

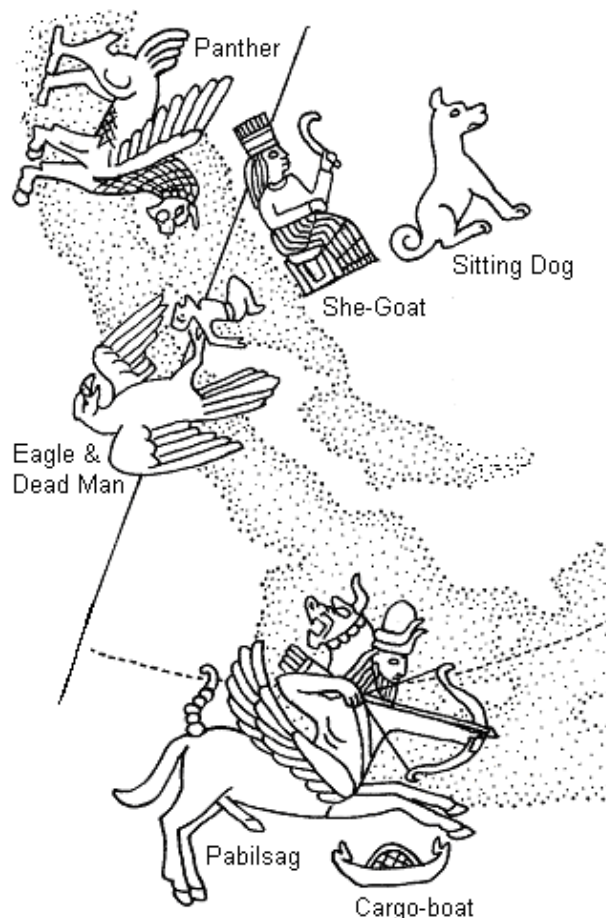
It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White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

*The sacred cycle of the stars comes to a close with the appearance of the wintertime constellations. These stars depict the final stages of the stellar calendar when the sun once more descends to its lowest point in the skies drawing ever closer to the longest night.*

*This is the time when the disembodied souls of mankind are spirited away from the environs of the earth and are driven up into the circumpolar regions of heaven to join their ancestors. The constellations in this part of the sky demonstrate that the 'underworld' is not actually located below the earth as common sense might dictate but is actually found among the stars. The evidence further indicates that the Milky Way itself was either directly envisioned as the pathway of the dead or that each of its myriad stars was thought to represent an individual soul on its journey to the afterlife.*



Sixth Sector – the constellations rising around the time of the winter solstice



At the base of the Milky Way we find Pabilsag, the Babylonian prototype of our *Sagittarius*, whose name means the 'Fore-Father' or 'Chief-Ancestor'. His function within the stellar calendar was to drive discarnate souls from the environs of the earth up into the heavens. In this role he bears many similarities to the god of the wild hunt found in western folklore.



The Eagle continues the same vein of symbolism; its mythic function is two-fold. In general terms, it acts as a guide to the dead, transporting the Dead Man to the underworld just as the Greek Harpies were sometimes thought to do. More specifically, it can also be thought of carrying away the soul of an evildoer for some special punishment – effectively denying him a place in the ancestral realms.



In the northern reaches of the winter skies we find the Panther, the sacred beast of Nergal, the king of the dead. It is arguable that his constellation image has been set in the upper reaches of the Milky Way to guard the entrance of the celestial underworld, an important part of which was located in the circumpolar regions.



The circle of life is now complete as the souls of the dead rejoin their ancestors among the stars. But even the underworld is not an absolute end to the cycle of life – it is in fact a new beginning – as souls destined for a new birth now depart the ancestral realm and travel towards the worlds of the living. The constellation of the Cargo-boat has been placed among the stars to represent

just this process – the boat upon the waters represents the foetus in the amniotic fluid and its 'cargo' is composed of symbols that indicate the sex of the child.

### PABILSAG (Pages 155-8)

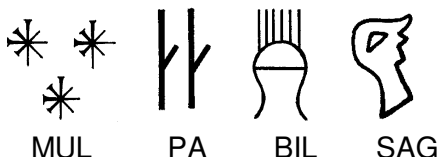
The origins of *Sagittarius*, the *Archer*, are to be found in the strange composite figure known as Pabilsag. The familiar image of the Greek constellation as a horse-centaur armed with a bow and arrow is, in fact, a simplified version of the Babylonian figure, which is a truly composite character with a number of features not seen in the Greek version, such as a set of wings, a scorpion's tail and the head of a dog. The details of Pabilsag's iconography show a considerable amount of variation – some depictions omit the wings or dog's head altogether, while other images can replace its back legs with those of a bird (*fig 99*).

Although the basic image of the horse-centaur can only be traced back to the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium (the Kassite period), the figure is undoubtedly older as the constellation name appears in the star-lists of the preceding Old Babylonian period. A potentially older form of the Archer that doesn't have any horse characteristics can also be found on entitlement stones. It combines the features of a human archer with a scorpion's body and birdlike feet (*right*). Very similar creatures first appear in Akkadian artwork where they can have wings and often have a snake-headed phallus. It isn't known if these Akkadian images represent an early form of Pabilsag, nevertheless their iconography certainly seems to have influenced its later appearance.



97 A 12th century image of a scorpion-bodied archer

The constellation of Pabilsag is written 'Mul Pa-bil-sag'



The Sumerian word **Pabil** means 'ancestor or relative'. In combination with the final element **sag**, meaning 'chief or foremost', his name can be translated as the 'Chief Ancestor' or 'Forefather'.

Additional epithets like 'the weapon with a burning tip' or 'he who strikes with a burning point' can be derived from the individual signs used to write Pabilsag's name.

The **Pa-sign** depicts two branches; it has several meanings including 'sceptre' and 'staff' and can also be used to write the verb 'to strike' or 'to beat'.

The **Bil-sign** depicts a flaming brazier; it can be used to write 'burning, stinging, hot'. Braziers were commonly employed in rituals dedicated to the ancestors.

The **Sag-sign** depicts a human head; it refers to the 'top or tip' of something, and is also used to signify 'first, foremost or top quality'.



98 Pabilsag from a 12<sup>th</sup> century entitlement stone

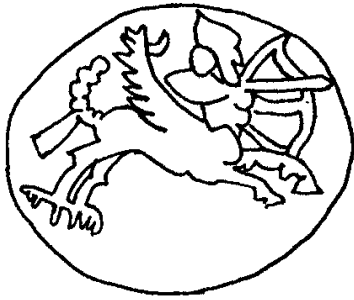
From the Old Babylonian period Pabilsag is frequently identified with the god Ninurta, but apart from this very little is known concerning him beyond the bare facts that he was, like Ninurta, a son of Enlil and the earliest evidence of his worship can be dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE. Babylonian star-lore reveals that his immediate family were also represented among the stars – his wife, the healing goddess commonly called Ninisina or Gula, has her celestial station in the She-Goat, and their son Damu, 'the child', who is annually reborn after midwinter is represented among the stars in the form of the Swine-star. Pabilsag's wife has the dog as her divine symbol, which may go some way to explain why he has a dog's head springing from his shoulders.

His name, Pabil-sag, reveals him to be the 'Chief Ancestor' or 'Forefather'. But this statement only begs a host of further questions concerning the nature of the ancestors and the state of the human soul in the afterlife.

Some of the answers concerning the nature of the soul can be found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where Enkidu, the hero's companion, dreams of his own impending death. He dreamt that he stood between heaven and earth, and that a 'man' with the face of an *Anzu*-bird seized him, turned him into a dove and carried him off, wings bound, to the house of no return. In his ensuing vision of the netherworld, Enkidu saw the unhappy host of the dead gathered around in the form of spirits, 'clad in coats of feathers'.

Recognisably the same conception can be found in Greek mythology, where ghosts are sometimes depicted as tiny winged men and women hovering about the tomb (see fig 96). Death too, can be thought of as the soul being 'snatched away' by a death-demon. The Greeks saw these death-demons as Harpies, literally the 'Snatchers', and envisioned them as bird-women – their images sometimes adorn gravestones where they can be seen carrying off the souls of the dead to the underworld, as did the *Anzu*-bird in archaic Mesopotamian art.

But there is a second element in the symbolic equation – the Harpies, like the *Anzu*-bird, are also personifications of the winds. And the winds, like the ancestors, have the power to fertilise, to generate new life. Hence the famous quote from Virgil that mares could be impregnated by the wind. So the ghosts of the dead can be envisioned as birds or winged men and women, their feathery symbolism further conveys the idea that the essential nature of the soul is breath or wind.



99 An impression from an Uruk seal

The whole range of functions associated with the ancestors is exemplified by the Athenian Tritopatres, the 'forefathers of the third generation', who are winds, even 'lords of the winds' as well as ghosts. The young men of Athens made offerings to them before their marriage, no doubt to ensure a healthy patrimony of sons and heirs.

The foregoing discussion drawing on Greek and Babylonian traditions has sketched out some of the most basic features associated with the ancestors; by returning to the Babylonian evidence we can now penetrate deeper into the mysteries of the Chief Ancestor.

Concerning Pabilsag's constellation two factors immediately stand out as highly significant. Firstly, his star rises in the ninth month of the year, which is the final month of the symbolic calendar imprinted upon the stars. This is the time of year that the sun descends to its lowest ebb at the winter solstice and the gates to the underworld are opened symbolising the transition between death and new life. Secondly, Pabilsag is located directly within the course of the Milky Way where it abruptly rises from the southern regions close to the horizon into the higher reaches of the heavens. Judging by the other constellations found in this part of the sky, such as the Eagle and the Panther, this section of the Milky Way arguably represents the souls of the dead on their way to the afterlife.

Taken together these features paint a picture of Pabilsag as a guardian and guide to the souls of the deceased. In many of his essential features he can therefore be equated with the figure of the Wild Hunter found in western folklore. The theme of the hunt, inherent in his bow and arrow and in various images (*right*) where he hunts down a demon or an antelope, merely disguises the ancestor's role as the guide to the deceased, spiriting away the souls of the dead with the winds, away from the earth and into the heavens above.



100 Pabilsag hunting a demon from a Babylonian seal of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium



101 A modern version of Pabilsag

The themes of death and destruction are very apparent in the astrological lore of Pabilsag. So far only omens for Jupiter's presence have been recovered but these paint a pretty desolate picture predicting destruction and carnage for the land, and the death of the prince.

Like the other ecliptic constellations that rise during the winter Pabilsag has surprisingly few omens explicitly attributed to him. This lack of omens is ingenuously circumvented by Babylonian astrologers by identifying his component parts with other independent star figures of a similar appearance – in this instance, Pabilsag's arrow can be identified with the constellation of the Arrow (properly speaking the star *Sirius*, which marks the summer solstice), and his scorpion-tail can be identified with the Scorpion's Stinger. The close affinity between Pabilsag and Ninurta may have

contributed to these particular identifications, as both the Arrow and the Scorpion's Stinger are closely associated with Ninurta in astrological lore.

See also: the Arrow, the Scorpion's Stinger, *figs 31 & 162*

