

APRIL 21, 1969PHILIP R. ADAMS

The title of this paper comes from the subtitle of a 1960 paperback publication, fortunately translated into French from the Dutch, by Martin Vermaseren, one of the leading specialists in an obscure subject. The full title is "Mithras, this mysterious god."

How mysterious Mithras really is has been driven into my awareness since the Art Museum last October placed on exhibition an animated, and, for late Roman sculpture, artistically gratifying carving in marble of the "Sacred Relief," as it is properly called, showing Mithras in Persian trousers and Phrygian cap (the headpiece of Liberty, or Marianne of France, or sundry Trojan heroes) plunging a sacrificial dagger into the neck artery of a bull whose blood will renew life on earth. The Sun and Moon witness the act; a dog, friend of Mithras and messenger of Ahura-mazda, leaps to observe its propriety; a serpent, representing the neutral earth, waits to drink the life-giving blood, while a scorpion, emissary of evil, tries to devour the full's genitals, destroying its fertility. The scene is a cavern. All these actors, it appears, are necessary to a true depiction of the sacrifice.

A general question rose from the Museum's staff, "Who was Mithras?" With directorial condescension I proceeded to answer, only to realize that my ignorance was a scant degree less than theirs. To us, and possibly to much of Cincinnati, Mithras was indeed a mysterious god.

To be sure I knew that his cult - and here we must examine the correct use of that word, since "cult" has more than a faintly denigrating flavor as compared with "religion." A "cult," the dictionary teaches, can be a concentration on some value inside a "religion," but does not have the inclusive self-sufficiency of a whole "religion." Let us, therefore, abandon the word "cult".

Very well, then, I knew that a religion bearing his name had contended with Christianity for three hundred years for dominion over the Roman

World. I knew that it had come near to winning. I knew that Mithras was Persian in origin, somehow involved with Zoroastrianism. I proudly knew that there were only two and a half sculptures of this subject in this country, none, of course, as fine as Cincinnati's.

I had seen Mithraic shrines, Mithraeums, in Rome, in London, as far north as Hadrian's wall on the border of Scotland. I had read Rudyard Kipling's reference to those northern shrines in "Puck of Pook's Hill." Kipling was an inspired if poetic historian, and had found traces of Freemasonry even in central Asia where Mithraism had retreated after its defeat in the Roman west. Though not a member of the lodge I could recognize suggestive Mithraic parallels to Masonic ritual, at least in its various degrees of initiation. That Mithraism also affected Manichaeism in its central Asian fastnesses is, as Kipling would say, another story, and an exceedingly complicated one. Let us then also dispense with Manichaeism.

There were unmistakable parallels to Christianity itself. But suggestive parallels can be dangerous as well as unscholarly. This was proven by a devout woman of presumably evangelical Christian persuasion who had blundered into the end of an informal lecture to the staff, "briefing sessions" we call them, on the season's new acquisitions, and had overheard some of these parallels suggested. In considerable distress she telephoned to protest that the nature of Christianity was to eradicate such pagan practices as the celebration of nature-resurrection myths and especially blood sacrifice, that no irreverent comparisons should be made. Luckily her call got through to a hapless curator of painting, of mixed Catholic and Lutheran background with no discernible strain of Mithraism. Had it come to me I could with faultless staircase wit have asked if she had been washed in the blood of the Lamb, did she sing of "the water and the blood from a riven side which flowed," had she no respect for the blood of the martyrs which is the seed of the Church? It was lucky, because I would not have been able to think of these Socratic rejoinders on the spur of the moment, and If I had

she might have been still more distressed. For this I would have taken no responsibility - it is always distressing to be provoked into thought.

So I was quickly discovering, not for the first time. For one thing a label had to be written. There is a twinge of latent scholarly conscience whenever I see someone reading one of our labels, and I often envy those museums whose label would simply say, "SACRED RELIEF OF MITHRAS, marble, said to have been found on Via Praeneste, Rome, II Century A.D. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher E. Nyce. Accessions Number 1968.112." But we believe that the serious museum visitor should be given as much information on the object's context, presumed purpose and meaning, as can reasonably and accurately be imparted in a printed and not too obtrusive label, whether he chooses to read it or not. And contrary to the "squawk box" method of labelling affected by some museums we thereby give him a choice in the matter.

This Reader's Digest assignment of defining Mithras and Mithraism in slightly over three hundred words was going to be about as easy as describing the first three centuries of Christianity to someone who had never heard of it. Naturally I turned to the Encyclopedia Britannica and its 1911 article on Mithraism by Professor Grant Showerman of the University of Wisconsin, which has survived all subsequent editions. Either it was a good article or not much had been learned about Mithraism since 1911. It was good, and offered leads to unobtainable, and for me unreadable learned treatises. Then, as was also natural, I dipped into "The Golden Bough," and had been already somewhat fortified by exposure to possible Mithraic influences on early Christian iconography through long-past years of graduate study. (I often wonder at modern scholarly permissiveness. In my day we were medievalists whether we wanted to be or not. Practically no other art-historical studies, whether "relevant" to the student's interests or not, were even offered, certainly not courses in twentieth century art.)

The murals of Dura-Europas, where Synagogue, Church and Mithraeum had enjoyed a precarious co-

existence on the upper Euphrates, were then freshly exposed. The conical Jews' caps of the Magi and their neighborly custom of sleeping three to a bed were frequently noted in Epiphany scenes, and the tetramorphic bull symbol of the Gospel according to St. Luke sometimes alluded to. Also one cannot be a public collector, or rather a collector for the public, or pre-Islamic Near Eastern art objects without acquiring some reading, if not speaking acquaintance with the great religions of their origin.

On this shaky foundation I proposed to try to build the three hundred words, chiefly drawing on Professor Vermaseren's relatively recent publication, checking it where possible from still more recent works by such as Harvard's Richard Frye and others. The Comte du Mesnil du Buisson had written Vermaseren's introduction. In one passage he regrets, and this is French humanism at an exquisite peak, that Bossuet had not, "sad weakness," known that "the philosophers of India, of Persia, of Egypt and Greece had prepared the way for Jesus Christ more than the prophets of Israel." But here the ears prick up, "The Magi brought to the cradle of Jesus a gift which was for infant Christianity more precious than gold: their philosophic doctrine."

Well then, acknowledging their eastern origin and not forgetting the Mithraic problem, who were these Magi? They first impinge on the consciousness of the average English-speaking Christian in the second chapter, first and second verses of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. "----behold there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born. King of the Jews for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." Village atheists have long profited from the geographic paradox of wise men from the east following a star they saw in the east and thereby coming west to Jerusalem. More pertinent is the fact that English bibles from the King James version on have chosen to translate into "wise men" the "magi" of the Vulgate which St. Jerome drew from his Greek sources. The English translators' intent may have been to simplify, at the cost of philological exactness, and, even more,

to disassociate the blessed "wise men" from those masters of the supernatural whose Old Persian name "magu," latinised into "magus" had created the very word "magic", at precisely the time of Caesar Augustus whose "decree.....that all the world should be taxed," had drawn the Holy Family to Bethlehem.

Wise men they undoubtedly were, but nowhere in the canon are they called kings. Yet by the end of the second century they had become so in sacred legend, and were three in number. St. Matthew had not counted them, but three has long been a mystic number, and the evangelist did specify the three gifts with their majestic symbolism: gold for power, frankincense for worship, and myrrh, the embalmers' unguent, for death and immortality.

That famous collector of relics, St. Helena, mother of Constantine, is said to have been in Jerusalem in 325 and to have found the true cross. She also is said to have gathered the remains of the three kings and translated them to Constantinople. Later they came to Milan, and in the late twelfth century Frederick Barbarossa presented them to the Archbishop of Cologne, where they have ever since been known as the "Three Kings of Cologne," with a shrine in the present cathedral. Some where in their journeys they took on the names of Gaspard, Melchior and significantly for these troubled times, Balthasar King of Abyssinia.

The scholar Jerome, in love with the Orient as some of his contemporaries acidly remarked, had been true to his Greek, possibly Aramaic originals, so from about 382 on they remained magi in the Vulgate. However, since the Vulgate did not become the official Catholic bible till 1546 at the Council of Trent there had been plenty of time for the magi to be sanctioned as kings. Oral tradition was strong and many written records must have disappeared. The oldest surviving written account of the kings, names and all, is as recent as 1346.

There was further and sound Christian

logic for distinguishing the blessed magi of Bethlehem not only from astrologist-magicians, but more vitally from the priests of Mithras, of the same name, who were well known on the frontiers of the empire, and especially in Rome itself. Mithraism was almost the official religion of the legions, for reasons that may appear later, and its priests, the magi, were more than mere diviners of dreams, they were servants of a mystery dangerously resembling Christianity. As late as the fifth century in the northern Celtic world the pagan opponents of St. Patrick were called magi. It happens that Padraic MacAlpurn, Patrick son of the decurion Calpurnius, grew up in a devout Christian home nearby the headquarters of Valeria Victrix, the XX Legion whose castrum, or camp, is still remembered in the town plan and name of Chester.

There was also a cogent theological reason for turning the magi into kings. Early Christian liturgists felt compelled to interpret the New Law as a fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Law, and did not Psalm 72 in verse 10 say, "The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents, the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts?" And what did the later Isaiah mean in Chapter 49, verse 7, "...Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship?"

Another reason for playing down the magi in the Gospel itself was the problem of the date of the Nativity and of the Epiphany. The Epiphany was the manifestation of the true God which the whole world came to Bethlehem to acknowledge at his birth. But which birth? For the first three centuries the Fathers were not much interested in the "natalis in carne," the birth from the flesh, the Nativity, but rather in the "natalis dies" the day of divine birth, the Baptism. Next to the Baptism in importance and still outranking the "natalis in carne" was the first miracle at the Marriage in Cana, the miracle of water and wine. Both of these gradually centered on January 6. When it seemed eventually necessary to pin down the "natalis in carne" - and here is an astonishing coincidence - the winter solstice of the Julian calendar, December 25, was

settled on. It was the birthday of the sun, known by this time throughout the Roman world and neighboring Near East as the birth of Mithras, celebrated by twelve days of lights and feasting.

Stubborn types, the magi, they refuse to leave the manger. Who, then, were they? We know them already as priests of Mithras, but who had they originally been? Herodotus says the Magians were one of the six tribes of the Medes, and the one from whom the priesthood was selected. After a century's conditioned reflex of doubting everything Herodotus said it now appears that he was more often right than wrong. At least Richard Frye is prepared to believe him in this particular, and agrees that while all priests were Magians not all Magians were priests. If the priestly tribe of Levi is recalled the idea may be more understandable.

There is another etymology, which Frye rejects, that "magus" is related to the Old Persian "maga", gift, in this case the gift of revelation. Because of his supreme "gift" some scholars have called Zoroaster the first "magus", even though he was not a Magian of whom he strong disapproved, not even a Mede, and probably came from east Persia where he may have died, forgiving his killer. It is very confusing.

Now we come to that elegant word, freed from its latter day medical context, (and how often do doctors corrupt the language) orthopraxy. The Magians were specialists in it, specialists in correct method of worship, ritual; as distinguished from orthodoxy, which is correct theology, belief, creed. The gods they worshipped so correctly seem to have been the old Aryan pantheon dominated by the sun god. In the "ursprach" or cradle language of all the Indo-European speaking peoples, at least as far as philologists can conjecture it, the words for god, "deus", day, "dies" and even more specific deities such as "Zeus" are all related to the sun.

Father even of the sun or, as Zoroaster was to say, offspring of the sun was the principle of Time, "Zurvan," ("Chronos," "Saturn.") Many forces of nature were named: "Anahita," female

principle of water and wine; "Mithra," god of vegetation and herds and their annual renewal. His name is first recorded in a Hittite inscription of the twelfth century B. C. - the Hittites of Anatolia were Indo-European - as meaning a treaty, a contract, and defender of the good faith necessary to a contract .

Considering his importance in the west it is curious that all textual knowledge of Mithras and of his place in this early pantheon comes from the east, India in particular. Western records are entirelyly visual, painted, sculptured or architectural. A good deal is implicit in Zoroastrian writings where a later hymn to Mithras is included in the canon, hut no physical trace of Mithras survives in the land of his birth. There are a hundred sites in Rome itself, more than two hundred along the northern and western frontiers of the empire, but none east of Iraq and Armenia.

Chief of all the gods was the god, Ahuramazda, the force of life and good in the universe, whose visible presence was the sun. Lesser deities were known as "daeva," "devi" in Sanskrit where they continue to be gods of greater or less beneficence, but, thanks to Zoroaster, evil forces in Persia, source of the word devil.

The rituals seem to have been elaborate; fasting and ceremonial ablutions prepared the worshipper for entrance to the shrine and its eternal flame, representing the sun and tended by the Magians. Hymns were sung telling of the origins of the gods, their creation of the world, their divine attributes, men's duty to them. Then a mind-enlarging drug called haoma in Persia and soma in India was taken to induce religious ecstasy and a feeling of oneness with the gods. Before this the Magians had instructed the worshippers in these matters; in fact they were probably the professional teaching caste.

Through all this a primitive dualism took form; the good gods gathered around Ahuramazda, called Ormuzd in the later Sasanian period, and evil forces of darkness began to rally around

Ahriman. What little middle ground there might have been between these polar opposites tended to disappear, exactly as on the semi-arid Iranian plateau there was no gentle transition from warm day to cold night, nothing but an abrupt boundary between the desert and the sown.

Then came the great reformer Zoroaster. His dates and details of his personal life are much disputed. Even his name as we know it is Greek; in Old Persian it was something like Zarathustra, in Pahlavi or Middle Persian, Zardusht, as he is still known to his Parsee followers in Bombay. A majority opinion says that he belongs to the first half of the sixth century B. C., that amazing cluster of decades that saw the rise of the Greek schools of philosophy, that heard the exiled Jewish prophets, the time of Lao-tse and Confucius in China, and of that Aryan prince of Nepal, Siddartha Cakyamuni, the teacher Gautama, the Buddha.

Some of the uncertainty about Zoroaster's dates and origin comes from the fact that while he is reasonably supposed to have written or caused to be written in Old Persian the Gathas, the oldest part of the Avesta, on sheets of leather probably thicker than parchment or vellum, bound with gold and deposited at Persepolis, the oldest known text of the Avesta together with the later commentaries and hymns which all together make up the Zend-Avesta is in Copenhagen of all places, dated 1258.

After the Gathas were scattered or destroyed by Alexander's burning of Persepolis, and after the Seleucid interim, the Parthian dynasts reassembled them, added to them and passed them on to the Sasanians who in their stern Zoroastrian orthodoxy rendered them into Pahlavi and must have copied many of them, not one of which has survived. Moslem zealots may have done away with most of them, but the fact remains that the earlier Persians, even the Sasanians in immediate contact with the highly literate Aramaic and Graeco-Roman worlds, were strangely indifferent to written records, in spite of their brilliant visual arts and later equally brilliant literature.

Whenever he was, and whoever he was Zoroaster was a great theologian, a kind of early Persian John Calvin. He proclaimed the unique greatness of Ahura-mazda and banished the lesser gods from the pantheon, keeping only Anahita and Mithras whom he demoted to the status of arch-angels. He also kept, as a fulcrum of evil, Ahriman, force of darkness, unquestionably the prototype of Satan and Lucifer. The Judaic concept of angels emerges in the time of the Babylonian captivity which brought intimate contact with growing Persian domination over the Near East, and from which Cyrus the Persian, "annointed of the Lord" released them. Then appear the cherubim of Ezekiel, the seraphim of Isaiah, the lesser angels Israfael, Uriel, Gabriel, Michael and the prince of angels, Lucifer. This may be a coincidence in time or an accident of place, but the historic fact exists.

Zoroaster was definitely not in favor of an established priesthood with its complicated ritual. He preached instead of man's direct responsibility to god, his hope of immortal identity with him, his necessary avoidance of evil. He discouraged the taking of haoma; he may not even have believed in fire altars. At least they cannot be certainly identified in the otherwise detailed depictions of royal ceremony at Persepolis and Susa where Ahura-mazda as a human-headed winged sun disk often floats above the King of Kings.

These Achaemenid monarchs, the royal line of Cyrus, of Darius and Xerxes, acknowledged Ahura-mazda in their stone inscriptions and in their gold foundation plaques. Witness Artaxerxes II in one of the Museum's rarer gold documents, "Ahura-mazda, great god, the greatest of gods, made me king. He bestowed on me the land Persia, with good people, good horses." Artaxerxes' life span was from 405 to 359 B. C., and he was not one of the important Achaemenids for all his shrewd sticking to the throne, even forging inscriptions to justify his claim. But in his case this was only human fallibility, not empty respect for Ahura-mazda, great god, who ordered them all, especially the kings, to adhere to truth and shun falsehood, to be just and govern mercifully. The Greeks knew this, and

more than once called on "the king" or his satrap to arbitrate their disputes.

These were the conditions, on the whole well-served, of the- two hundred years of the "Persian peace" shattered by Alexander. After him and his short-lived Seleucid successors the old certainties were gone. Where could one turn? It was a time of the "breaking up of mountains," of the dissolution of kingdoms. Spiritual unrest went hand in hand with political upset. Soon the Parthian Arsacid Dynasty took loose control; but it was quite loose, not at all like the calm reassurance of the splendid Achaemenids.

However, the Parthians expelled the Seleucids from Iran proper and moved their governmental centers to Mesopotamia, riding a frontier with Rome from Syria to Armenia. The Persian genius had been shaken but had not died. Only recently are archaeologists beginning to discover, from Hattra and Commagene in the north to Shami in the south, how vitally the arts at least flourished in the Parthian period. But it will take a long time to correct the textbooks which also rarely bother to mention Mithraism as a phenomenon of this period.

Rome would eventually impose on the Near East, outside of Persia, a new military order of unquestioned greatness, but the old moral-cultural certainties had gone, and in the current absence of absolute government a god of absolute good seemed impossibly remote from weak troubled mortals. Never have many men possessed the spiritual courage and at the same time the humility to stand alone before their god. Here the magi took over.

They had never disappeared, and had probably continued a modified priestly and teaching role during the Achaemenid period. At a safe remove from centers of Achaemenid administration they may even have kept alive some worship of the lesser gods. They had moved with the Parthian kings into Mesopotamia and had renewed their strength by fraternal exchange, but to say merger with those age-old astrologers now known as Chaldees.

The magi too could speak of a firmament with the sun as its center round whom the seven planets plied, of the celestial houses, of man ruled by his stars. When a new one appeared over Judea they would be strangely moved.

Their ordered ritual could be reassuring, and above all they recognized the need for an intermediary between man and god, a savior, divine to be sure, but of mortal proportions with a steady-ing human hand to hold. The need for such a savior was felt everywhere in the ancient world at this uncertain time. Isis with her resurrected consort came out of Egypt. The Messianic idea began to stir among the Jews; Attis, Adonis, Orpheus led their followers, and finally there would be Bethlehem.

Here and now, framed in a flickering aureole of divine light, was Mithras. Archangel, messenger, perhaps in the old Aryan word an avatar of the one god, Mithras had been born into the mortal world from a rock in a lonely cavern. Only a few shepherds were witnesses. He helped men's herds to increase, he helped their fields yield bounty. His arrow had struck the barren rock and life-giving water gushed forth. With bow, arrows and quiver he had hunted the wild beasts in symbol of man's lordship over the lower orders of creation. He had ridden the heavens on the back of the celestial bull, and he had reluctantly sacrificed the bull so that its blood could renew life with the Spring. Above all he was a soldier defending truth against falsehood, defending virtue-seeking men against their mortal weaknesses. He too, like men, would die, rising to heaven in a chariot of fire, thereafter to welcome lesser mortals into the fellowship of eternal light. For so Ahura-mazda had bade him do.

Nobody knows the date of the Yashtas, or hymns, in the newer part of the Zend-Avesta, but some of them may have been contemporary with Zoroaster. So the Mithraists chose to believe as they chanted the tenth Yasht where Ahura-mazda speaks thus to Zoroaster. "Since I have created Mithras I have also created him worthy of sacrifices, as worthy to receive prayer as I myself, Ahura-mazda."

Then the worshippers pray, "You protect the nations blessed by Mithras, oh lord of great lands; you break into pieces those who flout him; may he be our aid, Mithras, the feared, the victorious, worthy of prayer and sacrifice, shining lord of the nations, benevolent, full of compassion." Other epithets clang like bronze, "the conqueror," "the victor, and glory, attends him; he has a thousand ears, ten thousand eyes, ten thousand spies; he is the powerful, who knows all and is not deceived." (These are of course translations from the French translation of the Dutch translation of the Pahlavi original. They may have lost something in the process).

In the closing years of the old era this new idea spread like a prairie fire from Mesopotamia to Syria, Armenia, Anatolia, finding its first Mediterranean capital at Tarsus. Rome first officially heard of it from Cilician pirates captured by Pompey.

In 66 A. D. Tiridates came to Rome to be crowned king of Armenia by Nero and in return initiated the last of the Julians into the mysteries. Three Roman historians attest the fact, and Nero entered the new faith at the top, as Sol Invictus, counterpart of Mithras himself.

But Persia proper showed little interest. Just as Judaism after giving birth to Christianity went on its own stricter orthodox way, so the Sasanian Dynasty restoring firm central authority to Persia in 224 A. D. also restored orthodox Zoroastrianism as very much the state religion. The chief difference between Achaemenid and Sasanian Zoroastrianism was the Sasanian establishment of an orthodox magi priesthood. The sacerdotal idea was taking charge everywhere. Judaism had had its High Priests and would soon enter its rabbinical phase. Christianity would soon evolve from a simple government by elders into an apostolic succession of priests.

And now in Persia these new priestly intermediaries would have nothing to do with Mithras except to keep the tneth Yasht in the Zend-Avesta. Fire altars grew into fire temples

and ritual grew evermore elaborate. Anahita had survived, perhaps because a female principle is necessary to any well-balanced cosmos, but more probably because the Sasanian line descended from Sasan, priest of Anahita at Istakhr near Persepolis; she may have been a special patron of the royal house. At any rate she figures in a monumental stone relief at Naqsh-i-Rustum, and her draperies flutter on many a Sasanian gold and silver vessel, including one of the Museum's finer examples. Being a mere woman, however, she is conspicuously absent from Mithraic theology, as far as it is known.

Mithraism's missionaries to the west were the legions, and its special military appeal needs some explanation. One may be that at this time the ranks of the legions were filling with Germans and Celts; add their native fighting qualities to the organization and discipline of Rome and the result is the finest professional army the world has ever known. Naturally such freshly recruited units would not be stationed on the German frontiers of the Rhine and Danube or on the Celtic frontiers of Northumbria, Wales and Lusitania until their Roman loyalty had been thoroughly proved. So they were sent to Syria, Asia Minor and north Africa.

Their gods from the misty northern forests did not easily naturalise in the Mediterranean sunlight, the old religion of Rome had little or no appeal to any but old Romans, except for a mystic adoration of the eagles, so they were converted almost overnight to Mithraism. When they were reassigned to other frontiers they brought their new and vastly more sophisticated religion with them.

It was a soldier's religion, fit for a man's world. It had a code of duties and rewards, the rites were orderly and disciplined. The seven degrees of initiation resembled military grades. No women were allowed.

This club might applaud the principle, but it is a fatal weakness for any program of general persuasion. Essentially it is an oriental state_ of mind, common to the later Moslems, to a certain

extent the Jews, and it even affected the Greeks among whom Mithraism, curiously enough, never took firm hold. But then the Greeks never belonged or wanted to belong to the military structure of Rome. Vermaseren discusses this "Problem of Women," and, devout latterday Mithraist though he undoubtedly is, all he can say is that some other religions did the same thing.

But a compensating strength of Mithraism was its syncretism. Mithras would share an altar with Helios, Apollo, Sol, or the god-Caesar himself as long as his devotees could practise his special rites. Hence the heterogeneous legionaries could identify many of their sun and nature gods with Mithras. The Christians did not compromise. Nor did some of Jesus' gentler traits and requirements appeal to this wholly masculine society.

"A Song to Mithras" that Kipling inserts in his three stories of the young Centurion of the XXX catches this martial spirit. It should be recited to the loud brass accompaniment of Respighi's "Pines of the Appian Way," which, I am told by those who profess to know, is meretricious music, but vividly illustrative to the unknowing:

"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 soldier, 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 ungirt hour; now ere we blink
and drowse,
Mithras, also a soldier, keep, us true
to our vows!

Mithras, God of the Sunset, low on
the Western main,

Thous descending immortal, immortal
to rise again!
Now when the watch is ended,, now
when the wine is drawn,
Mithras, also a soldier, keep us pure
till the dawn!

Mithras, God of the Midnight, here
where the great bull lies,
look on thy children in darkness.
Oh take our sacrifice!
Many roads Thou hast fashioned: all
of them lead to the Light,
Mithras, also a soldier, teach us to
die aright!"

The prosody may not be classic, after all rhyme is a Celtic gift, but the meaning certainly is, and I see now that I needn't have bothered with the rest of the paper. The whole idea is there, as is often the case with Kipling.

Apart from not always precise archaeological evidence the only knowledge of Mithraic practice comes from Christian sources which were understandably far from objective. Mithraism was accused among other things of human sacrifice and cannibalism. Christianity was so accused, as was Judaism. It is perhaps an inevitable indictment of any religion which practises symbolic theophagy, the eating of the god's body and blood. But the Christian apologists answered a historical need: heathen practises and beliefs had to be described in detail before they could be systematically refuted. And, honest rhetoricians as many of the early Fathers were, a grudging respect for the chief enemy shows through many of their writings. St. Jerome, who as has been said was perhaps unduly sympathetic to things oriental, and who wrote after Mithraism had been almost completely defeated and expelled, is one of the more reliable commentators. Before him Tertullian of the late second century was observant, disapproving but not hostile. St. Augustine made a few oblique, not unfriendly remarks. There were many others.

Discounting as much as possible their

built-in bias we can deduce from the various Christian observers that, while women were completely banned, very young boys could begin their studies towards the initiations. The first degree was Corax, the Raven, messenger of Ahura-mazda, whereby he may have symbolised the element of air.

Scholars argue about the next degree. Some, including Professor Showerman and the great Frnaz Caumont of Belgium, who in the eighteenth-nineties first assembled and interpreted the archaeological evidence, contend that it should be called Cryphius, meaning occult, hidden. Others, Vermaseren among them, and they all deplore the impious necessity of disagreeing with Caumont, call the second degree Nymphus, the bridegroom. In both interpretations there was a ritual of unveiling. Whether Cryphius or Nymphus, the symbol was the element of water, the lustral bath.

Then came the most important of the lower degrees, Miles, the soldier, element of earth. Mithraists were said to have been tattooed or branded at some stage of the initiations, and it was most probably Miles whom Mithras "marked with fire on the forehead," as Gregory of Nazianzus says. This was considered most discreditable, but tattoos at least are not unknown among the military to this day. Gregory of Nazianzus was a classmate of Julian the Apostate and felt strongly about these things.

The fourth degree was Leo, the lion symbol of fire. Honey instead of water was used for the ceremonial ablutions, and here a graduation from the non-commissioned to the officer class may have taken place.

Perses, the Persian, came next, symbolising the moon. He was the reaper, and his attribute was a scythe, a sickle or a sheaf of grain.

The sixth degree was Heliodromus, messenger of the sun. Probably not many reached this elevation, and those who did may have formed a council with the one member of the seventh degree, Pater.

Pater wore the ring and carried the ceremonial

staff of a magus, clearly depicted in the frescoes of Dura-Europas. He was the head of the community, a person of exceptional sanctity. In a day of casual domestic relationships and in spite of his oriental origin he could be married only once. He oversaw the instruction of the neophytes, the proper conduct of the rites. He held the property of the community in his name, and enforced discipline on all of its members. Probably it was the Pater degree that was thought to be the official magi priesthood.

The meeting place, and here archaeology takes firm control, was called a Mithraeum. It was small, rarely accommodating more than a hundred worshippers. It was symbolically underground, or partially so, a rectangular room whose vaulted ceiling represented the firmament. It was lined by raised platforms where the initiates of the higher degrees reclined to worship and possibly be served the Sacred Banquet by the three lower degrees. At its eastern end stood the altar where the ceremonial sacrifices were made, and above it stood the Sacred Relief depicting Mithras performing The Sacrifice.

From many sources, none of them too specific, scholars had guessed that the sacrifices were followed by a Sacred Banquet where the flesh of the bull and his blood, possibly mixed with haoma, would be consumed by the worshippers, before Mithras' ascension. They even postulated a depiction of this banquet on the back of the Sacred Relief, which might have been mounted on a swivel so that it could face the celebrants in the later part of the ceremony. No even reasonably complete representation of the Sacred Banquet had survived, since it was a particular target of Christian iconoclasts. The otherwise moderate Tertullian, perhaps protesting too much, called it "a diabolic parody of the eucharist."

The scholars' guesses were proven to be surprisingly accurate in the late nineteen-forties when a Mithraeum was found under the church of Santa Priscia on the Aventine hill in Rome. It must have been sealed off before Christian violation,

and a series of striking murals had survived to illustrate various stages of initiation and the serving of the Sacred Banquet itself. Much minor revision of earlier theories has followed on the Santa Priscia find.

Mithraism's death sentence was passed in 324 when the recently converted Constantine the Great became sole emperor, proclaiming Christianity a sanctioned religion and ultimately the state religion. There was a short stay of execution when Flavius Claudius Julianus, known to Christian history as Julian the Apostate, made a brave, futile effort to preserve the other religions and philosophies of what he almost worshipped as "hellenism". He was born in 331 and had been raised as a Christian. But about 351 or 352 he was converted to Mithraism in Constantinople itself. After a series of brilliant campaigns against the Germans in Gaul, beginning in 357, the northern legions among whom he had grown up proclaimed him Caesar in 361. He promptly issued an edict of universal toleration; it was most displeasing to the now dominant Christians, who have rarely been accused of religious tolerance.

Time, however, had passed him by. His envoy Oribasius returned from Delphi with the last of the oracles, still in dactylic hexameter, the prosody of the gods.

"Tell the king that the richly-wrought
hall has fallen to the ground.
No longer does Phoebus have a shelter,
nor his prophetic laurels,
nor can he touch the rock that speaks.
The talking waters have run dry."

In other words the god - Phoebus, Apollo, Helios, Sol, Mithras, as Julian would have syncretised them - was dead.

Two years later Julian lay in Mesopotamia mortally wounded by orthodox Sasanian arrows. There is no historic basis for his famous last words, first recorded a century later, but there is poetic truth when he is said to have cried, "Oh Galilean,

thou hast conquered!"

It was a total victory. There were surface similarities enough to let many Mithraists go over easily and publicly to Christianity; others kept their peace or began a slow withdrawal to the east. Others, the timeless, invisible, stubborn ones who also know of power, worship and resurrection, still come to the manger with their prophetic gifts.

Philip R. Adams
