

Mithras

and the

End of Time

by Doug Orton



When examining the riddle of Mithras, we start with Mithras slaying a bull, an image that repeatedly comes up at temple digs around Europe. Often found in the center of the inner sanctum, this picture is a sacred drama, a creation myth.

But is there more?

Joseph Campbell writes: "The Mysteries of Mithra, which came to flower in the near east during the Hellenistic age as a kind of Zoroastrian heresy, and in the Roman period was the most formidable rival of Christianity... Celebrants wore masks representing animals of the Zodiac: for astronomy was undergoing a new development in this period through an application of Greek thought to the data of the centuries of Sumero-Chaldean observation. In all religions of the age, the Zodiac had come to represent the bounding, ever revolving sphere of time - space - causality, within which the unbounded Spirit operates — unmoved yet moving in all."

In this article, Doug Orton explores the origins of the Mithraic mysteries and the cycle of the zodiacal Great Year.

Graphics

Upper left: Attendant to Mithras

Right: Mithras slaying the Bull.

Opposite: Altar in ancient Mithraic temple, underneath c. 8th century church of San Clemente, Rome.

OUT OF PERSIA, well before the birth of "The Christ" (a Greek term), comes Mithras. Mithras, the cosmic fire god of light, was strongly felt in the Mediterranean and beyond from c. 300 BCE through 400 CE. Born on Winter Solstice, Mithras performed the usual Messianic miracles before ascending to heaven at the Spring Equinox (Persian new year), or "Easter," as some cults call it.

In a time of cross-culture appropriations carried by military intervention, the Mithras cult was embraced by Rome (or rather Rome's soldiers, independent of their native origins).

Say you're a Celt hanging out in Londinium under Roman occupation. The economy being what it is, you sign up with the local road crew swearing allegiance to Rome, and flim flam thank you Pan — you're shipped off to the wilds of Turkey to harass the local insurgents.

This place is definitely Oz, and they've got some weird ideas about God. On your day off you go to the local temple and you find out all about Mithras — a Herculean do-gooder with morals. Mithras doesn't rape and pillage. He's busy fighting evil and

trying to secure a small retirement in Heaven.

You yourself, a stranger in a strange land and fighting someone else's war, you relate to this guy.

He's just trying
to make order



out of chaos. Mithras sacrifices the cosmic bull and the world comes into being. When this cycle is over, Mithras will again sacrifice the cosmic bull and the next world begins. It's like a tour of duty. Mithras is the cosmic soldier saving the world.

The years go by. You swing through Rome to pick up a few medals, party toga style, and finally, with pension in hand, you head back for Britannia. There's a lonely place in your heart, though, because you don't relate to the Gods and Goddesses you knew as a boy.

But back in Londinium is a flourishing Mithras

temple! It seems some young Turks joined up like you did and got sent to your town, and they brought Mithras with them. Wherever you go, Mithras is the universal import of the army.

Centuries pass. Mithras is a different dharma bum than he was in the good old days. In the old days, it seemed that all Roman roads led to Mithras. Then the Empire had a nervous breakdown. In the recovery, there's a fusion of Persian mysticism, Greek ideology, and Semitic folklore. Okay, we'll take Jesus, and the Holy Roman Empire is on the track. Redemption is only a damnation away. Scourge and purge. The slander and the mud-slinging begins, and Mithras is buried under the mud. A soldier's death.

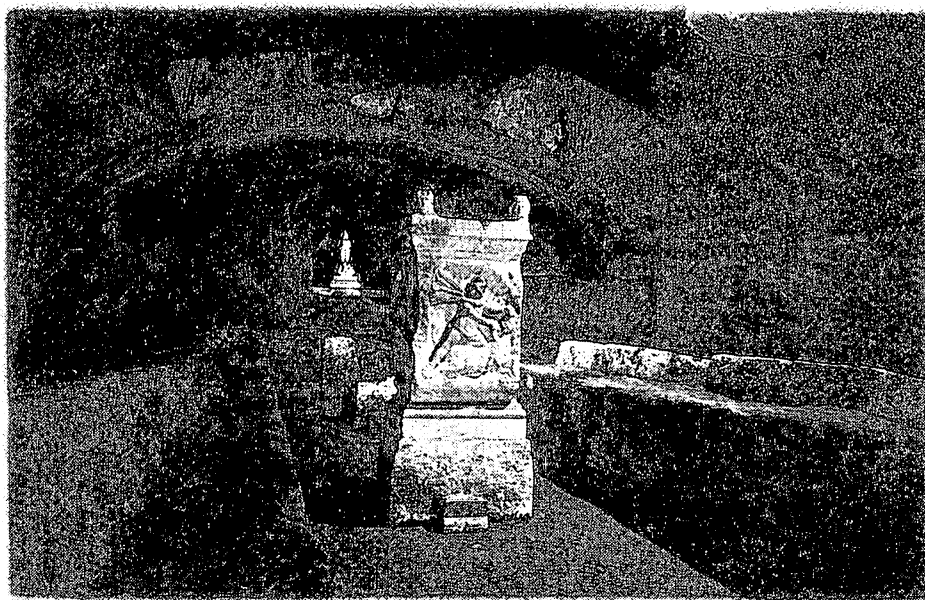
Fifteen hundred years later, anthropologists find Mithraic temples all over Europe and the trained professionals start to make speculations as to the nature of certain strange drawings and sculptures wherever Mithras is found buried. Always the same riddle: a young gent straddling a hunky bull while stabbing it. Zodiac-like creatures adorn the periphery. What does it mean? The prophecy of hamburger? The first cowboy?

Maybe more. The question being: Is Mithras a star cult which worked with Zodiac symbology? Could this picture of Mithras straddling the bull be a map to

a time when the constellations matched this picture? Was Mithras a creation myth built around a stellar time map?

MITHRAS AND THE ZODIAC

The Zodiac sequence devised by the ancient astronomers (still used today for star cluster identification and for astrology) was a big deal in the Mithraic scheme of the cosmos. Author David Ulansey in his "Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries" found an interesting correspondence. The famous bull-slaying iconography of the Mithraic Mysteries (called by some scholars



"Perses slaying the bull" — see accompanying illustration) corresponded exactly to how the stars were set in the Zodiac of Taurus, roughly 4,286 - 2,143 BCE. Quite a revelation in star revolution.

However, some perplexing questions arise. Mainly: Why did a religion's symbology correspond to a Zodiac Age in which the Mithraic religion didn't even begin to exist?

To grasp Mithraic religion, we need three elements of study: symbology, numerology, and astronomy. The riddle here is not to search for scientific or contemporary truth and parallels, but to look through the eyes of the Mithraic priests with the knowledge they held as truth. Then what do we see?

Throughout the history of religion, we see certain shared ideas, symbols, and mythologies. And so it goes with Mithras. Certain ideas, symbols, and

mythologies shared with the Gnostics and the Kabbalists no doubt were handed down in some fashion by the Mithraic cult.

Eliphaz Levi, a philosopher, an occultist, a French monk, and a collector of ancient folklore had this relevant passage to share in his work, "Dogme Et Rituel De La Haute Magie":

"We have said that to acquire magical power, two things are necessary: to disengage the will from all servitude, and to exercise it in control. But in fact it is the blind force which souls have to conquer to liberate themselves from the

bonds of the Earth; for if their will does not free them from this fatal attraction, they will be absorbed in the current by the force which has produced them, and will return to the central and eternal fire."

So how does this

apply to Mithras? We connect the dots and the picture we get is Perses (Mithras? I think so) wrestling, slaying, subduing the Bull of his will. Perses/Mithras is disengaging his intent from all servitude, so that his will no longer rules him. Our will is the "other," yet ourselves. There is a duality here, and I believe it is the crux of all the Mystery rites of that era. The Mithraic iconography becomes a meditation, a mandala to experiential understanding that can't be put into words.

CREATION AND COSMOLOGY

But how does this relate to cosmology and the supposed creation myth embodied in the Mithras story?

A phenomenon known as the Precession of the Equinoxes has been recognized since ancient times. In a nutshell, the relation of our solar system

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Mithras

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to the zodiac is slowly moving, so that over a period of about 2000 years, the coincidence of our seasons shifts by one zodiacal sign. Every 24,000-25,000 years, the stars are exactly as they were in the beginning of the cycle. So every Precession or 2000 years is a new Zodiac Age.

Today we find ourselves with the tide of Pisces winding out and the tide of Aquarius winding in. Now if we think (as did the ancients) of a cycle of 24,000 years as one Great Year, then 6000 years becomes one "Season." Then numerologically, the Age of Taurus takes on new strategic importance — indulge me here, there's a madness to the method.

Seasons are a condition that pertains to Earth. Can we generalize that "as above, so below," to the Universe at large? This is exactly what I believe was done, especially since the Earth was viewed as the center of the Universe, with the Sun revolving around it.

Now we see "solar seasonal" distinctions that represent the old tide running out and the new tide running in (Solstice and Equinox). The high tides are then the Pagan Harvest festivals (Brigid, Beltaine, Lammas & Samhain). This perspective was operating in some fashion during the Mithraic Mysteries and much before that. Apply this logic to the stars, and the Zodiac becomes four cosmic seasons of three signs apiece.

The Great Year: Precession of the Equinoxes with "The Great Seasons"

1. Winter Solstice

I: 23,573 - 21,420 BCE = Aquarius

II: 21,420 - 19,287 BCE = Capricorn
(Brigid / Olmec)

III: 19,287 - 17,144 BCE = Sagittarius

2. Spring Equinox

I: 17,144 - 15,000 BCE = Scorpio

II: 15,000 - 12,858 BCE = Libra (Beltaine)

III: 12,858 - 10,715 BCE = Virgo

3. Summer Solstice

I: 10,715 - 8,572 BCE = Leo

II: 8,572 - 6,429 BCE = Cancer (Lammas)

III: 6,429 - 4,286 BCE = Gemini

4. Fall Equinox

I: 4,286 - 2,143 BCE = Taurus

II: 2,143 BCE - 0 CE = Aries (Samhain)

III: 0 - 2,143 CE = Pisces

1. Winter Solstice

I: 2,143 - 4,286 CE = Aquarius

and so on

We thus have four "seasons" of three signs each. Every 6000 years or so corresponds to a solstice or equinox. If we consider every season a tide of influence, and the subsets of 2000 years to be the ebb and flow of the tide, we get a rhythm to our waltz cycle of threes.

What we suggest is this: Our Mithraic Mysterians perceived a cosmic undulating rhythm of wax and wane in a tide-like fashion. Not metaphorically, but literally.

Now Taurus becomes the fore-runner, the host of the last era of the old Great Year. What would launch the new cycle? The host (the bull) who is sacrificed by Mithras for the birth of a new world.

Troy was only found by following myth, and I apply the same lines of logic to Mithras as a mystic cult that followed the stars. The Mayans

did no less. There is support for this kind of equation-solving in myths and computations all over the world. We must remember that mathematics is a creative abstract. Math is mythical. And is Myth magic? Go ask Mithras.

MITHRAIC SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- Jungian David Ulansey tackled the riddle with his controversial book, "Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries." Ulansey intrigues but puzzles me. His answers don't match the criteria of the questions he was trying to solve.
- A lot of Ulansey's own foundation work relied on Franz Cumont's "The Mysteries of Mithra."
- Joseph Campbell, "The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology," places Mithras in a Mediterranean context.

Doug Orton is a Reclaiming teacher and multi-faceted scholar whose contributions frequently grace RQ's pages.

Samhain Fashion

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low. And then you chant:

*She changes every time she dresses
and every time she dresses, changes.
Changes, dresses, dresses, changes.*

G: Will this ritual open the necessary channels?

J: If anything can this will. It also helps to use a Barbie doll as your Goddess figure.

G: I'm so pleased. I'm ready to take the ferry to Avalon. I know, with your guidance, I'll be properly attired.

J: You always are, darling.

G: I wish to thank you and your inner fashion guide for these inspiring words of wisdom. I now feel that the community's needs in this arena have been met. At least until Yule comes with its own unique challenges.

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