

# The Cuneiform Puns that Defined *Ōkeanos* as a “River-God” that Encircled the Earth

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**Abstract:** Since Homer’s time Greek mythographers have portrayed the god *Ōkeanos* (“Ocean”) in an entirely discordant way: as a *Potamos*, “River.” Even more remarkable was their claim that this River-god encircled the earth. These perceptions elicit an obvious question: How did Homer, Hesiod, and later Hellenic authors learn that the god “Ocean” was actually a “River” that circled the terrestrial world? The current article shows that this mythical description was founded on celestial wisdom that originated in Mesopotamia. Babylonian and Assyrian astronomers envisioned the constellations as “heavenly writing” that imparted immaculate wisdom through the medium of wordplay. Puns encrypted in the cuneiform terms for the Southern Pisces Fish + ξ, ζ, θ, ε Pegasi defined this constellation as: “the God River Ocean.” Adjacent to the latter constellation-god on the north stood the Pegasus Square, which Mesopotamian dictionaries labeled with a cuneiform sign that meant “Inhabited World.” Two additional puns enciphered in the Pegasus Square imparted the verb *lamû*, “to circle around an object.” Thus, embedded as wordplay in the cuneiform names of the constellations we today call Pegasus and the Southern Pisces Fish stood the words: “the God, River, Ocean, Encircles, the World.” Archaeological and linguistic evidence implies that the Mesopotamian perception of the starry sphere as “heavenly writing” that imparted inviolable wisdom through the medium of punning was transmitted directly to Homer and Hesiod; implying that Hellenic mythographers’ perception of *Ōkeanos* as a deified “River” that “circled the world” was founded on the aforementioned Mesopotamian astronomical wordplay.

**Keywords:** celestial, mythology, constellation, heavenly, writing, lumashi, puns, wordplay

## Introduction

Since the inception of Greek alphabetic writing in the mid-eighth century BC, the god *Ōkeanos*, “Ocean,” was described as a *Potamos*, or “River,” that encircled the world. Károly Kerényi writes, “*Ōkeanos* was a River-god; a river or stream and a god in the same person ... Ever since the time when everything originated from him he has continued to flow to the outermost edge of the earth, flowing back upon himself in a circle” (Kerényi 1985: 15). The *Brill’s New Pauley Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* remarks that Ocean was the, “Divine representation of the world river, later world sea, that flows in a ring around the earth” (*BNP* 10: 10). And the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* similarly reports that, “The Homeric Ocean is the river encircling the whole world ...” (*OCD*: 1030).

Both Homer and his younger contemporary, Hesiod, allude to this cyclical flow in describing Ocean as, *apsorrooy Ōkeanoio*, “backward-flowing Ocean” (Homer 1999, II: 316-317; Hesiod 1977: 134-135); a phrase H. G. Evelyn-White clarifies as, “Ocean is here regarded as a continuous stream enclosing the earth and seas, and so flowing back upon itself [in a circle]” (Hesiod 1977: 135, n. 1, brackets inserted). Hesiod also described *Ōkeanos* as a *telēentos potamoio*, “perfect river,” with a nuanced meaning of *telēentos* rendering “ever-circling river” (Ibid., 96-97; Liddell & Scott 1997: 799). In his fifth century BC *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus wrote, “... father Ocean, who rolls around the whole earth in tireless flood ...” (Sommerstein 2008, I: 458-461).

Hence, since Homer and Hesiod’s time Ocean was conceptualized as a deified “River” that encircled the earth. This elicits the obvious question: How did the two fathers of Greek epic poetry and subsequent Hellenic mythographers arrive at such an exotic perception? There is certainly no visible river that “circles the world.” A vital clue might be found encrypted in the name of the father of Greek epic poetry: *Homēr*, “Hostage” (Beekes 2010, 2: 1067). Exploring how this adulated, legendary Hellenic author came to acquire such an unflattering name thrusts us onto a rarely trodden scholarly path. One that leads to the esoteric conceptions of the celestial sky that compelled this “Hostage”-poet, his younger contemporary, Hesiod, and later Greek mythographers to report that *Ōkeanos* was a “River” that “encircles the earth.”

## Mesopotamian Astronomers Read the “Heavenly Writing” of the Stars

Historians of Astronomy have shown that many of the Hellenic constellations originated in Mesopotamia (Krupp 2000; Rogers 1998). Numerous Mesopotamian constellations listed in early second millennium BC astronomical tablets reappear with the same names and in the same astronomical positions as the forty-eight codified in Claudius Ptolemy’s *Almagest* (e.g., Hunger & Pingree 1989: passim; *BPO* 2: 10-16; Gössmann 1950: passim). Thus, most of the zodiac, Aquila, Hydra, Corvus, Orion, and Lupus can be traced directly to Mesopotamian correlates, proving that the latter originated in the Fertile Crescent (Ibid.).

Yet the source of many other constellations and asterism can also be found in Mesopotamia. Their Mesopotamian origins, however, have been concealed beneath a shroud of wordplay. Thus Aries, Pegasus, Crater, Argo, and Cancer’s Manger and Donkeys asterisms appear to be the product of puns encrypted in their *cuneiform* spellings (McHugh 2016a, 2016b, 2017a). And here we begin to immerse ourselves into the arcane Mesopotamian mindset that leads us to the astral identity of *Ōkeanos*—the “Ocean” that took the discordant form of a “River” that circles the earth.

The Mesopotamian astronomer was one class of “scholar, expert” called an *ummānu*, who was proficient in one or more of the occult arts that involved intercommunication with the divinities and included the astrologer, the diviner, exorcist, physician, and lamentation-chanter (Brown 2000: 33; *CAD* 20: 108). The definition of *ummānu* provided by late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars—“magician, astrologer, sorcerer”—highlights the title’s esoteric functions (Thompson 1900, 2: xiii-xxix; Brown *ibid.*). In practice, then, the Mesopotamian “astronomer” was an “astrologer,” as the two terms were not effectively discriminated until the sixth century AD (Barton 1994: 5; Rochberg-Halton 1988: 5).

The title of the Mesopotamian “astronomer-astrologer” was *šupšarru*, a term that literally meant, “writer, scribe,” and referred to an expert in the celestial divination series, *Enūma Anu Enlil* (Brown 2000: 33-36; Rochberg 2004: 41, 45, 71, 219; *CAD* 19: 152-153). Therefore Mesopotamian astronomers were expert grammarians, a task that involved mastery of their own spoken tongue, Akkadian, as well as acquiring proficiency in the reading and writing of Sumerian, i.e., the “dead” language of the southern Mesopotamian people from

whom the Akkadian-speaking Babylonians and Assyrians adopted the cuneiform writing system. Proficiency in Sumerian is evinced by the fact that many constellation names retain their older, Sumerian titles (Hartner 1965: 2; Gössmann 1950, *passim*).

Although the Mesopotamian astronomer was an expert in the astrological handbook *Enūma Anu Enlil*, their curriculum extended well beyond astronomical and astrological subjects and included *The Tale of Atra-Ḫasis* (i.e., the creation story that included the oldest Flood story), *The Gilgamesh Epic*, and the Babylonian-Assyrian creation epic *Enuma Elish*. The latter point verified by the texts edited by astrologers serving Assyrian King Esarhaddon (Lambert 1976: 313-318; Rochberg 2004: 209-236). Astronomers also had extensive knowledge of the circa 1800-1600 BC bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian “dictionaries” that listed the Sumerian pronunciation of a Sumerian logogram beside its Akkadian meaning (Lambert *ibid.*); a Sumerian logogram consisting of a cuneiform sign or sign grouping that came to represent an Akkadian word with the equivalent meaning (Huehnergard 1997: 107-111). Modern scholars typically transcribe Sumerian logograms into capital letters, a convention that will be applied to all Sumerian words in this paper.

The Sumerian-Akkadian dictionaries indicate that the Sumerian logogram for “star,” MUL, stood for the Akkadian word *kakkabu*, “star,” as well as the terms *šīrtum*, “inscription,” and *šītru*, “writing” (*CAD* 8: 45-46, *kakkabu*, lexical section; *ibid.* 17/pt.3: 144, *šīrtum*, lexical section; *ibid.*: 144-145, *šītru*, lexical section). This idea is underscored by the entry: USAN *šītir kakkabū*, “Evening [means] the writing of the stars” (*AHW* III: 1253, *šītru*, lexical section). Moreover, MUL was the common determinative (i.e., noun classifier) used before the names of planets, stars, and constellations (Borger 2004: 302, no. 247).

Hence, a Babylonian or Assyrian astronomer envisioned each celestial body as a piece of heavenly *šītru* “writing.” And because stars, constellations, and planets embodied deities, this writing was divine—literally the “writing” of the star-gods. Francesca Rochberg emphasizes this point:

The metaphor may be interpreted to express the idea that a written message was encoded in the sky, and that the message was a form of communication from the gods (Rochberg-Halton 1988: 15, n. 54).

This perception is seen in cuneiform passages that describe the starry sphere as: *šīrti šamāmi*, *šītir šamê*, or *šītir burūmê*, “heavenly writing” (CAD 17/pt.3: 144, 2; Rochberg 2004: 64, 163, 294, 299).

Thus, the cuneiform evidence indicates that the Babylonian-Assyrian “astronomer-astrologer” (*tupšarru*) was a highly literate “writer” who envisioned the starry sky as a divine cuneiform “text.” He was also an *ummānu*, a “scholar-magician,” who served as an interlocutor with the star-gods. And while the aforementioned knowledge may seem a far cry from Homer and Hesiod’s conception of *Ōkeanos*/“Ocean” as a deified “River” that encircled the earth, we will soon see that it was indeed available to these founders of Greek epic poetry.

### The Propensity of Puns in Cuneiform Writing

Because Mesopotamian astrologer-magicians were skilled grammarians, they understood that their syllabic, cuneiform script lent itself to vast opportunities for polysemy (i.e., multiple meanings in a word or phrase), a point illustrated in Fig. 1.



AN	= <i>šamû</i>	= “heavens, skies”
	= <i>iā’u</i>	= “mine”
	= <i>šubultu</i>	= “ear of barley”
	= <i>zuqqupu</i>	= “impale”
	= <i>ša</i>	= “of”
	= <i>asakku</i>	= “taboo”
DINGIR	= <i>ilu</i>	= “god”

**Fig. 1: Two of the readings for the cuneiform sign AN, and the Akkadian words it represented. (sketch by Ashley McCurdy)**

The logogram AN represented the Akkadian words *šamû*, “heavens, skies,” *iā’u*, “mine,” *šubultu*, “ear of barley,” *zuqqupu*, “to impale,” *ša*, “of,” *asakku*, “taboo” (Borger 2004: 249; CAD 7: 330, *jā’u*, lexical section; ibid. 17/pt.3: 187, *šubultu*, lexical section; ibid. 21: 51, *zaqāpu* A, 3, lexical section; ibid. 17/pt.1: 1, *ša*, lexical section; ibid. 1/pt.2: 326-327, *asakku* B, lexical section). AN could also be read DINGIR, which stood for the Akkadian *ilu*,



“god” (Borger 2004: 249). Therefore, when a Mesopotamian astronomer saw the cuneiform sign AN on a tablet it could potentially interject the meanings “heavens/skies, mine, ear-of-barley, impale, of, taboo” or “god” into the passage through double entendre (Fig. 1).

Moreover, the potential for polysemy increased due to the vast number of homophones (i.e., words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings, e.g., *to*, *too*, *two*) found among the Sumerian logograms. The enormous number of homophones in cuneiform writing necessitated that modern linguists devise a transliteration system which allows researchers to distinguish which cuneiform sign appears on a tablet (Huehnergard 1997: 70; Halloran 2006: 1). This scholarly convention is exemplified in Fig. 2, which shows five different cuneiform signs that could be read “MUL.”



**Fig. 2: Five of the cuneiform signs that could be read “MUL.” (sketch by Ashley McCurdy)**

The sign most frequently read “MUL” does not have a subscript number; the second most frequent reading for the “MUL” sign is transliterated MUL<sub>2</sub>; the third most frequent reading for “MUL” is transcribed MUL<sub>3</sub>, and so forth (Fig. 2). Essential to the current article is that *the subscript numbers are a modern convention*. An ancient astronomer-magician would have read and pronounced all five of these signs as “MUL.”

Furthermore, the five “MUL” signs bore different readings and served as logograms for other Akkadian words, a fact already demonstrated with MUL. Thus MUL<sub>2</sub> represented *kakkabu*, “star” and *nabāṭu*, “shine brightly”; but it could also be read TE, which represented *uššu*, “foundation,” *simtu*, “ornament,” and *saḥālu*, “to pierce” (*ePSD*: mul<sub>2</sub>). MUL<sub>3</sub> represented *kuzāzu*, “wood wasp,” but was also read SUR<sub>3</sub>, the logogram for *ḥarru* and *sūru*, “watercourse” (*ePSD*: mul<sub>3</sub>; Borger 2004: 388, no. 634). MUL<sub>4</sub> represented *kakkabu*, “star,” *nabāṭu*, “shine brightly,” and was also read UL, which stood for the Akkadian words: *ṣātu*, “distant time,” *inbu*, “fruit,” and *ḥabāṣu*, “to be elated” (*CAD* 11/pt.1: 22, *nabāṭu*, lexical section; *ibid.* 16: 116, *ṣātu*; *ibid.* 7: 144, *inbu*, lexical section; *ibid.* 6: 8, *ḥabāṣu* A). And

MUL<sub>5</sub> was an uncommon logogram for *kakkabu* “star,” but was commonly read IKU, which represented the Akkadian *ikû*, “field” (Borger 2004: 290, no. 174). Therefore, when a Mesopotamian astronomer-magician read or inscribed the cuneiform sign MUL on a tablet it could interject the words “star, shine brightly, inscription, writing, foundation, ornament, pierce, wood-wasp, watercourse, distant time, fruit, feeling-elated” and “field” through homophonous punning (Fig. 2). Remarkably, the aforementioned terms represent only a portion of the variable readings and meanings for these five “MUL” signs.

Cuneiform writing’s predisposition for polysemy is summarized by Victor Hurowitz:

“The highly complex cuneiform writing system, in which every word could be written in a variety of ways and each sign had a potential of bearing numerous different phonetic or logographic readings, afforded Mesopotamian scribes unique levels of playing on written forms of words unavailable to scribes writing languages that employed alphabetic scripts” (Hurowitz 2000: 66, n. 9).

One area of punning definitely involved the “heavenly writing” of the constellations. In a monument inscription Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680-669 BC) informs that he wrote his name in *lumāši*, or “constellation”-writing. The passage reads: *lumāši tamšil šitir šumiya ēsiq šēruššun*, “I carved on them constellations, the image [i.e., equivalent] of the writing of my name” (Roaf & Zgoll 2001: 266; Finkel & Reade 1996: 244-265; Reade 1979: 35-46; CAD 9: 245, *lumāšu*). Esarhaddon’s name was inscribed through the medium of puns, with Michael Roaf and Annette Zgoll noting that:

...some signs are fairly obvious symbolic representations (direct or indirect pictograms), while others are derived from scribal knowledge of the forms of cuneiform signs, from equivalences between Sumerian logograms and Akkadian words ... Such linguistic and visual puns ... are commonly found in the Mesopotamian world (Roaf & Zgoll 2001: 291-292).

And although Esarhaddon never reveals the reason why he chose to write his name in the polysemous cuneiform signs, words, and images that were used to spell and depict the constellations, Scott Noegel cites similar texts that refer to “hidden words” (*amāt niširti*) as the “secrets of the gods” (*pirištu ša ilī*) (Noegel 2007: 37-38, n. 128). The implication being that Esarhaddon was communing with the gods in their own cryptic form of divine

communication—i.e., secret messages delivered through the medium of puns encrypted in the constellations' images and the titles.

Esarhaddon's use of *lumāši*-writing—i.e., enigmatic wordplays encrypted pictorially and linguistically in the constellation images and titles—implies an established scholarly tradition for encoding and deciphering such puns. And although Esarhaddon is the only author to specifically refer to *lumāši*-writing (i.e., 'astroglyphs'), scholars have suspected that similar symbols in temples constructed by his grandfather, Sargon II (721-705 BC), were also inscribed in constellation-writing (Roaf & Zgoll 2001: 267).

Instructive to this dialogue are the remarks of A. R. George:

Some of this esoteric scholarly lore was committed to writing, but it may be that much of it will always remain hidden from us because it was passed down orally as secret knowledge" (George 2003, I: 86-87).

The author contends that *lumāši*/"constellation"-writing is precisely the type of "secret knowledge" to which George is referring. The implication being that Assyrian king Esarhaddon had audaciously or inadvertently disclosed a trade secret that was revered by Mesopotamian astronomer-magicians: that the constellations were a form of divine cuneiform "writing" that imparted wisdom through the medium of wordplay.

## Wordplay as Revelation

Although modern thinkers view wordplay as a form of witticism or humor, cuneiform literature indicates that puns were typically conceptualized as a form of numinous inspiration. Noegel remarks:

We tend to think of puns as a literary device—a sign of humor, rhetoric ... In antiquity, puns were not used in that way, because the conception of words was so different. Writing was considered of divine origin... Puns provided diviners with interpretative strategies (Noegel in Joseph: 2002).

Noteworthy here is that the "astronomer-astrologer"/*tupšarru* was one of the "diviners" to which Noegel is referring. He then theorizes how a veiled pun in a word or name came to be seen as hallowed wisdom:



Perhaps because the written word evolved from pictographs in Mesopotamia, words were considered the embodiment of the object or idea they represented. While we read the word “dog” and know that refers to a dog, ancient Mesopotamians would view the word “dog” *as* a dog in a concentrated form. As a result, individual words contained the power of essence, in this case the essence of a dog. *There was a whole envelope of information that came with every sign or part of a word* (Ibid., second italics added).

Half a century earlier Biblical scholar Theodor Gaster stressed that, “The device [punning as the source of revelation] is based on the primitive idea that the name is an integral part of the identity. Accordingly, if a name possesses a double meaning, this implies *ipso facto* that what is so designated possesses a double aspect” (Gaster 1954: 206, brackets inserted). Hence, in archaic thought, the discovery of double entendre in a word or name was believed to divulge a hidden aspect of the entity it described.

This seems to explain why Babylonian and Assyrian magician-scholars—which included astronomers—embraced polysemy and puns with reverence, as if they had divulged a divine message illuminating a previously unknown aspect of the cosmos. Such pun-based edification was typically conceptualized as a revelation that had been imparted directly from the gods to humanity and was frequently accompanied with the admonition to keep it secret (Livingstone 1986: 1-4, *passim*; Rochberg 2004: 209-236; Noegel 2007: 37-38, 70-76).

A Mesopotamian example of pun-based enlightenment that elucidated some previously unknown aspect of the cosmos is seen with the Babylonian commentary asserting that the sky was made of water. It reads: *šamê ša mē*, “skies [mean] ‘of water’” (Livingstone 1986: 33; Horowitz 2011: 224). Here, the possessive case Akkadian word for “skies, heavens” (*šamê*) simultaneously spelled “of water” (*ša* = “of”; *mē* = “water”)—a double meaning that reflected the ancient scholarly belief that the “skies, heavens” were comprised of and fashioned from water. The solemnity of the discovery is seen three lines later, where the *ummānu*/“magician” adds, “... a secret of the scholar. The uninitiated shall not see” (Livingstone *ibid.*).

Vital to our quest for *Ōkeanos* was the manner in which divine names and epithets were analyzed for concealed puns that might disclose some previously unknown aspect of a deity:

In ancient cuneiform scholarship the writing of a name can be adapted to impart information about the nature and function of its bearer...

... Babylonian scholars themselves were fond of the speculative interpretation of names in particular. *This was not a trivial pursuit but a means of revealing profound truth about the nature and function of deities and their attributes* (George 2003, I: 86-87, italics added).

Therefore, if a Mesopotamian astronomer-magician discerned a pun within a deity's name, he was inclined to construe this concealed meaning as a numinous revelation from the gods—one that explained some previously unknown aspect or attribute of the deity in question. Such pun-based revelations were typically accompanied with some variation of the phrases: *mūdû mūdâ likallim lā mūdû aj īmur*, "Let the learned instruct the learned, the ignorant may not see!" or *pirištu ša ilāni rabûti*, "Secret of the great gods!" (Livingstone 1986: 1). Hence, the discovery of a veiled pun in a god's name or epithet was construed as inviolable wisdom that exposed a previously unknown attribute of its possessor.

Nowhere is this concept better illustrated than in *Enuma Elish* tablet VII. Jean Bottéro has utilized the commentaries on the ancient authors of *Enuma Elish* to show that practically the entire seventh tablet was compiled through punning. In that text, Mesopotamian magician-scholars decoded wordplay from the fifty epithets for the supreme Babylonian deity, Marduk, and then arranged these into coherent statements that exposed facets of his identity and powers (Bottéro 1977: 5-28; c.f., Dalley 1989: 276-277, n. 47). Because the commentaries on puns given in *Enuma Elish* VII were an essential reference manual to Mesopotamian astronomers (Lambert 1976: 313-318; Rochberg 2004: 209-236), and the ancient techniques for discerning and utilizing wordplay are pertinent to our quest to discover the basis for Ocean's mythical identity as a River-god that circles the earth, we will analyze one astronomical line to illustrate how this practice was employed.

The deity Marduk was embodied in the planet Jupiter (Gössmann 1950, no. 260). An astronomical epithet for Marduk-Jupiter was DINGIR *Nēbiru*, "the god Crossing," a title

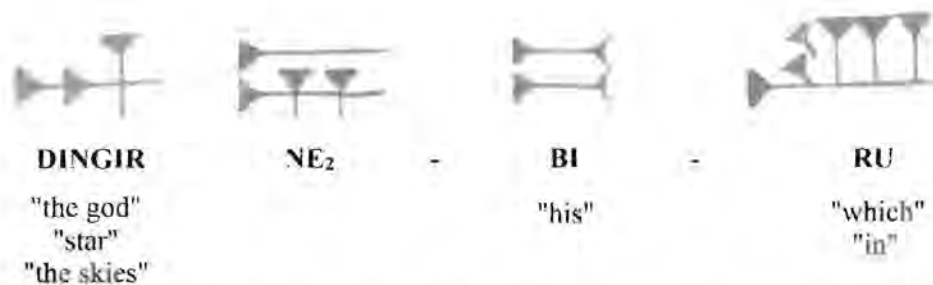
applied to this planet-god when he stood on the meridian and was therefore “Crossing” the midpoint of the sky (ibid. no. 311; Hunger & Pingree 1989: 28-29). Although *Nēbiru* is an Akkadian word, pun-seeking Babylonian magicians envisioned it artificially—as if it were the Sumerian logogram: DINGIR NE<sub>2</sub>-BI-RU (Bottéro 1977: 20). They then examined every cuneiform sign in this epithet in search of wordplay that might expose some previously unknown aspect of this planet-god’s powers. Their extensive grammatical knowledge allowed astronomer-magicians to comprehend that the determinative DINGIR was also read AN, “skies, heavens,” and was initially depicted by the symbol of a star (Kramer 1963: 303); therefore conveying the meaning *kakkabu*, “star,” and *šamê*, “the skies,” in Akkadian (Bottéro 1977: 12). Sumerian-Akkadian dictionaries imparted that BI represented the Akkadian word *šû*, “his” (Bottéro ibid.; Borger 2004: 320, no. 358). By the first millennium BC the vowel in consonant-vowel signs such as RU had become multivalent, thus the RU sign in NE<sub>2</sub>-BI-RU was also read RA, a nuance mentioned in the secret commentaries for this line (Bottéro ibid. 1977: 17-18). And RA represented *ša*, “which,” and *ina*, “in,” in Akkadian (Ibid.: 12; CAD 17/pt.1: 1, *ša*, lexical section; ibid. 7: 141-142, *ina*, lexical section). Finally, an additional commentary indicates that an earlier epithet for Marduk given in line 9, TU-TU, could be read DU<sub>2</sub>-DU<sub>2</sub>, thereby forging a homophone with the composite logogram DU<sub>6</sub>-DU, which meant *šūpû*, “to cause to appear, shine” in Akkadian; the latter verb was then conjugated into the third-person plural *ušāpû*, “they caused to appear,” to suit the grammatical needs of the pun (Bottéro 1977: 12, 16-17; CAD 1/pt.2: 202, *apû*, 5).

Therefore, polysemous readings embedded in the cuneiform signs used to write the title DINGIR *Nēbiru* yielded the puns: *kakkabu* / “star,” *šû* / “his,” *ša* / “which,” *ina* / “in,” *šamê* / “the skies,” *ušāpû* / “they-caused-to-appear” (Fig. 3). These puns were then arranged into a coherent statement that imparted an aspect of Marduk-Jupiter’s powers; wisdom that was then reported as fact in verse 126 of *Enuma Elish* tablet seven:

DINGIR NE<sub>2</sub>-BI-RU *kakkab-šu ša ina šamê ušāpû*

“The God Crossing [is] his star which in the skies they caused to appear.”

(von Soden 1942: 16-17; Horowitz 2011: 114-115)



**Fig. 3:** Each word from line 126 *Enuma Elish* VII was derived from a pun enciphered in the name of the planet-god *Nēbiru* (Jupiter). The verb *ušâpû*, “they-caused-to-appear,” came from a pun embedded in an earlier epithet given in line 9. (sketch by Ashely McCurdy)

Thus, the Babylonian-Assyrian astrologer/*ṭupšarru* was literally a “writer” who envisioned the astral sky as a sacrosanct cuneiform “text” that imparted divine messages via polysemous readings of cuneiform signs used to spell a deity’s name or epithet. And one of his most cherished reference manuals consisted of the secret, scholarly commentaries on *Enuma Elish* tablet VII.

## Homer, Hesiod and Their Connections to Mesopotamia

The aforementioned Mesopotamian wisdom becomes pertinent to *Ōkeanos* when we learn that the second astronomer-poet to describe *Ōkeanos* as “River”-deity that encircled the world—Hesiod (circa 700 BC)—was heavily influenced by *Enuma Elish*. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* writes that Hesiod’s *Theogony* “has striking parallels in Akkadian and Hittite texts, and seems originally to have come from the near east” (OCD: 700). In his analysis of Near Eastern influences on Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Peter Walcot makes the following salient assessment:

... its closest companions in Greek literature are the Homeric Hymns, but even closer is the picture of Zeus in the *Theogony* and that of Marduk in *Enuma Elish*, and it is to Babylonian tradition and the eighth century BC that we should resort if we wish to assess Hesiod’s debt to the Near East (Walcot 1966: 129).

Hence, this expert on Hesiod’s writing has declared that *Theogony*’s leitmotifs bear a closer resemblance to those in the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish* than Homer’s Hymns!

The latter evaluation allows us to assume that Hesiod either directly or indirectly relied upon *Enuma Elish* to compose *Theogony*. And dependence on *Enuma Elish* implies that Hesiod, or someone collaborating with him, was familiar with the methods used to discover the wordplays upon which tablet seven of that text was based. This idea becomes all the more plausible when we find Hesiod utilizing a pun on the name Pegasus (Greek: *Pēgasos*) to ascertain the setting of the Flying Horse's birth: "... the horse *Pēgasos* who is so called because he was born near the springs [*pēgas*] of Ocean" (Hesiod 1977: 100-101, brackets inserted; Liddell & Scott, 1997: 637). Hesiod's use of the accusative, plural term for "springs"/*pēgas* as the root for *Pēgasos* indicates that he had employed the same methodology that Babylonian-Assyrian scholars had utilized to reveal aspects of Marduk's identity in *Enuma Elish* VII.

How Hesiod might have become familiarized with the Akkadian *Enuma Elish* is seen in an archaic phenomenon attested throughout ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman literature. Vanquishing monarchs conscripted foreign scholars of the occult—including astrologers—into their own entourage, where they served as hostages in the court of the new regime (Brown 2000: 33-34). A prime example of this is seen in the Old Testament's Book of Daniel. The first six verses recollect how this young Jewish prophet and three of his countrymen were conscripted into the court of the conquering Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 BC), and that Daniel was to be "trained for three years, and after that ... to enter the king's service." His curriculum included learning "the language and literature of the Chaldeans [i.e., the Babylonians]," which was Akkadian and Sumerian, and, as we saw above, comprised numerous opportunities for punning. Verse 5:11 confirms that Daniel had risen through the ranks to become the supervisor of all forms of occult prognostication, including astrology, "... King Nebuchadnezzar your father—your father the king, I say—appointed him [Daniel] chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and diviners" (Daniel 5:11, brackets inserted).

In his *Natural History* Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) proclaims that a similar conscription brought the astronomical science to Rome, "... slaves on sale that had been imported from over-seas; instances of these being Publilius of Antioch the founder of our mimic stage and his cousin Manilius Antiochus the originator of our astronomy ..." (Pliny 1968, IX: 406-409). And M. J. Geller recounts how a Babylonian *ummānu*/"scholar-magician" was taken in the



Emperor Trajan's campaign in AD 116 and sold as a slave in Syria, where he eventually became the tutor for the Syrian author Iamblichus (Geller 1997: 50-51).

Moreover, the assumed separation between the Hellenic and Mesopotamian cultural spheres that has been adopted by modern historians of astronomy contradicts the archaeological and literary evidence. For instance, Bradley Parker discusses the earliest occurrence of the term *Ionian* ("Greek") in cuneiform writing in the context of a sea-born raid on an Assyrian-controlled Phoenician port city dating to the reign of Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BC); an incursion that ended the moment the Assyrian military appeared and the Greek raiders "got into their boats and [disappeared] into the middle of the sea" (Parker 2000: 72). Hence, here we have Greek pirates invading an Assyrian-ruled Phoenician port in a timeframe contemporaneous with Hesiod, with the specific purpose of attacking and looting this coastal town for plunder. Parker's additional comment is noteworthy: "The knowledge of exactly who these raiders were, and the fact that this relatively minor incident was being reported directly to the [Assyrian] king, implies that this was not the first time [governing administrator] Qurdi-Assurlamur had had trouble with Ionian pirates" (Ibid.: 75, brackets inserted). The implication being that Greek pirate raids were nothing new to this Assyrian-controlled Phoenician seaside city.

The goal of the Greek pirates' intermittent raids on Assyrian-controlled Phoenician cities was to acquire booty, which could come in the form of slaves. Similar accounts appear in Greek epic poetry. On two occasions Homer describes sea-going Phoenician slave traders interacting with Greeks in his *Iliad* (Homer, II: 56-59, 108-113). And the *Homeric Hymns* recall how the god Dionysus, while walking the beach in human form, was taken by pirates as booty, to be sold for a ransom (Hesiod 1977: 428-433).

The archaic custom whereby hostages were captured and sold or conscripted into the services of foreign satraps may illuminate the heretofore murky identity of Homer. The Greek word *Homēr* means "Hostage" (Beekes 2010: 2, 1067). Zenodotus of Mallos (second or first century BC) maintained that he was a Chaldean, that is, a Babylonian (Haubold 2013: 24-25, 178). Moreover, Martin West postulates:

... that 'Homer' was not the name of a historical poet but the fictitious or constructed name ... there was no original Homer, the *Homeridai* were not named

after a person, but, not knowing any better, they invented a Homer as their ancestor or founder ... (West 2011, 1: 408, 422).

Thus, the growing consensus holds that Homer was not an actual person, but an invented legendary personage.

Here again we are goaded by the question, “Why?” In an era when names were believed to inherently convey the attributes and characteristics of the name-bearer, *why* would Hellenic intellectuals call the father of their epic poetry “Hostage”/*Homēr*?

This leads us to the jaw-dropping proclamation of the second century Syrian author Lucian. In a fictional interview with *Homēr*, Lucian reported that this Greek poet was a Babylonian that had been taken “hostage”/*homēr*:

Lucian: “Above all,” said I, “where do you [i.e., *Homēr*] come from?”

*Homēr*: “... As a matter of fact, I am a Babylonian, and among my fellow-countrymen my name was not *Homēr* but *Tigranes*. Later on, when I was a hostage (*homēr*) among the Greeks, I changed my name.”

(Lucian 1961, I: 322-323)

If this imagined dialogue retains a shred of historicity, then it attests to the memory of a Babylonian scholar who had been taken “hostage” (*homēr*), the act serving as the eponym for the father of Greek epic poetry. A Babylonian *ummānu* “scholar-magician” such as this would have encyclopedic knowledge of the Mesopotamian constellations, and would have also been indoctrinated to believe that the constellations depicted hallowed “writing” that imparted revelations via the conduit of wordplay.

In previous papers the author has summarized a large body of archaeological and linguistic data testifying that direct contact between Mesopotamians and Greeks did occur in the eighth century BC—both in Phoenicia and on the isle of Cypress (McHugh 2016a; McHugh 2016b: 78-80; McHugh 2017a: 13-16; McHugh 2017b: 20-24). Significant to the current paper is Al-Mina, Syria. There, Greeks from the Aegean isle of Euboea had established a flourishing two-way trade among a population that consisted of Near Easterners and Greeks (Ridgway 1992: 15, 24-25, 30, 64-66, 108-113, 147; Burkert 1992: 21-22; Boardman 1980: 37-46). Extensive trade between Al-Mina and Euboea in the eighth century

BC indicates friendly relations between a coastal Syrian city under Assyrian political control (Boardman 1980: 44), and a Greek island where Hesiod was present. In fact, it was in Euboea that Hesiod won a handled tripod as a prize for a song he performed at the burial ceremony of King Amphidamas (Hesiod 1977: 50-51). Regarding the presence of Euboean Greeks at Al-Mina, Walcot remarks:

“... [Euboean Greeks] seem to have been extremely active here [i.e., Al-Mina] during the eight century BC, for part of which time the Assyrians were in control of the region. Al-Mina is an obvious place for the Greeks to have acquired a knowledge of *Enuma Elish* or any other work of Babylonian literature ...”  
(Walcot 1966: 121, brackets inserted).

And acquiring knowledge of *Enuma Elish* implies the presence of scholars fluent in the Akkadian and Greek languages as well as the religious ideologies of both cultures. More importantly, it implies the presence of Mesopotamian astronomer-magicians indoctrinated with the arcane belief that the constellations depicted divine “writing” that imparted sacred wisdom through wordplay.

Further evidence suggests that Euboean Greeks assisted Assyrian forces as mercenaries at Al-Mina (Burkert 2004: 9; Kearsley 1999: 109-134; Boardman 1980: 42). And, sometime after Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (circa 744-727 BC) had seized control of Syria and Cyprus, his governing official had reported three maritime raids by Greeks off the Phoenician coast, one of which was discussed by Parker, above (Parker 2000; c.f. Boardman 1980: 44). In circa 711 BC Assyrian king Sargon II—who is believed to have had *lumāši*-writing inscribed in his palace—quashed the rebellion of a Greek at the Phoenician city of Ashdod (Burkert 2004: 9; Burkert 1992: 13; Boardman 1980: 45). And finally, around 695 BC Sargon II’s successor, Sennacherib, had Greek sailors working for him on the Tigris River in the Assyrian city of Nineveh (Boardman 1980: 46).

Hence, the archaeological and literary record indicates that in Homer and Hesiod’s time Greeks and Assyrians had established intermittent commercial-based alliances and also confronted each other in military skirmishes. Any one of the aforementioned military conflicts, pirate raids, or trading expeditions between Mesopotamians, Phoenicians, and Greeks could have resulted in a Babylonian or Assyrian “astronomer-magician” being

captured and sold to a Hellenic overlord, a vestige of the transaction found in the name *Homēr*: “Hostage.” At which time the Mesopotamian concept of the starry sky as hallowed “writing” that imparted divine messages through the medium of wordplay would have passed into Hellenic thought.

Walter Burkert argues for direct contact in the eight century BC:

Akkadian cuneiform side by side with Aramaic, Phoenician, and Greek alphabetic script produces a continuum of written culture in the eighth century [BC] which stretches from the Euphrates to Italy. Cuneiform tablets are found not only as far as Syria but also on Cyprus and Tarsos, where the Greeks were definitely present... which proves that Greek literary practice is ultimately dependent upon Mesopotamia (Burkert 1992: 31-32).

Martin West also proposes direct contact between Greek and Mesopotamian scholars in the eight century BC:

But how was this influence transmitted from one poetic tradition to another across the language barrier? ... I see no alternative to the assumption of a certain number of bilingual poets, probably easterners who had settled in Greece and learned to compose epic in the Greek manner ... In other instances we seem to detect close relationships between Homeric or Hesiodic passages and other ‘classic’ Babylonian texts such as *Atrahasis* and *Enūma Eliš*. To account for them we must surely postulate poets educated in the Levant who subsequently became Hellenized and practiced in Greece (West 2011, 1: 71).

In sum, the archaeological and textual record implies intermittent face-to-face interaction between Mesopotamian and Greek scholars throughout the eight century BC, a circumstance that has compelled three authorities on Mesopotamian-Greek cultural transmission (Peter Walcot, Walter Burkert, Martin West) to argue that such direct encounters indisputably occurred. The ancient record specifies how this transmission took place: a Babylonian *ummānu* / “scholar-magician” had been taken “hostage” by a Hellenic satrap. According to Lucian a vestige of the encounter remains in the eponymous title of the father of Greek epic poetry, *Homēr* / “Hostage.” Whence the Akkadian language and constellation names were transmitted into the Hellenic cultural sphere along with the secret conviction that

the astral sky was a hallowed “text” that imparted revelation through wordplay; the manner in which astronomer-scholars were to utilize wordplay being exemplified in *Enuma Elish* VII.

Conceptualizing the constellations as “heavenly writing” that imparted divine communiqué through wordplay in the manner illustrated in *Enuma Elish* provides the cipher which allows us to discern the astronomical identity of *Ōkeanos* “Ocean,” its incongruous description as a “River”-god in Hellenic thought, along with the belief that this River encircled the terrestrial world.

### **The Cuneiform Puns that Expose the Celestial Identity of *Ōkeanos***

In a previous article the author has shown that Ocean’s celestial identity was embedded as *lumāši* “constellation”-writing wordplay in the cuneiform terms for the stars that in Greek and modern star atlases match up with the Southern Pisces Fish + ξ, ζ, θ, ε Pegasi (McHugh 2017b: 32-34). To see these celestial puns we must turn to the Flying Horse’s “Birth” story in *Theogony* (Hesiod 1977: 98-101):

280. And when Perseus cut off her [Medusa’s] head,

281. there sprang forth great *Chrysaōr* and the horse Pegasus

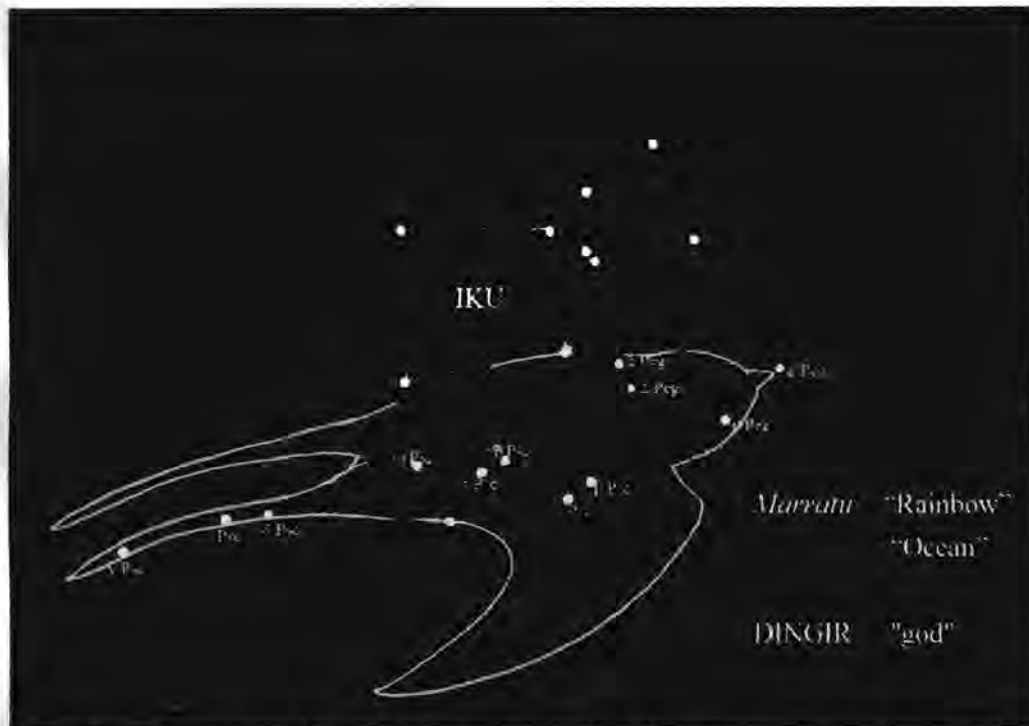
282. who is so called because he was born near the springs of Ocean.

Thus, according to Hesiod, Pegasus was born close to the springs of *Ōkeanos*. *Lumāši*-writing puns confirm this to be true.

Cuneiform astronomical texts label the Southern Pisces Fish as SIM-MAḪ, the “Great-Swallow” (SIM = “swallow”; MAḪ = “great”; Gössmann 1950: no. 389).

Astronomical tablets verify that it extended slightly further than the modern Southern Pisces Fish, and included some of the western stars that came to be incorporated into the Flying Horse’s neck and head, i.e., ξ, ζ, θ, ε Pegasi. (*BPO* 2: 14; van der Waerden 1949: 15) (Fig. 4).





**Fig. 4: The Mesopotamian “Great-Swallow” constellation incorporated the stars of the Southern Pisces Fish and the head and neck of what eventually became Pegasus. Its title could be written DINGIR *Marratu*, “the God Ocean.” (sketch by Ashley McCurdy)**

The 686 BC star atlas “MUL-APIN,” whose originals date to circa 1000 BC, unequivocally refers to the “Great-Swallow” as a DINGIR, “deity” (Hunger & Pingree 1989: 67-69). “MUL-APIN” also states that an alternate title for the “Great-Swallow” was IM-ŠEŠ (ibid.: 45). The latter logogram represented the Akkadian *Marratu*, “Rainbow” (CAD 10/pt.1: 286 *marratu* C; ibid.: 230 *manzât*, lexical section; ibid.: 231, 1b). And *Marratu* forms a homonym (a word with the same spelling and pronunciation but different meaning) with the Akkadian word *marratu*, “ocean, sea” (ibid.: 285, *marratu* A; Horowitz 2011: 22, 29-30). Hence, directly south of the Pegasus Square, and incorporating stars that came to become part of the Flying Horse’s neck and head, stood a constellation-god named *Marratu*, “Rainbow,” a name that can also mean “Ocean.” Because this constellation was also a deity it embodied the readings DINGIR, “god” (Fig. 4).

Thus, *lumāši*-writing wordplay encrypted in the Mesopotamian “Great-Swallow” constellation (Southern Pisces Fish + ξ, ζ, θ, ε Pegasi) embodied the words DINGIR *Marratu*,

“the God Ocean”; words that correlate directly with the Greek god *Ōkeanos* / “Ocean” (Figs. 4, 5).



**Fig. 5: The cuneiform terms for the stars of the Southern Pegasus Fish + ξ, ζ, θ, ε Pegasi could be written: DINGIR *Marratu*, “the God Ocean.” These terms equate with the Greek deity, *Ōkeanos*, “Ocean.” (sketch by Ashley McCurdy)**

## Ocean: the “River God” that Encircles the Earth

Additional cuneiform puns resolve the discordant manner in which *Ōkeanos* is portrayed in Hellenic literature. The Greek *Ōkeanos* meant “Ocean,” yet in mythology *Ōkeanos* was identified as a “River”-god (Kerényi 1985: 15; *BNP* 10: 10; *OCD*: 1030). In light of the throngs of shoreside inhabitants that gazed across the vast pool of ocean from their homes on the Greek peninsula, along with the multitude of Hellenic mariners that navigated

the deep-sea waters of the Aegean and Mediterranean, Homer and Hesiod's categorization of *Ōkeanos* as a diminutive "River" seems a grave misnomer.

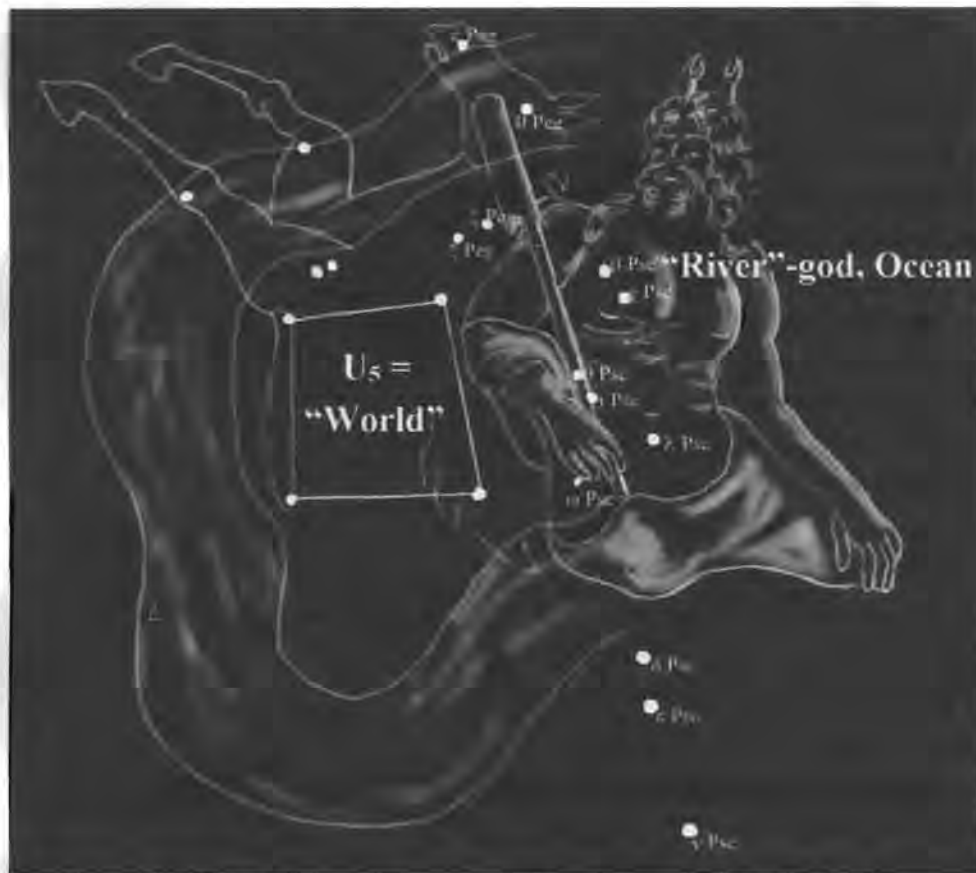
Yet, when we turn to the cuneiform term for the "Great-Swallow" (Southern Pisces Fish +  $\xi, \zeta, \theta, \varepsilon$  Pegasi) the discrepancy is resolved. We just saw that a title for the "Great-Swallow" was *Marratu*, a word that simultaneously meant "Rainbow" and "Ocean." Moreover, cuneiform texts show that the term *Marratu*/"Ocean" typically had the determinative for "river," ID<sub>2</sub>, affixed to its title (*CAD* 10/pt.1: 285, *marratu* A; Horowitz 2011: 22, 29-30). Thus, a common first millennium BC cuneiform designation for the word "Ocean" was: ID<sub>2</sub> *Marratu*, the "River Ocean"; with cuneiform astronomical texts unequivocally listing this constellation as a DINGIR/"god" (Hunger & Pingree 1989: 67-69). Hence *lumāši*-writing puns encrypted in the Great-Swallow (Southern Pisces Fish +  $\xi, \zeta, \theta, \varepsilon$  Pegasi) embodied the term, DINGIR ID<sub>2</sub> *Marratu*, "the God River Ocean." The latter correlates perfectly with the Greek conception of *Ōkeanos*: a "deity" whose name meant "Ocean" but whose description was that of a "River" (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6: Wordplay embedded in the Mesopotamian “Great-Swallow” constellation (Southern Pisces Fish + ξ, ζ, θ, ε Pegasi) imparted the terms: DINGIR ID<sub>2</sub> *Marratu*, “the God River Ocean.” This accords with *Ōkeanos*’ representation in Greek mythology as a deified “Ocean” that is described as a “River.” (sketch by Ashley McCurdy)**

Additional *lumāši*-writing puns in the cuneiform titles for the Pegasus Square reveal how Greek astronomer-poets learned that the River-god, “Ocean,” encircled the earth. In Mesopotamia the Pegasus Square was called *Ikû*, the “Field,” and was typically represented by the logogram IKU. However, the Sumerian-Akkadian dictionaries confirm that U<sub>5</sub> was also a logogram for *Ikû* “Field” (CAD 7: 69, *ikû*, lexical section). Amazingly, U<sub>5</sub> also served as the logogram for *kiššatu*, “entire inhabited world” (CAD 8: 457, *kiššatu* A, lexical section). Thus,

*Ōkeanos*/"Ocean," the River-god embodied in the Southern Pisces Fish +  $\xi$ ,  $\zeta$ ,  $\theta$ ,  $\epsilon$  Pegasi, was positioned beside a constellation that engendered the "World" (Pegasus Square) (Fig. 7).



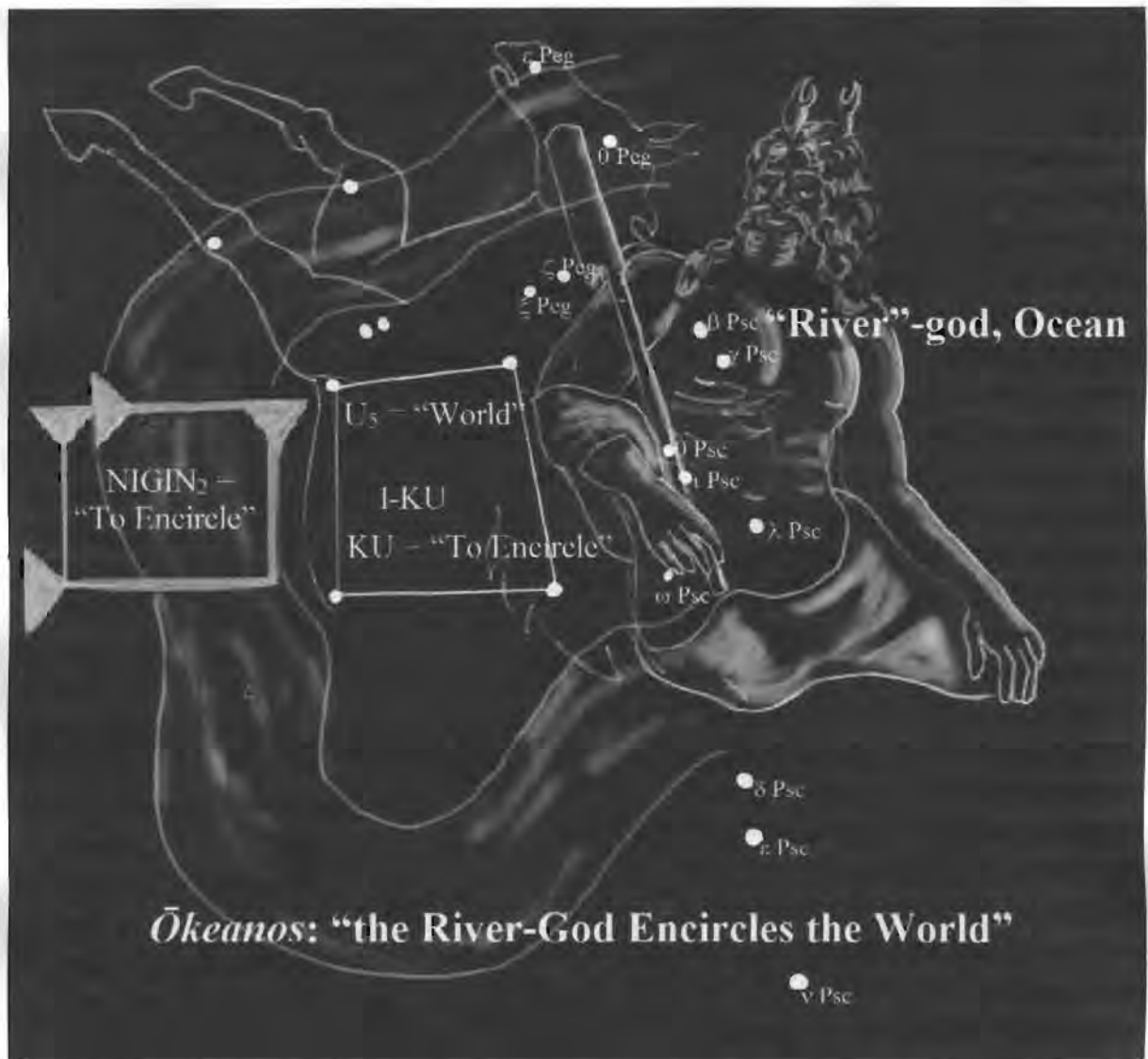
**Fig. 7: In Mesopotamia the Pegasus Square was called *Ikû*, "the Field." One of the logograms for *Ikû*/"Field" was  $U_{\xi}$ , which could also mean *kiššatu*, "the World." Thus, *Ōkeanos* was situated beside a constellation that meant "the World."**

Two plausible constellation-writing wordplays indicate how Greek astronomer-poets came to the conclusion that *Ōkeanos* circled around the earth. One is found in the Mesopotamian perception that the constellations embodied the readings and meanings of the cuneiform signs they resembled in the sky (Finkel & Reade 1996: 248; Reade 1979: 45). Hence the constellation that embodied the word "World," Pegasus Square, delineated a conspicuous "square" in the heavens; a shape that resembles the cuneiform sign NIGIN<sub>2</sub>, the logogram for *lamû*, "to circle around an object, to encircle" (CAD 9: 69-70, *lamû*, lexical section). Another possibility is seen in the Pegasus Square's common cuneiform logogram, IKU, whose phonetic utterance yielded "I-KU" (CAD 7: 69, *ikû*, lexical section). Because



Mesopotamian astronomers were apt to dissect words into their phonemic components in search of concealed puns, these two cuneiform signs (I-KU) would have been examined for hidden wordplay, as illustrated with DINGIR NE<sub>2</sub>-BI-RU in Fig. 3. And the KU portion of I-KU was also a logogram for *lamû*/ “to circle, encircle” (*CAD* 9: 69, *lamû*, lexical section). Thus, the verb “to encircle, circle” was pictorially and phonetically enciphered in the Pegasus Square; movement that corresponds with the manner in which the River-god *Ōkeanos* flowed: “circling, encircling” (Fig. 8).

All told, the puns enciphered in the Pegasus Square and Southern Pisces Fish + ξ, ζ, θ, ε Pegasi imparted: “the God, River, Ocean, Encircles, the World” (Fig. 8). This correlates exactly with the Hellenic perception of *Ōkeanos*/“Ocean” as a “River”-god that encircles the earth.



**Fig. 8: *Lumāši*-writing wordplay encrypted in the Mesopotamian “Field” constellation (Pegasus Square) also imparted the words “Encircling, the World.” These words correspond with the mythical Greek descriptions of *Ōkeanos* as a River-god that encircles the earth. (sketch by Ashley McCurdy)**

## Conclusion

Mesopotamian astronomer-astrologers were indoctrinated to believe that the constellations depicted sacred “writing” that imparted inviolable truth through the medium of wordplay. The ancient record implies that sometime during the eighth century BC a Mesopotamian astrologer-magician had been taken “hostage” and sold to a Hellenic overlord; an idea supported by the numerous literary references to pirate raids in which hostages were taken with the intent of being sold for profit. Zenodotus of Mallos (second or first century

BC) asserted that *Homēr* was a Babylonian. And the second century Syrian author Lucian stated that the name of the father of Greek epic poetry was eponymous, declaring that *Homēr* (“Hostage”) assumed this appellation because he was a Babylonian magician-scholar taken “hostage”/*homēr* by a Greek satrap. Sitting in colloquies with his Greek counterparts, this “hostaged” Mesopotamian astronomer-magician presumably disseminated the aforementioned astronomical wisdom and convictions into the Hellenic cultural sphere.

The implication being that a cadre of bilingual (cuneiform-Greek) scholars came into existence in the eighth century BC, a remnant of their origin encoded in the eponymous name *Homēr*/“Hostage.” Such bilingual astronomer-poets possessed the ability to decipher the cluster of puns encrypted in the cuneiform titles for the “Field” (Pegasus Square) and “Great-Swallow” (Southern Pisces Fish + 𒌦, 𒌧, 𒌨, 𒌩 Pegasi) constellations; wordplay that imparted: “the God, River, Ocean, Encircles, the World.” And it was this string of constellation-writing wordplay that inspired Homer, Hesiod and later Greek poets to conceptualize the god *Ōkeanos*/“Ocean” as a “River” that encircled the earth.

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