Reprinted from Science 255, 1685-1687 (1992).

The Breakup of a Meteorite Parent Body and the Delivery of Meteorites to Earth

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Whether many of the 10,000 meteorites collected in the Antarctic are unlike those falling elsewhere is contentious. The Antarctic H chondrites, one of the major classes of stony meteorites, include a number of individuals with higher induced thermoluminescence peak temperatures than observed among non–Antarctic H chondrites. The proportion of such individuals decreases with the mean terrestrial age of the meteorites at the various ice fields. These H chondrites have cosmic-ray exposure ages of about 8 million years, experienced little cosmic-ray shielding, and suffered rapid postmetamorphic cooling. Breakup of the H chondrite parent body, 8 million years ago, may have produced two types of material with different size distributions and thermal histories. The smaller objects reached Earth more rapidly through more rapid orbital evolution.

MORE THAN 10,000 ANTARCTIC meteorites have been collected (*1, 2*), some of them very rare and surprising types of meteorites, including meteorites from the moon (*3*). It has been suggested that there are differences, even in the most common ordinary chondrites, between Antarctic meteorites and those currently falling elsewhere in the world (*4*). These differences include elemental and isotopic composition (*5*) and the frequency of various classes and types of meteorites (*6, 7*). The interpretation of these differences is difficult, mainly because of the problems of pairing and the effects of weathering on the Antarctic meteorites, many of which have been on Earth for 300,000 years or more (*8, 9*). It has, however, been argued that differences between Antarctic and non-Antarctic meteorites should not be present, because the existence of such differences requires that the flux of meteorites impacting Earth changed, either in terms of average numbers or types, in the 10^5-year terrestrial age of the meteorites (*10*).

Another significant difference between the Antarctic and non-Antarctic collections is found in the H5 chondrites. H5 chondrites are among the most common ordinary chondrites in both collections; however, a significant proportion of the Antarctic H5 chondrites has distinctly different induced thermoluminescence (TL) properties. The induced TL properties of meteorites are determined by the amount of feldspar present and the degree of its crystallographic ordering, and hence these properties may be used as an indicator of metamorphism (feldspar growth) and extreme shock (feldspar destruction) (*11*). Figure 1 shows induced TL peak temperature versus peak width for Antarctic H5 chondrites. The Antarctic data form two distinct clusters, one at relatively high peak temperatures (hereafter referred to as the ">190°C group"). The other cluster, with lower peak temperatures (the "<190°C group"), is similar to modern non-Antarctic meteorites, which plot along the dashed line (*12*). The presence of the >190°C group among Antarctic H5 chondrites is independent of weathering and pairing (*12*). This unusual group is present only in the H5 chondrites; the other classes of ordinary chondrites (the L and LL chondrites) do not differ from their modern non-Antarctic equivalents in terms of induced TL data.

The >190°C group is not present at all the collection sites in the Antarctic. Rather, the group is best represented at sites with a significant number of meteorites with old terrestrial ages (generally >200,000 years), but the number is relatively small or absent at sites with meteorites with relatively young terrestrial ages (<100,000 years) (Fig. 2). The Allan Hills Main ice field has a large number of meteorites with old terrestrial ages [up to 300,000 years (*13*)], and natural TL data indicate that the upper ice tongue at Lewis Cliff likewise has a high proportion of meteorites with old terrestrial ages (*14*). The meteorites from the Allan Hills Farwestern ice field have not been examined in great detail, but natural TL data indicate that their average terrestrial age is similar to that of the meteorites from the Lewis Cliff upper ice tongue. The meteorites from the Yamato site have fairly young terrestrial ages [<140,000 years (*13*)]. Natural TL data indicate that meteorites from the lower ice tongue and meteorite moraine at Lewis Cliff have fairly young terrestrial ages; dating of ice bands at the former site gives ages of <30,000 years [see references in (*14*)]. These data show that the frequency of the >190°C group meteorites decreased with time and that the >190°C group is essentially absent in modern falls.

The presence of the >190°C group of meteorites in the Antarctic collection, and the reason for its unexpected temporal decay, should provide new insights into the origins of meteorites. Members of the >190°C group have cosmic-ray exposure ages of <20

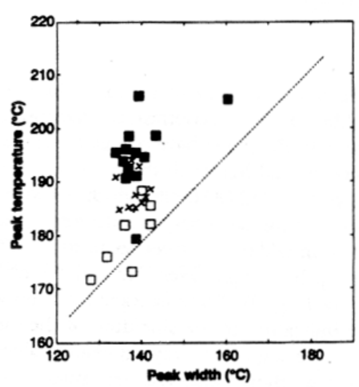

Fig. 1. Induced TL peak temperature versus peak width for Antarctic H chondrites (*12*). Exposure age: filled squares, <18 Ma; open squares, >18 Ma; ×, no data. The dashed line is the trend for non-Antarctic H chondrites (see Fig. 2). These properties are determined by the structural state of feldspar and therefore by the cooling rate after metamorphism. Two distinct groups, which have experienced different thermal histories, are apparent. Cosmic-ray exposure ages (*16*) are also different for the two groups.

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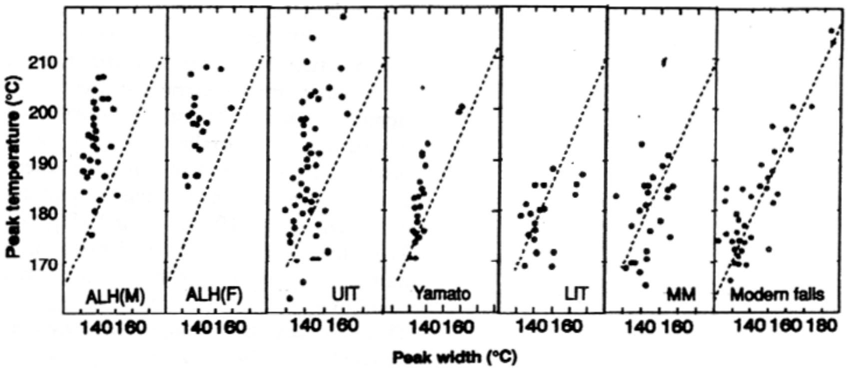

Fig. 2. Induced TL peak temperature versus peak width for Antarctic H chondrites, separated by collection site. ALH(M) and ALH(F), Allan Hills Main and Farwestern ice fields, respectively; UIT and LIT, upper and lower ice tongue at Lewis Cliff, respectively; MM, meteorite moraine at Lewis Cliff. The dashed line is the trend for non-Antarctic H chondrite falls, shown at the far right. Sites are arranged in approximate order of decreasing mean terrestrial age of meteorites, left to right. The >190°C group becomes less prominent with decreasing terrestrial age.

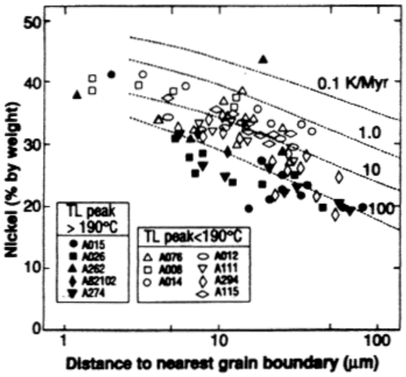

Fig. 4. Central Ni content data for taenite grains in Antarctic H5 chondrites. Cooling rate lines are from (*19*). Sample names are abbreviated from the full listing in (*12*). The two TL groups clearly have different cooling rates, and the unusual >190°C group cooled relatively rapidly.

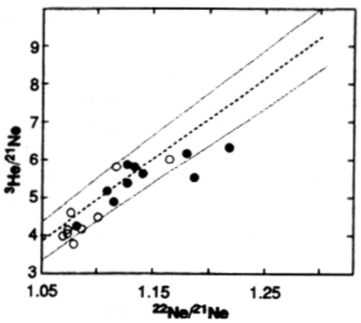

Fig. 3. The $^3He/^{21}Ne$ ratio versus the $^{22}Ne/^{21}Ne$ ratio for Antarctic H5 chondrites from Fig. 1. The dashed line is the trend line (approximate standard deviation, dotted lines) for all chondrites (*18*). These ratios are used to infer the degree of shielding during cosmic-ray exposure in space. Least-shielded samples plot in the upper right. TL peak: open circles, <190°C; filled circles, >190°C.

Ma (million years ago); most ages cluster near 8 Ma (*15, 16*). In contrast, the meteorites of the <190°C group have cosmic-ray exposure ages of >20 Ma, with the exception of one meteorite, ALHA76008, which is known to have an unusual history of radiation exposure (*15*). In addition, meteorites in the >190°C group have high $^3He/^{21}Ne$ and $^{22}Ne/^{21}Ne$ ratios (Fig. 3). These isotopic ratios provide an indication of the shielding of the meteorite during cosmic-ray exposure; values as high as those observed are usually interpreted as indicating that the original meteoroid bodies were relatively small (*16*). It therefore appears that the >190°C meteorite group was liberated, at approximately 8 Ma, as a pulse of relatively small bodies (compared to modern meteoroid bodies) that eventually struck Earth in a fairly concentrated orbital "stream."

Further constraints on the history of the >190°C group would be possible if the origin of their high TL peak temperatures could be better understood. It seems clear on the basis of annealing experiments (*12*) and numerical modeling of the shape of the glow curve (*15*) that thermal history was the major factor, involving either low-grade shock or metamorphism. To clarify the origin, we examined the Ni profiles of taenite (Ni-rich metal) grains in meteorites. Wood (*17*) showed that it is possible to determine absolute cooling rates, between approximately 200° and 500°C, by determining the Ni content of the cores of taenite grains as a function of grain size. We obtained taenite Ni profiles for six meteorites from the >190°C group and seven from the <190°C group (Fig. 4). There is a strong relation between induced TL group and metallographic cooling rates. The >190°C group clearly has a higher cooling rate, by approximately an order of magnitude, than the <190°C group. Also, taenite grains are less abundant in the >190°C group than in the <190°C group. In meteorites of the >190°C group Ni tends to be concentrated in tetrataenite rims on kamacite (Ni-poor metal) rather than as discrete taenite grains. One meteorite, ALHA77182, had no taenite grains suitable for Ni profiling; its Ni is concentrated in tetrataenite rims on both kamacite and troilite (iron sulfide). This observation is also indicative of a relatively fast cooling rate. Cooling was rapid enough to prevent or reduce Ni diffusion through the meteorites to form discrete taenite grains.

One interpretation of the differences in cooling rates between the two groups is that the >190°C group formed at shallower depths in their parent bodies than the <190°C group. For the thermal model of Wood (*17*), the cooling rates indicate that the <190°C group formed at depths of >40 km on a body (or bodies) >100 km in diameter, whereas the >190°C group formed at much shallower depths, perhaps as little as a few kilometers below the surface. These estimates are obviously dependent on assumed thermal diffusivities and the nature of the heating process and are only suggestive.

We suggest that, if the >190°C group formed at shallow depths in the source body, then it could have been extensively fractured and ejected at high velocities during the breakup event, which occurred at 8 Ma. These pieces, relatively small and numerous compared with those of the more protected interior fragments, might then have evolved to Earth-crossing orbits and dominated the meteorite flux up to approximately 200,000 years ago. However, these small bodies would have been prone to destruction by the usual mechanisms for bodies in unstable orbits [collisions in the asteroid belt, ejection from the solar system by interaction with the outer planets, as well as impact with the inner planets (*10*)], and thus their numbers might be rapidly depleted. The meteoroids of the <190°C group produced by this event, which would also have 8-Ma cosmic-ray exposure ages, also evolved to Earth-crossing orbits, perhaps more slowly than the >190°C group but were less depleted in numbers by the various mechanisms by virtue of their larger size. The <190°C group would then gradually come to dominate the terrestrial H5 meteorite flux starting about 200,000 years ago, until it represented virtually all of the meteorites among the modern falls derived from this parent body. This idea is a slight variant on the orbital dynamic model suggested by Wasson (7) to account for the high number of unusual iron meteorites in the Antarctic collection. Our data show, however, that there is also a "background" source of <190°C group H5 chondrites (for example, Fig. 1), with cosmic-ray exposure ages of >20 Ma, which might represent earlier breakup events or even fragments of a completely different parent body.

In summary, we suggest that we can now account for the origin and destruction of a large group of H5 chondrites found only in the Antarctic meteorite collection. Our data show that the terrestrial meteorite flux is not a constant. Numbers, sizes, and relative proportions of different meteorite types can change over relatively short periods of time, at least in some cases. In this light, we suggest that a more critical examination of the large Antarctic meteorite collection may well turn up more cases of temporal changes in the meteorite flux.

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20. We thank the U.S. Antarctic Meteorite Working Group and M. E. Lipschutz for samples and documentation, J. Roth and V. Yang for technical assistance, and G. A. McKay for access to the Johnson Space Center electron microprobe. This research was supported by National Aeronautics and Space Administration grant NAG 9-81 and National Science Foundation grant DPP 86-13998.

15 November 1991; accepted 31 January 1992