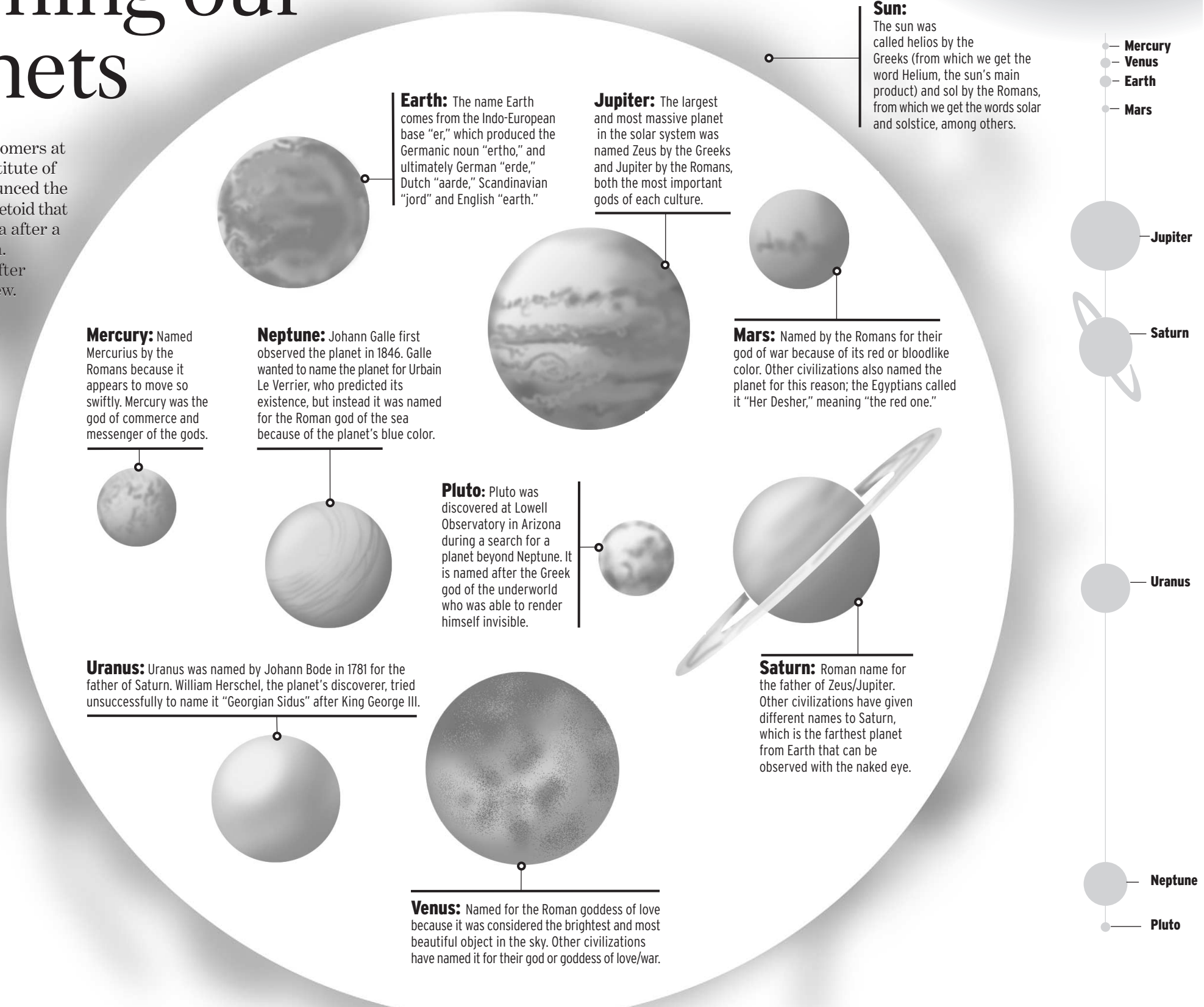


Naming our planets

This week, astronomers at the California Institute of Technology announced the discovery of a planetoid that was dubbed Sedna after a goddess of the sea. Naming planets after gods is nothing new. The Roman and Greek civilizations named celestial bodies, and the names stuck. Today, the International Astronomical Union is in charge of assigning such designations.



The distance of the planets from the sun

Mercury: Named Mercurius by the Romans because it appears to move so swiftly. Mercury was the god of commerce and messenger of the gods.

Neptune: Johann Galle first observed the planet in 1846. Galle wanted to name the planet for Urbain Le Verrier, who predicted its existence, but instead it was named for the Roman god of the sea because of the planet's blue color.

Earth: The name Earth comes from the Indo-European base "er," which produced the Germanic noun "ertho," and ultimately German "erde," Dutch "aarde," Scandinavian "jord" and English "earth."

Jupiter: The largest and most massive planet in the solar system was named Zeus by the Greeks and Jupiter by the Romans, both the most important gods of each culture.

Sun: The sun was called helios by the Greeks (from which we get the word Helium, the sun's main product) and sol by the Romans, from which we get the words solar and solstice, among others.

Mars: Named by the Romans for their god of war because of its red or bloodlike color. Other civilizations also named the planet for this reason; the Egyptians called it "Her Desher," meaning "the red one."

Pluto: Pluto was discovered at Lowell Observatory in Arizona during a search for a planet beyond Neptune. It is named after the Greek god of the underworld who was able to render himself invisible.

Uranus: Uranus was named by Johann Bode in 1781 for the father of Saturn. William Herschel, the planet's discoverer, tried unsuccessfully to name it "Georgian Sidus" after King George III.

Saturn: Roman name for the father of Zeus/Jupiter. Other civilizations have given different names to Saturn, which is the farthest planet from Earth that can be observed with the naked eye.

Venus: Named for the Roman goddess of love because it was considered the brightest and most beautiful object in the sky. Other civilizations have named it for their god or goddess of love/war.

Source: USGS Astrogeology Research Program


Michael Doss, Larry Nista and Monica Edwards/The Register

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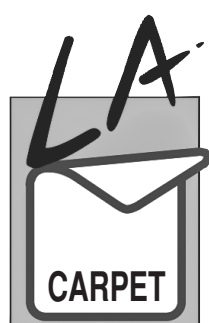
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