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THE RAVEN: AN ICONOGRAPHIC ADAPTATION OF THE PLANET MERCURY

Foreword

This essay is based upon four primary points. The first is that the tauroctonal image is composed of three basic units: “A” (Mithras, Bull, Scorpion, Snake and Dog), “B” (Raven) and “C” (Cautes and Cautopates and Sol and Luna). B is fundamentally different from both A and C.

The second is the recognition of the strong astral influence in Mithraism. In order to come to grips with the imagery, one must be fully conscious of the influence of astronomy in Mithraic art.

Thirdly, I examine the attested relationship of the Raven and Mercury outside the tauroctonal context, specifically that they represent the first grade of initiation. Additionally, I examine the various iconographic roles played by Mercury/Mercurius. This examination demonstrates that the Raven as a representation of Mercury does exist in Mithraism. We should therefore not be surprised that a similar relation existed between Mercury and the Raven in the tauroctony.

Fourthly, I examine the behavior of Mercury during its greatest eastern elongations, with specific reference to the elongation in closest proximity to the vernal (springtime) setting of Taurus on the western horizon. In light of the behavior of these greatest eastern elongations and the behavior of the Raven on the bull-slaying scene, I conclude that the tauroctonal Raven represents the planet Mercury at its eastern elongation.


I. The three basic units in the Mithraic tauroctone

The absence of definitive literary documents and the com-
plexity of the Mithraic tauroctone have displaced efforts to identify and analyse the iconographic components in the ever so common bull-slaying scene. The bulk of scholarship in Mithraic studies has tended heretofore toward theologizing about the mysteries lying beneath the surface of the imagery, not toward describing the visual phenomena themselves. The task of identifying the ideologies in Mithraism cannot be effectively done until such time as the systematic study of the religion's iconography is undertaken. The ideological cart must assume its proper place behind the iconographic horse.

In no way does this essay attempt to resolve the issue of whether or not the ideological traditions in Mithraism can be successfully deciphered. This essay analyses the iconography. This essay describes the imagery and in so doing seeks to identify and provide a rationale for the different units on the main cult scene. Particular reference is focused on the component of the Raven.

Of necessity, this choice of studying the physical placements and relationships of the visual units to one another preempts the question of what the imagery "really means". For the student more interested in this aspect of Mithraism, a diverse library of opinion is readily available.¹ To suggest that the study of iconography and ideology in Mithraism must first be wed before the proper study of iconography can begin foists an inappropriate requirement on iconographic studies.

The requirement that to cull out meaning one must coordinate imagery to doctrine is for this study and for any study of Mithraic iconography impossible. This does not imply that iconographic studies in general may function independently of real textual or doctrinal data. However in this instance no real textual or doctrinal data are available. The clues to an accurate study of Mithraic ide-