

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

# ANDROMEDA'S MORE COMPLETE STORY IN THE SKY

Originally appeared March 1, 2025

**KEY WORDS:** Perseus Andromeda Cepheus Cassiopeia Cetus Algol Pegasus Maia Hyades Pleiades Hercules Centaurus Hydra Gemini Cygnus Ophiuchus Corvus

*I gave the final-ever "live" planetarium presentation at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum on August 22, 2018. I retired soon thereafter and the aged yet still-magnificent Zeiss projector became an accessioned artifact. As part of the show, I spotlighted the group of five constellation associated with the basic story of Andromeda. But deeper digging into the mythologies of the sky turns up even more engaging connections you could use to embellish your understanding/presentations of the history of the night sky.*

### ANDROMEDA: THE BASIC STORY

Many of you may be familiar with the basics of this story. Andromeda was a princess in a mythical coastal kingdom somewhere in the vicinity of the Horn of Africa. Her parents, King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia, were very proud of her. The Queen, who was quite vain, bragged about Andromeda's great beauty, especially after age robbed her of her own youthful looks. Cassiopeia's bragging-by-proxy became well known throughout the kingdom. Who wanted to argue with the Queen? And besides, Andromeda's great beauty was obvious for all to see.

Everything was OK until Cassiopeia's boasting got really out of hand. She not only proclaimed that Andromeda was the most beautiful *person* in the kingdom, she also included the group of sea nymphs that lived offshore. They were collectively called the "nereids" because they were the favorites of Nereus, the King of the Sea. His anger was so great that he plotted a particularly-cruel punishment for the King and Queen. He sent a serpentine sea monster named "Cetus" to ravage the kingdom. Cetus' attacks were very damaging, and many of the King's subjects were being killed, so Cepheus made haste to the Oracle at Delphi to find out how he could appease Nereus and make Cetus depart. Alas, the advice Cepheus received from the fumarole-whacked priestess was that the only way Cetus would leave would be for Andromeda to be sacrificed to it.

This is an old-fashioned story, so I hope it comes as no surprise to you that Andromeda was not consulted in this matter, and before she knew it, she found herself chained to a seaside rock, awaiting her gruesome fate that would save her country.

Then, in the proverbial nick-of-time, a hero by the name of Perseus, astride the back of the great winged horse, Pegasus, espied the damsel in distress, swooped down, and slew Cetus with a mighty blow from Hermes' sword. An enormously-grateful Cepheus and Cassiopeia gladly awarded Perseus Andromeda's hand in marriage. As this is an old-fashioned story, you will not be surprised to know that she was not consulted in that matter, either.

However, it would seem that Andromeda was not too opposed to her new fate. She would bear nine children with Perseus.

All six primaries in the story are now **constellations** in the sky: **Cepheus, Cassiopeia, Andromeda, Perseus, Pegasus,** and **Cetus**. The Head of Medusa is also there (marked by the star, **Algol**, a contraction of the Arabic Rās al Ghūl, the Head of the Demon). After the fall of the Library at Alexandria, the seat of astronomical learning moved to the Arab world. They retained the Greek constellation asterisms, but used their own names for the stars, most of which we use today.

But who was this guy, Perseus? Where did he get his divinely-given weapons? How did he acquire a horse with wings? The answers have some connections with constellations, too...

## THE STORY OF PERSEUS

King Acrisius of Argos was a troubled man. He was much more succession-minded than Cepheus. He wasn't getting any younger, and his wife had only borne one child, a daughter named Danaë, who as a woman could not inherit his throne. He, too, traveled to Delphi to find out if he would ever have a male heir. The volcano-gas-besotted priestess there gave him horrible news, after which I would wager that he needed a change of toga. He would never have a son, but his daughter, Danaë, would, and her son would certainly kill him some day.

Acrisius was in a quandary. He knew he couldn't kill Danaë outright, as the gods punished severely those who killed family members (or guests). But he could keep her away from any men; think prison-sized chastity belt. He had a big tower built that was lined with thick bronze, leaving only a small hole at the top big enough to pass material up and down, but too small to allow access. And there she was, all alone, pining for companionship.

The opening at the top defeated all attempts at a conjugal visit, but not all of those pursuing Danaë were mortals. The greatest philanderer of them all, Zeus himself, was on the prowl. In due time, Danaë's time came due, and she delivered a baby boy. She named him "Perseus," and hid him away from her father. The concealment tactic worked at first, but a toddling son-of-Zeus was another matter. Aghast, Acrisius plotted against his daughter and grandson. Again, directly killing them would bring divine wrath (particularly so given Perseus' father, a relationship Acrisius did not know about). His solution was to seal both of them in a wooden box and cast them into the ocean. Away they drifted amongst the Greek isles.

The weather started getting rough, the tiny box was tossed. Without some intervention from the gods, it surely would be lost. The box set ground upon the shore of a small and lonely isle, where an elderly fisherman named Dictys found it, broke it open, and was astonished to see a

beautiful woman and her child inside. He took them to his home, and he and his wife generously provided shelter and support. Danaë wanted to keep a low profile, and lived quietly while Perseus grew to manhood, learning the fisherman's trade from Dictys.

Danaë stayed clear of Acrisius, but trouble came anyway. Dictys had a brother named Polydectes, who was his total opposite in terms of demeanor and kindness. Polydectes was a cruel tyrant, ruler of the island, and he "took a fancy" to still-beautiful Danaë. The only problem was Perseus, who was very protective of Mom. Polydectes had the same prohibition against killing Perseus directly, but he could send him on a mission from which he would not likely return.

A nearby island was the home of the Gorgons, a fearsome sister trio of monsters named Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa. The first two were immortal, but Medusa could be killed, but only a great risk. A single glance at any one of the sisters would turn one permanently to stone.

Polydectes' plan was diabolical. He announced his impending marriage (without specifying the bride), and sent out lavish invitations to many, including Perseus. Marriages at that level required gifts more expensive than Perseus could manage, but Polydectes mentioned to Perseus that the head of one of the Gorgons would be the best wedding present of all.

Nobody knew exactly where the Gorgon Island was, or how one might go about not getting turned to stone. At this point, Perseus received some divine support from Hermes and Pallas Athena. Hermes served as his guide, and gave him his personal sword, a weapon of great power, and a set of winged sandals. Athena gave him a cloak of invisibility, a "purse" that could expand/contract to hold any object, and a section of her shining armor, with the warning that he could look at Medusa's reflection in the armor without danger, but a direct look would lithify.

[Herein lies another astronomical connection. Pallas Athena had but one parent, Zeus; she grew from a bud on his forehead. Hermes, however, was the son of Atlas, a Titan, and **Maia**, one of the seven sisters comprising the Pleiades! Other sources have Atlas as son of Iapetus, brother of Epimetheus and Prometheus, and father of the **Hyades** and **Pleiades**.]

Travel trials and tribulations ensued, but finally Perseus made it to Gorgon Island, where to his lucky amazement, he found all three Gorgons asleep. A quick Athena-guided blow with Hermes' sword decapitated Medusa. Perseus found the head by feel and quickly placed it in Athena's magic bag. Then he watched with amazement as a great winged horse, Pegasus, sprang up from the blood of Medusa. The other two Gorgons awoke with great anger, but Perseus quickly mounted up and used the cloak of invisibility to escape safely. He was flying home when he saw Andromeda's plight.

After dropping Andromeda off with her grateful parents, Perseus went looking for his mother. He found that Polydectes was on a rampage over Danaë's refusal of marriage. She and Dictys had taken refuge, but Perseus learned that Polydectes and his foul supporters were holding a banquet. He made a grand entrance in the banquet hall, wearing the brightly-shining armor from Athena. All present looked at him in wonder; all present were looking at him when he

opened Athena's bag; all present became instant statues. Perseus proclaimed Dictys to be King of the island.

Perseus then took his mother to Argos in an attempt to reconcile with Acrisius, in spite of being cast into the sea by him so long ago. They found that Acrisius had become very unpopular and had been driven from the city, but that he was attending an athletic competition in the north, so off they went. Perseus after all was a son of Zeus, so he was attracted to the competition to show his stuff. He hurled the discus far over the playing field and into the crowd, striking Acrisius in the head, killing him and fulfilling the Oracle's prediction of long ago.

## THE DESCENDANTS OF PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA

Perseus was Acrisius' grandson, and since Acrisius had no sons that meant that Perseus would become the King of Argos. However, a killing, no matter how justified or accidental, required banishment. Perseus ended up trading Argos to a cousin in return for the Kingdom of the Tiryns, a much smaller and less-powerful kingdom in the Peloponnese. Perseus and Andromeda founded the soon-to-be-great city of Mycenae and started making babies. They would have seven sons and two daughters:

**Perses:** The first was a son, Perses. He would eventually travel to Asia, where he founded a new race of people, the Persians.

**Alcaeus:** One of the princes of Mycenae; his most notable offspring was his grandson, Amphitryon, who accidentally killed his uncle, Electryon in a fit of anger over cattle. His uncle Sthenelus drove him from Mycenae, along with this pregnant wife, his niece Alcmene, whose brothers who had died in a battle with the Taphians. Creon, the King of Thebes, absolved Amphitryon of guilt; the two defeated the Taphians, after which Alcmene gave birth to two sons: Iphicles (by Alcaeus) and Heracles (aka **Hercules**, by Zeus). Add another constellation to the story!

**Heleus:** Fought with Amphitryon against the Taphians.

**Mestor:** His wife, Lysidice, gave birth to Hippothoe, who became the mother of Taphius, by Poseidon. Considering that his grandchild was the founder of the group his brothers fought against (and ignoring the time warp necessary), I'm guessing it would be an awkward family reunion.

**Sthenelus:** He was the father of Alcyone, not one of the Pleiades; her mother was Nicippe, and she witnessed at least some of the labors of her cousin, Heracles. Hyllus, one of the sons of Heracles by Deianira (who inadvertently killed Heracles with the bloody Shirt of Nessus), killed Sthenelus. Some stories suggest that Nessus was placed in the sky as the constellation **Centaurus**. More think the Centaurus namesake was Chiron, who was wise, modest, and civilized, unlike other centaurs. Chiron was the tutor to notable Greeks such as Achilles and Asclepius. He was accidentally wounded by Heracles with an arrow dipped in the blood of **Hydra**, the sea monster. Being immortal, Chiron could not die, but he remained in agony continuously. Heracles asked Zeus to free Prometheus from the punishment meted out for his

stealing of fire from Olympus and giving it to the people. Zeus' demand for a human sacrifice for Prometheus' freedom, and Chiron volunteered. IMHO, that makes Chiron a better Centaurus! Sthenelus' throne passed to his son, Eurystheus, who would later force Heracles' Twelve Labors.

Electryon married Anaxo, his niece (daughter of Alcaeus and sister of Amphitryon).

Cynurus: His only claim to fame is that he led a group of colonists from Argos to the east coast of the Peloponnese.

Gorgophone was a Mycenaean princess who became both Queen of Sparta and Queen of Messenia. Her name means "Dragon Slayer," a reference to Dad's feat. She has an interesting family tree, too; her son Tyndareus became the King of Sparta, and was the "mortal father" of Helen of Troy, Clytemnestra, Castor and Pollux (**Gemini**), and Timandra, the Queen of Arcadia (Zeus apparently was no stranger to Leda, Tyndareus' wife. Zeus' favorite disguise for this string of affairs was to appear as a swan, a ruse he so much appreciated that he put the swan in the sky as the constellation **Cygnus**). Another son, Icarius (not Icarus), was the father of Penelope (Odysseus' wife), and her daughter, Arsinoe, in some accounts was the mother of the medical wonder, Asclepius, by way of Apollo. Asclepius is honored in the sky as the constellation **Ophiuchus**. The Romanized version of this story has Asclepius being the son of Apollo by a mortal named Coronis, whose later infidelity to Apollo was revealed by a raven snitch named Lyciscus, who is now commemorated in the sky by the constellation **Corvus**.

Autochthe, the second daughter, married Aegeus, which made an alliance between Argos and Athens.

***So add seven more constellations to the original six for the more complete mythological story of Perseus and Andromeda!***

Sorting out this family tree is a real chore, what with the multiple wives, semi-incest, obviously-mythological components, and many versions of history out there. The [generations prior](#) to Andromeda and Perseus were weird, too. But this more-complete story, however inaccurate it may be, does explain a lot of the present-day constellations!

**Egad, what a messy family tree! And why am I thinking about the [lyrics](#) of "[I'm My Own Grandpa?](#)"**

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The Wikipedia entry for Perseus: <https://www.greekmyths-interpretation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/D24-Heracles.jpg> Wikipeda entries for the other players in this story are useful, too.

Last Edited on 01 May 2025

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