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# Mithras = Auriga?

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In a recent discussion concerning the relationship between the principal image of the Roman Mithras cult, the tauroctony, and the constellations, the suggestion made by M. P. Speidel<sup>1</sup> that the Mithras-figure corresponds to Orion has been accepted by R. Merkelbach<sup>2</sup> whereas it has been less favourably treated by R. Beck.<sup>3</sup>

From a merely iconographic point of view it is difficult to combine Orion with the constellation Taurus in order to form the scene of Mithras killing the bull, because of the mutual position of the two constellations. It would be necessary to see these in a very unconventional way, since the head of Orion is the part closest to Taurus, and the sword and the knees of the giant point in the opposite direction.

Notwithstanding the difficulties implied in Speidel's theory, I want to make a suggestion of a similar kind. I will take my point of departure from an observation, which at first sight seems puzzling, but which may offer a clue to the problem of whether the initiates were able to see their most important icon in the form of a celestial constellation.

Many of the remaining Mithras-monuments show reproductions of the figures of the zodiac. Often they are represented clockwise following the sequence of the corresponding constellations as these are seen in the heavens

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<sup>1</sup> M. P. Speidel, *Mithras-Orion: Greek Hero and Roman Army God* (EPRO 81), Leiden 1980, 4-27.

<sup>2</sup> R. Merkelbach, *Mithras. Königstein/Ts.*, Hain 1984, 130f.

<sup>3</sup> R. Beck, *Mithraism since Franz Cumont* (ANRW II. 17. 4 [1984]), 2082.

at night or on a star-map.<sup>4</sup> But sometimes they are, as Campbell and Merkelbach note, reproduced counter-clockwise!<sup>5</sup>

One of the monuments shows a young bewinged man around whom a serpent winds itself. The figure stands in a kind of "niche, which is boarded by an elliptical band" containing the signs of the zodiac<sup>6</sup> running counter-clockwise. The young man, who wears attributes which can refer to many different godheads, is undoubtedly a divine figure.<sup>7</sup> This could explain the inverted order of the signs of the zodiac. They could be seen *sub specie aeternitatis* as it were, i.e. not from the side of the earth from which mortals see them, but from the opposite side of the celestial spheres, the realm of the gods.<sup>8</sup>

Now the Mithraic tauroctony-scene always has the head of the bull to the right, whereas the constellation Taurus has its head to the left.<sup>9</sup> But what if the tauroctony also is pictured as seen from the point of view of the eternal gods, who on Mithraic monuments are often pictured as witnessing the sacrifice?<sup>10</sup> Then the bull from an earthly point of view would have its head to the left as in the constellation Taurus. Close to this constellation there exists, however, the one called Auriga or Charioteer in a position, which very much resembles the position of Mithras in the tauroctony-scene, if this is inverted. The initiates into the mysteries of Mithras would then

<sup>4</sup> M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*. 2 vols. The Hague 1956 and 1960. See vol. 2, figs 274, 296, 302 and 340. See also M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithriaca II. The Mithraeum at Ponza* (EPRO 16. 2), Leiden 1974, 9.

<sup>5</sup> L. A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* (EPRO 11), Leiden 1968, 48f. Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 279, 306, 324f. and 329. Cf. Vermaseren, *Corpus*, vol. 1, figs 26, 112, 197, 218.

<sup>6</sup> Vermaseren, *Corpus*, vol. 1, 254.

<sup>7</sup> Vermaseren, *Corpus*, vol. 1, 254, Merkelbach, *Mithras*, 324.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Speidel, *Mithras-Orion* 8f.

<sup>9</sup> Although running counter-clockwise, the representations of the figures of the zodiac are not always reversed. Thus, for instance, the bull on the pictures referred to in n. 5 always has its head to the left. On the other hand, the lion on figs 112, 197 and 218 in Vermaseren, *Corpus*, has *its* head to the left, and is thus inverted.

<sup>10</sup> See Vermaseren, *Corpus*, vol. 1, figs 15, 46, 47, 48, 49, 98, 106, 112, 122, 195 etc.

have been able to see a combination of the constellations Auriga and Taurus as a picture of their principal myth seen from an eternal perspective. If this were the case, some connection may exist with the representations, where Mithras and the Sun-god are seen as mounted upon a wagon going to heaven.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Vermaseren, *Corpus*, vol. 2, figs 341, 400, 505, 512.