

Archaeological and Historical Evidences of the Existence of the Cult of Mithra in Egypt in the Greco-Roman Period

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ABSTRACT

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Mithra or Mithras was one of the most popular deities during the Roman times. The origin of this god is a subject of debate among the scholars; some suggest that it has an Indo-Iranian origin, while others believe that it came originally from Asia Minor. The cult of Mithra was a secret cult; therefore, the evidences of its presence are very humble. The main objective of this study is to represent different archaeological and historical evidences for the existence of the cult of Mithra in Egypt. The descriptive analytical method is employed to review the most important theoretical writings of scholars and their debate over the existence of Mithra in Egypt. This method was useful in studying and interpreting temples, sanctuaries, reliefs and papyri of Mithra in Egypt. The study concludes that despite the common debate over the cult of Mithra, archaeological evidences prove that the presence and worship of Mithra had started most probably from the Persian dynasty of the ancient Egyptian history (252-404 BC), which is the 27th dynasty, and the reason for scarcity of evidences of Mithra in Egypt is due to the fact that Mithra had a secret cult which was not permitted to be practiced publicly. The study has a significance importance as most of the studies focus on studying its archaeological sites in Rome. This study sheds light on the archaeological and historical evidences of Mithras's worship in Egypt, which will have a useful impact on the studies of both Egyptologists and classical scholars.

1 INTRODUCTION

The cult of Mithra was one of the popular religions in the Graeco-Roman world (Corcoran, 1995). There are some ancient sources which mention the cult of Mithra such as ancient Greco-Roman texts and Christian writings which mentioned the cult of the god Mithras or Mithra (Hopfe, 1994). However, what is left to us about the history and the origin of the Mithraic cult is very rare because it was a mystery cult. Moreover, what have survived of papyri, reliefs and texts are considered a subject of conflict and debate among scholars (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014).

Generally, Mithra was considered as a god of open air, light, sky, war, friendship and the sun itself. He was considered the poor man's friend who protected him in afterlife (Olmstead, 1966). The mysteries of Mithra were very popular among soldiers and merchants in the Roman Empire (Hopfe, 1994). It is suggested by some scholars based on some archaeological evidences that the cult of Mithra started in Egypt when Persians conquered it and founded the Persian dynasty (27th dyanasty) of the ancient Egyptian history. Both ancient Egyptians and Persians shared some religious and artistic features. In addition, Aramaeans, Greeks, Jews, Cilicians and Phoenicians lived in Persian Egypt together in harmony. They adopted different foreign deities and worshiped Egyptian gods together with their own deities (Mikolajczak, 2008). That is, Mithra most probably appeared in 1400 BC and continued to around 400 AD after it was crushed by Christianity (Morse, 1999).

This study aims to represent and discuss the discovered archaeological evidences of the presence and worship of the god Mithra since the ancient times in Egypt. It shows different discovered architectural elements, reliefs and papyri of Mithra preserved in different museums in Egypt and around the world to conclude that Mithra was worshipped in different sites of Egypt since the early times.

2 THE CULT OF MITHRA

Little is known about the rituals of the cult of Mithra or the Mithraic religion. It is a mystery cult originated in the Hellenistic world. It was a male religion and the deity himself did not die and rise from the dead. This cult was performed in underground caves and chambers which were called '*mithraea*'. The '*mithraea*' were rectangular sanctuaries provided by 'triclinium' benches on which the believers reclined for the rituals and ceremonies of the god (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014; Hopfe, 1994). The design of Mithra's sanctuary as an underground cave is a symbol of celestial sphere and heaven arch. Running water should also exist inside '*Mithraea*' (Akhondi and Akbari, 2016).

'*Mithraea*' were small in size and could only accommodate a small number of worshippers at onetime (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014; Moore, 1920). It is estimated that there were around 100 '*mithraea*' only in Rome. Several *mithraea* have been discovered accidently by archaeologists also at the north of today's England (Martin, 1989).

Mithras was also identified with the sun as one of the solar deities. Scenes depicted on the walls of some *mithraea* represent a true communion between Mithra and Helios as the two deities sometimes are depicted together as equals. For example, in a relief from Alba Iulia Mithra is represented climbing onto a chariot driven by the god Helios. Thus, Mithra is considered a different solar deity from Helios (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014). However, Mithra was identified with Helios, Apollo and Hermes on the Greek religion (Eckhardt, 2015).

Mithraism was a soldier religion as it was the deity who gave manliness and bravery. Therefore, Mithraism was based on good fellowship and exclusion of women, and widely spread among the Roman soldiers (DeFracisco, 2015).

Mithra was also associated with the Greek god Kronos¹ as the lion-headed figure of Mithra is frequently found in Mithraic temples (Mithraic Kronos) (Von Gall, 1978).

In this regard, it should be mentioned that the knowledge about the cult of Mithra is very limited as only 600 inscriptions have been found and about half of them are fragments. Some of these inscriptions are argumentative inscriptions against Mithraism dating to the 5th century AD. These inscriptions might be copied from Theodore of Mopsuestia who lived in the 5th century AD when Mithraism was ended (DeFrancisco, 2015).

3 THE ORIGIN OF MITHRA

According to some scholars Mithra is of ancient Iranian origins. The ancient Iranian god Mithra was identified with the Indo god Mitra who was mentioned in Vedic hymns. That is, Mithra is considered by many scholars as an Indo - Iranian god of the open air, the sun or maybe he was the sun itself (Olmstead, 1948; Hopfe, 1994). In the 6th century BC, the Zoroastrianism reached Iran and dominated Persia. After the Zoroastrianism the cult of Mithra was reduced to a minor rank among the angels of the god Ahura Mazda the Zoroastrian god of salvation. Therefore, one of the Zoroastrian priests called Magi moved the cult of Mithra to Babylon and Asia Minor (Hopfe, 1994; Morse, 1999). However, Franz Cumont believed that the cult of Mithra was a development of the cult of Ahura Mazda² (Cumont, 1903).

In the first century BC, the cult of Mithras was introduced to the Greek world by the Persians who remained in Asia Minor after the triumph of Alexander the Great (Nock, 1937). Although many scholars suggest that Mithra has a Greek origin, the Mithraism did not flourish in the Greek world (Soudavar, 2014). This fact can be also taken as evidence negates the Greek origins of Mithra.

The conquest of the kingdom of Mithradates or Mithridates VI Eupator (135-63 BC) by the Roman leader Pompey brought the Romans and the Roman troops into regions where Mithra was worshipped (Moore, 1920). It is also possible that the Pirates of Cilicia introduced Mithra to the Roman Empire (Hopfe, 1994). By the end of the first century in the time of Vespasian (69-79 AD), the worship of Mithra spread all over the Roman Empire. It is suggested that the Mithras's cult was carried by soldiers, traders and the Asiatic slaves throughout the empire. The cult reached its peak in the 3rd century AD, and vanished at the end of the 4th century AD in the time of Theodosius. That is, Mithra was worshipped at the same time when Christianity was quite well known and adopted by large number of people (Moore, 1920; Nock, 1937).

Thus, the origin of the cult of Mithra is a subject of debate among the scholars due to the scarcity of the surviving liturgical texts. However, it is possible that this cult

¹. Kronos was the god who ruled the cosmos in the Greek times which is known as Saturn in Roman mythology. He also became as the god time (See: von Gall, 1978).

². **Zoroastrianism** is an old religion began in Steppes in Central Asia in the 2nd century BC. The prophet of this religion is mentioned in the Greek literature as Zoroaster. The faith was the court religion of three Iranian Empires; Achaemenids (550-330 BC), Parthians (247 Bc-224 AD) and Sasanians (224-650AD). This religion is called Mazdaism after the supreme god of this religion Ahura Mazda; the god of salvation (See: SKJÆRVØ, 2011).

originated in the Hellenistic period and reached its peak under the Romans as it was considered the last of the official sun gods of the Roman Empire and, particularly in the third century (Von Gall, 1978).

3.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

David Ulnasey is against the Iranian origin of the god Mithra and he declares that Mithra arose originally from the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor by a group of Sotic philosophers who considered Mithra as an astronomical powerful god. He mentions that Mithra was worshiped by Mithridates VI Eupator (135-63 BC) the last of the rulers of Pontus before the rise of the Roman Empire. Then, a group of pirates spread the Mithraism into the Roman Empire. Ulnasey links the god Mithra with astrology and considers him as a Roman god with only a name of an old divinity (Ulnasey, 1989). That is, although a considerable number of scholars refer that Mithra had an Indo-Iranian origin, there are also some scholars who refuse the theory saying that Roman Mithraism is a continuation of the Iranian Mithra (Ulnasey, 1989).

Some other scholars believe that Mithras has an Iranian origin as it is found in the early Iranian sacred 'Avesta' which is the secret text of the Zoroastrianism (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014). However, Cumont thinks that the cult of Mithra is a blend of ancient Iranian tradition and Roman mythology (Cumont; 1903; Mastrocinque, 2017).

On the other hand, the widespread of *mithraea* in Roman world and the lack of any structure of Mithras in Iran has led some scholars to refer that the cult of Mithra can be dated to the Roman period (Soudavar, 2014).

3.2 ICONOGRAPHY OF MITHRA

Images and representations related to Mithras's cult are extensive because they were considered a very important part of the Mithraic cult. Therefore, iconography of the god Mithra was preserved in the *mithraea* scattered throughout the Roman Empire. He is usually represented as a beautiful young man wearing a Phrygian cap (which has an Iranian origin and later on it was adapted as a Phrygian cap in the representations of Mithra in the Graeco-Roman period). In the central apse of the Roman *mithraeum* Mithras is commonly depicted sacrificing a bull with a dagger and lifting the bull's head by nostrils which is called the tauroctony. This scene always shows a dog and a snake licking the bull's blood. A scorpion holding the bull's testicles is also represented in this scene. (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014; Hopfe, 1994; Morse, 1999). The caves of Mithra were lighted through openings made at the top of the cave (DeFrancisco, 2015). The most significant of the slaying action of the god was considered important for the salvation of the world (Ogawa, 1978).

The second important representation of Mithra is the banquet scene. Sometimes the two scenes are representing on the both sides of one relief. This scene represents Mithra and the son god "Sol" banqueting on the slaughtered bull and setting on its skin (Beck, 2007).

There is also another representation of Mithra always occupies the central scene of a *mithraeum* which depicts the sun in the upper left corner and the moon in the upper right corner. Two young men represent Mithras wearing similar dress and the

Phrygian caps appear below two torchbearers. The scene tells us the names of these torchbearers; one called *Cautes* who holds the torch pointing up while the other called *Cautopates* holds the torch downwards. This scene often shows a flying raven and rarely has a lion and a cup (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014).

Some Roman *mithraea* contain some other small scenes flanking the above mentioned main scenes representing the Mithra's mythical life with the zodiac signs (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014). The ceilings of Mithra's caves were usually painted in blue colour with shiny stars which represent the heaven (Hopfe, 1994).

The birth scene of Mithra was also represented in an independent image in the temples of Mithra. The birth scene often appears in one of the panels representing Mithra's legend (Ogawa, 1978).

Mithraism was a masculine cult with no representation of any female figure. However, the finding of female statues in some *mithraea* in England, Germany and Rome lead to a debate over the male dominance of the cult of Mithras (Ulansey, 1989).

4 MITHRA'S LITURGY

There are no written texts about the rituals and rites of the Mithraic cult have survived. Since the Mithra's cult was a mystery, the secret knowledge was never recorded by his worshipers. Thus, the Mithra's rites have reached to us from the iconography of the god. The most important relief in every discovered *mithraeum* depicts Mithra slaughtering the bull by stabbing its neck (Morse, 1999; Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014). The scene always represents a snake, dog, scorpion and a raven present in one scene. In Iranian religion, the bull is a symbol of the cosmic force of evil. On the other hand, one of the interpretations of this scene in the Roman Mithraic cult considers sacrificing a bull is a symbol of the life cycle, fertilization, creation, regeneration and salvation as the bull's blood gives fertility to the land and immortality to the participants in the ceremony (Betz, 1968). This interpretation based on the fact that some bull's sacrificing scenes represent the tail of the bull as an ear of wheat which is considered an allegory of the life cycle and regeneration. Some other scholars identified the scene with the constellations located in the sky; the bull is paralleled with Taurus, the snake with that of Hydra, the dog with Canis Minor, the raven with Corvus and the scorpion with that of Scorpio (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014). The underground *mithraeum* itself represents the cosmos. In regards to the torchbearers; the one who holds the torch upwards represents the sun itself while the one who holds it downwards represents the night. According to other theory, the scene of the torchbearers might represents life and death, east and west or the rising and the setting sun (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014).

The panels surrounding the central scene show the child Mithra being born from an egg-shaped rock which might represent the embryonic world (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014). On the other hand, according to Zoroastrianism, Mithra was born from a virgin mother called Anahita when she was washing in Hamun Lake (Akhondi and Akbari, 2016). The arc of the zodiac is sometimes depicted with Mithra while he is riding the

back of the bull in the sacrificing scene which represents the *mithraeum* as a cosmic cave (Cuadrado & Mozota, 2014).

5 SPREAD OF THE CULT OF MITHRA

During the Roman times, different religions and cults came from the East and rooted in Rome such as the faith of Isis and Osiris from Egypt and Mithra from Persia. The Romans knew Mithra or Mithras around the 1st century AD from Silica pirates in Asia Minor who tried to spread the cult of Mithras in different parts of the world at that time (Akhondi & Akbari, 2016).

Many discovered coins from Rome dated to the 2nd century AD bear the representation of Mithra slaughtering a cow. (Akhondi & Akbari, 2016). Archaeological evidences discovered in many places reveal a religion widespread in the whole Roman Empire from the second to the fourth centuries AD. Remains of paintings, sculpting, dedicatory plaques and *mithraea* are found in Rome, Germany, England and Roman Syria (Hopfe, 1994). The study of Mithra and the evidences of its existing and worship is based on three main sources; the Iranian and Indian archaeological texts, the Greaco-Roman texts and the inscriptions from the Mithra's caves (Mastrocinique, 2017).

There was over a hundred of *mithraea* scattered in the city of Rome as it was mentioned above which indicates that Rome was the centre of the cult of Mithra. Moreover, a considerable number of Mithra's temples were built by the followers through the Roman Empire such as in Roman Africa, Roman Britain and Roman Syria. It is said that in the 4th century Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363 AD) had an inner tendency towards the cult of Mithras and built a temple dedicated to the cult of Mithra inside his palace although he was a Christian. However, archaeological traces of Mithra represent severe violence made by early Christians to end paganism such as the destruction Mithraic temples or even their conversion into churches. In the *mithraeum* at Pons Saravi (Saar burg) in Gaul there are evidences show signs of burning and a skeleton of a man with his hands tied back (Nicholson, 1995).

5.1 MITHRA IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

A number of scholars suggest that the Mithraic cult is an ancient mystery religion started in the Roman Empire since the 1st to the 4th century AD. At the time of the Roman Emperor Nero (54-68 AD), Mithra began to be among the official divinities. Then, the Emperors Commodus (177-192 AD) and Valerian (253-260AD) initiated and worshipped Mithra publicly. Diocletian (284-305 AD), Galerius (305-311AD) and Licinius (308-324 AD) built a temple dedicated to Mithra on the Danube (DeFrancisco, 2015). The end of Mithraism was in the 4th century AD after the decree of Theodosius I (379-395) in 391AD when he banned all pagan religions announcing Christianity as the official religion of the whole Empire (DeFrancisco, 2015). Mithraism was protected by the nobilities of Rome till the 4th century AD when Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity as the official religion of the whole empire. At that time all other pagan cults were prohibited and all temples including Mithra were closed. At that time most of the Mithra's worshippers were converted into Christianity (Akhondi and Akbari, 2016).

That is, Mithraism was one of the most popular cults during the first few centuries of the Roman Empire. The cult of Mithras reached its peak of popularity when Christianity also reached its top of power. It was practiced by Persians, Indians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans (Morse, 1999). The main sources of information about the cult of Mithras came from the inscriptions in a Mithra's sanctuary which was discovered under the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome (Betz, 1968).

6 EVIDENCES FOR THE CULT OF MITHRA IN EGYPT

Persians conquered Egypt in the 6th century BC and founded the 27th dynasty of ancient Egyptian history. Persians respected different deities of the lands they conquered. Persian rulers followed same ancient Egyptian royal traditions to participate in religious rituals ancient temples. They depicted themselves as Pharaohs with different Pharaonic royal titles and attributes. On the other hand, the official religion of the conquered lands should have considered the Persian religion too (Mikolajczak, 2008). Therefore, there are several evidences that emphasize the acknowledgement of the different Egyptian deities. However, the evidences of the worship of Persian deities are few. If we consider the Iranian origin of the god Mithra, there are discovered evidences for the existence of the cult of Mithra in ancient and Ptolemaic period in Egypt as it is mentioned in the following pages (Mikolajczak, 2008). That is, the cult of Mithra could have been introduced into Egypt long time before the Roman period.

Moreover, there are archaeological and historical evidences for the presence of the cult of Mithra or Mithras in Roman Egypt. In 1986, the late archaeologist Gary Lease suggested that the present of Mithra in Egypt was very humble. He considered the widespread of the worshipping of Mithra throughout the Roman Empire and its humble presence in Roman Egypt is such a surprising thing (Martin, 2015).

The following lines show that there are some archaeological evidences were discovered in Egypt indicate the existing of Mithra's cult throughout the whole country since the early times.

6.1 THE "GREAR MAGICAL PAPYRUS OF PARIS"

The 'Great Magical Papyrus of Paris' which preserved now in Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris bears the number (1073) and most probably was found in Thebes in Egypt. It is categorized as a 4th century magical codex. It contains the Greek name of Mithras (Μίθραϛ) and some details of Mithra's Liturgy. The papyrus came from a collector called Giovanni Anastasi¹ (1780-1857 AD) (Betz, 2003; Emondos, 2014).

The magical papyrus is 36 leaves and has 3274 lines on both sides. It has a Coptic part which might have been added to the papyrus in a later time. In regards to Mithra's Liturgy part; it has been divided by scholars into two sections; the

¹. Giovanni Anastasi was the son of an Armenian merchant lived in Alexandria and Thebes for more than 18 years. In 1828, Giovanni was appointed by the Pasha as the Consul General in Egypt to Norway and Sweden. Thus, he occupied a high position in politics, business and also as a collector of Egyptian antiquities. He sent several pieces of the treasures he collected to Europe for auctions in Paris and London. Among his collection were 60 papyri, one of them was called 'Great Magical Papyrus' (Betz, 2003; Emondos, 2014)

immortalization and the instructions for the magical application of the liturgy of the god Mithras (Betz, 2003). The magic spell occupies lines from 475 to 834 of the codex labelled number (4) in Preisendanz's collection which is a group of magical papyri dating back from the 3rd century BC to the 4th century AD (Emondos, 2014).

The papyrus is in a good condition as it is believed that it came from the library of a priest and magician that was buried with him in his tomb in a large terracotta jar. Generally, the magic papyri were served as 'handbook' for the magicians in ancient times. The finding of this papyrus in Thebes doesn't mean that it had been written in Thebes. That is, it might have been written at any other place in Egypt and used by the magicians of Thebes. Thus, it is possible that 'Mithras Liturgy' including the ritual texts had been shared among the magicians in different parts of Egypt (Betz, 2003).

The date of this papyrus is a subject of debate among the scholars. It has been estimated that it took around 200 years for the composition of its parts to be completed and joined together. Therefore, the papyrus contains some older and some newer parts. The text is Egyptian- Hellenistic with no traces of Gnostic-Christian or Christian. It has been suggested that the original text is dating back to 100-200 BC, followed by the text of the Egyptian Mithra's liturgy which is according to some scholars dating back to the years 150-200 AD and the development done by the magicians dating to the years 200- 300 AD (Betz, 2003).

There are different points of views among scholars regarding this papyrus and its date; some suggest that the text is an expression of the fully developed religion Mithraism such as such as Marvin Meyer, while others against this theory such as Franz Cumont who refuses any connection between the cult of Mithra and the text of this papyrus. Hanz Betz sees the papyrus represents Greek, Egyptian and Mithraic traditions. Betz identified the Mithraic and liturgical aspects of the text of the papyrus. He concluded that the Mithraic Liturgy had a precious place among the religious and philosophical traditions in the Graeco-Roman Egypt (Betz, 2003).

Dieterich suggested that the original text of the "Liturgy of Mithra" was a liturgy of the mysteries of the god Mithra which had been transformed to a magical papyrus (Meyer, 2012).

Based on the scholar's opinions mentioned above, it can be concluded that despite the different opinions about the date of this papyrus and some of its details, its discovery in Egypt and the mention of the name of Mithra and its liturgy confirm the existence of the worship of Mithra in Egypt in the Greco-Roman era.

6.2 ELEPHANTINE ISLAND

A papyrus discovered in Elephantine Island and preserved now in Brooklyn Museum (47.218.89) in Germany emphasizes the presence of some Persian priests in Upper Egypt. The papyrus documents a donation made by a Jewish man named Ananiah to

his wife, Tamet, who was an Egyptian slave. It is dating to 434 BC¹ (Porten, 2011) and contains the names of some Persian gods including Mithra which represents the existing of the cult of Mithra in this region (Mikolajczak, 2008) (Fig.1).



Fig. 1. Brooklyn Museum Papyri from Elphantine Island. After: Porten, B. 2011.

That is to say, this period was characterised by the presence of many different divinities, communities and cultures in Elephantine Island. Mithra was known and existing in Egypt from time of the Achaemenid periods (525-404 BC and 343-332 BC) (Kuhrt, 2010).

6.3 MITHRA IN ALEXANDRIS

a. The temple of Mithra on the Akropolis

Cambyses II (530-522 BC), the first Persian ruler of Egypt, tried to take advantage of the mistakes committed by the Assyrians through their rule of Egypt. Therefore, he tried to create a kind of bond with the Egyptians by taking royal Egyptian titles and respecting the Egyptian deities and rituals. Persians also brought their divinities to Egypt and worshipped them (Olmstead, 1948).²

In the 4th century, Theodosius gave the final blow to paganism by his decree; he forbade all traditional worship of all previous deities and ordered all ancient temples to be destroyed. He gave the task of destroying the temples of Alexandria to patriarch Theophilus who was the governor of Alexandria. Theophilus started a campaign of destroying the ancient pagan temples and shrines. He also converted some of them into churches (Martin, 1989; Kamil, 1968).

A sanctuary dedicated to the god Mithra in Alexandria was abandoned in 361 AD when Christians decided to cleanse it. That was in the time of the Roman Emperor

¹. There was a Jewish community in Elphantine Island during the first Persian period in Egypt (525-404 BC) the "Achaemenid Egypt" (See: Kuhrt, 2010, pp.474-475).

². The Persian period is considered the most controversial period in the Egyptian history. It was subjected to distortion by the Greek writers. Although Cambyses tried to get close to the Egyptians by respecting their deities, beliefs and rituals, he committed some brutal actions such as stabbing the sacred deity Apis and burying him in the Serapeum, as well as the looting of the treasures of ancient Egyptian temples in Thebes (see: Kuhrt, 2010; Olmstead, 1948)

Julian the Apostate who was the first neo-pagan Emperor. Thus, this temple of Mithra was once stood on the hill of Akropolis near the great temple of the god Serapis the *Serapeum* as a statue of Mithra was discovered in that site and preserved now in the Graeco- Roman museum in Alexandria which is closed now for restoration (Kadous, 2000, Alexandria). Bishop George; the Arian bishop of Alexandria (356-361 AD) decided to convert the temple into a Christian church. However, sources mentioned that Bishop George was faced by the fanatical fury of the pagans of Alexandria to stop his attempt to build the church (Davis, 1957). Therefore, the temple was not cleared till the time of Patriarch Theophilus (385-412) (Nicholson, 1995).

b. The Monastery of St. Savvas the Sanctified in Alexandria

St. Savvas was born in 439 in a city called Mutalaska of Cappadocia, Turkey. His parents left to the city of Alexandria to serve in the military. St. Savvas chose the monastic life at the age of seventeen. Then, he moved to St. Theoctistus` coenobitic monastery where he lived till the age of thirty. Then, he was given a blessing to live in the wilderness as a hermit for about five years (Ganosn, 2018).

The Melkite Patriarch Euty chius of Alexandria Sa`id Ibn Batriq (877-940 AD) states that in the 8th century the Christian Melkites prayed in the church of St. Savvas in Alexandria. It had been recorded that the monastery had been restored many times (Ebeid, 2016).

Edward Forster stated that the monastery of St. Savvas the Sanctified which started as a large church dedicated to the Patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria was built on the same area of the temple of the god Apollo or Mithra in the 4th century AD. It is located in the northern part of Canopic street; now the Attarine Mosque occupies part of its site (Froster, 1922).¹

6.4 MITHRA IN FAYUM REGION

In Graeco-Roman times of Egypt there was a strong presence of Greeks in Fayum region. At that time, Greek literature was introduced into the villages of Fayum. Moreover, there were a large numbers of temples and priests interpreted the great variety of texts found in the Fayum. That is, Fayum gained great importance in Ptolemaic and early Roman period (Van Minnen, 1998).

Two Greek papyri from the 3rd century BC are found at Gurob in Fayum region². They contain evidence of the existence of some temples of Mithra (*mithraea*) in Egypt. These papyri witnessed the continuation of the cult of Mithra till a period later than the Persian domination of Egypt (Martin, 2015; Mikolajczak, 2008).

From 1924 to 1935 Karanis at Fayum was excavated by the Egyptian Exploration society and then by Michigan University. Some structures and a large collection of

¹. Monks started to build their cells around the ancient church and they began a monastery in the area. In the 7th century, the monastery was destroyed by an earthquake and rebuilt by the wealthy Alexandrian St. Savvas (See: Froster, 1922).

². A total of twenty literary texts were discovered in Gurob. They are dating back to the 3rd and the 2nd century BC. (See: Vanminnen, Boorish or Bookish? Literature in Egyptian Villages in the Fayum in the Graeco-Roman Period, The Journal of Juristic Papyrology, 1998,p.106-107).

papyri were discovered during the excavations. One of these discovered structures there was identified as a Mithraeum. Although there are some theories against this identification and considered the structure was for the ancient Egyptian crocodile god of Karanis (Van Minnen, 1998), the discovery of papyri containing the name of Mithra is considered a strong evidence of the existence of Mithra's cult in this region.

6.5 MITHRA IN MEMPHIS

A Greek papyrus of the 3rd century BC from Memphis attested the word "*mithraeum*" in the sense "fire temple of Mithra" which was a construction dating to the Persian times of Egypt (525-404 and 343-32 BC) (Richard, 2016). It is suggested that a Persian temple of Mithra was constructed in Memphis and continued to be used till the Roman times (Harris, 1996).¹ The architectural elements the Mithraic temple in Mit-Raheina was discovered accidentally in 1857 during the British Occupation of Egypt. Dorothy Thompson suggests that the temple mentioned in the papyrus sounds Memphite and Memphis would be the most plausible place for a temple dedicated to Mithra. He added that that temple was Persian and never reused by Romans (Thompson, 1988). Richard Foltz suggests that the temple is dating to the 5th century BC, and he believes that Mithra was one of the supreme deities during the early Achaemenid times of Egypt but its cult was restricted to the military (Foltz, 2013).

On the other hand, Franz Cumont described the discovery of a temple dedicated to Mithra at Memphis as an exception as Mithra has not been mentioned in any Egyptian or Assyrian texts. However, he considered this temple as evidence confirming the existence of the cult of Mithra in Memphis at least since the Roman times (Cumont, 1903).

Moreover, Michaélidis suggests the existence of a sanctuary dedicated to the god Mithra from the 5th century BC in Mit-Raheina near Memphis. In his theory he based on the discovering of a small figure of a bull in the same site (Michaélidis, 1943). This theory has been reinforced by another theory belongs to Dandamaev; who suggests that "Memphis Stela" most probably belonged to a *mithraeum* was found in the village of Mit-Raheina (Mikolajczak, 2008). However, other scholars doubted the existence of a *mithraeum* in Memphis at that early times and thought that the evidences of Michaélidis and Dandamaev are not enough to assume that there was a temple dedicated to Mithra in Memphis and connected the discovered bull figurine to the ancient cult of Apis rather than the Mithra's cult as Memphis was the centre of the cult of Apis (Mikolajczak, 2008).

The discovering of three Roman reliefs representing the scene of slaying a bull, which is the most common representation of Mithra in Mit-Raheina near Memphis is considered one of the strongest evidence of the existence of the cult of Mithra and its worship in Memphis at least from the Roman times. These pieces are displayed now in the Graeco-Roman section of Egyptian Museum in Cairo (Fig.5) (Martin, 2015). The first piece is a marble relief which was sent to the Egyptian Museum in 1940

¹. There has been a kind of confusion between these papyri and the papyri discovered in Fayum region.

(No.85747) represents Mithra with a tunic and red cloak slaughtering the bull. The head and the right arm are missing in this relief. The snake is represented on the ground and the dog near the blood of the bull. The scorpion is also represented as usual in all Mithra's scenes holding the bull's testicles. A raven is shown on the left top and a bust comes out of the rock (Saturn). On both sides of this piece are two columns decorated with Cautes and Cautopates with their torches. On the upper corners of this piece there are two representations; one of Sol in nimbus and the radiated crown, while the other representation is for Luna with the crescent (Harris, 1996) (Fig.2).

The second relief of Mithra is made of limestone and exists in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (No. 7259). In this relief Mithra is represented slaughtering a small bull. In this relief the Mithra's head and right arm also have got lost. The dog is clearly seen running towards the wound, while the scorpion is not clearly visible in this relief. At the top corners, there are two representations of "Sol" with the nimbus on the left and "Luna" with the crescent on the right. It is suggested that this piece was plastered into a wall or even was an initial sketch as the border of the rock is painted red (Harris, 1996) (Fig.3)



Fig.2. Marble relief of Mithra slaughtering a bull, Egyptina Museum, Cairo.



Fig.3. Limestone relief of Mithra slaughtering the bull, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (After: Cumont,F. 1899).

The Third piece of Cairo Museum (No.7260) is a limestone relief representing Mithra wearing the Phrygian cap and slaying the bull. The relief is in a bad condition, but the dog and the scorpion can be seen, while the raven is no longer present (Harris, 1996) (Figs.4,5).

The discovering of these pieces of the god Mithra led some archaeologists to suggest that there is a Roman *mithraeum* most probably from the 4th century still exists beneath the cultivated land of Memphis. Although some researchers claim that these reliefs were discovered in Hermopolis and mistakenly attributed to Memphis, there is no evidence to confirm their claim (Martin, 2015). Thus, it can be said that the discovery of these archaeological pieces in Memphis is considered a sufficient evidence to prove the existence of Mithra's cult in this region at least since the Roman period.



Fig.4. Limestone relief representing Mithra with the Phrygian cap and slaying the bull, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (After: Cumont,F. 1899).



Fig.5. Pieces of Mithra in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Graeco-Roman section.

6.6 MITHRA IN HERMOPOLIS MAGNA

In 1906 a collection of papyri dating to the 4th century AD was discovered in Hermopolis (Eshmunein in modern times) and preserved now in Berlin. A fragment of a partly damaged papyrus was identified as a part of a codex because of the identical writing on both sides of the papyrus. It contains a dialogue of initiation into

a mystery cult. The presence of the rare word “leontion” which means a little lion and mentioned in Mithraic inscriptions as one of the grades of the Mithraic hierarchy is called “Leo”. Moreover, the presence of the term “bothros” which means a trench also connects the codex to the cult of Mithra. Based on that, William Brashear connects confidently the text of the papyrus to the Mithra’s cult in Egypt. He suggests that the presence of the term “bothros” may be another evidence of the connection of this papyrus with a *mithreum*. He published the papyri collection in 1992 under the title “A Mithraic Catechism from Egypt” and he suggests that this codex might have been prepared for a *mithraeum* (Brashear, 1992) (Figure.6).

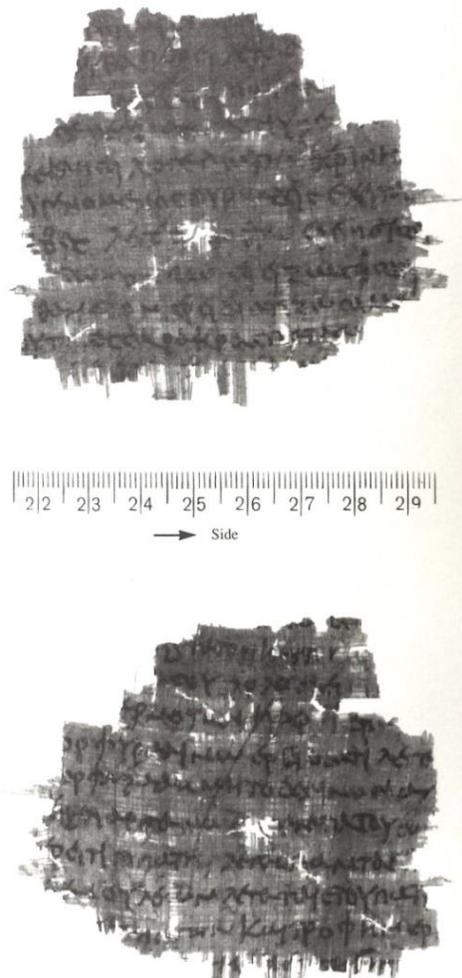


Fig.6. A portion of a Codex containing the name of Mithra, Berlin. (After: Brashear,1992, p. 2 plates)

In 1919 the tomb of Petosisiris was discovered in Tuna El-Gebel (the burial site of Hermopolis) and dating back to the reign of Ptolemy I (323 – 285 BC) (Lembke, 2014). According to some scholars, the tomb of Petosisiris is considered a useful case study of memories of the Second Persian Period (Colburn, 2015). A painted inscription can be seen on one of the engaged columns near the entrance of the tomb

which commemorates the visit of the slaves of *Mithraeum* to the sanctuary of Petosiris. The inscription is dated to the 3rd century BC and represents that Persians paid homage to Petosiris.¹ The mention of the Mithron's name suggests the existence of the worship of the Persian deity "Mithra" in Hermopolis (Venit, 2015).

Two paintings represent two zodiacs were discovered on the ceilings of the inner and outer rooms of the tomb of Petosiris in the 20th century. The planets in these zodiacs are symbolised by bust portraits which is unusual in the Egyptian zodiacs. Some scholars connected these zodiacs to the cult of Mithra. They based on the symbolic meanings of the planets and consultations related to Mithra (Fomenko et al., 2004) (Figs.7,8).

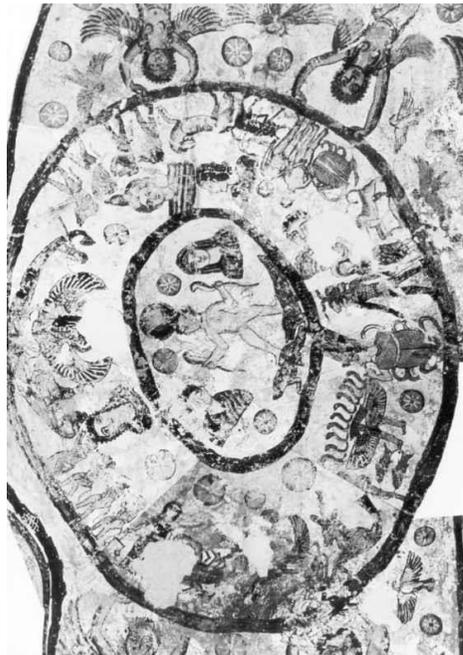


Fig.7. The Zodiac in the inner room of the Petosiris tomb. (After: Fomenko et al, 2004, p.40).

¹ . In the 3rd century BC, the tomb of Petosiris became a pilgrimage centre and visitors left their inscriptions on its walls. (See: Lembke, K. (2010), Petosiris-Necropolis Of Tuna El-Gebel, In Tradition and Transformation, Egypt Under Roman Rule, Proceedings of the International Conference, Hildesheim, Roemer- and Pelizaeus-Museum, 3-6 July 2008, Cultural and History of the Ancient Near East, vol. 41, Brill)

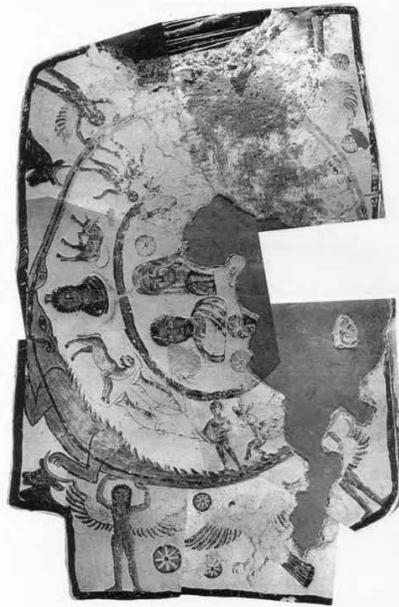


Fig.8. The Zodiac in the outer room of the Petosiris tomb. (After: Fomenko, et al, 2004, p.41).

Four discovered reliefs of slaying a bull (described above) were discovered in Memphis; three of them are displayed now in Egyptian Museum in Cairo, while the fourth one is displayed in Berlin Museum. Some researchers suggest that they were discovered in Hermopolis and mistakenly attributed to Memphis such as Cumont who states “the quality of sculpture represents that they came from Hermopolis” (Cumont, 1903; Martin, 2015).

Despite of the debate among the researchers over the exact location of the discovery of the reliefs of the deity Mithra, it can be said that the presence of a painted inscription related Mithra on one of the engaged columns in Petosiris tomb in Tuna El-Gebel is considered an evidence of the existence of the cult of Mithra in Hermopolis.

7 CONCLUSION

Mithra or Mithras was one of the popular deities in ancient times. It was considered the god of light, open air, war, sky and sun. He was considered as the poor man’s friend who protected him in afterlife. The mysteries of Mithra were very popular among soldiers and merchants in the Roman Empire

The origin and history of the cult of Mithra is a subject of debate among the scholars because of the scarcity of the archaeological and historical evidences. This scarcity of the evidence of Mithra is due to the fact that it was a secret cult and not allowed to be practiced publically. Therefore, some scholars state that the Mithraic cult appeared for the first time in the Greek world by the Persians who remained in Asia Minor after the triumph of Alexander the Great. Then, in the 4th century BC, the cult of Mithra reached the Roman world and widespread there till the 4th century AD. A

considerable number of scholars believe that Mithra or Mithras has an Indo-Iranian origin.

In Egypt, the cult of Mithra probably was started since the Persian period of the Egyptian history (525-404 BC). However, there are some discovered archaeological and historical evidences prove the presence of the cult of Mithra in Egypt from the Greco-Roman era. A papyrus discovered in Elephantine Island in Aswan from 434 BC and preserved now in Brooklyn Museum contains some names of Persian deities including the name of Mithra.

Moreover, in Alexandria, some sources mention a sanctuary of the god Mithra which was abandoned in 361 AD. It has been also recorded that the monastery of St. Savvas in Alexandria was built on the same site of a temple dedicated to the god Mithra or Apollo from the 4th century AD.

There are some discovered papyri also representing the existence of the cult of Mithra in Egypt such as the “Great Magical Papyrus of Paris” which was found in Luxor and contains the name of Mithra. According to most of the scholars, this papyrus is dating back to the 100-200 AD. In addition, A Greek papyrus of the 3rd century BC from Memphis attested the word “*mithraeum*” which indicates that there was a temple dedicated to the Persian Mithra in Memphis. The four reliefs representing Mithra slaying the bull discovered in Mit-Rahina near Memphis are considered the most important evidences of the existence of the cult of Mithra in this region at least from the Roman period.

A collection of papyri dating back to the 4th century AD was also discovered in Hermopolis and preserved now in Berlin. A fragment of a partly damaged papyrus had been identified as a part of a codex relating to a mystery cult which is most probably the cult of Mithra.

In conclusion, the presence and worship of the deity of Mithra was in all over Egypt from the ancient times. The cult of Mithra in Egypt probably was from the Persian dynasty of the ancient Egyptian history (252-404 BC). However, most of the scholars date the cult of Mithra in Egypt back to the Graeco-Roman era. The reason for scarcity and the lack of knowledge about this deity is due to the fact that the cult of Mithra was a mystery religion and there are no written texts about the rituals and rites of the Mithraic cult have survived

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الأدلة الأثرية والتاريخية على وجود وعبادة الإله ميثرا في مصر في العصر اليوناني الروماني

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الملخص

يعتبر المعبود ميثرا أحد أشهر المعبودات في العصر الروماني. تعددت الآراء حول أصل هذا الإله؛ فبينما يرى البعض أنه من أصل هندي إيراني يرى البعض الآخر أنه أتى من آسيا الصغرى. كانت عبادة ميثرا عبادة سرية؛ لذلك فإن الأدلة الأثرية الدالة على وجود هذا المعبود وأماكن عبادته متواضعة للغاية مما آثار جدلاً واسعاً بين المتخصصين. إن الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو عرض الأدلة الأثرية التي تثبت وجود وانتشار عبادة ميثرا في مصر على الأقل منذ العصر اليوناني الروماني. استخدم الباحث في هذه الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي من خلال مراجعة وتحليل أهم الكتابات النظرية لمختلف العلماء ومناقشتهم حول وجود المعبود ميثرا في مصر؛ وهي طريقة أثبتت فاعليتها في شرح المعابد، والآثار القديمة، والنقوش، والبرديات الخاصة بالمعبود ميثرا والتي اكتشفت في مصر. خلصت الدراسة إلى أنه على الرغم من الجدل الشائع حول عبادة ميثرا في مصر وأماكن تواجدها، إلا أن الأدلة الأثرية تثبت أن وجود وعبادة ميثرا كان على الأرجح منذ عصر الأسرة الفارسية في مصر (الأسرة السابعة والعشرين)، وأن وسبب ندرة الأدلة الأثرية الخاصة بميثرا في مصر يرجع إلى حقيقة أنها كانت عبادة سرية حيث لم يكن مسموحاً بممارستها علناً. إن هذه الدراسة لها أهمية كبيرة في مجال البحث العلمي حيث تركز معظم الدراسات على دراسة المواقع الأثرية لميثرا في روما ولا يوجد كتابات كافية حول عبادة ميثرا وانتشارها في مصر؛ لذلك تلقي هذه الدراسة الضوء على الأدلة الأثرية والتاريخية لميثرا في مصر؛ والتي سيكون لها أثر إيجابي على دراسات علماء المصريين والباحثين الكلاسيكيين على حد سواء.

معلومات المقالة

الكلمات المفتاحية

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