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Astronomical & Astrophysical Transactions

The Journal of the Eurasian Astronomical Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713453505>

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Online Publication Date: 01 January 1997

To cite this Article: Kaurov, E. N. and Raevsky, D. S. (1997) 'The zodiac history in the history of culture', *Astronomical & Astrophysical Transactions*, 12:4, 333 - 334

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/10556799708232088

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10556799708232088>

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DISCUSSION

THE ZODIAC HISTORY IN THE HISTORY OF CULTURE

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(Received December 21, 1995)

KEY WORDS The Zodiacal constellations

Under the heading “The ancient world in the light of interdisciplinary studies”, “Journal of ancient History” (No. 1 (212), 1995) published a selection of articles of a round-table discussion devoted to the hypothesis of the origin of the Zodiacal constellations recently proposed by A. A. Gurshtein (Institute for History of Science and Technology, Russian Academy of Sciences – RAS, Moscow).

His concept is described in an introductory article. According to this concept, each of Zodiacal constellation marked the solar position at the key moments of the yearly cycle, namely the days of the equinox and solstices at a certain epoch. The first four constellations were isolated in 6000–4000 B. C. and include the constellations of the Gemini, Virgo, Saggitarius and Pisces.

In the epoch between 4000 and 2000 B. C. the precession of the position of the Sun led to the choice of another four of constellations (Taurus, Leo, Scorpio and Aquarius). Finally, after the year 2000 B. C. the same precession made necessary to single out the third set of four constellations (Aries, Cancer, Libra and Capricorn) which completed the formation of the Zodiac belt. The way of expressing the semantic content is determined by the specific cultural and historical nature in the epoch of the formation of each quadruplet.

In the opinion of I. L. Kyzlasov (Institute of Archaeology, RAS, Moscow), this hypothesis agrees with the cultural and historical data on the most ancient stage of human history, beginning with the paleolithic ercch. A. P. Gulyaev (Sternberg State Astronomical Institute, Moscow) discussed the astrometric basis of this hypothesis to conclude that it is quite satisfactory. E. O. Berzin (Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, Moscow) compared the stages of the Zodiac formation singled out by A. A. Gurshtein with the phases of the development of archaic mythologies. E. N. Kaurov and T. V. Stepugina (Institution of Oriental studies, RAS, Moscow)

analyzed images and motives of the ancient Chinese mythology and found direct similarities with the Zodiacal symbols of Gemini, Virgo, Sagittarius and Pisces.

A. Yu. Militatev (Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, Moscow) critically assessed the hypothesis, as he believes that a considerable part of the contemporary Zodiac astronomy is of a comparatively late origin and does not admit any judgement about the original semantics of the Zodiac. Having analyzed Mesopotamian astronomical texts, G. Ye. Kurtik (Institute for History of Science and Technology, RAS, Moscow) believes that they do not corroborate the hypothesis about the three successive stages of the formation of the Zodiac, and refuted the possibility to use the apparent size of a constellation to date its the formation. Ye. V. Antonova (Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS, Moscow) studied the reflection of the Mesopotamian astral signs in ancient monuments and noted the connection of the former with the seasonal (including economic) yearly cycle.

Summing up preliminary results of the discussion, D. S. Raevsky pointed out its productive character. He noted the key significance of the equinoxes and solstices in ancient cultures proving the possibility to single out the quadruplets of the Zodiac on this basis and drew attention to some ancient monuments reflecting the stage when only two of the quadruplets had been formed.

At the same time he warned against overestimating the conservatism of astronomers, which, however, does not rule out the possibility of grasping the original semantics of the signs of the Zodiac, if its scholars use not only written texts but all available material such as graphic monuments, information about rituals, etc.

In his judgment, the discussion of A. A. Gurshtein's hypothesis by representatives of various disciplines should be continued.