

From Iranian Mithra to Roman Sun

A Comparative Study of the Roots of the Mithraic Tradition and Sol Invictus in the Context of History and Comparative Historiography



Dr. Basir Kamjo

This article presents a comparative study of the shared roots and cultural connections between the ancient Iranian deity *Mithra* and the Roman sun god *Sol Invictus*. Drawing on historical, mythological, and archaeological evidence, it explores how elements of the Iranian Mithraic tradition made their way into the Roman Empire, ultimately manifesting in the form of a mystery religion and becoming integrated into Rome's official religious structure. The aim of this research is to highlight the Iranian civilization's contribution to the formation and evolution of religious beliefs in the ancient West.

Keywords: Mithra, Mithraism, Sol Invictus, Roman Empire, Ancient Iran, Comparative Mythology, History of Religions

I – Understanding Historical and Cultural Identity

Understanding the historical and cultural identity of nations requires comparative studies between civilizations and their shared beliefs. The Mithraic tradition, one of the most prominent religious manifestations of ancient Iran (ancestors of Tajiks, Persians, and Kurds), not only influenced the Iranian world but also left its mark on the cultural fabric of ancient Rome. The emergence of the "Unconquered Sun" god, *Sol Invictus*, in the 3rd century CE, was not merely a native Roman phenomenon but partially reflected the cultural and religious presence of ancient Iran. (1)

II – Mithra in the Iranian Tradition

Mithra was one of the prominent deities in Iranian mythology and historiography and was part of the pre-Zoroastrian tradition. In the *Avesta*, Mithra is described as the god of covenant, light, and the guardian of justice and truth. (2) As a manifestation of light and truth, Mithra played a central role in ancient Iranian society and had a significant presence in the social and political rituals during the Achaemenid and Parthian periods (ancestors of Tajiks, Persians, and Kurds). (3)

III – The Spread of Mithraism to the Roman World

During the Parthian and later Sasanian eras, recurring interactions—through both war and commerce—between Iran and Rome facilitated the transfer of certain religious elements. The Mithraic tradition entered Roman territory via soldiers, slaves, and merchants and evolved into a mystery religion known as *Mithraism*. This religion gained considerable popularity during the early centuries of the Common Era, especially among Roman soldiers. (4)

IV – Structure and Features of Mithraism in Rome

In the Roman tradition, Mithra assumed a salvific and cosmological role. Mithraic temples (*Mithraea*) were typically constructed underground, and the rituals involved seven stages of initiation. (5) One of the central symbols of this faith was the *Tauroctony* scene—Mithra slaying a bull—representing the triumph of light over darkness and the cosmic rebirth. (6)

V – *Sol Invictus*: The Birth of a Political Deity

In 274 CE, Emperor Aurelian declared the worship of *Sol Invictus* as the official religion of the Roman Empire. (7) This sun god was associated with concepts such as invincibility, victory, and eternal light. His birth was celebrated on December 25—a date known in the Mithraic calendar as *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* (the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun). (8)

VI – Comparing Mithra and *Sol Invictus*

The fundamental similarities between Mithra and *Sol Invictus*—such as their solar nature, symbols of light and victory, and shared birth date—have led scholars like Mary Boyce, Franz

Cumont, and David Ulansey to view *Sol Invictus* as a continuation or adaptation of the Iranian Mithra. (9) Moreover, some Christian symbols and rituals also appear to have been influenced by Mithraic traditions. (10)

VII – Conclusion

The comparative study of Mithra and *Sol Invictus* reveals the depth of the cultural and religious influence of ancient Iran on Roman civilization. This research underscores the idea that understanding the historical identity of nations is impossible without re-examining comparative and mythological data. Mithra, as a symbol of light, manifested not only in the East but also in the very heart of Western civilization.

Sources and References:

1. Boyce, Mary. *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*.
2. Boyce, Mary. *Religions of Ancient Iran*. Translated by A. Rashid Yasemi, 1979.
3. Bahar, Mehrdad. *Research in Iranian Myths*. Tehran: Agah Publishing.
4. Cumont, Franz. *The Mysteries of Mithra*. Dover Publications, 1956.
5. Ulansey, David. *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*. Oxford University Press, 1989.
6. Nabors, Payam. *Secrets of Mithra: The Pagan Faith That Shaped Christianity*. Inner Traditions, 2005.
7–8. Ibid.
7. Boyce, Cumont, Ulansey. Cited works.
8. Nabors, *op. cit.*