Origins of the Mithras Cult

A Glimpse of Mystery

Relief of Mithras as bull-slayer, framed by scenes from Mithras' life. From Neuenheim near Heidelberg.

THE EXPANSION of the Roman Empire is indeed a phenomenon in and of itself. However, the consolidation and unification of so many vast and varied lands under a single banner brought with it the potential for the mingling of myriad peoples, languages and ideas that might not have mingled so extensively had they not been under the yoke of a single seat of power. In an empire that stretched from Scotland to Mesopotamia, as well as to nearly all points in between, a plethora of goods were able to be procured with ease, their delivery hastened by the relative peace of the entire Mediterranean region, making the massive sea and its tributary waters a hotbed of commercial endeavors. With the interchange of goods and services, however, came the interchange of ideas, philosophies, and – not least – religio-spiritual concepts.

From Stoic philosophical treatises to the mystery cults of Egypt, religious beliefs, dogmas, philosophies, and practices from a wide array of foreign regions were able to mingle, mix, and, ultimately, procreate in interesting and revolutionary new ways within the boundaries of the Empire. This ideal breeding ground was the fertile tract from which sprung the mysterious cult of Mithras, a secret initiatory religion which spread like wildfire throughout the Roman-occupied territories.

Though primarily a soldier's religion, as the populous number of Mithraic temples found along frontier regions such as the Rhine and Danube can attest, as well as the many inscriptions

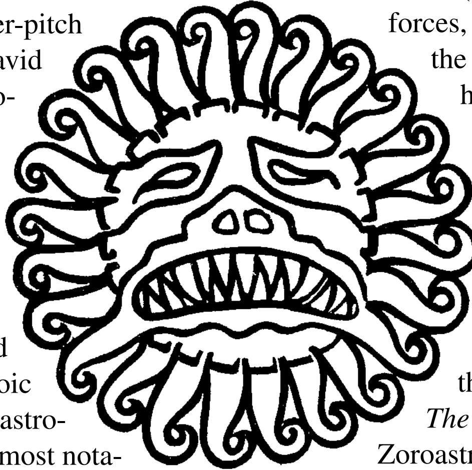
found among votive offerings, the ideals of truth, light, and might that Mithras represented to the ancient world were more than enough to spur less martially-minded citizens to present themselves for initiation into his mysteries. Metropolitan areas as well became rife with his worship, so much so that early Christian writers such as Tertulian and Augustine wrote scathing essays in an attempt to vilify the deity that captured the hearts of so many. The destruction of the mystery cult preached by the early "Church Fathers" was eventually actualized by the swords of their later adherents, as Mithraism was outlawed from the latter Empire, and its temples were subjected to zealotous iconoclasm on the part of its Christian nemesi.

The problem presented to the modern historian, then, is that of piecing together the theological and mystical nature of the cult in question using the paltry evidence available. Though older tracts concerning the God can be found among the writings of Indo-Iranian peoples stretching back into the Bronze Age, the syncretic god of the Roman Empire has almost no remaining literature written by the cultists who worshipped him in their secretive cave-like structures. Apart from the occasional mention in some Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri, the only written accounts of the Mithrasian religious rites of the Roman Empire can be found either among the uninitiated Pagan philosophers of the time period such as the Emperor Julian and the Neoplatonist Porphyry, or in the writings of their aforementioned Christian detractors.

It is within the occult iconography of the Mithraic temples themselves that historians for the past century or so have been searching fervently in an attempt to explain the complex rites of initiation and worship that occurred within their dimly-lit walls. The two modern works at the forefront of the Mithras mystery have been those of Franz Cumont and David Ulansey, respectively. For years, Cumont's scholarship which linked the Roman cult almost exclusively to the worship of the Persian conception of the deity went relatively unchallenged by the academics of his day. However,

Petra Genetrix *(Mithras born from the rock) Marble, 180-192 AD. From the area of S. Stefano Rotondo, Rome.*

over time, many academics became less and less convinced that Cumont's explanations were entirely valid, especially as more and more Mithraic monuments were excavated and more clues were placed under the looking glass. The culmination of the dissent reached a fever-pitch in the writing of David Ulansey, who proposed a new theory of the Mithraic mysteries, based partially on the Indo-Iranian conception of the god, but primarily based upon a semi-Stoic interpretation of astrological phenomena, most notably the precession of the equinoxes. So far, Ulansey's interpretation, with a few minor adjustments, appears to be the most plausible explanation to date.



Beginnings

The earliest recorded mention of the god "Mitra" has been found in a treaty between the Hittites and the Mitanni which dates approximately to the 14th century BCE and was found in the palace archives of the Hittite capital, Boghazkoy, in northern Anatolia. Mitra is invoked in order to specifically sanctify the treaty in question. A few centuries later, his name is found in the Rig Veda.

In other Hindu scriptures he is invoked as Mitra-Varuna, a binomial deity of order and justice. In India, sometimes the word "Mitra" itself was translated literally as "treaty." As such, his role as divine mediator and justicar was established well before the Romans had assimilated the deity into their own ever-changing and expanding pantheon. Plutarch places Mithra in a position of power in between the light (Horomazes/Ahura-Mazda) and the dark (Areimanius/Ahriman) forces, and specifically was the god who taught men how to properly sacrifice to each side to ensure their assistance. The most detailed account of Mithra(s) in pre-Roman literature can be found in the Persian holy book, *The Avesta*. A Yasht, a Zoroastrian hymn of prayer is offered to him. A few excerpts are as follows:

"Ahura Mazda spake unto Spitama Zarathushtra (Zoroaster), saying: "Verily, when I created Mithra, the lord of wide pastures, O Spitama! I created him as worthy of sacrifice, as worthy of prayer as myself Ahura Mazda.

The ruffian who lies unto Mithra brings death unto the whole country, injuring as much the faithful world as a hundred evil-doers could do. Break not the contract, O Spitama! Neither the one that thou hadst entered into with one of the unfaithful, nor the one that thou hadst entered into with one of the faithful who is one of thy own faith. For Mithra stands for both the faithful and the unfaithful…

If the master of a house lies unto him, or the lord of a borough, or the lord of a town, or the lord of a province, then

comes Mithra, angry and offended, and he breaks asunder the house, the borough, the town, the province; and the masters of the houses, the lords of the boroughs, the lords of the towns, the lords of the provinces, and the foremost men of the provinces…

The spear that the foe of Mithra flings, darts backwards, for the number of the evil spells that the foe of Mithra works out…

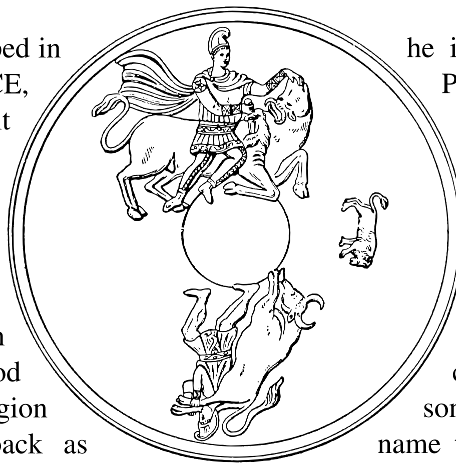
Not the wound of the well-sharpened spear or of the flying arrow reaches that man to whom Mithra comes for help with all the strength of his soul, he, of the ten thousand spies, the powerful, all-seeing, undeceivable Mithra."

In other parts of the *Avesta*, Mithras is deemed to be the genius of both diurnal and nocturnal celestial light. Regularly referred to as the "lord of wide pastures," he bestows beauty and fertility upon the earth, as well as defending all worshippers of Ahura Mazda against the devas of Ahriman, the evil spirits of the Zoroastrian pantheon.

The above serves to illustrate the role of Mithras as both a god of fairness and justice, as well as one of might and retribution. In the mind of a soldier of the ancient world, what better deity would there be to pray to? Not only is Mithras all-seeing, all-knowing, and forever just, but he is also a sacred protector of his worshippers. As the years progressed, and more elements were incorporated into the Mithrasian liturgy, this archetype of the grand protector would survive through the eventual Roman synthesis of the cult. Observance of the rites and ceremonies of the cult would ensure the safety and prosperity of the legions, no matter which land they might have hailed from originally. These rites of course involved sacred oaths of discipline and service, and archaeological evidence proves without a doubt that wherever

A mithraeum *found in the ruins of Ostia Antica,Italy.*

an army was encamped in the second century CE, members of the cult of Mithras could be counted among its number.



As already mentioned above, Mithra had been established as a god of the Anatolian region stretching as far back as the later Bronze Age. It would appear to be this same Anatolian influence, especially stemming from the southern Anatolian city of Tarsus, the capital of the province of Cilicia, which would have the most profound influence upon the religious minds of the later Romans.

Gift of Mithra

According to Plutarch, the Romans first encountered what would eventually become the mystery cult of Mithras during the Third Mithridatic War (73-63 BCE). Apparently, the legions of the Roman General Gnaeus Pompeius (Pompey the Great), in his successful war against the Eastern King Mithridates VI (literally translated as "Gift of Mithra") of Pontus (northern Anatolia), encountered Cilician pirates who practiced rites in honor of the god. Eventually, Pompey's soldiers would bring elements of these rites back to Rome.

It was noted by Ulansey, specifically, that Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, was the home of a cult to the Greek hero Perseus, mythical slayer of the Gorgon Medusa. Ulansey also notes that in many earlier representations of Perseus, he is depicted wearing a Phrygian (also a region of Anatolia) cap in the same manner as Mithras when depicted in his Roman temples. It should be noted, also, that Herodotus claimed that Perseus' son, Perses, gave his name to the peoples known as the Persians, i.e. the Zoroastrian people who worshipped Mithras and wrote hymns to him in their *Avesta*.

The central motif of the Roman temples to Mithras, called "mithraea", was that of the god slaying a bull. Ulansey noted that coins minted in the city of Tarsus as early as the fourth century BCE depicted scenes of a bull being slain by a lion, usually in conjunction with an image of Perseus. These scenes, as proposed by Ulansey and others, were deemed to be of a specifically astrological significance.

Strabo, as Ulansey points out, noted that the city of Tarsus and its countless schools of rhetoric, was a hotbed of intellectual activity, outstripping both Athens and Alexandria for the purposes of education. One of the primary schools of thought found in Tarsus and the surrounding region was that of the Stoic philosophers. Noted Stoics of the Tarsian region during the era of late antiquity included Athenodorus (tutor to the Emperor Augustus), Aratos of Soli, (author of the astronomical poem the Phaenomena, and student of the famous Zeno of Athens), Chrysippus (systematizer of Stoic thought), and

the following group of names that all ended with the suffix “of Tarsus”: Zeno, Antipater, Archedemus, and Heraclides, respectively. It is said also that the Stoic Aristocreon, nephew of Chrysippus, was most probably from the region as well.

All of the above mentioned Stoic philosophers held a deep reverence for the stars, astrology, and astrological phenomena. Many Stoics attributed a divine potency to each of the stars, constellations, and even to the entire cosmos itself. Each of these was revered as a rational god, under the dominion of none but the supreme god, Mind (Nous). Thus, the internal fire that animated the human soul was a divine spark indicative of the celestial fire which burned at the heart of every star. It was this deification of the cosmos itself and its celestial inhabitants that eventually mingled with the Indo-Iranian conception of the god Mithras, as well as with the legends and archetype of the also-deified Greek hero Perseus to bring to the Roman Empire one of the most interesting and spiritually complex cults of late antiquity.

Tauroctony

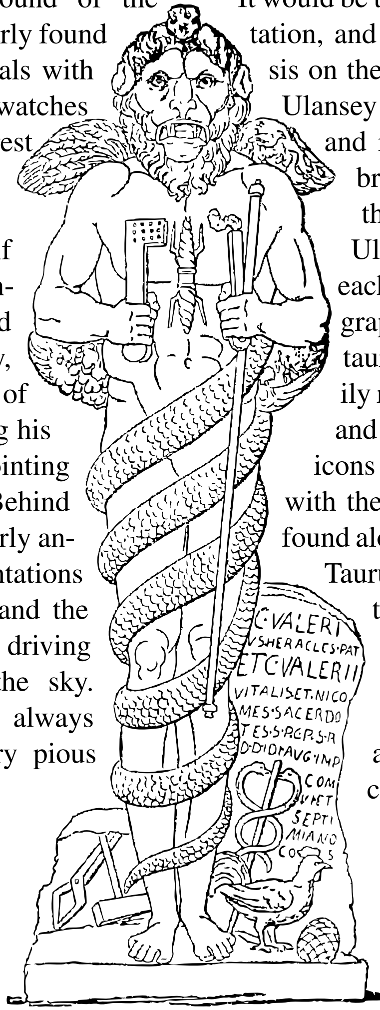
The central icon of the Mithras cult of Rome was that of the tauroctony, or bull-slaying scene. Deep within the cave-like (or, in some cases, natural caverns) structures of the mithraea, one would encounter a scene of the mighty Mithras, caped and wearing his trademark Phrygian cap, kneeling with one leg extended upon the back of the animal and plunging either a knife or a short sword into the exposed neck of the beast, right next to its shoulder, whilst pulling the face of the beast

Tauroctony in Kunsthistorisches Museum

skyward, usually by the nose. Mithras' face is turned away from the act as it is performed, and in some depictions, sheaves of wheat are seen either bleeding from the wound, or coming from the tail of the bull. Also included in many of these scenes are other players in the cosmic game. A dog and a snake, usually flanking each other, lap at the blood/wheat that issues forth from the bull's wound, a bowl is usually incorporated into the foreground of the motif, a scorpion is regularly found clutching the bull's genitals with its claws, and a raven watches the entire scene with interest from above. Also regularly included with this central bull-slaying motif are a pair of twin torch-bearers, named Cautes and Cautopates, respectively, that stand on either side of the scene, Cautes pointing his torch up, Cautopates pointing his towards the earth. Behind this scene are quite regularly anthropomorphic representations of the Sun (Sol/Helios) and the Moon (Luna/Selene), driving their chariots through the sky. The complex scene is always found rendered in a very pious and reverent manner.

The Neoplatonist Porphyry, writing in the 3rd century CE about the religion of Mithras, compared its symbols as specifically dealing with astrological archetypes and constellations. To quote: "Mithra's own seat however is determined by the equinoxes. He bears therefore the sword of the ram, the Aries of the zodiac, and rides on Aphrodite's bull, since the bull is generator and he (Mithra) is lord of creation."

It would be this astrological interpretation, and specifically the emphasis on the word "equinoxes", that Ulansey would grab a hold of and run with in his groundbreaking interpretation of the Mithraic iconography. Ulansey would reveal that each animal in the iconographic depictions of the tauroctony could very easily represent a constellation, and specifically, each of the icons correspond perfectly with the string of constellations found along the celestial equator: Taurus the bull, Canis Minor the Dog, Hydra the snake, Crater the bowl/cup, Corvus the raven, Scorpius the scorpion, and the mighty deified constellation of Perseus,



Leontocephaline of the Mithraic Mysteries. Line drawing of the figure found at the mithraeum of C. Valerius Heracles and sons (dedicated 190 AD) at Ostia Antica, Italy.

located directly above the constellation of Taurus, corresponding with the great god Mithras himself, the mover of the heavens. It is theorized that Spica (spike of wheat), a star found in the constellation of Virgo relatively close to the celestial equator, is represented in the wheat that issues forth from the bull's tail. Ulansey also noted that the sacred star-cluster of the Pleiades, known also in the ancient world as the "seven sisters", is located within the constellation of Taurus in precisely the same location as the "shoulder wound" found in the iconography.

Ulansey believes that this tauroctony was derived from the discovery by the ancients of the phenomenon known as the Precession of the Equinoxes. As the world orbits the sun, subtle shifts in its trajectory take place so that certain constellations are highlighted and others are obscured over time. In this case, the spring equinox, which at one point in time was highlighted by the constellation of Taurus, eventually shifted, over the course of approximately 2000 years or so, to be highlighted by Aries instead. He believed that the ancients then began worshipping Mithras as not only the mighty deified Perseus (whose constellation stood above the bull), but as the cosmic ruler (kosmokrator) that shifted the heavens as he wished.

Over time, Mithras began to also be worshipped as a solar deity, his name in many instances including the epithet Sol Invictus ("Unconquerable Sun"), thereby being associated with the solar cult of the Roman Empire established by Aurelian in 274. From the humble beginnings of the deity among the tribes of the Near East, to its inclusion in the cult of the Roman emperor himself, the religion of Mithras still astounds and bewilders historians to this day who, over 1600 years after the cult's demise, wish to delve deeply into its secret rites. There are, of course, volumes upon volumes of discourse and speculation concerning the minutiae of the subject, from the significance of the torchbearers and their relation to the Grecian dioscuri as well as the seven hierarchal grades of sacred initiation and their correspondences to the seven holy "planets" of the ancient world, but said specifics are far beyond the scope of the current article.

– Anthony Teth

Double-faced Mithraic relief. Rome, second to third century CE. Louvre Museum