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Impacts on Earth



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Editors' Preface

by Daniel Benest and Claude Froeschlé

Cosmic Impacts

At the beginning of the 19th century, astronomers discover the first asteroids ... and the academics recognize that stones may fall from the extra-atmospheric space. Half a century later, many other asteroids had been discovered, and Daniel Kirkwood found that there were gaps in their semi-major axis distribution, corresponding to mean motion resonances with Jupiter. As discovered in 1918 by Kiyotsugu Hirayama, some groups are apparent in the frequency distribution of the orbital elements of these minor planets, which he called *families*; Hirayama suggested that the origin of these families could come from a catastrophic break-up of a common parent body. Finally, since the 80's, modern celestial mechanics and dynamical planetology have begun to explain the processes that send asteroids on trajectories crossing the Earth's orbit. This will be developed in Part I of this book.

We know now that impact phenomena play an essential role in the formation of planets – and of other minor bodies orbiting the Sun – and keep a great influence during their evolution; impacts have therefore a non negligible importance in the history (particularly from the point of view of geology) of the Solar System. Part II describes some physical processes consecutive to the impact on a lithosphere, and Part III discusses the dating of ancient impacts on Earth together with some considerations about hazards due to space debris orbiting our planet.

Impacts cosmiques

Au début du XIX^e siècle, les astronomes découvrent les premiers astéroïdes ... et les Académiciens reconnaissent que des cailloux peuvent tomber du ciel. Un demi-siècle plus tard, de nombreux autres astéroïdes avaient été découverts, et Daniel Kirkwood détecta des lacunes dans leur distribution spatiale en demi-grand axe, qui correspondent à des résonances en moyen mouvement avec Jupiter. En 1918, Kiyotsugu Hirayama mit en évidence certains groupements dans la distribution en fréquence des éléments orbitaux de ces petites planètes, qu'il nomma *familles*; Hirayama suggéra que l'origine de ces familles pourrait se situer lors du brisement catastrophique d'un corps "parent". Finalement, depuis

les années 80, la mécanique céleste moderne et la planétologie dynamique commencent à comprendre les mécanismes qui envoient des astéroïdes sur des trajectoires qui croisent l'orbite de la Terre. Ce qui est développé dans la Partie I du présent ouvrage.

Nous savons maintenant que les phénomènes d'impact jouent un rôle essentiel dans la formation des planètes – et des autres petits corps qui orbitent autour du Soleil –, et conservent une grande influence au cours de leur évolution; les impacts ont donc une importance non négligeable dans l'histoire du Système Solaire (particulièrement du point de vue de la géologie). La Partie II éclaire certains processus physiques consécutifs aux impacts sur une lithosphère, et la Partie III expose les méthodes de datation des impacts terrestres anciens, ainsi que quelques considérations à propos des dangers que peuvent faire courir les débris spatiaux en orbite autour de notre planète.

The Goutelas School

The Spring School of Astronomy and Astrophysics of Goutelas has taken place since 1977. Founded by Evry Schatzman, of the French Sciences Academy, the school is held annually at Goutelas Castle in the Forez country (Haute-Loire, France), under the patronage of the S.F.S.A. (Société Française des Spécialistes d'Astronomie) and with the financial support of the C.N.R.S. (the French "Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique") through its "Continuing Formation" department. The manager and the staff of the "Centre Culturel de Goutelas" contribute a lot to the success of the school, as they do their best to provide pleasant and friendly surroundings.

In the past, for the schools of 1989 and 1991 to and for other meetings, we had already proposed topics closely related to the dynamics of minor bodies in the Solar System, or about techniques used in dynamical planetology (see references). The 18th Goutelas School was held during 2nd-7th May 1994, and was devoted to the study of these impact phenomena, and particularly those affecting our planet, the Earth. This book is born from the courses given in this school, and the chapters have been updated.

Last but not the least, we were assisted by Monique Fulconis, with all her efficiency and kindness.

L'École de Goutelas

L'École de Printemps d'Astronomie et d'Astrophysique de Goutelas existe depuis 1977. Fondée par Evry Schatzman, de l'Académie des Sciences, l'École se tient annuellement au Château de Goutelas dans le Forez (Haute-Loire, France), sous le parrainage de la Société Française des Spécialistes d'Astronomie et avec le soutien financier de la Formation Permanente du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Le succès de cette École tient pour une bonne part dans l'efficacité et la gentillesse de l'accueil du personnel du Centre Culturel de Goutelas.

Déjà, lors des Écoles de 1989 et 1991 – ainsi que lors d'autres réunions –, nous avons proposé des thèmes proches de la dynamique des petits corps du Système Solaire ou exposant des techniques utilisées en planétologie dynamique (cf refs.). La 18^e École de Goutelas s'est tenue du 2 au 7 mai 1994, et fut dévolue à l'étude de ces phénomènes d'impact, et en particulier à ceux ayant affecté notre planète, la Terre. Ce livre en est issu, et les chapitres actualisés.

Enfin, nous souhaitons remercier Monique Fulconis, qui sut assurer le secrétariat et régler tous les détails matériels avec efficacité et gentillesse.

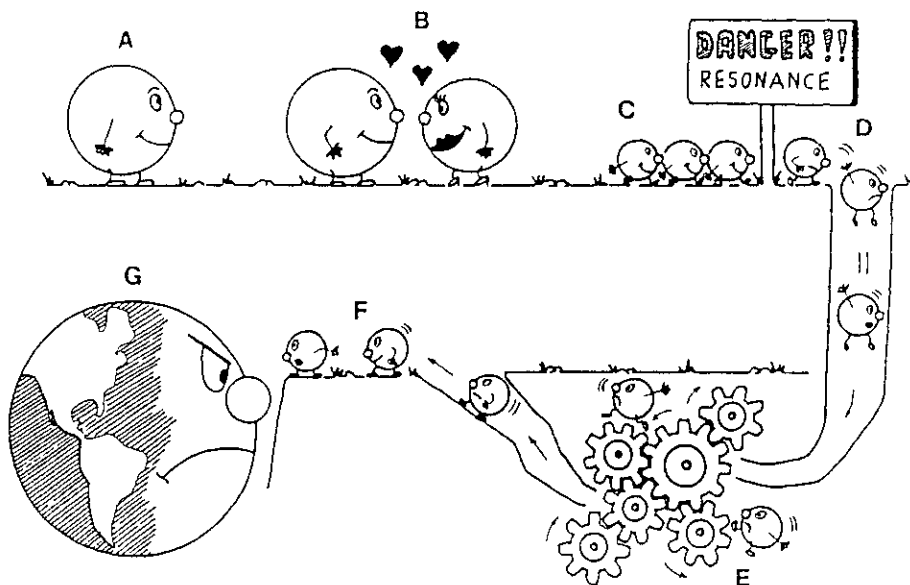


Fig. 1. Vincenzo Zappala, de l'Observatoire de Turin, illustre par ce dessin comment des fragments (C) issus d'une collision entre astéroïdes (A et B) peuvent être "piégés" dans une résonance (D) puis, par un mécanisme complexe (E), transférés dans les régions du Système Solaire interne (F) où ils risquent de rencontrer la Terre (G).

Vincenzo Zappala, from Turin Observatory, shows by this picture how fragments (C) produced during a catastrophic collision between asteroids (A and B) may be trapped in a resonance (D) then, by a complex mechanism (E), transferred in the inner regions of the Solar System (F), where there is a danger of collision with the Earth (G).

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VIII

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Contents

Part I Origin and Dynamics of Projectiles

Catastrophic Collisions in the Asteroid Belt – The Identification of Dynamical Families

A. Cellino and Ph. Bendjoya	3
1. Introduction	4
2. How to Identify Families	7
3. Two Independent Clustering Methods	12
3.1. The Hierarchical Clustering Method	13
3.2. The Wavelet Analysis Method	14
4. A “Quality Check”	15
5. The Most Recent Results	20
6. Conclusions	27
References	28

Origin and Dynamical Transport of Near-Earth Asteroids and Meteorites

A. Morbidelli and Ch. Froeschlé	31
1. Introduction	31
2. Geometry of Orbits	32
3. The Secular Resonances	34
4. Mean Motion Resonances	39
5. Transport of Planet-Crossing Objects by Planetary Close Encounters	43
6. Evolution Timescales and Orbital Distribution of NEAs	44
6.1. Dynamical Lifetimes	45
6.2. Steady State and Asteroid Showers	48
6.3. Orbital Distribution	50
7. Conclusions	50
References	52

**Topics on Chaotic Transport for Hamiltonian Systems
– Modelling of Diffusion Processes for Small Bodies
in the Solar System**

C. Froeschlé and E. Lega	54
1. General Introduction	54
2. Stochastic Mappings in Astrodynamics	55
2.1. Introduction	55
2.2. Exogenous Stochastic Mappings	55
2.3. Endogenous Stochastic Mappings	56
3. Another Approach: The Synthetic Mapping	60
3.1. A Local Exact Fitting	61
3.2. A Global Fitting: The Least Square Interpolation	63
3.3. Preliminary Conclusions	64
4. Conclusion	64
References	65

Collisional Disruption of Natural Satellites

P. Farinella	67
1. Introduction	67
2. Giant Craters	68
3. Irregular Shapes	69
4. Association with Rings	70
5. Dynamical “Natural Selection”	72
References	74

Part II Physics of Shocks

Concepts of Shock Waves

A. Migault	79
1. Shock Waves: Definition and Formation	80
1.1. Properties of Sonic Waves	80
1.2. Formation of a Shock Wave	81
2. Rankine-Hugoniot Equations (Conservation Laws)	82
2.1. Conservation of Mass, Momentum and Energy in the Laboratory Frame	82
2.2. The Same in the Shock Front Frame	83
2.3. The Same in Special Relativity	84
3. Hugoniot Curve and Its Representation in the (P, u_p) Plane	85
4. Comments on Conservation Laws and Relative Position of Hugoniot and Isentropic Curves in the (P, V) Plane	86
4.1. Comments on Conservation Laws	86
4.2. Position of Hugoniot Curve (H) Relatively to Isentropic Curves in the (P, V) Plane	88

5. Experimental Results	90
5.1. Some Experimental Results on Simple Metals	90
5.2. Relation Between U_S (Shock Wave Velocity) and u_p (Particular Velocity)	90
5.3. Some Results on Geological Materials	94
5.4. Numerical Compendiums	94
6. Hydrodynamic Attenuation	96
6.1. Hydrodynamic Decay of Pressure Pulses	97
7. Shock Transmission Between Two Media	98
7.1. Reflected Shock Waves	100
7.2. Reflected Release Waves	100
7.3. Equilibrium State at the Interface	101
7.4. Approximation on Curves H'_1 and S_{1-}	101
8. Planar Impact of Projectile on Semi-infinite and Massive Target at Rest	101
8.1. Chronology of Events	102
8.2. Theory	103
8.3. Numerical Examples	105
9. Equation of State and Temperature Evaluation	106
9.1. Mie-Gruneisen Equation of State	106
9.2. Temperature Behind a Shock Front. Low Pressure	107
9.3. Temperature Behind a Shock Front. High Pressure	108
9.4. Numerical Applications	109
9.5. Release from the Shocked State. Residual Temperature	109
9.6. Isentropic Curve from the Initial State	110
9.7. Comments	111
References	111

**The Experimental and Theoretical Basis
for Studying Collisional Disruption in the Solar System**

D.R. Davis	113
1. Introduction	114
2. Laboratory Experiments	115
2.1. Experimental Facilities	115
2.2. The Experiments	116
3. Scaling Algorithms and Fragmentation Outcome Models	127
4. Numerical Algorithms for Calculating Collisional Outcomes	131
5. Areas for Future Work	133
References	134

**Signatures of Impacts in Quartz
(Microstructures and Formation Mechanisms)**

J.C. Doukhan	137
1. Introduction	137

- 2. Lattice Defects Produced by Tectonic Processes 138
- 3. Shock-Induced Lattice Defects in Quartz 142
 - 3.1. Mechanical Twinning 143
 - 3.2. Planar Deformation Features 146
- 4. A Formation Model for PDFs 148
 - 4.1. Amorphization 149
 - References 153

Part III Terrestrial Impacts

Dating of Impact Events

- U. Schärer 157
 - 1. Introduction 158
 - 2. Some Numbers and Definitions 159
 - 3. Geological Dating Methods 160
 - 3.1. Crater Counting 160
 - 3.2. Bio-magnetostratigraphy and Paleomagnetism 161
 - 4. Nuclear Dating Methods 161
 - 4.1. General Aspects 161
 - 4.2. Thermoluminescence 162
 - 4.3. Cosmogenic Nuclides 162
 - 4.4. Fission Track Dating 163
 - 4.5. Radioactive Decay 164
 - 5. Shock Wave Metamorphism 167
 - 5.1. General Aspects 167
 - 5.2. Coherent Impact Melt Layers 169
 - 5.3. The Crater Basement 169
 - 5.4. Allochthonous Breccia Deposits 170
 - 5.5. Distant Ejecta 171
 - 6. Implications from Experiments 171
 - 7. Dating and Sample Selection 171
 - 7.1. Geological Frame 171
 - 7.2. Coherent Impact Melt Layers 173
 - 7.3. Allochthonous Breccia Deposits 173
 - 7.4. Crater Basement 174
 - 7.5. Distant Ejecta Deposits 175
 - 8. Examples 176
 - 8.1. Impactites of the Crater Area 176
 - 8.2. Distant Ejecta, and the Cretaceous/Tertiary (K/T) Boundary 177
 - 8.3. Crater Basement 181
 - References 181

Impact Energy Flux on Earth in the Last 150 My as Inferred from the Cratering Record

A.C. Bagatin, A. Montanari and P. Farinella	184
1. Introduction	185
2. The Cratering Record and Its Uncertainties	185
3. Impact Energy Flux Analysis	190
3.1. Cratering Energy Scaling	190
3.2. Energy Flux	192
3.3. Distribution of Impact Times	193
4. Discussion	195
References	197

Earth-Orbiting Debris Cloud and Its Collisional Evolution

A. Rossi and P. Farinella	199
1. Introduction	200
2. The Near-Earth Environment and the Space Surveillance	201
3. Long-Term Evolution of the Debris Population	206
3.1. Source and Sink Mechanisms	207
3.2. Long-Term Evolution Model	213
4. Policy Issues and Conclusions	219
5. Post-Scriptum	221
References	222

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