

# illuminating Mithraic Iconography: Mithras, God of Light, as the Milky Way

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**Rebecca Jelbert**

**Abstract.** Although the iconography of the ancient Roman cult of Mithras is not thoroughly understood, it has been suggested by a number of scholars that the image of the deity sacrificing a bull (the tauroctony) referenced two constellations, namely Taurus and Scorpius. Roger Beck, Stanley Insler and others theorise that the animals of the tauroctony scene symbolise a trail of constellations between Taurus (the bull) and Scorpius (the scorpion). Building on the notion that the tauroctony may represent a simplified star map, this article details how Mithras' body is analogous to the path of the Milky Way that bridges Taurus and Scorpius. This bifurcated section of the Milky Way mirrors the silhouette, scale and centrality of Mithras within the ancient reliefs. The concept of Mithras as the god of light and lord of genesis also resonates with the luminosity of the Milky Way, and with the location of the traditional soul gates at Taurus-Gemini and Scorpius-Sagittarius, gates which were believed to represent the celestial portals for the soul at birth and death, respectively.

Mithraism has next to nothing of strictly astronomical interest to teach a positivist historian of astronomy. By contrast, it has a great deal to teach those concerned with the religious deployment of astronomy in antiquity's cultural constructs.<sup>1</sup>

From archeological finds, it is possible to date the ancient Roman cult of Mithras (alternatively know as Mithraism, or the mysteries of Mithras) to between the first and fourth centuries.<sup>2</sup> There is a very small body of

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire; Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.33.

<sup>2</sup> Manfred Clauss: *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and his Mysteries* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.21–32.

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Rebecca Jelbert, 'Illuminating Mithraic Iconography: Mithras, God of Light, as the Milky Way', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 26 no 1, Spring/Summer 2022, pp.51-78.

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literary testimony for this once popular religion, so archeological evidence – such as temples, sculptures, reliefs and inscriptions – remains an essential source of information.<sup>3</sup> Sculptural reliefs of Mithras sacrificing a bull, known as the tauroctony scene (Figures 1-3), were displayed as centre pieces in Mithraic temples (mithraea), which suggests that this particular image was of great symbolic importance. This dramatic scene depicts the deity plunging his dagger into the shoulder of a collapsed bull. Sometimes there is blood oozing from the wound, and ears of corn (or wheat) sprouting from the animal's dying body. This ritual act is witnessed by a variety of smaller characters, often by a pair of male torch-bearers who stand either side of the deity and by a variety of smaller animals which are usually depicted in the lower part of the image.



Figure 1. Mithraic tauroctony scene. Two-sided monument from Nida, Heddernheim, Germany. Relief in sandstone, height 180 cm. Inv. 239. CIMRM 1083. (Stiftung Stadtmuseum Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden). This relief features Mithras sacrificing the bull beneath an arched band of the twelve zodiacal signs. Image source: The Tertullian Project (image from *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, published by

<sup>3</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.3–4; Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.62–101.

Martinus Nijhoff in 1956). Printed with the permission of Brill Publishers and Stiftung Stadtmuseum Wiesbaden.

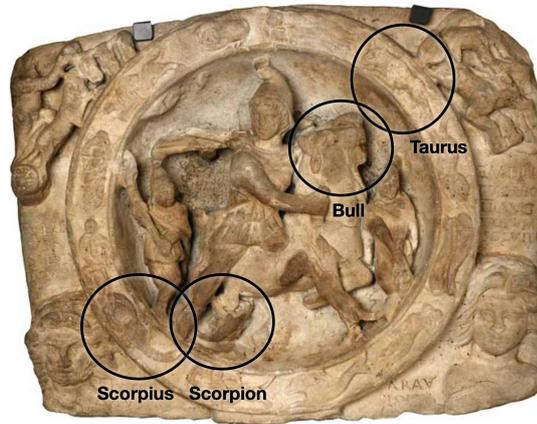


Figure 2. Mithraic tauroctony scene, found in the Walbrook Mithraeum, London. Late second to early third century. White marble, 43.2 by 50.8 cm. Inv. A16933. CIMRM 810-811. (Museum of London). The action of this cult relief occurs within a zodiacal ring. Image source: © Museum of London.

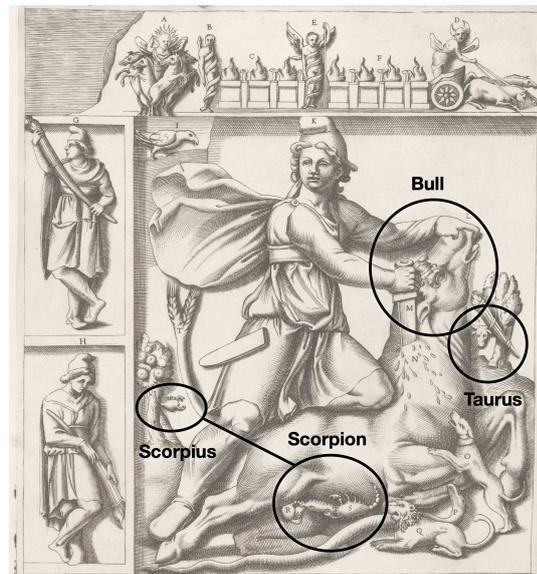


Figure 3. Relief of Mithras sacrificing the bull, after an ancient marble relief of the tauroctony of Ottavio Zeno, Rome, now lost. CIMRM 335. 1564. Engraving, 40.4 by 26.3 cm. Accession Number: 2012.136.852.

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(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Detail. Image source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It is generally accepted that tauroctony reliefs include a variety of astronomical references, such as zodiacal paths, symbols for the Sun and Moon, and Mithras' star-studded cloak.<sup>4</sup> In addition, a number of commentators have acknowledged that the image of Mithras sacrificing the bull is also associated with two constellations which together create a symbolic, oppositional axis across the artwork, namely Taurus (the bull, symbolic of spring) and Scorpius (the scorpion, symbolic of the return of winter).<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have gone further, suggesting that the tauroctony represents a simplified star map of the Northern Hemisphere, incorporating constellations on (or around) that part of the ecliptic ring that links Taurus and Scorpius. Recent supporters of this Mithraic star-map theory include Roger Beck, David Ulansey, and Stanley Insler.<sup>6</sup> Earlier proponents of this theory include Franz Cumont and Karl Stark.<sup>7</sup> This theory, however, has not been met with universal acceptance. Without giving any explanation to back up his assertion, Manfred Clauss writes that astronomical interpretations of the tauroctony scene as a star map are 'unconvincing speculation'.<sup>8</sup> Reflecting this same sentiment, Aleš Chalupa suggests that

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<sup>4</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.30–31, 106–7, 197–98; Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.82–91.

<sup>5</sup> Csaba Szabó, 'Notes on a New Cautes Statue from Apulum (jud. Alba/RO)', *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 45, no. 3 (2015): pp.241–42; Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.31, 161–62, 203, 214; Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.87, 97; David Ulansey: *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.22, 62–64; A. Demon: 'Mithras and Christ: some iconographical similarities', in John R. Hinnells, ed., *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies, Volume 2* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), pp.511–12; Stanley Insler, 'A New Interpretation of the Bull-Slaying Motif', in Margreet B. de Boer and T.A. Edridge, eds, *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren, Volume 2* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), p.528; Franz Cumont: *The Mysteries of Mithra* (Chicago, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1903), pp.129–30.

<sup>6</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.30–35, 194–200; Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, pp.15–24, 46–66; Insler, 'A New Interpretation of the Bull-Slaying Motif', pp.525–27.

<sup>7</sup> Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, pp.122–24; Karl B. Stark, 'Die Mithrassteine von Dormagen', *Jahrbücher des Vereins von Altertumsfreunden im Rheinlande* 46 (1869), pp.1–25.

<sup>8</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, p.xx.

some authors have tended towards ‘unbounded speculation’ with regard to cosmic interpretations of Mithraic iconography.<sup>9</sup> Beck notes that Mithraic scholars have tended to either ignore the corresponding links between the path of constellations (between Taurus and Scorpius) and characters of the tauroctony altogether, or to treat them as too trivial to warrant serious consideration.<sup>10</sup>

A wide-ranging array of alternative interpretations has been put forward for the imagery of the tauroctony. In 2001 Clauss suggested that the Mithraic bull-killing scene depicted the notion of renewal, with life and death symbolised by the cyclical rise and fall of the Sun.<sup>11</sup> Beck summarised a variety of interpretations in 2006: Willy Hartner (1965), Alessandro Bausani (1979) and Bruno Jacob (1999) argued that the tauroctony symbolised the seasonal cycle; A.J. Rutgers (1970) understood the tauroctony as a representation of a lunar eclipse, with Mithras as the Sun and the bull as the Moon; and Stanley Insler (1978) and John North (1990) associated the sacrificial scene with the passing of time.<sup>12</sup> Since 2006, additional theories have surfaced. In 2009 Glenn Palmer linked the image of Mithras stabbing the bull with the funerary ritual of the Opening of the Mouth in Ancient Egypt, a custom that was believed necessary for the rebirth of the deceased person’s soul.<sup>13</sup> In 2013 Christopher Faraone argued that the bull-wounding scene was influenced by classical depictions of Nike stabbing the bull, as well as evil-eye amulets.<sup>14</sup>

Scepticism around the notion that the tauroctony was designed to represent a star map has no doubt increased with the recent plethora of ideas put forward for the deity himself. Again, Beck presents a summary of the relevant theories, this time laying out the cosmological interpretations of Mithras in relation to particular constellations, to the Sun, or to the night sky in general.<sup>15</sup> For Mithras as a constellation, Beck notes

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<sup>9</sup> Aleš Chalupa, ‘The Origins of the Roman Cult of Mithras in the Light of New Evidence and Interpretations: The Current State of Affairs’, *Religio* 24, no.1 (2016): p.74.

<sup>10</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.31, 38, 49–50.

<sup>11</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.78–101.

<sup>12</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.36–40.

<sup>13</sup> Glenn Palmer, ‘Why the shoulder?: A study of the placement of the wound in the Mithraic tauroctony’, in Giovanni Casadio and Patricia A. Johnston, eds, *Mystic Cults in Magna Graeca* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), pp.314–23.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher A. Faraone, ‘The Amulet Design of the Mithraic Bull-Wounding Scene’, *Journal of Roman Studies* (May 2013): pp.1–21.

<sup>15</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.30–39.

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the following theories: Alessandro Bausani associates Mithras with Leo, in combat with Taurus the bull (1979); Michael Speidel links Mithras with Orion (1980); Karl-Gustav Sandelin suggests Auriga (1988); and David Ulansey proposes Perseus (1989). For Mithras' proposed association with the Sun, Beck reports: A.J. Rutgers' idea of Mithras as the Sun itself (1970); Beck's own understanding of the tauroctony as a representation of the heavens when the Sun is in Leo (1994); and Bruno Jacobs' interpretation of the tauroctony as being symbolic of the spring equinox (1999). For Mithras as the night sky, Beck notes Maria Weiss' multiple publications (1994, 1996, 1998 and 2000). We will examine these ideas in more detail later in the article.

The theories above see the tauroctonous Mithras as celestial bodies – or as astronomical events – that do not correspond with Mithras' central position within the bull-slaying image, or the scale of his body in relation to the other characters in the scene. In this article I return to the idea that artistic depictions of the tauroctony were deliberately designed to represent a celestial map based on the Taurus-Scorpius axis, and will claim that Mithras is analogous to the bifurcated path of the Milky Way that links Taurus and Scorpius. In visual terms, this section of the Milky Way mirrors Mithras' silhouette and scale relative to the smaller animals and people in the scene. With regard to the potential meaning of such an association, the deity's status as the god of light and lord of genesis would have resonated with the Milky Way as the largest illuminated body in the night sky, and with the location of the traditional soul gates at Taurus-Gemini and Scorpius-Sagittarius, for the soul's entry into the earthly sphere at birth and for its departure at death.<sup>16</sup> There will be a discussion around the celestial gates later in article, in which I will also link Mithras (as the Milky Way) to the path of the seven grades, and to the notion of salvation.

In depictions of the tauroctony, the centrally-placed deity and the bull represent the largest characters in the scene. The other elements can vary from image to image, in that not all of the additional characters are always included. The two male torch-bearers, Cautes and Cautopates, are dressed in a similar way to Mithras but are generally smaller than the deity. They are most often depicted either side of Mithras, but are sometimes absent from the scene. The tauroctony generally contains a dog lapping at the bull's blood, a scorpion attached to the bull's testicles, and a snake. In

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<sup>16</sup> For Mithras as the god of light and lord of genesis, see Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.16, 36–37, 102, 106–15; Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.4, 22, 62–66, 76, 81, 146.

addition, some of these ancient bull-slaying scenes contain a raven, a lion and a vessel (or crater).



Figure 4. Nike sacrificing a bull. Arch of Trajan, Benevento, Italy. 114-117 CE. Marble relief. Image source: Sergey Sosnovskiy.



Figure 5. Heracles and the Ceryneian Hind, metope from the Athenian Treasury at Delphi. c. 500 BCE. Marble relief. (Archaeological Museum of Delphi). Image source: Wikimedia.

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Mithras usually has one raised knee pushing into the bull's back to subdue the animal. This pose has been used by artists since early classical times to express a life-and-death struggle.<sup>17</sup> A number of commentators claim that the model for Mithras making his sacrifice was probably a winged Nike (Victory) killing a bull.<sup>18</sup> The Roman relief of the Victories on the Arch of Trajan (Figure 4) was created at a time when Mithraism was being practiced, so this mirror image of Nike may in fact have been influenced by Mithraic reliefs, rather than the other way around. Christopher Faraone gives as an earlier example, a mirror cover from Megara featuring Nike from the third-century BCE, but the woman in that image is beside the bull, rather than leaning over it with one knee in the animal's back.<sup>19</sup> The traditional life-and-death pose (with one knee raised up to subdue an animal) may, instead, have originated with the figure of Hercules vanquishing the Ceryneian Hind, an example of which can be seen on a metope from the Athenian Treasury at Delphi (Figure 5).<sup>20</sup> This particular carving of Hercules dates to around 500 BCE, centuries before the appearance of Mithraism. The association between Mithras and Hercules may be significant as mithraea housed dedications to a variety of divinities, including images and votive inscriptions devoted to Hercules.<sup>21</sup> Echoing the hero's slaying of the Ceryneian Hind, traditional illustrations of the constellation Hercules show him resting on one knee and with his foot on the head of the dragon, Draco, as though subduing this mythic beast. In terms of the depiction of a simplified star map, it is of note that a number of Hercules' exploits were associated with celestial bodies. As an example, Hercules has been linked to the constellation Cancer, as the hero threw a

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<sup>17</sup> Maria F. Maurer, 'The Trouble with Pasiphaë: Engendering a Myth at the Gonzaga Court', in Marice Rose and Alison C. Poe, eds, *Receptions of Antiquity, Constructions of Gender in European Art, 1300-1600* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2015), p.215; Leopold D. Ettlinger, 'Exemplum Doloris. Reflections on the Laocoön Group', in Millard Meiss, ed., *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honour of Erwin Panofsky, Volume I* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p.123.

<sup>18</sup> Faraone, 'The Amulet Design of the Mithraic Bull-Wounding Scene', p.4; Palmer, 'Why the shoulder?', p.314; Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, p.79; Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, p.30; Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, p.21.

<sup>19</sup> Faraone, 'The Amulet Design of the Mithraic Bull-Wounding Scene', p.14, figure 10.

<sup>20</sup> Maurer, 'The Trouble with Pasiphaë', p.215.

<sup>21</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.48, 158.

giant crab into the heavens during his second labour.<sup>22</sup> The constellation Centaurus has been linked to the centaur, Chiron, who was killed by Hercules, and the constellations of Hercules and Draco have traditionally been associated with Hercules slaying Ladon in the Garden of the Hesperides.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most well-known celestial myth relating to Hercules, however, is the story of the creation of the Milky Way, in which the infant Hercules caused Hera's breast milk to spray out across the heavens.



Figure 6. Limestone sculptures of the two Mithraic torch-bearers: **Left:** Cautopates holds a scorpion in his left hand and a torch (now broken off) in his right hand. CIMRM 2120-2121. (Muzeul de Arheologie Sarmizegetusa, Sarmizegetusa, Romania). **Right:** Cautes holds a bull's head in his right hand. CIMRM 2122. (Muzeul de Arheologie Sarmizegetusa). Image source: Ubi Erat Lupa.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Starlore Handbook: An Essential Guide to the Night Sky* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1997), p.50; Jaimee P. Uhlenbrock, 'Herakles: Labors, Works, Deeds', in Karl Galinsky et al., exh. cat. *Herakles: Passage of the Hero Through 1000 Years of Classical Art* (New York: New Rochelle, 1986), pp.1, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Theony Condos, *Star Myths of the Greeks and Romans: A Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1997), pp.79–81, 101–2, 115–17; Cornelius, *The Starlore Handbook*, pp.64–65, 76–77, 82–83.

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Although Clauss contests the notion that the tauroctony represents a simplified star map, he does concede that the scene of Mithras killing the bull sometimes includes references to two zodiacal signs, Taurus and Scorpius.<sup>24</sup> Clauss gives as examples the cult relief at Sarmizegetusa in Romania in which Cautes holds a bull's head and Cautopates a scorpion (Figure 6). In an article focussed on the depiction of Cautes, Csaba Szabó reports that nine carved examples have been found of this torch-bearer holding a bull's head, including a statue from Bodobrica in Germany and another from Apulum in Romania.<sup>25</sup> Although Szabo does not mention it, one presumes there was once a matching image of Cautopates holding a scorpion for each of these nine examples, as is the case for the sculptures from Sarmizegetusa.

Clauss suggests that Cautes holding a bull's head was a cipher for Taurus and, as such, could have symbolised the half-year in which the day is longer than the night.<sup>26</sup> Inversely, Cautopates might symbolise the other half-year, with the scorpion as a signifier of Scorpius.<sup>27</sup> Taurus and Scorpius were also picked out as important markers through a doubling up of the bull's head and scorpion's body within the same area of some tauroctony images. For example, in the relief found in the Walbrook mithraeum (CIMRM 810), the bull's head is positioned next to the zodiacal sign for Taurus, and the scorpion is positioned next to the sign for Scorpius (Figure 2). In a relief from Rome (CIMRM 335), this symbolic pairing is achieved through the inclusion of a small image of Taurus next to the large bull's head, and through the placement of a small image of Scorpius next to a larger scorpion (Figure 3).

The zodiacal signs of Taurus and Scorpius were associated in agricultural calendars with the beginning of summer and winter, respectively.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Virgil's *Georgics* (book 1) from the first century BCE describes the constellations as a cosmic calendar that can aid farmers in their cultivation of crops (chiefly corn), with Taurus' horns and Scorpius' pincers playing their respective allegorical roles.<sup>29</sup> For Clauss,

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<sup>24</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.xx, 87, 97.

<sup>25</sup> Szabó, 'Notes on a New Cautes Statue from Apulum', pp.237–47, figures 1 and 5.

<sup>26</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, p.97.

<sup>27</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, p.97.

<sup>28</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, p.87.

<sup>29</sup> Insler, 'A New Interpretation of the Bull-Slaying Motif', pp.534–35; James Hobbs Hanson, ed., *A handbook of Latin poetry, containing selections from Ovid*,

this Taurus-Scorpius axis represents a cyclical narrative of life, death and rebirth, with Mithras representing life (as the invincible Sun) and the horned bull representing death (as the crescent-shaped Moon).<sup>30</sup> Within this context, the twin torch-bearers also take on life and death symbolism through their raised and lowered torches, Cautes symbolising the rising of the Sun and Cautopates symbolising the setting of the Sun. Clauss sees the transformation of the bull's tail into ears of corn as a representation of new life being born of death, and the snake and hunting dog lapping at the bull's blood as absorbing its life-giving power. Whilst Clauss claims that the crater represents a vessel from which the snake drinks, he specifies no particular meaning for the raven or the lion.

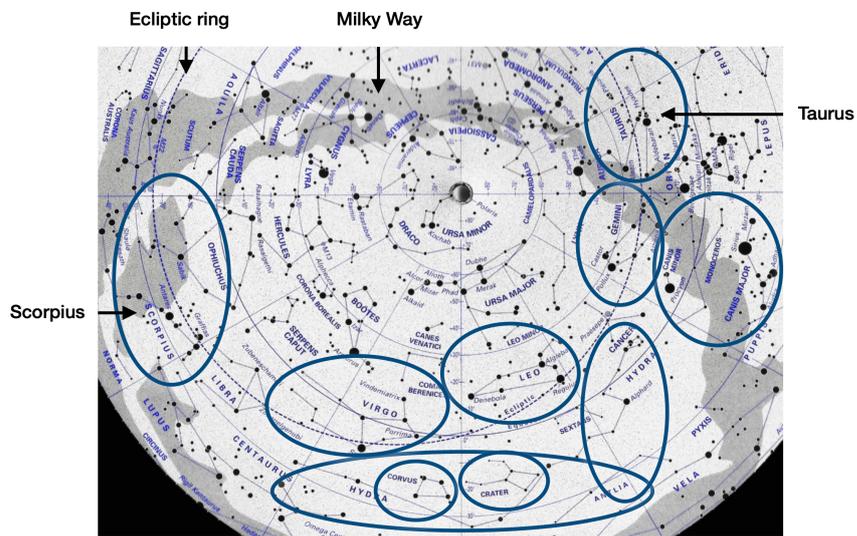


Figure 7. Celestial map of the Northern Hemisphere. The constellations ringed are analogous with elements in the tauroctony scene: Taurus, Gemini, Canis Major (or Canis Minor), Hydra, Leo, Crater, Corvus, Virgo, and Scorpius. Planisphere reproduced with permission of Philip's, a division of Octopus Publishing Group Ltd. (The light and dark areas of the planisphere have been inverted).

*Virgil, and Horace, with notes and grammatical references, third edition* (Boston, MA: Woolworth, Ainsworth and Company, 1870), pp.461–91.

<sup>30</sup> Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.78–101.

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If we return to the importance of the Taurus-Scorpius axis for images of Mithras sacrificing the bull, it is possible to attribute all the animals, the two smaller men and the vessel to those constellations on or around the circular path of the ecliptic that joins Taurus to Scorpius (Figure 7). The reading of the tauroctony as a simplified star map would not only fit with the importance of the celestial calendar for ancient farmers, but it would also resonate with the other astronomical symbols in the composition, such as the Sun and Moon in the top left- and right-hand corners of the image, with the zodiacal signs, and with Mithras' starry cloak. Beck and Insler both argue that the tauroctony represents a view of the night sky, extending from Taurus in the west to Scorpius in the east, and summarise the links between the constellations and the tauroctony scene in the following way:

- 1) the bull stands for Taurus
- 2) the twin torch-bearers (Cautes and Cautopates) represent Gemini
- 3) the dog signifies either Canis Major or Canis Minor
- 4) the snake symbolises Hydra
- 5) the lion is analogous to Leo
- 6) the vessel (or crater) equates to Crater
- 7) the ears of corn (or wheat) on the bull's tail evoke Virgo
- 8) the raven personifies Corvus
- 9) and the scorpion depicts Scorpius.<sup>31</sup>

The only adjustment I would make to this list is that if the tauroctony is a representation of the night sky – with the ancient tauroctony scene as a rough depiction of the scale and position of the constellations as they appear in relation to each other – then Taurus is likely to have been represented by the bull's head, rather than the animal's whole body. This would correlate with the placement of signs for Taurus next to the bull's head (Figures 2 and 3), and with ancient representations of Taurus as the front portion of the bull. This portrayal of Taurus as only the front portion of the bull can be seen on the *Farnese Globe* (or *Farnese Atlas*), a Roman carving perhaps made after a lost, Greek original (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples). Although there were some slight differences between tauroctony reliefs, particularly with regard to the position of the torch-bearers, it is striking how the figures, animals and the vessel of the bull-slaying scene generally follow a set tradition. The Mithraic representation

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<sup>31</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.194–95; Insler, 'A New Interpretation of the Bull-Slaying Motif', pp.525–27.

of the sky was never meant to be a technically precise rendition of the stars, of course, rather an artistic interpretation for the purposes of religious symbolism.

By looking at a group of conventional illustrations of the constellations, it is possible to see just how strong the visual relationship is between the Mithraic tauroctony and celestial imagery. In Figure 8, celestial illustrations from three medieval editions of the star catalogue *De signis caeli* have been placed together so that their relative placement to each other roughly matches the relative positions of the constellations as they appear in the night sky.<sup>32</sup> Although the *De signis caeli* illustrations were created sometime between the tenth to twelfth centuries – and not during the period when Mithraism was practiced – they do reflect the ways in which some of these constellations are depicted on the *Farnese Globe*, the oldest known globe. I have already mentioned the depiction of Taurus on the *Farnese Globe* as the front-half of a bull for Taurus, but we also see the twin-men as Gemini and the grouped constellations of Hydra, Crater and Corvus (the snake, vessel and bird), as we see in the medieval illustrations. The damage to the *Farnese Globe*, however, and the placement of Atlas' hands on the sphere, means that not all of the constellations are depicted in full. As for the details of the medieval *De signis caeli* illustrations, there will now be a brief account of how they help to present a visual approximation of the tauroctony scene.

Starting from the top right-hand corner of Figure 8, the drawing of Taurus shows the standard front-portion of the bull, but this illustration has circular markings on the exposed section of torso. Alongside the tongue hanging from the bull's mouth, this presentation of the animal suggests we are looking at a severed carcass. These signs of death and dismemberment tally with the notion of Mithras plunging his knife into the animal's shoulder. The Gemini twins are portrayed as a pair of soldiers, holding up spears in a way that is not dissimilar to the torch-bearers holding their torches, particularly Cautes with his vertical torch. The dog, Canis Major, is shown with its front paws slightly raised and with Sirius, the brightest star in the sky, in its mouth. The intensity of Sirius is highlighted by an array of light radiating from it, an image that evokes the dog lapping at the bull's blood as it emanates from the dying animal.

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<sup>32</sup> The creator of these illustrations is known as creator being described as anonymous 'pseudo-Bede'. For further information on the *De signis caeli* star catalogue, see K. Lippincott, 'Pseudo-Bede, *De signis caeli*', The Saxl Project (2010), <https://www.thesaxlproject.com/assets/Uploads/ps-Bede-de-signis-full-text-19-Nov-2010.pdf> [accessed 29 October 2022].

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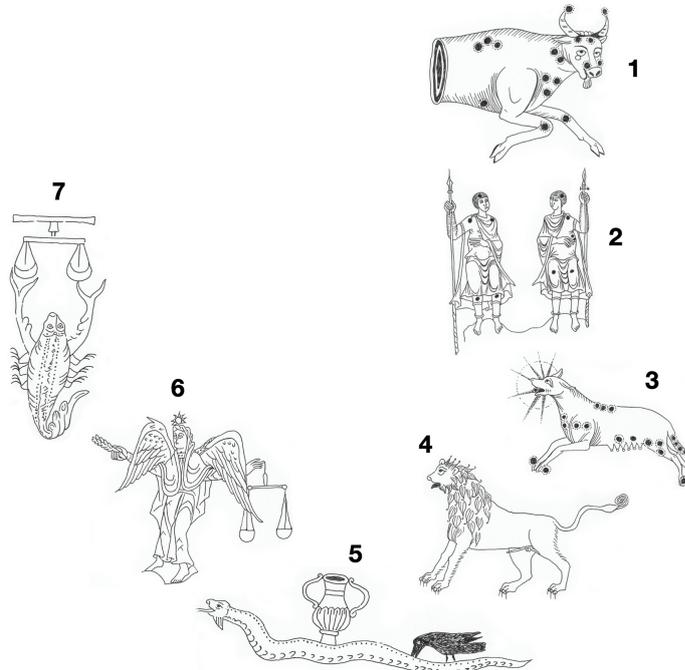


Figure 8. Celestial illustrations from three editions of *De signis caeli*, by pseudo-Bede, positioned to reflect the relative positions of the constellations in the night sky:

**1 - Taurus:** The front portion of a bull. From Germany. Twelfth century. MS 685. (Klosterneuburg Stiftskirche, Austria).

**2 - Gemini:** The Gemini twins as two soldiers with spears. Tenth or eleventh century. MS 488. (Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon).

**3 - Canis Major:** From Germany. Twelfth century. MS 685. (Klosterneuburg Stiftskirche, Austria).

**4 - Leo:** From Limoges. Tenth or eleventh century. Latin 5239. (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris).

**5 - Hydra, Crater and Corvus:** From Limoges. Tenth or eleventh century. Latin 5239. (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris).

**6 - Virgo:** Virgo holding the star Spica (as an ear of corn) in her right hand and the scales of Libra in her left hand. From Limoges. Tenth or eleventh century. Latin 5239. (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris).

**7 - Scorpius:** Scorpius with its pincers near Libra. Tenth or eleventh century. MS 488. (Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon).

Image source: line drawings by the author, after the originals.

In the Mithraic relief, the crater – when it is included – is shown next to the snake. This arrangement recalls that of Hydra, with Crater balanced on its back. Although the constellation Corvus is traditionally depicted on top of Hydra, in the bull-slaying scene the raven often appears in the upper section of the image. The medieval illustration of Virgo shows her holding the brightest star of that constellation, Spica (Alpha Virginis), in her right hand. This star takes the form of an ear of corn (or perhaps wheat), a detail that is reflected in the ears of corn that are often shown growing out of the bull's tail, on the left-hand side of the tauroctony scene.<sup>33</sup> Scorpius is reaching with its pincers towards the round scales of Libra. Not to put too fine a point on it, this particular composition brings to mind the image of the scorpion in the tauroctony scene, with its pincers on the bull's testicles.

The idea that reliefs of Mithras sacrificing the bull represent a simplified star map is strengthened when one considers how the traditional, celestial portals may also have influenced the imagery of the tauroctony. In antiquity the soul gates were believed to represent the points through which the soul entered and departed the earthly sphere at birth and death, respectively. Before explaining the significance of the celestial gates for Mithraism and the depiction of Mithras as the Milky Way, I will first summarise what these astronomical 'portals' were, and what they once meant.

There appear to have been two distinct sets of gates for the soul to enter and depart the earthly realm. One set of gates was connected with the highest and lowest points of the Sun in its yearly cycle (the gates of the solstices, or the gates of the Sun), with Cancer as the portal for the soul at birth and Capricornus as the portal for the soul's departure at death (Figure 9, marked in green). The other set of gates was connected with the two points of intersection at which the ring of the Milky Way appears to cross the zodiacal ring (which, for clarity, I will call the gates of the Milky Way). These two points of apparent intersection occur at Taurus-Gemini and at Scorpius-Sagittarius (Figure 9, marked in blue). Taurus-Gemini represented the gate for the soul to enter at birth and Scorpius-Sagittarius symbolised the gate for the soul to leave the earthly domain at death.

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<sup>33</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, p.195.

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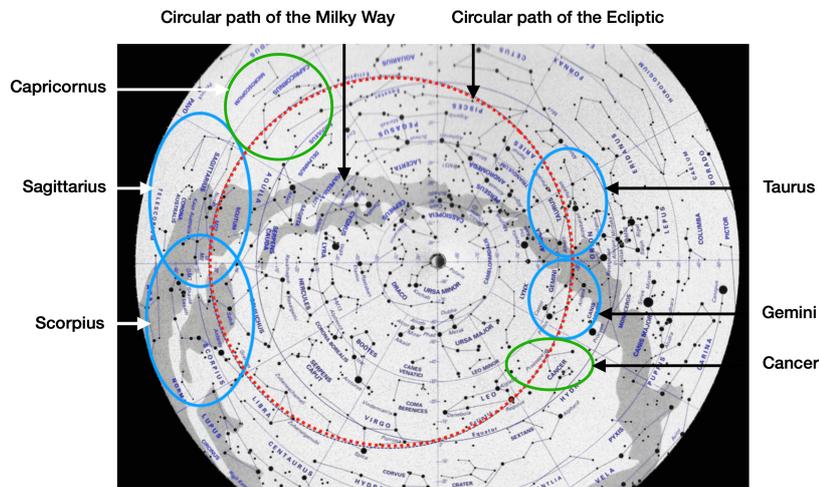


Figure 9. **The gates of the solstices**, or gates of the sun, are marked in green: Cancer and Capricornus. **The gates of the Milky Way** are marked in blue: Taurus-Gemini and Scorpius-Sagittarius. Planisphere reproduced with permission of Philip's, a division of Octopus Publishing Group Ltd.

The notion of celestial soul gates was used in the past to create narratives around birth and death. As an example, Jaap Loos suggests that Ovid (43 BCE – 17 AD) linked the gateways of the Milky Way – specifically Scorpius-Sagittarius – to the story of Phaethon in the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>34</sup> In *Met.* 2.192-206 Phaethon is confronted by the horrifying vision of Scorpius' enormous pincers and tail. His horses bolt and the Sun chariot veers off the track of the ecliptic ring. This calamitous incident ultimately ends in Phaethon's death, and – traditionally – his *catasterismus* into the constellation Auriga, which lies in the path of the Milky Way next to Gemini-Taurus.<sup>35</sup>

Stanley Jaki notes that, in *The Homeric Cave of the Nymphs*, Porphyry (c. 233 – c. 304) 'was prompted to make mention of the Milky Way only because it passed near the sacred gates of the extremities of the Sun's

<sup>34</sup> Jaap X. Loos, 'How Ovid Remythologizes Greek Astronomy in *Metamorphoses* 1.747-2.400', *Mnemosyne* 61, no. 2 (2008): pp.280–88.

<sup>35</sup> Loos, 'How Ovid Remythologizes Greek Astronomy in *Metamorphoses*', pp.280–88.

passage among the stars'.<sup>36</sup> Jaki goes on to explain the role of the Milky Way in man's generation for Porphyry:

In a world-description filled with nymphs, naiads, and continual references to the marital union between the sky and the earth, Pythagoras was chosen as the authoritative spokesman about the Milky Way: "According to Pythagoras, also, the *people of dreams*, are the souls which are said to be collected in the galaxy, this circle being so called from the milk with which souls are nourished when they fall into generation. Hence, those who evocate departed souls, sacrifice to them by libation of milk mingled with honey; because, through the allurements of sweetness, they will proceed into generation; with the birth of man, milk being naturally produced".<sup>37</sup>

Robert Durling notes that, in *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius erroneously identified the points where the ecliptic and the Milky Way intersect as the solstices in Cancer and Capricorn, 'the gates of the sun', through which souls descend at birth and ascend at death, respectively.<sup>38</sup> Although Durling does not state it explicitly, Macrobius' conflation of the gates of the solstices and the gates of the Milky Way illustrates that in antiquity there may have been some confusion around the two different sets of celestial portals.

It is worth mentioning that the notion of celestial gates was apparently so appealing to the creative imagination that it survived for centuries. The ninth-century French monk Helpéric d'Auxerre, for example, described the 'gates of the sun' as Cancer and Capricorn in *De computo*.<sup>39</sup> In

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<sup>36</sup> Stanley L. Jaki, *The Milky Way: An Elusive Road for Science* (New York: Science History Publications, 1972), p.17.

<sup>37</sup> Jaki, *The Milky Way*, p.17, citing Porphyry, *Select works of Porphyry: containing his four books on abstinence from animal food; his treatise on the Homeric cave of the nymphs; and his Auxiliaries to the perception of intelligible natures*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: Thomas Rodd, 1823), p. 193.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Durling, ed., *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 3, Paradiso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.298.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Burnett, 'Omnibus convenit Platonicis: An appendix to Adelard of Bath's *Quaestiones Naturales*', in Haijo J. Westra, ed., *From Athens to Chartres:*

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Renaissance Italy, Marsilio Ficino published his *Platonic Theory* in 1482, in which he observed that souls descend from Cancer, ‘the gateway of men’, and ascend through Capricorn, ‘the gateway of the gods’.<sup>40</sup> With regard to our discussion around the symbolism of Mithraism is Constantin-François de Volney’s *Les ruines (The Ruins, or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires: and the Law of Nature)*, published in 1890, in which the author linked ancient beliefs around the soul passing through the gates of water and heat, to ‘the baptism of Mithra’:

And this [the link between mythic deluges and natural cycles] illustrates the origin of purification by fire and by water; for having denominated the tropic of Cancer the gate of heaven, and the genial heat of celestial fire, and that of Capricorn the gate of deluge or of water, it was imagined that the spirit or souls who passed through these gates in their way to and from heaven, were roasted or bathed: hence the baptism of Mithra; and the passage through flames, observed throughout the East long before Moses.<sup>41</sup>

Beck argues that elements of the mithraeum could have reflected the location of the gates of the solstices, through mosaics of Cancer and Capricorn (such as those found at Sette Sfere in Ostia) and through images of the torch-bearers, with Cautopates’ downward-pointing torch representing the summer solstice and genesis, and Cautes’ upward-pointing torch representing the winter solstice and apogenesis (the return of the soul to heaven).<sup>42</sup> The gates of the Milky Way on the other hand, were believed to be located at Taurus-Gemini and Scorpius-Sagittarius. This second set of celestial portals may also have had significance for Mithraic iconography, through the oppositional axis between Taurus and Scorpius discussed above.

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*Neoplatonism and Medieval Thought: Studies in Honour of Edouard Jeauneau* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), pp.266–67.

<sup>40</sup> Michael J.B. Allen: ‘Marsilio Ficino on Saturn, the Plotinian Mind, and the Monster of Averroes’, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 16, no.1 (2010): pp.13–15.

<sup>41</sup> Constantin-François de Volney, *The Ruins, or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires: and the Law of Nature* (1802; New York: Twentieth Century Publishing Company, 1890), chapter 22, ‘Origin and Filiation of Religious Ideas’. Unpaginated, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1397/1397-h/1397-h.htm> [accessed 30 October 2022].

<sup>42</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.111–12, 212–14.

Both sets of celestial gates, the gates of the solstices and the gates of the Milky Way, were intimately bound to the notion of birth and death (or genesis and apogenesis). Mithras was considered a creator god and lord of genesis, associated with the descent of the soul at birth and with its ascent at death.<sup>43</sup> It should be considered, then, that the astronomical elements which define the soul gates – namely the circle of the Milky Way and the zodiacal ring – were highly relevant for the meaning of placed on Mithraic iconography. The zodiac ring – on which we find all of the constellations linked to the soul gates – is clearly visible in some tauroctony scenes (Figures 1 and 2). But what about the Milky Way, would we not expect to also see this important structure represented as well? If the bull-slaying scene did serve as a symbolic star map of the Northern Hemisphere, what is also missing is the celestial body analogous to the deity himself. Before considering how the Milky Way could represent the answer to this longstanding conundrum, let us first revisit the theories proposed for Mithras in more detail.

As briefly mentioned already, a number of suggestions have been put forward for the celestial equivalent for Mithras, including three constellations that are positioned close to Taurus, namely Perseus, Orion and Auriga. David Ulansey follows Fritz Saxl's idea that the image of Mithras stabbing the bull has its equivalent in Perseus wielding his sword over Taurus.<sup>44</sup> Mithras is often shown looking away from the bull, a characteristic that Ulansey suggests can be attributed to Perseus who, on celestial maps, looks away from the Gorgon Medusa. Ulansey also suggests that Perseus' position in the Milky Way may be significant for Mithraic iconography because of the link in antiquity between the Milky Way and the notion of souls coming into genesis through the soul gates.<sup>45</sup> Whilst there are certain visual similarities between Perseus and Mithras, and there is a connection to Mithras as the lord of genesis through Perseus' location in the Milky Way, it remains the case that this constellation is simply far too small to represent Mithras' scale within the tauroctony scene, stretching as he does across the entire composition.

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<sup>43</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.16–17, 102, 107, 213, 259; Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.9–15, 62, 76, 152–55; Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, pp.59–62, 86–87; Michael Speidel, *Mithras-Orion: Greek Hero and Roman Army God* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980), pp.19–20.

<sup>44</sup> Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, pp.25–45. Ulansey cites Fritz Saxl, *Mithras: Typengeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Berlin: Keller, 1931), p.14.

<sup>45</sup> Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, pp.59–62, 86–87.

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In a similar vein, Michael Speidel puts forward the idea that Mithras plunging his dagger into the bull corresponds to Orion pointing his sword towards Taurus.<sup>46</sup> As is the case with Perseus, this male character is wielding a knife above his head, whereas Mithras is most often depicted with his knife already in the bull's shoulder. In addition, neither Perseus nor Orion are shown in the ancient pose that signifies a life-and death struggle, with one knee pulled up high to subdue the victim. Moreover, Orion is also far too small a constellation, and too far over to the right-hand side of the celestial map, to represent the centrally-positioned deity.

Karl-Gustav Sandelin, on the other hand, suggests that Auriga, the charioteer, recalls Mithras on his sun chariot, riding up to heaven.<sup>47</sup> Mithras is connected with the Sun, and with the sun god Sol. The rising Sun is often represented in the top left-hand corner of tauroctony scenes as a chariot being drawn upwards by a group of horses. The image of a man riding a sun chariot, however, does not offer a convincing match for Mithras sacrificing a bull. An interesting connection with the Milky Way does arise through the traditional association between Auriga and the mythological character Phaethon. Not only does Auriga appear to sit in the path of the Milky Way, but this constellation was closely associated with Phaethon, whose death was traditionally linked to the creation of the Milky Way.<sup>48</sup> However, Auriga, like Perseus and Orion, is too far over to the right in the Northern Hemisphere to mirror the central position of Mithras within the bull-slaying reliefs. Also, Auriga is not a large enough constellation to signify the scale of the deity, relative to the other celestial characters of the tauroctony.

Another contender for the celestial counterpart to Mithras is Leo. Adrian Bailey suggests that the exaggerated postures of Mithras and the bull together imitate the shape of this constellation.<sup>49</sup> Alessandro Bausani claims that a precedent for Mithras killing the bull was the Eastern motif

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<sup>46</sup> Speidel, *Mithras-Orion*.

<sup>47</sup> Karl-Gustav Sandelin, 'Mithras = Auriga?', *Arctos, Acta Philologica Fennica* 22 (1988): pp.133–35.

<sup>48</sup> For the association of Auriga with Phaethon, see David E. Falkner, *The Mythology of the Night Sky: An Amateur Astronomer's Guide to the Ancient Greek and Roman Legends, The Patrick Moore Practical Astronomy Series* (New York: Springer, 2011), p.41; Richard Hinckley Allen, *Star Names and Their Meanings* (1899; Glastonbury: The Lost Library, 2010), pp.84–85; Loos, 'How Ovid Remythologizes Greek Astronomy in *Metamorphoses*', p.280.

<sup>49</sup> Adrian Bailey, *The Caves of the Sun: The Origin of Mythology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), pp.225–26.

of the bull-killing lion, and that the tauroctony symbolises the lion of summer (Leo) overcoming the bull of spring (Taurus).<sup>50</sup> Beck notes that Bausani followed Willy Hartner in this theory.<sup>51</sup> In a slightly different interpretation, Beck himself proposes that the tauroctony represents the heavens when the Sun is in Leo.<sup>52</sup> Whilst Leo does appear in a more centralised position than Perseus, Orion and Auriga, it does not stretch across the sky in a way that mirrors Mithras' pose. The same is true for those theories that see Mithras as the Sun. In this vein, Bruno Jacobs interprets the tauroctony as a symbolic representation of the spring equinox, and A.J. Rutgers equates Mithras with the Sun and the bull with the Moon.<sup>53</sup> Although the Sun is obviously an incredibly large object, its great distance from the earth means, of course, that to the human eye it actually looks very small in relation to the size of the constellations. Also, the Sun's constant movement around the sky does not easily translate into a simple, static star map.

Whilst the suggested theories linking Mithras to various constellations, or to the Sun, draw on attributes connected with the deity's close proximity to the bull, and on his status as a god of light and genesis, none of them satisfactorily address Mithras' impressive scale within the centre of the tauroctony. Within the sacrificial scene, Mithras metaphorically stretches across the tauroctony star map, from Taurus (Mithras' left hand is hooked around the bull's muzzle) all the way down to Scorpius (Mithras' right foot is usually close to the scorpion). At the same time, the deity's body looms over the animals in the scene, not just the large bull but the dog, lion, snake, raven and scorpion.

To find a celestial body that is equivalent to Mithras' shape and scale, it is necessary to return to the map of the sky in the Northern Hemisphere. If this map is divided into three parts, so that Scorpius is on the left and

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<sup>50</sup> Alessandro Bausani, 'Note sulla preistoria astronomica del mito di Mithra', *Mysteria Mithrae* 80 (1979): pp.503–13.

<sup>51</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, p.36; Willy Hartner, 'The earliest history of the constellations in the Near East and the motif of the lion-bull combat', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24 (1965): pp.1–16.

<sup>52</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, pp.36–37, 214–39.

<sup>53</sup> Bruno Jacobs, 'Der Herkunft und Entstehung der römischen Mithrasmysterien: Überlegungen zur Rolle des Stifters und zu den astronomischen Hintergründen der Kultlegende', *Xenia: Konstanzer Althistorische Vorträge und Forschungen* 43 (1999): pp.33–36; A.J. Rutgers, 'Rational Interpretation of the ritual of Mithra, and of various other cults', in E.A. Leemans, ed., *Anamnesis: Gedenkboek* (Brugge: De Tempel, 1970), pp.303–15.

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Taurus on the right (figure 10), we are left with a central panel that bridges these two important constellations. When one looks at this isolated section of the Milky Way that tracks across the sky from Taurus to Scorpius, it becomes apparent that its shape resembles the silhouette of Mithras.

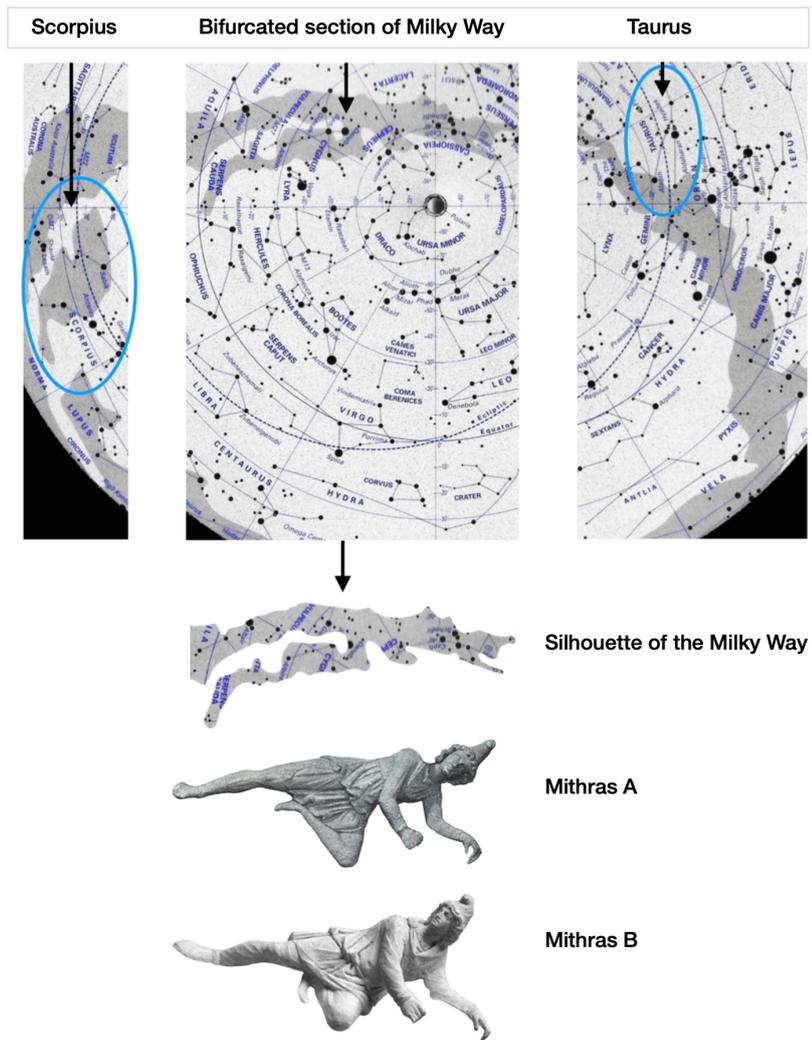


Figure 10. Celestial map of the Northern Hemisphere, split into three sections: Scorpius; the bifurcated section of the Milky Way; and Taurus. The silhouette of the Milky Way from the middle section is repeated below and compared with two silhouettes of Mithras:

**Mithras A:** Double-sided Mithraic relief, from Nida, Hedderheim, Germany. Wiesbaden). Detail from figure 1, rotated (image of Mithras digitally isolated, with cloak and knife removed).

**Mithras B:** Double-sided Mithraic relief, from Fiano Romano, Italy. Second to third century. Marble, height 58 cm. Inv. MA3441. CIMRM 641. (Louvre, Paris). Detail, rotated (image of Mithras digitally isolated, with cloak and knife removed). Image source: Wikimedia.

Planisphere reproduced with permission of Philip's, a division of Octopus Publishing Group Ltd.

In order to compare the silhouette of Mithras with the section of the Milky Way in question, I have isolated and rotated two images of the deity that show him in the traditional sacrificial pose, with one knee raised (Figure 10). Whilst the pose of Mithras is pretty standard across tauroctony scenes, with regards to the placement of his legs and arms, the size and shape of the cape can vary quite a lot. Therefore, for the two isolated figures of Mithras in Figure 10, the capes and knives have been digitally removed so that we are left more or less with just the body of Mithras. The first observation is that this specific part of the Milky Way splits into two parts about half way down. The higher fork goes across to the left and curves down slightly towards Scorpius. The lower fork forms a right angle, before tailing off on the left-hand side into a slim 'foot' shape. This configuration goes some way towards suggesting a human figure with one knee raised, bringing to mind Mithras' raised knee as he subdues the sacrificial bull.

Moving from left to right along this isolated silhouette of the Milky Way, there is a protrusion just about the bifurcation that is analogous to Mithras' right wrist and hand as he pushes the dagger into the bull's shoulder. Above this is another extension to the path of the Milky Way, but this one is thinner and longer, and has a perceptible bend in it. This second protrusion evokes Mithras' left arm as it reaches up to grasp the bull's muzzle. On the far right-hand side of this isolated section of the Milky Way, just above the second protrusion, is an oval shape with a small, pointed section. This pointed oval conjures up the image of Mithras' head with his distinctive Phrygian cap.

Although it is far harder to see the Milky Way in modern times, due to the scourge of light pollution, in antiquity this celestial body would have been by far the largest and most impressive object in the night sky. In the past the stars of the Milky Way would have shone out brightly, forming the glowing silhouette of a figure with parted legs across the dark backdrop of space. It is possible that the Milky Way, as an image of an important

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deity, had as a precedent the ancient Egyptian goddess Nut, whose starry body reached across the heavens.<sup>54</sup> In her article, ‘Goddess Nut and the Milky Way’, Rasha Soliman includes a diagram that shows the arc of the Milky Way as a representation of Nut, with the bifurcation of the milky path as the goddess’ two legs.<sup>55</sup>

The Milky Way was thought by some to be a reflection of light from the Sun, a great river, a ladder, or a path along which souls would travel to the afterlife.<sup>56</sup> For Ovid it was the dwelling place of the mighty gods and for Cicero, the abode of virtuous souls.<sup>57</sup> As Mithras was considered the god of light, it seems fitting that his body may have been associated with a celestial feature of such spiritual significance.<sup>58</sup> As Mithras was also believed to be a creator god and lord of genesis, connected with the descent of the soul at birth and its ascent at death, it seems fitting that the path of the Milky Way linking the two traditional soul gates of Taurus-Gemini and Scorpius-Sagittarius would have been represented by the deity’s body. In this way, the journey of life from birth to death would have been symbolised by the path of the Milky Way between Taurus and Scorpius, with Mithras’ body as a metaphorical path to salvation along which the initiates could tread.

The concept of Mithras himself as a path is particularly interesting in light of the paths that have been found in some Mithraic temples, such as the white mosaic on the floor of the Felicissimus mithraeum (CIMRM 299). The path is split into the seven Mithraic grades, starting with the first panel that includes a bird, a vessel and a caduceus. The third panel contains what has been previously understood as a bag, a helmet and a lance. In 2013, Aleš Chalupa and Tomas Glomb revisited the imagery of this third

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<sup>54</sup> For the Milky Way as one of the celestial forms of Nut, see Rasha Soliman, ‘Goddess Nut and the Milky Way’, *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Egyptian Science Through Ages*, Cairo, 9-11 October 2012, pp.1–8; Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.207; Ronald A. Wells, ‘The Mythology of Nut and the Birth of Ra’, *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 19 (1992): pp.305–10.

<sup>55</sup> Soliman, ‘Goddess Nut and the Milky Way’, p.4, figure 1.

<sup>56</sup> Hinckley Allen, *Star Names and Their Meanings*, pp.474–85; Edwin C. Krupp, *Beyond the Blue Horizon: Myths and Legends of the Sun, Moon, Stars, and Planets* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), pp.256–74; Jaki, *The Milky Way*, pp.1–2, 25.

<sup>57</sup> Jaki, *The Milky Way*, p.18.

<sup>58</sup> For Mithras as the god of light, see Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras*, pp.62–66, 81, 146.

panel (third grade, or *Miles*) and argued that the ‘bag’ should instead be understood as a bull’s foreleg.<sup>59</sup> Chalupa and Glomb highlighted the inclusion of a severed, bovine leg in other Mithraic imagery, including a fresco from the Santa Prisca mithraeum in Rome depicting a procession of Mithraic grade holders carrying offerings, and the relief of the Flavius Aper altar from a mithraeum in Ptuj, Slovenia.<sup>60</sup> The image of a severed limb may have held significance in terms of an ancient star map as, in Egyptian mythology, a bull’s foreleg generally symbolised the constellation *Mesjetiu*, which is now known as the Plough, the distinctive ‘pan’ of Ursa Major.<sup>61</sup>

Glenn Palmer also identifies the importance of the bull’s foreleg for Mithraic iconography by suggesting that the image of Mithras cutting into the bull’s shoulder recalls ancient Egyptian portrayals of the ceremony of the Opening of the Mouth.<sup>62</sup> Examples of ancient Egyptian depictions of the Opening of the Mouth ritual can be seen on the north wall of the inner hall Tomb of Rekhmire, Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, Egypt, and in the mortuary chapel of Princess Sesheshet Idut, Saqqara (Sakkara), Egypt. During this funerary ritual, the foreleg was severed from a sacrificed bull and an implement resembling the constellation of the Plough (an adze) was held up to the deceased person’s mouth to assure their rebirth in the next life.<sup>63</sup> The myth behind the severed bull’s leg as the constellation of the Plough goes back to the epic fight between Seth and Osiris. Seth, in the form of a bull, killed Osiris with his own foreleg. Horus then cut off Seth’s foreleg, after which it was guarded in the centre of the northern sky. Following his death, Osiris was resurrected, and in the ritual of the Opening of the Mouth

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<sup>59</sup> Aleš Chalupa and T. Glomb, ‘The Third Symbol of the *Miles* Grade on the Floor Mosaic of the Felicissimus Mithraeum in Ostia: A New Interpretation’, *Religio* 21, no.1 (2013): pp.9–32.

<sup>60</sup> Chalupa and Glomb, ‘The Third Symbol’, pp.14–16, 19–21.

<sup>61</sup> For the constellation of the Plough as a bull’s foreleg in Egyptian astronomy, see Giulio Magli, *Architecture, Astronomy and Sacred Landscape in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.13, 45–46; Chalupa and Glomb, ‘The Third Symbol’, p.22; Herman te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion: A Study of his Role in Egyptian Mythology and Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967), pp.86–88.

<sup>62</sup> Palmer, ‘Why the shoulder?’, pp.314–23.

<sup>63</sup> Ann M. Roth, ‘Fingers, Stars and the “Opening of the Mouth”: The Nature and Function of the Ntrwj-Blades’, *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 79 (1993): pp.57–79; Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, pp.84–91; Svein Bjerke: ‘Remarks on the Egyptian Ritual of “Opening the Mouth” and Its Interpretation’, *Numen* 12, no.3 (September 1965): pp.201–16.

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there was an entreaty to Osiris to allow the rebirth of the deceased's soul. The symbolic importance of the central, 'imperishable' stars of the Plough comes from the fact that they never set, hence their connection with notions of everlasting life and rebirth. Returning to the ancient Egyptian ritual, it was believed that the resurrected soul of the deceased was received by Nut – a goddess connected with the Milky Way – who provided 'health and life', and welcomed the deceased soul into the world of the gods.<sup>64</sup>

Cristina Riggs explains how mummification and funerary art, inspired by ancient Egypt, had such a transformative effect on Roman religion that they became 'privileged arenas of display in local communities'.<sup>65</sup> Quoting from Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Riggs reminds us that traditions are invented, not miraculously born.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, Riggs concentrates her study of Roman Egypt on the time period between around 30 BCE to 300 CE – roughly the era between the Roman annexation of Egypt and the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire – which happens to coincide with the rise and fall of Mithraism. The strong influence of Egyptian culture at this time does add weight to the notion that the Roman cult of Mithras may have been shaped, at least in part, by ancient Egypt astrological beliefs.

With regard to a possible link between ancient Egyptian culture and Roman Mithraic iconography, it is of note that the Mithraic personification of time – depicting Aion (or Aeon) wrapped in a large snake – bears a striking resemblance to Roman carvings of Osiris Chronocrator, who also represented eternal time.<sup>67</sup> A Mithraic relief of Aion/Phanes from the second or third century can be seen at the Galleria Museo e Medaglieria Estense, Modena (CIMRM 695-696). A second-century example of Osiris Chronocrator can be found in the Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome.

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<sup>64</sup> Bjerke, 'Remarks on the Egyptian Ritual', p.215.

<sup>65</sup> Cristina Riggs, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.3, 6, 431–32.

<sup>66</sup> Riggs, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt*, p.6; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.6.

<sup>67</sup> For the Mithraic figure of Aion as a symbol of eternal time, see Kristen Lippincott, 'Timely Secrets', *Apollo* 151, no. 455 (January 2000): pp.24–25; Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, pp.104–10.

For Osiris Chronocrator as a Roman representation of eternal time, see Riggs, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt*, p.431; Panayotis Pachis, 'Induction into the Mystery of "Star-Talk": The Case of the Isis Cult During the Graeco-Roman Age', *Pantheon* 7, no.1 (2012): p.83.

If Mithras' body is analogous to the path of the Milky Way, it may be the case that the constellations around this section of the sky are also linked to the path of the seven grades. If the Felicissimus path is mapped to the section of Milky Way between Taurus and Scorpius, the first panel (representing the first grade) would be roughly in line with the cluster of constellations that start just below Taurus, namely Corvus, Crater and Hydra. Together these stars were represented on celestial maps by a bird, vessel and snake, an image that is paralleled by the mosaic of the first grade which features a bird, a vessel and two snakes entwined around a staff. The third panel (representing the third grade), containing the image of a bull's foreleg, falls just under half way along the length of the Felicissimus path. Below the path of the Milky Way stretching between Taurus and Scorpius, roughly half-way along, is the Plough, a constellation once represented by a bovine foreleg. Nearing the end of the Felicissimus path, the sixth panel (representing the sixth grade) contains a crown with rays. This crown may represent Corona Australis, the constellation adjacent to Sagittarius. The sixth grade symbol may, then, have had relevance for the celestial gate at Scorpius-Sagittarius, through which the soul was believed to exit the terrestrial zone at death. If the path of the seven grades is linked to the path of the Milky Way, and to a number of the constellations roughly in line with it, this celestial trail may have symbolised the way in which Mithraists could strive to reach the highest grade, and eventually be admitted into the afterlife through the celestial gate of Scorpius-Sagittarius.

There is one final point worth mentioning with regard to the symbolism of the Plough as a bull's foreleg, in that it could help with the metaphorical positioning of Mithras' sacrificial bull in the night sky. It has been suggested above that Taurus represented only the front portion of the bull, as depicted in many traditional representations of this constellation. This idea is strengthened by ancient images of Cautes carrying the symbol for Taurus as a bull's head, rather than a complete, miniature bull. I also touched upon the idea that Scorpius reaching up towards the two scales of Libra brings to mind the image of the scorpion in the tauroctony grasping the bull's testicles. With Taurus as the bull's head, and Scorpius at its testicles, then perhaps the bull's foreleg was actually imagined at the Plough, just below that part of the Milky Way analogous with Mithras holding the dagger. In this way, the bull can be envisioned stretching across the sky beneath the bifurcated section of the Milky Way. Within this understanding of the tauroctony, the brightness of Mithras' body (as the Milky Way) would be in contrast to the blackness of the bull below (as the darkness of space). The evocation of such a stark contrast – between light

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Mithras, God of Light, as the Milky Way

and darkness – brings to mind the idea of an epic struggle between two opposing elements, as well as the never ending cycle of life, death and rebirth.

The presence of the zodiacal ring in the tauroctony, the depiction of the Sun and Moon, and Mithras' star-covered cloak all ground the ancient imagery of Mithras sacrificing the bull firmly in the celestial sphere. Stars visible to the naked eye held great sacred importance in antiquity as they picked out the great mythic characters of the sky and helped to pin-point the traditional celestial gates. The Milky Way was also important as it was believed to represent the path to the afterlife, and even the heavenly abode itself. These beliefs appear to have been reflected in the imagery of the tauroctony, through allusions to a particular path of constellations and to the section of the Milky Way that bridges Taurus and Scorpius. The central placement of Mithras within the tauroctony scene reflects the scale and shape of the Milky Way, and the way it arches over a specific group of constellations. This proposed configuration fits far better with the iconography of Mithraic reliefs than the notion of Mithras as a single, relatively small constellation set off to one side of the star map. By associating Mithras with the Milky Way, the deity's body would have been directly linked to beliefs around the descent of the soul falling into genesis, and his status as a god of light would have resonated with the luminosity of this huge structure in the night sky. Mithras' body, as the path of the Milky Way, may also have been analogous to the metaphorical path through which initiates progressed on their journey through the seven grades. Sadly, light pollution now prevents many of us from appreciating the impressive beauty of the Milky Way, but it seems fitting that such a spectacular structure may once have symbolised the ability of a deity to cast light on the world and to offer the hope of salvation in the next life.