

» **CULTURE****Mysterious Mithras**

by Tiffany Parks

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When asked which religious figure was born on 25 December, our guess is most people would think of Jesus. But by seeming coincidence, Mithras, the god of a mysterious religion popular in Rome from the 2nd to 4th centuries, was also said to have been born that day. According to this religion, which had its roots in ancient Persia, Mithras was born of a rock and destined to slay a cosmic bull, whose blood would give birth to the universe. Members of the religion, exclusively male and often soldiers, would reenact the ritual sacrifice in a mithraeum, a rectangular cave-like temple with a vaulted ceiling painted with stars, and side benches where the initiates would recline during a banquet. As a mystery religion, the details of its rituals and beliefs were known only to its initiates and almost never recorded in writing. The physical evidence found in mithraeums has provided some of the only clues to the details and practices of this secret cult. The most important of these is the tauroctony, a central image (either a fresco, sculpture, relief or stucco) of Mithras in the act of slaying the bull, always in the presence of three creatures, a dog and a snake drinking the bull's blood, and a scorpion biting the testicles of the bull. These three animals represent evil as they are trying to stop the bull's blood from fertilizing the earth. Another image frequently depicted, often in mosaic or fresco, were the seven constellations, each representing a different phase of initiation that each member of the religion was expected to pass through.

**Jesus vs. Mithras**

Their mutual birthday isn't the only thing that links Jesus and Mithras. Many scholars argue that the two religions have too many similarities to be explained by mere coincidence, particularly considering the fact that they were rival cults, gaining followers simultaneously. For example, according to their respective traditions, both Jesus and Mithras were visited by three wise men bearing gifts on 6 January, both were called the Way, the Truth and the Life, both had twelve followers or disciples, and both were seen as the savior of mankind as well as a mediator between God and man. Members of both religions participated in a ritual meal involving bread, and were expected to take part in seven initiations or sacraments. In addition, Petra, the sacred rock from which Mithras was born, could be compared to Peter, the rock upon which Christ built his church.

**See for yourself**

Although most of Rome's mithraeums were destroyed when pagan religions were outlawed in 380 AD, some were transformed into crypts of early Christian churches or foundations of other buildings, only to be discovered and excavated centuries later. Here's a list of our favorites:

**The Baths of Caracalla**

Rome's largest mithraeum, situated beneath the ruins of the imposing Baths of Caracalla, has been under restoration and closed to the public for over 10 years. What makes this mithraeum unique in Rome is the presence of a well, in which the blood of the bull was collected. This fascinating site reopened just last month and may be visited from now until 6 January by appointment only, Tue-Sun from 10am-2pm. Tel 0639967700. €9 includes guided visit. [www.coopculture.it](http://www.coopculture.it)

**San Clemente**

Rome's most easily accessible mithraeum can be visited on the lowest level of the multi-layered church of San Clemente near the Colosseum. This well-preserved mithraeum dates to the 3rd century and preserves its altar complete with a bas-relief of the tauroctony (pictured left). Open Mon-Sat from 9am-12:30pm and 3-6pm and Sun from 12-6pm. Via Labicana, 95. Free.

**Santa Prisca**

The crypt of this 5th-century church on the Aventine hill contains one of only two frescoed mithraeums in Rome, and the only one currently open to the public. The early 3rd-century wall paintings provide a valuable testimony of all seven stages of initiation. Visits by appointment only, every 2nd and 4th Sunday of the month at 4pm. Via Santa Prisca, 13. Tel 0639967700. €4.50.