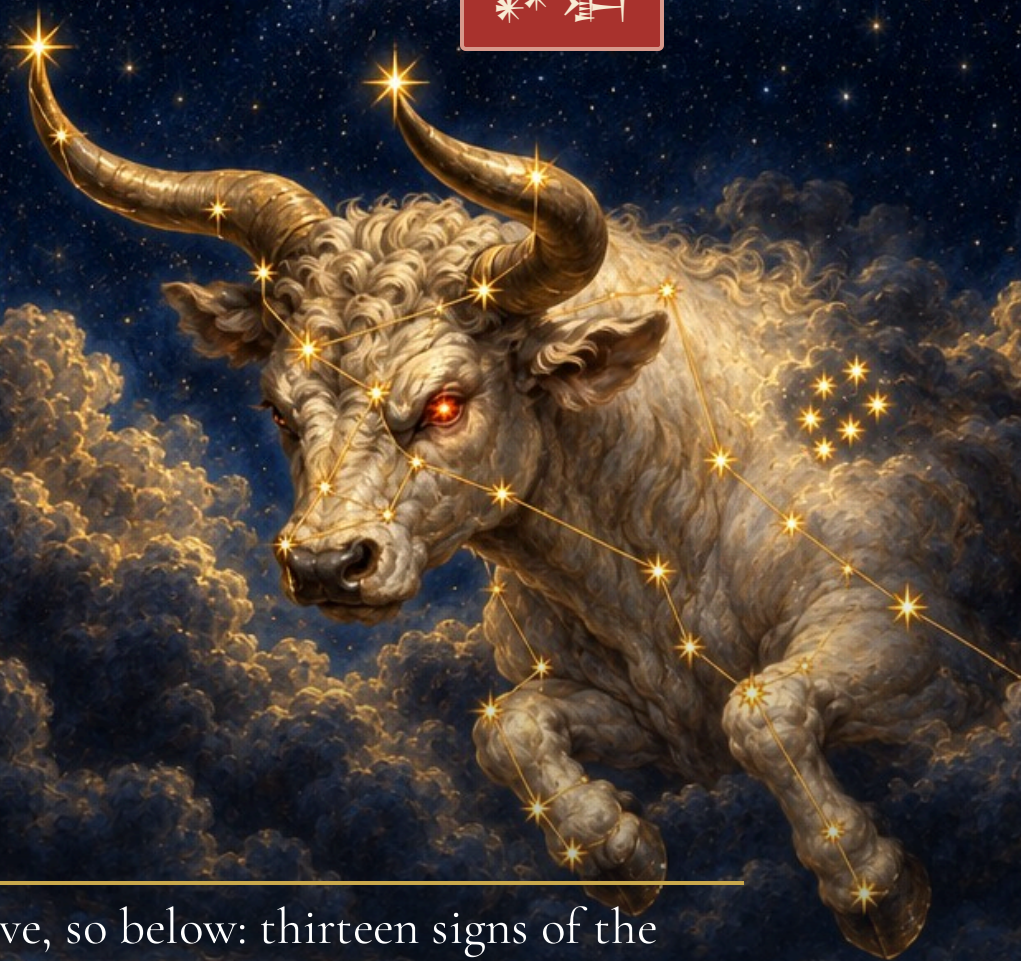


Zodiac

Babylonian · Greek · Egyptian · Roman



As above, so below: thirteen signs of the Sun's path

The Scorpion that slew Orion

The Bull of Heaven and the Seven Sisters

Babylon's Sea-Goat and the Golden Ram

19 FIGURES TO FIND IN THE SKY AND THE LAND

THE ECLIPTIC — THE
SUN'S YEARLY PATH
THROUGH TWELVE
CONSTELLATIONS,
SEEN FROM EVERY
LAND ON EARTH

Contents

Introduction

How the Sky Holds
Its Myths

FEATURE Scorpio

I Spring Signs — The
Ram, the Bull and the
Twins

II Summer Signs — The
Crab, the Lion and
the Maiden

III Autumn Signs — The
Scales, the Scorpion
and the Archer

IV Winter Signs — The
Sea-Goat, the Water-
Bearer and the Fishes

A note on respect



*The circle of little animals: the twelve
signs around the Sun*

Zodiac Mythology Field Guide

Long before the horoscope, the zodiac was a map. Babylonian astronomers divided the Sun's yearly path among the stars into twelve equal parts by about the 5th century BCE, each named for a constellation it passed through. Greek, Egyptian, Roman, Indian and Arabic astronomers inherited the scheme and filled it with their own stories.

The word comes from the Greek *zōidiakos kyklos*, the “circle of little animals.” Most of its figures are beasts — a ram, a bull, a crab, a lion, a scorpion, a goat-fish — and those that are not still carry a myth. This guide reads the twelve as a bestiary of the heavens and asks what they mirror on the ground: as above, so below.

*Long before the horoscope, the
zodiac was a map.*

CONTEXT

How the Sky Holds Its Myths

The stars were the first calendar. Farmers sowed when certain stars rose before dawn, sailors steered by them and priests timed festivals by them. The Babylonian compendium MUL.APIN, known from clay tablets copied from 686 BCE onward but older in origin, lists the constellations in the “path of the Moon” — among them the Bull of Heaven, the Great Twins, the Lion and the Scorpion — that later became the zodiac. The phrase “as above, so below” comes from the Emerald Tablet, a short Hermetic text known from medieval Arabic and Latin versions; it expresses the old belief that the heavens and the Earth mirror one another.

The stars were the first calendar.

SOURCES

MUL.APIN, the Babylonian star compendium (earliest dated copy 686 BCE). Aratus, *Phaenomena* (3rd century BCE). The *Catasterismi* attributed to Eratosthenes. Hyginus, *De Astronomia*. Manilius, *Astronomica* (1st century CE). Ptolemy, *Almagest* (2nd century CE), which catalogues 48 constellations. The Dendera zodiac (1st century BCE). Johann Bayer, *Uranometria* (1603); Johannes Hevelius, *Firmamentum Sobiescianum* (1690).



A Babylonian astronomer-priest records the stars from the top of a ziggurat

THE ECLIPTIC

Over a year the Sun appears to move once around a band of stars called the ecliptic; the Moon and planets travel close to it. Because Earth’s axis slowly wobbles, the signs no longer line up with their constellations — the Sun now stands in Pisces at the March equinox, not Aries. This drift, called precession, was described by Hipparchus in the 2nd century BCE.



Gaia's scorpion strikes, and the boastful hunter falls — they will never again share the sky

Scorpio

The Scorpion · GIR.TAB (Babylonian)

The scorpion that killed Orion.

Sent by Gaia to humble the boastful hunter, the scorpion stung Orion and was raised to the sky as a reward. The two were placed at opposite ends of the heavens: when the Scorpion climbs in the east, Orion sinks in the west. In Mesopotamia scorpion-men guarded the gate of the mountains where the Sun rises and sets, and Gilgamesh passed them on his journey.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a long hook of stars curving up to a raised stinger; with red Antares, “rival of Mars,” at the heart. Land: a curved ridge ending in a hooked point; red rock at a bend.

Orion SIPA.ZI.AN.NA, the True Shepherd of Anu

(Babylonian) · Sah (Egyptian)

The giant hunter who boasted he would kill every beast.

Orion, son of Poseidon, could walk on the sea. He boasted that he would hunt down every animal on Earth, so Gaia, the Earth, sent a scorpion that stung him to death. Zeus set both in the sky but on opposite sides, so that Orion sets in the west as Scorpius rises in the east, and the hunter flees his killer forever. In Egypt these stars were Sah, linked to Osiris.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: three bright stars in a row for the belt, red Betelgeuse at the shoulder and blue-white Rigel at the knee. Land: three mounds or peaks in a line; a giant figure laid out in hills.



Orion with his club, lion pelt and belt of three stars

THE THIRTEENTH CONSTELLATION

The Sun also crosses Ophiuchus, the Serpent-Bearer, between Scorpius and Sagittarius, for about eighteen days each year. The zodiac keeps twelve signs because it was built as twelve equal parts of a circle, matching the months of the year.



I · SPRING SIGNS

I The Ram, the Bull and the Twins

The sky of the new year, when the Sun returned to the stars of spring.

Above: The golden ram carries Phrixus over the sea, while Helle falls into the strait that bears her name

Aries

The Ram · LÚ.ḪUN.GÁ, the Hired Man (Babylonian)

The golden-fleeced ram; first sign of the zodiac.

Zeus's flying ram, with a fleece of gold, carried the children Phrixus and Helle away from their stepmother Ino. Helle fell into the strait named the Hellespont after her; Phrixus reached Colchis, sacrificed the ram and hung its fleece in a sacred grove — the Golden Fleece later sought by Jason and the Argonauts. Babylonian astronomers knew these stars as the Hired Man; the Greeks made him a ram.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a short bent line of three stars led by Hamal, west of the Pleiades. Land: a curling horn in a spiral rock or ridge; a golden fleece of grass on a hillside.

Taurus

The Bull · GU4.AN.NA, the Bull of Heaven (Babylonian)

Zeus as a white bull; the Bull of Heaven.

In Greek myth Zeus became a white bull to carry the princess Europa across the sea to Crete; only the bull's forequarters are drawn in the sky, as if it were still rising from the waves. Far older is the Bull of Heaven, which the goddess Ishtar sent against Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and which they slew.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: the V-shaped Hyades with red Aldebaran as the bull's eye, and long horns tipped by Elnath and Zeta Tauri. Land: a V of valleys; a horned headland rising from the sea.



Castor and Pollux, a star above each head, keep watch over sailors in the storm

Gemini

The Twins · MAŠ.TAB.BA.GAL.GAL, the Great Twins (Babylonian)

Castor and Pollux, the Dioscuri.

Castor was mortal and Pollux the immortal son of Zeus. When Castor was killed, Pollux begged to share his immortality, and the brothers were set in the sky together, spending alternate days on Olympus and in the underworld. Sailors saw them in the glow of St Elmo's fire on masts in storms.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: two bright stars side by side, Castor and Pollux, with two lines of stars for their bodies. Land: twin peaks; two standing stones; paired islands.

The Pleiades

The Seven Sisters · MUL.MUL (Babylonian) · Subaru (Japanese) · Matariki (Māori)

Seven sisters on the shoulder of the Bull.

The seven daughters of Atlas and Pleione, pursued by Orion, were turned into doves and then into stars. Hesiod advised farmers to begin the harvest when the Pleiades rise before dawn and to plough when they set. Almost every culture on Earth has named this cluster, and many tell of a missing or hidden seventh star.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a tiny dipper-shaped cluster of six or seven stars above Taurus. Land: seven stones in a cluster; a group of small islands; seven springs.



II · SUMMER SIGNS

II The Crab, the Lion and the Maiden

The long days, when the Sun burned among the stars of the Lion.

Above: Heracles wrestles the Nemean Lion, whose golden hide no weapon could pierce



The Crab, the Beehive Cluster glowing on its back

Cancer

The Crab · AL.LUL (Babylonian)

The crab that pinched Heracles.

When Heracles fought the many-headed Hydra in the swamp of Lerna, Hera sent a giant crab to bite his foot. He crushed it underfoot, and Hera set it among the stars as a reward. Its faint stars hold the Beehive Cluster, which ancient writers called the Manger, flanked by two stars called the Donkeys.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a faint inverted Y around a misty patch, the Beehive Cluster, between Gemini and Leo. Land: a crab-shaped rock at a tide line; a misty hollow between two hills.

Leo

The Lion · UR.GU.LA, the Great Lion (Babylonian)

The Nemean Lion, whose hide no weapon could pierce.

The first of Heracles' twelve labours was to kill the lion of Nemea. Arrows bounced from its golden hide, so he wrestled it and strangled it with his bare hands, then skinned it with its own

claws and wore the pelt as armour. Ancient writers linked the Sun's passage through Leo with the summer flood of the Nile.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a backward question mark, the Sickle, for the lion's mane, with bright Regulus at its heart and a triangle for the haunches. Land: a crouching lion in a rock outcrop; a sphinx-like ridge.

Virgo

The Maiden · AB.SIN, the Furrow (Babylonian)

The maiden with the ear of grain.

Babylonian astronomers saw the Furrow, holding the barley ear of the goddess Shala; its bright star is still called Spica, "ear of grain." The Greeks saw a maiden — Demeter, her daughter Persephone, or Astraea, goddess of justice, the last of the immortals to leave the Earth when people turned to violence. Astraea rose to the sky, and the Scales beside her are said to be hers.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a wide Y of stars ending in blue-white Spica. Land: a ploughed furrow; a ripe field; a figure of a woman holding grain.

The Hydra

MUŠ, the Serpent (Babylonian)

The longest constellation, coiling beneath three signs.

The water-snake of Lerna grew two heads for every one Heracles cut off, until his nephew Iolaus burned each neck. In another story Apollo sent a crow for water; it dawdled to eat figs and blamed a water-snake, and Apollo set the crow, the cup and the snake in the sky together, the crow forever kept from the cup.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a long winding line of faint stars from below Cancer to below Libra, with lonely red Alphard, "the solitary one," at its heart. Land: a winding river with many branches; a serpentine ridge.



III · AUTUMN SIGNS

III The Scales, the Scorpion and the Archer

The sky of the harvest, when day and night stood balanced.

Above: The centaur archer aims at the red heart of the Scorpion, in the brightest reach of the Milky Way



Asclepius the healer grasps the great Serpent, his feet upon the Scorpion: the thirteenth figure on the Sun's path



Astraea, the star-maiden, with her ear of grain and the Scales of justice

Libra

The Scales · ZI.BA.AN.NA (Babylonian) · the Claws (Greek)

The only sign that is not a living creature.

The Greeks knew these stars as the Claws of the Scorpion. The Babylonians called them the Scales, and the Romans settled on the name Libra. In antiquity the Sun stood here at the autumn equinox, when day and night are equal, and the Scales came to be held by Astraea, the maiden of justice in the neighbouring sign.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a lopsided square of faint stars between Spica and red Antares; its two brightest are still called the southern and the northern claw. Land: a balanced rock; two equal hills on either side of a pass.

Sagittarius

The Archer · PA.BIL.SAG (Babylonian)

The centaur archer.

A centaur draws his bow, aiming at the heart of the Scorpion. Some writers named him Chiron, the wise centaur who taught Achilles; others Crotus, a satyr who invented archery. The Babylonian Pabilsag was a winged centaur-archer with a scorpion's tail. The centre of our galaxy lies just beyond his arrow.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a teapot shape of eight stars in the thickest part of the Milky Way. Land: an arrow-shaped ridge; a horse and rider in a bill figure.

Ophiuchus

The Serpent-Bearer

The healer Asclepius holding a great snake.

Asclepius, son of Apollo, grew so skilled in healing that he raised the dead. Hades complained that his realm was emptying, and Zeus struck Asclepius down with a thunderbolt, then set him

among the stars grasping the serpent, emblem of healing. His feet rest on the Scorpion, inside the Sun's path.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a large, faint, coffin-shaped figure above Scorpius, holding the stars of Serpens. Land: a staff with a coiled snake; a healing spring.

The Milky Way

Galaxias Kyklos (Greek) · Via Lactea (Latin)

The river of stars.

Hera, nursing the infant Heracles, pushed him away, and her milk sprayed across the heavens. In China, Korea and Japan it is the Heavenly River that parts the Weaver Girl from the Cowherd, who meet once a year. The Sun crosses it twice a year, near Gemini and in Sagittarius.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a faint band of light from horizon to horizon, brightest toward Sagittarius. Land: a river across a plain; a pale road; a line of white stones.



IV · WINTER SIGNS

IV The Sea-Goat, the Water-Bearer and the Fishes

The watery quarter of the sky, and the circle that holds all twelve.

Above: The Sea-Goat, emblem of Ea, leaps from the waters into the winter sky

Capricorn

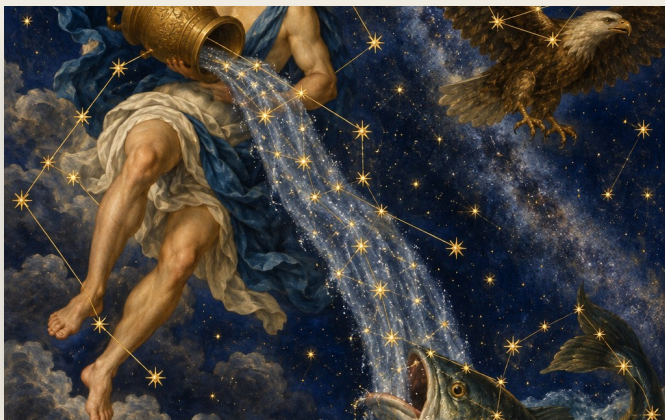
The Sea-Goat · SUḪUR.MAŠ, the Goat-Fish (Babylonian)

A goat with a fish's tail.

The goat-fish was an emblem of Ea (Enki), the Babylonian god of fresh water and wisdom, long before the Greeks. In a Greek telling the god Pan, fleeing the monster Typhon, leapt into the Nile and began to change into a fish, but only below the waist. The winter solstice once fell in this sign, which is why the southern tropic is called the Tropic of Capricorn.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a faint wide triangle, like a smiling boat, south of the Eagle. Land: a horned rock at the water's edge; a spring where hills meet a river.



The Water-Bearer's stream flows into the mouth of the Southern Fish

Aquarius

The Water-Bearer · GU.LA, the Great One (Babylonian)

The water-pourer.

The Babylonians drew the Great One, a god pouring streams from a vase — an image linked with Ea. The Greeks saw Ganymede, the Trojan youth whom Zeus, as an eagle, carried to

Olympus to pour drinks for the gods; the Eagle flies nearby. His stream flows down into the mouth of the Southern Fish, at the bright star Fomalhaut.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a Y-shaped water jar of four stars, with a stream of faint stars cascading south to Fomalhaut. Land: a spring pouring from a rock; a waterfall; streams branching across a plain.



The two Fishes, bound by a cord at the knot star Alrescha

Pisces

The Fishes

Two fishes tied by a cord.

Aphrodite and her son Eros, fleeing the monster Typhon along the Euphrates, became fish and tied themselves together with a cord so they would not lose each other. In Babylon the two figures were a swallow and the goddess Anunitum, joined by a cord. Because of precession, the Sun now stands in Pisces at the spring equinox.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: a large V of faint stars joined at the knot star Alrescha, with a small ring of stars, the Circlet, for one fish. Land: two streams meeting; two fish-shaped lakes joined by a river.

The Great Bear

MAR.GÍD.DA, the Wagon (Babylonian) · the Plough

The bear that never sets.

Callisto, a huntress of Artemis, was loved by Zeus and turned into a bear; Zeus placed her in the sky with her son Arcas nearby. Hera, still angry, asked Ocean never to let her bathe, so the Bear circles the pole and, seen from the Mediterranean, never sinks below the sea. Its seven stars point to the Pole Star, guide of travellers.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: seven bright stars in a dipper or plough circling the north; the end two point to Polaris. Land: seven stones in a ladle shape; a line pointing north.

The Dendera Zodiac

Egypt, 1st century BCE

A carved map of the whole sky.

On the ceiling of a chapel in the temple of Hathor at Dendera, Egyptian sculptors carved the twelve signs among Egypt's own star figures — the hippopotamus, the bull's foreleg and Sah — upheld by four goddesses and falcon-headed spirits. It joins Babylonian, Greek and Egyptian skies in one disc. The original is in the Louvre in Paris; a cast remains in place.

LOOK FOR ABOVE AND BELOW

Sky: the circle of twelve, read as one disc around the pole. Land: a stone circle; a ring of twelve markers; a round carved ceiling.

A NOTE ON RESPECT

The zodiac belongs to many peoples. Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Indian, Persian, Arabic and Chinese astronomers each read the sky in their own way, and many star names still in use are Arabic. Constellation myths vary between ancient authors; note the source a telling follows. This guide treats the zodiac as mythology and astronomy, not as prediction.

The plates in this issue are interpretive illustrations, not historical artefacts.



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