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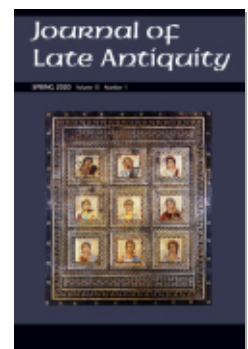
*The Cult of Mithras in Late Antiquity: Development, Decline
and Demise (ca. A.D. 270–430)* by David Walsh (review)

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Morley's article helpfully emphasizes the importance of the Arabian peninsula throughout Sasanian history, and convincingly links the timing of intensified Sasanian engagement in the region to broader geopolitical and economic trends. The importance of internal political developments among the Arabs could have been stressed more, however; the picture of Sasanian-Arab relations presented here is somewhat one-sided.

In his treatment of the dominant role played by the Sasanians in the Indian Ocean trade, Howard-Johnston makes a persuasive case for an influential "business lobby" at the Sasanian court, despite the general neglect of economic matters in the literary sources. The author argues that this group's mark can be found in many policies pursued by the Sasanian state—including Khusrō I's important break with the Turks and their Sogdian allies (rivals to Sasanian merchants) in the sixth century.

Generally speaking, this work usefully brings together a range of perspectives on Sasanian history. I could have done without Sauer's polemics against "relativism," however, which seem to be the key to some of the volume's broader shortcomings: the tendency to present Sasanian history simply in terms of technocratic notions of "success" and "failure," and the occasional bracketing-off of culture and religion from political and economic "reality." In any event, as Sauer argues in his introduction, these articles do suggest a somewhat greater capacity for long-term planning, level of military strength, and cultural influence than has been generally credited to the Sasanian Empire, and altogether constitute an important contribution to the study of Late Antiquity.

The Cult of Mithras in Late Antiquity: Development, Decline and Demise (ca. A.D. 270–430)

DAVID WALSH

Leiden: Brill, 2019.

Pp. xii + 146. ISBN: 978-90-04-38080-6

Reviewed by Eberhard W. Sauer
(University of Edinburgh)

This attractively illustrated monograph, on the Mithras cult throughout the Roman world from the late third century onward, is based on the author's doctoral thesis at the University of Kent, Canterbury, where he is now a member of Kent's Centre for Late Antique Archaeology. The introduction focuses on the cult of Mithras and changing scholarly views on religious change in Late Antiquity. In the past, it was widely accepted that temple destruction and coercive Christianisation played a significant part in the decline of polytheism in general and Mithraism in particular—a view still shared by many contemporary scholars, if alternative views are gaining ground. Walsh, sceptical of conventional wisdom from the start, seeks to re-evaluate the evidence by comparing and contrasting the fate of Mithraic monuments in different regions. Mithraism was not static and unchanging, and Chapter 1 explores the development of the cult in the late Roman world, postulating considerable changes over space and time. These range from a proven surge in coin offering to alleged ritual fragmentation of cult images. Investment in constructing and repairing mithraea progressively diminished in the course of the third to fourth centuries, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, and possible explanations for this are discussed in Chapter 3. These include a speculative decline in initiation rituals resulting in a

less committed community of worshippers. The fate of temples is the focus of Chapter 4. A vanishingly small percentage of pagan temples in the north can be proven to have been destroyed violently (82–83), the proportion of mithraea demonstrably affected being far greater. It might have been helpful to point out here that we simply cannot tell if a temple was peacefully abandoned or brutally desecrated if, as in the vast majority of non-Mithraic shrines, no stratified imagery or occupation layers survive. Damage is much easier to prove in, partially underground, mithraea than in sanctuaries surviving to foundation levels only. Walsh explores possible reasons for their fate and frequent proven destruction, concluding that “the claim that Christianity was the . . . dominant factor behind the end of the Mithras cult does not stand up to scrutiny” (94). What were the dominant factors?

Most mithraea suffering violent closure were, according to Walsh, on the northern frontiers pointing to barbarians as the most likely culprits (77, 98). Even mithraea as far from the borders as the Adriatic are attributed to frontier regions, and his own maps, not to mention iconoclasm at Vulci (115), disprove the claim that the “only mithraeum located in the interior provinces that looks to have been destroyed was found at Burdi{a}gala” (77). F. L. Schuddeboom’s persuasive work (*Babesch* 91, 2016, 225–45), that thorough image destruction and church building over some mithraea at Rome point to Christian responsibility, is dismissed in a footnote (68 note 5; cf. 84). There is no mention of the mithraeum at Syracuse with fragmented sculpture, used into the fourth century (G. Sfameni Gasparro, *I culti orientali in Sicilia*, 1973,

281–90; R. J. A. Wilson, *Sicily under the Roman Empire*, 1990, 301, 413). The recent discovery of a mithraeum on Corsica suffering a violent end (*Minerva* 28.3, 2017, 5) is a further nail in the coffin of the hypothesis that there are virtually none in the interior provinces.

Walsh attributes the decapitation of statues at Dieburg and elsewhere to barbarian invaders, claiming that this closely mirrors their treatment of members of a family (and others) at a villa at Harting who had “their heads removed and their bodies thrown down a well. The point of note is that . . . the heads were absent” (86–87, 92–93, 98). In fact, body parts and skulls were found together in two wells (e.g. M. Schnetz, *Bericht der Bayerischen Bodendenkmalpflege* 54, 2013, 83–85), invalidating the argument, one of many cases of Walsh not consulting original excavation reports. In the Dieburg mithraeum two naked statues of Mercury were more thoroughly destroyed than other images on display (e.g. E. W. Sauer, in K. Kolrud and M. Prusac, eds., *Iconoclasm from Antiquity to Modernity*, 2014, 20–21) and the targeting of naked images is one of the few criteria Walsh accepts as a possible sign for Christian responsibility (79–80), so why not here? Abandonment around 260 does not disprove it, as some temples remained accessible ruins for centuries and some demonstrably suffered post-abandonment iconoclasm, as acknowledged elsewhere.

Not just barbarians, but votaries themselves and those fighting in civil wars are blamed for intentional fragmentation of Mithraic art. Walsh envisages Mithras votaries decapitating their own images to continue to worship severed heads, as the army of usurper Magnus Maximus

approaches the Septeuil mithraeum, an “unsympathetic Roman soldier” subsequently disfiguring the face of the rock-borne Mithras that had somehow escaped the earlier Mithraic trophy hunting (89–90, 93, 98–99, cf. 33, 38). Keen on anthropological parallels elsewhere, none is provided for cult members decapitating their own statuary. Walsh believes that Tetrarchic anti-Manichaean laws indicate that Mithras was seen as “an enemy (Persian) deity,” leading to temple desecration (88, 92, 97), without explaining why in the famous Carnuntum inscription the imperial initiators of this legislation and their successors describe this supposedly “enemy” deity as “Protector of their *Imperium*” (1, 26). There is no shortage in creativity in attributing damage to anybody other than religious zealots. In an endeavor to argue that Christians are no likely suspects for image destruction in the north, Walsh goes as far as to claim that there is no strong evidence for Christian presence on the late antique Rhine and Danube frontiers (1, 83–85) despite copious evidence to the contrary.

Walsh does not accept particularly laborious forms of destruction, such as smashing cult images into hundreds of fragments, as possible indication for religiously motivated acts, despite the fact that his own study shows that such events occur almost exclusively from the late fourth century onwards, the very time when written sources attest a surge in Christian iconoclasm. Smashing of images datable to the third century and plausibly attributed to Germanic invaders, affecting for example some Jupiter Giant columns, does not show the same “overkill” mentality. Walsh accepts only religious symbols, such as chi-rho monograms, at the scene of iconoclastic attacks and the targeting of naked images

as possible evidence for religiously motivated iconoclasm (12, 77–85). Judged by these criteria, the Taliban must be innocent of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

Walsh has overlooked several relevant recent discoveries and does not mention the Angers mithraeum in Gaul with 765 coins up to 388/402, traces of fire and image destruction (J. Brodeur and M. Mortreau, *Archéopages* 36, 2013, 10–19; M. Molin et al., *Gallia* 72.2, 2015, 417–33), a mithraeum at Mainz with coins to AD 347/48 (I. Huld-Zetsche, *Der Mithraskult in Mainz und das Mithräum am Ballplatz*, 2008), the mithraeum of Rapperswil-Jona on the shores of Lake Zürich with a fragmented cult image and around 500 coins, perishing in a conflagration towards the end of the fourth century (R. Ackermann et al., *Jahrbuch Archäologie Schweiz* 99, 2016, 206–7; 100, 2017, 241–42), the mithraea of Els Munts on the Iberian Peninsula, in use into the later fourth century and Savaria in Pannonia, reportedly burned down in the fourth century (I. Klenner, in P. Jung and N. Schücker, eds., *Utere felix vivas*, 2012, 116–17, 120) and a mithraeum at Camporosso in southern Noricum, with late fourth-century coins, glass and fragmented Mithraic imagery (P. Casari, in L. Zerbini, ed., *Culti e religiosità nelle province danubiane*, 2015, 209–25). Such gaps diminish the value of the otherwise interesting distribution maps (69–73). These pay also insufficient attention to chronology; the differentiation between temples supposedly still in use in the fifth century and those abandoned in the late fourth (72–73) is a result of Walsh basing his chronology sometimes on the earliest and sometimes on the latest possible date of mintage of the latest coins found inside. The claim that Mithraism

declined earlier in Gaul than in the Upper Danubian provinces (43, 94–95) is also erroneous.

There are positive aspects, too. Walsh offers a useful compilation of data for late construction and repair of mithraea as well as valid, if hardly novel, observations on regional variations in the cult and large-scale coin deposition being a late antique innovation. He argues plausibly that population decline will have affected Mithraic communities in the north. Yet, numerous errors, omissions and heavily biased analysis mean that the book should be used with great caution.

Walsh wrote his work as Daesh reduced to rubble unique monuments and works of religious art at Palmyra, the Mosul museum and many other sites in the “Islamic State,” within a fraction of the time Christianity dominated the territories under investigation. Many late antique and early medieval Christian writers endorsed the destruction of pagan images and none, to my knowledge, openly opposed it, except where it was opportune to reuse monuments. Walsh’s attempt to downplay the phenomenon of religious extremism is not just unconvincing, but dangerous.

The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers

JACK TANNOUS

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
Pp. xiv + 672. ISBN 978-0-691-17909-4

Reviewed by Michael Morony
(University of California, Los Angeles)

Given that the formation of confessional religious traditions with mass memberships is taken to be definitive for Late Antiquity, Tannous makes two important points. One is that the vast majority

of ordinary, everyday, non-elite believers were illiterate, agrarian, theologically unsophisticated, and poorly catechized. The second is that instead of a simple dichotomy between the learned and the unlearned there was a layering of knowledge among ordinary believers, both Christian and Muslim. The focus in this book is on simple, non-elite believers, confessional belonging and boundaries, and religious change mainly in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt from Late Antiquity into the Islamic period, how and when Christians became the majority population in the countryside, and the mechanics and pace of de-Christianization/Islamization after the Muslim conquest, when Christians remained the demographic majority until the eleventh century CE. It remains to be seen if the concept of simple believers would work for Christian Armenians or Ethiopians or for Jews or Zoroastrians.

Because of the urban and/or elite biases of the written sources Tannous resorts to indirect evidence, what he calls an “oblique approach,” such as anecdotal information, references to uncanonical practices, the fact that there were not enough priests to go around, especially in villages, and the use of as many types of sources as possible for corroboration. He makes very illuminating and creative use of Jacob of Edessa’s (d. 708) canonical *responsa* and the unpublished Syriac and Karshuni manuscripts of the *Life of Theodota of Amid*. The questions asked of Jacob give a sense of what was happening among ordinary Christians, and Tannous argues that they reflect actual behavior.

Confessional multiplicity resulting from the permanent fracturing of eastern Christianity into rival Churches was a major reality at the end of Late Antiquity after the Council of Chalcedon in 451