

Re-thinking sacred “rubbish”: the ritual deposits of the temple of Mithras at Tienen (Belgium)

Marleen Martens

Despite the mass of material evidence, architectural, iconographic and epigraphic, for the worship of Mithras in the Roman Empire, the ritual aspects of the cult are virtually unknown. The literary sources are sparse and difficult to evaluate, while conclusions drawn solely from iconography, such as those of R. Merkelbach, mostly carry the unmistakable whiff of a-priorism. Conjecture rules where knowledge fails. What in fact went on in and around these temples? What kinds of rituals were actually performed there? Such questions have a direct bearing on our understanding of the notion of ‘mystery cult’, and the claims and promises offered by them. Until relatively recently, the analysis of “small finds”, such as coarse wares, faunal and floral remains, and taphonomic records, seemed at best incidental to the study of Mithraism, and, for that matter, ancient religion in general. But the growing recognition of the centrality of ritual, and blood sacrifice in particular, in the practice and *imaginaire* that sustained Graeco-Roman religion, suggests that it is high time to look around for new sources of evidence, and raise new kinds of questions. The general availability of technical support to analyse small finds with the required precision encourages us to emphasise hitherto-neglected finds of this type in order to formulate such new questions. The need for methodological innovation was strikingly underscored by a conference held recently at Tienen (Fr.: Tirlemont) in Belgium, specifically directed towards problematizing and re-evaluating of the notion of small finds.¹ The aim of the conference was to present new analyses and interpretations of find-complexes, and to examine the possibility of creating new historical facts by reconstructing ritual events of which traces are present in the archaeological record. The general conclusion was that both the repetitive nature and the apparently irrational features of the deposits in and around such temples ought to be integrated into the study of Mithraic ritual behaviour.

This shift of emphasis is legitimated by the changes in the type of archaeological evidence now routinely becoming available. Since the publication in 1960 of the second volume of M. J. Vermaseren’s *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae* (hereafter cited as V.), no less than 33 new mithraea have been published. Many of them contain conventionally-important monuments or architectural features. But others are significant not for this type of evidence but solely or mainly on account of their small finds: faunal and floral remains, timber, ceramics, glass, and metal (excluding coins).² The potential of a full range of detailed artefact- and ecofact-studies, and of a detailed analysis of their contexts, can be well illustrated by the case of the recently-discovered Mithraic temple at Tienen. Comparison with analogous assemblages from other recently-excavated mithraea suggests new hypotheses relating to certain cultic practices, specifically votive or commemorative sacrifices whose residues were subsequently buried, mainly in pits of different sizes, inside or outside mithraea. Finally, comparison between the locations of mithraea in towns may promote better understanding of the place and character of the cult of Mithras in (provincial) Roman society.

The Tienen mithraeum

In 1998 the enigmatic remains of an unidentified building, together with a number of pits containing very rich deposits, were excavated in the SW periphery of the *vicus* of Tienen (fig. 1), on the Roman road from *Colonia Claudia* (Cologne) to the Scheldt and thence to N Flanders and the Pas de Calais.³ Only after a preliminary examination of the finds could the small

1 Martens and De Boe (edd.) 2004.

2 Gordon 2004.

3 Martens 2004. Tienen lies just north of the Autoroute roi Baudouin (E40) between Herstal and Leuven/Brussels.