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Interiors of the planets

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

London New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1980

First published 1980

Printed in Great Britain by
J. W. Arrowsmith Ltd., Bristol BS3 2NT

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Cook, Alan Hugh

Interiors of the planets. – (Cambridge planetary science series).

1. Planets

I. Title

523.4 QB601 80-40040

ISBN 0 521 23214 7

Cambridge Planetary Science Series

Editors: W.I. Axford, G.E. Hunt, T.O. Mutch

Interiors of the planets

FOR ISABELL

**'The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that
take pleasure therein.'**

*From Psalm 111; carved over the entrance to
the Cavendish Laboratory*

FOREWORD

The planets, which have always been objects of wonder and curiosity to those with the opportunity or need to lift their eyes to the heavens, now in our times shine with new and strange lights revealed to us by the far seeing instruments carried upon space craft. The Moon, Mars, Venus and Mercury all bear on their surfaces the crater scars of innumerable meteorites that have fallen upon them from the beginning of the solar system. The Earth alone has an active surface that has obliterated those scars. The fluid surface of Jupiter is in constant and vigorous motion, driven by heat flowing out from the interior or, it may be, brought to it by the ultra-violet radiation from the Sun or by the solar wind. The Medicean satellites of Jupiter now present to us strange and individual faces: would Galileo who first saw the mountains on the Moon or the spots on the Sun have been surprised by the eruption of sodium and sulphur from Io and the cloud of gas within which it moves, or by the strange stress patterns upon other of the satellites? Seeing these strange and varied faces of the planets, each apparently different from any other, who can forbear to ask, what bodies are these, how are they made up, that their appearances are so distinctive? Why are some active, and others apparently dead, some dry, and others thickly covered with atmosphere or ocean? We have indeed little to go on to answer those questions, just the sizes of the planets, the grosser features of the fields of gravity around them and the magnetic fields they possess. But within recent years, as we have learnt more by experiment and by theory of the behaviour of solids and liquids at very high pressures, it has become possible to supplement our knowledge of the planets with understanding of how their possible constituents might behave. That, in essence, is the theme of this book. I aim to explain how the mechanical properties of the planets are determined nowadays, to describe the behaviour of planetary materials at planetary pressures, and to combine the Newtonian physics of celestial

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mechanics with the quantum physics of highly compressed matter to establish the general constitution of the planets. No detailed explanation of the state of each planet can be expected, indeed I shall often emphasize the limitations upon our knowledge and understanding, but some connexions can be made between what we see of the surfaces and what there must be within, and, more speculatively, something may be said about how the system of planets came into being. But for all the great achievements of space research our understanding of the planets is still rudimentary, with many surprises no doubt yet to come, and my emphasis is upon the ways in which we approach the study of the planets, rather than on the results we have so far attained.

I am indebted to Mr. W. B. Harland and to Professor V. Heine for reading certain chapters in typescript and to many other colleagues for discussions on various topics of this book. I am most grateful to the staff of the Cambridge University Press for their outstanding help.

Note on the expression of planetary masses

The masses of all planets are derived from the acceleration of some object in the vicinity at a known distance. The fundamental quantity observed is thus the product, GM , of the mass and the gravitational constant. For example, the value of this product for the Earth is

$$GM_E = 3.986\,03 \times 10^{14} \text{ m}^3/\text{s}^2.$$

Values of such products are known to very high accuracy, that of the Earth, for example, to a few parts in a million. The constant of gravitation is, however, poorly known. In this book its value is taken to be

$$6.67 \times 10^{-11} \text{ m}^3/\text{s}^2 \text{ kg};$$

it has an uncertainty of a few parts in a thousand.

It follows that ratios of masses are well known, as are the accelerations to which they give rise, but densities expressed in kilogrammes per cubic metre have uncertainties of a few parts in a thousand, and that should be borne in mind in comparing estimates of planetary densities with laboratory data.

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1

Introduction

1.1 The wonders of the heavens

The planets have been a subject of wonder to man from earliest recorded times. Their very name, the Wandering Ones, recalls the fact that their apparent positions in the sky change continually, in contrast to the fixed stars. Greek astronomers, Ptolemy particularly, had shown how the motions of the planets, the Sun and the Moon could be accounted for if they were all supposed to move around a stationary Earth, and in mediaeval times an elaborate cosmology was created, at its most allegorical, evocative and poetic in the *Paradiso* of Dante. The men of the Renaissance overthrew these ideas but provided fresh cause for wonder in their place. Placed in motion around the Sun by Copernicus, their paths observed with care by Kepler, the planets led Newton to his ideas of universal gravitation. Galileo, his telescope to his eye, showed that they had discs of definite size and that Jupiter had moons, the Medicean satellites, which formed a system like the planets themselves.

The discoveries of the seventeenth century settled notions of the planets for three centuries, but within that framework a most extraordinary flowering of the intellect attended the working out of the ideas of Newton. Closer and closer observation showed ever more intricate departures of the paths of the planets from the simple ellipses of Kepler, and each was accounted for by ever subtler applications of mechanics as the consequence of the gravitational pull of each planet upon its fellows. For some while the system of planets was tacitly or explicitly supposed to be closed, until William Herschel, in almost his first excursion into astronomy from his profession of music, saw from Bath an unknown planet – Uranus. Much later Adams predicted, a great achievement of dynamical theory, the existence of a further planet, and Leverrier found it. Now we know of yet a further planet, Pluto, and of the belt of asteroids between Mars and Jupiter. The major dynamical features of the motions

of the planets are now well understood, as are many minor features, among them the effects of the general-relativistic description of gravitation.

No doubt there are still discoveries to be made in orbital dynamics; they will come from the exploitation of modern developments in theory and, in particular, the execution of lengthy algebraic calculations by computer, and they will come also from the ever more precise measurements of the motions of the Moon and the planets and space probes that go close to them, by means of radio, radar and lasers. But these will probably be refinements; the heroic age of dynamical studies is almost closed, and other fields are now more productive. Early in this century, definite ideas about the internal constitution of the Earth began to develop, while estimates of the densities of the planets were available from dynamical investigations. It was realized that Mercury, Venus and Mars, as well as the Moon, must be in a general way similar to the Earth while the major planets, with much lower densities, were essentially different. In the 1930s the physics of the solid state and the quantum mechanics of materials at high pressures, rudimentary though they were by present day standards, were nonetheless adequate guides to thought about the nature of the planets, and the conjunction of dynamical studies on the one hand with the physics of condensed matter on the other is the theme to be developed in this book.

Space research has certainly contributed to the dynamical study of the planets, but rather in the way of refinement, for the observations of natural objects had led to considerable knowledge of the masses, densities, gravitational fields and moments of inertia of the Moon and a number of the planets before any space probes were launched towards them. The refinements have been valuable and have brought precision and simplicity to what previously may have been approximate and complex, but the great contributions of space research have been elsewhere, to the knowledge of surfaces and surface processes and of magnetic fields. We take it to be almost certain that the magnetic field of the Earth and the changes that the surface of the Earth undergoes are dependent on the internal state of the Earth and are driven by sources of energy within the Earth. The same is very likely true of the Moon and planets, but in different ways and to different degrees; surface features and magnetic fields no doubt contain clues to the nature of the interior, but we do not yet know how to unravel them; we do not understand the connexions in the Earth so how much less can we make use of them in studying the planets. We may nonetheless be fairly confident that it is

here that the next major step in understanding the planets will be taken. The relation between the structures of the planets and the natures of the materials, so far as they can be unravelled by dynamical studies and understanding of the physics of condensed matter, is established as far as the major features are concerned. Some ideas of the limits of knowledge are also clear and further studies are, on the whole, likely to lead to refinements of present ideas but not to major changes. If major changes come, it will probably be as a result of understanding the way in which magnetic fields and surface processes are related to internal constitutions.

1.2 The system of the planets

Some of the principal facts about the planets are collected in Table 1.1. It gives the distance of each planet from the Sun, and its radius and mass, all in terms of the Earth's distance, radius and mass, it gives the mean density of each and it gives the period of spin about the polar axis. In Figure 1.1 the masses and densities are plotted against the distance from the Sun. The table and figure demonstrate the well-known division of the planets into two groups: the inner, terrestrial planets, relatively close to the Sun, of low mass and high density, and the outer, major planets, relatively far from the Sun and having high masses and low densities. The size and mass of Pluto, the outermost planet, are poorly known, but it is certainly smaller and denser than the other outer planets.

Table 1.1. *The system of planets*

	Distance from Sun (AU) ^a	Radius ^b	Mass ^b	Density (kg/m ³)	Spin period (d)
Moon		0.27	0.0123	3340	28
Mercury	0.387	0.382	0.055	5434	58.6
Venus	0.723	0.949	0.815	5244	243
Earth	1	1	1	5517	1
Mars	1.524	0.532	0.107	3935	1.026
Jupiter	5.203	11.16	317.8	1338	0.411
Saturn	9.539	9.41	95.1	705	0.428
Uranus	19.18	4.02	14.60	1254	0.96?
Neptune	30.06	3.89	16.78	1635	0.92?
Pluto	39.44	0.24	0.002	~1000	6.4

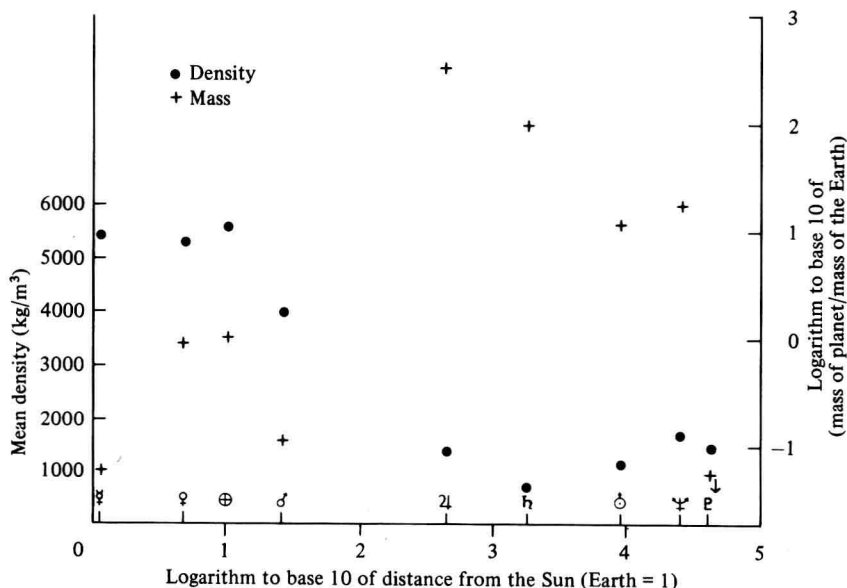
^a The astronomical unit (AU) is the mean distance of the Earth from the Sun and is equal to 1.496×10^8 km.

^b The radius and mass are given in terms of the Earth's radius (6378 km) and mass (5.977×10^{24} kg).

Any theory of the origin of the solar system must account for the sharp distinction between the two groups of planets. It is not my purpose to discuss the problem of the origin of the planets in any detail save that at the end I shall draw some conclusions about the origin of the planets from their present structure. The way in which the planets were formed does, however, have consequences for the chemical constitution of the planets, that is for the types of material of which we may suppose them to be made up, and hence for the physical properties of those materials at high pressure and temperature.

It is nowadays commonly supposed that the planets formed at an early stage in the history of the Sun, during the so-called Hiyashi phase, when the Sun was far more extended than it is now. Irregularities of density were brought about by the influence of a second star and led to condensations from which the planets formed. Many people currently favour a hot origin of the inner planets, that is to say, that they formed from the condensation of materials from a hot gas as opposed to accretion from a cloud of cold dust. It is therefore thought that the temperature of a planet immediately after formation would be the temperature of condensation. The distribution of temperature inside the planets is discussed in Chapter 9; here I am concerned to point out that theories of planetary origin entail

Figure 1.1. Masses, densities and distances of the planets.
The mass of Pluto is about 0.002 that of the Earth.



certain distributions. They also entail ideas about the compositions of the planets. In particular, if the planets condensed from a hot gas, then the different materials would condense in order of their boiling points, those with the highest points condensing first and so forming the innermost parts of the planets, followed by other materials in succession and leading to zoned structures for the planets. Quite detailed predictions of such sequences have been made, for the thermodynamic properties of materials that may form planets are known in some detail. Thus, if a mechanism for the formation of the planets is postulated, it may be possible to show that it entails a certain internal structure and a certain thermal history. Such an approach has been widely followed in much recent discussion, but it is not adopted here. The fact is that the origin of the solar system remains most obscure and while it may be plausible it is also surely hazardous to base our ideas of the internal structure of the planets on theories which of their nature do not admit of empirical verification.

A different approach is taken in this book. We start with the known dynamical properties of a planet, the size, mass, density and gravitational field, and ask what they imply for the internal distribution of density, and combine that with our knowledge of the properties of likely planetary materials to derive possible models of the internal structures. It may then be possible to make useful comparisons between the models derived in this way and those derived from theories of the origin of the solar system. No more will therefore be said about the origin of the planets until the final chapter when we look at the types of structure to which we shall have been led, and ask if they tell us anything significant about the origin of the planets. In brief, we are going to try to work back from observations of the planets, through models of their interiors, to criticisms of theories of origin, in contrast to going from theories of origin to models of structure which are constrained to fit the observed properties of the planets.

Seismological studies have enabled the internal structure of the Earth to be worked out in great detail, so that we know the density and elastic moduli as functions of pressure from the surface almost to the centre (Chapter 2). We have, in fact, empirical equations of state for the major constituents of the Earth and, by comparing them with equations of state found experimentally in the laboratory, it is possible to identify the chemical constituents of the Earth with some assurance. For no other body is that possible and in consequence other, indirect, evidence must be drawn upon to suggest the nature of the materials of the other planets. The densities of the major planets are so low that they must be composed

largely of hydrogen and helium. Table 1.2 shows the densities of the condensed phases of the lighter elements at a pressure of 10^5 Pa,† together with their abundances in the solar system. Evidently the only abundant elements that could form the major planets are hydrogen and helium. The densities of the planets are of course much greater than the densities of hydrogen and helium at one atmosphere, but the pressures in the interiors of those planets are of the order of 10^{12} Pa or more and the compression of hydrogen and helium under such pressures is sufficient (Chapter 7) to account for the mean density of Jupiter and all but account for that of Saturn. Uranus and Neptune, with their greater mean densities but smaller size and so lower pressures, must have heavier elements, such as carbon, nitrogen and oxygen, mixed with the hydrogen and helium.

The increase of density through self-compression is much less in the smaller terrestrial planets, in which the greatest pressure is 3×10^{11} Pa at the centre of the Earth. Accordingly we must suppose that those planets are composed of materials with densities of 3000 kg/m^3 or more at 10^5 Pa. There are three sources of evidence for the nature of such material. First, the surfaces of the Earth and the Moon are composed of silicates of aluminium, magnesium, sodium and iron and similar materials, having densities in the range of about 2500 to 3000 kg/m^3 . Secondly, meteorites are composed of similar materials together with free iron and nickel with densities of about 7000 kg/m^3 (Table 1.3). Thirdly, there is the evidence of the internal structure of the Earth. Comparisons between the empirical equations of state of the different zones of the Earth and equations of state determined in the laboratory indicate that the outer zones of the Earth are composed predominantly of silicates of iron,

Table 1.2. *Densities of the condensed phases of the lightest elements at 10^5 Pa*

Element	Solar system abundance (Hydrogen = 1)	Density (kg/m^3)
Hydrogen	1	89
Helium	10^{-1}	120
Lithium	2×10^{-9}	533
Beryllium	2.5×10^{-11}	1846
Boron	2.5×10^{-10}	2030
Carbon	5×10^{-4}	2266

† SI units are used throughout this book. 1 Pa (pascal) = 10^{-5} bar $\sim 10^{-5}$ atmospheres.

magnesium and aluminium and possibly the oxides of iron, magnesium, aluminium and silicon at the greater depths, whilst the inner zone, the core, is composed mainly of iron diluted with some lighter material such as sulphur.

In all the compact bodies of the Universe, the inward attraction of their own gravitation would lead to condensation to an exceedingly high density were it not balanced by some pressure. Stars are hot and the balancing pressure is the radiation pressure of the thermal radiation flowing outwards. White dwarf stars have cooled down so that the radiation pressure is inadequate to balance self-gravitation and in consequence the density of the material has increased until the pressure of the degenerate gas of electrons in the ionized material balances the self-gravitation. Since the pressure depends little on temperature in a degenerate gas, white dwarfs may be considered to be cold. The pressures and temperatures in planets are much less than in stars, whether hot or white dwarfs, and the self-gravitation is balanced by the forces in solids and liquids which prevent their collapse. If the materials are unionized, the forces are the Coulomb forces between electrical charges in crystals; if the materials are ionized and metallic, the forces are those corresponding to the kinetic energy of the conduction electrons and the potential energy of the electrons in the field of the positive ions. In each case, the density is determined by the balance between internal repulsive forces, on the one hand, and internal attractive forces and external pressure, on the other; the repulsive forces arise mainly from the effect of the Pauli exclusion principle on states of electrons and from the kinetic energy of the

Table 1.3. *Composition of the surface of the Earth and chondritic meteorites*

	Crust of Earth	Average chondrite
SiO ₂	0.587	0.380
MgO	0.049	0.238
FeO	0.052	0.124
Fe	—	0.188
FeS	—	0.057
Al ₂ O ₃	0.150	0.025
CaO	0.067	0.020
Ni	—	0.013
Na ₂ O	0.031	0.010
K ₂ O	0.023	0.002
Fe ₂ O ₃	0.023	—