THE ORIGINS OF MITHRAIC MYSTERIES
AND THE IDEA OF PROTO-MITHRAISM

In Memory of the late Professor
Osamu Suzuki (1905–1977)

Hideo Ogawa
Professor, Keio University

I

The majority of the Mithraic monuments and inscriptions have been known from the western half of the Roman Empire. The eastern half, including Greece, the Near East, North Africa, Egypt and South Russia, have given less evidences. This would not be so surprising, if Mithras had been a native god of the Romans or of a western province. But such is not the case.

With the exception of S. Wikander, most scholars have supported the eastern origin of the god Mithras and his mystery cult. This thesis was stated in the most typical way by Franz Cumont. His speculations have been the starting point of almost all subsequent Mithraic studies. I do not want to recapitulate his theory in length here, but confine myself in describing the main line of it with an emphasis upon his methodology concerning the problem of Mithraic origins.

According to Cumont, the Avestan origin of Mithras is obvious. In the days of the Persian empire, magi (perhaps with official support) transplanted from Iran the worship of Mithras and Anahita in Asia Minor, North Syria and Armenia. Anahita was identified there with various local mother goddesses such as Cybele. The cult of Mithras at first absorbed the astronomical ideas in Mesopotamia as the monuments of Nemrud-Dagh so indicate. Then, later, under the Greek influence in the Hellenistic period the cult was organized as an independent sectarian religion. The founding of this new sect could be shown by a relief of the taurocto- nous Nike found at Isparta, which Cumont thought was the prototype of the Mithraic bull-slaying scene and by a mixed state of Magian and Mithraic evidences (both archaeological and literary).

According to Cumont, Mithraism existed from the first century B.C. in Asia Minor. Then, it spread throughout the remainder of the Roman Empire. It is certain that in his last days Cumont inclined to emphasize the city of
Rome as the place of the final formation of Mithraism.\(^{(4)}\)

On the other hand, there is a corollary of the Anatolian theory that there were early Mithraic mysteries, which did not undergo refinement in Rome and which showed a more explicitly expressed naturalistic tendency. The existence of this naturalistic Mithraism is proved by some Syrian evidences. This assertion inaugurated by Frothingham\(^{(5)}\) after the discovery of the first Secia relief of bull-slaying and followed by Cumont,\(^{(6)}\) has never been seriously treated. The materials of Dura, which are the richest among Syrian Mithraic evidences, have not been considered from this point of view and instead, their purely Roman characteristics have been emphasized.\(^{(7)}\) However, Francis recently pointed out\(^{(8)}\) that the problems concerning the earliest stage of Mithraism in the eastern provinces remain unsolved.

Cumont's theory on the Mithraic origins, which have been pursuing several generations of Mithraic students during the first three quarters of this century, consists of three methodological propositions.

First, for Cumont Mithra-Mithras was essentially an Iranian deity. Therefore, the place of origin must be sought by necessity somewhere between Iran and Italy, where the Iranian cult changed into the Roman cult of the same deity. All researchers have been accepting this process self-evident. This conviction in turn gave a strong support to Cumont's authority.

Secondly, the combined history of the Mithraic beliefs in the East and West can be realized only by linking evidences of different nature. Cumont himself says that such a history would be like the history of Christianity if it were written by using as sources the Hebrew Old Testament and the ruins of the Western cathedrals.\(^{(9)}\) Even though we have various written sources mainly from Santa Prisca, the situation has not changed much. The restoration of this belief depends upon scientific guesswork. The work of linking was very skillfully done by Cumont, and thus no one could challenge its main line until recently. It is not impossible that the discrepancy of Mithraic cults in the East and West came about as a result from their essentially differing natures.

Thirdly, Cumont usually went about the work of linking and synthesizing by utilizing the idea of "syncretism"\(^{(10)}\) and gradual change of the belief. According to him it evolved step by step (Iranian, Mesopotamia, Anatolian and possibly Hellenizing stages) to arrive at last in Rome in temporal and spacial sequences. His theory of syncretism was evolutionalistic.
In regard to this classical viewpoint, there exist three different attitudes. The first one is S. Wikander's. He denies the eastern theory of origin. He believes that the origin of Mithras is Thraco-Phrygian, and that the western Mithras and the eastern Mitra-Mithres are different. His study carries merit in that he emphasizes the difference between the two Mithraic cults (eastern and western); as well his examination of the Mithraic evidence from Asia Minor partially disproved Cumont's classical theory of the Mithraic origin in Asia Minor. However, there are some important evidences for it which Wikander fails to discuss, such as the testimony of Plutarch in the Life of Pompey. The second is the opinion of A. D. Nock and E. Will. Either of them expressed no direct opposition to Cumont's. They accept the continuity of Mithraic belief from Iran to Rome, but emphasize differences of the Mithraic cults in the East and in the West to a greater degree than Cumont ever did. I shall describe these two kinds of opinions in this section, and the third opinions, which tend to expand upon Cumont's Oriental origin theme in various ways.

The impact that Wikander's criticism on the Cumont's theory of the Mithraic origin has been strongly felt. Wikander examined major Mithraic materials in Asia Minor and refuted them as non-Roman.

In this respect I want to refer to the recent theory of Hinnells and Gordon. They also emphasize differences of the Mithraic cults as well as the Mithraic sources in the West and East. Their position, however, is not like Wikander's. They only want to suspend the problem of origin and to find what the Roman Mithraism was, by using evidences only from the Roman Empire.

It is the fact that there are difficulties in Cumont's theory of Anatolian origin. It is hypothetical; but no doubt half of the appeal of Cumont's description of the Mithraic religions rests on that of the Mithraic origin. The real problem exists in that his followers have held to this classical theory all too uncritically.

Another way of confronting the discrepancy of the Mithraic sources and the cults between the East and the West has been proposed by A. D. Nock and E. Will. Both scholars emphasize an essential difference between the Mazdean Mithraic cult and Roman Mithraism, but in no way do they deny the continuity between them.
Nock\(^{(13)}\) does not reject Cumont's theory although he seems to assert a sharper distinction between Magian and non-Magian Mithras. Will,\(^{(14)}\) while admitting the merit of Wikander's work, suggests, too, that the importance of Asia Minor for the Mithraic origin cannot be negligible. He has pointed out defects in Cumont's theory and tried to amend it as far as possible, by stressing the place of origin in a more limited area, that is, the land of Mithradates Eupator. As Will's remark about Wikander's book shows, it is clear that the latter went to a hasty conclusion, that is, rejecting totally the Mithraic connection with the East. Wikander overlooked some meaningful evidences from Asia Minor. He did not discuss the evidence from South Russia and Syria. This negligence is the reason why he was led to such a conclusion. It is clear that Mithras came from Persia, and that there is important evidence of Roman Mithraism even in Asia Minor as well as in Syria and South Russia. There are some certain Near Eastern elements in the contents of this religion. It follows that despite the defects in Cumont's theory concerning the Mithraic formation, one cannot simply disavow it and invent a new theory or suspend the problem.

The importance of the theories of Nock and Will exists on the following point. Nock and Will emphasized the differences of Mithraic beliefs of the East and the West. This emphasis is presented in fairly strong language and the distinction is stated in the terms of the change of the nature to the mystery (Non-Magian, Roman) cult from the Mazdean (Magian, Iranian) cult. However, they did not reject the Iranian origin of Mithras. Nilsson also does not believe that this change of nature could happen during the simple evolutionalistic development of a cult from a folk religion to a higher one.\(^{(15)}\) All of these scholars think that the change was so essential that it could only happen with a great religious man or group working in a more or less locally restricted area. For this hypothesis they could not offer evidences, because there is none of them even now. Their theories contrast with Cumont's rather vague delineation of the homeland of Mithraism. Cumont, of course, knew the importance of Plutarch's *Life of Pompey*. On the other hand, he wanted to link the problem of origins with the relief of Nike Tauroctonos of Isparta and with the syncretism of Mazdeism and Anatolian native cults. Will's assertion is persuasive because of the clear importance of Pultarch's writing about the cult of Cilician pirates and also of Cilicia's geographical proximity to both Syria and South Russia, where earlier Mithraic evidences have
been believed to exist.

Nock agrees with Cumont that Mithraism was formed in Asia Minor, although he is critical of some alleged evidences from there. On the other hand, he emphasizes far more than Cumont the essential difference between Magianism (Iranian folk religion) and Non-Magianism (mystery cults) of the Mithraic belief: the origin of the Roman Mithraism must be sought in the change of the former to the latter. Will suggests that most of the Wikander's criticism of the Anatolian evidence is correct, while he does not intend to assert an independence of the western Mithras from the eastern Mithras. He feels that the origin of Mithraism must be placed in a more limited place of the eastern Asia Minor, that is, the land of Eupator.

The view of Nock and Will appears on first observation to be the same as Cumont's regarding a "gradual development" through Asia Minor, but they differ from Cumont's in that they emphasized the moment of the transfiguration in the essence of the Mithraic belief.

We can say that Mithraism was not formed as a result of gradual development and diffusion through the ages, but of a very critical change of the Mithraic belief in a specified place and time and perhaps by a specified person or group. In short, the formation of Mithraism was a kind of reformation. For Cumont it was a syncretism, although he sometimes used the word "réforme."

Many scholars other than those mentioned above agree to Cumont's Anatolian theory. However, they do not take into account the serious difference of Mithraic cults between East and West, or they seem to neglect or simply avoid this problem. However, their various theories concerning Mithraic origins are often suggestive. Most of them do not tend to treat the whole system of Roman Mithraism, and choose one or some Orientalizing elements for discussion. They believe that they could discover the origin of such elements in remote places and time in the Near East. We should not dismiss this sort of discussions, because it is a fact that Mithras and its Roman cult contain more or less Oriental elements. Such roots must be always worthy to be traced back with proper scientific methods: linguistic in the case of cautes and cautopates, iconographical in the case of the lion-headed monster, or historical in the case of some religious phenomena, such as the idea of god, or "perse" of the seven grades.

However, this problem of Mithraic origins is quite different from that of the continuity of the Mithraic cult itself. The Roman Mithraism was not
simply "the Romanized form of Mazdeism" (16) or the mere projection of Oriental religious ideas and cults. As we see it, there was a serious change of Mithraic religions in the eastern realm of the Romans since the first century B.C. The Oriental elements in the West are nothing but survivals.

For the problem of the Mithraic origins in the Near East, we would say that there are two different topics: one is the survivals which can be traced back to the pre-Roman cults in the Near East and the other is the formation of the Mithraic mysteries in the eastern Roman provinces.

Let us then summarize here the major theories concerning the former.

(i) Iconographical study of the Mithraic origin by Saxl and Campbell.

They upheld faithfully Cumont's theory of the Mithraic origin. But instead of Cumont's classification of the materials according to the Roman administrative regions, which came from the scholarly tradition of Mommsen's CIL and was now inherited by Vermaseren's CIMRM and CCCA, they invented new methods of classification according to iconographical types.

Campbell finds that his three types show geographical traits and that each type-group can be approximately dated. Thus, his first work is to trace these types to the Mithraic archetype, while his second work is to trace each iconographical element to its origin in the vast domain of the ancient history of Near Eastern religious art in order to uncover its meaning.

Generally speaking, he failed to find the archetype in other than the Baris relief, which shows nothing but the bull-slaying Nike. On the other hand, his exposition on the relationship between Mithaic art and Near Eastern art clarified the possible meaning of each element of Mithraic art, but he failed to establish an overall meaning of all these elements among the Roman Mithraists. In short, he extended upon Cumont's interpretation, but, as is shown by CIMRM, his classification neither replaced Cumont's nor was it accepted by other students.

(ii) Explanations of Orientalists.

They differ but slightly from Campbell and Saxl in following Cumont on the Mithraic origins. These specialists begin from an example or rather examples of the ancient Near East, which they know well. Then they try to explain a feature or some features of the Mithraic iconography, which they find in Cumont's explanations. Often, they offer an interesting explanation of one of the Mithraic elements; i.e., the leontocephalous monster. But they have thus far failed to explain the whole system or some major traits of Mithraic art and to recog-
nize the difference of Mithraic beliefs between West and East. They emphasize an Iranian, Mesopotamian, or Egyptian influence on the western Mithraic belief. Many of them superficially admit the importance of Asia Minor, which Cumont saw in the historical development of Mithraic belief. The approach of their expositions is iconographical, mythological or ritualistic. To this school belong Widengren, Bivar, Hartmann, Dussaud, Pettazzoni and Duchene-Guillemen.\(^{(17)}\)

### III

I have surveyed above the present situation of the Roman Mithraism study with special reference to its origin. The quantity of Mithraic materials from Syria-Palestine, Asia Minor and South Russia, as I wrote at the beginning, is not extensive. Sometimes it is difficult for us to separate Mithraic evidences of the Roman Mithraism and those of Magianism in these regions. Cumont once expected that more evidences would be discovered there by archaeologists, but such discovery has been made very slowly. One might imagine that the quantity of buried Mithraic remains in the East is definitely less than those in western provinces. Upon first sight they could contribute only little to the problem of the origin of Mithraism. In the days of Cumont, generally speaking, they were not useful for this problem. However, the amount of the newly uncovered evidences is considerable. I believe that a renewed general survey of those eastern materials would not be entirely useless at present.

I have appreciated the position of Nock and Will concerning the Mithraic origins and evaluated other assertions. It is now time to see whether the idea of Mithraic origins of Nock and Will could be substantiated by those materials from the eastern Roman provinces. Certainly their position would be justified as the proper one for the origins of the Roman Mithraism. The critical problem is whether we could find here evidences for the essential change of Mithraic beliefs, which are supposed to have occurred.

On the other hand it is not always certain that the comparative study of Mithraic evidences and those of the ancient Near Eastern religions will prove useful for this problem. Sometimes it is useful, however, as far as the interpretation of each individual evidence is concerned. Moreover, it is most difficult to locate the origin of the Roman Mithraism as a whole outside the realm and before the establishment of the Roman Empire.
As for Egyptian and North African materials, they are not many, disparate in nature and, above all, located distant from the land of Mithradates Eupator. However, Syria, Palestine, Asia Minor, and South Russia were traditional neighbours and historically related regions. It is possible that Mithraic beliefs as well as evidences from those regions were internally and historically connected. Regarding these I would emphasize the importance of Syria in stronger terms than has usually been accorded it. As the background of such a new sectarian movement Syria-Palestine may have been more advantageous and susceptible. The idea of god was very highly developed there, and a solid religious organization called marzeah or thiasos with the practice of common meals preceded or was contemporay with Mithraism. The acceptance of a new higher religion was easier accomplished in Syria than in Asia Minor.\(^{(18)}\)

**IV**

To treat effectively this situation of the problems of the Mithraic origins I would invent a new word, that is, Proto-Mithraism. The following is the definition of this word.

It spans a period from the first half of the first century B.C. to the first half of the second century, when Mithraic evidence (that is, typical evidence such as monuments and inscriptions of the earliest Roman Mithraism) began to appear in the realm of the Roman Empire. This period of about two centuries is the dark age of Mithraism and the lacuna of the evidence of the fully developed Mithraism. All Mithraic evidences related to this period, literary, archaeological or epigraphical, are somewhat incomplete and sometimes difficult to distinguish evidences of Proto-Mithraism and those of the Magian Mithraic belief.

Geographically Proto-Mithraism covers the regions of South Russia, Cappadocia, Armenia, Pontus, Cilicia, Syria-Palestine and Nabataea with the addition of Dura-Europus in Parapotamia.

Other evidences relating to Proto-Mithraism may be occasionally found in other regions. However, it is a conspicuous fact that both the Magian evidence of Mithras and the Proto-Mithraic evidence are concentrated in those districts of the eastern realm of the Roman Empire.

The contents of Proto-Mithraism are defined by any possible direct relationship with those of the typical Roman Mithraism. They were not defined by
any similarity to or partial coincidence with the Magian cult of Mithras in the ancient Near East, or any other cults which may have influenced the western Mithraism.

When the Durene Mithraeum was discovered, Cumont wrote, "peut-être pénètrera-t-on bientôt en Syrie ou en Asie Mineure dans un spéléaum du début de notre ère qui nous permettra d'éclaircir la genèse, encore si obscure, d'une religion appelée à un succès si éclatant." It is in that same spirit that this study has been undertaken.

Acknowledgement: In the work of translation, I was assisted by Mr. G. C. Sala, Koyasan, Japan.

Notes

(1) The only exception to this statement is the districts along the lower Danube, where many materials and epigraphical remains have been discovered.

(2) S. Wikander, "Études sur les mystères de Mithra I (Introduction)," Årsbok 1950, Vetenskapsocieteten i Lund, pp. 3-46.


(4) Cumont, CRAI 1945, p. 420; p. 169, n. 100; cf. J. R. Hinnells ed., Mithraic Studies (=M S), p. 154. Cumont thought that various Mithraic discoveries done at Ostia and at the Aventine hill were so significant that he would locate the origin of the Mithraic orthodoxy at these places.

Cumont himself realized a certain conspicuous defect of Mithraic diffusion in Asia proper and some districts of Asia Minor. He mentions some reasons for this phenomenon. However, it is sure that he did not confine the home of Mithraism to any particular district of such lands. See MM, p. 79.

(5) A. Frothingham, "A New Mithraic Relief from Syria," AJA XXII, 1918, pp. 54 ff.

(6) Cumont, Mithra et Dusares, RHR LXXVIII, 1918, pp. 207 ff. Cumont was on the whole sceptical about the validity of Syrian Mithraic materials.


(8) MS, p. 154.

(9) MM, p. VII.

(10) CRAI 1945, p. 419 ("religion syncrétique"); p. 420 ("religion composite").


(12) MS, pp. 245; 233; 352 f. Gordon and Hinnells admit, however, that the original tradition of Mithraism existed in Persia.
A. D. Nock, "The Genius of Mithraism," *JRS* XXVII, 1937, pp. 108–113. Recently the proposition, initiated by Nock and taken up subsequently by Will, was developed further theoretically by C. Colpe (MS, pp. 378; 389 f.). Colpe demonstrates a very critical understanding of the present situation.


*CRAI* 1934, p. 111.