



The 13th Sign: Ophiuchus

Everyone knows there are 12 signs in the zodiac, right? Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Ophiuchus, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, Pisces.

Ophiuchus?

Mythology

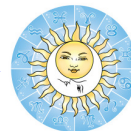
Ophiuchus is the serpent bearer or serpent holder otherwise known as Asklepios (sometimes written as Asclepius, Aesclepius or Aesculapius). The story goes that Asklepios was the first doctor. The beginning of his medical mastery came about when he was visiting a friend and a snake entered the room. Asklepios killed it, but then another snake entered carrying an herb in its mouth and immediately revived the first snake with it. Asklepios took the herb and thus began his medical career. He became more masterful with this and other herbs, able to bring people back from death, such as Hippolytus (by ‘gluing him back together’).

Hades was not thrilled about losing all those souls and perhaps being out of a job, so he talked to his brother Zeus. Eventually, he argued, all mankind would be immortal, which should only be a privilege of the gods. Zeus agreed with him and struck Asklepios dead with a thunderbolt. He honored Asklepios’ talent, though, by placing him in the stars. We humans have honored him as well, in our well known symbol of medicine, the rod of Asclepius (right), which is sometimes mistakenly referred to as the Caduceus (another story entirely; see further reading links below).

It is unclear to me how the name Ophiuchus is actually the Greek story of Asklepios, but the most logical source I found seemed to indicate that Ophiuchus was sort of like his nickname, because Ophiuchus comes from two Greek words meaning “serpent” and “holding.”

Astronomy

The constellation of Ophiuchus lies between Scorpio and Sagittarius, or rather, sort of on top of Scorpio. As the sun seems to dance across our sky, we can trace it’s path every year. That path is called the ecliptic, the apparent path of the sun. In figure 2 you can see the line of the ecliptic and some of the constellations lined up around it. The ecliptic is the white line running roughly horizontally, curving through the whole image. The stars of Ophiuchus are circled in red; the stars of Scorpius in blue. You can see that really both share the same space in the sky, with only a tip crossing the line of the ecliptic, it’s just that Scorpius hangs below and Ophiuchus above. In most artistic drawings of each constellation, Ophiuchus and Scorpius overlap, with Ophiuchus’ foot on Scorpius’ back.



The 13th Sign

If Ophiuchus was considered the 13th sign of the zodiac, it would take up most of the period of time each year that now belongs to the sign of Scorpio, about the first 20-24 days. So is Ophiuchus really the 13th sign? I guess the question is, what defines a sign? I'm not sure that there was an original, definite, and unarguable criteria, but the logical idea seems to be that the *sun passes through the constellations that correspond to the sign.*

By that definition, Ophiuchus certainly seems to be a sign. It appears to have only a toe (or rather, a leg, to be more specific) hanging over the actual ecliptic: 5 stars of the constellation Ophiuchus are below the ecliptic; the rest are above. Scorpio seems to have only a few stars crossing the ecliptic as well. The main measurement seems to be whether or not the sun passes through it, and the sun passes through both Ophiuchus and then Scorpius.

So what do I say to those people that think the exclusion of Ophiuchus in astrology is incorrect?

12 years of experience with astrology have taught me that it is a fluid and changing system, full of offshoots and misinterpretations and reinterpretations, and students of each offshoot bang their pulpit at the other. New students are often frustrated by the vastness of it all, even feeling betrayed when they discover that sometimes the best answer to a question is "whatever works for you." Why are there so many different ways of dividing the astrological houses? Why are the signs and the constellations no longer in alignment? What about all these new asteroids? What about this 13th sign?

It may not be as confusing and contradictory as it seems. I find that if we get caught up in the rules, we can find ourselves in a never-ending maze of contradictions. But if we are seeking meaning, we will often find the same truth at the end of many different paths. My astrological reading experience has taught me that a chart will repeat itself. If there is an important truth in there, the chart will communicate it several different ways, almost as if it's trying to make sure you don't miss it's essence. I believe that this Scorpius vs. Ophiuchus issue is the same principle.

Some people have said that many of the Ophiuchus sign traits have been mistakenly assigned to Scorpio. I can see that. Ophiuchus, from the stories in mythology, would seem to indicate the ability to come back from death into life, to heal. The myth of Scorpius says that it was the scorpion that was sent to kill Orion. So Scorpio, from the stories in mythology, would seem to indicate death. Death and Life. That is the modern interpretation of the sign Scorpio. Scorpio represents the transformative process of dying and living again in a new state. It's a snake shedding it's skin or a phoenix rising from the ashes.



I think all our quibbling about the rules or the names or the math doesn't matter. Ophiuchus by any other name would smell as sweet. The result is what it needs to be: Scorpio and Ophiuchus share their section of sky, and our collective consciousness has blended the two beautifully.

For further reading:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ophiuchus>

- <http://www.geocities.com/astrologyconstellations/ophiuchus.htm> (beware his statements about the evil that is the Tropical Zodiac though. The sidereal and tropical zodiac are both real, both effective and both true. They are based on different systems of measurement and different reasoning. For more information, see my Leo Issue 2007 newsletter).

For more about the medical symbol, the rod of Asclepius:

<http://www.annals.org/cgi/content/abstract/138/8/673>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caduceus>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod_of_Asclepius

Asclepius, Ophiuchus, Imhotep, oh my! Cross cultural references to the story behind Ophiuchus:

<http://www.startistics.com/ophiuchus/index.html> (be warned about this website—it is huge and winding. You can never tell whether you're coming or going, because the navigation is so poor, but it is rich in information and leads to many offshoots).