

Interactive Mithras: Giving Primary School Children an Introduction to Mithras

by Caroline Lawrence

In May 2018, I was invited to do a family storytelling session at the London Mithraeum's first #MuseumsAtNight event. I jumped at the chance.

The year before I had become obsessed with the grave of a 14-year-old Roman girl found in Lant Street, South London. Her bones and grave goods tell us that although she was blue-eyed with North European ancestry, she grew up in the Southern Mediterranean, (maybe even North Africa). When she was about nine or ten she made the long trip to London. She died five years later, aged about 14, and was buried with several interesting objects, including an exotic folding knife with an ivory handle in the shape of a leopard.

Bloomberg re-opened the London Mithraeum on its original spot around the

time I was thinking about the Lant Street Teen. Like her, the temple was active in mid to late 3rd century. I went as soon as it opened. You can read my first impressions here. <http://flavias.blogspot.com/2017/12/ten-things-you-probably-didnt-know.html>

As I descended the stairs from street level to mezzanine, a series of inscriptions in the black marble walls reminded me that as you go down, you go back in time. That gave me an idea. I could write a fictional book where someone travels back in time to find the Lant Street Teen, using the Mithraeum as a portal.

I write books for children, so naturally my time traveller would have to be a kid. I came up with the idea that for every hour an adult spends in the past

they lose a year off their life expectancy. But pre-pubescent kids only lose a month off the end of their lives so they are the most desirable time travellers.

Over the next few months I worked out the premise: *When 12-year-old London schoolboy Alex Papas is recruited by eccentric bazillionaire Solomon Daisy to go back to Roman London, his mission is to get information about a mysterious blue-eyed girl whose bones were discovered in a cemetery in Southwark. But things go wrong almost from the start and when Alex finds the girl he is totally unprepared for what happens next.*

Naturally one of the topics I had to research for my Time Travel book was the mysterious cult of Mithras. As a children's author, one of my main tasks is to explain the past in clear and concrete terms. *Show, Don't Tell* is my motto. But sometimes it's easier said than done.

So for my storytelling session I decided to share my knowledge of Mithras and his cult in a fun, interactive way.

When the thirty or so kids (plus parents) were seated comfortably on cushions on the floor of Bloomberg Space, I started by briefly addressing three aspects of this mysterious cult.

Who was Mithras?

Romans had hundreds of gods and were always inventing new ones by combining aspects of existing ones. Mithras was one of these new gods, part Persian and part





After each ceremony we think they all feasted and drank happily together in memory of how Mithras feasted with the sun god Sol after he killed the bull.

What's with the bull?

If the cross is the symbol of Christianity, the image found in every Persian Cave is of Mithras stabbing a bull in the shoulder. It's called a 'tauroctony' which is Greek for 'bull-slaying', though that word never appears in ancient times and we're not even sure he was actually killing the bull. Somehow the stabbing of the cosmic bull by the god Mithras has a creative function. Wheat comes from the bull's tail and animals lick his blood. It's a mystery!

People have written whole books about the 'tauroctony' but for now just know that some of these scenes of Mithras stabbing the bull have the signs of the zodiac around them, along with two men holding torches. The signs of the zodiac are linked to planets and the guys with torches might be guarding the gates to the heavens. The one with his torch up ushers the soul in its upward journey towards the stars. The one with his torch down is showing the immortal soul the way back down to a mortal body.

One scholar in Chicago, Roger Beck, thinks the ceremonies were like a driving simulator, so the person would know which road his soul should take when he died.

The kids on their cushions were beginning to get restless. It was time for the interactive part. I told them that as far as we knew, Mithraism was for men only. So if they wanted to play, they had to pretend they were a Roman man, probably a soldier or retired soldier.

I listed the seven avatars for the seven levels of achievement – Raven, Bridegroom, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Sun-Runner and Father – then asked, 'Who wants to be a Raven?'

The Mithraeum attendants handed out black wristbands to the kids who wanted to be Ravens. (I'd bought a few packs of multi-coloured scrunchies earlier). I told the 'ravens' their protective god was Mercury and their Latin code name was *Corax*. Everybody – not just the ravens – tried flapping their arms and making a 'cawing' noise.

Roman. He is young and handsome, with smooth cheeks and curly hair. He wears barbarian clothes: a long-sleeved tunic, leggings and a floppy cap that looks like a Smurf hat. He also has a billowing cloak, a dagger and sometimes a bow and arrow. He is usually shown kneeling on the back of a bull and looking away as he stabs it.

The temples dedicated to Mithras weren't like other temples. Romans were designed to look like caves, which for Romans symbolised the cosmos or universe. They never used the term Mithraeum but rather 'Persian Cave'.

What did worshippers want?

Ancient Roman religion was like a contract or deal. You brought an offering to a shrine (or took part in a sacrifice in front of a temple) in order to ask one of your many gods for a favour: a safe journey, luck in love, the healing of a disease or just general prosperity. Some people sum up Roman religion in three Latin words: *do ut des*. I give (to you, the god) so that you will give (to me).

But mystery cults were different. The point of joining a mystery cult was to get a happy afterlife. To join, you had to pass a special test, like the initiation into a secret club. After that you had to undergo secret rites and rituals. Each time you passed a test, you went to a higher level. We think there were seven grades of achievement in the worship of Mithras. Why seven? Because the Greeks and Romans believed in seven planets: the five they could see and also the sun and moon. They thought each 'planet' and the god who went with it ruled a sphere, or a 'heaven'. So when you reached the highest level you were in the seventh heaven.





The Bridegrooms got yellow wristbands. Bridegrooms were under the protection of the planet/goddess Venus. Their code name was *Nymphus*. We tried shouting *Io!* (Yelling *Hymen, O Hymenaeus!* might be tricky to explain.)

Several kids wanted to be Soldiers. Attendants gave them orange wristbands because the soldier's colours were red and yellow. They learned that they were under the protection of the planet/god Mars and that their Latin name was *Miles*. Having no idea what sound a soldier might make I taught them *Sin dex!* the famous marching chant beloved of Roman re-enactors.

Red-wristbands went to the Lions (under the protection of the god Jupiter). They got to roar and learned that their Latin code name was *Leo*.

Persians got white wristbands and were asked to guess their protective planet: the moon. I got them to purr like a Persian cat.

'Who wants to be a Sun-Runner?' I asked the kids, and attendants handed out gold wristbands to the last few. They made the sixth and almost highest level, under the protection of the 'planet' *Sol*, the sun. Their special attributes were a torch, a sun-ray crown and a whip. Why a whip? Because the sun was often imagined driving a fiery chariot. Everyone made a sound like a horse, neighing or whinnying.

The seventh and highest grade was the Father, *Pater*. There was probably only one Pater for each congregation. He would have been old and wise. Thankfully

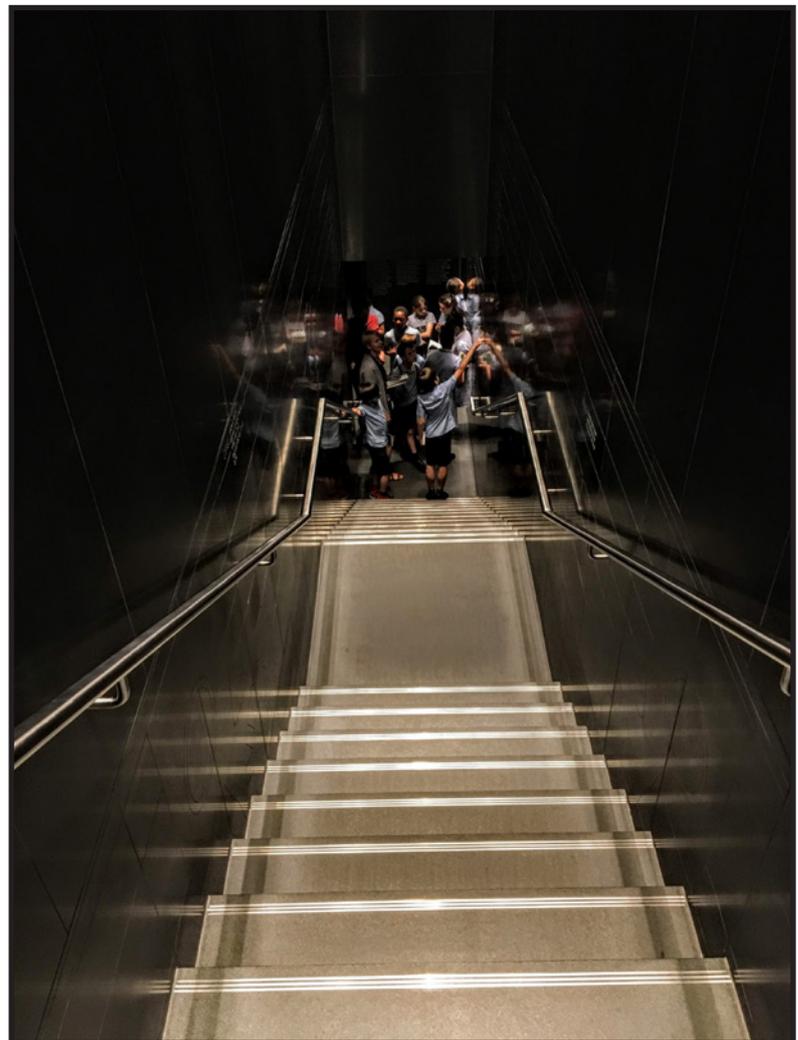
one of the dads volunteered. He got a special purple wristband. What does the Father shout? 'Hey, you kids! Get off my grass!'

Then I lowered my voice dramatically.

'You're about to go down into the Mithraeum,' I said, 'for an Immersive Experience. In Roman times you had to go down seven steps – of course! – into a dark space mysteriously lit by torches. Today you have to go seven metres below street level, because you usually go down to go back in time. When the room goes dark, imagine it full of lights and afterwards see if you can hear the ghosts of Roman Londoners feasting and drinking.'

I then read a short passage from the beginning of *The Girl with the Ivory Knife*, in which my Time Traveller Alex goes down the black stairs.

For readers of this magazine, here is chapter 49. Alex and his Romanian friend Dinu have spent 24 hours in Roman London but now they are being chased and have to get back through the portal to their own time. However, when they reach the Mithraeum they find a ceremony is in full swing. Now read on ...



Chapter Forty-Nine – Flight Simulator

Fortuna, the Goddess of Luck, was with us. A few minutes later we were hiding behind a stone altar near the entrance of the Mithraeum, spying on their secret ceremony. The changing room had been empty and the inner double doors open. It was almost as if The Universe was helping us get back to our own time.

The Mithraeum was full of candlelight, incense and the sound of singing.

For a moment it felt like the Greek Orthodox church of Saint Nektarios in Battersea. But only for a moment.

The men's chanting was not like any hymn I'd ever heard.

The pungent smell of burning pinecones made me dizzy.

And the space looked more like a cave than a church.

The flickering flames of candles, torches and oil-lamps showed me things I had not noticed the first time: painted altars here at the back of the temple, frescoes on the inner walls beyond the columns, and even the colours of the columns. The first pair of columns were painted black, presumably for the lowest level, the Ravens. The next pair of columns were yellow, then a reddish-orange pair of columns, then a red pair, then white, gold and purple.

There were about 40 men, standing in the two side aisles and chanting. They all wore cloaks of the same colours as the columns and a few had animal masks on their heads. In the flickering light of torches the empty eyeholes of their masks made them look extra creepy.

The only person in the centre part of the temple near the time portal was a grey-haired man dressed as Mithras. He wore a long-sleeved tunic, a purple cape and a floppy Smurf hat. He held a straight sword in his right hand and a candle in his left.

I guessed he was the head priest or *Pater*, the Father. He was the only one not chanting with the others.

I had been trying to pick out words from the chant but then I realised they were only singing vowel sounds like '*Aabb, eh, ayyy, eeee, oh, oob, obbb...*' Some were also shaking Egyptian rattles or clashing little finger cymbals.

'This is strange,' said Dinu in my ear.

'You're telling me!' I replied.

'How do we get to the portal?' said Dinu. 'I cannot even see it.'

'It's about two metres in front of the Mithras statue,' I replied. 'Keep an eye out for a faint glow or shimmer, like a giant soap bubble blower. I just hope it's dark enough in here so that we can see when it comes on.'

'And then?'

'Pull off your tunic and make a dash for it,' I said.

Then we had to be quiet because a horn blared and the priest dressed as Mithras raised the sword and the candle.

'*Nama, coracibus; tutela Mercurii,*' chanted the man dressed as Mithras. '*Hail! O ravens, protected by Mercury.*'

The chorus of caws almost made me jump out of my tunic. Some kind of amplifier in their masks left my ears ringing.

'*Nama patri,*' all the men responded, '*tutela Saturni. Hail to the father, protected by Saturn.*' I nodded in admiration. They had got that part absolutely right at London's twenty-first century Mithraeum.

And it confirmed the man dressed as Mithras was the Father or *Pater*.

After each of the seven categories had been greeted and the response given the Father held up his hands, the sword in his right and the candle in his left.

'*Death,*' he said in slow, clear Latin, '*comes to all of us sooner or later. On that day our souls will leave our bodies and rise up to the highest heavens.*'

As if by magic, or maybe a hidden pulley, the candle left his hand and rose up to the ceiling. Dinu gasped and grabbed my wrist. He and I and everyone else looked up to see about two dozen candles burning like stars against a background of painted constellations. It looked like a planetarium.

'How do they do that with the candles?' whispered Dinu.

'Hidden strings?' I said. But it was only a guess.

'*Our eternal souls are made of star stuff,*' said the priest. '*And to the stars they long to return.*'

The priest continued talking and although I couldn't understand every word I got the sense of it. When your soul reached the highest sphere, he said, you would be higher than men and angels and many other spirits. Together with your fellow star-souls, you could look down and see everything: past, present and future.

For a moment I forgot about the portal. Maybe it was something in the incense or the fact that I had not eaten in over three days, but I was totally absorbed in what he was saying.

I remembered the awesome stars I had seen my first night in Roman London. Was it only ten hours before? It would be wonderful to be a star-soul. You would no longer feel hunger or fear or the pain of losing people you loved. It would be amazing to fly through time and space, watching great battles from the past and seeing how men colonise planets in the future.

It was my turn to grab Dinu's arm.

'It's not a driving simulator,' I hissed. 'It's a flight simulator!'

'What?' Dinu frowned at me.

'Solomon Daisy told me that going into the Mithraeum was like a driving simulator for the soul. But it's more like a flight simulator – or even a space flight simulator – so the soul knows where to go when you die.'

Dinu nodded, gazing up in wonder. The candlelight reflected in his blue eyes made them seem green.

I turned my attention back to the Father.

He was saying that after a few thousand years, being a star soul would get lonely. You would long to talk to people and discuss the things you had seen. You would miss the feel of winning a race or giving a good speech or holding your first newborn.

That's why your star-soul would go back down through the spheres. To get into anything hot-blooded that could smell and taste and feel.

And that was why ordeals must be suffered here on earth, continued the priest, to ensure that the soul will be pure enough to go into a highborn man rather than a bean or an animal.

That was when they brought out the naked man.

The Girl with the Ivory Knife: Time Travel Diaries 1 will be published in April 2019. You can read a fuller account of my session with the kids here: <http://flavias.blogspot.com/2018/05/interactive-mithras-by-caroline-lawrence.html>

If you're interested in Roger Beck's flight simulator analogy, it's found on pages 145–6 in his book *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun*.

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