



The Cult of Mithra in Deva.

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OME twenty-five years ago it was my pleasing duty to attend the very lucid lectures of the late Professor Pelham at Oxford on the Early Principate. I can still remember how he insisted on the decay of the old Italian religion and the futility of the efforts which Augustus made to buttress the crumbling edifice against the corroding attacks of the Greek sceptical spirit. The old Roman worship survived only as a political figment maintained merely for utilitarian purposes. The discredited creed was replaced among the masses of the people in Italy by more vigorous and attractive cults brought from Eastern lands.

If the above views corresponded with the facts, I was at a loss to understand how the image carved in low relief on the bluff of Bunter sandstone in Edgar's Field, close to the ancient ford, could possibly represent the old Roman war-goddess. Its rude character and its position outside the walls remote from the centre of the State's authority rendered such a supposition to my mind hardly probable. The contiguous cave appeared to me to offer the most promising clue to the solution of the problem.

In December last the *Cornhill Magazine* had an interesting article dealing with "The Cults along the Roman Wall." About a century ago an underground Mithraeum was discovered at Borcovicus, just outside the camp, and remains of bas-reliefs taken therefrom are still preserved at Carlisle. I had often marvelled at the superb marble bas-relief of the Tauroctonus Mithra in the Louvre at Paris and it occurred

to me that there was a certain resemblance between the cave there shown and our little grotto in Chester. There was also more than a suggestion of a Phrygian mitra about the head-dress of the supposed goddess. Again, the raven in the Louvre bas-relief looked much more like an owl.

I sought for fuller information in M. Cumont's book on *The Mysteries of Mithra*, and in the more comprehensive and magnificent French text presented to the Society's Library by Professor Newstead. From the latter I discovered that at Borcovicus the temple had been situated, as at Chester, to the south of the south gate of the camp. Later I found from Cumont that at Vindobala—another camp on the Wall—the temple site was similar.

The Mithraic temples were usually oblong in shape, the length from two to three times the breadth. As it was generally impossible to find a convenient cave, a building was often constructed with one end against a wall of living rock in which one or more niches were excavated, similar to our tiny cavern in Chester. For it was in just such a cave that Mithra was said to have been born of the rock.

On examination of the rock-face above and around our cave I found two large holes on each side, well-adapted to receive the ends of the beams which would support the roof of such a structure. The hole for the central roof-beam was not visible, as a layer of soil covers the brow of the rock. The roof would have a spread of about twenty feet.

On p. 263 of Cumont's *Textes et Monuments*, I found a reproduction of a photograph showing a rock-face with a cave which has a remarkable likeness to the Chester cave. The photograph was taken on a hill-side at Angera near Lake Maggiore in North Italy. Above and around the cave (although not shown in the photograph, which had to be taken at too short a range) is a series of large holes, which must have helped to support the posts of a wooden structure leaning against the rock. Cumont says: "We must admit that the temple extended in front of the grotto, and that the latter in some way formed its apse." The cave at Angera had a height of 1.75 metres and a length of 4

metres. The interior had an elliptic shape, almost round. It opened towards the East, and the sun's rays shine into the cave in the early hours of the day. The orientation of our Chester cave is identical. On the floor of the grotto at Angera were Roman tiles, but no monument had been found there in the temple itself, as no excavations had been attempted. M. Cumont, however, had no doubt of the temple being Mithraic both from its arrangement and the presence at Angera of Mithraic inscriptions. Beside the grotto the rock-face has been levelled, and numerous holes and remains of plaster show where the bas-reliefs were fixed on the rock-wall. Probably the same arrangement existed at Chester and may account for the way in which the pillar has been cut away at the side of the image to make room for the cave. This suggests that the bas-relief is older than the cave.

On p. 413 (*T. et M.*) Cumont reproduces a bas-relief in marble found at Rome, which related to the mysteries of Sabazius, not those of Mithra. It shows Minerva pouring a libation on a small altar on her right, while an owl stands on the ground to the left of her feet.

I hope I have made it appear quite probable that we have here the site of an ancient Mithraeum founded perhaps before 150 A.D., and including under its roof the image, whatever its real character and exact date may have been. As the adherents to Mithraism grew in number, and the cult gained favour in the highest circles—for the Emperor Commodus became an initiate about 170 A.D.—other Mithraea were probably founded within the walls of the fortress. One temple may have been in White Friars, near the cellars in which the two bas-reliefs now in the Grosvenor Museum were found. Cumont considers that the number of members in a single community (*consacranii*) rarely exceeded one hundred; when that limit was reached, it would break up, and two separate groups would be formed. The strongest corroboration of my theory, which, owing to the nature of the evidence, may seem to some to be purely conjectural, is furnished by Cumont (*T. et M.*), p. 390. He

quotes Stukeley's record of the finding of a statuette of stone before the year 1725, near the river at Chester "by the scite (*sic*) of the Roman warrior," *i.e.*, the statue of Minerva in Handbridge. This statuette has now disappeared, but was reproduced in Horsley, *Britannia Romana*, London, 1732, p. 316, plate 67, no. 5, to which reference is made by Watkin, *Roman Cheshire*, p. 191. Cumont describes the statuette as a Mithraic torchbearer (*dado-phorus*) in the usual dress, standing upright with legs crossed, and holding in both hands a large torch turned down to the ground. I had no knowledge of this find until a few days ago, when I came across it in Cumont. The object was probably an *ex-voto* and was certainly Mithraic. In 1848 a stone lion was dug up in Handbridge, and is now preserved in the Grosvenor Museum. Such a figure was a regular feature in the *pronaos* of a Mithraeum, as we see in Cumont's picture of the temple at Carnuntum (*T. et M.* p. 493).

Watkin also records (p. 217) that in 1813, again in Handbridge, and beside the old southern road, a number of vases and lamps carefully packed in cells, and a demi-figure habited in sacerdotal costume, were discovered in excavating a cellar at Sir John Cotgreave's, Netherleigh. I have been unable to trace these remains, but in 1843, some of them were in the Water Tower Museum. The demi-figure may be the god Mithra being born from the rock (*vide* same sketch of Mithraeum at Carnuntum), while the lamps and vases may well have been part of the furniture of our suggested Mithraeum hidden away in the fourth century, when after a long and embittered struggle Christianity gained the day, and the heathen temples were in some places razed to the ground; in other parts of the Empire the Mithraea were walled up, and the bas-reliefs and other temple property put into a cache by the priests who were convinced that one day their cause would again triumph. "In some of the provinces mobs sacked the temples and committed them to the flames, with the complicity of the authorities."¹ Some-

¹ Cumont, *M. of M.*, p. 203.

times the refractory priests of Mithra were slain by their Christian foes and buried in the ruins of their sanctuaries, henceforth for ever profaned. At Sarrebourg, in Lorraine, a chained skeleton was thus found.

A winged figure wearing a garland over the shoulder and waist was found in 1851 in Duke Street, not more than 300 yards distant from our proposed site, and is now in the Grosvenor Museum. It presents features which suggest the *Heliodromus*, the sixth grade in the Mithraic hierarchy.

Mr. Thompson Watkin, in his *Roman Cheshire* records the existence of ruins near the site in question, and the occurrence of a subsidence not more than three centuries ago, which seems to point to the existence of vaults there.² The site is by no means extensive, so that it may some day be possible for the spade once for all to determine the value of my suggestion.

If we consider the somewhat peculiar conditions which prevailed in the western half of the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries, we shall realise that a further possibility cannot be neglected. It was quite usual for a Celtic or German deity to assume a Roman dress by adopting the name, and to some extent, the attributes of one of the old Italian gods. Thus we find in Britain, Mars Cocidius; in Germany, Mars Thingsus; and on a Chester altar, Jupiter Tanarus. In a similar way the oriental cults which invaded Italy and western Europe sheltered themselves under the camouflage of one or other of the ancient Roman worships. No deity except Mithra himself was more honoured by the troops who guarded the frontiers of the Empire than Jupiter Dolichenus. Dolichenus and Mithra both had their homes in far-off Commagene. Haverfield remarked in his *Romanisation of Britain* (p. 67) that "the polytheisms of ancient Europe contained little to hinder combinations of creeds: the western half of the Roman Empire became a blending-vat of worships western, eastern and Roman." M. Cumont has dealt with the problem of the relation of

² Cf. Braun's Map, 1580, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*.

Minerva to the cult of Mithra in the following passage. (*T. et M.* Intro : p. 148).

“ The Mazdean goddess, whose cult was most widespread outside Iran, was Anâhita, who in the inscriptions of the Achemenidæ is coupled with Mithra. Anâhita has been regarded by Greek authors, sometimes as an Aphrodite, sometimes as an Athene. In the former case they saw in her the celestial principle of terrestrial fecundity, in the latter that which assures to warriors, and especially to kings, success in battle. It is hard to guess to which of these divinities the Mithraic priesthood gave the preference, probably to the latter. We know in fact that Anâhita was especially honoured by the Magi established in Cappadocia, and when we see the Persian dynasty of this country regularly putting on their coins the image of a Pallas Nicephora, it is not rash to recognise in her the goddess of the Avesta who gives victory to kings. In Italy later, Anâhita, identified with the *Magna Mater*, introduced the practice of *Taurobolium*. A series of taurobolic inscriptions found at Beneventum is dedicated to Minerva Berecynthia, an unusual name for the Phrygian goddess, which would be strange unless one admitted that it is here identical with the Persian Athene. A final reason for considering the Mithraic Minerva as the substitute for the great Iranian goddess is the relative frequency with which she is represented. She appears on a bas-relief at Rome enthroned with Juppiter and Juno, but more often standing upright, as in the bas-relief at Osterburken, where she appears clothed in chiton and cloak, wearing a high-crested Attic casque, her left hand leaning on a buckler set on the ground and grasping a spear with raised right hand. A more special motif is that offered us by a Roman altar (mon. 293) of which unfortunately we know only a poor specimen—Minerva wearing a casque, holding her buckler in her left hand, before which is the owl, and pouring the contents of a *patera* with her right over a flaming altar. The inscriptions, which call her either “ Minerva sancta ” or simply “ Minerva ” teach us nothing about her character.

From this passage we see that Cumont finds nothing incongruous in a union of the two cults, one masculine, the other feminine. In Switzerland, a hatchet with the name of Minerva on it was found in a Mithraeum. (Mon : 239 bis.) On a *stèle* at Neuenheim, Minerva holding a lance appears. In another temple Diana was worshipped together with

Mithra as a result of the same tendency to syncretism. In Cologne, as at Ostia, there were mysteries for women in close relation to those of Mithra. Insc. 574b. (*T et M.*) on an altar to Semele shows there were *matres* as well as *patres*. If we are prepared to accept this union of the two cults in Chester, it becomes possible to understand the last line on the altar to Minerva in the Grosvenor Museum, which has hitherto been unintelligible. I would suggest the reading MAG. R. stands for *magister fratrum*, the F and R being ligulate.³ The *magister* was the annually elected president of the Mithraic society whose members were known to one another as the *fratres* (brethren). Cumont supplies ample evidence for both these uses, and we may compare the title of *pater leonum*. Cf. (*T. et M.* Insc. 24, 47 and 48; also 157).

It is, however, on the sepulchral monuments that we find the clearest and best evidence of the prevalence of the Mithra cult in Deva. Watkin noted the fact that "on tombstones of Mithraists lions frequently occur, as those who had reached the fourth grade were styled *Leones*." If he had gone a step further, and sought the symbols of the other grades, he could scarcely have failed to find them. The first grade was the Raven, and the bird, its emblem, may be seen in four examples, usually in festoons above the chief group; in two other cases the festoons are there but the birds have disappeared. In No. 115, which I regard as one of the earliest Mithraic monuments, the bird is on the table in front. It is seen beside the table at the banquet on Mon. 273 ter (Cumont). This monument (No. 115) was found on the Roodeye at the foot of the Wall not 100 yards from the Grosvenor Road, together with two skeletons, a coin of Domitian, and a gold ring. The ring was carried off by one of the workmen, but may possibly have found its way subsequently into the Museum, as there is one displayed there of unknown origin which has the *signum* of a raven. The second grade of initiates were styled *κρύφιοι* which Cumont translates "occult." Its literal meaning is

³ Professor Hübner wished to read *magister fabrorum*.

“ hidden ” or “ concealed ” as in the phrase ὄφεις κρύφιος—a lurking snake. The inscriptions tell us that the *patres ostenderunt cryphios, tradiderunt leontica*. “ The members of this class ” says Cumont (*M. of M.*, p. 154), “ hidden by some veil probably remained invisible to the rest of the congregation. To exhibit them constituted a solemn act.” Where then were they hidden? I venture to suggest that it was inside the little cave, which I believe to be the mark of this grade on the sepulchral slabs. (Nos. 159, 160, and 161). No. 161 looks forward to the next initiation in which a crown was proffered to the would-be *miles*, who became one of the warriors of the invincible god and waged war under his command on the powers of evil. No. 65 shows the sword and helmet of such a warrior in the upper section. What are known as the Rider slabs may refer to the same grade. Of this class Cumont says (*T. et M.* 328 bis.)

“In the Danubian provinces have been found a great many little bas-reliefs of stone or metal bearing the image of one or two horsemen trampling under their hoofs a person stretched on the earth. Outside the main group appear a series of representations very variable in number and nature. The most probable opinion is that they had to do with Thracian cults. However that may be, this unknown religion had been influenced by Mithraism. This is clearly shown by certain figures which appear on these accessory bas-reliefs, *e.g.*, the crater of the lion and serpent.”

In Britain I suggest that elements of this Thracian cult had been absorbed into the worship of Mithra, and having some connection with the grade of Miles, came to be its symbol. If so, we have in Chester at least four or five examples. These three grades did not authorise participation in the Mysteries: the initiates were styled ὑπηρετοῦντες or servants. Only the mystics, who had received the Leontics, became participants, μετέχοντες, and it is for this reason that the grade of Leo is mentioned in the inscriptions more than any other. I find two examples at Chester, Nos. 91 and 167. The former has a main group remarkably like the reverse of the coins of Trapezus in Pontus (218 A.D.) which represent a divinity on

horseback, which combines the characteristics of Men and Mithra, and is preceded by a dadophor (torch-bearer).

Of the next grade, the Persian, I find one clear example (No. 50). The small figures on either side of the inscription wear the Phrygian cap, which was assumed at this stage and served to recall the first origin of the Mazdean religion.

Of the sixth grade—the *Heliodromoi* or couriers of the Sun—I can find but one doubtful example, too mutilated to have much value for my purpose. It would serve almost equally well for a specimen of the fifth grade. (No 71). Nos. 163 and 164 formed the upper parts of two large sepulchral monuments, appropriate to the members of the highest grade in the Mithraic hierarchy—the *Patres*. The chief feature is a large male bearded head. Possibly Nos. 38 and 47 supply the inscriptions which went with these reliefs as the dimensions are almost the same, and they refer to men of appropriate age and position. Only two women are included in the above, both in the grade of Raven. In monuments of the first and perhaps the second grade, the main group was the Sepulchral Banquet relief, which occurs in Greece, Etruria, and especially along the Rhine frontier. It is remarkably like the bas-relief of the Mithraic communion discovered at Konjica, in Bosnia, about twenty years ago, and depicted by Cumont on page 159 of *The Mysteries of Mithra*. The couch, the tripod in front, and the cup held aloft are seen in both. Etruria and Germany were two of the chief centres of the Mithra-cult, and in Greece the form may have been derived from Asia Minor. The banquet of Mithra and Helios on the completion of the former's earthly labours was commemorated in the Mithraic Agape or Love-feast, and is a very common theme on the bas-reliefs, mostly on the side or bottom panels. What could be more natural than that the neophytes should picture on their monuments the most sacred rite to which they could aspire, and which they believed had power to impart divine grace requisite alike here and beyond the grave? Cumont says (*M. et M.* pp. 160 and 173) "The sacred wine conferred upon 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."

It is very significant that none of the tombstones of the Second Legion (Nos. 23-35) contain any of the features to which I have called attention. They are simply inscribed slabs, often much worn, without other ornament than rosettes, half-moons, etc. Many of the other stones which bear a general resemblance to these may be set aside for our present purpose. The stones which I hold to be those of Mithraists form the majority of the large bas-reliefs; the minority are merely portraits of the deceased such as Nos. 38 and 90, which were probably the work of the same sculptors as the Mithraic reliefs, but have no religious significance. What was the influence which about the middle of the second century produced so striking a change in the style of sepulchral monuments? Can it have been aught but the rapid dissemination of the cult of Mithra, whose bas-reliefs have been found in hundreds, if not thousands, from the banks of the Clyde to those of the Nile? Wherever the imperial eagles were set up, there we find the traces of this worship. The very badge of the Twentieth Legion as we see it on our monument No. 214, the Boar charging a cypress tree, is found thrice on undoubted Mithraic reliefs. (Cumont, M114b. and 239 at Trent and Mauls). The cypress figures largely in the reliefs and was the symbol of immortality. The boar also appears frequently (Cumont, *M. of M.* pp. 122, 244). On the latter relief from Mannheim, Hercules (who here represents Verethraghna, the genius of Victory) stands beside Mithra, and has behind him a charging boar. Cumont comments thus: "This group makes one think of the passage in the Mihir Yasht, which shows Verethraghna approaching Mithra under the form of a boar 'well-fed, furious, strong and seeking battle.'" On M.487 (Cumont) an altar at Lanchester, dedicated DEO INVICTO, a boar is graven on the left side. The boar appears also on the Communion relief from Konjica seated beside the table in front of the

couch. On either side of the inscription on our monument 214 is a figure winged on the shoulders, and carrying a *falx* in one hand and a bunch of grapes in the other. Above all each appears to be wearing a Phrygian cap. May not these represent the *Heliodromoi*? For this tablet was set up on the Wall of Antonine, the northernmost limit of the Roman Empire, where the daily course of the sun (*Ἡλίου δρόμος*) at mid-summer attains a greater length above the horizon than at any point to the south of it. The grapes are a regular feature on the bas-reliefs and are seen on the sides of the Chester monument 156. There was a large admixture of astrology due to Semitic influence in the Mithraic doctrines. See for instance the border of the relief from Borcovicus displaying the signs of the Zodiac.

At Rough Castle, also on the Wall of Antonine, a tablet with an inscription identical with ours but for the absence of the reliefs and of the bottom line, commemorates the building of a *principia*. Similar tablets along the Wall of Hadrian (*vide* Bruce, pp. 80, 97, 98, 103, 154,) always refer to the construction of some building such as a temple.

The severe tests and trying ordeals which the mystics had to undergo in order to reach the highest grade of *Patres* were eighty in number. Hence, few were privileged to reach the higher orders; a natural pride in their achievement would lead them to advertise their success to their fellow-mystics on their monuments. The numbers which my method supplies from the tombstones agree well with this consideration: six Ravens, four Cryphii, five Milites, two Lions, one Persian, one (?) Heliodromus and two *Patres*.

At least ten other stones in the Grosvenor Museum may have been Mithraic, as Nos. 169, 170, and 171. No. 149, a bull charging, may be a fragment of a relief showing Mithra riding on the bull; Nos. 120 and 117 probably show the *sacerdos* or *antistes* performing his sacred office, as in each we see a bird much like a raven. No. 140 is a subject which occurs repeatedly on the Mithraic reliefs—Poseidon reclining under a tree. I believe then that we have in Chester most of the essential elements of a Mithraic cemetery, such

as Professor Cumont so ardently desiderated. What was the lucky chance which preserved them intact for so many centuries? I incline to the belief that they were put away inside the North Wall in the 4th century, when the pagan cults were suppressed after Constantine's conversion in 311 A.D. Two objections have been put forward to this view, firstly that the quality of the work on the North Wall is too good for the 4th century, secondly that there is little indication that any of the stones are later than the second century. To the first objection Professor Haverfield in his *Romanisation of Britain*, gave the answer, where he quotes Eumenius as stating that Britain so abounded with artisans at that time that they were employed in Gaul as far south as Autun in rebuilding houses and temples. Moreover the stones for the Wall probably came from the disused temples. In reply to the second objection, the tomb-stones may have come from a cemetery close to the fortress [possibly from the Infirmary Field, where inhumation—the invariable practice of Mithraists—seems to have been the general rule] which had been filled full by the end of the second century. M. No. 108 is exceptional in showing little sign of exposure to the weather, and the Greek Υ in Dinysia is probably the mark of a late date. The third century in Britain was an age of peace and prosperity, but in the fourth dangers began to lower more and more darkly, and the garrison of Deva may well have found it needful to look to their defences. In 343 Constans was summoned from Gaul to repel the invading hordes of Picts and Scots. His entry into London is pictured on a coin lately found in France at Arras.

The Mithraic Communion relief must have been highly offensive to the Christians, who regarded the rite as a travesty of their own Eucharist inspired by the devil. By building into the North Wall all the relics of the pagan worships, the Christians, who were perhaps of the Manichean sect, put them beyond the reach of their former owners, and yet made it possible to recover them, if the swing of the pendulum should bring back the old superstitions once

more. For the cult of Mithra, among others, maintained its position much longer in the outer provinces of the Empire. At Saarebourg in Belgium, as many as 123 coins of the 4th century were found in a Mithraeum, which must have been functioning as late as 395 A.D. I cannot attempt therefore, to date the construction of the North Wall with any precision.

A famous Egyptologist in his latest work has said: "It is the business of the archæologist to wake the dreaming dead; not to send the living to sleep. It is his business to make the stones tell their tale; not to petrify the listener." Such is the ideal which I have set before me. If an excessive daring in speculation has led me astray, I hope your just criticism will set me right, and so in the end a solid contribution may accrue to the advancement of our knowledge of ancient Deva.

Bibliography.

F. Cumont: *Textes et Monuments.*

Mysteries of Mithra, 1903.

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POSTSCRIPT.—The name "Persian's Cave" which is given to Princess Street on Braun's Map of Chester (*circa* 1580), suggests that remains of another Mithraeum may have existed in the Middle Ages not far from the Infirmary Field. Higden, in the *Polychronicon*, in describing the remains of the Roman occupation, quotes from an earlier writer: "*Concava testudo bina latet sub humo.*" This may very well indicate that ruins of two Mithraea then existed in Chester.