AEOLIAN PROCESSES ON MARS: ATMOSPHERIC MODELING AND GIS ANALYSIS

Thesis by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Pasadena, California

2003

(Defended February 3, 2003)

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"...Combining this evidence with that we already possess of the presence of water in its liquid, vaporous, and solid states, upon the surface, and with the certainty that the red tint of parts of the planet is due to a real ruddiness of substance (corresponding to the tint of certain soils upon our own earth), we cannot but recognise the extreme probability that in all essential habitudes the planet Mars resembles our own earth."

- Richard A. Proctor, The Orbs Around Us, 1872.

"But it does not seem too much to hope that some day (haply not so far distant) that the lesson taught us by Professor Smyth's Teneriffe experiment will be appreciated as it deserves. Then a telescope surpassing in power any yet constructed shall be placed where alone the power of such an instrument can be efficiently exerted – where Newton long since told men that such an instrument should be placed – far above the denser atmospheric strata whose disturbances never cease, and are magnified and aggravated by every increase of telescopic power. When this is done, we may look in Mars for that which has long been sought for fruitlessly upon the lunar surface – the signs of life, of change, of progress, of decay."

- Richard A. Proctor, Essays on Astronomy, 1872

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The list of people who are responsible for getting me to this point is incredibly long. I will undoubtedly leave out people who deserve recognition simply because their contributions have slipped my mind, and I hope that my forgetfulness is not mistaken for a lack of gratefulness. The first people to thank are my parents, who always encouraged my independence and persistence. Without my mother's creative thought and my father's fascination with science, I doubt I would be here today.

I have had numerous mentors since I was an undergraduate. My advisor Arden Albee has always forced me to consider all sides of a problem, even when I'm convinced I've already solved it. I don't think we would have had as much fun if we weren't both such stubborn people. Mark Richardson has provided nonstop support and enthusiasm since he arrived at Caltech, and he has been very generous with providing and arranging for computer time for model runs. I was fortunate enough to acquire an advisor at the USGS in Flagstaff, AZ: Wes Ward gave me the resources to begin my GIS analysis and took some time out of his busy schedule for field trips and many rather invaluable conversations. Bruce Murray took me on when I first came to Caltech, introducing me to the world of Martian image analysis. My undergraduate advisors also deserve recognition: John Pearl at GSFC who started me on the path of Mars science with his patient explanations and wry humor, and Shymala Dason who guided me into the practicalities of the working world.

A number of students (and former students) have given me support or help over the years here. Sometimes it's advice or a listening ear, and sometimes it's data or a routine vital to my research. A short and by no means complete list consists of Shane Byrne, Ben Lane, Dave Camp, James Dennedy-Frank, Josh Bandfield (of

ASU), Anthony Toigo, Sarah Stewart-Mukhopadhyay, Antonin Bouchez, Margaret Belska, Zane Crawford, Michelle Koutnik, Anton Ivanov, Ashwin Vasavada, Adam Showman, Emily Brodsky, and Dave Kass. JPL'ers and other researchers who have provided support include Ken Herkenhoff and Tom Farr. Technical support in the form of debugging programs, providing nifty routines, or making computers, models, and equipment function properly is vital to any research program, and these people are greatly appreciated for their last-minute miracles as well as their conversation. Most notably this list includes Shawn Ewald, Trent Hare (of the USGS), JoAnne Gibson, Mike Black and recently, Ian McEwan. Susan Leising in the GPS library has magically produced articles and books for me that I was sure were impossible to find. Not to be forgotten, the office administrators who make the world go around (they make it look so easy): Irma Black, Leticia Calderon, Nora Oshima, and Kay Campbell in the Planetary Science office, and Carolyn Porter, Donna Sackett, and Marcia Hudson in the GPS office. A special note goes to Terri Gennaro who taught me 4x4 driving and has always been there to share a laugh or a story.

Friends from outside Planetary Science and the division have given me a measure of sanity and balance that is necessary to survival. Those closest to me have been Gilead Wurman, Chad Parker, and Aaron Eichelberger, and without their support and encouragement I would feel much older than I do. I give a special thanks to Loretta Hidalgo for introducing me to the world of Landmark Education. I also thank the Caltech Ballroom Dance Club, the old milonga group (especially Fabrizio Pinto and Taffy Beauvais), and the LARPers (especially Jordan Lees and Nick Burden). Without these people my life would have been much less interesting.

ABSTRACT

Wind is currently the dominant geological agent acting on the surface of Mars. A study of Martian aeolian activity leads to an understanding of the forces that have sculpted the planet's face over the past billion years or more and to the potential discovery of climate shifts recorded in surface wind features that reflect ancient wind patterns. This work takes advantage of newly available tools and data to reconstruct the sedimentary history reflected in aeolian features on Mars. The thesis is divided into two main projects. In the first section, a widely accepted hypothesis, that oscillations in Martian orbital parameters influence atmospheric circulation patterns, is challenged. A Mars global circulation model is run at different obliquity, eccentricity, and perihelion states and the predicted surface wind orientations are correlated with observed aeolian features on the Martian surface. The model indicates that orbital parameters have little effect on wind patterns, suggesting that aeolian features not aligned with the current wind regime must have formed under atmospheric conditions unrelated to orbital parameters. In the second project, new spacecraft data and a mesoscale model are used to determine the sedimentary history of Proctor Crater, a 150 km diameter crater in the southern highlands of Mars. Using high-resolution imagery, topography, composition, and thermal information, a GIS was constructed to study the aeolian history of the crater, which was found to have a complex interaction of deposition and erosion. Surficial features include 450 m of sediments filling the crater basin, small bright bedforms, dust devil tracks, and a dark dunefield consisting of coarse, basaltic sand and containing slipfaces indicative of a multidirectional, convergent wind regime. All wind features, both ancient and contemporary, are coaligned, indicating that formative wind directions have changed little since the first aeolian features formed in this area. Mesoscale model runs over Proctor Crater indicate that two dune slipfaces are created by winter afternoon geostrophic westerlies and summer evening katabatic easterlies, and

that dust devil tracks are created by summer noontime rotational westerlies.

Using all available tools, this thesis begins the work of understanding how aeolian processes have influenced the Martian surface.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iv
Abstract	vi
Table of Contents	
List of Illustrations and/or Tables	X
Nomenclature	
Locations on Mars	
Chapter I: Introduction and Overview	1
Chapter II: Martian Surface Winds: Insensitivity to Orbital Changes	
and Implications for Aeolian Processes	8
1. Introduction	9
2. Model Description	16
3. Present-Day Winds as Predicted by the GCM	18
4. Effects of Dust Loading on Surface Winds	22
4.1 Global Winds	22
4.2 At the Viking Lander 2 Site	25
5. Formation of Wind Streaks	29
6. Effects of Obliquity Extrema on Surface Winds	
7. Obliquity Extrema at Opposite Perihelion Passage	
8. Winds at the Pathfinder Landing Site	
9. Conclusion	
10. Acknowledgements	
Chapter III: Aeolian Processes in Proctor Crater on Mars: 1.	
Sedimentary History as Analyzed from Multiple Data Sets	51
1. Introduction	53
2. Method	
3. Study Area	59
3.1 Large-Scale Overview	
3.1.1 Regional Context	
3.1.2 Prominent Features	
3.1.3 Basin Fill	61
3.1.4 Concentric Ridges	62
3.2 Overview at MOC Narrow Angle Resolution	
3.3 Temporal Features	
3.3.1 Dust Devil Tracks	
3.3.2 Frost Features	82
3.4 Bright Duneforms	
4. The Dark Dunes of Proctor Crater	
4.1 MOC Narrow Angle Images	99
2 0	

4.2 Slipface Orientations	105
4.3 Dunefield Volume, Structure, and EST	
(Equivalent Sand Thickness)	111
4.4 Comparison with Kelso Dunes, California, USA	
5. Composition	
6. Thermal Inertia	
6.1 Background	
6.2 Thermal Inertia of Proctor Crater Dunes, Broad View	
6.2.1 Results	
6.2.2 Interpretation	
6.3 Thermal Inertia of Proctor Crater Dunes, Spatial View	
6.3.1 Results	
6.3.2 Interpretation	
6.4 Thermal Inertia of the Proctor Crater Floor	
7. Conclusions and Geomorphic Sequence	156
8. Acknowledgements	
Chapter IV: Aeolian Processes in Proctor Crater on Mars: 2.	
Mesoscale Modeling of Dune-Forming Winds	166
1. Introduction	
2. MOC NA Observations of Proctor Crater Dunes	171
2.1 Measured Orientations	171
2.1.1 Dark Dunes	171
2.1.2 Dust Devil Tracks	175
2.1.3 Bright Duneforms	177
2.2 Annual Slipface Reversal	
3. Mesoscale Modeling of Surface Winds	
3.1 The Mars MM5	
3.2 Model Results	184
3.2.1 Seasonal Winds	184
3.2.2 Daily Winds	
3.2.3 Wind Stresses	190
3.2.4 Spatial Variation and Origin of Wind Orientations	193
4. Discussion and Conclusion	199
5. Acknowledgements	201
Chapter V: Future Work	
Bibliography	

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS AND/OR TABLES

Number Page
Locations on Marsxiii
Fig. 2.1. Present-day Seasonally Averaged Surface Winds19
Fig. 2.2. Surface Winds with Dust Loading
Fig. 2.3. Modeled and Observed Winds at the Viking Lander 2 Site
Fig. 2.4. Correlation of Modeled Winds with Bright and Dark Streaks 30-31
Fig. 2.5. Windflow Over an Obstacle
Fig. 2.6. Surface Winds with Varying Obliquity
Fig. 2.7. Surface Winds with Varying Obliquity and Perihelion Passage42
Fig. 2.8. Winds at the Mars Pathfinder Landing Site44
Fig. 3.1 Proctor Crater: The Study Area60
Fig. 3.2. Profile Across Two Concentric Ridges
Fig. 3.3. Examples of MOC Narrow Angle Images
Fig. 3.4. Rose Diagram of Dust Devil Track Orientations77
Fig. 3.5. MOC Narrow Angle Images of Dust Devil Tracks
Fig. 3.6. Frost Features on the Dark Dunes
Fig. 3.7. Location and Rose Diagram of Bright Duneforms92
Fig. 3.8. MOC Narrow Angle Images of Bright Duneforms
Fig. 3.9. MOC Narrow Angle Images of Dark Dunes100
Fig. 3.10. Measured Dark Dune Brinks and Orientations108
Fig. 3.11. Rose Diagram of the Three Observed Dune Orientations109
Fig. 3.12. MOLA Reflectivities and Elevations across Dark Dunes
Fig. 3.13. SRTM Traverse of Kelso Dunes, California, USA118
Fig. 3.14. Composition and Thermal Inertia from TES123–124
Table 3.1. Thermal Inertia Dependence on Grain Size
Fig. 3.15. Dust Opacity and Thermal Inertia as a Function of Season

Fig. 3.16. Reflectivity and Temperature Trends across Dark Dunes 145-146
Fig. 4.1 Proctor Crater: The Study Area170
Table 4.1 Current Wind Regime in Proctor Crater172
Fig. 4.2 Rose Diagrams of Aeolian Features in Proctor Crater173
Fig. 4.3 Dust Devil Orientations as a Function of Season176
Fig. 4.4 Seasonal Slipface Reversal on the Dark Dunes
Fig. 4.5 Slipface Reversal as a Function of Season in MOC NA Images182
Fig. 4.6 Maximum Daily Stresses and Wind Orientations185
Fig. 4.7 Hourly Wind Orientations for Each Model Run
Fig. 4.8 Saltation Threshold and Modeled Stresses192
Fig. 4.9 Surface Wind Maps195
Fig. 4.10 Rose Diagrams for All Model Grid Points in Proctor Crater197

NOMENCLATURE

GCM – General Circulation Model

GFDL - Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory

GIS – Geographical Information System

 L_s – Solar Longitude of Mars' orbit around the sun, a measure of season (0° – 360°, where 0° = northern spring equinox/southern fall equinox, 90° = northern summer solstice/southern winter solstice, 180° = northern fall equinox/southern spring equinox, and 270° = northern winter solstice/southern summer solstice)

MGS – Mars Global Surveyor

MM5 – Mesoscale Model 5

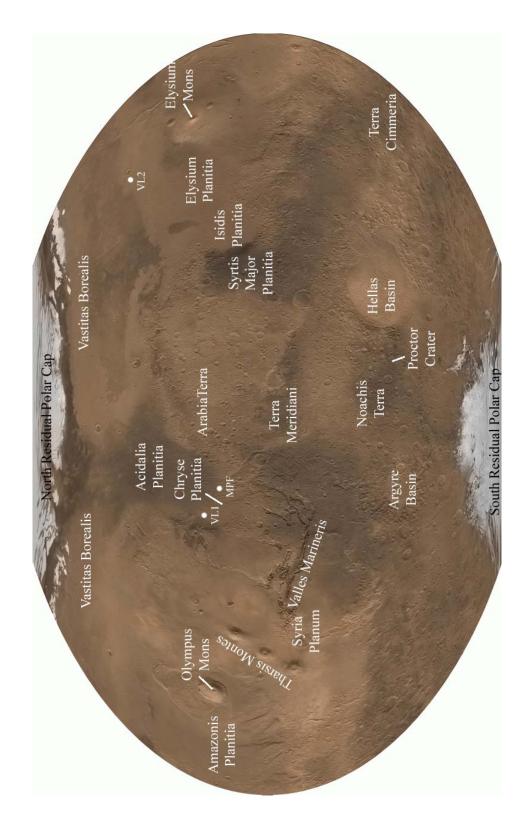
MOC – Mars Orbiter Camera

MOLA – Mars Orbiter Laser Altimeter

 $\boldsymbol{MPF}-\boldsymbol{Mars}\ \boldsymbol{Pathfinder}$

TES – Thermal Emission Spectrometer

VL 2 – Viking Lander 2



Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Wind is currently the dominant geological agent acting on the surface of Mars. The general lack of contemporary aqueous, volcanic, and tectonic features suggests that aeolian (i.e., wind) processes have prevailed on the Martian surface for a geologically significant period of time. Thus a study of aeolian activity leads to a better understanding of the forces that have sculpted the face of Mars over the past billion years or more. Furthermore, such a study has the potential for the discovery of climate shifts recorded in aeolian features that reflect ancient wind patterns. The instruments on the Mars Global Surveyor (MGS) spacecraft have provided data on the Martian surface with unprecedented detail, revealing windrelated features such as tracks eroded by dust devils as they travel downwind, small bright bedforms indicative of persistent strong winds, and sand dunes where previous spacecraft imagery indicated only dark "splotches." MGS images have also shown layered sediments with complex stratigraphic relationships, indicative of several episodes of successive erosion, deposition, and inactivity, all of which may well have been produced by aeolian activity [e.g., Malin and Edgett, 2000a]. In addition, mesoscale models of the Martian atmosphere with horizontal resolutions down to tens of meters are now available and can be used to study small-scale interactions between the surface and atmosphere. Given the acquisition of new data and the advent of these new tools, there has been no better time to investigate Mars' ubiquitous aeolian features to develop an understanding of how and when they formed, and how they are influenced by and subsequently reflect changes in climate.

I chose this work for its obvious potential implications on recent climate change on Mars, as well as for the excitement of studying a currently active process on a body that has so often been termed "dead." There are a number of advantages in taking on such a thesis topic at this time. One such benefit is that with the new high-resolution spacecraft data and mesoscale models, the study of Mars has shifted from an astronomical to a geological perspective. That is, in the past, typical studies encompassed a large part or all of the Martian surface, with conclusions indicating regional or global trends in cratering, dust mantling, ice cover, and the like. The new data and models allow for detailed studies of small areas which produce an understanding of local histories and conditions. These small-scale studies must ultimately be tied in with the regional and global-scale studies, but they add a refinement and precision that the larger-scale studies cannot provide. Both scales of studies are necessary for a complete understanding of the Martian history, and for the first time both types of study are possible.

Another advantage may be gained from using the new data and models. The availability of high-resolution imagery, topography, thermal, and compositional data as well as high spatial- and temporal-resolution atmospheric model output may be used in concert, each data set adding its own unique "piece of the puzzle" to the geological and climatic interpretation. The careful combination of geologic data with atmospheric data is particularly important for aeolian studies because they depend on one another. In the past, most work utilized only atmospheric or geological data to study aeolian features on Mars, occasionally leading to errors such as mislabeling aeolian features (which then propagates through the scientific community) or inaccurate estimation of sand and dust transport parameters. However, such interdisciplinary research on aeolian processes from both a geological and an atmospheric perspective is necessary for understanding how the surface and atmosphere interact with one another. It is vital from a geological perspective in that it is the only way to thoroughly study the most active surface process on Mars today, and it is vital from an atmospheric perspective in that surface features provide the only "ground truth" for verification of modeled wind circulation patterns and stresses. For the first time, data and models are available to allow such investigations to proceed, and this thesis work takes full advantage of this technique.

This thesis consists of three chapters, each of which discusses a self-contained research project. The thesis topic was chosen after an extensive research of existing literature on terrestrial and Martian aeolian geomorphology and sedimentology, as well as remote sensing techniques. Originally I had begun work on a sand transport model, which used modeled wind stresses and velocities to determine where the global sand sinks and sources are currently located, but too little is known about the distribution of mobile sand and surface roughness on the Martian surface, and so I decided that it was unlikely that the transport model would produce realistic results. The completed work and motivation for each chapter is described briefly below. Chapter 2 was supported in part by a PG&G grant (NRA 98–OSS–03); Chapter 2 was supported in part and Chapter 3 was supported in full by an MDAP grant (NRA 00–OSS–01 MDAP).

Chapter 2. The obliquity, orbital eccentricity, and argument of perihelion of Mars oscillate significantly over long time periods, with unknown consequences on the planet's climate. Some surface features, such as dunes and bright streaks, match well with the currently predicted wind patterns, and other types of aeolian features, such as yardangs, dark streaks, and ventifacts, do not. As a result, it has long been hypothesized that the astronomical variations change wind circulation patterns, and thus creating aeolian features that do not match present-day wind patterns. To test this hypothesis, my coauthor and I ran the GFDL Mars general circulation model (GCM) at different obliquity, eccentricity, and argument of perihelion states. Using a higher time resolution than has been applied before, we

established that dark streaks are contemporary features produced by a wind that in previous studies had been washed out due to poor time resolution. More importantly, we also showed that orbital parameters have little effect on wind circulation patterns, concluding that the aeolian features that do not align with current winds must have been produced under very different conditions unrelated to varying orbital parameters.

Chapter 3. Before the Mars Global Surveyor mission, Martian sand dunes were considered mysterious features. They were known to exist in a sand sea ringing the north polar cap, and as small accumulations in the floors of several craters in the southern highlands. It was not known whether or not they were active. Furthermore, only dunes with a morphology indicative of unidirectional winds appeared to be present in abundance, and it was not clear why this would be the case when on the Earth dunes indicating bimodal and multimodal wind regimes also occur. The introduction of MGS data changed this view drastically, showing that these dark dunes are much more prevalent than previously thought, and that much smaller bright bedforms are visible in high-resolution images where before such features were only hinted at. Noting both a lack of a detailed study of aeolian features in any particular region of Mars, as well as the abundance of new data, I decided to conduct such a study. I built a geographical information system (GIS) for Proctor Crater, a 150 km diameter crater in the southern highlands containing a large dark dunefield. Proctor Crater was the first place where dunes were discovered on Mars during the Mariner 9 mission in 1971–72, and as such it has become the type location for studies on dune morphology, thermal inertia, and composition. Using GIS analysis, I found that the sedimentary history of Proctor Crater has involved a complex interaction of deposition and erosion, much of which is likely to be aeolian in origin. The crater has accumulated as much as 450 m of sediments, the top layer of which now comprises the presentday crater floor. Small bright bedforms, dust devil tracks, and sand drifts abound,

indicating that aeolian processes dominate as expected. Close inspection of dunes indicates that the dunefield is located in a multidirectional wind regime, consisting of reversing transverse and star dunes, contrary to what was expected in pre-MGS days. The dark dunes are composed of coarse, basaltic sand that is probably volcaniclastic in origin, and which was blown into the crater from the southwest (locating the provenance of the sand requires a broader regional study). The dunes are undoubtedly active, but because they are located in a convergent wind regime they have little (if any) net transport (thus the lack of dune movement does not necessarily indicate that they are inactive). All observed aeolian features, from the potentially ancient bright duneforms, to the nearly erased remnant of a sand transport pathway into the crater, to the long-lived dunes themselves, and to the annually created and erased dust devil tracks, indicate an unchanging wind pattern, consistent with the model predictions from Chapter 2. A detailed study such as this greatly changes the way dunes and other aeolian features on Mars are regarded, answering many of the old pre-MGS questions but creating new ones as more and more is discovered. Further inquiries of this sort will continue to answer these questions and create a general understanding of how aeolian processes influence the Martian surface.

Chapter 4. The newly developed mesoscale atmospheric models are necessary, although largely unexplored, tools for investigating interactions between the surface and atmosphere. In the past, GCM's predicted only large-scale winds with horizontal scales on the order of hundreds of kilometers. They could not predict small-scale flow dictated by local topography, and often were run with too large a timestep to predict shifts in daily winds (as shown in Chapter 2). Thus the newly developed mesoscale atmospheric models are necessary, although still largely unexplored, tools for investigating interactions between the surface and atmosphere. My coauthors and I applied the Mars Mesoscale Model 5 (MM5) to the atmosphere over Proctor Crater, the same area studied in Chapter 3. In some

sense the model output may be regarded as yet another data set to be included in the GIS described in Chapter 3. A Martian atmospheric model has never before been run in conjunction with a thorough geological study of a particular area. In addition, a Martian atmospheric model has never been applied with the intent of understanding the morphology of a dunefield and other nearby aeolian features. The MM5 predicted two of the three observed dune slipface orientations as well as the winds that produce dust devil tracks in the summer. The wind producing the more prevalent of the dune slipfaces (the primary winds) was the strongest of the year, blowing in the fall and winter during the early afternoon as geostrophicenhanced westerly winds. The wind producing the least prevalent of dune slipfaces (the tertiary winds) blows in the spring and summer evening as easterly katabatic flows down the rim of Proctor Crater, influencing only the eastern portion of the dunefield. Winds producing the remaining dune slipfaces are not predicted by the model, and it may be that these winds are produced by rare storms that the model does not capture. Wind stresses are still not high enough to predict sand saltation, and the reason for this is due to a low model resolution, even though this study used a higher spatial resolution than has been applied in the past. Although there are issues with the model output, the MM5 does a superb job of explaining the forces driving dune morphology and other nearby aeolian features.

The chapters are similar in their approach and their research goals. Each chapter describes research that changes what is known about aeolian processes on Mars by varying different parameters and using higher resolution data and models than before. Chapter 2 challenges an old hypothesis that astronomical oscillations are responsible for ancient wind circulation patterns by running a GCM under those conditions and comparing the results to observed surface features. Chapter 3 uses new high-resolution imagery, topography, thermal, and compositional data to perform the first detailed and comprehensive study of the aeolian history of a

region. Finally, Chapter 4 applies a mesoscale model to the study area of Chapter 3 to explain the regional wind patterns behind the observed aeolian features, supporting the aeolian history described in Chapter 3. This thesis takes the first steps towards applying modern methods and viewpoints to the study of Martian surface processes.