

Auriga: Myths and Retcons(tellations)

Intro

Jordan: Hi, I'm Jordan.

Kit: And I'm Kit.

Jordan: Welcome to Starry Time. Where stars plus lines

Kit: equal stories.

Jordan: Today we're going to be continuing our exploration of the constellation Auriga, with a focus on the history and myths of this constellation.

Background

Kit: Given that Auriga has some very bright stars, as we discussed last week, it's probably not too surprising that this area of the night sky has some lore attached to it, even before the Greeks and Romans. So, for example, the stars in this part of the night sky were part of the White Tiger of the West, the Vermilion Bird of the South, and the Three Enclosures in Chinese astronomy and some specific stars in this area of the night sky were associated with Chinese asterisms of chariots for celestial empires and the grain harvest.

Jordan: The Bororo People of Brazil have seen these stars as part of a caiman constellation. And if you don't know what a caiman is, it's a smaller relative to an alligator or a crocodile that lives in South America. And various cultures have had associations with this bright star, Capella, including it as the heart of a deity and the Mother of all stars. And in Babylonian Star Lore, it was part of a goat shepherd's crook, i.e. the little, staff they used to control the goats. And the constellation was associated, of course, with harvesting and springtime.

Kit: I also read that Bedouin groups saw this area of the night sky as a herd of goats. So we're definitely getting some hints of goat here.

Jordan: Ah. yes. The aroma of farms and mountains and other places goats may live. Barns, towers to be discussed.

Kit: Yes. Yeah, we'll talk about that in our creature corner this month. So don't nobody worry. We're gonna talk goats. So Auriga is one of the constellations from Ptolemy's second century Almagest. But you might be shocked to learn that our guy Ptolemy was, um, kind of taking some liberties with this part of the night sky. Basically went from this constellation that was a goat or goat herder, um, but of course, the Greeks are really interested in this charioteer character. And so Ptolemy kind of just, like, smushed them together. um, so we then end up with a charioteer, but also goats involved. And it seems like this is probably due to this merging, changing interpretation and meaning of the night sky. And we'll definitely talk about the goat myth in our asterism, um, for this constellation. So today, instead of talking about Capella and the goats, we're going to focus on the mysterious charioteer.

Myth Retelling

Jordan: All right, let's get to it. Who was this charioteer?

Kit: Well, as usual, the answer to this is kind of complicated. So Ian Ridpath wrote a book called *Star Tales* and identified three different possibilities for who the charioteer is. And there are a couple of others that crop up on Wikipedia and other places. And so today we're just going to focus on the three most common myths associated with this charioteer.

Jordan: Yeah, we're going to focus on the most common myths because we do got to make choices on this podcast. But of course, we will post more about the other myths you can learn about in our show notes or on our socials, so keep an eye out for those.

Kit: Mhm. We're at starrertime pod on the Universeodon server on Mastodon. Or we're also starrertimepod on Twitter.

Jordan: So let's start with the most common or most popular myth that states the charioteer was a hero named Erichthonius of Athens.

Kit: It's a very long name. maybe this is why Ptolemy didn't name the charioteer. He was like, Erichthonius is just, it's too much.

Jordan: It's certainly a mouthful. Yes. Erichthonius is an early king of Athens, and the origin of his births, in typical Greek fashion, are a little bit ick.

Kit: Zeus being Zeus?

Jordan: This time I have to say, shockingly, no.

Kit: Hm.

Jordan: The story goes that Athena, the maiden, goddess of war and wisdom,

Kit: Who I, this is very important, I must interrupt you because I got to play Athena in the fifth grade musical we did about the Trojan War and Odyssey. It was very, very important and formative for me.

Jordan: This is the most Kit anecdote I've ever heard in my life. So Athena goes down to visit Hephaestus, aka Vulcan, in Roman mythology, who is the

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Jordan: god of the blacksmiths. So, of course, when we talk blacksmiths here, we're talking metalwork, we're talking fire and also volcanoes. This is where you go to get some weapons made.

Kit: Mhm. Of course.

Jordan: And Hephaestus, who you might recall is married, but constantly being cheated on by Aphrodite sees Athena and is like, all right, Athena. All right, Athena.

Kit: I mean, Athena is Hephaestus half sister because they're both children of Zeus. um, though, and this is kind of interesting, Hephaestus is the child of, you will never believe this, Zeus and Hera.

Jordan: I mean, it's a tough household to grow up in, for sure.

Kit: Yeah.

Jordan: So Hephaestus chases after Athena, and in typical Greek myth fashion, tries to force himself onto her. She fights back and, hey, there's no real nice way to say this, but she does get some of his semen on her thigh during this struggle.

Kit: Yuck

Jordan: Ick. Very ick. Anyways, Athena is understandably disgusted and wipes away the offending bodily fluid. However, this bodily fluid lands on Earth, and from it, a Erichthonius is born.

Kit: I hate it so much.

Jordan: Other stories will say that he was simply the son of Hephaestus and that Athena decided to take care of him because Hephaestus was an unavailable bad dad, just committed to work and, um, metallurgy.

Kit: I mean, Hephaestus doesn't have the best role model, so.

Jordan: Oh, because his dad, Zeus?

Kit: Right.

Jordan: Yeah, that's tough. Well, also, his Mother is Hera

Kit: Yeah. Tough.

Jordan: Yeah, it's tough to be Hephaestus. Anyways, Erichthonius he may just be bodily fluid turned into body, but there are other myths about his early life that also insist that he was part serpent or that Athena wanted him hidden in some ways that mortals violated. But either way, he was protected as he grows up by Athena. And as an adult, he drives out a usurper of the Athenian throne and manages to become King of Athens. From there, he basically founded festivals for Athena. And his big claim to fame is making the four horse chariot, which is known as the quadriga,

Kit: Which is, of course, an iconic symbol of ancient Rome and the entire classical era, for sure.

Jordan: At least one version of the myth suggests he created this quadriga, or quadriga, because he had some kind of issue with his feet or difficulties walking. But we do know he loved racing chariots. And Zeus was like, that's my grandson. Let's put him out in the night sky.

Kit: Well, I mean, this myth definitely started really weird and gross, but the ending seems pretty good, even though I see nary a goat.

Jordan: Nary a single goat.

Kit: So the second myth has some similarities, but also a lot of differences from Erichthonius's myth. So, in some versions, this charioteer, Auriga, was Myrtilus So Myrtilus like Erichthonius, is a child of a god.

Jordan: This time it's gotta be Zeus right?

Kit: Still not Zeus! So instead, Myrtilus is said to be the son of Hermes, and his mother is of ambiguous origins. Maybe an Amazon, maybe a nymph, maybe just a regular lady. We just don't really know.

Jordan: Yeah, that's unusual, because it seems if you're gonna know one of the two parents, that would be the one that, gets recorded.

Kit: Yes. So we don't know. um, Myrtilus is not a King, but he is a king's charioteer. So you know the guy that drives the King around in the chariot. But the King he works for is like, kind of intense. And he's particularly intense about his beautiful daughter.

Jordan: Ah. he has a beautiful daughter. Don't they all?

Kit: It sure seems like they all do. So this king's daughter is named Hippodamia. And of course Myrtilus is in love with her.

Jordan: I mean, of course, she's beautiful. What more do we need to know? Myrtilus I can't blame you.

Kit: But he's a little scared to ask her dad to court her because her dad is super intense, as I mentioned. So her dad, anytime a suitor comes to pursue her or to ask to court her, her dad challenges them to the death

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Kit: to a chariot race.

Jordan: Eek. A little overprotective, even by ancient Greek standards. This is a lot.

Kit: Right. So basically the suitors come and the King is like, you can only marry her if you can escape with her by chariot. So, like, he puts her in the chariot with the suitor and they have to make it to a certain place. And, um, if they can make it to that place without getting killed, then they get to, um, get married. And, um, unfortunately for the suitors, Myrtilus is really good at his job. And the King keeps catching the suitors and then beheading them.

Jordan: I can't imagine that's traumatizing at all for Hippodamia but...

Kit: Anyway, one day a suitor called Pelops comes to town, and for some reason, Hippodamia is just kind of taken with him and she really doesn't want him to get beheaded. So from here, there's two sort of divergent stories of this myth. So in the first version, Hippodamia asks Myrtilus to allow them to escape, basically, like throw the race somehow. And in the second version, Pelops bribes Myrtilus into throwing the race by a pretty gross means.

Jordan: Oh, no. What's the bribe?

Kit: So the bribe is that Myrtilus can have the first night with Hippodamia before. You know, Pelops marries her.

Jordan: This is disgusting. This is awful.

Kit: Yes. So either out of the goodness of his heart or because, ew. Myrtilus agrees to the bargain and he loosens the wheels of the chariot. It goes out of control, the wheels fly off, the King is tossed to his death and Myrtilus lives somehow. So then we're in a bit of an awkward situation because Myrtilus is alive and so is Pelops. And in both versions of the myth, Pelops decides that the easiest way to deal with this is to throw Myrtilus into the ocean to his death. Now, it's either because Myrtilus told Hippodamia, about the ahem gentleman's agreement, or, you know, just for existing, just for being there and being an awkward sort of third wheel, but either way, gets thrown to his death.

Jordan: Just know, if you're Myrtilus don't bargain with this guy. It's not going to end up the way you think it's going to.

Kit: But you will be happy to know that on Myrtilus's long way down to the ocean, he curses Pelops's family, which lasts for many future generations. And then he's put into the night sky, because I don't know why.

Jordan: This one's not great, Kit.

Kit: Mm mm. Not great.

Jordan: And I'm sorry to say the myths don't get less tragic with the final common understanding of who this charioteer was.

Kit: Onwards we go.

Jordan: Unlike our last two charioteers, this one doesn't have a god as a dad. But close enough, this kid is the son of Theseus.

Kit: Theseus himself might be a demigod or maybe just the son of a different king of Athens, but, um, if you're not familiar, Theseus is basically the one that kills the minotaur.

Jordan: So, in this myth, this focuses on Hippolytus, who is Theseus's son.

Kit: Not to be confused with Hippodamia. That's different. um, but hippos is the Greek word for horse, so there's lots of names, um, in Greek mythology that are related to horses, and his name actually means destroyed by horses. So, spoilers.

Jordan: Hippolytus is the son of Theseus and one of the Amazons, either Hippolyta or Antiope. The most famous version of this myth comes from Euripides in a tragedy titled Hippolytus.

Kit: It's very creative.

Jordan: Hey, when it works, it works. We don't mess with Euripides. So Hippolytus is living his princely life in his kingdom with his dad, Theseus the demigod, and his stepmother Phaedra. Now, to be very clear, they are not related.

Kit: Oh, no. That caveat's never good.

Jordan: Phaedra is unrelated to but falls in love with Hippolytus.

Kit: Mhm.

Jordan: And some versions of the myth say this is due to a curse from Aphrodite

because Hippolytus worships Artemis and vows he will never love anyone or marry anyone else.

Kit: Yep. See, it's Quests and Curses all ties together the theme.

Jordan: You hear that? That was a curse.

Kit: It was a curse. Mhm.

Jordan: So Aphrodite takes offense to this and makes Phaedra fall in love with Hippolytus. Other versions of the myth leave this part out and say Phaedra

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Jordan: fell in love with Hippolytus. Regardless, Hippolytus spurns her advances, either because of his aforementioned vow to Artemis or because he's like, um, um, you're my stepmom, and you're married to my dad. I mean, we can hope that's what he thinks. But anyways, in most versions of the myth, Phaedra's response to this is to kill herself, either because she's heartbroken or driven mad, or she wants to prevent herself from acting on these feelings that she's either been cursed to or developed on her own free will. But before she dies, Phaedra writes a letter to Theseus and accuses Hippolytus of pursuing her.

Kit: The myth definitely gets more explicit than that, but let's just leave it, with that for now, I think.

Jordan: Yeah. Cause regardless, Theseus does find out about this supposed affair, and

he prays to the god Poseidon, who brings forth a bull from the sea that scares Hippolytus's horses. And in response, they go into a frenzy and manage to kill him.

Kit: Destroyed by horses. Indeed. Well, there we have it. Three very different myths, none of which have anything to do with goats.

Myth Analysis

Jordan: A common theme among them, I mean, I'd say chariots, but we don't actually even know if Hippolytus was in a chariot or just riding some horses. Dot, dot, dot.

Kit: Right? Yeah. This is a really tough group. Like, we have the inventor of the four horse chariot. We have a charioteer who loves a princess and gets dead. And then we have poor Hippolytus, who's just cursed by Aphrodite and dies by horses getting spooked.

Jordan: I mean, not the most cohesive set of stories. So I guess I don't think we have any other choice but just take them one by one.

Kit: Yeah, it makes as much sense as anything else.

Jordan: So I think that Erichthonius myth is giving us the invention and importance of the Quadriga chariot and then linking this invention to some form of divineness. So this one's probably the most straightforward. I mean, the gross birth myth, bodily fluid, um, notwithstanding. But, yes, this is a very important invention, and it came from very important people, period.

Kit: Yep, that one makes sense, right, doing the work of explaining how someone could come up with something this cool. And making that person larger than life makes sense. Myrtalis's story, to me is completely different, and it falls into the consequences of treachery and betrayal. Right. He betrays his King and himself, in a way, and he pays the ultimate cost for this.

Jordan: It has a more moralistic tone to it, for sure. And the last myth is getting more into the issue of family and inappropriate relationships, which, again, it's pretty rich, coming from this pantheon, but it does show us that gods are allowed to do things that mortals are not permitted to do. Again, this distinction is made clear over and over again in these myths. So maybe highlighting the power of the gods and the differentiation between what is permissible for gods versus what mortals are able to do, this myth served to reinforce that very important point.

Kit: Yeah. And this idea of a married, older woman infatuated with a younger man shows up in other Greek myths as well. Um, and this particular version is written as a tragedy, which is one of the three genres in ancient Greek theater. And tragedies are really about these big stories of life, helping to understand and make sense of the world as people are living them. And we see a lot of elements of that here, especially around Theseus's actions, which ultimately leave him without a son or a wife. And so, um, I think one of the reminders from this is to take in information, to gather information before doing something you know, that you can't undo.

Jordan: Kit, I will say I'm excited for some retconstellations of this myth that aren't tragedies. I can get enough of that from the news every day, am I right? I mean, let's take a quick break and then return with some reconstellations of this myth.

Retconstellations

Welcome back to our segment, retconstellation. In this segment, we reimagine, reboot, and revise the myths of our monthly constellation in hopes to either modernize them, subvert them, or deepen the story of this monthly constellation. Or sometimes our goal is just to make them a little less cringy. So will you start us off this week, Kit?

Kit: Yeah. So I actually have two ideas. um, and both of them are just about ditching the other myths just totally. I just ignored them completely. So the

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Kit: first suggestion I have, as long as we're throwing out names People that could be the charioteer. um, my first is to make Auriga the Spartan princess Cynisca, who was born in 1442 and was the first woman to win the Olympic games in the event of chariot, and she actually won it twice.

Jordan: I think this is a great choice. We're going to make it someone who actually existed in history, and we want to make it underdog story. Let's go with someone who defied all the odds and then proved it wasn't a fluke and won the Hippodrome Olympic racing not once but twice. So, Cynisca I think that's a pretty good choice if we want to try to tie this into something that has a historical relevance. But what was your second idea?

Kit: Well, the second idea was inspired by a post from a friend of the pod on our socials showing a majestic woman in a gown, cape and a chariot being pulled by two goats. And I saw this and I was like, this is instantly the most inspiring photo I've ever seen.

So, um, to make this mythological, I'm now saying that Auriga is the adopted daughter of Sagittaria, which everyone knows is my mythological centauress, who created the bow and arrow and founded the Amazons in my retcon of the constellation Sagittarius. And so Auriga is, um, this adoptive daughter of Sagittaria. And you know what? She is very good friends with Pricus's goat children. Who is Pricus? Well, you'll have to go back to season one, episode one, for the details. This is related to the myth of Capricornus, so definitely check that out. And so Auriga is friends with Pricus's goat children, and she supported them in their decision to become goats instead of part fish, part goats. So in return, the goats were always very happy to see her and they were very good friends. So one day with all this setup, Auriga was wandering the woods and she saw a fire in the Amazon homestead and she heard fighting. And she knew.

Jordan: Uh-oh!

Kit: Yes, very dramatic. She knew she needed to get home quickly to fend off the attackers. So she constructed a chariot that could be pulled by goats and rode it into the battle. The fearsome sight of this majestic charioteer being pulled by supernatural goats put the attackers into a panic and they were treated without any further bloodshed. And Athena put her into the night sky for her cunning and bravery. And that is my retcon of Auriga.

Jordan: That's incredible. So good. So, so good. I'm just grateful I got to be here for that. I will say this, one of my retconstellations did involve creating a goat charioteer.

Kit: Great.

Jordan: um, combination. I also wanted to fuse these two parts, but what I came up with

lacked a lot of the style and substance of what you were going with. But that does. I did think I had two to bring to the table. But now, in fact, I only have one.

Kit: Well, I want to hear it.

Jordan: Perfect. So, in my reconstellation, Auriga is just a simple goat herder. And his life, you know, it's pretty unremarkable, but he's content. He drives his ox cart every day along dusty roads. And then one day, our good friend Auriga, he witnesses a marvel, something he's never seen before. A chariot. and its golden wheels, Kit, they spin like the sun itself. And the horses, they gallop with divine grace. Auriga has never seen anything like this. A simple goat herder with an ox cart. This is a revelation. An instrument of power and speed and destiny. And Auriga, his heart races as he vows to master this creation. So Auriga abandons his ox cart, abandons his goat herd, leaving them all by the roadsides. And he transforms his days and his nights into dedicated study. He learns the art of chariotry. The balance, the speed, the precision. And he dreams of racing across the plains, wind in his hair. Gods as his witness. His goats, meanwhile, remain unattended. Unattended. And the villagers

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Jordan: whisper, I think Auriga has lost his mind. And with time, Auriga's obsession, it did consume him. He fashioned his own hubris chariot. Its wheels were carved from ancient oak. And news spread that he was practicing driving circles in his meadow faster than any charioteer had ever been before. News spread one day of a race. A great chariot race. Kings, gods, mortals, would all be in attendance. And Auriga, his heart raced. This would be the culmination of years of obsession.

Kit: Mmm.

Jordan: And the day arrives, and Auriga stands at the starting line with the reins in his hand. And his chariot, it gleams, and the gates open. The crowd holds its breath, and Auriga's horses surge forward. Years of obsession finally paying off. And he races faster and faster and faster than any mortal had ever raced before. But, Kit, obsession blinds reason. And in his fervor, in his excitement, Auriga veers too close to the edge, too close to the crowd. His chariot topples, wheels splinter, horses scatter. And he lays over the top of the boundary amongst the crowd, bruised, humbled, broken. And as he lays in the crowd, he nurses his wound. And a wise old shepherd says to him, chariots are but tools. Mastery lies not in their speed, but in the heart that guides them. And you know what, Auriga? He listened. He gave up this life of chariot racing, and he returned to his goats, his ox cart, and his simple rhythm of life. But now he drove his oxcart and attended to his goats with a newfound wisdom.

Kit: A much better moral than all of the other myths that we've heard. Yeah, I love it. I love it. Wow.

Jordan: But, yeah. We did our best to make retconstellations here that fit with our mission. If nothing else, they are hopefully somewhat less cringy than the original myths. But. All right, Kit, let's go to our final segment of Retconstellations.

Oracle AI

Kit: This section is when we ask Oracle AI about our myth and give, them an opportunity to retconstellation it. So the first thing that we did was ask the Oracle what

the most popular myth of this constellation was, and it told us all three of the ones that we've already outlined. So then we insisted that it pick the most well known and interesting one. And after a lecture about subjectivity, the Oracle decided the most interesting myth was the one of Myrtilus. So then we asked the Oracle to summarize the problematic themes of the Myrtilus myth. And the Oracle said, "the myth of Myrtilus contains several problematic themes that may raise ethical concerns or provoke critical analysis." And these included betrayal and treachery, exploitation and manipulation, revenge and violence, abuse of power and lack of agency for Myrtilus. So says the Oracle, "these themes reflect complex ethical and moral considerations inherent in the myth of Myrtilus inviting critical examination of power dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and the consequences of deceitful behavior."

Jordan: Okay, Oracle, you kind of neglected the whole overprotective dad, daughter relationship, but okay, sure.

Kit: Well, I mean, it's normal for your dad to challenge to the death every person that tries to pursue you.

Jordan: Totally.

Kit: All right, Jordan, would you kindly voice the Oracle in their retelling that they say, fixes all these problematic elements?

Jordan: Kit, it is my honor to speak on behalf of the Oracle this month. "In the kingdom of Elis, Myrtilus a humble charioteer, finds himself caught in a web of love and duty. Encouraged by the king's daughter, Myrtilus aids Pelops, her beloved, in the chariot race against her father, King Oenomaus. Despite his conflicted heart, Myrtilus yearns

for peace and harmony among those he cares for. When Pelops emerges victorious, Myrtilus celebrates the triumph of love over adversity. However, as gratitude turns to greed, Pelops

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Jordan: betrays Myrtilus casting him into the abyss. In his final moments, hanging in the abyss, Myrtilus forgives. His spirit embracing the heavens as a beacon of reconciliation and forgiveness itself. This retelling highlights themes of love forgiveness and the power of redemption, offering a gentler interpretation of this enduring myth."

Kit: So this is just the original myth, except there's no curse at the end.

Jordan: I was hoping I wasn't the only one who noticed. This is the first time I felt like, the chat was just, like, genuinely lazy. I mean, I know that's anthropomorphic. I know it's not actually lazy.

Kit: And the wild part is that when we put it in initially, the very first thing that came back was literally the original myth. And I was like, no, no, Oracle, we need to, we need to address those problematic elements. And this is what it came up with.

Jordan: If, AI Oracle is getting worse as time goes on, that's, only good news for you and me.

Outro

Jordan: This brings us to the end of our episode this week. Please join us next week for the pop culture segment of our exploration of the constellation Araiga, the charioteer.

Kit: This has been Kit

Jordan: And Jordan.

Kit: Sisters. Lovers of stars and stories.

Jordan: and we'll see you next time

Kit: On Starry Time. [Music].

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