

Heavenly Discourses Sky Mythology Week 4

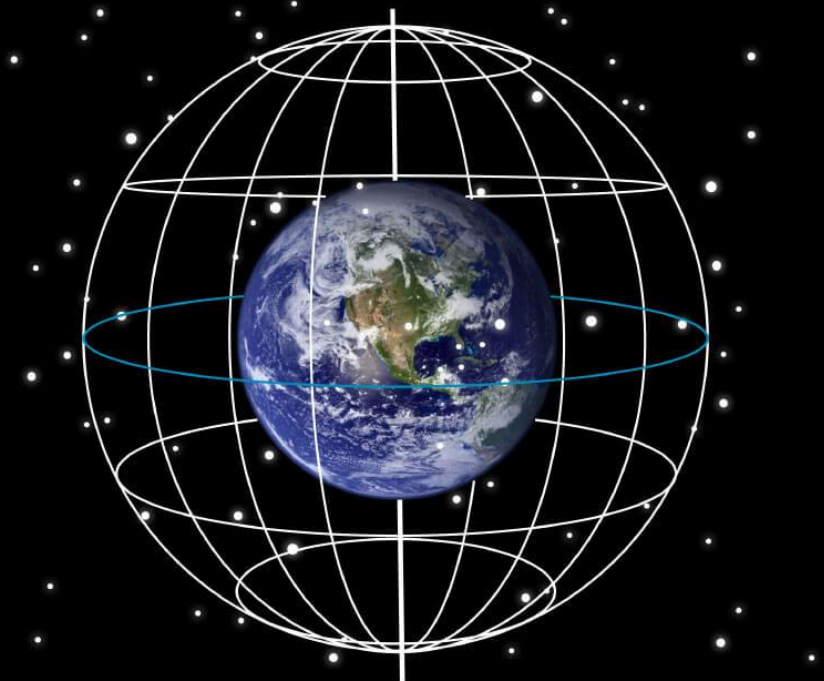


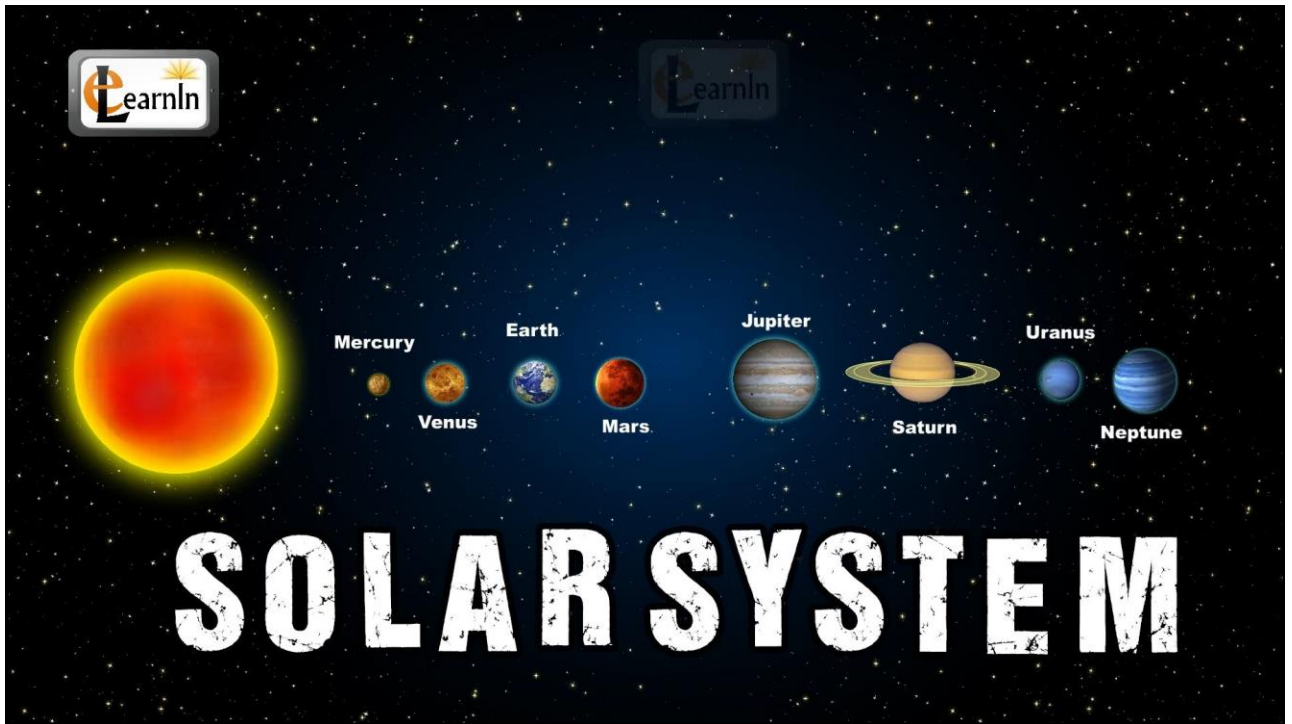
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Our Sky View

Today's view of the sky is largely informed by the cultural dominance of the celestial sphere, its constellations, and its rotation around the slowly processing poles.

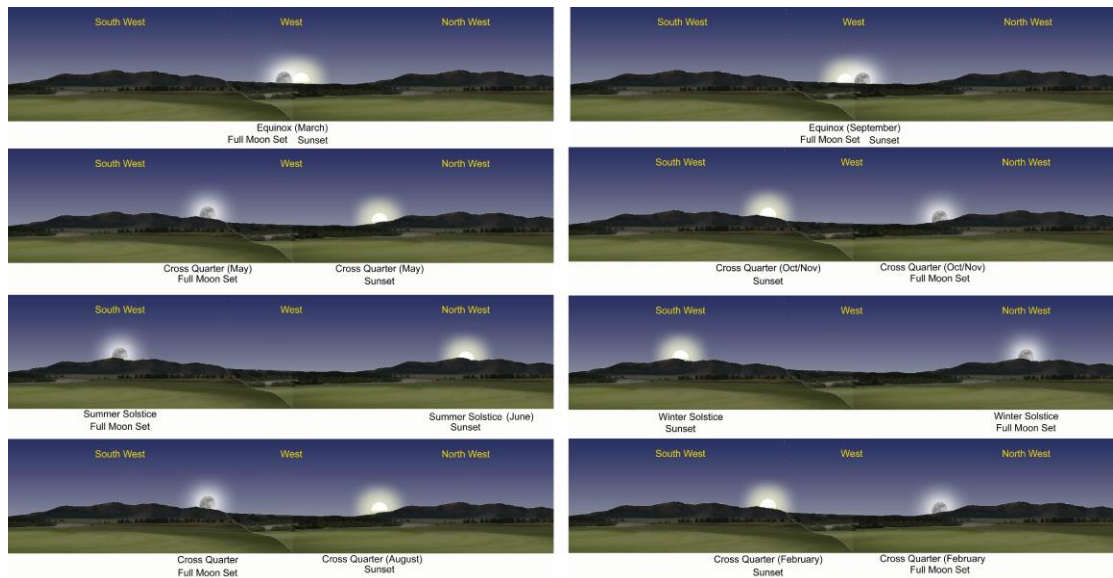




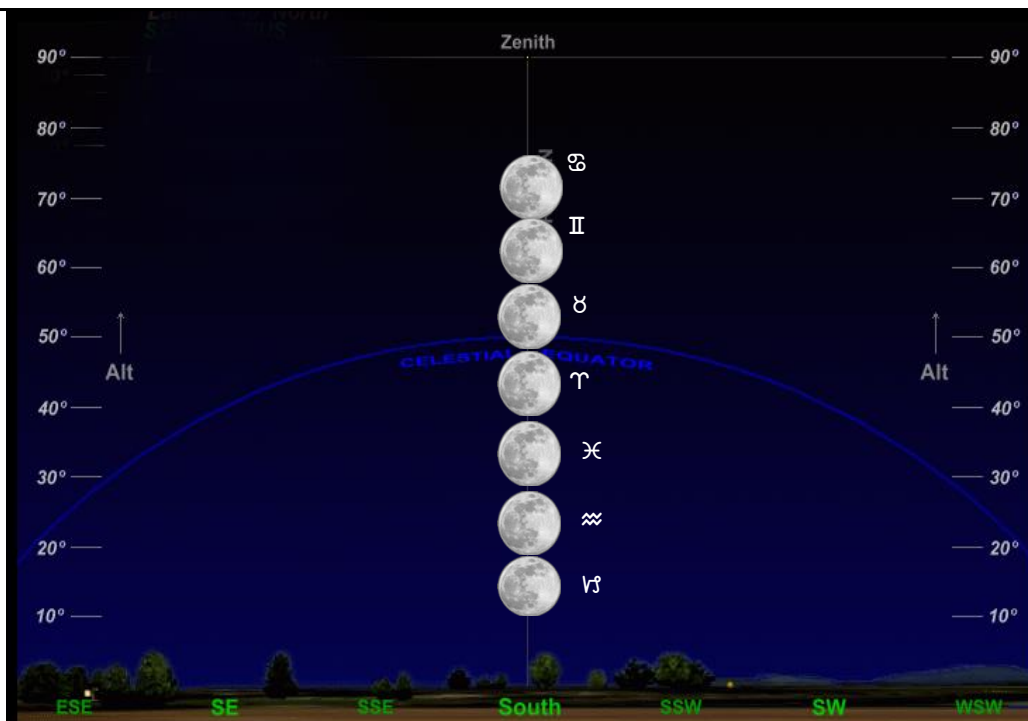


But today
this
knowledge
and view of
the sky is
almost lost.

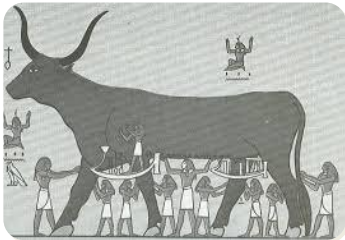




The Lunar/Solar Rhythm



We will not find our sky in their stories. We will not find our stories in their sky



The nursery rhyme

'Hey diddle diddle' in which the cow jumps over the moon is seen only as a nursery rhyme emerging out of eighteenth century England in a book of children's stories.

But is this a sky myth which has lost its cultural roots?

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.

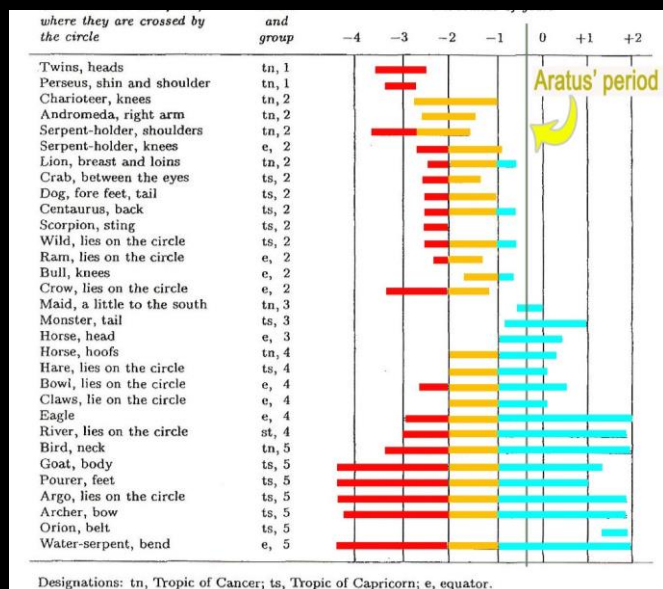


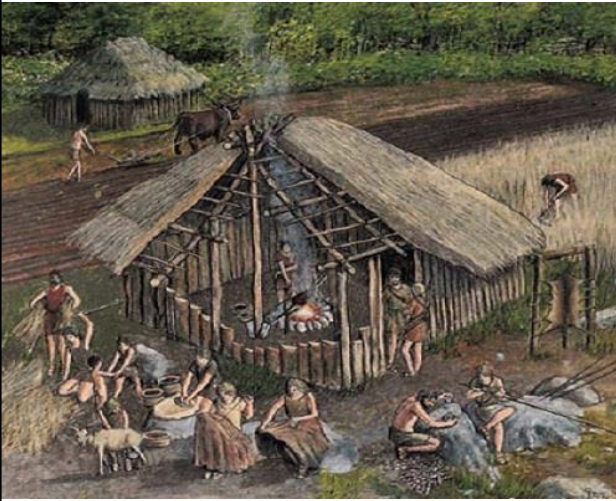
Oral Transmission

Aratus (310 BC-240 BC)
the Phaenomena.

S.Zhitomirsky (1999) showed how some of his constellational positions were for 3000 years earlier than his life time.

Thus they had been carried for nearly 3000 years using only oral tradition as their cultural holder





Some sky myths can be potential windows that look back into early Bronze Age cultures. But they do present problems.



Some sky myths are the stories which have lost their cultural roots

They may contain sky elements but may or may not be linked to the sky.

Or we have stories or artifacts that are suggestive of the sky!



Gundestrup Cauldon
(c.150 BC to 1 BC)



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

Do we have some of these stories but just do not know it?



In this regard a sky myth is a **primary document**

Piecing it back together (if possible) and placing it back into its period and place potentially gives a valuable resource to the cultural astronomer.

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 Mythology

Sky myths can use 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.

The Constellations

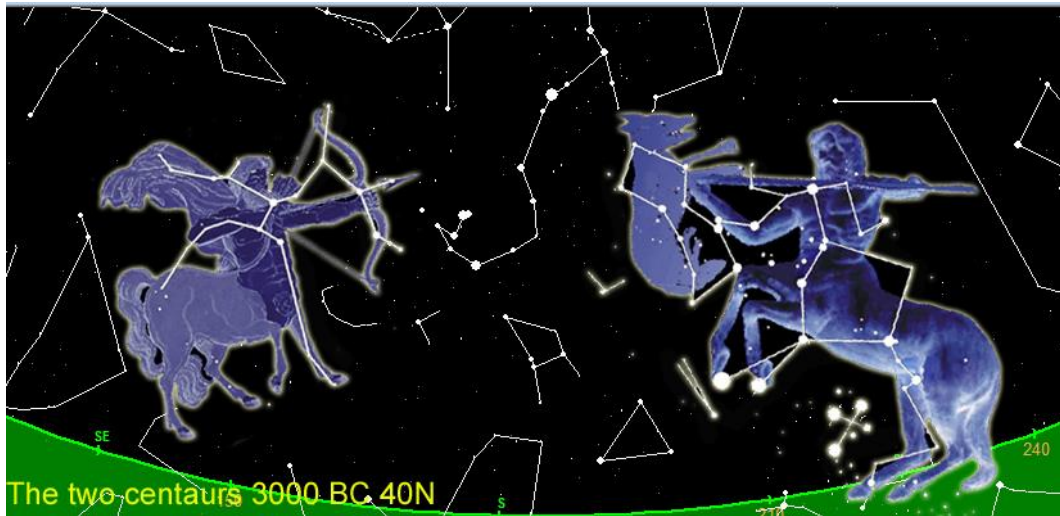
Lehoux continues and writes:

'The constellations have shapes, and the constellations have powers. Their powers are related to their shapes because the universe is rational and ordered at every level. The powers and the pictures combine into what we might profitably treat as the *natural history* of each constellation. They have actions and abilities in the world, they have environments (geometrical), and they have characteristic interrelationships with us and each other.'

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

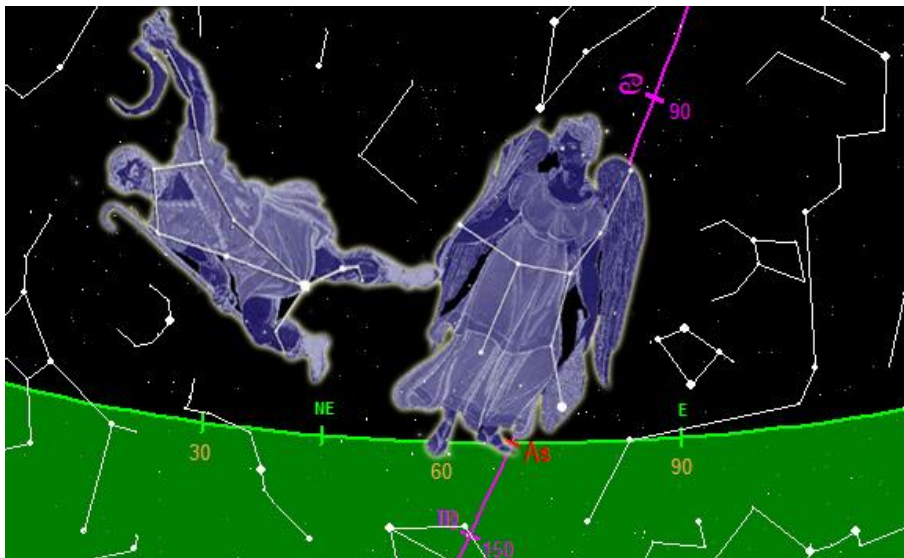
Sky Mythology - Constellations

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

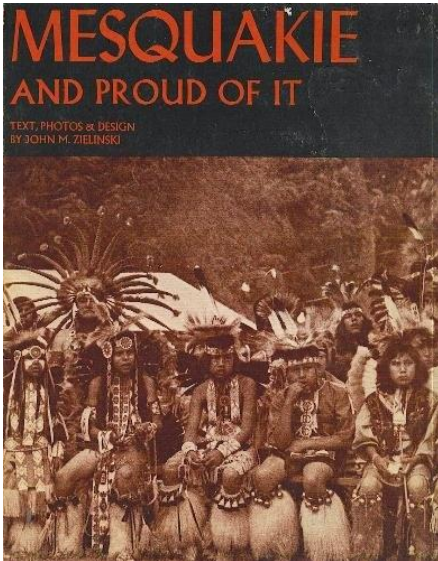


Sky Mythology - Constellations

The 'Hunter who now farms' stands next to Virgo with her wheat sheaf. Virgo is also known 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.



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

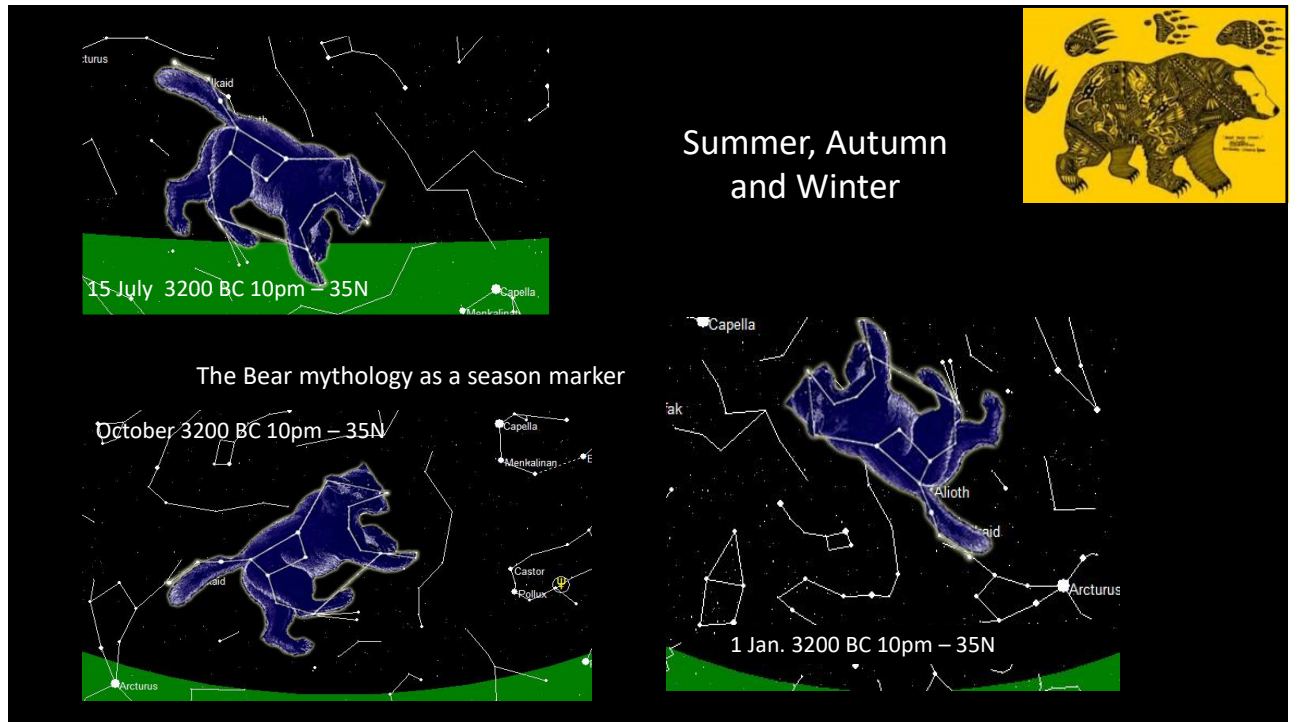
They say that once, a long time ago, **it was early winter**. Three young men went out to hunt at first light. One of them took his little dog, Hold Tight, with him. ... They had found a bear's den. They flush the bear out of its den. The bear moved to the north, he then moved to the east ... to the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



The Blood of the Bear

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

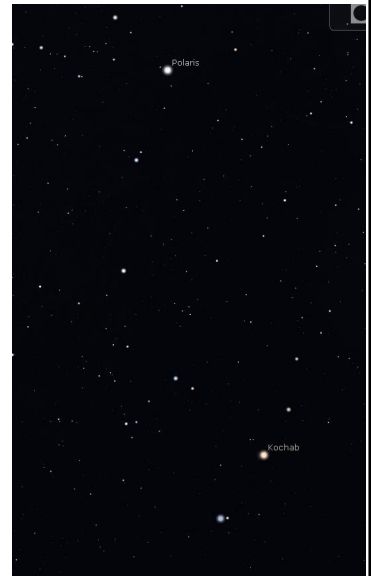


Another use of these stars...

In the pre-Islamic sky poem by Abū **al-Qāssim** Muḥammad ibn Hānī' (932-973 CE), there is a story of the murder of a father and the grief of his three daughters who seek to find a place to bury him and then take revenge against his murderer.

Their lone brother cannot help, as he is weak with a fluttering life force. Such a story has all the threads of a great mythic tragedy, yet it is firmly embedded in the sky poem, *Qasīdat al-Nujūm*, where it is used as a way of describing the stars in the tail of Ursa Major, the great bear.

ibn Hānī al-Andalusī, *The Dīwān of ibn Hānī the Andalusian* (Beirut: Dār Beirūt lil-Ṭibā'ah wal-Nashr, 1980). My thanks to Mai Lootah for bringing this to my attention and for the English translation of the poem.



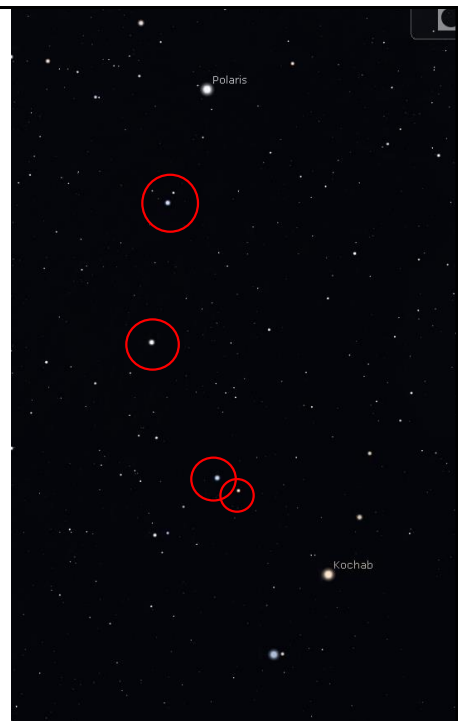
Ursa Major

Qasīdat al-Nujūm

The poem or ode to the stars

The three sisters hunting the
murder of their father with their
weak little bother whose life force
flatters are the stars that circle
around the pole in Ursa Minor

If this star story ever lost its title, it would become separated from the sky and it is unlikely that it could every be restored to its correct place within the heavens.



Such 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.



Another story concerning the celestial pole comes from the period of the Old Kingdom in Egypt. In the Pyramid Texts, which are the religious and mythical texts written on the walls of the fifth and sixth Dynasties Pyramids around the years of 2400 BCE, this is another type of narrative about the stars.



Pyramid Text of Unas

These religious writings tell of the journey of the pharaoh's soul. Upon his death he rises into the heavens on a ladder or on the wings of a great vulture. In this way, according to these ancient texts, he becomes a star. The sky story, which remains complete and intact on the walls of the pyramids, is largely unrecognisable to the modern eye.

This story never lost its link to the heavens but it lost its people.

The Sky's Necessity as a part of the myth

- Stories of constant circling in fixed positions
– circumpolar stars

The grieving daughters of the Islamic sky poem, keep hunting the murderer, going around and around... with the little bother trailing behind.

The hunters of the bear also are on a perpetual circular hunt, cycle after cycle.



The Sky's Necessity

- 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.

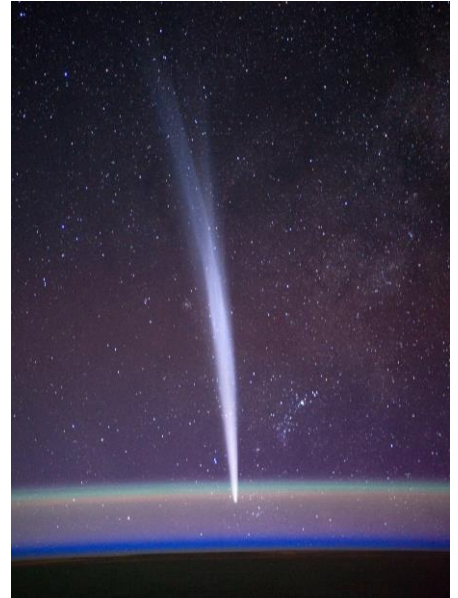


Relief image on the Tablet of Shamash, British Library room 55. Found in Sippar (Tell Abu Habbah), in Ancient Babylonia ; it dates from the 9th century BC and shows the sun god Shamash on the throne, in front of the Babylonian king Nabu-apla-iddina (888-855 BC)

The Sky's Necessity

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

The one track hero ploughing forth in a straight path with nothing being able to stop him!



The Moon



Moon Mythology

There is probably more mythology focused on the moon than any other heavenly body, including the sun.

- Stories about lunar rhythms
- Stories about lunar time
- Stories about the moon and weather
- Stories about lunar thinking – intuition
- Creation stories – when linked to the sun
- Stories about the faces in the moon
- Stories about moon and fertility
- Stories about the moon and planting cycles
- Stories about the moon and 'fate'
- Stories about life and death and rebirth.
- Stories about monsters and the moon.

Cashford, J. (2003). *The moon : myth and image*, London, Cassell Illustrated.

Beaulieu, P.-A. (1999). 'The Babylonian Man in the Moon'. *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 51, 91-99.



PRIMARY SOURCES - Required Reading

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/>

SECONDARLY SOURCES - Required Reading

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.