Mon Oct 25, 2010

DEATH OF TYCHO

“Let me not seem to have lived in vain.” These were the last words of the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, who after eleven bed-ridden days of suffering, died on October 24, 1601. Working before telescopes were invented, Tycho accurately measured the positions of stars and planets, proved that comets were objects in outer space, and believed that while some planets orbited the sun, the sun orbited the earth. A popular legend surrounding the death of Tycho is that it was caused by his failure to go to the bathroom on time. Tycho was at a banquet, and did not wish to insult his patron by leaving early. As a result, his bladder burst, which killed him. However, in 1993, Brahe’s body was exhumed, and analysis of his hair revealed a high amount of Mercury. A recent book suggests he was poisoned by a rival astronomer, but it’s more likely that he accidentally killed himself, as he was also an alchemist who had regular exposure to this toxic metal.

Tue Oct 26, 2010

STUDY ABROAD: CARIBBEAN

The ancient Mayans were keen observers of the sky, taking a special interest in the positions of the sun, the moon, and the planet Venus. They used three calendar systems with 20-day months, and they had a written language consisting of hieroglyphs which can still be read today. Next spring, Dr. William Tyler and I are planning an expedition to Cozumel and Belize - the land of the Mayans; Dr. Tyler will teach students about coral reef ecology and I will provide lessons on Mayan astronomy and star and constellation recognition, including Alpha Centauri and the Southern Cross, stars which can only be found in the skies to the south. This Study Abroad opportunity will take us by cruise ship across the Western Caribbean to the Yucatan peninsula; we depart from Port Canaveral on May 14, 2011 and return on May 21st. If you’re interested in this classroom at sea and among the Mayan ruins and coral reefs, call me at 772 462-7515; that’s 462-7515. The estimated cost for this expedition is about $900.

Wed Oct 27, 2010

PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA

One of mythology’s oldest monster stories is in our evening sky. Well-placed in the east are four stars which form a large square – this is the constellation Pegasus the Flying Horse. To the north of the square there’s Cassiopeia, which resembles a letter W. Queen Cassiopeia was a boastful woman who compared her beauty to the mermaids. In punishment, the sea god Poseidon sent Cetus, the sea monster, a scattering of stars below Pegasus, to devour Cassiopeia’s daughter, the princess Andromeda, marked by several stars between Cassiopeia and Pegasus. But the hero Perseus, some stars just to the east of Cassiopeia, came to the rescue by showing Medusa’s head to the sea monster. Cetus looked at the gorgon’s snake-infested head, turned to stone and sank. Perseus then flew off with Andromeda on the back of Pegasus, and a happy ending.

Thu Oct 28, 2010

MONSTER STORY

In the constellation Perseus the hero, there is a star, over in the northeastern sky this evening, named Algol. It’s not a particularly bright star – if you didn’t know just where to look for it, you’d probably not even notice it. But it is quite an unusual star – two stars, actually. The name Algol derives from its arabic designation as “the head of the demon,” and is also the basis of the word, “ghoul.” Algol is a binary star system, and is so aligned with our planet that we can observe one star pass directly in front of the other, an eclipsing binary. When that happens, the light from this double star dims. To the ancients, this was like the winking of a demon’s eye. Algol was thus portrayed as the eye of the snaky-haired gorgon Medusa, whose glance could turn anyone who looked upon her into stone.

Fri Oct 29, 2010

CREATURES OF THE NIGHT

People long ago imagined all sorts of strange and scary animals in the starry sky. Of the eighty-eight official constellations, nearly a dozen of them are monsters or fierce creatures of the night: the three stars in the summer triangle, overhead this evening, represent man-eating birds that were chased from the Stymphalian swamps by Hercules. At sunset, the constellations of Scorpius the scorpion, Serpens the snake and Lupus the wolf are sinking into the southwest. A scattering of stars in the southeast this evening mark the location of Cetus the Whale – a sea monster in Greek mythology. Perseus the hero, over in the northeast, holds out the head of the gorgon Medusa, while Draco the dragon guards the northern skies tonight. After midnight, Canis Major rises in the southeast. He is associated with the three-headed dog Cerberus who guarded the gates of the Underworld. And before dawn, the multi-headed hydra, or swamp monster, dominates the southern sky.