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The Crab, the Sun, the Moon and Venus:

STUDIES IN THE ICONOLOGY OF HIERONYMUS BOSCH'S TRIPTYCH
THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

In 1966 I explained the symbolism of the Fountain of Life in the Earthly Paradise situated on the left wing of the triptych The Garden of Earthly Delights. The fountain is in the form of a red crab which was usually represented on astrological coins to designate the sign of the zodiac Cancer (figs. 1 and 2). The Crab or Cancer is topped by the crescent, symbol of the moon. The circle of its shell with the dark opening in the centre is a symbol of the sun. It appeared in this very form in paintings of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as well as of later periods.

The union of the signs of the sun and the moon expressed so precisely in the shape of the Crab-Cancer symbolizes the astrological function of the zodiacal Cancer as the astrological house of the moon as well as the summer house of the sun. The Fountain of Life, the source of the Rivers of Paradise, was represented by Bosch as the Crab-Cancer connected with the moon, the moon being the planet that directs all the water complexes on the earth, i.e. the springs and rivers. The vegetal forms of the zodiacal Crab may remind us that it was the 'patron' of the flora like its mother planet, the moon.

The Tree of the sun and the moon represented in the 15th-century Book of Travel by Sir John Mandeville vividly resembles the vegetal shapes of the Crab composed of the signs of the sun and the moon (fig. 3).

One of Bosch's followers placed the same Crab on the temple in his painting The Expulsion of the Money-Changers from the Temple (fig. 4). In a copy of the same painting another unknown follower has depicted the sign of the sun and the moon instead of the Crab (fig. 5). This deliberate transposition proves beyond all doubt


2 The resemblance of the Fountain of Life to a crab or lobster was pointed out for the first time by P. Lafond, Hieronymus Bosch, Brussels 1914, 45 and O. Benesch, Hieronymus Bosch and the Thinking of the Late Middle Ages, Konsthistorisk Tidskrift 26, 1957, 115. Lafond: '... au milieu d'un lac, une végétation étrange et colossale...'. Benesch: 'the Fountain of Life... takes the forms of gigantic crab petrified in coral...'. Lafond and Benesch do not however explain the symbolic meaning of the crab-fountain. My identification of the Crab as the astrological representation of the zodiacal Cancer was discussed in the catalogue of the exhibition Hieronymus Bosch, Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch 1967, nr. 41; P. Reuterstrård, Hieronymus Bosch, Stockholm 1970, 279 f. This paper contains new iconographic material developing the thesis contained in the catalogue and in the book.

3 The symbolism of Crab-Cancer as the astrological house of the sun and the moon was comprehensively discussed by W. Deonna, The Crab and the Butterfly: A Study in Animal Symbolism, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 17, 1954, 47-86; Spychalska-Boczkowska, op. cit., s. 60, 62.

4 See: The Beginning of Wisdom, An Astrological Treatise by Abraham ibn Ezra. An edition of the old French version of 1273 / Li Livres Abraham Eyn, Aze: Commencement de Sapience. An English translation by Raphael Levy, Baltimore 1939, 165: 'Takent as a whole, Cancer prognosticates water flowing constantly, all the vegetation near water, the rain water, and all calm bodies of water... In its part occur also the ponds, every sea shore, every river bank, and the trees of average height'.


6 See the catalogue of the exhibition European Art, Between Renaissance and Rococo, 1520-1600, City of Manchester Art Gallery 1965, nr. 43.

7 M. J. Friedländer, Neues von Pieter Bruegel, Pantheon 1, 1931, 54.

The zodiacal Cancer and its home the moon. Astrological coin of Antoninus Pius. Present whereabouts unknown.