

# *Preface*

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STORYTELLING is one of the most engaging of human arts, and what greater inspiration to a storyteller's imagination than the stars of night. My interest in star tales has its roots in a series of skywatching guides that I produced in conjunction with the great Dutch celestial cartographer Wil Tirion. As I came to describe each constellation I found myself wondering about its origin and the way in which ancient people had personified it in mythology. Astronomy books did not contain satisfactory answers; they either gave no mythology at all, or they recounted stories that, I later discovered, were not true to the Greek originals. In addition, many authors seemed unaware of the true originators of several of the constellations that have been introduced since ancient Greek times. I decided, therefore, to write my own book on the history and mythology of the constellations, and a fascinating undertaking it proved to be.

My theme has been how Greek and Roman literature has shaped our perception of the constellations as we know them today – for, surprisingly enough, the constellations recognized by 21st-century science are primarily those of the ancient Greeks, interspersed with more recent additions. To this end, I have gone back to original Greek and Latin sources wherever possible; for a list of sources and references see pages 211–13. While I have attempted to recount the main variants of each myth, and to identify the writer concerned, it should be realized that there is no such thing as a 'correct' myth; for some stories, there are almost as many different versions as there are mythologists.

I should also make clear what this book is not about: I have not tried to compare the Greek and Roman constellations with the constellations that were imagined by other cultures such as the Chinese, Egyptian, or Hindu. Such a diversion would have taken me too far from my intended task. Neither have I delved too far into the confusing morass of speculation about when and where the very first constellations originated. Indeed we may never be able to provide

convincing answers to those questions from the fragmentary information available. In this second edition of the book, though, I have provided additional background about the origin and history of the constellations that have been introduced by astronomers since ancient Greek times including 24 now-obsolete figures that gained at least some degree of currency.

Since ancient astronomers regarded each constellation as embodying a picture of a mythological character or an animal, rather than as simply an area of sky as defined by today's surveyor-astronomers, it seemed natural to illustrate each constellation with a picture from an old star map. Most of the illustrations I have chosen come from either Johann Bode's *Uranographia* of 1801 or John Flamsteed's *Atlas Coelestis* of 1729, probably the two greatest star atlases of all time. These celestial charts are works of art in themselves, and are among the most elegant treasures bequeathed to us by astronomers of the past. The constellations give us a very real link with the most ancient civilizations. It is a heritage that we can share whenever we look at the night sky.

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Brentford, 2018*