

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INDICATIONS ON THE ORIGINS OF ROMAN MITHRAISM

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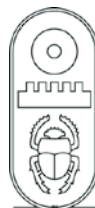
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Between the end of the first century CE and the last part of the fourth century a mystery religion called Mithraism was extremely popular among soldiers, merchants, and civil administrators in the Roman Empire. Today more than four hundred locations of Mithraic worship have been identified in every area of the Roman Empire. Mithraea have been found as far west as England and as far east as Dura-Europas. Between the second and fourth centuries CE, Mithraism may have vied with Christianity for domination of the Roman world.²

Evidence for Mithraism comes from several sources. It is mentioned in early Christian writings.³ The Christians' view of this rival religion is extremely negative, because they regarded it as a demonic mockery of their own faith. One also learns of Mithraism from brief statements in classical Greek and Roman authors.⁴ These rare literary sources are of little help in understanding the beliefs and practices of Mithraism. Apparently, Mithraism was truly a "mystery" religion in that its devotees never committed its rituals or theology to writing. If the tenets of Mithraism ever



Tauroctony scene. Second to third century Roman marble monument. This (obverse) face of the monument depicts a tauroctony scene, Mithras slaying the bull in a cave, above which in the upper corners Sol (top left) and Luna (top right) emerge. Luna has a crescent behind her shoulders. Around Sol's head is a crown of twelve rays, plus another that darts out in the direction of Mithras. Also in the upper left is a raven. The dog, serpent, and scorpion are set at their standard positions. The tail of the bull ends in ears of wheat. Photo © 2008 by Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.



were written down, no evidence of such writings has so far come to light.

By far the greatest evidences for Mithraism are found in its many remaining places of worship. Throughout the Roman Empire Mithraists worshiped in underground rooms. The typical Mithraeum was built in a rectangular form, with benches installed along each wall. Along the back wall was the *taurectone*, the central image of the cult, which depicted Mithras slaying the sacred bull. An altar was often placed in front of the taurectone. The ceilings of the Mithraea were frequently painted blue, with stars representing the heavens. Sometimes the walls of these meeting places were decorated with frescoes that showed scenes from the story of Mithras or moments in the initiatory rites. Some Mithraea have adjoining side rooms for instruction or other rituals. A Mithraeum in Ostia has mosaic floors portraying symbols of the various grades of the Mithraic orders.⁵ In addition, Mithraea often contain plaques of dedication revealing the names of the Mithraists who worshiped at these locations and, because they are dated, the periods during which the shrine was in use. From these paintings, statues, mosaics, and dedication plaques it is possible to draw only an outline of the religion of Mithraism.

The Origins of Mithraism

The question of the origin of Mithraism has intrigued scholars for many years. Franz Cumont, one of the greatest students of Mithraism, theorized that the roots of the Roman mystery religion were in ancient Iran.⁶ He identified the ancient Aryan deity who appears in Persian literature as Mithra with the Hindu god Mitra of the Vedic hymns. Mithra/Mitra was a solar deity. With the coming of Zoroastrianism to Persia in the

sixth century BCE, Mithra was demoted to a minor rank among the angels that served the supreme Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda. The Magi, who were Zoroastrian priests, carried the message of Mithra first to Babylon and then into Asia Minor as they established religious colonies. After the collapse of the Persian Empire in the fourth century BCE and the dominance of the Hellenistic rulers, the Magi continued to worship Mithra. In the religious and philosophical ferment of Asia Minor in the first and second centuries BCE, Mithraism began to take its distinctive shape. Cumont pointed to the use of the name Mithradates among the rulers of Asia Minor during that era and statuary showing them receiving power from Mithras as evidence for Mithraism's crystallization in this place and time. He admitted that the precise location and time of the development of Mithraism is uncertain. However, by the first century CE, Cumont believed that Mithraism had developed its distinctive theology and rituals. Cumont accepted Plutarch's statement that the pirates of Cilicia were devotees of Mithras.⁷ It was believed that these pirates acquainted the Romans with Mithraism. For many years, Cumont's theory of the origin of Mithraism was widely accepted.⁸

In 1971 at the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies, John Hinnells, the organizer of the Congress and editor of the two-volume collection of papers presented there, challenged Cumont's position on the Iranian origin of Mithraism.⁹ Hinnells attacked Cumont's interpretation of the Mithraic symbols and his identification of them with elements in Iranian religion. At the same conference, R. L. Gordon also attacked the theory of Iranian origin.¹⁰ Both scholars accused Cumont of



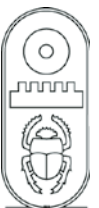
Tauroctony scene bas-relief found in Aquileia. Collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo © 2010 by CristianChirita / Wikimedia Commons.

circular thinking. According to Hinnells and Gordon, Cumont believed that Roman Mithraism developed from Iranian religion, found Iranian parallels to the symbols of Mithraism, and then used these parallels to prove the Iranian foundations for Mithraism.

Even though Hinnells and Gordon effectively destroyed Cumont's theory, neither offered an alternative hypothesis. Hinnells believed that Mithraism still had a basic Iranian origin, though his belief was not based upon Cumont's theories. Gordon frankly admitted ignorance of the true source of Mithraism and postulated that no one will ever know its origins.

Recently, another theory of the origin of Mithraism has been set forth by David Ulansey.¹¹ Ulansey theorizes that Mithraism arose in the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor.

He believes it was devised and propagated by a group of Stoic philosophers who thought they had discovered astronomical evidence to prove the existence of a new and powerful god. They identified this god with Perseus, one of the hero gods of Tarsus. Since the constellation of Perseus was directly above the constellation of Taurus the bull, the philosophers believed that Perseus dominated the bull. This new religion became popular with the Cilician pirates who had close ties to the intellectual circles of Tarsus and who were interested in astral religion. They changed the name of the hero god from Perseus to Mithra in honor of Mithridates VI Eupator, the last of the dynasty of rulers of Pontus before Roman rule. It was this group of pirate-sailors who gave Mithraism its form and spread the religion to the Roman world.



All theories of the origin of Mithraism acknowledge a connection, however vague, to the Mithra/Mitra figure of ancient Aryan religion. They all point to Persian influence in Asia Minor during the Hellenistic era and to the religious ferment of that period. All see the city of Tarsus as a starting point of Roman Mithraism. Plutarch's single statement about the Cilician pirates carries enormous weight, and as a result, all theorists accept them as the missionaries who carried the new religion to Rome.

The theories of the origin of Mithraism from Cumont to Ulansey remain only theories. Because of a dearth of literary evidence, we cannot be certain that Mithraism developed in a certain place or a certain time. However, the weight of scholarly opinion has clearly moved away from the long-held theory that Mithraism began in Persia and moved westward across Babylon, Syria, Asia Minor, and into Rome.

Archaeological evidence is the strongest source of information about Mithraism. The remains of hundreds of Mithraic worship sites, the sculpting and painting of those sites, and the dedicatory plaques reveal a religion widespread across the Roman Empire from the second through the fourth centuries CE. Current archaeological evidence may bear out the critics of Cumont's theory of the origin of Mithraism. If, as Cumont believed, Mithraism began as an Iranian cult and then moved west into Syria and on to Rome, one might expect to find well-established cult centers in Roman Syria. An examination of a map showing the locations of Mithraic centers in the Roman empire reveals that this is not so. While Mithraic materials have been found throughout the empire, the heaviest concentration is located in central Italy

and northern Germany. East and west of these centers, archaeological evidence grows thinner. In Asia Minor Mithraic sites are relatively rare. They are even scarcer in Roman Syria. At the present only three Mithraea and a scattering of Mithraic artifacts have been located in Roman Syria.

The Mithraea of Roman Syria

Within the geographical dimensions of Roman Syria only three Mithraea have been discovered and excavated. They are located at Dura-Europas on the far eastern border of Roman Syria, at Sidon on the Mediterranean coast of Phoenicia, and at Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast of Roman Palestine.¹²

Dura-Europas is located on the extreme eastern border of Roman Syria on the banks of the Euphrates River. The city was established by Seleucid rulers about 300 BCE to protect trade routes. Roman occupation of the city began in 164 CE and continued until 256, when it was conquered by the Sassanians.

During the ninety years of Roman occupation, Dura-Europas was apparently inhabited by diverse religious populations. Archaeological excavations carried on in the 1920s and 1930s revealed a Christian chapel, a Jewish synagogue and a Mithraeum. The results of these excavations were thoroughly published,¹³ and as a result, students of Syrian Mithraism know more about the Dura-Europas Mithraeum than any other site.

The Dura-Europas Mithraeum was apparently begun in the late second century CE. Its first phase was probably a small room in a private home. Unlike other Mithraea, which were built underground to simulate Mithras's actions in the sacred cave, the Dura-Europas Mithraeum was

above ground. Certain details were added to make it appear to be a cave. The furniture and arrangement of this Mithraeum are fairly typical of the period. It contained two carved reliefs of Mithras killing the sacred bull (*taurectone*), benches ran the length of the room, there were two altars, and the Mithraeum contained two dedicatory plaques naming Roman military leaders among its patrons.

In the early third century CE, the Dura-Europas Mithraeum was apparently destroyed and rebuilt. The second phase was larger and more elaborate than the first. Dedications in this phase reveal that the rebuilding was done during the reign of Septimius Severus. The revised and enlarged Mithraeum probably indicates a larger Mithraic community in this outpost city. This phase is distinguished by a series of drawings illustrating aspects of the life of Mithras and the life of the worshipping community. Some aspects of these drawings are truly unique in Mithraism.¹⁴

In the middle third century, the Dura-Europas Mithraeum was again enlarged. The altar area was raised, additional rooms were built, and new paintings were added. This may indicate further growth in the popularity of the religion in this region.

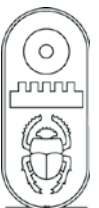
Dura-Europas was conquered by the Sassanians in 256 CE, driving the Roman army and influence from this eastern frontier of the empire. The Mithraeum was destroyed, and Mithraic worship apparently came to an end. The Sassanians, who were Zoroastrian, had no use for a Roman Mithraeum.

A second center of Mithraic worship that has been excavated in Roman Syria is found in the ancient city of Sidon. Sidon was located on the Mediterranean coast of Roman Syria approximately halfway between Tyre on the south and Berytus (modern Beirut) on the north.

A Mithraeum was excavated in Sidon in the late nineteenth century. The results of the excavation of this site were reported by the journalist E. Durighello and repeated by S. Reinach.¹⁵ Generally, students of Mithraism are dissatisfied with these reports, feeling that they are incomplete.¹⁶ After the completion of the excavation, the site was covered and no further excavation was possible. Today all that remains of



Tauroctony Scene, second century CE. Fresco and bas-relief from the Mithraeum at Dura-Europas.





Dedicatory Stele to Mithras by Ulbius Gaianus, a civil servant of the postal service (*praefectus vehiculorum*). Second century CE. Collection of the Archaeological Museum in Milan. Photo © 2008 by Giovanni Dall'Orto / Wikimedia Commons.

the Sidon Mithraeum are eleven pieces of sculpture now housed in the Louvre.

With only limited archaeological materials available it has been difficult to assign a date to the Sidon Mithraeum. Several dedicatory plaques from the building give the name of Fl. Gerontios and the year 500. If normal standards of Roman Syrian chronology are applied, the date of the building of the Mithraeum would have been approximately 188 CE. Ernest Will disputes this chronology and places the dedication in the late fourth century CE.¹⁷ The earlier date for the building of this Mithraeum would be more in keeping with the Mithraea at Dura-Europas and Caesarea Maritima.

The extant pieces of sculpture from the Sidon Mithraeum include a bas-relief of the taurectone, including the twelve signs of the zodiac; a statue of the taurectone; a statue of Mithras carrying a sacred bull;

a statue of a winged, lion-headed figure with a set of keys; four statues of the companions of Mithras, usually identified as Cautes and Cautopates; a statue of the triple-headed earth goddess, Hekate; and two statues of Venus.

The most recently discovered Mithraeum in Roman Syria was found during the excavation of Caesarea Maritima in 1973.¹⁸ Caesarea Maritima is located on the Mediterranean coast of Roman Palestine.¹⁹ The city was built on an essentially virgin location between 22 and 10 BCE by Herod the Great.²⁰ It was named for and dedicated to his sponsor, Augustus Caesar. Among the many unique features of this city was a huge artificial harbor. Since Palestine had so few natural ports on the Mediterranean coastline, Caesarea Maritima became the natural location for the disembarkation of Roman troops and administrators during the troubled first and second centuries CE.

Soon after its dedication Caesarea Maritima became the political capital of Palestine. It remained one of the leading cities of Syria until long after its conquest by the Muslims in 640 CE.

Because of its location and massive remains, Caesarea Maritima has long been the site of archaeological activity. During the 1973 season, the joint Expedition to Caesarea uncovered an underground vaulted room in the sand dunes just off the Mediterranean coast. Although this large room lacked the massive statuary and dramatic paintings that are frequently associated with Mithraea, and although there are no known literary references to Mithraism at Caesarea Maritima, sufficient evidence was found to identify it as a site of Mithraic worship. At the present, this is the only Mithraeum known in Roman Palestine.

Excavation of the room revealed the typical participants' benches running along either side. At the east end of the vault was a small, almost square stone, which was identified as the base for an

altar. Beside the altar stone was found a collection of Roman-era lamps and a small, circular, engraved marble piece. This medallion was inscribed with the taurectone image and three small scenes from the life of Mithras. On the walls of the vault were the faint remains of frescoes that may have depicted scenes from initiatory rituals. The ceiling showed slight traces of blue paint. During its days as an active Mithraeum, the entire ceiling may have been painted to represent the sky and the stars.²¹

It is difficult to assign an exact date to the founding and life of the Caesarea Maritima Mithraeum. No dedicatory plaques have been discovered that might aid in the dating. The lamps found with the taurectone medallion are from the end of the first to the late third century CE. Other pottery and coins from the vault are also from this era. Therefore, it is speculated that this Mithraeum was developed toward the end of the first century and remained active until the late third century.²² This matches the dates assigned to the Dura-Europas and the Sidon Mithraea.

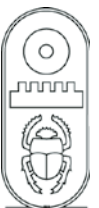


Mithras and the Bull, second century fresco from the Temple of Mithras, Marino, Italy.

Mithraic Articles from Roman Syria

In addition to the fully developed Mithraea of Dura-Europas, Sidon, and Caesarea Maritima, a few articles of Mithraic worship have been discovered in the area of Roman Syria.

A rectangular relief of the taurectone was found in northeastern Syria at Arsha-wa-Qibar in 1932.²³ Though the engraving of the relief is not clear, most of the elements of the taurectone can be identified. These include the bull, Mithras,





Asclepius, god of medicine. Second century CE Roman copy of a Greek original of the early fourth century BCE, restored in the eighteenth century. Photo © 2006 by Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.

the snake, the dog, the raven, Sol and Luna, and Cautes and Cautopates. The relief contains no inscription, and it is impossible to assign a date or to connect it to a Mithraeum.

Sahin, located in northern Syria, has yielded a Greek inscription that seems to be a dedicatory plaque to Mithras. Some letters on this plaque are missing, and its

meaning is not absolutely clear. However, the best guess connects it to the worship of Mithras.²⁴ It appears to have been written in the early third century CE.

Two Mithraic reliefs were found in the ruins of the temple of Dusares at Secia located southwest of Sidon.²⁵ Both of these rectangular reliefs are carved from basalt and appear to be the work of the same sculptor. Both show the taurectone scene with all its figures. In the first only Cautes is present,²⁶ while in the second both Cautes and Cautopates are visible. Cumont suggested that at some point Mithras had become identified with Dusares, “the Arab Dionysus”²⁷ and speculates that the temple of Dusares contained these taurectone reliefs.

The Aleppo museum contains a relief showing the head of Mithras. The exact source of this relief is not known, but it was probably found on the Mediterranean coast between Lattakieh and Tartous. Though the relief is badly worn, it shows the head of Mithras with its typical curls, Phrygian cap, and nimbus. This head may have been carved in the first half of the second century CE.²⁸

A cippus found at Sidon bears an inscription in Greek that is a dedication to the god Asclepius by Theodotos, *hiereus* of Mithras.²⁹ The cippus may have been a gravestone. This inscription is dated 140–141 CE and is therefore the earliest reference to Mithras from Roman times in Syria.

A knife found at Niha in central Lebanon was apparently connected to Mithraism.³⁰ Its handle is elaborately carved and includes the head of a bull. It also contains the heads of a lion, a bear, a snake, a scorpion, as well as a krater, a Phrygian cap, and two busts. Because several of these items are a part of the

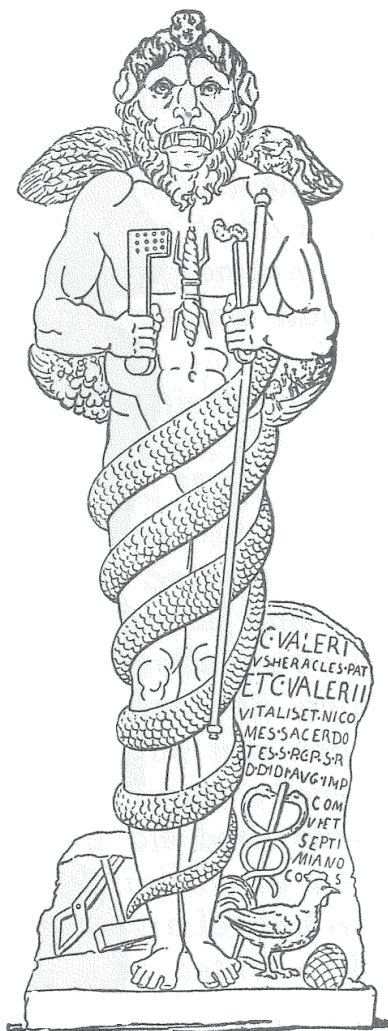
taurectone, it is believed that this knife may have been connected to Mithraism in this region. The knife bears no indication of date or place of origin.

In the late nineteenth century, the British Museum received a small bronze lion-headed figure from Beirut. The object is approximately three inches long and has a human body and wings. There is some indication that once there may have been a snake attached to the body. Even though the object was not found with other Mithraic materials, it is assumed to be an image of Kronos.³¹ Barnett speculates that the figure may have belonged to the Sidon Mithraeum.³²

Conclusion

In the brief survey presented in this paper it is clear that the number and quality of Mithraic materials uncovered in Roman Syria is extremely limited. Only three Mithraea have been excavated in the region. The Dura-Europas Mithraeum on the eastern frontier of the empire was apparently a full temple, the equal of any. It has been fully excavated and fully reported. The Sidon Mithraeum remains something of a mystery because of the incomplete reports of its excavation. The Caesarea Maritima Mithraeum was apparently poor in its furnishings and relatively small. In addition, time and the atmosphere have deteriorated many of the frescoes that might have told a more complete story at this site. Beyond these three Mithraea, there are only a handful of objects from Syria that may be identified with Mithraism.

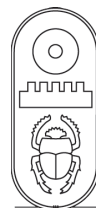
Archaeological evidence of Mithraism in Syria is therefore in marked contrast to the abundance of Mithraea and materials that have been located in the rest of the Roman Empire. Both the frequency and the quality of Mithraic materials are



Mithraic Kronos or Zervan Arkana, deity of endless time in Zoroastrian religion. Dedicated 190 CE by C. Valerius Heracles and his sons. Mithraeum of Ostia. Image in Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (1902).

greater in the rest of the empire. Even on the western frontier in Britain, archaeology has produced rich Mithraic materials, such as those found at Walbrook.

If one accepts Cumont's theory that Mithraism began in Iran, moved west through Babylon to Asia Minor, and then to Rome, one would expect that the religion left its traces in those locations. Instead, archaeology indicates that Roman Mithraism had its epicenter in Rome. Wherever its ultimate place of origin may have been, the fully developed religion known as Mithraism seems to



have begun in Rome and been carried to Syria by soldiers and merchants. None of the Mithraic materials or temples in Roman Syria except the Commagene sculpture bears any date earlier than the late first or early second century.³³ While little can be proved from silence, it seems that the relative lack of archaeological evidence from Roman Syria would argue against the traditional theories for the origins of Mithraism.

ENDNOTES

¹ The publisher thanks Prof. Gary Lease, who read the proofs of Dr. Hopfe's article.

² The French historian Ernest Renan stated that if Christianity had not developed, the world would have become Mithraic. Ernest Renan, *Marc-Aurele et la fin du monde antique* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1923), 579.

³ See Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 40 and Jerome, Epistle 107 *Ad Laetam*.

⁴ The Emperor Julian made brief reference to his devotion to Mithras (Helios) in *Oration 4, Hymn to King Helios Dedicated to Sallust*.

⁵ Samuel Leuchili, ed., *Mithraism in Ostia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967).

⁶ Franz Cumont, *Textes et Monuments Figures Relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra* (Brussels: H. Lamertin, 1896–99).

⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 24:5.

⁸ Essentially the same theory of the origin and development of Mithraism is expressed by A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (1933; reprinted Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1988), 41ff.

⁹ John Hinnells, "Reflections on the Bull-Slaying Scene," *Mithraic Studies* (ed. John Hinnells) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), Vol 2, 290–313.

¹⁰ R. L. Gordon, "Franz Cumont and the Doctrines of Mithraism," *Mithraic Studies* (ed. John Hinnells; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), vol. 1, 215–48.

¹¹ David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹² For a more complete description of the Mithraea and the Mithraic materials discussed here, see L. M. Hopfe, "Mithraism in Syria," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* part 2/18/4, 2214–35.

¹³ M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Das Mithraeum von Dura* (Regensburg: Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung 49, 1934), 180–207; M. I. Rostovtzeff, et al., *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939).

¹⁴ For a more complete discussion of these drawings, see Franz Cumont, "The Dura Mithraeum," *Mithraic Studies* (ed. John Hinnells) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), vol 1, 151–214.

¹⁵ E. Durighello, [no title], originally published in *Le Bosphore Egyptien*, August 19 1887; reprinted in *Revue Archeologique* (1888) part 1, 91–93; and subsequently reprinted with a brief critical introduction in Salomon Reinach, "Sidon," *Chroniques d'Orient 1* (Paris: Didot, 1891), 434–46.

¹⁶ M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithraicae* (CIMRM). 2 volumes (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956–60) 1.73; Israel Roll, "The Mysteries of Mithras in the Roman Orient: The Problem of Origin," *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 2 (1977), note 8.

¹⁷ Ernest Will, "La date du Mithraeum de Sidon," *Syria* 27 (1950): 261–69.

¹⁸ See L. M. Hopfe and G. Lease, "The Caesarea Mithraeum: A Preliminary Announcement," *Biblical Archaeologist* 38(1) (1975): 2–10; R. Bull, "A Mithraic Medallion from Caesarea," *Israel Exploration Journal* 24 (1974): 187–90; J. A. Blakely, *The Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima, Excavation Reports: The Pottery and Dating of Vault 1: Horreum, Mithraeum, and Later Uses* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1987).

¹⁹ This city is known as “Caesarea Maritima” to distinguish it from the other Caesarean of Roman Syria.

²⁰ The construction and magnificent features of Caesarea Maritima are described by Josephus (see *Antiquities* 15.9.6).

²¹ For a more complete description of the furnishings of the Caesarea Maritima Mithraeum, see Hopfe and Lease, “Caesarea Mithraeum,” and Bull, “A Mithraic Medallion from Caesarea.”

²² For the most detailed development of the Caesarea Maritima Mithraeum, see Blakely, *Joint Expedition*, 150.

²³ Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithraicae* (CIMRM), Mon. 71, cf. Plate 5; cf. note 15 above.

²⁴ The Mithraic reading of this inscription has been challenged by R. Mouterde, *Melanges de l'Universite Saint Joseph* 31 (1954): 334.

²⁵ Ernest Will, “Nouveaux Monuments Sacres de la Syrie Romaine,” *Syria* 29 (1952): 67–93.

²⁶ Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithraicae* (CIMRM), Mon. 88.

²⁷ F. Cumont, “The Dura Mithraeum,” in *Mithraic Studies* (ed. John R. Hinnells) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), vol 1, 160.

²⁸ See Will, “Nouveaux Monuments,” 67.

²⁹ M. Dunand, “Le Temple d'Echmoun a Sidon,” *Bulletin du Musee de Beyrouth* 26 (1973): 27–44.

³⁰ H. Seyrig, “Un Couteau de Sacrifice,” *Iraq* 36 (1974): 229–30.

³¹ R. D. Barnett, “A Mithraic Figure from Beirut,” *Mithraic Studies* (ed. John R. Hinnells) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), 466–69.

³² *Ibid.*, 466.

³³ Mithras, identified with a Phrygian cap and the nimbus about his head, is depicted in colossal statuary erected by King Antiochus I of Commagene, 69–34 BCE (see Vermaseren, CIMRM 1.53–56). However, there are no other literary or archaeological evidences to indicate that the cult of Mithras as it was known among the Romans in the second to fourth centuries CE was practiced in Commagene.



Mithraism was truly a “mystery” religion in that its devotees never committed its rituals or theology to writing. If the tenets of Mithraism ever were written down, no evidence of such writings has so far come to light. By far the greatest evidences for Mithraism are found in its many remaining places of worship. Throughout the Roman Empire Mithraists worshiped in underground rooms. The typical Mithraeum was built in a rectangular form, with benches installed along each wall. Along the back wall was the *taurectone*, the central image of the cult, which depicted Mithras slaying the sacred bull.

