

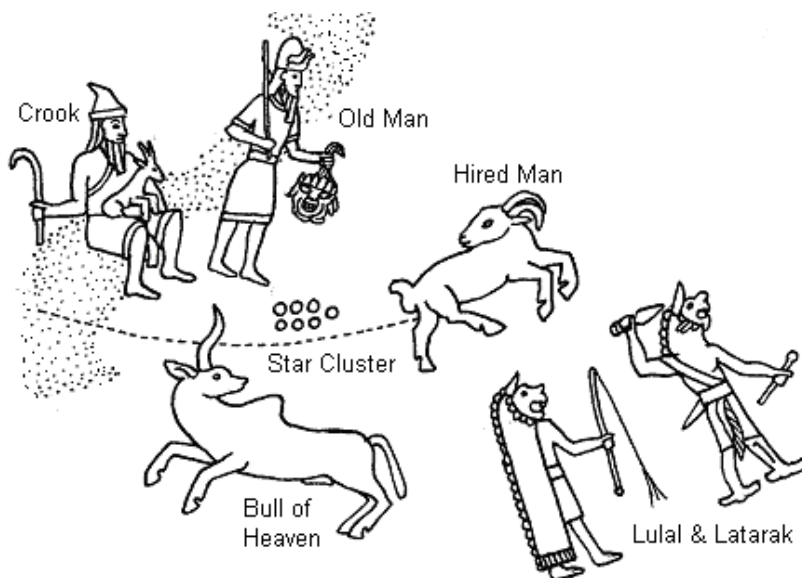
It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White 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 SPRING EQUINOX PERIOD (Pages 27-9)

*By the time of the spring equinox, light has triumphed over darkness as the days now start to outlast the nights and as such it is a time when new life is celebrated and any lingering influences of the winter are banished. In the fields and cattle-folds, the spring is celebrated as the time of nature's abundance when a majority of animals bear their young, the harvest is brought in and all nature springs into life.*

*The new moon closest to the spring equinox marks the start of the calendrical New Year. And befitting this sacred juncture it is the season most closely associated with the king, who is now inaugurated and empowered by the gods to rule for another term.*



The constellations rising around the time of the spring equinox



Contrary to its name, the Hired Man was represented in the heavens by the familiar ram or lamb of *Aries*. As a seasonal symbol the lamb reflects the fact that a majority of newborn lambs, kids and calves appear in the cattle-fold in the springtime. On the other hand, the name of the Hired Man refers to the hired labour used to bring in the springtime barley harvest. The lore of the constellation has been purposefully contrived to reflect the concerns of both barley farmers and cattle-herders. The symbolic meaning of the lamb is best preserved in Greek tradition where it appears as the horned lamb with a golden fleece, possession of which conferred kingship. Its radiant fleece clearly points to the solar nature of the lamb, which like the similar symbols of the bull-calf and goat-kid represents the newborn sun springing into manifestation.



The constellation of the Crook depicts a shepherd tending his flocks. Beyond the obvious pastoral symbolism of the herders, the shepherd also functions as one of the primary symbols of the king, who guides his people and nation as a shepherd guides his flocks.

As a symbol, the shepherd's crook naturally represents the king's regalia and his divinely ordained power to rule. It is therefore fitting that the celestial Crook rises in the first month of the year when the king was inaugurated and empowered by the gods. The figure of the shepherd-king is naturally associated with Dumuzi, who is now grown

to be a young man and is about to marry the goddess in the rite of the Sacred Marriage. By this union the king, who was identified with Dumuzi, established his right to rule and further guaranteed the fertility of his realm.



The Bull of Heaven is probably the oldest exemplar of the theme of the shepherd and his flocks, which is so strongly represented in the springtime skies. As a basic celestial symbol cattle seem to represent all the fertile powers of the springtime skies – world mythology frequently relates the images of bulls, cows and calves to a whole range of heavenly phenomena including rain-clouds, rays of sunlight and the newborn sun. More specifically, the Sumerian Bull of Heaven is

described as a destructive beast, which came down from heaven to drink the rivers dry and to parch the land. These seasonal attributes are no doubt derived from the fact that the Bull of Heaven rises late in the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of the year when the temperature starts to rise and the rains diminish.



The final group of springtime constellations have a strong calendrical significance, as they seem to be purposefully located at the juncture of the old and new years. At this time of natural abundance, the earth was thought to 'open up' in order to yield her bounty, but to the archaic mind this opening up was accompanied by a host of dangers, chief of which was the potential pollution from the dead who could gain easy access to the upper worlds at this pivotal time. In light of this belief, I would suggest that the Old Man, with his wand and prophylactic head, is banishing the ghosts of the old year and driving them back to the underworld.



A similar set of ideas probably informs the lion-headed demons known as Lulal and Latarak. Like many ferocious 'demonic' beings, their influence could be utilised to exorcise any type of evil or malignant force. In the main body of the book I suggest that they act as guardians of the year – banishing any lingering influence of the closing year and purifying the start of the new calendrical cycle.

### THE BULL OF HEAVEN (Pages 64-70)

The wild bull, which had roamed the plains of central Mesopotamia since time immemorial, was a massive creature standing over six feet tall at the shoulder. In literature and the visual arts, it was venerated as a symbol of supernatural strength and ferocity, often being likened to gods, kings and heroes. Its broad curving horns inspired the horned headdress that all gods and goddesses wore to signify their divine status.



Cattle were first domesticated in the fertile valleys of Mesopotamia round about 7000 BCE. The overriding motive for their domestication was not for their meat but for their great strength, which was harnessed by early farmers to provide traction for ploughs and threshing sledges. Most households would only keep one or two beasts, which were often named and almost treated as part of the family. Large





19 An impression from a Sumerian cylinder seal

herds were much rarer only being kept by the palace and temple, whose financial and logistic resources were capable of supporting them. Milk, their most valuable by-product, was turned into cheese, butter and ghee. In the artwork of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> millennium the bull is often combined with an ear of barley – together they symbolise the wealth and bounty of the land brought about by the Neolithic farming revolution.

The age-old meaning of the bull as a symbol of prosperity and abundant herds is conveyed in a pair of contrasting omens: *'If the Bull of Heaven's stars are very bright: the offspring of cattle will thrive'*, but if its stars are very faint: *'the wealth of the land will disappear; the offspring of cattle and sheep will not thrive'*. These omens expose part of the simplest encoding scheme that underpins celestial divination – if a star or constellation is 'bright' its meaning is positive, but if it is 'faint' or 'obscure' the prediction is negative.

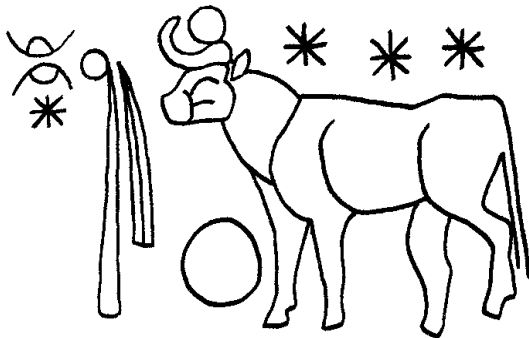
Beyond their nature as symbols of the land's prosperity, the bull, cow and calf all have a decidedly celestial quality to their character. Sumerian poetry sometimes refers to rain-laden clouds as the 'bull-calves of the storm god' and other texts attribute huge herds of cattle to the moon god, their numbers – well over half a million individual beasts – are so implausibly large that many modern commentators have suggested that they represent the stars of the sky.

Very similar ideas about celestial cattle can be found in early mythology the world over. The Egyptians personified the heavens as the goddess Hathor, who was often envisioned as a star-spangled cow with the solar disk set between her horns. The falcon-headed god Horus would enter her mouth each evening to re-emerge as the sun the next day. Comparable ideas can also be found in Vedic literature where herds of cows represent the fertile rains of the heavens and the rays of sunlight released at dawn. In this symbolic scheme the golden calf naturally represents the newborn sun of spring emerging from the cosmic waters just as the newborn calf emerges from the life-giving waters of the womb. Essentially the calf is a symbol of the reborn sun and of the resurgent life that follows in his train. Just such an idea can be found in Mesopotamian tradition where Šamaš, the sun god, is sometimes called the 'calf of the wild cow'.

The Bull of Heaven is written as 'Mul Gu-An-na'			
			
MUL	GU <sub>4</sub>	AN	NA
In Akkadian these signs are read together as <i>alû</i> – 'the bull of heaven', which occurs in mythic, magical and astrological texts.			
<p>The <b>Gu-sign</b> depicts the head of a bull. Like many signs that signify animals, it only illustrates the most characteristic part of the beast as an abbreviation for the whole animal. Essentially the same symbol lives on in the form of the modern astrological sigil for <i>Taurus</i>.</p> <p>The Sumerian term <b>Anna</b> means 'of heaven'. The <b>An-sign</b>, which depicts a star, has three distinct meanings – 'heaven', 'god' in general and the sky god 'Anu' in particular.</p> <p>The final <b>Na-sign</b> functions as a grammatical element, here signifying the possessive case – so the whole name can be read either as the 'Bull of Heaven' or the 'Bull of Anu'.</p>			

During the course of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium the symbol of the bull became associated with a range of deities, and it is from this period that the very earliest evidence for the existence of constellations can be found. A fascinating cylinder seal from the Uruk period (*fig 20*), only manufactured a few centuries after the invention of writing, is decorated with a scene that can effectively be read as script. On the right-hand side, the Bull of Heaven appears with a series of three stars placed above it, this being a variant form of the **Mul-sign** that signifies a 'star, planet or constellation'. The group of signs on the left-hand side can be read as 'the goddess Inanna of sunrise and sunset'. Inanna herself is represented by her sacred reed column that stands in front of the bull, and her status as a deity is marked by the eight-pointed star. The signs used to represent 'sunrise' and 'sunset' are an upright and inverted image of the sun rising between a pair

of mountains. As an attribute of Inanna, they identify her with the planet Venus, which is only seen as the Morning and Evening star.



20 Inanna and the Bull of Heaven from an Uruk period cylinder seal

*Sun's crown' – she comes close to the Bull's Jaw* (The equation is probably based on the fact that the Bull's Jaw is also known as the Crown of Anu.) The solar attribution is still present in the latest texts – a 1<sup>st</sup> millennium text that combines astrology and liver divination attributes the sun god to the second month of the year and the Bull of Heaven.

The idea of the sky-bull can be found on artefacts distributed throughout the Ancient Near East. On one such object, a pedestal stone from Teima (*fig 21*), a true assemblage of celestial symbols drawn from neighbouring cultures can be seen. In the centre of the stone, the principle object of veneration is the bull's head surmounted with a solar disk. Its appearance is very reminiscent of Egyptian portrayals of the Apis bull. While arrayed around it is a group of astral symbols – a winged disk, lunar crescent and star of Venus – all of which are clearly drawn from a Babylonian milieu.



21 A 1<sup>st</sup> millennium pedestal stone from Teima, Arabia

In Babylonian tradition, the nature of the celestial bull is best seen in the Sumerian poem entitled *'Hero in Battle'*, which forms part of the earliest Gilgamesh cycle. In the poem, Inanna demands the Bull of Heaven from her father Anu so that she can wreck her vengeance on Gilgamesh who has rejected her love. Although Anu isn't happy to hand over the bull, saying that it would have no food on the earth as 'its pasture is on the horizon', and 'it can only graze where the sun rises', he finally concedes to his daughter's demands when she flies into a rage. Inanna took hold of the bull's halter and led it down to earth, where it ravished Gilgamesh's city, Uruk. In its insatiable hunger it devoured the pastures and palm groves, and drank the rivers dry.



22 Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay the Bull of Heaven, while Inanna tries to restrain them, detail from a Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal

Gilgamesh's minstrel interrupted his lord while feasting and informed him of the destruction wrought by the bull. After calmly finishing their beer, Gilgamesh and his heroic companion, Enkidu, armed themselves and went out to fight the bull. After sizing up their adversary, Enkidu seized its tail and Gilgamesh dispatched it with a blow from his axe. The bull's carcass was subsequently butchered; its meat was distributed among the orphans of the city, its hide sent to the tanners

while its horns were made into flasks for pouring oil to Inanna in her temple.

A strange episode occurs at the end of the story. After Gilgamesh and Enkidu had killed the Bull of Heaven, one of the heroes cut off the bull's haunch and threw it at Inanna. In response to this apparent insult, Inanna assembled her courtesans and performed rites of mourning over the bull's haunch.

There is an intriguing parallel to this puzzling incident in Egyptian mortuary traditions where a bull's foreleg is one of the chief offerings made to the deceased (*right*). And it can be no coincidence that the Egyptians placed their constellation of the *Bull's Foreleg* among the stars of *Ursa Major* – which the Babylonians envisioned as their funerary Wagon.

Like so many myths there is more to this story than is immediately apparent. When we take an overview of the whole story we can see that a number of mythic and ritual features have undergone some quite radical reformulations.

Certain incidents in the myth presuppose a change in the relationship between the king and the goddess. In the older kingship rituals, Inanna married the king in the Sacred Marriage ceremony and thereby conferred all her powers upon the king. But Gilgamesh now refuses Inanna's love and transfers his allegiance to Šamaš, the sun god. Furthermore, by the time that the *Menologies* were written the kingship rites, where the king is empowered and installed in office, are patronised by Enlil and Anu, rather than Inanna. There is also reason to think that the fundamental nature of the bull-sacrifice has also changed from the solemn offering of a complete bull to Inanna, to a joyful communal feast where only a small part of the sacrifice (the haunch) is offered to the deity.

Above and beyond these ritual changes, we must also suspect that the very nature of the bull has changed from a 'Golden Calf', symbolising the birth season of lambs, kids and calves, to the raging 'Bull of Heaven' found in the Sumerian story. Such a transformation could only come about through the long-term effects of precession which has progressively moved the bull's rising date from close to the spring equinox into the 2<sup>nd</sup> month of the year, which is when the rains start to diminish at the onset of the dry season. This finally explains the Bull's attributes in the myth where he destroys the pastures and drinks the rivers dry.

Even though the Golden Calf of spring was transformed into the raging Bull of early summer, its symbolism lived on in newly created constellations. Set further to the west where they correctly rise around the time of the spring equinox, the constellations of the Crook and the Hired Man were represented on the star-map by a shepherd tending a goat-kid and a running lamb respectively.

The bull's shifting position among the stars may well inform a distinct art motif found on a number of late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium seals. It is generally called the 'bull and winged gate' by modern scholars, if indeed, a gate is actually depicted. The motif is of unknown significance, but the common appearance of a star above the bull's head certainly suggests that an astral theme is alluded to.

The format of the images varies somewhat – the bull can crouch before the figure of a god or goddess, who sometimes holds a tether fastened to the bull's nose-ring, while in other images an attendant may hold the tether, which is either attached to the winged gate or held by the deity.

Given that the symbol of the tethering rope or celestial bond is often applied to the solstices and equinoxes we might have in these images a visual record of *Taurus*' shift away from the spring equinox.



23 A bull's foreleg is offered to the deceased, 10<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (2100-2052 BCE)



24 The bull and winged gate from an Akkadian cylinder seal



25 Bull and Gate symbol from a late Uruk seal

Unfortunately, the motif goes out of fashion for many centuries and only reappears in the latest astrological art, where it is seen on a seal from Uruk (fig 25). At the very least, this seal demonstrates that the 'gate' was associated with *Taurus* in the minds of 1<sup>st</sup> millennium astrologers, but at present nothing further can be added.

One of the most confusing aspects of the celestial bull is its portrayal as a constellation image. Our modern image of *Taurus* can be traced back to the Greek model, which is invariably represented by a hump-backed bull

(right) – or rather, the front half of a hump-backed bull as the figure is entirely missing its hindquarters.

This curtailed image was certainly known in Babylonia in the latter half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, as the *Astronomic Diaries* mention a star called 'the beginning of the bull', which only makes sense in the context of this half-figure. (Similarly, Ptolemy refers to a 'line of stars where (*Taurus*) is cut-off' in his *Tetrabiblos* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE).

The only certain image of the celestial bull, to survive from Babylonia itself, can be found on the famous set of tablets from Uruk (fig 27). But fate has played a cruel trick, in so far as the crucial area of the tablet,

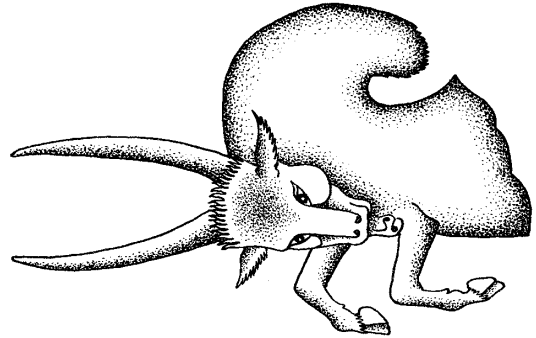


27 The Bull of Heaven from the Uruk tablet

which contained the Bull's hindquarters, has been totally destroyed. So much so, that we simply can't tell whether the bull was originally figured as a complete beast or was missing its hindquarters.

At first sight the general orientation of the Uruk Bull appears quite consistent with the Greek image except for a slight reorientation of its head. However, the other constellation images from this set of tablets are all reversed left to right, reflecting their origin as images drawn from a celestial sphere, and when this is factored in, the image is no longer compatible with the Greek figure.

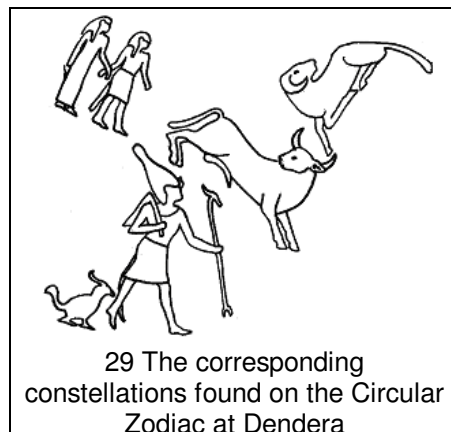
This is indeed, most peculiar, not least because it directly contradicts the only safe assumptions that can be made concerning the orientation of the bull on the celestial sphere. These are that its head corresponds to the distinct 'V'-shaped group of stars known as the *Hyades*, and that its shoulder corresponds to the compact cluster of stars known as the *Pleiades*. So we face the seemingly absurd possibility that the figure of the Bull was purposefully reversed in astronomic illustrations. On grounds of common sense, this idea would have to be dismissed outright were it not for the Dendera Zodiac, which portrays the Bull in exactly this fashion.



26 The familiar half-figure of *Taurus* from a medieval Arabic manuscript



28 The Greek constellations surrounding *Taurus*, including *Aries*, *Gemini*, *Orion* and the *Hare*



29 The corresponding constellations found on the Circular Zodiac at Dendera

By comparing figures 28 and 29 we can see that the Circular Zodiac at Dendera has, like the Babylonian model, reversed the image of *Taurus* from left to right and has furthermore, done exactly the same to *Aries*. To my knowledge this anomaly hasn't been commented on before. Even though earlier Egyptian images of the constellations are notoriously badly orientated, I don't believe that this is a simple error but is, on the contrary, a purposeful clue that points to some significant end. Although it is outside the remit of the present book to go into this subject in any detail, I would suggest that the designer of the Circular Zodiac is trying to reformulate the star-map for the *Piscean* Age. By shifting the position of the Star Cluster into the region of *Pisces* the designer has restored the traditional placement of the moon at the beginning of the year. (*Compare figures 164 and 165*)

By way of a summary, I believe that the Bull of Heaven was originally depicted on the star-map as a bull-calf, which symbolised the spring equinox way back in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium. Many centuries later, in the mid to late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, the golden calf was transformed into a full-grown bull, whose fiery nature symbolised the onset of the hot season. It was now represented in the skies by the half-figure of the bull that was eventually transmitted to the Greek star-map – the episode in the Gilgamesh cycle concerning the removal of the bull's haunch can certainly be cited in support of this idea. The Bull was probably cut in half to accommodate newly created constellations to its west, such as the Hired Man and Lulal and Latarak, which would now mark the New Year. The occurrence of complete bull figures, in astrological art such as the Dendera Zodiacs, could best be explained as symbols representing the bull, rather than as accurate constellation images.

See also: the Crown of Anu, the Bull's Jaw, the Bison-man, the Star Cluster, *figs 30, 34, 43, 105, 118, 138 & 139*