

Zodiac constellations 12: Cancer

'The crab' in Latin ranks 31st in size of all the constellations. It is the faintest of the zodiac constellations and, in cities, is often not visible with the naked eye.

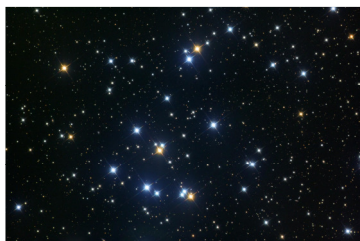


In Babylonian astronomy, the constellations name referred to both a crab and a snapping turtle. An apparent link between these and ideas of death and passage to the underworld, were possibly the origin of these ideas in later Greek myths associated with Hercules and Hydra. The crab was also associated with death and afterlife in ancient Egypt. Around 2,000 BCE, it was a symbol of Scarab, the sacred emblem of immortality. In Greek mythology, it was Cancer, the crab, that attacked Hercules during his fight with multi-headed Hydra. It bit his foot and was crushed underfoot; a minor role befitting a faint constellation. Hera, sworn enemy of Hercules, placed the crab among the stars. During the 1500s, Cancer was depicted as a large crayfish or lobster, a symbol still used in Germanic cultures.

In ancient times, Cancer was the location of the Sun's most northerly position in sky. The Sun was directly overhead at 23.5° and this line of latitude was named the Tropic of Cancer. This northerly position is now in Taurus due to precession of the equinoxes, but the label has not changed. The Sun passes through Cancer for 3 weeks from late-July to mid-August.

At least ten of Cancer's stars are known to have exoplanets. 55 Cancri has 5 – 1 super-Earth, 4 gas giants, one of the latter in habitable zone.

Notable features include:



- Praesepe (M44): a major open star cluster also known as the Beehive or Manger cluster. It is one of the closest clusters to Earth, at a distance of 590 ly. It was one of the first objects observed by Galileo in 1609 with his new telescope. It contains about 50 bright stars and many red dwarfs (over two-thirds of the stars in the cluster). In Greek mythology, gamma and delta Cancri, located near the cluster, were seen to represent two donkeys feeding at the box shaped manger formed by four of the brightest stars in the cluster. The donkeys were those of the god Dionysus and his tutor Silenus rode on in the war against the Titans.
- M67: a smaller and denser open cluster with over 500 stars which is visible through binoculars

Sources: Ridpath, I (Ed) 2012 Oxford dictionary of astronomy Oxford, OUP, Ridpath, I (Ed) 2006 Astronomy London, Dorling Kindersley, en.wikipedia.org