

STARS IN THE SKY, GODS IN THE HEAVENS

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THE SACRED NUMBER 7

The number 7 first gained sacred status in Sumer. The number represents the 7 lights in the sky that moved their positions relative to the more stable palette of stars. These moving lights became personified as gods, whose movements wrote the scripts of ancient mythology by moving closer to, away from, or across other planets and constellations. Many of these stories are explained in this section.

Without paper, chalkboards, or computers, the ancient astronomers worldwide needed ways of recording the basic movements of the 7 wandering lights seen with the naked eye: the sun and moon, as well as the planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

Although these planetary names are Latin monikers, they originated mostly because of Mesopotamian cosmology. The Sumerians began the identity of the modern zodiac, but it was the Babylonians who turned this science into great literature. Whereas the Sumerians told nature myths to help communicate good farming practices, the Babylonians looked skyward for understanding, divination, and control. You will notice this difference in the unit's readings compared with the Sumerian tales of earth and water.

The number 7 can be found in many places: the days of the week, the number of steps on their temples (ziggurats), and even the number of branches on their sacred trees in their artwork, representing life (and thus, the Tree of Life). In spite of this, the seventh day in Babylonia was not holy. Rather, it represented danger and darkness due to the dramatic transformation of the moon from night to night. Being superstitious peoples, the seventh day became a day of rest.

7 DAYS A WEEK

Although the 7-day week developed from the lunar calendar, there were no weeks in ancient Sumer. Holy days were typically celebrated on the first, seventh and fifteenth of each month, corresponding to the main stages of the moon: crescent, half, and full. Sargon I had conquered Akkadia, upstream from Sumer, but soon conquered the deteriorating city-states that comprised Sumer. In 2350 BCE, Sargon instituted the first weekly calendar ever recorded.

The Mesopotamian day started at sunset (similar to the Hebrew tradition) and was twelve double hours long: six of daytime and six of nighttime. Because an "hour" was calculated as one-sixth of the available daylight, the length of each hour differed from day to day, due to the length of the daylight that each season provided. Because of their sexagesimal-based numbering system, the Sumerians' hour contained 60 minutes and the minute contained 60 seconds. A measure of distance, called a "beru," was calculated as the distance that a man could walk in a "double hour" (roughly five miles).

The Sumerian year was divided into twelve lunar months, each being 29 or 30 days long, and beginning at the first sighting of the new moon. To keep the lunar year (354 days) in step with the solar year, the king would periodically add an extra month at his decree. This resulted in some years having thirteen months instead of the normal twelve.

All this was governed by the moving lights in the sky, so it was deemed. The word “planet” is derived from the Greek “planets,” meaning “wanderers.” The wanderings of the planets will inspire much of this unit’s literature, and you will see the names of the main characters immortalized in the 7 days of the week:

GLYPH	“STAR”	SUMERIAN	BABYLONIAN	GREEK	ROMAN
☉	Sun	Utu	Shamash	Helios	Sol
☾	Moon	Nanna, Suen	Sin	Selenê	Luna
☿	Mercury	Ningishzida	Nabu	Hermes	Mercurius
♀	Venus	Inanna	Ishtar	Aphrodite	Venus
♂	Mars	Gugalanna	Nergal	Ares	Mars
♃	Jupiter	Enlil	Marduk	Zeus	Jupiter
♄	Saturn	Ninurta	Ninurta	Kronos	Saturnus

ENGLISH	ITALIAN	FRENCH	SPANISH	“STAR”	GLYPH	ELEMENT
Sunday	Domenica	Dimanche	Domingo	Sun	☉	gold (Au)
Monday	lunedì	lundi	lunes	Moon	☾	silver (Ag)
Tuesday	martedì	mardi	martes	Mars	♂	iron (Fe)
Wednesday	mercoledì	mercredi	miércoles	Mercury	☿	mercury (Hg)
Thursday	giovedì	jeudi	jueves	Jupiter	♃	tin (Sn)
Friday	venerdì	vendredi	viernes	Venus	♀	copper (Cu)
Saturday	sabato	samedi	sábado	Saturn	♄	lead (Pb)

NOMENCLATURE: DAYS OF THE WEEK

Our current names in English for the seven days of the week originate from two different sources: astronomical references and Norse mythology: Sunday = The Sun’s Day; Monday = The Moon’s Day; Saturday = Saturn’s Day. Here are the Norse/Germanic identities:

- Wednesday = Woden’s Day Woden (or Odin) was the god of wisdom, war, battle, and death
- Friday = Freya’s/Frigg’s Day Freya was the goddess of love, sex, war, beauty, and fertility
- Tuesday = Tiw’s/Tyr’s Day Tyr was the Norse god of combat and heroes
- Thursday = Thor’s Day Thor was the thunder god who used his hammer to create thunder

**THE SKY**

Sumer — An
 Babylonia — Anu
 Other Mesop. — Uru-Anna

Egypt — Nut
 Greece — Uranus
 Rome — Uranus

The Mesopotamian sky was divided into three realms: the “way of Anu” was the vertical band rising from the eastern horizon, providing a pathway for the sun and the Milky Way to follow. Flanked to either side were two other realms: the “Way of Enlil” resided in the north, from where favorable winds from Enlil blew in the rain and perhaps were attributed to the motion of the seven moving lights. The “Way of Enki” fell to the south, where Enki presided over the “fixed stars,” or the constellations of the zodiac. The southern horizon also received the waters flowing in a southerly direction into the Persian Gulf. The land, the “sphere of elements,” was governed by Ki, an early form of the birth mother Ninhursag (also called Ninmah, Aruru, etc.).

In Greek mythology, Uranus was considered to be the earliest god of the heavens, the son of Terra (or Gaea), the earth. Uranus married his mother and became the chief lord until his son Saturn (Kronos) deposed him (and was later deposed by his son Jupiter (Zeus)).

**THE SUN**

Sumer — Utu
 Babylonia — Shamash
 Other Mesop. — Bishebi, Shash-arū

Egypt — Ra
 Greece — Helios
 Rome — Sol

The sun represents power, justice, omniscience, and compassion in most mythologies. In Mesopotamia, Utu (Shamash) provides direct assistance to many literary characters, perhaps representations of the other planets. Shamash was said to create sunbeams with his saw that he used to cut his way through the Zagros Mountains to the east each sunrise, painting him as a character of great power and virility. The Egyptian sun god Ra would also acquire the personality of a strong and aggressive god, ruling the sky.

In Greek mythology, the Titan Hyperion was the original sun god, but he was ultimately replaced by his son Helios (Sol), the “royal sun” who looked over his cattle in *The Odyssey*.

**THE MOON**

Sumer — Nanna, Suen
 Babylonia — Sin
 Other Mesop. — Aku

Egypt — Khons, Thoth
 Greece — Selene/Artemis
 Rome — Luna/Diana

Nanna (also Suen or Sin) was called “the wise lord” or the “Lord of Wisdom” by the Babylonians, who perhaps acknowledged the art of calendar making by tracking the moon’s

changes each night. Technically, “Nanna” refers to the full moon, while Suen (Sin) refers to the new moon. Nanna was father to both Utu (the sun) and Ishtar (Venus), suggesting his importance to the Sumerian pantheon.

The moon’s waxing and waning were often associated with female menstrual cycle and capricious behavior, but the earliest characterizations of the moon god were male. The crescent moon was associated with the horns of a bull, creating the most recognizable fertility symbol from the Age of Taurus. The moon’s mutability also caused it to be associated both with the dead, the underworld, and immortality. Monthly agricultural sacrifices were performed to encourage its resurrection on the third day of the new moon.

In Greek mythology, the Titan Atlas and his consort Phoebe ruled the moon, ultimately replaced by the goddesses Selene (Luna), Artemis (Diana), and Hekate (Hecate).

☿ MERCURY			
Sumer —	Ningishzida, Enki	Egypt —	Anubis, Thoth
Babylonia —	Nabu (Nebo)	Greece —	Hermes, Apollo
Other Mesop. —	Nabul, Bibbu, Lubat-gud	Rome —	Mercurius

The planet Mercury is the fastest in our solar system, so most mythologies equate the swift movements of Mercury with a messenger god or a wandering spirit. Some Sumerian cities assigned Ningishzida to the speedy planet, calling him the “Bull of Light” or “Shining Bull,” likely communicating Mercury’s proximity to both the sun and the constellation Taurus in the eastern sky in spring and autumn. Ningishzida’s descent into the underworld and ascent into the Way of Anu is the subject of several Sumerian myths. He earned the nicknames “The Buyer-God” and “The Messenger” (Mushtaddullu) due to his ability to transcend the realms of the underworld and the heavens, making him a powerful god.

He is also associated with another god half-way around the world: the Aztec creator god Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, who brought civilization to the Aztecs and returned to his heavenly home on a raft of snakes over the ocean (and will one day return). Other cult centers worshipped Enki (Ningishzida’s father) as Mercury, perhaps due to Enki’s shifty use of language.

The Babylonians changed Mercury’s god to Nabu, called “The Herald” or “The Prophet,” and often depicted riding a mušhuššu dragon on the water (same as Marduk, Nabu’s father). He is told to have received prophecies by singing and chanting in foreign tongues. In one story, Nabu heroically traveled to the mountains and into the Underworld to rescue his father Marduk. He was the god of writing, record-keeping, and wisdom, developing a parallel to both Enki (his grandfather and the god of wisdom) and the Egyptian god Thoth (writing and wisdom), even though Thoth was also regarded as a moon god. No Sumerian stories of Nabu seem to exist.

Nabu even makes his way into the Bible: “The Idols of Babylon, Bel [Marduk] and Nebo [Nabu], are being hauled away on ox carts! But look! The beasts are stumbling! The cart is turning over! The gods are falling out onto the ground! Is that the best they can do? If

they cannot even save themselves from such a fall, how can they save their worshippers from Cyrus?" (Isaiah 46:1-2)

Greek mythology adapted the messenger symbolism with its parallel character Hermes (Latin Mercurius), the a son of Zeus (Jupiter). Hermes means "He of the Market" or "The Retailer"; likewise, Mercurius means "God of Merchandise." Originally, the Titan Coeus and Titaness Metis ruled over Mercury.

♀ VENUS			
Sumer —	Inanna	Egypt —	Hathor
Babylonia —	Ishtar	Greece —	Aphrodite
Other Mesop. —	Zib (Zig), Dil-bat	Rome —	Venus

Venus bobs up and down in both the morning sky as well as the evening sky during different times of its 584-day cycle. After residing in the western evening horizon for nine months, Venus rises above the sun as it moves into the morning sky for the next nine months. After its initial appearance in the morning sky, it then pauses for a bit and slowly follows the sun with each passing day. It then passes behind the sun, disappears for several weeks, and then again moves into the evening sky. Venus climbs high into the evening sky as it follows the Sun to the horizon each night. After hanging above the sun for a while, Venus plunges back into the morning sky, and the cycle continues.

Venus and the sun perform this dance about five times in eight years. About every 120 years, Venus passes in front of the sun (this is called a *transit*). This last occurred on 8 June 2004, when Venus emerged back into the morning sky after glowing as the evening star for the previous three seasons. The following table shows when Venus will occupy the eastern morning sky or the western evening sky in the coming years:

DATE	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
JAN 1	<i>morning</i>	evening	NV*	<i>morning</i>	evening	<i>morning</i>
FEB 1	<i>morning</i>	evening	NV*	<i>morning</i>	evening	<i>morning</i>
MAR 1	<i>morning</i>	evening	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening	NV*
APR 1	<i>morning</i>	evening	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening	NV*
MAY 1	<i>morning</i>	<i>morning</i>	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening	NV*
JUN 1	NV*	<i>morning</i>	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening	evening
JUL 1	NV*	<i>morning</i>	evening	<i>morning</i>	<i>morning</i>	evening
AUG 1	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening	NV*	<i>morning</i>	evening
SEP 1	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening	NV*	<i>morning</i>	evening
OCT 1	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening
NOV 1	evening	<i>morning</i>	<i>morning</i>	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening
DEC 1	evening	<i>morning</i>	<i>morning</i>	evening	<i>morning</i>	evening

NV — Venus is not visible (too close to the sun or the sky is too bright)

evening — Venus is visible in the evening just after dusk

morning — Venus is visible in the morning just before dawn

In Sumer, Venus was known as Inanna, and she was sometimes called Sinishat (“The Female”) or Dil-bat (“The Herald”) because she would remain as the brightest light in the eastern sky before sunrise, beckoning the Utu to rise from the dark Underworld.

The earliest tablet known to chart star patterns came from the court of King Amisaduqa of Babylon, dating between 1646 and 1626 BCE, called The Venus Tablet of Amisaduqa. Here is a passage from that tablet regarding Venus: “In month XI, 15th day, Venus disappeared in the west. Three days it stayed away, then on the 18th day it became visible in the east. Springs will open and Adad will bring his rain and Ea his floods. Messages of reconciliation will be sent from King to King.”

The Babylonians called her Ishtar; sometimes she was also referred to as Ilat Shimetan (“Goddess of the Evening Star”) or as “Qadishtu Ilani (“The Pretty Lady of the Gods”). Because Venus resides in both the eastern sky at sunrise and in the evening sky at sunset, she has acquired a dual identity in Mesopotamian literature.

In the evening, she epitomized love, desire, beauty, compassion, and extreme femininity. At sunset she was called Ishtar of Uruk and “The Lady of the Gods” as she descended beyond the western horizon with many different characters of the zodiac. Because of her perpetual descent into the Underworld, she also acquired status as a goddess of mourning. After disappearing for three nights, she is reborn in the fiery eastern sky at sunrise. Here, she assumes more aggressive and masculine characteristics. Now promoting war and authority, Venus was sometimes called Ishtar of Agade or “Ishtar of the Stars.”

Her two main symbols, the eight-petaled rosette and the lion, also reveal her dual nature. When associated in conjunction with Mercury, Venus often depicted bisexuality (the word “hermaphrodite” comes from combining the Greek gods Hermes [Mercury] and Aphrodite [Venus]). In Egypt, the goddess Hathor would parallel Inanna’s/Ishtar’s attributes of both love and war.

In Greek mythology, Aphrodite was the goddess of love who appeared out of the sea, born from the severed genitals of her father Uranus. The name “Aphrodite” literally means “Born from Foam.” Originally, Venus was a representation of the Titan Oceanus and his wife Tethys.

♂ MARS			
Sumer —	Gugalanna, Nergal	Egypt —	Horus
Babylonia —	Nergal, Marduk	Greece —	Ares/Herakles
Other Mesop. —	Zal-bad-anu, Mushtabarru	Rome —	Mars/Hercules

In Sumer, Mars was identified with two Underworld gods who were attributed to be the husbands of Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld. One was Gugalanna, the first Husband of Ereshkigal, also known as the “Great Bull of Heaven.” Many stories depict the death of Gugalanna, including the Sumerian story *The Descent of Inanna* and the Akkadian *Gilgamesh*.

In Babylonia, Nergal became the predominant figure to represent the red planet. Nergal was the second husband of Ereshkigal, as depicted in the story *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. Also known as Erra (Ares), Nergal was a fierce god of war who was blamed for fevers, plagues, fires, and strife. One nickname of Nergal was “The Great Watcher,” while another was more ominous: *Mushtabaru mutanu*, which means “satiated by corpses.”

Most names for Mars involve the consonants M and R, leading many scholars to suggest that Marduk had replaced Nergal in parts of Babylonia. Marduk was often depicted riding a musshushu dragon, one of the main symbols of this planet’s mythological identity. In Hebrew, “marah” means “bitterness” and “disobedience.” It is also possible that Marduk’s name was likewise associated with Mercury. The Babylonian creation story *Enuma elish* depicts Marduk as a character who collects all of the powers from the pantheon, potentially representing all seven moving lights in the sky in some cult centers — implying a flirtation with monotheism in Babylonia.

Egypt did not utilize Mars directly in its literature, which is surprising. The god Set is the likely candidate for this depiction (Set was a chaos god who was described as the red desert sands as well as an angry god bent on warfare). Interestingly, Set appears to have contributed the two consonants used to begin the name Saturn instead. Some sources name Horus as the depiction of Mars due to his penchant to fight Set in senseless battles.

In Greece, both Ares and Herakles were representatives of Mars. Greek nicknames for these characters include Pyroeis (“The Fiery”) and Thouros (“The Flamboyant”). Romans stoics often called Mars Airein (“To Kill”), equating the red color of this planet with human blood. Ares was the son of Zeus and Hera; Mars was the son of Jupiter and Juno. In more ancient times, the Titan Crius and the Titaness Dione ruled the red planet.

4

JUPITER

Sumer —	Nibiru (Nibru, Neberu), Enlil	Egypt —	Amon-Ra
Babylonia —	Marduk, Ellil	Greece —	Zeus
Other Mesop. —	Merodach, Dapinu	Rome —	Jupiter

Since the planets Jupiter and Saturn are further away from the sun, their revolutions around the sun take much longer, giving these planets the appearance of relative stability in the night sky. Their slow, plodding progress across the heavens inspired their godly characteristics of stability and leadership.

In Sumer, Jupiter was referred to as Nibiru, and sometimes Enlil. Called “The Transient” and “Planet of the Crossing” in astronomical texts, Nibiru came to represent the area in the sky where the Anunna (Anunnaki gods) resided before they descended to earth to govern it. The Anunnaki were the collection of older Sumerian gods, including Anu, Enki, Enlil, and Nanna, and the name means literally “Those Who From Heaven to Earth Came.” The Bible even refers to the “Anakim” and the “Nefilim” (literally, “Giants” – see *Genesis* 6). Although Nibiru did not translate into a personified character like his fellow Anunnaki gods, Jupiter’s stability earned Nibiru the names Umun-sig-ea and Molobarar, the “Chief Oracle Giver.”

In later Babylonian times, Jupiter became the literary character Marduk, the chief of the gods who collected the Anunnaki's powers, defeated Tiamat (the ocean dragon), and organized the cosmos in *Enuma elish*. As the primary god of kingship, wisdom, and judgment, Marduk acted like a shepherd to the other stars. Marduk earned 50 powerful names, including Amar-utu ("Bull Calf of the Sun"), but was most commonly known throughout the Semitic Near East as Ba'al (or Bel), which means "lord" or "master." Riding his mushushu dragon in the heavens, Marduk/Bel was so powerful that his name had to be associated with evil by other cultures to explain why their gods were better (such as "Baalzebub," meaning "Lord of the Flies," an epithet of Satan).

In Egypt, the worship of Amon grew in the city of Thebes to the point where the local god Amon was fused with the wider worship of the sun god Ra, creating the god Amon-Ra. His name means "hidden," and he was often depicted as blue in color, the Egyptian symbol of invisibility. This practice parallels Hindu art, which likewise depicts its greatest gods with blue skin. The largest religious temple to honor Amon-Ra is located in Karnak, and Amon-Ra was later credited as the source of all life, even spawning the first pharaohs, who claimed Amon-Ra to be their mutual ancestor to solidify their authority. Amon-Ra was father to Khons, the moon god and the creator of humans.

Ancient Greece also associated this planet with supreme authority. Zeus, the father of the gods, was the most powerful — and the most frisky, having made love with hundreds of goddesses, thus producing most of the Greco-Roman pantheon. Originally, the Titans Eurymedon and Themis ruled Jupiter. Connections to Marduk/Bel also become evident: the god Triton was often called "Baal-zephon," meaning "Lord of the Black Northern Void," and Meri-Baal, "Lord of the Rebellion." Modern Greeks speak of Zeus Hypsistos, "The Most High God."

The Roman Jupiter was the sky god of thunder (who became Thor in Norse mythology, the thunder god who stuck his hammer in the clouds to create thunderclaps, immortalized in the English name for Thursday: Thor's Day). Jupiter was the son of both Saturn (Kronos) and Ops (Rhea), and he was married to his patient and forgiving wife, his sister Juno (Hera).

♄ SATURN	
Sumer —	Ningursu, Nintura
Babylonia —	Nintura
Other Mesop. —	Lu-bad-sag-ush, Nirig
Egypt —	Ptah, Set
Greece —	Kronos
Rome —	Saturnus

Saturn owns the longest orbit of all the planets, needing about 30 years to complete one revolution. This extensive orbit makes Saturn appear to be stationary in the sky, with slow movements noticeable only to those who study the sky over a lifetime. Hence, Saturn has generated such epithets as Father Time and, sometimes, as the Grim Reaper (both carry a staff, perhaps representing the precessional axis of the earth).

Nearly all Mesopotamian cultures were in agreement as to Saturn's godly identity, calling him Nintura, a warrior god. The Sumerians often referred to the ringed planet as Ningirsu (a local version of Nintura, meaning "Chief God"), Sag-ush (Sumerian for "Head-Firm") and

sometimes Lu-bad-sag-ush (“Planet Kaiawanu”). The Babylonians also called him Ninib (Semitic for “Steadfast” or “The Steady One”). Nintura was often depicted in art as an ox, an eagle, or a vulture.

In Egypt, two different gods were associated with this planet. The oldest was the ancient god Ptah, husband to Sekhmet or Bast. Ptah, whose name means “The Sculptor” or “The Creator,” was an early creator god who placed everything in motion and governed over the Universal Law. He was often depicted in art as a balding, bearded old man wearing a tight headband. Other traditions identified Set, the red desert god of chaos, as being Saturn’s representative. This association may have developed in time of drought or weak Nile River inundations, causing the Egyptians to acknowledge a greater force in the universe that was maleficent.

In Greece, the Titan Kronos was understood as the ancient nocturnal representative of Helios, sometimes called Kakkab Shamahi (“The Star of the Sun”). Kronos was later deposed by his son Zeus, who became the supreme leader of the classical pantheon, but Kronos (Cronus) still provides us with the etymology of our words for “time”: “chronology.”

The Romanized Saturnus was the son of Uranus and Terra Mater (Gaea, earth), and was considered to be the god of agriculture. Saturnus means “Sower” or “Seedsman,” and he was sometimes called Assiduss, “The Constantly Plodding One.”

The travels of these seven heavenly lights were immortalized in many of the stories that we will examine in Unit 2: The Age of Aries.

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