

THE DISSEMINATION OF MITHRAISM IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE.¹

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IT MAY be said, in a general way, that Mithra remained forever excluded from the Hellenic world. The ancient authors of Greece speak of him only as a foreign god worshipped by the kings of Persia. Even during the Alexandrian epoch he had not descended from the plateau of Asia Minor to the shores of Ionia. In all the countries washed by the Ægean Sea, one belated inscription in the Piræus only recalls his existence, and we seek in vain for his name among the numerous exotic divinities worshipped at Delos in the second century before our era. Under the empire, it is true, Mithræums are found in divers ports of the coast of Phœnicia and Egypt, near Aradus, Sidon, and Alexandria; but these isolated monuments only throw into stronger relief the absence of every vestige of the Mithraic Mysteries in the interior of the country. The recent discovery of a temple of Mithra at Memphis would appear to be an exception that confirms the rule, for the Mazdean deity was probably not introduced into that ancient city until the time of the Romans. He has not been mentioned hitherto in any inscription of Egypt or Assyria, and there is nothing as yet to show that altars were erected to him even in the capital of the Seleucidæ. In these semi-Oriental empires the powerful organisation of the indigenious clergy and the ardent devotion of the people for their national idols appear to have arrested the progress of the invader and to have paralysed his influence.

One characteristic detail shows that the Iranian *yazata* never made many converts in the Hellenic or Hellenised countries. Greek onomatology, which furnishes a considerable series of theophorous or god-bearing names indicating the popularity which

¹ Extracted by the author from his *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra* (Brussels: H. Lamertin). Translated by T. J. McCormack.

the Phrygian and Egyptian divinities enjoyed, has no *Mithrion*, *Mithrocles*, *Mithrodore*, or *Mithrophile* to show as the counterparts of its Menophiles, its Metrodotes, its Isidores, and its Serapions. All the derivatives of Mithras are of barbaric formation. Although the Thracian Bendis, the Asian Cybele, the Serapis of the Alexandrians, and even the Syrian Baals, were successively received with favor in the cities of Greece, that country never extended the hand of hospitality to the tutelar deity of its ancient enemies.

His distance from the great centers of ancient civilisation explains the belated arrival of Mithra in the Occident. Official worship was rendered at Rome to the *Magna Mater* of Pessinus as early as 204 B. C.; Isis and Serapis made their appearance there in the first century before our era, and long before this they had counted their worshippers in Italy by multitudes. The Carthaginian Astarte had a temple in the capital from the end of the Punic Wars; the Bellona of Cappadocia since the time of Sulla; the *Dea Syria* of Hierapolis from the beginning of the empire, when the Persian Mysteries were still totally unknown there. And yet these deities were those of a nation or a city only, while the domain of Mithra stretched from the Indus to the Pontus Euxinus.

But this domain, even in the epoch of Augustus, was still situated almost entirely beyond the frontiers of the empire, and the central plateau of Asia Minor, which had long resisted the Hellenic civilisation, remained even more hostile to the culture of Rome. This region of steppes, forests, and pastures, fringed with precipitous declivities, had no attractions for foreigners, and the indigenous dynasties which, despite the state of vassalage to which they had been reduced, still held their ground under the early Cæsars, encouraged the isolation that had been their distinction for ages. Cilicia, it is true, had been organised as a Roman province in the year 102 B. C., but a few points only on the coast had been occupied at that period, and the conquest of the country was not completed until two centuries later. Cappadocia was not incorporated until the reign of Tiberius, the western part of Pontus until the reign of Nero, and Commagene and Lesser Armenia not definitively until the reign of Vespasian. Not until then were regular and immediate relations established between these remote countries and the Occident. The exigencies of administration and the organisation of defence, the mutations of governors and officers, the relieving of procurators and revenue officers, the levies of troops of infantry and cavalry, and finally the permanent establishment of three legions along the frontier of the Euphrates, provoked

a perpetual interchange of men, products, and ideas between these mountainous districts hitherto closed to the world, and the European provinces. Then came the great expeditions of Trajan, of Lucius Verus, of Septimius Severus, the subjection of Mesopotamia, and the foundation of numerous colonies in Osrhoene and far Nineveh, which formed the links of a great chain binding Iran with the Mediterranean. These successive annexations of the Cæsars were the first cause of the diffusion of the Mithraic religion in the Latin world. It began to spread there under the Flavians and developed under the Antonines and the Severi, just as did another cult practised alongside of it in Commagene, namely that of Jupiter Dolichenus,¹ which made at the same time the tour of the Roman empire.

According to Plutarch, Mithra was introduced much earlier into Italy. The Romans, by this account, are said to have been initiated into his Mysteries by the Cilician pirates conquered by Pompey. Plutarch's testimony has nothing improbable in it. We know that the first Jewish community established *trans Tiberim* (across the Tiber) was composed of captives that the same Pompey had brought with him from the capture of Jerusalem (63 B. C.). Owing to this special event, it is possible that toward the end of the republic the Persian god had actually found a few faithful devotees in the mixed populace of the capital. But mingled with the multitude of brother worshippers that practised foreign rites, his little group of votaries did not attract attention. The *yazata* was the object of the same distrust as the Asiatics that worshipped him. The influence of this small band of sectaries on the great mass of the Roman population was virtually as infinitesimal as is to-day the influence of Buddhistic societies on modern Europe.

It was not until the end of the first century that the name of Mithra began to be generally bruited abroad in Rome. When Statius wrote the first canto of the *Thebaid* about eighty years after Christ, he had already seen typical representations of the tauroctonous hero, and it appears from the testimony of Plutarch that in his time (46-125 A. D.) the Mazdean sect already enjoyed a certain notoriety in the Occident. This conclusion is confirmed by epigraphic documents. The most ancient inscription to Mithra which we possess is a bilingual inscription of a freedman of the Flavians. Not long after, a marble group is consecrated to him by a slave of T. Claudius Livianus who was pretorian prefect under Trajan (102 A. D.). The invincible god must also have penetrated

¹ Named from the city of Doliche, now Doluk, in Commagene.

about the same time into central Italy: at Nersæ, in the country of the Æqui, a text of the year 172 A. D. has been discovered which speaks of a Mithræum that had "crumbled to pieces by reason of its antiquity." The appearance of the invader in the northern part of the empire is almost simultaneous. It is undoubted that the fifteenth legion brought the Mysteries to Carnuntum on the Danube about the beginning of the reign of Vespasian, and we also know that about 148 A. D. they were celebrated by the troops in Germany. Under the Antonines, especially from the beginning of the reign of Commodus, the proofs of their presence abound in all countries. At the end of the second century, the Mysteries were celebrated at Ostium in at least four temples.

We cannot think of enumerating all the cities in which our Asiatic cult was established, nor of stating in each case the reasons why it was introduced. Despite their frequency, the epigraphic texts and sculptured monuments throw but very imperfect light on the local history of Mithraism. It is impossible for us to follow the detailed steps in its advancement, to distinguish the concurrent influences exercised by the different churches, to draw up a picture of the work of conversion, pursuing its course from city to city and province to province. All that we can do is to indicate in large outlines in what countries the new faith was propagated and who were in general the champions that advocated it there.

The principal agent of its diffusion was undoubtedly the army. The Mithraic religion is predominantly a religion of soldiers, and it was not without good reason that the name of *militēs* was given to a certain grade of initiates. The influence of the army may appear less capable of affording an explanation when one reflects that under the emperors the legions were quartered in stationary encampments, and from the time of Hadrian at least they were severally recruited from the province in which they were stationed. But this general rule was subject to numerous exceptions. Thus, for example, the Asiatics contributed for a long time the bulk of the effective troops in Dalmatia and Mœsia, and for a certain period in Africa also. Furthermore, the soldier who after several years of service in his native country had been promoted to the rank of centurion was as a rule transferred to some foreign station; and after he had mastered the various difficulties of his second charge he was often assigned to a new garrison, so that the entire body of centurions of any one legion formed "a sort of microcosm of the empire." These officers were a potent source of influence, for their very position insured to them a considerable moral influence

over the conscripts whom it was their vocation to instruct. In addition to this individual propaganda, which is almost totally withdrawn from our ken, the temporary or permanent transfers of single detachments, and sometimes of entire regiments, to remotely situated fortresses or camps brought together people of all races and beliefs. Finally, there were to be found side by side with the legionaries who were Roman citizens, an equal, if not a greater, number of foreign *auxilia*, who did not like their comrades enjoy the privilege of serving in their native country. Indeed, in order to forestall local uprisings, it was a set part of the imperial policy to remove these foreign troops as far as possible from the country of their origin. Thus, under the Flavians, the *alæ* or indigenous cohorts formed but a minimal fraction of the auxiliaries that guarded the frontiers of the Rhine and the Danube.

Among the recruits summoned from abroad to take the place of the national troops sent to distant parts were numerous Asiatics, and perhaps no country of the Orient furnished, relatively to the extent of its territory, a greater number of Roman soldiers than Commagene, where Mithraism had struck deepest root. In addition to horsemen and legionaries, there were levied in this country, probably at the time of its union with the empire, at least six consanguineous cohorts. Numerous also were the native soldiers of Cappadocia, Pontus, and Cilicia, not to speak of Syrians of all classes; and the Cæsars did not scruple even to enroll those agile squadrons of Parthian cavalry with whose warlike qualities they had become acquainted at their own cost.

The Roman soldier was upon the whole pious and even superstitious. The many perils to which he was exposed caused him to seek unremittingly the protection of Heaven, and an incalculable number of dedicatory inscriptions bears witness both to the vivacity of his faith and to the variety of his beliefs. The Orientals especially, transported for twenty years and more into countries which were totally strange to them, piously preserved the memories of their national divinities. Whenever they found the opportunity, they did not fail to assemble for the purpose of rendering them devotion. They had experienced the need of conciliating the great lord (*Ba'al*), whose anger as little children they had learned to fear. Their worship also offered an occasion for reunion, and for recalling to memory under the gloomy climates of the North their distant country. But their brotherhoods were not exclusive; they gladly admitted to their rites those of their companions in arms, whatever their origin, whose aspirations the offi-

cial religion of the army failed to satisfy, and who hoped to obtain from the foreign god more efficacious succor in their combats, or, if they succumbed, a happier lot in the life to come. Afterwards, these neophytes, transferred to other garrisons according to the exigencies of the service or the necessities of war, from converts became converters, and formed about them a new nucleus of proselytes. In this manner, the Mysteries of Mithra, first brought to Europe by semi barbarian recruits from Cappadocia or Commagene, were rapidly disseminated to the utmost confines of the ancient world.

From the banks of the Pontus Euxinus to the north of Brittany and to the border of the great Sahara Desert, along the entire length of the Roman frontier, Mithraic monuments abound. Lower Mœsia, which was not explored until very recently, has already furnished a number of them,—a circumstance which will not excite our astonishment when it is remembered that Oriental contingents supplied in this province the deficiency of native conscripts. To say nothing of the port of Tomi, legionaries practised the Persian cult at Troësmis, at Durostorum, and at Æscus, as well as at the *Tropæum Traiani*, which the discovery of the monuments of Adam-Klissi has recently rendered celebrated. In the interior of the country, this cult penetrated to Montana and to Nicopolis; and it is doubtless from these northern cities that it crossed the Balkans and spread into the northern parts of Thrace, notably above Serdica (Sofia) and as far as Bessapare in the valley of the Hebrus. Ascending the Danube, it gained a footing at Viminacium, the capital of Upper Mœsia; but we are ignorant of the extent to which it spread in this country, which is still imperfectly explored. The naval flotilla that paroled the waters of this mighty river was manned and even commanded by foreigners, and the fleet undoubtedly disseminated the Asiatic religion in all the ports it touched.

We are better informed regarding the circumstances of the introduction of Mithraism into Dacia. When in 107 A. D. Trajan annexed this barbarous kingdom to the Roman empire, the country, exhausted by six years of obstinate warfare, was little more than a desert. To repopulate it, the emperor transported to it, as Eutropius tells us, multitudes of colonists "*ex toto orbe Romano*," from all the territories of Rome. The population of this country was even more mixed in the second century than it is to-day, where all the races of Europe are bickering and battling with one another. Besides the remnants of the ancient Dacians were found here Illy-

rians and Pannonians, Galatians, Carians, and Asiatics, people from Edessa and Palmyra, and still others besides, all of whom continued to practice the cults of their native countries. But none of these cults prospered more than the Mysteries of Mithra and one is astounded at the prodigious development that this cult took during the 150 years that the Roman domination lasted in this region. It flourished not only in the capital of the province, Sarmizegetusa, and in the cities that sprang up near the Roman camps, like Potaïssa and notably Apulum, but along the entire extent of the territory occupied by the Romans. Whereas one cannot find in Dacia, so far as I know, the slightest vestige of a Christian community, from the fortress Szamos-Ujvar to the northern frontier and as far as Romula in Wallachia, multitudes of inscriptions, of sculptures, and of altars which have escaped the destruction of Mithræums have been found. This *débris* especially abounds in the central portions of the country, along the great causeway that followed the course of the valley of the Maros, the principal artery by which the civilisation of Rome spread into the mountains of the surrounding country. The single colony of Apulum counted certainly four temples of the Persian god, and the *spelæum* of Sarmizegetusa, recently excavated, still contains the fragments of a round fifty of bas-reliefs and other votive tablets which the piety of the faithful had there consecrated to their god.

Likewise, in Pannonia the Iranian religion implanted itself in the fortified cities that formed the chain of Roman defences along the Danube, in Cusum, Intercisa, Aquincum, Brigetio, Carnuntum, Vindobona, and even in the hamlets of the interior. It was especially powerful in the two principal places of this double province, in Aquincum and in Carnuntum; and in both of these cities the causes of its greatness are easily discovered. The first-named city, where in the third century the Mysteries were celebrated in at least five temples scattered over its entire area, was the headquarters of the *legio II adjutrix*,¹ which had been formed in the year 70 A. D. by Vespasian for the purpose of supporting the fleet stationed at Ravenna. Among the freedmen thus admitted into the regular army, the proportion of Asiatics was considerable, and it is probable that from the very beginning Mithraism counted a number of adepts in this irregular legion. When toward the year 120 A. D. it was established by Hadrian in Lower Pannonia, it undoubtedly brought with it to this place the Oriental cult to which

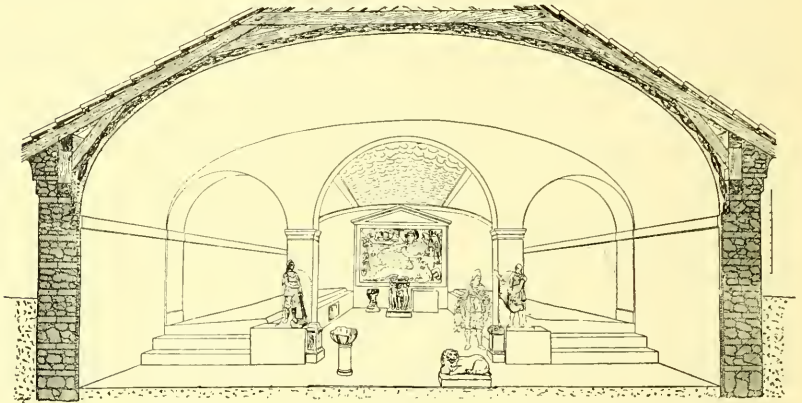
¹One of the legions raised by the proconsuls in the Roman provinces for the purpose of strengthening the veteran army.—*Trans.*

it appears to have remained loyal to the day of its dissolution. The *legio I adjutrix* which had a similar origin probably sowed the fertile seeds of Mithraism in like manner in Brigetio, when under Trajan its camp was transferred to that place.

We can determine with even greater precision the manner in which the Persian god arrived at Carnuntum. In 71 or 72 A. D., Vespasian caused this important strategic position to be occupied by the *legio XV Apollinaris*, which for the preceding eight or nine years had been warring in the Orient. Sent in 63 A. D. to the Euphrates to reinforce the army which Corbulo was leading against the Parthians, it had taken part during the years 67 to 70 A. D. in suppressing the uprisings of the Jews, and had subsequently accompanied Titus to Alexandria. The losses which this veteran legion had suffered in its sanguinary campaigns were doubtless made good with recruits levied in Asia. These conscripts were for the most part probably at home in Cappadocia, and it was they that after their transportation to the Danube with the old rank and file of the legion there first offered sacrifices to the Iranian god whose name had been hitherto unknown in the region north of the Alps. There has been found at Carnuntum a votive Mithraic inscription due to a soldier of the Apollinarian legion bearing the characteristic name of *Barbarus*. The first worshippers of the *Sol Invictus* consecrated to him on the banks of the river a semicircular grotto, which had to be restored from its ruins in the third century by a Roman knight, and whose high antiquity is evidenced in all its details. When, some forty years after its arrival in the Occident, Trajan again transported the fifteenth legion to the Euphrates, the Persian cult had already struck deep roots in the capital of Upper Pannonia. Not only the fourteenth legion *gemina Martia*, which replaced that which had returned to Asia, but also the sixteenth and the thirteenth *geminae*, certain detachments of which were, as it appears, connected with the first-mentioned legion, succumbed to the allurements of the Mysteries and counted initiates in their own ranks. Soon the first temple was no longer adequate, and a second was built, which—and this is an important fact—immediately adjoined the temple of Jupiter Dolichenus of Commagene. A municipality having developed alongside the camp and the conversions continuing to multiply, a third mithræum was erected, probably toward the beginning of the second century, and its dimensions surpassed those of all similar structures hitherto discovered. It was enlarged by Diocletian and the princes associated with him, when in 307 they held a conference at Carnuntum. They

sought thus to give public expression of their devotion to Mithra in this holy city, which of all those in the North probably contained the most ancient sanctuaries of the Mazdean sect.

This warlike post, the most important in the entire region, seems also to have been the religious center from which the foreign cult radiated into the smaller towns of the surrounding country. Stix-Neusiedl, where it was certainly practised from the middle of the second century, was only a dependent village of this powerful city. But farther to the south the temple of Scarbantia was enriched by a *decurio colonie Carnunti*. Toward the east the territory of Æquinoctium has furnished a votive inscription to *Petræ Genetrici*, and still farther off at Vindobona (Vienna) the soldiers of the tenth legion had likewise learned, doubtless from the neighboring camp, to celebrate the Mysteries. Even in Africa, traces are found

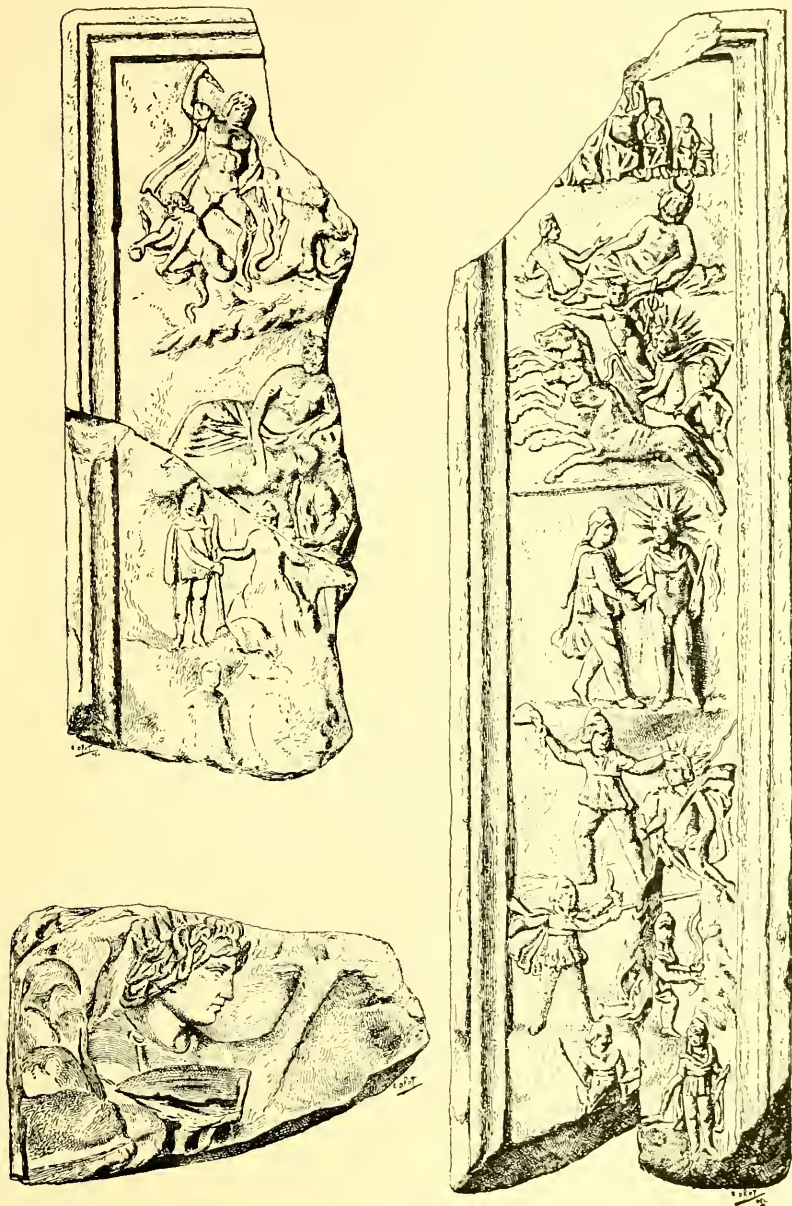


MITHRÆUM OF CARNUNTUM, THE MODERN PETRONELL, NEAR VIENNA
TO THE EAST.¹ (Restored by Mr. Tragau.)

of the influence which the great Panonian city exercised on the development of Mithraism.

Several leagues from Vienna, passing across the frontier of Noricum, we come upon the hamlet of *Commagenæ*, the name of which is doubtless due to the fact that a squadron of Commagenians (an *ala Commagenorum*) was quartered here. One is not surprised, therefore, to learn that a bas-relief of the tauroctonus god

¹This Mithræum, like all others of the same style, is underground. Before the great bas-relief of Mithras slaying the bull are two altars, the one large and square in form, the other smaller and richly ornamented. The small statue on the left is Mithras being born from the rocks. At the entrance we see on the right the lion of Mithras and on the left a font for holy water. The two torch-bearers have their stand at the pillars which separate the aisles. The Mithræum is approached by a staircase and through a square hall (or pronaos) which is considerably larger than the sanctum itself.



FRAGMENTS OF A BAS-RELIEF IN WHITE ITALIAN MARBLE.

Found in the Zollfeld (in Noricum), now in the Historical Museum of the Rudolfinum at Klagenfurt, Austria.¹

¹The central part of the monument is utterly destroyed; the head of the sun-god from the left-hand corner alone being left. The left border represents a Hellenised illustration of Ahura

has been discovered here. Nevertheless, in this province, as in Rhetia, the army does not seem to have taken, as it did in Pannonia, an active part in the propagation of the Asiatic religion. A belated inscription of a *speculator legionis I Noricorum* is the only one in these countries that mentions a soldier; and generally the monuments of the Mysteries are very sparsely scattered in the valley of the upper Danube, where the Roman troops were concentrated. They are not found in increased numbers until the other slope of the Alps is reached, and the epigraphy of this last-named region forbids us to assign to them a military origin.

On the other hand, the marvellous extension that Mithraism took in the two Germanies is undoubtedly due to the powerful army corps that defended that perpetually menaced territory. We find here an inscription dedicated by a centurion to the *Soli invicto Mithræ* about the year 148 A. D., and it is probable that in the middle of the second century this god had already obtained a goodly number of converts in the Roman garrisons. All the regiments appear to have been seized with the contagion: the legions *VIII Augusta*, *XXII Primigenia*, and *XXX Ulpia*, the cohorts and auxiliary *alæ*, as well as the picked troops of citizen volunteers. So general a diffusion prevents us from telling exactly from what side the foreign religion entered this country, but it may be assumed without fear of error that, save possibly at a certain few points, it was not imported directly from the Orient, but was transmitted through the agency of the garrisons on the Danube; and if we wish to assign absolutely the circumstances of its origin we may take it for granted, with every likelihood of truth, that the eighth legion, which was transferred from Mœsia to Upper Germany in the year 70 A. D., first practised there the religion which was soon destined to become the preponderating one in this country.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Mazda's struggle with demons, after the pattern of the *giganto machia*. The lower part of the same fragment exhibits the birth of Mithras and two shepherds who figure as torch-bearers. The right border shows scenes from the life of Mithras, among them Mithras crowning the sun-god with a halo of rays and ascending in the solar chariot to heaven.