

10.4: The Geology of Mars

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the main missions that have explored Mars
- Explain what we have learned from examination of meteorites from Mars
- Describe the various features found on the surface of Mars
- Compare the volcanoes and canyons on Mars with those of Earth
- Describe the general conditions on the surface of Mars

Mars is more interesting to most people than Venus because it is more hospitable. Even from the distance of Earth, we can see surface features on Mars and follow the seasonal changes in its polar caps (Figure 10.4.1). Although the surface today is dry and cold, evidence collected by spacecraft suggests that Mars once had blue skies and lakes of liquid water. Even today, it is the sort of place we can imagine astronauts visiting and perhaps even setting up permanent bases.

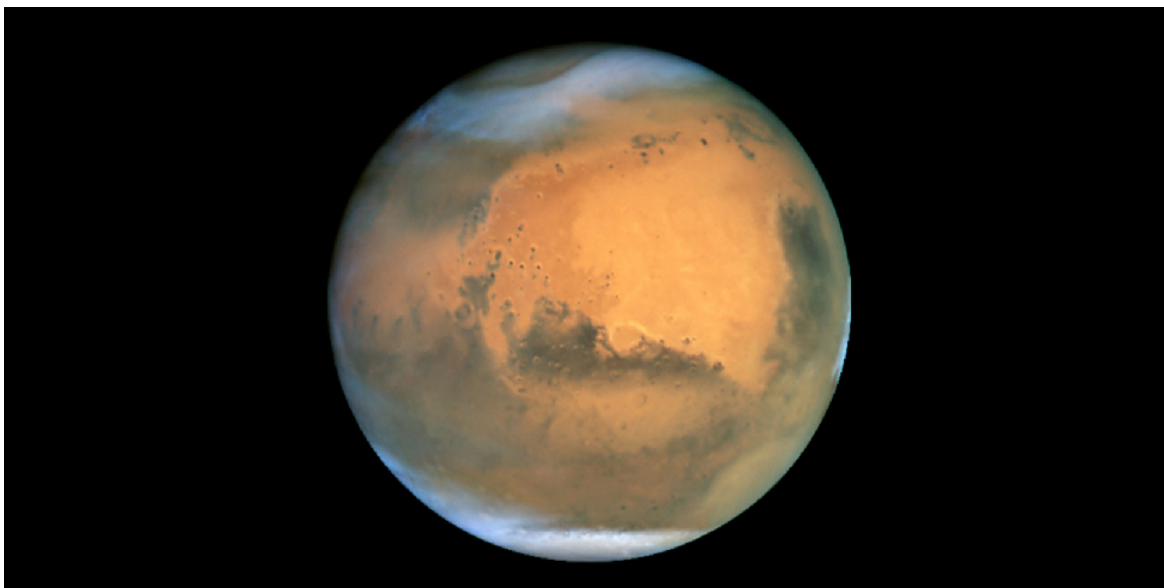


Figure 10.4.1 Mars Photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope. This is one of the best photos of Mars taken from our planet, obtained in June 2001 when Mars was only 68 million kilometers away. The resolution is about 20 kilometers—much better than can be obtained with ground-based telescopes but still insufficient to reveal the underlying geology of Mars. (credit: modification of work by NASA and the Hubble Heritage Team (STScI/AURA))

Spacecraft Exploration of Mars

Mars has been intensively investigated by spacecraft. More than 50 spacecraft have been launched toward Mars, but only about half were fully successful. The first visitor was the US Mariner 4, which flew past Mars in 1965 and transmitted 22 photos to Earth. These pictures showed an apparently bleak planet with abundant impact craters. In those days, craters were unexpected; some people who were romantically inclined still hoped to see canals or something like them. In any case, newspaper headlines sadly announced that Mars was a “dead planet.”

In 1971, NASA’s Mariner 9 became the first spacecraft to orbit another planet, mapping the entire surface of Mars at a resolution of about 1 kilometer and discovering a great variety of geological features, including volcanoes, huge canyons, intricate layers on the polar caps, and channels that appeared to have been cut by running water. Geologically, Mars didn’t look so dead after all.

The twin Viking spacecraft of the 1970s were among the most ambitious and successful of all planetary missions. Two *orbiters* surveyed the planet and served to relay communications for two *landers* on the surface. After an exciting and sometimes frustrating search for a safe landing spot, the Viking 1 lander touched down on the surface of Chryse Planitia (the Plains of Gold) on July 20, 1976, exactly 7 years after Neil Armstrong’s historic first step on the Moon. Two months later, Viking 2 landed with equal success in another plain farther north, called Utopia. The landers photographed the surface with high resolution and carried out complex experiments searching for evidence of life, while the orbiters provided a global perspective on Mars geology.

Mars languished unvisited for two decades after Viking. Two more spacecraft were launched toward Mars, by NASA and the Russian Space Agency, but both failed before reaching the planet.

The situation changed in the 1990s as NASA began a new exploration program using spacecraft that were smaller and less expensive than Viking. The first of the new missions, appropriately called Pathfinder, landed the first wheeled, solar-powered rover on the martian surface on July 4, 1997 (Figure 10.4.2). An orbiter called *Mars Global Surveyor* (MGS) arrived a few months later and began high-resolution photography of the entire surface over more than one martian year. The most dramatic discovery by this spacecraft, which is still operating, was evidence of gullies apparently cut by surface water, as we will discuss later. These missions were followed in 2003 by the NASA *Mars Odyssey* orbiter, and the ESA *Mars Express* orbiter, both carrying high-resolution cameras. A gamma-ray spectrometer on *Odyssey* discovered a large amount of subsurface hydrogen (probably in the form of frozen water). Subsequent orbiters included the NASA *Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter* to evaluate future landing sites, MAVEN to study the upper atmosphere, and India's *Mangalayaan*, also focused on study of Mars' thin layers of air. Several of these orbiters are also equipped to communicate with landers and rovers on the surface and serve as data relays to Earth.

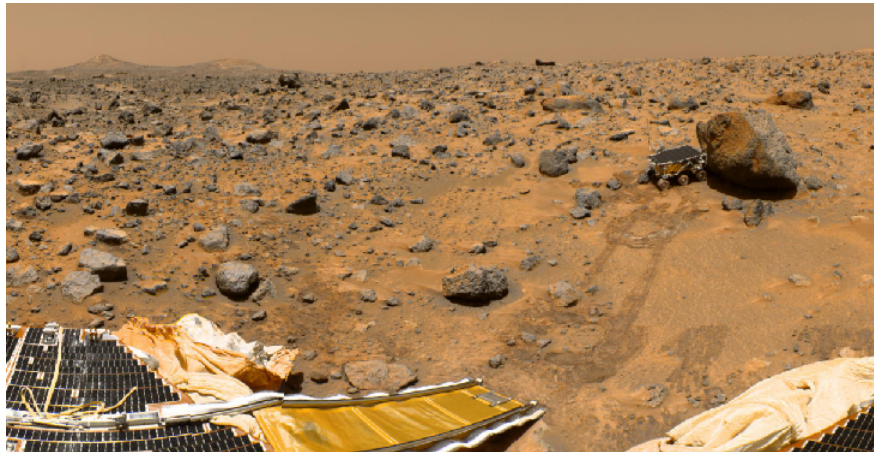
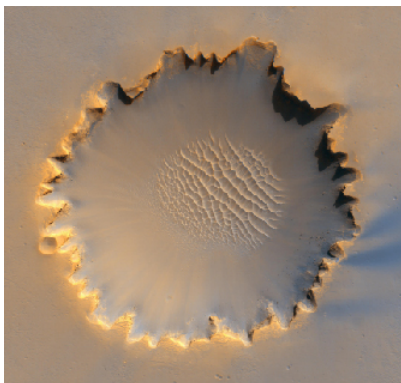
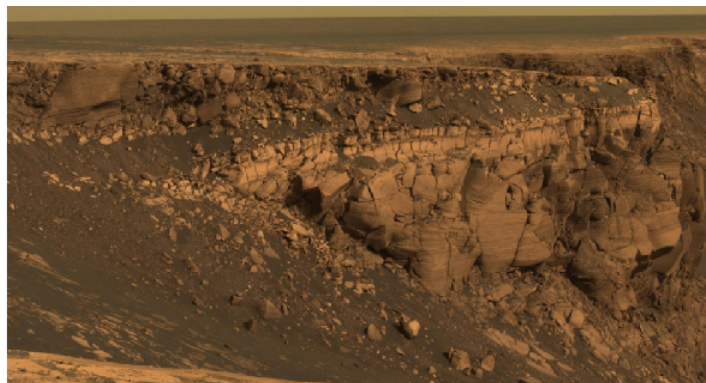


Figure 10.4.2 Surface View from Mars Pathfinder. The scene from the Pathfinder lander shows a windswept plain, sculpted long ago when water flowed out of the martian highlands and into the depression where the spacecraft landed. The Sojourner rover, the first wheeled vehicle on Mars, is about the size of a microwave oven. Its flat top contains solar cells that provided electricity to run the vehicle. You can see the ramp from the lander and the path the rover took to the larger rock that the mission team nicknamed “Yogi.” (credit: NASA/JPL)

In 2003, NASA began a series of highly successful Mars landers. Twin Mars Exploration Rovers (MER), named *Spirit* and *Opportunity*, have been successful far beyond their planned lifetimes. The design goal for the rovers was 600 meters of travel; in fact, they have traveled jointly more than 50 kilometers. After scouting around its rim, *Opportunity* drove down the steep walls into an impact crater called Victoria, then succeeded with some difficulty in climbing back out to resume its route (Figure 10.4.3). Dust covering the rovers' solar cells caused a drop in power, but when a seasonal dust storm blew away the dust, the rovers resumed full operation. In order to survive winter, the rovers were positioned on slopes to maximize solar heating and power generation. In 2006, *Spirit* lost power on one of its wheels, and subsequently became stuck in the sand, where it continued operation as a fixed ground station. Meanwhile, in 2008, *Phoenix* (a spacecraft “reborn” of spare parts from a previous Mars mission that had failed) landed near the edge of the north polar cap, at latitude 68°, and directly measured water ice in the soil.



(a)



(b)

Figure 10.4.3 Victoria Crater. (a) This crater in Meridiani Planum is 800 meters wide, making it slightly smaller than Meteor crater on Earth. Note the dune field in the interior. (b) This image shows the view from the Opportunity rover as it scouted the rim of Victoria crater looking for a safe route down into the interior.

In 2011, NASA launched its largest (and most expensive) Mars mission since Viking. The 1-ton rover *Curiosity*, the size of a subcompact car, has plutonium-powered electrical generators, so that it is not dependent on sunlight for power. *Curiosity* made a pinpoint landing on the floor of Gale crater, a site selected for its complex geology and evidence that it had been submerged by water in the past. Previously, Mars landers had been sent to flat terrains with few hazards, as required by their lower targeting accuracy. The scientific goals of *Curiosity* include investigations of climate and geology, and assessment of the habitability of past and present Mars environments. In 2018, NASA's InSight Lander touched down on Mars, carrying a suite of scientific instruments. These include a package (nicknamed “the mole”) that will dig into the surface of Mars 1 mm at a time, hoping to reach a depth of 5 meters with heat sensors. Neither of these missions carries a specific life detection instrument, however. So far, scientists have not been able to devise a simple instrument that could distinguish living from nonliving materials on Mars.

The *Curiosity* rover required a remarkably complex landing sequence and NASA made a [video](#) about it called “7 Minutes of Terror” that went viral on the Internet.

A dramatic [video summary](#) of the first two years of *Curiosity*'s exploration of the martian surface can be viewed as well.

Martian Samples

Much of what we know of the Moon, including the circumstances of its origin, comes from studies of lunar samples, but spacecraft have not yet returned martian samples to Earth for laboratory analysis. It is with great interest, therefore, that scientists have discovered that samples of martian material are nevertheless already here on Earth, available for study. These are all members of a rare class of *meteorites* (Figure 10.4.4)—rocks that have fallen from space.



Figure 10.4.4 Martian Meteorite. This fragment of basalt, ejected from Mars in a crater-forming impact, eventually arrived on Earth's surface.

How would rocks have escaped from Mars? Many impacts have occurred on the red planet, as shown by its heavily cratered surface. Fragments blasted from large impacts can escape from Mars, whose surface gravity is only 38% of Earth's. A long time later (typically a few million years), a very small fraction of these fragments collide with Earth and survive their passage through our atmosphere, just like other meteorites. (We'll discuss meteorites in more detail in the chapter on Cosmic Samples and the

Origin of the Solar System.) By the way, rocks from the Moon have also reached our planet as meteorites, although we were able to demonstrate their lunar origin only by comparison with samples returned by the Apollo missions

Most of the martian meteorites are volcanic basalts; most of them are also relatively young—about 1.3 billion years old. We know from details of their composition that they are not from Earth or the Moon. Besides, there was no volcanic activity on the Moon to form them as recently as 1.3 billion years ago. It would be very difficult for ejecta from impacts on Venus to escape through its thick atmosphere. By the process of elimination, the only reasonable origin seems to be Mars, where the Tharsis volcanoes were active at that time.

The martian origin of these meteorites was confirmed by the analysis of tiny gas bubbles trapped inside several of them. These bubbles match the atmospheric properties of Mars as first measured directly by Viking. It appears that some atmospheric gas was trapped in the rock by the shock of the impact that ejected it from Mars and started it on its way toward Earth.

One of the most exciting results from analysis of these martian samples has been the discovery of both water and organic (carbon-based) compounds in them, which suggests that Mars may once have had oceans and perhaps even life on its surface. As we have already hinted, there is other evidence for the presence of flowing water on Mars in the remote past, and even extending to the present.

In this and the following sections, we will summarize the picture of Mars as revealed by all these exploratory missions and by about 40 samples from Mars.

Global Properties of Mars

Mars has a diameter of 6790 kilometers, just over half the diameter of Earth, giving it a total surface area very nearly equal to the continental (land) area of our planet. Its overall density of 3.9 g/cm^3 suggests a composition consisting primarily of silicates but with a small metal core. The planet has no global magnetic field, although there are areas of strong surface magnetization that indicate that there was a global field billions of years ago. Apparently, the red planet has no liquid material in its core today that would conduct electricity.

Thanks to the *Mars Global Surveyor*, we have mapped the entire planet, as shown in Figure 10.4.5. A laser altimeter on board made millions of separate measurements of the surface topography to a precision of a few meters—good enough to show even the annual deposition and evaporation of the polar caps. Like Earth, the Moon, and Venus, the surface of Mars has continental or highland areas as well as widespread volcanic plains. The total range in elevation from the top of the highest mountain (Olympus Mons) to the bottom of the deepest basin (Hellas) is 31 kilometers.

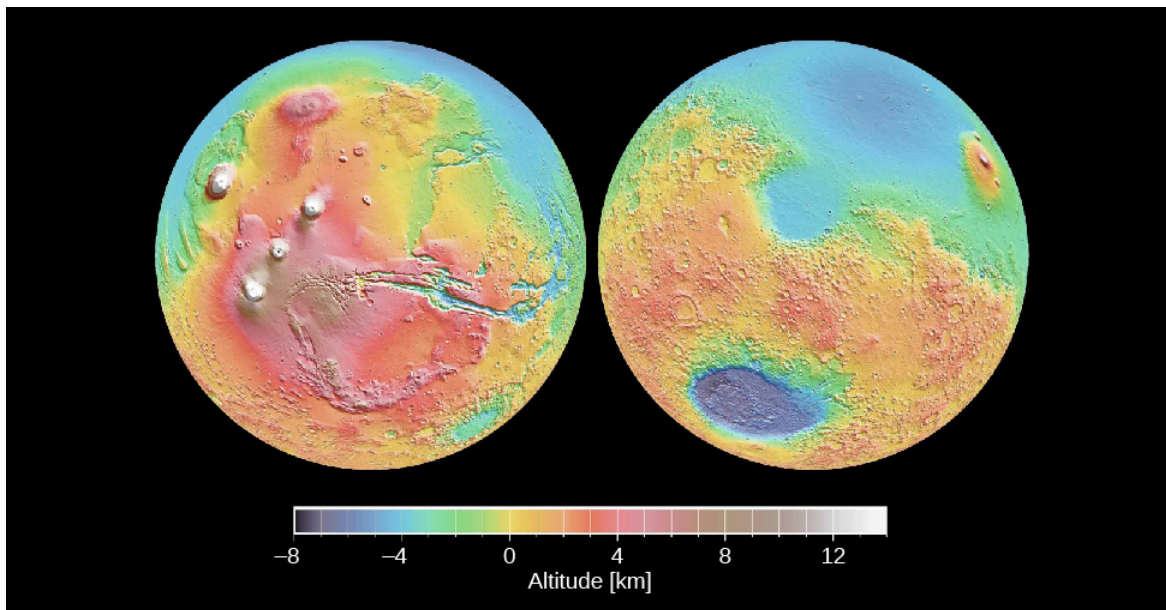


Figure 10.4.5 Mars Map from Laser Ranging. These globes are highly precise topographic maps, reconstructed from millions of individual elevation measurements made with the Mars Global Surveyor. Color is used to indicate elevation. The hemisphere on the left includes the Tharsis bulge and Olympus Mons, the highest mountain on Mars; the hemisphere on the right includes the Hellas basin, which has the lowest elevation on Mars.

Approximately half the planet consists of heavily cratered highland terrain, found primarily in the southern hemisphere. The other half, which is mostly in the north, contains younger, lightly cratered volcanic plains at an average elevation about 5 kilometers lower than the highlands. Remember that we saw a similar pattern on Earth, the Moon, and Venus. A geological division into older highlands and younger lowland plains seems to be characteristic of all the terrestrial planets except Mercury.

Lying across the north-south division of Mars is an uplifted continent the size of North America. This is the 10-kilometer-high Tharsis bulge, a volcanic region crowned by four great volcanoes that rise still higher into the martian sky.

Volcanoes on Mars

The lowland plains of Mars look very much like the lunar maria, and they have about the same density of impact craters. Like the lunar maria, they probably formed between 3 and 4 billion years ago. Apparently, Mars experienced extensive volcanic activity at about the same time the Moon did, producing similar basaltic lavas.

The largest volcanic mountains of Mars are found in the Tharsis area (you can see them in Figure 10.4.5), although smaller volcanoes dot much of the surface. The most dramatic volcano on Mars is Olympus Mons (Mount Olympus), with a diameter larger than 500 kilometers and a summit that towers more than 20 kilometers above the surrounding plains—three times higher than the tallest mountain on Earth (Figure 10.4.6). The volume of this immense volcano is nearly 100 times greater than that of Mauna Loa in Hawaii. Placed on Earth's surface, Olympus would more than cover the entire state of Missouri.



Figure 10.4.6 Olympus Mons. The largest volcano on Mars, and probably the largest in the solar system, is Olympus Mons, illustrated in this computer-generated rendering based on data from the Mars Global Surveyor's laser altimeter. Placed on Earth, the base of Olympus Mons would completely cover the state of Missouri; the caldera, the circular opening at the top, is 65 kilometers across, about the size of Los Angeles.

Images taken from orbit allow scientists to search for impact craters on the slopes of these volcanoes in order to estimate their age. Many of the volcanoes show a fair number of such craters, suggesting that they ceased activity a billion years or more ago. However, Olympus Mons has very, very few impact craters. Its present surface cannot be more than about 100 million years old; it may even be much younger. Some of the fresh-looking lava flows might have been formed a hundred years ago, or a thousand, or a million, but geologically speaking, they are quite young. This leads geologists to the conclusion that Olympus Mons possibly remains intermittently active today—something future Mars land developers may want to keep in mind.

Martian Cracks and Canyons

The Tharsis bulge has many interesting geological features in addition to its huge volcanoes. In this part of the planet, the surface itself has bulged upward, forced by great pressures from below, resulting in extensive tectonic cracking of the crust. Among the most spectacular tectonic features on Mars are the canyons called the Valles Marineris (or Mariner Valleys, named after Mariner 9, which first revealed them to us), which are shown in Figure 10.4.7. They extend for about 5000 kilometers (nearly a quarter of the way around Mars) along the slopes of the Tharsis bulge. If it were on Earth, this canyon system would stretch all the way from Los Angeles to Washington, DC. The main canyon is about 7 kilometers deep and up to 100 kilometers wide, large enough for the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River to fit comfortably into one of its side canyons.

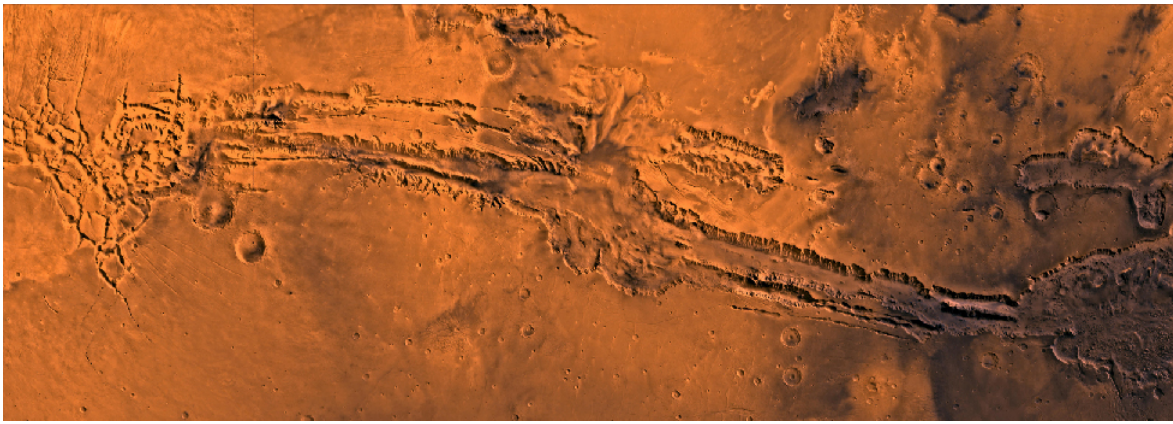


Figure 10.4.7 Heavily Eroded Canyonlands on Mars. This image shows the Valles Marineris canyon complex, which is 3000 kilometers wide and 8 kilometers deep.

An excellent [4-minute video tour](#) of Valles Marineris, narrated by planetary scientist Phil Christensen, is available for viewing.

The term “canyon” is somewhat misleading here because the Valles Marineris canyons have no outlets and were not cut by running water. They are basically tectonic cracks, produced by the same crustal tensions that caused the Tharsis uplift. However, water has played a later role in shaping the canyons, primarily by seeping from deep springs and undercutting the cliffs. This undercutting led to landslides that gradually widened the original cracks into the great valleys we see today (Figure 10.4.8). Today, the primary form of erosion in the canyons is probably wind.

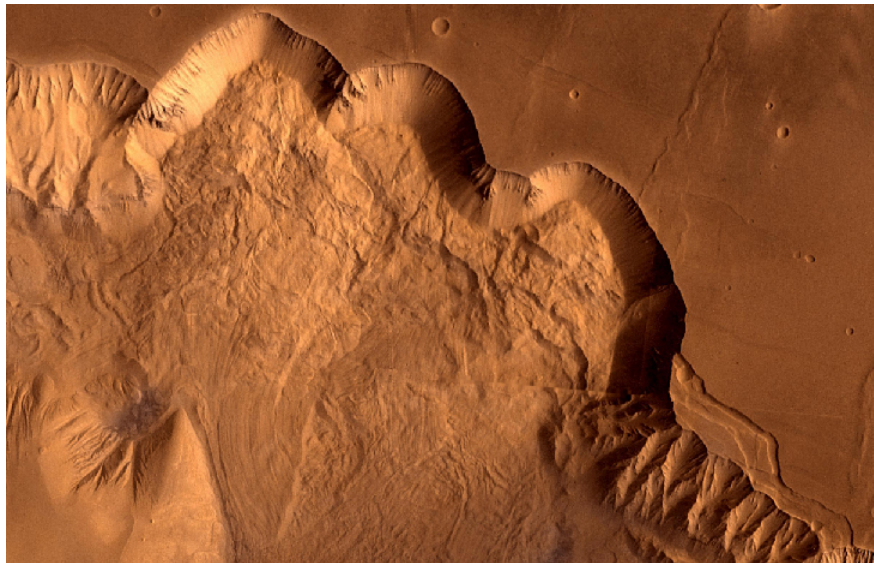


Figure 10.4.8 Martian Landslides. This Viking orbiter image shows Ophir Chasma, one of the connected valleys of the Valles Marineris canyon system. Look carefully and you can see enormous landslides whose debris is piled up underneath the cliff wall, which tower up to 10 kilometers above the canyon floor.

While the Tharsis bulge and Valles Marineris are impressive, in general, we see fewer tectonic structures on Mars than on Venus. In part, this may reflect a lower general level of geological activity, as would be expected for a smaller planet. But it is also possible that evidence of widespread faulting has been buried by wind-deposited sediment over much of Mars. Like Earth, Mars may have hidden part of its geological history under a cloak of soil.

The View on the Martian Surface

The first spacecraft to land successfully on Mars were Vikings 1 and 2 and Mars Pathfinder. All sent back photos that showed a desolate but strangely beautiful landscape, including numerous angular rocks interspersed with dune like deposits of fine-grained, reddish soil (Figure 10.4.9).



Figure 10.4.9 Three Martian Landing Sites. The Mars landers Viking 1 in Chryse, Pathfinder in Ares Valley, and Viking 2 in Utopia, all photographed their immediate surroundings. It is apparent from the similarity of these three photos that each spacecraft touched down on a flat, windswept plain littered with rocks ranging from tiny pebbles up to meter-size boulders. It is probable that most of Mars looks like this on the surface.

All three of these landers were targeted to relatively flat, lowland terrain. Instruments on the landers found that the soil consisted of clays and iron oxides, as had long been expected from the red color of the planet. All the rocks measured appeared to be of volcanic origin and roughly the same composition. Later landers were targeted to touch down in areas that apparently were flooded sometime in the past, where sedimentary rock layers, formed in the presence of water, are common. (Although we should note that nearly all the planet is blanketed in at least a thin layer of wind-blown dust).

The Viking landers included weather stations that operated for several years, providing a perspective on martian weather. The temperatures they measured varied greatly with the seasons, due to the absence of moderating oceans and clouds. Typically, the summer maximum at Viking 1 was 240 K (-33°C), dropping to 190 K (-83°C) at the same location just before dawn. The lowest air temperatures, measured farther north by Viking 2, were about 173 K (-100°C). During the winter, Viking 2 also photographed water frost deposits on the ground (Figure 10.4.10). We make a point of saying “water frost” here because at some locations on Mars, it gets cold enough for carbon dioxide (dry ice) to freeze out of the atmosphere as well.



Figure 10.4.10 Water Frost in Utopia. This image of surface frost was photographed at the Viking 2 landing site during late winter.

Most of the winds measured on Mars are only a few kilometers per hour. However, Mars is capable of great windstorms that can shroud the entire planet with windblown dust. Such high winds can strip the surface of some of its loose, fine dust, leaving the rock

exposed. The later rovers found that each sunny afternoon the atmosphere became turbulent as heat rose off the surface. This turbulence generated dust devils, which play an important role in lifting the fine dust into the atmosphere. As the dust devils strip off the top layer of light dust and expose darker material underneath, they can produce fantastic patterns on the ground (Figure 10.4.11).

Wind on Mars plays an important role in redistributing surface material. Figure 10.4.11 shows a beautiful area of dark sand dunes on top of lighter material. Much of the material stripped out of the martian canyons has been dumped in extensive dune fields like this, mostly at high latitudes.

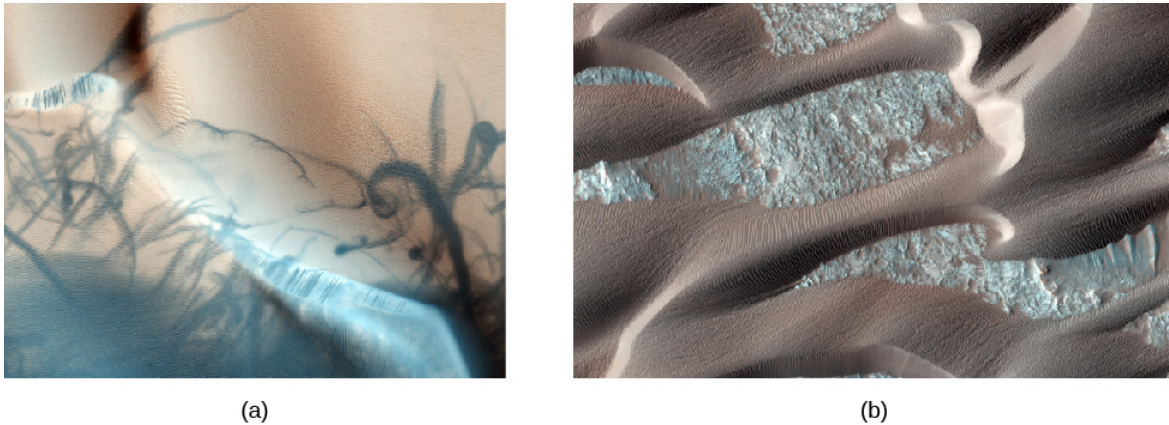


Figure 10.4.11 Dust Devil Tracks and Sand Dunes. (a) This high-resolution photo from the Mars Global Surveyor shows the dark tracks of several dust devils that have stripped away a thin coating of light-colored dust. This view is of an area about 3 kilometers across. Dust devils are one of the most important ways that dust gets redistributed by the martian winds. They may also help keep the solar panels of our rovers free of dust. (b) These windblown sand dunes on Mars overlay a lighter sandy surface. Each dune in this high-resolution view is about 1 kilometer across.

Key Concepts and Summary

Most of what we know about Mars is derived from spacecraft: highly successful orbiters, landers, and rovers. We have also been able to study a few martian rocks that reached Earth as meteorites. Mars has heavily cratered highlands in its southern hemisphere, but younger, lower volcanic plains over much of its northern half. The Tharsis bulge, as big as North America, includes several huge volcanoes; Olympus Mons is more than 20 kilometers high and 500 kilometers in diameter. The Valles Marineris canyons are tectonic features widened by erosion. Early landers revealed only barren, windswept plains, but later missions have visited places with more geological (and scenic) variety. Landing sites have been selected in part to search for evidence of past water.

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