

# Pleiades (Greek mythology)

The **Pleiades** (/ˈplaɪ.ədiːz, ˈpliːədiːz, ˈpleɪədiːz/<sup>[1]</sup> Greek: Πλειάδες, Ancient Greek pronunciation: [pleːádes]), companions of Artemis, were the seven daughters of the titan Atlas and the sea-nymph Pleione born on Mount Cyllene. They were the sisters of Calypso, Hyas, the Hyades, and the Hesperides. The Pleiades were nymphs in the train of Artemis, and together with the seven Hyades were called the Atlantides, Dodonides, or Nysiades, nursemaids and teachers to the infant Dionysus. They were thought to have been translated to the night sky as a cluster of stars, the Pleiades, and were associated with rain.



*The Pleiades* (1885) by the Symbolist painter Elihu Vedder

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## Etymology

Classicists debate the origin of the name *Pleiades*. It ostensibly derives from the name of their mother, Pleione, effectively meaning "daughters of Pleione". However, the name of the star-cluster likely came first, and Pleione was invented to explain it.<sup>[2]</sup> According to another suggestion *Pleiades* derives from πλεῖν (*plein* , "to sail") because of the cluster's importance in delimiting the sailing season in the Mediterranean Sea: "the season of navigation began with their heliacal rising".<sup>[3]</sup>

## Seven Sisters

Several of the most prominent male Olympian gods (including Zeus, Poseidon, and Ares) engaged in affairs with the seven heavenly sisters. These relationships resulted in the birth of their children.

- Maia (Μαῖα), eldest of the seven Pleiades, was mother of Hermes by Zeus.
- Electra (Ἠλέκτρα) was mother of Dardanus and Iasion, by Zeus.
- Taygete (Ταυγέτη) was mother of Lacedaemon, also by Zeus.

- Alcyone (Ἄλκυόνη) was mother of Hyrieus, Hyperenor and Aethusa by Poseidon.
- Celaeno (Κελαινώ) was mother of Lycus and Nycteus by Poseidon; and of Eurypylus also by Poseidon, and of Lycus and Chimaereus by Prometheus.
- Sterope (Στερόπη) (also Asterope) was mother of Oenomaus by Ares.
- Merope (Μερόπη), youngest of the seven Pleiades, was wooed by Orion. In other mythic contexts she married Sisyphus and, becoming mortal, faded away. She bore Sisyphus several sons.

Sometimes they are related to the Hesperides, nymphs of the morning star.

## Mythology

After Atlas was forced to carry the heavens on his shoulders, Orion began to pursue all of the Pleiades, and Zeus transformed them first into doves, and then into stars to comfort their father. The constellation of Orion is said to still pursue them across the night sky.

One of the most memorable myths involving the Pleiades is the story of how these sisters literally became stars, their *catasterism*. According to some versions of the tale, all seven sisters committed suicide because they were so saddened by either the fate of their father, Atlas, or the loss of their siblings, the Hyades. In turn Zeus, the ruler of the Greek gods, immortalized the sisters by placing them in the sky. There these seven stars formed the star cluster known thereafter as the Pleiades.

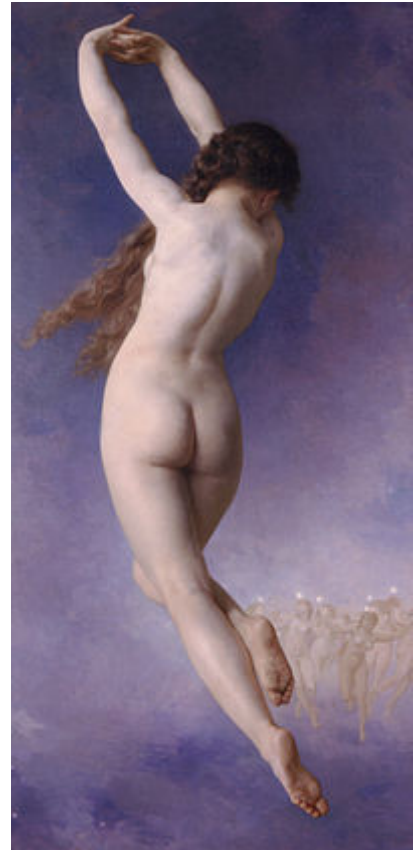
The Greek poet Hesiod mentions the Pleiades several times in his *Works and Days*. As the Pleiades are primarily winter stars, they feature prominently in the ancient agricultural calendar. Here is a bit of advice from Hesiod:

And if longing seizes you for sailing the stormy seas,  
when the Pleiades flee mighty Orion  
and plunge into the misty deep  
and all the gusty winds are raging,  
then do not keep your ship on the wine-dark sea  
but, as I bid you, remember to work the land.

— *Works and Days* 618–623

The Pleiades would "flee mighty Orion and plunge into the misty deep" as they set in the West, which they would begin to do just before dawn during October–November, a good time of the year to lay up your ship after the fine summer weather and "remember to work the land"; in Mediterranean agriculture autumn is the time to plough and sow.

The poet Lord Tennyson mentions the Pleiades in his poem Locksley Hall:



*Lost Pleiad* (1884) by William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

Many a night I saw the Pleiads, rising through the mellow shade,  
Glitter like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid.

The loss of one of the sisters, Merope, in some myths may reflect an astronomical event wherein one of the stars in the Pleiades star cluster disappeared from view by the naked eye.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

## **Alternate version**

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In the account of Diodorus, the Pleiades were called Atlantides after their father Atlas and Hesperides from their mother Hesperis, daughter of Hesperus, brother of Atlas (making him the uncle of his bride). These sisters excelled in beauty and chastity and thus, Busiris, the king of the Egyptians, was seized with desire to get the maidens into his power; and consequently he dispatched pirates by sea with orders to seize the girls and deliver them into his hands. Later on, Heracles conquered this prince when the latter attempted to sacrifice the hero.

Meanwhile the pirates who had seized the girls while they were playing in a certain garden and carried them off, and fleeing swiftly to their ships had sailed away with them. Heracles came upon these pirates as they were taking their meal on a certain strand, and learning from the maidens what had taken place he slew the pirates to a man and brought the girls back to Atlas. In return, the father was so grateful to Heracles for his kindly deed that he not only gladly gave him such assistance as his Labour called for, but he also instructed him quite freely in the knowledge of astrology.<sup>[6]</sup> A scholia also added that after this events, the Pleiades were then persecuted by Orion.<sup>[7]</sup>

Although most accounts are uniform as to the number, names, and main myths concerning the Pleiades, the mythological information recorded by a scholiast on Theocritus' Idylls with reference to Callimachus<sup>[8]</sup> has nothing in common with the traditional version. According to it, the Pleiades were daughters of an Amazonian queen; their names were Maia, Coccymo, Glaucia, Protis, Parthenia, Stonychia, and Lampado. They were credited with inventing ritual dances and nighttime festivals.

## **See also**

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- Alexandrian Pleiad
- Krittika
- Peleiades
- Parveen

## **Notes**

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1. [1] (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Pleiades>)
2. Robin Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 518.
3. "Pleiad, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, December 2014. Web. 20 January 2015.
4. *The Pleiades in mythology* ([http://www.pleiade.org/pleiades\\_02.html](http://www.pleiade.org/pleiades_02.html)), Pleiade Associates, Bristol, United Kingdom, accessed June 7, 2012
5. Marusek, James A., *Did a Supernova cause the Collapse of Civilization in India?* (<http://www.breadandbutter-science.com/IndiaCataclysm.pdf>), October 28, 2005

6. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica* 4.27.1-3.  *This article incorporates text from this source, which is in the public domain.*
7. Scholia, on Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 3.309
8. Scholia on Theocritus, Idyll 13, 25

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