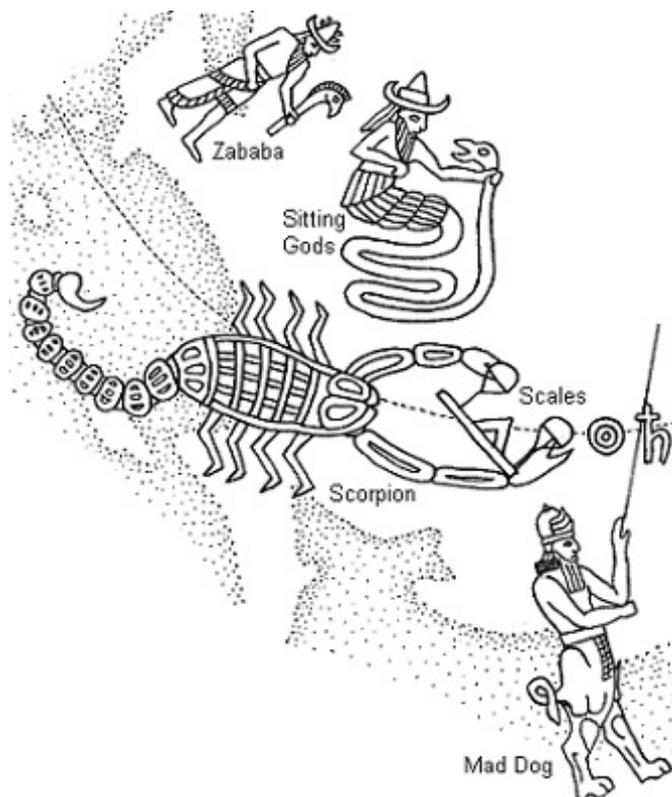


It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White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

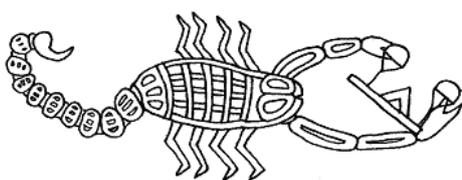
The excerpts reproduced on this site are taken, with the author's permission, from the recently published book '[Babylonian Star-lore](#)' by Gavin White.

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.



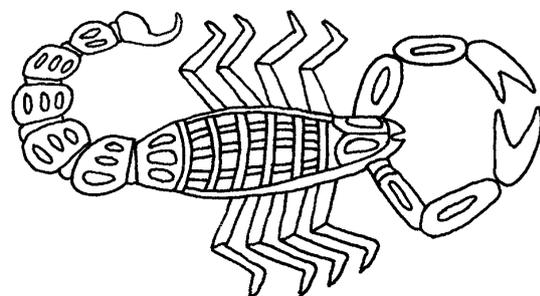
Behind the serpent-bodied gods is the figure of Zababa. Very little is known about this ancient god beyond the fact he was a warrior god who was closely associated with the symbol of the eagle. As so little is known about Zababa, the constellation image offered here is admittedly little more than an 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 SCORPION (Pages 177-80)

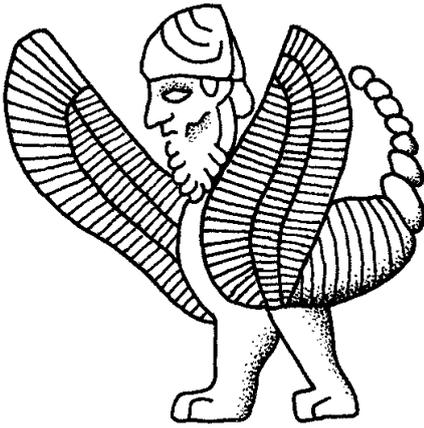
The Scorpion's array of weaponry and its armoured body segments has naturally led it to symbolise the clash of weapons in battle and the martial prowess of the king: *'If the Scorpion comes close to the front of the moon and stands there: the reign of the king will become long; an enemy will attack but will fall'*. In literature it is described posed for attack with 'its pincers extended like the horns of a wild bull, and its tail raised up like that of a raging lion'.

In the artwork of the Akkadian period the scorpion is commonly combined with the features of men and birds to produce a range of composite beings called Scorpion-men (*left*).

Their mythic nature is most clearly revealed in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* where a Scorpion-man and woman act as guardians to the mythic mountain



116 A scorpion from an 11th century entitlement stone



117 A Scorpion-man from a 12th century entitlement stone

beneath which the sun descends every night. They are said to guard the sun at his rising and setting, and because Gilgamesh is a favourite of the sun god they allow him to travel the path of the sun under the mountain. The epic describes how Gilgamesh travels through the tunnel during the night and eventually emerges into a gem-encrusted paradise, on his quest to find immortality.

Scorpion-men become increasingly popular figures in 1st millennium artwork where they still appear as attendants to the sun god. In terms of the stellar calendar the Scorpion marks the descent of the sun into the darkness of the underworld – its poisonous sting, which rises just before the winter solstice, symbolises the death of the sun and the dissolution of the year.

In Sumerian the Scorpion is written 'Mul Gir-tab'
MUL GIR ₂ TAB
The scorpion is called <i>zuqaqipu</i> in Akkadian – the name is derived from the verb <i>zaqāpu</i> , which has a number of meanings including 'to erect, impale or rise up' – an obvious allusion to the raised stinger of the scorpion.
The Gir-sign depicts a sword or dagger; it is used as an element in the names of all types of blades. This has led to the Scorpion being called the 'Sword of Heaven'.
The Tab-sign has a wide range of meanings – it can be used to write the verb 'to double', or to write 'twin or companion'. Its less common meanings are probably more relevant here – 'to burn up' by fire or fever; and a 'sting or sharp point'.
So the combination Gir-tab probably means something like the 'sharp weapon' or 'burning sting' – another reference to the scorpion's stinger.

In Babylonian astrology the Scorpion is divided into three main components, each with its own associated deities and star-lore:

- The Claws or Horns, which were later transformed into the Scales
- The Breast, which is sacred to Lisi, the goddess of lamentations
- The Stinger, which represents the battle-maces of the warrior god Ninurta

The Scorpion in its entirety is attributed to the multifaceted goddess Išhara. She was worshipped by many peoples and nations throughout the Ancient Near East, which has led to a confusing array of attributions – she is known as a great goddess to the Hurrians, the wife of Dagon among the West Semites, and to the Akkadians she was a goddess of love with close affinities to Ištar, whose sacred plant cannabis (*qunnabu*) was known as the 'aromatic of Išhara'. In astrology texts she is sometimes called 'Išhara of the ocean' (Išhara Tiamat), a name applied to Venus, and from her widespread worship she is also known as the 'queen of the inhabited world'.

Notwithstanding these varied aspects of her character, Išhara is overwhelmingly known as a goddess of war and victory in astrology texts and related literature. On entitlement stones her warlike nature is revealed in the epithet 'mistress of victory over the lands' and in curses she is entreated 'not to hear him in the midst of mighty battle'. In a similar vein, she is sometimes regarded as the mother of the Seven Gods, the warmongering regents of the Star Cluster.

In astrology the fortunes of war can be predicted by comparing the ideal time of the Scorpion's rising – in month 8 – to the actual time of its first appearance: *'The Scorpion rises in month 8: If this star rises early: the king will go about proudly; he will subdue his enemies. If this star rises late: the kings of all lands will start hostilities against the king.'*



118 A symbolic ploughing rite. The gods harness a bull and a lion to their seed-plough, from an Akkadian seal

When warlike planets such as Mars are present in the Scorpion the forecast is predictably dire: 'If Nergal (Mars) stands in the Scorpion: a strong enemy will carry off the land; Enlil will give his weapons to the enemy; a few enemy troops will defeat my numerous troops'. One of the worst predictions in the whole corpus of celestial omens must be: 'If the Plough (Mars) comes close to the Scorpion: the ruler will die by the sting of a scorpion'.

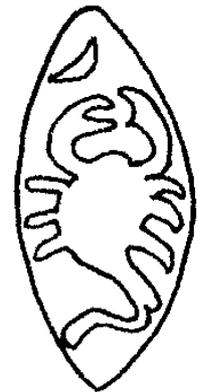
Beyond its warlike nature the Scorpion has also accumulated various seasonal attributions

associated with the autumn months. The illustration above depicts a ritual ploughing scene in which the gods are seeding the fields. Its main point of interest is the inclusion of a scorpion and a dog on the far left-hand side. Assuming that these two figures are not simply decorative, there is the intriguing possibility that they are calendrical in nature and are referring to the constellations of the Scorpion and Sitting Dog. These constellations rise in month 7 and 8, when the seeding season commences – in the *Menologies* the festival of the seeding season is specifically celebrated in month 8. So this seal could be one of the earliest examples of using the constellations in a rustic calendar.

Further seasonal attributes can be found in the *Astrolabes* where we learn that the Scorpion is thought to be 'favourable for the price of oil' – the constellation rises as the sesame harvest finishes and the new season's oil comes onto the market. An incomplete omen illustrates this usage: 'If the Scorpion rises in month 8, the market for wool and oil will...' The missing prediction is likely to be favourable, as the Scorpion should indeed rise in month 8.

The Scorpion's association with trade and the commodity markets is probably derived from the fact that its Claws were long ago converted into the Scales, which are the natural emblem of merchants and traders alike. The association is even evident in the Hittite astrology text that declares that a child born in month 8 'will buy grain and silver'. The astrological series *EAE* contains some early examples of using astrology to speculate on the markets. The paradigm is briefly stated: 'the Scorpion is for the market' and is worked out in a series of six omens detailing the progress of Jupiter through the body of the Scorpion, its changing positions are interpreted as dramatic changes in the home and foreign markets: 'If Sargegar (Jupiter) reaches the head of the Scorpion: in Akkad the market will be halved', or if it reaches its stinger 'the market will be halved in Elam'.

See also: the Scorpion's Breast, the Scorpion's Claws, the Scorpion's Sting, the Creatures of Tiamat, Appendix 12 on the Four Winds, *fig 98*



119 An Uruk seal