

The Zodiac

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Have you ever wondered how the zodiac or the horoscope came about? There are many cultures that practice their own astrology, but the ones I will be concentrating on are Western and Chinese astrology. Many people confuse astronomy with astrology. While astronomy is the study of celestial objects, astrology is the study of the position of these celestial objects during the time of our birth and their relevance in our lives. Astrology has been around for centuries. The literal meaning of astrology is “the science of the stars.”

The first astrologers were scholars; they studied the movements of the sun, moon, and planets and how these movements correlate with our lives. People who believe in astrology maintain that the position of these astronomical bodies influences our personalities and moods, and can predict the near future of our careers or relationships. In the past, astrology was used to predict seasonal shifts and used to foresee future outcomes. Some people cannot accept astrology because it cannot be proven by science. It leans more towards metaphysics (things that are more than just matter and energy).

Many controversies revolve around astrology; for example, no one is clear how astrology works, astrology is not a science you can validate, and there is no scientific evidence for astrology (Currey, 2014). For people who believe in astrology, it can be a fun and interesting thing to follow. Your horoscope is somewhat like your cosmic fingerprint.

There are two types of zodiac systems or methods in Western astrology. One is called sidereal zodiac and the other is called tropical zodiac. They used to line up, but, over time, due to precession—the rotating of the earth and the shift of its axis—they no longer match up. The similarities between these two zodiac systems are that they’re both divided into 12 equal ecliptic regions and have 12 constellations. The differences are that they were formed during different times. The sidereal zodiac was formed in 130 BCE while the tropical zodiac was formed hundreds of years after that (<http://lookingatthestars.biz/en/sidereal-astrology.html>).

The 12 constellations come from dividing the sky into 30° sectors. The names of these signs are in Latin. Through research, I found the translations and also what these names mean. It’s mostly due to the fact that they have Greek and Roman history and therefore leading to mythology. The majority of the society doesn’t know how these horoscopes earned their names. For us, knowing our own sign is as far as we’d go. But through thorough research, I slowly found that the information I gained was too interesting not to share. The source I use was Kim Ann Zimmerman at space.com:

- Aries means the ram: “in Greek mythology, Aries represents the ram whose fleece was sought by Jason and the Argonauts” because it turned into gold (also called the golden fleece)

- Taurus means the bull: “When Zeus fell in love with the Phoenician princess Europa, he transformed himself into a white bull with golden horns to whisk her away to Crete”
- Gemini refers to twins: Castor (mortal) and Pollux (immortal)
- Cancer means the crab: The giant crab Hera sent to Hydra to kill Hercules (but got crushed by his club in the end...)
- Leo means the lion: The lion terrorized citizens because iron, bronze or stone could not harm it; eventually strangled by Hercules...
- Virgo means the maiden: “According to Greek mythology, the earth experienced eternal spring until the god of the underworld abducted the spring maiden Persephone.”
- Libra means the scales: “with the scales representing the balance between the seasons as well as day and night. The ancient Greeks viewed Libra as the claws of Scorpius reaching out”
- Scorpio means the scorpion: Orion threatened to kill all the animals on earth, so Artemis (goddess of hunt and wild animals) sent a scorpion to kill him. After winning, Zeus rewarded it by placing it in heaven at opposite position in the sky from Orion.
- Sagittarius means the archer: Half man half horse sent to watch Scorpio the Scorpion and to shoot him down if he tries to go after Orion again!! (So much drama!) Another belief is that he is sent to shoot Scorpio down while Scorpio is out to kill Orion.
- Capricorn means the goat: The popular belief is “Amalthea, the mythical goat that acted as a foster mother to Zeus as an infant”. But since it is half goat half fish, it is also said that he was fleeing from a fight, got his bottom half stuck in the Nile and therefore half of it turned into fish.
- Aquarius means the water-bearer: Beautiful looking young man who Zeus fancied and was brought to Mount Olympus to be a cup bearer for the gods while staying for all eternity...(creepy)
- Pisces means the fish: Aphrodite and Venus “tied themselves to their sons to stay together in the turbulent waters, which is represented by the two fish entwined.” But other tales say that gods were fleeing from Titan Typhoon and changing to animal forms. The two lovers, Ares and Aphrodite transformed into fishes but got caught by fishermen.

Astrology has been recorded back to at least the 2nd millennium BC and Babylonian astrology was the first organized system. Through my research, however, I found that it is believed that astrology originated in China around the 3rd millennium BC. Chinese astrology is very complicated to understand compared to the rest of the cultures. It relies mainly on the lunar calendar, the five elements, and yin & yang. Instead of using “signs” like Aries or Taurus, it is based off of a 12-year cycle, using 12 animals called the 12 Earthly Branches: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig. Each year is an animal going in that order. (I find this fascinating. I was born in 1992, the year of the monkey. I’ve been told

that my grandfather was also born the year of the monkey. I would sometimes forget his birth year so I would find all the years of the monkey before mine (1980, 1968, 1956, 1944, and 1932) and do deductive reasoning, answer: 1932.)

As in Western astrology, many people believe that the zodiacal animals are unique to each individual and their year. Similar to western civilization, each animal has their weaknesses, best matches, fortune, relationship and luck. According to the legends, there are many different tales of how the Chinese zodiac came about. For example, the orders of the animals are based on a famous Chinese folktale where the Emperor in Heaven, the Jade Emperor, thought that there should be a way to measure days and the easiest way was from a calendar. He announced that the first twelve animals that met with him would have a year of the zodiac named after them. The cat and rat were good friends so the rat promised to wake the cat up to wake up super early to go together. Yet when the time came, the rat was too excited and went directly to the meeting place and forgot about the cat. Along the way, he noticed that many of the animals ran faster than he did, so he convinced the ox that he would serenade him if the ox would let him on board. By the time the animals almost reached the destination, the ox was first in line. But being that the rat was sitting on his head, he jumped ahead of the ox and arrived first to be the first zodiac sign of the years (that cheater!). This is also the theory of why the cat chases the mouse (out of hate and contempt!).

As you can see, astrology goes so far back in time that almost every culture has its own practice. The specifics are different, but the concepts are all the same: looking at how celestial objects and their movements influence our daily lives.

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