Ancient zodiac discovered in Jordan demonstrates pre-Islamic astrotheological religion

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It is not only the other Abrahamic sects or non-Abrahamic religions that posses significant nature worship or astral religion, as Islam too incorporated this ancient astrotheology into its tenets as well. In reality, pre-Islamic Arabia and other places where Arabs spread were rife with observations of the celestial bodies. It is because of stellar observations and astral religion that various astronomical elements have Arabic names, later developments concerning very ancient knowledge, as by the Arab Sabeans, for example, who may have been equated in antiquity with the famous Semitic astronomers called “Chaldeans.”

A discovery in Jabal/Jebel Qurma, Jordan, is “fueling debate on the links between Arabic-Islamic and pre-Islamic civilizations.” This archaeological discovery is of a rock carving found in the “vast wasteland” of Harrah, which contains “tens of thousands of inscriptions adorning the desert’s rocks,” written in Old Arabic via “an indigenous Arabian alphabet known as Safaitic.” The carving in question, which may date to around 2,000 years ago, had been known for some time but was recently deciphered by linguist Dr. Ahmad Al-Jallad, a professor at Leiden University in Holland.

In “An Ancient Zodiac from Arabia Discovered,” Dr. Al-Jallad states:

The zodiac of Islamic times used names of the signs that were clear translations from Aramaic or Greek. The ancient Arabian zodiac, on the other hand, has much older roots, going back to Babylon. Almost all knowledge of this ancient tradition seems to have been lost by the Classical Islamic period. Al-Ṣūfī, the 10th century Persian astronomer, claimed that the zodiac was unknown to the pre-Islamic Arabs. Its discovery in the Safaitic inscriptions not only proves the opposite, but also suggests much closer cultural ties between the pre-Islamic nomads of Arabia and the great civilizations of the Fertile Crescent than has usually been assumed.

The Arabian zodiac corresponds neither to the Greek/Aramaic nor Babylonian systems perfectly, but seems instead to sit somewhere in between the two. The names of three of the constellations, Pisces, Taurus, and Capricorn, side more closely with the Mesopotamian signs. In Greek and Aramaic, Pisces is represented by a Fish, while the Safaitic ḏayl (‘tail’) corresponds to the Babylonian name zibbātu (‘the tails’). The Babylonians called Taurus alû (‘the bull of heaven’), and Safaitic ʾaʾlay seems to be derived from the same source. The Arabian term for Capricorn, yaʾmūr, has several meanings in the Classical Arabic dictionaries – a wild beast; a beast resembling a goat, having a single branching horn in the middle of its head; a certain beast of the sea. Combining these together, the image of the Babylonian sign, a goat-fish hybrid, takes shape.

Most of the other constellations correspond in meaning with the Aramaic/Greek signs, but their names still differ from those found in the Classical Arabic tradition. Some signs are reimagined. Aquarius is a salt worker or vessel instead of a water bearer. Gemini is called gamal, which probably reflects a re-interpretation of the constellation as a Camel.

The name for Scorpio, ʿaqqabat, is open to two interpretations. While it is most likely derived from the normal Semitic word for scorpion, ʿaqrabat, a more adventurous interpretation is possible: the term could be related to Arabic ʿuqāb (‘an eagle’). The astrological connection between Scorpio and the eagle is well known in Christian times, but no clear evidence for this association has yet been discovered in the ancient sources. Some scholars have suggested that Scorpio was represented by an eagle in a few verses in the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible. In Revelation 4:7, John encounters four creatures:

“And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle”

This statement echoes the famous vision of Ezekiel (1:10) of four Cherubim:

“Each had a human face in the front, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle at the back.”

Some Rabbinic scholars have interpreted Ezekiel’s vision as references to the zodiac signs, the lion = Leo, the ox = Taurus, the man = Aquarius, and the eagle = Scorpio. If this is correct and if the Safaitic term should in fact be translated as ‘eagle’, then the Arabian zodiac may provide the first clear evidence for the representation of this constellation by an eagle in ancient times. This could also imply that the Arabian zodiac stems from the same source – now lost – as the zodiac known to biblical authors.

Ezekiel’s wheel within a wheel

Here we see confirmation of the zodiacal symbolism in the biblical book of Ezekiel, which I discussed in some detail in my book Did Moses Exist? The Myth of the Israelite Lawgiver, excerpted here:

Ezekiel’s Wheel within a Wheel Revealed

Ezekiel’s four beasts evidently symbolize the fixed points of the zodiac, the man equated with Aquarius, the ox or cherub with Taurus, the lion with Leo and the eagle with Scorpio. These points represent the signs immediately after the winter solstice, vernal equinox, summer solstice and autumnal equinox, respectively.

This astrotheological element was incorporated also into the New Testament, as featured in our 2015 Astrotheology Calendar.

Al-Jallad further remarks:

The full historical implications of this finding are not yet clear, and many questions remain open. Did the Arabs borrow the zodiac from the Babylonians during their expansion into Arabia or does it represent a much older, shared cultural tradition? Can its intermediate status between the Babylonian and Greek names of the signs shed light on the dissemination of the zodiac across the Near East and eastern Mediterranean? Why did almost all knowledge of this particular zodiac disappear in the Islamic period? No matter how these questions are answered, its discovery underlines one inescapable fact: the image of pre-Islamic Arabia as presented in the literary sources of the Abbasid era is incomplete. Arabia’s pre-Islamic cultural, religious, and linguistic history is just beginning to be written, and the epigraphic record is essential.

In addition to this important artifact, “the arid and desolate, basalt-strewn lands are astonishingly rich in archaeological monuments of all kinds and periods, in the form of circular stone dwellings, round enclosures with low stone walls, burial cairns, chambered tower tombs, hunting installations, rock drawings, and Safaitic and Arabic inscriptions on stone.” (Jebel Qurma Project)

We would like to see more research done on pre-Islamic Arabian religion, mythology and archaeology, which are constantly at peril because of religious fundamentalist doctrine denigrating everything before Mohammed.