

THE CULT OF MITHRA IN BRITAIN AND THE RHINELAND IN  
THE FIRST CENTURY A.D. : EVIDENCE FROM TOMBSTONES  
FOR ITS PLACE OF ORIGIN, AND ITS INTER-RELATIONS  
WITH PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY.<sup>1</sup>

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When Cumont compiled his magnificent work on the Texts and Monuments of the Mithra-cult in the Roman empire a quarter of a century ago, he found it necessary to prune away the numerous accretions which imaginative but uncritical antiquaries had in the course of time attached to it. One might almost say that for a time it had been the fashion both here and in Germany to regard *omne ignotum pro Mithraico*. One example of this tendency was the interpretation of the group of sculpture not uncommon on Roman sepulchral monuments, depicting a lion overpowering a ram, boar or other victim, which was adopted at a later date by the burghers of Bonn on the Rhine for their civic seal. A Mithraic origin was suggested as probable for this animal group on the Roman tombstones as signifying that the person commemorated had been initiated into the fourth grade of the mysteries—the Lions.

When, however, German scholars at length succeeded in classifying and approximately dating the abundant sepulchral remains which have survived in the Rhineland from the days of the Roman occupation, it was found that some at least of the Lion-stones belonged to a period almost a century earlier than the introduction of Mithraism into the western provinces of the Roman empire. The writer hopes in the pages which follow to furnish evidence that the older view was probably correct, to indicate on other tombstones the marks of the other six grades, and to

<sup>1</sup> ABBREVIATIONS USED :

C.I.L.—*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*.

P.S.A.L.—*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries* (London).

B.J.—*Bonner Jahrbücher*.

T. et M.—*Textes et Monuments relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*.  
Franz Cumont.

discover the means by which this oriental cult had been able to establish itself and to spread rapidly among the troops massed along the Rhine frontier not later than the middle of the first century A.D.

Early in 1922 the writer undertook the task of collecting the few and uncertain vestiges of Mithra-worship which time had left in Chester, once the Roman fortress of Deva and the headquarters of the Legio XX Valeria Victrix. An examination of the rude sepulchral monuments preserved in the Grosvenor Museum in that city, whose recovery we chiefly owe to the enthusiastic efforts of the late Professor Haverfield, suggested that there was a certain correspondence between the symbols carved in relief on some of the stones and the seven grades of the Mithraic mysteries. The stones appeared to group themselves in two divisions. The first included those having an inscription on a plain slab decorated with a few slight ornaments, as rosettes, crescents, etc. To this group belonged all the tombstones of the Legio II Adiutrix which left Britain A.D. 85 or 86. The second group comprised stones of a more elaborate character, with busts and figures carved in relief. It is the latter series which the writer believes to be Mithraic—the work of the same craftsmen who produced the almost innumerable bas-reliefs which adorned the Mithraea in every part of the empire in which the Roman army had its garrisons. Although it was possible to identify the marks of four or possibly five out of the seven grades with some degree of verisimilitude, unfortunately the mutilated condition of many of the monuments and the absence in most cases of the inscriptions made it difficult to apply an adequate test of the truth or falsity of the new theory. A study of the similar tombstones elsewhere in Britain did not throw much more light on the problem. On extending his survey, however, to the stones which have been preserved in the Rhineland, the writer found a much ampler material, which had been most accurately described, classified and dated by the keen analysis and unremitting labours of scholars like Klinkenberg and Weynand.

In the *Bonner Jahrbücher*,<sup>1</sup> Weynand had collected two

<sup>1</sup> Heft 108-109, 1902.



TOMBSTONE OF RUFUS SITA.

*(By permission of the authorities of the Gloucester Museum).*



TOMBSTONE OF SEXTUS.

*(By permission of the authorities of the Grosvenor Museum Chester)*



hundred tombstones of the first century, all fairly intact and with their inscriptions still legible, which allowed a more searching test than the British stones made possible.

The writer hopes to be able to show good reason for thinking that more than seventy of these stones are the memorials of initiates into the mysteries of Mithra.

If the *Dis Manibus* dedication may be trusted as a date-criterion, the German stones are somewhat earlier than those discovered in Britain. In the Rhineland only a few of the monuments have the dedication: in Britain it is frequently present.

Of the first grade--the Ravens--the sign is a pair of birds, in Germany perched on the rim of a bowl, washing themselves (fig. 1, no. 3),<sup>1</sup> in Chester usually in the festoons above the main relief (plate II, *a*). The two German examples are both pre-Flavian, those in Britain are probably of a later date. Women appear to have been admitted to this grade at Chester: in the Rhineland there is no evidence of such a privilege. At Great Chesters is a tombstone to Aurelia Cauli which has above the epitaph a cantharus with a single bird.<sup>2</sup> If the suggestion is well founded that the pine-cone decoration found on fountains is a conventional substitute in the Western Empire for the male spathe of the palm commonly used in the East as an aspergillum in lustration,<sup>3</sup> the pine-cone may sometimes have indicated this grade. It occurs together with lions at Mainz in Germany and at Wroxeter in Britain.<sup>4</sup>

Of the second grade two distinct names are known from St. Jerome and the inscriptions, Gryphus and Krypheus. Corresponding with these two names are two different marks on the tombstones indicating this grade. Those who used the name Gryphus to denote this grade would naturally adopt the gryphon or griffin as its symbol (plates IV and V). In Egypt the gryphon was distinguished from the sphinx only by the possession of wings, while in Greece the sphinx was generally winged. Hence these two mythical creatures had by the first century of our era become practically

<sup>1</sup> This is no doubt an attempt to represent the initiation rite of baptism. It is reproduced as a painting (fig. 1, no. 4) above the sunken basin in the hypogaeum lately discovered at the Porta Salaria in Rome. The identification of this symbol enabled the

writer to suggest with confidence that the Roman crypt had been a Mithraeum. cf. *B. J.* 129, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 1926, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> *P.S.A.L.* 1920, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Weynand, no. 124; *C.I.L.* vii, 156.

interchangeable, and it is not surprising to find either used at will as the mark of the second grade. Neither form has yet been discovered at Chester, but the famous Colchester sphinx (plate v) is probably an example of this use, and others have been found at Cirencester, York and Old Carlisle. In Germany there are six examples, four sphinxes and two gryphons.<sup>1</sup> The other symbol of this grade which is related to the name Kryphius (concealed) is, as before in grade I, a crude representation of the actual initiation ceremony, in which the neophyte, at first hidden behind a curtain, was presented by the officiating priest (*antistes*) to the assembled brethren (*fratres*), when the curtain was drawn back. The grade-mark accordingly consists of a semicircular niche containing a bust of the initiated person. Such recesses are known to have existed in Mithraea, as at Angera in North Italy.<sup>2</sup> The Cirencester sphinx on the Sita tombstone suggests a possible connexion between the semicircular niche and the recess formed between the two fore-legs of the sphinx (plate I, *a*). Moreover it was the custom in the Egyptian mysteries to make the candidates for initiation pass between the fore-feet of a sphinx. If gryphus is a synonym for sphinx, both names of this grade convey the idea of secrecy. At this stage most probably a solemn oath of secrecy was exacted from the neophytes, who pledged themselves to be as silent as the sphinx and were then admitted to the temple services. The human skull and bones beneath the feet of the Colchester sphinx indicated the dreadful fate which awaited all who divulged any of the mysteries soon to be imparted to them as initiates in the higher grades. The many breasts of the sphinx may possibly refer to the rapid propagation of the new religion. It is, however, a feature which appears on a seated sphinx forming the reverse on a coin of Augustus. Of the second mode of indicating this grade there are three examples in Chester<sup>3</sup> (plate I, *b*) and one in North Britain,<sup>4</sup> while Weynand's list shows six specimens in Germany.

There the bust is in some cases enlarged into a demi-figure in civil dress, sometimes holding in one hand a roll or book which was perhaps the Mithraic liturgy. The

<sup>1</sup> *B. J.* 129, p. 269 is a recent addition.

<sup>2</sup> Cumont, *T. et M.* ii, p. 263.

<sup>3</sup> Haverfield's *Catalogue*, nos. 158, 159, and 160.

<sup>4</sup> *Lapid. Sept.* no. 563.



TOMBSTONE OF DINYSIA.

*(By permission of the authorities of the Grosvenor  
Museum, Chester).*



TOMBSTONE OF M. AURELIUS LUCIANUS.

*(By permission of the authorities of the Grosvenor Museum,  
Chester).*





earliest German example (no. 23) exactly corresponds with those at Chester. One peculiar form which may perhaps be assigned to this grade is that of a bearded head surrounded by a crown.<sup>1</sup> This form also occurs at Carnuntum,<sup>2</sup> the holy place of the Mithra-cult, where a Mithraeum founded about A.D. 70 took the shape of a semi-circular grotto.

M. Cumont records a very remarkable monument dedicated at Rome *circa* A.D. 376, in honour of the two Victores Olympii, grandfather and grandson, who had been great benefactors of the cult, and had risen to the highest office in the mysteries.<sup>3</sup> The name of the grandson, Tamesius, may indicate a connexion of the family with Britain.

The monument found in 1867 consists of a series of *zothecae* or niches of which four were square and three semi-circular. The outermost of these towards the left still contained a *zothecula* or smaller niche. Cumont suggested that they had contained images of the seven planets, but perhaps no less appropriately they may have held figures representing the seven grades, through which the two men had passed. In that case the *zothecula* may correspond with our semi-circular niche occurring on the grave-stones.

The third grade was that of the Miles or soldier. This was indicated, if the man had belonged to the infantry, by a full figure in military dress, enclosed in a niche, in most cases having shell ornament above (plate iv). At first the full figure seems to have presented difficulties to the sculptor, so that we find a few three-quarter or half-figures, or even in one example a mere head and shoulders.<sup>4</sup> In Britain the stone of the centurion Favonius (plate iii) at Colchester is perhaps the best example, but there are several others at Chester of the same type.

If the man was attached to a cavalry corps, he is seen on horseback, usually trampling under the hoofs of his charger a disarmed foeman (plates i, a and i, b). This is the well-known Rider relief of which we have in Britain so fine a specimen at Hexham, the Flavinus stone (plate vi).

The connexion of this group with the Mithraic mysteries was suspected by Cumont.<sup>5</sup> It occurs in the Danubian

<sup>1</sup> Weynand, no. 156; cf. no. 196.

<sup>2</sup> B.J. 108-109, p. 221, no. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cumont, *T. et M.* ii, insc. 13.

<sup>4</sup> B.J. 108-109, Weynand, p. 221.

<sup>5</sup> *T. et M.* ii, Mon. 328 bis.

provinces on numerous small bas-reliefs of stone or metals within a border of accessory reliefs, of which some, as the lion and crater, are undoubtedly Mithraic. Perhaps we may see in this group the proto-type of the familiar St. George and the Dragon. The comparison is so much the more interesting in view of the strange parallelism which has been noted between the legends of the two heroes Mithra and St. George.<sup>1</sup> In both the above grade-marks, whether the soldier had been attached to the infantry or to the cavalry, it should be noticed that the sword is well displayed. To ensure this the horseman is always shown moving to the right. Very probably Dieterich was correct in considering the sword to be the specific mark of this grade<sup>2</sup> (fig. 1, no. 1, and plate II, *b*).

The fourth grade was that of the Lion, and was denoted by a twice-repeated group showing a lion rending a victim, usually indicated merely by a head (plates I, *a*, 1, *b* and IV). The head might be that of a ram, a bull, a boar, or even of a human being. As a rule this group was represented on each corner above the slab, forming a sort of acroterion. In Britain it occurs at Chester, Cirencester, Viroconium and along the Wall of Hadrian.

The fifth grade was the Persian. At this stage the initiate assumed the Phrygian cap, which became the mark of the grade. A head with such a cap forming the acroterion on each top corner of the stone occurs on a Chester example,<sup>3</sup> and was the simplest form. In Germany a full figure in Phrygian dress adorned each side-face of the stone (plate IV). This figure is what has been known as the *Attis funeraire*. A single instance occurs at Chester. One German stone of a *libertus* has the figures above the gable in each case playing a flute.<sup>4</sup> That instrument was found in a Mithraeum at Hedderheim and was no doubt used in some of the temple services. On a more elaborate monument at Krufft both forms of the grade-mark seem to have been used.<sup>5</sup>

The mark of the sixth grade, the Heliodromus, is a tree, apparently a bay or laurel, as Dieterich had long ago suggested.<sup>6</sup> This, like the symbol of the fifth grade, is

<sup>1</sup> *T. et M.* ii, pp. 73, 461.

<sup>2</sup> *B. J.* 108-109, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Chester Arch. Soc. Journal*, vol. i (o. s.), p. 460.

<sup>4</sup> Weynand, no. 144.

<sup>5</sup> *B. J.* 130, p. 190; *Taf.* ix, 1 and 2.

<sup>6</sup> *B. J.* 108/9, p. 33.



*(Loaned by Society of Roman Studies)*

TOMBSTONE OF FAVONIUS FACILIS AT COLCHESTER.



found generally on the two side faces of the monument. No. 101 in Weynand's collection has a small tree below the inscription. This, however, is probably a mere ornament, introduced by a sculptor ignorant of its Mithraic significance. On the genuine Mithraic stones the tree is always doubled. No example of the highest grade appears to have been discovered in Germany. Dieterich asserts that the *Patres*, as that grade was called, were known also as Eagles. A monument to M. Clodius Hermas and to Annius Felix, now no. 2358 in the British Museum catalogue, shows on either side face a bay-tree with a pair of eagles at its foot<sup>1</sup> (fig. 1, no. 2). This may indicate that one of the two men had been a *Pater*, the other a *Heliodromus*. The monument in question is a *cist*, but may none the less be Mithraic. The change from cremation to inhumation would be very gradual. After the conversion of the Teutonic tribes to Christianity the old pagan burial customs still lingered for more than a century.

It is a remarkable feature of the stones that, except in the second and third grades, the grade-mark is almost always doubled. Perhaps it may be relevant to recall here the two *dadophores*, *Cautes* and *Cautopates*, who stand on either side of the god in the reliefs of the tauroctonous Mithra. None of the grade-marks occur on any of the four stones set up to women. On two of the *Lion-stones* in Germany the *Medusa-head* occurs as a subsidiary ornament.<sup>2</sup> Cumont records its employment as a motif in the decoration of *spelaea*.<sup>3</sup> A draped girl-dancer occurs twice on the tombstones<sup>4</sup> and should be compared with the two bronze figures found with other Mithraic objects and a *Medusa* head in bronze at Angleur in Belgium, which Cumont suggested might represent two of the four Hours.<sup>5</sup>

Dieterich's identification of the signs of the third, fifth and sixth grades was derived from the border of a relief of the tauroctonous Mithra found at Apulum in Dacia<sup>6</sup> (fig. 1, no. 1). There we see seven times repeated a sword, a flaming altar, a Phrygian cap perched on a sword<sup>7</sup> (or a *bâton*, as Cumont believed), and a tree in full leaf.

<sup>1</sup> *C.I.L.* vi, 15740.

<sup>2</sup> Weynand, nos. 124, 145.

<sup>3</sup> *T. et M.* i, p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> No. 143, and *B. J.* 108, p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> *T. et M.* ii, p. 431.

<sup>6</sup> *T. et M.* ii, p. 311 mon. 192, *bis*.

<sup>7</sup> The cap perched on the sword may refer to a possible doctrine of the Mazdean cosmogony that the heaven rested on the waters of the circumambient Ocean.

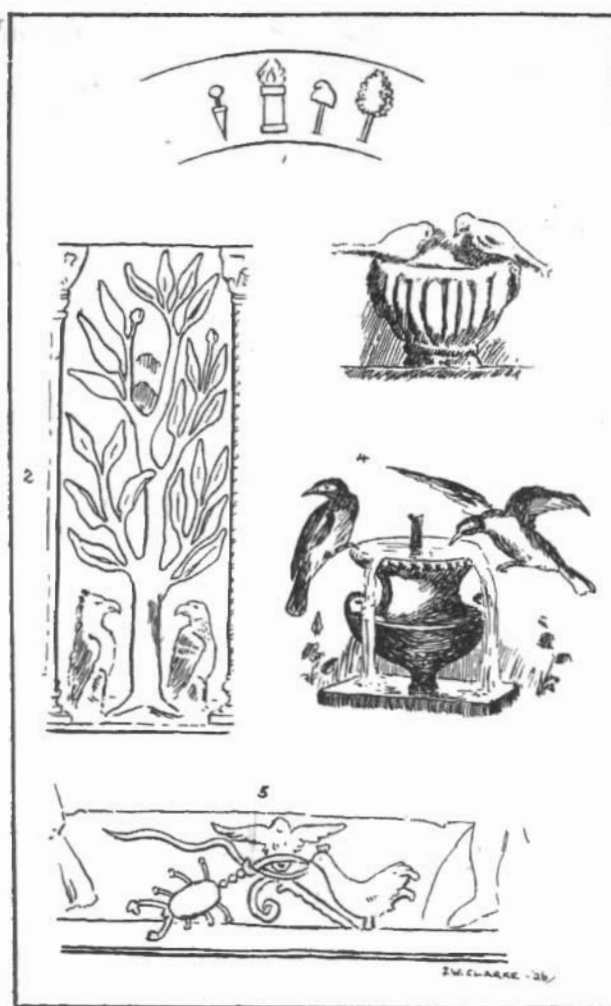


FIG. 1.

1. The marks of grades iii, iv, v and vi from border of Mithraic relief at Apulum in Dacia.
2. Marks of grades vi and vii on monument to Hermas and Felix. (Reproduced by permission of British Museum authorities).
3. Mark of grade i from tombstone of L. Nasidienus Agrippa. Weynand No. 21.
4. Painting over basin in hypogaeum at Rome. (By permission of the *Illustrated London News*).
5. Group of symbols on tombstone of Geminus Saturninus at Auzia in Algeria.

TABLE SHOWING THE AGES OF MEMBERS OF GRADES I-VI AND  
THE AVERAGE AGE IN EACH GRADE.

Grade I. Raven. No. Age.	Grade II. Kryphus. No. Age.	Grade III. Miles. No. Age.		Grade IV. Lion. No. Age.	Grade V. Perses. No. Age.	Grade VI. Heliodromus. No. Age.
116 38	23 45	4 37	132 36	25 43	75 48	151 35
21 —	87 16	24 32	133 35	124 53	125 36	182 vet.
—	121 33	42 25	136 40	126 45	127 36	183 43
—	150 18	44 50	140 25	134 46	129 62	186 36
—	156 22	45 24	162 35	143 35	130 60	188 vet.
—	177 {	60 46 37	166 40	191 30	193 vet.	189 46 <sup>1</sup>
—		25 52 36	169 30	145 ?	144 —	196 55
—	77 —	53 30	170 48	146 —	—	141 ?
—	Gryphus	54 47	171 45	—	—	—
—	69 16	57 35	184 27	—	—	—
—	147 —	76 30	185 26	—	—	—
—	148 —	82 35	190 36	—	—	—
—	—	83 30	192 30	—	—	—
—	—	84 50	55 —	—	—	—
—	—	85 38	56 —	—	—	—
—	—	86 45	81 ?	—	—	—
—	—	128 35	168 —	—	—	—
—	—	131 30	—	—	—	—
Average age : 29·4		35·5		42	49·5	46·4

The numbers are those given in Weynand's list.  
In the case of veterans an age of 55 years is assumed.

<sup>1</sup> Vide B.7. 108-9, p. 95.

Cumont identified these emblems with the four elements—earth, air, fire and water—in a reversed order. They may at the same time represent the four grades in question, if each grade was related in some way to a particular element. For some unknown reason the lion was preferred on the sepulchral stones to the flaming altar, of which no example is anywhere found.

From a fragment of Porphyry it is known that members of the first three grades had no share in the mysteries.<sup>1</sup> They may be compared to the Christian catechumens and formed an inferior group, which bore the name of Servants (ὕπηρετοῦντες). Grades iv–vii formed the superior group, whose members after receiving the Leontica were known as Participants (μετέχοντες) because probably they alone had the privilege of partaking of the sacramental meal.<sup>2</sup>

An examination of the table on page 9 shows that the numbers comprised in the different grades varied greatly in Germany. Grade i, which includes two members only, was evidently merely preliminary. It was only on entering grade ii that the neophyte was formally presented to his fellow-members (*consacranei*). Promotion to grade iii was probably easy and rapid, but, before reaching grade iv and joining the ranks of the participants, a longer interval would have to elapse and more severe tests would have to be undergone. Moreover it must be remembered that we are dealing with the early days of the movement, when the new religion was rapidly spreading through the various corps of the Roman army on the Rhine. At first in pre-Claudian times we find very few above grade iii; in the Flavian age they are much more numerous.

In view of these considerations it should not appear surprising that, according to the tabulated results of our inquiry, nearly half of the total number of members fall into grade iii. The difference in the average ages of grades ii and iii is seen to be almost six years. It would, however, be unsafe to conclude that so long an interval had to elapse between the two initiations, as there may have been age-limits for entrance into grades iii and iv. The youngest member of grade iii was twenty-four years

<sup>1</sup> *De Abstinencia* iv. 16 (p. 253 Nauck).  
*T. et M.* ii, 42, l. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *T. et M.* i, p. 321.







TOMBSTONE OF FIRMUS ECCONIS.

(By permission of the Verein von Altertum's freunden im Rheinlande).

old, the youngest in grade iv was thirty. In grade iv the average age was forty-two years, a difference of six and a half years as compared with grade iii. The average age of members of the fifth grade, the Persians, works out at 49.5 years, but this is probably too high, as the number of initiates is only six and two of them were sexagenarians. Both these men belonged to the Cohors I Sagittariorum. One came from Lappa in Crete; the other, who had a record of forty years' service, was from Sidonia.

For the veterans an age of fifty-five years has been assumed, by no means an extravagant figure, as in no. 65 in Weynand's list we find a man who had reached the age of 120 years.

Of the sixth grade, the Heliodromi, no example occurs in the pre-Flavian age. The average age is 46.4 years, which is probably somewhat less than the normal.

On some of the stones we find the marks of more than one grade. No. 125 has the marks of four consecutive grades (plate iv). It commemorates a soldier of the cohort of Rhaeti, was found at Andernach and is thus described by Weynand:

'In the angle of the gable acanthus with rosette. Above the gable on both sides a lion holding a ram's skull; in between a sphinx. Under the gable in a niche, whose top is shell-like, a soldier with a smaller attendant on each side. On each side of the stone an Attis.'

From the same site at Andernach came fragments of two other tombstones very similar to the above, but of superior workmanship. In neither case was the inscription preserved, but one stone had evidently, like no. 125, had the marks of four successive grades.<sup>1</sup>

The marks of three grades occur on nos. 127 and 141. The inscription on the latter has probably been wrongly restored, as the age of twenty-three is too young for a Heliodromus. There are several stones on which are found the marks of two grades.<sup>2</sup> In Britain we find three grades indicated on the Rufus Sita stone from Cirencester (plate i, a), and on the Sextus stone at Chester<sup>3</sup> (plate i, b).

From about A.D. 70 a change of fashion in tombstones set in among the worshippers of Mithra. Klinkenberg

<sup>1</sup> B.J. 77, 43.

<sup>2</sup> Weynand, nos. 182, 186, 196.

<sup>3</sup> Haverfield, *Cat.* no. 91.

has determined the date of this change from the movements of the *Alae Noricorum et Indiana*.<sup>1</sup> The so-called sepulchral banquet (plate II, *a* and *b*), whatever its earlier history may have been, came into favour for all grades. Grade ii is apparently rarely indicated by any special mark, nor is grade iii, unless the deceased was an eques, in which case a modified form of the rider relief was employed below the inscription. The rider is now on foot, leading his charger. The superior grades are still shown as before.

A comparison with the Konjica relief figured on page 159 of Cumont's *Mysteries of Mithra*<sup>2</sup> is convincing proof that we have in this well-known scene a representation of the Mithraic communion or agape, which recalled the legendary banquet of Mithra and Helios. This motif was most appropriate to such a use, as it was through partaking of the sacred meal that the Mithraists assured to themselves a glorious immortality.

Cumont says: 'The sacred wine conferred on them a glorious immortality. They came forth strengthened from these sacred banquets, which contained the promise of a better life, where the sufferings of this world find their full compensation.'<sup>3</sup> There are twenty-three examples of this scene in Weynand's collection. Thirteen have the marks of at least one grade; ten are without any such mark, but on two of these the mark may have been destroyed. In Britain the same type of relief occurs at York, Chester and Templebrough. At Chester grade i is indicated by a pair of ravens in festoons (plate II, *a*) above the banquet relief; similarly grade iii by a sword and helmet (plate II, *b*).

Soon after A.D. 110, as Klinkenberg has shown, the banquet scene ceased to appear on the sepulchral monuments in Germany<sup>4</sup>; in Britain it may have continued in use a little later. We see it without the table in front on a slab erected to Victor, a Moor, which was found at South Shields.<sup>5</sup> It is not easy to discover the cause of this sudden disappearance. Perhaps such reliefs were prohibited by the Mithraists themselves, because they attracted unwelcome attention or exposed the holiest

<sup>1</sup> *B.J.* 108-109, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> *Or T. et M.* i, 175.

<sup>3</sup> *Mys. of Mith.* pp. 160, 173.

<sup>4</sup> *B.J.* 108-109, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce, *Handbook*, p. 246.



*(Loaned by Society of Roman Studies).*

THE COLCHESTER SPHINX.



rite of their religion to the ridicule of unbelievers. More probably their cessation was due to the suppression of the cult by the imperial authority. In A.D. 112 Trajan issued his well-known rescript against associations (*ἐταῖρᾱι*), which led to the persecution of the Christians recorded in Pliny's letters. Unless the new religion had received recognition by decree of the Roman senate, the Mithraic communities would certainly be liable to the penalties of the imperial rescript as secret and illegal sodalicia. If a persecution of the Mithraists did take place, the foreign cult was only driven underground, to break forth with renewed vigour some thirty or forty years later.

Cumont believed that the Mithraic infection had filtered slowly into the Rhineland from the Danubian provinces, and expressed some surprise that the earliest known Mithraic inscription outside Rome should have been found in Upper Germany.<sup>1</sup> This was a dedication made in A.D. 148 at Recking near Heilbron, by a centurion of the Legio VIII Augusta. Cumont thought that Germany was undoubtedly one of the latest provinces to which the oriental cult penetrated. At the same time he recognised the possibility of its having been introduced by the eighth legion about A.D. 70 from Moesia.<sup>2</sup> It may be relevant to recall the famous incident at the second battle of Betriacum in A.D. 69, when the Legio III Gallica saluted the rising sun before advancing to victory over the Vitellians. That legion had been for some years in Moesia, though previously its station had been in Syria.

The new evidence furnished by the tombstones shows that the cult of Mithra flourished most rapidly and extensively in the cohorts and squadrons of auxiliary troops. Some of the legions caught the contagion at a very early date, in others it appears to have been entirely absent. In the Legio XIV Gemina, stationed at Mainz from the death of Augustus until A.D. 43, when it joined the expedition to Britain, there are four examples, of which one is erected to the memory of a tribune. The absence of the legionary titles *Martia Victrix* from these stones is sufficient proof that they belong to the pre-Claudian period. For these titles are known to have been gained

<sup>1</sup> *T. et M.* i. p. 50, and ii, inscr. 423.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* i, 256.

by the legion's services in the fighting in Britain. Another of its distinctions was the unofficial title of *Domitores Britanniae* (*Tac. Hist.* v, 16). In the *Legio IV Macedonica*, which was brought from Spain to take its place in Upper Germany, out of nineteen monuments there is not one certain example of Mithraism. The only doubtful case is Weynand no. 101, to which reference had been made above (page 7). A tombstone found at Asberg subsequent to the date of Weynand's article, if Dr. Oxe's account of it is accepted, appears not to conform to our theory.<sup>1</sup> It was set up to a woman, Polla Matidia, by a veteran of the *Legio II Augusta* and above the somewhat damaged inscription is a demi-figure in a semicircular niche—the mark of grade ii. Probably, however, the figure is that of the veteran himself and the inscription was never completed after his death, though a space had been left for that purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Of the twentieth legion there are two stones of Mithraic initiates.<sup>3</sup> Both are probably earlier than A.D. 43, when it came to Britain.

An examination of the tombstones which Weynand, by a series of skilful deductions from known data, has assigned to the period before Claudius will enable us to determine the probable centre from which the foreign cult was propagated. There are twenty-four stones which have the marks of various Mithraic grades, out of a total of 88 belonging to this period. Seven come from Mainz, five from Worms, which is situated about thirty miles away to the south, seven from Bonn, about seventy miles to the north-west, two from Köln and one each from Neuss and Strasburg. Two or possibly three of the Mainz stones<sup>4</sup> are those of soldiers of the *Cohors I Ituraeorum*, of whom one is figured holding a bow and arrow. Its inscription runs thus :

MONIMUS IEROMBALI F. MIL. CHOR. I  
ITURAEOR(UM) ANN. L. STIP. XVI. H. S. EST.

The name Monimus is suggestive, as it (*Monimos*) was applied by the Syrians of Edessa to one of the two boys

<sup>1</sup> *B. J.* 116, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Oxe writes: 'Während der Steinmetz in den nicht vollen Zeilen 3 und 6 die Schrift symmetrisch in die Mitte

schob, liess er in Zeile 4 auffallender Weise nur das Ende der Zeile leer.'

<sup>3</sup> Weynand, nos. 81, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Weynand, nos. 44, 45, 46.



who were set on either side of their Baal, a sun-god, as Cautes and Cautopates on either side of Mithra in the tauroctonus relief.<sup>1</sup>

The Cohors I Ituraeorum was stationed in the camp at Zahlbach near Mainz, where the Legio XIV Gemina also lay. The dates of its coming and of its departure are alike unknown. Tacitus tells us that, as early as the time when Germanicus was in command (A.D. 15-17), there were mounted archers on the Rhine.<sup>2</sup> Who these were is revealed by a lucky find of a silver ring at Neuss with the inscription :

DECU(RIONIBUS) ALAE P(A)RTHOR(UM)  
VET(ERANAE) QUOI PRAE(E)S(T) P.  
VIBIUS RUFUS.<sup>3</sup>

Of the twenty-four stones above mentioned, two only, from Bonn and Mainz respectively, commemorate members of grades higher than the third. The chief focus of the contagion was probably near Mainz, but there may have been a subsidiary centre near Köln. More probably, however, the Parthian archers were followers of the old Mazdean religion, which was by no means identical with the hellenised Mithra-cult.

To allow the soldier of legion I at Bonn<sup>4</sup> sufficient time to rise to grade v, at least ten years would be needed. Hence we may conclude that the Ituraeans were already in Upper Germany as early as the year A.D. 33 and that the mystery-cult soon spread rapidly up and down the Rhine valley from the army head-quarters at Mainz. In a similar way, Cumont suggested that Mithraism might have been introduced into Dacia by a numerus Palmyrenorum, who came from a district in Syria some 150 miles to the north of the Ituraeans.<sup>5</sup>

The Ituraeans inhabited the desert region which lay between Damascus and the sea of Galilee. They were a wild nomadic race, dwelling in the caves and rocks and robbing the caravans on their way to and from Damascus. An inscription of the time of Augustus, found at Berytus,

<sup>1</sup> Cumont, *T. et M.* i, p. 207, n. 3: J'ai voulu identifier l'Helios d'Edesse a Mithra, Aziz-Phosphoros et Monimos Hesperos aux dadophores, mais cette hypothese est douteuse.

<sup>2</sup> Tac. *Ann.* ii, 16.

<sup>3</sup> *B.Z.* 111-112, p. 14; *C.I.L.* xiii, 10024, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Weynand, no. 75.

<sup>5</sup> *T. et M.* i, 250.

records the capture of an Ituraean *castellum* in Mount Libanus by a Roman prefect.<sup>1</sup> Their fame as archers was world-wide, as we see from Vergil's *Georgics* ii, 448.

Ituraeos taxi torquentur in arcus.

Cicero a half century earlier had taunted M. Antonius: 'Cur homines omnium gentium maxime barbaros Ituraeos cum sagittis deducis in forum?'<sup>2</sup> Still earlier they had been subdued by the Jewish prince Aristobulus and compelled to be circumcised. Their homeland was by no means extensive, not more than fifty miles in breadth, and the population must have been sparse in such a barren land. Is it then an extravagant surmise that among the 600 men of the Ituraean cohort there were some who had heard Jesus preaching to the multitudes, who flocked out into the wilderness east of the sea of Tiberias to hang on the words of the new prophet? If such there were, perhaps we have here found the explanation of that curious parallelism between the doctrines and practices of the two religions in later times, which has so long been a puzzle to theologians. The most probable date of the Crucifixion was fixed by Baron von Soden in the year 30, while the cohorts I Ituraeorum must have arrived in Germany, if our conclusions are even approximately correct, not much later than A.D. 33.

The conversion of St. Paul at Damascus was fixed by the same chronologist about the year 32. The apostle spent the next three years in Arabia and Damascus: there he probably started his missionary career, as appears from Galatians, i, 23 and ii, 7.

Artaxerxes II, the devoted servant of Mithra and Anahita, is known to have set up an image of the latter goddess at Damascus before 359 B.C.<sup>3</sup> An old tradition existed that the district of Ituraea was settled by the Persians with people brought from Media.<sup>4</sup> Cumont supposed, though the evidence for it was admittedly slender, that the cult of Mithra, as it appeared full-grown in the West towards the end of the first century, had been moulded by Hellenistic influences somewhere in Asia Minor. Dieterich believed he could detect the influence of Egypt in addition.

The district east of the Jordan, abounding in rocks and

<sup>1</sup> B.J. 117, p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> Cic. *Phil.* ii.

<sup>3</sup> Berosus, frag. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Rendell Harris, *Eucharistic Origins*, p. 17.

caves and studded with flourishing cities of Greek origin, seems to satisfy the conditions of our problem. There the ancient Mazdean religion, which had survived from the days of the Persian domination, was brought into close contact with Hellenistic ideas and culture, while the caravan-route to Damascus maintained constant intercourse with Egypt. The excavations now in progress in that little-known region may be expected to test the truth of the hypothesis that the Decapolis region was the focus of the Mithraic religion, as we find it later in the Roman armies in Western Europe.

A tombstone which presents several remarkable variations from the normal type is that of Geminius Saturninus, a beneficiarius in an auxiliary corps. It was discovered at Auzia in Algeria.<sup>1</sup> Portraits of the dead man, his wife and two children form the main relief, two ornate lions stand in their usual position on the two angles above, while in the gable between them is a conventional representation of the Sepulchral banquet. Below the principal relief is seen a group of symbols which was probably intended to protect the dead or possibly the living from the influence of the 'evil eye.' Around an eye and facing inwards towards it are an eagle with wings outspread, a serpent and scorpion, and a cock, and below a shepherd's staff. All the four above mentioned creatures figure more or less frequently on Mithraic reliefs, and it is known that in the Mazdean cult the 'evil eye' was regarded as a manifestation of demonic powers.<sup>2</sup> A more elaborate example of a similar group of symbols on a marble relief of unknown provenance is figured and described in *Archaeologia* xix, p. 70, pl. vi. There the eye is apparently being attacked by a lion, a serpent, a scorpion, a crane and a raven, while above the eye crouches a man wearing a Phrygian cap in the indecorous attitude sometimes assumed by Italian sailors when delayed by unfavourable winds. It will probably be safe to assume with the writer of the account in *Archaeologia* that the group of symbols is Mithraic in origin. In that case the Auzia monument affords inde-

<sup>1</sup> *Revue archéologique*, N.S. 1863, pl. 8; also figured in Schreiber's *Atlas of Classical Antiquities* (pl. 87, 2); epitaph in *C.I.L.* viii, 9057.

<sup>2</sup> Cumont, *T. et M.* i, p. 141.

pendent proof of a connexion relating the lions and the banquet scene on sepulchral stones to the Mithraic religion.

The device of an eye attacked by snakes and scorpions occurs also on the tomb of Zenobia at Palmyra, and it is interesting if Mithraism had its origin in the Trans-Jordan region, to note the existence of a similar relief<sup>1</sup> on a capital at Kefer near Sueida in the Jebel Druz, within the limits of ancient Decapolis.

Some critics, such as Robertson, have suggested Mithraic influence in the gospel-story, as in the Temptation episode viewed as an initiation rite conferring power over evil spirits. In the cursing of the fig-tree, the tree may perhaps symbolise the Mithra-cult, as the vine was often used as a type of the Christian Church.<sup>2</sup> These borrowings, however, are in any case few and unimportant.

The Mithraic hierarchy, adopting from the first a less intransigent attitude towards the various religions with which it came into contact, borrowed largely from its new rival in Palestine, the sacrament of baptism, the shepherds at the birth, and above all the sacramental meal or Last Supper. Roese and Harnack both inclined to the belief that this was the most likely explanation,<sup>3</sup> in spite of the scepticism of Cumont and Dieterich. The Nasidienus stone (Weynand, no. 21) seems to prove that the baptism-rite was Mithraic before A.D. 43; the banquet relief does not appear in Germany before A.D. 70. The details of the latter rite are copied too exactly to be accounted for in any other way. The bread stamped with the cross, the water mingled with the wine, their consecration by an unchanging formula of the priest, and the life-giving efficacy of the solemn rite are alike faithfully reproduced. It was not surprising that later Christians believed the Mithraic practice to be due to the direct inspiration of Satan.

These speculations are put forward merely tentatively, in order to indicate the possible scope of the conclusions to which our hypothesis may lead. The correspondence of the sepulchral reliefs with what is known of the seven Mithraic grades is too close to be the result of mere accident,

<sup>1</sup> *The Times* of April 24th, 1925, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> M. Dunant in *Jebel Druz*.

<sup>3</sup> cf. St. John, i, 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, ii, 319, 320.

the preponderance of the lower grades in the early years and the distribution among the various grades are what one might expect under the known conditions, and above all the corroboration afforded by the age-test applied to the successive grades is hardly explicable except on the assumption that the hypothesis is in the main true.

The symbols which were adopted by the Mithraists to indicate membership of the three lowest grades had not previously been recognised. In their desire to attract as little attention as possible they selected marks so general in character that they had escaped notice.

The birds and the bust in a niche may have been in use previously before their adoption by the Mithraists. Hence, if these grades stood alone, it would be necessary to admit that the evidence was not conclusive. In the case of the three higher grades the evidence is much more convincing. Their symbols had already been identified by Dieterich on monuments that are unquestionably Mithraic. They appear on twenty-three of the tomb-stones; there are eight Lions, seven Persians and eight Heliodromi. Nineteen of these stones record the man's age at death. With one exception the ages are from thirty-five upwards. The exception is a Lion, the lowest of the three grades, who died at the age of thirty.

In a peaceful civil community there would be nothing at all remarkable in such a death-incidence. In the Rhineland during the first century, however, the conditions of life must have been vastly different. The army of occupation, to which with very few exceptions the dead men belonged, was exposed to constant hostile attacks. An examination of 155 cases recorded on the gravestones in Weynand's list yields the following results:—

Under 21 yrs.	21 to 25 yrs.	26 to 30 yrs.	31 to 35 yrs.	36 to 40 yrs.	41 to 45 yrs.	46 to 50 yrs.	51 to 55 yrs.	56 to 60 yrs.	Above 60 yrs.
12	16	33	30	26	13	12	5	4	4

From the above table it will be seen that the heaviest death-rate occurred between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-five. The deaths of those not older than thirty-five amounted to 59 per cent. of the total number.

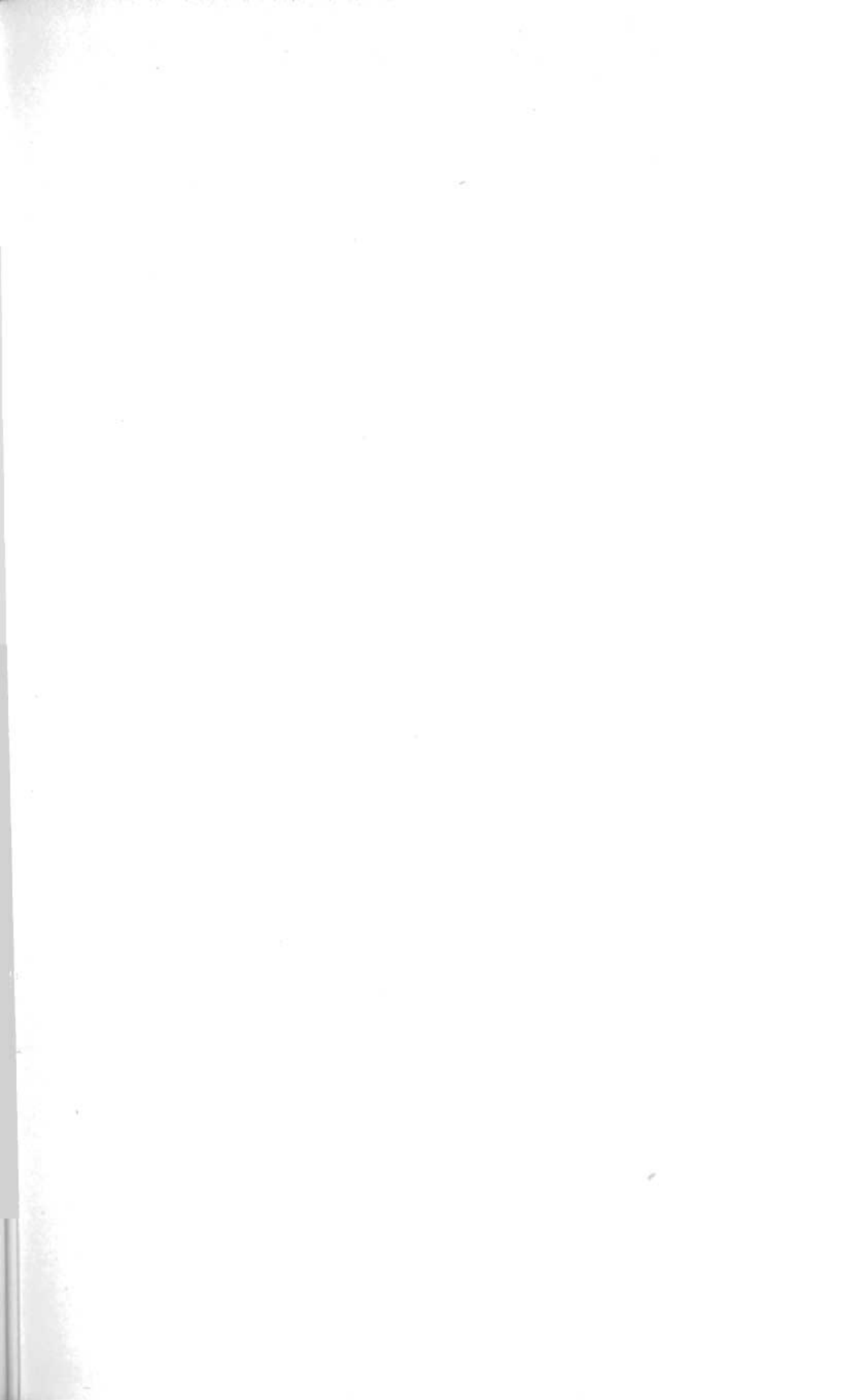
Out of the nineteen men contained in grades iv, v and

vi only three are below the same limit—less than 16 per cent.

The Mithraic theory provides a satisfactory explanation of this wide discrepancy. How little attention German scholars have devoted to this aspect of the problem is best illustrated by the unfortunate suggestion which one of the ablest of them propounded in what must have been a momentary aberration, that the Attis-figure, the mark of grade v, was an emblem of a premature decease!

\* \* \* \* \*

The above article was already in type when a most valuable contribution to our knowledge of the influence of the oriental mystery-cults in the Rhineland appeared in the *Bonner Jahrbücher* (1924) by Dr. H. Lehner. Among his main conclusions is this, that the influence of oriental religious ideas had by the second century permeated the civil no less than the military population of the Rhineland to an extent hitherto hardly suspected. The possibility that Druidism may have formed a bridge, over which the Keltic peoples easily passed to an acceptance of the new beliefs, is mentioned only to be summarily dismissed. If, however, the Mithraic cult was spreading rapidly in the Roman army of occupation before the days of Claudius, the question may deserve re-consideration. Even so the influence of Druidism was probably not great among the general population. Dr. Lehner's earliest record of Mithraism is a dedication by a Thracian cavalry officer at Dormagen about the end of the first century. The influence of Thracians serving in the Roman army played an important part, in Dr. Lehner's opinion, in promoting the spread of oriental culture and ideas. He finds very slight evidence in the first century of the presence of oriental merchants or slaves among the civil population. He is inclined to favour the suggestion that the Rider-relief and the Funeral banquet were introduced into the Rhineland by Thracian auxiliaries. An examination of the group of Rider-reliefs, which are pre-Claudian in date, shows no such preponderance of Thracians as one might in that case expect, but a general diffusion among the various auxiliary units. The Thracians certainly bulk largely in the later examples of that relief, especially in







(Lent by Society of Roman Studies)

TOMBSTONE OF FLAVINUS AT HEXHAM.



Britain. The Hellenistic origin of the type is no objection to its Mithraic use, as a similar source is generally accepted for the most popular Mithraic sculpture, that of the tauroctonous Mithra.<sup>1</sup>

Why was this relief adopted as an emblem of the third grade—the Miles or Soldier? In the mysteries the initiates, as we know, re-enacted the warfare of the gods in heaven, where Ormuzd and his supporters, of whom Mithra was chief, fought for world-supremacy against Ahriman and his swarm of demons. There can be little doubt that the Roman auxiliaries and legionaries who held the frontiers of the empire against the barbarian hordes outside believed themselves under the impact of the new religious ideas to be champions of the Light against the powers of Darkness. Perhaps it was religious enthusiasm which inspired the Fourteenth Legion to become the dreaded *Domitores Britanniae*. The signifer Flavinus on the tombstone at Hexham<sup>2</sup> bore aloft on his standard not an image of the Emperor but the rayed head of the Light-god Mithra (plate vi). Dr. Lehner is certainly right in seeing in this relief a reference to the future life. It is hardly probable, at least in the first century, that Roman troops would be allowed to adopt such a foreign device.

The training and discipline of the Roman army on earth was merely a preparation and a test through which the warrior acquired merit and gained experience for an eternal life of greater triumphs over the same foes in the service of his master and saviour. That eternal redemption was to be secured for him by Mithra's slaying of a second bull. The prominence given to the communion relief after A.D. 70 involves a doctrine hardly consistent with the above belief. Probably it would be unwise to expect too logical a consistency from simple soldiers who had no scruples about holding both beliefs side by side. The imperial authority saw its advantage and was not slow to profit by the new movement. If the fighting spirit of the troops was improved by their newly-found religious enthusiasm, the imperial command was prepared to wink at a good deal that was not strictly according to law. The Mithraists on their side from the first were remarkable for

<sup>1</sup> *T. et M. i.*, 179.

<sup>2</sup> *County History of Northumberland*, x, 506.

their complaisant attitude towards other forms of religion. Probably it was at this period that the legions adopted as their peculiar badges certain emblems in which some writers have seen a connexion with the signs of the Zodiac.<sup>1</sup> The latter occur repeatedly on Mithraic reliefs and must have figured largely in the doctrines of the new cult. The badge of the twentieth legion—the boar and the cypress (?) tree—appears on reliefs of the second century in Britain and probably had a Mithraic origin and significance, as the two emblems are combined more than once on undoubted Mithraic monuments, as at Trent and Mauls.<sup>2</sup>

An inscribed stone found in 1726 at Hexham abbey in the wall of the crypt was (on grounds unfortunately not stated) considered by Hübner to be a Mithraic dedication, but his conjecture has received no support from more recent critics. The inscription<sup>3</sup> runs:—

LEG . A . . . . . / Q. CALPVRNVS/  
 CONCESZINI/VS . PRAEF. EQ/ CAESA . CORI/  
 ONOTOTAR/VM MANV PR/AESENTISSIMI/  
 NVMINIS DE V S

Horsley<sup>4</sup> wrote: 'Every remaining letter is certain, even the backward S in Concessinius is sure,' and above, p. 248, 'I spent some time in examining every particular and have here represented them as I found them with the greatest impartiality.' The DE in the last line has been regarded as a mason's error for DEO, but surely the correction is needless. The stone records, somewhat ambiguously, either that the prefect fulfilled his vow, or that the victory was won on the day when the god's influence and power was at its highest. If the Sun-god's dies natalis was known as the dies numinis invicti, what name could be more fitting for his summer festival than the dies numinis praesentissimi? The actual reading is internal evidence for the correctness of Hübner's conjecture. Hübner's suggestion must, how-

<sup>1</sup> von Domaszewski, *Westd. Zeitschr.* xiv, 45.

- *T. et M.* ii, 267, and 339.

<sup>2</sup> *C.I.L.* vii, 481.

<sup>3</sup> *Roman Britain*, pref. p. xvi, and p. 248, Northumb. 108.

ever, have been based on some other reason, since he rejects *die for deo*.

There is in Germany an interesting parallel to the Hexham stone of Flavinus. It was found in 1892 at Bonn and was the subject of a paper by Dr. Lehner in the *Bonner Jahrbücher*, Heft 117, p. 279. The deceased, an eques in the Ala Longiniana, although not like Flavinus a signifer, holds aloft a standard or vexillum representing the head and fore-legs of a bull. This device is obviously perfectly consistent with the Mithraic significance of the Rider-relief. Dr. Lehner's explanation of it is that it is a Celtic deity, the three-horned bull.<sup>1</sup> The border surrounding the figure of the bull seems not to be part of the vexillum but to be intended merely to divide the standard from the ornamentation of the gable over which it projects. In that case, what Dr. Lehner takes to be the third horn may well be the spear point of the standard.

One or two other points in Dr. Lehner's latest paper deserve mention, particularly an addition to the list of oriental troops serving in the Rhineland in the earlier half of the first century. A tombstone from Asberg commemorates a Tyrian of the cohors Silau[ci]ensium. Dr. Oxé has very reasonably suggested that the more correct version is Seleuciensium, i.e. Seleucia in Northern Syria. That corps may have been the first to spread the doctrine of Mithraism in Lower Germany. The abandonment of the legionary fortress at Neuss soon after the end of the first century, according to Dr. Lehner, accounts for the fact that it is one of the few military sites on which the Romans left no remains of the worship of the invincible Mithra. There were, however, a few tombstones found there, of which one is probably Mithraic.

Early in 1928, in digging the foundations for a garage at Colchester, there came to light the tombstone of a duplicarius in the Ala Prima of Thracians which in the main presented the same features as that of Rufus Sita at Gloucester, two lions flanking a sphinx-like figure set over the Rider-relief. The unique feature in the new monument is that writhing over each lion from front to back and apparently biting the lion's tail is a large serpent. The reptile clearly from

<sup>1</sup> A stone at Chester showing a similar relief of a bull may likewise be of Mithraic

origin. Haverfield, *Catalogue*, no. 149, described its execution as spirited.

its attitude is not the lion's victim represented on different tombstones in so many various forms.

A badly mutilated tombstone found at Andernach many years ago may supply the clue to its meaning. Dr. Josef Klein<sup>1</sup> in his description said: 'There was most probably a serpent or a dragon lying between the two lions.' All that was left of it was three coils of the tail. Both the monuments are of about the same early date, not later than A.D. 50. The likeliest explanation is that we have here a grade-mark which very soon fell into disuse. Possibly it may refer to grade vi, as on monument no. 182 in Weynand's list the bay-tree was encircled by such a reptile.

The well-known bronze funerary vase which was found in a tumulus at Grächwil in the canton of Berne has hitherto been accepted as a product of the Hallstatt II culture<sup>2</sup>. Four of the symbols which decorate it are those which we have tried to assign to Mithraic grades, the sphinx, the lions, the serpents and the eagle. Two other symbols, the hares and the smaller lions, are unaccounted for. If the Grächwil vase is a Mithraic monument—a conclusion difficult to resist in the face of so many striking points of resemblance—it must be the earliest known and belong to the period before the cult had assumed its final shape. The hares may correspond to what afterwards were called ravens, the smaller lions may be the hyenas of Porphyry,<sup>3</sup> for which, as Cumont records, Felicianus wished to substitute lionesses. In that case there were in the early days of the cult not seven but six grades, the hare, the gryphus, the lion, the lioness or hyena, the serpent and the eagle. All of these are animal forms, the grade of soldier may be an afterthought, a later addition.

There seems to be no question of the authenticity of the Grächwil vase, or one might be tempted to believe that some forger might have adorned it with ornaments borrowed from the tombstones.

Grateful acknowledgments are due to Miss M. V. Taylor, of Oxford, for help with illustrations, as well as for information on various points.

<sup>1</sup> *B. J.* 77, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> *T. et M.* ii, 42, n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Dechelette, *Manuel d'archéologie*, II, fig. 306-7, p. 784.