

The Seven Sisters

In Greek mythology, the Pleiades were seven sisters: Maia, Electra, Alcyone, Taygete, Asterope, Celaeno and Merope. Their parents were Atlas, a Titan who held up the sky, and the Oceanid Pleione, the protectress of sailors.

After a chance meeting with the hunter Orion, the Pleiades and their mother became the object of his pursuit. Enamoured with the young women he pursued them over the face of the Earth. In pity for their plight, Zeus changed them into a flock of doves, which he set in the heavens. Thus the Olympian added the penalty of the absence of his wife and family to the Titan's original punishment of eternally supporting the heavens from the Earth.

Only six stars are distinctly visible to the naked eye. The ancient Greeks explained the sudden disappearance of the seventh star in various narratives. According to one, all the Pleiades were consorts to gods, with the exception of Merope. She deserted her sisters in shame, having taken a mortal husband, Sisyphus, the King of Corinth. Another explanation for the 'lost' star related to the myth of the Electra, an ancestress of the royal house of Troy. After the destruction of Troy, the grief stricken Electra abandoned her sisters and was transformed into a comet – ever after to be a sign of impending doom. Yet another story tells us she hides with the star Mizar a star in Ursa major.

The Greek legends of the disappearing star are echoed in Jewish, Hindu and Mongolian folklore: their basis in an actual event seems to be corroborated by astronomical evidence that a clearly visible star in the cluster became extinct towards the end of the second millennium BC.

In an alternative myth, the Pleiades were the virgin companions of Artemis, to the ancient Greeks, the goddess of hunting and the Moon. Whilst stalking a hind, the great hunter Orion crept into a sunlit glade, disturbing the innocent play of the sisters. They fled in alarm. His immoderate passions enflamed by their beauty and grace, he pursued them relentlessly, as was fitting for the greatest mortal hunter. In frustration, Artemis pleaded with Zeus to for his intervention. With characteristic Olympian sarcasm, he did. As the hunter closed in on his prey, Zeus transformed the sisters into a flock of doves. They flew into the heavens, beyond the reach of their pursuer, but also removed from earthly companionship with the goddess!

Artemis, enraged by these twofold masculine affronts, revenged herself on Orion. Apollo, her brother, having been affronted by the mortal hunter's prowess, was persuaded to set a monstrous scorpion to attack Orion. Not to be outdone in this, in another characteristic display of mordant wit, Zeus set the dead hunter in the heavens in a vain pursuit of the Pleiades through the night sky for eternity, with the constellation Scorpio ever chasing after Orion. Even so the Olympian had some compassion for his daughter: the path of the Moon in the heavens passes close to the Pleiades, and thus Artemis – as the goddess of the Moon – had the solace of their frequent reunions.

The Flock of birds theme might be the most ancient part of the story, the Vikings knew the Pleiades as Freya's hens. The label "Hen and Chicks" is also known in Old English, Old German, Russian, Czech and Hungarian.

The Bible contains three direct references to the Pleiades in Job 9:9 and 38:31, and Amos 5:8, and a single indirect reference in the New Testament. This latter passage (Revelation 1:16) describes a vision of the coming of the Messiah – who holds, in his right hand, seven stars...