

Orion, the hunter, promptly returned to his cabin as the sky became dark. For the eighth night in a row he came home empty-handed from his day in the woods. He walked endless miles that day in search of even a small prize to fill his growing hunger and that of his two dogs, Sirius and Gomeisa. Trying to ease the throbbing pain in his head and erase the memory of the disappointing day, Orion grabbed a saucepan and started to heat up some milk. He walked away from the stove and began to take off his hunting gear. Just as he was about to take off his belt, the milk started to bubble and spill over the sides of the pot. As he ran to control the mess, he forgot about the heat of the pot. As quickly as he had seized the handle he was forced to let go, burning his hand and sloshing milk all over the floor. Exasperated by the day, Orion left the mess and retired to his bed for the night, assuming that Sirius and Gomeisa would lick the overturned milk. Though the dogs tried to drink the milk, it was too hot and burned their tongues. Following their master's example, they returned to their own beds for a night of restless sleep. The spilled milk traveled across the uneven floor of the kitchen until it reached the lip of the doorway. The path of milk between the pot and the door started to dry and seep into the floor, leaving a permanent stain. This white path collected the dust of the past and the energy of the present and became molded by its surroundings. The saucepan left a permanent mark along with the stain where it fell, and each day Orion, Sirius and Gomeisa allowed the path to carry them from one end of the kitchen to the other.

This is how the Milky Way was created, and how the Big Dipper, Orion, Canis Minor and Canis Major became constellations.

I have always lived in a place in where I could look up into the night sky and see thousands of gleaming dots. The constellations of Ursa Major and Orion guide me home every night in Colorado. I often find myself lost in the sky when I finally reach my house. No matter where I am, when I look up and see these constellations I am instantly transported home.

When I was five my parents took me to an IMAX movie about space at the Natural History Museum in Manhattan. At the end of the movie there was a scene in which the camera zoomed out from our location at the Natural History Museum to our spot in the United States to planet Earth to our galaxy and then all of the surrounding galaxies. I remember feeling tiny and infinite at the same time. Space fascinated and terrified me.

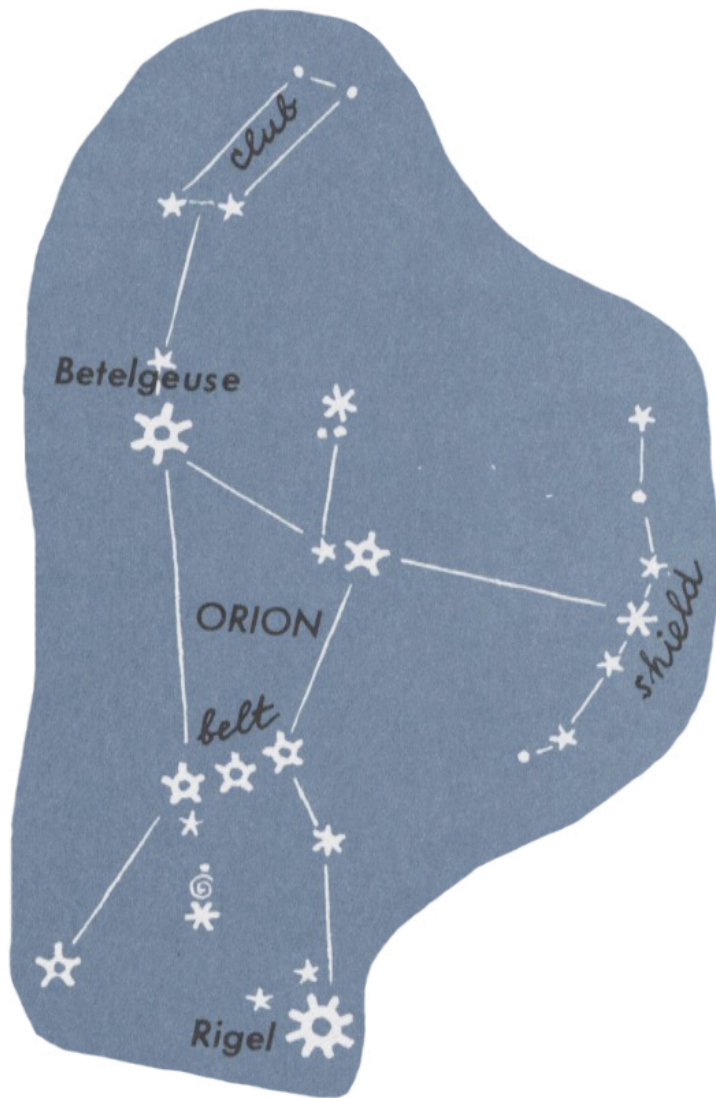
When I was eight, my mom and I went camping in Canyonlands National Park. We slept under the stars each night because it was too hot for a tent. She stayed up late into the night, distracting me from my fear of the dark by telling me stories about the stars. I felt as though if I gave the stars respect and consideration while I could keep my eyes open, then in return, the stars would protect me while I slept. I would awaken in the early hours of the morning, when the light of dawn first hit the sky to find the stars slowly fading away. Each morning I thanked them for keeping me safe during the night. Knowing that people all over the world were looking at the same sky made me feel connected to something bigger than myself. I was connected to my history, my present, and my future through these little dots in the sky. I was participating in an activity of my ancestors and, consequently, becoming part of the environment.

For centuries, humans have been fascinated by the stars. We try to comprehend why and how our world exists. Many ancient cultures turned to the stars to make sense of the world. They told stories to describe why the stars were there. They made maps to better understand their own environment. Despite its improbability, each civilization charted the same groups of stars into the same constellations, and they even found the same pictures when connecting the dots. For example, seven different cultures each saw a vehicle when looking at the stars of Ursa Major. The stories of the constellations were driven from the location, time, and spiritual importance of each culture. These myths played a significant role in their society. Our ancestors saw and created detailed stories about the sky. What was the point of these stories? How did the constellations help these societies, and what did they provide them with?

Many ancient civilizations that were on opposite sides of the planet and had no connection to each other found the same images in the sky. While the images were the same, the myths surrounding each constellation were very different. The myths were a way to unite and root each culture to their communities. To each culture the myths were seen as actual stories about their history. The Greek myths were designed to honor the Gods, while Native American myths were focused around animals. Some myths explained why the seasons changed, while others explained what happened after death. By acknowledging and telling these stories, a sense of community was formed because everybody knew the stories. The myths were passed down generation to generation. When we tell stories, we transfer the message of our ancestors. Though the stories differed, they served the same purpose—to make sense of the world we are a part of.

Orion

Orion was depicted as the link between the mortals and the heavens. Throughout all of the stories, Orion has appeared as a hunter or as a path to the Heavens. The following table reflects the different cultures and their view of Orion:



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1. Greek-----Orion, a hunter in Love with the Goddess Artemis¹

2. Egyptian-----Sahutte, a hunter of Gods and men

3. Judaism-----Nimrod, a man who thought himself more powerful than God²

4. Eskimos----- A stairway to Heaven

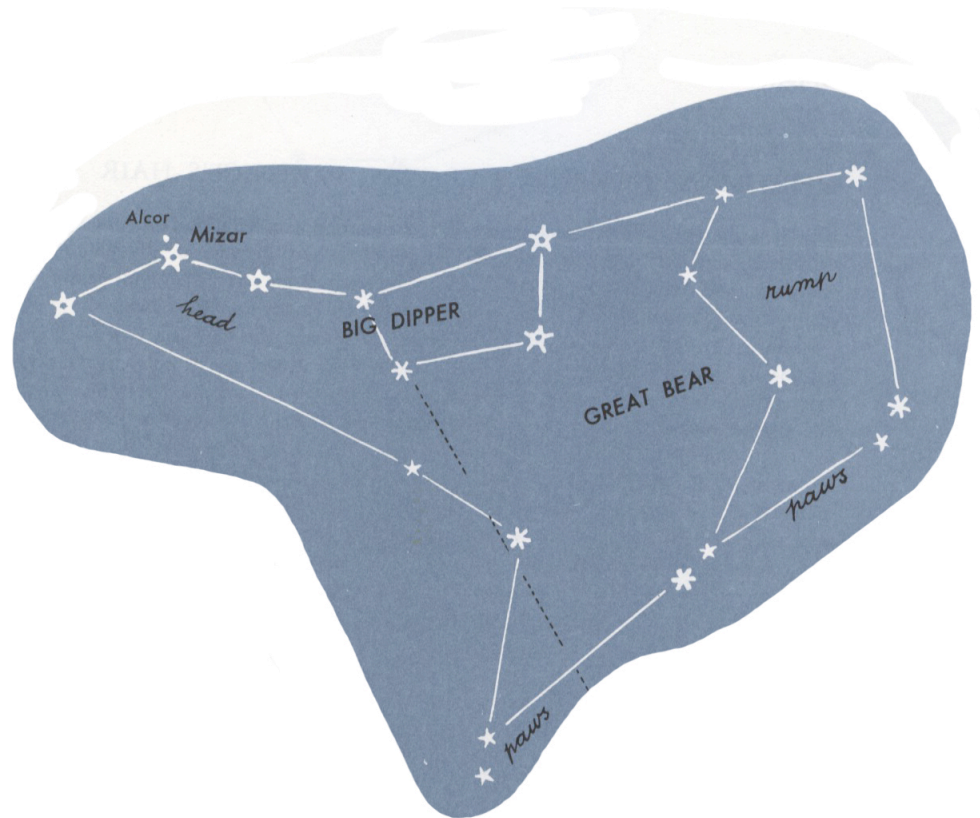
¹ Her jealous brother tricked her into killing Orion. To honor Orion, Zeus placed his body among the stars.

² He built the Tower of Babylon in order to reach the sky. When God found him, he punished him by placing him in the sky and forcing him to wander the heavens forever.

Ursa Major

Ursa Major represents a journey. This journey has been depicted as a bear's migration, as a voyage, and as a relationship. The following table displays different cultural representations of the constellation:

1. Native Americans----- Bear Migration³
2. Greek-----Callisto turned into a bear⁴
3. Chinese----- Chariot
4. Vikings-----Wagon
5. English----- King Arthur's Chariot
6. Romans----- Plow pulled by oxen
7. Germans-----Wagon pulled by three horses



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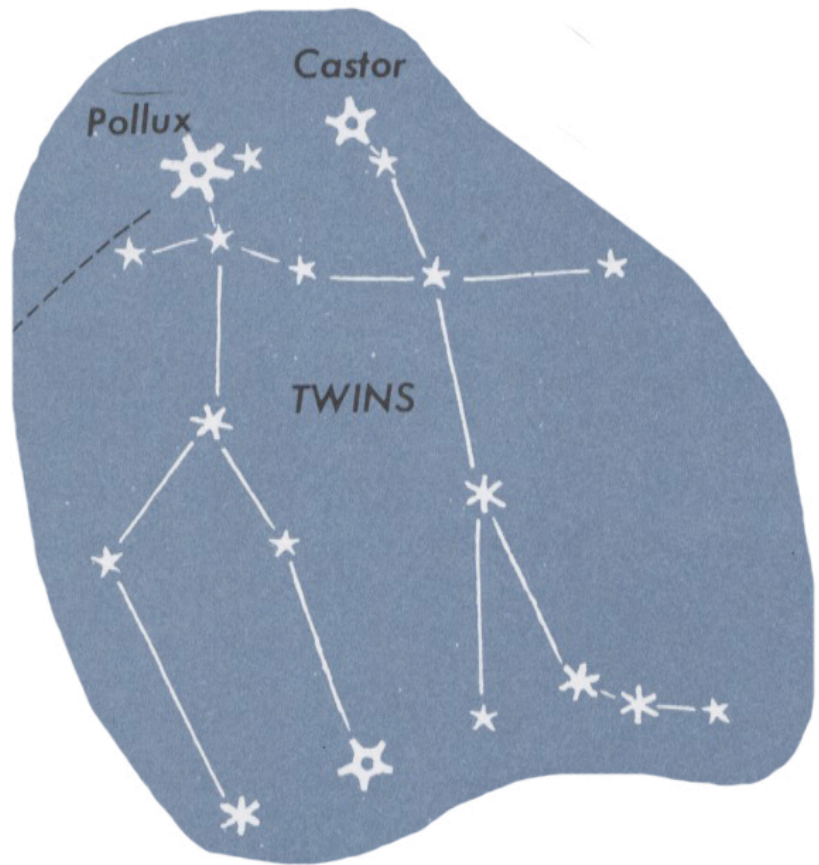
³ Native Americans believed Ursa Major to be a bear that came out every spring. During the summer he was chased around the sky, and in autumn, they finally killed the bear. The bear's blood would drip down from the sky and color the fall leaves. The bear's spirit would then go north and become part of the northern lights. Each spring a new bear would come out of hibernation to go through this cycle.

⁴ Hera became jealous of the mortal woman, Callisto, because she was believed to be having an affair with Zeus. Hera turned Callisto into a bear in order to rid her of beauty. One day, a hunter came and, right before he killed Callisto, Zeus turned the hunter into a bear as well. To keep both of them safe from other hunters, he grabbed them by the tails and placed both bears in the sky. This is why the Ursa Major and Minor have abnormally long tails.

Gemini

The constellation Gemini was always looked at as two parts coming together to make one constellation. The following table shows what twin creatures each culture saw coming together to create the constellation:

1. Arabic----- twin peacocks
2. Egyptians----- twin goats
3. South African----- two wives of the Antelope God
4. Hindu-----twin warrior gods on horseback
5. Greek----- twin brothers of different fathers.⁵



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⁵ Castor and Pollux were Leda's twins. Castor's father was the king of Sparta, while Pollux's was Zeus. This made Castor mortal, while Pollux was immortal. Castor became a horseman and a soldier, and Pollux became a boxer. When Castor was killed by angry cattlemen, Pollux begged Zeus to kill him as well so that he could be with his brother. Instead, Zeus brought Castor back to life every other day, and on the off days, Pollux was allowed to visit him in the world of the dead. After some time, Zeus placed them together in the sky to spend eternity together.

Different cultures placed importance on the stars for entertainment, religious inspiration and as a way to organize their society. Greek, Chinese and Egyptian societies formed supernatural connections with the stars to reach their god(s). The Greeks saw the night sky as a window to heaven. As a culture, they were strongly linked to their gods. Their gods influenced everything they did. They believed the gods to be watching them at all points, which is why they viewed the sky as the layer in between them and the gods. By viewing the constellations as a connection between them and their gods they gained understanding. To make the gods more tangible, the Greeks used the constellations to illustrate stories about them. They genuinely believed in their gods and treated their mythology as events in human history. This practice became a ritual and served as a source of entertainment, as well as a way to explain morals. Their heroes and villains would battle in the sky and the Greeks could watch and tell the stories. Interacting with the sky served as a way to teach about their culture and history, while telling tales of adventure and romance. The story of Andromeda, the daughter of the rulers of Ethiopia, Cepheus and Cassiopeia, is a good example. Andromeda and Cassiopeia thought they were more beautiful than all other creatures, including the water nymphs. When Poseidon heard about this, he sent a great whale to destroy Cepheus's kingdom and attack his people. The only way Poseidon would agree to stop the beast was if Cepheus sacrificed his daughter. Meanwhile, on the way back from one of his journeys, Perseus spotted Andromeda and fell madly in love with her beauty. He offered to slay the whale for Cepheus in return for Andromeda's hand in marriage. Cepheus agreed, allowing his people and the new couple to live happily ever after, but the water nymphs never got over it (Peters). For this reason, Cassiopeia, Cepheus, Andromeda, and Perseus are placed next to each other in the sky.

The Chinese used the sky as a way to balance themselves with the world around them. They thought that if they lived in harmony with the constellations, then their society would be more organized because it was connected to all parts of their world. In China, the Emperor used the stars as a guide: "The position of bright celestial objects were thought to have influential powers on nations and the human condition" (astronomy.org). The Emperor made spiritual connections to the stars by locking himself away for days until he could understand what was going on in the heavens. The Winter Solstice, a celebration in Ancient China that honored "the renewal of the world order," was directly affected by the Emperor's harmonization with the stars. "His annual sacrifice to Heaven on the winter solstice made him the link between cosmic harmony and the sun's yearly course" (Krupp 198). Heaven was all-ruling in their culture because it controlled the Emperor's authority. This ceremony conducted by the Emperor was designed to create a balance between the people and the cosmos. The stars were believed to predict events and were thought to have a higher knowledge of earth than humans. The stars were symbolic to the Chinese, rather than pictorial. They become symbolic by the limited amount of detail. With minor detail, the image was roughly shaped, but allowed room for interpretation. The fractional amount of detail represents how the stars are constantly changing, rather than being in a specific form forever. The sky was a mirror of society, and as people moved and changed, the stars moved and changed. The Chinese did not view the sky as being Heaven, but they saw it to be Heaven's essence. They believed they were viewing heaven's beauty and peace, instead of literally what happened after death. They were connected to the supernatural because they allowed the sky to determine their actions.

In Egypt, the stars represented eternity. The Egyptians connected their belief of immortality to the endless repetition of the sky: "The sky itself is eternal, and its occupants are

continuously resurrected. There, in the celestial passages and returns, is the contrast between what is mortal and what is divine” (Krupp 64). The constellations are in a continuous rotation, disappearing for a season and coming back the next. Because they keep returning, the Egyptians believed that they would return again once they disappeared. When the sun or moon disappeared, their absence was only temporary. The sky was represented by Goddess Nut in Egyptian culture. Her body cradled the Earth, and when it was time for night, she would swallow the sun, making the world dark. At dawn she would birth the sun again to create light. Parts of the sky died when they vanished from the Egyptians’ view, but parts always returned. Death seemed escapable when they saw “the sun, moon, and stars survive night after night, month after month, year after year” (Krupp, 63). Part of the beauty of the stars is that they have lasted the test of time. While the sky shifts and changes, what we see when we look up is generally what our ancestors saw. Simply by recognizing it, this everlasting part of our environment connects us to our history. While we alter so much of our landscape, we cannot alter the skies; they remain untouched from generation to generation.

Native Americans and Eskimos recognized the sky as a part of the world with which they were required to be in tune. The Navajo tribe believed that the key to life was being connected to all things around them. They used the constellation stories as a tool to understand their surroundings and put them into cultural perspective. They believed the stars had genders and were created in pairs. This supported their “idea of balance and an orderly universe that is holistic, rational or explainable, and spiritual” (UNM.edu). While they connected themselves to the physical matter of Earth, they believed that there was more to their environment. Eskimos believed stars to be living things, bound to roam the sky on a constant path. Some of the stars were believed to be mortal men who had fallen off the edge of the earth and landed in the rotating heavens above. The sky was seen as a continuation of Earth. Therefore, it was treated as part of the environment that required care.

Many ancient cultures used astrology and the constellations as a tool to regulate their society. Egyptians and Incas based their calendar around the moon’s cycle: “In Egypt the month began on the day the waning crescent moon disappeared from the predawn sky” (Krupp 172). To keep their system in line with the seasons they added an extra month so that there were twelve cycles. Without this extra rotation, their summer solstice would have gradually become later and later in the year. The Egyptians used this thoroughly devised system to plan feasts and celebrations. The calendar “governed the sequence of timing of the festivals and events that defined Egyptian life and was administered by priests—a bureaucracy of scribes and astronomers who fashioned Egypt from the cycles of the sky” (Krupp 173). This calendar enabled their society to rely upon the sky.

The Incas of Peru created a calendar-like system by splitting into different groups to represent the sky: “The Inca king split the people of Cuzco into twelve groups and assigned to each of them the name of a month and duties related to the public announcement of the year’s progress through the calendar” (Krupp 182). The stars have also been used to aid agricultural practices. The Hopi farmers tied the success of their crop to the sky. They began winter with a sixteen-day ceremony to allow their annual growth season its highest potential. This ceremony was determined by the position of the setting sun in combination with the proper phase of the moon. It recognized “the energy that the sun transmits to the Earth” (Krupp 191). By following the sun, the Hopi were in sync with the seasons, permitting optimal farming.

Unlike the Greeks, Chinese, and Egyptians, I do not attach my life to spiritual possibilities in the sky. I do not think that constellations can predict my future. The sky is not an

all-knowing being to me; rather, it connects me to my environment and surroundings mostly through memories I have created from my relationship with the constellations. I am fascinated with the complexity of it, instead of the mirror of my life it may provide. Similar to the Native Americans and Eskimos, I use the constellations to connect to the place around me by orienting myself from the constellations. No matter where I am, if I look up and see Cassiopeia I'll know what direction I am facing in accordance to various places I have been to. While this type of mapping connects me to my past, it also allows me to identify my current place. When I see a constellation I associate with home, it brings memories to me. I will remember sleeping on my best friend's roof during the summer, or making a bed on my hammock to watch the shooting stars. I allow myself time to see the depth of space, for it allows me to put myself into perspective. Although I do not connect to a higher power in the sky, I like to follow space as a representation of time. I estimate how much time has passed between when I last saw a constellation—its disappearance and its reappearance. I put into perspective how much has happened to me in between “then” and “now.”

The ancient societies connected to their place in history by allowing the constellations to teach them something. In modern times, constellations are used simply as reference points. They are no longer looked at with the awe of something bigger than life. By learning the stories that our ancestors told, we become a part of history. Engaging in sky-myths allows us to relate to other humans. I think we get lost looking at the things that separate us—that make us different—when we should see the things that unite us. Though the stars play such a minimal part of our day, they make our similarities obvious. As humans, we strive to make sense of our world; looking at the stars allowed ancient cultures to do so. We get lost in the world of the instant, only seeing what is right in front of us, not taking time to look at the bigger picture. By stepping back, we see that we aren't that different after all. The constellations remind us that we are not alone, nor are we the first or last to gaze up at the sky.

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