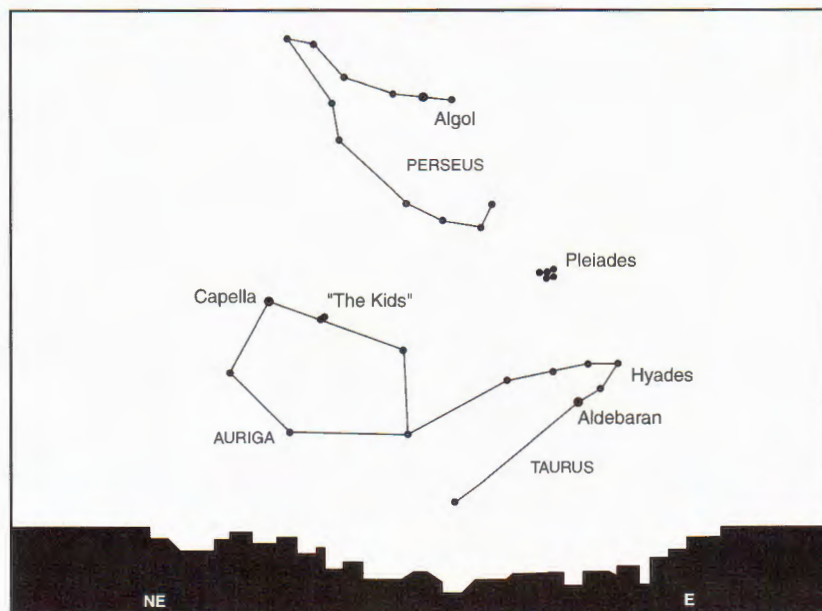


Who is Auriga?



LOOKING EAST-NORTHEAST AT 6:00 P.M ON DECEMBER 15, 1996

During the latter half of autumn, the stars of the constellation Auriga the Charioteer rise over the eastern horizon in the early evening sky. The appearance of this pentagon-shaped constellation signals the onset of winter to sky watchers. By the end of winter, Auriga is a very prominent constellation that appears almost directly overhead.

It is thought that Auriga is depicted as a charioteer because its brightest star, Capella, is known as the "goat star," and a group of nearby stars are known as "the kids." The connection is that charioteers, sort of wagon masters, were responsible for maintaining the livestock levels for the households they served. In many illustrations, Auriga is shown with young goats draped over one arm while managing the reins of the chariot with his free arm.

Others believe that Auriga is actually Neptune (or Poseidon), the God of the Seas, who always traveled by seahorse-drawn chariot when he left the ocean. This theory is sup-

ported by the proximity of several other constellations associated with the myth surrounding Neptune and the arrogant Queen Cassiopeia. Angered by Cassiopeia's bragging, Neptune banished her into the sky to circle the North Star and spend half the year upside down. He also chained her daughter Andromeda to a rock along the coast and sent the sea monster Cetus to devour her.

Fortunately, Perseus came riding by on the back of Pegasus the Horse, carrying the head of the slain Medusa in one hand. Our gallant hero made quick work of Cetus and freed Andromeda. The constellation of Perseus appears just above Auriga, with the star Algol representing the head of Medusa. The other constellations mentioned in this story appear just to the west of Auriga and Perseus.

Sky events

Geminid Meteor shower: The Geminid meteor shower (Perseids' winter counterpart) reaches its peak during the early morning hours of

Friday, December 13, a lucky day for meteor shower watchers.

A meteor shower occurs when the Earth passes through a cloud of debris left behind by comets or asteroids. The Geminid shower is unique because it originates from 3200 Phaethon, an Apollo asteroid. The orbital path of an Apollo asteroid actually crosses the Earth's, which results in a spectacular shower. Only Apollo asteroids can create a meteor showers because they travel between the Earth and the Sun. Asteroid debris that causes meteor showers is unique because comet debris is the primary source of most meteor showers.

Comet Hale-Bopp: This comet might be visible to the naked eye, as it moves slowly across the boundary between the constellations Ophiucus the Serpent Bearer and Serpens the Serpent.

Evening planets

Jupiter: Low over the southwest horizon at sunset.

Saturn: Over the southern horizon at sunset and sets around midnight.

Moon phases

December

Last Quarter - December 3
New Moon - December 10
First Quarter - December 17
Full Moon - December 24

January

Last Quarter - January 1
New Moon - January 8
First Quarter - January 15
Full Moon - January 23
Last Quarter - January 31

Bob Riddle is the planetarium director of the Kansas City School District at the Southwest Math & Science Magnet High School; Bob Riddle's home page, *Que Tal*, describes the current sky: http://oz.sunflower.org/~starwalk/current_sky.html.