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Dimensions of History

"London" project

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Mithraic Mysteries:

The Cult of Mithras in Roman London

The second chapter entitled "Londinium" of Edward Rutherford's novel, London, centers around the character, Julius and his involvement in a love triangle between himself, a woman named Martina, and his friend Sextus. Julius and Martina eventually carry on an elaborate love affair successfully, despite her marriage to the hulking Mariner, who is Julius' employer (Rutherford, 50-97). However, the story, which is set

in the Roman-occupied province of Londinium in AD 251, is more than that of a 3rd century romance novel.

It also offers insight into central aspects of Roman culture. One of these is the **Cult of Mithras**, around which much of Julius' story revolves.



Londinium

Image obtained from:
http://www.eastendtalking.org.uk/OurHistory/assets/Hist_images/londinium.jpg

In London, Rutherford states that although there had always been many religions in the Roman Empire, such as the various cults and shrines to the

goddess Diana that are also mentioned in the chapter (Rutherford, 69), the mystery cults and religions from the eastern part of the world had come to gain popularity in the West within the first two centuries AD. The two religions that held precedent throughout the empire during this

time were Christianity and the Cult of Mithras (Rutherford, 72). According to the tenets of Persian religion, Mithras was the sun god, personifying the qualities of purity and honesty. He was also a warrior, battling for truth and justice in an eternal cosmic war between the forces of good and evil. Legend had it that Mithras had slain a bull whose bloodshed provided the Earth's life force (Rutherford, 72).

One can gain a better understanding of "Londinium", and a better understanding of the beliefs that much of the Roman military most likely built their lives upon, in the 3rd century AD, by studying the Cult of Mithras. The secret societies that evolved around the worship of Mithras were highly organized and exclusive, only allowing a limited number of members. In London, Julius' father, Rufus, is proud to be a member of the cult, because of this. The Cult of Mithras was mostly popular among merchants and the military (Rutherford, 72). While Julius attends a ritual ceremony with his father, he learns that Martina's husband, the Mariner-another military man, is also a member of the cult (Rutherford, 76).

By studying the status of religion in Roman London, one can also gain information regarding the economic and social classes of the citizens living therein, and their religious implications. Because the Cult of Mithras was secret, exclusive, and most popular among wealthy citizens such as merchants and the Roman military, it can arguably be referred to as a religion for the wealthy. It is also perhaps significant that the deity the religion revolved around was a god who achieved greatness through cosmic military victory. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that persons involved in the military would follow the tenets of such a religion. Rutherford points out through his narrative that Christianity, on the other hand, is a religion

based on “humility and the hope of a happier afterlife”. Because of this, one can conclude that the Christians of Roman London were mostly people who personified these hopes, such as slaves and poor people, who were underprivileged and suffering (Rutherford, 72). Despite the differences in social implications of the time, it is also possible for one to draw similarities between the symbolisms involved in the basic tenets of both religions. For example, Christ’s blood saves the souls of his believers, giving them new life according to the tenets of Christianity. In a similar way, the Cult of Mithras involved the idea that the blood of the sacred bull, slain by Mithras, gave life to the Earth, as previously stated.



Crucifixion, Diego Velázquez

image obtained from: Wikipedia



Mithras, slaying the legendary bull

image obtained from: Wikipedia

Scholarly studies have speculated that Mithraism took root in the Roman Empire due to the vast expanse of its territory and the extent of the Roman army’s travel and recruiting. According to the proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies, Mithraism was first practiced to a considerable degree in the Roman Empire when the Roman army travelled through Italy and the Danube (Daniels, 250). C.M. Daniels draws conclusions from Plutarch’s *Pompey* in his section of the studies, entitled

“The role of the Roman army in the spread and practice of Mithraism”. Plutarch states that the cult arrived in Italy “as a result of Pompey the Great’s defeat of the Cilician pirates, who practiced ‘strange sacrifices of their own...and celebrated certain secret rites, amongst which those of Mithra continue to the present time, having been first instituted by them’ (Plutarch, 24-5, cited in Daniels). This particular study is very extensive and goes into greater detail regarding various areas in which Mithraism developed among members of the Roman army. However, by glancing over the various accounts, the one related to Italy through Plutarch’s writing seems to be the most directly related to a primary source.



mithraeum, found in Ostia Antica, Italy

image obtained from Wikipedia



3rd century tauroctony fresco, found in a mithraeum at Marino, Italy

image obtained from: Crystalinks.com/Wikipedia

Mithraic rituals in the Roman world often took place in a cave or an underground structure called a mithraeum. Contained in each mithraeum, was a sculpture of Mithras slaying the legendary bull (Catholic Encyclopedia). This sculpture is called

a tauroctony

(Mithraism:



full tauroctony sculpture, date unknown

image obtained from: Crystalinks.com

Crystalinks.com). Usually, the tauroctony also contains a serpent, a dog, and a scorpion attacking the bull's testicles.

These symbols are believed by many to represent different celestial constellations ("tauroctony" may be a form of

"Taurus"), which had deep religious meaning for the people of the Persian cultures where Mithraism originated (Ulansey).



detail of the scorpion attacking the bull's testicles

image obtained from: Wikipedia

When one views images of the tauroctony, it is probably quite easy for them to gain a sense of the power and masculinity embodied by the god, Mithras. Therefore, it is simple to understand the draw to a religion such as this one by a group of powerful imperialistic men, such as the Roman army. The cult of Mithras also contained a complex ranking

structure among its members, much like masonry and other secret societies (Catholic Encyclopedia). Hierarchies such as this are arguably reminiscent of military ranking systems, and therefore explain another connection between the Cult of Mithras and the



mithraeum, location and date unknown

image obtained from: Crystalinks.com

Roman army. Members of these cult ranks, identified by different animals, are mentioned in Rutherford's novel when Julius and Rufus attend the Mithraic ceremony (Rutherford, 73).

As previously mentioned, the mythology behind the story of Mithras slaying the bull was part of the Persians' creation story. The bull's blood brought life to the Earth. When one knows this story, and observes the scorpion attacking the bull's testicles in the tauroctony, it is possible to draw connections between this image and one from Greek mythology: Aphrodite's birth resulting from the castration of Uranus. Personally, I do not know of any study that has been done relating these two things, but it is a possible connection that one could make.



The Birth of Venus, Botticelli

image obtained from: faculty.evansville.edu



Mithras, slaying the bull

image obtained from: Wikipedia

Besides the blood-life connection mentioned earlier, there are arguably many other similarities between the basic ideas of Mithraism and those related to Christianity. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, connections have also been made by religious scholars, between the fact that Christ was supposedly born in a cave, and the fact that Mithraic rituals were performed in caves, and cave-like structures. Also, according to the legends of Mithraism, Mithras' date of birth was December 25: the date adapted as Christmas Day by the Catholic Church, commemorating Christ's birth (Catholic Encyclopedia, and Rutherford, 72).

London's conclusion is comprised of a vignette in which a Temple of Mithras is featured in a museum, along with many other artifacts from the time periods highlighted in the novel (Rutherford, 1122). This possibly shows that Rutherford finds the Cult of Mithras to be a very significant part of the history of London. Before reading this novel, and conducting this project, I had personally heard of Mithraism, but was not aware that Mithraic worship took place in Roman-occupied London. By studying the history of Mithraism and the Cult of Mithras, especially during the 3rd century AD, even briefly, one can gain a better insight into the religious and philosophical mindset of much of the Roman military. Furthermore, this knowledge can apply greatly to one's better understanding of the Roman characters in Rutherford's London.

