use of one term or another to designate Mithraic places of worship. Regardless of the place of origin of the inscription, when the term *spelaeum* or *antrum* is used (it could also be linked to *crypt*, but we do not have the verb), it refers to the founding moment of the building chosen for Mithraic worship practices, irrespective of the other parameters mentioned above (cave, free-standing, private, public, etc.). Thus, in our opinion, *spelaeum* is the word that the Mithraists would use when naming their communal gathering place. The terminology would thus reflect the symbolic meaning that it should convey in the set of beliefs and elements that compose Mithraism, which would be specifically confirmed in the evocation of a cave through decoration and other elements incorporated into the interior of the appointed building. As can be interpreted from the meaning of the other inscriptions that use the term *templum*, the Mithraists who commissioned them wished to refer to an intervention carried out on an existing building. Accordingly, the idea underlying them does not refer to the symbolic sense of what it means to inaugurate a new Mithraic cave but rather to a specific intervention carried out on a building already consecrated to liturgical activity, which more directly corresponds to the meaning of *templum* in the Roman mentality. Although this word was originally associated with the delineation of a space by an augur where auspices were taken,³¹ over

³⁰ Sonnemans 2022, 39.

³¹ Castillo 2000, 88; Chatzivasiliou 2015, 214.

time it was eventually assimilated and replaced by the terms *aedes* and *fanum* to refer to a constructed building.³² Consequently, the use of these words in the Mithraic inscriptions under analysis describe the relationship that the dedicators establish with a sacralised space,³³ which has already been fully integrated into the religious praxis of the Mithraists and the physical environment where it is located, where the building that has been altered is defined (without renouncing its cave-like symbolic component) using traditional Roman religious terminology.

The epigraphic testimonies do, however, contain some exceptions to the distinction we have made regarding the verbs associated with the terms *spelaeum* and *templum*. Nevertheless, if we consider the information they provide, we can understand those exceptions. In the inscription from Umbria (AE, 1996, 601), the use of *refecit* is explained by the fact that it is a complete reconstruction of the *spelaeum*, as the previous one had completely collapsed following an earthquake. Something similar occurs in the case of Nersa (CIMRM I, 648), Ostia (CIMRM I, 308) and Milan (CIMRM I, 706), where it is explained that the restoration is due to the collapse and destruction of the previous building and that it is therefore a new building. A different situation is observed in the limited use of *fecit* associated with *templum*. Using the example of Apulum (AE 1998, 1079), despite the verb used, the term indicated the rehabilitation of a pre-existing place of worship;³⁴ in the epigraph from Dostat (CIMRM II, 2008), there is a similar case, as the dedicator Publius Aelius Artemidorus becomes a *pater* in an already existing community in Dostat (Singidava), Apulum or Sarmizegetusa.³⁵ The inscription of *Fructosus* found in Ostia (CIMRM I, 228) represents a paradoxical testimony for the entire debate analysed herein:

[---]rius *Fructosus* patron(us) corp(oris) s[tup(patorum?)
[---te]mpl(um) et spel(aeum) Mit(hrae) a solo sua pec(unia) feci(t)

[...]rius *Fructosus*, patron of the guild of the tow-makers,
built the temple and cave of Mithras, alone and at his own expense. (Transl. mine — I. C.)

It is a *unicum* in which both terms appear together in connection with the construction of a Mithraic place of worship. This situation has posed a problem since its discovery,³⁶ as it was not clear how to interpret the mention of temple and spelaeum. However, if we consider the context in which this space is located and the role of the patron who commissioned the inscription, there is no conflict with the conclusion we are drawing in this study. The text appears on two cornices found in the collegiate seat of the *stuppatores*, which encompassed an entire *insula*; the complex consisted of several adjoining *tabernae*, and the collegiate house,³⁷ with a central courtyard and outbuildings around it, was in the south. This building is dated to the early third century CE and its plans included a temple that was possibly to be dedicated to Minerva. However, construction was halted at the podium, and later, this part was used as the site of a “Mithraeum”. This halt was attrib-

³² Morani 1983, 25.

³³ Rüpke 2020, 4.

³⁴ Szabó 2013, 58.

³⁵ Carbó 2010, 767.

³⁶ Becatti 1953, 24.

³⁷ Subías 1994, 101.

uted by Hermansen³⁸ to a lack of funds in the confraternity, which may have been taken advantage of by one of its members with sufficient capital — the Fructosus identified as the *patronus* — in order to cover the expenses to complete the first phase and adapt it to the specificities of a Mithraic cavern. What was to be the *favissa* of the original temple was modified to a vaulted form.³⁹ The inscription thus refers in the same text to the involvement of Fructosus in the intervention carried out on the initial templum and the adaptation of a place for the gathering of the Mithraic community to which he belonged in the city of Ostia.

By examining the information provided by the inscriptions as well as the verb used to clarify the cause being commemorated by them, it is possible to explain the variations in the terms used to designate places of worship. We thus believe that the use of *templum-fanum* cannot be considered to be equivalent to the use of *spelaeum-crypta-antrum* in the inscriptions studied. On the contrary, it is clear that the primary word used among the initiates was *spelaeum* (or any other synonym), insofar as it served to define the idea of what the space used for worship represented and sought to evoke the characteristics of a cave when it was artificially constructed. Its replacement by *templum* (or *fanum* or *aedes*) reflects situations in which a specific intervention has been carried out on a pre-existing *spelaeum*, and what this term underscores is the full incorporation of Mithraic worship cave into the religious conceptual framework of the Mithraists that, in turn, is fully integrated into the Roman legislation governing religious practices and spaces. The acceptance of Mithraeum as a way of defining Mithraic sanctuaries today has obscured the nuance that Mithraists would have had in mind when evoking their gathering places. As a term that has played a key role in the construction of the entire modern Mithraic historiography, we find it difficult to relinquish its use as a valid and recognisable expression. Nevertheless, in this study, we have endeavoured to explore the conceptual reality that would come as close as possible to the one that existed at the time when Roman Mithraism flourished.

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³⁸ Hermansen 1982, 125.

³⁹ Becatti 1953, 24; Sonnemans 2017, 80–83.

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Initiator in spelaeo: обзор античной терминологии для обозначения митраистских культовых пространств

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Наиболее распространенным словом, принятым в митраистской историографии для обозначения мест поклонения, является *Mithraeum*. Однако исторические источники предлагают нам множество терминов, расходящихся с этим определением, которые могут отражать различные реалии и обозначать культовые помещения другого типа. В данной работе мы собрали все упоминания, встречающиеся в эпиграфике и литературных источниках, чтобы иметь полное представление обо всех этих терминах.

Благодаря данным свидетельствам мы пересмотрели прежние интерпретации, связанные с использованием различных наименований. Их разнообразие не обусловлено ни местом, ни периодом. Но мы предполагаем, что это терминологическое разнообразие связано с тем, как последователи древнего Митры относились к моменту создания культового пространства. С выбором слова *spelaeum* или *templum* можно связать первое представление о том, что должно быть “первоначальной митраистской пещерой”, если учесть значение глаголов, которые использовали посвятившие в своих надписях. Справедливость такой интерпретации позволит лучше понять ту “символическую вселенную”, в которой действовали последователи Митры, противопоставив ей общепринятый современный термин *mithraeum*.

Ключевые слова: митраизм, пещера, восточные культы, эпитафическая, митраистский храм.

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