

## **THE *LONDINIUM MITHRAEUM* AND THE EXCAVATION OF TWO EMPIRES**

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### **Abstract**

The discovery of the Londinium Mithraeum in 1952 was a milestone in the reconstruction of London after the bombings of World War II. Coming from the Hellenistic world, Mithraism arrived in Britannia in the second century AD, already re-signified, and worshiped by the army, merchants and rich freedmen. The temple dedicated to Mithras was built at the beginning of the third century and lasted until the middle of the IV, symbolizing resistance to the attacks of Christianity and was possibly reconsecrated to another deity. The excavation of the temple and the archaeological finds in the twentieth century in its interior have led many Britons to connect the remains of an ancient empire with the anxiety related to the death throes of their modern one. Despite the Mithraeum's success in modernity, its archaeological trajectory is complex and involves reconstruction issues of a large city like London and the role of museums and the private initiative in guarding the archaeological heritage.

### **Key-words**

Roman Britain (*Britannia*); *Londinium*; *Londinium Mithraeum*; Mithraeum Bloomberg Space; Archaeological Heritage.

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## Resumo

A descoberta do Mitreu de *Londinium* em 1952 foi um importante marco na reconstrução de Londres após os bombardeios da Segunda Guerra Mundial. Vindo do mundo helenístico, o mitraísmo chegou à Britânia (*Britannia*), província do Império Romano, no séc. II d.C. já ressignificado, voltado aos militares, mercadores e ricos libertos. O templo dedicado a Mitra foi construído no início do séc. III e durou até meados do IV, simbolizando resistência aos ataques do cristianismo e, possivelmente, sendo reconsagrado a outra divindade. A escavação do templo e os achados arqueológicos no séc. XX no seu interior levaram muitos britânicos a conectar os vestígios de um império da Antiguidade com a ansiedade relacionada aos estertores do seu império moderno. Apesar do sucesso do Mitreu na modernidade, sua trajetória arqueológica é complexa e envolve as pressões imobiliárias de uma grande cidade como Londres e o papel de museus e da iniciativa privada na guarda do patrimônio arqueológico do passado.

## Palavras-chave

Britânia (*Britannia*); *Londinium*; Mitreu de *Londinium*; *Mithraeum Bloomberg Space*; Patrimônio arqueológico.

## Introduction

It happened the first time I visited London, in the late 1990s. It was a thought-out walk to a *specific location*, as I had already carefully planned the route, a short walk from Cannon Street tube station. Turning right into Queen Victoria Street, I found it. Simple, laid on a corner, not a grandiose structure, at street level. And yet *spectacular*. After all, it was the first structure directly linked to Roman Antiquity that I had seen in my life. There was an explanatory sign, modest and concise. But the impact was huge on me. For someone who had developed a taste for studying the Roman world since childhood, the moment could not have been different. That place referred to an existence of 1800 years before our “meeting”. It was not the ruins of the city of Rome, it is true, but it was a vestige of the northernmost province of the Empire. Good enough for me. Destiny and will led me to research from that moment on the presence of polysemic Roman culture in Britain, a period traditionally known as *Roman Britain*, or *Britannia*, the historical name in Latin. In London there was much more to be seen of that period. But I cannot fail to mention the importance of my archaeological “discovery” from Roman antiquity: the Temple of Mithras in *Londinium* (*Londinium* is the Latinized name, used during part of the Roman occupation).

Dating from the third century AD, the London Mithraeum (the name of the temples dedicated to the god Mithra in Latin are: *mithraeum*, in the singular and *mithraea* in the plural) is one of the most important archaeological finds of the Roman period in the city, if not the most important. In fact, the hundreds of artifacts found during its excavation in the mid-1950s are, to this day, the key to a lot of research on the cult of Mithraism in the Western provinces of the Roman Empire. The temple is also called by some as the “Walbrook Mithraeum”, a reference to the river that flowed into the Thames and which ran right next to the building in antiquity. The river Walbrook was channeled and disappeared from the surface of the city in the nineteenth century. There is arguably no other *mithraea* in London, and on the whole island there are few places where there is consensus on the existence of *Mithaea*, such as the Mithraeum in Rudchester (*Vindobala*), and another in Carrawburgh (*Procolita*), both on Hadrian's Wall, in the north of the island (Salway, 1993: 509; 525). The strong appreciation of the cult of Mithras among Roman legionaries explains the presence of artifacts linked to the cult near the sites of frontier forts in the empire (Elliott, 2021: 11). But the London Mithraeum is set in a very urban context, something rare in the Western provinces. Its size also deviates from the standards of other *mithraea*.

Mithraism had been known for centuries in the Hellenistic world and in parts of the Roman territory, coming from distant places such as India and Persia. But it began its expansion path with the dynamism of a new phenomenon of diffusion in the Westernmost and Northernmost portions of the Roman Empire in the first century AD. The cult, in its trajectory and movement through the Hellenistic world and beyond surely suffered resignifications in time and space. These adaptations, transformations and expansions create a very rich field of study in Archaeology and History, and invite great dedication to research such phenomena. They are not within the scope of this text, however. Here, I seek to make a brief presentation of the London Mithraeum, without claiming any verticality on the theme of Mithraism, which is very broad and complex, nor will I try to exhaust what could be written about the London Mithraeum. Although I intend to bring some information from works specialized in ancient religion and from the discovery in London of this structure from the period of Roman Britain, I think it is very presumptions to even attempt to approach the exhaustive work on the temple and its multiple religious connections in *Britannia* and in the rest of the Roman Empire. Among the most complete works on the temple of Mithras in London, and its excavation in 1954, are that of Jocelyn Toynbee (1986) and that of John Shepherd (1998). I suggest that the researcher who seeks to delve deeper into the history of the discovery and the excavation of the London Mithraeum should do so through these aforementioned authors and their works, to begin with.

In this paper I intend to briefly present the historical context of Mithraism in Rome and in the province of *Britannia*, and discuss the structure of the *Londinium* Mithraeum. The history of the Mithraeum in Antiquity is mixed with the way it is resignified in the present. Its path as an archaeological object is complex and remains controversial, opening several paths for debates about the heritage and expansion of large cities. Here, I consider it important to highlight the role that Archaeology plays in its mission to the public, by presenting a little of the archaeological trajectory of the London Mithraeum. Thus, this is a merely introductory work and, with any luck, a small contribution.

To continue, it must be said that the London Mithraeum is no longer where I “discovered” it so many years ago. As a matter of fact, it should never have been where I first saw it. The discovery and excavation of the temple, under the command of Welsh archaeologists William F. Grimes (a.k.a. Peter Grimes) and Audrey Williams, took place at another site nearby between 1952 and 1954. The temple was dismantled and taken carelessly to the Queen Victoria Street area in the 1960s to make way for an office

building. A measure that was, at least, better than its simple destruction, so to speak. Some of the main objects found in the 1954 excavation, mainly the statues, sculptures and reliefs (the famous small relief of the Tauroctony Mithras mentioned later was found earlier, in the nineteenth century), were kept by the Museum of London and have been exhibited in a segment of this museum ever since.

I have been back to the Mithraeum site on Queen Victoria Street a couple of times, but in 2010 I found the site with strong signs of abandonment, with rubbish thrown on the floor and the information sign covered with graffiti. It was in disrepair and it was a bleak sight. I figured it would not last much longer. But something would soon radically change the situation of the Mithraeum

### **The influx of Eastern religions into the Principate**

A series of religions of oriental origin advanced, especially from the first century AD onwards, through large portions of the Roman Empire, reaching the Westernmost provinces. A good part of them brought messages of salvation after death, but also the prospect of a better earthly life. Many were mystery religions, involved voluntary and exclusive associations (*collegia*), and, through initiation rites, promised eternal life (Hingley, 2018: 183-4). To a large extent, they broke with Greco-Roman religious traditions, which advocated a much more contractual relationship between deities and devotees than profound changes of a spiritual and ethical background. Christianity immediately comes to mind, but there were others, such as Mithraism, or the cult of the Mother Goddess (*Magna Mater*).

The second and third centuries AD saw some of these Eastern religions gain increasing influence on the Western side of the empire, after they had already passed and morphed through the Hellenistic world. Mithraism followed this pattern. A mystery religion that had its origins in India and Persia, and which spread throughout the empire from the first century AD, undergoing adaptations in the various places where it passed, mainly in the Hellenistic world. The influence of the Greek language in Rome would have been fundamental to the expansion of these Eastern religions. They were cults that spread through a remarkable theurgy, theatrical rituals, rites of passage and the need to find the truth, which was secret and should be revealed (*Gnosis*). They offered different types of “rebirth” (Henig, 1984: 95; Hingley, 2018: 183; 317, n. 139).

According to Martin Henig (1984), the offer of new benefits to souls thirsty for salvation did not come without some rules and limitations, however. Christianity, in theory, did not allow its followers to share their belief in Christ with other deities, but other Eastern religions were more tolerant in this regard. Mithraism, in turn, did not require the break between ancient beliefs and its adoption, allowing the inclusion of old rites in its liturgical arsenal. Ancient sources, textual or material, reveal a great theological complexity in these Eastern religions, but we do not always have all the details. In fact, in general, the more intolerant side of Christianity made the erasure of these sources and traditions one of its greatest missions from the fourth century onwards.

But not everything could be obliterated, fortunately. The westward movement of these eastern cults takes place through conversion, too, but it is impossible to ignore the strength of the influence of the Eastern merchants in the provinces and the influx of huge contingents of slaves from that region to the Italian Peninsula, for instance. Many of these slaves gained their manumissions and, when freed, remained on the Western side of the Empire, developing some of their religious traditions there (Henig, 1984: 95; 97). In another diffusion interpretation, it is possible to suggest that the Roman legions stationed in the Danube region had direct contact with Hellenistic Mithraism, in its various liturgical forms. All these elements can help to understand the arrival of Mithraism in the West, which carried enough energy to settle and remain there. Christianity was yet to have the deleterious effect on the so-called pagan cults that its apologists so desired. It was the same with other mystery religions, too, or with the cult of Isis, for example. However, Mithraism had certain characteristics that set it apart from many other Eastern cults. The main one was the demand for a lifelong devotion to Mithras, in dynamism reminiscent of a commitment to military service. In vast regions of the Roman Empire, the cult of Mithras became famous among young Roman officials, foreigners and merchants, from the Black Sea to Britain, from Egypt to Germany (Henig, 1984: 97-101; Hingley, 2018: 183-4).

As mentioned, Mithraism was a religion of mysteries and initiations. The third step was that of the *miles*, that of the soldier, hence another indication of the strong connection with the corporate spirit of the Roman legionaries. The origins of such ritualistic traditions lie in Mithraism's connections with India and Persia. Mithras' submission to Ahura Mazda (Zoroastrianism) is documented in material culture. In the Avesta, Mithras is the god of light, and it was in the Achaemenid Empire that Mithraism suffered some of its greatest influences and resignifications (Henig, 1984: 101).

Gradually, Mithraism made itself known in imperial Rome. The aforementioned Roman troops from the Danube region, in Pannonia, must have received a great influence from Mithraism and this helps to explain the speed of diffusion of the cult of Mithras in the Antonine period, in the second century AD. The political and military crisis of the third century Roman Empire would have helped to promote religions that offered a greater and more efficient connection between devotees and their deities. The search for greater introspection of the soul, in addition to its own salvation, and the maintenance of the cosmos in counterpoint to chaos, could be met by the philosophies of many of these religions that arrived from the east. Mithraism could offer more enthusiasm and hope in those dark times. Mithras was light, associated with the Sun (*Sol*), reaching, in some cases, syncretism with *Sol Inuictus*. And more: Mithras *indicated* the path from darkness to the luminosity of salvation, the escape from chaos to the cosmos. In one of its ritualistic representations, that of Mithras Tauroctonos, the sacrifice of the bull (bull slaying) created by Ahura Mazda at the beginning of times represents the destruction of a divine being so that all forms of life can then be born. Mithras was represented in different ways from his birth and cosmic invention/intervention narratives. Among them, the form of Mithras *Saecularis* (Lord of the Times), hatching from an egg (Henig, 1984: 97-99; 101-2). And in another conformation, like Mithras *Petra Genaratrix*, when it is born from a stone, being then, *petra natural*. Examples of the enormous complexity involved in Mithraism. But our attention will focus, starting from the London Mithraeum (*Londinium*), only on the tauroctonic representation of Mithras. The book *Religions of Rome* (2000), by Beard, North and Price offers extensive material on Mithraism and is highly recommended.

In Tauroctonos iconography, Mithras enters a cave, where he sacrifices the cosmic bull with a dagger held in his right hand. Wearing a cloak and his famous Phrygian cap, he dominates the animal by leaning on its torso and delivers the fatal blow. The blood that generates all forms of life flows from the mortal wound and is drunk by a dog and a serpent, symbolizing the creatures of the earth. Thus, from a destructive rite, the “true” creation emerges. However, intent on hindering the rite and to show the necessity of the eternal fight against evil, Ahura Mazda's arch-rival, Ahriman, sends a scorpion to sting the bull's genitals, intoxicating it during the sacrifice, in order to affect the fertility in its divine source. In the imagery construction of this cosmogony, Mithras Tauroctonos is also accompanied by two other figures: Cautes, on the right, with a raised torch, and Cautopates, on the left, with a torch facing downwards. They represent the opposition of the attributes between dark and light, good and evil, life and death. Aspects

linked to the zodiac circle are also common in Mithraistic iconography (Henig, 1984: 102; Ottaway, 2013: 217).

It must be said: Mithraism was a sophisticated cult. It was an exclusionary religion, insofar as its mysterious liturgy was aimed at men of certain possessions, merchants and, almost always, officials above the rank of centurions. And, furthermore, initiations seemed to require heavy psychological and physical sacrifices (Henig, 1984: 98). It had seven steps of initiation, rigorous access rites. A small congregation was thus expected. His devotees were people of political and social consequence, privileged in Roman society. Mithraism combined well with the discipline of military life and with the stoicism of the Roman world, and, similarly, with the indelible desire to keep the social hierarchies in the empire untouched, the origin of multiple privileges for the few (Salway, 1993: 510).

Although little remains of Mithraism scriptures and other liturgical information, it is possible to affirm, from epigraphic and artistic remains, that Mithraism required discipline and dedication, although not exclusive when it came to worshipping other gods. In the Roman Empire, it was common for temples dedicated to Mithra to be located next to those of other deities. Thus, we would normally speak of templar and thermal complexes around the mithraea, not isolated buildings. There are several examples of this arrangement in the temples dedicated to Mithras in the port of Ostia, in Rome, for example (Hingley, 2018: 184).

In what can be said about the places of worship, certain Eastern deities, venerated by the military and merchants, offered sensorial religious experiences different from the more traditional ones of the Roman pantheon, whose rites were practiced in open places and were less excluding and theatrical. On the other hand, oriental cults, in turn, were generally held in closed places, surrounded by mysterious initiation rituals. In the case of Mithraism, the Mithraea symbolized the cave where Mithras Tauroctonos slays the bull. They used to be tight, underground locations (Ottaway, 2013: 217; Salway, 1993: 510). Therefore, they were small spaces, without windows, and built in regions close to rivers, to indicate the presence of the purifying element, despite all the risk of floods (which, in fact, happened, as can be seen from the works of repair the floors of some mithraea, such as the *Londinium* Mithraeum). Despite the absence of entrances for natural light, there were specific niches for oil lamps and candelabras. It is curious that sunlight itself was not desired, protecting the secret aspect of the cult from foes, especially from the curious or judgmental eyes of Christians. The whole ritual had a strong theatrical appeal. The use of masks for initiates at different levels of the hierarchy,



symbolizing animals such as crows and lions, appears in some representations of Mithraism, found in the Balkan Peninsula, for example. Ceremonies could involve extreme rites, such as the temporary burial alive of some devotees, so that they could be “reborn” when they came out of their coffins (Henig, 1984: 103; 105). Or exposure to intense heat at times. It was also possible for the initiate to drink wine mixed with hallucinogenic herbs during rites, such as *haoma*, widely used in Zoroastrianism. Other substances, such as honey, could be used for libations and ablutions in initiation rites, too. Incense and other aromas, in addition to what has already been mentioned, would apparently offer diverse multisensory experiences (Henig, 1984: 102-3; 105; 107).

There are few records of mithraea outside the *limes* area, where legions were stationed. Thus, it is clear the strong appeal that the cult had for legionaries, especially for aspirants to high positions. Mithras seems to have risen to prominence among the higher echelons of the military, but wealthy merchants could also participate. The inscriptions found inside the cells or temples point to a very select, privileged and reduced congregation of legionaries and merchants, therefore. It was exclusionary, however, not accepting women or people of limited means among its devotees (Henig, 1984: 98; 108; Ottaway: 2013: 217-8; Hingley, 2018: 172).

Restricted to men only (Salway, 1993: 510), this exclusion of women, cut off from the salvation that Mithras could offer, must have become an obstacle to the expansion of the cult beyond the boundary areas. And the threat of more proselytizing Christians was always present. Some discretion was always needed. The cult of Mithras declined significantly throughout the empire from the mid-fourth century onwards but Emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus was favorable to its cult and, thus, Mithraism may have lasted much longer, in more select and conservative circles, at least until the beginning of Theodosius' rule, in 379 AD (Henig, 1984: 109; Hingley, 2018: 183).

### **Mithraism in Britannia**

Among the eastern religious cults that reached Britain, Mithraism is one of the most familiar. In Britain, the first of the Eastern mystery religions to establish themselves effectively was Mithraism (Henig, 1984: 97; Salway, 1993: 510). This is not to say that it spread widely throughout the province. In fact, it remained deeply exotic and secret compared to the other deities of the Greco-Roman or local deities. As elsewhere, the cult of Mithras in *Britannia* was accompanied by other deities, without this generating any

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religious or political conflict among its followers (Henig, 1984: 101). This is what happened in Bath, for example. And in the same way, Mithraism in *Londinium* shows how easy it was to assimilate other religions, their tolerance of other deities. From the London Mithraeum several votive elements and statues referring to various deities could be obtained (Mattingly, 2007: 304; 310; Salway, 1993: 510).

According to David Mattingly (2007), as with some other cults with strong appeal among the island's military community, Mithraism in its mystery religion format and composed of several levels of initiation could offer, at the same time, a sense closer to the consciousness of military ranking and, also, a sense of unity among the enlisted. In fact, almost all the contexts in which there is no doubt about the worship of Mithras in Britain are connected with military life. Even the *Londinium* Mithraeum, on the edge of the Walbrook, an urban context, had strong associations with the soldiery established in the city, especially in the fort of Cripplegate (Mattingly, 2007: 217; Henig, 1984: 108). It is not possible to clearly determine how the cults of deities of military appeal underwent adaptations and resignifications when they were adopted by legionaries coming from different parts of the empire, and taken to the multiple areas of defense of provinces, far from their origins. There is some expectation that such cults, coming from regions further away from the empire or belonging to the provinces themselves, would be more widespread among the lower-ranking military. But one cannot underestimate or dismiss the devotion of the commanders, either (Mattingly, 2007: 217-8). Likewise, it is difficult to establish how much integration could have taken place between such military worship and the population of *Londinium* or other regions close to the Mithras cult in *Britannia*.

In Britain, Mithras was particularly worshiped by the military in temples and cells in small forts along Hadrian's Wall, with offerings made by high-ranking officers, included. There seems to be at least an attempt here to maintain ties between these legionaries, their favorite deities, and their homelands. An identity issue, therefore. The Carrawsburgh Mithraeum contains a dedication by an official named Aulus Cluentius Habitus, who makes clear his family connections (it is worth remembering the case of the senatorial trial *Pro Cluentio*, by the orator Cicero) with the elite of the late Republican period in Rome (Huskinson, 2002: 120-1).

Further inland, there is the case of York Mithraeum. Images of tauroctony can be seen in a relief of Micklegate, southwest of the river Ouse, which could indicate the presence, at the site, of some temple dedicated to the deity of Persian origin (Ottaway, 2013: 217-8). The southern portion of

*Britannia* offers a significant amount of figurines, reliefs, jewelry and mosaics with images of classical deities, however, there is a scarcity of votive inscriptions. When they exist, there are a number of ambiguities in the definition of deities by devotees, whose own identities are not clear either (Mattingly, 2007: 308-9). As can be seen, in general, the places of worship of Mithras in *Britannia* are distributed along Hadrian's Wall, a region of *limes*, and in a few localities in the rural areas of the island. This indicates a preference for more remote locations or markedly inhabited by legionaries, on the borders. Even in these locations, the identification of mithraea becomes a complicated act, surrounded by uncertainties.

An important exception is the *Londinium* Mithraeum, a very busy urban center in the third century AD, the most likely moment of the foundation of the temple dedicated to Mithras. *Londinium* was a city of merchants, soldiers, freedmen, founded by the Romans, shortly before 50 AD, six or seven years after the Roman conquest of the island, made in 43 AD by the legions of Emperor Claudius. Powerful since the second century, it had become an international commercial city, with characteristics of an emporium, with around 50 thousand inhabitants as early as 140 AD.

### **The Londinium Mithraeum**

The *Londinium* Mithraeum is the only proven site of Mithras worship in an urban centre, with multiple inscriptions from devotees associated with ex-legionnaires or local officials (Mattingly, 2007: 309). In fact, it is worth noting that the temple of Mithras is also the only temple in London from the Roman period whose deity to whom the space was dedicated is undoubtedly known.

The construction of the temple of Mithras in *Londinium* dates back to the mid-third century AD, although archaeological material found in its interior may be from the previous century. Vascular material found in the temple points to its construction around AD 240. It is not known for certain who built the *Londinium* Mithraeum, but it may have been the work of some wealthy veteran or a *collegium* of Mithras patrons (Hingley, 2018: 183-4; Salway, 1993: 510).

The Mithraeum would have been a construction, at least partially, underground, devoid of windows, in order to simulate the cave of the tauroctony rite. In a rectangular format, it measured 18.3m in length and 7.6m in width. An exceptional size for a temple dedicated to Mithras [Henig, 1984: 108; D. Perring (2022: 318) indicates other measurements:

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17.83m x 7.84m]. The entrance to the Mithraeum would have been from the east side. At the other end, there was a small semicircular recess (*apse*), where the statue of Mithras Tauroctonos would have been put, on a plinth. The temple was built east of the ancient river Walbrook, and would have suffered from flooding, requiring the floor to be raised at least eight times throughout its existence. The interior of the temple had seven pairs of columns supported by low platforms, which ended up dividing the rectangular space into three segments. The floor of the side aisles was higher than that of the nave. These limited narrow spaces indicate that the temple would not have been designed to accommodate a large number of devotees (Hingley, 2018: 184-5).

There may have been other religious structures at the site, as a fragment of an inscription found during the excavation of the mithraeum points out (see below). However, the area around the temple was little explored in subsequent excavations. Cults of other deities, such as Bacchus, may have developed in the vicinity, but there is little complementary archaeological information. In spite of this, the temple of Mithra in London is often represented as an isolated building. In any case, there is no doubt that the mithraeum was composed of other parts, in addition to the excavated one, and could have been just a segment of much more rhizomatic structures. Difficulties in the 1954 excavation led Grimes and Williams to expose and explore only what may have been an antechamber of the temple (Hingley, 2018: 184).

### **The demise of the Mithraeum in Antiquity**

Threats from part of Christianity followers may have led the devotees of Mithra to hide objects related to the cult in pits under the temple floor. Inside these were images of Greco-Egyptian gods (Serapis), a Dionysian scene (Bacchus), the head of Minerva, and an unidentifiable water god, among others. The first signs of possible vandalism occurred at the beginning of the fourth century, with the dismantling of part of the structure and that is when the main sculptures would have been hidden or discarded (Salway, 1993: 509-10). It was probably at this time that Mithras's marble head was cut by an axe and separated from its body, which has not been found to this day. Mithraism was a clear target of Christian intolerance, while other so-called pagan religions could suffer less repression from the leaders of Christian apology (Salway, 1993: 509-10). Constantine's visit to *Britannia* in 312 or 314 AD may have marked the trigger moment for the vandalism of the temple of Mithras. The statues

would then have been broken and parts of the structure damaged. But the temple was rebuilt and returned to service, presumably dedicated to Bacchus, or it may have partly retained its original religious purpose. It is not known for certain (Henig, 1984: 108-9; Mattingly, 2007: 348).

As already mentioned, the deposit of the fragments may have been the result of positive rituals (*ex-voto*) and not vandalism. Richard Hingley (2018: 184-86) recalls that the heads of the sculptures formed most of the deposits, indicating that there was a careful choice of parts to be dedicated for burial. The fact that heads are the most selected part for *ex-voto* deposits is part of intense debates that may be connected to the cult of severed heads and the Walbrook skulls in the province (See Redfern; Bonney, 2014; Pinto, 2017; Perring, 2022: 250-56). Hands can also be well represented in deposits. Heads and hands would be more directly associated with the identities and/or powers that would emanate from the fragments (Croxford, 2003: 83-8). Dominic Perring (2022: 355) proposes an alternative version for the fate of the *Londinium* mithraeum. Since there is no uncontested evidence of Christian vandalism at this temple, Perring suggests that the site was rededicated to Bacchus and that the mutilation of the statues may be linked to the mythical ritual of *sparagmos*, when sacrificial limbs to the god Bacchus are ripped off and scattered. But we cannot prove this hypothesis either.

Despite the advance of Christianity in *Britannia* and its mission to erase Mithraism, the temple of Mithras survived, and would have been remodeled in the beginning of the fourth century, its columns having been removed, to create more interior space. What is noticeable is that new altars seem to have been installed in the enclosure in a semicircle (*apse*) at the beginning of that century. According to Richard Hingley, in observation of the interpretations by Henig and Shepherd, such alterations feed the idea that the temple may have even been dedicated to a new deity, possibly Bacchus (Hingley, 2018: 214). Or even survived together with the new deity. What is known is that from the mid-fourth century onward the building would have been abandoned and fell into ruins. But given the intensity of persecution of so-called pagan temples by Christianity's most exalted followers, it is significant that the Mithraeum endured for so long (Hingley, 2018: 215). In any case, the so-called paganism had certain strength until the middle of the fourth century, showing a very tense and complex scenario in the field of religious practices in *Britannia* (Salway, 1993: 510). Perhaps it is still possible to find more archaeological material that can shed more light on the last moments of the temple of Mithras in Antiquity.

## The archaeology of the Mithraeum and the ruins of two empires

Interest in epigraphic research on the period of Roman occupation of Britain began to shape in the academy at the beginning of the twentieth century, in particular, at the University of Oxford. With the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, the British Empire experienced moments of uncertainty, but these were soon mitigated with a renewal of incentives for colonialism in Africa and the instigating confrontation of the Ottoman Empire. In spite of the surge in belligerency, it is common to understand the early years of the twentieth century as a continuation of the alleged *Pax Britannica*. In this context, the Roman Empire was seen as a largely successful example of conquest and domination. The main academic stager of the advance in Romano-British studies as a discipline was the archaeologist and epigraphist Francis Haverfield (Perring, 2022: 15). Since then, other scholars have focused on *Britannia* in a process that is almost always openly comparing the Roman and British Empires, based on the controversial concept of “Romanisation” (Hingley, 2000).

The so called “Roman finds” on the island were closely approximated to the belief that Rome had brought the ideals of civilization to Britain, a view defended by many academics and the population (Perring, 2022: 15-6). In the run-up to World War II, the Society of Antiquaries of London was able to raise funds for further excavations in London and it was this new window of opportunity that archaeologists such as Eric Birley, Gerald Dunning and Frank Cottrill used to excavate the tomb of Julius Classicianus (the provincial procurator), show part of the plan for the reconstruction of the forum and the basilica, and reveal the Boudican and Hadrianic fire “horizons” in the stratigraphy of *Londinium* (Perring, 2022: 16). The Guildhall Museum and the Museum of London organized collections of objects from the Roman period in the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but nothing compared to the reconstruction works from the bombings that took place during World War II (Hingley, 2018: 6).

After the German bombings of London in 1940 and 1941, the UK government, concerned with the reconstruction of the devastated areas, chose to found the Roman and Medieval Excavation Council in London, with the finance support of the Ministry of Works. A team of archaeologists began digging in 1947 under the direction of William Francis Grimes. The idea was to move away from areas that were under immediate development pressure and the process was monitored by the Guildhall

Museum. The fieldwork itself was coordinated by archaeologist Audrey Williams (Perring, 2022: 16), a pioneer in Welsh Archaeology, and indeed, the first woman to preside over the *Royal Institution of South Wales (RISW)*.

Among the main archaeological discoveries by the Grimes and Williams team are the Roman fort at Cripplegate and the Mithraeum, both the result of excavations between 1946 and 1968. However, few would oppose the thought that Grimes and Williams biggest find was the *Londinium Mithraeum*, during the excavation of a transect of the Walbrook at *Bucklersbury House* in 1952. It is an archaeological landmark. Already in the nineteenth century, in 1889, a group of sculptures, including a bas-relief of Mithras in the act of slaying the bull (tauroctony), had been found in this region of the Walbrook valley (see Image below: Mithras Tauroctonos). But the presence of a mithraeum in the area had not been asserted (Hingley, 2018: 6; 183). Although the mithraeum was found in 1952, excavations did not begin until 1954. The work took only a few weeks and it would have been only on the last day (Sunday, September 18, 1954), that the Grimes and Williams team found a marble head of Mithras, which was then associated with the temple's patron. Although there are other temples in London, this is the only one unequivocally dedicated to the god Mithras.

The finding of the Mithraeum generated enormous public interest and plans for urban reconstruction were suspended (Perring, 2022: 16). The site was open to visitors for two weeks. The discovery and the exposed ruins proved to be a resounding success with the public after being reported on the *Sunday Times*. On the first day, more than 35,000 people went to the site to see the mithraeum (Perring, 2022: 16-7). The demand and the rush to see the ruins make some sense since the excavation was to salvage the excavated material, which should then be removed as soon as possible to continue the post-war project of urban reconstruction of the area. The discovery site would be destroyed for the construction of an office building, but the strong popular reaction, adverse to the loss of the temple, led even Prime Minister Winston Churchill to look for a way out of the impasse. For many Londoners, after the traumatic period of the bombings of World War II, and with the destruction of parts of the city still visible on the surface years after the attacks, a find like the London Mithraeum could bring hope for a fresh start and a feeling of resilience. More than a curiosity with such a distant past, there was a certain perception that the city, still the proverbial capital of a modern empire, but already in its evident throes, had been part of another powerful imperial world in Antiquity. London's connection to the Roman world would not be ignored. The outcrop of the mithraeum seems to have activated the feeling, then already somewhat nostalgic, that *Englishness* was, since Antiquity, linked to the burden of

civilizing. How could they let this be forgotten? Archaeology itself, it seemed, was right there to remind them. The excavation of the Mithraeum by the British archaeologists was symbolically one of two empires. But empires also lose their “materialities”.

Despite all the support from the public and the media, the mithraeum could not remain where it had been buried for over 1800 years. The rage of real estate speculation won and in 1962 the temple was dismantled and rebuilt in another nearby location, at ground level, but without keeping the correct dimensions and cardinal positions found in the original site. Also, there was no great concern to involve archaeologists in the endeavor. This generated major inaccuracies in the reconstruction. Over time, especially at the end of the 2010s, the place was practically abandoned and constantly vandalized. The government seemed to do nothing about it: a very dismaying abandonment of a heritage structure. It was then that the US billionaire group Bloomberg bought the entire region near the temple.

In 2010, the last year I saw the mitreu in the open, the idea of moving it once more came up. However, with greater scientific concern, this time the Museum of London would participate in the removal process. The mithraeum was saved, reconstructed with the expertise of archaeologists from the Museum of London. In a way, the mithraeum was buried again, placed seven meters below ground level. But not only did it get a new location, it also got a new guardian: the American media and technology group Bloomberg. That is where the money for the venture in partnership with the Museum of London came from. However, once again, the problem of property appropriation is laid in the hands of a gigantic billionaire international conglomerate. The place, which schools and tourists can visit, always free of charge, is called *Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE*, and it was opened to the public in 2017. It is worth reviewing some more information about the restoration and relocation project before proceeding with more data about the London Mithraeum. The partnership between the Bloomberg group and the Museum of London in the preservation of the temple must, necessarily, lead to new debates regarding the use of public heritage and the role of the private sector in the custody of this material, although such debates cannot be exploited in depth in this paper.

### **The archaeological material of the London Mithraeum**

Hundreds of artifacts (almost 600!) of wood and leather, as well as significant vascular, epigraphic, numismatic and statuary material were

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found during excavations of the London Mithraeum. A hundred names of inhabitants of *Londinium* are cited and among such inscriptions is the oldest found to date that mentions the Roman name of the city.

One of the highlights among the archaeological material found in Grimes and Williams' excavation of the Mithraeum is the marble head of the god Mithra. According to Richard Hingley (2018) and Jocelyn Toynbee (1986), Mithras's head would have been carved somewhere between 130 AD and 190 AD. Most of the Carrara marble pieces found in the Mithraeum would have been produced in workshops in Italy. Mithras' head shows signs that it was deliberately separated from the rest of the statue, still in antiquity, by means of a powerful cutting instrument, possibly an axe. It was precisely the discovery of the marble head of Mithras at the final moment of the excavations by the Grimes and Williams' team that ended up defining the site as a temple of that god (Hingley, 2018: 184; 186; Toynbee, 1986; Perring, 2022: 319).

In addition to the head of Mithras, the archaeologists also found those of Minerva (an unusual deity in *Mithraea*) and of Serapis, always in marble, and very well preserved. Emperor Septimius Severus visited the city of *Londinium* sometime in the beginning of the third century, and he was a devotee of Serapis, actually identifying himself with the Greco-Egyptian deity. It is possible that the marble head of this god, placed in the mithraeum, was part of a statue donated by some wealthy patron in honor of the emperor. Also in the excavated assembly were a sculpture of Mercury sitting on a stone, accompanied by a ram, a large hand of Mithras in the act of immolation of the bull and a hand and a forearm, made of limestone, of the same god. The heads would have belonged to bodies that were lost. Perhaps, in another possible interpretation, the parts that were excavated were the only ones deposited at the site, which opens the possibility for a specific selection. Bone material was also found during the excavations, from animals used in sacrifice or for meals and their symposiasts. They are bones of chickens, pigs, sheep, goats and a few of cattle, all quite modest compared to other *mithraea*. At the entrance to the temple, fragments of marble sculptures and statues were excavated, perhaps votive material, possibly dating from the fourth century (Hingley, 2018: 172; 184-6; 318, n. 158).

Another great highlight of the Mithraeum is a bas-relief, in marble, 53 cm high, clearly showing in detail the rite of Tauroctonos Mithras, but which had been excavated in the region at the end of the nineteenth century, in 1889. However, nothing was known of the existence of a Mithraeum in that region (Merrifield, 1965: 179). It is very likely that the small relief, which

represents very well the Tauroctony mythology, belonged to the temple, only excavated in the following century. The relief in question was defined as British art and style by Toynbee (1986). There are figures associated with tauroctony, including the torchbearers Cautes and Cautopates, the dog, the serpent, the scorpion, in addition, of course, to the bull and Mithras himself. The entire scene is surrounded by a zodiac disc. The relief is accompanied by an inscription, outside the disc, which refers to a veteran of the second Augustan legion, Ulpus Silvanus, who would have served in the army or had been initiated into the mysteries of Mithras in Southern Gaul (in Arausio, or *Colonia Iulia Secundanorum*). Ulpus Silvanus may have been the founder of the temple, and he took to *Londinium* the objects that would be, almost two thousand years later, excavated by Grime (Hingley, 2018: 184; 186). The inscription reads: VLPVS SILVANVS EMERITVS LEG II AVG VOTVM SOLVIT FACTVS ARAVSIONE. The translation could be "Ulpus Silvanus, *emeritus* of the Second Legion Augusta, paid his vow, enlisted at Orange" (Collingwood; Wright, 1965: 1; 2. *RIB* 3).

Other sculptures linked to the Mithraeum were found in the same period, in the nineteenth century and show multiple aquatic deities, perhaps Neptune, or even a personification of *Londinium*, in addition to the aforementioned bas-relief of Tauroctonos Mithras (Hingley, 2018: 186). A connection of Mithras with the solar deity also appears in a specific inscription. It would have been made around 308 AD and has a line where the expression [AU] GGGG appears in reference to the four emperors of the time, Maximian, Galerius, Constantine and Maxentius. The same inscription also makes mention of the god Sol Inuicto, [soli i] *nuicto* (Salway, 1993: 222, *image*; Collingwood; Wright, 1965: 2. *RIB* 4).

Many of the artifacts found in the Grimes and Williams' excavations were studied by influential English archaeologist Jocelyn Toynbee (1986), who compared the findings to other contemporary sculptural materials from the Mediterranean, especially those from Italy. With this, the material assembly found can be dated as belonging to the second and third centuries, and were produced, apparently, in marble workshops in Italy. Richard Hingley points out that such objects are older than the temple, and may have been donated to other spaces, always in devotion to Mithras (2018: 185).

Other objects found in the Temple of Mithras, which are worth mentioning here are: a cylindrical casket, plated in silver, inside which was an infuser / strainer for drinks and herbs. The container measures 6.3 cm high and 8 cm in diameter. The lid of the casket shows scenes that suggest animal fights and that of a man who seems to get up from a chest or a funerary

coffin. Perhaps a reference to the rebirth aspect of the Mithras's cult, after a temporary burial ritual for the initiates. The infuser, on the other hand, may be linked to the consumption of hallucinogenic drinks during sacramental services (Henig, 1984: 103; 105).

There are many other artifacts found in excavations in 1954 and even earlier, in the nineteenth century. There would be no way to account for so many important objects in this space. But it is important to mention that many of these objects were found in ditches, or pits as *ex-voto* material, or to simply protect them from vandalism caused by religions averse to the cult of Mithras in the fourth century, in particular, Christianity.

### **The Archaeological Context**

The 1950s managed to direct many students to the field of Archaeology in the UK, especially encouraged by the success of excavations in London in that decade. But the 1960s were not promising. The London Medieval and Roman Excavation Council stopped sponsoring excavations in 1963. Reconstructions no longer followed the advice of archaeologists and extensive damage was caused to ancient sites. The discoveries then relied much more on volunteer work. As out of bad comes good, the economic decline of the 1970s put a stopper to new construction and gave new impetus to conservation work. This time, the archaeologists sought renewed support from the authorities for the creation of new teams of archaeologists. From there, the Department of Urban Archaeology (DUA) (Perring, 2022: 17-8). There is a marked resumption of excavations in London after the foundation of the DUA, linked to the Museum of London in the early 1970s. The focus of such research was, quite specifically, the Roman past in the city (Hingley, 2018: 6).

According to Dominic Perring (2022: 18-21), the increase in the number of archaeological sites also led to the problem of deadlines for interventions to be met more quickly. Thus, a good part of the teams started to work with the perspective that the best analyses would come from the material collected and taken to the laboratories, and not *in-situ*. This problem became even more acute in the late 1980s and clashes between archaeologists and real estate investors intensified, as entrepreneurs were funding part of the excavations and wanted more immediate results. The 1990s were even more problematic, as there was a significant contraction in investments in archaeological contracts. An immediate consequence is the lack of publication of studies carried out in this period, which are still awaiting printing.

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The Museum of London Archaeological Service (MOLAS) was founded in 1992 and has become London's largest archaeology office. In 2008, MOLAS would become the Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA). The Museum of London has worked hard on revamping its teams and publishing reports, but the volumes, more than a hundred of which have already been published, despite bringing a lot of data on *Londinium*, do not allow for an easy dialogue with each other. As a result, the data is fragmented. The 2008 crisis led to greater funding problems and the construction of the Elizabeth Line's tube stations showed how outdated archaeological studies are in the city. Brexit and the Covid pandemic brought everything to a virtual standstill.

There are other Archaeology offices that have been carrying out excavations in London for the past 20 years, which help to reveal segments of *Londinium*'s history that are salient to creating a chronology and mapping of public buildings in the Roman city. London is the best excavated city in the UK and one of the best studied in the Roman Empire. However, despite this new *corpus* of excavation report publications, the urban fabric of *Londinium* remains considerably lacking for scholars (Hingley, 2018: 6-7). The *Londinium* Mithraeum "lived" this historical-archaeological context and its current destiny is inseparable from the nationalist narratives that marked and still affect the guarding of the heritage of Antiquity in the United Kingdom.

### **O London Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE**

The *London Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE* is a media and archaeological project to exhibit to the public, through guided tours, the reconstruction of the *Londinium* Mithraeum in the basement of the building that houses the European branch of the international group Bloomberg, in the City. It is a partnership between the Museum of London and the media and technology giant. The Bloomberg group's main site for the tour is *londonmithraeum.com*. Bloomberg's website, with the aim of promoting London's new educational and tourist attraction, offers among other information elements downloadable *packs*. It also provides basic and technical data about the Mithraeum: its chronology, its structure, interpretations of its past use and details of its excavation and relocation northwest of its place of origin in 1962. It is explained that in 2010, the Bloomberg conglomerate acquired a large part of the properties where the ruins of the temple were located and, also, from its place of origin. The purpose of the acquisition by the Bloomberg group was to build its

European headquarters there. The real estate investment triggered a major archaeological investigation and rescue excavation campaign, spearheaded by a team of specialists in the conservation of material heritage from the MOLA (*Museum of London Archaeology*, an important and fruitful archaeological research and publishing arm of the Museum of London). The project resulted in other major archaeological discoveries in the region, and, as said, the relocation of the Mithraeum. The removal relied on the great expertise of archaeologist Sophie Jackson, among others. It was a very outreaching project. The temple of Mithras was rebuilt almost on its original site in antiquity. In fact, the reconstruction and relocation of the temple did not return it to the *exact* site of its excavation, but to an underground point as close as possible to the original location, including in orientation (relative to the cardinal points) more suitable to that of antiquity. As a result, the temple today is still a few meters away from its construction site in *Londinium*.

The Museum of London also produced similar material to celebrate the inauguration of the joint project, which opened in 2017. There are more than nineteen pages with questions and answers from experts, accompanied by high-quality images and maps. According to this information *pack*, the space reserved for the London Mithraeum, recreated in the basement of Bloomberg's headquarters, receives British elementary school students (KS2, age group between 7 and 11 years), who go to the local to visit and study the ruins of the temple. But tourists can also complete the tour and access the ruins, by appointment. As for students, tourists can visit the temple for free.

Despite also receiving tourists, the material available on Bloomberg's official website is mainly aimed at school visits. There are PDF files, material to be downloaded, in order to facilitate the work of teachers in their teaching activities. The *London Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE website* works as a guide booklet that presents the objective of the visit to enable students to expand their knowledge of London in the Roman period, fostering skills of questioning, observation and predictability. An educator-guide will lead students to investigate authentic artifacts from antiquity, and to make connections between the present and the past, as they observe which objects from the past are still used today. Modern artworks inspired by the archaeological site, for example, are explored. Classes on the cults of *Britannia* are given by the educators before the students descend seven meters below street level to the Mithraeum floor. Visitors to the new London attraction will go through immersive, multisensory experiences of sound and lighting in this proposition. After visiting the Mithraeum, visitors will also be able to go on foot and through

the nearby streets, to the London Museum gallery, for more access to the objects of the museum collection.

The *London Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE* media material lives up to Bloomberg's experience in creating communication channels. The cooperation between the Bloomberg group and the Museum of London generated a very well structured *website* with information and comments on Mithraism in Antiquity, the construction of the Mithraeum, its excavation in 1954, public visitation and its effects on conceptions of past and present which we have today from material culture. Also on Bloomberg's official *website*, besides the specific *packs* for teachers, there are also some for tourists. In addition to the printed material, five videos are available on the *about tab* of the site, a page called the *cultural hub*. There are valuable and rare video testimonies from archaeologists and, in what is truly curious and instructive, from people who visited the site during its excavation in 1954. It is a very well organized material and very rich in information. There is no doubt that there was a massive investment in the creation of these channels of communication with the lay public as well as academics. The use of images is very efficient and they exist in abundance in the pages of the websites. All this material is involved in the question of archaeological heritage politics. As well coordinated as the project was between the Museum of London and Bloomberg, it raises debates about the presence of large private institutions in the custody of public assets.

### **Additional considerations**

Recently I was able to visit the new resting place of the London Mithraeum, in the bowels of the European headquarters of the Bloomberg group. My impressions of this experience were not very positive. Going down the stairs is part of the process of returning to the past, so that we forget that we are under the headquarters of the Bloomberg group. The space is illuminated in a way that gives the impression of returning to the past, without filters, and also to what is thought to be the mysticism of the past and the cult. Smoke and lights and sounds are intended to affect the senses of sight and hearing. The experience proposes to be multisensory, as said. However, we are quickly reminded that the visualization or even the entire experience is controlled in minutes. It is not possible to stay close to the structure. Another group of tourists or students needed to enter. The cue was there for me to leave. Everything is very fast. Kind of alienating. There is no time for the abstractions I tried to form when I saw the Mithraeum in the street. I knew the tour was guided, of course, but my first impression

was not that positive. It is impossible to forget the first time I saw the ruins of the Mithraeum, on a London winter's day, more than twenty years ago. The sculptural pieces of the mithraeum, exhibited for a long time by the Museum of London, will also get a new address, as the museum itself is moving. It will leave the iconic Barbican Center area for its new premises in the West Smithfield neighborhood, close to Farringdon train station. The London Mithraeum, a World Heritage Site, will still continue to greatly influence the way we perceive *Britannia*, its inhabitants and the Roman world as a whole, as we look back and resignify the past.

There are questions to be answered. The UK will have to rethink several heritage conservation processes. The death of Queen Elizabeth in September 2022, the arrival of a new king, Charles III, and a new Tory government marked by massive internal dissent, as well as challenges to the UK's position in Europe and the world afflicted by the war in Ukraine will create enormous tension in the supply of funds for archaeological research. Or will Heritage politics surrender everything to the fury of the private sector?



**Figure 01:** Marble bas-relief of Tauroctonos Mithras, from the Mithraeum in London. Museum of London. *In:* Henig, 1984: image 40, 103.

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