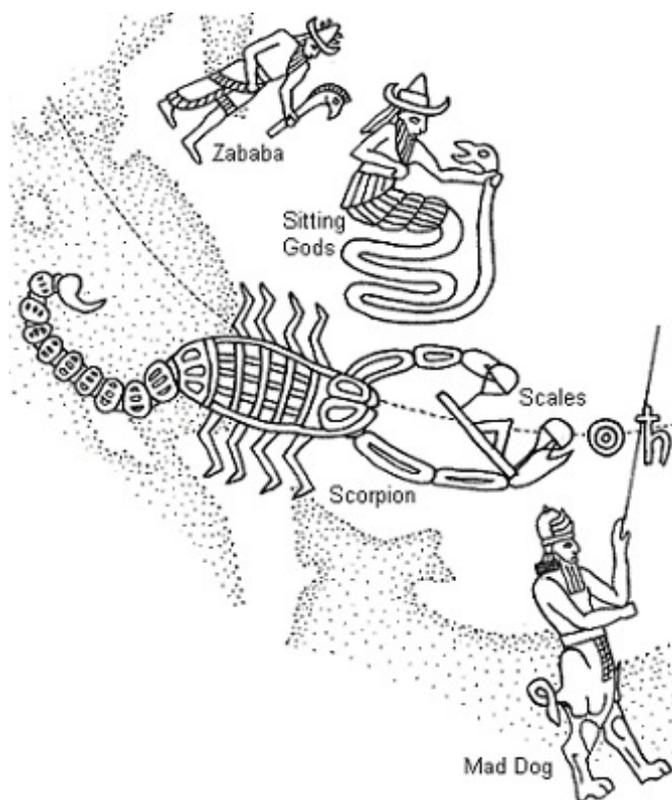


It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White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

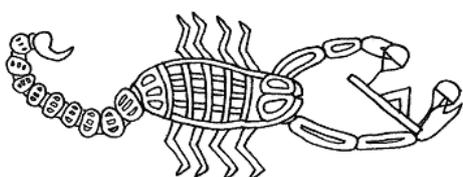
The excerpts reproduced on this site are taken, with the author's permission, from the recently published book '[Babylonian Star-lore](#)' by Gavin White.

THE POST-AUTUMN EQUINOX PERIOD (Pages 34-35)

As the autumn equinox passes, the nights start to outlast the days and once again darkness triumphs over light. As the sun and the dying gods descend into the darkness of the underworld, the spirits of the dead travel the long road that leads to the realm of the ancestors. The constellations that rise at this sacred juncture appropriately enough portray the themes of descent into darkness and the serpent-bodied guardians of the underworld who guide the spirits of the dead ever onward towards their final resting place among the stars.



Fifth Sector – the constellations rising around the time of the Autumn Equinox



The autumn skies are dominated by the enormous figure of the Scorpion. Its array of weaponry has led it to be regarded as a creature symbolising war and the martial prowess of the king. And its venomous nature further expresses the autumnal themes of death and descent to the underworld. A similar theme is also reflected in the attribution

of the Scorpion's brightest star to the goddess called Lisi, whose name is used as a generic title for groups of lamenting goddesses.

Nevertheless, the Scorpion's mythical nature within the stellar calendar is most clearly revealed in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* where the gate of the sun is guarded by a pair of scorpion-people. The gate marks the start of an underground tunnel that was travelled by the sun during the course of each night and was traversed by Gilgamesh on his way to the visit the immortals who lived beyond the confines of this world. In terms of the sun's annual circuit of the stars this tunnel can naturally be thought of as symbolising the sun's autumnal descent into the darkness of the underworld.



The constellation of the Scales, which was formed from the Scorpion's Claws long ago, is held to be particularly sacred to the sun god Šamaš. In the first place, the Scales symbolise the autumn equinox, when the watches of day and night are held to be of equal duration and the sun rises due east and sets due west. And secondly, the Scales symbolise the idea of judicial prudence, as in the phrase 'weighing up the evidence', which is particularly appropriate to the sun god

as his principle role within the Babylonian pantheon was to act as the arbitrator of truth and justice. For these reasons the Scales are thought to be the special station of the sun in Babylonian astrology, where they are purposefully set opposite to the moon's station in the Star Cluster (the *Pleiades*).



The strange serpent-bodied figures called the Sitting and Standing Gods represent the ancestors of Enlil. They lived in the Sacred Mound, which was not only a grave mound covering a passageway to the underworld but was also the source of all earthly fertility. Various texts speak of them guiding discarnate souls to the land of no return, some sources even describe them performing the duties of judging the dead and determining their destinies.



Behind the serpent-bodied gods is the figure of Zababa. Very little is known about this ancient god beyond the fact he was a warrior god who was closely associated with the symbol of the eagle. As so little is known about Zababa, the constellation image offered here is admittedly little more than an educated guess.



The strange figure known as the Mad Dog is made up of a combination of human and leonine elements. It is, I believe, an ancient relic that would originally have been paired to the Bison-man. Together they constituted an image of the 'lion-bull conflict', which represented the incessant seasonal conflict between the drought-bringing lion of summer and the fertile rains of spring and autumn, which were symbolised by the bull. Here in the autumn skies the Bison-man was portrayed overcoming the summer lion – his victory over the lion thus symbolised the welcome return of the rainy season. However, the Bison-man has subsequently been removed from the star-map, leaving the Mad Dog as an isolated relic of former times. (See appendix 2 for more details)

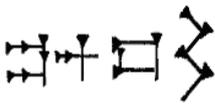
THE SCALES (Pages 175-7)

Long ago the stars that comprised the Scorpion Claws were transformed into a new constellation called the Scales, which we know today as the zodiac constellation of *Libra*. The beam of the Scales was slotted into the space between the Scorpion's forearms and the weighing pans were directly overlaid upon the Scorpion's Claws. Greek astronomers from Ptolemy onwards continued to call the weighing pans of *Libra* the 'Claws of the Scorpion' and the title then passed into Arabic tradition and thence into the modern stellar nomenclature, where the principle stars of the weighing pans are still known as the 'northern and southern claws'.

The scales in question are not simply a pair of pans suspended on a beam, they also incorporate some kind of mechanism, presumably a needle and measuring scale, that would allow a more accurate reading to be made. Something of this nature can be seen on one of the few surviving images of the Scales (*right*).



114 The Great Twins and the Scales from a late Uruk seal

In all earlier texts the Scales are known by their Akkadian name <i>zibānu</i> , which is spelt out in syllabic fashion 'Mul Zi-ba-an-na'	
	
MUL ZI BA AN NA	
In Akkadian the Scales are also known as <i>zibānītu</i> – 'a set of weighing scales'.	
	In later periods the Scales could also be written 'Mul Giš Erin ₂ '. The Erin-sign had by this time become assimilated to a variant of the sign for sun called the Zalag-sign – a testament to the close affinity between the Scales and the Sun.

Like so many changes in celestial imagery the transformation of the Scorpion's Claws into the Scales was ultimately due to precession, which had gradually shifted these stars into the region of the heavens that rose at the time of the autumn equinox. The equinox is rightly symbolised by the Scales because at this time of year the watches of day and night are exactly equal to each other, and when the sun is in the constellation of the Scales it rises due east and sets due west. The concept of balance is also applied to the sun and full moon, which are said to be 'in balance', that is on opposite horizons, on the 14th day of the month: *'If the moon and the sun are in balance: the land will be stable, the people will speak truth, the king of the land will make his throne endure'*. The idea is developed in Sumerian literature where the rising place of the sun can sometimes be referred to as the 'weighing place': 'As day breaks, as the sun god rises, the sun god stands at the weighing place'.

For these reasons the constellation of the Scales, as well as standardized weights and measures, were held to be especially sacred to the sun god *Šamaš* (Utu in Sumerian). The Scales symbolised his primary role within Mesopotamian culture as the god of truth and justice. Some of the reasoning behind these attributions is plain enough – the sun illuminates the world and therefore sees everything that happens upon the earth. He is the ultimate witness of all actions and therefore the arbiter of truth, and it was believed that he would punish anyone foolish enough to swear false witness. Kings and heroes, as well as ordinary men, called upon him as the upholder of truth and righteousness and petitioned him to rectify the iniquities they suffered.



115 The sun god with his saw and scales, from an Akkadian seal

Another of the sun god's characteristic symbols was the serrated saw. He is sometimes thought to use this saw to cut through the mountains to affect his release from the underworld, but a handful of seals clearly show a warrior god cutting off the hand of a criminal with a scimitar-like weapon. So this might well indicate that the intended meaning of the saw was as a symbol of retributive justice – a literary reference in a hymn to Nabu goes some way to confirm this when it states 'You are able to impose the saw of the sun god on crooks'.

In fact the sun god's saw and scales can still be recognised in the modern figure of 'justice' that stands above the British law courts. She is blindfolded to symbolise her impartiality, and holds the sword of punishment in one hand and the scales of judgement in the other.

In Babylonian astrology the Scales and the Sun both have a special relationship to Saturn, which is often called 'the star of the sun' or 'the path of the sun' in astrological omens and commentaries, and like the sun it can also be called the 'star of truth and justice'. This association between the Sun, Saturn and the Scales is known from astrology texts dating to the 13th century

BCE and can also be seen in some of the earlier versions of the *Astrolabes*. Part of the association has survived into modern astrology where Saturn is still thought to have its exaltation in *Libra*. Reflecting the importance of the solar-lunar opposition at full moon the Babylonian system purposefully places the sacred station of the sun in the Scales, diametrically opposite to the Moon's special station in the Star Cluster (our *Pleiades*).

See also: the Scorpion's Claws and Appendix 16