



## THE SWASTIKA AS REPRESENTATION OF THE SUN OF HELIOS AND MITHRAS

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### ABSTRACT

At the 20th International Conference of the European Society for Astronomy in Culture, held in Slovenia in 2012, Reza Assasi (2013) presented the paper 'Swastika: The Forgotten Constellation Representing the Chariot of Mithras', in which he identified Mithras and his quadriga with the constellation Draco, centre of the zodiac in the map of the stars. Thus he proposed a new interpretation that contradicted that accepted by researchers of the Mithraic religion who associate Mithras with the sun.

This article aims to show that, contrary to this new interpretation, Mithras should still be identified with the solar deity. Mithraic iconography and liturgy is analysed in the present work, paying special attention to the relationship between the two solar deities Helios and Mithras. The context in which the swastika is depicted is analysed, demonstrating that it never represented a constellation but instead represented the sun. We follow the theory of David Ulansey (1994), which asserts that Mithras should be identified with the "hypercosmic sun", the sphere of fire which Greek philosophers located beyond the starry heavens.

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**KEYWORDS:** Mithras, sun, swastika, Helios, hypercosmic sun, tauroctony, *mithraeum*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Mithraic religion appeared in the Roman Empire in the first century CE. Mithras began to be studied in greater depth in the nineteenth century, when Franz Cumont (1896, 1897) first compiled the known texts and iconography depicting Mithras. However, little is known about Mithraic rituals because there are no surviving liturgical texts. Initiates were bound to secrecy, so the only accounts of its rituals to come down to us are the very biased and sometimes contradictory accounts of outsiders, such as Christian authors (Campos, 2010: 50). However, it is the mystery religion with the most surviving iconography, which explains the large number of works devoted to the subject. But the symbols depicted are the subject of conflicting interpretations, which suggests that an appropriate methodology for their study needs to be developed.

The oldest references to Mithras appear in the Vedic texts, which were studied by J. Gonda (1972) in relation to the ancient Indian pantheon. Mithras is also found in the Iranian world, in particular in the Avesta sacred texts (Thieme, 1957, 21). These eastern references have long been interpreted in terms of the continuist theory first propounded by Franz Cumont (1903), who saw it as a development of Mazdaism, with interesting subsequent contributions. The debate continues to this day between proponents of the continuous development of a religion that originated in the Indo-Iranian world and those who think it developed its own identity in a Roman context (Alvar, 2001, 80).

## 2. THE MITHRAS CULT

The Mithras cult in Roman society is found in the context of the mystery cults that blossomed from the Hellenistic period onwards and were at their height under the Roman Empire. Their popularity can be seen in the Eleusinian Mysteries that arrived from Magna Graecia, the Phrygian goddess Cybele's temple built in Rome in the late third century BCE, the celebrations in honour of Bacchus-Dionysus observed in 186 BCE, and the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis, which

reached Rome in Republican times. A common feature of the mystery religions was their secrecy and an initiation ritual in which the initiate identified with the deity and was promised the salvation of his soul and eternal life. Mithraism had two peculiarities: it was an exclusively male religion and the deity did not die and rise from the dead (Alvar, 2001, 93).



Figure 1. Mithraeum at Santa Maria di Capua (Italy). (Photograph F. Burillo).

The Mithras cult was performed in *mithraea*, small, rectangular underground chambers, measuring about 23 by 9 meters, with sculpted or painted Mithraic iconography at one end (Figure 1). The room was flanked by two characteristic *triclinium* benches on which worshippers reclined for the ritual feast. These sanctuaries could only accommodate a small group of believers, so when their number increased another *mithraeum* was built, which explains their abundance. It is estimated that there were about 40 *mithraea* at Ostia and 100 in Rome, of which we know approximately half (Coarelli, 1979, 69).

## 3. MITHRAIC ICONOGRAPHY

The iconography relating to Mithras is extensive because images were very important in the Mithraic religion and formed part of the *mithraea*, where they have been preserved in their underground setting. The uniformity of Mithraic iconography throughout the Roman Empire is remarkable. The complex iconography allows three different levels to be discerned, with each of them forming part of the next.

1) A group of sculptures depicting a tauroctony, the central element of Mithraic iconography, can be seen in many museums. Mithras is depicted as a classically beautiful young man with a Phrygian cap denoting his Persian origin. He is portrayed sacrificing a bull, which is shown submitting to him, its legs bent. The god stabs it with a dagger while lifting its head by the nostrils with his left hand and holding it down with his left leg bent against its back. There are always three animals in this scene: a dog and a serpent licking the blood, and a scorpion driving its claws into its testicles.

2) When an intact tauroctony is found in a mithraeum it always occupies a central scene in the representation of a cave, which simulated the mithraeum itself. The sun is depicted in the upper left corner of the frame and the moon is on the right. Two similarly attired young men wearing the same Phrygian cap as Mithras, who appear below the two celestial bodies, are the torchbearers. The inscriptions tell us their names: Cautes holds the torch pointing up and Cautopates holds it downwards. A raven often appears in this scene and, less frequently, a lion and a cup.

3) Some mithraea contain only the scene described above at one end, as in the case of those at Duino and Capua, but it is usually flanked by a series of smaller scenes on each side which depict the mythical life of Mithras, as seen in the Barberini mithraeum (CIMRM 390). The content of the panels is not standardised in these complex scenes, and it is not uncommon to find the signs of the zodiac, as in the case of the Barberini mithraeum referred to above.

#### 4. MITHRAIC LITURGY

Unlike other mystery cults (the mysteries of Isis, the cult of Attis, Serapis mysteries, etc.), where written documentation describing their rites has survived, those of the Mithraic religion have to be reconstructed mainly from the iconography.

1) The tauroctony was the central icon of Mithraism; it depicts Mithras killing the bull. The bull is Ahriman, the cosmic force of evil in Iranian religion, according to Franz Cumont (1903, 19). However, the separate development of the Roman Mithraic religion

began to be defended in 1971 at the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies. There are two currents of thought: one, based on the fact that in some scenes the bull's tail becomes an ear of wheat, sees its sacrifice an allegory of the life cycle: fertilization, regeneration and salvation of all creation (Alvar, 2010, 71); the other, led by David Ulansey (1991), interprets the tauroctony as an astronomical star map in which every figure found in the standard tauroctony has a parallel in a group of constellations located along a continuous band in the sky: the bull is paralleled by Taurus, the dog by Canis Minor, the snake by Hydra, the raven by Corvus, and Scorpio by the scorpion.

2) The meaning of some of the icons that appear in the mithraeum's central scenes, such as the sun and the moon, is not in doubt. In side scenes the cave appears to be linked to the birthplace of Mithras and therefore, like the underground mithraeum itself, was intended to represent the cosmos. The raven always appears as the intermediary between the sun and Mithras. Cumont interprets the torchbearers from their position and the direction of the torch. Cautes is shown below the sun and is holding the torch pointing upwards, so one theory is that he represents the sun itself. Cautopates holds the torch pointing downwards and is shown below the moon, and so is identified with the night. But there are other possibilities, such as that they represented life and death, east and west, or the rising sun and the setting sun (Alvar, 2001, 83).

3) The panels surrounding the mithraeum's central scene allow the life of Mithras and his multiple meanings to be reconstructed. The child Mithras is shown being born from a rock which is sometimes egg-shaped and is identified as the embryonic world and the genesis of all things. Mithras is often depicted on the back of the bull, catching it after its escape, and concluding with the main scene showing its sacrifice. The scenes in which Mithras is associated with Helios are particularly important in this study, as is the arc of the zodiac sometimes depicted, intensifying the symbolism of the cosmic cave.

## 5. MITHRAS AND HELIOS

The relationship between Mithras and the sun is a constant of Mithraic imagery. In the central panels of the mithraeum depicting the tauroctony we see how Mithras turns his attention from the main event of sacrificing the bull to gaze at the sun in anthropomorphic form, which returns his gaze, always accompanied by the raven, his sacred animal.

It is in the scenes of Mithras' life depicted in the panels surrounding the mithraeum's tauroctony that we can see the sequence of the relationship between Mithras and the sun, as Helios. First there is a scene showing Helios' submission. For example, in the Roman mithraeum of Barberini (CIMRM 390) Mithras is shown standing on the right-hand side of the lower scene, placing a crown on the sun, which is kneeling.



Figure 2. Mithra attempting to mount the chariot of Helios. CIMRM 1283. (Photograph M<sup>a</sup>. P. Burillo).

The banqueting scene that follows the one described above is more common. In all cases the two deities are depicted as equals, showing that there is true communion between them. In the relief from Alba Iulia (CIMRM 1958) the two deities appear on a triclinium. After the banquet, Mithras is portrayed climbing onto the chariot driven by Helios. This can be seen in the Barberini mithraeum and also in the upper part of the central scene of the complex relief at Neuenheim (CIMRM 1283). In the case of Alba Iulia, the scene is completed with a snake coiled around the bearded figure of Oceanus, emphasising the upward direction of the scene. The snake could be a symbol of time and an element of Saturn's iconography and is associated with the snake shown coiled around the Aion deity (Beck, 1984, 2087).

We find representations in which Mithras is identified with the sun, although there is a clear differentiation between him, Helios and Sol. The oldest representations are from an Iranian context, as is the case of the orthostat at the Nemrut Dagı funeral sanctuary in Commagene, where Antiochus I (324-261) extends his hand to Mithras, who is surrounded by the sun's rays on his Phrygian cap (Silloti, 2006, 21). This identification with the sun is less common in Roman Mithraic scenes. It can be seen on a bronze brooch from Ostia (CIMRM 318) depicting Mithras wearing a Phrygian cap surrounded by a halo and a great crown of nine rays.



Figure 3. Antioch I extending his hand to Mithra. Funerary sanctuary of Nemrut Dagı, Comagene (Turkey). (Digitalization M<sup>a</sup>. P. Burillo).

The clearest identification of Mithras with the sun is found in the many inscriptions that refer to him as *Soli Invicto* (Halsbergue, 1972, 79). Thus Mithras is a different solar deity from Helios.

## 6. MITHRAS AND THE HYPERCOSMIC SUN

David Ulansey (1994) puts forward an interesting hypothesis in his work *Mithras and the Hypercosmic Sun*, in which he identifies Mithras' role as the "unconquered sun", a different solar deity from Helios. This interpretation is supported by the philosophical theories of the Neoplatonists.

In Book VI of the *Republic*, Plato (427-347 BCE) describes the sun as the source of all enlightenment and understanding of everything that exists in the visible world. He amplifies this image in Book VII with the metaphor of the myth of the caves, in which he likens normal human life to living in a cave.

Plato complemented this myth in *Phaedrus*, in which he makes the destination of immortal souls a realm beyond the heavens (Hackforth, 1952).

The prolific philosopher Philo (15/10 BCE - 45/50 BCE) later developed the concept of "hypercosmic sun" in a passage from *De Opificio Mundi*. The existence of two suns was still being defended by Julian in the Chaldaean Oracles of the second century where, in certain unnamed mysteries, it was taught that "the sun travels in the starless heavens far above the region of the fixed stars" (Lewy, 1978).

In view of these testimonies David Ulansey defends a striking parallel with the Mithraic evidence, in which we also find two suns, one being Helios the sun-god (who is always distinguished from Mithras in the iconography) and the other being Mithras in his role as the "unconquered sun". He reiterates this proposal in his article 'The Eighth Gate: The Mithraic Lion-Headed Figure and the Platonic World-Soul', in which he analyses the central scene of the Barberini mithraeum (CIMRM 390). The tauroctony appears under an arch formed by the signs of the zodiac. Above the arch there are a number of fires separated by trees. There is also a figure with a snake coiled around it; this figure links the two layers and stands on a globe located in the middle of the zodiac while his body penetrates into the upper level. The head, unseen, is at the height of the fires (Figure 4). This is the Aion figure that stands on the cosmic sphere holding a key in his right hand (CIMRM 543) or with the zodiac inscribed on his body (CIMRM 879). Its position in the Barberini zodiac is explained, according to Ulansey, by Origen (185-254) in his work *Contra Celsum*. Celsus describes a Mithraic symbol consisting of a ladder with seven gates, each associated with one of the seven planets, while at the top there is an eighth gate associated with the sphere of the fixed stars leading to the region beyond that sphere (Chadwick, 1953, VI:22).



Figure 4. On the left, "Aion" deity standing on a cosmic sphere and on the right, the same figure depicted in the centre of the zodiac above the head of Mithras, in the Barberini Mithraeum. (Digitalization S. Hernández).

We now have the complete iconographic reading, where Mithras ascends on Helios' chariot to the limit of the sphere of the fixed stars which he alone is capable of penetrating; he becomes the Aion figure in order to reach the fiery sphere referred to by Greek philosophers such as Parmenides and Anaxagoras. The fiery sphere would equate with the "hypercosmic sun" and even survives in Catholic theology as "Empyrean", the highest heaven or Paradise, the abode of God and the celestial beings described in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Dante, 1876, 193).

## 7. THE SWASTIKA AS A SYMBOL OF THE SUN

The swastika is a universal symbol present on all five continents and has been used by different cultures throughout history. It is one of the best examples of a symbol's convergence, found all over the world without an original source, and this has given rise to different interpretations. Although the identification of this sign with the revolving sun is the most widespread explanation (López-Pamplo, 1982), we cannot say a priori that this is the meaning given to it in all cultures.

The swastika's presence in the cultures of the Indus, where it appeared in the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, which emerged in 2600 BCE, and its survival to the present day as a sacred symbol has led to this region being defended as one of the places where it originated (Marshall, 1973). The existence of more ancient examples, such as an outstanding dish found in Samarra on the Tigris, leaves the question of its origin unresolved (Herzfeld, 1930), and suggests that there

may have been a common substrate and not an expansion from the Indus to the east (Ries, 2013, 206). This would be corroborated by the fact that one of the oldest examples of a swastika can be identified on Neolithic pottery dating to the 5th millennium BCE, on display at an exhibition at the Archaeological Museum of Zagreb (Figure 4). This example would confirm Colin Renfrew's theory (1987) linking the process of Indo-Europeanization with Neolithic expansion.



**Figure 5.** Neolithic pottery from Bapska (Croatia) belonging to the "Sopot Culture" dated to the 5th millennium BC. Archaeological Museum, Zagreb. (Photograph F. Burillo).

The swastika frequently appears on geometric pottery and in the Greek world is identified with the figure of the sun moving through the firmament (Palma di Cesnola, 1884, 218). Helios rides a chariot drawn by four horses on Greek red-figure ware (Carabatea, 1997, 37). The sun appears to radiate from the god's head or from a point beside it. On a ceramic vase in the Vienna museum we find a frontal view of Helios driving his chariot with a swastika emblazoned on his chest, confirming this symbol's identification with the sun (López, 1982, fig. 67). Thus in these cases and this context the meaning of the swastika is directly related with the sun.

We can see a clear identification of the sun with the swastika in the diachronic development of Celtiberian iconography. Repoussé bronze plates found in the Numancia necropolis depict a realistic sun associated with a horse; it is radiant by day but without rays to represent the sun at night. In a later period, the sun also appears as a right-facing swastika for the sun of the day and left-facing for the sun at night, always associated

with the horse in black-painted ware from the oppidum of Numancia (Burillo *et al.* 2013).

The identification of the swastika in the middle of the night sky was proposed, amongst others, by Joscely Gowin (1966), who points out that this symbol would appear from observing the annual movement of the Great Bear around the North Star at the time of the solstices and equinoxes. Reza Assasi's (2013) interpretation follows the same lines. He bases it on the swastika's presence on a Mithraic relief (CIMRM 2247) and the interpretation of references in the Avesta to Mithras riding a chariot pulled by four horses moving through the sky together with the figure of "Mithras turning the Zodiac and the cosmic sphere" (CIMRM 985), which Assasi mistakenly equates with the scene depicted on the sixth century mosaic in the synagogue of Beth Alpha in which Helios is shown in the centre of the zodiac. He interprets it literally and places the chariot carrying the deity at the centre of the cosmos where the constellation Draco is found. However, if a constellation had been identified with the swastika in the past, this symbol would have prevailed over others, given its continuous presence in Graeco-Roman iconography. The most important criticism of Assasi's hypothesis can be found in the celestial vault depicted in the mithraeum of Ponza (Beck, 1976; Lamonica, 2012) (Figure 6), where the signs of the Zodiac are shown in a circle with the Great Bear and Ursa Minor in the centre.



**Figure 6.** The mithraeum of Ponza (Italy). (Digitalization M<sup>a</sup>. P. Burillo).

And if we read such classical authors as Aratus, in his work *Phaenomena* (3rd century BCE), we find that the constellations described in the centre of the cosmos are Draco and the two Bears and that no mention is made of a constellation in the form of a swastika: "All without exception moving the same way as they are ceaselessly drawn across the heavens each day; however the axis does not move at all, but remains always fixed ... The two Bears that surround it move together, so they are also called the Wains" (Aratus, 1993, 66); "[b]etween the two, like the current of a river, revolves the Dragon..." (Aratus, 1993, 69). Eratosthenes (3rd century BCE) writes about the myths of the constellations and describes those associated with Ursa Major, Ursa Minor and Draco but does not mention a constellation in the form of a swastika (Eratosthenes, 1999, 33-38).

Ptolemy (2nd century), in his meticulous description of the constellations and the stars within them, which gives the longitude, latitude and magnitude of each one, mentions the constellations of Ursa Minor, Ursa Major and Draco in the centre of the cosmos, but there is no association with stars in the form of a swastika (Toomer, 1998, 341 - 344). Thus the authors are unanimous about the constellations at the centre of the universe, confirming the iconography seen in the mithraeum of Ponza. Furthermore, according to Beck (1998, 121) the Roman astrologer Ti Claudius Balbillus is credited with the introduction of the concepts of Roman astrology into Mithraism.

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#### 8. CONCLUSIONS

The cult of Mithras is the most enigmatic of the mystery religions because it lacks liturgical texts. However we can gain an insight into this religion if we study the Mithraic iconography and the cultural context in which Mithraism developed. Reza Assasi's interpretation, that the swastika is a constellation in the middle of the night sky, is not plausible if we analyze classical authors like Aratus, Ptolemy and Eratosthenes and Mithraic iconography, in particular the mithraeum of Ponza, where the stars existing in the centre of the cosmos are always grouped into two constellations: Ursa Minor and Ursa Major. In addition, it was the Roman astrologer Ti Claudius Balbillus that introduced Roman astrology into the Mithras cult.

Furthermore, Mithras is a solar deity that is differentiated iconographically in the mithraea of Helios, with whom he always appears associated. The fact that Mithras is identified in inscriptions as *Soli Invicto* and that fires are depicted above the zodiac in some mithraea, together with philosophical traditions dating back to Plato, has led David Ulansey to identify Mithras with a sun located beyond the cosmos, situated above the sphere of the fixed stars. Given all these arguments, we can conclude that in Mithraism the swastika must represent the sun, not a constellation.

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