

Saturn: Origins and Associations

Saturn, the furthest of the planets visible to the naked eye, has always held a special place in celestial matters. Its distance and seeming remoteness has seen it labelled as *a baleful star with black fires*¹ and according to Proclus, Saturn was the most important celestial object and was referred to as god of the *steadfast star* (poem *Aetna*) and 'lord of the law of the universe'.

In Sumero-Babylonian cosmology Saturn was conceived as the embodiment of the whole universe, the various deified astral and natural phenomena imagined as members of this divine body. Saturn's epithets included the term *Kaainu*, which means 'pillar' in the Babylonian language and also came to be related with *kittu*, 'justice'. These associations pre-date and echo much of what we today associate with Saturn in a natal chart. But just what were the roots of some of these associations?



The Mesopotamian god, Ninurta

The scope of this article is limited so it will focus only on some selected but interesting associations and how they came to be incorporated into the astrological corpus.

Here is how Rhetorius the Egyptian, a 6th century writer, described Saturn:

*"...It signifies the father, the older brothers, orphanhood of children, agriculture, gloomy², treacherous, dirty, slow, solitary, deceitful, black-clothed, inheritors, given to seafaring, violent..."*³

In early Mesopotamian cosmology, planets were considered gods in their own right and the Babylonian name for Saturn was *Sagush* and Ninurta was the god associated with Saturn.

Ninurta was the god of rain, fertility, war, thunderstorms, wells, canals, floods, the plough and the South Wind. His name means "lord of the earth" and humankind was indebted to him for fertile fields and healthy live-stock. He is a son of Enlil and when the Tablets of Destiny were stolen by the storm-bird Zu, he managed to retrieve them. As a result of his exploits, Ninurta was given the responsibility for fate and law. Thus, *Sagush*, the planet Saturn was associated with law and order together with agriculture and water.

In his role as law-maker and judge, he was also known as Enlil's seal-keeper and the protector of justice. In Mesopotamian cities, special areas were set aside where courts were held and more often than not they were held in squares or gates dedicated to Ninurta. In our modern day court systems, Saturn is still present with judges traditionally wearing black, which is the colour associated with Saturn.

¹ Lucan, l. 652

² The translator here suggests that the Greek word *endomychous* could mean either 'gloomy' or 'stay-at-home'

³ Rhetorius the Egyptian, *Astrological Compendium*, trans J H Holden

The notion of judgement and justice also has ancient associations and Sumerian legal taboos are often those of Ninurta. For example "A judge who perverts justice, a curse which falls on the righteous party, a (first-born) heir who drives the younger (son) out of the patrimony - these are abominations of Ninurta".⁴ The concept of justice, the application of due diligence, the sacredness of the seal and, the pronouncement of judgement are all Saturnian and ones which we still apply today. There is also the association with inheritance or patrimony as that which comes from or is inherited from the father. Often, we read in traditional texts that a difficult or debilitated Saturn may indicate the loss or lack of wealth implying that the person has difficulty with inherited wealth or patrimony. The importance of wealth in a traditional society was seen as one's insurance against a difficult life and this came from the paternal line.

Going back to myth, we find Ninurta in another exploit where he is called to do battle with the creature Asag, who did not have human qualities, being a sort of stone, resistant to the blows of the spear and the axe. Incited by Asag, the rocks constantly kept rolling down the mountains to crush cities on the plain. After an initial defeat, Ninurta takes the advice of Enlil who cautions Ninurta to wait for the appropriate time and with the coming of rainstorms eventually Asag would be defeated. Indeed, this is what takes place, and little by little Ninurta learns to direct the mountain streams to flow down into the plains so that none of their waters were wasted. Ninurta thus learnt the art of digging and piling up rocks to create embankments for watercourses and to channel the flow into a river so that mountain waters could be used to sustain the barley in the fields and the fruits and vegetables in the orchards and gardens.

Here we see Saturn's association with water emphasised and also his role as an agricultural deity whose efforts establish an ordered way of using water (irrigation) to ensure sustainable cultivation of the soil (agriculture).

Another consequence of this battle is that Ninurta then separates and identifies the different qualities and minerals found in stone and assigns to them their natures and duties. More than three thousand years later we still associate Saturn with rocks and minerals found under the earth as well as with water and of course, irrigation and its benefits on agriculture. It is in this capacity as a farmer-god, that Ninurta is eventually incorporated into the Greek harvest-god Kronos, who in turn is identified by the the Romans as their fertility-god Saturn.

Moving on a few millennia, we find in Greek mythology, the figure of Kronos who, encouraged by his mother Gaia, overthrows his father Ouranos by castrating him and casting his genitals into the sea. Drops of blood falling on the ground manifest into the Furies, the goddesses of vengeance: Tisiphone (avenger of murder), Megaera (the jealous) and Alecto (constant anger).

Without mercy, the Furies punish all crime including the breaking of rules covering all aspects of society. They would strike offenders with madness and never ceased in their pursuit of criminals. The worst of all crimes were patricide or matricide, and first and foremost, the Furies would punish this kind of crime.

⁴ <http://www.gatewaystobabylon.com/essays/wisdomninurta.html> [accessed 10//7/2011]



Francisco Goya's famous painting depicting Saturn consuming his children.

Here we see an association with retribution and consequence as the Furies are born out of Kronos act of defiance and usurpation. Every act, no matter what the motive, has a consequence and the Furies are there to exact retribution – a Saturnian concept. The Furies are also born out of what was considered to be one of the most heinous crimes: that of patricide i. e. the murder of father. Here we have enshrined in cosmic law the concept of father and the price one pays when one does not honour that relationship.

In the myth, we see an existing order overthrown and another established; new boundaries are defined and a new ruler installed. This is Saturn as the Lord of separation and distinction, of order and hierarchy, of destruction and formation but most importantly his association with consequence and karma, crime and punishment.

Kronos, as he settles into his position of power, is also fearful of being overthrown and swallows his children to prevent them from being born. He in turn, is overthrown when his wife substitutes a stone for the youngest child which he swallows. The child is raised in secret and eventually comes back to free his siblings and overthrow his father, establishing his own order and hierarchy. Kronos is then banished or, in some versions, flees to Tartarus, the underworld.

The association of Saturn with Father and the fear of being usurped are again highlighted. The first century writer, Manilius in his epic poem, *Astronomica*, tell us:

Where at the opposite pole the universe subsides, occupying the foundations, and from the depths of midnight gloom gazes up at the back of the Earth, in that region Saturn exercises the powers that are his own : cast down in ages past from empire in the skies and the throne of heaven, he wields a father power over the fortunes of fathers and the plight of the old. Daemonium is the name the Greeks have given it, denoting influences befitting the name.⁵

Saturn here is associated with the IC or the 4th house as it is the lowest and darkest point. What is interesting is that it also refers to a much older version of planetary joys where Saturn was considered to be in its joy in the 4th house. This eventually changed after the time of Ptolemy (ca 2nd century CE) and Saturn was allotted the 12th house as its joy. However, the association of the 4th with Father and Saturn is still relevant.

The other point is, this is where we may see the connection in Christian cosmology with the devil (daemonium) and hell as a place below ground. Saturn's association with the devil incorporated aspects of the myth of being cast out and looking longingly to heaven. Indeed some of the traditional images of Saturn were recast by Christianity as the devil.

⁵ Manilius, *Astronomica*, 2. 929 – 938.

As we have seen, Saturn's association with agriculture and farming was well established by the time of the rise of Greek and Roman civilisations. At the Greek harvest festival called the *Cronia* and later, the Roman midwinter festival of *Saturnalia*, an important part of the festivities involved a relaxation of established order, where masters served their slaves and slaves ruled their masters.

The Saturnalia festival lasted seven days and was also supposed to commemorate the merry reign of *Saturnus*, a god of sowing and husbandry, who lived on earth as a righteous and beneficent monarch, and he drew the rude and scattered dwellers on the mountains together, taught them to till the ground, gave them laws, and ruled in peace. His reign was the fabled Golden Age.

As part of the Saturnalia celebrations, thirty days before the festival a young and handsome man was chosen by lot from amongst the people. He was then clothed in royal attire to resemble Saturn and was attended by a multitude of soldiers as he went about in public with full license to indulge his passions and to taste of every pleasure, however base and shameful. His reign was merry but short for at the end of the thirty days and at the start of the festival of Saturn, he cut his own throat on the altar of the god whom he impersonated.

Here we see the association of Saturn with order and hierarchy but also with the concepts of sacrifice and obligation; of actions and consequence. Note too, the use of 30 days echoing the Saturn cycle of approximately 30 years.

Saturn's traditional association with Time is, according to the Roman writer, Cicero because:

*Saturnus was chosen as the one to have as his province the intervals and cycles of time. In Greek this god is called by the very word time, since Kronos is the same as chronos, that is, time. We call him Saturnus because he saturates himself with years.*⁶

Saturn has also been associated with Time and carried the epithets, "father time" and the "father of time". Images of Saturn holding the hour-glass as the sands of time fall through or, with scythe in hand as the grim reaper, ready to cut through the thread of life abound:

*They conclude that, when there was chaos, no time existed, insofar as time is a fixed measure derived from the revolution of the sky. Time begins there; and of this is believed to have been born Kronos who is Chronos.*⁷

Giorgio Santillana in his book, *Hamlet's Mill* discusses the Saturn myth and the emasculation of Ouranos and concludes:

*The fact is that the "separation of the parents of the world," accomplished by means of the emasculation of Ouranos, stands for the establishing of the obliquity of the ecliptic: the beginning of measurable time. And Saturn has been "appointed" to be the one who established it because he is the outermost planet, nearest to the sphere of fixed stars.*⁸

⁶ Cicero, *De deorum natura*, ll. 25

⁷ Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 1:22:8

⁸ Santillana, Giorgio *Hamlet's Mill*, Chapter 8: Shamans and Smiths

What we have here is both an allegorical and a scientific association with the myth suggesting that myths were not just stories but were ways of explaining certain fundamental truths of the celestial world.

Saturn's association with ships is described by the Roman poet, Ovid:

Because Saturnus traversed the entire sphere of the 'earth' in his primordial voyage, his special token was a ship.⁹

The metaphor of the voyage to illustrate the Saturn cycle has evolved into Saturn's association with ships and sailors. Also, Saturn, in many of the world's mythologies is portrayed as a helmsman, the 'one who turns' and this is a direct reference to Saturn's placement at the outer sphere of the seven planets, next to the sphere of the fixed stars. He was seen as the pivot or the peg upon which the world turned. Here we go back to the reference in Manilius of Saturn's joy in the 4th. If we consider that the IC is the pivot which connects the MC and upon which the horoscope (world) turns then the importance of Saturn as the one who directs the motion becomes clear.

The 13th Orphic hymn to Kronos (Saturn) addresses the god as:

"Father of the blessed gods as well as of man, you of changeful counsel, . . . strong Titan who devours all and begets it anew [lit. "you who consume all and increase it contrariwise yourself"], you who hold the indestructible bond according to the *apeirona* (unlimited) order of Aion, Kronos father of all, wily-minded Kronos, offspring of Gaia and starry Ouranos . . . venerable Prometheus."¹⁰

Here Saturn is acknowledged 'father of the gods and also the one who bonds everything together and is both the source of all and the agent of change and regeneration.

In summary, we need to be aware that, as astrologers, when we look at a chart and judge the planets, they are more than just the symbols on a page. The planets themselves are a summation of the physical truths about life which have come down to us over the ages through the agency of myth, ritual and art. These associations are full of meaning and to dilute them down to a list of key words is misleading.

As we have seen, the nature of Saturn has not been 'invented' by ancient scribes, it is a summation of the observation and experience of millennia and it is a living mnemonic of the physical realities of the cosmos we dwell in.

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⁹ Ovid, *Fasti*, l. 233-234

¹⁰ Op Cit