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The 1976 Face on Mars

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THE VIKING MISSION

In the summer of 1975 NASA began its Viking program, which involved sending two separate spacecraft to Mars, equipped with cameras and landers. The mission's primary objectives were to obtain high-resolution images of the Martian surface, characterize the atmosphere and surface, and search for evidence of life. On August 20, 1975, a Titan III-Centaur rocket launched the Viking 1 spacecraft from Cape Canaveral, Florida on its mission to Mars.[1] Two months later on September 9, 1975, the Viking 2 spacecraft was launched on its trip to Mars. After its eleven month cruise, the Viking 1 orbiter began orbiting Mars on June 19, 1976 and the Viking 2 spacecraft followed suite and successfully entered orbit on August 7, 1976.[2]

The original landing sites for both Viking landers were based on earlier Mariner 9's pictures however, higher resolution images from the Viking 1 orbiter showed the potential landing sites in the Cydonia and Chryse Planitia regions to be too hazardous for a safe touchdown. As a result, NASA scientists changed the landing sites and dates for both spacecraft. The Viking 1 lander, which was planned for July 4, 1976 landing to celebrate the United States Bicentennial, was pushed out over two weeks and touch downed safely at an alternate location in Chryse Planitia area on July 20, 1976. The Viking 2 lander was rescheduled from its original Cydonia site and sat down at a safer place in Utopia on September 3, 1976.[3]

A HEAD-SHAPED MESA

On July 25, 1976, the Viking 1 Orbiter, circling the planet Mars at an altitude of 1,000 miles, snapped one of the first pictures of the Cydonia region that included a mesa that had an incredible resemblance to a human head (Figure 1). The image 035A72 was acquired in the summer, during the mid-afternoon with a resolution of 48 meters per pixel.[4] This head-shaped mesa, which is approximately a mile and a half long and a mile wide, was initially spotted in this first image by Dr. Tobias Owen,[5] a member of National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) own imaging team at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, California.

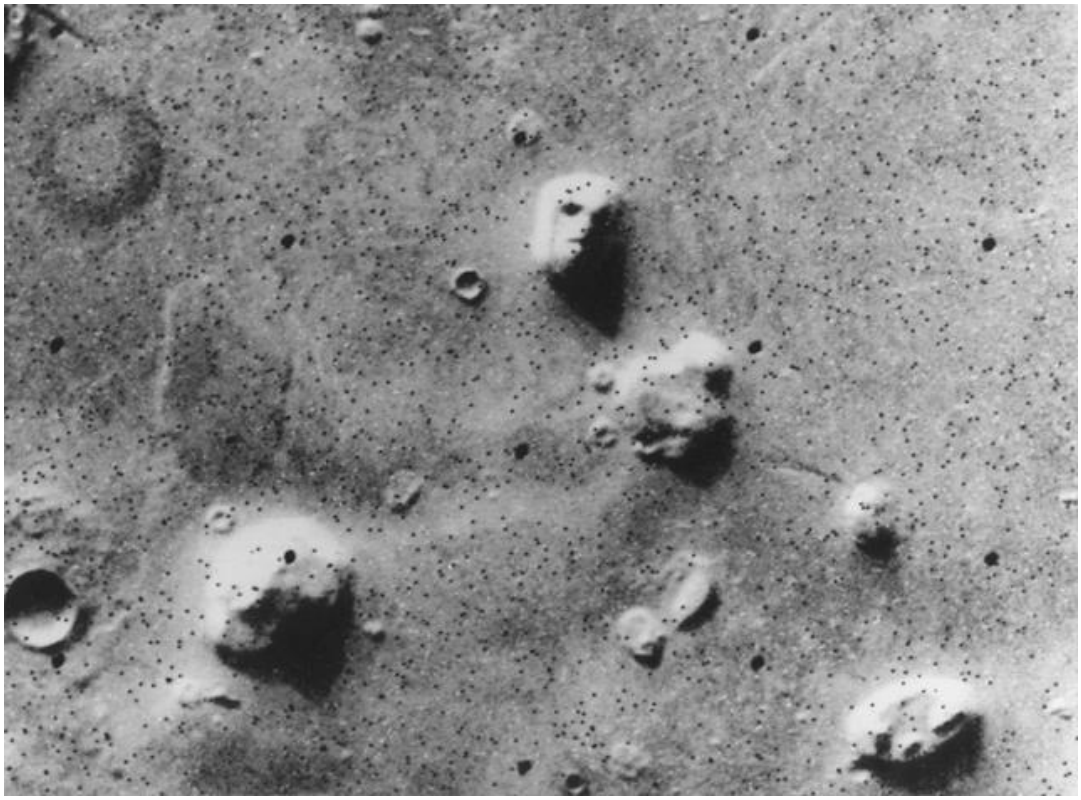

Figure 1 human head. JPL Viking Press Release P-17384, (detail of Viking Orbiter 1 image 35A72, 1976. https://photojournal.jpl.nasa.gov/catalog/PIA01141

The image was discovered by planetary scientists Dr. Tobias Owen while searching through images of the Cydonia region acquired by the Viking I spacecraft for

possible landing sites for the upcoming Viking 2 Lander. In one image he noticed a gigantic, human-like head glaring up at him from the barren Martian surface. He brought the unusual formation to the attention of the Viking program director Dr. Gerry Soffen (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Dr Tobias Owen and Dr Gerry Soffen. "Gee guess what I found, a face on Mars." Photo by Hans-Peter Biemann.

The facial formation, which the NASA team simply labeled "head" appeared to have human facial features. Although its eastern side was clocked in shadow, its western side reveals an eye, nose and mouth and wears some kind of a tight-fitting helmet (Figure 3). Michael Carr, a geologist with the U. S. Geological Survey who was then head of the Viking Orbiter imaging team approved the release of the unusual image to the press. Here is the caption for of that release;

The picture shows eroded mesa-like landforms. The huge rock formation in the center, which resembles a human head, is formed by shadows giving the illusion of eyes, nose and mouth. The feature is 1.5 kilometers (one mile) across, with the sun angle at approximately 20 degrees. The speckled appearance of the image is due to bit errors, emphasized by enlargement of the photo. The picture was taken on July 25 from a range of 1873 kilometers (1162 miles). Viking 2 will arrive in Mars orbit next Saturday (August 7) with a landing scheduled for early September.[6]

A press briefing was held by NASA's Project Scientist for the Viking program Dr. Gerry Soffen announcing that an image of an odd landform resembling a "face" had been found within the Cydonia region of Mars.

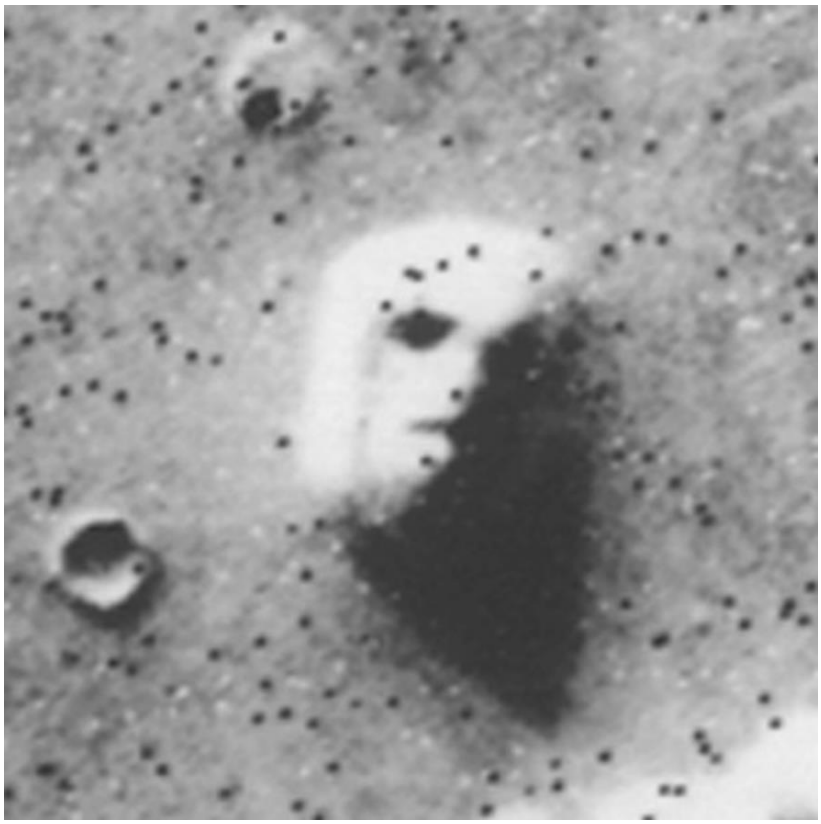

Figure 3 Face on Mars. Detail Viking 35A72, 1976.

CYDONIA

Situated within the Valles Marineris hemisphere of Mars, the area known as Cydonia is located just above the Arabia Terra region of the planet and stretches up towards the northern plains of Acidalia Planitia. The official boundaries of Cydonia region occupy an area located between 29.75° and 43.5° north.[7] The area is seen as a transitional zone between the southern highlands and the vast northern plains. Its surface is intermixed with small craters, knobs and hills. The region continues southward with engaging topography of oddly-shaped mesas and buttes that are found in a variety of shapes and sizes.

Over the past 35 years there has been a prolonged debate among geologists and independent researchers as to the origin and specific geology that was responsible for creating the topographical facial features observed within the Cydonia Face. According to a little known study conducted by the U.S. geological Survey team in 2005 that analyzed the physical materials that make up the Cydonia Face and its surrounding mesas and knobs concluded that the geology of these formations are highly enigmatic.[8] Simply put, the results of this unpublicized report concludes that whatever explanations have been offered by NASA about the origins of these formations, they are only speculative at best and even their most learned geologists are unable to determine the origins of these formations or what they are really made of.

According to the IAU, this little piece of Martian real estate that includes the Face on Mars is titled "Cydonia" after "a poetic term for Crete."[9] Historically the root name for Cydonia comes to us through the ancient doctrine of Greek Mythology, which identifies a little Minoan city on the north western coast of the Mediterranean island of Crete as Kydonia[10] (Figure 1.5).

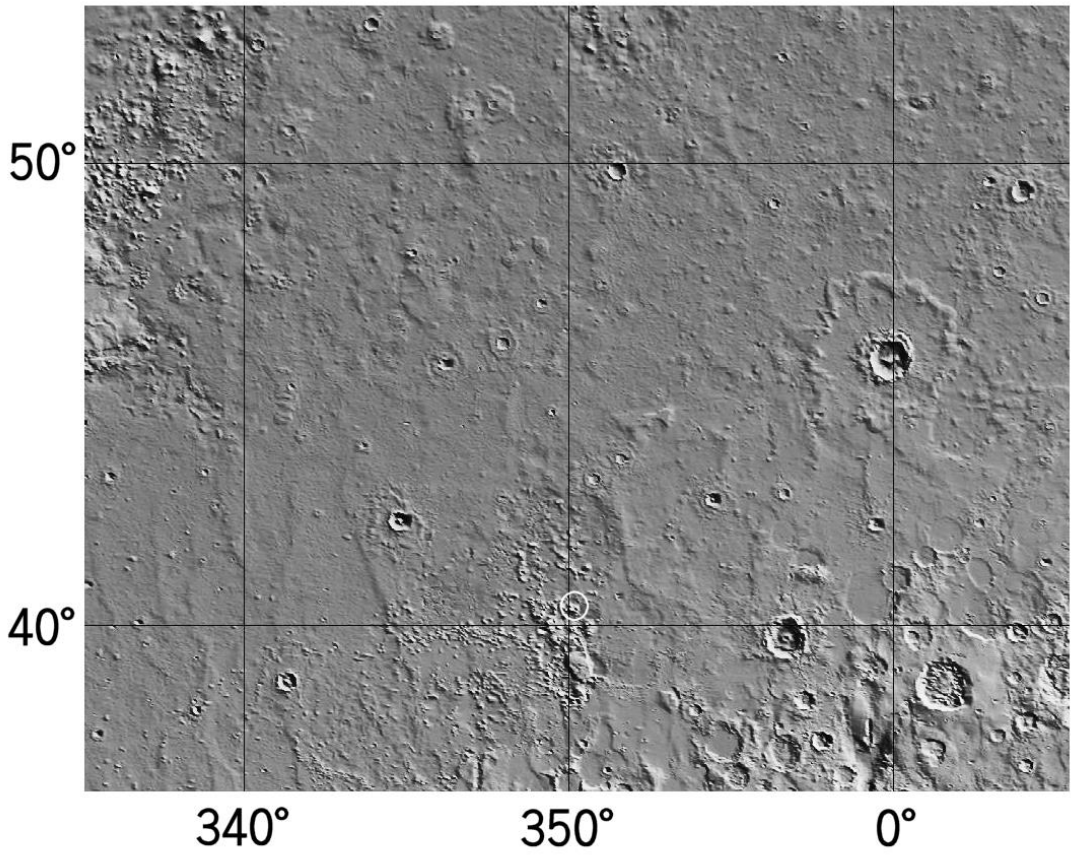

Figure 1.4 Cydonia Region of Mars identifying the location of the Cydonia Face (circled). Notations by the author.

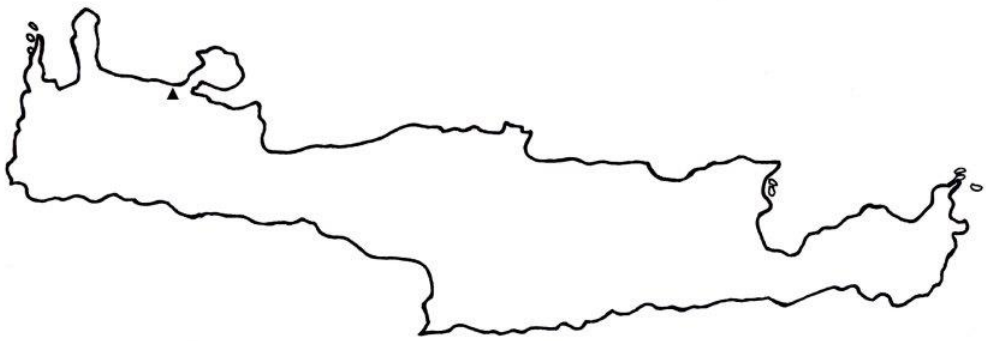

Figure 1.5 The Island of Crete. A triangle symbol marks the location of Kydonia. Drawing by the author.

Interestingly, just as the Cydonia Face is thought to be located along an ancient shoreline within the Cydonia region of Mars,[11] the Minoan city of Kydonia was also built along an ancient seaport. Its remains lay beneath the modern-day coastal city of Chania.[12]

A TRICK OF LIGHT AND SHADOW

Soon after the original press release, NASA quickly informed the news media that when a second picture of the "head" formation was taken only a few hours later and the odd facial features had disappeared.[13] Dr. Soffen assured the media that the head-shaped formation was nothing more than a "trick of light and shadow." Oddly, this second image never surfaced and only the original high-contrast picture of the "Face" was circulated to the press as nothing more than a phantom novelty. From this moment forward NASA's official position was that the Face on Mars was nothing more than an apparition of shadows and rock, and the overall mesa had no resemblance to a face.

With the Cydonia region officially being deemed "unsafe" for the Viking 2 Lander the NASA team decided not to proceed with the original plan of landing within the Cydonia region"[14] After a quick evaluation of alternate sites the NASDA team decided to land in the desolate plains of Utopia. This last-minute change in plans went virtually unquestioned by the mainstream media. With NASA's firm and consistent stance that this facial formation was nothing more than a "trick of light and shadows," the public eventually lost interest. From that point on both NASA and a fawning media considered the case closed.[15] As a result any talk of "Face on Mars" was banished to the sensational pages of supermarket tabloids and the illusion-filled minds of fringe-science enthusiasts. Cydonia was never spoken of again.

Notes

1. Robert S. Arrighi, *Centaur Launched First U.S. Spacecraft to Land on Mars*, NASA/gov, Aug 20, 2019. https://www.nasa.gov/history/centaur-launched-first-u-s-spacecraft-to-land-on-mars/

2. Williams, David R., *Viking Mission to Mars*. NASA, December 18, 2006.

3. Elizabeth Howell Viking 2: Second Landing on Mars, Space.com, December 6, 2012.

4. Mars Viewer, Viking 035A72, dated, July 25, 1976.

5. Hans-Peter Biemann, *The Vikings of '76*, Biemann Publishing, January 1, 1977.

6. NASA, *Caption of JPL Viking Press Release P-17384*, Viking News Center, July 31, 1976.

7. International Astronomical Union (IAU), Gazetteer of Planetary Nomenclature, Cydonia on Mars. https://planetarynames.wr.usgs.gov/Feature/1364

8. George E. McGill, "Geologic Map of Cydonia Mensae-Southern Acidalia Planitia, Mars: Quadrangles, MTM 40007, 40012, 40017, 45007, 45012, and 45017," Geologic Investigations Series I-2811, 2005. http://pubs.usgs.gov/imap/i2811/.

9. Gazetteer of Planetary Nomenclature, Mars, Cydonia. https://planetarynames.wr.usgs.gov/Feature/1364.

10. T.L. MacDonald, *The origins of Martian nomenclature*, Icarus, Volume 15, Issue 2, October 1971, 233-240.

11. Mark Carlotto, *Ancient Shoreline in Cydonia, Analysis of THEMIS Multispectral Imagery of Mars provides further evidence that the Face and City are located along an ancient shoreline in Cydonia*, New Frontiers in Science, 2001 (ISSN 1537-3169). http://www.carlotto.us/newfrontiersinscience/Papers/v01n03b/v01n03b.pdf .

12. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume IV Copyright (c) 1908 by Robert Appleton Company Online Edition Copyright (c) 2003 by Kevin Knight. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04581b.htm.

13. The Viking Orbiter could not have taken another picture of the Face at Cydonia, only a few hours later because the probe was programmed to systematically image the planet in sequential orbits, and would have been over an area many miles away at the time in question. According to NASA official ancillary data the second image was taken 35 days after the first image.

14. Masursky, H. & Crabill, N. L., *Viking site selection and certification*, NASA SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS SERIES, NASA-SP-429. 1981. P. 7-9.

15. Michael Malin, *The Face on Mars*, (California, Malin Space Science Systems, Inc, 1995), http://www.msss.com/education/facepage/face.html