

THE "TEMPLE OF MITHRAS" AT BURHAM

By R. F. JESSUP, F.S.A.

DURING the excavation of the Roman barrow at Holborough¹ the landowners, the Associated Portland Cement Manufacturers Ltd., invited the writer to look at the site of the underground chamber on their property on the bank of the Medway at Burham, a site which has been described more than once since its discovery in 1895 as that of a temple of Mithras. It is in fact noted on the 6 inch Ordnance Survey map (Kent, Sheet XXXI, N.W.) as the site of a Roman temple. A summary account written in 1932² may now be amended in several particulars. One or two unpublished photographs and some additional indirect evidence have helped in this new assessment.

There is now no trace whatever of the underground chamber. It was discovered during extension work to a cement factory, and not only has that factory served its day and disappeared, but another factory later built on the same site now lies in ruins. Nothing, therefore, is to be obtained from the site itself.

This very interesting discovery was reported at length to the Society of Antiquaries by our then Secretary, George Payne,³ and separately by Frederick W. James,⁴ then Curator of Maidstone Museum, though no account appeared in our own Journal. Yet another report was made to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland⁵ by a member of the Leland Club, a travelling band of antiquaries who had the social spirit but scarcely the archæological ideals of their better known contemporaries, the Noviomagians. Mr. James investigated the discovery on behalf of the owners, and it may be guessed that there was some personal feeling between him and our Secretary. The Scotsman did not see the site at all until a season's weather had done its worst. It is not surprising that the three accounts differ in material particulars.

In brief, the structure was regarded as a Mithraic shrine because it was an underground chamber and ruined, because it had a dim natural light and was near a water supply, but more particularly because there were three niches in one of its interior walls. Each of these features

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, LXVIII (1955), 1-61.

² By the writer under the direction of (Sir) Mortimer Wheeler in *V.C.H. Kent*, III (1932), 109-10 with illustrations.

³ *P.S.A.L.*, XV (1895), 184-5; XVI (1896), 105-8.

⁴ *P.S.A.L.*, XVI (1896), 108-13 with illustrations.

⁵ *P.S.A.S.*, XXIX (1895), 204.

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was recognized, and quite rightly, as a possible attribute of a shrine dedicated to Mithras. While Professor Francis Haverfield advised an admirable caution in the complete absence of any remains belonging to the Mithraic cult, Professor Cumont's view,¹ which had the great weight of Continental authority behind it, saw here an undoubted Temple of Mithras.

It is interesting to note, by the way, that the Kentish people concerned made considerable efforts to gain the influential support of both Societies of Antiquaries in a plan to save the fabric and rebuild it elsewhere. London, however, was then too concerned with the fate of the Rolls Chapel and with what might happen to the west front of Peterborough Cathedral to offer any assistance, while the Scots were content with their own Mithraeum at Borcovicium on the Roman Wall.

Mr. James's plan shows a rectangular building of about 41 feet by 19 feet which was sunk about 15 feet deep into the face of a small cliff bordering the east bank of the river. The southern wall is shown with a wide return angle at its western end, which can be amply confirmed from the photographs available, but the zig-zag entrance is conjectural and seems quite unwarranted, and further it cannot be recalled by those still alive who saw the chamber uncovered and excavated. In addition to the three niches on the interior of the eastern wall there was a battered splay in the north wall and some indication that the roof had been a barrel vault. A causeway of hard chalk led from the entrance towards the river where remains of a substantial timber-fronted wharf were uncovered; these features do not appear on the plan, but they are well remembered by people present at the time who formed the opinion that both were to be considered as adjuncts to the chamber.

From the photographs it is possible to elucidate one or two other features of note. A small window looked directly onto the river front. Close to the structure but not connected with it were sections of the robbed foundation trenches of a building; we are told by each of our authorities that the upper layers of soil on both sides of the cavern yielded Roman remains in quantity. The photographs also demonstrate that the choice of the site was governed by the surface geology. The original excavation for the chamber was made at the most convenient place adjoining the tidal river where a deposit of the soft sand and gravel known geologically as "head" lay against hard chalk. Excavation here would have been easy provided that the "head" could be controlled, and the return angle of the southern wall was clearly designed to prevent the slipping of the sand and gravel which under certain conditions of weather run almost like a liquid.

The whole structure was faced on the inside with rectangular blocks of the local "curly burr" chalk, the hard Melbourn Rock which was

¹ *P.S.A.L.*, XVII (1897), 96.

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used by a succession of Roman and Medieval builders in the Medway Valley. The few specimens now remaining, in Rochester and Maidstone Museums, have been identified with the kind co-operation of the Museum authorities at the Research Laboratories of the Associated Portland Cement Manufacturers. The Research Laboratories have also examined mortar still attached to one of the blocks and report that it agrees in physical and chemical composition with other mortars of known Roman date.

The tooled decoration of the carefully trimmed and uniform facing blocks was much commented upon by our early colleagues. Much of it exhibited a chevron pattern, but this surely has no special significance. It is the normal result of dressing from alternate sides which is familiar enough in Roman masonry: one thinks at once of facing-stones in the Roman Wall, but here the stone happens to be not grit but hard chalk.

Our three authorities agree in general vagueness about the finds of animal bones, roof- and flue-tiles and sherds of pottery, made inside the structure. All the building material, it is said, had been re-used, and it seems to have found its way here when the cavern was filled in after the collapse of the roof. Something of the story emerges from the photographs. A single small brass with the Constantinopolis legend may or may not supply some sort of evidence of date, but otherwise there was only a piece of sandstone which bore what is enigmatically called a mason's mark.

There is a welcome though indirect description of some of the pottery. A retired chalk foreman now eighty years old saw in Maidstone Museum the reconstructed amphorae from the Holborough barrow, and at once recalled pieces of "fossilized bull" he had helped to dig out of the Burham cavern many years ago. Further enquiry made it clear that he had had the story of the Mithraic sacrifice quite correctly from George Payne, but that he was a little astray in his application of natural history. At any rate, we may now think that there is a distinct possibility of such amphorae having been stored in the building, for our informant recollected sizeable pieces of pot and not small sherds.

A further clue to its purpose is given by the ten-foot wide splay centrally placed in the north wall. It was well smoothed in contrast to the decorated blocks elsewhere. There is little difficulty in recognizing it as a loading-ramp, its sides well worn by use, which gave access to a cellar from the ground level above. Such features are known in the buildings of Roman Gaul as, for a convenient example, in the farmyard cellar of a villa at Obergrombach in Baden.¹

This cellar also has three niches in the east wall and, like many other

¹ *Germania Romana*, Part II (1924), i, 22; ii, pl. xxvi, fig. 1.

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of the German cellars, it is free-standing.¹ The niches at Burham were designed, in the view of our early friends, for the usual statues of Mithras and his torch-bearing attendants. It is a fascinating idea, but there are no traces of Mithras or the Mithraic cult at all, and indeed we have only to look at such cellars as that in a villa at Haulchin in Hainault² to see an example of a Gaulish arrangement, namely a series of niches in groups of three. Whether the niches were intended for the storage of goods or more probably, perhaps, for lamps to light the cellar can only at present be a matter for interested speculation. Such cellars appear to have a limited distribution in Gaul, and no other examples seem to be recorded in Britain.

The Burham cellar has no outside staircase such as is often found, but in recognizing it as a cellar for storing the wine and oil imported by its owner, and perhaps corn for export, we find that it fits well into the pattern of topography and economy of the Medway Valley in Roman times. We have lost Mithras but found, as in the nearby barrow at Holborough and others of its kind, and in the Hooded Dwarf from Reculver,³ significant cultural links with Roman Gaul.

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¹ *Op. cit.*, i, pl. xxii, fig. 2 for a cellar outside the walls of Saalburg.

² F. Cumont, *Comment la Belgique fut Romanisée* (1914 reprint), 44 and fig. 13.

³ Frank Jenkins, "The Genius Cucullatus in Kent," *Arch. Cant.*, LXVI (1954), 86-91.