Mithraism -- Precession of the [Vernal] Equinox

The Earth's rotation axis is not fixed in space. Not only is the axis itself tilted but, like a rotating toy top, the axis executes a slow precession. This precession has a period of 25,772\(^1\) years causing our days, year, and seasons to creep backwards by 50 seconds per year. Our calendars periodically have to make adjustments to keep the same months in the same seasons.

This fact was discovered by the Hellenistic Greek astronomer, Hipparchus (2C BCE), using accurate data kept by ancient Babylonian and Egyptian astronomers. Every 71.6\(^1\) years, on any given date, the sun rises against the night sky behind it having recessed 1 degree. Thus, with 30° of the complete 360° horizon allotted for each of the twelve signs of the Zodiac, then the sun will be rising on the morning of the Vernal Equinox against the predawn backdrop of a different constellation every 2160 years.

Each of the twelve constellations has its turn being the sun’s background over the full 25772 year cycle, meaning each “rules” the Vernal equinox for 2160 years. The Vernal Equinox has been the focus of all agricultural peoples in temperate zones: the marking of the return of the sun to bring life back to a world dead during winter, to bring the world out of its underworld journey in to life again. So which heavenly divinity rules the Vernal Equinox is of utmost importance.

For the past two thousand years the constellation Pices the Fish has “ruled” the Vernal equinox. Prior to the age of Pisces it was the age of Aries the Ram, and before that the age of Taurus the Bull.

Gemini......the Twins...6380 BCE

---

\(^1\) this varies slightly with each cycle
Coincidental to the birth of Christ (though maybe not coincidentally), we were moving out of the Age of Aries into the Age of Pisces. This was well known to everyone alert to celestial matters in the Roman world, which meant every religious thinker. [Next century, we will be moving into the Age of Aquarius, as is well known to everyone alert to pop cultural matters in the 1960s.]

During the second half of the twentieth century, several scholars have speculated on the relationship of the image of the Mithraic Tauroctony (above) with celestial constellations. It was a relationship begging for an explanation, since every symbol shown in the Tauroctony is also the symbol of a constellation. “In the absence of any ancient explanations of its meaning, however, Mithraic iconography has proven to be exceptionally difficult to decipher.”

David Ulansey has proposed that the tauroctony image, as central to Mithraism as the Madonna and child is to Catholicism, represents Mithras as the constellation Perseus, “killing” the bull (as constellation Taurus), attended by all the constellations along the celestial equator during the Age of Aries (the dog, Canis Minor; the snake, Hydra; the raven, Corvus; the scorpion, Scorpio). The Age of Aries was in effect when Mithraism was developing and the iconography Ulansey theorizes represents the change that happened bringing to power the Age of Aries. Many scholars disagree with his explanation; the debate continues.

---