Why Did the Romans Name Mars for Their God of War?

Ancient cultures gave this wandering red light in the sky special meaning

Since prehistoric times, people in many cultures have gazed at the night sky at the reddish point of light we call Mars.

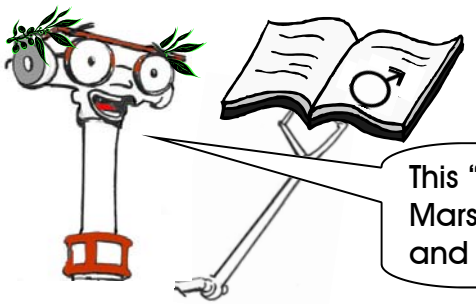
Like other planets* visible to the naked eye, Mars looks much like a bright star, except it does not twinkle, and it appears to shift its position in the sky a little bit from night to night.

Ancient people gave the planets special attention and respect because they *appear* to wander among the stars. Because of Mars' color, ancient cultures called the planet by names like "Red One", "Burning Coal" and "Torch".

Take a look at the sky images on the right. See how one of the points of light appears to move a little from picture to picture? This is a planet!

The ancient Greeks named the red planet Ares, after their god of war. The Romans had some of the same gods as the Greeks, and the Roman name for Ares is Mars.

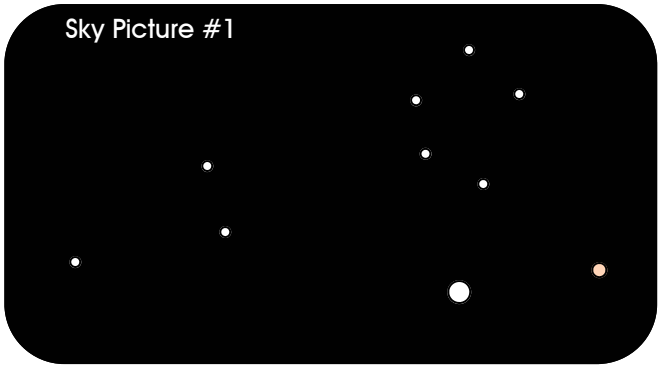
The Romans had a powerful army and a huge empire. They thought of Mars as the father of Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of Rome. The Romans also named a month on their calendar for Mars — the month of MARCH!



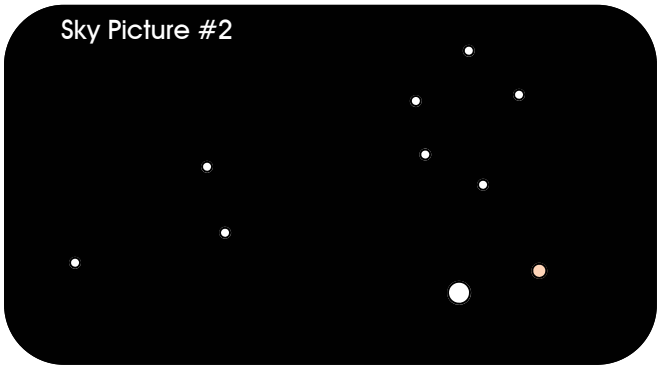
This "circle & arrow" symbol for Mars may represent the spear and shield of a god of war.

Which point of light in the pictures below is "wandering"?

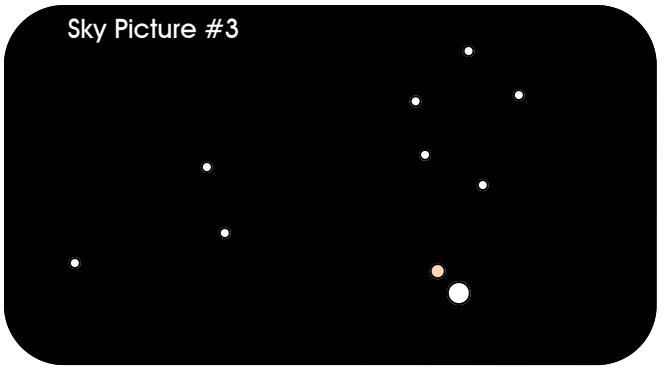
Sky Picture #1



Sky Picture #2



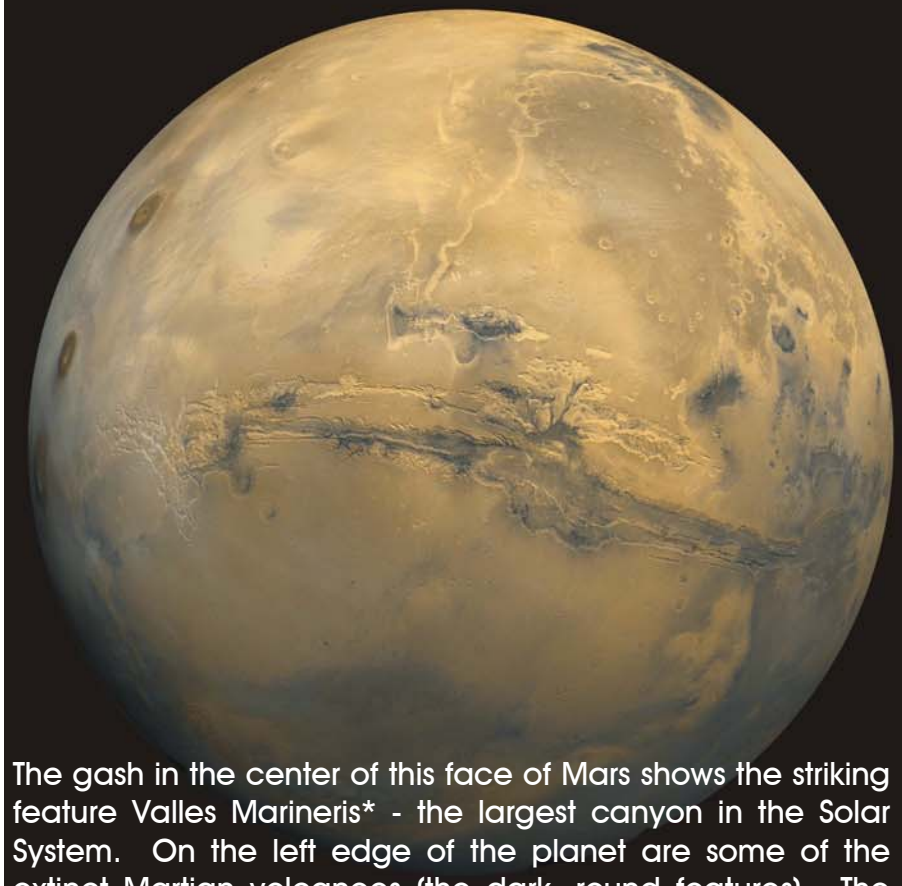
Sky Picture #3



Two Faces of Mars

Mars has some incredible features. What do you see?

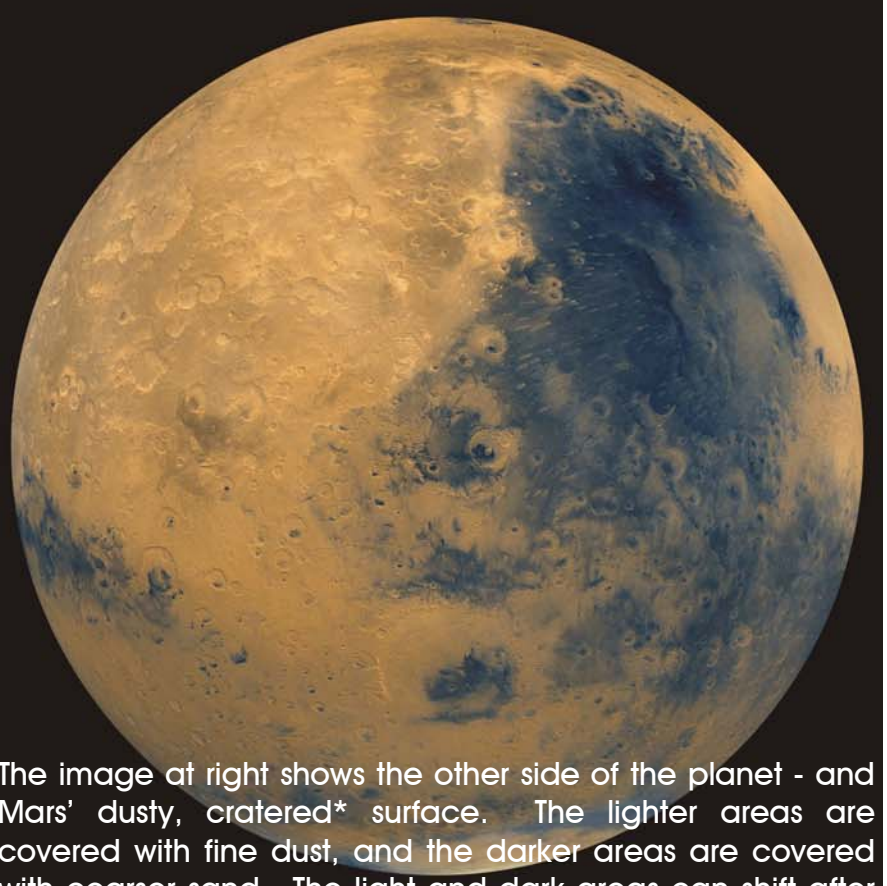
Can you find the huge canyon?



The gash in the center of this face of Mars shows the striking feature Valles Marineris* - the largest canyon in the Solar System. On the left edge of the planet are some of the extinct Martian volcanoes (the dark, round features). The largest volcano in the Solar System, Olympus Mons*, is just over the horizon to the left.

For more images, see Resources #1-3 on p. 44!

Can you find the giant impact crater?



The image at right shows the other side of the planet - and Mars' dusty, cratered* surface. The lighter areas are covered with fine dust, and the darker areas are covered with coarser sand. The light and dark areas can shift after large dust storms.

Hellas Basin, located in the lower center of this image, is the largest impact crater on Mars. It is 2,000 km across and over 7 km deep!

Evidence of Water on Mars

Can you match the labels in the center with the correct pictures?

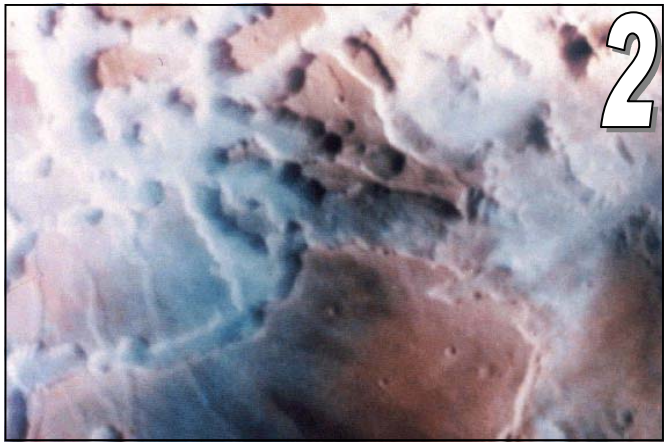
Water ice on Mars, covered by a layer of carbon dioxide* snow.

ICE CLOUDS

Image # _____

GULLIES

Image # _____



Early morning in a part of Valles Marineris*.

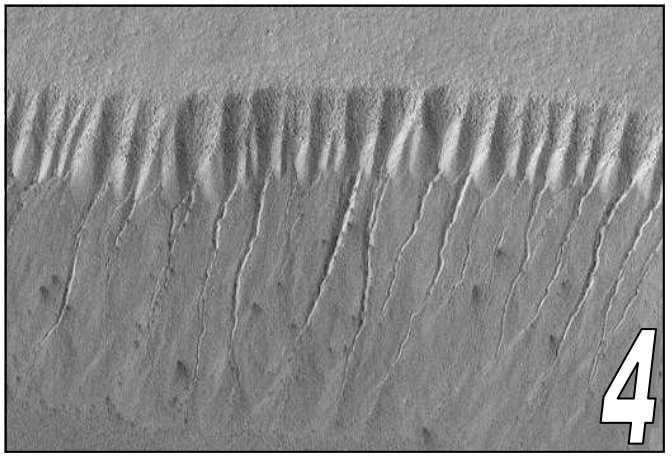
POLAR ICE CAP

Image # _____

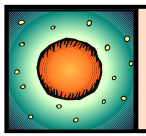
FOG

Image # _____

High in the morning sky on Mars. Image taken by the Mars Pathfinder lander.



These crater* wall patterns may have been caused by liquid water.



More on water: see FAQ #10 on p. 421

ANSWERS:

Ice Clouds –3 Gullies—4 Polar Ice Cap—1 Fog—2