

Coma Berenices

Berenice's Hair
Size: 42 of 88. Region: Northern. Season: Spring.
Origin: Eratosthenes (3rd century BCE)

Learning Leaflet: Constellations

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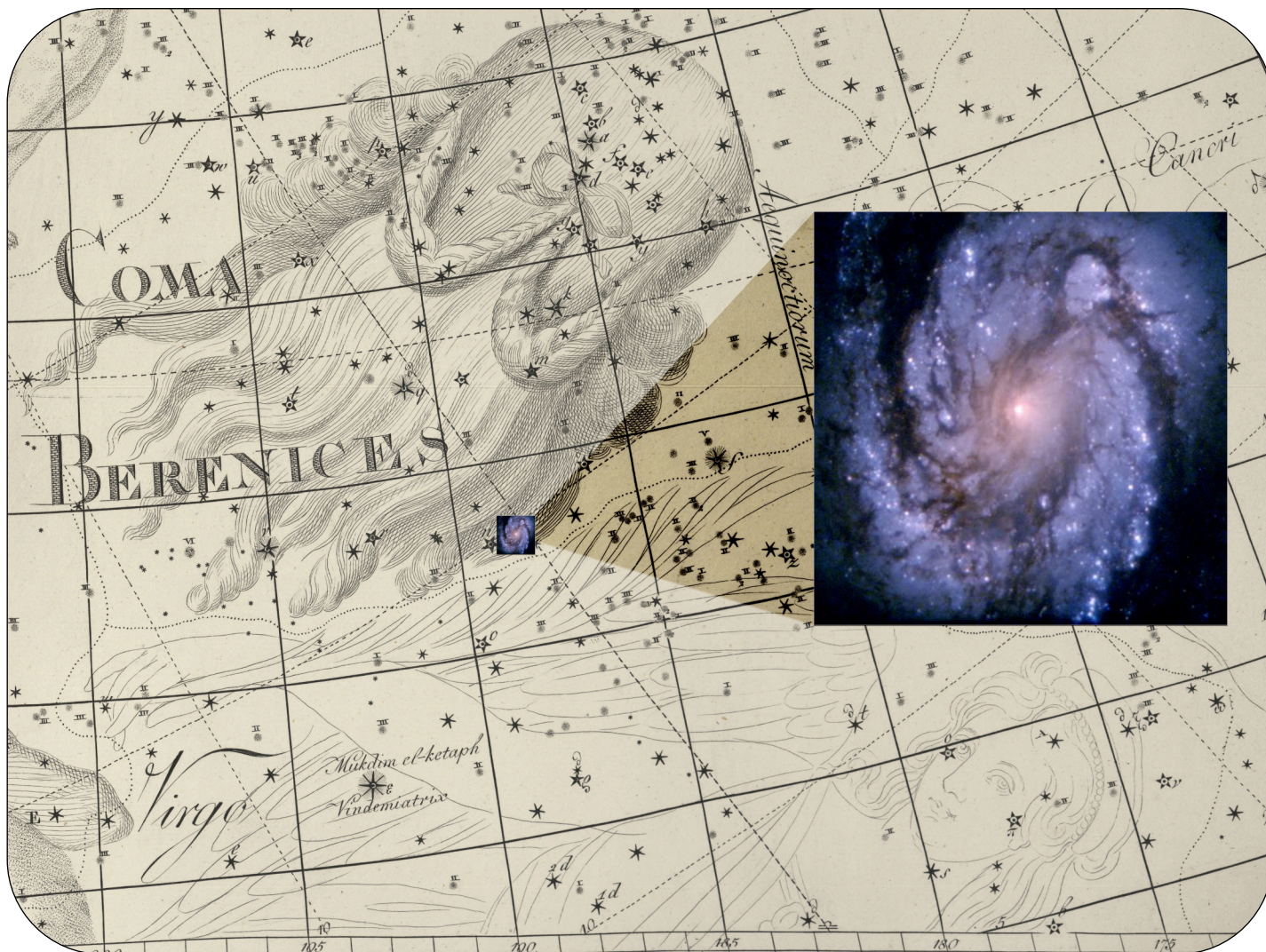
Johann Bode, *Uranographia* (Berlin, 1801)

Exhibit: Galileo's World | Galleries: Music of the Spheres; The Sky at Night, no. 17;
Space Science after Galileo (any celestial atlas)

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What modern female heroines are known both for their hair and their skill in war?

Coma Berenices | Berenice's Hair



Coma Berenices is the only one of the modern 88 official constellations named after a historical figure. It represents the hair of Berenice, Queen of Egypt (267-221 BCE), who reigned with Ptolemy III Euergetes.

Berenice, known for her horses as well as her beautiful hair, once rode to the king's defense and rallied the army against overwhelming odds.

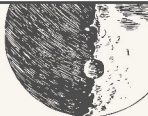

For the safe return of her husband from war, Berenice cut off her hair as a thanksgiving sacrifice to Venus. Ptolemy did indeed return, only to find his wife without her beautiful hair. To defuse his burst of ill-considered anger, the wise astronomer Conon of Samos declared that the gods had placed her braids among the stars.

Berenice's hair is mentioned in the ancient star catalogs of Eudoxos of Knidos, Aratos of Soli, and Ptolemy (who regarded it as part of Leo the Lion).

Looking in the direction of Coma Berenices and Virgo we gaze upon a "field of nebula" containing thousands of galaxies. The Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies are lonely stragglers millions of light years away from these giant clusters. If we were situated within any one of these galaxies, hundreds of neighboring galaxies would be visible in the sky as luminous balls of light brighter than the brightest stars visible here on Earth.

Shown: M100 in Coma Berenices, Hubble Space Telescope, NASA. M100 is part of the Virgo Cluster, located on the boundary of Virgo and Coma Berenices.

Kerry Magruder

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