

## THE ZODIAC AND ITS SIGNS

The apparent path of the Sun across the heavens, made by the yearly revolution of the Earth, is called the *Ecliptic*. This term is derived from the fact that eclipses of the Sun or Moon can take place only when both these bodies are on, or very near, this line. The paths of the Moon and planets (except the asteroids), though each is different from that of the others, are all near this line, so that a space of a few degrees on each side of it will comprize them all. This space is called the ZODIAC. If it could be made visible across the sky, it would appear as a ribbon or belt circling the whole heaven. The Sun would always be in the Ecliptic, exactly in the middle of the belt, and the Moon and planets sometimes in the Ecliptic and sometimes north or south of it, but always within the limits of the Zodiac.

As there are 12 months in a year, the Sun, were its motion uniform, would pass over one-twelfth part of the whole circle of the Ecliptic each month. This space is called a *sign*; and as every complete circle contains 360 degrees, each sign must contain 30 degrees, so that the Sun moves over one degree each day, very nearly.

In order to fix the exact places of the signs in the Zodiac, the ancients grouped the stars which lay along its path into 12 constellations, having an imaginary outline resembling the figures of persons and animals; and they named the signs according to these constellations. Beginning at the exact point where the sun is in Spring, at the time when the day and night are of equal length, and going thence eastward 30 degrees, they called the constellation of stars occupying that space *Aries*, or the Ram; hence Aries is the name of both the first constellation and the first sign.\* The next they called *Taurus*, or the Bull; the third *Gemini*, or the Twins, &c. Hence the origin of the word *Zodiac*, from the Greek word *Zodia*, animals. Our English ancestors used to call it "The Bestiary," and "Our Lady's Waye." The following are the names of the 12 signs:—

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|------------|------------|-----------------|------------------|
| 1. Aries.  | 4. Cancer. | 7. Libra.       | 10. Capricornus. |
| 2. Taurus. | 5. Leo.    | 8. Scorpio.     | 11. Aquarius.    |
| 3. Gemini. | 6. Virgo.  | 9. Sagittarius. | 12. Pisces.      |

It is well known that the Sun is much further north in Summer than in Winter. Were the Earth's *Equator* extended on every side to the heavens, making a circle visible along the sky, the Ecliptic, or Sun's path, would cross this at an angle of a little over 23 degrees. Consequently one half of the Ecliptic is north and the other half south of the Equator. The points where these two circles cross are called *Equinoxes*, because when the Sun is in these points the night is of the same length as the day, and the same in all parts of the Earth.

\* This is now not strictly correct. A motion called the *precession of the Equinoxes* has displaced the *signs*, so that they do not at present exactly coincide with the *constellations*.