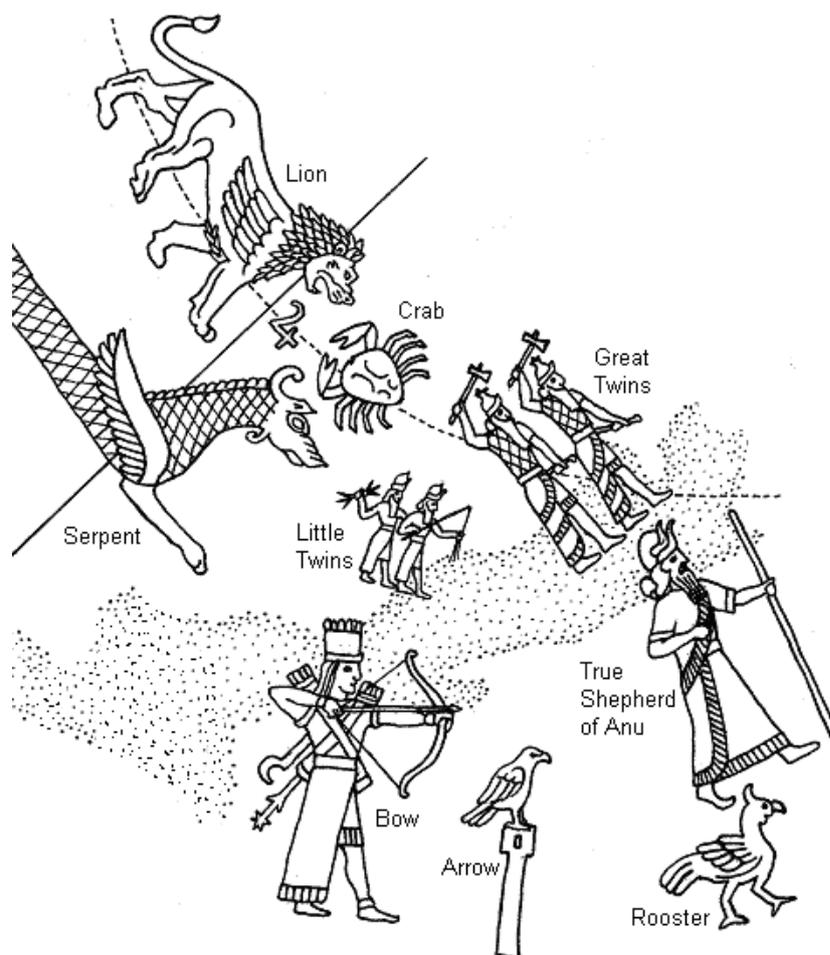


It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White for allowing us to reproduce excerpts of his recently published [Babylonian Star-lore](#). Over the forthcoming months these articles will help to address this deficiency by presenting the lore and symbolism of the twelve Babylonian Zodiac constellations.

**The excerpts reproduced on this site are taken, with the author's permission, from the recently published book '[Babylonian Star-lore](#)' by Gavin White.**

### THE SUMMER SOLSTICE PERIOD (Pages 29-31)

*The next distinct group of symbols is made up from the constellations that rise during the summer. These stars mark the hot dry season, which, unlike the milder climes of Europe, is regarded as the time of death in Mesopotamia. At this time the lands are ravished by drought and plague, and even nature herself becomes barren – the life-giving rains have ceased and river levels decline, the harvest is finished and all vegetation dies back under the scorching summer sun.*

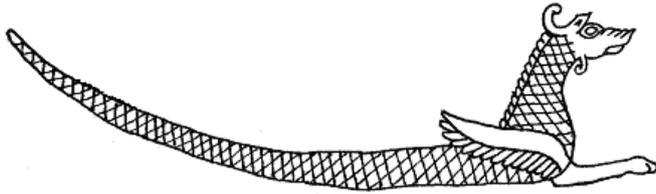


Third Sector – the constellations rising around the summer solstice

*As the sun approached the peak of his powers, Dumuzi had foreboding dreams of his own death. His premonitions came true at the summer solstice and his funeral rites were performed amidst wailings and lamentations in month 4, immediately after the solstice. As Dumuzi walked the path of the dead, he took the sorrows of the worlds with him to the land of the shades.*

Rituals dedicated to the dead also dominated month 5, which fell in late summer. At this time, when the veil between life and death was at its thinnest, the great Brazier festival was celebrated. This festival commemorated the ancestors, who were invited back to the world of the living for an annual feast in their descendant's homes. The rites involved lighting torches and braziers to guide the departed ghosts of the ancestors back from the darkness of the underworld.

The stars rising around the time of the summer solstice are thus fittingly informed by images of death, war and travel between the worlds.



The Serpent is one of the primary symbols of death and the underworld. Like its Greek counterpart, the *Hydra*, the Babylonian Serpent was set in the heavens to guard an entrance to the underworld. This entrance was used by Dumuzi on his way to the underworld and it would also be

the most logical route used by the ancestral ghosts when they returned to earth for the great ancestral festival celebrated in late summer. In Babylonian tradition the Serpent was held sacred to Ningiškida, the 'Lord of the Underworld' and when Death itself was envisioned it was thought to have the face of a serpent. The malign nature of the Serpent constellation is all too apparent in astrology omens where its appearance predicts famine, plague and pestilence.

It is also possible that the Serpent performs a secondary seasonal role as a symbol of the summertime drought. The clearest expression of this function can be found in Greek myth where the Serpent's counterpart, called the *Hydra*, is literally known as the 'water-serpent'. In Greek myth the *Hydra* was portrayed constraining the underground waters and thereby causing springs to dry up and river levels to fall.



The Crab was also closely associated with an entrance to the underworld in Greek and Roman traditions. Much the same is implied in Babylonian traditions where some magical texts even speak of using the influence of the Crab in rites designed to raise ghosts from the underworld and to make offerings to the dead. In the section on the Crab I propose that it has ultimately inherited these otherworldly traits, as well as its strong associations to rivers, from the older constellation of the Serpent.



The underworld themes continue in the form of the Great Twins and their lesser counterparts, the Little Twins, who are all depicted on the star-map as fully armed warriors. The Great Twins in particular, are both closely associated with Nergal, the king of the underworld, and one of them is known to travel back and forth between the realms of the dead and the upper worlds. The symbolic function of the Great Twins within the stellar calendar was to guard the summertime entranceway to the realm of the dead that was located in the region

of the Serpent and Crab.



The theme of travelling between the worlds continues in the lore of the True Shepherd of Anu and his accompanying animal symbol, the Rooster, who both represent the herald of the gods. Their divinely ordained role was to communicate the messages of the gods to the denizens of every realm, which necessitated their journeying between the worlds. Among the messages they relayed would have been the decision of the gods concerning the fate of Dumuzi and the other dying gods who are now making their way towards the underworld. As 'the one struck down by a mace', the True Shepherd has himself walked the long path of the dead.



The summer solstice itself was represented on the star-map in the form of a bird seated on a high-perch. The summer solstice not only marked the longest day of the year but also the time that the sun was at its highest in the skies. In the section on the Arrow, I proposed that the bird seated on a high perch represented the solar-bird at the highest point of its annual ascent in to the heavens.



The Lion has a number of inter-related themes woven into its symbolic nature. As king of the beasts he can naturally represent the king; as a ferocious predatory beast he can also symbolise war and death – the Lion's astrological omens mostly concern the vagaries of war and the occurrence of natural disasters such as famine; and as a seasonal symbol he represents the heat of high summer – his radiant mane being a simple metaphor for the overbearing rays of the summertime sun.

The goddess of war is also portrayed among the summertime stars in the form of the Bow-constellation. Together with her sacred Lion, she marks the summer as the season of war, when campaigns commenced in the spring finally come to fruition. She grants glory and victory to her royal favourites who are represented in the heavens by the King Star, which stands at the Lion's breast.

### THE CRAB (Pages 79-82)

The Crab is described in a 1<sup>st</sup> millennium astrology text as having a number of stars on its sides, and containing within its centre a group of stars that are 'pressed together' – these stars are none other than the open cluster known in Greek star-lore as the *Manger* or *Beehive*. Like the Greek figure of *Cancer*, its latter-day namesake, the Babylonian Crab is set astride the ecliptic with its claws pointing towards the Lion.

Strangely enough there are no known depictions of a crab on any entitlement stones, a circumstance that has led some commentators to suggest that it may be represented on these monuments by the figure of a turtle. This is, in fact, very plausible as the Crab's name can be written as **Kušu**, a 'water creature', which according to the lexicon can refer to a crab as well as a snapping turtle.

The turtle gives every impression of being an important symbol on entitlement stones. It commonly occurs as an individual symbol, and is occasionally combined with the Goatfish. These two symbols, as well as the Ram-headed staff, which is also commonly found in combination with the Goatfish (see fig 69), are all attributed to the wise god Enki. As the Goatfish and Ram-headed staff undoubtedly represent *Capricorn* and *Aries*, it is therefore very likely that the turtle represents *Cancer* – the three symbols then have an added significance in that they each mark one of the equinoxes or solstices.

In the era when *Mul-Apin* was composed the Crab occupied the most northerly section of the ecliptic, where the sun, moon, and planets reached their most northerly positions. This fact probably informs its description in *Mul-Apin* where the constellation is called the 'seat of Anu'. The god Anu, who is literally the god of 'heaven', rules the highest and most remote of the three superimposed heavens found in Babylonian cosmology, it is thus fitting that he should rule the highest sector of the ecliptic. Perhaps for the same reason the special station of Jupiter, the 'king of the planets', is traditionally stationed between the Lion and the Crab, an association that has survived into modern times where his astrological exaltation is located in *Cancer*.

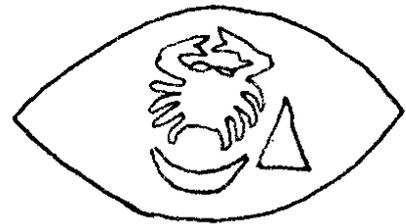
As a creature of the waters, the Crab is used in astrological omens to predict the coming floods. The fundamentals of the scheme are expressed in binary form:

*'If the stars of the Crab scintillate: high floods will come.'*

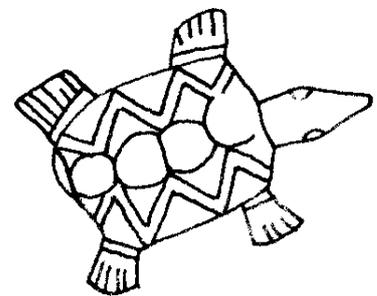
*'If the stars of the Crab are faint: high floods will not come.'*

This basic scheme is developed further in the *Great Star List* where the front stars of the Crab specifically represent the waters of the Tigris, and its rear stars are used to foretell the water levels of the Euphrates.

The association of the Crab with rivers is so strong that the following omen is understood to refer to the Crab even though it isn't explicitly mentioned: *'If the moon is surrounded by a river:*

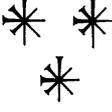


38 The Crab from a 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE seal impression



39 A turtle from an entitlement stone

there will be great floods and cloudbursts' – the Crab stands in the halo of the moon. Reflecting the same symbolism, late astrology texts sometimes refer to the Crab simply as 'the Waters' (**A-meš**).

In astrology texts the Crab is usually written 'Mul Al-lul'		
		
MUL	AL	LUL
<p>The Sumerian term has been borrowed into Akkadian as <i>alluttu</i> – a 'crab'. The plural form of the Akkadian name may have been used to designate 'tongs or pincers'.</p> <p>Although one source suggests that the Crab's name means 'the deceptive digger', it is, in truth, impossible to be certain. Its component elements are as follows:</p> <p>The <b>Al-sign</b> depicts a hoe or pickaxe, perhaps alluding to the crab's claws as digging implements, or to the turtle's spade-like flippers</p> <p>The <b>Lul-sign</b> depicts a fox; it has a variety of meanings as an individual sign including 'false, deceptive, criminal and rebellious'. It is the primary element in the name of the Fox-star and the False Star, both of which are commonly used to refer to Mars.</p> <p>The Crab is actually identified with the False Star in the astrological dictum: '<i>the False Star is the Crab</i>'. This aphorism illustrates one of the esoteric methods employed by astrologers to derive identifications between one stellar body and another. The common identity of the False Star and the Crab can only be understood in terms of the cuneiform writing system where the False Star is written <b>Lul-la</b> – when this name is read backwards the Sumerian name of the Crab, <b>Al-lul</b>, is revealed.</p> <p>There are two alternative ways of writing the Crab's name that could throw some light on its perceived meaning – <b>A-meš</b>, which simply means 'the waters', and <b>A-lu</b>, which can be understood as 'abundant water'. Given these forms, which place a significant stress on the idea of water, and what we know of the esoteric methods used by scribes, we could speculate that ancient astrologers could have reinterpreted the Crab's name as <b>A-lul</b>, which would mean something like 'the deceptive waters' – in reference to it withholding the waters of heaven during the summer dry season.</p> <p>In later texts the name of the Crab can also be written with the <b>Nagar-sign</b> (<i>left</i>). This sign signifies a carpenter or craftsman, which suggests that it has been selected to illustrate the analogy between the crab's claws and a carpenter's saw.</p>		
		

In Greek star-lore, the origins of the Crab as a celestial figure can be found among the Labours of Hercules. For his second Labour, Hercules is set the task of defeating the monstrous *Hydra*, a multiple-headed serpent that was terrorising the swamplands around the town of Lerna. At the height of the combat a gigantic crab emerged from the swamp to distract the hero by nipping his foot – but to no avail, as Hercules simply crushed the hapless creature underfoot. After his victory the goddess Hera reverently placed the crab into the heavens as *Cancer*.

It has often been thought that this episode involving the crab was inserted into the Labours by an over zealous astrologer with the aim of assimilating the 12 Labours to the 12 signs of the zodiac. However, the various elements of this myth can all be found to have striking parallels in the mythology of the Mesopotamian god Ninurta. His exploits against a series of fantastic monsters called the Slain Heroes are now widely thought to provide the inspiration for Hercules' Labours. Listed among the monsters which Ninurta defeated is a seven-headed dragon, which is an obvious prototype for the Greek *Hydra*; the illustration (*fig 40*) dating to the Early Dynastic period, shows an unnamed hero severing one of the dragon's heads. Hercules' encounter with the crab is directly paralleled by another episode in Ninurta's mythology where he battles with a turtle. The story tells



40 A hero battling against a  
Seven-headed dragon

how Ninurta coveted the powers and symbols of civilised life (called the **Me** in Sumerian) for his own selfish ends. But Enki, the wise god of the Abyss, divined Ninurta's selfish intent, and fashioned a turtle to battle with him. The adversaries, locked in mortal combat, fell into a pit where the turtle kept 'gnawing Ninurta's feet with his claws'.

Although it is well beyond the scope of this book to make a comparative study of Greek and Mesopotamian myths, one significant theme emerging from this material does deserve to be mentioned – in both sets of myths the crab or turtle is either newly created or newly placed into the stars – in other words the myths detail the actual creation of *Cancer* as a constellation. As I have argued elsewhere, the creation of many constellations is due in large measure to the long-term effects of precession. This phenomenon slowly causes the stars to rise later and later in the calendar, thus necessitating the periodic creation of new constellations. As I hope to show in the final section, the Crab has actually inherited its principle symbolic traits from the much older figure of the Serpent.

One final aspect of the Crab's symbolism is worth exploring – it has an unmistakable association to death, the ancestors and the path to the underworld. These associations are particularly reflected in the magical lore surrounding the Crab, which can be variously utilised to 'take hold of a ghost and let it associate with living men, to reveal the nature of men's deaths, and to offer water to a ghost'. Comparable symbolism is prominent in astrological lore where we learn that: '*If the Strange Star (Mars) comes close to the Crab: the ruler will die*' and that: '*If the Crab is dark: the ghost of a wronged person (or the spirit of death) will seize the land, there will be deaths in the land*'.

Part of this deathly symbolism can be accounted for in calendrical terms as the Crab makes its annual appearance in the course of month 4, when the death rites of Dumuzi are celebrated. In many respects these rites form a prelude to the festival of the ancestors celebrated in month 5, in which the ancestors are temporarily invited back to the upper worlds to commune with the living – which would account for much of the magical lore mentioned above. The path that the ancestors follow to the upper worlds is located in the region of the Crab and is remembered in Greek mythology as the entrance to the underworld situated close to the *Hydra's* lair. Dionysus used this entrance when he attempted to bring his dead mother back from the realm of shades. And it is also remembered in Roman astrology as the 'Gates of Men', which is the route taken by the souls of babies destined to be born on earth.

A further reason for associating the Crab with the underworld may be found in its Akkadian name *alluttu*. Although there is probably no real etymological connection, its name could easily be assimilated to the Semitic underworld goddess known as *Allatum*, who was later identified with Eriškigal, the great Sumerian queen of the dead.

These deathly traits have undoubtedly been transferred to the Crab from the Serpent, who not only has a watery nature (see the Raven) but is also one of the principle symbols of the ancestral realm via its attribution to Ningišzida, the 'Lord of the Underworld'. Even the rebirth symbolism associated with the Crab is found in the lore of the Serpent – as the *bašmu*-serpent is literally the 'serpent with a womb'.

To return to Hercules' Labour, we can now understand the essential action of the myth – the slaying of the *Hydra* and the creation of the *Cancer* – as a calendrical reform of the stars, which reflected the ongoing effects of precession. The ancient constellation of the Serpent had slipped back in the calendar to the point at which it no longer rose in its appropriate season and had consequently been 'killed off' and replaced by the Crab, which now embodied the symbolic traits previously associated with the Serpent.

See also: the Serpent, Appendix 16, *figs 73, 145 & 161*