

Mithraism in Roman Britain

Investigating the impact on society from Mithraic Cults

By Frederick Webb (150275222) VV14 Ancient History & Archaeology – F.Webb1@newcastle.ac.uk - Supervised by Federico Santangelo. School of History, Classics and Archaeology



Introduction

Cults worshipped Mithras, a Sun God who symbolises the creation of life. These cults were secluded and hidden away from the rest of society in sites called Mithraea. Despite this seclusion, dedications to Mithras appeared across Roman Britain. Archaeological and literary evidence shows multiple social groups partaking in Mithraic cults and consequently having an impact on which deities were worshipped in Roman Britain. The Mithras exhibition at the Great North Museum from July to September 2017 was integral to this research.

Aims & Objectives

The project was designed to analyse the impact of Mithraism on imperial and social life in Roman Britain. A comparative discussion of archaeological sites and literary sources will offer a better picture of which social groups became initiates in Mithraic cults. Comparing the Mithraea at Walbrook, Carrawburgh and Housesteads will shed light on the rituals practiced by Mithraic Cults and the strength of their following. Most Mithraeum are studied in isolation; comparing sites should yield a stronger understanding of Mithraic Cults.

Methodology

- Compare the dedications and deities from the London Mithraeum at Walbrook, Carrawburgh and Housesteads on display at the Great North Museum exhibition.
- Use literary evidence from the Great North Museum library and the Robinson Library in order to explain which social groups took part in Mithraic cults and analyse their impact.
- Compare the reports on materials from the London Mithraeum at Walbrook, Carrawburgh and Housesteads to show any shared practices of the Mithraic cults and their impact on society.

Hierarchy of initiates in Mithraic Cults

All Mithraic Cults had a descending hierarchy (father at the top) which initiates were a part of. The 7 grades of initiation were explained by St Jerome Letters 107 and shown on a relief at Ostia.

1. Father (Pater) – The leader who carries out initiations and rituals.
2. Sun-Runner - An initiate who can be a torch bearer in rituals.
3. Persian – A link with the eastern origin of Mithraism despite the Roman changes.
4. Lion – A representation of Jupiter, God of the sky and thunder.
5. Soldier – Represents the Roman Legionaries and Auxiliaries and Mars, the God of war.
6. Bridegroom – The grade is used to represent Venus, Goddess of prosperity and victory.
7. Raven – Ravens were used to send messages to the Gods.

1. Marble head of Mithras, AD 180-220 Walbrook Mithraeum, London. Mithras was the God of creation, light and dark. "The maker and father of all" (Porphyry *Antro Nympharum "Cave of the Nymphs"* 6).
2. Marble head of Minerva, AD 130-190 Walbrook Mithraeum. Minerva, Goddess of wisdom and trade. Unique appearance at Walbrook, referring to Londinium's mercantile and prosperous reputation.
3. Marble head of Serapis, 2nd C AD Walbrook Mithraeum. The Egyptian God of the Sun and agriculture. Serapis is wearing a *modius*, a cylindrical headdress resembling a grain measure.
4. A seated marble statue of Mercury, 3rd C AD Walbrook Mithraeum. Patron god of commerce and eloquence. The image of Mercury is unique to Londinium in Roman Britain, due to the mercantile profile of London.
5. A relief of Mithras and the bull-slaying scene, early 3rd C AD Walbrook Mithraeum. The bull was a symbol of death and rebirth in mythology; the sacrifice by Mithras allowed new life to be created.
6. An altar dedication from the Housesteads Mithraeum by Litorius Pacatianus, early 3rd C AD. Pacatianus was a *beneficiarius consularis*, a higher ranking military official. It was common practice for officials to make dedications when they have fulfilled a vow or a task.
7. A statue of Mithras being born from an egg, Housesteads Mithraeum, 2nd-3rd C AD. The God being framed in an egg with zodiac symbols shows life being given by Mithras. Egg symbols also appeared at Carrawburgh and Zodiac symbols appear in all the Mithraea discussed in this project.

Statistics from Walbrook, Carrawburgh and Housesteads Mithraeum

Type of Animal Bone	Total number of Bones
Chicken	342
Pig	86
Cattle	10
Sheep	36

Figure 8: Number of bones found at each Mithraeum. The large amount of bones show evidence of feasting and ritual sacrifices.

Inscriptions	Walbrook	Carrawburgh	Housesteads
Military Officials	2	2	1
Equestrian	1	1	1
Clerics	0	0	0
Slaves	0	0	1
Freeman	0	0	0
Unknown	2	0	0

Figure 9: Number of inscriptions at each Mithraeum from different social groups. The inscriptions show that these groups were involved in Mithraic cults, with higher ranking army officials being the most prevalent.

Site	Third Century	Fourth Century	Constantinian
Walbrook	8	4	9
Carrawburgh	3	2	0
Housesteads	5	1	0

Figure 10: Coins from each Mithraeum, showing a high amount of human activity in the third century AD.

Depictions of Deities	Walbrook	Carrawburgh	Housesteads
Mithras	6	2	1
Minerva	1	0	0
Serapis	1	0	0
Bacchus	2	0	0
Mercury	1	0	0
Water Deities	1	0	0
Genius	1	0	0
Cautes and Cautopates	2	2	2
Venus	3	0	0
Boreas	1	0	0
Zephyros	1	0	0
Sol/Mithras	1	0	1
Luna	1	0	0
Castor and Pollux	0	0	0
Anonymous	0	1	0
Matres	0	1	0
Mars	0	0	1
Thincus	0	0	1
Jupiter	1	0	1
Cocidius	0	0	1
Emperors	1	0	0

Small Finds	Walbrook	Carrawburgh	Housesteads
Third Century			
Copper			
Alloy	13	1	4
Bone/Antler	2	6	5
Iron Alloy	10	3	0
Pine Cones	20	12	0
Jet	1	0	1
Fourth Century			
Copper			
Alloy	3	0	0
Bone/Antler	3	0	0
Iron Alloy	11	0	0
Pine Cones	0	0	0
Jet	3	0	0
Ceramic	1	0	0
Silver	1	0	0
Lead Alloy	1	0	0
Glass	2	0	0
Leather	3	0	0

Figure 11: Deities depicted at each Mithraeum showing a mixture of name-paired deities, regional deities and common images and animals in Roman and Greek Mythology.

Figure 12: Finds from each Mithraeum, showing that most attested may be dated to the 3rd century.

Conclusions

- A number of male social groups participated in Mithraic Cults, predominantly army officials and equestrians.
- Generally, Mithraic Cults had some centralised practices, but have a lot of regional differences. Regional deities commonly appear in Mithraeum such as anonymous water deities and others such as Matres.
- Mithraic Cults have shared ritual practices due to archaeological layouts, environmental evidence and material finds.
- Chicken bones and pinecones appear at a number of Mithraea and show ritual burning and feasting ceremonies (Fig 8 and Fig 12) (Shepard, J. 1998).
- Overall, the cult of Mithras was appealing to many as belonging to the cult replicated everyday routine. People had to accept a specific role in an organisation which was controlled by an authoritative figure. In the cult it was Mithras, in society it was the emperor.

References:
 Beck, R. (2006) *The religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: mysteries of the unconquered sun*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
 Crow, J. (1995) *Housesteads*, London: Batsford
 Gordon, R. (2000) *The Roman cult of Mithras: The God and his mysteries*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
 Mattingly (2006) *An imperial possession: Britain in the Roman Empire, 54 BC- 409 AD*, London: Allen Lane
 Richmond, I. (1951) *The temple of Mithras at Carrawburgh*, Newcastle: Society of Antiquaries Newcastle
 Shepard, J. (1998) *The temple of Mithras, London*, London: English Heritage