

Virgo

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Virgo

Virgo, 23 August – 22 September. The sixth sign, **mutable earth**, ruled by **Mercury**. The constellation is the largest in the zodiac and the second largest in the whole sky, a long sprawl of faint stars with one brilliant exception: **Spica**, the blue-white giant that the figure holds. The name means "ear of grain". The maiden is a harvest maiden, and she has been holding that sheaf since before anyone drew her as a woman.

Religion and myth

The Babylonian constellation is **MUL.AB.SIN**, "the Furrow" — the seed furrow cut by the plough — associated with **Shala**, goddess of grain and consort of the storm god Adad, shown in Mesopotamian art holding a stalk of barley. Spica was known as the ear of grain of Shala. This is agricultural religion with real cult behind it, and it is the layer that actually explains the picture: the sign is not a woman who happens to carry wheat, it is a wheat-field that acquired a woman.

Greek tradition supplied three overlapping identifications, all **Hellenistic literary catasterism** rather than cult. **Demeter** with her sheaf is the obvious fit. **Persephone**, whose descent and return organize the agricultural year, is the same idea in narrative form. The third is different in kind: **Astraea** or **Dike**, the star-maiden of justice, whom Aratus in the *Phaenomena* describes as the last immortal to live among humans, withdrawing to the sky in disgust as the ages declined from gold to iron. That version explains why the maiden stands next to a set of scales, and it is the one that gave Virgo its association with exacting standards.

Medieval Christian writers read the figure as the **Virgin Mary**, helped by the calendar: the Nativity of Mary on 8 September falls while the Sun is in Virgo, and the sign appears as Mary in some illuminated calendars and cathedral cycles. The association is interpretation laid over an older image, not descent from it.

Key dates

Date	Event
c. 1000 BCE (<i>contested</i>)	MUL.APIN lists MUL.AB.SIN, the Furrow, among the stars in the path of the Moon.
c. 295 BCE	Timocharis of Alexandria records the position of Spica — the observation Hipparchus will later need.
5th century BCE (<i>contested</i>)	Virgo becomes the sixth of twelve equal 30° signs.
c. 127 BCE	Hipparchus compares his own measurement of Spica with Timocharis's and finds it displaced. Precession is discovered from this star, in this constellation.
c. 150 CE	Ptolemy catalogues Virgo in the <i>Almagest</i> , reports Hipparchus's result, and assigns Mercury the rulership in the <i>Tetrabiblos</i> .
present	Precession has moved the sign about 24 degrees off its stars. The Sun spends most of tropical Virgo against the stars of Leo , entering the constellation Virgo only around 16 September.

In the year

Virgo is the harvest itself — the mutable sign that closes summer and hands the year to the equinox. In the Mediterranean it covers threshing, the start of the vintage, and the accounting that follows a harvest: measuring, sorting, storing. The Athenian **Eleusinian Mysteries**, the great Demeter and Persephone rite, were celebrated in Boedromion, falling in September while the Sun stood here. The sign's reputation for precision is the reputation of anyone counting sacks before winter.

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