

Orion: 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 Orion with a focus on the history and myths of this constellation.

Kit: As we discussed in our cosmic background episode last week, Orion is a bright and very recognizable constellation in the night sky. And it looks like a convincing stick figure.

Background

Jordan: So even though the character Orion is a Greco- Roman invention, other cultures were also able to interpret this. Whether or not they designated this was a Hunter, a hero or a god, that depends on the civilization.

Kit: Yeah. So in Ancient Babylonian astronomy, this constellation was the true shepherd of Anu, who was a messenger god that walked between the realms of the gods, humans, and the dead. But there's also some suggestion in Babylonian and Sumerian star lore that this figure was Gilgamesh and was sort of depicting the story between Gilgamesh and the Scorpion Men. So that's another possible interpretation. In Hungarian star lore, this figure is Nimrod the giant, who was a famous hunter and the father of twins that are related to the origins of the Hungarian People. And these are just two examples, because when I was looking up and learning about the history of this constellation and what people associated with this constellation myth wise, I was really overwhelmed. I was like, it's so much so, so, so much so. I would just strongly recommend checking out Judy Volker's website, which has a whole collection of myths and lore behind this constellation. There was, yeah, it was so much. I was really overwhelmed. This constellation has a very long history and has been interpreted and seen in the stars in a lot of different ways.

Jordan: And that's not even discussing how some other cultures see the three stars in Orion's belt, which are their own constellation, according to some. Some see it as the spine of a bison, which is the way the Lakota People. And in Scandinavian stories, they see it as Frigg or Freya's distaff, aka a cursed spindle. We don't talk nearly enough about cursed spindles these days.

Kit: yeah, it's so, so popular. And so I think we're definitely leaving a lot on the table maybe to come back to Orion, especially to focus on some of those other cultural myths. Um, but today, I think we're just gonna focus mostly on the Greco- Roman myth of Orion the Hunter. But that's not saying we're not gonna come back some other time for some of those other myths.

Myth Retelling

Jordan: All right. We have actually met this quote unquote hero in previous episodes. If you listen back to our episode, on Scorpius in season one, you'll hear one of the myths on how Orion was killed. Spoilers. It was due to a scorpion. [laughter]

Kit: yeah.

Jordan: shocker. I know.

Kit: Um, yeah, so the premise is basically that Orion was maybe killed by a scorpion for basically saying he would kill all the creatures on Earth because he was such a good hunter that he could. He could just do it. That myth really stayed with me as I was preparing for this episode. And I'm just gonna have to go ahead and admit that I'm coming in with an anti Orion bias, even though, as we talked about in our cosmic background section, I love this constellation. Like, this constellation speaks to me. I love it. I love looking at it. I'm inspired by all the cool stuff in this constellation, but. Whoo. Orion. The myth. Eek.

Jordan: Let me just tell you the myth of Orion that we covered in Scorpius, where Artemis just sends a scorpion to kill him. By far, my favorite of all the versions. Very simple, but let's back it up a little bit, and let's talk about Orion's origin and birth.

Kit: So there are two popular versions of the origins or birth of Orion, much like his death. In the first mythical origin, he is the son of Poseidon, who is the god of the sea, and a mortal woman called Euryale. So this means he's a demigod, and this is how his giant status, um, is being explained. And it's not clear from what I read if they mean,

like, literally a giant, like a mythological giant, or he's just, like, really big. Not

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Kit: clear. Um, but he's a giant, and he's also able to walk on water or to, like, manipulate the waves in some way because he's the son of Poseidon.

Jordan: And I guess Poseidon's wife is much more chill than Hera because there's, like, no evil stepmother backstory.

Kit: Uh-huh, yeah. All of Orion's terrible behaviors is just 100% him. But, uh, we have another origin myth first.

Jordan: The second version of his birth is a bit, um, magical, I guess you could say. In this version of the myth, Zeus Poseidon, and Hermes go to a bar. Wait, no, that's not right. They go to visit a king in Boeotia.

Kit: I think, Boeotia.

Jordan: They go to visit a King in Boeotia. The King roasts them a bull and they're like, wow, that was really good. Thank you. I've never had a hamburger before. Is there anything we can do for you? And the King is like, well, it'd be kind of cool, like, to have a son, you know? And so they're like, okay, sure. So they go take the hide of the bull and then, of course, as gods, uh, do they piss on it and then bury it on a mountain. Kind of myth that keeps coming up over and over in culture, and then they're like, okay, King guy, go dig that up in, I don't know, ten months and you'll have a son. Well, that son, well, he was Orion, and that's how he was born.

Kit: I just don't even know how to process this, um, version. I just. It's a lot

Jordan: yeah, it's certainly it's a birth story all right. But, yeah, pissing and burying things on a mountain and then waiting ten months.

Kit: Yeah. So Orion is a really interesting character in Greek myth because unlike Hercules or Peresus or Jason, the stories we have about Orion are a lot more fragmented. We don't really have a unified set of stories about him.

Jordan: Just various pieces of different mythographers. And sometimes these stories conflict or are just totally different entirely.

Kit: Yeah. Which does give us some insight into, you know, the pros and cons of the oral tradition. For sure. There is some suggestion that Orion was actually more of a regional hero and that's part, maybe part of the reason why we don't have this unified myth. So he's got this. These two different origin stories, one of which is interesting, but the surviving myths about his actual life raise some serious questions about whether this guy should be considered a hero. So, for example, one of the common myths about Orion is related to his big old crush on Princess Merope. Orion is, like, obsessed with her and goes about trying to win her hand. He clears the fifth largest island of Greece of wild animals to win her hand. So he gets engaged, and the thing is, Merope is just, like, not really keen on the marriage. And so she keeps finding ways for it to get postponed.

Jordan: Yeah. It's almost as if, like, she doesn't actually want to get married to him and they should probably call off the marriage. One interpretation. yeah.

Kit: yeah. Um. Some versions of the myth say that her father just didn't approve of

Orion. Other versions of the myth say that she was the queen of the island. So, like, not a princess, but a queen. But it doesn't really matter because Orion gets drunk and either with or without consent, has sex with Merope, at which point her father or husband, not clear which, blinds Orion and runs him out of town. And that's saying nothing about his other first marriage, to a woman that was so beautiful that Hera sent her to Hades.

Jordan: I'll get into this more in the retcon, but I'm thinking the single life might actually be a better fit for Orion.

Kit: And the weirdest thing is that Orion gets his sight back through some kind of mythical intervention, and then he goes back to try to kill the King, but the king's hiding and then goes off on his, um, adventure to live with Artemis.

Jordan: So this whole thing is that not only is he a really good hunter, he's also a giant, though there don't seem to be any popularized stories of what he hunted, unlike Hercules, who was taking on these mythic beasts.

Kit: yeah, and so maybe it's just that none of those stories survived, or maybe I'm putting this out there. Maybe he was just all talk.

Jordan: I got a feeling he might be a poser. There are, however, a number of versions of his death, including one that was due to his hubris. As we already discussed, Scorpion alert. Other versions of his death include the goddess of dawn, Eos, falling in love with him and carrying him away. But this

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Jordan: made the other gods angry, and so Artemis killed him.

Kit: Yep. So basically a classic Hera move here from Artemis killing a mortal for the indiscretions of the gods.

Jordan: Another version of the myth states that Artemis was in love with Orion and that Apollo killed him or tricked Artemis into killing him out of jealousy or something, you know, like, uh, a love triangle type of myth.

Kit: which is weird because, again, Apollo is Artemis's twin brother.

Jordan: Very Game of Thrones. A related myth suggests that Orion liked Artemis and she didn't like him back, and so she killed him for trying to make a move or for cheating at a game of discus. Um, basically the same thing. That's courtship. It's all about your discus game, apparently.

Kit: Yeah. Very unclear how the discus game is involved. It was very confusing, just like these fragments of myths. Um, we have all these death myths. We got two birth myths, and, again, very little of him actually doing anything useful. So, yeah, I already mentioned the myth with Merope. There's also another famous myth of Orion, which wasn't about him hunting animals, but was actually about him relentlessly pursuing either an Oceanid nymph or her seven daughters, the Pleiades, chasing them for so long that even Zeus was like,

Jordan: come on, bro.

Kit: yeah, like, come on. And basically ended up putting them in the sky just so they

could escape him. So there's a little bit more to the Pleiades story, but this month, we'll do our asterism on Pleiades, both in myth and astronomy. So we'll hold on to that, and we'll tell you more about that story later in the month.

Jordan: I'm excited for that one.

Kit: So, again, there are other fragmented myths about connecting Orion to other constellations, saying things like canis minor and canis major were his dogs. There are some saying that Orion hunted the hare constellation or the bull constellation. So there's all these other little myths that are connected to him, but they're not very well developed, and there's not a unified myth that says he was actually a good hunter.

Myth Analysis

Jordan: Taken together, I feel like all these myths, with their various interpretations, bring us nicely into the like, what's the point of this guy who is Orion? What's he all about?

Kit: yeah, it's kind of hard, at least with the myths that we have left.

Jordan: Obviously, in the shortened version, which I love it's just a hubris type story. Human says, nature, I'm better than you. god sends giant arthropod scorpion to say, in fact, no, you're not. Pretty cut and dry.

Kit: yeah, the ancient Greeks were really out on hubris, and also they were out on god, mortal relationships. So basically, anything that involves a romantic relationship or even

romantic daydreams between the god and a mortal ends badly for the mortal.

Jordan: And the issue of this hubris and these boundaries between gods and mortals are somewhat related if we each think about them violating the natural or right order of the world. In fact, the idea of hubris in ancient Greece was really about excess. So these stories of hubris and punishment reinforced the mythos in a similar way as making god mortal relationships extremely fraught. It emphasizes and reinforces the difference between the god and the mortals, the humans and the natural world, and seeks to put us as humans in our place.

Kit: And hubris and excess are seen as counter to logic and reason. And so I think that these stories are trying to emphasize the importance of these latter ideals. Right. The ideals of reason and logic.

Jordan: And if it's not about hubris, there is a simple fact of biology here that we could see the myth is useful for as a potential explanation for human variation. Orion is described as a giant, which might simply mean he was larger or taller than average. But if you're an ancient civilization trying to explain this variation, maybe you attribute this height and strength to a godly parentage.

Kit: Right. An extremely common use of mythology, as we've talked about before, explaining the natural world, explaining variation that we can see.

Jordan: And without more of the heroic stories of Orion, it's kind of hard to know what the purpose of his stories are.

Kit: yeah, we just don't really know what the story was trying to get at but the advantage

is that we now have a lot of room to make retcons, to make Orion into a guy that is worthy of his constellation. So let's take a quick break, and then let's retconstellation this myth into something good.

Retconstellations

Jordan: Welcome back to our segment, retconstellation In this segment, we reimagine, reboot, or revise the myths of our monthly constellation in hopes to either modernize, subvert, or perhaps even deepen the story. Or sometimes it's all we can do just to make them a bit less cringey. Kit, would you start us off this week?

Kit: Yeah. So like I mentioned, Orion is one of my favorite constellations, and learning about his mythology made me womp, womp on the constellation. Like, this guy's kind of the worst. So I wanted to make Orion into an actual hero I'm proposing to change Orion into an archer vigilante of the ancient world. So instead of killing animals or harassing people, he's kind of like a Robin Hood slash Hawkeye slash Green Arrow like character, except he's most interested in taking out people who hurt animals. He's an amazing archer who protects animals. And, that is nice. When he dies, as we all do of old age, or maybe protecting an endangered whale or something, Artemis and Gaia are like, good job, Orion. And they put him in the sky to thank him for protecting animals. And that is my retcon, and I love it.

Jordan: I love it, too. Well, Orion, just do a total 180 on your personality, and that's what retconstellations are for.

Kit: Mhm. Hmm. All right, Jordan, you've been talking about your retcons for a little while

now, and so I'm excited, uh, to see where you was with this one.

Jordan: My Retconstellations is that maybe the biggest problem with Orion is he came too soon.

Kit: Hmm.

Jordan: To me, Orion is basically an angsty gamer, but they haven't invented video games yet, so he has to go out and decide to kill everything. So in my retcon, I just want Artemis or Gaia or whoever to give him a PlayStation Greek and Buck Hunter or some other game, and he can just kill, and he can just chill out in his room and kill all the virtual animals he wants until he realizes, you know, maybe. Maybe this isn't the way I want to live, but, yeah, give him time to game out, invest in crypto, and then hope maybe he goes back to school or picks up a trade or tries to make some friends, you know? What I want for Orion is for him to work on those social skills to find a team of, like, non toxic people who show you you don't need to act this way, this boastful, arrogant way, in order to be loved and appreciated. Just chill out. Embrace the simpler things. So my retconstellation for Orion is just that he meets some good friends. Maybe he realizes that just because you can kill everything doesn't mean you should kill everything.

Kit: Hm.

Jordan: And perhaps he needed, you know, the advantage of the virtual world in order to pursue those hobbies and realize they actually were ultimately pretty unfulfilling. So, yes, that's my Retconstellation. Orion in the modern day.

Kit: Wow.

Jordan: Speechless.

Kit: Speechless. Wow. yeah, I love the idea of Orion living out the hunting on virtual creatures and instead, and then maybe being like, huh, huh. This is not the way. Yeah. Finding some people to, um, surround himself with to make him m a better person, I think that's always a good lesson.

AI Oracle

So we've given our reconstellations and we, of course, asked Oracle AI about Orion. So we started by asking, what is the most popular Orion myth, which was, of course, related to the Pleiades. So we will hang on to that for later. So then we asked the Oracle, what's the second most popular myth, which had to do with the various deaths that we discussed. So we asked the Oracle what were the problematic elements of these death myths. And the Oracle identified the following One divine intervention and the lack of agency. Two, jealousy and competition. Three, fatal consequences for minor transgressions and four romanticizing unhealthy relationships.

Jordan: yeah,

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Jordan: I don't know about the Oracle here. I mean, shout out to you. Chat GPT but maybe killing all the creatures in the world is perhaps more than a minor transgression.

Perhaps this won't bode well for our future as living organisms when the AI take over. But, hey, all right, minor transgression. Moving on.

Kit: yeah, I guess the Oracle sees the world differently. So, as usual, we told the Oracle, great, we love your analysis. Now please retell the myth, addressing the problematic elements that you've developed. So I'm just going to hand over to you, Jordan, to give voice to the Oracle.

Jordan: In ages past, when gods and mortals shared the world, the mighty Hunter Orion formed a close bond with the goddess Artemis. They roam the wilderness together, their companionship a testament to the harmony between mortal and divine. One day, the Earth god Gaia, observing their camaraderie, felt just a pang, a pang of concern for her daughter, Artemis.

Kit: Just to chime in here, Artemis is not the daughter of Gaia. So.

Jordan: here's the thing about the Oracle, the fumes are so powerful that the myths just blend together. The Oracle is going to Oracle, let's continue. Instead of resorting to jealousy, Gaia, she approaches her daughter non-canon with care, expressing her love and respect for the goddess's choices, but also sharing her concerns about potential challenges that mortals face. And Artemis, you know, she really appreciates her Mother, not Gaia, and she decides to address the matter openly with Orion. In their heartfelt conversation, they recognize the importance of balance in a relationship, ensuring that their connection doesn't disrupt the larger cosmic order.

Kit: Mm hmm.

Jordan: They have some real talk and pledge to maintain their friendship without letting it overshadow their respective roles and responsibilities. And in an unexpected twist, Gaia witnesses the maturity and understanding displayed by both Artemis and Orion, decides against throwing a giant scorpion into their life and killing them. Instead, she bestows a celestial gift upon them, a shared constellation in the night sky, a symbol of their enduring friendship and unity.

Kit: Mhm. The Oracle then offers the following analysis of their retelling. In this retelling, the emphasis shifts from divine interference and jealousy to open communication, understanding, and mutual respect. The characters navigate their relationships with agency and maturity, promoting themes of cooperation and balance rather than punitive consequences for perceived transgressions. This would be a good lesson, and I think about this a lot when I'm reading stories, how common that trope is of, like, that people don't talk to each other and that results the whole plot happening. And I'm like, this is right. It's like, literally, in so many books, you're just modeling bad behavior. Right? Like, not having transparent conversations. And then, like, the whole book hinges on this like I didn't want to tell somebody that I was afraid of heights and, you know, or whatever it is. And so it's not a very interesting story, I will give you that. And it's factually incorrect in who's Artemis's Mother. So overall, you know, it, I like our retcons better, but this isn't as bad as some of the Oracle AI myths that we've had in the past. But I agree with you. It's not the most interesting story, but it is probably a story we need to tell more often.

Jordan: Kit, you're absolutely right. Shout out to the Oracle for actually analyzing what was wrong with the original myth. No, it did not come up with a very compelling, uh, narrative. But the Maenads point, if you were just to read this as, like, a, hey, couples should talk more still way better than I'm gonna kill everything on Earth, or I'm gonna chase some women across the stars for seven years. Shout out to the Oracle. You got

this one right.

Outro

So that 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 Orion.

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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