

## The Milky Way and the Cosmic Soma

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The key to the meaning of the signs of the zodiac should be evident from the orientation of the zodiac itself. The most dramatic factor in stellar observation for any person is the Milky Way. The meaning of the signs of the zodiac, if stellar based, should be centered on their relationship to the Milky Way. The Milky Way intersects the zodiac around two main points, 0 Gemini and 0 Sagittarius.

In Vedic thought, the area of the Milky Way, and the surrounding signs of Taurus and Gemini, was regarded as the most auspicious portion of the zodiac, particularly the Nakshatras Rohini and Mrigashira. On the other hand, the opposite side of the Milky Way, and the surrounding signs of Scorpio and Sagittarius, was regarded as most inauspicious, particularly the Nakshatras Jyeshtha and Mula.

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The 0 Gemini area is marked by the Nakshatra of Soma called Mrigashira or the antelope's head (23 20 Taurus - 06 40 Gemini, with 0 Gemini as the central point). It is said to be the head of Prajapati or Brahma, the Creator, who also has the form of a deer or antelope. Mrigashira includes the same region as the constellation Orion, marking its upper portion. If one draws a line directly north from the three stars in the belt of Orion one comes to the star Calpella (Alpha Auriga), the star called the heart of Brahma (Brahma-hridaya) in Vedic thought (Surya Siddhanta VIII.20). This appears to be the main spiritual power point in the Vedic zodiac.

Soma in Vedic thought, we should note, is the nectar of immortality and the drink of the Gods. It is also identified with the Moon and with various sacred plants. The Vedic view appears to be that the Milky Way in this region of the sky is the heavenly Soma.

The opposite side of the zodiac or the 0 Sagittarius area was, on the contrary, a region of death and poison, the worst place in the zodiac for the Moon to be located at birth—said to signify death of the person or death in his family. It is marked by two Nakshatras, Jyeshtha at the end of Scorpio (16 40 – 30 00) said to kill the eldest born (Jyestha-ghna) and Mula at the beginning of Sagittarius (00 – 13 20) said to be ruled by Nirriti or the Goddess of calamity, said to pull out the root of the family (Mula-barhana, also called Vichrita in the Vedas). As early as the Atharva Veda, there are several hymns to protect a person from the influence of these two malefic Nakshatras (VI.110, 112, 117, 121).

Clearly the Taurus-Gemini side of the Milky Way represents the nectar of immortality or Soma, while the opposite Scorpio-Sagittarius side of the Milky Way represents poison or death. Rohini and Jyeshtha: Taurus and Scorpio.

There are two important first magnitude red giant stars almost exactly opposite each other in Taurus and Scorpio; Aldeberan (Alpha Taurus) called Rohini in Vedic thought and

Antares (Alpha Scorpio) called Jyestha in Vedic thought. They are located around 18 degrees of Taurus and 20 degrees of Scorpio (according to Surya Siddhanta VIII.4 and VIII.18). They mark the doorways to the Milky Way.

Rohini or Aldebaran is the main star of the Nakshatra Rohini (10 00 – 23 20 Taurus) ruled by Prajapati or Brahma, the creator. Rohini herself is the daughter of Prajapati and the wife or favorite of the Moon. Rohini Nakshatra represents the gods, dharma and good fortune (Lakshmi) and is said to be the most fortunate of all Nakshatras for worldly affairs. Opposite to it, Jyeshtha or Antares is the star of misfortune (alakashmi), death and the Asuras, perhaps the worst Nakshatra for worldly affairs. Jyeshtha is ruled by Indra, the king of the Gods, and is said to be where he fights and overcomes Ahi-Vritra, the serpent or dragon that dwells there. So it is also the Nakshatra of Vritra or the dragon.

This Aldebaran-Antares or Rohini-Jyeshtha axis is the main line of good fortune and misfortune in the Vedic zodiac that provides a key to the signs as well. We can link it with the Milky Way axis with which its meanings are aligned.

The main Vedic symbol of the creative power is the Bull (vrisha or vrishabha). It relates to Brahma (the Brahma bull) or the creator, also called Prajapati or the lord of progeny. This is the probably Vedic basis of the bull as the symbol of the sign Taurus, which is Prajapati's or Brahma's sign, the source of his creative power. The bull is also a symbol of virility and sexual power, which comes into play here as well. Vrisha, which is short for Vrishabha or bull, specifically means virility.

The scorpion, on the other hand, is a symbol of poison and misfortune in the Vedas, occurring in the regard as early as the Rig Veda (I.191.16). Therefore, it easily became the symbol of the sign opposite Prajapati or Taurus, the place of Jyeshtha or the star of conflict and misfortune. Jyeshtha's association with Vritra, the snake or serpent suggests a similar symbolism. Therefore, the Rohini-Jyeshtha axis in Vedic thought helps us understand Taurus and Scorpio as signs in the zodiac representing the opposing forces of life and death, creation and destruction.

In Vedic thought, the Creator Prajapati is a kind of demiurge, not the supreme divine. His creation of the world of time and death is based on desire and is stained by duality. In some myths his creation proceeds through his intercourse with his own daughter (Rohini), for which sin Prajapati himself is eventually slain by the other Gods. The Gods come together and create the great God Rudra to slay Prajapati with his arrow for this indiscretion. Opposite Prajapati, therefore, is always the shadow of lust and envy. This also enters into the symbolism of Scorpio.

The region of Scorpio in Vedic thought is also related to the God Mitra who is the deity of the previous Anuradha (03 20 – 16 40), the previous Nakshatra to Jyeshtha. Mitra is also the God of death, Mrityu. Mitra in Persian thought is the slayer of the bull and is often accompanied by a scorpion for this process. For the Romans, Mitra became the Sun God as the God of the zodiac itself!

Indra, who rules Jyeshtha, is himself the king of the Gods, while Prajapati as the father of the Gods is also the father of Indra. However, in Vedic mythology Indra fights with Prajapati, having to overcome his own father to gain his own independence. This Indra-Prajapati opposition also comes out in the Taurus-Scorpio axis.

As Prajapati is only a demigod, his opposition or destruction can also come from the higher Gods like Mitra, Indra or Rudra who transcend the dualities and outer forces of creation. This Taurus-Scorpio, Rohini-Jyestha axis and its dualism is perhaps the key to the entire zodiac on both inner and outer or worldly and spiritual lines.  
Gemini and Sagittarius

Prajapati's main action is procreation or prajana. This occurs through the creation of couples as the Vedas and Upanishads say. The Prashna Upanishad I.15. says that those who follow the law of Prajapati is to create couples or give rise to intercourse or Mithuna. This provides a basis for calling the sign after the bull or Taurus as Mithuna or Gemini, which in Vedic thought is not portrayed as twins but as a male and female couple. Note that Vedic Soma is also connected to enjoyment, sexuality, reproduction, which can be related to the Milky Way or heavenly Soma as located in Gemini.

The two main stars that mark the constellation of Gemini, Castor and Pollus or Alpha and Beta Gemini, are the two stars that mark the Nakshatra of Punarvasu (20 00 Gemini – 03 20 Cancer) and the end of the sign Gemini. They are ruled by Goddess Aditi, who is the great Earth Mother, carrying a similar creative energy to that of Prajapati. Punarvasu is a dual constellation and so regarded itself as a couple. So these twin stars could easily be brought into the Gemini symbolism.

Gemini and Sagittarius as opposite signs follow a similar dualism and have similar stories as Taurus and Scorpio. Gemini contains the Nakshatras Mrigashira (23 20 Taurus - 06 40 Gemini) ruled by Soma and Ardra (06 40 – 20 00 Gemini) ruled by Rudra. Mrigashira is the antelope's (Mrigas) head (shira) slain by the arrow of Rudra, the hunter, who rules nearby Ardra. It is also Prajapati's head where he is slain by Rudra's arrow for having sex with his own daughter, Rohini. So his coupling or Mithuna is also the basis of Prajapati's death.

The opposite sign of Sagittarius is symbolized by a bow and arrow (called Dhanus or the bow in Vedic thought), which may also reflect this slaying of Prajapati. Its first Nakshatra Mula, though technically in the Sagittarius subdivision (00 – 13 20 Sagittarius), actually consists of the two stars at the tail of the Scorpion, the stinger that contains its poison. Mula is ruled by Nirriti, the goddess of destruction, who is listed in Vedic texts as a form of Rudra. In Vedic hymns it is also to Rudra, the bowman, to whom one prays to avert calamity (Nirriti), as in the famous Rudram chant of the Yajur Veda. So one can easily see how the figure of Rudra with his arrow, which also occurs in the Ardra portion of Gemini, gets transferred to Sagittarius on the opposite side of the zodiac based upon the dualism inherent in the zodiac.

Rudra is also a horseman in Vedic thought and his sons, the Rudras and Maruts, are the greatest of horsemen, which relates to the horse symbolism of Sagittarius. Rudra is the prototype for the great god Shiva, who has the ability to drink poison and transform it into nectar. Rudra is a storm God connected to thunder and lightning that also enters into the symbolism of Sagittarius.

## The 0 Gemini and 0 Sagittarius Axis: The Shiva Axis

Though Scorpio and Sagittarius and the Milky Way on their side of the zodiac may spell difficult karma or even worldly misfortune, they can also bring spiritual gains. The scorpion is also the Kundalini force, the serpent fire or dragon, particularly in its dormant phase as an obstructive force. The arrow of Sagittarius, on the other hand, can represent the Kundalini in its aroused state as a weapon for the Gods. Rudra opens the door to higher states of consciousness by taking us behind the enjoyment seeking of the outer creation (symbolically the slaying of Prajapati). What is nectar at a worldly level may be poison at a spiritual level and vice versa.

In addition, these points of 0 Gemini and 0 Sagittarius are not simply opposite in meaning but also parallel in meaning. As the two ends of the Milky Way, they have much in common. This is reflected in Vedic thought. Jyeshtha or Antares is also called Rohini. So there are two Rohinis. Similarly, the Nakshatra Mula (00 – 13 20 Sagittarius) is sometimes said to be ruled by Prajapati and to have its own creative force, with Mula also meaning the root.

Gemini contains the Nakshatra Ardra, ruled by Rudra, which has a similar energy to Sagittarius as representing the arrow and the hunter. In fact both Prajapati and Rudra are called the father of the Gods, the difference being that Prajapati represents more the creative power of the Gods while Rudra is their destructive and transformative power. In this regard, Ardra is called Bahu or the arm in some early Vedic texts, indicating that it is the arm of the deity of which Mrigashira is the head. This would make Ardra and Mrigashira form a single being, much like Orion. Meanwhile, Indra, the deity of Jyeshtha, is himself often represented by a bull.

In Vedic mythology, Soma is guarded by various archers. Rudra is one of the guardians as the Milky Way or heavenly Soma as the Nakshatra Ardra in Gemini. Other bright stars along the Milky Way are regarded as, if not archers, at least the dogs that accompany these Divine hunters or their teeth. This includes the dog stars Sirius and Procyon and probably Ardra (Betelgeuse) as well.

However, it may well be that Rudra as Sagittarius also symbolizes the archer that guards the Milky Way on the other side of the zodiac. Sagittarius as an arrow or bow relates to Rudra-Shiva who is the Divine hunter and who has among his sacred animals a deer (mriga).

In addition, the later portion of the Milky Way in Sagittarius falls under the Nakshatra Purvashadha, whose deity is Apas, the Water Goddesses who are also connected to Soma. So it seems that the energy of the Milky Way on the Sagittarius side is not simply negative but has a positive portion represented by the Waters and Purvashadha and a negative aspect represented by Nirriti (Rudra) and Mula. Similarly, the energy of the Milky Way on the Gemini side has a positive aspect represented by Mrigashira and Soma and a negative aspect represented by Rudra and Ardra as portions of the Milky Way cross Ardra as well.

We must remember that Soma as the nectar of the Gods can be poison to mortals. Mortals who are not prepared can be killed by drinking Soma, which is a force that the ordinary human nervous system cannot handle, like the awakening of the Kundalini that requires a high power of awareness to be able to endure. Therefore, the Soma-poison opposition reflects a meaning everywhere in the Milky Way which as the milk of heaven is a drink that mortals are barred from taking, unless they develop special divine qualities within themselves.

The spiritual nature of Sagittarius as a sign also makes sense as representing Shiva, the God of the Yogis. We could perhaps call the Gemini-Sagittarius axis, the 'Shiva' axis of the zodiac. The secrets of Shiva energy of sex, death and immortality clearly appear hidden in its diverse symbolisms.

Yet part of such parallel meanings for opposite sides of the zodiac is reflected in the nature of the Sun-Moon relationship. When the Moon is full and therefore able to fully energize any Nakshatra, it must be 180 degrees from the Sun which is opposite it in the zodiac, energizing the contrary section of the sky. So the qualities of the full Moon on one side of the sky have a relationship with that those of the Sun on the other side of the sky.

Similar meanings for these constellations occur in other mythologies as well. For example, in Egyptian thought Orion, which marks the Taurus-Gemini area of the zodiac that it is placed south of these two signs in the sky, was the constellation of Osiris, who like Prajapati is the slain creator and like Soma is a figure of rejuvenation and immortality. Orion itself in Greek thought is the hunter, like the Vedic Rudra, who himself is slain, like Prajapati. I have already mentioned the connection of Persian and Roman Mitra with Taurus and Scorpio as well.

Generally the Orion side represents the Divine Father while the Scorpio-Sagittarius side is the Divine mother, the Shiva and Shakti principles. We could also say that the Orion side is the head, while the Scorpio-Sagittarius side is the base of the spine, of the Milky Way that represents the brain and nervous system. Soma in Vedic thought is also the deity of the crown chakra, represented by the head of Prajapati or the Creator that must be pierced or cut off (removed from his body) for the liberation of the spirit. Meanwhile the Nakshatra Mula relates to the Muladhara or root chakra in which the Kundalini dwells. The 0 Gemini-0 Sagittarius axis therefore represents the Kundalini below and its piercing of the Soma in the crown chakra.

A confirmation to the connection between Rashis and Nakshatras can perhaps be found in Harappan archaeological ruins. An Harappan seal dated to 2400 BCE has been found recently that shows a deer and an arrow on one side, the symbol of Mrigashirsha (Orion) and a Scorpion on the other. Scorpio is opposite Orion in the zodiac. When one rises, the other sets. S.M. Ashfaque has argued an astronomical basis for this seal ("Primitive astronomy in the Indus Civilization. In Old Problems and New Perspectives in the Archaeology of South Asia, ed. J.M. Kenoyer, 207-215, Madison, Wisconsin).

## Planetary Rulership of the Signs

If we follow this line of research further, we can see how the planetary rulership of these four signs arose. The sign Taurus is ruled by Venus, in Vedic thought Venus is called Shukra, which also means the reproductive fluid. As Prajapati, the Creator in his desire or reproductive energy, the sign Taurus makes perfect sense as ruled by Venus, particularly Rohini itself as having a Venus like energy as the Creator's beautiful daughter.

Scorpio is ruled by Mars. In Vedic thought Mars indicates poison and enmity, which goes well with the sign's energy as opposite Taurus and with the qualities of Jyeshtha. In fact the name Antares means alter-Mars and suggests a similar connection as well.

Gemini is ruled by Mercury and symbolizes Mithuna or coupling, which is the outcome of the Prajapati-Rohini connection of Taurus. In Vedic thought, the planet Mercury is regarded as having both male and female sides, to be half-male and half-female, or alternatively male and female. Of all the single planets, Mercury best represents coupling, intercourse or communication represented by Mithuna or Gemini, so its rulership makes sense here as well.

Jupiter, on the other hand, is the planet of justice and morality. It is often opposite to Mercury in qualities. Jupiter represents the consistent ethical nature that is opposed to Mercury's duality and ambivalence. Just as Venus energy as the creative desire force (Prajapati-Rohini) gives rise to Mercury energy as coupling (Mrigashiras-Gemini), so does Mars energy as poison and enmity (Scorpio) give rise to Jupiter energy as retribution and punishment (Sagittarius).

The power of retribution or the weapon/arrow of the Gods is lighting or the atmospheric fire, which Jupiter represents just as does the sign Sagittarius. As Gemini relates to love and the coming together of opposites, Sagittarius relates to opposition and conflict. So Jupiter's rulership of Sagittarius is also explained.

In summary, we can explain the qualities of the signs, Nakshatras and planets in these two opposite sections of the zodiac of Taurus/Gemini and Scorpio/Sagittarius through Vedic symbolism. These four signs of the zodiac provide the foundation on which to understand the other signs. We would expect the inherent duality of time to be most evident where the Milky Way, the river of stellar influences, crosses the zodiac.

Rudra and Prajapati: The Origin of the Planets and the Signs

There is a specific story in the Aitareya Brahmana (which also occurs in several other Brahmana texts as well) that explains the mythology of Prajapati further. I will quote it at length as it has bearing on the origins of the signs, Nakshatras and planets:

Prajapati felt love towards his own daughter, the sky some say, the dawn others. Having become a deer, he approached her in the form of a doe. The Gods saw him. 'Prajapati does a deed that is forbidden.' They sought someone to punish him but couldn't find anyone among them. Then they took their most terrible forms and combined them together. These combined together became another God here. Therefore his name is Bhuta (what exists).

The Gods said to Bhuta. Prajapati has done something forbidden. Pierce him with your arrow. He said, 'be it so'. 'Let me choose a boon from you'. 'Choose', they said. He chose to be the ruler of the animals (Pashupati, lord of the beasts). He who knows this becomes a possessor of animals. Bhuta attacked and pierced Prajapati with his arrow. Prajapati being pierced flew upwards. Him they call the deer (Mriga) star. He who is the piercer of the deer is the piercer of the deer star (Mriga-vyadha or the star Sirius). That which is the doe is the star Rohini (Aldebaran). That which is the three pointed arrow is the three pointed arrow star (the three stars in the belt of Orion)."

Prajapati is the Nakshatra Mrigashiras and his daughter is the Nakshatra Rohini. He is shot by the arrow of Rudra (also called Bhuta and Pashupati) who is generally identified with the star Ardra (Betelgeuse), but Mriga-vyadha appears to have been Sirius, bright star in the same vicinity. Pashupati's arrow is the three stars in the belt of Orion which are the arrow on the head of the deer that is Prajapati. We see here the story of Prajapati and his daughter as explaining the signs Taurus and Gemini. The bull, Vrishabha, is a symbol of fertility and of male lust, while Mithuna, refers to sexual intercourse in Sanskrit. But the story goes much further. To continue to quote it further.

The seed of Prajapati that had been released flowed out. It became a lake. The Gods said, 'May this seed of Prajapati not be spoiled. When the said, "May this seed of Prajapati not be spoiled (madusham), it became Madusha. That is the meaning of Madusha. Its name is Madusha. What is Madusha that is Manusha (man). That is the secret why man (manusha) is called man (manusha). The Gods indeed love mystery."

The seed of Prajapati, the Creator, born of lust and duality but purified by the Gods became man, the human being. The lake created by the seed of Prajapati is probably the Milky Way, which crosses the zodiac at Mrigashiras. Man is born of the Milky Way.

That lake they encompassed with fire. The winds blew over it. But the fire couldn't move it. Then they encompassed the lake with the universal fire (Agni Vaishvanara). The winds blew over it. The universal fire caused the lake to flow.

That which was the first part of Prajapati's seed that blazed upward from the lake became the Sun (Aditya). That which was the second part became Venus (Bhrigu). Him Varuna welcomed. That is why Bhrigu is said to be the son of the God Varuna (the God of water). That which was the third part to take flame became the other Sun Gods (Adityas). The coals became the Angirasa Rishis. When the coals after having died down flamed up again that became the Rishi Brihaspati (Jupiter).

The Creator's seed in the form of a lake was heated by fire. It was the universal fire, Agni Vaishvanara, which symbolizes the life soul that alone had the power to enter into it and cause it to move. That heated water of the Milky Way or heavenly Soma gave rise first to the Sun and second to Venus or Bhrigu, the brightest of the planets and the great Vedic Rishis or seer. It also gave rise to the other forms of the Sun God and to the main Rishi or Vedic seer family, the Angirasas, including their foremost leader Brihaspati or Jupiter, implying the production of the other planets as well. Here we have the origin of the planets from the Creator's seed in the Milky Way around 0 Gemini. But this is not all that takes birth here:

The coals that remained became the black animals. That which was the red earth scorched by the fire became the red animals. That which was the ashes crept off as mixed colored animals. The wild bull, buffalo, deer, camel and donkey, these became the ruddy animals. To them Pashupati (the lord of the animals) said, "These are mine. Mine is what remains on the sacrificial ground."

Not only are the planets born of Prajapati's seed in the sky, so are the animals. These must be the animals in the sky or the stars of different colors or degrees of radiance. Elsewhere in the Vedas it is said that Prajapati created the animals and assigned them each a star (Taittiriya Brahmana I.5.4). While the animals mentioned here may not simply be the specific animals of the twelve signs of the zodiac, this idea does presage such a formulation. Note that the animals arise from the coals after Jupiter. The signs are determined by Jupiter's revolution of one sign per year as it takes it about twelve years to circle the zodiac.

Rudra (Shiva) as the lord of the animals or the lord of the beasts, Pashupati, can also be seen as the lord of the zodiac. Prajapati or the rule of desire is replaced by Pashupati or the rule of knowledge. In Sanskrit as in other mythologies the animal is a symbol of the soul. Pashupati is the Lord of souls. Pashupati is often seen with animals like lions and bulls that are part of the signs of the zodiac.

Here we see a myth of the origin of the planets and the constellations in the form of animals from the Milky Way. There are other Vedic stories that reflect similar insights. Nakshatras and Upanakshatras

The Sidereal Zodiac

This orientation of the zodiac to the Milky Way raises some interesting questions. The Scorpio-Sagittarius side of the Milky Way in fact marks the galactic center. Why should this be such a malefic point in Vedic thought? This can be explained at least in part that it is an area of karmic rectification. It is good spiritually but not necessarily materially.

If the determinative factor for the meaning of the signs is the Milky Way and the Aldebaran-Antares axis, then it is also clear that the signs must be a sidereal division, not a tropic division. Today the Milky Way is now falling in early Taurus and early Scorpio tropically.

This mythology also has implications for our civilization today. Today the winter solstice is falling in early Sagittarius or Mula Nakshatra around six degrees of Sagittarius. This means it is in conjunction with the poisonous side of the Milky Way. At the same time the summer solstice is in Mrigarshira or six degrees Gemini or the constellation of Soma. Will we choose to drink the Soma or the poison? So far we are polluting our planet and taking the role Nirriti or calamity, for which the Gods of retribution like Rudra cannot be far behind us.

Summary



The Vedas show a division of the zodiac into 27 Nakshatras or lunar mansions. That they might have more subtle divisions of the zodiac than 27 should not surprise us. A twentysevenfold division would demand finer divisions for accurate calculations. In this regard Satapatha Brahmana describes Upanakshatras or secondary Nakshatras with each Nakshatra divided into 27 parts equalling a total of approximately 720.

It is generally thought in the West that the zodiac of 360 degrees and 12 signs is an invention of Babylonian thought and was brought to India by the Greeks after the time of Alexander (after 300 BCE). However the Vedas, all the way back to the oldest Rg Veda, contain references to a sun wheel or wheel of heaven divided into 360, 720 and 12, as well as other numbers. Vedic literature describes these divisions as located in "heaven" or the sky. Satapatha Brahmana clearly notes them as "rays" and "directions," giving them a spatial orientation and equates them with the Upanakshatras furthering making them into divisions of a zodiac.

In other words, Satapatha Brahmana presents a zodiac of 720 Upanakshatras equated with the 720 rays and directions that surround the sun. This shows a zodiac divided into 720 parts or  $360 \times 2$ . Such a zodiac existed in India at the time of Satapatha Brahmana. While modern scholarship has generally dated this text around 800 BCE, recent new discoveries in India, like that of the Sarasvati river,\*\*1 may push this time back much further. The same text speaks of the vernal equinox in the Krttikas or Pleiades (which occurred around 2000 BCE). Hence it can be suggested that a zodiac of 360 or 720 portions was known in India by this period.

## 1. Background

In order to establish the background for the concept of Upanakshatras, let us first examine the complexity of Vedic thought in regard to science, astronomy and calendars. The Vedic zodiac is part of a larger system of mathematical thought, and not merely an interpolation, borrowing or an extraneous factor. It is integral to this entire system, particularly for constructing fire altars, which was probably the most important and complex aspect of Vedic thought. Vedic knowledge of the zodiac must be viewed in the context of other careful observations made in that area.