

The mithraeum at Lucus Augusti (Hispania Tarraconensis).

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The University of Santiago de Compostela (Galicia) has a campus in Lugo, ancient *Lucus Augusti*, a well-known Roman town with extraordinary ramparts of the Roman period and several archaeological remains. To accommodate the Vice-chancellor's office, the University acquired an old *pazo*, a manor house, belonging to the Montenegro family. The proximity of the Roman wall suggested that it would be as well to explore the immediate area. This exploration led to the discovery of a Roman *domus*, which existed continuously from the beginnings of the Christian Era until the Late Empire. During the period corresponding to Level IV.c, part of this *domus* was remodelled to create a room identified as a mithraeum. During the period corresponding to Level V.c, new structures suggest that its ritual use came to an end at that time. In terms of absolute chronology, Level IV.c can be dated to the early 3rd century A.D.; Level V.c corresponds to the end of the same century. Around 260 A.D. the *domus* was almost completely destroyed in the course of re-building the city wall. Nevertheless the mithraeum remained in use for a further 60 years or more.

The mithraeum seems therefore to have been constructed at the beginning of the 3rd century and, to judge from the numismatic evidence, have continued in use as a religious centre for its community until the mid 4th century. Indeed, with a single adventitious exception (a coin of Hadrian was found in the northern area, where modern constructions had altered the stratigraphy), all the coins found in the course of the excavation belong to the period AD 250-350.

The mithraeum structures, totally new in the complex, appear in the highest part of the area, and for that reason have suffered more alteration than other excavated parts. Apparently the upper part of the building was destroyed in the course of excavating the foundations of the Vice-chancellor's office. It had previously been damaged during the construction of the city wall in the mid third century (ca AD 260). The structure is rectangular, some 15.7 m long x 7m wide, with a central corridor bordered on each side by five equidistant pillars of uncertain height. It is plausible to suppose that they supported the lateral podia which served as *triclinia* for the members of the community (and perhaps also the roof). There are no other architectonic elements to connect this building with the cult of Mithras. Indeed, no cult niche could be located. Between the

fourth and fifth pillars from the South wall (where it can be assumed that the entrance was, facing the now lost cult-niche), two parallel walls narrow the central aisle; in its centre at this point, there was a low base constructed of bricks. Other evidence, to be described later, makes it clear that the main *ara* was located on this platform. Behind it was probably located the cult-niche with a statue or relief of Mithras killing the bull, but there are no archaeological traces of it because of the intrusion of modern building work. The main door was probably located in the façade opposite the niche, as usual, but no remains of it could be located, just some structures identified as a sort of a narthex or ante-room. The superficial area of the cella is around 110 sq. m, but some of the adjoining rooms may have belonged to the same complex for ritual purposes or service needs.

Inside the shrine two inscriptions were found. The first is a rectangular block of granite 60 cm. long, 35 cm. high and 25 cm. deep. The epigraphic area is seriously damaged, as only the first 20 cm. of each line are legible. The reading of the beginning of each line is sure:

IO [
SACE[
·LVS[
IT[

In the first line there is no trace of an M, so the hypothesis IO[M cannot be adopted. In the second line it is clear that the beginning of the word is *sace-* but, since the length of the word is unknown, we cannot decide between the various alternatives, *sacer-* (*sacerdos/sacerdotalis*) or *sacellum*. The first mark in the third line is an *interpunctio*, followed by three letters. Its position in the epigraphical field does not permit the suggestion *libens votum solvit*; we would prefer to interpret it as the initial letters of the word *lustrum* or *lustratio*. The fourth line contains only the letters IT[-, and there is little point in trying to offer supplements. Amid all the uncertainties, we seem to be justified in claiming that this fragmentary text is related to the ritual of the cult either by the staff (*sacerdos*), by the activities performed there (*lustratio*, *votum*) or by the sacral character of the site (*sacellum*).

The second text is inscribed in a granite *ara* in an excellent state of conservation. It is 93,5 cm high, 36,3 cm wide and 23,5 deep; letters are 4 cm high and the epigraphic field is 63,5 x 31,5. The text can be read as follows:

INVIC(to) MITHRAE

C(aius) VICTORIVS VIC-
 TORINVS (Centurio) L(egionis) VII G(eminae)
 ANTONINIANAE P(iae) F(elicis)
 INHONOREM STA-
 TIONIS LVCENSIS
 ET VICTORIORVM
 SECVNDI ET VIC-
 TOR(is) LIB(ertorum) SVOR-
 VM ARAM PO-
 SVIT LIBENTI
 ANIMO (hedera)

Translation: “To the never-conquered god Mithras, C. Victorius Victorinus, centurion of the 7th Legion, Gemina, Antoniniana, Dutiful and Loyal, gladly erected (this) altar in honour of the Military Post of Lucus (Augusti) and of his two freedmen, Victorius Secundus and Victorius Victor.”

This document is of great importance because of its implications for several aspects of the cult of Mithras in the Iberian Peninsula. The epithet *Antoniniana* for *Legio VII* gives a solid argument to date the inscription in the reign of Caracalla (rather than Elagabalus). Indeed, we can assume that the altar was made between 212 and 218, which fits the date assigned to the archaeological remains of the mithraeum. So far, only two Mithraic monuments in Hispania could confidently be dated to the third century AD: the triptych from Tróia, Portugal (CIMRM 798) and the inscription of San Juan de Isla, Asturias (CIMRM 803). This situation changes with the discovery of the mithraeum at *Lucus Augusti*. Other cults of oriental origin such as that of Sarapis have produced several monuments of the third century, many of them in a polytheistic and syncretistic context, under the aegis of important imperial officers. We can assume that the cult of Mithras was promoted in the same way. Admittedly, no indubitable evidence survives; but in *Asturica Augusta* several inscriptions dedicated to Sol Invictus, among other deities, have been found. It has usually been supposed that the deities mentioned by these representatives of the Emperor were their own personal choice, based on their own career and the places where they had served. Consequently, such evidence should not be used to interpret the religious history of the town where the inscription was

discovered. The population had probably its own pantheon, with no shrines for the deities honoured by imperial officers.

The inscription of Lucus Augusti could be interpreted in this way, stressing the lack of relation between the city pantheon and Victorius Victorinus' Mithras. On the other hand, the fact that the altar was found in a mithraeum suggests some continuity between the centurion's personal belief and that of a wider social group. The implication may be that we need to be more flexible and open-minded and entertain the possibility that other officers could have expressed their devotional feelings in temples erected in the cities in which they are working for the Empire. The sanctuary of Sarapis in Panòias (Portugal) is quite suggestive here: it shows a *procurator* constructing a shrine of a foreign cult in his official post. Similarly, the Sol Invictus texts from Asturica Augusta may indicate the existence of a mithraeum there.

The inscription set up by C. Victorius Victorinus re-emphasizes a well-known feature of the cult of Mithras, its relation to the later Antonines. But its most important contribution is to draw attention to a feature of the cult in Hispania that has hitherto been largely ignored, namely the connection between the army and the spread of the cult of Mithras. In Emerita Augusta sixty years before, M. Valerius Secundus, *frumentarius* of the same legion, helped the *pater* C. Accius Hedychrus furnish the first mithraeum in the capital city of Lusitania (CIMRM 793). Perhaps he was a *centurio frumentarius*, but he does not specify his rank further, so he was presumably on detachment from the office of the provincial governor of Tarraconensis. If we are to point to a link between Victorinus in Lucus Augusti and Secundus in Emerita, it would have to be the important city of Legio VII (modern León), despite the fact that up to now no Mithraic evidence has been found there.

No other epigraphical document connects the army and the cult of Mithras in Hispania. That is the reason why, until now, we have assumed other motivations for the introduction and spread of the cult in the Iberian Peninsula. Even though it is half a century later, Victorinus' inscription seems to suggest a much stronger connection between Mithras and the army than has hitherto been suspected. At the same time, we must consider that it is only one document among several others in Hispania; and these seem to relate to civilians. Earlier explanations, which suggested that traders, oriental specialists and freedmen of oriental origin played an important rôle in the spread of the cult in Hispania, may not necessarily be wrong.

The mithraeum was erected inside the city walls, near the gate called Puerta de Santiago, a logical position to locate a *statio*. Indeed, we might consider this mithraeum as a shrine used exclusively by the military members of the *statio*, as part of the buildings belonging to the military post, or as part of the personal residence of the *statio* commander, the centurion C. Victorius Victorinus. So far as is known, this *statio* was the only military post in *Lucus Augusti*, so that its functions were of many kinds, not only or not primarily related to the *fiscus*. This inscription is in fact the very first evidence of a military *statio* in *Lucus Augusti*. On present evidence, then, the inference is likely to be that C. Victorius Victorinus himself introduced the cult of Mithras to *Lucus*.

However, the structures excavated do not belong to a military post, the *statio*, but to a private *domus*. It is possible that the post was located nearby, but the *domus* is wealthy enough (size, two floors, wall-paintings etc.) to have been the residence of the centurion. In that case, the mithraeum would not have been the religious centre of the Mithraists of the *statio*, but the personal shrine of its commander; that assumption would convincingly explain why he mentions his freedmen in his votive inscription. Its location inside the *domus* suggests the possible existence of other mithraea in *Lucus Augusti*. However, when the *domus* was largely destroyed around AD 260, the mithraeum continued to be used, independent of the rest of the building: at any rate by that time, the worshippers of the mithraeum were no longer part of the immediate *familia* of Victorinus (and his successors). Future excavations will perhaps contribute to solve these questions.

C. Victorius Victorinus has the same *nomen* and *cognomen* as a *beneficiarius consularis* in *Praetorium Latobicum* (now Trebnje, Slovenia), *Pannonia Superior*, who dedicated a votive altar to Jupiter (*AE* 1944, 134; *AE* 1976, 537; *ILJug* 331; *AE* 1948, p. 91 ff. n. 233), but their *praenomina* are different:

Tertullo et Clemente co(n)s(ulibus) // I(oui) O(ptimo) M(aximo) / pro sal(ute) / Aug(usti) / M(arcus) Vict[o]rius Vi/ctori/nus b(ene)f(iciarius) co(n)s(ularis) // u(otum) s(oluit).

We do not know the relationship, if there is any, between these two persons. Gaius' devotion to Mithras may have been due to a connection with *Pannonia*; but it is more probable, we think, that it is due to his membership of the *Legio VII*. Two of the rather small number of Mithraic inscriptions from *Hispania* now point to this legion, in which the cult must have played an important role. That suggests that we can expect further

inscriptions to confirm the association, either from the HQ at *Legio* (León) or from other *stationes*. The case of Emerita is interesting, because, as we have seen, a *frumentarius* of the legion was associated with the beginning of the cult in the city (ca. 155 AD); the new inscription of *Lucus* strongly suggests that *Legio VII* was a centre of the cult well into the third century if not for a considerable time after that.

Perhaps following this kind of exploration, we shall be able to reconstruct more accurately the history of the cult of Mithras in the Iberian Peninsula.