

2. MITHRA AND THE CARMINIELLO AI MANNESI THERMAL COMPLEX

There is ample evidence to suggest that ancient **oriental cults** were popular in Naples. One of these centred around the god **Mithra**, and is linked to an Imperial Roman Age thermal complex which was found in the **Via Duomo** area.

The ancient complex covered an area the size of an *insula*, bound to the North and South by the central and southern decumanus (Via Tribunali and Via San Biagio dei Librai today). Originally built on the remains of a **domus repubblicana**, it was abandoned in V century A.D. and then various parts of it once again put to use during VIII century. A small church was built in the late Middle Ages and then, in XVI century, the whole complex was incorporated into the church originally called **Chiesa di Santa Maria del Carmine ai Mannesi**, and then renamed "**del Carminiello**". The term "Mannesi" refers to the whole area where **builders and chariot repairers** used to work. In 1943, when the whole area was bombed and the church and surrounding buildings were destroyed, the archaeological remains came to light.

The Carminiello ai Mannesi archaeological site is divided into **four main sections**: storage areas on the middle floor, a residential part on the upper floor, the thermal complex on two floors, and the mithreum where the god Mithra was worshipped. This god was of **Indoeuropean** origin and the cult was imported from territories in the Roman Empire in Persia between II and III centuries A.D. It was very popular, especially amongst the military population, where, to a large extent, the level of initiation into the cult corresponded to rank within the military hierarchy. In urban areas it was usual to find mithreums **underground** and they usually had antechambers to the sides. They were set out with benches where initiates could sit to follow the service. They had a vaulted ceiling made to look like natural rock.

The Neapolitan mithreum presumably dates back to **mid II century A.D.** It is believed that the cult was introduced to the place by the slaves and military veterans who used to live on the *insula*. However, the finding of a bas-relief of Mithra in Posillipo, (now in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples) with the inscription *vir clarissimus Appius Tarrionius Dexter*, confirms the idea that the higher social classes were involved in the cult too.

The identification of Carminiello ai Mannesi as a place of worship is based on a stucco relief of the god Mithra, depicting him sacrificing a bull, which is still on display there. It is possible that groups of small marble statues originally adorned the room used for worship. Images of the god typically portrayed him in his Phrygian cap cutting the throat of a sacrificial bull surrounded by other animals: a **dog** and a **snake** making for the victim's blood and a **scorpion** grabbing the bull's testicles. In this relief, you can make out the scorpion under the bull's belly and, to the right, a few traces of the snake. At the top, on the left, you can see a semi-capital with a rook and the half-painted trunk of Sol. The scene was partly painted and must have been surrounded by rocks to form the *spaeleum*. There are no traces of altars or statues but it is thought that a statue of the **god as a young man** stood in the centre of the room and that, in the far corners, there would be statues of the two attendants **Cautes** (with his torch held aloft) and **Cautopates** (with his torch pointing down).

There is no literature that talks about the cult of Mithra in Campania, even though evidence of its existence has been found in other ancient settlements like Pozzuoli, Ischia, Capri, Calvi and Santa Maria Capua Vetere.