

LONDON
MITHRAEUM

Bloomberg

SPACE

Bench Transcript

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The mystery of Mithraism

London Mithraeum audio bench transcript

Narrator: Welcome as we explore the London Mithraeum, one of Britain's most important archaeological discoveries. This site has seen many changes over the centuries with the destruction by the Great Fire of London in 1666 and bombing during World War II. It was after the bombing that the Temple of Mithras was first discovered.

It's been almost 2,000 years since the cult of Mithras was founded and we continue to be fascinated by this ancient god, the secret rituals of his followers, and the temples built in his name, including one that once stood here.

After all this time, so many questions remain unanswered: Who were the worshippers of Mithras? How did they express devotion to their god? What's the meaning of the objects displayed in their temples? Experts on this ancient cult share some observations with us. Richard Gordon, an authority on Mithraism, describes why the religion is still largely a mystery.

Richard Gordon: This is a long dead religion. There is lots and lots and lots of archaeological evidence which is very difficult to decipher, and in the last 40 or 50 years, a lot more information has turned up.

Astrology in Mithraism

Narrator: The architecture of the Mithraeum, the temple where Mithras was worshipped, provides some of the most helpful clues to understanding the beliefs and rituals of the cult.

Hugh Bowden: It can be seen to represent the whole cosmos. And the roof of the cave and the walls correspond to the sky, to the heavens and this means that if you're in a Mithraeum you can have this idea of the vastness of the cosmos and of your insignificance. But also because of the importance of Mithras and the idea that within this cosmos Mithras is the one in control, then you as a worshiper of Mithras have actually got an important place within this cosmos.

Narrator: Signs of the zodiac have been found in temples to Mithras and on objects related to the rituals of the cult. These astrological symbols played an important role in the beliefs and rituals of Mithraism.

Richard Gordon: As we can see from the use of the zodiac, they believed that Mithras had arranged and organised the whole cosmos and it was he who caused it to go on and on and on.

Mithraic rituals

- Narrator:** Archaeological evidence discovered within the remains of Mithraic temples across the Roman Empire give experts clues to the cult's rituals.
- Eberhard Sauer:** We know that there were initiation ceremonies, but by the very nature it's a secretive religion, so we don't know precisely what the initiation rituals did involve. What we do know for sure is that, that light effects, probably sound effects, as well as the use of incense played a role, so it would have been a very thought-provoking atmosphere in these very small windowless temples.
- Ines Klenner:** You can imagine some small lamps in a dark room. It's a quite small room and you have something like 12-15 people attending the ritual. You've got some torches in a corner and you've got an altar with a light behind. And then you can imagine some incense and smoke in the room. You had people acting with masks on and they might have been telling stories about the origins of Mithras in the east and the bull killing in the holy cave.

Hugh Bowden: We have images from some Mithraea - of rituals that were probably quite painful, quite frightening - being threatened with a sword, being blindfolded. Taking part in these ritual activities would mean that you could feel part of a community of special people. At its best, you might experience a sort of feeling of close contact with the god, with Mithras himself, you might feel that you're close to meeting him.

Narrator: The image of the god Mithras slaying the sacred bull - also known as the Tauroctony - is the cult's main icon. Also central to the practice of Mithraism, were the elaborate feasts that occurred inside the temples. Richard Gordon explains.

Richard Gordon: What they tried to do is to reproduce aspects of the myth and the central part of the myth was the killing of the bull which creates order and fertility in the world. But it's obvious that there were no bull sacrifices in the cult of Mithras, the temples are much too small, so this is an ideal first sacrifice and the structure of the temple is essentially a dining room.

Identity of cult members

Narrator: All of the evidence uncovered to date suggests that women were deliberately excluded from the cult. Of the thousand or so followers of Mithras known by name, not a single one of them is a woman.

Richard Gordon: It's crucial that the cult of Mithras did not accept women, at least as far as we know. That meant that a certain kind of appeal to masculinity, to male bonding, male brotherhood was a given in the cult.

Narrator: Who were the members of the cult of Mithras? Were followers of Mithras all from one social class or from different backgrounds? How did the religion spread across the vast Roman Empire? These are only a few of the questions that experts continue to debate.

Hugh Bowden: The leaders of Mithraic groups were probably members of the upper classes. But otherwise, the presence of Mithraic temples across the empire, spreading rapidly might suggest that people who took part in it would be traders, merchants, sailors perhaps, travelers and also probably shopkeepers, other ordinary business people.

Conclusion

Narrator: We hope that this introduction helps you to unravel some of the mystery of the cult of the Roman god Mithras. There are many gaps in our knowledge, which may be filled as new discoveries are made. No matter how much we uncover, we still need to use our imagination to place ourselves in the world of Roman London, 1,800 years ago, when worshippers gathered here.

To experience something of what it might have been like inside a temple to Mithras, you can explore the reconstructed remains of the London Mithraeum by descending to the floor below.

