The Story of Perseus: Mythology , Star Charts , and Art

Why are constellations always associated with ancient Greek mythology?

In fact, not all constellations have corresponding mythological stories. Of the 88 internationally recognized constellations still in use today, as defined by the International Astronomical Union, only the 50 constellations designated by Ptolemy have corresponding Greek mythological counterparts. Actually , Ptolemy only designated 48 constellations in his book *Almagest*, and the two additional Ptolemaic constellations in modern astronomy are due to later divisions of Arkema Australis into Carina, Puppis, and Vela—because Arkema Australis is simply too large.

Modern understanding generally holds that the true author of Ptolemy's constellations was not Ptolemy himself, but his predecessor, the ancient Greek astronomer Hipparchus . Hipparchus divided the observable celestial sphere into 48 constellations in his original star catalog, supplementing it with fragments of ancient Greek mythology to aid memorization. This catalog was subsequently cited and refined by Ptolemy in his *Almagest*.

Tips: Did constellations really originate in ancient Greece? (Note : The same applies to tips below .)
Today, ancient Greek mythology and its corresponding constellation legends are widely circulated throughout the world, leading to a common misconception that modern

constellations originated in ancient Greece. In reality, a relatively complete astronomical calendar and some rudimentary forms of modern constellations existed as early as the ancient Babylonian period; Hipparchus also referenced existing constellation systems from different cultures when compiling his star catalogues. For example, the constellations we are very familiar with, such as Leo, Aries, and Andromeda (mentioned in this article), can all find similar legendary prototypes in ancient Egyptian or Babylonian cultures .

This shows that the earliest correspondences between constellations and Greek mythology, besides imbuing astronomy with a mystical aura, also served a practical purpose: enabling people to quickly memorize and divide the sky, and thus skillfully conduct observations. Therefore, Ptolemaic constellations are mostly pictographic, or were created through mythological aids to make a set of abstract lines more representational . However, what may disappoint those with a great interest in constellations is that, precisely because of this emphasis on practicality, the myths and legends associated with these constellations are often fragmented and marginalized. Few constellations play a significant role in Greek mythology; many famous constellations correspond to archetypes who are merely insignificant extras or even cannon fodder in the protagonist's adventure stories (such as the seemingly fierce Scorpio).

However, our protagonist this time is different. He is a very important figure in Greek mythology, with a complete storyline, and several major constellations are derived from his tale. It can be said that the northern sky of ancient Greece depicted his legendary life, a truly magnificent spectacle. He is the prototype of the constellation Perseus—Perseus.

Perseus

The Latin name for the constellation Perseus is Perseus, the name of Perseus. Perseus is a northern constellation, adjacent to Andromeda, Cassiopeia, Aries, and Taurus. For astronomy enthusiasts, it features the remarkable variable star Algol ; for those who don't usually follow astronomy, the Perseid meteor shower, which appears in major news outlets every July and August, will likely have given them some exposure to this constellation.

[Photo] A meteor I captured during the Perseid shower in 2021. Photographed at Anguli Lake.

Among the many Greek myths and dramatic works, the story of Perseus is one of the few that is complete, vivid, and widely circulated. This may be because Perseus was revered by the Mycenaeans as the founder of their city, which elevated his

actual status; in addition , the Library of Christ, a work recording his myth from the first century AD , survived the ravages of war and religious destruction, allowing us to see such a complete story today .

The Birth of Perseus

According to the definition in Greek mythology, the offspring born from the union of a god and a human are called "heroes." Perseus is one of the most important heroes in Greek mythology, born to Zeus, the king of the gods, and Danaë, his mortal lover and princess of Argos.

Legend has it that the King of Argos, having foretold in a prophecy that he would die at the hands of his grandson, imprisoned his daughter Danaë, keeping her hidden from all. However, this did not deter Zeus, who transformed himself into a shower of gold and found Danaë, from whom Perseus was born. The mother and son later escaped and survived with the help of Poseidon, the god of the sea, and Perseus grew to adulthood.

This story has been favored by many painters in the history of Western art. From Renaissance masters such as Titian and Tintoretto, to Rembrandt in the Middle Ages, and Gustave Klimt and Picasso in the modern era, all have interpreted this subject in different styles.

[Image] This is one of the many versions of " Danaë" painted by Titian , a master of the Venetian school . The static stillness of the protagonist Danaë contrasts sharply with the dynamic movement of the old servant greedily collecting the rain of gold.

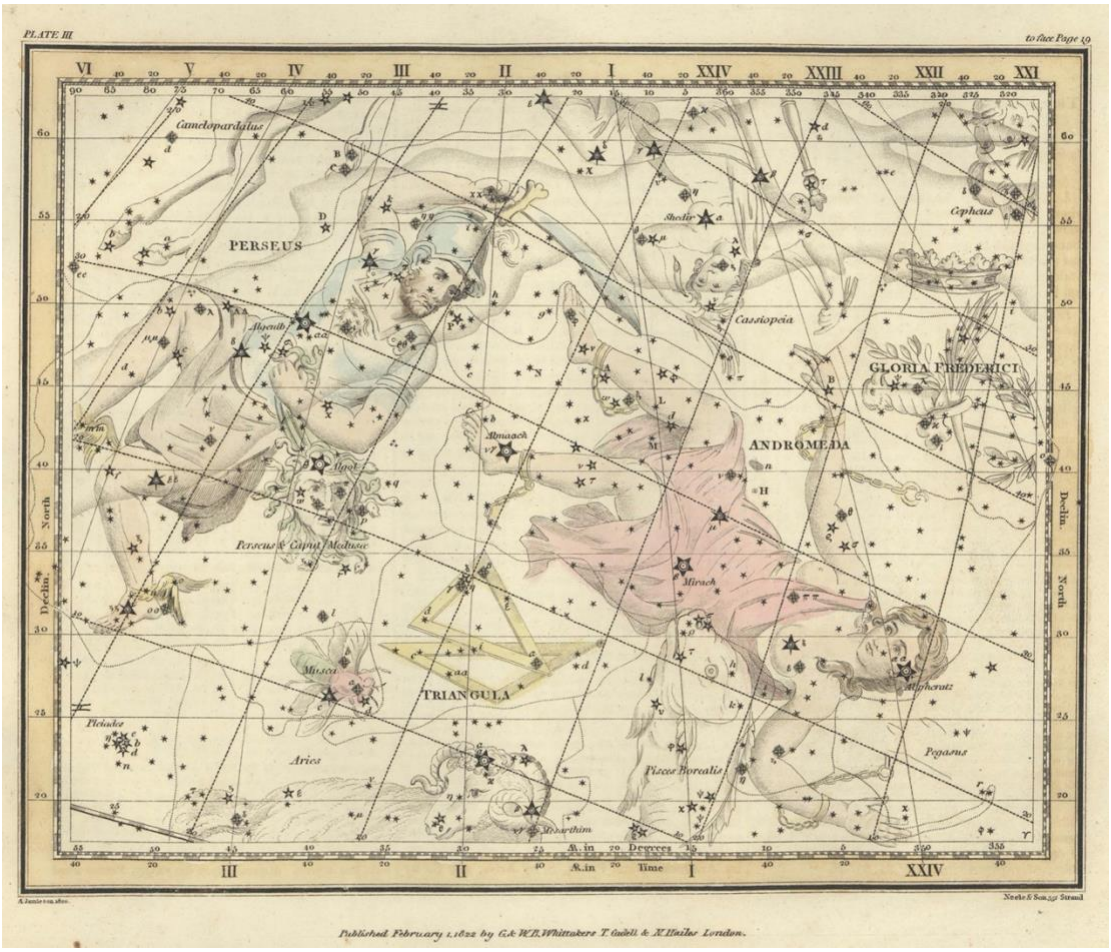
Medusa and the "Devil's Star"

Medusa's power—that anyone who gazes into her eyes will be petrified—is already well-known to modern readers. Medusa's name and petrifying ability continue to be widely featured in various forms of popular and subcultural works.

The battle between Perseus and Medusa is one of the most classic "battle scenes" in Greek mythology. Perseus, bound by a pact, was to obtain Medusa's head. During his campaign against Medusa, he received help from several gods: he

obtained a shining shield from Athena, allowing him to see Medusa's location through the reflection of the shield without looking directly into her eyes; he obtained a sharp sword from Hermes; and he received a helmet of invisibility from Hades, enabling him to quickly escape the pursuit of Medusa's sisters after successfully ambushing and beheading her.

The combination of shield, sword, helmet, and Medusa has become a common element in the constellation Perseus in classical star charts. Perseus is commonly depicted in Western star charts as an armored warrior, holding a sword above his head in his right hand and the head of Medusa in his left.



[Image] Perseus as depicted in the 19th-century star chart work " Atlas of the Celestial Bodies " (left). Adjacent to it is Andromeda (right).

[Image] The constellation Perseus as depicted in the popular astronomical science software " Stellarium " . Unlike traditional star charts, Perseus's right arm is shown hanging down, holding a shield.

Located to the left of Perseus, the " Eye of Medusa " is Algol (β Persei) , a famous variable star. Because ancient Western beliefs largely held that celestial bodies were perfect and unchanging, this star, with its fluctuating brightness, naturally acquired an aura of mystery and danger. It also has another frightening-sounding name: Algol, the Devil's Star , which is also its official Latin name . In the Chinese astronomical system, "Daleng" in Algol refers to the imperial tomb, further imbuing it with a sense of mystery.

Afterwards, Medusa's head continued to be used as Perseus's most important weapon in his subsequent stories. Indeed, Medusa is the most important character throughout the legend of Perseus. In fact, because the image of Medusa is so iconic, when her image is frequently used in various art, film, and game works, people tend to forget who Perseus, who defeated her, really was.

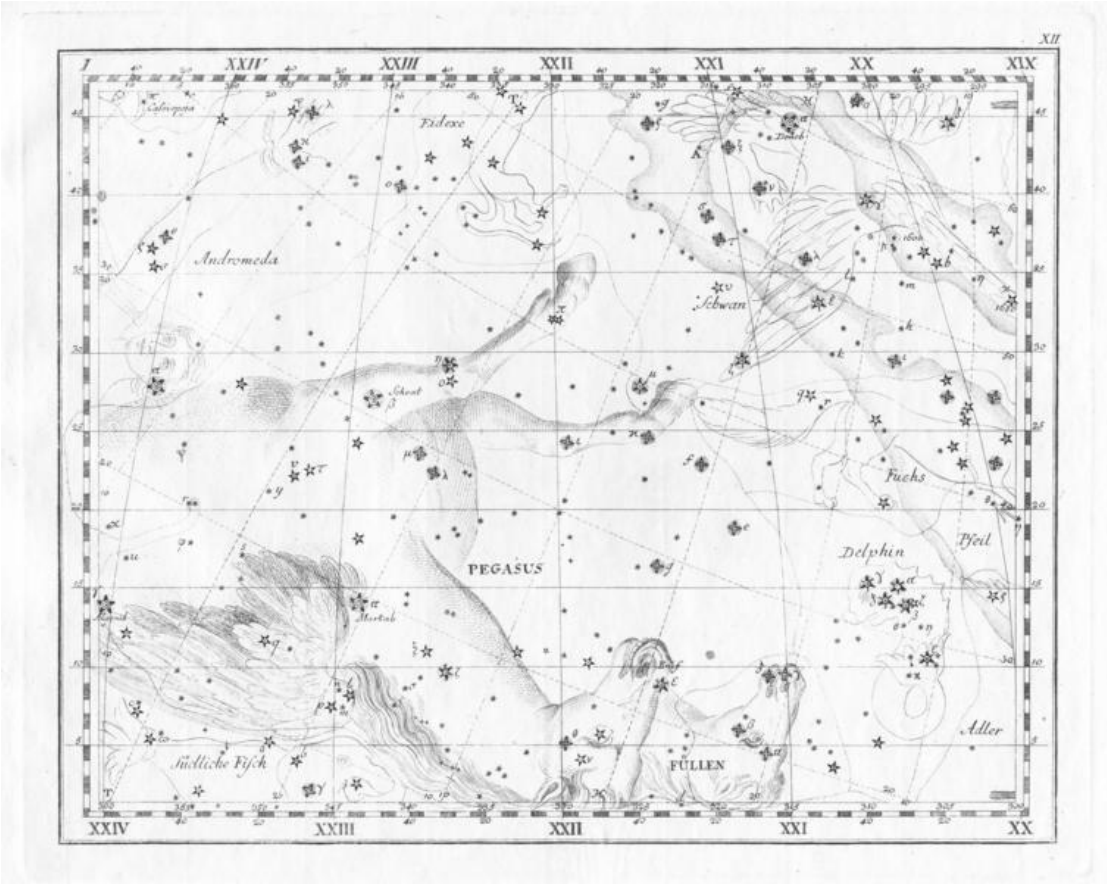
Tips: Warner Bros. once produced a movie called "Clash of the Titans", which mainly tells the story of Perseus defeating Medusa, but it received poor reviews due to a series of problems such as too many deviations from the original myth.

Elegance born from blood

One legend says that when Perseus beheaded Medusa, a white winged horse named Pegasus was born from the spurting blood. Later, after a long journey, Pegasus arrived in the heavens and became the constellation Pegasus.

The image of Pegasus probably doesn't need additional illustrations ; the anime * Saint Seiya * is enough to leave a deep impression on many people born in the 70s, 80s, and even 90s regarding the constellation Pegasus. Even setting aside this classic anime, "Pegasus" is enough to become synonymous with all winged divine horses. In the night sky, Pegasus is also a very bright constellation. The famous Pegasus Square is one of the most dazzling celestial phenomena in the northern autumn sky, well-known to astronomy enthusiasts .

Although Pegasus is the seventh largest constellation in the sky, its image in classical star charts often only shows its forequarters. The four sides of the horse together form its belly. In classical star charts, Pegasus is often depicted upside down. It's important to note that when viewing classical star charts, we often see Pegasus with "two" heads. This is not a printing error or because Pegasus himself was a two-headed mythical beast. The other head is actually Equuleus, which has no actual connection to Pegasus. Equuleus is also the smallest of the Ptolemaic constellations.



[Image] The constellation Pegasus in John Bode's 18th- century star map, "Bode's Star Map." Bode himself was one of the proposers of the famous "Titius-Bode Law."

"I was just a kind passerby."

On his victorious return journey, Perseus encountered Atlas, the Titan who had been punished by Zeus to hold up the heavens. Atlas, unable to bear the pain of supporting the heavens, demanded that Perseus use Medusa's power to turn him to stone, and Perseus agreed. Legend has it that this is the origin of the name of the Atlas Mountains in North Africa.

This part of the story is actually unrelated to the main plot of Perseus ; it's just one of many versions of Titan mythology. We mention it here because Atlas is closely associated with astronomical culture. Atlas is the Western god of geography and astronomy. Early Europeans often depicted Atlas 's image supporting the heavens in their atlases, and later, European mapmaking was also called Atlas . Star charts were no exception ; many famous star charts are named "Celestial." "Atlas" or its variants.

[Image] Atlas is often depicted in classical art as a giant carrying a celestial sphere. It is easy to see that the celestial sphere is covered with hieroglyphic patterns of various constellations.

[Image] The giant holding up the Earth in the cinematic of the strategy game Civilization VI is a classical sculpture that pays homage to Atlas. Atlas's image is always associated with maps and star charts, thus symbolizing humanity's endless spirit of exploration and adventure.

The Sea Monster and the Bound Princess

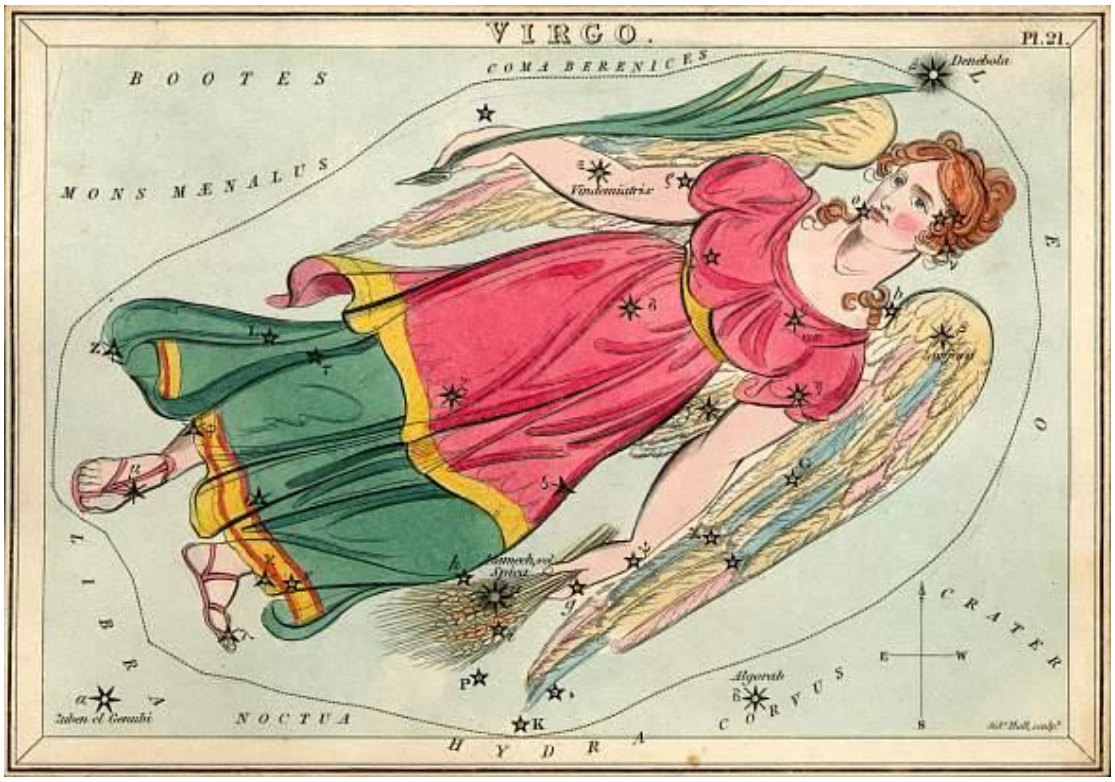
On his return journey, Perseus discovered Andromeda bound in chains. Andromeda was a beautiful princess of the Ethiopian kingdom, but her mother's boast, "My daughter is prettier than all the sea nymphs," had brought her to the brink of destruction. The mother's arrogant words angered Poseidon, who sent the sea monster Cetus to destroy the kingdom. Desperate, the king and queen decided to sacrifice their daughter to the monster to avoid annihilation. Fortunately, the hero Perseus happened to pass by, slew Cetus, and rescued Andromeda. Afterwards, Perseus married Andromeda, and this Greek version of the hero-saves-the-damsel story came to a close. After their deaths, Andromeda

ascended to the heavens to become the constellation Andromeda, her father became Cepheus, her mother became Cassiopeia, and Cetus became Cetus. The Latin names of these constellations correspond one-to-one with their original names.

[Image] Titian's "Perseus and Andromeda," depicting the moment Perseus descends from the sky to attack Ceto. Perhaps due to the limitations of the painting's size, Ceto is noticeably smaller here.

Based on their names alone, Andromeda is often confused with Virgo. In fact, their star chart images are quite different: Virgo's prototype is the earth goddess

Demeter (or, according to another account, her daughter, Persephone, the queen of the underworld), a celestial goddess. Therefore, in classical star charts, Virgo is often depicted as a goddess with wings on her back and holding grain. Andromeda, although named after a fairy, was actually a mortal in life, so she usually appears as a young girl. Some star charts even depict her being tied to sea rocks, with incomplete depictions of chains on her wrists.



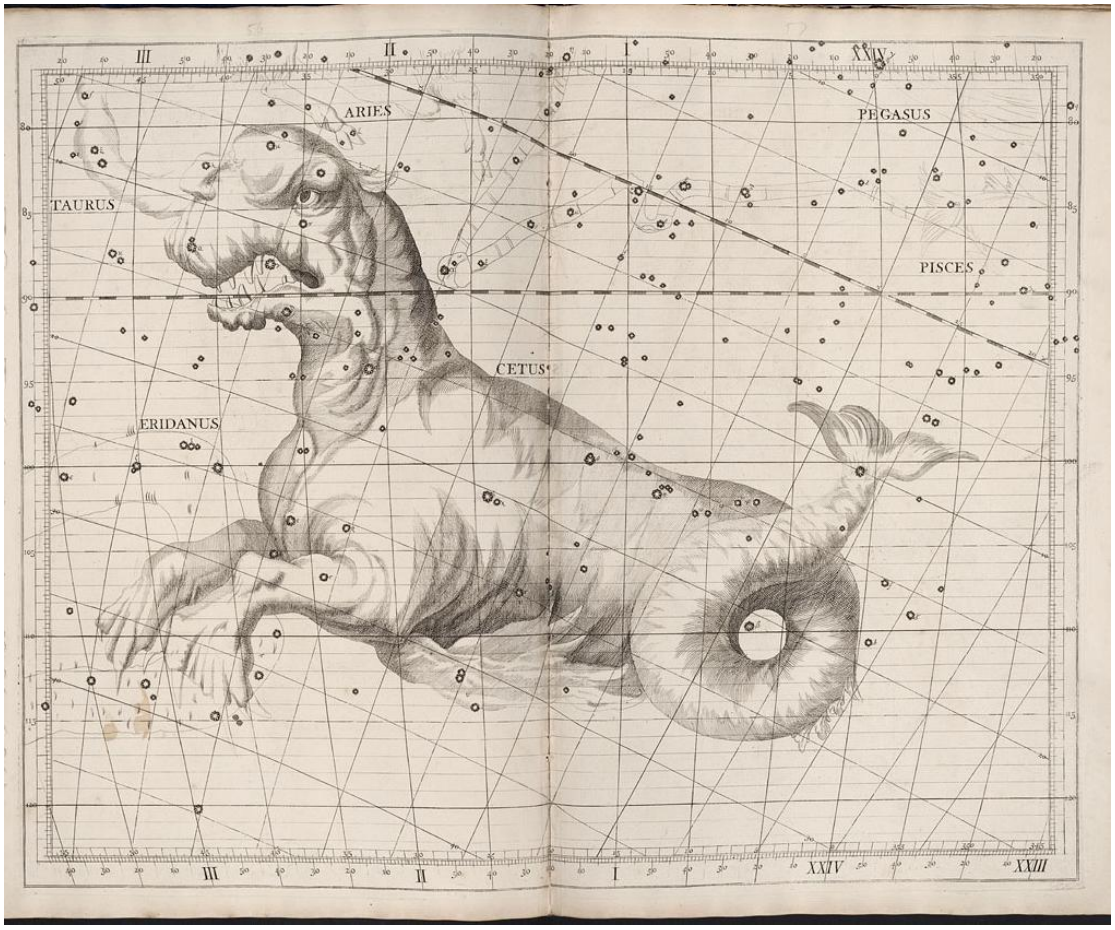
The depictions of Virgo [above] and Andromeda [below] in "The Mirror of Urania" clearly show significant differences in their shapes and expressions.

Tips: Virgo is the astronomical name, while the more commonly known Virgo is the astrological name. Similarly, Sagittarius is the astronomical name, while Sagittarius is the astrological name. Since this article does not involve astrology, the standard astronomical names will be used here.

[Image] M3 1 , taken with a QHY 410 C astronomical camera, by Terry Hancock (USA). The Andromeda Galaxy (M 31) is one of the most well-known deep-sky objects. M 31 is the closest galaxy to us besides the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds, and is visible to the naked eye in areas with good light pollution. Because it is large, bright, and beautiful, M 31 is often the first subject for beginners in deep-sky photography.

The constellation Cetus is quite different from the whale in real life. In Greek mythology, it is depicted as something between a snake and a fish; while in classical star charts, Cetus is often portrayed as a monster with the forequarters

of a land beast and the hindquarters of a fish. Cetus itself has few bright celestial bodies, which contributes to its relatively low public recognition, but it is the fifth largest constellation in the entire sky. When looking at a classical star chart, it's hard to ignore this enormous sea monster.



18th - century star map.

is little known to the general public outside of astronomy enthusiasts because its region contains few famous celestial phenomena . However, Cassiopeia is hard to ignore; its prominent "W"-shaped stars are widely known as important coordinates for finding Polaris . Cepheus and Cassiopeia never set in the Northern

Hemisphere, and one theory suggests this is punishment for their sacrifice of their daughter , making them forever orbit the North Pole without rest.

The End of the Myth

A distinguished lineage, leveling up through trials, acquiring divine gear, winning the heart of a beauty, and returning home in glory—this seems like a classic, timeless trope for a successful male protagonist. However, ancient Greek mythology often ends in tragedy. After returning home, Perseus accidentally killed his grandfather while throwing a discus in a sporting event. Yes, this is the fateful prophecy mentioned at the beginning of the story, a fate even heroes cannot escape. The grieving Perseus ultimately relinquished his claim to the throne of his homeland and returned all the treasures he had acquired to the gods. From then on, Medusa's head appeared on Athena's shield , completing the image of the fully armed goddess of war that we know today.

A century later, a direct descendant of Perseus began an even more glorious heroic tale—the story of Hercules, the greatest hero in all of ancient Greek mythology, resonates with several constellation legends, shining alongside his ancestor in the same sky.

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The majority of the Greek mythological passages selected in this article are from the original version in *The Library* . Greek mythology has a long history and numerous versions; some content may differ from other circulated versions. If you find any shortcomings in the narrative, please feel free to point them out.

Image source:

Celestial Atlas , John Flamsteed , 1729

Celestial Atlas , Alexander Jamieson , 1 822

Co elum Stellatum , Johann Bode, 1801

Urania's Mirror Anonymos , 1824

Stellarium

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