

2.2: Origins

Constellations

Looking up... that is exactly what people used to do. The night sky held a fascination for people who told accounts about their experiences, beliefs, or simply stories and myths based on patterns they saw in the stars on the celestial sphere. Many of these constellations and stories are as old as humans; each people group, country, or culture developed their own constellation outlines and accompanying stories. Many of these historical constellations changed over time, or were dropped altogether.

It appears that the term *constellation* came from the Late Latin term *cōstellātiō*, or set of stars. The term constellation was accepted in English sometime during the 14th century. Constellations are basically connect-the-dots, where the stars act as the dots and the connections were made by the imagination. The constellations represent groupings of stars that form outlines of animals, objects, mythological people and creatures, or gods. Today we recognize 88 modern constellations, adopted by the International Astronomical Union in 1928. At the same time, the International Astronomical Union adopted constellation boundaries, much like state boundaries within a country like the United States. ⁽¹⁾

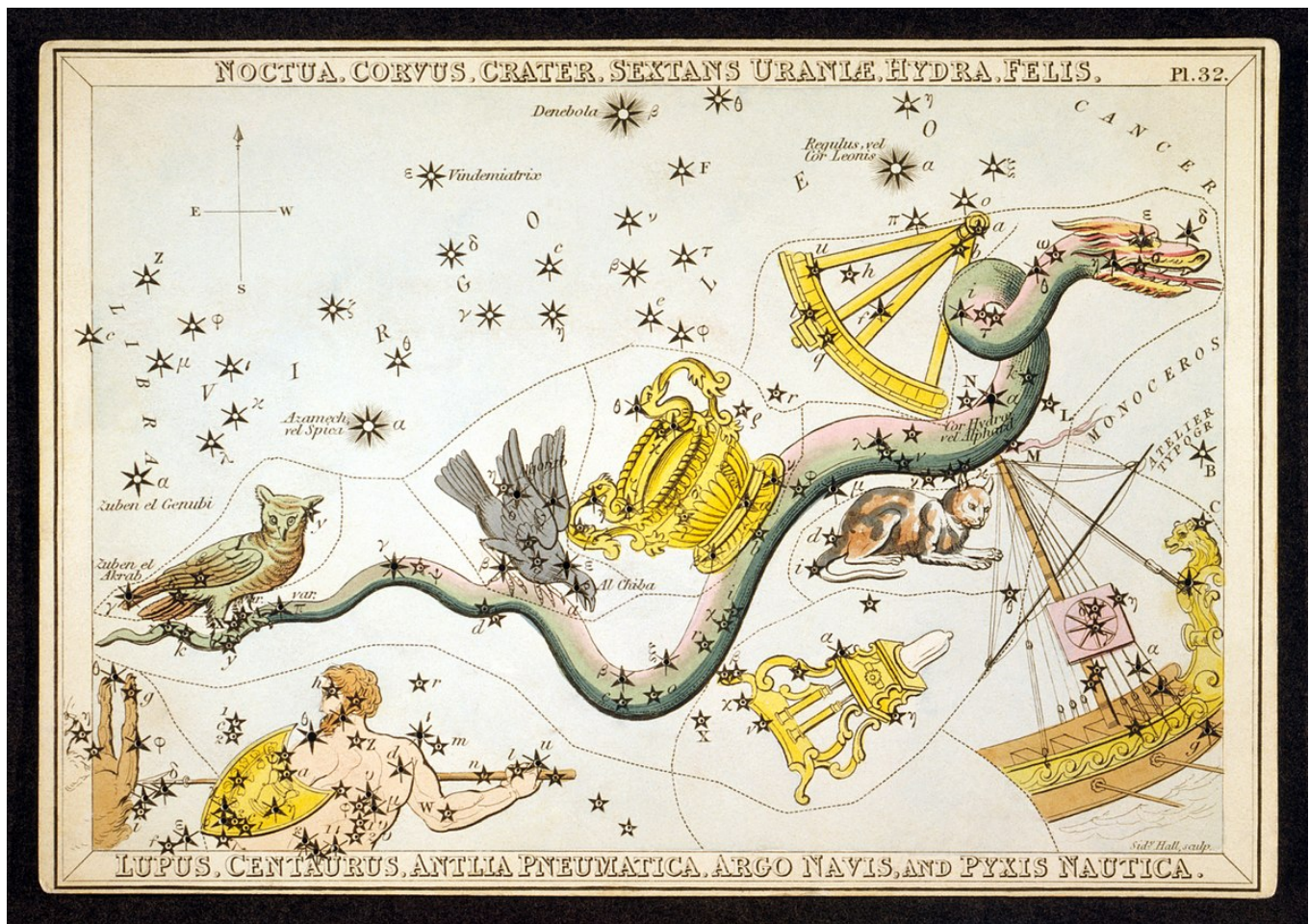
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The oldest depictions of shapes go back to the Sumerians, in the Early Bronze age, and the Babylonians, in the Late Bronze Age. These civilizations lived in Mesopotamia, what is today's modern Iraq. The Chinese, known for their accurate astronomical observations and records, also produced star maps with constellations. Dating back to the 5th century BC, the Chinese divided the sky into twenty-eight mansions. Think of these like the zodiacal constellations, though the twenty-eight Chinese mansions also depicted the Moon's path across the heavens. Even relatively-more modern star maps, like the star maps from the Song Dynasty, kept with Chinese traditions.

Astronomy and the heavens was a center point for ancient Egypt, including Egyptian religion. Egyptian constellations appear to have been original, with no influence from other cultures. Some of the original Egyptian constellations included a lion, crocodile, bull, and a hippopotamus. In the New Kingdom, the constellations were revised. The earliest example, from 1470 BC, is that of Senenmut, an architect who served under the rule of Queen Hatshepsut. ⁽¹⁾



The twenty-eight Chinese mansions ["The twenty-eight mansions of the Chinese astronomy." by Mysid is licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)]



Chinese star map from the Song Dynasty, 11th century AD [“Su Song Star Map” by Pericles of Athens is in the [Public Domain](#)]
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