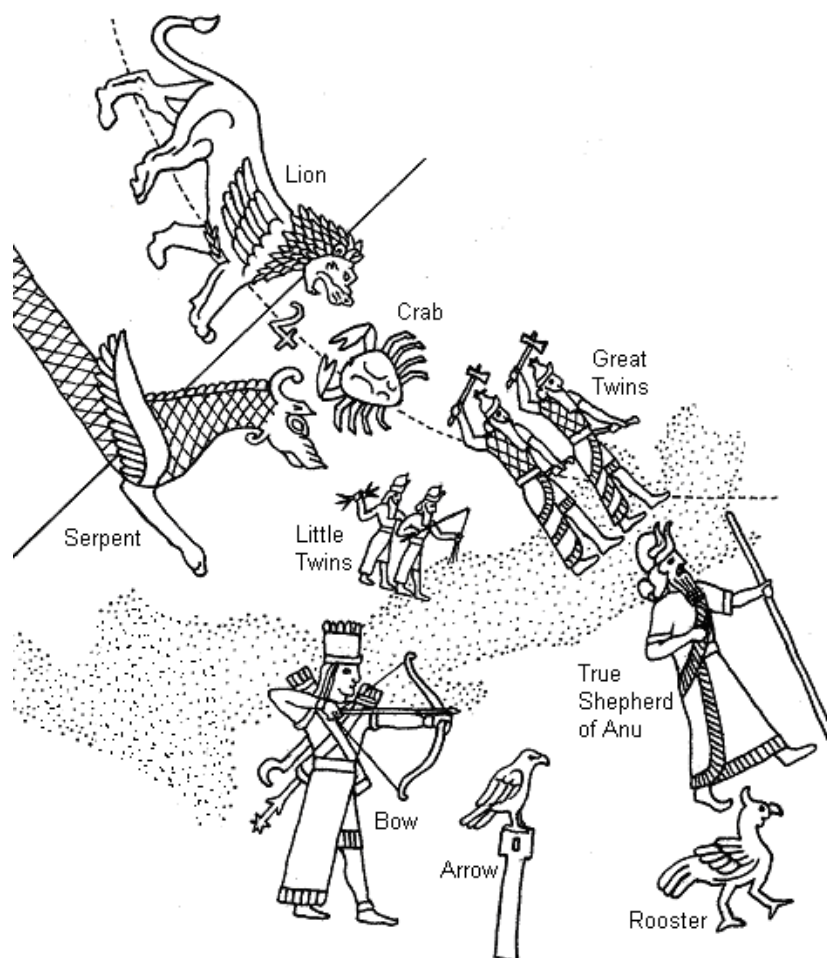


It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White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

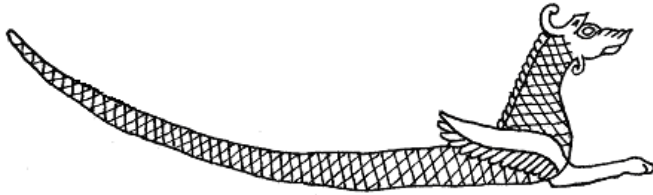


Third Sector – the constellations rising around the summer solstice

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.

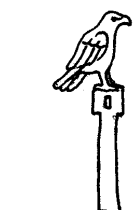


The underworld themes continue in the form of the Great Twins and their lesser counterparts, the Little Twins, who are all depicted on the star-map as fully armed warriors. The Great Twins in particular, are both closely associated with Nergal, the king of the underworld, and one of them is known to 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 LION (Pages 140-1)

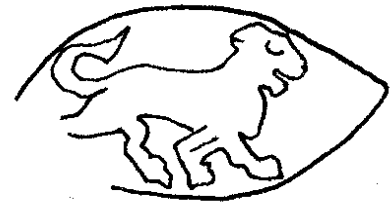
The zodiac constellation of *Leo* has its ultimate origins in the ancient Babylonian constellation of the Lion. The only appreciable difference in their respective appearances is that the Great Lion, to give the Babylonian constellation its full name, is normally portrayed with a set of wings, no doubt to emphasise its celestial nature.

The Lion’s symbolic character is dominated by three major themes – it is a symbol of high summer, war and carnage, and the king.

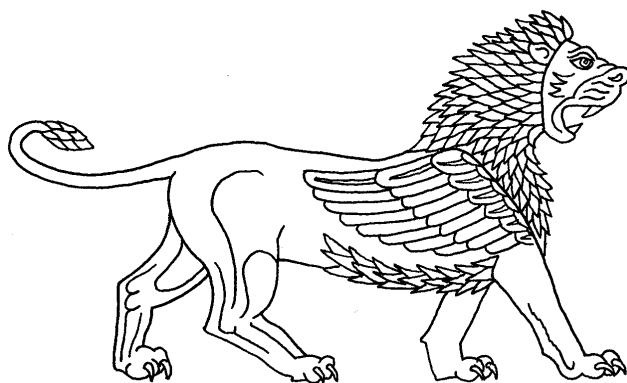
As a seasonal symbol representing high summer the Lion’s radiant mane represents the full power of the summertime sun. Its scorching rays parch the fields, dry up the rivers and grip the whole land in drought. Relief only comes with the advent of the rainy season in early autumn.

As a ferocious carnivore the lion has further come to symbolise war amongst men and carnage amongst the herds.

Rampaging packs of lions were a common enough menace throughout Mesopotamia during the Sumerian period. Along with the wolf they were feared as the destroyer of herds: *‘If Mars enters the Lion and stands there: downfall of cattle’*; and when huge packs were abroad they even shut down overland trade-routes and turned their fury upon men: *‘If the Lion is dark: for three years lions and wolves will kill people, they will cut off the traffic with the Westland’*.



83 The Lion from a seal impression, Uruk



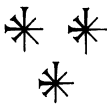



84 A modern rendition of the Great Lion

And as ‘king of the beasts’ the lion represents the king and his relationship to the realm. This basic meaning can be traced back to ‘anomaly omens’ whose predictions are derived from the appearances of malformed births and miscarriages. These omens, first committed to writing in the Old Babylonian period, are undoubtedly based on a Sumerian oral tradition, and it is apparent from the examples quoted below that the lion’s regal symbolism was already firmly established in the Mesopotamian imagination long before any astrology texts were committed to writing: *‘If a woman gives birth and the child has a lion’s head: there will be a harsh king in the*

land’. However, these unfavourable predictions are transformed when the mother in question is of royal blood, then the prediction is positive: *‘If a woman of the palace gives birth and the child has a face of a lion: the king will have no opponent’*.

In contrast to the anomaly omens involving the lion, astrological omens tend to make a clearer distinction between the king and the realm – the Lion as a whole seems to represent the realm: *‘If the Lion is black: the land will be discontented’*, while the king is represented by the King

Star (our *Regulus*), which stands at the Lion's breast: *'If the King Star is black: the commander of the palace will die'*.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| In earlier texts the Lion is usually called 'Mul Ur-mah' – the 'Exalted Lion', but from the middle of the 2 nd millennium its name is usually written 'Mul Ur-Gu-la' | | | |
|  |  |  |  |
| MUL | UR | GU | LA |
| The Sumerian word was borrowed into Akkadian as <i>urgulû</i> . | | | |
| The Ur-sign depicts a lion's head; it is best translated as 'large carnivore' as the sign can also refer to dogs and wolves. | | | |
| The combination Gu-la appears to be an alternative way of writing the Sumerian word Gal , which simply means 'great or big'. | | | |

In astrology texts such as *Mul-Apin* the regent of the Lion is named as the minor god Latarak. He is a lion-headed being who gives the impression of being a 'protective figure' more akin to a demon than a god. He is often twinned with another lion-headed deity called Lulal – together they are depicted as constellation figures in their own right (*see the section on Lulal and Latarak*).

Regardless of its attribution to Latarak, the Lion is especially associated with the war goddess in both literature and art. The war goddess, known as Inanna in Sumerian and *Ištar* in Akkadian, is sometimes simply known as the 'Lioness of Heaven'. Mythic texts reveal that her temple throne was supported by a pair of ferocious lions, but more often than not Inanna could be found on the battle-field where the roar of her sacred lion enunciated war – 'the lion, the dog of Ištar, roared and did not stop roaring'.

Inanna's lust for war and carnage is frequently praised in Sumerian literature. Many of her warlike attributes are recorded in the Sumerian poem '*Inanna and the mountain of Ebih*', which recounts the goddess' destruction of a mountain realm that refused to submit to her will. The poem praises her as the 'lady of battle', who is 'clad in terror' and 'drenched in blood'. She 'destroys mighty lands with the arrow and overwhelms the lands with her strength'. 'In the heavens and upon the earth she roars like a lion and devastates the people'. She proudly proclaims that she was 'placed at the right hand of the king so that she might destroy the rebel lands'.

In astrology, Inanna's sacred planet is Venus, whose appearance in the Lion naturally enough portends war – her aspect as morning or evening star indicates the theatre of battle: '*If Venus stands inside the Lion in the east: in Elam there will be a battle*'. '*If in the west: in Akkad there will be a battle*'. In fact the association of Venus and the Lion is so close that she is regarded as having her second exaltation or 'secret place' in the Lion: '*If Venus reaches her secret place: good fortune will come to pass*' – *She reaches the constellation of the Lion*.

See also the King Star, the Exalted Lion, the Bison-man, the Bridle, *figs 11, 17, 59, 118 & 120*