Porphyry and Mithraism: *De antro nympharum* and the Controversy against the Christians

Pablo Maurette
University Of London, Royal Holloway College

As the "earliest surviving interpretive critical essay in the European tradition,"[1] as well as the only extant text from pagan antiquity that provides a complete example of an allegorical exegesis, *De antro nympharum* deserves much more attention than it has received so far. Furthermore, even the scholars who have paid attention to the opuscule did not consider it an original work of hermeneutics in itself, but insisted on stressing either its historical importance or its sources.[2] The articles dedicated exclusively to it are extremely scarce and tend to focus on very precise details. The only access to thorough studies is by way of some of its modern editions, the Italian one being the most complete and satisfactory.[3] It is therefore the intent of this essay to propose a new approach to Porphyry's *De antro nympharum*, another perspective from which to read it and understand it, without neglecting its originality and seeking to stress both its historical and its philosophical relevance.

The key concept to understand such an obscure and erudite work as *De antro nympharum* is, without a doubt, syncretism. Indeed, within the confines of this particular text it is crucial to keep in mind that its nature is essentially syncretic, and that syncretism is in Porphyry's case, as we shall see further on, a means to an end. *De antro nympharum* is an interpretation of ten verses of book thirteen of the *Odyssey* (XIII, 102–12) in which the poet

1. Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1986) 120.

2. Buffière is convinced that Porphyry does nothing but *vulgariser* ideas of Numenius and Cronius (see F. Buffière, *Les Mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque* [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1956] 418), Lamberton does not pay much attention to it in his book dedicated to Neoplatonic allegorical interpretation of Homer, and Jean Pépin barely mentions it in his well-known book on allegory, *Mythe et Allégorie: Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes* (Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1958).

3. Porfirio, *L'antro delle ninfe*, a cura di Laura Simonini (Milan: Adelphi Edizioni, 1986).

Dionysius, Vol. XXIII, Dec. 2005, 63–82.

describes the cave in Ithaca next to which Odysseus was left by the Phaeacians. In order to explain the meaning of what he clearly perceives as deliberate symbols—such as the cave itself, the nymphs that dwell in it, the tunics they weave, the looms in which they work, the bees that produce honey, the amphorae, the olive tree, etc.—Porphyry appeals to the whole of the Hellenic intellectual tradition. Thus, he jumps from Numenius and Cronius to Heraclitus and Pythagoras, from Artemidorus to Empedocles, from Eubulus to Sophocles, and from Plato to Orpheus. In doing so, Porphyry's reductive syncreticism is clearly displayed. For him, Homer was not saying anything different than what all these thinkers, poets, geographers and mythical figures said; they all belonged to one consistent spiritual tradition which throughout more than a thousand years and in the same language gave answers, in many different ways, to the same questions.

There is however one particular element in Porphyry's *De antro nympharum* that immediately draws our attention and strikes us as odd. This element, to which Porphyry appeals *ad auctoritatem*, in the same way as he does to Plato or Homer himself, is not originally Greek and this is the first reason why it strikes us as strange. This element is Mithraism. Even though we know, thanks primarily to the work of Turcan,[4] that the process of Platonizing of the mystery cult of Mithras had been going on for a while before Porphyry's times, it is only in *De antro nympharum* that we first appreciate fully how Mithraism could be interpreted in Platonic terms. Nevertheless it is not the fact that he appeals to Mithraic elements that surprises us the most, but the fact that the name of Mithras appears in the text as many times as that of Plato! Thus, Porphyry's insistence hints at something that necessitates a satisfactory explanation.

Why does Porphyry refer to a non-Hellenic element such as Mithraism in a work, which has as one of its most obvious goals to prove the unity and consistency of the Hellenic intellectual tradition? Moreover, why does he refer to it so often? Does he implicitly acknowledge that it is a non-Hellenic element, or is he trying to make it pass as a Hellenic one? How could he be so learned in the minutiae of the Mithraic liturgy, when it was a mystery cult? All these questions come to mind when one first realizes the astonishing fact that Mithraism is one of the protagonists of Porphyry's *De antro nympharum*. However, it is not my goal here to give a satisfactory answer to all of them. The first two are the ones which will operate as Ariadne's thread and lead us through the text, helping us focus on the passages where there are explicit and implicit references to Mithraism. After doing this we shall

4. Robert Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus: Recherches sur l'hellenisation philosophique de Mithra* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975).

direct our attention towards the figure of Porphyry himself, his life and works, with a special emphasis on his polemic side. Porphyry was notorious among Christians of his own and later times, for being one of their most dangerous intellectual enemies. This could be relevant when trying to answer the question why there is so much interest on Mithraism in the work that concerns us. Finally, a word on Mithraism, its entry into the religious sphere of the Roman Empire, its peak of popularity in the third century AD and its surprising similarities with Christianity. As we shall see, *De antro nympharum* is far from being a harmless exercise in allegorical interpretation that simply repeats what others have already said.

References To Mithraism In *De Antro Nympharum*

The first mention of the name Mithras in the text comes relatively soon. In chapter 6 Porphyry is explaining the importance of the cave as a sacred place and he gives the example of the Persians who celebrate their rituals in caverns (*spelaia*), emulating the entrance and exit of the souls into the bodies. According to Eubulus,[5] says Porphyry, the first one to do so was Zoroaster, who consecrated a cavern in the Persian mountains "to the glory of Mithras, maker and father of all things; the cavern being an image of the universe that Mithras modeled."[6] We have in this passage two clear samples of Porphyry's syncretic method. On the one hand, there is the mention of Zoroaster as the founder of the cult of Mithras. Zoroaster was well known to the Greeks since the time of Plato, or even before,[7] but no other Greek author had so far associated Zoroaster with Mithras in such an explicit manner. The second sample of Porphyry's syncretism is the formula used to characterize Mithras: "maker and father of all things (*tou panton poietou kai patros Mithrou*)" that clearly refers—as Turcan pointed out—[8]to the Platonic characterization of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*: "the maker and father of this universe (*ton men oun poieten kai patera toude tou pantou*)" (*Timaeus* 28c). Thus it is evident that Porphyry is aligning together Zoroaster, Mithras and Plato. Mithras, according to Porphyry, might as well be the Demiurge of whom Timaeus speaks.

5. Eubulus is also mentioned by Porphyry (*De Abstinentia* IV, 16, ed. Bouffartigue-Patillon) as the author of a lost work on Mithras, *Historia peri tou Mithra en pollois biblois*. He may be, along with Pallas (*De Abstinentia* II, 56), one of Porphyry's main sources for his knowledge of Mithraism.

6. All translations of passages from *De antro nympharum* are my own.

7. Plato refers to Zoroaster as an "illustrious magus" (see *Alcibiades I* 121e–22 a). Plutarch also mentions him and expresses his enthusiasm for Zoroastrian dualism (see *De Iside et Osiride* 369 e–f).

8. See Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus* 26.

The passage ends with what could be considered as an accurate description of an actual Mithraeum. These caves, says Porphyry, consecrated to Mithras father and maker of all things, "had in their insides symbols of the cosmic elements and of the regions of the sky, displayed symmetrically." The archaeological evidence sufficiently proves that the Zodiac signs were depicted in many Mithraea[9] and later on in the text Porphyry will make a long digression regarding the Zodiac and its symbolism (22–29), i.e., the planetary trip made by the soul on its way to the body and on its way back from it.

In chapter 20 we find another reference to the celebration of the Mithraic liturgy. Porphyry is explaining how the most primitive peoples, before they invented temples and shrines, worshipped their gods in caves. He then adds: "Everywhere where Mithras was known, the god was celebrated in a cave." The fact that *De antro nympharum* deals exclusively with a cave has lead some scholars, such as Leroy Campbell, to allege that Porphyry's cave of the nymphs is the description of an actual Mithraeum.[10] Of course this could be an exaggeration, but it is definitely not far-fetched. It is true that Plato's allegory of the cave is also mentioned by Porphyry, and so is a quotation from Empedocles (8),[11] but the first reference when explaining the significance of the cave is that to the Mithraic cave (6). Homer's cave, just like a Mithraeum, is a symbol of the cosmos.

Why are caves symbols of the cosmos? Homer "hints at it" (*ainittetai*) when he says that the cave of the nymphs is both "pleasant and shadowy" (*eperaton eeroeides*, *Od.* XIII 103). Porphyry's allegorical exegesis of this contradiction—what is shadowy cannot be pleasant since it is scary—is clearly conceived in Platonic, or Neoplatonic, terms.[12] The cosmos is a convergence of matter, which is instable and chaotic, and form, which delimits it and sets it in order. The cave symbolizes both matter and form, and thus the whole of the cosmos. It is shadowy or dark in the inside and in this way it symbolizes the obscurity of matter, its lack of the enlightening form. The streams of water running through it also symbolize the aquatic and fluid nature of matter (5). However, it is also pleasant and beautiful if we look at it from outside, thanks to the order conveyed by the forms (6).

9. See M.J. Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963) chapter 15 and M.J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960) figs. 26, 218, 296, 340.

10. See Leroy A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968) 55.

11. "For in Empedocles the powers that guide souls say: We have arrived here in this covered cave" (*De antro nympharum* 8).

12. This would sustain the hypothesis that the *De antro nympharum* was written after Porphyry had met Plotinus. We shall talk more about its chronology later on.

To the Mithraists the cave was a sacred place since they believed that Mithras had been born from a rock.[13] It also represented the cosmos, and the Zodiac signs found in the Mithraea show this. So, could it be possible that one of the reasons that drove Porphyry to comment on this Homeric passage was that it also suited perfectly well his intentions of including Mithraism into the Hellenic Tradition? Again, this is extremely difficult to ascertain but we should nevertheless hang on to the idea, since it will be the sum of many similar suggestions that will lead our way into understanding Porphyry's interest in Mithraism.

The next reference to Mithraism is a much more erudite one. Porphyry is talking about the significance of the honey, which bees produce in the cave of the nymphs, and he gives the example of "those initiated in the grade of the Lion" (15) who purify themselves with honey instead of water, since the Lion represents fire and water kills fire. "The Persian" is also offered honey, since "honey preserves the fruits," adds Porphyry cryptically (16). These two obscure examples are references to the Mithraic mysteries, whose participants were divided into seven grades: *corvus, nymphus, miles, leo, perses, heliodromus, pater.*[14] The Lions were the first ones to become *metekhontes*, or participants in the actual ceremony.[15] As Porphyry says, also the Persian was offered honey. Vermaseren explains this obscure reference: "The ancient Persians believed that honey came from the moon…, the moon makes fruits grow and the Persian symbolizes the moon."[16] These two references evidence how well Porphyry knew the Mithraic liturgy.

In this same line of argument we get to chapter 17 where we find another reference to the Mithraic mysteries. Given that water assists in the process of generation, says Porphyry—just like honey, symbol of the sweet temptation that leads to reproduction—the bees in the cave produce their honey in amphorae and bowls, which symbolize natural water springs: "Just as in the cult of Mithras the bowl is placed instead of the spring."[17] We cannot

13. Clauss adds that both the rock from which Mithras was born and the cave in which he was celebrated symbolized the cosmos (see M. Clauss, *Mithras, Kult und Mysterien* [Munich: Beck, 1990] 74).

14. See Jerome, *Epistula* 107, 2.

15. See F. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (New York: Dover Books, 1956) 157. In an inscription found in Steklen, Bulgaria, the Mithraic Lion is called *melichrisus*, "the honey-anointed" (see Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God* 146).

16. See Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God* 130. In the Mithreum of Felicissimus, in Ostia, the dagger carried by the Persian is associated with the face of the moon that produces fruits and honey (see Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus* 71).

17. Turcan understands this passage in the following manner: In the Mithraea that were distant from natural springs, as many in Rome must have been, there were bowls that contained natural spring water for purification purposes (*Mithras Platonicus* 68).

say if he had read all these details in Eubulus since his works are lost, but considering that in the third century Mithraism had its peak of popularity, and that Porphyry lived in Rome where there was a proved abundance of Mithraea,[18] it is not preposterous to venture the hypothesis that he had actually been inside a Mithraeum.

Chapter 24 contains what probably is the most obscure reference to Mithras and his cult. Porphyry is here explaining why Homer assigned the two doors of the cave to the North and the South. The souls come in and out of bodies through those two directions. On the other hand,

> That is why they assigned the seat at the equinoxes to Mithras, as it is suitable to him; for he holds the dagger of Ares, zodiacal sign of Aries, and rides the bull, and Aphrodite is the bull. Being Mithras the demiurge and lord of generation he was assigned to the equinoxial circle, having the northern regions to his right and the southern [regions] to his left. To the south they placed Cautes given that he is warm, and to the north Cautopates since the northern wind is cold.

There are many elements that come together in this short passage, as well as many enigmas. Mithras has his seat at the equinoxes (*isemerias*), says Porphyry, but then he only mentions the spring equinox (21 March). Given that he then mentions Aphrodite, zodiacal house of Libra; it is most likely that Beck's emendation of the text does hold water. According to Beck,[19] Porphyry should have mentioned Libra and its association with Aphrodite since the autumn equinox is in Libra (21 September). In the ancient Persian calendar the beginning of the year was marked by the spring equinox that together with the autumn equinox and the two solstices were the most sacred dates for the Mithraists.[20] Also the spring equinox, marking the beginning of the year, symbolized the beginning of the world. It was a common belief among the ancient Persians that the world had come into existence in spring.

To this we should add the image of Mithras riding the bull. The main image of Mithraic iconography was the tauroctony. Mithras seated on top of the bull, sticking a dagger into its neck and looking away. Until well into the second half of the twentieth-century scholars, following Cumont's interpretation were convinced that the tauroctony depicted an ancient Persian foundational myth. Mithras steals the bull, carries it into a cave (*Mithra*

18. Several of the most important Mithraea were discovered in Rome. Under the churches of St. Clement and Santa Prisca, under the baths of Caracalla, near the Circus Maximus and under the Palazzo Barberini there are impressive Mithraea to be found. See Ivanna della Portella, *Subterranean Rome* (Verona: Koneman, 2000).

19. See R. Beck, "The Seat of Mithras at the Equinoxes: Porphyry, *De Antro Nympharum* 24," *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 1 (1976): 95–98. Instead of *epocheitai de tauro Aphrodites de kai o tauros,* he proposes: *epocheitai de tauro Aphrodites, o de zugos Aphrodites os kai o tauros*.

20. See Porfirio, *L'antro delle ninfe* 202.

taurophorous) and he then kills it (*Mithra tauroctonous*). This primordial sacrifice represents the beginning of the world, since from the dying bull comes the seed of life. However authors such as Ulansey[21] and Speidel[22] have recently argued that the tauroctony was in fact a star map, a product of a mixture of Persian religion, Stoic philosophy and Greek mythology. As the text goes, Mithras the demiurge, the *despotes* of generation, rides the bull[23] and is placed in the beginning of the world—the spring equinox—with the gates for the comings and goings of souls at both sides. To his right, where the northern regions stand, we find Cautopates. To his left, we find the southern regions and Cautes. These two characters, omnipresent in almost every tauroctony, are the so-called torchbearers or *dadophori*. They stand at both sides of Mithras holding torches. Cautes holds his torch upright, whereas Cautopates holds it upside down. The symbolism of this trinity[24] could be that of the three stages of the sun: sunrise, noon and sunset, which would also be a metaphor for life, i.e., birth, prime and death. Cautes with his torch to the skies represents the end of bodily life and return of the soul after its cosmic voyage to the divine, whereas Cautopates symbolizes the entrance of souls into bodies, the beginning of earthly life. In accordance with this, Porphyry says that souls descend into the world of generation through the northern door, where Cautopates stands, and leave generation through the southern door, guarded by Cautes. The winds are in charge of carrying the souls through their journey in and out of generation:

> For the breeze of the Boreas, being colder freezes and keeps souls in the coldness of earthly generation, but the breeze of the Notus, on the other hand, dissolves because it is warmer and sends the souls back up to the heat of the divine. (25)

The symbolism that Porphyry finds in the iconography of the Mithraic trinity is very interesting because it evidences how deeply his interpretation is rooted in the Platonic philosophy. The upright torch, symbol of the rising sun, of the beginning of life, is held by Cautes who is placed at the south. Souls leave generation through the southern gate, after being dissolved from the body by the warm air of the Notus. On the other hand, the upside down torch, representing the setting sun, the end of life, is held by Cautopates on

21. D. Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries, Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1989).

22. M. Speidel, *Mithras-Orion: Greek Hero and Roman Army God* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980).

23. Mithras was also always associated with the Sun—hence the popular formula *Mithras Sol Invictus* (see below page 20)—and the bull, because of its horns, with the moon. The symbolism of the tauroctony also represents the victory of light over darkness, of day over night, of masculine over feminine—it is worth noticing that women were not allowed in the Mithraic mysteries.

24. Ps. Dionysius the Areopagite referred to *Mithras triplasios* (*Epist*. 7, 2).

the northern side, the side by which souls come into the bodies, thus initiating their earthly lives. Considering the beginning of bodily life as a death, and death as the beginning of life is the quintessence of Platonism and more specifically of Neoplatonism.[25] The descent into the body is for the soul a sort of death, whereas physical death is a liberation, thanks to which the soul returns to its place of origin, i.e., the divine.[26]

We therefore see how Porphyry keeps interpreting Mithraism in a strictly Platonic line. Mithras has been thus far portrayed as the Demiurge, *poietes* of genesis—an interpretation of Mithras which is totally absent from Persian religion and is a product of Late Antique syncretism—and now as supervisor of the souls' comings and goings into bodies. The tauroctony seems to be, according to Porphyry, a scene that depicts the Demiurge overlooking the cyclical process of genesis and apogenesis. Mithras killing the bull at the time of the spring equinox symbolizes the beginning of the process of generation. The blood of the bull may even represent the souls, according to Turcan, and the role of Mithras would be to "provoke the incarnation of the souls and their entry into the cycle of life."[27] Cautes and Cautopates are the missing two faces of the Mithraic trinity and they supervise the entries and exits of souls. Mithraism is thus absolutely compatible with Platonic philosophy; this is what Porphyry is trying to tell us. You Mithraists and we Platonists are speaking the same language, says Porphyry at the end of the third century in Rome.

Finally there is one last matter to which we should draw our attention. It is not in this case an explicit reference to Mithras, but it is indeed of relevance. In chapter 18, where Porphyry is still arguing about the significance of honey, he points out that

25. See for example Plotinus, *En.* I, 6 [1] or *En.* IV, 8 [6]. Understanding physical birth as a downfall can be deemed as metaphysical pessimism and is one of the greatest conundrums that Platonism has to deal with. In the letter to his wife Marcella, Porphyry says: "You know about the fall into genesis" (*Letter to Marcella* 5, 15, ed. R. Sodano). Nevertheless, Plotinus' polemic against the Gnostics (*En.* II, 9 [33]), who thought the physical world was the work of an evil Demiurge, proves that the Neoplatonists appreciated the beauty and intrinsic goodness of the generated world. In a very interesting article M. Edwards argues that *De antro nympharum* and its conception of Mithras as a good Demiurge was written by Porphyry as a continuation of Plotinus´ attack against the Gnostics. See M. Edwards, "Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs* and the Gnostic Controversy," *Hermes* 124 (1996): 88–100.

26. In studying Mithraism Campbell says that "it is reasonably clear that Cautes presides over genesis and Cautopates over life after genesis […], Cautes has to do with the preexistence and descent of souls into physical birth […] whereas Cautopates has to do with the process of apogenesis […], as suggested by the lowered torch." (*Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* 55–56). This view is radically opposed to that of Porphyry. We thus see, interestingly enough, how the same depiction can produce two radically opposed interpretations.

27. Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus* 86.

> also Selene, patron of generation, was called Melissa (*bee*) amongst other things because Selene is the bull, the bull is Selene's exaltation[28] and bees are generated from cattle (*bougeneis*). Besides, the souls in their coming into generation are also *bougeneis* and the god that secretly promotes generation is a cattle thief.

The passage is incredibly rich. We first have the already mentioned analogy between bees, honey and generation. Selene, the Moon, was called the bee (*melissa*). In chapter 22 Porphyry will remind us that the Moon is the astral house of Cancer and Cancer is the door through which the souls enter this world of generation. Honey had already been associated with generation (chapters 16–17), and here we have the Moon as a new element. But the Moon is also associated closely with the bull. Again the ancient comparison between the moon and the bull, complemented this time by the addition that bees are generated from cattle.[29] Finally, there is the analogy between bees and souls given that they are both born from cattle (*bougeneis*). The phenomenon of bees being born from the rotten carcass of a bull is a beautiful metaphor of the process of transmigration. From death comes life and vice versa; souls are eternally going through this process over and over again. They start their interstellar journey from the highest peaks of ontology, where the gods dwell, descend to bodily life—which is a kind of death for them—and when the body dies they break free and ascend back to their homeland.

However it is the last bit of the passage that interests us the most: "… the god that secretly promotes generation is a cattle thief." The cattle-thief god is Hermes, and it is also Mithras, who steals the bull and then sacrifices it. But this is not the only thing Mithras and Hermes have in common; they are both mediating divinities. Hermes was for the Greeks the god that transported souls to the realm of the dead, the *psychopompus* who acted as an active link between light and darkness. Mithras was originally a god of mediation between good and evil, the two opposed gods Ahura Mazda and Ahriman in the ancient Persian religion. Plutarch refers to him as a *mesites*[30] and in every iconographic representation of the tauroctony we always find him in between Cautes and Cautopates, supervising, mediating. According to the ancient myth, Mithras was sent by Ahura-Mazda to steal and sacrifice the bull before Ahriman did ensuring thus that the world was ruled by the good. Hence this god, of whom Porphyry is talking without naming him, "secretly promotes generation" by means of sacrificing the bull.

28. The Greek word *hupsoma* has a Zodiacal meaning, as Merkelbach points out, and it refers to "the Zodiac sign in which the planet has its stronger effect." See R. Merkelbach, *Mithras* (Königstein: Verlag Anton Hain, 1984) 202, note 24.

29. It was a common belief in Antiquity—Aristotle is an exception (see *Historia Animalium* V, 21, 553a 16–25)—that bees were born from the putrefied body of a sacrificed bull. See for example Democritus (68 B 37a DK), Vergil, *Georgics* IV (286–566).

30. Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 369e.

There has been a great controversy regarding this particular phrase. The standard text by Nauck says *akouon*,[31] "the god that secretly *hears* about generation," but the edition of the Seminary of Classics 609 proposes *anakinon* or *anakuklon*,[32] i.e., "the god that secretly *promotes* generation." However, Merkelbach gives another interesting variant: *dakruon*, i.e., "the god that secretly *weeps* generation."[33] Mithras thus regrets the sacrifice he has to perform and weeps, but still carries on with it since it is his celestial mission. In accordance with the Platonized Mithraic theology that Porphyry has been using up to this point both "promote" and "weep" could seem reasonable as choices. Mithras, seated in the spring equinox, supervises and thus promotes the earthly generation, carried out by the entrances and exits of the souls into and from the bodies. Mithras, the Demiurge, steals the bull and sacrifices it, thereby initiating the eternal and cyclical process of generation, and from then on he supervises and promotes it from his strategic position at the equinoxes. But he also weeps; he regrets what he does because the beginning of generation and the entrance of the soul into the body are a downfall.

Porphyry, An Anti-Christian Intellectual

Amongst Christian authors of his own time and of later times, Porphyry was notorious for being one of Christianity's harshest critics.[34] Jerome refers to him as a "barking dog" (*Comm. in Matth.* 21, 21). Firmicus Maternus regards him as a *hostis dei, veritatis inimicus, sceleratarum artium magister* (*De Errore Profanarum Religionum* 13, 4). St. Augustine calls him the *Christianorum acerrimus inimicus* (*De Civitate Dei* XIX 22, 17) but also acknowledges his philosophical skills.[35] This rivalry comes primarily from the fact that Porphyry wrote a refutation of Christianity in fifteen books, the *Kata Christianon*. This treatise was banned and publicly burnt thrice in history: first in AD 333 when Constantine condemned it in his edict against Arius;[36] second by Theodosius II and Valentinian III, both in AD 448, in edicts against Nestorius and Irenaeus of Tyre.[37] The work is unfortunately lost, but in 1915 Adolf von Harnack edited the remaining fragments, so

31. Porphyrii, *De antro nympharum* in *Opuscula Selecta*, ed. August Nauck (Leipzig: Teubner, 1884) 69.

32. Porphyry, *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey,* a revised text with translation by Seminar Classics 609 (Buffalo: State U of New York Press, 1969) 20.

33. Merkelbach, *Mithras* 17, note 29.

34. In *Suidas* (s.v.) the reference to Porphyry starts as follows: *Porphyrios, o kata Christianon grapsas*.

35. St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XXII 3, 22: *…Porphyrio, nobilissimo philosopho paganorum ….*

36. *Cod. Theod.* 15. 5. 66.

37. *Cod. Just.* 1. 1. 3.

that posterity could at least have a faint idea of what Porphyry's views on Christianity were.[38] In his attack against the Christians, Porphyry continues Celsus' main points of dispute.[39] The three dogmas that scandalized the educated Greeks were the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, that of the *logos* made flesh (fr. 68, von Harnack), and that of the resurrection of bodies (fr. 94). But this is not all; Porphyry also looks for contradictions in the writings of the Apostles, historical discrepancies, and exegetic mistakes so that he can refute Christianity on its own ground.

However, Porphyry's activism against the rising power of Christianity apparently took a step further. We happen to know that Porphyry actively participated in pagan councils[40] worried as he was about the fate of a centuries' old tradition of Hellenic wisdom he had so lovingly studied and followed. Francesco Romano, in his study on Porphyry, claims that from the Roman school of Platonism founded by Plotinus, Porphyry tried to bring Greek culture back into the world and fought the Christian *Weltanschauung* that was winning more and more adepts every day.[41] In fact, the edition of Plotinus' writings on which he worked at the end of his life could even be regarded as an attempt to contrast the wisdom of a pagan holy man and philosopher with the pseudo-wisdom spread by the Christians. A passage from his work *Against the Christians* quoted by Eusebius supports this idea. Talking about Origen, Porphyry says that he had studied with Ammonius, the greatest philosopher of his times, but instead of following him he was lead astray to "the barbaric recklessness" (*to barbaron tolmema*) of the Christians.[42] In the biography of Plotinus with which the *Enneads* start, Porphyry narrates how Plotinus also studied under Ammonius (*Life of Plotinus* 3). Of course, Plotinus chose the right path, as opposed to Origen. Porphyry is thus explicitly contrasting the figure of Plotinus to that of Origen, the pagan sage versus the Christian sage.

Even though the *Kata Christianon* is the only work specifically dedicated to attacking the Christians, many of Porphyry's remaining works can be read as supportive of Greek culture against Christianity. In one of his earliest

38. Porphyrius, *Gegen die Christen*, 15 Bücher, Zeugnisse, Fragmente und Referate, Adolf von Harnack, Abhandlungen der könniglichen preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin, 1916).

39. Girgenti believes that the *Kata Christianon* is Porphyry's answer to Origen's *Against Celsus* (G. Girgenti, *Introduzione a Porfirio* [Bari: Laterza, 1997] 96).

40. In the letter to his wife Marcella, written not long before his death, he excuses his absence by saying: "the needs of the Greeks had summoned me" (*Letter to Marcella* 4, 1–3, ed. Sodano).

41. F. Romano, *Porfirio di Tiro, Filosofia e Cultura nel III secolo D.C.* (U of Catania P, 1979) 102.

42. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* VI, XIX 5–9.

works, *Philosophy from Oracles*, from which we only have fragments, Porphyry draws a distinction between Christ and his followers. Christ had been indeed a very pious man, but the Christians had been wrong in believing he was God made flesh (*De or. philos.* 180 ff., ed. Wolff). In his treatise on statues, the *Peri agalmaton*—also fragmentary—he attacks the Christians without naming them for their condemnation of the pagan cult of statues.[43] He refers to them as those "most ignorant (*amathestatous*)" and "lacking in intellect (*anoetoi*)" who only see the wood or the marble, and fail to appreciate the divine manifestation in the statue (*Peri agalmaton* 1, 7–9, ed. Bidez).[44]

Up to here we have a thought under development. Porphyry was still a student. But around the year AD 268 he apparently went through some kind of psychological breakdown, and Plotinus advised him to retreat somewhere fearing for his life (*Life of Plotinus* 11, 12–15). That is when he moved to Lilybaeum, Sicily, and that is when he probably wrote three main works: *De antro nympharum*, *Kata Christianon* and a history that started with the fall of Troy and finished with the reign of Claudius the Goth. Thanks to Eusebius' testimony we can be certain that the *Kata Christianon* and the historical chronicle were written around the years AD 270–271 in Sicily (*Hist Eccl.* VI, 19)[45] but the date of the opuscule we have been following is a different story. Many agree that it is clearly a work inspired by Platonic philosophy, which means that it was written after Porphyry had met Plotinus,[46] but Turcan for example says that there is nothing in the treatise that shows clearly it is a work inspired by the teachings of Plotinus.[47] However, it is clear that the exegesis of the Homeric passage is heavily tainted with a deep knowledge of Platonic philosophy and is expressed in a Neoplatonic tone, as we have seen in the previous section.

We then have Porphyry retreating to Sicily, writing against the Christians, completing a history of over a thousand years of paganism and making a syncretic mixture of Greek philosophy and mythology to interpret a Homeric passage. According to Bidez, in leaving Plotinus, Porphyry surrendered to

43. In the fragments found in the work of Macarius Magnes, attributed to Porphyry by both A. von Harnack and J. Hoffmann, the philosopher also accuses the Christians of not being able to distinguish the image of the God from the material the statue is made of. See R.J. Hoffmann, *Porphyry's Against the Christians, the Literary Remains* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1994) 85.

44. For this reason Bidez considers the *Peri agalmaton* an apology for paganism. See J. Bidez, *Vie de Porphyre* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964) 21.

45. See T.D. Barnes, "Porphyry *Against the Christians*: Date and the attribution of fragments" *The Journal of Theological Studies* 24 (1973): 424–42.

46. Girgenti, *Introduzione a Porfirio* 35; Buffière, *Les Mythes d'Homère* 420.

47. Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus* 64. If it is a work influenced by Plotinus or the Middle-Platonic tradition, or both is very hard to tell. The Platonic tone is, nevertheless, undeniable.

an impulse that drove him to act, to fight; in Sicily he was again taken over by his "ardeur de propagandiste."[48]

Furthermore, Porphyry's anti-Christian militancy never wavered. His treatise *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, in which he defends the old Pythagorean vegetarianism, arguing that eating meat pushes the body and the soul down into the world of generation and making the ascent of the soul much more difficult, was read by Sodano as also a tacit condemnation of the Eucharist.[49] Porphyry also wrote a biography of Pythagoras, portraying him as the epitome of the pagan holy man in the same age when Christians were writing biographies of their saints and martyrs. It is interesting that, according to Porphyry, Pythagoras had traveled to Babylon and studied under Zoroaster, who purified the faults of his past lives and instructed him about nature (*physis*) and the origins of the cosmos (*Vit. Pyth.* 12, ed. Nauck). We have here another sample of this syncretic attempt to unite Greek philosophy and Persian religion.

His edition of Plotinus' works and his biography of the philosopher are also means through which Porphyry thought classical culture would be preserved and promoted. And at the very end of his life, in his letter to Marcella, he compiles ethical maxims—mostly Pythagorean—trying to prove that Christianity did not have new spiritual lessons to teach. Girgenti even agrees that in the letter to Marcella Porphyry was also exhorting Christianity to learn from Hellenism "dignity, austerity, purity and intellectual asceticism."[50] Thus, bearing in mind that one of Porphyry's main concerns was the preservation of classical wisdom against the upcoming threat of Christianity, it is difficult to overlook the connotations of a work like *De antro nympharum*, in which he displayed his syncretic method like never before. *De antro nympharum* is an extraordinarily important document to understand the cultural battle that was taking place in the last quarter of the third century. In it Porphyry gathers his army and aligns it, giving unity to over a thousand years of classical wisdom, and puts it out into the world to resist the attacks of the new enemy expressing his own account of the fate of souls before and after death. No beginning in time, no resurrection of bodies, but a cyclical interstellar voyage into earthly generation and back.

The question that remains unanswered is that which initiated this quest. Why does Porphyry, in recruiting his intellectual army, also resource to Persian

48. Bidez, *Vie de Porphyre* 64.

49. R. Sodano, *Porfirio, Vangelo di un Pagano* (Milan: Rusconi, 1993) 9–10. In book IV of the *De abstinentia* Porphyry stresses that the wisest amongst Mithraists do not sacrifice animals or eat animal food since they believe in metempsychosis, just like the Pythagoreans (*De abstinentia* IV, 16, ed. Patillon-Segonds). Also in the *Kata Christianon* (fr. 69) Porphyry expresses strong disagreement when discussing the Eucharist.

50. Girgenti, *Introduzione a Porfirio* 25.

elements? Even though we agree that these elements were in fact thoroughly Hellenized, they were still intrinsically alien to the Greek tradition. Why then did he include them, and why did he insist on them so much? Why does the name of Mithras appear as often as that of Plato in the *De antro nympharum*?

Mithraism And Christianity In The Third Century AD

The history of Mithraism is a long and complicated one. Mithras is one of the oldest gods we know of. Worshipped by both Persians and Indians, he survived thousands of years in the East before he made his entrance into the western spiritual world. By the half of the first century BC the cult of Mithras appeared in Rome brought by Cilician pirates captured by Pompey.[51] The cult to the god skyrocketed during the course of the first centuries of our era mainly thanks to the soldiers in the Roman army, who adopted it and carried it all around the vastness of the Roman Empire. It was a manly cult, a secret cult; women were banned from it and in order to become a member one had to overcome certain tasks. Since it was a mystery religion we hardly know anything about the details of its liturgy. The evidence we have is mostly archaeological, Porphyry actually being one of the few literary sources. We know of its seven grades of initiation, we know there was a ritual banquet, we know the holy dates and festivities and we know that a great many important political figures took part in it at some point or another, but not much more can be said with certainty.

In the third century AD the century of Plotinus and Porphyry, Mithraism had its peak of popularity. The number of Mithraea dating from this time found not only in Rome and Ostia but all over the Empire is outstanding.[52] However the most relevant fact that confirms this popularity would most certainly be the political support the cult received throughout the third century. Archaeologists found in Tarsus, Cilicia, coins from the times of Gordian III—who ruled between 238 and 244—with the image of Mithras killing the bull.[53] Gordian III organized one of the biggest campaigns of the third century against the Sassanid Persians and it is most likely that he traveled through Tarsus on his way to Persia. It is also very significant that Plotinus himself took part in that campaign (*Life of Plotinus* 3, 15–20), driven by his interest in Persian and Indian philosophy.

In AD 274 Aurelian, who ruled the Empire from 270 to 275, established an astral monotheism as the State religion and built a spectacular temple

51. Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* XXIV.

52. See Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*: "Mithras and the Imperial Power of Rome" and Vermaseren, *Mithras the Secret God* 186–87.

53. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* fig. 4.

on the Quirinal to the god Sol Invictus. Heliogabalus had already done something similar back at the beginning of the third century, but had failed because of his fanaticism. In third-century Rome, the cult to Mithras and the cult to the Sun had many points of contact. Mithras was identified with the Sun, and was commonly worshiped as *Mithras Sol Invictus*. The repeated attempts to found a solid monotheistic religion and to make it a State religion clearly show a growing fear. Fear that the Christians, who were becoming more and more popular every passing day, would take over the Empire. Finally Diocletian, who carried out great persecutions against the Christians, built an altar in Carnuntum dedicated to the god Mithras around the years 307–308, naming him "benefactor of the Empire."

We can see how paganism felt about Christianity, but how did Christianity feel about these pagan attempts to overshadow it? Is it an idea coined by modern scholars that Christianity and Mithraism were direct contenders, competing for the reverence of the masses, in the third century? It most certainly is not. If we go to the writings of many prominent Christian intellectuals of the first centuries we find very strong attacks against Mithraism. However, it is not *that* Christianity attacked Mithraism, which interests us, but it is how and why it attacked it. Many Christian authors regarded Mithraism as a very substantial threat because its liturgy very much resembled the Christian liturgy. Mithraism is hence portrayed by Christians as a diabolic travesty of Christianity.

We already find strong attacks on Mithraism in the first half of the second century AD Justin Martyr notices with horror how the Mithraic mysteries are performed in a cave (*spelaion*) like the one Christ was born in (*Dialogus cum Tryphone* 78). Also in his first apology he talks about "the evil daemons that imitate the Eucharist in the mysteries of Mithras" offering bread and a chalice filled with water in the rituals of initiation (*Apology* I, 66). Tertullian's famous work against all heresies, written at the end of the second century, also deals with Mithraism, which is defined as an invention of the devil whose aim is to *invertire veritatem* (*De praescriptione haereticorum* 40). In the mysteries of Mithras, according to Tertullian, there is a part of the ceremony, which is a mockery of baptism, and there is also an offer of bread, which would be the false Eucharist (*Ibid.*). This ritual bath—*lavacrum*—is performed to the initiate (*De baptesimo* 5, 1) in the Mithraeum, or as Tertullian puts it: *in spelao, in castris vere tenebrarum* (*De corona* 15, 3).

Firmicus Maternus wrote in the fourth century another work against the heretics in which he also strongly attacked Mithraism for being a mockery of Christianity. In it he condemned the cult to the *theos ek petras*—Mithras was celebrated as having been born from a rock—saying that the only true rock is Christ (*De errore profanarum religionum* 20, 1). He also comments in

awe how some heretics celebrate in dark caves a man who stole cattle, in clear reference to Mithras and stating that he was only a mortal man (*De errore …* 5, 2). Also in the fifth century, Jerome repeated the idea that the mysteries of Mithras mocked (*subvertit*) the baptism of Christ (*Epistula* 107, 2).

The threat Mithraism posed to Christianity was so important, that around the years 354–360 the Church started celebrating the birth of Christ on 25 December instead of 6 January. Mithras' birth used to be celebrated on 25 December, which makes this decision made by the Church seem like a way of obliterating the cult of the Persian god.[54] Furthermore, the strict anti-pagan laws signed by Theodosius I especially in the last quarter of the fourth century, the following destruction of the Mithraea and the almost complete disappearance of the cult by the end of the fourth century AD prove how brutal and relentless the Christian reaction was.

So going back to the last quarter of the third century, we find a fully Hellenized intellectual like Porphyry, writing a refutation of Christianity and aligning Mithras with the Greek gods, poets and philosophers. The time when Porphyry wrote both his *Kata Christianon* and his *De antro nympharum*—i.e., the last quarter of the third century—is a time in which the Roman Empire had recovered a great part of its territory and was starting to overcome the dreadful crisis that had started after the death of Alexander Severus (235). Religion was a main issue to the Emperors of the later part of this century, and to all of them Christianity was a menace. Claudius II, then Aurelianus and after him Diocletian ordered persecutions while they built temples to pagan divinities, and especially to the Sun god in its syncretic Roman version. However, what pagans did not know is that Christians had already won this battle for spiritual primacy. From the moment in which pagans had started trying to impose a monotheistic cult, not only politically but also philosophically, it became evident that the Christian model of religion had succeeded.[55] It was only a matter of time though for the Empire to realize Christianity had to be its State religion.

So what could it have been that attracted both the Emperors and Porphyry about Mithraism? Its great level of popularity was of course undeniable, so that could have been a key political factor. But what about Porphyry? What could he have seen in Mithraism that intellectually excited him? One thing on which Cumont and the most recent scholars who have studied Mithraism agree is the sophistication of the Mithraic dogma. According to Cumont Mithraism, unlike classical Greco-roman paganism, had a "genuine theology,

54. G.H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972) 175.

55. Girgenti rightly points out "while Christians such as Origen were trying to integrate authority with reason and faith, the Platonists had started to substitute reason for authority" (Girgenti, *Introduzione a Porfirio* 105).

a dogmatic system that took its main principles from science."[56] The newest studies on Mithraism regard the cult as an intellectual construct made out of Greek philosophy, astronomy and Greek and Persian mythology, and Turcan explains that it is "no wonder that the Platonists were so seduced by Mithraism" since it was the most optimistic, logical, mystical and rational of all religions of that time.[57] We have seen how Porphyry introduces Mithraism when talking about the interstellar voyage of the soul to and from the body—thus making Mithraism agree with the Orphic-Pythagorean-Platonist theory of the transmigration of the soul—, how he identifies Mithras with the platonic Demiurge, and how he tacitly recognizes the Mithraeum as a legitimate place of worship. It is impossible to say if Porphyry was referring to the Mithraism about which he had read in the works of Pallas and Eubulus, or if he was actually acquainted with the cult. We can suspect that a man with such a strong attraction for all aspects of the divine, a man who possessed so much knowledge about the known world and its religions, living in Rome where almost every known religion had a representative and where Mithraism was popular in the extreme, may very well have had direct contact with the actual ceremony or at least with someone who partook in it. Alas we lack any reference to anything of the kind, so we can only speculate.

In the sixth book of his *Contra Celsum*, Origen poses a very interesting question that may lead us into the path of rational and feasible speculation. Celsus, says Origen, in his attempts to refute Christians and Jews, has resource not only to Plato, but also to "the Persian mysteries of Mithras and their interpretation (*ten diegesin auton*)" (*Contra Celsum* 6, 22). Origen is confused. He doesn't understand why Celsus, instead of discussing the mysteries of Eleusis, or those of Hecate, or even the Egyptians mysteries or the Cappadocian mystery cult to Artemis—all of which were much more "exceptional" (*exaireta*) in Greece—chose to talk about Mithras. Origen fails to provide an answer to this conundrum.

Isn't Origen's question extremely similar to ours? Why does Celsus pick Mithraism to oppose to Christianity, when it was neither a Greek element nor something that had been popular in Greece? Why does Porphyry pick Mithraism to support many of his interpretations of a Homeric passage? Maybe the answer is one and the same.

Porphyry Between Mithraism And Christianity

In his foundational work on Porphyry, Joseph Bidez says: "It will be neither in the caves of the Mithraists nor in the temples of Isis where, according

56. Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras* 105–06.
57. Turcan, *Mithras Platonicus* 133.

to Porphyry, men shall find true rest, but in the philosophy of Plotinus."[58] Sensible as this reflection may be, especially taking into consideration that Porphyry dedicated the last years of his life to the strenuous task of editing all of his master's works; we still cannot belittle the importance he gave to Mithraism. We have seen throughout this essay how Porphyry, in the *De antro nympharum*, goes out of his way to bring together Mithraism and Hellenism. We cannot be certain if, in doing this, he was following Plutarch, Numenius and Cronius or Pallas and Eubulus. It is likely that he was. Regardless, his syncretistic approach has an intimate and profound value of its own, especially when we read it bearing in mind the intense dispute Porphyry had with Christianity. We thus have an anti-Christian intellectual aligning Greek cultural heritage with Mithraism, a Persian-born cult regarded by Christians as one of the most perilous enemies of the rising Church. Knowing how involved he was in the religious and philosophical scene of the last quarter of the third century, it would be almost naïve to believe that Porphyry's insistent references to Mithraism in the opuscule were coincidental. It is most certain that he knew about the Christians and their fear of Mithraism, it is most certain that his inclusion of Mithraism—which is the only non-Greek element to which Porphyry appeals in the work—was not devoid of a certain intentionality.

Was he then, in his own philosophical and syncretic manner, suggesting that Mithraism was the best pagan weapon against Christianity? Was he hoping that the "fatal illness" Renan talked about,[59] which would have killed Christianity and made Mithraism the religion of the future, was something worth fighting for? Porphyry, at least in the fragments we have, does not appeal to Mithraism when he combats Christianity, but he does include it fully within the Greek tradition, as we have seen. In the end, Mithraism disappeared and Christianity became the State religion. Two of the reasons Mithraism may have disappeared are its mystery nature and its ban on women, apart from the obvious fact that Paganism started being banned and persecuted after the adoption of Christianity as State religion.[60] The Mithraea were small temples, built to hold no more than fifty people at the most. Mithraism was a cult for minorities. The masses in the late third century, a century of deep spiritual crisis, sought for fast answers and social sheltering. Mithraism involved initiation rituals, grades and probably a strict discipline; it was not a religion for the many. But more importantly, it left

58. Bidez, *Vie de Porphyre* 96.

59. Renan's assertion is extremely famous and highly controversial, as well as certainly exaggerated. He said that had Christianity died of a fatal illness, then we would be Mithraists (see E. Renan, *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du monde antique* [Paris: Le livre de poche, 1984] 579).

60. See Vermaseren, *Mithras the Secret God* ch. 21.

at least half of the population out: it didn't accept women. At the same time the Church was being flooded by widows, single mothers and children, all of whom had a place in it. It is extremely interesting that one of the attacks Porphyry directs to Christians is that they had women take over the Church.[61] Could he have been thinking of Mithraism, a masculine, virile religion, when he said this? We will never know.

Porphyry died in AD 305. The date is paradigmatic, since in AD 306 Constantine was crowned Emperor of the Romans in York. Porphyry was dead and one year later the man responsible for making Christianity the State religion ascended the throne. The fate was sealed and Christianity was the new voice; but even though the ways and religious customs changed, classical culture was to be adopted, reinterpreted and carefully preserved by the Christians of the East and the West until the Renaissance, when it started being promoted again. Porphyry witnessed a dying world and feared for the irrevocable disappearance of a cultural legacy that was millennia old. History proved him wrong.

61. See *Kata Christianon* fr. 97, ed. von Harnack.