



Orion, the mighty hunter, strides across the southern late winter skies. In this photo, he struggles to free his legs, mired in Edmonton's light pollution dome which covers the city at night, obscuring the dimmer stars in his constellation.

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The dusk has come and gone and no moon lights the night sky. It is clear, dark and cold. As time passes the fire slowly dies and everyone huddles closer for warmth. Soon, more wood is added and crackling flames dance again in a blazing fire. Golden sparks rise to the heavens, as do the eyes of our ancestors.

Overhead a myriad of stars blaze brilliantly in the blackness. As night wears on the chatter continues and ancient stories describe the groups of stars sliding slowly overhead only to dissolve in the mist of the west. Through time and imagination the stars are linked to stories of animals and objects, heroes and heroines.

So began many of the myths that have been perpetuated through thousands of year of human history. They became an integral and unique part of early cultures. The stories were told, retold and embellished and made more colorful with time.

Passed from generation to generation, first by mouth then in writing, they inspired others to see for themselves these wonderful entities emblazoned in the night sky. As man learned to write and record these stories, they became part of the culture's mythology and even religion. Lessons could be taught and learned from the lives of those great ones now immortalized in the sky. Different cultures saw the star-shapes through their own eyes and experiences, creating unique stories about these nightly figures so high above.

To the Greeks, Orion is a great hunter and the son of Neptune, god of the sea, and a nymph named Eurayle. His story, grown long and more interesting and in diverse versions, was probably recorded as early as the seventh or eight century B.C. To the Egyptians he is 'of Osiris,' part of Egyptian religion and worship. His rising also signalled the beginning of the new year.

Native tribes of North America also saw Orion as a great hero.

New Mexico's Tewa tribe referred to him as the hero Long Sash, a leader who led the tribe to freedom after a long march.

The Navajo referred to Orion as the First Slim One, using his setting in May to signal the planting of the crops. Other tribes had their own stories, sometimes using parts of Orion's body for different constellations and other hero stories.



This image is courtesy of the United States Naval Observatory Library, who gives explicit permission to use it. From Johann Bayer's "Uranometria" copper engraving.

Even today the names of these stellar heroes, heroines, animals and objects haunt many aspects of our culture. Most daily newspapers carry astrology columns and almost everyone knows the 'sign' under which they were born, the constellation in which the sun resided at the time of their birth. Even NASA acknowledges the great hunter as a spacecraft, now in development and called Orion, will be used by NASA to return men to the moon in 2020 after a long hiatus.

Orion is just one example of how stars, stories, myths and cultures have intertwined throughout the ages, enriching the cultures that created and recorded them. Over the millenia, these heroes and their constellations have been celebrated

Left: A beautiful copper engraving of a map of Orion from Johann Bayer's Uranometria. Printed in 1603, it depicts the stars of the constellation overlaying an artistic rendering of the sky's great hunter.

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and embodied in literature, sculpture, paintings, music and other art and technological forms.

In human terms the stars are eternal. Those we see today were loved and worshipped by our ancestors thousands of years ago. In the past, one had only to look upward through clear, dark skies to behold the source of inspiration and admire the stars.

Indeed, up to the time of mass artificial lighting, one could commune with these gods and goddesses of the night sky or simply sit and admire their beauty as they slowly, majestically and silently drifted by. We could appreciate what our ancestors saw in the distant past, and experience a link to their thoughts and feelings as they did the same.

However, with the onslaught of mass lighting, and deepening light pollution, the stars, the source of so much inspiration over the millenia, have faded to pale imitations of their former glory. They have grown dim, as have our memories and interest and, in our brightest towns and cities, they have virtually disappeared from view.

Like gods who are no longer needed, they have left our cultures, our hearts and our thoughts, no longer an inspiration to those who would create new works in their memory. They are no longer there to awe, inspire and fill us with wonder. They have disappeared as the lights from towns and cities have increased over time..

The Earth's cultures are worse for their loss and so are we.