

13.6: The Formation of the Galaxy

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the roles played by the collapse of a single cloud and mergers with other galaxies in building the Milky Way Galaxy we see today
- Provide examples of globular clusters and satellite galaxies affected by the Milky Way's strong gravity.

Information about stellar populations holds vital clues to how our Galaxy was built up over time. The flattened disk shape of the Galaxy suggests that it formed through a process similar to the one that leads to the formation of a protostar (see The Birth of Stars and the Discovery of Planets outside the Solar System). Building on this idea, astronomers first developed models that assumed the Galaxy formed from a single rotating cloud. But, as we shall see, this turns out to be only part of the story.

The Protogalactic Cloud and the Monolithic Collapse Model

Because the oldest stars—those in the halo and in globular clusters—are distributed in a sphere centered on the nucleus of the Galaxy, it makes sense to assume that the *protogalactic* cloud that gave birth to our Galaxy was roughly spherical. The oldest stars in the halo have ages of 12 to 13 billion years, so we estimate that the formation of the Galaxy began about that long ago. (See the chapter on The Big Bang for other evidence that galaxies in general began forming a little more than 13 billion years ago.) Then, just as in the case of star formation, the protogalactic cloud collapsed and formed a thin rotating disk. Stars born before the cloud collapsed did not participate in the collapse, but have continued to orbit in the halo to the present day (Figure 13.6.1).

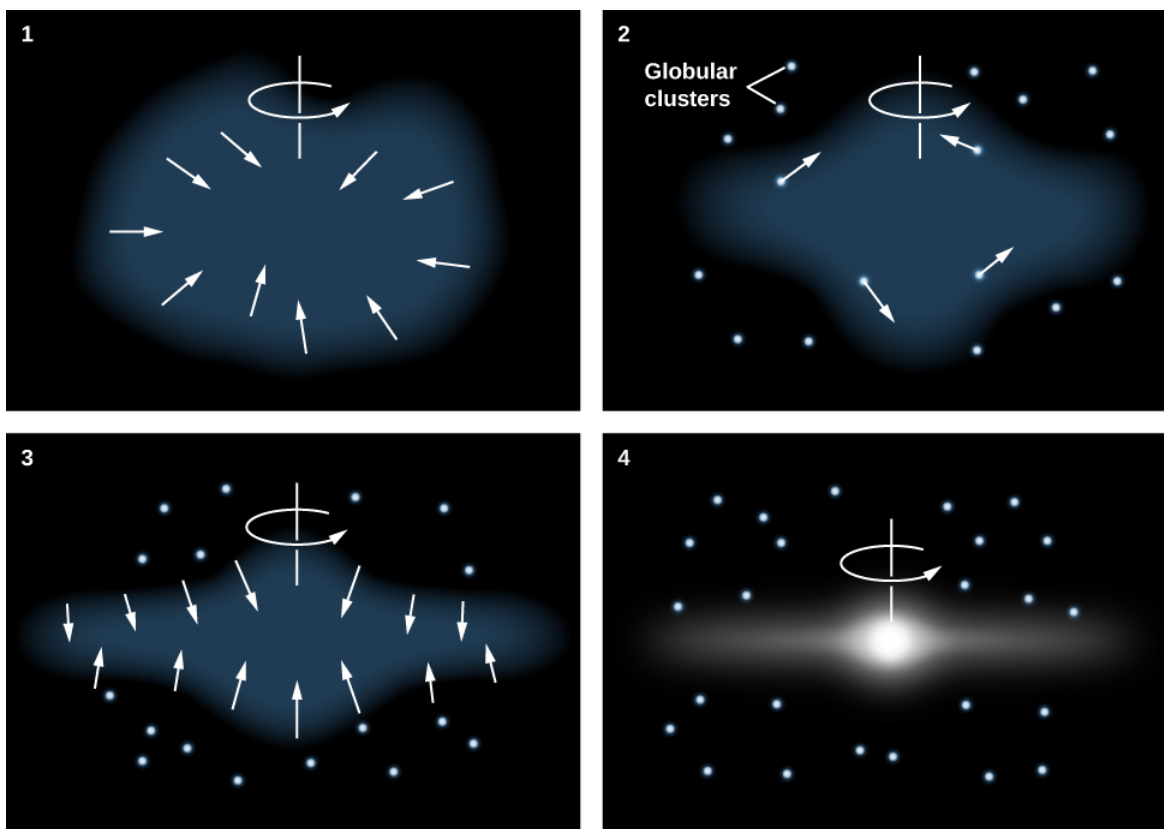


Figure 13.6.1 Monolithic Collapse Model for the Formation of the Galaxy. According to this model, the Milky Way Galaxy initially formed from a rotating cloud of gas that collapsed due to gravity. Halo stars and globular clusters either formed prior to the collapse or were formed elsewhere. Stars in the disk formed later, when the gas from which they were made was already “contaminated” with heavy elements produced in earlier generations of stars.

Gravitational forces caused the gas in the thin disk to fragment into clouds or clumps with masses like those of star clusters. These individual clouds then fragmented further to form stars. Since the oldest stars in the disk are nearly as old as the youngest stars in the halo, the collapse must have been rapid (astronomically speaking), requiring perhaps no more than a few hundred million years.

Collision Victims and the Multiple Merger Model

In past decades, astronomers have learned that the evolution of the Galaxy has not been quite as peaceful as this monolithic collapse model suggests. In 1994, astronomers discovered a small new galaxy in the direction of the constellation of Sagittarius. The Sagittarius dwarf galaxy is currently about 70,000 light-years away from Earth and 50,000 light-years from the center of the Galaxy. It is the closest galaxy known (Figure 13.6.2). It is very elongated, and its shape indicates that it is being torn apart by our Galaxy's gravitational tides—just as Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 was torn apart when it passed too close to Jupiter in 1992.

The Sagittarius galaxy is much smaller than the Milky Way, with only about 150,000 stars, all of which seem destined to end up in the bulge and halo of our own Galaxy. But don't sound the funeral bells for the little galaxy quite yet; the ingestion of the Sagittarius dwarf will take another 100 million years or so, and the stars themselves will survive.

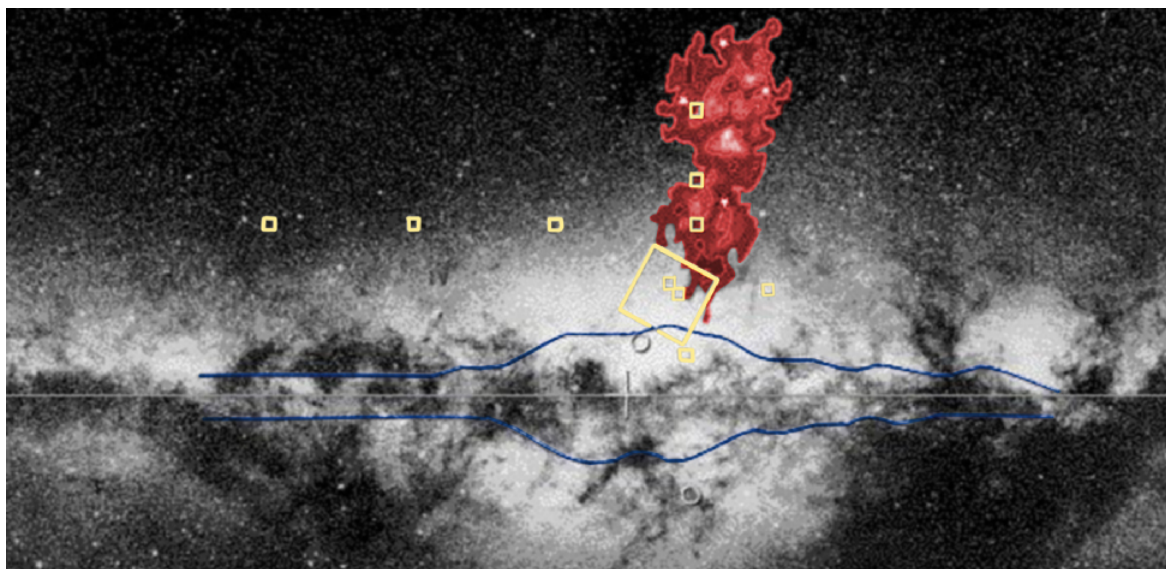


Figure 13.6.2 Sagittarius Dwarf. In 1994, British astronomers discovered a galaxy in the constellation of Sagittarius, located only about 50,000 light-years from the center of the Milky Way and falling into our Galaxy. This image covers a region approximately $70^\circ \times 50^\circ$ and combines a black-and-white view of the disk of our Galaxy with a red contour map showing the brightness of the dwarf galaxy. The dwarf galaxy lies on the other side of the galactic center from us. The white stars in the red region mark the locations of several globular clusters contained within the Sagittarius dwarf galaxy. The cross marks the galactic center. The horizontal line corresponds to the galactic plane. The blue outline on either side of the galactic plane corresponds to the infrared image in Figure 25.1.6 in Section 25.1. The boxes mark regions where detailed studies of individual stars led to the discovery of this galaxy.

Since that discovery, evidence has been found for many more close encounters between our Galaxy and other neighbor galaxies. When a small galaxy ventures too close, the force of gravity exerted by our Galaxy tugs harder on the near side than on the far side. The net effect is that the stars that originally belonged to the small galaxy are spread out into a long stream that orbits through the halo of the Milky Way (Figure 13.6.3).

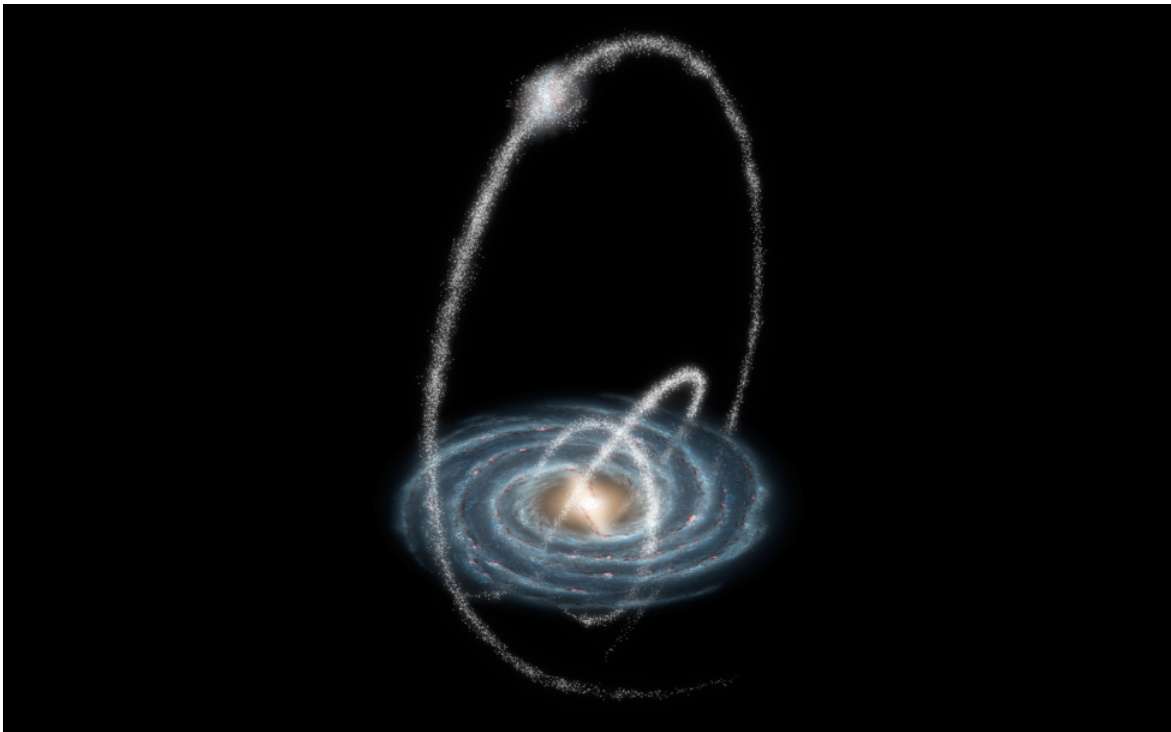


Figure 13.6.3 Streams in the Galactic Halo. When a small galaxy is swallowed by the Milky Way, its member stars are stripped away and form streams of stars in the galactic halo. This image is based on calculations of what some of these tidal streams might look like if the Milky Way swallowed 50 dwarf galaxies over the past 10 billion years.

Such a tidal stream can maintain its identity for billions of years. To date, astronomers have now identified streams originating from 12 small galaxies that ventured too close to the much larger Milky Way. Six more streams are associated with globular clusters. It has been suggested that large globular clusters, like Omega Centauri, are actually dense nuclei of cannibalized dwarf galaxies. The globular cluster M54 is now thought to be the nucleus of the Sagittarius dwarf we discussed earlier, which is currently merging with the Milky Way (Figure 13.6.4). The stars in the outer regions of such galaxies are stripped off by the gravitational pull of the Milky Way, but the central dense regions may survive.



Figure 13.6.4 Globular Cluster M54. This beautiful Hubble Space Telescope image shows the globular cluster that is now believed to be the nucleus of the Sagittarius Dwarf Galaxy.

Calculations indicate that the Galaxy's thick disk may be a product of one or more such collisions with other galaxies. Accretion of a satellite galaxy would stir up the orbits of the stars and gas clouds originally in the thin disk and cause them to move higher above and below the mid-plane of the Galaxy. Meanwhile, the Galaxy's stars would add to the fluffed-up mix. If such a collision happened about 10 billion years ago, then any gas in the two galaxies that had not yet formed into stars would have had plenty of time to settle back down into the thin disk. The gas could then have begun forming subsequent generations of population I stars. This timing is also consistent with the typical ages of stars in the thick disk.

The Milky Way has more collisions in store. An example is the Canis Major dwarf galaxy, which has a mass of about 1% of the mass of the Milky Way. Already long tidal tails have been stripped from this galaxy, which have wrapped themselves around the Milky Way three times. Several of the globular clusters found in the Milky Way may also have come from the Canis Major dwarf, which is expected to merge gradually with the Milky Way over about the next billion years.

In about 3 billion years, the Milky Way itself will be swallowed up, since it and the Andromeda galaxy are on a collision course. Our computer models show that after a complex interaction, the two will merge to form a larger, more rounded galaxy (Figure 13.6.5).

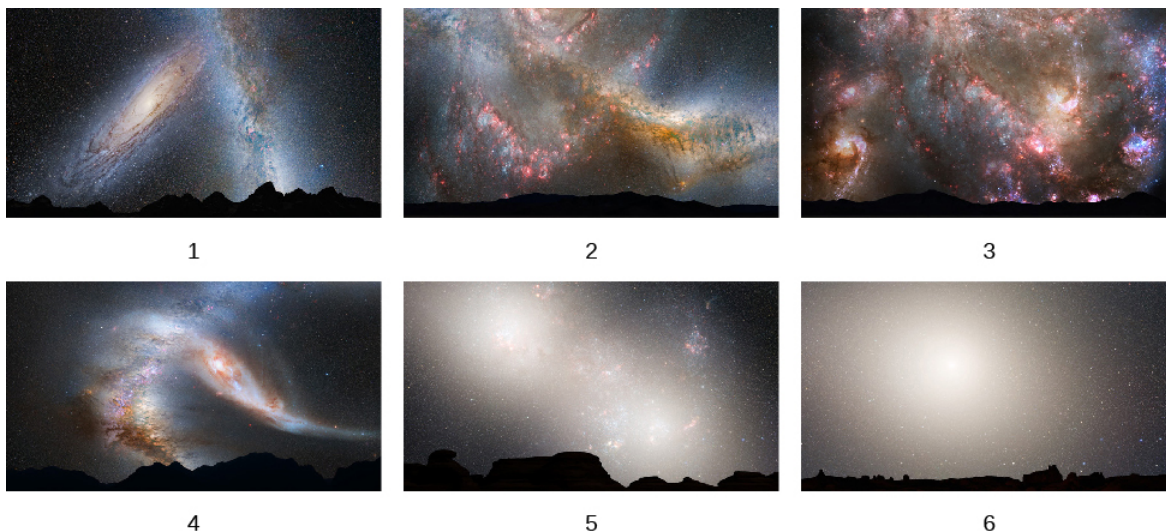


Figure 13.6.5 Collision of the Milky Way with Andromeda. In about 3 billion years, the Milky Way Galaxy and Andromeda Galaxy will begin a long process of colliding, separating, and then coming back together to form an elliptical galaxy. The whole interaction will take 3 to 4 billion years. These images show the following sequence: (1) In 3.75 billion years, Andromeda has approached the Milky Way. (2) New star formation fills the sky 3.85 billion years from now. (3) Star formation continues at 3.9 billion years. (4) The galaxy shapes change as they interact, with Andromeda being stretched and our Galaxy becoming warped, about 4 billion years from now. (5) In 5.1 billion years, the cores of the two galaxies are bright lobes. (6) In 7 billion years, the merged galaxies form a huge elliptical galaxy whose brightness fills the night sky. This artist's illustrations show events from a vantage point 25,000 light-years from the center of the Milky Way. However, we should mention that the Sun may not be at that distance throughout the sequence of events, as the collision readjusts the orbits of many stars within each galaxy.

We are thus coming to realize that “environmental influences” (and not just a galaxy’s original characteristics) play an important role in determining the properties and development of our Galaxy. In future chapters we will see that collisions and mergers are a major factor in the evolution of many other galaxies as well.

Summary

The Galaxy began forming a little more than 13 billion years ago. Models suggest that the stars in the halo and globular clusters formed first, while the Galaxy was spherical. The gas, somewhat enriched in heavy elements by the first generation of stars, then collapsed from a spherical distribution to a rotating disk-shaped distribution. Stars are still forming today from the gas and dust that remain in the disk. Star formation occurs most rapidly in the spiral arms, where the density of interstellar matter is highest. The Galaxy captured (and still is capturing) additional stars and globular clusters from small galaxies that ventured too close to the Milky Way. In 3 to 4 billion years, the Galaxy will begin to collide with the Andromeda galaxy, and after about 7 billion years, the two galaxies will merge to form a giant elliptical galaxy.

Contributors and Attributions

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