# ST. SEBASTIAN AND MITHRAS: A SUGGESTION.

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In the *Acta Sanctorum* of the seventeenth century we read the harrowing story of St. Sebastian's martyrdom; in the more critical *Analecta Bollandiana* of to-day we are told that the story 'bears the stamp of a work of imagination.' Yet even so, we believe, with Renan, that although 'la légende n'est pas vraie comme fait, elle est toujours vraie comme idée.' What is the idea behind this legend of terrible torture? Why do we find the legend associated with Rome of the third century? To reply that St. Sebastian was a christianised Apollo, the god of Light, whose arrows, shot amongst the Greeks, brought pestilence and death, leaves us still questioning, for although Apollo was, par excellence, the purifying and expiatory god, to whom a temple—that of Apollo Medicus, mentioned by Livy—was built in Rome as early as 433–431 B.C. in performance of a vow made during a plague, and although we know that St. Sebastian was invoked under similar circumstances, especially during the great cycle of epidemics in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and that the familiar art-representations of him were inspired by those of Apollo, it would seem as if the details of the legend can only be explained, and the places specially associated with the saint accounted for, if we see in St. Sebastian not merely a christianised Apollo, but a christianised Apollo-Mithras, and, in his early cult as a Christian saint, the continuance of religious tradition in certain places once consecrated to Mithras.

Let us first recall the legend itself, and then, before examining it in order to see where it resembles and where

it differs from others, and whether in the differences we can detect any Mithraic elements or reminiscences, let us consider very briefly how Mithraism spread throughout the Roman world in the second century A.D. and what was its position in Rome itself in the third and early fourth centuries. Scholars and students are well acquainted with the learned works on this subject, especially M. Cumont's *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mysteres de Mithra* (1896–1899). It is only necessary, therefore, to refer to such points as seem to throw light upon the question here under consideration.

According to the legend, St. Sebastian was born at Narbonne, in Gaul, whilst his parents were citizens of Milan, in which city he was brought up. Later, he went to Rome, and came under the notice of the emperors Diocletian and Maximian, who, ignorant of his Christian piety, and highly esteeming him, made him an officer in the imperial guard. Secretly he urged the Christians to constancy in the faith, visiting those who were in prison in the house of Nicostratus, keeper of the records. There, whilst exhorting them to fight the good fight, he was suddenly illumined for about the space of an hour with an exceeding splendour coming down from heaven, and, whilst thus illumined, was clothed by seven most radiant angels with a pallium, dazzling white. Discovered and denounced to the emperor Diocletian, he was tied to a stake in the hippodrome on the Palatine hill, and shot with arrows until he was thought to be dead, but recovering a few days afterwards, he reproached the emperors with their treatment of the Christians, and, under their orders, was finally beaten to death with rods, his body being thrown into the Cloaca maxima. The following night he appeared in a dream to a saintly woman, told her where his body was to be found, and asked that it should be buried with the apostles on the Appian way, a request said to have been fulfilled. These events took place, according to tradition, about A.D. 287.

Mithraism, the cult of the Persian Mithras, god of light and air, and, as such, mediator between heaven and earth, god and man, spread to Rome and the Roman world, from Rome's outlying provinces in eastern Asia Minor, as early as the first century B.C. There the Greek

and Persian worlds had met, and, though superficially indeed, since there could be nothing more than compromise between two such divergent peoples, they had intermingled. One of the results of this intermingling was that some of the gods were invested with a double title; hence the title Apollo-Mithras.

Towards the close of the second century of our era, that is, from the reign of Commodus, Mithraism assumed great importance in the empire, partly because of the encouragement given to sun-worship, under its various forms, by the emperors, who courted the support it gave to the idea of divine right, and partly because Mithraism was pre-eminently the creed of the soldier, and Rome largely recruited her legions and auxiliary forces from Cappadocia and Pontus, both Mithraic centres; and further because of the number of oriental slaves and traders who found their way to Rome. The track of the soldier and of the trader was the track of the god.

When Christianity was taking shape, there were various forms of worship in Rome more or less similar to, and overlapping, each other; their votaries even worshiping in adjacent sanctuaries. Mithraism, one of such forms, for a time rivalled nascent Christianity. Hence it was possible for a Christian legend to take its name from one of these cults, and some of its legendary lore from others, and to unite them all around a Christian ideal. The first Christian mention of St. Sebastian goes back to the *Depositio Martyrum* in the Philocalian calendar of the year 354, where his burial on the Appian way is thus recorded: 'Jan. 20th. Sebastian in the Catacombs.' In the fourth century Christianity and Mithraism were overlapping, Christianity consolidating, Mithraism disintegrating. An example of such overlapping may be recalled in the ridicule of a minor Latin poet of the late fourth century, who derides Nicomachus Flavianus for trying, after the death of Valentinian (A.D. 392), to revive the cults of the Magna Mater, Isis, and Mithra, saying that he 'goes in winter to look for the sun in some peasant's silo,' thus designating the underground Mithraea.

In the year 274 sun-worship was established with great pomp as the national religion by the emperor

Aurelian, who, we may remember, was the son of a peasant of Pannonia, a province specially devoted to the Mithraic cult, though it would seem that Aurelian adopted the Syrian form of sun-worship, centred at Emesa.[1] In 284 Diocletian, a native of Illyria, where also Mithraism found many adherents, was proclaimed emperor. From the various forms of sun-worship prevailing he 'selected the Persian Mithraic system, because he was more oriental than western.'[2] Two years later he took as his colleague Maximian, also a Pannonian peasant, and the worship of Mithras became predominant, attaining almost to the dignity of an imperial religion. Many temples were dedicated to the god. Discoveries under the church of San Clemente seem to indicate that some portion of an early building, which perhaps formed part of the dwelling of St. Clement himself, was adapted for the exercise of the Mithraic mysteries. This predominance, however, was not to endure for long. With the accession of Constantine, and his celebrated victory under the banner of the Cross in 312, the triumph of Christianity was assured, though it was left for his nephew, the emperor Julian, to be the last of the imperial sun-worshipers. St. Basil, at the end of the fourth century, attests that the worship of the sun-god still persisted, and it was not until the middle of the fifth century that an almost complete silence enveloped this once powerful cult, though doubtless it still lingered on in outlying districts and the more unfrequented parts of the empire. It is easy to imagine how difficult it must have been to shake off so powerful a tradition, since even Christian art could not free itself from its dominance, but adopted and adapted its motives.

Near to the church of San Clemente, with its Mithraeum, is that of the 'Quattro Coronati,' which once possessed a silver and enamel reliquary,[3] said to contain the head of St. Sebastian. These 'Quattro Coronati,' in whose honour the church is dedicated, and who suffered martyrdom under Diocletian, are associated with the

[1] A. L. Frothingham, *Diocletian and Mithra*, *Amer. Jour. of Arch.* 2nd ser. xviii (1914), no. 2.

[2] Frothingham, op. cit.

[3] Now in the Museo Cristiano of the Vatican: A. Muñoz, *Studi Romani*, anno I (1913), pp. 197–207.

five martyr-sculptors of Pannonia, and indeed do not seem to be definitely distinguished from them[1]; legend assigns to them the same date as it does to St. Sebastian. Pannonia was an important Mithraic centre, and from its marble quarries votive offerings for Mithraic devotees everywhere were produced in large quantities. Thus here again we seem to find a link between St. Sebastian and the cult of Mithras.

The reliquary referred to was given to the church in the ninth century by pope Gregory IV (827–844), though there is another tradition that the head of St. Sebastian, in the seventh century, was given by pope Sergius I (687–701) to St. Willibrord, and that it is now kept at Echternach, in the duchy of Luxemburg.[2] This latter tradition is perhaps the earliest discoverable reference to a gift of relics of the saint. Thus far we find no power over plague ascribed to St. Sebastian or his relics, but Paulus Diaconus,[3] writing in the eighth century, records how, during the plague in Pavia in 680, relics of St. Sebastian (because of a dream) were asked for from Rome to stay the visitation, and how an altar was set up in the church of San Pietro-in-Vincoli, Pavia, for their reception, and how the plague was stayed. The mosaic over the altar of St. Sebastian in San Pietro-in-Vincoli, Rome, is said to have been dedicated in the same year, though now, at the suggestion of De' Rossi, the inscription is considered to be of the fifteenth century, and to be only a borrowing of the Pavia tradition. This latter conclusion is in part deduced from the fact that whilst the plague happened during the pontificate of pope Agathon (678–682), and is recorded in the authentic life of this pope, no mention is there made of the erection of the altar. We may notice that in this representation of St. Sebastian there is between his feet a disk marked with crossed bars, and De' Rossi has suggested that this may be a reminiscence of the disks given in the amphitheatre as prizes, and in remembrance of the hippodrome on the Palatine as the scene of the martyrdom. This idea can no longer be entertained if, as modern scholarship suggests, this so-called hippodrome, instead of being

[1] Delehaye, *Origines du culte des martyres* (1912), pp. 295 and 320.

[2] Butler, *Lives of the Saints.*

[3] *De Gestis Lombardorum*, lib. vi, c. 5.

a place for chariot races and games, was in reality a sunk-garden, with statues and green alleys, vine-covered porticoes and fountains, and a spacious exedra on the east side commanding a view of the garden.[1] If, however, the relationship between St. Sebastian and Mithras is admitted, this disk suggests comparison with the small loaves represented in the Mithraic communion on the Konjica relief, thus appropriately symbolising the celestial food. In this connexion the disk marked with a cross, carved on the corner of a decorated triangular stone found at Vindolana,[2] may likewise be recalled, and the sphere, intersected by transverse bands, found in various Mithraic reliefs, may also be cited.

St. Sebastian, as a plague-saint, may be grouped with SS. Cosmo and Damian, eastern saints, physicians, and likewise stayers of plague and pestilence, whose legend was introduced into the West in the early centuries of Christianity. Their connexion with the Dioscuri, who are associated with Mithras, has been considered and rejected,[3] but even if we accept this conclusion, the association between these saints and St. Sebastian seems worth noting, since they also were stayers of plague, and share with him the torture of being shot at with arrows.[4]

We turn now to St. Sebastian and his legend, and first of all to his name. Father Delehaye[5] says that the names of many saints are mere transformations of topographical names, Sebastian, from Sebaste in Armenia Minor, bordering on Pontus and Cappadocia, among the number, though later[6] he suggests that this name may have been derived from *Sebastos*, the Greek name for Augustus, when the deus loci of some temple of Augustus was christianised.[7]

[1] Fr. Marx, *Jahrb. d. Inst.* 1895, 136; Jordan-Hulsen, *Top. der Stadt Rom.* (1907), I, iii, p. 94.

[2] Cumont, *Textes, etc.* ii, 434.

[3] W. Weyh, *Die syrische Kosmas und Damian Legende*, 1909–1910; also *Ana. Boll.* xxvii, 223; Deubner, *Berliner phil. Wochenschr.* 1910, no. 41.

[4] St. Edmund, king of East Anglia in the ninth century, said to have been shot to death with arrows by the Danes, and appearing in later art like a St. Sebastian, but crowned to mark his royal rank, does not come under consideration here, since he is of the middle ages, and an historical personage.

[5] Writing in the *Analecta Bollandiana*, xxv (1906), p. 94.

[6] xxxi (1911), pp. 343–344.

[7] For another suggestion, we would refer readers to an article by S. Minocchi, *Il martirio di San Sebastiano, Nuova Antologia*, 1st August, 1911, and to the notice of it by H. D. in the review columns of the *Analecta Bollandiana*, xxxi (1911), pp. 343 and 344.

Sebaste was an important city, and was made the capital of Armenia by Diocletian. It was a focus for Mithraic worship, and at the same time the home of many Christians, who naturally suffered persecution, and even martyrdom, in a land where the legions were largely recruited, and where those who would not join the army lest they should have to sacrifice to the false god were treated as deserters.

The fact that, according to the legend, St. Sebastian was born at Narbonne, though his parents were citizens of Milan, at once makes us pause. Why should the pious writer of the legend, whoever he was, have chosen Narbonne as the place of his birth? What do we know of its history to help us in any way to an answer? Narbonne was a flourishing oriental colony before the Romans (in 118 B.C.) there founded their first colony in Gaul. By the third century of our era it was an important centre of Mithraic rites, which, as inscriptions verify, spread thence through the Narbonnaise, and also into Spain, where there was an organised cult in the valleys of the Asturias and Galicia. Traces of the god's popularity, though rare in Spain, have also been found near San Juan, not far from Silos, in Old Castile. In this connexion it is interesting and suggestive to recall the famous chalice in the treasury of that abbey, on which is an inscription recording that the abbot Santo Domingo (1041–1073) dedicated it in honour of St. Sebastian, at that time patron of the abbey, 'In nomine Domini, in honorem Sancti Sebastiani Dominicus abbas fecit.'[1] The origin of the monastery seems to be quite obscure, since the earliest certain reference to it is in a charter of the year 919.[2] We would hazard the suggestion that this may at one time have been a Mithraic shrine, adapted later to Christian purposes. In Narbonne itself,[3] in a wall near the church of St. Sebastian, may be seen a mutilated bas-relief, representing a Mithraic torch-bearer.

Turning to Milan, the home of St. Sebastian and his parents, we remember that here, in the third century,

[1] According to the *Analecta Bollandiana*, it was not till the eleventh century that St. Sebastian appears as a patron saint.

[2] Pere Houlin, *Tresor de Silos*, Paris, 1901

[3] Cumont, *Textes, etc.* i, p. 365.

was established the court of the emperor of the West, and that the emperor at this time was Maximian, a devotee to Mithras, whilst Milan seems to have been the place in the whole valley of the Po where the worship of the sun-god had official protection, though the dedication at Como (c. 300) of a temple to the sun, by order of Diocletian and Maximian,[1] is recorded.

From Milan, St. Sebastian is said to have gone to Rome, where, greatly regarded by the emperors Diocletian and Maximian, he was raised to a command in the palatine guard. History, however, tells us that whilst Diocletian visited Rome to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of his accession, he otherwise hardly saw it, preferring, when not on the march, his eastern capital of Nicomedia in Bithynia. There follows the account of the saint's secret visits to Christian prisoners, of his exhortations to them, of his illumination from heaven, and of his discovery by his enemies, his martyrdom, and his burial. The more we consider some of these details the more they seem to suggest that perhaps we have here, though only hinted at, a fragmentary account of an initiation into the rites of Mithras, distorted purposely, or, as is more likely, misunderstood, since the greatest secrecy prevailed concerning them. As M. Cumont has remarked, 'Les mystères païens étaient parfois de simples mystifications.' To this fragmentary account was added local colouring, memories of the Diocletian persecution, and the ordinary material that went to the making of stories of edification. Even in the fifth century, when the *Acts* of St. Sebastian are thought to have been written, many similar compositions of doubtful authenticity must have been in circulation, since in the Roman synod, held under pope Gelasius in 494, many of the *Acts* of the martyrs were excluded from the number of authentic works in the decretal *de Recipiendis*.[2]

The legends of many prominent saints so much resemble one another in important features as to appear to issue from a common mould. The interest of each consists, however, in the features peculiar to itself, and

[1] *Comptes rendus*, Acad. Inscr. 1914, pp. 147–150.

[2] E. R. Barker, *Rome of the Pilgrims and Martyrs*, p. 182.

not in those possessed in common with others. Thus St. Sebastian, in the legend, must needs occupy a position of importance, and therefore he is represented as an officer in the imperial guard; by his reproaches he provokes his persecutor; after martyrdom, his dead body is treated with contumely, and then rescued and given honourable burial by a devout woman. These features are common to the stories of many a martyr, but where the present case differs from others is in the account of the saint's prolonged illumination from heaven, during which time he is arrayed in dazzling splendour, and in the special form of his martyrdom. Another incident in the legend, the curing by the saint of a Roman prefect from mortal sickness on the condition of his consenting to the destruction of a secret chamber in his house, used for magical purposes, where was represented the stellar system, also seems suggestive, and to throw some light upon the problem. In the Mithraic mysteries, considerable prominence was given to astrology, and remains have been found in private houses of vaulted chambers dedicated to the cult, and perhaps originally painted (as we know the vaults of Mithraic caves were) to resemble the starry heavens. Many legends record the destruction of sacred images used in idolatrous worship, but in the legend of St. Sebastian alone, it would seem, do we read of the destruction, not of idols, but of a star-strewn magical chamber.

Let us consider the death and the return to life of St. Sebastian as a ceremony of initiation, and see how far the details of the legend bear out this conjecture. We know that Mithraea, like the one beneath the lower church of San Clemente, in Rome, were sometimes lighted from the roof.[1] Now in the story, St. Sebastian is said to have been illumined, whilst preaching, with a great splendour, coming down from heaven, in which splendour—and let us recall that rays of light are sometimes represented by arrows—he was clothed by seven angels with a pallium exceeding white. There were seven grades of initiation,[2] and in one of them the initiate

[1] Cumont, *Textes, etc.* ii, p. 204, fig. 30. [2] St. Jerome, *Epist.* c. vii.

bore the title of *miles*.[1] May not the pallium be either the cloak assumed at this grade, seeing that members of the different grades assumed at the sacred ceremonies the disguise appropriate to the title awarded to them,[2] or may it not be reminiscent of the Kosmos garment, the mystic starry mantle, in which Mithras is sometimes arrayed, and which is sometimes represented as adorned with seven stars? And may not the seven angels be representative of either of the seven grades, or the seven stars? We may remember that in canto xxxi of the Purgatorio, the four cardinal virtues to whom Dante is led after his plunge into Lethe, exclaim, 'here we are nymphs, and in heaven are stars.'

Mithras was pre-eminently a military divinity, and it is as a soldier that we first meet with Sta Sebastian. In what is perhaps the earliest known representation of him, a fifth-century painting in the crypt of St. Cecilia, as well as in the before-mentioned seventh-century mosaic in San Pietro-in-Vincoli in Rome, near to which was once a Mithraeum,[3] the saint is portrayed as a soldier with a pallium. Furthermore, just as the initiate remained for a season in seclusion, during which time he was thought to die unto his old life and to rise again unto a new one, so St. Sebastian is thought to be dead, and to come to life again, and is finally said to be beaten to death with rods. In this connexion we may recall the fact that in some part of the mysterious Mithraic ceremonial, as in other initiations, a sacred rod, made of a bundle of twigs, was used. Again, we read that he suffered martyrdom in the hippodrome or garden of the palace.[4] Near this traditional spot on the Palatine, not far from which was once a temple of Apollo,[5] there now exists a church[6] dedicated to the saint, and, on the same hill, a

[1] An inscription by two 'soldiers' of Mithras has lately been found at Patras: see Avezou and Picard, *R.H.R.T.* lxiv (1911), pp. 179–183.

[2] See bas-relief of Konjica: Cumont, *Textes, etc.* i, p. 175, fig. 10. Compare also, for ceremonial disguise, the priest of the Babylonian fish-god Hanni-Oannes, who, when officiating, was clad in the skin and head of the holy fish: Eisler, *Wettermantel und Himmelzelt*, 1910, i, p. 82.

[3] Cumont, *Textes, etc.* i, p. 353.

[4] Jordan and Hülsen, *Topographie der Stadt in Alterthum*, i, 3te. Abt. 1907, p. 94.

[5] O. L. Richmond, 'The Augustan Palatium,' *Journ. of Roman Studies*, iv, pp. 193–226.

[6] There is no historical mention of this church before A.D. 1001, but a small church was built in the eighth century in honour of the saint: Marucchi, *Le forum Romain et le Palatin*. 1902.

temple of the Magna Mater, whose worship was associated with that of Mithras. An inscription of the time of Severus records that there once existed on the Palatine a Mithraeum which must have been in close proximity to the imperial palace, though its site has not yet been discovered,[1] and in connexion with this, we may recall that in his *Orations*, the emperor Julian, in the *Hymn of king Helios* (153 D), whom he identifies with Mithras, says: 'Apollo also dwells on the Palatine hill, and *Helios* himself,' thus indicating the existence of a Mithraeum.

Here we have two references to a Mithraeum on the Palatine, and here also on the Palatine we find the important church of St. Sebastian. In the light of these two references and as there must have been a Mithraeum in connexion with the palace, is it presuming too much to surmise that this church of the saint may have been the site of the imperial Mithraeum?[2] This would naturally take precedence over all other shrines in Rome consecrated to Mithras, and doubtless later, when this sun-temple was adapted to Christian purposes, such prestige might attach to the church.

Even the name of the church itself, San Sebastian in Palladio, or Pallara, is significant. It has been suggested[3] that probably the name Palladio, Pallara, may be derived from the Palladium Palatinum of the temple of Elagabalus, said by tradition to have stood near by, but is it not possible that it may have taken this name from the pallium of Mithras?

This suggested association of the three temples, to the sun-god of Emesa (temple of Elagabalus), to Mithras, and to Apollo, in close proximity, seems worth noting when we remember the three forms of sun-worship respectively honoured by the emperors Aurelian, Diocletian, and Constantine.[4]

Leaving the Palatine, and going by way of the Porta San Sebastiano, near to the Catacomb of St. Calixtus (with

[1] Jordan and Hulsen, op. cit. p. 104, note Mithraeum; *C.I.L.* vi, 2271: L. Septimus Augg. lib. *Archelaus pater et Sacerdos invicti Mithrae domus Augustanae.*

[2] As an example, among many, that such dedications were possible, we note that in 361 at Alexandria the patriarch George provoked a riot in attempting to erect a church on the ruins of a Mithraeum: Cumont, *Mysteries of Mithra*, 1903, p. 202.

[3] Armellini, *Le chiese di Roma*, p. 525.

[4] Frothingham, op. cit.

its early painting of St. Sebastian) and to the church of St. Sebastian on the Appian way, we come to the Catacomb of Pretextatus, where, in an adjoining passage, there have been discovered Mithraic frescoes of the end of the second or beginning of the third century, representing, among other subjects, a celestial banquet. This yet further shows that places we now connect with St. Sebastian were, in early centuries, Mithraic centres.[1] It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that both the place on the Palatine where tradition says he was shot with arrows, and the place on the Appian way where tradition says he was buried, were on the site of, or close to, Mithraic temples.

Gradually legend, as happened in the case of many saints, crystallised about these places. A legend, once formed and accepted, may, in course of centuries, appeal to the faithful in different ways. If at first St. Sebastian was nothing more than a christianised Apollo-Mithras, it by no means follows that in mediaeval days, when his original status was forgotten, or at least confused, he should be primarily thought of as a saint with a radiant pallium. When, after the tenth century, it became the custom, with ever increasing frequency, to set up images of the saints, and, as time went on, to provide each saint with such consistent forms or emblems as made his image immediately recognisable, the distinguishing feature for any particular saint might be taken from any part of his legend. Thus St. Sebastian might have been represented as a soldier in shining pallium, or as a martyr beaten to death with rods, just as well as a man tied to a stake and shot with arrows.[2] The fact, however, that it was this last form that ultimately prevailed need not be regarded as mere accident. It was, in fact, the best expression of the fundamental idea of the legend. In the image thus composed, when Mithras had faded from memory, and Christian art had inherited what Greek art had attained to, the youthful sun-god, as Apollo, re-emerges, no longer, however, as the archer slinging

[1] Michel, *Hist. de l'Art*, i, pt. 1, p. 25.

[2] For early representations see Von Hadeln, *Die Wichtigsten Darstellungsformen des St. Sebastian in der Italienischen Malerei bis zum Ausgang des Quattrocento*, 1906.

his arrows over the world, but as a divine, or semi-divine, personage, whom arrows might pierce but could not slay.[1]

So Apollo-Mithras, god of light, whose rays are sometimes likened to, and depicted as, arrows, was, by an inverse process as he became christianised, transformed from 'the divine archer' into the arrow-stricken saint, and the legend of St. Sebastian is, it would seem, the result of this process.

[1] For an early example of this youthful St. Sebastian see *Vies et Passions des Saints*, thirteenth century, Brit. Mus. Royal MS. 20, p. vi, fo. 48b; compare Bib. Nat. MS. fr. 412, f. 52d (A.D. 1285).