2. THE BULL SLAYING SCENE AS A SERIES OF EQUATORIAL CONSTELLATIONS

The bull slaying scene is the essential icon of Western Mithraism. Carved and painted in the cult niches of sanctuaries throughout the Roman empire, it portrays with remarkable regularity Mithras turned to the right, coming upon the bull from behind, pressing his left knee on the back of the animal. The bull is crouching, its right foreleg is sharply bent. With left hand Mithras holds the bull by the mouth, jerking the animal's head backwards, while with his right hand he thrusts a sword into the bull's shoulder. Mithras and the bull are surrounded by other figures: a dog leaps up at the bull's wound, a snake glides along the bottom, a scorpion attacks the bull's genitals, and higher up there sits a raven. Sometimes a lion squats next to

Fig. 1. Cult icon from Hedernheim/Germany. (Frontispiece)
a mixing bowl and the tail of the bull ends in ears of corn. The rising sun and the setting moon frequently surmount the scene, while the twin gods Cautes and Cautopates with their torches stand on the sides, Cautes' torch pointing up, Cautopates' torch pointing down. A rocky cave, at times with a zodiac arching over it, often serves to indicate the locale.

Over five hundred such representations of the bull slaying scene have been found, most of them with only minor variations. Hence, there can be no doubt that they express the central myth of the cult. Yet in the almost complete absence of theological or liturgical literature of Roman Mithraism, the scene and the myth it portrays, have remained only dimly understood. To unlock the secret of the icon, three fields of investigation have been combed for comparative and relevant material:

1. Iranian religious literature
2. Greek and Roman art
3. Astral and seasonal symbolism.¹

None of these have provided a unified, compelling explanation of the scene. Therefore, and because the many astral features of the Mithraic sanctuaries point to a cosmic meaning of the icon, the answer may be found in a somewhat different field, i.e.

4. Greek and Roman astronomy.

We have it on ancient authority that the bull on which Mithras is kneeling is the constellation Taurus. Porphyry, writing in the later third century A.D. when Mithraism had reached its climax, states in his treatise 'On the Cave of the Nymphs' that Mithras carries the sword of Aries, i.e. the zodiacal sign of Mars, and that he rides 'on the bull of Venus', i.e. Taurus, the zodiacal sign of Venus.² Since


² Porphyrius, De antro Nymphaeum, 24 (A. Nauck, 1886: 73): διὸ κριοῦ μὲν φέρει