

Proposal of a Mithraic Ritual based on Archaeological Remains

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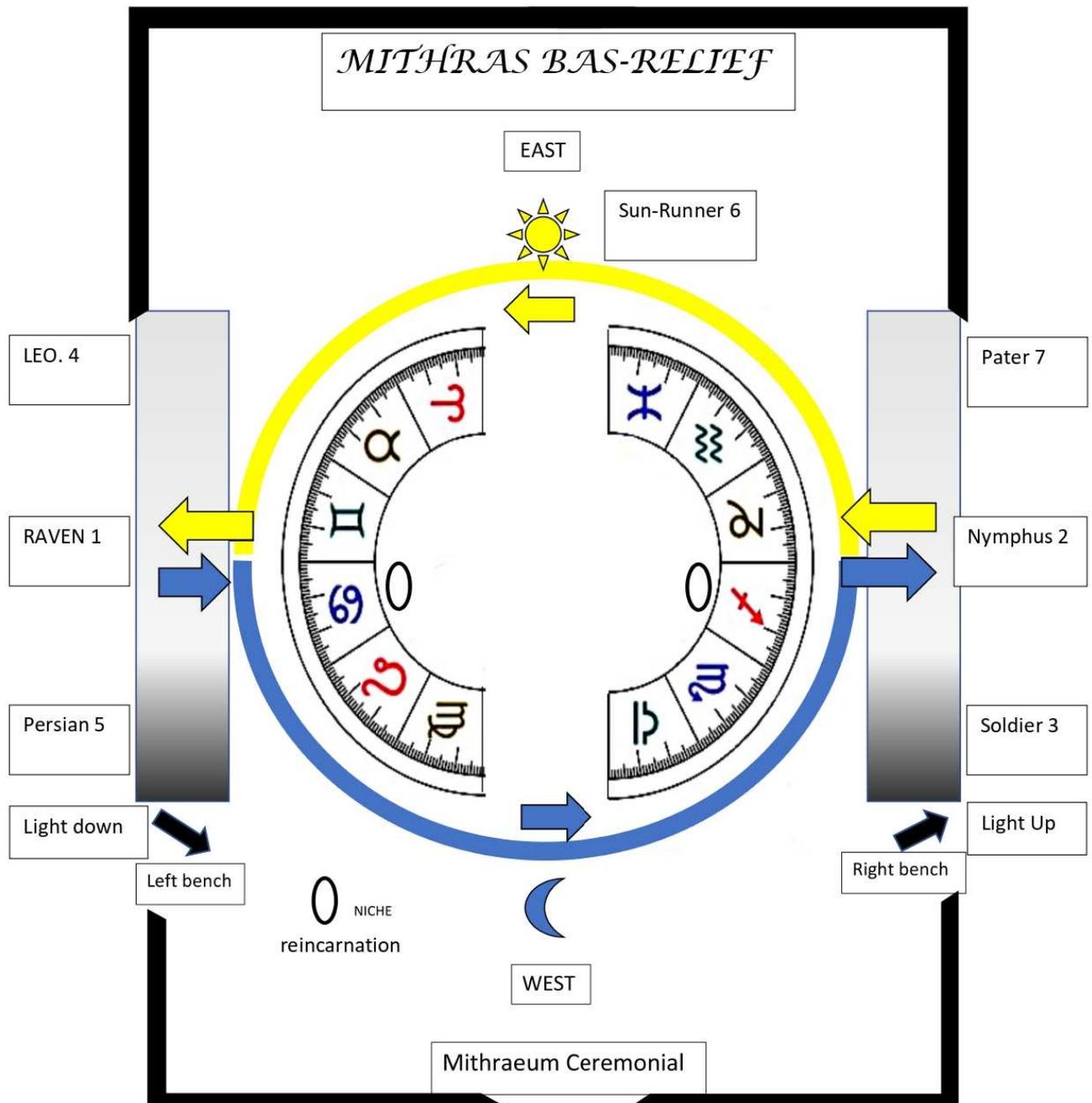


Fig. 1 : Representation of the functioning of a mithraeum based on recent and classical discoveries. Although all writings from this religion were destroyed after the Council of Nicaea by the Catholic bishops, it is possible to group together various sources to organize the symbolic functioning of a mithraeum.

The organization of a Mithraeum reflects the liturgy of this religion and helps us understand its functioning. A remarkable discovery was recently made in the

Mithraeum of Santa Maria Capua Vetere in Rome. Infrared photography revealed the presence of two deities in the lower part. It was evident that the Moon condemned impure souls to return to Earth (metempsychosis), while the Sun became the ultimate point of resurrection for pure souls who went to join the stars. This ebb and flow is the opposite of what Christianity proposes. The Moon saves souls (tympanum of the Basilica of Autun) while the Sun condemns sinners.

In the liturgy of Mithras, there is therefore a column of descent (left) and a column of ascent (right). The Zodiac is the basis of this religion. It is divided into a lunar portion from the summer solstice to the winter solstice. This path allows souls to be rehydrated in preparation for their return to Earth. Arriving there a little before the winter solstice, they are forcibly reincarnated into living beings, either almost pure or into very impure bodies.

Just after the Winter Solstice, souls declared pure by the judgment of the Sun enter the Zodiac for six months. They pass through the spring equinox, where Mithras can issue a final judgment. They lighten, dry up, and emerge completely purified at the Summer Solstice. There, they are taken in charge and migrate to the firmament, among the stars, for eternal life. The entire theology of Mithras is based on the Zodiac cycle of twelve months.

There are seven grades among the mystics. Three sit on the left bench, three on the right bench, and one is in the East and follows the path of the Sun. Each member of the lodge carries a specific charge. The first grade, the lowest, is called a raven. He sits in the middle of the left bench and therefore attends the judgment of the Moon which condemns the impure souls to return to Earth, and the exit of the pure souls and their migration. The second rank is that of the Nymph who attends the winter solstice, the exit of the impure souls and their dispersion, and the entry of the pure souls into the course of the Zodiac. The third rank is that of the soldier who forces the impure souls to enter the body designated for them. The fourth degree is that of the Lion. He is at the head of the left-hand tray and accompanies the pure souls to the firmament. The fifth degree is that of the Persians, who are at the entrance of the left column. They are seated above the effigy of the Moon and therefore order the lunar judgment, and transmit it to the crows. The sixth grade is occupied by the Sun-Runner, and

occupies the position of venerable in the pulpit. He directs the services, rituals and organizes the debates. Finally, the Pater, is the master of the lodge and is seated at the head of the right-hand column. He is the seventh member and the Master of the lodge. He executes the judgment of the Sun by designating the pure souls chosen to become eternal (resurrection). Thus, with each adept at his post, the ritual functions like a clock. Each sign of the Zodiac is represented, each adept represents two signs, and occupies a particular function in the circulation of souls. The four capital points, the two solstices and the two equinoxes had particular importance. Each member participated symbolically in transmitting the theology of this religion based on Stoicism.

Three mithraeums have shed essential light on reconstructing the theology of this religion:

- The Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres of Ostia has left an exceptional wealth thanks to the marking of each place and their relationship to the signs of the Zodiac. It is this artefact that revealed the number of grades of this religion, and their symbolic position.
- The Mithraeum of Santa Maria Capua Vetere recently yielded two effigies of gods, at the bottom of the fresco. On the right, the goddess Terra, symbol of the generous Earth. She is perfectly aligned with the axis of the Sun, and therefore indicates a direction from bottom to top. This is the path of pure souls. In the lower left corner, the effigy of the god Oceanus, of the depths of the ocean, was discovered. It is perfectly aligned with the axis of the Moon and indicates the direction of this axis: from top to bottom. This is the path of souls condemned by the Moon. They return to the depths of the Earth to be reincarnated.
- The third important mithraeum is that of the island of Ponza, not far away from the coast of Ostia. This remarkable sanctuary has preserved a ceiling decorated with a complete Zodiac as well as signs of the constellations (the Great Bear, etc.). It allowed us to verify the arrangement of the Zodiac of the seven spheres of Ostia. The liturgy of Mithras was therefore based on the course of the Zodiac.

It is interesting to note that Christian religion preserves a procession with 12 stations in the Orthodox rite (14 in the Catholic ritual). This is the Passion of

Christ, which allows for a circumambulation. In the church, the priest marks 12 stations corresponding to the 12 stages of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is precisely reminiscent of the ritual of Mithras. It is possible that a circumambulation also existed in the Mithraeums, with a stop at each zodiacal sign.

It should also be noted that the Zodiac of Mithras is divided into two parts: a dark part, under the influence of the Moon, is the path traveled by condemned souls from the summer solstice to the winter solstice. This part is located on the west side of the temple. The other part is luminous and follows the journey of the saved souls. From the winter solstice they dry up and purify themselves until the summer solstice. Perfectly lightened, they rise again towards the firmament.

The fresco of **Santa Maria Capua Vetere** allowed to show the direction of the circulation of souls under the control of the Moon and the Sun. The line of the Moon (blue) descends and the line of the Sun (yellow) ascends. Bees are the classic symbol of souls in Roman mythology.

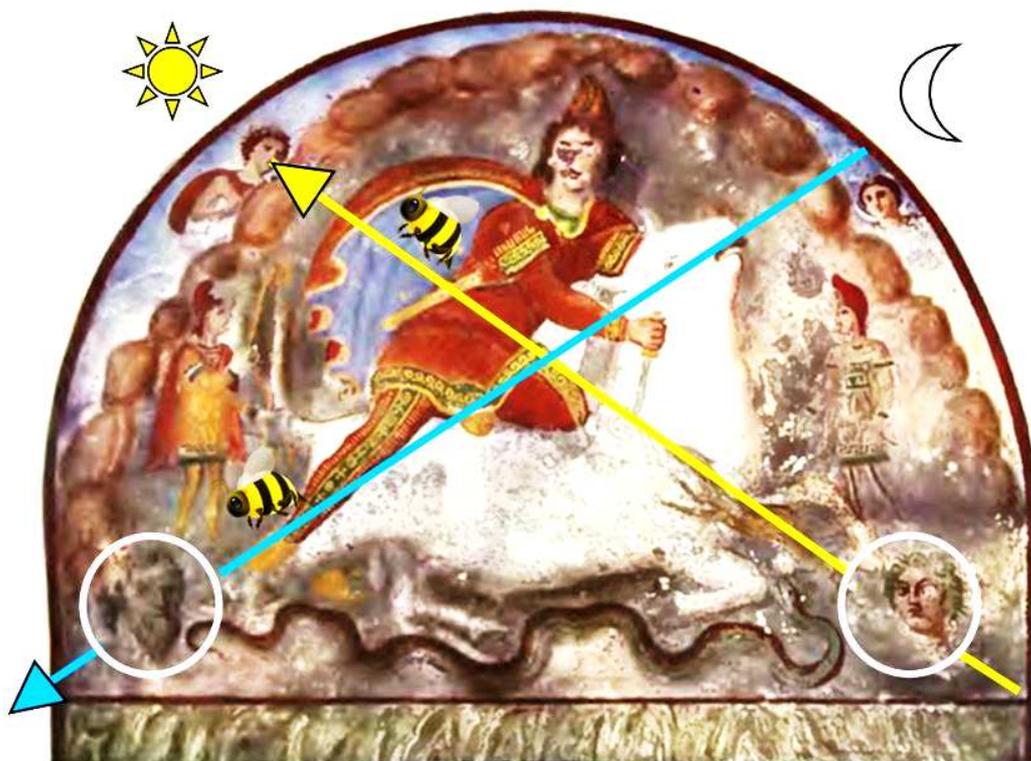


Fig. 2. Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Mithraeum. Digital treatment in order to reveal invisible details. (Pompeii-pictures website). In the sky, top left, is Sol with red hair, a red cloak and a golden sceptre. The yellow line includes the goddess Terra at the bottom. The line goes up from Terra to Sol. In the sky, at the top right, stays Luna/Diana with long hair and a crescent moon. The blue line includes the god Oceanus (deep inside the ocean). The blue line goes down from the top to the ocean god, to say the hidden world. The bee goes deep inside the underworld, while the other one climbs up to the heaven.

The **Barberini Mithraeum** was discovered by chance in 1936 in a basement of the *Palazzina Savorgnan di Brazzà*, in the garden behind *Palazzo Barberini*, and is one of the best-preserved places dedicated to the god Mithras in Rome. Above the main scene an arch in which the twelve signs of the zodiac have been represented: Aries-Taurus-Gemini-Cancer-Leo-Virgo-Libra-Scorpio-Centaurus-Capricornus-Aquarius-Pisces. In the centre, on a globe a standing, naked figure, entwined by a serpent, which lays its head on the god's lion's head (Aion). Above the Zodiac, a second arch with seven altars alternating with trees. A light ray from Sol passes exactly through the torch of Cautes and the sign of Capricorn – winter solstice and, more importantly, “gates of the immortals” – before reaching Mithras. Since Sol is almost invariably to the left of Mithras, to achieve this effect the artist had to set up the zodiac counterclockwise, contrary to almost all the other known Mithraic arc reliefs, including the arch zodiac around the cult niche in the same Mithraeum. This confirms that the arrangement was deliberate. So it seems that the axis Cancer-Capricorn was in most cases intentionally aligned with Mithras. The fact that Cancer was for the Mithraists the sign of the soul entrance at birth as narrated by Porphyry appears therefore confirmed in these reliefs¹.

In Porphyry's “Cave of the Nymphs”, is it written: Theologians therefore assert, that these two gates are Cancer and Capricorn; but Plato calls them entrances. And of these, theologians say, that Cancer is the gate through which souls descend; but Capricorn that through which they ascend. Cancer is indeed northern, and adapted to descent; but Capricorn is southern, and adapted to ascent. The northern parts, likewise, pertain to souls descending into

¹ Amendola, L. (2018). Mithras and the Zodiac, *Journal of Ancient History and Archeology*, 5,1, p.24-34

generation... Taurus Mithras is the author of the world [Capricorn] and the master of generation [Cancer]. He is situated on the circle of the equinox”². But Plato in the Gorgias by tubs intends to signify souls, some of which are malefic, but others beneficent; and some which are rational, but others irrational³.

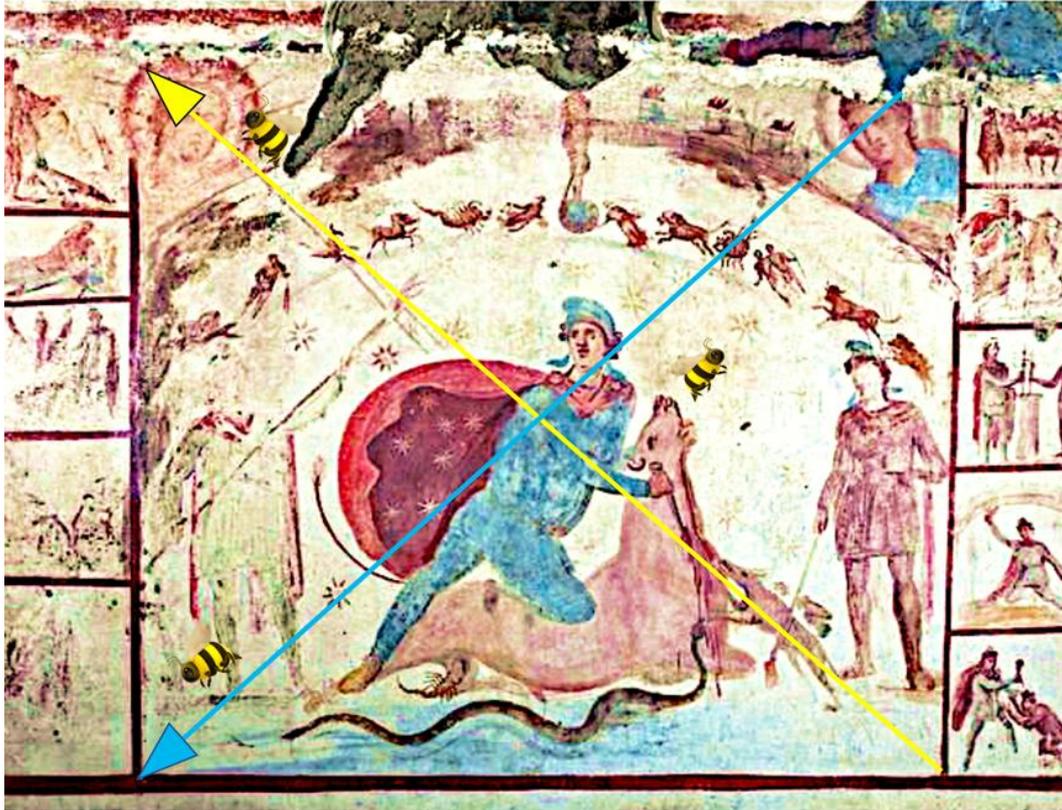


Fig. 3: Barberini fresco: Luca Amendola (Amendola., 2018) mentions the line through Capricorn and the flame of Cautes to Mithras, which corresponds with the yellow line. It also passes through the dog. This line is that of the ascending days, it is a rising line (“gates of the immortals” which passes through the Capricorn to Sol invictus god). The blue line passes through the moon, Cancer, above the bull and represents the descending days. We find here on the right a dark triangle with Cautopatès which is that of the reincarnation, and a clear triangle on the left, with Cautès which indicates the line of the resurrection.

² Ibid.

³ Porphyry “On the cave of the Nymphs”, Thirteenth Book of the Odyssey

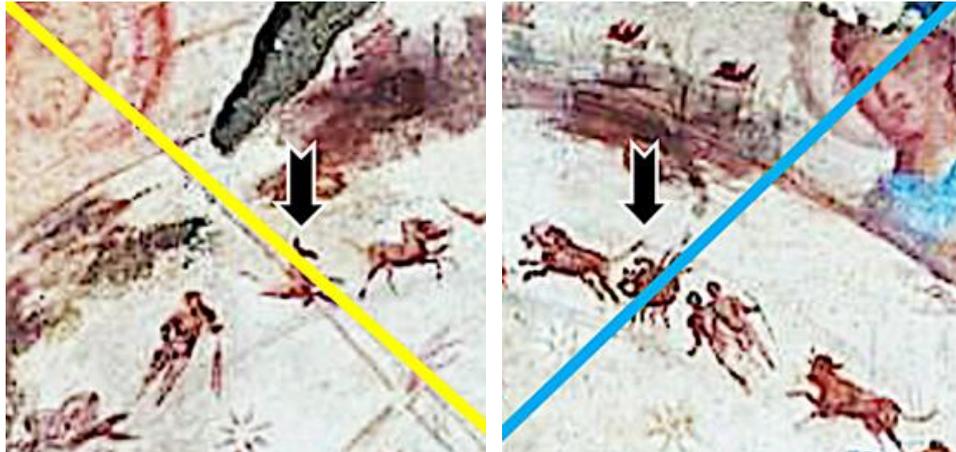


Fig. 4: *Two lines go from the sun, through the Capricorn to Mithras cap (red); the ascending yellow line passes exactly through the Capricorn gate (precisely along the existing line); the descending Moon line passes exactly through the Cancer gate. Those two Platonic lines seem to fit perfectly to the design of this fresco.*

This learned statement is confirmed by the two Platonic diagonals we have found. The blue axis (of the moon), is thus called “summer solstice” (descending days), and represents genesis, re-creation. It can therefore represent reincarnation, and maintenance on Earth. The alignment with Cancer is favourable to descent. This solstice is in the North, therefore on the side of Cautopates. The yellow axis is called “winter solstice” (ascending days) and represents the empire of the sun, the apogenesis (anabasis, see further). This solstice is in the south, and passes through the alignment with Capricorn, the warmer days and the rising torch of Cautes. This axis represents the ascent of souls to heaven, i.e. resurrection. This makes sense to this “gate of the immortals”, linked to Capricorn (see the black arrow). This is the way to resurrection. Note that the arrangement of the Zodiac has been done upside down to allow the alignment of the resurrection line (yellow) with Capricorn, and the blue line (reincarnation) with Cancer. This proves that the signs of the zodiac must serve the Platonic message and not the other way around. This inversion was already quoted by Porphyry in his “cave of the Nymphs”.

It is still debated whether the doctrine of transmigration has an Orphic or Pythagorean origin. The notion of the transmigration of the soul would therefore have appeared in Pythagorean circles as a logical consequence of their belief in the immortality of the soul. Such an idea was part of the Pythagoreans' overall vision of the cosmos, in which the cosmos as a whole was seen as a universal

community governed by order and harmony. In the beginning, metempsychosis would not have been considered a punishment, nor would there have been the slightest moral derivation linking the purity of the soul to its salvation. It is the soul alone that must face up to the moral consequences of its own conduct, for this is a responsibility that falls to it alone, throughout each of its lives. The Papyrus of Derveni, an Orphic text from the fourth century BC., speaks of “terrible trials in Hades”. Plato, in turn, echoes the punishments with which the Orphic imagination threatened the uninitiated: that of freezing in the mud and that of carrying water through a sieve with a hole in it to a pierced jar.

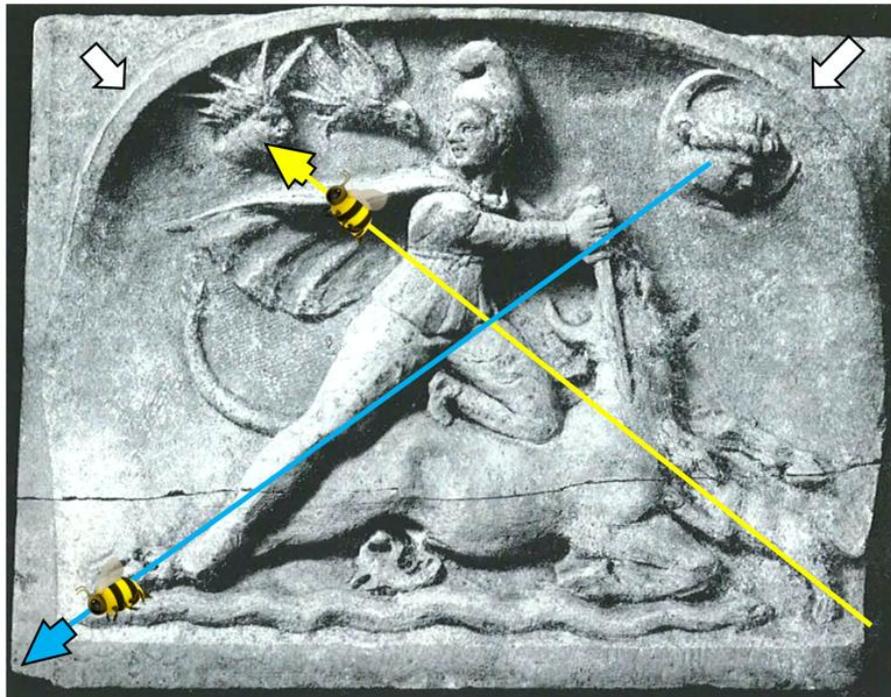


Fig. 5 : Mithras'slab from Tiny Mithraeum at Via S.Giovanni Lanza, Esquiline Hill, Rome. In 1883, during works to clean up the Esquiline Hill district, at Via S. Giovanni Lanza, behind the church of St. Martino ai Monti, the remains of some houses from late antiquity were discovered. In the fourth century it was turned into a tiny Mithraeum.

This slab particularly shows the deep sadness of the moon, i.e. the distress facing the return of the soul to earth and the difficult reincarnation in another body. It should be noted that the sun and the moon are under the celestial vault, in other words, inside the human world. This completes the demonstration of their psychological character; this could show a convergence with Christianity.

Louis Gasquet wrote⁴ (Gasquet, 1899) the Mithraic dogma of the catabasis and anabasis of souls can be explained by combining the information we have from Celsus, Porphyry and Macrobius. The astronomical symbols in the cave represented the vault of heaven and the twofold celestial revolution, that of the fixed stars and that of the planets; the former, abodes of light and splendour; the latter, reserved for the evolution of souls. At the two extremities of the sky are the two Tropics, that of Cancer and that of Capricorn. These are the two gates, one of the gods, the other of men, so called because from one descend souls enamoured of mortal bodies, and through the other they ascend to their place of origin. Cancer is assigned to the Moon, the source of generation and preserver of life for all ancient theologians; Capricorn to Saturn, the most distant and remote of the planets. From Cancer to Capricorn, and from Capricorn to Cancer, the twelve signs or constellations are distributed and staggered. As for Mithras, he sits between the two equinoxes.

⁴ Gasquet, A. (1899). Le culte et les mystères de Mithra, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, tome 152, p. 542-543