4. THE IMAGE OF THE HEAVENS
AND THE CULT ICON

The bull slaying scene as a work of art derives its elements from
the Greek and Roman image of the heavens. Indeed, some of these
elements are portrayed with surprisingly close resemblance to the
constellation pictures on the Atlas Farnese globe (Fig. 2). This is true
in particular for Mithras himself. On the bull slaying scene he always
reaches with his left knee and left arm towards the bull; frequently
his upper body bends forward, a sword hangs on his belt, and his
head turns backwards—just as on the Atlas Farnese globe. A few
icons, discussed above, show Mithras in the exact image of Orion
with the raised right hand holding the sword, but possibly even the
god’s lowered right arm with the sword pointing downwards goes back
to a variant view of Orion in the sky as a text of Hermes Trismegistos
apparently suggests.¹

Of the animals some details are also remarkable. The bull’s left
foreleg is consistently shown in the cult icon to be bent back,—in
accordance with the Atlas Farnese globe and our written sources.²
Similarly, the snake is always extended, never curled up. Of Canis
Minor no ancient picture or detailed description survives but it is
said to resemble closely Canis Maior which will mean that it was
a dog leaping upwards as on the bull slaying scene.³

¹ See W. Gundel (1936: 197) placing the sword to where otherwise the fur or the
shield of Orion is depicted.
² E. G. A. Bouché-Leclercq (1899: 134 fn. 3). Cicero, Aratea 330 (= V. Buescu,
1941: 239) inflexoque genu proiecto corpore Taurus.
³ Eratosthenes, Catasterismi 42 (= K. Robert : 1878: 192, 14 f.) : καὶ ποιεὶ ὁμοίω ῥιμ
circulo defixus, pedibus aequinoctiali circulum tangit. Spectat ad occasum. The Carolingian
miniature of the Leiden illustrated Aratus going back directly to a 4th century model
shows Canis Minor leaping to the left, but the illustrations in this manuscript partly
give the view from inside the sphere (Hydra) and partly from outside (Orion), so that
nothing can be gained for the direction of the dog, except that it is leaping; see
G. Thiele (1898: 130). Hermes Trismegistos (W. Gundel 1936: 58, 6) : Anticanis cum
radiis Canis erectus, cf. ibid. 201 f.
As for the overall composition of the scene, the need for a well composed icon obviously necessitated some changes of the Greek image of the heavens. The most notable of these changes is the turning around of the bull and its representation as a complete animal rather than just the front portion of it, i.e. similar to the way it is represented on pictures of the Zodiac (see e.g. Frontispiece and Fig. 1). The other animals were grouped around Mithras and the bull. Dog, snake and scorpion kept their positions relative to each other but were moved underneath the main picture, while the raven was put further up. All figures, except for the bull and possibly Canis Minor kept their original orientation,—the great majority of the monuments even preserves the direction of the scorpion to the upper right with the sting curling to the upper left.4

Thus the changes from the image of the sky to the icon of the bull slaying scene are comparatively few and readily understandable as necessary for artistic reasons. No doubt, the turning around of the bull and its completion was needed in order to arrive at an icon following an accepted pattern of bull slaying, i.e. the model of Nike killing a bull as seen on the temple of Athena Nike on the Akropolis at Athens,5 or that of Heracles fighting the Cretan bull.

The fact that all the elements of the bull slaying scene, and much of their iconography, are taken from the Greek image of the heavens is of the greatest importance not only for the origin but also for the meaning of the icon. In particular it precludes all primarily Iranian influence. No longer will one argue that the scorpion and the snake were added to the icon as the evil animals of Mazdaism, bent upon swallowing up the life-giving essences coming forth from the bull. Perhaps Mithras kills the bull in the image of the Iranian Ahriman or Saoshyant6—but if so, his deed was first assimilated to the exploit of

---

4 When Crater is added it is generally to the right of the snake rather than on its back, and the lion, too, is to the right of the Crater rather than atop it: the connection between the signs is expressed instead by the snake curling up to the mouth of the Crater as if to drink from it (Frontispiece; Fig. 1) and by the lion frequently putting a paw on the Crater. In the Danubian examples, though, the lion is indeed atop the Crater, see CIMRM, vol. 2, plates figures 274 through 505.
5 See F. Cumont (1899: 179ff.); E. Will (1955: 169ff.).
6 F. Cumont (1899: 186ff.). For the scorpion as the embodiment of evil see e.g. F. Saxl (1931: 67ff.).