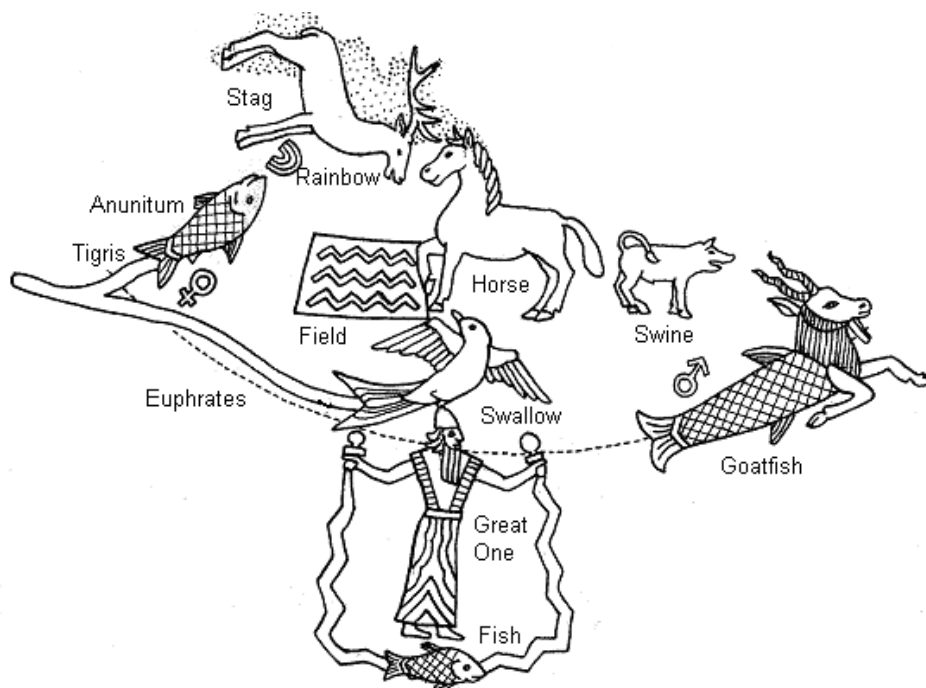


It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White 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 POST-WINTER SOLSTICE PERIOD (Pages 25-7)

Unlike the familiar calendar system that commences in the spring, the symbolic cycle embodied in the stars makes most sense when you start and end with the winter solstice. When the longest night is celebrated, the sun's power is at its weakest and it has reached its lowest and most southerly station in the heavens. But the crucial turning point has been attained and from this time onwards the sun's light and power increase day by day. The period following on from the winter solstice thus celebrates the rebirth of the sun from the waters of chaos and the re-emergence of life, in all its manifold forms, from the realm of darkness and death.

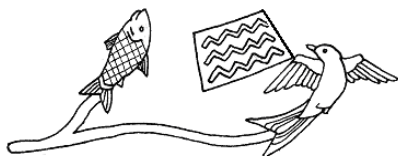


First Sector – the constellations rising after mid-winter



As mythical symbols, the Horse and Stag both represent the rebirth of the sun. This is most clearly seen in the mythology of the horse, whose principle mythic duty was to pull the chariot of the sun. The solar chariot ultimately governs the three major cycles of time recognised in myth – the rising of the chariot announces the dawn of each and every day, its annual rising after mid-winter ushers in the New Year, and in terms of the whole cycle of creation its rising celebrates the original birth of the sun from the primordial waters of chaos. The Horse was probably chosen for this exalted role because of its speed and its shimmering mane, which was thought to represent radiating beams of sunlight.

The Stag is, in many respects, a very similar symbol to the Horse; it too has an age-old association to the sun and fire, and like the horse's mane the stag's horns also represent rays of sunlight. The annual renewal of its horns further predisposes it to be a symbol of rebirth, and in the form of the reindeer sledge of Father Christmas, the Stag is still honoured to this day as the symbol of the sun's wintertime passage. As symbols of solar rebirth the Horse and the Stag are thus very appropriate symbols to find at the very start of the stellar calendar.



The same theme of solar rebirth is expressed in a somewhat different form in the adjacent constellations known as Anunitum, the Swallow and the Field. These star figures together constitute a vivid depiction of the 'myth of the Syrian goddess', which can be thought of as the master-myth of this season. The myth runs as follows – two fish found an enormous egg floating in the depths of

the river Euphrates, the fish guided the egg up from the watery depths of the river and rolled it onto dry land, where a dove appeared and started to brood it. In due time, the Syrian goddess herself was born from the egg. On account of this myth, fish and birds were held to be particularly sacred to the Syrian goddess.

The star-map indicates that the setting of this myth and its participants are not, in fact, of this earth, but are to be found in the heavens. What is of pivotal importance is the identity of the 'river Euphrates'. Apart from the earthly river, the 'Euphrates' can also be found on the star-map where it is closely associated with the watery outflow joined to the Swallow. This heavenly river actually runs parallel to the course of the ecliptic (represented by the dotted line on the main map) and now that this fact is established, the action of the fish can be better understood – they escort the sun (the mythical egg) from its lowest point at the solstice and guide it onto its ascending path that leads towards the spring and 'dry land', which is represented on the star-map by the constellation of the Field. The myth as a whole can now be understood as an image of time that has guided us from the darkness of winter to the beginning of spring.

Continuing the watery theme we next encounter the Babylonian equivalents to *Capricorn* and *Aquarius*, known as the Goatfish and the Great One. The compound nature of the Goatfish is best understood in terms of the symbolism that we have already examined. In short, I would argue that it is essentially a combination of the Stag and the Fish – the Stag representing the renewal of the sun's power at midwinter, while the Fish acts as a guardian to the nascent sun and guides it upon the first stages of its ascending path.



The watery symbolism continues in the figure known as the Great One, the Babylonian name for our *Aquarius*. As a seasonal symbol, the Great One with his overflowing vases symbolises the increased rains and floods of winter and early spring. Along with the constellation of the Field, which represents a plot of arable land, the Great One can be thought of as the 'Irrigator' – as the rising of these constellations mark the season when the ripening barley is irrigated before the springtime harvest.



Although the precise location of the Swine is still a matter of debate, it is very likely that his star is to be found in the rebirth sector of the star-map as it is attributed to the god Damu, whose name can be translated as the 'child'. Mythic texts portray Damu as one of the dying gods, closely related to Dumuzi, who vanished from the earth and was mourned by his mother and sister. Like all the dying gods he does eventually return to the earth – and true to form, myths speak of him escaping from the underworld via a river.



All in all, the symbolism of the constellations that rise after the winter solstice concur in depicting a time when the sun re-emerges from the darkness of winter and starts its ascent into the heavens. Similarly, in the unfolding lifecycle of the dying god, Damu (the 'Child'), escapes from the underworld and starts to make his way back to the upper worlds.

The image of the child escaping the underworld, and of the nascent sun dwelling within the waters, can also be interpreted in human terms as the foetus dwelling within the creative waters of the womb. The multitude of images all relate one essential truth – that life, in all its myriad forms, takes shape within the creative waters.

THE GOATFISH (Pages 118-21)

The Goatfish is the Babylonian prototype of our modern-day *Capricorn*. This strange creature, which combines the head and forelimbs of a goat with the body of a fish, is first seen in Mesopotamian art towards the end of the 3rd millennium. Presuming that it was a constellation figure at this early date, its strange form has adorned the winter skies for the last 4,000 years or more.

The Greek and Babylonian figures are almost identical, in fact the only noticeable change to occur in the process of its transmission was that the Greek constellation has ended up with a somewhat longer tail that is sometimes coiled around itself and sometimes tied in a knot.



67 The Goatfish from an Uruk seal impression

The constellation of the Goatfish is written 'Mul Suhur-Maš-Ku'			
✱ ✱ ✱	☐	☐	🐟
MUL	SUHUR	MAŠ ₂	KU ₆
The Sumerian name has been transmitted into Akkadian as <i>suhurmāšu</i> – the mythical 'goatfish'.			
The Suhur-sign probably depicts a bunch of leaves; it is used to signify a 'tuft, plume or crest'.			
The Maš-sign represents a 'goat-kid or lamb'.			
The whole sequence is terminated by the Ku-sign signifying the class of fish.			
The whole name can therefore be translated as 'the crested goat-fish'.			



68 A modern rendition of the Goatfish

Even though the Goatfish is part of the zodiac, and thus constantly interacting with the sun, moon and planets, it has surprisingly little lore directly associated with it in either Babylonian or Greek traditions. Consequently, if we want to describe the symbolic nature of the constellation, we have to fall back on other, more indirect methods.

The first clue to understanding the nature of the Goatfish lies in its calendrical behaviour. In the mid to late 3rd millennium, when I believe the Goatfish was originally created, its head and horns would have risen at the time of the winter solstice, while its fishtail would only have become fully visible during course of the following month. This all suggests that its character is likely to be informed by the rebirth symbolism associated with the winter solstice.

Further information can potentially be gleaned by examining the Goatfish in the context of the constellations surrounding it on the star-map. There is every reason to believe that the Goatfish is one of the newer generation of stars, and if this is the case, there may well be older constellations, still present on the star-map, that embody the same seasonal symbolism. As such, they offer the possibility of describing the diverse elements of the Goatfish in terms of other better-known constellation symbols. We can further infer that these older constellations would be located behind the figure of the Goatfish and, in terms of their calendrical behaviour, they would probably rise between one and two months later.

Given the terms of this hypothesis, we can now postulate that the goat-element of the Goatfish is an equivalent symbol to the Stag, which was an archaic constellation closely associated with the rebirth of the sun. Likewise, its fish-element is either derived from *Anunitum* or the Fish-

constellation, whose astral lore reveals that the mythical fish was thought to rescue the sun from the watery depths of winter and guide it safely towards dry land.

In summary, we can now conclude that the Goatfish was newly created in the latter part of the 3rd millennium to symbolise the rebirth aspect of the winter solstice. Its component parts reveal it to be the guardian and guide of the newborn sun as it re-emerges from the waters of darkness and death.

Like a number of wintertime constellations embodying aquatic symbolism, the Goatfish became increasingly associated with Enki during the course of the 2nd millennium. Enki or *Ea* was one of the great trinity of deities recognised in Babylonian tradition. He was loved and respected as a wise and benevolent god who, long before the Great Flood, had invented the arts and crafts of civilisation. Alongside the Seven Sages, he was thought to live in the freshwater Abyss that extended below the earth, where he was attended by a whole entourage of mythical beings such as water-monsters, mermaids and mermen.

The close affinity between Enki and the Goatfish is manifest on numerous entitlement stones where the Goatfish is often combined with other astral symbols associated with him such as the turtle or the Ram-headed staff (*right*).

Despite the strong affinity to Enki, astrology texts list the regent of the Goatfish as the little-known goddess Tašmetu. Her name is derived from the Akkadian word *šamû*, and can be roughly translated as 'the granter of requests'. She is regarded as the wife of the scribe god Nabu, who is the regent of the nearby Cargo-Boat.



69 The Goatfish and Ram-headed staff

In the whole corpus of celestial omens there are only a handful of omens that actually concern the Goatfish. One of the few to survive describes the presence of Mars: '*If Mars rides the Goatfish: devastation of Eridu, its people will be annihilated*'. The negative prediction here is somewhat unexpected as Mars is considered to have its exaltation in the Goatfish. The circumstance of Mars 'riding' the Goatfish – whatever that might mean – probably indicates some sort of behaviour that is thought to be outside the normal parameters of the planet's behaviour, and in the minds of astrologers anything acting outside its 'normal' pattern of behaviour is a sign of ill portent.

Babylonian astrologers have overcome the apparent lack of omens for the Goatfish by dividing the creature into its component parts – the goat and the fish – and then applying omens from other goat-like and fish-like constellations. So, in practice, the head of the Goatfish can be treated as the She-Goat (properly speaking a northern constellation corresponding to *Lyra*), whose omens chiefly concern the well-being of the herds. And its fishtail can be described in terms of the Fish-constellation (corresponding to *Pisces Austrinus*), which is used to foretell the abundance of the seas and the nature of the floods. Numerous examples of this practice can be drawn from the *State Archives*: '*If Venus approaches the Fish: there will be a defeat in the land*' – *Venus approaches the Goatfish*.

But astrologers didn't stop here – another way of referring to the Goatfish without actually mentioning its name was to call it the 'Star of Ea': '*If the Star of Ea is dark: the harvest will not thrive, for 3 years ... will devour*' – *Mercury is faint in the Goatfish*. As a celestial sign, a 'dark' planet generally forebodes ill. The negative prediction here should be compared with the following omen that also describes the (presumably bright) appearance of Mercury in the Goatfish: '*If the Fish (the Goatfish) stands close to the Raven (Mercury): fish and fowl will thrive*' – *Mercury is visible in the Goatfish*.

Even the foregoing examples do not exhaust the range of omens applicable to the Goatfish – a closer examination of the sources reveals that the Goatfish can also be referred to by other constellation names such as the Yoke, the Crab and the Kidney, although it must be said that the reasons behind these identifications are entirely obscure.

See also: the Fish, the She-Goat, Appendix 16, *figs 5, 73 & 162*