

Using Greek Mythology to Find the Constellations

To Help Find Your Way About the Night Sky

The following article is an edited and expanded version of a talk I gave at Macarthur Astronomical Society (of which I am a member) on 15th June 2009. I was encouraged by the feedback I received from the talk, so decided I would place it on this website. I hope that you may gain a few useful tips from it to help make your navigating about the night sky a bit easier.

Robert Bee - 26th July 2009.

INTRODUCTION:

We regularly enjoy hearing from expert speakers and article writers talking about the science side of astronomy. It's all great stuff, and let there be much more of it. It's the basis of good astronomy.

With this article, I thought I'd lighten the mood and depart from the astrophysics and cosmology (which I love). Instead, I want to discuss a novel method of finding your way around the night sky, sorting out those sometimes confusing star patterns we call 'the constellations'. This article is mostly aimed at those of you who don't enjoy the help of a Go-To telescope or similar. Some of us still like to use a bit of personal skill in navigating about the sky and gain that extra satisfaction in doing so.

To some of you this may be like being told how to suck eggs. However, I hope the majority will enjoy it and take something new away with you.

This is especially since I'll be using the stories of Greek mythology as a tool.

BY WAY OF EXPLANATION:

Now what I'm going to be writing about is not rocket science. I'm sure there are many other methods to memorise your way around the 88 constellations in the sky or at least the 60 or so we can see from our latitude of 35° South.

I just find the method I'm going to explain helps me. Having a story association with various parts of the sky works as a memory aid. It's a basic education tool. Ask any school teacher. Besides, it also makes the sky and its star patterns that little easier to sort out.

Hopefully, the point of this will make more sense when I've finished. If not, at least maybe you will have been entertained.

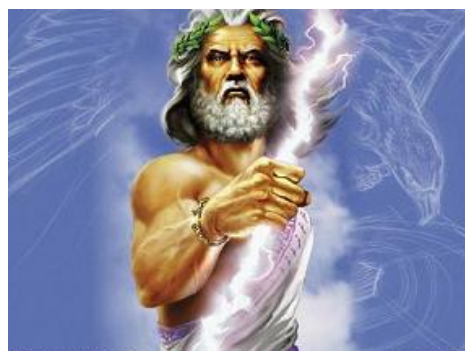
When I was a kid I lived at Punchbowl. (For readers who don't know, it's in outer western Sydney, NSW.) Like most people those days, we didn't have a car so I had to travel everywhere by shanks pony (that is, walk), bus or by train. I soon learned that Bankstown was one station that-a-way, while if I went the other way I'd go through Wiley Park, Lakemba, Belmore etc. Also, Greenacre, my Primary School, was the next suburb north etc. So it's natural now (decades later when I live a long way away) if I have to navigate to one of those suburbs that I can make the spatial association without even thinking about it because they form part of my life story.

Similarly for other Sydney suburb geography or on a larger scale NSW towns, based on my travels for work. I worked and lived in the Muswellbrook and Tamworth regions for a few years, so now I can spatially relate the various towns on the route from Sydney. North from Sydney, through Cessnock, up to Branxton, then north-west to Singleton, north to Muswellbrook and further north to Tamworth and so on. It's all part of a (life) story so easily remembered.

By learning some of the key Greek mythology stories and the associations they have with various constellations, I find it almost second nature to identify constellations or find them based on their relationship to other more visible constellations. One leads to another, as Lakemba leads to Belmore.

NOTE: This sadly doesn't work for those pesky southern constellations which missed out on the mythology stick. Identifying them is sheer hard work. We won't go there in this article. Maybe another time.

Of the 88 constellations, I believe 56 of them can be related in some way to Greek mythology. Some are 'stand alones' with no obvious story link to another constellation but most have links with at least one other constellation. But firstly I'll point out that initially I was puzzled as to why there is no constellation representing the King of the Olympic gods, the head-honcho, Zeus.



Then I realised that Zeus has his finger in the pie of almost every constellation story up there, so there was no need.

The best way to go from here is by some examples. I'll start with some simpler cases.

A simple one would be:

1) Leo-Cancer-Hydra

In March through to June, how can I most easily find the very faint Cancer, or the long and circuitous Hydra?

Hydra and Cancer are fairly faint constellations and not so easy to find. I suppose you could simply remember that Cancer is immediately to the east of Procyon in Canis Minor as well as Pollux and Castor in Gemini. But you have to remember that fact.

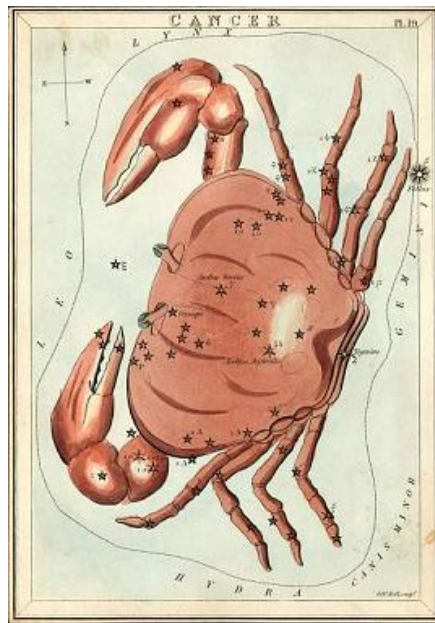
However, if you know the story of Hercules and his Labours (and a ripping yarn it is too, with Zeus having a key role in Hercules' birth by tricking Alceme into thinking he was her husband Amphitryon and seducing her), then you'll know that his first labour as penance for murdering his own wife and children (under the evil spell of Hera, Zeus's jealous wife) was to fight the Nemean Lion (seen as constellation Leo)...



... while his second labour was to fight the many headed Hydra of Lerna...

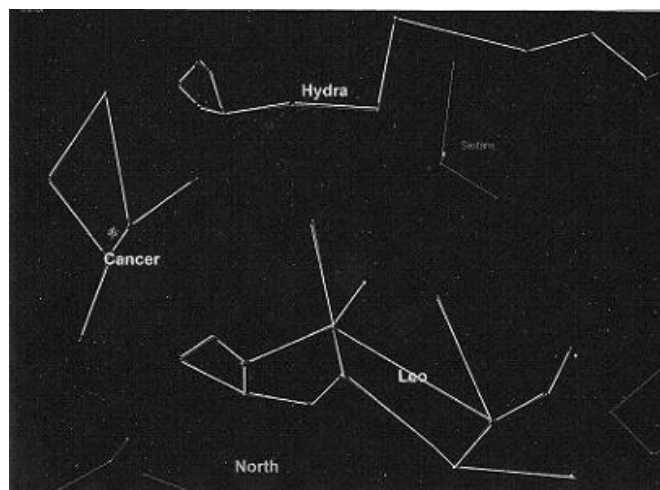


...during which he was bitten by the crab, Cancer (sent by Hera to distract Hercules and hopefully have him killed by the Hydra).



Now Zeus put Leo and Hydra up in the stars as a tribute to Hercules' heroic labours, while Hera put the plucky crab up there as a consolation (or constellation?) prize. So the story suggests that the three of them can be found close together. (Just to be contrary, Zeus put Hercules himself in another area of the sky away from those beasts. Maybe he decided he needed some space. But there's method and use in that anomaly as we'll find out later.)

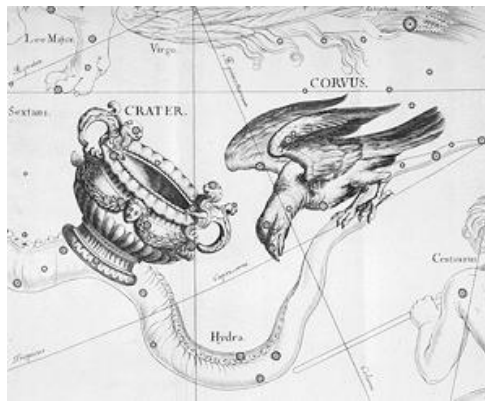
So you'll know that if you find Leo (which, with its Sickle, is easy to locate), that immediately to its west you'll find Cancer, while hanging above them both is Hydra. In fact, the head of Hydra (its most distinctive feature) is directly above the crab. Of course, you have to remember that from southern latitudes looking North, we see these constellations upside-down.



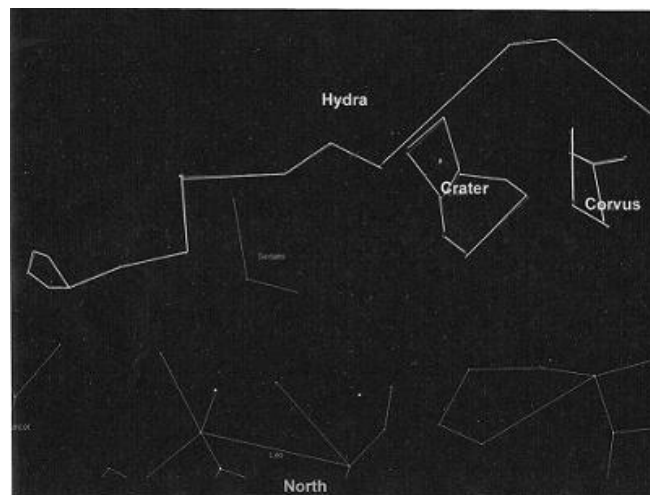
Another simple example:

2) Hydra- Corvus-Crater

You'll quickly discover that many constellations have multiple roles in different stories. An example here is Hydra which I just mentioned. Hydra features in another, unrelated, story about the god Apollo sending a crow (Corvus) with a cup (Crater) to get some water as an offering to Zeus. The crow stuffed himself on figs from a tree near the river, then brought back a water snake with the cup as an excuse for his delay. Apollo angrily threw the crow, the cup and snake into the sky in banishment.



So... we can expect to find those three together. If you follow Hydra eastward from its head (above Cancer), you find along its length first Crater, then Corvus, just like in the story. As Corvus is such a distinctive pattern, I use it as a starting point for identifying the less distinct Crater and Hydra.



And yet another simple example:

3) Centaurus-Lupus-Ara

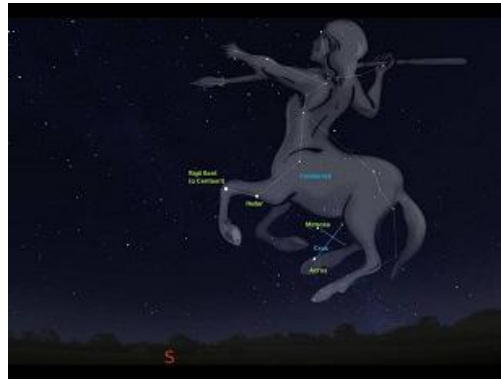
This one is a bit of a fudge as it's not strictly found in Greek mythology but most people, it seems, make this association and it's a handy story. Ara represents an altar at which the Olympic gods made sacrifices in preparation for battle with the Titans.



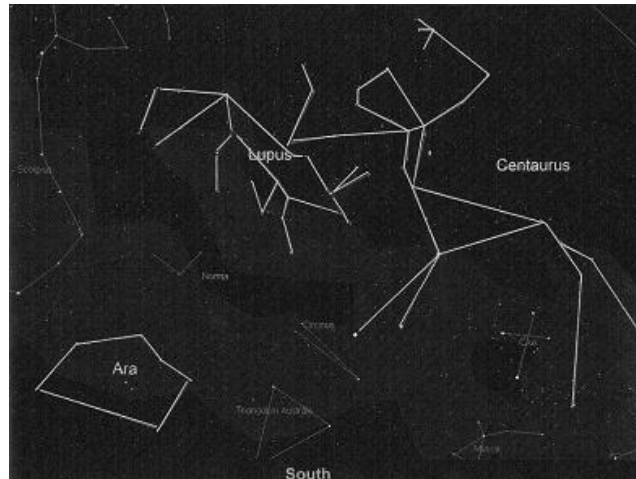
Lupus (the Wolf) is seen as skewered on a spear...



...held by Centaurus (the gentler centaur Chiron) who was bringing it to Ara for a burnt sacrifice.



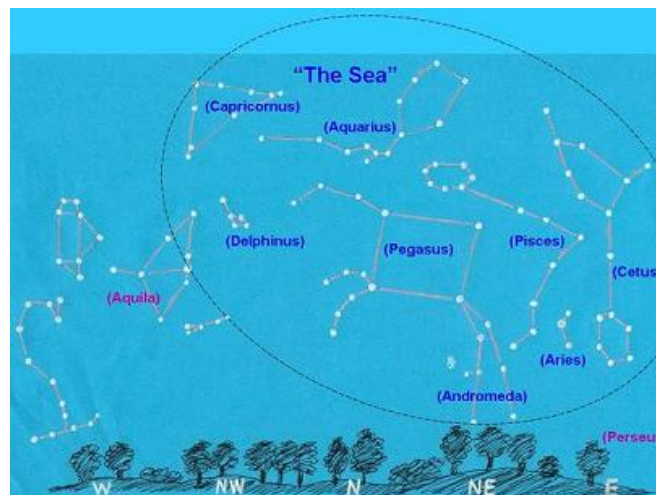
So... accepting this quasi-myth, we can associate them together in the sky. Where do I find Ara? Oh yes, it's under the wolf held by Centaurus. Where's Lupus? Oh yes, it's out front of the Centaur's head and spear.



4) The Sea

Let's take a slightly different approach for a moment. Not so much a story as a theme. This is a great memory jogger for October through to December:

The Greeks referred to a large part of the sky as 'The Sea'. This was basically because all (or at least most) of the constellations/stories in that part of the sky had to do with the sea, or at least water. That part of the sky looks like this:



It includes Aquarius, Capricornus, Delphinus, Pegasus, Andromeda, Cetus, Pisces and Aries. Piscis Austrinus could also be included but is not shown in this diagram (it is above Aquarius 'out of frame'.)

All of these participate in their own stories, some grouped with others (as we will hear about) but even for the 'stand alones', at least we can know the general area of the sky where to find them. If you acquaint yourself with their stories it helps to make an association with their place in 'The Sea'.

For example, we'll see later that Pegasus, Andromeda and Cetus are linked.

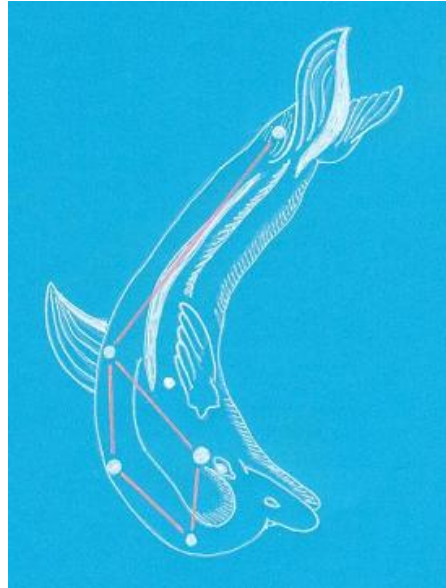
Aquarius is linked with Aquila (which is just to the west of The Sea) and Piscis Austrinus (south of the Sea) – we'll see that story later too.

Delphinus, Capricornus, Pisces and Aries have their own separate stories, though again, with a stretch, you can 'link' Capricornus and Pisces as they have another common theme.

Delphinus is the dolphin who was a good friend of Poseidon (or Neptune), God of the Sea. Poseidon had a bevy of concubines (such as the 50 Nereid nymphs) but wanted a proper wife to be his Queen. He set his sights on the beautiful daughter of Oceanus, Amphitrite, who was quite at home in the shallows and depths of the ocean. However, Amphitrite didn't share his love. In fact, she wanted nothing to do with Poseidon, so she fled, hiding in the depths and sometimes on shore.

Poseidon asked the friendly dolphin to help him find her and win her across and after much searching, Delphinus found Amphitrite. Dolphin then spoke so glowingly about Poseidon that he won her over. She agreed to marry Poseidon and returned with Dolphin. There was much rejoicing and, being such a talented creature, Dolphin performed the wedding ceremony himself.

In gratitude, Poseidon placed the little dolphin amongst the stars to be remembered forever. He can be found in-between Aquila and Pegasus.



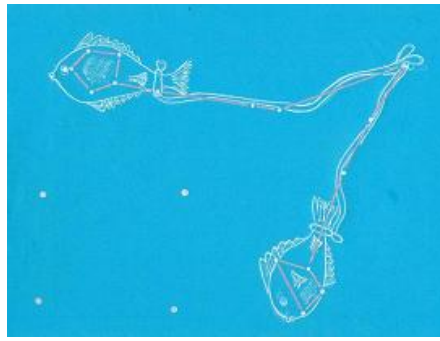
Capricornus and Pisces, while totally different tales, shared a common experience.

During the Mount Olympus gods' 10 year war with the Titans, they were set upon by the monstrous Typhon. He was as tall as a mountain, with an arm span kilometres wide. Each arm ended in a hundred snake heads, he 'walked' on monstrous serpent-like legs and his terrible head belched flames from his mouth and eyes. From this fearsome monster, the Olympic gods fled to Egypt, but their flight was stopped when they reached the mighty Nile river.

Now Pan, he of the cloven hooves, horn and flute decided he could turn himself into a fish and swim up the Nile to escape. Unfortunately, his transformation spell went awry and he only half succeeded, leaving his top half goat. But it was enough to splash his way to safety. After Typhon was defeated, Zeus was so amused by Pan's half transformation that he transferred it to the heavens so that the rest of the world could enjoy his merriment. You can find Capricornus in The Sea just above Delphinus. Also, the three main stars of Aquila point right at it.



Meanwhile, back at the Nile, Venus and her son Cupid were faced with the same problem and chose a similar solution. Their transformation to fish was more successful, but the waters of the Nile were treacherous and murky, so they used bull rushes to tie their tails together so they would not be separated as they swam downstream. Hence, the image of two fish tied together in **Pisces**. Pisces is easiest found in The Sea stretched out above and down the east side of the Square of Pegasus.



Aries as a member of The Sea is quite a stretch, but... it's just a memory aid so you can do anything you want. The 'Sea' association is the fact that, in the story of the Golden Fleece (which pops up later in the Argo constellations story) the Golden Ram was ridden by two children to escape their wicked father. They were the boy Phrixus and his sister Helle. The ram flew them over the water between Europe and Asia (there's the water aspect) to Colchis. Sadly, Helle disobeyed the Ram's 'don't look down' warning and fell off into the waters, which were then named after her – the Hellespont, now the Dardanelles. In The Sea, we find Aries tucked neatly between the lower end of Pisces and the head of Cetus



Now these stand-alone stories don't give clues as to how one points to the other, but it is useful to know they are in the same 'small' circle of sky at that time of year and if you remember the 'Sea' pattern, inspired by the stories, locating one you should help you to locate the others nearby. A little bit of memory work, but still very helpful.

Back to the stories

5) Aquila-Aquarius-Piscis Austrinus

This one is a double-barrel story, or at least an overlap of two unrelated stories.

a) Firstly, here is a brief account of the Ganymede story.

Ganymede, the youngest son of Tros, the King of Troy, was standing guard over his father's sheep.

Zeus has just lost the services of his cup bearer and wine pourer (it's another long story) so he was seeking a replacement. He happened to look down from Mt Olympus and saw this beautiful youth and decided to make him an offer he couldn't refuse. Zeus sent his loyal eagle to swoop down on Ganymede and carry him up to Olympus.



Zeus offered Ganymede immortality if he would serve as cup pourer to him and the other gods. Ganymede accepted the offer and we see him carrying the water jug in the constellation Aquarius, while the eagle is Aquila. The prominent 'Y' asterism represents the water gourd or wine flask.



From this there is the association of the constellations Aquila and Aquarius. So find Altair in Aquila (which is easy to locate with its asterism of 3 stars in a line), then you'll know that Aquarius is just off to its east, a short eagle's flight up to Mt Olympus.

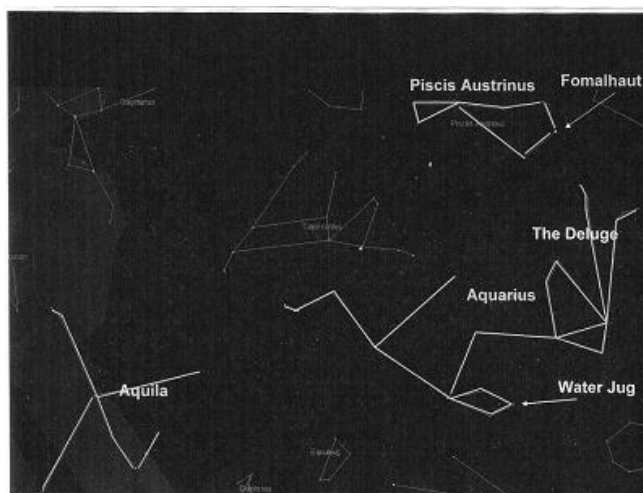
b) Now you can use Aquarius to locate Piscis Austrinus. Why? Because another non-Ganymede version of Aquarius has the water container he holds being the source of a great deluge on the land. (The land being any culture you care to think of that has a great flood as part of their folk-lore. Think Noah and the ark etc.) Many cultures saw this asterism in such a way and the flood is the sprinkling of stars emanating from the jar and spreading southwards (which from our viewpoint is 'upwards').

Directly south of this 'flood' of stars is the 1st magnitude star Fomalhaut, or alpha Piscis Austrinus, the southern fish. The deluge cultures see this great maw in the fish swallowing the flood waters to return the dry land.



So... to find Piscis Austrinus (and Fomalhaut), use this story and look 'downstream' of the Aquarius water jug. Or vice versa. To locate the asterism in Aquarius, locate Fomalhaut and move 'up-stream'.

The two stories combined are shown on the map below. You can see how Aquila leads to Aquarius, and Aquarius leads up to Piscis Austrinus.



Another useful Myth story: Another case of a constellation having multiple roles in different stories.

6) Hercules-Aquila-Sagitta

Remember I said Hercules wasn't located near the beasts he beat in his Labours. This is why – he's involved in another story at a different time of year (best seen around August) and even Hercules can't be in two places at once.

It involves the fantastic Prometheus story. Here's a brief account.

Prometheus, the gentle Titan, in his compassion for humans, introduced them to the arts and science. In particular, when humans had lost the power to make fire, Prometheus stole some fire from the Sun and gave it to the humans.



Zeus was very displeased with Prometheus over this. So he had Prometheus chained naked to a rock high in the mountains. From dawn to dusk, the eagle tore through his flesh and ate away at his liver.



Because Prometheus was immortal, his liver healed overnight, so the eagle arrived the next day and pecked away again. So it went on, eternal torment for poor kind Prometheus and eternal Prometheus paté for the eagle.

Hercules, a good friend and co-student of Chiron, the Centaur, appealed to Zeus to show mercy. Zeus refused to listen to Hercules' pleas. However, the wise and gentle Centaur Chiron (who is depicted in the constellation Centaurus) offered to give up his immortality in exchange for Prometheus' freedom.

Since Zeus didn't much like Chiron, he thought that was a good deal, so agreed to it. He gave Hercules permission to release Prometheus.

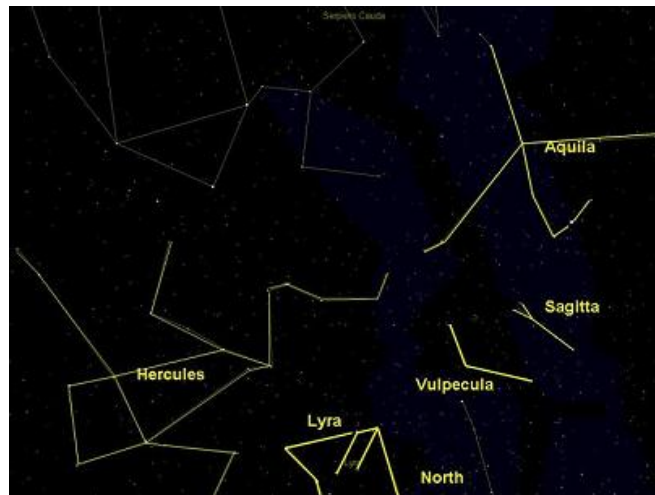


Once Prometheus was freed and out of Zeus' way, Hercules shot the eagle with an arrow, Sagitta.



Zeus placed the eagle (Aquila) in the sky as a reward for his devoted service.

So this story helps us remember where to find these three constellations: Hercules (which is a tad obvious with the 'keystone' as his pelvis), Aquila to his east, and flying towards Aquila is the arrow, Sagitta, fired by Hercules.



If you want to be a bit creative, you can stretch this story by imagining that the now dead eagle has been carried off as 'road kill' by a hungry fox – **Vulpecula**, which was originally called Vulpecula cum Ansere (The Fox with Goose). Going from a goose to an eagle is not a great stretch. With that idea in mind, you can find Vulpecula 'on the road' immediately below the eagle, still with the arrow stuck in it.

Another tip is to locate **Lyra**, the Harp (in case you have trouble identifying the bright star Vega near the horizon). The link is that both Hercules and Ophiuchus were educated by Chiron, the Centaur, and that included lessons in music. They both would have leaned to play the harp. So we can see the harp (Lyra) within arms reach of our hero Hercules, as on the chart above.

Let's look at a slightly more complex mapping:

7) Orion-Taurus-Canis Major-Canis Minor-Lepus

This is a very helpful grouping, though I suspect the main constellations could be found fairly easily in their own right.

The myth has it that the randy hunter Orion enjoyed both hunting by day and wooing women by night.



At some stage, he had his roving eye on the Pleiades, the seven beautiful virgin daughters of Atlas and Pleoine.

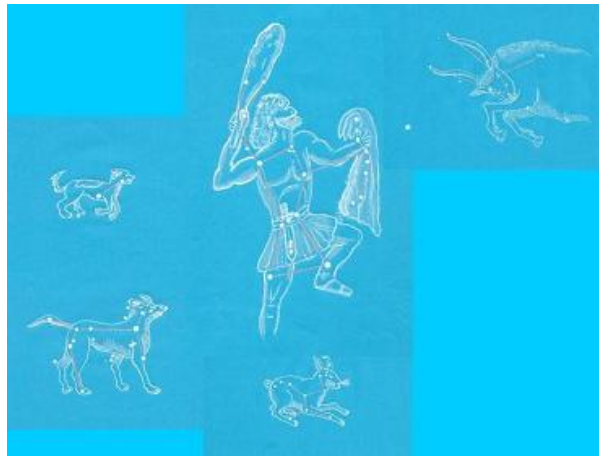


He pursued them and wooed them for seven years, only kept at bay by the diligence of their father Atlas. Finally in desperation, Atlas asked Zeus for help to protect his daughters' virtues from Orion. Ever helpful, Zeus turned the girls into white doves and placed them in the heavens out of Orion's reach. These are seen as the open cluster M45, the Pleiades.

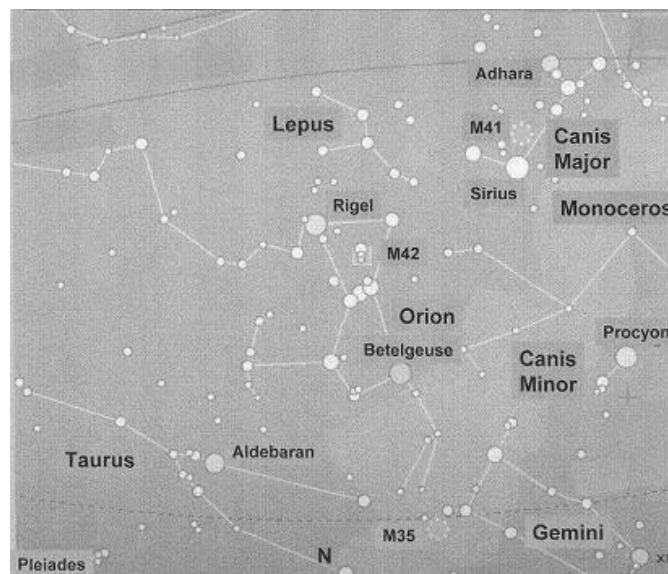


Years later when Orion died, Zeus placed him up in the stars as well. Atlas was again concerned about his daughters, so Zeus placed a huge bull between Orion and the girls. So we see Orion and Taurus (with the bull's face as Hyades) and the seven sisters Pleiades.

To complete the story, Zeus placed Orion's two favourite hunting dogs up there to keep him company, Canis Major and Canis Minor. And to keep them occupied, he put a hare, Lepus, up there for the dogs to chase. Each time they caught the hare, they laid it at Orion's feet. Good dogs.



Of course, from “Down Under”, we see this montage upside-down, like this:



So, as a guide, you find Orion (obvious) and to his west is Taurus, to his east one above the other are Canis Major and Minor, and at Orion’s feet is the offered hare, Lepus. Note that the Unicorn (Monoceros) between the two dogs has no part in the story, though if you want to associate the unicorn’s horn with Orion’s libido, you’re free to do so.

8) Andromeda-Perseus-Cetus-Cepheus-Cassiopeia-Pegasus

The stories are getting bigger:

I usually describe this story as the soapy ‘Days of Andromeda’, playing on your celestial TV every November – January.

Once you hear (and remember) this story (and it’s a doozy), you’ll never be able to miss these constellations. Unfortunately, for Cepheus and Cassiopeia you need to be a lot further north to see them. But they’re there. Here is a fairly detailed version of the story to get you in the spirit of it.

Scene 1:

Pegasus was the son of Neptune and the Gorgon Medusa. He was born in a very unusual manner. Neptune just happened to have taken the shape of a horse when our hero Perseus battled with Medusa.



Using his reflective shield, Perseus kills Medusa by cutting off her horrible serpent haired head.



When the blood of the head hit the sea, Neptune commanded it to give birth to a son, so Pegasus, in the shape his Dad was in at the time, was born as a winged horse and rose out of the sea.



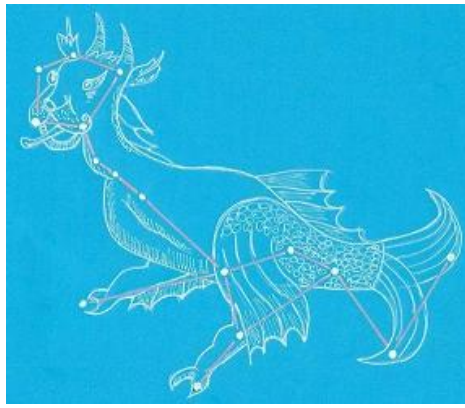
The Great Square of Pegasus we see in the sky represents his torso. There are no hind legs as he is rising up from the sea.

Being a friendly creature, Pegasus allows Perseus to ride on Pegasus' back to return home. Perseus kept Medusa's head, storing it in a special wallet.

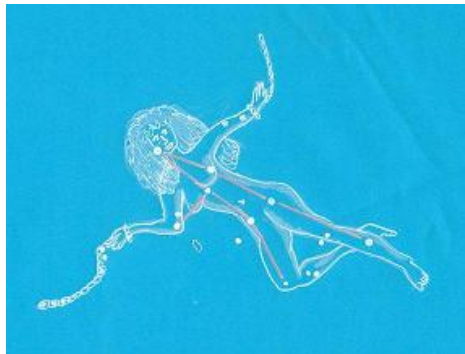
Scene 2:

Andromeda was the daughter of King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia of Ethiopia (or Phoenicia). Cassiopeia was very vain and boasted that she and her daughter were more beautiful than the Nereids (the 50 daughters of the old man of sea). The jealous Nereids asked Poseidon to avenge this gross insult.

Poseidon sent a sea monster (Cetus) to ravage the coast and lay waste to the country side.



Cepheus desperately sought the advice of an oracle, who predicted the country would be freed of the scourge only if their daughter Andromeda was sacrificed to the monster. Cepheus and Cassiopeia were horrified. Imagine Andromeda's reaction. However, the King's suffering people forced him to do it. Andromeda was chained to a rock on the sea's edge and awaited her fate.



Scene 3:

Now as soap opera plots would have it, Perseus was flying by on Pegasus. He looked down and saw Andromeda chained to this rock. He swooped down to investigate and learned the sorry story. Andromeda was beautiful and he fell in love.

Perseus went to Cepheus and offered to kill the sea monster Cetus if they would let him marry Andromeda. Naturally they agreed. Perseus returned to the shore and waited beside Andromeda until Cetus appeared, salivating over the thought of a tasty damsel.



Perseus pulled Medusa's head from the wallet and flashed it at the monster, which promptly turned to stone. Andromeda was joyously returned to her relieved parents and Perseus reminded them of their promise.

The wedding celebrations went ahead, and the knot was tied. However, Cassiopeia had decided she didn't want this upstart Perseus as a son-in-law, promises aside, so had made some other arrangements. She had told one of Poseidon's sons, Agenor, that if he killed Perseus, he could have Andromeda's hand. Agenor turned up at the wedding reception with a small army behind him.

When Perseus saw the betrayal, he shut Andromeda's eyes and whipped out Medusa's head. (He just happened to have it with him.) This turned Agenor and his army to stone. For good measure, he also turned his new parents-in-law Cepheus and Cassiopeia to stone.

Then Perseus and Andromeda flew off into the sunset on Pegasus, for what mythology tells us was a long and happy life together, with many children, starting the nation of Persia.

All of the players in this soap opera earned a place in the stars. We've seen Pegasus, Andromeda and Cetus. Perseus is below and to the east of Andromeda, perched just above the horizon. Cepheus (the King) and Cassiopeia (the vain and cheating Queen) also are up there, but really are 'down there' below our horizon.

Yes... it's a long story, but a good one. It is lurid enough for you to remember and help you to map that part of the sky. If you remember the map of 'The Sea' ...



... you'll see that by finding Pegasus (fairly obvious from the Square of his torso), Andromeda is immediately below and to the east of the Square. (In fact, the alpha star at top of Andromeda shares the star of the bottom right of the Square.) Then the monster Cetus is east of Andromeda and looms over her. Perseus is very close to our horizon and directly below Cetus. (Remember, we are seeing it upside-down. It's very much like the inverted painting below, except that Pegasus is to Andromeda's left without Perseus.)



If you are a lot further north, you would also be able to see the parents, Cepheus and Cassiopeia, further below Andromeda and Perseus.

This story is a very powerful memory tool for these constellations.

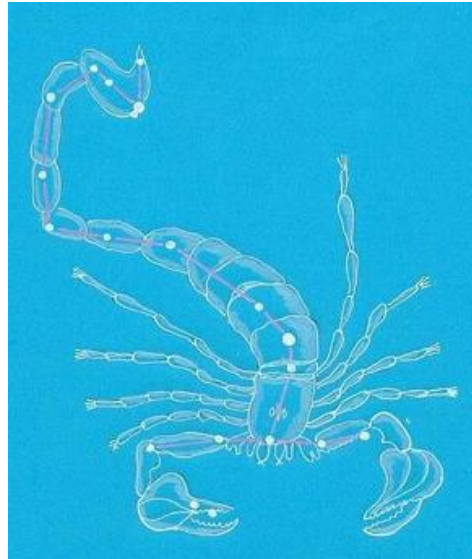
9) Orion-Scorpius and Collateral Damage

My next example is a huge mosaic in the sky, covering a very complex story with many constellations. This is excluding the associated constellations covered in the earlier Orion story above. It is basically titled "Orion-Scorpius and Collateral Damage". You'll see why. I find this a helpful mapping device for the following constellations:

Orion; Scorpius; Sagittarius; Ophiuchus; Serpens; Aquila; Sagitta; Hercules; and Centaurus. Admittedly the geographic layout of the constellations is a bit random but they are all up there together, except Orion (and I'll tell you why later).

The story, very briefly, is basically as follow:

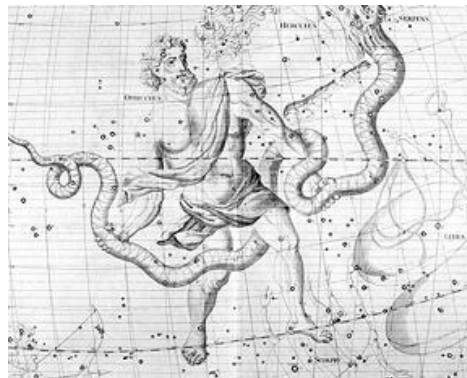
Orion boasts drunkenly that he can hunt and kill all the beasts of the earth. Gaia (Goddess of Earth) decides to punish him for his boast and sends the scorpion (Scorpius) to sting and kill him. The scorpion stings Orion.



There are (at least) two versions of events after that.

Version 1:

Ophiuchus (wrapped in his snake) and who had been trained in medicine by the wise centaur Chiron (Centaurus), crushes the scorpion underfoot and heals Orion (so Orion lives, for now).



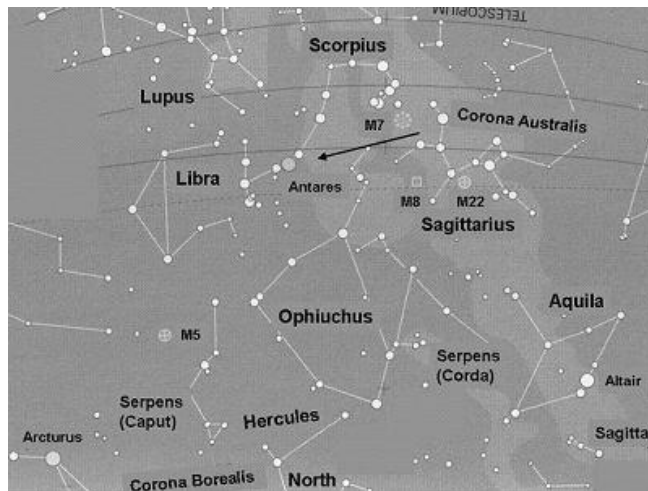
Zeus is angry at Ophiuchus interfering in the affairs of the gods, so sends Aquila (the eagle) to shoot an arrow (Sagitta) which kills Ophiuchus.

Version 2:

After the scorpion stings Orion, Orion dies. Sagittarius, the warlike centaur and friend of Orion, is angry and shoots his arrow at the heart of Scorpius (Antares) killing the scorpion.

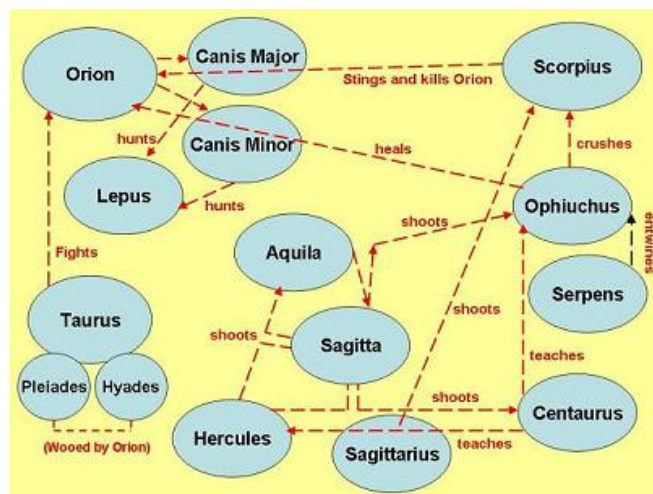


With this story in mind, one can know that in the area of Scorpius and Sagittarius (which are easily found with Sagittarius' arrow aimed at Antares), you will be able to find Ophiuchus and Serpens (which straddles either side of Ophiuchus), Aquila and Sagitta. You can find Centaurus okay by itself, knowing that the two Pointers are the front hooves of Centaurus and it arches over the Southern Cross.



But where is Orion in all this? Well, the story tells us that Orion, even when placed in the heavens after his death, became very shy of the scorpion, so that when the scorpion rises in the east, Orion scurries over the western horizon for safety. And when the scorpion finally sets in the west, Orion rises again in the east, knowing the coast is clear. That is why Orion and Scorpius can always be found on diametrically opposite sides of the sky, one setting just as the other is rising.

If you add this Orion story to the earlier Orion story and its constellations, you end up with a large area of the sky mapped out for you. The diagram below does not represent the spatial relationships in the sky, but shows how the constellations are related in story. It's mythological mayhem up there.



OTHER MYTHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATIONS IN THE SKY

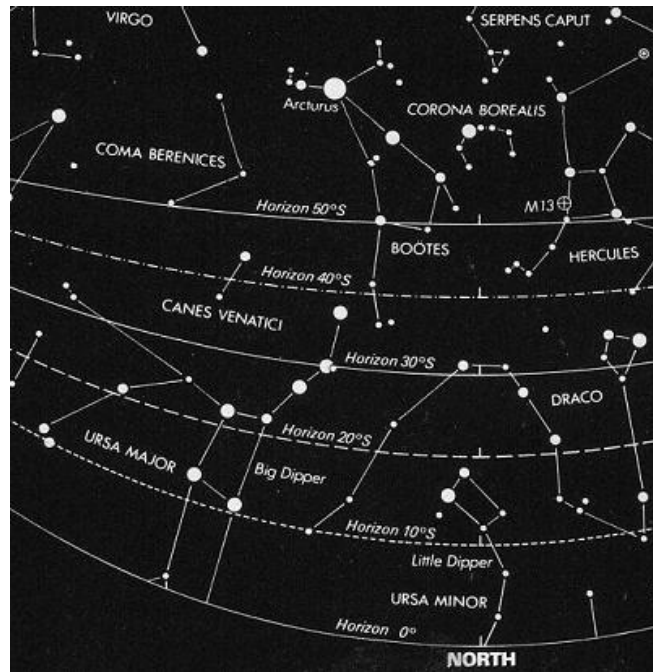
Here are some other groups of adjacent constellations that may help you. Some involve stories (making them easier to remember) and some are just associations without a specific story. You'll see what I mean.

10) Boötes and Friends

Boötes represents a herdsman driving a bear about the sky. He is also seen as holding some hunting dogs by the leash as he does it. There is only one bear (**Ursa Major**) in the story, but as there is another smaller bear (**Ursa Minor**) nearby, we can include it in our story as well. The hunting dogs, of course, are the constellation **Canes Venatici**. So, here we have an image of a herdsman (Boötes), two bears (Ursa major and Ursa Minor) and some hunting dogs (Canes Venatici). All very conveniently placed in a group in the sky.

That's fine if you live north of latitude 10° South where you'll actually be able to see Ursa Minor (the Big Dipper). Further south (near Sydney's latitude) you'll be able to see all but Ursa Minor and the bottom half of Ursa Major. But they're there.

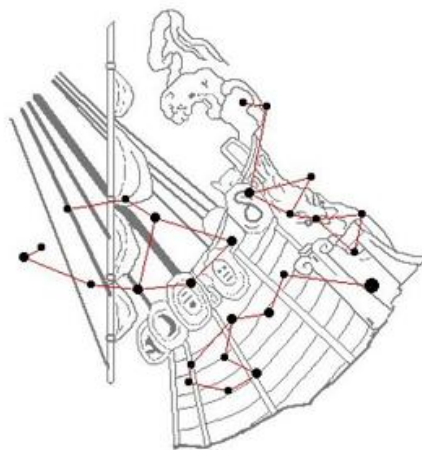
How does this help you? When you find Arcturus, the bright star in Boötes, the hunting dogs (two stars making up Canes Venatici) are immediately below (north of) it, as you'd expect if they are on a leash. Ursa Major is below and also east of CanV and Ursa Minor is below and further east of it. They are set out as per the chart below:



11) The Argo Navis Connection

The well known story of Jason and the Argonauts has a connection with a number of constellations.

You've seen all the Swords and Sandles movies so you should know that Jason and his 50 heroes sailed on an adventure on the good ship Argo to find the Golden Fleece in Colchis. The Argo was originally one huge constellation, the Argo Navis, but it was unmanageable so was divided into three parts. **Carina** (the Stern), **Vela** (the Sails) and **Puppis** (the Poop).



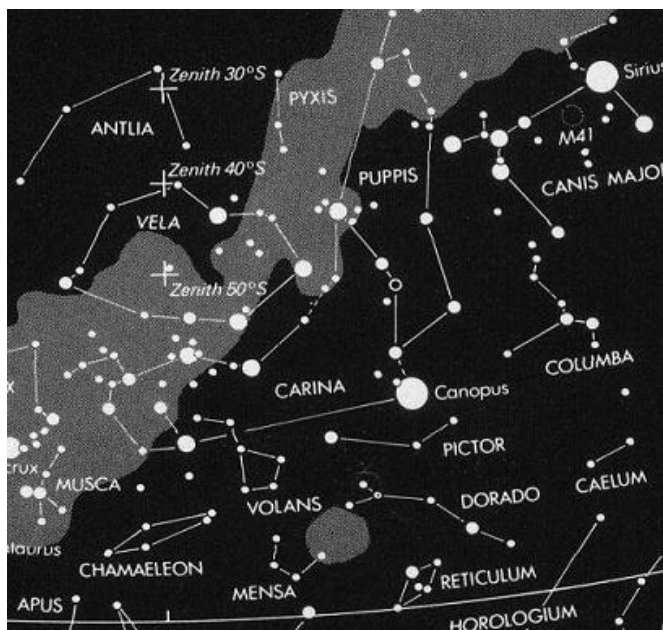
That's how they appear in the sky, facing south. Carina (with the bright star Canopus) below, Vela above, and Puppis to their west.

But there is also the small constellation **Pyxis** (the Compass). Yes, I know that Jason wouldn't have a compass, but one can imagine one on a boat. So Pyxis appears 'on' the poop deck, forward (east) of Puppis' top.

Also, the Argonaut story tells us that the Argo had to pass between a set of rocks that had the nasty habit of crashing together and crushing ships passing between them – the Clashing Rocks. So Jason sent a dove ahead to trigger the rocks. As they drew apart (after just missing the dove), the Argo was sailed through, narrowly missing the reclosing rocks. That dove is represented by the constellation **Columba** which is found just west of Puppis and Canopus. Think of it floating in the water behind Argo, too exhausted to land on the boat.

Now we use our imaginations. The Argo is at sea, and what swims in the sea? Fish. So we can imagine the sailors seeing flying fish

(**Volans**) skipping along on the surface beside them and goldfish (yes, I know it's a stretch) swimming beneath the surface. That's **Dorado**. The main thing is you can fix this story in your mind and in future associate Volans and Dorado with the Argo. Volans is found immediately below Carina and Dorado (with its Large Magellanic Cloud) is found below and west of Volans. See the chart below:

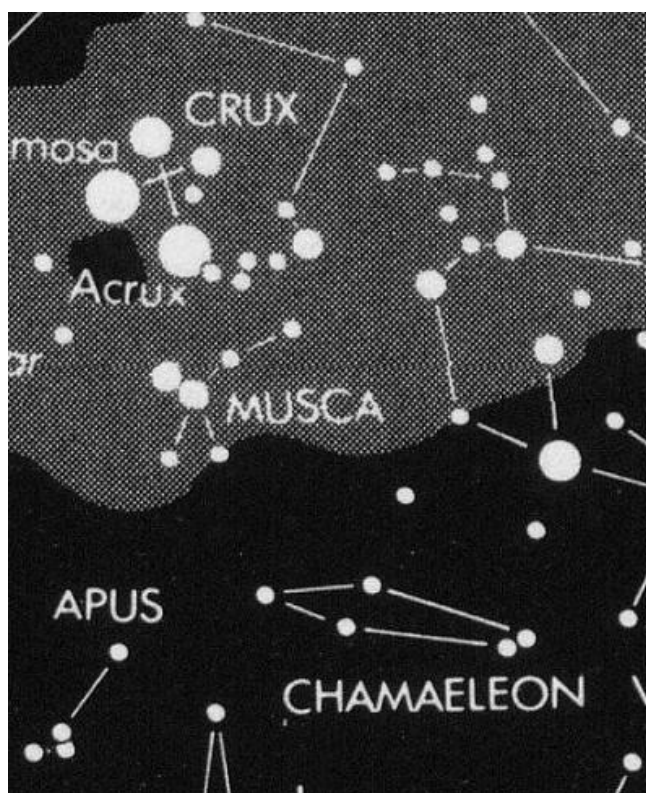


(Be careful not to confuse Pictor with Pyxis. Pyxis is hidden amongst the Milky Way star fields.)

12) Chamaeleon and its meal, Musca

Hopefully you will already know where to find **Musca**, the Fly. It's immediately below Crux. What is not so easy to find is the creature that loves flies for dinner. The **Chameleon**. Imagine a chameleon lying flat on a log, waiting patiently for a fly to come within tongue length. Then a fly comes along, just above and in front of its mouth. One flick, and it's gone. That's what we see to the south below the Southern Cross.

So when searching for the constellation Chamaeleon, remember it eats flies and go down under Musca.

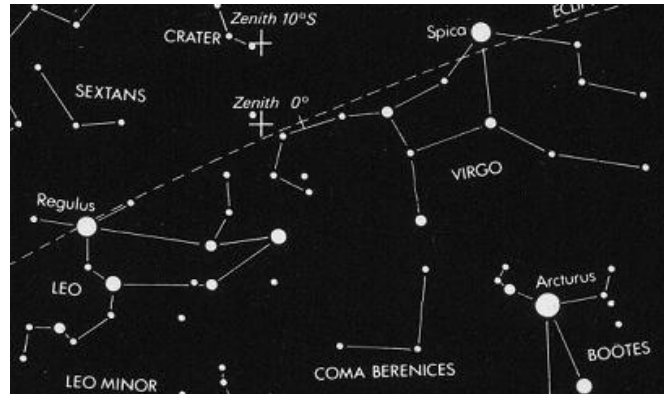


13) Coma Berenices and Virgo

These two constellations have absolutely no links via stories. BUT... out of the 88 constellations, there are only four based on women. Two of them, Andromeda and Cassiopeia we have already dealt with in the Andromeda saga.

The other two are Coma Berenices (Berenices Hair) and Virgo (The Virgin). While their stories are totally unrelated, by happy coincidence these two adjoin each other in the sky. And joined-by-gender is a sufficient memory jogger for our purpose.

So for the months roughly from April to July, when the 1st magnitude star Spica is high to the north, giving you the location of Virgo, remember that its sister in gender Coma Berenices is immediately below it, midway between Leo and Arcturus in Boötes.

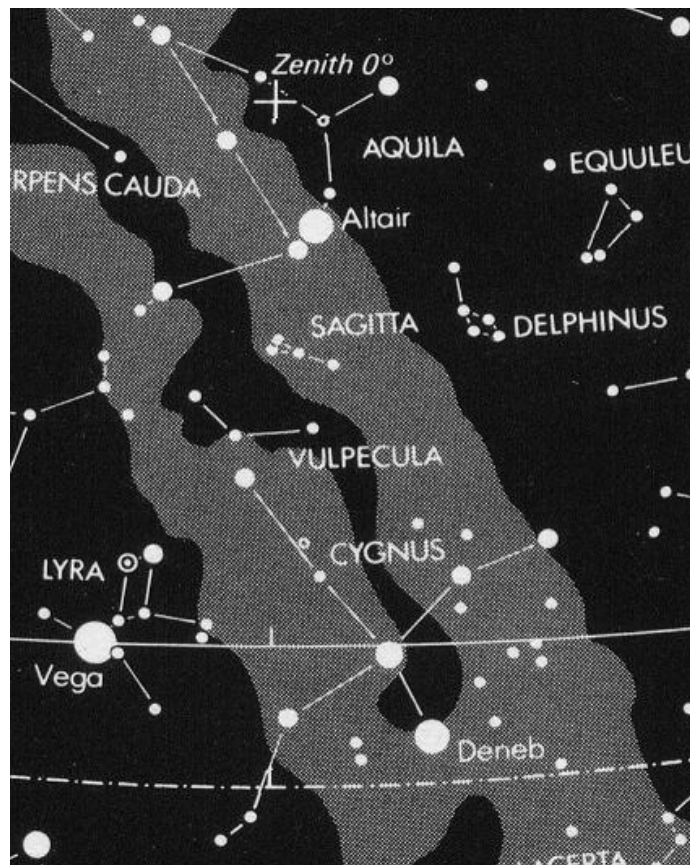


14) Birds of Feather etc... Cygnus and Aquila.

There are many bird related constellations, but most of these are to the south. However, the two largest birds – Eagle and Swan – are very close together to the north. So we have an association by species.

Cygnus, the Swan, may be found close to the northern horizon immediately beneath **Aquila**. Birds of feather sticking together? This is more easily remembered (if you need any further memory joggers) when you know that Aquila was Zeus's loyal and faithful servant and Cygnus is the disguise that Zeus took on to seduce the beautiful Leda, the bride of Tyndareus the King of Sparta. This liaison resulted in the birth of the heroes Pollux and Castor (but that's another story).

So remember – Zeus (in disguise as Cygnus) and his servant, Aquila – two big birds one above the other. You can see them in the chart below:



SUMMARY OF CONSTELLATIONS FOUND BY MYTH

That's a lot to remember at first go. Here's a summary of all the above story associations with constellations to help you.

1. Leo-Cancer-Hydra
2. Hydra- Corvus-Crater
3. Centaurus-Lupus-Ara
4. The Sea – Aquarius, Delphinus, Capricornus, Pisces, Aries, Piscis Austrinus. Pegasus, Andromeda, Cetus.
5. Aquila-Aquarius-Piscis Austrinus
6. Hercules-Aquila-Sagitta - Vulpecula
7. Orion-Taurus-Canis Major-Canis Minor-Lepus
8. Andromeda-Pegasus-Perseus-Cetus-Cepheus-Cassiopeia
9. Orion-Scorpius- Ophiuchus-Serpens-Sagittarius-Hercules-Aquila-Sagitta
10. Boötes-Ursa Major-Ursa Minor-Canes Venatici
11. The Argo Navis Connection
12. Chamaeleon-Musca
13. Virgo-Coma Berenices
14. Aquila-Cygnus

CONCLUSION

There are many more mythological connections to other constellations which I don't have time to cover. Even though this 'technique' may not be your personal cup-of-tea, or nectar, I hope it gives you an idea of how a general understanding of the stories in the sky can be used, with a little practice, to provide that memory trigger to locate some of the less obvious constellations, especially on those moonlit nights. It's not really that *mythsterious*.

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