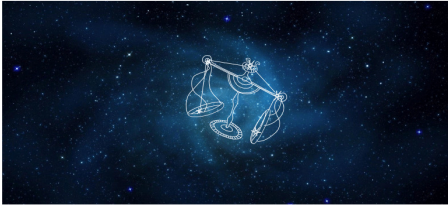


Zodiac constellations 15: Libra



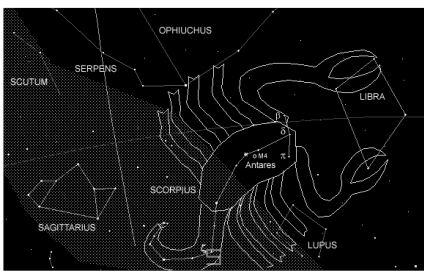
The scales' (of justice held by Virgo) form the 29th largest of the constellations. It is a fairly faint constellation, with no magnitude 1 stars.

The Sun passes through Libra during the first three weeks in November. The so-called First point of Libra is the point on celestial sphere directly opposite First point of Aries. These mark the points of the northern hemisphere autumn and spring equinoxes, respectively. The first point of Libra has right ascension at 12h and a declination of 0°. It is the point at which the Sun passes from north to south of the celestial equator, on 22 or 23 September. Because of precession of the equinoxes, this point no longer lies in Libra, but moved into Virgo after 730 CE. However, both of the points have retained the names of their original constellations.



In Babylonian astronomy, Libra was linked with its two adjacent constellations. At times, it was known 'scales' or 'balance' of Birgo, the scales being sacred to the god of truth and justice. It is suggested, by some, that the scales identity was proposed because, as the Sun entered this area at equinox, day and night were equal in length.

At other times, in ancient Babylon, Libra was regarded as the claws of the scorpion Scorpious. In ancient Greece, the latter notion dominated, and Libra was the claws of neighbouring Scorpious. Its Arabic name also refers to 'scorpion's claws'. However, in Roman times, its portrayal as the scales held by Astrara, the goddess of justice again prevailed.



Libra's historic dual personality continues to be reflected in its modern existence. The two brightest star names have Arabic names which mean 'northern claw' and 'southern claw'. However, its brightest stars are also described as forming a quadrangle with alpha and beta Librae representing scales balance bean and gamma and sigma the weighing pans.

Libra contains no Messier objects, while at least three stars are known to have exoplanets.

Notable features include:

- Alpha Librae (Zubenelgenubi – Arabic 'southern claw'): is the upper of the pair in the southern hemisphere. It is a wide double star easily divided with binoculars.
- Beta Librae (Zubeneschamali – Arabic 'northern claw'): one of few stars to have greenish tinge. It is the brightest star in Libra.
- NGC 5897: a loose globular cluster about 50,000 ly away
- Gliese 581: a planetary system with five exoplanets

Sources: Ridpath, I (Ed) 2012 Oxford dictionary of astronomy Oxford, OUP, Ridpath, I (Ed) 2006 Astronomy London, Dorling Kindersley, en.wikipedia.org