

Aries or the *Agnus Dei*: is the zodiac pagan or Christian in medieval art?

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Abstract. The title for this article is inspired by the questions repeatedly asked by my students, and this study attempts to break the question apart and reconsider the language used to study the zodiac in medieval art. The terms ‘pagan’, ‘Christian’ and ‘Christianising’ are problematic and create misleading binaries, so first I reframed the question by carefully redefining the terms used to describe the zodiac in medieval art. I further refined the query to one central question: Why did the signs of the zodiac, and the constellations generally, persist in their Hellenistic renderings in art and texts into the Christian era and beyond, and not reinvented with more religiously-appropriate signifiers? Drawing from contemporary texts and art, I suggest that there were two cultural forces perpetuating the Hellenistic zodiac: the methods of dissemination of astronomical knowledge from classical sources, and the active creation of zodiacal art. I explore how the folkloric authority of the zodiac signs synergistically combined with the visual arts to stimulate astrological practices. I argue that art production was crucial as an advancing influence and not simply a by-product of a classical inheritance.

Introduction

This study focuses on one central question: Why did the signs of the zodiac, and the constellations generally, persist in their Hellenistic renderings in art and texts into the Christian era and beyond, and not reinvented with more religiously-appropriate signifiers? This question is so metahistorical to seem perhaps aporetic, except that there were indeed efforts made by influential church leaders in the early Middle Ages to reconfigure the zodiac and other constellations with new connotations. Why were they unsuccessful? It may be precisely because the star signs survived so robustly that scholars tend to overlook the efforts made to recreate them. They are taken for granted, but history could have gone a different way. Reviewing this problem also raises valuable questions concerning the language scholars have used to discuss the topic. Specifically, I am considering the efforts of ecclesiastical leaders and writers between c. 300-

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900 CE, and the subsequent flowering of astrological art in medieval Europe between c. 1050 and 1200 CE, particularly in sculpted church portals.

In the multi-faceted, centuries-long conversion to Christianity, many symbol systems underwent significant reinvention, but the constellations remained nearly unchanged. The practice of converting pagan subject matter into Christian in a work of art is termed *sphragis*, a method of ‘baptising’ a subject in the mode famously promoted by Pope Gregory (c. 540–604 CE) in his letter to Abbot Mellitus in 601.¹ For this paper, ‘conversion’ specifically indicates shifting religious systems toward Christianity, as opposed to indigenous or classical belief systems, but without creating a strict binary between ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’.² Sometimes this process was as simple as overlaying a cross onto pre-existing work, or as complicated as transforming seasonal celebrations into saints’ days, or as invisibly as building churches and cathedral over ancient temple sites.³ The stars retained not only their classical names, but their mythology, imagery and place in the complicated intellectual system of an astrological cosmos.

However, the terms ‘Christianizing’ and ‘pagan’ are problematic. The division between pagan and Christian in regard to the zodiac can be drawn from the language of the church leaders who wrote about the subject, but this most likely reflects ‘an unrepresentative minority of reforming churchmen [who] condemn[ed] forms of Christianity of which they disapproved’.⁴ Neither can we, as historians, wholly consider the zodiac as

¹ As recorded by Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* I:30 (c. 731). Robert A. Markus, ‘Gregory the Great and a Papal Missionary Strategy’, *Studies in Church History* 6 (1970): pp.29–38. George Demacopoulos, ‘Gregory the Great and the Pagan Shrines of Kent’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no. 2 (2008): pp.353–369.

² Guyda Armstrong and I. N. Wood, *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals. International Medieval Research* (Series 7, Brepols, 2000).

³ Bente Kiilerich, ‘Making Sense of the Spolia in the Little Metropolis in Athens’, *Arte Medievale* IV/2: pp.95–114; Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Stephen McCluskey, ‘The Mid-Quarter Days and the Historical Survival of British Folk Astronomy’, *Archeoastronomy* 13; suppl. *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, p.20 (1989): S1-S19.

⁴ C. S. Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2007), pp.76–106.

areligious folklore.⁵ Zodiacal imagery was chosen to adorn some of the most sacred spaces of Christendom, such as the pavement stones leading to the shrine of Thomas Beckett in Canterbury, or in the west portal jambs of St-Denis in Paris.⁶ As an historical process this is notoriously thorny, and requires a thoughtful approach. Ronald Hutton wrote about the current scholarly revision of pagan/Christian terminology in his most recent book this way: “Revisionism, therefore, like most reformations, has shattered a former near-unity but not produced a new one, generating a number of competing positions instead”.⁷ ‘Pagan’ is a nebulous, catch-all term that does not encapsulate the religious ideology and practices of the classical or medieval periods.⁸ However, the overwhelming majority of publications concerning the history of constellations and the zodiac in particular discuss a ‘Christianising’ process, glossing over the subtle nuances and complexities of this issue. Even the most up-to-date texts include chapters with titles such as ‘The Christianized Zodiac of the Northern Hemisphere’.⁹ The facts seem irreconcilable: the Hellenistic constellations, with their hemerology and folklore, certainly continued, and they certainly continued into Christian intellectual and physical spaces. I suggest two primary cultural forces were responsible for this perpetuation: primarily, the predominance of Greek sources as authorities in astronomy, revived at different times and places. This is the most obvious and well-studied, and will not be extensively covered here. Secondly, and the focus of this study, is the folkloric authority of the star signs, which I argue synergistically combined with visual arts to stimulate astrological practices. The inertia of established traditions and visual media motivated astrological ideas. Studies to date have not considered the visual tradition

⁵ Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p.140.

⁶ Peter Draper, ‘Canterbury Cathedral: Classical Columns in the Trinity Chapel?’, *Architectural History* 44, *Essays in Architectural History Presented to John Newman* (2001): pp.172–78, 175. Matthew M. Reeve, ‘A Seat of Authority: The Archbishop's Throne at Canterbury Cathedral’, *Gesta* 42, no. 2 (2003): pp.131–42, 139. Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and its Art Treasures*, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.23.

⁷ Ronald Hutton, *Queens of the Wild, Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe: an Investigation* (Yale University Press, 2022), p.40.

⁸ Sophie Page, *Astrology in Medieval Manuscripts* (British Library Publishing, 2002), pp.45–47.

⁹ M. Mendillo, *Saints and Sinners in the Sky: Astronomy, Religion and Art in Western Culture* (Springer-Praxis Books in Popular Astronomy) (Chichester, 2022).

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as crucial to the longevity of astral signs in astronomical texts or in popular culture, rather it has been defined as a by-product of a classical heritage, or a 'pagan survival'. Partially this is the result of the twentieth-century fixation on defining objects by schools of art, with 'high' and 'low' categories.¹⁰ I suggest that art production was vital as an advancing influence preserving the zodiac, especially as it related to astrological ideas. The zodiac was able to succinctly express what the visual anthropologist Clifford Geertz termed a 'complex conceptual structure' that is 'superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render'.¹¹ The signs of the zodiac are inexplicit, with centuries of accumulated semiotics, but not accidental. They were chosen to render the concept of time by visual means, and proved effective.

The Labours of the Month paired with zodiac signs are specifically interpreted in publications as an evolved classical theme, and not as an astrological exercise.¹² However, artistic expressions indicate some level of choice on the part of the patron, artist and viewer, and the choice to depict the classical constellations in their Hellenistic iterations was not inevitable, it was preferred. This interpretation is influenced by the study of agency, social networks and objects, in which 'artworks are active agents able to influence social networks in subjective and tangible ways'.¹³ Journeys, pilgrimages and transcendent visual experiences were integral to experiences in religious structures, and the zodiac played an active role in establishing the machinations of the cosmos. Naturally, this study is hardly definitive, leaving spacious room for discussion and further development, but provides a new perspective on an old problem. First, the significant efforts to manipulate or eradicate the zodiac from the cultural consciousness of Christians in the early centuries CE will be discussed, and then the developments of visual depictions of the zodiac in medieval art analysed.

¹⁰ Grażyna Jurkowlaniec, Ika Matyjaszkiewicz, and Zuzanna Sarnecka, *The Agency of Things in Medieval and Early Modern Art* (Routledge Research in Art History) (Milton: Routledge, 2018), see introduction.

¹¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), p.10.

¹² Ewa Sniezynska-Stolot, *Astrological Iconography in the Middle Ages; The Decanal Planets.*, trans. Joanna Komorowska (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2003), p.38.

¹³ Jurkowlaniec, *The Agency of Things*, p.6.

Antiquos Signorum

The signs of the zodiac were used as particularly visual symbols in anti-astrological rhetoric in early Christian poetry and prose. The popular late antique writer Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348–405? CE, Roman Spain) used the zodiac signs thus in his work *The Divinity of Christ*. This apologetic text was written as a refutation of paganism and a poetic treatment of Christian truth, intended for private, devotional readings for Christian Romans embroiled in the conflicts between classical literary traditions and educational culture.¹⁴ Prudentius was well-known for centuries, described as a ‘pioneer in the creation of a Christian literature,’ and included in as many as three hundred extant manuscripts.¹⁵ In the following passage, he draws a metaphor for the victory of Christianity over ancient astrologers, describing the zodiacal signs with vibrant imagery:

‘We have seen,’ they said, ‘this child passing over the sky and outshining the trains of the ancient stars.’ The astrologer watching all night on a height in Chaldaea felt his blood curdle with alarm when he saw that the Serpent had given place, the Lion taken to flight, the Crab drawn in his feet in a crippled row along his side, that the Bull was roaring in defeat, his horns broken, the constellation of the Goat, with his hair torn, fading away. Here slides off in retreat the Boy with the Water Pot, there the Arrows, the Twins wander apart in flight, the false Maiden deserts her silent wooers in the vault of heaven, and the other blazing orbs hanging in awful clouds have feared the new Morning Star.¹⁶

¹⁴ Diane Fruchtman, ‘Modeling a Martyrial Worldview: Prudentius’ Pedagogical Ekphrasis and Christianization’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 7, no. 1 (2014): pp.131–58, pp.131–2. H. J. Thomson, introduction to Prudentius: Prudentius, *The Divinity of Christ*, trans. H. J. Thomson, Loeb Classical Library 387 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp.x, xiv.

¹⁵ H. J. Thomson’s introduction, p.xii.

¹⁶ Prudentius, *The Divinity of Christ*, p.167. See also: Nicola Denzey, ‘A New Star on the Horizon: Astral Christologies and Stellar Debates in Early Christian Discourse’, in Scott Noegel, Joel Walker, and Brannon Wheeler, eds, *Prayer, Magic and the Stars in the Ancient and Antique World* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), pp.206–21, p.219.

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The *antiquos signorum* are described as maimed, broken, torn, and fading away.¹⁷ As the handmaiden to astrology, the zodiac and its mythological images fade with the brilliance of the magi's guiding star as signs belonging to a false art. Diane Fruchtman identifies this poetic mode as pedagogical ekphrasis, a visualization activating the mind's eye.¹⁸ In this instance, Prudentius's image is a persuasive illusion in which the zodiacal signs "roar in defeat" at the new Morning Star.

Similar ideas were expressed in the east: the Gnostic Theodotus (c. 190 CE), as recorded by Clement of Alexandria, wrote that the new star appearing at the birth of Christ '...[having done] away with the old astral decree, shining with a new unearthly light... revolved on a new path of salvation'.¹⁹ The zodiac is conquered by Christianity in this text, and mankind is rescued from astrology's dominion. The creatures and myths of the zodiac were replaced with the twelve apostles, the coming of Christ relegated them to realms of antiquated lore. Recently, Matthew R. Crawford recently discussed Tatian the Assyrian's (c. 120–180 CE, Syria and Rome) *Oration to the Greeks* and its carefully contrived attack against astrology as 'hostile devices of the demented demons', in which Tatian specifically decries the zodiac as a demonic contrivance.²⁰ These authors used the zodiac as a visual tool to dismantle astrology's hold in Christendom, intended for the educated and powerful in both society and ecclesiastical realms.

In another message of triumphant Christianity, the zodiac as a visual device appears again in a sermon, delivered by the Bishop Zeno of Verona in Italy (c. 300–380 CE). Zeno was revered in his diocese, and after his

¹⁷ A parallel sentiment was expressed in Ignatius of Antioch's (second century) *Letter to the Ephesians* 19.2-3, trans. William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p.87.

¹⁸ Fruchtman, 'Modeling...', see "Pedagogical Ekphrasis" beginning p.135.

¹⁹ Theodotus, *Excerpta ex Theodoto of Clement of Alexandria*, ed. Robert Pierce Casey, *Studies and Documents*, ed. Kirsopp Lake and Silva Lake, vol. I (London: Christophers Publishing, 1934), pp.40–91, verse 74. Stephen C. McCluskey, *Astronomies and Cultures in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.39–40. See also Priscillian of Avila, *Priscillianist Tracts*.

²⁰ Matthew R. Crawford, "'The Hostile Devices of the Demented Demons': Tatian on Astrology and Pharmacology", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 29, no. 1 (2021): pp.31–60, esp. pp.33–38.

death remembered in a local cult.²¹ His recorded sermons are some of the oldest surviving in Latin and preserved almost by accident. He was not particularly renowned or influential during or after his time, but these texts provide a glimpse into the religious life of his community. He offered an Easter sermon for neophytes, using the format of a natal horoscope as a metaphor for rebirth. In this sermon, the zodiacal signs are remade: it is not Aries but the *Agnus Dei*, Virgo and Libra are the ‘equity and justice’ of the Son of God, brought forth by the Virgin. Scorpio should now remind the baptized viewer of the serpent and original sin, and Aquarius’s spout the cleansing waters of baptism. Lastly, instead of two fish, Pisces are the Jews and Gentiles, ‘sealed by one sign into the people of Christ’.²² Zeno of Verona’s sermon is gentle and welcoming, relying on the familiarity of the zodiac to deliver his message, and exemplifies the intriguing ways the zodiac could be reimagined by early Church leaders.

A more direct attempt to rewrite the constellations into a Christian paradigm was made by Gregory of Tours (d. 593 CE), who wrote his monastic astronomical guidelines in *De cursu stellarum ratio* after 573 CE.²³ This was not widely circulated and made obsolete by better *computi* within a few decades, but it offers a tantalizing view of how the star signs may have been reinvented. In this text, Gregory refused to employ the established classical stellar nomenclature. He was expressly concerned that the mythical constellations were too closely tied to forbidden astrological practices.²⁴ He substituted Cygnus the Swan with ‘The Greater Cross,’ Delphinus with Alpha, and Lyra with Omega.²⁵ He assigned particular spiritual meaning to the rising and setting of The Cross in the sky: it appears recumbent when it rises in the east, and slowly ascends until upright at the apex, nocturnally proclaiming Jesus Christ’s triumph over death. Bishop Gregory thus reinvents the constellations and the movements of the heaven within the Ptolemaic, sympathetic cosmos with more

²¹ Gordon P. Jeanes, *The Day has Come! Easter and Baptism in Zeno of Verona* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

²² Jeanes, *The Day has Come!*, pp.70–71.

²³ Gregory of Tours, *De cursu stellarum ratio*, a complete Latin edition with accompanying images: Gregory of Tours, *S. Georgii Florentii Gregorii Turonensis Episcopi liber ineditus De cursu stellarum ratio qualiter ad officium implendum debeat observari sive de cursibus ecclesiasticis*, edited by Friedrich Haase (Vratislaviae: Jos. Max, 1853), Discussion of the stars, pp.15–19.

²⁴ *S. Georgii*, pp.15–16. McCluskey, *Astronomies*, pp.101–110.

²⁵ *S. Georgii*, p.19.

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acceptable signifiers for the Church.²⁶ This may have even been executed in a strange and rare bas-relief from the eighth century, the *Exaltation of the Cross*, now in the Musée de Narbonne (Figure 1).²⁷



Figure 1. *Triomphe de la croix*, inventory 833.939.1 Palais Musée Archevêques de Narbonne, eighth century CE. Image used by permission of ©DEFACTO, Palais Musée des Archevêques de Narbonne.

²⁶ *S. Georgii Florentii*, 23-24. Edward Grant, 'Cosmology', in: *Science in the Middle Ages*, ed. David C. Lindberg (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp.275-89.

²⁷ This is the commonly accepted interpretation of the subject matter on this bas-relief: see the portion on Gregory of Tours in McCluskey, *Astronomies*.

It is believed to have been part of an altar base. It features the cross prominently in the centre, filled with star-like circles, with two figures below, one gesturing to the sky. The Cross replaces Cygnus, flanked by two stellate flowers above the Greek signs for Alpha and Omega. Here the cross is victoriously risen in the sky as a nightly testament. This may be a deliberate attempt to refashion the stars in the viewer's imagination. If it was indeed an altar base, it would have been displayed in the heart of the church, a highly visual centre of attention. It would have sent a distinct message to the congregants: all the natural world attests to Christ's divinity, and even star signs should be read as such.

It is evident from these examples from the fourth to eighth centuries CE that an array of Church leaders, both prominent and obscure, actively attempted to transform the visual symbols of constellations. They were puzzlingly unsuccessful. Even if the visual signs remained unchanged, ostensibly their connotations could have been superseded.²⁸ Aries the Ram permanently replaced with the *Agnus Dei* in art and texts. Virgo, whom Prudentius so unflatteringly decried as a false lover, succeeded by the Virgin Mary. Or, as the Bishop Zeno of Verona encouraged, Gemini reimagined as the twin Testaments. It seems as if a full *sphragis* could have been accomplished; it does not require much effort to envision them differently. The stars are, after all, abstract dots of light in the night sky open to interpretation. Historically, the zodiac was not an inflexible system of symbols; the Greeks kept the Babylonian constellation imagery but reassigned them Greek myths and characters. Why then was the zodiac not reassigned with Christian imagery? Gregory of Tours and perhaps Zeno of Verona seem to have attempted this, but their ideas were not broadly adopted in any meaningful way, as evidenced in the corpus of astrological treatises and extant artwork of the high and late Middle Ages that perpetuated the signs.

Astronomical authorities

The primary motivation propelling the survival of the constellations and zodiac is evident in the textual sources. Astronomical knowledge in the early Middle Ages did not rely on observation, but rather on classical authorities, who employed the Hellenistic signs and hemerology. The foundational reason the signs of the zodiac were never permanently reassigned new values is because astronomical knowledge did not originate

²⁸ A fascinating re-creating of the zodiac has indeed been undertaken recently: Kalen Boyd, 'New Techne of the Ancient Zodiac', *Jung Journal* 16, no. 2 (2022): pp.75–102.

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from the Church Fathers or monastic astronomers, but from antiquity. By its nature, astronomical knowledge is difficult to attain, to observe, or record, so it was carefully handed down in exactitude. The surviving astronomical treatises from the fifth to tenth centuries in Europe are copies of copies of classical authorities. Glossing and copying are commonplace in medieval writings of course, but early medieval astronomical writings almost never include original content of any kind.²⁹ As author Charles Burnett wrote in his introduction to Pseudo-Bede's *De mundi celestis* (dating to the late eleventh century) concerning the medieval transmission of astronomical knowledge: 'one gets the impression that one is dealing with a body of knowledge passed on from scholar to scholar, perhaps orally in the form of a *lectura* as much as through the scriptorium'.³⁰ The texts copied in the early Middle Ages were mostly used to establish *computi*, useful in calculating the dates of moveable feasts, but also include the transmission of the established constellations and some of the astrological traditions.³¹

The dissemination of astrological knowledge and zodiacal lore are fairly clear today due to extensive efforts by researchers, but they were not so to medieval or even classical writers. Muddled theories were offered in medieval texts, claiming the founders of astrology were alternately powerful Persian magi, the priests of Egypt, astrologers of Chaldea, or Assyrian mages.³² Greek texts claim the Egyptians were the inventors of

²⁹ Rudolf Simek may have oversimplified this concept: 'The actual achievement of the Middle Ages lay in the conveying and popularization of knowledge, not in deepening it'. Rudolf Simek, *Heaven and Earth in the Middle Ages*, trans. Angela Hall (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996), p.99.

³⁰ Charles Burnett, *Pseudo-Bede, De mundi celestis terrestrisque constitutione: a treatise on the universe and the soul* (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1985), p.3. The provenance of this text is debated, it may have been written in the ninth century in Southern Germany: H. W. Hine, 'Seneca and Anaxagoras in Pseudo-Bede's *De Mundi Celestic Terrestrisque Constitutione*', *Viator* 19 (1988): pp.111–27.

³¹ Bruce Eastwood and Gerd Grasshoff, *Planetary Diagrams for Roman Astronomy in Medieval Europe, c. 800-1500* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society 2004); Immo Warntjes and Daibhi O. Croinin, eds, *Late Antique Calendrical Thought and its Reception in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2017), see introduction.

³² Isidore of Seville, *The "Etymologies" or Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) book III, also p.99; Charles Homer Haskins, *Studies in the*

astrology.³³ Therefore, it seems perhaps surprising, considering the mysterious and emphatically un-Christian pedigree of the zodiacal signs in the medieval imagination, that they should continue in ecclesiastical art and literature as strongly as it did. However, if it were the classical texts alone perpetuating the Hellenistic zodiac, without the astrological beliefs of layfolk and the production of zodiacal images, then it may not have survived.

Art, folk beliefs and agency

Observational astronomy may have lain mostly dormant, but popular folk astrology as a practice and a cosmological construct were perennial in the early medieval west.³⁴ It is this astrological folklore combined with the visual tradition that played a crucial role in the perpetuation of the zodiac signs. Ptolemy, the acknowledged founder of western astronomy, mixed observational astronomy with visual practices and folklore in his enduring texts, a mixture that remained potent well into later centuries. Ptolemy described folk traditions thus in the first book of the *Tetrabiblos*, in defence of practicing astrology:

... most people admit that they have foreknowledge of the seasons, of the significance of the constellations, and of the phases of the moon, and take great forethought for safeguarding themselves... furthermore, to ensure the safety of the seasons and of their sailings they watch the significance of the fixed stars, and, for the beginning of breeding and sowing, the aspects of the moon's light at its full, and no one ever condemns such practices either as impossible or useless.³⁵

History of Mediaeval Science (1924; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp.272–98, p.286. Raymond of Marseilles, *Opéra Omnia, Traité de l'astrolabe, Liber cursuum planetarum*, trans. Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, Charles Burnett, and Emmanuel Poulle (Paris: CNRS edition, 2009), p.129.

³³ First evidence of this is in the writings of Herodotus (484-425 BCE). Jan Assmann, *Weitsheit und Mysterium, Das Bild der Griechen von Agypten* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000), pp.31–32, pp.44–51.

³⁴ Folk astrology may have influenced the elite astronomy studied by the clergy: Joseph Bernard McAllister, *The Letter of Saint Thomas Aquinas De Occultis Operibus Naturae Ad Quemdam Militem Ultramontanum* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1939); Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (1989; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.86.

³⁵ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, p.29.

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It was exactly this kind of folk tradition of interpreting of star signs that Augustine of Hippo railed against in *De Civitate Dei* V, but to no avail.³⁶ Ptolemy continued in his text by methodically describing the ‘significance of the constellations,’ with the utmost reliance upon zodiacal artistic conventions. He defines the zodiac as ‘natural characters’ handed down by tradition, with unmingled powers intrinsic to the signs, which interact with the movement of the sun, moon and planets.³⁷ The visualized signs directly relate to their influential qualities: constellations figured by the human form impact the human race, the four-footed constellations hold sway over terrestrial animals, the tame signs relate to domesticated creatures, and the wild to the undomesticated. Water signs like Cancer and Capricorn govern aquatic events, and winged creatures affect flying beasts. There are no rationalizations offered for these connections beyond the apparent visual parallels, a robust and eminent example of astrological traditions and the illustrative conventions establishing the prominence of the classical zodiac signs.

Folklore and agricultural rituals notoriously evade detection in historical accounts and leave scant evidence. However, one unexpected comment on folkloric authority was written by Remigius of Auxerre (c. 841–908, France). In his glossing of Martianus Capella’s *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (c. 410–420), he interjected short lines of his own experience or opinions. In 428.18, Remigius draws a metaphor between the *semidei*, lesser divinities of air, earth and sea, who are stupefied by the personification of Astronomy.³⁸ They are like the *rustici et vulgares*, common rustics, who similarly are stupefied by the *disciplinam astrologiae*, the science of astrology.³⁹ He draws a line between those who are educated in the approved discipline of astrology in monastic schools or universities, and the layfolk who are not and cling to false traditions. Stephen McCluskey mentioned: ‘Remigius seems to have been concerned that even his students may have been influenced by folk practices; he repeatedly reminded them that Martianus used the word *auspicium* to mean

³⁶ St. Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate Dei*, V, 1-8, translated by W.M. Green (London: Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1963), p.133–66.

³⁷ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, p.65.

³⁸ Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, VIII.

³⁹ Remigius of Auxerre, *Commentum in Martianum Capellam*, ed. C. E. Lutz (Leiden, 1962-65). In Latin: ‘Per aereos, terrestres, et marinos deos intelliguntur rustici et vulgares qui nesciunt disciplinam astrologiae, et cum audierint aliquem de ea disputare, non credunt’. Thanks are due to Chiara Alberti and Jacob Currie for checking my Latin translation.

beginning, directing them away from the more common sense of augury'.⁴⁰ A few lines later, Remigius emphasizes that the zodiac signs are figments of the Greek imagination: 'Fabulosis commentis id est figmentis, ut est Aries, Taurus, et cetera. Grai Greci.'⁴¹ Fantastic figments or not, Aries remained the ram, and not the lamb of God, in the collective imagination.

Astral Art

There is a clear correlation between centres of learning and zodiacal subject matter in art. The Carolingian and Ottonian courts were consequential patrons of revived classical learning and zodiacal artwork. A few centuries later, the twelfth-century scholastic renaissance likewise propitiated Greco-Roman learning and produced fine examples of astrological art. Zodiacal art was an expression of the underlying groundswell of interest in astrology and astronomy due to the influx of knowledge from the Muslim world. This was expressed most directly in the Labours (or Occupations) of the Month motif, which took some inspiration from Roman art but was a medieval invention. James Carson Webster wrote of the Labours of the Month this way: 'Moreover, the secular character of the theme, together with the scientific pretensions inherited from its early association with astronomy, fostered a very close and frank relationship with pre-Christian renderings of the theme'.⁴² From the late eleventh century onward, visions of the zodiac as part of the Labours of the Month motif appeared on building portals, column capitals in abbeys and churches, altar cloths and vestments, floor mosaics, baptismal fonts, and stained-glass windows.⁴³ In classical calendars, the labours were generally passive, timeless, and connected to religious festivals.⁴⁴ In the medieval tradition the labours were active, temporal, and secular, 'concerned with life at full flood, not with its source, nor with its

⁴⁰ McCluskey, *Astronomies*, p.160.

⁴¹ Remigius of Auxerre 432.6.

⁴² James Carson Webster, *The Labors of the Months in Antique and Mediaeval Art to the End of the Twelfth Century* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), p.1.

⁴³ Colum Hourihane, *Time in the Medieval World, Occupations of the Months and Signs of the Zodiac in the Index of Christian Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), p.1; K. Lehmann, 'The Dome of Heaven', *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945): pp.1–27.

⁴⁴ Webster, *The Labors*, pp.38–39. Michele Renee Salzman, *On Roman Time: The Codex Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990).

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ebbtide'.⁴⁵ The personifications of the labours were innovative expressions of rural life, but the star signs remained nearly identical to their Hellenistic predecessors.

Of all zodiacal images in medieval art, the most public were carved on Romanesque and Gothic church portals.⁴⁶ West façade portals were large-scale public art spaces, sculpted and painted with complex programs, an artform indigenous to medieval Europe.⁴⁷ They were interactive with liturgical rituals, acting as triumphal gateways in religious processions.⁴⁸ Colum Hourihane wrote: 'They were powerful symbols of involvement and brought the viewer into closer unity with mankind but also with the church. In many ways, even though the iconography is personal, it is also collective, in the sense that it united everyone, and as such it has a religious undercurrent'.⁴⁹ Religious imagery and ritual action thus combined to mark seasonal changes and celebrations, and on a grander societal scale, unite the community in religious feeling and understanding. Portals acted as symbolic structures for defining community time and ordering interpersonal behaviour by visualizing the Christian cosmology at a critical site.⁵⁰ The Labours of the Month and the signs of the zodiac were often included in the iconography of these church portals, witnessed by at least fifty architectural projects across western Europe built between 1050–1400 CE.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Bridget Ann Henisch, *The Medieval Calendar Year* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p.136.

⁴⁶ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge, the Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.56. Marjorie Jean Hall Panadero, 'The Labors of the Months and the Signs of the Zodiac in Twelfth-Century French Facades, vol. I & II' (PhD Dissertation University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, University Microfilms International, 1984). Simona Cohen, *Transformations of Time and Temporality in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (New York: Brill, 2014).

⁴⁷ Conrad Rudolph, 'Inventing the Gothic Portal: Suger, Hugh of Saint Victor, and the Construction of a New Public Art at Saint-Denis', *Art History* 33, no. 4 (2010): pp.568–95, p.569.

⁴⁸ Linda Seidel, *Songs of Glory, the Romanesque Facades of Aquitaine* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁴⁹ Hourihane, *Time in the Medieval World*, pp.liv–liv.

⁵⁰ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p.406.

⁵¹ These zodiac cycles have been corroborated by at least three sources, primarily drawing upon the Princeton Index of Medieval Art. Please see my [interactive map](#) for locations and dates.

It was, in a sense, a celebration of revived classical learning. The cycles on portals are a manifestation of annual rhythms, but more importantly for this study is that the proliferation of zodiacal images indicates deliberate choices made by patrons and artisans. Subsequently the objects themselves presented viewers with astral images which lived well beyond their initial audience, providing lifeblood to the continuation of astrological imagery and beliefs.⁵² The labours and zodiac motif, as an integral part of façade or portal programs, began at critical pilgrimage sites that assuredly influenced its adoption more widely. The earliest evidence of zodiac signs adorning a cathedral portal are at Santiago de Compostela in Spain, on the Francígena Façade, destroyed in 1112 (Figure 2).⁵³

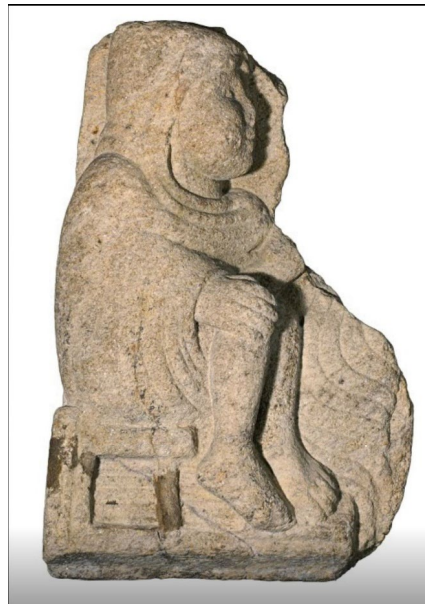


Fig. 2. Fragment of the occupation of the month for February, originally paired with Pisces. Artist called the ‘Maestro de Platerías’. Part of the Francígena Façade, Santiago de Compostela, 1100–1112 CE.

⁵² On the agency of art objects: Nicholas Thomas, Foreword, in *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2013), p.vii.

⁵³ The description of the lost zodiac portal: William Melczer, *The Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela* (New York: Ithaca Press, 1993), p.123. See also Marilyn Stokstad, *Santiago de Compostela* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978).

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This is a different conclusion than that drawn by Conrad Rudolph in his recent article in *Speculum*, in which he claims Vézelay (portal sculpted c. 1120–32) represents the first time in cyclical format that the zodiac and the months appear in a Western medieval sculpted portal.⁵⁴ However, the evidence at Santiago antedates Vézelay. The labours and zodiac once decorated the lateral entrance above the doors to the left of the north portal, of which we only have a fragment of February depicting warming by the fire.⁵⁵ It was part of the older cathedral renovated under Cluniac direction, by an architect named Bernard, a Benedictine monk from Cluny who had studied in France.⁵⁶ Two smaller churches along the *camino* are also adorned with images of the zodiac above the portals: San Isidoro c. 1108, and Santa Maria c. 1125–1149.⁵⁷ Thus, the evidence suggests that the motif began in Spain and migrated along pilgrimage routes into France and beyond.

Efforts to reconfigure the constellations in texts or reimagined in art with Christian signifiers failed because of the sources and dissemination of knowledge came from the classical world, but also because of the enduring visual tradition and artworks themselves. The zodiac was adopted into church decoration because it provided a familiar visual device to represent time and the sympathetic cosmos that did not pre-exist in Christian iconography. Simona Cohen discussed the zodiac and the Labours as a medieval invention: ‘The church adopted a new image to depict a theme that was unprecedented in ecclesiastical art, an image whose temporal meaning had been established in writings dedicated to natural phenomena,

⁵⁴ Conrad Rudolph, ‘Macro/Microcosm at Vézelay: The Narthex Portal and Non-elite Participation in Elite Spirituality’, *Speculum* 96, no. 3 (2021): pp.601–61, p.658.

⁵⁵ S. Moralejo, ‘Le porche de la gloire de la cathédrale de Compostelle: problèmes de source et d’interprétation’, *Le cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* 17 (1985): pp.97–110, p.96.

⁵⁶ Friedrich Rahlves, *Cathedrals and Monasteries of Spain*, trans. James C. Palmes (New York: A.S Barnes and Co., 1966), p.123.

⁵⁷ M. Gomez-Moreno, *Catálogo monumental de España Provincia de León* (Madrid 1925), p.197; Olivier Beigbeder, *Lexico de los Simbolos* (Madrid: Ediciones Encuentro, 1989), p.412. John Williams, ‘San Isidoro in Leon: Evidence for a New History’, *Art Bulletin* 55, no. 2 (June 1973): pp.170–84. Sebastián Moralejo Álvarez, ‘Pour l’interprétation iconographique du portail de l’Agneau a Saint Isidore de Leon: Les Signes de Zodiaque’, *Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cura* 8 (1977): p.159.

but which had not been associated with Christological depictions'.⁵⁸ They were not passive, static images, rather they were part of a complex active network forming and perpetuating astrological ideas.⁵⁹ The Hellenistic zodiac was utilized to inform the viewer of the structure of the *scala naturae*, a visualization of the spheres above and their superior power over the Earth.⁶⁰ Images are the vehicle to make abstract concepts psychologically real, and in the drive to construct an all-encompassing Christian cosmos, the zodiac was the chosen image of mortal time and humanity's relationship to the cosmos.⁶¹

As examples of astral art performing as astrological agents, I want to draw two examples from little known sites. Today in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn, Germany are six bas-relief sculptures of zodiacal figures that once adorned northern tower of the abbey church in Pulheim-Brauweiler near Cologne (Figure 3).⁶²

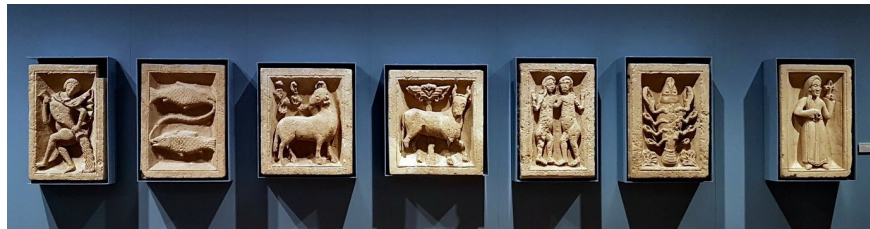


Figure 3. Original zodiac relief sculptures, *Tierkreisreliefs*, from the tower of Brauweiler Abbey, now in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn.

In a paper published in 1915, M. Creutz suggested these zodiacal figures were likely placed above a vestibule portal, during the abbey church's first construction period between c. 1048–1061.⁶³ Rather than alternating with

⁵⁸ Cohen, *Transformations of Time*, p.111.

⁵⁹ Jurkowlaniec, *The Agency of Things*, p.4.

⁶⁰ Ellen Beer, *Der Rose Kathedrale von Lausanne* (Bern, 1952), p.45; Nigel Hiscock, *The Symbol at Your Door* (London: Ashgate, 2007), p.168.

⁶¹ Allan Paivio, *Mental Representations, A Dual Coding Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶² Wesenberg, R., *Frühe mittelalterliche Bildwerke* (1972), pp.63, 103. Uwe Bathe, *Der Romanische Kapitelsaal in Brauweiler: eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme seiner Architektur, Bauskulptur und Malerei* (Köln: Verlag, 2003).

⁶³ M. Creutz, 'Die frühromanischen Reliefs der alten Benediktinerabtei Brauweiler', *Zeitschrift für christliche Kunst* XXVIII (1915): p.152.

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the occupations of the months, the author argues they may have surrounded sculpted images of the apostles, stylistically akin to the Reliquary Box of Emperor Otto I, which is now in the Treasury of Quedlinburg's Church of St Servatius. It is likely that the sculpture of Aquarius (at least) was an ancient Roman relief, recycled onto the exterior walls of the abbey. The rest of the signs date from different periods, sculpted in a style consistent with the ancient relief(s). However, because there are no adequate records of when these zodiacal sculptures were created or where they were moved, Creutz's theory has been challenged by many art historians since.⁶⁴ Whatever the provenance of the sculptures, clear effort was made to preserve, match, and keep the cycle in a classical mode. Roman zodiacal imagery was deliberately chosen to decorate the exterior of the church. This is a fascinating case of *spolia* rewoven into the fabric of a Christian building, in which the Hellenistic images were intentionally preserved. Visually these sculptures connected Brauweiler Abbey to Rome (classical and Christian), but also reinforced the zodiac within the Christian cosmos.

Another, and even more mysterious, example of astral art performing actively as astrological agents in ecclesiastical buildings is from Oxfordshire in England (Figure 4).⁶⁵ This tiny church is far from any pilgrimage route, dating to the twelfth century, although the core of the church is probably Saxon. The Church of Saint George in Kencot is a parish church which owes its patronage to the Barony of d'Oyly, an aristocratic Norman family descendant from Roger d'Oyly, who accompanied William the Conqueror in 1066. It is an example of Anglo-Norman architecture, expressing influences from the Continent in the carved chevron designs. It has one central portal on the south side and above this door in a semi-circular tympanum is a curious image of Sagittarius shooting an arrow into the gaping mouth of a monster, erupting from the lintel, dating to the first half of the twelfth century. The carefully incised, and contemporary, 'SAGI T ARIUS' leaves no room for doubt that this is the celestial centaur. No documents survive which might

⁶⁴ M. André Grabar, 'Un relief du XIe Siecle a Brauweiler et l'origine des motifs "sassanide" dans l'art du moyen-age', Chapter in *Memorial d'un voyage d'etudes de la societe nationale des antiquaires de France en Rhenanie juillet 1951* (Paris: Palais de Louvre, 1953), pp.227–34. Phila Calder Nye argued these types of images evolved from Mithraism: 'The Romanesque Signs of the Zodiac', *The Art Bulletin* 5, no. 3 (March 1923): pp.55–57.

⁶⁵ Arthur Stanley Theodore Fisher, *The History of Kencot, Oxfordshire* (Burford: Bear Court Books, 1971), pp.4–20.

illuminate this choice for the tympanum program. The monster has been interpreted as the mouth of hell, and Sagittarius as a representation of Christ as the Harrower.⁶⁶ If this is so, it may be only extant example of this kind of imagery. It seems to be unique, but points to a richer iconographic tradition in both France and Norman England than we currently understand.



Figure 4. South portal and tympanum, St. George's Church in Kencot, Oxfordshire, England. Twelfth century. Photos in the public domain.

⁶⁶ Fisher, *The History of Kencot*, p.22.

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To further support this point, coincidentally King Stephen of England (1092–1154, r. 1135–1154), chose as his heraldic ensign a single Sagittarius.⁶⁷ Just like the Kencot church, there does not appear to be corroborating documents to contextualize this heraldic device. Although there is no clear link between the king's insignia and the Kencot church (the d'Oyly families were firmly 'Matilda's men'), it hints at an interplay between star signs and Christian iconography that is lost to us today.⁶⁸ There are other 'orphaned' Sagittarius across Britain in churches sculpted in the twelfth century, such as at Saint Mary the Virgin, Salford, Oxfordshire; the parish church of Elkstone in Gloucester, and Saint Cuthbert's Church, Dalmeny in Scotland. It seems we are missing some key elements to decipher these zodiacal images, but it does indicate the kind of nuanced relationship between architecture, astrological signs and contemporary viewers that I suggest played an active role in the long-term success of the zodiac signs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest the longevity of the zodiac was not as an accidental survivor of the classical world but a deliberate choice. The zodiac was chosen as a distinctly medieval motif propelled by the visual arts. The evidence indicates that ecclesiastical leaders across Christendom endeavoured to re-assign new meanings to the star signs in the early centuries CE, but the zodiac did not thus undergo a successful *sphragis*. Terms such as 'Christianising' and 'pagan' should be approached with caution when studying images of the zodiac in medieval visual arts. Ultimately, the zodiac provided creative space for artists to present fantastic and compelling images. Zodiacal symbols were interactive in the sense that they visually connected the earth to the heavens in artworks designed for a medieval audience; the star signs were agent images between the viewer and the cosmos. The zodiac is perhaps the oldest complex conceptual structure in western civilization, and it proved useful in medieval art programs, and certainly influential and enduring.

⁶⁷ John Vinycomb, *Fictitious and Symbolic Creatures in Art, with special reference to their use in British Heraldry* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1906), pp.142–43.

⁶⁸ Fisher, *The History of Kencot*, p.23.