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USA TODAY Update On Cydonia Controversy

From: [Stig Agermose@online.pol.dk](mailto:Stig.Agermose@online.pol.dk) (Stig Agermose)
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Stig

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Mars' 'face' a pile of rocks?

Whether carved by aliens or sculpted by nature, the famous "face" on Mars continues to stir up a cosmic controversy.

Never mind that NASA's Mars Global Surveyor spacecraft made three sweeps near the planet last month and sent back photos to debunk notions that an ancient civilization carved the face.

"This is ancient, ruined architecture we're seeing," insists Richard Hoagland, author of *The Monuments of Mars* and the loudest voice for the theory that aliens built the face.

NASA says Surveyor's pictures provide ample evidence that the mile-long mesa on the Martian plain Cydonia is just a naturally occurring pile of rocks. Surveyor's camera is 10 times more powerful than the one aboard the Viking probe, which in 1976 first sent back pictures of the mesa and other strange rock formations.

But on Internet sites, in calls to talk radio programs and in UFO conferences, the cry is growing for more and better pictures from different angles. The Cydonian formation has galvanized Mars buffs and the ET crowd in ways few other phenomena have.

Some believers accuse the government of hiding evidence that would "prove" that Cydonia contains too many strange architectural shapes for them to have formed naturally. The outcroppings, they say, could have taken shape only by design.

Hoagland says NASA has photographs confirming his theory but won't release them because they could so shock Earth that civilization might collapse.

"They are seeing things they did not expect. That's why they're not showing all the data," Hoagland says.

NASA says it has released everything it has on Cydonia and, for that

matter, everywhere else on Mars. Officially, the agency declines to take a position on the origin of Cydonia. But some scientists note privately that Hoagland is keeping the controversy alive to push his book, videotapes, posters and speeches.

Scientists on the Surveyor mission say there's a simple explanation for why Cydonia's features appear the way they do. The same natural forces that shaped the rocks there can be found on Earth.

"The area is geologically very interesting," says Arden Albee, project scientist at the California Institute of Technology. "It looks like there were a number of layers of material laid down in the planet's formation with different hardnesses. These layers then eroded, so you get craters which are perched up in the air sort of like on a pedestal. We've seen these elsewhere on Mars."

But that assessment is not enough to keep others from joining the fray. Geologists, photography experts and architects are downloading Surveyor's pictures from the Internet and analyzing them.

Even members of Congress are taking new interest in briefings from the Planetary Society in Pasadena, Calif., on the Cydonia images and other missions to Mars.

"Those of us who have studied it are unanimous that it's artificial," says Tom Van Flandern, an astronomer and former head of celestial mechanics at the U.S. Naval Observatory.

Van Flandern, who runs a Washington, D.C.-based group called Meta Research that investigates celestial anomalies, doesn't buy into the theory of a government cover-up or that "UFO pilots" built monuments on Mars.

But because the Martian region has so many odd patterns and shapes, he puts the odds at a billion to 1 that all of them occurred naturally.

Van Flandern says he hopes NASA can be persuaded to take more photographs of the formation while it can.

NASA would have to race against time. On Sept. 11, Surveyor's orbit will be adjusted so it won't pass over Cydonia every nine days, as it is now. The maneuvers are necessary to lower the spacecraft into a tight circular orbit so it can begin its primary mission of mapping the planet starting in March 1999.

No more pictures are coming anytime soon. Mars now is in solar conjunction, which means that it is behind the sun as seen from Earth. That makes it hard for controllers to exchange transmissions with Surveyor. The cameras have been turned off, and they won't be back on until May 26, when the conjunction period ends.

At that point, the camera will take pictures as the science warrants, says Mike Ravine, advanced projects manager at Malin Space Science Systems in San Diego, which built the camera. "We're not going to be targeting specific things. We already took the picture of the face, and I don't care what Hoagland says, it's a good picture."

As Ravine sees it, even if Surveyor takes photos only of Cydonia, it will not be enough to satisfy believers. "I don't believe these people are going to be happy no matter what we do. The idea that I would play some willing role to suppress information that some alien civilization exists is just ridiculous.

"There is no conspiracy."

To Hoagland, the controversy will be settled only with more data.

"If we don't get it, all we'll have for the next 20 years to argue about are just these three images. That would be a tragedy."

By Paul Hoversten, USA TODAY

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