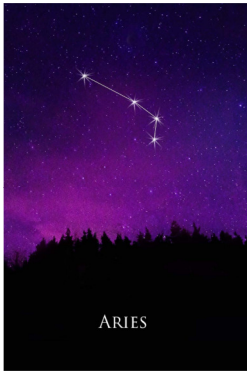


Zodiac constellations 9: Aries



'The ram' is the second smallest zodiac constellation, ranked 39th in size of the 88 constellations. Located between Pisces and Taurus, it is not very prominent, having only four bright stars. Of these, three form its most recognisable feature. Alpha, beta and gamma Arietis form a crooked-line asterism. Historically Aries was depicted as a crouched (lying down) ram with its head turned towards Taurus.



Since Babylonian times, the constellation has been a ram. In contrast to modern times, Babylonian Ari, named for a god, was the final station along the ecliptic. In ancient Egypt, Ari was associated with the god Amon-Ra, a man with a ram's head who represented fertility and creativity.

In Greek mythology, Aries was the ram whose golden fleece hung on an oak tree in Colchis on the eastern shore of the Black Sea. Jason and the Argonauts undertook their epic voyage to return fleece to Greece. Despite evidence of its historic existence, Aries was only fully accepted as a constellation by Ptolemy during the Hellenistic era.

In ancient Greece, over 2,000 yrs ago, the northern hemisphere's vernal (spring) equinox lay near border of Aries and Pisces. Because of this, Aries was described as 'indicator of reborn Sun'. Precession has now moved this point through Pisces and almost into Aquarius. However, this point, where ecliptic crosses 0 degrees on celestial equator is still called 'first point of Aries' despite its inaccuracy. The Sun passes through Aries from late-April to mid-May but is still associated with spring.

Aries has several stars with known exoplanets.

Notable features include:

- Alpha Arietis: named Hamal, the Arabic for 'ram' or 'head of lamb', is an orange giant of magnitude 2, located 66 ly away. It is visible through binoculars.
- Gamma Arietis: one of several double stars in Aries, this pair is nearly equal in size. A telescope will identify both components.
- The few deep sky objects are faint but include several pairs of interacting galaxies are visible with a telescope.
- Meteor showers including Daytime Arietids (May – July) are associated with the Marsden group of comets. Unusually, the parent body may be asteroid Icarus.

Sources: Ridpath, I (Ed) 2012 Oxford dictionary of astronomy Oxford, OUP, Ridpath, I (Ed) 2006 Astronomy London, Dorling Kindersley, en.wikipedia.org