

On the SCOPE skies

Soar with Pegasus and friends through the skies of Greek mythology.

In the autumn months, the skies noticeably lack bright stars. The brighter stars of summer, including such constellations as Scorpius, Sagittarius, and Capricornus, move to the western skies near the horizon and become increasingly difficult to see. At the same time, some of the winter stars in the constellations Taurus and Orion start to appear over the eastern horizon. Between the setting summer stars and the rising winter stars are the stars of the fall constellations, most notably Pegasus, Andromeda, and Perseus—major figures in Greek mythology as well as in the sky.

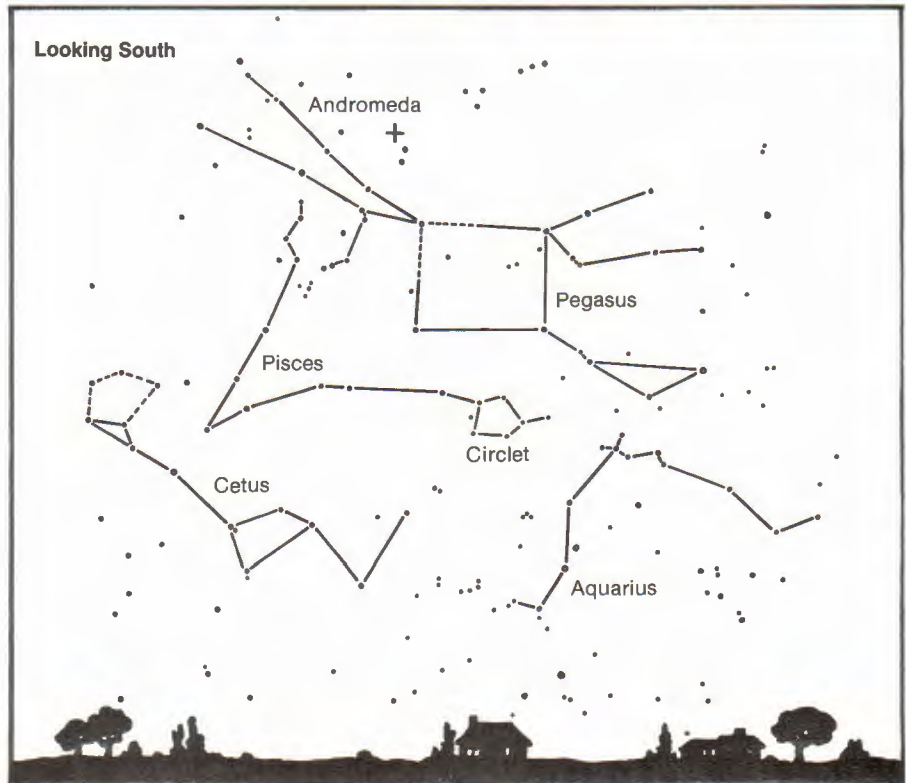
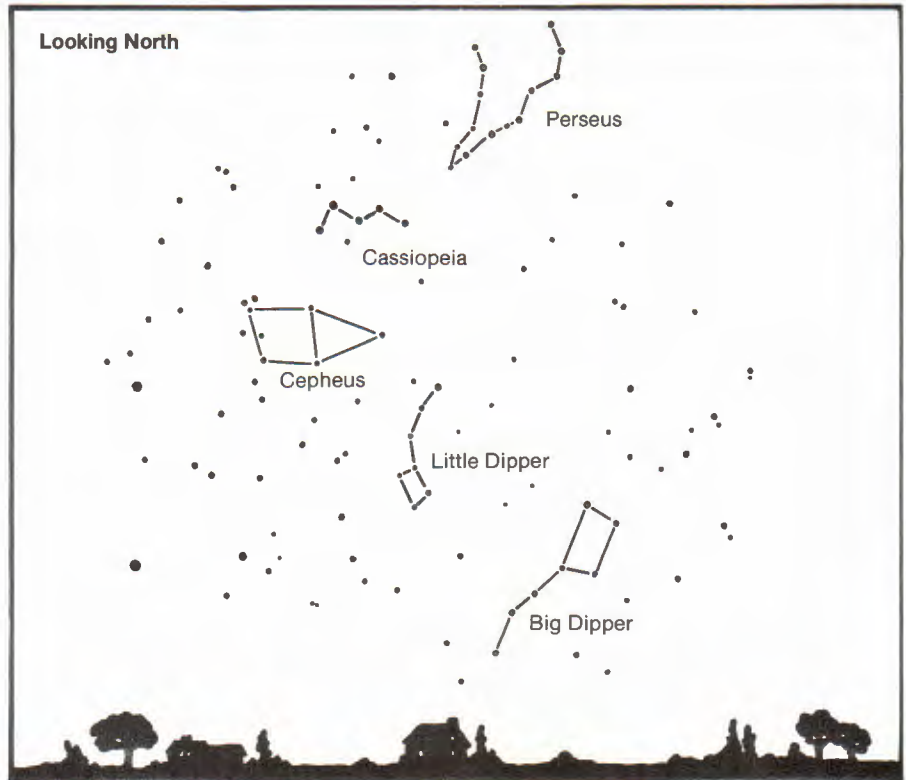
Pegasus to the rescue

On a clear, starry evening, the winged horse Pegasus appears almost directly overhead. The body of Pegasus is easy to locate as a large square and is therefore often referred to as “the Great Square” of Pegasus. The constellation consists of only the front half of the horse and is depicted with its front feet pawing at the sky as if, in accordance with some tales, it is rising up through the clouds or sea. In Greek mythology, Pegasus was instrumental in the rescue of Andromeda, the princess of Ethiopia.

According to the myth, the boastful and arrogant Queen Cassiopeia had angered Poseidon, the god of the seas, by claiming to be fairer than the beautiful water nymphs, the Nereids. In retaliation, Poseidon created a sea monster, Cetus, to attack and destroy Cassiopeia’s people and their herds. In desperation, the King, Cepheus, decided to sacrifice his daughter Andromeda to appease Poseidon.

Just as Andromeda was being chained to a rock on the sea coast about to be attacked by Cetus, the hero Perseus flew by on Pegasus, carrying the head of the Gorgon, Medusa, in a leather bag. Perseus had arranged with Cepheus to rescue Andromeda in exchange for her hand in marriage.

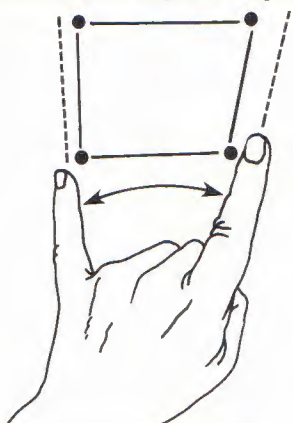
When Cetus arose from the sea, Perseus quickly pulled Medusa’s head from the leather bag and held it up for Cetus to see. Cetus instantly turned to stone and was no longer a threat to Andromeda. Later, Perseus and Andromeda had a beautiful wedding, and they lived prosperous and happy lives.



Art by Max-Karl Winkler

When viewing the fall evening sky, face north and look for Perseus just east of overhead in a Y-shape, almost as though he is straddling Pegasus. Cassiopeia, composed of five bright stars in an M-shape, appears just below and to the west of Perseus. Cassiopeia's husband Cepheus, shaped like a house on its side, lies below and to the west of his wife. Andromeda, best viewed when facing south, lies nearly overhead between Perseus and Pegasus. Down toward the southeast horizon is the long constellation Cetus the monster.

In addition to learning about the heroic role he played in mythology, you will want to become familiar with Pegasus for practical reasons. Because of its nearly exact dimensions of 15 degrees on each side, the Great Square serves as an excellent scale for estimating distances across the sky. In fact, the distance between your little finger and first finger, at arms length, is also approximately 15 degrees. Use the Great Square as a grid to adjust your fingers more precisely.



Water constellations

Pisces the Fishes wraps around Pegasus from the south to the northeast. The constellation depicts two fish tied together at the tails, with the star Al Risha, "the cord" marking the knot where the fish are tied. The fish to the east of Pegasus is known as the "Northern Fish," and the "Western Fish" is located below Pegasus. Its head is depicted by a five-sided figure outlined by faint stars known as "the Cirlet".

Bob Riddle is the planetarium director for the Kansas City School District, at Southwest Magnet Math & Science High School.

According to Roman mythology, the two fish are said to represent the Goddess Venus and her son Cupid, who were attacked by Typhon, a monster-dragon able to live in fire and flames but not water. Venus (who was born out of the foam of the sea) and Cupid transformed into fish and escaped from Typhon by swimming away. Their escape is commemorated as the constellation Pisces, sometimes referred to as "Venus and Cupid."

Southwest of Pisces is the constellation Aquarius the Water Bearer. Most cultures recognize this star pattern as a man pouring water from a jug. Looking south, the Y-shaped group of stars to the right of the Cirlet marks the jug. (Look for the man's elbow, the crook at the star alpha.) A stream of water pours down toward the horizon east of the jug.

Solar system positions

Sun: Located in Libra (astronomically as opposed to astrologically)

Mercury: Low over the eastern horizon just before sunrise

Venus: Not visible this month

Mars: Rises over the eastern horizon about two hours after sunset

Jupiter: Rises over the eastern horizon after midnight

Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune: Visible throughout early evening over the south-southwest horizon

Moon phases

Full Moon - October 4

Last Quarter - October 11

New Moon - October 18

First Quarter - October 26



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