BOULDERS AND BEYOND: A Multiscale Analysis of Asteroid (101955) Bennu

Lisette E. Melendez1; Erica Jawin1; Cari Corrigan1, Tim McCoy1
1Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History, Washington D.C.

Research Question:
How can we better understand the diversity and characteristics of boulders on Bennu by examining boulder features at various spatial scales?

Larger Scale:

Background
NASA’s first asteroid sample return mission is OSIRIS-REx (Origins, Spectral Interpretation, Resource Identification, Security-Regolith Explorer), set to return a sample from near-Earth asteroid (101955) Bennu.

Bennu is a carbonaceous rubble-pile asteroid, meaning it likely originated from the main asteroid belt and contains rocks and chemicals preserved from the birth of the solar system

Aim
To map key characteristics of boulders, including shape, size, aspect, surface texture, and more, in order to create a working classification system for boulders on Bennu and characterize their diversity, thus providing insight into Bennu’s surface processes.

Methodology and Data

Boulder Classification System

Type Characteristics

A dark toned, rounded aspect, clastic, rugged, hummocky boulders
B intermediate tone, relatively round, scattered clasts, swaths of smooth and rough terrain, undulatory texture
C bright toned, angular aspect, smooth with little to no clasts, linear fractures

Location of Boulders by Classification Type

Diameter of Mapped Boulders by Type

OBA v. PolyCam Albedo Values

Part 1

• Since the location of boulders bears little to no correlation to boulder type, we hypothesize that these boulder characteristics are due to parent body processes, rather than surface processes on Bennu.
• Type A and B have closely linked features, to the point where there are “transitional” boulders with overlapping characteristics, which indicates that the oldest boulders start as Type A and eventually transition to Type B through weathering and deformation.
• Type C appears to be a separate group, possibly from a separate impactor.
• Next step: continue mapping boulders to increase sample size.

Discussion

• In both MET 00434 and MET 00435, particles exhibited deformation along a preferential orientation, indicating that the layering observed on Bennu’s boulders can be explained by fabric-scale deformation as the rock was undergoing aqueous alteration on the parent body, as opposed to in-situ weathering processes. This data is substantial due to the range of ellipticities.
• MET 00431 does not exhibit this same correlation, but since it’s from the same sample, this could be due to the sample preparation technique not considering the plane of deformation.
• Next step: confirm findings by analyzing the returned regolith samples in 2023.

Conclusion

By examining boulder features at various spatial scales, we were able to identify several boulder morphology groups and interpret their diversity to be caused by parent-body processes, back before Bennu was ejected from the main asteroid belt due to a cataclysmic collision. Additionally, the mapping of thin sections from CM chondrites implies that the morphologies can be traced to the fabric of the boulder, where even aqueous features were altered, once again pointing to a parent-body process.

Selected References:
1 Lauretta, D.S. et al., 2017, Space Sci Rev 212, 925-984; 2 Jawin, E. 2020, IGR Planets 125, 64-75; 3 Walsch, K. 2008, Nature 454, 188-291. Images of Bennu from NASA/Goddard/University of Arizona. This material is based upon work supported by NSF grant OCE-1560088 through the NHRE Program.