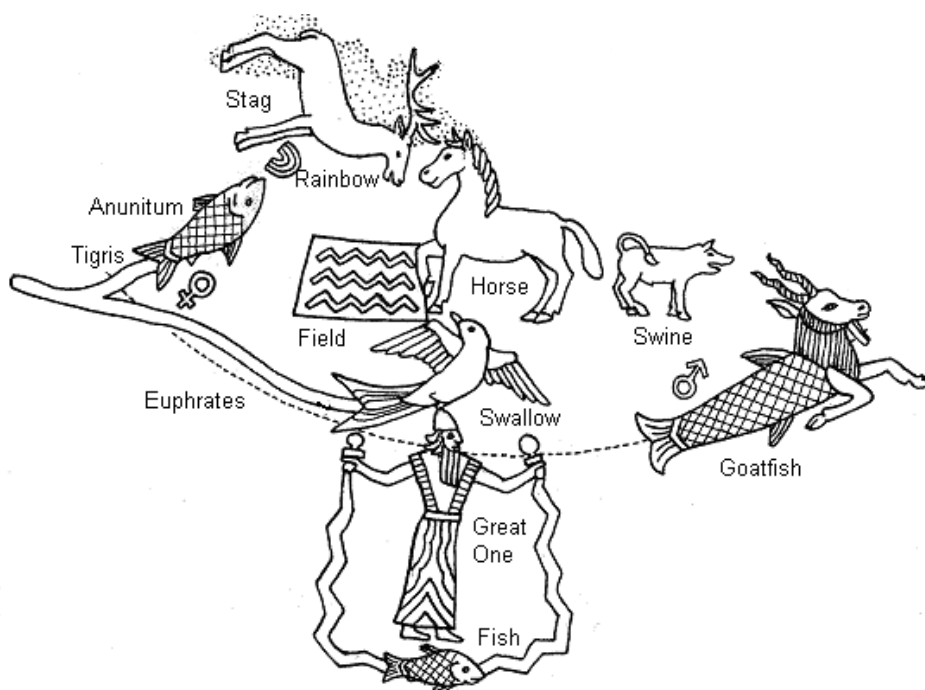


It is now well known that the constellations of the Zodiac originated in the ancient land of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Yet, despite more than a century and a half of scholarship, very little information on this subject has been made accessible to the non-specialist. We are very grateful to Gavin White 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-WINTER SOLSTICE PERIOD (Pages 25-7)

*Unlike the familiar calendar system that commences in the spring, the symbolic cycle embodied in the stars makes most sense when you start and end with the winter solstice. When the longest night is celebrated, the sun's power is at its weakest and it has reached its lowest and most southerly station in the heavens. But the crucial turning point has been attained and from this time onwards the sun's light and power increase day by day. The period following on from the winter solstice thus celebrates the rebirth of the sun from the waters of chaos and the re-emergence of life, in all its manifold forms, from the realm of darkness and death.*



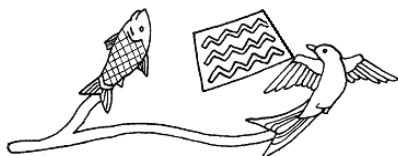
First Sector – the constellations rising after mid-winter



As mythical symbols, the Horse and Stag both represent the rebirth of the sun. This is most clearly seen in the mythology of the horse, whose principle mythic duty was to pull the chariot of the sun. The solar chariot ultimately governs the three major cycles of time recognised in myth – the rising of the chariot announces the dawn of each and every day, its annual rising after mid-winter ushers in the New Year, and in terms of the whole cycle of creation its rising celebrates the original birth of

the sun from the primordial waters of chaos. The Horse was probably chosen for this exalted role because of its speed and its shimmering mane, which was thought to represent radiating beams of sunlight.

The Stag is, in many respects, a very similar symbol to the Horse; it too has an age-old association to the sun and fire, and like the horse's mane the stag's horns also represent rays of sunlight. The annual renewal of its horns further predisposes it to be a symbol of rebirth, and in the form of the reindeer sledge of Father Christmas, the Stag is still honoured to this day as the symbol of the sun's wintertime passage. As symbols of solar rebirth the Horse and the Stag are thus very appropriate symbols to find at the very start of the stellar calendar.



The same theme of solar rebirth is expressed in a somewhat different form in the adjacent constellations known as Anunitum, the Swallow and the Field. These star figures together constitute a vivid depiction of the 'myth of the Syrian goddess', which can be thought of as the master-myth of this season. The myth runs as follows – two fish found an enormous egg floating in the depths of

the river Euphrates, the fish guided the egg up from the watery depths of the river and rolled it onto dry land, where a dove appeared and started to brood it. In due time, the Syrian goddess herself was born from the egg. On account of this myth, fish and birds were held to be particularly sacred to the Syrian goddess.

The star-map indicates that the setting of this myth and its participants are not, in fact, of this earth, but are to be found in the heavens. What is of pivotal importance is the identity of the 'river Euphrates'. Apart from the earthly river, the 'Euphrates' can also be found on the star-map where it is closely associated with the watery outflow joined to the Swallow. This heavenly river actually runs parallel to the course of the ecliptic (represented by the dotted line on the main map) and now that this fact is established, the action of the fish can be better understood – they escort the sun (the mythical egg) from its lowest point at the solstice and guide it onto its ascending path that leads towards the spring and 'dry land', which is represented on the star-map by the constellation of the Field. The myth as a whole can now be understood as an image of time that has guided us from the darkness of winter to the beginning of spring.

Continuing the watery theme we next encounter the Babylonian equivalents to *Capricorn* and *Aquarius*, known as the Goatfish and the Great One. The compound nature of the Goatfish is best understood in terms of the symbolism that we have already examined. In short, I would argue that it is essentially a combination of the Stag and the Fish – the Stag representing the renewal of the sun's power at midwinter, while the Fish acts as a guardian to the nascent sun and guides it upon the first stages of its ascending path.



The watery symbolism continues in the figure known as the Great One, the Babylonian name for our *Aquarius*. As a seasonal symbol, the Great One with his overflowing vases symbolises the increased rains and floods of winter and early spring. Along with the constellation of the Field, which represents a plot of arable land, the Great One can be thought of as the 'Irrigator' – as the rising of these constellations mark the season when the ripening barley is irrigated before the springtime harvest.



Although the precise location of the Swine is still a matter of debate, it is very likely that his star is to be found in the rebirth sector of the star-map as it is attributed to the god Damu, whose name can be translated as the 'child'. Mythic texts portray Damu as one of the dying gods, closely related to Dumuzi, who vanished from the earth and was mourned by his mother and sister. Like all the dying gods he does eventually return to the earth – and true to form, myths speak of him escaping from the underworld via a river.



All in all, the symbolism of the constellations that rise after the winter solstice concur in depicting a time when the sun re-emerges from the darkness of winter and starts its ascent into the heavens. Similarly, in the unfolding lifecycle of the dying god, Damu (the 'Child'), escapes from the underworld and starts to make his way back to the upper worlds.

The image of the child escaping the underworld, and of the nascent sun dwelling within the waters, can also be interpreted in human terms as the foetus dwelling within the creative waters of the womb. The multitude of images all relate one essential truth – that life, in all its myriad forms, takes shape within the creative waters.

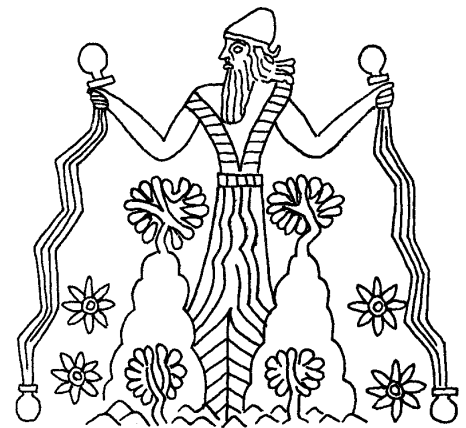
THE GREAT ONE (Pages 121-3)

The Babylonian precursor of *Aquarius* is known as Gula, the 'Great One'. The constellation is generally portrayed as a standing male figure, sometimes of gigantic proportions, who holds one or more vases overflowing with streams of water.

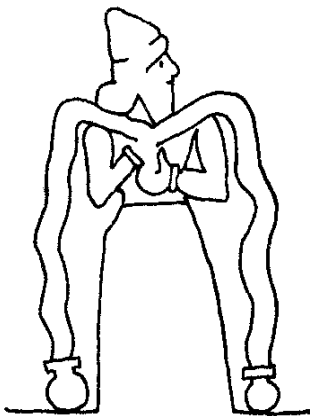
With his feet firmly set upon the earth, the gigantic figure of Gula towers above the mountaintops (*right*). The overflowing vases he holds aloft symbolise the fertile rains falling from heaven, and the vases set about his feet represent the watery Abyss below the earth from which freshwater wells up to feed rivers and lakes.

As a seasonal star the Great One represents the increase in river levels and rainfall that occurs during the winter months. In an agricultural context he can also be understood as the 'irrigator' whose waters irrigate the thriving barley fields in late winter. The barley fields are, of course, represented among the stars by the adjacent constellation of the Field.

To emphasise their watery nature the streams of water flowing from his vases are often embellished with the tiny images of fish (*see fig 2*). In fact, one of these fish appears on the Babylonian star-map as the constellation known as the Fish – it too has been transmitted to the Greek heavens as the *Southern Fish (Pisces Austrinus)*, where it can be seen swimming along the outflow of *Aquarius'* vase.



70 Decoration from a 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE cylinder seal, later discovered in Thebes, Greece



71 The Great One from an entitlement stone

In Babylonian art, waterways such as rivers and streams are conventionally depicted as a pair of wavy lines, which are thought to represent the parallel banks of a river. Recognisably the same image occurs in the cuneiform writing system as the **A-sign** (*right*). This sign by itself simply signifies 'water', but it is also used in numerous compounds expressing watery concepts, such as river, flood, sea and lake. The basic form of this sign has evolved into the familiar zigzag symbol used as the modern glyph for *Aquarius*.

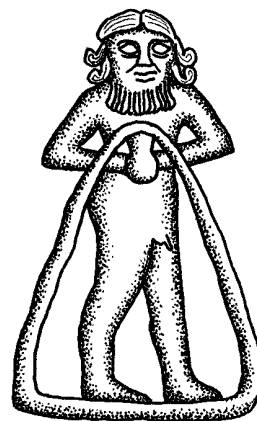


Like many of the constellations that embody aquatic symbolism, the Great One is closely associated with the god of wisdom and water, known as Enki in Sumerian and *Ea* in Akkadian. One astrology text simply states that 'the Great One is the Lord of springs, *Ea*'. In ancient art Enki is commonly depicted with overflowing vases in his hands or set around his throne dais, and sometimes he is seen seated within a square enclosure that is thought to represent the *Abyss* (*see fig 54*).

The constellation of the Great One is written 'Mul Gu-la'		
 MUL	 GU	 LA
<p>The name 'Gula' is derived from the Sumerian word <b>Gal</b>, which at the simplest level means 'great or big'. It can also signify 'a chief, or eldest son', and significantly it can also refer to 'a large cup or bowl'.</p> <p>Even though the <b>Gu-sign</b> is commonly used to write 'thread, string, flax' it appears to depict a cup with the sign for 'share or division' below it.</p> <p>The <b>La-sign</b> can be used to write 'plenty, exuberance, wealth'.</p> <p>On a pictorial level the combination of these the signs suggest the abundant water streams flowing from the <i>Water-bearer's</i> vases.</p>		

The ultimate origins of *Aquarius* can be traced back to a figure often called the *lahmu* or 'nude hero'. He first appears in the artwork of the early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium where he sometimes appears in depictions of the 'Lion-bull conflict' (see the Bison-man for more details). These images typically portray him as a benevolent figure, protecting the herds from the attack of savage lions

From 2500 BCE the nude hero starts to appear in new contexts. First, he is seen as a gatekeeper holding open stylised doors. But it is only in the Akkadian period, a couple of centuries later, that he becomes associated with the water god Enki and makes his first appearance as a water-bearer. By the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium his iconography has settled down into the familiar form of a standing man holding an overflowing vase (*right*). To emphasize his celestial character stars are sometimes arrayed about him.



72 A Nude Hero with overflowing vase, Old Babylonian period

Alongside the masculine water-bearer we also find a feminine version. Even though the symbol of the overflowing vase can be held by a wide variety of divine and semi-divine figures (see the Star of Abundance) we can be sure that the feminine form does indeed represent the Great One as her throne is sometimes placed above the Goatfish (*right*), and at least one entitlement stone actually labels an enthroned goddess as 'the Great One'. There has got to be a suspicion that this feminine form is older as the ancient divine name 'Gula' was originally applied to goddesses.

Like other ecliptic constellations that rise over the winter, the Great One has very few omens explicitly associated with it. However, the commentaries reveal that the 'Kidney-star' can be used as an alternative name for the Great One. Omens for the Kidney typically make predictions concerning the harvests and the nature of the coming floods, which is entirely consistent with the symbolic meaning of the Great One. As I argue in the section on the Star of Eridu, this identification probably depends on the common appearance of the two constellations as human figures holding overflowing vases.

See also: the Kidney, the Star of Eridu, the Fish, *figs 2, 54 & 161*



73 Detail from an early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium cylinder seal