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The cult of god Mithras in the Roman army

The spread of the eastern cults in the Roman Empire by the example of the Iranian god Mithras who was worshipped by the legionaries in the army of the Roman Empire is presented.

Keywords: Mithras, the Roman army, the Roman Empire, Iranian god

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Культ бога Мітри в римській армії

Представлено поширення східних культів у Римській імперії на прикладі іранського бога Мітри, якому поклонялися легіонери в армії Римської імперії.

Ключові слова: Мітра, римська армія, Римська імперія, іранський бог

The goal of the paper is to present the development of the cult of god Mithras in the Roman society in the period of the Empire. The popularity of the foreign, Iranian cult among a very conservative group of the Roman society, namely, the legionaries, seems surprising. The paper attempts at answering the question whether the cult had a potential to/ could have potentially developed among a wider group of worshippers in the Roman Empire.

The problem related to the cult of Mithras both as regards the aspect of popularity of eastern cults in the 3rd century CE as well as its mystery character was studied by older researchers such as Franz Cumont, Manfred Clauss and David Ulansey. Recently, the problem has been studied by Roger Beck, Tommaso Gnoli and Luther H. Martin.

First mentions about Mithras appear in Rigveda, which is dated 2000 BCE, and is written in the form of hymns. Some scholars date it before 2000 BCE. The god is also mentioned in Avesta, which is a successor of Rigveda, and is a compilation of holy religious texts of worshippers of Zoroastrianism [1]. Both books were devoted to the god of sun [2, p. 70]. The existence of numerous solar temples in India testifies to the cult of sun there. The cult was first formalized in the temple form by Indo-Iranian religions.

Information on the cult is mainly based on the interpretation of numerous preserved historical monuments and archaeology. Mithras, also called *Deus Sol Invictus Mithra*, was a Persian god of sun. In Persian mythology, he was also considered as a helper to Ahuramazda [3, p. 77]. God Mithras comes from an ancient Indo-Iranian solar god, and was probably transferred by the Achaemenid army to Asia Minor, but before the cult of Mithras reached Rome, it had undergone a Hellenist transformation, and Mithras was presented as god-saviour. The god was presented as an invincible soldier, steadfast in fight, the vanquisher of daemons. Mithras promised his worshippers strength and success, and special afterlife after their death. The cult of Mithras might have been popularized either by Ionic Greeks in the Persian army or some groups in Alexander's army, which on a large scale married the Persian fiancées, and freed the Jews from Babylon [4].

The cult of Mithras took place in grottos cut in rock. Offerings of various animals were made to worship the god. Afterwards the animals were eaten. Mithras was depicted as a youth wearing a tunic and Phrygian bonnet (cap) on his head, killing a bull. Mithras

was born out of rock on 25th December. He became famous for killing bull on the god's of sun order. He first took the bull to the grotto and then stabbed his right side killing it. To commemorate this event, Mithras worshippers made bloody offerings to the god (*tauroctonium*) [5]. Iconographic sources show Mithras catching the bull, bringing it to the cave and making an offering. This ritual act always looked in the same way. The god pulled the head of the animal up, holding it by the nostrils and stabbed it in the neck. The blood dripping from the wound was licked by the dog and the snake, and the scorpion approached the bull's genitals. From the offered animal's tail ears of grain sprang. General sense of *tauroctonium* seems clear. Mithras' full of obstacles search for the bull, called *tranūtus dei* in inscriptions is considered an allegory of earthly human life, which is perceived as a difficult and full of obstacles way to salvation. Mithras guaranteed salvation by means of the offering made on behalf of the worshippers, which is novelty considering the traditional understanding of offering, which was traditionally made by the worshippers to the god, as opposed to god making the offering to himself. The blood spilled by Mithras was believed to have purifying power and symbolized rebirth: "You saved us by spilling eternal blood". This inscription is engraved on the wall of the sanctuary discovered in the catacombs of Santa Prisca Church in Rome. The god was worshipped in caves, grottos or cellars, since it was of primary importance that the rituals were performed in places, which were closed and isolated from sun. Only men could participate in the rituals, and they gradually passed to subsequent levels of initiation that consisted of seven levels. The ritual was strictly connected with astrology and led to overcoming of human vices, freeing human soul and returning to *Empireum* – the ideal world of eternity and permanence.

Roman god Mithras appears in the sources from the end of the 1st century BCE and disappears at the end of the 4th century CE [6]. As opposed to main mythological gods and heroes of the Greek-Roman religion, such as Jupiter and Hercules, no religious texts survived. The presented information is based on historic monuments and few mentions about the cult in literary sources. Inscriptions worshipping Mithras allow to "trace not only the history of all formations but also individual careers, e.g. Marcus Valerius Maximianus, born in Pannonia (a region near the Danube river), who, around 180 was the commander of a legion in Dacia, where he left an altar dedicated to Mithras. A few years later, he appears in sources as a legate of the 3rd Augustian legion stationing in Nubia in Northern Africa; his presence there is also confirmed by the inscription worshipping Mithras" [7]. The cult of Mithras in Rome began to spread in the 1st century CE during the reign of Flavius dynasty. The first place where it was practised was in the catacombs of the present Basilica of Saint Clement in Rome (Italian Basilica di San Clemente). In Latin inscription Mithras is described as Sun Invincible (*Sol Invictus*), due to the fact that on the order of Sun he killed the incarnation of the forces of darkness after a long chase and fierce fight. Mithras is believed to struggle against the forces of Darkness, serving justice and truth. He fights in the struggle, in which the Universe is at stake, and, in which the Universe is the witness and audience. At the end of time, the struggle will end with the triumph of good. Righteous people, waiting for the final of the great struggle will enjoy immortality in heaven.

Roman Sol Invictus feast, falling on the 25th December, was adapted by Christians as Christmas, and its holy day – Sunday – as a sacred day for Christians. It is worth noting hostility of Christians to the cult of Mithras. It was due to the fact that Mithras worshippers, like Christians, also celebrated common supper and shared bread and wine. According to writings left by Justin Martyr: “Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same things to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn” [8].

The cult of Mithras was most popular among legionaries, merchants, prosecutors, and other people whose professions required continuous travelling from one corner of the Empire to the other. In Rome, the first inscriptions for the new god are from persons liberated by the Emperor and slaves belonging to military officers of high rank. In provinces, the evidence of the cult leads to camps of legionaries, in particular, those located in the territories in the vicinity of the Danube and Rhine Rivers. Roman soldiers were extremely fascinated with Mithraism, a religion with strong emphasis on military elements, which offered its worshippers a feeling of community and brotherhood. Such a religion was appealing to people who stationed far from their motherland for many years and risked their lives every day due to the fact that they needed a sense of belonging to a group that fulfilled their need of security, and was governed by other laws than the surrounding reality [9]. From the 2nd century CE the cult spread to each and every corner of the Empire. The first ruler of Rome who showed the most interest to Mithras was Commodus, who, at the end of the 2nd century and in the 3rd century CE became his worshipper (180–192 CE). As Sol Invictus, Mithras was worshipped by Roman Emperors from the times of Aurelian, e.g. by young Constantine I (306–337 CE). In 308 CE, Galerius, Diocletian and Licinius made him their protector.

Roman Emperor Vespasian and his son Titus supported this cult in hope that it would help unite different ethnic and national groups with subordination to the rule of the Roman Empire. In practice, it seems that the cult was very loyal to the person and the values of the Emperor as most Emperors were believed to be sons of god. The worshippers were also very loyal to each other. The opportunity to make acquaintance with officials during the meeting was also a factor contributing to its popularity. There is no evidence suggesting that the Emperor and the Pretorian Guard in were engaged in the cult officially. However, political and governing elites might have as well supported the cult covertly due to its extreme loyalty towards the emperor. Mithraism as a “foreign” cult was deeply rooted in the Roman army, and may be an example of the spirit of Rome and its soldiers. The cult was most likely popularized in Asia Minor and in the west by Greeks and Jews, which borrowed it from the Persian Achaemenid army. Mithras is the only Iranian god, whose name was popular in ancient Greece, and it shows how deeply it was worshipped in the great neighbouring empire [10].

The cult of Mithras was highly exclusive, which prevented it being worshipped by masses. It was extremely popular among the legionaries. Traces of the cult of Mithras can be found in places where legions were stationed, from the shores of the Black Sea to Britain and the Sahara Desert. It was soldiers who travelled the territories of the Empire that were

“missionaries” of Mithras. The inscriptions on the relics suggest that Mithras worshippers were mainly merchants and soldiers.

In the 2nd and the 3rd centuries CE, Mithraism flourished in many provinces of the empire, reaching as far as Euphrates and the Danube, Rhine and Scottish mountains. This religion was a kind of order, military service, which recruited a neophyte to form a part of the army of Good, to live in faithfulness and loyalty, and commit noble deeds. Therefore, Mithraism, which valued masculine virtues, was mainly spread by legionaries guarding long borders of the Roman Empire. Dozens of sanctuaries of Mithras with low relief and murals have been discovered in border provinces and new ones are being discovered. Mithraea were discovered in Londinium (London) and in Eburacum (York) in Great Britain, in Carnuntum in Austria, in the vicinity of the Danube and in Lugdunum (Lyon) in southern France, where a large garrison stationed. In Rome alone, Mithras temples were located in praetorians’ camp, in the vicinity of quarters of soldiers from municipal cohorts and armed municipal guards – vigils. In both German provinces, famous sanctuaries that were once located in present cities of Heddernheim and Böckingen and in other towns on both banks of the Rhine River. Mithraea were also discovered in ancient Dacia (present Romania) and Hunday. Inscriptions devoted to Sun Invincible were found on the outskirts of Aquincum (Budapest). There is also an underground sanctuary – Mithraeum (also spelled Mithreum) under the Basilica of Saint Clement in Rome. The part of the building from the 4th century hides the greatest secret of the basilica, Mithreum, i.e. the place of the cult of Mithras. The Mithreum is a small room with a stone altar with a low relief depicting Mithras killing a bull. There are also two stone benches in the room, on which the ritual meal – one of the key elements of the ceremony – was consumed to honour Mithras.

The cult of Mithras was particularly popular in the 3rd century CE, when successive emperors were elected to the throne by their soldiers. At the turn of the 3rd and the 4th century CE, the cult of Mithras was included in the official state religious cannon in Rome. However, it was soon eliminated by Christians hostile towards it.

Mithraism was one of the most popular mystery cults at the beginning of the first millennium. The basis of the cults was initiation, during which secret knowledge on the afterlife was passed. Mithraism differed from the mysteries honouring Demeter, Dionysius or Isis in that only men participated in the ceremony. It is believed to have been extremely popular. According to some historians, it Mithraism was in competition with Christianity (consumption of bread and wine during ritual meals was perceived as imitating the Eucharist). Christianity prevailed over Mithraism because of the fact that it excluded women [11]. Mithras mysteries were the most popular cult in the Empire, and the cult competed with Christianity until the 3rd century CE. In 324 CE, Constantine the Great prohibited the rituals, and in 341 CE, his sons prohibited bloody offerings. As Christianity flourished in the Roman Empire, Mithraism gradually ceased to exist. Some attention has been drawn to the cult recently, due to archaeological findings.

Mithraism was a mystery cult, in which the fundamental and the most important rites were related to the initiation. The ritual practises were performed in Mithraeas – the places usually located underground or in caves. The ceremonies were secret and only men were

allowed to participate. Mithraism enjoyed the greatest popularity among legionaries both because of the fact that Mithras was a brave and warlike god and the cult required strict discipline. Due to its elite character, the cult did not have a chance to become the common religion of the society of the Roman Empire.

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