

***FOUNDATIONS IN DECODING ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN ICONOGRAPHY I*****ARCHAEOASTRONOMY AND ASTROLOGY: THE INDISPENSIBLE KEYS**

The research topic I work on is to look into the meaning of an image showing a lion attacking its prey, a recurring subject in ancient near-eastern art. When I looked into the literature by those commenting on its possible symbolic meaning, of course the tendency is to draw on one's own background knowledge and education, whatever it might be, and fit the image to that. To some this animal group is sheer observation of nature - to others an expression of political or religious power, while just a handful saw it as the first in service of the second, both in turn reflecting astronomical cosmology. This last group tended all to come from the Victorian generation where traditional Astronomy still formed part of a curriculum based on the Seven Liberal Arts - when it was still alive as an oral tradition in country customs dealing with the Seasons of the Year. Often a quite trite interpretation is perpetuated from one scholar to the next without any questioning.



***2M sealing from a seal bought by T E Lawrence at Membij, Syria (Ashmolean Museum 1913.251/AshCatl 897E) Different modes of attack around the Solar Palm Tree of the Year suggest the Four Seasons***

Only a small minority had the imagination to put themselves back into the mind-set of the era they were studying to avoid projecting onto ancient near-eastern iconography present-day attitudes, such as unawareness that time was not easily measured just by a quick glance at the clock and, moreover, that the stars and planets were each understood as the manifestation of the power of a God or Goddess - not so much worshipped but observed and propitiated, and their effects noted (immediate examples being the Sun and Moon). These Gods/Planets would be represented by obvious symbols like crescent or radiant disc - but could also be represented by animals or different human types. Only a smaller handful of that more aware minority even knows the difference between astronomy - with its liturgical and/or calendrical functions - and astrology as its predictive or interpretive arm and connected with omen-reading (the best example being an eclipse).

While people in the field of ancient near-eastern studies would deem it indispensable for a scholar in the field to know at least one of the relevant languages (Sumerian, Akkadian, Aramaic or Hebrew being the most important) and to start off with a general background in its history (even if only based on the Bible, a Classics degree or knowledge of Dynastic Egypt), it is not usually a *desideratum* that they should be visually literate, and does not cross their mind at all that they should have under their belt the basics of sky phenomena, seeing no link between these and the

Pantheon of Gods. If archaeologists had more training in art history they would be in a better position to comment on certain artefacts (strata or historical context are easier to establish than iconographical sources). The opposite equally applies to those who start off as art historians and end up looking into artefacts from the ancient near-eastern world where better awareness of stratigraphy and dating can help avoid making basic mistakes of judgment.

When an ordinary member of the public buys a general book on Ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology in one of the great museums of the world, one of the first tests in assessing its quality is to see if the text goes beyond the placing of artefacts in chronological order, providing historical context and giving plain descriptions of them (they often speak for themselves in any case if well illustrated). Does the writer get at the heart of the meaning of the imagery on them, though?

Entering the stage late in time compared with the art history of European Art, the itemisation stage of ancient near eastern art history is now more or less settled. There is an entire oeuvre of extraordinary books (now antiquarian) recording the discovery of ancient ruins and their contents - often valuable for showing how things looked before later damage occurred. We now have shelves full of archaeological reports and seal catalogues itemising each tiny work of art for which, archaeological context aside, we still do not really understand the basis of a certain class of imagery that I take to be calendrical/astronomical from a time when ordered government depended on it. Wherever an artefact also holds an inscription, mastery of texts in ancient languages may enable readings of seal owners, the reigns of named kings, or even the illustration of a myth - yet overall the visitor to a museum holding these objects often comes no nearer to understanding what the belief system lying behind the imagery was, and what the key to decoding the iconography on them might be.

Early on in my research into the meaning of the lion attacking the bull in ancient near-eastern art, I noticed the recurrence of certain key images from the ancient Near East that were not factually historical in nature, but often placed next to each other in different combinations, the lion-bull group being one of them (we give examples later). These images started to appear from as early as the 5M BC and never completely died out - surviving the rise and fall of empires and their provinces in changing geographies even on into Classical Greek and Roman times, with their meanings so obvious and taken for granted that no-one particularly took the trouble to write them down.

Due to my particular training it was natural to apply a method not familiar to the archaeologists and textual experts in the ancient near eastern past which I believe not only enables the identification of what I call *The Canon of Ancient Near Eastern Art*, but also points to the discipline to turn to for understanding its imagery - that is to say, astronomy.

Let me demonstrate an obvious example from another period in the history of art where sequences of images enable identification of their story content, and where the background texts for them are to most people completely familiar, requiring no particular research.

#### ***A POINTER TO METHOD TAKEN FROM OTHER ART HISTORICAL TRADITIONS***

If we look at another Canon - that of Christian art - we know the Crucifixion is one image in a cycle of images telling the story of the *Life of Christ*, its textual basis being the *New Testament*. This

scene, along with *The Nativity*, the *Wedding at Cana*, or the *Ascension*, can be depicted within the entire cycle of the *Life of Christ* from beginning to end (as Giotto did in the Arena Chapel, Padua - see the illustration below). But for more restricted settings, separate scenes are painted as stand-alone icons of doctrinal significance and spiritual power, each with a different meaning - exactly as I found happens with core pieces in the ancient near-eastern cycle.



In the same way, in Classical art without a background in Greek and Roman mythology and knowledge of the characters and events of individual myths, sequences of images or separate iconic renditions chosen from them are a closed book.

My contention in this very short polemic is that those studying the history of ancient near-eastern art not only require knowledge of dynasties and a language or two, but also a background in the basic facts of about astronomical and astrological behavior affecting daily life (in the earliest millennia they were not separated) - along with some idea of the stages of mastering this branch of scientific observation in ancient times. Indeed, knowledge of the nature of astral and planetary influence still survives in modern astrology in unbroken transmission from Babylon, and knowledge of the stars' and planets' purely astronomical behavior (such as their periodicity and cyclical nature, or star identification) - similarly handed down over the centuries - is the kind of basic know-how still applied in present-day naked-eye observation practised by millions in local astronomy clubs. Since we know Gods and Goddesses were illustrated in ancient near eastern art - either in full cycles of images or in individual pieces - we *must* not omit their association with planetary and stellar behavior and just treat them as aesthetic, 'arty' objects! Anyone brought up on modern astrophysics, however, will be at sea... . How can we possibly tell what powers the Gods or Goddesses (and their totem animals) represent if we have no grounding in the basic grammar of what the planets and stars do?

### **THE IDEA OF A CANON OF ART**

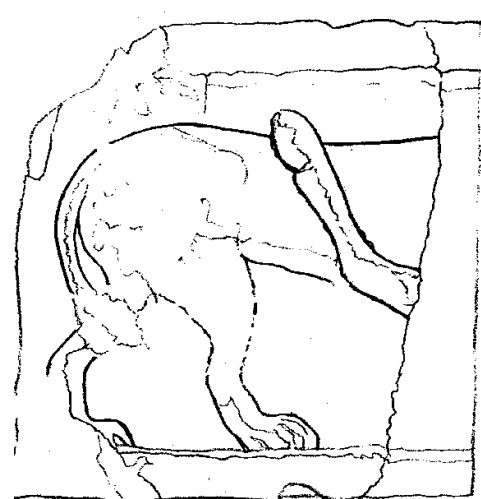
The important lesson one learns from other art historical traditions is that they have *sequences* of imagery, where the order of the pictures in relation to each other helps identify what the story is.

This is true of works of art telling the story of the Life of Christ, the Life of the Virgin Mary, of Greek myths, or stories based on *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad*. In my case, as I looked at different artefacts using the lion-prey group, they were alone or shown next to other images - sometimes just one or two, sometimes many more - suggesting there was a complete narrative (or CANON) consisting of many more pictures where it played a part as a king-pin. In my first Catalogue of



artefacts, for instance, on the 6C BC sarcophagus from Xanthos above, apart from the main focus on a bull lying under the lion on one side in high relief, one end shows a man poignarding a lion, the other long side a line of soldiers going to war, and on a further facet a lioness suckling two cubs. For the full message concerning death and renewal one needs to read all four facets.

Again, in the case of a Doric frieze slab from the Temple of Assos (below) this slab was one of an entire scheme of decoration round the entire temple which, again, needed to be looked at as a whole in order to understand its place in the story, mainly to do with the Seasons of the Year.



*Architrave frieze fragment, Doric Temple of Athena 7C BC*

For *Catalogue A* (which concentrated on lion attacks with the prey on its back), this juxtaposition of images starts as early as the 4M in Egypt and at Susa. In 3M Sumer, on one side of the steatite vase below tucked in underneath the lion attack is a group with two small bears either side of a palm tree. On the other side of the vase are two more groups. What do they all mean, taken together? I must leave it to you to access *Catalogue A* on this website, by clicking on the central square of the Home Page, and again on the central square of the next page to get to the level

where all the Catalogues are gradually being archived (*Catalogue E* being the latest addition in early 2018, and very much more complex).



*(Top) View of 3M Iranian chlorite vase said to be from Khafaje (BM ME-128887) showing two snakes held in 'master of the beasts' fashion by a standing figure of neutral sex standing on the rumps of two lionesses with tails upheld like ears of wheat (the rosette is a pointer to Inanna); (below) overview of the two further heraldic units comprising the scenes on the pot (photos author).*

#### **KEY NARRATIVES IN ANCIENT NEAR-EASTERN ART, AND THE CORE CANON**

I took the idea of looking at sequences of images from the German archaeologist and scholar, Anton Moortgat, in his book, *Tammuz* - though crucially he did not interpret the images of that myth as he saw them on Sumerian cylinder seals as particularly astronomical in nature (in fact, Tammuz is a symbol of the Year). Of course there are background myths to be found depicted in ancient Near Eastern art that are peculiar to different regions (or held in common over vast geographies) - but aside from these are recurrent icons that remain perennially in use, singly or within longer sequences. On many artefacts the lion-prey icon is deemed sufficiently central in itself to be a stand-alone icon (much as the Virgin and Child icon is). On a preliminary reading I began to realise that the Lion attacking its Prey image that was my particular research topic was the icon in a cycle of near-eastern images adding up to an astronomical Canon which, so far, has not been pieced together, with the lion-prey group signaling the very end and very beginning of the cycle. **Chapters 19** and **20** give the general astronomical background for understanding all the items in the Catalogues (so far **Chapter 19** is accessible through the centre square of the Home Page and is accessed through the bottom left square). **Chapter 20** is still in the making. Like all true icons, depending on context, I found the lion-prey group has several levels of meaning.

If we come back to the analogy of the Christian Canon in more detail, in a large work like Giotto's fresco cycle at the Church of St Francis at Assisi, the upper chapel is taken up by scenes from the Life of Mary, culminating in the Annunciation, the Birth of Christ, and the visit of the Magi. Then in the lower chapel we have the more often illustrated cycle of the Life of Christ, which of course is enmeshed with the early events of Mary's story. In the Arena Chapel the Christ cycle begins with

the Miracle of Water changed into Wine at the Wedding at Cana, through other incidents in his life such as the Raising of Lazarus, the Entry into Jerusalem on a Donkey and the stages of his Passion and Crucifixion. It is rare, as in this case, to find the entire story cycle played out in full - obviously it is only possible if there is extensive space available, such as an entire church. Usually the artist is commissioned to make *one* sculpture, *one* altarpiece, and so the patron decides which scene from the cycle should be the focus of attention, usually one of doctrinal or eschatological importance, such as the Nativity, Crucifixion, or Resurrection.

I am finding the same holds true for my posited Canon of Ancient Near Eastern Art. The symbolic animals and plants initially used to describe the behaviour of the heavenly bodies were first coined in prehistoric times, elaborated upon in the centuries of the early urban civilisations and given their finishing touches in Classical and Mediaeval art (some are still in use in astrology today). Gratifyingly, there *are* some monuments where the entire cycle is depicted, serving to prove the theory. These will be described in ***Chapter 17: Piecing together the Ancient Near Eastern Canon*** and are ancient near eastern art's equivalent of the Arena Chapel!

My research has found so far that the perennial astronomical images of ancient near-eastern art (shown to be zodiacal or planetary in my on-going research) are scenes such as goats flanking a bush, lions attacking prey, the hero fighting a lion, the mistress of the beasts - and several intermediate images. They probably describe Calendrical turning points used as a common visual language in the arts of Mesopotamia, Persia, Canaan, Greece - and even Egypt. As the centuries passed, after crusader contact with the Near East this canon was incorporated as a set of cosmic undertones even within the Christian doctrine of Romanesque and Gothic cathedral sculpture programmes.

The symbol of the lion attacking its prey was first used in Mesopotamia at the end of the Fifth Millennium, travelled century by century across Iran, Syria, Egypt, Anatolia, Crete, Mycenae, and ended up as the subject of the pre-Parthenon pediments of the Temple to Athena at Athens. Its meaning, simultaneously religious, astronomical, imperial and economic, changed emphasis according to the civilisations using it. This one image will ultimately only be understood in the context of the Ancient Near-Eastern Canon as a whole, and I have found that unless the Ancient Near Eastern expert has some background in astronomy and astrology, despite all the factual enumerations of seals, wall-paintings and sculptures in catalogues they will get no nearer to the reason why such images were made.