Amazonian-aged fluvial valley systems in a climatic microenvironment on Mars: Melting of ice deposits on the interior of Lyot Crater

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Received 25 January 2009; revised 17 March 2009; accepted 20 March 2009; published 17 April 2009.

Valley networks, regional drainage patterns suggesting liquid water stability at the surface, are confined to early in the history of Mars (the Noachian/Hesperian boundary and before), prior to a major climate transition to the hyperarid cold conditions of the Amazonian. Several later fluvial valley systems have been documented in specific Hesperian and Early Amazonian environments, and are thought to have formed due to local conditions. Here we describe fluvial valley systems within Lyot crater that have the youngest well-constrained age reported to date (Middle or Late Amazonian) for systems of this size (tens of km). These valleys are linked to melting of near-surface ice-rich units, extend up to ~50 km in length, follow topographic gradients, and deposit fans. The interior of Lyot crater is an optimal micro-environment, since its low elevation leads to high surface pressure, and temperature conditions at its location in the northern mid-latitudes are sufficient for melting during periods of high-obliquity. This micro-environment in Lyot apparently allowed melting of surface ice and the formation of the youngest fluvial valley systems of this scale yet observed on Mars. Citation: Dickson, J. L., C. I. Fassett, and J. W. Head (2009), Amazonian-aged fluvial valley systems in a climatic microenvironment on Mars: Melting of ice deposits on the interior of Lyot Crater, Geophys. Res. Lett., 36, L08201, doi:10.1029/2009GL037472.

1. Introduction

Valley networks [Carr, 1996] and the mineralogy [Bibring et al., 2005] of the Martian highlands respectively demonstrate that periods of fluvial erosion and aqueous alteration occurred on Mars in the Noachian, a period likely characterized by a warmer and wetter climate. Limited fluvial activity extended into the Hesperian and Early Amazonian [e.g. Gallick and Baker, 1990; Mangold et al., 2004; Fassett and Head, 2008], but these are likely due to localized environments, rather than to a continuation of the Noachian climate. No fluvial valley systems at the scale of tens of kilometers have yet been reported during the Middle to Late Amazonian.

The Middle/Late Amazonian climate is interpreted to have been much the same as that of today: a cold hyperarid desert [Marchant and Head, 2007] with average conditions below the triple point of water. Ice is not stable at the surface in equatorial and mid-latitude regions [Mellan and Jakosky, 1995], but due to variations in spin-axis/orbital parameters [Laskar et al., 2004], ice during the Late Amazonian was mobilized from high-latitudes and redeposited equatorward as interpreted from: 1) remnants of tropical mountain cold-based glaciers [Head and Marchant, 2003]; 2) mid-latitude glacial deposits [e.g., Holt et al., 2008, and references therein]; and 3) latitude-dependent mantling deposits from ~30° latitude to the poles interpreted to be remnants of a recent ice age [Mustard et al., 2001; Head et al., 2003].

In spite of the fact that the Middle and Late Amazonian climate of Mars has generally been below the triple point, analyses of the global topography and atmosphere show that some areas on Mars are characterized by micro-environments within which liquid water is stable on the surface for short periods of time (tens of days) throughout the Martian year [Haberle et al., 2001; Lobitz et al., 2001]. This prompted us to investigate the most likely micro-environments that might have permitted melting of surface/near-surface ice, especially impact craters at low elevations in the mid-latitudes, which provide high pressure and high insolation under optimal climate conditions.

Lyot Crater, a ~215 km basin in the northern lowlands (50°N, 30°E) (Figure 1a) fits these constraints. With a floor elevation of ~7000 m, Lyot represents the lowest point in the northern hemisphere. Haberle et al. [2001] calculated a maximum surface pressure at Lyot of >10 mb, above the triple point of water (6.1 mb), consistent with the calculations of Lobitz et al. [2001]. Stratigraphy shows that Lyot formed in the Early Amazonian [Greely and Guest, 1987], post-dating the cessation of extensive valley network development [Fassett and Head, 2008].

Lyot is north of Deuterinitus Mensae (Figure 1a), an area characterized by Lineated Valley Fill (LVF) and Lobate Debris Aprons (LDA), interpreted to represent networks of glacial flow [Head et al., 2006a, 2006b]. Analysis of these deposits suggests past ice thicknesses of ~1 km [Dickson et al., 2008]. Given the youth of Lyot, its proximity to Amazonian glacial deposits, and its unusually high surface pressure, we used high-resolution data to examine the Lyot micro-environment for evidence of ice-rich deposits and liquid water.

2. Observations

2.1. Lyot Crater Interior

At Context Camera (CTX) resolution (~6 m/px), a mantling unit blankets the majority of Lyot and adjacent plains (Figure 1b). This unit has a stippled texture (Figures 2 and 3), diffuse margins, and impacts within the unit range from fresh bowl-shaped craters to rimless depressions. Three CTX frames of the eastern portion of Lyot permitted us to map this unit in detail (Figure 1b).
Along the Lyot rim and peak ring, deposits similar to glacial features mapped in Deuteronilus Mensae [Head et al., 2006a, 2006b] are observed (Figure 3). These features contain convex-outward ridges, convex-upward profiles, and features indicative of debris-covered glacier deposits [e.g. Head et al., 2005, 2006a, 2006b] (Figure 3). They are prominently observed along the southern interior rim, where three LDAs extend from the rim towards the floor (Figure 3). Knobs along the rim and peak ring also host LDAs, as well as young gully systems [Hart et al., 2008].

2.2. Fluvial Valley Systems

The interior of Lyot exhibits several systems of sinuous valleys incised into the stippled mantling unit. Twenty systems are observed, fifteen of which occur in the eastern half of Lyot (Figure 1b). Valleys range in length from 2–50 km with widths that average ~250 m. They follow local gradients (Figure 3), with slopes in the down-valley direction ranging from 0.4° to 6° (median = 2°). Valleys start at a range of elevations in the crater interior, from ~−2880 m to ~−5680 m (mean = −3800 m). Valley walls appear sharp and no impact craters are observed on valley floors (Figure 2). Valleys are superposed by smooth material on the flanks of isolated mesas where the two units are found in conjunction (Figure 2b).

Several of the longer valleys deposit alluvial fans at their termini (Figures 2c and 2d). These deposits show a range in morphology from fans with broad, smooth surfaces (Figure 2c) to smaller dissected examples (Figure 2d). The largest valleys in Lyot produced the largest fans, as observed in Figure 2c, which shows a fan emanating from a 28 km valley on the northern rim of Lyot. This fan exhibits a 2.9° scarp, based upon MOLA altimetry tracks, and these data suggest a thickness of ~60 m.

The dissection and modification of many of the smaller fans in Lyot (e.g., Figure 2d) appears to have been unrelated to valley activity, suggesting that modification has taken place over a significant period of time. Nonetheless, the existence of these fans in Lyot, comparable in size and morphology to alluvial fans on the Earth and Mars, as well as the low slopes and meandering nature of the valleys, supports the interpretation that the valleys were carved by fluvial processes.

3. Chronology

Crater size-frequency distribution measurements of Lyot and its ejecta using High Resolution Stereo Camera (HRSC) data yield a formation age for Lyot of Early Amazonian for both the Neukum [Ivanov, 2001] (~3.3 Gyr) and Hartmann [Hartmann, 2005] (~1.6 Gyr) isochron systems (Figure 4a). Stratigraphic relationships are consistent with an Early Amazonian age as well, as Lyot ejecta superposes Amazonian smooth plains material (Aps in the work by Greeley and Guest [1987]). These constraints show that Lyot formed well after the cessation of ancient valley network activity [Fassett and Head, 2008].

We interpret the fluvial valley systems of Lyot to have incised the stippled mantling unit. We performed crater counts on this unit to obtain a maximum age for valley network formation. Due to resolution and spatial footprint constraints, we focused our mapping on the three CTX orbits in eastern Lyot (Figure 1b), where the majority of valley systems are observed. The subdued morphology of craters within this unit makes superposition relationships unclear in some cases; thus we counted every crater...
observed within the unit, providing a conservative maximum age.

[14] We calculated a Middle Amazonian age for the stippled mantling unit, with a best fit of ~1.5 Gyr in the Neukum [Ivanov, 2001] system and 0.78 Gyr in the Hartmann [Hartmann, 2005] system. This measurement is well matched by production model isochrons (Figure 4b) and is consistent with stratigraphic constraints. Thus, we are confident that these valleys are Middle Amazonian or younger. There is a substantial (0.8–1.9 Gy) period of time between the Lyot impact and the emplacement of the stippled mantling unit, suggesting that valley formation significantly post-dates the formation of Lyot.

4. Discussion

[15] Like the Noachian-aged valley networks, the fluvial valley systems of Lyot display morphologies (Figure 2) and topographic relationships typical of fluvial features carved by liquid water, but at a much younger time (Figure 4). What is the source of the water? We propose that the glacial deposits found within Lyot and the stippled mantling unit itself provide the most plausible sources (Figure 3). We interpret the direct association of debris-covered glacial deposits and these fluvial valley systems (Figure 3) as evidence of cause and effect, and suggest that the glaciers were a significant source of meltwater for these valley systems (Figure 2a).

[16] What processes could have provided enough energy for melting of these ice-rich deposits? While the Lyot impact likely initiated groundwater convection that delivered energy to the surface, the time span between impact and emplacement of the stippled mantling unit (at least 800 Myr (Figure 4)) surpasses the greatest model lifetimes for impact-induced thermal anomalies in terrestrial

Figure 2. Lyot crater fluvial valley systems and fans. (a) Valleys converging and trending downslope toward the lower right (CTX P04_002560_2309), (b) Smooth mantling deposits on knobs superposed on valleys. Direction of flow from topography was from upper-right to lower-left (CTX P04_002560_2309). (c) Broad fan sourced by a ~28 km valley (CTX P04_002494_2310). (d) Smaller dissected fan sourced by small channel from the north (CTX P04_002494_2310).

Figure 3. (a) Perspective view of the southern Lyot rim. (b) Sketch map overlain on identical perspective view. We observe (1) a broad LDA with multiple lobes emanating from the steep crater rim, and (2) two separate fluvial valley systems trending towards the crater floor, one from the terminus of the LDA and one from the stippled mantling unit. Vantage point is provided in Figure 1b. Image is CTX P04_002560_2309 draped over MOLA. Scene is ~27 km wide along the crater rim.
impact and the emplacement of the stippled mantling unit. There is a significant (0.8–1.8 Gyr) time span between the Lyot Middle-Amazonian age for the stippled mantling unit. There is consistent with an Early-Amazonian age for Lyot and a systems. Isochrons provide a robust fit to these counts the formation of fluvial valley systems in an otherwise hyper-arid environment. The observed glacial deposits and the valley network formation. Chronologically, these valleys are contemporaneous with the glacial deposits and later than the stippled mantling unit that are interpreted to be the source of water (Figures 3 and 4).

5. Summary

Lyot crater represents a unique micro-environment on Mars due to its low elevation and resulting high surface pressure, and its geographic location, which is in a region where glacial deposits are observed and subsurface ice is expected. These factors combined to cause melting of ice-rich deposits to form fluvial valley systems in the interior of the crater. These valleys formed in the Middle to Late Amazonian, significantly post-dating the major period of valley network formation. Chronologically, these valleys are contemporaneous with the glacial deposits and later than the stippled mantling unit that are interpreted to be the source of water (Figures 3 and 4).

A further survey is underway to determine the global extent of young fluvial valley systems in association with Middle and Late Amazonian glacial deposits. The valley systems of Lyot illustrate that fluvial activity occasionally was possible even during the generally cold hyper-arid Amazonian period. These data show that micro-environments permitting liquid water can exist within the context of these conditions, analogous to what occurs today in the Antarctic Dry Valleys [Marchant and Head, 2007].
[21] Acknowledgments. We appreciate helpful discussions with Joseph Levy, Samuel Schon, Francois Forget, J.-B. Madeleine, and Aymeric Spiga. Insightful reviews from Vic Baker and an anonymous reviewer improved the final manuscript. We greatly acknowledge financial assistance from the NASA Mars Data Analysis Program grants NNG04GJ99G and NNX07A095C, the NASA Mars Fundamental Research Program grant GC196412NGA, the NASA Applied Information Systems Research Program grant NNG05GGA1G, and the Mars Express Guest Investigator Program, JPL contract 1237163.

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