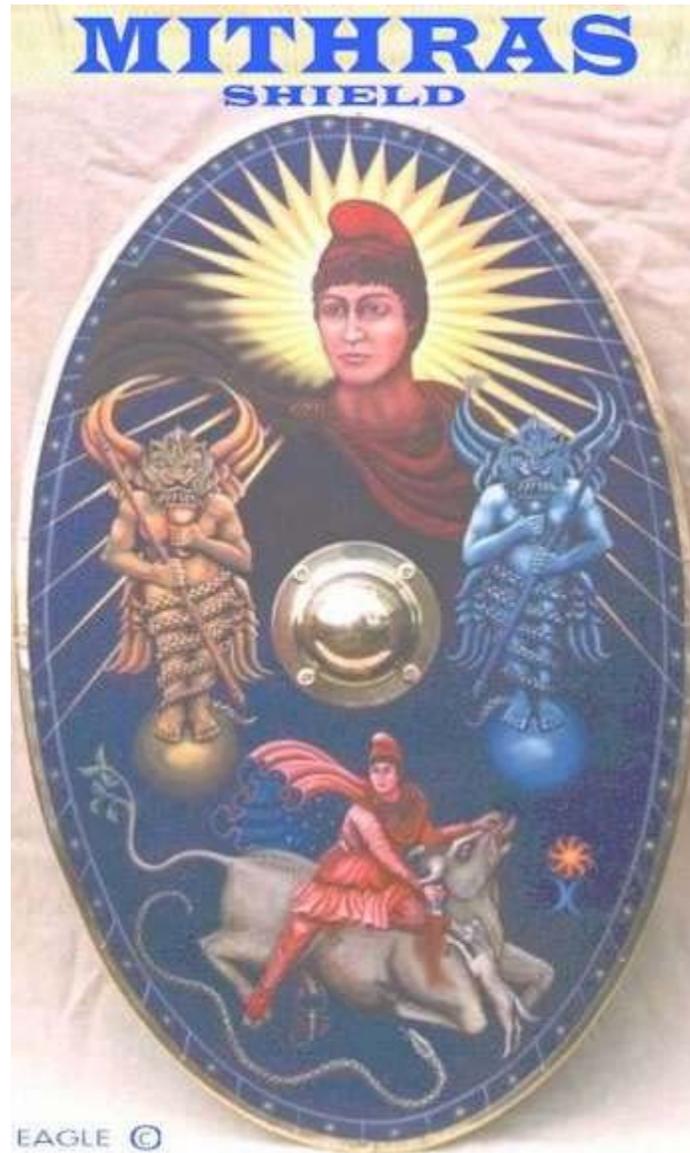


The Cult of Mithras

An Ancient Rite



(1) The Iranian Connection

From Angel to Warrior

"Dating from around the 15th century BC, Mithraism emerged in ancient Persia. 'Mihra' (the Persian form of Mithras) was the word not only for the Sun but also for a friend; and that seems to be how this pagan god was originally worshipped - as both supreme sun god and god of love."

- *Quest for the Past*

"Among the most universal cults of the ancient Armenians was that of Mithra, who was identified on the one hand with the sun, or Helios, on the other, with Apollo and Hermes. Mithra was originally conceived of as a kind of angel, a power of light who fights on the side of [Ahura-Mazda](#) [the Zoroastrian Lord of Wisdom]. This warlike characteristic he seems always to have retained.... Mithra's festival, the Mithrakana, was celebrated in Iranian lands on the sixteenth day of the seventh month, and survived in modified form right up to Muslim times."

- Burney and Lang, *The Peoples of the Hills*

"Mithra was believed to be the eye of Ahura Mazda and to rule over the earth. In the imagination of the Mithraic cult he came to replace the supreme deity. He engaged in a great struggle between good and evil in which he was steadily victorious. To assure his victory, he sacrificed a great bull which was the prototype of the living world of nature. Through this sacrifice nature was made fertile."

- Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*

"The basic doctrine of Mithraism, as far as can be told, is that Mithras was a god who was born from a rock and destined to secure the salvation of the world; to do this he was commanded by the god Apollo (through the intermediary agent of a raven) to slay the Bull from the region of the Moon, which was said to represent the fullness of life. Mithras was reluctant to do this but acquiesced in deference to the divine will; in the ensuing struggle between god and bull, other animals joined in - the dog, and scorpion and the snake. After Mithras was successful a quarrel broke out between Mithras and Apollo, but they were reconciled and celebrated a banquet."

- Peter Clark, *Zoroastrianism, An Introduction to an Ancient Faith*, pp. 157-158

"By the beginning of the third century BC, the militaristic rulers in western outposts of what had been the Persian empire were venerating Mithras as a divine warrior, no longer a loving Sun god but the unconquerable god of soldiers and friend of power."

- *Quest for the Past*

A Question of Origins

"At the end of the nineteenth century Franz Cumont, the great Belgian historian of ancient religion, published a magisterial two-volume work on the Mithraic mysteries based on the assumption of the Iranian origins of the cult. Cumont's work immediately became accepted as the definitive study of the cult, and remained virtually unchallenged for over seventy years."

- David Ulansey, "[The Cosmic Mysteries of Mithras](#)"

Cumont's conclusions are supported by a number of archaeological findings.

"Reliefs on the many Mithraic altars scattered around Europe invariably show the god Mithras killing the 'Bull of Heaven', a scene clearly echoing that of the slaughter of the uniquely-created [Primal bull](#) by Ahriman and recounted in the *Bundahishen*. (It also resembles a similar Mesopotamian myth from the Gilgamesh epic.) What is more, this scene contains other imagery which is also identifiably Zoroastrian, such as the dog who leaps up in apparent approval of Mithras' deed; the [dog](#),...is an important creature in [Zoroastrianism](#), essential to certain death rites. The snake, an Ahrimanic [demonic] creature, which can be seen under the bull's body, is shown attempting to prevent the fruits of the sacrifice, the blood of the bull, from making contact with the earth and giving it life."

- Peter Clark, *Zoroastrianism, An Introduction to an Ancient Faith*, p. 158

Some contemporary scholars, however, disagree with Cumont's conclusions.

"It is probable...that the western Mithras had its roots in a daevic cult of the god as practiced in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, and not in the cult of the Zoroastrianized Mithra in Iran. The western Mithras is a savior god in an era of savior gods."

- Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*

"One of the most elusive and hotly debated issues in the study of Zoroastrianism is the precise nature of the connection between the Iranian deity Mithra and the military Roman Mithraic mystery cult, a connection which seems on the one hand so conclusive' and yet on the other so disturbingly remote. Even the historical problem of the manner of Mithra's arrival on the Roman scene remains unanswered. Some scholars have suggested that the conscription of Persian soldiers into the Roman army may account for it; others believe that Roman Mithraism was in fact a totally separate religion from its inception and was merely given a Persian 'gloss' to make it attractive to a population obsessed with the cryptic and inscrutable cast. Still others connect the Roman cult with Anatolia, where Mithra was known to be venerated in the company of other deities familiar to Zoroastrianism such as Anahita. There is little we can say about its journey west with any certainty, since it was evidently a cult which seemingly functioned without the need for texts (there are none remaining which, given the geographical area covered by the cult at its most popular, strongly suggests that none were ever written down), and the few inscriptions that do survive often merely illuminate the subjects of the carvings they accompany, revealing nothing substantial about the cult's origins. The cult which venerated Mithra in Roman circles (where he is traditionally known as Mithras), and which enjoyed a life of nearly 400 years, was esoteric, confined to male members of the Roman military and political elite (though traders and even slaves may have been eligible for membership), and demanded a series of seven graded initiation rites."

- Peter Clark, *Zoroastrianism, An Introduction to an Ancient Faith*, p. 157



(2) The Connection with the Stars

The Taurobolium

"A central feature of the ceremonial associated with Mithras was the *taurobolium*, the ritual slaughter of a bull which commemorated and repeated Mithras' primeval act. The initiate was baptized in its blood, partaking of its life-giving properties. It may be noted that this part of the ceremonial closely resembled the ritual of the cult of Cybele, the Great Mother of Asia Minor, which had been brought to Rome three centuries before Christ.."

- Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*

"Mithraic temples were conceived in imitation of the 'world cave' in which the god was supposed to have captured and killed the Bull of Heaven and secured for himself the title *Mithra Tuaroctonus* (Mithra the Bull-Slayer), from which the term *tauroctony*, or 'slaying of the bull', is derived."

- Peter Clark, *Zoroastrianism, An Introduction to an Ancient Faith*, pp. 158-159

"...By far the most important icon in the Roman cult was the tauroctony. This scene shows Mithras in the act of killing a bull, accompanied by a dog, a snake, a raven, and a scorpion; the scene is depicted as taking place inside a cave like the [Mithraeum](#) itself. This icon was located in the most important place in every mithraeum, and therefore must have been an expression of the central myth of the Roman cult."

- David Ulansey, "[The Cosmic Mysteries of Mithras](#)"

A Star Map?

There is no Iranian myth, however, of their god Mithra killing a bull. This calls into question the traditional explanation that the tauroctony is a pictorial representation of an Iranian myth. Mithraism may have had an entirely different origin and the name of Mithra/Mithras may have been borrowed to help legitimize and popularize the religion. At the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies, held in Manchester England in 1971, several scholars came up with a radical new theory - that the tauroctony was actually a star map.

"This remarkable explanation of the tauroctony is based on two facts. First, every figure found in the standard tauroctony has a parallel among a group of constellations located along a continuous band in the sky: the bull is paralleled by Taurus, the dog by Canis Minor, the snake by Hydra, the raven by Corvus, and the scorpion by Scorpio. Second, Mithraic iconography in general is pervaded by explicit astronomical imagery: the zodiac, planets, sun, moon, and stars are often portrayed in Mithraic art; in addition, numerous ancient authors speak about astronomical subjects in connection with Mithraism. In the writings of the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry, for example, we find recorded a tradition that the cave which is depicted in the tauroctony and which the underground Mithraic temples were designed to imitate was intended to be 'an image of the cosmos.'"

- David Ulansey, "[The Cosmic Mysteries of Mithras](#)"

Hipparchus' Discovery and an Unseen God

In 128 B.C.E, the noted Greek astronomer Hipparchus discovered the precession of the equinoxes - a wobble in the axis of the earth's rotation which causes the celestial equator to intersect a new constellation of the Zodiac every 2,160 years.

"According to Ulansey [*The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries* (1989)], Tarsus, an intellectual hub in the first century B.C. and a center of Stoic philosophy, incubated a Mithraic doctrine of cosmic transcendence in response to the discovery of precession by Hipparchus in 128 B.C. To the astrally oriented Stoics, the precessional displacement of the entire cosmos implied the existence of a powerful, unseen god who resided beyond the stars and moved the entire universe according to his own timetable. Ulansey argues this supernatural power was identified in Tarsus with Perseus, the city's legendary founder and divine tutelary hero. Even in the fourth century B.C., Tarsus minted coins depicting Perseus in the company of Apollo and presiding over a lion-bull combat. Ulansey sees Aquarius in the bowl symbol and links it and the lion to the solstices. The pair of torch-bearing, cross-legged shepherds who so often flank the bull's death scene, he judges, symbolize the two equinoxes."

- E.C. Krupp, "[Throwing the Bull](#)"

"During...the 'Age of Taurus,' lasting from around 4,000 to 2,000 B.C., the celestial equator passed through Taurus the Bull (the spring equinox of that epoch), Canis Minor the Dog, Hydra the Snake, Corvus the Raven, and Scorpio the Scorpion (the autumn equinox): that is, precisely the constellations represented in the Mithraic tauroctony."

- David Ulansey, "[The Cosmic Mysteries of Mithras](#)"

The End of the Age of Taurus

As the intersection of the celestial equator during the spring equinox moved to the constellation of Aires, the Age of Taurus came to an end - an event symbolized as the death of a bull.

"In a well-reasoned research paper, "The Earliest History of the Constellations in the Near East and the Motif of the Lion-Bull Combat," historian of science Willy Hartner showed that the ancient symbol of the lion battling the bull actually illustrated the fiery

death of Taurus in the glow of the setting Sun. Leo, the Lion, triumphantly commanded the meridian as the Bull went down. Hartner tracked this theme back to Elam, in what is now southern Iran. The lion plays matador on an Elamite seal from about 4000 B.C.

"New Stone Age farmers saw seasonal transition in this celestial event. In the fourth millennium B.C., the Bull succumbed in early February, a time that coincided with the year's first plowing and the start of the agricultural cycle. The Bull's sacrifice was the prelude to the next renewal in the rhythm of growth.

"Even though the slowly wobbling axis of the Earth gradually precesses the stars out of their familiar seasons, in 500 B.C. the Achaemenid dynasty of Persian kings was still putting the lion-bull combat to work as an emblem of seasonal sacrifice. By then, however, Taurus was going down in flames closer to the time of the vernal equinox, in March. The Bull's twilight death roughly coincided with the Persian Empire's New Year equinox festival, and a key myth in the Zoroastrian religion of ancient Persia involves the death of the Bull of Creation at the hands of Ahriman, the Lord of Evil."

- E.C. Krupp, "[Throwing the Bull](#)"

"This, I propose, is the origin and nature of Mithras the cosmic bull-slayer. His killing of the bull symbolizes his supreme power: namely, the power to move the entire universe, which he had demonstrated by shifting the cosmic sphere in such a way that the spring equinox had moved out of Taurus the Bull."

- David Ulansey, "[The Cosmic Mysteries of Mithras](#)"

"It was, then, the knowledge that a key seasonal station of the Sun, the vernal equinox, had been shifted out of Taurus to terminate the Age of the Bull that inspired belief in the hidden god who truly governed the universe. It is odd, however, that this catechism, formulated so close to the wind-up of the tenure of the Ram and on the eve of the Age of Pisces, invested so exclusively in the archaic symbolism of the Bull. There are, no doubt, Mithraic mysteries unrevealed."

- E.C. Krupp, "[Throwing the Bull](#)"

The Spread of a New Religion

"The mysteries of [Dionysos](#)-Sabazius had been replaced by the rites of Mithras, whose 'caves' superseded the crypts of the former god, from Babylon to Britain."

- M. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*

"...The later Hellenistic period is one of pessimism, a world where the bankruptcy of both the rationalism of the Greeks and the ancient institutionalized authoritarian religions of the Orient is manifest. And the way out of the dilemma for both is a savior who is above reason and who abolishes the law."

- Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*

"The cult of Mithras had been taken up with great enthusiasm by the Roman legions and had traveled with them from Iran to Rome, to Tunis, to the Rhine and even on to London and Hadrian's Wall. Mithras' cult satisfied many of the same urges that would also attract people to Christianity. It was a brotherhood where rank and mutual obligation were based not upon accepted social codes but on the secret bonds of a closed circle, an underground

network of close allegiances operating right across the strong social fabric of the Empire."

- John Romer, *Testament*

In the Gospel of Mark, "we find Jesus, at the moment of his baptism, having a vision of 'the heavens torn open.' Just as Mithras is revealed as a being from beyond the universe capable of altering the cosmic spheres, so here we find Jesus linked with a rupture of the heavens, an opening into the numinous realms beyond the furthest cosmic boundaries. "

- David Ulansey, "[The Cosmic Mysteries of Mithras](#)"

For more remarkable parallels between these two religions, see [Mithraism and Christianity](#).



Cult Practices

(1) The Mithraeum

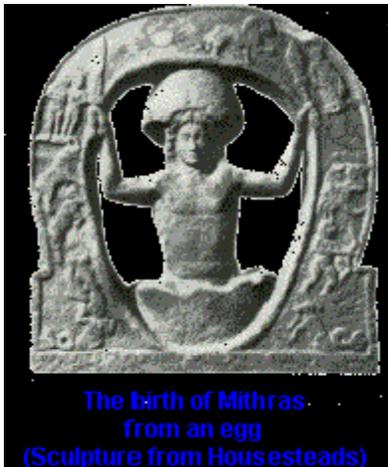
The mysteries of Mithra were celebrated in underground temples, built in imitation of caves, called methraei.

"The typical mithraeum was a small rectangular subterranean chamber, on the order of 75 feet by 30 feet with a vaulted ceiling. An aisle usually ran lengthwise down the center of the temple, with a stone bench on either side two or three feet high on which the cult's members would recline during their meetings. On average a mithraeum could hold perhaps twenty to thirty people at a time....There were many hundreds-- perhaps thousands-- of Mithraic temples in the Roman empire."

- David Ulansey, "[The Cosmic Mysteries of Mithras](#)"

"After killing the bull, Mithra and Sol seal their friendship by a banquet in which they share the flesh of the bull. The two gods are served by persons wearing animal masks. Having finished their meal, the two gods ascend to heaven riding in Sol's chariot. This banquet constitutes the paradigm for the communal meal shared by the followers of the god, who likewise wear masks that indicate their degrees of initiation. In the myth, the life of the cosmos is renewed by the blood of the bull. In a similar fashion, the followers of Mithra believed that by eating the meat of a bull and drinking its blood they would be reborn to ascend with Mithra to the celestial home of the Sun, and immortality."

- *An Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism*



(2) The Seven Degrees

"Unlike the other mystery religions, Mithraism was open only to men, so that in no sense could it be regarded as a universal faith. Mithras, the unconquered and unconquerable sun (*sol invictus*), symbolized the courage, success, and confidence of the soldier. The ethics of the cult demanded self-control and other virtues necessary to a legionary, and this was one main reason for its spread through the army. Imperial patronage helped too. From the second century A.D. Roman Emperors assumed the title *Invictus*."

- Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*

"Mithraism recognized seven degrees of divine knowledge. Members could advance from one degree to the next by undergoing a special initiation, tests of courage and stamina, at each stage. The seven ranks corresponded to the seven known celestial planets, and scaling them was a metaphor for the passage of the soul through the planetary spheres toward heaven."

- *Ancient Wisdom and Secret Sects*

"The lowest degree of initiation was known as the Sacrament...and it symbolized, according to present-day Mithraists, the death of the new member, from which he would arise reborn as a new man."

- Arkon Daraul, *Secret Societies*

"...In the text which is known under the title of the *Liturgy of Mithra*, but which is pervaded with Hermetic Gnosticism, we read: 'Today, having been born again by thee, out of so many myriads rendered immortal..' or 'Born again for rebirth of that life-giving birth...'

- Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*

"Ascension was symbolized by seven grades of initiation, each stage governed by a 'plant': Raven (Mercury); Bride (Venus); Soldier (Mars); Lion (Jupiter); Persian (the moon); Courier of the Sun (the sun); and Father (Saturn). The ultimate goal was to

transcend all levels of the cosmos and to attain the level of the fixed stars, or *aeternitas*."
- *An Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism*

Grade	Zodiacal Sign	Emblem (worn or carried)
Corax (Raven)	Mercury	Wand, beaker
Nymphus ("Bride")	Venus	Crown, lamp, veil
Miles (Soldier)	Mars	Helmet, spear
Leo (Lion)	Jupiter	Thunderbolt, "fire-spade"
Perses (Persian)	Moon	Persian sword, scythe
Heliodromos (Sun-runner)	Sun	Crown, torch, whip
Pater (Father)	Saturn	Ring, staff, cap

"...Each grade had a distinctive mask or dress to be worn at rites celebrated secretly in caves."

"According to some students of the subject... converts could be accepted into the 'church' only by undergoing 12 trials, including ordeals by fire, water, hunger, cold, flagellation, bloodletting, and branding. The whole exhausting program lasted from two to seven weeks. Successful candidates swore to keep the rites secret. Then they were baptized."

- *Quest for the Past*

"Like a hungry raven you came flying to the bread basket of knowledge, and satisfied you now sit in the community of your brothers, shearing bread and the water of life. But what is it that urges you to gain even more knowledge? It is the feeling that almighty nature hides from us more than what we can see and feel without the help of sages. And this help, to a certain degree, is here offered to you.

(3) Magic and Visions

"This very ancient cult, from which more than one present-day secret society may well be derived, is thus seen to contain many of the elements which underlie organizations of this sort. It is a training system; it attempts to produce in its members a real or imagined experience of contact with some supreme power. The magical element is there, too, shown in the belief in the power of certain names to achieve things which cannot be done by men."

"...The secret of religion was partly that the worshipper must restrain himself physically in order to attain power over himself and over others. This graphic teaching of the

diversion of sexual power into psychic channels shows that the Mithraists followed in essence the pattern of all mystical schools which believed in the production of power through discipline. In this they are clearly distinguished from the more primitive and less important orgiastic schools, which merely practiced indiscriminate indulgence, mass immorality, and so on."

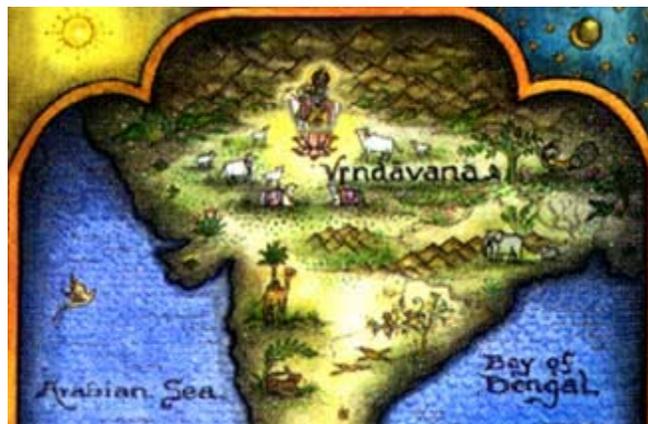
- Arkon Daraul, *Secret Societies*

The Mithra Liturgy "gives instructions on how to achieve visions, descriptions of visions, and culminates with the visionary becoming a spirit possessed oracle."

- Stevan Davies (Mediators)

"After you have said these things, he will immediately respond with a revelation. Now you will grow weak in soul and will not be in yourself, when he answers you....And even if you are alone, and you undertake the things communicated by the god, you speak as if prophesying in ecstasy."

- Mithra Liturgy, (H. D. Betz *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (transl. Marvin Meyer)



Underground Mithraic temple in Rome

The typical mithraeum was a small rectangular subterranean chamber, on the order of 75 feet by 30 feet with a vaulted ceiling. An aisle usually ran lengthwise down the center of the temple, with a stone bench on either side two or three feet high on which the cult's members would recline during their meetings. On average a mithraeum could hold perhaps twenty to thirty people at a time. At the back of the mithraeum at the end of the aisle was always found a representation-- usually a carved relief but sometimes a statue or painting-- of the central icon of Mithraism: the so-called tauroctony or "bull-slaying scene" in which the god of the cult, Mithras, accompanied by a dog, a snake, a raven, and a scorpion, is shown in the act of killing a bull. Other parts of the temple were decorated with various scenes and figures. There were many hundreds-- perhaps thousands-- of Mithraic temples in the Roman empire. The greatest concentrations have been found in

the city of Rome itself, and in those places in the empire (often in the most distant frontiers) where Roman soldiers-- who made up a major segment of the cult's membership-- were stationed.

Mithraeum in Capua, Italy

Our earliest evidence for the Mithraic mysteries places their appearance in the middle of the first century B.C.: the historian Plutarch says that in 67 B.C. a large band of pirates based in Cilicia (a province on the southeastern coast of Asia Minor) were practicing "secret rites" of Mithras. The earliest physical remains of the cult date from around the end of the first century A.D., and Mithraism reached its height of popularity in the third century. In addition to soldiers, the cult's membership included significant numbers of bureaucrats and merchants. Women were excluded. Mithraism declined with the rise to power of Christianity, until the beginning of the fifth century, when Christianity became strong enough to exterminate by force rival religions such as Mithraism.

For most of the twentieth century it has been assumed that Mithraism was imported from Iran, and that Mithraic iconography must therefore represent ideas drawn from ancient Iranian mythology. The reason for this is that the name of the god worshipped in the cult, Mithras, is a Greek and Latin form of the name of an ancient Iranian god, Mithra; in addition, Roman authors themselves expressed a belief that the cult was Iranian in origin. At the end of the nineteenth century Franz Cumont, the great Belgian historian of ancient religion, published a magisterial two-volume work on the Mithraic mysteries based on the assumption of the Iranian origins of the cult. Cumont's work immediately became accepted as the definitive study of the cult, and remained virtually unchallenged for over seventy years.

There were, however, a number of serious problems with Cumont's assumption that the Mithraic mysteries derived from ancient Iranian religion. Most significant among these is that there is no parallel in ancient Iran to the iconography which is the primary fact of the Roman Mithraic cult. For example, as already mentioned, by far the most important icon in the Roman cult was the tauroctony. This scene shows Mithras in the act of killing a bull, accompanied by a dog, a snake, a raven, and a scorpion; the scene is depicted as taking place inside a cave like the mithraeum itself. This icon was located in the most important place in every mithraeum, and therefore must have been an expression of the central myth of the Roman cult. Thus, if the god Mithras of the Roman religion was actually the Iranian god Mithra, we should expect to find in Iranian mythology a story in which Mithra kills a bull. However, the fact is that no such Iranian myth exists: in no known Iranian text does Mithra have anything to do with killing a bull.

Mithras killing bull

Franz Cumont had responded to this problem by focusing on an ancient Iranian text in which a bull is indeed killed, but in which the bull-slayer is not Mithra but rather Ahriman, the force of cosmic evil in Iranian religion. Cumont argued that there must have existed a variant of this myth-- a variant for which there was, however, no actual

evidence-- in which the bull-slayer had been transformed from Ahriman to Mithra. It was this purely hypothetical variant on the myth of Ahriman's killing of a bull that according to Cumont lay behind the tauroctony icon of the Roman cult of Mithras.

In the absence of any convincing alternative, Cumont's explanation satisfied scholars for more than seventy years. However, in 1971 the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies was held in Manchester England, and in the course of this Congress Cumont's theories came under concerted attack. Was it not possible, scholars at the Congress asked, that the Roman cult of Mithras was actually a new religion, and had simply borrowed the name of an Iranian god in order to give itself an exotic oriental flavor? If such a scenario seemed plausible, these scholars argued, one could no longer assume without question that the proper way to interpret Mithraism was to find parallels to its elements in ancient Iranian religion. In particular, Franz Cumont's interpretation of the tauroctony as representing an Iranian myth was now no longer unquestionable. Thus from 1971 on, the meaning of the Mithraic tauroctony suddenly became a mystery: if this bull-slaying icon did not represent an ancient Iranian myth, what did it represent?

Within a few years after the 1971 Congress, a radically different approach to explaining the tauroctony began to be pursued by a number of scholars. It is not an exaggeration to say that this approach has in just the past few years succeeded in completely revolutionizing the study of the Mithraic mysteries. According to the proponents of this interpretation, the tauroctony is not, as Cumont and his followers claimed, a pictorial representation of an Iranian myth, but is rather something utterly different: namely, an astronomical star map!

This remarkable explanation of the tauroctony is based on two facts. First, every figure found in the standard tauroctony has a parallel among a group of constellations located along a continuous band in the sky: the bull is paralleled by Taurus, the dog by Canis Minor, the snake by Hydra, the raven by Corvus, and the scorpion by Scorpio. Second, Mithraic iconography in general is pervaded by explicit astronomical imagery: the zodiac, planets, sun, moon, and stars are often portrayed in Mithraic art (note for example the stars around the head of Mithras in the carving of the tauroctony illustrated above); in addition, numerous ancient authors speak about astronomical subjects in connection with Mithraism. In the writings of the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry, for example, we find recorded a tradition that the cave which is depicted in the tauroctony and which the underground Mithraic temples were designed to imitate was intended to be "an image of the cosmos." Given the general presence of astronomical motifs in Mithraic art and ideology, the parallel noted above between the tauroctony-figures and constellations is unlikely to be coincidence.

Tauroctony encircled by zodiac

My own research over the past decade has been devoted to discovering why these particular constellations might have been seen as especially important, and how an icon representing them could have come to form the core of a powerful religious movement in the Roman Empire.

In order to answer these questions, we must first have in mind a few facts about ancient cosmology. Today we know that the earth rotates on its axis once a day, and revolves around the sun once a year. However, Greco-Roman astronomy at the time of the Mithraic mysteries was based on a so-called "geocentric" cosmology, according to which the earth was fixed and immovable at the center of the universe and everything went around it. In this cosmology the universe itself was imagined as being bounded by a great sphere to which the stars, arranged in the various constellations, were attached. So, while we today understand that the earth rotates on its axis once every day, in antiquity it was believed instead that once a day the great sphere of the stars rotated around the earth, spinning on an axis that ran from the sphere's north pole to its south pole. As it spun, the cosmic sphere was believed to carry the sun along with it, resulting in the apparent movement of the sun around the earth once a day.

In addition to this daily rotation of the cosmic sphere carrying the sun along with it, the ancients also attributed a second, slower motion to the sun. While today we know that the earth revolves around the sun once a year, in antiquity it was believed instead that once a year the sun-- which was understood as being closer to the earth than the sphere of the stars-- traveled around the earth, tracing a great circle in the sky against the background of the constellations. This circle traced by the sun during the course of the year was known as the "zodiac"-- a word meaning "living figures," which was a reference to the fact that as the sun moved along the circle of the zodiac it passed in front of twelve different constellations which were represented as having various animal and human forms. Because the ancients believed in the real existence of the great sphere of the stars, its various parts-- such as its axis and poles-- played a central role in the cosmology of the time. In particular, one important attribute of the sphere of the stars was much better known in antiquity than it is today: namely, its equator, known as the "celestial equator." Just as the earth's equator is defined as a circle around the earth equidistant from the north and south poles, so the celestial equator was understood as a circle around the sphere of the stars equidistant from the sphere's poles. The circle of the celestial equator was seen as having a particularly special importance because of the two points where it crosses the circle of the zodiac: for these two points are the equinoxes, that is, the places where the sun, in its movement along the zodiac, appears to be on the first day of spring and the first day of autumn. Thus the celestial equator was responsible for defining the seasons, and hence had a very concrete significance in addition to its abstract astronomical meaning.

As a result, the celestial equator was often described in ancient popular literature about the stars. Plato, for example, in his dialogue *Timaeus* said that when the creator of the universe first formed the cosmos, he shaped its substance in the form of the letter X, representing the intersection of the two celestial circles of the zodiac and the celestial equator. This cross-shaped symbol was often depicted in ancient art to indicate the cosmic sphere. In fact, one of the most famous examples of this motif is a Mithraic stone carving showing the so-called "lion-headed god," whose image is often found in Mithraic temples, standing on a globe that is marked with the cross representing the two circles of the zodiac and the celestial equator.

Lion-headed god standing on globe with crossed circles

One final fact about the celestial equator is crucial: namely, that it does not remain fixed, but rather possesses a slow movement known as the "precession of the equinoxes." This movement, we know today, is caused by a wobble in the earth's rotation on its axis. As a result of this wobble, the celestial equator appears to change its position over the course of thousands of years. This movement is known as the precession of the equinoxes because its most easily observable effect is a change in the positions of the equinoxes, the places where the celestial equator crosses the zodiac. In particular, the precession results in the equinoxes moving slowly backward along the zodiac, passing through one zodiacal constellation every 2,160 years and through the entire zodiac every 25,920 years. Thus, for example, today the spring equinox is in the constellation of Pisces, but in a few hundred years it will be moving into Aquarius (the so-called "dawning of the Age of Aquarius"). More to our point here, in Greco-Roman times the spring equinox was in the constellation Aries, which it had entered around 2,000 B.C.

It is this phenomenon of the precession of the equinoxes that provides the key to unlocking the secret of the astronomical symbolism of the Mithraic tauroctony. For the constellations pictured in the standard tauroctony have one thing in common: namely, they all lay on the celestial equator as it was positioned during the epoch immediately preceding the Greco-Roman "Age of Aries." During that earlier age, which we may call the "Age of Taurus," lasting from around 4,000 to 2,000 B.C., the celestial equator passed through Taurus the Bull (the spring equinox of that epoch), Canis Minor the Dog, Hydra the Snake, Corvus the Raven, and Scorpio the Scorpion (the autumn equinox): that is, precisely the constellations represented in the Mithraic tauroctony.

In fact, we may even go one step further. For during the Age of Taurus, when the equinoxes were in Taurus and Scorpio, the two solstices-- which are also shifted by the precession-- were in Leo the Lion and Aquarius the Waterbearer. (In the above diagram of the "Age of Taurus," Leo and Aquarius are the northernmost and southernmost constellations of the zodiacal circle respectively-- these were the positions of the summer and winter solstices in that age.) It is thus of great interest to note that in certain regions of the Roman empire a pair of symbols was sometimes added to the tauroctony: namely, a lion and a cup. These symbols must represent the constellations Leo and Aquarius, the locations of the solstices during the Age of Taurus. Thus all of the figures found in the tauroctony represent constellations that had a special position in the sky during the Age of Taurus.

The Mithraic tauroctony, then, was apparently designed as a symbolic representation of the astronomical situation that obtained during the Age of Taurus. But what religious significance could this have had, so that the tauroctony could have come to form the central icon of a powerful cult? The answer to this question lies in the fact that the phenomenon of the precession of the equinoxes was unknown throughout most of antiquity: it was discovered for the first time around 128 B.C. by the great Greek

astronomer Hipparchus. Today we know that the precession is caused by a wobble in the earth's rotation on its axis. However, for Hipparchus-- because he held to the ancient geocentric cosmology in which the earth was believed to be immovable-- what we today know to be a movement of the earth could only be understood as a movement of the entire cosmic sphere. In other words, Hipparchus's discovery amounted to the discovery that the entire universe was moving in a way that no one had ever been aware of before!

At the time Hipparchus made his discovery, Mediterranean intellectual and religious life was pervaded by astrological beliefs. It was widely believed that the stars and planets were living gods, and that their movements controlled all aspects of human existence. In addition, at this time most people believed in what scholars call "astral immortality": that is, the idea that after death the human soul ascends up through the heavenly spheres to an afterlife in the pure and eternal world of the stars. In time, the celestial ascent of the soul came to be seen as a difficult voyage, requiring secret passwords to be recited at each level of the journey. In such circumstances, Hipparchus's discovery would have had profound religious implications. A new force had been detected capable of shifting the cosmic sphere: was it not likely that this new force was a sign of the activity of a new god, a god so powerful that he was capable of moving the entire universe?

Hipparchus's discovery of the precession made it clear that before the Greco-Roman period, in which the spring equinox was in the constellation of Aries the Ram, the spring equinox had last been in Taurus the Bull. Thus, an obvious symbol for the phenomenon of the precession would have been the death of a bull, symbolizing the end of the "Age of Taurus" brought about by the precession. And if the precession was believed to be caused by a new god, then that god would naturally become the agent of the death of the bull: hence, the "bull-slayer."

This, I propose, is the origin and nature of Mithras the cosmic bull-slayer. His killing of the bull symbolizes his supreme power: namely, the power to move the entire universe, which he had demonstrated by shifting the cosmic sphere in such a way that the spring equinox had moved out of Taurus the Bull.

Given the pervasive influence in the Greco-Roman period of astrology and "astral immortality," a god possessing such a literally world-shaking power would clearly have been eminently worthy of worship: since he had control over the cosmos, he would automatically have power over the astrological forces determining life on earth, and would also possess the ability to guarantee the soul a safe journey through the celestial spheres after death.

That Mithras was believed to possess precisely such a cosmic power is in fact proven by a number of Mithraic artworks depicting Mithras in various ways as having control over the universe. For example, one scene shows a youthful Mithras holding the cosmic sphere in one hand while with his other hand he rotates the circle of the zodiac. Another image shows Mithras in the role of the god Atlas, supporting on his shoulder the great sphere of the universe, as Atlas traditionally does. If Mithras was in fact believed to be capable of moving the entire universe, then he must have been understood as in some sense residing

outside of the cosmos. This idea may help us to understand another very common Mithraic iconographical motif: namely, the so-called "rock-birth" of Mithras. This scene shows Mithras emerging from the top of a roughly spherical or egg-shaped rock, which is usually depicted with a snake entwined around it.

As I mentioned previously, the tauroctony depicts the bull-slaying as taking place inside a cave, and the Mithraic temples were built in imitation of caves. But caves are precisely hollows within the rocky earth, which suggests that the rock from which Mithras is born is meant to represent the Mithraic cave as seen from the outside. Now as we saw earlier, the ancient author Porphyry records the tradition that the Mithraic cave was intended to be "an image of the cosmos." Of course, the hollow cave would have to be an image of the cosmos as seen from the inside, looking out at the enclosing, cave-like sphere of the stars. But if the cave symbolizes the cosmos as seen from the inside, it follows that the rock out of which Mithras is born must ultimately be a symbol for the cosmos as seen from the outside. This idea is not as abstract as might first appear, for artistic representations of the cosmos as seen from the outside were in fact very common in antiquity. A famous example is the "Atlas Farnese" statue, showing Atlas bearing on his shoulder the cosmic globe, on which are depicted the constellations as they would appear from an imaginary vantage point outside of the universe. That the rock from which Mithras is born does indeed represent the cosmos is proven by the snake that entwines it: for this image evokes unmistakably the famous Orphic myth of the snake-entwined "cosmic egg" out of which the universe was formed when the creator-god Phanes emerged from it at the beginning of time. Indeed, the Mithraists themselves explicitly identified Mithras with Phanes, as we know from an inscription found in Rome and from the iconography of a Mithraic monument located in England.

The birth of Mithras from the rock, therefore, would appear to represent the idea that he is in some sense greater than the cosmos. Capable of moving the entire universe, he cannot be contained within the cosmic sphere, and is therefore depicted in the rock-birth as bursting out of the enclosing cave of the universe, and establishing his presence in the transcendent space beyond the cosmos.

This imaginary "place beyond the universe" had been described vividly by Plato several centuries before the origins of Mithraism. In his dialogue *Phaedrus* (247B-C) Plato envisions a journey by a soul to the outermost boundary of the cosmos, and then gives us a glimpse of what the soul would see if for a brief moment it were able to "look upon the regions without." "Of that place beyond the heavens," says Plato,

none of our earthly poets has yet sung, and none shall sing worthily. But this is the manner of it, for assuredly we must be bold to speak what is true, above all when our discourse is upon truth. It is there that true being dwells, without colour or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof.

I would suggest that the awe-inspiring quality of Plato's vision of what is beyond the outermost boundary of the cosmos also lies behind the appeal of Mithras as a divine being whose proper domain is outside of the universe. As the text from Plato shows, the establishment by ancient astronomers of the sphere of the stars as the absolute boundary of the cosmos only encouraged the human imagination to project itself beyond that boundary in an exhilarating leap into an infinite mystery. There beyond the cosmos dwelled the ultimate divine forces, and Mithras's ability to move the entire universe made him one with those forces.

Here in the end we may sense a profound kinship between Mithraism and Christianity. For early Christianity also contained at its core an ideology of cosmic transcendence. Nowhere is this better expressed than in the opening of the earliest gospel, Mark. There, at the beginning of the foundation story of Christianity, we find Jesus, at the moment of his baptism, having a vision of "the heavens torn open." Just as Mithras is revealed as a being from beyond the universe capable of altering the cosmic spheres, so here we find Jesus linked with a rupture of the heavens, an opening into the numinous realms beyond the furthest cosmic boundaries. Perhaps, then, the figures of Jesus and Mithras are to some extent both manifestations of a single deep longing in the human spirit for a sense of contact with the ultimate mystery.



Carrowburgh Mithraeum lies 27.4m south-west of the Roman fort at Carrawburgh (Brocolitia). The site of the temple was first discovered in 1949 when a dry summer caused the surrounding peat to shrink away from the stones. It was excavated in 1950 by Sir Ian Richmond and Mr J.P.Gillam. The first mithraeum to be built on the site was erected in the early 3rd century AD but soon proved too small for its purpose and the two successive buildings were very much larger: 5.79 x 12.8m

Worshippers entered the Mithraeum through a door in the south-west wall. This led to the antechamber in which a large fireplace was placed next to a stone

bench. During one period of its history the antechamber housed the 'ordeal pit'. A statuette of a mother-goddess with a small pot for offerings was also found in this area.

A wickerwork screen divided the antechamber from the nave. Against the nave walls there were clay benches faced with wickerwork and covered with a thick rendering of plaster. It was on these benches that the worshippers reclined when taking part in the ritual meals which marked the initiation ceremonies. Along the front of the benches were four small altars with the statues of [Cautes and Cautopates](#) at one end.

In the sanctuary were found three large [altars](#) and some fragments of the tauroctony, the latter apparently having been smashed and removed after the Theodosian Edict of 391AD banned the worship of pagan gods. A ritual deposit of two pots with the skull of a cockerel and two lumps of charcoal made from pinecones was found under the altars.

'To the Invincible God Mithras, Marcus Simplicius Simplex, prefect, willingly and deservedly fulfilled his vow'

Deo Invicto Mitrae M(arcus) Sim/plicius Simplex / pr(a)ef(ecus) v(otum) s(oluit) l(ibens) m(erito)

The front of the capital has a frieze of leaves and there is no focus. On the front of the shaft is the relief of the torso of Mithras rising from the Living Rock. He wears a cloak and a radiate crown, the rays of which are cut through to a hollow niche at the back of the altar in which an oil lamp would have been placed; when lit the light of the lamp would have shone through the openings into the gloom of the Mithraeum. Mithras's link with the sun is further emphasized by the Sun God's Whip which he holds in his right hand. When found, traces of red paint survived on the cloak, hair and letters, green and red paint were found on the decorated columns and Mithras's face was plastered white and then painted.

The Mysteries of Mithras remained in Britain for sometime after the Christianisation of Rome, and in his 'Song of the Macrocosm' (Canu y byd mawr) the Bard Taliesin (6th century A.D.) demonstrates his initiatory knowledge of the 'Cult of Mithras'.

Sir James Frazer proposed that indeed Taliesin the Bard (6th century AD) was a Mithraic initiate. The 'Song of the Macrocosm' certainly contains some Mithraic Lore and Taliesin the historical figure was versed in many of the magical lores of the British Isles. Therefore its not surprising that he was also familiar with Mithraic Mysteries. Another interesting connection between the Invincible Sun god and Celtic lore is proposed by John Matthews in *'Taliesin: Shamanism and the Bardic Mysteries in Britain and Ireland'*.

In the Language of trees, the Ogham alphabet could be accredited to god Ogma Cermait (Honey-Mouthed), Grain-aineach (Sun faced), or Trenfher (Strongman, Champion), a son of the great god Dagda and Goddess Danu. In Gaul he was called Ogmios and was worshipped as a god of light and learning. *"In an inscription found at Richborough, Ogmios is depicted with rays of light coming from his head and holding the whip of Sol Invictus"*. All three titles of Ogma certainly do link in with the rites of Mithras and the inscription in Richborough also supports a link. However what is not clear is if the link derives from the original Mithra, that is with the spread of Indo-European people or from the introduction of Mithras with the Roman Empire, that is Ogma possibly gained some Mithraic characteristic during the Roman Empire as he already showed some parallels with Mithras.

A special grade was created as the movement went underground at the end of 4th century AD. The grade of 'Chryfii' meaning "hidden ones" is inscribed in a Mithraeum in Rome. This was to insure the lore was not totally lost, and it is during this time we see the Mithraic lore return to the Middle East with all of its new Greco-Roman based knowledge. The spread amazingly went all the way to Korea and finally reached Japan in 612AD. By modifying it to fit local customs and adapting to each new culture, the lore survived and Mithras was worshiped from Hadrian's Wall in England in the West all the way to Japan in the East. The Invincible Sun God lived up to its title and survived all his adversaries.

The possibility of Taliesin the Bard (6th century) being a Mithraic initiate also adds weight to the way lore was preserved by fusion with local customs and remained hidden by being one with the masses.

Findings of local Goddess statues and other Celtic religious artifacts in the Mithraic Temples (Mithraeums) along Hadrian's Wall suggest the male-only imagery of the cult had shifted and was again fusing with local custom and deities. It is perhaps a romantic notion to think that as Christianity overcame paganism within Britain, the remaining pagans of different traditions gathered in the well-protected walls of the underground Mithraeums to pull together - Druids (or proto-druids) alongside Mithraists invoking their gods of solar lights to stop the destructions.

One way of unlocking the mysteries that have been lost is perhaps by looking at the where it started, the old land of Persia. In the same way Christianity overcame Mithraic mysteries and all paganism in the west, what was left of the original Mithra was dissolved by rise of Islam in the East. However the magical current of the Invincible Sun god survived despite the rise of Christianity and Islam. In the East Mithra was fused with Islamic lore and became part of mystical branch of Islam, Sufism.

The Myths of Mithras and iconography

Deciphering the meaning of the paintings and statues that survived in Europe has been a challenge to many academics in the field and the works of Speidel and Ulansey have shed

light to much of the iconography. The various interpretations of the iconography all point to a deep cosmology within the tradition.



Dies Natalis Solis Invicti

Birth of the Invincible Sun God:

According to Persian traditions, the god Mithras was actually incarnated into the human form of the Saviour expected by Zarathustra. Mithras was born of Anahita, an immaculate virgin mother once worshipped as a fertility goddess before the hierarchical reformation. Anahita was said to have conceived the Saviour from the seed of Zarathustra preserved in the waters of Lake Hamun in the Persian province of Sistan. Mithra's ascension to heaven was said to have occurred in 208 B.C., 64 years after his birth. This birth took place in a cave or grotto, where shepherds attended him and regaled him with gifts, at the winter solstice. This is based on a older myth about birth of Mithra, that his magical birth at the dawn of time was from a rock from which he formed himself using his Will. He holds in his hand a dagger and a torch. A statue from Housesteads shows Mithras being born from the rock while the twelve signs of the zodiac surround him, showing his image as a stellar god who rules the cosmos even at his birth. A serpent sometimes shown to be coiled around of the Mithras or birth stone/egg.

After his birth he challenged other forces when the world was young. His battle with the Sun resulted in the formation of a friendship and Mithras was bestowed with rays/crown of the Sun. Christians adopted this date as Christ's birthday in the Fourth century of the common era, according to Sir J.G. Frazer in his work *The Golden Bough*: "*the festival of Christmas, which the church seems to have borrowed directly from its heathen rival. In the Julian Calendar, the 25th of December was reckoned as the winter solstice, and was regarded as the nativity of the Sun, because the day begins to lengthen and the power of the Sun increases from that turning point of the year. ... Mithras was regularly identified by his worshippers with the Sun... The [Christian] Gospels say nothing of the day of Christ's birth, and accordingly the early church did not celebrate it.*"

The New Catholic Encyclopaedia records: "*The birth of Christ was assigned the date of the winter solstice (December 25 in the Julian calendar, January 6 in the Egyptian),*



because on this day, as the Sun began its return to northern skies, the pagan devotees of Mithras celebrated the Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (Birthday of the Invincible Sun). On December 25, 274, [Roman Emperor] Aurelian had proclaimed the Sun God the principal patron of the Empire and dedicated a temple to Him in the Campus Martius. Christmas originated at a time when the cult of the Sun was particularly strong at Rome." (Vol. III, p.656, 1967 ed.).

The Hunt

Some images survive with Mithras on horseback with bow and arrow in hand hunting a stag whose horn is the crescent moon. Mithras is accompanied by a lion, snake and a dog. This too might be a star map, however no one has been able to interpret it yet.

Tauroctony (Bull-slaying scene)



Mithras presides over the changing of the seasons and the movement of the heavens themselves. In the ancient cult Mithras was represented by the constellation Persus, who changes the position of the celestial sphere by 'slaying' the constellation Taurus (the Bull). At the spring equinox Mithras moves the earth back into Aries, raising lots of energy and power. At the autumn equinox this position is reversed bringing Scorpio back into Libra and balancing sexual energies.

The Bull Slaying was the central icon within the Western form of Mithraism and was present within every Temple. Here all the mystery of this tradition comes together, showing its Persian origins and the incorporation of Roman astrology and Greek mythology, giving rise to an esoteric path that must have had an everlasting impression on those who were prepared to follow its path. The Bull that Mithras kills is his ego, which is the aim of all followers of Mithras. *"The lower self or ego (nafs ammare in sufism) is symbolised by a Bull or cow which must be sacrificed in order that the spirit may come to life by Sohravadi in his treatise "on reality of Love" and by Mawlana in Masnavi and Qoran 2:67"* (Dr. Masoud Homayouri, Origin of Persian Gnosis).

The scene shows Mithras facing away from the Bull with one foot on the back of the bull, one hand holding the bull's head and other hand stabbing the bull in the neck where blood pours forth. Around him there is a dog, a raven, a scorpion, a snake, a lion and a cup and an ear of wheat is growing from the tip of the bull's tail. The cloak of Mithras is the night sky with stars and the signs of the zodiac surround the whole scene. The symbols of the seven planets are present. The two torch bearers of Mithras stand at either side of the bull slaying scene. The central mystery represents the constellation Persus (Mithras), Taurus (Bull), Canis Minor (dog), Hydra (snake), Corvus (raven), Scorpio (scorpion). The wheat is the star Spica (the brightest star in Virgo). The blood is the Milky Way. The two torchbearers Cautus and Cautopates symbolise the equinoxes; Cautus torch is pointing upward - the spring equinox, while Cautopates torch is pointing down - autumn equinox.

The meaning of this star map lies within the procession of equinoxes. At the present time the spring equinox occurs when the sun leaves the constellation of Pisces; in time, the equinox will be in the constellation of Aquarius, bringing the Age of Aquarius. In Graeco-Roman times the spring equinox was in Aries, and the autumn equinox in Libra. Before that, the spring equinox was in Taurus and the autumn equinox in Scorpio, 4000 BC - 2000 BC. This also means the summer solstice was in Leo (lion) while the winter solstice was in Aquarius (cup).

The whole Bull slaying scene is therefore the representation of the 'heavens' as we moved from Age of Taurus to Age of Aries. That is, the constellation Persus, which is above constellation Taurus, leads to the image of Mithras killing the bull, bringing an end to Age of Taurus by moving the entire universe. In a time when magic and science was based on a geocentric cosmos, with earth fixed in space and everything going around it, the procession could only be understood as a movement of the entire cosmos rather than earth. Mithras therefore became the Kosmokrator (cosmic ruler). The blood of bull is the Milky Way, the pathway which souls ascend and descend to genesis. The slaying of the constellation Taurus by the constellation Persus is perhaps one of the greatest star maps left to us. It shows the gnostic notion of overcoming of ego and uniting with the subconscious, a whole new dimension and one that can be observed in the cosmos. Mithras presides over the changing of the seasons and movement of heavens themselves.

Mithras is asked by the sun to kill the Bull, but is reluctant to do this. The Raven, messenger of the Sun, comes to him again with the message. Mithras goes into the field and captures the Bull and with his strength lifts the back legs of the bull over his shoulder

and drags him to the cave of his birth. The crescent moon over the bull suggests its connection to the moon. When Mithras kills the bull, from his blood comes the wine and all plants that cover the earth. The tail became wheat which gives our bread. The seed and the genitals of the bull are taken to the moon goddess and purified giving rise to all animals. By slaying the first Bull, life comes onto the earth.

That Mithras looks away from the bull while slaying it is significant. Persus, too, looked away from the Gorgon when he decapitated her for whoever looked upon the Gorgon would turn to stone. That is, the ego would turn the heart and the soul of into stone. In order to overcome the ego(nafs) one has turn the head (intellect) away as the intellect is unable to overcome the ego. It is only when we look with our hearts, that is *Mithra is my only crown*, that the battle can fought. It is only on the path of Mithra (love) with the guidance of the Father who has already slayed the Bull that we can decapitate our own Gorgon, before it turns us to stone. The Tauroctony demonstrate literally that Love moves the Universe. This is perhaps one of the greatest mystery within the Cult of Mithras.

Sol and Sol Invictus

The new life on earth was growing slowly due to drought and Mithras as the mediator between heaven and earth was asked to resolve this. However this meant a conflict with the sun who was burning the land. The battle between the sun and Mithras results with Mithras overcoming the sun and becoming the Invincible Sun. Sol kneels in front of Sol Invictus while Mithras holds constellation the Great Bear in one hand, emphasising his power as the stellar god who moves the cosmic pole as well being responsible for the procession of equinoxes. They then become friends and shake hands.

The Miracle of the Rock

Mithras was a archer god and by firing an arrow into the a rock face of a mountain, causes water to pour forth. The drought ends. The rock represents the clouds and the clouds the cave or the universe.

The Sacred meal

The remains of the bull is brought by the torchbearers of Mithras, Cautes (dawn, spring equinox) and Cautopates (dusk, autumn equinox) to a meal where sun and Mithras sit together, and this was imitated by the followers of Mithras where Pater represented Mithras, Heliodromus the sun and other initiates sat around and shared the sacred meal.

The Ascension

After the meal Mithras gets into the Sol's horse drawn chariot and heads to the sky or the ocean to fulfil his role as the cosmic ruler (Kosmokrater).

Origins of Mithraic Mysteries

"The oldest source of Persian Gnosis is to be found in Mithraism, an ancient Persian spiritual path, which began in Eastern Iran many thousands of years ago". (Dr. Masoud Homayouri, Origin of Persian Gnosis). Mithra is an Indo-Iranian god, worshipped at least as early as 1400BC. In Hinduism he is praised as the binomial Mitra-Varuna. A hymn is also dedicated to him alone in Rig Veda (3.59). He is the Lord of Heavenly Light, protector of truth, and is invoked when a contract or oath is taken.

In Persia Mithra was the protector god of the tribal society until the Zoroaster's reformation of Persian polytheism (628-55BC). Mithra, like the rest of the gods and goddess of the Iranian Pantheon, was stripped of his sovereignty, and all his powers and attributes were bestowed upon Ahura Mazda. However due to his popularity we see in the Avesta (Mehr Yasht) Ahura Mazda saying to Zoroaster: *"Verily, when I created Mithra, the Lord of Wide Pastures, I created him as worthy of sacrifice, as worthy as prayer as my self Ahura Mazda."*

In the Avesta, Mithra or Mehr (translation: love, sun) is the protector of the Aryan nation, giving victory to those who lie not unto Mithra. He is the warrior deity carrying the hundred knotted mace from whom all demons flee in fear. In a Yasht 6 during a prayer to sun Mithra is mentioned again and referred to as a friend: *"...I will sacrifice unto that friendship, the best of all friendships, that reigns between the moon and the sun"*

Mithra is also found in Chinese mythology, where he is known as The Friend. Mithra is represented as a Military General in Chinese statues, and is considered to be the friend of man in this life and his protector against evil in the next.

In the west Mithra is best known as cult of Mithras which had an immense popularity among the Roman Legions, From late 1st century BC until 4th century AD. During which it came under the influence of Greek and Roman mythologies. However like other mystery traditions of that period (the Eleusinian mysteries and Isian mysteries) the Mithraic cult maintained secrecy and its teaching were only revealed to initiates. Remains of Mithraic temples can be found through out the Roman empire, from Palestine across north of Africa, and across central Europe to North of England.

The Rites of Mithras

There were seven degrees of initiation, these degrees allowed the neophyte to proceed through the seven celestial bodies. Allowing the reversing of the human souls descend into the world at birth. Ascending the seven heavens and walking through Milky Way and returning to the origin of the Soul. The initiates worked with the four elements and seven planetary energies. The initiations involved purifications and ordeals.

The first degree was of corax (Raven) under Mercury. This stage symbolized death of neophyte. In ancient Persia it was a custom to expose dead bodies to be eaten by ravens on funeral towers. Raven as symbol of death can also

be seen in some tarot packs as card 13 instead of Grim Reaper. At this stage the neophyte dies and is re-born into a spiritual path. A mantra was given to him to repeat and his sins were washed away by baptism in water.

The next degree is of Nymphus(male-bride) under Venus. The neophyte wears a veil and carries a lamp in his hand. He is unable to see the light of truth until the veil of reality is lifted. He is vowed to the cult, and becomes celibate for at least duration of this stage. He is a bride(lover) of Mithra. He also offers a cup of water to the statute of Mithra, the cup is his heart and the water is his love.

On reaching Miles (solider) under Mars, the neophyte had to kneel naked (casting off old life), blindfolded with hands tied. (In similar manner of Wiccan initiations) He was then offered a crown on the point of a sword. Once crowned, his binds were cut with a single stroke of the sword and blindfold removed. This represented his liberation from bondages of the material world. He would then remove the crown from his head and placing it on his shoulder, saying: "Mithra is my only crown" (Fanz Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra). This also symbolizes the removing the head itself, allowing Mithra to be the guide. The meaning of the first part of Taliesin's Song of the Macrocosm refers to this and his initiation.

At this stage the neophyte starts the real battle against his lower self, a solider is one actively struggles with the real enemy. The stage of Leo (lion) is first of the senior degrees and is under Jupiter. He is entering the element of fire. Therefore the lions were not allowed to touch water during the ritual, and instead honey was offered to the initiate to wash his hands and anoint his tongue. The lions carry the food for the ritual meal that was prepared by the lower grades to the ritual feast, and take part. Lions duties included attending the sacred altar flame. The ritual feast represented Mithras last supper of bread and wine with his companions, before his ascend to the heavens in Suns chariot.

The degree of Perses (Persian) under moon, *"The initiate to this grade obtained through it an affiliation to that race which alone was worthy of receiving the highest revelations of wisdom of Magi"* (Fanz Cumont, Rapport sur une mission a Rome, in Academic des inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Comptes Rendes, 1945 p.418). The emblem for this stage was a harpe, the harpe that Persus decapitated the Gorgon. Symbolizing the destruction of the lower and animal aspect of the initiate. The initiate was also purified with honey as he was under the protection of the Moon. *"Honey is associated with purity and fertility of the moon as this was, in ancient Iran believed to be the source of honey, and thus the expression of honey-moon denotes not the period of a month after marriage, but continued love and fertility in married life."* (Dr. Masoud Homayouri, Origin of Persian Gnosis).

In grade of Heliodromus(sun runner) under sun, the initiate imitates Sun at the ritual banquet. Sitting next to Mithra (Father), dressed in red, color of sun, fire and blood of life. Highest grade was of Pater (father) under Saturn. He was Mithras earthly representative, light of heaven embodied, the teacher of congregation which he lead,

wearing a redcap and as well as a *"red baggy Persian trousers, carrying a staff symbol of his spiritual office"* (Charles

Daniels, Mithras and his temples on the Wall). Mithra also presided over changing of seasons and the movement of heavens themselves, The scene of Mithra slaying a bull represents, "the precession of the equinoxes; Mithra was in effect moving the entire universe" (Professor David Ulansey, *The origins of Mithraic Mysteries*). Mithras represented by constellation Persus changes the position of the celestial sphere by slaying constellation Taurus and moving the earth into constellation Aries at spring equinox, this miracle of Mithra is product of Roman astrologers and a latter development that is not seen in Iran to the same extent. However the celebration for changing of seasons was carried out both by western and eastern followers of Mithra: Nou-roz (spring equinox), Mehregan (autumn equinox), Shab-Yalda (winter solstice) and summer solstice.

As Christianity gathered momentum and eventually became the Roman Empires state religion, Mithraism was not tolerated. The Apologist saw it as a *"satanic transversty of the holiest rites of their religion."* Fanz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*). Nevertheless Catholicism has preserved some of the outer form of Mithraism to name some; the timing of Christmas, Bishops adaptation of miters as sign of their office, Christians priests becoming Father despite Jesus specific proscription of the acceptance of such title (Matthew 23:9), and *"the Mithraic Holy father wore a red cap and garment and a ring, and carried a shepherds staff. The Head Christian adopted the same title and outfitted himself in the same manner."* (William Harwood, *Mythology's Last Gods: Yahweh and Jesus*). While the outer appearance of Mithraism can be detected in Catholicism, some traces of the inner teachings of Mithraism can be found in Sufisim, therefore study of Sufisim allows a new insight into Mithraism, and possibly vice versa.

My attempt here is to interpret Mithraic Mysteries using sufi symbolism and show some parallels between these two esoteric traditions, that both originated from Persia but separated by several centuries. The poetic concepts we observe in sufi literature can be seen in physical events during Mithraic rites.

The first stage, that of Raven, is the rebirth of the neophyte into a spiritual path (Tariqat); his sins are washed away and a mantra given to him. A common step among esoteric paths, and not limited to sufisim.

In stage of male-bride, the neophyte offers a cup of water to a statute of Mithra. The cup is his heart and the water is his devotional love, through this offering he hopes to receive wine (Divine Love) into his cup later on the path, after many trails. When he reaches lion stage he would drink the wine.

The male-bride as name suggests is setting out to become a bride/lover of Mithra, remembering that Mithra is Love, the neophyte begins his journey toward the Divine Wedding with the Beloved as known in sufisim. His inability to become united with his Beloved at an early stage of his journey is demonstrated by him carrying a lamp while

wearing a veil. This veil needs to be lifted before he could see the light, the source of which he carries in his own hands and yet unable to see. In words of Hafez:

*Between lover and Beloved there is no veil,
Hafez! Thou thyself art thy own veil
Rise from this between .*

The degree of solider (Miles) was given to those who taken up the spiritual battle against the ego (nafs), the struggle with lower self. During the rite the neophyte is crowned while in bondage of the material world, he is given the kingdom of this world, but he rejects the crown and once his binds were cut, he removes the crown saying: "*Mithra is my only crown*".

The removing of crown also symbolises an attempt to remove the head (intellect) itself, allowing Mithra to be the guide, significance of which becomes clear in latter stages. Followers of Mithra came from different backgrounds centurions, merchants, slaves and even emperors. All were equal in this brotherhood despite their social standing, this was demonstrated by nakedness of the neophyte during the initiation at this stage.

In end of the initiation for Miles degree a mark was branded on him. "*This indelible imprint perpetuated the memory of the solemn engagement by which the person under vow contracted to serve in that order of chivalry which Mithraism constituted*" (Fanz Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra).

To reach degree of lion demonstrated ones long standing commitment to the order and making real progress on the path. Their duties included attending the altar flame and setting up the ritual meal(sofar). They were in element of fire and made no contact with opposite element. The lions were engulfed by the fire of love and no trace remained of water of intellect. They said to have growled like lions and moved strangely (from point of view of those who prosecuted them). This emphasis that the lion or crow mask were not just props but also acted as part of shamanistic aspect of the religion. The ordeals of fire, water, heating and cooling all point to the shamanistic nature of the mysteries. The presence of a ordeal pits in Carrawburgh Mithraeum suggests these were even carried out

even on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. The ordeal pit would be have been covered by stone slabs, resulting in the initiate being engulfed by earth.

During the ritual meal they would drink wine, their cup which they offered their devotional love with at the male-bride stage is now filled with Divine Love (Esheg). The bread is flesh of the bull in whose death there was life. In degree of Persian (Perses) the initiate tries to make a rapport to Persia, become part of the chosen people, so to speak. In Greco-Roman mythology Perses is the son of Persus, and as in the west the cult of Mithras associated constellation Persus with Mithra, the title of Pater (Father) for the seventh grade make sense. Most importantly emblem for this stage is the harpe that Persus used against the Gorgon. The Gorgon is the ego which initiate is been fighting with since solider degree. He drank the wine in lion degree and he is ready to face the

great the monster with in, and with guidance of the Persus (the Father, one who has already decapitated his own gorgon), the initiate takes the harpe and tries to destroy his ego. This can be likened to St George slaying the dragon or Gilgamesh killing Humbaba. A common theme in many paths, however here it is seen as a fusion between eastern and western mythology. Title of Heliodromus (Sun runner) would be reserved for one who has seen the sun, and is close to it (sun is another word for love or Mithra in Farsi). In the ritual meal the initiate of this grade would sit next to Mithra himself (Father).

The highest grade was of Father (pir-e moghan), which was Mithras' earthly representative, teacher of all the other grades; he would pour the wine in the cup of the lions and provide the guidance to finally die before you die and overcome the ego.

Revival of Mithras in 20th Century

Like all other branches of neo-pagan revival, a great deal of reinvention has occurred. There are no kitchen initiations here or secret texts: Mithra is lord of the Truth and its important to admit that. Some of the magical current has survived perhaps through fusion with Sufism, Christian gnosticism, the Catholic Church, its influence on several local forms of magical lore were there was a Temple, and some folk customs. We will never know really how successful the 'Chrysiis' were in taking the movement underground, it depends on each individual and on how they put the fragmented pieces together and formulating their own speculation. The work with the Energy is what matters, rather than any one theory. The key to entering the tradition is simple - all that's needed is to call with an open heart upon Mithra (The Friend, Love, Sun). In other words to "say 'Friend' and enter".

The Mithraic Liturgy from Greek Magical Papyri (350C.E.) clearly demonstrates that Mithras was a deity invoked alongside other deities. The Mithraic Liturgy, which is the working of a magician in 4th century AD, shows how Ananke (Goddess of Necessity), Pronoia (Providence), Psyche (Soul) are invoked alongside Mithras for the particular magical working of the writer. This is the earliest magical writing in the West in connection with Mithras that can be authenticated. It is in effect a single spell and only sheds light on the working of one magician who was a Mithraic initiate as well perhaps of several other cults. This liturgy is used excessively in the modern revival, however due to its length and intensity simpler versions are now available.

Another text which is used by new revival is the '*A Song to Mithras*' from Rudyard Kipling's Puck of Pook's Hill. (In Songs from Books and Verse this poem is subtitled 'Hymn of the XXX Legion: Circa A.D. 350'.) In which the spirit of Mithraism can be seen.

This beautiful poem is a great contribution to the path of Mithras. However this is not the only place where Kipling's poetry has been used in the pagan revival, the May Eve song in the Wiccan Book of Shadows is also written by Kipling.

Mithras is also encountered in the autoerotic 7th degree of OTO (Ordo Templi Orientis) and the homoerotic 11th degree of OTO. The 11th degree was an addition by A. Crowley

to the original OTO system. However it does emphasis one aspect of modern Mithraic movement, which has attracted many gay pagans. In a same way that some Dianic covens are single sex and have strong feminist presence. Some Mithraic groups are male mystery groups only. In the Gnostic Mass, which is the origin for some of the wording in the Wiccan Great Rite, there is also a mention of Mithras.

'Io Io Io IAO Sabao Lord Abrasax, Lord Meithras, Lord Phallos. Io Pan Io Pan Pan Io Pan Io Mighty One, Io Deathless One, Io Immortal One, IAO. Hail Phallus, Hail All-Devourer, Hail All-Begetter...'

This is the final invocation in opening the veil of the Gnostic Mass, Meithras has the power of seven letter for the seven planets and his value is that of 365. Becoming the ruler of the earth cycle of a year, connecting the energies together.

Hymn to Mithras - Mithras: God of the Morning

Mithras, God of the Morning, our trumpets waken the wall!
'Rome is above the Nations, but Thou art over all'
Now as the names are answered, and the guards are marched away,
Mithras, also a solider, give us strength for the day!
Mithras, God of the Noontide, the heather swims in the heat,
Our helmets scorch our foreheads; our sandals burn our feet,
Now in the ungrit hour; now ere we blink and drowse,
Mithras also a solider, keep us true to our vows!
Mithras, God of the Sunset, low on the Western main,
Thou descending immortal, immortal to rise again!
Now when the watch is ended, now when the wine is drawn
Mithras also a solider, keep us pure till the dawn!
Mithras, God of Midnight, here where the great bull dies,
Look on thy children in darkness. Oh take our sacrifice!
Many roads Thou has fashioned: all of them lead to the Light,
Mithras, also a solider, teach us to die aright.

Song of the Macrocosm:

I praise my Father
my God, my strength,
who infused in my head
both soul and reason,
who, to keep guard over me,
did bestow my seven senses,
from fire and earth, water and air:

the mist and flowers,
the wind and trees,
and much skilful wisdom
has my father bestow on me.
One if for instinct,
two is for feeling,
three is for speaking,
four is for tasting,
five is for seeing,
six is for hearing,
seven is for smelling.
As I have said,
seven heavens there are
above the astrologer's head,
and three companies (parts) of the sea;
the sea beats on the strand,
the sea is great and wonderful,
the world itself likewise.
On high, God made
the planets:
He made the Sun,
He made the Moon,
He made Mars,
He made Mercury,
He made venus,
(He made Veneris)
He made Jupiter,
Seventhly, He made Saturn.
The good God made
five zones of the earth,
for as long as it lasts:
the first is formed cold,
the second is formed cold,
the third is formed hot,
injurious to flowers,
unpleasant and hurtful.
The forth is paradise,
which people shall enter.
The fifth is temperate,
the habitable part of the universe.
Into three it is divided,
Into determined regions:
the first is Asia,
the second is Africa,
the third is Europe,
blessed by baptism,

lasting until doomsday
when everything will be judged.
He made my awen
with which I praise the king.
I am Taliesin,
I have the prophet's voice.
Continuing until the end
for Elffin's deliverance.

Mehregan ([Persian](#): ن‌اگرمم) or **Jashn-e-Mehregan** is an ancient [Iranian autumn](#) festival, observed on the ninth or tenth of [October](#), and dedicated in honor of [Mehr](#), also known as [Mitra](#) or [Mithra](#), the Persian god of Light and Love. It is a celebration of [thanksgiving](#) between family and friends, and [charity](#) to the poor. The festival symbolically ends with bonfires and fireworks.

For this celebration, the participants wear new clothes and set a decorative, colorful table. The sides of the tablecloth are decorated with dry wild marjoram. The holy book [Avesta](#), a mirror and Sormeh Dan (antimony cellar) are placed on the table together with rose water, sweets, flowers, vegetables and fruits, especially pomegranates and apples. A few silver coins and senjed seeds (fruit of the lotus tree) are placed in a dish of pleasant smelling wild marjoram water. Almonds and pistachio are also used.

A burner is also part of the table setting for kondor (frankincense) and espond (rue seeds) to be thrown on the flames.

At lunch time when the ceremony begins, everyone in the family stands in front of the mirror to pray. Sherbet is drunk and then as a good omen, antimony is rubbed around their eyes. Handfuls of wild marjoram, senjed seeds and noghl (sugar plum) are thrown over each others heads while they embrace one another.

In some of the villages in Yazd, Zoroastrians still sacrifice sheep for Mehr. These sacrifices are done on the day of Mehregan and for three days afterwards. The sacrifice should be done during the hours of sunlight. The sheep is placed on three stones in the furnace, representing the good words, good deeds and good thoughts, and barbecued. After this special ritual, the sheep, including the skin and fat is taken to the fire temple'. The fat is thrown on the fire to make the flames burn fiercely and then the participants pray. This celebration continues for the next five days.



Yaldā is celebrated on the eve of the first day of the [winter](#) in the [Iranian](#) calendar, which falls on the [Winter Solstice](#). It celebrates the birth of Sun god [Mithra](#).

Fires would be burnt all night to ensure the defeat of the forces of [Ahriman](#). There would be feasts, acts of charity and a number of deities were honored and prayers performed to ensure the total victory of sun that was essential for the protection of winter crops. There would be prayers to Mithra (Mehr) and feasts in his honor, since Mithra is the Yazat responsible for protecting "the light of the early morning" known as "Havangah" It was also assumed that Ahura Mazda would grant people's wishes, specially those with no offspring had the hope to be blessed with children if performed all rites on this occasion.

One of the themes of the festival was the temporary subversion of order. Masters and servants reversed roles. The king dressed in white would change place with ordinary people. A mock king was crowned and masquerades spilled into the streets. As the old year died, rules of ordinary living were relaxed. This tradition persisted till Sassanian period, and is mentioned by Biruni and others in their recordings of pre-Islamic rituals and festivals. Its' origin goes back to the Babylonian New Year celebration. These people believed the first creation was order that came out of chaos. To appreciate and celebrate the first creation they had a festival and all roles were reversed. Disorder and chaos ruled for a day and eventually order was restored and succeeded at the end of the festival.

Another related Roman festival celebrated at the same time was dedicated to [Sol Invictus](#) ("the invincible sun"), originally known as [Mithra](#) Originally a [Persian](#) deity, this cult was imported by Emperor Heliogabalus into Rome and Sol was made god of the state. With the spread of [Christianity](#), Christmas celebration became the most important Christian festival.

