The star catalogue presented in Ptolemy’s *Almagest* (second century AD) was probably based on the earlier catalogue of Hipparchus (second century BC). There were forty-eight constellations. Some date back many thousands of years.\(^1\)\(^2\) The far southern constellations were always below the horizon to observers in the Mediterranean so were absent from Ptolemy’s catalogue.

Over the centuries some constellations (like Argo Navis) have been broken up and renamed. Most of the southern constellations were named in the eighteenth century by Nicolas Louis de Lacaille (1713–1762). At that time the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, and many of the new constellations were named after pieces of machinery, such as Antlia (the air pump), Microscopium, and Telescopium.

Ian Ridpath has written an excellent account of the history of constellations.\(^3\) This includes obsolete constellations, such as the unfortunate sounding Turdus Solitarius. This constellation resembles a female blue rock thrush (*Monticola solitarius*, family *Turdidae*).

The modern constellation boundaries were organized by Belgian astronomer Eugène Delporte (1882–1955). As Ridpath describes:

Delporte’s new boundaries were approved by the [International Astronomical Union] at its General Assembly at Leiden in 1928. The Assembly also asked him to modify Gould’s southern hemisphere boundaries to make them consistent with the new scheme for the north. This he did, in particular removing the diagonal lines that Gould had occasionally used and replacing them with verticals and horizontals.
The final job was published in 1930 in *Délimitation Scientifique des Constellations* and an accompanying volume, *Atlas Céleste*.4

A translation of the introduction to *Délimitation* can be found in reference 5. Perhaps it is just a coincidence, but the number of constellations is the same as the number of keys in a regular piano keyboard.

*The Pirates of Penzance* (1879), by Gilbert and Sullivan, contains a tongue twister called The Major General’s Song. Nearly a century later, mathematician and clever rhymster Tom Lehrer rewrote it to list the periodic table of the elements.6 With that as piano music you may play my 1987 rewrite, which has the eighty-eight constellations in it. Two do not scan at all: Canes Venatici (the Hunting Dogs) and Camelopardus (the Giraffe). And you have to get ahead of the beat with Sagittarius. So far as I know, I am the only person who has ever performed this song in public.

The constellations in the sky were not put there to bore us.

- Antlia, Andromeda, Aquarius, and Taurus,
- Apus, Leo, Lepus, Ara, Aries, and Centaurus,
- Carina, Crater, Cancer, Canis Major/Minor, Corvus,
- Aquila, Auriga, Leo Minor, and Monoceros,
- Columba, Libra, Lyra, Lynx, and Caelum, Cygnus, Circinus,
- Corona Borealis, Cetus, Crux, Oh! do not scorn us
  When you learn we fondly love the likes of Capricornus.

- Horologium and Hydra, Hydrus, Indus, Microscopium,
- Cepheus, Bootes, Eridanus, Telescopium,
- Chamaeleon and Hercules, Dorado, Draco, Delphinus,
- Norma, Octans, Lupus, Musca, Pyxis, Grus, and Scorpius.

There’s Coma Berenices, Fornax, Pavo, Puppis, Perseus,
- Corona Australis, Tucana, places like Equuleus,
- Sagittarius and Sagitta, both north and south Triangulum,
- Scutum, Sculptor, Sextans, Serpens, Mensa, and Reticulum.
- Lacerta, Ophiuchus, Pictor, Gemini, and Pisces
  Is where we hope to find a cloud of interstellar ices.
- Orion, Piscis Austrinis, in Phoenix, and in Pegasus is
  Where the clouds are dense enough and each then coalesces.

Toward Cassiopeia, toward the Giraffe, and also toward the Hunting Dogs
We find the stars and galaxies and scribble in our nightly logs.
- Ursa Major/Minor, Vela, Virgo, Volans, and Vulpecula
  Is where we plan to aim tonight with million-dollar specula.

To lofty mountains off we go in confident reliance,
In hot pursuit of photons there and world-beating science.
Endnotes


