Author’s Note

Like all history-based novels this book is a mix of historical facts and creative speculation. Both the mystery cult of Mithras and political conspiracies both ancient and modern share one frustrating feature. They shun full exposure. Like a fan dance they expose enough for informed speculation. Of such intriguing stuff are history-based novels made. This Author’s Note sets out the factual soil from which grew this work of fiction cross-fertilized by the ancient cult of Mithras and modern Italian political conspiracies.

The Cult of Mithras

What we do know is that Mithraism existed as a Roman religion reaching its zenith in the second and third centuries after Christ. Only tantalizing tidbits of its beliefs and rituals remain. Relatively few contemporaries of the mystery cult, mostly outsiders and some antagonistic Christians, passed on to us what little information they had.

Dr. Martin Luther King, a theology student at Crozer Theological Seminary, wrote a research paper summarizing the similarities of Mithraism to Christianity: (1) the holy day of Sunday (2) the selection of December 25 as the birth date of Mithras (3) baptism and the sharing of a communal meal (4) the spiritual rebirth of members (5) the ultimate victory of good over evil and (6) a probationary period for those wishing to become members. These resemblances unnerved some Christians at the time. Tertullian, a Christian apologist, viewed Mithraic beliefs as so threateningly similar to Christianity that the devil must have devised the religion to deceive Christians.

To this date fierce debate exists about the relationship of Mithraism to Christianity and the significance of the similarities. That these two religions with their resemblances existed for
over a century in the heart of the Roman Empire, with one waxing and the other waning, raised a question that stimulated my curiosity and imagination: What was their relationship during the period of religious co-existence?

For some, several key differences between the two religions foreordained the growth of Christianity and the eventual demise of Mithraism. Mithraism apparently excluded women as members. Christianity accepted them. Mithraism was not evangelistic. Christianity was. Christianity demanded exclusive adherence to the Church. Mithraism tolerated contemporaneous membership in different religious cults. What is clear is that they co-existed for a long period in the Roman Empire before the Emperor Theodosius banned pagan practices in the fourth century A.D.

Scholars dispute whether Mithraism was essentially an ancient Persian cult with a Roman veneer or a Roman cult with an ancient Persian veneer. The Encyclopedia Britannica conjectures that Roman Mithraism was most likely a new creation devised by an unknown religious genius who enriched Persian ceremonies with Platonic interpretations acceptable to the Romans. Most of what we know about Mithraism is gleaned not from written history but from the extensive archaeological remains scattered over most of the Roman Empire. Archaeologists have found thousands of inscriptions and pieces of sculpture. The archaeological evidence indicates that the practice of Mithraism was especially concentrated in Rome and in Ostia, the port of ancient Rome.

From the evidence, meager though it is, we can make out shadowy outlines of Mithraic practice and belief. Followers of the god Mithras gathered within rectangular cave-like structures underground called mithraeums. Flanked by a stone bench on either side, a main aisle typically ran down the center. At the end of the aisle one found an image of Mithras slaying a
bull... known as the tauroctony. The slaying of the bull by Mithras is the central motif of mithraeums. Clearly the act symbolizes a sacrifice of some sort. Scholars have suggested the sacrifice creates or ends the world. Or maybe it saves the world or at least those who follow the teachings of Mithras. A beguiling but cryptic inscription mentioning the possibility of salvation can be found in the mithraeum under the church of Santa Prisca which my wife and I visited in Rome.

The bull-slaying scene is sometimes accompanied by images of a dog, a snake, a raven, and a scorpion. This iconography intrigues but does not fully explain. One modern interpretation holds that the tauroctony is a not simply a reworking of a Persian myth but rather an astronomical tool with the symbols of dog, snake, raven, and scorpion corresponding to the ancient names given certain constellations. Typically a mithraeum would also contain a banquet scene of Mithras dining with Sol Invictus (the unconquered Roman sun god) with both deities eventually blurring into one. The Romans had a genius for assimilating other religious deities into their own heavenly pantheon. The birth of Mithras springing out of rock and a puzzling lion-headed figure are two other iconographic figures often found in mithraeums.

Seven grades of ascending initiations distinguished members in their search for spiritual growth: Corax, Nymphus, Miles, Leo, Perses, Heliodromus, and Pater. Aside from the hierarchy of these spiritual distinctions, the status of members inside the cult seems to have borne no relationship to social status outside the cult. Government officials, soldiers, freemen, and even slaves entered as brothers and equal members in search of a higher spirituality.

*The Catholic Encyclopedia* acknowledges that the chief Pater (Father) was a “sort of pope” who lived in Rome and called himself Pater Patrum or Pater Patratus. According to this Catholic source, the icon of the bull-slaying symbolized the nourishment of mankind through the
spilling of bull’s blood from the dagger. The same source concludes that the followers of Mithras had some kind of “Eucharist” celebration. Once humankind was established, Mithras ascended to heaven to sup with the sun god. Although similarities between the two religious systems exist, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* denies Christianity is an adaptation of Mithraism without essential differences and further claims the more likely scenario is that Mithraism borrowed from Christianity rather than the reverse.

As anyone who has visited Rome can verify, a victorious Christianity at the end of the Roman Empire staked out its social success by typically building churches over pagan temples. The church of Santa Maria *sopra* Minerva (Saint Mary above Minerva) in Rome is explicit in the connection. As part of the research for this novel, my wife and I visited the churches of San Clemente, Santa Prisca, and Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome. A mithraeum lies under each church.

We know that Christian zealots also smashed or defaced the statuary of pagan gods and goddesses once Christianity had gained political dominance. A particular form of mutilation was the carving of a Christian cross on a pagan cult statue. Some authorities think the motivation was to drive out the demonic force within the work of art without destroying the work itself. Perhaps the intent was also to show the triumph of Christianity over a pagan cult or even to purify the work of art with the new Christian faith.

The relationships between Paul of Tarsus, Seneca, and the Mithraic priest, Marcus Lollianus Callinicus, an invented figure of mine, are entirely fictitious and simply a way to illustrate the possibility of this détente between Christianity and Mithraism. Nevertheless, the hypothesis of *The Mithras Conspiracy* is that at this watershed period in history, when the two
religions co-existed side by side, the more open members of both religious groups reached out in friendship.

During the time of peaceful co-existence, I believe some early Christians shared the view of Dr. Martin Luther King that Mithraism was not the devil in disguise but an imperfect cult preparing the way for Christianity by encouraging movement away from sterile rituals toward a desire for personal salvation and the promise of life after death. After all, the Christian view was and is that Judaism paved the way for a future Christianity through the prophecies of the Old Testament. Surely, some ancient Romans turned Christians would have agreed with Dr. King based on their own understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

Some dispute Ernest Renan’s claim that Mithraism was a major rival of Christianity. My novel presupposes the likelihood of cooperation and understanding between Christians living in Rome and their Mithraic neighbors. During the period of co-existence it is likely that Romans who converted to Christianity themselves would have seen Mithraism more as an opportunity for conversion than a religious threat. It was Saint Paul after all who latched on to the unknown god of Athens in an attempt to proselytize pagan Athenians. Those Christianized Romans raised with an appreciation of Greco-Roman culture would most likely have tried to assimilate and rechristen what they could rather than deny their entire heritage.

Although some in the past believed Saint Paul and Seneca knew each other, modern historians have discounted that possibility as a figment of Christian fantasy despite the similarities of certain ethical doctrines between Stoicism and Christianity. But their meeting, or at least knowledge of each other, was not impossible given the overlapping time periods of their likely presence in or near Rome. The New Testament in the Acts of the Apostles relates that Paul came to Rome to prosecute his appeal to Nero regarding charges initiated by Jerusalem enemies.
At the time Seneca would have been a well-known figure in the city. While under house arrest in Rome for two years Paul was given unusual liberties. He was not treated as a common criminal. He received visitors. It seems plausible that the detention of this curious evangelist from a troublesome province would have come to the attention of ancient Rome’s elite.

The Acts of the Apostles ends abruptly on a note of suspense. It does not report the result of Saint Paul’s appeal to Nero. However, circumstantial clues suggest that he was either acquitted or somehow released. The New Testament does not indicate how or when Paul died. Church tradition holds he was beheaded when he returned to Rome shortly after the Great Fire of 64 AD when Nero rounded up Christians and punished them for starting the conflagration. Modern historians are divided on the extent of Nero’s culpability for the Great Fire of 64 A.D. or its causes.

The Villa of the Papyri actually exists as the only library to have survived from the ancient world. It was found in the middle of the eighteenth century buried ninety feet below the earth. More than eighty superb statues were excavated along with about 2,000 papyrus scrolls carbonized in varying degrees of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesonius, the father-in-law of Julius Caesar, was presumably the original owner of this mansion some 721 feet in width. Not all the floors have been excavated and many think more manuscripts from the ancient world await discovery. A controversy exists as to whether further excavation should take place. The Callincus scroll and the Unity Report are purely fictional elements of the novel as are any connection between the cult of Mithras and the Villa of the Papyri.
Italian Political Conspiracies after World War II

The attempted coup d’état against President Erdogan of Turkey on July 15, 2016 by a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces shows that even now a modern country runs the risk of a coup. With a history of conspiracies and coups harking back beyond the Medici to those of ancient Rome, Italy is no exception. The latest of these Italian flirtations with political upheaval occurred in the middle of the twentieth century.

As World War II wound down to its devastating conclusion the United States and the UK prepared to confront a possible takeover of a prostrate Western Europe by the Soviet Union. What resulted was the creation of clandestine cadres of “stay-behind” guerrilla fighters and saboteurs who could fight behind Soviet lines if Stalin’s armies did in fact overrun the European continent. The program codenamed “Operation Gladio” in Italy [after the Roman short sword] expanded to include personnel from other NATO countries. One of the best sources for a detailed overview of “Operation Gladio” is a 1992 online BBC documentary of the same name.

Operation Gladio focused on Italy because of the rising strength of the Communist party in that country. As the conflict between the West and the Soviet Union settled down into the Cold War, the undercover organization focused more on the likelihood of an internal takeover of the Italian government by the Communist Party rather than an external invasion from Soviet forces. Operation Gladio became the nucleus for a series of extremist right-wing and neo-fascist cadres because of their shared opposition to the Communist Party.

A series of bombings broke out in Italy during the 1960’s with evidence of sponsorship by right-wing groups. A general in the Italian secret service was deemed responsible for withholding information and obstructing an investigation to protect neo-fascists. A newspaper
story in *L’Expresso* claimed that the government had drawn up a contingency plan in conjunction with the CIA to occupy media outlets and other institutions, including the seizure of offices belonging to certain leftist parties. Rumors of a coup circulated during the tense political negotiations that culminated in a government led by Aldo Moro.

The Italian Communist Party continued to rise steadily in strength until by the 1970’s, it accounted for about a third of the voters. It became the second largest party in Italy and the largest in democratic Europe. The fears of a Communist or other leftist takeover in Italy reached fever-pitch with the rise of the Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades) whose avowed aim was the replacement of the Italian state with a revolutionary proletariat regime through terrorist tactics. The Brigate Rosse did not consider the Communist Party revolutionary enough after the party strove to become part of the political establishment.

The Golpe Borghese (Borghese Coup) involved a botched right-wing Italian coup d’état set for December 1970 after a rising tide of left-wing protests and bombings. The attempted coup was named after Prince Junio Valerio Borghese. The “Black Prince” was a fascist military commander in the Mussolini regime who organized hundreds of other neo-fascists for action. Although Borghese denied the plot, many participants at his rallies believed they were part of a plan to kidnap the prime minister and take over government offices. Arrests were made but Borghese fled to Spain where he died. Four military officers complicit in the affair escaped punishment. The investigation indicated the conspirators counted on the support of the Italian intelligence services. Events like this eventually forced the Italian government into a major overhaul of its secret service that lead to a division of authority between internal and external matters.
In 1972 a car bomb exploded in Peteano, Italy killing three carabinieri. A judge determined that a militant right-wing group named Nuovo Ordine (New Order) had instigated the bombing. Nuovo Ordine tried to place the blame on Red Brigade terrorists. Contrary to false testimony at the trial, the C-4 explosive in the bombing was a type used by NATO and not the Red Brigades. By accident the police discovered an arms dump near Trieste with C-4 identical to the one used at Peteano.

The lead witness for the prosecution confessed to involvement and testified he was part of a secret and far-right organization which had as its goal terrorizing the population with acts of terror so that the public would demand a state of emergency against Communists and left-wing radicals. This is what secret service operatives call “false flag” operations: the covert use of deception to attribute the origin of an operation or event to some group other than the one which actually perpetrated it.

Because of a leftward political drift in Italian politics, the fears of the far right escalated when Aldo Moro, the prime minister, championed a “compromesso storico” (historic compromise) with the Communist Party. The compromise would allow the Communist Party entry into the national government. The fear existed on the right that Aldo Moro would provide an opening for the Communist Party to take over legally. After all, Mussolini’s elevation to prime minister was technically legal even though the threat of further Fascist violence by a march on Rome provided the necessary persuasion.

After the Red Brigades kidnapped Moro in 1978, the Italian government refused to negotiate for his release. Steve Pieczenik, a hostage negotiator for the U.S. State Department, even claimed in his book, We Killed Aldo Moro, that Moro had been sacrificed for political and social stability in Italy because of Moro’s overtures to the Communist Party. The police found
Moro assassinated in an automobile trunk. A few Red Brigade suspects fled the country. Others were tried and convicted. In Italy the assassination has remained a traumatic event spawning conspiracy theories similar to the numerous ones surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Some prefer to believe the Moro affair was just another false flag operation by neo-fascists under cover of Operation Gladio to pin the blame on radical leftists. Licio Gelli, a successful businessman and unrepentant Fascist from the Mussolini era, was implicated as a member in the Golpe Borghese. He had fled to Argentina after the war where he became a close friend of Juan Peron. During raid on his villa the Italian police discovered a list of 962 persons composed of Italian military officers, governmental officials, and business leaders, including the future prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi. They belonged to a renegade Masonic lodge called Propaganda Due (P2) headed by Licio Gelli. Investigators tied the under-the-radar organization to plots intended to destabilize the Italy by blaming left-wing groups for social unrest and using this subterfuge to catapult a neo-fascist coup into power.

In 1990 Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti publicly acknowledged the existence of Operation Gladio and its underground net of activities in Italy which had remained a state secret for over forty years. Andreotti further reported that 622 Italians had joined the covert organization and that Operation Gladio had scattered secret stores of weapons across Italy. The weapons in twelve locations remained missing. This fueled speculation that the missing weapons wound up in the hands of neo-fascist terrorists with close links to Operation Gladio.