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The Roman cult of Mithras : atlas of sites and catalogue of Mithraic evidence I : summary

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The Roman Cult of Mithras

Atlas of Sites and Catalogue of Mithraic Evidence I

More than sixty years have passed since a Dutch scholar Maarten J. Vermaseren published the last comprehensive two-volume corpus of all Mithraic archaeological and epigraphic evidence: *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis Mithriacae* (*CIMRM*). Unfortunately, this still indispensable work is characterized by some conceptual shortcomings that make its usefulness problematic. Vermaseren's corpus largely followed the second volume of Franz Cumont's *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra* (*TMM*) based on Cumont's conception of the Roman cult of Mithras as a continuation of the authentic Persian religious tradition in the territory of the Roman Empire. *CIMRM* thus also includes finds that chronologically predate the establishment of the Roman Empire or discoveries made outside the geographical boundaries of the Roman Empire. *CIMRM* also routinely includes evidence of sun worship among Mithraic monuments without a more thorough examination of their connection to the cult of Mithras, a practice that is unsustainable from today's perspective.

This *Atlas of Sites and Catalogue of Mithraic Evidence* has two primary aims. First, to provide an updated list of sites in which the presence of the Roman cult of Mithras can be attested, together with a brief overview of the various archaeological and epigraphic finds, including those reported since the publication of the Vermaseren corpus. Second, to critically evaluate the individual items in the Vermaseren's corpus with regard to their relevance to the study of the Roman cult of Mithras and to suggest the exclusion of any irrelevant or mislisted monuments. Thus, the ambition of this publication is to complete and cleanse Vermaseren's corpus of spurious entries, not to replace it. In that sense, it is merely a prolegomenon to this much needed and desirable undertaking. However, the compilation of a new and updated corpus of Mithraic evidence is currently far beyond the capabilities of an individual research project due to its financial cost and time demands.

The individual chapters of this publication provide an inventory of sites and discovered Mithraic material for each province of the Roman Empire, with a geographical scope corresponding to the first volume of Vermaseren's *CIMRM* and including the following provinces and regions: the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire (except for finds from the Crimea, which have been moved to the second volume), the North African provinces, Rome, Ostia, Italian Regions I-VIII, Cisalpine Gaul, Hispania, Britannia, and the Gallic provinces. The sites in the introductory tables at the beginning of each chapter are listed and arranged in alphabetical order reflecting the modern name of the locality from which the Mithraic find originated. The assignment of each site to a particular Roman province reflects (unless indicated otherwise) the territorial division of the Roman Empire in 117 CE. For each site, a brief inventory of discovered Mithraic objects and monuments is given, with references to the source providing basic information about the find (e.g. in the form of a reference to the *CIMRM*, one of the epigraphic corpora or databases, or another publication reporting the monument in question). The catalogue section, following the same division, provides a more detailed description of the objects and artefacts discovered, together with a brief justification

of their relevance to the study of the Roman cult of the god Mithras, using a four-tiered, colour-coded scale. The dark green fields indicate monuments of confirmed Mithraic character, i.e. those monuments that were dedicated to Mithras or are typically Mithraic in nature (e.g. tauroctony) or were discovered in a context that is demonstrably Mithraic (i.e. in an archaeologically excavated and reliably identified Mithraeum). The light green fields indicate monuments likely to be Mithraic, but their Mithraic character is not indisputably proven. The orange fields indicate monuments whose Mithraic character is possible but disputed and that should be used only with great caution in any interpretation of the Roman Cult of Mithras. The dark red fields indicate those finds whose Mithraic status is extremely doubtful or even ruled out in later research. Each chapter also includes a map showing individual sites from which Mithraic objects originate, with the colour-coding of sites corresponding to the scale used to classify the Mithraic character of each find in the tables.

Only limited attention is paid to the actual interpretation of the symbolism of individual monuments or iconographic elements, usually through reference to specific publications that deal with these monuments in greater detail. More careful attention is typically given to an evaluation of the arguments that support or challenge the classification of the monument in question as Mithraic and any exceptional details that distinguish the monument in question from other finds of a similar type made in discovered in different sites and provinces of the Roman Empire. In this context, it is worth making a few methodological remarks on the problem of classifying certain types of evidence that recur regularly in the inventory and present a more general research challenge. These objects are: 1) dedications of objects to *Soli, deo Soli, Soli invicto* or *Soli augusto*; 2) dedications of objects to *invicto, invicto deo* or *numini invicto*; 3) statue heads depicting young men with Phrygian caps, or of light-bearers in Eastern-style attire; 4) ceramic lamps displaying solar deities or solar symbolism; 5) ceramic vessels with a serpent motif.

In the case of the dedications to *Soli, deo Soli, Soli invicto* or *Soli augusto*, the classification complicates the fact that, without an evaluation of the discovery context, makes it nearly impossible to decide on the possible Mithraic character of these artefacts. Although Vermaseren routinely included dedications to *Sol* in his corpus, usually without any argumentation, this decision is currently considered methodologically unsustainable. These objects may have been consecrated either within the tradition of the sun worshipping that had its roots in the Republican religious tradition (*Sol Indiges*), or in local solar cults reflecting an originally non-Roman religious tradition, or in later solar cults of a public nature promoted primarily by the Roman emperors of the 3rd century CE. The Mithraic character of these objects can only be seen as confirmed only if they were found in a demonstrably Mithraic context, usually inside of an archaeologically excavated and positively identified mithraea. Finds of this type, if discovered outside a demonstrably Mithraic context, are then classified as possible but disputed Mithraic artefacts. If their public character can be inferred from the nature or contextual circumstances of their discovery, they are excluded as non-Mithraic, because they relate, in all likelihood, to the cult of Invincible Sun controlled of the Roman state. In the case of dedications to *invicto, invicto deo* or *numini invicto*, the following procedure is followed. If they were made in a demonstrably Mithraic context or appear on inscriptions with other terms of demonstrably Mithraic character, they are classified as confirmed Mithraic evidence. If found outside a demonstrably Mithraic context, they are classified as probable but not indisputable Mithraic monuments. In this case, the observation formulated by Manfred Clauss is taken into account, who argued that the prevalent majority of attested dedications to the Invincible God come from a Mithraic context, notwithstanding the fact that the epithet *invictus* occasionally appears in dedications to other Graeco-Roman deities, e. g. Mars, Hercules or Sarapis. However, if the deity is not explicitly mentioned by its proper name but only by the generic designation *deus* or *numen*, it is very likely referring to Mithras. Also, in the case of heads of depicting young men in Phrygian caps or statues of torchbearers, increased caution is advisable. Vermaseren routinely included these artefacts in his corpus of Mithraic finds, often without any discussion. Still, the mere presence of a Phrygian cap is usually insufficient to identify the depicted figure as Mithras or Mithraic torchbearer. The Phrygian cap was also routinely used attribute of Attis and some mythical heroes representing typical “Orientals” in the eyes of the Roman world, such as Paris or Ganymedes. Thus, if these artefacts were discovered outside a demonstrable Mithraic context

and no other clues suggest their Mithraic character, they are classified among the possible but disputable Mithraic evidence. Circumstances of discovery also play a crucial role in the case of the lamps displaying the sun god or other solar motifs and vessels with a snake motif (the so-called *Schlangengefässe*). If the context of their discovery is unknown or does not show a demonstrably Mithraic character, these objects are excluded from the list of relevant finds. Although items of this type have been found in some mithraea and a snake is a motif widely attested in Mithraic iconography, this symbolism is so general and present in other religious cults or communities that connection of these items to the Roman cult of Mithras cannot be reliably established without corroborating evidence.

