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Ivan Šprajc
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Peter Pehani

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www.drustvo-antropologov.si

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Swastika: The Forgotten Constellation Representing the Chariot of Mithras

Reza Assasi

McGill University, School of Architecture
Macdonald-Harrington Building, 815 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3A 2K6
reza.assasi@mail.mcgill.ca

Abstract

The swastika is an ancient symbol that has been used by various ancient cultures. There is no convincing theory about the origins of the swastika. In this paper the author suggests how this symbol is related to a group of stars visible in the northern hemisphere. The author suggests the constellation formed by this group in relation to Mithraic myths as a support for the possibility of early awareness of astrological changes caused by the axial precession of the Earth. The research is based on a comparative study of ancient Iranian sources and Roman Mithraic iconography. The result suggests that the symbol of the swastika, along with several other symbols, can reveal a code for better understanding Iranian and Roman Mithraic myths and their early connections. This research is an original contribution to the field that represents a step towards revising previous theories on Mithraism.

KEYWORDS: Mithraism, Iranian studies, swastika, precession of equinoxes, Roman antiquity, Archaeoastronomy

POVZETEK

Svastika je star simbol, ki so ga uporabljala številna starodavna ljudstva. O njenem izvoru ni prepričljive teorije. V članku avtor predlaga, da se svastika povezuje s skupino zvezd, vidnih na severni polobli. Zveza med konstelacijo, ki jo tvori ta skupina, in mitraističnimi miti navaja na možnost, da so bile astrološke spremembe, ki jih povzroča precesija Zemljine osi, znane že zgodaj. Raziskava temelji na primerjalni študiji starodavnih iranskih virov in rimske mitraistične ikonografije. Rezultati kažejo, da lahko svastika skupaj z nekaterimi drugimi simboli razkrije ključ za boljše razumevanje iranskih in rimskih mitraističnih mitov ter njihove zgodnje povezanosti. Raziskava je izvirni prispevek k preučevanju, ki vodijo k reviziji prejšnjih teorij o mitraizmu.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: mitraizem, iranske študije, svastika, precesija enakonočij, rimska antika, arheoastronomija

Mithraism

The modern term 'Mithraism' replaced the terms 'the mysteries of Mithras' or 'the mysteries of Persians' in antiquity. 'Mithras' is the name of the Indo-Iranian god 'Mithra', adopted into Greek. Because of the secret nature of this cult in Roman antiquity, almost no considerable written narratives or theology from the religion survive, but fortunately hundreds of materials related to Mithraism have been preserved. The most important artefact is a repeated bull-slaying scene, which leaves no doubt that this figure conveys the core divine message of the cult. The majority of the research on Roman Mithraism focuses on interpreting the physical evidence, while the definition of Roman Mithraism remains problematic and controversial. Despite the fact that the Romans believed in an Iranian origin for this cult, finding its origins has been one of the controversies among 20th century scholars.

The first surviving record of the name 'Mithra' dates back to 1400 B.C., spelled 'Mi-it-ra', in the inscribed¹ peace treaty between the Hittites and the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni in Asia minor (Theim 1960). In Iranian mythology the god Mithra appears in the Avesta, the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism. The second longest *Yasht* (a collection of hymns) of the Avesta is named after him and has 146 verses. In this part of the Avesta, which is considered to preserve pre-Zoroastrian myths, Mithra appears to have *Varahran* (*Bahram* in modern Persian), a divinity associated with victory, as a companion. *Varahran* here is described as a boar with iron teeth running in front of Mithra's four-horse chariot, fighting for him.²

The first major scholarship on Roman Mithraism was published in 1894–1900 by Franz Cumont. Cumont believed that Roman Mithraism is the 'Roman form of Mazdaism' (Beck 1987: 298), and that the god Mithra came to Rome together with a large representation of the Mazdean pantheon. Cumont's theories remained widely accepted until the first International Congress of Mithraic studies in 1971. In this congress, John Hinnells and R. L. Gordon posed severe criticism of Cumont's theories. Hinnells argued that Cumont's reconstruction of Mithraic iconography is not supported by Iranian texts and is in fact in conflict with known Mazdean theology (Hinnells 1975: 294). Gordon claimed that Cumont forced the available material and evidence to conform to his model of Zoroastrian origins. He suggested that Roman Mithraism was an entirely new religion with no Persian origins (Gordon 1975: 215f). Yet none of these scholars proposed a new model to explain Roman Mithraism.

Michael Speidel, another scholar, associates some of the figures of tauroctony³, or Mithras' slaughter of a bull, with figures of the zodiac, and the others to figures on the

¹ The name appears together with four other divinities as witnesses and keepers of the treaty. In Indic culture, 'Mitra', as it exists in Sanskrit, is a divinity of the Rigveda, distinguished by a relationship to Varuna, who is the protector of Rta, the principle of cosmic order and the regulator and coordinator of the universe.

² In another collection of hymns in the Avesta, the Gathas, which are associated with the words of Zoroaster himself, Mithra means 'oath'.

³ In this scene a man wearing a Phrygian cap (generally accepted as the figure of Mithras) kills a bull. The bull always faces towards the right and the bull slayer turns his head while killing the bull. In the elaborated form, usually a dog, a snake, a cup, and a raven appear in the scene. In this scene a scorpion is attached to the bull's genitals. Two other men wearing Phrygian caps are standing one on each side with crossed legs, and bear torches in different positions. Some times a complete zodiac is depicted on top of the scene, and, rarely, a lion is also present sitting in the middle.

celestial equator (Speidel 1977). David Ulansey later suggested Taurus and Scorpius as the equinoctial constellations around the second millennium B.C., but argued that Speidel's model for the equatorial constellations is not convincing. He suggested instead that Mithras corresponds to Perseus, and believed that this concept originated in Asia Minor and developed in Rome as a new cult (Ulansey 1991).

Swastika

Each of these theories suffers from a self-referential hypothetical nature and does not draw an acceptable framework to describe the reason for selecting these constellations, or explain their vital symbolic meaning in Mithraic theology. In addition, they have missed an important symbolic element, the swastika, which mysteriously appeared in a Mithraic tauroctony scene. According to M. J. Vermaseren, a counter-clockwise swastika has been well preserved on a tauroctony scene found at Ghighen, in modern Bulgaria, and is now in the national museum in Sofia (Vermaseren 1956-1960: Mon. 2247). In another Mithraic artefact (fig. 1) from Italy, a clockwise swastika is depicted on a bronze statue along with two six-rayed star signs (Vermaseren 1956-1960: Mon. 765). Despite the rarity of this symbol in Roman Mithraic artefacts, this instance should not be ignored.



Figure 1: Left: Tauroctony found at Ghighen (CIMRM 2247). Right: Mithraic artefact with swastika (CIMRM 765).

The swastika is a symbol used by several ancient cultures. The swastika as a sacred symbol is well-known in the east, found commonly in the Indus valley around 2500 B.C. It remains a religious symbol in Hinduism and Jainism, and is widely in use. It has also been found in bronze and iron age cultures around the Black sea, Caspian Sea, and south-west Iran. In Buddhism it is known as *yung drung* and is the graphic representation of eternity. In Chinese and Japanese the word represented by swastika in writing is a homonym of the number 10,000, and is commonly used to represent the whole of

creation. It is also present in Greek architectural motifs, cloths, coins, and artefacts dating back to the 8th century B.C.

What makes the swastika interesting in the context of Mithraism is the wide use of this symbol in the east, particularly in ancient Iran and India, coinciding with the Mithraic tauroctony. Interestingly, the swastika was known as ‘the chariot of Mithra’ in Iran (Bakht-vartash 2001: 139; Ghiasabadi 2003: 36). In the *Mihr Yasht* of Avesta, Mithra is described as having a celestial quadriga pulled by four heavenly white horses, who have front hoofs made of gold and back hoofs made of silver (*Mihr Yasht*, Verses 112,124,125,136). His chariot is decorated with the stars and his bright face is like the star Sirius (*Mihr Yasht*, Verse 143). He hears with his thousand ears and watches with his thousand eyes, always standing on the high end of the sky, restlessly, in the north, arising above the *Alborz* mountain.⁴ He appears before the sunrise and after the sunset and touches both ends of the ball-shaped earth, and he watches everything between the earth and the sky (*Mihr Yasht*, Verse 95).

This leaves no doubt that the seat of Mithra and his quadriga is a celestial body in the sky close to the celestial north pole.⁵ If we look out in a clear night sky in the northern hemisphere to the constellation Draco, we can recognize a clockwise swastika (Fig. 2). Its center is Zeta Draco (HIP83895), and it consists of four wings: 15 Draco-Pherkad-Zeta Ursa Minor, Eta Draco-Theta Draco-Edasich, 26 Draco-Gramium-Rustaban, and Omega Draco-Phi Draco-Upsilon Draco-Atlantis; and it has four stars as companions: Kokab, HIP78189, Etamin, and Epsilon Draco (Fig. 3).

The counter-clockwise swastika in the tauroctony scene of Ghigen is the mirror image of the celestial clockwise swastika because tauroctony is a symbolic projection of the celestial bodies. Also, other symbolic figures such as Taurus, Canis minor, and Scorpio which appear together in most of tauroctony scenes are always projected as mirror images of the celestial constellations.

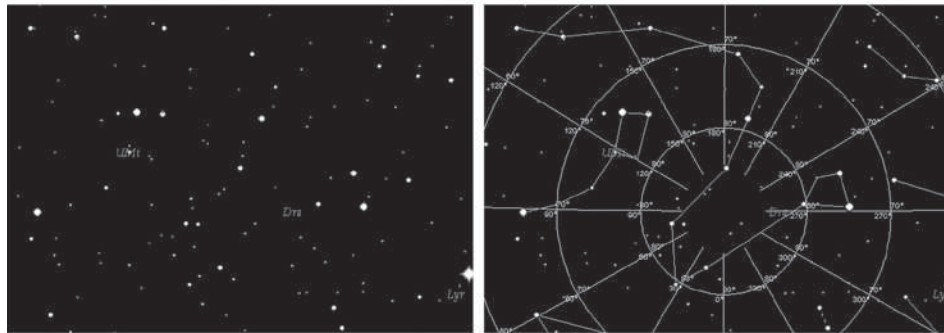


Figure 2: Stars around the north ecliptic pole.

⁴ Alborz is now the name of a chain of mountains in northern Iran, but in ancient times the name referred to the whole chain of mountains from Pamir to Anatolia. This verse identifies the location of the celestial body of Mithra in the north sky.

⁵ R. M. Ghiasabadi related Mithra to the north celestial pole and the four horses to the four bright stars of Ursa Minor pulling the sky around the pole once a day (Ghiasabadi 2003: 36,57).

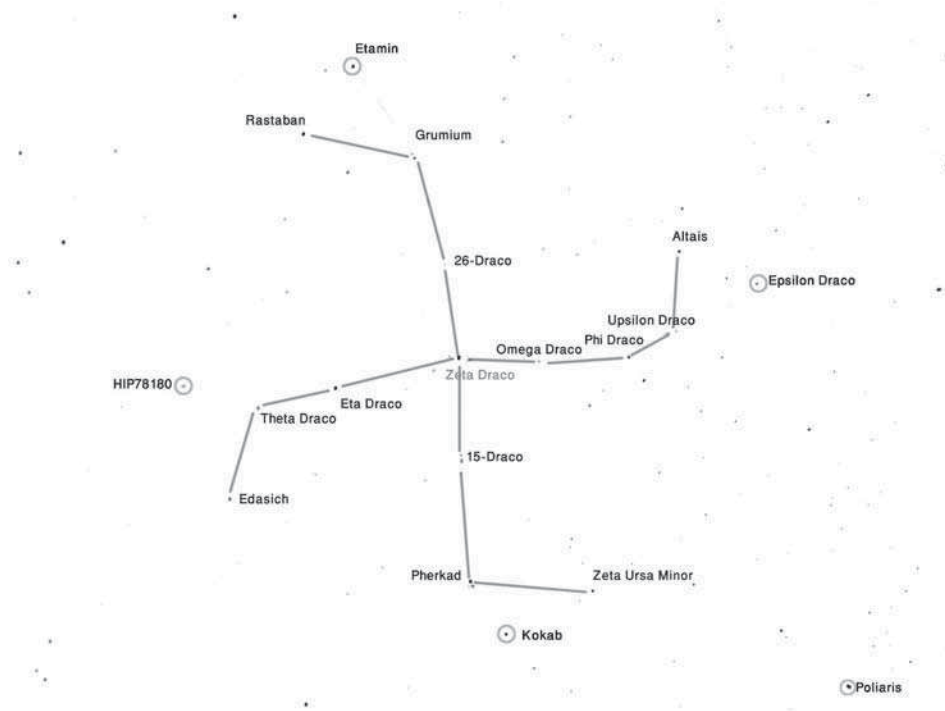


Figure 3: The celestial Swastika.

Zeta Draco is the closest star to the north ecliptic pole and the center of the zodiac in the star map. Because the axial precession of the earth takes place around an axis perpendicular to earth's orbit around the sun, ecliptic poles serve as the precessional poles of the earth, too. Therefore, Zeta Draco is not only the star of the north ecliptic pole, but also represents the north precessional pole. It is the only star which never changes its path in the north sky; instead, the north celestial pole and other celestial bodies rotate clockwise around this point (almost one degree every 72 years). The ecliptic pole as the center of the zodiac would have been known to ancient civilizations, even if one does not admit that the precession was known until the Greek astronomer Hipparchus.

Symbolism in Tauroctony

As an observational consequence of precession, the constellations of the zodiac remain on the ecliptic but shift backwards almost one sign every two millennia (30 degrees every 2160 years), which are known as an astrological age. Each astrological age is named after the zodiac sign(s) rising or setting on the equinoctial points⁶ in that age, representing

⁶ The points on the horizon where the sun rises/sets during the equinoxes, or the intersection of the ecliptic and celestial equator.

the sign(s) of the spring or fall equinox. The precession forces all the constellations to change their position – except the swastika, which spins slowly round in its clockwise direction around Zeta Draco. In this great change the family of signs of the zodiac stays on the ecliptic while the family of the constellations representing the east rising stars or the celestial equator changes its members in each age. The latter family gains a new pair of zodiac constellations on its intersection with the ecliptic (which become the symbol of the age), accompanied by one other constellation which ‘passes over’ the celestial equator at the same time. I suggest that this phenomenon provides a framework for decoding the secret of the cosmic imagery of the Mithraic tauroctony.

Here is the explanation: Knowing that, in addition to the planets and the moon and the sun having their cyclical movement, the cosmos appears to have its own great cycle rotating around the ecliptic pole, one can make a simple astrolabe in which its background image showing the constellations rotates around the center of the ecliptic circle (Zeta Draco), while the two circles of the ecliptic and the equator of the astrolabe remain fixed. This is the secret to simulating the cosmos during the great year: by rotating the astrolabe thirty degrees, or one sign of the zodiac, for each astrological age, one reveals the star map of that age. By rewinding this cosmic clock and tracking back the motions of the celestial bodies, one can see that the beginning of each age corresponds to the arrival of a new pair of zodiac signs at the intersecting points of the two circles of this astrolabe. Another constellation, which I call the ‘forerunner’, also intersects with the equatorial circle and rises on the east just before the sign of the age. Surprisingly, the forerunner constellations of successive ages correspond with the constellations depicted in the tauroctony.⁷

The forerunner constellation of each age joins the new zodiac pair in the east, metaphorically overthrowing the sign of the previous age. Corvus comes with Leo-Aquarius, Crater with Cancer-Capricornus, Hydra with Gemini-Sagittarius, Canis Minor with Taurus-Scorpius, and Orion with Aries-Libra. More precisely, the brightest star of Orion, Betelgeuse (Alpha Orion), intersects with the celestial equator, overthrowing the brightest star of Taurus, Aldebaran (Alpha Taurus), commencing the age of Aries. Correspondingly, in the tauroctony, the man who overthrows the Bull with Scorpius attached to its genitals could be Orion – or the god Mithras incarnated as Orion, as the hero of the age of Aries.⁸ This imagery might even have been developed from a basic astrological framework derived from the east by the Greeks and Romans. The message of this image is the awareness of the coming of the new age, Pisces-Virgo (two fish and a virgin). This age commenced around 1 A.D., when the edge of Pisces (the segment between Omicron

⁷ Spiedel contemplated their relationship with the equator in the ancient sky, but this set of constellations (Corvus, Hydra, Crater, Canis Minor, and Orion) never appears fully as the equatorial constellations. For example, Canis Minor should not appear in the tauroctony according to Spiedel’s framework, but it does. Ulansey also rejects Spiedel’s theory of Mithras-Orion because of this fact (Ulansey 1991).

⁸ In addition to Taurus and Scorpius, which are always present in the tauroctony as zodiac signs, a lion, which could be Leo – the Solstitial sign of the age of Taurus – often appears in the middle of the scene. A relation between this lion and the lion-headed god of Roman Mithraism is also possible.

Pisces and Eta Pisces) reached the equinoctial point (the intersection of the ecliptic circle and celestial equator) and Spica, the brightest star of Virgo, reached the celestial equator and rose in the east (fig. 4).

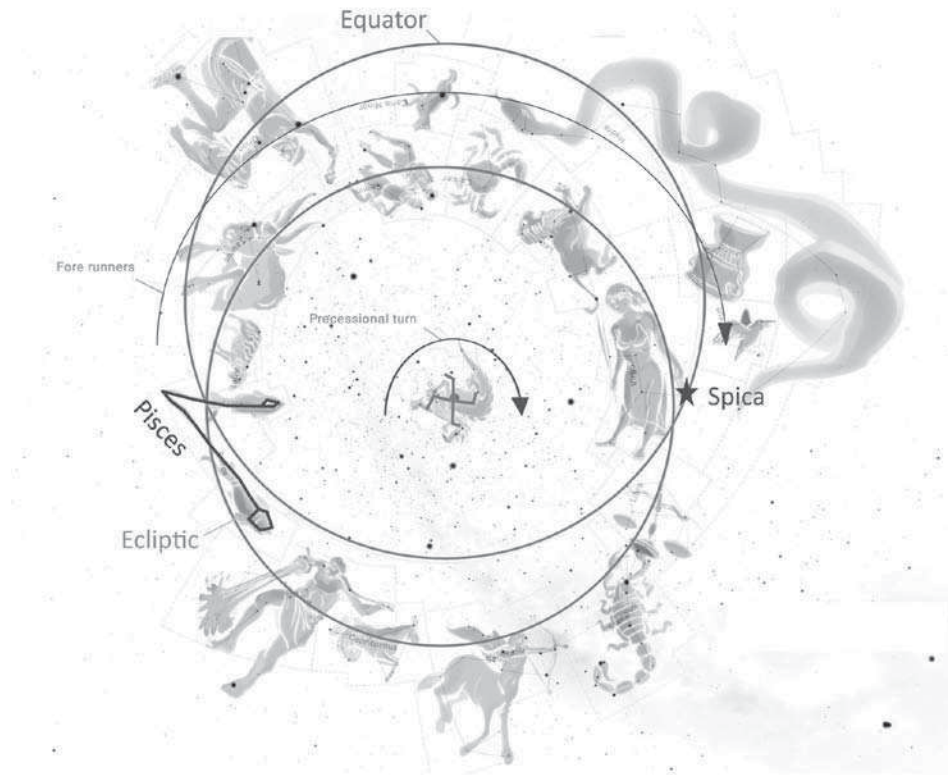


Figure 4: The proposed Mithraic astrolabe. The precessional rotation in the sky of the northern hemisphere from 10500 BC to 1 AD.

The tauroctony proposes the start of this cosmic clock in the age of Leo-Aquarius (10,500 B.C. – 8000 B.C.), represented by the constellation Corvus, and the only missing age in this imagery is Pisces-Virgo, which was yet to come. In this binary system the great cycle of the world sums up to 12 millennia. The concept of the great year, or 12,000 years consisting of six ages, half evil and half peaceful, is a Zurvanite belief in ancient Iran.

Zurvan is the concept of time, supreme god, and primordial creator deity in the Iranian cult of Zurvanism. The name 'Zurvan' may be discerned on tablets dating back to the 12th century B.C. Zurvan is referred to in two forms: 'Zurvan Akarānak' (the god of infinite time) and 'Dirang Xutāy' (the god of finite time). Iranian Pahlavi sources tell that material creation evolved from the infinite to four elements, then to a second form of mixing of these primary properties, and finally to the fully developed cosmos. This form

exists for twelve thousand years after which the whole is taken up to the infinite again (Zaehner 1955: 266). According to another report (from Eznik of Kolb, an Armenian writer of the fifth century), Zurvan wished to have a son, with the name Ohrmazd, who would create heaven, earth, and all beings. After offering sacrifice for a thousand years Zurvan began to ponder and doubt if he should wait. While doing so, Ohrmazd and Ahriman were conceived: Ohrmazd (Ahura-Mazda, the good god of Mazdean theology) from Zurvan's thousand years of sacrifice and Ahriman (evil) from Zurvan's doubt. In finite time and space, which exists for 12000 years, there is a battle between good and evil. There is also a treaty between Ohrmazd and Ahriman to keep the balance and prevent Ahriman from ruling for more than half of the ages.⁹ The mediator¹⁰ who keeps the treaty is Mithra (Zaehner 1955: 101).

Chariot of Mithra

Now we can draw a scheme to understand the cosmic image of Mithra and its symbolism. Mithra is the god of cosmic order, the divinity who keeps the treaties, the god of vast pastures, who rises on the north sky, never sleeps, and watches everything with his thousand eyes. His chariot is the swastika driven by four white horses running smoothly through the ages of time.

If we look more carefully at the proposed celestial swastika, we can even draw the star map of the four horses of this constellation pulling the swastika (or the 'cross' of swastika) on its clockwise direction around the center, as shown in the figure (fig. 5). The story of the four horses of Mithra is copied in the so-called Song of Magians preserved by *Dio Chrysostom* and cited by Cumont, Reitzenstein, Nyberg, and Zaehner.¹¹ According to Cumont, the myth is genuinely Magian in origin.¹²

In Cumont's account of the story, 'the supreme god drives a chariot drawn by four steeds which turn ceaselessly round in a fixed circle.' (Cumont 1956: 116-118). Zaehner states that: 'The myth speaks of Zeus as the first and perfect charioteer of the perfect chariot. This chariot which is the cosmos, is guided by the one charioteer and proceeds on its course throughout "unceasing periods of eternity". Men can only see the course of the sun and Moon, but "can not grasp the movement of the whole". Each horse is sacred to one of four mythical figures: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, and Hestia ...' (Zaehner 1955: 226). And Cumont goes on to describe the story in detail:

⁹ Dark and light cycles are usually 1000 years long, for example the evil rule of Zahhak in Iranian myths.

¹⁰ After the third century, Mihr (Mithra) was often presented as identical to the sun, where as in the Avesta he is clearly distinguished from the sun.

¹¹ Zaehner believes this song is evidence for the divinization of the four elements in Zurvanism and fits in a fourfold structure that repeats in this worldview.

¹² He believes the charioteer Zeus in this myth is the supreme god Zurvan, and the four horses represent the four elements.

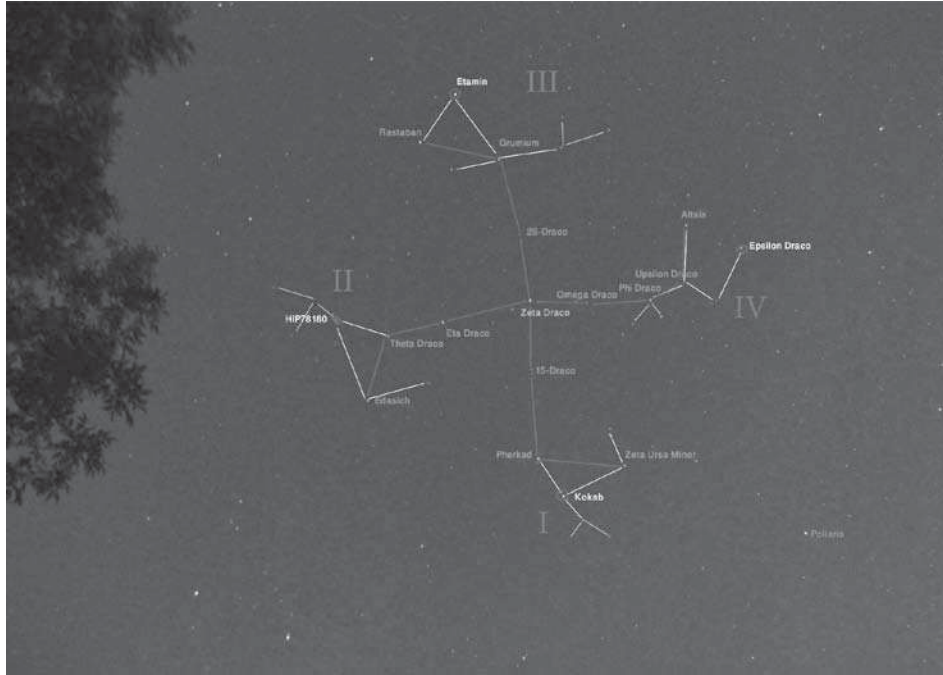


Figure 5: The celestial quadriga.

The first [of these horses], which bears on its shining coat¹³ the signs of the planets and constellations, is sturdy and agile and traverses the circumference of the fixed circle with extreme velocity; the second, less vigorous and less rapid in its movement¹⁴, wears a sombre robe, of which one side is illuminated by the rays of the sun; the third proceeds more slowly still; and the forth turns slowly in the same spot, champing restlessly its steel bit¹⁵, whilst its companions moved round it as round a stationary column in the center. The quadriga turns slowly and unimpeded, regularly completing its eternal course. But at a certain moment the fiery breath of the first horse falling upon the forth ignites its mane, and its neighbour, exhausted by its efforts, inundates it with torrents of perspiration. Finally, a still more remarkable phenomenon takes place, the appearance of the quartet ...

¹³ 'Shining coat' may refer to the star Kokab – the brightest star among the four companion stars of the celestial swastika.

¹⁴ The details of the story about the first horse being agile and rapid and the second horse being less rapid are possibly because the angle of 15Draco-Zeta Draco-Eta Draco is smaller than the angle of Eta Draco-Zeta Draco-26 Draco. Thus it seems that the first horse wearing the shiny coat (Kokab) runs faster than the second horse that wears a somber robe (HIP 78180, the least bright star among the four companion stars of the celestial swastika).

¹⁵ The suggested figure of the fourth horse turns in the same spot instead of continuing on the circular path of the celestial swastika.

The details of this story coincide with the graphic and geometric forms of the horses in the proposed star map of the figure for the four horses of the swastika. There is a bronze age statue of a Charioteer found in Serbia with the symbol of swastika and also some Roman artefacts show four horse-heads shaping a counter clock-wise swastika while the horses move the swastika in clock-wise direction (fig. 6). Regardless of finding direct connections between the latter instances and the Mithraic cult, they show that, in the west, the swastika could represent the four-horse chariot running clock-wise around a stationary column.



Figure 6: Left: A bronze age statue of a charioteer with three swastikas, City museum of Vrsac, Serbia (source: www.muzejvrsac.org.rs). Right: Roman bronze brooch showing four horses of swastika (source: www.antiquesnavigator.com).

In Roman artefacts, Mithras is shown as the charioteer of the quadriga. In another image, Mithras spins the cosmic sphere in his hand, and in another he holds the cosmic sphere in one hand and turns the zodiac with the other (fig. 7). This image resembles a Greek mosaic of Aeon, the god of time, turning the circle of the zodiac. Even more interestingly, a zodiac mosaic from the 6th century in the core space of a synagogue at Beth Alpha shows the four horse chariot in the middle of the zodiac, and a charioteer with a six-ray crown (fig. 8).¹⁶

¹⁶ Considering the rarity of astrological graphics in the Jewish tradition, this zodiac is significant and, while potentially suspect of imitating an older Roman graphic, should convey an astronomical message. In the middle of the zodiac is the charioteer on a quadriga and four horses. There are four other figures at the corners. The charioteer has a crown with six rays and around the chariot are the moon and the stars. The chariot has two wheels, each consisting of six parts of dark and light colors.



Figure 7: Left: Mithras running the quadriga (CIMRM 943). Middle: Mithras spinning the cosmic sphere (CIMRM 506). Right: Mithras turning the Zodiac and the cosmic sphere (CIMRM 985).



Figure 8: 6th Century mosaic pavement of Beth Alpha synagogue (source: www-spf.gsfc.nasa.gov).

In Roman artefacts the constellation of swastika is depicted as a four-horse chariot of Mithras. Representing the north ecliptic pole (the center of the ecliptic circle), this four-horse chariot often symbolically serves the Sun or Helios who runs on the ecliptic circle. The affiliation between Mithras and Helios could be explained in this way. The cross of Zodiac is a well-known symbol. The ring of Mithra or a circle depicted on this cross possibly is the path of the star of Mithra (Zeta Draco). This path is the circular path, of apparent daily rotation of Zeta Draco around the north celestial pole. This circle remains in the same place during the astrological ages, while the celestial north pole changes position because of axial precession.

In Christianity we often see the image of Jesus appearing the middle of a zodiac with his twelve companions. The image of Christ also coincides with the cross and circle. If we take the cross as the short form of the swastika (or the celestial quadriga), then Jesus would be the successor of Mithras, born when Pisces reaches the equinoctial point and Spica, the brightest star of Virgo (the virgin) and the symbol of wheat or the house of bread (the literal translation of Bethlehem), reaches the celestial equator and rises in the east. The story of three Magi wearing Phrygian caps, like the three men in the tauroctony, sounds Mithraic: their following the star in the east towards Bethlehem to inaugurate the birth of Jesus could be a story about the astronomical observation of Spica in order to determine its arrival on the celestial equator to announce the beginning of the age of Pisces. This is the age in which mankind was saved and gifted a loaf of bread and two fish by their virgin-born savior (in the christian account).

This fact might be a tenet of Roman Mithraism: the wonder of the new astrological age which was believed to be the last age of the universe. It represents the problem of finding a new mythical hero for the age of Pisces, in which the god Mithras is incarnated. It is the age of the final battle between good and evil.

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