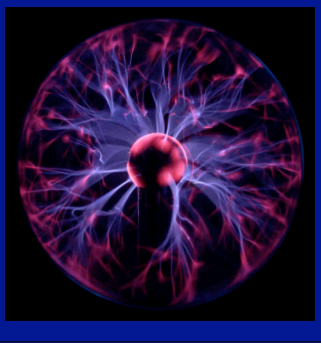
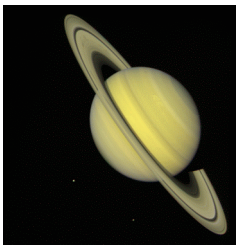
The rings of Saturn

Another word on plasma, the "fourth state of matter"

Demo

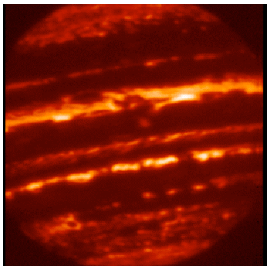


Saturn also has a liquid metallic interior and rotates rapidly. It also has a magnetosphere. ("dipole moment" 560 times Earth). The University of Iowa experiment aboard the Cassini spacecraft has measured waves traveling in the ionized gas of the Saturnian magnetosphere.



plasma waves from the University of Iowa instrument on Cassini

Are Jupiter and Saturn planets or stars?



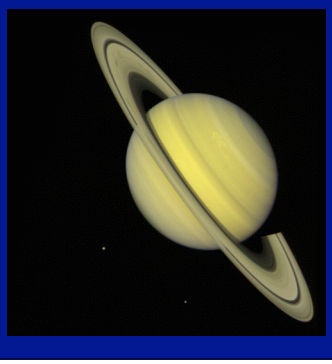
Jupiter emits 70% more radiation to space than it receives from the Sun. It has an "engine" inside

Comments on the “Pluto Controversy” of a few years ago. Whether Pluto lacked the “stuff” to be a major planet

What you should have learned is that Jupiter and Saturn are vastly different objects than the terrestrial planets, and maybe should not be in the same category

Perhaps we should generalize a concept from antiquity based on the huge amount that we have learned since the time of the Egyptians and Babylonians

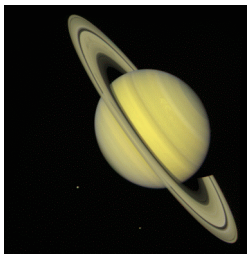
Saturn and its ring



Recall basic facts about Saturn

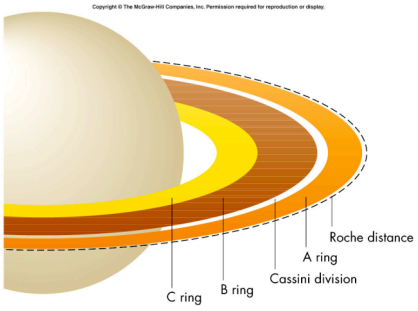
- Further from the Sun than Jupiter (a =9.54 au)
- Systematically colder as a result
- 95 Earth masses
- Diameter 9.5 times that of Earth
- Like Jupiter, only less extreme

Most unique feature of Saturn: the ring



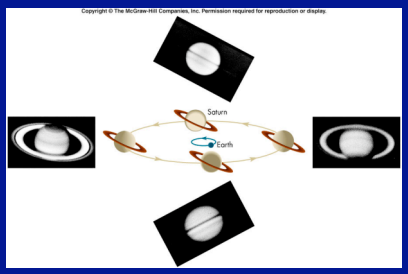
(1) What are its properties?
(2) How did it get there?

The size and structure of Saturn's ring



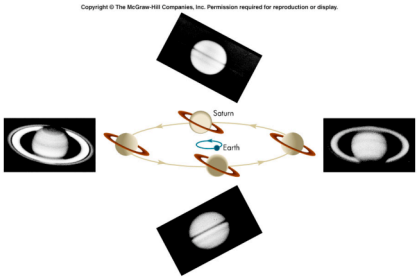
The ring extends out to about 2.4 Saturnian radii,
And is composed of 3 main rings and a prominent gap

The appearance of Saturn's ring changes during its 29 year period

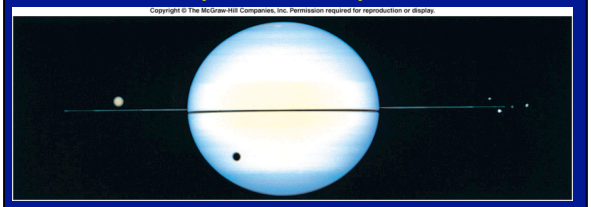


The ring is in Saturn's orbital plane. The obliquity of Saturn is 26.7 degrees.

How would you determine the current tilt of Saturn's ring? Do we see them edge-on, or fully opened up? Use JPL solar system simulator, or look through a telescope



The near-disappearance of Saturn's rings when they are edge-on indicates that they must be very thin.

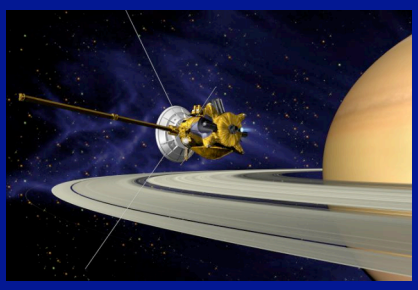


Hubble Space Telescope Observation of Saturn
In 1995 when ring was edge on

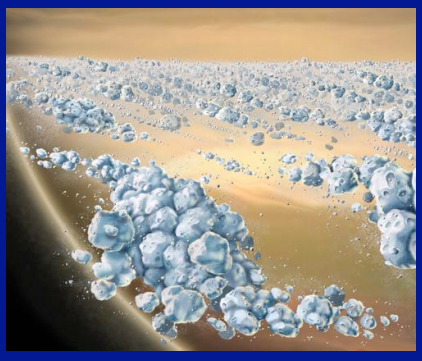
The nature of Saturn's ring

- Maxwell (yep, the same one) proved on the basis of physical arguments in 1859 that the ring could not be a solid, orbiting disk
- It must be composed of billions and billions of little moonlets, each orbiting Saturn

The Cassini spacecraft at its first approach to Saturn, summer 2004



A close-up view for a space traveler

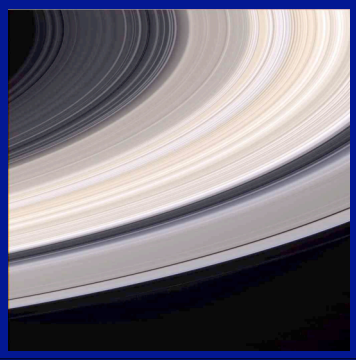


Data from University of Iowa radio receiver on Cassini demonstrates that Saturn's ring consists of particles, many of them very small

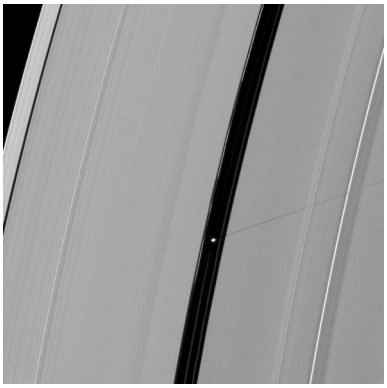
Radio static from Saturn Ring crossing

In one of its orbits, Cassini passed through the outer part of the ring. Each impact of a dust particle produced a blip of radio static

How were the rings of Saturn formed?
Why does Saturn have them?



The Cassini spacecraft has revealed incredible and beautiful detail in the rings



The existence of Saturn's ring due to "tidal disruption"

- Tidal "stresses" due to a difference of the gravitational force on the front and rear side of a moon near a planet.
- If a moon gets closer to a planet than about 2.4 planetary radii, the tidal stresses pull the moon apart
- In case of Saturn, a moon probably moved within the "tidal disruption radius" and was torn to rubble.