

Aries

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Aries

Aries the constellation is a small, faint bent line of stars; [Aries the zodiac sign](#) is the first 30 degrees of the tropical calendar and, confusingly, no longer coincides with it at all. About 24 degrees of precessional drift have carried the sign's namesake stars out of step with the season named after them — through almost all of tropical Aries, the Sun is actually in front of the stars of Pisces, not Aries.

From 40°N, Aries is modest: three or four stars bent into a shallow crook, sitting in a relatively empty stretch of sky between the Great Square of Pegasus and the Pleiades. It carries an outsized job in the history of astronomy for a constellation this dim.

Finding it

Find the Pleiades first — they're unmistakable — then look west, back toward Pisces, for a short, faintly bent line of three or four stars. Aries also sits below and east of the Andromeda–Triangulum chain that hangs off the Great Square of Pegasus.

Best seen around 9 p.m. in December, visible from roughly October through February in the evening sky. Not circumpolar from 40°N, and genuinely faint — none of its stars beat third magnitude, so it needs a darker sky than most of its zodiac neighbors except Cancer.

The stars

Star	RA	Dec	Mag	Spectral type	Distance	Name
Hamal (? Ari)	2h 0 7.2m	+23° 27.6'	2.01	K2 III (orange giant)	~66 ly	Arabic <i>raʿs al-hamal</i> , "head of the ram" — the brightest star in Aries.
Sheratan (? Ari)	1h 5 4.7m	+20° 48.6'	2.64	A5 V, spectroscopic binary	~60 ly	Arabic <i>al-sharatan</i> , "the two signs" — originally applied jointly to Sheratan and Mesarthim, which once marked the vernal equinox before precession carried that point further along.
Mesarthim (? Ari)	1h 5 3.5m	+19° 17.4'	3.86 (combined)	A1p + A1p	~164 ly	A true binary, its two white components split by 7.6 arcseconds — one of the first double stars ever resolved with a telescope.
41 Arietis	2h 4 9.9m	+27° 15.6'	3.61	B8 V	~165 ly	Sometimes called Nair al Butain, "the bright one of Al Butain" — the belly asterism of the ram in older Arabic star lore.

Myth and history

Chrysomallos, the golden-fleeced ram of Phrixus and Helle, and the earlier Babylonian **MUL.LÚ.HUN.GÁ**, "the Hired Man," linked to the shepherd god Dumuzi, belong to [the zodiac sign's page](#) and aren't repeated here. A third, unrelated tradition landed on a similar theme from its own direction.

In Chinese astronomy, Hamal, Sheratan, and Mesarthim together form **Lou**, "the Bond" — the sixteenth of the 28 lunar mansions, governing pastures, sacrificial animals, and the supplies for sacrifice, with the dog

as its associated creature. It is worth noting without claiming any connection between the traditions: Babylon's Hired Man tends Dumuzi's flocks, and China's Bond mansion governs livestock and sacrifice, over the exact same three stars. Two cultures with no contact read the same faint patch of sky as pastoral.

The First Point of Aries

This dim constellation gave its name to the single most important reference point in positional astronomy, and still holds the name for reasons that have nothing to do with the stars anymore.

Around 2000 BCE, the March equinox — the moment the Sun crosses the celestial equator heading north — stood roughly in the stars of Aries. By the time **Hipparchus** fixed the equinox as the zero point of celestial longitude around 127 BCE, he had also discovered, in the same body of work, that the point itself was slowly moving: **precession**, the 26,000-year wobble of Earth's axis, carries it backward through the constellations at about one degree every 72 years. Ptolemy inherited both the zero point and the discovery of its drift in the *Almagest*.

The name never moved even after the sky did. The equinox now sits well inside **Pisces**, close to the Aquarius border, and is commonly said to cross into Aquarius sometime around the 26th century CE — though that date depends on which constellation boundary you use, since "the Age of Aquarius" is a term from Western astrology rather than a boundary the IAU has ever defined. The technical term "First Point of Aries" and its glyph, ♈, still mark the zero point of right ascension in every modern star catalogue — a fossil label on a coordinate, pointing at empty space near the Pisces–Aquarius line, that has carried the name of a constellation it left behind roughly two thousand years ago.

Deep sky

Aries has no Messier objects and nothing bright enough to reward casual binocular or naked-eye observing. Mesarthim itself is the constellation's best target — a clean, close double star, easily split in a small telescope, first resolved by Robert Hooke in 1664 while he was searching the sky for a comet.

Key dates

Date	Event
c. 2000 BCE	The March equinox stands within the stars of Aries — the origin of the sign's later name.
c. 127 BCE	Hipparchus fixes the vernal equinox as 0° of celestial longitude and discovers precession in the same body of work.
1664	Robert Hooke resolves Mesarthim into two stars, among the earliest double stars found telescopically.
c. 150 CE	Ptolemy's <i>Almagest</i> catalogues Aries as one of the 48 classical constellations and records the equinox's ongoing drift.
1930	The IAU adopts Delporte's constellation boundaries.
present	The vernal equinox has drifted out of Aries entirely and now lies in Pisces, near the Aquarius border — the "First Point of Aries" is a fixed name for a moving point that left the constellation behind long ago.

Related

- [Aries](#) — the zodiac sign; same name, a different 30 degrees of sky.
- [Western Zodiac](#) — the precession that pulled the sign loose from the stars.
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