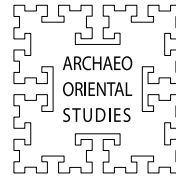




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Ordering the sky
Legitimacy and tradition in ancient Egyptian astral science

Abstract

Though the constellations of the zodiac had long been known in Mesopotamia, it was only in the fifth century BCE that they were transformed into signs. The result of this transformation can be described as a mathematical construct dividing the ecliptic into 12 equal segments of 30 degrees each. The concept had entered Egypt by the third century BCE, but it is only from the mid first century BCE that evidence for the use of the zodiac becomes abundant. The presence of the zodiac is not limited to a horoscopic setting: it is also found as a means to describe the heavens, entering cosmological views and funerary beliefs, where it could replace or complement more traditional ideas. My talk will introduce the topic and discuss a few case studies on how the zodiac transformed Egyptian culture, how it was anchored in society, and how the Egyptian priesthood found in the zodiac a vehicle to disseminate traditional beliefs.