The Origin of Planetary Impactors in the Inner Solar System

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ABSTRACT

New insights into the history of the inner solar system are derived from the impact cratering record of the Moon, Mars, Venus and Mercury, and from the size distributions of asteroid populations. Old craters from a unique period of heavy bombardment that ended ~ 3.8 billion years ago were made by asteroids that were dynamically ejected from the main asteroid belt, possibly due to the orbital migration of the giant planets. The impactors of the past ~ 3.8 billion years have a size distribution quite different from the main belt asteroids, but very similar to the population of near-Earth asteroids.

The Moon and all the terrestrial planets were resurfaced during a period of intense impact cratering that occurred between the time of their accretion, ~ 4.5 Ga, and ~ 3.85 Ga. The lunar cratering record and the radiometrically dated Apollo samples have shown that the intense bombardment of the Moon ended at ~ 3.85 Ga; the impact flux since that time to the present has been at least an order of magnitude smaller. The 3.85 Ga epoch might represent the final end of an era of steadily declining large impacts (the tail end of the accretion of the planets). However, it has also been argued that only a sudden injection of impacting objects into the terrestrial planet zone accounts for the abrupt end of the intense bombardment; thus, this event has been named the Late Heavy Bombardment (LHB), or sometimes the Lunar Cataclysm, to distinguish it from the prior final accretion of the planets at 4.5 Ga. Specifically, the lunar cataclysm hypothesis (1,2) postulates that the intense bombardment of the Moon lasted only a very short period of time, 20–200 My (2-5). Recent results on the impact ages of lunar meteorites (which represent a much broader region of the lunar surface than the Apollo samples) support this hypothesis (6-8). Furthermore, the impact-reset ages of meteoritic samples of asteroids (9-10) and the shock-metamorphosing at 3.92 Ga of the only known sample of the heavily cratered highlands of Mars, meteorite Allan Hills 84001 (11), indicate that the LHB affected the entire inner Solar System, not just the Moon.

Identifying the sources of planetary impactors has proven elusive. Dynamical models invoking both geocentric and heliocentric debris and both asteroidal and cometary reservoirs have been

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proposed (12), but chemical analyses of Apollo samples of impact melts point to a dominantly asteroid reservoir for the lunar cataclysm (10). In this paper, we provide compelling new evidence that the source of the LHB impactors was the main asteroid belt, and that the dynamical mechanism that caused the LHB was unique in the history of the Solar System and distinct from the processes producing the flux of objects that currently hit planetary surfaces.

We examined the crater size distributions (13) of surface units of various ages on the Moon, Mars and Mercury, based on published data (14,15) supplemented by new crater counts (S1). Of the terrestrial planets, only the Moon, Mercury and Mars have heavily cratered surfaces. These surfaces all have complex size distributions, as seen in Fig. 1a. The curves for Mercury and Mars are steeper than the lunar curve at diameters less than about 40 km, because plains formation has obliterated a fraction of the smaller craters (S2). Therefore, the lunar highlands curve best represents the shape of what we shall call the Population 1 crater size distribution.

In addition to the highlands, the crater curves for Martian old plains east of the Tharsis region, old plains within the Hellas basin and plains within and surrounding the Caloris basin on Mercury also have the same shape as the lunar highland curve over the same diameter range, but with a lower crater density (16). The lower crater densities imply that these older plains probably formed near the tail end of the LHB, about 3.8 billion years ago.

For the younger surfaces, the crater size distribution curves are flat and distinctly different (Fig. 1b). These include the lightly cratered, hence younger, plains on Mars and the Moon, as well as fresh craters with well-defined ejecta blankets (Class 1 craters) on the Moon. This crater population we call Population 2.

The crater density on Venus (Fig. 2) is about an order of magnitude less than on Mars. Only young craters are present, evidently because older craters have been erased by multiple global resurfacing events (17). Furthermore, small craters are scarce on Venus because its thick atmosphere screens out small impactors (18). Part of the Venus crater population consists of clusters of craters (multiples) that result from fragmentation of the impacting object in the dense atmosphere. These comprise 16% of all Venus craters (S1). The size distribution of these multiples is also shown in Fig. 2, where the diameter is derived from the sum of the crater areas in the cluster. The turnover of the curve for multiple craters does not occur until diameters less than 9 km; at larger diameters the curve is flat. This, together with the much lower crater density, strongly suggests that the impacting population on Venus was the same as Population 2 on the Moon and Mars. It is also evidence that the turnover of the crater curve is indeed due to atmospheric screening.

The two characteristic shapes of the crater curves in the inner Solar System are summarized in Fig. 3. We conclude that the terrestrial planets have been impacted by two populations of objects which are distinguishable by their size distributions. Population 1 is responsible for the LHB, and Population 2 is responsible for the post–LHB period and up to the present time.

A number of studies on the physics of impact cratering on solid bodies have derived projectile—crater scaling laws. We used the Pi scaling law (19) to derive the projectile size distribution for

Population 1 and Population 2 impactors. We used the lunar highland crater curves as representative of Population 1 and the Martian young plains as representative of Population 2, as these provide the best statistics. (We did not include crater diameters greater than 500 km, because of scaling uncertainties.) We assumed projectile parameters appropriate for asteroidal impacts: density of 3 g cm⁻³ (similar to basaltic rock), an impact angle of 45° and impact velocities of 17 km s⁻¹ and 12 km s⁻¹ on the Moon and on Mars, respectively (20). In Fig. 4, we compare these distributions to recent determinations of the size distributions of the main belt asteroids (MBAs) (21–23) and Near Earth Asteroids (NEAs) (24). The size distribution of the current MBAs is virtually identical to the Population 1 projectile size distribution, as pointed out in (25). This result indicates that the objects responsible for the LHB originated from Main Belt asteroids. Unless comets or Kuiper belt objects have the same size distribution, these objects could not have been significant contributors to the LHB.

The close match between the current MBA size distribution and that of the LHB projectiles implies that the main asteroid belt has remained unchanged in its size distribution over the past 3.8 Gy. There are two possible interpretations of this result: either collisional processes produced a steady-state size distribution in the main asteroid belt at least as early as 3.8 Ga, or the collision frequency in the main asteroid belt was drastically reduced around 3.8 Ga.

The mechanism responsible for ejecting asteroids from the main asteroid belt and into terrestrial planet-crossing orbits during the LHB had to be unique to the early Solar System because there is no evidence for any subsequent event of similar magnitude in the inner planets' cratering history since then. Furthermore, that mechanism had to be one that ejected asteroids from the main belt in a size–independent manner, preserving the MBA size distribution in the inner planet impactor population. This precludes size–dependent non–gravitational transport processes, such as the Yarkovsky effect, and instead implicates a dynamical process, such as sweeping gravitational resonances, that was largely insensitive to asteroid mass.

A dynamical mechanism consistent with the above constraints that explains the congruence of the size distributions of the MBAs and the Population 1 projectiles, involves the orbital migration of the giant planets. Such migration of the outer planets is thought to have occurred on a timescale of about 10^7 – 10^8 years early in Solar System history (26–29), and it would have caused severe depletion of the asteroid belt due to orbital instabilities that ensue as strong Jovian mean motion resonances sweep across this zone (30). This phenomenon would have caused the Moon and terrestrial planets to be cataclysmically bombarded by asteroids and icy planetesimals (comets) for a period of 10–100 Myr (31). A recently proposed variation on the giant planet migration theory invokes the change of the eccentricities of Jupiter and Saturn, if and when these planets passed through a 1:2 orbital resonance during their orbital migration (32). Such resonance passage would have destabilized the planetesimal disk beyond the orbits of the planets, causing a sudden massive delivery of comets to the inner Solar System; in this scenario, the asteroid belt is also destabilized due to sweeping gravitational resonances; together, these cause a significant spike in the intensity of cometary as well as asteroid impacts on the inner planets (33).

In either scenario, the relative intensity of comets versus asteroids in the projectile population of the LHB is not well determined by the published dynamical simulations. Since the impact signature in the crater record in the inner Solar System is asteroidal, we conclude that either comets played a minor role or their impact record was erased by later–impacting asteroids.

Both of these mechanisms predict a LHB lasting between ~ 10 My and ~ 150 My. Therefore, the LHB was a catastrophic event that occurred from about 3.9 Ga to 3.8 Ga. Because of this, it is not possible to use the crater record to date surfaces older than about 3.9 Gy; the previous crater record has been obliterated by this event. The heavily cratered highlands of the Moon, Mars and Mercury that register Population 1 were resurfaced 3.9 billion years old, although older rock relics may have survived.

The size distribution of Population 2 projectiles (Fig. 4) is the same as the NEAs and quite different from the LHB projectiles. Thus, NEAs are largely responsible for the cratering record after 3.8 Ga. This result is contrary to the findings in (34) that apparently used biased data containing observational losses (cf. ref. 24) and whose analysis based on cumulative (rather than differential) size distributions was not sufficiently sensitive to the differences in the distributions.

A plausible reason that the MBAs and the NEAs have such a different size distribution is the Yarkovsky effect that causes secular changes in orbital energy of an asteroid due to the asymmetric way a spinning asteroid absorbs and reradiates solar energy (35). Over a few tens of millions of years the effect is large enough to transport a significant number of sub–20 km size asteroids into strong Jovian resonances (36) that deliver them into terrestrial planet-crossing orbits. The magnitude of the effect depends on the size of the asteroid: for diameters greater than about 10 m, the smaller the asteroid the larger the effect. This explains why the NEAs (Population 2 projectiles) have relatively more small objects compared to MBAs. Because the younger post-LHB surfaces have been impacted primarily by NEAs, the ages of these surfaces can be derived from the crater production rate of NEAs. However, the ages derived from the NEA impacts will be an upper limit because we do not know the comet crater production rate with any certainty.

Our results further imply that dating surfaces of solid bodies in the outer solar system using the inner planet cratering record is not valid. Attempts have been made to date outer planet surfaces on an absolute time scale by assuming that the crater population found in the inner Solar System is the same throughout the entire Solar System and has the same origin. In light of our results, this assumption is false. Additional evidence to support this conclusion is found in the cratering record of the Jovian satellites. Indeed, Callisto has a crater size distribution different than both Population 1 and Population 2 craters (37,38).

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- 13. Throughout this paper we display the crater and projectile size distributions using the "Relative" plot method (see NASA Technical Memorandum 79730, 1978) which was devised to better show the size distribution of craters and crater number densities for determining relative ages. The R plot provides a more sensitive and discriminating comparison tool than Cumulative Distribution plots which tend to smear out important details of the crater size distribution curves, and can lead to erroneous interpretations. For an R plot, the size distribution is normalized to a power law differential size distribution function, $dN(D) \sim D^p dD$, where D is diameter and p=-3, because most crater size distributions are observed to be within ± 1 of a p=-3 power law distribution. The discretized equation for R is: $R=D^3N/A(b_2-b_1)$, where D is the geometric mean diameter of the size bin $(\sqrt{b_1b_2})$, N is the number of craters in the size bin, A is the area over which the counts were made, b_1 and b_2 are the lower and upper limit of the size bin, respectively. The size bins are usually defined in $\sqrt{2}$ increments because there are many more small craters than large craters. In an R plot, log R is plotted on the y-axis and log(D) is plotted on the x-axis. A p=-3 distribution plots as a horizontal straight line; a p=-2 distribution slopes down to the left at an angle of 45°, and a p=-4distribution slopes down to the right at 45°. The vertical position of the line is a measure of crater density; the higher the vertical position, the higher the crater density.
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Figure Captions

- **Fig. 1.** The crater size distributions on the Moon, Mars and Mercury, shown as R plots (13). The upper curves (a) are for heavily cratered surfaces on the Moon (blue), Mars (red) and Mercury (green). The lower curves (b) are for younger surface on the Moon (blue) and Mars (red). The size distributions on younger surfaces (Population 2) are different than for the old surfaces that represent the LHB (Population 1).
- **Fig. 2.** Size distributions of all Venus craters and, separately, multiple craters, compared to the Mars Northern Plains (green). The downturn in the Venus curves (dashed blue lines) is due to atmospheric screening of projectiles. The unscreened portions (red) are the same as Population 2 on Mars.
- Fig. 3. These crater curves summarize the inner Solar System cratering record, with two distinctly different size distributions. The red curves are Population 1 craters that represent the period of Late Heavy Bombardment. The lower density blue curves (Population 2) represent the post-LHB era on the Moon, Mars and Venus. The Mars Young Plains curve is a combination of the Mars Northern Plains and Mars Young Volcanics. The Venus curve is a composite of the production population for all craters greater than 9 km, including multiples in the range of 9–25 km diameter.
- Fig. 4. The size distributions of the projectiles (derived from the crater size distributions) compared with those of the Main Belt Asteroids (MBAs) and Near Earth Asteroids (NEAs). The red dots (upper curve) are for the lunar highlands (Population 1), and the red squares (lower curve) are for the Martian young plains (Population 2). The other colors and point styles are for the asteroids derived by various authors: in the upper curves, the light blue, the dark blue and the green symbols are from Spacewatch (21), the Sloan Digital Sky Survey (22), and from the Subaru asteroid surveys (23), respectively; the black dots in the lower curves are the debiased LINEAR near earth asteroids (24). An arbitrary normalisation factor is applied to obtain the R values for the asteroids. The MBA size distribution is virtually identical with Population 1 projectiles responsible for the LHB crater record. The NEA size distribution is the same as Population 2 projectiles responsible for the post–LHB crater record.







