

# How Did Ancient Humans Interpret Eclipses?

For the vast majority of history, people freaked out about eclipses.

Ancient peoples in particular often could not rationally explain eclipses. Unsurprisingly, it was not uncommon to say the eerie, celestial phenomena foretold doom: floods, pestilence and famine.

The earliest record of an eclipse we have comes from clay tablets unearthed from the ancient Sumerian city of Ur. The tablets record a lunar eclipse that occurred 2094 B.C. on April 4, 2094 B.C. (based on our current calendar) and, predictably, the news was not promising:

*“In the month Simanu an eclipse occurs on day 14, the Moon-god in his eclipse is obscured on the east side above and clears on the west side below, the north wind blows, [the eclipse] commences in the first watch of the night and it touches the middle watch... The king of Ur will be wronged by his son, the Sun-god will catch him and he will die at the death of his father...”*

The king in question, whose murder is foretold in the tablets, was [King Shulgi](#), who had recently claimed his throne. Fortunately for Shulgi, the prophesy did not come to pass; his reign extended for half a century.

Writing nearly 1,500 years later, the Greek poet Archilochus similarly freaked out:

*“Nothing can be surprising any more or impossible or miraculous, now that Zeus, father of the Olympians has made night out of noonday, hiding the bright sunlight, and . . .*

*fear has come upon mankind. After this, men can believe anything, expect anything. Don't any of you be surprised in future if land beasts change places with dolphins and go to live in their salty pastures, and get to like the sounding waves of the sea more than the land, while the dolphins prefer the mountains."*

Few humans today pay much attention to solar or lunar eclipses, perhaps because they no longer seem mysterious to us. But this needn't be the case. Though we have gained much when it comes to rationally explaining nature, we shouldn't lose our sense of wonder about it.