

THE DOCTRINE OF THE MITHRAIC MYSTERIES.¹

BY PROFESSOR FRANZ CUMONT.

FOR more than three centuries Mithraism was practiced in the remotest provinces of the Roman Empire and under the most diverse conditions. It is not to be supposed for a moment that during this long period its sacred traditions remained unchanged or that the philosophies which swayed one after another the minds of antiquity, or for that matter the political and social situation in the empire, did not exercise upon them some influence. But undoubted though it be that the Persian Mysteries underwent some modification in the Occident, the inadequacy of the data at our disposal prevents us from following this evolution in its various phases and from distinctly defining the local differences which it may have presented. All that we can do is to sketch in large outlines the character of the doctrines which were taught by it, indicating the additions and revisions which they apparently underwent. Besides, the alterations which it suffered were superficial. The identity of the images and hieratical formulas of the most remote periods and places, proves that before the time of its introduction into the Latin countries reformed Mazdaism had already consolidated its theology. Contrary to the ancient Greco-Roman paganism, which was an assemblage of practices and beliefs without logical bond, Mithraism had a genuine theology, a dogmatic system, which borrowed from science its fundamental principles.

The belief appears to prevail generally that Mithra was the only Iranian god that was introduced into the Occident, and that everything in his religion that does not relate directly to him was adventitious and recent. This is a gratuitous and erroneous supposition. Mithra was accompanied in his migrations by a large representa-

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

tion from the Mazdean Pantheon, and if he is in the eyes of his devotees the principal hero of the religion to which he gave his name, he was nevertheless not its supreme god.

At the pinnacle of the divine hierarchy and at the origin of

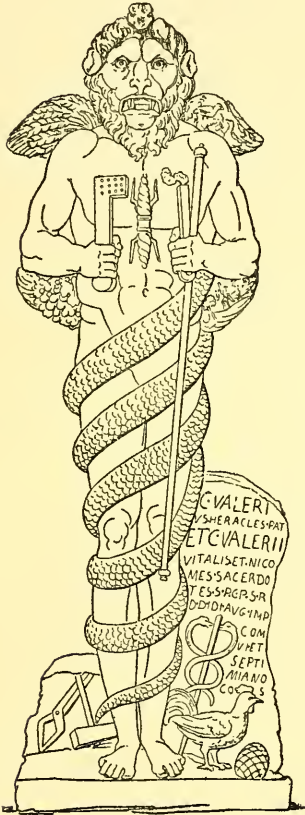


Fig. 1. MITHRAIC KRONOS (ÆON OR ZRVAN AKARANA) REPRESENTING BOUNDLESS TIME.)¹

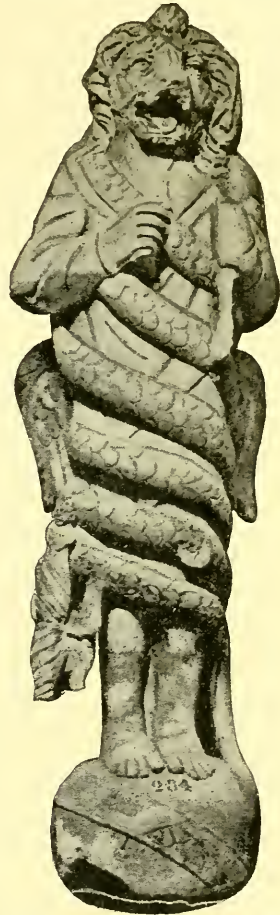


Fig. 2. MITHRAIC KRONOS OF FLORENCE.²

things, the Mithraic theology, the heir of that of the Zervanitic Magi, placed boundless Time. Sometimes they called it *Αἰών* or

¹ The statue here reproduced was found in the Mithræum of Ostia, where C. Valerius Hercules and his sons dedicated it in the year 190 A. D.; it was figured for the first time by Lajard in his *Recherches sur Mithra*, Plate LXX.

² An important Italian bas-relief representing the Mithraic Kronos surrounded by the signs of the zodiac, has just been published by us in the *Revue Archéologique* for 1902, pages 1 et seq.

Sæculum, Κρόνος or Saturnus ; but these appellations were conventional and contingent, for he was considered ineffable, bereft alike of name, sex, and passions. In imitation of his Oriental prototype, he was represented in the likeness of a human monster with the head of a lion and his body enveloped by a serpent. The multiplicity of attributes with which his statues are loaded is in keeping with the kaleidoscopic nature of his character. He bears the scepter and the bolts of divine sovereignty and holds in each hand a key as the monarch of the heavens whose portals he opens. His wings are symbolic of the rapidity of his flight. The reptile whose sinuous folds enwrap him, typifies the tortuous course of the sun on the ecliptic ; the signs of the zodiac engraved on his body and the emblems of the seasons that accompany them, are meant to represent the celestial and terrestrial phenomena that signalise the eternal flight of the years. He creates and destroys all things ; he is the Lord and master of the four elements that compose the universe, he virtually unites in his person the power of all the gods, whom he alone has begotten. Sometimes he is identified with Destiny, at others with the primitive light or the primitive fire ; while both conceptions rendered it possible for him to be compared with the Supreme Cause of the Stoics,—the heat which pervades all things, which has shaped all things, and which under another aspect was the *Εἰμαρμένη*. (See Figs. 1 and 2.)

The preachers of Mithra sought to resolve the grand problem of the origin of the world by the hypothesis of a series of successive generations. The first principle, according to an ancient belief found in India as well as in Greece, begot a primordial couple, the Heaven and the Earth ; and the latter, impregnated by her brother, gave birth to the vast Ocean which was equal in power to its parents, and which appears to have formed with them the supreme triad of the Mithraic Pantheon. The relation of this triad to Kronos or Time from which it had sprung, was not clearly defined, and the starry Heavens of which the revolutions determined, as was believed, the course of all events, appears at times to have been confounded with the eternal Destiny.

These three cosmic divinities were personified under other names less transparent. The Heaven was naught less than Ormuzd or Jupiter, the Earth was identical with Speñta-Armaîti, or Juno, and the Ocean was also called Apâm-Napât or Neptune. Like the Greek theogonies, the Mithraic traditions narrated that Zeus succeeded Kronos, the king of the first ages, in the government of the world. The bas-reliefs show us this Mazdean Saturn placing in

the hands of his son the thunderbolts which were the symbol of his sovereign power. Henceforward Jupiter with his consort Juno was to reign over all the other gods, all of whom owe to this couple their existence.

The Olympian deities were sprung in fact from the marriage of the celestial Jupiter with the terrestrial Juno. Their eldest daughter is Fortune (*Fortuna primigenia*), who bestows on her worshippers every grace of body and every beauty of soul. Her beneficent generosity is contrasted with Ananke, which represents the unalterable rigor of fate. Themis or the Law, the Moiræ or the Fates, were other personifications of Destiny, which manifests under various forms a character which was susceptible of infinite development. The sovereign couple further gave birth not only to Neptune who became their peer, but to a long line of other immortals: Shahrîvar or Hercules whose heroic deeds the sacred hymns celebrated; Artagnes or Mars who was the god of the metals and succored the pious warrior in his combats; Vulcan or Atar the genius of fire; Mercury the messenger of Zeus; Bacchus or Haoma the personification of the plant that furnished the sacred drink; Silvanus or Drvâspa, protector of horses and agriculture; then Anaïtis, the goddess of the fecundating waters, who has been likened to Venus and Cybele and who, presiding over war, was also invoked under the name of Minerva; Diana or Luna who made the honey which was used in the purifications; Vanaiñiti or Nike who gave victory to kings; Asha or Arete, perfect virtue; and others besides. This innumerable multitude of divinities was enthroned with Jupiter and Zeus on the sun-tipped summits of Mt. Olympus and composed the celestial court.

Contrasted with this luminous abode, where dwelt the Most High gods in resplendent radiance, was a dark and dismal domain in the bowels of the earth. Here Ahriman or Pluto, born like Jupiter of Infinite Time, reigned with Hecate over the maleficent monsters that had issued from their impure embraces. These demoniac confederates of the King of Hell then ascended to the assault of Heaven and attempted to dethrone the successor of Kronos; but, shattered like the Greek giants by the ruler of the gods, these rebel monsters were hurled backward into the abyss from which they had arisen.¹ They made their escape, however, from that place and wandered about on the surface of the earth to spread there misery and to corrupt the hearts of men, who, in order to ward off the evils that menaced them, were obliged to appease

¹ See the cut on p. 309 of the *May Open Court*.

these perverse spirits by offering them expiatory sacrifices. The initiate also knew how by appropriate rites and incantations to enlist them in his service and to employ them against the enemies whose destruction he is meditating.

The gods no longer confined themselves to the ethereal spheres which were their apanage. If theogony represents them as gathered in Olympus around their parents and sovereigns, cosmology exhibits them under another aspect. Their energy filled the world, and they were the active principles of its transformations. Fire, personified in the name of Vulcan, was the most exalted of these natural forces, and it was worshipped in all its manifestations, whether it shone in the stars or in the lightning, whether it animated living creatures, stimulated the growth of plants, or lay dormant in the bowels of the earth. In the deep recesses of the subterranean crypts it burned perpetually on the altars, and its votaries were fearful to contaminate its purity by sacrilegious contact.

They opined with primitive artlessness that fire and water were brother and sister, and they entertained the same superstitious respect for the one as for the other. They worshipped alike the saline floods which filled the deep seas and which were indifferently termed Neptune and Oceanus, the springs that gurgled from the recesses of the earth, the rivers that flowed over its surface, and the placid lakes resplendent in their limpid sheen. A perpetual spring bubbled in the vicinity of the temples, and was the recipient of the homage and the offerings of its visitors. This font perennial (*fons perennis*) was alike the symbolisation of the material and moral boons that the inexhaustible generosity of Infinite Time scattered throughout the universe, and that of the spiritual rejuvenation accorded to wearied souls in the eternity of felicity.

The primitive earth, the nourishing earth, the mother earth (*terra mater*), fecundated by the waters of Heaven, occupied a like important place, if not in the ritual at least in the doctrine of this religion, and the four cardinal winds which were correlated with the deified Seasons were invoked as genii to be both feared and loved: feared because they were the capricious arbiters of the temperature, which brought heat or cold, tempests or calms, which alternately moistened and dried the atmosphere, which produced the vegetation of the spring and withered the foliage of the autumn,—and loved as the diverse manifestations of the air itself, which is the principle of all life.

In other words, Mithraism deified the four simple bodies which, according to the physics of the ancients, composed the uni-

verse. An allegorical group, often reproduced, in which a lion represented fire, a cup water, a serpent the earth, pictured the struggle of the opposing elements, which were constantly devouring one another and whose perpetual transmutations and infinitely variable combinations provoked all the phenomena of nature.

Hymns of fantastic symbolism celebrated the metamorphoses which the antitheses of these four elements produced in the world.¹ The supreme God drives a chariot drawn by four steeds which turn ceaselessly round in a fixed circle. The first, which bears on its shining coat the signs of the planets and constellations, is sturdy and agile and traverses the circumference of the fixed circle with extreme velocity; the second, less vigorous and less rapid in its movements, wears a sombre robe, of which one side only is illuminated by the rays of the sun; the third proceeds more slowly still; and the fourth turns slowly in the same spot, champing restlessly its steel bit, whilst its companions move round it as round a stationary column in the center. The quadriga turns slowly and unimpeded, regularly completing its eternal course. But at a certain moment the fiery breath of the first horse falling upon the fourth ignites its mane, and its neighbor, exhausted by its efforts, inundates it with torrents of perspiration. Finally, a still more remarkable phenomenon takes place: The appearance of the quartette is transformed. The steeds interchange natures in such wise that the substance of all passes over to the most robust and ardent of the group, just as if a sculptor, after having modelled figures in wax, had borrowed from one wherewith to complete the others, and had ended by merging all into a single form. Then, the conquering steed in this divine struggle, having become by his triumph omnipotent, is identified with the charioteer himself. The first horse is the incarnation of fire or ether, the second of air, the third of water, and the fourth of the earth. The accidents which befall the last-mentioned horse, the earth, represent the conflagrations and inundations which have desolated and will in the future desolate our world; and the victory of the first horse is the symbolic image of the final conflict that shall destroy the existing order of all things.

The cosmic quadriga, which draws the suprasensible Cause, has not been figured in the sacred iconography. The latter reserved for a visible God this emblematic group. The votaries of Mithra, like the ancient Persians, adored the Sun that traversed each day in its chariot the spaces of the firmament and sank at

¹ Dio Chrysost., *Or.* XXXVI. § 39 et seq.

dusk extinguishing its fires in the ocean. When it appeared again on the horizon, its brilliant light scattered in flight the spirits of darkness, and it purified all creation, to which its radiance restored life. A like worship was accorded the Moon which voyaged in the spheres above on a cart drawn by white bulls. The animal of reproduction and of agriculture had been assigned to the goddess that presided over the increase of plants and the generation of living creatures.

The elements, accordingly, were not the only natural bodies that were deified in the Mysteries. The two luminaries that fecundated nature were worshipped here the same as in primitive Mazdaism, but the conceptions which the Aryas formed of them have been profoundly transformed by the influences of Chaldæan theories.

As we have already said,¹ the ancient belief of the Persians had been forcibly subjected in Babylon to the influence of a theology which was based on the science of its day, and the majority of the gods of Iran had been likened to the stars worshipped in the valley of the Euphrates. They acquired thus a new character entirely different from their original one, and the name of the same deity thus assumed and preserved in the Occident a double meaning. The Magi were unsuccessful in harmonising these new doctrines with their ancient religions, for the Semitic astrology was as irreconcilable with the naturalism of Iran as it was with the paganism of Greece. But looking upon these contradictions as simple differences of degree in the knowledge of one and the same truth, the clergy reserved for the *élite* exclusively the revelation of the original Mazdean doctrines concerning the origin and destiny of man and the world, whilst the multitude were forced to remain content with the brilliant and superficial symbolism inspired by the speculations of the Chaldæans. The astronomical allegories concealed from the curiosity of the vulgar the real scope of the hieratic representations, and the promise of complete illumination, long withheld, fed the ardor of faith with the fascinating allurements of mystery.

The most potent of these sidereal deities, those which were most often invoked and for which were reserved the richest offerings, were the Planets. Conformably to astrological theories, the planets were endowed with virtues and qualities for which it is frequently difficult for us to discover adequate reasons. Each of the planetary bodies presided over a day of the week, to each some one

¹ See *The Open Court* for March, p. 171.

metal was consecrated, each was associated with some one degree in the initiation, and their number has caused a special religious potency to be attributed to the number seven. In descending from the empyrean to the earth, the souls, it was thought, successively received from them their passions and qualities. These planetary bodies were frequently represented on the monuments, now by symbols recalling the elements of which they were formed or the sacrifices which were offered to them, and now under the aspect of the immortal gods throned on the Greek Olympus: Helios, Selene, Ares, Hermes, Zeus, Aphrodite, Kronos. But these images have here an entirely different signification from what they possess when they stand for Ahura Mazda, Zervan, or the other gods of Mazdaism. Then the personifications of the heavens or of infinite time are not seen in them, but only the luminous stars whose wandering course can be followed amid the constellations. This double system of interpretation was particularly applied to the sun, conceived now as identical with Mithra and now as distinct from him. In reality there were two solar divinities in the Mysteries, one Iranian and the heir of the Persian Hoare, the other Semitic, the substitute of the Babylonian Shamash, identified with Mithra.

By the side of the planetary gods who have still a double character, purely sidereal divinities received their tribute of homage. The twelve signs of the zodiac, which in their daily revolution subject creatures to their adverse influences, were represented in all of the mithræums under their traditional aspect (Fig. 3). Each of them was without doubt the object of particular veneration during the month over which it presided, and they were customarily grouped by threes according to the seasons to which they conformed and with the worship of which their worship was associated.

But the signs of the zodiac were not the only constellations that were incorporated by the priests in their theology. The astronomical method of interpretation, having been once adopted in the Mysteries, was freely extended and made to embrace all possible figures. There was scarcely any object or animal that was not in some way conceived as the symbolic image of a stellar group. Thus the raven, the cup, the dog, and the lion, that ordinarily accompany the group of the tauroctonus Mithra, were readily identified with the constellations of the same name. The two celestial hemispheres that alternately pass above and below the earth were personified and likened to the Dioscuri, who, according to the Hellenic fable, lived and died by turns. Mythology and erudition were everywhere mingled. The hymns described a hero like the

Greek Atlas who bore on his untiring shoulders the globe of Heaven and who is regarded as the inventor of astronomy. But these demi-gods were relegated to the background; the planets and the signs of the zodiac never ceased to preserve their incontestable primacy, for it was they above all others, according to the astrologers, that controlled the existence of men and guided the course of things.

This was the capital doctrine that Babylon introduced into Mazdaism: belief in Fatality, the conception of an inevitable Destiny controlling the events of this world and inseparably conjoined with the revolution of the starry heavens. This Destiny, identified with Zervan, became the supreme being which engendered all

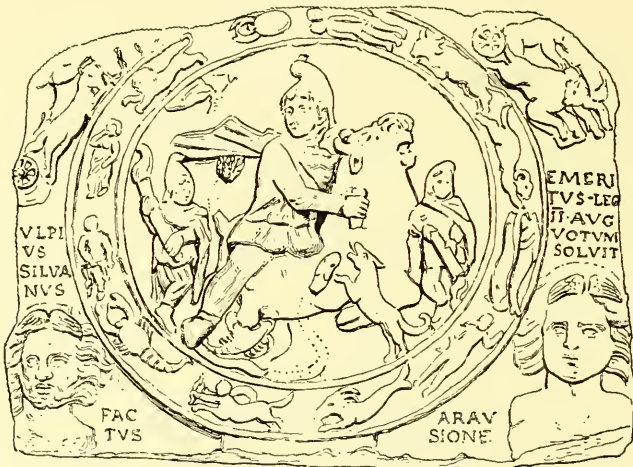


Fig. 3. MARBLE BAS-RELIEF FOUND IN LONDON.

In the center the Tauroctonus Mithra with the torch-bearers surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac. In the lower corners busts of the Winds; in the upper corners the Sun on his quadriga and the Moon on a chariot drawn by bulls. The inscription reads: *Ulpus Silvanus emeritus legionis II Augustae votum solvit. Factus Arausione* (that is, honorably discharged at Orange).

things and ruled the universe. The development of the universe is subject to immutable laws and its various parts are united in the most intimate solidarity. The position of the planets, their mutual relations and energies, at every moment different, produce the series of terrestrial phenomena. Astrology, of which these postulates were the dogmas, certainly owes one portion of its success to the Mithraic propaganda, and Mithraism is therefore partly respon-

sible for the triumph in the West of this pseudo-science with its long train of errors and terrors.

The rigorous logic of its deductions assured to this stupendous chimera a more complete domination over reflecting minds than the belief in the infernal powers and in the invocation of spirits, although the latter commanded greater sway over popular credulity. The independent power attributed by Mazdaism to the principle of evil afforded justification for all manner of occult practices. Necromancy, oneiromancy, belief in the evil eye and in talismans, in witchcraft and conjurations, in fine, all the puerile and sinister aberrations of ancient paganism, found their justification in the rôle assigned to demons who incessantly interfered in the affairs of men. The Persian Mysteries are not free from the grave reproach of having condoned, if not of having really taught, all these superstitions. The title "Magus" became not without good reason in the popular mind a synonym for "magician."

Yet neither the conception of an inexorable necessity un pityingly forcing the human race toward an unknown goal, nor even the fear of malevolent spirits bent on its destruction, was competent to attract the multitudes to the altars of the Mithraic gods. The rigor of these sombre doctrines was tempered by a belief in benevolent powers sympathising with the sufferings of mortals. Even the planets were not, as in the didactic works of the theoretical astrologists, cosmic forces whose favorable or sinister influence increased or diminished for all eternity conformably to the revolutions of a fixed circle. They were, as in the doctrine of the old Chaldæan religion, divinities that saw and heard, that rejoiced or lamented, whose wrath might be appeased and whose favor might be gained by prayers and by offerings. The faithful reposed their confidence in the support of these benevolent protectors who combated without respite the powers of evil.

The hymns that celebrated the exploits of the gods have unfortunately almost all perished, and we know these epic traditions only through the monuments which served to illustrate them. Nevertheless, the character of this sacred poetry is recognisable in the *débris* which has come down to us. Thus, the labors of Verethraghna, the Mazdean Hercules, were chanted in Armenia. It is told here how he strangled the dragons and aided Jupiter in his triumphant combat with the monstrous giants; and like the votaries of the Avesta, the Roman adepts of Mazdaism compared him to a bellicose and destructive boar.

But the hero that enjoyed the greatest rôle in these warlike

tales was Mithra. Certain mighty deeds, which in the books of Zoroastrianism were attributed to other divinities, were associated with his person. He had become the center of a cycle of legends which alone explain the preponderant place that was accorded him in this religion. It is because of the astounding feats accomplished by him that this god, who did not hold supreme rank in the celes-

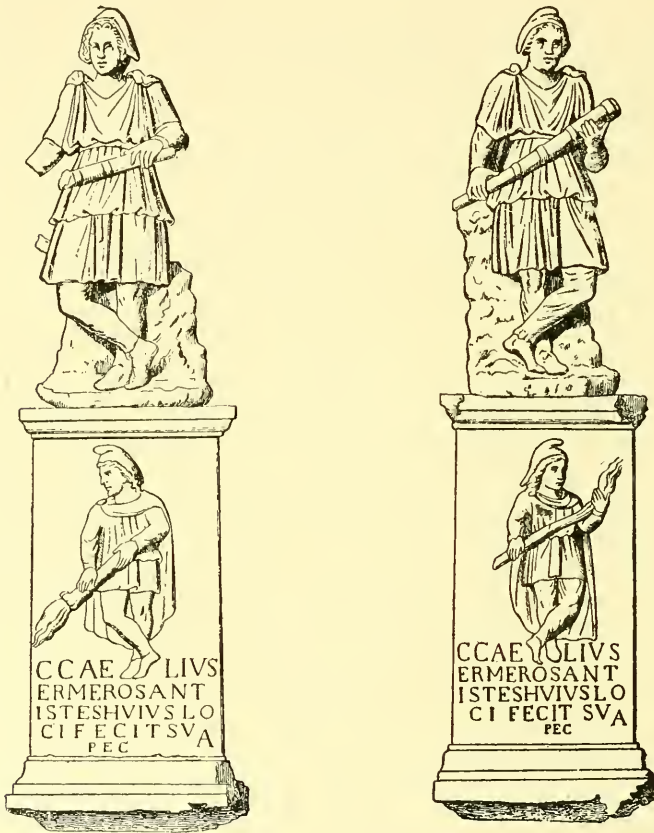


Fig. 4. STATUES OF TORCH-BEARERS (DADOPHORI).

From a Mithraeum at Ostia, now in the Lateran.

tial hierarchy, has given his name to the Persian Mysteries that were disseminated in the Occident.

For the ancient Magi, Mithra was, as we have seen, the god of light, and as the light is borne by the air he was thought to inhabit the Middle Zone between Heaven and Hell, and for this reason the name of *μεσότης* was given to him. In order to signalise

this attribute in the ritual, the sixteenth or middle day of each month was consecrated to him. When he was identified with Shamash,¹ his priests in investing him with the appellation of "intermediary" doubtless had in mind the fact that, according to the Chaldæan doctrines, the sun occupied the middle place in the planetary choir. But this middle position was not exclusively a position in space; it was also invested with an important moral significance. Mithra was the "mediator" between the unapproachable and unknowable god that reigned in the ethereal spheres and the human race that struggled and suffered here below. Shamash



Fig. 5. STATUES OF TORCH-BEARERS.
(Museum of Palermo.)

had already enjoyed analogous functions in Babylon, and the Greek philosophers also saw in the glittering globe that poured down upon this world its light the ever-present image of the invisible Being, of which reason alone could conceive the existence.

It was in this adventitious quality of the genius of the solar light that Mithra was best known in the Occident, and his monuments frequently suggest this borrowed character. It was customary to represent him between two youthful figures, one with an uplifted, the other with an inverted torch. These youths bore the

¹ See *The Open Court* for March, p. 172.

enigmatic epithets of *Cauti* and *Cautopati*, and were naught else than the double incarnation of his person (Figs. 4 and 5). These two dadophori, as they were called, and the tauroctonus hero formed together a triad, and in this "triple Mithra" was variously seen either the star of day, whose coming at morn the cock announced, who passed at midday triumphantly into the zenith and at night languorously fell toward the horizon; or the sun which, as it waxed in strength, entered the constellation of Taurus and marked the beginning of spring,—the sun whose conquering ardors fecundated nature in the heart of summer and the sun that afterwards, enfeebled, traversed the sign of the Scorpion and announced the return of winter. From another point of view, one of these torch-

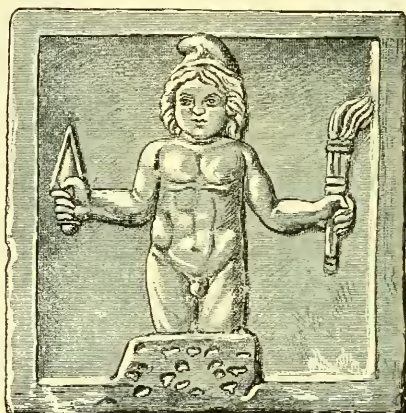


Fig. 6. MITHRA BORN FROM THE ROCK.
Bas-Relief found in the Crypt of St. Clements at Rome.

bearers was regarded as the emblem of heat and of life and the other as the emblem of cold and of death. Similarly, the tauroctonus group was variously explained with the aid of an astronomical symbolism more ingenious than rational. Yet these sidereal interpretations were nothing else than intellectual diversions designed to amuse the neophytes prior to their receiving the revelation of the esoteric doctrines that constituted the ancient Iranian legend of Mithra. The story of this legend is lost, but the bas-reliefs recount for us certain episodes of it, and its contents appear to have been somewhat as follows.

The light bursting from the heavens, which were conceived as a solid vault, became, in the mythology of the Magi, Mithra born

from the rock. The tradition ran that the "Generative Rock," of which a standing image was worshipped in the temples, had given birth to Mithra on the banks of a river, under the shade of a sacred tree, and that shepherds alone, ensconced in a neighboring mountain, had witnessed the miracle of his entrance into the world. They had seen him issue forth from the rocky mass, his head adorned with a Phrygian cap, armed with a knife, and carrying a torch that had illuminated the sombre depths below (Fig. 6). Worshipfully the shepherds drew near, offering the divine infant the first fruits of their flocks and their harvests. But the young hero was naked and exposed to the winds that blew with violence: he had concealed himself in the branches of a fig-tree, and detaching the fruit from the tree with the aid of his knife, he ate of it, and stripping it of its leaves he made himself garments. Thus equipped for the battle, he was able henceforward to measure his strength with the other powers that peopled the marvellous world into which he had entered. For although the shepherds were pasturing their flocks when he came, all these things came to pass before there were men on earth.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]