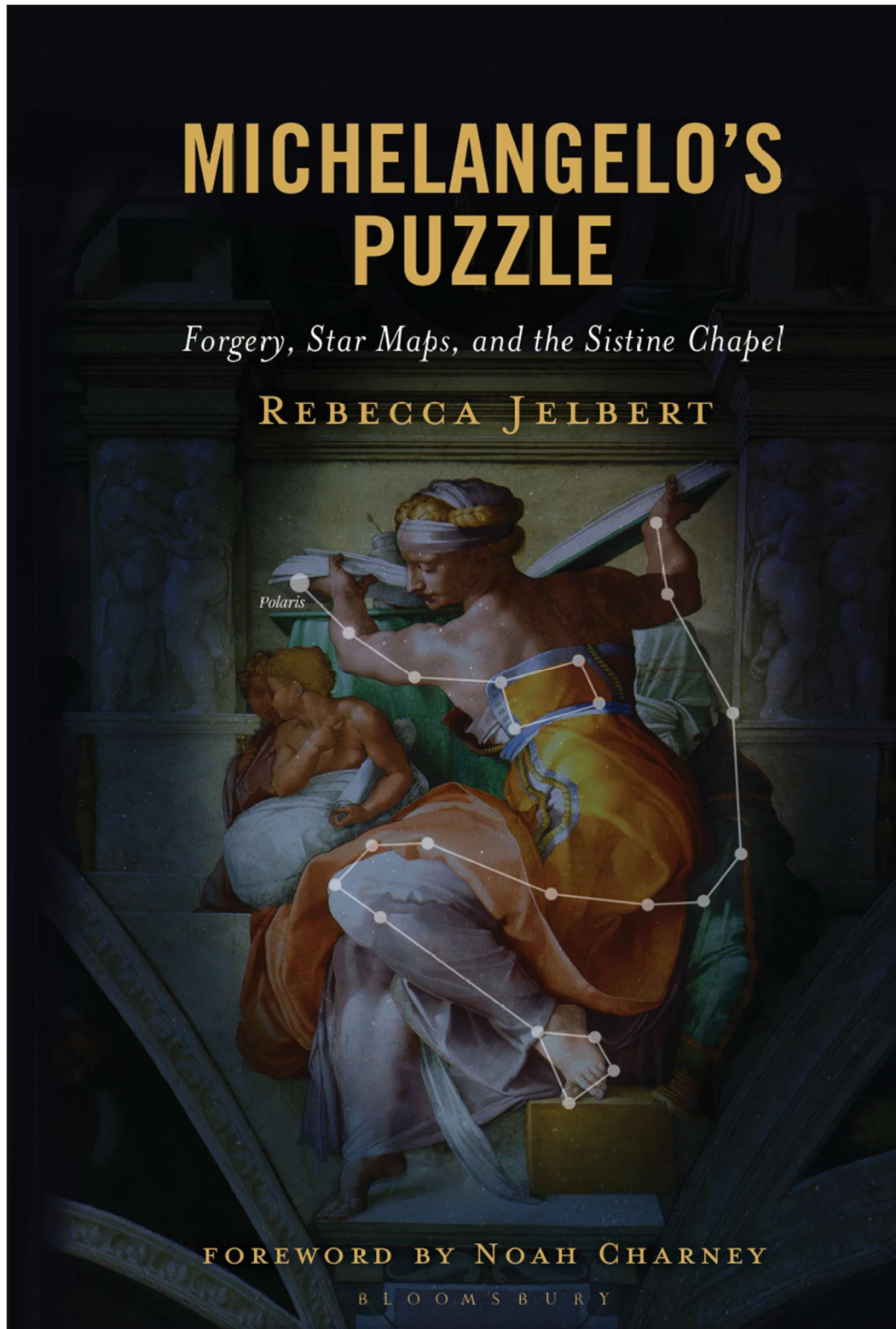


Images in a larger format to accompany

Michelangelo's Puzzle by Rebecca Jelbert (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025)



Cover design by Rosalind Ingram, <https://rosingram.co.uk/>. *Libyan Sibyl*, by Michelangelo Buonarroti. 1509. (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican, Rome). See figure 2.14 for constellations (chapter 2).

Introduction

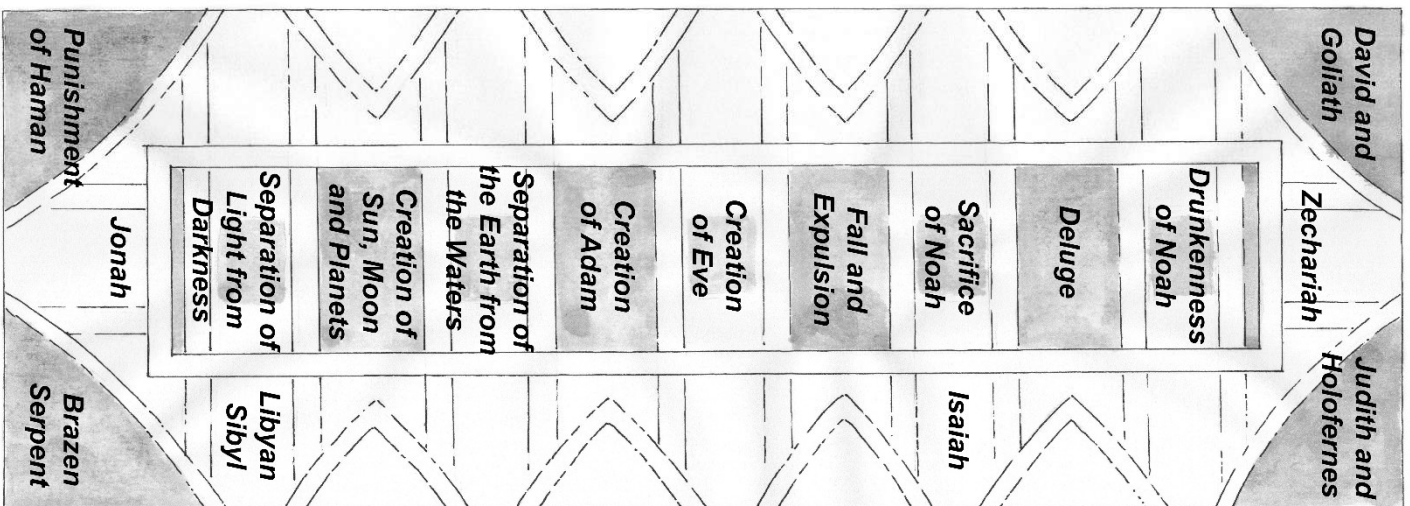


Figure 0.1. Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (Cappella Sistina), by Michelangelo Buonarroti. 1508-12. Fresco, 40 by 14 m. (Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome). Image credit: public domain via Wikimedia, printed with the permission of the Vatican. Labelled version by the author.

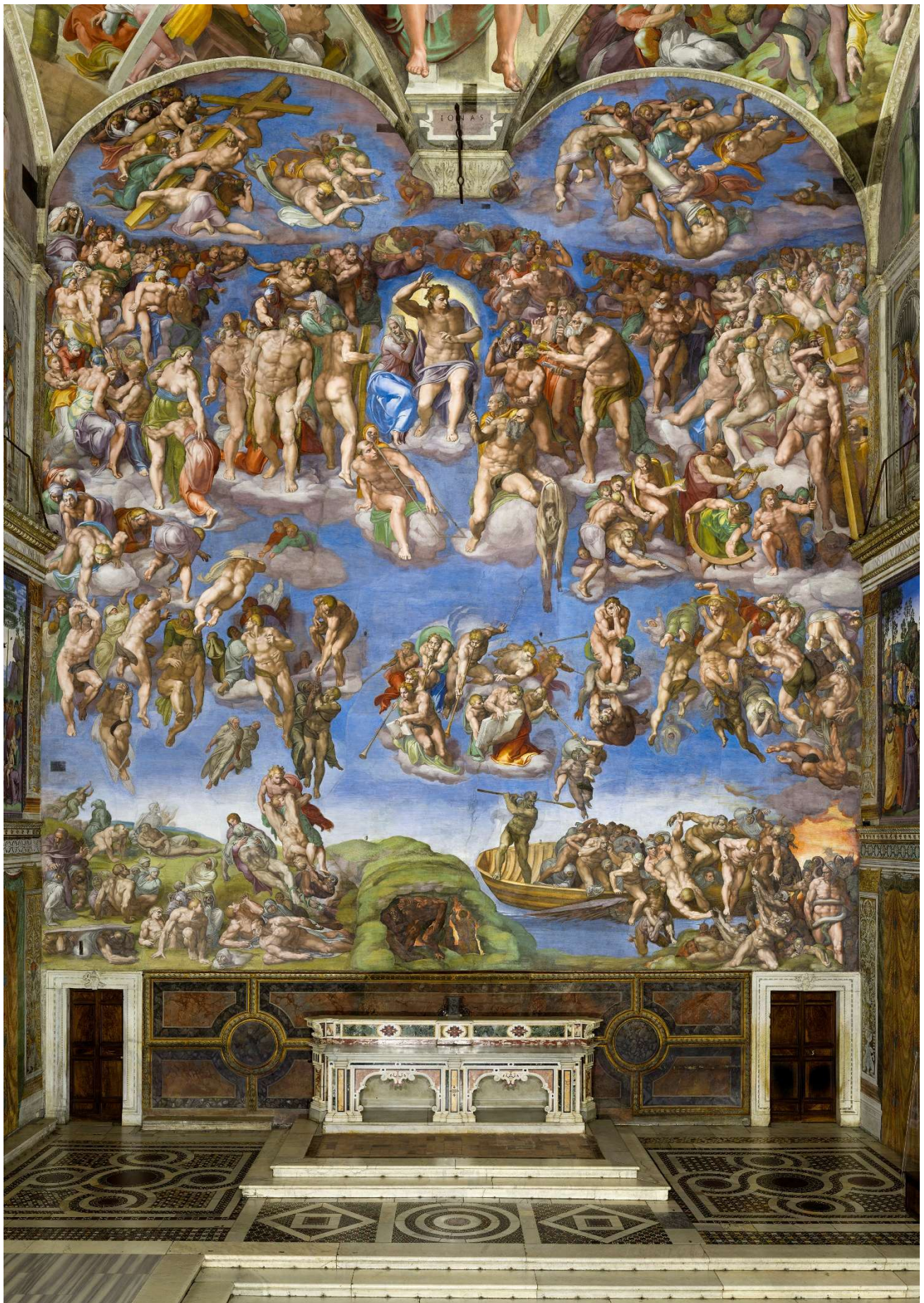


Figure 0.2. *Last Judgment*, by Michelangelo Buonarroti. 1536-41. Fresco, 13.7 by 12.2 m. (Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome).
Image credit: Vatican Museums.



Figure 0.3. *Laocoön and his Sons* (or *Laocoön Group*). c.40-20 BC. Copy believed to be by Agesander, Polydorus and Athenodorus, after a Hellenistic original from c.200 BC. Marble, 208 by 163 by 112 cm. (Vatican Museums, Rome). Image credit: photograph by Wilfredo Rafael Rodriguez Hernandez, public domain via Wikimedia. Printed with the permission of the Vatican. Inset added by the author.

Chapter 1

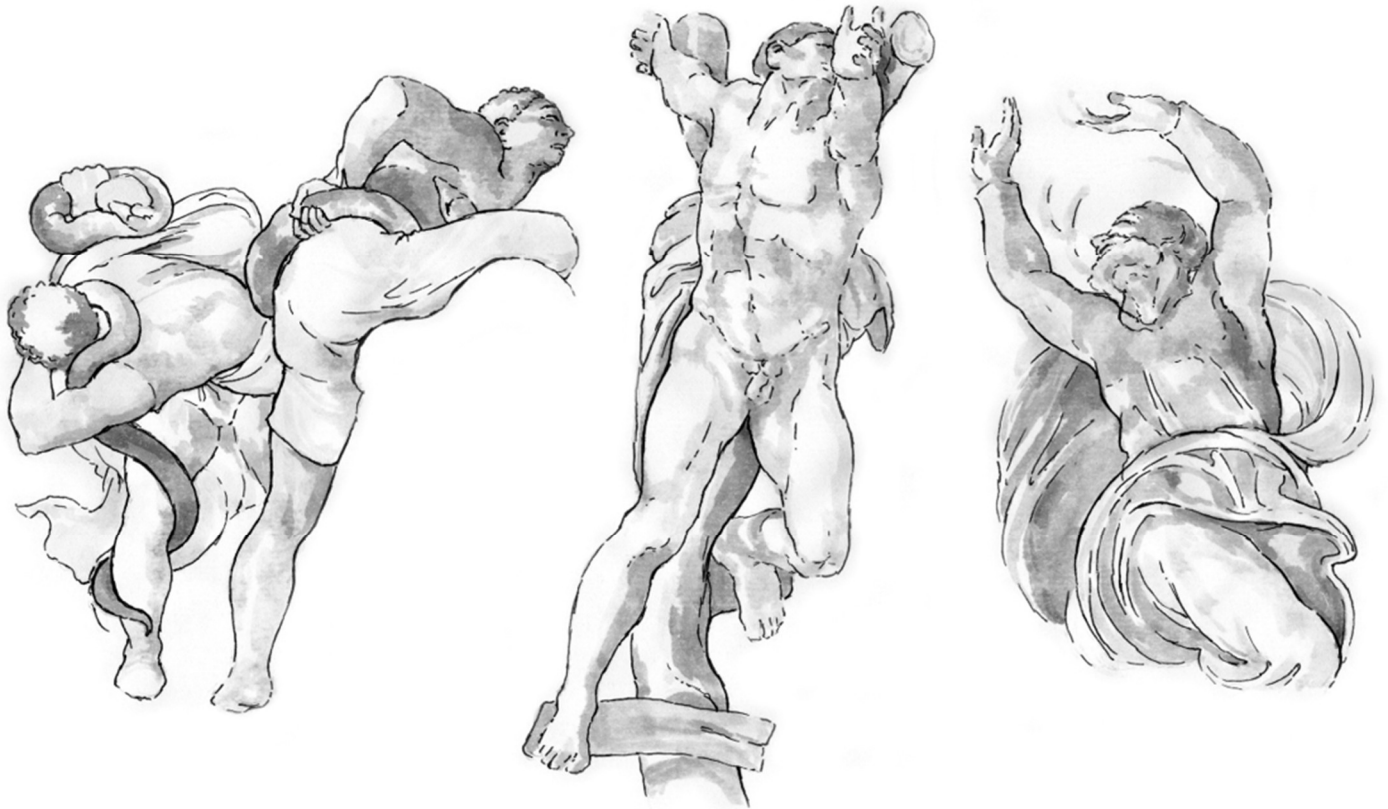


Figure 1.1. Michelangelo's borrowing of the *Laocoön Group* for three frescos on the Sistine ceiling. Left: *Brazen Serpent*. Middle: *Punishment of Haman*. Right: *Separation of Light from Darkness*. Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.



Figure 1.2. *Death of Laocoön*, by an anonymous artist. First century AD. Roman fresco. Casa del Menandro, Pompeii. Image credit: photograph by Johannes Eber, courtesy of Jackie and Bob Dunn, www.pompeiiinpictures.com.



Figure 1.3. Details from ancient images of the death of Laocoön using the bent-knee pose. Left: Laocoön's son from a Roman fresco from the House of Laocoön in Pompeii (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli). Right: Laocoön from the Vatican Virgil Codex (Vat. lat. 3225), f.18v, c. AD 400 (Vatican Library). Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.



Figure 1.4. Study for *Leda and the Swan*, by Leonardo da Vinci. c.1505-07. Black chalk, pen and ink and wash, 16 by 13.9 cm. (Chatsworth House, Derbyshire). Detail in the circle shows one of Leda's children with a with a sheer break to the wrist. Image credit: public domain via Chatsworth House, with circle added by the author.



Figure 1.5. *Three Monkeys Imitating the Laocoön*, by Niccolò Boldrini. c.1545. After an original drawing by Titian. Woodcut, 27.5 by 39.7 cm. (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut). Image credit: public domain via Yale University Art Gallery.

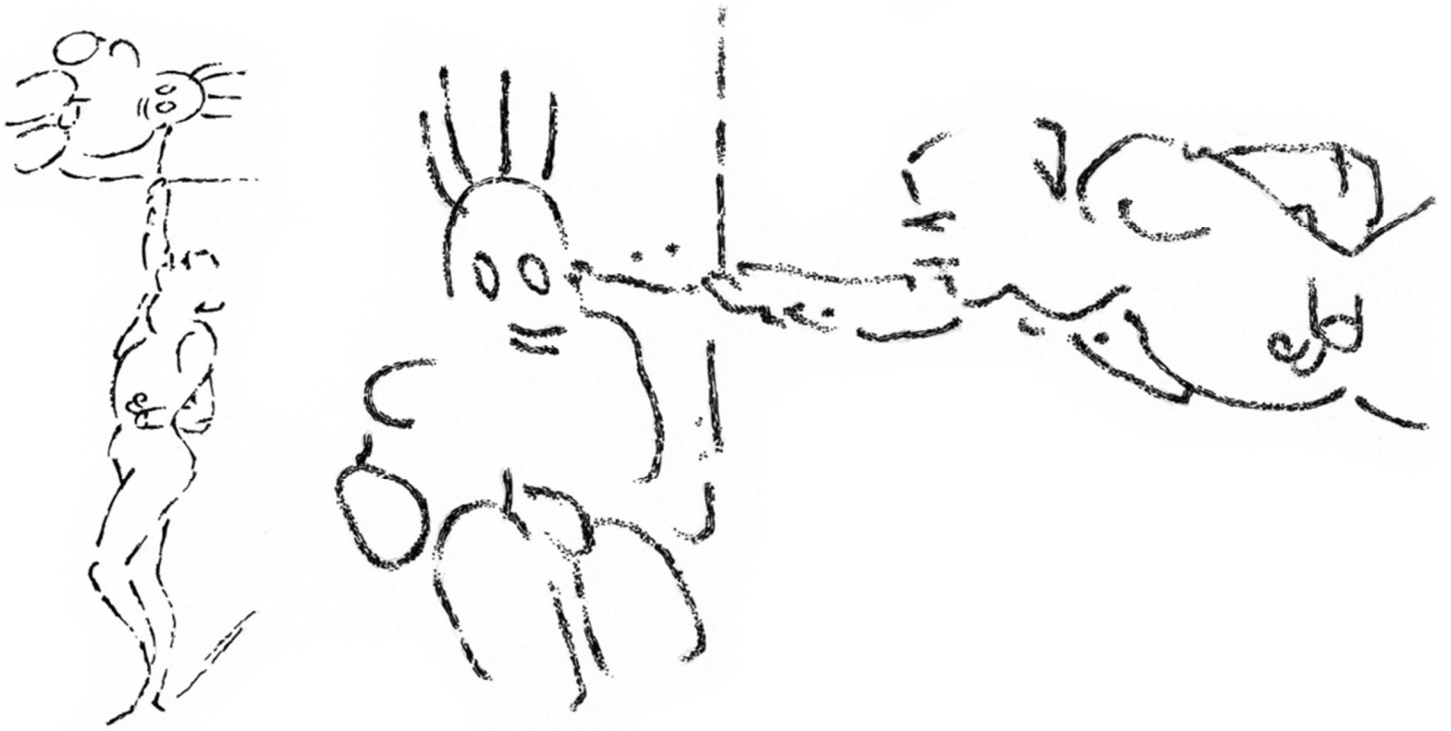


Figure 1.6. Detail from an illustrated sonnet with self-portrait written whilst painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling, by Michelangelo. c.1511. Pen and brown ink, 28.3 by 20 cm. Vol. XIII, fol. III (no. 39). (Casa Buonarroti, Archivio Buonarroti, Florence). Enlarged detail of Michelangelo's self-portrait on the right has been rotated. Image credit: sketches by the author, after the original.



Figure 1.7. A digital rearrangement of the central figures in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. St. Bartholomew (on the right) has been moved upwards and reduced slightly in size. This new placement of the figures recalls that of the *Laocoön Group*, with the Trojan priest flanked by his two sons. Image credit: Vatican Museums, with digital adjustment of St. Bartholomew by the author.



Figure 1.8. Illumination for *Inferno* 25, by Priamo della Quercia. 1444-c.1450. Yates Thompson Manuscript 36, f.46r. (British Library, London). On the left, Dante and Virgil are witnessing Vanni (Vanno) Fucci (the pillager of a church in Pistoia) being attacked by Cacus. On the right, Dante and Virgil are speaking to three souls being tormented by snakes and lizards. The isolated detail on the far right is of a soul being attacked by a snake. Image credit: British Library Collection, with digital isolation of figure by the author.

Chapter 2

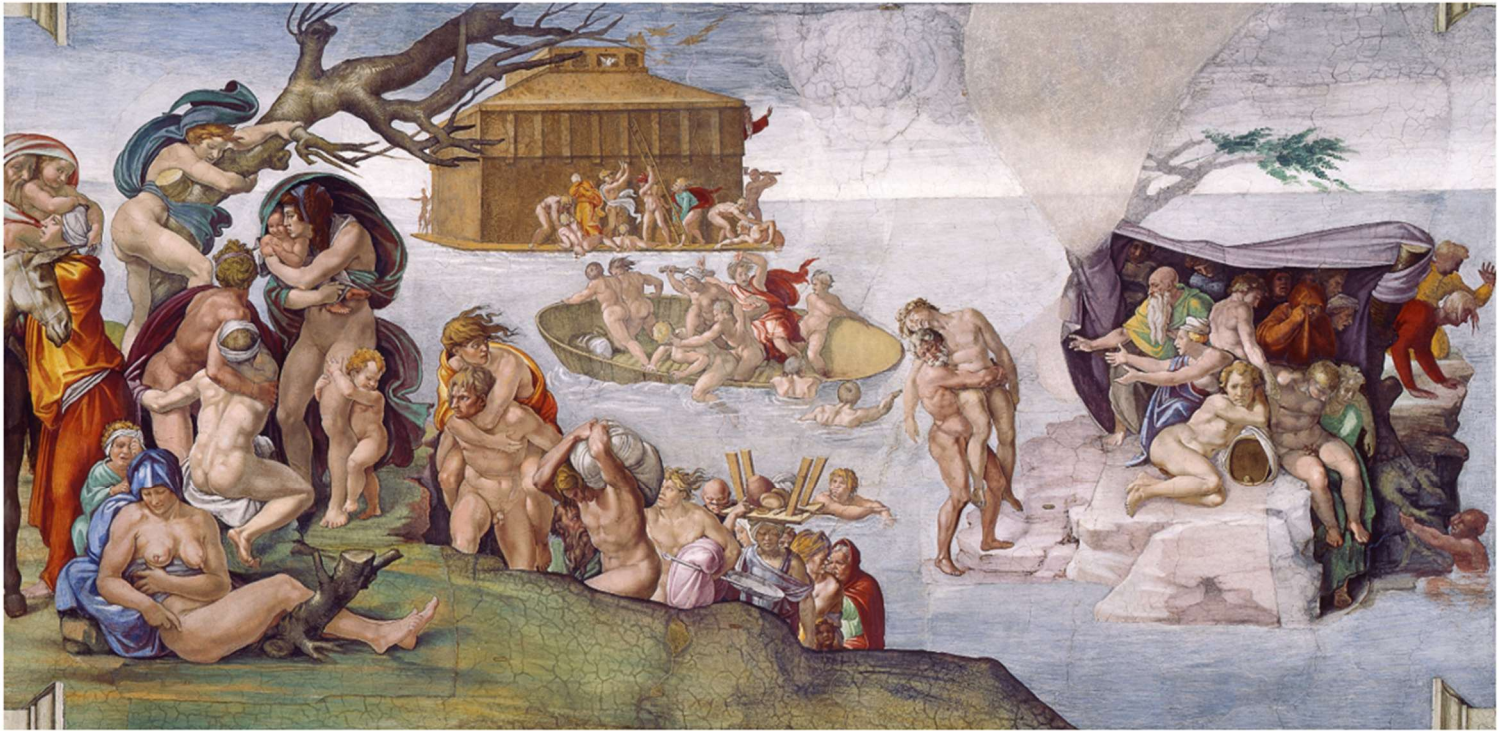


Figure 2.1. *Deluge*, by Michelangelo. 1508-09. Fresco, 280 by 560 cm. (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). Image credit: Vatican Museums.

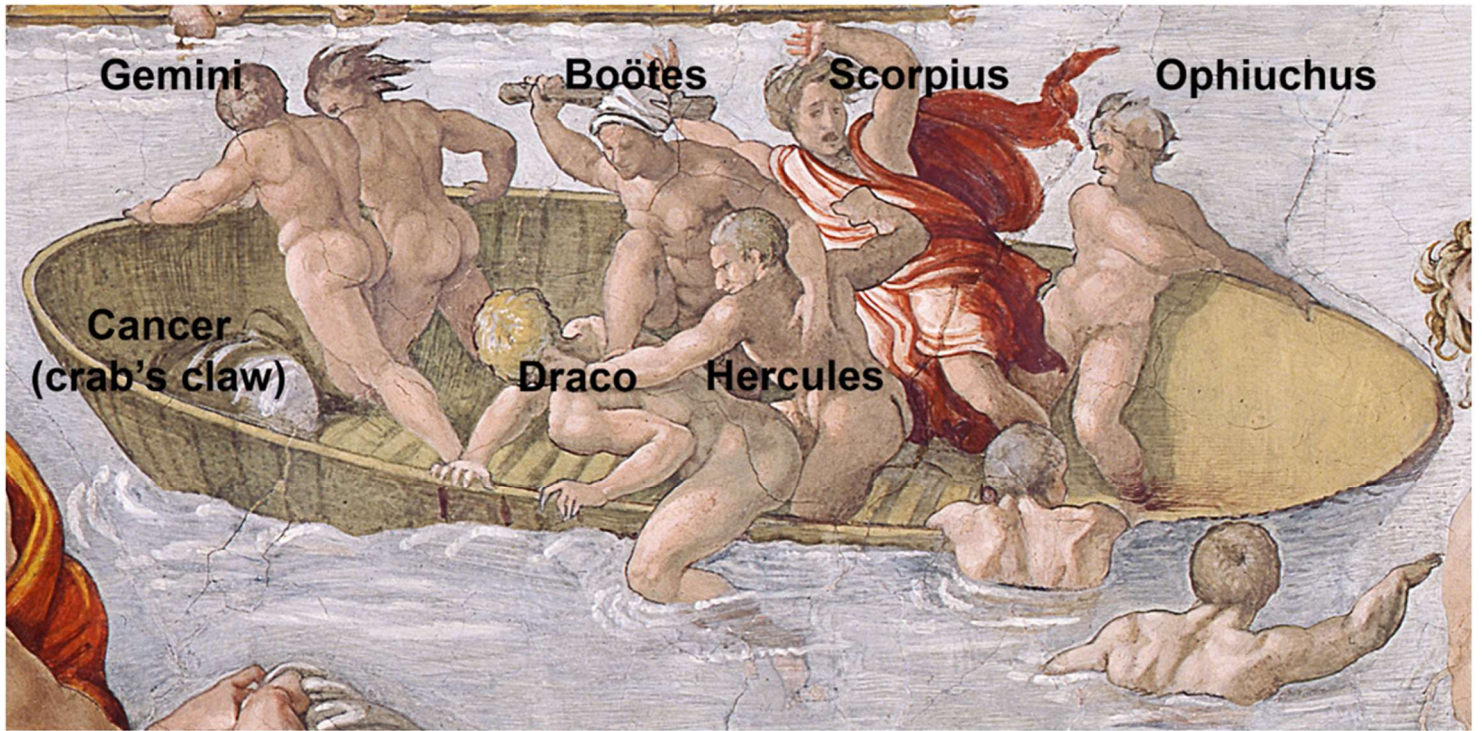


Figure 2.2. *Deluge*, by Michelangelo. Each character has been identified with the constellation they represent. (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). Detail showing central boat. Image credit: Vatican Museums, with text added by the author.

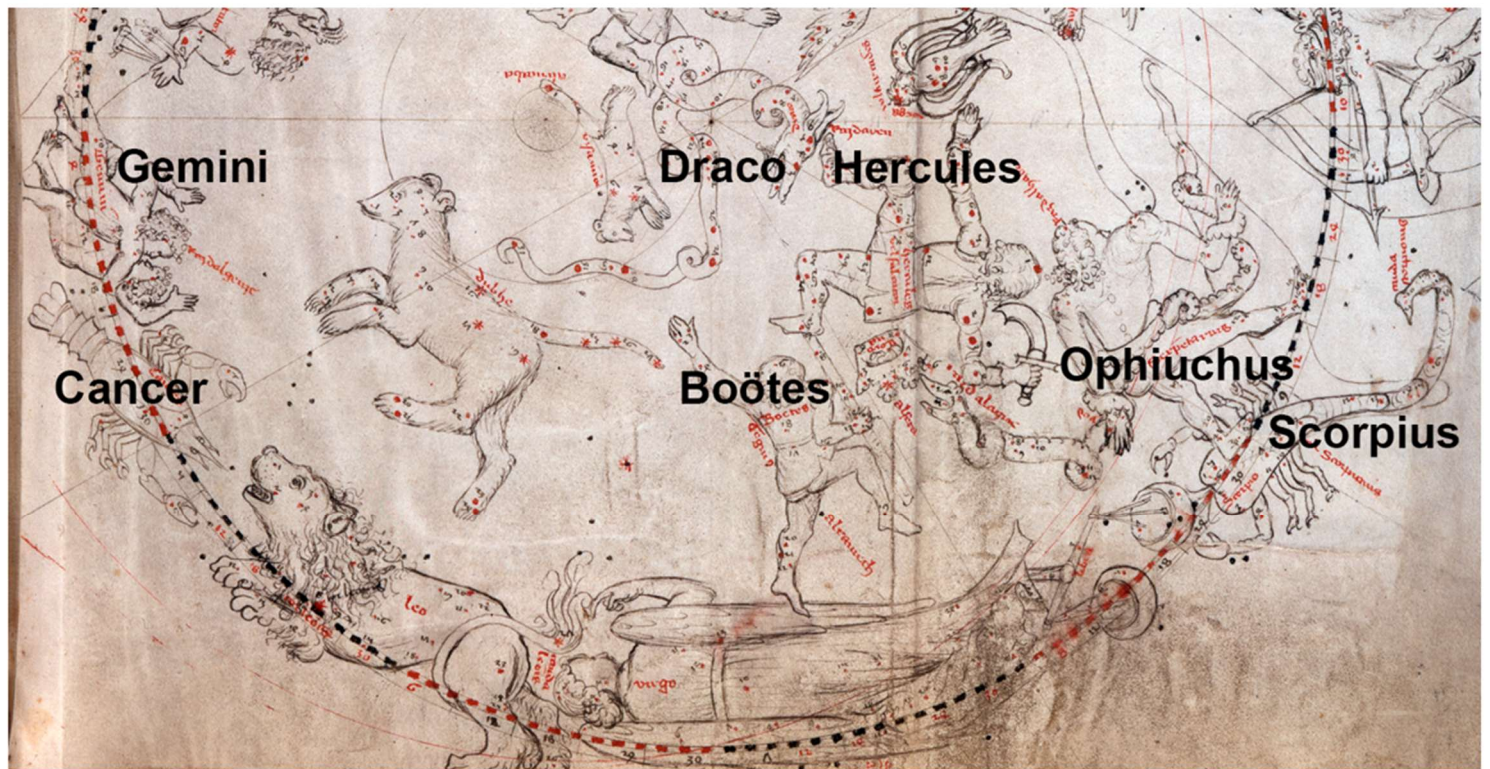


Figure 2.3. The Vienna Manuscript (or Vienna map), star map of the northern hemisphere, by Reinardus Gensfelder. c.1435. Cod. 5415, f.168r. (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna). Detail. Image credit: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, with text added by the author.

Circle of the ecliptic

Circle of the Milky Way

Capricornus

Sagittarius

Scorpius

Taurus

Gemini

Cancer

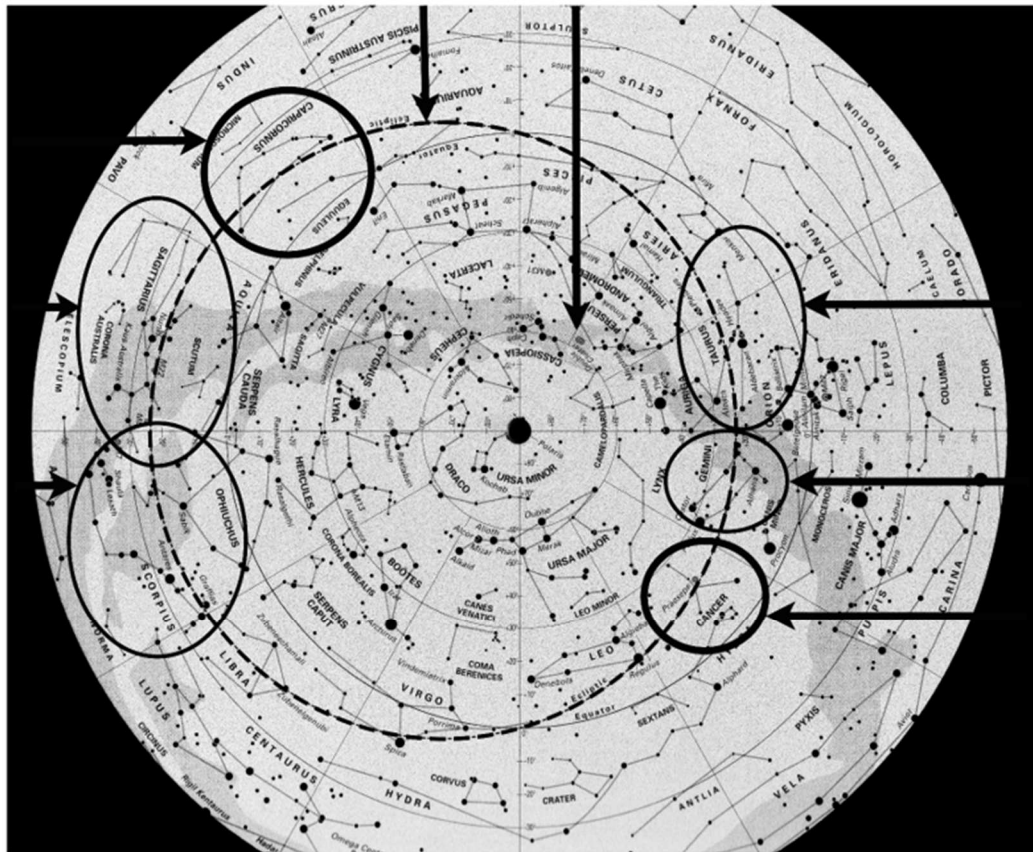
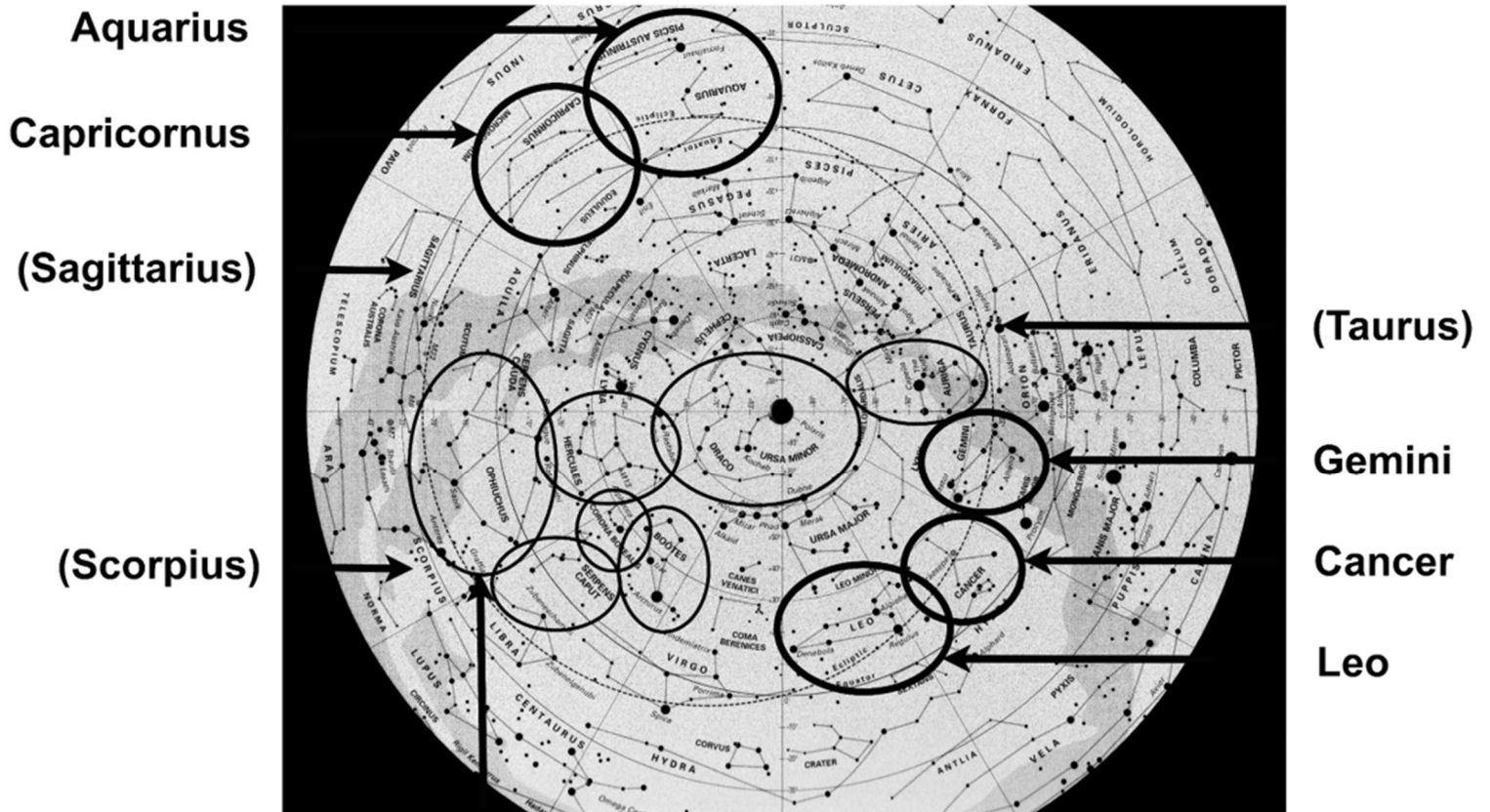


Figure 2.5. The two sets of traditional, celestial gates in the northern hemisphere. Gates of the Milky Way: Taurus-Gemini and Scorpius-Sagittarius (thinner circles). Gates of the solstices: Cancer and Capricornus (thicker circles). Image credit: Planisphere reproduced with permission of Philip's, a division of Octopus Publishing Group Ltd (the light and dark areas of the planisphere have been inverted). Circles and text added by the author.



Path: Auriga, Draco, Boötes, Corona Borealis, Hercules, and Ophiuchus and Serpens

Figure 2.6. Michelangelo's path of constellations across the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The trail of stars evoked through sculptural references: Auriga; Draco, Boötes, Corona Borealis, Hercules, and the joint constellations of Ophiuchus and Serpens. The constellations evoked through celestial illustrations: Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Capricornus and Aquarius. Image credit: Planisphere reproduced with permission of Philip's, a division of Octopus Publishing Group Ltd. Circles and text added by the author.



Figure 2.7. The shared theme of sacrifice. Top: *Sacrifice of Noah*, by Michelangelo. 1509. Fresco (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican), detail. Bottom: Mithras sacrificing the bull from an illustration of an ancient Roman relief in Carlo Ludovico Visconti, "Bassorilievo Mitriaco Scoperto al Campidoglio e Tazza Mitriaca," *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Rome* 1 (November 1872): plate 3, figure 1. Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

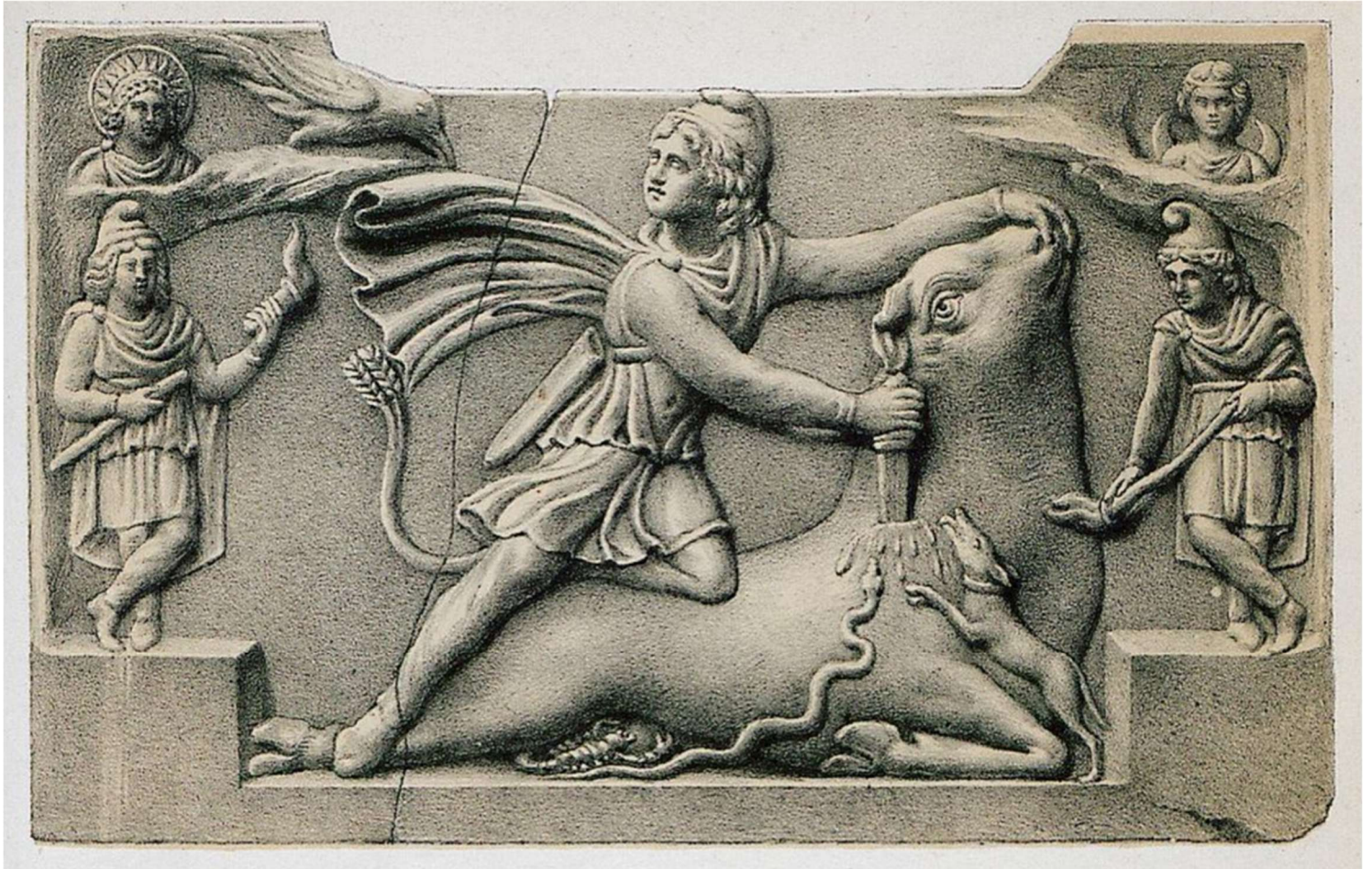


Figure 2.8. Mithras sacrificing the bull. Illustration of an ancient Roman relief in Carlo Ludovico Visconti, "Bassorilievo Mitriaco Scoperto al Campidoglio e Tazza Mitriaca," *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Rome* 1 (November 1872): plate 3, figure 1. Original relief found in Rome in the nineteenth century, at the bottom of the garden where Michelangelo once lived. The relief is housed in the Museum Centrale Montemartini, Rome (MC 1203). Image credit: Heidelberg University Library.

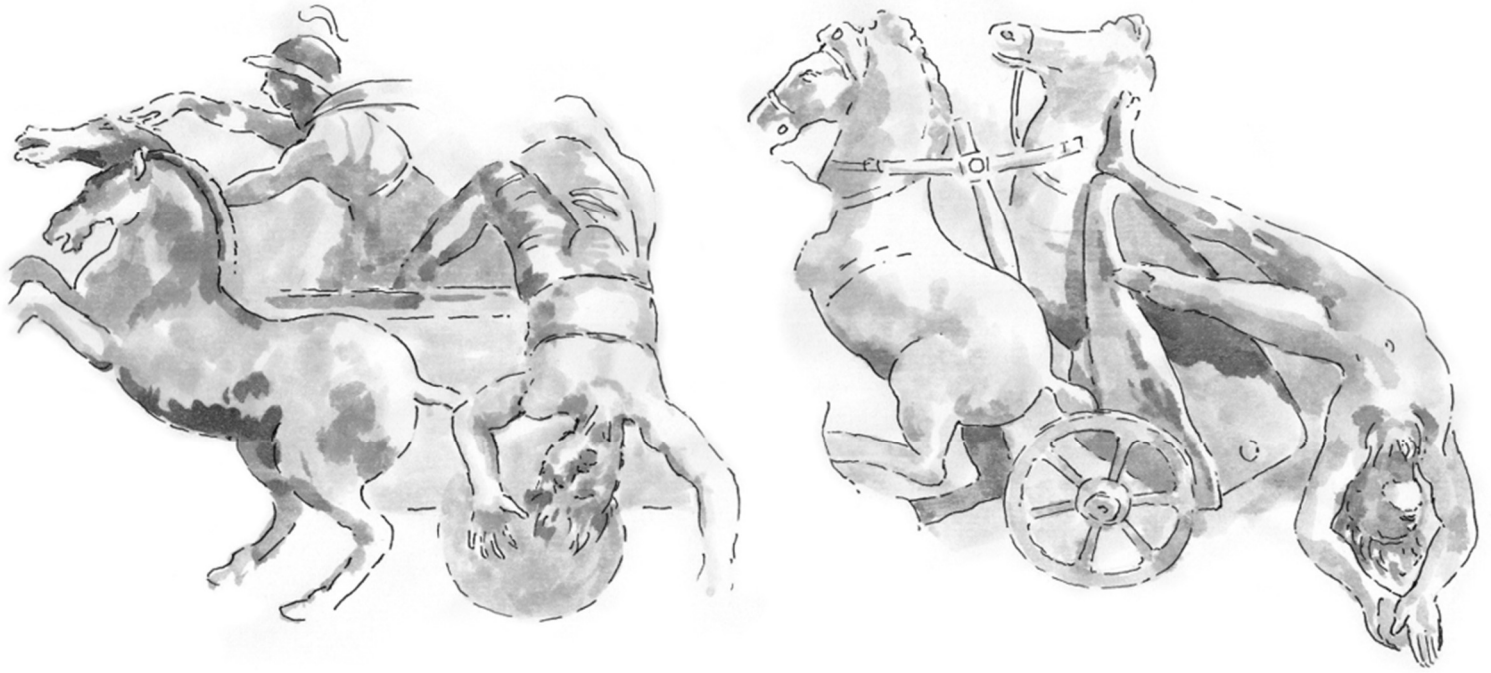


Figure 2.9. Falling from a chariot. Left: *Antiochus Epiphanes falling from his chariot* (or *The death of Joram*), a medallion fresco by Michelangelo, 1511. (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). Right: Roman sarcophagus showing Phaethon's fall from the sun god's chariot, c. AD 150-170, detail (Uffizi, Florence). This relief was located outside Santa Maria in Aracoeli around 1500. Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

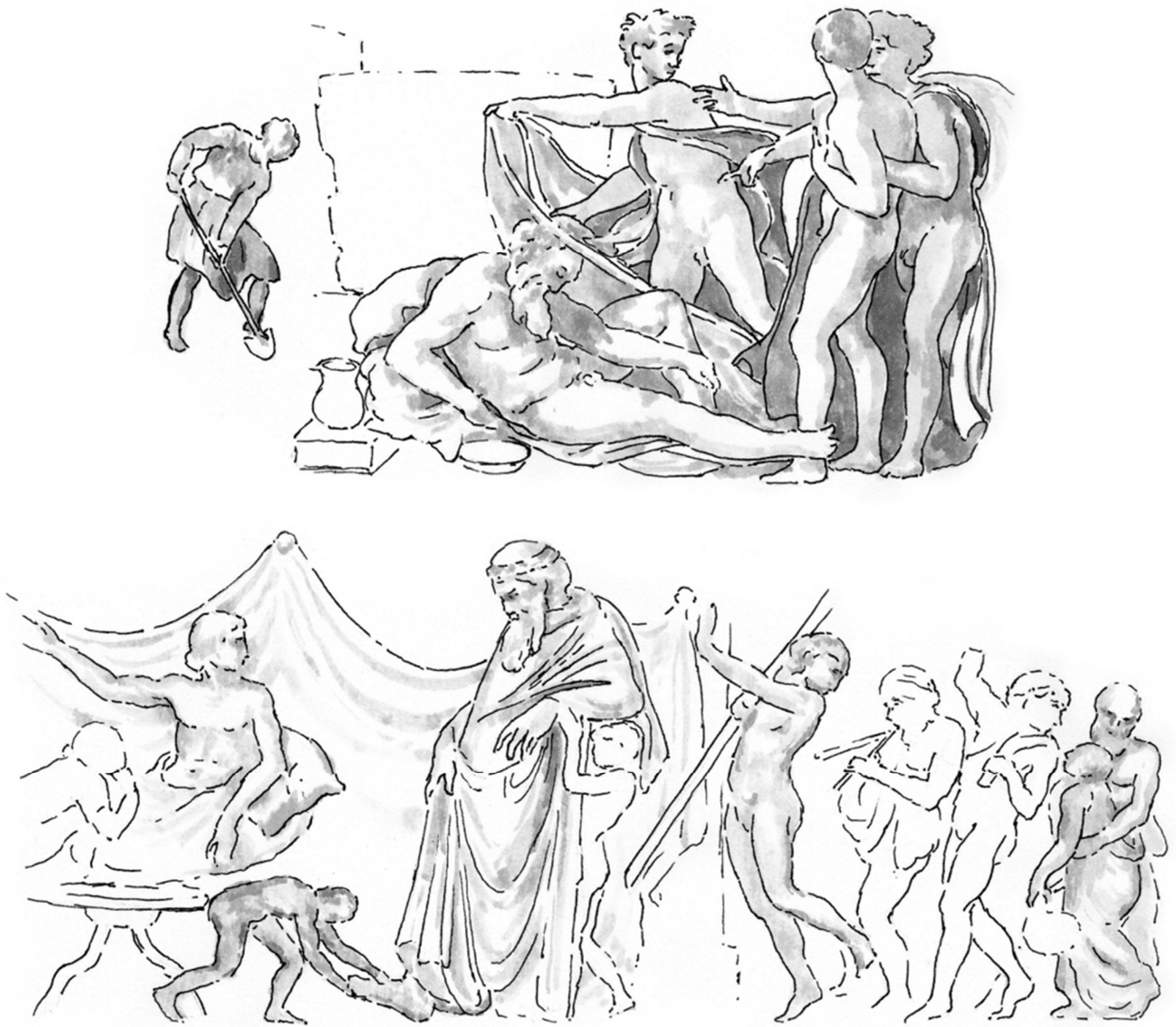


Figure 2.10. A shared allusion to drunkenness. Top: *Drunkenness of Noah*, by Michelangelo, 1509, detail (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). Bottom: *Icarus Relief*, Roman copy (first or second century BC) of a Hellenistic original, detail. Found in Rome, Inv. MA 1606 (MR 719) (Louvre, Paris). Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

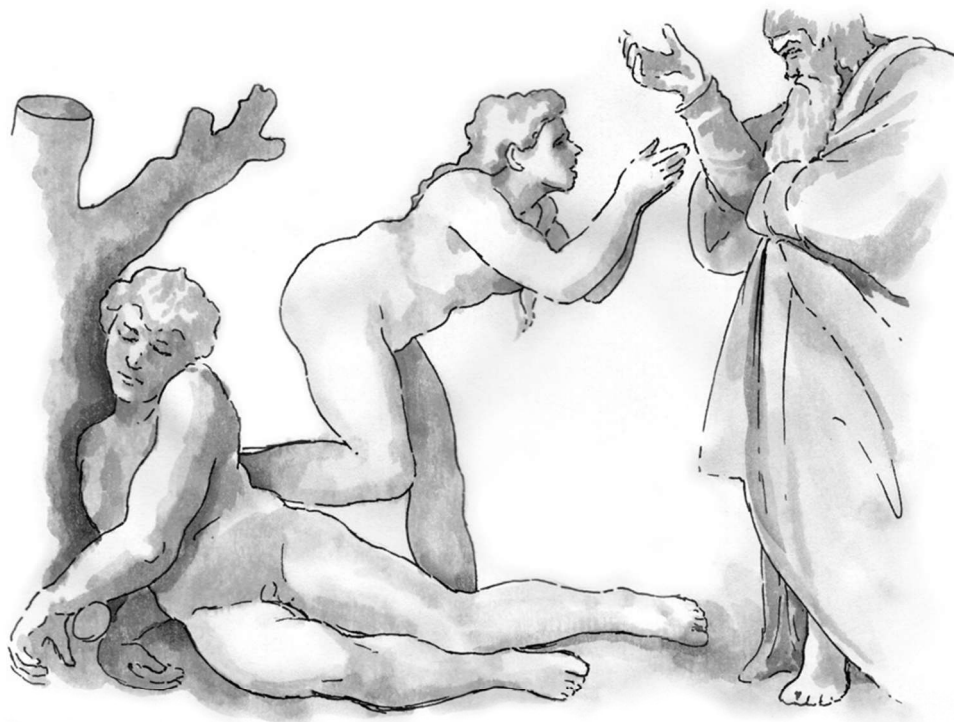


Figure 2.11. The influence of imagery from the myth of Theseus and Ariadne. Top: *Creation of Eve*, by Michelangelo, 1509-10, detail (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). Bottom: *Theseus Fleeing Ariadne*, detail from Roman sarcophagus, c. AD130-150, detail (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

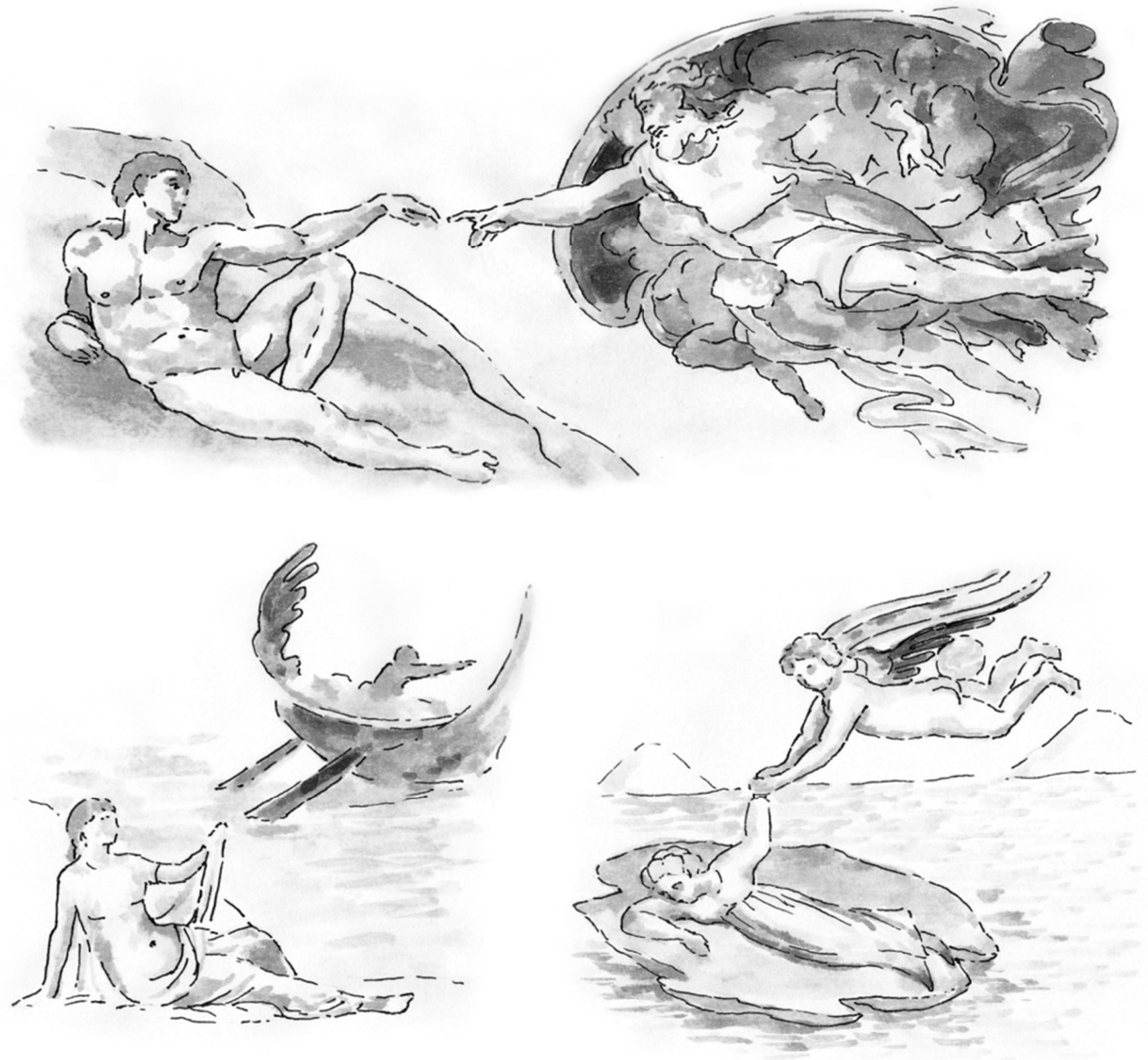


Figure 2.12. A shared allusion to recumbent and 'floating' characters. Top: *Creation of Adam*, by Michelangelo, 1510 (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). Bottom left: Roman fresco of Ariadne on the shore of Naxos, first century BC - first century AD, Inv. 1867,0508.1358. (The British Museum, London). Bottom right: Illumination for *Paradiso* 13, by Giovanni di Paolo. 1444-c.1450, from the Yates Thompson Manuscript 36, f.152r (British Library, London). A Bacchic angel wakes Ariadne, detail (image reversed). Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

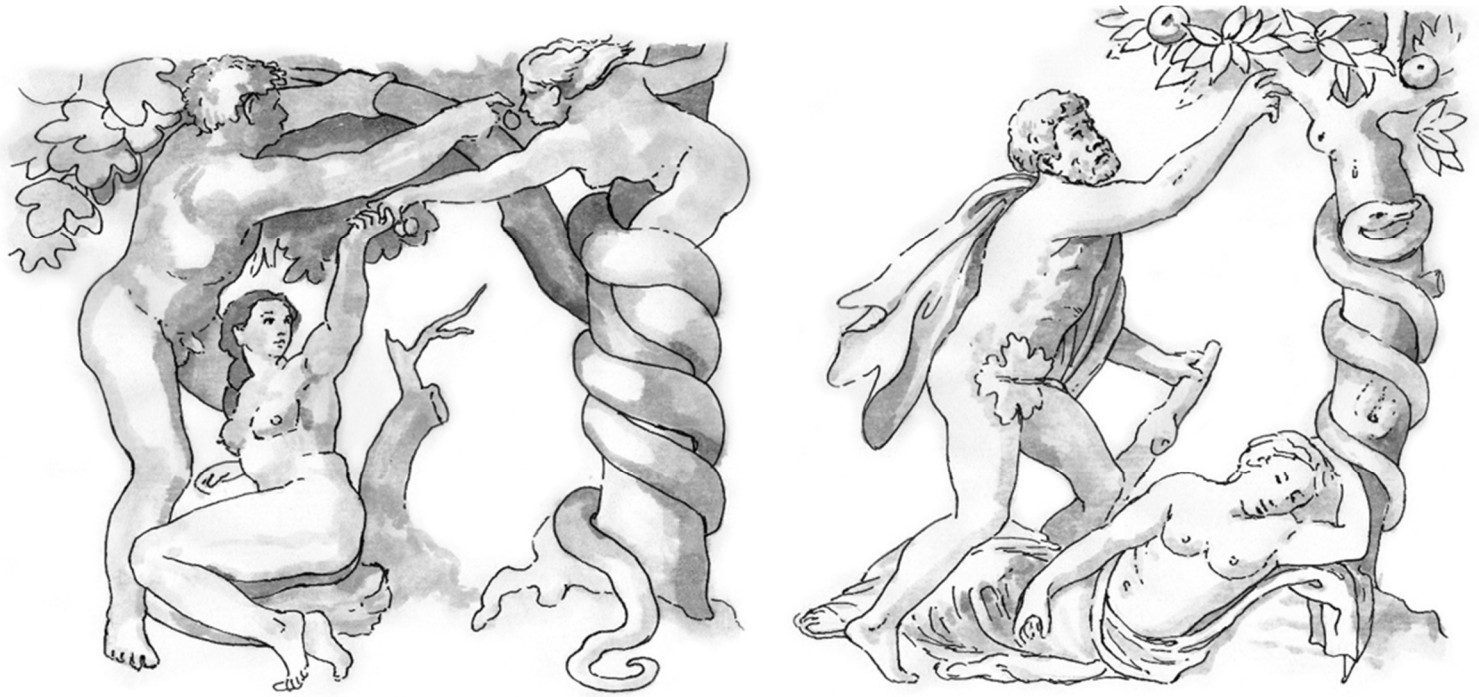


Figure 2.13. Picking fruit from a sacred garden. Left: *Fall and Expulsion*, by Michelangelo, detail (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). Right: an ancient Roman marble relief of Hercules picking golden apples from a tree guarded by Ladon in the Garden of Hesperides. Illustration in Giovanni Battista Ferrari, *Hesperides, sive, De malorum aureorum cultura et usu libri quatuor* (Rome: Sumptibus Hermann Scheus, 1646), 27. (Peter H. Raven Library, Missouri Botanical Garden's Rare Books Collection). Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

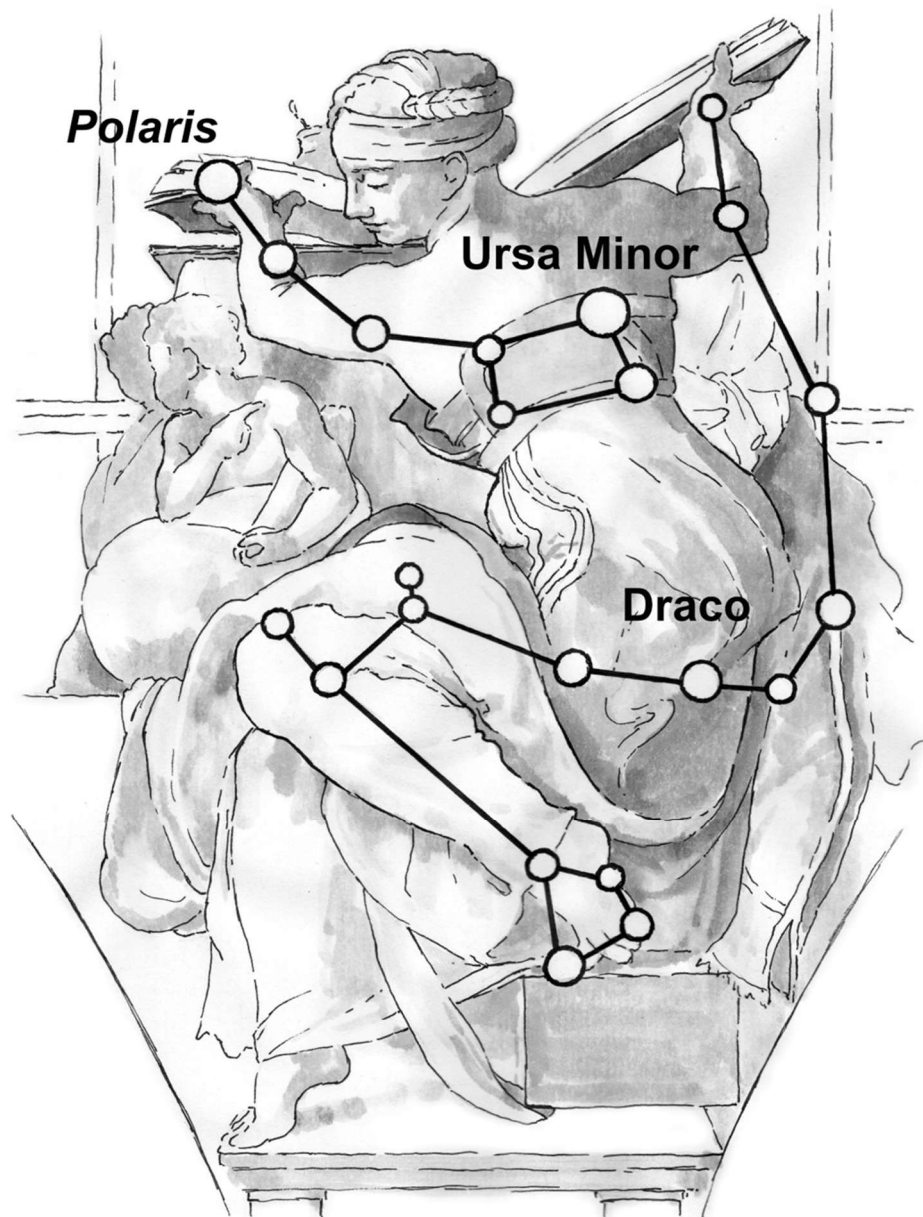


Figure 2.14. *Libyan Sibyl*, by Michelangelo. 1509. Fresco. (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). The constellations of Draco and Ursa Minor have been superimposed on the fresco (Ursa Minor has been slightly enlarged and rotated). Draco and Ursa Minor are based on diagrams published by the International Astronomical Union (IAU). Image credit: sketch by the author, after the originals.

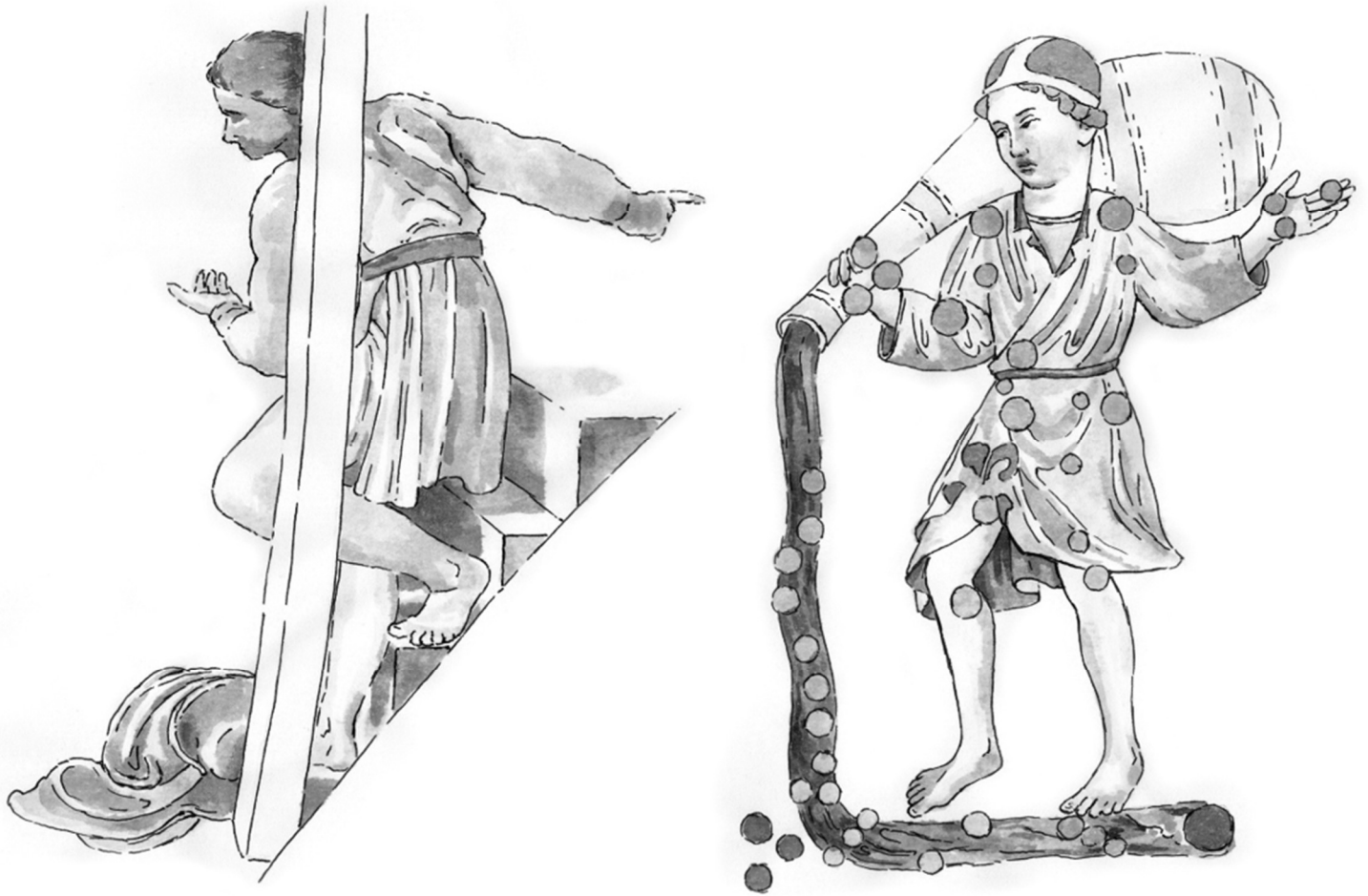


Figure 2.15. A male figure in a yellow robe, with arms outstretched. Left: *Punishment of Haman*, by Michelangelo. 1511, detail (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). Right: Aquarius, after Al Sufi's *Liber locis stellarum fixarum* (*Book of Fixed Stars*) produced in 964. Sufi latinus, North Italian, early 15th century illustration from Pergamenthandschrift M II 141 (Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, Germany). Image credit: sketch by the author, after the originals.

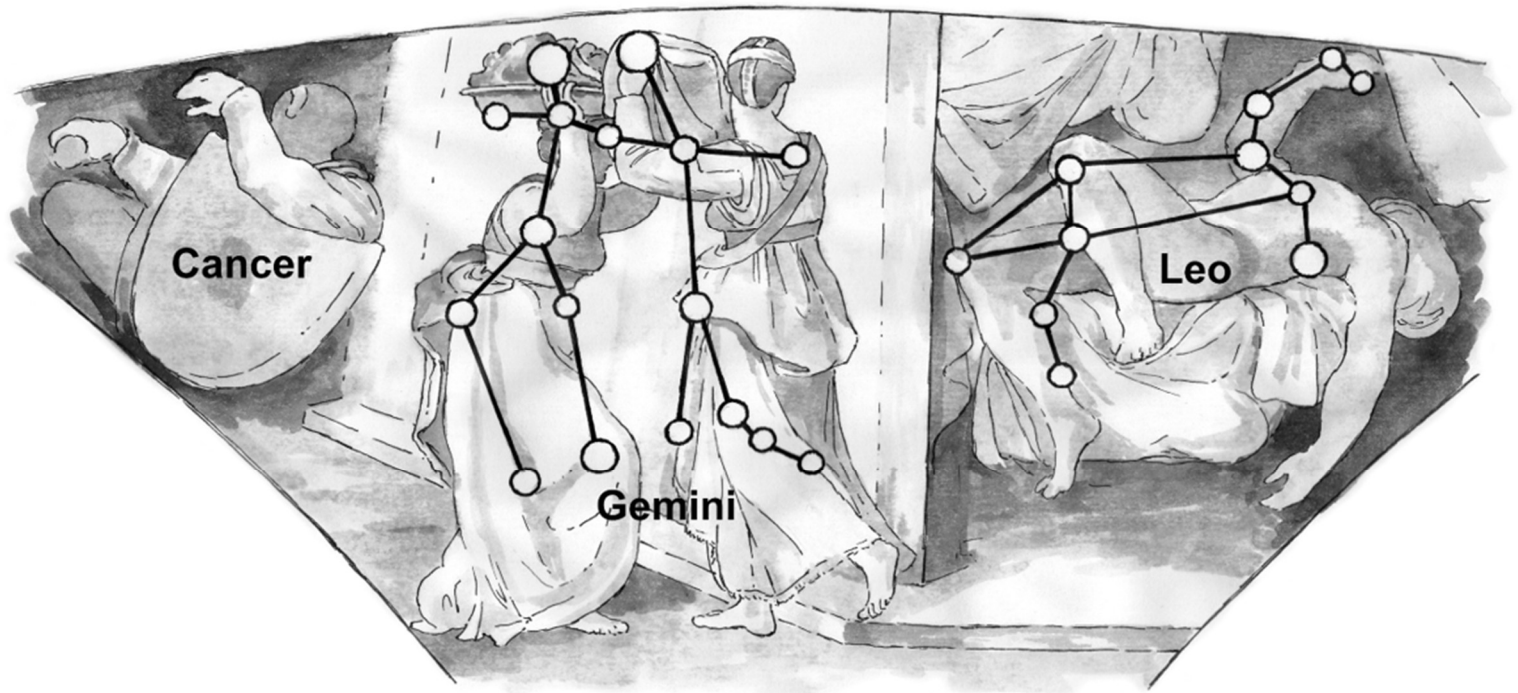


Figure 2.16. *Judith and Holofernes*, by Michelangelo. (Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vatican). The stars of Gemini and Leo have been superimposed on the fresco (based on IAU constellations). Image credit: sketch by the author, after the originals.

Chapter 3



Figure 3.1. Mithraic tauroctony scene beneath an arched band of the twelve zodiacal signs. Two-sided monument from Nida, Hedddernheim, Germany. Relief in sandstone, height 180 cm. Inv. 239. CIMRM 1083. (Stiftung Stadtmuseum Wiesbaden, Wiesbaden). Illustration in Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae*, vol. 2 (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), figure 274. Image credit: printed with kind permission of Brill Academic Publishers and Stiftung Stadtmuseum Wiesbaden.



Figure 3.2. *Deluge*, by Michelangelo. 1508-09. (Sistine Chapel, Vatican). Detail. Image credit: Vatican Museums.

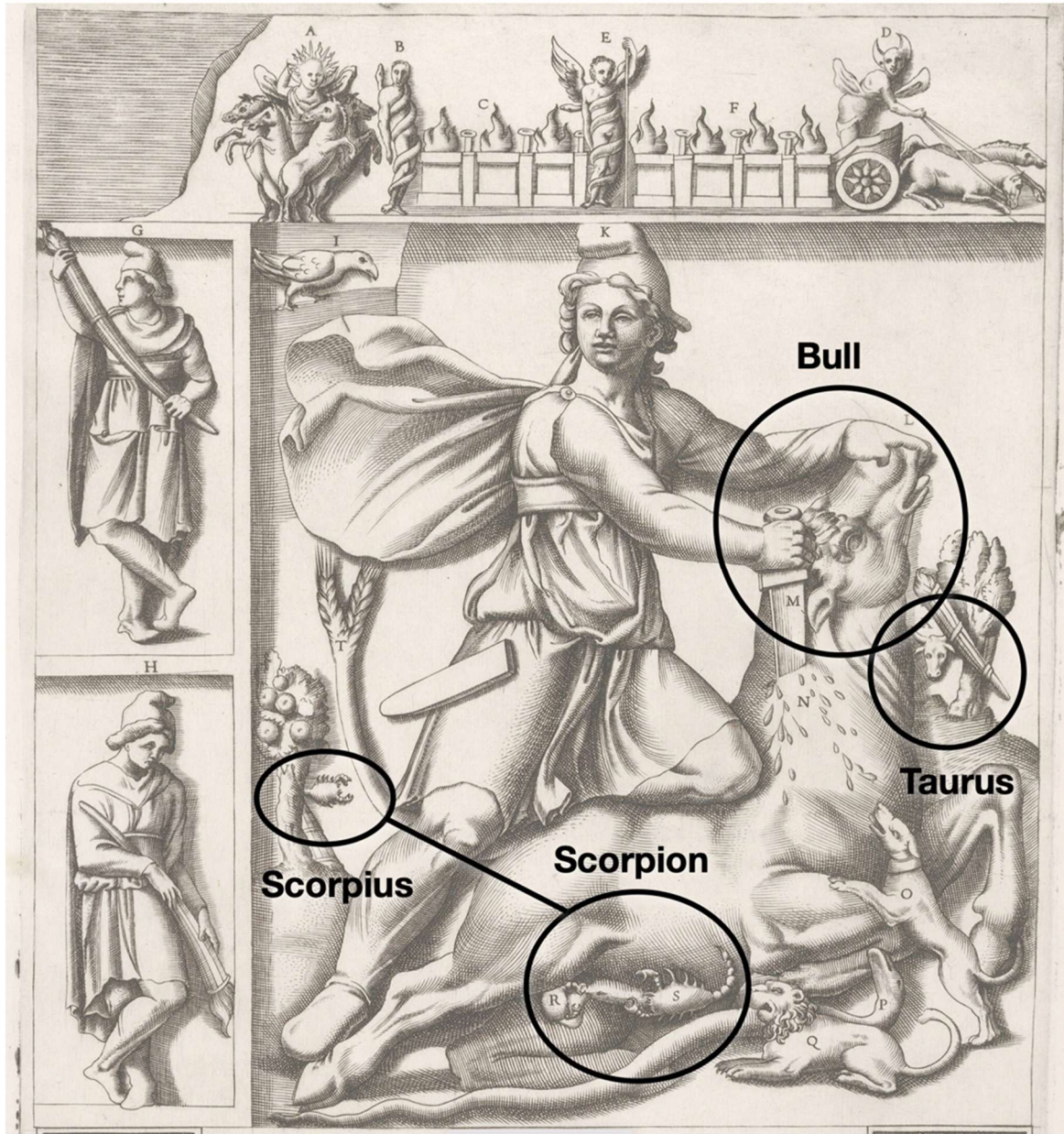


Figure 3.3. Renaissance engraving after an ancient marble relief of the tauroctony of Ottavio Zeno, Rome, now lost. CIMRM 335. 1564. Accession Number: 2012.136.852.(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Image credit: public domain via the Met. The constellations of Taurus and Scorpion have been labelled by the author.

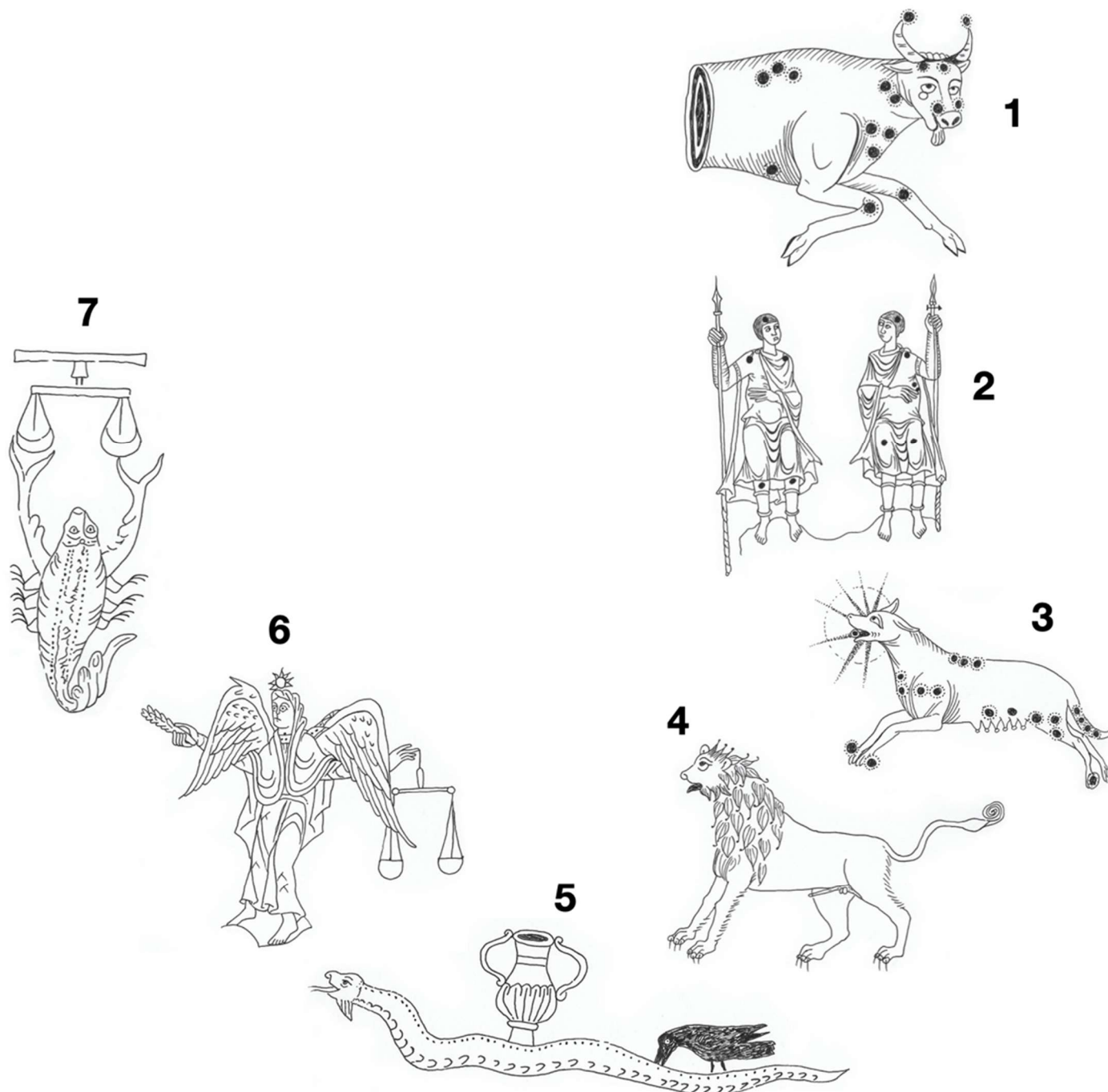


Figure 3.4. Celestial illustrations from three editions of *De signis caeli*, attributed to Saint Bede (known as pseudo-Bede), positioned to reflect the relative positions of the constellations in the night sky.

1 - Taurus: The front portion of a bull. From Germany. Twelfth century. MS 685. (Klosterneuburg Stiftskirche, Austria).

2 - Gemini: The Gemini twins as two soldiers with spears. Tenth or eleventh century. MS 488. (Bibliothèque municipale, Dijon).

3 - Canis Major: From Germany. Twelfth century. MS 685. (Klosterneuburg Stiftskirche, Austria).

4 - Leo: From Limoges. Tenth or eleventh century. Latin 5239. (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris).

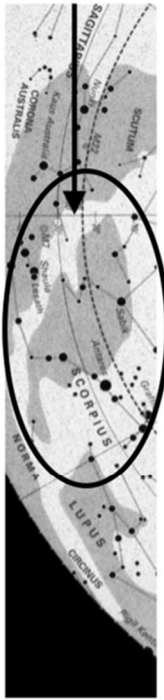
5 - Hydra, Crater and Corvus: From Limoges. Tenth or eleventh century. Latin 5239. (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris).

6 - Virgo: Virgo is holding the star Spica (as an ear of corn) in her right hand and the scales of Libra in her left hand. From Limoges. Tenth or eleventh century. Latin 5239. (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris).

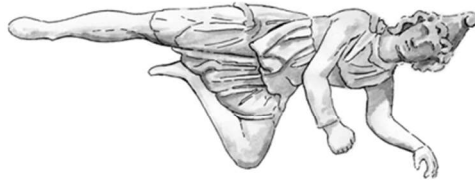
7 - Scorpius: Scorpius with its claws near Libra, zodiac rota. Tenth or eleventh century. MS 488. (Bibliothèque municipale, Dijon).

Image credit: drawings by the author, after the originals.

Scorpius Bifurcated section of Milky Way Taurus



Silhouette of Milky Way



Mithras A



Mithras B

Figure 3.5. Celestial map of the northern hemisphere, split into three sections: Scorpius; the bifurcated section of the Milky Way; and Taurus. The silhouette of the Milky Way from the middle section is repeated below and compared with two silhouettes of Mithras:

Mithras A: Double-sided Mithraic relief, from Nida, Hedderndheim, Germany. Wiesbaden). CIMRM 1083. Rotated. (Mithras' knife and cloak removed).

Mithras B: Double-sided Mithraic relief, from Fiano Romano, Italy. Second to third century. Marble. MA3441 07-509298. CIMRM 641. (Louvre, Paris). Rotated (Mithras' knife and cloak removed).

Image credit: Planisphere reproduced with permission of Philip's, a division of Octopus Publishing Group Ltd. Images of Mithras by the author, after the originals.

Chapter 4



Figure 4.1. Christian sarcophagus from Ostia showing the corresponding figures of the Fisher and Orpheus. This detail shows Orpheus only. Illustration in Robert Eisler, *Orpheus-The Fisher* *Comparative Studies in Orphic and Early Christian Cult Symbolism* (London: J.M. Watkins, 1921), plate 34. Image credit: drawing by the author, after the original illustration.



Figure 4.2. Mithras sacrificing the bull interpreted as Samson slaying the lion. Top: Samson and the lion, eleventh century, Capital in the nave of Anzy-le-Duc, Burgundy, France. Bottom: Samson defeats the lion, c.1360, manuscript illumination from *Speculum humanae salvationis*, MS 2505, f. 55r (Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt, ULB Darmstadt). Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

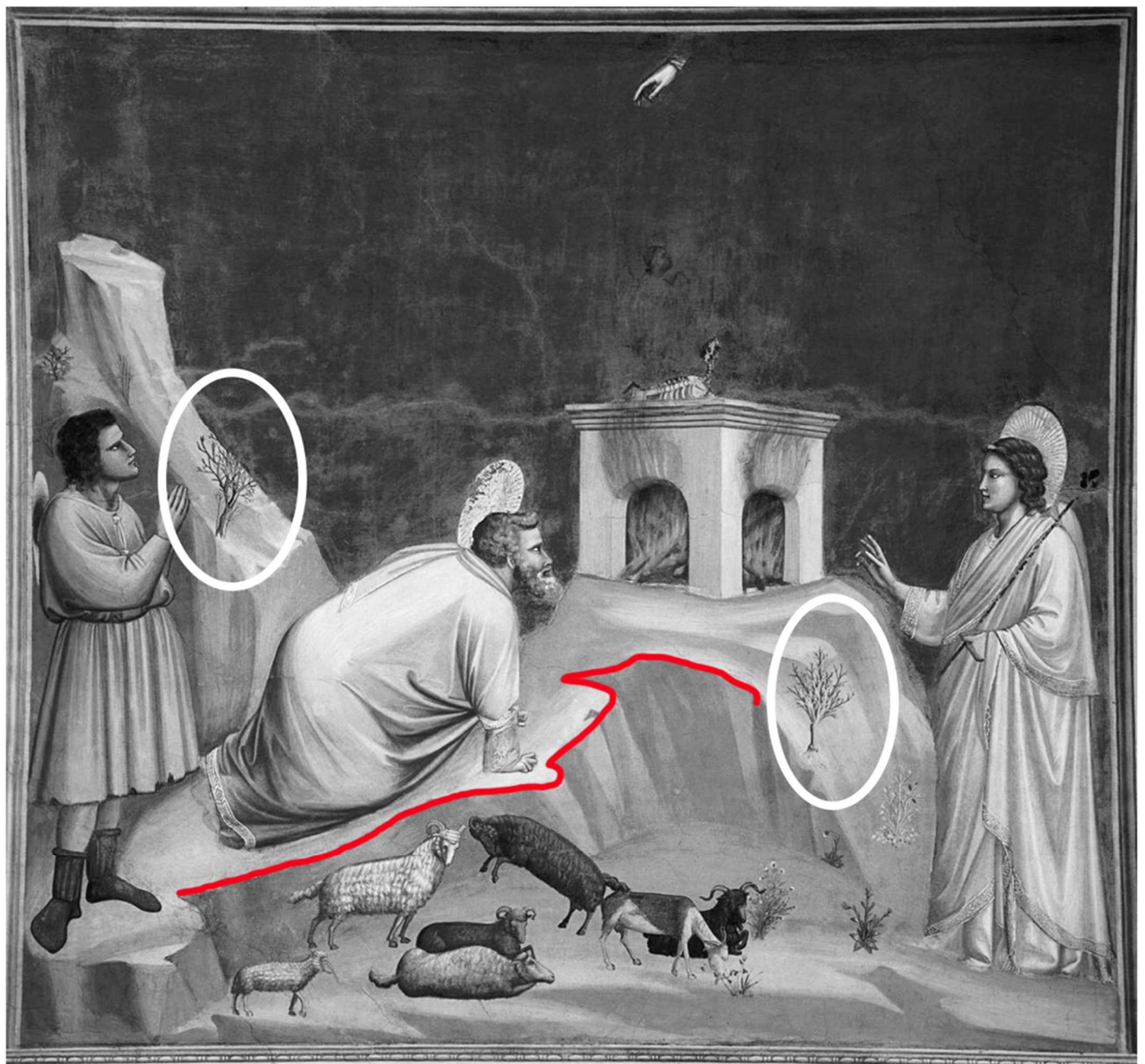


Figure 4.3. *Sacrifice of Joachim*, by Giotto di Bondone. c.1304-06. Fresco, 200 by 185 cm. (Arena Chapel, Padua). The thick, red outline directly below Joachim highlights the shape of Mithras' bull in the cut-away rock. The white ovals highlight the raised and lowered twig-like plants in front of the two angels, substitutes for Mithras' two torch-bearers. Image credit: courtesy of Web Gallery of Art, <https://www.wga.hu>. Red line and white ovals added by the author.



Figure 4.4. Virgil on the back of Geryon. Illustration of *Inferno* 17 (Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*), by Sandro Botticelli. c.1485. Drawing on white vellum. (Staatliche Museen, Berlin). Detail, rotated. Image credit: drawing by the author, after the original illustration.



Figure 4.5. The infant Christ posed as Mithras sacrificing the bull. Left: *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, by Leonardo da Vinci, c.1503, oil on wood, (Louvre, Paris). Right: *Virgin and Child*, by 'Master of Female Half-Length', oil on panel (private collection). Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

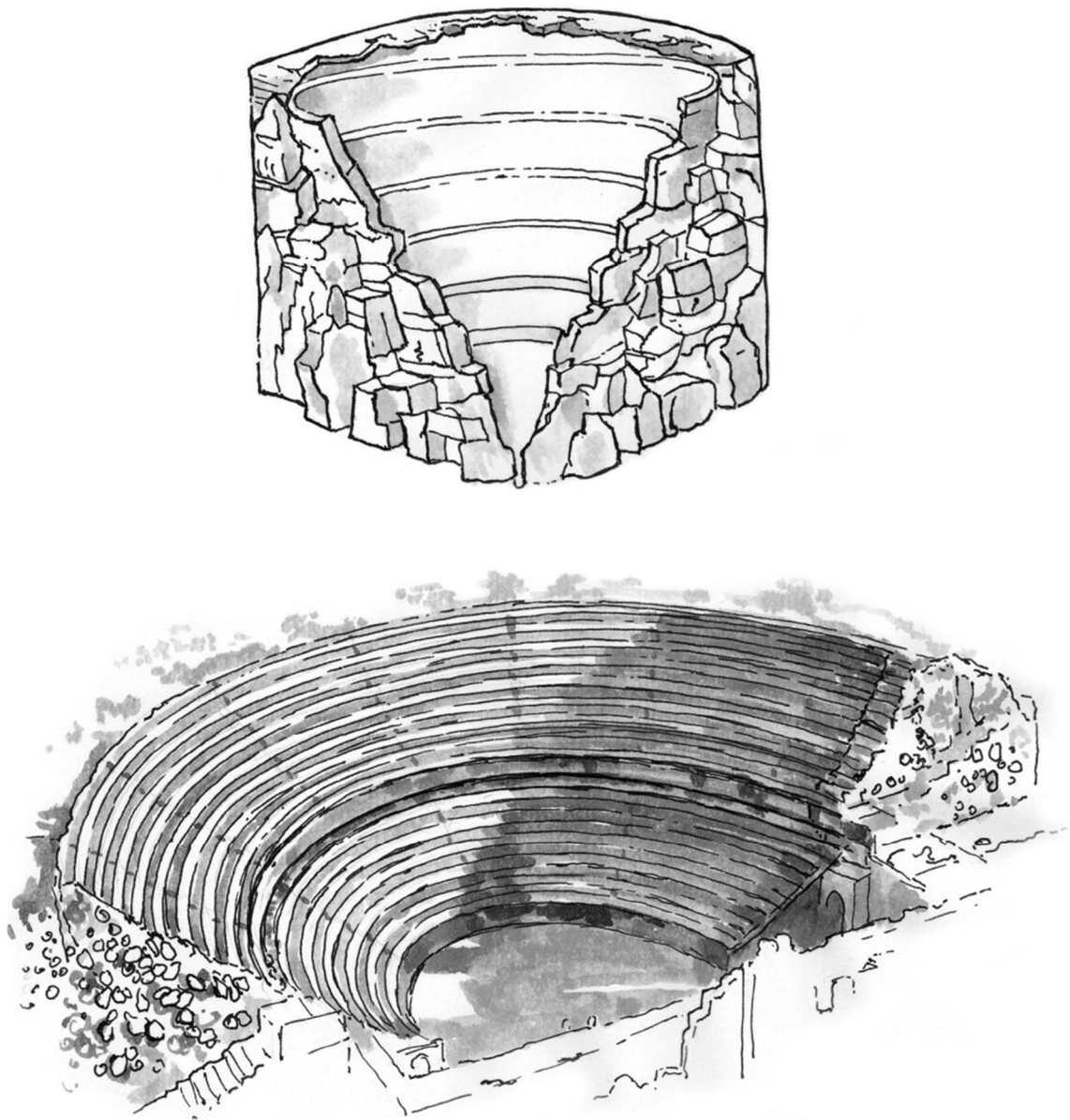


Figure 4.6. Dante's *Inferno* as a Roman amphitheatre with tiered seating. Top: The circles of Hell, published in *Commedia di Dante insieme con uno dialogo circa el sito, forma et misure dello Inferno*, (Florence: Filippo Giunta, 1506). LA(22), leaves avi v–bi r (Cambridge University Library). Bottom: view of a Roman amphitheatre from Jerash, Jordan. Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

Chapter 5



Figure 5.1. *The Last Judgment*, attributed to Francesco Rosselli. c.1470-85. Engraving, 35.5 by 49.3 cm. Inv. 1845,0825.642. (The British Museum, London). Image credit: public domain via The British Museum.



Figure 5.2. Michelangelo's skeletal self-portrait, bottom left corner of the *Last Judgment*. (Sistine Chapel, Vatican). Image credit: Vatican Museums.



Figure 5.3. *The Ambassadors*, by Hans Holbein the Younger. 1533. Oil on oak, 207 by 209.5 cm. Inv. NG1314. (The National Gallery, London). Image source: public domain via Wikipedia.

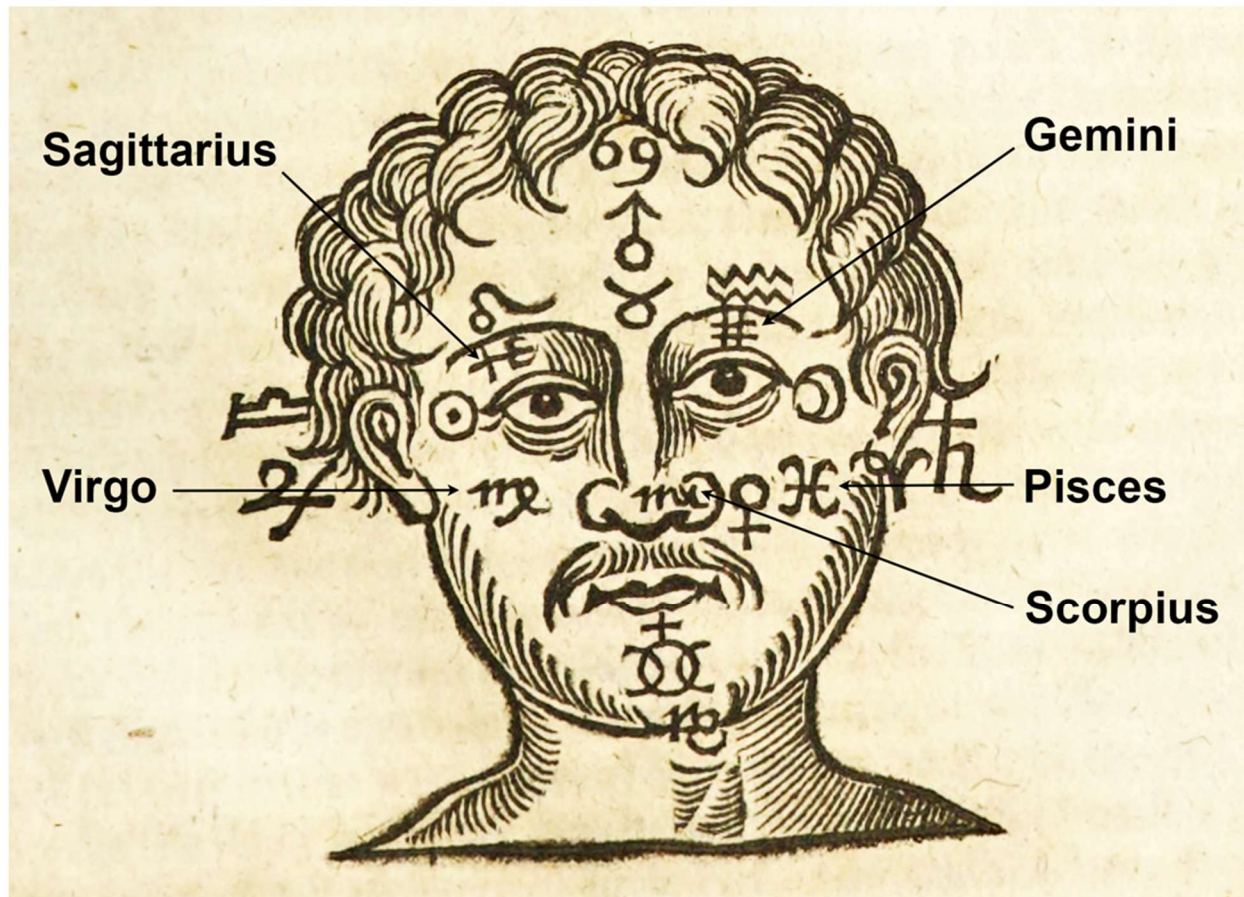


Figure 5.4. Diagram charting the link between the features of the face and the zodiacal constellations and planets. Illustration in Richard Saunders, *Physiognomie and Chiromancie, Metoposcopia, the Symmetrical Proportions and Signal Moles of the Body* (London: Nathaniel Brooke, 1653), 145. Image source: Seventeenth-century book by Richard Saunders, with text labels added by the author.



Figure 5.5. Shared allusion to a couple, their heads together and their arms held out. Top: *Last Judgment*, by Michelangelo, detail from the top right-hand corner of the fresco (Sistine Chapel, Vatican). Bottom: detail from the Vienna Manuscript showing the constellation of Gemini. Image rotated and reversed. Image source: sketches by the author, after the originals.



Figure 5.6. Two kneeling figures, both holding symbols of their martyrdom. Left: detail from Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* showing St. Sebastian kneeling at the foot of the Cross with his arrows (Sistine Chapel, Vatican). Right: *Saint Lucy*, by Francesco del Cossa, c.1473-7, tempera on poplar panel (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.). Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.



Figure 5.7. Top half of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (Sistine Chapel, Vatican). The optic nerves are represented by two objects of Christ's Passion placed at an angle, namely the Cross and the pillar from the Flagellation of Christ. Two trails of blue track down from the area of the tear ducts and continue down over the cheeks. Image credit: Vatican Museums, with white lines added by the author.

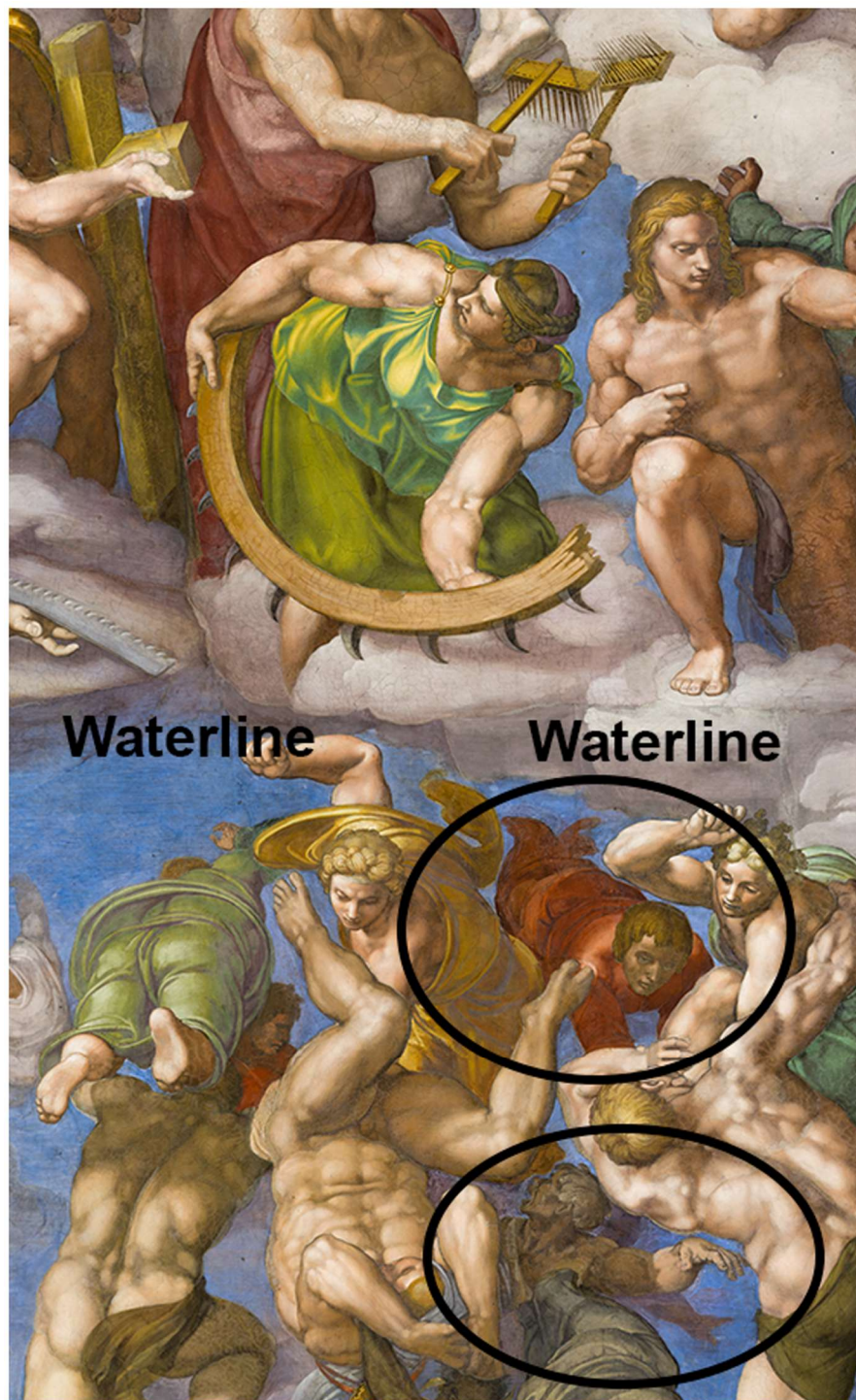


Figure 5.8. *Last Judgment*, by Michelangelo. (Sistine Chapel, Vatican). Directly below St. Catherine and her wheel of torture is the waterline that tracks the edges of the clouds. Below this waterline are two figures that appear to have fins (through a clever configuration of material and limbs). Behind St. Catherine, St. Blaise is holding two carding combs. Image credit: Vatican Museums, with the ovals and text added by the author.



Figure 5.9. Two women standing upright, their forefinger raised towards their face. Left: detail depicting the Virgin Mary from around the centre of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Right: detail showing Virgo from the Vienna Manuscript, rotated. Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.



Figure 5.10. Two men, each holding flayed skin in their left hand. Left: St. Bartholomew from Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* holding his own flayed skin (Sistine Chapel, Vatican). Right: Hercules holding the pelt of the Nemean Lion, from Albrecht Dürer's celestial map of 1515 (The Metropolitan Museum Art, New York). Image credit: sketches by the author, after the originals.

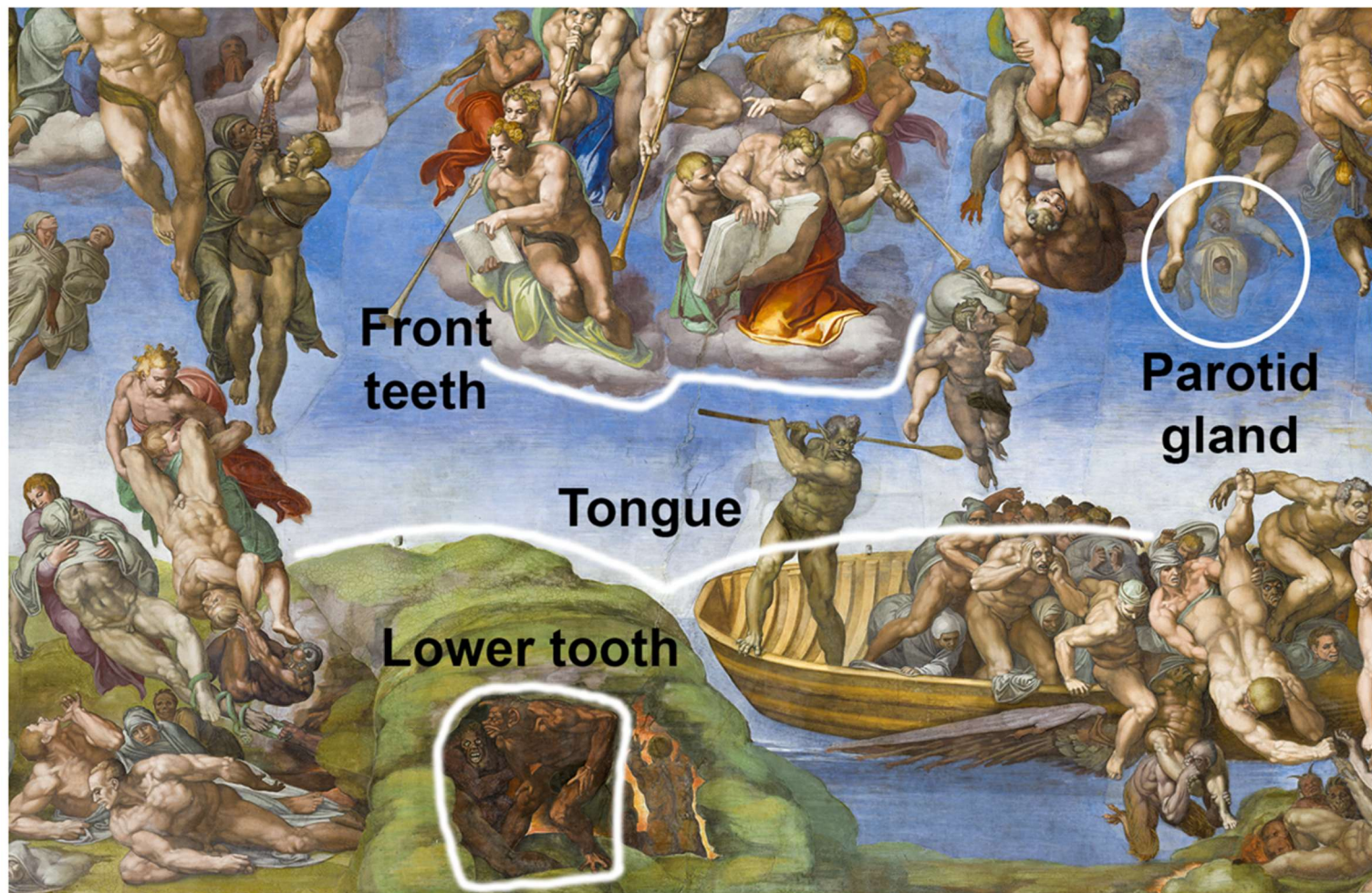


Figure 5.11. The lower portion of the *Last Judgment*, by Michelangelo. (Sistine Chapel, Vatican). The position of the two top front teeth and one front tooth at the bottom have been marked in white. Between these falls the double curve of the tongue at the back of the throat. Marked in the circle is a hooded figure that recalls the parotid gland opening, close to the back teeth. Image credit: Vatican Museums, with white lines and text added by the author.



Figure 5.12. The final indented image, reconstructed here by superimposing Michelangelo's skeletal self-portrait from the bottom left-hand corner of the *Last Judgment* over the entire altar wall of the Sistine Chapel. The dark, blank areas of the skull - in the eyes, nose and mouth - were made transparent so that the forms of the *Last Judgment* can be seen through these natural apertures. Image credit: Vatican Museums. The combined image was created digitally by the author.