Mithras: Master of Mystery
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The cult of Mithras is the most famous of the mystery religions of the Roman Empire, meaning closed societies of worshippers, entered by initiation, conducting private rituals, and intended to give members a special relationship with a particular deity or pair of them. The current evidence for it consists of 420 ruined shrines, around 1100 images, a few short texts and a few denunciations by Christians. This sounds like a lot, but actually misses almost all the information that we need about the beliefs and practices of the cult. As a result, historians are left with a scarily large amount of ignorance and a huge space for speculation.

This starts, logically enough, with the origins of Mithraism. It sold itself as an exotic importation into the Roman Empire from the east, having a god with a Persian name and costume. No trace of it has however been found in Persia itself and it was very weak in the eastern provinces of Rome and appeared there late. There was a genuine Persian sun god called Mithra, but he bore no resemblance to the deity of the Roman cult. All the extant evidence suggests that this appeared in Italy, and probably at Rome itself, in the 90s CE, and pretended to represent the ancient wisdom of an exotic oriental land.

Its proliferation across the empire was then sensationally rapid, so that within fifty years it was found from Britain to Mesopotamia. Within this huge range, however, it was especially concentrated in Rome, eastern Gaul (France), and the military garrisons on the northern frontiers, from the Danube to Britain. It never received any public recognition or funding and was never put into the official calendar of festivals. Despite this and its exoticism, there was nothing subversive or counter-cultural about it: it was politically loyal and socially respectable. It continued to grow until the 250s, shrank for a while, revived in the fourth century and went into dramatic decline from the 380s, vanishing by the year 400. Its members were men, until some women appeared in it during the fourth century, at least in a few eastern provinces. It was also usually avoided by the social elite, attracting the middle and lower classes. These consisted of common soldiers and junior officers, civil servants, merchants, ordinary citizens and slaves from worthy households. It appealed to people who valued authority and social advancement. There seems in addition to have been an expectation that initiates would achieve salvation after death.

Its shrines (*mithraea*) are remarkably uniform throughout the empire, with the size and shape of a modern railway carriage.They could accommodate at most twenty people seated and forty standing. If a congregation outgrew one it would not be extended, but some members would move to another. They were clearly confined spaces for limited numbers and intense experiences. They were supposed to represent caves, and so lacked windows. Outside they were completely unremarkable, blending into surroundings. Inside each had a central nave flanked by parallel benches and leading to an altar with a carved relief of Mithras. Flanking the entrance were reliefs or statues of two male figures in Persian costume, holding torches, one turned up and one down. They were called Cautes and Cautophates, and are thought to have represented sunrise and sunset. The walls and other spaces were commonly decorated with representations of the seasons, the zodiac and astronomy. Some scholars have accordingly claimed that each *mithraeum* was a map of the heavens. None however agrees with any of the others over its details. What is certain is that a *mithraeum* was a place to which to withdraw from the world. Unlike other mystery religions the cult had no public ceremonies at all.

For its mythology we are totally reliant on the visual imagery in the *mithraea*, with a few inscriptions. It is clear that Mithras was young, energetic and fresh-faced and born from a rock. He had some kind of connection with the Roman sun god, Sol, and his great feat was to slay a cosmic bull, representing night and winter, in order to restore warmth and fertility, and so life, to the world. It is clear that members of the religion were initiated through seven grades corresponding to the visible planets. At least the first grade needed an elaborate initiation ceremony, in which the candidate was stripped naked and blindfolded, challenged, questioned, and then released, crowned and shown the relief of Mithras slaying the bull. It is not clear whether the grade system operated in every congregation. Where it did, the higher grades seem to have been expected to operate a special code of ethics. Other ceremonies are hard to identify, and the only other certain activity in the shrines was feasting, often with quite extensive menus, which was regarded as a sacred as well as a nourishing activity. Strictly speaking, Mithraism was not a religion in itself, but a cult of a particular god within a wider pagan system, and other deities were given (lesser) honours within his shrines.

The cult that was revived in the fourth century had some differences from that earlier: the admission of women and the opening of the shrines, especially in Rome, to anybody who wished to enter and worship. None of this prevented its sudden collapse in the century's last quarter. Most *mithraea* were violently dismantled, some certainly by hostile Christians, some perhaps by invading barbarians and some by worshippers decommissioning them. It is clear however that doom was spelled for the cult chiefly by the triumph of Christianity. It had lasted only around three centuries, a short time in the ancient world, but it had made a great impact on the Western Roman Empire, and left a proportionate one on the modern imagination, where our persisting ignorance of much about it leaves a huge area for free operation of individual creativity.

References and Further Reading

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Walsk, David. *The Cult of Mithras in Late Antiquity*. 2018.