

# St. George Decoded

by

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In this essay, the author tells how, in a moment of pure serendipity, he discovered a major astronomical event embedded in the legend of St. George and the Dragon.

**Changes over previous edition:**

Sky charts re-based on latitude/longitude of Athens, Greece, and redrawn.  
Some small editorial changes.

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## Foreword

*“Now this has the form of a myth, but really signifies a declination of the bodies moving in the heavens around the earth...”*

Plato, The Timæus Dialogues, 360 BC

Plato knew it over two thousand years ago: mythology was the medium humankind used to transmit important information over generations. Most of the knowledge transmitted was astronomical, like the movement of the planets against the background stars. Those Ancients who discovered these things, not having a writing system, made up stories to represent those movements. It was known, down to Plato and Aristotle’s time that gods were planets, and stories of the gods were allegories of the interactions of those planets and the constellations of the zodiac.

In the millenia since those times a darkness has fallen. The origins of myths were forgotten and we became ignorant of their inner meanings. But even in those dark centuries storytellers who did understand formulated myths and fables for their listeners. Those stories were transmitted orally over the centuries, their inner meaning lost until the 19th and 20th centuries when researchers began digging. And what treasures they were to unearth. Many of those who grew up before the 1970’s remember reading folk tales and fables as children. Being a child I had no idea that there was a significance beyond the tales themselves. Today, when I scour book shops for Christmas presents for nieces and nephews all I find are artificially constructed stories pushing some social agenda, or meaningless fantasies. Where, I wonder, will these tales lead a child? It’s for sure there are no hidden treasures for them to find as adults, because these tales have no inner truth except some dubious “author’s message.”

During the 1960’s an historian of science (who was researching scientific content of myth), and an ethnologist (who had a collection of 10,000 pages of incomprehensible Polynesian mythology), joined forces. They were Giorgio de Santillana, and Hertha von Dechend respectively. Their scientific collaboration during the 1960’s was to unlock the key to mythology and dispel millenia of darkness. The technical language that was mythology could be understood, and mythic systems could now be decoded. Those bizarre stories turn out to be masterpieces of recording astronomical events for future generations, or social and historical records of preliterate cultures. Santillana and von Dechend encapsulated their findings in a quest to trace the ultimate origins of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the hapless Prince of Denmark. That sad figure could be traced back from one culture to another to the earliest days of civilisation. In doing so, the authors unravelled a technical language, a universal meta-language even, that when applied to a culture’s mythology could unravel its inner secrets. We have finally regained what Plato knew over two thousand years ago.

Since they published their findings in *“Hamlet’s Mill”*, others have applied that meta-language to unravel the Roman cult of Mithras, a social history of the pre-Inca cultures of the Andes mountains, and uncovered precessional astronomy in the Ancient Egyptian myths of Osiris.

This essay of mine that follows, is my contribution to the quest to reveal the true nature of these treasures from the past. Others are in progress.

-- Roy Taylor, autumn 2004

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## Introduction

I have to state, right at the beginning, that I was not looking for St. George. The last time I ever considered him was when I stumbled across this statue in Stockholm old town in the late 1980's. It is our good knight battling the dragon.



Figure 1: St George in Stockholm

Figure 1

St. George is an iconic figure who has found a place in the consciousness of several nations. My own, England, has adopted him and his cross as national emblems although he wasn't born there, nor had anything to do with that side of Europe. He is important to countries across Europe and is a major saint of the Christian churches. His festival was once one of the major days of the calendar.

My path to the good chap led via a life long interest in mythology and its bizarre stories, and a similarly long interest in astronomy. Such interests had to take second place to my career in technology, but later years have found them rekindled.

Ground-breaking work had been done in the 1960's in a seminal work on decoding mythology written by two historians of science, Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend,

called *Hamlet's Mill*, first published in 1969. They showed in considerable depth that mythology contained a technical language for describing astronomical events. Since then, much work has been done by others to decode various mythic systems, see "Bibliography" on page 27.

As Santillana and von Dechend's system requires an understanding of precessional astronomy (more of this later), I set about constructing a star map device with a precessing celestial pole, plus precessing equinox and solstice markers. Once I had built that, I would be the equal of any High Priest of Heliopolis, or indeed any Pharaoh, in being able to 'go down to any sky'. I marked the place where the spring equinox ought to have been two thousand years ago. In a moment of pure serendipity I saw before me, hidden in plain sight, all the elements of the legend of St. George and the Dragon.

So, in this essay I have to cover, in a logical fashion, what was essentially a momentary flash of insight. We need to cover these subjects:

- The legend of St. George and the Dragon,
- The history of a knight called St. George,
- The Mithraic Cult of ancient Rome (the reason will become plain later),
- Some astronomy (don't worry, no maths required).

For those to whom St. George is a treasured Christian saint, I have good news. This essay does not in any way deconstruct nor trivialize the good knight, but rather my

discovery elevates him to much greater importance than hitherto suspected.

For those with an interest in the inner meaning of ancient mythology I hope this essay provides an inspiration for their own endeavours. We have a tremendous heritage of worldwide mythology and I believe we owe it to those ancient compilers of myth to expose their masterworks for all of humanity to see and understand.

Note that all star charts used in this essay were produced by **RedShift® 4** astronomy software, and equinox charts are viewed from Athens, Greece (38° 00' N, 23° 46'E), a centre of the ancient world.

## The Legend of St. George

The legend was first recorded in the sixth century AD. It may have been around orally before then, but if so, earlier written records have not survived. Certainly, by the twelfth century AD it was recorded in the form that we know today. You will find many variants of this and similar dragon/maiden legends. It would cloud the issue completely if we were to examine all the variations, so let me summarize the main features:

1. A pagan town is beset by a troublesome pest, a dragon.
2. The townspeople offer it two sheep each day to appease it. Running out of sheep they offer a maiden, drawn by lot, to be devoured.
3. On one occasion it is the king's own daughter who has drawn the unlucky vote to feed the beast. She is taken out and chained to a stake (or sometimes a rock) there to await her gruesome fate. Some variants omit the stake/rock, or the chain.
4. But lo, a brave knight, St. George, cantors into sight. He asks the princess why she is chained in such a fashion, and she tells him the whole sorry story. Our hero is suitably disgusted. Who wouldn't be, at such a dreadful waste of a maiden?
5. At that, the dragon appears. St. George does his warrior stuff, gives battle and wins, freeing the princess. In some dragon tales the creature is killed, in others the dragon is merely overcome. The princess then puts her girdle around the dragon's neck and she leads him into town where he calms down and becomes great friends with the townspeople. Presumably, eating maidens was all a big misunderstanding now happily forgotten, except of course for the previously-devoured maidens who could not be un-eaten.
6. St. George converts the pagan town to Christianity.

But what is the meaning of this legend.? The conventional interpretation is:

Maiden = Church  
Dragon = Satan/Evil  
St.George = Good knight.

The legend is thus a metaphor for the battle of good against evil, saving the Church and all it stands for from the clutches of Satan. However there are no such creatures as dragons. If you follow the conventional reading, the compilers of the legend needed an evil and loathsome creature for our good knight to fight. Whoever heard of a knight jousting a snake, a lizard, a spider, or some other scary creature? Nature simply doesn't make them big enough for such a challenge. But dragons - well, we all know how fearsome they come. They breathe fire, fly around the sky, seem to be invincible, and have a fine taste for maidens. But again, there are no such creatures as dragons, although there was indeed a good knight called George, so what were the compilers expecting us to believe?

This legend was not totally original. For centuries beforehand people knew a similar legend, that of the goddess Andromeda. She had been chained to a rock on the sea shore as a sacrifice to a sea monster that the god Poseidon had sent to ravage the land. She was rescued by a hero who battled with, and defeated, the monster. The hero was the Greek demigod Perseus. We'll be meeting him later.

## The Historical George

Of all the sources I've found about our good knight, some are specific in identifying the original George, while others are somewhat vague. The specific case is of a Roman tribune, or soldier, or military bureaucrat in the Near East who converted to Christianity. During a period of persecution of Christians by the Emperor Diocletian, he supposedly tore up an edict of the Emperor and for this he was executed. Another identification suggests he was a disreputable bishop of the early Church who assumed the mantle of hero and martyr.

Whoever he really was, the first recorded mention of him was less than twenty years after he was martyred, and a cult revering him spread for the next two or three centuries far and wide. He became a major saint for the Church, and by the 15th Century his day was a major celebration, almost as important as Christmas is to us today.

What is not mentioned in any source I have accessed is that at precisely the time of the historical George, the Roman cult of Mithras was a serious rival to Christianity. This may have had an influence on the development of the legend.

Before we progress to decoding the legend, for the key to our good knight's story lies in the sky above us.

# An Astronomy Lesson

As the answer to the puzzle of St. George depends on the effects of precessional astronomy, a small diversion is required for those readers who are not familiar with its concepts. No maths is required to understand this. Those readers familiar with the precession of the equinoxes can skip straight to the section entitled *Decoding the Legend*.

## The wobble in the axis

The planet Earth is a spinning object, just like spinning tops and gyroscopes. It is much larger, more massive, and it takes all of 24 hours to make one revolution. Nevertheless, like all spinning objects, its axis wobbles in a circular manner, as shown in Figure 3 on this page. Just watch a toy gyroscope and you'll see this happen. This wobble is called *precession*. It takes the Earth's axis nearly 26000 years to complete one cycle of this wobble. Precession is subtle, but measurable, and its major effect is to point the Earth's axis at different points of the polar skies. The following sky shot, from RedShift, shows the position of the Celestial North Pole in 7BC compared to its present position on Polaris (in the constellation of Ursa Minor), see Figure 2 on this page. The significance of the year 7BC will become apparent later.

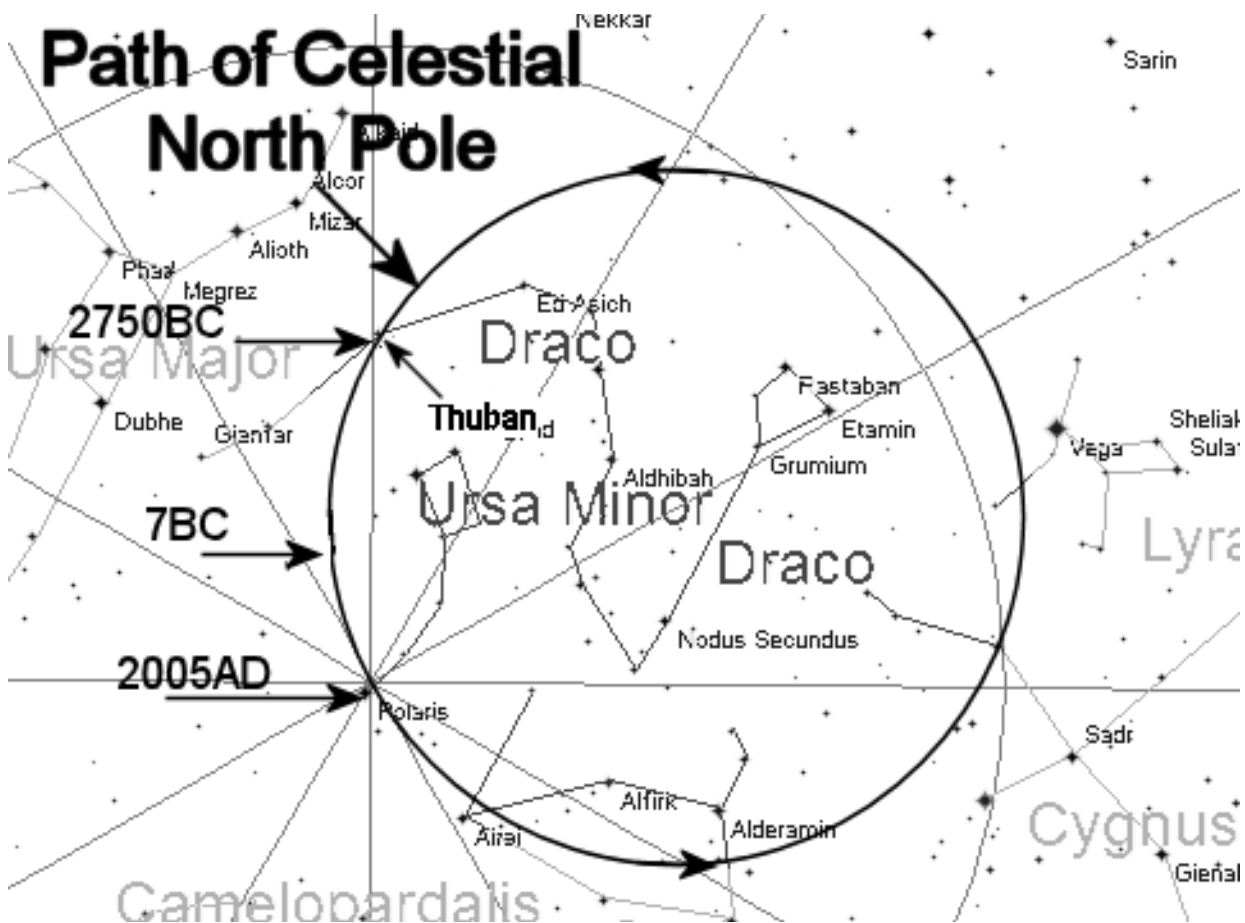


Figure 2: Celestial north pole position in 7BC and in 2005AD.

The north and south poles each describe a circle across their polar skies over that 26000 year cycle. In the Northern Hemisphere, our planet's axis points toward a star in Ursa Minor (the small bear) called Polaris. This is called the 'pole star', but Polaris has had that privilege only recently. 2000 years ago, the axis pointed into empty space between the

constellations of Draco and Ursa Minor. Almost half way around the cycle, in about 13000 years time, and about 13000 years ago, the pole star will be and was near the extremely bright star Vega. Figure 3 on page 9 shows the complete cycle amongst the northern constellations.

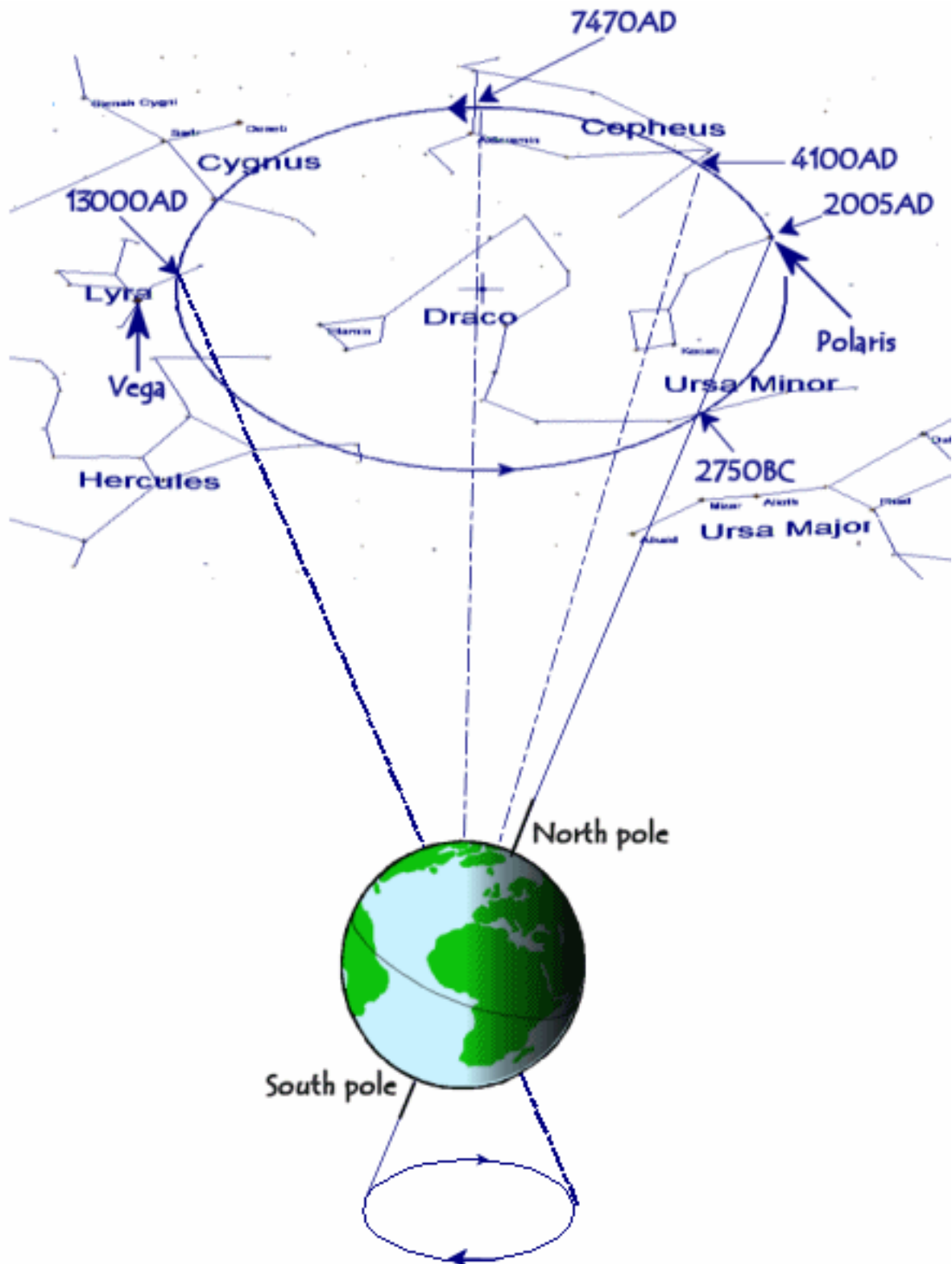


Figure 3: Movement of the poles caused by the precessional wobble

## Solstice and equinox

The axis is tilted at 23.5° from the vertical (that is, compared to its orbit around the sun), and this produces some noticeable effects, chiefly the seasons and their varying hours of daylight. In the Northern Hemisphere:

- At winter, in December, the days are at their shortest and the nights are at their longest. This is called the **Winter Solstice**.
- At midsummer, in June, the days are at their longest, and the nights are at their shortest. This is called the **Summer Solstice**.

Between the two extremes there is a day (one in spring, and one in autumn) where day and night are equal in length, that is 12 hours each. Each of these days is called an *equinox*:

- March 21st is the **Spring (or Vernal) Equinox**,
- September 21st is the **Autumn Equinox**.

In the days of yore, when we had no calendars, marking the passage of the seasons was vitally important, and these four days provided a marker every three months, if only we could spot them.

## Marking the equinox

Ancient farmers couldn't fail to notice that the sun rose or set at progressively different places along the eastern and western horizons during the year. It would not have taken them long to figure this was a regular occurrence and could be used to mark the passage of the year. For farmers, marking the equinoxes was vital because:

- Any farmer who was fooled into planting crops during a warm period at the end of winter could lose the crop to a late frost.
- Any farmer tempted to leave the harvest during a warm autumn could reap too late and lose the crop to early frosts.

It is probable that two rules evolved amongst those who survived starvation:

1. Don't plant any crops until two complete lunar cycles have passed since the spring equinox, that is the second half of May, to avoid the frosts.
2. No matter how warm the weather, harvest the crops when the autumn equinox arrives, frosts are not too far away.

It's not difficult to mark the equinoxes as the sun rises and sets at each end of a straight line, due east and due west. A sighting line drawn in the ground is all you'd need, or two posts, or two stones, to mark these special days. Our ancient farmers survived, and we are here today precisely because of their cleverness.

## The equinox stars have shifted

It wouldn't take long for our farmer to notice that just before dawn on each equinox the same constellations of stars were in the eastern sky. That is, one constellation for the spring equinox, another for the autumn equinox. We say that the constellation 'carries' the sun into the equinox sky. No doubt in educating the next generation in farming lore, the farmer mentions these stars, draws a picture, or marks them on his alignment stone in some way.

A couple of generations down the line something is going wrong. The pattern of stars in relation to the sun has changed. This is not an imperceptible difference, it's an angle of about 1° over 72 years (actually 71.6, but 72 is close enough). That doesn't sound like much, but the full moon is about half a degree in width, so the position of the stars, in

relation to the sun at spring equinox, will have changed by two widths of the full moon. This is not an insignificant amount.

Such a difference is noticeable over the generations if they bothered to draw pictures of the sun in relation to its equinox constellation. The fainter stars will now be blotted out by the increasing light from the rising sun (See "Appendix 3: Effect of Rising Sun" on page 26. for a simulation), and the brighter stars will be rising later. If they had paired rising stars in the east with setting stars in the west, the eastern ones will one day disappear into the sun's light long before the western stars have set. In today's world, mariners who still use chronometers and star tables (showing rising and setting times of prominent stars) to fix longitude know that because of precession their star tables have to be republished from time-to-time with the latest times.

The sky shots in Figure 4 on this page, Figure 5 on this page, from RedShift, show the movement of the background stars against the sun on the spring equinox just before the sun rose on the eastern horizon. The constellation is Pisces, shown at 100 BC and 500 AD. In relation to the sun, Pisces has changed position over 600 years by about 8°, or 16 times the width of the full moon.

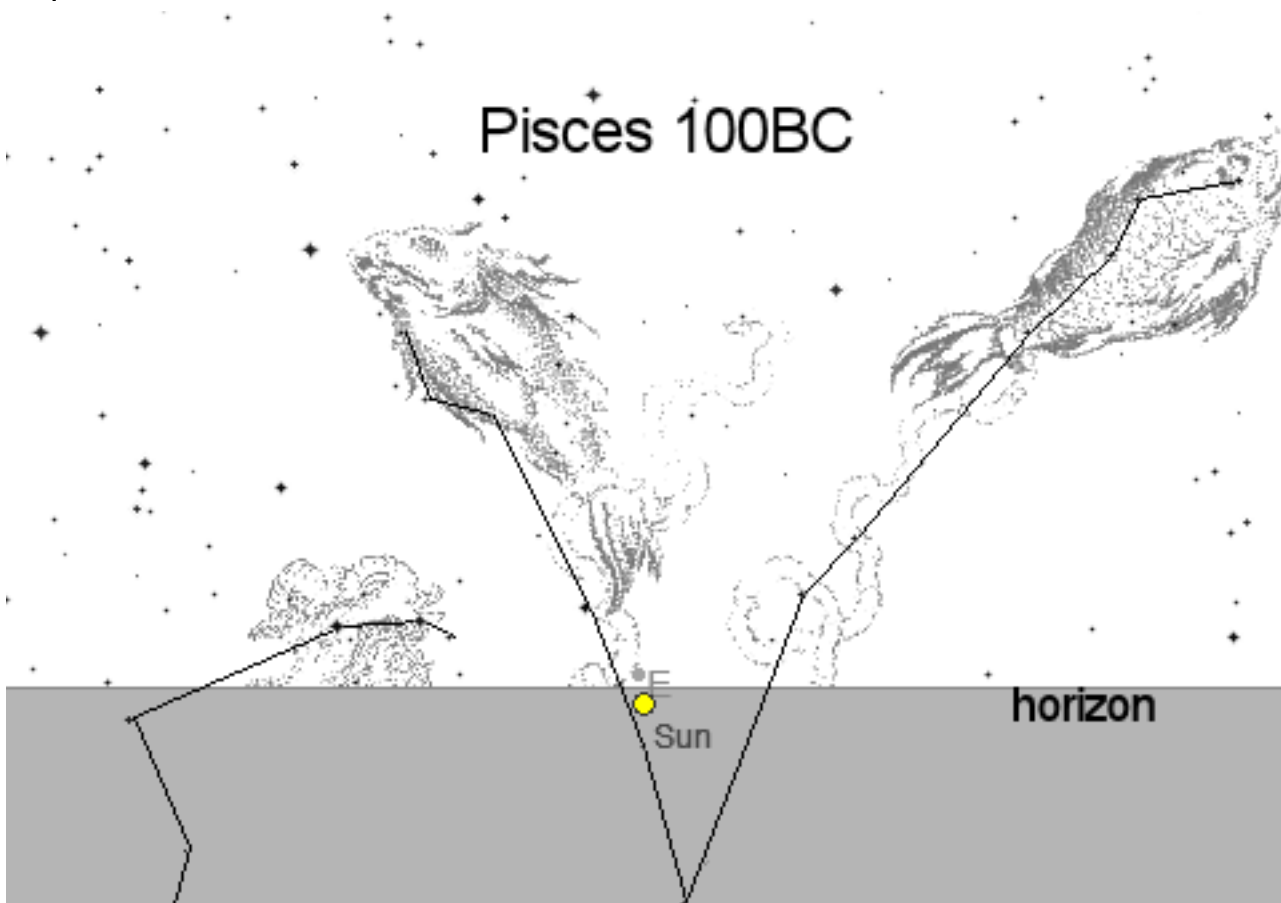
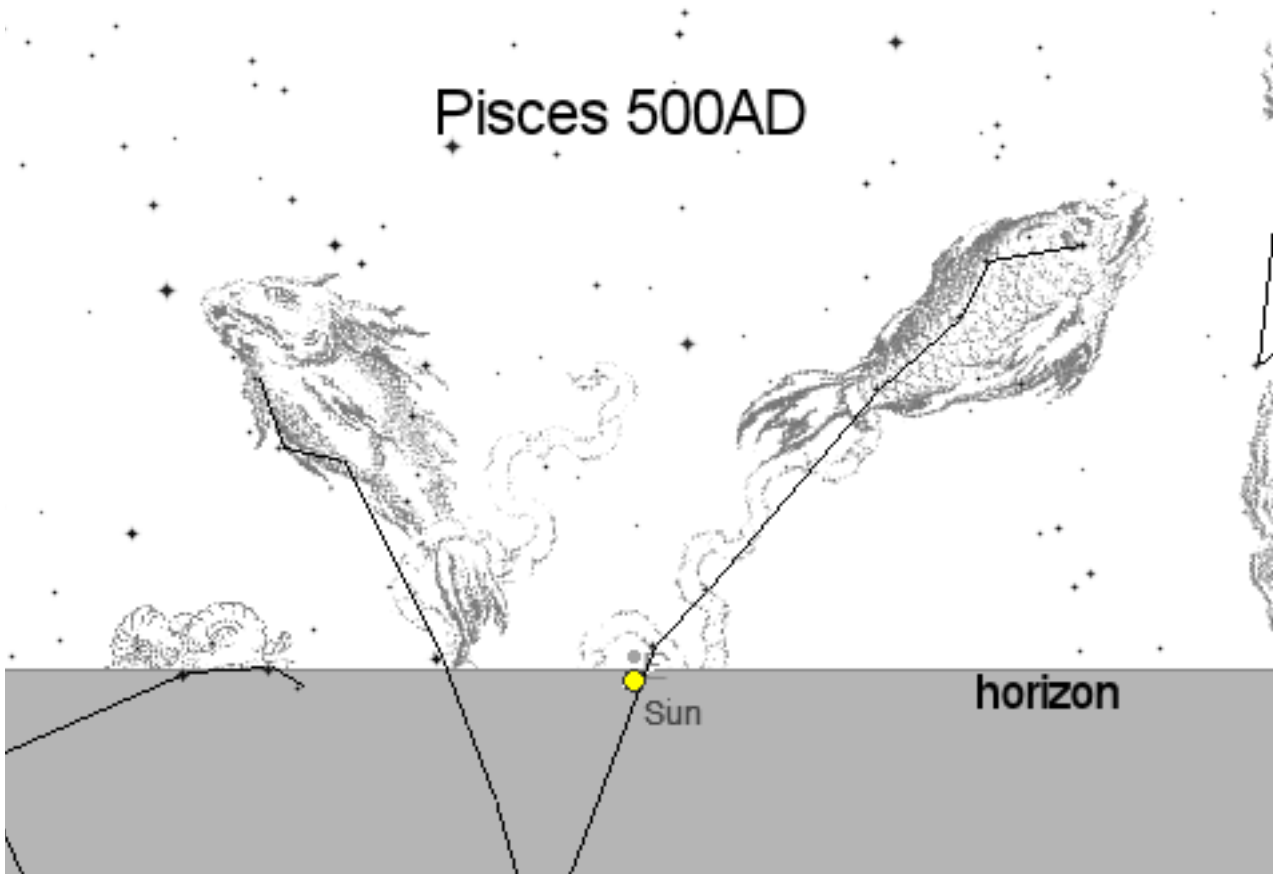


Figure 4: Spring Equinox 100BC



**Figure 5: Spring Equinox AD 500**

Now look at the year 2005 AD, and we'll see a radical change in position, see Figure 6 on this page. Pisces has now descended in the sky quite noticeably and the sun will soon have Aquarius carry it up into the dawn sky on the spring equinox. This is an effect of the Earth's wobble and is called *the precession of the equinoxes*. It will take nearly 26000 years for the sky to look the same on any equinox dawn.

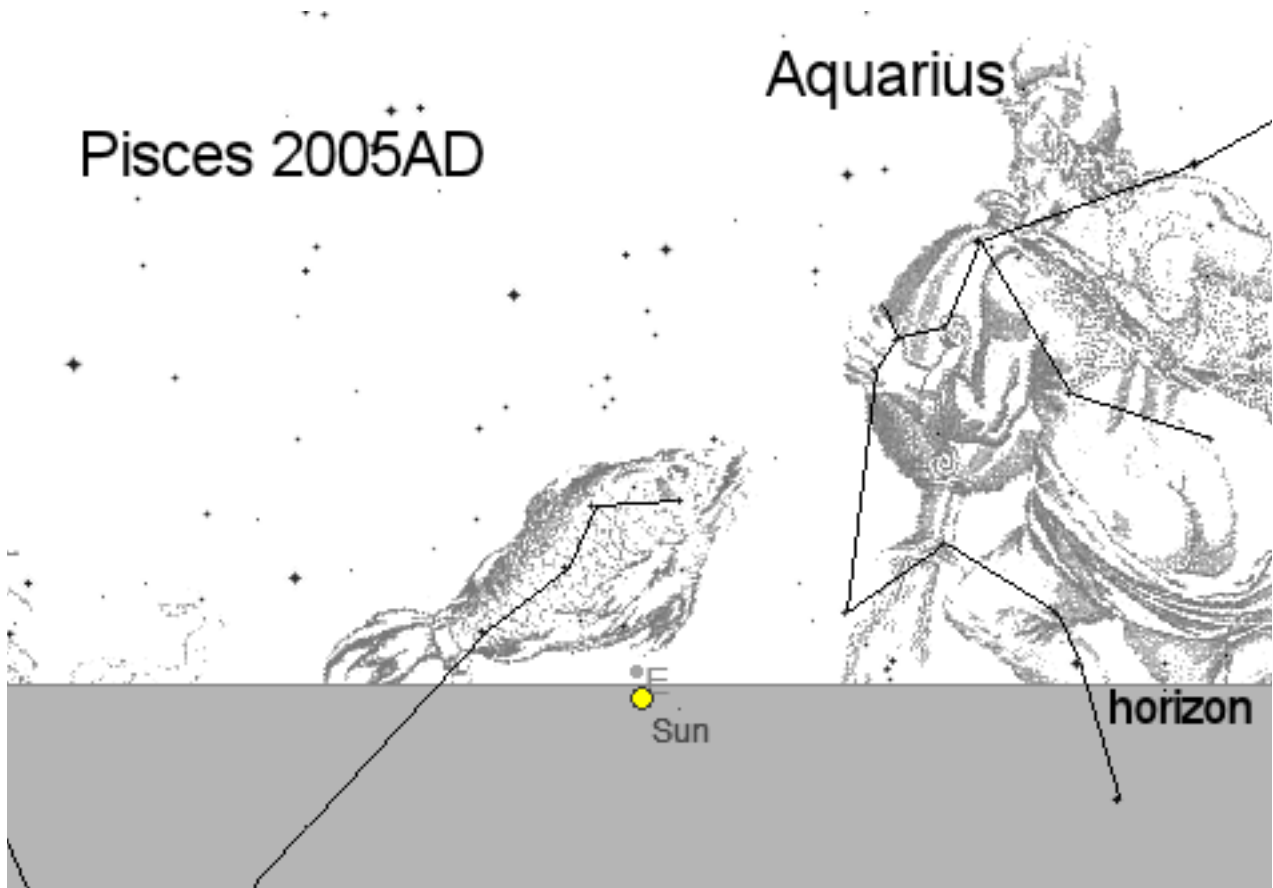


Figure 6: Spring Equinox 2005 AD

### Constellations of the equinoxes

Only one thing more needs discussing before we get back to our good knight St. George, that is the actual constellation of stars that carry the sun into dawn. For the last two thousand years or so, they were:

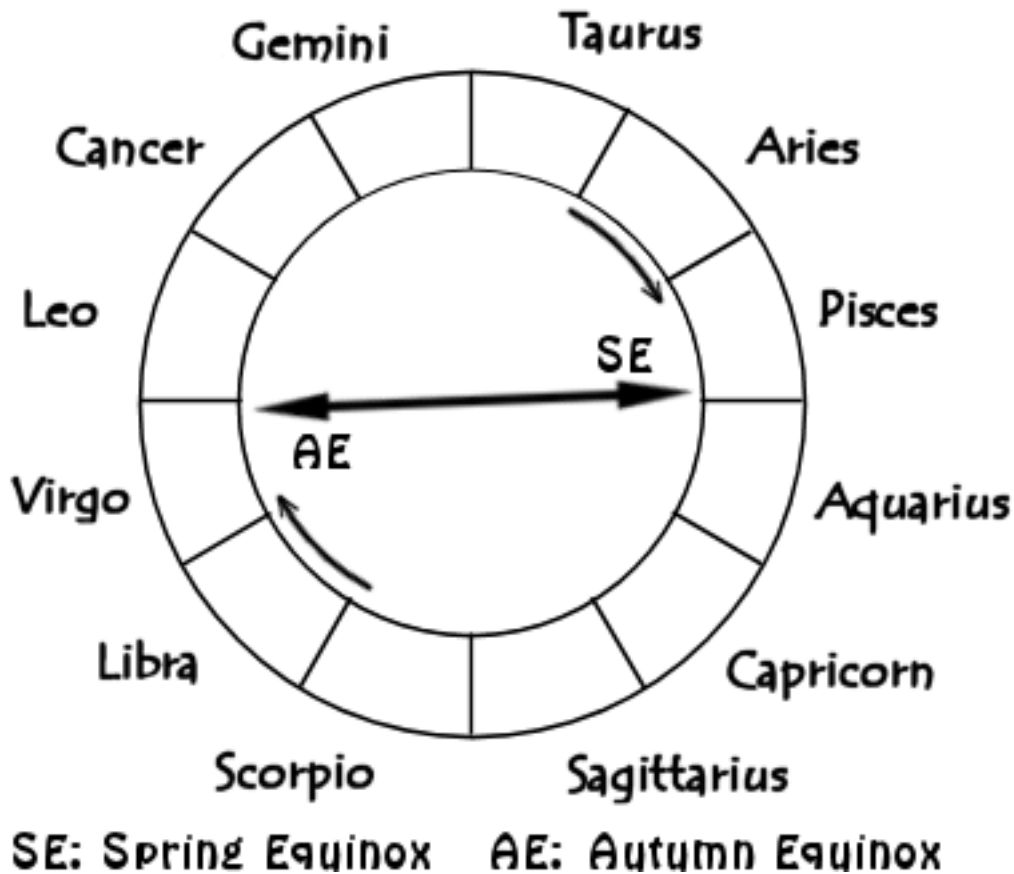
- For the spring equinox: Pisces.
- For the autumn equinox: Virgo.
- For the winter solstice: Sagittarius.
- For the summer solstice: Gemini.

However, precession, as we have noticed, is changing the relationship between the sun and its dawn constellations by  $1^\circ$  (two Moon widths) every 72 years.

### A new constellation, a new age

The constellations that the sun passes through on its annual journey round the heavens are those of our familiar zodiac. Although the constellations of the zodiac vary in length, by convention we say that each zodiac constellation dominates a  $30^\circ$  segment of the sky. For the sun to move by  $30^\circ$  in relation to the dawn constellation will take just over 2000 years, by which time a different constellation is carrying the sun into the dawn sky.

We call this long period, when the sun rises under the same constellation, an 'age', and name the age for the constellation that carries the sun on the spring equinox. Thus we are living in the Age of Pisces, and are about to enter the Age of Aquarius. (Yes, this really is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, though we have a couple of centuries to go yet, see Figure 7 on this page.)



**Figure 7: Equinoxes in 2005AD, at the dawning of the Age of Aquarius**

In former times, they may not have had this precision, so marking the actual beginning of an age would be a matter of dispute and contention. Some constellations overlap, for example Libra and Virgo. There is a large gap between Gemini and Taurus, and Scorpio is hardly touched by the sun at all. Here may have been considerable dispute amongst ancient priest-astronomers about the actual starting point of the new age. Signs in the sky would therefore be important. Santillana and von Dechend determined that conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn were significant to the ancients who may then have used this as a marker. These transitions between ages saw the astrological age enter a cataclysm when all the old gods died, and new ones had to be found. Such an event needed marking.

## Decoding the Legend

I said at the beginning that I was trying to make a star chart that took precession into account. It was just when I precessed the spring equinox back to the beginning of the Age of Pisces, about 2000 years ago, that I noticed an interesting configuration amongst other constellations.

### Freeing the virgin from the dragon

The insight came as I was marking the new spring and autumn equinox positions for that year and noticed what constellation was moving into the autumn equinox position. It was Virgo. Now look across the pole and you'll see the celestial north pole for that time is in empty space just off the tail of Draco, the Dragon or Serpent. After thousands of years the Dragon no longer held the pole star position in its grip, and Virgo, the Virgin, became the defining constellation of the autumn equinox, see Figure 8 on this page. Virgo is a long constellation, so it could be argued that she had already been the autumn equinox for centuries. This doesn't matter because the point is that she couldn't mark the equinox until the axis precessed out of Draco.

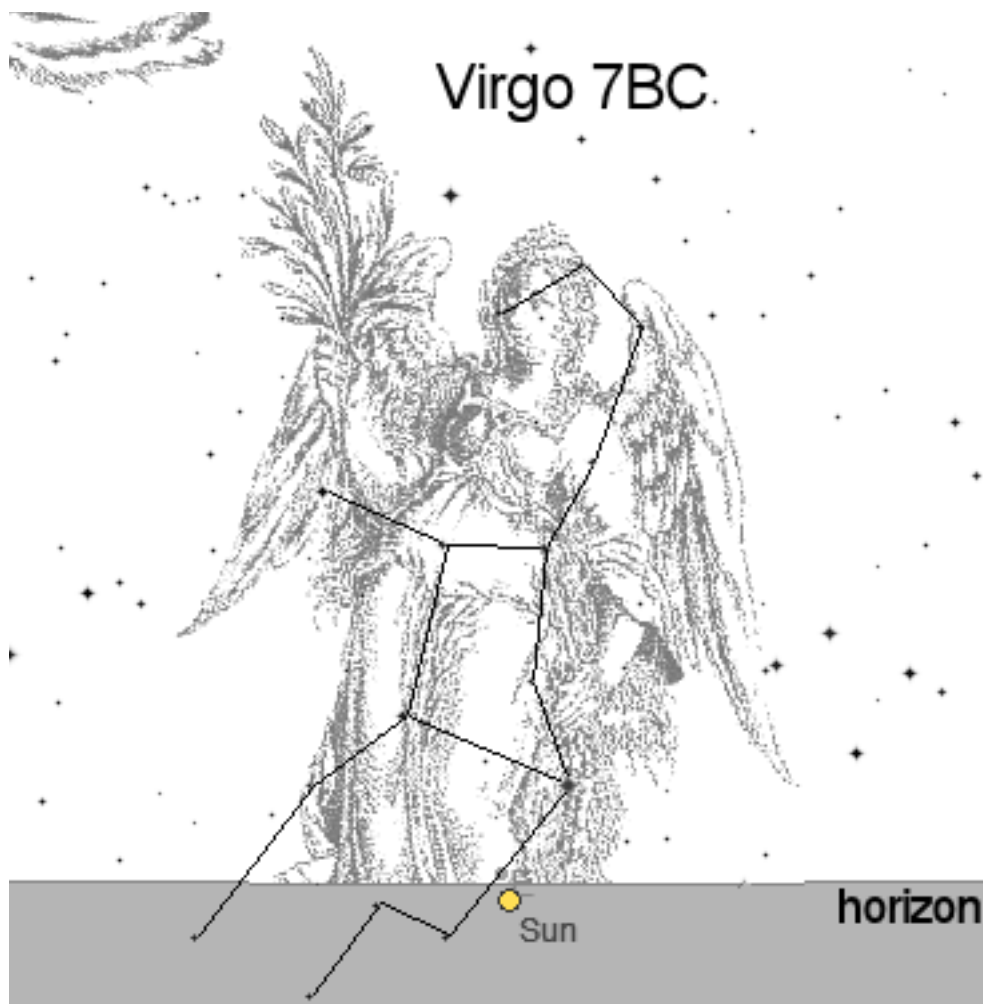


Figure 8: Virgo carrying the sun into the autumn equinox dawn 7BC

### The hero to the rescue

Only a mighty and powerful warrior could have defeated the Dragon to bring this all

about, but where is he? Look on the other side of Draco from the Virgin and you come across a warrior powerful enough to defeat fearsome monsters - the Greek demigod Perseus. One of his feats was to rescue the goddess Andromeda who had been chained to a rock as a sacrifice to a sea monster. But the ancient world knew him for another great feat.

David Ulansey, in his *"The Origins of Mithraic Mysteries"*, showed that Perseus was also the hidden godhead of the Roman cult of Mithras, see "Appendix 1: The Cult of Mithras" on page 22, The core mystery of that cult was the precessional force that shifts the celestial pole and the equinoxes around, and they represented that process by Perseus in battle with Taurus the Bull. Now we have a hero and an existing precessional battle. But what does this have to do with a Christian knight? We'll see later, but for now bear in mind that the cult of Mithras was widespread in the Roman Empire at the time of the early Christian church.

Figure 9 on page 16 shows Draco, Virgo, and Perseus in the sky of 7BC. The Christian cult is centred around a demigod born of a Virgin, and there in the sky at that time we have one of the most significant points of the sky, that of the autumn equinox, having moved into the constellation of Virgo. What better then, than to take over the godhead of a rival cult and dress him up as the warrior who freed Virgo?

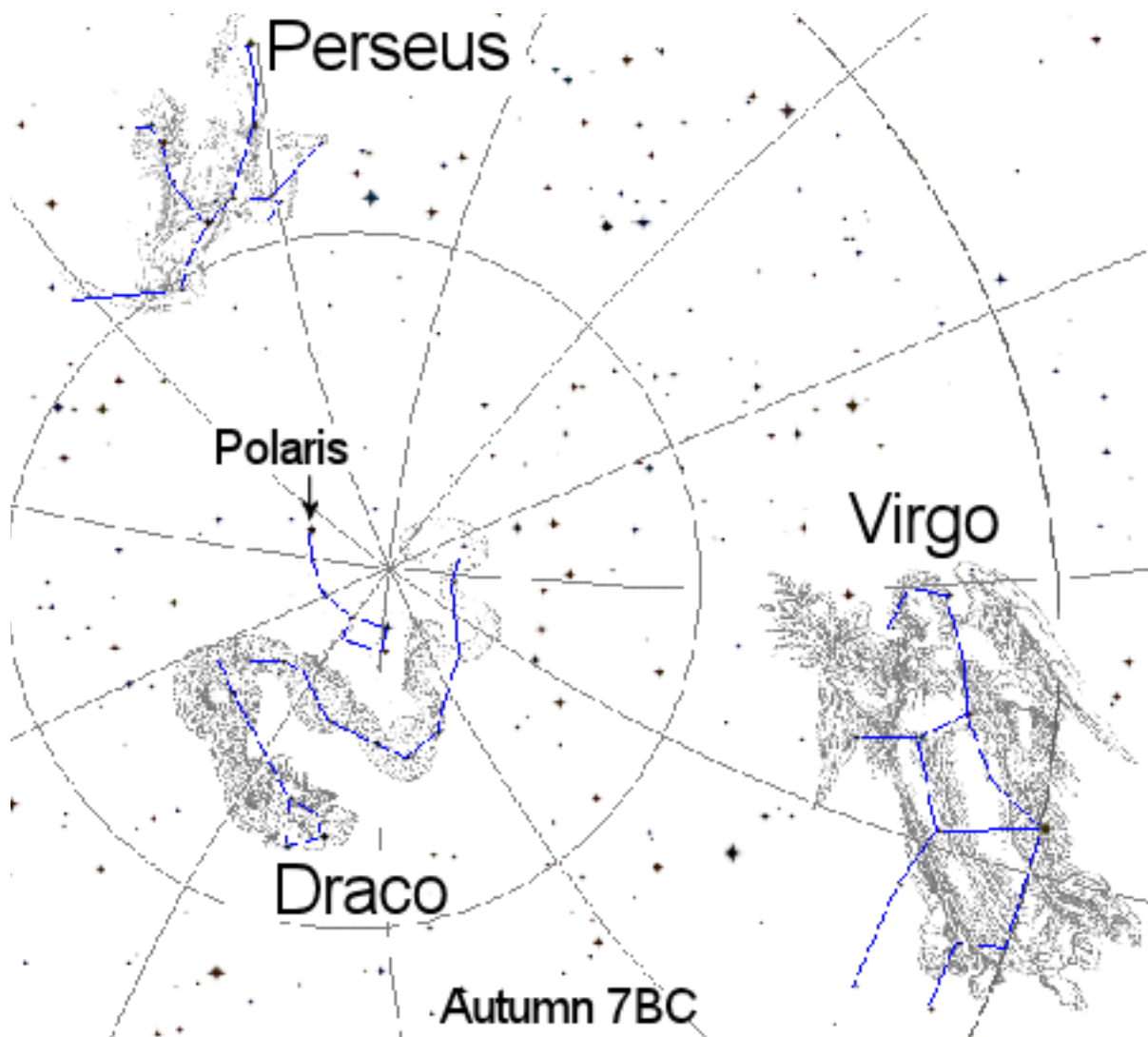


Figure 9: Virgo, Draco, and Perseus

## **Sacrificing the sheep**

Before the princess was given up to feed the dragon, the townspeople offered up two sheep. Does this have any astronomical significance in the scheme? Indeed it does, for just as the spring equinox was moving into the Age of Pisces, it was moving out of the Age of Aries (the Ram), the male counterpart to the sacrificed sheep, see Figure 10 on page 18.

## **The stake as world axis**

According to the technical language of myth, a pole, a stake, or a rock represents the Earth's axis. In many myths the stake is moved, uprooted, or otherwise operated upon with dire consequences for the whole world, bringing destruction of the old astronomical world age, and necessitating the creation of a new world age with new gods.

The allegorical tying of the princess to the stake states that the fate of the princess (Virgo) is tied to that of the world axis. She cannot become the constellation of the autumn equinox until the celestial north pole, the extension of the earth's axis on the polar skies, has precessed away from the constellation of Draco (the Dragon).

## **The dragon tamed**

Some variants of the legend tell of the dragon being subdued rather than killed. The princess takes off her girdle, puts it around the dragon's neck and leads it into town. Astronomically this is saying that Draco no longer has dominion over sky matters. The princess, as Virgo, has come into her own as queen of the autumn equinox.

## **St. George in all his glory**

We cannot but admire the unknown compiler of this legend. He not only understood precession but also displayed the talents of a master story teller by encapsulating a significant astronomical event in such an elegant little fable. We now have an astronomical reading for the complete legend:

1. Two sheep had been fed to the dragon every day, to no avail. The Age of Aries was passing and was losing its power to influence matters.
2. The princess (constellation of Virgo) is chained to the stake (Earth axis). Her fate is literally tied up with that of the axis. They are inseparably in thrall to the dragon (constellation of Draco). The celestial north pole has spent thousands of years precessing through Draco.
3. Along comes our hero St. George (in the persona of the constellation of Perseus). He defeats the dragon. The celestial north pole, is freed from the grip of the constellation of Draco.
4. This also frees the princess (Virgo) to gain her position as the dominating constellation of the autumn equinox.

My point is that the legend has been constructed to commemorate the autumn equinox constellation at the opening of the Age of Pisces. Through St. George, Virgo came into her birthright as queen of the autumn equinox.

Figure 10 on this page shows the relationship between the equinoxes and their zodiacal constellations at that time.

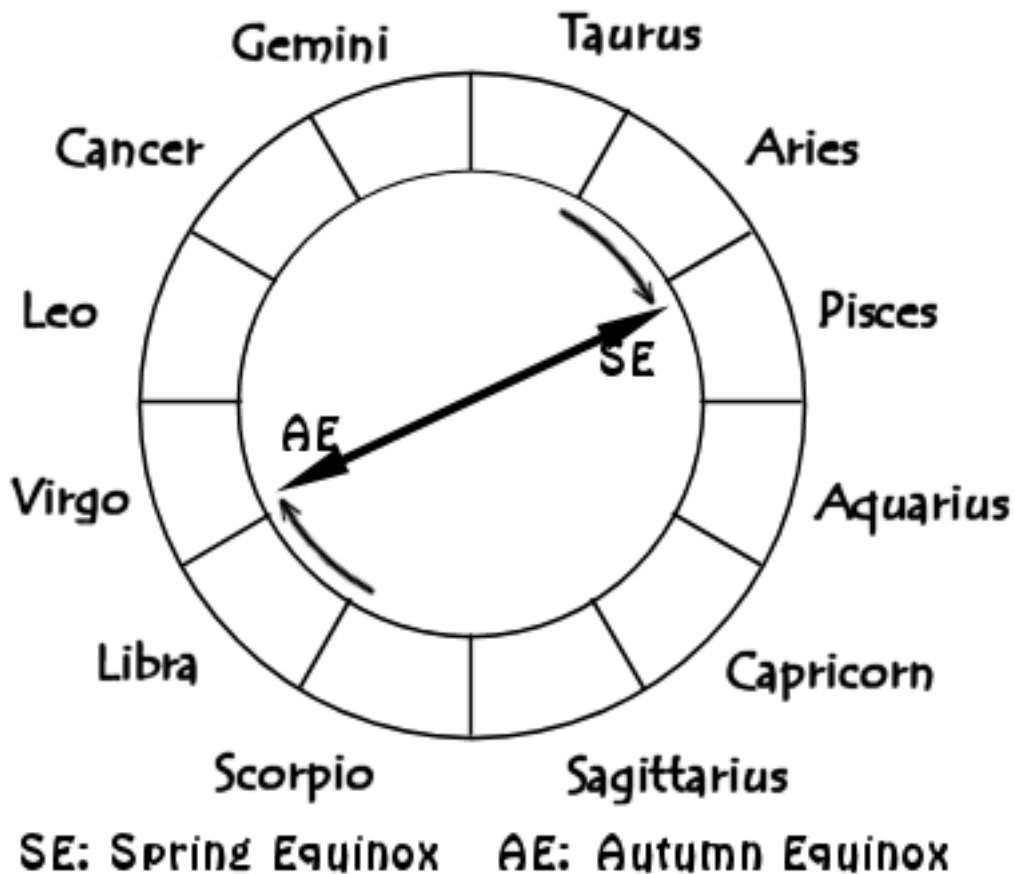


Figure 10: Spring Equinox moving into Pisces, Autumn Equinox moving into Virgo 7BC

### A king is also born

These celestial events were tremendously significant to people of the time. For example, the early Christians, during the days of persecution, used the sign of the fish (Pisces) to recognise one another. It cannot have escaped the notice of educated people that there had been a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces in 7 BC, see Figure 11 on page 19. In mythic terms this was a heavenly sign of great importance. One conjunction would have heralded the birth of a king, but a triple conjunction could only have meant that a 'king of kings' would be born who would dominate the coming Age of Pisces itself. Although we cannot be certain, this event may have been the defining moment opening the Age of Pisces. On top of this, a virgin gave birth to this demigod, so why not commemorate her through the constellation of the autumn equinox?

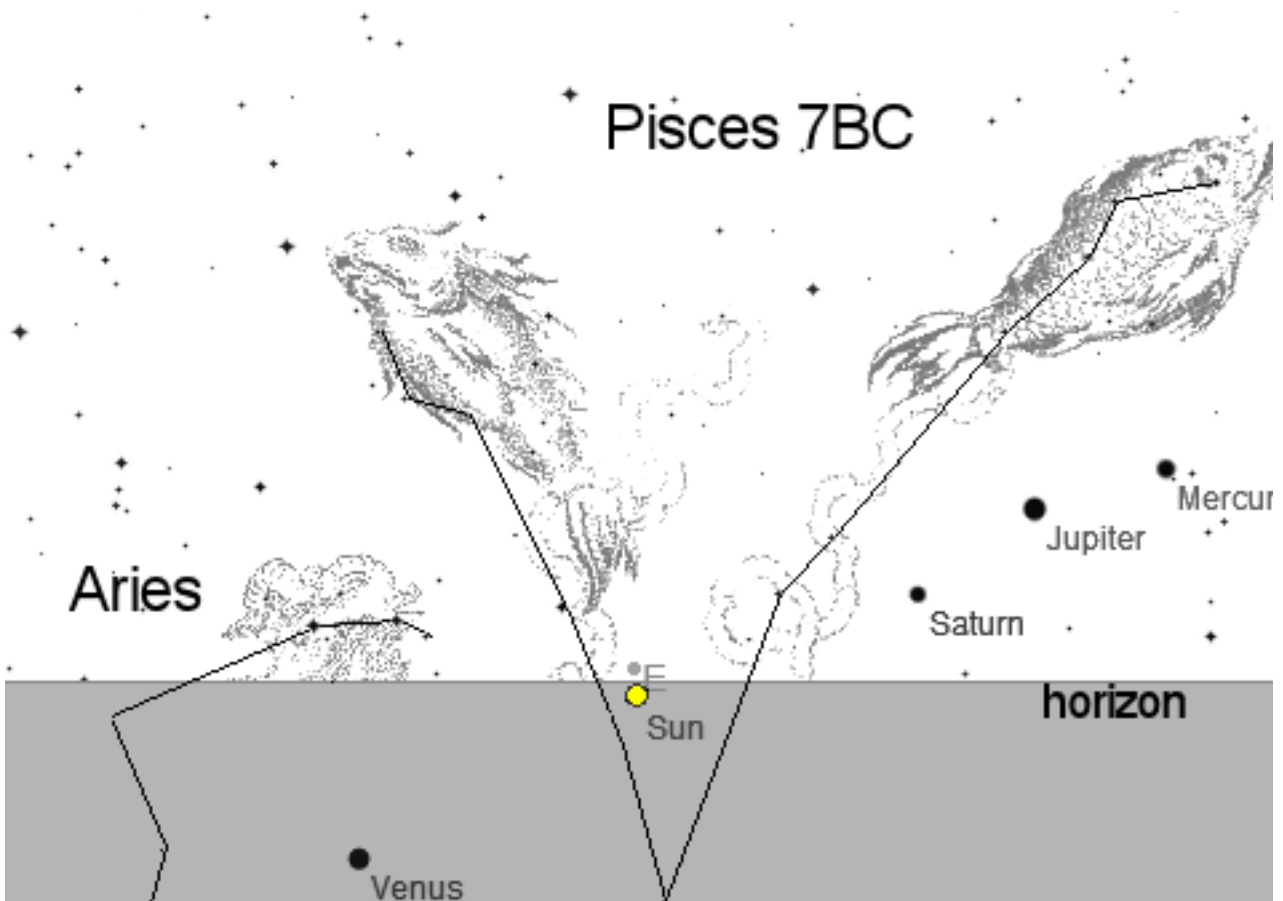


Figure 11: Dawn, Spring Equinox 7BC, Saturn and Jupiter in Pisces

### A sky show

If you have an astronomy program, set it for the spring equinox, 21st March, in the year 7 BC, dawn at 06:00, and centre on Jupiter or Saturn. Roll forward a few days at a time until either of the planets leaves Pisces. Due to the relative motions and positions of the Earth, Jupiter, and Saturn, the whole series of conjunctions lasted into 6BC.

## Converting the Opposition

To our minds today, this business of dragons/Draco, knights/Perseus, princess/Virgo all seems to be somewhat abstruse. To our ancestors at that time, the sky was the domain of gods and what happened up there had significant effect down here. This is the milieu into which the Christian Church was born, so it is hardly surprising that they should lay claim to a unique precessional event and encode it in time-honoured fashion by way of mythology. It must have been too good an opportunity for the early Church to miss when the rival cult of Mithras had claimed an exclusive prerogative in these precessional events.

For some time there must have been conversions to Christianity by former followers of Mithras. In the battle for hearts, minds, and souls, recent converts from Mithraism must have known how to dress up Christian stories in Mithraic terms to attract their former fellow cultists. They could show that while it took the full godhead Mithras/Perseus to do the precessional deed, the Christian God was so much more powerful that He could assign a knight to do the job instead.

Our story here is about St. George only, but in a broader context, the early Church effectively laid claim to the whole system of equinoxes and solstices. In summary:

- a. The early Christians used the sign of the fish, which is Pisces, the constellation of the **spring equinox**. The birth of their demigod was forecast by the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the very same constellation of the spring equinox, Pisces.
- b. They celebrate the birth of St. John the Baptist, who foretold the coming of the Christ, on the **summer solstice**.
- c. St. George defeated the Dragon allowing Virgo (the Virgin) to become the constellation of the **autumn equinox**.
- d. They celebrate the birth of Jesus near the **winter solstice**.

Those who study mythology according to Santillana and von Dechend's system will recognise a complete 'world frame' here.

Once the Christian Church prevailed, and Mithraism (and other sky cults) had withered, the precessional interpretation of St. George, the Princess, and the Dragon was redundant. St. George could now be dressed up as the first hero of the age of chivalry, his shining Christian persona an example both to individuals and nations alike.

## Conclusion

I believe we have done the ancient compilers of this legend a great disservice. They encoded a major astronomical event into our new religion, only for later generations to diminish the significance of this system of astronomical 'World Ages'. The importance of events up there in the sky withered, for Christianity is not a sky cult. While we celebrated St. George as a good example to all Christians, we forgot that his battle was of cosmic proportions. Today, our fantasies are played out in Hollywood movies which have no inner significance. Our ancestors played out their fantasies in the night sky above them, and buried in their stories a rich cosmology available to any who could find the key.

In a moment of pure serendipity, St. George and his Dragon dropped, literally, out of the sky I was studying and into my lap. I hope that I have now restored St. George to his proper place as the warrior who set the Virgin free from the Dragon to become Queen of the Autumn equinox.

It is sad that in these impious days we no longer respect the ways of our ancestors, for they knew something we have forgotten: we are coming to the close of a World Age. As the ancients knew so well, there can only be trouble and strife ahead until a new World Age is established. For rationalists and those who believe in continual progress, this is all superstitious nonsense from our prescientific past. Nevertheless, whether you count yourself as a devout religionist or a convinced rationalist, I hope my little essay has illuminated a corner of our mythological heritage and elevated St. George to his proper place up there in the sky. It's only a thought, but out of respect to ancient custom, shouldn't we now rename the constellation of Perseus to that of St. George?

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## Appendix 1: The Cult of Mithras

A number of misconceptions are extent about the inner mysteries of this religion. Mithra was a Persian deity and is thus seen to be a Persian belief system that found its favour with the Romans from about the first century BC. It was a mystery religion whose inner truths were revealed to the acolyte as he proceeded through the levels until the core revelation was laid out before him. I say 'he' and 'him' as women were specifically excluded from membership of the cult. It was especially favoured by Romans serving the state, like soldiers and functionaries. (The historical George was just the sort of functionary who could have been a Mithraist before his conversion to Christianity.) The Mithraic Cult spread widely from its place of origin in the Near East and found itself practised in many corners of the Empire. It had no gospel, and left no written system of theology. Quite what it represented had remained largely a mystery. They did leave behind, however, a rich resource of graphic images in their temples.

David Ulansey, in his book *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, showed that the godhead of this religion was not Persian at all. They worshipped the Greek demigod Perseus. For a mystery religion, what better than to hide the true identity of its godhead behind another tradition. It seems that the cult was astronomical in nature and its theology was written in the constellations of the sky. Its core revelation embodied a discovery by a Greek astronomer called Hipparchos in about 120 BC. He had been studying ancient Babylonian star tables and noticed that since the tables had been compiled the positions of the stars with respect to the sun had changed. He came to the conclusion that the starry dome above us, once believed to be fixed, eternal, and immutable, was in fact in motion. Such a conclusion finding its way into general society must have thrown into doubt the eternal and infallible nature of the gods themselves. Into that uncertainty stepped the cult of Mithras, which had a complete explanation for the mysterious shifting of the eternal starry domain of the gods above.

The revelation of the Mithraists was that Perseus was in fact far more powerful than the pantheon of all the existing Roman gods put together, for it was he who had the strength and the power to shift the universe in just such a fashion. Perseus is shown symbolically in battle with Taurus the Bull, see Figure 12 on page 23\*. This represents the force that shifted the starry dome from its relationship with the Sun. What Hipparchos had discovered, and what the cult of Mithras adopted, was an astronomical phenomenon visible only from the surface of the Earth called *precession of the equinoxes*. Indeed, precession is also at the heart of St. George's story.

\*In these discussions we are dealing with allegory, that is, the constellations involved represent figures in a story, or some physical process. Nobody actually says that the constellation of Perseus rushed across the sky and battled the constellation of Taurus like some Battle of Britain dog-fight over the fields of Kent.

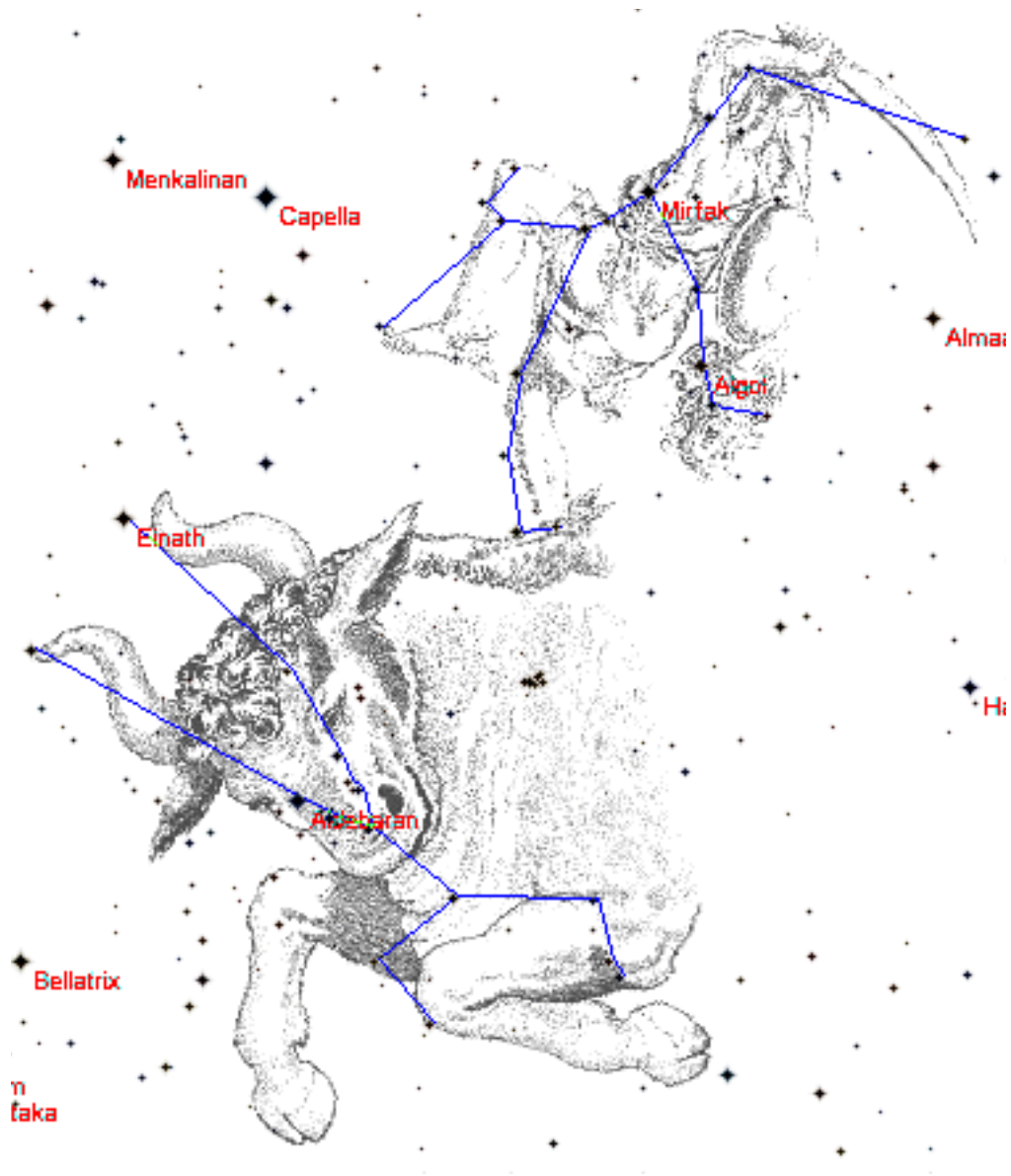


Figure 12: Perseus and Taurus the Bull

## Appendix 2: Some More Dragon Lore

Before we leave our good knight, readers may know of other dragon lore not mentioned in St. George's story. Does this also have astronomical significance? I believe it does.

### A fine taste for maidens.

This explanation for the legend of St. George and the Dragon may well apply to many, if not all, tales relating to dragons, imprisoned maidens, and battling heros.

### A dragon can only be killed by a blow to a particular point of its body.

This may be a metaphor for the crossing point of the path of the celestial north pole as it precesses across the constellation of Draco, close to the star Thuban (alpha Draconis), see Figure 13 on this page.

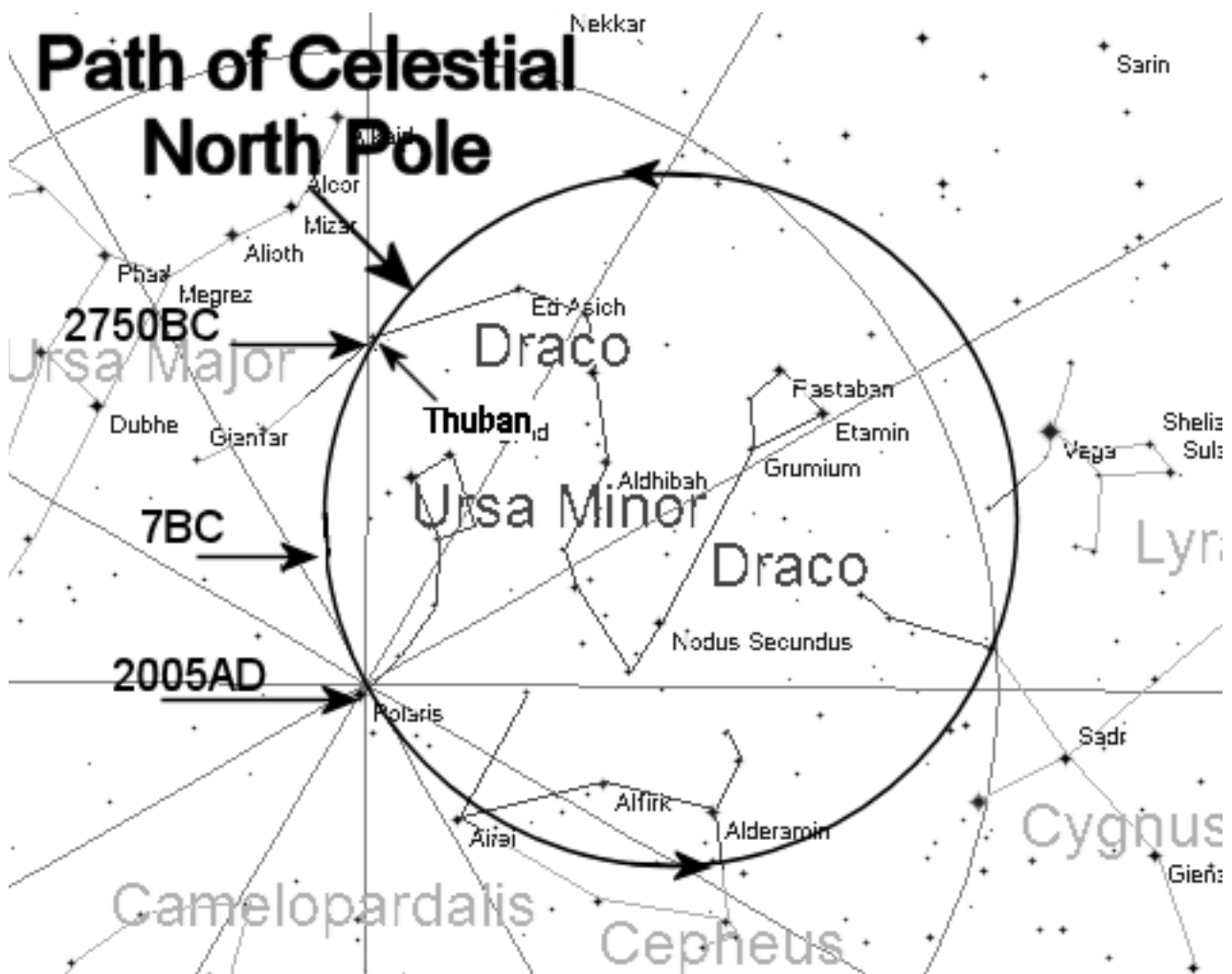


Figure 13: Path of celestial north pole crossing Draco.

That crossing occurred some 4750 years ago, just before the Great Pyramid of Cheops was built in Ancient Egypt.

### A dragon guards a hoard of treasure.

In some legends the dragon sleeps on a hoard of treasure in a burial mound. This was probably circulated to deter the locals from breaking into the places and stealing the grave goods. There is indeed a great treasure to be gained by those who 'defeat' the dragon. That

treasure is not gold, rather it is knowledge of the precessional mechanism that drives the cosmos above us.

**Breathes fire, burns people.**

Only those acolytes who are fully prepared in sky lore should think of approaching the dragon. The resulting shock of finding that the starry dome above is not so fixed after all might be deep enough to 'burn', intellectually, those unable to accept such a precept.

## Appendix 3: Effect of Rising Sun

In this essay, all dawn sky shots have been shown with all stars visible, but in reality we'll see something like the shots shown below (constellation shapes left overlaying the sky):

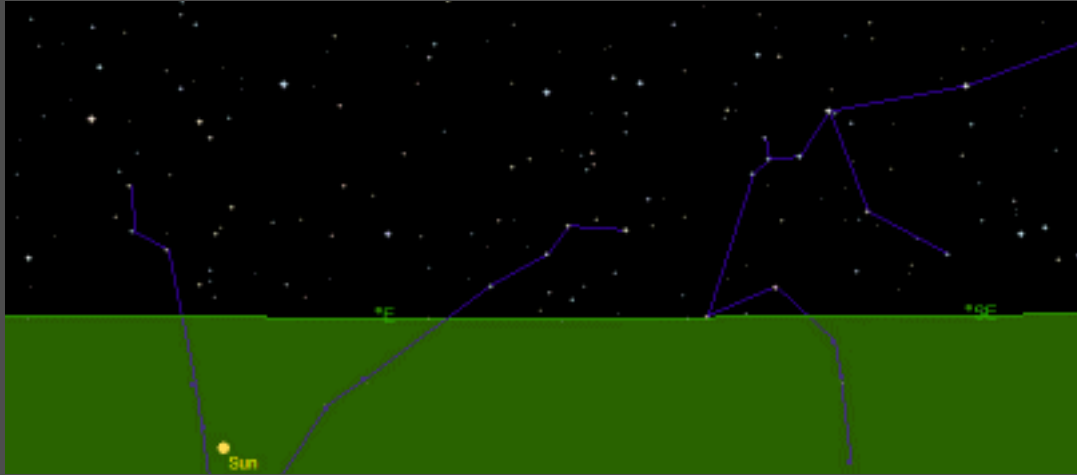


Figure 14: The darkest hour before the dawn, all stars visible.

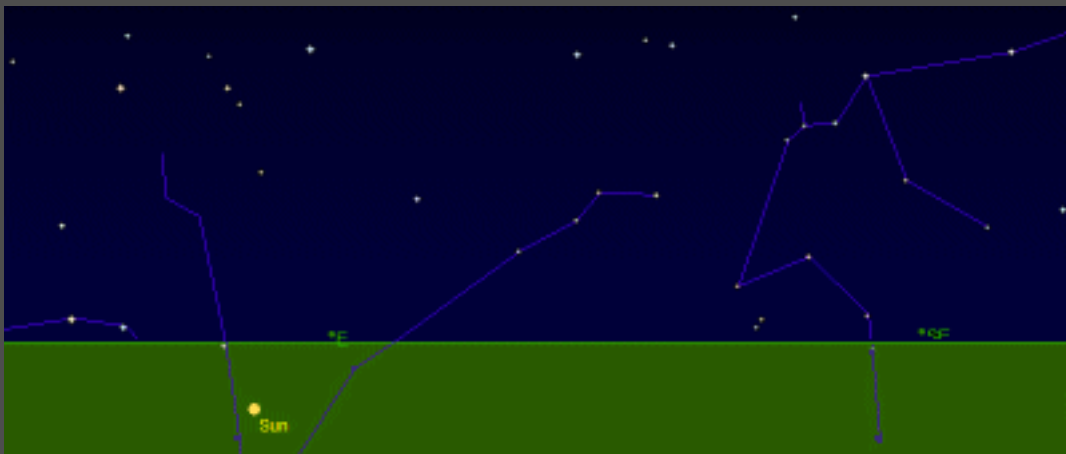


Figure 15: Sun arising, the faintest stars have gone, but brightest remain visible.

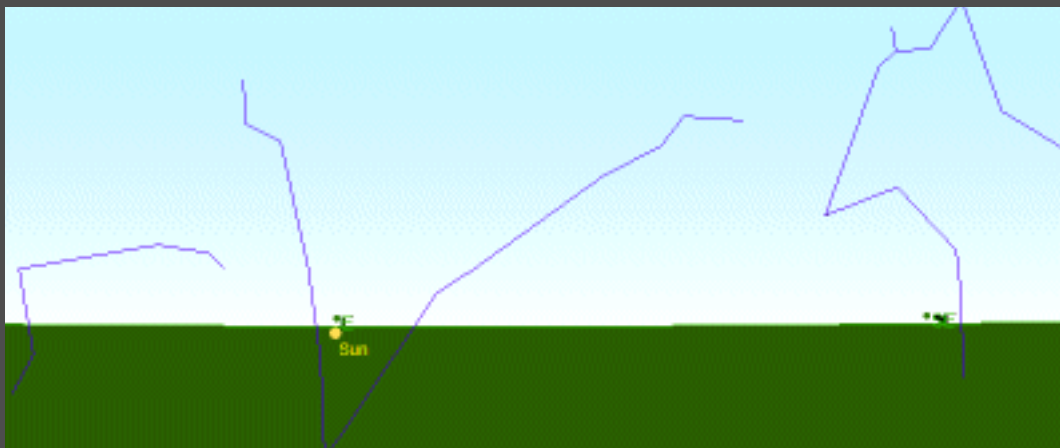


Figure 16: Sun now appearing, all stars gone.

## Bibliography

### Hardcopy books

These scientific tracts mentioned below are perfectly readable to anybody who has read and understood this essay on St. George. I recommend them all.

**Hamlet's Mill** by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, first published in 1969, my paperback edition first published in Nonpareil Books, by David R Godine, Publisher, Inc. 1977. This is the seminal work that discovered a technical language embedded in mythology. The language was that of astronomy. It should be required reading for all those seriously interested in understanding mythology. It includes a short course in precessional astronomy, but if science isn't strictly your forte, there are internet websites that can help you visualise the concepts. Some find this book somewhat dense, but you should consider it instead extremely rich in detail. It should not be taken in one meal, as it is more of a moveable feast, an intellectual tour de force that can enlighten those readers with the patience to delve. It will open unsuspected doors on our preliterate forebears.

**The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries**, by David Ulansey, first published by Oxford University Press in 1989, still available from this publisher. It is subtitled *Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World*. The author begins work with no written gospel nor written theologies, working primarily from images the cult of Mithras left in its temples. Unravels the Mithraic belief system. His article in *Scientific American* in December 1989 provided a broader view of Mithraism in Western culture.

**The Secret of the Incas**, by William Sullivan, first published in hardcover by Crown Publishers in 1996, currently published by Three Rivers Press of New York. It is subtitled *Myth, Astronomy, and the War Against Time*. In decoding Andean mythology from an astronomical viewpoint, the author discovered a social and political history of Andes cultures stretching back some 2000 years.

**The Death of Gods in Ancient Egypt** by Jane Sellers, published by Penguin, London 1992. One of the first Egyptologists to have used Santillana and von Dechend's system to analyse Ancient Egyptian religion.

**The Timæus Dialogues** by Plato, available on the Internet in various places. Plato's ideas from the third century BC on how the Great Architect went about his work in making the universe. Often quoted by those decoding mythology, why not read it yourself?

### Useful web links

Readers who want to pursue these matters further might like to try these links to some useful web sites. It is not an exhaustive list and apologies to anyone I've missed. Using a search engine will reveal many more. (Links correct as of 6.February.2006.)

### On St. George:

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06453a.htm>

<http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/saintg05.htm>

<http://www.britannia.com/history/stgeorge.html>

<http://www.ucc.ie/milmart/grgorig.html>

**On dragons:**

<http://www.theserenedragon.net/home.html>

**On precessional astronomy:**

<http://www.crystalinks.com/precession.html>

<http://www-spof.gsfc.nasa.gov/stargaze/Sprecess.htm>

<http://csep10.phys.utk.edu/astr161/lect/time/precession.html>

**On the Mithras/Perseus mysteries:**

<http://www.well.com/user/davidu/mithras.html>

<http://www.roman-empire.net/religion/mithras.html>

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10402a.htm>

<http://museums.ncl.ac.uk/archive/mithras/intro.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mithras>

<http://www.mythweb.com/encyc/entries/perseus.html>

<http://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Heroes/Perseus/perseus.html>

**Or a more esoteric slant:**

<http://www.revealer.com/platonic.htm>

<http://ancientegypt.hypermart.net/royalarch/>

<http://www.elysian.co.uk/precessi.htm>

\* \* \* \* \*

These are starting points for those interested in diving into the waters of humankind's mythological heritage. Each of these books contains a substantial body of references, notes and bibliography, far more than I could assess and include here. Consider my essay as a mere portal into the world of decoding mythology. These are early days, there is much to do, and plenty of unexplored territory right in front of us.

### **About the Author**

I grew up in London, England, and was educated in a London grammar school. A local public library had such treasures as "*Mayan Art and Civilisation*" which opened my eyes to ancient cultures and their mythology.

At technical college I studied Pure Maths, Applied Maths, and Physics. Mathematics or astrophysics was my destiny until seduced by the promise of computers. Astronomy and mythology took a back seat to a career in high technology. Magazines such as *New Scientist*, *Scientific American*, and *Astronomy* kept me in touch with the sciences. During this period I discovered the ground-breaking epic work of "*Hamlet's Mill*" by Santillana and von Dechend and was determined to make a contribution to this field using my twin interests of astronomy and mythology. Latter years have seen more time to spend on this in between the occasional projects. This essay is the first of several publications on the matter of decoding mythology.

Roy Taylor - 2006