

Notes for a Mithraic Ceremony

by Paul Elliott

Context for Mithraic Worship in the 4thC

Mithraeums in Rome destroyed in 377

Mithraeums in Britain demolished/destroyed in the 4thC (dating difficult), Carrawburgh dated to 325 by one archaeologist - perhaps inspired by politics of the day (death of Licinius, Constantine's move to push Christianity and forbid pagan worship).

This has been on my mind everytime we talk about Mithras. Is there any surviving worship in the 4thC? The temples certainly suffer either vandalism or decay and demolition in the 4thC (various dates), but these temples are close to or in urban centres, or at forts. The Christian gentry of Britain and the politicized officers of the army may well have ensured 4thC closures of these Mithraeums. Emperor Theodosius' edict banning pagan worship in 391 was probably aimed at the big public festivals, doubtful any Mithraists left by that time. They were an easier target for Christians. But Christianity was lacking in rural areas in Britain, it is noted that there is a pagan resurgence in Britain, with sites such as Lydney becoming well established. Peter Salway says that paganism survived to the end of Roman rule outside the cities. Imperial anti-pagan declarations will have made no difference here.

Based on that evidence (ie. not a lot) you could speculate that formal military Mithraic worship may have gone 'underground' in the early 4thC when Christianity first became the religion of the legionary standards (probably dated to 325, death of Licinius, when Constantine officially made Christianity the religion of the empire, and also presumably of the standards and the principia shrine in every fort), but was forced to be abandoned completely by the 370's. Worship may have continued away from forts, villas and cities in natural grottos and caves. But there is no direct evidence for that.

So a military Mithraic ceremony could be recreated for the time of Constantine prior to 325. At this time Christianity had been accepted and tolerated, but there had been no moves to ban pagan worship. All were tolerated. Mithraists in forts could still worship freely and openly, the legionary standards probably still sat in a pagan shrine to Jupiter and Mars.

Mithraic congregations averaged around twenty individuals, going on the size of temples. Sometimes more, sometimes less. Poorer temples worshipped in front of a painted backdrop of the taurobolium. More well endowed congregations had stone carvings of the event instead.

Seven grades - each marked with symbols or items of clothing.

Raven - face mask - or use black feathers? Poured wine for the others?

Nymphus - a veil, or a lighted lamp. An initiate to this grade had his veil removed with the words. Lamp-lighter?

Soldier - Tattooed/branded on forehead with the 'sign'. Unlikely. Better to draw an M (miles) with charcoal from the holy brazier I think ... Also presented with a crown on the tip of a sword which he rejects with the words "Only Mithras is my true crown". Also awarded a kit bag and a helmet.

Doorman/guard?

Lion - Symbols are a sistrum or thunderbolt. He uses honey for purification. Receives a spoonful from the Father perhaps? Probably wore a lion mask. Lions burnt incense. Incense-burner?

Persian - Symbol was the sickle and lunar crescent. Fruits/harvester. Dishing out food?

Heliodromos - Sunrunner, symbols are a whip, rayed diadem and lit torch (all on the back of my shield). Lit the torches.

Father - Wore richly brocaded cap, wand of command and a libation cup. Performed the ceremonies.

Possible Invocations:

"Look, Nymphus! Hail, Nymphus, hail young light!"

"Hail to the Lions for new and many years!"

"Hail to the Fathers, from East and West, under the protection of Saturn!"

"We must get through dark times in piety"

"To the very end I have borne on my shoulders the accomplishment of divine orders"

"Spring hidden in the rock, whose nectar has fed the two brothers"

"I have transcended the boundaries of death, I have trodden the threshold of Proserpine, and having traversed all the elements I am returned to the earth. In the middle of the night I have seen the Sun scintillating with a pure light; I have approached the gods below and the gods above, and have worshipped them face to face." [COOL!]

Possible Initiation Ceremony

The Mithraeum of Capua has a wall painting of an initiation ceremony. Perhaps that of a 'Soldier'. The candidate walks blindfolded under the guidance of a cult member. He then drops to one knee in front of a man with a helmet on (another 'Soldier'). There is then an embrace (the 'Kiss of Peace'?). The next panel shows the initiate kneeling beside a sword before the priest (a 'Father'?) who wears a white tunic bordered with red and holding up a crown with red ribbons over the head of the initiate. Other panels are a bit more mystifying, with the initiate lying face down, or kneeling with head lowered, other cult members are around him. Ordeals?

Possible Daily Worship Ritual

Sharing a meal, at the cena (late afternoon or evening). This meal was preceded by instruction in the Mithraic texts (readings? commentaries?) They ate bread and drank water, as well as water mixed with wine communally from a bowl passed around. Poultry may have been popular, could have been sacrificed on the flimsy small altars, plus an inscription at Santa Prisca said: "chicken livers are certainly delectable".

Suggestions for a Mithraic Event

Above and beyond any talk to the audience, I would love to see a daily liturgy (perhaps a midday worship) with a reading from the Father, followed by individual declarations of faith by worshippers - reiterating their sacramentum to Mithras (their oath on being initiated to the cult). This is followed by breaking bread, mixing wine and water and passing around the bowl, with a holy phrase uttered as it is drunk (wine stands in for the Iran/Zoroastrian haoma, so the wine is holy).

Of course I'd like to see something of an initiation too. The cult rank of 'Soldier' would be good. The crown could be a wreath with red ribbons. Lots of martial imagery will re-inforce the fact that Mithras was a soldier's god. The candidate (who should already be a Nymphus) is led on to the Father, and words are said. He can drop to one knee and be embraced after making his sacramentum to the rank of 'Soldier; (new oath every rank). He can stand, be given the victor's crown on a sword by knock it away as mentioned above. Instead the Father will give him the helmet (how about an older style helmet like the Heddernheim or something, something that doesn't look too much like its lifted off a passing legionary), he can also give him his soldier's knapsack.

You may or may not want to have an ordeal??? Perhaps instead have the new initiate be led on *directly from his ordeal* (maybe laid in the temple 'pit' fasting for the past three days ...) so he'd stagger on all exhausted.