

Normative Mithraism at the London Mithraeum

The London Mithraeum might be one of the world's best archaeological sites for interpreting Roman culture in a multi-media environment. In 1954, the London Mithraeum was discovered within the Walbrook valley in the center of *Londinium* and was an archaeological sensation (Shepherd 1998). By 2010 the Mithraeum had been a neglected treasure, yet when Bloomberg News bought the original site, they worked to reinstall the Mithraeum to its approximate location and level underneath their headquarters (MOLA 2018). A collaboration between Bloomberg News and the Museum of London restored the Mithraeum so visitors can descend underground and “experience” the feeling of participating in an ancient ritual via smoke and sound.

The textual interpretation of what is said during the ‘experience’ is the focus of this paper. The voices are from *dipinte* (paintings) within the Roman Santa Prisca *mithraeum* depicting their respective membership grade within the cult (Vermaseren 1956). The inscriptions associated with the *dipinte* may reflect a ritual speech spoken by initiates. usage of the Santa Prisca *dipinte* in the imagined ritual vocalizations contributes to a hegemony of Italo-centric interpretations within Mithraic scholarship in which Philippa Adrych calls “normative Mithraism” (Adrych 2020). This paper argues that the London Mithraeum’s audio-visual “ritual greetings” curate a “normative Mithraism” at the cost of a multisensory experience for visitors. This experience thus complicates and distorts viewer interpretations of the site with pan-Mithraic ideas.

Adrych argues that Mithraic scholarship has an Italo-centric bent that colors any reading of archaeological and literary finds (Adrych 2020). With Rome and Ostia Antica having thirty-two identified *mithraea* between them, reconstructed evidence across these sites have contributed

to an assumption of ritual, cult, belief, worship, decoration, symbolism, social and spatial organization applying to *mithraea* outside of Italy. The Santa Prisca *dipinte* are unique for providing confirmed textual and pictorial evidence for the grades of Mithraism, a cult with a limited and controversial corpus (Beck 2000).

The excavation of the London Mithraeum did not uncover any pictorial nor textual evidence of the site (Shepherd 1998). As the Santa Prisca *dipinte* do not have a canonical interpretation, they were a blueprint for an imagined script created for the London Mithraeum. The Mithraeum is riding the wave of immersive digital technology communicating the importance of cultural heritage. While the dramatic atmosphere of the *mithraeum* captures your attention, the Mithraeum is perpetuating a norm that has high public impact but does not critically engage with the material it uses from other parts of the Empire.

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