

Of Urth's Stars, and the use of Magnetic Compasses

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 25 Mar 1999

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Mitchell A. Bailey — 25 Mar 1999, 14:26

"...the constellation called The Eight, which curiously has only three stars. The constellation he's talking about is our Octans, meaning octant--an eighth of a circle--which is triangular-shaped. Hence someone in the future, in compiling his or her atlas of the sky, has mistranslated Octans as The Eight."

Thanks, Robert, I had wondered about that, but, Octans being a minor constellation, I missed it in a casual search. I once speculated that some missing components of "the eight" might have burnt out, implying a time frame of hundreds of millions of years, or moved drastically out of place, over a time frame of millions of years. Since stars within the galaxy orbit the galaxy or otherwise are in motion, constellations change over the course of tens or hundreds of thousands of millenia. That a constellation of our time is recognizable to Severian would be an indication that either BNS is not set millions of years in the future, but a few tens of millenia at most, or (shudder) Wolfe goofed his astronomy by neglecting the time dimension.

Are there any more mentions of constellations known to us, other than that controversial reference to "The Swan" among Thecla's memories discussed before? Taurus is implied in that same passage, but the creature described resembles the Minotaur more so than a bull, in my opinion.

Here's a homework question for fellow Urthlings: does anyone recall any mentions or references being made anywhere in B/UNS to the use of magnetic compasses on Urth? It could be as simple as one of Sev's typical throwaway simile lines e.g. "- as a mariner uses a lodestone to steer his pelagic argosy-" or some such. Alternatively, any references to what substitutes navigators might use would be a clue.

Any geologists out there may have figured out what I'm driving at, but otherwise if and when some passage of that kind is found, I'll explain.