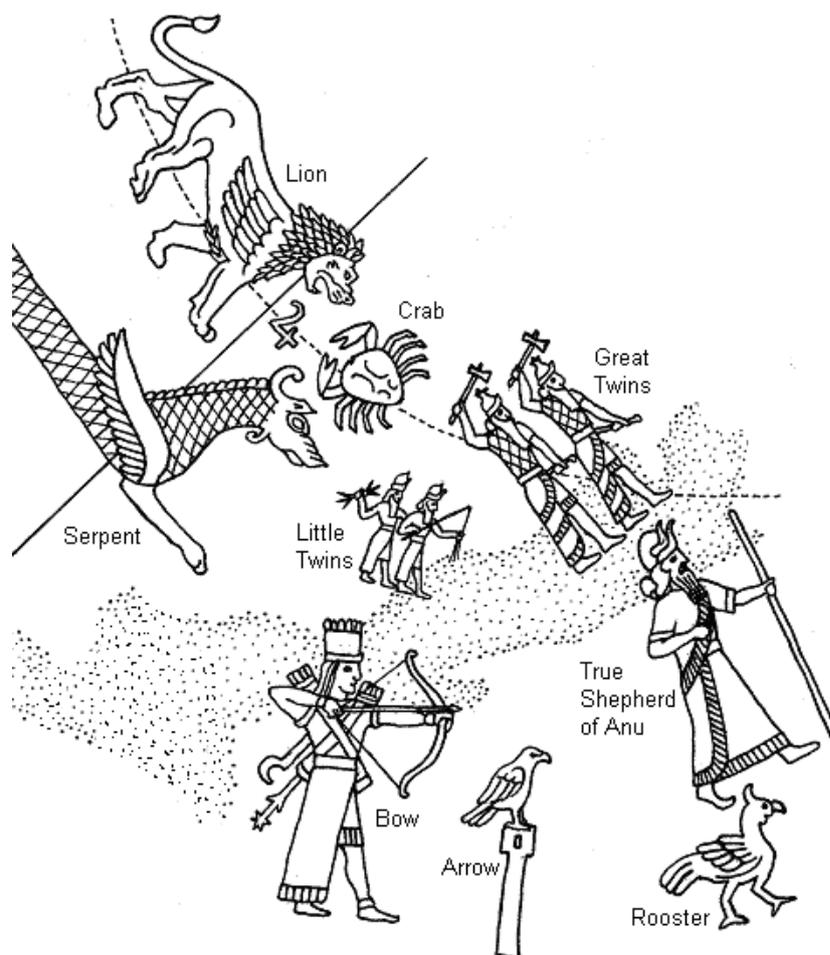


It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White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

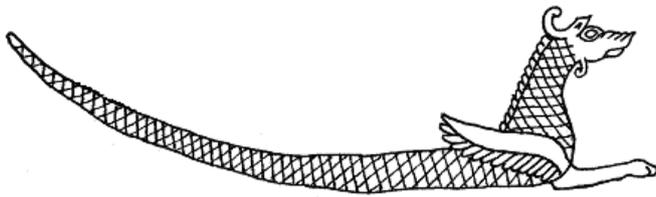


Third Sector – the constellations rising around the summer solstice

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 Ningišzida, 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.

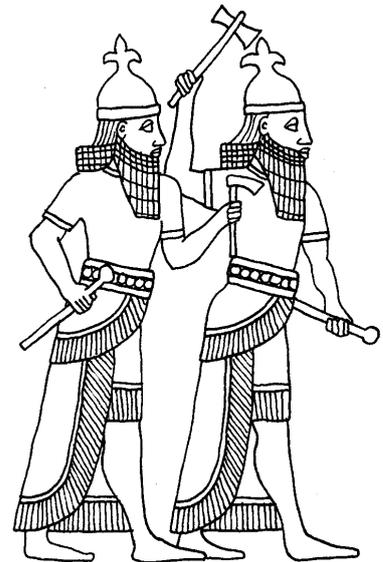
The goddess of war is also portrayed among the summertime stars in the form of the Bow-constellation. Together with her sacred Lion, she marks the summer as the season of war, when campaigns commenced in the spring finally come to fruition. She grants glory and victory to her royal favourites who are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

THE GREAT TWINS (Pages 124-5)

In Babylonia, the zodiac constellation of *Gemini* was known as the Great Twins, and like their Greek counterparts, the Dioscuri, the Babylonian Twins were depicted as a pair of warriors armed to the hilt. A Neo-Assyrian text describes their constellation figures as ‘two bearded males’. The front twin carries a weapon called a *hinšu* (possibly a type of mace) in his right hand, while the rear twin ‘carries a sickle-axe in his left hand’.

The war-like nature of the Great Twins is vividly portrayed throughout the corpus of celestial omens: ‘If Venus stands between the Great Twins: the land will become altogether hostile’. ‘If the Strange Star (Mars) approaches the Twins: the prince will die and hostilities will arise’.

The Twins were envisioned, weapons at the ready, guarding one of the entrances to the underworld. In Babylonian tradition, there are actually two entrances to the underworld, each of which is associated with one of the solstices. The wintertime entrance is primarily used by discarnate souls journeying to the afterlife, but the summer entrance, located in the region of the Crab, is used by the spirits of the ancestors when they return to earth to visit their family homes for the great ancestral festival celebrated in month 5. The summertime entrance is also the route that the souls of newborn babies use to enter into the world of men. The Twins probably guard this entrance to prevent the ingress of evil demons, which are sometimes said to use this otherworldly portal to bring plague and disease to mankind.



74 Reconstruction of the Great Twins

The name of the Great Twins is written ‘Mul Maš-tab-ba-gal-gal’					
✱ ✱	+		△	∩	∩
✱					
MUL	MAŠ	TAB	BA	GAL	GAL
The Great Twins are known as <i>tū’amū rabûtu</i> in Akkadian. The Sumerian word Maš , meaning ‘twin or companion’ has also entered Akkadian as <i>māšû</i> .					
In Sumerian ‘twin’ can be conveyed by the Maš-sign alone, but more often ‘twin’ is written in a longer form as Maštabba . As an independent sign Tab signifies a ‘companion or partner’, so the idea of the ‘twins’ can be more literally translated as ‘the two companions’.					
It is not known what the Gal-sign actually depicts – suggestions include a crown or headdress of some sort. The sign is commonly used to mean ‘great or big’. In the cuneiform writing system the final adjective (Gal) is often doubled to indicate plurality.					

Even though the Twins are gods in their own right, they are both commonly identified with Nergal, the Lord of the Underworld, who brings death to man through the combined agencies of war, famine and plague. Indeed, the names of the Great Twins simply reveal two aspects of Nergal's character – Lugalirra means the 'Mighty King', perhaps a reference to Nergal as king of the dead, and Meslamtaea is literally 'the One who has arisen from the Underworld'. The identity of Nergal and Meslamtaea is visually confirmed on entitlement stones where Meslamtaea can be represented by the double-headed lion staff, which is usually regarded as one of Nergal's primary symbols (see *fig 104*). The close affinity of the Twins to Nergal is concisely stated in astrology texts: *'If the Twins rise: devouring by the disease god Nergal'*.

Befitting their associations to the disease-bringing Nergal, the Great Twins are mentioned in medical texts as a cause of disease. There are specific illnesses called 'Seizure by Lugalirra' – possibly a form of epilepsy, and 'Covering by the Twins' associated with the winds and flies. A fragmentary omen that involves the Twins predicts that *'in Akkad, Enlil will cause leprosy and epilepsy, and Nergal will devour the cattle'*.

Later texts elaborate upon the underworld theme where they identify Lugalirra and Meslamtaea with the Moon god and Gilgamesh. These identifications probably rely on the facts that the Moon god was born in the underworld, and that Gilgamesh, after his death, became one of the judges of the dead.

The Greek myths associated with *Gemini* help to throw some light on the basic nature of the Babylonian Twins. One of the Greek warrior twins was mortal (Castor who was sired by a mortal father) and the other immortal (Polydeuces who was fathered by Zeus). The mortal twin was killed by a rival and was immediately avenged by his immortal brother. But their mutual love for each other forbade one of them to outlive the other – so Zeus solved their dilemma by allowing the twins to spend their time alternately in the heavens and the underworld. Their endless roaming between the upper and lower worlds clearly parallels the annual journeying of Nergal who annually descends to the underworld after mid-summer and re-emerges again before mid-winter. In light of this, we can see that Meslamtaea's name – 'the One who has arisen from the Underworld' – is, in fact, another attribute of Nergal.

See also: the Little Twins and *fig 114*