The Mythology of the Constellations
• Most ancient cultures saw pictures in the stars of the night sky. By far, though, we owe the greatest debt to the mythology of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

• The earliest references to the mythological significance of the Greek constellations may be found as early as the 7th century B.C.

• Originally, the constellations were known simply as the objects or animals which they represented--the Lyre, for instance, or the Ram.

• By the 5th century B.C., however, most of the constellations had come to be associated with myths
At this stage, the fusion between astronomy and mythology is so complete that no further distinction is made between them"--the stars were no longer merely identified with certain gods or heroes, but actually were perceived as divine.

Roman Ptolemy of Alexandria, grouped 1022 stars into 48 constellations during the 2nd century A.D. It forms the basis for the modern list of 88 constellations officially designated by the International Astronomical Union.

The influence of both the Greek and Roman cultures may be plainly seen; the myths behind the constellations date back to ancient Greece, but we use their Latin names.
The Influence of Mythology

• Mythology, of course, influenced the naming of many objects in the night sky, not just the constellations.

• The planets all bear names from Roman mythology which reflect their characteristics
Cepheus, King of Ethiopia

- Cepheus, king of Ethiopia, was married to the beautiful Cassiopeia, and together they had a daughter, Andromeda.

- Voyaged as an Argonaut with Jason on the quest for the Golden Fleece.

- All three members of the family may be found in the northern sky; Cepheus and Cassiopeia are quite close to the northern celestial pole.
• Cassiopeia was the beautiful wife of King Cepheus of Ethiopia, and the mother of Andromeda.

• The queen bragged on her and her daughter’s beauty. The God of the Sea, Neptune, sent a sea monster to destroy the kingdom in response. The king and queen were ordered to sacrifice their only daughter to appease Neptune's wrath.

• Although Cassiopeia was placed in the heavens by Neptune, it was to humiliate her for all eternity.

• She is seated on her throne, with her head pointing towards the North Star Polaris. In this position, she spends half of every night upside-down. This is considered the ultimate sign of disrespect.
Princess Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia.

She was known for being the sacrifice in response to her mother’s bragging on their beauty.

Andromeda is represented in the sky as the figure of a woman with her arms outstretched and chained at the wrists.
Perseus

- Known for killing Medusa & saving Andromeda.
- When the hero died, Perseus was immortalized as a constellation.
- He may be found near Andromeda and her parents, Cepheus and Cassiopeia, in the northern sky.
- The hero is depicted with a sword in one hand and the head of Medusa in the other.

The eye of Medusa is the star Algol, which means "Demon Star" in Arabic, is an eclipsing binary star—it is normally about as bright as Polaris (second magnitude), but every two and a half days it becomes dimmer for roughly eight hours as the dimmer star of the pair passes between the brighter and the earth.
Pegasus

- Sprang from the blood of Medusa after Perseus cut off her head.
Cetus, the Whale

• Cetus represents the sea monster sent to Ethiopia as punishment for the boasting of Queen Cassiopeia to kill Andromeda, but is killed by the hero, Perseus.

• Cetus is represented as a whale. It is possible that the ancients perceived whales as monstrous creatures.

• The constellation is appropriately a large one, and is relegated to the southern sky--far from Andromeda, Cepheus, Cassiopeia, and Perseus.
Cygnus, the Swann

- Some myths state the swan was once the pet of Cassiopeia.

- Cygnus, also called the Northern Cross because of its shape, is easily found in the summer sky. Its brightest star is Deneb, is part of the Summer Triangle with Vega and Altair. Cygnus is located next to Cepheus and Lyra.

- Cygnus was once a man & close friend of Phaethon. Phaethon died in the river after attempting to drive the chariot of the sun, and Cygnus was overcome with grief that Jupiter (Zeus) struck down his friend. As he mourned, his voice became thin and shrill, and white feathers hid his hair. His neck grew long, stretching out from his breast, his fingers reddened and a membrane joined them together. Wings clothed his sides, and a blunt beak fastened on his mouth. Cygnus became a new kind of bird: but he put no trust in the skies, or in Jupiter, for he remembered how that god had unjustly hurled his flaming bolt. Instead, Cygnus made for marshes and broad lakes, and in his hatred of flames chose to inhabit the rivers.
Eridanus, the River

• Eridanus is a river in northern Italy, now known as the River Po.

• Made famous in connection with the death of Phaethon. Phaethon was the son of the sun god who wanted to drive his father’s chariot across the sky. But because of his inability to control the chariot, he was struck down and killed by Zeus.

• Eridanus is the longest constellation in the sky, meandering from Orion to Cetus.
**lyra, the lyre**

- Lyra represents the lyre played by Orpheus, musician of the Argonauts & son of the God, Apollo.
- Apollo gave his son the lyre as a gift, and Orpheus played it so well that even the wild beasts, the rocks, and the trees were charmed by his music.

- Orpheus fell deeply in love with the nymph, Eurydice, and the two were married. One day Eurydice was wandering in the fields with her friends when a shepherd named Aristaeus saw her and was struck by her beauty. He pursued her. As she fled, she was bitten by a snake in the grass and died. Orpheus was devastated. He went to seek out his wife in the underworld. The king and queen of the underworld were charmed by his music and granted him permission to take Eurydice back to the land of the living with him: on condition that he must not look back until he had emerged from the Underworld.
Lyra, the Lyre

- Anxious and eager to see her, the lover looked behind him, and straightaway Eurydice slipped back into the depths.

- Orpheus was so heartbroken from having lost his love not once, but twice. Now a single man, he still would not give other women the time of day. The women were infuriated and, while maddened, they hurled rocks at him. The rocks, tamed by the sound of Orpheus's lyre, fell harmlessly at his feet, but the shrieks of the infuriated women soon drowned out the music.

- The women dismembered Orpheus, throwing his lyre and his head into the river. The Muses gathered up his limbs and buried them, and Orpheus went to the underworld to spend eternity with his beloved, Eurydice. Jupiter himself cast the lyre into the sky.

- Lyra is easily picked out in the sky because it contains Vega, at zero magnitude the second brightest star visible from the northern hemisphere.
Hercules was perhaps the greatest hero in all mythology. After his step-mother, Juno (Hera), succeeded in driving him mad, and he killed his wife and his children. As atonement, he serves the King Eurystheus, performing his famous twelve labors to seek forgiveness for his sin.

- The constellation Hercules, found next to Lyra shows the hero wearing the skin of the Nemean Lion while holding his characteristic club. He also rests his foot atop the head of Draco, the dragon.
- The constellation is huge—the fifth-largest in the sky.
Sagittarius represents the centaur, Chiron from Hercules’s Wild Boar labor. Chiron, however, was accidentally shot and wounded by Hercules by the arrow, which had been dipped in the poison of the Hydra.

- Also associated with the myth of Prometheus. The gods had punished Prometheus for giving fire to man by chaining him to a rock. Each day an eagle would devour his liver, and each night it would grow back. Jupiter (Zeus), however, had at the request of Hercules agreed to release Prometheus if a suitable substitute could be found. In agony from the arrow shot by Hercules,, Chiron instead offered himself as a substitute for Prometheus. Chiron gave up his immortality and took Prometheus’s place; in recognition of his goodness, Jupiter (Zeus) placed him in the stars.

- From the northern hemisphere, Sagittarius may be seen only in the summer, lying low in the south. The Milky Way runs through Sagittarius.
Represents the Nemean Lion, killed by Hercules in his first labor. According to myth, the Nemean lion had an impenetrable skin. Hercules wrestled the lion and strangling it to death. He then removed one of its claws, and used it to skin the animal.

- Leo is easy to locate; following the pointer stars of the Big Dipper south approximates the location of the bright blue-white star Regulus in Leo's chest.
Draco, the Dragon

- The Draco represents the dragon who guarded the golden apples in the one of the labors of Hercules.

- Twisting past Cepheus and between Ursa Major and Ursa Minor in the north, with its head beneath the foot of Hercules.
This constellation represents the Hydra, slain by Hercules as his second labor. The Hydra was a multi-headed monster—according to some it had a hundred heads, others said fifty but the most common opinion, however, seems to be that it had nine. Whenever one of its heads was chopped off, two would grow in its place.

Hydra is a long and wandering constellation, stretching almost from Canis Minor to Libra. It lies south of Cancer, Leo, and Virgo, and is best seen in the northern hemisphere during the months of February through May.
Cancer, the Crab

- Cancer was the crab sent to harass Hercules while he was on his second labor. As he battled Hydra, the ever-jealous Juno (Hera) sent Cancer to nip at the hero's heels. The crab was eventually crushed beneath Hercules's feet, but Juno placed it in the heavens as a reward for its faithful service.

- Cancer may be found between the constellations of Leo and Gemini.
Corona Borealis, The Northern Crown

- This constellation is generally associated myth of Theseus & the Minotaur and Princess Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos of Crete.

- Immediately after killing the Minotaur, he returned with Princess Ariadne and made her his wife. Soon afterwards, Theseus set sail for adventures.

- Ariadne, left all alone, when the God Bacchus came her aid. He took the crown from her forehead, and set it as a constellation in the sky, to bring her eternal glory. Up through the thin air it soared and, as it flew, its jewels were changed into shining fires. They settled in position, still keeping the appearance of a crown, midway between the kneeling Hercules and Ophiucus, who grasps the snake.
Orion, The Hunter

- Orion is one of the most well-known constellations, visible in the southern sky during northern hemisphere winters.

- He is generally shown as a hunter attacking a bull with an upraised club, and is easily recognizable by his bright belt of three stars. (Orion’s Belt) In addition, his shoulder is marked by the red star ("armpit of the central one" in Arabic), and his left leg is marked by the blue-white star.

- According to the versions of the myth which have him killed by Scorpius (scorpio), the two were placed on the opposite sides of the sky from each other so that they are never visible at the same time.
Scorpio

- The scorpion is generally believed to be responsible for the death of the great hunter, Orion.

- In some myths, the scorpion stung Orion in response to his boast that he could defeat any beast; according to others, it was sent by Apollo, who was concerned for his sister Diana's continued chastity.

- Placed in the opposite side of the sky from Orion so as to avoid any further conflict. It is to the southeast of Libra, and is marked by the bright red star, Antares.
Aquarius, the Water Carrier

• The water carrier represented Aquarius is Ganymede, a beautiful young prince in Troy. While tending his father's flocks on Mount Ida, Ganymede was spotted by Jupiter (Zeus). He became enamored by the boy and flew down to the mountain in the form of a large bird, whisking Ganymede away to the heavens. Ever since, the boy has served as cupbearer to the gods.

• Aquarius is a summer constellation in the northern hemisphere, found near Pisces and Cetus.
Capricorn, the Sea Goat

- The God Bacchus was feasting on the banks of the Nile at the time, and jumped into the river. The part of him that was below water was transformed into a fish, while his upper body became that of a goat.

- It may be seen between Aquarius and Sagittarius low on the southern horizon.

- One day he saw that Typhoeus, an earthborn giant, was attempting to tear Jupiter into pieces; he blew a shrill note on his pipes, and Typhoeus fled. Jupiter then placed the new shape of Bacchus in the heavens out of thanks for the rescue.
Gemini, the Twins

- The twin brothers Castor and Pollux had the same mother but different fathers: in one night, she was made pregnant both by Jupiter (Zeus) in the form of a swan and by her husband. Pollux, as the son of the god, was immortal while his brother was a mortal. Both brothers voyaged in search of the Golden Fleece as Argonauts, and then fought in the Trojan War.

- Pollux was overcome with sorrow when his mortal brother died, and begged Jupiter to allow him to share his immortality. Jupiter, acknowledging the heroism of both brothers, consented and reunited the pair in the heavens.

- Castor and Pollux were unique among those placed in the sky as they are not represented merely as a constellation but as actual stars which mark the twin's heads in the constellation. They may be found between Cancer and Taurus.
**Libra, The Scales**

- It represents the balance or scales
- One of the oldest constellations.
- Associated with **Virgo**, a Goddess of Justice who had scales as the emblem of her office.
- Libra is represented in the heavens next to the hand of Virgo.
Virgo, the Virgin

- According to the ancient poets, the virgin is known as Astraea. She lived on the earth during the Golden Age of Man.

- Virgo is the second largest constellation

- Highest in the northern hemisphere during May and June.

- The brightest star in Virgo is Spica.
Pisces, The Fish

• The horrible earthborn giant Typhoeus suddenly appeared one day, startling all the gods into taking on different forms to flee. Jupiter, for instance, transformed himself into a ram; Mercury became an ibis; Apollo took on the shape of a crow; Diana hid herself as a cat; and Bacchus disguised himself as a goat. Venus and her son Cupid were bathing on the banks of the Euphrates River that day, and took on the shapes of a pair of fish to escape danger. Minerva later immortalized the event by placing the figures of two fish amongst the stars.

• Pisces represents two fish, tied together with a cord. It lies near Pegasus and Aquarius.
Taurus, the Bull

• Taurus represents the white bull-form taken on by Jupiter (Zeus) when he became enamored of Europa, Princess of Phoenicia. Princess Europa was impressed by the beauty and gentleness of the bull, and the two played together on the beach. Eventually, she climbed onto the bull's back, and he swam out to sea with her. He took her to Crete and revealed his true self.

• The constellation Taurus consists of only the head and shoulders of the snowy white bull.
Aries, the Ram

- Known from myth of Jason & the Argonauts.
- Ram with the Golden Fleece
- Aries is still regarded as the first constellation in the zodiac.
Ursa Major, The Great Bear

- The wood-nymph Callisto was a maiden in the wild region Arcadia. She was a huntress. Jupiter (Zeus) caught sight of her and immediately desired her. He took on the shape of the goddess Diana and spoke to Callisto, who was delighted to see the form of her mistress. She began to tell him of her hunting exploits, and he responded by raping her. Callisto bore a son to Jupiter, Arcas, infuriating Juno (wife of Jupiter). Out of jealousy, she transformed the girl into a bear.

- The king of gods then placed both mother and son into the heavens as neighboring constellations.
- The constellation is one of our most familiar. It includes the Big Dipper, perhaps the most-recognized feature of a constellation in the heavens.
Ursa Minor – Lesser Bear

• When Arcas was fifteen, he was out hunting in the forest when he came across a bear. The bear behaved quite strangely, looking him in the eyes. He of course could not recognize his mother in her strange shape, and was preparing to shoot her when Jupiter prevented him. Arcas was transformed into a bear like his mother, and the two were taken up into the sky.

• It is for this reason that Ursa Major and Ursa Minor are both circumpolar constellations, never dipping beneath the horizon when viewed from northern latitudes.

• Ursa Minor is better known as the Little Dipper.
• Polaris, the star marking the end of the dipper's handle, is located at the north celestial pole.