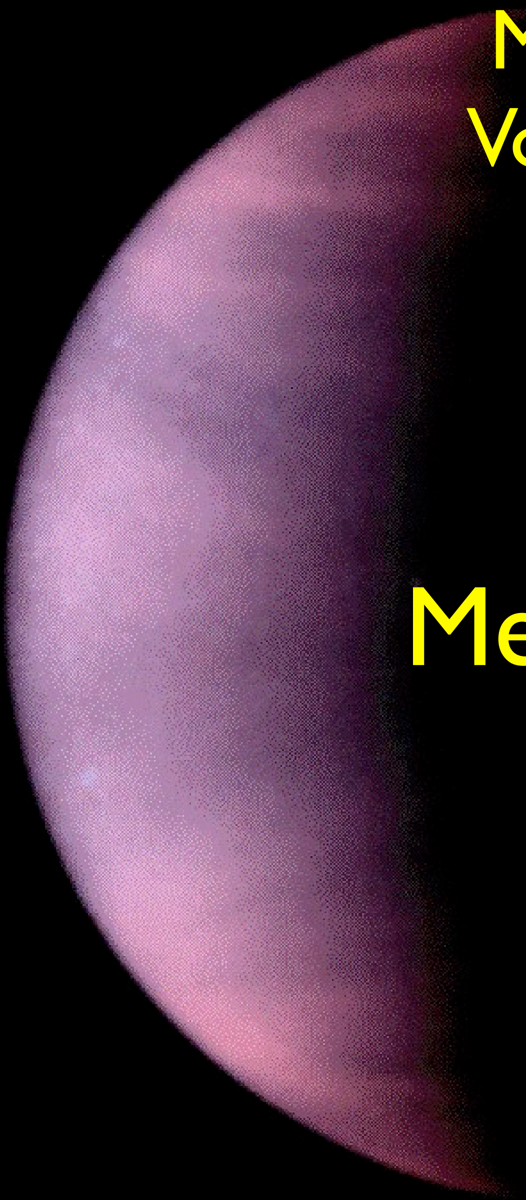


Modern Astronomy: Voyage to the Planets

Lecture 3

Mercury and Venus

the inner planets

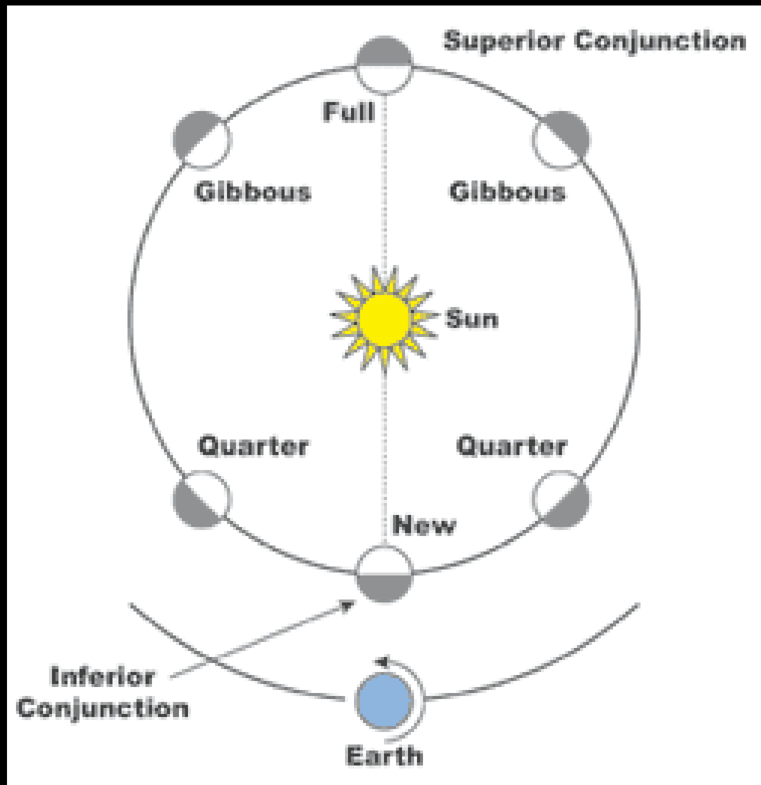
University of Sydney
Centre for Continuing Education
Autumn 2005

Don’t forget the viewing night at Mount Wilson is on Saturday night. Remember, anyone’s invited.

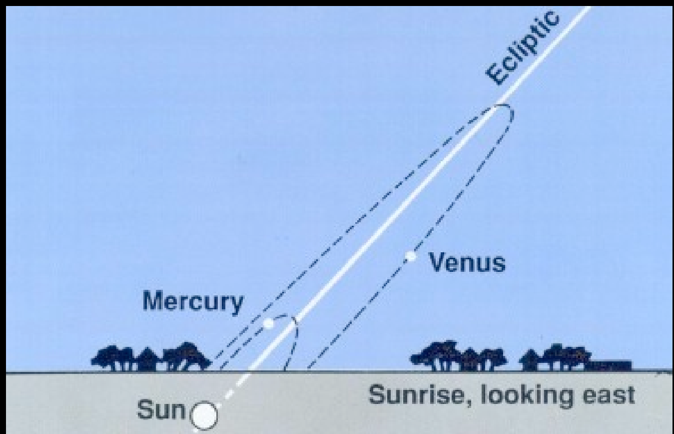
Please take a handout if you don’t already have one. It includes John’s phone number to ring if there’s doubt about whether it’s on.

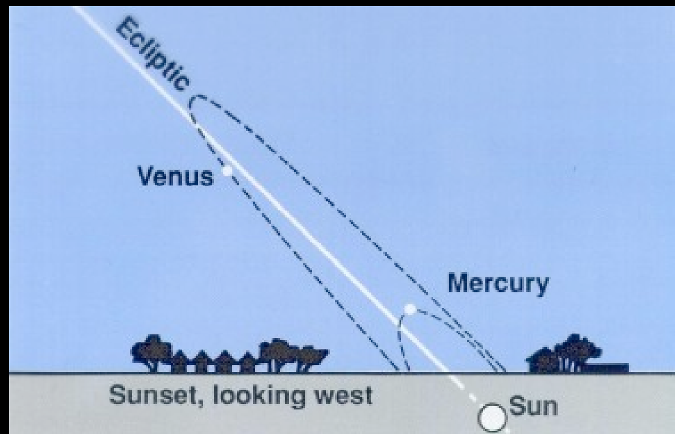
If you still don’t have a means of getting there and would like to go, let me know over tea and we’ll see if we can pair you up with someone who’s driving.

This week we'll look at the *inferior planets*, Mercury and Venus. Because they orbit closer to the Sun than the Earth, we never see them very far away from the Sun., and they show a full range of phases.



The furthest Venus ever gets from the sun (its *maximum elongation*) is 47°; for Mercury it is 28°.

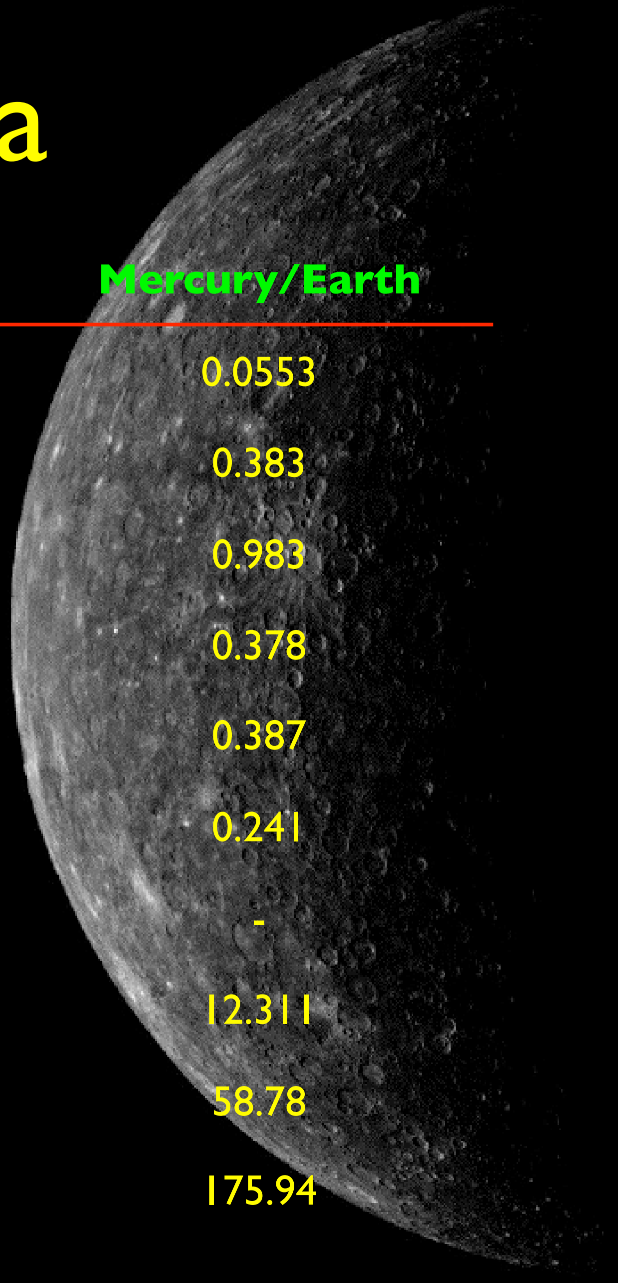




Mercury's successive positions during March of 2000. Each picture was taken from the same location in Spain when the Sun itself was 10 degrees below the horizon and superposed on the single most photogenic sunset.

Mercury

Basic data



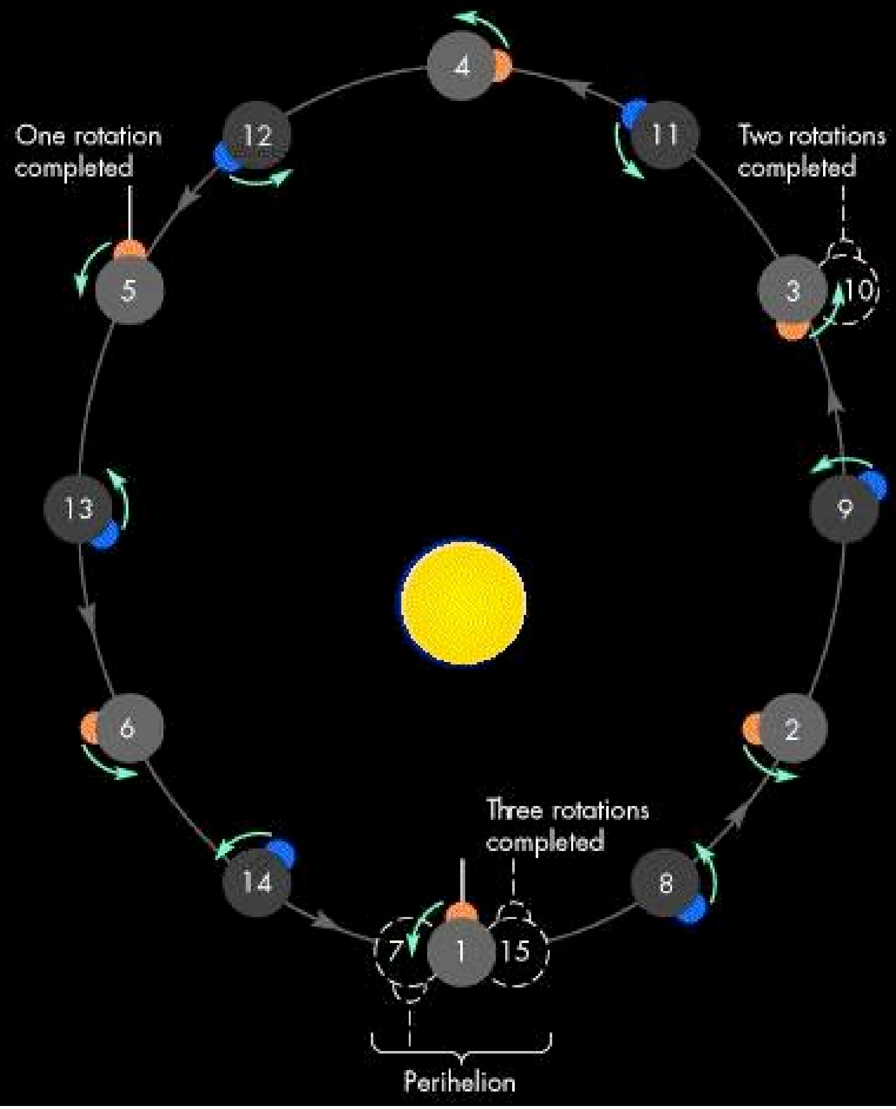
	Mercury	Mercury/Earth
Mass	0.3302×10^{24} kg	0.0553
Radius	2440 km	0.383
Mean density	5.427 g/cm^3	0.983
Gravity	3.70 m/s^2	0.378
Semi-major axis	57.91×10^6 km	0.387
Period	87.969 d	0.241
Orbital inclination	7.0^o	-
Orbital eccentricity	0.2056	12.311
Rotation period	1407.6 h	58.78
Length of day	4222.6 h	175.94

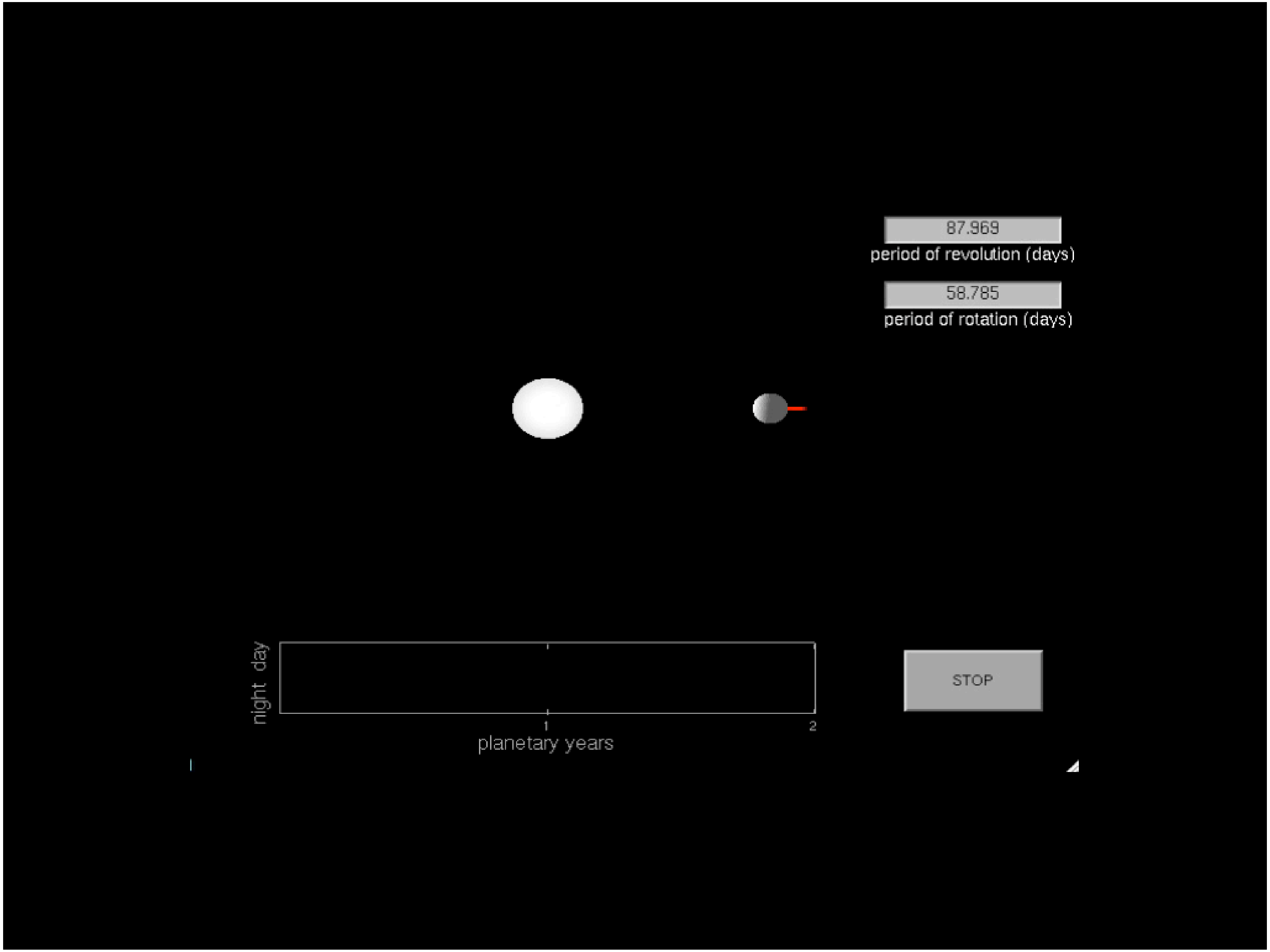
Only one spacecraft has visited Mercury: Mariner 10 made three flybys in 1974–1975. Only 45% of the surface was photographed, so there is still a lot to learn about Mercury.

NASA launched the MESSENGER mission to Mercury in August last year. It will flyby Mercury three times in 2008–9, then enter Mercury orbit in 2011.

ESA plans two Mercury orbiters called BepiColombo, for launch in 2012.

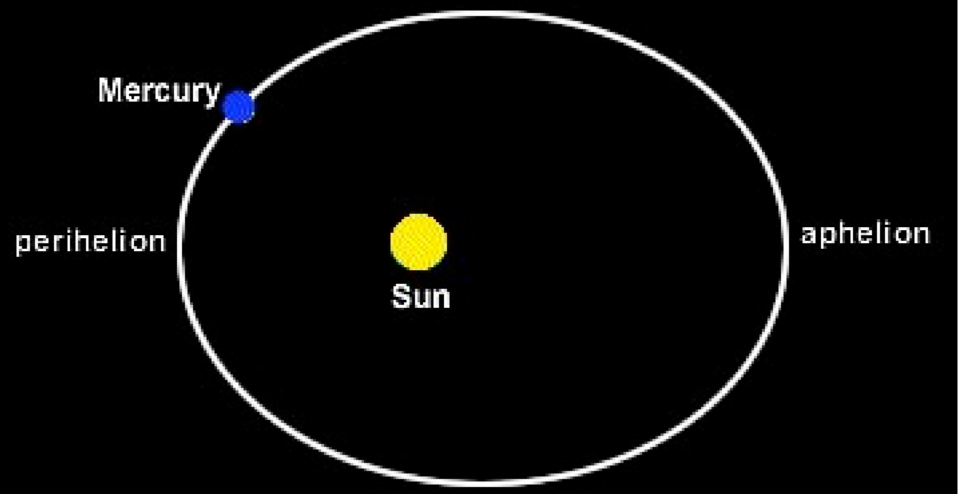
Mercury's period of rotation (58.7 days) is exactly two-thirds of the orbital period (88.0 days, the Mercurian year). This 3:2 resonance means that the *solar day* on Mercury – the time between noon and noon – is 176 (Earth) days long, twice the length of the year!

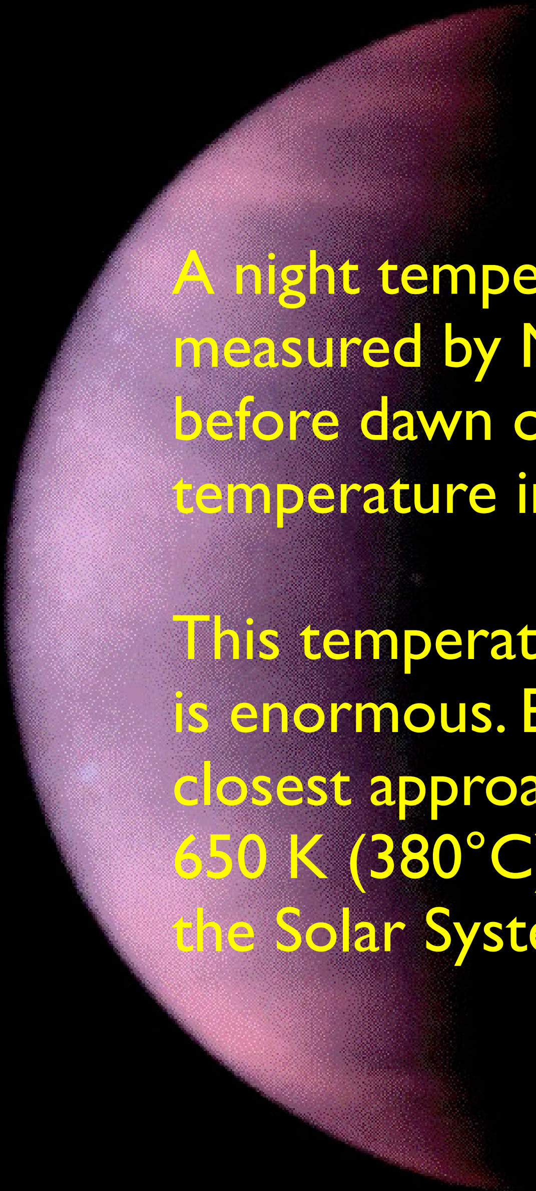



87.969
period of revolution (days)
58.785
period of rotation (days)
night day
1
2
planetary years
STOP

Mercury's orbit is the most elliptical of any planet except Pluto. Its distance from the Sun varies from 46 million km at perihelion to 70 million km at aphelion, a difference of more than 50%. This means that the intensity of sunlight on the surface varies by about a factor of two.

The 3:2 resonance means that the same region of tha plane faces the Sun every *second* perihelion, with the region on the opposite side of the planet facing the Sun in alternate years. So Mercury has two "hot poles".

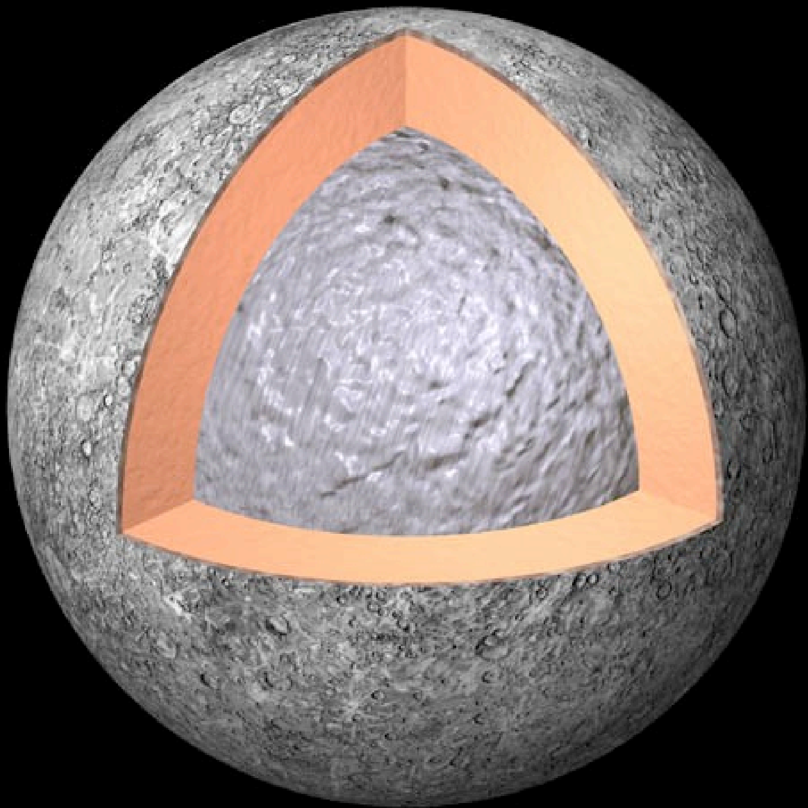




A night temperature low of 90 K (–180°C) was measured by Mariner's infrared radiometer just before dawn on Mercury. The maximum daytime temperature in late afternoon was 460 K (190°C).

This temperature difference between night and day is enormous. But at times, when Mercury makes its closest approach to the Sun, the range can reach 650 K (380°C): greater than on any other planet in the Solar System.

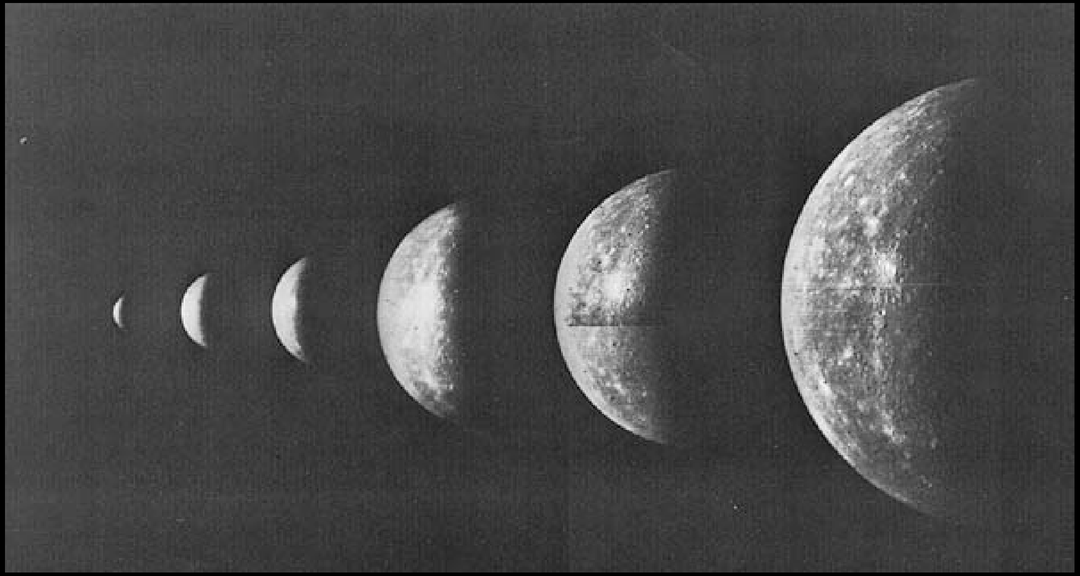
Mercury is extremely dense: despite its small size (only slightly larger than the Moon), it is nearly as dense as the Earth. This implies that about 70% of its mass must be made of iron, probably in a large core about 75% of the planet's radius.

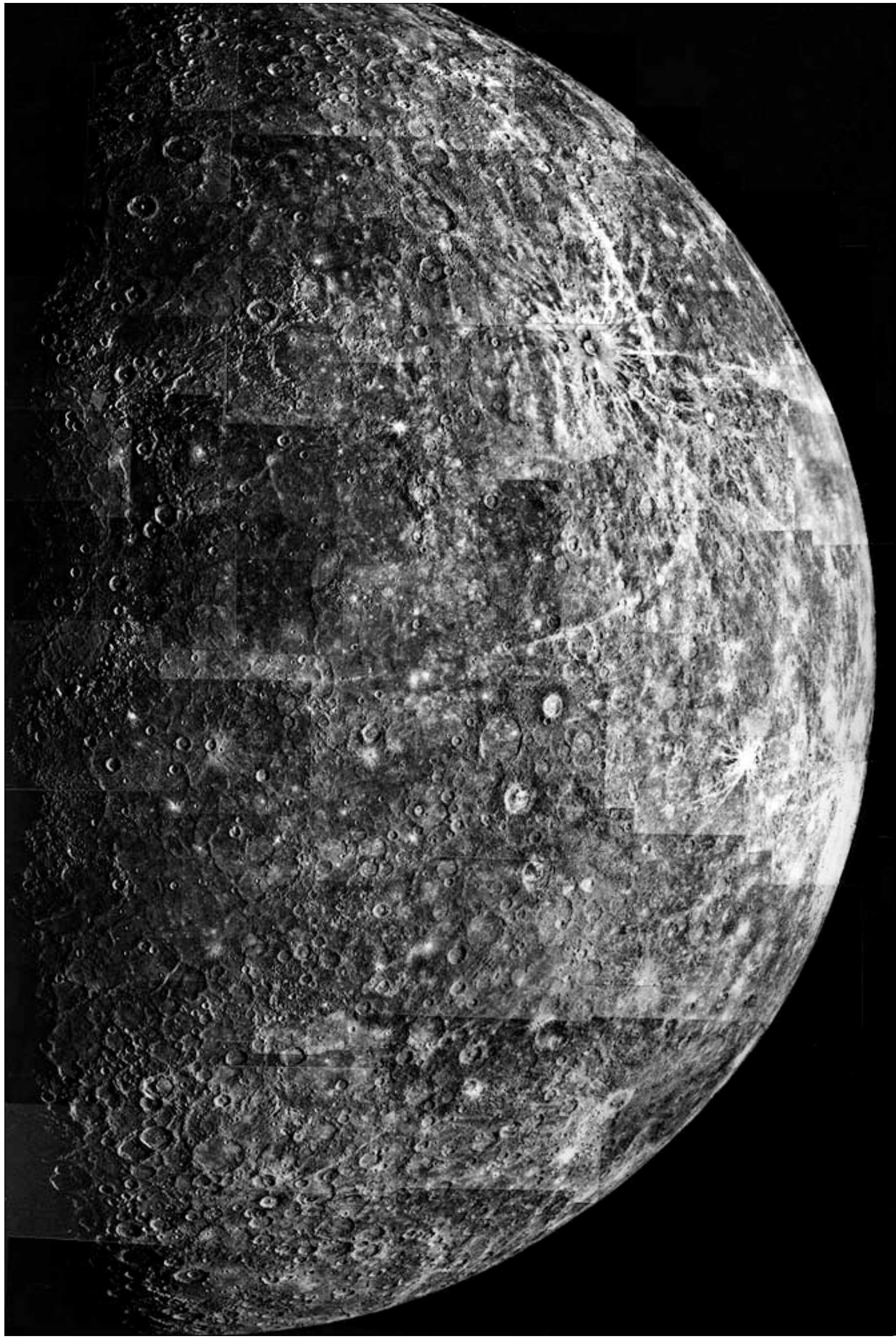


Cutaway view of the possible structure of the interior of Mercury. The core is much larger in proportion than Earth's, about 1800 km in radius. The silicate outer shell is only 500–600 km in thickness.

Surface

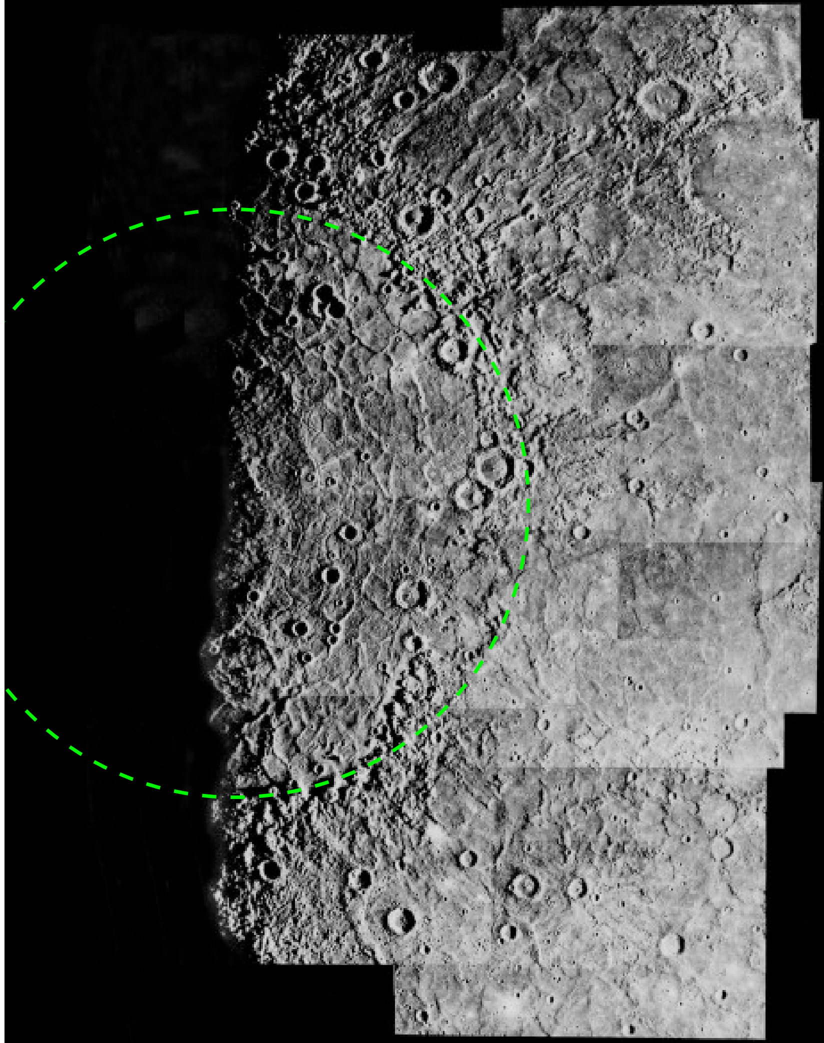
The Mariner 10 photos revealed a surface bearing a striking resemblance to the Moon: heavily cratered, with large flat circular basins similar to those on the Moon and Mars.





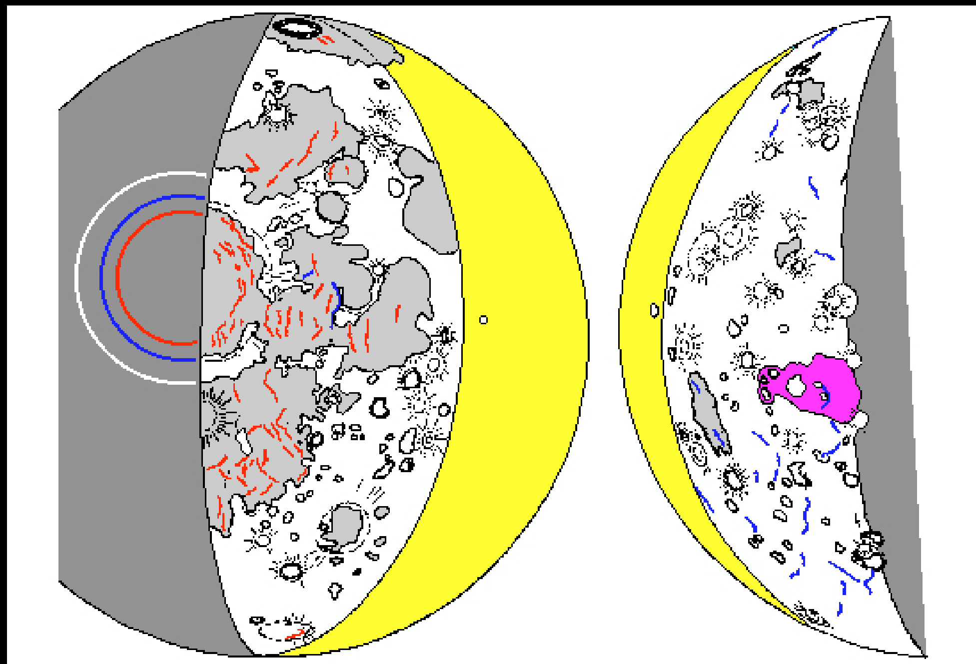
Impact craters cover most of the planet. The craters range in size from 100 meters (the smallest resolvable feature on Mariner 10 images) to 1,300 kilometers. Some are young with sharp rims and bright rays like the craters we saw on the Moon. Others are highly degraded, with rims that have been smoothed by the bombardment of meteorites.

The largest crater on Mercury is the *Caloris basin*. It is located near one of the two “hot poles”, near 180° of longitude.

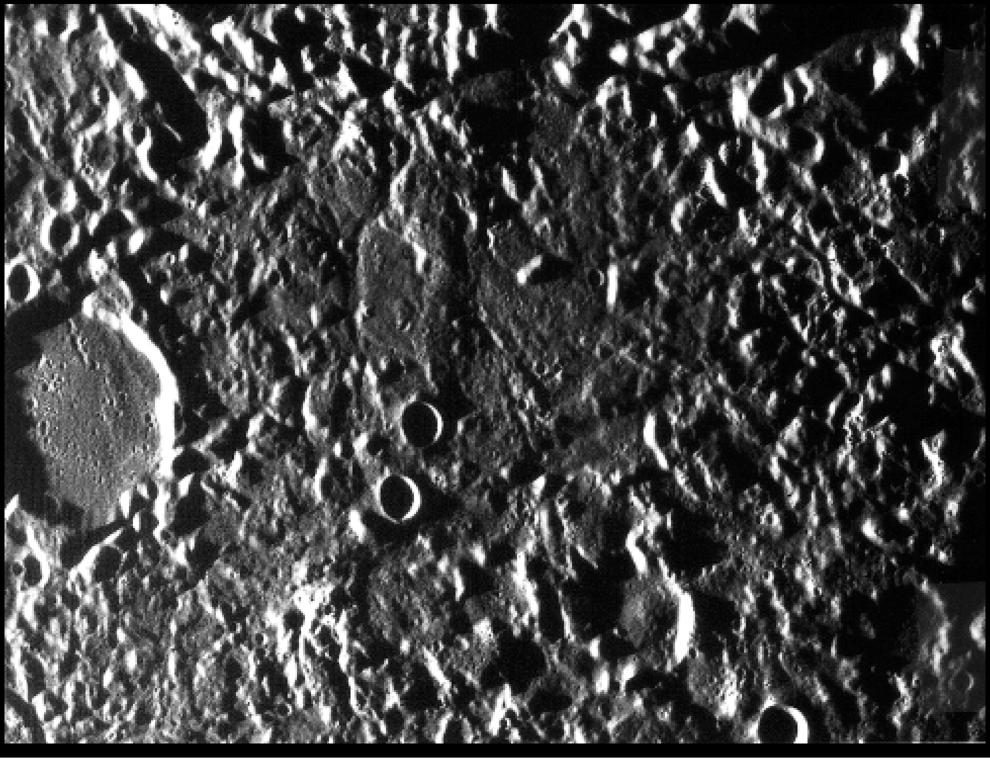


The Caloris basin must have resulted from the impact of an asteroid at least 100 km across early in the formation of the planet. Caloris is just north of the planet's equator and is surrounded by circular mountain ridges up to 2 km high. The diameter of the basin is 1300 km. Smooth plains between the rings may represent volcanism triggered by the impact.

Aside: Here is where the fact that Mariner 10 photographed less than half of the surface becomes a real problem! This is a tentative map of Mercury's surface, showing how little we know.



On the exact other side of the planet to the Caloris Basin is a vast area of jumbled, peculiar terrain. It has been suggested that the immense shock waves produced by the impact of the body that produced Caloris were focused around the planet so that the resultant seismic disturbances broke up the surface, and that this is responsible for the chaotic appearance of this region.



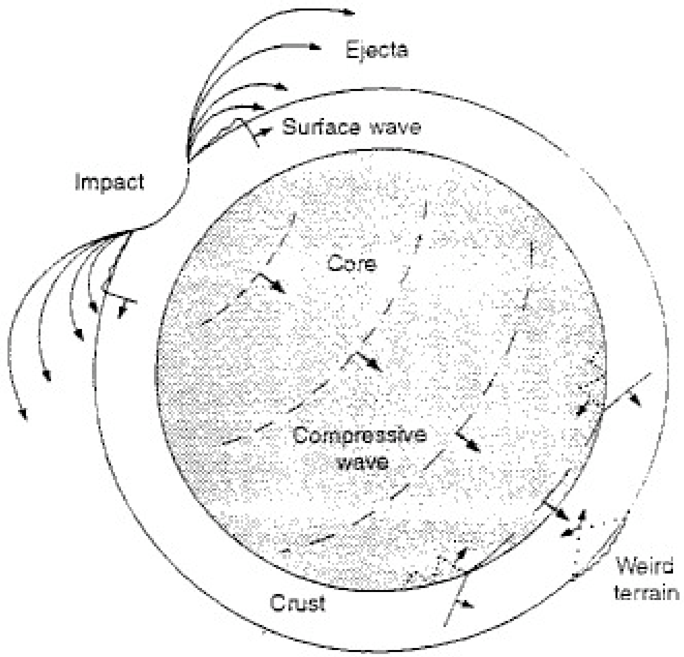
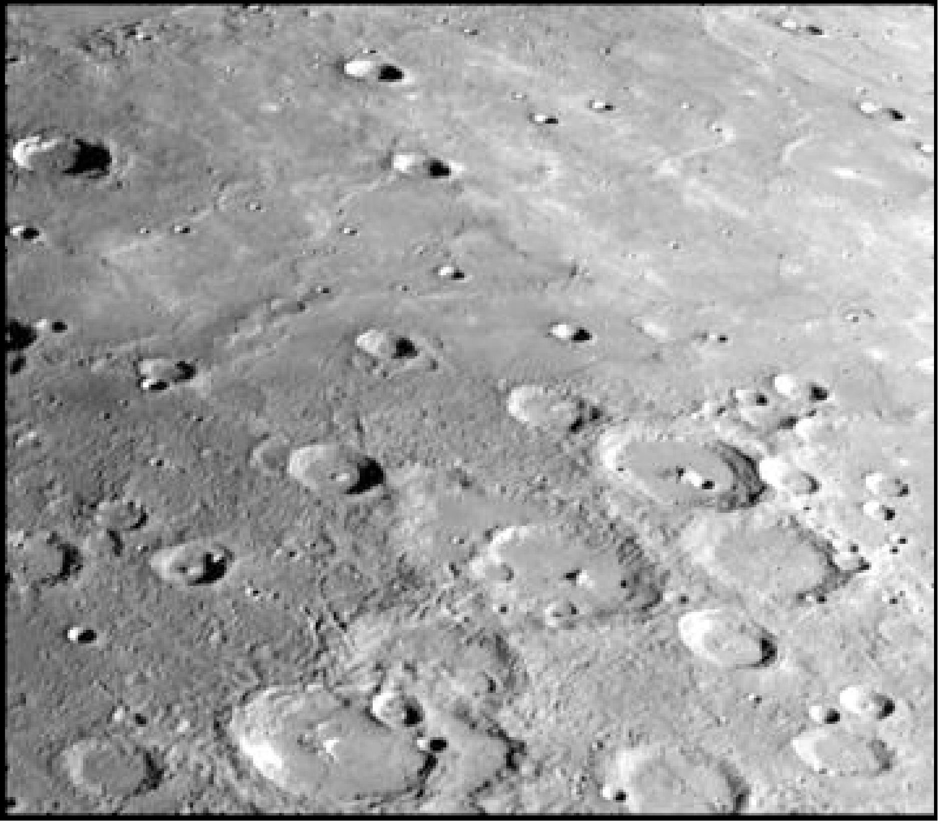


FIGURE 10 Diagrammatic representation of the formation of the hilly and lineated terrain by focused seismic waves from the Caloris impact. [From Schultz, P., and Gault, D. (1975). *The Moon* 12, pp 159–177.]

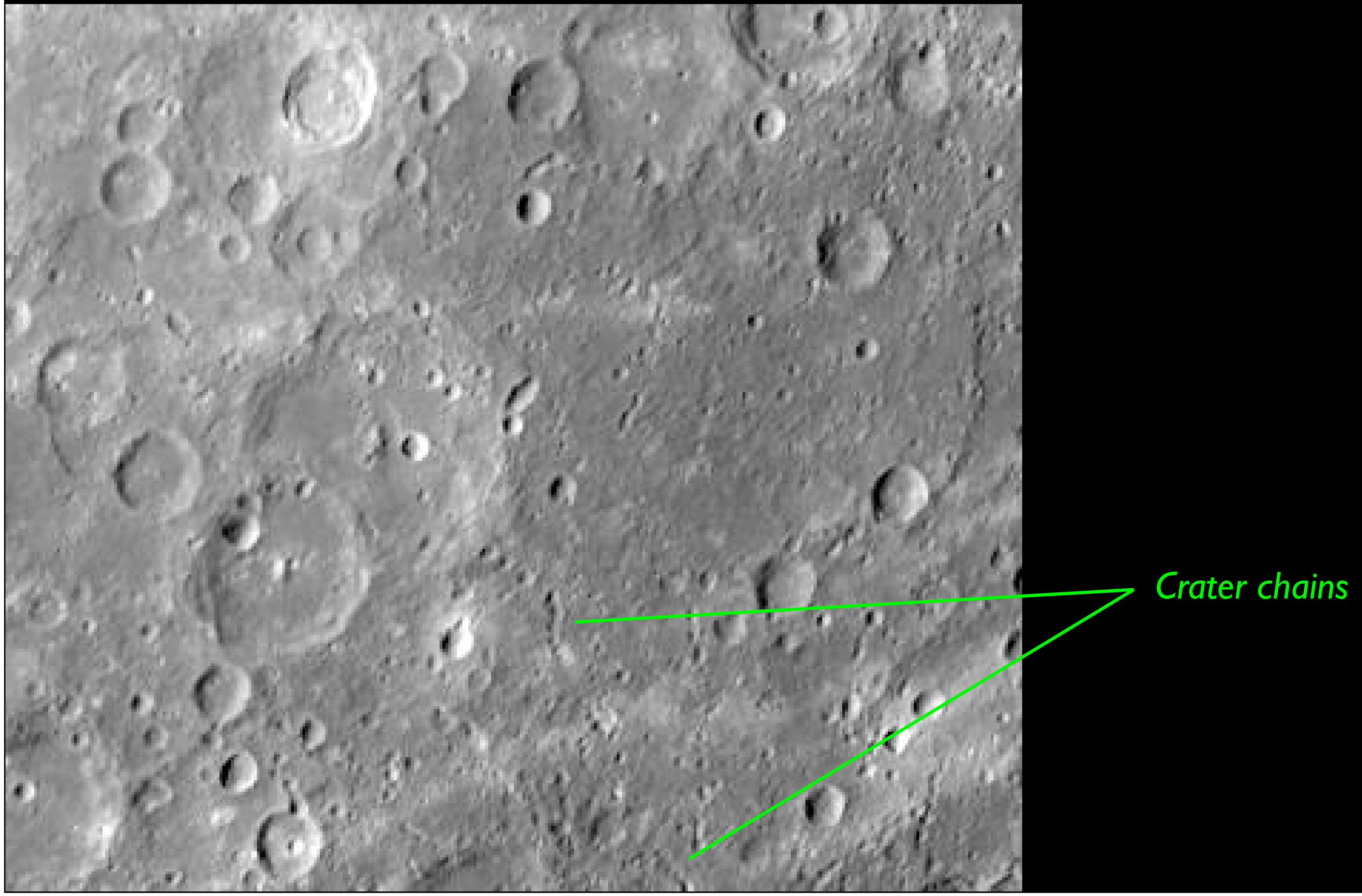
The heavily cratered regions are not as densely cratered as the Moon: the surface is not saturated with craters as the lunar highlands are.

Around and between regions of heavy cratering are *intercrater plains*. Unlike the maria on the Moon, they are distributed among the heavily cratered regions instead of in broad basins, and they are much more highly cratered than the lunar maria. They don't lie obviously under or over the craters, implying the planet was resurfaced late in the accretion process.

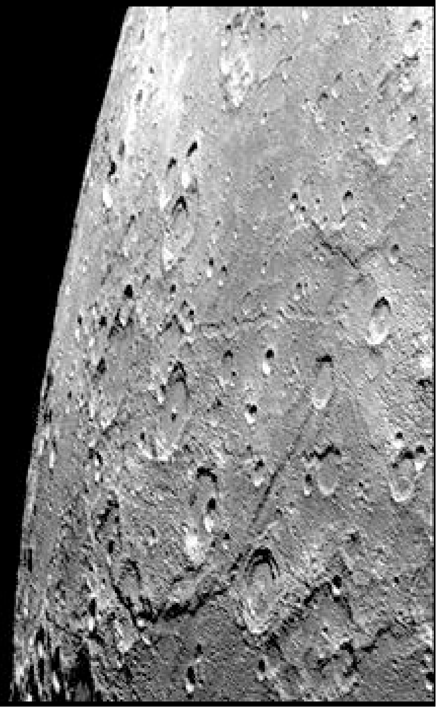


Heavily cratered terrain abutting a smooth plain, with a few young craters.

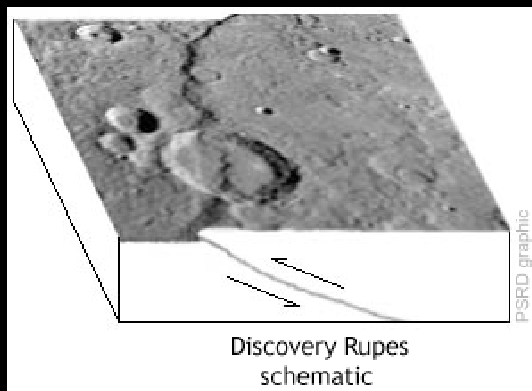
The intercrater plains are peppered with small craters, often in chains, which must be secondary craters formed by material ejected from a larger crater.



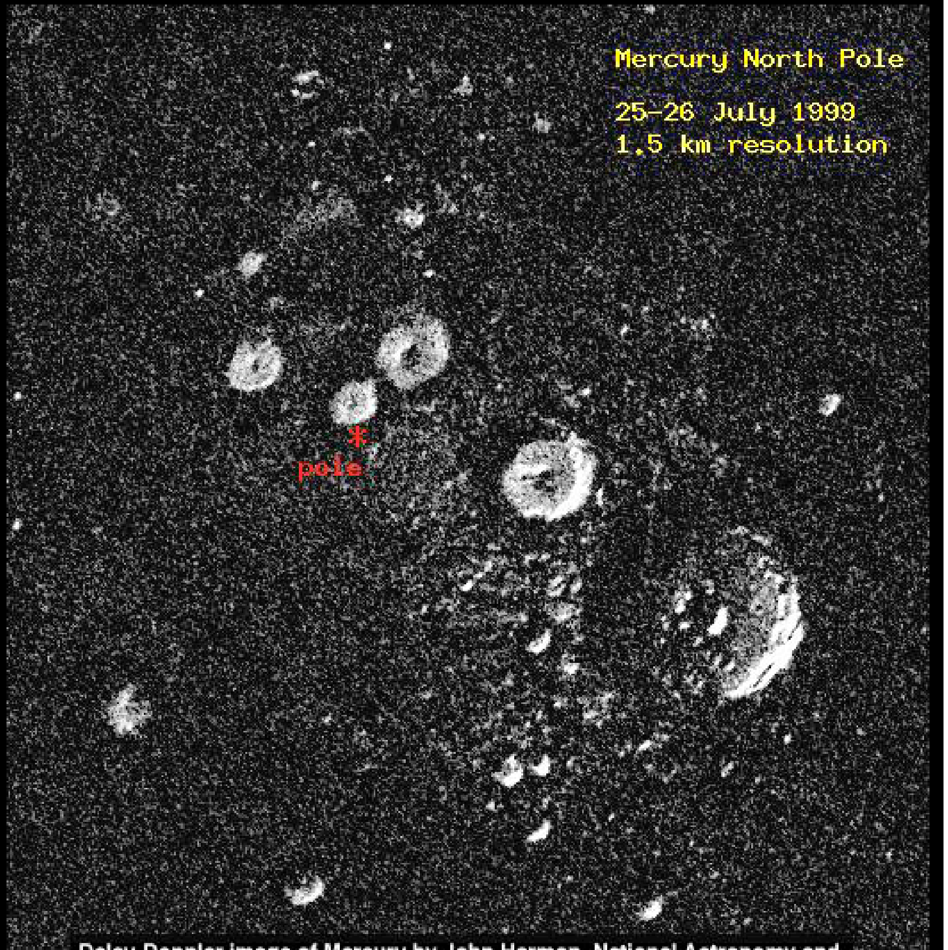
Mercury shows long linear features: *scarps* and *troughs*. The scarps are between 500–1000 m in height and can be several hundred km long. They are thought to arise by contraction of the crust, possibly as a result of cooling. The fact that some scarps cut across craters, while others are partially obliterated by craters, suggest they were formed during the period of heavy bombardment.



Discovery Rupes (left) and Hero Rupes (right). Below, a picture of how the ground may have shifted to produce the scarp.

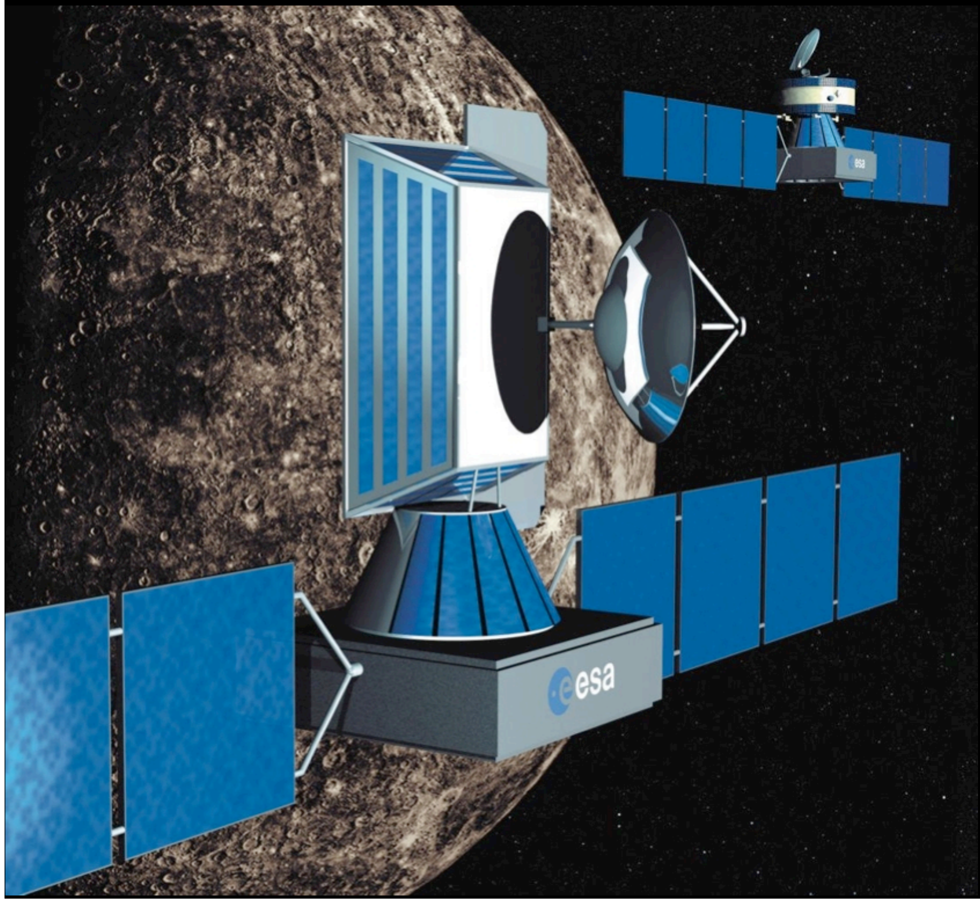


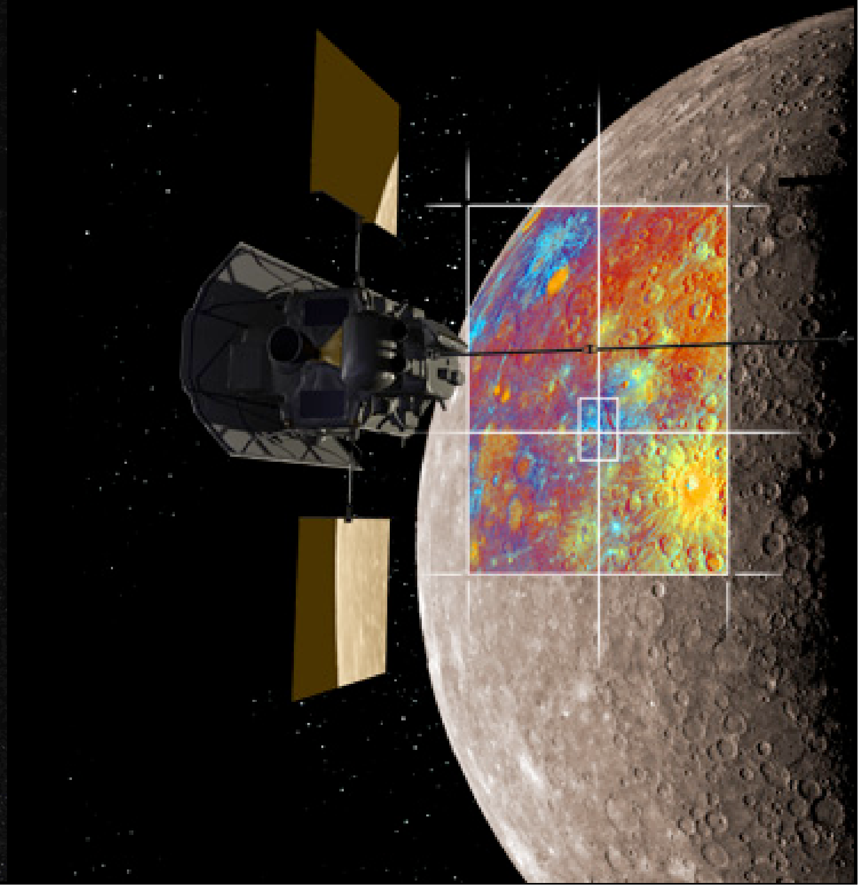
Earth-based radar observations show strong radar reflections from permanently shadowed craters near the north pole. These could represent deposits of ice inside the craters, possibly just below the surface.



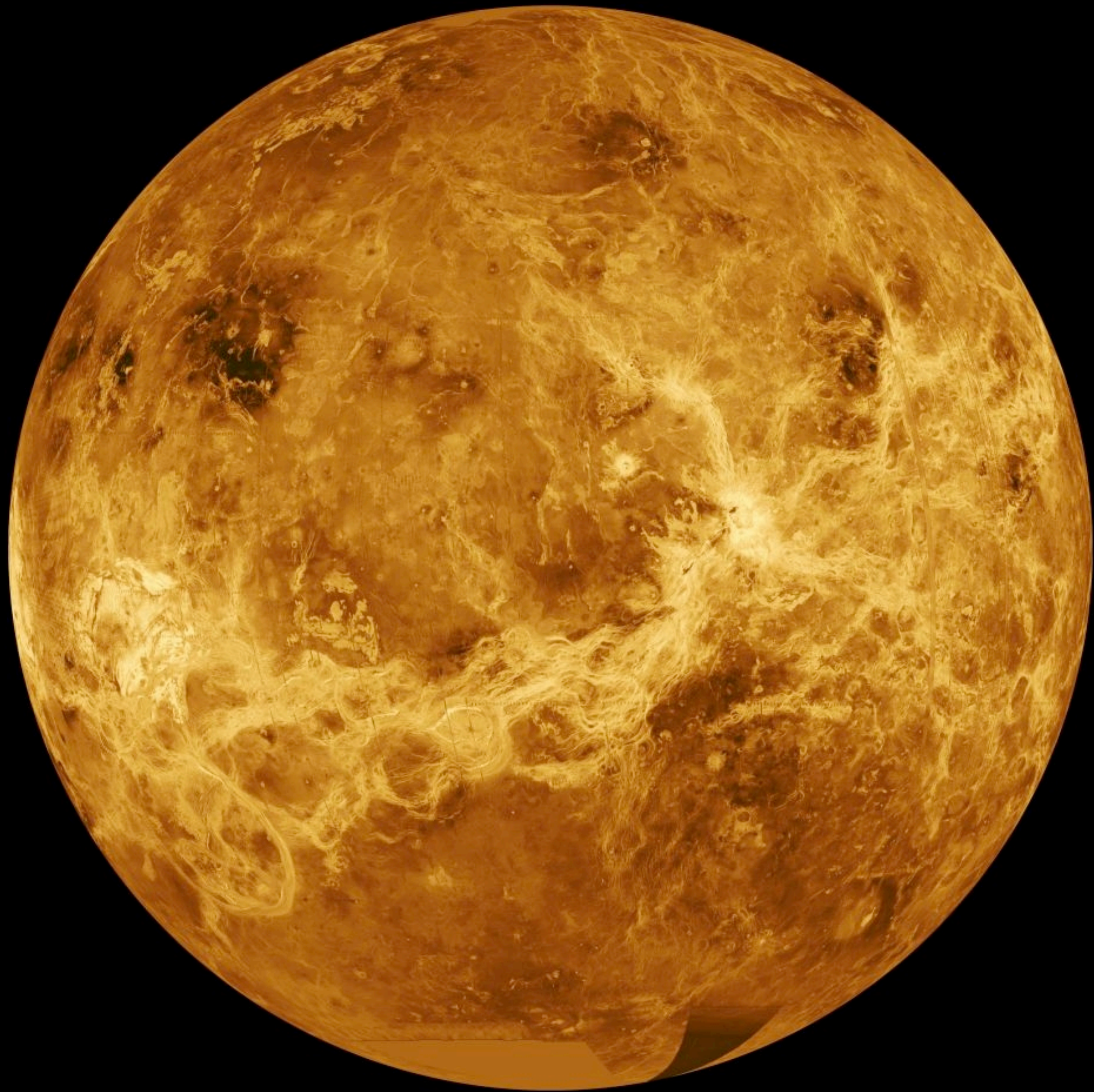
Delay-Doppler image of Mercury by John Harmon, National Astronomy and Ionosphere Center, Arecibo Observatory, Puerto Rico.

There is still much we don’t know about Mercury. We’ll have to wait for Messenger and BepiColombo to learn more.





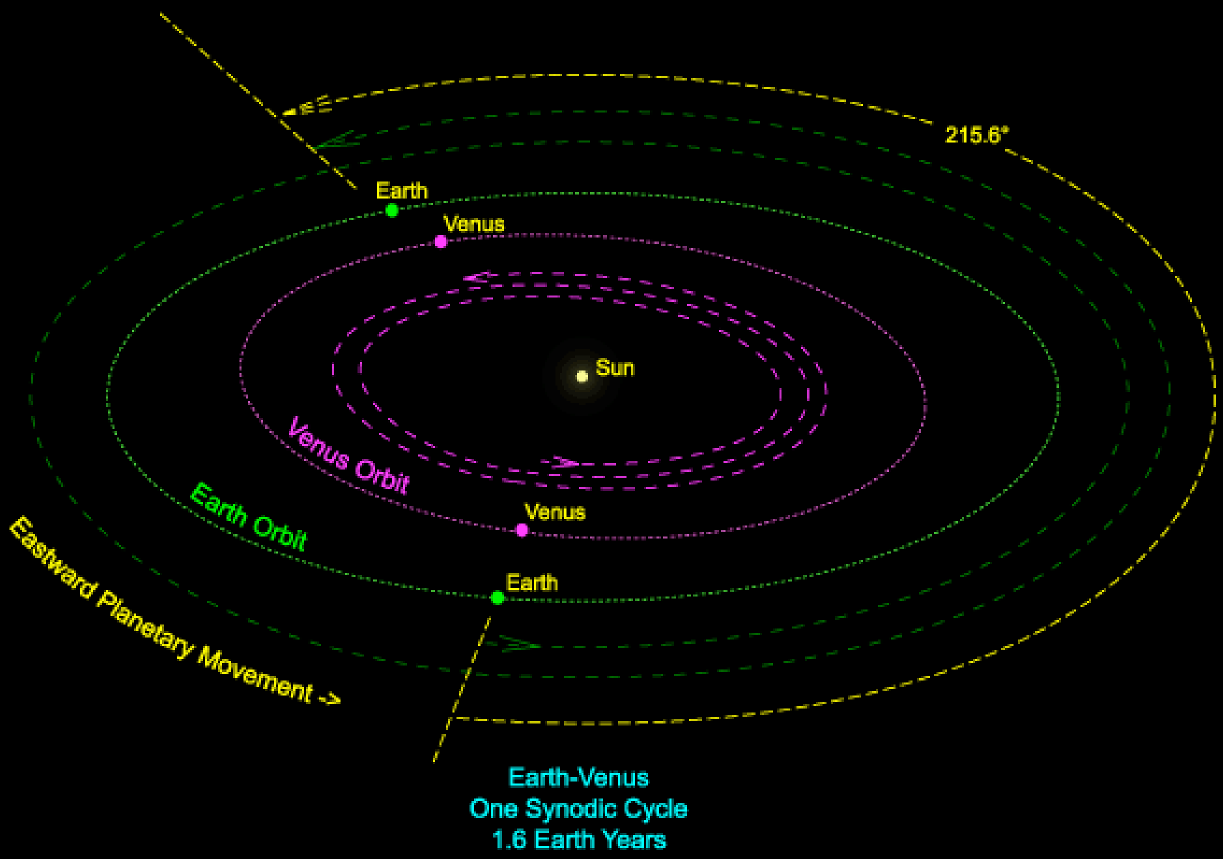
Venus



Basic data

	Venus	Venus/Earth
Mass	4.8685×10^{24} kg	0.815
Radius	6052 km	0.95
Mean density	5.243 g/cm^3	0.943
Gravity	8.87 m/s^2	0.907
Semi-major axis	108.21×10^6 km	0.723
Period	224.7 d	0.615
Orbital inclination	3.39^o	-
Orbital eccentricity	0.0067	0.401
Rotation period	–243.686 d (retrograde)	243.686
Length of day	2802 h	116.75

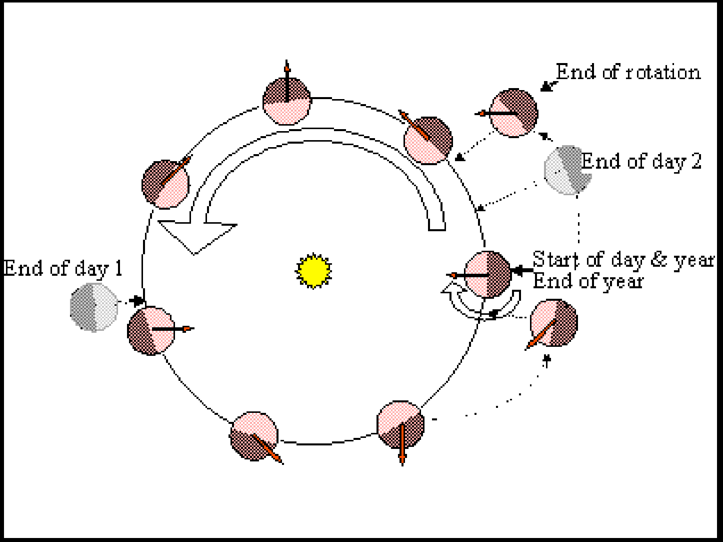
Venus' orbital period is almost exactly 5/8 of a year, so Earth and Venus are in a 5:8 resonance. This means that inferior conjunction occurs every 1.6 years, during which time Venus has covered 2.6 orbits. After eight years, the two planets are back to almost the same position (off by about 2°).

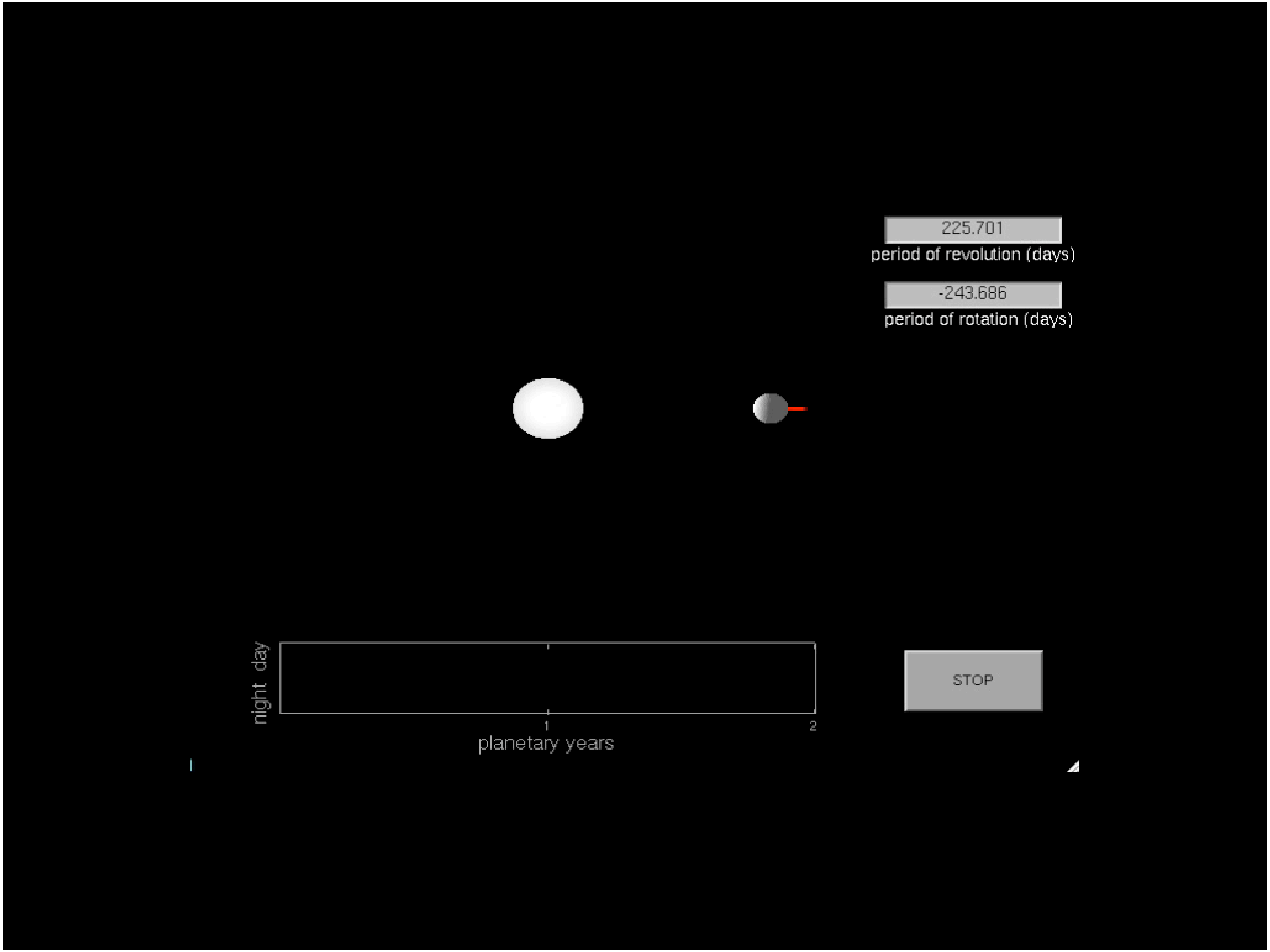


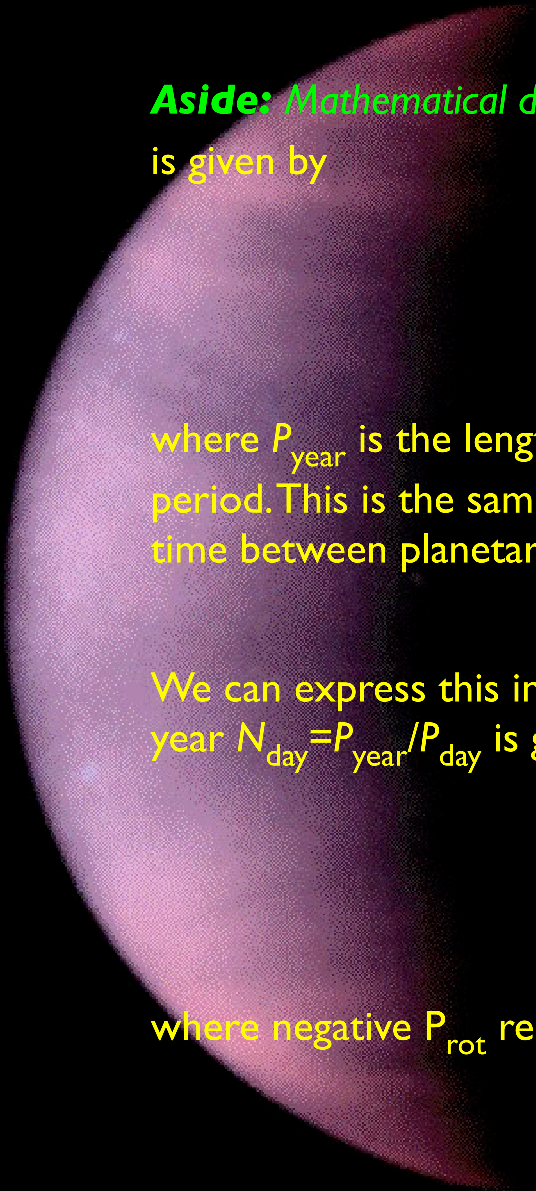
Venus' rotation period is 243 days in the opposite sense to its orbit: Pluto is the only other planet with retrograde rotation.

This means the solar day (the time between sunrise and sunrise) is 117 days.

To an observer on the surface, the sun rises in the west and sets in the east 59 (Earth) days later, so the sun rises and sets twice a year.




225.701
period of revolution (days)
-243.686
period of rotation (days)
night day
1
2
planetary years
STOP



Aside: *Mathematical details for those who are interested*: The length of the day P_{day} is given by

$$P_{\rm day} = \frac{P_{\rm year} \times P_{\rm rot}}{P_{\rm year} - P_{\rm rot}}$$

where P_{year} is the length of the planet's year, and P_{rot} is the planet's rotation period. This is the same equation we came across when we were discussing the time between planetary conjunctions – the "beat period".

We can express this in a slightly more useful way by saying the number of days per year $N_{day}=P_{year}/P_{day}$ is given by the number of rotation periods per year minus 1:

$$N_{\rm day} = \frac{P_{\rm year}}{P_{\rm rot}} - 1$$

where negative P_{rot} represents retrograde rotation.

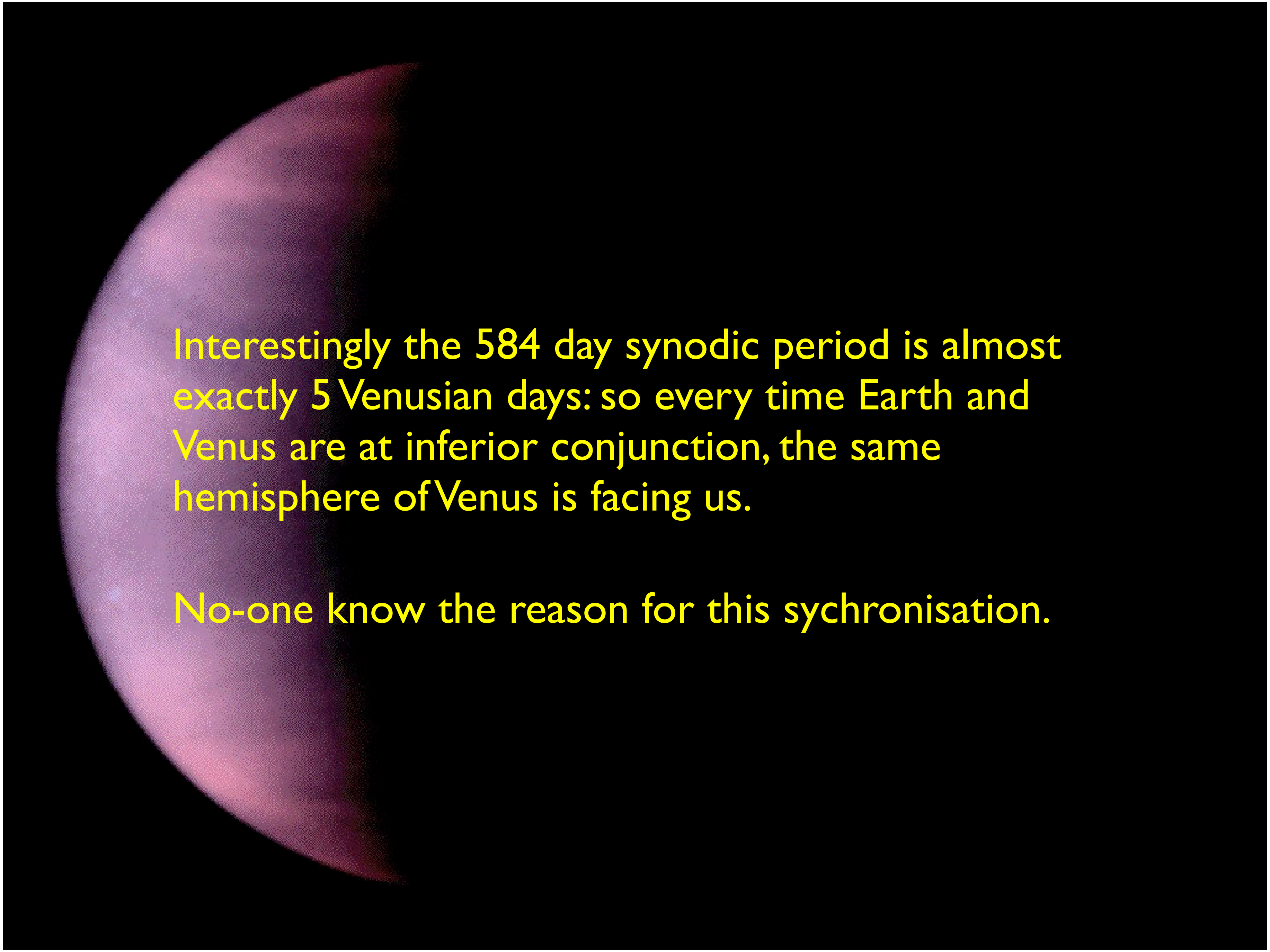
The Earth's rotation period is so much smaller than its year that we don't notice the difference between the length of the day (24h) and the length of the Earth's rotation period (23h56m), except that astronomers notice because the stars all rise 4m earlier every night. But when the rotation period is comparable to the year, the difference between the two is very pronounced indeed.

So for Venus, P_{year} = 224.7 d, P_{rot} = –243.686 d, so you can verify that N_{day} = –1.922, so the length of the day is P_{day} = 224.7/1.922 d = 116.9 d.

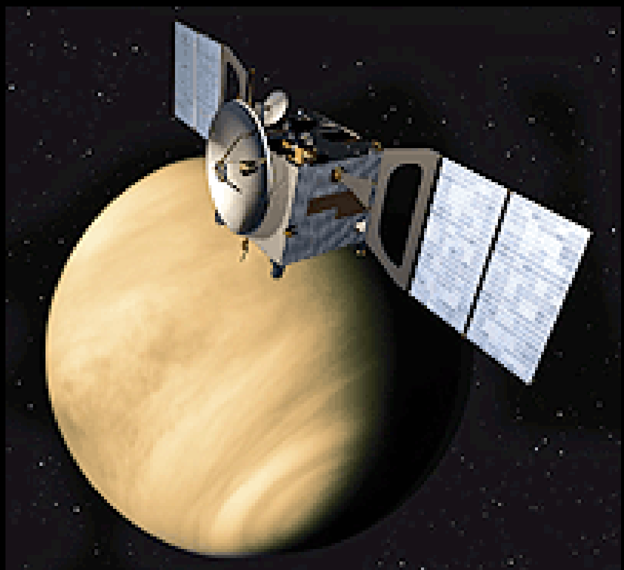
For Mercury, P_{year} = 87.969 d, P_{rot} = 58.785 d, so N_{day} = 0.496, or a day length P_{day} = 177.2 d.

So in fact Mercury is the only planet with a day longer than its year!

Note that if $P_{year} = P_{rot}$ (tidal synchronisation), the number of days per year is *zero*: the sun never rises and sets.


Interestingly the 584 day synodic period is almost exactly 5 Venusian days: so every time Earth and Venus are at inferior conjunction, the same hemisphere of Venus is facing us.
No-one know the reason for this sychronisation.

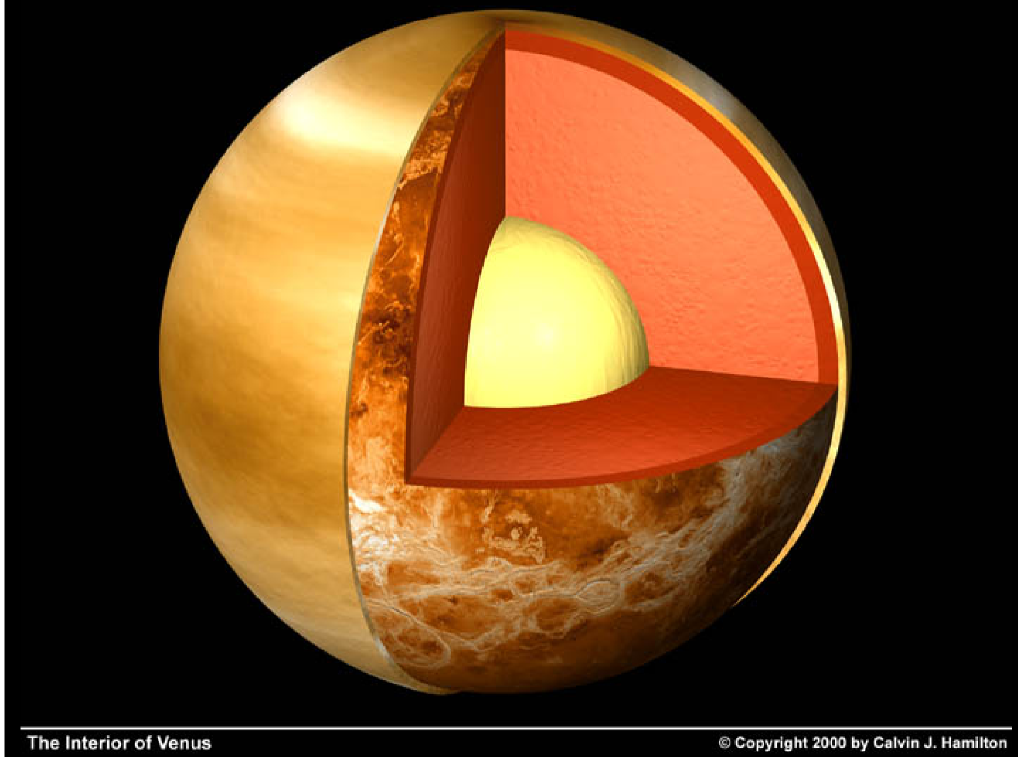
More spacecraft have visited Venus than any other planet, including three NASA Mariner missions, sixteen Soviet Venera orbiters and landers, the NASA Pioneer orbiter and probes, and more recently Galileo and Magellan.



Venera 1	1961	Flyby (contact lost)
Mariner 2	1962	Flyby
Venera 4	1967	Probe
Mariner 5	1967	Flyby
Venera 5	1969	Probe
Venera 6	1969	Probe
Venera 7	1970	Lander
Venera 8	1972	Lander
Mariner 10	1974	Flyby
Venera 9	1975	Orbiter & lander
Venera 10	1975	Orbiter & lander
Pioneer Venus	1978	Orbiter & probes
Venera 11	1978	Lander
Venera 12	1978	Lander
Venera 13	1982	Lander
Venera 14	1982	Lander
Venera 15	1983	Orbiter
Venera 16	1983	Orbiter
Vega-1	1985	Flyby
Vega-2	1985	Flyby
Galileo	1990	Flyby
Magellan	1990	Orbiter
Messenger	2006,2007	Flyby
Venus Express	2006	Orbiter

The mean density of Venus is 5243 kg/m^3, very similar to Earth's, so it must also have an iron core.

Venus has no magnetic field, presumably because the slow rotation means there is not enough motion in core to form a planetary dynamo.

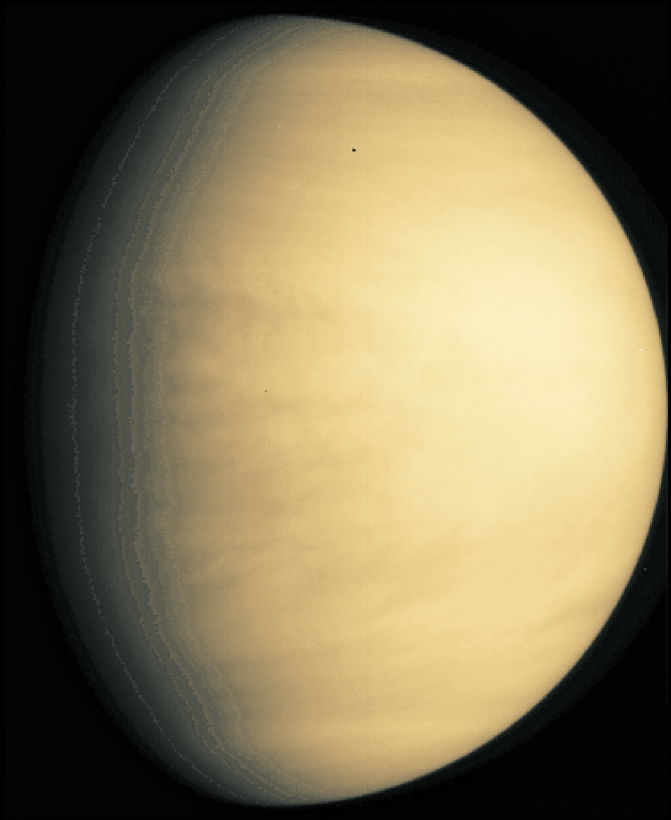


One of the outstanding questions about Venus' interior is: does Venus have plate tectonics?

Cutaway view of the possible structure of the interior of Venus. The core is probably similar in size to Earth's, about 3000 km.

Atmosphere

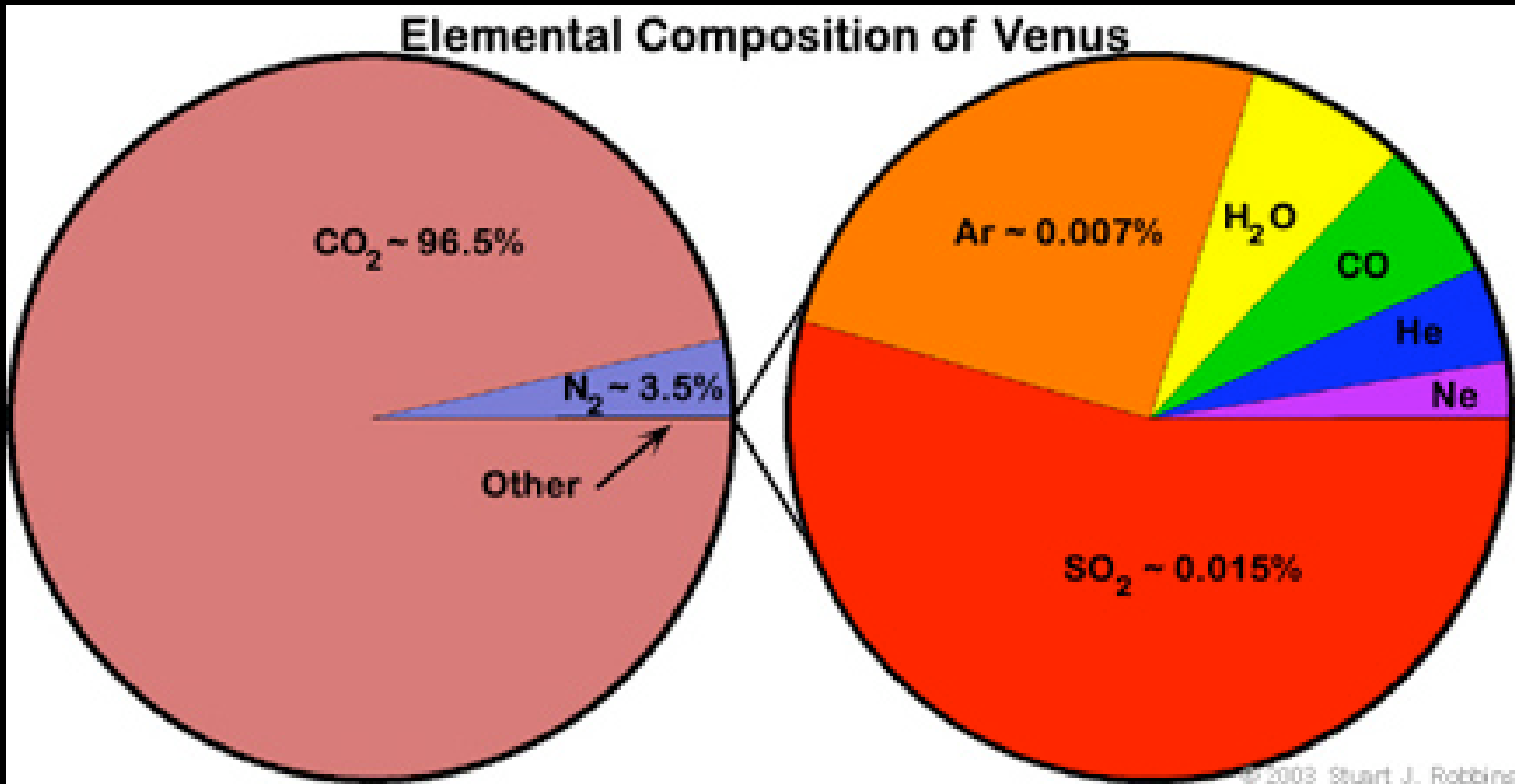
Venus is completely covered by clouds. For many years this led to speculation that under the clouds Venus was



a wet planet, possibly even teeming with life, like the Carboniferous period in Earth's history.

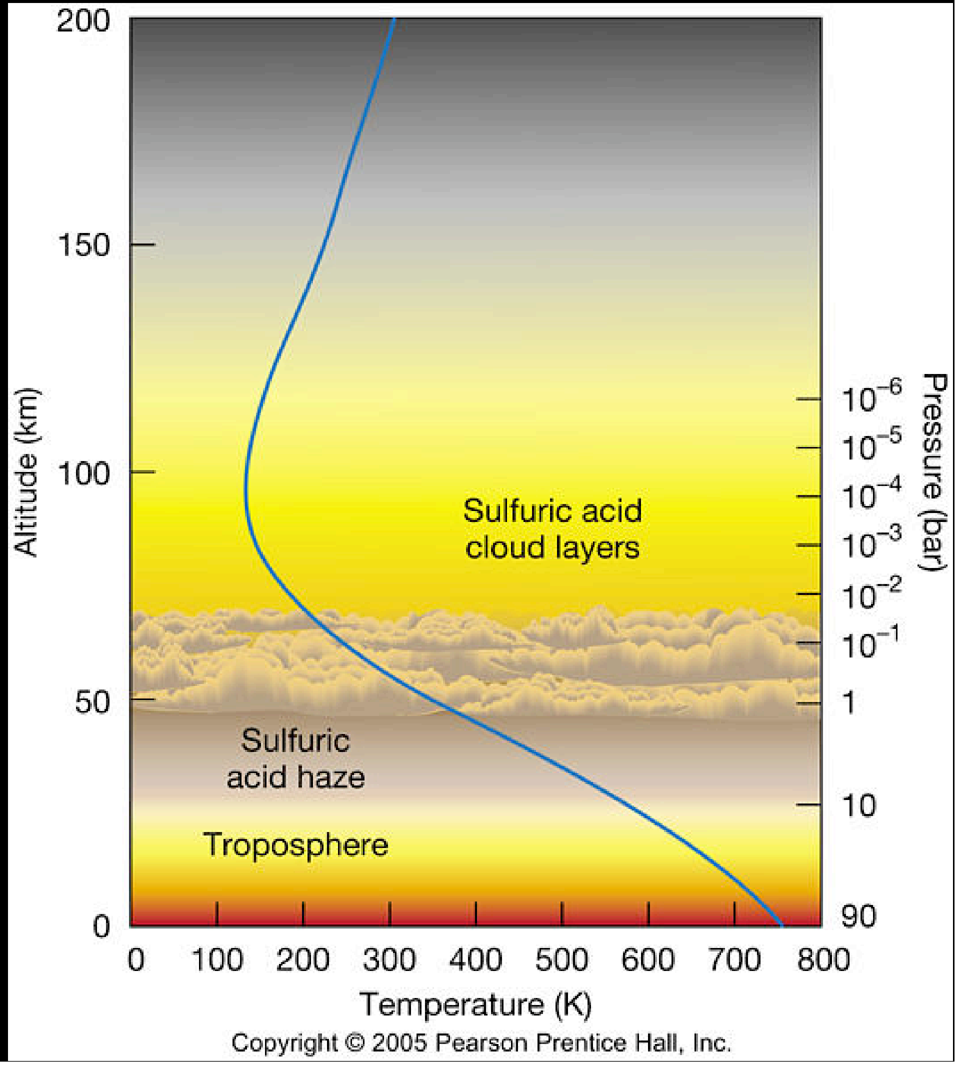
The reality is not nearly so idyllic.

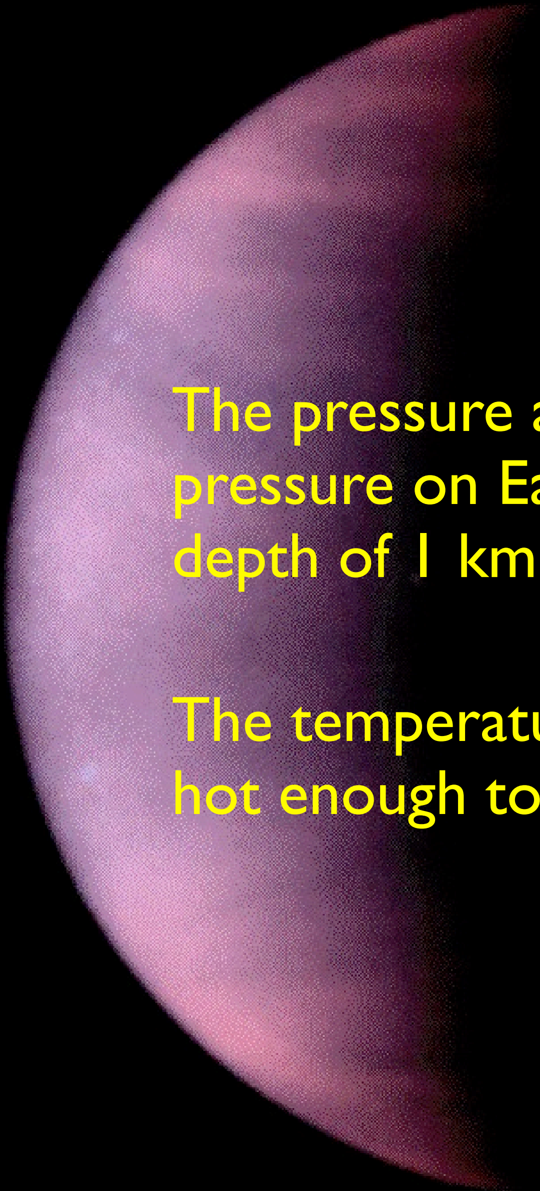
The atmosphere on Venus consists of 96% CO_2, 3% , and trace amounts of other chemicals. Deuterium (heavy hydrogen) is 150 times more abundant than on Earth, suggesting Venus once had water but it evaporated. Argon and neon are also 50–100 more abundant on Venus.



The clouds on Venus are not water vapour, but sulphuric acid. They are confined to a layer 20km thick, about 60km above the surface.

The average size of the cloud droplets is much smaller than in clouds on Earth, so the density of the clouds is much lower: it would seem more like fog than cloud, but fog without end.

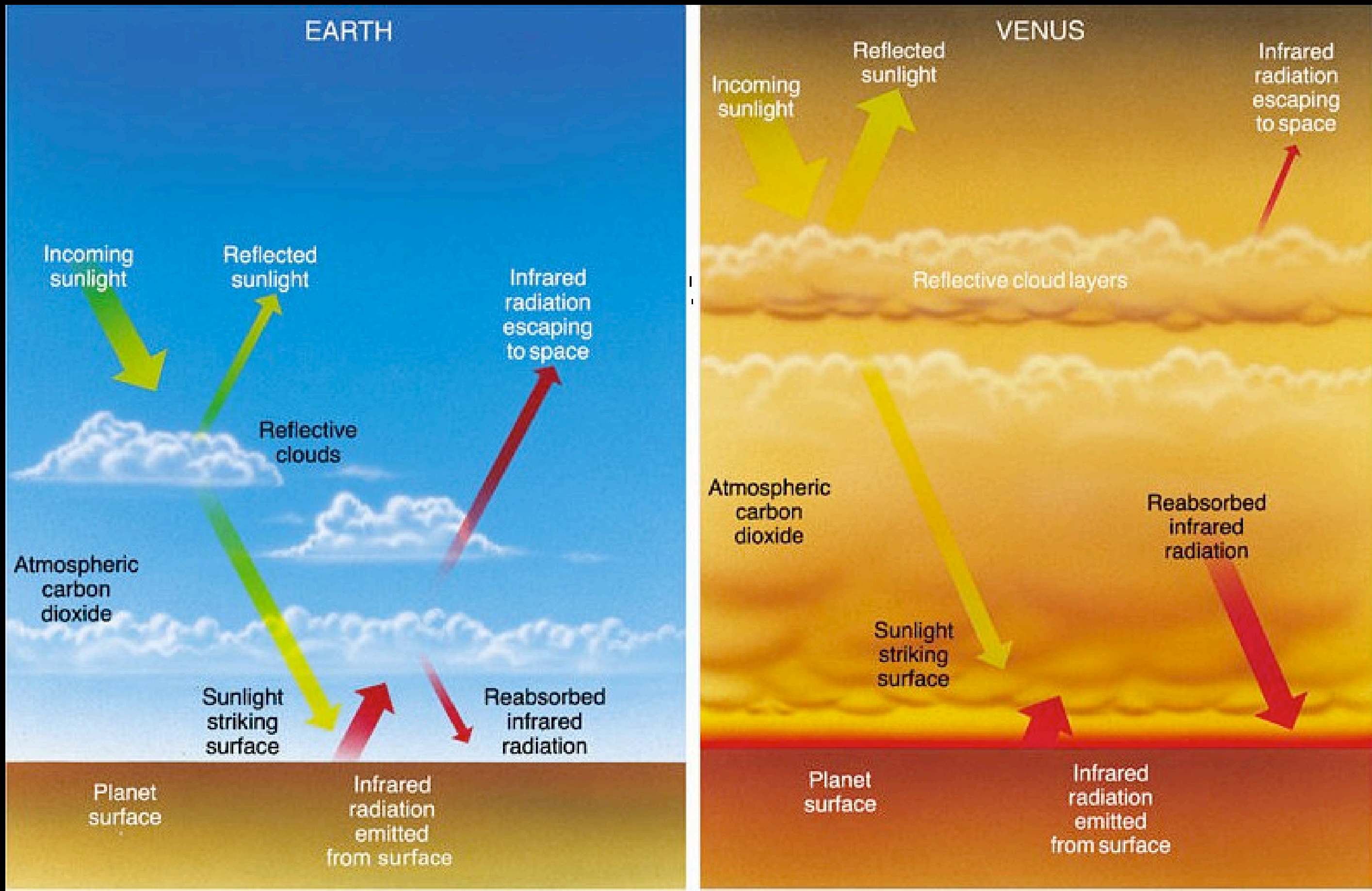




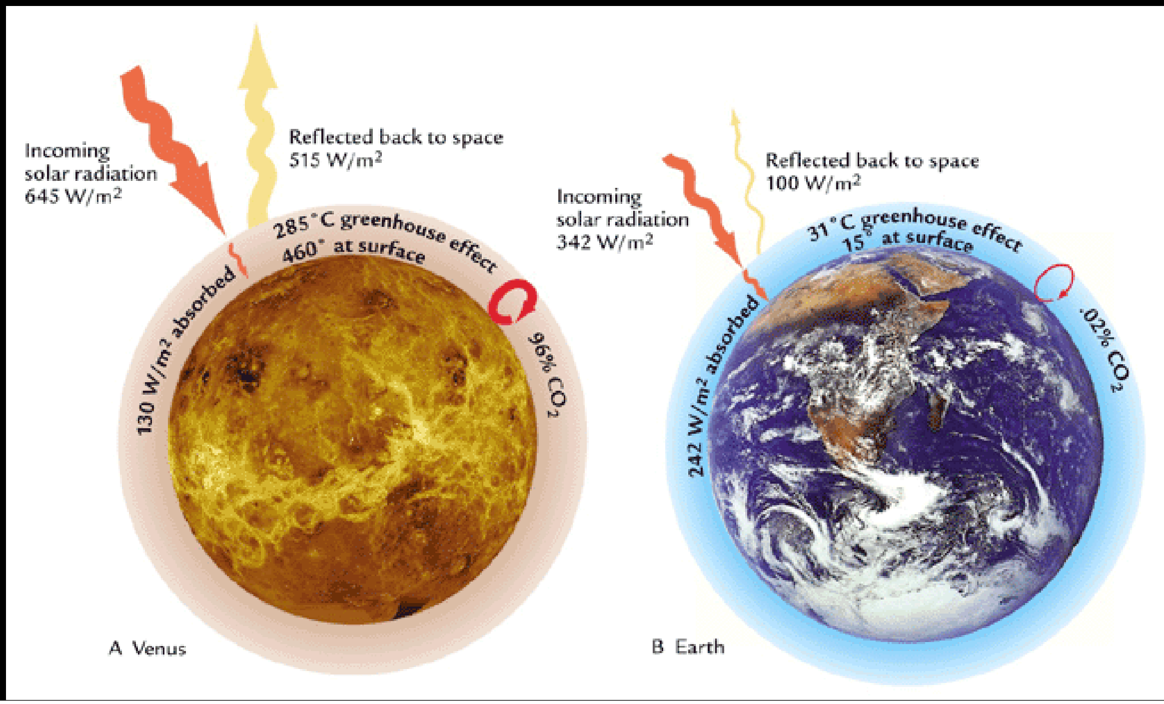
The pressure at the surface is 90 times the air pressure on Earth – the same pressure found at a depth of 1 km in Earth's oceans.

The temperature at the surface is 740 K (470° C), hot enough to melt lead.

The surface of Venus is so hot because of the *greenhouse effect*. Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere traps heat radiated from the ground, which is reabsorbed by the ground, raising the temperature still further.



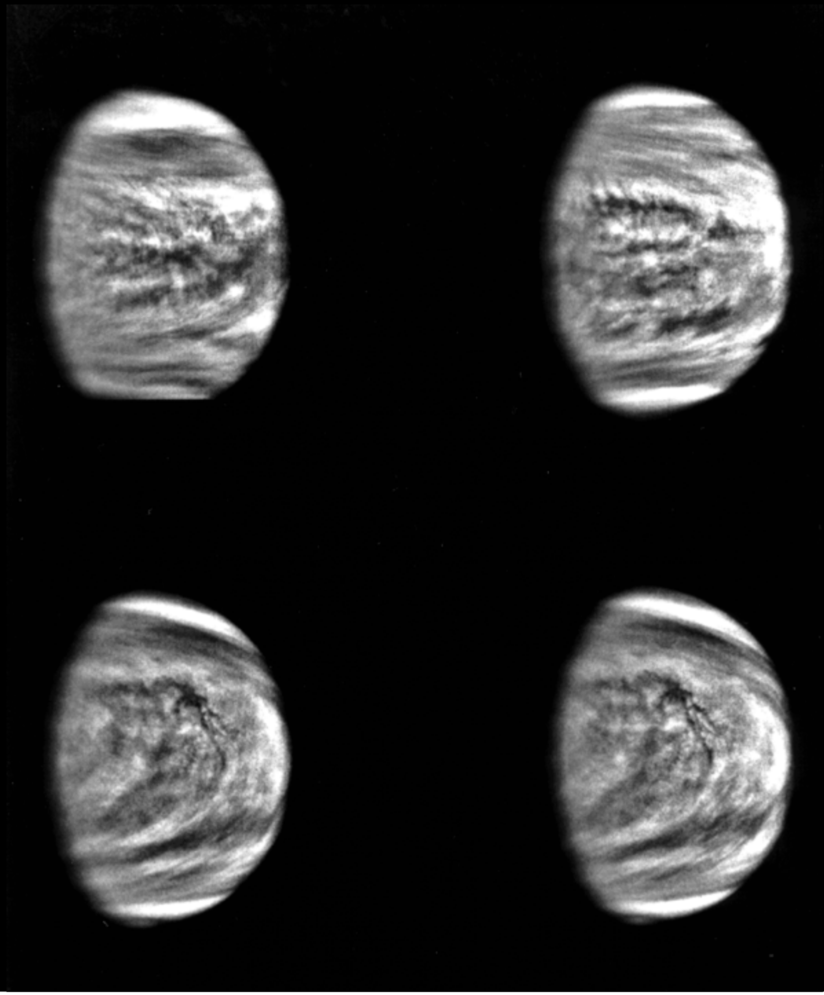
Venus actually reflects 70% of sunlight back into space, whereas Earth only reflects 30%, which means that Earth actually receives somewhat more sunlight at the surface than Venus, despite being further away. However, the actual surface temperature depends on the atmosphere. The small amount of CO_2 in Earth's atmosphere means it is about 30° warmer than its equilibrium temperature. Venus' atmosphere, however, raises the surface temperature by nearly 500° C.



Almost no features are visible in optical light on Venus: the planet-wide clouds are bright and featureless. Ultraviolet images, however, show swirls and streaks.

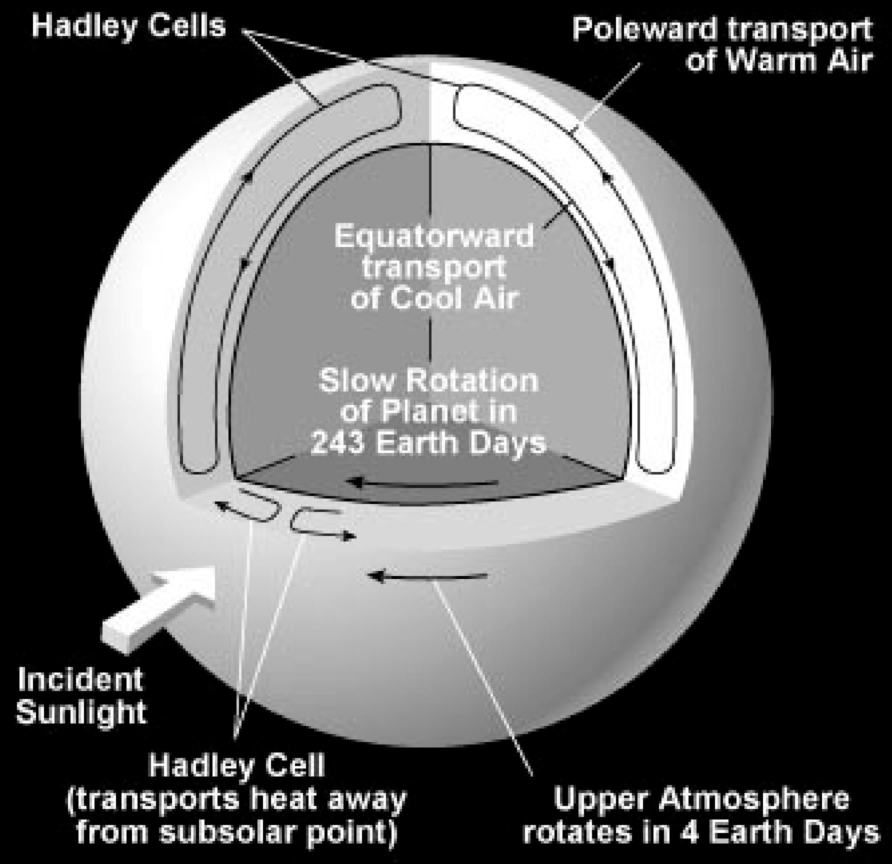
These dark patterns, from absorption by an unknown material, trace the motion of Venus' upper atmosphere.

The upper atmosphere mover at speeds of 100 ms^{-1}, circling the planet in just four days.



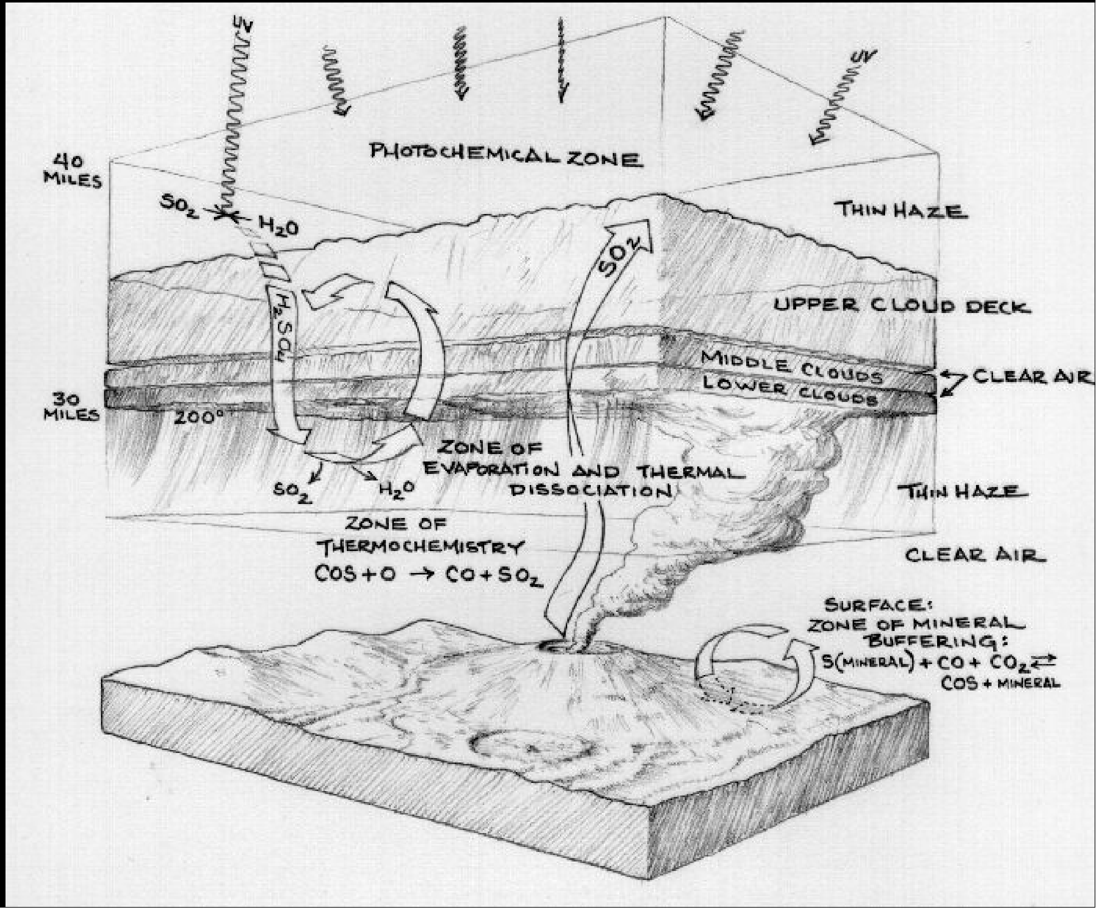
Near the ground the atmosphere is much more sedate. The slow rotation of Venus means that there is almost no Coriolis deflection, so heated air at the equator rises and travels to the poles, where it cools and sinks.

Given how slowly Venus rotates, its not clear what causes the “superrotation” of the upper atmosphere.



Venus has a complex *sulphur cycle*, similar to the water cycle on Earth. H_2SO_4 is formed when UV photons hit the atmosphere; these droplets condense to form the clouds, then start to fall. At an altitude of 50 km, the temperature is high enough for the drops to evaporate and dissociate. Rain on Venus never reaches the surface!

Below this, all sorts of chemical reactions are taking place, possibly including replenishment of atmospheric SO_2 by volcanoes.



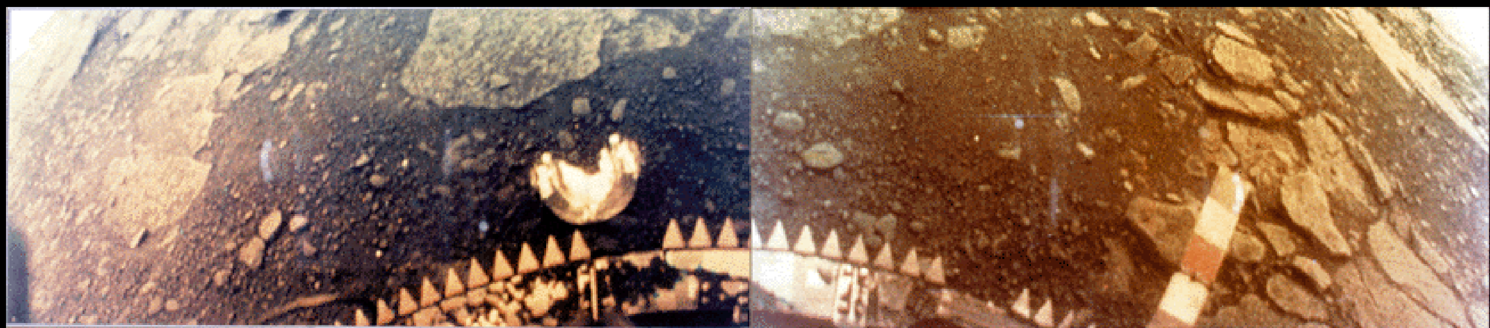
Surface

Because of the thick clouds, everything we know about the surface of Venus has come from radar measurements.

In particular, the Magellan mission, which mapped the surface of Venus from orbit from 1990–1994, has given us detailed information on the hidden surface.

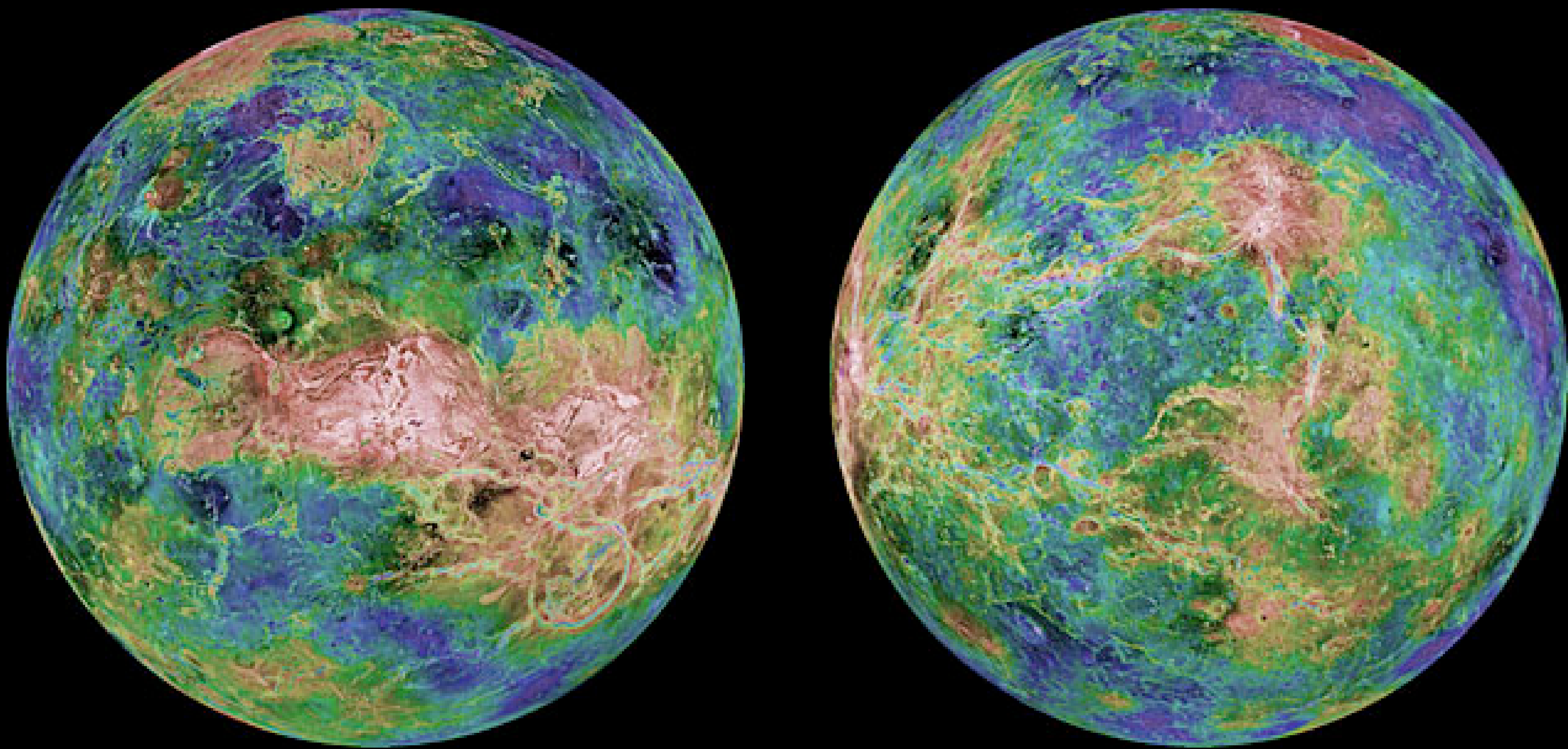
We do have a couple of views of the surface: the *Venera* probes sent back pictures from their landing sites; those on *Veneras 13* and *14* were even in colour.

It showed a scene with a strong red tint. The rocks themselves are not red; but the thick atmosphere has removed nearly all the blue light, so on the surface of Venus, everything looks red.

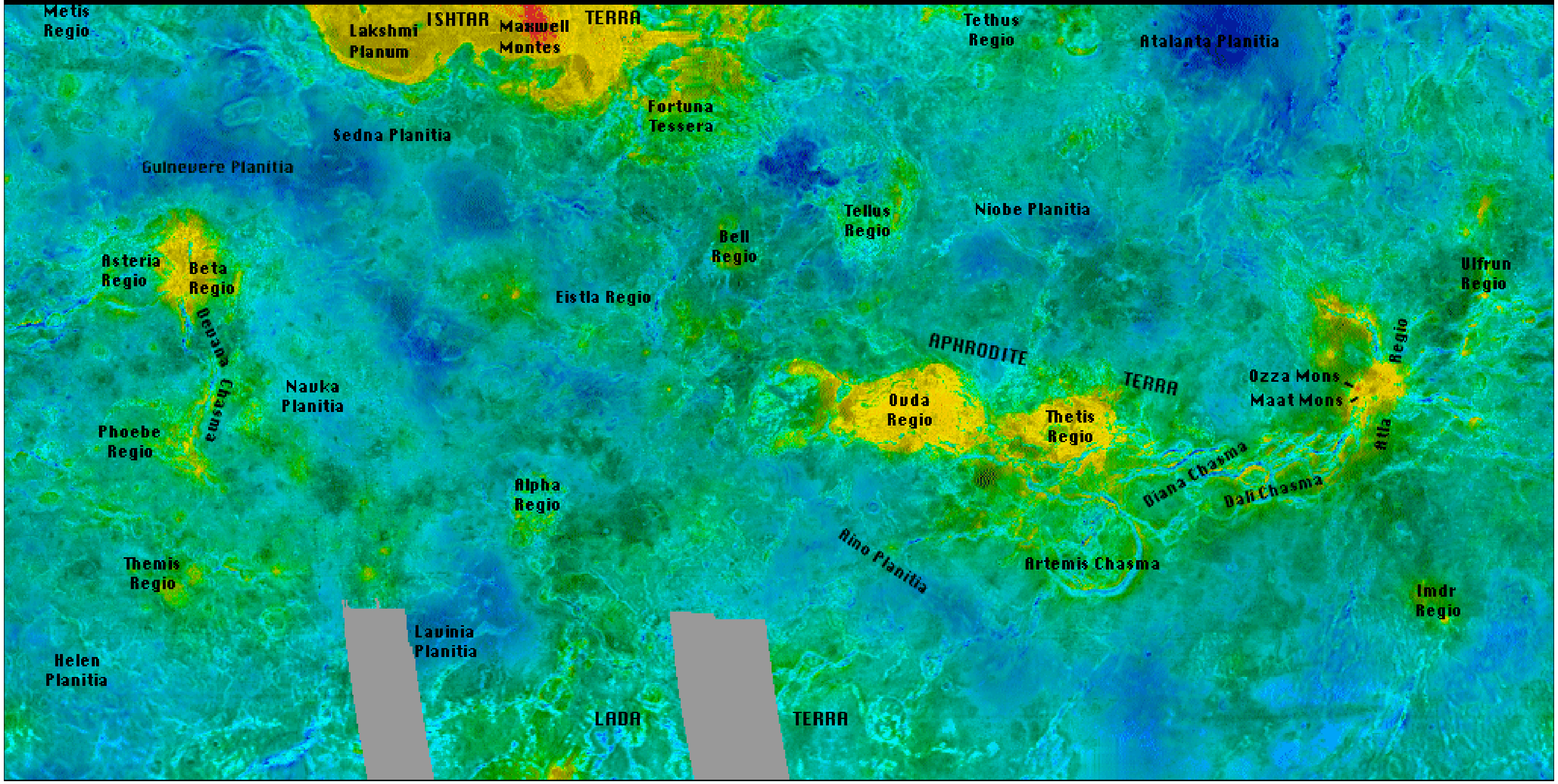


170 degree panorama taken by Venera 13 on 1 March 1982; part of the spacecraft and the camera lens are visible in the foreground.

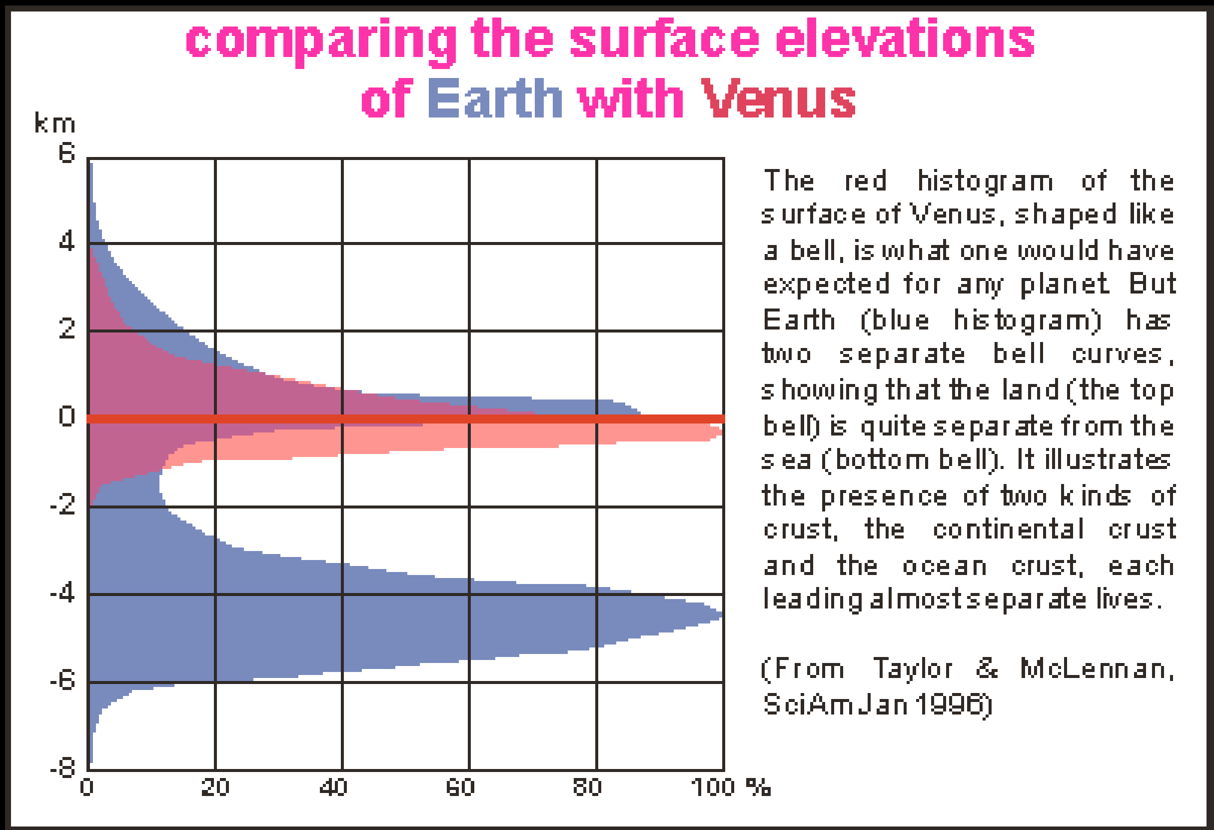
Magellan revealed a world dominated by volcanoes: almost 90% of the surface is occupied by volcanic landforms.



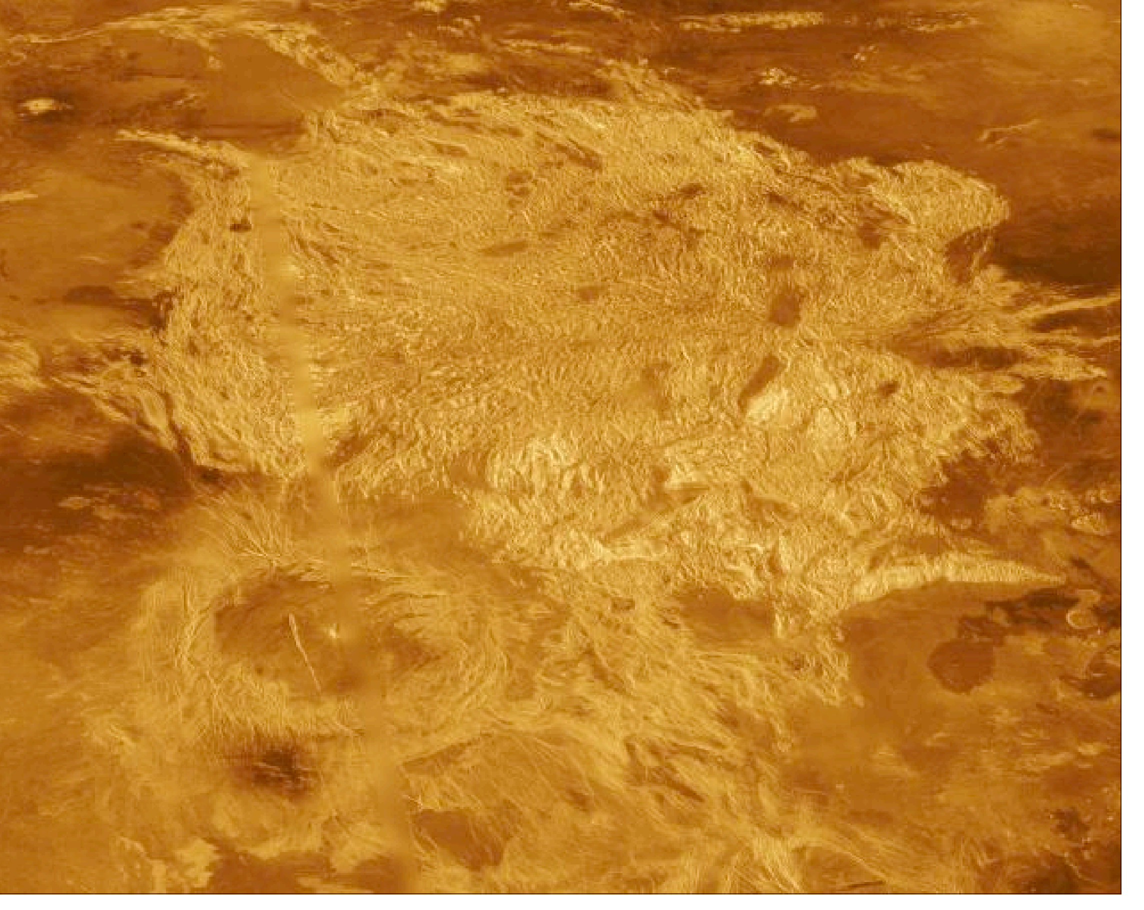
There are two “continents” – large regions several kilometres above the average elevation: *Ishtar Terra* and *Aphrodite Terra*. Ishtar is about the size of Australia, Aphrodite about the size of Africa.



A comparison of the surface elevations of Venus with those on Earth show that in fact the “continents” are not like the continents on Earth, which are quite distinct from the oceanic crust.

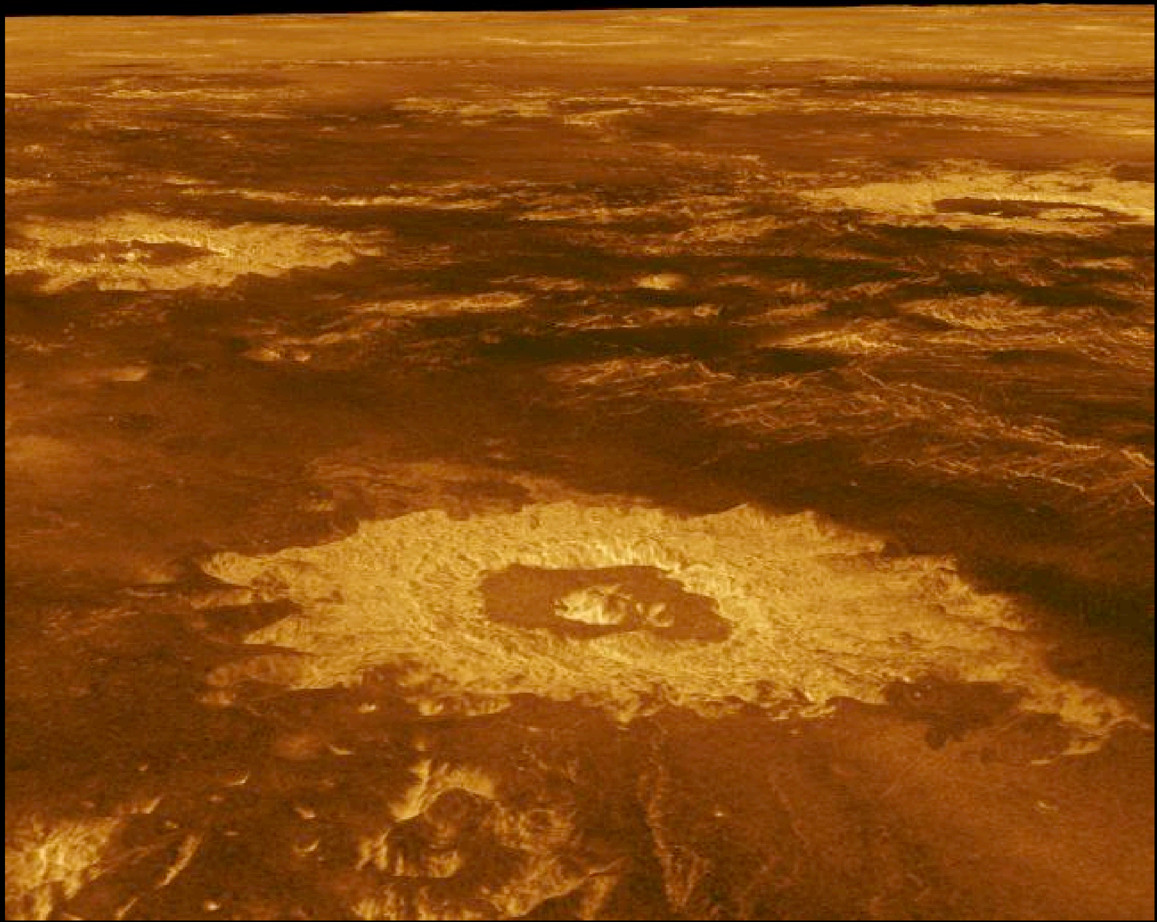


Highland regions above 2.5 km in height are unusually bright in radar images. It is not clear what causes the unusual radar reflectivity. One suggestion is that it might be deposits of iron pyrite ("fool's gold"), which is unstable on the plains but would be stable in the highlands.



Perspective view of the radar-bright area of Alpha Regio. The radar-bright spot located centrally within Eve (the large ovoid-shaped feature south of the complex ridged terrain) marks the location of the prime meridian of Venus.

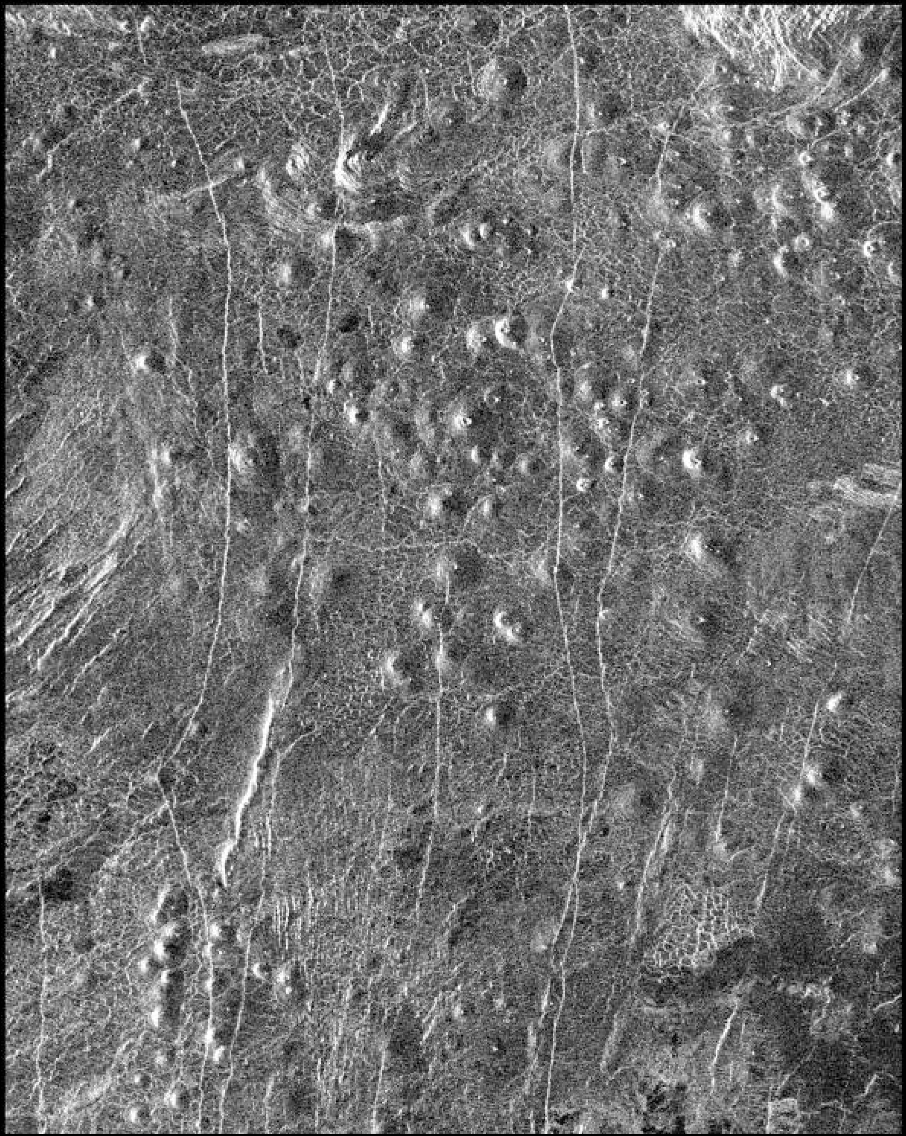
Much of Venus (more than 80%) is covered by vast low-lying areas of relatively featureless flows of lava.



Perspective view of Lavinia Planitia, showing craters on a smooth lava plain.

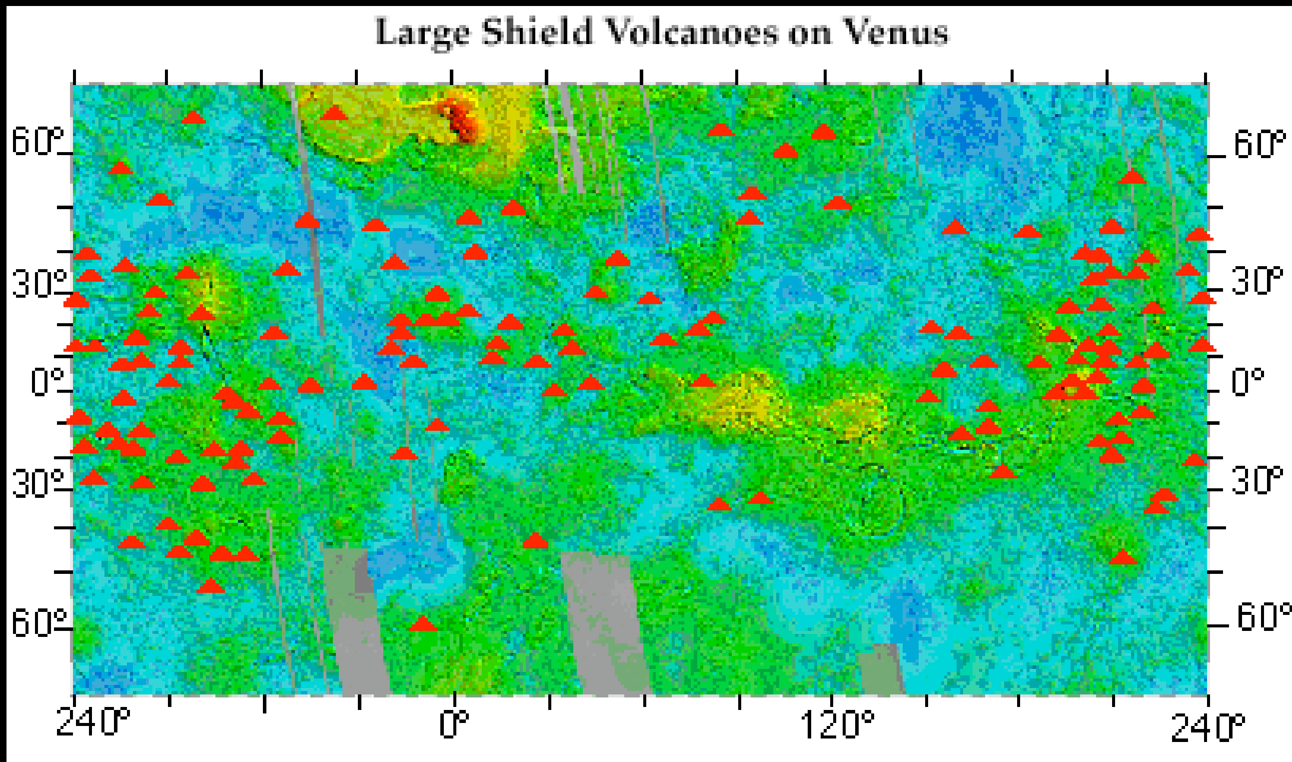
These plains are dotted with thousands of small shield volcanoes, built up gradually by repeated flows of runny lava. They usually occur in clusters, called *shield fields*.

The shield fields are widely scattered on Venus, but they mostly occur in the lowland plains. Many have also been partly buried by later lava plains.

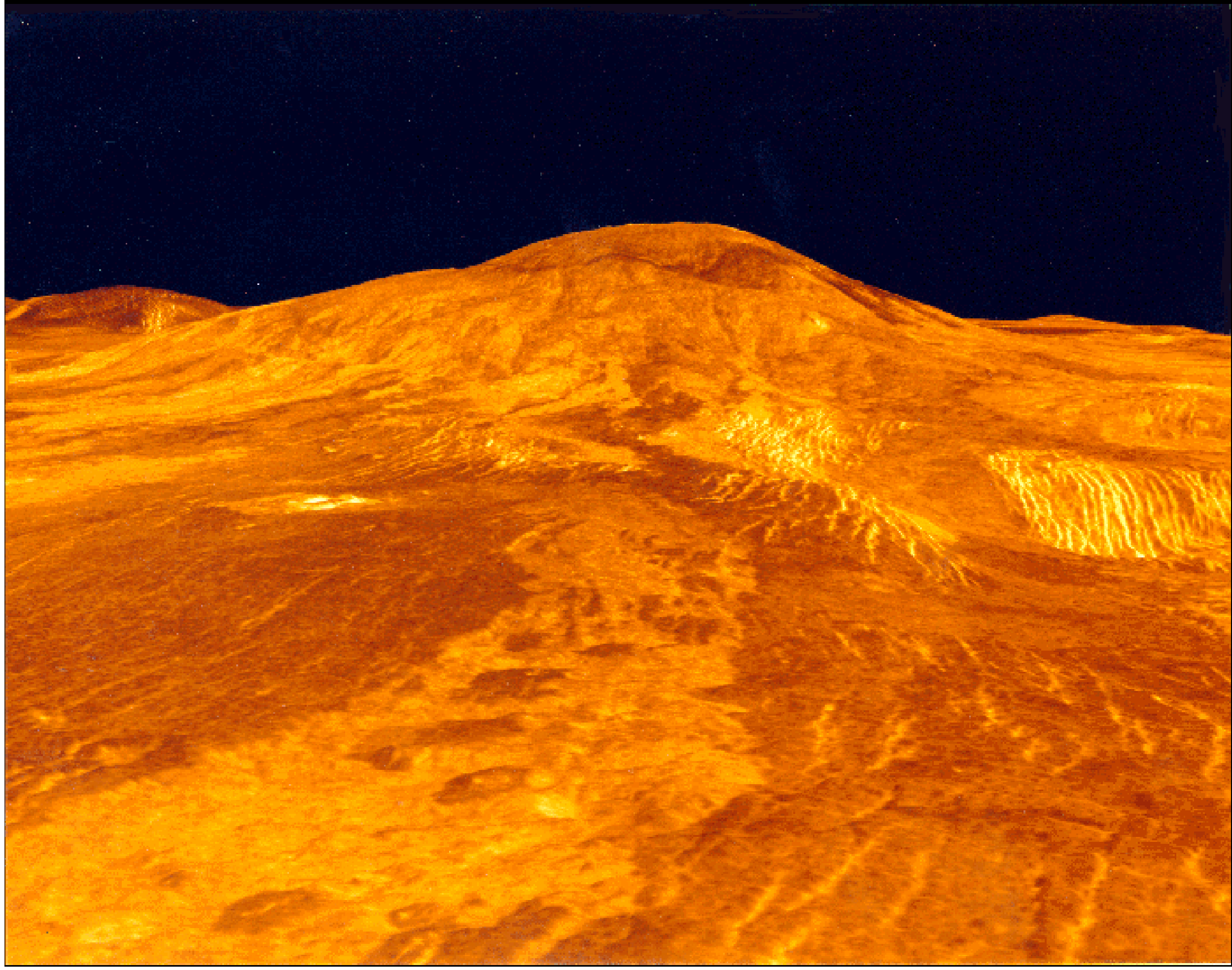


Region of the Tilli-Hanum Planitia, showing hundreds of small volcanoes ranging from 2–12 km in size.

There are also about 150 giant volcanoes, up to 700 km in diameter and up to 5.5 km in height. They are mostly in the upland regions, and are widely scattered over the planet, instead of being found in linear volcanic chains like on Earth. This suggests that Venus does not have active plate tectonics.

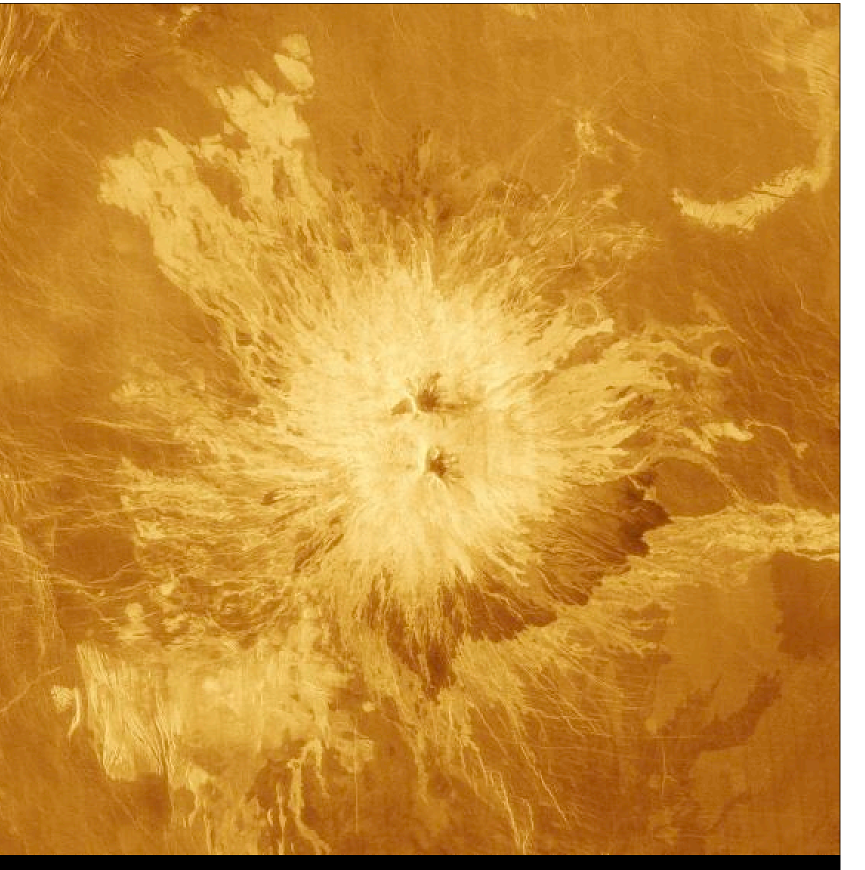


The volcano Sif Mons. is about 2 km high and nearly 300 km across. It lies near the equator in Western Eistla Regio. There appear to be recent lava flows at the front of the image: these flows are about 120 km long, which suggests that these lavas were also very fluid.



Perspective view of Sif Mons: this image has a vertical exaggeration of 23x.

Sapas Mons is a large volcano, 400 km across, in Atla Regio. Numerous lava flows overlap, and some appear to come from the flanks of the volcano instead of the summit.



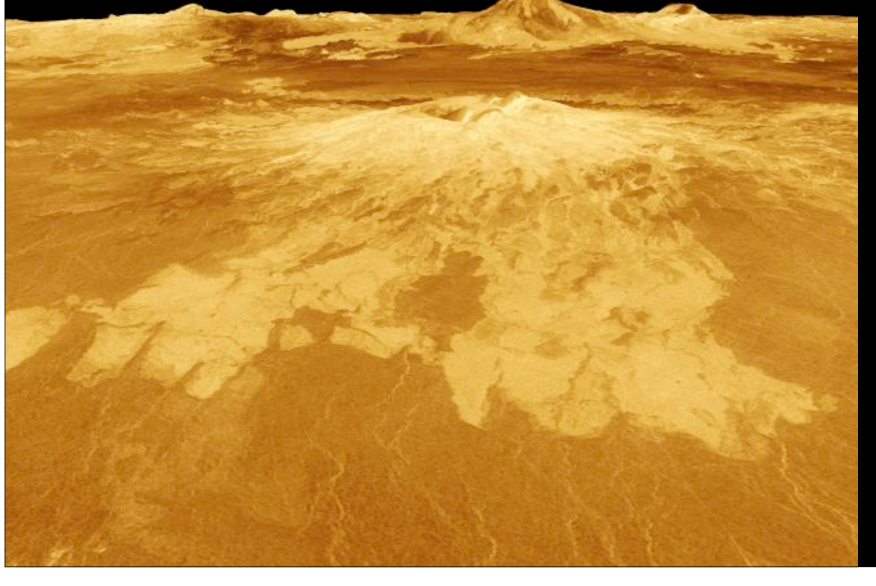
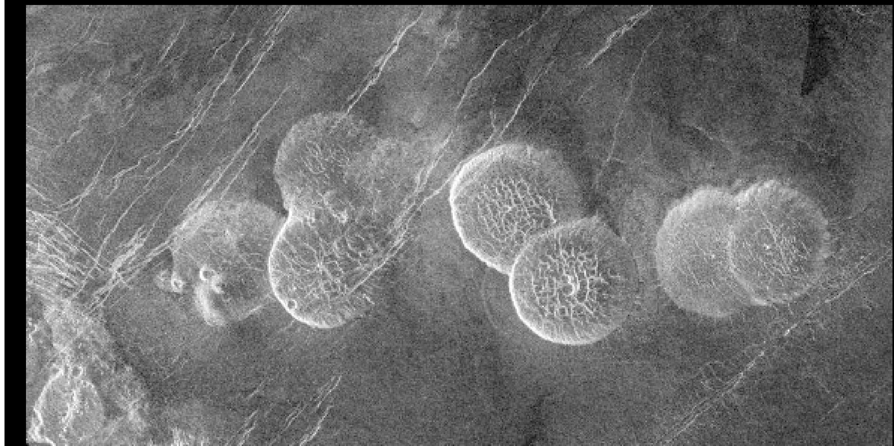


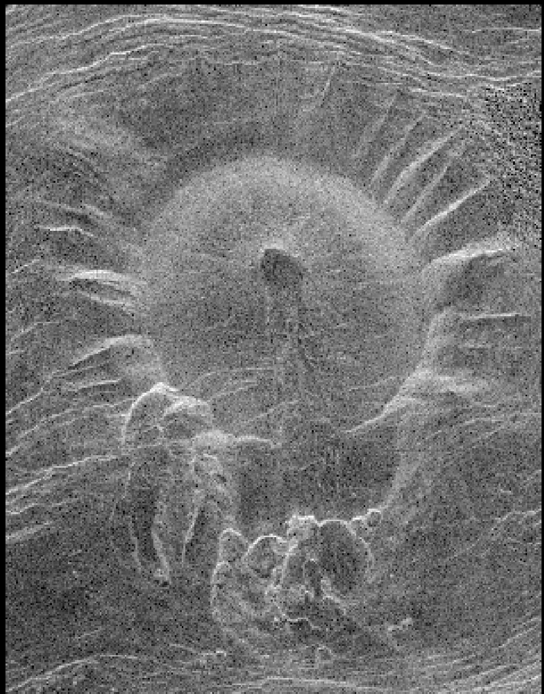
Image and perspective view of Sapas Mons.

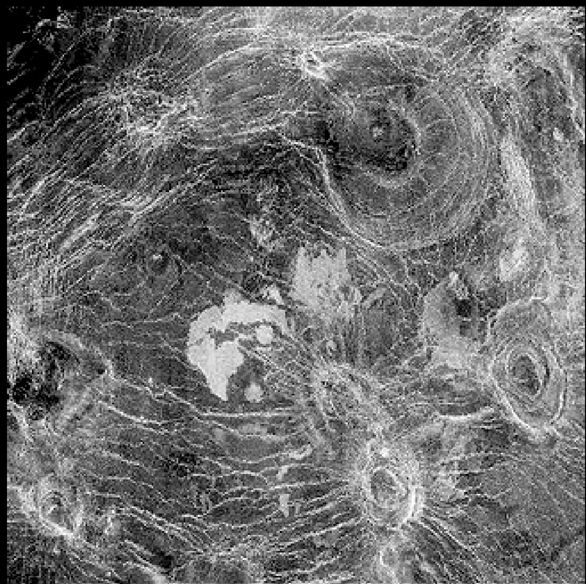
Pancake domes are steep-sided, flat-topped volcanoes. They are probably sites where more viscous lava squeezed up through the crust and piled up, instead of flowing away. Much smaller versions can be seen on Earth.

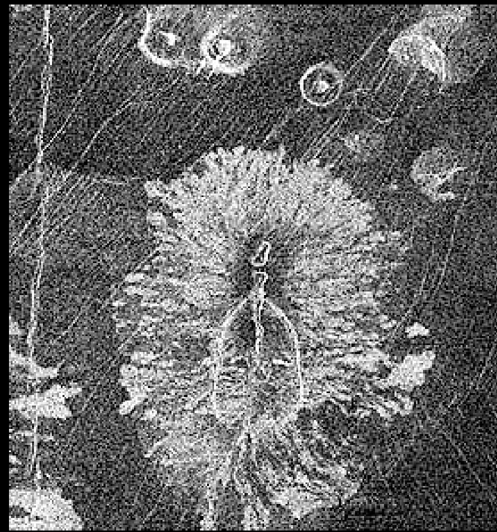


Pancake domes in Alpha Regio (left) and the Eistla region (right). The domes are 20–65 kilometers in diameter with broad, flat tops less than one kilometer in height. Much smaller domes can be seen on Earth, such as this dome formed by the 1912 eruption of Katmai in Alaska.

Some of Venus' other volcanic features look like nothing on Earth, presumably because the lava acts very differently under Venusian conditions: *ticks*, *arachnoids* and *anemonae*.





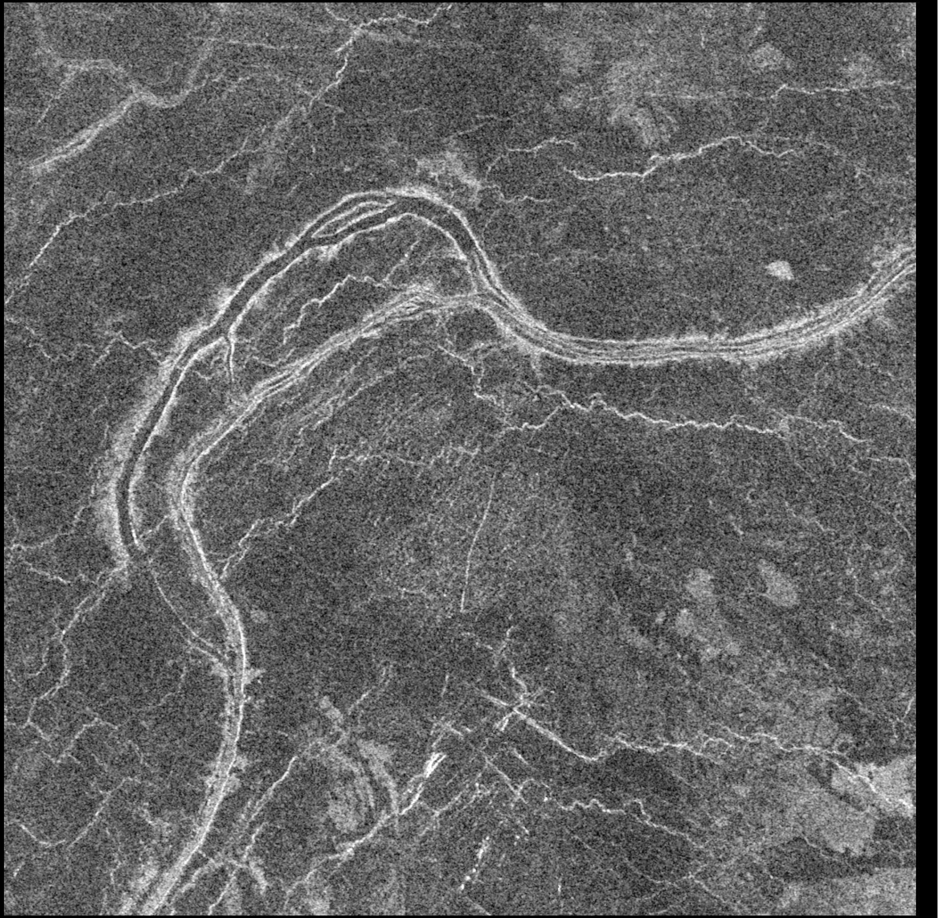


Coronae have patterns of circular rings; they can be as small as 80 km, or as large as 2100 km. They are thought to arise from upwelling in the mantle, which eventually subsided and cracked the crust, leaving the characteristic round fractures.

Aine Corona, located south of Aphrodite Terra, is 200km in diamater. Note the pancake domes to the north and inside the corona.

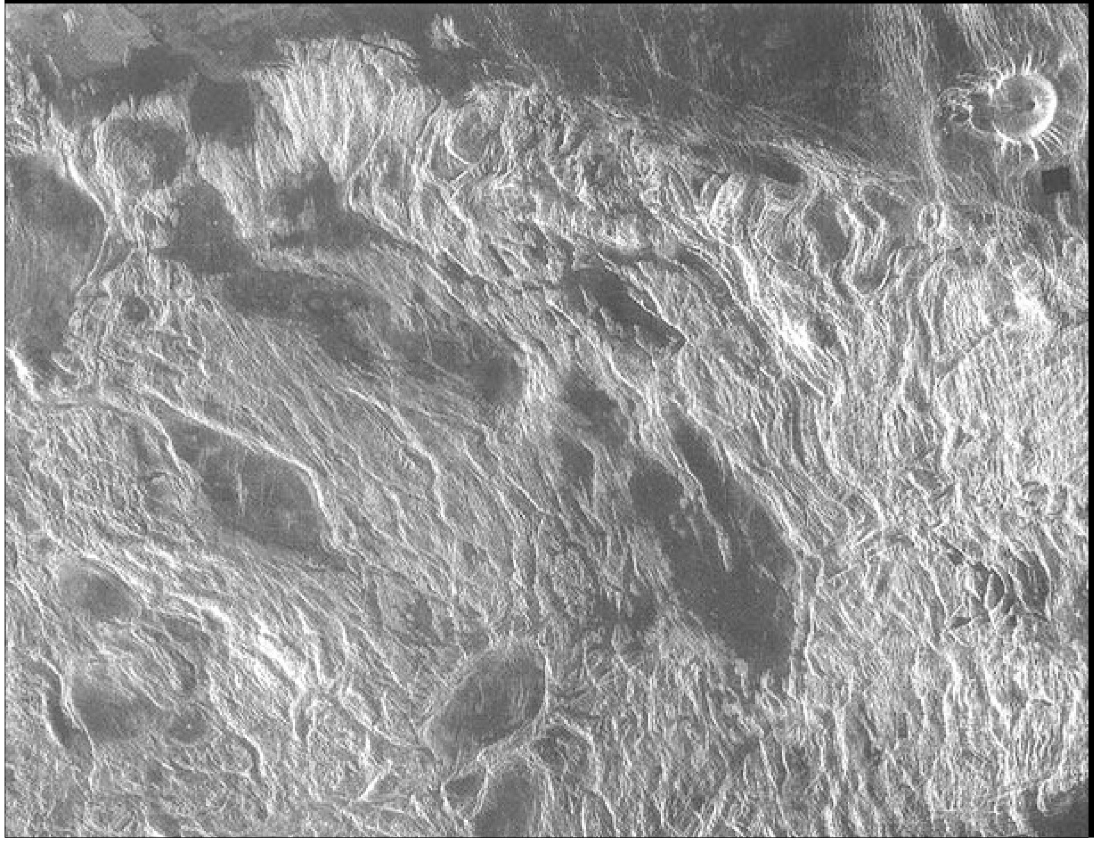
Venus also has *lava channels*, like rivers feeding the lava flood plains. These are typically a few kilometres wide and up to thousands of km in length. The longest, Baltis Vallis, is at least 6800 km in length.

These channels must have been formed by something with very low viscosity, which flowed for a long time.



This unusually long channel ranges from Fortuna Tessera in the north down to the eastern Sedna Planitia in the south. The channel is about 2 km wide and shows branches and islands along its length.

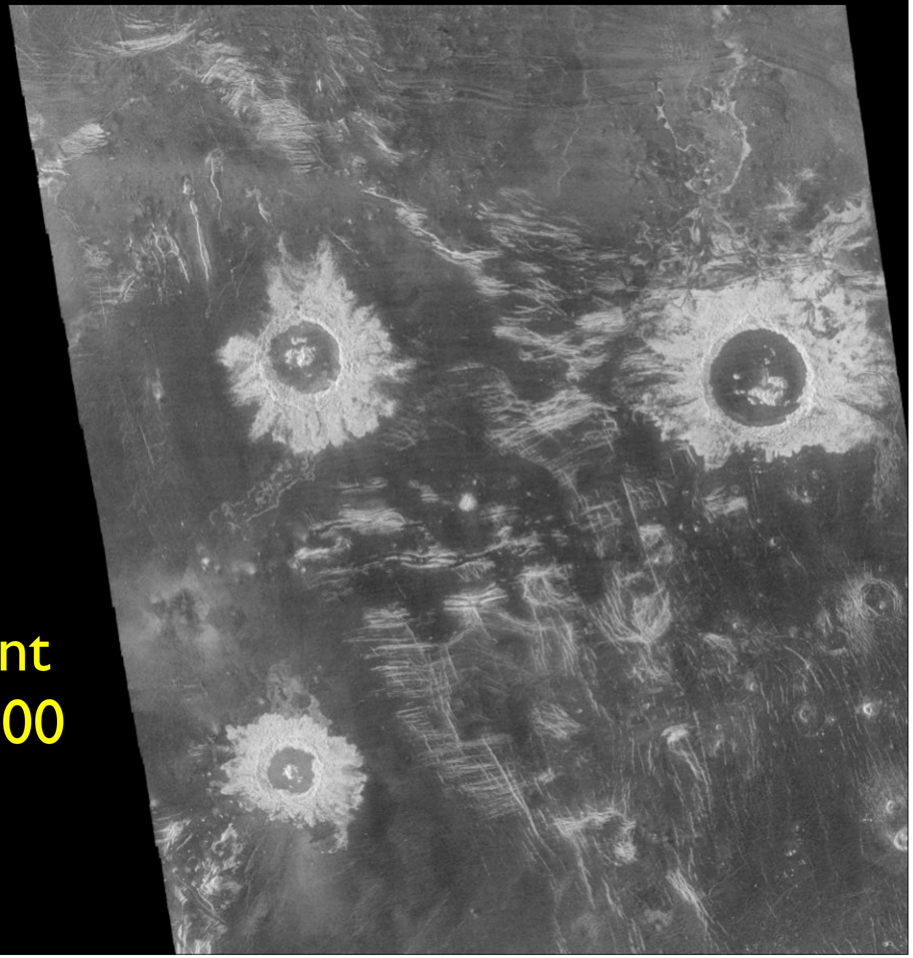
About 10% of the surface, including most of the elevated regions, consists of highly deformed areas called *tesserae*. These appear to be tectonic features, but for whatever reason, Venus does not have continent-sized plates which move relative to each other. Instead, the crust cracks and fractures more easily than on Earth.



Tesserae are always covered on their edges by other features, indicating they are the oldest regions on the planet.

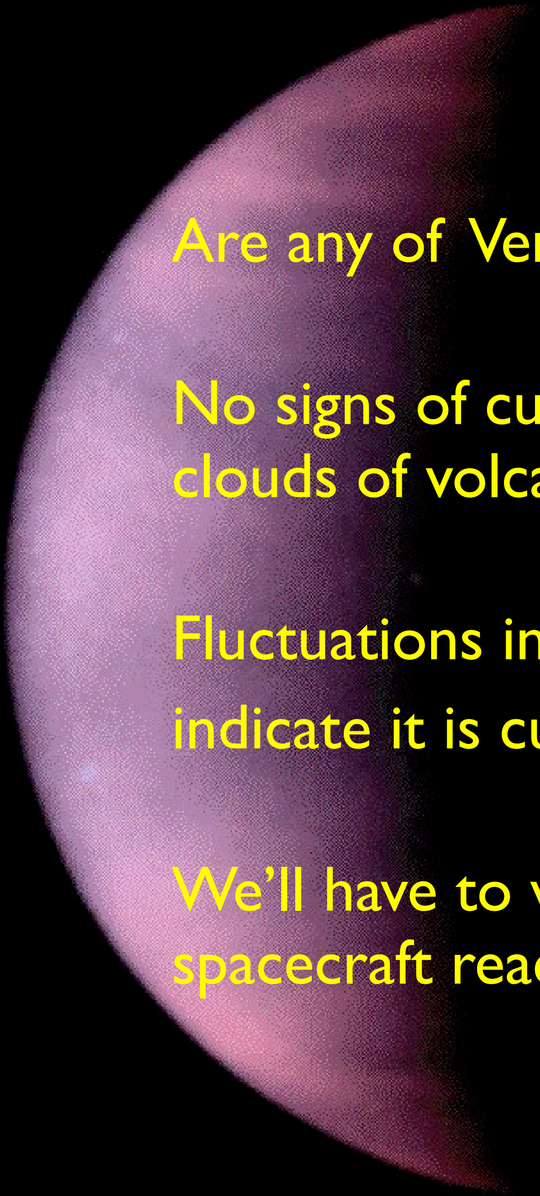
A portion of Alpha Regio, showing networks of intersecting ridges and troughs.

Venus also has impact craters, though many fewer than on Mercury, Mars or the Moon. There are no craters smaller than 1 km in diameter, because the thick atmosphere prevents the smaller meteors from reaching the surface.



The surface density of craters indicates most of the surface is only 500 million years old; but craters do not appear to be eroding. Where are all the older craters?

It appears that Venus underwent *catastrophic resurfacing* about 500 million years ago.

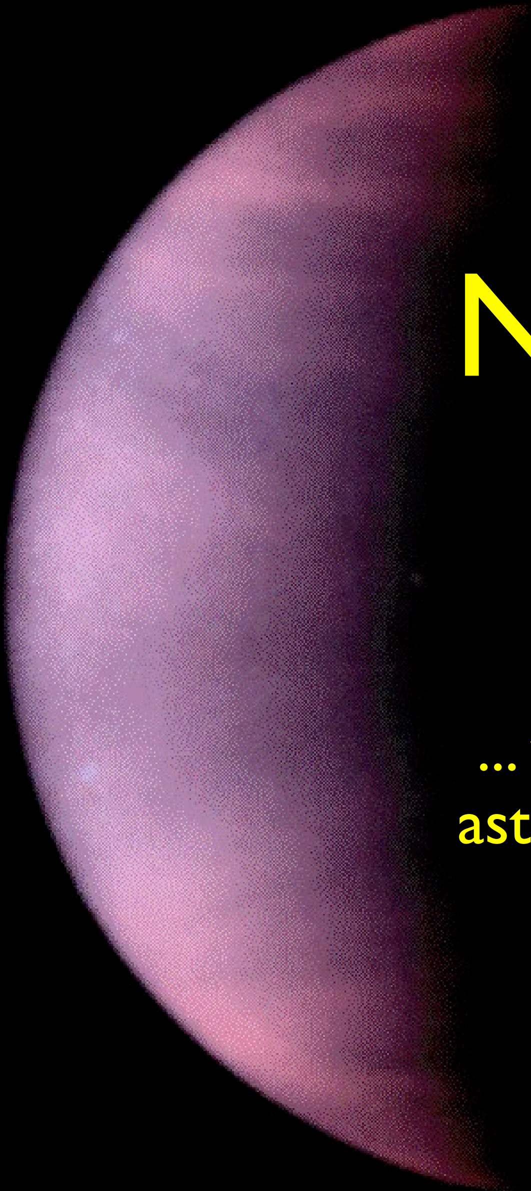


Are any of Venus' volcanoes still active?

No signs of current activity have been found. But clouds of volcanic dust are invisible to radar!

Fluctuations in the amount of atmospheric SO_2 may indicate it is currently being injected by volcanoes.

We'll have to wait till the next generation of spacecraft reach Venus to find out.



Next week...

... we'll look at rocks in space:
asteroids, comets and meteors.

Further reading

There are not too many really up-to-date books about the inner planets.

- **"Venus Revealed: A new look below the clouds of our mysterious twin planet"** by David Grinspoon (Helix Books/Addison-Wesley 1997) is an excellent description of the latest results on Venus, from one of the Magellan scientists. A very entertaining and informative read.
- There's a nice set of java applets on planetary science at "The Solar System Collaboratory", http://solarsystem.colorado.edu/. The module on the greenhouse effect allows you to play with the various factors that influence the temperature of the surface of a planet.
- There are beautiful relief maps of Venus, Mars and the Moon at Ralph Aeschliman's Planetary Cartography and Graphics http://ralphaeschliman.com/

Sources for images used:

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- Except where otherwise noted, all Mariner 10 images are from NASA Planetary Photojournal: Mercury, http://photojournal.jpl.nasa.gov/targetFamily/Mercury or the NSSDC Planetary Image Catalog: Mercury, http://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/imgcat/thumbnail_pages/mercury_thumbnails.html
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- Radar detection of ice: from "New Data, New Ideas, and Lively Debate about Mercury" by G. Jeffrey Taylor, http://www.psrd.hawaii.edu/Oct01/MercuryMtg.html

- Image of Messenger: from the Messenger website, http://messenger.jhuapl.edu/. Image of BepiColombo: from ESA Space Science, http://www.esa.int/esaSC/120391_index_0_m.html
- Venus title image: computer generated picture of Magellan radar data, from Astronomy Picture of the Day 2002 March 30, http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/ap020330.html
- Venus background image: HST ultraviolet image of the crescent Venus, from Hubble News Archive, http://hubblesite.org/newscenter/newsdesk/archive/releases/1995/16/
- Venus orbit figures: from Venus Transit by Nick Fiorenza, http://www.lunarplanner.com/HCpages/Venus.html
- Venus' rotation: from Modern Myths taught as Science by Kenneth Fuller, http://www.geocities.com/kfuller2001/tVenus.html
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- Hadley rotation: from NASA's Cosmos by Kenneth Lang: Venus, the Veiled Planet http://ase.tufts.edu/cosmos/view_overview.asp?id=7
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- Venus map: from Venus' Surface by David Soper, http://zebu.uoregon.edu/~soper/Venus/surface.html
- Comparison of Earth and Venus elevations: from Searfriends – Oceanography: Oceans, http://www.seafriends.org.nz/oceano/oceans.htm
- Except where otherwise noted, all Magellan images are from NASA Planetary Photojournal: Venus, http://photojournal.jpl.nasa.gov/targetFamily/Venus or the NSSDC Planetary Image Catalog: Venus, http://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/imgcat/thumbnail_pages/venus_thumbnails.html
- Distribution of shield volcanoes: from Volcano World: Volcanoes on Venus, http://volcano.und.nodak.edu/vwdocs/planet_volcano/venus/intro.html
- Lava dome: Novarupta Dome, Katmai Vicinity, Alaska, USGS Photo by Gene Iwatsubo, http://vulcan.wr.usgs.gov/Glossary/Domes/description_lava_dome.html
- Arachnoid and anemone: from NASA's Remote Sensing Tutorial, Section 19–9: http://rst.gsfc.nasa.gov/Sect19/Sect19_9.html
- Tessera: from Guide to Magellan Image Interpretation, Fig. 8–10, http://history.nasa.gov/JPL-93-24/p104.htm