

FORCING THE BULL TO ITS KNEES: THE MITHRAIC STRIFE IN MODERN ARTHURIANA

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ABSTRACT: Mithraism is one of the most mysterious religions in the World. In fact, it was a *mystery*, a cult where initiates were supposed to remain silent about it to the profanes. These cults also offered the promise of eternal salvation them. Little is known about Mithras and its cult, and so it remains more than a mystery.

We could say almost the same about Arthuriana and some of its most important characters: they are a mystery in History, Folklore and Literature. However, British author Bernard Cornwell has mixed up both mysteries into one in his thrilling and mind-boggling trilogy *The Warlord Chronicles*, published between 1996 and 1998. This kaleidoscopic trilogy retells Arthur's deeds and miseries from the moment his nephew Mordred is born until his final departure to Camlann, through the eyes of his best friend, Derfel Cadarn, a Mithraist. Derfel shows how Christianity triumphs over the rest of the pagan religions, most of the times with no fair play. The aim of this paper is to show how some of the actions in the trilogy symbolise the death of Paganism, the mystery of Mithras included, and the final triumph of Christianity.

KEYWORDS: Arthuriana. Bernard Cornwell's *The Warlord Chronicles*. Mithraism.

One of the features which makes Arthurian literature famous is the way it deals with religious matters. From some of the first texts in Welsh, like the famous *Mabinogion*, where pure Celtic myth meets Christianity, to the latest novels, religion has always played a predominant role that, at times, has been more important and more powerful than the plot or the characters themselves.

In the Middle Ages, the Christian Church held a strong influence on the production of Arthuriana. Consequently, those who kept to the Christian faith were highly praised. By way of contrast, modern Arthurian literature uses religion as a means to explain different historical aspects, such as the political divide of the Celtic kingdoms which eventually led to the triumph of the Saxons, the religious diversity or the general problems of the age. This totally opposes the idea of religious

uniformity in the medieval texts. Furthermore, in most of the modern texts, Christianity is criticised rather than exalted.

Bernard Cornwell, author of *The Warlord Chronicles*, a trilogy written between 1996 and 1998, follows this modern pattern by introducing four different creeds competing against each other. It can certainly be said religion has played an important role in Cornwell's life, since he was adopted by a couple who belonged to a sect called the "Peculiar People", who took the Puritan ideas to the extreme. In order to extricate himself from the sect, he decided to study Theology. In his Arthurian trilogy, Cornwell particularly attacks the zealous Christians. There is a deeply religious background throughout; three of the religions were an import of the Romans: Christianity, the cult of Isis and the cult of Mithras. All of them play an important role in the development of the trilogy, which mainly focuses on the fight between Christianity and the native Celtic religion. The cult of Isis will prove fatal to Arthur's psyche, while the cult of Mithras is probably the most positively described. The focus of this paper will be on the latter.

What we know nowadays about Mithras and his mysteries comes mainly from archaeological remains of *Mithraea*, or temples of Mithras¹, inscriptions, iconography, and Classical literature. It is also a very difficult religion to describe, mainly because it was a mystery religion open to very few people and its rites were not observable (Turcan, 1996: 216). A further problem is that while the religion has been described, its rites are still obscure or misunderstood.

The cult of Mithras historically originated in Iran and flourished in the Middle East in the Hellenistic age. When it got to Rome, there was a time when Mithras became the most serious contender against Christianity, because of the similarity of their rites and beliefs. However, Turcan (247) dismissed the thesis that, at some stage, the world might have become Mithraist rather than Christian, a thesis that Renan had defended. However, this mystery, along with that of Isis and the Syrian cult of the *Sol Invictus*, encouraged by emperors Caracalla (211-217) and Heliogabalus (218-222) "represented a competition greatly to be feared [by the Christian Church], and the more so since they had the benefit of official protection." (Eliade: 368)

The division of the cult into seven grades highlighted the fact that the divinity was both immanent, and so it was inside the person, and transcendent, or outside the person.

¹ *Mithraea* were usually built in caves. An average *mithraeum* was longer (10-12 m.) than wider (4-6 m.). In some of the services, always presided by the *Tauroctony*, the image of Mithras sacrificing the bull, some *podia*, or Roman dining couches, were placed along the cave, thus exacerbating the claustrophobic atmosphere of the *Mithraeum*.

The first grade was that of the novice, represented by a crow. The people celebrating the rites of this first grade wore masks representing the animals in the zodiac. The orbits of the seven known planets (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn) represented the seven steps for the soul when it travelled towards the earth when it was born. The crow took the novice beyond the first sphere, the lunar, which represented the cycle of life and death.

Mercury represented the sphere of the hidden powers, the magic and the knowledge, and that is why the novice became a *nymphus* (bridegroom)², from where he progressed up to the sphere of Venus, where desire got mystic characteristics. In the third grade, the candidate became a soldier or *miles*, and went to the circle of the sun, symbolizing intellectual arrogance and power. He was offered a crown which he had to reject, by claiming that Mithras was his only crown. In the fourth stage, the candidate became a *leo*, a lion, and took part in a sacramental banquet with bread and wine mixed up with water. In the fifth stage he passed on to Mars, symbolizing boldness and daring and the candidate wore the typical Phrygian hat as well as Persian loose robes, which provided the initiate with the title of *Persa*. After this, he went to the sphere of Jupiter and he was given the title of sun-runner or *heliodromus*. Eventually, he went on to pass on to Saturn and he was sanctified as *pater*, who was in charge of guiding the transmission of the initiation grades. There was still another grade, according to Burkert (1987), that of *pater patrum*, considered a central authority. Originally, they bore Greek names, but when the Romans took over the cult and adopted it, their names were changed into Latin. Along this long way, the candidate had to learn the stoic virtue of indifference towards both pleasure and pain and the symbolic apparitions he saw in this process marked his mind with essential attitudes.

These rites were carried out in a grove which symbolized the cavern of the world where the old mythological topic of the union of the macrocosm, or universe, mesocosm, or liturgy, and microcosm, or soul, was represented. The cave or *Mithraeum* usually held fewer than twenty people on average and when more adherents to the cult joined a new larger cave had to be found, instead of enlarging the already existing temple, and the construction and changes were made, established, and paid by a rich benefactor (Turcan 219- 221). It was probably thanks to those wealthy donors that *Mithraea* were “embellished elsewhere ... with exemplars of the tauroctony.” (Beck 2006: 21).

² Cumont (1956a) uses the term *Occult* (the translation for the Greek *κρύφιος*) instead of *nymphus*.

In the second century appeared the figure of Mithras *Tauroctonus*, killer of a bull from which he takes some blood. This figure was quite popular in Europe and it could have become a commonplace to baptise the novice with hot bull's blood, as Cornwall exemplifies in his trilogy. This type of baptism might have still been carried out in Rome as late as 384: Clauss states that some initiates of the cult "had undergone the taurobolium, that is, had undergone a ritual in which a bull was sacrificed over a pit containing the initiand; through the blood, he was reborn for eternity" (31). Due to its masculine characteristics, the Mithraic cult influenced the Roman pantheon and the Empire adopted the cult without further reserves.³ Eliade pointed at the fact that the profanes were impressed for the "discipline, temperance, and morality of its members- virtues that were reminiscent of the old Roman tradition" (327). Despite this strong influence, the cult eventually disappeared under the stronger Christian sway.

It is precisely the strife between Christianity and other faiths (Mithraism amongst them) that forms the background of Cornwall's *Arthuriad*. Derfel Cadarn, the main character in the book, is a Mithras soldier, but he is not the only devotee to Mithras. Other characters, including a bishop, also worship Mithras. This could represent the fact that Mithraism was opened to every stratum in society, although it is difficult to imagine a bishop acknowledging Mithras as his god in the fifth or sixth century. However, it helps Cornwall to represent the accommodation of different faiths, or their coexistence, within the same period of time (but not, indeed, Mithraism in the fifth/sixth centuries).

When young, Derfel is taught the warlike art by Hywel, one of the men of the Tor, Merlin's stronghold, who used to fight for Uther until he lost his leg in a battle against the Saxon leader Otha. One day, while hunting, Derfel kills his first boar and Hywel coats Derfel's face with the boar's blood and makes him a necklace with its tusks. The boar is taken to a cave (we may suppose it is a Temple of Mithras), where all the initiated would celebrate it, though Derfel has to wait a little bit longer, until, as he says, "I had grown my beard and slain my first Saxon in battle" (1996: 22). Indeed, he is initiated in the cult of Mithras, not by Hywel, but by Sagramor, one of Arthur's Numidian commanders. Derfel's initiation takes place in the late winter and he describes it as follows:

We stopped by a cave entrance where Sagramor instructed me to lay my weapons aside and strip naked. I stood there shivering as the Numidian tied a

³ Indeed, de la Bédoyère (2006) uses the term *Roman Mithraism* to describe this cult. In Rome, not only the higher layers of society but also the common folk seem to have accepted Mithras willingly, especially in the southern part of Italy, where the Eastern cults proved to be very popular (Turcan, 207). As for the difference between *Mitra* and *Mithra*, see Clauss (3).

thick cloth about my eyes and told me I must now obey every instruction and that if I flinched or spoke only once, just once, I would be brought back to my clothes and weapons and sent away. (1996: 223)

Vermaseren (1963) confirms that “nobody could be initiated ... if after having undergone a certain number of ordeals, he did not show himself to be sanctified and so impervious” (133-134), following a quote in Suidas. Derfel describes the initiation as “an assault to the man’s senses” (1996: 223). Some of the rites of initiation described by Derfel are the following ones: his being turned about several times, maybe as a symbol for the orbit of the planets; eating dried fish; drinking a strange beverage which produced some strange visions “of bright creatures coming with crinkled wings to snap at my flesh with open mouths” (1996: 224); flames touching his skin and his manhood; stepping onto icy water; and killing: “It’s a child under your hand, you miserable toad ... an innocent child that has harmed no one,” the voice said, “a child that deserves nothing but life, and you will kill it. Strike!” (1996: 224). Part of this description seems to be drawn from sources that were alien and particularly hostile towards Mithraism: most of them are Christian sources (Nonnos or Cosmo of Jerusalem) and, hence, not very reliable.

Derfel is made to drink some beverage; at first, he thinks that it is the blood of the child he has killed, which, once the cloth is stripped off his eyes, turns out to be a lamb. And there, surrounding him, he can see friends and enemies: Agricola, the champion of Gwent, with two enemies from Siluria, Ligessac one of them, some of Arthur’s warriors and bishop Bedwin. Later in the trilogy, Arthur and Derfel are sent to St. Cadoc’s place to fetch Ligessac and hand him over to king Mordred. One of the rules for the initiates in the mysteries of Mithras was to show mercy to another member, even if he was an enemy. Rather than avoid killing an enemy, and a fellow Mithraist, as Cornwell reflects, what really bound the fellowship together and what made them respect each other- even in battles- was the feeling of collectiveness that the Mithraists had from the very beginning of their initiations. As Turcan puts it, it was important the “psychologically strengthening ordeals of initiation, the stimulating hierarchy” (239), proper and familiar to the Roman world. It was probable that the feeling was reinforced with the liturgy of the communal meal which took place at least weekly. This was perceived as a “rite of collective invigoration.” (Turcan, 240)

However, Derfel breaks the rule with Ligessac, by letting his men shave his beard and make a leash with it. An oversight of our author? It could even be a Cornwell’s adaptation of the medieval topic of beard-shaving, of which Arthuriana was not unaware, as Geoffrey of Monmouth shows (238-240).

Derfel asserts that he “had become part of a secret society that stretched clear across the Roman world and even beyond its edges (...) To become a Mithraist was

a real honour, for any member of the cult could forbid another man's initiation" (1996: 225). This very sentence will bear consequences, as Derfel will ban Lancelot's initiation. Derfel also comments that after being accepted as a member of the society, he is given the secret words ("*Ten times the black sword*") which could allow him to identify his comrades in a battle and, if necessary, kill them with mercy, "and if such a man become my prisoner, I was to do him honour" (1996: 225). As stated above, this must be understood as a poetic licence by Cornwell, but, nonetheless, reinforces that idea of "tightly bound brotherhood" (Salway 2000: 53). Cumont (1956b) also explained that the "initiates considered themselves as sons of the same father owing to one another a brother's affection." (156)

How were the rites of initiation for the cult of Mithras? As a creed which believed in death and rebirth, those rituals were similar to others in which the aim was to separate the novice from the previous world, provoking a symbolic death, as Cornwell exemplifies with Derfel's initiation⁴. Gregory of Nazianzus explained in one of his theological discourses that the novice experienced a series of tasks that inflicted pain, maybe in order to test his endurance. Among these tasks they had to carry out were a fifty-day fast, two days of whipping and twenty days in the snow. Cumont (1956a) rejected these ideas⁵, stating that if these acts had been carried out originally, they were "softened by contact with western civilisation" (161). As stated above, most of these descriptions come from Christian authors, who were especially violent against the Persian myth.

In other classical accounts for the mysteries, the candidates are said to be "blindfolded, hear the sounds of ravens and of lions, and some (most likely those at a certain grade) have their hands tied with chicken guts and are made to stumble into a water basin" (Burkert 1987: 103). Some murals at Capua Vetere, in Campania, Italy, represent some scenes similar to the description provided by Burkert. He also adds that some of the rites could have been carried out with fire (coinciding then with Derfel's torment) and even that in some of them the members of the cult could have performed human sacrifices as some human skulls show, like in the *Mithraeum* of Riegel, in Germany. We can see, thus, how Cornwell follows closely the descriptions by Burkert and some other scholars of Mithraism for Derfel's tests.

It has been said that Mithraism was not socially restricted, and the fact that Emperors and slaves, soldiers and merchants worshipped him alike, and that they

⁴ Other authors, such as Burkert or Turcan, prefer to describe it as an entry into the world of the sacred, rather than a rite of rebirth. On the other hand, de la Bédoyère holds the idea that, unlike Paganism and like Christianity, Mithraism offered a salvation through rebirth.

⁵ Cumont's theories dominated Mithraism for decades, but several books published from the 70's onwards have proved some of his ideas wrong. See Beck (2006), Hinnells (1975) and Turcan (1996).

were initiated in the mysteries, bear witness to this: “some men led armies and were never selected, others never rose above the ranks and were honoured members” (Cornwell 1996: 223). Turcan confirms that it did not only attract “the flower of distinguished theosophers” (240). However, women were not allowed to take part in the mysteries. Some authors have used this idea to explain one of the reasons for the disappearance of Mithraism. Despite Jessie Weston’s ideas that “Attis Mysteries were utilized by the priests of Mithra for the initiation of women who were originally excluded from the cult of the Persian god” (168-9), everything points at the fact that they were not allowed. Vermeseren (1963) explains that in the tomb of a Mithraist in Libya, a man and a woman were termed as “lion” and “lioness”, but this offers “no definite answer” (162) to the question of the role of women in the mysteries, if they ever had any.

Cornwell is not unaware of this and he mentions a visit to the London *Mithraeum*, a “lovely building; long, dark, narrow and tall with a high painted ceiling supported by twin rows of seven pillars ... The temple was supposed to be dark, for Mithras had been born in a cave and we worshipped him in a cave’s darkness” (1997, 222-223). But contrary to the Mithraic regulations, Nimue, Merlin’s main druidess, is also there:

“Don’t be absurd!” Merlin snapped. “Someone made that later! You really think you’re hiding secrets of your pathetic religion?” He tapped the floor beside the statue again, then tried another spot a few feet away and evidently decided that the two places yielded different sounds, so tapped a third time at the statue’s feet. “Dig here,” he ordered my spearmen.

I shuddered for the sacrilege. “She shouldn’t be here, Lord,” I said, gesturing at Nimue.

“One more word from you, Derfel, and I’ll turn you into a spavined hedgehog. Lift the stones!” he snapped at my men. (1997: 223)

As we can see here, Derfel is more worried about the presence of the druidess in the cave rather than at the fact that his own men are going to damage Mithra’s statue to dig out some spears. It can be assumed that, as Clauss (2000) said, “the female principle played no role, either on the divine or the human level [in Mithras cult]... and, anyway, in a society dominated by men a male cult was at no particular disadvantage.” (33)

Derfel also mentions the sacrifice of a bull in the winter solstice, a Mithraist custom which clashes with the Christian Nativity. This sacrifice was called *taurobolium*, and the cult stated that all the living creatures came from the primeval bull. Burkert said that

The sacrifice of the bull always has a cosmic setting, between the rising sun and the setting moon ... The movement of the sun in the cycle of the year directly enters the

ceremonies; some Mithraea had openings through which a ray of the sun would penetrate on certain days right to the central panel, illuminating the head of the god. (Burkert 1987: 83)

Burkert elaborates on the fact that this ritual of the sacrifice of the bull is carried out when the sun is passing through the sign of Taurus. Nevertheless, it is not coincidence that these Mithraic rites clash with the most important Christian festival in Cornwall: “at the solstice, we Mithraists killed a bull at our annual festival that honoured the sun while on the same day the Christians celebrated their God’s birth” (1997: 342). The clues are given by Federico Revilla (1999) and José Antonio Pérez Rioja (2000). The former says that the birth of Jesus Christ at the start of the solstice of winter was a symbol for the beginning of a new cycle; the initiates in Mithras started the induction in winter. Pérez Rioja says that the Church made coincide the Nativity of Christ with the Syrian pagan festivity of the Undeclared Sun, or *Sol Invictus*, celebrated in the winter solstice, in another step and example of Christianization of pagan rites. It was this syncretism, originally of Greco-Latin and Iranian cultures, that favoured the popularity of the cult. Unlike some other Eastern cults, Roman priests could carry out the Mithraic rites: in the case of Isis and Osiris, they should be carried out by Egyptian priests (see Burkert, 39).

Derfel, while in a temple of Mithras at Mai Dun, imagines what the sacrifice of the bull might have been like:

I imagined the Roman soldiers forcing the bull to its knees, then shoving its rump and tugging its horns to cram it through the low doors until, once in the inner sanctuary it would stand and bellow with fear, smelling nothing but the spearmen all about it in the dark. And there, in the terrifying dark, it would be hamstrung. It would bellow again, collapse, but still thrush its great horns at the worshippers, but they would overpower it and drain its blood and the bull would slowly die and the temple would fill with the stink of its dung and blood. Then the worshippers would drink the bull’s blood in memory of Mithras, just as he commanded us. The Christians, I was told, had a similar ceremony, but they claimed that nothing was killed in their rites, though few pagans believed it for death is the due we owe to the Gods in return for the life they give us. (1998: 71-2)

This is not the first time, nor the last, that a parallelism between Mithras and Christ is drawn. When Merlin is blind and imprisoned by Nimue, along with Derfel, the wizard asks the warrior about his god, opening the warrior’s eyes up towards the future of the pagan religions. Derfel does not remember either the name or the different grades, to which Merlin replays:

“Miles and Pater, they should be called. And once there were also Leo, Corax, Perses, Nymphus and Heliodromus. How little you know of your miserable God, but then your worship is a mere shadow worship. Do you climb the seven-runged ladder?”

“No, Lord.”

“Do you drink the wine and bread?”

“That is the Christian way, Lord,” I protested.

“The Christian way! What halfwits you all are! Mithras’s mother was a virgin, shepherds and wise men came to see her newborn child, and Mithras himself grew to become a healer and teacher. He had twelve disciples, and on the eve of his death he gave them a final supper of bread and wine. He was buried in a rock tomb and rose again, and he did all this long before the Christians nailed their God to a tree. You let the Christians steal your God’s clothes, Derfel!” (1998: 406)

Besides the parallelisms we have mentioned above, and those that Merlin explains, some others can be drawn. For instance, in some Greek texts dealing with the myth, he is called *logos*, the Word (Cumont, 1956a: 191); in other texts he is referred to as Redeemer, Saviour or Messiah, who created the good things in the world and provided men with the Bread of Life. He sacrificed himself for the peace in the world and after being buried, he resurrected three days later. Another striking parallelism is that Mithraists celebrated a rite very similar to the Christian communion, an act that, some authors have pointed to be the key for the Christian attacks on Mithraism: the former accused the latter of being too *devilishly* similar to Christianity- but never of doing acts such as sacrifices (Cumont 1956a: 190- ff.). Justin, as collected by Vermaseren, confirms that “bread and water were used in the mysteries by initiates of Mithras, that we know” (102). Vermaseren elaborates on this, by saying that Justin “is careful to use the word ‘water’, not ‘wine’, although there is certain evidence for the use of wine” (102). Added to this, Mithras is depicted in some *Mithraea* with twelve companions partaking a dinner after which is he carried to the heavens in a cart.

In the second century AD, the Christians accepted something that the Church had previously described as idolatry: the worship of a new form of the *Sol Invictus*, this time personified in Christ to whom Sunday was especially dedicated for this matter. Cumont (1956a) declares that the followers of Mithras “also held Sunday sacred, and celebrated the birth of the Sun on the 25th of December, the same day on which Christmas has been celebrated since the fourth century at least” (191).

During his papacy (337-352), Pope Julius I fixed the day of Jesus Christ’s birth on the night of the 24th December. Before that, 136 different dates had existed. This night was the one when the ancient cults and mysteries celebrated the Midnight Sun, to commemorate the rising of the sun even in the shortest day of the year, opposed to Midsummer’s Night, where the power of the sun was at its height, as explained by the Christian writer John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople between 398 and 404. This Greek archbishop complained that the pagans were still carrying out their rituals of the Winter Sun, called *Bromalia*, and Julius I decided to move and fix Jesus Christ’s birth on the same date so that no faith disturbed another one with their festivities. Once more, Cumont informs that in “the fourth century Christmas was placed on the 25th December because on that date was celebrated the

birth of the Sun (*Natalis Invicti*), who was born to a new life each year after the solstice.” (1956b: xvii)

The fixing of Easter underwent more or less the same ordeal, and it was changed following a pagan reason, as Good Friday always falls on a full moon following the spring equinox, or immediately after it. This is the time where Mithras and other gods, such as Attis, were supposed to have sacrificed their lives for the welfare of humankind.

However, the coup de grace for Mithraism was the fact that Christianity was made the official religion in Rome. Some of the upper Roman classes (people in the government and, for sure, high hierarchies within the legions) abandoned Mithraism in favour of Christianity in order to get the Emperor’s preferential treatment. In a beautiful parallelism created by Cornwell, Derfel has to renounce Mithraism and become a Christian, symbolising the death of the Persian faith at the hands of Christianity. Likewise, druidess Nimue, a fierce opposition to Christianity observes how Excalibur, the last fortress of paganism in the trilogy, sinks forever in the sea, in another poetic image of the death of paganism.

Some of the new Christians are bound to have turned their swords against Mithraism since 313. While proscribed from Italy, where the new official religion sided with the power immediately, Mithraism was still practiced in the outer provinces of the Empire for another hundred years or so. The Christian hierarchies proclaimed that Mithraism was a devilish imitation of the Christian rites. Consequently, *Mithraea* were abandoned and the Christians began to devastate them, while the authorities did not do anything to prevent this. Besides, and unlike the Christians, the Mithraists were not well organized, or at least, not as well as they had been once, and so Christianity began to attract soldiers, who saw it a more stable organization.

Of course, Mithraism could not have reached the fifth and sixth centuries in the British Isles. However, its anachronistic use serves Bernard Cornwell to illustrate the difficult period which is the British Dark Ages in religion and politics. British Arthurian literature has resorted to Mithras in some of the most recent texts: besides Cornwell’s trilogy, Allan Massie’s Merlin in *Arthur the King* (2003) is described as a Mithraist. These examples not only show the popularity of the myth, but also the adaptations and changes that modern authors are making on religious matters in Arthuriana, by introducing new faiths and the rebirth of Paganism.

The mystery of Mithras will remain, clearly enough, a mystery. We can always make guesses as to how they rites might have been conducted, how Mithraism reached its peak or why it died. The rest lies upon our imagination. Derfel’s description illustrates what an actual rite of initiation might have been like,

according to the relatively scarce information we have. The description of the bull's sacrifice as imagined by Derfel in the *Mithraeum* at London is also realistic. And Merlin's words to Derfel when they are both imprisoned by Nimue can be understood as the doom of the faith, its being conquered by a new and stronger religion and, indirectly, a new civilization.

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