ROMAN MITHRAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

LUTHER H. MARTIN

Unlike early Christian sites, which were recorded as the foci of cult activity and which often perdured as the loci for later architectural exploitation, the locations of Mithraic sites went unrecorded and have been discovered quite by chance as a result of modern restorations or excavations directed towards other ends. In addition to earlier known sites concentrated in the Rhine and Danube regions, twentieth century discoveries have produced a steady flow of new Mithraic finds in Italy, especially in Ostia and Rome. When Franz Cumont, the father of modern Mithraic studies, published his charter work in 1898, only three mithraea were known in Ostia; now at least 15 have been identified. And in Rome, discoveries have continued apace with the uncovering of such major mithraea as those in the Baths of Caracalla and the Circus Maximus, the Barbarini and the S. Prisca Mithraea, and most recently, in the castra Peregrinorum, discovered during the renovations of S. Stefano Rotondo. The flood of new Mithraic discoveries in the capital of the Roman world allowed Cumont to conclude by 1945 that Rome was the capital of Mithraism, and almost the seat of its papacy. The density of Mithraic finds in and around the city emphasizes its importance for any understanding of the relationship of Mithraism to Christianity.

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As with so much else, the traditional understanding of the relationship between Christianity and Mithraism has been based upon the polemical judgements of the church fathers. Since Justin’s accusation in the mid-second century that Roman Mithraists were diabolically imitating the Christians, the two religions have been considered rivals for the religious allegiance of the West. In 1882, Ernst Renan summarized this view for modernity in his widely cited judgement that “If the growth of Christianity had been
arrested by some mortal malady, the world would have been Mithraic.\textsuperscript{18} Several years later Cumont concurred, writing of the "ferocious and implacable duel" between Mithraism and Christianity for "the domination of the world."\textsuperscript{9} Although M.J. Vermaseren, the greatest modern interpreter of Mithraism, found this opinion to be "too sweeping,"\textsuperscript{10} he nevertheless perpetuated the conventional view of Christianity and Mithraism as "deadly rivals."\textsuperscript{11}

Father Leonard Boyle, who resides above a famous mithraeum in Rome, at S. Clemente, has written that "too much... has been made of the 'threat' of Mithraism to Christianity." He based his judgement on the evidence of "only fifty known mithraea for a Rome of about one million inhabitants in the third century."\textsuperscript{12} But Filippo Coarelli has estimated that as many as 2000 mithraea might have existed in Rome, a figure he arrives at by analogy to Mithraic finds in Ostia in proportion to its population and by assuming that the population of Ostia was 1/50 that of Rome.\textsuperscript{13} However, population estimates for Rome range from 538,000 to 1,250,000 in the mid-second century when its population was greatest, and from 250,000 to 800,000 at the time of Constantine.\textsuperscript{14}

If the population of Rome—for which more information is available than any other city in the Empire—is so uncertain, population estimates for Ostia, which range from 20,000 to 58,000, are even more so.\textsuperscript{15} Such differences in estimates depend upon such variables as the calculation of the slave population, the size of households, the numbers of persons in each house, life expectancy and various uses of modern population figures as a basis for calculating those of antiquity,\textsuperscript{16} and demonstrates that it is simply not possible to arrive at any such calculations with even approximate exactness.\textsuperscript{17}

More conservative than his estimate of Roman mithraea based upon population estimates, is Coarelli's estimate, based upon topographical distribution, that just under 700 mithraea should exist in Rome. This estimate is based upon the 33 hectares of Ostia that have been systematically excavated out of a total of 70, or approximately one half of the ancient town. Since the 15 Ostian mithraea are evenly distributed throughout the town, two per hectare, Coarelli estimates that a comparable distribution throughout