

# western

<https://www.agoramores.com/culture/zodiac/western>

Tags: culture · zodiac · western-zodiac · astrology

## Western Zodiac

The zodiac in the breadcrumb bar marked **WEST** is the *tropical* zodiac: twelve equal thirty-degree arcs of the ecliptic, the path the Sun appears to walk against the stars over a year. It is a coordinate system before it is anything else. Its zero point is not a star but a moment — the March equinox, when the Sun crosses the celestial equator going north. Everything else is measured out from there in twelve equal steps, so the first day of Aries is by definition the first day of spring in the northern hemisphere.

That single decision is what separates this system from the *sidereal* zodiac used in [Jyotisha](#) and elsewhere, which pins its signs to the fixed stars instead. The two frames drift apart because the Earth's axis wobbles: **precession** carries the equinox point backwards along the ecliptic at about one degree every 71.6 years, a full circuit in roughly 25,772 years. The frames last agreed around the third century CE. They are now about **24 degrees apart** — nearly a whole sign — which is why the Western and Vedic chips in the bar rarely show the same answer on the same day.

So the constellations and the signs have come unstuck. When the site says the Sun is in Aries on 25 March, the Sun is physically in front of the stars of Pisces. This is not a flaw anyone hid; Ptolemy knew the equinox moved, and chose the equinox anyway. The tropical zodiac is a calendar of the seasons wearing the names of constellations it has outlived.

## The invention calendar

The zodiac was not revealed. It was compiled, standardized, mathematized, and then repeatedly re-anchored by calendar reform. This is the sequence.

| Date                                                                                      | Event                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| c. 1900–1600 BCE                                                                          | Old Babylonian star lists and the <i>Prayer to the Gods of the Night</i> name constellations that survive into the zodiac — the Bull, the Scorpion, the Goat-Fish among them.                                                                                                                                                                            |
| c. 1100 BCE                                                                               | The "Three Stars Each" texts (Astrolabe B) sort 36 stars into the paths of Ea, Anu and Enlil, three bands across the sky. The first systematic celestial bookkeeping.                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| c. 1000 BCE ( <i>contested; some place the underlying observations c. 1300–1000 BCE</i> ) | <b>MUL.APIN</b> is compiled — a two-tablet Babylonian compendium of star lists, risings, intercalation rules and shadow tables. Its list of the "stars in the path of the Moon" gives seventeen or eighteen constellations along the ecliptic. This is the direct ancestor of the zodiac, but it is not yet twelve, and the divisions are not yet equal. |
| 686 BCE                                                                                   | The oldest surviving dated copy of MUL.APIN. The text is older than the tablet.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

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| 7th century BCE                                                                                    | <i>Enuma Anu Enlil</i> , the roughly seventy-tablet omen series, is in canonical use. Celestial divination is temple and palace work, read for the king and the land — not for private individuals.                                                                         |
| 5th century BCE, commonly c. 450–400 BCE ( <i>contested</i> ; J. P. Britton argued for c. 400 BCE) | Babylonian astronomers replace the ragged constellations with <b>twelve equal signs of 30 degrees each</b> . This is the actual invention of the zodiac as a measuring scheme.                                                                                              |
| 410 BCE                                                                                            | The earliest <b>dated horoscope</b> yet identified, a Babylonian cuneiform tablet casting a birth. Astrology turns from the fate of kingdoms to the fate of a person.                                                                                                       |
| 331 BCE onward                                                                                     | Alexander's conquest opens sustained Greek access to Babylonian scholarship.                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| c. 280 BCE ( <i>tradition, contested</i> )                                                         | Berosus, a Babylonian priest of Bel, is said by Vitruvius to have taught Chaldean astral doctrine on the island of Kos. The story is late and may be legend, but it stands for a real transmission.                                                                         |
| c. 275 BCE                                                                                         | Aratus's <i>Phaenomena</i> versifies the constellation scheme of Eudoxus of Cnidus and becomes the standard Greek and Roman sky poem.                                                                                                                                       |
| c. 150–120 BCE ( <i>dating contested</i> )                                                         | The pseudonymous <i>Nechepso–Petosiris</i> texts appear in Ptolemaic Egypt — the founding literature of Hellenistic astrology, fusing Babylonian signs with Egyptian decans and Greek geometry.                                                                             |
| c. 127 BCE                                                                                         | <b>Hipparchus of Nicaea discovers precession</b> , comparing his measurement of Spica with observations made about 150 years earlier by Timocharis. He puts the drift at not less than one degree per century. His treatise is lost; we know it because Ptolemy reports it. |
| 45 BCE                                                                                             | The <b>Julian calendar</b> takes effect. Its 365.25-day year runs about eleven minutes long, so the equinox slips earlier against the dates by roughly one day every 128 years.                                                                                             |
| c. 150 CE                                                                                          | <b>Ptolemy's <i>Almagest</i></b> — the star catalogue of 1,022 stars in 48 constellations, and the explicit statement that the signs are reckoned from the equinox, not the stars. The tropical zodiac is now fixed by definition.                                          |
| c. 150–170 CE                                                                                      | <b>Ptolemy's <i>Tetrabiblos</i></b> gives astrology a physical rationale in Aristotelian terms and becomes the base text of the Western tradition for fourteen centuries.                                                                                                   |
| c. 285 CE                                                                                          | The conventional epoch at which the tropical and sidereal zodiacs coincided under the Lahiri definition. Everything after this is drift.                                                                                                                                    |
| 325 CE                                                                                             | The Council of Nicaea works from an equinox on 21 March. The date is now embedded in Easter reckoning, which is what will eventually force a calendar fix.                                                                                                                  |
| 4th–6th centuries CE                                                                               | Zodiac wheels appear in synagogue floor mosaics at Hammat Tiberias and Beth Alpha, complete with a Helios figure at the hub.                                                                                                                                                |

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|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 787–886 CE        | Abu Maʿshar al-Balkhi writes the <i>Great Introduction</i> , the most influential Arabic systematization; Latin translations by John of Seville (1133) and Hermann of Carinthia (1140) carry it back into Europe.                                                                                                                                                |
| 1582 CE           | <b>The Gregorian reform.</b> <i>Inter gravissimas</i> is issued on 24 February; 4 October is followed directly by 15 October, dropping ten days to pull the equinox back to 21 March. Britain and its colonies do not follow until 1752. Because the tropical zodiac is anchored to the equinox, the reform is what keeps the sign dates roughly where they are. |
| 1922 / 1930 CE    | The IAU fixes 88 constellation names, then adopts Eugène Delporte's boundaries. The ecliptic now demonstrably crosses <b>thirteen</b> constellations, Ophiuchus included — a fact about lines on a chart, not a lost sign.                                                                                                                                       |
| 1890s–1917 CE     | Alan Leo strips horoscopy down to sun-sign character reading, making mass-market astrology possible.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 24 August 1930 CE | R. H. Naylor's column in the <i>Sunday Express</i> , written on the birth of Princess Margaret, launches the newspaper sun-sign column — the form almost everyone now means by "zodiac".                                                                                                                                                                         |

## Religion

In Mesopotamia this was religion, straightforwardly. The sky was legible because the gods wrote on it, and reading it was a licensed profession: the *tupšar Enuma Anu Enlil*, the scribe of the omen series, reported to the palace. Ishtar was Venus, Nergal was Mars, Marduk was Jupiter — not symbols of those planets but those planets. The omens concerned the king, the harvest, the enemy and the flood.

The Greek layer sits on top of that and behaves differently. Attaching Chrysomallos to Aries, or the Nemean lion to Leo, is mostly **Hellenistic literary tradition** — catasterism, the business of Eratosthenes' *Catasterismi* and Hyginus's *De Astronomia*, which collect and tidy stories rather than record worship. There are exceptions worth naming: the Dioscuri behind Gemini had genuine cult at Sparta and at Rome, and the Babylonian gods behind Taurus, Capricorn and Aquarius were receiving offerings in temples long before any Greek wrote them down. But nobody sacrificed to Libra.

Christian writers argued with the zodiac rather than ignoring it. Augustine attacked it on free-will grounds in the *Confessions* and *City of God*, leaning on the case of twins born under one sky to opposite fates; church councils barred clergy from practising it. It survived anyway, absorbed rather than erased — as the labours of the months in cathedral portals and books of hours, and as the tetramorph, where the four fixed signs (bull, lion, eagle-for-scorpion, man-for-water-bearer) become the four Evangelists of Ezekiel and Revelation. In the Islamic world *ʿilm al-ḥkam al-nujum* was a serious mathematical discipline with serious opponents; Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali both wrote against it, and Maimonides condemned it outright in his *Letter on Astrology* of 1195.

## The twelve signs

Rulers below are the **traditional seven-planet rulerships** — the ones the site displays. Modern astrology reassigns Scorpio to Pluto, Aquarius to Uranus and Pisces to Neptune, but those are twentieth-century

additions.

| Sign                        | Dates           | Glyph | Element | Modality | Ruler    |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|-------|---------|----------|----------|
| <a href="#">Aries</a>       | Mar 21 – Apr 19 |       | Fire    | Cardinal | Mars     |
| <a href="#">Taurus</a>      | Apr 20 – May 20 |       | Earth   | Fixed    | Venus    |
| <a href="#">Gemini</a>      | May 21 – Jun 20 |       | Air     | Mutable  | Mercury  |
| <a href="#">Cancer</a>      | Jun 21 – Jul 22 |       | Water   | Cardinal | the Moon |
| <a href="#">Leo</a>         | Jul 23 – Aug 22 |       | Fire    | Fixed    | the Sun  |
| <a href="#">Virgo</a>       | Aug 23 – Sep 22 |       | Earth   | Mutable  | Mercury  |
| <a href="#">Libra</a>       | Sep 23 – Oct 22 |       | Air     | Cardinal | Venus    |
| <a href="#">Scorpio</a>     | Oct 23 – Nov 21 |       | Water   | Fixed    | Mars     |
| <a href="#">Sagittarius</a> | Nov 22 – Dec 21 |       | Fire    | Mutable  | Jupiter  |
| <a href="#">Capricorn</a>   | Dec 22 – Jan 19 |       | Earth   | Cardinal | Saturn   |
| <a href="#">Aquarius</a>    | Jan 20 – Feb 18 |       | Air     | Fixed    | Saturn   |
| <a href="#">Pisces</a>      | Feb 19 – Mar 20 |       | Water   | Mutable  | Jupiter  |

The four **cardinal** signs open the seasons at the equinoxes and solstices. The four **fixed** signs hold their middles. The four **mutable** signs hand over to the next.

## How this site computes today's sign

The chip in the breadcrumb bar reads the sign from a **fixed table of month-and-day boundaries**, not from an ephemeris. Real ingresses wander by a day or so from year to year, because the tropical year is not a whole number of days and the equinox slides around inside 20–21 March. The table takes the conventional dates and holds them steady.

That is the right trade for what this is. The strip is a cultural display — seven ways different people have divided the same year, shown side by side — not a prediction and not an astronomical instrument. If you want the Sun's true ecliptic longitude, use an ephemeris. If you want to know what the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Mughal court astrologers and a 1930 London newspaper all thought late March was for, the strip is the point.

## Related

- [World Zodiacs](#) — the other six systems in the strip.
- [Vedic Zodiac](#) — the sidereal counterpart, about 24 degrees behind these dates.
- [Calendar](#) — the live month grid.
- [Religion](#) — the wider religion section.
- [Culture](#) — the parent section.