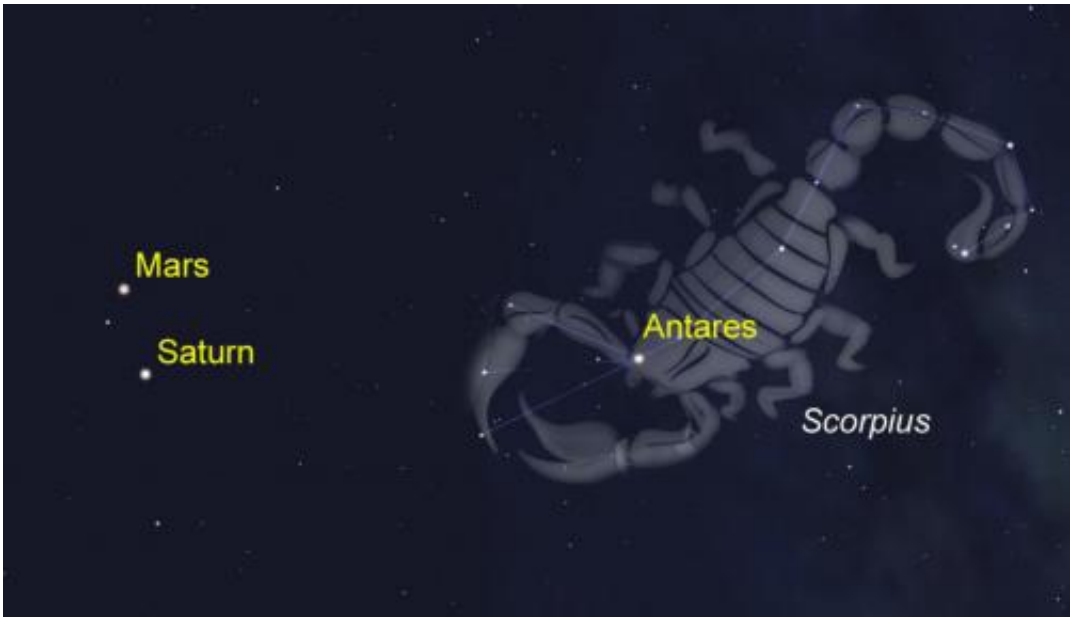
Mars, Saturn and the claws of Scorpius

August 21 2014, by Tanya Hill



Across Australia, catch Mars and Saturn around 8pm local time. Credit: Museum Victoria/Stellarium

Look up at the night sky this week and you'll find Mars and Saturn together in the west. Mars stands out with its reddish colouring and you might just be able to detect a faint yellow tinge to Saturn.

The two planets have been slowly drifting towards each other and now Mars makes its dash to move past Saturn.

Towards the north is Scorpius, a dominant feature of our winter sky and an easy constellation to recognise with its hook-shaped tail and bright red

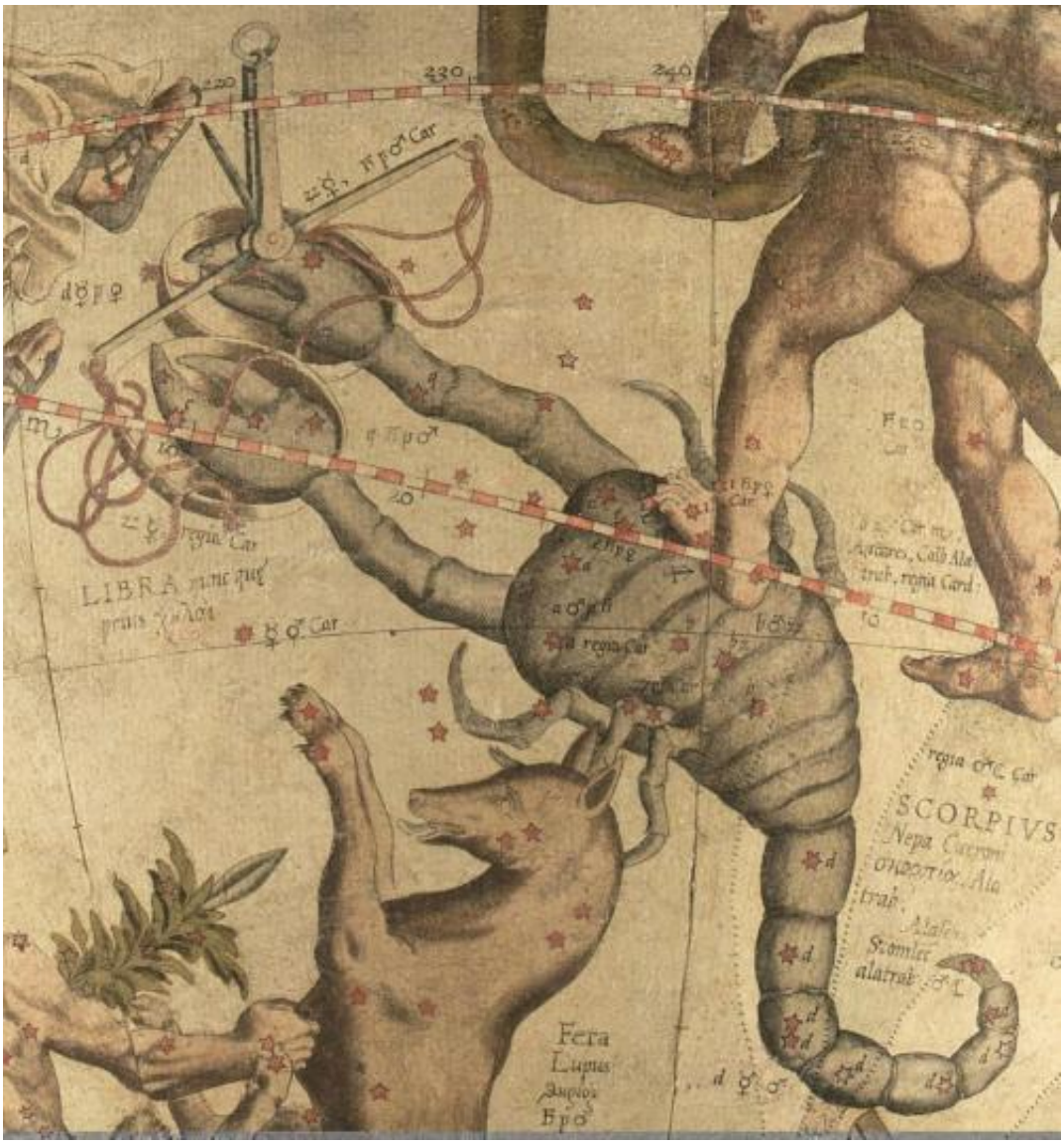
supergiant Antares.

Claws of justice

In ancient times the scorpion's claws extended out towards the region where Mars and Saturn are currently seen.

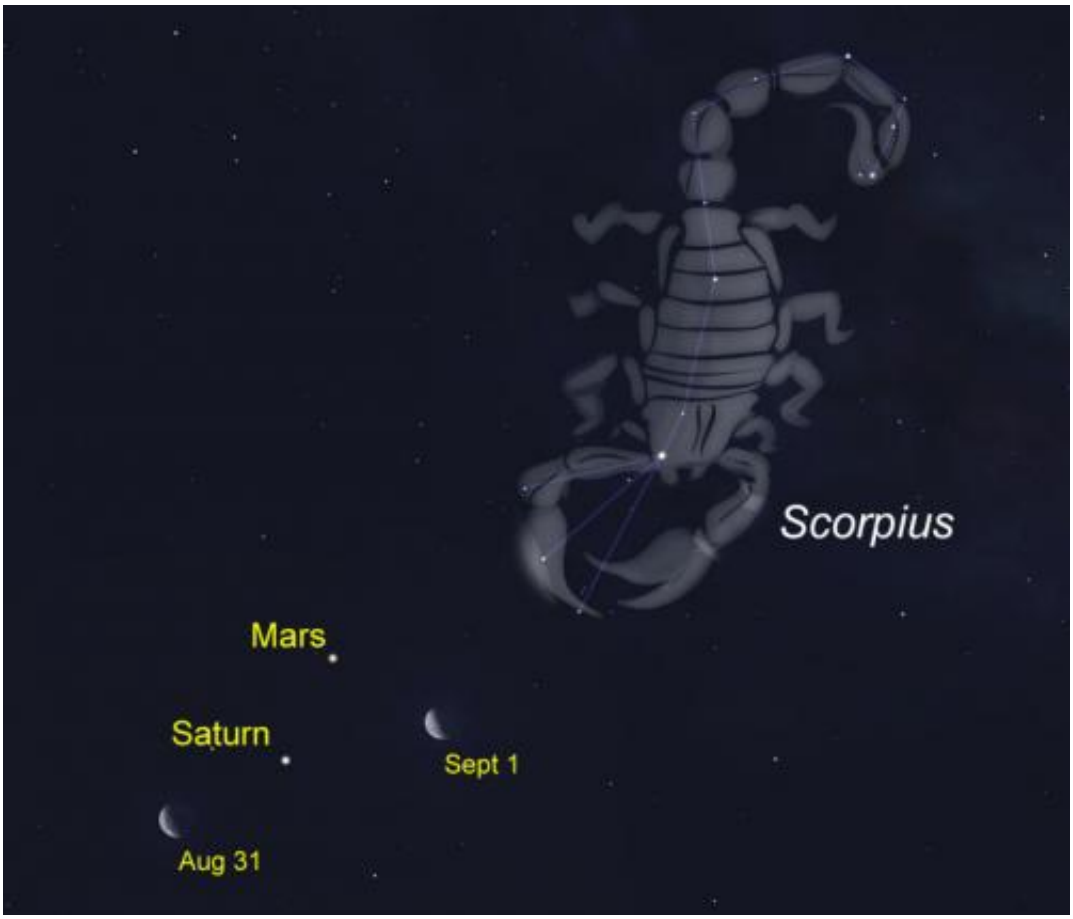
The faint star between the two planets is known by the fantastic arabic name Zubenelgenubi or 'the southern claw'. It's partner, 'the northern claw', is the star found below Saturn and is called Zubeneschamali.

It was the Romans, during the reign of Julius Caesar, who broke off the Scorpion's claws and turned them into the symbol of justice, which we know as the constellation of Libra the scales.



The claws of Scorpius extend into Libra as depicted on a 16th century celestial globe. Credit: Gerard Mercator

If you keep a watch each night, you should notice that Mars will be drifting closer to Scorpius. And on Sunday August 31 and Monday September 1, you can catch the moon as it passes by that way too.



Watch the moon as it passes by Saturn and Mars on August 31 and September 1. Credit: Museum Victoria/Stellarium

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