



Sacred Skies

Sky Myths

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Sky Myths

This lecture considers the nature of sky myths.

- It considers the question of why a culture has sky myths.
- The problems of understanding a culture's sky myths:
 - Through its artefacts.
 - Through its structures.
 - Also, whether an object or structure is holding a sky myth.
- It considers the indicators of a sky myth held in a story.
- It looks at a case study of a sky myth.

Considering Sky Myths

- Exploring sky mythology is largely an anthropological journey as the myths can reveal a culture's cosmological views.
- This view will be of a 'Meaningful Whole' - how a people saw individual parts of the sky/land (sun, moon, stars, clouds, horizon) and what was meaningful for their world view.



Sky myths can be based in the movement of:

- Stars and constellations
- Sun
- Moon
- Planets
- Other events – meteorites, comets and eclipses
- Or climatic – thunder, lightning , wind and clouds.



Sky myths are also referred to as ethnoastronomy.¹

Daryn Lehoux: 'Reason does not supplant myth. Reason has always been there and myth will continue to fare under the supposed hegemony of reason.'

Lehoux, D. (2011). 'Myth and explanation in Manilius'. In: Green, S. J. & Volk, K. (eds.) *Forgotten stars : rediscovering Manilius' Astronomica*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. P.55

1. See for the early definition : Baity, E. C., Aveni, A. F., Berger, R., Bretternitz, D. A., Clark, G. A., Dow, J. W., Giot, P. R., Kelley, D. H., Klejn, L. S., Loops, H. H. E., Muller, R., Pittioni, R., Pleslova-Stikova, E., Zenon, S. P., Reyman, J. E., Roy, S. B., Smiley, C. H., Snow, D. R., Swauger, J. L. & Vermeersch, P. M. (1973). 'Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy So Far [and Comments and Reply]'. *Current Anthropology*, 14, 389-449.

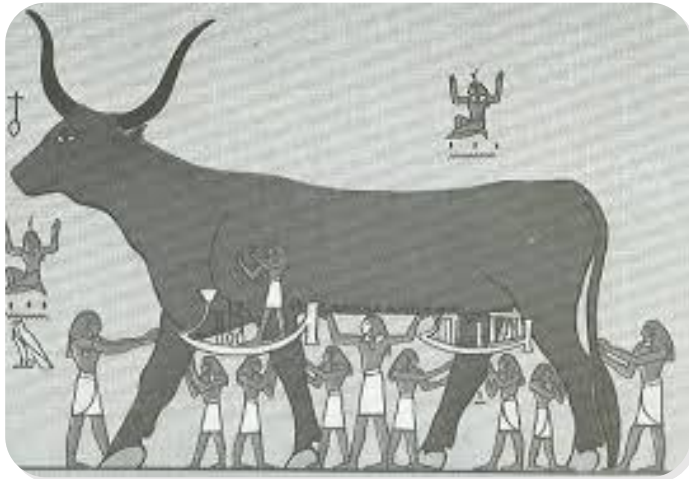
Sky mythology tends to hold information such as:



- How the sky moves.
- Memory devices for navigation or for building calendars.
- A vessel for a holding a community's or a person's story.
- Stories of extraordinary sky events.

Sky Myths in artefacts and images

We have our sky view... but we struggle to understand the sky view of others.

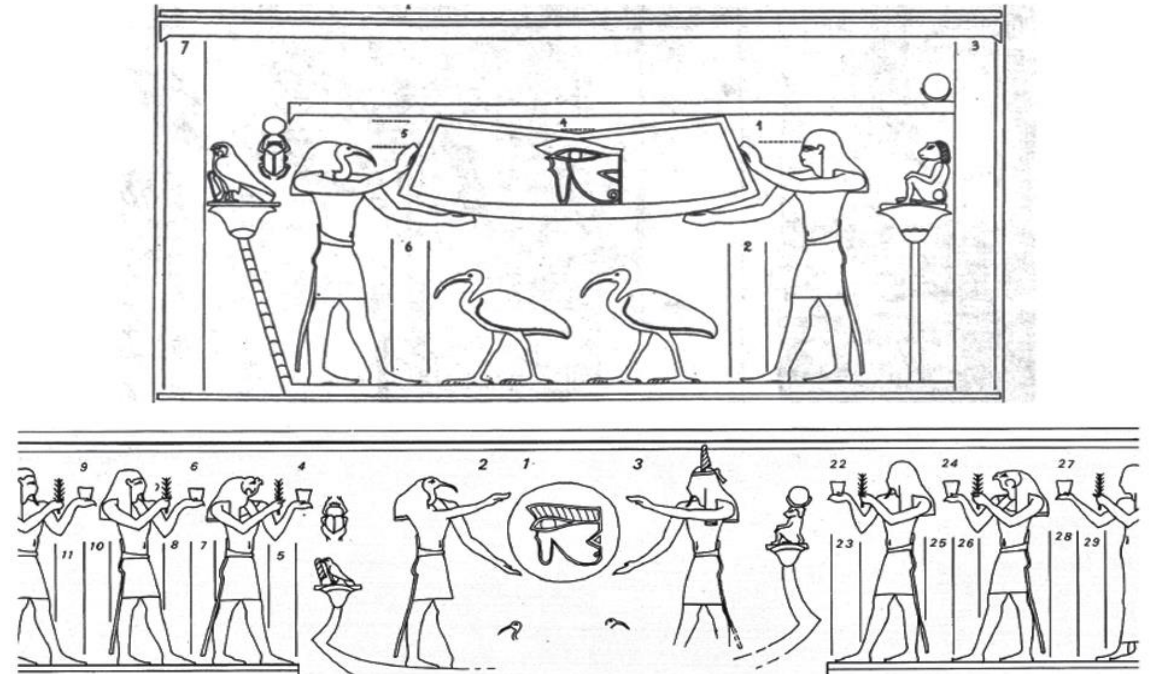


There are artifacts that are suggestive of the sky but we may never understand them!



Gundestrup Cauldon (c.150 BC to 1 BC)
National Museum of Denmark
Found in a bog in 1891.

Or we learn to understand them by adopting a very different idea about how the sky moves!



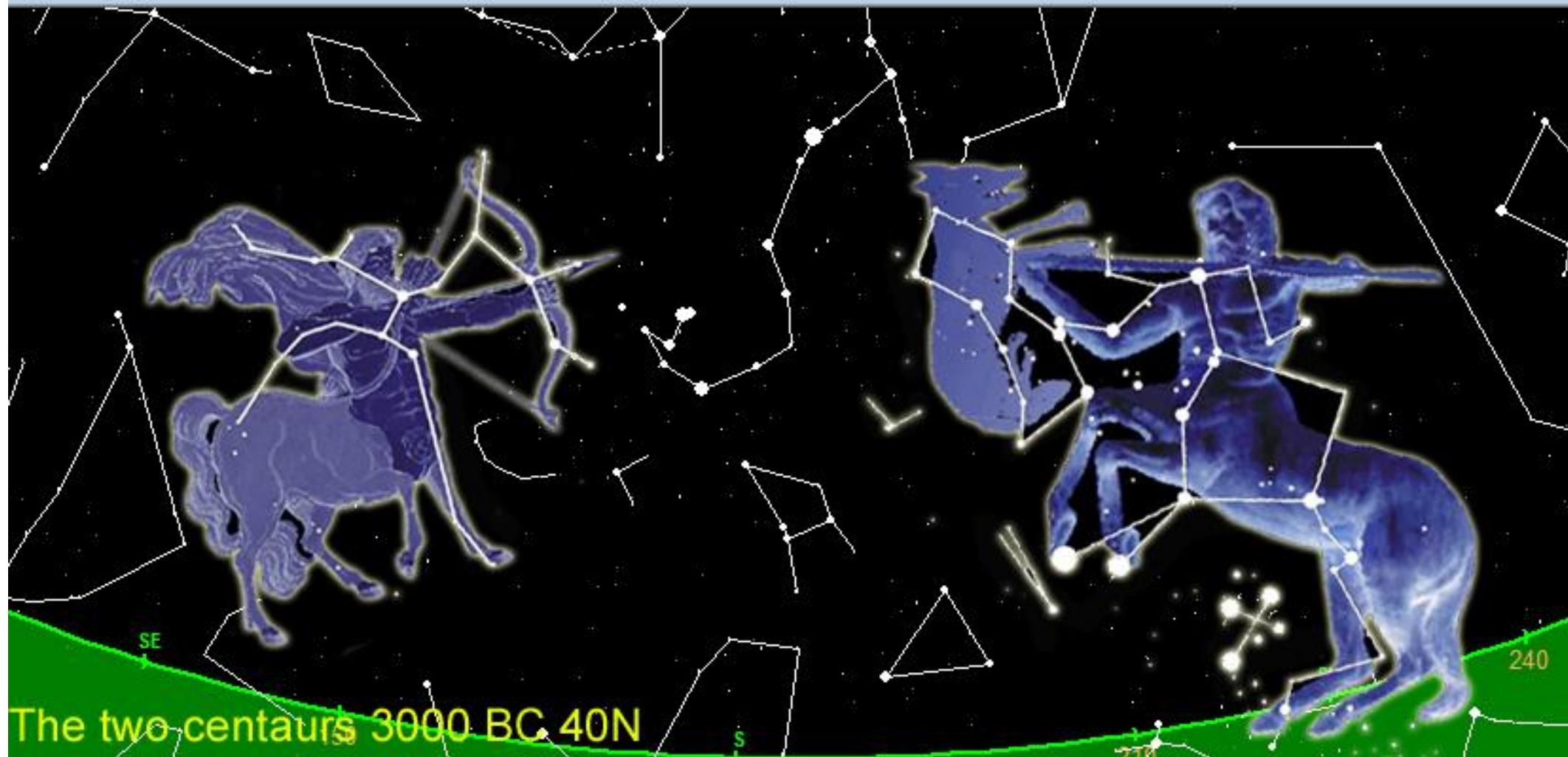
Netting the *wedjat*-eye in the Sokar chapel at Dendera



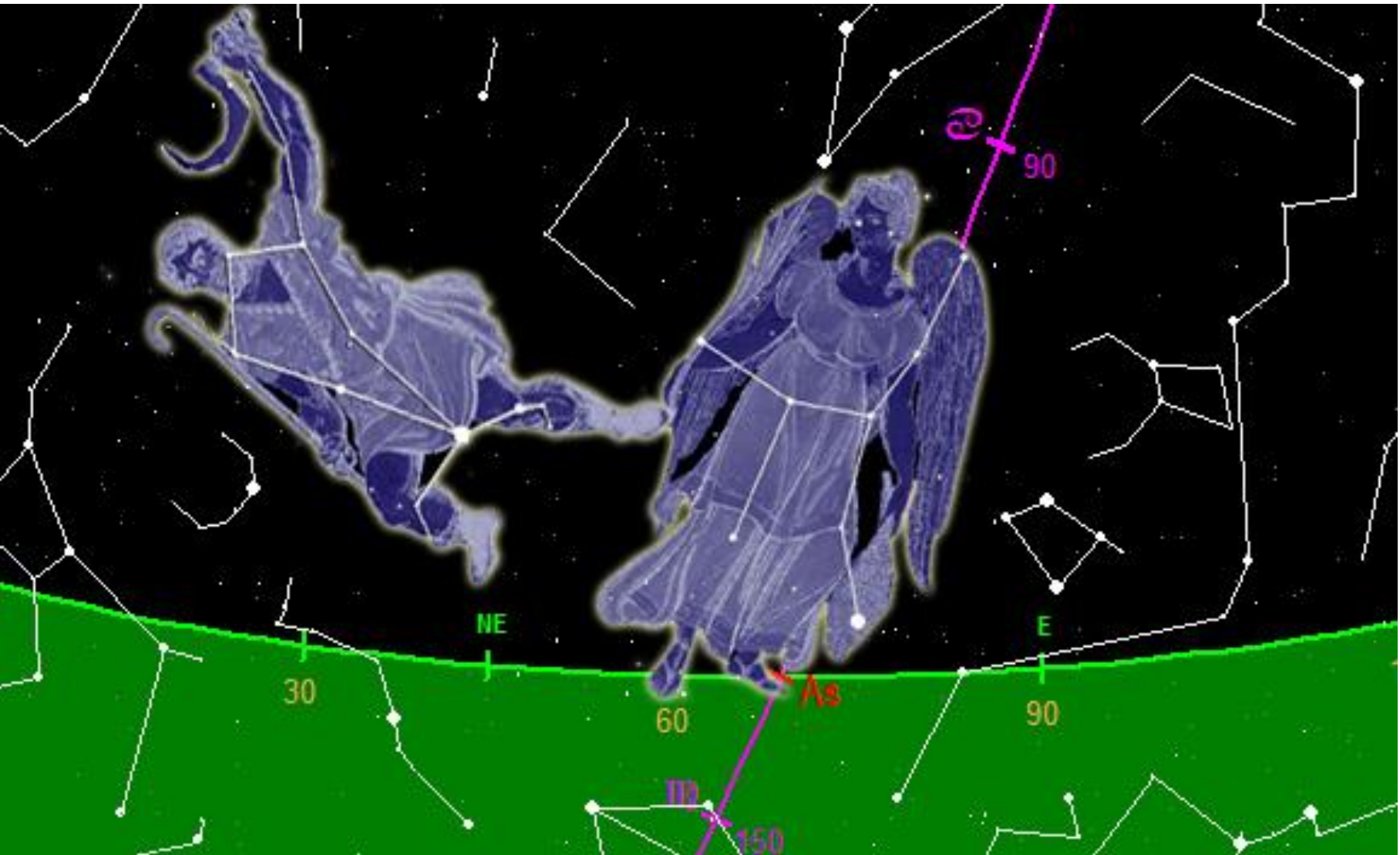
We also have structures that have lost their stories, lost their people.

Do we still have some of these stories but just do not recognize them?

The two centaurs used to face each other in the sky – is this part of their story?



The 'Hunter who now farms' stands next to Virgo with her wheat sheaf. Virgo is also know as the farrow – or the ploughed field.

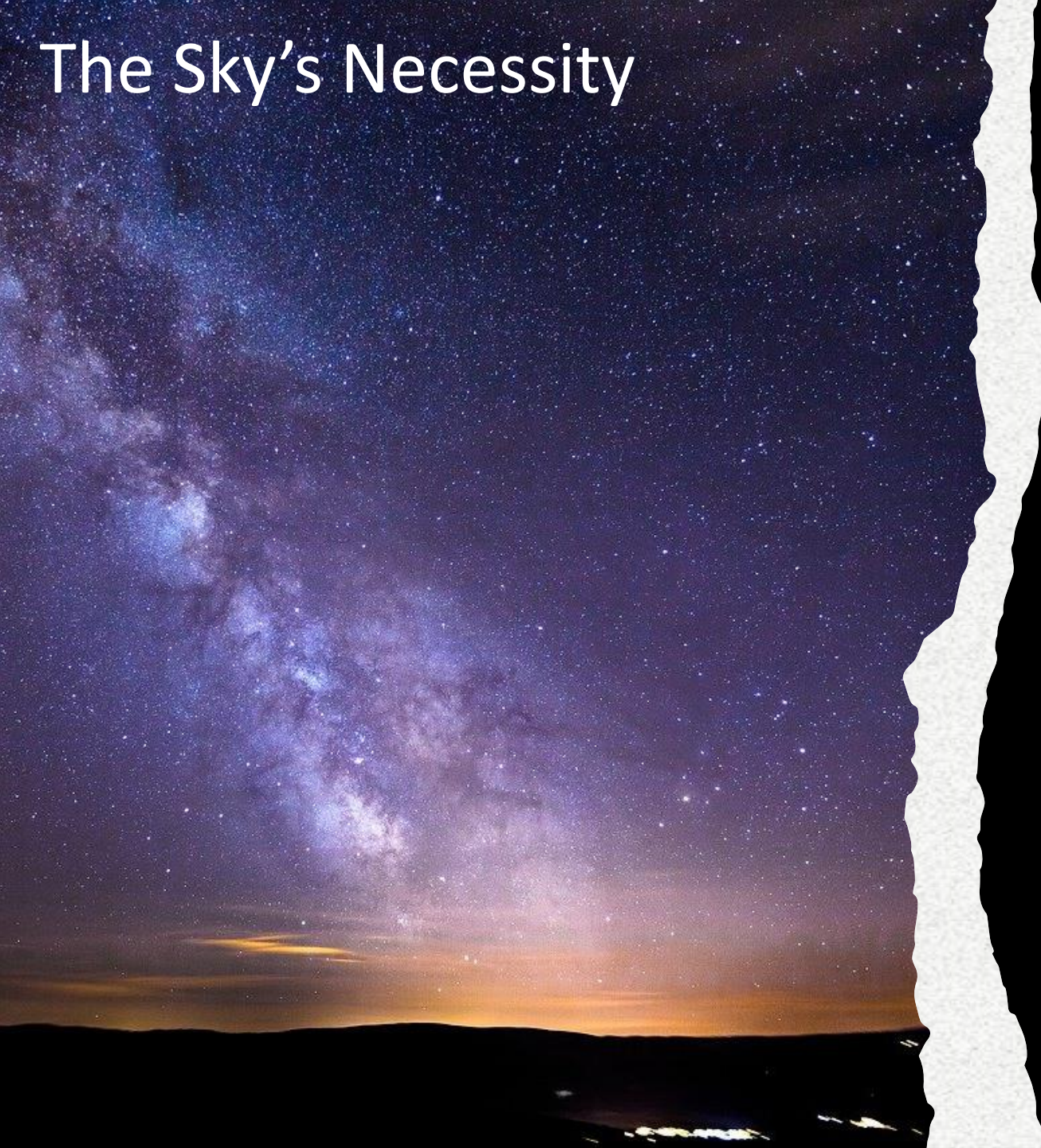


Bootes and Virgo rise together and both constellations are associated in their mythology with the knowledge of agriculture.

Indicators of a sky story



The Sky's Necessity

A photograph of a night sky featuring the Milky Way galaxy. The galaxy's bright, dusty band stretches diagonally across the frame. The sky is filled with numerous stars. At the bottom, a dark horizon line is visible, with a faint orange glow suggesting a sunset or sunrise. A jagged, torn-paper-like white line separates the image from the text on the right.

The Sky moves in a fixed way.

The stars are fixed in their relationship to each other and mark out a regular annual rhythm of rising and settings or shifting between the earth and the circumpolar stars.

They appear in stories as characters that cannot change their relationship to each other

The Sky's Necessity



The Moon moves in shifting phases always out of sync with the agricultural seasons measured by the sun.

The Moon can appear in stories of a contra but important character, or a mystery woman – or as a feather in the east.

The Sky's Necessity

The sun measures the agricultural seasons and by its movement along the horizon it marks out the days of the year.

It's presence in a story is marked by events happening too the very day from one year to the next.



Solar and star seasonal sky stories are circular and without end.



One can speculate that the round animal motifs – Celtic as well as those found in Norwegian Stave Churches - draw on such sky narratives.

The Sky's Necessity

- Planets: Stories of tension and shifts of relationships *between* characters could potentially represent the movement of the planets and the sun and the moon.
- Such narratives are seen in the Mesopotamian literature which represents the origins of astrology – the movement of the planets produce a **continuous narrative** which continues to this day.



Relief image on the Tablet of Shamash, British Library room 55. Found in Sippar (Tell Abu Habbah), in Ancient Babylonia ; it dates from the 9th century BC and shows the sun god Shamash on the throne, in front of the Babylonian king Nabu-apla-iddina (888-855 BC)



The Milky Way will rise out of the landscape but at other times it will lie down across the land.

Stories of a floods, falling into ditches, a woman descending or ladders reaching into the sky are all potential Milky Way stories.



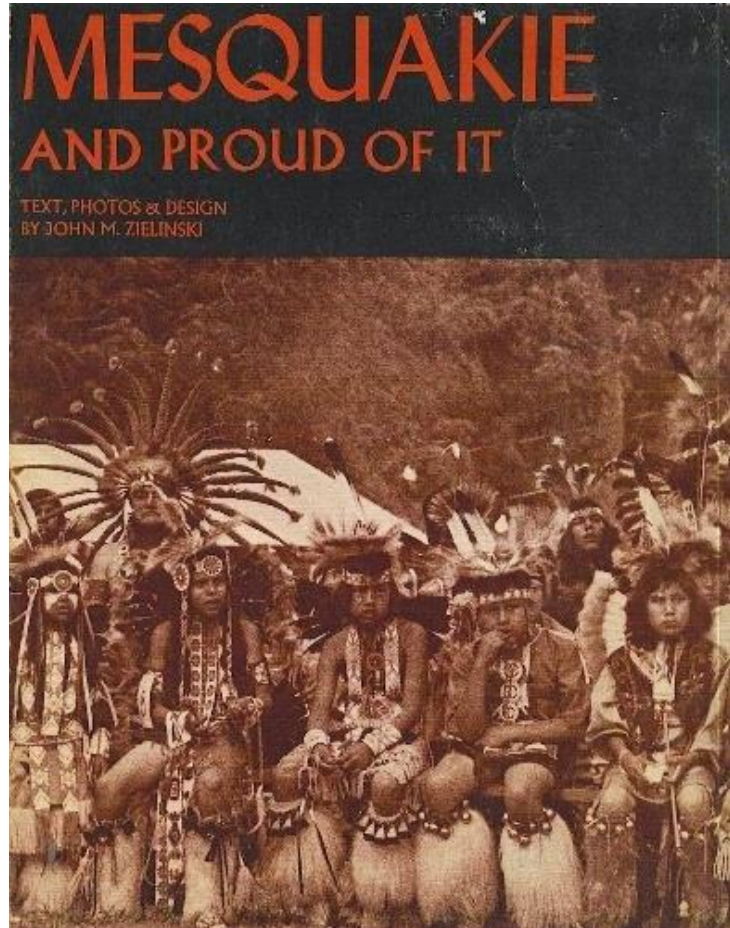
Comets

Stories with characters that undertake a fixed unswerving path regardless of the path's outcome, may be a story speaking of a comet.

The one-track hero ploughing forth in a straight path.



Sky Myths Example



An Example, North American mythology around the Great Bear

<http://nativeamericanencyclopedia.com/native-american-stars-legends-musquakie-chasing-the-bear/>

Native American Stars Legends: Musquakie – Chasing the Bear

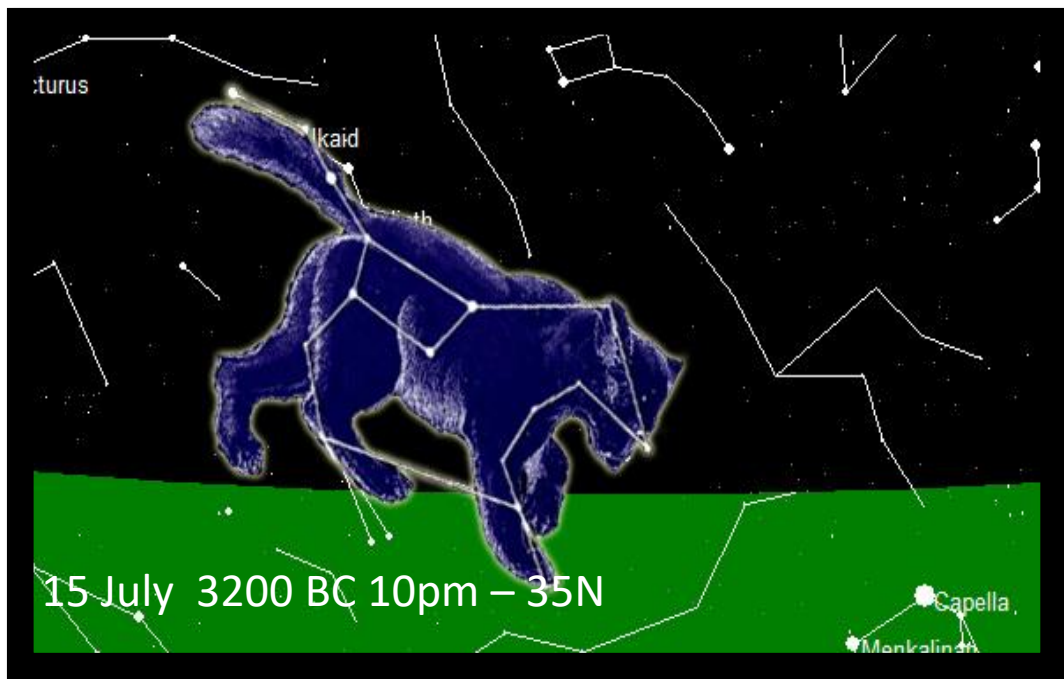
They say that once, a long time ago, **it was early winter**. Three young men went out to hunt at first light. One of them took his little dog, Hold Tight, with him. ... They had found a bear's den. They flush the bear out of its den. The bear moved to the north, he then moved to the east ... to the **place where midday** comes from. The bear then turns to the west. The bear leads the hunters high into the sky.

The hunters then kill the bear and its blood turns the **leaves of the trees red**.

Then the hunters stood up. All together they lifted the bear's head and threw it away towards the east. Now, early on winter's mornings a group of stars in the shape of the bear's head can be seen **low on the horizon in the east, just before daybreak**. (This could be the small head-like constellation of Equuleus)

Next the hunters threw the **bear's backbone away to the north, and if you look north at midnight in the middle of winter** you will see the bear's backbone there, outlined in stars.

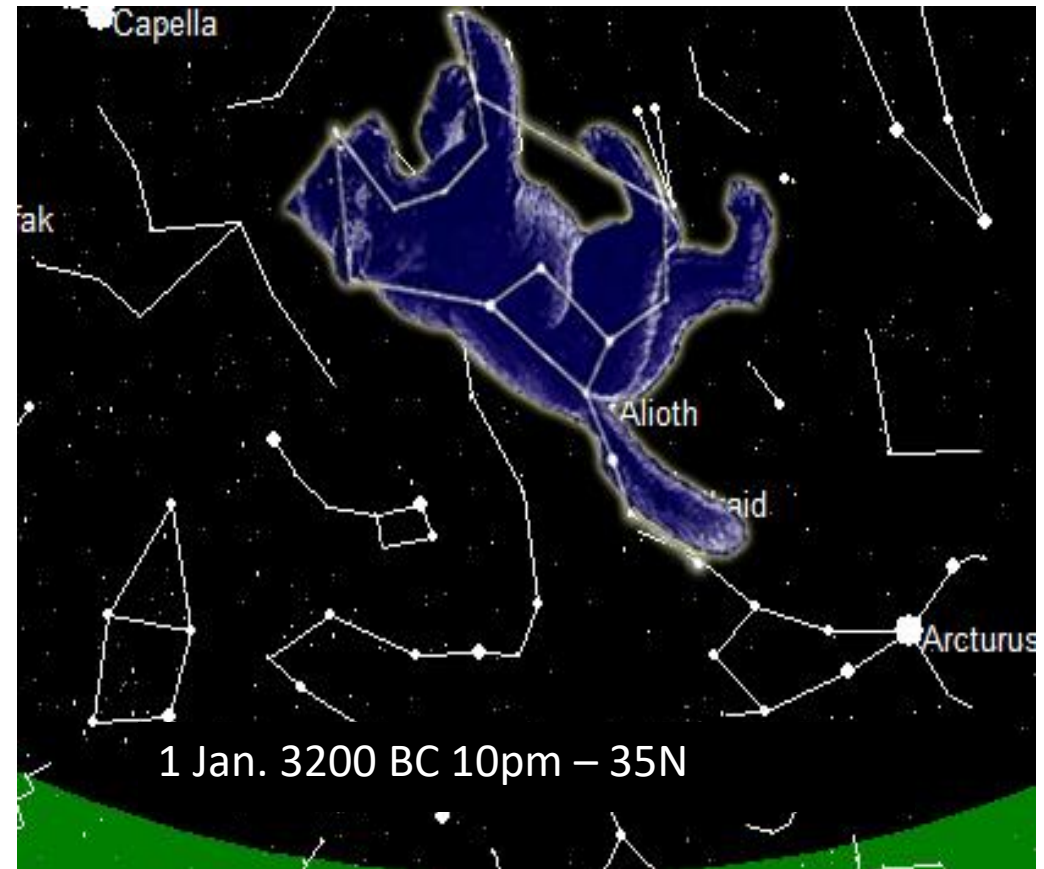
At any time of the year, if you look at the sky, you can see four bright stars in a square, and They never go in to rest like some of the other stars. Until the hunters catch up with the bear, they and the little dog will never rest.



Summer, Autumn
and Winter



The Bear mythology as a season marker



The Blood of the Bear

This story is
secure with its
strong
seasonal
themes are
recognisable
constellation
of the Bear.





The myth and the sky are both
primary documents

Uniting sky and myth (if possible) can place the story back into its period and culture.

This potentially gives a valuable insight into that culture's cosmology.

The primary sources for this week are the actual myths themselves - the sky narratives and tales which are linked to the sky - the following are just two examples.

Video Lecture: John Morieson and Alex Cherney, 'When Giant Fish Leaves the Sky it is time to Travel- a cultural reconstruction' presented at SEAC 2011, Evora Portugal <http://vimeo.com/28620183>

North American mythology around the Great Bear

<http://nativeamericanencyclopedia.com/native-american-stars-legends-musquakie-chasing-the-bear/>

JSTOR

Wang, Eugene Y. "Mirror, Moon, and Memory in Eighth-Century China: From Dragon Pond to Lunar Palace." *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 9 (2005): 42-67.

Cressy, David. "Early Modern Space Travel and the English Man in the Moon." *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 4 (2006): 961-982.

eBook: Lehoux, D. (2011). 'Myth and explanation in Manilius'. In: Green, S. J. & Volk, K. (eds.) *Forgotten stars : rediscovering Manilius' Astronomica*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

PDFs on Moodle: Brady, Bernadette. "A Consideration of Egyptian Ascension Mythology as a Reflection of the Mythopoeic Nature of Star Phases and Its Implication for Belief in the Descent of Divine Beings." In *Current Research in Egyptology Volume Xii*, edited by Heba Abd El-Gawad, Veronica Tamorri, Nathalie Andrews, James Taylor and Maria Correias-Amador, 40-47. Oxford: Oxbow, 2012.

Bernadette Brady, 'Star-Paths, Stones and Horizon Astronomy', in *Stars and Stones*, ed. by F.Pimenta, et al. (SEAC 2013, 2014), pp. 44-48.