GENDER AND CULT IN THE ROMAN WEST: MITHRAS, ISIS, ATTIS

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For the purposes of this paper, I would define the issues under discussion as the relations of male and female people with one another, including their attitudes towards family life and reproduction; but I also have in mind the question of male dominance, and how it was reflected and recreated in the area of religious life.¹ The main concern of the paper will be the implications of the different rules of admission of important cults and of the myths associated with their deities. The three cults of my title are chosen in this context because they take such contrasting attitudes towards the place (or lack of it) of men, women and inter-gender people in their membership. Three questions will underlie the discussion that follows:

1. Do the three cults in any sense form a set? Can we legitimately take them together for purposes of comparison?
2. Should we think of them as in any sense in competition with one another for members or adherents?
3. Would their respective patterns of admission in relation to gender or to gender orientation have been relevant to any such competition?

I shall return to these specific questions at the conclusion of this paper.

1. Admission Rules

Up to a point, the facts about their cults’ gender ‘rules of admission’ are reasonably well attested, even though many of the details and their significance may prove to be contested. In the case of the cult of Mithras, the evidence of the images makes it overwhelmingly likely, as has generally been assumed,

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¹ I am most grateful to those who commented on this paper at the conference in Amsterdam, both in the formal discussion and afterwards.
² On the role of women in Roman religious life, see e.g. Kraemer (1992); Schultz (2006); Hemelrijk (2009).
that only men were eligible for membership of the groups. Richard Gordon\(^2\) in a famous paper tried to go further and show that Porphyry\(^3\) provided an explanation of the Mithraist position:

> For all of them, metempsychosis is a crucial dogma, as becomes clear through the mysteries of Mithras. For they (the Mithraists) typically demonstrate our community with the animals by allegorizing us by means of animals, thus calling the participants in their mysteries 'lions', women 'hyenas' and inferiors 'ravens'. In the case of the Fathers [lacuna] they call them eagles and falcons. Those who reach the rank of 'lion' assume the forms of all the animals.

So women were apparently classified within the Mithraist system as 'hyenas', and Gordon\(^4\) was able to use the bestiary of the 'Greco-Roman Encyclopaedia' to show that this implied that they were untrustworthy and dangerous beings, who could never be thought worthy of initiation, let alone form a grade of their own. The passage is not free of problems because both 'lion' and 'raven' are true initiatory grades and to have placed 'hyena' between the two is rhetorically very eccentric, if the whole point being made by the author was that 'hyena' was not such a grade at all, but rather an anti-grade, a grade of exclusion. Gordon's position has duly been debated and challenged\(^5\) and it can be argued, at least plausibly, that the Mithraist iconography was not wholly free from female elements. All the same, Gordon's is still far the most plausible interpretation of Porphyry's sentence, even if it is a somewhat dislocated one: it seems certain that women were defined out of the cult; and there is no good evidence that they were ever included.

The cult of Attis provides some reason to believe in religious activity by both males and females, though the most characteristic evidence available in fact concerns the priests, the Galli, who were, perhaps in reality, or at least imagined as, males who had been ritually castrated.\(^6\) But whatever we may make of the erratic sources available, it is far from clear, particularly in the earlier period of the empire, whether Attis-worshippers did form themselves into identifiable groups or were merely committed worshippers associated with the cult of the Magna Mater and taking part in her festivals. The later inscriptions recording the celebration of the *taurobolium* ritual do show


\(^{3}\) Porph. *Abst.* 4.16.


\(^{5}\) David (2000) challenged the whole contention, but was effectively refuted by Griffith (2006); cf. Gordon (2011) 359.